

# Food and Social Politics in Early Modern Ireland

## *Representing the Peasant in The Parliament of Clan Tomas*\*

▼ **ABSTRACT** Recent historiography has demonstrated the immense material and metaphorical importance of food to representing social distinction in medieval and early modern Europe. To date there has been no effort to explore the Irish experience in this context. This article approaches the “meaning” of food in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ireland through a focused gastro-political analysis of Irish literary and material satire. It will examine representations of low-born food consumption in relation to broader early modern discourse around dietary classification, manners and food consumption. It will also explore the basis of Irish social food stereotypes by locating them in contemporary nutritional theories, philosophical and “scientific” ideas and by comparing imagined Irish foodways with a broad range of comparative European visual, literary and material examples. The “meaning” of food will be considered thematically, exploring dietary codification; the physical and moral embodiment of peasant foods; and the relationship between food association and sexual generation. This approach will demonstrate the highly sophisticated conceptual integration of European ideas and symbols in Irish culture, whilst developing a new tool for understanding the metaphorical intricacy of this period in Irish history. The article will move food, for the first time, into the arena of early modern Irish history, opening a window for future comparative studies of Irish and European food cultures.

▼ **RÉSUMÉ** L'historiographie récente a démontré l'immense importance matérielle et métaphorique de la nourriture pour représenter la

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distinction sociale dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne. Jusqu'à présent, il n'y a eu aucun effort pour explorer l'expérience irlandaise dans ce contexte. Cet article aborde le "sens" de la nourriture dans l'Irlande des XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles à travers une analyse gastro-politique ciblée de la satire littéraire et matérielle irlandaise. Il examinera les représentations de la consommation alimentaire des personnes de basse naissance par rapport au discours moderne plus large sur la classification alimentaire, les mœurs et la consommation alimentaire. Il explorera également les fondements des stéréotypes alimentaires sociaux irlandais en les situant dans les théories nutritionnelles contemporaines, les idées philosophiques et "scientifiques" et en comparant les voies alimentaires irlandaises imaginées avec un large éventail de comparaisons visuelles européennes, littéraires et exemples matériels. Le "sens" de l'alimentation sera considéré thématiquement, en explorant la codification diététique, l'incarnation physique et morale des aliments paysans, et la relation entre l'association alimentaire et la génération sexuelle. Cette approche démontrera l'intégration conceptuelle très sophistiquée des idées et des symboles européens dans la culture irlandaise, tout en développant un nouvel outil pour comprendre la complexité métaphorique de cette période de l'histoire irlandaise. L'article déplacera la nourriture, pour la première fois, dans l'arène de l'histoire irlandaise moderne au début, ouvrant une fenêtre pour de futures études comparatives des cultures alimentaires irlandaises et européennes.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Gaelic Irish literature, Early modern satire, Peasant representation, Irish foodways, *Parliament of Clan Tomas*, Food and class, Food and self-fashioning, Early modern diet, Seventeenth-century Ireland, Food and embodiment, Food and social politics

▼ **MOTS CLÉS** Littérature irlandaise gaélique, Satire, Représentation paysanne, Habitudes alimentaires irlandaises, *Parlement de Clan Tomas*, Classe sociale, Auto-représentation, Régime alimentaire, Irlande moderne, Nourriture et représentation, Alimentation et politique sociale

In early modern Europe, the meal was a central feature of the "world of manners" and served a fundamental role in the maintenance and expression of group solidarity and

cultural identity.<sup>1</sup> As such, food, was central to processes of “self-fashioning”, serving to define the “natural boundaries” of hierarchy in society.<sup>2</sup> Elite representations of lower-class eating habits, in this period, stemmed from a number of intertwined social discourses. The first is a polemic, derived from classical ideology, and politicized over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that sought to classify foods suitable for high- and low-born bodies.<sup>3</sup> The second, relates to the emergence of a “cult of manners” which “gathered the privileged and respectable into a shared wariness of the threat posed by those who lacked manners”.<sup>4</sup> The third is an anti-consumption discourse; a response to the nascent democratization of luxury in European society.<sup>5</sup> This discourse extolled the control of low-born consumption, to avoid blurring prevailing social distinctions, thereby preventing more generalized forms of disorder. In this milieu, the boundaries of elite and lower-class diets were fashioned and reinforced through a dynamic literary, visual and material culture. These inter-related media embedded a range of common stereotypes and motifs to imagine and patrol social foodways.<sup>6</sup>

To date, there has been no attempt to explore Irish “food-fashioning” in the context of this discourse or cultural output.<sup>7</sup> Reasons for the neglect include such issues as the ideological impact of the “Great Famine” of the nineteenth century and its stultifying effect on the focus of Irish cultural food studies; the fact that while English colonial “descriptions” of Irish diet are abundant, there is a dearth of corresponding Gaelic literary representation; and the tendency to view Gaelic society and culture, as “intensely conservative”, insular and disconnected from broader European ideas and discourse, thereby rendering the study

1 Paul VANDENBROECK, “Verbeeck’s Peasant Weddings: A Study of Iconography and Social Function”, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1984), p. 115.

2 Sheila MCTIGHE, “Foods and the Body in Italian Genre Paintings, about 1580: Campi, Passarotti, Carracci”, *Art Bulletin*, vol. 86, no. 2 (2004), p. 312; Allen J. GRIECO, *Food, Social Politics and the Order of Nature in Renaissance Italy* (Florence, 2020).

3 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 2002); Marilyn NICOUD, *Les régimes de santé au Moyen Âge. Naissance et diffusion d’une écriture médicale, XIII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 2 vols. (Rome, 2007); Sheila MCTIGHE, “Foods and the Body...”; Allen J. GRIECO, “Food and Social Classes in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy”, in Jean-Louis FLANDRIN, Massimo MONTANARI (eds), *Food: A Culinary History* (New York, 1999), pp. 302-12; Allen J. Grieco, *Food, Social Politics...*; Laura GIANNETTI, “Italian Renaissance Food-Fashioning or The Triumph of Greens”, *California Italian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2010), <http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/C312008890>; David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health in Early Modern Europe* (London, 2016).

4 John HALE, *The Civilisation of Europe in the Renaissance* (London, 1993), p. 494.

5 Here accepting Linda Levy Peck’s broad definition of luxury as “the habitual use of, or indulgence in what is choice or costly, whether food, dress, furniture, or appliances ... sumptuous food or surroundings”: Linda LEVY PECK, “Luxury and War: Reconsidering Luxury Consumption in Seventeenth-Century England”, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2002), pp. 1-23, esp. p. 5.

6 For example, on the influence of didactic dietary literature on artistic depictions of the peasant body, see Sheila MCTIGHE, “Foods and the Body...”; on the influence of print on material objects and links to fine art, see Claudia GOLDSTEIN, *Pieter Bruegel and the Culture of the Early Modern Dinner Party* (Oxfordshire, 2016), pp. 90-103; on the links between satirical anti-peasant literature and art, see Paul VANDENBROECK, “Verbeeck’s Peasant Weddings...”.

7 The term “Food-fashioning” is borrowed from Laura Giannetti, who adopted it as a take-off on Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of Renaissance self-fashioning. See Laura GIANNETTI, “Italian Renaissance Food-Fashioning...”, p. 2. For a broad overview of the food trope in the Irish tradition see Máirtín MAC CON IOMAIRÉ, “The Food Trope in Literature, Poetry, and Songs from the Irish Tradition”, in Lorna PIATTI-FARNELL, Donna LEE-BRIEN (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* (New York-London, 2018), pp. 364-78.

of comparative foodways a futile endeavour.<sup>8</sup> These issues, and the general underdevelopment of food studies, mean that when Gaelic sources *are* approached from a cultural perspective, engagement with food tends to be superficial and unsystematic at best, with no effort to situate the Irish experience in a broader historiographical context, or in the context of contemporary European ideas.<sup>9</sup> At worst, literary references to food are treated as a “historical truth”, as evidence of the lived experience of the actors; the complex symbolic and cultural significance overlooked entirely.<sup>10</sup>

This article represents the first sustained effort to explore the symbolic “meaning” of food in early modern Ireland. It approaches this through a deep, contextualized analysis of the well-known seventeenth-century social satire *Pairlement Chloinne Tomás* (*The Parliament of Clan Tomas*).<sup>11</sup> This anonymous “extravaganza in prose and verse” was written during a period of remarkable social and cultural change in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> The late sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth century were characterized by conquest, colonization and the “plantation” of settlers on native lands; the extension of English governance and market economics throughout the country; enforced religious reformation and ultimately, the collapse of “traditional” Gaelic society. As the Gaelic aristocracy and the privileged learned or bardic class lost their lands, status and authority, an agrarian *nouveau riche* element emerged at their expense. *The Parliament of Clan Tomas* (PCT) is a literary response to this

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8 For example: Michelle O’ RIORDAN, *The Gaelic Mind and the Collapse of the Gaelic World* (Cork, 1990); Tom DUNNE, “The Gaelic response to conquest and colonisation: the evidence of the poetry”, *Studia Hibernica*, vol. 20 (1980), pp. 7-30; Bernadette CUNNINGHAM, “Native culture and political change in Ireland, 1580-1640” in Ciaran BRADY, Raymond GILLESPIE (eds), *Natives and Newcomers: Essays on the Making of Irish Colonial Society, 1534-1641* (Dublin, 1986), pp. 148-70. For an opposing view, see Marc CABALL, “The Gaelic mind and the collapse of the Gaelic world: an appraisal”, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, vol. 25 (1993), pp. 87-96. Also: Brendan BRADSHAW, “Native reaction to the Westward Enterprise: A Case-Study in Gaelic ideology”, in Kenneth ANDREWS, Nicholas CANNY, Paul HAIR (eds), *The Westward Enterprise: English Activities in Ireland, the Atlantic and America, 1480-1650* (Liverpool, 1978), pp. 65-80. On conservatism in the *Pairlement Chloinne Tomás*, see Joep LEERSSEN, “Wildness, Wilderness and Ireland: Medieval and Early Modern Patterns in the Demarcation of Civility”, in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 56, no. 1 (1995), pp. 25-39; Vivian MERCIER, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 155-60; Nicholas Jonathan Anselm WILLIAMS (ed.), *Pairlement Chloinne Tomás* (Dublin, 1981), p. lix. For a contrary view: Marc CABALL, “Pairlement Chloinne Tomais I: a Reassessment”, *Eigse*, vol. 27 (1993), pp. 47-57. On the social and cultural interconnectedness of Irish society, see Colin BREEN, John RAVEN, “Maritime Lordship in Late Medieval Gaelic Ireland”, *Journal of Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2017), pp. 1-33. On Irish engagement with trade and material culture, see Susan FLAVIN, *Consumption and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Ireland* (Woodbridge, 2014).

9 Leslie CLARKSON, Margaret CRAWFORD, *Feast and Famine: A History of Food and Nutrition in Ireland 1500-1920* (Oxford, 2001), p. 13.

10 For example: Anthony LUCAS, “Irish Food Before the Potato”, *Gwerin*, vol. 3 (1960), pp. 8-43, esp. pp. 18, 35-36; John O’DONOVAN, *The Tribes of Ireland, a Satire* (Dublin, 1852), p. 24; Nicholas Jonathan Anselm WILLIAMS, *Pairlement...*, pp. xix, 124, 134, 169; Redcliff SALAMAN, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 217-24. For a critique of the problem, see Joep LEERSSEN, “Wildness...”, pp. 37-38.

11 All direct references to the text, hereafter cited as PCT, are taken from Williams 1981 edition. Line numbers provided throughout correspond with those in William’s edition. My sincere thanks to Philip McGill at Trinity College Dublin for his assistance in relation to editing the original Gaelic text for inclusion in the footnotes.

12 Vivian MERCIER, *Irish Comic Tradition...*, p. 157. The PCT comprises two books. The second is generally accepted to be of a later date than the first. For a detailed discussion, see Nicholas Jonathan Anselm WILLIAMS, *Pairlement...*, pp. xvii-xxii.

upheaval. It served as an elite assertion of moral and cultural superiority in a dynamic and unstable society. It is a humorous, but intensely bitter diatribe against low-born usurpers, both native Irish and English, who are melded into one imagined clan, or a “single mass of anti-civilized enemies” and represented as the antithesis of aristocratic culture and manners.<sup>13</sup>

Although largely overlooked to date, food is by far the most dominant mode of social representation in this text, which literally abounds with dietary “descriptions”, food stereotypes and symbolic associations. This analysis, which includes comparative examples from other Irish literary sources, considers these associations in relation to prevailing early modern discourse around social classification, manners and food consumption. It explores the basis of Irish social food stereotypes by locating them in contemporary nutritional theories, philosophical and “scientific” ideas and by comparing the imagined Irish diet with a broad range of comparative European visual, literary and material examples, within the context of recent interdisciplinary food studies. The “meaning” of food is considered thematically, exploring dietary codification; the physical and moral embodiment of peasant foods; and the symbolic relationship between food and sexual generation. The function of this approach is to demonstrate a highly sophisticated conceptual process at play in the text, challenging its traditional interpretation as an “elementary kind of humour” filled with “tedious detail” and revealing it instead as a nuanced and clever exposition of contemporary European ideas and attitudes.<sup>14</sup>

### Codifying the Low-Born Meal

One of the most notable features of the PCT is the obsessive attention paid to describing the components and attributes of low-born diet. As noted, such references have been treated as direct evidence of Gaelic food consumption. This is misleading. As demonstrated in other contexts, literary and artistic images of peasants “eating, starving, or feasting do not conform to experience, but rather are polemical or humorous representations”; they represent an “imagined order of things, which could depart significantly from what we know of real diets and actual people”.<sup>15</sup> There may, of course, be parallels between the types of foods classified as peasant fare and the lived experience of the lower orders, but dietary representations and images are more fruitfully approached as cultural artefacts; as “a barometer of social differentiation” in dynamic societies.<sup>16</sup> Explored from this perspective, the imagined Gaelic foodscape is remarkably cosmopolitan in character, suggesting

13 Joep LEERSEN, “Wildness...”, p. 37.

14 Vivian MERCIER, *Irish Comic Tradition...*, p. 157.

15 Sheila MCTIGHE, “Foods and the Body...”, p. 312; Paul FREEDMAN, *The Peasant Diet: Image and Reality* (Valencia, 2008), p. 2.

