Viewing the Enlightenment of Civilization through Cannibalism in Early Eighteenth-Century British Literature

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Abstract. Cannibalism is a taboo for humans in both cultural and medicinal history of Western civilizations. The rapidly growing British Empire developed various strategies to deal with the stigma of cannibalism and moral guilt within. In the early eighteenth century, cannibalistic events were present in the works of British writers such as Defoe, Chetwood, Aubin, and Swift, reflecting the post-Enlightenment England's struggle between barbarism and civilization.

Keywords: Cannibalism, civilization, British literature

1 Introduction

Although only in oral or written tradition, cannibals have existed in Western folklore for a long time. The cannibalism described in many eighteenth-century British imperial texts is considered to be based on prejudice or fiction, a racist myth. In particular, post-colonial researchers argue that the image of cannibalism is a product of the projection of Western imperialist desires and created to promote cultural colonization. As a product of the European imagination, it creates a binary opposition between civilization and barbarism, exposing and summarizing the power relationship between "eating" and "being eaten" through the symbolism of cannibalism. By focusing on the works of British writers in the early eighteenth century, represented by Daniel Defoe, Penelope Aubin, William Rufus Chetwood, and Jonathan Swift, this paper attempts to explore the complex attitudes of the British empire toward cannibalism and their confrontation through literature.

2 History of cannibalism: a taboo for humans

Throughout the history of cannibalism in Europe, the basic motivation is to feed the hunger. In November 1528, five Spaniards went on an expedition to Florida [1]. Due to food shortages, they had to eat the corpses of their companions. In 1536, in the Spanish colonies of Central America, two Spaniards found a murdered Indian. They, suffering from hunger, roasted the body of the Indian and ate it under the pretext of holding

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a funeral for him. Later, they killed a Christian from Seville and joined some Spaniards to enjoy his body; later, they killed and ate a second fellow Spaniard, even arguing over who had the right to eat the brain and liver of the deceased. Ultimately, the two initiators of the cannibalistic incident were burned to death, and the other participants were enslaved. Cannibalism is then overshadowed by primitive, barbaric, and even sinister overtones.

Besides, cannibalism was a commonplace business chain. In early modern Europe, according to Richard Sugg, fragments of human corpses were an important commodity in the medical trade, used for health, beauty, and healing [2]. At first, the human corpses consumed came from travelers who died in the North African desert during sandstorms, and later from the hanged criminals. In addition to flesh, blood is also utilized, with the fresh ones being used for direct slurping and the stale ones being dried, powdered, or distilled. Fat is one of the most persistent substances, making ointments for external use. Bones were distilled to obtain a liquid for human consumption; apothecaries in London sold complete human skulls in their stores or ground mossy skulls into powder to cure all kinds of bleeding. In short, all parts of the human body, secretions, and excretions could be used as treatments for patients.

The medical use of human corpses is based on the belief that corpses retain the life force of the deceased, having healing properties. However, the very idea of obtaining the life force by ingesting the corpse is tinged with witchcraft. It is a distorted system of natural laws and a pseudo-science based on delusion. Fortunately, with the rapid advancement of natural science, the notion of superstition gradually became less deep-rooted. Physicians gradually raised objections to cadaveric medicine, and the cadaver declined from a sacred, miraculous object to a mere commodity. After the Enlightenment, the opposition to cadaveric medicine took on a mainstream. People holding a reverent attitude began to realize that it was ineffective and insulted medical science's professionalism. The rejection of cadaveric medicine reflects the progress of reason over superstition.

In mythological history, cannibalism is best known for Kronos in ancient Greek mythology. He ate his sons and daughters to secure his position of power. Cannibalism is here performed to establish and delineate social identity. However, it is so drastic and violent that it can only be accomplished by gods while a taboo for humans. Homer's epic reinforces this impression by comparing Achilles and the Cyclops. Achilles claims to cut off Hector's flesh and eat it raw after the death of his friend, Patroclus, in battle. The barbaric gambit echoes the Cyclops' cannibalization, suggesting Achilles's aspiration to be a socially detached individual like the Cyclops. But he does not practice his wager, but meekly lowers his head to the order and rules of ancient Greece. Through the interpretation of cannibalism in ancient Greek mythology and Homeric epics, cannibalism, a synonym for barbarism, is defined as a vice that has to abandon to enter civilized society.

