

**The Devolution of Irish Masculinity in Twentieth Century Irish Drama:
Representations of Manliness in the Plays of
John Millington Synge, Sean O'Casey and Martin McDonagh**

by

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Abstract

This project argues that prominent playwrights John M. Synge, Sean O’Casey and Martin McDonagh who are either native Irish or self-identify as Irish reject the various versions of masculinity proposed by nationalistic entities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as representing the ideal Irish man. Instead, these dramatists create either hypermasculine or hyperfeminine male characters to represent Irish manhood which are ultimately ineffectual in any traditional masculine roles. Synge’s female characters in *The Playboy of the Western World*, “The Shadow of the Glen,” and “Riders to the Sea” represent the nation of Ireland while his male characters are proven incapable of either supporting or defending this nation. O’Casey demythologizes key moments in Ireland’s quest for independence in his Dublin Trilogy as he presents characters that progress in the de-evolutionary process as they embrace or pretend to embrace the cause for a free Ireland only for their own purposes and only to fail in their ambitions. Both Synge and O’Casey adopt a more conventional method of depicting Irish manliness by identifying their male characters with and against the women in the plays. With Martin McDonagh’s postmodern drama, there is a rapid de-evolution of both the Irish man and the Irish woman as each of the plays depicts scenes of both genders doing violence for the sake of violence with no revolutionary subtext to justify the butchery. In his *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* this violence stems from the extreme domestic dysfunction that is associated with being physically present in Ireland. The masculinities developed within McDonagh’s drama are thus indirectly positioned opposite not a female version of Irishness, but compared with a fantasized “normal” masculinity

that exists either in England or America. With the advent of Synge's *Playboy*, the representation of Irish masculinity devolves relatively quickly into a version of manhood that, as long as it resides on Irish soil, verifies the colonizer's depiction of Irish men as inherently incapable of attaining the manly ideal.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE MONSTROUS IRISH MAN

Signifying Irishness

“...a country which has no national institutions must show its young men images for the affections...”

W. B. Yeats, *Synge and the Ireland of His Time*

During the February 28, 2010 episode of *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, Lionel Barber, British editor of *The Financial Times* described the Irish economy as “a leprechaun on steroids.” He and the host of the show shared a chuckle and moved on to discuss the economic issues facing Europe at the time. It was a humorous image and not particularly noteworthy unless one considered that in discussions of other European economies like those of Italy, Greece, and France, no such similes were employed. Only Ireland merited the evocation of a mythical figure. Indeed, Mr. Barber consciously avoided stereotyping Greece by stating “I’ll spare you the analogy with Greek tragedies and all that” before embarking on a serious discussion of the “first test of the European Monetary Union.” With the uncomplimentary labeling and thus dismissing the importance of one economy while studiously avoiding such labeling of the other economy, one might assume that Greece was being privileged over Ireland. Ironically this was not the case; the final point the economist made was that Greece needed to follow the example set by Ireland to alleviate its own crisis. The steroid enhanced leprechaun thus proved to be more efficient at solving national monetary issues than the epic hero. Why even evoke the leprechaun? Why is it that in discussions of Ireland, pundits of all kinds usually feel compelled to assign a moniker to this particular segment of the European Union? One answer to this

question can be found in Fredrick Jameson's essay, "Modernism and Imperialism," where he describes the redirecting of the British Empire's gaze from its colonized other to Germany in the late nineteenth century. Jameson suggests that "this substitution of rivalry for exploitation, and of a First World set of characters for a Third World presence, may be thought of as a strategy of representational containment" (50). The "leprechaun on steroids" statement while obviously an off-the-cuff comment designed to lighten the tone of an otherwise somber Sunday morning discussion is an example of this representational containment still at work. Even in the 21st century, it is difficult for some pundits to mention Ireland and resist some paltry evocation of an Irish stereotype. In his introduction to *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd offers an explanation for this tendency when he states that Ireland is "a foil to set off English virtue... a laboratory in which to conduct experiments and... a fantasy-land in which to meet fairies and monsters" (1). In other words, Ireland (and by extension Irishmen) is not to be seen as other European nations, but condescendingly, as one the rest of the First World is fond of but does not take seriously. The invocation of popular stereotypes as the leprechaun and fairies may seem harmless, but the persistence of such stereotypes illustrates that the masculinity of the post-colonial Irish is still called into question.

Historically, there have been many more sinister signifiers for the Celtic Irish than the leprechaun, of course. For centuries, the Irish have been excoriated as animalistic or worse, feministic by the British. British propaganda successfully ingrained the image of the Irish and their past as both barbaric and weak and, therefore, in need of governing. In *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*, C. L. Innes describes the systematic maligning of the Irish as a people, telling of writer Charles Kingsley writing home during a visit to Ireland in 1860 of the "white chimpanzees" he saw "along that hundred miles of horrible country" (14). Innes

points out that even as the Irish were vilified as barbaric animals, they were also depicted as possessing the “soft, pleasing quality and charm of a woman, but with no capacity for self-government” (9). It is important to note that the feminized portrait of Ireland was applied to the nation in the abstract while the “bestial, dirty, loutishly masculine, aggressive and ugly” (Innes 14) image is reserved for the people of Ireland. Both renderings, while seeming diametrically opposed, work to effectively disenfranchise the Irish from their own governance since women and animals were seen as basically being on the same level when it came to intellectual capacity. Innes furthers this argument by pointing out that these representations extended from the Irish individual to Ireland as a nation which “is frequently allegorized as a woman [where] the allegories are ones in which family or gender relationships are metaphors for political and economic relationships with a male England” (10).

This notion of Ireland as a female in need of a man can be traced back to 1620 when an English writer likened Ireland to “a young wench that hath a green sickness” (qtd. in Jones and Stallybrass 164). Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass describe this “green sickness” as “the pallor symptomatic of a wandering womb, supposedly needing to be fixed in place by intercourse” (164), with England being just the “man” to do the deed. The metonymical association of Ireland with a female animal in heat is referenced again in an April 1799 article appearing in the *Times* which suggests that “nothing can tend to humanize the barbarous Irish as an habitual intercourse with [England]” (qtd. in de Nie 3). The author of this article was writing on the occasion of the proposed Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland. The rhetorical choice of the word “intercourse” may not be intended as a double entendre, but in the context of the habitual representation of a needy and maidenly Ireland, the meaning is clear. When Ireland ultimately refuses to be constrained to the proper place of a British wife, a journalist writing for the *Daily*

Telegraph in December 1867 laments that “Ireland is inflicted with an incurable disease, and that though we may use the strait-waistcoat for her maid fits, we can have no certain hope of seeing her one day clothed and in her right mind” (qtd. in de Nie 4). It is fascinating that over a period of more than 200 years these representations of Ireland consistently follow the popular model of woman progressing from virgin to wife to mad-woman who has fits and must be restrained. One can imagine Victorian England wishing for the proverbial attic to which Ireland can be consigned.

Ireland as Woman

The association of the land that came to be known as Ireland with a female figure did not originate with the colonizer. As early as the eighth century, the people living in Ireland associated their land with a woman in the guise of a goddess or goddesses that fulfilled many roles pertaining to “nation” from marrying a strong and virile king to ensure sovereignty over the land to predicting the death of this same king if he did not meet the necessary expectations. The “Great Queen” or land goddess of pre-Christian Ireland, according to Maire Herbert, held “dominance over the landscape...and influence (over) the fortunes of those seeking control of the land” (143). Her role was one of guardian; one who “oversees both animal and human populations of the land, which is her personification or place of frequentation” (149). In the Derridean sense of *différance*, this strong feminine presence relies on or defers to an inherent masculine presence in Ireland’s men that is necessary for the goddess to function in that role. For a man to be worthy of this land-goddess, he must be virile and able to protect the land. The goddess tradition was not completely subjugated by the British despite the empire’s attempt to devalue Celtic traditions as is evidenced by the continuing presence of the banshee in the popular culture during the time of Cromwell’s ruthless suppression of Irish identity. In the seventeenth

century, the goddess in the form of death messenger is used to differentiate from those who had a legitimate claim to the land and those who obtained land through confiscation. According to Patricia Lysaught, the goddess as death messenger is traditionally associated with “illustrious Gaelic families” and as such is “concerned with the fortunes of the family, and thus also with the ownership and fertility of land” (154). In the early 1640’s, a nobleman-poet wrote, “banshees do not cry for the merchants and hucksters of the area but only for noble Irish families” (qtd. in Lysaught 155). In effect, by refusing to “cry” for foreigners, the banshee, a form of the land goddess, is “symbolically denying their title to Irish land” (Lysaught 155) and denying the empire-imposed image of the land as “a wench that hath a green sickness” (Jones and Stallybrass 164). Consequently, even into the seventeenth century, Ireland is still inhabited by a goddess figure who serves as “a symbol and protectress of (Irish) land” (Lysaught, 155). The female divinity who is necessary to ensure the sovereignty of the masculine ruler in the pre-Christian tradition lives on in early colonization as one who mourns the loss of the land while denying the sovereign right to possess the land to the conqueror. Thus the early feminine emblem that serves as the verifier and protector of Ireland’s national or at least territorial masculinity is a powerful one that defies containment, at least at first.

The colonizer’s association of Ireland not only with a woman, but a “sick” woman resonates with what Judith Butler terms “female trouble,” a reference to the “medicalization of women’s bodies” (*Gender* viii) that further problematizes what could be termed the nation’s “male trouble” or “the radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female ‘Other’ [which] suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory” (*Gender* vii). The identification of the nation of Ireland as woman doesn’t just feminize the Irish man; it actually places him in a position of dependence on this female “Other.” In other words, the Irish man is perceived and

established by the colonizer as completely lacking in autonomy, henpecked as it were, by his mother/wife nation which has “no capacity for self-government” (Innes 9). Interestingly, there is support in the land goddess mythology for this version of Irish manhood. Maryna Romanets describes this mythology as emblematic of “male/female rivalry...with its warrior cult representing virility that is inspired, protected, and ruined by the female, belligerent supernatural powers” (57). This description is in line with what Butler concludes about the origin of “female trouble” whose genesis occurs with the “unanticipated agency of a female ‘object’ who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position” (*Gender* vii). One can argue, therefore, that an inherent weakness in what western civilization considered “masculine” was already present in Celtic culture and borne out by repeated failures of Irish “men” to overthrow the British and thus protect the land goddess of Ireland over centuries of occupation. Ironically, those who would masculinize Irishness sought to reconstruct the “authentic Irish man” by invoking other iconic female figures, notably the Virgin Mary, “old woman” mythical figures such as the Shan Van Vocht as Cathleen Ni Houlihan, and the nationalist’s version of Ireland as woman, Erin. In his history of the depiction of masculinity on stage, Michael Mangan argues that “there are many ‘masculinities’; they are historically contingent, continually changing, continually being redefined and renegotiated, and their meanings are closely tied in with those other kinds of power relations, such as those concerning class and nationality” (6). As the nineteenth century neared its close, a concerted effort began to be made to rehabilitate the “loutishly masculine” (Innes 14) image perpetuated by the colonizer and “marshal the manhood of Ireland” (Nugent 588) as part of a deliberate re-definition of Irish identity. This movement was led and influenced by four definable groups: the Catholic Church in the guise of the League of Saint Columba, the Gaelic Athletic Association,

the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and the Irish literati under the auspices of the Irish National Theatre.

As Ireland became Christianized, the goddesses of Ireland began to be collapsed into one female figure, the Virgin Mary. This shift from a goddess fructified by encounters with masculine Irish heroes and associated with motherhood in an essential earthy and sexual way to an asexual “virgin” mother figure becomes very significant in Ireland’s quest for independence. The Catholic Church may have caused the shift, but the British capitalized on it. In political cartoons appearing in the late nineteenth century, Ireland is depicted as the maiden “Hibernia” who is often surrounded by ape-like Irishmen and is being forced to appeal to figures of British authority such as John Bull for protection from the animalistic Irish (Innes 12). The ultimate Victorian feminine ideal, Hibernia’s “salvation lies in her rescue and ‘marriage’ to her English father/husband, whose benevolent and patriarchal governance will allow her to fulfill her essential self and remain feminine and Celtic” (Innes 15). I would add pure and asexual to the preceding list of characteristics. Hibernia, therefore, can be seen as the land goddess of old who has been rendered powerless to choose a suitable king husband but must, instead, rely on the beneficence of a strange ruler. The nationalists responded to this colonial imagining of Ireland with a feminine rendering of their own. Cartoons from the same time period appearing in nationalist publications show Ireland as “Erin,” sometimes maiden, sometimes motherly figure but always “stately and slightly more mature than the limper, girlish Hibernia” (Innes 17). Another major difference in the nationalist depictions of Ireland is in the rendering of the Irish males who accompany her. The men who appear with “Erin” are handsome and respectable, not ape-like. L. P. Curtis describes Erin as “a stately as well as sad and wise woman [who] suggested all that was feminine, courageous and chaste about Irish womanhood” (75). Again, this addition

of the “chaste” aspect to the visage of the Irish land goddess can be attributed to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Under the influence of Catholicism, Ireland transformed from a loose confederation of fiercely independent tribes and warlords, at least one of them female¹, to a patriarchal society where women were at once revered and oppressed by virtue of this reverence and its accompanying Christian-based expectations of moral perfection. The various branches of the nationalist movement upheld both the concept of Ireland as woman (Erin rather than Hibernia) and Irish woman as saint. The Irish woman revered by the nationalists was pure and above reproach. The Irish man might be weak and sinful but the Irish woman, like the Virgin Mary, was always there to understand and make his blood sacrifice for his nation worthwhile. That this woman was expected to do so within the confines of what Irish society had become goes without saying. Nelson O’Ceallaigh Ritschel argues that many nationalists “embraced a conservatism that was unmistakably shaped by the foreign paternalism of the Catholic Church and British rule” (14). Ritschel uses founder of Sinn Fein, Arthur Griffith, as a primary example of this conservatism ultimately arguing that Griffith’s stance on divorce even from an abusive husband revealed the “foreign nature of Griffith’s paternalistic beliefs” (14). Many other nationalists held these beliefs, invoking them as they protested representations of Irishness displayed by both Synge and O’Casey. Notably, all three of the playwrights to be discussed in this project conveyed criticism of the church’s influence over Irish identity in their work.

Three Iterations of Irish Manhood

This triad of Britain, the Catholic Church and Ireland is a complicated one. On one hand, an integral part of British oppression of the Irish was the brutal oppression of Ireland’s Catholic

¹ Grainne ni Maille a.k.a. Grace O’Malley (c.1530-1603) who, when her husband was killed, led her husband’s men and continued the defense of her castle and clansmen. See Ellis, Peter Berresford. *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995.

faith and identity. The penal laws, also referred to as “popery laws”, enacted between 1698 and 1728 forbade Catholics to keep weapons, own land, travel overseas for the purposes of education, hold governmental office or even vote (Connolly 462). The laws stayed in effect to greater and lesser degrees until Catholic emancipation in 1829. Emancipation led to an increase in the “political and economic strength of a Catholic middle class...the changing social and family structure of the mainly Catholic peasantry, [and] was accompanied by the growth in numbers, power and authority of the Roman Catholic clergy in Ireland” (Innes 37). On the other hand, as previously described, the Catholic Church played a subtle but significant role in the re-identifying of Ireland’s “Great Queen” goddess persona from a powerful and earth connected part of this world to a meek, asexual “Queen of Heaven” who has no power over the land. The “cult of the Virgin” took firm hold in the burgeoning Catholic culture in Ireland. In the late nineteenth century, “two female images had become potent social, political and moral forces in Catholic Ireland – the images of Mother Ireland or Erin, and the Mother of God” (Innes 41). It is not surprising, in a symbolic sense at least, that a nation whose history is grounded in the fertility and power associated with the “mother earth” joined with the uber-masculine king would find itself weakened when this mother is replaced by one associated only with heaven and humility. This replacement shifts the emphasis of a here-to-fore powerful albeit feminine national image from a fertile one to a virginal one who not only seeks to avoid masculine contact but impedes masculinity by its very nature. A virginal mother who is reserved for a god rather than a man renders that man useless. His only purpose is to worship her (and her son, of course) and obey her priestly representative.

The advent of so-called “muscular Christianity” was a reaction to this perceived dilution of masculinity in the Protestant churches of England and America in the 19th century. In his

entry to *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural and Historical Encyclopedia*, Clifford Putney describes the muscular Christianity movement in England as being developed to counteract an Anglican church weakened by “asceticism and effeminacy” (557). “To make that church a suitable handmaiden for British imperialism,” Putney argues, “[the founders of the movement] Hughes and Kingsley² sought to equip it with rugged and manly qualities” (557). This reclamation of a feminized church was echoed during the same time period in Ireland with the founding of the League of St. Columba in 1898. The fact that both Roman Catholic and Protestant men recognized the tendency of exposure to Christian tenets to make its male followers less traditionally “rugged and manly” reinforces the contention that shifting from a belief in pre-Christian warrior goddesses to quasi-worship of a quiescent virgin further feminized an already weakened Irish male identity. According to Joseph Nugent, the purpose of the League of Saint Columba was to “summon and shape an essential Irish identity through ... ‘the actualisation of the authentic Irishman’” (587). It is interesting that both of these religious movements aligned themselves with national identity. The British “muscular” Christians were focused on maintaining an empire that controlled one-fourth of the world. The self-styled warrior saints of Ireland were operating in a climate of nationalism and a growing sense that independence from that empire was not only possible but imminent.

The League of St. Columba held as its overriding purpose paving the way for a new Irish identity that was masculine in both a Gaelic and Roman Catholic sense. The League took as its inspiration, Columb (also known as “Columba” or “Colmcill” in the Irish language), “the sixth-century Irish warrior-become-saint ... [to] present a new model of manliness for the edification of Ireland” (Nugent 588). The image of a saint as the exemplar for the Irishman was grounded in Roman Catholic theology. According to Nugent, “the saintly paradigm was unusually well-

² Charles Kingsley also referred to the Irish as “white chimpanzees.” See comment and citation on page 2.

suited to combat...more practical, secular models of the manly hero, for the means of attaining saintliness had been extensively codified by the Catholic church under the rubric of heroic virtue” (589). The heroic code adopted by the church asserted that heroism was “spiritual yet worldly” and as such “could be made to serve the performance of manliness” (Nugent 589). In other words, manly Catholic men could be spiritual *and* masculine as long as their motivation for “heroic” deeds was to increase in spiritual virtue. Nugent makes the point that by controlling the “discourse of saintliness” the church “wield[ed] its power over the imagination and behavior of the faithful” (590). As emulation was the byword for Victorian virtue in the Empire where etiquette books and books of manners were ever-present, emulation of the saints of the church helped Ireland begin to identify itself as something other than a British colony. Indeed, Nugent goes so far as to argue that the “ideal of the Irish saint...became the quintessence of the Irish priest in popular representations” with the result that “for the greater part of the twentieth century, it was in and against those priests, the authorized positive stereotype of Ireland, that the Irish Catholic male subject was fashioned” (608). While Nugent’s assertions as to the dominance of the Irish priest as the masculine ideal in “popular representations” may be defended, this was not the only image vying to be considered as ““the actualisation of the authentic Irishman”” (Nugent 587).

Just four years before the Catholic Church articulated its version of authentic Irish manhood, the Gaelic Athletic Association created its own reproduction of Irish masculinity. Formed by Michael Cusack in 1894, the surface purpose of the GAA was to revive uniquely Irish sports such as hurling and football. Much like the formation of the League of Saint Columba, the goal of the association was to produce “antidotes to the imputed unmanliness of the Irish male” (Kiberd *Irish* 389) by also invoking the pre-British mythical figure, Finn

Macumhnaill who was considered a great hurley player. It is not surprising then that this movement also became a call to patriotism as, according to Tim Pat Coogan, author of *Ireland in the 20th Century*, “the hurling stick became a symbol of militant national identity, being carried in demonstrations to such an extent that even during the phase of Anglo-Irish hostilities, [...] it was known as ‘the Tipperary Rifle’” (16). The prevailing theme of looking to a mythic past to determine a future post-colonial identity is continued with the renewal of the sport of hurling which, as Patrick F. McDevitt describes in his examination of the intersection of sports, masculinity and nationalism in the British Empire, is associated with pre-Christian Ireland as it is “intimately connected to warfare and warriors... [with] an extended association to violence and predominantly male behavior” (18). McDevitt describes Michael Cusack as “content to re-endow his compatriots with the qualities of *Strong-men*, [and] assumed that in God’s good time they would reach the status of *Free-men*” (19). Other colonies subverted the Empire by beating England at its own sport.³ McDevitt terms the GAA’s rejection of the games England played for a quintessentially Irish sport as “repudiating the central rituals of the British imperial religion [and thus] reject[ing] the tenet that team games were symbolic of the superiority of British manhood” (20). Indeed, McDevitt argues that “the creation of the ‘anti-rituals’ of their own games became the most visible, viable, and successful pillar of the Irish cultural renaissance” (20).

Whether it was the most successful pillar or not, the resurgence of uniquely Irish games both justified and contained violent behavior as a marker of masculinity. McDevitt describes the “civilizing tendencies” of the games where “discipline and control of violent impulses were praised in participants” (21). Interestingly, the violence displayed, particularly in hurling, was a

³ McDevitt details how the British spread their games, most notably rugby, in order to further civilization often with the unintended consequence of being beaten on their own playing field by those they “civilized.”

way for Irishmen “to demonstrate that they were not naturally unruly” and that “rely[ing] in the imposition of a formal set of rules and regulations [served] to order and enforce...notions of civilization” (McDevitt 21). In other words, showing that they could be violent in an orderly fashion somehow showed the British that Irishmen were “authentic” or civilized men. Both the Catholic Church and the nationalists who were part of it were fervent supporters of the Gaelic Athletic Association. In his history of the role of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Marcus Tanner describes the “ethos” of the GAA as “profoundly Catholic” with “bishops [as] *ex-officio* presidents” (387). Tim Pat Coogan describes how both Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Brotherhood worked within the GAA to recruit members to the cause of a free Ireland (27). The conflict between these and other groups as to what this new nation would look like notwithstanding, all agreed that a new vision of Irish manliness was needed and displays of athleticism were a good beginning. There were, however, some influential voices that did not often concur with any of these renderings designed to create a more masculine image of Ireland, and those were the voices of the Irish Literary Renaissance.

In 1899, just one year after the founding of the League of Saint Columba, W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory realized their goal of establishing the Irish Literary Theatre, an institution whose goals would include, according to Robert Welch’s history of the Abbey Theatre, performing “certain Celtic and Irish plays...aimed to correct false and demeaning stereotypes of Irish character and Irish sentiment” (2). Declan Kiberd describes Yeats’ determination to “shift the centre of gravity of Irish culture back to the native capital” as coming from his depression following a time in London where he observed “the ease with which London publishers could convert a professional Celt into a mere entertainer” (*Inventing* 3). The role Yeats had in mind for a national theater in Ireland was what Welch terms the “third phase” of drama that “drives to the

core, into the form theatre gives to the pressures that build up in the individual psyche and in society in general” (vii-viii). In his work on Anglo-Irish Theatre and its influence on Irish nationalism, Georg Grote discusses the problematic position of the primarily Anglo-Irish artists as they attempted to “transform Celtic mythology into an item of contemporary interest” (216). Grote describes “the literary movement’s influence on the shaping of an Irish identity” as that of a vehicle for interpreting “the Irish past and its unifying symbols” rather than one of “blunt political agitation” (216). Unfortunately what Yeats believed to be these pressures of society and the Celtic mythic symbol that could ease this pressure did not always align with the Irish “society in general” especially with those loyal to the Catholic Church. The tension between these differing visions of what Irishness should look like was immediate. One of the inaugural plays of the Theatre was Yeats’ *Countess Cathleen*. A Catholic cofounder of the Theatre, Edward Martyn, requested that a representative of the Catholic Church examine the play for “theological accuracy” (Welch 5). Just the suggestion that this was necessary created a stir that led one of Yeats’ detractors, Hugh O’Donnell, to write a pamphlet attacking “Yeats’ depiction of the peasantry of Ireland ‘of the old days’ as being ‘like a sordid tribe of black devil-worshippers and fetish worshippers on the Congo or the Niger’” (Welch 6). Robert Welch describes this attack as “presumably representing the greatest insult O’Donnell could imagine being thrown at ‘holy’ Ireland” (6). Yeats’ nearly manic desire was to reanimate the pre-Christian, pre-British “pagan” heroes of Ireland’s past in order to create a cultural difference with the First World that also elevated the position of the Celtic sensibility from the demeaning British imposed stereotypes. In his own words, his goal was to “spiritualize the patriotism and drama of [his] country” (qtd. in Welch 7). This spirituality did not in any way relate to Christianity, but rather to “fire and

energy, united with subtle thought and a respect for traditional myth, legend, and folklore” (Welch 7).

Much of the drama played on the stage of the Irish Literary Theatre during its inaugural years was not received well by the public at large. Welch tells us of the final performance at what was then termed the Irish Literary Theatre of a Gaelic play written by Douglas Hyde. The audience apparently laughed throughout what was intended to be a reverent retelling of the tale of Diarmuid and Grania mainly because of the English actors who had trouble pronouncing the Gaelic words and an errant goat who made off with some of the scenery (Welch 12). Welch relates that the actors unintentionally “brought the house down” when “Diarmuid said to Grania, ‘The fools are laughing at us’” (12). It was not until 1901, when Frank Fay challenged Yeats and company by writing in the *United Irishman*, “Let Mr. Yeats give us a play in verse or prose that will rouse this sleeping land... This land is ours, but we have ceased to realise the fact. We want a drama that will make us realise it” (qtd in Welch 14), that Yeats and Lady Gregory began to try to meld their need for the ‘fire and energy’ of mythology with the demands of their nationalist audience. The resulting collaboration was the very popular *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The play meets the “spiritual” requirement of Yeats, drawing on the Shan Van Vocht figure of Gaelic folklore while also satisfying the need for a nationalistic masculine ideal where the Irishman is willing to sacrifice his life to the cause of a free Ireland. Welch argues that Modern Irish theater began with “this performance of a play, of mostly pseudonymous authorship, written by two products of Anglo-Ireland, with a revolutionary feminist in the title role” (16). The image of masculinity put forth by Yeats and Lady Gregory in this play is a very familiar one. It is the one who responds to a call to arms, to do violence and accept violence done to him in the name of the nation. Using a woman’s voice to make this call is certainly not uniquely Irish. However, using

the mythical figure of the “poor old woman” who is transformed into a “young girl” with the “walk of a queen” (Yeats *Cathleen* 57) is an integral part of the Yeatsian drama’s contribution to the quest for a new Irish masculine identity. Invoking the pre-Christian goddess figure who also serves as the emblem for Erin (in opposition to the British-conceived Hibernia) serves to satisfy the nationalist’s desire to inspire Irish men to do the “manly” thing and take up arms against the oppressor. It is telling, as Christopher Lockett points out, that “Yeats’s *Cathleen* is notably asexual” (295). This is in keeping with the previously discussed de-sexualizing of Ireland’s pre-colonial identification with various goddess forms that were conveniently collapsed into the persona of the Virgin Mary who is of course often referred to as the Queen of Heaven. Lockett discusses another, even more significant change from the myth of “The Calleich” explaining that “Yeats rescripts the narrative of the regenerative myth such that it is death and not sexuality that facilitates the renewal of the land” (296). That this death is necessarily met through violence at the hand of the oppressor while fighting for the freedom of the mother nation furthers the identification of masculinity with violence. The Catholic warrior-saint image is also satisfied here since the death is one of a martyr sacrificing himself for a spiritual cause, in this case, a “free” Ireland. In this play, Yeats resolved all three of what Alan Fletcher refers to as the “tensions and tenterhooks that stretched taut the practice of theatre” for the Literary Revival: the Roman Catholic Church, the “political imperatives of a nationalist culture” and “the theatre of commerce” (203-204).

One could argue then, that Yeats and his compatriots set the stage as it were for the performance of Irish masculinity as the culture forged its soon to be postcolonial identity. The version of the “authentic” Irishman as represented by the character of Michael therefore seems to consolidate all of the competing masculinities. Michael is not overtly depicted as athletic, but

one can assume he is physically strong or he would not be a suitable recruit. He is Roman Catholic, arranging his marriage to Delia with the local priest. An even more notable nod to the Roman Catholic voice in nationalist politics is the transformation of Michael from a virile young man on the eve of his wedding and the subsequent consummation of the marriage to his implied acceptance of celibacy as he instead heads to the battlefield at the request of “mother” Ireland who “demands death as opposed to sex” (Lockett 296), a Christ-like blood sacrifice. As Lockett argues, “not only does the sacrifice entail one’s own death but a disavowal of familial ties; the rejection, in other words, of an even more elemental organizing principle, leaving one’s assimilation into the mythic nation unfettered by other considerations” (296). Thus, this particular work satisfies both the Catholic Church’s identification of Irish maleness with saint-like martyrdom and the nationalist’s association of Irish masculinity with a willingness to suffer violent death for mother Ireland theoretically setting a precedent for future productions to “rouse [the] sleeping land” (qtd. in Welch 14) and inspire it to overthrow the oppressor .

In his exploration of the genesis of Ireland’s identity and the role England played in that identity formation, Kiberd argues that “each nation badly needed the other, for the purpose of defining itself” (2). Judith Butler contends that “power [is] an exchange between subjects or a relation of constant inversion between a subject and an Other” (*Gender* vi-vii). She ultimately links this idea to how we think about gender, but the contention can also be applied to the relationship between the imperial state and its colonized other, itself a form of “impacted dialectic” (Valente 2) that occurs when the representation of the ideal (in this case English-ness) relies on the existence of a subordinate and therefore inferior Other (Irish-ness). The binary of English/Irish exists at the top of a hierarchy of binaries that include dichotomies based on race

and gender. The various organizations mentioned previously each attempt to subvert the binary and refute the identification imposed on both Irish ethnicity and Irish masculinity.

Ideal Masculinity Defined

In order to understand how the playwrights discussed in this work subvert or undermine representations of masculinity that is specifically “Irish,” it is necessary to define what Joseph Valente refers to as the “fundamentally ideological category” of “manliness” (2) within the context of the time periods during which these plays were written and performed. In his introduction to *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*, Valente defines the relationship between “the late Victorian conception of masculinity” and “its ideal form, manliness or manhood” as “an impacted dialectic” (2). Valente explains this paradox as follows: “...masculinity came to be defined in terms of the possession of robust ‘animal spirits,’ the source of conventional ‘masculine’ fortitude, tenacity, assertiveness, and stamina. The ethos of manliness or manhood involved turning those traits inward and thus converting these cruder ‘animal’ virtues into the higher order spiritual attainments of integrity, self-possession, and self-control” (2). Valente concludes that what is perceived as “men’s primordial bestiality” is what gives rise to “the self-disciplining spirituality that subsumes, legitimates, and dignifies it” (3). He thus generalizes that “every paradigm of the manly begins with a primal male-identified element of animal vitality that helps to fuel the exercise of sublimating discipline that it so badly requires” (4). In other words, the primal animalistic spirit⁴ that is a signifier of *masculinity* is a requisite to *manliness* because it is these “more urgent and brutish energies [that feed] the effort required to restrain and redirect them” (Valente 7). Valente contextualizes the feminine ideal,

⁴ Valente cites several voices who worked to define “manliness” in the 19th century such as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, noting that one tenet of muscular Christianity valued “manly thumos (animal passion) as “the root of all virtue” (2).

not as a complement to the manly ideal, but as a part of it where “the manly comprehends and commands a morally regenerative tension that the feminine *properly* lacks” (7 emphasis author’s). In other words, the feminine *should* lack the tension required to control primal animal impulses because the feminine should not have these impulses. Thus, a biological female attains the ideal feminine state simply by adhering to what Victorians perceived as the normative female nature, that is “emotionally centered yet comparatively delicate or muted in their desires...the vessels of an idealized ‘passionlessness’” (Valente 6). The manly ideal, in contrast, displayed a fullness of (animal) passion, but one that was restrained and redirected into the manly traits. These traits included “conventional phallic attributes such as virility, aggression, power, physical courage, [and] resolution” (Valente 1). The lack of either primal animal inclinations or the ability to control those inclinations was believed to lead to a “disaggregation of these parts” and “signified a descent into some other(ed) less cohesive form of life, be it man’s internal other (the animal) or external other (the woman)” (7). Valente points out that “manliness in Victorian Britain was ardently believed to be peculiar to *Englishness*, a joint benison of an Anglo-Saxon and an Anglican-Protestant heritage” (8 emphasis author’s). Thus, the manly hegemonic privilege inscribed to the English by the English easily prevented the subaltern Irish from identifying as “manly” in relation to the colonizer. Valente refers to this representational containment as the “metrocolonial double bind” which was “implemented on either side by the feminizing discourse of Celticism and the bestializing discourse of simianization, which cooperated in representing the ‘mere’ Irish as racially deficient in manhood and so unready for emancipation” (11). It is within and against the context of this “metrocolonial double bind” that Synge and O’Casey crafted their drama.

In his discussion of the emergence of masculinity studies in recent years, Robert Nye argues that masculinity possesses a “protean quality” and that “historically hegemonic forms of masculinity have undergone crises requiring restabilization” (1939). He goes on to suggest that “masculinity is in perpetual crisis, permanently engaged in patching up traditional ideas, inventing new ones, and reconsolidating masculine advantage” (1939). Attempting to ascertain the quality of masculinity represented in a postmodern work is complicated by the continually shifting representations of gender in this context. As a postmodern playwright whose representation of Irishness is already problematized by his London roots and irreverence toward mythologies of Irish nationalism, Martin McDonagh employs intertextuality and a subversion of genre expectations to further destabilize Irish gender in his drama. According to Nye, “recent gender analysis emphasizes the adaptive nature of masculine identities [and] the racial, class, and sexual masculinities that reflect power imbalances among men” (1938). In other words, postmodern theories of masculinity have moved away from the delicate balance between animal spirits and self-discipline that characterized the Victorian masculine ideal to a concept of gender identity that is amoral where (ideally) no idealistic limits are imposed or expected. Nonetheless, in a postcolonial space, there still exists a pressure to attain a hegemonic masculine identity. This impetus is ironically treated by McDonagh in his drama where the men are gossips and impotent and the women exhibit hypermasculine behaviors.

This project will argue that prominent playwrights of the 20th century who are either native Irish or self-identify as Irish reject the various versions of masculinity proposed by nationalistic entities as the “authorized positive stereotype of Ireland” (Nugent 608), instead depicting the Irish man as impotent and/or violent. John M. Synge, Sean O’Casey, and Martin McDonagh instead adapt either hypermasculine or hyperfeminized characters to represent Irish

manhood which are ultimately ineffectual in any traditional masculine roles. John Synge's male characters in *The Playboy of the Western World*, *The Shadow of the Glen*, and *Riders to the Sea* are ultimately thwarted from getting a wife, keeping a wife, or providing for a wife respectively. Sean O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy presents characters that progress in the de-evolutionary process as they embrace or pretend to embrace the cause of a free Ireland only for their own purposes and only to fail in their ambitions. Both Synge and O'Casey adopt a more conventional method of depicting their versions of Irish manliness by identifying their male characters with and against the women in the plays. With Martin McDonagh and his *Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, there is a rapid de-evolution of both the Irish man and woman as each of the plays depict scenes of violence for the sake of violence with no revolutionary overtones to justify the butchery. Instead, this violence stems from extreme domestic dysfunction that is associated with being physically present in Ireland. The masculinities developed within McDonagh are thus indirectly positioned opposite not a female version of Irishness, but compared with a fantasized "normal" masculinity that exists outside of the space of Ireland. With the advent of Synge's *Playboy*, the representation of Irish masculinity devolves relatively quickly into a version of manhood that, as long as it resides on Irish soil, is uncontrollably and senselessly violent, ultimately confirming the colonizer's depiction of the monstrous Irish man.

