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A Modest Proposal in Context: Swift, Politeness, and A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars

by Elizabeth Hedrick

The present essay argues that the notion of politeness spans the distance between two disparate views of the Modest Proposal: one in which Swift is detached from his speaker, and another in which Swift is complicit in his speaker's brutality. Swift's essay can be seen as an attack on politeness in two ways. In the first, Swift attacks presuppositions about politeness of the sort embraced by contemporary Whigs, whose spokesmen were eager to regard it as yoking civility with natural benevolence. While Swift's speaker is superficially modest, his barbaric proposal shows that the putative link between politeness and kindness is spurious. The second way in which the Modest Proposal attacks politeness involves Swift's regard for his own idea of it. While Swift believed that politeness entailed self-command—the suppression of one's asocial impulses—his various writings on politeness suggest that he nonetheless found the rigors of self-command vexing. As an ironic satire, Swift's work attacks self-command in the process of embodying it. A comparison of the Modest Proposal with one of Swift's non-ironic proposals for dealing with the poor reveals clearly the hostility and the impulse to self-aggrandizement that Swift had to suppress in order to write the Modest Proposal.

JONATHAN Swift's *A Modest Proposal* has long been regarded as a perfect example of its kind. In 1974, Wayne Booth named it “the finest of all ironic satires,” a defining instance of what he calls the “ironic sublime.” The *Modest Proposal*, says Booth, is a work that has produced enough critical consensus to justify calling it “stable, not only in intent but in effect.”¹ Other readers, both before and since the '70s,

¹ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 105. Booth's perspective has a notable precursor in the position offered by Ricardo Quintana, who sees the *Modest Proposal* as the “most perfect expression” of Swiftian irony. See his *The*

have shared Booth's perspective. Indeed, Booth's is only the most explicitly theoretical of a number of readings of the *Proposal* that see Swift as fully detached from his speaker's argument and totally in control, both distanced from his rhetorical subject and rid of the emotions out of which he shapes that subject from a carefully walled-off distance. The question of what Swift is attacking in the *Proposal*, establishing the object of its satire, is often uppermost in these readings; and critics who have approached the *Proposal* by attempting to specify its satiric irritants have collectively done much to place Swift's work in its economic, political, and cultural contexts. These readings have given us a *Proposal* that attacks (variously) the mercantilist thinking of Swift's day and the economic projectors who embraced mercantilist views;² the value placed on populousness per se in mercantilist thought (the argument that people are the wealth of the nation);³ the regressive tax policies proposed by the Irish Parliament in 1729;⁴ the language of "market rationality" that underwrote the eighteenth-century slave trade;⁵ and the members of the Irish upper classes who worsened Ireland's poverty by colluding with English oppression.⁶

Since the mid-twentieth century, the view of Swift as seigneurially removed from his Proposer has been qualified considerably. During this time, the *Modest Proposal* has been studied through the lens of biography as intensively as that of cultural, political, and economic history. The result has been a Swift whose identity as an Irishman and whose loathing of the Irish poor—to whom he was persistently charitable, but whom he often reviled as immoral and indolent—significantly complicates his relationship to his satiric persona. This revised image of Swift

Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift (London: Methuen & Co., 1936), 255. Martin Price echoes this view in *Swift's Rhetorical Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953), 71–74.

² This reading has been advanced most comprehensively by George Wittkowsky, in "Swift's *Modest Proposal*: The Biography of an Early Georgian Pamphlet," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4 (1943): 75–104. See also Price, *Swift's Rhetorical Art*. Peter M. Briggs provides a fuller context for Swift's attack on mercantilism by examining the works of eighteenth-century economic writers ("John Graunt, William Petty, and Swift's *Modest Proposal*," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 29.2 [2005]: 3–24).

³ Louis A. Landa, "A *Modest Proposal* and Populousness," *Modern Philology* 40 (1942): 161–70.

⁴ Sean Moore, "Devouring Posterity: A *Modest Proposal*, Empire, and Ireland's 'Debt of the Nation,'" *PMLA* 122 (2007): 679–95.

⁵ John Richardson, "Swift, A *Modest Proposal* and Slavery," *Essays in Criticism* 51 (2001): 404–23.

⁶ See Leo Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 420; Price, *Swift's Rhetorical Art*, 73; and Oliver W. Ferguson, "Swift's *Saeva Indignatio* and A *Modest Proposal*," *Philological Quarterly* 38 (1959): 473–79.

has weakened his essay's vaunted irony to the point of near-collapse. Oliver Ferguson perhaps inaugurated this way of reading the *Proposal* by studying Swift in his Irish context, emphasizing Swift's fury at the poor and at the apparent intractability of their state. Says Ferguson, "In their conception of the Irish as beasts, Swift and the projector are one."⁷ David Nokes has examined Swift's hatred of the Irish poor even more pointedly, drawing on Swift's correspondence and (chiefly) his sermons to identify a disquieting similarity between the non-ironic Swift, angrily blaming the distresses of the Irish poor on their moral failings, and the Modest Proposer, whose hostility to the poor suffuses his cannibalistic scheme.⁸ No doubt the most expansive yet nuanced reading of Swift as identified with his Proposer is that of Claude Rawson, whose vision of the *Modest Proposal* in *God, Gulliver, and Genocide* forms an important part of his larger discussion of cannibalism as a pervasive marker of the barbaric. For Rawson, Swift's sense of himself as Irish constituted a tortured identification with a despised (and barbaric) cultural subgroup. Swift's Modest Proposer is an Irish barbarian appealing to others of his kind, and his speaker's cannibalistic proposal involves the routine sacrifice of related barbarians, for all of whom Swift felt a roiling mixture of complicit anguish and disgust.⁹

These two ways of reading the *Modest Proposal* clearly pull in opposite directions, temperamentally as well as methodologically, and each has its virtues and liabilities. If the more established view of Swift as fully detached from his speaker fails to convey the complexity of his Irish identity or of his feelings about the Irish poor, it confirms the reader's sense that Swift was in rhetorical control of his subject as he wrote, creating a persona through whom he purposefully addressed an array of contemporary political and economic issues. If readings that weaken the *Proposal's* irony usefully show Swift to be (in Rawson's

⁷ Ferguson, *Jonathan Swift and Ireland* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 175.

⁸ Nokes, "Swift and the Beggars," *Essays in Criticism* 26 (1976): 218–235, especially 231. Nokes incorporates much of this essay into part 5 of his biography, *Jonathan Swift, A Hypocrite Reversed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Louis A. Landa anticipates Nokes's discussion of Swift's hostility to the Irish poor in "Jonathan Swift and Charity," in his *Essays in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 49–62. But Landa is concerned, in a way that Nokes is not, to explain Swift's hostility in the context of contemporary beliefs about the natural order of the classes and Swift's own disposition as a conservative Anglican.

