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Leerssen, J.T.

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Wildness, Wilderness, and Ireland: Medieval and Early-Modern Patterns in the Demarcation of Civility

Joep Leerssen

In the Middle Ages the great contrast was not, as it had been in antiquity, between the city and the country (*urbs* and *rus*, as the Romans put it) but between nature and culture, expressed in terms of the "opposition between what was built, cultivated, and inhabited (city, castle, village) and what was essentially wild (the ocean and forest, the western equivalents of the eastern desert), that is, between men who lived in groups and those who lived in solitude."¹

Culture and Civility, Wildness and Wilderness

History and the social sciences are linked in a close but often slightly uneasy relationship. If in the following pages I address the historical or political impact of sociocultural attitudes concerning wildness and civility, I address an overlap between these two spheres of scholarship, where different, sometimes incompatible methodological presuppositions apply. In the end, therefore, we shall have to face the question whether this type of topic aims to give historical or social-scientific information and what the difference is between those two. Meanwhile, the interest of this kind of topic is manifest, and the fact that social-scientific and historical interest can be combined fruitfully has been amply proven by many illustrious scholars.

Special thanks to Steve Ellis, Ton Hoenselaars, Jelle Koopmans, Peter Mason, Arthur Mitzman, and Ann Rigney.

¹ Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1988), 58.

I want to take my cue from an observation by the anthropologist Mary Douglas as quoted by the historian Keith Thomas and to explore their correlation between culture and society, or rather their correlation between the opposition culture/nature and the circumscription of a society's in-group: "In each constructed world of nature, the contrast between man and not-man provides an analogy for the contrast between the *member* of the human society and the *outsider*."² "Civility" may be defined as the set of cultural values current in a given society; that is, as the social manifestation of cultural awareness. The idea of "culture" is usually seen as part of an antonym, one half of the opposition between culture and nature. Culture, then, is that which distinguishes us from animals, that in which we tame or refine our natural existence—the fact that we till fields, construct dwellings, clothe our nakedness, cook (or otherwise prepare) our food, and bury our dead (or otherwise dispose of them in a ritual fashion). There is also the aspect that Norbert Elias has traced: that we have placed certain social restrictions on physical activities which beasts perform quite openly, especially those centered around the ingestion and digestion of food and around sexuality and procreation; all these activities are either excluded to some extent (historically variable) from the public domain and relegated to privacy or else regulated or exorcized by taboos and rituals, which results in cordoning off certain spheres of life (the sustenance and procreation of life as well as death) from the natural world.

It is this sense of de-naturing our behavior (we speak of "refinement" or being "polite," i.e., polished, no longer in our raw state) which is central to our cultural values. These are the standards by which humans stand higher than animals in the Great Chain of Being, and to fall short of these standards means that either one must be educated and socialized (this is what is done to young children) or else segregated or outcast (witness the exclusion or confinement of madmen and criminals).

Thus, in terms of the social organization and regulation of human behavior, the opposition between culture and nature is translated into the related one of civility vs. savagery. Humans who fail to live up to communal standards revert to that wildness which is proper to beasts and wild nature. Civility orders life, which in its non-civilized, natural state is wild. The notion of wildness has a double meaning, therefore: wild "in its raw, uncivilized state," and also with a connotation of being "unruly, erratic, incomprehensible and surprising." The semantic bifurcation is worth noticing and also inheres in the French cognate of "wild," *sauvage* ("savage"), with the additional connotation "untrammelled by rational restraint, swayed by unmitigated passion and instinct."

Savagery and civility are, then, modalities of social behavior: savage is as savage does, civil is as civil does. We are wild or civil to the extent that we

² Quoted in Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World. Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London, 1984), 41.

behave wildly or civilly; yet at the same time this behavioral articulation of a cultural ethos will also define spaces and spatial circumscriptions of where such behavior is to be found.

In the Middle Ages the center of civility is the aristocratic court, in accordance with a code of civility that is in itself an aristocratic one. All codes of chivalry exist in the medium of an extreme ritual or ceremonious control over affect, instinct and physical immediacy. Table manners and courtly behavior (indeed, the very notion of "courtesy"), protocol and an elaborate hierarchical system of titles and artificial dignities: all these are manifestations of this overriding de-naturing and refinement of life, and its most powerful symbol is perhaps the notion of courtly love, that wholly de-sexualized, disembodied devotion to a lady which becomes further and further removed from real ("natural") intercourse between the sexes.

As "culture" is the counterpart of "nature," so the courtly articulation of civility can also be traced in its contraries. What are the areas which are excluded from the civilized sphere? Against which contrastive background does the courtly ideal silhouette itself? A few instances are noteworthy.

