Notes on Swift’s “A Modest Proposal”

Satire = sustained irony
Wit is function of recipient—if you don’t get it, that’s your problem
Poking fun at/calling attention to:

England’s treatment of Ireland
- Most Irish live in housing owned by English landlords
- Brits take money out of Ireland but don’t put it back in
- Leeching out Ireland
Unstated assumption:
  England really is killing people—only one step away from eating them
  - Famine the year before in Ireland, Britain did nothing to relieve it
  - Northern Ireland still property of Britain
  - Unionists = North, Separatists = South
  - Similar struggle still there today

Projectors = proto-social scientists
Devised ridiculous proposals for major complex social issues

Writing to aristocrats who were raised on Greek & Roman writings
Ciceronian oration form is used for “Modest Proposal”
Use of ethos (ethical), logos (logical), & pathos (emotional) appeals to convince
Sentences are long and complex, diction is elevated (Neoclassic style)
Rhetoric – art of manipulating audiences; Pope was well trained in this
Has what appears to be a source or witness (the American), but hard to trace
“Drastic times require drastic measures”
Creates joke out of social problem that people won’t listen to in other forms
Humor can be effective way to gain attention

Eventually England became consumed with other colonies and possessions (and their uprisings)
British Empire became too big to maintain effectively
Eventually, WW1 & WW2 caused a kind of implosion, and Britain let its colonies have independence
By 1947 British gave up most of its territory

As dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Ireland, Swift saw firsthand the devastating consequences of famine on the poorer segments of the Irish population. Conditions in Ireland reached a crisis point in 1729. Thousands of men, women, and children suffered homelessness and poverty as the result of crop failures, high unemployment, rising prices, and trade restrictions imposed by the British government. Responding to the public outcry for a remedy, Swift wrote “A Modest Proposal” as a satire—a literary work that ridicules a subject using irony and wit and is intended to create amusement, contempt, or anger in readers. The essay blasted those whom he believed to be responsible for Ireland’s state of affairs—the British government, as well as corrupt landlords and merchants. He also criticized the “projectors,” people who offered often absurd and simplistic solutions to very complex problems. “A Modest Proposal” provides just such a solution as obvious satire.

Irish Politics in the Early 1700s

The Tory political party came to power in England from 1710 to 1714, employing Swift to write as a political journalist. It was a happy period in his life that ended abruptly with the death of Queen Anne and the downfall of the Tory government. The opposing political party, the Whigs, came to power with King George I, whose reign would last from 1714 to 1727. Prime Minister Robert Walpole became the dominant party and government leader under King George. A strong leader, Walpole believed firmly in the right of the British government to oversee and regulate Irish affairs.

As early as the 1500s, England had exerted power over Ireland and fought to make the country a subordinate kingdom, a colony loyal to the British monarchy. By 1700, however, the Irish, who had their own Parliament and cultural identity, felt they were an independent nation that simply shared a king in common with the English. The British government recognized the Irish Parliament as a legitimate body, but felt that the Irish House of Lords was subordinate to the British House of Lords and passed a law to that effect in 1720. It eliminated the rights of the Irish to make their own laws, mint their own currency, or exercise supreme judicial and legislative authority in their country. This enraged many Irish nationalists. These “Patriots,” as they came to be known, initiated an aggressive fight for Irish independence from Great Britain.
The Rise of the Irish Protestants & Patriotism

Among those Patriots calling for Irish independence was Swift. Although he had lived much of his life in England, Swift was born and died an Irishman. Appointed dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in 1713, Swift was a devoted Protestant who supported the so-called “Protestant Ascendancy,” the coming to power of the Protestant landed class in the largely Catholic country of Ireland. These Irish Protestants included Patriots who were fiercely anti-English and strongly supportive of the Church of Ireland—the equivalent of the Church of England in Ireland. Swift spent a considerable amount of effort defending the Church of Ireland from Protestants who dissented or refused to join it.

Trade Restrictions

The English economy prospered in the early 1700s, partly due to the country’s colonies and trade. Ireland, meanwhile, was in a period of decline. In the 1690s, the English restricted Irish exports of wool and wool products. They then further restricted Ireland’s agricultural trade with the European continent, at the same time increasing English imports into Ireland. These decrees had a devastating effect on the Irish economy. Because it could not export many of its products, Ireland lost domestic industries, especially in agriculture. As Ireland’s economic health deteriorated, it became less self-sufficient and fell victim to high unemployment and inflation. The Irish became overly dependent on potatoes and pigs for subsistence, and when disease and drought harmed both during the 1720s, nationwide famine occurred. The series of bad harvests continued into the late 1720s, and a devastating crop failure occurred in 1727. During this period, the English monarchy tried to devalue further Irish currency by issuing “wood’s coins.” The coins made Ireland wholly dependent on England for trade because no other nation but England would accept them.

