

The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue: Literature, Translation and Violence in Early Modern Ireland. Patricia Palmer.

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On 11 September 1599, Beatrice Cenci, a beautiful, young Roman noblewoman, was publicly beheaded on Ponte Sant'Angelo for the crime of murdering her tyrannical father. Art historians surmise that Caravaggio witnessed her execution, this experience standing him in good stead for his disturbing painting of Judith decapitating Holofernes. No stranger to violence himself, Caravaggio was banished from Rome after committing a murder in 1606, and painted David's decapitation of Goliath in a plea for clemency. What is most striking about this painting is that the head of Goliath is a self-portrait, Caravaggio himself in extremis. It is telling that the only painting signed by Caravaggio is yet another decollation scene, that of John the Baptist, the artist inscribing his name in the martyr's blood.

Aesthetics and violence are inextricably linked in Caravaggio's career, one that coincides with the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland. If severed heads emblemized the uneasy relationship between aesthetics and violence in Caravaggio's work, severed heads proliferate at an inordinate rate in England's colonial war of extermination. Consider the stratagem devised by Sir Humphrey Gilbert to cow his Munster enemies in 1569: "[The] heddes of all those (of what sort soever thei were) which were killed in the daie, should be cutte off 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 ledyng 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. . . . [It brought] greate terrour to the people when thei sawe the heddes of their dedde fathers, brothers, children, kindsfolke, and friends." As Patricia Palmer comments: "Gilbert's grotesque installation shows just how artificial the distinction between violence and the aesthetic can be. Here, the atrocious sculpture *is* the atrocity" (7). While the English administration depicted Irish decollations as confirmation of native savagery, the fiction of martial law supplied

justification for its own decapitations as instruments of reform. Palmer's new book demonstrates how the experience of colonialism in action infected the writings of a number of English humanists who served in Ireland.

Sir John Harington's exposure to the Munster wars in 1586 gave his translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, with its stylized combat and aestheticized beheadings, a hardness and edge that is lacking in the original. The severed heads of the Munster wars keep bleeding in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, where the face, the locus of ethical responsibility, struggles unavailingly with the severed head, a symbol of untrammelled violence. Sir George Carew, a major player in reducing Munster to a waste land, translated part of Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana* during his campaign of terror. Though upholding the legitimacy of the Spanish conquest of Chile, Ercilla was not loath to criticize Spanish cruelty and express sympathy for the sufferings of the Araucanians. Dismissing the poetics of pity, however, Carew preferred to recast his original as a textbook of counterinsurgency. If the suppression of pity dominates most of Palmer's book, compassion is given its due place in the final chapter, where the author discusses a number of Gaelic elegies to the severed heads of their patrons.

Palmer's work inspires some piquant ironies. The exiled Ulster earls were buried in Rome in S. Pietro in Montorio, the same church where Beatrice Cenci lies in an unmarked grave. The only bardic poem known to me that mentions Holofernes was written to Hugh O' Neill in Rome by a fellow exile. S. Pietro in Montorio is also the locus of Aodh Mac Aingil's elegy on O' Neill's son, who addresses his former tutor from the grave on its disturbance in 1623, a speaking, if not severed head. With the simultaneous disturbance of O' Neill's own grave, his two hands were found to be in perfect condition, prompting the guardian of S. Pietro in Montorio to exclaim: "Behold these blessed hands which were often washed in the blood of heretics, and in their own sweat for the faith and for his country." Severed hands, unlike severed heads, never threatened to speak. The intact hands of O' Neill's skeleton, however, triggered a heartfelt acclamation of the dispossessed prince.

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