The courtier's opposite number is often the bumpkin. We have many instances of elite poetry vilifying the *vilein*, the churl, the boor; witness, for instance, the courtly-aristocratic tendency of the German satires associated with the name of Neidhart von Reuenthal. (The same attitude can also be found among urban elites: witness, in the Low Countries, the famous *Kerelslied* by the Bruges patrician Jan Moritoen, or the case of the sixteenth-century Brussels printer Thomas van der Noot.³) Medieval vocabulary generally sees an antonymical opposition between *vilein* on the one hand and *cortes* or *chevalier* on the other and denigrates one as it articulates the accomplishments of the other.⁴ Thus, words like *vilein* and churl originally denoted people living in the countryside; and they have all, significantly, become negative bywords for uncouth, uncivil behavior. Churls' eating habits are revolting; they lack personal hygiene and have no self-discipline but tend to be lazy and unruly—in short, their behavior resembles that of animals. The implicit message is that, like animals, menials are natural inferiors and must, like animals, be ruled by strictly enforced authority. Feudal society mirrors, in its vertical hierarchy, the Great Chain of Being, with the ruling, governing principle on top, as a fount of civility which emanates redemption from bestiality, and at the bottom of society a passion-driven swarm of un-cultivated sub-humans.

³ Herman Pleij, *De sneeuwpoppen van 1511. Literatuur en stadscultuur tussen Middeleeuwen en moderne tijd* (Amsterdam, 1988), 121-45.

⁴ Per Nykrog's argument, in his *Les Fabliaux* (Geneva, 1973), on the courtly character of the *fabliaux* is well-known; see also Jean V. Alter, *Les Origines de la satire anti-bourgeoise en France. I: Moyen-Age -XVIe siècle* (Geneva, 1966), and Glynnis M. Cropp, *Le Vocabulaire courtois des troubadours de l'époque classique* (Geneva, 1975), 98-99, 438-40.

There are more opposites against which courtly civility can silhouette itself: the madman or fool (domesticated as a court jester), the witch, and the Wild Man. This fabulous creature, which has been studied as a type of civility-*en-creux* by Richard Bernheimer and more recently by Hayden White, apparently arose conjointly with the courtly ethos.⁵ The Wild Man (a widespread figure and popular in heraldry as a shieldbearer) lives in the woods, usually with unkempt shaggy hair, armed with nothing more high-tech than a cudgel, and naked except possibly for some leaves in strategic places. His lifestyle is one of extreme primitivism, and often he is seen as an intermediary being between man and beast.

The Wild Man's forest habitat is significant. It is the absolute counterpart of the court, which is a place where civility reigns under the supervision of the king or nobleman with his attendant, well-ordered, and polished courtly train, with its embellished and refined interior and its ceremonious ordering of daily activity. It is in the forest that the courtly discipline on activity can be relaxed in the sport of hunting; it is here that "the wild things are." Typically, many chivalric romances of the Middle Ages begin with a transition from court to forest: a knight's quest takes him away from the banquetting hall and towards that somber, shady haunt of dragons and damsels in distress. The forest is a labyrinth without charted roads, and knights invariably start their adventures by getting lost there.⁶

Once again there is a double connotation of *wildness* at work. On the one hand it is unkempt, uncultivated nature (thus, as Le Goff highlights, forest life is described as lacking cuisine and table manners); on the other hand it is a place where wild beings live and wild adventures can take place. The forest is a place for untrammelled imagination, for improbable occurrences: the locus, as Le Goff sees it, of "le merveilleux," or in Bernheimer's words:

[Wildness] implied everything that eluded Christian norms and the established framework of Christian society, referring to what was uncanny, unruly, raw, unpredictable, foreign, uncultured, and uncultivated. It included the unfamiliar as well as the unintelligible.⁷

Interestingly enough, the separate status of the forest was given a legal title.⁸ Medieval England knew two sets of law: common law for the civil part of the country, that is to say, for "society" proper, and forest law for the wilderness, that is to say, for such wilderness as came within the purview of a

⁵ Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952); Hayden White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archeology of an Idea," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, 1978), 150-82.

⁶ Cf. Le Goff on the Yvain romance, *op. cit.*, 56 and n., 107ff.

⁷ Le Goff, *op. cit.*, 114 and 11; Bernheimer, *op. cit.*, 20.

