Irish Mantles, English Nationalism:

Apparel and National Identity
in Early Modern English and Irish Texts

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ABSTRACT

The Irish mantle—a type of long, heavy woolen cloak—came under regular attack by writers and lawmakers in Tudor and Stuart England. This article examines how a range of early modern English texts used the Irish mantle to establish and regulate the boundaries of national identity. The Irish were problematically similar to the English; most significantly, they lacked the clear physical differences that distinguished other colonial subjects. For writers such as Barnabe Rich, Edmund Spenser, John Davies, and Ben Jonson, the mantle takes on the function of signifying an essential “Irishness” and differentiating it from “Englishness.” Relying on an easily changed garment to signal natural difference, however, rendered less stable the very distinctions in national identity that English writers attempted to create and maintain. Irish texts from the same period, including several of the Annála [Annals] and poems by Tadhg Dall Ó bUiginn and Dхаibhдв́ Dhа́йбдв́х Ó Bhruadair, offer competing images of Irish dress and often demonstrate a greater comfort with hybrid identities and less concern with the idea of an Irish nation. English discourse on the mantle could help to create and police an English identity only by simultaneously creating an Irish nation against which to define itself.

In the Rainbow Portrait (fig. 1), painted c. 1600, Elizabeth I boldly appropriated an item of clothing that Edmund Spenser thought fit only for thieves, beggars, and rebels. She wears an anglicized, extremely luxurious version of the Irish mantle, a garment about which the man with so much praise for the Fairie Queene had nothing good to say. Why would the most powerful person in England choose this particular garment to display her power? What made the Irish mantle such a potent symbol for the early modern English?
The title of the ninth chapter of Barnabe Rich’s *A New Description of Ireland* (1610) advises that “a conquest should draw after it Lawe, Language, and Habit” (33). Tudor and Stuart England agreed, regularly producing legal and rhetorical attacks on such markers of “Irishness” as language and clothing. The denunciation and attempted elimination of the Irish language were spurred by fears about a disturbing permeability of “Englishness” and its cultural and geographical proximity to Irishness. This attitude toward the Irish language is paralleled by similar attitudes toward the more easily changeable marker of clothing, specifically the Irish mantle. The mantle simultaneously offered a way to keep the Irish separate by marking them as visibly different from the English and functioned as a symbol of the very difference that English expansionism sought to eliminate. As such, English texts considered the mantle in ambivalent and sometimes contradictory ways. Whether represented as covering the nude bodies of beggars, the armor of soldiers, or the satin of the elite, it appeared as a locus of fear and a mechanism of transformation. English writers simultaneously used Irishness to define Englishness and, at the same time, to contain the potential of Irishness to disrupt English identity.

The mantle was a heavy, thick woolen garment that extended between knee- and ankle-length. Sleeveless and relatively shapeless, it would have been placed over the shoulders and wrapped around the body, and it could be pulled up to cover the head as well. The popular English cloak, as a point of contrast, was usually shorter and often lined with velvet. There existed, of course, a broad range of both mantles and cloaks, from the rough and unadorned to the costly and ornate. In the case of mantles, though, while Irish texts might acknowledge such differences, their English counterparts rarely did so. In Spenser’s *A View of the State of Ireland*—a dialogue completed in 1596, entered in the Stationer’s Register two years later, but not published until 1633—Eudoxus, who represents England, describes the mantle as able to replace “housing, bedding, and clothing” (57).2 In fact, a 1599 request for supplies to equip English soldiers in Ireland included money for Irish mantles for this very reason and echoed Henry Wallop’s similar proposition from two years earlier, which was rejected partly “on the grounds of national preference” (Morgan 154).3 Wallop argued not only that mantles would cost less than English clothing but also that “any soldiers that hath seen the service of other countries and of this can inform your Honour [Sir Robert Cecil] that the solider must here of necessity use a mantle at all times for his lodging at night and to keep him dry in the day” (Calendar 359–60). He was answered that “English apparel will do best for English men” (381). Mentioned in Henry VIII’s Act for the English Order, which banned, among
other items of Irish clothing (and grooming), “any mantles, coat or hood made after the Irish fashion” (qtd. in Maxwell 113), the mantle survived as a focal point of English anxieties about cultural confusion into the early modern period and beyond. In the process of launching their attacks, English writers imposed a “national,” that is, “racial” identity on the Irish. And while the signifiers of this identity are important, the very idea of an Irish national consciousness is itself of fundamental significance. The creation of English national identity relied in part on the creation of an Irish nation in English discourse. That is to say, the idea of an English nation was necessarily co-produced with the idea of an Irish nation; English discourse on the mantle played a significant role by enlisting, paradoxically, an item of outerwear that one could easily put on or take off as a means of marking the Irish as essentially different.
Literary scholarship has increasingly, though with some challenges, considered Ireland as a colony, and the connections between English colonial activities and ambitions in Ireland and in the New World have been repeatedly demonstrated. However, because only the Irish Sea separates Ireland and England, their relationship took on a unique character that differentiated it from the relations defined by England’s other colonial projects. Andrew Murphy criticizes the tendency of critics to collapse “the various subjects of early modern colonialism . . . into a single community of the colonized” and to ignore the “crucial distinction separating the Irish on the one hand from the North American Indians, Caribbeans, and South American indigenes on the other” (4). He employs the term “proximity” to describe that distinction: “Ireland and Britain are ‘proximate’ in the sense that they lie close to each other geographically, but that geographical proximity has led to a complex relationship of closeness between the populations, so that, even by the sixteenth century, they had shared an extended political, ethnic, and religious heritage” (6).

The most intensive phase of interaction was violently established by the English invasion of Ireland in the late twelfth century. The descendants of these landowning settlers, who primarily lived in the English-controlled Pale surrounding the city of Dublin and retained their Catholicism, came to be known as the Old English, to be followed much later by the New English wave of Protestant settlers who came with the reconquest of Ireland under the Tudors. Indeed, most early modern English writers on Irish history, culture, and colonization draw on historiographical works composed in the 1180s: Gerald de Barri’s *Topographia Hibernica* (*The Topography of Ireland*) and the *Expugnation Hibernica* (*The Conquest of Ireland*). In turn, the fact that Gerald, a supporter of English colonization, sometimes borrows from an Irish source in *Topographia* provides a related kind of proximity, demonstrating the complicated interplay between the two cultures (Carroll 15).

