

**HUMAN SACRIFICE AND  
SEVENTEENTH-  
CENTURY ECONOMICS:  
OTWAY'S *VENICE  
PRESERV'D***

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Whereas human sacrifice in Virgil is inseparable from Aeneas' mission, Tasso and his imitators repeatedly oppose Christian imperialism to the practice of human sacrifice, and see such imperialism as culminating in the abolition of cannibalistic sacrifice in the New World. The contrary view?? That European civilization itself embodied forms of sacrificial barbarity appears not only in the well-known condemnations of conquistador atrocities but, in England, in critical accounts of the growing culture of measurement, enumeration, and monetary exchange. Answering the contention that the East Indies trade did not justify the sacrifice of lives that it entailed, Dudley Digges responded by citing Neptune's justification in the Aeneid of the sacrifice of Palinurusto the cause of empire: "unum pro multis [dabitur caput]." Not all authors were, however, so complacent. Particularly in the late seventeenth-century, authors such as Dryden, Otway, and Aphra Behn came to see the burgeoning trading economy as embodying systems of exchange which, in reducing the individual to an economic cipher, recreated the primal exchanges of human sacrifice. In *Venice Preserv'd* (1682), for example, Otway depicts an advanced, seventeenth-century trading empire, initially regulated by clocks, calendars, documents, and coinage. As the play proceeds, these are increasingly revealed to be elaborations of more primitive forms of exchange. A perpetually imminent regression to pre-social anarchy is staved off by what Otway portrays as the originary forms of economic transaction: the submissive offering of weapons to potential foes (daggers change hands far more often than coins) or the offering of the body in the act of human sacrifice.

Taking a hint from Achilles' sacrifice of the Trojan youths at Patroclus' funeral,<sup>1</sup> Virgil turned the place of human sacrifice in history into one of the major concerns of the *Aeneid*, portraying it as a perpetual condition and cost of civilization. If one immerses oneself in the flood of Renaissance and Baroque epics that christianised Virgil's imperial theme —epics of Christian conquest

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<sup>1</sup>*Iliad* XXIII. 175-177. Homer's vocabulary is not sacrificial, and Dennis D. Hughes (1991: 49-60) has argued that the incident is not even a relic of forgotten sacrificial rituals. When Plato condemns the incident in the *Republic* (I. Burnet 1902, 391b), he describes the killings as *sphagai*, which suggests sacrificial killing, and when Virgil imitates the incident in the *Aeneid* in his account of the funeral of Patroclus, the verb he uses is "immolet" (*Aeneid* X, 519 [Hirtzel 1900]). In David's painting of the funeral of Patroclus, the killings are performed by a priest.

such as Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1575) and its various imitations, such as Girolamo Graziani's *Il Conquisto di Granata* (1650) and Pierre Le Moyne's *Saint Louys* (1658) —one discovers that, like the quest and the imperialistic mission, the eradication of human sacrifice was almost an obligatory point of reference in the epic;<sup>2</sup> greatly transmuted, all three topics of course profoundly shape *Paradise Lost*. Virgil, however, sees the sacrificial impulse as ineradicable: in the final event of the poem, Aeneas' slaying of Turnus, the verb with which the defeated antagonist is dispatched is "immolat" (XII, 949). Writing in the aftermath of the conquest of the New World, by contrast, the Catholic epic poets celebrate a Christian expansionism that triumphs over barbarous sacrificial cults. A particularly detailed example is provided by the French Jesuit neo-Latin poet Pierre Mambrun (Petrus Mambrunus), who in the 1650s published a work of epic theory accompanied by a Christian equivalent to the entire Virgilian corpus: eclogues, a four-book Georgics of the soul (*De Cultura Animi*), on the four cardinal virtues, and a twelve-book epic: *Idololatria Debollata; sive, Constantinus*. In the "Fortitude" book of *De Cultura Animi*, Mambrun sees an approval of human sacrifice as a defining evil of the *Iliad* and *Aeneid*,<sup>3</sup> and the paganism which Constantine defeats relies on human sacrifice. Immediately after Constantine's antagonist Licinius has sacrificed his own wife, however, there is a divine vision of the future unfolding of history, clearly modelled on Jupiter's exposition in *Aeneid* I, in which Jupiter's teleological goal —Augustan Rome— is replaced by the spread of Christianity to the New World where, in dreadful parody of the Eucharist, men drink human blood from golden cups (pp. 305-10; Book XII). The final event of the poem recreates the duel of Aeneas and Turnus, but on this occasion there is no immolation, for Licinius is spared.

