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Issues Of Gender
in the
Texts Of Ulster Theatre

Thesis submitted for The Degree of Doctor of Philosophy to
the School of Drama, Samuel Beckett Centre,
Trinity College, Dublin

2001
Imelda Foley
Student Number: 91677688.
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Imelda Foley
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Imelda Foley
Belfast 2001
Summary

And the profiled basalt maintains its stare
South: proud, protestant and northern and male
Adam untouched by the shock of gender

This thesis is neither a history nor an exact socio/political documentary of Ulster Theatre. However, within textual readings, both discourses are employed to examine issues of gender within a context of more familiar issues relating to Northern Ireland, colonialism and sectarianism. The thesis purports that patriarchy is intertwined within more perceptible hegemonies, all of which condition Ulster and its representation in theatre throughout the twentieth century.

This work is circular in its narrative form contradicting its feminist theme of openness and non-closure, but directly relating to the evolving pattern of theatre from an ideology of Enlightenment to a self-imposed provincialism in the work of the Ulster Literary Theatre through to the feminine voices of Frank McGuinness and the women playwrights of the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Four discrete chapters present a feminist critique of chosen landmark texts. The ULT’s short-lived Nationalism transgressed into a regional vein of Ulster Comedy which depicted sectarianism as a harmless folk culture. Divorced from European and Irish Revivalist influences, the theatre capitulated to local populism and avoided political controversy. Alice Milligan, Ulster Nationalist and Feminist was not invited to the citadel which the ULT set about constructing. Masculinity of terminology is matched by a chauvinism on the part of W.B. Yeats who protected Revivalism from Ulster infiltration. However, in the early ‘60s, Sam Thompson’s Over the Bridge in its depiction of hegemonic sectarianism ensures that there is no retreating back over that bridge.

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Graham Reid’s work metaphors an Ulster whose centre cannot hold. Its reality is represented by Gary Mitchell whose ‘Little World’ exists in contented violent isolation. The hegemonies of these male strongholds are epitomised by irony and metaphor within naturalistic form. Colonialism, sectarianism, religion and patriarchy have become contemporary functions of a masculine culture. Like Reid and Mitchell, Christina Reid’s claustrophobic Loyalist psyches and back streets are appeased by naturalistic emigration and exits from them. Women writers Anne Devlin and Marie Jones devise new feminine forms to depict potentiality and subjunctive futures.

It is in the work of Frank McGuinness that hybridity, the fusion of opposites finds voice and form positing sexual, social and political exorcisms. The central chapter on McGuinness examines his texts as feminist constructs within a framework of contemporary feminist criticism. Representations of patriarchy in his first play, The Factory Girls, as with Anne Devlin’s ,Ourselves Alone are necessarily bound by the form of naturalism. The subjunctive and manufactured sites of Carthaginians, Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me and Mary and Lizzie adopt a feminist form and espouse a feminist ideal which precedes and anticipates a new language of pluralism and cultural diversity, one which is heard emanating from strange quarters within Northern Ireland’s new Assembly, bringing us back full circle to the Ulster Literary Theatre’s short lived espousal of Enlightenment.

In conclusion, if ‘the war in the streets’ is over, ‘the war in the heads’ is a more complicated long term business. Our theatre has represented both but has had to adopt a feminine form in order to signpost possibilities and futures. In Northern Ireland a new critical language is essential in order to comprehend and embrace the potential which has already been forecast by our playwrights. That critical language must adopt an understanding of feminine principles and the forms within which these must be embodied.
This work originated in a need to address and redress an imbalance in the quantitative and qualitative criticism applied to Brian Friel and his company Field Day Theatre Company (co-founded in 1980 with Stephen Rea) in comparison to that of the work of Frank McGuinness. A perception that McGuinness had not only been neglected, but misunderstood and misinterpreted deserved analysis. His apparent denial of traditional ideology and form evoked on occasion negative reception, not by audiences but by critics. In particular, reviews of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of *Mary and Lizzie* were uniformly negative for a text and production which, represented a highly intelligent and carefully crafted response to the age old theme of the colonisation of Ireland. The gendered mechanism of text illustrated by title, defied and eluded the same critics who were drawn to Field Day’s polemic of the Fifth Province of the Imagination, a cultural/political dimension which, could contain aspects of cultural diversity and if not resolve at least absorb the problems of Northern Ireland. McGuinness fulfils the very same criteria in many of his texts without extraneously underlining methodology or ideology. Dramatic form and content harmonise. In comparison, while the Field Day mission was attractive, the methodology was more problematic and there were less plays encompassing the ideology than pamphlets exploring aspects of it.

Concurrently, McGuinness’s *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985) had been rejected by Field Day and the later *Carthaginians* (1988) which was to be premiered by the company was withdrawn by the author. The Field Day machine could have done much to progress the work of Frank McGuinness. Instead, there was the age long adage of Northern playwrights – refuge in the Abbey Theatre.

This work began with a deconstruction of McGuinness’s texts, positing sexual politics, feminism, and issues of gender as central theories and formal
dynamics within his work. Born in Buncrana just miles over the border from
the North, McGuinness transits boundaries and definitions to write a hybrid
combination of two cultures, North and South. McGuinness is both Ulster and
Irish and an analysis of that hybridity in its broadest interpretation,
socio/political, sexual, formal was the starting point of research although not
embodied within the eventual thesis itself.

To contextualise and comprehend the mellorism of McGuinness against
the bleakness of Graham Reid or Gary Mitchell for example, led back to the
roots of the founding of Ulster Theatre distinct from its Irish predecessor, the
Irish National Theatre Society. Tracking an historical path from 1902 in the
North revealed pre-partitiion political and ideological u-turns which separated
theatre in the island of Ireland. The Ulster Literary Theatre's original and short
lived values of Enlightenment transferred to a localised strategy of building a
'citadel'. This image of civic masculinity provided another starting point - to
trace the tenor and culture of Ulster plays within a framework of gender.

Eighty or ninety years later, Frank McGuinness orbits Ireland North and South.
His plays acknowledge civic and national atrocity and its public and private
pain. The texts never prescribe but enact catharsis to proffer possibilities,
recovery, some means of communal endurance and survival. The concept of
gender relates particularly to his work but also provides terms of reference for
the evaluation and linking of other work, of the women playwrights, essential to
gendered analysis and of the work of some of our male playwrights, Graham
Reid and Gary Mitchell.

The Thesis

Theatre in Ulster has been defined by a separatism and insularity which have
been both imposed and self determined. Yeats, in banishing the Ulster
Literary Theatre back to its geographic and ideological roots in Belfast,
precipitated a provincialism which fostered a regional theatre movement based
on local identity. He also ensured that the blinds were drawn on
Enlightenment, on the potential of an essentially European political ideology
which had originally informed the founding of a theatre movement in Belfast.

but was not entirely congruent with the ideology of the Revival in Dublin. The feminine politics of 1798, feminine in the broadest sense that oligarchies were challenged and fixed politics interrogated, were reconfigured a century later to establish a political theatre movement in Belfast. That configuration soon lost sight of its original aims.