16 Paul VANDENBROECK, “Verbeeck’s Peasant Weddings...”, p. 115; Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 185; Joep LEERSEN, “Wildness...”, pp. 38-39.

wide-ranging engagement with contemporary prescriptive and imaginative literature, material culture and art.<sup>17</sup>

In the PCT I (c. 1610–15) and II (c. 1662–65), low-born foods are tightly prescribed, limited in range and instantly recognisable as stereotypes of early modern European peasant fare. In an opening justification of natural servitude, reminiscent of the biblical curse of Ham, St Patrick condemns the “demonic” clan and their progeny to lives of service and labour in the maintenance of the nobility.<sup>18</sup> They receive the gifts of indolence, slobbering and ineptitude, and their diet is “ordained” for them as:

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 and full of hairs and blue pock-marks.<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere, peasants eat large amounts of horse-beans, porridge, hodge-podge, barley, oat-cakes, buttermilk, parsnips and beets.<sup>20</sup> In PCT II, the range includes peas, potatoes, bacon, cheese and tripe.<sup>21</sup> These foods, which can be grouped as heavy bread, dairy produce, offal and salted meats, legumes and root vegetables are accompanied by negative descriptors and are closely associated with vulgar peasant behaviour and manners. They are juxtaposed throughout with unspecified “delicate, palatable foods” and “sweet intoxicating liquor” reserved to the nobles and aristocracy.<sup>22</sup>

The taxonomy of foods assigned to the Irish peasant is best understood within a broad European cultural framework where dietary preferences and habits were core indicators of social status and cultural identity.<sup>23</sup> This framework derived from a key organizing concept: humoral-Galenic theory, which received revived interest during the Renaissance. As recent studies of prescriptive dietary literature have shown, this theory had inherent potential for dietary class prejudice.<sup>24</sup> Labourers’ bodies were understood to produce more vital heat, giving the working classes better digestive capabilities than the more sedentary and

17 Foodscape here defined as ‘A metaphorical landscape of foods and their production methods and cultural associations’. See: <https://glosbe.com/en/en/foodscape> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> November 2021].

18 PCT, line 14: cineoil dheamhnuighe. For a discussion on the biblical justification of human inequality, see Paul FREEDMAN, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (California, 1999), chapters 3 and 4. The idea that the peasant’s life was ordained was a common one in medieval European anti-peasant satire. See Nicholas Jonathan Anselm WILLIAMS, *Pairlement...*, p. liii.

19 PCT, lines 51–56: Agus go madh é budh biadh agas budh beatha dhóibh .i. féitheach ceann 7 cosa beathadhach 7 fuil 7 follracht 7 ionathar na n-ainmhighthe n-éigcialluighe, 7 fós go madh é bhus arán 7 bhus annlann dóibh .i. arán omh úrgharbh eorna, agas praiseacha práipeamhla prácáis, bun bainne, 7 bréaním rui beach cuasghorm gabhar 7 caorach.

20 Horse beans are fava beans. PCT, lines 156; 381: pónaire oirnéis; 1167–68: pruisseacha príomhamhla prácáis; 510–4; 949: srubhán; bláthaighe; 694; 1204; 1467: meacáin; 696; 1468: bhiaitaisí.

21 PCT, lines 1761: pise; 1352; 1467: phutátoi; 1556: bhagúin; chaise; 1640: putóga.

22 PCT line 104–5: biadha séimhe sochaithmhe...deocha mílse meisgeamhla.

23 Laura GIANNETTI, “Italian Renaissance Food-Fashioning...”, p. 1; Massimo MONTANARI, *Food is Culture* (New York, 2006), pp. xi–xii.

24 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 187. On dietetic literature see also Marilyn NICLOUD, *Les régimes...*; David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, pp. 9–27, 49–75.

delicately complexed elites.<sup>25</sup> Workers could therefore digest heavy foods, that would putrefy in the stomach of a noble who required more delicate fare. Their bodies were more suited to coarse items such as beans, roots, cheese, bran breads and old meats. The leisured, on the other hand, were better nourished primarily with more delicate and refined fare such as poultry, wild fowl and white bread. Humoral theory, then, entailed an essential split between foods deemed suitable for workers and for the leisured/learned classes.

We should not be at all surprised to find the assimilation of Galenic physiological theory in Irish literature. These ideas were ubiquitous in European society and there is abundant evidence in surviving Irish medical manuscripts to demonstrate sustained scholarly engagement with dietetic ideas. Of the surviving corpus of Gaelic Irish manuscripts, almost one hundred contain medical material. These consist of translations or adaptations of continental Latin treatises into early modern Irish by doctors at the medical schools of Montpellier, Salerno and other English and continental universities from the twelfth to the seventeenth century.<sup>26</sup> Sources cited by Gaelic writers include Galen, Avicenna and Bernard of Gordon, and many manuscripts incorporate details on the humoral properties of plants and foods.<sup>27</sup> The best-known medieval dietary regimens, the *Regimen sanitatis*, *Lilium medicinae* and the *Rosa anglica* are among the texts translated and adapted by elite physicians.<sup>28</sup> There is also evidence of elite interest in contemporary printed dietetic literature. In the 1570s, for example, Thomas Butler, Earl of Ormond, had a “food book”, valued at 8d. shipped to him from Bristol.<sup>29</sup> Further, although little is understood about the popular diffusion of these ideas, there was certainly precedent for the chauvinistic literary deployment of humoral dietetic theory in Ireland. English writers, throughout the period, used popular understandings of the link between food and humoral complexion to rationalize and reinforce perceived social and ethnic distinctions. Thus, the Irish as a race were lusty, idle and angry because of the warm air, the “moisture of the ground and of their meats”.<sup>30</sup> We also find the direct application of humoral ideas in the PCT itself, for example, when the author makes an association between incessant peasant brawling and the excessive heat of their food and clothing.<sup>31</sup> Irish food writing, then, both theoretical and imaginative, was grounded in the same classificatory framework as its European analogues.

25 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 187; David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 55.

26 For a useful overview and select examples, see <https://www.ria.ie/gaelic-medical-manuscripts-academy-collections>. See also Margaret DUNLEVY, “The Medical Families of Mediaeval Ireland”, in William DOOLIN, Olivier FITZGERALD (eds), *What's Past is Prologue: A Retrospect of Irish Medicine* (Dublin, 1952).

27 Royal Irish Academy MS 23 O 6. It is noted that these manuscripts were working rather than prestige documents.

28 URL: <https://celt.ucc.ie/medical.html> [accessed 1st January 2022]. The author of PCT I is assumed to be a member of one of the elite Gaelic families who dominated literary and medical fields in Ireland. On authorship, see Nicholas Jonathan Anselm WILLIAMS, *Pairlement...*, p. xxiv-xxvii. On Irish manuscript tradition within a broader context of “vernacularization” in northern Europe see Jason HARRIS, “Latin learning and Irish physicians, c. 1350–c. 1610”, in Liam MURCHU (ed.), *Rosa Anglica: Reassessments* (London, 2016), pp. 26–56.

29 Personal communication. My thanks to David Edwards, University College Cork, for this reference.

30 William CAMDEN, *Britannia* (London, 1607). See also: Andrew BOORDE, *The Fyrst Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge* (London, 1547); George O'BRIEN (ed.), *Advertisements for Ireland* (Dublin, 1923), p. 43–44; John DUNTON, *Teague Land*, ed. Edward MACLYSAGHT (Dublin, 1982), p. 23; Echard LAURANCE, *An Exact Description of Ireland* (London, 1691). For disagreement see William PETTY, *The Political Anatomy of Ireland* (London, 1672) in John P. HARRINGTON (ed.), *The English Traveller in Ireland* (Dublin, 1991), pp. 126–27.

31 PCT, line 1779.

What is particularly noteworthy regarding the specific application of these ideas in the PCT, however, is their contemporary interpretation. In the Middle Ages, while certain foods were deemed *more* suitable to high- and low-class bodies, this was the extent of social food prejudices. The distinct high and low cultures were separated only by “luxury items, the complexity of production, and abundance”.<sup>32</sup> Everyday staples were not invested with social symbolism; their suitability dictated by physiology rather than class. As the sixteenth century progressed, however, and the European social structure shifted and became more complex and mobile, the cultural meaning of food grew in intensity and dietary distinctions became increasingly specific. Food symbolism became a literary and artistic obsession about “distinguishing status through appropriate consumption”.<sup>33</sup> Foods previously deemed *more* suitable to the lower orders because of their nutritional properties, were, by the late sixteenth century seen as suitable *only* for lower-class bodies and repugnant to the upper classes.<sup>34</sup>

Examining the foods assigned to the seventeenth-century Irish peasant in this context is illuminating. Beginning with bread, it is clear first, that this staple foodstuff was deeply socially construed and second, that its meaning evolved between the Middle Ages and the late sixteenth century. The symbolic significance of bread is, of course, unsurprising. Its central importance to diet throughout Europe made it, in real and imaginary terms, the core dietary marker of social status.<sup>35</sup> The most noble bread was white, made of hard wheat, well-milled and bolted and made into dough that was well-kneaded, risen, baked and cooled.<sup>36</sup> Breads made of dark or impure flours, or with too much bran, were universally regarded as inferior.<sup>37</sup> This view went back to the ancients, but what was new, from the start of the early modern period was an increasing concern with establishing “a hierarchy of bread” in European food culture.<sup>38</sup> Dietary regimens and literary sources, from the sixteenth century onwards, increasingly differentiated between the types of cereal used as well as the analogous groups in society to which they were suited in physiological terms. In the hierarchy of grains, pure wheat was at the top and barley and oats were in the bottom gradation. These were not just what the peasant could afford but were also better suited to the rustic constitution.<sup>39</sup> It is clear from Irish dietary representations that this cultural shift occurred in Gaelic society also. Throughout the PCT, every effort is

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32 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 199.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 185; Sheila MCTIGHE, “Foods and the Body...”, p. 308; David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 56.

34 David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 55.

35 David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 58; Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 196; Allen J. GRIECO, *Food, Social Politics...*, p. 105.

36 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 196; David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 58. For a discussion on bread in literature, Diane PURKISS, “Crammed with Distressful Bread? Bakers and the Poor in Early Modern England”, in Joan FITZPATRICK (ed.), *Renaissance Food from Rabelais to Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 11-24.

37 For example, see Michele SAVONAROLA, *Libreto Tute le Cose Che Se Manzano Comunamente e Piu Che Comune* (Venice, 1508), ed. Jane NYSTEDT (Stockholm, 1982), pp. 4 r-v, cited by Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 197. See also Allen J. GRIECO, “Food and Social Classes...”, pp. 303-04; David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 58.

38 David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 58.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 59.



made to distinguish elite and peasant cereals. This is especially clear in the juxtaposition between the grains produced and consumed by the clan. While they are destined to reap the “billowing fields of fine wheat” in the service of the aristocracy, they never consume the best breads.<sup>40</sup> Instead, they eat “coarse, half-baked” or “fresh, bent-edged black and badly kneaded barley-cakes” and “bannocks” or griddled oatcakes.<sup>41</sup> Peasant debasement is thus demonstrated through the type of grain consumed, and through the mode and quality of its preparation. An interesting comparative example, demonstrating these ideas in a late sixteenth-century context, is the *Tribes of Ireland* satire, written by Aengus O’Daly, where the impoverished Irish chiefs are ridiculed by their association with miserable food and hospitality. Here bread, which is referenced obsessively, is thin and dry, and again, made with oaten chaff rather than wheat.<sup>42</sup>

That these early modern biases represent a change in food culture is clear from the comparative analysis of medieval and early modern literary sources. As Lucas has noted, citing hagiographical literature from the ninth to the seventeenth century, “pure” wheat was always deemed a more noble food than oats or barley in Ireland, being associated with chieftains and kings, feast days and important social occasions.<sup>43</sup> This said, however, there does not seem to have been an elite aversion to other cereals in the medieval tradition. In the twelfth-century food satire *The Vision of MacConglinne*, for example, the gluttonous King Cathal eats cakes of “pure wheat”, but it is also noted that at his feast “three things are wanted: a bushel of oats, a bushel of wild apples, and a bushel of flour cakes”.<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere the author, a scholar and poet, is advised by an angel of God:

The eight kinds of grain you must not spare ... wheresoever they are offered you, namely, rye, wild-oats, beare, buckwheat, wheat, barley, fidbach, oats. Take eight cakes of each fair grain of these, and eight condiments with every cake, and eight sauces with each condiment; and let each morsel you put in your mouth be as big as a heron’s egg.<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, these emerging social food biases are evident with regard to other cereal-based foods also. In the PCT, as occurred in a broader European context, porridge is associated with peasant degradation.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, in the much earlier *Vision of MacConglinne*, porridge, albeit “white porridge”, is described as a “treasure” and “the smoothest and sweetest of all food”.<sup>47</sup>

Beyond bread, other foods demonstrate similar shifts in meaning. The animal products consumed by the clan are also clearly representative as stereotypes of early modern peasant food. Meat can be divided into two categories: 1) preserved meat or bacon and 2) offal,

40 PCT, lines 497-8: moing maisig míncruithneachta.

41 PCT, lines, 57; 510; 1057: srubhán úr imiolcham dubh drochshuaite; bannachán.

42 James Clarence MANGAN (ed.), *The Tribes of Ireland: A Satire* (Dublin, 1852) pp. 43, 45, 51, 55, 57, 59, 69.

43 Anthony LUCAS, “Irish food before the potato...”, pp. 11-12. See for example: George HENDERSON (ed.), *Fled Bricend* (London, 1899), pp. 8-9; Charles PLUMMER, *Vitae Santorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1910), vol. 2, p. 214; Whitley STOKES (ed.), *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore* (London, 1890), p. 229; Whitley STOKES, “The Voyage of the Hui Corra”, *Revue Celtique*, vol. 14 (1893), p. 27.