Public Reaction

Irish nationalist cries for independence from England and pleas that citizens consume only domestic products echoed across the country in the 1720s. Patriots urged the masses to take matters into their own hands and rebel against the tyranny of the British monarchy. Pamphlets calling for independence circulated throughout the country, and Swift began using his literary talent as a pamphleteer for the Irish cause.

His first piece of protest literature was “A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacturers,” a pamphlet that urged the Irish to buy only Irish-made products and to boycott English goods until the restrictive import/export laws were repealed. The tract, published anonymously (as were all of Swift’s writings), was banned at once by the British government. The government arrested the printer, but after nine attempts to convict him, he was finally acquitted. The Irish people had achieved their first small victory in an incident sparked by Swift’s writing.

Swift Emerges as National Hero

After that mild initial success, Swift began his famous Drapier letters, which implored the Irish to reject wood’s coins and to seek independence from England. He tried to incite his countrymen into action: “By the laws of God, of nature, of nations, and of your country, you are and ought to be as free a people as your brethren in England. All government without consent of the governed is the very definition of slavery.”

Incensed by the pamphlets, the English monarchy offered substantial monetary rewards to anyone who would name the author. While the identity of the pamphleteer was well known in the Irish community, no one turned Swift in. His efforts led to the withdrawal of the patent for wood’s coins in 1725, a victory that catapulted Swift to national hero status. He would soon attempt to deal an even more lethal blow to the English in his biting essay, “A Modest Proposal.”

Age of Reason

The 1700s were part of an era called the Age of Reason, largely due to huge advances in science and technology. This “scientific revolution” fueled the belief in reason over emotion and promoted the idea that humans could achieve perfection through rational thought and scientific achievement. This concept applied not only to scientific endeavors but also to government and social institutions.

By 1729, however, Swift and others saw that the Age of Reason had not produced a more capable government or responsible society. In fact, society was stained by corruption and extreme social inequality. This was especially true in Ireland, where landlords (who were mostly English) focused primarily on making money. They did little or nothing to improve or maintain their property and became notorious for their ill treatment of poor Irish tenants. Such landlords reasoned coldly that profit was more important than people’s welfare, an attitude that allowed them—as well as merchants and government leaders—to ignore the famine and unemployment that had cast the poor into such a wretched state by 1729. Swift’s biting pamphlets and satires emerged in response to what he considered the failure of the Age of Reason to improve society.
Religious Battles

The Church of Ireland represented less than a quarter of the population but served as the official state religion. An offshoot of the Church of England, the Irish Church was Protestant and opposed to both Catholics and Dissenting Protestants who refused to join it. Fear of a Catholic uprising (Catholics comprised 75% of the population) prompted the all-Protestant Irish parliament to impose severe restrictions on Catholics. All citizens, including Catholics and Dissenters, were made to swear an oath of loyalty to the Church of Ireland and pay “tithes,” or taxes, to support it. In 1729, the legislature passed a measure that forbade Catholics from voting. This law, coupled with previous restrictions, prompted many to leave Ireland. The “absentees,” as they were known, were Catholics and Dissenters who fled to other lands. While some went to France, another popular destination was the islands of the West Indies; by 1729, 4200 people had left Ireland for these Caribbean islands, where religious freedom and employment were possible.

A supporter of the Church of Ireland, Swift opposed Catholics and, in particular, absentees. Reflecting the view of the majority of Protestants, he blamed absentees and their failure to pay taxes for many of Ireland’s economic and social problems. The Church of Ireland saw emigration as an evil, as did Swift, who sought to have absentees pay taxes to the government of Ireland while living abroad. This idea is one of many articulated in “A Modest Proposal.”

Wretched State of Ireland

In 1727, King George II assumed the throne of England, and Prime Minister Walpole gained even more power. Hopes for political and social reforms and for Irish independence were all but dashed. Just two years after George II’s accession, Ireland experienced its worst year on record. Severe restrictions on the woolen trade by the English, coupled with the impact of famine, draught, devalued currency, and the continual threat of war, had disastrous effects on Ireland. The nation’s poor were particularly brutalized during this period. As the economy declined, job competition became fierce. Violent outbreaks in the nation’s slums—often between Catholics and Protestants—were common. Population growth among the poor drastically increased and homeless men, women, and children became a familiar sight in city streets.