This thesis charts the demise of a feminine politic whose potential was vibrant in Ulster at the turn of the last century. Its resurgence almost a century later in the work of Frank McGuinness witnesses an hiatus in cultural politics in the North and one which has been underlined by a conservative theatre establishment. To illustrate that journey, textual readings which interrogate extant critiques and present new renderings have formed the basis of research and discourse. Alone, these provide a contribution to the dearth of criticism of Ulster Theatre and the apologetic criticisms of it within current publications based on Irish Theatre, where theatre in the North of Ireland is a common appendage.

This work is neither a history or exact socio/political documentation of Ulster Theatre, although its history and context are important informing elements. At the time of research these two discrete areas were being addressed by other forthcoming publications. Lionel Pilkington’s *Staging the Troubles* promised to appraise the theatre’s response to thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland, while Sam McCready was updating and extending the two valuable historical accounts, Sam Hanna Bell’s *The Theatre in Ulster* (1972) and Ophelia Byrne’s *The Stage in Ulster from the Eighteenth Century* (1997).

This thesis charts the demise of the essentially feminine ideology which identified the founding of locally based theatre production in pre-partition Ulster at the turn of the last century. In socio/political terms, the current terminology of ‘pluralism’ and ‘inclusivity’ echoing from strange quarters within Northern Ireland’s new Assembly, completes a circle. Within that I have endeavoured to do two things: to illustrate by textual deconstructions the way in which some of our contemporary playwrights have challenged an essential socio/political patriarchy which has reigned in Northern Ireland. Its condition is represented by the work of Graham Reid and Gary Mitchell, challenged by the

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2 Neither Pilkington’s or McCready’s publications have been published at time of writing.
women writers, Marie Jones, Anne Devlin and Christina Reid, while radical alternatives are enacted by some of the texts of Frank McGuinness. Secondly, in terms of form there is a struggle between naturalism, the eventual legacy of the Ulster Literary Theatre, and a feminist form of non-closure which accommodates subjunctive territories.

There are positive omissions. Exclusion from this thesis is not related to quality of work or its relevance within the big picture of theatre in Northern Ireland. However, since this thesis is not a history, selection of work for textual analysis and the plan and structure have been based on criteria specifically relating to the theme, 'issues of gender' and its textual landmarks over a century. Four discrete chapters encompass the narrative thrust from the founding of an Ulster Theatre in 1902 to the women playwrights of the '80's and '90's.

In terms of output it has been impossible to include all Gary Mitchell's or Frank McGuinness's more recent work. With the latter, 'Dolly West's Kitchen'³ questions my extant theories with the introduction of a nuclear family and a concomitant Irish setting, the kitchen. *Mutabilitie* (1997) dissects the Irish obsession with British colonialism, which I have covered in depth and linked to gender in the analysis of *Mary and Lizzie* in Chapter Three. There was no necessity to repeat my criticism within the context of the later play which also focuses on Ireland as a whole while the subject of this thesis is Ulster. However, it is a phrase by Frank McGuinness which is always at the forefront of my mind in relation to Northern Ireland, to Ulster and its theatre and to this work; 'the war on the streets, the war in the heads'. The four chapters address both wars and the unspoken, perhaps unmentionable war of gender which, I endeavour to illustrate as an underlying and unspoken war behind all the manifestations of the war in Northern Ireland.

**Chapter One**

This chapter outlines the founding of the Ulster Literary Theatre based on the ideology of the European Enlightenment and contemporising the liberal values

³ *Mutabilitie* and *Dolly West’s Kitchen* are published by Faber & Faber
of 1798 in Belfast in 1902. The role of W.B. Yeats in converting the founders' cultural nationalism to 'Ulsterisation' is central and the outcome, a sectarianisation of myth, an absence of sexuality and an instatement of patriarchy is demonstrated by Gerard McNamara’s texts, *Thompson in Tir NànÓg*, (1912) *The Mist that Does Be on the Bog* (1909) and *Suzanne of the Sovereigns*. (1907)

I rely on Declan Kiberd’s analysis of the revival in the South of Ireland to highlight influences, which the ULT’s proposed ‘citadel’ of drama had effectively obstructed. The gender of the ‘citadel’ becomes apparent.

In a more literal sense I examine the ULT’s exclusion of the work of Alice Milligan, the high profile Nationalist and feminist from the North. Milligan’s *The Last Feast of the Fianna* opened Yeats’s second season in Dublin. She had edited *The Shan Bhan Bocht* (1896-99) in Belfast and was a renowned figure in the North. Her play, *The Daughter of Donagh*, encouraged and then shunned by Yeats is perhaps evidence of an editorial policy which, occludes the perceived oppositional values of Feminism and Nationalism.

The quiet instatement of sectarianism as comedy and a ground rule for the emerging genre of Ulster Theatre in the 30’s and ‘40’s is decimated by Sam Thompson’s *Over the Bridge* (1960), a premonition of realities which could not be ignored by the next generation of playwrights. Thompson founded a new naturalism, an urban based realism which contradicted the simple formula of comic humour, of sectarianism as a palatable folk custom enacted around rural fireside hearths.

**Chapter Two**

The legacy of well crafted rural comedies is forfeited for the urban playwrights of the '70s, '80s and '90s. Graham Reid’s depictions of a respectable middle class hypocrisy are dramatic templates, metaphors of an Ulster whose ‘centre cannot hold.’ The central symbolic character, George Sampson, in *The

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5 A throw back to 1916 in Ireland from Ulster seventy years on.
Death of Humpty Dumpty provides a chilling allegory of colonisation of the beast, the wolf, which in D.E.S. Maxwell’s terminology ‘eats itself up’.

In this chapter, I contest extant readings and analyse The Death of Humpty Dumpty and the sister play Dorothy to develop a concept of sectarianism as a function of patriarchy, or patriarchy as a function of sectarianism. The interdependence is indecipherable. Reid’s thesis of ‘sectarianism as an umbrella for other social deviances’ is borne out in vivid detail by his heir apparent, Gary Mitchell. The Rathcoole estate of North Belfast is Mitchell’s site and ‘citadel’. Within this, self-elected powers have replaced the recognised mechanisms of democratic society. The unacceptable becomes normal, violence a legitimate methodology of everyday life. Mitchell’s cool irony replicates and interrogates the power structures within and without. We watch ‘the wolf eating itself up’.

Both Reid and Mitchell describe a kind of terminal illness, which has no antidote. Only their respective forms may obviate the virus. The momentum of futures, of survival requires other mechanisms.

Chapter Three

The work of Frank McGuinness forms the centre of this thesis and his plays are read as feminist paradigms. His articulation of feminist theory provides a vocabulary of gender and an absorption of theatrical genres which are central to contemporary theatre and to the specific context of Northern Ireland. McGuinness brings us back to Kiberd, to the Revival, to Joyce and Beckett and to the recreation of identity as hybrid and the crafting of forms within which to contain such recreations.