⁸ Cf. generally Charles R. Young, *The Royal Forests of Medieval England* (Leicester, 1979).

courtly order. Whereas common law was a regulation of social codes and rules, forest law was essentially a formulation of the supreme individual right of the king to hunt in the forest. Thus, in the early modern period the legal scholar John Manwood saw in the decline of the forest a decline of the courtly, feudal prerogatives of a romantic kingship.⁹ The case of Manwood's *Treatise and discourse of the lawes of the forrest* (1592) has been illuminatingly studied by Richard Marienstras, who illustrates how much, in the Tudor period, the notion of wildness was shifting.¹⁰ The forest ceases to be an ectopia where culture is suspended and the adventurous confrontation with nature and the supernatural can take place. Rather, it is a sanctuary for animals which fall under the king's hunting rights, a place where humans other than under the king's auspices forfeit their legal standing; it is a reservoir of booty to be exploited in highly regularized hunting parties. In short, the forest is now a place of unrestrained royal authority, a place, moreover, where in each hunting party a symbolic victory over wild nature is staged. The forest is becoming something to be exploited in terms of its natural resources and a place where the king's ultimate control over such circumscribed wildness is celebrated, a far cry from the forests of medieval romance.¹¹

This new attitude towards the proximity of wilderness can also be gauged in a Tudor instance of the Wild Man topos (likewise dealt with by Marienstras). In the anonymous play *Mucedorus* (1592) a *homo sylvestris* is no longer the essentially georgic presence of the Wild Men of earlier imaginings but rather a figure of abhorrence to be exterminated. He is a violent brute and significantly an enemy even to his "natural" environment.

⁹ Indeed the very etymology of the term *forest* may indicate as much. "The word no doubt comes from the expression *silva forestis*, a forest under the jurisdiction of a royal tribunal (*forum*). Originally it referred to a hunting preserve and had a legal significance" (Le Goff, *op. cit.*, 52). Again: "Offenses committed in the forest did not fall under the jurisdiction of the regular courts. The laws of the forest issued 'not from the common law of the kingdom but from the will of the prince, so that it was said that what was done according to those laws was just not in an absolute sense but according to the law of the forest'" (*ibid.*, 110). Le Goff's view is difficult to reconcile, however, with the etymology as outlined by Emile Benveniste in his authoritative *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (2 vols.; Paris, 1969), I, 313: "... le latin tardif a tiré de *foris*, *foras*, les dérivés *foranus*, *foresticus*, *forestis*, tous pour indiquer ce qui est au dehors, étranger"; moreover, other historians have followed H. L. Savage, "Hunting in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, 8 (1933), 30-41, in maintaining that the royal monopoly on forest hunting was a late medieval expansion of royal prerogative against local gentry and nobility. Obviously, more work on the status of hunting and of the Forest in late courtly and early modern society needs to be done.

¹⁰ Richard Marienstras, *Le Proche et le lointain. Sur Shakespeare, le drame élisabéthain et l'idéologie anglaise aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris, 1969).

¹¹ Corinne Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arven* (Woodbridge, 1993).

Wildness and Ireland

From the very beginnings of the English hegemonic presence in Ireland, attitudes as outlined above were operative. As early as the 1170s the tone was set, when Giraldus Cambrensis, in his Irish topography, marshalled an explicitly evolutionary model of civilization to bolster his derogatory estimate of the Irish:

This is a people of forest-dwellers, and inhospitable; a people living off beasts and like beasts; a people that still adheres to the most primitive way of pastoral living. For as humanity progresses from the forests to arable fields, and towards village life and civil society, this people is too lazy for agriculture and is heedless of material comfort; and they positively dislike the rules and legalities of civil intercourse; thus they have been unable and unwilling to abandon their traditional life of forest and pasture.¹²

The items are all there, and all in place: the habitat of the Irish is the wild forest; their lifestyle is beast-like; they are unruly and undisciplined, living by instinct. In short, the Irish are what Giraldus calls a *gens silvestris*, a term which serves to describe their habitat and their lifestyle and proves their cultural inferiority, even their lack of true humanity.

Giraldus's use of the term *gens silvestris* was to become a commonplace but a commonplace with political, even constitutional implications. The idea of *silvestri Hiberni* became a legally distinguishing criterion. Once again it held a number of connotations. One of these was the fact that the Irish lived in the wild, impenetrable part of the country like so many Wild Men, semi-beastial "naturals." The other was that they themselves were "wild"—unruly outlaws without a title to legal status. Thus, both in their habitat and in their personal status the Irish were "wild" as a direct consequence of being *silvestris*. The terms *silvestri Hiberni*, *Wilde Irish*, and *Mere Irish* occur interchangeably, and a gloss from 1401 explains the term *wildehirissheman* as "Hibernicus et inimicus noster."¹³ In practical terms this assessment of

¹² "Est autem gens haec gens silvestris, gens inhospita; gens ex bestiis et bestialiter vivens; gens a primo pastoralis vitae vivendi modo non recedens. Cum enim a silvis ad agros, ab agris ad villas, civiumque convictus, humani generis ordo processerit, gens haec, agriculturae labores aspernans, et civiles gazas parum affectans, civiumque iura multum detrectans, in silvis et pascuis vitam quam hactenus assueverat nec desuere novit nec descire" (*Topographia Hibernica*, book III, chap. 10). For text editions and translations see J. J. O'Meara (ed.), "Giraldus Cambrensis in *Topographia Hibernie*," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 52 C, no. 4 (1949), 113-78; and Giraldus Cambrensis, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, ed. and tr. J. J. O'Meara (Harmondsworth, 1982).

