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"An headlesse Ladie" and "a horses loade of heades": Writing the Beheading

by PATRICIA PALMER

The savagery of the native Irish and, in particular, their predilection for severing heads, is repeatedly asserted, not only in the texts of conquest, but in representations of the "Wild Irish" on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. This essay tests this literary commonplace against the historical record of the early modern conquest of Ireland. Far from being merely the aberrant practice of the barbarous Gaels, beheading — and a form of judicial headhunting — became a cornerstone of the conquerors' policy of martial law. As atrocity was redefined as justice, so, in the hands of writers such as Spenser, Churchyard, and Derricke, was it aestheticized. But even as such writers wove inventive beheadings into their texts, Irish poets were elegizing the severed heads of patrons killed by the English. The poetry of beheading became a site of cultural confrontation and of unexpected assertions of humanity.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1612, five years after the Flight of the Earls signalled the symbolic end of the Gaelic order, John Webster wrote *The White Devil*.[1] The savagery of the Irish wars had already been winnowed down in English recollection to Irish savagery. Cold-bloodedly plotting to avenge his sister Isabella, Francisco, Duke of Florence, links atrocities of decapitation to Irishness twice in fifty-five lines. His ally, the malign Cardinal, provides him with a "black book . . . to point me out a list of murderers." This book, he mordantly recognizes, has been compiled by an underling who "intends, / As th'Irish rebels wont were to sell heads, / So to make prize of these."[2] Steeled to set in motion his own lurid revenge, he triumphantly concludes, "Brachiano, I am now fit for thy encounter. / Like the wild Irish I'll ne'er think thee dead, / Till I can play at football with thy head."[3] Webster scholars have obligingly fanned out in search of real-life parallels. The New Mermaid's editor, Christina Luckyj, thoughtfully explains that "The Irish were notoriously cruel and bloodthirsty."[4] R. W. Dent, followed by David Gunby, cites Thomas Gainsford (writing four years after Webster): "[the Irish] are desperate in reuenge, and their kerne thinke no man dead, vntill his head be off."[5] Dent helpfully directs us to F. P. Magoun's *History of Football from the Beginnings to 1871*. Magoun's

[1]On the flight, see Morgan, 1989, 31; Canny, 184.
[2]Webster, 1966, 75 (act 4, scene 1, line 88; 4.1.79–81).
[3]Ibid., 77 (4.1.135–37).
[4]Webster, 1996, 80.
[5]Dent, 121–22; Webster, 1995, 314; Gainsford, 150.

instances, however — the Green Knight's head being kicked about in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the head of an abbott's murdered servant kicked around a fourteenth-century Cheshire monastery "by feet, in the manner of a ball," a Shrove Tuesday ritual in Kingston-upon-Thames — seem wide of the mark as glosses on the practices of the "wild Irish."[6] Indeed, in a pattern that threatens to become circular, Magoun's only Irish instance comes from Webster.

We need to go to Ireland, it seems, to see precisely what kind of terrible games were being played out in the desolate landscape of the Elizabethan conquest. Webster, and all of London, would have heard about Sir John Chichester's gruesome end. Chichester, the Governor of Carrickfergus, turned a parley into an ambush and paid for his unchivalrous sally with his head. The head was sent "to [Hugh O'Neill] the Earl of Tyrone by four horsemen" and, rumour had it, "was made a football by the rude galloglass of the army."[7] But far from being the exclusive sport of the wild Irish, this was a game which all sides played. The Old English citizens of Limerick, backing O'Neill in his rebellion, "vaunt[ed] that they assaulted the Constable of the castle . . . and cut off his head, and brought the same into the Island, and played at football with it."[8] In Ulster a New English Captain, Humphrey Willis, and his soldiers "cut off the head of the son of Edmund MacHugh McGuire and hurled it from place to place as a football."[9] This triangulation suggests that the neat demarcation of savagery performed by Webster's comparatives ("as th'Irish rebels," "like the wild Irish") hides a more complex story.

Webster's clutch of Irish allusions fits with the dark undertow of pan-European misery that darkens his play: 40,000 shaven-headed Polish beggars, Dutch gallows-birds swung to the drop from their fellows' shoulders, Russian debtors with punitively smashed shins.[10] But as Ann Rosalind Jones argues, the images of the wild Irish provide a barbaric counterpoint

[6]Magoun, 6, 9, "ad modum pilae cum pedibus," 45. He might have added Mrs. E. Willoughby's eyewitness account of the execution of the Jesuit Fr. Hugh Green in Dorchester in 1642. Willoughby records that "the ungodly multitude . . . from ten o'clock in the morning, till four in the afternoon, stayed on the hill and sported themselves at football with his head" (Challoner, 427).

[7]*Calendar of State Papers, Ireland* [hereafter abbreviated as *CSPI*] *1596–1597*, 214; *CSPI 1598–1599*, 444–45; Bigger, 2.

[8]*CSPI 1600–1601*, 13. "Old English" refers to the descendants of the original twelfth-century Anglo-Norman conquest.

[9]*Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts* [hereafter abbreviated as *CCM*] *1589–1600*, 156.

[10]Webster refers, *inter alia*, to Irish gamesters (1.2.30), keeners (4.2.93), and mantles (5.3.231).

to supersubtle Italian decadence, leaving the English as the implicit golden mean between these polarized variants of European depravity.[11] But the simplicities of that polarity are challenged, paradoxically, by poles: the poles that stake out the landscape of the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland, each with its severed head.

Far from being a story of polarities (civil Englishmen versus Irish headhunters), late sixteenth-century Ireland is marked by intersections. In the extremities of a war of attrition, carefully drawn lines between civility and savagery dissolve: the real bleeds into the imagined, and aestheticized violence offers no respite from slaughter.[12] The lethal intimacy of close combat reduces the distinction between beheader and beheaded to one of hazard.[13] Equally, acts of beheading intersect with beheadings as art. Revealingly, Magoun's list glides effortlessly from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s Wirral of romance to a real Cheshire monastery. The line between fact and fiction, between violent act and violent aesthetic, blurs. In fact, *Sir Gawain* exemplifies the kind of intersections that lie at the heart of this paper. At one level — linguistically and geographically — the poem is archetypally north-of-England. But tucked into its very plotline — the beheading challenge — is a ninth-century Irish tale, the *Fled Bricrenn*.[14] An English beheading tale folds over into an Irish one. And, as we shall see, artful fictions of beheadings intersect with all-too-real decapitations.

2. A Parity of Atrocities?

> He made for the field of slaughter. He came upon a half-headed man who had half a corpse on his back.
>
> "Help me, Cúchulainn," he said. "I am stricken and bear half my brother's body on my back. Carry it a while for me."
>
> "I will not," Cúchulainn said.
>
> The other threw his burden at him. But he tossed it from him. They reached out at each other. And Cúchulainn was thrown down.
>
> Then I [Fergus, the narrator] heard something: the Badb [the raven goddess of war] calling from among the corpses: "It's a poor sort of warrior that lies down at the feet of a ghost!" Cúchulainn reached up and knocked off the half-head with his hurling stick and drove it before him, playing ball across the plain of battle.[15]

[11]See Jones, 254–60.
[12]McGurk, 250.
[13]Bourke, 52.
[14]See Jacobs.
[15]Kinsella, 80.

The cultural inheritors of Cúchulainn had little to learn from the Elizabethans about decapitation. Writing of the Irish victory at the Yellow Ford (1598), Hugh O'Donnell's biographer offers a deadpan synopsis of its aftermath: "The soldiers and their attendants returned and proceeded to strip the people who had fallen in the battle and to behead those who were severely wounded there. The booty of unusual, varied supplies was great."[16] Fiach Mac Hugh O'Byrne, a Wicklow chieftain who threatened English hegemony on the very fringes of the Pale, was a master of "slippery diplomacy."[17] When its imperatives required him to buy time by surrendering to Lord Deputy Perrott, he got into role by sending "several heads" to Dublin.[18] His posture of loyalty was short lived. By 1594 Fiach had become the dominant Leinster player in the Nine Years War. Sometime that year "he slaughtered the ward of a lime-washed [English] castle."[19] Aonghus Dubh Ó Dálaigh's *amhrán* raucously celebrates this raid; but, amid the unfocused exultation, two images intrude: "no survivor of the slaughter was left without bone-cutting," and we see "the head of the warden in the shadow of the spike."[20] Meanwhile, in Connacht an English soldier, John Baxter, was present when Hugh O'Donnell invited Murrogh O'Malley, son of the "pirate" Grace O'Malley and an opportunistic ally of the English, to share a cask of wine. O'Donnell had recently inflicted a punishing defeat on the English under Captain Clifford and, Baxter reported, "in which time of our drinking, O'Donnell did shew unto the said Murrogh the head of Sir Conyers Clifford," *pour décourager*.[21]

After the Flight of the Earls, Sir John Davies, clearing the legal ground for the Plantation of Ulster, noted: "Our geographers do not forget what entertainment the Irish of Tyrconnell gave to a mapmaker, about the end of the late great rebellion; for one Barkeley being appointed by the late Earl of Devonshire to draw a true and perfect map of the north parts of Ulster . . . when he came into Tyrconnell the inhabitants took off his head, because they would not have their country discovered."[22] Hugh O'Neill dramatizes the reactive nature of Hugh Maguire's violence: "a man that hath bene soe hardlie dealte with, as he hath bene will not suffer a man to

[16]Uí Chlérigh, 183–85.