Texts The Factory Girls, Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, Carthaginians, Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me and Mary and Lizzie are analysed in detail to demonstrate an ideology which espouses and formulates a feminist ideal. Removing his characters from a real world of domestic social and economic existence into manufactured environments,

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6 D.E.S. Maxwell ‘Northern Ireland’s Political Drama’ Modern Drama, Vol XXX111, No.1, March 1990.
7 Ibid,
McGuinness operates in the subjunctive territory of future possibilities. It is the ability to recognise the complexity of pain in the present and its slow therapeutic release within his manufactured and metaphorical communities which characterises McGuinness's work. Psychic journeys replace Ulster's fireside chats, and removed environments, prison cells graveyards and battlefields substitute the typical kitchen and local drinking club. So too, McGuinness's sense of form is best articulated by Dido on his leaving the graveyard and Derry in Carthaginians – 'What happened? Everything happened, nothing happened, whatever you want to believe, I suppose.' The feminist form of openness, of non-closure of text, which pervades McGuinness's work becomes a theme within the play Mary and Lizzie, itself an instance of formally dramatised feminist ideology.

Chapter Four

In this final chapter I examine the work of women playwrights, Anne Devlin, Marie Jones, Christina Reid and the role of Charabanc Theatre Company. The simple European axiom of women writers equating with and advocating Feminism is unfounded in Northern Ireland. A sociological background to Feminism and the Women's Movement in Northern Ireland forms an introduction.

While the work of the three playwrights combines to create a cultural continuum, Reid presenting a staunch Protestant East and North Belfast culture, Devlin portraying an equally staunch West Belfast Republicanism and Marie Jones with or without Charabanc Theatre Company and orbiting both and more territory, their forms are individual and distinct. Yet collectively they present the closed, hierarchical and patriarchal state of Ulster society while attempting to define or image exit strategies toward liberation and regeneration.

While exit routes vary from Christina Reid's literal emigrations to Marie Jones's comic inversions and Anne Devlin's torturous inner journeys, vehicles of form not provided by Ulster Theatre's legacy, are much needed. Devlin's exposition of an 'armed patriarchy' in Ourselves Alone makes feminist

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Frank McGuinness, Carthaginians and Baglady, London, Faber and Faber, 1988, 70.
statements but, within the socio/political context of West Belfast Republicanism, can do no more than represent patriarchy and the pain of the women who endure its reign. In *After Easter*, Devlin secures a new mode of representation. The diagnostic methodology of *Oursevles Alone*, like that of McGuinness's in *The Factory Girls* mutates towards the realisation of feminist form within *After Easter*. This text is reminiscent of *Cartaginians* and comparisons are made in my Conclusion to the thesis.

**Terms of Reference**

**Ulster**

While theatre in Northern Ireland has traditionally been referred to as 'Ulster Theatre' the terminology derives from the founding of the Ulster Literary Theatre as a branch of the Irish Literary Theatre (1902). Ulster still comprises the Province of nine counties within pre-partition Ireland – three in the South. I have endorsed this regional distinction for the above reason of tradition and expediency and to allow inclusion of the work of Frank McGuinness, from Buncrana 12 miles over the border from Derry in the Republic of Ireland, not the North, but within Ulster. While recognising that the term 'Ulster' has derived connotations which relate historically to separatism, anti-home rule and Loyalism a particularly Protestant hue is matched as Susan McKay⁹ points out by ideas of politics and power which are 'male' – Ulster as an issue of gender enters the framework.

**Male/Female**

Biological terms delineating sexual difference (not to be confused with social constructs of difference employed by adjectives 'masculine/feminine')

**Feminism**

The definition may refer back to the movement of the '70s to attain equal rights for women. While seen as political doctrine at that time, current usage implies an ideological shift whereby feminine values are asserted to create positive social transformation. A style and ideology, which is anti-autocracy and anti-patriarchal is my defining guideline. I employ the term mostly in Chapter 3

where a clear stance is made against male oligarchy and in Chapter 4 where a study of the women playwrights identifies a localised political fear of gendered terminology. Within the thesis it has not been necessary to distinguish brands of feminism – Radical, Marxist etc.

**Feminist Criticism**

Particularly in Chapter three, feminist critical theory is employed to debate issues such as the male 'appropriation' of the feminine versus the capability of the male to produce feminine work. Theorists, Annette Kuhn, Toril Moi and others are pitted against Declan Kiberd and the argument that feminist writing is the inheritance of the Moderns is debated.

**Feminine**

The adjective has traditional connotations relating to polite, passive behaviour of the female in support of the male, with appearance and grooming relating to that role! I employ the term in a positive sense insinuating values relating to the female – openness of emotional expression and understanding. In this work the feminine male has absorbed some of the values of female and subverts dominant culture. The term 'feminine' does not insinuate sexual orientation.

**Masculine**

Traditionally, the term relates to a superior physique, to power, control and authority, responsibility for a weaker sex and siblings. I confess to an employment of the term which criticises such dominance and interrogates a binary culture which prevents pluralism, inclusion and cross-fertilisation of ideologies. My usage insinuates singularity and closed ontology in general socio/political contexts.

**Patriarchy**

'A system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions. In any of the historical forms that patriarchal society takes, whether it is feudal, capitalist or socialist, a sex/gender system and a system of economic discrimination operate simultaneously. Patriarchy has power from men's greater access to, and mediation of, the resources and rewards of authority structures inside and
outside the home.' In this thesis the term must be distinct from 'masculinity' 'masculine' or 'male', terms which do not necessarily insinuate female oppression.

**Gender**

'Gender' is not based on biological facts of sex but is a cultural phenomenon of attributes and behaviours given to the male or female. As with corollary terminology, feminine, masculine, patriarchy, etc., I employ the term in its broadest sense in relation to all aspects of culture. In particular, the State of Northern Ireland is repeatedly referred to as 'masculine' not simply because of the literal exclusion of women from public life, but because of hegemonies relating to all aspects of society.

**Finale**

In endorsing these terms, I have been informed by the work of Feminist critics within the fields of Performing Arts, Literature and Film. Eventually, I have relied on critics such as Annette Khun for her explications of audience reception, Toril Moi for her interpretations of broad Feminist criticism within the area of psychoanalysis, and Sue-Ellen Case for her incisive theatre analyses. These have formed a foundation for feminist readings of texts and a feminist critique of theatre in Northern Ireland. My diagnostic rendering of work applauds the variety of forms and the integrity by which they have been presented. Most of all I appreciate the difficult circumstances in which most of Northern Ireland's drama has been constructed.

Our playwrights have looked back and at their times to map an unpalatable patriarchy which has been forged by men and women alike in Northern Ireland. They have also envisioned futures. This thesis charts that journey and analyses the forms in which it has been expressed. In the work of Anne Devlin, Marie Jones and Frank McGuinness new forms have been developed to encompass new possibilities and futures for Northern Ireland. These forms have not been readily assimilated or understood. Old hegemonies which rely on old terminology persist. It is time to move on.

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Chapter One

Skating Over Thin Ice: Partition and Absence; The Ulster Literary Theatre, Yeats, and Alice Milligan.¹

Introduction

Archival and critical evidence suggests that in the late nineteenth century Dublin and Belfast enjoyed common theatrical fare, largely based on imported touring productions from England.² In Belfast, at the Theatre Royal, the melodramas of Boucicault mingled with other Irish themes in, for example, the light opera, *Lily of Killarney*, and *The Leaves of the Shamrock*, presented by J. P. Sullivan, 'Master of Irish Singing'.³ Boucicault's depiction of the stage Irishman caused no sectarian storms in Protestant Belfast while the city celebrated its merchant culture and aspired to the cosmopolitanism of its political neighbour, London.