For English writers, the proximity of Ireland to England exacerbated uncertainties regarding national identity, which English texts thus tended to foreground. While English authors labored to create, consolidate, and perpetuate a national identity, colonialist encounters with other cultures offered challenges to their construction of “Englishness.” Challenges to Englishness from a proximate other like the Irish proved especially troubling. The greater degree of apparent similarity and intersection in culture, politics, religion, and physical appearance meant that English writers had to deploy a separate set of markers of difference than those they used to write about colonial activity in
the New World. Physical (what we would call “racial”) and religious similarities between the Irish and English, not to mention centuries of political and military encounters, dictated that the English had to draw finer distinctions. Differences in law, culture, and genealogy take precedence in English writings on Ireland, reappearing with consistency from tract to tract. Less stable characteristics, such as language, processes of inheritance, hairstyles, and even which side of a horse a woman faces when she rides, become the primary loci of criticism of the Irish. While, for example, the unwashable blackness of African skin presented permanent visible difference, Irish clothing and hairstyle did not. Thus the identities that clothing and hairstyle separated became more easily changeable as well, resulting in an “inability to place the Irish population within comfortable categories” (Cavanagh 117). Like the permeable boundaries and contingent characteristics marking Turks and Moors, the blurred boundaries of Irishness, abetted by belief in the mutability of the individual, concomitantly unsettled definitions of Englishness.

One of the most significant of these tenuous markers of difference, often paired in English texts with the distinctive hairstyle known as the glib, is the Irish mantle. The beginnings of concern with Irish dress followed in the wake of the English invasion in the 1170s. English attacks on Irish dress attempted to naturalize and police the borders of national difference. If clothing, however, has the power to create and maintain national difference, then it necessarily also has the power to undermine it. The category “English” was especially challenged by Irish dress. If clothes make the Englishman, then what happens when those clothes cease to be entirely, or even primarily, English? Portia’s satirical declaration in The Merchant of Venice that the Englishman buys his “doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany” (1.2.62–63) and Thomas Dekker’s gibe in Seaven Deadly Sinnes of London that “an English-mans suite is like a traitors bodie that hath beene hanged, drewne, and quartered, and is set up in severall places” (59–60) testify to the influence of foreign fashions on English dress. European elements could be acceptably, if not without some protest, incorporated into English dress, but traditional Irish dress, because it signified a proximate national identity to the English imagination, was the constant target of calls for suppression and was even outlawed. Saffron-dyed clothing, as a point of comparison, was also strongly associated with the Irish and was prohibited by Henry VIII. It, however, did manage to attain popularity in England, and even in James’s court. Barnabe Rich, one of the most vituperative critics of the Irish, became so disgusted
with the English vogue for saffron dye that he actually endorsed the mantle in the 1618 “Epistle Dedicatory” to his scattershot collection of moral condemnations *The Irish Hubbub*: “For want of a better cloake, wherby to shelter these endeavours of my untutored pen, I have borrowed an Irish mantle” (A2r). For him, the modest mantle, as opposed to expensive saffron-colored clothing, “carrieth no shew of pride” (A2r). Yet, on the whole, the mantle, as the strongest symbol of Irish dress to the early modern English, remained unpopular in England. As a focus of anxieties about identity, it appears throughout sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writing on Ireland.

**Representing Irish Difference**

One way that English writers used the mantle to represent Irish difference was to connect it with sexuality and nudity. The linkage of Irish clothing and sexuality bespeaks the tension between, on the one hand, an attraction to the ways of the colonized people, and on the other hand, a fear that they might contaminate the English colonists. The problem of colonists’ transformation into native Irish preoccupied English writers on Ireland. Potential contamination was closely allied to ideas of Irish “increase” through cultural and sexual hybridization with the Old English, as well as through past and continued promiscuity. *A View of the State of Ireland* reacts against just such fears when Irenaeus, who represents Ireland, connects Irish dress with a centuries-old tradition of sexual censure:

Thus necessary and fitting is a mantle, for a bad man, and surely for a bad huswife it is no lesse convenient, for some of them that bee wandring woe men, called of them Mona-shul, it is halfe a wardrobe; for in Summer you shal fine her arrayed commonly but in her smock and mantle to be more ready for her light services: in Winter, and in her travaile, it is her cloake and safeguard, and also a coverlet for her lewd exercise. And when she hath filled her vessel, under it she can hide both her burden, and her blame; yea, and when her bastard is borne, it serves instead of swaddling clouts. (58)

Here, wearing a mantle promotes lightness and “lewd exercise,” not to mention bastardy. The ability of an Irish woman to hide her “burden” from English eyes speaks to the fear of an unregulated increase in an Irish population imagined with the stereotype of barbarian hordes in mind. Spenser’s text represents
Irish sexuality as a paradoxical blend of exposure and concealment, and employs it as a vehicle for various commonplaces about Irish barbarity. It repeats stereotypes about promiscuity, idleness, and a propensity for “wandring” due to a lack of agriculture or primogeniture. Irenaeus’s commonplaces about Irish nudity and sexuality resurface briefly in John Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612): Zanche, a Moor herself, tells Francisco, the Duke of Florence, who is disguised as a Moor, that she dreamed of him “stealing to my bed” (5.3.225). He replies, “I was a-dreamt on thee too; for methought / I saw thee naked” (5.3.227–28), and reveals his solution to her imagined nudity: “And lest thou shouldst take cold, I covered thee / With this Irish mantle” (5.3.230–31). The mantle’s surprising appearance in this context testifies to the dominance and longevity of the association between mantles and lascivious female sexuality, as well as that association’s intersection with weakly delimited and overlapping notions of foreignness.