⁹ Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination*, 1492–1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Rawson discusses the *Modest Proposal* at several points in this work, but the most sustained examinations of it occur in the third chapter, "Killing the Poor: An Anglo-Irish Theme?"

words) “deeply implicated . . . in unruly energies of the human mind which he simultaneously denounced and sought to control,” they do so by suggesting that Swift produced his most famous short satire out of an internal state marked by moral turbulence, even confusion.¹⁰ More specifically, they offer no way of describing the compositional mechanism through which Swift held his hostilities at a distance in order to embody his Proposer. The essay that follows seeks to build a bridge between these two methods of reading Swift’s work. It proceeds out of the suggestion that we separate Swift as the author of the *Proposal* from the content of his Proposer’s scheme—agreeing that Swift does not actually endorse cannibalism and thereby making a fundamental concession to Booth’s vision of the *Proposal*’s irony as “stable”—without at the same time separating Swift from his speaker’s hostility. That hostility is of course in some sense implicit rather than explicit in the *Proposal* itself, submerged in or diffused throughout the structure of its grisly scheme and superficially detectable only in such details as the Proposer’s references to the poor as “breeders.” But its presence is devastatingly real; and we can see Swift as controlling his speaker and as complicit with him simultaneously if we take Swift’s management of his own and his speaker’s hostility—the politeness through which the Proposer is dramatically suspended above the barbarism he suggests—as an object of Swift’s attack.¹¹

Politeness is a virtue the cultural definition of which was in a state of recognizably partisan flux in the early decades of the eighteenth century, and the subject was of palpable interest to Swift for much of his career. He was unsympathetic to the newer, more optimistic attitude toward the topic, typically promoted by his Whig contemporaries, an attitude that involved identifying commerce with good manners and believing that patriotism, benevolence, and modesty—the last of which Swift saw as crucial to politeness—naturally travelled together. The cruelty of Swift’s formally modest Proposer obviously squashes this notion flat, and on this point Swift’s attack on politeness in the *Proposal* shows him to be fully detached from his speaker. Politeness was also a virtue about which Swift had visibly mixed feelings, however, especially insofar as he regarded self-command, as a kind of socially ac-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ My contention draws upon Rawson’s observation that while Swift doesn’t mean his proposal to be taken seriously, he doesn’t not mean it either. See *God, Gulliver, and Genocide*, 12.

cepted irony, as essential to good manners. Swift's life and work were marked by various "angers," as Rawson has suggested, and his efforts to contain his hostilities on polite terms were not only unreliable but sometimes the objects of exasperation in themselves.¹² The *Modest Proposal* offers a dramatic enactment of Swift's contradictory feelings about politeness, for creating the Proposer required him to suppress his authentic hostility toward the Irish poor in favor of nominal politesse. The process through which Swift created his work was no doubt suffused with discomfort for Swift himself. But if the pain occasioned by it is recast in the *Proposal* as the oppression of Irish Others, the process that produced it is also the most vivid and immediate target of the *Proposal's* satire. It marks a point on which Swift and his speaker are clearly one.

We can discern the nature of Swift's authentic feelings for the Irish poor and trace the progress of authorial self-suppression through which Swift created his Proposer by examining the *Proposal* in the context of Swift's non-ironic works of the 1720s and '30s. One work in particular, *A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars in all the Parishes of Dublin*, offers a useful point from which to measure the distance between Swift's authentic hostility toward the poor and his suppression of that hostility as the Modest Proposer. Written in Swift's own voice and emphatically identified as his on the title page, the badging proposal puts forward a scheme for distinguishing the native poor of Dublin parishes from those Swift calls "foreign" beggars, whom he blasts as "vermin" and explicitly reviles as unworthy of charity. Both the content and the textual apparatus of this tract reveal a self-extolling Dean, far from "modest," who formally asserts his patriotic significance and who expresses his anger at the poor freely. This work can be shocking to modern readers who are unfamiliar with its eighteenth-century context, not only because of its punitive approach to the poor but also because it so flagrantly refutes the idea (still widely cherished) that the Swift behind the *Modest Proposal* was actually warm and humane, possessed of sentimental feelings that bear no relation to the Modest Proposer's brutality.¹³ The point to reading this essay beside the *Modest Proposal*, however, is not simply to emphasize the eerie similarity between the historical Swift and his Modest Proposer, nor is it to deny the sincerity of Swift's commitment to alleviating Irish poverty, however much his approach

¹² Rawson, *Swift's Angers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1.

¹³ David Nokes warns readers explicitly against being so appalled by the *Modest Proposal* that they turn it into a "monument of compassion" by way of compensation in his *Jonathan Swift: A Hypocrite Reversed*, 347.

to the problem may have differed from any we would endorse. (The apparent inconsistencies of his attitudes on this subject were not inconsistencies to a man of his time, temper, and occupation.) It is instead to offer a position from which to observe the self-suppressions through which Swift created one of his most effective personae.

SWIFT AND POLITENESS

In calling his speaker's proposal "modest," Swift was adhering to an authorial practice that was well-established by 1729. Between 1680 and 1730, there were roughly 893 works published in the British Isles that included "modest" in the title—although the phrase "modest proposal" per se appears in only six titles between 1700 and 1730, and all of these refer to Swift's essay.¹⁴ While the claim to modesty in Swift's title may be conventional, the word "modest" nonetheless had real significance for Swift himself, who identifies "Modesty and humility" as the "chief ingredients" of good manners in his "Hints on Good Manners."¹⁵ The Proposer's claim to modesty, moreover, is precisely not a claim to kindness or benevolence. This point is important because Swift's readers have sometimes assumed, without elaboration, that the fraudulence of the Proposer's "modesty" is immediately apparent from the cruelty of his proposition.¹⁶ In doing so, they have conflated "modesty" and "kindness" with a readiness that is understandable, given the Proposer's ideas, but that obscures the fact that this conflation is itself a central object of Swift's assault. If we examine the *Modest Proposal* in the context of Swift's writings on politeness and good manners, in fact, we

¹⁴ These numbers are of course limited by the parameters of the data reviewed by the online search engines *Early English Books Online* and *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. A search of *EBO* for works with "modest" in the title, published between 1680 and 1700, yielded 734 hits in 187 records. A search of *ECCO* for works with "modest" in the title, published between 1700 and 1730, yielded 159 titles. Both these figures obviously include duplications through reprints and new editions. But the figures are still substantial. In most of these cases, "modest" qualifies such nouns as "examination," "reply," "vindication," "enquiry," "account," "essay," "proof," or "address." The phrase "modest proposal" per se appears only in a total of eight titles in these two databases together: in addition to the six mentioned above, there are two from the 1690s, both cited by Wittkowsky, "Swift's *Modest Proposal*," 88.