The Victorian acceptance of the arts as refinement and reflection of culture was marked in Belfast by the opening of the newly built Grand Opera House in 1895, 'promoted from the first as the most respectable of establishments'. A decade later, the 'failed experiment' of the Grand Opera House as a venue for the 'risen classes', was manifest in its policy transformation. In 1904, the theatre's subtitle indicated its re-direction; 'The most respectable of establishments' became 'The Palace of Varieties,' a music hall 'for the masses'.⁴ Ophelia Byrne states that while Dublin and London were welcoming theatre 'back to respectable society', Belfast was judged as

³ Theatre Royal scrapbook, 1893-95, Linen Hall Library Archive.
⁴ Byrne, 22.
'an icy' place for theatre, a disastrous place to play, uniquely philistine, a purely industrial city'.

In Dublin, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn had formed The Irish National Theatre Society. The founding ideology was based on a reinterpretation of the heroic past to inform a national future. Presentation of 'the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland' would 'show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism'. Lady Gregory's mission statement does not mention nationalism, or political futures. In comparison in the North, the Protestant National Association was driven by political ideology, by nationalism and by its reciprocation through cultural constructs. As Lady Gregory, Yeats and Edward Martyn plotted an Irish Literary Revival, with theatre as one vehicle, a political revival was gathering force in Belfast, with the idea, too, of theatre as its propagandist vehicle.

**Background to the Ulster Literary Theatre**

In contemporary terms, the existence of a Protestant National Association constitutes an oxymoron, a contrary mix of Irish nationalism and Protestant liberalism. At the turn of the century in the North of Ireland, the political values of the preceding century, of 1798, were still prevalent amongst Presbyterian liberals. The cause of national independence, of freedom from colonial power was central to an enlightened minority. As Yeats, Lady Gregory and others gathered at her homes, Duras and Coole Park, another collective met at Loretto Cottage in North Belfast. Joseph Campbell, David Parkhill and Bulmer Hobson were leading members of the Protestant Nationalist Association whose objective was the realisation of an independent Ireland free from British colonialism. The perspective, definitions and visions of 'nationalism' were not congruent, Yeats's based on a revival of ancient heroism, the Northerner's on one nation ousting British rule. The contesting ideologies, based on differing priorities, the aesthetic principle versus or fused with a political objective,

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5 Ibid.

never had the opportunity of proper discourse and debate, and, from an early stage, parted company.

Sam Hanna Bell’s anecdotal account of Parkhill and Hobson’s well-meaning approach to the members of the National Theatre Society in 1902, denies its consequences, and uncritically celebrates a dubious achievement. Bell quotes a letter from Hobson, dated 2 July 1965; ‘Annoyed by Yeats we decided to write our own plays - and we did’. That decision, informed by irritation, has shaped the history and tenor of theatre in Ulster.

The narrative history of the Ulster Literary Theatre, as the pioneers named themselves in 1904 is well documented by Bell, Rutherford Mayne, playwright and actor, by Dr. Margaret McHenry, by actor Whitford Kane and in a recent thesis by Mark Phelan, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Ulster Literary Theatre’. Here, in this work the shifting focus, and its inheritance are examined within a framework of gender related themes, myth, sectarianism and female absence. But, perhaps the first intrusion of gendered politics, relating as Kathleen Danaher states, to Yeats’s ‘aestheticism and dislike of the Northerner’ occurred at the outset.

The ULT founders sought political nationalism within the framework of ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’, and cultural fusion through the ideology of the Revival in the South of Ireland. They nominated a title, ‘The Ulster Branch of the Irish Literary Theatre’ and in November 1902 produced Yeats’s Cathleen Ni Houlihan and The Racing Lug by Seamus Cousins. The productions were assisted by actors Dudley Digges and Maire Quinn from the Dublin Company, and it was Maud Gonne who granted the rights for Cathleen, claiming that the play had been written for her. Yeats had not agreed to the rights and in 1904, when the ‘Ulster Branch’ wished to reproduce Cathleen, the National Theatre Company not only demanded royalties, but as Bell recounts, informed the company that it had no authority to state that it was a branch of the Irish National Literary Theatre. Bell bluntly summarises the response; ‘They

9 Kathleen Danaher, ‘The Irish Literary Theatre’, Journal of Irish Literature, Vol.17, Nos. 273, May-
renamed their company the Ulster Literary Theatre and applied themselves to
the task of writing their own plays’.  

It should be noted that the ‘business’ of theatre production in Dublin
was not exactly straightforward and opposing personalities and objectives led
to a series of internal disagreements. George Moore joined the founding trio,
Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn for the Irish Literary Theatre’s first
season in 1899. By the end of the third season in 1901 and following disputes
with Martyn and finally Yeats left the company. Martyn’s departure allowed
Yeats to employ the Fay brothers, (Frank and Willie) and to reconstitute the
company in 1903 as the Irish National Theatre Society with the Fays ‘building
a stock of Irish players and a repertoire of Irish plays by new writers’.  

Meanwhile, Moore and Martyn (remarkably), had joined forces with the
rival Players’ Club. Yeats may have felt that, with the Fays, he was moving
towards aesthetic and political autonomy. So, the new Ulster arrivals, Hobson
and Parkhill who were seeking partnership with a defunct Irish Literary
Theatre, were understandably not welcome. Yeats had had enough of internal
politics although there were more storms in the offing with the resignations of
Maud Gonne, Arthur Griffith and Douglas Hyde. 

Meanwhile, back in Belfast, alongside the theatre venture, the literary
review Uladh was established in November 1904 to promote ‘the product of
the Ulster genius’. The first editorial defines Ulster’s separatism which would
be expressed in forms ‘more satiric than poetic’. It also announced that ‘Ulster
has its own way of things’. The next edition in February 1905 had defined
‘the way of things’. It states;

We have not striven to erect a barrier between Ulster and the rest of
Ireland; but we aim at building a citadel in Ulster for Irish thought and art
achievements such as exists in Dublin. If the result is provincial rather than
national, it will not be our fault, but due to local influences over which we have
no control.  

A mission statement which employs negatives, and abdicates
responsibility for the outcome, is odd indeed. The irreparable split between

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9 S. H. Bell, 4.
10 See Maxwell, 14.
11 Ibid. 15.
North and South was enshrined within the columns of Uladh and the forging of a regional identity within a manufactured 'citadel' had begun.

Whether this demarcation was circumstantial, (Yeats's subtle banishment) or, given the political climate, inevitable, is debatable. Hagal Mengel may confuse cause and effect when he interprets the outcome as being Ulster led: 'from the year of its inception onwards we see it facing the reality of life in the Province'.