[17]Edwards, 1998, 239. The "Pale" designated the area comprising Dublin and neighboring counties controlled by the Anglo-Norman conquerors.

[18]Morgan, 1998, 184–85. See also *CSPI 1574–85*, 540; *CCM MSS*, 427.

[19]My translation; Mac Airt, 150: "do chuir ár ar bhárda an aolchaisleáin."

[20]Ó Dálaigh, ll. 7–8, quoted in Mac Airt, 150: "nár fágbhadh neach d'fhuidheall an áir / gan chnáimhghearradh"; ibid., l. 28: "Ceann an bhárda ar sgáth an spíce."

[21]*CSPI 1599–1600*, 332.

[22]*CSPI 1601–1603*, 280.

passe downe that weares a hatt on his head, or a cloke on his back, or that speakes a worde of english withoute takinge his head from his shoulders."[23] Nonetheless, the extract from *The Táin* which opens this section reminds us that such responses have a genealogy. English legislative sanctions against poets and storytellers recognized all too well the intersection between the literary and the political in Gaelic society.[24] The conservatism of the Irish literary tradition meant that sagas which reflected the headhunting practices of the pagan Celts retained their currency into the early modern period.[25] Sprinkled throughout Geoffrey Keating's great seventeenth-century work of cultural salvage, the *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, are iconic tales of beheading: Ceat playing a bed-trick that fools Bealchu's sons into beheading their father instead of him; Conall Cearnach parading the brain of the warrior Meisceadhra as a "trophy of valour."[26] The easy alliance between literature and bloodletting is illustrated by two late sixteenth-century rewritings of early Irish tales. The beheading plots of both were reconfigured to reflect Shane O'Neill's beheading by the MacDonnells of Antrim — and to remove the imputation of treachery that hung over that deed.[27] Literature could provide material for exculpation as well as emulation.

So far, so predictable. The Gaels, raised on heroic tales of head-hunting warriors, perform to type, while the English fit comfortably within the European norm, where decapitation and official acts of desecration were standard judicial practice for crimes such as treason.[28] So, should English beheadings be read differently from Irish beheadings? Untroubled by the question of definition raised by the term *rebellion* — and, in consequence, *treason* — John Hooker concludes his "Irish Historie" "with the briefe recitall of the most speciall points . . . in this pageant" (that is, the Desmond Rebellion in 1580s Munster). Its leader, James FitzMaurice, "was slaine by a gentleman . . . and his head & quarters set vpon the gates

[23]PRO SP 63/173/64.iv.

[24]Palmer, 2001, 138.

[25]See Jackson, 19, 36–37; Mac Cana, 97–101.

[26]Céitinn, 2:209, 200. Like a premonition of Webster, the lime-hardened brain is stolen by two jesters who "hurl it from hand to hand like a ball."

[27]See Breatnach, 1990; Breatnach, 1992. For Sidney's backing of the MacDonnell conspiracy, see Morgan, 1989, 11.

[28]Davis, 162; Ruff, 99, 103. The Old English Earl of Ormond, beheading rebels in his lordship with no quarter given, reminds us that decapitation was a common currency among the three cultures in conflict in early modern Ireland; see Edwards, 2003, 233–36, 252, 309–10. The Earl of Essex himself was rushing toward precisely that fate on his precipitate return from Ireland. For this, see Shapiro, 372.

of the towne of Kilmallocke. Then Iames of Desmond brother to the earle . . . was likewise taken and caried to Corke, where he was drawne, hanged, and quartered; and his head and quarters set vpon the gates and wals of the citie of Corke. After him, sir Iohn of Desmond . . . being killed and then caried dead to Corke . . . his bodie was hanged by the heeles, and his head sent to Dublin, and there set vpon the top of the castle. And in the end, the earle himselfe was also taken, and with the sword the head was diuided from the bodie: the one was sent to London, and there set vpon London bridge; and his bodie vncerteine whether it were buried or deuoured by the wild beasts." In the body of his text, Hooker underscores each beheading: "the pestilent / venomous hydra hath lost an other of his heads."[29] Elizabethan commentators such as Hooker would insist that we read the two patterns of beheading very differently: for them there was no equivalence between Irish and English beheadings. The former was a confirmation of savagery, the second a legitimate instrument of justice. David Edwards has shown how the imposition of martial law became a cornerstone of English colonial policy in Ireland. The preemptive punishment of any suspect "by marshal lawe, as well by death as by losse of members, [and] limbs," redefined atrocity as justice.[30] Extended countrywide under Lord Deputy Henry Sidney, the policy made the mid-1570s "a time of massacres" and the whole period "one of mounting state terrorism."[31] One of the most notorious of these massacres happened at Mullaghmast in 1578, when seventy-four members of the O'More clan were drawn into a parley and then slaughtered, with Sidney's complicity. In his study of the massacre, Vincent Carey weighs the English actions against Barbara Donagan's findings about the importance of "keeping faith" in early modern theories of war. He concludes that the Midlands campaign, "even by the standards of contemporary English military theory and practice . . . represented a departure from the norm." Furthermore, he argues, "the pattern of conquest" which accommodated massacre "was accompanied by an apologetic ideology of civility and savagery."[32] But a distinction between civil beheadings and savage ones would prove hard to maintain.[33]

[29]Hooker, 6:459, 412, 433, 446.

[30]Quoted by Edwards, 2004, 290.

[31]Edwards, 1997, 18.

[32]Carey, 1999, 322, 305; see also Donagan.

[33]The State Papers record, overwhelmingly, English beheadings. Irish beheadings may have been underreported for morale and propaganda reasons. Edwards, however, argues that the earliest episodes of large-scale decapitation, at Maynooth Castle and elsewhere in the 1530s, involved English soldiers recruited in the Borders, where beheading had long been a feature of Anglo-Scottish warfare: see Edwards, forthcoming.

English reports of the protracted and bloody campaigns that culminated in the Flight of the Earls in 1607 are rife with internal contradiction. Dry runs for Webster's axiom — Fynes Moryson, for example, charging the Irish with "not only mangling the bodyes of their dead Enemyes, but neuer beleeuing them to be fully dead till they haue cutt off their heads"[34] — sit alongside accounts of Englishmen cutting Irish heads from mangled Irish bodies. Triumphalist celebrations of English beheadings challenge the truism of Irish barbarism on which English practice complacently rested. War becomes a terrible, but sanctioned headcount. Lord Deputy Perrott, pursuing some of James FitzMaurice's men in County Limerick, ordered his men to dismount, to "ryppe off their Bootes, and to leppe into the Bogges" after "the rebels." Perrott's men fell to "and cut off fifty of their Heads, which they carried Home with them unto *Kyllmalog* and put the Heads round about the Crosse."[35] Proclamations rang out — "to such person or persons, that shall deliuer the bodie of [Hugh O'Neill] . . . the summe of two thousand Markes"[36] — and the heads rolled in. Shane O'Neill's "unnatural monster's head" was delivered to Sir Henry Sidney, "pickled in a pipkin."[37] When the Earl of Desmond's head was brought in, £93.6s.8d. "hedd monie" was paid to his killer, "Kelly, a butcher," and £120 to Captain Cheston, who had ceremonially carried it on the point of his sword to Cork.[38] A Captain Dowdall filed this dispassionate headcount from Munster in April 1582: "some days two heads and some days four heads, and other some days ten heads."[39]

The official journal recording Lord Deputy Russell's engagements in Ireland between 1595 and 1597 moves seamlessly between social diary — "My Lord went ahunting" — and logbook of decapitation. Between accounts of Russell walking "abroad with Lady Russell to see fish taken," dining with Ormond, sending Fulke Greville a goosehawk, hearing Dr. Hanmer preach "a very bitter sermon," there are forty separate entries devoted to heads brought in: "Captain Mince brought in the head of Feogh [Mac Hugh O'Byrne]'s piper"; "Captain Henry Streete sent in 35 heads of the rebels of the Breny, besides 10 more of the rebels' heads which were

[34] *The Irish Sections of Fynes Moryson's Unpublished Itinerary*, 70.

[35] *The History of Sir John Perrott*, 52.

[36] *CSPI 1600–1601*, 41; see also the proclamation for Maguire's head in *CSPI 1592–1596*, 178.

[37] *A Viceroy's Vindication?*, 53–54.

[38] Sheehan, 106–10.