¹⁵ Jonathan Swift, *Hints on Good Manners*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, vol. 2, "Parodies, Hoaxes, Mock Treatises," ed. Valerie Rumbold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 195. All future references to Swift's compositions on conduct are from this edition and volume and will be cited parenthetically within the text by work and page number.

¹⁶ See, for example, Nokes, *Jonathan Swift*, 348.

see that the *Proposal* constitutes an attack on politeness in two ways.¹⁷ In the first, Swift specifically targets in his "insinuating" Proposer a type of Whig moral arrogance that he satirizes more explicitly in *A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation, According to the Most Polite Mode and Method Now Used At Court, and in the Best Companies of England*—usually called *Polite Conversation*.¹⁸ The Modest Proposer and the speaker of the first part of *Polite Conversation* are absurdly convinced of their own patriotic goodness and in virtually identical ways. In the second, Swift both embodies and reviles the ideal of politeness in which he himself believed and for which we can trace the theoretical outlines, however fraught with tension, in several of his non-ironic works: *Hints Towards an Essay on Conversation* (1762), *A Treatise on Good-Manners and Good-Breeding* (1758), and *Hints on Good Manners* (1765).¹⁹ This attack is formally nonpartisan, but its object is one in which Swift, writing as the Modest Proposer, is personally implicated.

Polite Conversation offers a clear picture of the kinds of behavior that Swift regarded as mannerly (or not), despite the fact that its titular focus is on "conversation."²⁰ The work is a two-part ironic satire of some

¹⁷ The present essay more or less equates "politeness" and "good manners," even though it does not see those notions as strictly coterminous. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers "courteous . . . well-mannered" as one definition for "polite," with an illustration from 1751 as the earliest instance of this meaning, although "well-mannered" was clearly a synonym for "polite" decades before. In his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Samuel Johnson offers "Elegant of manners" as his second definition for "polite," and his illustrative quotation, from Pope's "Epistle to Bathurst," dates from 1733. The oldest meaning of "polite" in the *OED*, in use until the 1770s but now obsolete, is "smoothed, polished, burnished." Johnson's first definition ("Glossy; smooth") reflects the same physical sense and is illustrated with quotations from Isaac Newton's *Optics*. As the term "polite" applies to Swift's *Polite Conversation*, it also includes wit, a notion suggested in *OED* definition 2.b, "refined; cultured, cultivated" (*OED Online*; March 2017, Oxford University Press; <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146878?rskey=x3r3y3&result=1> [accessed 6 April 2017]).

¹⁸ The characterization of the Proposer as "insinuating" is that of an anonymous eighteenth-century French commentator in *Journal Anglais* 3.17 (1 June 1777), 4, recorded in *Swift: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Kathleen Williams (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 199.

¹⁹ All three of these works were posthumously published, making composition difficult to date, and the *Hints on Good Manners* is visibly fragmentary. For fuller discussion of the dating of these works and their development within Swift's oeuvre, see the headnotes to them in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Rumbold, 172, 184, and 194.

²⁰ "Conversation" had an extended meaning in Swift's day, now obsolete, that included social interactions of many kinds, whether specifically verbal or not: "The act of consorting or having dealings with others." See the second definition in the *OED*. The first, also obsolete, is even more expansive: "[t]he action of living or having one's being in a place or among persons."

length, and its second part is a dialogue or small drama in which a group of apparently polite, or at least propertied, folk reveal themselves to be dull and witless (“impolite” in the sense of “unpolished”), despite their apparent gentility: they say nothing substantive or engaging in a long stream of verbal inelegancies, including clichés that were already thoroughly mildewed by 1700. The first part of the work, however, embodies false politeness in the speech of a single persona—the introducer and putative author of the dialogue—and it allows Swift to characterize that false politeness at length. The very name of Swift’s speaker, Simon Wagstaffe, ridicules the pseudo-author’s inferior talents: as a reduced form of “Shakespeare,” “Wagstaffe” suggests a writer who can only make a weaker gesture (a wag rather than a shake) with a less potent weapon (a staff rather than a spear) than that of the great dramatist. Just as significantly, the name of Swift’s speaker has Whiggish associations. As Valerie Rumbold has noted, “Wagstaffe” was probably inspired by the family of “Staffs” in *Tatler* no. 11 (1709), which “dates from a period of creative conviviality” that Swift shared with Joseph Addison and Richard Steele.²¹ The fact that Swift completed most of his work on *Polite Conversation* during the 1730s reverses the moral polarity of the name’s original associations and identifies it with Swift’s most vigorous anti-Walpole satires.²² Moreover, Wagstaffe’s Whiggish alignment is everywhere apparent in his preface to the dialogue, despite his claim that in his work “there cannot be found one Expression relating to Politics” (*Polite Conversation*, 295). His Whiggism appears in his enthusiastic references to such favorite targets of Swift’s as Charles Gildon, John Dennis, and Colley Cibber (292, 297, and 300); in his disparaging comments about Swift’s friends, including Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot (293); and in his allusion to the “whiggish, loyal, true Protestant Heart[s]” endangered by “the *Craftsman*, and his Abettors” (295).²³

Swift’s aggressive yoking of false politeness with Whiggism is far from adventitious: discussions of politeness were in Swift’s day extensions of politics by other means. As J. G. A. Pocock has argued, manners were crucial to redefining civic virtue in the eighteenth century for a commercial and acquisitive society, away from older definitions

²¹ Rumbold, headnote to *Polite Conversation*, in Rumbold, ed., *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, 257. On this point she follows Herbert Davis, introduction, *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1957), xxix.

²² *Ibid.*, 258. For Rumbold’s discussion of the dating of *Polite Conversation*, see 256–60.

²³ *The Craftsman* was the leading anti-Walpole journal of its day. Rumbold’s annotations to the Cambridge edition of *Polite Conversation* usefully register the many markers of Wagstaffe’s Whiggism in the first part of the work.

that tied it to personal valor and the ownership of landed estates.²⁴ As the mechanism through which virtue and commerce could be bound together and commerce itself projected as both benevolent and patriotic, manners were central to the Whig bid for cultural power.²⁵ Moreover, the Whigs' enthusiasm for politeness and their identification of good manners with benevolence and patriotism tended to undermine the traditional association of mannerliness with self-command. Their perspective fostered an assumption that good manners were in some sense transparent rather than performative, a reliable sign of one's innate goodness rather than a pleasing front for malice or aggression; and early-century Whig writers recurrently promoted this view, together with the enthusiasm that bore it along, in a variety of literary contexts. Steele, for example, celebrates in his 1722 comedy, *The Conscious Lovers*, a hero who is both benevolent and polite and who, with commercially minded self-possession, defines benevolence itself as "a better taste in expense."²⁶ The author of the play's prologue—Steele's friend and political ally, Leonard Welsted—makes the virtues of Steele's hero the basis of his opening appeal for the audience's favor: "Ye modest, wise and good, ye fair, ye brave, / To-night the champion of your virtues save; / Redeem from long contempt the comic name, / And judge politely for your country's fame."²⁷ Welsted suggests that as Steele's comedy is both polite and kind, so, too, are the "modest, wise and good" audience members who applaud it. (The adverb "politely" in the last line occu-

²⁴ Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 37–50, especially 48.

