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"It just tastes better than other meat…": satire and cannibalism after Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* (1729)

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Abstract

This article examines the trope of cannibalism in satire after Jonathan Swift's Modest Proposal *(1727), identifying its function as a form of satiric exaggeration and vehicle for deconstruction. It also argues that cannibal satire demonstrates a reoccurring fascination with the privileging of the sensual above the intellectual. The taste for human flesh is mobilised to foreground the arbitrary and disturbing behaviours society can come to unthinkingly adopt when taste—as determined by governing fashions, cultural elites or newly emboldened publics—rather than reason becomes our guiding principle. In confronting readers and audiences with an invitation to accept cannibalism on the grounds of its sensual taste, couched in terms devoid of contempt, anger and disgust, Swift's Modest Proposal challenges us to consider the extent to which our decision making is determined by either reason and critical discernment or gustatory satisfaction. Cannibalism also provides an allegorical framework for Swift and subsequent satirists to discuss politics, capitalism and animals. The enduring efficacy of this model will then be demonstrated through comparison to Matt Edmond's mockumentary, Gregg Wallace's Britain's Miracle Meat. This type of cannibal satire, I modestly propose, helpfully illustrates the way satire in general uses exaggeration to stage critique. More significantly, this discussion of cannibal satire goes further still, making the case for satire's ability to instil in readers a kind of critical habitus, encouraging them to rehearse their own reason and discernment.*

Keywords: satire, cannibalism, hoax, eighteenth century, British literature.

1. Introduction

"If anthropophagy is a question of taste", Cătălin Avramescu writes,"[then] the cannibal thereby becomes the arbiter of a bizarre species of taste" (2011, p. 172). Anthropophagy refers specifically to the practice of humans eating other humans, as opposed to cannibalism which refers to any creature eating another of its own species. Ahsan Chowdhury has stressed the importance of drawing a clear and firm distinction between "cannibalism as a discourse about the other" and "anthropophagy as a supposedly neutral term" (2008, p. 133). In this, Chowdary

echoes Peter Hulme, who offered a distinction in which 'anthropophagy' referred to the social practice of eating human flesh whilst 'cannibalism' be reserved for describing the "discourses of European colonialism" which fixate on "the image of ferocious consumption of human flesh frequently used to mark the boundary between one community and its others" (1986, p. 86). Cannibalism-as-discourse has been recognised by Mimi Sheller as constituting a language and iconography which "haunts the foundational moment of European presence in the Caribbean Island" (2003, p. 145). This description of cannibalism as something which haunts western culture recalls William Arens's earlier claim that "the idea that others at some far distance eat human flesh knows no beginning and probably will know no end" (Arens, p. 10). According to Sarah McFarland, cannibalism is violently repulsive in Western cultures because it "exposes the permeable, fluid relations between oneself and others, forms boundaries and dissolves them" (2019, p. 866). Jeff Berglund offers a similar explanation for horror cannibalism, again recognising that its representation is so often bound up in the collapse of social boundaries:

> Being cannibalized makes one estranged from one's familiar self/selves. In sum, cannibalization makes the familiar unfamiliar. At the same time, it threatens to make the unfamiliar familiar. The fear of losing one's self to another alien culture is also the force responsible for projecting cannibalistic behaviours onto others, in [a] classic moment of 'othering'
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> (2006, p. 9).

Given cannibalism's fraught history, entwined as it is in racist and colonial attitudes, and its status as an enduring signifier of social collapse, it is noteworthy that it has been mobilized for satirical purposes as recently as June 2023, when the British terrestrial television station Channel 4 broadcast a hoax titled *Gregg Wallace: The British Miracle Meat*, in which a celebrity chef passionately encouraged viewers to eat meat harvested from young children.

1.1. Jonathan Swift: satire and cannibalism

In 1729, Jonathan Swift published a pamphlet in London, anonymously, with the title, *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*. Addressed to the topical issue of the Irish famine and overpopulation, the pamphlet observes that many Irish families cannot support their children. Until these impoverished children come of age, and can source their own recourses (likely through thieving, the author laments), they will remain a drain on the economy of Great Britain. The pamphlet proposes, therefore, that several pressing issues might be simultaneously resolved if the Irish poor were simply to sell their surplus offspring to their absentee English landlords as meat. The author makes this appeal to the public using a highly persuasive classical method of rhetoric, pragmatic economic rationality and by promising the same gustatory pleasure in eating children apparently experienced by Avramescu's cannibal, described above. "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance", the author writes, "that a young, healthy child well nurs'd is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will serve in a fricassée, or a ragout" (Swift, 2009, p. 232).

