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A "Perverse and Ill-Fated People": English Perceptions of the Irish, 1845-521

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It is a fatal assumption to ascribe these calamities exclusively to the errors and infirmities of the Irish character; and set about alternately coercing and cajoling, as if it were a child or a maniac we had to deal with. No empire has ever yet treated a whole section of its subjects as inferior in heart and mind without incurring the condemnation of posterity. 2

This question of race is the very last topic that English writers and politicians should have broached... The fallacy of referring Irish evils to Celtic causation, is one very likely to be wiped off in blood. 3

The 150th anniversary of the Irish potato famine in autumn 1996 is already stirring a highly emotional reappraisal of the history of English treatment of Ireland. The belief that the racist English refused substantial famine relief to Ireland because of their hatred for the Celtic race is widespread both within and outside the scholarly community. Recent demands by the Irish Republic for an official British "apology" for the famine reflect this belief, which sometimes extends to the assertion that the English sought to perpetrate racial genocide by engineering mass starvation in Ireland. This understanding of the famine poisons English-Irish relations to this day, just as memories of 1641 or 1798 stirred anger and bitterness in the Victorian period.

Lewis Perry Curtis, Jr. is the most prominent of many historians who conclude that race was the defining element in nineteenth-century English perceptions of the Irish. The English, according to Curtis and others, looked with a self-conscious sense of Saxon superiority at what they considered to be a childlike and inferior but dangerous Celtic race. This attitude, it is assumed, shaped policy and lay at the root of Irish oppression. Irish nationalist historians have used these arguments to place their people among other victims of colonial racism and genocide in Africa, Asia and North America. Anti-Irish racism in this sense appears as an inevitable manifestation of colonialism.

It is easy to forget, however, that prejudice takes many forms, not all of them based on a concrete conception of the victim as a biologically distinct race. Those who forget this fact have trouble interpreting English policy toward Ireland in the 1840s. Some writers misjudge, for example, the motivations behind the insistence of many Englishmen in the early famine period that Celt and Saxon and even Protestant and Catholic were fundamentally equal. Liz Curtis hails John Stuart Mill, who repeatedly rejected the notion that the Irish were racially inferior, as one of the few Englishmen who

understood the true nature of "British exploitation" of Ireland. 5 Mill also, however, asserted at the height of the famine that

We must give over telling the Irish that it is our business to find food for them. We must tell them, now and forever, that it is *their* business.6

K.D.M. Snell sees Alexander Somerville's lack of religious or racial bigotry as evidence that Somerville was not "prejudiced" against the Irish. 7 Yet Somerville also wrote in early 1847 that the starving Irish were willingly foregoing food and using English charity money to buy arms, and that continuing to give them relief would only "make the people think that the government should do everything." 8

British perceptions of the Irish in the 1840s were more complex than they may at first appear. During the first months of the crisis, advocates of the tight-fisted government policy drew on what may be called a Liberal discourse of moral improvement which explicitly denied the racial inferiority of the Irish and saw the famine as a Providential opportunity to civilize and improve them. The Liberal understanding of human nature gave the great majority of the public confidence that Irish degradation was moral and not biological in nature, and thus subject to change. Forcing the Irish to fend for themselves in time of dearth thus appeared as a useful and necessary moral lesson for a people with such potential for improvement. Frustration at the apparently obstinate unwillingness of the Irish to improve as a result of the famine led an increasingly large portion of the English public to believe, however, that the Irish were an irredeemably inferior race for whom no amount of tutoring would do any good. The years that followed saw resurgence of racialist discourse on Ireland that would persist for the remainder of the century.

The "condition of Ireland question" was a matter of great public attention in the years preceding the famine. Ireland was, most people agreed, a country of immense economic potential existing in the lowest possible state of degradation. Fish teemed off her shores, her harbors were some of the best in the world, and her land was capable of producing excellent crops. Her people, however, seemed unwilling to take advantage of the natural resources at their fingertips, living instead in abject poverty attended by a barbaric state of mind. External factors, not inherent flaws in the Irish character, were considered to be responsible for this state of affairs. Particularly to blame was the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, as it perpetuated "the system which has given to the character of the Celt some of the qualities peculiar to a slave population," 10 ruling the Irish peasantry as an alien people incapable of integration into civilized society.