For most of the early playwrights of the ULT, sectarianism, the matter of Ulster, became the central theme. In Belfast, the pronounced concern with the local scene very soon separated the Ulster Literary Theatre from the theatre movement in the South and made future cooperation between the two difficult and erratic. Bell's account of the sequence of events clearly points to Dublin keeping Ulster out and lends credence to Edna Longley's broader political statement quoting Liam de Paor who asks 'whether partition arose not merely from the refusal of Ulster Unionists to come under a Dublin Parliament, but also from a powerful but largely unconscious drive by Nationalists (in the South) to exclude Protestants'. The ensuing cultural apartheid can be seen as a precursor of political partition with the consequences contributing to theatre in Ulster today.

David Kennedy refers to the 'high political winds' blowing between the National Literary Theatre and its Ulster counterpart, but there were other 'political winds' blowing across Ulster at the time. The validity of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, the ideological framework within which the French Revolution occurred and which was to become the rallying call of the United Irishmen in 1798, more than a century after the insurrection and in the wake of a decade which had experienced sporadic sectarian clashes, is questionable. F. S. L. Lyons describes the 'limited numbers' and 'limited liberalism' of Ulster Presbyterians up to Gladstone's adoption of Home Rule, which forced 'most of them into a Unionism which went somewhat against the grain'. The diminution of Protestant support for the one-nation theory in that era is quoted

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14 Uladh, No. 2, February, 1905.
17 Kennedy, ‘The Drama in Ulster’, 51.
by Desmond Bell to highlight a contemporary 'no-nation' state of Protestant ethnicity:

The enthusiasm for the idea of an independent Irish republic amongst certain sections of the Protestant population in the last decade of the eighteenth century turned to determined opposition to the same notion from the same ethnic group in the first decades of the twentieth century.\(^\text{19}\)

It would seem that the founders of the Ulster Literary Theatre, if not politically anachronistic, represented a minority view.

Against this background, in 1902, \textit{Cathleen Ni Houlihan} was produced. The play has been described as Yeats's 'most patriotic and nationalist play'\(^\text{20}\) and one whose propagandist power Yeats himself was to ponder in later life:

\begin{quote}
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?\(^\text{21}\)
\end{quote}

Yeatsian nationalism was never militant or even anti-colonial but could have been appropriated as such, which is his concern, perhaps an arrogant one. In Belfast, the response should have caused little concern to Yeats. 'The Belfast public were not taken by \textit{Cathleen Ni Houlihan}. Ninety-nine per cent of the population had never heard of the lady, and cared less: in fact someone in the audience commented that the show was going rightly until SHE came on'.\(^\text{22}\)

This cultural disillusionment met its political parallel in the enforced Unionism of the Home Rule campaign. The idea of a secular democratic republic, an imagined political community incorporating Protestant, Dissenter and Catholic, never became a reality. Exiled from the ideals of the Irish Revival, both culturally and politically, the Ulster Literary Theatre was denied the realisation of an essentially radical and feminine ideal, radical in its objective of ousting colonial power, feminine in its replacement not by a hegemony based on


\(^{20}\) Stephen Wilmer on \textit{Cathleen Ni Houlihan}, 'Beyond National Theatre', \textit{Irish Stage and Screen}, Vol.4, No. 3, April/May, 1992, 13-14. (It is widely acknowledged that Lady Gregory co-wrote \textit{Cathleen} but all texts are ascribed to Yeats.) See Daniel J Murphy, 'Lady Gregory, Co-author and Sometimes Author of the Plays of W.B. Yeats', in Harrington, 436.


\(^{22}\) S. H Bell, 4.
power but on empowerment. Culturally thrown back on their native Ulster resources, the movement had to forge a realistic identity within a dominant socio/political context which was at odds with the inherent cultural nationalism of its founding ideology. The gradual consequences of a conscious Ulsterisation within theatre can be examined within four broad areas which relate to gender: myth, sexuality and patriarchy, female absence, and sectarianism.

**Myth as Ideological Framework**

The reliance on myth as the cornerstone of the Irish National Theatre movement was based on Yeats’s conviction that the heroism of a past ideology could be endorsed to recreate the same values in the present. Conflicting definitions of myth, as legitimisation or discreditation of one set of values against another, complicate the very meaning and deployment of the concept.

Robert Welch writes well on the subject, within an Irish, and particularly, Ulster context. He quotes Malinowski who describes myths as ‘charters by means of which a people or tribe told themselves a story to enhance or justify their right to a particular piece of land, inheritance or heritage.’ These relationships with ‘usage’ become narrow and literal defying the ‘essence’ of myth as ‘language’ (Barthes), or as a system of signs ‘whereby entangled meanings are unfolded,’ (Lévi-Strauss). Again Welch and Anne Bernard emphasise the fluidity and femininity of myth, the ‘huge structural arrangement, the unity that underlies all diversity,’ (Welch) and the ‘expression of unconscious realities which are able to clarify certain aspects of human complexity in a unique way.’ (Bernard) These definitions recognise the metaphysical potential of myth, the ability to accommodate contradictions, to

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23 The ideal of pluralist self-government embracing Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter within a framework of Equality, Liberty Fraternity insinuates political and cultural empowerment. Of course, we are aware that in reality, the evolution of the nation state, the Republic of Ireland, replaced one hegemony with another.


26 Welch, 99.
defy a narrow application which is masculine and advocate an essence which is feminine.

The feminist polemic which criticises the mythological image of woman, itself confuses application and essence. Bernard states that, 'it is quite unwarranted to treat every mythic image of woman with contempt'. However, the female personification of representations of Ireland is more complicated and seen as the abuse by male hegemony of a feminine concept. Roisin McDonough describes the imagery as:

A crass, sentimental and ultimately offensive stereotype of Ireland as a tragic but stoically dignified woman whose honour was/is defended by her brave sons fighting against perfidious Albion.

McDonough continues to argue that there is room for different mythological images of the Great Mothers of our culture - images of mothers as warriors, clever, imaginative, strong, cunning, wise and compassionate. These, she adds, 'are precisely the ideological images of Mother Ireland trampled down by the imposition of a narrow patriarchal colonial culture'. Mary Holland too, objects to the male tyranny of myth which runs through Irish popular culture:

We have apostrophised the country itself as a mother. The concept of Mother Ireland has met with wholehearted national approval. The message has been unequivocal. The proper place for a woman apart from the convent is the home, preferably rearing sons for Ireland.

But these contemporary interpretations point up the abuse of appropriation of myth as 'legitimisation' of one regime as opposed to another. Returning to the ancient mythographers, Welch interprets their logic in terms which would have been acceptable to the founding radicalism of the Ulster Literary Theatre. It is the accommodation of opposites which characterises myth. Welch translates into contemporary terms:

An Irish person wants the sovereignty of Ireland to be preserved; that means it must be capable of accommodating everything, all traditions. The Irishman who wants to protect sovereignty will be characterised

28 Ibid.
by movement, he will move across borders and be at home anywhere. If he is of the Catholic tradition, he will take on Presbyterianism; if he’s Presbyterian he’ll take on the Catholic. If he’s male he’ll take on female, and vice versa.\(^{31}\)

Myth becomes a circumvention of pluralities, an unfixed and essentially feminine entity, as mobile and elusive as her characters Maeve and Macha. Furthermore, Welch presents a manifesto which is relevant to Northern Ireland’s contemporary state of cultural diversity.