That Swift's speaker has been assured of the taste of human flesh by an American acquaintance alludes again to the way that the origins of the "man-eater" myth were bound up in transatlantic colonisation. "Beginning with Columbus", Eric Cheyfitz writes, "the idea of cannibalism developed not as an anthropological fact but as a political fiction that the west employed to justify its exploitation of Native Americans" (1991, p. 143). Columbus first popularised accounts of cannibalism in the northern islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, and the Bahamas as early as 1493. William Arens reminds us that the very etymology

of the word "cannibal" is bound up in moment in colonial history: "The word [for] man-eater is now cannibal and not 'arawakibal', because Columbus first encountered the latter, who were eager to fill him in on the gossip about their enemies in the south" (1979, p. 45). In Swift's hands, however, the function of cannibalism is reversed. The speaker does not reach for cannibalism to encourage the reader's rejection of an idea, culture or people. Rather than reading the cannibal as other, the text hails us as though we are the cannibal. "A well-grown, fat, yearly child… roasted whole, will make a considerable figure at a Lord Mayor's feast" the speaker insists, assuring us that pork is in "no way comparable, in taste or magnificence" (Swift, 2009, p. 236). By addressing readers in this manner and rendering plausible an act so deeply antithetical to the self-conceptualisation of the Western subject, Swift simultaneously mobilizes cannibalism as the ultimate form of satiric exaggeration whilst also demonstrating satire's ability to disrupt, disturb and deconstruct commonly-held principles in social discourse.

Swift's *Modest Proposal* easily meets the generally accepted criteria for satire listed by Dustin Griffin as being:

> A work [designed] to attack vice or folly. To this end it uses wit or ridicule. Like polemic rhetoric, it seeks to persuade an audience than something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous; unlike pure rhetoric, it engages in exaggeration and some sort of fiction. But satire does not forsake the "real world" entirely. Finally, satire usually proceeds by means of clear reference to some moral standards or purposes
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> (1995, p. 1).

Ashley Marshall agrees that satire needs to address a corrigible fault that exists in the lived reality of the author, but has since tempered Griffin's definition slightly, arguing that if we only think of satire as a kind of attack we might miss other, subtler modes of satire (2013, p. 1). This is a point more recently asserted by Amanda Hilner and Elizabeth Davis, who stress that the "prevalent critical association between satire and aggressive masculinity has produced a critical blind spot that obscures the presence of a vital, diverse group of women satirists" (2022, p. 4). They argue that if we no longer figure satire as a kind of violence, what emerges is a set of conventions which include "exaggeration, wit, humour, irony, and other devices of indirection" and which, historically, have "afforded women writers a palatable, flexible, and intellectually potent vehicle for voicing opinions that would otherwise be deemed too indecorous for a lady" (2002, p. 4). Marshall therefore proposes a definition of satire which emphasises critique over attack: "I would suggest a more open set of formulae, including but not limited to critique plus distortion, critique plus humorous ridicule, or critique plus gratuitousness in motive" (2013, p. 3). We might therefore understand satire as being a mode which uses exaggeration and distortion to critique a corrigible fault from the real world.

1.2. Cannibalism and questions of taste

By disrupting the boundaries between the British citizen and the cannibal-as-other, *A Modest Proposal* also presents readers with an epistemic challenge, vexing assumptions grounded in contemporary discussions of taste and reason. As Clare Bucknell recently put it, Swift's "wildly unthinkable subject [is] yoked to the finely discriminatory in style, as the proposer, in numbered paragraphs, dilates thoughtfully on which month of the year infant flesh might prove to be most plentiful" (2024, p. 128). This aspect of Swift's strategy plays on the semantic instability of the word taste in the eighteenth century. The children might *taste* good, but is it in *bad taste* to say so? Taste, during this period, was the site of a contentious, contested and rapidly expanding discourse. Samuel Johnson's definition of taste hints at the key vectors of debate, describing it as at once signifying "the act of tasting, gustation; the sense by which the relish of anything on

the palate is perceived; sensibility, perception; intellectual relish or discernment" (1755). There are clearly at least two different types of taste operating in this definition, one of which gives name to the physical, embodied, gustatory sensation experienced whilst consuming and another which is associated with intellectual discernment and refined appreciation; the ability to discriminate between different types of idea, object, experience or consumable. Voltaire would later term these the "goût sensuel" (sensual taste) and the "goût intellectuel" (intellectual taste), noting that the former was often prone to corrupt the latter (1759, p. 215).