Walpole and the Irish Parliament did virtually nothing to aid the nation’s poor. Instead, they aggravated the situation by raising taxes on goods sold in the country. Even the Church of Ireland failed to provide for the poorer classes, as it catered primarily to the landed elite. It was this sad state of affairs that prompted Swift to write “A Modest Proposal,” a bold effort to change society’s perception of Ireland’s poor and provide for their welfare.

The Essay Itself

Under the heading “A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public,” Swift’s essay opens by noting that anyone who can find a remedy for Ireland’s devastating economic problems will be a national hero. He briefly describes the deplorable state of the kingdom of Ireland in 1729 and then goes on to define a solution to the nation’s ills.

Utilizing a deadpan tone, Swift says he has thought long and hard about this issue and has “weighed the several schemes of our projectors,” finally coming up with this proposal. Before stating what his scheme is, he lists the many benefits his proposal will yield. One benefit, he says, would be that poor children would no longer be a burden to society; on the contrary, they will “contribute to the feeding and partly to the clothing of many thousands.” To add weight to his argument, he lists the exact costs of raising children, calculates approximately how many poor children would be affected by his remedy (120,000), and computes the profit to be derived from his own solution. Parodying serious journalists, pamphleteers, projectors, and politicians, Swift matter-of-factly points out the sound reasons for murdering the nation’s poor children and using them for food, providing data to substantiate his claim.

Swift’s proposition—that Ireland raise the children of the poor for sustenance, thereby reducing the nation’s poor and creating a profitable, domestic industry untaxed by the English—is put forward in a reasonable tone. He insists that small children make very tasty and wholesome food. He has been assured of this by an American (who is presumably from a country where savages prevail). He then lists the many benefits of his plan in detail: poor people will finally have something of value to sell; Ireland’s gross national product will increase £50,000 per year from the profit earned by the sale of 100,000 children annually; restaurateurs and vintners will profit because they will invent new gourmet dishes, wines, and ales that will sell for a high price to the upper classes; the country will no longer have to rely on pork and potatoes—food sources that are prone to disease and draught; and finally, the plan will promote marriage, reduce wife and child abuse, and induce landlords to treat their tenants better, as they will now view the poor as an asset rather than a liability.

Once he lists his manifold reasons for killing poor children, Swift states that he is making his proposal strictly for the good of Ireland. He realizes his plan may be a bit controversial but says the alternatives—increasing taxes, urging people to boycott English goods, and generally making do with less in order to help their neighbor—are far more outrageous. Swift thus cleverly...
lists his true proposals for elevating the suffering of the Irish people, disguising them as a list of solutions that he would never propose.

Swift concludes his essay by stating that he welcomes response from any politicians bold enough to reply or offer their own solutions. However, as an admonition to himself as well as other projectors, he insists that no remedies should be offered unless “there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice.” He further comments that those who think it cruel to kill the poor at birth should ask them whether they would not have rather been killed at age one “and thereby have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortunes as they have since gone through.” Swift concludes “A Modest Proposal,” as he begins it, insisting he is writing the tract unselfishly for the benefit of the Irish people. His proposal is not intended to bring him any personal gain.

Reviews & Response

“A Modest Proposal” was well received. It was reprinted several times in both London and Dublin within months of its first edition. Swift was already a national hero and “A Modest Proposal” added to his acclaim; though neither of the works was published under Swift’s name, the identity of the author was well known.

Despite the commercial success of the essay, Swift was deeply disturbed at the nation’s response—or lack of it. He had hoped the Irish people would take action against the British government and aid the poor. Instead, the situation worsened on all fronts. Swift became exasperated with the Irish people (and probably at society in general) and withdrew completely from politics.

Role of Satire in the 1700s

In the late 1600s and early 1700s, satire became a popular literary genre. Developed about seventeen hundred years earlier by Roman writers such as Horace, the style was perfected by Englishmen of Swift’s time. British satire emerged partially in response to the failure of the Age of Reason, the inability of cold science to improve life in a way that would ease mass suffering. Swift, John Dryden, and Alexander Pope became known as the era’s most talented practitioners of satirical writing, and “A Modest Proposal” is considered the best short satire in the English language. The essay’s central idea, to solve Ireland’s hunger problem by eating poor children, turns on irony and wit, the key ingredients of satire. In Swift’s view, satire exposed the injustices of life.

