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Food and Foreignness in *Sir Thomas More*¹

Consumption, as physically or morally reprehensible or strange, is a distinct indication of alterity in *Sir Thomas More*. The recurrent association, in the early modern period, of foreign culinary appetites with physical and sexual degeneracy gives rise to the perception that foreign consumption is harmful to English natives. Contemporary accounts of the Irish diet in colonial prose writings that describe unusual and degenerate consumption contextualize the complaints Londoners made against European foreigners in *Sir Thomas More*, thus drawing distinctions between civilized English men and their foreign inferiors. Important research undertaken on humoral theory, diet, and the body in early modern culture² – specifically the notions that there were four human complexions (sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic) based on the four humours (blood, choler, melancholy and phlegm) and that diet was the most effective way of altering an unfavourable complexion – indicates that food was more than simply a means to assuage hunger. In *Sir Thomas More*, however, food is primarily significant in its effect upon the economy, the strangeness of its cultivation by foreigners, and its use as a means of undermining national and specifically masculine pride.

Sir Thomas More is an inherently interesting text since part of it probably represents the only creative writing by Shakespeare that has survived in his own handwriting. The play exists solely as British Library manuscript Harley 7368, in several hands, and comprising 22 sheets. Most of the writing is in the hand of Anthony Munday, although ‘additional’ sheets in different hands have been inserted. The front of the first sheet contains a provisional licence from Edmund Tilney, the state censor, requiring alterations before public performance. The ‘additions’ might represent changes to the play made after Tilney’s objections were known, but this explanation is difficult to sustain because in some ways the changes (such as the rewriting of the scene in which More quells the rioters) make matters worse. This problem is treated in the Revels edition of the play by its editors Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio

Melchiori³ and more fully in Scott McMillin's book *The Elizabethan theatre and 'The Book of Sir Thomas More'*.⁴

Part 1: *Sir Thomas More*, European Foreigners and Food

The play's interrelation of food and civil disorder can be contextualized in the light of the food shortages in the 1590s and early 1600s that gave rise to real riots in London. The need for food is dramatically related to the need for sex, and accusations of foreigners' gluttony accompanied by accusations of their voracious sexual appetite suggest that foreign appetites must be controlled in order that English national security be maintained. McMillin and the Revels editors concur, as do most scholars, that Shakespeare is probably the composer and writer of Hand D and hence of the scene which depicts events leading up to the riots of Londoners against resident foreigners on May Day 1517. The riot's leaders – John Lincoln, Williamson and his wife Doll, George and Ralph Betts, and Sherwin – are angry at the behaviour of foreigners in London and have planned a violent uprising against them. Shakespeare's contribution comes before the entry of Sheriff More of London who has been sent by the authorities to calm the situation:

Enter [at one end] LINCOLN, DOLL, CLOWN, GEORGE BETTS, [SHERWIN,] WILLIAMSON [and] others; and [at the other end] a Sergeant-at-arms [followed by MORE, the other Sheriff, PALMER and CHOLMLEY].

Lincoln. Peace, hear me: he that will not see a red herring at a Harry groat, butter at elevenpence a pound, meal at nine shillings a bushel, and beef at four nobles a stone, list to me.

Another citizen. It will come to that pass, if strangers be suffered: mark him.

Lincoln. Our country is a great eating country, *argo* they eat more in our country than they do in their own.

Clown. By a halfpenny loaf a day troy weight.

Lincoln. They bring in strange roots, which is merely to the undoing of poor prentices, for what's a sorry parsnip to a good heart?

Another. Trash, trash! They breed sore eyes, and 'tis enough to infect the city with the palsy.

Lincoln. Nay, it has infected it with the palsy, for these bastards of dung—as you know, they grow in dung—have infected us, and it is our infection will make the city shake, which partly comes through the eating of parsnips.

Clown. True, and pumpions together.

Sergeant. What say you to the mercy of the King? Do you refuse it?

