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December 15, 2011

E101-01

Paper 3 Final

### Cannibalism: The Ultimate Social Slander

In 1729, Jonathan Swift put forth the most modest of proposals. It would reduce poverty, eliminate abortion, and provide nourishment for the hungry, income for the destitute, and shoes for the barefoot. This grand solution? Eating babies. After all, “It is a melancholy object to 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 every passenger for an alms” (Swift). Wouldn’t it be nicer, and the streets cleaner if the women could sell those children to a butcher for income, restaurants could serve the meat, and craftsman sew gloves and boots from the leather? —The only thing more horrifying than Swift’s “Modest Proposal” is how logical he makes it seem. This well known satire of Irish poverty layers each argument neatly upon the one before it. Yet throughout the logical progression lies the absurdity of the concept that the civilized approach to poverty is to kill, cook, and eat human babies. Why is it that readers immediately understand this discourse, which on some level makes so much practical sense, to be a ridiculous and repulsive satire, instead of a reasonable proposition?

As Swift’s proposal reveals, there is something about cannibalism that is not and cannot be accepted into the moral fabric of society. Cannibalism is such a grievously antisocial act that it has come to represent the worst transgression an individual or a society can commit. This becomes evident when one examines the cannibalism-related

rumors used by one group of people to slander another individual or another group.

Regardless of whether these accusations are true, the mere suggestion of cannibalistic activity has historically proven enough to justify a wide range of extreme crimes against the accused cannibal. The fact that even suspected cannibalism seems enough to justify socially unacceptable crimes, implies that cannibalism is the ultimate social offense.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that cannibalism is so tabooed, it still represents a source of enduring fascination to the societies and individuals that condemn it.

The focus of this paper is neither on individual cases of cannibalistic activity nor on the legitimacy of rumored cannibalism, but rather on the rumors themselves as indications that cannibalism is the ultimate social taboo and the ultimate form of slander. For the purposes of this argument, examples of fiction, non-fiction, rumor, and fact are all equally relevant because each demonstrates a facet of the social perspective on cannibalism. When it comes to cannibalism as a means of creating an enemy, many seemingly unrelated bodies of writing become disturbingly similar. Though evidence of cannibalistic slander is universal, this paper will focus on such slander surrounding European societies.

The most seemingly innocent form of cannibalistic slander occurs in many European didactic tales, which use cannibalism to vilify the antagonists. “Hansel and Gretel”, “Tom Thumb”, and “Jack and the Beanstalk” each have a humanoid monster who threatens to eat the child protagonist (Tatar 195-197). Whether in the form of witch, ogre, or giant, each villain’s taste for human flesh makes her or him seem significantly more frightening. This vilification might not exactly be slander, because the accusations

of cannibalism are true within the confines of the story. However, it is still a form of maligner that makes cannibalism the ultimate evil deed.

In some stories, the protagonist uses the antagonist's cannibalism to justify actions, which, against any other adversary, would be horrifically immoral (Tatar 195-197). In Joseph Jacob's widespread version of "Jack and the Beanstalk", regardless of the serial theft and eventual murder Jack commits, his crimes are necessitated by the fact that his opponent eats flesh (Tatar 199). The story's precursor, entitled "The History of Jack and the Giants" and printed by J. White of Newcastle in 1711, describes an instance where Jack, "setting his foot upon [the fallen giant's] neck said, thou savage and barbarous wretch, I am come to execute upon you the just reward of your villany. And with that running him through and through, the monster sent forth a hideous groan, and yielded up his life" ("The Origins...", Green 13). Jack justifies the giant's murder and the corpse's repeated stabbing with this declaration of punishment for the giant's "villainy." Jack is referring to the giant's intentions to eat "a worthy knight and his fair lady", a cannibalistic tendency that allows Jack to murder the giant and defile his corpse in the name of heroics (Green 14). Such justification suggests that cannibalism is the pinnacle of all these crimes—worse even than murder.

