

A Study of the Language of *The Reprisal*

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I

When Tobias George Smollett was nineteen years old, he ambitiously entered London fresh from his native Scotland sometime in the summer of 1739. The quickest entry into the world of renown seemed to be the theater.¹ Regardless of the disappointment and time-consuming labors of play-writing, the young playwright continued in his ambitions of writing for the theater. On 22 January 1757, he had at last the satisfaction of hearing words he had written declaimed from an English stage when his two-act comedy, *The Reprisal; or, The Tars of Old-England*, was presented at the Drury Lane Theater as an afterpiece to a performance of Aaron Hill's *Merope*.² This was his second drama, by which he attained his desire to acquire fame as a dramatist.

The Reprisal is one of the plays that managed to survive unfavorable reviews to become a living piece for at least a generation. "This is not to say that it was ever widely produced; still, it did enjoy revivals on the London stage at least three times during Smollett's lifetime (during the seasons of 1758-59, 1761-62, and 1770-71) and probably well beyond that."³

What brought success to the drama? Paul Gabriel Boucé comments on the success of *The Reprisal*, "The only literary interest of this play, which had a certain success in spite of the very harsh criticisms of contemporaries, is the doggedness of the sailor characters and the constant linguistics jokes about the peculiarities of Scottish and Irish speech, not to mention the 'Frenghish' Smollett puts into the mouth of Champignon."⁴

This awareness of linguistic varieties is also present in Smollett's earlier novels. Win Jenkins's language in *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771), for example, is much more than the linguistic comedy of a semi-literate. Her misspellings become metaphors and are a kind malapropism. As one word is turned into another, new meanings are generated which reveal the writer's particular obsessions: "God's grace"

becomes "God's grease."⁵

This paper is intended to examine the language of *The Reprisal* in terms of Smollett's use of verbal distortion, beginning with the use of nautical language, and then discussing the rendering of Irish, Scots, and Frenchified English for comic ends.

II

The man with only his pen for keeping hunger at bay had to consider public taste, and public taste was particularly interested in normal social life, with which the writer's own preoccupations made him familiar. Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, and Henry Fielding for example are men whom an incessant concern with the circumstances of life, at the level where survival means struggle and even callousness (as well as, often generosity), stamped with a mark of hard-headed practicality. It kept their phrases direct, their comment trenchant, and their substance near to the robust effort that life requires.⁶ *The Reprisal* sprinkles the characters' dialogue with historical events at that time. Brush and his master Heartly talk about Oclabber and Maclaymore.

Brush: You mean lieutenant Oclabber and ensign Maclaymore, a couple of renegadoes!—you lean upon a broken reed if you trust to their compassion.

Heartly: Oclabber I knew at Paris, when I traveled with my brother, and he then bore the character of an honest man and a brave officer—The other is an Highlander, excluded (I suppose) from his own country on account of the late rebellion; for that reason, perhaps, more apt to pity the distress. (1.1)⁷

Here "the late rebellion" indicates the fact that "Many Scotsmen found haven in France with Charles Edward after the defeat of the Jacobite rebels at Culloden in 1746."⁸ The audience must have associated the dialogue with the event.

Smollett also explored an ingenious device to make his works popular. One of the devices is that the characters speak in the language of daily life.

First of all, we must not forget the most linguistic interesting technique of *The Reprisal* is a variety of nautical language. Eric Partridge discovers the brilliance of Smollett's linguistic keenness in his works and comments: "Smollett was the eighteenth century's sole novelist with a thorough knowledge of nautical colloquialism and slang, though it should be added that he possessed almost as thorough a knowledge of the general slang of the period."⁹ Smollett actually "shipped in 1740 for the West Indies as a surgeon's mate, and observed the British navy under Admiral Vernon during the war with Spain."¹⁰ He "described with indignant and savage power the horrors of the expedition to Cartagena."¹¹

Smollett's intention in creating his sailor characters was not so much to record their ways of speech in life as to invent a comic idiom with a high density of technical terms.