[39] *CSPI 1574–1585*, xciv.

stolen away."[40] One Thomas Ball pocketed £15 for bringing in seventeen heads.[41]

In his telling of Essex's 1599 campaign, Sir John Harington reported that Christopher St. Lawrence, spotting a band of horse-rustling rebels, "passed by the [river] Baro naked . . . reskewed the praie, and retourned withe the heade of a rebell."[42] Mountjoy, regaling Cecil with the success of his scorched-earth policy in Offaly, recalled eight heads being brought in one day; his guide, idly surveying the haul, found himself gazing at his own son's head.[43] A messenger captured by the Irish returned with more than a grisly tale: when his galloglass guard fell asleep, he escaped, "bringing away the head" of the fatally somnolent keeper with him.[44] From Derry, Captain Docwra reported that some of the rebel Turlough Magnylson's men "came into my hands aliue, whom I caused the Souldiers to hewe in peeces with their swordes." Turlough himself was followed to what he thought was a safe-house. A boy left to spy on him "lookt in & sawe him pull of his trowses, & ly downe to sleepe." The lad alerted the soldiers who quickly "dispatcht [Turlough] and brought mee his heade . . . which was presentlie knowne to euery Boy in the Armey, & made a ludibrious Spectacle to such as listed to behould it."[45]

"Ludibrious Spectacle" was crucial to the strategy: rough justice had to be seen to have been done. Sidney recollected how, on the "evening and all the night [before a raid], there was nothing but singing, casting of bullets, drying of powder, filing of pikes' heads, sharpening of swords."[46] "Pikes' heads" anticipates the piked heads that, for Sidney's propagandist, John Derricke, emblematized his campaign. Plates 5 and 6 of the series of woodcuts in his *The Image of Irelande* includes two striking representations of severed heads (figs. 1–2). The first is set in wild, mountainous country. Its top left-hand corner shows a kerne awkwardly kneeling, hands up in surrender, pinned to the spot by spears and helmeted infantry. A moustachioed soldier grips him by the glib (the despised Irish fringe, or bangs), his raised sword poised to fall on the kerne's exposed neck. A jingling surtitle glosses approvingly: "To see a souldiour toze a karne, O Lord it is a wonder: / And eke what care he taketh to part, the head from neck a

[40]*CCM*, 230, 248, 227, 234, 235, 230, 256.
[41]*CSPI 1596–1597*, 214.
[42]Harington, 1:270.
[43]*CSPI 1600*, 339.
[44]*CCM*, 233.
[45]Docwra, 258–59.
[46]*A Viceroy's Vindication?*, 68.

FIGURE 1. Woodcut, plate 5 from John Derricke's *The Image of Irelande*, 1581. Special Collections Department, Edinburgh University Library.

sonder." The rest of the woodcut shows the leisurely return of the soldiers with their booty: prancing horses and a herd of fat cattle, a youth with a halter around his neck, and three severed heads. Derricke invites us to "see how trimme their glibbed heades are borne by valiant men." Two, bearded and male, are skewered on the points of blood-spattered swords held aloft by a duo of nonchalant soldiers. The third is a woman's.[47] A soldier, making a moue of distaste, carries her by the hair; blood still spurts from her neck. The second woodcut gives the sequel. The strong towers of Dublin Castle flank Lord Deputy Sidney and his entourage as they ride out. Above the portcullis, three severed heads, bearded and disconsolate, are staked through the *foramen magnum* onto poles angled outwards. Derricke's sequencing accommodates savagery within a legitimating narrative: bloody deeds in the Gaelic wilderness provide an astringent prologue to rituals of civility. State violence is recuperated as pomp and admonitory display.

Heads and arms, dismembered after death, which archaeologists have uncovered in river mud at the foot of Isolde's Tower in Dublin, give a

[47]I am indebted to Dr. Ken Nicholls of the History Department, UCC, for alerting me to this; the woman, he suggests, could be Margaret Byrne, wife of Rory O'More.

FIGURE 2. Woodcut, plate 6 from John Derricke's *The Image of Irelande*, 1581. Special Collections Department, Edinburgh University Library.

physical reality to the place of such spectacles in the medieval colony.[48] For the Elizabethans, too, the procedure was clear-cut: after English victories, Irish "heddes are taken up, / their triumph to declare."[49] In June 1597, Lord Deputy Burgh could jokingly complain to Cecil that so many heads of "beggarly rogues" were daily brought in that "the air about Dublin . . . is corrupted."[50] Four years later, Cecil was being pacified in a similar way by Mountjoy: "I have heard you complain that you could not hear of one head brought in for all the Queen's money; but I assure you now that the kennels of the streets are full of them."[51]

3. The Aesthetics of Atrocity

Dehumanizing the enemy, transforming them into "vermin," eases the way, as Natalie Zemon Davis reminds us, for "guilt-free massacre."[52] John Derricke did just that when he portrayed Irish foot-soldiers as substitute

[48]Ó Donnabháin.
[49]Derricke, 58.
[50]*CSPI 1596–1597*, 315.
[51]*CSPI 1600*, 85.
[52]Davis, 181.

"vermine."[53] His patron, Sidney, shaped and executed policy; Derricke supplied the apologetics.[54] Just as Sidney's acts called into question the polarity insisted on by Webster, so Derricke's art brings us to a second, crucial intersection, that between beheading and the writing of beheading. Amid the crude crosshatching of Derricke's woodcuts and glancing allusions to horror in the State Papers, comes a longer, more deliberate account of the practice of terror. During the Desmond War, Thomas Churchyard tells us, Sir Humphrey Gilbert ordered "that the heddes of all those (of what sort soeuer thei were) which were killed in the daie, should bee cutte of from their bodies, and brought to the place where he incamped at night: and should there bee laied on the ground, by eche side of the waie leadyng into his owne Tente: so that none could come into his Tente for any cause, but commonly he muste passe through a lane of heddes, which he used *ad terrorem*, the dedde feelyng nothyng the more paines thereby: and yet did it bryng greate terrour to the people, when thei sawe the heddes of their dedde fathers, brothers, children, kinsfolke, and freendes, lye on the grounde before their faces, as thei came to speake with the saied Collonell." Churchyard is not exposing an atrocity; he is off-handedly dismissing any possible objections: "the dedde felte no paines by cuttyng of their heddes." His brief goes beyond justification — "although to some it maie seeme otherwise . . . there was muche blood saved"[55] — to advocacy. He writes expressly to show that "severe and straight handley [handling] of rebellious people, reformes them sooner to obedience, then any courteous dealing: because the stiffe necked must be made to stoupe, with extremitie of Justice, and stoute behaviour." Gilbert's "irremouvable determination" offers a pattern for emulation: "he killed manne, woman, and child, and spoiled, wasted, and burned"; moreover, the killing of "Calliacks, or women . . . by the sworde, was the waie to kill the menne of warre by famine."[56] Dedicated to Sir Christopher Hatton, architect of the Munster Plantation, Churchyard's work presents a blueprint for conquest through imitation of Gilbert's "noble footesteppes."[57]

Our contemporary reluctance to focus on the violence of the Elizabethan campaigns is at odds with its perpetrators' ebullient self-publicizing.[58] Vincent Carey argues that, far from covering up the atrocities of the

[53]Derricke, 32.
[54]Carey, 1999, 305.
[55]Churchyard, Q.iii.v.–iv.r.
[56]Ibid., Q.i.r.–ii.r.
[57]Ibid., R.iv.r.
[58]On this reluctance, see Bradshaw, 338–41.

scorched-earth campaign that brought Gaelic Ireland to submission in 1603, its practitioners and their propagandists used descriptions of brutality as "a rhetorical strategy" to convince the Queen and her administration that their methods worked.[59] But at an even deeper level, those who imposed civility through deeds which could be spoken of only in euphemism — as with "buisines" and "hire" in the quotation below — had first of all to talk to themselves. Captain George Bingham, the constable of Boyle Castle, sent a letter to his brother, Sir Richard, the iron-fisted military ruler of Connacht, in December 1593:

> My good brother yesterdaye as I walked in the halle at the Boyle ther came in to me one the sudden one of the mguires [who] presentlie I demaundinge what he was; he answered That he was a poore mann and had some secret busines with me whervpon I wente asyde and tooke Renoldes to interpret betweene vs; and at the firste he asked me what I would giue him to bringe the Souldiors where Tumultaghe bane, Edmonde Duffe and xxx knaues more weare keepinge of their Christmas for they holde their feaste as the Papists dothe to wch I aunswered I woulde giue him tenne li*br*i but he made a pogh at that and saide I woulde gaine his mantell full of golde for Tumultaghe Bane his heade onely. In the ende I agreede to giue him twentie pounde ster in money xxx Cowes and two quarters of fre-lande. And then he willed the souldiors to goe presentlie wth him. Vpon this I caused my Coosine Martenis to make redie thre score of the Companye . . . and soe they depted aboute 3 of the clocke after dynner and by viii of the Clocke had dispatched their buisines verie sufficientlie and well the Lorde be praised for it; for the guide broughte them to a house wher the Traitours weare makinge merrie rostenge of Beefe and had two good Fieres in the hall and but two escaped sore wounded. the reste had their hire and now I have sped vnto you with a horses loade of heades; wch I knowe wilbe better welcome vnto you than all the Cowes in the Breny.[60]

