

## A MODEST PROPOSAL

For preventing the children of poor people in Ireland, from being a burden on their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the public.

by

Dr. Jonathan Swift

1729

It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great town<sup>1</sup>, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads and cabin doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, and importuning<sup>2</sup> every passenger for an alms. These mothers instead of being able to work for their honest  
5 livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance<sup>3</sup> for their helpless infants who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want of work, or leave their dear native country, to fight for the Pretender in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes<sup>4</sup>.

I think it is agreed by all parties, that this prodigious<sup>5</sup> number of children in the  
10 arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present deplorable state of the kingdom, a very great additional grievance; and

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<sup>1</sup> **this great town:** Dublin, the capital of Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> **importuning:** persistently annoying or intrusive.

<sup>3</sup> **sustenance:** nourishment.

<sup>4</sup> **sell themselves to the Barbadoes:** Barbados is an island in the West Indies; the poor often sought better fortunes by going to the New World, often as indentured servants because they had no money for their passage.

<sup>5</sup> **prodigious:** extremely large in number.

therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the commonwealth, would deserve so well of the public, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.

15 But my intention is very far from being confined to provide only for the children of professed<sup>6</sup> beggars: it is of a much greater extent, and shall take in the whole number of infants at a certain age, who are born of parents in effect as little able to support them, as those who demand our charity in the streets.

As to my own part, having turned my thoughts for many years, upon this  
20 important subject, and maturely weighed the several schemes of our projectors, I have always found them grossly mistaken in their computation. It is true, a child just dropped from its dam<sup>7</sup>, may be supported by her milk, for a solar year, with little other nourishment: at most not above the value of two shillings<sup>8</sup>, which the mother may certainly get, or the value in scraps, by her lawful occupation of begging; and it is exactly  
25 at one year old that I propose to provide for them in such a manner, as, instead of being a charge upon their parents, or the parish, or wanting food and raiment for the rest of their lives, they shall, on the contrary, contribute to the feeding, and partly to the clothing of many thousands. There is likewise another great advantage in my scheme, that it will prevent those voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice of women murdering their  
30 bastard children, alas! too frequent among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babes, I

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<sup>6</sup> **professed:** openly declared.

<sup>7</sup> **dropped from its dam:** dam is generally used in animal science as the term for the female parent of infant livestock rather than a human mother.

<sup>8</sup> **two shillings:** An English unit of currency of the day equal to 12 pence; twenty shillings constituted a Pound.

doubt, more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast.

The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about two hundred thousand couple whose wives  
35 are breeders; from which number I subtract thirty thousand couple, who are able to maintain their own children, (although I apprehend<sup>9</sup> there cannot be so many, under the present distresses of the kingdom) but this being granted, there will remain an hundred and seventy thousand breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand, for those women who miscarry, or whose children die by accident or disease within the year. There only remain  
40 an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born. The question therefore is, How this number shall be reared, and provided for? which, as I have already said, under the present situation of affairs<sup>10</sup>, is utterly impossible by all the methods hitherto proposed. For we can neither employ them in handicraft<sup>11</sup> or agriculture; we neither build houses, (I mean in the country) nor cultivate land: they can very seldom  
45 pick up a livelihood by stealing till they arrive at six years old; except where they are of towardly parts<sup>12</sup>, although I confess they learn the rudiments<sup>13</sup> much earlier; during which time they can however be properly looked upon only as probationers<sup>14</sup>: As I have been

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<sup>9</sup> **apprehend:** uneasily anticipate.

<sup>10</sup> **present situation of affairs:** conditions.

<sup>11</sup> **employ them in handicraft:** manufacturing of handmade household goods produced by weaving, sewing, or building furniture.

<sup>12</sup> **they are of towardly parts:** showing exceptional promise; exceptionally talented.

<sup>13</sup> **rudiments:** fundamentals.

<sup>14</sup> **probationers:** novices.

informed by a principal gentleman in the county of Cavan<sup>15</sup>, who protested to me, that he never knew above one or two instances under the age of six, even in a part of the  
50 kingdom so renowned for the quickest proficiency in that art.

I am assured by our merchants, that a boy or a girl before twelve years old, is no saleable commodity, and even when they come to this age, they will not yield above three pounds, or three pounds and half a crown at most, on the exchange; which cannot turn to account<sup>16</sup> either to the parents or kingdom, the charge of nutriments and rags having been  
55 at least four times that value.