Thus, as a taboo in cultural history, cannibalism draws the line between civilization and barbarism; as a popular treatment in medical history, it embodies the conflict between superstition and scientific rationality. In both, cannibalism is a disgraceful presence that modern Europeans want to erase. Avoidance or even denial in written records highlights the anxiety of Europeans in trying to conceal their primitiveness in their

quest for civilization. By examining representative works of early eighteenth-century English literature, typical European responses to anxiety and measures to relieve them can be analyzed.

3 Defoe: The avoidance and externalization

In Robinson Crusoe, Robinson happened to see the traces left by cannibals on the island — "the shore spread with skulls, hands, feet, and other bones of humane bodies" — which makes him extremely fearful and disgusted, and concocts plans to kill these "savage beasts" [3]. His initial reaction is instinctive resistance. But he gradually realizes that he does not have the power of granting life or death over the savages: he should leave it all to the God's judgment. If he did kill the savages, he would be no different from the cannibals. As an individual, Robinson is able to contain the barbaric and impulsive nature, and finally establish an identity of "civilized man." As for European civilization as a whole, Robinson and cannibalism constitute a dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, which justifies the cultural colonization of European civilization. Although Defoe sometimes praised the innocence and purity of cannibals, he never abandoned the ideal of Christianizing and civilizing them. Viewing cannibalism as a manifestation of human depravity and the antithesis of civilization, he uses it to demonstrate the necessity of colonization and imperialism.

In The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Robinson rescues a Bristol-based English ship caught in a storm. When he arrives, the three passengers on the boat — a mother and son and a maid — are starving to death. The mother droops like a corpse, while the son's mouth is chewing on a broken glove. When the maid retold the tragedy, she said bluntly that if her mistress died, she would bite off flesh to feed her hunger. She was even tempted to bite off flesh from her own arm. Driven by this desire, when she saw the bowl holding her nosebleed, she hurriedly picked up and drank it, wondering why no one else bother to drink.

In Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe, Defoe expresses an attitude of hopeless compromise. He envisions what people would do if they were adrift at sea and had to kill for food. According to him, in this case they had to cannibalize people because "their compulsion concealed the evil of the crime" [4]. Because of the necessity, this evil of men's nature becomes feasible. Defoe recognizes the rationality of cannibalism in critical situations, but refuses to seek moral justification.

Generally speaking, Defoe's evasive strategy was the most well-accepted among Europeans. The descriptions of cannibals in his novels are based on hearsay rather than eyewitnesses, so they are largely defined as fiction. The reason for Europeans' obsession with this fabrication is because of their existing belief in witchcraft. After all, the former European pharmacopeias were largely convinced of the medicinal value of human corpses, which fostered their imagination of the world beyond. So, despite the emerging scrutiny and skepticism of eighteenth-century Europeans, the belief in cadavers convinces the existence of cannibals. Defoe projects cannibalization onto savages and establishes the opposition between civilization and brutality. Most importantly, he

excludes cannibalism from civilized Europe, separating educated Westerners from exotic barbarians. This successfully relieves the guilt, shame, and inferiority complex generated by violating the scientific and rational order.

4 Chetwood and Aubin: The Rationalization in Religion

In contrast to Defoe's avoidance of cannibalism by civilized men, his contemporaries Penelope Aubin and William Chetwood directly address this theme. They bring cannibalism into the public eye in a fictional way, although their strategy of addressing cannibalism in a religious way may not work either.

In Chetwood's novel The Voyages, Dangerous Adventures, and Miraculous Escapes of Captain Richard Falconer, Falconer is shipwrecked on a deserted island in the Caribbean and meets Mr. Randal, a British sailor who later becomes his spiritual mentor. Randal described his early exile on the island with only a female dog and six puppies, one of which he killed in hunger for food. He recalled in detail: "So at last I resolv'd to kill one of my bitch's whelps … 't was palatable and eat wonderfully well, they being not two months old" [5]. He admitted that it was against his conscience to kill such a harmless and innocent creature, but he had no other choice for survival. Despite this, Randal killed four other puppies, salted two of them, and fed the dam and surviving puppies, commenting that they "eat of it heartily, making no scruple tho' their own flesh and blood." Here, Randal contributes to the cannibalization of animals, and foreshadows the cannibalization of humans later. He died after telling the story. After a drunken spell, Falconer was blown off the island by a hurricane. When he finally returned, he found that because the remaining crew had no food for five full days, they dug up Randal's body and ate it. Chetwood's juxtaposition of canine and human cannibalization threatens to amplify the anxieties of civilized Europeans. For unlike Defoe, who confined the perpetrators of cannibalism to the safe range of only savages, Chetwood brings to light the fact that so-called civilized people have the same unrestrained, desperate desire to survive in a primitive environment.