44 *Aeslinge Meic Conglinne*, trans. Kuno MEYER (London, 1892), p. 2, 98, 44.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

46 David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 56.

47 *Aeslinge Meic Conglinne...*, p. 98.

or specifically, the tripe of sheep and cows; the head gristle and trotters of cattle; and the blood, gore and entrails of animals.<sup>48</sup> Significantly, this aligns with contemporary English “descriptions” of Gaelic Irish diet. Fynes Moryson, for example, claimed that the wild or “mere Irish” commonly ate “swine’s flesh” along with the “entrails of beasts unwashed”, which “they seethe in a hollow tree lapped in a raw cow’s hide, and so set over the fire, and therewith swallow whole lumps of filthy butter”.<sup>49</sup> Edmund Campion likewise described the gluttonous eating of the “blood of raw flesh”, which they “boileth in their stomachs with aquavita<sup>e</sup>” along with blood jelly which was baked, spread with butter and eaten in lumps.<sup>50</sup>

In both the English and Irish contexts, the metaphorical use of these meats to distinguish base/peasant foodways also fits explicitly within the contemporary European dietetic worldview. Bacon, for example, in the sixteenth century, became associated exclusively with the lower classes in Europe.<sup>51</sup> Contemporary English dietaries classified it as one of the “gross meats” that *only* labourers could digest “eating them with pleasure and sleeping soundly after them”.<sup>52</sup> According to Andrew Boorde, bacon was not nutritious and only appropriate for the carter or ploughman, “the which be ever labouring in the earth or dung”.<sup>53</sup> William Bullein, similarly advised that bacon was only for a “hot cholericke labouring body”.<sup>54</sup> Organ meats developed a similar social stigma. Albala notes that by the late sixteenth century, “repugnance” towards offal was well developed in nutritional literature, if not yet in practice.<sup>55</sup> Pisanelli claimed that tripe was only suitable for workers because it was the toughest part of the animal.<sup>56</sup> Pictorius suggested that “the stomach, interior, feet and ears” must be left to rustics and to “men who work hard enough to digest stones”.<sup>57</sup> In the English dietaries, Boorde thought that “the blood of all beast and fowls is not praised, for it is hard of digestion. All the inards of beasts and of fowls ... with all the entrails is hard of digestion and doth increase gross humors”.<sup>58</sup>

The reasons for the entrenchment of these distinctions in social and biological terms have been considered in recent years by historians including Albala, Montanari and Gentil-

48 PCT, line 53-4: ceann 7 cosa beathadhach, fuil 7 follracht 7 ionathar na n-ainmhighthe n-éigcialluighe.

49 Fynes MORYSON, *An Itinerary*, in James P. MYERS (ed.), *Elizabethan Ireland: A Selection of Writings by Elizabethan Writers on Ireland* (Hamden, 1983), p. 188. ‘Mere’ means pure Irish as distinct to gaelicised descendants of English settlers.

50 Edmund CAMPION, *A History of Ireland written in Yeare 1571* (Dublin, 1809), p. 25.

51 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 194; Massimo MONTANARI, Alberto CAPATTI, *Italian Cuisine, A Cultural History* (New York, 2003), p. 65.

52 Andrew BOORDE, *A Compendyous Regyment* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, 1562), chapter XVI: URL: <https://search.proquest.com/eebo/docview/2240934578/fulltextPDF/984BD00FBF264741PQ/4?accountid=14404> [accessed 26/09/21].

53 Andrew BOORDE, *Compendyous Regyment...*, chapter XVI.

54 William BULLEIN, *The Government of Health* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, 1595), p. 63.

55 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 193.

56 Baldasare PISANELLI, *Tratta Della Natura de’Cibi et del Bere* (Venice, 1586), p. 88-89. URL: <https://archive.org/details/trattatodellanaoapisagoog/page/n96> [accessed 2nd February 2022]. Cited by Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 193.

57 Georgius PICTORIOUS, *Dialogi Del Eccellente Medico M. Giorgio Pittore Villingano*, trans. Pamhilius FIORIMBENE (Venice, 1550), p. 33. URL: [https://archive.org/details/bub\\_gb\\_zg-LqRoJ-akC/page/n31](https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_zg-LqRoJ-akC/page/n31) [accessed 4th February 2022]. Cited by Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 193.

58 Andrew BOORDE, *Compendyous Regyment...*, chapter XVI.

core. It is suggested that rising food prices in the sixteenth century, particularly with regard to fresh meat, meant that the lower classes ate less meat overall, and when they could afford it were more likely to buy cheaper salted products, which over time became seen as symbols of poverty.<sup>59</sup> As wealth polarized, fresh meat became a luxury item and the consumption of salted meats, and meat substitutes like legumes, was perceived as an “act of debasement” for those who should be able to afford better; hence the obsessive insistence on fresh meat in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dietary regimes.<sup>60</sup> With regard to offal, further cultural associations gradually came into consideration. As consumers became more detached from the rearing and slaughtering of animals, organ meats, particularly those parts which are “visible reminders of the living animal”, like the head and eyes, became repugnant to “civilized” consumers.<sup>61</sup> By the mid-sixteenth century, both meat categories were consigned in the dietary literature to lower-class stomachs, suitable only to sustain hard labour or as substitute foods in times of food shortages.<sup>62</sup>

These ideas are worth considering in the context of seventeenth-century Irish food prejudices. It is traditionally accepted, in both academic literature and popular culture, that fresh meat was never an important component of either the elite or lower-class Gaelic Irish diet.<sup>63</sup> English commentators repeatedly stressed the distinctive pastoral nature of the economy and its reliance on dairy rather than meat products.<sup>64</sup> Ongoing interdisciplinary research, however, is revealing a more complex and diverse approach to diet in Gaelic Ireland, indicating that, like class-based representations, ethnic dietary depictions are fictions, designed to further the colonial agenda by demonstrating the barbarism of native food culture.<sup>65</sup> If then, given favourable economic conditions, the Gaelic Irish peasant was as partial to fresh meat as his European counterpart, there is little doubt that the turbulent conditions of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which incorporated numerous episodes of famine and scorched earth warfare, created *in extremis* the conditions whereby salted meats, offal, along with meat substitutes like legumes and dairy produce, became reviled as emblems of poverty. While the dearth of sources means that it is not possible to establish exactly when it occurred, it appears this culinary aversion was not a feature of

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59 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 191; David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 56; Massimo MONTANARI, Alberto CAPATTI, *Italian Cuisine...*, p. 65.

60 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 191; Christopher KISSANE, *Food, Religion and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (London, 2018), p. 78.

61 *Ibid.*, 193; Stephen MENNELL, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in Britain and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford/New York, 1985) pp. 310-16.

62 See for example Joannes SYLVIUS, *De Parco Ac Duro Victu Libellous*, in Jean LIEBAULT, *Thesaurus Sanitatis Paratu Facilis* (Paris, 1577), p. 20 cited by Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 193. Here fried blood and offal are foods suitable to stave off famine.

63 For example, John DORNEY, “War and Famine in Ireland”, *The Irish Story blog*, URL: <http://www.theirish-story.com/2012/01/03/war-and-famine-in-ireland-1580-1700/#ennref2>.

64 For example, Fynes MORYSON, *An Itinerary* (London, 1617), p. 190; Barnabe RICH, *A New Description of Ireland* (London, 1610), p. 137-39 and Luke GERNON, *A Discourse of Ireland* (Unpublished, 1620), p. 252 all in James P. MYERS ed., *Elizabethan Ireland...*

65 Fiona BEGLANE, “The faunal remains from Bective Abbey”, in Geraldine STOUT, Matthew STOUT (eds), *The Bective Abbey Project* (Dublin, 2016), pp. 106-53. See also the ERC FoodCult Project (2019-24) which develops an interdisciplinary methodology to explore the contexts for meat and dairy consumption in Ireland. URL: [www.foodcult.eu](http://www.foodcult.eu).

medieval ideology. Again, *The Vision of MacConglinne* provides useful comparative evidence. Here, bacon and tripe, while certainly associated with gluttony, were undoubtedly identified as foods of the nobility.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, the plant foods eaten by Clan Tomáis are also precisely those considered suitable only for the peasant in contemporary European dietary literature. Beans and root vegetables, particularly, were usually described as the grossest form of food. According to Pisanelli, whose dietary was one of the most influential of the sixteenth century, beans were “of poor nourishment to delicate persons [and] should be left to working people, and country people”.<sup>67</sup> Eating them would not only lead to poor digestion, but would literally render the consumer, and their progeny, base. In addition to generating harmful humours, such vegetables were imbued with social meaning in philosophical terms. This derived from another organizing schema inherited from classical theory, *The Great Chain of Being*; a concept that imagined the hierarchical division of creation into the four Aristotelian elements: earth, water, air and fire. Within this schema, foods were assigned a hierarchical status depending on their morphology or nearness to the earth.<sup>68</sup> This arrangement was paralleled in the social world. Elites were destined to eat delicate and noble foods; those that were light in colour and grew far from the ground, symbolizing their white, elevated status. The lower orders were destined to eat the opposite; foods that were dark in colour and closely associated with the ground, signifying and reinforcing their base and earthly origins.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the peas, beans, beets, parsnips (PCT I) and potatoes (PCT II) associated throughout the PCT with rustic toil, consumption and peasant behaviour, served to reinforce the natural divisions between the low and high born in both physiological and philosophical terms. Again, it is notable that these associations are absent in earlier Irish food satire. In the *Vision of MacConglinne* root vegetables, including leeks, carrots and onions, are all described in noble terms. Carrots are described as the “Queen’s Mash” and leeks are a “pure” food.<sup>70</sup> In a scene where the author travels through Munster with his angel guide, they arrive at a fort constructed from food, which included:

A row of fragrant apple trees  
 An orchard in its pink tipped bloom  
 Between it and the hill  
 A forest tall of real leeks  
 Of onions and of carrots stood  
 Behind the house.<sup>71</sup>

66 Kuno MEYER, *Aeslinge Meic Conglinne...*, For tripe see: pp. 32, 38, 68, 80, 88, 90, 98. For bacon see: pp. 8, 22, 24, 32, 36, 54, 60, 68, 76, 78, 82, 88, 90, 98, 153, 154.

67 Bartolomeo PISANELLI, *Trattato della Natura de’ Cibi et del Bere* (Carmagnola, 1589), p. 134. Cited by Sheila MCTIGHE, “Foods and the Body...”, p. 308.

68 Allen J. GRIECO, “Food and Social Classes...”, pp. 302-12; Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 194; Laura GIANNETTI, “Italian Renaissance Food-Fashioning”, p. 2.

69 Allen J. GRIECO, “Food and Social Classes...”, p. 311.

70 Kuno MYER, *Aeslinge Meic Conglinne...*, pp. 88, 98.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

It appears, then, that food classification, in line with contemporary European prejudices and stereotypes, became a key mode of defining the natural boundaries of social hierarchy in early modern Ireland.<sup>72</sup> In addition, depictions of peasant interaction with these prescribed foods, further served to reinforce the imagined frontier between high- and low-born diets. The clan, rather conveniently, enjoyed this restrictive diet. Indeed, the members are so content with their food, that they would rather choose a rustic meal over eternal life. When one of the clan, Labhrás, is dying after a brawl, he asks a priest to come to him, swearing to God:

that I would be happier to be with my wife and children tonight, where I would get early morning porridge-gruel, skimmed milk and the butter of sheep and goats, rancid, full of hairs and blue hollows, than be in the place known as the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>73</sup>

Elsewhere it is noted that when the clan and their descendants conformed to their approved diet, they:

spent their time in a prosperous and contented fashion as St Patrick had ordained for them, for their custom was not to eat delicate, palatable foods, nor drink sweet intoxicating liquor ... and they were as St Patrick ordered them to be, guarding and tending and doing service, tillage and hard labour for the nobles and aristocracy of the Christian peoples ... as was only proper for them.<sup>74</sup>

Such peasant preference for crude foods was a common theme in medieval literature and art. As Freedman noted, humorous accounts of peasants composed for elite audiences were designed to demonstrate that rustics “should stick with the lowly and familiar”.<sup>75</sup> In medieval *fabliau* and *exempla*, for example, peasants are often depicted enjoying the coarse foods that they are associated with. In a well-known example, a well-off peasant marries a bourgeois woman, and she prepares for him the sophisticated foods that she is used to. He cannot tolerate the rich food and becomes ill until she gives him peas and beans with bread soaked in milk, whereupon “he is happy, and his gastric difficulties disappear”.<sup>76</sup>

Peasants, then, were happier when they adhered to their prescribed lifestyles and existed within the hierarchical status quo. On the other hand, attempts by the lower classes to challenge their subservient status, for example by consuming inappropriately elegant meals, were presented as threats to the natural social order that lead to chaos and

72 On the link between food classification and “scientific” debates about the biological basis of nobility in sixteenth-century Italy, see Sheila MCTIGHE, “Food and the Body...”, p. 318.

73 PCT, lines 1166-70: Go madh shocra liom bheith a bhfocair mo mhná 7 mo chloinne anocht, mur a bhfaghainn prui-seacha príomhamhla prácáis, bun bainne 7 bréaním ruibeach cuasghorm gabhar agus caorach, ná bheith san ionad sin frisa ráidhtíor flaitíós Dé. For a similar use of this trope in English representations of Irish diet, see John DUNTON, “Conversations in Ireland”, in John P. HARRINGTON, *The English Traveller...*, p. 153.