Lincoln. You would have us upon th' hip, would you? No, marry, do we not; we accept of the king's mercy; but we will show no mercy upon the strangers. (2.3.0–24)⁵

The accusations rehearsed against the foreigners in this scene are that they have a detrimental effect upon the economy, specifically inflation, they have strange culinary practices, and they bring disease. Most significant however for my purpose is the belief that vegetables grown by the foreigners infect Londoners and undermine the security of the city: 'for these bastards of dung — as you know they grow in dung — have infected us, and it is our infection will make the city shake'. As the Revels editors pointed out, Lincoln confuses parsnips with potatoes which were discovered by the Spanish in the West Indies and imported into England in the late 1580s.⁶ Whether or not the 'bastards of dung' are the 'parsnips' or the foreigners is unclear, and is perhaps a deliberate conflation of both. The body's consumption of infected vegetables becomes a powerful symbol for what the rioters believe to be the detrimental effect of London's absorption of aliens. Just as the body consumes that which will infect it so London incorporates the seeds of its own destruction by allowing the aliens to remain. As a body that has been poisoned should purge itself of the poisonous matter to ensure its well-being so violent efforts to purge London of foreigners are considered necessary by the rioters to ensure the safety of the city. The city will 'shake', become weak and feverish, if its people are made sick but the city will also 'shake' at the hands of the rioters if things are allowed to continue as before. Pernicious consumption is a powerful symbol of foreign influence in *Sir Thomas More* and it is not surprising that eating, an essential human behaviour, should be made to seem unnatural in the case of foreigners: even their food is harmful. Certain vegetables appear to have acquired their negative reputation from a general association with the place from which they came and the nationality of those responsible for their importation to England. Hostility toward the potato was arguably due to its association with the Spanish but its foreign origin presumably added to the suspicion with which it was regarded. Notably the parsnip, with which Lincoln confuses the potato, was imported to England from France which was, like Spain, a traditional enemy.⁷

The Londoners' concern about the influx of foreigners in *Sir Thomas More* reflects the reality of demographic change in England and the specific effect of such change upon London. W. K. Jordan noted that during this period the population of London expanded rapidly:

it would seem probable that London in 1500 did not number more than about 1.5 per cent of the whole population. But by 1600 the city very probably included slightly more than 5 per cent of the inhabitants of the kingdom and, most pertinently, controlled nearly 80 per cent of its foreign trade.⁸

London's expansion, which 'was ill understood in the late sixteenth century and was truly frightening to the responsible authorities', continued as 'hordes of men poured in to the metropolis to fill its ranks and . . . the population continued to rise at a rate which suggests that London can best be described as a "boom town"'.⁹ Stephen Mullaney concurred that this period saw 'unprecedented social and cultural upheavals'¹⁰ so that John Lyly could say of England:

Traffick and travell hath woven the nature of all Nations into ours, and made this land like Arras, full of devise. . . . Time hath confounded our mindes, our mindes the matter; but all commeth to this passe, that what heretofore hath been served in several dishes for a feaste, is now minced in a charger for a Gallimaufrey. If wee present a mingle-mangle, our fault is to be excused, because the whole world is become an Hodge-podge.¹¹

As Mullaney noted, Lyly's view of England was also 'most emphatically true of Elizabethan London' and 'As the city expanded far beyond its customary social, cultural, and geographical limits, it indeed became a "Gallimaufrey" of the nation (if not of all nations) as a whole.'¹² That the influx of 'all Nations' into England, or perhaps more specifically London, should be considered in terms of food, a 'Gallimaufrey' and a 'Hodge-podge', is particularly striking in relation to *Sir Thomas More* and demonstrates that Lyly, like Shakespeare, was interested in the changing face of London and the connection to be drawn between strangers, food, and disorder.

The Revels editors refer to William Harrison's *Description of England* from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* for 'the obnoxious properties of the strange roots' condemned by Lincoln in 2.3.13–19.¹³ Harrison commented as follows: 'Of the potato and such venerous roots as are brought out of Spaine, Portingale, and the Indies to furnish vp our bankets, I speake not.'¹⁴ Besides the obvious contempt with which any discussion of foreign vegetables is