Many writers tried to overlook practices in Irish dress that could result in any confusion over national identity. However, the construction by English authors like Spenser “of disparate economic groups within Ireland as one social category” (Carroll 40–41), all of whom wore a mantle over their naked bodies, did not stand unchallenged by other texts. During a 1535 visit to Sir John of Desmond, an Old English noble, Stephen Ap Parry wrote that Desmond’s nephew “keepeth his hair and cap after the English fashion” (qtd. in Palmer 43). Such a statement suggests a greater degree of overlap in markers of national identity, certainly among the upper ranks, than New English writers wished to acknowledge. In fact, there is evidence that even those well-off Irish who adopted fashionable English-style dress in the seventeenth century continued to top them with a mantle (Dunlevy 80). For example, Luke Gernon’s *Discourse of Ireland* (1620) acknowledges practices that could lead to a confusion of visible identity, pointing out that the “better sorte are appareled at all points like the English onely they retayne theyr mantle” (qtd. in Leeressen 57). Irish sources further sketch a picture of a luxuriously dressed Irish nobility far different from the nearly-nude thieves and rabble described by Spenser, Davies, and Jonson. An inner garment, an “ionar sróill” (“satin tunic”; 3: 268), figures prominently in one of Geoffrey Keating’s tales as well. These passages make plain the practice of wearing a shirt of some kind underneath an outer layer, or mantle. In “Aisling” (“A Vision”), sixteenth-century bardic poet Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn dreams of a woman who similarly wears “Brat corcra go gciomhshaibh sróil, / léine dheirgimeal ndeargóir” (lines 29–30) (“A purple
mantle with satin fringes, a red-bordered golden tunic”; 175). His poem “Ó Domhnuill” (“To Hugh O’Donnell”) refers to sumptuous clothing among the rewards given to bardic poets by their patrons:

Ní ar son gcuidh ná gcupadh n-óir,
Séad mbuadha nó brat ndonnsróil,
Frióth linn adhbhair na haoire
Ar dhamhraidh bhfinn bhFormaoile. (25–28)

It was not for the sake of cattle or golden goblets, precious jewels or mantles of red satin, that we found reasons for satirizing the fair warriors of Fermolye. (13)

The appearance of “sróll glan” (70), “bright satin” (27), of “mbruit chorcra” (69), “purple mantles,” and “d’ainnribh béaltana brat sróil, / . . . / ag cor chorthair iongnáith óir” (61–63), “of maidens mouth-slender of mantles of satin/ . . . / putting wonderful fringes of gold” in other of Ó hUiginn’s poems provides further hints of comparably expensive dress that did not fit easily into English categories of cultural identification. The higher status Irish, then, might not look much different from their stylish English counterparts, further denaturalizing national differences signified by dress. The mantle covers not only nationality and promiscuity, as in our previous examples, but also, disturbingly, the differences in rank that satin clothing, for example, should visibly signify.

However, persons below the rank of nobility must also have engaged in modes of apparel that challenged dominant English descriptions. Annála Ríoghachta Éireann (The Annals of Ireland, also known as The Annals of the Four Masters) for example, mentions the shoes, light clothes, and finely woven shirts of Hugh Roe O’Donnell and his companion when recounting their 1592 escape from prison (6: 1918–19). An entry concerning a 1597 battle led by O’Donnell against the English notes the role of the weather-appropriate clothing in the conflict: “Acht ba moa ro lá for muintir, Uí Domhnaill na frossa fer-thana h-íshin, inás for shlogh an ghobernora ar ro fhácaibhsiot a f-forbruta amhail remhebertmar. Nir bó samhlaidh tra don lucht n-áile badar eidighthe iad-suidhe os cenn a n-erradh dia n-ectair” (“These showers of rain did more injury to O’Donnell’s people than to the Governor’s army; for they the former had left their outer garments behind, as we have said before; but not so the others, they wore coverings over their battle dresses”; 6: 2034). The Annals also
makes regular reference to clothing as spoils of battle. Another entry from the *Annals* describes the actions of O’Donnell’s people after a battle earlier that same year: “Nír bó sodhaing riomh nó airemh ina ruccadh dumha, & d’iarann d’edach & duradh as in m-baile sin arna marach” (“It was not easy to enumerate or reckon the quantities of copper, iron, clothes, and habiliments, which they carried away from the town on the following day”; 6: 2008). The plundering of clothing as a valuable commodity on the order of mined metals occurs elsewhere in sixteenth-century entries in both *The Annals of the Four Masters* and *Annála Locha Cé* (*The Annals of Loch Cé*), while the Ó hUiginn poem “Máig Uidhir” (“To Cú Chonnacht Maguire”) further testifies to the commodity value of apparel, specifying as part of a reward “[t]ríocha colg—ní comha bheag— / tríocha brat, deich n-eich fichead, / trícha géirreann sídh iar soin” (73–75) (”[t]hirty blades—no small gift—thirty mantles, thirty steeds, and thirty sharp edges of the Sidh after that”). The distribution of such spoils, whether taken from the Irish or the English, along with their worth as items of exchange, must have meant that they were circulated across both socioeconomic and national boundaries, especially given the common heterogeneity of armies in both of these aspects. Due to such circulation, apparel in Ireland would again seem to tend toward the ambiguity that so disturbed English writers and English identity.

If writers used the mantle to define a cohesive Irishness through problematic sexuality and homogenized dress, they also used it to connect the Irish with more exotic and physically different colonial subjects, working to make the Irish more different and to reinforce the idea that clothing signified irreducible difference. Patricia Palmer notes that Englishmen deliberately drew parallels between the Irish and native Americans, partly by positing an equivalency in dress: “When Shane O’Neill entered the court of Elizabeth with galloglasses attired in saffron shirts and ‘rough hairy Cloakes’, the courtiers ‘admired no lesse, than they should at this day to see those of China, or America’” (21). Similarly, John White, the Governor of Roanoke and an illustrator, writes of “an Indian pulling a knife from that most stereotypically Irish of garments, a ‘mantell’” (Palmer 157). The discourse pertaining to Irish apparel thus functioned in connection with representations of a range of colonial others.