CHAPTER 2: JOHN SYNGE - THE DEVOLUTION BEGINS

Synge in Context

By the early twentieth century, the British had ruled Ireland for over seven hundred years. Punctuated with bloody insurgencies and brutal retaliations, the relationship between the colonized other and its imperial oppressor was as hostile in 1900 as it was during the rising of 1641. In spite of placating gestures such as the repeal of the final Catholic Relief Act in 1829 and the admission of Irish representatives into the British Parliament in 1800, the Ireland in John Synge's time was still very much an oppressed part of the British empire and equally resentful of this fact of its existence. It is in this atmosphere that the Irish Renaissance was born. After the fall of Charles Stewart Parnell, a nationalist member of the House of Commons who scandalized Irish society by having an affair with a married woman, there was a power vacuum during which "various forms of cultural nationalism [began] to flourish which called for the staging of revolution in the minds of the Irish people: for reimagining the civilization, often on the model of ancient legends" (Tiff 319). As discussed earlier, the advent of the Abbey Theatre and the introduction of a truly Irish dramatic movement was one of the forms of cultural nationalism that came into being. While Yeats and Lady Gregory initially wanted to found an Irish theater that "steer[ed] clear of all political factionalism" or "activism that could and did lead to violence" (Welch 2), they eventually succumbed to the nationalist desire for a more revolutionary tone

with the production of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*⁵ in 1902. This play was much better received than some of the theatre's earlier offerings, but left at least one attendee wondering "if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot"(qtd. in Welch 16). Yeats expresses his own uneasiness regarding the effect of his and Lady Gregory's rendering of Cathleen in his later poetry wondering "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" ("Man" 11-12). Despite the misgivings of the primary founders of the movement, Welch's claim that the modern Irish theater began with the performance of this play would have set well with the nationalists. Indeed, following the inaugural performance of the play, prominent nationalist and Sinn Féin founder Arthur Griffith referred to the Irish Literary Theatre as an institution "where the heroic past of Ireland can be made to live again for us and give us inspiration and aspiration" (qtd. in Tiffit 318). Grote describes the reception of the play by nationalists as "emphatic" and proof that "separatists were craving national symbols and role-models which supported their cause" (218). These separatists were to be confronted with a very different idea of Irish-ness when John Synge's *Nora* took the stage later that year in "The Shadow of the Glen." The fact that Yeats and Lady Gregory enthusiastically sponsored the production of Synge's first staged play just a few months following the success of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is evidence that the Theatre was in no way irrevocably aligned with any of the groups attempting to establish their own image of Irish identity, particularly Irish manhood.

Edmund John Millington Synge was born in a prosperous suburb of south Dublin on April 16, 1871. In his biography of Synge, David M. Kiely details the history of Synge's grandfather who "borrowed freely [to make] many improvements to the beautiful pleasure grounds" (10) of the family seat at Glanmore Castle. Unfortunately, the elder John Synge's extravagance resulted in bankruptcy and excessive debt which became the burden of his eldest

⁵ See previous discussion of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in Chapter 1, pp. 16-18.

son, Francis upon his death in 1845. Kiely reports that Francis was able to salvage the estate but not to the extent that it could support the younger sons of the family (11). Thus the playwright was born into a middle class existence of a barrister father, John Hatch Synge and the daughter of a rector, Kathleen Traill (11). Synge's mistrust of Catholicism was nearly unavoidable as both sides of his family were abjectly Protestant. His grandfather was a member of the "Brethren," a protestant community formed in Dublin in the 1820s and his mother's family "were of northern Irish Protestant stock" with an "extreme" antipathy toward "popery" (Kiely 11). As his father died when he was an infant, Synge was primarily reared by his mother and his maternal grandmother, both of whom lived insular existences preferring that they (and the children under their sway) associate only with those who held the same religious beliefs. Kiely refers to this life as living in a "garrison *within* the garrison [of the Protestant Ascendancy]" (12). Their code of behavior was marginalized even within the already narrow confines available to Protestants in Dublin. Despite his mother's best efforts to instill the same set of beliefs in Synge, he ultimately rejected his family's theology, writing in his *Autobiography* that by the time he was sixteen or seventeen, he had "renounced Christianity after a good deal of wobbling" (qtd. in Kiely 13). Some nine years later, Synge, who by that time had decided to be a writer, met W. B. Yeats in Paris where the older poet famously adjured him to "go to the Arran Islands [and...] express a life that has never found expression" (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 61).

While Synge was thereafter a compatriot of Yeats and his associates, he refused to politicize his work. As a pacifist, he was particularly disturbed by what he termed "Fenian" sentiments expressed by Maud Gonne who, according to Kiely, believed the "solution to the 'Irish Question' was a bombing campaign in England" (19). Instead, Synge held that "England would only do Ireland right when she felt herself to be safe" (Kiely 19). Perhaps it was his

pacifist, non-nationalistic, anti-organized religious leanings that prompted Synge to consistently refuse to incorporate the kind of nationalist themes that would “rouse the sleeping land” (Welch 14). In any event, he chose instead to devote himself to refashioning ancient myths and folk tales he heard as he travelled among the “folk” in the western environs of Ireland. He believed that his drama was a collaboration with the “authentic” Irish he met on these travels, writing, “I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen” (Synge “Preface” 107). His patriotism was due to the “imagination of the people, and the language they use” which he believed in the countryside of Ireland was “rich and living” (“Preface” 107). What problematized his drama for Irish audiences was his representation of these authentically “rich and living” Irish people.

Synge takes the accepted emblematic representation of Irish Woman and Irish Nation and challenges not only the British view of Ireland as helpless “Hibernia” but also the nationalists’ view of their land as the strong and capable and most of all sexually pure “Erin.” The most volatile component of Synge’s works where the nationalists were concerned was his perceived attack on the purity of Irish womanhood and, by extension, the masculinity of Irish men and the validity of Ireland as nation. Joseph Holloway, a devotee of the Abbey Theatre who attended the opening performance of *The Playboy of the Western World* on January 29, 1907, recorded this experience in his diary and mentions that some “gentlemen” told him that “they were delighted they had not taken their wives to the show” (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 238). These gentlemen went on to refer to the play as “filth” and describe Synge as “the evil genius of the Abbey” (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 238). One reason for their reaction is described in a telegram that Lady Gregory sent to Yeats that evening where she mentions that the “audience broke up in disorder at

the word ‘shift’” (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 238). The audience apparently did not object to parricide, but were angered by the mention of a woman’s undergarment. This is not surprising when one takes into account the regard that the nationalists had for “Irish womanhood in its pure state” which Hugh Kenner claims is analogous to a “revolutionists utility like gunpowder” (24). The key descriptor for Irish womanhood here is “pure.” The nationalists had developed a narrow ideal with which to rehabilitate the image of the Irish for the world. Their own version of the propaganda regarding Ireland “required an impeccable peasantry” particularly since the English “already confused Irish peasants with comical monkeys” (Kenner 24). Therefore, for Synge to glorify the emblem of Ireland as strong but lonely woman frustrated in her desire for a manly consort rather than a pure and humble maiden in need of a savior completely upends the nationalist’ agenda. That Synge deliberately constructed a feminine emblem at odds with the nationalists’ ideal can be seen in the following entry in his autobiography:

Soon after I had relinquished the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland. Everything Irish became precious and had a charm that was neither quite human nor divine, rather perhaps as if I had fallen in love with a goddess, although I had still sense enough not to personify Erin in the patriotic verse (26).

He rejects organized religion even as he expresses his growing love of Ireland which he sees personified as a goddess. He also appears to show disdain for the patriotic portrayal of Ireland as Erin in the nationalist verse of the day.

In 1897, Synge wrote a letter to Maude Gonne requesting that she remove his name from the membership roll of *Jeune Irlande*, offering this explanation for his withdrawal from the group: “I wish to work in my own way for the cause of Ireland, and I shall never be able to do so if I get mixed up with a revolutionary and semi-military movement” (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 63). According to a letter written by his mother, Synge told her that he believed “Ireland [would] come to her own in years to come when socialistic ideas spread in England”

(qtd. in Greene and Stephens 63). He also told her that “he [did] not at all approve of fighting for freedom” (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 63). This disapproval of the revolutionary approach to independence is reflected in his drama, particularly in his characterization of Irish men. This is in contrast to his celebration of the actual Irish people he observes and reports on in his nonfiction prose, *The Aran Islands* and *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara*. In these works, Synge describes life as he observes it in the west of Ireland and credits the peasants he found there as his inspiration in his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, “I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk-imagination of these fine people” (107). One figure that particularly inspires Synge is that of the vagrant whose lifestyle he describes as being spent in “out-of-door conditions that keep him in good humour and fine bodily health” (“Vagrants” 202). He characterizes this “tramp life” as having “a certain wildness that gives it romance and a peculiar value for those who look at life in Ireland with an eye that is aware of the arts also” (“Vagrants” 208). He acknowledges his romanticization of the vagrant’s existence even as he declares it an artistic inspiration. He does not idealize the “people of the glens” in Wicklow, claiming that “while there are still many fine young men...it too often happens, that the men under thirty are badly built, shy and despondent” (“People” 224 note). While he admires the tenacity, traditions and hospitality of the peasants he spends time with, he also feels the need to point out their faults, lamenting what he refers to as “the fashion in Dublin...to exalt the Irish peasant into a type of almost absolute virtue, frugal, self-sacrificing, valiant...” (“People” 224 note). He saw his role as presenting the peasant authentically even as he celebrated him or her as the true representative of Ireland.

Welch discusses this when he describes Synge’s plays as having a “shocking authenticity” (25). He explains his use of this problematic term saying that although it “can

be...loosely used to refer to a kind of art or writing closely attuned to a certain type of nationalist *pietas* or allegiance,” in the case of Synge’s work, “[it] is a form of super-realism, or, as [Synge] termed it, ‘transfigured realism’, where the elements of a situation or a mood or a set of human atmospheres are presented in all their surprising (and sometimes brutally divergent) diversity” (25). Welch argues that Synge’s work is “completely and utterly Irish but entirely remote from any comfortable idea of ‘Irishness’” (25). While the argument that the characters in the three plays to be discussed here are “completely and utterly Irish” is entirely subjective, Synge does offer an interpretation of Irishness that does nothing to further the agendas of any of the individuals or groups working to establish an identity to work against the colonizer’s definition. He stays true to his observations of real life Irish peasantry and his determination not to portray Irish woman as a patriotic personification of Ireland that also meets the standards of the Victorian ideal of young womanhood. He also refrains from invoking the “old woman” trope in order to inspire supposedly noble and brave young Irish men to die for their country. The old women in his plays are simply women worn out by living in a harsh land.

In his overview of masculinity studies in the 20th century, Robert A. Nye explains that even as masculinity can be “divided into a plurality of kinds,” there are “masculine scripts generated in and for particular milieus” (1940). As Ireland moved into the 20th century, there were several “masculine scripts” being generated by various entities. Whether it was the warrior saint, the heroic athlete or noble revolutionary, the scripts called for a masculine ideal that was courageous in the face of adversity and motivated to protect “mother” Ireland, particularly as she was embodied by Irish woman. Much of the controversy surrounding Synge’s dramas was his refusal to follow this masculine script, particularly where it called for Irish men to protect and serve “mother” Ireland. His depiction of priests in his drama could not be further from the image

of the warrior-saint in priest's garb celebrated by the League of St. Columba. Indeed, none of his male characters invoke the "heroic past" emblem demanded by the nationalists or the church. Instead, he creates characters and actions that portray what he sees as the true tragedy of colonization, the absence of a purpose and identity in Irish men that leaves Irish women isolated and alone.

"I do be afeard": The Frightened Man

When Synge's play, "The Shadow of the Glen," was first performed on October 8, 1903, its opening lines were met with silent fascination. According to Kiely, the audience was captivated by Mary Walker, the actress who played Nora, as "her beauty, combined with the loveliness and strangeness of the lines Synge had given her, held Molesworth Hall hushed until near the close of the short play" (117). Nora's final lines, however, tell the audience she is leaving her husband for the Tramp and led to hisses and loud booing. Although the applause eventually won out, the controversy over Synge's depiction of Irish woman (and Irish nation) had begun. Arthur Griffith who was ecstatic in his praise of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* a few months before was initially the most vocal in his criticism of the play. Ritschel quotes the following excerpt from a Griffith editorial published after the opening night performance:

[T]his play of his [Synge's] shows him to be as utterly a stranger to Irish character as any Englishman who has yet dissected us for the unlightenment of his country men. [...Some] men and women in Ireland marry lacking love, and live mostly in a dull level of amity. Sometimes they do not – Sometimes the woman lives in bitterness – Sometimes she dies of a broken heart – but she does not go away with the Tramp. [...] It is not by staging a lie we can serve Ireland (8).

Maud Gonne was also vehement in her criticism, accusing Synge of inserting "foreign" ideas into a work supposedly representative of Irish culture, declaring, "I would ask for freedom [for the theatre] [...] from the insidious and destructive tyranny of foreign influence" (Ritschel 8). Ironically, Synge's portrayal of a woman free to leave her husband and take up company with

another was far from being a “foreign” practice but came directly from the pre-British Irish law regarding a woman’s right to divorce her husband.⁶ In this sense, Synge was de-Victorianizing traditional rural Irish marriage practices while asserting Nora’s right to move out of an unbearable patriarchal situation into a more natural, free existence. Synge may attempt to revise the revision of Ireland personified as woman, but he offers no similar re-identification of Irish manhood. Yeats recognizes Synge’s harsh depictions of the men of Ireland in this summing up of the play: “she that is ‘a hard woman to please’ must spend her days between a sour-faced old husband, a man who goes mad upon the hills, a craven lad and a drunken tramp” (“Preface” 63). Yeats’ list effectively identifies the types of Irish manhood Synge believes exist. The men are disparate in their roles, but they all define themselves against Nora as the only female character. In *Staging Masculinities*, Mangan suggests that “the masculine may be characterized as ‘that which is not womanly’” (9). Judith Butler offers a similar comment arguing that “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender” (*Gender* 22). Thus Nora’s husband asserts his masculinity by signifying Nora as “old woman” (14) or “bad wife” (8). He genders himself masculine by feminizing her as well as denoting her as old and bad. The other male characters also assert their manly characteristics (all evidence to the contrary) by overtly referring to her womanliness. One by one and to their dismay, she rejects their definition of her as womanly and consequently challenges their self-perception as masculine.

The entire play is set in a cottage kitchen, the space of domesticity. Two characters are on the scene as the curtain rises. Nora, the apparent woman of the house is moving about, setting

⁶ According to S. J. Connolly, editor of *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (2002), the Gaelic-Irish law followed during early Christian times granted divorce with the option to remarry to both men and women. A marriage took place whenever two parties consented to the union in the presence of witnesses. A woman in Gaelic-Irish society also had substantial economic rights. In the event of a divorce she “withdrew what she brought into the marriage and received a share of the profits generated while within the union” (364).

things straight, lighting candles – in other words, presenting a picture of domestic tranquility. The other figure in the scene is also tranquil but morbidly so – it is a body lying on the bed covered with a sheet. The discordance is quiet but immediate. Indeed, it is the quietness of the scene that is so bizarre. The tranquil silence is disturbed by a knock on the door. It is not family and friends come to wake a loved one; it is instead a Tramp who responds to the body as one would expect, exclaiming “The Lord have mercy on us all!” when he notices the corpse (3). Nora’s contrasting reaction, “It doesn’t matter anyway, stranger, come in out of the rain” serves to amplify her studied indifference to the death of the person who turns out to be her husband (3). During this part of the play, the Tramp provides the “normal” voice of the narrative. He describes the body, saying, “it’s a queer look is on him for a man that’s dead” (3). The state of the body, that it is “not tidied, or laid out” (4) adds to the queerness of the scene. Indeed, the entire situation, as the Tramp vocalizes it, is “queer,” an assessment that aptly sums up the unfolding scene so far. Nora reveals that her cavalier attitude toward the body is a result of a curse imposed by the dead man on her if she touched him after death. Only his sister, it seems, is fit to tidy and lay out the body. Again the Tramp identifies the situation as “queer,” and again, Nora attributes its queerness directly to the dead man saying, “he was an old man, and an odd man...always cold, every day since I knew him...and every night” (4). The deliberate mention of his coldness at night, gives us a distinct impression of not only a loveless but a sexless marriage. As the scene unfolds, the Tramp suggests that Nora should be afraid of being alone and at the mercy of a strange man, “...it’s many a lone woman who would be afeared of the like of me in the dark night” (5). Nora’s response is interesting: “I’m thinking many would be afeared, but I never knew what way I’d be afeared of beggar or bishop or any man of you at all... It’s other things than the like of you, stranger, would make a person afeared” (5). By this

statement, Nora rejects being typified as a “woman,” instead claiming a courage that the Tramp does not seem to have. His masculinity is challenged by her refusal to accept her womanly role.

What Nora does seem to be afraid of is the “old woman” status as she describes her life with Dan as “a long while...with the young growing behind me and the old passing” (12). She goes on to refer to two other local women, one who is younger with two children and one on the way and another who is “walking around on the roads, or sitting in a dirty old house, with no teeth in her mouth, and no sense” (12). She seems to exist between the two states of the goddess figure. She is neither “old woman” nor “young queen,” but is middle-aged and loveless. We discover that she is particularly lonely since the death of the shepherd, Patch Darcy who she describes as “a great man surely” (11). Here Nora is starkly depicted as a solitary figure that has no one to look after her or care what happens to her. It is easy to see this character as Synge’s version of the goddess Ireland in a futile search for a deserving consort in these lines: “It’s in a lonesome place you do have to be talking with someone, and looking for someone...and if it’s a power of men I’m after knowing they were fine men, for I was a hard child to please, and a hard girl to please...and it’s a hard woman I am to please this day...” (11). She married Dan because she associated him with the land as he had “a bit of a farm, and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills” (11). His oldness, oddness and coldness “every day and every night” (4) is a great disappointment to her and now that she is free, she is ready to look elsewhere for the power of a “fine” man.

Interestingly, it is the mention of the dead Patch Darcy that prompts Nora’s description of the “fine men” she is after indicating that Darcy was a viable candidate for this role. She describes him as one who would “always look in here and he passing up or passing down” and admits that her loneliness became more acute when he died. Kiely refers to Patch Darcy as “a

superman, a shepherd... a Wicklovian Paul Bunyan” who was driven mad by “the solitude and oppression” of the hills” and died (98). Not only is he portrayed as a man who at least had the potential of heroism, he is also clearly denoted as a Christ-like figure with references to his being found dead “on the third day” (6) and as one who “would walk through five hundred sheep and miss one of them” (10). Unfortunately for Nora, this potential savior dies mad, to no end and without hope of resurrection. With this character Synge dismisses the church’s promise of hope in the life to come for the spiritually virtuous as horrifically useless to Ireland in her plight. He also suggests that the nationalists who were the self-proclaimed saviors of Erin are ineffective and doomed to failure, not from a lack of courage, but from a lack of mental stability.

The candidate that Nora seems to consider as a replacement for her husband is Michael Dara, the man who replaced Darcy as shepherd. Described as a “tall, innocent young man” (9), Michael initially seems the logical choice for Nora. We see her expression lighten for the first time as she gives “half a smile” (7) when the Tramp describes a “young man with a drift of mountain ewes” that he saw as he approached the cottage (7). Once she fetches Michael, Nora indicates her desire to be alone with him, asking the Tramp to “go into the little room and stretch yourself a short while on the bed” (9). She clearly wants privacy with this young man, and when the Tramp refuses to leave the room, she tells Michael, “Let you not mind him at all...he has a drop taken, and it’s soon he’ll be falling asleep” (10). Instead of recognizing Nora’s desire for his company, the proper response of a suitor, Michael focuses his attention on the Tramp, trading insults and then admitting to Nora that the Tramp is right about his lack of shepherding ability. He freely describes his incompetence concluding that “mountain ewes is a queer breed...and I not used to them at all” (10). This is in direct contrast with Darcy’s ability to not only shepherd the mountain ewes but to know each of them so intimately that he could tell if one out of five

hundred was missing. This reference to the different abilities of each man to handle ewes can also refer to their competency in meeting Nora's needs. Of course, Darcy is dead and Michael is what is available to her. Her description of what it was like to be married to Dan while "looking out from a door the like of that door, and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog" makes Michael uneasy and he declares that her talk is "the like of that talk you do hear from men, and they after being a great while on the back hills" (12). This also links her to Patch Darcy who was one of the men who spent time "on the back hills" and "went queer in his head" (10). Like the Tramp, Michael recognizes that Nora is not "womanly" and therefore a threat to his self-perceived masculinity. When Nora puts money on the table, Michael quickly forgets his uneasiness, declaring to Nora, "it's a fine life you'll have now with a young man, a fine life surely" (13). He attempts to reassert the man/woman dichotomy by signifying himself as the man who will provide the "fine life" for her albeit with her dead husband's money. It seems that a vision of material wealth rather than a noble and courageous impulse to come to Nora's rescue is what motivates this particular young man of Ireland. We will never know if a life with Michael would satisfy Nora or not for it is at this moment that Dan sneezes and Michael runs for the door. Michael, "afear'd" of Dan when he thought he was dead is even more terrified of a living Dan with a large stick in his hand.

Any potential he had as a proper consort for Nora is destroyed when he appeals to her to save him instead, saying, "Get me out of it, Nora, for the love of God" (14). It seems that faced with a dead paternal figure which echoes an absent empire, Michael, a possible nationalist figure, is more than eager to take the spoils left behind. As soon as Dan is "resurrected," however, Michael not only abandons Nora, he reverses her curse on Dan. When Dan reveals his trickery, Nora proclaims, "...it's bad you are living and it's bad you'll be when you're dead" (14). As a

proclamation of a goddess figure, these are chilling words, or they would be if Synge were writing this to further a nationalist message. Instead, he lets Michael, the failed suitor, have the last word and bless Dan at the end of the play, saying, “may you have a long life and a quiet life, and good health with it” (16). Dan’s “resurrection” and promise of a relatively peaceful life is in direct opposition to Darcy’s failure as a successful Christ-figure. The old man, the abusive patriarchal figure, lives again along with a cowardly sycophantic young man, while the brave and virile potential mate dies mad.

On the surface, the plot of this one-act play is fairly simple and seems to privilege the man who wins the woman at the end. A close look at the characterization of all of the male figures including the tramp, however, reveals that there is no hero, only the lesser of several evils for the distressed woman to choose from. As the various options available to Nora take shape, it seems she is faced with two choices: she can leave Dan and go out on her own to face Patch Darcy’s fate, risking starvation and madness, or she can take the offer of the Tramp, to go with him and feel “the cold, and the frost, and the great rain, and the sun again, and the south wind blowing in the glens” (15). Her decision to go with the Tramp seems to fit with Synge’s view of what should be valued in the people of Ireland. In order to come to some clearer understanding of the Tramp’s intended symbolic significance, I again refer to Synge’s, “The Vagrants of Wicklow.” In this essay, he sees the “abundance” of vagrants on the roads of rural Ireland as “an interesting sign, for wherever the labourer of a country has preserved his vitality, and begets an occasional temperament of distinction, a certain number of vagrants are to be looked for” (1). Synge goes on to describe the vagrant as the gifted younger son of a peasant family who, were he of the middle class, would become “a writer or artist,” but because he is poor, is “soon a tramp on the roadside” (1). He also believes these tramps have “a curious reputation for witchery and

unnatural powers” (3) which would make one of them a suitable companion for a supernatural rendering of Ireland as goddess. Synge clearly views tramps in general as special members of the “kingdom of Ireland” – the gifted younger sons of the peasants he sees as his muse and the true people of the land. As such, the Tramp in “Shadow” would appear to be the perfect choice as a consort for Nora. He has no allegiance to the laws of the empire or the Church, institutions that support the race-killing practice of marrying young women to old men too cold to produce children. This view of the Tramp as the perfect match for Nora, however, is problematized by the Tramp’s behavior until the very end of the play when he abruptly transforms from an average homeless man to Nora’s champion.

Initially the Tramp is depicted as not easily “afraid” as he describes “long nights, and crossing the hills when the fog is on them, the time a little stick would seem as big as your arm, and a rabbit as big as a bay horse, and a stack of turf as big as a towering church in the city of Dublin” (5-6). The Tramp may not be afraid of sticks, horses, or even towering churches, but he is “destroyed surely” when he hears a voice out of the thick mist. He admits that upon hearing this voice, he ran away and “got drunk in the morning and drunk the day after” (6). It is only when he discovered that it was Darcy’s voice and not his own mind hearing things that he “wasn’t afraid any more” (6). Thus the Tramp reveals himself to be frightened into running away and getting drunk by the supernatural and one not likely to respond to the Shan Van Vocht call to arms even if Nora were to fulfill that role. The tramp’s cowardice is also confirmed when he only agrees to be left with Dan’s body if Nora arms him with a needle, itself a weapon associated with the domestic and therefore the feminine. He needs the needle and some thread to mend his coat, but he also claims “there’s great safety in a needle” as he “mov[es] uneasily” (7) and eyes Dan’s body indicating that in spite of his claim that “A man’s that’s dead can do no

hurt” (7), he is afraid. Indeed, when Dan uncovers himself and sits up on the bed, the Tramp forgets his “weapon” and “springs to his feet with a movement of terror” (8). When Dan threatens to kill the Tramp if he reveals his scheme to catch Nora in adultery, the Tramp cooperates, giving him whiskey and even his stick, and agrees not to reveal Dan’s trickery. He is therefore complicit in Dan’s womanizing of Nora as a “bad wife,” arming Dan with his stick and agreeing to help him catch her in an act of womanly misbehavior.

Synge calls attention to the men aligning themselves against the sole woman in order to prove their masculine prowess. When Dan orders Nora out of the house, we do see the Tramp literally “standing up” for Nora, admonishing Dan, saying “what would the like of her do if you put her out on the roads?” (14). In this scene, the Tramp is still asserting his masculinity, however, by suggesting that “the like of her” is helpless as a female. After the Tramp tries and fails to shame Dan into keeping Nora in the house, he suggests that Michael should take her. Only when there are no other options, does the Tramp offer to take Nora himself. He assures her that she’ll “not be sitting up on a wet ditch, the way you’re after sitting in this place, making yourself old with looking on each day, and it passing you by” (15). As a man, he offers to save her from the inevitable aging that happens to a woman alone. “Come with me now, lady of the house,” the Tramp says, “and it’s not my blather you’ll be hearing only, but you’ll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you’ll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm” (16). The Tramp asserts his masculinity by offering Nora, “lady of the house,” a life free from drudgery and loneliness, a life where nature is kind and welcoming. His pretty speech helps her forget his complicity in Dan’s deception as he does the “manly” thing and assures her of his protection. Here is no “happily ever after,” but it is a chance to escape the cottage and the apathy of her existence with an old,

cold husband. Dan Burke, the older man who was to provide for her has become her living nightmare. Patch Darcy, the quasi-savior has gone mad and died. Michael Dara, the poor substitute for Darcy has abandoned her to bond with the man of the house and maintain the patriarchal structure of the land. Only the stranger, the Tramp, is willing to offer her at least a modicum of freedom and companionship even as he reifies her identity as womanly.

Ritschel proposes that the Tramp is being used to attack the “loveless marriage” and, by extension, the Church when he “proposes to Nora a salvation that not only includes life in the Irish landscape, but also life away from Dan and away from the Church’s unreasonable control” (11). In this sense, the Tramp “saves” Nora in a way that none of the other male characters are willing or able to accomplish. Nicholas Grene, however, argues that the Tramp has “ordinary human fear” as “a very un-mysterious stranger” and thus cannot represent an ideal Ireland (72-73). Innes takes this further and points to the ultimate futility of the Tramp’s proposal arguing that we cannot “see her departure with the Tramp as more than a bravely poetic gesture born of necessity, given her knowledge of the harsh reality of a tramp’s life and his collaboration with Dan Burke in the plan to catch Nora betraying him with Michael” (53). Indeed, the Tramp’s reversal from co-conspirator with Dan to Nora’s savior is quite abrupt and almost too romanticized as is the change in the way the Irish glens are described. Suddenly the landscape is no longer just a stark view from a door as “the mists roll...down the bog” with nothing to hear “but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees” (12). Instead, the Tramp offers Nora a world where, instead of hearing Dan’s wheezy insults, she’ll “be hearing the herons crying out...and the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm and...fine songs...when the sun goes up” (15-16). While the Tramp takes this uncharacteristic and poetic turn to a romanticized nature, Nora remains firmly rooted in her present reality. She

realizes that this romantic return to nature, harkening to the past, is ultimately unrealistic and will most likely result in her death: “I’m thinking it’s myself will be wheezing that time with lying down under the heavens when the night is cold” (16). Nora realizes that her choices are limited: she can either remain with an abusive and impotent husband and be doomed to the life of a childless drudge, or she can leave the security of a roof over her head to live unsheltered with the stranger whose virility has yet to be determined. The option that is not available is being manless and independent.

Synge seems to be suggesting that Ireland as a nation is also faced with several less than ideal solutions. She can continue under the rule of an Empire whose authority has been stretched so thin that it cannot even maintain the illusion of beneficent caretaker in light of the famines and mass immigrations of the nineteenth century. She can submit to the various forms of nationalist movements who themselves cannot agree on the ultimate path to independence. She can be free from the colonial oppressor while submitting to another form of patriarchy, the Roman Catholic Church, or she can look to her vagrants – the gifted sons of the peasant class who are in communion with nature and the mystical past and, thus, immune to the authority of both the overbearing paternal empire and the insipid Church. If one simply reads Synge’s essay on vagrants and applies his romanticized ideals of a tramp’s life to the offer being made to Nora, this very complex play would suddenly seem quite simple. Synge does not completely idealize the folk as represented by the Tramp, however. He is not interested in following Yeats’ lead and giving Ireland a romanticized version of the mythic past “to rouse [the] sleeping land” (qtd. in Welch 14). Instead, he produces what he sees as the reality facing the peasant woman of the west and Nora’s response to the Tramp’s offer shows her to be firmly grounded in this reality. Seamus Deane argues that Synge’s work “recognizes the link between constriction and intensity

and shows a desire to escape from the intensities of the personal life, which can become merely neurotic or worse, into the ‘naturalness’ of the folk life, which can retain intensity and remain communal” (52-3). Synge may have recognized this link, but in “Shadow” he also recognizes that a drunken Tramp is only an option when the true savior is dead, his substitute is a coward, and the oppressor is impotent. The life offered to Nora may not be as bad as being bound to an abusive and impotent oppressor but neither is it a glorious form of independence. Some suitor is better than none, however, and the Tramp at least has some connection to the folk-life that harbors the residual of Ireland’s cultural identity. The Tramp romanticizes what he can provide, but Nora goes with him fully knowing what to expect. When she questions the Tramp’s romanticized vision of life in the Irish outdoors, she also admits, “but you’ve a fine bit of talk, stranger, and it’s with yourself I’ll go” (16). She knows his talk of the beauty of living hand to mouth on the glens is just that, but she is willing to take a chance to escape what is clearly an oppressive life.

Which of these two voices is the one that has the power to overcome the invisibility imposed by the “First World” on its colonial other? Is it the voice of the Tramp, promising happily-ever-afters with the birds and the flowers? Or is it Nora’s pragmatic voice, aware of her limited options but willing to make the best of them until something better presents itself? Grote argues that “the literary revival promoted an imagined glorious past and used it to make cultural demands for a new Ireland” suggesting “while the Irish past was presented as a desirable ideal, the present became a mere stepping stone from the past to the future” (222). With what Synge himself termed “transfigured realism” (qtd. in Welch 25), it seems the playwright preferred to examine the present paying particular and brutally honest attention to the options available to the people and therefore the nation of Ireland. By forcing Nora to rely on a return to the primitive

past to escape her oppressor even if it means a lonely death or a descent into madness, Synge does not show much faith in those re-imagining Irishness to understand much less meet the cultural demands of a new Ireland.

“A daring fellow is the jewel of the world”: The Violent Man

Similar to reactions to the staging of “Shadow,” the opening performance of *Playboy of the Western World* in 1907 was greeted with outrage from audience members and critics. Welch explains that Synge knew this play would not be popular, insisting that William Fay be kept on to not only direct but to star in the title role even though his being replaced as stage manager was imminent (41). Yeats, who realistically admits in a letter to Lady Gregory and Synge that his plays “will not draw large audiences for some time” (Welch 40), was the primary voice in favor of replacing William Fay as stage manager. His reasoning for this decision is particularly telling as he suggests that the company needs someone “to train players in a tragic style of acting, one which would have a less ostensibly Irish approach” (Welch 40). It is interesting that a theater founded at least in part to “correct false and demeaning stereotypes of Irish character and Irish sentiment” (Welch 2) would require “a less ostensibly Irish approach” (Welch 40) to be successful in Ireland. This is evidence of the conflict within the cultural revivalists as to what should be presented as “authentically” Irish. Based on reactions to Synge’s “Shadow,” his offered representations were not at all aligned with what Dublin wanted the world to see as Irish. Synge obviously knew that his play would be seen as controversial and wanted no one else involved before the opening performance, insisting that William Fay with his brand of Irish-ness be kept on to not only direct but play the role of Christy Mahon (Welch 41). A man so devoted to portraying his brand of authentic Irish folk culture would necessarily be suspect of someone

hired to specifically offer a “less ostensibly Irish approach” and Synge was rightly concerned that his play would be at risk under a new manager. Welch reports that Synge and Fay “had considerable anxiety over the impact the language, the theme of parricide, and the glorification of physical violence would have” (41). Events would prove that their anxiety was justified.

During the first performance, the audience was quiet until the third act when Christy attacks the father he believed already dead. At this point, “shouting and catcalls were heard – including ‘Sinn Féin forever’” (Welch 41). For the next performance, Synge’s detractors were ready, packing the audience with Sinn Féin protestors who “booed and shouted from the start” (Welch 41). At the third performance, Yeats himself took the stage, asking the audience to give the play “a hearing” (Welch 41). The appeal fell on deaf ears as shouts of outrage continued to interrupt the play with many protestors yelling, “That’s not the West” (qtd. in Welch 42). Arthur Griffith’s, paper, *Sinn Féin*, predictably castigated the work, condemning it as a “vile and inhuman story told in the foulest language” (qtd. in Welch 42). At least one branch of the Gaelic League unanimously agreed to also condemn the play issuing a statement that read, “...we can only come to the conclusion that the alleged play has been prepared and is produced not for the sake of arts but with a purpose” (qtd. in Welch 42). The latter criticism is particularly interesting since it seemed that proponents of the nationalist cause or at least the forming of a cultural expression distinctly Irish would expect the Theatre to produce works “with a purpose,” that purpose being to further their cause. The problem with this “alleged play” was that it seemed to simply verify the colonizer’s depiction of Irish men as farcical, propagating the “monstrous gospel of animalism” (qtd. in Welch 42), and therefore did not inspire Irish men to behave in an ideal way, ready to die for country and queen, or Irish women to exhibit the feminine virtues of the popular “Angel in the House.”

The animalized version of Irish manhood so enjoyed by English caricaturists is chronicled by L. Perry Curtis, Jr. as he describes the depiction of “Paddy” as evolving from “essentially human” to “more like a monster than a man” after 1860. This animalized representation continued from then into the twentieth century, waning in popularity in the early 1900’s but making a reappearance in the early 1920s (Curtis 57). Curtis’s detailed study of how Irishmen were represented in popular venues of the British press explains why those seeking to rehabilitate the perception of Irish manhood were anxious about Synge’s portrayals. During the same period that Irishmen were depicted as more monstrous than human, both sides of the conflict “began to use the icon of feminine and chaste Erin to melodramatize the perceived contest between the forces of good and evil” (Curtis 157). The British personification of Ireland as a “beautiful maiden” who was also “passive or defenseless” is deliberately undermined by “the Erins created in Dublin [who] possessed reserves of strength and an air of authority rarely found among the equivalent Irish icons made in England” (Curtis 158). In her preface to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler describes the “foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power” (viii). What we see in *Playboy of the Western World* is a power struggle that is divided along and between gender lines. Pegeen and the Widow Quin vie for Christy’s attention even as Shawn barter to wrest Pegeen from Christy. Pegeen and the Widow Quin also challenge the patriarchal system with both of them dictating and attempting to control the behavior of the male characters. The gendering of these characters is thus muddled, with none of them behaving exclusively masculine or feminine. With this play, Synge once again reifies the colonizer’s version of Irish manhood while challenging both the colonizer and the nationalist versions of Irish woman.