Known as the golden age of satire, the 1700s produced a host of acclaimed writers who, like Swift, attempted to “laugh men out of their follies.” Satire was an acceptable form of ridicule during the Age of Reason, whereas outright attacks could be deemed treasonous and punished by death. Whether out of fear of government persecution or because he felt satire was a more powerful form of persuasion, Swift used the medium to urge change and vent his anger. “A Modest Proposal,” however, has been called “the darkest pamphlet he ever wrote,” and it reflected Swift’s growing cynicism toward society.

Form in “Modest Proposal”

The 8 Parts of a Ciceroanian Oration

- Entrance (exordium)
- Narration (narratio)
- Exposition and definition (partitio)
- Proposition (propositio)
- Confirmation (confirmatio)
- Confutation and refutation (confutatio/refutatio)
- Digression (digressio)
- Conclusion or epilogue (peroratio)

1. Exordium: Unlike the modern maxim that the introduction of an essay or speech must “grab the reader’s attention,” the exordium simply presents the topic as one worthy of consideration. Because most readers lose attention later on in an essay, it isn’t important to get their attention at the beginning. Instead, a writer explains why the topic at hand is worth the reader’s time and reflection. At the outset, the writer establishes his ethos by showing his command of the subject, his serious attention to it, and his ability to suggest its worthiness as a topic for the reader’s concern.

2. Narratio: “Narratio” does not mean “narrative” in the current sense but, instead, it presents any necessary background information on the topic to the reader. The writer must provide enough information to help the reader think about the topic in an informed manner, so the narration might be definitional, statistical, chronological, anecdotal, or historic. It also might give a quotation to explain various sides of a controversy; or provide an important summary.
3. **Partitio:** The partitio outlines the major arguments that constitute the writer’s approach to proving his claim(s), anticipating the writer’s lines of inquiry or what Aristotle called *topoi.*

4. **Propositio:** The propositio or “proposition” is the means by which the writer finally takes a position on his topic. Note that until this time, the writer has not divulged his opinion about his subject matter. The proposition is a syllogism (consisting of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion) or an enthymeme (a syllogism in which the minor premise is omitted). In other words, the proposition is a complex sentence that is positional (the writer takes a stand) as well as casual and controversial (in that the writer is gutsy enough to take on a difficult topic and to look at that topic from an original perspective).

5. **Confirmatio:** The confirmatio does what you would expect, given what you already know of the English word “confirmation”: it confirms what has been asserted in the proposition. Through various appeals or the pattern of reasoning required to prove the “true” nature of the proposition – and oftentimes a display of secondary evidence (or non-artistic proofs that come from outside the writer such as data, statistics, quotations, interviews, and the like) – the writer confirms the likelihood of his propositio with various rhetorical examples.

6. **Refutatio:** Again, as suggested by the word “refutation,” here the writer pre-empts potential disagreements to his propositio by presupposing the main objections to the essay’s claims. The writer argues against each objection, thereby attacking his opposition before such opposition even has a chance to voice any objections.

7. **Digressio:** Unlike the confirmatio and conflutatio that take logic as their rhetorical strategy, the digressio uses emotion. Although some readers might be moved by examples and quotations and a rational presentation of evidence, Aristotle said that that’s not enough – most readers will be moved by an appeal to emotion. Thus, the digressio entails a story, an anecdote, an extended metaphor, a myth, or an allegory – something that takes the more abstract propositio and “brings it home” to the reader through narration, description, and imagery.

8. **Peroratio:** Finally, the peroration is not just a reiteration of the propositio. Here the writer answers that vital question, “So what?” What does this argument mean for the future? For humanity? For me, the reader, personally? Returning to the need to build credibility through emotion, then, in the peroratio, the writer shows his capacity for thinking broadly and in a visionary manner about the ways the reader and writer may, together, envision a new future as a direct result of the writer’s argument.

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**Persuasion, according to Aristotle and the many authorities that would echo him, is brought about through three kinds of proof or persuasive appeal:**

**Logical Appeal (** *logos*)**
- Relies on sound reasoning, facts, statistics
- Uses evidence well
- Analyzes cause-effect relationships
- Uses patterns of inductive and deductive reasoning
- Pitfall: failure to distinguish clearly between fact and opinion
- Pitfall: committing logical fallacies

**Emotional Appeal (** *pathos*)**
- Aroused and enlists the emotions of the reader
- Elicits sympathy; appeals to fear, sadness, anger, joy, patriotism, etc.
- Often uses descriptions and examples to stir emotions
- Pitfall: failure to employ restraint, displaying excessive sentimentality

**Ethical Appeal (** *ethos*)**
Refers to morality, a sense of right and wrong based on people’s values and beliefs

Although they can be analyzed separately, these three appeals work together in combination toward persuasive ends.