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THE REPRESENTATION OF FOOD ON THE IRISH STAGE FROM 1968 TO 2023 IRISH FOOD HERITAGE: FROM COLONIAL DEPRIVATION TO POSTCOLONIAL UNEXPECTED GASTRONOMICAL FUSION

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Abstract

Conjuring the representation of food as well as its opposite counterpart, hunger, requires a kaleidoscopic approach to understanding the role, consumption of, and craving for food both on and offstage in the Republic of Ireland from the period of the Troubles (1968-1998) to post-Brexit Ireland. This includes examining its presence in Irish theatres, its representation, its appropriation, and political glorification, as well as its associated rituals from the cradle to the grave (anniversaries, celebrations, festivals, rites of passage, funeral ceremonies) to explore interrelated topics such as postcolonial dietary habits and a vanishing cultural identity overflowed by an unfathomable process of globalization. How is food or hunger portrayed on stage? To what extent does food reflect changing modes of sociability and highlight an international gastronomic fusion? We will first explore how the representation of food as well as its opposite counterpart, hunger during the Troubles partake in the shaping of a national identity. We will then see how a growing number of translations and adaptations of foreign writers changed the representation of food on the Irish stage before and after the Good Friday Agreement (1998) engendering a culture and language in which the Irish, after centuries of hosting a foreign linguistic host, felt at home. And finally, we will focus on the representation of food in the various adaptations of Molière on the Abbey stage from 1968 onwards to demonstrate a growing socio-cultural and gastronomic interest in Molière exemplified by the latest translation/ adaptation of Tartuffe by Frank McGuinness.

Keywords: food; hunger; Irish Stage; globalization; the Troubles; Good Friday Agreement; Molière

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1. Introduction

The representation of food on the Irish Stage from 1968 to 2023 will be analysed crossing the hermeneutic borders of drama, food, and post-colonial studies. The traumatic and intertwined notions of food, hunger, and colonisation are deeply rooted in the Irish psyche and reverberate in live theatre. From Oscar Wilde's cucumber sandwiches in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), William Butler Yeats's lobster in *The Player Queen* (1922), John Millington Synge's soda bread in *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), Sean O'Casey's sausage in *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), Tom Murphy's blackened potatoes in *Famine* (1968) or Brian Friel's bilberries and flour in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) to Frank McGuinness lavish use of food in his adaptation of Molière's play *Tartuffe* (2023), there has been a cryptic interdependency between the viewer and the performer eating or craving for food on the Irish stage. Are the viewer and the performer partners in crime? And how do performances teeming with food destabilize the viewers' identity? In Ireland, the temporal altered experience of seeing actors eating

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on stage invite the viewers to extend their capacity for social and highly political perception and taste, receiving information about food origin and meaning, making choices, and setting intercultural connections. The specific situation of participating in a performance with actors eating or craving for food heightens human awareness of life's cracks, expectations, and failures: thus, highlighting the everlasting intermingling of food for thought and food for the body and soul. Conjuring the representation of food as well as its opposite counterpart, hunger entailed by colonisation, requires a kaleidoscopic approach to understanding the role, consumption of, and craving for food both on and offstage in the Republic of Ireland from the period of the Troubles (1968-1998) to post-Brexit Ireland considering Homi Bhabha's significant notions of ambivalence and stereotypes and the long and complex process of food interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. This includes examining food presence in theatres, its representation, its appropriation, and political glorification, as well as its associated rituals from the cradle to the grave (anniversaries, celebrations, festivals, rites of passage, funeral ceremonies) to explore interrelated topics such as postcolonial food habits and a vanishing cultural identity overflowed by an unfathomable process of globalization. How is food or hunger portrayed on the Irish stage? To what extent does food reflect changing modes of sociability and highlight an international gastronomic fusion? How do playwrights use food or the absence of it through mode of expression, *dramatis personae*, or stagecraft?