Writing in the hall of Boyle Castle, where he himself would later be beheaded, poised between the ferocity of slaughter and dispatch of the loaded cart, Sir George occupies the point where writing and violence meet. From "makinge merrie" hours before, Tumaltagh Bán and thirty others are becoming the stuff of anecdote. Bingham's jaunty telling turns their heads into a curiously private currency, an epistolary tale whose punch lies as much in the delivery of the story as in the actual delivery of the "horses loade" itself. In the disparity between Bingham's telling and the postprandial reality lies the gulf that might have been occupied by empathy. Writing up the atrocity seems not so much ancillary to the act as its

[59]Carey, 2004, 212.
[60]PRO/SP/63/172/38.ii.

culmination, the point at which the stench and mayhem of slaughter gets shaped into meaning.[61]

"There's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed," laments Pegeen Mike in *The Playboy of the Western World*.[62] To aestheticize violence, however, is to close that gap by turning a dirty deed into a gallous story. The pitiless conflict in late sixteenth-century Ireland had a notably literary element. Poets and translators like Thomas Churchyard, Sir John Davies, Geoffrey Fenton, Barnabe Googe, Sir John Harrington, John Hooker, Gervase Markham, Edmund Spenser, and Barnabe Rich move between text and conquest with a facility that makes the line between fancy and documentary difficult to draw. The reportage of war bleeds into "historicall fiction."[63] Hooker recounts how one of Captain Pelham's men "incountered with two lustie Kernes, the one of them he slue, and the other he compelled to carrie his fellows head with him to the campe: which when he had doone, his head also was cut off and laid by his fellowes."[64] In Spenser's Faerielond, the casual sadism of Hooker's anecdote could be transformed into the racy plotlines of romance. Artegall — the martinet Lord Deputy Arthur Grey remolded as a romance hero — has just set out to rescue "the faire Irena" when he encounters a lamenting squire with "An headlesse Ladie lying him beside, / In her owne blood all wallow'd wofully."[65] The squire explains that the uncouth Sir Sanglier had ridden up, intent on exchanging his lady, riding pillion, for the squire's own "faire loue." Squire and both ladies had roundly rejected the proposal. Undeterred, the knight threw down his lady, hauled up the squire's, and rode off. The cast-off lady pursued him, but "With that his sword he drew all wrathfully, / And at one stroke cropt off her head with scorne" (5.1.18.5–6). Artegall dispatches Talus to apprehend Sir Sanglier and when Sanglier joins the squire in denying culpability, Artegall — the Knight of Justice, after all — sets about adjudicating. If, he craftily suggests, both want the surviving damsel, why not, literally, split her? Whoever refuses must carry the dead lady's severed head "for a twelue moneths day" (5.1.26.7). Sanglier is quite sanguine about seeing the living damsel "cut in twaine" (5.1.27.4); the squire, appalled, prepares to take up the decapitated head to save his beloved. With this Artegall learns who really loves her, and

[61]Barker has influenced my thinking generally on this point. For a fuller treatment of violence and atrocity in the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland, see Palmer, forthcoming.

[62]Synge, 207.

[63]Spenser, 1987, 15.

[64]Hooker, 430.

[65]Spenser, 1987, book 5, canto 1, stanza 14, lines 3–4. Parenthetical citations will be given in the text hereafter.

condemns Sir Sanglier "to beare that Ladies head before his breast" (5.1.29.4) in condign punishment.[66]

Romance's aestheticization of the severed head cannot quite keep the dirty reality of the Munster wars from leeching into Spenser's poetry. Just eleven stanzas after adjudicating in the "headless Ladie" case, Artegall himself is doing the beheading. He comes to a bridge controlled by Pollente, who demands "passage money" of all who approach "according to the custome of their law" (5.2.11) — a legality that should give pause. Pollente's villein, "with scull all raw," rushes out to collect the levy, "To whom [Artegall] aunswerd wroth, loe there thy hire; / And with that word him strooke, that streight he did expire" (5.2.11.8–9). Pollente, outraged, "streight him selfe vnto the fight addrest." Artegall drops through a trapdoor in the bridge, into the fast-flowing river below; Pollente leaps after him. They grapple in the water like sea-beasts, but, when Pollente flees on to land,

> *Artegall* pursewed him still so neare,
> With bright Chrysaor in his cruell hand,
> That as his head he gan a litle reare
> Aboue the brincke, to tread vpon the land,
> He smote it off . . . .
> His corps was carried downe along the Lee,
> Whose waters with his filthy bloud it stayned:
> But his blasphemous head, that all might see,
> He pitcht vpon a pole on high ordayned;
> Where many years it afterwards remayned,
> To be a mirrour to all mighty men (5.2.18.1–5, 19.1–6).

Artegall next turns his attention to Pollente's daughter and treasurer, Munera, but, ever the gentleman, he balks at beheading her. Instead, he has Talus, his alter ego, slice off surrogate parts instead:

> he her suppliant hands, those hands of gold,
> And eke her feete, those feete of siluer trye,
> Which sought vnrighteousnesse, and iustice sold,
> Chopt off, and nayld on high, that all might them behold (5.2.26.6–9).[67]

[66]Calidore, too, uses a severed head to smooth the course of true love: he brings the head of the boorish knight who had intruded on Priscilla and Aladine's lovemaking to Priscilla's father, as a "counter-cast of slight / To giue fair colour" to her truant dalliance (6.3.16.8–9).

[67]Rowe, 1999, examines the severed hand as a metaphor for loss of agency within literary texts, but without reference to the wider historical context of mutilation. Similarly, see Tricomi.

The veil of allegory is thin and flyblown here. Pollente's "blasphemous head" reconfigures James of Desmond's, whose "head and quarters [were] set vpon the gates and wals of the citie of Corke."[68] Munera's fate echoes that of a young woman whom James FitzMaurice had infiltrated as a fifth columnist into Ardnagh castle, and whose frightful end John Hooker relates: though the "yoong harlot . . . was somewhat snowt fair," the castle's "warie and circumspect" English keeper "so handled the matter . . . that he in the end found out all the deuise, and foorthwith he carried hir vp vnto the top of the castell and cast hir ouer the wals, where with the fall she was crushed and died."[69] Her fall is eerily replayed in Munera's:

> Her selfe then tooke [Talus] by the sclender wast,
> In vaine loud crying, and into the flood
> Ouer the Castle wall adowne her cast,
> And there her drowned in the durty mud (5.2.27.1–4).

Ó Donnabháin reminds us that the punishment for traitors included the injunction that their "privy members to be cut off" to symbolize the erasure of their lineage.[70] In a wider sense, Carey shows how the brutality of Mountjoy's campaign at the end of the Nine Years War sought to reduce Ireland to a *tabula rasa*.[71] Artegall is doing precisely this when he turns from dismemberment to effacing the sites of memory: Pollente's

> Castle quite he raced,
> Euen from the sole of his foundation,
> And all the hewen stones thereof defaced,
> That there mote be no hope of reparation,
> Nor memory thereof to any nation (5.2.28.1–5).

Pollente's head "pitcht vpon a pole on high" and Munera's hand and feet "nayld on high" represent the amputation of the old order, its defunct extremities set out as mutilated trophies to proclaim the triumph of the new.[72] The intersection of literary text with historical fact is multilayered here: with Pollente, Spenser is returning, in the theme-and-variation mode of *The Faerie Queene*, to an incident that flattered his patron, Ralegh. In

[68]Hooker, 459. Jenkins, 134, identifies Pollente as John of Desmond, but the Cork context points to James.

[69]Hooker, 448.

[70]Ó Donnabháin, 13.

[71]Carey, 2004, 213.

