Abstract
Henry VIII and his successors attempted to ‘make Ireland English’ through a combination of policy, coercion and colonisation. Efforts of successive governments to establish centralised authority in Ireland were beleaguered by endemic violence and political and cultural fragmentation. Morose observations on the state of the ‘common wealth’ of Ireland were commonplace in the sixteenth century. As a commonwealth, Ireland was defective: the local elite were overmighty, seditious and corrupt, and the Gaelic Irish appeared to persist in a cultural backwater with little desire for progression. Differences in the physical environment reflected the divide between anglicised Ireland and the Irish who lived beyond the Pale. ‘Civil’ habitation was marked by land clearances, arable farming and nucleated villages. The undrained bogs and forests that characterised much of Gaelic Ireland were viewed with fear and suspicion by the English. Undeveloped, unbound wilderness represented a failure to exploit the natural world for the furtherance of humanity. The idea of a hierarchically ordered universe in which each person was expected to labour for the common good explains the disgusted reactions to the ‘loose’ and ‘idle’ people plagued the country. Such people were treated as ‘untidy’ elements in the fabric of the commonwealth, and had to be reformed through vigorous education or rooted out entirely. The English, therefore, had ready justifications for removing the Irish from the land and ‘planting’ it with loyal and industrious English families.

This paper will reflect upon the themes of spatial and moral improvement as applied to the Irish landscape and people. I will argue that common creeds of Renaissance humanism and Reformation theology provided reformers with mandates to confiscate, plant and reorganise the Irish landscape. Both extolled the virtue of industry, the moral obligation of obedience and the sanctity of universal order. Although theorists differed in opinion on strategies and policy, the intersecting rhetorical trajectories of the civic humanist and Protestant moralist indicate that their aims – the reduction of Ireland to a well-ordered commonwealth – were synonymous.

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