dismissed, Harrison's use of the adjective 'venerous' strikingly imbues the inanimate with a characteristic associated with the foreign, sexual lust. Although the complaints levelled against foreigners in the scene centre on food they have previously irritated the Londoners with their sexual impropriety: in the opening scene of the play De Barde accosts Doll, Williamson's wife, and boasts about his previous sexual exploits with Sherwin's wife. In both cases sexual relations with English women are constructed in terms of the offence such relations cause to English men. De Barde aggravates the offence when he boasts to Betts, 'I tell thee fellow, and she were the mayor of London's wife, had I her once in my possession I would keep her, in spite of him that durst say nay' (1.1.46–9), since the notion of sex with the wife of an English official is here meant to constitute a general insult to the English nation. Notably, in the same scene Caveler enters with a pair of doves which he has stolen from Williamson. Doll's admonishment – 'How now, husband? What, one stranger take thy food from thee, and another thy wife?' (1.1.31–2) – alerts us to an oft-repeated association in the play between foreigners and food. Caveler's sneer 'Beef and brewis may serve such hinds. Are pigeons meat for a coarse carpenter?' (1.1.23–24) demonstrates that food is socially encoded in the play and just as the penetration of English women by foreigners emasculates English men, so too does their dictation of what English men should eat: Willams is forced to settle for modest fare and reduced to a 'hind', a female deer.

Lincoln arranges for the Londoner's complaints against the strangers to be read from the pulpit during the following week's sermons and the specific complaints that foreigners steal English jobs and thus reduce English men to poverty are initially couched in terms of food:

Lincoln (reads). To you all the worshipful lords and masters of this city, that will take compassion over the poor people your neighbours, and also of the great importable hurts, losses and hindrances whereof proceedeth extreme poverty to all the king's subjects that inhabit within this city and suburbs of the same. For so it is that aliens and strangers eat the bread from the fatherless children, and take the living from all the artificers, and the intercourse from all merchants, whereby poverty is so much increased, that every man bewaileth the misery of other, for craftsmen be brought to beggary, and merchants to neediness. (1.1.106–16)

The complaint that foreigners take bread from the mouths of fatherless English children emphasizes how ineffectual English men have become in the face of hostile foreigners, something previously noted by Doll who threatens the

strangers with violence from English women since English men do not take effective action: 'I am ashamed that freeborn Englishmen, having beaten strangers within their own bounds, should thus be braved and abused by them at home' (1.1.77–80). That the foreigners consume more than their fair share of English food and English wealth is apparent even to the nobility with Shrewsbury expressing concern that the aliens should have responded to the King's grace with insolence and 'fatted with the traffic of our country / Already leap into his subjects' face' (1.3.14–15).

John Jowett used stylistic analysis to argue that Henry Chettle (not Munday as is usually claimed) wrote the first scene of the play and that several others wrote 'over one-third of the original text'.¹⁵ For my purpose however, the question of the authorship of particular scenes is less important than the parallels that can be traced between them and like Jeffrey Masten I find that a number of thematic concerns run across the traditional editorial divisions of the work into hands.¹⁶ The authors of the first scene and Hand D focus on food and foreignness in a like manner, and since the 'additions' appear to be rewritings of some kind, rather than sources for the main text, Hand D was presumably influenced by his knowledge of the existing first scene. But Hand D might also have been influenced by the section of Holinshed's *Chronicles* upon which the first scene is closely based. The *Chronicles* themselves link food and foreignness:

About this season there grew a great hartburning and malicious grudge amongst the Englishmen of the citie of London against strangers; and namelie the artificers found themselues sore grieued, for that such numbers of strangers were permitted to resort hither with their wares and to exercise handie crafts to the great hinderance and impouerishing of the kings liege people. Besides that, they set nought by the rulers of the citie, & bare themselues too too bold of the kings fauor, wherof they would insolentlie boast; vpon presumption therof, & they offred manie an iniurious abuse to his liege people, insomuch that among other accidents which were manifest, it fortunued that as a carpenter in London called Williamson had bought two stockdooues in Cheape, and was about to pay for them, a Frenchman tooke them out of his hand, and said they were not meate for a carpenter.¹⁷

Then follows the incident upon which the taking of Sherwin's wife in *Sir Thomas More* is based:

For a Lombard called Francis de Bard, entised a mans wife in Lombard street to come to his chamber with hir husbands plate, which thing she did. After,

when hir husband knew it, he demanded his wife, but answer was made he should not haue hir: then he demanded his plate, and in like maner answer was made that he should neither haue plate nor wife.¹⁸