[72]Spenser himself, granted Sir John's castle at Kilcolman, opted for "reparation" rather than defacement: Henley, 64.

book 3, Timias checks the "griesly Foster's . . . beastly lust" for Florimell (3.1.17.2–3). In revenge, the Foster and his two brothers ambush Timias "Foreby a narrow foord" (3.5.17.1–2). Timias quickly runs the first brother through. The second he "Smote . . . so rudely on the Pannikell, / That to the chin he cleft his head in twaine" (3.5.23.5–6). The third he "strooke" with "force so violent / That headlesse him into the foord he sent" (3.5.25.4–5). Bednarz shows how the Fosters' episode allowed Spenser to pay Ralegh a double compliment, allegorizing both his victory over the Seneschal of Imokelly at a ford near Youghal and his role in defeating the house of Desmond.[73]

The State Papers record no instance of a woman suffering decapitation. The prominence of women among the beheaded — and, in the case of Britomart, among the beheaders — intensifies the dark imaginings of book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*. Having knocked Radigund into a "sencelesse swoune," Artegall "her sunshynie helmet soone vnlaced, / Thinking at once both head and helmet to haue raced" (5.5.11.4, 8–9). But her bloodstained loveliness, swimming into view "like as the Moone in foggie winters night," disarms him (5.5.12.8–9, 13.6, 14.2). Britomart makes no such mistake when rescuing him from his consequent emasculation: with Radigund at her mercy, "She with one stroke both head and helmet cleft" (5.7.34.6). Through the sorry trio of Radigund, Munera, and the "headless Ladie," story that has been left largely untold emerges.[74] It is the story of violence and suffering visited on women: Hooker's "snowt fair" harlot; the "Calliackes, or women, who milked their creates" selected for slaughter by Gilbert;[75] the women whose forced testimony led to the beheading of their men;[76] and the woman whose plight provided grist to Spenser's polemical mill: "at the execution of a notable traytor at Limericke, called Murrogh O-Brien, I saw an old woman, which was his foster mother, take up his head, whilst he was quartered, and sucked up all the blood that runne thereout, saying, that the earth was not worthy to drinke it, and therewith also steeped her face and breast, and tore her haire, crying out and shrieking most terribly."[77] Spenser's decision to model Artegall, the Knight of Justice, on Sir Arthur Grey, mastermind of the Smerwick massacre, placed him on

[73]Bednarz, 53. Ralegh, C4v, recalls that Sir John's body was "hanged over the gates of his native city to be devoured by Ravens."

[74]But see MacCarthy.

[75]Churchyard, Q.ii.r.

[76]See below, p. 47–48.

[77]Spenser, 1997, 66.

a tightrope between condoning his patron's violence and denying it.[78] Heads roll but, squeamishly, often at the hands of Artegall's surrogates, Britomart and Talus. Talus offers no escape from history either: Artegall's tin manslayer with the death-dealing flail picks up on "the flail of Connacht," Sir Richard Bingham, a key figure in Spenser's plan to "reform" Ireland by reducing it to "ruefull spectacles of . . . wretched carcases starving [and] goodly countreys wasted."[79] The historical groundedness of Spenser's "darke conceit" meant that instead of offering an allegory of justice "coloured with an historicall fiction," he offers a fiction of justice imbrued by historical fact.[80]

4. Severed Heads: Talking Back

There is a potent difference between a severed head and a skull. If a skull is a *memento mori*, the severed head is a *memento vitae*. It is its resemblance to the living, while being utterly drained of life, that disturbs. In Rubens's *The Miracle of St Justus*, the young martyr carries his own freshly severed head. The thumb and forefinger of the boy's right hand delicately support the chin, the bloodspattered fingers of the left draw the head protectively against his chest, above which gapes the neat and terrible cross-section of his sliced neck. The face has the pallor of death but the eyes stare out in arrested terror and the boy's soft mouth struggles to speak.[81] When Bernal Díaz del Castillo entered Tenochtitlan at the end of the siege of Mexico, he reported that "in one of the houses there were some upright posts on which [the Aztecs] had put the heads of many of our Spaniards whom they had killed and sacrificed during the recent battles. Their hair and beards had grown much longer than they were in life."[82] It is this wrenching quality of still-life death, of animation abruptly arrested, that both mesmerizes and repels us. The severed head is a terrifying figure of liminality, staked on the

[78]See O Rahilly.

[79]Spenser, 1997, 96, 102. For Bingham, see Highley, 120.

[80]Spenser, 1987, 15.

[81]Rubens, Peter Paul. *The Miracle of St Justus*. 1635. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux. See also, Janes, 97–138; and Constantijn Huygens (quoted in Woollett and van Suchtelen, 183) on Rubens and Franz Snyders's *The Head of Medusa*: "The countenance of the extremely beautiful woman has its grace still preserved, but at the same time evokes the horror of the fitting beginning of death and of the wreath of hideous snakes. The combination is so shrewdly executed that the spectator would be shocked by the sudden confrontation (normally the painting is covered), but at the same time is moved by the lifelikeness and beauty with which the grim subject is rendered."

[82]Díaz, 397.

no-mans-land between life and death. Derricke facetiously imagines a head "poled vp" on Dublin Castle, "beholdyng starres, as though he were, / in high Astronomie."[83] The title page of a newsletter celebrating Cahir O'Doherty's failed insurrection and subsequent execution shows two heads, ostensibly staked at Newgate in Dublin (fig. 3).[84] O'Doherty's brow is crinkled, his eyes lightly closed; his mouth is open and his lower lip and beard jut forward. He looks for all the world like a traditional *sean-nós* singer absorbed in song or a practiced orator hitting his stride.

The urge to ventriloquize could seem irresistible. In his "Memoir of Service in Ireland," Sidney recalls with satisfaction the killing of Rory Óg O'More, who had resisted his attempts to colonize Laois: "his head was sent me and set up upon the Castle of Dublin; for which I had proclaimed 1,000 marks to be given to him that would bring it to me."[85] John Derricke dutifully rushed out the commendatory doggerel: "Suppose," he instructs the reader, "that you see a monstrous Deuill, a trunckelesse head, and a hedlesse bodie liuyng, the one hid in some miskin & donghill, but the other exalted, yea mounted vppon a poule (a proper sight, God wot, to beholde) vanting it self on the highest toppe of the Castell of Dublin, vttering in plaine Irishe the thynges that ensewe." He then ventriloquizes O'More's severed head denouncing itself:

> And here I lye groulyng, poore wretch, on the ground,
> Spoylde of the jewell, I cheefly loved,
> Thus God of justice, doeth traitours confounde:
> When from their sinnes thaile not be removed,
> With shame and confusion, I now am reproued,
> My hed, from the bodie parted in twaine,
> Is set on the Castell a signe to remaine.

Derricke editorializes in the margin: "Rorie Oges hed is sett vppon the top of the Castel of Dublin for a spectakle to all the whole land."[86] But Derricke's need to script a retraction in a language Rory Óg's did not speak — his "plaine Irishe" is English — betrays a hermeneutical anxiety. The "whole land" was far from agreed on how to read the "spectakle."

Barnabe Riche's virulently anti-Catholic *Catholicke Conference* — framed as a debate between "Patricke Plaine a young student in

[83]Derricke, 58.

[84]*The Ouer-throw of an Irish rebell*, 1608. In a striking instance of the intersections that this paper charts, the printer recycled an image of the Gunpowder plotters. I am grateful to Dr. Hiram Morgan for this observation.

[85]*A Viceroy's Vindication?*, 101.

[86]Derricke, 92, 97.

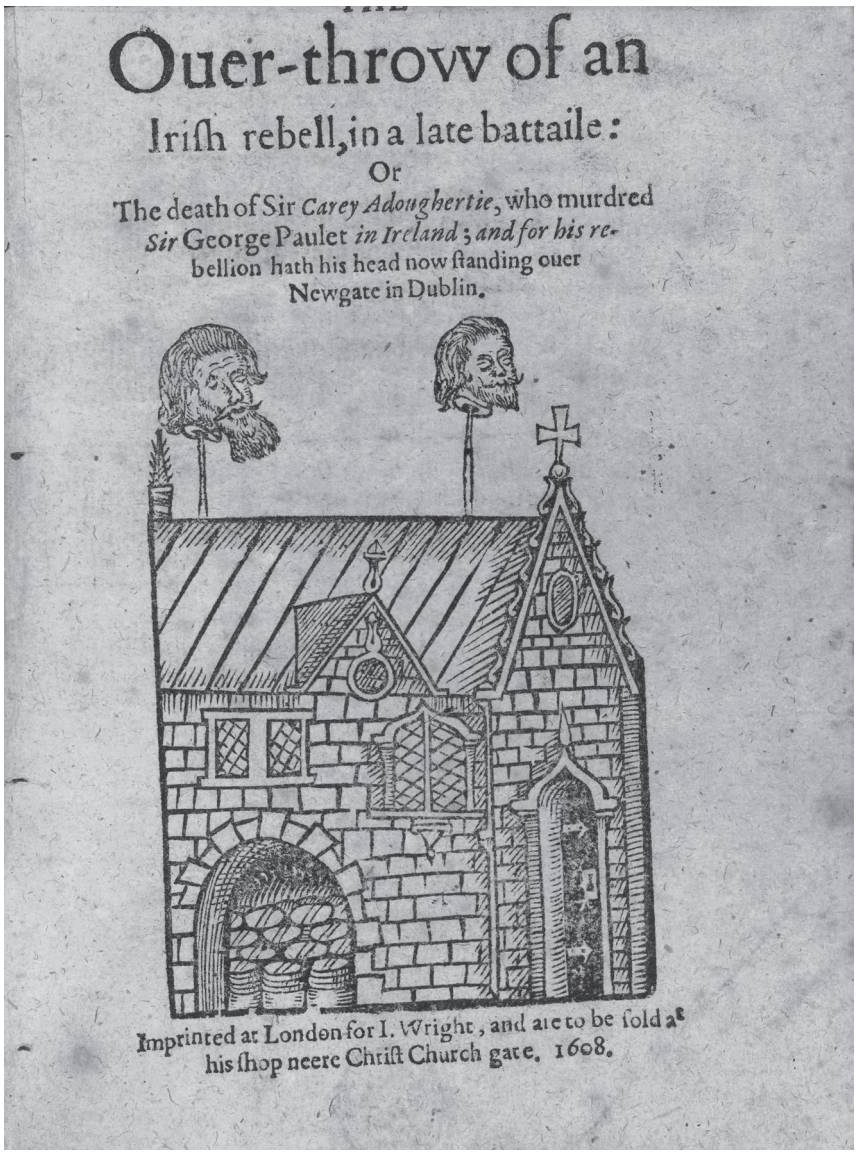

FIGURE 3. Woodcut, title-page from *The Ouer-throw of an Irish rebell*, 1608. By permission of The British Library, shelfmark 601.d.34.