Intellectual taste could be cultivated, through experience, reflection and exposure to a wide variety of "refined pleasures": "intellectual taste is much more formed by education and culture than the sensual one; for [the] latter may be brought, by habit, to relish what at first excited loathing and disgust" (1759, p. 215). The difficulty, Voltaire explains, is that individuals are often predisposed to consume materials which satisfy the sensual taste whilst destroying the intellectual taste. Jennifer Tsien has surveyed definitions of "Taste" ("Goust") recorded in early eighteenth-century France and concluded that the intellectual taste of the public was considered delicate and easily tainted:

> Good taste comes from an exquisite and precise knowledge of how to judge good from bad, concerning matters of propriety and charms of all sorts; one only acquires it with a great deal of care and reflection [...] Bad authors spoil the taste of the public by accustoming it to bland and insipid things.
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> (Tsien, 2011, p. 4).

In justifying his scheme, Swift's speaker insists repeatedly that the children of the Irish poor will be delicious, appealing to his reader's sensual taste over and above their reason and their discernment, which we might understand as their intellectual taste.

This article argues that, as well as being a form of satiric exaggeration and vehicle for deconstruction, the privileging of the sensual above the intellectual is also a trope of cannibalism in satire. The taste for human flesh is mobilised to foreground the arbitrary and disturbing behaviours society can come to unthinkingly adopt when taste—as determined by governing fashions, cultural elites or newly emboldened publics—rather than reason becomes our guiding principle. Swift's *Modest Proposal* confronts us with an invitation to accept cannibalism on the basis of appeals to sensual taste, couched in terms devoid of contempt, anger and disgust. In doing so, the text challenges us to consider the extent to which our decision making is determined by either reason and critical discernment or gustatory satisfaction. The enduring efficacy of this model will then be demonstrated through comparison with Matt Edmond's mockumentary, *Gregg Wallace's Britain's Miracle Meat*. This type of cannibal satire, I modestly propose, helpfully illustrates the way satire in general uses exaggeration as mode of critique. More significantly, this discussion of cannibal satire goes further still, making the case for satire's ability to instil in readers a kind of critical habitus, encouraging them to rehearse their own reason and discernment.

2. Cannibalism as signifier: the ferocious consumption of human flesh

2.1. The discourse of cannibalism

The emergence of the "cannibal" is also strongly associated with the period in which Swift produced his *Modest Proposal*. As Martin Lefebvre puts it: "the cannibal may be said to belong specifically to the early modern European imagination" (2005, p. 46). In charting the spread of cannibalism-as-discourse, Alan Rice notes that, whilst as we have already seen, fear of

cannibalism has "been a staple of a European psychosis since Columbus had first encountered what he described as 'cannibals' in his 'discovery' of the America's in 1492", the cheap print culture of the eighteenth century certainly accelerated the dissemination of the cannibal meme (1998, p. 111). "The eighteenth century", Rice writes "did not require proof of cannibalism to taint whole peoples with accusations of the act, just rumours from those willing to point the finger at people living differently in a neighbouring region" (p. 111). A further consequence of this dissemination, however, is that cannibalism transmuted from being understood as act to becoming a cultural signifier, one which Sebastian Williams argues "plays an important role through literary history" (2023, p. 304). On the one hand, in texts like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), cannibals are represented as characters who signify an existential threat to civilization. Here "cannibalism symbolises the purported savagery of indigenous peoples and reinforces the colonizer's values." (Williams, 2023, p. 304). Such cannibals stalk the periphery of the western cultural imagination, like a spectral homo sacer. The function of these cannibal "others" is to reassert the identity of the western subject through negation, but they are also sources of horror because they too represent the obliteration of that identity: not only could they physically consume the observer, but their existence reminds that observer of the potentially porous boundaries upon which their own identity is constructed.