Although Holinshed is an importance source for 1.1. the play contains material not present in the prose source, including a greater focus on foreign food. It is likely that the pun on ‘hartburning’ in the first extract cited above triggered for the composer of 1.1. a connection between the Londoner’s grievances, foreigners, and food and he decided to elaborate upon the references to food in the *Chronicles*. The *OED* records that the word ‘heart-burning’ in the sense of grudge and in the sense of a stomach ailment was current in the period (*OED*, *n.* 1, 2). Most notably, 1.1. saw the invention of Doll which allows for an emphasis on the sexual misbehaviour of the foreigners in the context of anxieties about foreign influence on English food. In the *Chronicles* Lincoln is recorded as saying that foreign trade makes ‘Englishmen want and starue’ whilst the foreigners ‘liue abundantlie in great pleasure’, a hint at the sexual abandonment which is made more explicit with reference to the foreigners as ‘raueners’,¹⁹ a word which implies sexual force, greed, and gluttony, as well as robbery (*OED*, *Ravener*, *n.*1, 2, 3). It seems that hints of sexual impropriety in the *Chronicles* were noted by the composer of 1.1. and expanded upon in his creation of Doll so that sexual misbehaviour is considered in the context of goods, wives, and food in order to suggest that the foreigners are responsible for all kinds of pernicious consumption.

In 2.1, revised by Hand B who was probably Thomas Heywood, the Clown urges action against the foreigners: ‘Come, come, we’ll tickle their turnips, we’ll butter their boxes. Shall strangers rule the roast? Yes, but we’ll baste the roast’ (2.1.1–3). This might be nonsense with ‘turnips’, a pun on ‘turn-ups’, simply referring to the turned-up part of a garment (*OED*, *Turn-up*, *n.* 2) or may carry an altogether different meaning. The Revels editors gloss ‘we’ll tickle their turnips’ to mean ‘kick their bottoms’ since a sense of ‘tickle’ recorded in the *OED* is ‘chastise’ and ‘turnups’ indicate ‘the backside of breeches’ as well as carrying an association with French parsnips.²⁰ Yet it seems more likely that the clown is using ‘tickle’ in a lewd sense especially given that ‘turn-up’ could mean prostitute (*OED*, *Turn*, *v.* 81bb; *Turn-up*, *n.*1) and that foreign men have behaved with sexual impropriety toward English women earlier in the play; thus ‘tickling the turn-ups’ of foreigners would mean fornicating as an act of revenge against foreign women, here denounced as whores. That the clown might be referring to sexual violence problematizes the claim by the Revels editors that the introduction of the new role of the

Clown by Hand B was intended to result in a 'lightening' of the riot scenes.²¹ Punning on food and violence, specifically sexual violence, continues with the notion that the foreigners will have their boxes buttered. The Revels editors suggest that as well as carrying the violent sense of beating heads the phrase is 'based on 'butterbox', the current nickname for a Dutchman'.²² It is also likely that 'buttering boxes' refers to sexual intercourse; Gordon Williams provides examples of 'box' meaning 'vagina' and 'butter' meaning 'semen' in early modern usage.²³ That the Revels editors should omit any reference to the sexual implications of the Clown's revenge fantasy is puzzling especially since further evidence that the Clown, more than any other rioter, intends specifically sexual violence toward foreign women is evident in his announcement: 'Now Mars for thy honour, / Dutch or French, / So it be a wench, / I'll upon her' (2.1.50–3). The Clown is clearly (and typically for this stock character) preoccupied with foreign women as whores, as suggested by his estimation of Doll as their opposite: 'Ay, Lincoln my leader / And Doll my true breeder' (2.1.5–6). Doll stands for chaste English women everywhere who will not allow their 'boxes buttered' by foreign bullies, as made clear in the opening scene of the play. The Clown's reference to foreigners' ruling and basting 'the roast' (2.1.2–3) continues the punning on food and implies violence, as suggested by the Revels editors, and perhaps more specifically burning, since the rioters discuss setting fire to houses belonging to foreigners. The extended association in the early part of the play between the foreigners and food continues in More's appeasement of the rioters when he argues that if violence were to rid them of foreigners then some day violence might be used by others to get rid of them: 'other ruffians . . . Would shark on you and men like ravenous fishes / Would feed on one another' (2.3.90–3). If, as seems likely, Hand D is a subsequent addition, its writer picked up on and repeated associations drawn between foreigners and food in the earlier part of the play in an effort to fully realise the extent of their pernicious consumption; they not only devour the wives of London's citizens but their food, their profits, their culinary culture, and their general well-being.