²⁵ The literature describing the Whig linkage of commerce, virtue, and politeness, following Pocock's reading, is by now sizeable. Of particular relevance for the present argument are Lawrence Klein's "The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness" (*Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18 [1984–1985]: 186–214), and "Property and Politeness in the Early Eighteenth-Century Whig Moralists: The Case of the Spectator," in *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (ed. John Brewer and Susan Staves [London: Routledge, 1995], 221–33); and Nicholas Phillipson's "Politics and Politeness in the Reigns of Anne and the Early Hanoverians," in *The Varieties of British Political Thought, 1500–1800* (ed. J. G. A. Pocock [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 211–45). The account offered by these and other writers is now widely accepted. Markku Peltonen has offered a useful corrective of it, arguing persuasively that the range of eighteenth-century opinion on politeness was more politically varied than the standard (Pocockian) account suggests. See his "Politeness and Whiggism, 1688–1732," *The Historical Journal* 48 (2005): 391–414. For purposes of the present argument, the crucial point is that Swift accepts what is now the most widely accepted view and uses it as a basis of attack.

²⁶ Steele, *The Conscious Lovers*, in *British Dramatists from Dryden to Sheridan*, ed. George H. Nettleton and Arthur E. Case (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 452.

²⁷ Welsted, prologue to *The Conscious Lovers*, 439.

pies a place that might well have been taken up instead, meter aside, by “kindly.”) Most of all, Welsted sees the kind politeness that he solicits as contributing to the nation’s moral greatness.

Swift regarded this Whig view of politeness as ethically simple-minded and politically dishonest. In the introduction to *Polite Conversation*, he satirizes this perspective by foregrounding its central hypocrisies, depicting Wagstaffe as extravagantly proud of his puny literary gifts, as well as bombastically patriotic and absurdly frugal. Wagstaffe regards his sodden little playlet as a boon to the country, and he asserts that he deserves greater fame for contributing to the nation’s weal than either Charles XII of Sweden or Sir Isaac Newton (299). At one point, in the course of appealing to the Whig administration for financial support, he likens himself to a classical hero:

I may venture to affirm, without the least Violation of Modesty, that there is no Man now alive, who hath by many Degrees, so just Pretensions as my self, to the highest Encouragement from the Crown, the Parliament, and the Ministry, towards bringing this Work to its due Perfection. I have been assured, that several great Heroes of Antiquity, were worshipp’d as Gods, upon the Merit of having civiliz’d a fierce and barbarous People. It is manifest, I could have no other Intentions. (294)

In a piquant touch, Swift also presents Wagstaffe as happy to regard his dialogue as a commodity and as ridiculously eager to assure his readers that his work, *qua* commodity, will be an even greater bargain than expected if it is prudently consumed. Of the “ingenious Speeches contained in this Work,” says Wagstaffe, one can be certain that “by a discreet, thrifty Management, they may serve for the Entertainment of a whole Year; to any Person who doth not make too long, or too frequent Visits in the same Family” (283). Farther on he asserts:

The Reader will find, that the following Collection of polite Expressions, will easily incorporate with all Subjects of genteel and fashionable Life. Those which are proper for Morning Tea, will be equally useful at the same Entertainment in the Afternoon, even in the same Company, only by shifting the several Questions, Answers, and Replies, into different Hands; and, such as are adapted to Meals, will indifferently serve for Dinners, or Suppers, only distinguishing between Day-Light and Candle-Light. By this Method, no diligent Person of a tolerable Memory, can ever be at a Loss. (293)

There are of course vital differences between Wagstaffe and the Modest Proposer. Wagstaffe is merely ignorant and fatuous, while the Modest Proposer is shockingly inhumane. More importantly, the commodi-

ties they are either selling or suggesting for sale differ profoundly: the stale aphorisms retailed by the one are obviously far less horrifying than the butchered infants recommended for sale by the other. The performative energies behind the two characters are virtually identical, however. Indeed, the Modest Proposer is in essence a more brutal, and earlier, version of Simon Wagstaffe. The Modest Proposer exhibits Wagstaffe's sense of himself as an object of national gratitude, even if his self-esteem is more appallingly unmerited than Wagstaffe's. It appears in his self-flattering suggestion, early in the *Proposal*, that anyone who could "find out a fair, cheap, and easy Method of making these [poor Irish] Children sound and useful Members of the Commonwealth, would deserve so well of the Publick, as to have his Statue set up for a Preserver of the nation" (*Modest Proposal*).²⁸ It appears again in his concluding assertion that he has no other motive for offering his proposal than promoting "the publick good of my Country, by advancing our Trade, providing for Infants, relieving the Poor, and giving some Pleasure to the Rich" (118).²⁹ Like Wagstaffe, if much more viciously, the Modest Proposer is happy to regard as commodities items that have no business being sold; and like Wagstaffe, he is eager to assure his readers that the commodities he envisions are amenable to commonplace thrift. He suggests early in his essay that "A Child will make two Dishes at an Entertainment for Friends; and when the Family dines alone, the fore or hind Quarter will make a reasonable Dish; and seasoned with a little Pepper or Salt, will be very good Boiled on the fourth Day, especially in Winter" (112). He adds quickly, "Those who are more thrifty (*as I must confess the Times require*) may flay the Carcase; the Skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable *Gloves for Ladies, and Summer Boots for fine Gentlemen*" (*ibid.*). In the dark web of Swift's ironic imagination, hoary clichés and slaughtered babies are economic equivalents, commodities whose value a Whiggish mind sees as similarly enhanced by careful domestic management.

Examining these two speakers side by side clarifies the ways in which the Modest Proposer embodies a Whiggish form of politeness that Swift

²⁸ Swift, *A Modest Proposal*, in *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Davis, vol. 12, 109. All future references to the Irish pamphlets that I will be discussing, *A Modest Proposal* and *A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars*, are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text by work and page number. *A Modest Proposal* is in volume 12 and *A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars* is in volume 13. Volume 14 of the Cambridge edition of Swift's works, which contains both, is forthcoming as of this writing.

