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**"A Modest Paper, or a Response Essay on Persuasiveness in 'A Modest Proposal'"**

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**Abstract:** The aim of my article is, taking advantage of the freedom the response paper offers, to make a different type of essay. By adapting it to the necessities of the form in question, which I consider fulfilled, I have tried the formula used in "A Modest Proposal" (including fallacies and mistakes which, I hope, will be understood as intended) to state my opinion on the persuasiveness of the text written by Swift. To do so, I have added two groups of cited elements: the first one, formatted between doubled inverted commas, corresponds to quoted fragments that are aimed at exemplifying and proving my statements; and a second group, in italics, comprising all sentences taken from the text, not with the intention of plagiarising, but to obtain the impression I would like to have made on the reader, which is to establish the connection between this paper and "A Modest Proposal".

**Keywords:** Swift, Satire, persuasiveness, Rhetoric, British Colonialism, Ireland.

**María PÉREZ DELGADO**

**A Modest Paper, or a Response Essay on Persuasiveness in "A Modest Proposal"**

If we assume that satire is a way of criticising a person, an idea or an institution, in which humour is used to show their faults or weaknesses, and that from its conflict derives, usually, an effect of persuasion and then reform, and that Swift was a well-known satirist, then, the remaining question would be "why was his essay, "A Modest Proposal", not convincing?". In this pamphlet, I am using a rather useful book<sup>1</sup> to expose my own thoughts on such an important matter.

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<sup>1</sup> See, Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal and Other Writings*. Hawes, Clement. Riverside, 2004.

*I think it is agreed by all parties* that the prodigious essay written by Jonathan Swift is, indeed, a rather controversial text, *and therefore whoever finds a way to defend infantophagia would deserve so well of the public to have a stature set up for a preserver of the nation.* For it seems one of the most logical texts that the history of Irish Literature has ever produced and it suggests to the reader that eating the offspring of the country is the best plausible way to put an end to the suffering that Catholic families had been experiencing along the 18th Century in Ireland.

*But my intention is very far from being confined to provide only for a mere description of the situation existent in 1700, in which this colonial kingdom was to tackle with the Navigation Acts, Wool Acts and Cattle Acts at the time of the publishing of the pamphlet.* Ireland was oppressed, not only by these economic reforms that had taken control over the imports and exports of the country, but by a series of Acts, such as the Test Acts, the “popery law” and the Acts for the settlement of Ireland, that negated to every Catholic Irish the access to their lands and profession of their religion, leaving it all to those of Protestant ascendancy. But, *as I have too long digressed, I shall return to my subject.*

*I’ve been assured by a grave author, an eminent philosopher,<sup>2</sup> that the art of persuasion involves three main elements for making the audience form a favourable judgement about one’s project: the first covering the credibility of the orators; the second entailing the capability of the speaker of moving the audience by using emotional premises; and a third one involving the use and conception of the morals and values of the audience.* It is of his belief, too, that the speaker should enjoy good prestige by means of fame, virtue and benevolence in order to sound credible; that he should take into account the characteristics and conditions of his audience, so that he is able to perform a moving speech; and that he should use the reasoning of logic, with arguments and sound evidence.

*I shall now humbly propose my own statements, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection:* I suggest that “A Modest Proposal” may not, according to the postulates included in the work on discourse produced by the man of philosophical eminence mentioned above, whom I had the opportunity to speak of, be a convincing text.

For first, although the writing complies with such rhetoric—it gives facts (“it is very well known that they are everyday dying, and rotting, by cold, and famine, and filth, and vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected” (Swift 327)) and statistics (“the number of should in Ireland being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate, there may be about two hundred thousand couples who are able to maintain their own children...” (Swift 324)), gives analysis of cause and effect through six points (Swift 327-328), names authorities, shows confidence on the part of the speaker (“I grant this food will be somewhat dear” (Swift 325)); uses emotional premises (using sentimental vocabulary such as “the poor innocent babes” (Swift 324), or “that horrid practice of women” (Swift 324)) and offers arguments on morals, religion, economy, society and politics—again, although the essay complies with the requirements, it is worth noticing that it is full of fallacies which would easily invalidate the whole argument.

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<sup>2</sup> See, Aristotle. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Penguin Classics, 2006.

Secondly, these fallacies are committed in the ground of authority, and doubtful sources such as “a principal gentlemen of Country of Cavan” (Swift 324), “a very known American of my Acquaintance in London” (325), or “a very worthy person, a true lover of his country, and whose virtues I highly esteem” (Swift 326), can be found in the text. There are also fallacies appealing to probability, being a case of it every number given in the discussion: the speaker takes for granted the data and statistics, hoping it may be the case, but they are not obtained from a reliable source. There is also a strong predisposition of the audience. The speaker carefully puts the ideas in an order in which first attracts the attention of the addressee by using compassion and pity. The speaker turns later, nonetheless, into the ethical issue in opposition with the audience once the proposal of eating human flesh is put forward.

As I stated before, the fallacies included in the reasoning would invalidate the argument, had it been the case of them, the fallacies, being unintended. Since I consider them completely in the opposite direction; of them constituting no accident, the result is a satire of a most delicate and sharp humour employed by Swift as a subtle vehicle for his own *serious* proposals. It represents a last call for change in a society that pays little attention to the vast majority of poor people, and whose proposals seem as absurd as this modest one. “A Modest Proposal” epitomises, for me, both a mockery of the uselessness of politics and another landscape of Swift’s visions of Ireland. By an act a *little bordering upon cruelty*—Swift seems to assume a basic moral with which no one could believe the suggestion of infantophagia, as he himself claims not being much interested in carrying the project had there been better proposals (“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, easy and effectual” (Swift 330))—the author shows the faults of such society, by blaming both the British—for the exertion of the oppression—and the Irish<sup>3</sup>—for the permission of it. This is not, then, a text on Irish eating their own children. Rather, it is an essay on preventing Irish children from British cannibalism, *which would be glad to eat up their whole nation without it*.

Therefore, shall I conclude, “A Modest Proposal” is not a persuasive text because it is not intended to be. In fact, no political reforms or consequences followed its publication. It is an intended absurd text whose humour atones for the fallacies and logical mistakes to leave an acute criticism of the Ireland of the time.

### Works Cited

- Aristotle. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Penguin Classics, 2006.  
 Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal and Other Writings*. Riverside, 2004.

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<sup>3</sup> Irish landlords were so called absenteees because they fled to England and left Ireland behind, while claiming the ownership of those lands.

**Bioprofile of the author**

María Pérez Delgado is currently completing a degree in English Studies at Complutense University of Madrid. During her degree, she enjoyed an Erasmus grant, selecting as her destination Ludwig-Maximilians Universität in Munich (Germany). Her main interest within the degree is literature, and she's focusing her investigation on British contemporary fiction. She expects to finish this year and soon start a Master's degree in British contemporary fiction.

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