Trinity Colledge by Dublin" and Tady Mac Mareall, "a popish priest of Waterforde" — provides a satirical account of the execution of Cornelius O'Deveny, Bishop of Down and Connor, in Dublin in 1611:

> The executioner had no sooner taken of the Bishops heade, but that the townes men of *Dublyne*, began to flocke about him: some taking vp the head with pitious aspect. . . . Some kissed it with as religious an appetite as euer they kissed the *Paxe*. Some others were practising to steale the heade away, the which beeing espyed by the executioner, hee gaue notice of the matter to the Sheryues of *Dublyne*. Now when he began to quarter the body, the women thronged about him as fast, and happy was shee that coulde gett but her handkercheife dipped in the bloud of the traytor: And the body being once disseuered into foure quarters, they neither left finger nor toe, but they cut them off, and carried them away: And to shew their Catholike zeale, they tare his garments into tatters, and some others that could get no holy monumentes that appertayned to his person, with their kniues they shaued of chippes from the hallowed gallowes . . . both men and women, with holy water, holy candle: and congregating themselues at the holy gallowes, in the place of execution, they spent the fore part of the night in heathenish howling, and performing many popish ceremonies.[87]

Patricke Plaine's irony serves only to throw into relief the dissidence it seeks to ridicule. Any voiced dissent, however, receives short shrift. "You are too full of scoffes," remonstrates Tady, but he exists only as a straw man to be silenced by Patrick's anti-Jesuitical taunts.[88] The bishop, too, had sought a hearing at the moment of his execution: "Sine me quæso" ("If I might"), he began.[89] But the axe falls, permanently suspending his entreaty.

Yet, the silence of the beheaded hangs in the air; openmouthed, the head seems angled for speech. Pollente's head,

> tumbling on the strand
> It bit the earth for very fell despight,
> And gnashed with his teeth, as if he band
> High God, whose goodnesse he despaired quight,
> Or curst the hand, which did that vengeance on him dight (5.2.18.5–9).

David Quint calls our attention to "the losers' prophetic curse," where the vanquished, often on the point of death, offer a "rival narrative of resistance": the curse of Polyphemus in *The Odyssey*, or that of Adamastor, the monster-prophet in Camões's *Lusiads*.[90] Pollente's moment is fleeting; the narrator reads meaning into his post-mortem spasm, which he affects to second-guess: "as if he band . . . Or curst."

[87]Riche, 5v–6r. For the custom of kissing the death's-head, see Stahl, 21; for dissent at English executions, see Dwyer Amussen; Laqueur.

[88]Riche, 12v.

[89]Ibid., 4v.

[90]Quint, 11, 107, 117.

With its instinctive anglophone reflex, Anglo-American criticism is as trapped in its own way as Derricke was in his imagining that "plaine Irishe" comes out as English. So it stops there on the strand with Pollente: second-guessing Spenser in turn, ventriloquizing the ventriloquized.[91] But our access to the voices of the vanquished is not restricted to the howls, curses, and retractions projected onto them in English texts; we are not reduced to parsing Barnabe Riche's "scoffes" in seeking to reconstruct the native response to spectacles of dismemberment. There is a way beyond Derricke's projections of inarticulacy onto Irish grief:

> Bohbowe now crie the knaues,
> and lullalowe the karne . . .
> And other beying hedlesse made,
> like witlesse Geese remaine.[92]

Just occasionally we catch a glimpse of a Gaelic response incommensurate with English imaginings of it. We have met Fiach Mac Hugh O'Byrne in the midst of severed heads before in this story. In English verse, he has his apotheosis as Malengin.[93] Spenser is returning in allegory to Glenmalure — the valley of "balefull Oure, late staind with English blood" (4.11.44.5) — where O'Byrne had routed Sir Arthur Grey in August 1580, and where Spenser had probably first seen service in Ireland. Now, in a fantasy reversal of that defeat, Malengin the smoothtongued shapechanger is tracked to his "hollow caue" (4.11.10.1) and pounded into oblivion by Talus, who

> with his yron flayle
> Gan driue at him, with so huge might and maine,
> That all his bones, as small as sandy grayle
> He broke, and did his bowels disentrayle (4.11.19.2–5).

In reality, Fiach's long fugitive run came to an end on a dark night in May 1597. The aging chieftain was cornered in a cave by a Sergeant Milburne: "Feagh cried out to save his life, for he was a verie good pledge: the sergent answered that his head was the best pledge that he did look for, and so killed him and cutt of his head."[94] Milburne presented the head to Lord Deputy Russell, "which with his carcass was brought to Dublin, to the great comfort and joy of all that province."[95] His body was dismembered:

[91]See Palmer, 2006.
[92]Derricke, 67.
[93]Spenser, 1932–49, 9:392–93.
[94]"William Farmer's Chronicles," 106.
[95]*CCM MSS 1589–1600*, 259.

his quarters were displayed in Dublin, his head dispatched to London. The ever-implacable Robert Cecil was "not well contented that the head of such a base Robin Hood is brought so solemnly into England."[96]

But while Malengin was left "Crying in vaine for helpe . . . / a carrion outcast; / For beasts and foules to feede vpon for their repast," Fiach, on the far side of the linguistic and cultural divide, did not cry alone (4.11.19.6, 8–9). The poem-book of the O'Byrnes preserves five elegies for Fiach Mac Hugh. Three are conventional *marbhnaí* (elegies), lamenting Fiach's absence.[97] Two, however, are the stunned responses of poets who saw Fiach's quartered body.[98] The first of these is Domhnall Mac Eochadha's "Alas that I saw Fiach's head."[99] Mac Eochadha writes as a traumatized witness. He has seen Fiach's quartered, headless body, and his response has the quality of dry-mouthed shock. Each quatrain opens, like a fresh ejaculation of pain, with "Alas" ("Mairg"). The poet revisits this horror again and again: "Alas alas that I saw his body / Headless as I saw it" (2.1–2).[100] Mutilation is written all over this elegy. Mac Eochadha can never reconfigure Fiach back into wholeness. He remains dismembered, a figure of synecdoche and metonymy: "My shield in his dark hour / In Dublin of the quartered [bodies]" (3.3–4). He is a torch, a tower, a rampart. Afterimages of the dismembered limbs which the poet has seen alternate with the brooding absence of the (further dissected) "slow-gazing, bright-toothed head" (9.4). Fiach's absence moves the focus elsewhere, onto the poet himself. Mac Eochadha registers the pain of his reluctant witness somatically, in a displaced, self-mutilating blazon:

> Alas the swift foot
> that carried me to where I saw. . . .
> Alas the eyelash that opened
> To show me the well-bred head. . . .
> Alas the ear that heard
> The story of his death. . . . (3.1–2, 4.1–2, 5.1–2)

[96]*CSPI 1596–1597*, 300. In fact, Cecil refused to pay a penny in "head-money" to John Lane, the bearer of the head. So Lane "gave the head to his boy to bury in Enfield Chase, who instead put it on a tree, where it was found . . . by two boys, who went to fetch their cattle" (*Cal. Salisbury MSS*, VII, 395).

[97]Mac Airt, 155–65 (poems 44–46).

[98]Elegies addressed to mutilated patrons come to constitute almost a subgenre of their own during the last years of the bardic order; see Ó hUiginn.

[99]Mac Airt, 151–53: "Mairg do-chonnairc ceann Fiachaidh"; subsequent parenthetical references in the body text are to quatrain and line numbers. See Appendix for full text and my translation.

[100]See Appendix for original.

Aonghus Ó Dálaigh's response to the same sight in "His body I see without a head," is subtly different.[101] Ó Dálaigh, too, may regret "that my eyes weren't blind" (13.4), but, unlike the faltering Mac Eochadha, he holds his gaze. He may address the body in the present tense — "His body I see without a head" (1.1) — but, in contrast with Mac Eochadha's entrapment in trauma, Ó Dálaigh establishes a distance: "You the body we saw" (2.1). The "you," unarticulated to "the body" by any copula, stands apart. What Ó Dálaigh holds in gaze is Fiach's body ("colann"), his "broken body-parts" ("boill brisde"), his corpse ("marbh"); Fiach himself is elsewhere, his absence measured in the loss felt by his followers and in the impoverishment of their lives. What we see are the spikes and the knives, the instrumentation of dismemberment and display. What can never be seen again — though memorized in a paradoxically restorative blazon — is "the lithe step," "the bright hand," and the peerless head (14.3–4).