Interestingly, the anonymous pamphlet *Hic Mulier: Or, The Man-Woman* (1620) does something slightly different with dress, Irishness, and the exotic. It presents a relationship among several types of foreign others, women who alter their (already mutable) bodies with masculine clothing, and civil and colonial
rule. The author asks what can be more barbarous than for women to “mould their bodies to every deformed fashion. . . . If this bee not barbarous, make the rude Scithian, the untamed Moore, the naked Indian, or the wild Irish, Lords and Rulers of well governed Cities” (Bv). Supposedly, unacceptable choices in apparel could lead to the sort of identity confusion that results in such horrific inversions as rule by the wild Irish.

The mantle figures importantly in John Davies’s *A Discovery of the True Causes Why Ireland Was Never Entirely Subdued* (1612) and Ben Jonson’s *The Irish Masque at Court*, which, along with Spenser’s *View*, are the most commonly discussed late Elizabethan and early Jacobean works dealing with Ireland. *A View* takes up the issue of the mantle while arguing a Scythian rather than Spanish descent for the Irish. The English Eudoxus objects that “most nations of the world aunciently used the mantle” (Spenser 56). At least one Continental writer, Paolo Giovio, had made the same connection in a 1548 work when he compared the mantle to the Roman toga in order to accomplish what Carroll calls a “magnification of Irish virtue” (139). Irenaeus rejects and dismantles this competing lineage, claiming that the mantle disappeared from use after the fall of the Roman Empire and “in this later age of the world, . . . it was renewed and brought in againe by . . . Northerne Nations” in Europe (Spenser 57). Irenaeus thereby severs the Irish from the context of Western Europe and its civilized Graeco-Roman tradition and links them instead to barbarians involved in “perpetual warres” (57). Depicting Irishness as unchanged and unchanging elided any cultural hybridization that had taken place since the first English invasion and thus maintained a division between English and Irish identities.

The rejection of the mantle in *A View* parallels the rejection of the Irish language and stems from similar anxieties about the fluidity of national identity. When Irenaeus characterizes the mantle as “a fit house for an out-law, a meet bed for a rebel, and an apt cloke for a theife” (57), much of his elaboration on this point depends upon fears of disguise, concealment, and mutable identity. He notes the ability of a “rebel” or criminal to conceal himself in the woods or to “under his mantle goe privily armed without suspicion of any” (58).

**From Representation to Policy**

One response to the fear of identity confusion was to advocate changing the Irish through clothing. Davies wrote the *Discovery* at a historical moment when
he believed that armed conflict with Ireland was at an end, but the cessation of open hostilities does not alter the key aspects of the colonial discourse that runs through his text. Davies notes, for example, that one law aimed at “the abolishing of their [the Irish] barbarous customs and manners” such as “ap- pearl and riding in saddles” was ineffective because it applied penalties only to the English and because it was “made only to reform the degenerate English,” not “for the reformation to the mere [i.e., native] Irish” (140). In other words, Davies believed that merely trying to prevent English identity from taking on Irish characteristics was not enough—and that it would be more effective to eliminate those Irish characteristics at their source. His description of the rebellion against the English government by one family of such “degenerate Eng- lish” (in other words, Old English, who had been in Ireland long enough to become suspiciously Hibernicized) offers the standard connections between clothing, language, and national identity: “They changed their names, lan- guage, and apparel, and all their civil manners and customs of living” (181). The phrase recurs almost exactly when Davies returns to discussing the statutes outlawing Irish “customs and manners” and claims that the English colonists during the time of Edward III “were at that time become mere Irish in their language, names, apparel, and all their manner of living” (188).

Rich had two years earlier expressed a similar sentiment, common in tracts on Ireland: “It is holden for a Maxime in Ireland, that ten English will sooner become Irish, then one Irish will be found to turne English” (A New Description 34). The obsessive fear of crossing those boundaries—of becoming Irish—prompted attacks by English writers, including Spenser, on the Old English who had adopted varying degrees of Irish clothing, speech, and customs. That many of these writers spent more ink on condemning the Old English, or English Irish, than the Gaelic Irish illustrates the intensity of their fears of “degeneration” through contact with the proximate other. Further, as David Beers Quinn observes, due to the “increased coming and going between Ireland and England . . . , in English minds, the distinction, if it had ever been a clear one, between the Old English and the Irish from Ireland had become blurred,” and though the Old English conceived of themselves quite differently, in England they “were thought of simply as Irishmen” (160). Despite Irenaeus’s subsequent refutation, Eudoxus’s comment about the Englishmen wearing their hair in a way that resembled glibs implicitly equates the English and the Irish. This highlights the potential slippage between identities and the difficulties posed by so readily alterable marks of difference as hair and
clothing. This was particularly problematic in a culture in which people believed that clothes could “give a nature to what had no nature; they take an existing nature and transnature it, turning the virtuous into the vicious, the strong into the weak, the male into the female, the godly into the satanic” (Jones and Stallybrass, Renaissance 4)—or the English into the Irish.26

Davies approvingly cites Poynings’ Act, which stipulated that “the lords of Ireland should appear in the like parliament robes as the English lords are wont to wear in the parliaments of England” so that “the parliaments of Ireland might want no decent or honorable form that was used in England” (198). Davies assumes that to make the Irish English in their choice of clothing is to make them English in their laws and behaviors, a transformation that reproduces English ideas of governance and nationhood. Moreover, he claims that “civil assemblies at assizes and sessions have reclaimed the Irish from their wildness; caused them to cut off their glibs and long hair, to convert their mantles to cloaks” (217). Here, as in Spenser, Irish clothing is part of a complex of markers that produce and patrol the borders of national identity. However, as also happens in A View, that identity remains highly unstable. The very impulse to “reformation” assumes that the Irish can, to an extent that is never fully articulated, be made English, while the consistent use of forms of the word degeneration to describe English persons who take on Irish characteristics implies a relationship of the colonist to the proximate other in which the latter is somehow already present in the former.27