On the other hand, as Lefebvre observes, "cannibalism entered the European imagination as a rhetorical tool […] connected in good measure with both that of the other and the will to dominate him, and with the economics of the new world and the beginnings of capitalism" (Lefebvre, 2005: 46). The period's best-known use of cannibalism as a rhetorical device appears in Michel de Montaigne's 'On Cannibals' (1580). Written "against a backdrop of the reformation and counter-reformation conflicts as well as the exploration of the New World", Montaigne evokes the figure of the cannibal as a rhetorical device, suggesting that his own countrymen are worse than cannibals (Chowdhury, 2008: 132). Referring to the European practice of live torture, Montaigne writes: "nous avons le droit de les appeler barbares par référence aux lois de la raison, mais non par comparaison avec nous-mêmes, qui les surpassent en toute sorte de barbarie" ("we are justified in calling [cannibals] barbarians by reference to the laws of reason, but not in comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity") (1993, p. 114). Here the cannibal's function is not only to regulate but castigate the western subject. It is from this tradition that Swift's *Proposal* emerges although, unlike Montaigne, the engine for Swift's satire is his speaker's celebration rather than condemnation of the potential for cannibalistic behaviour he sees in his countrymen.

2.2. Cannibal landlords

A Modest Proposal lashes several targets, but it is most commonly understood as an indictment of England's treatment of Ireland. As Reay Tannahill observes, the mock treatise functions as "a satire against the politicians and landlords who kept Ireland in a state of poverty and servitude and then complained that it was a nation of beggars and thieves—advocating reducing the beggary and thieving, and coincidentally the population, by encouraging mothers to raise their children for a year and then sell their children, at a small profit, to the landlords" (1996, p. 189). The idea that those with economic power and privilege may be aiming to consume the life-force of the labouring poor was not an uncommon one in the early eighteenth century, which saw "the image of the vampire passed into the vocabulary of French and English satire as a vivid metaphor for such commonplace 'bloodsuckers' as landlords and governments" (Morrison & Baldick, 1997, p. x). Swift's central joke plays on a literal realisation of the common-place figurative language used to describe the relationship between tenant and landlord, with one consuming the assets and livelihood of the other: "I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already *devoured* most of the parents,

seem to have the best title to the children (my emphasis)" (2009, p. 232). If the English are already content to "devour" Ireland's adult population, metaphorically speaking, would it be so very much worse to literally devour the country's children as well? There is of course a hefty verbal and situational irony underpinning Swift's mock-treaty—his proposal is anything but "modest"—but its challenge comes in forcing readers to contemplate how close the horrifying spectacle he conjures actually is to the reality of Ireland's treatment by the English at the time of writing.

As Swift's speaker eagerly shares his calculations— "I have reckoned upon a Medium, that a child just born will weigh Twelve Pounds; and in a solar Year, if tolerably well nursed, encreaseth (sic) to twenty-eight pounds"—it becomes increasingly apparent that the English are not the work's only subjects of reproach. As the full title announces, the Irish poor are also indicted. At one point, the speaker imagines that the poor will adopt the scheme so wholeheartedly as to even produce thrift products: "flay[ing] the Carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable Gloves for Ladies"—are also indicted. Even the speaker who is himself an Irish critic, so keen to win English approval that he will persuade his political masters to devour the offspring of his countryman, is a target of the work's satire. Indeed, David M. Palumbo has argued that instead "of creating a narrator who from an 'elevated standpoint of knowing' parodies the unpalatable rhetoric of his satirical targets, Swift collapses the distance between narrator and satirist and mimics the colonizer's 'dark fantasies' about the colonized population" (2018, p. 264). What emerges is a vision of "an 'unfeeling nation' and a 'famished population which devours itself'" (Lestringant, 1994, p. 125). As the essay draws to a close, however, a final shot offers some suggestion as to who, in this whole wretched situation, is most to blame. The speaker begins to lament that the scheme to sell the children of the Irish poor to the English may be impractical after all, for the Irish cannot afford the salt to preserve the taste of the meat long enough for it to reach London. "Although", the voice reflects, sounding suddenly Swiftian, "perhaps, I could name a country, which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it" (2009, p. 238). The English, Swift implies, will consume without regard.

