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Mary Davys, The Merry Wanderer


Mary Davys (1674–1732) is one of those enigmatic writers about whom nothing is known, not even her maiden name, prior to her marriage to Peter Davys, a Dublin Church of Ireland clergyman and schoolmaster who was a friend and correspondent of Jonathan Swift. Even her place of birth cannot be definitely identified. Although Siobháin Kilfeather describes her as ‘the first known Irish woman writing in English to explore national and sexual identities’,1 Martha Bowden draws attention to the significant contradiction between Davys’s suggestion in The Fugitive; Or, The Country Ramble (1705) that she was born in England and her unequivocal claim to Irish birth in The Merry Wanderer (1725), a reworking of The Fugitive in which she records her travels through provincial England and Wales.2 We do know that Davys was widowed in Dublin in 1698, shortly after which she settled in York, where she began her writing career. The commercial success of her social comedy, The Northern Heiress; Or, The Humours of York (1715), marked a career turning-point, not only in being the first publication to bear her name, but also by providing her with the financial and psychological resources to continue writing into her fifties, at a time when there was much social opprobrium attached to the category of professional woman writer. The income Davys derived from the play’s London production also enabled her to open a coffee-house in Cambridge, where she spent the rest of her life and where she was buried in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on 3 July 1732. The fact that her clothes were posthumously valued at less than five pounds suggests that she died in penury.3 If, then, we accept Davys as an Anglo-Irish writer, she is almost certainly the first of her kind to dramatise the potent cultural encounter between Irish immigrant and English

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native, as evidenced by the opening section of *The Merry Wanderer*, extracted here. Her encounter with an Englishman named Hodge, who is curious to see some of the ‘wild Irish’ in the flesh, sets the scene for a witty canard in which Davys exploits anti-Irish stereotypes in order to gull her credulous inquisitor with consummate brio.

As Ignorance is the Mother of Devotion, and Necessity of Invention; so may Travelling be properly enough call’d the Mother of Observation: And tho’ the petty Journeys I have taken, will hardly intitle me to the Name of a Traveller, because I have never been in *France* for new Fashions, nor at *Rome* for Religion, or a Song; yet I hope *England* is not so barren of Diversion, but one may pick up some things in it worthy of Note. To tell the Reader I was born in *Ireland* is to bespeak a general Dislike to all I write, and he will, likely, be surprized, if every Paragraph does not end with a Bull: but a Potato’s a fine light Root, and makes the Eater brisk and alert; while Beef and Pudding, that gross heavy Food, dulls a Man’s Brain as bad as too much Sleep. And I am going to say a bold Word in defence of my own Country; The very brightest Genius in the King’s Dominion⁴ drew his first Breath in that Nation: and so much for the Honour of *Ireland*, of which I am just going to take a final Leave. When I had made a Stride from *Ringsend* to *Hollyhead* in *Wales*, a Gentleman in the Ship advised everybody to take the Provisions they had aboard with them ashore; for he told us a smoaky House and no Food would be our best Entertainment, and so we found it. But a few Hours remov’d us from thence, and after sixty very bad Miles riding, we got into *England*; and while we were at Supper in a very good Inn, we heard a great Noise, and the People very merry: at last one of the Maids came grinning in, and told us there was a Man without, who heard there was some of the wild *Irish* there, and offer’d her a Shilling to help him to the sight, for he had never seen any of them in his Life. She happening to have a little more Wit than he, came in with the Jest, to see how far we would encourage it; for my part, I was mightily pleas’d with the fancy, and bid the Wench earn the Shilling, and bring him in. Now, *said I to my Company*, does this Fellow fancy we have Horns and Hoofs, and imagine Humanity alters as oft as his own dull Fancy? Pray let us humour his opinion, and see how far it will go. The rest consented, and the Man (half afraid to come near the Monsters) enter’d with Eyes staring, and Ears and Mouth wide open, big with Expectation of seeing and hearing something

⁴ The genius in question was probably Swift, whose patronage Davys unsuccessfully courted through public appeals and private begging letters, though her allusion to him here seems to be motivated as much by a desire to vindicate her nation and class as to promote herself. Margaret Anne Doody’s observation is apposite in this context: ‘Praise of Swift was praise of the national literary identity. […] Swift redeems a group at apparent disadvantage; he proves the potential excellence of those traditionally judged by (imposed and alien) authority to be dull and inferior’ (‘Swift Among the Women’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 18 (1988), p. 70).