The interpenetration of English identity with its proximate other in Ireland appears explicitly in Jonson’s Irish Masque at Court, performed during the Christmastide festivities of 1613. The masque begins with a stage direction that specifies the entrance of “a fellow attir’d like a citizen: after him, three or foure foote-men.” Unless the fellow dressed as a citizen enters and remains unspeaking on the sidelines for the entire masque, we must assume that he is Dennise, one of the four Irishmen specified in the text. Dennise appears throughout to be the leader of the group, and he “vash borne in te English payle” (line 54). So, the audience immediately encounters the liminal figure of an Irishman, born in the English-controlled portion of Ireland, who speaks in a stage Irish accent but dresses like an Englishman. Donnell, one of his compatriots, points out further identity confusion when he complains about not being recognized as an ambassador: “Ish it te fashion, to beate te Imbasheters, here? ant knoke ’hem o’ te heads, phit te phoit stick?” (9–10). The Irish characters are identified simultaneously as ambassadors and undesirables or interlopers; they are beaten because
they do not look like they belong. After briefly expressing confusion over which person is the king, they deliver their message that James has many loyal subjects in Ireland who love him and would willingly fight for him. Thus they ask James, “Be not angry wit te honesh[t] men, for te few rebelsh, & knauesh” (117–18).

Despite the assertion that most Irish were loyal English subjects, the image of the naked Irishman, often associated with rebels and thieves, does make an appearance. The footmen’s masters planned to dance before the court, but there has been an incident with their clothing: “But tey vere leeke to daunsh naked, an’t pleash ty mayesty; for te villainous wild Irish sheas have casht away all ter fine cloysh” (72–74). The well-dressed Irish have been unable to cross the Irish Sea, the physical boundary between England and Ireland, without being reduced to at least symbolic nakedness. Now they sit “like poore men i’ te porsh yonder,” clothed only in Irish mantles (130). In one sense, the crossing has stripped them of their visible identity; in another, it has made them identifiably Irish, which the fine clothes would not have done.

The complications in national identity only increase as the masque progresses. After the footmen dance to “the bag-pipe, and other rude musique” (136), “the Gentlemen dance forth a dance in their Irish mantles, to a solemne musique of harpes” (140–41). Non-speaking roles in the scripted portion of masques were often performed by members of the court, so the gentlemen dancers would likely have been courtiers dressed as Irishmen who had previously had clothes more like those of Englishmen. Interrupting, one of the footmen asks how James likes the dance and wishes that the dancers “had fine cloyshs now, and liveries, like tine own men” (144–45). Another adds, “[b]ut te rugs make t’em shrug a little” (146). Wearing rugs, or mantles, rather than fine clothes like James’s “own men,” causes the dancers to shrug and creates imperfections in the dance’s expression of love and loyalty to the English state as embodied in James. Perhaps the most interesting twist on national identity comes after one of the gentlemen, speaking unaccented English, banishes the Irish footmen to “some place, / Fit for their wildnesse” (151–52) and the courtiers resume their dance. They are accompanied by a singing bard, and during a song that advises, “[b]ow your heads at once and hearts / Obedience doth not well in parts” (159–60), they “let fall their mantles and discover their masquing apparel, then dance forth” (167–68). The climax of Jonson’s masque reverses English degeneration into Irishness, with its attendant suggestion of the attractiveness of the Irish other, and performs the desires of the New English reformers who would turn the Irish into obedient English subjects by stripping them of their mantles. As
in Spenser and other English writers, the Irish lords here are supposedly naked beneath their mantles, and Jonson suggests that it is only by virtue of “James’s beneficent royal gaze” that they turn out to be “newly clothed” (Iyengar 88), meaning newly English.

The power of James’s gaze apparently does not extend to the bard, who comments on the change but does not himself transform. Lauren Shohet observes that the *Irish Masque* “actually unravels several different models of courtly power” (128). She concentrates, however, on the shifts in speech and music, arguing that “the royal gaze changes the spectacle in only a relatively trivial way (when the ‘Irishmen’ drop their mantles to reveal the underlying courtiers)” (130–31). Although perhaps not as striking as other masque effects, letting fall the mantles would have registered as a far from trivial change. Andrew Murphy terms the *Irish Masque* “a vacuous dream of transformation,” but there are pressing anxieties about English identity that necessitate the “dream of transformation” (149) in the first place. Who exactly are the mantled masquers supposed to be—mere Irish? Old English? New English? The dancers had been dressed like English courtiers to begin with, and had to be stripped of their fine clothes by the sea and re-clothed in Irish mantles to make clear the movement from one category of national identity to another. The ambiguity of English subjects who become or already are “Irish” before their climactic reversion to Englishness literally performs the degeneration observed in the Old English and feared in the New as much as it does the reformation of the Irish. And once again, such transformations are as easy as taking up or letting fall a mantle.

To return to Spenser, let us recall that Irenaeus explicitly underscores how the mantle obscures identity and complicates English powers of identification and surveillance. The Irishman, for example, “can, in his mantle passe through any town or company, being close hooded over his head” (58). Here, as often occurs, the glib is immediately invoked alongside with the mantle. Irenaeus asserts that “the Irish glibbes, they are as fit maskes as a mantle is for a thief” (59) because the hair can be pulled down over the face or cut so as to render a man “nothing like himselfe” (59). His description foregrounds the association of the mantle with the alleged barbarousness and criminality of the native Irish. Presumably, though, the glib and mantle could have provided an equally good disguise for an Englishman, and indeed, Irenaeus’s observation closely follows Eudoxus’s remark that “our Englishmen take it up in such a generall fashion to weare their haire so immeasurably long, that some of them exceed
the longest Irish glibs” (59). When the English begin to resemble the Irish by sight, it creates an intensely problematic weak point in national boundaries.