Of course, ever since Las Casas there were plenty of commentators on Christian imperialism who thought that the real sacrificial barbarians in the New World were the European invaders, and I should here like to concentrate on a new framework for defining the relationship between empire and sacrifice, and of defining the sacrificial processes *within* European civilization, that to the best of my knowledge was at this stage confined to Britain. It relates to the rising culture of measurement, enumeration, chronometry, and monetary exchange, which creative writers often felt reduced human beings to transactional ciphers in ways that re-enacted primitive rituals of human sacrifice (in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer were broadly of the same view). Protesting in 1615 about the human cost of the East India trade, John Kayll complained of the "labors and liues" that had been "sacrificed to that implacable

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<sup>2</sup>For fuller discussion of human sacrifice in the early modern epic, see D. Hughes (2001).

<sup>3</sup>P. Mambrun (1661: 79-82). An earlier version of the epic, *Constantinus, sive Idololatria debollata*, was published at Paris in 1658.

East Indian Neptune” (Kayll 1615: 28-29). Replying in defence of the East India trade, the elder Dudley Digges sustained the idea of sacrifice to Neptune, but at the same time sanctioned it, citing that most memorable statement of the sacrificial principle in the *Aeneid*: (as Neptune in the Poet said)

*Vnus erit amissum tantum quem in gurgite quaerent,  
Vnum pro multis [dabitur caput].*<sup>4</sup>

In Virgil, however, the lines define the individual’s place in the great historical cause. Digges writes more like an accountant, entering “unum caput” in the debit column and “multis” in the credit. Result, happiness, as Mr Micawber would have it.

It is well known that an immense change in the technology and cultural dominance of calculation started in the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> In a work published in 1686, Sir William Petty reflected on the differing rates of population growth in London and the rest of the country, and predicted a demographic crisis by the year 1842 (Petty 1686: 20). Individuals become terms in equations whose solution takes centuries. Both Thomas Culpepper the Elder and Sir Josiah Child argued that the Israelites flourished as God’s chosen people because the ban on usury enforced zero interest rates (Culpepper 1668: 20; Child 1690: 28). Providential history is a narrative less of divine moral vision—as it was for Mambrun—than of divine economic planning. One minor symptom of the growing cult of measurement is a corresponding, and distorting, emphasis on the numerically non-advanced features of “primitive” cultures. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, writers such as José de Acosta and Roger Williams had publicized the mathematical sophistication not only of the Mesoamerican civilisations but of the North American Indians (Acosta 1605: 433-50; Williams 1973: 110-112). As the century draws on, however, what fascinates people about New World mathematics is that the Caribs can only count as far as twenty, the number of their fingers and toes; that they have a numerical system which is bound to the body, and does not ascend to the sphere of incorporeal abstraction. It is a fact, for example, which is implicitly alluded to in *Oroonoko*, and discussed in Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Todd 1992-96: 7.101; Nidditch 1975: 207). An increasingly mathematical society constructs the primitive in increasingly unmathematical terms. Whereas the Caribs could not count beyond twenty, the Maya and their successors had an elaborate system of counting on a vigesimal rather than decimal basis; this aroused far less interest.

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<sup>4</sup>D. Digges (1615: 25). This is a slight misquotation of *Aeneid* V, 814-815 (which reads “quem gurgite quaeres”): “There shall be one alone whom you seek, lost, in the waters; one life shall be given for many”.

<sup>5</sup>See, e. g., S. Sherman (1996).