The worst thing about "the system" was that it had stood in the way of the complete union of the English and Irish people. This union was held to be the natural consummation of God's will; and what God had placed together no man could break apart:

The condition of Ireland is, directly, the condition of the British empire. No legislative union can tighten - no Utopian separation could dissolve - that intimate and close connexion between the two islands which has been formed by the hand of nature, and consolidated by the operations of time . . . Each year cements by closer fusion the twain branches of the Saxon and the Celtic stocks . . . Whilst our passions are the most excited, and our jealousy the most vigilant, terror and passion are found equally unavailing to keep those apart whom a higher Power than man's has joined by the contiguity of position and the bond of mutual dependence. 11

The landed aristocracy of Ireland thus acted against natural law in seeking to perpetuate divisions among the peoples of the British family of nations. Unlike the larger of the British Isles, where Saxon, Norman and Roman had "amalgamated," and were in the process of doing so with the Welsh and Scots, in Ireland the races had remained separate. 12 The blame for this, it was supposed, rested on Anglo-Irish and English policy as practiced from the twelfth through the eighteenth centuries. These policies, by segregating the two peoples socially, racially and religiously, had kept them artificially divided and had worked to prevent the proper consummation of the union.

These errors could only be rectified, it was believed, by bringing the Irish more fully under English law. The Act of Union was only the first step; measures to strengthen this legislation through the introduction of measures such as a Poor Law on the English model were necessary. The ultimate aim in doing so was "the blending and amalgamation of the two peoples." 13 Or, as James Grant put it, "There is one way, and one way only, of crushing repeal. That is by rendering Ireland in reality what it is nominally - an integral part of the British empire," instead of ruling it as "a conquered province." 14 The Poor Law Extension Act of 1847 was enacted during the famine with this end in mind.

For all of the English admissions of the shortcomings of British rule in Ireland through 1800, it was considered inconceivable that the Irish could govern themselves. The only potential leaders of an Irish government, the English assumed, would be the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. Attacks on repeal of the Union therefore necessarily involved denigration of the ability of this class to rule effectively. They were therefore roundly excoriated by the English government and public as lazy, profligate, and brutal. The *Times* proclaimed that

the prime cause why the Irish peasantry have been reduced to their present level must be sought for in the neglect and unthrift of past generations of claret- drinking, writdespising, landlords. 15

In this respect the landlords had also become the scapegoats for English misgovernment. As Alexander Somerville put it,

It would be in the natural order of things for an Irish parliament of Irish landlords to legislate for themselves and against their tenantry and the great body of the people.16

Peasants and aristocrats could therefore obviously not supervise the regeneration of Ireland. The assumed absence of a native Irish middle-class ruled out the possibility that natives of any sort could rule the country. The possibility that an Irish middle-class could emerge at any point in the future was simply not considered. The Irish had no choice, therefore, but to look to the English and Scotch middle classes to govern and regenerate Ireland. Somerville expressed this attitude in the form of a hypothetical lecture of a pro-repeal Irishman:

your parliament, if you had it, would be entirely composed of landlords and lawyers, neither of whom as yet have done you any service, but much mischief. . . Feudalism and territorial representation is on the decline. It will decline more and more in England every year; but you would restore it in Ireland by an Irish parliament of landlords and law - jobbers. You have no middle class to control them. It is to the new current of legislation from the commercial classes of England that you must look for real substantial benefits to Ireland. 17

Confidence in the English middle-class as the ultimate source of all social and moral progress combined with the Liberal belief that all human beings were capable of moral education and improvement. With English help, therefore, the Irish people would not be doomed to forever exist in a

state of semi-barbarism. Celts, no less than any other European people, would ultimately prove responsive to Liberal treatment. Liberals denied, in Somerville's words, "the natural incapacity of the Celts for becoming a commercial people" or "the impossibility of improving the Celtic population." 18 English thrift and forethought would, it was assumed, be transmitted to the Irish and uplift their physical and mental states to a substantial degree.