3. Cannibal inversions: political authority, capitalism and the animal

3.1. Cannibalism as political metaphor

Swift's suggestion that The Britain Government might plausibly pass legislation making it official foreign policy to eat the inhabitants of other nations is satirical exaggeration in the extreme. It plays on the language of consumption, literalising the metaphors of British imperialism. At the same time, it inverts the assumption underpinning contemporary cannibal discourse: that cannibalism is the signifier of a barbarism that is the inverse of Western civilization and perfectibility. Cătălin Avramescu argues that the impulse to reject cannibalism was so central to Western political philosophy, and to the concept of political authority—the confluence of law, justice, governance and the protection of property—that the spectre of anthropophagy can even be found in Thomas Hobbes's *The Leviathan* (1651). Famously, Hobbes imagines a state without political authority, which he calls the "state of nature", where there can be no possibility of a social contract and therefore no foundation for law, safety, culture or community. "Amongst masterless men" he writes, "there is perpetual war" (1996, Part 2, Cap 21). Hobbes explains that in "such a condition, every man has a right to everything; even to another's body" (1996, Part 2, Cap 21). For Avramescu, this renders the "possibility of anthropophagy" within the state of nature "implicit" (2009, p. 244). The social function of Hobbes's natural state is to define the ideal political state through negation. A good state, according to Hobbes and his followers, is one where you do have political authority, where you

can enter into a social contract, where your property is protected under the law, and where you are unlikely to be eaten by your neighbour. In the first instance, the potency of Swift's satire in *A Modest Proposal* comes in imagining what would happen if the government, the political authority, could be persuaded to ratify behaviours associated with the state of nature. What if the law actively encouraged you to eat children? Secondly, and even more controversially, the *Proposal* implies that this is already happening as part of an institution we would later call capitalism.

Lefebvre has discussed the close semantic overlap of consumption, capitalism and cannibalism, noting that:

> One strand of the figurative network of the cannibal is, from the very origin of the term itself, connected to capitalism in the modern Western imaginary… both cannibalism and capitalism are tied as interpretants of the term consumption, that is, both belong to the term's meaning… savage consumption may be said to characterise both cannibalism and capitalism
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> (2005, p. 48).

Though the central thrust of Swift's Juvenalian satire draws attention to England's treatment of Ireland, and the potential complicity of the Irish poor in their own exploitation and domination, the *Proposal* doubles as a more general satire on the logics of early capitalism, repeatedly drawing attention to the dehumanization that occurs when property is prioritised over people. If, as Avramescu asserts, the "cannibal is a creature of circumstances and education", then Swift's *Proposal* suggests that cannibalism is the inevitable end point of what we now term capitalism (2021, p. 2). For instance, if Irish families could be persuaded, the speaker asserts, to think of their children as financial assets, then the general treatment of women and children would improve:

> It would increase the care and tenderness of Mothers towards their children, when they were sure of a settlement for life, to the poor babes, provided in some sort by the public, to their annual profit rather than their expense. […] Men would become as fond of their wives during the time of their pregnancy, as they are now of their mares in foal, their cows in calf, or *Sows* when they are ready to farrow; nor offer to beat or kick them, (as it is too *frequent* a practice) for fear of a miscarriage.

The irony here arises in the suggestion that mother's need to be persuaded to show affection to their children reveals, again through negation, that affection is not common between Irish mothers and their children, or Irish husbands and their wives (indeed, in the case of the latter, the issue is not simply a lack of affection but active cruelty). The promise of capital, though—the idea that a child is merchandise and the bearer of that child a means of production—generates a simulacrum of the familiar relationships Swift's speaker might otherwise hope to see in a civilized society. That these Irishmen already value their cattle more than their wives is also indicative of a further dimension to cannibal satire, in that it invites us to imagine ourselves as animals to be farmed and slaughtered.

3.2. The cannibal and the animal

In 1709, Swift's contemporary, Joseph Addison, wrote in *The Tatler* "I am sure you will like the pig, for it was whipped to death… I must confess, I heard him with horror, and could not eat of an animal that had died so tragic a death" (1817, p. 19). Addison was not alone in feeling a sudden sympathy for the animals he ate. Tristram Stuart has traced a growing enthusiasm for arguments in favour of vegetarianism during the eighteenth century, most of which were based on assertions of the psychological similarity between creatures killed for their flesh, and man

(2007). "For [Jeremy] Bentham", Avramescu writes, "animals' capacity to feel pain is what confers on them privileges similar to those of man and excludes them by right from the alimentary circuit. Tolerance toward cruelty, which was an important ingredient of modern man's cookery, began to decline. The agonies of the flesh suddenly became visible on the everyday table" (2021, p. 170). There are two consequences of imagining human children subjected to the farming processes inflicted on animal livestock: the dehumanization of the child and the humanization of the animal. As Swift's speaker dispassionately explains:

> …Of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for Breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males; which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle, or swine; and my reason is, that these children are seldom the fruits of marriage, a circumstance not much regarded by our savages; therefore, one male will be sufficient to serve four females
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> (2009, p. 232).