74 PCT, lines 102-16: Do chaithíodar an Chlann sin Tomáis a naimsiór, 7 a sliocht dá n-éis, go subhach somheanmnach soibheathuighthe, amhuil d’orduig Pádrúig dóibh, óir níor chleachtadar biadha séimhe sochaithmhe ná deocha mílse meisgeamhla... 7 iad mar d’orduig Pádrúig dóibh ag faire agus ag forchoimhéad agus ag foghnamh 7 ag treabhadh agus ag mursuireacht do mhathaibh agus do mhóruaislibh na gcineadhach.

75 Paul FREEDMAN, “Peasant Diet...”, p. 4.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 4; Frederic C. TUBACH, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales* (Helsinki, 1969), no. 3652, pp. 282-83.

confusion.<sup>77</sup> This is clear in PCT I. When, for example, Murchadh marries the daughter of Maghnus, and the clan celebrate with a noble banquet, the author points out that they may have consumed the “delicate, palatable foods and sweet intoxicating drinks” of the aristocrats, but they were not ennobled or civilized by them. When the time came to eat, “they took their seats hastily, boorishly and in an ill-behaved fashion, without anyone of them looking at his neighbour, as was their wont”.<sup>78</sup> Moments later, the house was in chaos with families fighting viciously and, at the height of the disorder, threatening to grind up and make soup of each other.<sup>79</sup> In a second attempt to feast like nobles, when the time came to eat the “delicate, palatable foods”, placed on the “smooth, fair-sided and very long tables”, the huge Mathghamhuin Ó Feoir, in his frenzied and churlish haste to sit down, spills his food over the entire table and puts the candle out.<sup>80</sup>

In PCT II, the warnings to the lower orders become more explicit and urgent. In a speech by Giolla Dubh Ua Gláimhín, he tells the clan that:

until you return to the custom that was upheld by your ancestors, you will have neither prosperity nor fortune; now when you are going about happily and simply, according to the old ways, that was the time when life was at its best ... until we give our lords coshering, feasts and necessary provision, until they love us and we love them, we will have neither prosperity nor success; rather we will go on until war or pestilence come upon us, as they have before now; that was when life was good, cows had milk, rivers had fish and the corn was plentiful ... it is a crime that a churl or labourer should be similar to a nobleman's son ...<sup>81</sup>

The tendency, as here, to romanticize rustic life was a feature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century peasant representations. Writers emphasized, for example, the link between rustic simplicity and health and well-being.<sup>82</sup> Bullein noted that “these people” (labourers) can “digest gross meats, eating them with pleasure and sleeping soundly after them”.<sup>83</sup> He further claimed that they were more content than the elites because of their freedom from higher responsibilities.<sup>84</sup> These ideas were part of a pastoral genre that “idealized country life as a way of ignoring or rationalizing harsh reality”, in part to assuage

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<sup>77</sup> Paul FREEDMAN, “Peasant Diet...”, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> PCT, lines 227-31: Do bhádar umorro biadha saora sochaitmhhe 7 deocha millse meisgeamhla acu, agus an tan táinig ám a gcaithmhhe dhóibh, do shuigheadar go dian drochbhéasach drochiomchair, gan féachuin ag neach dá chéile dhíobh, mar fa béas dóibh.

<sup>79</sup> PCT, lines 308-9: Budh mion t'fheoil agumsa 7 budh mór th'anbhruithe agumsa...

<sup>80</sup> PCT: lines 652-3: bórduibh sleamhuine sliosbhlátha síthfhoda.

<sup>81</sup> PCT lines 1702-15: Nó go bhille sibh ar an nós do bhí ar coimhead ag bhur sinnsearuibh, ní bhia rath ná sonus oruibh; agus an uair do bhíodh sidh ag imtheacht go sona simplidhe do réir na seanaimsire...nó go ttugamaoid cóisir, féasda, uirithisíocht dár dtighearnaíobh 7 go mbia grádh acu dhúinn 7 grádh aguinn dóibh, ní bhia rath ná foghnámh oruinn; 7 fós nó go dtige cogadh, gorta mhór nó pláig mur tháinig roimhe so; 7 an uair do bhí an saogal go math 7 do bhí lucht ag eallacht 7 iasc ar aibhnibh 7 toradh san arbhur; agus is éagcór go mbiadh mac boduigh nó lóimínigh ar aonnós ré mac duine uasail nó deaghathar...

<sup>82</sup> Ken Albala, *Eating Right...*, p. 200. For examples, see Petronio, Lessus, Hessus.

<sup>83</sup> William BULLEIN, *The Government of Health* (London, 1558) p. xlv. URL: <http://tei.it.ox.ac.uk/tcp/Texts-HTML/free/A17/A17162.html> [accessed 20th February 2022].

<sup>84</sup> William BULLEIN, *Government of Health...*, p. lii.

the guilt of the upper classes for the conditions of the poor.<sup>85</sup> There was also a tendency, however, for writers to romanticize rustic life as a way of critiquing the state of contemporary society and apportioning blame for social decline. In other words, continuing the tradition of ancient satirists like Juvenal, food was used to contrast the “good old days of simple virtues” with the degeneracy of modern times.<sup>86</sup> This idealization of the past is a clear feature of the PCT II, where it serves, with echoes of Gower, to warn the lower classes of the dangers of violating the natural social hierarchy, whilst admonishing them for the current state of society.<sup>87</sup> Taken together then, the codification of low-born diet and the policing and critique of transgression served to map, in a changing world, “the supposed fixity of a social hierarchy onto the fixity of a natural order”.<sup>88</sup>

## Food and the Body

The codification of food is a key device in the reinforcement of gastro-political hierarchies. It is, however, merely the first part in a complex conceptual process whereby the peasant embodies or “becomes” what he eats. Throughout the PCT, images of food cultivation and consumption are exploited to distinguish high from low culture and crude from civilized bodies. In the broadest sense, the Irish rustic is imagined as the physical embodiment of his food; his physiognomy representing his natural lowliness, toil and servility in the production of food and drink.<sup>89</sup> Irish rustics, in the tradition of their medieval European counterparts, are “crudely made, coarse featured, ill-dressed and graceless”.<sup>90</sup> In opposition to the elevated, smooth, pale and clean civilized body, they are filthy, dark and deformed. They are physically associated with excrement, both animal and human, an “emblem of their distance from civilization”.<sup>91</sup> They are ill-shapen with “tangled sinews”, “crooked noddles and noses”, “bent feet” and “knobbly toes”.<sup>92</sup> In common with their French literary

85 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 200; David GENTILCORE, *Food and Health...*, p. 57.

86 Margaret A. SULLIVAN, “Aertsen’s Kitchen and Market Scenes: Audience and Innovation in Northern Art”, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 81, no. 2 (1999), pp. 236-66, 249. See George Gilbert RAMSEY (trans.), *Juvenal Satire*, 11 (New York, 1918). Url: [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/juvenal\\_satires\\_11.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/juvenal_satires_11.htm) [accessed 3rd February 2022].

87 John GOWER, *Mirour de L’omme*, ed. George Campbell MACAULAY, *The Complete Works of John Gower* (Oxford, 1899), vol. 1, vv. 26425-26480, p. 293. On the providential ideas of the Irish literati and in the PCT, see Marc CABALL “Providence and Exile in Early Seventeenth-Century Ireland”, *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 29, no. 114 (1994), pp. 176-77.

88 McTighe has noted the same process in sixteenth-century Italian Genre art. See Sheila MCTIGHE, “Foods and the Body...”, p. 312.

89 Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, p. 139.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

91 PCT, lines 335; 383; 770: aoileach; chac. Freedman discusses excrement and scatology in relation to images of the medieval peasant in the Neidhart poetic tradition. See Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, p. 151. For analysis of the significance of scatology in visual representation, see Alison STEWART, “Expelling from top and bottom: The changing role of scatology in images of peasant festivals from Albrecht Dürer to Pieter Bruegel”, in Jeffery C. PERSELS, Russell GANIM (eds), *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art: Studies in Scatology* (Abingdon, 2004) pp. 118-36.

92 PCT, lines 61-2, 226-8: croicionnuibh [...] croisfhéitheacha; 246: cham-stóic; 268: a gcamshrónuibh; 285: cnapmhéaracha.

antecedents, for example Froissart's peasants of the *Jacquerie*, their stature and colour are repeatedly emphasized to represent their crude status.<sup>93</sup> They are dark, with "hard swarthy skin", "yellow-legged" or "tawny"; their colour symbolizing their natural association with the earth and outdoor labour.<sup>94</sup> This link is very explicit, such as when "Tawny Cathal" is advised to:

plant the parsnips, sow the barley;  
put from your mind your fever,  
plant flax, beet and beans.<sup>95</sup>

The peasant body is also directly associated with animals.<sup>96</sup> Through the repeated juxtaposition of brute beasts, animal foods and low-born bodies, the rustic literally embodies the livestock that he rears, butchers and consumes, thereby reinforcing his innate barbarity and natural servility. Peasant physiognomy is central to this image. Rustics are bestial in stature; grotesquely large and fat, with oversized bottoms and bulging stomachs, or "huge, boorish and misshapen".<sup>97</sup> They are hirsute, covering themselves in neck-pieces made from the "fuzz and skins of dumb animals" and "tail coats made from the stinking fuzz of buck goats and other animals".<sup>98</sup> They incorporate animal-like body parts; the emphasis is on their heads and feet, the parts of the animals assigned to low-class consumption. They have "taloned, crooked, knobbly and lumpy-toed feet", "droop-ears", "snouts", "thick bones and round shoulders".<sup>99</sup> They sound like cattle, "bellowing emptily" as they attack each other like bulls in a herd.<sup>100</sup> They also move like animals, with clumsy limbs, sluggishly, and with heavy boots.<sup>101</sup>

93 Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, pp. 139-43; Marie-Thérèse MEDEIROS (ed.), *Jacques et Chroniqueurs. Une étude comparée de récits contemporains relatant la Jacquerie de 1358* (Paris, 1979), p. 51.

94 Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, p. 139. PCT, lines 61-2: croicionnuibh cruadha cróna; 347: cosbhuidhe; 1129; 752: cuirp chróna.

95 PCT, lines 614-6: cuir na meacuin, cuir an eorna; cuir as t'aighe do chuid fiabhruis, cuir líon, biatuis agus pónra. "Fever" is probably a reference to the 'hot' humoral complexion of the peasant.

96 Leersen notes the bestial representation of the Irish churl. Joep LEERSSEN, "Wildness...", p. 27.

97 PCT, line 816-7: aonóglach mór aimhghlic anchumtha. For comparatives, see Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, pp. 139-73. Irish peasants are frequently depicted with large stomachs or broad belts in the text, reminiscent of Gros Guillaume a carnivalesque character in seventeenth-century France. PCT, lines 744; 1448 bolgmhór; 753: criosleathan; 680: líonadh a bhrú agas a mhórbhuilg ... etc. They display all three of principal features of the grotesque body as defined by Ashley. They have open bodies, with an emphasis on orifices; they have devouring bodies, associated with gross overindulgence and they have 'dynamic' bodies, associated with eating, farting, vomiting and dying etc. See Bob ASHLEY, "Food, Bodies and Etiquette", in Bob ASHLEY, Joanne HOLLOWS, Steve JONES et al. (eds), *Food and Cultural Studies* (London, 2004), pp. 41-57.

98 PCT, line 1088-89: do chlúmh agas do chroicnibh ainmhinntidhe éigcialluidhe; 107-8: slatchótuidhe slime sná.threamhra do bhréanchlúmh pucán agas ainmhighthe eile.

99 PCT, line 285: cosuibh crúbacha croma cnocacha cnapmhéaracha; 272; caoingcínibh; 120: maolchluasach; 1767: smúsachuibh; 754: cnáimhreamhur cromshlinneánach.

100 PCT, line 286: baothbhúithrig. This line is reminiscent of a satire by Erasmus: "Poet, your witless verses sound to me ... like the bellowing of a mad bull among the cattle in the country ...". See Desiderius ERASMUS, *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto, 1974) vol. 85, no. 128, pp. 350-51. Cited by Margaret A. SULLIVAN, "Aertsen's Kitchen...", p. 259.