Besides the man-eating antagonist, an even more extreme form of cannibalistic vilification exists, in which the villain coerces or tricks the innocent and noble protagonist into eating one of *his or her* own kind. In the early oral variations of "Little Red Riding Hood", before Charles Perrault transcribed a more moderate version in 1697, the wolf tricks the little girl into eating the meat, bones, or blood of her own grandmother. Similarly, in *The History of Jack and the Giants*, Jack entered a Giant's castle and:

...found three fair Ladie's ty'd by the hair of their heads, almost starved to death, who told Jack, That their husbands were slain by the Giant, and that they were kept many days without food: in order to force them to feed upon the flesh of their husbands... (Green 8)

Here the women are permitted to starve in place of eating their husbands, whereas in Little Red Riding Hood, the little girl never knew what, or who, she had eaten. In either case, this forced cannibalism represents the pinnacle of cannibalistic crime, because it taints the necessary purity the reader projects onto the protagonist. So in this sense, the villain is vilifying the hero through the ultimate form of corruption: cannibalism. However, both of these examples fell out of popularity before the post-Enlightenment romantic ideal of children as "icons of innocence and naiveté" became prominent ("Innocence in Art"). Perrault censored the girl's cannibalism from his transcription of "Little Red Riding Hood" and *The History of Jack and the Giants* became virtually unknown after the enlightenment era transformed the story into "Jack and the Beanstalk" ("The Origins of Fairy Tales..."). It seems that parents and publishers deemed this most evil form of cannibalism, too disturbing for children's ears.

This censorship raises an interesting question: If these stories contain the most antisocial atrocity, one that exceeds even murder, then what, if anything, makes these stories fit for child consumption? It appears that there is one thing that separates a horrible, mature story from a mystical fairytale: the name given to the villain. If a story calls the cannibalistic villain a witch, then it is a children's tale, if she is called a woman, then it becomes much too mature.

One story in particular met its early downfall because it did not mask its

cannibalistic villain with the title “witch” or “ogre.” “The Children of Famine,” a story included in the Grimm Brothers’ first printing of *Nursery and Household Tales* tells the story of a starving mother who threatens to eat her two daughters unless they can provide food for her (Tatar 193). This story does not appear in any subsequent editions of Grimm’s fairytales, while similar stories centered around cannibalistic female figure, for example: “Hansel and Grethel”, have reappeared thousands of times in popularized media. Such an immediate censorship of this story alongside the continued printing and reprinting of “Hansel and Grethel” seems odd when one considers the fact that the two stories follow similar storylines. In both tales, a mother-like figure—even the witch in Hansel and Grethel is at first a welcoming replacement for the cruel stepmother who left them in the forest to starve—threatens to eat the children. Both sets of children struggle to please the cannibalistic mother, and in both the children finally manage to escape—Hansel and Grethel run away, and the famine daughters, “legten sie sich hin und schliefen einen tiefen Schlaf, aus dem sie niemand erwecken konnte” (“lie themselves down and slip into a deep sleep, from which they can never awake”) (Grimm). Finally, both stories end with the disappearance of the cannibal figure—the witch dies, and the mother flees. Apparently, the only element that makes “Hansel and Grethel” more acceptable than “Die Kinder in Hungersnoth” (“Children of Famine”) is the title given to the cannibalistic antagonist. The word witch, or Hexe in German, gives this antagonist a non-human identity that the other antagonist lacks. Therefore these titles—witches, ogres, giants—are used in such stories to distance, both the individual characters and the act of cannibalism itself, from the rest of human society. These stories are prevalent despite the fact that they include cannibalism, but that does not imply a social acceptance of

cannibalism—quite the contrary. Instead these stories attempt to remove cannibalism from the depiction of civilized society, by first making the villain's cannibalism his or her most hideous feature, then removing that cannibalistic villain as far from the stream of society as possible through the use of a non-human title. Thus the popularity and prevalence of fairytales that include cannibalistic villains underscores the tabooed nature of cannibalism.

The fairytale form of cannibalistic slander creates a victim out of what would otherwise be a normal human. It seems from the stories, that the only characteristics separating a witch from a woman or a man from a giant is the name applied to them, some arbitrary and variable characteristic such as size or dress, and, of course, the evil deeds they threaten to commit. Arguably these traits could apply to anyone outside mainstream society or who is in any way "other." In actual medieval settings, the distinction between a fictional witch and a real life woman occasionally became blurred, and the cannibalistic discourse that criminalizes villains in fairytales was used to slander actual human beings.