People like Josiah Child, however, did not write plays, and late seventeenth-century English drama is well-known for its predominant hostility to trade and the work ethic, at whatever social level they are conducted. In the most thoughtful dramatists —such as Dryden, Otway, and Aphra Behn— we have (as I've indicated) a concern with how a structure of abstract numerical and monetary manipulation can turn individuals into sacrificial ciphers. In his play about the conquest of Mexico, *The Indian Emperour* (1665), for example, Dryden takes a view of events very different from Mambrun's, creating a complex interplay between Mexican and Spanish modes of human sacrifice. Near the beginning of the play is a description of a mass Aztec human sacrifice, of five hundred prisoners of war, as part of a ritual of death and rebirth (it is followed by a courtship ritual with flowers). Near the end of the play, the Spaniards, under the supervision of a Catholic priest, torture Montezuma and his priest in an attempt to get Montezuma to reveal the whereabouts of his gold. The Indian priest dies.

This incident clearly parallels the earlier human sacrifice (especially because of the prominent role of the Christian priest), yet at the same time it is profoundly different, in that it is not a mimicry of the natural cycle but a linear economic transaction: Montezuma's body is a token to be exchanged for something else, namely gold. The treatment of Montezuma's body sums up what is, for Dryden, the key difference between the native and the invading culture: the Europeans operate through intermediate tokens, agents, and signs. As Montezuma's body can be substituted for gold, so individuals can represent or personate other individuals or beings: Cortez represents Charles V, and the Pope is said to represent God.<sup>6</sup> The Indians, by contrast, have got no concept of signs. They do not turn gold into money, using it only for religious purposes, they have no economic infrastructure (they feed themselves by taking fish directly from the lake), and they have no chronometric means of subdividing the day. Individuals never signify a god or another individual: they re-embody him or her in a way that reflects the Indians' cyclic view of existence. Montezuma participates in the identity of the Sun, the villainess relives the experiences of her mother, who had been the villainess of Dryden's previous heroic play, *The Indian Queen*, and in doing so illustrates a cyclic determinism in which the dead "did before" what living men "are doom'd to do."<sup>7</sup> The Indians do not even have that most basic form of symbolic substitution, metaphor —until they first see the approaching Spanish fleet, and struggle to describe the unknown in

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<sup>6</sup>Dryden is probably influenced by *Leviathan* I, xvi ("Of PERSONS, AUTHORS, and things Personated") (McPherson 1968: 217-222).

<sup>7</sup>II, i, 20, in E. Hooker (1956- : 46). Her re-enactment of her mother's life cycle occurs when she tries to kill Cortez but falls in love with him instead, as her mother had done with the young Montezuma ("My Mothers Pride must find my Mothers Fate," IV, i, 28)

terms of familiar experience (“floating palaces” [I.ii.111], etc.). Their sacrificial practices, enacting a cyclic movement from mass human sacrifice to a regenerative courtship ritual, express their unmediated oneness with cycles which they never translate into abstraction.

Some of Dryden’s details are right, some wrong, and he is largely following Montaigne’s description of the New World in “Of Coaches”:

It is not full fifty yeeres that he knew neither letters, nor waight, nor measures, nor apparell, nor corne, nor vines. But was all naked, simply-pure, in Natures lappe, and lived but with such meanes and food as his mother-nurce afforded him. (Florio 1910: 3.141)

Montaigne, however, is describing the *Caribs*, and goes on to contrast their simplicity with the far more elaborate civilization of the Aztecs. Dryden reduces the Aztecs to the conceptual level of Montaigne’s caribs, in order to heighten the contrast with the European systems of measurement and abstraction; doubly false, if we remember Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s description of Cortez apportioning Montezuma’s gold with hastily improvised weights and measures (García 1908: 2.138-139). Yet both the non-symbolic and the symbolic visions of the world come by their contrasting routes to the ritual of human sacrifice. As in Virgil, it is inescapable.