101 PCT, lines: 536: ludurtha; 94: míothapa; 188: ramharbhrógach.



The dominant images, unsurprisingly, are of pigs, cattle, sheep, goats and dogs. This is highly significant. As Freedman noted, bestial representations of medieval European peasants tended to fall into two discrete categories.<sup>102</sup> First, and often associated with insurrection and rebellion, are the grotesque and frightening wild peasants. These are uncontrollable, threaten the social order and resemble animals like wolves, mountain beasts or verminous creatures such as foxes, frogs or flies.<sup>103</sup> The second type of association is the domesticated peasant, likened to farm or draft animals such as oxen, horses, goats, pigs and sheep. These are equally uncivilized, but when subject to appropriate discipline were “ultimately tractable and useful” to society.<sup>104</sup>

This distinction is notable here. In English depictions, or descriptions with a colonial agenda, the dangerous or rebellious Gaelic Irish are likened to wild or savage animals. According to Fynes Moryson:

these wild Irish are not much unlike wild beasts, in whose caves a beast passing that way might perhaps find meat, but not without danger to be ill-entertained, perhaps devoured by his insatiable host.<sup>105</sup>

Likewise, in the *Tribes of Ireland* satire, an Irish work, purportedly commissioned by the English administration to undermine the authority of the rebellious and impoverished Gaelic Irish chiefs, Conor Maguire (The Baron) is described as:

A badger in roughness and in greyness,  
An ape in size and ugliness  
A lobster for the sharpness of both his eyes  
A fox for his stench is the Baron.<sup>106</sup>

The peasant in the PCT, in contrast, is a domesticated beast. Although innately bestial, he presents no real threat to the higher classes. The physical juxtaposition of low born and beast serves to underscore the naturally servile nature of the rustic and even to justify physical coercion of the peasant body. Brute beasts might not be dangerous, but like the peasant, they must be subject to discipline to ensure their compliance. The link is clear, for example, in the comment that the clan members were destined, under their curse, to prefer to all men, the man that would “strike and rebuke them”.<sup>107</sup> Elsewhere, it is suggested that when the clan listened to reasoned speech, it was because they had been “struck across the ear with a stick”, like animals.<sup>108</sup>

Besides their physiognomy, lower-class embodiment is also emphasized through the symbolic language of material culture. In the broadest sense, landscapes and foodscapes are cleverly entangled to emphasize the absolute immersion of the clan in their natural

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102 Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, p. 142.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

104 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

105 Fynes MORYSON, *Itinerary...*, in James P. MYERS, *Elizabethan Ireland...*, p. 192.

106 James Clarence MANGAN (ed.), *Tribes...*, p. 53.

107 PCT, lines 67-8: do bhuailfeadh agus do cháinfeadh iad.

108 PCT, lines 359-60: déisdiodar ris amhuil do buailfidhe do chapóig ar a gcluais iad.

world. In a scene in PCT I, for example, they go on journey where every landmark is named after an item of peasant food including: Machaire na Meacan (Parsnip Plain); Ráithín na Praisge (Porridge Fort); Bhuailtín an Phónaire (Bean Booley) and Bhealach na Lótuighe (Tablescraps Way).<sup>109</sup> To reinforce their natural state, the men wear dark and rough clothing or, as noted above, cover themselves in the skins of animals. They even sleep in the refuse of their diet and toil; in bedclothes made from the stalks of peas and beans, along with multitudes of lice and fleas.<sup>110</sup>

Their domestic objects are also used to underscore their base condition. Like their foods, household vessels are highly prescriptive and limited in range. In a lay recited by Labhrás on his death bed, for example, he claims to own just two bowls, two dishes and a little bag of spoons.<sup>111</sup> Mirroring their physical embodiment, these objects are dark coloured, coarse and heavy/solid. When, for example, Cathal and Brian fight over the seating position of their wives at a feast, Brian is assaulted with “a dark-brown porridge dish”; the object, its contents and its mode of use, reinforcing the baseness of both food and consumer.<sup>112</sup> Elsewhere, objects directly mimic the physical attributes assigned to the peasant body. Buttermilk, for example, is served in a “heavy, thick-bottomed tankard”, porridge and soup dishes are “bent” and misshapen.<sup>113</sup> Tobacco pipes, problematic for their whiteness and luxury association, are made more peasant-like by being “broken and dirty” and stored in the earpiece of a cap.<sup>114</sup>

Such depictions bear remarkable similarity to contemporary European visual sources of peasant satire. In Dutch realist and Italian genre art, which flourished in the late sixteenth and through the seventeenth century, coarse earthenware vessels are a ubiquitous symbol of lower-class food culture and base behaviour. From the kitchen and market scenes by Vincenzo Campi, Annibale Carracci and Pieter Aertsen, to feasting and drinking scenes by Pieter Bruegel, Frans Verbeeck, Adriaen Brouwer, David Teniers and Jan Steen, among others, crudely made, plain earthenware objects are synonymous with peasant embodiment. In Verbeeck’s sixteenth-century burlesque *Peasant Wedding* scenes (c. 1550), for example, where characters demonstrate remarkably similar physical and behavioural resemblance to the descriptions of their Irish counterparts, broken earthenware vessels symbolize the chaos and licentiousness of the lower classes. Elsewhere, in Bruegel’s *Peasant Wedding* (1567), open-mouthed peasants are juxtaposed with wide-brimmed drinking vessels, whilst in Adriaen Brouwer’s *Inn with Drunken Peasants* (c. 1626), the huge potbellies of gluttonous peasants are mirrored in the shape of large storage vessels. In each example, as

109 For a list see PCT, lines 182-8. This literary mode has Irish roots. In the *Vision of MacConglinne*, the poet is visited by an angel of God, and is granted a vision of a land made entirely of food. For a discussion of gastro topography in Ireland see: Máirtín MAC CON IOMAIRÉ, “Gastro-Topography: Exploring Food-Related Placenames in Ireland”, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1/2 (2014), pp. 126-57.

110 PCT, line 60: cosa pise agus pónaire.

111 PCT, lines 1173, 1176: mo dhá sgála is mo dhá mhéis ... máilín mo liadh.

112 PCT, line 253: dhonngála praisge.

113 PCT, line 510-1: bunata bunreamhar bláthaighe; 270-1: do chamsgáladhuibh praisge agus anbhruithe.

114 PCT, line 1264-65: tharruing... amach a bhuinín manntach salach a híochtar a sheircín nó a cluais a chaipín. The position of the pipe is interesting and compares with Flemish visual representations of peasants smoking. See for example, Adriaen Brouwer’s *Inn with Drunken Peasants* (c. 1626).

in the Irish literary context, objects serve to reinforce the parody, visually symbolizing the gross materialism of the low born in opposition to courtly codes of behaviour.

This symbolic significance of everyday objects in the delineation of social status has been examined in detail in a variety of early modern contexts.<sup>115</sup> As Yentsch has argued, hierarchies in object status mirrored social divisions and were “elements in boundary maintenance” in early modern culture.<sup>116</sup> In this understanding, as cultural boundaries became more sharply defined and contested, from the sixteenth century, ceramics, which were key symbols of the “prestige structure associated with food use”, came to define cultural dichotomies: male/female and nature/culture. Dark, earth-toned domestic ware became the “primary vessels used in social spaces assigned to subordinated social groups (women and servants) and white-toned vessels were increasingly associated with status, social display and elite male spheres of activity”.<sup>117</sup> An outstanding example of how this material dichotomy was deployed to reinforce Irish cultural boundaries is found in another Irish literary source – *A Partition of Ireland* – an anonymous seventeenth-century poem in the *croisantacht* tradition, written to honour the Burkes, a Gaelic clan.<sup>118</sup> A prose section in the poem demonstrates the opposition of noble and rustic as follows:

not greater is the sprit and pride of the impetuous, vigorous, famous, respected race of the Earl, with their proud, martial, young warriors around them, when they sit by the smooth walls of their palaces, drinking noble wine-potations and their strong, fermented drinks, when brightness and flushing has come to their faces as they listen to the poems and chants of their forefathers and ancestors being brightly told by the lips of ... noble bards; nor (is) the common folk's spirit and pride (greater) when they sit in their crooked, bare-walled cottages, drinking against each other from their overflowing bowls of buttermilk and their big-handled vessels of bubbling whey, listening to the chattering and uproar of the senseless beasts about them, each of them cleverly distinguishing the chatter and roaring of each beast; their spirit and wit grows with the constant uproar, and they make a louder concert of noise in opposition. Therefore, as a fixed choice of this arrangement has been made by each of our hero-kindred, what remains to be done is to fix firmly the division and to have a clear ratification of the peace.<sup>119</sup>

Here again, through the symbolic associations of food and drink, the uncivilized plebeian is physically represented as natural, unformed and bestial; he is an emblem of gross materialism, in opposition to the cultivated, controlled and chivalrous noble.

115 Anne YENTSCH, “The Symbolic Divisions of Pottery: Sex Related Attributes of English and Anglo-American Household Pots”, in Randall H. MCGUIRE, Robert PAYNTER (eds), *The Archaeology of Inequality* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 192-230; James DEETZ, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York, 1996).

116 Anne YENTSCH, “Symbolic Divisions...”, p. 194.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 194.

118 A *croisantacht* is a type of eulogy which combines verse with entertaining prose interludes. See Margo GRIFFIN-WILSON, *The Wedding Poems of Dáithí Ó Bruadair* (Dublin, 2010).

119 Lambert MCKENNA (trans.), “A Partition of Ireland”, *The Irish Monthly*, vol. 57, no. 673 (1929), pp. 368-72.

## Food, Virtue and Manners

Beyond physical manifestation, the third phase in the representation of the peasant foodways in the PCT is the moral embodiment of base foods; the juxtaposition of rustic virtues with low foods. This concept also has roots in prevailing European nutritional theory, which, in this period, still entailed the “literal incorporation of a food’s substance and qualities into the consumer”.<sup>120</sup> Eating crude foods would quite literally render the consumer base, as they absorbed the elements of those foods. In the Irish example, this idea is manifest at two levels. First, peasants eat and embody foods that emblemize specific qualities and traits. Second, in a more general sense, through their appetites, behaviours and food associations, they present a parody of civilized manners, and the antithesis of courtly and bourgeois ideals and behaviours.

At the first level, peasant representation is part of a conceptual process that, as already noted, progresses through food codification, consumption, physical manifestation and finally, spiritual and moral embodiment. Thus, in the PCT, the clan is destined to eat the debased parts of dumb animals. They then physically embody those animals, looking, moving and sounding like brute beasts. Finally, they incorporate and demonstrate the undesirable moral traits associated with those animals whose meat or products they consume. So, for example, the clan eats the rancid, hairy butter of goats; its members physically embody the animal by covering their bodies in goat fuzz, and finally, in line with popular early modern perceptions of the goat, they are presented as lascivious, wanton, lusty and always ready to mate.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, like the cattle and sheep that they eat and embody, they are indolent, slobbering and cowardly.<sup>122</sup> Their surnames reinforce this embodiment, emphasizing inherent animal traits like dim-wittedness and sluggishness.<sup>123</sup> They are also associated with swine. Indeed pigs, usually accompanied by dogs, are the most dominant animal emblem in the PCT.<sup>124</sup> These are reared and exchanged as currency; they are the cause of internecine feuding and violence, and are consumed as peasant meat. In turn, peasants are analogized as swine, described, for example, as “a drove of rowdy ravenous pigs who squabble ... for the last dregs of porridge or stew”.<sup>125</sup> This association is not

120 Ken ALBALA, *Eating Right...*, p. 184 and Ken ALBALA, *Beans: A History* (Oxford, 2007), p. 56; Allen J. GRIECO, “Food and Social Classes...”, p. 307; Sheila MCTIGHE, “Food and the Body...”, p. 318.

121 See, for example, ISIDORE OF SEVILLE (*Etymologies*, Book 12, 1:14-15) in Stephen BARNEY, Wanda J. LEWIS, J.A. BEACH (eds), *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 247. For a material expression of this idea, see a gargoyle dating from the fifteenth century at Notre-Dame de Marais, in Villefranche-sur-Saône. Interestingly, with reference to the representation of Irish male sexuality discussed below, in Spanish the term “cabrón” is usually employed for the husband cuckolded by his wife. See Cristóbal M. VILLALOBOS, Delia M. FUENTES, “Symbolism of the Goat and its Presence in Picasso’s Work”, *Arts*, vol. 6, no. 2-3 (2017), URL: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/6/2/3/html> [accessed 7th February 2022].

122 PCT, lines 49-50: buadh liosdachta, lodurthachta ... lánmhíthapa.

123 See PCT lines 84-101 for the list of names. Line 88: Brúideamhuil means bestial; line 91: Baoi means dim-witted; line 94: Míothapa means sluggish.

124 PCT, line 1556: bhagúin ... a gcriciønn mhadra uilc. Bacon is wrapped in the hide of a mad dog. The juxtaposition of these two animals, both of which were popular emblems of gluttony in the sixteenth century, serves to emphasize the meaning.

125 PCT, line 676-8: amhuil do bhíadaois cloigis do mhucaibh garbha gortacha ag coimheasgur fa dheireadh dríodair praisge nó anbhruithe.

restricted to the PCT. In other satire, references to swinish embodiment are even more explicit. In *The Tribes of Ireland* satire, the writer claims “all the Jennings feed hogs, and *are* hogs too ... such deaf and blind mopers! Such ditch water toppers! That is when they can have ditch water to drink”.<sup>126</sup>

This juxtaposition of rustic and pig is significant. As Alison Stewart has shown, pigs, along with dogs, were the most dominant animal imagery deployed in northern Europe in moralizing texts and prints of the sixteenth century.<sup>127</sup> They were an emblem of gluttony, associated with the uncontrolled indulgence of carnival and the grotesque body that results in eating or drinking to excess and vomiting. Certainly, this association is explicit in the Irish context. Throughout the PCT, the clan fill their grotesquely vast bellies with food; indulge in “incessant carousing”, particularly, the “pouring of galley pots down the gullets of sluggards”; and are associated, in turn, with epic bouts of vomiting, farting and defecating.<sup>128</sup> The pig had other connotations too, however. As early modern dietaries show, eating them was highly ill advised on moral/spiritual grounds. According to Boorde, the pig was “not praised” in Holy Scripture, “for a swine is an unclean beast and do lie upon filthy and stinking soils”.<sup>129</sup> Bullein was more emphatic, wondering how pigs could be good to eat when they were treacherous, unclean and ungodly, or:

so vile of their own nature; their sole feeding most stinking filth and carion. The noisome wallowing in the mire and dirt, the eating of their own pigs, and oftentimes pulling children out of the cradle for their dinners, if the good wife be not at home. Who is able to behold such noisome spirits, or hell hounds: did not almighty God command the Jews to eat none of them ... why should we then commend them, for they are most vile?<sup>130</sup>

These associations help to contextualize the emphasis on swine in the Irish satire. The ungodly Irish peasant, dramatically presented in the PCT as a demonic race descended from Beelzebub and the tribes of hell, embodies all the traits of Bullein’s pigs. They are evil-minded, sinful and perverse.<sup>131</sup> They are inherently treacherous towards the aristocracy, and even towards each other; on one occasion even threatening, like Bullein’s pigs, to eat

<sup>126</sup> James Clarence MANGAN, *Tribes...*, p. 89.

<sup>127</sup> Alison STEWART, “Man’s Best Friend? Dogs and Pigs in Early Modern Germany”, in Pia F. CUNEO (ed.), *Animals and Early Modern Identity* (Abingdon, 2016), pp. 19-44; see also Peter STALLYBRASS, Allon WHITE, “The Fair, the Pig, Authorship”, in Peter STALLYBRASS, Allon WHITE, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London, 1986), pp. 44-58; Christopher Kissane, *Food and Religious Communities...*, pp. 77-106.