Irish Representations

English attempts to stamp out Irish dress operated in the service of eliminating Irishness as a disruptive category of self-identification. Irish responses to such attempts are both more difficult to reconstruct and less rigidly programmatic. Nevertheless, an effort to address that absence is worth undertaking because an increase in attention to Irish texts by critics outside of Irish Studies continues to reproduce this same absence, addressing only the viewpoints advanced by the New English. While this essay does juxtapose Irish and English sources, I have attempted to avoid what Patricia Palmer criticizes as the literary critical restriction of Irish literature that would make it a mere “verso to the recto world of English discourse and perceptions” (“Missing Bodies” 390). Ultimately, Irish texts may exhibit less anxiety about apparel and its hybridization than English texts simply because Irish identity did not depend upon the same sort of nationalistic self-image that the English constructed. This contrast sheds further light on questions of the mantle’s place in both the English imagination and Elizabeth’s Rainbow Portrait.

The type of proto-anthropological invective found throughout Protestant English texts on Ireland is almost entirely absent from Irish sources of the same period. Early vague references in Annála Rioghacha Éireann and Annála Locha Cé (The Annals of Loc Cé) to Saxons, Briton, Norse, and Flemish peoples as “foreigners” eventually resolve into more consistent delineations, and later still the categories of foreigner and “English” come to be more regularly equivalent. However, Englishness does not often come under detailed analysis in Irish texts in the same way that Irishness does in English texts. Several annals (including Annála Connacht [The Annals of Connacht]) present the Irish fighting alongside the English as often as against them and praise both English and Irish warriors and lords according to the same standards, most often involving prowess in battle, learning, and generosity. In bardic poetry, the other largest body of early modern Irish material, while “a recognizable and characteristic attitude is taken towards the lower-class Gaels, only the barest hints of a distinctive character attributed specifically to the Foreigners emerge” (Leerssen 201). The poetry’s highly stylized nature, the patronage system under which it was produced, its extremely specific intended audience (the patron himself or
one of his family members), and the social status of the bardic poets—all of these ensured that the bardic tradition often lacks any nationally oriented political content and almost entirely lacks reactions to English dress or English laws on Irish dress. The passage of laws prescribing death for bardic poets without proof of a patron only exacerbated the situation, as an English lord would be as good a patron as an Irish lord. It is ironic, therefore, that the bard is often made to represent Irishness, which is the case in Spenser’s View, James Shirley’s St. Patrick for Ireland (1639–40), and Jonson’s Irish Masque.32

Irish texts do sometimes explicitly demonstrate a concern with apparel as a marker of national identities. There, however, identity often appears as more adaptable and thus, paradoxically, more resilient. The story of a coming conflict between Hugh Roe O’Donnell’s forces and the English in both Annála Rioghachta Éireann (6: 2000–01) and Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Uí Dhombnaill (The Life of Aodh Ruadh O Domhnaill) exoticizes the English army partly through its battlefield accoutrements. Beatha claims that the Irish were full of terror of the English soldiers

ar allmardhacht a ninnill 7 a nèccuisce 7 ar iongnaithe a nerradh 7 a nèr-labra 7 la fogarthorman a ttrompadh 7 a ttapúr 7 a ccaismert catha la grain 7 géréaitc ã ngaiscced 7 a ngallarm ar narbhó hadhma eolaigh Erendaigh riamh gósin. (Ó Clérigh 34)

on account of the strangeness of their weapons and appearance and the novelty of their armour and speech and the loud noise of their trumpets and tabours and war music, together with the horror and peculiarity of their warriors and their strange arms for the Irish had no knowledge of them before this. (Ó Clérigh 35)33

The text foregrounds the exotic arms and armor of the English five more times, in very similar language.34

Given English stereotypes describing hordes of faceless, glib-oblscrbed Irish, it is important to note that one passage from Beatha includes the comment that English armor hides the face and obscures identity (175). As the narrative proceeds, however, the Irish soldiers begin to absorb some of these English markers of identity, using the foreign armor and weapons themselves. In fact, in 1595, Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone, “surprised his opponents by confronting them in battle with forces trained, armed, and garbed [in red coats] like
themselves” (Murphy 105). O’Neill’s adoption of English apparel in this attack bodily enacts English fears surrounding hybridization. If, as Declan Kiberd writes, “the Irish were not foils to the English so much as mirrors” (15), then here the English found themselves set upon by their own image. Here, there is also the suggestion of a fear that, while English identity can degenerate into Irishness, Irish identity might remain resiliently in place even in English clothing.

English concern over the Irish mantle as a cultural symbol gained widespread currency because the newly constructed English national identity turned out to be disturbingly fluid when tested by the similarity-in-difference of the Irish. English writers deployed garments as markers of social identity as much to shore up Englishness as to render Irishness barbaric. Indeed, the two processes were inseparable. The Irish did not reciprocate in the same way because, to use Kiberd’s phrase, “the English helped invent Ireland” (i); the Gaelic order consisted of multiple centers of local authority bound by common traditions rather than the institutionalized laws of a nation-state. Thus “the Irish could not visualize the nation as a whole because it did not exist for them” (Wibberly 97). Ireland as a unified body politic was not truly part of the construction of Irish identity until the reign of James II. Therefore, there was no need for the Irish to patrol the boundaries of “Irishness” as vigorously or in the same proto-anthropological manner as the English did. Indeed, in the same way that Irish annals “continually reshaped” the “descriptions of the positions of English administrators . . . to make them part of the existing order” (Gillespie 191), Irish identity was more able to absorb or confront English influences without anxiety—which, in many ways, is exactly what the English feared.

A lesser degree of anxiety about the fluidity of identity, however, does not mean that the Irish could not and did not employ and manipulate the political symbolism offered by apparel. Actions such as Hugh O’Neill’s adoption of English garb for his soldiers, the discarding of English attire by the sons of the (Old English) Earl of Clanricarde to symbolize their rebellion in 1572 and after their escape from prison in 1576, and the adoption by the Earl of Thomond during his own rebellion of the dress of a Gaelic chieftain all challenged the assumptions of English colonialism in Ireland and employed the shortcomings of those assumptions to political advantage. Gestures such as these played on the fears of the Protestant English and turned their own system of signification against them, as the Irish had done with English weapons and training.