His sailors mainly appear when they have come ashore for good. Like Ben Block, the midshipman Haulyard and the lieutenant Lyon in *The Reprisal*, Smollett's sailors are as uncomfortable on land as fish out of water.¹² The comedy of these characters lies in the systematic application of nautical language to *all* situations of daily life, whether material, psychological or ethical. The nautical vocabulary of the steering and handling of a ship plays an important part in the remarks of these sailors, as well as the terms of practical meteorology.¹³ In the drama, Brush explains to Harriet about his master's safe: "now they have doubled the point of land, and in four hours or so will be in sight of sweet Old England," (2.3) with the nautical phrase "doubled the point of land."¹⁴

The Reprisal is, above all, a piece of propaganda destined to raise the morale of the English after the tragic naval and military reverses of 1756. In the prologue, Smollett states that the farce (which he called "a comedy in two acts") is "a Sea-ragout. A dish—howe'er you relish his endeabours, Replete with a variety of flavours."¹⁵

The Reprisal demonstrates that Smollett was the chief of English sea novelists and did not hesitate to use rough and vulgar words and phrases. Vulgarisms are of the two kinds: illiteracies and low language. Illiteracies are words and phrases used only by illiterate; that is, they are words and phrases used incorrectly. In the drama, the Scotsman Maclaymore speaks in non-standard language: "I'se warrant we have left a bonny lass too..." (1.2) Low language consists of expressions avoided by the polite and the decent, at least in polite or decent company.¹⁶ In the drama, the Irishman Oclabber swears in pejorative words "Devil fire you, my dear! You're wag." (1.8) Smollett did not hesitate to put low-class characters in his works.

III

We will examine Smollett's talent of creating a comic atmosphere in *The Reprisal*, focusing on the language of these three prominent characters: the French commander Champignon, the Irish lieutenant Oclabber, the Scotch ensign Maclaymore. Those characters are supporting roles speaking in their own dialects or language, but are certainly essential roles for enlivening the drama for comic ends. They look like clowns for entertaining their audience in a circus. Arnold Whitridge says, "The humor of the piece consists in the antics of Champignon, a typical Frenchman, and his complete inability to cope with Oclabber and Maclaymore, an Irishman and Scotsman in French service."¹⁷

Historically, dialect was occasionally introduced into Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, but no great subtlety was shown in its use, and realism was not aimed at.

Traditionally, one group of dialects which has found frequent literary expression in English for the last three or four centuries, especially on the stage, is that provided by foreigners with an imperfect command of English.¹⁸

The presence of the Scotsman Maclaymore and the Irishman Oclabber, both of whom express themselves in a language full of dialectal peculiarities, more or less well rendered, does not help to lighten this impression of heavy phonetic farce.¹⁹ In 1.3, Oclabber and Maclaymore appear impressively and ridiculously for the first time.

Oclabber: Arrah, for what?—I don't value Monsieur de Champignon a rotten potatoe; and when the ship goes ashore, I will be after asking him a shivil question, as I told him to his face, when he turned his back upon me in the cabin.

Maclaymore: Weel, weel, maister Oclabber, I wanna tak upon me to say a'together ye're in the wrang—but ye ken there's a time for a'things; and we man gang hooly and fairly while we're under command. (1.2)

Here we see some features of Oclabber's language and Maclaymore's language. First we will look at Oclabber's language. The interjection "Arrah" is very Irish. He sprinkles his speech with many Irish words such as the term of endearment *honey*,²⁰ the interjection *gra*,²¹ and the oath *by my saoul*. The interjection is often one of effective ways to portray a character. The use of *after* with a verbal noun to express the perfect tense is a typical Irish English construction. Jeffrey L. Kallen comments "The use of *after* as a marker of tense/ aspect is perhaps the most noticeable characteristic, yet it is one for which modern usage may obscure the nature of historical development."²² Especially, we have the archaic example "will be after asking..." here. The tense, modality and aspect marker *after* was used in a sentence which refers to a future state of affairs, typically marked with the modal verb *will*. However in modern Irish English, *after* is a perfective marker and never takes a future sense.²³ The unfamiliar word "shivil" is *civil*, and the initial fricative sound /s/ of *civil* is pronounced the affricate /ʃ/. The Irish lieutenant is so rough as to enjoy comparing Monsieur de Champignon to "a rotten potatoe." The metaphor sounds ridiculous. The *OED* carries the line as the first citation of the word *potato* meaning "an insignificant person" (s.v. *potato* 2). N.F. Blake points out that Smollett could have picked up those Irish words "from late seventeenth-century drama".²⁴