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection.

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and  
60 wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie<sup>17</sup>, or a ragoust<sup>18</sup>.

I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration, that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males; which is more than we allow to sheep, black  
65 cattle, or swine, and my reason is, that these children are seldom the fruits of marriage, a circumstance not much regarded by our savages, therefore, one male will be sufficient to

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<sup>15</sup> **Cavan:** an Irish county that was once part of Ulster.

<sup>16</sup> **turn to account:** turn to one's advantage; that is, to turn a profit.

<sup>17</sup> **fricasie:** a fricassee; fried or stewed meat served in a thick white sauce.

<sup>18</sup> **ragoust:** a ragout (ragu); a highly seasoned dish of pieces of meat stewed with vegetables.

serve four females. That the remaining hundred thousand may, at a year old, be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune, through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump, and fat  
70 for a good table. A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends, and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt, will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter.

I have reckoned upon a medium, that a child just born will weigh 12 pounds, and  
75 in a solar year, if tolerably nursed, increases to 28 pounds.

I grant this food will be somewhat dear<sup>19</sup>, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.

Infant's flesh will be in season throughout the year, but more plentiful in March,  
80 and a little before and after; for we are told by a grave author, an eminent French physician, that fish being a prolific diet<sup>20</sup>, there are more children born in Roman Catholic countries about nine months after Lent, the markets will be more glutted than usual, because the number of Popish infants, is at least three to one in this kingdom, and therefore it will have one other collateral advantage, by lessening the number of Papists  
85 among us.

I have already computed the charge of nursing a beggar's child (in which list I reckon all cottagers, laborers, and four-fifths of the farmers) to be about two shillings per

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<sup>19</sup> **dear:** expensive.

<sup>20</sup> **prolific diet:** prolific diet; commonly eaten.

annum, rags included; and I believe no gentleman would repine<sup>21</sup> to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child, which, as I have said, will make four dishes of excellent  
90 nutritive meat, when he hath only some particular friend, or his own family to dine with him. Thus the squire will learn to be a good landlord, and grow popular among his tenants, the mother will have eight shillings neat profit, and be fit for work till she produces another child.

Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess the times require) may flea<sup>22</sup> the  
95 carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen.

As to our City of Dublin, shambles<sup>23</sup> may be appointed for this purpose, in the most convenient parts of it, and butchers we may be assured will not be wanting; although I rather recommend buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the  
100 knife, as we do roasting pigs.

A very worthy person, a true lover of his country, and whose virtues I highly esteem, was lately pleased, in discoursing on this matter, to offer a refinement upon my scheme. He said, that many gentlemen of this kingdom, having of late destroyed their deer, he conceived that the want of venison might be well supplied by the bodies of  
105 young lads and maidens, not exceeding fourteen years of age, nor under twelve; so great a number of both sexes in every country being now ready to starve for want of work and service: And these to be disposed of by their parents if alive, or otherwise by their nearest

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<sup>21</sup> **repine:** fret.

<sup>22</sup> **flea:** flay; skin.

<sup>23</sup> **shambles:** slaughterhouse.

relations. But with due deference to so excellent a friend, and so deserving a patriot, I cannot be altogether in his sentiments; for as to the males, my American acquaintance  
110 assured me from frequent experience, that their flesh was generally tough and lean, like that of our school-boys, by continual exercise, and their taste disagreeable, and to fatten them would not answer the charge. Then as to the females, it would, I think, with humble submission, be a loss to the public, because they soon would become breeders themselves: And besides, it is not improbable that some scrupulous people might be apt  
115 to censure such a practice, (although indeed very unjustly) as a little bordering upon cruelty, which, I confess, hath always been with me the strongest objection against any project, how well soever <sup>24</sup>intended.

But in order to justify my friend, he confessed, that this expedient was put into his head by the famous Salmanaazor<sup>25</sup>, a native of the island Formosa, who came from  
120 thence to London, above twenty years ago, and in conversation told my friend, that in his country, when any young person happened to be put to death, the executioner sold the carcass to persons of quality, as a prime dainty; and that, in his time, the body of a plump girl of fifteen, who was crucified for an attempt to poison the Emperor, was sold to his imperial majesty's prime minister of state, and other great mandarins of the court in joints  
125 from the gibbet, at four hundred crowns<sup>26</sup>. Neither indeed can I deny, that if the same use

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<sup>24</sup> **how well soever:** to any extent.