Playboy opens similarly to “Shadow” with a domestic setting, although this one is of a country public house instead of a cottage kitchen. As the first act unfolds the similarities between the two plays become more apparent. Pegeen is alone until Shawn, her fiancé, appears. Although he is not a Tramp, but a supposedly upstanding citizen of the area, he is afraid to be out in the dark. His description of “a kind of fellow above in the furzy ditch, groaning wicked like a maddening dog” calls to mind the image of Patch Darcy talking in the dark and frightening the Tramp (111). Like Nora, Pegeen’s choices for suitors are lacking in traditional manly virtues, to say the least. Shawn, her intended husband, is a coward and bound by the Church’s rules more than he is bound by honor to protect her. When her father suggests that Shawn stay with Pegeen while he goes out, Shawn admits, “I’m afeard of Father Reilly; and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard I did the like of that?” (113). In this play, Synge’s contempt for the Christian Church as well as his doubt that a return to pagan ways will save Ireland is even more apparent than in “Shadow.” Pegeen’s father, Michael Flaherty is described as an “old pagan” by Shawn and as such represents pre-Christian Ireland. Although he is not an abusive man like Dan Burke, he would rather drink than stay with his neglected daughter, so he negotiates with the effeminate Shawn to relieve him of his responsibility. Shawn both aggrandizes himself and reveals himself as a coward when he thinks the Cardinals of Rome will care what he does and when he admits to being more “afeard” of the priest than he is committed to protecting Pegeen. Her other possible options include the squint-eyed “Red Linahan,” the lame “Patcheen,” or the “mad Mulrannies” (110). This pathetic list of suitors available in Pegeen’s Ireland is a reflection of the “badly built” young men Synge discovered in Wicklow (“People” 224 note) and is revealing of what Synge believes is the state of Irish manhood. Just as Nora laments the dead Patch Darcy, Pegeen also decries the absence of certain

men. However, there is no attempt here to cast them as possible Christ-like saviors. One man that Pegeen misses “the like of” is “Danne Sullivan [who] knocked the eye from a peeler” (110). In a land oppressed for centuries by its own people in the employ of the colonizer, this could be seen as a noble gesture, but Mr. Sullivan is unavailable. The other man whose presence Pegeen longs for is “Marcus Quin” who, like Darcy, is deceased but not before he “got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland” (110). It seems even a man who maims sheep is a preferable option since he is also great story teller. Clearly Pegeen values a propensity for violence and brutality as masculine characteristics. Shawn is just as clearly not suited for this role as he wishes for the “courage to come behind [Christy] and run a pike into his side” but admits he does not possess such courage because he is “God-fearing” (139). Instead, Shawn appeals to one of the old women in the play, the Widow Quin, promising her not only the ever-present ewe, but also “the red cow...the mountainy ram...the right of way across [his] rye path” as well as a “wedding ring...and the loan of a new suit” (139) if she will marry Christy and thus remove him from Pegeen’s pool of possible husbands. Shawn’s offer to the Widow would ironically prevent him from marrying Pegeen himself since he gives up the few items that would make him suitable for the daughter of a business owner.

Christy Mahon is a stranger to Pegeen, and therefore more attractive to her. Since law breakers in an oppressed society are often seen as heroes by the oppressed, it is not surprising that Christy becomes an object of fascination as the men attempt to guess his offense. The first assumption by Michael’s friend Jimmy is that the stranger, “a wicked-looking fellow” may have “followed after a young woman on a lonesome night” (116). This oblique reference to rape is met with shock by Christy who claims he “was all times a decent lad” and derision by Michael’s other friend, Philly, who suggests that this is a silly suggestion since Christy’s “father was a

farmer” (116). The following speculation as to Christy’s crime ranges from an understandable act of violence resulting from someone taking his land to his stealing “gold guineas” from a soldier to polygamy (116). Pegeen, who is mostly derisive toward all of the men in the play at this point, dismisses Christy’s crime saying, “you did nothing at all. A soft lad the like of you wouldn’t slit the wind pipe of a screeching sow” (116). With this statement, Pegeen challenges his manhood and obliquely and unfavorably compares him to the sheep maiming Marcus Quin. When Christy accuses her of “not speaking the truth,” Pegeen threatens him, saying “Would you have me knock the head of you with the butt of the broom?” (117), proving herself to be more of a “man” than Shawn who is too God-fearing to resort to violence. Pegeen quickly changes from “mock rage” to “blank amazement” when Christy reacts “with a sharp cry of horror” even as he counters her threat with one of his own: “Don’t strike me. I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that” (117). Thus, Christy becomes instantly attractive to Pegeen, proving himself worthy to this Irish woman who values violence as an indicator of masculinity.

The fickle tendencies of all of the villagers present for the interrogation is revealed as Philly and Jimmy “retreat” from Christy and Michael speaks to him “with great respect” when he confesses to killing the very father whose noble profession as farmer precluded Christy from the heinous accusation of rape just moments before. Suddenly, he is not only a viable candidate for the position of “pot-boy” to stay with Pegeen while her father goes carousing with his friends, but he is described as having “the sense of Solomon” and as one who is so brave he “would face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell” (118-119). It is Jimmy who sums up the relief of the older men: “Now, by the grace of God, herself will be safe this night, with a man killed his father holding danger from the door” (120). On the surface of the story, once Christy describes his father, it is not surprising that his tale would be met with sympathy rather than condemnation.

An oppressed people would be sympathetic to one who fought off his own brand of oppression whether by the state or the father. Interestingly, in both “Shadow” and *Playboy*, Synge questions “foundational categories of gender” (Butler viii) as he challenges what turn of the century Ireland values as feminine, creating strong female characters who are brave, outspoken, and somewhat prone to violence. He does not question the foundation of masculinity as a category of gender, but he does overtly challenge the notion that Irish men have “masculine” characteristics.

Synge’s characterization of parricide as laudable in the opening act could be seen as an allegorical staging of the relationship between Ireland and England. This interpretation could be why members of the audience were initially quiet during the beginning of the play on opening night despite their mistrust of the author who shocked them with “Shadow.” Perhaps they believed that Synge was finally offering them a glimpse into life in the West that could inspire pride instead of dismay by creating a character who could allegorically represent a successful nationalist rebel. In his introduction to *Masculinities and Violence*, Lee H. Bowker argues that “hypermasculinity equals status, self-worth, and diminished risk of victimization” (xvii).⁷ Bowker equates hypermasculinity with overt violence perpetrated by the “biological male of the human species” as he stresses that “violence is dominated by masculine role players in all modern, complex societies” (xiv). Therefore, it is not surprising that both the English and the Irish perceive violence in the name of “saving” a damsel in distress, protecting oneself from an animalized other or even being victorious in the sports arena as a positive marker of masculinity. Thus, when Christy meets the violent attack of his father with one of his own, he inevitably epitomizes masculinity for both his audience in the public house setting of the play and the Dublin audience viewing the play from their seats in the theater. His perceived masculinity is

⁷ Bowker is referring specifically to the behavior of prisoners but the observation can be extended to any population where being victimized is a real possibility.

immediately problematized, however, as he consistently postures as a “manly” man only to undermine his own assertions by his behavior. For example, he runs away and hides in fear as by his own admission, he is exhausted from “walking wild eleven days, and waking fearful in the night” (120). He attempts to reassert his masculine identity much like the men in “Shadow” by signifying Pegeen as female, claiming that he is unafraid of her only because she is “a kindly woman” (121). He begins to posture in the face of Pegeen’s admiration claiming he is “a seemly fellow with great strength...and bravery” (124). However, in the next instant of the action the stage direction calls for Christy to cling to Pegeen when someone knocks at the door (124). His startled exclamation, “Oh, glory! It’s late for knocking, and this last while I’m in terror of the peelers, and the walking dead” (124) reveals him to be neither strong nor brave. Under duress, he clings to the woman rather than offering his protection. Christy’s motivation for killing his father also undermines the allegorical association of this character with the hero of an oppressed people. In Act I, Christy describes his oppressor as a “man’d be raging all the times, the while he was walking, like a gaudy officer you’d hear cursing and damning and swearing oaths” (123). He goes on to tell Pegeen that his father “never gave peace to any, saving when he’d...be locked in the asylums for battering peelers or assaulting men” (124). This violent behavior from a father to an unfortunate offspring can be compared to the violence visited on the colonized by imperial forces. However, it is not this behavior that motivates Christy to “halve his [father’s] skull” (124). Instead, it is his father’s insistence that Christy marry the Widow Casey, only one of the “old woman” referents in the play that prompts the young man to finally fight back.

The Widow Casey character is only mentioned in passing but is very important as the catalyst of Christy’s uprising against the father. Stephen Tifft describes this “maternal hag” as “an exorbitantly nostalgic trope for a victimized Ireland as the maternal object of nationalist

devotion” (317). Yeats’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* fit this bill as “an aged seductress who for those devoted to her is transformed into a beautiful young queen” (Tiffit 317). Synge creates this trope only to upend it on several levels. The Widow Casey is characterized as an “aged seductress,” an older woman “of noted misbehavior with the old and young” (131). The “maternal hag” requirement for this trope is also satisfied as Christy himself offers this description of the widow: “all know she did suckle me for six weeks when I came into the world, and she a hag this day” (132). For the trope to be satisfied, the Widow Casey would have to be calling Christy to engage in some noble act for Ireland that would ultimately result in his death but would also transform the Widow into a beautiful young woman. Instead, Christy’s father claims that he wants the Widow Casey for his son as “a protector from the harshness of the world” (132). Synge thus completely dismantles the “old woman” trope, suggesting that Irish men turn to the “victimized Ireland” out of cowardice, not bravely offering to protect her, but seeking a shelter from the world. Christy doesn’t object to wedding the Widow because of the suggestion that he needs protection. He objects because of his perception of her as a maternal hag (131). The fact that she is a “walking terror...two score and five years, and two hundred-weights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping leg on her, and a blinded eye” also has a bearing on his refusal to marry her. She is an object of comic horror, a lampooned version of the “old woman” and Christy responds to this image of the “maternal object of nationalist devotion” (Tiffit 317) with derision, attacking his father to avoid her.

Christy is offered a second chance to answer an old woman’s call with a proposal from the Widow Quin, another possible depiction of the “old woman” construct. She verifies that Christy is a not a suitable recruit for the Shan von Vocht when she meets him, describing him as “a smiling little fellow” (125) as if he were a child. She also casts doubt on his capacity for

brave deeds when she says, “It should have been great and bitter torments did rouse your spirits to a deed of blood” (125). This could be a reference to the centuries of British oppression but when spoken in the sardonic tones of this “old woman,” it is clearly a sarcastic assessment of Christy’s propensity to violence. In spite of her assessment of his masculine traits, the Widow Quin sees herself as a more suitable companion for Christy saying to Pegeen, “all knows a widow woman has buried her children and destroyed her man is a wiser comrade for a young lad than a girl, the like of you, who’d go helter-skeltering after any man would let you wink upon the road” (125). The young village girls who come to ogle Christy and hear his story reveal the Widow Quin’s real motivation for pursuing Christy. It seems that she has “a great yearning to be wedded [but] all dread her” (133). With Christy, she appears to have both met her match and met someone does not know enough to dread her. They are fellow murderers but are termed “heroes, surely” (133) by the village girls who pose them with linked arms and “drink a health to the wonders of the western world, the pirates, preachers, poteen-makers, with the jobbing jockies” (133). It seems the Widow Quin has no need of a young man of Ireland to fight and die for her. She is quite capable of overcoming her own version of patriarchal oppression. What she does have need of is someone to do odd jobs about the house and to share “great times whispering and hugging” (145). Apparently this “old woman” fantasizes about “gallant hairy fellows” (144) and is looking, not for protection and freedom from an imperial oppressor, but for romantic love. Failing that, she will take material goods as she negotiates with both Shawn and Christy for livestock and land (139 and 145). Far from fulfilling the Shan von Vocht role that Yeats and Lady Gregory immortalized with Cathleen, this “old woman” is motivated by a desire for physical excitement and material wealth.

Pegeen is a much better candidate for a mythic role, behaving more like the “land goddess” or “Great Queen” persona⁸ as she tells Christy “you’ll have peace in this place...and none to trouble you, and it’s near time a fine lad like you should have your share of the good earth” (124). If one puts these words into the mouth of the maiden Irish land goddess speaking to a young Cuchulain, the symbolism is clear. Pegeen chooses Christy because, unlike Shawn, he has shown himself stronger than those who would oppress him. Ironically, Christy wants no part of “the good earth” as evidenced in the following lines: “I’ll be growing fine from this day, the way I’ll have a soft lovely skin on me and won’t be the like of the clumsy young fellows do be ploughing all times in the earth and dung” (128). Christy has no intention of being connected to the land (the nation) the way Pegeen (the land goddess) expects him to be. He is not above playing the role, however, as evidenced later in the play when he attempts to persuade Pegeen to marry him, not by declaring his intention of protecting or taking care of her monetarily, but by appealing to her sensually: “Let you wait, to hear me talking till we’re astray in Erris...and making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap of sunshine, with yourself stretched back unto your necklace, in the flowers of the earth” (155).

Kenner describes this scene as one of “a wild man overwhelming a peasant girl of but twenty with his rush of pagan talk” (20). Kenner is quick to point out, however, that this young peasant girl doesn’t admonish Christy for his inappropriate words. Rather, she breathes “in a low voice” what Kenner refers to as the “most alarming line of the play: ‘I’d be nice so, is it?’” (20). Her response to what is clearly a sexual proposition, as shocking as it may have been to the provincial Irish audience, reflects the nature-bound attitude toward sex and procreation that would have been expected of the mythic land goddess. This sexual frankness is also in keeping with Synge’s attitude toward “the facts of life” as evidenced by these words from his

⁸ See page 4 of Chapter 1 for a detailed discussion of the land goddess figure in Irish folklore.

autobiography, “we talked of sexual matters with an indifferent and amused frankness that was identical with the attitudes of folk tales” (qtd. in Kenner 18). It is telling and in keeping with the goddess construct that Christy’s attempted seduction fails, not because of any moral objections on the part of Pegeen, but because he is revealed to be a fraud. Pegeen is saved from making the serious error of handing the land over to this imposter when the fantasy hero is revealed to be a coward who wasn’t even able to kill his father effectively.

The irony, and perhaps most disturbing to the nationalist audience, is that Christy was not successful, that the entire construct of his heroic deed was a lie both fabricated by and imposed on him. In spite of Christy’s obvious cowardice and the real story behind his commission of parricide, the community imposes its need for a hero on him, literally constructing this hero out of the very raw materials he provides. Christy can only celebrate his triumph when he finds a group of fellow-oppressed who are also seeking to avoid victimization to tell him that he has triumphed and should be proud of himself. He quite naturally buys into their construct of his character and is able, to a point, to become the hero they need. The fact that his only heroic actions consist of reacting to the admiration of the women of the village and winning a few village games is significant. Synge seems to suggest that the Irish hero, the nationalist, is only heroic on a local, very small, level. When the father returns, when the bigger oppressor shows up, his heroism deflates, and he is reduced to wearing women’s clothing and biting people on the leg. He is feminized and animalized. He epitomizes the stereotypic colonized Ireland the British have constructed. In this way, Synge toys with the image of Irish nationalism as he knew it, reducing it to a representative of what the British have created.

When this fantasy existence begins to unravel, the land goddess Pegeen is forced to face her disillusionment and lament the lack of a sovereign to marry and thus ensure the land. The

lament that concludes the play, “Oh, my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only Playboy of the Western World” (167) is not a keening for Christy as an individual but what he for a short time represented: the means for the land goddess, for the true spirit of the nation of Ireland, the spirit that not only needs but desires a strong male counterpart to consummate a union and thus ensure the nation’s very existence as an independent entity. As “Shadow” ends with the unsatisfactory image of Nora leaving with the Tramp to almost certainly face a life of poverty, albeit a life connected to nature and Ireland’s mythic past, *Playboy* leaves us with the modernist image of a completely estranged Pegeen with no one to meet her needs but an emasculated tool of the church and an “old pagan” of a father who would rather drink than save his daughter.

With the character of Pegeen, Synge is channeling the goddess Ireland that he prefers. She is rough around the edges and more than a bit desperate, but possesses a measure of courage and is in no way like the virginal Hibernia the colonizer prefers. Unfortunately for the nationalist cause, the playwright cannot idealize the mythic past of Ireland in order to create an vision of Irish masculinity. Instead, he celebrates the past in female characters who are constrained by the present circumstances of the nation. He clearly had a reverence for the folk culture of Ireland and just as clearly had no confidence in the nationalists’ ability or desire to successfully reanimate this culture. By shocking his contemporary public with sexual innuendo while simultaneously celebrating the folk spirit of rural Ireland and failing to provide resolution for his characters, Synge falls within the classic attitude of modernism as described by Michael Levenson when he lists the devices of the movement as “the recurrent act of fragmenting unities, the use of mythic paradigms, the refusal of norms of beauty...all often inspired by the resolve to startle and disturb the public” (3). He denies his female goddess-protagonists a suitable consort,

and thus depicts the people of Ireland as powerless to render themselves visible through their own agency.

“He’s gone now...I’ll have no son left me in the world”: The Absent Man

In his writings on the Aran Islands, Synge relates an incident where a body washed ashore “with one pampooty on him, and a striped shirt with a purse in one of the pockets, and a box for tobacco” (136). More than one woman arrived to identify the body, but eventually he was claimed by his sister who was able to describe his clothes, purse, and tobacco box satisfactorily. Synge reports that when her description was confirmed, she simply said, “It’s Mike sure enough, and please God they’ll give him a decent burial” (136). She then sat down to nurse her infant and began keening. Synge remarks that “she seemed like a type of the women’s life upon the islands” (136). It is this “type” that Synge depicts in “Riders to the Sea.” Even though the Irish theater critics could not find fault with the character of the men and women in this play as they did with those in “Shadow” and *Playboy*, and thus could find no reason to riot during performances, they still did not like the play. Following the opening performance on February 25, 1904, an *Irish Times* reporter wrote that while “the idea underlying the work is good enough...the treatment of it is to our mind repulsive. Indeed the play develops into something like a wake” (qtd. in Stephens 164). The same paper suggested that “the East wind does not always blow on the Irish soul, and there’s mirth still in Erin. Up till now our stage has not been remarkable for diffusing sunshine around, and we need sunshine badly” (qtd. in Welch 29).

While the “comic” caricatures in “Shadow” and *Playboy* were insulting to the Irish critics, it seems “Riders” simply depressed them. Interestingly, the opening performance of the play in London the following month was received much better with one critic describing the

work as “a singularly beautiful and pathetic piece of hopeless fatalism” (qtd. in Stephens 166). Unlike the representations of men in “Shadow” and *Playboy*, the one man with a speaking part in this play is not without courage. Indeed, Innes suggests that there are a number of correspondences between “Riders to the Sea” and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* pointing out the parallels between the “old woman” and Maurya as well as the “young heroes” who “go down to the sea” (50). Innes argues, however, that the similarities simply serve to highlight the contrasts between the “visions and concerns” of the two dramatists. In “Riders” Synge “rejects...abstract heroism, and hence abstract nationalism or mere patriotism” (Innes 50). As in “Shadow” and *Playboy*, it is the female who is left at the mercy of the decisions made by the man. Much like Nora and Pegeen, the mother and daughters in this play have no agency. By virtue of being the women in the house, they are helpless to direct their own fate. Even as he brought to life a “type” of Irish woman, Synge also depicts yet another type of Irish man. The criticism of Irish manhood is not as comically explicit in this play; rather, it is implied in the absence of “speaking” men, in the fatalistic abandonment of the women in the family by the youngest and only remaining son of the house, and the complete ineptitude of the family priest. Indeed, it is the very “hopeless fatalism” described by the London critic that characterizes even the courageous Irish man of the islands.

The cottage kitchen once again sets the scene for the drama. The opening dialogue between Nora and Cathleen, the daughters of the house, reveals the tension that will drive the action. A shirt and sock that may belong to the missing older son of the house have washed ashore. Their dialogue also introduces two other characters, the young priest and the youngest and only surviving son, Bartley. Critics of the play make much of the obvious disdain Synge displays for the Roman Catholic Church in this play through his depiction of the young priest.

Far from being the “authorized positive stereotype of Ireland” (Nugent 608), this priest is absent as either an inspiration or a comfort. His refusal to persuade the younger son from basically sacrificing himself to the sea is based on a passive belief that “God won’t leave [Maurya] destitute...with no son living” (20). Not only does he fail to protect the women of the house by assertively ordering the only living son to avoid sacrificing himself to the sea, he is also notoriously absent when this son’s body is retrieved. Ritschel argues that the priest “is either unwilling or incapable of [stopping Bartley]” and is thus “clearly lacking as a community leader” (16). I would add that Synge is just as clearly presenting the Catholic priesthood as a poor representative for what Nugent describes as the “actualisation of the authentic Irishman” (587). In Synge’s view, the Irish priest is a stumbling block to the bolstering of Irish identity rather than a prototype for the authentic Irish man. As in *Playboy*, the priest does not merit a speaking part. Instead, he is an offstage impediment to the display of courage in *Playboy* and the assumption of responsibility for the family in “Riders.” He is present in his impact but absent in actuality.

Bartley is present, but only as he embodies the “hopeless fatalism” that Maurya, the “old woman” persistently combats in spite of her losses. Bartley’s first lines are to ask for the “new rope was bought in Connemara” (21). The stage direction as he asks what appears to be a fairly banal question call for him to speak “*sadly and quietly*” (21). It can be argued that his emotional state is a result of losing all of his male relatives, but the tone and content of all of his lines point to a sense of destiny as he collects the tools he needs to take the horses to the boat and tells his sisters how to provide for themselves when he is gone. If this were a retelling of the Shan Van Vocht legend, Bartley would listen to his mother and be rewarded for his obedience. Instead, he ignores her pleading and leaves without her blessing. It is the “old woman” who then must follow after him, purportedly to offer him bread and her belated blessing in an attempt to protect

him from his fate. Instead of reconciliation and one more opportunity to from self-destruction, she is treated to the horrific image of a son already dead following behind him. This “fearfullest thing” (26) is what kills Bartley as the grey pony being ridden by the dead man knocks him into the sea. Not only does the old woman have no power to inspire the young men around her, those men already dead seem determined to leave her completely abandoned. As Innes points out, “the loss of her menfolk makes her older rather than younger. She can expect no glorious transformation” (51). Innes goes on to argue that the play doesn’t focus on “the quietly practical and matter-of-fact heroism of the young men” but on the “suffering of the sisters, and above all, their mother” (51). In the characters of the priest, Michael and Bartley, however, there is no heroism. The priest is ineffectual at best and absent when he is ostensibly most needed. The dead Michael is an ominous presence both in the pathetic remains of his clothing and as an apparition bent on murdering his brother. As the only major male character, Bartley is the least heroic of all as he callously ignores his mother’s pleas in order to futilely and unnecessarily attempt to make money.

The other absent men are listed by Maurya much like the old woman in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* lists the men who gave the ultimate sacrifice at her bidding. The difference here is that Maurya prefers her men alive. This “old woman” doesn’t demand a blood sacrifice. Unlike Cathleen, she doesn’t want men to die for the love of her. Instead she wants them to live for the love of her. She would rather have her only living son alive than “the price of a thousand horses” (21). With this “type” of Irish woman, Synge creates a metaphor for nation that prefers living sons, even living in poverty, to sons who die for an abstract ideal. It is not as if the family’s survival depends on Bartley going across the dangerous water to sell two horses. His parting instructions to his sisters reveal that the family is not without means. He tells them to

mind the sheep, “sell the pig with the black feet,” and “get up weed enough for another cock” (21-22). He acknowledges that they will struggle “with no one in it but one man to work” (22) but also shows confidence that his sisters can handle the job of supporting the family until he returns. He completely ignores Maurya’s common sense response to his instructions as she points out, “It’s hard set we’ll be surely the day you’re drowned with the rest” (22). Bartley refuses to respond to this old woman’s appeal to his sense of duty. Indeed, he never directly addresses his mother, choosing instead to confine his comments to his sisters who defend his decision. When Maurya describes him as “a hard and cruel man [who] won’t hear a word from an old woman” (22), Cathleen admonishes her saying “It’s the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over” (22). Maurya is the only character who is not resigned to the fatalistic belief that the young men of the islands have no choice but to sacrifice themselves to the sea.

Ritschel argues that “Maurya represents and embodies an Irish return to the native – or ultimately, a return to Ireland” (17). He suggests that her final lines show her moving from “Christianity to Irish paganism” (17) and that she ultimately “decides to enwrap herself within her native pagan culture” (17). Innes also indicates that Maurya’s character undergoes a transformation as she “progresses in stature, from a rather frail and uncertain figure offstage who must be protected from grief, to one who embodies all mothers, confronting grief and death fully and accepting both” (51). She may indeed be rejecting Catholic Christianity as useless to her, but the “pagan culture” she turns toward is one where the men of the culture are sacrificed with no benefit to the nation. They are simply absent and therefore useless to her. If she does embody “all mothers” it is a “type” of Irish mothers who have no choice but to accept death and grief as their sons die, in this case, needlessly. This is not an old woman triumphant in her return

to native paganism with its fatalistic view of life and death. Identifying herself with the land and therefore the nation like the pagan land goddess has no reward for this woman. It is instead her daughter Cathleen's description that best sums up what an Ireland whose men are dead looks like when she says, "It's getting old she is, and broken" (29). She has no power to inspire young men because the young men do not believe in her enough to even acknowledge her presence, much less her wishes.

These three plays are representative of Synge's contribution to the Irish Literary Revival. They are starkly different in tone and character from the other drama being simultaneously performed. Synge stands out as a controversial figure precisely because he refused to politicize his art. Instead, he opts for a darkly comic rendering of Irish manhood in "Shadow" and *Playboy* and a hopelessly fatalistic masculinity in "Riders." Kenner points out that many of Synge's plays "end with a pair setting forth upon a future of wandering" (119). Within this grouping is Nora and the Tramp from "Shadow" and Christy and his father from *Playboy*. "Riders," Kenner argues, ends "when the best and most vital people have finished their vagabondage and lay dead" (120). Kenner over-romanticizes the endings, suggesting that "those who set forth have chosen better than those who choose the stay" (120). The idea that leaving the reality of their particular Ireland, even if it means death, is a better choice than staying may be the ultimate theme of Synge's work; however, this choice does not lead to an authentic reimagining of Irish identity. Instead, it leads to an annihilation of this identity. Maurya, the broken old woman, is not celebrating a return to a mythic Irish past when she seems at peace with Bartley's death. Instead, she is accepting that "no man at all can be living for ever" (30) and that, in that place at that time, death is not preferable, just more likely. Christy and his father do not march off in united bliss. Instead Christy pushes his father down the road as Mahon smiles and exclaims, "I am crazy

again” (167). Pegeen has the final word of this play and the final act of violence as she hits Shawn and the ear and laments her loss of “the only Playboy of the Western World” (167). Nora and the Tramp are forced out into the rain to face probable death either from illness or Darcy-like insanity. They go willingly, but with the knowledge that life will be as or more difficult. It is Dan and Michael who are privileged, at least materially, as they drink to each other’s health in the relative comfort of the home. Instead of a romance of nature, where characters happily consign themselves to the whims of the Irish countryside in a leap of faith in the goddess Ireland, these plays reveal Synge’s devotion to representing “reality” as he saw it in his observations of the peasants in the west. Welch describes what he terms “Synge’s dramatic practice” as specializing “in depicting the yawning chasms between what a person sees and hopes and believes, and what is revealed to be the case” (87). In these three plays, Synge exposes the yawning chasm between the nationalist version of the ideal Irish man and the what he perceives as reality as he knowingly refuses to follow the scripts developed by the various entities bent on rehabilitating the Irish image.

CHAPTER 3: SEAN O'CASEY - THE DEVOLUTION CONTINUES

O'Casey in Context

Samuel Beckett described Sean O'Casey as a “master of knockabout [farce] in this very serious and honourable sense – that he discerns the principle of disintegration in even the most complacent solidities, and activates it to their explosion. This is the energy of his theatre...mind and world come asunder in irreparable dissociation” (qtd. in Welch 87). Using words like “disintegration,” “explosion,” “asunder” and “irreparable” to characterize O'Casey's “energy” not only provides a compelling description of his work, but also aptly describes his life. O'Casey was born on March 30, 1880 in Dublin, the last of thirteen children, one of only five who were to survive to adulthood. In his biography of the writer, David Krause describes the early life of O'Casey as one lived in “outrageous conditions of filth, slavery, fear, and ignorance” (23). He further characterizes this urban setting as “the inferno of [O'Casey's] discontent” and credits the tenement experience with leaving “deep scars on the body and mind of the young O'Casey which he was never to forget” (23). Declan Kiberd describes Dublin during O'Casey's youth as “a raw and desperate place [where] almost one-third of its citizens lived in tenements...and over two-thirds of the tenement-dwellers lived in a single room” (*Inventing* 219). While Nicholas Grene counters these somewhat romanticized versions of O'Casey's childhood experiences in a slum environment with the information that O'Casey's parents were actually of the lower middle class rather than the working class, he concedes that the playwright “did at times endure real poverty and the menace of the tenements was readily before him”

(113). Many critics, including both those who celebrate O'Casey as one of the great Irish playwrights and those who denigrate him as an overrated revisionist, agree that it is his experiences growing up in proximity to the Dublin tenement environment that lends his trilogy its air of authenticity. It is the "complex emotions and attitudes of that class identity" (Greene 113), for example, that prompted the adult O'Casey's mistrust of leaders such as Eamon de Valera and Arthur Griffith. Greene points to the following reference O'Casey makes to de Valera and Griffith in his *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well* as "typical": "Sean couldn't see an excited De Valera rushing round a hurling field...or slanting an approving eye on any pretty girl...or standing...in a Dublin pub, about to lower a drink...He knew, like Griffith, next to nothing about the common people" (qtd. in Greene 118). Though initially an enthusiastic supporter of the Gaelic League, he became equally derisive of what he saw as their members' "fatal addiction to respectability" and criticized them for "preferring...to stay in the more respectable Dublin suburbs... 'lisp[ing] Irish wrongly' and wincing at workmen like himself who frequented their meetings" (Kiberd *Inventing* 221, 149). Thus, O'Casey pointedly criticized some of the hallmark figures and movements associated with the Irish quest to establish a political and cultural identity separate and distinct from the English.

Krause cites two major influences on O'Casey's developmental years that explain his disenchantment with the various branches of the nationalist movement: the Parnell scandal culminating in the early death of Ireland's "Uncrowned King" when O'Casey was eleven and the rise of labour leader, Jim Larkin, the "'Uncrowned King' of the Dublin working people" during O'Casey's young adulthood (18). O'Casey followed Larkin and his second in command, James Connolly, eventually serving as Secretary of the Citizen Army formed by them "to protect the strikers and the people of the city from the baton-swinging police" (Krause 36). According to

Bernice Shrank, the 1913 Dublin General Strike and Lockout organized by Larkin and Connolly was “the formative event of O’Casey’s early manhood” (43). In her essay, “Sean O’Casey and the Dialectics of Violence,” Shrank argues that the lack of success of the nearly yearlong strike “produced a profound awakening to the importance of class solidarity” and ultimately led O’Casey to view “the Irish employer who daily exploited him and all other Irish working people, [and] not the British ‘colonialists’ *per se* [as his] primary antagonist” (43 emphasis author’s). Following the strike, O’Casey resigned from the Citizen Army as he observed its growing alliance with the Irish Volunteers, reportedly reminding Connolly “that [he] could paint all the pillar-boxes green and hoist the tricolour over Dublin Castle, and yet achieve nothing, for unless there was a change in the distribution of wealth, [he] would simply be exchanging one set of exploiters for another” (Kiberd *Inventing* 219). It is not surprising therefore, that O’Casey chose not to participate in the Easter 1916 Rising, instead spending this time financially supporting and caring for his ailing mother (Kiberd *Inventing* 225).

He also refused to participate as an active combatant in either the War of Independence or the Irish Civil War that followed, instead devoting himself to writing among other things the *Story of the Irish Citizen Army* under the pseudonym S. O’Cathasaigh and sending multiple play manuscripts to the Abbey Theatre, all of which were rejected until 1923 when *The Shadow of a Gunman* opened and, for the first time in Theatre history, the “House Full” sign was displayed (Krause 51, 55-8). One year later the Theatre produced *Juno and the Paycock* which set another precedent as it was the first play to be extended to a second week (Krause 58). Although *Juno* was “met with some grumbling” and had to be edited for religious and sexual references before the theatre in Cork would agree to run it, it was the 1926 production of *The Plough and the Stars* that resulted in riots, the presence of police, and an irate Yeats announcing from the stage,

“Dublin has once more rocked the cradle of genius” (Krause 60, 62). Contemporary criticism of the plays varied with many Irish critics praising O’Casey’s “authentic” representation of the Dublin poor (Greene 110),⁹ while others struggled to categorize them as either tragedies or comedies. Irish drama critic, Andrew E. Malone,¹⁰ insisted that the plays be termed “hideous tragedies” rather than “tragi-comedies” while an American critic¹¹ argued that while he could “appreciate and even admire” the comedy in the plays, they ultimately “lack[ed] any informing purpose” (qtd. in Krause 113, 115). These initial impressions of the plays demonstrate their resistance to easy categorization and interpretation.

Critics and audience members who were treated to the earliest performances of the trilogy are not the only consumers of O’Casey’s work to express ambivalence about his representations of Irishness. Twentieth century critics also fail to come to a consensus, not only as to meaning but as to the trilogy’s place in Irish dramatic history. Shakir Mustafa is most vehement in his condemnation of the trilogy as both escapist and revisionist, arguing that this “vision of Ireland’s turbulent history sidesteps meaningful engagement with that history and presents instead a blueprint for escaping its conflicts” (95). Additionally, Mustafa indicts O’Casey as creating a narrative that portrays nationalism as “incoherent, destructive, and irrelevant” thus denying nationalism “justification and legitimacy” (96). He claims that the revisionist portrayal of the nationalist movement by O’Casey and other writers helped to create an “anti-nationalist atmosphere [that] has thwarted recognition of nationalism as a significant tradition in Ireland” (103). David Krause’s assessment of the trilogy occupies the opposite end of the critical spectrum and is most effusive in praise of what he terms a “tragi-comic trilogy”

⁹ Greene specifically quotes reviews of *The Shadow* appearing in *The Irish Statesman* and the *Irish Times*.

¹⁰ Drama critic in a 1925 article covering *The Shadow* and *Juno* appearing in *Dublin Magazine*

¹¹ 1927 article written by Joseph W. Krutch, drama critic for *The Nation* and based on his viewing of productions of *Juno* and *The Plough* in America

composed of “pacifist plays in which the main characters are not the National heroes actually engaged in the fighting but the noncombatants in a city under military siege” (94). Krause sees genius in O’Casey’s use of humor to “reveal a native vigour and shrewdness in his characters which ironically becomes a means of survival in a shattered world” (101). He admits that O’Casey “mock[s] the illusions” of the nationalist narrative where “women willingly send their men out to die” but argues that the mockery is justified as O’Casey shows “the brutality of war through the realistic eyes of working-class Irishwomen instead of through the haze of sentimental patriotism” (99-100). Mustafa critiques what he describes as Krause’s conclusion that “needless death results from nationalist illusions of heroism,” charging Krause and others with duplicating O’Casey’s dismissiveness of nationalist resistance (98). Ultimately, Mustafa argues that the Dublin trilogy “produces a false opposition [humanity over political activity] merely to denigrate politics” (111) while Krause insists that the plays of O’Casey along with those of Synge are the works “which represent the highest achievements of the Irish Dramatic Renaissance” (94).