Here are other examples of Irish English:

Phonology: as you please (1.2); you are spaiking (1.2) I taak you to witness (2.9)²⁵

Interjection: arrah, now since that's the caase (1.2) Ochone²⁶ my dear Sheelah! (1.2)

Oath: By shaint Patrick! I know them as well as the father that bore them (2.2) I'm asllep or awake agra (1.2) Acquaintance, honey!—by my saoul! (1.7) Devil confound me! But I'd never desire a better joke (1.8)

Lexis: you're a man of learning, Honey. (1.2)

Grammar: An²⁷ it pleased God (1.2) If he will be after playing at rubbers, he must expect to meet with bowls (2.3) I shall be after shewing you some diversion (2.9) he don't trust after the blood of his enemy (2.14)

Next we will turn to Maclaymor's language. His pronunciation is consistently more distorted and is harder identified than Oclabber's : "Weel, weel, maister (well, well, master)," "wonna tak (want to take)," and "a'together ye're wrang (altogether you are wrong)." He has the unfamiliar words "ken" and "gang," and the phrase "hooly and fairly" as well as the archaic second person pronoun "ye." The *OED* notes "hooly and fairly" is Scottish and Northern dialect (s.v. *hooly* 1). Blake notes that "ken" means *know* and that "gang" means *go*.²⁸ The *ee* spelling in "weel" indicates [i:]. The pronoun *ye* is a suitable representation of Scots.²⁹ J. Derrick McClure says "In the plural, a consistent distinction between nominative *ye* and objective *you* survive into the modern period."³⁰ Like Oclabber, he also despises the French official with the Scottish word "worricow" meaning *hobgoblin*: "It canna be our commander Monsieur de Champignon, running about in the dark like a worricow (2.1)."³¹ Smollett was a Scotsman and "invented those words from his own knowledge of his native dialect."³² The social status of Scots was low in the period, because "Scots was being described as a language only fit for rustics and the urban mob, and educated men expressed their dislike of it in unequivocal terms."³³

Here are other examples of Scottish English:

Phonology: nae gentleman wad plunder a leddy—awa', awa'! (1.2) sha has any taste for moosic (1.2) As I sall answer, the folks are a'gaen daft!(2.1) He'll no care to wrestle anither fa' with you (2.3) I'se tauk with you in another stile (2.9)

Oath: Hoot-fie! Captain Oclabber, where's a' your philosophy? (1.2)

Lexis: And a right sonsy damsel too (1.2) I'm sure it made my heart wae (1.2) gif it be an elegy, it must be written in the Carmen elegiacum (1.2) Heigh sirs! How she grat and cried (1.2) Whisht, what's a that rippet? (1.2) By my saul! He's a gowk, and a gauky (1.2) to ettle at diverting the poor lassy (1.2) ye'll soon gar her forget disaster (1.2) deel stap out your een!³⁴(2.1) I'm nae sic midge (2.1) weel I wot, Sir, I'm right sorry to find you in sic a pickle (2.1) defend her from the maggots of this daft Frenchman. (2.3) he had the wrang sow by the lug (2.3) Never fash your noddle about me (2.10)

Grammar: if ye was the best Champignon in France. (2.1) I'se³⁵ warrant we have left a bonny lass too, (1.2) I'se no be the first to cry *barley* (2.10) As I sall answer it's a black burning shame! (2.14)

Those characters seem to be proud of acting and speaking English in their own style in the drama. They do not humble themselves before people speaking Standard English. Irish and Scottish dialects enjoy greater prestige in England than do the

dialects of the North of England, because they are national, and not merely regional, dialects. G.L.Brook introduces a story about an Irish fellow's nature: "An Irish peer once said that, although he preferred to live in England, he returned to Ireland once or twice a year just to freshen up his accent, and a barrister is reported to have said that his Irish brogue was worth a thousand a year to him."³⁶