<sup>25</sup> **Salmanaazor:** George Psalmanazar (1679? – May 3, 1763): An acquaintance of Samuel Johnson and other literary figures of 18<sup>th</sup> century London, Psalmanazar convinced many in England that he was the first Formosan to visit Europe; around 1702, he was proven a fraud.

<sup>26</sup> **crowns:** a coin valued at 5 shillings or ¼ of a British pound.

were made of several plump young girls in this town, who without one single groat<sup>27</sup> to their fortunes, cannot stir abroad without a chair<sup>28</sup>, and appear at a playhouse and assemblies in foreign fineries which they never will pay for; the kingdom would not be the worse.

130           Some persons of a desponding spirit are in great concern about that vast number of poor people, who are aged, diseased, or maimed; and I have been desired to employ my thoughts what course may be taken, to ease the nation of so grievous an encumbrance<sup>29</sup>. But I am not in the least pain upon that matter, because it is very well known, that they are every day dying, and rotting, by cold and famine, and filth, and  
135 vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected. And as to the young laborers, they are now in almost as hopeful a condition. They cannot get work, and consequently pine away from want of nourishment, to a degree, that if at any time they are accidentally hired to common labor, they have not strength to perform it, and thus the country and themselves are happily delivered from the evils to come.

140           I have too long digressed, and therefore shall return to my subject. I think the advantages by the proposal which I have made are obvious and many, as well as of the highest importance.

                  For first, as I have already observed, it would greatly lessen the number of Papists, with whom we are yearly over-run, being the principal breeders of the nation, as  
145 well as our most dangerous enemies, and who stay at home on purpose with a design to

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<sup>27</sup> **groat:** a silver coin worth four pence.

<sup>28</sup> **chair:** a sedan chair: an enclosed chair carried by servants used to transport wealthy persons through cities.

<sup>29</sup> **encumbrance:** burden or impediment.



deliver the kingdom to the Pretender<sup>30</sup>, hoping to take their advantage by the absence of so many good Protestants, who have chosen rather to leave their country, than stay at home and pay tithes against their conscience to an episcopal curate<sup>31</sup>.

150 Secondly, The poorer tenants will have something valuable of their own, which by law may be made liable to a distress, and help to pay their landlord's rent, their corn and cattle being already seized, and money a thing unknown.

155 Thirdly, Whereas the maintenance of an hundred thousand children, from two years old, and upwards, cannot be computed at less than ten shillings a piece per annum, the nation's stock will be thereby increased fifty thousand pounds per annum, besides the profit of a new dish, introduced to the tables of all gentlemen of fortune in the kingdom, who have any refinement in taste. And the money will circulate among our selves, the goods being entirely of our own growth and manufacture.

160 Fourthly, The constant breeders, besides the gain of eight shillings sterling per annum by the sale of their children, will be rid of the charge of maintaining them after the first year.

Fifthly, This food would likewise bring great custom to taverns, where the vintners<sup>32</sup> will certainly be so prudent as to procure the best receipts<sup>33</sup> for dressing it to

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<sup>30</sup> **the Pretender:** James Francis Edward Stuart, “the Old Pretender,” claimed to be the rightful King of England because he was the eldest son of James II, the last Catholic King of England who was deposed in the “Glorious Revolution of 1688” that established William and Mary as protestant monarchs.

<sup>31</sup> **curate:** a priest of the Church of England or Church of Ireland who was supported by local tax revenues; reformation protestants, like the Puritans, generally opposed the practice of a state supported church.

<sup>32</sup> **vintner:** wine seller or tavern owner.

<sup>33</sup> **receipts:** recipes.

perfection; and consequently have their houses frequented by all the fine gentlemen, who  
justly value themselves upon their knowledge in good eating; and a skilful cook, who  
165 understands how to oblige his guests, will contrive to make it as expensive as they please.