Part 2: *Sir Thomas More*, Irish Foreigners, and Food

The desire to maintain homogeneity and define borders against the Europeans, as figured in *Sir Thomas More*, ran contrary to the English desire for colonial expansion, with the first focus for England's colonial aspirations being Ireland. Surprisingly some critics have claimed that England did not have colonial aspirations. For example, Tobias Gregory maintained that men like Edmund

Spenser, accused by Stephen Greenblatt and Simon Shepherd of being a poet of empire, were primarily motivated by personal ambition and international Protestant solidarity and that the period was one of perceived isolation and Catholic threat not expansion. Gregory claimed that 'Elizabethan England was no more engaged in empire-building in the New World than in the old. As Jeffrey Knapp has reminded us, English efforts at colonization in America were 'dismal failures' until the seventeenth century, particularly by comparison with the vast, lucrative colonies of Spain'.²⁴ However it is unreasonable to assume that failure implies the absence of what Gregory has called 'an imperial impulse'. The impulse may not have been particularly fulfilled but it was evident nonetheless as the American examples show.

Proximity did not prevent the English viewing the Irish and the Irish diet as alien. The potato had not yet become a staple food in Ireland and English writers were particularly interested in the Irish tendency to include raw flesh and blood in their diet. In his *Britannia* William Camden noted:

When they are sharp set [hungry], they make no bones of raw flesh, after they have squeez'd the blood out; to digest which, they drink *Usquebaugh*. They let their cows blood too, which, after it is curdled, and strew'd over with butter, they eat with a good relish.²⁵

In *The glory of England, or a True description of Blessings, whereby she Triumpheth over all Nations* Thomas Gainsford similarly claimed: 'Both men and women not long since accustomed a sauage manner of dyet, which was raw flesh, drinking the blood, now they seeth [boil] it, and quaff vp the liquor, and then take *Vsquebath*'.²⁶ The distinctive characteristics of the Irish diet are raw meat, and a combination of the familiar, butter, with the unfamiliar, blood. 'usquebaugh' or 'usquebath' is, literally, 'water of life' or whisky (*OED*, *Usquebaugh n.*), the alcoholic beverage made strange by the Gaelic word used to identify it. Camden and Gainsford's descriptions of the Irish appetite for blood concur with what Richard Stanyhurst wrote in Holinshed's *Chronicles*:

Fleshe they deuour without bread, and that halfe raw: the rest boyleth in their stomackes with *Aqua vitæ*, which they swill in after such a surfet by quartes & pottels: they let their coves bloud, which growne to a gelly, they bake and ouerspread with butter, and so eate it in lumpes.²⁷

The implication is that the niceties of English eating habits, that cooked meat should be taken with bread and consumption should be leisurely, are neglected by the Irish and the effect of Stanyhurst's description is to align the Irish with

the animals they 'deuour' and so alert the reader to the brutishness of the Irish nature.

In a comment analagous to the complaints made by Londoner's against the European foreigners in *Sir Thomas More*, Fynes Moryson makes a metaphorical connection between the Irish diet and disease:

Many of the English-Irish, have by little and little been infected with the Irish filthinesse, and that in the very cities, excepting Dublyn, and some of the better sort in Waterford, where the English continually lodging in their houses, they more retaine the English diet.²⁸

If left unchecked, diet – an important indication of civility – can effect English degeneration, a process which preoccupied Early modern English writing on Ireland with commentators denouncing those Old English, or twelfth-century colonists, who had allowed themselves to be influenced by their colonized inferiors and warning the second wave of colonizers, the New English, against the threat of degeneration. Foreign vegetables, or 'strange roots' (2.3.10), are condemned in *Sir Thomas More* because it is feared they will be the 'undoing of poor prentices' (2.3.11) causing the breeding of infection and a physical weakening. So too in early modern writings about the Irish diet there is a fear that the absorption of strange foodstuffs will make strange the English body and initiate a wider social corruption which will inevitably undermine English cultural superiority. As in *Sir Thomas More* early modern commentators on Ireland perceived a link between diet and sexual degeneracy, something hinted at in *A New Description of Ireland* where Barnaby Rich claimed that the Irish 'had rather stil retaine themselues in their sluttishnesse, in their vncleanlinesse, in their rudenesse, and in their inhumane loathsomnes, then they would take any example from the English, either of ciuility, humanity, or any manner of Decencie'.²⁹ The link between diet and sexual behaviour is more overt in Sir John Davies' *A Discoverie of the True Causes why Ireland was never Entirely Subdued* which referred to 'their promiscuous generation of Children; their neglect of lawfull Matrimony; their vncleannesse in Apparrell, Diet, & Lodging; and their contempt and scorne of all thinges necessary for the Ciuill life of man'.³⁰

