Tropes of Ireland in the Gendered Mirror

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Abstract

The paper discusses the connections between gender, colonialism and nationalism by focussing on the "woman-nation" pairing that has characterised both the colonial and countercolonial modes of representing Ireland. One strand of the argument focuses on English allegorical representations of the colonised land as a frail but docile Hibernia, protected by the English law and order, which is a favourite trope of the 19th-century British periodic press and its iconographic texts. In opposition, the Irish native tradition (exemplified by the early 18th-century aislinge of Aogán Ó Rathaille and by the political ballads of the late 18th- and 19th-centuries) revert to either the image of "a vulnerable virgin ravished by the masculine aggressive invader from England" or that of "a mother goddess summoning her faithful sons to rise up against the infidel invader" (Kearney 1984: 21). Blending the two, Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan constitutes itself into a mythic nexus for personifications of Ireland, becoming a potent symbol of Irish nationalism. A final part of the argument considers the 'afterlives' of such feminine national icons, which "while seeming to empower women, actually displace them outside history into the realm of myth." (Fleming 1999: 48) Maud Gonne's play Dawn and Eavan Boland's poem "Mise Eire" offer examples of women's rewritings of patriarchal modes of representation which question and reformulate the "woman-nation" trope.

Key words: *identity, gender, colonialism, nationalism, representation, "woman-nation"*

Defined as "the distinctive character belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group" (Rummens 1993: 157), the term identity implies a self-conscious process of affiliation to a group, on various criteria that can range from gender, age or class to ethnicity, religion, language and territorial allegiance. The identification with and alleged acceptance into a group that has a shared system of symbols and meanings as well as norms for conduct (Collier & Thomas 1988: 101-2) can be described as cultural identity, a concept that reflects the group's development of a defining cultural system, which, according to

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Hofstede (1994) is made up of symbols (verbal and non-verbal language), rituals (collective activities essential to a given society), values (collective assumptions underlying moral or aesthetic categorizations into good or bad, beautiful or ugly, normal or abnormal) and heroes (the real or imaginary people who serve as behavioural patterns for the members of a cultural group.)

Nevertheless, as Julia Wright notes in her "Introduction" to the two-volume *Companion to Irish Literature* published in 2010, "identity questions are also discernible in a recurring concern with gender and sexuality" (6), which is characteristic for colonial (as well as post-colonial) writings. On the one hand, this can be explained through the translation of the colonial binary model of thought (predicated upon the basic opposition established between self and other) in the gendered construction of the colonial project metaphorically identified with the attempt "of the male colonizer to subdue and penetrate the female territory of the colonized people" (Flynn 2000). In response to this colonial feminization, the colonized have attempted to "produce a reverse discourse of over-determined masculinity" (Flemming 1999: 41), in which the land becomes a "mother forced into penury by foreign invaders" (Flynn 2000), requiring her sons to fight the oppressors in order to restore her former grandeur and possessions. Tough placed in the paradoxical position of being at once Western and a colony, Ireland has not escaped being culturally cast as "other" and "female" in both colonial and counter-colonial contexts (also see Mohor-Ivan 2014: 150-69).

Since at least the 17th century, a major Anglophone strand of representations for Ireland has typically figured it within the frame of ideals of the domestic feminine (Flemming 1999: 41), a tendency that intensified during the 19th century, under the influence of Matthew Arnold's seminal collection of lectures entitled *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), in which the English poet and cultural critic advanced a construction of the Celt as sensible, exalted and thus "peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy" (Cairns & Richards 1988: 48). As L.P. Curtis has demonstrated in his study of anti-Irish prejudice in Victorian England, suggestively named *Anglo-Saxons and Celts* (1968), one political entailment of stereotyping the Irish in terms of typically feminine attributes like emotion, irrationality, and lack of self-reliance was that "the self-consciously mature and virile Anglo-Saxon had no intention of

conferring his sophisticated institutions upon the child-like and feminine Irish Celt" (Curtis 1968: 62)

One locus where the multiple and overlapping strands of thoughts on Ireland and Irishness achieves full visibility is the 19th century periodical press, because, as Michael de Nie asserts in the introduction to his study on *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press. 1798-1882*:

> Throughout the nineteenth century, British reporting on Ireland was informed by the enduring stereotypes that constituted Irish identity. "Paddy", the objectified Irishman, was discursively constructed in leading articles, editorial cartoons and letters to the editor, using a number of different elements. The most important components in this manufacture were stereotypes of race, religion and class. Rooted in traditional anti-Irish prejudices, these stereotypes were all revived and reaffirmed for the press by episodes of violence or distress in nineteenth-century Ireland. British conceptions of Ireland, the Irish and themselves were thus always the product of both timeworn stereotypes and contemporary crisis and concerns. (2004: 4-5)

Though Anthony Wohl draws our attention to the fact that "it is of course both dangerous and simplistic to analyse the complexities of an enormously complex age through the lens of just one journal" [2012], the above-stated can be demonstrated by turning to the iconographic productions of the period, such as exemplified by the cartoons appearing in the *Punch.* As the most popular comic journal of the period, the *Punch* can thus stand as an index of popular English conceptions on the Irish question. In addition, in a "hierarchic and race conscious age", many of its cartoons "reflected, and so perhaps strengthened and sustained, Victorian prejudices and the propensity to stereotype and to think stereotypically" (Wohl 2012).

The cartoons published in the *Punch* are thus illustrative of "the new scientific racism which developed in Britain over the course of the nineteenth-century", which combined "popular ideas of difference and long-held stereotypes" (de Nie 2004: 6) to assign a second-order, or sub-human status to the Irish. In addition, they are a reflection of the gendered interplay between "masculine power and feminine virtue under colonial domination" (Wright 2010: 6). As figure 1 illustrates, famous cartoonists of the time would lean on the theme of Beauty (Hibernia or Ernia, representing Ireland) being saved from the clutches of the Best (Fenianism) by a figure representing law and order, sometimes appearing as the stern

Athens (Britannia), as in this case, at other times being represented by a handsome prince (St. George). The second illustration (figure 2), which appeared as "The Irish Tempest" under the signature of Sir John Tenniel, reworks the same theme against the cultural scenario provided by the Shakespearean play, where "Prospero", "Miranda" and "Caliban" are easily identifiable for the Victorian readers as an analogy for the English state (impersonated through William Gladstone, the leading British statesman and prime minister of the times) which embraces in a protective manner a frightened Ireland/Hibernia, threatened by the clutched fist of the Irish Caliban (with a deformed, animalistic face and body).

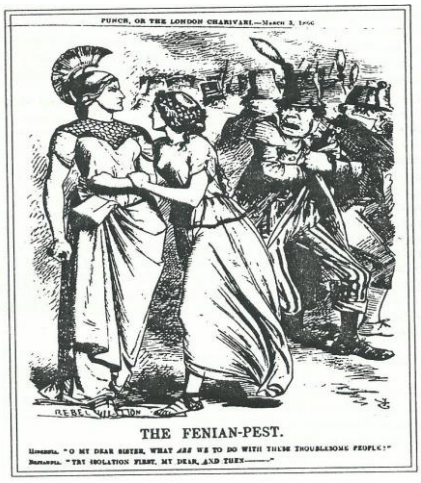

Figure 1[1]

Figure 2[2]

In the reversed side of the mirror, the counter-colonial Irish agenda responded by "emphasizing the manly and masculine traits of the Irish character" (Cairns & Richards 1988: 49), while concomitantly espousing the same tendency to gender the territory in feminine terms. As Richard Kearney explains:

> After the plantations of the 17th century, Ireland became more frequently identified with a vulnerable virgin ravished by the masculine aggressive invader from England.[…] In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the passive daughter seems to assume the more militant guise of a mother goddess summoning her faithful sons to rise up against the infidel invader so that through the sacrificial shedding of their blood, she might be

> miraculously redeemed from colonial violation and become free and pure again – that is, restored to her pristine virginity of language, land and liturgy. (Kearney 1984: 21)

Thus the eighteenth-century *aisling* (vision) poems evolved by native Irish authors exemplify the increasingly political character of this tradition which disguises hopes of political deliverance "in what seemed like harmless love songs" (Kiberd 1996: 16), which rework the conventions of the Gaelic vision tale. Frequently looking outside the country for liberation and the true sovereign, these poems foreground the image of "a willing [and] defenceless *spéirbhean* [sic] or 'sky-woman', who would only recover her happiness when a young liberator would come to her defence" (Kiberd 1996: 18).