Mitchell Merback speaks of the "intersubjective experience" of medieval — that is, pre-Reformation — executions, when a "liturgy of execution" focusing on redemption fostered a "paradigm of compassionate spectatorship," an identification which was often intensified when the victim was a "rebel."[102] Ó Dálaigh's poem has all the hallmarks of this dispensation. A momentary intimation of presence flickered over the last line of Mac Eochadha's poem — "we glimpsed the shadow of his head" (14.4) — but Ó Dálaigh works toward a more sustained transformation. He writes as part of a "mórshluaigh," "a great crowd" (2.2), and he is self-consciously part of — and giving expression to — a collective. He speaks for those left without a protector: the poor, the clergy, the scholars, the widows, the poets. Viewed from the perspective of the crowd, this is not a judicial process but a "crucifixion" ("césadh," 9.1). The sacrificial victim, "tortured with a foreigner's knife" (9.3), is indeed "transformed in complexion and shape" (10.4), but not just in the way his tormentors intended. In the eyes of the crowd, and through the agency of the poem, Fiach has become a "mionn": a jewel, a venerated object (2.2).

In 1586 one of the McDonalds of Antrim and the Isles, Alasdair Mac Somhairle Mac Domhnall, was ambushed:

> [W]hen [his men] were overthrowen Captayne Meryman made searche for Allexander emongst the hurt men, knowinge he was not able to goe farre. At the length an olde woman (whoe satte very mornefull), being examined what became of hym, and threatned by the soldiers, for feare of death, she poynted to the place where he lay hidden. And there he was found by the turninge up

[101]Mac Airt, 153–55: "A cholann do-chím gan cheann"; see Appendix.
[102]Merback, 20, 153, 272.

> of some turffes, in a kinde of vaute covered with hurdles and closed with theise turffes. They stracke of his head and sent it unto the Lord Deputie, who caused it to be sette upon a poale in the castell of Dubline.

Shortly afterwards, Alasdair's father, Somhairle Buidhe, "submitted hymselfe unto the Quennes mercie; and, cominge to Dubline, when one tolde hym there was his sonnes heade: 'It is noe matter,' quoth he, 'my sonne hath many heades.'"[103] For the pre-Christian Celts, the severed head gave access to the sacred.[104] A head severed in wrath might afterwards be washed, combed, and reverenced.[105] Grief followed after slaughter and the severed head offered a way of meditating on loss and the pathos of brief lives.[106] The severed head of the beautiful boy, Donn-bó, singing in darkness out of the rushes after the ferocity of battle, can make the victors weep at the pity and sorrow of slaughter.[107] So, when the bard of the MacDonalds, Brian Ó Gnímh, set about elegizing Alasdair, he could draw on a complex tradition of writing that gave expression to both the haunting liminality of the severed head and its inalienable humanity.[108]

"Mionn súl Eirinn anath cliath," "Jewel of Ireland's Eye in Dublin," delivers its punch by holding life and death in an unstable equilibrium.[109] Heads that hold the vestiges of their just-departed life frozen on their features are not uncommon in early Irish literature. When Emer beholds the severed head of Cúchulainn's killer, Erc Mac Cairbre "of the crooked curls," she exclaims that its clear bright cheek is redder than the rose.[110] In Ó Gnímh's more subtle meditation, however, Alasdair's head is, at once, "the head still as it was hale" and a weather-ravaged visage pecked by ravens. The face of the living Alasdair, red-lipped and smooth-complexioned, is defiantly superimposed on the poem's terrible apotheosis, the death's-head:

> Jewel of Ireland's eye in Dublin
> I love the still-unbleached red mouth
> head of silk complexion I see above everyone
> his familiar self with the smooth delicate cheek

[103]Perrott, 47.
[104]Ross, 154.
[105]Marstrander, 244.
[106]Redshaw, 177.
[107]Stokes, 63.
[108]On Ó Gnímh, see Cunningham and Gillespie.
[109]Cameron, 2:301–03: translations from this imperfectly-preserved text are mine.
[110]Ibid., 1:67.

He was the most high of heroes
a prince descended from Cairbre of the slender curls
a warning dart for the rights of Ireland
overhead all is rightly his head
To go unrecognized was not his manner
his customary dash is today his fame
with his fine soft abundant curling tresses
with his gaze-holding green eyes, princely warrior rose. . . .
Head with eyelashes densely woven
against sharp showers and wind
The cause of my mind's turmoil overhead us all
the lovely jewel, the tender earl
A mantle of snow for his perfect tresses
your appearance experienced like blight
singular head of proud-gazing deed
fierce weather, ice cold squalls
Head on high, its face tanned
its elevation no surprise to us
sufficient to rebuild his quiet stronghold
your father didn't breed a bowed head
Around the bright head the keen raven
shaking it north and south
often I notice all across his face
a lump of his cheek's clean flesh taken (1–3, 5–8).[111]

The raven swooping on carrion flesh is both a real bird and Badb *belsalach*, the filthy-mouthed raven goddess of war.[112] Ó Gnímh flips back and forth between the death's head and the recollected appearance of the living Alasdair. In forcing us to watch forms intersect and change shape, he brings us far from the polarities with which we started. He paradoxically rewrites the meaning of the staked head. He restores the pained sentiments of the mourners, giving us the words behind the "crying out and shrieking" and

[111]Ibid., 2:302: "Mionn súl Eirinn anath cliath / mo ghrádh don bhel derg nar bháoth / cenngo siodhshnúadh céim ós chách / a ghnath fein ga mhíongruadh maoith. // Da bhí dáirde anua na conn / rí díbh Cairbre na ccuach seang / ga roibhe cert chlár na bhfionn / tós cionn cháigh gur clecht a chenn. // A bheith gan fhios nior bhaill leis / a ghnáth gusa aniugh a nois / ga chéibh mionmhaoth clannuir chais / ga mhall suil ghlais ríoghlaoc rois. // an mían búdh ghnáth don ghel don / aníugh anáth clíath ga chenn / do be mían amhalach séang / gan chenn dfhalach don fhial fionn . . . // Fulang snechta ga fholt fíar / do chlechtadh do chruth mar smúal / aon chenn do boirrdherca ghníomh / síon fhraoich tenn oighrenta fúar. // Cenn anairde ar fhioghruibh croinn / a airde ni hionghadh linn / diol athógtha a ccaithir chuinn / nior thuill taithir cromtha cinn. // Um cenn ngel í fhiachadh úir / ga mbianghadh teas 7 túagh / minic braneoin ar fhud náigh / go ttug dháibh glainfheoil a ghruaidh."

[112]Stokes, 52.

the "heathenish howling" that was all Irenius and Patrick Plaine could hear. And he rehumanizes the head itself. The head-as-object, set up as a "mirror," a "spectacle," and a "pageant" to draw the appalled and chastened gaze of the vanquished, looks back out at us in this poem, through Alasdair's "gaze-holding green eyes." Seen, here too, as a *mionn súl*, a precious object in the eyes of the beholders, Ó Gnímh reconfigures the head as a sign of elevation, not of humiliation: "overhead all is rightly his head." Then, at the close, he brings us to the brink of an even more profound transformation. Life stirs in Alasdair's head: "A promise of rose reddening his cheeks / the head still as it was hale" (12.1–2). Then it seems to change shape one last time:

> There is before me on top of a foreigner's wall
> my head of beautiful gold-ringleted hair
> hostage, in my judgement, of the guilty
> the head of the son of Mary our jewel.[113]

In the manuscript, the scribe records that "the distressing logic of this poem caused the Foreigners to take down Alasdair's head."[114] The piquant notion of the English colonial elite reading — and then acting on — a bardic poem brings us to one last point of intersection. In an odd reechoing of Webster's "black book" with which we started, Ó Gnímh's elegy for a beheading, too, comes from a black book, the so-called Black Book of Clanranald. Ó Gnímh's complex meditation on an English beheading does not simply close the circle on Webster's apothegm about Irish beheadings. It reactivates Webster's comparatives — "As th'Irish," "Like the wild Irish" — and reminds us that the polarities which he so confidently asserts are built not on absolute difference but on a figure of similitude.

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[113]Cameron, 2:303: "A ta uaim anáol múr ghall / mo chen da chaomhchul chúachbhfionn / bráighe rem breithsi na ccionn / cenn an mhicsi Maire ar mionn."

[114]Ibid. (my translation).

Appendix

All translations are my own.
Domhnall Mac Eochadha, "Alas that I saw Fiach's head."
("Mairg do-chonnairc ceann Fiachaidh": Mac Airt, 151–53)

Alas that I saw Fiach's head
the golden, shield-bearing noble destroyed
his headless body
set off Ireland's misery.