²⁹ The italics in this passage, emphasizing the speaker's (false) patriotism, are in the original.

regarded as fraudulently benevolent and fraudulently patriotic, as well as myopically commercial. For Swift, the Proposer's putative modesty represents a claim to goodness on the morally self-centered terms of his Whig contemporaries, and by ironically yoking that modesty with cannibalism, Swift convulsively repudiates the tacit Whig belief that politeness and goodness are naturally one. The fact that the "Modest Proposal" was written nine years before *Polite Conversation* was revised and completed, moreover, points up its centrality to what we might see as an ongoing critique of the Whig view of manners within Swift's canon as a whole. While the bland arrogance of the Modest Proposer is visible on a broad narrative canvas in 1726, in the affable self-conceit and misplaced national pride displayed by Gulliver in the early books of the *Travels*, it snaps into sharp, even head-spinning, focus in 1729, with the Modest Proposer's putatively benevolent and supposedly patriotic endorsement of cannibalism. Having articulated this persona concisely and pungently in the *Modest Proposal*, and in a manner that condenses some of the performative energies of Gulliver, Swift had his persona ready to hand when he turned his attention to completing *Polite Conversation* for publication in the 1730s. There the subject of the work as a whole in some sense aligns with the disposition Swift attacks in Wagstaffe, its nominally polite front man. But the persona also serves as the medium through which Swift's non-ironic perspective on manners—in the *Hints Towards an Essay on Conversation*, the *Hints on Good Manners*, and *On Good-Manners and Good-Breeding*—is transmuted dramatically into its moral opposite.

The irony of Swift's attack on the Whig view of manners in the *Modest Proposal* is stark, and to the extent that Swift aims his attack at his Whig contemporaries, he is clearly detached from his polite Proposer. Nonetheless, Swift believed sincerely in the importance of mannerly behavior, Whig permutations of it aside. His attitude toward politeness was complex, and the quality of that complexity is worth examining briefly because it shapes Swift's relationship to the Modest Proposer at a deep rhetorical level. Swift's view of politeness involved an emphasis on self-command that he saw as lacking in the Whig enthusiasm for it. But evidence from his life and work suggests that he recurrently found the exercise of such self-command—the ritualized hypocrisy entailed in politeness as he saw it—personally vexing.³⁰ By at least one account,

³⁰ In *Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Jenny Davidson describes the extent to which social conservatives such as Swift promoted manners in terms that effectively defended hypocrisy, although much of her

Swift in his private character . . . knew to a point all the modes and variations of complaisance and politeness. And yet his manners were not framed like the manners of any other mortal . . . they shone forth, always enlivened more or less with some spirit of dominion, in a blaze of politeness, so inimitably, and determinately his own, that in effect they seemed to be the result of pure nature.³¹

Swift's memoirist praises Swift's manners in this description, but this praise is curled carefully around the "spirit of dominion" that apparently made Swift's manners distinctive and which undoubtedly gave Swift himself more discomfort over time than this tribute suggests. In the "Hints Towards an Essay on Conversation," Swift specifically reviles "the itch of Dispute and Contradiction," among other asocial tendencies, because it renders a person "as unfit for Conversation as a Madman in Bedlam" (180). But Swift's hatred of combativeness, beyond if not within specifically conversational contexts, must be set against his long-term role as a literary *agent provocateur* on any number of political and social issues, as well as his "defiant readiness to offend," an ingrained tendency that (paradoxically) accompanied his intense personal ambition and that may well have undermined it at crucial points in his career.³²

As Rawson has observed, Swift's ways of dealing with his "angers" were many and complex, and in private as well as public contexts they often involved polite suppressions of fury that were warped or elliptical—visibly false or deliberately incomplete.³³ Moreover, Swift's observations on politeness in his non-ironic works recurrently exhibit a

argument focuses on exploring the ways in which Swift and others attempted to exclude members of certain social groups from the benefits of hypocrisy in the form of lying. The present account of Swift's vision of manners emphasizes the partisan investments of early-century discussions of the topic in a way that Davidson's does not. It also suggests that for someone like Swift, the notion that "all forms of self-control are akin to hypocrisy" (32) was not as distasteful as it might have been for those of a Whiggish bent, who were more inclined to naturalize politeness and see it as a true sign of inner goodness.

³¹ Deane Swift, quoted in Rumbold, ed., *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, 4:li–lii.

³² Rawson, *Swift's Angers*, 17.

³³ Rawson offers an example of this tendency as it appears in a 1711 letter from Swift to Charles Ford. Here Swift lashes out at his superior, Archbishop King—Swift's long-time mentor and ally—for failing to provide him with promised assistance in advancing his career and for instead suggesting that Swift turn his hand to writing theology, quite against Swift's own literary bent, and in apparent obliviousness of the intensity of Swift's worldly ambitions (*Swift's Angers*, 13). Says Swift: "I never expect Sincerity from any man; and am no more angry at the Breach of it, than at the colour of his Hair." As Rawson observes, Swift's posture in the letter constitutes "huffy indignation pretending to lofty indifference."

sideways hostility to mannerly self-control itself, even in the course of recommending such control to others. In *On Good-Manners and Good-Breeding*, for example, Swift devotes nearly half his remarks to deriding those who refine manners needlessly, and at one point he complains of the effects of such overrefinement on the victims of the hyper-refined: “The impertinencies of this ceremonial behavior are no where better seen than at those tables, where ladies preside; who value themselves upon account of their good-breeding; where a man must reckon upon passing an hour without doing any one thing he has a mind to” (186–87).³⁴ Swift’s criticism here focuses on the tortures of being treated with excessive courtesy. But his complaint suggests that what one endures at the hands of the overrefined is merely a protracted version of what one endures in conditions requiring routine politeness: it involves “passing an *hour* without doing any one thing [a man] has a mind to” [emphasis added] instead of shorter, intermittent stretches. In *Hints Towards an Essay on Conversation*, Swift enters the domain of the conduct-book writer to describe ways of conversing that one must avoid in order to be polite. But his injunctions are not written in the spirit of sociability that they nominally seek to cultivate. Swift confesses that he was “prompted to write [his] Thoughts upon this Subject by mere Indignation, to reflect that so useful and innocent a Pleasure . . . so much in all Men’s Power, should be so much neglected and abused” (173). Most of the essay itself is a muted rant about various forms of irritating social behavior, the heat of which is tamped down only by the comic particularity with which Swift characterizes some of the conversational malefactors he reviles—the over-garrulous, the self-absorbed, the self-consciously witty, and so on. Near the end, he fulminates:

Thus we see how human Nature is most debased, by the Abuse of that Faculty which is held the great Distinction between Men and Brutes; and how little Advantage we make of that which might be the greatest, the most lasting, and most innocent, as well as useful Pleasure of Life: In Default of which, we are forced to take up with those poor Amusements of Dress and Visiting, or the more pernicious ones of Play, Drink and Vicious Amours, whereby the Nobility and Gentry of both Sexes are entirely corrupted both in Body and Mind, and have lost all Notions of Love, Honour, Friendship, Generosity; which, under the Name of Fopperies, have been for some Time laughed out of Doors. (180)

³⁴ As Rumbold notes, Swift rails against overrefinement in other contexts, including William Harrison’s *Tatler* 20 and “Hints on Good Manners” (*The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, 2:186 n.8). In the latter, he suggests that the problem is more pronounced in Ireland than in England (195).