The Indian Emperour, then, juxtaposes an “advanced” culture with a “primitive” one, and shows that the former’s culture of symbolic exchange reconstitutes the sacrificial practices of the latter in its own terms. The play I want to look at for the rest of the paper, Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d* (1682), is set entirely in a modern society: the economic empire of Venice. Except in the hero Jaffier’s concluding “Libation” of his blood,<sup>8</sup> the play does not portray a literal sacrificial ritual, but imagery of ritual sacrifice is prominent, and (as Aphra Behn was to do in *Oroonoko*) Otway implicitly shows how traces of primitive sacrificial violence can resurface in a modern society. In the following century, Enlightenment writers such as Voltaire (in *Les Lois de Minos*, 1773) and Claude Guimond de la Touche (in *Iphigénie en Tauride*, 1757) would use plots about ancient sacrificial cults to criticize the reactionary fanaticism of their own milieu. Otway adopts the reverse approach, portraying the contemporary, but emphasizing its retention of the primitive. In doing so, he partially reproduces Dryden’s opposition of wealth-seeking and pre-economic societies, since *Venice Preserv’d* portrays a conspiracy to overthrow a ruling plutocracy and restore a primitive, pre-commercial state of nature. It is, indeed, notable that the similar imaginative opposition of primitive and economic man leads to a similar overall structure, for the play opens with recollections of a fertility rite and

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<sup>8</sup>V, 470, in J. C. Ghosh (1932: 2. 285).

concludes with an explicitly sacrificial scene on the scaffold. The “fertility rite” is the annual ceremony of marriage between Venice and the sea, during which the heroine Belvidera had fallen overboard and been rescued by hero Jaffeir. In gratitude, she “paid” him “with her self,” becoming his wife (I.i.48). The difference is that the fertility rite is itself an economic statement, of the relationship between the trading empire and its trade routes, and it is the context for a further identification of the natural with the transactional when Belvidera pays Jaffeir with herself.

Although the conspirators aspire to restore a pre-monetary state of nature such as that of Dryden’s Indians, man cannot in fact conceive even the most elemental natural processes and acts except according to a commercial model. Later, when his powerful father-in-law’s hostility induces him to join the conspiracy, Jaffeir performs the remarkable action of surrendering Belvidera to his new companions as a surety for his good behaviour, with the instruction that *she* be killed if *he* prove unworthy (II.i.394-395). As she had paid him with herself, so he hands her over as a deposit for his good behaviour. This extraordinary transaction with his wife’s body takes place in a brothel—where, indeed, the entire conspiracy is conducted—and is juxtaposed with scenes of literal prostitution, between a masochistic senator (Antonio) and the chief conspirator’s mistress (Aquilina). The fact that the conspiracy to overthrow the plutocratic state and restore a premonetary state of nature is conducted in a brothel shows how inescapable the commercial construction of nature really is.

Prostitution, the exchange of the female body, is one fundamental and indeed archetypal form of transaction in this play. Another, also involving the offering of the body, is human sacrifice, also a recurrent idea, and often explicitly linked to that of prostitution. At the end of the first flagellation scene, Aquilina says that she has “*Sacrifice[d]*” Antonio (III.i.145). Immediately afterwards, Belvidera enters, having almost been raped by one of the conspirators. “I’m Sacrific’d! I am sold!” she exclaims (III.ii.1), completely identifying prostitution and sacrifice.

Why the interplay between monetary and sacrificial transactions with the human body? Until (as far as I know) the age of Schiller, continental representations of human sacrifice portray conflicts of obligation, reward, and reciprocation in which money is not an imaginative point of reference. The word “prix” (in the senses both of *prize* and *price*) recurs throughout Racine’s *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1674), but not a centime or drachma changes hands. “Precio” is a key word in Calderón’s *El Principe constante* (1636), but although the play concerns the exchange of the captured hero’s person and finally corpse, the system of exchange is dictated by honour and religious values. As I have indicated, however, British dramatists, tend from an early stage to be interested