The recognition of myth as feminine, is seen by Sam Hanna Bell as an emasculation which is unwelcomed by the Ulster psyche. His tone of patronising charm, double-edged, returns us to the province of Ulster; ‘notwithstanding the beauty of these tales, the heroes are too vast, too amorphous; they lack the savage salt of human vulgarity’.\(^{32}\) ‘The great virtues, the great joys, the great privations come in the myths’, said W. B. Yeats, ‘and, as it were, take mankind between their naked arms, and without putting off their divinity’. Bell interjects; ‘There is nothing, I should say, more distasteful to an Ulsterman, of whatever persuasion, than to be hugged by a myth, unless, of course, he has had the privilege of creating it’.\(^{33}\) While Yeats may have overblown the potential of the employment and presentation of myth, within the work of the Ulster Literary Theatre, its local deployment by them became more a signifier of sectarianism and separatism than an effect of the values which Welch has outlined. His statement of the essence of myth as ‘the unity which underlies all diversity’ itself underlies the original objectives of the ULT. The provincialism and narrowness to which the movement quickly reverted, was a reflection and endorsement of masculine values.

The choice of \textit{Cathleen Ni Houlihan} as the introductory play in 1902 and A E’s (George Russell), \textit{Deirdre} in 1904 indicates the Ulster Literary Theatre’s awareness of myth as an appropriate vehicle for propaganda and, at the same time, as a vehicle for the transcendence of prejudice and the masculinity of sectarianism. Given the political climate, these plays were hardly likely to, and did not, elicit a broad popular response.

\(^{31}\) Welch, 104.
\(^{33}\)Ibid.
Gerald MacNamara was a leading founding member of the ULT. His plays are among their best known and revived today. His disillusionment with community indifference to the company’s aspirations did not immediately temper its predilection for the mythological framework. Hobson’s *Brian of Banba* (1904), Campbell’s *Little Cowherd of Slainge* (1905), and MacNamara’s *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* (1907) which were reviewed as ‘poetic dramas recalling the heroic past in the style of Yeats’, ran alongside plays which were grounded in local themes, *The Enthusiast* (1904) (land reform), *Turn of the Road* (1906) (the artist against Puritanism) and *The Reformers* (1904) (a satire on the ethos of ‘jobs for the boys’).

But it is in MacNamara’s *Thompson in Tir na nÓg* (1912), that a symbiosis of the ancient heroic and the not so heroic present attempts to use the former to satirise the latter. In weaving two very different sets of mythologies, the green and the orange, MacNamara’s subtlety met with a less than subtle reception when some of the audience arrived at The Grand Opera House armed with rivets from the Protestant shipyard.

In the play, Orangeman Andy Thompson has been ‘blew up’ by his own gun at the mock battle of Scarva, an annual re-enactment of the battle of the Boyne, to be transported to Tir na nÓg where Grania is despatched by the king to woo Andy and hence discover his cultural background. The constant juxtaposition of archaic and colloquial dialogue with the stunted presence of Andy in suit, bowler hat and orange sash presents an ingenious collage of comic inversion and opposition:

Thompson: Sure I told you I was on King William’s side. Of course we won the day.
Grania: Why do you say ‘of course’? The fortunes of war are so uncertain.
Thompson: Sure it wasn’t a real fight. It was a sham fight.
Grania: But have you been in a real fight?
Thompson: O aye, I was in a scrap in Portadown last Sunday.
Grania: And whom were you fighting in Portadown?
Thompson: The Hibernians.


Grania: The Hibernians! But are not all the people in Eirinn Hibernians?
Thompson: Talk sense, woman dear.
Grania: Many changes must have come over Eirinn since the days of Cuchulain and Oisin. Then we were all Hibernians. I wish, dearest Thompson, that you were a Hibernian too.
Thompson: You’ll never see the day. And what’s more, I’ll have nothing more to do with you, for I’m no believer in mixed marriages.36

Grania’s world here is both open and rational, Thompson’s closed with prejudice which presents itself as rational and logical. As Kathleen Danaher remarks, ‘Thompson’s innocence is so engaging and his confusion so complete that we cannot but find him endearing’.37 Like Swift’s Gulliver, Thompson’s ‘endearing’ qualities are signifiers of a closed and unimaginative ontology. Finally, Andy has to choose between learning Gaelic, assimilation into the tribe, or death at the stake. *Thompson in Tir na nÓg* was allegedly commissioned by the Gaelic League and turned down on the grounds that it ‘travestied Celtic mythology’.38 The play seems to have backfired in both directions, a classic case of intentionality versus reception. Produced in Belfast in 1912 when the first Home Rule bill had already passed the House of Commons, in its care not to alienate the audience it attempted to convert, ‘its subtlety escaped the offender whom it was endeavouring to chastise’.39 *Thompson in Tir na nÓg* became one of Ulster’s most popular plays, the champion of the Orange Order for whom the play confirmed their worst fears of the intractability and blood thirst of Irish nationalism.40

MacNamara’s sequel, *Thompson on Terra Firma*, (1934), as the title suggests, implants the Gaelic speaking Thompson back among his Orange family. Like Gulliver ascending the stairs of the family home backwards on all fours as a Houhynnim, Thompson is a deranged embarrassment. The accidental act of violence, which occurred in an atmosphere of potential violence to send him to Tir na nÓg is repeated to bring him back ‘to his

38 S H. Bell, 43.
senses' and the 'real' world. In the play the values of this 'real' world, of distinctly Orange hue, are reinstated. *Thompson on Terra Firma* can be seen as a metaphor for the failed ideals of the Ulster Literary Theatre. That metaphor includes a depiction of the device of myth within the play, concomitant with the political appropriation of myth by Nationalism. If, inadvertently, *Thompson in Tir na nÓg* portrayed myth as the embodiment of not only Nationalism but sacrificial death for its cause, the identification of myth with the 1916 Rising bound it 'inextricably and fixedly to a theocentric vision which was Catholic, Republican and, to the Protestant north, heretical.'

The function of myth was thus identified with Nationalism, and seen as the preserve of the Nationalist South of Ireland, by the Unionist North.

If the ULT originally aimed to employ myth as legitimation of a cause, that cause embodied an ideology or 'huge structure' which is itself the basis of myth. Referring back to Welch, to the 'multivalent and intertribal' to the 'movement and fluidity' and to 'the male taking on female', this socio/political concept did not take root in Ulster. The mythic elements of the feminine, timeless prehistoric, unfixed are replaced by the male, the temporal and the historic. This is the provenance where 'nothing' is 'more distasteful than to be hugged by a myth.' *Thompson in Tir na nÓg* marks the end of a cycle and the later play, *Thompson on Terra Firma*, in making no attempt to justify the possibilities of its predecessor, ineffably accepts, and indeed, promotes the values of a Protestant/Orange ethic which would have been unpalatable to the founders of the ULT, two decades earlier.

**Sexuality**

The text of David Kennedy's *The Ulster Region and the Theatre* is as proudly chauvinistic as Thompson himself. Kennedy dismisses the mythological and by insinuation, the principles of the Revival; 'the shadowy darkness in which Yeats's imagination swathed this strange world owed more to the theosophical vapourings of Madame Blavatsky. Ulster common sense instinctively rejected this charlatanism'.