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, shortly after the Middle Ages when so many of these stories are fabled to have originated, the number of men and women prosecuted as witches began to rise (Federici 32). For many of these "witches", cannibalism became one among many devilish accusations, because, "eating human flesh symbolized a total inversion of social values, an inversion of which the witch became the main embodiment" (Federici 34). Since witches were supposed to epitomize antisocial behavior, it is only natural that they would be given the greatest antisocial label: cannibal. Society saddled actual people with the worst type of slander, the accusation of cannibalism, in order to

distance them enough to justify their executions. Thus the same distancing, dehumanizing discourse that occurs in fairytales to create villains, had the same effect of slandering and vilifying people in real life.

While the cannibalistic slandering of witches was born in fiction and then applied to reality, the opposite occurred in European imperialism. Perhaps the most significant body of cannibalistic slander in Europe occurred as justification for European colonization. Even toward the beginning, the stories of cannibals that came back to Europe from the New World were shrouded in rumor and myth, and it is still unclear how much is true about the Caribbean, American, African, and Australian societies accused of cannibalism. The “travel stories” written by explorers fueled numerous novels and tales about cannibals, which in turn sparked more fervent cannibalistic slander in Europe about those in other lands.

European imperialism and the cannibalistic slander that helped fuel it are so closely tied that they nearly began simultaneously. The Arawak people, who greeted Columbus upon his arrival on their Mediterranean island in 1492, happened to maintain a constant feudal relationship with the neighboring Carib people (Arens 45). As the Europeans spoke with the Arawaks, “The Spaniards were shocked by stories of the cruel practices of the Carib (or Cannibal) Indians who waged war on the nearby island and ate their captives” (Tirado 6). Columbus himself recounts in a letter announcing his discovery, “As for monsters, I have found not trace of them except at the point in the second isle as one enters the Indies, which is inhabited by a people considered in all the isles as most ferocious, who eat human flesh...but I only hear this from the others” (Columbus). Columbus’ secondhand account of the Caribs by means of the “others”

demonstrates a twice-removed series of cannibalism-rumors—first told by the Arawaks to Columbus about the Caribs, then by Columbus to the Europeans about the Arawaks’ description of the Caribs—which at each level inspires revulsion toward these fabled man-eaters.

Amerigo Vespucci experienced a similar shock several months before Columbus. In a letter to government representative, Pier Soderini, Vespucci wrote about the native islanders:

...another ignominy: they eat little flesh except human flesh: for your Magnificence must know that herein they are so inhuman that they outdo every custom [even] of beasts; for they eat all their enemies whom they kill or capture, as well females as males with so much savagery, that [merely] to relate it appears a horrible thing. (Vespucci)

While Columbus admits to an element of rumor in his mention of Caribbean cannibals, Vespucci claims to have witnessed the cannibalism “infinite times and in many places” (Vespucci). But in both Vespucci’s and Columbus’ recounts the practice described is something horrifying, which each believes will shock the recipient of his letter. Also, in both cases, cannibalistic tendencies (or rumors of them) create a dehumanizing effect on the accused natives. In Columbus’ letter the natives become “monsters” and in Vespucci’s description they become “inhuman” and “savage.” This discourse is reminiscent of those witches, ogres, and giants in European children’s lore. Both the fairytale cannibals and the Indian natives are dehumanized and removed from society because they are accused of cannibalism. While the fairytale cannibals are shrouded with mystical titles and removed from society under a supernatural pretext, the Europeans

compare the island natives to animals and call them savages in order to make them into something less than “civilized” humans. In either case, the Europeans slander the witch or the native with an accusation of cannibalism, and then remove that practice from society by identifying the accused as non-human.