¹³ On Giraldus and this image of Irish wildness, see J. Th. Leerssen, *Mere Irish & Fior-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Amsterdam, 1986), 33-39, and Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (New York, 1992), 185-200.

Irish affairs led to the formulation of what we may best describe as a segregation policy, whose main objective was to articulate a proper division between civility and wilderness. Various statutes, foremost among them the well-known "Statutes of Kilkenny" of 1366, define and prescribe the difference between civility ("Englishness") and savagery ("Irishness") in habit, language, and general behavior. Although a racial terminology and an iconography of biological phenotype were occasionally and metaphorically applied to summarize such cultural differences, in actual practice one's constitutional status and indeed one's legal nationality (English subject or Irish outlaw) was dependent not so much on the accident of birth or ethnic descent¹⁴ but rather on attitude and behavior; indeed, these statutes aimed specifically to counteract the tendency of English subjects to adopt Irish manners. The King's obedient subjects are *ipso facto* Englishmen—"without," as one Statute phrases it, "taking into consideration that they be born in England or Ireland."

Even so, this demarcation of civility proceeds not only in terms of lifestyle but also by way of a spatial distinction. Ireland was officially divided into regions within and beyond the "Pale," which was the area held to be under the effective rule of the King: Dublin and environs and a variable and disputed extent of settled land. This division is an extreme example of the need to give spatial boundaries to an idea of civility, and even the very nomenclature ("within the Pale" vs. "beyond the Pale") is symbolic in this remarkable instance of fixing a political, legal boundary on cultural criteria.

Giraldus's *Topography of Ireland* is memorable not only for its remarkably derogatory stance vis-à-vis the Irish but also because of its obviously fantastical nature. A large part of it is a book of wonders, describing uncouth phenomena and weird creatures in the manner of a bestiary. Bearded women, fish with golden teeth, etc. are all reminiscent of the fantastical, of Books of Wonders, of bestiaries, of speculative geography in the style of Pliny, or of the later travels of Mandeville.

The point I want to make here is that these two aspects of Giraldus's book are not linked by mere coincidence but belong structurally together. Giraldus's discourse on the uncouth marvels of Ireland is a standard, received iconography which in medieval descriptions assigns a value of exoticism. Much as, in the *imaginaire* of medieval romance, the forest is a place for marvelous adventures to occur, so, too, the wildness of Ireland and its position beyond the Pale of civilization are expressed through the iconography of marvelous natural phenomena such as gold-toothed fish. Giraldus's invocation of this standard set of uncouth marvels is a straightforward echo of that geographic imagination which conflates two aspects of the notion of

¹⁴ Pace Richard C. Hoffmann, "Outsiders by Birth and Blood: Racist Ideologies and Realities around the Periphery of Medieval European Culture," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 6 (1983), 1-36.

strange lands, meaning both "foreign" and "weird." That imagination uses the blank spaces of the map to write *here be tygers* or *hic sunt leones*, or stocks the distant, exotic regions of the world with Plinian races like people with no heads and their faces in their chests, people hopping around on one huge foot, or people with tails (*homines caudati*).¹⁵

Thus Giraldus exoticizes Ireland with the descriptive and rhetorical conventions that were open to him. Ireland is placed beyond the pale of plausible reality and is placed in the distant regions of adventure, romance, and speculation. Ireland was the outer limit of the Western world; beyond it lay the emptiness of the world ocean and, quite literally, the end of the world. Accordingly, we see not only among Giraldus's more slavish imitators like William of Newburgh, William of Malmesbury, and Ralph Higden but throughout the entire corpus of medieval representations the ways in which Ireland counts as *strange*. The image of Ireland's strangeness is current all over Western Europe: indeed, the two things that were probably best known in medieval Europe concerning Ireland were that at a place called "St. Patrick's Purgatory" one could catch a glimpse of the Other World and that it was the place from where St. Brendan started on that famous and oft-transcribed, oft-translated Voyage to (again) otherworldly places. Ireland was on the edge of the world ocean, on the edge of Life As We Know It.