Not only are these children to be managed in a manner ordinarily reserved for "sheep, black cattle, or swine", the speaker's disregard for "our savages" on the basis that they are uninhibited by the institution of marriage implies that he barely considers them human already. There are several such instances littered throughout the essay. At one point, shortly after recommending spare infant flesh be flayed into gloves, he recommends "buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife, as we do *roasting pigs*" (p. 232). Again, Swift revels in a horrifying vision of what might happen when a seemingly transcendental barrier—in this instance, that which stands between human and animal—is removed.

Famously, Jacques Derrida theorized the concept of "what we confusedly call 'animal'" as being the basis upon which concept of the human subject is also founded; the difference being that unlike the animal, the human is subject to law, and therefore political authority (1990, p. 951). As Williams writes, the "concept of 'animal' is part of a boundary-making apparatus within culture, denoting the very limits of the law and the structure of subjecthood" (2021, p. 305). Cary Woolf goes further, proposing that "it is in order to mark such killing as either 'criminal' or 'noncriminal' that the discourse of animality becomes so crucial. We can see how the law of culture arranges its species significations on a kind of grid" (2003, p. 101). Much in the same way that the spectre of the cannibal haunts conceptualizations of political authority, defining it through negation, or as the cannibal "other" is used to reinforce a distinct image of the western subject as civilised, the figure of the animal serves to propagate an ideologically coherent model of human subjectivity. Swift's cannibal satire disrupts all three of these, legislating behaviours lifted from the state of nature, addressing Western readers as cannibals whilst advocating the farming of human children as a new kind of livestock.

4. Good harvest: cannibal satire today

The constituent elements of Swift's cannibal satire have appeared more recently in a hoax documentary broadcast on the British terrestrial television station Channel 4 in June 2023 hosted by celebrity chef Gregg Wallace and titled *Gregg Wallace: Britain's Miracle Meat*. The documentary recalled Wallace's previous factual programmes about the food industry, such as *Inside the Factory* (2015) and *Gregg Wallace's Magical Christmas Market* (2019). It offered a panegyric examination of a newly launched food company— "Good Harvest"—which has devised a means of cheaply producing vast quantities of meat grown using human stem cells. This development is presented as a positive and necessary response to Britain's cost-of-living crisis, providing the poorest in society with access to cheap meat and a means of earning money,

given that the source of the human stem cells is "pain subjective" donations. The mock-documentary, which is written by Matthew Edmonds, finds a host of satirical targets, including the industrial meat complex, the glossy celebrity culture that produces characters like Gregg Wallace, and, most explicitly, the in-office Conservative party government which has presided over more than a decade of austerity, Britain's exit from the European Union, and the cost-of-living crisis. Although Edmonds's satire finds modern targets, the fundamental principles of Swift's cannibal satire persist: cannibalism is primarily used for satirical exaggeration as part of a wide-ranging critique which in turn destabilises the boundaries between human and animal and vexes assumptions about what might count as "civilized" in our contemporary capitalist society. And, at the centre of the satire, once again sits the conflict between sensual and intellectual taste.

4.1. Eat the poor: cannibalism, class and economic privilege

During the documentary, Wallace interviews the CEO of Good Harvest, Tamara Ennett, who explains the origins of the company and the role she has come to play within it:

> My background is in elite health care specializing in human cellular science. That combined with the cost-of-living crisis, the demand for cheaper meat and, *voilà*, Good Harvest was born. It would be amazing to do something that would give back and help so many people who can't help themselves right now
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> (Kingsley, 2003, 12:54).