Adopted by the majority of the former bardic poets, the genre became highly formalized, its five principal traits being summarized by Breandán Ó Buachalla as:

> 1) a localization of the poem's action, usually in a bedroom or outside near a river, forest, or other type of place with mystical associations; 2) a formalized description of the woman; 3) a request for the woman's identity, in which she is usually compared to classical and Irish beauties; 4) a response in which she rejects these comparisons and identifies herself as Éire; and 5) a message of hope for the people, predicting the return of a Stuart king or Ireland's liberation by the Spanish or French. (in Koch 2006: 33)

For example, Ireland's misfortunes are lamented in the series of elegies composed by the Irish language poet Aogán Ó Rathaille, which "mix personal grief at the starkly diminished circumstances of his life with outrage at the country's chaos" (Welch 1996: 452). At the same time, Ó Rathaille used the new allegorical political vision poem "to express his view of the contemporary state of Ireland and his pessimism regarding her future" (Koch 2006: 1007), being credited with developing the genre to its fullest expression, such as his "Gile na Gile/Brightness Most Bright" (composed c. 1709) illustrates:

> The brightness of Brightness I saw in a lonely path,
> Crystal of crystal, her blue eyes tinged with green,
> Melody of melody, her speech not more with age,

> The ruddy and white appeared in her glowing cheeks. […]
>
> A tale of knowledge she told me, all lonely as she was
> News of the return of HIM to the place which is his by kingly descent,
>
> News of the destruction of the bands who expelled him,
> And other tidings which, through sheer fear, I will not put in my lays. (trans. Patrick S. Dinneen in Murphy & MacKillop 1987: 43-5)

During the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, the Irish popular ballads favour the trope of the "The Poor Old Woman", an idealised persona of the land who suffers historic wrongs, and, Kali-like, requires the sacrifice of successive generations of sons in the hope that the recurring heroic failures to eject the invader will finally prove successful (also see Mohor-Ivan 2009). In *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Richard Kearney has suggested that the Sean Bhean Bocht has been turned into an emblem of Irish nationalism because it is closely linked to its sacrificial mythology in which the blood sacrifice of the heroes is needed to free and redeem Ireland, at the same time in which these heroic sacrificial martyrs are rewarded by being "remembered for ever" (Kearney 1988: 218). Moreover, this nationalist sacrificial mythology can be further tied to pagan concepts of "seasonal rejuvenation" and the sacrificial aspects of Christianity in the Crucifixion and tradition of martyrdom (Kearney 1988: 220).

Composed at the time of the 1798 rising and alluding to the expected help from revolutionary France, "The Shan Van Vocht" uses the poetic motif of the "poor old woman" to express confidence in the victory of the United Irishmen:

> "Oh the French are on the sea," says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,
> "The French are on the sea," says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,
> "Oh The French are in the Bay, they'll be here without delay,
> And the Orange will decay," says the Sean Bhean Bhocht. […]
>
> "Then what colour will be seen?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,
> "What colour will be seen?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,
> "What colour should be seen where our fathers' homes have been
> But our own immortal green?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

> "And will Ireland then be free?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,
> "Will Ireland then be free?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,
> "Yes old Ireland will be free from the centre to the sea,
> Then hurrah for liberty!" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht.
> (in MacManus 2005: 511)

As can be seen from the above examples, nationalism itself remains a gendered world, tributary to the patriarchal system in which it operates. Woman is turned into a national abstraction, defined and utilized by men for the ideological naturalization of their counter-colonial agenda, which, in the process, contains and neuters the female agency.

The feminine trope of Ireland will be a constant in the writings of the authors associated with the Irish Revival. A famous example is provided by William Butler Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), which makes use of what Joseph Valente (1994) has called the double-woman trope (i.e. the combination of the Spéar-bhean and the Sean Bhean Bocht into its title figure – who is both young and old, mother and bride, sexual and pure) in order to create its dynamic tension.