Other critics, notably Raymond Williams, Nicholas Grene and Christopher Murray adopt a mediating approach and firmly place the trilogy under the general header of naturalism. Williams, speaking specifically of Gallogher’s letter in *The Shadow*, suggests that O’Casey “moves from this kind of caricature to a simpler excited naturalism” describing “the endless overflowing talk” as that of “a dramatist speaking at once from inside and outside this rush of life” (54). Grene refers to O’Casey’s “tenement drama” as “slice-of-life naturalism, with all the contemporaneity of immediate events rendered from within by the self-educated slum dramatist” (111). He goes on to argue that the “trilogy showed Dubliners the life of their own city” and differentiates between Synge’s questionable “vision of the West” and the authenticity of

O'Casey's drama that was "guaranteed [by his] supposed tenement origin" (133). Grene defines this as "fourth-wall naturalism of a special sort, admired not just for its dramatic skill in creating a life-like illusion but for its near-literal reproduction of the life of the people itself" (134). Christopher Murray also applies the label of naturalism to the trilogy, arguing that O'Casey's detailed stage directions at the start of each of these plays "shows how adept he was in naturalism, with its notion of character controlled by environment and the importance of 'will' as a possible means of overcoming its power" (vii). While these critics differ on what these plays mean in the context of the Irish Renaissance, they agree that O'Casey's socialist proclivities as well as his relationship with the Dublin tenements largely inform his representation of the narratives of the Dublin working class and the larger nationalist agenda.

The American drama critic, Joseph W. Krutch expresses confusion in his 1927 review of *Juno* and *The Plough*, ultimately concluding, "To this day I do not know just where the author's sympathies lie" (qtd. in Krause 116). Therein lies part of the difficulty critics and audience members alike are faced with when formulating a response to the plays. Irish drama critic, Andrew Malone faults the actors for the confused reception, accusing them of "playing for laughs and misleading the untutored audiences" (qtd. in Krause 113). He poses the questions: "Why...do they laugh in the theatre at the things which excite their pity in daily life? Why do they laugh at Joxer and the Captain in the theatre and treat them as a problem when they worry the newspapers with their letters?" (qtd. in Krause 113). This rhetorical query suggests a social and cultural disconnect between theater-goers and O'Casey's characters and can at least partially explain why, despite filling the stage with caricatures that could have been lifted directly from the pages of *Punch*, productions of the trilogy met with overall favorable responses from the audience. Kiberd accounts for the initially enthusiastic reaction to *The Plough* by pointing out

that the audience for the play would have been composed of the Free State Elite, negating the “old *canard* that O’Casey’s plays attracted the poorer people of Dublin” (*Inventing* 233). “Though there was much in the play to make such people gasp,” he argues, “there was even more to soothe and reassure” (*Inventing* 233). Kiberd cites the character of Fluther in particular as one who “invites the literate, theatrical audience to patronize rather than understand this half-articulate workman in a manner that is not different from the ‘superior’ British indulgence of blarney in the nineteenth century” (*Inventing* 232). Kiberd goes so far as to invoke the stereotype, claiming that it is O’Casey’s depiction of “his inner-city Dubliners as jabbering leprechauns [that] appealed to the new middle-class elites” (qtd. in Grene 147). Grene takes issue with the “jabbering leprechauns” reference, arguing that the Free State ruling class “was probably not so securely in place by 1926 to make a definite target audience” (148). Grene’s point is that O’Casey did not deliberately develop *The Plough* to condescend to the tenement dwellers nor to comply with the prejudices of an established Free State elite (148). He supports his classification of the trilogy as “fourth-wall naturalism” by contending that the comic representation of characters such as Seumas Shields and Joxer “were almost certainly modelled on real-life originals” (134). He does acknowledge that the depiction of the tenements, “supposedly seen as they were, in fact depended on the vantage point of class difference, a gap not only between the characters and the audience but between the characters and the author also” (134).

Grene thus attributes a form of social activism to O’Casey’s representation of the Dublin poor, claiming that “the plays work as an act of writer’s ventriloquism for a social group that cannot speak for itself” (134). He sees the trilogy as one concerned more with giving voice to the Dublin poor who were not invited to participate in the nationalist narrative but nonetheless

suffered greatly in the conflicts within that narrative. Ultimately, Grene argues that O'Casey among others was "engaged in demythologising, de-dramatising revolution, denying the miraculous transformatory powers which it claimed for itself in the light of the intractable, untransformed political realities it had left behind" (137). This may have been O'Casey's intent; however, it does not account for the contemporary reactions of audience members who only took offense to what could be termed "moral" issues such as references to out of wedlock pregnancy, the suggestion that prostitutes were alive and well in Ireland, and the carrying of a national symbol into a pub where a prostitute and drunkards are present, while being amused by caricatures that overtly signify those historically imposed on the Irish by the colonial oppressor. The lack of outrage at such representations suggests that post-revolution play-goers comfortably designated the inner city lower class as a repository for the colonial trope of the powerless, yet comical, Irish man.

Kiberd actually praises O'Casey's utilization of "the stock Irish types of English drama," asserting that the playwright "breathed life into a moribund tradition" (*Inventing* 220). The problem with O'Casey's use of such types, however, is that they were created by an imperial power for the express purpose of denying agency to the colonized. The subject/object relationship between England and Ireland necessitated a representational containment that is an essential part of maintaining colonial power. O'Casey may have desired to inspire identification with and an acknowledgment of a continued class disparity that rebellion, revolution and civil war did nothing to mitigate, but by crafting Irish men who are characterized by cowardice, laziness, and madness, he instead reifies the English imposed stereotype and allows the Irish audience to see this particular Irish man as distinctly "other," placing him at a safe distance from their experience. Grene's characterization of O'Casey's tenements as "spectacle" is therefore

confirmed, but the “vantage point of class difference” is what allows the Irish audience to avoid confronting the abject indictment of Irish masculinity portrayed in the trilogy.

In O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy, place is key. The grimy and grasping Dublin tenement is O’Casey’s version of Synge’s cottage kitchen without the benefit of a raw natural setting just outside the door. Like Krause, Synge’s biographer, David M. Kiely, sees O’Casey as a direct descendent of Synge. He suggests a strong connection between the two playwrights even in the minds of playgoers arguing that when Yeats was compelled to take the stage to defend O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* much as he had defended Synge’s *Playboy*, “the mob knew well his meaning: Synge was back” (228). Not only were they both associated with the national theatre, but they also adhered to “the impulse to give voice to the voiceless [which] was inherent in the literary revival” (Greene 135). While Synge’s “previously unexpressed community is on the rural periphery,” what is revealed by O’Casey is a “hidden Ireland at the heart of the city” (Greene 135). In other words, the voices the playwrights express are only different due to location, not ideology. Greene argues that there *is* one major difference between these two representations in that “the wholeness of the country cottage [in Synge] which could figure a putative wholeness of the nation is replaced with a fragmentariness [in O’Casey] which can represent a people only in refracted shards, if at all” (135). I would argue that the “wholeness of the country cottage” is a surface observation only. Certainly in the plays discussed in an earlier chapter, any “wholeness” apparent in the opening scene is completely subverted as the “cottages” in *Playboy of the Western World*, “The Shadow of the Glen,” and “Riders to the Sea” are left bereft of a husband, a wife, and sons respectively by the time the curtain falls. Thus the “putative wholeness of the nation” (Greene 135) is a mirage in Synge’s drama which dissipates as

his various forms of the goddess/nation Ireland are failed by the Irish man's lack of "manliness." In O'Casey, even the illusion of wholeness is absent.

In her discussion of O'Casey and Martin McDonagh, Dagmara Krzyżaniak suggests that O'Casey "show[s] disrupted families as a vehicle...to make similar accusations concerning large-scale (national) issues [by] concentrat[ing] on individual human tragedies to bring out the senselessness of fighting and bloodshed in the circumstances of the 'greatest' moments in Irish history" (198). I would draw a further comparison between the families in O'Casey's trilogy and the inhabitants of Synge's cottages in that the primary female protagonists similarly struggle to establish or maintain the family structure within the tenement dwellings while the male characters work to undermine it. If therefore, the family is being used to represent a microcosm of the nation in these plays, the nation is likewise being failed specifically by its male citizenry. Ironically, in drama termed as naturalist by many critics, the nation-as-environment, the literal nation-space of the setting prevents the male characters from behaving or being perceived as behaving in any other way.

The inability of O'Casey's male characters to be fully empowered within the overtly nationalist narratives that comprise their environment verifies what Joseph Valente refers to as the "metrocolonial double bind" which was "implemented on either side by the feminizing discourse of Celticism and the bestializing discourse of simianization" and is the state of Irish men who are "at once members and wards of the British metropole" (11). While *The Plough and the Stars* is the only one of the trilogy strictly set in a pre-independence context, the characters in all three of the plays are mired in a metrocolonial state of being. Despite Ireland's 1921 change in status from a colony to a nominally independent state, the taint of this metrocolonial identification does not disappear just because of politics. O'Casey's male characters are

inextricably caught in the role of the subaltern regardless of whether they exist in a colonial or postcolonial space because of the common context of violence that served to confirm the colonizer's assertion that Ireland was incapable of self-government. This violence reifies the animalistic side of the "double bind" inferred by the British onto the Irish and seen by some to be affirmed by O'Casey's representations of the "real" nationalists in his plays. For example, in *The Shadow*, it is the briefly glimpsed patriot Maguire whose decision to leave the bag of bombs in the tenement house that ultimately leads to the outbreak of deadly violence in the final act. In *Juno*, we see a particularly horrific outcome to the nationalist imperative in the crippled Johnny Boyle, veteran of both the Rising and the Revolution, and doomed to be executed by his former army mates. The most deliberate representation of the nationalist cause is seen in *The Plough* where a figure only glimpsed as a shadow through a window is designated as the "Voice of the Man" and expresses sentiments culled directly from speeches made by Padraic Pearse, martyr of the Rising. The violence inherent in all three of the historical contexts that provide the settings of these plays served to reinforce the English belief that the Irish man was not capable of the "self-disciplining spirituality that subsumes, legitimates, and dignifies...men's primordial bestiality" (Valente 3). Thus this violence that in O'Casey's dramatized version of events is fomented and carried out by nationalists lends itself to the "bestializing discourse of simianization" that occurs when "robust 'animal spirits'" fail to be controlled (Valente 11).

In his assessment of the legacy of the Irish Civil War, Kiberd points to the contrast between the "originality and independence of thought" that characterized the decades leading up to independence and the "bleakness of freedom" and "distinctive conservatism in public life" that was the consequence of the war (Kiberd *Irish* 482). This "conservatism" was at its root an attempt to resolve the metrocolonial double bind as "pragmatism replaced principle as a driving

force behind the public mood” (Kiberd *Irish* 483). Kiberd describes the practical application of this pragmatism as follows: “The leaders of the new state asserted the importance of respectability in thought and action. Irish people must by their discipline show themselves worthy of the new freedom” (*Irish* 483). Thus, Ireland’s post-independence shift to conservative pragmatism is both an attempt to refute its “otherness” and an identification with its former colonizer through a conscious adaptation of “respectability,” the byword of a distinctly English imperial culture. It is this same “addiction to respectability” that O’Casey sensed and derided in the members of the Gaelic League (Kiberd *Inventing* 221). The notion that the Irish people must prove that they are deserving of their new freedom begs this question: to whom must they show themselves worthy? The obvious answer is to the English and the vehicle for such worthiness, i.e. discipline, legitimizes the simianized caricatures imposed by the English in the decades leading up to the revolution and acknowledges that these images can only be overcome by behaving more like the English. Valente explains that the “exercise of self-restraint and self-discipline...could not be easily distinguished from passivity, docility, acquiescence, or weakness, all of which signaled the absence or loss of the stalwart masculinity necessary to justify any bid for liberation...[therefore], a subaltern’s conformity to the ethos of manliness would likely be read as a testament to his colonial emasculation” (10). In other words, even achieving “respectability in thought and action” was no guarantee that the “worthiness” to be free would be conceded. O’Casey seems to recognize this futility both in his reaction to and his depiction of various nationalist ideals.

In his Dublin trilogy, O’Casey focuses more on differentiating between the Irish nationalists and the Irish working class than between the Irish and the English. In his discussion of the performance of masculinity and nationalism within the context of O’Casey’s plays, David

Waterman posits that O'Casey "demonstrates clearly his understanding of the contradictions inherent in a society which both resists and cooperates in its oppression, and the necessity of dismantling a binary framework of dominance and submission if meaningful social transformation is to occur" (53). He goes on to argue that the thesis of *The Plough and Juno* specifically is that "Irish nationalism cannot succeed as a program of political emancipation because nationalism simply transposes foreign for domestic domination" (53-4). Waterman suggests that ultimately the plays subvert "the entire notion of the desirable 'masculine' qualities needed during war time" (65-6) and they do this by creating a performance "which fails to conceal a crisis of masculinity" (66). This crisis is epitomized in and carried out by the primary male characters in the trilogy. While the underrepresented "authentic" nationalists are characterized by violent rhetoric and actions, the male tenement dwellers who are on the periphery of the nationalist narrative but at the center of O'Casey's stage are not only feminized but caricatured as weak and cowardly.

Valente argues that the advent of the "racial sciences...helped to shift the epicenter of Irish femininity from the national to the racial dimension" (12), thereby establishing the feminized half of the double bind. This resulted in the Irish being "depicted as genetically feminine and so, on the reigning patriarchal logic, congenitally attuned to obeying the will of a masculine race" (12). This representation of a specifically Irish masculinity is what we see in O'Casey's trilogy where the "environment" is a space where tradition and religion insist on patriarchy in a culture where the men are congenitally and temperamentally incapable of or unwilling to utilize their gender-based authority to overcome the "power" of this space. In this way the geographical national space and race-based identification is inextricably linked and any attempt for the Irish to establish a hegemonic ideal of manliness is completely subverted

genetically from within and environmentally from without. Unlike Synge's female characters, some of which are stand-ins for various forms of the goddess Ireland seeking the perfect consort, O'Casey's women resist such metonymic association with the land or even the postcolonial nation of Ireland. Krause's contention that O'Casey's female characters "put aside self-gratification and act" (109) whenever responsible action is needed may be true in a general sense, but also suggests an active heroic quality that is not consistent. It is difficult to develop a minimalist characterization that includes all of the female characters in the trilogy, but one issue binds them together and that is their inability to depend on the Irish men in their lives, whether they be family members or neighbors.

Mustafa points out the disconnect between critics "who find in [O'Casey's] plays positive images of women" and the "sexist attitudes" revealed both in O'Casey's debate with Sheehy-Skeffington and in his *Autobiographies* (110). One example from the latter that Mustafa uses to support his contention is the following description of Maud Gonne who incidentally supported Sheehy-Skeffington in the debate: "Sean saw, not her who was beautiful, and had the walk of a queen, but the poor old woman, whose voice was querulous, from whom came many words that were bitter" (qtd. in Mustafa 110). The Shan Van Vocht trope is similarly invoked in the playwright's response to the *Plough* riots, "He saw now that the one who had the walk of a queen could be a bitch at times" (qtd. in Mustafa 111). Mustafa's point is to caution critics not to over-romanticize the depictions of women in the trilogy in an attempt to assign heroes to the narratives. I completely agree with his assessment. To suggest that these women merely serve as a tragic heroic contrast to the anti-heroic Irish male is to oversimplify their role. Instead, they are the reactive objects of the men's lack of proactive impetus. In order to survive, they must attempt to fill the masculine role left vacant by the male tenement dwellers who are either

paralyzed by fear or clinging to some fantasy filled notion of heroism. They cannot afford to put vain faith in some obscure and idealized view of nation or poetry or even heroism. Instead, they must remain grounded in reality, attempting to transcend their trying circumstances but failing because the power to do so is denied them in an inept patriarchal system that in itself lacks the hegemonic masculinity to control the environment. O'Casey is not celebrating some ideal of Irish womanhood through these characters, but using them to starkly reveal the lack of ideal masculine traits in the male characters. Thus O'Casey extends the double bind to the post-colonial Irish space, depicting revered national figures as violent and anti-heroic, affirming their animalistic tendencies and depicting the working class tenement-dwelling Irish men as either feminine or comically caricatured so as to render them incapable of attaining the manly ideal. This characterization is accomplished quite vividly as the various men in the trilogy react to the females in their immediate surroundings. In her introduction to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses the “unanticipated agency...of a female ‘object’ who inexplicably returns the glance...and contests the place and authority of the masculine position” (vii). She is referring specifically to sexual desire here, but the concept can also be applied to the postcolonial state of masculinity as represented by O'Casey in the trilogy. The gaze the women are bestowing upon the men is not necessarily one of sexual desire, but one of a desire to survive. The “unanticipated agency” of the female characters results from the actions they must take when the male characters fail to fulfill the traditional masculine role of enabling that survival. The men occupy the feminized half of the metrocolonial bind, but not in comparison to the masculine hegemony of the colonizer, but by their literal “dependency...on the female ‘other’” (Butler *Gender* vii).

“Oh, Kathleen ni Houlihan, your way’s a thorny way.”: The Shadowy Man

The Shadow of a Gunman was the first of O’Casey’s plays to be performed at the Abbey Theatre. The play, set in May 1920 during the Irish War of Independence, opened on the twelfth of April in 1923 while the civil war was still being waged (Welch 83). Welch reports that in the months leading up to the opening performance, the IRA had destroyed several of the houses of the Anglo-Irish gentry and the Abbey itself was under police protection (83). O’Casey personally experienced a raid similar to the one portrayed in *The Shadow* in 1920. Grene and Murray argue that this raid provided the raw material not only for the action but the setting in the play (Grene 119-20; Murray xi). Indeed, Grene refers to Donal Davoreen as “O’Casey’s *Shadow* stand-in... [who] is shown composing O’Casey’s own poems” (120). In his discussion of “Class and Space in O’Casey,” Grene argues that “the design of the play is to illustrate how essential it is for a writer in a working-class environment, as for a woman writer, to have a room of his/her own” (120). It is interesting that Grene evokes Virginia Woolf here and equates Davoreen’s working-class male experience with the powerlessness of a woman writer who is denied working space by familial obligations or a lack of independent means. While Grene is obviously referring to the powerlessness engendered by a lower class environment, his analogy also feminizes the working class author lending credence to the idea that O’Casey’s working class Irish-men perform the kind of femininity inscribed to the Irish within the context of colonial oppression. In other words, these men are *expected* to be powerless to control their own environment. Thus, they fulfill the role assigned to the subaltern biological males who are lacking the “robust ‘animal spirits’ required to attain the “manly ideal,” and therefore are relegated to the role of the colonizer’s “external other (woman)” (Valente 2, 7). This relegation takes place as the men

interact, not with representatives of hegemonic English manliness, but with their own genetic predisposition to markers of femininity and with the actual females of the tenement.

The stage is literally and figuratively set for the depiction of impotence from the beginning of the play. O'Casey provides detailed stage directions, not only for the location of props and movement of actors, but for the physical appearance and personality of each character as he or she is introduced. His detailed setting description for Act 1 calls for a mixture of religious and scholarly symbols surrounded by a state of "*absolute untidiness, engendered on the one hand by the congenital slovenliness of Seumas Shields, and on the other by the temperament of Donal Davoren...*" (3 emphasis author's). O'Casey goes on to indicate that inherent characteristics of these two men "[*make*] it impossible to effect an improvement in such a place" (3 emphasis author's). The writing materials, typewriter and books are associated with the poet Davoren whose face has "*an expression that seems to indicate an eternal war between weakness and strength*" (3 emphasis author's) which O'Casey goes on to describe as a conflict between a "*desire for activity*" and "*an unquenchable tendency towards rest*" (3 emphasis author's). This conflict echoes the "disaggregation" of the "parts" of the manly ideal (Valente 7) where the "desire for activity" is analogous to the animal spirit and the "unquenchable tendency towards rest" can be related to the developed ability to regulate that spirit which distinguishes merely masculine behavior from the ideal manly identity. Because Davoren is racially Irish, he is unable to unite these two characteristics to attain manliness. The fact that this conflict is discernible in his physical appearance makes his inability to be manly genetically determined. It is part of him. It is also related to the space he occupies - not just a tenement - but a tenement in Ireland. His environment is not only his physical surroundings, but is determined and controlled by his national and racial identity and is thus inescapable.

Davoren seeks an escape route through poetry, both his own and that of Percy Bysshe Shelly whom he refers to as “the sensitive, high-minded, noble-hearted Shelley” (6-7). For his inspiration, Davoren chooses a poet who is notably *not* Irish, but certainly sympathetic to the cause of Ireland as evidenced in his “Address to the Irish People” published in 1812. It is worth noting that Shelley’s approach to the Irish desire for emancipation was to advocate nonviolence on all sides, instead adjuring the Irish to “in no case employ violence [for] the way to liberty and happiness is never to transgress the rules of virtue and justice” (Shelley 20). Shelley also had no use for organized religion, but is particularly critical of the Roman Catholic Church. Pairing Davoren with Shelley therefore associates him with nonviolent behavior and anticlericalism, but in his case this becomes an “*unquenchable tendency toward rest*” (O’Casey *Shadow* 3) rather than an active search for the way to liberty and happiness. The lines from *Prometheus Unbound* quoted by Davoren are found in Act I where Prometheus is lamenting his pain while bound to the precipice. Davoren therefore identifies with Shelley’s Prometheus while he is still a prisoner, captive of a jealous god. Meanwhile, Davoren has his own trials to face as he is frustrated by his lack of privacy and inability to compose in the tenement environment. Like Prometheus, he is bound, but not by a jealous god. Instead, his bondage results from his own sense of inadequacy, his “*eternal war between weakness and strength*” (*Shadow* 3). His derisive attitude toward what Seumas seems to hold dear is evident when he irreverently repeats Seumas’s lament to Kathleen ni Houlihan but replaces the goddesses name with his own: “Oh, Donal Og O’Davoren, your way’s a thorny way” (14). He thus elevates himself to the level of an Irish deity as well as a Greek god as he follows self-invocation with these words: “Ah me, alas! Pain, pain ever, for ever. Like thee, Prometheus, no change, no pause, no hope. Ah, life, life, life!” (14). Again, it is not the colonized state of Ireland that is causing him “pain ever, for ever;” it is his inability to

realize his fantasy of imitating his idol who happens to be English and thus a member of the imperial Other. His self-appointed godliness is no match for the inescapable racial dimension where his feminized Irishness resides.

Davoren adds to his repertoire of poetry when he regales Minnie with lines from a poem O'Casey wrote to Máire Keating. It is interesting that these lines are not included as poetry Davoren has composed for Minnie but poetry he quotes "that might apply to any girl" (17). O'Casey may have intended to imbue Davoren with some of himself (as Grene suggests), but this could also be read as further evidence of Davoren's inability to compose an original poem of his own. He is therefore not only the mere shadow of a gunman, but he is also masquerading as a poet, inspired by a member of the imperial Other and unwilling to assume the role of an Irish poet composing poems destined to inspire his countrymen, telling Minnie, "we've had enough poems about '98, and of Ireland, too" (16). Later, when Seumas professes his belief that "a poet's claim to greatness depends upon his power to put passion in the common people" (35), Davoren exclaims, "Ay, passion to howl for his destruction. The People! Damn the people!" (35), confirming his choosing his "unquenchable tendency toward rest" over what turns out to be a nonexistent desire for any heroic activity. While his roommate Seumas also adopts an anti-nationalist stance that is due in part to a similar genetic propensity to inaction, his lack of faith in the cause of a free Ireland is also born of an innate cowardice and disillusionment with Ireland as a country.

O'Casey describes Seumas as one in whom "*is frequently manifested the superstition, the fear and the malignity of primitive man*" (4). These signify a man who is further down the evolutionary ladder than the educated Davoren. This "primitive man" is associated with the religious symbols of the Virgin Mary, the Sacred Heart and the crucifix that are located in the

room. O'Casey's anticlericalism is noted by his biographer and is attributed, among other things, to the bitter feud between Larkin's adherents and the Catholic leadership who equated Socialism with Satanism (Krause *Sean* 26). Born of a devout Protestant father¹² in a decidedly Catholic world, O'Casey ultimately self-identified as an Atheist when responding to a 1930 letter sent to the *Catholic Herald*. In a letter to the editor, an anonymous contributor suggested that the playwright deliberately allowed his English audience to assume he was Catholic. The exact words contained in O'Casey's response are both humorous and acerbic: "I have never tried to hide the fact that I am an Atheist (were the Catholic Church as powerful now as She was many years ago, there's no knowing what I would have to do)" (Krause *Letters* 394). Thus it is not surprising that a character who is as markedly Catholic in his worldview as Seumas would also be described as superstitious and primitive. In addition to his lack of urbanity, Seumas is ascribed with "*congenital slovenliness*" and it is this that gives "*the aspect of the place*" its "*absolute untidiness*" (3). The use of the word "congenital" indicates that O'Casey is not only establishing this character as a product of his environment, but attributing a characteristic (slovenliness) usually inscribed by the colonizer onto the subaltern as one that is "congenital" and thus inescapable. The congenitally sloven Seumas is dismayed that he missed Mass yet "*gives a snarling laugh of pleasure*" at the image of Shelley "doing a jazz dance down below" (6). He refers to Ireland as "the land of Saints and Scholars" even as he derisively predicts that it will soon "be a land of bloody poets" (5). As the action unfolds, it becomes apparent that Seumas identifies all things wrong with Ireland as associated with educated and literate men like Davoren.

As a writer of letters to the papers regarding the state of the tenement house, Seumas fancies himself a social reformer who is committed to following the way of Kathleen ni

¹² See Krause's description of Michael O'Casey in *Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work*, pp. 16-17

Houlihan even though it is a “thorny way” (6). In actuality, he is just a tinker, selling “*spoons, forks, laces, thread*” (7) and braces that are so well-made, “they’d do Cuchullian” (7). Even his reference to a figure often invoked to establish a connection to Ireland’s mythic masculine ideal is tainted with a pithy reference to the strength of his suspenders. The humorous moment when Seumas stoops to pick up a spoon and exclaims, “Oh, my God, there’s the braces after breakin’” (8) draws a laugh but also points to O’Casey’s mistrust of invoking the so-called cult of Cuchullian to inspire blood lust in young Irish men to overthrow the colonizer, while doing nothing to ensure economic equality in the resultant nation. Seumas’s various laments regarding the state of Ireland culminate in his assertion that “the Irish People aren’t, never were, an’ never will be fit for self-government” (9). His is the voice of the has-been disillusioned Republican who consistently refers to Irish mythical figures, traditional Irish songs, and outdated patriotic poetry to establish his decidedly Irish worldview even as he expresses dismay that Ireland “is a hopeless country” (9). It is not surprising that he would reject Davoren’s devotion to Shelley who made no secret of his belief that the Roman Catholic Church was a stumbling block to Irish emancipation, but his extreme reaction as he takes pleasure in his image of the poet suffering “the tortures of the damned” (7), betrays a conflicted Republican who once believed in the cause of a free Ireland but has become disillusioned with the methods used to attain such a goal.

Seumas extols his past efforts for an independent Ireland proclaiming himself “as good a Gael as some that are knocking about now,” a former teacher of Irish, and one who “when in the Irish Republican Brotherhood...paid [his] rifle levy like a man” even as he references his poor reward for all of his work for “Dark Rosaleen”¹³ (9). By invoking this particular personification

¹³ Also the title of a highly sentimental poem by 19th century Irish poet, James Clarence Mangan, in which the speaker in typical chivalric fashion, names quests he is willing to undertake for Ireland and evokes an apocalyptic image of blood and flames that will occur “ere you can fade, ere you can die,/My Dark Rosaleen!” (PoetryFoundation.Org 78-79).

of Ireland, Seumas again reveals his disillusionment with the cause. He implies that he has put in the time but has not reaped the reward that chivalric devotion should earn, complaining that “after all [his] work for Dark Rosaleen, the only answer [he] can get from a roarin’ Republican is ‘goodbye...ee’” (9). With Seumas’s constant lament over Ireland’s failure to realize the ideal expressed in Mangan’s poem as well as his complaint to Kathleen ni Houlihan that her “way’s a thorny way,” he consistently demonstrates his congenital slovenliness as a nationalist who “paid [his] rifle levy like a man” (9) but only believed in “nothing but the gun...when there wasn’t a gun in the country” (39). He *masqueraded* as a member of the violent side of the double bind when there was no danger that actual violence would erupt; when the possibility of violence appears, he quickly decamps and resorts to lamenting the altered version of Kathleen ni Houlihan which he describes as “a ragin’ devil” who punches those who “look crooked at her” in the eye (39). With his admitted shift from committed nationalist to avowed pacifist, Seumas fulfills what Valente refers to as the external other that, when separated from the internal animal, merely manifests itself as the feminine (7). Seumas realistically adds that it is the “civilians that suffer” as they have nowhere to run and are likely to be “shot in the back to save the British Empire, an’ shot in the breast to save the soul of Ireland” (40) and thus self identifies as a “Nationalist [who] believe[s] in the freedom of Ireland” but who “draws the line when [he] hear[s] the gunmen blowin’ about dyin’ for the people, when it’s the people that are dyin’ for the gunmen” (40). Through this character’s words, O’Casey suggests that there is no distinction between the British forces and the IRA when it comes to danger to civilians. The playwright thus destabilizes the image of the IRA gunman as a force for good in Irish history by emphasizing the random acts of violence that are perpetuated in wartime.

Mustafa argues that in *Shadow*, the “ideology [of the nationalists] is appropriated and relayed to us through questionable agents” (99-100). Mentioning Maguire as “the only nationalist who pays with his own life for what he believes in” and discounting Minnie as merely having “pretensions to being a nationalist,” Mustafa concludes that the “denial of narrativity to nationalists in the play is consequently tantamount to a denial of meaning and legitimacy” (99). It may indeed be O’Casey’s ultimate goal to represent the nationalist agenda as anathema to the “people” of Ireland, but his characterization of both ends of the anti-nationalist spectrum (from educated man to “primitive” man) does not give the pacifist approach to surviving imperial subjection any credence. Indeed, his overt linkage of genetic Irish-ness to Irish men doomed to fall short of the manly ideal suggests that O’Casey had little hope for emergence from colonization on any terms to be successful. His characterization of Minnie Powell further emphasizes the profound lack of traditional masculine markers in either Davoren or Seumas.

While Davoren and Seamus are identified from the appearance of their characters on stage to the final line of the final act as genetically powerless to attain the manly ideal, Minnie Powell is ascribed masculine characteristics that are directly attributed to her life circumstances. Her femininity is stressed with her “*well-shaped figure*” (14 emphasis author’s) and charming dress, but the essence of her personality has a patina of animus controlled as she possesses “*an easy confidence [...] a force and an assurance beyond her years*” (14 emphasis author’s). O’Casey attributes this to her unknowing loss of a “*sense of fear*” which results in her ability to be “*at ease in all places and before all persons, even those of superior education, so long as she meets them in the atmosphere that surrounds the members of her class*” (14 emphasis author’s). Minnie’s unusual self-possession is attributed to the loss of her parents at an early age, requiring her to “*earn her living, and to take care of herself*” (14 emphasis author’s). Valente argues that

“every paradigm of manliness looks to...the marshaling of that [primal male-identified element of animal] vitality to moral and spiritual purpose” (4). He goes on to offer a description of optimal females during the late Victorian and Edwardian period as “passive and reserved in their sexuality, the vessels of an idealized passionlessness” (6). “Active or aggressive female desire,” according to Valente, “counted as not only immoral but abnormal [and] seemed to betoken...the intrinsic weakness of women’s rational faculty and the instability of their affective constitution” (6). With the character of Minnie Powell, O’Casey subverts these definitions of gendered ideals. Minnie actively desires a gunman, but she is far from intrinsically weak or unstable. Her behavior is not deliberately provocative, but is a result of a forced independence and self-reliance. She is able to adapt to her immediate environment far more easily than the two major male characters, gauging other characters’ behavior and responding accordingly in order to attain her personal goals.

The initial encounter between Davoren and Minnie frustrates him as he only wishes to be left alone. When Minnie expresses her desire “to be able to write a lovely poem on Ireland an’ the men o’ ’98” (16), Davoren clearly expresses his lack of desire for revolution saying, “Oh, we’ve had enough of poems, Minnie, about ’98 and of Ireland, too” (16). She misunderstands his meaning, believing he intends to “give up the writing an’ take to the gun” (16) which he does not deny. She then sees the flowers in the room, an almost banal symbol of femininity, as “oul’ weeds” (16), only changing her reaction to “aren’t they lovely” (16) when Davoren defends them as wildflowers and recites a love poem that includes a reference to one of the blooms. His knowledge of even the Latin names of the varieties is in sharp contrast to Minnie’s less informed reaction, but there is more going on here. Minnie’s immediate response to seeing flowers in a vase is a more traditionally masculine one. She only assumes a more feminine response when to

do so might bring her closer to her obvious goal, to attract the attention of a man she believes is a hypermasculine gunman, an appropriate mate for an Irish woman who “*has lost the sense of fear*” (14 emphasis author’s) and possesses “*a force and assurance beyond her years*” (14 emphasis author’s). The expectation of behavior along gender lines is initially disrupted only to be reestablished when the more dominant of the two realizes that to acquire this gunman she must inspire him to assert his masculinity more overtly. Her reversion to more feminine behavior, admiring the flowers as well as his supposed willingness to die for his country as a gunman, has its intended result.

Once Davoren finally realizes that Minnie is attracted to him, he shifts from his “unquenchable tendency toward rest” (the external feminine) and begins to vocally exhibit a “desire for activity” (the internal animal). He asserts his masculinity, differentiating himself from “poets [who] aren’t fond of girls, to one who “especially [likes] girls who can add to their charms by the way in which they dress” (17). When Minnie assures him that she knows what he is, “A gunman on the run” (18), Davoren is “*too pleased to deny it*” (18) and furthers his posturing by claiming that “a gunman throws a bomb as carelessly as a schoolboy throws a snowball” (19). By now he has progressed from wearily subjecting himself to her company for politeness sake, to “*putting his arm around her*” and claiming that they are “great friends” (19). His truer nature, the one that desires rest over activity, reasserts itself, however, when Minnie simply suggests she tidy his room. He is “*frightened at the suggestion*” and hides his fear with a chivalric argument that Minnie must not risk her looks or her reputation. When Minnie verbally demonstrates her courage to do “what she wants to do” (19), Davoren is momentarily inspired by her, “*forgetting his timidity in the honest joy of appreciating [her] independent courage*” (19 emphasis author’s). He identifies Minnie as courageous, telling Seumas that he “believe[s] she is

a brave girl” (37). Consistently described as internally fearful, he verbally admits his cowardice when he says to Seumas, “we’re a pair of pitiable cowards” (57) after they allow Minnie to take the incriminating bag of bombs and “we’re a pair of dastardly cowards” (61) when they hear that Minnie has been killed. Thus, he willingly feminizes both himself and Seumas, capitulating any claim to a hegemonic manly identification.

Seumas is likewise feminized by his interaction with and reaction to Minnie. When she first notices the flowers, she assumes they belong to Seumas asking, “What’s Mr Shields doin’ with the oul’ weeds?” (16). Her assumption comes right after her assertion that “it’s time to give up the writing an’ take to the gun” (16). She is thus identified with the overtly masculine symbol of the gun while she identifies Seumas with the feminine symbol of flowers arranged in a vase. Later, Seumas warns Davoren about Minnie, saying “the oul’ ones’ll be talkin’, an’ once they start you don’t know how it’ll end” (37). His concern about Davoren’s reputation is uncharacteristically considerate, but his next words reveal a misogynistic attitude toward Minnie that he does not have for the other women in the tenement. He refers to Minnie as “an ignorant little bitch that thinks of nothin’ but jazz dances, fox-trots, picture theatres an’ dress” (37). When Davoren responds that “She is certainly a pretty girl. I’m sure she is a good girl, and I believe she is a brave girl” (37), Seumas’s words become even more derisive: “A Helen of Troy come to live in a tenement...she thinks a lot about you because she looks upon you as a hero – a kind o’ Paris...she’d give the world an all to be gaddin’ about with a gunman. An’ what ecstasy it ud give her if after a bit you were shot or hanged” (37-8). At this point it becomes clear that Seumas is afraid of Minnie whom he sees as Kathleen ni Houlihan come to life. While Helen of Troy is obviously not a Shan Van Vocht figure, it is clear that Seumas is casting Minnie as a version of the goddess. The “gaddin’ about” Minnie wants to do with Davoren parallels the

pairing of Kathleen with a virile man who is willing to die for her. Seumas completes the metaphor by suggesting that Minnie would experience “ecstasy” if Davoren were killed for the nationalist cause mirroring the transformation from old woman to beautiful young girl that takes place when the blood sacrifice is complete. Minnie’s beauty and desirability complicates this image, however, and this is part of why Seumas distrusts her. To him, Kathleen ni Houlihan is a “ragin devil” (39) whose way is a “thorny way” (14) and thus she is to be feared and avoided. Thus he answers Davoren’s assertion that Minnie is a “pretty girl” by positing her beauty as dangerous. He responds to the suggestion that Minnie is a “brave girl” with equal derision saying, “it’s easy to be [brave] when you’ve no cause for cowardice; I wouldn’t care to have me life dependin’ on brave little Minnie Powell – she wouldn’t sacrifice a jazz dance to save it” (38). These lines, of course, are particularly ironic since Minnie does save his life and sacrifices her life to do so.