<sup>128</sup> Clan bodies are classic representations of the Rabelsian grotesque. See for example: PCT, lines 298: bhrám Mannarthach go lánmhór; 794-5: dortagh cannuighe a mbráighdibh sgraisdí; 586-7: bhrúcht buidéal bréan ime iarna leaghadh as a bhrághaid.

<sup>129</sup> Andrew BOORDE, *Compendyous Regyment...*, chapter XVI.

<sup>130</sup> William BULLEIN, *Government of Health...*, p. lxxxvii URL: <http://tei.it.ox.ac.uk/tcp/Texts-HTML/free/A17/A17162.html> [accessed 15th January 2022].

<sup>131</sup> PCT, line 91: Rúnolcach; 312: ort do chol 7 do chuntracht. Caball noted the ‘existence of a strain of thought amongst the Gaelic literati to the effect that their people had merited the censure of God by their failure to observe his laws’, citing the PCT and Geoffrey Keating’s *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bhdís* (“The Three Shafts of Death”) as examples. See Marc CABALL, “Providence...”, pp. 176-77 and Marc CABALL, “Pairlement Chloinne Tomais I...”, pp. 47-57. Also Geoffrey KEATING, *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bhdís: Seáthruín Céitinn do sGriobh*, ed. Osborn BERGIN (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Dublin, 1931).

each other.<sup>132</sup> They epitomize chaos and misrule, described variously as frenzied, hasty, impetuous, turbulent and churlish; beasts who are totally unable to control their impulses.<sup>133</sup> It is worth noting, by contrast, a food that is glaringly absent from the imagined peasant's diet – fish. In the context of contemporary food symbolism, to suggest an association between the low born and fish consumption would imply religious observation, spirituality, social compliance and organization with regard to provisioning and consumption. The focus on pigs, on the other hand, symbolizes the opposite: materialism, gluttony, spiritual indifference and civil disobedience.<sup>134</sup>

Specific foods and their embodiment by the lower orders, then, serve to underscore and critique Irish morals and behaviours. In broader terms too, the plebian's relationship with food demonstrates his baseness and lack of higher sensibility. Irish churls exemplify gross materiality, or as Freedman notes, with regard to the European stereotype, they are “uncomplicated, unscrupulous and unheroic, eager for their next meal, rather than on any sort of noble or heroic ideal”.<sup>135</sup> In this regard, almost every enterprise in the PCT is driven by appetite rather than by any higher ideal. When a plan is hatched, for example, to undertake a quest to the pope in Rome, bringing money to free the clan from the ancient curse, one-eyed Tadhg Ó Céirín suggests that it would be better to wait until autumn, when they would have ripe beans and barley and their “bellies will be full”.<sup>136</sup> Their decision to elect a president is, likewise, based on who makes the best spiced cake at Christmas.<sup>137</sup> On occasions where they do seem motivated by higher ideals, they are ultimately thwarted by their stomachs. In a battle for the hand of the beautiful Seiligeaán, for example, the clan takes part in a harvesting competition. They fight “bravely and noisily” until dinnertime, and then stop abruptly to satisfy their hunger with a typically base meal, before turning their weapons on each other in one of numerous mock-heroic fratricidal brawls.<sup>138</sup>

132 PCT, line 308-9: budh mion t'fheoil agumsa 7 budh mór th'anbhruithe agumsa.

133 PCT, line 88: Brúideamhuil; 100: Tútach; 674-5: do-neidís ag dubhsholadh na beatha sin go blasda borbghreannach; 303: tugsad sidhe sanntach sárnimhneach d'ionnsuighe a chéile.

134 For the symbolic juxtaposition of pigs and fish with regard to religious observation, see, for example, Pieter BRUEGEL's *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (1559).

135 Paul FREEDMAN, “Peasant diet...”, p. 1.

136 PCT, line 1516: go mbiam go bolglionta.

137 PCT, line 1786: cáca spíosarrtha. In a comparative Medieval comparative *fabliau* “Berengier au Lonc Cul” the low-born knight prefers tarts and baked custard to fame or chivalry. See Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, p. 159.

138 PCT, lines 507-14: go calma coinngleodhach. Male peasants exemplify the unchivalric, a theme reinforced through episodes of burlesque brawling and mock-heroic battles. Clan members, like their German antecedents in the Neidhart poetic tradition, are violent and prone to internecine fighting, always over ludicrous, and often food-related, pretexts. As in the Neidhart tradition, they pose no real threat to the elites. Instead of swords, they fight with the tools of their toil: agricultural and butchery implements, including cleavers, billhooks, flails and sickles, which are blunt, rusty and ugly, like the “virile heroes” who carry them. On domestic implements and male sexuality, see Patricia SIMONS, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe, A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 254-62. See PCT, line 490: airm áig agus iorghuile leo; 109: uircionna; 266-7: mileóguibh; 273: súist; 374-5: bhur mileoga, bhur n-uircionna, bhur gcarráin. Similar imagery is found in *A Partition of Ireland*, where the mob fight with grind stones, wood axes and sickles, demonstrating their inferiority to the “brave and courteous” noble warriors, which the poet laments have been banished from Ireland. See Lambert MCKENNA, “Partition of Ireland...”, pp. 330-33. The burlesque brawl had origins in the medieval period, but by the seventeenth century, it was a standard feature of early modern European farce, particularly associated with Dutch comic literature and art. See Anna C. KNAAP, “From Lowlife to Rustic Idyll: The Peasant Genre in 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Dutch Drawings and

Indeed, throughout the PCT, the clan members speak obsessively about food, their lack of civility underscored by their association with the lowest produce in both nutritional and philosophical terms. In a speech by Sir Domhnall Ó Pluburnáin, he notes:

we don't talk about civilised things or the saving of our souls, but we fight, plough, harrow, drive and talk about how good we are at threshing, reaping and hoeing ... or else we talk about how good the parsnips, potatoes or beetroots are, that our wives have got back home ... or how huge was the soda cake that Bald Brian and Scurvy Gráinne had together last night or ... some other equally nasty, coarse and unpleasant topic of conversation.<sup>139</sup>

Elsewhere, as noted above, they devour food “toothsomenly and with great mouthfuls”, without any thought for conversation or entertainment, but rather as though they were pigs.<sup>140</sup>

These images affirm the humanist influences on Irish literature.<sup>141</sup> Two early modern discourses are represented here, both with roots in ancient literature. First is the discourse around moderating the appetite, which, as recent historiography on food and the senses has demonstrated, was particularly vexed in the early modern period.<sup>142</sup> Gluttony was seen as a deadly sin, associated with disorder of both the body and intellect. Overindulgence, especially of “heavy” foods, led to a “darkening of the brain” and “dulled the vigour of the mind”, while simultaneously provoking carnal appetites.<sup>143</sup> In his fifteenth-century devotional work, *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis advised “curb your appetite

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Prints”, *Harvard University Art Museums Bulletin*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1996), pp. 30-59. For a comparative visual example, see Pieter Bruegel the younger's *Peasant Brawl* (c. 1620), which is chronologically comparative with the PCT and depicts a fight between two peasants, also armed with agricultural tools including a pitchfork and a flail.

139 PCT, lines 1459-73: ‘...nach ag trácht ar nithibh sibhialta ná ar shlánughadh ar n-anman bhiamaoid, acht ag troid 7 ag treabhadh 7 ag fuirse agas ag tiomáin, 7 ag trácht ar chumus buailte, buana nó grafaidh...Nó biamaoid ag trácht ar fheabhus na meacan nó na bputátaoi nó na mbiataisidhe atá ag ar mnáibh san mbaile, nó ag innisin méid na sodóige do bhí eidir Briainín Mhaol agus Gráinnín Charrach araer... nó a shamhuil eile so do chómh rádhdhuairc bharbarrdha mhíthaitheamhach éigin eile.

140 PCT, lines 674-8 go blasda borbghremannach, 7 gan aire acu ar chomhrádh ná ar chaitheamh aimsire, acht amhuil do bhia daois cloigis do mhucuibh garbha gortacha ag coimheasgur fa dheireadh dríodair praisge nó anbhrúithe. This should be compared to Plutarch's *Moralia*, first translated into English by Philemon Holland in 1603. Plutarch says, “For a group of men to say nothing while stuffing themselves with food would be positively swinish”. PLUTARCH, “Table-Talk” 8.716E, in Edwin L. MINAR Jr., F. H. Sand BACH, William C. HELM-BOLD, (transl.), *Plutarch's Moralia in Fifteen Volumes* (Cambridge, 1961), vol. 9, pp. 108-09, cited by Margaret A. SULLIVAN, “Aertsen's Kitchen...”, p. 256. Likewise, in Frederick Dedekind's influential manner's book *Grobianus*, first published in 1549, the title page, which features calves, pigs, wolves, dogs, lions, monkeys, asses and geese seated at a table, or fighting, vomiting and dancing, bears the inscription “tongues are unrestrained here, and the meal treated with disrespect; swinish people live in a swinish way”. Reproduced in Barbara KONNEKER (ed.), Friedrich DEDEKIND, *Grobianus: Morum Simplicitate ... Deutsche Fassung von Caspar Scheidt* (Leipzig, 1979), pp. vi-vii. For a detailed discussion, see Paul VANDERBOECK, “Verbeeck's Peasant Weddings...”.

141 Williams briefly considers but significantly underestimates the post-medieval literary influences on the PCT. See Nicholas Jonathan Anselm WILLIAMS, *Pairlement...*, pp. lviii-lx.

142 Viktoria VON HOFFMANN, *From Gluttony to Enlightenment: The World of Taste in Early Modern Europe* (Illinois, 2016); see also Florent QUELLIER, *Gourmandise: Histoire d'un péché capital* (Paris, 2010); Elena LEVY-NAVARRO, *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity* (New York, 2008).

143 Ibid.

and you will easily curb every inclination of the flesh”.<sup>144</sup> Likewise, in the seventeenth century, St Francis de Sales, a Tridentine Bishop, in his spiritual guide *Introduction to the Devout Life*, wrote that thinking about food too much made a “god of the belly” and that “men of honour do not think of the table except when they sit down and after dinner wash their hands and their mouth so as no longer to have either the taste or the smell of those things which they have eaten”.<sup>145</sup> Intertwined with this discourse were ideas around the moderation of behaviour. Writers like Erasmus and Bodin imagined the civilized meal as a sort of philosophical banquet.<sup>146</sup> Erasmus, for example, described the ideal meal in colloquies such as *The Godly Feast* and *The Poetic*, insisting that at meals it was best to “avoid foolish yarns and enjoy profitable conversation”.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, in his view, nothing was “more boorish than to call attention to what kind of food you have, how it is cooked, how much it cost”.<sup>148</sup> Prescriptive tracts proliferated in this period, urging moderation in food practices. Along with published spiritual guides, like de Sale’s, books on table manners and etiquette, including Erasmus’ own *De civilitate morum puerilium*, also became popular. At the same time, other works began to give satirical descriptions of breaches of those rules. In these, the peasant was often presented as the proverbial boor, a gluttonous creature, devoid of good manners and rational conversation. The peasant meal, as exemplified in the PCT, became a parody of civilized manners, and the antithesis of civilized behaviour.

It is worth noting direct evidence for Irish engagement with these discourses and cultural trends. At an intellectual level, it is noteworthy, for example, that writings by both de Sales and à Kempis were translated into Gaelic in the seventeenth century.<sup>149</sup> At a more popular level, from the last quarter of the sixteenth century, manners books found a market in Ireland. “Small Books for Children”, most likely referring to the popular *The Little Children’s Little Book*, along with Francis Seager’s *The School of Virtue*, were imported from at least 1576.<sup>150</sup> There are also rare, but thought provoking, indications that the wealthy engaged with popular visual parodies of “civilized” and moderate behaviour. Archaeological excavations at four sites in Munster, the county where the PCT is set, have revealed sherds of popular German Raeren stoneware panel jugs.<sup>151</sup> Such jugs were used primarily as drinking implements in northern Europe. They incorporated a range of

144 Thomas à KEMPIS, *Imitation de Jesus-Christ*, ed. rev. William BENHAM (Champaign, 1999), book 1, chapter 19. URL: <https://gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1653/pg1653.html> [accessed 4th February 2022]

145 St FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, ed. Allan ROSS (New York, 2009), p. 211.

146 Walter S. GIBSON, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (California, 2006), p. 107.

147 Walter S. GIBSON, *Pieter Bruegel...*, p. 108; Desiderius ERASMUS, *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, ed. Craig R. THOMPSON (Chicago, 1965), p. 56.

148 ERASMUS, *The Colloquies of Erasmus...*, p. 381.

149 Joep LEERSEN, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, Its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cork, 1996), p. 298.

150 Susan FLAVIN, *Consumption and Culture...* For imports, see The National Archives (Kew), E190112912 fol. 9v; E190113110 fol. 49r; fol. 50r; E190113211 fol. 24 r & v; fol. 26v; fol. 27v; fol. 29r; fol. 30r; fol. 32r; fol. 34r & v.