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42 David Kennedy, 'The Drama in Ulster', 55.
chauvinism. However, if the poetic heroism of Yeats was seen as antithetical to the Ulster psyche, it might be argued that the ULT in its inception was inherently more radical than it was aware of, and in essence matched the ideology of the second phase of the Revival more than the first.

Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland* (1995) refers back to an earlier article *Inventing Irelands* where the plural of the title is apposite. In the 1984 article Kiberd dichotomises the Revival - Yeats creating a Celtic Twilight for the conservatism of De Valera, and Joyce, Synge, Behan and Connolly creating a post-colonial alternative 'within which the pursuit of freedom might begin,... from first principles all over again'. 43 Within the context of critics of colonialism, Said, Fanon, Memmi, Kiberd has revised his earlier dichotomy to present a more seamless mutation where the hybrid of modernist mythic realism is seen as dependent on Yeats's backward gaze. But even in revision, there is difference. Kiberd states that:

In theory, two kinds of freedom were available to the Irish: the return to a past, pre-colonial identity, still yearning for expression if long denied, or the reconstruction of a national identity, beginning from first principles all over again. The first discounted much that had happened, for good as well as ill, during the centuries of occupation; the second was even more exacting, since it urges people to ignore other aspects of their past too.44

So, in revision, Kiberd is kinder to the Yeatsian model but distinctions are still made. In Ulster, the sense of possibility, of regeneration and discovery can be traced much earlier in the annals of *Uladh*, in attempts to create a separate Northern identity, one which had not yet materialised but which was anticipated through drama as a means of propaganda. The ULT might have embraced the values of later revivalism as embodied by Joyce and Synge, if they had not been 'snubbed' by the instigator, W B. Yeats.

From the text *The Mist that does be on the Bog*, (1909), by Gerald MacNamara, there is no evidence of an appreciation of the roots and implications of later revivalism. The play parodies the language of Synge and his West of Ireland field trips.

Bridget: Good evening kindly lady, it's welcome you are, but it's a wild and stormy day, God Bless us to be out in the mountain side with the white mists driving up like shrouds from the rocky shores of Lough Corrib.

Cissie: This is just the sort of place I have always pictured in my imagination.  

The play within the play, which Cissie and Gladys have retired to the West to rehearse, is aptly titled *What's All The Stir About*. The dialogue is indistinguishable from that of the central text and literal facts are swathed in exaggeratedly sonorous language;

Gladys: Do you think he will be comin' home by the long gap and the wind rising up from the North East and him burdened down by the weight of drink?  

The 'Ulster common sense' subtext of both extracts is audible. Cissie and Gladys, in their wholehearted adoption of the parodied culture, provide the comedy. They are portrayed as willing dupes, completely entranced by their newly discovered language. The parody is based on Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, where the tramp's 'blather' is pitted against Nora's pragmatism and her disinterest in the climatic soul of the Wicklow Hills. She says in Synge's text:

For what good is a bit of farm with cows on it, when you do be sitting looking out from a door and seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog and the mists rolling up the bog.  

MacNamara's *Mist on the Bog* is a comedy which depends for effect on parodied language and ridiculous situations. While the women are rehearsing, or in raptures about the ambience of the West of Ireland, cousin Fred practise golf swings in the background, interjecting Ulsterisms and behaving like a middle class Thompson. His masculine reluctance to participate in the women's charade, symbolises a broader masculinity, that of Ulster itself,

45 Gerald MacNamara, 'The Mist that does be on the Bog', Danaher, 59.
46 Ibid., 61.
separate and sensible. All the characters, including the locals, inhabit a pastiche world of mist and bogs, turf and blather. The central nuance of Synge's work is entirely ignored in a simple comic rendering of its superficialities.

While Robert Hogan states that it is only 'Synge's mannerism, not his soul, which may be parodied,' there are elements of 'mannerism' which MacNamara's text does not investigate or parody, most obviously the sexual which is central to *The Shadow of the Glen* on which the parody seems to be based. Language apart, *The Mist that does be on the Bog*, predates *Thompson* and coincides with a formative period in the life of the ULT when its increasing local popularity effected institutional change.

Given the earlier split with Dublin, the establishment of a Belfast audience and the redeployment of myth three years later in *Thompson in Tir na nÓg*, it can be deduced that interest in the later revival was not as extensive as that of the movement perpetrated by Yeats. In addition, MacNamara's light parody does not touch on the issues which caused 'the stir', of the play within the play, Synge's perceived anti-nationalism in terms of sexual ethics. If the first characteristic of the Joycean/Syngian revival, the invention of identity, recalls the ULT's and *Uladh*’s founding ideology, the second, 'pre-colonial sexuality', is obvious by its absence. Synge's cosmopolitan sense of the sexual and its place is summed up in his response to *The Shadow Of The Glen*:

> On the French stage the sex element of life is given without the other balancing elements. I restored the sex element to its natural place, and the people were so surprised they saw sex only.

In comparison to Nora (*The Shadow Of The Glen*), Gladys and Cissie are positively asexual. Ulster removes 'sex' and, as D. E. S. Maxwell points out in reference to *Uladh* editorials, 'the theocratic Catholicism of the South had its

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49 In 1909, the ULT was invited as resident company at the Grand Opera House where they remained 'for almost thirty years'. See Rutherford Mayne, 21.
Protestant counterpart' in the North.\textsuperscript{52} While the ULT could attack other elements of Puritanism, the sexual seems to be taboo, in its absence from the texts. If political Anglicisation was objectionable, the Anglicisation of sexuality remains silently unrefuted.

If the device of myth, central to the first phase of the revival, could be absorbed within the ULT genre, the inherent sexuality of the latter part of the revival, of the Modernists, could not. By establishing myth as 'green', and plain Ulster vernacular as 'orange', and by pitting the two against each other, an easy comic form developed. Both traditions could laugh at each other, if not at themselves. Both could witness each other's stereotypes and the complex subject of sectarianism could be simplified within the comic form.

\textbf{Sectarianism}

Representations of sectarianism in Ulster and its characterisation through culture and ethnicity have pervaded the Ulster theatre from its inception. As sectarianism has historically been constituted and reconstituted, so too has its representation in theatre.

Professor J.M. Barkley traces the roots of sectarianism back to colonial confrontations within religious orders in Ireland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, predating the reformation. An Act of Parliament in 1310 forbade the reception of 'any native Irish religious, monk, canon, or friar among the colonists'.\textsuperscript{53} This political sectarianism between Irish and English had less to do with religion, than the effective implementation of the process of colonialism.

Barkley sees the complexity of contemporary sectarianism as having its roots in a list of differing historical phenomena:

\begin{itemize}
  \item National relationships and independence, intolerance and ostracism,
  \item religion, religious and political desire to dominate, agrarian strife, trade restrictions, Roman triumphalism, Protestant isolationism, political intransigence, party chicanery and social injustice.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{itemize}


\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., 11.
If religion is one element within the complicated matrix, Lyons too, outlines the development of sectarianism through the inadequacy of the Plantation. ‘Because the conquest was gradual, piecemeal, and often precarious, the settlers who struck their roots in the region did so under conditions of maximum insecurity’. Protestant conquest and fear of Catholic insurrection manifested itself in religious terms:

For Catholics, Protestantism represented heretical error. For Protestants, Catholicism represented potential persecution of their innermost beliefs should the balance of power ever change hands.