in juxtaposing a monetary economy with its sacrificial antecedents or roots. One thinks of the burying of the gold in *Titus Andronicus*, whose temporary return to the earth whence it came “must coin a stratagem” that results in a reversion to a non-symbolic economy, of exchanged bodily parts (II, iii, 5, in Greenblatt *et al.* 1997: 394). Both in monetary and non-monetary plays of sacrifice, the ur-economy may be seen as one of absolutely primary transactions: the giving of life (parenthood), the saving of life, and the rendering of life in sacrifice — as in *The Indian Emperour*, where Montezuma feels reluctant to sacrifice Cortez, who has saved his life, but feels entitled to kill the son who has saved his life, because he gave life to that son. A once highly popular eighteenth-century opera, Peter von Winter’s *Das unterbrochene Opferfest* (*The Interrupted Sacrifice*) (1796) portrays an Inca who is seemingly obliged to sacrifice the English hero to whom he owes his kingdom and his life. The primal debt, of life itself, also features prominently in *Venice Preserv’d*, since (as has been noted) the transaction which precedes and sets in motion the action of the play is Jaffeir’s saving of Belvidera’s life at the risk of his own; yet even this is monetary in its setting and conception. For Otway, there is no state which is culturally or imaginatively prior to that of currency.

It is worth, however, considering the various kinds of currency that he portrays. Three classes of object change hands: documents, as when Jaffeir hands over the conspirators’ names to the Senate. Coins, as when Antonio pays Aquilina. But the object which changes hands most is the dagger.<sup>9</sup> When Jaffeir delivers Belvidera to the conspirators, for example, he also gives a dagger — to be used on *her* if *he* prove unfaithful; both are described as “pledges” (II.i.346, III.ii.190)— as securities, an economic metaphor. When Jaffeir actually is unfaithful, Pierre (his friend, and the chief conspirator) scornfully returns it, again calling it a “pledge” (IV.i.362). Jaffeir, however, restores its value by killing Pierre and himself on the scaffold, making a public “libation” of blood. In the rebellion against the great trading city of Venice, the conspirators are not imaginatively or practically capable of regressing to a world without units of exchange; they can only retreat to a more primitive unit.

Why the economic role of the dagger? Hobbes argued that the way out of the presocial state of total war was the surrender of personal power in return for security. In *Venice Preserv’d*, a return to the primal state of war always seems imminent, not only because the conspirators wish to overthrow the state but because they are constantly at each other’s throats, and constantly having to reinvent their alliance. How do you prevent someone from killing you? You give him the power to do so, and thereby prove that you are not a threat. You

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<sup>9</sup>E.g., D. R. Hauser (1958: 481-93). J. Munns (1995: 184, 193-94) sees the dagger as a phallic symbol.

give him your dagger. Such rituals of submission are central to *Venice Preserv'd*, and the psychology of the ritual is particularly well displayed at the end of Act III, when the conspirators rightly suspect that Jaffeir might betray them, and want to kill him. Coming to Jaffeir's defence, Pierre at first uses the ploy of submission, inviting his colleagues to kill him:

Here, here's my bosom,  
Search it with all your Swords! (III.ii.410-411)

This, however, is too early, so he goes on the offensive and threatens to betray the conspiracy. Hereupon, the conspirators promptly launch into their own ritual of submission, offering their weapons: "Here, take our Swords and crush 'em with your feet" (III.ii.467). Pierre now becomes submissive again, now (remarkably) urging the conspirators to kill Jaffeir. At this they are yet more mollified, and Pierre expresses relief that Jaffeir did not fall "a *Sacrifice* to rash suspicion" (III.ii.481; italics added). Sacrifice is what happens when the rituals of submission fail; when, instead of offering your own life as a pledge in an exchange benefiting yourself, you find it offered by someone else on his own account.

Otway's theory of sacrifice thus neatly reverses that which René Girard was to offer in our own time. For Girard, sacrificial ritual supersedes collective outbursts of violence; it is a ritual way of evolving beyond them, channelling the forces behind them, and preventing communities from being torn apart by them (Girard 1977: 13-38). For Otway, sacrifice is the primal outburst of violence (and the primal economic act). The secondary one, the pacificatory offering of your own life, is a means of keeping sacrifice at bay. His view of human behaviour approximates more to that of Konrad Lorenz, who traced back rituals of submission to the animal kingdom, describing how dogs and wolves use them to defuse aggression with rituals of submission (Lorenz 1966: 113-114). Three centuries earlier, Otway was fascinated by the same thing. Dog images are very frequent in his work, and they vacillate between polarized qualities: not only enviable lustfulness and contemptible insignificance, but also (most relevantly) snarling aggressiveness and unstable subservience. It is particularly significant, for example, that Antonio acts the part of a dog in his sessions with Aquilina, which are clearly rituals of submission. He is, however, a dog who bites his mistress; he enacts the interplay of aggression and submission.

