



# A Modest Proposal

*Jonathan Swift*

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## **A Modest Proposal** Jonathan Swift

A Modest Proposal is a satirical essay written and published by Jonathan Swift. Swift suggests that the impoverished Irish might ease their economic troubles by selling their children as food for rich gentlemen and ladies. This satirical hyperbole mocks heartless attitudes towards the poor, as well as Irish policy in general. In English writing, the phrase "a modest proposal" is now conventionally an allusion to this style of straight-faced satire. Swift goes to great lengths to support his argument, including a list of possible preparation styles for the children, and calculations showing the financial benefits of his suggestion. He uses methods of argument throughout his essay which lampoon the then-influential William Petty and the social engineering popular among followers of Francis Bacon. These lampoons include appealing to the authority of "a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London" and "the famous Psalmanazar, a native of the island Formosa." This essay is widely held to be one of the greatest examples of sustained irony in the history of the English language. Much of its shock value derives from the fact that the first portion of the essay describes the plight of starving beggars in Ireland, so that the reader is unprepared for the surprise of Swift's solution when he states, "A young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout." Readers unacquainted with its reputation as a satirical work often do not immediately realize that Swift was not seriously proposing cannibalism and infanticide. The satirical element of the pamphlet is often only understood after the reader notes the allusions made by Swift to the attitudes of landlords, such as the following: "I grant this food may be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for Landlords, who as they have already devoured most of the Parents, seem to have the best Title to the Children." Swift extends the conceit to get in a few jibes at England's mistreatment of Ireland, noting that "For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, and flesh being of too tender a consistence, to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I could name a country, which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it."

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