Let us now, turn to the Frenchified English of Champignon, has treacherously seized an English yacht in time of peace. He is vain, cowardly, stupid, a lady-killer, and a dandy, without an ounce of dignity. The commander is, so to speak, a grotesque puppet shown as fuel to feed the patriotic fire of an English public exasperated by a series of defeats. On the other hand, the English sailors, Block, Haulyard and Lyon, are hearts of oak in the drama.³⁷ The French protests to Oclabber against his unsuitable treatment. The Irishman makes fun of him.

Champignon: Monsieur O-claw-bear, you mocques de moi—you not seem to know my noblesse----dat I descend of bonne famille----dat my progeniteurs ave bear de honourable cotte----de cotte of antiquité.

Oclabber: By my saoul! When I knew you first, you bore a very old coat yourself, my dear, for it was thread-bare and out at elbows. (2.2)

In 1.3, Champignon and a young lady Harriet appear for the first time. The French commander speaks both English with a foreign accent and French language.

Champignon: Madame, you see de fortune of de war—my fate be admirable capricieux—you be prisonier of my arm—I be de cautive of your eye—by gar! My gloire turn to my disgrace!

Harriet: Truly, I think so too—for, nothing can be more disgraceful than what you have done.

Champignon: Den vat I ave done!—parbleu! I not understand vat you mean, madame—I ave de honor to carry off one great victoire over de Englis. (1.3)

Those words "capricieux" (capricious), "prisonier" (prisoner), and "cautive" (captive) sound French, and the French minced oaths "parbleu" and "by gar" are often put into his speech. He frequently drops the initial [h] sound like the word "ave" (have). The word ending "—ory" is transformed into "—oire" like "gloire" (glory) and "victoire" (victory). The initial "th" is changed into "d" in "Den"(then) and the initial "wh" into "v" in "vat" (what). The conjugation of the *be*-verb is consistently *be* and the negation is non-periphrastic negative like "I not understand." Champignon plays the gallant saying a polite language such as "I ave de honor to be one man à bonnes fortune." (1.3)

Here are other examples of English with a French accent:

Phonology: I teash dem to love—they teash me to sing your jolies vaudevilles (1.3)

Oath: By gar! My gloire turn to my disgrace! (1.3) parbleu! It is all your generosite

(1.3) Morbleu, madame, you sing a merveilles (1.3) Comment! You call me Puff-and-horf? Ventre bleu! (2.1) mardy! Dat is all I desire (1.4) Ventre saingris! My whole brain de derangee! (2.1) mort de ma vie! De Englis vaisseau! (2.1) sacrebleu! Ma gloire! Mes richesses! (2.1)

Lexis: By gar, she love me eperduement. (1.3) Madam your servieteur tres humble (1.3) souffrez den dat I present my'art at your altar (1.3) alte la—et la belle marquise! (1.3) tell a me, if you know my condition, ha? (2.2)

Thus, Champignon is often laughed at as a lamentable puppet with pidgin English. His unintelligible English is criticized by Haulyard saying: "I don't take in your palaver, not I—and may hap, you don't know my lingo; but, agad! we'll soon make you understand plain English." (2.9) Smollett makes much sport with the anglicized pronunciation of wantonly distorted French words. Such a pejorative treatment of French characters was probably secretly motivated by Smollett's abhorrence of the French. But he can also laugh, and make others laugh, at the linguistic murders committed by English visitors ignorant of French and Latin.³⁸

Making comic scenes alive, those remarkable characters of several different nationalities are a kind spice for the drama. The audience must have enjoyed their funny dialogue in such an inventive and festive comedy. The Scotsman and the Irishman form a group intermediate between foreigners and the speakers of English dialects, since some of their linguistic characteristics are features of English regional dialects and some are due to the influence of Celtic and other language. The Frenchman uses half English and half French. Smollett certainly invented such a verbal distortion for comic ends. That is the way he explored the art of entertaining the audience. One of the reasons he succeeded must be his genius for using provincial dialects and the language of foreigners as well as professional sea language.