To circumvent that danger, the storyline strives to portray Randal as a saintlike man. Falconer fondly reminisces, "honest, without interest; friendly, without design; religious, attended with reason… in short, he was a miracle of a man." Meanwhile, Randal refers to the manuscript he left behind as the original document transcribed from the priest in the name of Jesus. Through Falconer's tribute and Randal's manuscript, Randal is successfully linked to Jesus, reminding readers of the Eucharist. If the cannibalization of the crew is transformed into a religious enjoyment of the flesh and blood of Jesus, the animalistic desire to eat one another can be overpowered by the divine glory of saintly self-sacrifice.

However, the treatment of equating cannibalism with the Eucharist inevitably reminds the reader of the controversy evoking by the Catholic Eucharist itself. The Eucharist originally comes from the Passover feast of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, when he handed the disciples the bread, claiming that it was his body, and the cup, claiming that it was his blood of the new testament. Before the thirteenth century, the Christian understanding of the Eucharist tended to be symbolic; however, at the Fourth

Lateran Council in 1215, the Pope announced a new interpretation: the bread and wine penetrate the body of Christ through divine power and are physically transformed into his flesh and blood, which is known as “transubstantiation” [6]. Since then, the Eucharist shifted from a symbolic tendency to a literal one, establishing a connection with cannibalism — Christ becomes an object to be ingested by his followers. The pope intended to consolidate the majesty of the Church, but combining the barbaric taboos of mankind with the holy power of religious forgiveness, this innovative move inevitably created conflicts and chaos. Some believers even claimed to have seen blood flowing from the communion wafers, and wafers thrown into boiling water turned into human flesh. So what is the connection between the Catholic Eucharist and cannibalism? Anthropologists believe that the Catholic Eucharist has its origins in animal sacrifice in primitive times. This is logically connected to the medical statement mentioned above that corpse retains the life force of the deceased and has healing properties. Both long for the redemptive power that can be derived from human body.

In response to the convergence between transubstantiation and cannibalism, Protestants accused the Catholic Eucharist of being barbaric and cruel. The Swiss convert Zwingli, for example, argued that the view of bread and wine as the blood and flesh of Jesus was not only impious but also absurd, and that the theologians adhering to transubstantiation were the descendants of brutal cannibals [7]. Protestantism is more of a “religion of reason” than Catholicism; on the issue of cannibalism, it opposes the old traditions and aligns with the emerging natural sciences. They do not allow the taboo of cannibalism to exist in their territory, but completely shun and dispel it. So when Chetwood attempts to use the implicit Catholic Eucharist to relieve the anxiety of cannibalism, the relief strategy works in reverse. The audience may be reawakened to the bloodiness of cannibalism and aware of how blurred the boundary between themselves and barbarism is.

Aubin, who also tries religious strategy, is more decisive than Chetwood. She counters cannibalistic desires with the devotion of believers, although the plots of her works are accused of being unrealistic because of their extremely noble moral standards. In The Life of Charlotta du Pont, an English Lady, Charlotta and Belanger, a couple, were adrift at sea in the Caribbean with a close friend. When they ran out of food, Belanger's friend asked Belanger to “kill him, and preserve his own Life, by feeding on his warm flesh, and sucking his blood.” Shocked by the proposal, Belanger rejected and promised, “We will live and die together … now pluck up your spirit, and let us redouble our importunity to God to send us a deliverance” [8]. Just after the words, a big wave brought a dolphin to their boat, which they ate and survived. Thus, after raising the issue of cannibalism, Aubin arranges Belanger to make the rational choice reverently and resolutely, and shows immediately that the God answers the prayers of devout believers. She saves the crisis by religious miracles before the dilemma truly arrives. Perhaps even under urgent dying moments, Aubin shall let them “die together” in a righteous manner, as Belanger says. Characters possess an extremely high level of sanity and self-discipline, exceeding normal people. The distinctly religious moral standard in Aubin's work is so strong as to undermine authenticity.