Set at the beginning of the United Irishmen Rebellion of 1798, the play takes place in the cottage of the Gillane family, where the eldest son, Michael, is about to be married the next day. An old woman arrives who, taken for a beggar at first, starts to bemoan that she has been set wandering by "too many strangers in the house," who took from her "four beautiful green fields" and then tells of the sacrifices young men have made for her across the ages. Mesmerized by her words, Michael decides to forsake his family and bride in order to go off to fight in the brewing insurrection, and, as the son leaves, the old woman offers no doubt as to what his fate will be:

> It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid. (Yeats 1971: 254-5)

Once the young man has been stirred into joining the army that has gathered down on the shore, the Sean Bhean Bocht is transformed into the

Spéar-bhean of the aisling tradition, reverting to the stately beauty of Cathleen ni Houlihan that she enjoyed in a pre-colonial time. The play ends with the family's youngest son arrival, who acknowledges the transformative power of martyrdom, at the same time at which "it asserts not only the superiority of spiritual passion over human love, but the falsity of naturalistic appearances (Innes 1992: 361):

> *Peter*: Did you see an old woman going down the path
>
> *Patrick*: I did not; but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen. (Yeats 1971: 256)

As such, Yeats not only conflates the two principal images of the feminine Ireland into one, but also re-writes the regenerative myth of Cailleach Beara (The Old Woman of Beara), a queen who supposedly lived seven lifetimes, each time with a new husband. If, at the end of each life, the Queen's youth and beauty were renewed by copulating with a young man of noble blood, in Yeats's version it is death and not sexuality that facilitates the renewal of the land (Cullingford 1990: 12).

According to Joseph Valente, though such nationalist texts run counter to the gendered structures imposed by the British colonialism, what they ultimately achieve is to reinforce another set of gender stereotypes, from an internal, Celtic origin (Valente 1994: 193-4). Such feminine national icons, "while seeming to empower women, actually displace them outside history into the realm of myth. This effectively re-inscribes the woman as devoid of agency" (Fleming 1999: 48). No wonder then that Cathleen has proved an extremely problematic symbol, which has subsequently been scrutinized, deflated or deconstructed to revaluate traditional encodings of womanhood, be they the product of colonial or countercolonial agendas. A telling case in this respect is Maud Gonne's response to Yeats's representation of womanhood. Having played the title-role in the opening production of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Gonne published in 1904 in *The United Irishman* her own play, entitled *Dawn*, which embodies her own vision of the woman as nation trope. In contrast to the Yeatsian text in which the mythic woman inspires the men to fight, while the mother/bride are trying to hold Michael to the domestic world, in *Dawn* it is the regular mothers/daughters who represent Ireland's unbroken spirit, and take an active role in initiating the call for violence.

Almost a century later, discussing the potency of such icons of Irish womanhood constructed in Western culture through both the Anglophone and the nationalist discourses, Eavan Boland acknowledges the painful silencing and erasure of the actual women's experience in both the colonial and countercolonial enterprise:

> The heroine, as such, was utterly passive. She was Ireland or Hibernia. She was stamped, as a rubbed-away mark, on silver or gold; a compromised regal figure on a throne. Or she was a nineteenth-century image of girlhood, on a frontispiece or in a book of engravings. She was invoked, addressed, remembered, loved, regretted. And, most importantly, died for. She was a mother or a virgin … Her identity was as an image. Or was it a fiction? (Boland 1995: 66)

Boland's "Mise Eire" (a title which literally translates as "I am Ireland", but can also sound like "misery" when read aloud) returns in time to reclaim the stories and silences of women, filling them now with her own voice, which replaces the one of the male bard, which still reverberates through "songs/that bandage up the history" (an allusion to the native tradition of the aislinge and that of the popular ballads). "I am the woman" – proudly asserts Boland's speaker, who is nolonger a virginal maiden queen or mythical mother, but counteracts the motionless icons in the patriarchal record with a vivid and complex persona who is both a prostitute, "who practises / the quick frictions, / the rictus of delight", and an emigrant mother forced to leave Ireland "on board the Mary Belle, / in the huddling cold, / holding her half-dead baby to her" (in Dettmar 2010: 2780).

By partaking "of female suffering, of the sexual and psychological wounds inflicted on women throughout history" (Lojo Rodríguez 2006: 99), this speaking voice ultimately fractures the gendered mirror of the woman-nation pairing, dislocating both the image of the submissive and frail Hibernia which haunts 19th century English iconographic texts and that of the mythic Cathleen which inspires Irish nationalism with her subversive, even if troublesome portrayal of "Mise Eire".

Notes

1. The illustration was given to the author as handout during the 1995 *Saxons and Celts* seminar, Antrim, Northern Ireland.
2. Retrieved from http://www.aoh61.com/images/ir_cartoons/political_cartoon.htm

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