Just as Jack in “Jack and the Beanstalk” uses the giant’s cannibalism to justify theft and murder, the Europeans used the accusation of cannibalism to justify killing, enslaving, and taking the land of the natives. The Spanish eventually got to a point where, “it was enough to label a native “cannibal” to enslave him” (Tirado 6). And just like with Jack, this justification implies that cannibalism is the worst of all these crimes. As time wore on and imperialism grew popular in various European nations, this justification became a, “... ‘civilizing mission,’ which suggested that a temporary period of political dependence or tutelage was necessary in order for ‘uncivilized’ societies to advance to the point where they were capable of sustaining liberal institutions and self-government” (Kohn). This is where the concept of the cannibal became so closely laced with the European justification for imperialism. Since the Europeans were trying to create a distinction between themselves: the “civilized”, and those they wished to control: the “savages”, an iconic image of the savage developed. Because cannibalism represented the very antithesis of civilized society, it was often associated with so-called primitive societies and incorporated into the idealized image of the “savage”. Regardless of whether or not the various societies actually partook in cannibalistic acts, the label “cannibal” was enough to propagate the image of a lesser society. Thus the “savage cannibal” starting with the Caribs, circulating around the Mediterranean and Americas,

and eventually residing in Africa and Australia, became a necessary element of European justification.

The slandering image of the cannibalistic savage eventually crept from its origin in travel tales and into European works of fiction. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719 is a prime example. The hero, Crusoe, braves the land, "where are found the worst of savages; for they are cannibals or men-eaters, and fail not to murder and devour all the human bodies that fall into their hands" (Defoe). Crusoe repeatedly witnesses evidence of such cannibalism and provides graphic details:

The place was covered with human bones, the ground dyed with their blood, and great pieces of flesh left here and there, half-eaten, mangled, and scorched; and, in short, all the tokens of the triumphant feast they had been making there, after a victory over their enemies. I saw three skulls, five hands, and the bones of three or four legs and feet, and abundance of other parts of the bodies. (Defoe)

Crusoe is horrified at each encounter. He demonstrates his own civilized restraint by searching for animal meat in times of hunger and urging his cannibal companion to do the same. The story establishes a stereotypical savage cannibal, it asserts the concept of superior anti-cannibal civilization, and it even "civilizes" an individual cannibal by discouraging his consumption of human flesh. *Robinson Crusoe* represents the pinnacle of cannibalistic slander in imperialism-inspired fiction. Defoe uses cannibalism to create at once an enemy and a primitive being in need of civilizing. In his efforts to differentiate the "civilized" Crusoe from the "savage cannibals", Defoe reinforces the idea of cannibalism as the ultimate social taboo. Indeed, Crusoe's tale of his journey to various cannibal-inhabited lands is remarkably similar to "Jack the Giant Slayer." Each

protagonist combats a series of cannibalistic foes whose sense of civility and morality he thinks are far beneath him, all the while finding adventure and challenges through his journey in a strange land. Perhaps the greatest thing separating the two is the name attributed to the cannibals: giants or savages.

On the one hand European fairytales caused real life accusations of cannibalism in the form of witch trials. Conversely, real-life imperialistic accusations of cannibalism lead to fictional European adventure tales. How strange it seems that the cannibalistic enemy can so easily cross the boundary from fiction into fact, and vice versa. Especially considering the questionability of the sources in both the witch trials and in imperialistic discourse, each so rooted in rumor and ulterior motive; the cannibal almost seems to never have existed at all. In either case, the presence of cannibalistic slander is exceedingly evident and suggests a morbid European fascination with this ultimate taboo.

In all genres investigated, the Europeans accused their enemies of cannibalism in order to remove them from the socially accepted norm. However, another element of distancing was also evident. It seems that each example needed not only to alienate the foe with the anti-social practice of cannibalism, but also to further distance the accused cannibals with words that made them inhuman. As though to underscore the antisocial aspects of cannibalism, words like witch and savage attempt to eliminate any human association with them at all. By giving the cannibal such names, these stories, letters, and narratives remove cannibalism not just from society, but also from humanity itself. Thus any societies rumored to practice cannibalism must not just be antisocial, but also antihuman.

In every example thus far provided, whether fiction, narrative, rumor, or some indiscernible combination of the three, an individual or society has the power to demonize another with one simple word: cannibal. The mere suggestion of this one act is enough to justify slaying a giant, burning a witch, and plundering, enslaving, and slaughtering the indigenous societies of four continents. What about this one word gives it such power? What about this one act makes it so repulsive? And what about this entire concept makes it command such a bizarre fascination?

Word count: 3263

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