And then Columbus sailed to the other side.

With the discovery of the New World, the application of this exotic, peripheral iconography is telescoped westward to the far shores of the Atlantic. Thus, Peter Mason has shown that the discovery of America did not in itself provide the discourse and iconography of strangeness which was applied to it. On the contrary, Mason argues, America now became the projecting screen on which the whole stock-in-trade of Old World exoticism—Plinian races, phantasms in the style of Mandeville—was projected. The first thing that happened to America upon its discovery was that it was fitted into the pre-formulated European discourse of exoticism, uncouthness, wildness, and strangeness. What Mason analyzes is, then, a shift where iconography previously applied to Ireland and other countries is moved westward along with the westward shift of the horizon of the European world-view.

What does this mean? With the discovery of the New World, Ireland is no longer Ultima Thule and loses the status of being "on the edge," and on the imaginary plane, the discovery of America moves Ireland closer to Europe. This means that the medieval type of exoticism can no longer remain in force and that Ireland's status changes from "far" to "near," from "distant" to "domestic."

¹⁵ On the Plinian races in the European imagination see Peter Mason, *The Deconstruction of America: Representations of the Other* (London, 1990). On the widespread belief in England that the Irish had tails, see Thomas, *op. cit.*, 42-43.

I by no means wish to argue that the discovery of America and the changing perception of Ireland's geopolitical status actually *inspired* Tudor policy—for one thing, Tudor policy relating to Ireland was partly based on the experience of domesticating the Scottish and Welsh marches, as Steven Ellis has shown¹⁶—but the new perception of Ireland at least facilitated a new discourse which made it possible for a wholly new set of political aims to be formulated regarding Ireland's constitutional position. Ireland must come under central control, must be integrated now that it is so obviously a part of England's inner sphere; and accordingly we see how the uncouth inhabitants of Ireland are no longer seen as semibestials out in the wilds, relegated to their own beyond-the-pale existence, but how their presence (like that of the Wild Man in *Mucedorus*) is in itself irksome, something to be reduced and prosecuted. The Tudors' *surrender and regrant* policy, Henry's cultural-political legislation (e.g., the act 28 Henry VIII Ireland), the establishment of plantations in "wild" areas like Munster, and the establishment of Presidencies and English administrative structures are all examples of this new attitude. Instead of otherworldly aliens, the Irish are now recalcitrant subjects of the King, and the segregation policy exemplified by the Statutes of Kilkenny becomes unthinkable under Henry's kingship.¹⁷ We see the new attitudes expressed by spokesmen like Edmund Spenser in his *View of the Present State of Ireland*¹⁸ or a little later by James I's attorney-general in Ireland, Sir John Davies, the architect of the Ulster Plantations.

In *A discoverie of the true causes why Ireland was never entirely subdued* (1619) Davies criticizes the medieval complacency which let Ireland-beyond-the-pale persist in its natural savagery without seeking to extirpate and incorporate this irksome Otherness. Davies argues that the entire island should have been given a constitutional status under English law, and he wants to see the Irish not as Wild Men or marginal outlandish brutes on the fringes of humanity but as subjects of the king, subject to Common Law, or even, if the country is too "wild" to enforce Common Law, to Forest Law:

¹⁶ Steven Ellis, *The Pale and the Far North: Government and Society in Two Early Tudor Borderlands* (Galway, 1988).

¹⁷ Properly speaking, therefore, the Tudor campaigns are not an example of "colonialism" in the strict sense. Although the methods (including the establishment of plantations and ruthless, indeed genocidal, establishment of control) resembled those of the Spanish in America, Tudor policy was not primarily concerned with extracting wealth from Ireland; rather, the aim was the definitive homogenization and assimilation of Ireland within the inner circle of the emerging British national system. On Tudor policy in Ireland generally see Brendan Bradshaw, *The Irish Constitutional Revolution of the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1979); N. P. Canny, "The Ideology of English Colonization: From England to America," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 30 (1973), 575-98; Steven Ellis, *Tudor Ireland* (London, 1985); and Jon G. Crawford, *Anglicizing the Government of Ireland: The Irish Privy Council and the Expansion of Tudor Rule, 1556-1578* (Dublin, 1993).

¹⁸ Concerning which see Patricia Coughlan, "'Some secret scourge which shall by her come unto England': Ireland and Incivility in Spenser," in P. Coughlan (ed.), *Spenser and Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Cork, 1989), 46-74.