A few scenes later, Tamara reveals a new product, insisting that Good Harvest will easily secure market dominance once it has been made available to the public. This product is meat grown using stem cells harvested from infants. Earlier in the documentary, Wallace visits Le Gavroche, a famous two Michelin-starred restaurant in London, to interview the highly lauded French-English chef Michel Albert Roux. During their conversation, Roux explains the concept of "le terroir", a gastronomical term suggesting that environmental factors impacting on the rearing of animal livestock can affect the way that they taste when served as meat. "It's about life-style", Roux explains, "You wanted it reared outdoors and not stressed" (Kingsley, 2023, 6:23). In the case of meat harvested from human stem cells, it is the life-style of the donor that will affect the quality of the meat. To demonstrate, Roux invites Wallace to try two samples. The first has been grown using stem cells donated by Alison, a nurse in the British National Health Service (NHS) who has been working a second job to compensate for her low NHS salary whilst struggling to provide for her family. As a result of the stress Alison has experienced on a day-to-day basis over several years, the meat she produces is stringy and difficult to digest. The second sample, grown using stem cells from a former social care worker who has been made redundant and who has spent the last few years sitting on the sofa watching television, is by contrast tender and fattier. "It's not good for Guy to be made redundant like that," Wallace observes, "but it's great for us!" (Kingsley, 2023, 8:44). It is due to the principles of "le terroir" that Good Harvest's new premium product will be extracted from very young children. These children have yet to experience long-term stress, so will produce the most tender meat. Tamara guides Wallace into a waiting room, where young children are cheerfully playing with toys and sporting stickers bearing the slogan "I'm beating the cost-of-living crisis." It is crucial for the donors to be relaxed prior to the surgical extraction, she explains, if the meat is to taste its best. Wallace asks Tamara how she intends to navigate the seemingly inevitable public backlash when consumers discover that her company is harvesting meat from children. Undaunted, Tamara smiles, exclaiming that the public will be unable to maintain any moral objections once they have tasted the meat, emphatically appealing to sensual rather than intellectual taste: "It's so creamy," she beams, "It just tastes better than other meats" (Kingsley, 2023, 19:23).

Intertextual allusions to well-known literary representations of cannibalism are scattered throughout the script. Tamara's name, for instances, recalls the character of Tamora, the Queen of the Goths in William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594). Upon discovering that Tamora's sons Chiron and Demetrius, have raped and mutilated his own daughter Lavinia, the titular Titus Andronicus holds a feast at which he serves a pie into which he has baked his daughter's abusers (2008, p. 268). Tamora unwittingly eats her own offspring. Unlike Tamora, though, *Miracle Meat*'s Tamara does not eat her young by accident. Rather, she is cheerfully, proactively hellbent on eating meat grown from the children of the country's lowest income families. She is not motivated by desperation and demonstrates no remorse. Indeed, if anything she manifests a delirious enthusiasm for infant flesh. Once again, cannibalism serves as a metaphor for capitalism, trading a figurative consumption for a literal one.

4.2. Same joke, new target: topical cannibal satire

As the documentary draws to a close, a voiceover from Wallace informs us that "The Trussell Trust says a future without food banks requires a benefits system that works for all, and secure incomes so that people can afford essentials – so it's no surprise that eating children seems a more likely path for our country" (Kingsley, 2023, 22.38). The shot cuts to find Wallace turning to camera and smiling before adding: "It's a modest proposal but it's the first attempt we've seen to take the cost-of-living crisis seriously" (22:41). Here, writer Matt Edmonds explicitly acknowledges Swift's *Modest Proposal* of 1729, foregrounding the similarities between Swift's text and his own, both in terms of content and context. It is in its final moments that *Miracle Meat* reveals itself as a satire, announcing that Tamara, unlike her namesake Tamora, serves as a satiric rather than a tragic construct. Tamara is the well-spoken CEO of a company, unbound by ethical constraints, which has found a way to take advantage of a poorly funded and chronically mismanaged political state, the United Kingdom, by explicitly profiting from the exploitation of those who are most financially impoverished. Not only that, but the programme suggests that the Conservative government are actively encouraging Good Harvest's business model as a potential solution to the cost-of-living crisis, rather than seeking alternative political or fiscal solutions such as increased taxes or state investment. Though ultimately fictional, this is far from an unfamiliar scenario for British viewers. The revelation that Tamara's company is eating the poor simply serves to literalise a subtext that is already present.