Even so, though the Irish were not considered "inferior," it was assumed that on their improvement the Irish could not simply dispose of English support and begin to fend for themselves. They were instead expected to reciprocate by settling down in contented submission, sharing and enjoying the fruits of economic prosperity that would follow on realization of the union. Despite its apparent optimism, the ultimate purpose of Liberal discourse on Ireland was to justify perpetual English rule under the guise of the creation of a British family of nations. Critics like Daniel Owen-Madden argued that adherents of this view erred by failing to recognize the inherent difference of the Celtic people, which made ruling them through English laws and institutions a mistake:

There is a class of Imperialists who propose to govern Ireland without the slightest regard to local feelings, or to Irish prejudices. They would wish to obliterate Ireland in the map of the Empire, and to substitute West Britain. They would first deride all Irish instincts, malign all Irish character, and then proceed to treat a concursive and semi-celtic population as if it inherited the individualism and characteristic phlegm of English nature. This school of Imperialists is one made up of Whigs, Whig-Radicals, and Economists. 19

A fundamental paradox *did* lay at the heart of the Liberal discourse. Although the principles of social and economic Liberalism could not admit that the Irish (or, indeed any people) were unimprovable, the case for English rule depended on the continual subservience of the Irish people. Englishmen professed their desire to fully assimilate Ireland into the British family of nations, 20 but also desired to maintain the colonial relationship of the two islands. Were the Irish ever improved to the extent of being admitted as full moral and physical equals of the English, their desire for independence could no longer be denied; but to justify their subservience on the basis of inherent racial inferiority would have been to reject the dogma of the improvability of all men. Somehow the Irish needed to be represented, not as racially inferior to or incompatible with the English, but as necessarily and perpetually playing the subservient role in the Union.

A conceptual framework for reconciling these paradoxes was at hand in the rhetoric of marriage. Lynda Nead has explained the Victorian concept of marriage in the following manner:

The underlying principle of gender division in the nineteenth century was that the two sexes were different and complementary. Woman was never described as inferior to man; rather, she was different, and her differences were to be valued since they entirely complemented male attributes. 21

Working within the same intellectual boundaries, the English were able to conceptualize the Union as a marriage in which the partners were different but compatible and, at least in theory, not unequal. The subservience of the feminine partner was natural, but not a matter of inferiority.

The utility of this discourse rested upon the ability of the English to represent the Irish as feminine and the English as masculine. In doing so the English were able to draw on a long standing tradition on both sides of the Irish Sea for, though the reconceptualization of the union as a marriage was a product of the early nineteenth century, perceptions of the two peoples had been gendered for centuries, if not always. English accounts dating back to Giraldus Cambrensis feminize the Irish as, indeed, do accounts by the Irish themselves. William Carleton and other Irish writers reinforced this

gendered discourse in the nineteenth century, portraying impulsiveness, sensitivity and aptitude for poetry and music as fundamental Irish character traits. In *The Black Prophet*, for example, Carleton used the feminine character of Sarah M'Gowan to represent Ireland's needs and potential:

It is impossible to say to what a height of moral grandeur and true greatness culture and education might have elevated her, or to say with what brilliancy her virtues might have shown, had her heart and affections been properly cultivated. Like some beautiful and luxuriant flower, however, she was permitted to run into wildness and disorder for want of a guiding hand; but no want, no absence of training, could ever destroy its natural delicacy, nor prevent its fragrance from smelling sweet, even in the neglected situation where it was left to pine and die. 22

The unlucky but desirable figure of Hibernia thus appeared a natural mate for John Bull, whose own qualities could bring her potential beauty to fruition. Anna Maria Hall, another Irish writer, confidently believed that

a union, based on mutual interests, is rapidly cementing. The insane attempts to procure 'Repeal' may retard, for a time, a consummation for which every upright British subject must devoutly wish; but a growing intelligence and increasing intimacy are barriers which the advocates of the measure will vainly endeavour to break down.23