Againe, if King *Henry* the second, who is said to be the K. that Conquered this Land, had made Forrests in Ireland [...] or if those English Lordes, amongst whom the whole Kingdome was devided, had beene good Hunters, and had reduced the Mountaines, Boggs, and woods within the limits of Forrests, Chases, and Parkes; assuredly, the very Forrest Law, and the Law *De Malefactoribus in parcis*, would in time have driven them into the Plains & Countries inhabited and Mannured, and have made them yeeld uppe their fast places to those wild Beastes which were indeede less hurtfull and wilde, then they.¹⁹

The English image of the Irish as uncouth and uncivilized and therefore naturally inferior and legitimately subjectable is constant but adaptable, fulfilling different functions at different moments in history. Indeed, the discourse of cultural denigration is not limited to the case under review here but is a constant and all-pervasive feature of the European articulation of civility. The European articulation of one's civility requires the peripheral presence, on the edge of one's sphere of influence, of a semi-subdued Other. The history of English perceptions of Ireland before and after the discovery of the Atlantic's farther shore reflects the broadening of the English cultural horizon, until Ireland became fully a part of the English domestic purview and ceased to be the boundarystone on the edge of the world.

The Gaelic Perspective

The Irish themselves, though at the receiving end of English hegemony, exhibit a similar tendency of articulating their civility by silhouetting it against a counter-image of the Other's wildness and uncouthness. Thus, Irish political poetry of the later Middle Ages and the early modern period (especially the more directly political poems addressed to individual clan chiefs) contains direct political advice on how to resist English encroachment. However, to see such literature in nationalist colors as was traditionally done in older works of Irish literary history might be anachronistic and distortive. Such a view will fail to account for the fact that after the defeat and exile of the last native sovereign chiefs in the early 1600s (the "Flight of the Earls"), political poetry to a considerable extent abandons the exhortatory anti-English terms, and we find little evidence of poets trying to address their fellow-countrymen in order to raise their anti-English spirits. On the contrary, we get such curious phenomena as the "Contention of the Bards" in which, at the height of the Jacobean Plantations, poets devote all their energy to the clarification of minute points of abstruse lore; and there are many

¹⁹ Sir John Davies, *A discoverie of the true causes why Ireland was never entirely subdued, and brought under the obedience of the Crowne of England, untill the beginning of his Majesties happy Raigne* (London, 1619), 114-15.

poems extant which mourn the defeat of native civilization purely and simply because it means a decline in the poet's social status. Such preoccupation with professional as opposed to national interests has traditionally bewildered literary historians of a nationalist disposition and has been presented as a paradox, a curiosity, something begging for an explanation.²⁰

The Irish mode of distinguishing between civility and its enemies should perhaps be interpreted not anachronistically as a clash between "nations" but rather in the more general frame of reference outlined in the foregoing pages. The starting-point must be to understand the Irish sociocultural self-image and to see around which central institutions it gravitated. After the Reformation that central institution becomes, of course, the church: Irishness becomes increasingly defined in terms of Roman Catholicism, and Roman Catholicism in Ireland becomes increasingly an assertion of non-Englishness. But that religious opposition does not mark the beginning of the Anglo-Irish confrontation; it complicates and realigns cultural self-definitions which in themselves antedate the Reformation and which have been in operation since Giraldus's day.

We are justified in assuming that the courtly notion of culture did make its way into Ireland. Seán Ó Tuama's admirable work on the reception and dissemination of amatory conventions in the Irish literary tradition makes a strong case for their courtly origins.²¹ If in the wake of the Hiberno-Norman nobles courtly love made its way into Irish culture, then it seems likely that other aspects of a chivalric or courtly outlook would be imported. Surely the poems that were addressed to various Butlers and, more importantly, the poetry that was written by men like Gearóid Iarla reflects a chivalric ethos at work. To bear out this point fully would require an enterprise as demanding as that performed by Seán Ó Tuama, but as a working hypothesis it may stand.

In geographic terms Gaelic Ireland knew only a very feeble pull towards a political "center": there was nothing comparable to a royal court for the entire island; church organization was weaker in its episcopal hierarchical organization than in other countries; and it still reflected the localism of monastic communities, a point made by Giraldus's *Topography*, which labors this point and conflates criticism of the regular clergy with criticism of Irish shoddiness in religious matters. Most importantly, Gaelic Ireland had no capital like London or Paris. There was a notion of a potential, nationwide "High-Kingship" linked to the site of Tara in County Meath, but it was an abstract ideal rather than a really existent or operative centralizing force. In systemic terms we could say that the social-geographic organization of Ireland reflected not a center-periphery structure but rather a network structure.

²⁰ On Irish literary history and historiography see Leerssen, *op. cit.*, 169-229.