Sixthly, This would be a great inducement to marriage, which all wise nations  
have either encouraged by rewards, or enforced by laws and penalties. It would increase  
the care and tenderness of mothers towards their children, when they were sure of a  
settlement for life to the poor babes, provided in some sort by the public, to their annual  
170 profit instead of expense. We should soon see an honest emulation<sup>34</sup> among the married  
women, which of them could bring the fattest child to the market. Men would become as  
fond of their wives, during the time of their pregnancy, as they are now of their mares in  
foal, their cows in calf, or sow when they are ready to farrow; nor offer to beat or kick  
them (as is too frequent a practice) for fear of a miscarriage.

175 Many other advantages might be enumerated. For instance, the addition of some  
thousand carcasses in our exportation of barreled beef<sup>35</sup>: the propagation of swine's flesh,  
and improvement in the art of making good bacon, so much wanted among us by the  
great destruction of pigs, too frequent at our tables; which are no way comparable in taste  
or magnificence to a well grown, fat yearly child, which roasted whole will make a  
180 considerable figure at a Lord Mayor's feast, or any other public entertainment. But this,  
and many others, I omit, being studious of brevity.

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<sup>34</sup> **emulation:** imitation.

<sup>35</sup> **barreled beef:** even while the Irish population was starving, absentee British landlords often exported the food from their Irish estates to England and its possessions.

Supposing that one thousand families in this city, would be constant customers for infants flesh, besides others who might have it at merry meetings, particularly at weddings and christenings, I compute that Dublin would take off annually about twenty thousand carcasses; and the rest of the kingdom (where probably they will be sold somewhat cheaper) the remaining eighty thousand.

I can think of no one objection, that will possibly be raised against this proposal, unless it should be urged, that the number of people will be thereby much lessened in the kingdom. This I freely own, and 'twas indeed one principal design in offering it to the world. I desire the reader will observe, that I calculate my remedy for this one individual Kingdom of Ireland, and for no other that ever was, is, or, I think, ever can be upon Earth. Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients: Of taxing our absentees at five shillings a pound: Of using neither clothes, nor household furniture, except what is of our own growth and manufacture: Of utterly rejecting the materials and instruments that promote foreign luxury: Of curing the expensiveness of pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in our women: Of introducing a vein of parsimony, prudence and temperance: Of learning to love our country, wherein we differ even from Laplanders, and the inhabitants of Topinamboo<sup>36</sup>: Of quitting our animosities and factions, nor acting any longer like the Jews, who were murdering one another at the very moment their city was taken: Of being a little cautious not to sell our country and consciences for nothing: Of teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy towards their tenants. Lastly, of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shopkeepers, who, if a resolution could now be taken

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<sup>36</sup> **Topinamboo:** a region of Brazil.

to buy only our native goods, would immediately unite to cheat and exact upon us in the price, the measure, and the goodness, nor could ever yet be brought to make one fair  
205 proposal of just dealing, though often and earnestly invited to it.

Therefore I repeat, let no man talk to me of these and the like expedients, 'till he hath at least some glimpse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice.

But, as to my self, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain,  
210 idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal, which, as it is wholly new, so it hath something solid and real, of no expense and little trouble, full in our own power, and whereby we can incur no danger in disobliging England. For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, and flesh being of too tender a consistence, to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I  
215 could name a country, which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it.

After all, I am not so violently bent upon my own opinion, as to reject any offer, proposed by wise men, which shall be found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual. But before something of that kind shall be advanced in contradiction to my scheme, and offering a better, I desire the author or authors will be pleased maturely to consider two  
220 points. First, As things now stand, how they will be able to find food and raiment for a hundred thousand useless mouths and backs. And secondly, There being a round million of creatures in humane figure throughout this kingdom, whose whole subsistence put into a common stock, would leave them in debt two million of pounds sterling, adding those who are beggars by profession, to the bulk of farmers, cottagers and laborers, with their  
225 wives and children, who are beggars in effect; I desire those politicians who dislike my

overture, and may perhaps be so bold to attempt an answer, that they will first ask the parents of these mortals, whether they would not at this day think it a great happiness to have been sold for food at a year old, in the manner I prescribe, and thereby have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortunes, as they have since gone through, by the oppression  
230 of landlords, the impossibility of paying rent without money or trade, the want of common sustenance, with neither house nor clothes to cover them from the inclemencies<sup>37</sup> of the weather, and the most inevitable prospect of entailing the like, or greater miseries, upon their breed for ever.

I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in  
235 endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich. I have no children, by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine years old, and my wife past childbearing.

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<sup>37</sup> damp or cold weather (for which England is often known).