In the *Hints Towards an Essay on Conversation* Swift becomes visibly excessive—in some sense uncontrolled—in excoriating those who lack social self-control. At times his voice is uncomfortably reminiscent of Gulliver's, in the deranged screed on liars at the end of the *Travels*. To the extent that *Hints Towards an Essay* can be called ironic, it is so at Swift's own expense. Taken together, the *Hints Towards an Essay* and Swift's other non-ironic works on politeness suggest that however much Swift believed in manners as the highest grace of social life, his view of them was shot through with hostility and defensiveness; he recurrently saw the self-restraint required in social settings as annoying to exhibit and as even more annoying not to find in others. Moreover, this aggravation at the frustrations of self-command cannot be construed as an attack on Whig smugness. If anything, it implies an unacknowledged longing for the moral self-confidence that Swift hated in his Whig antagonists. Given the contradictions in his feelings, it's not surprising that Swift never published a non-ironic treatise on politeness, even though the *Hints Towards an Essay on Conversation*, the *Hints on Manners*, and *On Good-Manners and Good-Breeding* constitute repeated if inconclusive efforts to assemble materials for such a work. In Swift's mental universe, manners per se were always ripe for attack, even though—perhaps because—Swift adopted putatively mannerly postures to produce some of his most effective satires. As a mannerly performance that is undermined even as it displays Swift's commitment to polite self-command, the *Modest Proposal* is Swift's most concise and compelling attack on manners. Given that irony is in some sense the rhetorical essence of Swift's own view of politeness, we might even regard the *Modest Proposal* as an ironic attack on irony. The intensity of the essay's effect derives in no small part from the fact that Swift is fully involved in the object of his own assault.

COMPOSING THE MODEST PROPOSER

The fact that *A Modest Proposal* attacks the Whig view of politeness is readily apparent from the postural similarities between the Modest Proposer and the putative author of *Polite Conversation*. The fact that it also attacks Swift's own vision of politeness, which Swift self-consciously embodies in the process of assaulting the Whig view, is perhaps less obvious. But we can find evidence that Swift is both removed from and fully immersed in his satire in the *Modest Proposal* if we examine the essay in the context of Swift's non-ironic writings on the Irish poor in

the 1720s and '30s. Specifically, if we compare the *Modest Proposal* with a work Swift proudly claimed as his own—*A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars in all the Parishes of Dublin* (1737)—we discern in the latter a Swift who is far less polite in his own voice than he is as the Modest Proposer. While the *Modest Proposal* is undoubtedly the product of moral fury, that fury is at least partly obscured by the Proposer's bland face and ingratiating voice, the products of Swift's deliberate irony. The badging proposal is marked by the same fury, but it appears without ironic obstruction, after Swift's bitterness regarding the intransigence of Irish poverty in the 1720s had continued into the 1730s. The Swift of the 1737 essay, in other words, is a Swift driven to candor by circumstance. In 1737 Swift was unwilling or unable to sustain the polite posture of the *Modest Proposal* in discussing the Irish poor, and his ironic pose in the *Modest Proposal* in 1729 suggests a capacity for detachment from the topic (if not actual optimism about it) that is no longer visible in 1737. If the *Modest Proposal* is a "cry of despair," as Leo Damrosch has called it, the badging essay marks a move out of that despair only insofar as what it proposes is politically feasible.³⁵ In any case, the feelings Swift expresses in the badging proposal are feelings he had to suppress in order to write the *Modest Proposal*, and Swift himself no doubt found this process of suppression taxing even in 1729.

In the *Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars*, Swift argues that the poor of each Dublin parish should wear badges to certify their parochial affiliation. These badges would indicate to those whom the poor asked for alms that they were legitimate objects of parochial responsibility; the non-native poor were to be "driven or whipt out of Town" (135).³⁶ Unlike the *Modest Proposal*, Swift's badging essay is palpably angry, and its hostility is directed principally at what Swift calls the "Evil of Foreign Beggars," the indigent who flock to the metropolis from areas outside Dublin, and who are "nothing else but a profligate Clan of Thieves, Drunkards, Heathens, and Whore-Mongers, fitter to be rooted out of the Face of the Earth, Than suffered to levy a vast annual Tax upon the City" (139). In Swift's view, these "foreign beggars" place unfair demands on wealthier Dubliners who already fund the Dublin Workhouse and who should not be expected to provide for the poor

³⁵ Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World*, 420.

³⁶ Davis's title for *A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars* omits "the," which is present on the original title-page. For this essay, the word has been retained in abbreviations of the title.

from outside the city as well (132).³⁷ While the 1737 essay was published eight years after the *Modest Proposal*, it does not represent any fundamental change in Swift's attitude toward the poor or his recommendations for dealing with them after 1729. Badging the poor by parish was an idea that Swift had supported since at least 1726, when he complained that a badging scheme instituted by the Church in Dublin was not working because the poor were refusing to wear their badges.³⁸ In a sermon from 1725 or '26, one that also recommends badging, Swift displays the same punitive attitude toward the poor that he presents more aggressively in 1737, depicting them as "infesting" the streets and as reduced to poverty largely through their own moral failings.³⁹ Swift believed the parochial defensiveness he expresses in these works was supported by law: "By the old Laws of *England* still in Force, and I presume by those of *Ireland*, every Parish is bound to maintain its own Poor" (*A Proposal for Giving Badges to the Beggars*, 133).⁴⁰ As several scholars have noted, Swift was wrong in this assumption.⁴¹ There was no statute

³⁷ The workhouse had been established by the Irish Parliament in 1703, by *The 1st George 2nd cap. 27*. Its governing board was expanded in 1727 by *The 2nd Anne cap. 19*, which went into effect in 1728. For the first act, see *The Statutes at Large, Passed in the Parliaments Held in Ireland: From the Third Year of Edward the Second, A. D. 1310, to The First Year of George the Third, A. D. 1761 inclusive*, vol. 4 (Dublin, 1765), 6–67. For the second, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, 314–32. Swift complains about the expansion of the workhouse board under the second act at the outset of *A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars*, and he sees it as contributing to an increase in the numbers of foreign beggars in Dublin.

³⁸ See Swift, "Upon Giving Badges to the Poor," dated 26 September, 1726, appendix C, in Davis, ed., *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, 13:172–73. William Fownes wrote a pamphlet that recommended badging the poor in 1725, and this apparently triggered the formal adoption of the plan. Landa suggests that Fownes, an ex-Lord Mayor who was friendly with Swift, "came under Swift's persuasive influence and wrote this pamphlet at Swift's instigation" ("Jonathan Swift and Charity," 52).