²¹ Seán Ó Tuama, *An grá in amhráin na ndaoine* (Dublin, 1960), and *An grá i bhfilíocht na nuaisle* (Dublin, 1988).

As a result of these combined factors, the articulation of cultural values such as we see it in operation in Irish discourse until well into the seventeenth century is almost exclusively vertically oriented: a courtly, aristocratic notion which sees the nobility as the social focus of cultural values and sets itself off against a proletarian, boorish counterpart. Significantly, English settlers in Ireland, whatever their background, are always denigrated in invective that follows a courtly register: the English are slow, dull-witted, have no *savoir-faire*, are clumsy, and no match for the cleverness and sprightliness of the Sons of the Gael.

It comes as no surprise, then, to see that the disintegration of the Gaelic sociocultural system in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century was registered as the ruin of aristocratic rather than "national" cultural values. Gaelic writers after the Flight of the Earls refer to their fallen station and evince a sense that "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Significantly, they even express disdain for their own countrymen of menial origin: part of the unhinging of their social order consists of the fact they are now forced to live among their former underlings, the Gaelic menials. That reaction obviously assesses the upheavals of the time from a courtly-aristocratic cultural outlook. The courtly focus in famous seventeenth-century poems such as the lament for Kilcash or the song for Seán Ó Duibhir an Gleanna is not a side issue or a curious flavor within a Gaelic "national" tradition; this courtly preoccupation is the very modality in which Gaelic culture perceives its identity. The Gaelic sense of cultural identity is as non-national as that of the knights of the High Middle Ages, who were bound up in feudal and lineage-based values of honor and fealty, and formed part of a transnational, indeed, "a-national" elite with loyalties to class and ethos rather than to country or ethnic peer group.

If we look for the contrastive counterpart, the "hetero-image," against which this sense of cultural identity silhouettes itself, then we must accordingly look in class terms; and we find them in an ongoing tradition of anti-proletarian invective throughout the seventeenth century, from well-known and often-anthologized poets like Fear Flatha Ó Gnímh, Mathghamhain Ó hÍfearnáin and Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig to the invectives of Dáibhí Ó Bruadair. Indeed, so exclusively courtly are the values of these men that they heap scorn, without any national differentiation, on English and Irish boors alike. The most striking case in point is provided by that highly interesting prose satire of the mid-seventeenth century, *Pairlement Chloinne Tomás*.²²

This work, like the sarcastic pieces by the aforementioned poets, conflates proletarian Gaels and English usurpers into a single amalgamated mass of anti-civilized enemies. The terms in which this happens are highly reminiscent of the pieces that were written by Continental elites from the

²² N. J. A. Williams (ed. and tr.), *Pairlement Chloinne Tomás* (Dublin, 1981). The family designation in the title (The Parliament of "Clan Tomás" or "Tomás's Offspring") carries strong demotic overtones.

High Middle Ages to satirize churls and *vileins*. The circumstances are the same (an elite feels the need to assert its moral and cultural superiority in what is an unstable world), and the literary response is very similar (the desire to distance oneself from embarrassing underlings is resolved by asserting their lack of true civility). I find it highly suggestive, for instance, that the acme of Clan Tomás's scandalous, upstart behavior is their use of a *parliament*. That is not just an echo of other medieval humorous social parables like the parliament of fowls or the parliament of women, but it is used to double effect, showing how the Gaelic order (aristocratic as it is) is being threatened by English-imported anti-aristocratic institutions like that of a Parliament. It is for that reason that Clan Tomás sing a hymn to Cromwell, the ravager of Ireland but deliverer and champion of boors and churls. This hymn is not a questionable slander on the national cause—Clan Tomás are made out to be not quislings but the natural allies of all culture-threatening savages, whatever their national origin.

Pairlement Chloinne Tomás, like Continental satires against the lower classes, typically uses comparisons with animals, stressing their disgusting bodily functions and their nauseating eating habits, their rough and uncivil behavior in social interaction, etc.—all of these topics being so many ingredients to show that these menials, despite their social pretensions, are closer to animals and more prone to the dictates of nature. To recall the famous words of Sallust, at the beginning of *Coniuratio Catilinae*: "[They are] as they have been formed by nature: prone and in thrall to their bellies, like cattle."²³ Accordingly, we encounter a bestialization of the satirized rustics in *Pairlement Chloinne Tomás* through a revolting description of their boorish and disgusting eating habits: the menials feed on

the head-gristle and trotters of cattle, and the blood, gore and entrails of dumb animals; and furthermore these were to be their bread and condiment: coarse, half-baked barley bread, messy mish-mashes of gruel, skimmed milk, and the butter of goats and sheep, rancid, full of hairs and blue pock-marks. (2 and 66)

Pairlement Chloinne Tomás is usually read in the context of mid-seventeenth-century Ireland, but its attitudes to my mind are best understood in the context of a mentality like the decline of the aristocratic, courtly outlook in late medieval Picardy and the Burgundian Netherlands and the rise of the trading cities there.