¹ Byron Gassman, introduction, *Poems, Plays, and The Briton*, by Tobias Smollett (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pre., 1993) 69.

² Gassman, introduction, 79.

³ Gassman, introduction, 83.

⁴ Paul Gabriel Boucé, *The Novels of Tobias Smollett*, trans. Antonia White (London: Longman, 1976) 24-25.

⁵ Clive T. Probyn, *English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century 1700-1789* (London: Longman, 1987) 126.

⁶ A.R. Humphreys, *The Augustan World* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1954) 94.

⁷ The edition used throughout is Tobias Smollett, "The Reprisal; or The Tar of Old England" in *Poems, Plays, and The Briton*, ed. O. M. Brack, Jr. (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Prs., 1993).

⁸ Gassman, notes, *Poems, Plays, and The Briton*, by Tobias Smollett (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pre., 1993) 467.

⁹ Eric Partridge, *Slang* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1950) 72.

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- ¹⁰ Robert Morss Lovett and Helen Sard Hughes, *The History of the Novel in England* (George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., n.d.) 76.
- ¹¹ Oliver Elton, *A Survey of English Literature 1730-1780*, vol.1 (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1928) 205.
- ¹² Boucé, 323.
- ¹³ Boucé, 323.
- ¹⁴ The *OED* notes "To sail or pass round or to the other side of (a cape or point), so that the ship's course is, as it were, doubled or bent upon itself." (s.v. *double* verb 9)
- ¹⁵ Boucé, 24.
- ¹⁶ Partridge, *Here, There and Everywhere* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1950) 52.
- ¹⁷ Arnold Whitridge, *Tobias Smollett A study of his Miscellaneous Works* (n.d., 1925) 20.
- ¹⁸ G.L. Brook, *English Dialects* (Andre Deutsch, 1963) 202.
- ¹⁹ Boucé, 330-31.
- ²⁰ The *OED* notes the term of endearment *honey* was "Formerly chiefly Irish." (s.v. *honey* 5. a)
- ²¹ The *OED* notes the interjection *gra* was obsolete and "An exclamation ascribed to Irishman," and carries only two citations of the eighteenth century. (s.v. *gra*)
- ²² Jeffrey L. Kallen, "English in Ireland," *English in Britain and Overseas: Origins and Development*, ed. Robert Burchfield, vol. V of *The Cambridge History of the English Language* (Cambridge Univ. Prs, 1994) 172.
- ²³ Kallen, 173.
- ²⁴ N.F. Blake, *Non-standard Language in English Literature* (Andre Deutsch, 1981) 121.
- ²⁵ Kallen points out "the use of a front /a:/ vowel in words taking /i:/ or /ei/ in most Modern English varieties." (168)
- ²⁶ The *OED* notes the interjection *ochone* means "Oh! Alas" and is "A Scottish and Irish exclamation of lamentation." (s.v. *ochone*)
- ²⁷ The conjunction *an* means *if* and the *OED* notes "In this sense *an*, *an'*, is rare before 1600, when it appears occasionally in the dramatists, especially before *it*." (s.v. *an* conj.2)
- ²⁸ Blake, 121.
- ²⁹ Blake, 120.
- ³⁰ J. Derrick McClure, "English in Scotland," *English in Britain and Overseas: Origins and Development*, ed. Robert Burchfield, vol V of *The Cambridge History of the English Language* (Cambridge Univ. Prs, 1994) 69.
- ³¹ The *OED* cites this line. (s.v. *worricow*)
- ³² Blake, 121.
- ³³ McClure, 41.
- ³⁴ McClure notes the old weak plural /in/ (*eyes*) has survived in the Scots of the modern period. (69)
- ³⁵ McClure says "The loss of *sall* from contemporary speech is fairly recent. Literary attestations of both the full form and the reduced 'se /z/, used with personal pronouns, are common until the beginning of the present century; the reduced form may still be heard in conservative speech." (71)
- ³⁶ Brook, 19.
- ³⁷ Boucé, 24.
- ³⁸ Boucé, 331.