151 See <https://excavations.ie/report/2005/Kerry/0013718/>; see also Clare MCCUTCHEON, “The pottery”, in Maurice F. HURLEY, Cathy SHEEHAN (eds), *Excavations at the Dominican Priory St Mary’s of the Isle* (Cork, 1995), pp. 85-97. Sherds of panel jugs have been found at four sites in Munster, in Kerry, Limerick, Cork and Waterford. Interestingly, as Clare McCutcheon has pointed out (personal communication), these are all found in a Dominican/religious context.



images and inscriptions, including biblical and classical scenes. Of the surviving European examples, however, the peasant feast scene is the most prevalent.<sup>152</sup> These scenes, based on the *Peasant Dance* print series by Sebald Beham, usually incorporated key basic elements, whereby peasant couples dance, carouse, become drunk and lascivious and then vomit dramatically, along with inscriptions mocking this type of behaviour. As Goldstein notes, the imagery on such jugs relates closely to the work of artists like Bruegel and Aertsen, suggesting a connection between paintings and the more general fashion for peasant imagery in this period.<sup>153</sup> Importantly, there is also some evidence of demand for Dutch images in sixteenth-century Ireland. A ship departing Middleburgh for Cork in 1596, for example, carried foodstuffs, table and cooking ware, including Dutch fruit dishes, pots and ovens, and “twenty four pictures of sundry sorts”.<sup>154</sup> These were most likely the small, modestly priced genre scenes that became popular in the Netherlands from the late sixteenth century, often featuring peasants eating and drinking.<sup>155</sup> The presence of such images and objects in an Irish context is telling. Regardless of how they were used or interpreted, they affirm the importance of European ideas and rituals in Irish practices. The owners of these items, like their European counterparts, used everyday visual and material culture to define their civility vis-à-vis the lower orders and to demonstrate their wealth and cosmopolitanism. The presence of such popular European imagery also highlights the idea that literary satire, like the PCT, was part of a wider thematic interest in this period, with analogues in a variety of media beyond the textual.

## Food, Sex and Generation

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated the significance of food classification and embodiment in demarcating ignoble status and incivility, in line with broader European trends. The final phase in this conceptual process is the perpetuation of the low-born condition through the association of food with sexual proclivity and procreation. This is clear in the reinforcement, through popular food symbolism, of gendered and class-based sexual stereotypes, or what Patricia Simons describes as “a ‘social iconography’, formed of words, images and practices relating to sex and gender”.<sup>156</sup> It is also, perhaps more subtly, seen through the association of base foods with inherent intellectual and biological inferiority.

To begin, it is clear that many of the foods associated with the clan, in particular, beans, beets, parsnips, potatoes, nettles, were potent symbols of the everyday carnality and intemperance of the early modern labouring classes.<sup>157</sup> This link between food and sexual appetite derived in part from humoral nutritional theory, which understood that gross foods increased sperm, both the male and female variety, and led to an urge to

<sup>152</sup> Claudia GOLDSTEIN, *Pieter Bruegel...*, pp. 90-103.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>154</sup> John C. APPLEBY (ed.), *A Calendar of Material relating to Ireland from the High Court of Admiralty Examinations, 1536-1641* (Dublin, 1992), p. 84.

<sup>155</sup> Christopher BROWN, *Scenes from Everyday Life* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 6-7.

<sup>156</sup> Patricia SIMONS, *The Sex of Men...*, p. 3; Christopher KISSANE, *Food and Religious Communities...*, p. 83.

<sup>157</sup> Sheila MCTIGHE, “Food and the Body...”, pp. 317-18.

procreate.<sup>158</sup> Beans had particularly strong associations.<sup>159</sup> Boorde, for example, wrote that they are a “strong meat” that “provoke veneryous acts”.<sup>160</sup> Similarly, Thomas Moffat, suggested that beans were best avoided “because they too much encreaseth the seed to lusty wantons”.<sup>161</sup> The emphasis in the medical discourse was on base sexual proclivity. As Laurent Joubert noted, legumes rendered vulgar people salacious rather than “gallant in the venereal act”.<sup>162</sup> Root vegetables held similar connotations. The parsnip was, according to Culpepper, in “governance and virtue ... under Venus” and a “provoker to venery”.<sup>163</sup> Boorde wrote that parsnips were eaten “to provoke urine and increase nature”.<sup>164</sup> Likewise, in John Gerard’s *General Historie of Plants*, potatoes were “a food, as also a meate for pleasure”.<sup>165</sup> These foods were further sexualized through the popular contemporary belief that the shapes of certain plants were inherently anthropomorphic and that particular fruits and vegetables could therefore be associated with specific human organs.<sup>166</sup> This idea, the “doctrine of signatures”, gained popularity with the publication of Giambattista della Porta’s *Phytognomica*, a volume that “grounded the metaphorical play between food and sex within a semi-scientific framework”.<sup>167</sup> There is evidence, however, of its metaphorical use in literature at an earlier date. In Erasmus’ *Colloquies*, for example, he cites Catullus’ line, “Whose tool hung flabby as a tender beet” for the proverb “To wilt like a beet” [*Betizare. Lachanizare*].<sup>168</sup>

These nutritional, philosophical and “scientific” ideas are clear in the Irish context, where the juxtaposition of low-born bodies with base, erotically charged foodstuffs is designed to demonstrate the vulgar sexuality of the peasant. In particular, the deployment of food imagery, in accord with popular European symbolism, serves to underscore a comic inversion of civilized gender relations. In a speech by Sir Domhnall Ó Pluburnáin, for example, he notes that when the clan men are in the tavern they never talk about “civilized things” but rather about “how good the parsnips, potatoes or beetroots are, that our wives

158 Ken ALBALA, *Beans...*, p. 58; Sheila MCTIGHE, “Food and the Body...”, p. 318.

159 Varriano notes that Aristotle and Empedocles related beans to the testicles. See John VARRIANO, *Tastes and Temptations: Food and Art in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley, 2011), p. 132. For the Renaissance continuation of this association, see Barry WIND, “Pitturer Ridicole: Some Late Cinquecento Comic Genre Paintings”, *Storia dell’Arte*, vol. 20 (1974), pp. 24-35. See also Barry WIND, “Vincenzo Campi and Hans Fugger: A Peep at Late Cinquecento Bawdy Humor”, *Arte Lombarda*, vol. 47-48 (1977), p. 109 for transcriptions of relevant verses. See also, Valter BOGGIONE, Giovanni CASALEGNO, *Dizionario Storico del Lessico Erotico Italiano* (Milan, 1996); Patricia SIMONS, *The Sex of Men...*, pp. 1, 193, 273-75.

160 Andrew BOORDE, *Compendyous Regyment...*, chapter XXI.

161 Thomas MOFFETT, *Health’s Improvement* (London, 1655), p. 236. URL: <https://search.proquest.com/eebo/docview/2240932783/fulltext/817FCF7374F249A7PQ/3?accountid=14404> [accessed 31<sup>st</sup> January 2022].

162 Laurent JOUBERT, *Erreurs populaires* (Bordeaux, 1587). Cited by Ken ALBALA, *Beans...*, p. 58.

163 Nicholas CULPEPPER, *The Complete Physician* (London, 1653). URL: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/49513/49513-0.txt> [accessed 2nd February 2022].

164 Andrew BOORDE, *Compendyous Regyment...*, chapter XXI.

165 John GERARD, *General Historie of Plants* (London, 1597), chapter 350.

166 John VARRIANO, “Fruits and Vegetables as Sexual Metaphor in Late Renaissance Rome”, *Gastronomica*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2005), pp. 8-14. URL: <https://gastronomica.org/2005/11/08/fruits-vegetables-sexual-metaphor-late-renaissance-rome/> [31<sup>st</sup> January 2022].

167 Giambattista DELLA PORTA, *Phytognomica* (Naples, 1588), book iii.

168 ERASMUS, *Collected Works...*, vol. 33, no. 72, pp. 227-28. Cited by Margaret A. SULLIVAN, “Aertsen’s Kitchen...”, p. 259.

have got back home”.<sup>169</sup> The implication here, given the carnal associations of these foods, is that while the clan men are satisfying their vulgar appetites in the tavern, they are being made cuckholds by their wives at home. Suggestive foods, in other words, are puns to demonstrate the classic sexual stereotype: the subservient and sexually inept nature of the low-born male and the insatiable lust of the female.<sup>170</sup> This is reinforced through the repeated use of humorous pseudonyms throughout the satire. Males are named after suggestive foods like beans and parsnips, for example Domhnall an Phónaire (beans); Mathghamhuin Ó Meacanáin (parsnips), while both male and female surnames imply their association with sexual organs. Murcha an Phrioca (prick); Brighid Ní Mhagarláin (testicles); Breallach (penis); Ó Magarláin (testicles).<sup>171</sup> Mercier interprets this use of pseudonyms in the PCT as evidence of a very “elementary kind of humour” addressed to an uncultivated audience.<sup>172</sup> In fact this mode was common in sixteenth-century Italy, where, as Varriano has discussed, authors were “drawn to the congruities of fruit and vegetables and sex”.<sup>173</sup> Burlesque poems and images by Bronzino, Berni and Varchi often featured foods as sexual innuendo and this mode of representation was indeed popular with an elite audience.<sup>174</sup> The Academy of Vintners in Rome, for example, was renowned for celebrating the harvest season with recitations of bawdy poems about sexually suggestive crops and identified themselves, in a similar manner to the rustics in the PCT, by “pseudonyms like Signor Radish, Carrot or Cardoon”.<sup>175</sup>

The sexual stereotypes suggested through food are also demonstrated in behaviours and interactions of the clan. Male peasants approach courtship in the same manner as eating and fighting; like beasts rather than civilized men. This crudity stems again from their innate inability to control their natural urges and material appetites.<sup>176</sup> In a speech to the clan, Sir Domhnall notes, for example, that:

whenever we are drinking our ... half groats worth in the tavern ... we shout great oaths, boasting ... I'll have a go at your wife and daughter just as soon as I get home.<sup>177</sup>

169 PCT, line 1467-68: ag trácht ar fheabhus na meacan nó na bputátaoi nó na mbiataisidhe atá ag ar mnáibh san mbaile.

170 Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, p. 159; On emasculation in a sixteenth-century German context, see Christopher KISSANE, *Food and Religious Communities...*, p. 88.

171 PCT lines: 150; 273; 1435; 136; 137; 139.

172 Vivian MERCIER, *The Irish Comic Tradition...*, p. 157.

173 John VARRIANO, *Tastes and Temptations...*, p. 121. For a discussion of the popularity of food in burlesque poetry, see Silvia LONGHI, *Lusus. Il Capitolo Bur Lesco Nel Cinquecento* (Padua, 1983). On food in Bronzino's poetry, see Deborah PARKER “Towards a Reading of Bronzino's Burlesque Poetry”, *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1997), pp. 1011-44.

174 For a discussion of the popularity of food in burlesque poetry, see Silvia LONGHI, *Lusus...* On food in Bronzino's poetry, see Deborah PARKER “Towards a Reading...”.

175 John VARRIANO, *Tastes and Temptations...*, p. 121.

176 Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, p.160 As Freedman noted regarding medieval stereotypes, peasant men might be affected by a crude form of desire but were devoid of amorous sensibility. Irish male rustics clearly fit this stereotype.

177 PCT, lines 1457-65: an uair bhemaoid ag ól ar ... leathbhuinn a dtigh an tabhairne ... ag glamaoil, ag tabhairt mhionn mór, bimaoid dá mhuigheamh “... go racha mise chum do mhnása agas chum h'inghine acht go dul bhaile dhamh.

And further:

When we are courting, we go for the woman we court with our fists, and we put our hands on her belly, and then lower down, and finally have intercourse with her by night.<sup>178</sup>

Notably, however, while the men talk about sex in aggressive terms, their actual engagement with women is presented in rather pathetic terms. It is claimed, for example, that when they go to “a fair, market or gathering”, their wives will not let them “speak or take the floor but throw sheep’s lights in our faces and snatch off our caps”.<sup>179</sup> They are equally submissive in private, noting that when they have intercourse with their wives, the wives “strike us a blow with their feet across our mouths and noses”.<sup>180</sup> This public emasculation of the male peasant is again, a common theme in contemporary European literature, where rustics have a general tendency to allow themselves to be dominated and mocked by women.<sup>181</sup> The scenes in the PCT might usefully be compared, for example, to a Flemish engraving by Cornelius Massys, *Market Peasants in a Brothel* (c. 1540), where male peasants are comically fleeced by prostitutes after selling their goods at the market. Within the print is a picture showing a peasant sitting on a pile of eggs with the legend, “It is a sorry house when the hen crows and not the rooster”.<sup>182</sup>

The importance of food in underlining these gendered stereotypes is very clear when the sexual behaviour of the female peasant is considered in detail. In an argument between two clan wives, Anasdás insinuates the promiscuity of Sadhbh through her association with suggestive peasant foods.<sup>183</sup> She tells Sadhbh “that she had known her since the night she went to wash parsnips in the well, and the fellow hammered her at the bottom of the curved plot”.<sup>184</sup>

She goes on:

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- 178 PCT, lines 1481-83: ag suirghe, go mbímaoid ag gabháil do dhóirnibh ar an mnaoi le a mbímaoid ag suirghe, agas ag cur láimhe ar a bolg agas as sin síos, agas iona dhiaig sin ag innéirghe uirthé san oidhche. This type of language is typical of male peasant representation in the early modern period. Lucas de Heere, for example, in *Hofen Boomgaard der Poesien*, includes a poem about “A peasant from the country and a refined town girl” which contains similar motifs: the man’s brute desire for carnal relations, his coarse language, his aggression (“I’ve got a nice long knife”), and his behaviour at the festivities, where he also greedily guzzles food and drink. See Lucas de HEERE, *Hofen Boomgaard der Poesien* (Leyde, 1565). Cited by Hessel MIEDEMA “Realism and Comic Mode: The Peasant”, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1977), p. 211.
- 179 PCT, lines 1475-79: an uair bhímaoid ar aonach nó ar marga nó ag oireachtus, ní léigthíor a ngoire áite na urláir sinn, acht ag cathamh urchar do sgámhóguibh caorach ionar n-éadanuibh agas ag fuadach ar bpléicidhe uainn.
- 180 PCT, lines 1474-75: buailid siad urchar do chois tárrsna feadh ar mbeoil 7 ar srón oruinn.
- 181 Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, p. 160. For a recent discussion in a sixteenth-century German context, see Christopher KISSANE, *Food and Communities...*, pp. 83-95.
- 182 Paul FREEDMAN, *Images...*, p. 160; see also, Christopher KISSANE, *Food and Religious Communities...*, pp. 89-95. For a similar visual example, see Erhard SCHÖN, *Peasant Breeding Eggs* (Nuremberg, early sixteenth century), from *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 13, p. 341, reproduced by Christopher KISSANE, *Food and Religious Communities...*, p. 94.
- 183 Nicholas Jonathan Anselm WILLIAMS, *Pairlement...*, p. 156. Sadhdh is a name associated with lower class women.
- 184 PCT, line 1047-48: ón oidhche do-chuaidh sí ag nighe na meacan chum an tobair 7 gur ghiolc an t-óglách í láimh re tóin a gharrdha chaim.