In the English-Irish union, the partners were considered not unequal, but different; the English would realize themselves through the practition of a public and masculine role within the marriage, while the Irish would find their destiny in a feminine and domestic role. *Integration* of the two through "consummation" of the marriage would result in each making the other whole, bringing English values to the Irish and Irish values to the English. As John Garwood argued, the Irish possessed

in spite of all their social degradation, a peculiarity of character which would blend most usefully with that of their Saxon neighbours. The English labourer, with all his manliness and honesty, is often wanting in intellectual acuteness and in imaginative glow. In both these characteristics the Irish excel. . . I do think that a few rays of Irish imagination, a little more play of fancy, more exuberance of joyousness, and more brightness of hope, would greatly add to the happiness of our own poor. . . I would put more good sense into the Irishman, and more poetry into the Englishman. And in this way I cannot but hope that even intellectually, morally, and socially, they may do each other good; and that the English character, retaining its own solidity, may acquire the gracefulness of the Irish, and while equally useful, become more pleasing, demand as much of our approbation, and more engage our love. 24

The subordinate role of Ireland in the English-Irish marriage was, however, always clear. Though different in fact, the Irish would lose their separate identity in marriage - right down to the adoption of their "husband's" name:

As a family name [Anglo-Saxon] does not exclude the Celt, whether Irish, Scotch, or Welsh; the two families are rapidly blending into one, and it is only natural to retain the name of the predominating element.25

Hibernia could not survive independently. As James Johnson argued,

A repeal of the Union would eventually divorce Hibernia from John Bull 'a mensa et thoro' - and that without alimony of maintenance. It is true that she might, perhaps, be at

liberty to form another matrimonial connexion - but with whom would this new *liason* be? Johnny Crapaud - or Cousin Johnathan? Hibernia is not of the constitution to live in blessed singleness during the remainder of her life. 26

Once domesticated, however, the Irish would prove happy and congenial partners in the Union. Samuel Smiles approvingly cited an unknown author as saying that

the Irish are indeed a tractable nation, and though they have resisted chains of iron, they may easily be conducted by a kindly hand with a silken thread.27

The English and many Irish therefore maintained an optimistic belief that Irish moral and social improvement would follow on their domestication through the spread of English law; reconciled in the marital bliss of the Union, the two peoples would become friends and allies.

The potato blight of 1845 and the famine that followed from 1846 to 1852 appeared to English Liberals as a God-given opportunity to teach the Irish the value of English middle-class morality and learning. The efforts of English and Scotch scientists and agriculturalists to tutor the Irish peasants in methods of facing the crisis were hailed by the *Times*, which noted with relish the inability of O'Connell and other Irish leaders to fend off the impending disaster. Indeed, in the first stages of the potato blight many English men and women believed that the famine would be a perfect occasion to divorce the Irish from the Repeal movement. The *Times* encouraged this by arguing that O'Connell's continued collection of the Repeal rent showed that he "did not care" about his people, and should therefore be abandoned by the peasantry in favor of John Bull. 28 Fired with confidence in the abilities of the enlightened middle class to provide for Ireland in time of dearth, most English shared Sir James Graham's confidence that

Ireland itself is softened in all its parts by their [sic] sudden calamity; and capable of receiving new permanent impressions, if a master-hand can be found to direct them. 29

The failure of free trade and middle-class science to prevent starvation, however, worked to destroy this confidence. It became all too easy for the English to blame the Irish for Ireland's miseries rather than to question the middle-class ideals in which the English had placed such faith. The reluctance of the traditionally-minded peasantry to accept the often bizarre advice of English scientists gave the latter an excuse to exculpate themselves and blame the peasants for the progress of blight and dearth. Robert Traile was one of these agriculturalists who visited Ireland with grandiose plans to teach the peasantry to ventilate their potato pits, which he was convinced would save the country from famine. His frustration at his failure to do so was vented on the peasantry, as in the following message to Peel:

I found the miserable apathy, the unmanageable doggedness, of the people, who would not move a hand, but folded their arms to wait, in listlessness & torpid stupidity, the ruin of the food of themselves & their families. 30

As the distress deepened and Irish appeals for help multiplied, the mood of the ministers became more pessimistic but still determined:

we shall succeed in the end. It will not be for many a long month, or many a long year perhaps that we shall get the people in that country to do their duty decently.31

More and more, however, the Irish began to seem a threat to English prosperity, particularly as the dearth spread to Europe and England suffered from financial panics driven by railway speculation.