²³ See A. J. Woodman, "A Note on Sallust, *Catilina*, 1.1," *Classical Quarterly*, 23 (1973), 310.

The Historicity of Nastiness

But there is another parallel—not with the late-medieval anti-churl satires of the continent but rather with contemporary, seventeenth-century English discourse. Early-modern English travellers in Ireland such as Fynes Moryson and Barnaby Rich have left descriptions of the disgusting Irish cuisine which are highly reminiscent of the one quoted from *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*.

Should we conclude from this that if both the author of *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis* and English observers make this point, it must probably be true? I am not so sure if that is a fruitful path to pursue. Both descriptions demarcate a sphere of civility through the *via negativa* of cultural denigration. *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis* does so in a social, courtly denigration of the local plebs, while Rich and Moryson do so in a national, early-modern denigration of the unruly, half-savage western neighboring isle. The denigrated Irish plebeian is at the point of intersection of these two perspectives, the Other against which both derive their different ideas of cultural identity; but the denigration in both cases, though following a standard discourse, is performed from different political needs. For Rich and Moryson the disgusting slobberers are representative of all Gaels high and low (including, we may assume, the author of *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*); for that aristocratically-minded Irish author, the plebeian slobberers are the sign of a disintegrating society unhinged by the presence of Englishmen like Rich and Moryson. What we see here is a discursive *menage à trois*, rehearsing several possible variations on a standard pattern of cultural representation.

What historical truth can be learned from all this? I have not charted events or brought to light any hitherto unknown or neglected “facts”; all I have done is to study discourse, representational conventions, and commonplaces; and I hope that I have been able to pinpoint some stylistic constants and topoi in that discourse. I am not even sure whether the nastiness of Irish eating habits is “true” or not. What sort of truth would it be—to know whether or not the lower-class Irish had a nasty cuisine? “Nasty” in whose frame of reference? “Nasty” in comparison to who else? Nastier than that of English or French menials?

Historical facts, as Paul Veyne argues, are facts that *make a difference*, that allow us to compare different points in time. Thus, to cite Veyne’s apposite example, to say that “human beings eat” is perhaps an anthropological but not a historical truth.²⁴ Something similar may be said of the statement that “the Irish eat nastily.” To cite such a contemporary opinion in order to describe the Irish cuisine might be useful in a broad ethnographical sense which has informative value and give us access, if not to the situation “as it really was,” then at least to the situation as contemporaries perceived it

²⁴ Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l’histoire: Essai d’épistémologie* (Paris, 1971), 78.

or chose to represent it. But it is not a historically useful topic unless we define the historicity of nastiness, and see such patterns and attitudes as part of a process, a complex of historical changes and differences.

But to historicize concepts like civility and savagery also poses a methodological challenge. It straddles the concerns of the social and historical sciences (the former primarily oriented towards a synchronic analysis of social structures and institutions, the latter towards a diachronic analysis of developments and transitions), and in doing so it raises the issue of the spatial and chronological categorization of our working field.

We can compare social confrontations in a spatial articulation and seek ways of demarcating a sphere of civility from the wilderness outside, and we can analyze such questions in their temporal articulation and look at transitions from one period or attitude to another. Either way of looking runs the risk of reifying its opposite number, of taking for granted either the "period" or the "society" (the thing whose demarcation is *not* being looked at) as a neat fixity, a categorical pre-given. But neither of these two is fixed, neither a yardstick by which to measure the other. The division between "medieval" and "early modern" outlooks is set at different dates in different places on the European map; "medieval" and "early modern" attitudes may coexist at a given point in time at different places; and the places on the European map are differently configured or categorized according to the medieval or the early modern world-view.

We can trace continuities and discontinuities across Europe and across the centuries. From twelfth- and thirteenth-century authors like Neidhart von Reuenthal and Giraldus Cambrensis to seventeenth-century sources like *Pairlement Chloinne Tomás* and Fynes Moryson. What they share is a fundamental European myth; like a myth, the notion of civility has a symbolic value which is universalist and timeless as well as infinitely adaptable to the particular needs of a given time and place. The concept of civility, though exhibiting a fairly constant inner structure and operative at various points in the history of European conflict, is too protean to be tethered to a particular society or period. The best way to study and understand it, in its structural typology as well as its synchrony and diachrony, is by looking at its counter-images, at what it excludes or hopes to surmount.

University of Amsterdam.