2. Food and the Troubles 1968

We will first explore how the representation of food as well as its opposite counterpart, hunger performed during the Troubles partake in the shaping of a national identity, focusing on the following plays: *Famine* (1968) by Tom Murphy, *The Quare Fellow* (1954) by Brendan Behan, and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) by J. M. Synge. The representation of food or its absence on the Irish stage, during the Troubles (1968-1998) conveyed something highly political through words and gestures, signs, and emblems. It meant a haunting presence in the mind and imagination of the characters and the audience even though food was sometimes invisible on stage. Food became according to Derrida's notion of hauntology "the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible" (Derrida, 2006, 5). In the play *Famine* (1968), Tom Murphy summons a fearful army of spectres that re-enacts a spectacle of food scarcity at the Abbey Theatre. The impact of *an Gorta Mór*, Ireland's Great Hunger linked to the potato blight is not only represented by the scarcity of food but also by the size of the cast diminishing on stage. Human bodies on stage disappear because of lack of food and with them the Irish language. Thoughts, dreams, and expression are erased and as Murphy wrote in the introduction to the play *Famine* "a hungry and demoralised people become silent" (Murphy, 1968, xi). And Gaelic, this ghost language, an "ancient and rich expression of articulate being lapses into irretrievable silence" (Steiner, 1975, 53). Murphy adds in his introduction to the play that there are "other poverties" (Steiner, 1975, 53) that attend famine in addition to hunger, such as that of thought and expression. The definition of "representation" as appearing in public and exhibiting for instance food is showing a thought-provoking political and cultural presence/ absence, as well as a social issue. It is the food which is itself its own representation.

In *Famine*, the protagonist John O'Connor sinks into madness and destroys his family because of lack of food. The loaf of bread, held by John O'Connor that had signified Holy communion as well as mass protest and food privation, becomes for Murphy a symbol of the fight for self-preservation, the sight of which however leads to internal collapse. Hence, the lack of food and bread in this instance emphasizes not only the psychological and emotional disabilities of the main character but also the breakdown of a whole society. The representation of food on the Irish Stage invites us to ponder over the notion of change and the act or process of passing something from one person to another, from one *topos* or *one logos* to another, and from one parochial memory to a boundless diasporic vision. The representation of food or its opposite counterpart, hunger, prompts us to examine translations, borders, boundaries, limits, even hermeneutic crossings that lead to new experiences, new ways of considering, re-imagining and questioning the self and the world. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, we may say that to write about food or its absence is thus to 'show oneself', to project oneself into view, to make one's own face appear in the other's presence, which also implies a close link between sociability, the fact of sharing a meal and ideas, ethics, poetics, and politics. The theatre is "the place where a nation thinks in public in front of itself" (Esslin, 1978, 101) according to Martin Esslin. And this quote is relevant when we think of the

representation of food on the Irish Stage. As Marvin Carlson highlighted in *The Haunted Stage*, “the need continually to rehearse and renegotiate the relationship with memory and the past, is nowhere more specifically expressed in human culture than in theatrical performance” (Carlson, 2011, 167). All theatre for Carson is haunted by repetition and what is more repetitive than eating or craving for food on stage. Irish theatre is indeed haunted by transmission through rituals from the cradle to the grave (anniversaries and celebrations in for example *Living Quarters* (1977) by Brian Friel, birthday in *Ariel* (2002) by Marina Carr, festivals in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) by Brian Friel, rites of passage in *The Hostage*, (1958) *An Ghiall* (1957) by Brendan Behan or *Famine* (1968) by Tom Murphy, funeral ceremonies in *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) by J. M. Synge, that is to say, an Irish cultural and social activity deeply involved with food, hunger, memory, culture and history. In the play *Famine* (1968) by Tom Murphy, blackened potatoes are the symbol of starvation, emigration, death, and loss of the Irish language. Murphy has admitted the revelation he experienced in the process of researching and writing the play more than a century after its dramatic setting in the darkest years of the 1840s. Writing the play made him more a victim of the Famine than a mere student of Irish history digging into the intricacies of memory and trauma. He felt Homi Bhabha’s notion of “unhomeliness” (Bhabha, 1994) stemming from colonisation and the violent trauma of lacking food. One of the bleakest and excruciating scenes of the play is the one in which John O’Connor kneeling digs up a potato with his bare hands and finds it rotten. He is bloodless. A clear echo to Bram Stoker’s play *Dracula or the Un-Dead* performed at the Lyceum Theatre on 18 May 1897 in London, eight days before the publication of the Gothic novel *Dracula* (26 May 1897). *Dracula* can be analyzed in the light of the absolute horror of the Famine. Born in 1847, also called Black 47, the worst year of the Great Hunger in Ireland, Bram Stoker was haunted and traumatized by the effects of the famine, the lack of food, the absentee and greedy landlords, emigration, and the coffin ship going west just like Dracula. The protagonist, Jonathan Harker writes in his journal about the Romanian food he ate before meeting Dracula, “I had for dinner, or rather supper, a chicken done up some way with red pepper, which was very good but thirsty. (Mem. get recipe for Mina.) I asked the waiter, and he said it was called "paprika hendl," and that, as it was a national dish” (Stoker, 2019, 7). In the 1800s, food was one of the most politically charged topics in Western Europe. Citrus fruits, pineapples were considered the domain of the wealthy, while vegetables grown underground, such as potatoes were considered literally beneath the dignity of the rich man’s feet. The political implications of food in Ireland intensified throughout the twentieth century because starvation, willing or unwilling, became a recurring theme in Irish history and in poems, plays, short stories and novels. In 1904, William Butler Yeats in the play, *The King’s Threshold* explored the old Irish legal system, the Brehon Laws, and the notion of *Troscud*, i.e. food deprivation to empower a weaker party in bringing a stronger party to justice, a legal concept meaning fasting for justice:

He has chosen death: Refusing to eat or drink, that he may bring
 Disgrace upon me; for there is a custom,
 An old and foolish custom, that if a man
 Be wronged, or think that he is wronged, and starve
 Upon another’s threshold till he dies,
 The Common People, for all time to come,
 Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,
 Even though it be the King’s. (Yeats, 2001, 122)

During the Troubles, this medieval legal procedure of fasting or tactic of denial and self-starvation was used to protest mistreatment or imprisonment. In 1968, plays by Brendan Behan (*The Quare Fellow*, *The Hostage* and adaptations of his novel *Borstal Boy*) were staged at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin as well as in New York and Paris and entangled the notion of food deprivation with political internment. *The Quare Fellow* was premiered at the Pike Theatre, Dublin in 1954 and first produced at the Abbey Theatre in 1956. Its latest outing was made in 1984. In 2023 numerous celebrations of the centenary of Brendan Behan’s birth were carried out in Ireland and throughout the world, for instance in Prague and in the French Embassy in Paris. At the Abbey Theatre at the end of November 2023, *The Quare Fellow* was given a new production directed by Tom Creed which saw the traditionally all-male cast played exclusively by female and non-binary actors. Thinking about how food representations and imprisonment construct male and female identities on the Irish stage helps us understand relationships of domination and how these representations are themselves dependent on the unequal resources and

contradictory interests that can mobilize those whose power they legitimate and whose subjugation they perpetuate. *The Quare Fellow* opens with a prisoner singing “A hungry feeling came o’er me stealing...” (Behan, 1978, 39). But Warder Donnelly dehumanized the singing prisoner stating that “he must be getting birdseed with his bread and water” (Behan, 1978: 73) and threatens to leave him weeping. The setting is Dublin's Mountjoy Prison in 1949 on the eve of a hanging; and, while reminding us of the rituals surrounding a state execution, Brendan Behan shows how it leaves no one uninvolved. The victim's fellow prisoners may bang the water pipes in sympathy, but they also bet their Sunday bacon on whether, or not he may get a reprieve: “Dunlavin. No, I’ll bet you my Sunday bacon that a reprieve will come through before morning. I feel it in my bones” (Behan, 1978, 77).

In *Borstal Boy*, Brendan Behan talked about his own craving for food in jail in this autobiographical portrait of the artist as a young prisoner. Behan talking about food scarcity said that “To get enough to eat was regarded as an achievement. To get drunk was a victory” (Rudman, Rosenthal, 1961, 334). In *The Playboy of the Western World* by J. M. Synge, premiered at the Abbey Theatre in 1907, and performed in 1968 during the Troubles, Christy Mahon arrives as Behan’s prisoners cold and hungry, thinking he had killed his father. But he is offered soda bread by Pegeen Mike. Irish soda bread, a dense, unleavened bread made with flour, buttermilk, salt, sugar, and baking soda instead of yeast was introduced around the time of the Irish potato famine of 1845-1849. And in Synge's play this soda bread features heavily as a symbol of safety, domestic warmth, and budding love. After the performances of 1968, a growing number of translations and adaptations of foreign writers changed the representation of food on the Irish stage before and after the Good Friday Agreement (1998) engendering a culture and language in which the Irish, after centuries of hosting a foreign linguistic host, felt at home. Field Day theatre company founded by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea in 1980 during the Troubles was a political and cultural project built on theatre tours in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland whose ideal was to create ‘a fifth province of the imagination’ to bring together artists from the North and South of Ireland, to create “some kind of awareness that there was the possibility of a cultural wholeness” (Murray, 1999, 113). It explored as did John M. Synge, Lady Gregory, and W. B. Yeats the idea of an Irish decolonisation of the imagination. Friel and the leading members of the company favoured Hiberno-English adaptations of French playwrights, like Molière, Russian playwrights, like Chekhov with Russian and Irish food on stage or Greek playwrights like Sophocles. Hence in the 80s onwards the representation of food on the Irish Stage was slowly moving from colonial deprivation to postcolonial unexpected gastronomical fusion.