Irish despair at the blight and famine increasingly appeared to the English as a parasitical desire to live off the wealth of their neighbors, with the inevitable result that England and Scotland would have to feed the whole of the Irish population. In the mind of the Whig Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Charles Wood, this was the product of "the universal disposition to do as little for themselves, & to throw as much upon the Government as possible." 32 By 1848 Lord Clarendon, the Whig Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, was like many of his countrymen fuming that "it is difficult to know how to deal with such a perverse people." 33

By the middle of 1847 the English public had lost interest in charitable donations to the Irish. The *Times* both reflected and irresponsibly fed this attitude, complaining that "the working population of this country is dividing its last loaf with Ireland," 34 a sacrifice for which the Irish were in any case ungrateful, since "we send money to Ireland and it is used as the price of sedition and to buy firearms." 35 The government's decision to cut off aid outside the Irish Poor Law in the summer of 1847 was therefore popular in England.

The famine and the 1848 Young Ireland rising began, indeed, to make the "sister island" appear more an object of fear than desire. The emigration of Irish paupers to England and Scotland, which had been going on for decades, added to English fears, coming after 1847 or so to seem increasingly ominous, like the spread of a moral and physical disease. English workers reacted to the Irish influx with particular fright, and, stirred by Protestant evangelical demagogues, sometimes greeted the Irish with violence. George Poulett Scrope, an economist ostensibly sympathetic to Irish suffering, feared that continuing immigration would "spread through Britain the gangrene of Irish poverty, Irish disaffection, and the deadly paralysis of industry that necessarily attends upon these elements of evil." 36 Further intercourse between the two nations might therefore result only in the spread of infection.

Even the longstanding belief in Irish fertility disappeared for a time, though England remained tied to Ireland for better or for worse. English capitalism and money had not impregnated Hibernia; or, if it had, it may only have helped give birth to a monster:

The money which the English government disburses, and the English people pay, is not wholly barren or unproductive. It has its harvests, though not of the plough or the sickle. It has its fields, but not of peaceful fertility and gladdening richness. Its crop is not the golden corn, but the steel blade; it has wrought bayonets for sickles, and firelocks for mattocks.37

Though some writers such as John Garwood remained optimistic concerning the ultimate potential of the Anglo-Irish marriage, they were increasingly the exception rather than the rule after 1850. Disgust at the "unreasonable" behavior of the Irish dampened enthusiasm for a more intimate Union. Instead, the British began to turn to a new discourse that justified British rule on the basis of Irish racial inferiority.

A minority of scientists and intellectuals, writing in journals such as the *Medical Times*, had long maintained a racialist interpretation of Irish difference; but before the famine their ideas were rarely supported in Parliament or the popular press. The experiences of the famine, however, in conjunction with the efforts of newspapers like the *Times*, served to popularize biological racism as it was applied to the Condition of Ireland Question. By the beginning of the 1850s explicitly or implicitly racialist literature spread widely through the press and in bookshops, and was received with much acclaim. Many Liberals persisted in criticizing racialism, but for the remainder of the century the public would pay them as little heed as they had to the racialists before the famine.

Robert Knox's work *The Races of Men* (1850) was the first and most influential of a series of racialist works. Knox triumphantly rejected the Liberal understanding of the Irish question, which he characterized as being based upon "long-received doctrines, stereotyped prejudices, [and] national delusions."38 Sneering at those who, like John Bright, continued to seek the future moral reformation of Ireland, Knox declared that "the source of all evil lies in *the race*, the Celtic race of Ireland."39 Significantly, he went out of his way to deny the possibility of long-lasting results from "the admixture of race by intermarriage."40 Celt would always remain Celt, and Saxon would always remain Saxon: "The possible conversion of one race into another I hold to be a statement contradicted by all history."41 Finally, Knox savaged Liberal ideals of an intimate and fruitful marriage in the Union with the simple statement that "Ireland is not a colony, but merely a country held by force of arms, like India; a country inhabited by another race."42

It is beyond the scope of this article to enter into the manifold repercussions of the emerging racialist conception of Irish difference, which became dominant in the second half of the nineteenth century. In a sense, the products of Liberal and racialist interpretations of the Irish problem were the same. Idealistic Liberal dreams of an "intimate" marriage between Hibernia and John Bull did not challenge the essentially paternalistic and colonial Anglo-Irish relationship. Indeed, Liberal faith in the improvability of men contributed to a restrictive famine policy intended to teach the Irish to adopt middle-class standards of thrift and morality. It is worth emphasizing in any case that Liberals and racialists agreed on the basic qualities of Saxon and Celt; but while Liberals explained this difference in a gendered discourse of moral inequality, racialists insisted that the ineradicable boundaries of biology would forever separate the two peoples. In both instances, Britain would forever be the master and Ireland the subject.