O thieving Sadhbh of the knobbls. Daughter of the flat-footed, wide-bottomed Labhrás of the porridge, I'm not a maker of an evening circuit of the bushes, so as to get my backside stung by neighbours' nettles, as yours is, you big-bellied fatty, with your bannocks (oatcakes) and your mammoth night-visiting.<sup>185</sup>

Williams expressed uncertainty regarding the level of innuendo here. He noted that an innocent explanation may be possible; the allusion to nettles, a reference not to Sadhbh's sexual exploits but to getting her "hindquarter" stung "as she relieved herself after great eating bouts".<sup>186</sup> This is unlikely. John Gerard, for example, described how the "Nettle stirreth up lust".<sup>187</sup> Likewise, Culpepper, while noting some medical benefits to the nettle, warned that some "think it only powerful to provoke venery".<sup>188</sup> Nettles, therefore, like all the other plant foods associated with the clan, were charged with salacious meaning.

This interplay between nutritional understanding and symbolic representation again indicates Irish engagement with contemporary European tropes.<sup>189</sup> Indeed, the specific link between female lust and root vegetables situates Irish satire within a much broader milieu of visual and literary erotica, first popularized in Italy during the Renaissance, and later found in Dutch and Flemish art.<sup>190</sup> A direct comparison can be made, for example, with images of women in a series of sixteenth-century carnivalesque wedding paintings by the Flemish artist Frans Verbeeck. Here too, women are mocked for bestowing their favours too liberally. In one example, a fat and ugly bride, whose carnality is insinuated by the illegitimate baby sitting in her lap, wears, around her head, a crown of carrots and parsnips.<sup>191</sup> This association suggests, that Sadhbh's "big belly" (*bholgmhór*) refers to more than her overindulgence in food and is, rather, a double entendre for both her sexual appetite and fecundity.<sup>192</sup>

185 PCT, lines 1053-58: a Shadhbh bhradach na ccupán, a inghean Labhráis Laghrúigh Leathantónuigh na Lition, ní mise camchuaird bhóthánach na dtor agá mbíonn a tón dóighte ón neanntóig iasachta, mar bhíos tú féin, a cheirtleog bholgmhór na mbannachán agas na miráirneaghan.

186 Nicholas Jonathan Anselm WILLIAMS, *Pairlement...*, p. 157.

187 On aphrodisiacs: Jennifer EVANS, *Aphrodisiacs, Fertility and Medicine in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2014), p. 217. On nettles: Jennifer EVANS, "Sexual Curiosities? Aphrodisiacs in Early Modern England", [blog post] URL: <http://notchesblog.com/2014/09/18/sexual-curiosities-aphrodisiacs-in-early-modern-england/> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> February 2022].

188 Nicolas CULPEPPER, *The Complete Physician* (London, 1653).

189 For a recent study on early modern erotica, see Sara F. MATTHEWS-GRIECO, *Erotic Cultures of Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 2016).

190 See John VARRIANO, *Tastes and Temptations...*, pp. 118-39.

191 For a discussion and the image, see Paul VANDERBOECK, "Verbeeck's Peasant Weddings...", p. 94. Other visual sources deploying similar imagery include: Aertsen's *The Cook* (1559) and Nicholas Maes paintings of the 'virtuous' and 'shameless' woman in 1655. In an eighteenth-century erotic work, *A Voyage to Lethé* by Samuel Cock, an engraving entitled, "Masturbation in the Kitchen" shows a lower-class woman masturbating with parsnips, indicating the association with lower-class carnality. Image reprinted in Karen HARVEY, *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 17; see British Library: Cup.1001. c.4. For a comparative use of root vegetables to ridicule Irish sexuality by English writers, see John DUNTON, *Teague Land...*, p. 47.

192 Elsewhere the author directly comments on the fertility of the clan noting that "many children were engendered" on the night of Murcadh and Meadhbh's wedding. See PCT, line 224: agas ro geineadh clan iomdha eaturra an oidhche sin. For an interesting seventeenth-century English comment on food and procreation among the Irish, see George O'BRIEN (ed.), *Advertisements for Ireland* (Dublin, 1923), p. 43-44. The author claimed that the

The implied link between base foods and peasant procreation is probably significant. As McTighe noted, there was a clear association in contemporary literature between labourers' foods and sexual generation.<sup>193</sup> In northern Italy, for example, a medical text by Giuseppe Rosaccio claimed that gross foods:

make semen gross and of bad temperament; the son that is generated will have the force of a bull but will be wild and of bestial temper. It is because of this that among country people it is a miracle if one turns out acute of intellect and apt for learning, particularly where such rough foods are used. This is why they are born slow and rough, from having been generated through such foods.<sup>194</sup>

These pseudo-scientific ideas, unsurprisingly, had significance beyond nutrition, and were incorporated into a broader discourse about the basis of "biological nobility" in the sixteenth century. Italian commentators like Alessandro Piccolomini and Paolo Paruta, writing in the 1570s, for example, integrated the ideas as evidence of the innate differences between those of high and low status, who it was believed belonged to two separate races and should not mix.<sup>195</sup> As McTighe notes, the link between food and intellect, in particular:

served to assert a fixed biological division between social groups ... this natural fixity, determined by the very construction of the lower orders' bodies, would only be strengthened in the very act of generating children.<sup>196</sup>

There is no doubt that elements of these ideas are found in Irish satire. Lower-class diet, as already shown, was prescribed by the Gaelic elite specifically to underscore and maintain two distinct biological and social classes. It was also used to highlight and mock the regenerative prowess of the peasant. Furthermore, the PCT indicates an explicit anxiety of the threat posed by the intermingling of these two groups. As the druids advised:

It is obvious therefore that you should never until the end of the world sully yourself with the blood of serf or churl, for they are not a good breed, and it does not matter how high they reach, nor what office they attain, they always desire to pollute and corrupt high-born kindreds, if only they are able.<sup>197</sup>

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increase in numbers of 'mere' Irish was the result of them being "wholly devoted" to idleness and feeding on "moist meats" which meant that they "abound" with children. He suggested they should spend more time "taking pains to dry their superfluous humours".

193 Sheila MCTIGHE, "Food and the Body...", p. 318.

194 Cited by Sheila MCTIGHE, p. 318. Giuseppe ROSACCIO, *Il Microcosmo di Giuseppe Rosaccio, Cosmografo* (Bologna, 1688): this 1688 edition is a reprint of a text written in the c. 1580s. Rosaccio's, and similar statements, may derive from the work of the Spaniard Juan Huarte, which went through numerous editions from the middle of the sixteenth through the end of the seventeenth century. Juan HUARTE, *Examen de Ingenios*, trans. and ed. Richard CAREW, *The Examination of Men's Wits* (London, 1594).

195 See Sheila MCTIGHE, "Food and the Body...". See also Gino BENZONI, *Gli Affanni Della Cultura: Intellettuali e potere nell'Italia della Controriforma e Barocca* (Milan, 1978), pp. 37-38, cited by McTighe.

196 Sheila MCTIGHE, "Food and the Body...", p. 318.

197 PCT, lines 209-14: nach cóir duitse go deogh ná go deireadh an domhain t'fhuil do shalcha le fuil mhoghuidh ná dhaoirsig, óir ní miannach maith iad, agas ní bfhuil cruth dá aoirde ionna rachaid, nó oifig nó ughdarrás do-gheabhuid, nach é budh mian leo fola uaisle do mhaslughadh agas do mhilleadh, dá dtíosadh leo a dhéanamh.

What is less clear, however, is a direct link between the consumption of base foods and the generation of intellectually and biologically inferior offspring. There are, however, suggestions that this was the belief. The clan and their progeny, after all, inherit their base diet from St Patrick which they receive along with the associated “gifts” or hereditary traits of indolence, cowardice, ineptitude, deceit and aggression.<sup>198</sup> There are also instances where parentage and base foods are juxtaposed, such as when Sadhbh is addressed insultingly as the daughter of “flat-footed, wide-bottomed Labhrás of the Porridge”; the implication, being that her father ate nothing but porridge and hence her propensity to baseness.<sup>199</sup> In other satires, however, the link is more explicit. In the *Tribes of Ireland*, the debased condition of the impoverished clans is directly linked to the quality of their progeny. The “miserable” and “decrepid” O’Reilly, produce “puny, stunted, stammering sons”.<sup>200</sup> The Kenry men are hungry and lean-bodied and therefore the children they produce are “ill-favoured” and should be enclosed like animals “in a pound”.<sup>201</sup> The O’Carroll’s owe their miserable condition to having “felt starvation in the womb”.<sup>202</sup> Taken together then, the association of peasants with sexually suggestive foods, the juxtaposition of those foods with crude and prolific sexuality, and the tentative link between base foods and biological inferiority, serves to reinforce an important point in Irish satire: the natural and immutable condition of the low born, impervious to the changes taking place in broader society.

## Conclusion

Early Modern Ireland, often perceived as an insular, colonial and impoverished region on the Celtic fringe of Europe, may, at first glance, seem an unpromising case study for the diffusion of new scientific and cultural ideas. Yet, as this literary exploration demonstrates, a food studies lens can reveal compelling depths and connections in even the most unlikely settings. In this case, a contextualized and historicized analysis of Gaelic satire shows that food was invested with intense social, cultural and political “meaning”. In a changing society, where traditional hierarchical structures threatened to disintegrate, elite observers, in a similar manner to their Dutch, German, Italian, Spanish and English counterparts, refashioned classical and medieval imagery and stereotypes to bolster social distinctions. This refashioning, rooted in contemporary discourse on manners, class and consumption, integrated emerging nutritional, philosophical and “scientific” ideas to codify and sustain “natural” social boundaries and to critique and mock “uncivilized” behaviours. In this regard, the Irish rustic demonstrates remarkable similarities to his European counterparts. He eats and enjoys the same taxonomy of foods; his physiognomy is similar, reflecting his embodiment of the food he cultivates and consumes; and he displays typical peasant behaviours, underscored by his association with the same symbolic foods. This indicates, of course, the remarkable fluidity of dietary science, learning and ideological interpretation

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198 PCT, lines 50-60.

199 PCT, line 1054.

200 James Clarence MANGAN, *Tribes...*, p. 51.

201 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

202 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

across the continent and Gaelic Ireland in this period. Further, it supports the findings of historians of European dietetic literature, who notice a distinct intensification in these ideas from the late sixteenth century. The comparative analysis of Gaelic satire corroborates this shift from medieval to early modern food stereotypes, while illuminating, in unique ways, the evolution of these ideas in the popular imagination. The social and economic factors underlying cultural food ideas obviously varied across Europe, in response to prevailing social and economic conditions, but the language with which they were expressed, in material, visual and textual terms, was universal.

This analysis has deep implications for how we approach and understand Gaelic sources and society moving forward. Opening the PCT to less insular literary-critical engagement challenges certain conclusions about the historical truths to be wrought from the text. In particular, the analysis demonstrates serious issues with the acceptance of either Gaelic or indeed English literary descriptions as evidence of the lived experience of Irish people. The intense metaphorical significance of food, and the remarkable, and somewhat suspicious, similarity of dietary representation across Europe, urges the need to reassess the perceived composition of the early modern diets, as understood from literary sources, and to pay close attention to the relationship between representation and reality in future analyses. In specific terms, this means we may need to question current perceptions, for example, around the ubiquitous nature of beans in the peasant diet or, specific to the Irish context, the significance of potatoes in the seventeenth century.

This food-focused analysis also challenges wider beliefs about the nature of Irish society in this period, particularly, the “traditionalism” associated with the Gaelic elite. Certainly, in some ways, lower-class representation in the PCT is, as Williams suggests, “intensely conservative”.<sup>203</sup> Despite its humanist flavour and influences, there is no indication that the lower classes can, or should be, “civilized”, nor is there any suggestion that peasant behaviour is intended to serve as a cautionary mirror for an aspiring elite.<sup>204</sup> Rather, the polarizing language and incessant efforts to demonstrate the inherent baseness of the lower orders appear intended solely to reinstitute the status quo of the traditional order. This conservatism of purpose is, however, not matched by an inward-looking intellectual approach. Indeed, this analysis shows the PCT is a remarkably current effort, demonstrating Irish engagement with a wide range of European ideas, both popular and intellectual. It is also a far more nuanced and sophisticated work than has been generally acknowledged, interpreting emergent ideas in a complex conceptual schema that fully demonstrates the centrality of food to Irish social identity and self-fashioning.<sup>205</sup> Crucially, this complexity and integration can only be understood through a sustained food-focused analysis, indicating the immense value of this approach to Irish studies moving forward, but also the need to contextualize Gaelic texts within the full range of early modern representative sources, visual, material and literary, to better understand the transmission of ideas in this period.

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203 Nicholas Jonathan Anselm WILLIAMS, *Pairlement...*, p. lix.

204 On peasant representation as didactic mode, see Paul VANDENBROECK, “Verbeeck’s Peasant Weddings...”, p. 108. For a debate about the interpretation of peasant representations, see Svetlana ALPERS, “Bruegel’s Festive Peasants”, *Simiolus*, vol. 6 (1972), pp. 163-76 and Svetlana ALPERS, “Taking Pictures Seriously: A Reply to Hessel Miedema”, *Simiolus*, vol. 10 (1978), pp. 46-50; Hessel MIEDEMA “Realism and Comic Mode...”

205 In this regard the findings agree with Caball’s analysis of the text. See Marc CABALL, “Providence...”, p. 177.