It is in the final act of the play that these two men are ultimately revealed as weak and cowardly in comparison to the actions of Minnie Powell. It is Minnie who alerts them to the presence of the Auxiliary. She is able to do this because she is “on the watch every night” (52). It is Minnie who “becomes calm” as “Davoren reclines almost fainting on the bed [and] Seumas sits up in an attitude of agonized prayerfulness” (52). It is Minnie, the stand in for the Shan Van Vocht, who submits herself as a blood sacrifice to save, not the nation of Ireland, but a man she believes to be devoted to the nationalist cause. When the real gunmen appear on the scene, it is Minnie who assumes responsibility for the bombs, saying “they won’t harm a girl” (53). Seumas, who only moments before was questioning her bravery, is too busy invoking the Virgin Mary and St. Anthony to acknowledge this act of courage. Later, when Davoren admits that they are “pair of pitiable cowards to let poor Minnie suffer,” Seumas retorts, “What else can we do

man? ...Besides, they won't harm her, she's only a girl" (57). Even when Minnie is arrested and they hear her "shouting bravely, but a little hysterically, 'Up the Republic,'" Seumas is more concerned that she "keep her mouth shut" than he is for her safety. Indeed, this becomes his mantra as the situation escalates and Minnie is ultimately shot and killed. Even her death does not shake Seumas from his congenital cowardice. When Davoren insists it is their fault that she died, Seumas deflects responsibility, saying "she did it off her own bat – we didn't aks her to do it" (61). As Minnie is dead, it is the two men who have the final lines. Davoren reverts to the self-pitying stance he held before Minnie caught his eye as he laments, "Ah me, alas! Pain, pain, pain, ever for ever! It's terrible to think that little Minnie is dead, but it's still more terrible to think that Davoren and Shields are alive" (62). Even though he acknowledges his cowardice, there is no resolve to assert a more masculine stance; thus, Minnie's death serves no purpose in his life other than confirming his pathetic assessment of his existence while taking no responsibility for it. Seumas also reverts to the character he represented at the opening of the play. He has the final word as he "solemnly" states, "I knew something ud come of the tappin on the wall!" (62). As the "primitive man," his superstitions are confirmed as he comfortably avoids responsibility for Minnie's death by adopting a fatalistic acceptance of portents and unavoidable destiny.

Judith Butler argues that "female trouble" from the male perspective occurs when a "female 'object'... returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position" (*Gender* vii). In *The Shadow*, Minnie Powell does not contest the authority of the males in the tenement; she simply takes it on herself to assume the traditionally masculine role of protecting the house. The feminization of the male characters and the ultimate role reversal that occurs at the end of *The Shadow* create a tension that is exemplary of Samuel

Beckett's description of O'Casey quoted earlier. In the case of *The Shadow*, the explosion that results when "complacent solidities" disintegrate is both figurative *and* literal. Grene argues that with the sacrifice of Minnie, O'Casey turns "the ignorance of the value of privacy...into a heroic ideal of communal solidarity" (123). The surprising twist here, of course, is that the heroic ideal is actually embodied by a female who unaccountably morphs from a stereotypical man hunter who is unavoidably attracted to the "gunman on the run" and who is "all of a tremble when [she] hear[s] a shot go off" (O'Casey *Shadow* 18-19) to the only person in the room who "*retains her presence of mind*" (52) and attempts to hide the bombs when the Tans show up to raid the tenement. Her self-sacrifice may be a testament to communal solidarity, but if so, her only fellow community member is Mrs. Henderson who, as Minnie shouts "'Up the Republic' at the top of her voice" (59), fights with the soldiers and is also arrested. The other predominantly male members of the tenement cower as the Tans ransack their rooms and steal their belongings. Thus, O'Casey disintegrates not only the solidity of class and education, but also traditional gendered expectations of behavior. To triumph over the adversity occasioned by the environment, Davoren and Shields would have to employ what Valente refers to as "the ethos of manliness" which occurs when "robust 'animal spirits,' the source of conventionally 'masculine' fortitude, tenacity, assertiveness, and stamina" are turned "inward, and thus convert[ed]...into the higher order spiritual attainments of integrity, self-possession, and self-control" (2). Since the nation of Ireland is the environment and Davoren and Seumas both occupy and contain the racial markers of this metrocolonial space, they are excluded from hegemonic masculinity and destined to always represent either the animalized or feminized Other imposed on them by the colonizer.

“It’s better to be a coward than a corpse!”: The Strutting Man

When *Juno and the Paycock* opened in 1924, it “drew such large crowds that it had to be extended for a second week, the first time in Abbey history that a play had run longer than a week” (Krause 58). Krause reports that it was also the “first time in the twenty-year history of the Abbey [that] there were long queues outside the theatre and many people had to be turned away” (58). Initial responses were quite positive with Yeats declaring “it was a very fine play,” and Lady Gregory stating, “This is one of the evenings at the Abbey that makes me glad to have been born” (qtd. in Krause 58). The only aspects of the play that playgoers did object to had to do with references to sex and religion. Krause reports that the theater manager in Cork only allowed the play to be performed “in a badly bowdlerized version, with all references to religion eliminated and all references to sex cleaned up” (60). For example, Krause explains that the plot was altered to show that Bentham married Mary before leaving her and that the prayers spoken by Mrs. Tancred and Juno Boyle were eliminated (60). Welch confirms the adjustments to the dialogue but reports that for one performance the plot was adjusted so that Mary’s pregnancy was changed to a diagnosis of tuberculosis and that this edict was issued by the theater manager between the first and second houses on opening night, requiring Sarah Allgood (playing Juno) to improvise her lines (89). Gabriel Fallon, the actor who played Bentham, describes the awkwardness on stage as Allgood attempted to adjust her lines but ultimately blurts out, “Oh, Jack, Jack; d’ye know what Bentham’s after doing to Mary?” (qtd. in Welch 90). Fallon reports that this line “was capped by the loudest laugh I have ever heard in a theatre” (qtd. in Welch 90). This completely unraveled the tragic effect of Juno’s entrance and the revelation of Mary’s pregnancy, reducing the end of the play to the spectacle of the stock stage Irish comics as the

drunkards, Boyle and Joxer have the last slurred words. It is notable that once again O'Casey's representations of Irish masculinity are not called into question by Irish audience members.

As the play progresses, it follows the Boyle family fortune as it waxes and wanes, but it also follows the characters' responses to their specific circumstances. The women in the play, primarily Juno and Mary, progress from no hope to hopefulness to resignation even as their propensity to survive is highlighted while Boyle and Joxer are buffeted but unchanged and Johnny is executed as a traitor. In other words, the female characters move forward in a determination to survive their environment while the men remain static, stuck in their world with no hope or desire to progress toward an ideal manly state of being. As in *The Shadow*, the men are incapable of realizing the manly ideal because of their racial and environmental connection to the space of Ireland. Grene suggests that "the stock device of a legacy that turns out to be false is a bitter comment on the testament of Irish nationalism...that had promised workers reconquest of Ireland but delivered no more than green flags and green postboxes" (483). Certainly the plight of the Boyle family mired in poverty but made hopeful by the promise of change can be a metaphor for the Irish working class who arguably suffered the most in the aftermath of revolution, but O'Casey is also offering an indictment of Irish manhood, both of the nationalists and of the working class husbands and fathers. One could argue that his characterization of these men indicates that they are not responsible for the genetically bound circumstances they face and are thus incapable of effecting change for themselves or the larger Irish population. However, this is in effect confirming the colonizer's assessment of Irish masculinity as either too animalistic or too feministic to attain the manly ideal.

The play is set in 1922 during the Irish Civil War between those who supported the Free State Settlement and the die-hard Irish Republicans who rejected it. In Act I, the stage is set for

what is essentially a domestic drama where conflict exists between husband and wife, parents and children and brother and sister paralleling the larger national situation. Kiberd suggests that the Boyle family is a “metaphor for the state...but in terms that mock the Free State” (*Irish* 484), specifically referencing Captain Boyle’s intention to make Juno take an oath of allegiance to him as he is “establishin’ an independent Republic” (O’Casey *Juno* 89). He argues that it was the “Oath of Allegiance to the crown demanded of all political representatives of the Free State” that the Republicans protested and went to war over rather than the ceding of the six northern counties (*Irish* 482). If O’Casey intends to mock the Free State by invoking the Oath of Allegiance as one taken by a wife in allegiance to a husband, he does so by feminizing Free State adherents as well as the newly independent Irish nation. The fact that Boyle only demonstrates dominance over his wife when he is inebriated and posturing for his fellow pub crawler, Joxer, stresses the cowardice that lies at the heart of his character and furthers O’Casey’s mockery of the political realities that emerged from the Irish War of Independence.

As the play begins, we are introduced to Juno and Mary, mother and daughter who are struggling to improve their lives in spite of the working class environment. Detailed descriptions of both their physicality and personality are provided by O’Casey. Mary is introduced first and is described as a “*well-made girl of twenty two [with] two forces working in her mind – one through the circumstances of her life, pulling her back; the other, through the influence of books she has read, pulling her forward*” (67 emphasis author’s). We are reminded of the conflicting forces that motivate Davoren here, but Mary’s are not referenced as genetically marking her but as the circumstances of her environment in conflict with influences that reveal a different, possibly better world for her. The rest of the description clarifies this, stating that “*the opposing forces are apparent in her speech and her manners, both of which are degraded by her*

environment and improved by her acquaintance – slight though it be – with literature” (67-8 emphasis author’s). O’Casey is obviously suggesting that environment can be overcome with literacy and education, but it is interesting that he denied this possibility in his description of the presumably educated Davoren in *The Shadow*. It is also worth noting that the books Mary is reading are Ibsen’s plays, specifically *The Doll’s House*, *Ghosts*, and *The Wild Duck*, dramas that shed merciless light on the domestic façade that often hides painful realities, particularly for wives and mothers. When Boyle complains of her reading habits to Joxer, decrying her choices as “boks only fit for chiselurs!” (85), his mistaken assumption that the titles are children’s books reveals both his self-imposed ignorance and his contempt for highbrow culture. Grene suggests that for this line to work, “an audience has to be educated enough to find the Captain’s misrecognition of the plays’ titles funny; the laughter derives from a vicarious enjoyment of Boyle’s ignorant derisiveness” (129). Once again, O’Casey counts on a level of “respectability” (or the desire to appear respectable) in his Irish audience that will allow them to feel distant enough from Boyle’s ignorance to find him humorous rather than offensive. Thus, Mary’s reading habits are used to both elevate her in terms of the tenement environment and mark her father as a permanent fixture of that environment.

Juno is also treated with a detailed description and her appearance and personality are likewise linked directly to her environment: “*she must have been a pretty woman; but her face has now assumed that look which ultimately settles down upon the faces of the women of the working class...were circumstances favourable, she would probably be a handsome, active and clever woman*” (68 emphasis author’s). It is obvious that O’Casey believes that if these women were afforded the opportunity to improve their financial circumstances and physical surroundings, they would naturally move up the evolutionary ladder and be more “handsome,

active and clever.” He does not extend such possibilities for improvement to the men of the Boyle family. Johnny is described as “*a thin, delicate fellow...pale and drawn...[with] a tremulous look of indefinite fear in his eyes*” (71 emphasis author’s). The description of Jack Boyle portrays a much stronger man, but still in terms that stress a physiognomy that lends itself to an unwillingness to evolve as he has a short neck and a head that “*looks like a stone ball that one sometimes sees on top of a gate-post*” (73 emphasis author’s). He also has a walk that “*is a slow consequential strut*” (73 emphasis author’s). His stone-like mentality and strut coupled with dingy clothes and his faded seaman’s cap reveal a man who is stuck in a world where he imagines an importance that can never be realized. The other three male characters who play supporting roles are characterized as similarly entrenched. Jerry Devine, Mary’s erstwhile suitor, is simply described as a “*type...common...in the Labour Movement, of a mind knowing enough to make the mass of his associates, who know less, a power, and too little to broaden that for the benefit of all*” (72 emphasis author’s). O’Casey does not indicate that there is a possibility that Jerry could improve his circumstances through reading books as he does with Mary, implying that Jerry has no inclination to read and is no more than a “type” of man. Charlie Bentham shows promise as a tall, good-looking young man, but his image is tainted as well as he has “*a very high opinion of himself*” (91 emphasis author’s). As he later abandons the pregnant Mary to leave for England, his lack of character is confirmed. Joxer Daly, Jack Boyle’s drinking companion, is the stock stage Irishman with his “*cunning twinkle*” and ingratiating manner (74 emphasis author’s). He is Boyle’s yes man, always agreeing with his stronger companion and is what Krause refers to as a “clever parasite full of comic platitudes” (108). With this cast of male characters, one is reminded of Pegeen Mike’s limited choices for male companions in Synge’s *Playboy*.

The play is framed by violence, beginning with the murder of an Irish Republican die-hard in the first Act and details the execution of the die-hard who betrayed him in the final Act. The first dead man, Robbie Tancred, is the son of a fellow tenement dweller and a former associate of Johnny Boyle. Later, Johnny Boyle is killed by two Irregulars because he informed on Tancred. The violence that bookends the play is largely overshadowed by the comic antics of Boyle and Joxer and the pathos generated by the state of Juno who singlehandedly supports the family and Mary who becomes romantically and sexually involved with a man who ultimately abandons her. Act I opens with the scene of Mary reading aloud the gory details of Tancred's wounds to Juno and Johnny. As she reads, Johnny erupts, exclaiming, "It'll soon be that none of you'll read anythin' that's not about butcherin'!" (68). Mary's response, "He's gettin' very sensitive, all of a sudden" (68), feminizes Johnny and thus denies him the animal spirit that is a necessary ingredient of ideal manliness. Juno's response to the reading and Johnny's reaction is not to side with her sensitive son's opinion about the subject matter, but to help him avoid the animalistic nature of the violent story even as she expresses her desire to join Mary in vicariously experiencing it as she says, "I'll read it myself, Mary, by an' by, when I come home" (68). Johnny's repulsion is due to his guilty conscience as the informer who betrayed Tancred and fear of the reprisal that is sure to come, but as the audience is unaware at this point of his role in Tancred's death, his girlish disgust at the details of "butcherin'" simply serves to feminize his character. Once his feminine sensibilities are satisfied, the discussion between mother and daughter quickly shifts to the absent father.

Juno and Mary are portrayed as being expected to fulfill the role of the typical women of the house, preparing and serving food and drink for the men. Mary resists this role, suggesting to her mother that she "let him get it himself" (69) when Juno complains about getting Boyle's

breakfast. The daughter repeats her admonition, “Isn’t he big an’ able enough to come out an’ get it himself?” (69) when Juno orders her to take a drink of water to Johnny who is in the next room. Juno excuses Johnny’s inability to get his own water by pointing to his disability even as she condemns her husband who uses his supposed disability to excuse his lack of employment. In this way Juno is revealed as conflicted as to the traditional role, but not because she resents what is perceived as her responsibilities toward the men of the house, but because her husband is not fulfilling his traditional role as provider.

Boyle provides the comic relief that is nonetheless an almost grotesque parody of his son’s injuries as he grabs his thigh and exclaims, “U-ugh, I’m afther getting’ a terrible twinge in me right leg!” (79) when Jerry Devine tells him of a possible job opportunity. His repetition of the phrase, “I’ve a little spirit left in me still!” (78, 79, 80, 83) as he refuses the breakfast Juno has prepared in order to assert his independence is a comical double entendre as it could also refer to the liquor he has consumed that morning. Certainly his antics are amusing, but when set against the serious injuries of his son and his wife’s clear and understandable despair at their financial situation, Boyle’s posturing depicts a serious deficit of traditional masculinity. In his essay on the performance of masculinity in this play, David Waterman points out that “despite all of his rhetoric Boyle fails miserably in his performance of the nationalist/masculine ideal” (65). I would go further and say that in his depiction of Boyle, O’Casey isn’t just satirizing the nationalist/masculine ideal but the entirety of Irish manhood as it existed in the inner city of Dublin during the Irish Civil War.

The satirical treatment of the Irish man of the house is extended to include his children. Both of the Boyle children use the mantra, “a principle’s a principle” (70, 93) when Juno challenges their behavior. Mary’s “principle” is her devotion to the Trades Union while

Johnny's principle is doing "his bit for Ireland" (93). Juno's is the voice of reason as she tells Mary that her principles won't pay the bills (70) and Johnny that he "lost [his] best principle...when [he] lost [his] arm" (93). Mary's devotion to the labor movement is undermined by her obsession with her appearance as she agonizes over the color of her hair ribbon (69-70). Johnny, who as a wounded warrior figure should inspire compassion and pride, is equally obsessive about the votive light in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary, appearing ridiculously paranoid in his panic should it go out. Grene refers to these exchanges between the adult children and their mother when he asserts that the "anti-intellectual, apolitical mother has it all her own way" (128). His argument that O'Casey's rendering of Juno may reflect his own mother who "must have had a number of occasions to regret her son's adherence to the proposition that 'a principle's a principle'" (128) is compelling and points to O'Casey's disillusionment following the failed General Strike and subsequent violence of Easter week. O'Casey imbues Johnny and eventually Mary with this same sense of disillusionment but in a way that enables Mary to move forward while Johnny is ultimately destroyed as he betrays his principles and his fellow Republican. Grene also posits that the ultimate "conflict of principles" in the play is not between mother and children but "between caring wife and care-free husband" (128). "If Juno stands as an archetype of the working-class mother," Grene argues, "the Captain is a comic embodiment of the shiftless working-class father" (128). Boyle certainly provides comic relief as he postures as a ship's Captain who sailed "from the Gulf o' Mexico to the Antanartic Ocean" (88) when in reality, he was "only wanst on the wather, in an oul' collier from [Dublin] to Liverpool" (77), but as Kryżaniak points out, "his reactions are thoroughly aggressive and involve lying, deliberate misunderstanding [as he] constantly tries to reinforce patriarchal, dominating values" (199). His attempt to establish and maintain patriarchal authority

is certainly demanded of the manly ideal, but his means to this end, specifically his reliance on an imaginary crippling to avoid the patriarchal responsibility of providing for his family, subvert this attempt. If Boyle were presented as a peripheral figure included solely for comic purposes, this subversion would be somewhat softened. However, as the only man who can fill the patriarchal position, his abject and cruel refusal to do so even as he verbally claims the role, makes this representation of Irish manhood particularly disturbing. This is made even clearer as the action of the play progresses.

Act I ends with the promise of a legacy and the possibility of a new life for each member of the Boyle family. Juno will not have to work quite so hard to support them, Mary can pursue both the man she desires and the different life she has read about in her books, and Johnny can possibly escape retribution simply by relocating to a place where he is not known. Boyle vocalizes the emerging possibilities that a change of environment promises when he swears off Joxer's company and declares, "I'm a new man from this out" as he clasps Juno's hands and serenades her with a love ballad (97). With this scene, O'Casey is affirming his own belief that it is economic opportunity rather than political power that can save the tenement dwellers from the caustic environment of superstition and poverty. Unfortunately for the Boyles and for many of Ireland's poor in the 1920's, the promise of change is not realized and the consequences are the dissolution of the family.

When the curtain lifts for Act II, two days have passed and we see a Boyle household cluttered with new furniture and Mr. Boyle already reneging on his promise to Juno as he eagerly welcomes Joxer into the house. He quickly assumes his old habit of posing as the paterfamilias when Juno is absent, assuring Joxer that it "doesn't matther" if Juno is home, declaring, "I'm masther now, an' I'm goin' to remain masther" (98). He thus indicates his belief that money

does indeed make the man and that being a husband of means automatically confers patriarchal authority. Johnny feels no such confidence in their new prosperity as Juno asks him what he is thinking and he responds, “Nothin’, nothin’, nothin’” (103). When she reveals that he has been moving from one relative’s house to another and challenges his odd behavior, he responds, “I can rest nowhere, nowhere, nowhere” (103). He follows this with “Let me alone, let me alone, let me alone, for God’s sake” (103). Johnny’s strange trinity of statements is forgotten as Bentham arrives for the party to celebrate the Boyle’s good fortune. It is interesting that O’Casey does not reveal the reason for Johnny’s odd behavior until near the end of the play. Choosing to hide the information that Johnny is an informer and traitor to the Republican cause makes both the family and the audience dismiss him as anyone of importance from the beginning. His terrible wounds which should inspire sympathy and imbue him with heroic status are subsumed by his manic tone and feminine devotion to religious symbols. If the circumstances leading to his strange behavior were known by the audience from the beginning, this would be a very different play. Because he is simply portrayed as a cowardly man made mad by his war experiences, he is easy to dismiss. Mustafa argues that it is “Johnny’s moral and verbal inadequacy [that] prevent our identification with him” (101), but I would argue that it is also his family’s response both to his disability and to his strange behavior that allows the audience to skim over his role and focus more on the drama between Juno and Boyle.

In Act II, Johnny’s madness deepens as his as yet unexplained fear increases. When he sees what he believes is the ghost of Robbie Tancred kneeling in front of his statue of the Virgin Mary, it is to his mother that he appeals for protection, saying, “Sit here, sit here, mother...between me an’ the door” (107). His subsequent prayers to the “Mother o’ God” (107) as well as his entreaty that Juno, his earthly mother, “go into the room an’ see if the light’s

lightin' before the statue" (107) overtly infantilizes his character. His constant appeals to the Virgin Mary and his obsession with the votive light he keeps lit for her can be seen as an indirect reference to the Shan Van Vocht. Unlike Seumas Shields who never did more than pay his rifle levy, Johnny's life is a true testimony that Kathleen ni Houlihan's way is a "thorny way." He has made the blood sacrifice required by this incarnation of an Irish goddess, but has not reaped any reward. There is no beautiful queen in his life so he turns his attention to the Queen of Heaven. His behavior is in stark contrast to the celebratory tone of the rest of the characters.

Following Johnny's outburst, the party continues as if nothing has happened, with neighbors arriving and guests taking turns entertaining by singing songs. Similar to Johnny's reaction to the supposed ghost, the levity of the songfest is undermined once again by the lamentations of Mrs. Tancred who arrives with more neighbors as they are on their way to bury her son. Hers is the voice of reality, made all the more stark and pitiless as it is contrasted with the songful celebration of the Boyle's good fortune. It is through Mrs. Tancred's words that the tragic consequences of the Civil War are most strikingly revealed: "I'm told [Robbie] was the leader of the ambush where me nex' door neighbor, Mrs Mannin', lost her Free State soldier son. An' now here's the two of us oul' women, standin' one on each side of a scales o' sorra, balanced be the bodies of our two dead darlin' sons" (115). Grene refers to the "party-piece songs and recitations" as a "temporary gaiety under threat from the realities that impinge so starkly with the entrance of Mrs. Tancred" (130). Just as Johnny's sudden vision of her dead son, Mrs. Tancred's appearance disrupts and negates the false promise of hope that came with the possibility of financial independence. This character abruptly reminds the party goers and the audience that the tragedy of Civil War is immediately present in the absence of sons and neighbors. The Boyles and Bentham quickly recover their equanimity, however, by distancing

themselves from the tragedy. Peter-like, Johnny denies having been friends with Tancred, declaring, “I never cared for him, an’ he could never stick me” (116). Bentham’s remark is particularly brutal as he simply says, “the only way to deal with a mad dog is to destroy him” (116). Boyle characteristically absolves himself of any responsibility saying, “We’ve nothin’ to do with these things, one way or t’other. That’s the Government’s business, an’ let them do what we’re payin’ them for doin’” (116). Juno initially counters his callousness by pointing out the neighbors who have lost limbs and lives, notably failing to include her own son in this litany. Boyle also seems to forget his son’s involvement when he responds, “Here, there, that’s enough about them things; they don’t affect us, an’ we needn’t give a damn” (117). Juno then turns on Mrs. Tancred saying, “In wan way, she deserves all she got; for lately, she let th’ Die-hards make an open house of th’ place” (117).

This movement from sympathy to blaming the victim is necessary for the Boyle’s to maintain some semblance of belief that their lives are improving and that the ugliness of war has not and cannot touch them. Kiberd argues that for O’Casey, “the pretension to respectability that led many of yesterday’s rebels to see themselves as the new elite” was the saddest feature of “a land sundered by civil strife” (483). It is this “pretension to respectability” that leads both Juno and Boyle to conveniently ignore their son’s part in this civil strife. Indeed, it is his presence and the testimony of his wounds that they work hard to ignore. Boyle rarely addresses Johnny directly and when he does it is to defend himself from his son’s annoyance with his presence. Juno is much more sympathetic to Johnny but her treatment of him as if he is a little boy negates his manhood as well as his sacrifice for Ireland. After the various responses to Mrs. Tancred’s grief are completed, Johnny exclaims, “For God’s sake, let us have no more o’ this talk” (117). No one responds to him or even acknowledges that he has spoken. They simply pick up with

their celebration as Mary and Bentham go for a walk and Boyle is encouraged to recite a poem he composed. Their levity is once more disrupted as the funeral procession for Robbie Tancred goes by. With the exception of Johnny who “*sits moodily by the fire*” (120), the remaining revelers go down to see the spectacle with Mrs. Madigan declaring, “We’d have a bettther view from the street” (120). They are not rushing to the procession as an act of unity with the grieving mother, but to be ghoulishly entertained by the “*daarlin’ funeral*” (120).

The Act ends by finally giving the audience a hint as to the reason for Johnny’s state of mind as a Young Man appears and orders him to attend a Battalion Staff meeting set for two nights hence indicating that the Republican leaders know that Johnny had something to do with Tancred’s death (120). When Johnny declares that he won’t go, exclaiming, “Haven’t I done enough for Ireland! I’ve lost me arm an’ me hip’s desthroyed so that I’ll never be able to walk right agen! Good God, haven’t I done enough for Ireland?” (121), the Young Man replies sinisterly, “Boyle, no man can do enough for Ireland!” (121). Johnny names his wounds as proof of his sacrifice for Kathleen and his assertion that he has “done enough,” but he is mocked as the mourners invoke another version of the goddess as they recite the “Hail Mary” confirming both the futility of Johnny’s sacrifice and his isolation from his community.

The domestic space of the Boyle home unravels in the final act of the play. The complete absence of any inclination to fulfill the manly ideal is confirmed as the male characters, some of whom could have prevented the various disasters that befall the family, are either absent, mad, or drunk. As in Act 1, the focus is on the women in the family as the curtain rises on a mother/daughter conversation. Bentham has abandoned Mary to go to England and because she looks “like one pinin’ away” (123), Juno is taking her to the doctor. Irish manhood is once again the topic as the two women debate both Bentham’s lack of masculinity and possible reasons for

his decampment. It is interesting that they agree that Bentham “wasn’t the man that poor Jerry was” (123) suggesting levels of masculine competence. The fact that Jerry wants to marry Mary even though her family is not going to be prosperous does indicate the presence of redeeming “manly” qualities, but this is quickly revealed as illusion as he recoils from Mary when hearing of her condition, sadly walking away from her even as he offers empty words of comfort. Mary sums up the absence of the manly ideal when she says with resignation, “it’s only as I expected – your humanity is just as narrow as the humanity of the others” (141). The “others” she is referring to are her father and her brother.

When Boyle hears of Mary’s pregnancy, he initially declares his intention of following Bentham to England and bringing him back to “make him do her justice” (134). Initially, it seems that Boyle is uncharacteristically responding like a “good” father determined to right the world for his daughter. We are quickly disabused of that notion, however, as he reverts to type, expressing his concern for how Mary’s situation will affect him, crying out, “Oh, isn’t this a nice thing to come on top o’ me, an’ the state I’m in!...Amn’t I afther goin’ through enough without havin’ to go through this!” (134). When Juno remonstrates with him, trying to point out that “every wan of [Mary’s years will] be tainted with a bittther memory” (134), Boyle ultimately declares his intention to go out and “have a few dhrinks” and tells Juno to “tell that lassie o’ yours not to be here when I come back; for if I lay me eyes on her, I’ll lay me hans on her, an’ if I lay me hans on her, I won’t be accountable for me actions” (137). It is this refusal to be accountable that ultimately identifies Boyle as incapable of realizing the manly ideal. His propensity to violence is unchecked by his wife’s attempts to reason with him even as we are aware that, as a coward, he is incapable of carrying out any violence. Therefore, his failure to attain ideal masculinity is evidence of the double bind. He threatens violence, not to protect

those naturally placed under his protection, but to harm them. His threat of violence to the man who used and then abandoned his daughter is well-placed, but is quickly delegated to the crippled son when he tells Johnny, “Go an’ get Bentham if you want satisfaction for all that’s afther happenin’ us” (137). Thus, he abandons wife and children for the comfortable illusion of male camaraderie as he leaves the tenement calling for Joxer, gladly relinquishing any pretense to honorable masculinity.

Johnny, the only other man in the room, likewise resists any call to represent the manly ideal for his mother and sister. When he first hears that his sister’s “illness” is worse than consumption, he panics, declaring, “we’ll have to get her into some place ower this, there’s no one here to mind her” (133). He does not want his role as dependent invalid to be superseded by an ill sibling. When he hears of the true nature of her illness, he quickly sides with his father, saying, “She should be dhriven out o’ th’ house she’s brought disgrace on” (135). This father/son harmony quickly disintegrates when it is revealed that there is no legacy, only massive debt incurred on the promise of the legacy and Johnny rightly accuses his father of failing the family declaring, “I’m done with you, for you’re worse than me sisther Mary!” (137). When Boyle leaves to go carousing with Joxer, Johnny turns on his mother: “You’re to blame yourself for a gradle of it – givin’ him his own way in everything, an’ never assin’ to check him, no matter what he done” (138). Johnny’s blame game continues as he verbally attacks Mary for telling Jerry Devine the truth about her condition. He sees Jerry as a likely masculine substitute for himself and his father, declaring to Mary, “he’d have stopped th’ takin’ of the things, if you’d kept your mouth shut” (142). Thus, Boyle is blamed for not providing for and protecting the family, Juno is blamed for not forcing the father to fulfill his patriarchal duties, and Mary is blamed for losing not one but two suitors who could have taken the father’s place. What is

notable is that at no time does Johnny, the adult son of the house, even consider attempting to fulfill this role himself.

It is “th’ takin’ of the things” that symbolizes Johnny’s downfall as the votive candle is extinguished as furniture is being removed. Almost immediately, the two irregulars appear to take Johnny away even as he pleads with them, pointing to his missing arm as evidence of his patriotism to no avail. When Mrs. Boyle is informed of Johnny’s death, she faces it with calm resignation, identifying in her mother’s grief with Mrs. Tancred, equalizing all of the young men who died for Ireland, “why didn’t I remember that then he wasn’t a Diehard or a Stater, but only a poor dead son!” (146). While she would be justified in giving up and abandoning her family, she does not. Instead, she announces her intention to leave Boyle, letting him “furrage for himself,” declaring, “I’ve done all I could an’ it was no use – he’ll be hopeless till the end of his days” (145). When Mary laments her baby’s lack of a father, Juno expresses what is ultimately the message of the play: “It’ll have what’s far bettther – it’ll have two mothers” (146). Thus, O’Casey creates a representation of Irish gender that is multitudinous rather than dichotomous. If the play ended with Juno’s declaration, the focus would be on the triumph not just of Irish womanhood over her environment but Irish motherhood, a trope near and dear to Irish Catholic sensibilities. It does not end there, however. Instead O’Casey leaves his audience with an awkward vicarious view of two inebriated Irishmen, mumbling and singing to themselves as what passes for an Irish father vaingloriously absolves himself from responsibility for family or nation and drunkenly declares, “th’ whole worl’s...in a terr...ible state o’...chassis!” (148).

Greene describes the close of the play as one “with a strong emotional drive which divides sympathies along gender lines” even as it “works against any simple moral or ideological polarisation” (131). He goes on to argue that ultimately the play “is a theatrical invitation to an

audience to watch this space, a space which can never be viewed or valued in one way for long” (131-32). This space is, of course, the tenement environment which is viewed by the audience “across an implied class gap which allows/demands that it be seen from no one fixed position” (Greene 132). It is this “class gap” that allows the audience to be amused by what Kiberd describes as “O’Casey’s terse epitaph on the Irish male” (*Inventing* 381). Unlike Irish members of *Playboy* audiences, some of whom were heard shouting “That’s not the West” during a performance (Welch 42), O’Casey’s audiences felt secure enough in their middle class respectability and tendency to “other” the Irish poor, that the caricatures of Boyle and Joxer that so resembled English-imposed stereotypes were not only accepted, but enjoyed. The men are two-dimensional at best, at times posturing a desire for the attainment of the manly ideal, but ultimately revealed as typical caricatures of Irish masculinity. While neither Juno nor Mary are called upon to die to save the men of the tenement like Minnie Powell, they do both exhibit a quiet heroism as they consciously decide to face an uncertain future with courage and the knowledge that two Irish mothers are better than one Irish father.

“I was burnin’ to dhraw me sword, an’ wave an’ wave it over me”: The Cowardly Man

The third play in O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy is the most complex, consisting of four acts, multiple set changes, and spanning several months. It was also the most controversial for contemporary audiences. In an October 1924 letter to Lady Gregory, O’Casey informed her that he was beginning work on a new play which he described as one “dealing with Easter Week” and one which would “bring to our Remembrance ‘old unhappy, far off days, & battles long ago!’” (Krause *Letters* 119). Nearly a year later, in a letter to Gabriel Fallon dated 26 August 1925, O’Casey described the reception of his play by Lady Gregory, Yeats and Lennox

Robinson, telling Fallon that these key figures in the Abbey Theatre believed that, “[the play] is probably the best thing [he] has done” (Krause *Letters* 141). This glowing response was not unilaterally shared, however. In September of the same year, George O’Brien, appointed by the Irish Government to serve as co-director of the Abbey Theatre alongside Lady Gregory, Yeats and Robinson, submitted a detailed list of objections to the play that, in his words, “could not possibly be produced in its present form” (Krause *Letters* 145). His objections were almost entirely on the grounds of morality and had to do with the love scene between Nora and Jack Clitheroe in Act I, the depiction of Rosie the prostitute in Act II, and the “objectionable expressions” in the speeches of Mrs. Gogan and Bessie Burgess (Krause *Letters* 145). The response of Yeats and Robinson to O’Brien’s objections agreed that the Act I love scene needed revision in order to make the characters more realistic and less sentimental, but they refused to require any other revisions or reject the play out of hand, explaining that some modification would naturally take place in rehearsal at the discretion of the producer (Krause *Letters* 146-7). O’Brien’s response indicated that his objections did not rest on a critique of the play as “dramatic literature” but on his concern that the play may offend “any section of public opinion so seriously as to provoke an attack on the theatre” (Krause *Letters* 147n). Krause reports that O’Brien’s objections were echoed by the actors who on January 10, 1926 (one month before opening night), “refused to say some of his earthy dialogue and objected to playing his rough characters from the slums” (*Letters* 164). These objections came after the directors had already revised the love scene in Act One and omitted Rosie Redmond’s song at the end of Act Two (Krause *Letters* 164). O’Casey then threatened to withdraw the play and it was only through the intervention of Yeats and Lady Gregory that the play went on (Krause *Letters* 164). It may be that O’Brien and the actors were concerned about the reception of the play based on audience

reaction to the morally questionable moments in *Juno* and subsequent modifications of its staging to eliminate Mary's out of wedlock pregnancy. In any event, the inferences to love making and the suggestion that prostitutes existed in Dublin were not what motivated playgoers to violently protest the staging of *The Plough and the Stars*.