5. Conclusion. Taste and reason: cannibal satire as critical habitus

5.1. The triumph of reason over taste

The most chilling moment in *Miracle Meat* is not entirely fictional. Filming on the streets of Newcastle, an actor posing as a Channel 4 journalist stops passers-by and asks them to try a sample of meat; meat which they are told has been grown from human stem cells. A pair of students stop to taste a sample. Upon tasting the meat, they smile and nod appreciatively. When asked if they would buy the meat, knowing it was harvested from human donors, one of them, beaming, declares "As a student, for 99p, I'd 100% buy that" (Kingsley, 2023, 16:40). The documentary implies that a decision has been made: the fact that it is available cheaply and tastes good outweighs any ethical or moral apprehensions about the source of the meat (in this instance, so-called "pain subjective" donations extracted from over-worked NHS nurses, out-of-work social workers and children). Swift's original, as we have seen, plays the same trick, listing the practical and financial benefits of eating Irish children whilst repeatedly insisting that they taste delicious, especially when "seasoned with a little pepper or salt" (2009, p. 232). In

both cases it is the speaker, Swift's eager projector or Wallace's gurning celebrity host, whose lack of disgust at their own proposal enables this kind of rationalisation. Theirs is a triumph of reason over taste which, in turn, seeks to facilitate in the audience a momentary triumph of sensory taste over intellectual taste.

5.2. The cannibal taste test: Swift's challenge to readers

Swift's *Modest Proposal* challenges readers to resist its appeal, deploying the persuasive techniques of classical rhetoric whist offering up a host of advantages, rewards and incentives. Elizabeth Hedrick draws attention to the medium Swift uses to advance his arguments, proposing that the message itself is a target of his satire: "Swift saw that the [classical argumentative template] could be employed most pristinely and effectively of all by barbarians masquerading as generous and tender-hearted saviours of the commonweal" (2021, p. 178). Swift's speaker is just such a barbarian, seducing his readers to agree with the most reprehensible act available to the Western early modern imagination. Hendrick concludes that if "the classical argumentative model is partly Swift's co-conspirator in the *Modest Proposal*, heightening the essay's irony at crucial points, it might plausibly be included among Swift's satirical targets as well" (2021, p. 178). We can have it all, the *Proposal* implores us: all we need to do is partake in cannibalism. Of course, as we've seen countless times throughout this essay, to become cannibal is to undo the very fabric of Western subjectivity. The key to resisting this offer, and to retaining one's identity as a civilized, western subject protected by a working social contract, lies in recognising the tract's rhetorical strategies and remaining impervious to its appeals to sensual taste.

Writing in 1760, David Hume asserted that intellectual taste consisted of five complementary qualities:

> a strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the verdict of such, wherever they are found, is the true standard of taste and beauty
>
> (1965, p. 7).

Noel Carroll writes that although "Hume often seems to speak of [taste] as if it were an innate capacity", he also indicates that it is something that can be cultivated' (1984, p. 184). The serious appraiser should work to refine their "delicacy of taste and passion" (1965, p. 25). Carroll also stresses that Hume's "ideal appraiser" will also require reason and "good sense" to mitigate against their own innate bias or circumstantial prejudices (1984, p. 184). Swift's cannibal satire has many targets, but its most enduring function is to test the reader's good sense and discernment. Matt Edmonds lays out the same challenge in *Miracle Meat*. In both cases, what tastes good is not in your best interests. What is in your best interests, is to engage in critical thought.

5.3. The cannibal taste test: Swift's challenge to readers

Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe claim that satire "tends towards open-endedness, irresolution, and thus chaos. Closure, in most cases, would turn a narrative satire into either comedy or tragedy and thus contradict the satirist's representation of evil as a present and continuing danger" (1995, p. 5). Cannibal satire not only questions several of the boundaries upon which Western, human subjectivity is founded, it also refuses to legitimize them. What it does instead is challenge us to remain critical. Andrew Bricker has suggested that it is a mistake to gauge the efficacy of satire by observing the influence it has (or more often does not have)

on its target, instead proposing that "Satire works in subtler long-term ways, by inducing in readers a kind of critical habitus" (2017, p. 166). Cannibal satire offers a highly compelling instance of satire as critical habitus. As we have seen, Swift and Edmonds each mobilize cannibalism to achieve Juvenalian and Menippean satire, lashing specific targets—be it Britain's treatment of Ireland in the eighteenth century or the Conservative government's cost of living crisis in the twenty-first century—as well as general targets, such as capitalism and the genocidal violence committed against the animal. However, the true enduring value of cannibal satire is in presenting audiences with a taste test which, ultimately, nurtures their incredulity and feeds their critical faculties.

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