Within both English- and Irish-language texts and practices, Irish apparel—the mantle in particular—interacted in a volatile manner with the lack
of a nationally based Irish identity and the instability of the relatively new English nationalism. National identity was figured as variously hidden, revealed, or transformed by the Irish mantle. The mantle thereby emblematized the very mutability of identity that both generated and consistently undercut English rhetoric surrounding the project of colonizing and reforming Ireland. Perhaps Elizabeth chose to be painted in this powerful and problematic garment for exactly these reasons. As the literal embodiment of national identity, her wearing a mantle functioned as an assertion that Englishness would not, in fact, degenerate in the face of Irishness; it might even adapt Irishness to its own purposes and subordinate it to Englishness. The queen’s use of the Irish mantle to display her dominion over Ireland and to exhibit the resilience of English identity demonstrates what a powerful place it occupied both in the English imagination and in imagining Englishness.

NOTES

1. Neill calls the portrait “the last of a series of great royal icons in which the queen identified the idea of the nation with the display of her own royal body” (370). Eyes and ears cover her apparel, and she “boldly appropriates the most threatening of all images of degeneration.” Neill writes: “it is now the queen who assumes the Irish cloak of inscrutability, here emblazoned, however, with the signs of her all-seeing power” (370). Fischlin complicates Neill’s reading: “The flip side of Neill’s reading, however, is that such an inquisitorial perspective subjects the sovereign as well, her putative inscrutability and panoptic power being dependent on the demonized Irish ‘other’ who literally and figuratively clothes her and gives her political and military substance, while also symbolically embodying the spouse she never took” (200–01).

2. This list of attributes resonates with English condemnation of the supposedly nomadic Irish lifestyle.

3. Jones and Stallybrass discuss this incident as well; see “Dismantling” 168.

4. Palmer and Gillespie, for example, both argue that early modern Ireland occupies a liminal state that is neither wholly kingdom nor colony. See Palmer, Language, 11–12 and Gillespie, 204–05.

5. Gillingham argues persuasively for the term English rather than Norman or Anglo-Norman based on contemporary sources (29–32). He also argues against the common use of “Gerald of Wales” to refer to Gerald de Barri (33).

6. Carroll, similarly to Murphy, refers to Ireland as a “proximate other” (22) and suggests a consideration of early modern Ireland within a larger European context due to its longstanding interrelationship with the Continent.

7. One interesting example is the anonymous 1643 broadsheet “The Kingdomes Monster Uncloaked from Heaven,” which resorts to a large image of a many-headed Irish and Catholic monster to create visible difference, but in which the hat-wearing Irish heads are still not readily identifiable as Irish.

8. The glib is long in the front, with the rest of the head shaved above the ears, and was criticized by the English as allowing the hair to fall over the eyes. Dunlevy notes that, ironically, it may have been the result of the success of an earlier English ban on the contrasting
culan, in which the front of the head was shaved (55). This reaction shows the Irish, like the English, antagonistically producing visible signifiers of nationality. See Dunlevy’s \textit{Dress in Ireland} for a useful account of Irish apparel from early Ireland through the end of the nineteenth century.

9. See Gillingham, who notes, “Already in the twelfth century there were worries that the newcomers were running the risk of being infected by the barbarous Irish” (28).

10. The varied selection of quotations that Palmer provides in order to illustrate the perception of sixteenth-century English reformers of the “hibernicisation of the original colonizers” (41–42) is notable for the consistency with which the writers pair apparel with speech.


12. For the complex status of saffron dye in James’s court, see Jones and Stallybrass, \textit{Renaissance} 68–77.

13. As he prepares to conclude his tract, Rich takes some time to blame the English for teaching the Irish pride in dress and hair (see 47–50; also, cf. Rich, \textit{A New Description} 34–35). This contrasts with the common image of dirty or (nearly) nude Irish men and women, but it is also important in that, while using the Irish to condemn contemporary English culture, it assumes a measure of success in the project to make the Irish adopt that culture. The full title of the piece, \textit{The Irish Hubbub, Or, The English Hue and Crie}, also creates a sense of hybrid identity as it creates an equivalence between the two expressions, significant not least because he adopts the former throughout, raising “the Hubbub” about various English moral failings (1–2).

14. In resistance to denaturalizing identity, perceptions of the Irish came to center on “a violent and instinctive antipathy to Irish marriage law which, like Irish dress, was believed to lead to sexual sinfulness on a massive scale” (Gillingham 28–29).

15. One notes, for instance, the “massive desertions by English troops in Ireland, many of whom seem to have happily changed sides or settled down to live in Ireland . . . [and who] did not consider themselves irrevocably, or even deeply, ‘English’” (Jones and Stallybrass, \textit{Renaissance} 57).

16. See Quinn 7–9 for a useful summary of these bases for English feelings of superiority.

17. Thanks to Jerry Kelly of The Gerry Tobin Irish Language School for consultations about the Irish translations in this essay. Translations are from sources cited unless noted.

18. All citations of Ó hUiginn’s poetry in the original Irish refer to the line numbers in volume 1. Citations of the translations refer to page numbers in volume 2, in which the lines are unnumbered. Line numbers here refer to the first of two poems under the title “Ó Domhnuill,” pages 19–36 in volume 1.

19. The translations here are mine and Jerry Kelly’s. The quotations occur in the poems “Lios Gréine,” “Éamonn Búrc” (the second by this title in the volume), and “Inis Ceithleann” respectively.

20. Wearing shoes is significant in light of the common English practice of illustrating the Irish as barefoot.


22. Galloglasses were heavily armed footsoldiers (from the Irish \textit{gallógaigh}). Saffron was also outlawed by Henry VIII’s Act for the English Order.