Welch explains that the opening night response to the play was generally positive as reviewers praised several of the actors, but by the second night's performances, "there was some ominous hissing during Act II" and family members of some of those killed during or in the aftermath of the Easter Rising began to strongly voice complaints (95). Welch accounts for the delayed outrage suggesting that there was a "gradual absorption on the part of Dublin audiences of what this play was actually communicating about the struggle for Irish independence in 1915-16 and the foundational event of the Easter Rising itself" (95). The last few performances were the most chaotic. During Nora's description of the frightened insurgents in Act III of the February 11th performance, several women and men got up on stage leading to a fight between the players and the demonstrators (Welch 96). On the day of the final performance two days later, three armed men attempted to abduct Barry Fitzgerald who played the role of Fluther. The attempt failed but only because the actor was not at home (Welch 96).

The objections of O'Brien and the actors to prurient sexual references and female characters using unladylike language were subsumed by the virulent response to O'Casey's demythologization of the Rising and the men who fomented it. Mrs. Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, widow of Rising martyr Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, organized the February 11th protest and later wrote a letter to the *Irish Independent* confirming that her objections to the play were not based on its "moral aspect" but on "national grounds only, voicing a passionate indignation against the outrage of a drama staged in a supposedly national theatre, which held up to derision

and obloquy the men and women of Easter Week” (Krause *Letters* 167-68). O’Casey’s scathing public response defended his depiction of Easter Week by de-romanticizing popular views of the men and women so praised by Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington. A major part of his defense of his play dealt with charges regarding his depiction of both the character and the courage of the men in the drama. The “young Republican women” as he termed them were apparently most offended by the presence of rebels in a public-house, the bringing of the Tricolour into this establishment, and the “representation of fear in the eyes of the fighters” (Krause *Letters* 169). O’Casey answers the first two charges by deriding the first as unrealistic and claiming that he had personally witnessed the occurrence of the second. He responds to the third charge by suggesting that if those who participated in the Easter Rising were unafraid, “what is the use of sounding forth their praises?” He goes on to argue that “if they knew no fear, then the fight of Easter Week was an easy thing, and those who participated deserve to be forgotten in a day, rather than to be remembered for ever” (Krause *Letters* 169). The inferred representation of these revolutionaries as afraid and therefore more worthy of being remembered is at odds with his depiction of them in *The Plough and the Stars*.

Mustafa suggests O’Casey offers a counter-narrative in this play which “ridicules heroism and celebrates domesticity” (106). He further explains O’Casey’s strategies to discredit the nationalist narrative by pointing to the behavior of the wounded Lieutenant Langon, the desire of rebel Corporal Stoddard to shoot the looting slum residents, and most especially, the depiction of Rising martyr Padraic Pearse as an offstage unnamed speaker whose carefully selected words are dramatized in such a way to inflame rather than inspire key characters (106-7). While O’Casey is certainly not privileging any heroic vision of the events leading up to and including the Rising, his representation of that event goes much further than simply ridiculing

ideals of heroism and celebrating domesticity or even socialism as a viable alternative. Instead, he uses the gaze of the female characters, who as women are traditionally relegated to the role of spectator of men's heroics, to pinpoint the complete inability of any of the Irish male characters to actively demonstrate the manly ideal. This certainly acts to undermine a mythic representation of this event but it also universally casts the Irish man as an inept poseur who either derisively ignores or deliberately misunderstands the true message of the Shan Van Vocht. O'Casey does seem to privilege the domestic (feminine) rather than the public (masculine) sphere as much of the play is performed in various versions of the tenement home; however, as most of the female characters are either dead or insane by the close of the play, this privileging is subsumed by the eventual dominance of the hypermasculine behavior of both the rebels and the English soldiers. Instead of offering a celebration of domesticity, O'Casey uses the domestic scene and the women who inhabit it as a lens through which the shortcomings of Irish versions of masculinity represented in the play are revealed.

Fluther Good (an amiable drunk and fellow resident of the tenement), Peter (Nora's uncle), and The Covey (Jack's cousin) provide a variety of Irish male representations and are primarily cast as a foreground of comic relief to the life or death nationalist conflict that frames the play. Fluther is trying to quit drinking as the play opens; an ideal that is quickly foresaken in the aftermath of a nationalist speech in Act Two. He frequently finds himself in the unenviable position of taking care of women whose husbands are dead or absent and futile negotiations for peace between Peter and The Covey. Peter plays at being a member of the Citizen Army, wearing its uniform and carrying its accoutrements, but carefully avoids any physical confrontation. The Covey provides the voice of socialism, spouting socialist theories and suggesting Marxist reading material. On the surface he attempts to goad Peter into a fight but

since it is obvious Peter is afraid of fighting and unlikely to attack, this does not demonstrate a propensity for courage. Fluther occasionally moves toward the manly ideal but is ultimately undermined by his love of drink. While Peter and The Covey may use words and wear clothes that hint at hypermasculine tendencies, their lack of manliness is inexorably confirmed by the responses of the female characters to this behavior.

Act One begins with a sober Fluther Good repairing the lock on the Clitheroes' door and Peter readying himself for a Citizen Army demonstration. It is Mrs. Gogan who initially provides the audience with a true characterization of these men. She refers to Peter as "a funny-lookin little man...Like somethin' you'd pick off a Christmas Tree" (156). When she examines the sword that Peter wears with his uniform, she points out that it is "twiced too big for him" (156). She then examines his shirt, points out the frills on it and compares it to "a woman's petticoat" (158). Thus she infantilizes Peter, pointing out his small stature and associating him with a Christmas ornament, she insults his manhood, suggesting the phallic symbol of the sword is too big for him, and she feminizes him by suggesting another symbol of masculinity, the shirt he wears with his Army uniform, resembles a woman's undergarment.

Mrs. Gogan also reveals Fluther's hypochondria which serves as comic relief but also represents his failure to realize the manly ideal. When Fluther coughs, she suggests he has a cold and proceeds to tell him of a "big lump of a woman" who could "put out her two arms an' lift a two-storeyed house on th' top of her head" who had a little cough one day and was dead by the next morning (157). Her hyperbolic description of this individual's strength is in contrast to what she perceives as weakness in Fluther's body. Mrs. Gogan hyper-feminizes Fluther by comparing a female who has super masculine-associated physical strength to the ordinary man who is in the act of "lowerin' a pint, thinkin' of a woman...or doin' the work [Fluther's] doin', while th'

hearse drawn by the horses with the black plumes is driving up to his own hall door" (157). Her point is that if this super-strong woman succumbs to a cough and dies, men like him have no chance to survive. His response which is given "faintly" and "with a frightened cough" culminates in anger at her as she holds up Peter's shirt and he exclaims, "Blast you and your nightshirt! Is a man fermenting with fear to stick the show-off to him of a thing that looks like a shining shroud?" (158). Thus, the same militaristic symbol of manliness is reduced to signify death due to illness as well as a cowardly fear of death in general.

Nora's gaze is likewise the vehicle through which the true nature of Peter and The Covey is revealed. Her first lines in the play admonish the two men as if they are bickering children: "Oh, can I not turn me back but the two of you are at it like a pair of fighting cocks!" (165). They likewise respond to her as children, each accusing the other of being the instigator in an appeal for Nora's favor. Her second admonition particularly infantilizes them: "Am I always going to be having to nurse you into the hardy habit of trying to keep up a little bit of appearance?" (165). This reference to nursing reduces the two men to the role of infants. The image is furthered with her comical and universal mother's threat to any child brandishing a dangerous weapon as she says to Peter: "If you attempt to wag that sword of yours at anybody again, it'll have to be taken off you and put in a safe place away from babies that don't know the danger of these things" (165). Like Mrs. Gogan, Nora's gaze denies these men any semblance of masculinity as she not only reduces them to childlike representation but emasculates them with this representation.

This depiction of these three characters continues throughout the play and is particularly solidified in Act Two where they are subjected to the gaze of the prostitute, Rosie and Act Three where they join Mrs. Gogan and Bessie Burgess to loot the local stores as the battle between the

Irish rebels and the English soldiers rages on around them. Much of the criticism of *The Plough and the Stars* focuses on the events of these two acts, specifically the framing of the Voice of the Man speaking Pearse's words offstage by a public house setting and a prostitute's perspective and the anti-heroic looting of community shopkeepers (including the pub) even as people are dying in the streets during the Rising itself. Grene argues that it was these two acts that Dublin audiences found most offensive as they are where "O'Casey brings his bystanding non-participants closest to the sacred drama of the Rising" (143). It is this removal from the domestic scene that crystallizes the un-masculine aspects of these specific representations of Irish men. Rosie's voice is privileged at the beginning of Act Two as she laments the lack of business, describing the men marching outside as being in a "holy mood," telling the Barman, "You'd think they were th' glorious company of th' saints, an' th' noble army of martyrs thrampin' through th' sthreeets of paradise" (182). Her imagining the rebels as martyrs is echoed by the words of the man speaking outside of the pub window: "Bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing, and the nation that regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood" (182). The sanctifying nature of a blood sacrifice for the national cause is directly linked to the Shan Van Vocht's requirement of bloodshed in order for her transformation from an old woman to a beautiful young queen to be complete. With these words, the Voice of the Man becomes the voice of Cathleen ni Houlihan as he exhorts the men of Ireland to sacrifice themselves and thus assert their manhood. To fail to do so, to see violence as the "final horror" is an invitation to impotence.

When Fluther and Peter enter the pub, they are visibly inspired by the Voice. Fluther describes his response to the speech, "I said to meself, 'You can die now, Fluther, for you've seen th' shadow-dhreams of th' past leppin' to life in' th' bodies of livin' men that show, if we

were without a tither o' courage for centuries, we're vice versa now...The blood was BOILIN' in me veins!" (184). This inspired vision of a resurgence of heroism among "livin'" Irish men does not prompt a desire to join the heroes, but a temptation to drink again. He uses the emotions that the speaker stirs as an excuse to reoccupy his space as the stereotypical Irish drunk. Peter responds to Fluther's invocation of "livin'" heroes with his own posturing: "I was burnin' to dhraw me sword an' wave an' wave it over me" (184). His presumably masculine response to a call to arms is undermined by Nora's earlier threat to take the sword away from him if he continued to "wag" it. It is inferred that Nora's voice is stronger than the Voice of the Man since, although Peter was "burnin'" to draw the sword, he resisted the impulse to do so. Instead, he is left holding a baby, the ultimate symbol of motherhood, instead of the phallic symbol that has already been identified as "twiced too big for him" (194, 156). The fact that this baby is handed to him by Mrs. Gogan as she prepares to enter into a physical altercation with Bessie Burgess serves as a direct contrast with Peter's threatening but never following through with his intention to "run out in front o' God Almighty an' take [The Covey's] sacred life" (194). Even as these two men verbalize ideology related to the masculine ideal of honor in battle, their actions belie their words and they continue to occupy the space fixed for them by the women around them.

The Covey suffers a similar fate at the hands of Rosie. As a socialist, he is unimpressed by the Voice of the Man and goes into the pub to escape from the crowds and the rhetoric that is stirring them. He is also resistant to the invocation of Kathleen ni Houlihan as he responds to Fluther's reminiscences of being "taught at his mother's knee to be faithful to the Shan Van Vok" (196) by referring to this mythical reference as "dope...th' sort o' thing the workers are fed on be th' Boorzawzee" (196). He perceives himself as embodying the masculine ideal of the working man and attempts to educate those around him about the superiority of socialism over

nationalism when Rosie blatantly advertises her profession by revealing her bosom and saying, “it’s heartbreakin’ to see a young fella thinkin’ of anything, or admirin’ anything, but a silk thransparent stockin’s showin’ off the shape of a little lassie’s legs!” (186). The stage direction following this sexual invitation calls for Covey to appear frightened and to move away from her (186). Undaunted, Rosie follows him, trying to put her arm around his neck and talking about “kissin’ an’ cuddlin’” (186). The Covey is described again as frightened and turning away. Later, Rosie retaliates against him for rejecting her, referring to him as a “thing that’s only an inch or two away from a kid” in a blatant reference to his lack of genital prowess. When he angrily turns on her, she exclaims, “You’re no man... You’re no man... Thryin’ to put his arm around me a minute ago, an’ givin’ me th’ glad eye, th’ little wrigglin’ lump o’ desolation turns on me now because he saw there was nothin’ doin’” (197-98). The significance of her diatribe is not that she revises the narrative of their earlier encounter, but that her voice is used to emasculate The Covey, revealing him to be a *little* lump, an “inch or two” short of the manly ideal. It is Fluther who gets the girl, defending Rosie from The Covey’s verbal abuse and then promising to walk her home after a few drinks and a session “in the snug” (200). Fluther may appear to be the ideal masculine hero of this narrative, but he is actually being manipulated by Rosie who gets him drunk and convinces him to take her home with him, not out of any appreciation for his male sexual prowess, but because he will pay her for her services.

Act III is set a few months later in the midst of the Rising itself. As the act begins, Fluther is out looking for Nora who is desperately searching for Jack while Peter and The Covey have just returned from observing the conflict to report on the Proclamation read by Pearse declaring an independent Ireland. These three men, two of whom were inspired to action by the Voice of the Man and one who steadfastly verbalizes socialist ideology, find themselves united

in this Act, not men imbued with passion for a cause, but as cowardly looters. It is the voice of Loyalist Bessie Burgess that questions their masculinity at the beginning of this Act when she demands, “Go on an’ get your guns if you are men” (206). The fact that they do not go and get their guns nor is there ever any indication that they own guns suggests that they are not true men and do not embody the manly ideal.

Their failings are further revealed in the contrast between their enthusiasm for looting and their refusal to assist a woman who needs someone to see her safely home. The *fashionably dressed, middle-aged, stout woman [who] is almost fainting with fear*” (213) serves as a direct contrast to Rosie’s “*exemplified glad neck*” and “silk thransparent stockings” (186) but the response of the men to her is similar. She appeals to all three of them saying, “For Gawd’s sake, will one of you kind men show any safe way for me to get to Wrathmines?...I was foolish enough to visit a friend...and now I cawn’t get a car or a tram to take me home...” (213). Fluther, backs away and says, “I’m afraid, ma’am, one way is as safe as another” (213). His body language as well as his verbal admission (I’m afraid) indicate the cowardice that motivates him. While he does accept Rosie’s sexual invitation, he only does so because he is drunk. Just before the “Woman” appeared, he was enthusiastically preparing to find a pub to loot (212). He describes his intention to loot as a desire “to thry an’ save a few things from th’ burnin’ buildin’s” (214). This attempt to justify his refusal to escort a damsel in distress through an urban battlefield is comical, but also reveals that only the possibility of acquiring free liquor would motivate him to risk his life.

While The Covey responds to Rosie’s overt sexuality by initially running away, he doesn’t bother acknowledging this woman’s presence. Instead, the socialist who responded to The Voice of the Man’s exhortation to Ireland to “welcome [war] as she would welcome the

Angel of God!” (191) by exclaiming “Dope, dope. There’s only one war worth havin’, th’ war for th’ economic emancipation of th’ proletariat” (191) is far more interested in looting the stores with Fluther than he is in escorting a helpless female home. His rejection of Rosie’s sex appeal and an older, more motherly woman’s appeal to his honor is coupled with the comic revelation that his socialist posturing is insincere. When the woman appeals directly to Peter, he doesn’t pretend not to hear her or attempt to justify a refusal to help her. Instead, he indignantly retorts, “D’ye think I’m goin’ to risk me life throttin’ in front of you? An’ maybe get a bullet that would gimme a game leg...?” (214). He irrevocably denies her appeal and walks into the house, leaving her to navigate the dangerous streets alone. We never learn the fate of the woman. O’Casey simply uses her to further establish the natural ineptitude of these three men to occupy the space of the ideal masculine. They provide comic relief, but they also undeniably establish an image of the state of Irish masculinity according to O’Casey’s views. Any attempt any of them make to assert their masculinity is subverted by the revelation of their true character by the women around them.

O’Casey is similarly merciless with his characterization of the nationalists. As the face of the rebels in *The Plough*, Jack Clitheroe appears at first to embody the masculine ideal. Unlike the pretend gunman in *The Shadow* and the wounded gunman in *Juno*, Jack is characterized as a virile and courageous man, willing to lead men into the fight for Ireland’s independence. O’Casey sets this expected masculine-based desire to defend one’s country in opposition to the equally masculine-based sexual desire for one’s wife. Jack’s failure to realize the manly ideal is primarily revealed through the gaze of his wife Nora. O’Casey uses the descriptions of this married couple to foreshadow the nature of their relationship. Nora’s description contrasts “*the firm lines of her face*” with “*a soft, amorous mouth and gentle eyes*” (164 emphasis author’s).

These presumably conflicting characteristics are further explained, “*When her firmness fails her, she persuades with her feminine charm*” (164 emphasis author’s). Jack is described as “*a tall, well-made fellow [whose] face has none of the strength of Nora’s*” (167 emphasis author’s). Much like Davoren in *The Shadow*, Jack’s face reveals both the desire to be masculine and the inability to attain the manly ideal: “*It is a face in which is the desire for authority, without the power to attain it*” (167 emphasis author’s).

Before the couple appears on stage, we learn much about their marriage from Mrs. Gogan. We learn from her, for example, that Jack Clitetheroe may be losing sexual interest in his wife even though Nora “dresses herself to keep him with her” (154). Mrs. Gogan indicts marriage in general and men specifically when she suggests that Jack’s lack of interest may be due to solving the “mystery” of having a woman saying that Nora’s efforts to attract her husband are “no use [because] afther a month or two th’ wondher of a woman wears off” (154). Her criticism initially seems to be directed at Nora whose “skirts are a little too short for a married woman” and whose “glad-neck gown would make a body’s blood run cold” (154), but her later dialogue with Fluther reveals that she is actually criticizing Jack for his inattention to his wife.

Through Fluther’s words the audience learns that Jack used to be a loyal member of the Citizen Army but that he has recently stopped his army activities. Mrs. Gogan has an answer for that as well: “because he wasn’t made a Captain of. He wasn’t goin’ to be in anything where he couldn’t be conspishuous. He was so cocksure o’ being made one that he bought a Sam Browne belt...I think he used to bring it to bed with him” (156). She consistently colors military behavior with sexual innuendo, ultimately suggesting that given an ultimatum to choose one over the other, Jack would rather be an officer in the Citizen Army and take his Sam Browne belt to bed

with him than enjoy sex with his wife. These homosocial if not homosexual undertones are borne out by what unfolds when the amorous interaction between the couple is interrupted by a member of the Irish Citizen Army.

The initial conversation between Jack and Nora confirms Mrs. Gogan's musings about the couple. Jack's decampment from the Citizen Army is true, and when he avows that he gave up being a soldier for her, Nora challenges his version of the story saying, "Ay, you gave it up – because you got th' sulks when they didn't make a Captain of you. It wasn't for my sake, Jack" (172). She thus echoes the indictment of his behavior handed down by Mrs. Gogan. Jack does not deny this indictment, merely responding, "For your sake or no, you're benefitin' by it" before he proceeds to seduce her (172-73). His masculinity is called into question as Nora initially resists his seduction and firmly states, "It's hard for a body to be makin' thoughts that'll be no longer than th' length of your own satisfaction" (173). This direct contrast between her intellect and his ability to satisfy her sexually denies him both the satisfaction of claiming a sacrifice for her and the opportunity to assert his power over her. True to her description, however, her firmness is quickly overcome by her softness and she takes on the role of seducer, making a "*coaxing move of her body towards him*" (175) and convincing him to serenade her. It is during this tender moment that Captain Brennan of the Citizen Army appears to summon Jack to his new command. Jack's response to the attempts of his "little red-lipped Nora" to keep him by her side by burning his letter of commission is to angrily grip her arm and tell her that she "deserve[s] to be hurt" (178). Her demand to know if she is "goin' to be only somethin' to provide merry-makin at night for you" (178) is answered with threats, violence and ultimately abandonment as he eagerly leaves her to go with Captain Brennan.

We see Jack Clitheroe again in Act Two in the pub scene which takes place only a few hours following the events of Act One. Like Fluther and Peter, Jack and his army companions come into the pub following the speech made by the Voice of the Man. Captain Brennan and Lieutenant Langon are carrying the banner of the Plough and the Stars, the flag of the Irish Citizen Army and a green, white and orange Tricolour, what was to become the national flag of Ireland. The stage directions for this scene describe the three men as “*mesmerized by the fervency of the speeches*” (200). Clitheroe, “*almost pantingly*” (200), orders drinks and they excitedly discuss the coming revolution. It is interesting to note that when Nora is in a state of sexual excitement in Act One, she is described as “*panting*” (173). It is in a similar state that these men declare Ireland to be greater than a mother or a wife. Once again, passion for violence and passion for a woman are conflated. The Voice of the Man is again heard exhorting the men of Ireland to avenge the Fenian dead of a former generation. The three men then individually and collectively declare they will suffer imprisonment, wounds, and even death for “th’ Independence of Ireland” (201).

Clitheroe’s tantamount rejection of Nora for Ireland and willingness to die for the cause could be interpreted as a noble and generous demonstration of ideal manly behavior. It is clear that this is not the impression O’Casey intends, however, as this heroic declaration is made in a pub where just a few feet away from the aspiring heroes, Fluther the drunk and Rosie the prostitute are having a tête-à-tête in a snug. Rosie’s bawdy serenade of Fluther contrasts with the sentimental ballad sung by Clitheroe for Nora in Act One. Rosie’s song is preceded by an Officer’s voice commanding, “Irish Volunteers by th’ right, quick march!” (202). It is followed by Clitheroe’s offstage voice giving the same command to the Dublin Battalion of the Irish Citizen Army (202). By replacing Clitheroe’s romantic serenade with Rosie’s song about

cavorting with various men and bookending Rosie's rendition with officers' commands to march to battle, O'Casey further links a lust for battle as an avoidance of lusting for women and thus undermines not only the officers' potential for actual heroism but hints at sexual impotence. The behavior of the representative nationalists in Acts Three and Four does not lead to glory on the battlefield, but to senseless death and destruction. Just as the true nature of Fluther, Peter and The Covey is revealed as they abandon their principles to loot for material goods, Jack Clitheroe's posturing as a brave defender of home and country is revealed to be a sham as neither home nor country benefit from his sacrifice.

As argued earlier, the Voice of the Man echoes the appeal of the Shan Van Vocht, exhorting the men of Ireland to sacrifice themselves for their mother Ireland. O'Casey subverts both the message and the vehicle for the message in the character of Nora, ultimately unmasking this myth as one that destroys Irish homes and families. As Nora returns to the tenement after a futile search for Jack with the intention of bringing him home, she recounts the response of the men she encountered in her search: "They told me I shamed my husband an' the' women of Ireland be carryin' on as I was...They said th' women must learn to be brave an' cease to be cowardly...Me who risked more for love than they would risk for hate..." (207). She goes on to declare, "My Jack...is to be butchered as a sacrifice to th' dead!" (207). Her declaration serves as an answer to the demand made by the Voice of the Man as he invokes Kathleen ni Houlihan. Christopher Lockett describes the sacrifice dictated by the goddess as one that not only "entail[s] one's own death but a disavowal of familial ties; the rejection, in other words, of an even more elemental organizing principle, leaving one's assimilation into the mythic nation unfettered by other considerations" (296). Nora's rejection of both the men's suggestion that her behavior is cowardly and of the entreaty of the Voice of the Man demanding that the "Fenian dead" (201) be

avenged delegitimizes the ideology that dictates such sacrifice. Instead of meekly accepting her husband's "disavowal of familial ties" (Lockett 296), Nora demands that it is these ties rather than loyalty to some mythic vision of nation that should be honored and protected by the men of Ireland. Her function as a reinterpretation of the Shan Van Vocht's purpose in imaging a newly independent Ireland is furthered when she becomes the voice of all women declaring, "there's no woman gives a son or a husband to be killed – if they say it, they're lyin', lyin' against God, Nature, an' against themselves!" (208). Here, her words condemn any woman who willingly sacrifices her men. Such a woman, "a blasted hussy," challenges her vision of the ideal Irish man and Nora responds by "claw[ing] her an' smash[ing] her in th' face" (208), making it clear that physical violence is justified when it is committed to protect the family.

O'Casey furthers this character as a reinvention of the Shan Van Vocht when he uses her words to expose the fear that is at the heart of the rebellion. As Nora describes the dead nationalist she saw in the street to her fellow tenement dwellers, she does so in terms that are gruesomely compelling. Indeed, this is one of the primary passages that upset the Dublin audiences both for its unedited rendition of a body broken by war and its negation of any beauty or honor resulting from human sacrifice. This man who, in the mythic retelling of the Rising would be termed a hero, is reduced to "somethin' huddled up in a horrible, tangled heap" (209). From Nora's perspective, "every twist of his body was a cry against th' terrible thing that had happened to him" (209). Thus, Nora as Celtic goddess stand-in laments the loss of human life even for a nationalist cause.

Near the end of Act Three, Nora in her role as a reimagined Shan Van Vocht offers her version of the goddess's entreaty as she attempts to convince Jack to stay with her by seducing him, saying, "Kiss me, kiss me, Jack, kiss your own Nora!" (219). Her plan seems to be working

at first as Jack kisses her and declares, “My Nora; my little, beautiful Nora, I wish to God I’d never left you” (219). This poignant lover’s reunion is short-lived however, as Jack’s fellow rebel questions his masculinity. Capt. Brennan refers to Jack’s exchange with his wife as “dallyin’ with Nora” (221). His demands that Jack leave Nora are specifically designed to challenge Jack’s manhood: “Why are you beggin’ her to let you go? Are you afraid of her, or what? Break her hold on you, man, or go up, an’ sit on her lap!” (222). It is this demand that Jack either prove his masculinity by deserting his wife or run the risk of being labeled cowardly that prompts Jack to roughly loosen her grip and push her away (223). One could term this exchange as the classic conflict between love and honor except O’Casey clearly does not consider the nationalists as honorable. Indeed, the exit of the Jack and Capt. Brennan is followed by the entrance of Fluther, also loyal to the nationalist cause, fresh from looting, roaring drunk, and wearing “*a woman’s vivid blue hat with gold lacing*” (223). He is so drunk that he cannot be sent for a doctor when Nora becomes ill. Act Three ends with the image of the nationalists, both those who have been involved in the fighting and those who have cowardly avoided it, as either absent or incapacitated and thus unable to serve the goddess.

Act Four simply serves to confirm what the rest of the play has suggested. The death of Nora’s baby and resulting destruction of her mind eclipses the news that Jack has been killed. Nora’s assertion that Jack’s companion, Capt. Brennan, only wants him “to go th’ way he’ll have th’ chance of death sthrikin’ [Jack] an’ missin’ him” (222) is confirmed by Brennan himself when he relates the manner of Jack’s death to the other residents of the tenement house: “I said a prayer for th’ dyin’... Then I had to leave him to save meself” (230). Nora’s assertion that she is Jack’s “dearest” and “thrupest comrade” and that his companions only “want th’ comfort of havin’ [Jack] in th’ same danger as themselves” proves true, but it is too late for either of them to

benefit from her prescience. The husband and father-to-be is ultimately unable to attain the manly ideal and realize where his true loyalty should lie. As a result, Nora as representative of a reimagined goddess figure is left man-less, childless and mindless as she is gently led offstage to sleep in a dead woman's bed.

In his discussion of *The Plough*, Welch specifically points to the juxtaposition between “the sacrificial rhetoric Pearse deployed in 1915 to inflame rebellion and fortify Republican sentiment” and the referencing of a prostitute’s “transparent silk stockings” as representing a “profoundly anti-idealistic..., anti-republican and anti-patriotic critique of the founding icons of the Irish Free State” (95). Grene refers to this “juxtaposition of the political meeting and the pub talk” as “the deliberate contamination of the metaphoric and the material” (143). In his comparison of *The Plough* with Yeats’ “Easter 1916,” Kiberd argues that O’Casey doesn’t merely question the necessity of the rebellion, he “goes farther and questions the whole idea of a hero” (*Inventing* 224). He goes on to suggest that O’Casey’s version of the “Cuchulain cult” is not a “spur to battle” but a “confession of impotence” (*Inventing* 224). This deliberate pairing of revered nationalist rhetoric with images that would be considered irreverent if not offensive to those loyal to the Irish Free State reimagines and re-historicizes the impact of the Easter Rising in a way that privileges the wife/mother/goddess figure represented by Nora and emasculates the husband/father/rebel represented by Jack, revealing him to be blind to the true nature of the goddess and the demands of the manly ideal. The other male figures in the play are variously and overtly feminized and infantilized by the voices of the women rendering them incapable of representing an ideal Irish masculinity. Their confession of impotence is implied in their actions and is heard and confirmed by the women who suffer because of their lack of masculinity.

O'Casey's Dublin trilogy verifies the existence of the "metrocolonial double bind" defined by Joseph Valente as the inevitable state of Irish manhood as it is both feminized and animalized through terms dictated by the colonial oppressor. The playwright does not rely on the voice of the English to establish this double-bind, however. Instead, in each of these plays, O'Casey uses the voices of the women to develop a reimagined Shan Van Vocht who insists not on blood sacrifice for nation but on loyalty to the Irish women and their children. It is the Irish women in O'Casey's drama who offer the opportunity for the men to establish their masculinity and it is these women who identify the men as incapable of attaining the manly ideal when the men fail them. In *The Shadow*, it is Minnie who willingly sacrifices herself while Davoren and Seuamus cower in the tenement. It is Juno's voice who declares that it is better for an Irish baby to have two mothers than one father, matter-of-factly verifying the failure of the men in her family to fulfill their masculine roles. In *The Plough*, the voices of the tenement women reveal the men to be either childish and impotent or blind to their true obligations as ideal Irish men. Through these voices, the Irish men, whether they are fulfilling the role of the stock stage Irishman as imagined by the colonizer and ironically embraced by the Free State audiences or the hapless nationalists who misunderstand the goddess's directive, are revealed as incapable of the hegemonic agency required to attain the manly ideal.

CHAPTER 4: MARTIN MCDONAGH: VIOLENT WOMAN AS NATION
McDonagh in Context

As a London-born man of Irish descent, Martin McDonagh's representations of Irishness are necessarily from an outside-looking-in perspective. As such, many critics and reviewers deem his representations as problematic at best. Adding to the spirited debates about themes and meanings in his drama, McDonagh has deliberately crafted an elusive persona, giving few interviews and rarely bothering to either explain or defend his work. As is typical in the world of media and theater, controversy seems to have fed his enormous success, both as a playwright and as a Hollywood screenwriter. In his review of the text, *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, edited by Richard Rankin Russell, Nicholas Grene poses this question: "Is McDonagh to be considered a self-consciously postmodern parodist, an ethical satirist or an anarchic cultural bother-boy?" (Russell). The latter description fits his public persona best as McDonagh seems to delight in being provocative, saying in a 1998 interview with Irish drama critic Fintan O'Toole: "Theatre isn't something that's connected to me, from a personal point of view, I can't appreciate what I'm doing" ("Martin" 68). This might be considered an effort to appear humble except this interview took place two years after McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane* first took the world of theater by storm, garnering the playwright a fistful of awards including a Tony nomination. He accounts for his disconnection from drama as a genre by pointing to his "position as a youngish guy involved in a medium that is mostly frequented by older, duller, less rock'n'roll-y kinds of people" (O'Toole "Martin" 68). Notorious for his lack of respect for icons of any kind (he famously told Sean Connery to f*** off at an awards ceremony), McDonagh's professed

irreverence for the leadership of the Irish theaters is strikingly similar to Sean O’Casey’s disgust at the powers that held sway over the production of his plays shortly before he decamped to Europe. Just as O’Casey threatened to withdraw *The Plough and the Stars* when actors refused to speak his lines as written and members of the Abbey board of directors objected to his play (Krause *Sean* 65), McDonagh declared that he would not allow any of his future plays to premiere at the Druid, the Royal Court, or the Royal National Theatre when all three rejected *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (“Are” par. 6). He unabashedly defends his “in-yer-face” narrative style by claiming that he is actually “really nice,” stating at the London premiere of his newest film, *Seven Psychopaths*, “I’m normal, because I get all the s*** out there and let other people deal with it” (“I”). In 2005, after five years of refusing interviews and with six successful play debuts behind him, McDonagh has a different view of the theater, telling a reporter for *The New York Times*: “I’m happy what can be done [in the theater]. ‘It’s a box to tell a story in, basically. And that’s a beautiful thing” (McKinley).

Fintan O’Toole, columnist and drama critic for *The Irish Times*, has the distinction of being granted extensive access to the playwright. In a 2006 essay published in the *New Yorker* O’Toole writes about McDonagh’s childhood and family and how the influence of his parents with their working class lives and family back in Ireland informs his drama. McDonagh’s parents met and married in London during the nineteen-sixties, having (like so many Irish young people) left the homeland for England to find work (O’Toole “Mind” par. 7). McDonagh was born in 1970 into a family that, according to O’Toole, “coped with their dislocation by trying to re-create the world of home, living among other Irish families in... a low-rent London neighborhood” and sending their two sons to Catholic schools, “where most of the teachers were Irish priests, and where most of the pupils were of Irish descent” (“Mind” pars. 8-9). For six weeks every summer,

McDonagh and his family would visit his father's family in Connemara, where they would hear Gaelic being spoken and take boat trips to the Aran Islands (O'Toole "Mind" pars. 1, 10).

McDonagh told O'Toole that he lost his religious faith at the age of twelve, explaining "I started questioning, partly as a reaction to just being around the priests in my school" (qtd. in "Mind" par. 9). He also credits punk-rock, "in particular, the raucous, anti-establishment songs of the Clash" with teaching him to be skeptical of authority (O'Toole "Mind" pars. 9-10). Another significant theme of his childhood was the conflict in Northern Ireland. McDonagh tells O'Toole that his "parents were sympathetic to the Catholic nationalist side," but that "he was deeply suspicious of the terror campaign of the Irish Republican Army and of the sentimental cult surrounding the men who died for the cause" ("Mind" par. 10). In addition to being a devotee of the punk-rock group, Clash, McDonagh also enjoyed listening to the Pogues, "a London Irish punk band that combined the raw aggression of the Sex Pistols with the lyrical storytelling of traditional Irish ballads" (O'Toole "Mind" par. 11). McDonagh discussed his interest in this group with O'Toole, saying, "Even while they were trying to destroy the crap side of Irish folk, they still had brilliant lyrics, brilliant tunes, and a love of music...I was beginning to get the same idea: taking the parts you love and destroying the parts you hate" (qtd. in "Mind" par. 11). The music of the Pogues, therefore, "showed him that he didn't have to discard his Irish heritage; he could make use of it instead" (O'Toole "Mind" par. 11).

McDonagh dropped out of school at sixteen and "happily subsisted on fifty dollars a week in unemployment benefits" until they ran out and he was forced to get a menial job stocking shelves in a supermarket (O'Toole "Mind" par. 18). He continued to alternate being on the dole to working menial jobs until his early twenties. When he was twenty-two, his parents retired and returned to Ireland, leaving him and his older brother the house in London. Two years

later his brother won a fellowship to study screenwriting in California and left for the states, leaving McDonagh alone in the house. It is then that he quit his latest job and began writing every day. According to O'Toole, he wrote seven plays in nine months ("Mind" pars. 21, 23). *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* opened in Galway two years later, in February 1996 winning for McDonagh the Most Promising Playwright Prize at the London Evening Standard Theatre Awards ceremony¹⁴ (O'Toole "Mind" pars. 28-29). The remaining six plays except one¹⁵ have also been quite successful, popular with audiences and critics alike, and have earned more awards for the playwright. McDonagh has also realized his dream of writing for the screen, winning an Oscar for his short film, *Six Shooter* in 2007 and writing and directing two feature films, *In Bruges* (2008) and *Seven Psychopaths* (2012). Despite the wide range of critical responses and analyses that McDonagh's work garners, most agree that his "anarchic cultural bother-boy" persona manages to produce provocative and well-crafted drama.

