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The Butler Tomb Effigies, St. Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny, Ireland
National Identity through Dress

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In the first half of the sixteenth century in Ireland a particular type of tomb effigy sculptures was erected in memory of members of noble families. The effigies may be double, of husband and wife, or of single individuals; the men are shown wearing archaic armour and the women archaic dress. The armour would seem to be that of a hundred years' earlier, and the female gowns and headdresses are in the fashions of at least the same period. Many of these effigies are found in the lands around Dublin, within the area of strong English influence known as the Pale. John Hunt in his seminal book, *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture* catalogues about twenty-five male and fourteen female figures from the sixteenth century, and ten men and nine women from the mid to late fifteenth century (Hunt 1974, 61–65; 88–91; 187).

By the beginning of the fifteen hundreds the new Tudor dynasty was well established in England and was intent on breaking the power of the Anglo-Irish lords in Ireland. These had built up immensely strong, wealthy fiefdoms and an almost royal individual freedom of action that ran directly counter to the ambitions of Henry VIII. One of the most powerful families, the Butlers had their long-established base in Kilkenny; as Earls of Ormond they ruled the surrounding countryside from the massive castle that still dominates the town. It is fortunate that a near contemporary Richard Stanyhurst has given vivid descriptions of their personalities in Holinshed's *Irish Chronicle and The Historie of Ireland 1577* (Miller/Power 1979). In St. Canice's Cathedral lies the double tomb effigy of Piers Butler, eighth earl of Ormond and his wife Margaret Fitzgerald, daughter of the Earl of Kildare. The tomb is dated to the second quarter of the sixteenth century but the armour of the earl, and the dress of the Countess bear no resemblance to the contemporary fashions of the court of Henry VIII or François I of France. The question to be discussed here is why would this powerful couple, known to have established a modern school in the Renaissance manner and to have introduced skilled artisans from Flanders to introduce tapestry and carpet making to Kilkenny, have chosen to make their final statement in this way? (Empey 1983/84, 299–301, Hist. MSS. Comm. 1870, 224–225). It would appear that the import of that particular mode of dress outweighed all other considerations, and must have carried a very specific message to contemporary observers.

What do we know of Piers Butler, Earl of Ossory and eighth Earl of Ormond and his wife Margaret Fitzgerald, of the house of Kildare, near neighbours of the Ormond family? The Fitzgeralds, like the Butlers were among the most powerful dynasties of the time. Piers and Margaret Butler were a colourful couple, ambitious and strong-willed. They married young, in their late teens or early twenties and had two sons and six daughters. Piers Butler died in 1539 AD in his early seventies, and Margaret Fitzgerald in 1542 AD. She may have commissioned the double tomb sculpture after her husband's death, or indeed the arrangements may have been made well before that date by Butler himself. It has been suggested that could have been as early as between 1515 and 1527 AD (Rae 1970/71, 33). Piers Butler had achieved his lifelong ambition to become Earl of Ormond only eighteen months before he died so the tomb sculptures might represent an affirmation of his enhanced standing, or it may have been an earlier establishment of his position. Both the earl's armour and the formal dress and headdress of

the countess would communicate specific messages to their contemporaries.

The suit of armour worn by Piers Butler is at least a hundred years 'out-of-date'. On the question of whether it would have been worn at this late time, John Hunt's definitive discussion of Irish armour in the late Middle Ages is quite specific that the suits of armour shown on the figure of Piers Butler, and other similar effigies are factual representations, and indeed that individual pieces may have survived over a long period of time (Hunt 1974, vol 1, 63). It is perhaps less likely that the female gowns would be actual physical survivals although it is of course well established that dress of very costly cloth was given and bequeathed between generations, and so may have survived for longer periods than in modern society. The form of dress of his countess is archaic, probably dating from the late fourteenth century but with, seemingly, developments specific to Ireland (Peacock 1994, 25; 28).

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries fashion was indeed important but in different parts of Europe national trends had become specific rather than generalised. Wearing the dress of your own land showed your loyalty, and adopting other styles could be dangerous (Tarrant 1994, 54). In Ireland the impetus towards this individual insularity was strengthened by the fact that the country was being ruled from England, against its wishes, by Henry VIII and his ministers in London. It is well known that Henry VIII, as well as other late medieval dignitaries felt it was well within his power to legislate on his subjects' dress. In Ireland by this time such legislation was specifically political and directed towards the destruction of a separate Irish identity. An example of these restrictive edicts prohibits any person in Ireland after May 1, 1539 to dress their hair in the Irish fashion or to 'weare any shirt, smock, kerchor, bendel (band or ribbon), neckerchour, mocket (bib or handkerchief) or linnen cappe coloured, or dyed with Saffron, ne yet to use, or weare in any their shirts or smockes above seven yardes of cloth to be measured according to the King's Standard, and that also no woman use or weare any kyrtell, or cote tucked up, or imboydered or garnished with silke, or courched ne (overlaid, embroidered) layd with usker, (Gaelic *usgar* a jewel or ornament) after the Irish fashion, and that no person or persons, of what estate, condition or degree they be, shall use, or weare any mantles, cote, or hood, made after the Irish fashion' (McClintock 1943, 66–67).

Although the Butlers, of course, had nothing of the modern twentieth/twenty-first century concept of nationality, dress was an integral part of their identity, and therefore their power structure. Indeed it was a far more important factor in creating identity than in the modern world. Margaret's tomb sculpture shows a heavy pleated dress or gown, belted just below the bust, and an elaborate stiffened two-horned headdress. There is little or no information on how frequently this type of ceremonial dress would have been worn. Margaret Fitzgerald's choice may represent the deeply held conservatism of a member of the aristocracy, a conscious decision that underlined her independence of thought, and an affirmation of her place in society.

In his last will and testament Piers Butler leaves his habergeon (coat of mail) to his son James (Curtis 1937, 187). In his tomb effigy, also in St. Canice's Cathedral, James is wearing identical armour to that of his father. It would seem that in putting on his father's armour James will 'become' the ninth earl of Ormond, and that in some sense his father will be alive in him. The armour would, of course, have been recognised by their contemporaries as being specifically Irish. Indeed much of Piers Butler's will can be understood as being concerned with the passing of power to his heirs, his two sons. It appears that they are legitimised by wearing specific items of dress (Interestingly, there is no mention in his will of legacies to his six daughters). James is left firstly, his father's cloak, then his horse and habergeon and lastly his great collar of gold. Richard, the other son is left his second best cloak, his other horse and his small gold chain. The remainder of Ormond's goods is to be given to local churches. This choice of named bequests probably had clearly understood meanings to the community at large. We have seen something of the importance of cloaks and mantles in Irish society, since they were proscribed, and of armour. Horses played an integral role in creating power, and Ormond's great collar of gold might well have been instantly recognisable as a mark of his authority to his family and followers.

The custom of willing armour between generations was also current in England in the sixteenth century. Such bequests were often specifically to sons, and beyond that to heirs in

perpetuity (Jones/Stallybrass 2000, 250–251). This was to ensure the prosperous survival of these landed families by imprinting the successive heirs with the ancestral memories of their fathers and grandfathers. In long established families in Ireland and England specific suits of armour, normally kept in the ancestral home would have become very familiar from early childhood to each succeeding generation.
Probably well before their deaths and before he achieved his earldom, Piers and Margaret Butler had decided on the style and content of their tomb effigies, and instructed the sculptors as to what was their intent. This would be their monument to the importance and nobility of their family in Ireland, their place in that family and in the wider community, their expectations of their heirs and the sense of identity both personal and societal that had grown out of these beliefs.

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