In *Sir Thomas More*, the mob claims that the foreigners' vegetables are poisonous because they have been grown in dung. The foreigners have Dutch names (De Barde, Peter van Hollock, Adrian Martine), but Shakespeare could draw upon the popular association between actively hostile foreigners particularly close to home, the Irish, and dung, or dirt, via the word 'bog'. Bogland,

a common feature of the Irish landscape, was closely identified with Ireland itself and, by association, with its people, a racist slur which identifies Ireland and the Irish as being the equivalent of excrement: waste matter and ultimately dispensable. Andrew Hadfield drew a connection between Shakespeare's association of Ireland with the kitchen maid's buttocks in *The Comedy of Errors* (Ireland is 'in her buttocks. I found it out by the bogs', 3.2.115–16) and John Derricke's *The Image of Ireland* (1581). Shakespeare may well have known Derricke's work which, aside from Holinshed's sections on Ireland in the *Chronicles* (1577), was the only description of Ireland readily available to English readers. Hadfield notes that

Derricke explicitly connects the Irish with dirt as an inversion of the clean and proper established order, specifically with the anus. One of the accompanying woodcuts represents figures publicly defecating at a feast, and he tells the story of the Irish eagles (who clearly stand for the Irish) preferring life in 'the Deuills Arse, A Peake' and the desolate bogs to that at court.³¹

Defecation in front of an audience and during a formal meal situates the Irish as uncivilised and makes a specific connection between excrement and food similar to that found in *Sir Thomas More*. As mentioned earlier, it is unclear whether the phrase 'bastards of dung' refers specifically to potatoes (confused by Lincoln with parsnips), identifies the foreigners, or deliberately conflates both. In any case the association between troublesome foreigners and dung or dirt extended to Ireland as well as mainland Europe.

Detailed descriptions of the common Irish diet by Camden, Gainsford, Stanyhurst and Moryson function as disturbing accounts of alterity primarily due to their emphasis on the Irish taste for raw flesh and blood which suggests a people capable of that most extreme form of uncivilised eating, cannibalism. Although contemporary English accounts of Irish cannibalism describe a people not naturally disposed to the practice but reduced to survival cannibalism as a result of war, the overwhelming effect of such accounts is the endorsement of English perceptions of the Irish as savage. In *A View of the Present State of Ireland* Irenius describes the starving Irish in Munster as 'Anatomies of death' that 'did eate the dead Carrions, happie wheare they Coulede finde them, Yea and one another sone after, in so muche as the verye carkasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves.'³² Writing on Ireland in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, John Hooker reported that after the defeat of the Papal force in 1580 the people of the area surrounding Smerwick ate the bodies of dead men washed up on shore from a shipwreck, so severe was the

extent of the famine after the Desmond rebellion.³³ Similarly Fynes Moryson claimed in his *Itinerary* that after the tactical destruction of Irish corn by English forces a group of soldiers returning home from an expedition against the rebel Brian Mac Art came across ‘a most horrible spectacle of three children (whereof the eldest was not aboue ten yeeres old), all eating and knawing with their teeth the entrals of their dead mother’.³⁴ Other accounts accuse the Irish of ritual cannibalism, confirming suspicions that their participation in the uncivilised and unnatural practice was voluntary. In *A View of the Present State of Ireland* Irenius reports that the Irish, like the Scythians before them, indulge in blood rituals:

Allsoe the *Scythians* vsed when they would binde anie solempne vowe of Combination to drinke a bowle of blodd together vowinge theareby to spende theire laste blodd in that quarrell, And even so do the wilde Scottes as ye maie reade in *Buchannan* and some of the Northern Irishe likewise.³⁵

Spenser was particularly sensitive to perceived English degeneration in Ireland and his focus on Irish blood rituals, passed on from one people to another, suggests a real fear that English men might become implicated in barbaric Irish cultural practices.