Central to the plays being discussed in this project is the notion of national identity and how it is framed by national mythology. Within the concept of Irish national identity is a necessary assertion of a certain representation of masculinity. As discussed in chapter 1, there were several forces at work during the years leading up to Irish independence which offered definitions for Irish masculinity that were typically informed by the Victorian ideal of manhood. In her study of cultural and religious identities as they specifically relate to Ireland, Birgit Breninger defines national identity as "not only one of the major elements that constitute a sense of identity [but] also a 'unifying force' that offers a form of social organisation and political order as well as a sense of historical continuity and cultural uniqueness" (53). Breninger goes on

¹⁴ It was at this awards ceremony that McDonagh, in the company of his brother, insulted Sean Connery. He also told O'Toole that he "apparently kissed Jessica Lange" at this event as well, but he has no memory of it.

¹⁵ "The Banshees at Inisheer," the third play in McDonagh's Aran Islands trilogy has never been staged because McDonagh doesn't believe it is any good.

to argue that “national identity represents such a decisive part within identity formation because a strong sense of belonging...offers individuals a feeling of self-confidence and pride, of which many have been deprived by colonial powers” (53). This conceptualization of “national identity” is widely held and was what motivated Yeats to “spiritualize the patriotism and drama of [Ireland]” with “fire and energy, united with subtle thought and a respect for traditional myth, legend, and folklore” (Welch 7). Yeats saw the invocation of pre-British and pre-Christian Celtic mythologies as the direct route to establishing an identity separate from the colonizer. David Lloyd argues that “a certain questioning of identity [is] an indispensable element of the decolonizing project” (4). “The rationale for this position,” he explains, “lies in the implicit violence of identity formation...in the sense that...the formation of identity requires the negation of other possible forms of existing” (4). The establishment of a mythology that worked to create and establish an Irish national identity was an attempt to “negate” their existence as “the perfect foil to set off [English] virtues” (Kiberd *Inventing* 9) and provide motivation to be “proud” to be Irish for the first time in several centuries. It was Synge and O’Casey who depicted “the implicit violence of identity formation” as damaging to the representation of Irishness. Indeed, their works collectively depict an Irish version of masculinity that is both violent and inept with regard to protecting and defending the Irish woman who was viewed by many nationalists as the incarnation of Mother Ireland. Judith Butler defines gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (“Performative” 519 emphasis author’s). One could argue that all aspects of identity are instituted through repetitious actions, including a national identity that is informed by a rejection of the colonizer’s representation even as it strives to meet the standard of the masculine ideal established by said colonizer. Through their repeated failures to rise to the occasion of this ideal masculine, the men

in Synge and O'Casey perform an identity that it is decidedly un-manly, completely undermining the mythical national identity being politically constructed at the time.

Martin McDonagh, however, wrote his Irish plays within the context of an Ireland that was finally emerging from its self-imposed theocratic shell. While stage Irishness had long been a commodity especially on stages located outside of Ireland, there was a loosening of historical tensions during the final decade of the twentieth century as Ireland saw unprecedented economic growth and political stability even as the power of the Catholic Church waned significantly as a result of the child sex abuse scandals. Sebastian Barry describes this shift in self-perception, telling an interviewer, “the way we think about ourselves in Ireland means there is no longer a necessity for those secrets...It’s as if the signal has been given that we can drop the purely nationalistic, DeValera history” (qtd. in Wroe). We see this echoed by Sonya Perkins, editor of the *World of Hibernia*, in this message to her subscribers:

For the first time in many a long year, Ireland is booming and blooming--the Celtic Tiger is roaring... our culture is being rejuvenated by fresh ideas, and enduring peace at last seems within our grasp...Our pride in our Irish heritage is no longer pride in defiance, pride that finds its justification in past glories. We should remember what has gone before, certainly, but we should also revel in who we are today and dream of what we can achieve tomorrow...We celebrate Boston and Belfast--two cities with very different histories, but both occupying a special place in Irish hearts. Think of great Irish playwrights and the names of Beckett or O'Casey may spring to your lips, but theaters across the U.S. are selling out weeks in advance when plays by McDonagh or McPherson come to town. Look out for them in a theater near you (para 1-2).

The rhetoric of this editor’s letter is interesting to note as she resituates the locus of Irish pride from the glorious past to promising future. In his discussion of globalization and the Irish Theatre, Patrick Lonergan suggests that the historic “otherness” of Irish drama “has now been reconfigured to correspond with an internationalized branding of Irishness as a consumable commodity” (“Laughter” 647). This tendency is confirmed in Perkins’ enthusiastic endorsement of contemporary Irish playwrights including McDonagh as she specifically highlights their

tremendous popularity with American audiences. McDonagh takes advantage of this branding, creating drama that is unmistakably Irish in language and in geographical location.

Loneragan defines several contexts through which Irish drama is perceived by non-Irish audiences. One of these contexts occurs when the action of the play is perceived as “representing ‘authenticity’ or primitivism, so that...the work on stage is received as ‘nature’ to the audience’s ‘culture’ (“Laughter” 648). He goes on to describe Irish violence as “represented as being primal or tribal” and the action of Irish plays as set “not in a society but in a landscape” (“Laughter” 648). McDonagh deliberately invokes the landscape as well as the national space of Ireland in the three plays discussed in this chapter investing his Irish characters with a range of responses to that space that can certainly be termed “primal” in terms of violence. Lonergan also argues that “the reception of Irishness on the globalised stage is arbitrary: it is in no way dependent for its currency on any form of Irishness that actually exists” (“Laughter” 648).

John Waters accounts for this arbitrary representation by referring to McDonagh’s London roots: “The Irish community in Britain...existed not by reference to the society in which it existed, still less to the reality of the society it referred to across the Irish Sea, but to the Ireland existing at the frozen moment of parting” (35). Waters suggests that McDonagh “has inherited a profound sadness from the forced dislocation of the generation just before him...as though the pain in his ancestry has been passed to him in the guise of something else – in the rhythms of language, the absurdity of humour and the phantom attachment to something that no longer exists” (36). McDonagh’s comments to O’Toole seem to reject this notion. When the journalist asked him if he was influenced by some connection with the Irish storytelling tradition, McDonagh replied: “Thinking about being Irish only came into my life when I decided to write Irish plays” (“Martin” 66). He goes on to say he feels “kind of phony” when he expresses his

desire that his plays “will someday be recognized as Irish stories” (66). It is certainly in McDonagh’s self-interest to accept the commodification of Irishness even as he self-identifies as “against all nationalisms” (O’Toole “Mind” par. 10). To suggest that he is profoundly sad because of some forced dislocation romanticizes both the playwright as an artist and as an individual. He firmly resists such romanticization when he admits to O’Toole that if he were “Italian or Luxemburgian they would be the same stories” (“Martin” 66). What McDonagh produces in these plays is not an attempt to imbue Irishness with some primitive focal point for “other” audiences to feel comfortably distanced from; instead, he mimics what he claims the punk-rock culture he so admires does: he destabilizes and destroys the myths associated with the literary revival. Most notably, he subverts any claim to heroism by Irish men through his disruption of the representation of Ireland as mother or maiden.

In the two plays being considered in this chapter, McDonagh destabilizes the national mythology of Irishness by depicting a domestic space that is disturbing and dysfunctional even as it is poignantly and heartbreakingly funny. In his essay, “The Identity Politics of Martin McDonagh,” José Laners suggests that in his Irish plays, McDonagh satirizes nationalism “through the fragmentation of the nuclear family and the destabilization of the ‘fixed’ categories of gender and sexual identity” (17). These fixed categories are reminiscent of the ideal masculine described by Joseph Valente as “the possession and regulated deployment of robust ‘animal spirits,’ the source of conventionally ‘masculine’ fortitude, tenacity, assertiveness, and stamina...[while] turning those traits inward and thus converting these cruder ‘animal’ virtues into the higher-order spiritual attainments of integrity, self-possession, and- self-control” (2). Both Synge and O’Casey suggest in their plays that the absence of the ideal masculine results in women who are unable to fulfill their roles as re-presenters of nation. The women in Synge’s

plays are left lamenting the lack of the ideally masculine Irish man or the skepticism that he ever existed. The men in O'Casey's Dublin trilogy are either too cowardly or too drunk to fill this role, leaving their female counterparts to either die for Ireland in their place, go on to raise Irish babies without them, or go mad because of them. Therefore, in the context of these two dramatists associated with the Irish Literary Revival, masculinity is expected to reside in the biologically male actors. Its lack is felt by the females who nonetheless continue to perform femininity in various guises.

McDonagh's representation of Irish masculinity (or the lack thereof) is entirely different. In these three plays which are all titularly associated with an actual geographical location in Ireland, the concept of the ideal masculine and its association with ideal men has gone completely awry. It is as if McDonagh is suggesting that the various attempts to realize the masculine ideal imposed by an outside actor (England) has resulted in a nuclear fall-out of destabilized masculinities that cross physiologically gendered lines. The result is an almost maniacal version of Irish masculinity that is hyper-dysfunctional and hyper-violent. Not only are the ideals of the nuclear family and traditional gender roles subverted, but the very foundations of Irish identity as it was imagined by those on the cusp of independence are crumbled as McDonagh's characters show strikingly irreverent attitudes toward such bastions of traditional Irishness as the Roman Catholic Church, an obsessive adherence to sexual purity and a passionate patriotism for the homeland. The outcome is a cast of male characters who are physically, mentally and emotionally impotent while the primary female characters are psychopathically violent. As in Synge and O'Casey, the male characters' lack of traditional masculine markers is demonstrated within and interpreted through the gaze of the women interacting with them, but these women do not go on to shoulder the man's burden in the

typically feminine role to take up the slack left by effeminate or absent male figures. Instead, McDonagh's women react to the masculine lack with the "stylized repetition of [violent] acts" (Butler "Performative" 519) and therefore feel empowered in an environment that has traditionally denied them power.

Maureen and Mairead each respond to the various challenges they face as specifically Irish women with acts of violence toward other characters. I say "specifically Irish" because, just as in O'Casey, their extreme dysfunction is directly related to place and national identity. As violence is traditionally associated with the masculine¹⁶ McDonagh inverts traditional Irish gender roles, placing the female in the traditional masculine role. He remains on the trajectory established by Synge whose women are resigned in their acceptance of the failures of Irish men to fulfill their role as protectors of woman as nation, but moves leaps and bounds along that path with women who replace resignation with actively punishing and destroying what they see as the force preventing them from whatever it is that they want. McDonagh deliberately and provocatively masculinizes his female protagonists in order to reveal the lack or absence of masculine characteristics in his Irish men. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Maureen and Mag can be seen as the two faces of the Shan Van Vocht figure who in this context, is failed by young Irish men and consequently self-destructs. The true Lieutenant of Inishmore in the play of the same name is Mairead, a sixteen-year old sharpshooter who thinks she is in love until the object of her desire murders her beloved cat. The over the top, farcically bloody conclusion of this play gives us the hypermasculine embedded within a feminine persona that is so disturbing, it is only the comical overtones and the relief that Wee Thomas is alive after all that make the narrative bearable.

¹⁶ See Bowker reference on page 47.

“Twas over the stile she did trip. Aye. And down the hill she did fall. Aye...”
The Shan Van Vocht as Mother/Daughter

Most critics agree that categorizing McDonagh is problematic for a variety of reasons including his refusal to adhere to traditional demands of the dramatic genre as well as his resistance to following any one of several paths laid out for him by his Irish dramatist antecedents. Heath A. Diehl contends that McDonagh “disrupt[s] the codes of readability” (99) in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. He goes on to suggest that Act I of the play shows a “strong commitment to realism” (99) while the second act “must be read within the traditions of Irish nationalist and angry young men drama in order to understand fully the play’s meanings and themes” (102). Charles Andrews agrees that the play can be read as a statement on nationalism but in terms of nationalism as a religion, suggesting that “[in] McDonagh’s plays, religion is a national commodity and national tragedy becomes something like a religion – giving definition to peoples’ lives” (142). Laura Eldred reads the play as gothic horror arguing that McDonagh has a tendency to “adopt and reinvent classic horror film plots by adding his own extra-gory, postmodern twists” (114). Marion Castleberry places *Beauty Queen* squarely within the Irish comic dramatic tradition but with the addition of “several distinctive postmodern themes and devices” (42). One of these devices is McDonagh’s employment of a bewildering array of intertextuality. The presence of many texts within *Beauty Queen* is one aspect of the play on which critics agree. The most obvious influence, of course, is Synge’s *Playboy*.

In true postmodern fashion, McDonagh denies that his Leenane trilogy was influenced by Synge, claiming that he “didn’t know [*Playboy*] at all” when he was composing his plays (qtd. in Lonergan “Never” 150). He does admit that when he read Synge’s work, “the darkness of the story amazed [him]” and that he can now “see similarities” between *Playboy* and his own work (qtd. in Lonergan “Never” 150), but he persists in denying being influenced by Synge. This

claim raises questions as to an author's unreliability when commenting on his own work, but the fact remains that the parallels between *Beauty Queen* and *Playboy* are undeniable. Some critics also point to similarities between McDonagh's work and that of Sean O'Casey. Dagmara Krzyżaniak, for example, compares O'Casey's Dublin trilogy to McDonagh's Leenane trilogy, pointing to the propensity of both playwrights to "concentrate on broken family relations that on a micro-scale reflect national problems" within the context of tragi-comedy and dark humor (196). Christopher S. Morrison cites yet another Irish playwright as one that McDonagh borrows from as he compares the obsession with food in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a similar obsession in *Beauty Queen*. Other critics point to the influence of contemporary film on McDonagh's work. Eldred notes McDonagh's self-admitted interest in film over the theatre, reporting that he is often referred to as "the Quentin Tarantino of the Emerald Isle" (114). In her analysis of McDonagh's work, she points to the parallels between *Beauty Queen* and Hitchcock's *Psycho*, arguing that this play can be "read as a rewriting of *Psycho* from a female perspective since both works present sexual repression as the motive for murder" (114). Another powerful inspiration that McDonagh does admit to is the influence of folk tales.

The title of this section references a line spoken by Maureen as an explanation for her mother's death. It has a nursery rhyme cadence that is not surprising given that McDonagh references refashioning fairy tales as his inspiration as a budding author. Specifically, he tells O'Toole, "I started getting into trying to retell the fairy tales I'd remembered as a kid, but to tell them in a more truthful way... There's something dark about them that doesn't quite come through. I tried to go down that corridor of thought" ("Martin" 65). Castleberry quotes a reviewer for the *New Yorker* who categorizes McDonagh's plays as "a sort of cautionary fairy tale for our toxic times" (42). The most obvious fairy tale connection to be made with *The*

Beauty Queen of Leenane is the story of Cinderella. While Mag does not strictly fit the evil step-mother construct, she does seem to privilege her two older daughters over Maureen while effectively limiting Maureen to the role of cook and housekeeper and preventing her from attending a party to meet and ultimately marry her “prince.” It is an interesting reading but it fails to incorporate the deliberate association of Irish identity with family dysfunction and failed romance. A “fairy tale” reading that does incorporate Irish folklore is one that associates Maureen not with the disenfranchised daughter, but with the beautiful queen construct associated with the Irish goddess tradition.

According to Maria Tymoczko, “the most distinctive Irish goddess is the Sovereignty, whose union with the rightful king was thought to result in the fertility and prosperity of the land. Her union with the sacral king was signaled by her metamorphosis from hag to beautiful young girl” (97). The Shan Van Vocht or “poor old woman” is the metaphor Yeats and Lady Gregory associated with Ireland in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. In this refashioning of the myth, the hag is transformed into a young girl, not following a sexual encounter with a king, but after she successfully lures a young Irish man away from his wedding to die so that her “beautiful green fields” will be restored to her (55). Once she seduces the young man away from his bride and convinces him to die in her service, her metamorphosis is completed and she is envisioned as “a young girl [with] the walk of a queen” (57). Yeats conflates two figures from Irish folklore in his play. One is Cathleen ni Houlihan, who, according to musicologist Donal O’Sullivan, was “the heroine of...love songs, written in the same metre and sung to the same tune, to which she gave her name” (qtd. in Bessai 116). The other is the Poor Old Woman. O’Sullivan also points to the patriotic roots of this Shan Van Vocht figure as she was featured in a ballad composed in 1797 “after some ships from the French fleet braved a storm to enter Bantry Bay in 1796” (qtd. in

Bessai 117). Interestingly, this ballad was composed to the tune of a “‘scurrilous’ eighteenth-century ballad in Irish ‘dealing with the unpleasant theme of a young man married to an old woman’” (qtd. in Bessai 117). Bessai points to many other manifestations of the hag figure in Irish folklore including the tenth century poem, “The Hag of Beare” that features an old woman who is “aged, ugly, and lamenting the loss of her many princely lovers” (118). This particular hag “seems to be symbolic of pagan Ireland, regretting the stricter regime of Christianity” (Bessai 118) and echoes the “two Medb figures of the heroic tales” (121). Bessai cites Tomás O Maille who studied manuscript materials “which indicate traditions in which as mate of the king, Medb represents the Sovereignty of Ireland [which was] always half red or bloody” (121). Bessai also cites Rudolf Thurneysen who suggests that the name, “Medb” means “drunken one” and that the ritual marriage between goddess and king “took place in the form of a solemn drinking bout” (122).

In her study of narrative evidence of Irish mythology, Máire Herbert points to the existence of the Mórrígan whose name “may be rendered as ‘Great Queen’” (142). Herbert provides several narrative examples of the role of this multifaceted and possibly multi-person goddess figure, but argues that her primary attributes seem to be as “a goddess of the land...[whose] power in the earthly and supernatural worlds in linked with possession of cattle” (143-44). In some manifestations, she is seen as Babd, “the scald-crow” who is often depicted as washing the bloody linen of those killed in battle in a stream (Herbert 148). Herbert’s thesis is that though it is “the dark side of the Mórrígan’s power that has the most enduring impact,” her original function was as “a multi-aspected deity whose very name implies a role of power and guardianship” (149).

Bessai points to allegorical tales “of a figure who is called Sovereignty of Ireland and no other name” which include a marriage ritual between a prince-hero and a “grotesque hag” (123). Once the hero of the tale embraces her, “she is transformed into a radiant beauty who announces her identity as Sovereignty of Ireland...prophesying that he will be King of Tara and that his descendants shall be over every clan” (123). Bessai argues that “the mythological authenticity of Yeats’ Cathleen rests in her power to change into a beautiful young queen” (125) as he “restored the ancient image of sovereignty in the terms of the patriotic idealism of his own time” (126). As this figure in her various forms is central to Irish folklore, it is likely that some version of her story was part of the “myths” that McDonagh mentions as he accounted for his fascination with “Irish fairy tales, or myths [he’d] heard growing up” (qtd. in O’Toole “Martin” 66). Nicholas Grene argues that in *Beauty Queen*, “the cult of Connemara and the culture of weepy Irish nostalgia are treated to a savagely sardonic iconoclasm” (301). Grene goes on to focus on the “the violently dysfunctional relationship of Mag and Maureen” arguing that it is “central to this strategy of demythologizing Ireland” (301). McDonagh ironically chooses as a vehicle for this demythologizing a reconfiguration of a myth central to Ireland’s national identity as he invokes the Shan Van Vocht in her earlier guise as that of the Poor Old Woman or hag who needs the embrace of a hero-prince to inspire her transformation into beautiful queen. He destabilizes the nationalist narrative in several ways by hearkening to a pre-Yeatsian interpretation of the myth. First he rejects the necessity of self-sacrifice. He also reanimates the sexuality of the mythical figure. Ultimately, he demythologizes the “sentimental cult surrounding the men who died for the [nationalist] cause” (O’Toole “Mind” par. 10) by depicting an Irish man who utterly fails in both his loyalty to Ireland and in his role as the catalyst for Ireland’s transformation.

In Synge's *Playboy*, there is an oblique reference to one version of the Shan Van Vocht myth when Christy's father attempts to marry his son off to an old hag. It is this that prompts Christy to attempt to murder his father by hitting him over the head.¹⁷ Synge introduces the myth only to upend it as he uses its signification as a test of an Irish man's masculinity to subvert the idea that dying for mother Ireland proves manhood. McDonagh submits the myth to yet another reconfiguration. In *Beauty Queen*, the characters of Mag and Maureen serve as the two versions of Cathleen ni Houlihan, the Poor Old Woman and the beautiful young queen. Their names even start with the same letter as the Madb and the Mórrígan "great queen" figures. Mag is obviously a stand-in for the poor old woman guise of the goddess. She is described as "*a stoutish woman in her early seventies with short, tightly permed grey hair and a mouth that gapes slightly*" (3 emphasis author's). Maureen consistently identifies her mother as old, calling her "oul and stupid" (9), "smelly oul bitch" (45), "interfering oul biddy" (64), and "feeble-minded oul feck" (71). In these contexts, the term "oul" is not a simple reference to age, but an indicator of a character where "oldness" has a much more negative connotation. The Poor Old Woman as Ireland revered by the nationalists is a noble figure whose transformation is a reward for self-sacrifice. The hag figure in the earlier myth of the "Sovereign" is also associated with the land and is one who, if treated properly, guarantees success for her consort. If one associates the character of Mag with the Shan Van Vocht, this vision of Ireland is characterized as odorous and slow witted by her younger counterpart.

Mag is also associated with another Shan Van Vocht figure, "a poor oul woman" who was murdered by "a fella" in Dublin (10). She is conflated with this figure when Maureen admits, "Sure, that sounds exactly the type of fella I would like to meet, and then bring him home to meet you, if he likes murdering oul women" (10). When Mag replies to this by saying,

¹⁷ See discussion of the Widow Casey in Chapter 2.

“Sure why would he be coming all this way out from Dublin? He’d just be going out of his way” (10), Maureen explains, “For the pleasure of me company, he’d come. Killing you, it’d just be a bonus for him” (10). In this way, McDonagh establishes the desire for a man that is integral to the Irish goddess construct. In his retelling of this myth, the younger version of the goddess is forced to coexist with the poor old woman until a worthy consort frees her. Maureen’s desire for a man who murders “oul” women reinforces this shift in the narrative as in this version, the younger goddess cannot “transform” until the Poor Old Woman is destroyed. This narrative is further developed in Scene Two when Maureen shares this fantasy with Mag:

I have a dream sometimes there of you, dressed all nice and white in your coffin there, and me all in black looking on on you, and a fella there beside me there, comforting me, the smell of aftershave off him, his arm around me waist. And the fella asks me then if I’ll be going for a drink with him at his place after (23).

When Mag tells her that her dream is “not a nice thing to be dreaming” (24), Maureen says, “I know it’s not, sure, and it isn’t a *dream*-dream at all. It’s more of a day-dream. Y’know, something happy to be thinking of” (24). On the surface, this could be the disturbing if understandable fantasy of a middle-aged unmarried woman who has the sole care of her unpleasant and aging mother. When combined with deliberate references to figures entrenched in the Irish national imagination, however, this fantasy takes on a more metaphorical significance.

Envisioning Maureen as the “beautiful young girl” half of the construct is more challenging as she is “*a plain, slim woman of forty*” (4). However, much like the daughter identifies the mother’s role, Mag refers to Maureen as a “young girl” when she explains why she objects to Maureen’s association with Pato: “Young girls should not be out gallivanting with fellas...!” (22). Even though Maureen scoffs at being termed a “young girl,” her confession that the only sexual experience she has involves kissing two men, reveals her to have the virginal characteristics of a young girl. Her virginity is confirmed by her mother again in Scene Seven

just before Maureen pours boiling oil over her mother's hand. Mag tries to account for her knowledge of Pato's impotence by suggesting that Maureen's lack of sexual experience is physically obvious: "On your face it was written, Maureen... You still do have the look of a virgin about you you always have had... You always will" (66). It is after Mag affirms her perpetual state of virginity that Maureen tortures her with the boiling oil. It may seem that she is burning her mother's hand to force her to reveal what was in Pato's letter, but the fact that her mother was "terrified" as the oil was boiling and admitted to reading the letter before Maureen burned her indicates that the torture is more punishment for her suggestion that Maureen will always be a virgin.

Another indication that McDonagh is deliberately invoking the pre-Yeatsian version of the Sovereign mythology is Maureen's eagerness to be sexually active. In the same conversation about the two men Maureen has kissed, she asks her mother, "Do you think I like being stuck up her with you? Eh? Like a dried up owl..." (23). One can imagine she was going to say "owl woman," but Mag interrupts her to call her a "Whore!" (23). Maureen whimsically responds, "'Whore'? Do I not *wish*, now? Do I not wish? Sometimes I *dream*..." (23). This explicit reference to a desire for sexual experience even the experience of a whore echoes the implication of sexual immorality in Synge that so upset the nationalists in both *The Playboy of the Western World* and "The Shadow of the Glen." The nationalists were outraged at the suggestion that the Irish woman may be a sexual being. Synge celebrates the sexuality of the Irish peasant woman in his work as he attempts to free her from the signification the nationalists insist upon. McDonagh furthers this construct, depicting Irish woman as represented by Maureen as highly sexualized. Indeed, Maureen goes further in her promiscuity by avowing something that would be abhorrent in an Irish Catholic context. She declares that she does not want a baby, saying that she and Pato

were “careful enough, ‘cos we don’t need any babies coming, do we?” (39). One might assume that this carefulness is to avoid scandal, but as Maureen claims later that she does not care “if tongues be waggin” (71) so long as she is with Pato, her reputation is clearly not the reason she avoids getting pregnant. She equates caring for a baby with caring for her mother saying, “We do have enough babies in this house to be going on with” (39). The disruption of both the older myth of the Sovereign and the Cathleen ni Houlihan construct is taking place here. The hag refuses to allow the younger version of the goddess to fulfill her role by repressing her sexuality while the young woman refuses the role of the goddess as one who is “the mother of tribes and races” (Bessai 121).

What most completes Maureen’s characterization as the younger version of the goddess, however, is Pato’s name for her. When Pato accompanies Maureen to her house after the party, he refers to her as “the beauty queen of Leenane” (30). She scoffs at this characterization, but Pato declares that it is true (30). When she asks him “why so have no more than two words passed between us the past twenty years,” he responds, “Sure, it’s took me all this time to get up the courage” (30). Thus, Maureen is established as both a “young girl” and a “beauty queen,” echoing Patrick’s final line in Yeats’ *Cathleen ni Houlihan* “I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen” (57). Her designation as the more desirable iteration of the Shan Van Vocht by the “hero-prince” is colored by his admission of cowardice indicating he is an unworthy suitor for the goddess figure. His unworthiness to bed the beauty queen is further confirmed following their supposed sexual encounter.

The transformation mythology often involves the partaking of an alcoholic drink. Bessai relates three separate versions of the myth that involve drinking, explaining that in the Niall and Lughaidh stories, “the transformation is followed by the dispensing of drink” (124). She also

cites Rudolf Thurneysen's contention that "a ritual marriage [between the goddess Medb and the king] took place in the form of a solemn drinking bout in which the union with the goddess was consummated in a ritual intoxication" (122). We see a parallel to this narrative when Maureen and Pato return to her house "*slightly drunk*" and proceed to engage in sexual foreplay. Scene Three ends with the image of Pato fondling Maureen as she encourages him to "go lower" (35). Later, the audience discovers that Pato was not able to perform sexually as he writes in his letter: "It has happened to me a couple of times before when I've had a drink taken and was nothing to do with did I want to" (49). The "hero-prince" is therefore unable to consummate the "marriage" with the "goddess" due to impotence brought on by the ritual itself. There are few markers of masculinity more important than sexual prowess. Being unable to perform sexually as well as freely admitting to cowardice emasculates Pato and effectively eliminates him as one who has the masculine power to transform the Shan Van Vocht.

The retelling of the myth exists on yet another level as McDonagh in true postmodern fashion includes a mini-narrative with the old woman/young woman trope in two key scenes. The 1884 Irish folk song, "The Spinning Wheel" is heard playing on the radio during the love scene between Maureen and Pato and again during the closing scene after Maureen realizes that Pato is going to marry someone else. This song tells the story of Eileen who is busily working the spinning wheel while her grandmother drowsily knits on a particular evening. Eileen's "true love" appears at the window and entices her to come with him to wander the grove by moonlight. She only goes with him once she is certain that her grandmother has fallen asleep ("Drift"). Apparently McDonagh grew up hearing this and other ballads sung by Delia Murphy as his mother enjoyed listening to them (O'Toole "Mind" par. 8). His inclusion of this folk song reifies the mythic associations between a poor old woman and a virginal young girl. Eileen cannot

freely roam the fields by moonlight with her true love. She must sneak away while her grandmother is sleeping. Similarly, Maureen cannot freely leave to be with Pato. She must also wait until Mag is “sleeping.” The conversation that Pato and Maureen have about the song highlights the similarity of Eileen and Maureen’s circumstances and serves to foreshadow what will happen to Mag. The song is overtly associated with Mag as Maureen says, “Me mother does love this oul song. Oul Delia Murphy” (32) when it comes on the radio. Pato and Maureen agree that “it is a creepy oul song” (32). The song takes on a larger significance through Pato as he reminisces about hearing the song as a boy: “Always scared me this song did when I was a lad. She’s like a ghouel singing. (*Pause.*) Does the grandmother die at the end now, or is she just sleeping?” (33). His reference to Delia Murphy, the Irish singer who made this ballad popular in the nineteen-fifties (“Drift) as having a “creepy oul voice” and “like a ghouel singing” (33) designates Murphy as another iteration of the Poor Old Woman construct. The remainder of their conversation regarding this song is laced with innuendo:

MAUREEN: Just sleeping I think she is.

PATO: Aye...

MAUREEN (*pause*): While the two go hand in hand through the fields.

PATO: Aye.

MAUREEN: Be moonlight.

PATO (*nods*): They don’t write songs like that any more. Thank Christ.

It is clear that while both of them deride the song’s syrupy sentimentality, they are momentarily drawn to the romantic image of a young couple going “hand in hand through the fields...be moonlight” while an unsuspecting mother figure sleeps. If Pato accepted the role of a romantic suitor come to steal Maureen away from a repressive old woman and thus aid in her transformation into a beautiful young maiden, he would have a much more positive response to the ballad. Instead he rejects the mythology associated with the old woman/young girl metaphor

for Ireland, finding the song “creepy” and thanking “Christ” that they “don’t write songs like that anymore” (33).

The song is replayed in a moment of dramatic irony in the final scene of the play. It is one month since Maureen murdered her mother. She has just returned from the funeral which was delayed because of an investigation into her mother’s death. It has been ruled an accident and she is eagerly getting ready to pack to go and finally be with Pato. Pato’s brother, Ray, has dropped by and reveals that Pato is going to marry a woman in America. Through their conversation, Maureen begins to realize that she imagined the meeting with Pato at the train station. Since Pato never received a reply to the proposal in his letter, he assumed she did not want him and made other arrangements. Ray has just left the house in anger after declaring to Maureen: “The exact fecking image of your mother you are, sitting there pegging orders and forgetting me name” (83). As Maureen “*starts rocking slightly in the chair,*” the radio announcer’s voice is heard as he introduces the next song: “This next one, now, goes out from Annette and Margo Folan to their mother Maggie...on the occasion of her seventy-first birthday” (84). This is the song dedication promised to Mag by her other daughters. As “The Spinning Wheel” plays, the stage direction is as follows: “MAUREEN *gently rocks in the chair until about the middle of the fourth verse, when she quietly gets up, picks up the dusty suitcase...moves slowly to the hall door and looks back at the empty rocking-chair a while*” (84 emphasis author’s). It is during the fourth verse that Eileen’s true love comes tapping at the window. This scene is both tragic and poignant as Maureen realizes that Ray is correct. She is much closer to being “the exact fecking image” of her mother than she is to being like Eileen. Her opportunity for transformation has passed. Her erstwhile suitor lacked the courage or conviction to answer the call of the Shan Van Vocht, leaving her untransformed and unfulfilled.

In the Sovereign myth, the desires of the poor old woman and the young maiden are the same. Indeed, they are two sides of the same figure, each with a role to play in the preservation of the land. In the context of *Beauty Queen*, this trope is subverted as the old woman refuses transformation and the young girl is in reality a middle-aged spinster. It is further complicated when the only available consort lacks the courage to properly court the goddess, instead leaving Ireland and marrying a Yank. Through the destabilization of this particular version of Irish identity, McDonagh stresses that it isn't the colonizer who is responsible for the emasculation of the Irish man; it is the "mythology" of Ireland, the impossible vision for both men and women that creates the dysfunction. It is impossible for Pato to fulfill the role that Michael accomplished in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. He has nothing to offer an Irish woman but self-imposed exile from the homeland. There is no reason to offer his life for her "four green fields" because all she has are some chickens and an "oul hill" that is "steep, muddy and rocky" (14). Even if his life was required, he lacks the courage to even speak to her, much less defend and die for her. In order to fulfill her role as sexualized land goddess, Maureen must assume the role of the hero-prince, by literally claiming the phallic symbol of the fireplace poker and attempting to bring about her own transformation by destroying the poor old woman with this symbol. The final scene implies that the poor old woman cannot be destroyed. Diehl refers to the end of the play as "an eerie collusion of Maureen and Mag, a blurring of the borders between self and Other" (106). As a refiguring of both the archaic myth of the Sovereign and the nationalist version contained in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, this blurring of the old woman and the beautiful queen as she rocks in her empty house at the top of an "oul" muddy and rocky hill of Ireland leaves the audience with a grim prospect of the nation. There is no loud lament at losing the "only Playboy of the Western

World” (Synge *Playboy* 167), but there is a similar sense of profound and insurmountable loneliness.

“There’s no boy-preferers in Irish terrorism...! They stipulate when you join.”

The Emasculating Power of a Wild Woman

The Lieutenant of Inishmore is the only one of McDonagh’s Irish plays to take place within an overtly political context. Much like O’Casey’s *Dublin Trilogy*, this drama is framed by historical references and real-time events. As discussed earlier, it was O’Casey’s representation of the revolutionaries as well as the descriptions of dead rebels in *The Plough and the Stars* that angered some theatre goers and culminated in the famous debate between O’Casey and widow of a 1916 martyr, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington.¹⁸ O’Casey criticizes the nationalist cause and the means the Republicans employed to further that cause by creating a pathos-filled scenario showing the utter disruption and destruction of the domestic space as a direct result of those means. McDonagh offers a similarly scathing critique of the Republican tactics of the late twentieth century, but does so by representing the gunmen as comically inept even as he highlights their inhumanity.

The domestic space in *The Lieutenant* is a space where sons threaten to kill fathers and sisters threaten to blind brothers. It is where romance is expressed through violence and bloodstains simply make a girl’s dress prettier. The Republican cause doesn’t destroy the domestic space in McDonagh’s critique; rather, this space is marked as what fomented the violent mentality in the first place. The gunmen in the play exhibit hyperviolent characteristics as they murder cats and each other. Christy brutally kills Padraic’s cat in order to lure the gunmen to be assassinated. Padraic shoots Mairead’s out of rage when he discovers that the cat is not his own beloved Wee Thomas. Christy and his men want Padraic dead in revenge for his torturing a

¹⁸ See page 48.

drug dealer who gave money to the IRA. Padraic kills the three of them by shooting them point blank with two guns in revenge for their wanting to kill him.

In his study of the relationship between masculinity and culture, John Beynon states, “Violence is predominantly a masculine phenomenon” and cites the statistic that “men engage in eight times as much violence as women” to support his contention that “much violence is undoubtedly associated with machismo, a culture of male honour” (81). The “macho man,” Beynon suggests, “is compelled to be dominant and controlling and refuses to tolerate any disrespect or challenge to his honour and feels obligated to respond with threatened or actual violence” (81). The gunmen in *The Lieutenant* exhibit the hyperviolent thus hypermasculine behavior that marks them as “macho men”. As they turn on each other, however, an unexpected figure steps into their role. In an interesting application of the metrocolonial double bind, McDonagh subverts the domestic space and emasculates his otherwise hypermasculine Irish male characters by transforming this space into the site of violence for the sake of violence. He furthers this subversion and emasculation through the figure of Mairead, a sixteen-year old girl who successfully kills the killer, earning for herself the title of Lieutenant.