Alas alas that I saw his body
headless as I saw it.
Better my eye had first been blinded
my grief has no cessation.

Alas the swift foot
that carried me to where I saw
my shield in his dark hour
in Dublin of the quartered [bodies].

Alas the eyelash that opened
to show me the well-bred head
the athlete wrung lifeless
that fresh, renowned body.

Alas the ear that heard
the story of his death when it was delivered
my heart lurched in my chest
and in my flesh sense withered.

Alas the treachery, whoever is guilty.
Mac Hugh, the betrayed prince.
The wrath of God on whoever traduced
the man who was king of Ragnall.

Alas his people and the churchyards pillaged
because the head of the son of Mac Duirinne
must travel to England's royal and pleasant court
hard that journey.

Alas that there isn't
fair wind and a space of respite
to carry to England
the head of that peerless warrior.

Alas that it happened as it happened
for the order of the poets of fair Banbha
under pressure of happenings and the absence
of the slow-gazing, bright-toothed head.

Mairg do-chonnairc ceann Fiachaidh
Do dhíoth an fhéil óirsciathaigh;
Beith d'easbuidh a chuirp dá cheann
Do dheasguibh uilc na hÉireann.

Mairg mairg do-chonnairc a chorp
Ar dhíoth chinn mar do-chonnarc!
Dob fhearr dall an rosc roimhe,
Cosc ní ham dom eólchoire.

Mairg riamh ar a raibhe an chos
Rug mé san áit ar fhéachos
Mo sciath a ttráth a thurbhuidh
A nÁth Cliath 'na cheathrumhnaibh.

Mairg do osguil an abhra
Tug orm an ceann cathardha,
An lúdh gan anam d'fhaiscin,
Nó an chalann úr ordhairc-sin.

Mairg 'gá raibh an chluas ré a gclas
Scél a bháis an t-am fhuaras;
Do bheadhg am chliabh mo chroidhe,
's do shearg ciall ar gcollai-ne.

Mairg do bhraith, gi-bé as cionntach,
Mac Aodha, an triath toirbhiortach;
Fearg Dé ar an tí lé a ttorchuir
An té budh rí ar Raghnallchaibh.

Mairg tuaith is creachadh cille
Toisg cinn mheic meic Duirinne
Go cúirt roighil suairc Sasan;
Doiligh a chuairt chuca-san.

Mairg nách faghann mar a bhfuil,
Cóir gaoithe agus uain arthruigh
Do-bhéaradh sinn go Sagsuibh
D'fhéghadh chinn an churadh-sain.

Mairg tarla mur do tharla
Ord fileadh fóid fionnBhanbha
Fá theann eachtrann 'na easbhuidh
An ceann dearcmhall déidgheal-soin.

Alas for his waiting people
a torch to his followers in time of need
a tower of strength
to the bloodline of his clan.

Mairg dá fhine do fhuirigh
Beó dá éis dá fhiafraighidh,
Cia bhus díon dún 'na dheaghuidh
Do shíol a ghlún ngeinealaigh.

Alas the havoc of the time
it's not just the anguish of that heart
but the anguish of all
all my dearest and most beloved.

Mairg oile dá n-uair misi,
Ní hé as crádh don chroidhi-si,
Crádh damh-sa mar gach nduine
's dá lán m'annsa is m'ionmhuine.

Alas so many burnings, such loss
the head of Fiach who never refused peace
the sheltering rampart of the learned
going unavenged among the Saxon horde.

Mairg as mó dhúinne ná díoth
Ceann Fiachaidh nár ob eissíoth,
Cliath fhasgaidh na ndruadh ag dul
A n-asgoidh lé sluagh Sacsan.

Alas to you who don't challenge
the ill-will of the foreigners and the Lord Justice
his body would not be there long
if God allowed his soul to return.

Mairg dhíbh nách n-aghann ar-ís
Do neamhthoil Ghall 's an ghiúisdís,
Ní sia a chalann, dámadh cead
Ó Dhia a anam ar aiseag.

Trading a foundling for Fiach
released the hostage from the foreign lords,
a stray hostage of the foreigners;
we glimpsed a shadow of his head.

A ndíol a bhfríoth lé Fiachaidh
D'fhuasgladh giall ó Gailltriathoibh
Fríoth bráighe ghill lé Galluibh;
scáile a chinn do-chonncamair.

Aonghus Ó Dálaigh, "His body I see without a head"
("A cholann do-chím gan cheann": Mac Airt, 153–55)

His body I see without a head
you who wrought it withered my strength
body parts on spikes in Dublin
for the poets of Banbha it is their destruction.

A cholann do-chím gan cheann
Sibh d'fhaiscin do shearg mo bhríogh
Rannta ar sparraibh a nÁth Cliath;
d'éigsi Banbha bhias a dhíoth.

You [are] the body we saw
overhead the great crowd, a venerated object in the eyes of all.
Whatever your new plight today
your head was the first to suffer.

Tú an cholann do-chonnairc sionn
Ós cionn mórshluagh ad mhionn shúl;
Gé taoi a n-ainriocht nuaidhe a-niogh,
Dob áirmhioch do chion ar tús.

His illustrious body so widely famed
since I saw you quartered
I haven't the same heart in my breast
and my body lacks sensation.

A chuirp oirdheirc dob fhearr clú,
Ód-chonnarc thú ad cheithre chuid,
Ní bhia an croidhe cédna am cliabh
's ní bu cuimhnioch ciall mo chuirp.

You blind the sight of my eye.
You've taken the power of motion from my foot.
The body of my champion subdued —
I've never heard of a feat like yours.

Tú do dhall radhorc mo rosc,
Rug luadhaill mo chos ar gcúl;
A cholann do chlaoi mo thrén,
Ní chuala riamh éacht mar thú.

Who will remedy the wants of the poor?
Who will bestow a living on the clergy?
Since you, o body, are headless
there's no life for those left behind.

Cia fhóirfios easbhuidh na mbocht,
Nó cia bhronnfas crodh ar chléir?
A cholann ó taoir gan cheann,
Ní marthain dob fhearr tar h'éis.

From whom will the scholars ask prizes?
From whom will they receive visitations ever?
Since you, o body, are lifeless
who will pay for music or wine?

Four body parts broken in the fray
before me in Dublin I saw
staked out on four spikes
blinded my heart with sadness.

Those body parts left headless
leave the land of Leinster and its cool heathlands
without a term to weeping, without the music of the harp,
without athletic contests, without martial shows.

Alas that I saw the crucifixion of limbs
that bestowed weapons and steeds
tortured with a foreigner's knife
alas that the end of his era has come.

A story of how we are twisted with grief
the lithe limbs of the hero from the Glen
distributed on harsh, hard-pronged spikes
transformed in complexion and shape.

Unleashed on us from one place to the next
neighboring warriors in prospect
unleashed on widows, unleashed on schools
that turn brings me great sorrow.

Alas his head gathered as booty
taken to an enemy country by force
what in honor you were due did not happen
to have your body buried in a grave.

Before I saw your corpse myself
son of Hugh of the bare arm
it's a pity my heart didn't stop in my chest
that my eyes weren't blinded.

Alas that I'll never again see
the lithe step nor the bright hand
and that never again will I see the head
finest of aspect, form and expression.

Cia ar a n-iarrfuid draoithe duas?
Cia ó a bhfuighid cuairt do shíor?
Ó taoi, a cholann, gan beith beó,
Cia chinneóchus ceól ná fíon?

Ceathra boill brisde na ruag
Do-chonnarc uaim a nÁth Cliath,
Dá gcomhroinn ar cheithre spairr
Tug mo chroidhe fá dhall chiach.

Na boill-sin do bheith gan cheann
Tug críoch Laighion na learg n-úr
Gan riar deórach, gan cheól crot,
Gan luadh comhlann, gan chor clú.

Mairg do-chí césadh na mball
Lér ghnáth bronnadh arm is each,
Dá bpianadh ag gaillsin ghéir;
Mairg tárruidh a ré do theacht.

Scél fá mbíd curaidh ag caoi,
Boill lúthmhara an laoich ón Ghleann
Roinnte ar sparra chruaidhbheann chlach
D'éis claochluighthe a ndath 's a ndealbh.

Scaoiltioch ortha ó thír go tír,
Laoich coigcríoch do-chínn ad dhún;
Scaoiltioch bantrocht, scaoiltioch scol,
Is diombáidh liom a gcor súd.

Uch a chinn chnuaisge na gcreach
Ó thír námhad lé neart sluaigh,
Nách tarla a fhiú d'onóir ort
Do cholann do chor a n-uaigh!

Sul do-chonnorc féin do mharbh,
A mhic Aodha na n-arm nocht,
Truagh mar tharla croidhe am chlí,
Nó nách dall do bhí mo rosc!

Far-íor ní fhaicfiom go bráth
An troigh lúthmhar ná an lámh gheal,
Is ní fhaicfeam choidhche an ceann
Dob fhearr cuma, dealbh is dreacht.

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