Notes

- 1. The author expresses his gratitude to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation at the University of Virginia for the grant of a Dumas Malone Travelling Fellowship, which made the completion of this paper possible.
- 2. *Times*, June 26, 1845.
- 3. Daniel Owen-Madden, *Revelations of Ireland in the Past Generation* (Dublin: James McGlashan, 1848), 302-3.
- 4. Liz Curtis, *Nothing but the Same Old Story: The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism* (London: Information on Ireland, 1984): 21, 45-6.
- 5. Ibid., 50.
- 6. Morning Chronicle, Dec. 7, 1846. Quoted in Richard Ned Lebow, ed. John Stuart Mill on Ireland, with an Essay by Richard Ned Lebow. (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1979), 35.
- 7. K.D.M. Snell, introduction to Alexander Somerville, *Letters from Ireland during the Famine of 1847* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 20-1.
- 8. Somerville, 50-1, 67.

- 10. George Poulett Scrope, *How to Make Ireland Self-Supporting; or, Irish Clearences, and Improvement of Waste Lands* (London: James Ridgway, 1848), 17.
- 11. *Times*, January 25, 1847.
- 12. Samuel Smiles, *History of Ireland and the Irish People*, *under the Government of England* (London: William Strange, 1844), iv-v.
- 13. Sir George Nicholls, A History of the Irish Poor Law, in Connexion with the Condition of the People (London: John Murray, 1856), 67, 72.
- 14. James Grant, *Impressions of Ireland and the Irish*. 2 volumes (London: Hugh Cunningham, 1844), 2: 189-90.
- 15. Times, August 24, 1847.
- 16. Somerville, 98.
- 17. Somerville, 145-6.
- 18. Somerville, 177-9.
- 19. Daniel Owen-Madden, *Ireland and its Rulers*; since 1829, 3 volumes (London: T.C. Newby, 1843-4), 3: 237-8.
- 20. Cf. for example, John Russell to Lord Auckland, September 23, 1846, PRO 30/22/5C, ff. 255-6, Public Record Office.
- 21. Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 34.
- 22. William Carleton, *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine* (London: Simms and M'Intyre, 1847), 452.
- 23. Mr. & Mrs. S.C. Hall, *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character, etc.* 3 volumes (London: Howard Parsons, 1841-3), 1: 2.
- 24. John Garwood, *The Million-Peopled City; or, One-Half of the People of London Made Known to the Other Half* (1853; reprint, New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 256-7.
- 25. "Who are the Anglo-Saxons?" *The Anglo-Saxon* 3 (July 1849), 6.
- 26. James Johnson, A Tour in Ireland; with Meditations and Reflections (London: S. Highley, 1844), 144.
- 27. Smiles, x.
- 28. Times, October 30, 1845.
- 29. Sir James Graham to Peel, September 26, 1846. Add. MS 40452, pp. 163-4, Peel MSS, British Library.

- 30. Robert Traile to Sir Robert Peel, November 18, 1845. Peel MSS, Add. MS 40579, f. 98.
- 31. Sir Charles Wood to Lord John Russell December 2, 1846, PRO 30/22/5F, f. 53
- 32. Sir Charles Wood to Lord John Russell, October 16, 1846. PRO 30/22/5D, f.214.
- 33. Lord Clarendon to Lord John Russell, August 21, 1848, PRO 30/22/7C, f. 377.
- 34. Times, May 10, 1847.
- 35. Times, March 19, 1847.
- 36. Scrope, 28.
- 37. Times, December 10, 1846.
- 38. Robert Knox, *The Races of Men: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Influence of Race over the Destinies of Nations*, second edition (London: Henry Renshaw, 1862), v.
- 39. Knox, 379; emphasis in original.
- 40. Ibid., 13.
- 41. Ibid., 20.
- 42. Ibid., 375.