On March 20th, 1993, the Provisional IRA set two bombs to go off in a busy shopping district in Warrington, UK. Two children were killed and over fifty people were injured. This is the event that McDonagh claims was the catalyst for *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. McDonagh admits he wrote this play specifically to provoke a response from the IRA: “I was trying to write a play that would get me killed...I had no real fear that I would be because the paramilitaries never bothered with playwrights anyway, but if they were going to start, I wanted to write something that would put me at the top of the list” (qtd. in O’Toole “Mind” 31). While his play did not provoke the desired death threats, some critics do take issue with McDonagh’s one sided

depiction of the Troubles. For example, in his critique of the play as farce, Eamonn Jordan points out that McDonagh “confronts ‘crisp’ distinctions by querying Republican paramilitary terrorism...., but does not account for either Loyalist or state terrorism” (372). Other critics seem to take delight in McDonagh’s treatment of Irish republicans. In his 2008 review of the play in the *Washington Post*, Peter Marks claims the play “milks Irish terrorism for laughs” and refers to the characters as “nut jobs [who] could be unbearable if not handled with care, with a clear idea of the Irish stereotypes that the dramatist is making fun of” (pars. 2, 9). Alan Franks, reviewer for the *Times*, writes: “It’s a brave man who can take the mick out of the Irish Troubles – but Martin McDonagh has never been one to shrink from a challenge” (par. 1). Franks goes on to highlight McDonagh’s hybrid nature as London-born Irish and has high praise for McDonagh’s satiric portrayal of the republican cause, closing his article by saying the drama reminds him “why the old maxim about laughter being the weapon most feared by tyrants is such a good one” (par. 19). Clearly, the “tyrants” in this context are the paramilitary organizations responsible for the Irish side of violence during the Troubles. Others are disturbed by McDonagh’s inclusion of real victims of terrorist violence.

For example, Airey Neave, an army officer who was assassinated by an INLA car bomb in 1979, is referenced as one of the gunmen compares “battering cats” to “blow[ing] up a fella just because he has a funny name” (29). Patrick Lonergan sees this as problematic, wondering, “Is [McDonagh] laughing at the expense of people who were killed by the IRA, thereby intensifying the pain of their loved ones?” (qtd. in Jordan 378). In anticipation of the play’s Ireland debut in September 2006, a columnist for the *Irish Times* expressed a similar concern regarding McDonagh’s use of the names of actual victims of the IRA: “Is Martin McDonagh reminding us that, despite his play’s outrageous plot, innocent people were killed during the Troubles? Or is he

instead exploiting those people's deaths for a cheap laugh?" ("Are"). Thus, McDonagh's representation of the revolutionaries and their victims within a late twentieth century context is as problematic and controversial as O'Casey's representation of the men who participated in the Easter Rising.

McDonagh does offer an explanation as to why he chose to focus only on the barbarity on the Irish side of the conflict: "It's worthwhile to attack your own side first, and hope other writers will do the same" (qtd. in Jordan 372). The playwright admits that he wrote the play in an attempt to "catch some of the rage that [he] felt at the time" (qtd. in Franks par. 7). He goes on to say, "I didn't feel like pointing out the good and bad sides of each person, each argument, I just felt like exploding in rage. Nothing was sacred...Maybe I was trying to take apart the plain stupidity that goes on around Irish terrorism of all shades" (qtd. in Franks par. 7). Thus, the playwright characterizes this work as an emotional outpouring of anger towards the "plain stupidity" of "Irish terrorism." His representation of Irish republicanism is certainly one of brutal and senseless violence coupled with a comical stupidity. However, I would argue that he is not simply venting his rage at IRA gunmen. Rather, he casts Irish masculinity in general as emasculated by virtue of its geographical location even as his male characters desperately attempt to assert masculinity through cruel and senseless acts of violence.

In his discussion of masculinities and war, David Morgan suggests that "despite far-reaching political, social, and technological changes, the warrior still seems to be a key symbol of masculinity" (165). He goes on to describe the "informal cultures" of military training that "revolve around the construction of heterosexuality" (167). He argues that "emphases on aggressive heterosexism and homophobia seem to lend support to the argument that masculine group solidarities organized around violence...serve as a defense against homosexuality" (167).

Wallace McDowell argues that “in addition to the central division of man/woman, hegemonic masculinity also highlights the importance of relationships between groups of men, which also follow a dominant/subordinate model” (96). This relationship is exposed “in the cultural domination...of heterosexual masculinity over homosexuality” (96). One could argue that homophobia among those seeking to attain or hold on to a position of masculine power is a way of exhibiting hypermasculinity and differentiating oneself from a subordinate (homosexual) masculinity.

In *Lieutenant*, McDonagh doesn't use his rage to simply expose members of Irish paramilitary organizations as stupidly violent; he exposes all of his male characters as less than masculine. Specifically, their monstrous behavior is either motivated by emotions associated with the feminine (sentimentality) or a fear of being exposed as having feminine characteristics (cowardice). Davey and Donny play the role of the typical stage Irishman, ineptly humorous and basically harmless. Their role as the comic relief relies heavily on their association with the feminine. All three of the INLA members bent on assassinating Padraic experience various crises in masculinity that are prompted by and associated with their militant endeavors. Padraic, cast from the beginning as the alpha male, is marked as homosexual by the only female character in the play. Mairead ultimately exposes any pretensions to masculinity on the part of the men as a façade as she assumes the alpha male position herself after killing the gunmen and intimidating Donny and Davey into unquestionably following her orders.

The characters of Donny and Davey serve as comic relief with their matter of fact commentary on the brutal murders they witness in the final scenes of the play. For example, as they are about to be murdered by their son and sister respectively, one of the wounded gunman distracts Padraic and Mairead, saving Donny and Davey who are ultimately the only men to

survive the carnage. As they hear the gunman “*screaming hideously*” and see “*blood spattering*” as he is tortured by Padraic, Donny calmly observes, “It’s an ill wind that doesn’t blow some fecker good!” (54). Davey agrees, “Isn’t it though?” as the scene fades to black. They, of course, are the “feckers” who benefit from their fellow man being tortured to death. These two characters open the play with their conversation regarding another act of violence, the murder of Padraic’s cat. Davey’s feminine nature is immediately established by Donny as he accuses Davey of running over Wee Thomas with his bicycle, exclaiming, “you’re a cowshite eejit with nothing better to do than roar down roads on your mam’s bicycle for no reason other than to feel the wind in that girl’s mop o’ hair of yours!” (4). Davey’s bicycle and long hair become a running joke in the play, used to metonymically identify him as more female than male. The bike whose tires Davey is described as “*lovingly pumping up*” (17 emphasis author’s) is “*pink, with small wheels and a basket*” (5 emphasis author’s) and overtly identifies Davey as not only a girl, but a *little* girl. An affection for cats is also used to mark men as effeminate in the play. Davey self-identifies as a cat lover, telling his sister, “I have as much concern for the cats of this world as you do, only I don’t go around saying it, because if I went around saying it they’d call me an outright gayboy, and they do enough of that with me hairstyle” (18). Thus, while he attempts to avoid being termed “gayboy,” he also recognizes and fully participates in his own feminization by maintaining his girlish hairstyle and riding around the island on his mother’s very feminine bicycle.

Davey also verifies his awareness of his propensity toward more feminized behavior when he refuses to steal another black cat to pass off as Wee Thomas, telling Donny, “I am no man to be pinching cats off of children” (23). His unwillingness to upset these children (another marker of maternalism) is revealed to actually be a fear of their mothers as he admits “and their

mams were there anyways” (23). It is Donny who exposes this fear as not-manly, saying, “if you were any man at you’d’ve walked up to them mams and said ‘I’m taking yere kid’s cat’, and if they’d put up a show you could’ve given them a belt, and then trampled on the bitches!” (23). Donny goes on to boast that he “trampled on his mam” many times just because she got on his nerves (24). Thus, Donny both heckles Davey for not being man enough and establishes his definition for performing masculinity as performing acts of violence against women, specifically those who naturally inhabit the domestic space. As violence in general is associated with the performance of masculinity, one might assume that Donny’s suggestion marks him as more masculine than the girlish and sensitive Davey. Domestic violence, however, is traditionally viewed as problematic within the context of the ideal masculine.

Sikata Banerjee points out that “the treatment of Irish women became a symbol of ‘proper’ masculinity for both republicans and British soldiers...violence against women being a violation of the code of chivalry and hence a proof of ‘unmanly’ behavior” (86). The IRA did, however, view public humiliation of “women who were seen as consorting with the enemy” as performing their manly duty since in this case, the “[Ireland as Mother] vision of nation” was threatened by “female sexuality” (87). If Donny were proud of humiliating his own or someone else’s “mam” because they were friendly to the enemy, his actions could be viewed as appropriately masculine within the context of the republican code of honor. However, his deliberate abuse of Irish mothers marks him as decidedly un-masculine and un-patriotic. McDonagh uses Davey’s voice to highlight the problematic nature of Donny’s behavior within a nationalist context as the younger man says, “Your mam’d have to have done something awful wrong for you to go trampling on her. I love my mam. Love her more than anything. Love her more than anything” (26). Within the republican code, love of mother typically equals love of

country, but McDonagh problematizes this code by having a character that has already been designated as unsuitable to represent the nationalist cause because of his self-feminization also be the only man who expresses a love for his mother. Jordan argues that, “as a character [Davey] is clearly feminized for comedic purposes as he uses his mother’s pink bicycle to get around the island and his long hair is regarded as girlish” (374). His and Donny’s purpose in the play is to provide much needed comic relief from the disturbing and psychotic butchery taking place around them; therefore, Davey’s emphatically professed love for his mother is reduced to just that, a laugh line that further distances him from the manly ideal. He may be following the republican code, but it is incidental and has more to do with Oedipus than with nationalistic fervor.

The identification of Donny and Davey as comedically unmanly is ultimately verified with their exclusive association with the domestic space in the play. The play begins and ends with the two of them alone in the cottage kitchen. Much like Boyle and Joxer are given the last word in O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*, McDonagh gives the last words of this play to characters that effectively fulfill the role of the stock stage comical Irishmen. The play ends with a laugh as it is revealed that Wee Thomas whose supposed death has led to all the carnage is actually alive. The dialogue that ensues includes some of the funniest lines of the play as the two men assess the damage that was done on behalf of the cat. They decide he “deserves shooting” (68), but true to their unmanly characters are unable to pull their triggers. They not only refuse to participate in idealizing the nationalist cause or fighting for that cause, but also effeminize themselves with a “*sigh of relief*” (69 emphasis author’s) as they jointly decide to stop the violence by allowing Wee Thomas, the “cat [that] deserves shooting” to live (68). Their care for the cat, as “*they stroke and pet [him]*” immediately after putting their guns down marks them as

rejecting the masculine role of warrior for the domesticated role of the maternal. Donny's reference to the cat as "baby" and his reassurances to him that he is "home now" reinforces this role. Davey participates in the domestication of this scene by echoing "Home sweet home" as he also pets the cat. The gunmen are dead, the "wild woman" who assumes the role of the Lieutenant of Inishmore has decided to stay there and launch an investigation of the death of her cat prompting Davey to wonder, "Will it never fecking end?" and Donny to affirm, "It fecking won't, d'you know?" (67). These two effeminate men know the truth. The violence will never end, but in the domestic space they inhabit, at least while the "Lieutenant" is away, they can choose to abstain from it themselves by letting Wee Thomas live.

The most disturbing relationship in the play is the one between Padraic and Mairead. Padraic is Donny's son, a former member of the IRA and the IRA splinter group, the INLA. He tells his father that he is thinking of forming a splinter group of his own, explaining, "A splinter group is the best kind of group to splinter from...It shows you know your own mind" (14). In Padraic's mind, the biggest danger to the future of Ireland are drug dealers who "push [their] filthy drugs on the schoolchildren of Ireland...keeping our youngsters in a drugged-up and idle haze, when it's out on the streets pegging bottles at coppers they should be" (12). Padraic explains this military strategy for freeing the north while torturing one of these drug dealers. This scene is both horrific as the dealer is hanging upside down from the ceiling of a warehouse, "*barechested, bloody and bruised*" as Padraic "*idles near him, wielding a cut throat razor, his hands bloody*" (10 emphasis author's), and comedic as the ensuing conversation has the drug dealer suggesting Padraic take up smoking marijuana and offering advice on how to cure a worm-infested cat as Padraic justifies removing only two toenails from the same foot and advises his victim on how to avoid infection. Padraic's tendency to hold men over whom he has power to

a higher standard of masculinity than he holds himself is evidenced as he accuses James of “bawling like some fool of a girl” as James cries while he is being tortured, but justifies his own tears when he hears that his beloved Wee Thomas is “doing poorly” (10,15). Later, even as Padraic is lamenting the death of his own cat, he brutally murders another cat which turns out to belong to Mairead. A. J. Knox points to this and other evidence of Padraic’s hypocrisy, arguing that “there is a jarring lack of honor in Padraic’s own code of honor, having been replaced with vitriol and malice, and this disconnect is a source of a great deal of the play’s dark humor” (371). Padraic’s lack of honor does provide comedic relief, but his hypocrisy is not limited to the double-standard he applies with regards to crying and cat killing; he also exhibits a decided homophobia even as he demonstrates homosexual proclivities. Indeed, if it is McDonagh’s intention to brutally satirize the republicans, he could not have chosen a more effective tool than a hyperviolent renegade who exhibits homosexual tendencies even as he asserts himself with hypermasculine behavior.

Michael S. Kimmel defines homophobia as “the effort to suppress that [homoerotic] desire, to purify all relationships with other men [and] with women...and to ensure that no one could ever mistake one for a homosexual” (130). “What we call masculinity,” he argues, “is often a hedge against being revealed as a fraud, an exaggerated set of activities that keep others from seeing through us, and a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves” (131). As McDonagh’s primary representative of republicanism, Padraic employs a series of strategies to avoid being outed, to “keep others from seeing through” him, but his love for his cat, his attraction to a tomboy who “[has] some balls” (35) and his fervent denial of being a “boy preferer” (33) make his overt claims to hypermasculinity seem more like compensating than manly behavior. One might think that his brief love affair with Mairead would confirm a decided

heterosexuality, but as her character is far from feminine, this affair only serves to further call Padraic's sexuality into question.

Similar to Davey, Padraic is marked as feminine from a young age. We learn from Donny that Padraic acquired Wee Thomas when he was just five years old and that the cat has been "his only friend for fifteen years" (6). There is much debate even in today's popular culture about the manliness of owning a cat¹⁹; however, in McDonagh's world cat ownership is irrevocably determined to be feminine by Davey who in spite of sporting girl's hairstyle and riding a pink bicycle, refrains from sharing his affection for cats to avoid being labelled "gayboy" (18). It seems that even the village homosexual is aware enough to know that real men don't own cats. Padraic's devotion to his cat, Wee Thomas, is so intense that he is willing to murder his father in revenge for the cat's death. His reaction to the news that his cat is doing poorly is an odd mixture of violent and tender rhetoric as he demands to know from his father, "What have you done to Wee Thomas now, you fecking bastard?" and then follows by telling Donny to "put a blanket on him and be stroking and stroking him...and don't be talking loud near him" (14). He exhibits maternal characteristics but employs violent language as a strategy to mask his self-feminization. Davey reveals yet another feministic side of Padraic when he recalls that Padraic "outright cripple[d] the poor fella laughed at that girly scarf he used to wear, and that was when he was twelve" (7). Again, Padraic attempts to establish his masculinity by responding to challenges to it with hyperviolent behavior. The mention of "the girly scarf he *used to wear*" (emphasis added) indicates that he learned to mask this side more effectively by refraining from wearing "girly"

¹⁹ A cursory google search on the subject provides links to several websites arguing both sides of the issue with many arguing that in spite of popular perception, "macho" men do love cats. There is even a Facebook page titled "Real Men Love Cats" and a page listing male celebrities who own cats. The necessity of "proving" this reveals that the masculinity of men who enjoy cat ownership is typically called into question.

clothing. It is Mairead, however, who completely unmask Padraic and reveals his anxiety about his own masculinity.

In her study of gender, violence and empire in India and Ireland, Sikata Banerjee defines “muscular nationalism” as “the intersection of a specific vision of masculinity with the political doctrine of nationalism” (2). She goes on to explain that this particular vision of masculinity “is juxtaposed with a chaste female body that both symbolizes national honor and provides a moral code for the lives of women in the nation” (2). She thus foregrounds her argument in the binary of “martial man versus chaste woman” and suggests that “several forms of female activism, especially those associated with facilitating political violence, challenge this cultural dualism to create social dis-ease” (2). The Cumann na mBan, formed in April, 1914, was the women’s auxiliary to the Irish Volunteers (Coogan 32). These women were termed “wild and unmanageable revolutionaries” by Eamon de Valera (qtd. in Banerjee 164) and created “dis-ease with the explicit physicality of the female body, whether mediated through a fear of female desire or through material responsibilities, both of which were seen as having the potential to dilute a woman’s commitment to the movement” (Banerjee 164). Banerjee points to “the power of masculinities that use the process of effeminization to subordinate bodies” pointing to strategies used by the British to “justify political presence” (166). This, she argues, is similar to the strategy employed by the IRA who insisted that Irish women maintain their modesty and virtue. The relationship between Padraic and Mairead exhibits the conflict that arises when the martial man/chaste woman binary is disrupted by the refusal of the woman to remain in her proper space by interrogating the man’s masculinity and ultimately assuming his martial role.

Padraic and Mairead first meet in Scene Six. The scene is set on a moonlit roadside. Mairead who was earlier described as “*a girl of sixteen or so, slim, pretty, with close-cropped*

hair, army trousers, white T-shirt, sunglasses...carry[ing] an air rifle" (17 emphasis author's), is described here as wearing "*lipstick and a little make-up for once*" (32 emphasis author's). She is obviously lying in wait for Padraic, who initially doesn't recognize her, but then admits, "I remember you chasing me begging to bring you when I left to free the North, and that when you were ten" (32). She corrects him saying, "Eleven. I'm sixteen now. If you get me meaning. Haven't I grown up since?" (32) in a clear attempt to call attention to her sexuality. He responds, "You have. Upwards if not outwards. From a distance, I thought 'What's a boy doing sitting there with lipstick on?'" (33). His dismissal of her attempt to look attractive for him understandably angers her and she sarcastically comments, "The girls must be falling over themselves to get to you in Ulster so, if them's the kind of compliments you be paying them" (33). This begins a back and forth exchange regarding Padraic's desire for girls. As he admits that he "paid no mind" to the girls in Ulster and that he doesn't prefer Inishmore girls either, Mairead introduces the possibility that the gunman is gay, asking him, "You don't prefer boys?" which receives an emphatic reply, "I do not prefer boys! There's no boy-preferers involved in Irish terrorism, I'll tell you that! They stipulate when you join" (33).

As he continues to resist her advances, she retaliates by inferring that she has a message about his cat, but she refuses to give it to him. Padraic's response is to pull out both of his guns and point them at her head, demanding, "Tell me the fecking message now, ya bitcheen!" This is where McDonagh begins to subvert the binary on which muscular nationalism is based. Rather than behaving in a manner expected from a proper Irish woman, Mairead is "*poised, disgusted AND superior [as she] picks up her air rifle, cocks it, and, while Padraic still has his guns to her head, points the rifle towards one of his eyes so that the barrel is almost resting on it*" (35 emphasis author's). After a pause, Padraic lowers his gun and exclaims, "You have some balls,

anyways” (35). With this statement and by his earlier perception of her as a boy with lipstick, Padraic identifies Mairead as more male than female. At the end of this scene, Mairead, angered that Padraic won’t accept her into his organization, lies to him, telling him that Wee Thomas, the cat that has been dead from the beginning of the play, is on the mend. His response is to grab her in his arms and kiss her. Stage direction calls for the kiss to be one of thanks at first, which then “*lengthens into something much more sensual*” (36 emphasis author’s). After the kiss, they both seem disturbed as Padraic “smiles uncomfortably” and hurries offstage. On the surface, this kiss would seem to reaffirm Padraic’s heterosexuality as his casual kissing of a girl turns into a sensual encounter, but since he has already identified her as figuratively having testicles and looking like a boy, this length of the kiss and the awkwardness following it could indicate the presence of same sex desire. Therefore, McDonagh subverts both the chaste female and the martial male construct required for muscular nationalism to be maintained.

In her discussion of the correlation between woman and nation in Irish culture, C. L. Innes explains that “Irish portrayals of their country fall into two categories: those that depict Ireland as maiden, and those that depict her as mother” (15-16). In the years leading up to the Irish Revolution, the personification of Ireland as female by Irish nationalists was a deliberate attempt to re-appropriate this imagery from the English in order to reify their own masculinity as protectors of nation. In Scene Nine, we see Padraic attempt to reassign Mairead to the female side of the muscular nationalism binary, putting her in the proper place as representer of the nation. In the previous scene, Mairead saves his life by shooting out the eyes of the three men who were intent on assassinating him and then helping him kill them in a surrealistic scenario where the two “*seem to almost glide across the room, their eyes locked on each other [as] Padraic caresses her hair and cheek, impressed beyond words at her abilities with a gun*” (52

emphasis author's). Once again, his attraction to her is not inspired by her female sexuality, but by her sharpshooting skills, a traditionally masculine trait. Donny and Davey affirm Mairead's masculinity and imply that Padraic is found lacking in that area as they discuss their respective shooting styles:

Donny: I'll say this about Mairead. She's fecking accurate. Knock your eye out from a mile...Padraic has an entirely different style.

Davey: Padraic goes all the way up to ya.

Donny: Padraic goes all the way up to ya, and then uses two guns from only an inch away.

Davey: Sure, there's no skill in that.

Donny: I think the two guns is overdoing it. From that range, like.

Davey: It's just showing off, really.

Donny: Mairead sees more of the sport (56).

Thus, Padraic's shooting is perceived as ineffectual posturing in an attempt to show off "masculinity" and Mairead is established as the more authentically masculine with her skill and sportsmanship.

When Mairead reappears, having gone home to pack, she is wearing a dress and carrying a rucksack and her air rifle. By changing into more feminine dress yet still carrying her rifle, she continues to complicate her role as chaste feminine symbol of nation. She returns to a scene of horrific carnage as Donny and Davey have been spared to cut up the bodies of the three gunmen she and Padraic killed. She sits next to Padraic who is perched on the chest of one of the gunmen, holding the headless corpse of what he believes is Wee Thomas. His reaction to seeing her in a dress is to exclaim, "What in the hell's that you're wearing?", explaining that seeing her dressed like that "is a shock." (58). It seems that he perceives her willingness to don a dress as a tacit agreement to stay in her assigned space as a female. Her response to his suggestion that she grow out her hair like a character in a British TV series quickly disabuses him of that notion as she retorts, "Well me hair's staying the way it is and feck Evie" (59).

With their reversed gender roles firmly established, Padraic asks for Mairead's permission to name their splinter group, "Wee Thomas's Army" and suggests they start a list of "valid targets" – a phrase used by real members of Irish terrorist organizations to designate so-called legitimate victims of their violence. When Mairead insists that "people who brain cats for no reason" be at the top of their list, Padraic admits that he "did brain a cat this morning, but I did have a reason" (60). Unbeknownst to Mairead, this cat that Padraic "brained" was her own cat, her beloved Sir Roger. His reason for killing the cat is that Donny and Davey attempted to fool him into thinking it was Wee Thomas by painting it with shoe polish. Mairead, not knowing that he is referring to her cat, excuses him for killing an "unhygienic [cat] covered in black muck" (60). Shortly after this exchange, Padraic indirectly proposes marriage to Mairead by threatening her brother (asserting his dominance over the village homosexual) and then referring to him as his future brother-in-law. Mairead accepts his quasi-proposal, agreeing to marry him "when Ireland is free." Padraic's militant aggression toward Davey and Mairead's patriotic response to his proposal seems to reestablish the muscular nationalism binary once again. However, this binary is permanently disrupted when Mairead discovers the mangled body of her cat in the bathroom.

When she enters into the room carrying her dead cat, Padraic says: "Look at you. We have a matching pair. One fecked cat each. Who says we have nothing in common but shooting fellas?" (64). He is back to recognizing that Mairead is at least as much a man as he is. Mairead approaches Padraic who is standing in front of the table where his guns are placed. She kisses him and begins to sing the nationalist song, ironically titled, "The Dying Rebel." Between kisses, Padraic sings the verses with her as she picks up the guns and points them, one on each side of his head. The last words Mairead speaks to Padraic are: "There was nothing unhygienic about

my fecking cat” (65). She then shoots him in the head with both guns, places the barrels of the guns in Padraic’s mouth and leaves them there, symbolically affirming his same sex desire as she assumes his role as commander of their splinter group. She also reveals her disillusionment regarding the cause of a “free Ireland” as she tells her brother, “I think I’ll be staying around here for a bit. I thought shooting fellas would be fun, but it’s not. It’s dull” (66). Some critics have speculated that Mairead’s character may be inspired by the real life member of the Cumann na mBan, Mairead Farrell, who was one of the leaders of the Armagh prison dirty protest and was eventually killed by SAS soldiers in order to prevent a bombing. Following her imprisonment, she made this statement: “In the prison, we used to slag, and say ‘Mother Ireland get off our backs.’ Because it just didn’t represent what we believed in. Maybe at one time. But not now. We’ve been through all that and we’re not going back. We’re going forward” (qtd. in Banerjee 124). McDonagh’s Mairead also announces her intention to go forward, taking up a leadership position in her community as the Lieutenant of Inishmore and indicating by her announcement that she intends to investigate Sir Roger’s death (67) that she will replace target practice with preserving law and order on her island.

In *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, McDonagh articulates his rage against what he perceives as the senseless violence of the Irish terrorist organizations by representing the terrorists as emasculate homophobics, posturing masculinity through hyperviolent acts even as they mask their own impotence. By investing a sixteen year old girl with more “balls” than her gunman boyfriend, then having her realize that “shooting fellas” is not fun or heroic even as she takes over the leadership role in the terrorist organization, he replaces the nationalist iconography of Mother Ireland with a Violent Woman more capable than the contained mother to establish and maintain order in the nation. Patrick Lonergan identifies the “destabilising force” in *The*

Lietenant as “entirely home-grown,” arguing that “Mad Padraic may fight in Northern Ireland but he was shaped by Inishmore, and we often see how his actions are made possible by the indifference, cowardice or passivity of the other islanders” (“Theatre” 74). Much like Synge and O’Casey, McDonagh creates his characters within a deliberately Irish framework; thus, he is not simply making a statement on the abject failure of paramilitary men in general to exhibit the masculine ideal of animal passions controlled by intellect. He is specifically indicting Irish men as homophobic due to gender identity anxiety and easily emasculated when confronted with genuine and more superior masculine skills. Exposing the absence of hegemonic manliness through the gaze and “stylized repetition of acts” of a sixteen-year old female does not simply demythologize the republican gunmen; it completely dismantles any possibility that these men were manly to begin with. McDonagh exacts his linguistic revenge on those he holds responsible for cowardly acts of terror in the name of nationalism by representing them as girly men and thus, laughingly inept.

CONCLUSION: DESTABILIZING THE MYTH

In her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Judith Butler argues that “it is primarily political interests that create the social phenomena of gender itself” (529). She makes this statement in the context of her contention that “without a radical critique of gender constitution feminist theory fails to take stock of the way in which oppression structures the ontological categories through which gender is conceived” (529). Valente agrees that the construction of gender is politically motivated, but argues that it is neither ontological nor ethical, but “a fundamentally ideological category” (2) within the context of the late Victorian British Empire, construing “manliness” as “at once an assertion of male authority and an apologia for such authority as morally legitimate and conducive to the welfare of the whole community” (2). As a colony perched on the brink of possible independence after centuries of subjugation, it was essential that Ireland be capable of sustaining its own brand of “manliness” to counteract deep seated assertions that it was too feminine to govern itself. Valente also identifies the late nineteenth century English version of the ideal female as “emotionally centered yet comparatively delicate or muted in [her] desires...the vessel...of an idealized ‘passionlessness’” (6). As previously discussed in this project, what emerged at the end of the nineteenth century were a number of concerted efforts to establish the manliness of the Irish nation, making “the social phenomena of gender” integral to a successful bid for independence. Whether this iteration of masculinity resembled the warrior-saint invested with heroic virtue, the powerful athlete whose violence on the hurling field within the constraints of the game marked him as both exhibiting and controlling his masculinity, or the chivalric man choosing to fight and die for

Mother Ireland over marrying and having children, the resulting vision of the ideal Irish masculine closely resembled that of the Victorian ideal. In addition to imposing a British-influenced version of manliness onto Irish men, the various entities seeking to establish a postcolonial Irish identity also adopted the British version of the ideal feminine. The image of Erin, the popular icon for the nation of Ireland adopted by Irish nationalists and unionists, can be identified as an emblem of the ideal Victorian woman as she “suggested all that was feminine, courageous and chaste” (Innes 17). In his discussion of England’s feminization of Ireland as a nation, C. L. Innes points out the relationship between England’s depiction of Ireland as female and Ireland’s self-depiction as “Irish nationalists and unionists even more frequently depict Ireland as a lady in distress” with the greatest difference between the representations being “their perception of the nature of the enemy and would-be rescuers” (15). Thus, even on its path to independence, Ireland adopted the gender ideals of the colonizer as its own ideals, seeking to live up to those ideals in order to prove itself capable of self-government. The “social phenomena of gender” therefore imbues the politics of de-colonization with the colonized deliberately echoing the ideals of gendered behavior held by the colonizer.

Nicholas Grene establishes the close relationship between the Irish dramatic tradition and the state of the nation acknowledging that “as long as there has been a distinct Irish drama it has been so closely bound up with national politics that the one has often been considered more or less a reflection of the other” (*Politics* 1). He goes on to attribute “a large part of the anxious obsession with self-representation in the Irish dramatic tradition” to the “colonial and postcolonial condition of the country” (267). This conceptualization of the dramatist as one tasked with representing Irishness is echoed by Declan Kiberd who credits the Irish Renaissance as “shap[ing] a notion of the artist as a person at war with the social consensus, a crusader for

some ideal which existed more often in the past or in the future” (*Inventing* 580). Thus, the Irish playwrights of the twentieth century are tasked with both representing and challenging the representations of Irishness within the context of the national politics of a space emerging from colonization. The nationalist narrative of Irishness established a demarcation of Irish identity along gender lines, adopting an ideal masculine and ideal feminine that was informed both by the late Victorian paradigm of gender identity and a similar paradigm espoused by the Catholic Church in Ireland. This gendered representation was vigorously defended by nationalists as an attempt to oppose an identification that both feminized and simianized the Irish man while representing the Irish woman as a metaphor for a land that needs to be protected by a stronger, more masculine nation.

Therefore, one lens through which to view gender representations in early twentieth century Ireland is as socially constructed, politically informed embodiments where the masculine is the contestator and the feminine is the site of contestation. The necessity of establishing a hegemonic masculinity within the colonial/postcolonial space required a narrative that irrevocably placed the Irish male on the same level of the manly ideal as the English male even as the Irish female was established as the icon for nation, both as mother and maiden. This construct persisted throughout much of the twentieth century in a nation which responded to independence by isolating itself and establishing rigorous laws and social policies that strictly regulated sexuality, marriage and reproduction. Many Irish dramatists responded to the mythologization of the Irish masculine and the Irish feminine by destabilizing it, writing characters who subvert gender expectations and therefore demythologize the ideal itself. The gendering of the land of Ireland as female was in place many centuries ago. For example, Herbert cites several landmarks in Ireland including the “paps of Anu” in Co. Kerry as she

explains that “an equation seems to be made between the body of the goddess and the contours of the earth” (143). The nationalists, influenced by both feminization of the land by England as a form of control as well as the reverence held for the Virgin Mary, continued this construct of the feminine, but transformed it to align with the expectations of the ideal feminine held by Victorian England and the Church. It is in opposition to this feminine that the ideal masculine can potentially be realized. As Judith Butler contends, “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender” (*Gender* 22).

Greene reflects on the “phenomenon of Irish drama as its own special tradition” arguing that it has “a quite marked intertextual line of descent, fulfilling its own role as interpreter of the national life both inside and outside Ireland” (*Politics* 268). This “line of descent” can be traced through John Millington Synge and Sean O’Casey to Martin McDonagh as they all work to complicate this rehabilitation of Irish gender, offering counter representations that subvert and destabilize the mythical ideal. Synge and O’Casey write along more traditionally gendered lines where the men are (nominally) in positions of power within the domestic space. Those men are then viewed, characterized, and judged as lacking ideal masculine characteristics through the eyes of the women. Synge’s version of Irish masculinity is one that is impotent either because of age (Dan in *Shadow*), cowardice (Christy and Shawn in *Playboy*) or fatalism (Bartley in *Riders*). These three plays reveal a lack of ideal manliness, but they do so by visioning this lack from the perspective of the Irish woman who becomes the hero of her own story even if it is just in her ability to survive without the protection of an Irish man. O’Casey moves the setting from rural Ireland to the urban center of Dublin and the focus from the romanticized concerns of the country cottage to the very immediate conflicts of revolution and civil war. Nonetheless, he follows the trajectory begun by Synge as his male characters irredeemably fail their female

counterparts, leading to her death (Minnie in *Shadow*) or at a minimum, her abandonment to survive on her own (Juno and Mary in *Juno* and Nora in *Plough*). McDonagh blurs the lines between gendered behavior with female characters who refuse to occupy the traditionally feminine role of passivity even as the male characters they are paired with either occupy that passive role themselves (Pato in *Beauty Queen*) or attempt to realize the manly ideal through overt acts of violence designed to mask their own gender anxiety (Paidraic in *The Lieutenant*).

What is significant here is that these plays are not simply set in Ireland, the characters themselves are associated with the physical space of Ireland, at times with the landscape itself. In Synge's work, the stark Irish landscape of the west is romanticized as it is associated with Ireland's mythic past when goddesses associated with fertility held "dominance over the landscape...and influence (over) the fortunes of those seeking control of the land" (Herbert 143). The failure of his male characters to embody the manly ideal is revealed in their failure to properly serve the women who represent this goddess figure. O'Casey's Dublin setting is likewise responsible for the weak figures who attempt to occupy the masculine space in his trilogy as he overtly links congenital characteristics and natural temperament to the hopeless state of being an Irish man. McDonagh returns to the west but instead of romanticizing it, he characterizes it as a space that one must escape in order to be fulfilled. He further identifies the geographical location with the dysfunction of the characters by including the place name in the titles of his Irish plays. Thus, not only do these playwrights deliberately construct representations of masculinity that are at odds with the hegemonic manly ideal established by the colonizer, they do so in a manner that associates the origin of this dysfunction with the state of being Irish. Grene credits Synge's *Playboy* with starting the tradition of the "Irish play about tradition and conflict...outraging its audiences by the portrayal of a violent crime-loving Mayo community at

a time when nationalists felt the urgent need to combat British misrepresentations of the Irish as irredeemably lawless” (“Ireland” 309). He goes on to explain how Irish playwrights such as Synge and O’Casey were able to set the precedent of “a staged Ireland of violent absurdity” that McDonagh continued, positing that “Ireland...provided a satisfyingly appropriate setting for unending, grotesque, and unresolvable conflict” primarily because this conflict actually existed (309). Thus, by marking the Irish men in their plays as either feminized or animalized, these three playwrights work against the nationalist mythology and confirm the colonizer’s assertions regarding the lack of Irish masculinity.

In these early years of the twenty-first century, there is much discussion of the destabilization of –isms including nationalism and feminism. One of the defining characteristics of post-modernity is such destabilization or lack of definition. As the new millennium gets underway, we see more and more speculation as to the evolving nature of masculinity; indeed, the existence of an objective gender identity is itself being called into question. As long as playwrights deliberately construct gendered behavior and lend this behavior symbolic significance as either undermining or reifying cultural institutions, however, viewing drama through the lens of gender remains a necessary activity in order to get at what the play may be revealing about our world. Synge, O’Casey and McDonagh establish that traditional gender roles exist and then subvert these roles in order to reveal what they see as problematic about one –ism that factored heavily in the violence that tore apart both Ireland and the world during the twentieth century. Their destabilization of the Irish nationalist narrative works to reveal the true cost of patriotic fervor.

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