Camille Paglia points out that the cult of speech existed in Judeo-Christianity; however, during Greco-Romanization, Christianity was gradually adulterated with the fetish of worship, such as "half-nude St. Sebastian pierced by arrows and St. Lucy holding her eyeballs out on a platter." Protestantism started as an "iconoclasm", destructing the images representing corruption [9]. If Protestantism inherited the verbal worship of Judaism, pursuing simplicity and clarity, then Catholicism embodies image worship, emphasizing sensory stimulation, including much cultic exhibitionism. A typical example is the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, which portrays in an almost erotic way the sweetness and pain felt when being baptized by an angelic love. However, during the Age of Enlightenment, scientific factuality and Protestant ideology motivated people to seek a more realistic account of their lives. Some voices criticizing Catholicism began to emerge: they believed that Catholic priests had invented tales due to the lack of real miracles. Their creation of "Romance" contains too much fanaticism and irrationality.

Chetwood and Aubin confront the cannibalism of civilized man, but the eucharistic analogy and the prayer for fish in their works have obvious Catholic qualities, either exposing the indistinct boundary between eucharist and cannibalism or reflecting too strong an irrational color. Their works prove that covering cannibalistic anxieties with Catholic tradition is merely self-deceptively rationalization, yet it cannot avoid the exposure of essence.

5 Swift: The Unity of Opposites in Satire

If Defoe resolves anxiety by projecting to the exotic world, and Chetwood and Aubin rationalize it within Catholicism, Swift stays in an eclectic position, reflecting his complex standpoint. *Gulliver's Travels* includes two direct references to cannibalism, both of which occur during Gulliver's voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms. When Gulliver arrived in the Houyhnhnms, he introduced a laxative for bloating from England to the king. It was "from … serpents, toads, frogs, spiders, dead men's flesh and bones, birds, beasts, and fishes, to form a composition" [10]. This is probably an allusion to cadaver medicine. Besides, Gulliver never wanted to admit that he and Yahoos were the same species. He was eager to adapt to the Houyhnhnms' life, weaving bird nets with Yahoo's hair, using Yahoo's skin to make shoe soles, etc. However, Yahoo is the creature that resembles Gulliver, that is, Gulliver's consumption of Yahoo's body parts is almost equivalent to cannibalization.

So, when Gulliver accuses Yahoos of being dominated by their desires, how does he, occupying Yahoo's body, separate himself from the corrupted nature he is hiding? In this regard, Swift's satirical strategy seems to make his text contradictory: Gulliver mocks the cadaver medicine in English society, while performing cannibalization himself. Gulliver's name has the same root as "gullible": as a simple, straightforward observer, he is probably an object of ridicule for Swift. The self-appointed civilized Gulliver, while disapproving cannibalism, sharply demarcated himself from Yahoos and relieves that his killing of Yahoos is not considered cannibalism. Through the self-deceptive psychological hint, he eases his guilt and self-condemnation. But the satirical approach distances Swift from Gulliver, preventing readers from seeing the conceptual

similarities and differences between them. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce “A Modest Proposal” to explore deeper Swift's position on cannibalism.

In “A Modest Proposal,” Swift plays a sincere proponent of finding a just and easy solution to the Irish famine: leave 20,000 children as seeds, fatten all the others for meat, and make their hair and bones into artifacts for a thriving market. Cannibalization is obviously not a serious solution proposed by Swift, but an accusation of the British colonial government and landlords. They consumed the poor Irish commoners; their extreme corrosion, greed, and selfishness were disguised under plausible economic policies. Here Swift employs cannibalism as a metaphor for the British Empire's colonial practices in Ireland, exposing its shamelessness and sinfulness in an ironic way. Defending the human rights of the Irish people by speaking out against the evil deeds of the British Empire, Swift can be described as a humanitarian of justice.

But in fact, Swift’s accusation also aims at Ireland: cannibalism is also a metaphor for the current status of Ireland. Cannibalism is one of the common discourses of ethical vilification of Ireland, mixed with deep pity and contempt. The Irish were descended from the Scythians. During the Renaissance, they were regarded as absolutely savage, as were the Indians, who were also of Scythian descent. Moreover, the publication of “A Modest Proposal” coincided with the Irish famine, which forced cannibalism to emerge. Swift’s use of cannibalism seems to go beyond a symbolic critique of the British government, into a traditional denigration of the Irish. His sarcastic tone may remind readers of the real cannibalization that occurred during the Irish famine. The comments on the flesh of Irish children (that the tastiest ones are at the age of 12-14, and the older ones are tougher) are coincidentally consistent with Gulliver's claim about the skin of the Yahoos (that the skins of small Yahoos are suitable for making sails, while the large ones are too thick and hard); the looks of Yahoos and their dirty eating habits may also be an allusion to the Irish. From this perspective, Swift is in denial about humanity and subconsciously tries to maintain a distance between himself and Ireland, classifying Ireland as a savage nation. However, just as Gulliver cannot get rid of his similarity to Yahoos despite denying being the same species, Swift cannot shed his Anglo-Irish identity.