³⁹ Swift, "Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland," in Davis, ed., *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, 9:205–6. In this undated sermon, Swift mentions that the poor have expressed preemptive resistance to wearing badges, which suggests that the badging plan put in place in the wake of Fownes's 1725 pamphlet was in the early stages of adoption. This in turn suggests that this sermon dates from after Fownes's work in 1725 but before September of 1726, the date of "Upon Giving Badges to the Poor."

⁴⁰ As Landa points out, Swift's assertion on this point is more tentative in the 1737 badging proposal than it is in "Causes of the Wretched Condition of Ireland" ("Jonathan Swift and Charity," 51 n. 10). In the earlier work, from which Swift borrowed several sentences for his 1737 proposal, Swift states more simply: "By the antient Law of this Realm, still in Force, every Parish is obliged to maintain its own Poor" (207).

⁴¹ See Landa, "Jonathan Swift and Charity," 51; David Dickson, "In Search of the Old Irish Poor Law," in *Economy and Society in Scotland and Ireland, 1500–1939*, ed. Rosalind Mitchison and Peter Roebuck (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1988), 151; and Peter Gray, *The Making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815–43* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 20. Sir George Nicholls discusses the absence of a formal poor's rate in Ireland in

enforcing a parochial poor's rate in Ireland until 1838, nor were there laws of settlement and removal (England had had both since the seventeenth century). It is true, however, that parochial care of the poor in Swift's day was a kind of "*'lex non scripta'* . . . in which the Church of Ireland vestry had been an active or potentially active welfare body."⁴² The hardships of the 1720s had placed extraordinary strain on this parochial relief, and by 1737, Swift felt more intensely than ever that the financial burdens of the propertied needed to be limited through the rigorous policing of parish boundaries.

Swift's exasperation with this problem reached a peak in his 1737 proposal. His anger is palpable throughout the essay, and it is aimed primarily at the poor—as we can see in a passage in which Swift describes his own treatment of beggars who approach him for alms but wear no badge:

They are too lazy to work; they are not afraid to steal, nor ashamed to beg, and yet are too proud to be seen with a Badge, as many of them have confessed to me, and not a few in very injurious Terms. . . . I appeal to all indifferent People, whether such Wretches deserve to be relieved. As to myself, I must confess, this absurd Insolence hath so affected me, that for several Years past, I have not disposed of one single Farthing to a Street Beggar, nor intend to do so until I see a better Regulation; and I have endeavoured to persuade all my Brother-walkers to follow my Example, which most of them assure me they do. For, if Beggary be not able to beat out Pride, it cannot deserve Charity. However, as to Persons in Coaches and Chairs, they bear but little of the Persecution we suffer, and are willing to leave it intirely upon us. (134–35)

Swift's snarky reference to "Persons in Coaches and Chairs" at the end of this passage no doubt alludes to the fact that the Dublin Workhouse derived a large portion of its funding from licensing fees for hackney coaches and sedan chairs.⁴³ Swift's comment constitutes a reminder that while those who hire private transport can be said to help fund the workhouse, those who do not and who are therefore the routine targets of mendicant solicitation are (literally) footing the bill for the poor outside the workhouse, many of whom are from outside Dublin. Swift's anger in this passage, however, is more than an expression of the personal frugality that led him to walk rather than ride around the city.

the eighteenth century, although he doesn't mention Swift's misapprehension on the point in his book, *A History of the Irish Poor Law* [1856] (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967).

⁴² Dickson, "In Search of the Old Irish Poor Law," 157.

⁴³ Both the 1703 and the 1727 laws establishing the Dublin Workhouse provided for the collection of fees from these sources. See *The Statutes at Large*, n. 37, above.

It is an exaltation of meanness into principle. Having insisted that the arrogance of beggars who won't wear badges justifies refusing them aid, Swift boasts that others admire him for his fiscal prudence. While Swift's anger in this passage has its own policy-driven logic, it terminates in a moral smugness that sets modesty aside.

Swift's self-aggrandizements in the 1737 essay are perhaps most pointed in the layout of his title page, where he brought the "full weight of his authority" to bear in support of his argument, both as Dean of St. Patrick's and as an Irish patriot.⁴⁴ Here the author's attribution, which appears below the title, reads, "By the Dean of St. Patrick's." Below this is a woodcut that shows a ¾-length portrait of a clergyman, obviously meant to be Swift, facing front but standing next to a writing table, quill in hand. Beneath the cut is the inscription, in a large, bold-faced, cur-sive font: "M. B. Drapier." (See figure 1.) The image and its inscription invoke Swift's literary campaign against Wood's half-pence in 1724 and '25, which Swift conducted under the pseudonym "M. B. Drapier." This effort successfully beat back the introduction of copper coins into Ireland that would probably have devalued the Irish currency and further damaged the already weak economy. The Drapier's Letters, as they are called, earned Swift renown as an Irish national hero, and his effort to summon this renown on behalf of his badging proposal was aggressive and deliberate.⁴⁵ As Janine Barchas has shown, Swift signaled his authorship of *Gulliver's Travels* for buyers of the octavo edition of his 1735 *Works* by including in it a portrait of Gulliver that resembled Swift himself and that resembled him in ways that the portrait in the cheaper duodecimo did not.⁴⁶ If Swift was directly engaged in setting the portraits for the 1735 *Works*—the authorship of which is clear enough on the title page but never explicit—he almost certainly dictated the appearance of the title page for an essay that he signed and which, as scholars have noted, is one of the very few of his publications that he did

⁴⁴ Irvin Ehrenpreis, *Swift: The Man, His Works, and the Age*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1983), 815.

⁴⁵ Clive Probyn has suggested that the image on the title page of Swift's proposal is "the only surviving image we have" of the "Drapier's Head" figure, which appeared all over Dublin after the Drapier's triumph in 1725 and which served as a logo for taverns and coffee houses. Probyn also discusses the head- and tail-pieces in the badging proposal, which similarly extol Swift as a cleric and an Irish patriot. See Probyn, "Jonathan Swift at the Sign of the Drapier," in *Reading Swift: Papers from The Third Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Hermann J. Real and Helgard Stöver-Leidig (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1988), 225–35; here, 229.

⁴⁶ Barchas, *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 31–34.

A
PROPOSAL
FOR GIVING
BADGES
TO THE
BEGGARS
IN ALL THE
Parishes of DUBLIN.

By the Dean of St. PATRICK'S.



DUBLIN:
Printed by GEORGE FAULKNER, Bookseller, in
Essex-Street, opposite to the Bridge,
MDCCLXXXVII.

FIGURE 1. A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars in all the Parishes of Dublin (1736), title page.

sign.⁴⁷ The idea to include the cut on the title page of the 1737 proposal is highly likely to have been Swift's own, in other words, rather than his printer's.