3. Food on the Irish Stage on the eve of the Good Friday Agreement

The representation of food on the Irish stage on the eve of the Good Friday Agreement (1998) intermingles memories of a vanishing rural past with experimentation. Brian Friel’s experimentation of the Dionysiac languages of dance and music using food as a journey towards a spiritual self-discovery is strikingly present in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). Maggie:

spreads her fingers (which are covered with flour), pushes her hair back from her face, pulls her hands down her cheeks and patterns her face with an instant mask. At the same time she opens her mouth and emits a wild raucous ‘Yaaaaah!’ – and immediately begins to dance, arms, legs, hair, long bootlaces flying (Friel, 1990, 21).

Maggie instead of making bread, which is a potent symbol of a Christian Holy communion spreads the flour on her face transforming herself into a pagan Dionysian goddess. In the 1930’s in Ireland, making bread and breaking the bread together meant an unbreakable family and religious bond. Maggie’s refusal to make bread not only foreshadows the scattering and destruction of the Mundy Family but also the Irish Diasporic society. For George Steiner in *Two Suppers*:

The sharing of food and drink reaches into the inmost of the social-cultural condition. The range of its symbolic and material bearings is almost total. It comprises religious ritual, the constructs, and demarcations of gender, (...) the confrontations of politics, the contrasts of discourse, (...), the rites of matrimony and of funeral sorrow. In its manifold complexities, the consumption of a meal around a table, with friend or foe, disciples or detractors, intimates, or strangers, (...), are the microcosm of society itself (Steiner, 1995, 52).

The five Mundy sisters (Maggie, Kate, Rose, Agnes, and Chris) using food as a distorting religious ritual, become the incarnation of this chaotic and vital energy hidden in every human being, this orgiastic frenzy which brings us back to the roots and to the birth of theatre. For Friel, the primitive and vital forces of the Mundy sisters, who are transformed into real Maenads, into bacchantes when they throw themselves into a frenzied dancing, are opposed to the regulating forces of the Irish Catholic Church that destroy them. With the flour/ preparation of bread episode the Christianized soul is opposed to the pagan body because when words fail to convey Wittgenstein's famous idea that thoughts, and propositions, are pictures, Brian Friel used food as a mask to convey other ways of communication and exchange, i.e. a language without words. In the maenads' scene, the movement from Christianity to paganism using mystical and eschatological food is also linked to the stripping away of the holy garments. Father Jack's clerical garments are disrespectfully used by his sister Chris during the Dionysian dance scene in the first act. To Chris, they are no longer holy garments: "*Chris, who has been folding Jack's surplice, tosses it quickly over her head and joins in the dance. The moment she tosses the vestment over her head Kate cries out in remonstrance, 'Oh, Christina' –!*" (Friel, 1990, 21). Brian Friel's dance scene with food as a spiritual and pagan symbol is a striking illustration of the Joycean sublimation of experience into art. James Joyce wrote that "[a writer is] a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life" (Ellmann, 1976, 70). The perception of life as a metaphoric "daily bread" by the Irish artist is a spiritual and mnesic state. Food, memory and imagination for James Joyce and Brian Friel are intermingled with the mysterious nature of memory. They record the past unfaithfully but nevertheless maintain a powerful, even oppressive, bearing on the present. But how does food become the most universal symbol of involuntary memory, the taste of a whole life behind us that rekindles our memory through the palate?