23. See Quinn 23–27 for further examples, through 1640, of equivalencies drawn between the apparel of the Irish and that of Russians, Native Americans, and Africans.
24. In contrast to the English campaign to annihilate the Irish language, an entry for the year 1579 in *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* (*The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*) commends multilingualism. It praises Theobald Burke, son of the chieftain of Castleconnell, not only for his military prowess but also for his “foghlaim bérla & bésccna” (“knowledge of the English language and the law” s: 1717). The suppression of the Irish came to figure in the later characterizations of the English in bardic poetry, as in these Cromwell-era lines by Dáibhí Cúndún: “Ní fhoidhnid teagasg ar Laidin ná ar Gaelge/ Ná d’aon bheith gasdá ‘sa healadhnaibh saora” (“They do not tolerate the proper knowledge of Latin or Irish,/ nor that anyone should be well versed in the liberal arts”; qtd. in Leerssen 251).

Burke was a descendant of the Old English and a cousin of James FitzMaurice, a key figure in the second Desmond Rebellion, during which Burke was killed fighting on the side of Elizabeth I. He was also an example of a generational shift in the Irish peerage toward learning English (Palmer 144–45). Attributed to Dáibhidh Uí Bhruadair, “Scéal do scail” (“Through tearful Banbha news hath spread”) shows a similar lack of discomfort with hybrid identity, eulogizing its subject as “don phlannda ghallda ghaedhlach” (“thou Norman Irish plant”; 14). I have rendered all quotations from this volume in Roman script and any consonant with a *buailte* as a consonant followed by an “h.” In addition, because translations are found on facing pages, and lines are unnumbered, my citations are of the pages of the Irish originals.

For a complicating viewpoint, see “Nach ait an nós” (“How queer this mode”) (1643 and 1662 or after are both proposed as date; the poem is included in Uí Bhruadair). It attacks those who entirely abandon one language for another and speak nothing but “garbhbhéarla” (“strident/crude English”; 18–19). See also “Créacht do dháil me” (“A fateful wound hath made of me” [1652]), in which “Céada atá dá rádh mar ghallaibh” (“Hundreds are proclaiming themselves as English”; 30), which involves both speaking English and dressing above their station (37). “Is olc an ceart” (“’Twould be an act of shabbiness” [1660?]) takes a similar jab at speaking English (83).

25. See Murphy 80–96 for a discussion of these concerns (in the context of Ireland) in the *Faerie Queene*.

26. See Jones and Stallybrass, “Dismantling Irena,” on Irish clothing in general, and especially 168 on Spenser’s retelling in his *View* of how clothing the Lydians in women’s garments rendered them civil and tractable and the implications of that success for dealing with the Irish.

27. Rather than, say, *transformation* or a more closely related word: *turning* Turk, for example.

28. Complicating the realization of this dream, Shohet notes, would have been the national identities of the performers and audience themselves: “No royalty at this court celebration of English ascendancy over Irish idiom is English, or speaks without accent. The King, his children, the bridegroom, and five of the masquers are Scottish; the Queen is Danish” (134–35). Interestingly, a contemporaneous parliament (1613–15) would enact “the removal of some of the legislation against Irish dress and customs, though not language” (Gillespie 194).

29. Rich makes a similar connection, avowing that “the uncivil sort so disfigure themselves with their Glybs, their Trowes, and their mishapen attire” (*A New 15*). The glib is often used to quickly establish barbarity in English writing. Elsewhere, Rich records one of a group of “Roaring Boyes” as sporting “a long lowesie locke hung dangling by his eare, like a Derry Irish Glybei” (*The Irish Hubbub* 37). A character in Dekker’s *The Whore of Babylon* reports that his men had their throats “cut by Kernes, whose haires like elf-locks hang”; a second character continues that a single one “of those shamrock eaters at one breakfast, / Slit
fourscore wezand-pipes of ours” (5.4.97–99). Dekker also writes in The Guls Horn-Booke that in the distant past it “was free for all Nations to have shaggy pates, as it is now onely for the Irishman.” Shakespeare’s Richard the Second, too, makes a reference to “rough rug-headed kerns, / Which live like venom where no venom else / But only they have privilege to live” (2.1.157–59), and his 2 Henry VI compares one character to “a shag-haired crafty kern” (3.1.1367). Even a visitor to the country might absorb this connection. A German witness to the 1584 Accession Day tilt records that some “of the servants were disguised like savages, or Irishmen, with the hair hanging down to the girdle like women” (qtd. in Strong 134).

30. The surviving poetic exceptions often deal with social status, as in Ó Bruadair’s worry in ranns 23 and 24 of “Créacht do dháil me” (“A fateful wound hath made of me”; 37) about those who speak English and dress above their station.

31. Annála Lochá Cé still refers, though, for example, to Elizabeth as “the Saxon Queen” (398) in a 1567 entry.

32. See Palmer, “Missing” 378–81 on the bard in Spenser’s View, where she finds “no native voice,” and for her critique that the “bard holds no real interest for . . . critics; he enters their discourse only when his identity merges with Spenser’s” (379).

33. A “7” in the quotation represents the modern rendering of manuscript shorthand for “agus” (“and”). The translation itself is taken from Ó Cléirigh.

34. See pages 65, 103, 149, 175, and 223.

35. See Leerssen 223. Ellis traces this development linguistically: “Traditionally, the Irish had been the Gaedhil, those of Gaelic speech, law, and custom inhabiting parts of Ireland and Scotland, as opposed to the Gaill, or ‘foreigners’, inhabiting other parts of the British Isles, who were English by speech, law and custom. By c. 1670, however, those Gaedhil and Gaill who were living in Ireland and were part of this new Irish nation were described as Éireannaigh—the people of Ireland” (58).

36. Nor is it to say that Irish writers did not attack the “foreigners.” They, however, did not attack them in the same proto-racial manner as the English, but most often for their lack of education, their deceitfulness, and their hold over traditionally Irish land. The often patron-specific nature of bardic poetry was also more likely to result in distinctions between individual lords, whether they were English, Old English, or Irish.

37. See Canny 142–43 for the rebellions of the sons of Clanricarde and of Thomond.

Works Cited