The echoes of these masochistic scenes in the serious plot have long been recognized (E.g., McBurney 1958: 389; Hughes 1971: 437-457). For example, when Jaffeir is induced by Belvidera to betray the conspiracy, he compares himself to a lamb enjoying the pain inflicted by the beautiful priestess who is sacrificing him (IV.i.90-94). But Antonio is a faint-hearted masochist. He has



his limits, and Aquilina does not respect them. And it is the whipping that goes beyond what he enjoys that Aquilina describes when she says that she has sacrificed her fool; even here the sacrifice occurs when the ritual of submission breaks down. For women, however, the rules are different: they have no physical strength to trade in, and offer their lives not in order to renounce their own power, but in order to appeal to the powerful. When Jaffeir is tempted to kill Belvidera with the dagger, to atone for his betrayal of the conspirators (an incident she later describes as a potential sacrifice; V.i.111), she dissuades him from the sacrifice by offering her life, and representing death as an erotic pleasure, in which she will “die in joys / Greater than any I can guess hereafter” (IV.i.518-519).

It is beyond doubt, however, that Belvidera doesn't really want a *Liebestod*: she is submitting in order to save her life, and gains it on condition that she intercede for the conspirators. Antonio himself follows the same course in his second session with Aquilina: here, the fantasy finally becomes real, for she threatens Antonio with a dagger, he fears for his life, and agrees to intervene to save Pierre. In all these rituals of submission, however, there remains a clear differentiation of sexual power, for only the strong need to submit to prove they are no threat: Jaffeir betrays the conspiracy not because he wants to feel like a sacrificial lamb but because someone has infringed his rights of sexual property by attempting to rape his wife. Even the feeble Antonio baby-talks to Aquilina while she is dominating him.

To each other, men talk in terms of shared codes —trust, honour, friendship— which articulate the rituals of submission which restrain violence. Women are excluded from this terminology: when Belvidera asks Jaffeir to view her as a friend, she has to say “Look not upon me as I am, a Woman” (III.i.119).<sup>10</sup> Men are friends because they are antagonists, they are antagonists because they can kill each other, and they can kill each other because they are each other's replicas, other because they are the same. (The antagonists in Otway's previous tragedy, *The Orphan* [1680], are twin brothers). Women are simply other. When Jaffeir hands over his wife to the conspirators, he is using her as a token to stabilize *his* relationship with the male pack. When Belvidera escapes death at Jaffeir's hands, the price is that she save the lives of the conspirators, which she attempts to do by using her body to remind her powerful father of her mother. Her role is not the foregoing of violence. Rather, she has to use her body as a token to secure the foregoing of violence by other people. Women are always outside that primal, yet endlessly reiterated, social

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<sup>10</sup>Other aspects of the construction of masculinity in this play are D. Digges (1615: 25). This is a slight misquotation of *Aeneid* V, 814-815 (which reads “quem gurgite quaeres”): “There shall be one alone whom you seek, lost, in the waters; one life shall be given for many”.

act of the foregoing of violence. They remain candidates for a sacrificial transaction.

Both Dryden and Otway, then, see advanced economic cultures as reproducing the patterns of primitive cultures. Dryden, however, sees the introduction of currency —of intermediate signs in the transaction— as introducing a complete shift in episteme, mirrored by the sudden arrival of metaphor in the Indians' language. Otway, by contrast, sees continuity: the primal transactions of sacrifice and submission are the basis of economics, and the weapon is the original coin; hence the impossibility of a primal, pre-monetary state.

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