4. Food and Molière/ Moli-Éire on the Irish Stage

The representation of food throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the various adaptations of Molière on the Abbey stage has demonstrated a growing socio-cultural and gastronomical interest in Molière on the Irish stage with an increasing number of performances, exemplified by the latest translation/ adaptation of *Tartuffe* by Frank McGuinness which started at the Abbey in March 2023 before touring venues in the Republic of Ireland (Donegal, Cork, Limerick, and Galway) and Northern Ireland (Belfast). Lady Gregory's translation of four of Molière's plays, (*Le Médecin malgré lui, The Doctor in Spite of Himself* (1906) *Les Fourberies de Scapin, The Rogueries of Scapin* (1908), *L'Avare, The Miser* (1909) and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, The Would-Be Gentleman* in 1926) into the Kiltartan dialect was more than a mere adaptation. It was a political statement, a way of constructing a national identity. Derek Mahon (1941-2020) translated for Field Day, *L'école des Maris* as *High Time* in 1984, followed by the translation of *L'École des femmes* by *The School for Wives* for the Dublin Theatre festival in 1986.

The Abbey Theatre's Artistic Director Caitríona McLaughlin introduced the 2023 Abbey's adaptation of *Tartuffe* by Frank McGuinness as an opulent Irish retelling of a true classic. This adaptation of Molière's play is indeed made up of great feasts with French food, pastries such as macarons and madeleine and unbelievable drinking bouts, in which the gluttonous protagonists gorge themselves as much on food as on words. The play is a gargantuan meal with music. To paraphrase the French Poet Apollinaire, it is like an orchestra with its chords, arpeggios, solos, ensembles, adagios, and fortissimos (Baronian, 2022, 17). The action of the play takes place in a partitioned space. There is a large and colorful 17th century dining room with a banquet table covered with food and drink and a smaller room, mostly bare save for a charging phone or laptop and a ring light. There are numerous doors in both spaces, allowing eavesdropping and the comic entrance and exit of maids and suitors. This partitioned performing space is the archetypal representation of a divided geographical, physical, social, and psychic Irish society. On one side we witness Tartuffe, the hypocrite, the devout spiritual advisor of Orgon, always eating and never fasting, hence presenting a false and distorted image of himself to the world, and on the other, we face the hidden space of a psyche, the Freudian id, the subconscious part of Tartuffe's mind that is responsible for driving him towards guilty physical desires. In this smaller empty space, he flogged himself in front of a mobile phone camera, illuminated not by a Christian candle but by a twenty first century ring light. Hence fasting or preparing and eating food during a performance is used to touch on

the issue of identity (personal, cultural, national, religious). The staging of a meal takes up a large part of the show. This ‘table setting’ places the actors, and the spectators with the actors, around a table where a real meal and the stage action take place at the same time. In this way, the table, and more specifically the dining table, becomes a kind of stage; this sensation is reinforced by the fact that it is made of wood, reminiscent of the stage floor. The scenic presence of the food adds a ritualistic and societal dimension.

5. Conclusions

The ever-changing theatrical use of food or lack of it on the Irish Stage from 1968 to 2023 is suffused with the beauty of mnemonic decay, loss, changing political ideals and cultural reassessment. The polymorphic gastronomical explorations of playwrights such as Yeats, Murphy, Friel, Behan, Marina Carr in her latest play *Audrey or Sorrow* (2024) and director Caitríona McLaughlin’s adaptation of Molière’s play *Tartuffe* (2023) at the Abbey intertwine food, theatre, post-colonial issues in a post-Brexit Ireland. Irish theatre is to quote Antonin Artaud “a theatre, which without killing, induces the most mysterious changes not only in the minds of individuals but in a whole nation” (Artaud, 2013, 63). Food and drink are seeds for renewed art and nature, culture, and cultivation. Food on the Irish stage from Yeats to Frank McGuinness and Marina Carr comes with mastery to the threshold of changes where discourses of inclusion and marginalisation need not exclude or diminish the past but are bound to reconceptualize it. Because as Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin stated in *Physiology of Taste* (1825), “The destiny of nations depends on how they feed themselves” (Baxter, 2017, 213). Food and hunger are crucial features of the Irish cultural identity. Interweaving food and theatre is a promising area of scholarly investigation in Irish Studies because of its performative, symbolic and literary potentialities as well as its socio-economic meta-theatricality.

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