Swift's pride in his most widely celebrated achievement as an Irish patriot was certainly warranted. But his eagerness to capitalize on it in the badging proposal constitutes a degree of self-promotion that exceeds any exhibited by the Modest Proposer. Indeed, as a polite suppression of authorial self-aggrandizement and hostility, the rhetorical posture of the Modest Proposer marks a decided improvement over that of Swift, in his own voice, in the badging essay. To be sure, the Modest Proposer imagines near the outset of his argument that he might have his statue "set up for a Preserver of the Nation" (109). But his claims to patriotic glory throughout the *Proposal* are brief and speculative. The Swift of the badging essay, in contrast, frames his entire proposal by foregrounding his status as an Irish patriot. His assertions on this point appear graphically and structurally at the outset of his work, and they are presented with preemptive assurance. The fact that the *Modest Proposal* involves a polite suppression of the anger and self-promotion that openly suffuse the badging essay becomes clearest when one compares the terms Swift uses to describe foreign beggars in the badging essay with those his speaker uses to describe the poor in the *Modest Proposal*. Swift's recurrent metaphor for foreign beggars in his 1737 proposal is that of "vermin," a term that in Swift's day could refer to any parasitic, thronging animal (such as a rat), but one that leaned heavily—then as now—in the direction of worms or insects, such as fleas or lice.⁴⁸ Foreign beggars, says Swift, "infest" the city of Dublin and appear in "perpetual Swarms." At one point, he refers to foreign beggars as "Caterpillars."⁴⁹ While these metaphors are not original with Swift, and "caterpillar" in particular had been a term of derision for a lazy parasite since the fif-

⁴⁷ In addition to the attribution and the cut on the title page of the 1737 proposal, Swift includes "J. Swift April 22, 1737" at the end of the text. See *A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars*, 25. For the evasions regarding authorship on title pages of the 1735 *Works*, see James McLaverty, "George Faulkner and Swift's Collected Works," in *Jonathan Swift and the Eighteenth-Century Book*, ed. Paddy Bullard and James McLaverty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2013), 154–75.

⁴⁸ The first two meanings of "vermin" in the *OED* pertain to parasitic animals, and the second of them denotes "creeping or wingless insects (and other minute animals) of a loathsome or offensive appearance or character." Figurative uses, applied to humans, appear as early as 1562.

⁴⁹ The *OED* lists metaphorical uses of "caterpillar" to denote "A rapacious person . . . one who preys upon society," beginning in 1475.

teenth century, Swift uses this language energetically in the badging essay.⁵⁰ In the *Modest Proposal*, in contrast, the language of infestation is nowhere in sight, and the poor are systematically—and with apparent respectfulness—referred to by the Modest Proposer as cattle. The females are “breeders” who can be “served” by the males, and the children “dropt” from their “Dams” are an excellent potential source of food (110 and 111).⁵¹ From the badging proposal to the *Modest Proposal*, in other words, the poor at issue move several rungs up the Great Chain of Being—or, as we would say now, the evolutionary ladder. They move from being fiscal burdens to financial assets.

At this point, of course, Swift’s ability to embody the Modest Proposer intersects directly with his self-conscious critique of his speaker, with the fact that the Proposer sees the poor as valuable only in commercial terms and commerce itself, on Britain’s imperial terms, as amenable to cannibalism. Swift’s attack on the dehumanizing effects of modern economic thinking, however, is only part of his larger and more protracted attack on the Whig confidence in commerce as a universal refiner of taste and sentiment, an attack that Swift leveled at real as well as invented Whigs in a variety of contexts throughout the 1720s and ‘30s. In any case, examining the *Modest Proposal* beside the badging proposal allows us to discern the process of self-suppression—what we might call the psycho dynamic of politeness—that allowed Swift to create his Modest Proposer out of a temper recurrently inclined to righteous indignation. Because Swift saw politeness, as a form of social performance, as virtually indistinguishable from irony as a rhetorical mode, we can regard the *Modest Proposal* as an attack on the very compositional process through which Swift wrote it. The *Modest Proposal*, like other of Swift’s best works, eats its own vitals, epistemologically speaking. It destroys the moral and rhetorical premises out of which it proceeds, using ironic means to demolish the concept of irony itself. Most importantly, reading the *Modest Proposal* in context helps us recognize that the pain Swift may have felt in composing his essay is not entirely absent from the finished work. The compositional process behind the *Proposal* is, one might say, masochistic, an instance of sadism enacted against the self. That masochism appears in the *Proposal* as the epiphenomenal but real correlative of the culinary sadism endorsed by

⁵⁰ For examples of the language of infestation in *A Proposal for giving Badges to the Beggars*, see 132, 134, 138, and 139.

⁵¹ This language appears recurrently in *A Modest Proposal*.

the Proposer. It is this, the felt self-punishment of the author, that is the affective essence of Swift's work. It lingers uncomfortably under the skins of the *Modest Proposal's* squirming readers even now.

THE MODEL OF MODESTY

In presenting politeness as the object of Swift's assault in *A Modest Proposal*, this essay does not claim that politeness was the only target of Swift's attack. As students of the *Proposal* recurrently note, Swift's satire in the *Proposal* is multifarious—barbed in all directions, cactus-like. The argument offered here, however, does present Swift's assault on politeness in the *Proposal* as intimately bound up with his attacks on more explicitly political objects. This attack not only sharpens Swift's satire on other objects, it enables all of them, serving as the performative glue that binds Swift's aims together and makes them difficult to specify in isolation. Beyond this, regarding the *Modest Proposal* as an attack on politeness allows us to consider the ways in which Swift's essay has provided a template for ironic satire that bloggers and op-ed writers continue to employ even now, whenever they propound, with a straight face, a "modest proposal" that is likely to offend their readers until it is explained further and that may continue to offend even then. Modern writers of ironic satire, whatever their agendas and whatever their compositional modes, are often drawn to Swift's template because they see the polite posture at its core, freed from its historical contexts, as licensing a kind of faux-naïve obnoxiousness. It gives them the power to shock, and to relish the sensation of shocking, while daring their readers to call them boors in earnest; readers who do so can be charged with a simple-minded inability to grasp a joke, even if that joke is not entirely a joke at all. Thus has the *Modest Proposal* served as a pretext for blurring "satire" and "irony"—the words are now often confused in common parlance—and for rendering "irony" itself so unstable as to be, in extreme cases, all but meaningless. Finally, the politeness of the *Modest Proposal* is essential to the work's antiseptic sadism. It is also the component of the essay that makes it most adaptable to the purposes of later ironists, whether self-conscious and deliberate or not. The eighteenth-century contexts of the *Proposal*, while invisible to many of Swift's imitators, are vital to its transhistorical character.

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