Although there were European accounts of cannibalism amongst native American tribes, the important matter was proximity: barbarity might be expected in the unchartered territory of the New World but the prospect of cannibalism in Ireland, a region physically close and inhabited by English men, would have proved more disturbing than reports of the practice in a remote location. As in *Sir Thomas More*, the cultural practice that raises particular concern and is perceived as strange and harmful is a culinary one: consumption, be it of strange vegetables or raw meat or blood, is as much an indication of alterity as physical appearance, language or other customs. While there is no straightforward equivalence between the invasive strangers in *Sir Thomas More* and the invaded Irish, implicit comparisons are drawn between the two via their strange culinary customs. Proximity conditions influence: European foreigners in *Sir Thomas More* threaten to undermine English order and effect degeneration in much the same way that English order was being challenged in the colony of Ireland, the resistance to colonial rule being judged by English authorities as civil disorder rather than political resistance.

William Camden rejected as spurious stories suggesting that the Romans had conquered Ireland and complained that this failure made England’s job of civilizing the Irish more difficult:

I can never imagine that this island was conquered by the Romans. Without question it had been well for it, if it had; and might have civilized them. For wheresoever the Romans were Lords and Masters, they introduced humanity among the conquer'd; and except were they rul'd, there was no such thing as humanity, learning, or neatness in any part of Europe. Their neglect of this Island [Ireland] may be charged upon them as inconsiderateness. For from this quarter Britain was spoil'd and *infested* with most cruel enemies . . . [my emphasis].³⁶

The anger expressed by Camden about ancient 'infestations' by the barbarous Irish echoes the feelings expressed by the mob in *Sir Thomas More*. The common confusion of 'infest' with 'infect' (*OED*, *Infest v.*² 1b) serves to draw connections between the perception that England will be over-run by foreigners and the perception that those foreigners will bring disease and cause degeneration.

In *Sir Thomas More* foreign contact triggers the ingestion of poisonous strangers, yet simplistic notions of civility and savagery are problematized via the savage potential of the rioters admonished by More. In *The Faerie Queene* Spenser refers to the civilising influence of Brutus on ancient Britain. Before the coming of Brutus the land was a 'saluage wilderness, Vnpeopled, vnmanurd, vnprou'd, vnpraysd' (2.10.5.3–4) and its inhabitants were barbaric 'But farre in land a saluage nation dwelt, / Of hideous Giants, and halfe bestly men, / That neuer tasted grace, nor goodnesse felt' (2.10.7.1–2). England's savage past is a painful memory which undermines notions of inherent English civility and implies the need for constant vigilance against degeneration. This danger was particularly threatening given the proximity of Ireland which, unlike Britain (England, Wales, and to a lesser degree Scotland), had not felt the civilising influence of Roman invasion, a reality which was used by some commentators to explain Ireland's contemporary status as an especially uncivil environment. In *Sir Thomas More* the traffic is in destabilizing and threatening figures whose behaviour undermines a precarious order. The play can be read not only as a warning against unwise expansion abroad, and particularly against the incorporation of foreigners, given the evidence in classical history of a particularly spectacular fall, but also as a warning that popular responses to this threat are likely to be as savage as the ills which precipitate them.

Notes

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- 1 I am grateful to The British Academy for supporting this research with the award of an Overseas Conference Grant. I would also like to thank the anonymous reader for *Early Theatre* for comments that substantially improved this essay.
 - 2 For example see Jurgen Schafer, “When They Marry, They Get Wenches”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22 (1971); David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, eds, *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1997) and Gail Kern Paster, ‘The Body and Its Passions’, *Shakespeare Studies* 29 (2001).
 - 3 Anthony Munday, *Sir Thomas More* (revised by Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood and William Shakespeare), ed. Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester, 1990).
 - 4 Scott McMillin, *The Elizabethan Theatre and The Book of Sir Thomas More* (Ithaca, 1987).
 - 5 All quotations of the play will be from Munday, *Sir Thomas More* (cited above at note 3).
 - 6 Munday, *Sir Thomas More*, 95.
 - 7 Munday, *Sir Thomas More*, 84n1.
 - 8 W. K. Jordan, *The Charities of London 1480–1660: The Aspirations and the Achievements of the Urban Society* (London, 1960), 15–16.
 - 9 Jordan, *The Charities of London 1480–1660*, 17.
 - 10 Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Ann Arbor, 1995), 19.
 - 11 This comment appears in the prologue to Lyly’s play *Midas*, first published in 1592 (John Lyly, *The Complete Works*, ed. R. Warwick Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1902), 3.12).
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