Thus, Swift's contradictory position may fundamentally stem from the duality of his identity. As an Irish-born Englishman, his identification with the English aristocracy always coexists but conflicts with his empathy for the Irish poor. By using cannibalism as a colonial metaphor for the British Empire, Swift turns it into a symbolic sense, alleviating the moral anxiety of civilized people; at the same time, he excludes cannibalism from himself by implicitly classifying the Irish as a barbaric community and denying his own Irish-ness. His attitude toward cannibalism thus lies somewhere between Defoe’s and Chetwood’s: abstracting the cannibalistic element of the British Empire itself inwardly, while projecting moral anxiety outwardly toward exotic cannibals.

6 Rationale and motivation for the cannibalistic fiction

The British Empire's promotion of civilization in the eighteenth century relies on the inculturation of Christianity and the cultivation of rational science. However, science

and Christianity discovered cannibalism inside in the form of superstition and the Eucharist. Cannibalism has always been a part of European civilization, whether during the Christianity-reigned medieval period, or the colonial expansion period. Reason and religion endeavor to conceal their cannibalistic elements, or the brutal character within, and the presentations of cannibalism in literary texts is proof of the search for solutions.

Moral relativism may be the framework on which civilizations create cannibals. Initially, under natural law, cannibalism was the absolute boundary between morality and immorality, presenting a universal standard of judgment. After the Age of Enlightenment, cannibalism became a product of historical circumstances, and people were more concerned with specific factors such as social norms and economic conditions. It gave birth to moral relativism, i.e., evaluating an event no longer by looking at the event itself, but by discussing the extent to which the event is the result of the education of a certain society. Since morality no longer reflects objective standards, certain cultural environments may breed races with legitimate cannibalistic practices. And under specific existential situations, civilized people may also be infiltrated by some customs and develop the cannibalistic urge. These two possibilities provide the basis for the conception of cannibals in eighteenth-century British literature. For example, when Robinson contemplates the cannibalism of savages, he argues that the cultural context of savages makes them view cannibalism as a reasonable act that does not hurt their conscience, and the cannibalization of savages simultaneously helps legitimize Robinson's killing.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, cannibalism is the product of the projective mechanism of cannibalistic guilty in civilized groups. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein introduced the concept of projective identification and illustrated it with the example of infants. Together with the harmful excrescence, the split-off parts of the ego are projected onto the mother along with an abhorrent expulsion process. These excretions and the damaged parts of the ego control, possess, harm the object, and the hatred toward which is directed at the mother. Klein also notes that projection is usually accompanied by introjection, i.e., after the subject completes its control over the object, the object becomes a combination of the persecuted object and the damaged part of the self, exacerbating the annoyance and anxiety within itself when the subject reintroduces the object [11]. This may explain why European civilizations strived to create cannibals. Cannibalism was a “harmful excrescence” that Europeans wanted to expel in both intellectual and medical history; when they constructed cannibals through moral relativism, they projected cannibalism onto the object cannibals, giving rise to the opposition between civilization and barbarism. The subject will be anxious about the attack of the destructive object during the introjection. This is why a projection of cannibal anxiety by civilized groups can backfire — cannibalization may stimulate savage desires within civilized men. For example, civilized men are highly susceptible to cannibalistic behavior in areas where cannibals are present.

7 Conclusion

Cannibalism in the works of Defoe, Chetwood, Aubin and Swift, the four representative early eighteenth-century British writers, reflects that their imagination of cannibalism

originates from the cannibalistic concerns of the European civilizations itself, and displays three different strategies they adopted to relieve their concerns. The British Empire in the early eighteenth century was at a critical stage of building its identity awareness and expanding its colonial territory. The four writers' creation of cannibalism becomes the textual force of both its internal construction and external radiation. Cannibalism indicates how literary texts, part of imperial power, relieve moral concerns by creating intellectual myths. A civilized and powerful empire is flourishing, but its primitive character, buried as a stain, still stands at the backside.

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