The geographical distribution of the settlers, en bloc in the East and then more haphazardly, intensified the preservation of identity, an identity which was originally expressed partly in religious difference but within time, as Lyons demonstrates, became entwined within a broad mesh of cultural difference. The religious label attached to sectarianism, in other words, simplifies the complexities embodied within cultural and ethnic traditions. Desmond Bell summarises and interprets in a similar vein:

The two communities identify each other and themselves by reference to religious affiliation. And Loyalism in particular certainly utilises religious representations in its political discourse. However, in Northern Ireland religious identifications serve fundamentally as ethnic markers for communities with conflicting political aspirations. These aspirations are the product of a specific colonial situation.

While Lyons contends that sectarianism may have been deployed ‘at some periods to avoid the danger of having to confront a united labour movement’, the central theme of Over The Bridge, Sam Thompson, (1960) Dockers, Martin Lynch, (1980), and, to an extent, Mixed Marriage, St John Ervine, (1911), Bell sees the identification of sectarianism as ‘false consciousness’, as a failure to address ‘the historical conditions under which patterns of working-class ethnicity express themselves’. Ethnic differentiation ‘is as important a historical dynamic as class division’. That matters of such difference which

55 FSL Lyons, Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939, Oxford University Press 1979, 135.
56 Ibid.
57 Desmond Bell Acts of Union: Youth Culture Sectarianism and in Northern Ireland, 64.
governed life and perceptions of it in Northern Ireland, could be largely ignored by playwrights and producers became an issue in itself, and often to the embarrassment of an establishment which was content to maintain the status quo.

The short lived romance with Yeatsian myth is exemplified by Bulmer Hobson’s departure to straight politics after his one and only play, *Brian of Banba* for the inaugural opening of the ULT in 1904. As Bell comments, there was the inevitable comparison with the plays of Yeats and he quotes the *Uladh* critic’s description, ‘beauty touched with strangeness’. In 1905, Joseph Campbell’s *Little Cowherd of Slainge* again adopted the device of myth, and like Hobson, he too, after a first attempt, retreated from the art of the playwright. It was not until 1907, with MacNamara’s *Suzanne and the Sovereigns*, that the ULT hit on its successful formula, a mixture of history and mythology within a contemporary setting. The play itself represents the first Ulster representation of staged sectarianism. Suzanne is the female replica of the later Thompson. She falls hopelessly in love with James the Second in Sandy Row and a local deputation is sent to Amsterdam to rally William the Third to the rescue. Rutherford Mayne states that the play ‘might easily have had the same result as throwing a lit match into a barrel of gunpowder. The result was a complete triumph’. The play effected the company’s promotion to the large-scale venue of the Grand Opera House, and in retrospect, this move may have heralded the ULT’s downfall. MacNamara’s comic inversions of staunch Protestants to a Catholic orientation is matched in the early satires by individual transitions from an emphatically Protestant work ethic to artistic or even Socialist endeavours, *The Enthusiast*, Lewis Purcell, (1905), and Rutherford Mayne’s, *The Turn of the Road*, (1906), and *The Drone*, (1909). But, the presentation of stereotypical caricatures refuted analysis and the ULT’s original framework of reason and enlightened humanism transgressed almost to the realms of farce.

The pattern of satirical comedy gradually acquired a lightness of tone which created a genre in which sectarianism appeared, if not ethically

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58 Sam Hanna Bell, 14.
59 Rutherford Mayne, 18-19.
acceptable, then harmless, almost quaint. Mengel recognises the
development and its effects on later writers:

Their lack of earnestness should not be interpreted as an absence of
care. Still, their satiric levity dominated the Ulster Theatre for
some time; most of the plays of George Sheils, Hugh Quinn, Joseph
Tomelty, were not free from the superciliously farcical treatment of
serious topics which in some cases even led to an acceptance of low
farce.\textsuperscript{60}

Both David Kennedy and, later, the poet John Hewitt, see 'this skating over the
thin ice of local prejudices\textsuperscript{61} as a form of artistic abdication. Certainly, the
stereotyped images of mythic queens, men in bowler hats and sashes and
Catholic-loving philanthropists avoid any level of social or political analysis to
almost legitimise sectarianism as a colourful, local custom. The poet W. R.
Rodgers, in a critical article on Ulster, can define sectarianism as an
anthropologist's dream: 'it is this diversity and interplay of opposites that
makes Ulster life such a rich and fascinating spectacle'.\textsuperscript{62} The 'rich and
fascinating spectacle' has some hideous manifestations.

An obvious exception to this analytical 'lack' is St John Ervine's \textit{Mixed
Marriage} (1911). In this play, sectarianism is represented as a product of
political confusion and ignorance which manifests itself in domestic
chauvinism. The role of woman is central and sectarianism is a function of
male hegemony whose treble articulation is political, religious and sexist.
Factually based during the 1911 strike where political/economic insecurity
allows hidden prejudices to float freely to the surface, the play is a maze of
human confusion, contradiction and ignorance embodied in the key character
Rainey, patriarch, speech-maker and bigot. The mute power base, inhabited
by the portrait of King Billy on the living room wall is shared by Rainey whose
public performances to the Orange Lodge are paralleled by a monosyllabic
stubbornness at home. Public and private are at loggerheads within Rainey's
psyche. His schizophrenia is thrown into relief by his wife's astuteness. Mrs

\textsuperscript{60} Hagel Mengel, 'A Lost Heritage', \textit{Theatre Ireland}, Nos. 1 & 2, 1982, 18-19.
\textsuperscript{61} Kennedy 'The Drama in Ulster', 56.
\textsuperscript{62} Unreferenced quote by S.H. Bell, 'The Banderol', 14-15.
Rainey, as John Cronin has pointed out, is 'the Juno Boyle of the piece' and like Juno, endures and analyses male folly without effectually doing anything about it. At the end of the play when the mob is raging outside the door and Nora (anticipating a later classic victim, Bessie Burgess) is shot, Mrs Rainey's impotent complicity is framed within a single moment of intense human and spiritual isolation:

Rainey: (as if dreaming) A wus right. I know A wus right.
Mrs Rainey: (weeping a little, and patting him gently) Aw, my poor man, my poor man.

*Mixed Marriage* presents woman as the embodiment of an unfulfilled integrity whose power exists only in its ability to camouflage itself to maintain the empowerment of the male. Mrs Rainey's ability to encompass broad philosophies within the simplest language is pitted against the self-important bombast of the men and always with irony:

Mrs Rainey: Can't ye see, they're doing the very thing ye want Irelan' to do?
Michael: There'll be no salvation fur Irelan' til a man is born that dussen care a God's curse fur weemen. They're hangin' about the neck o' the lan' draggin' her down.
Mrs Rainey: (aside) Aw let the men talk. Sure it keps them quiet.

While Mrs Rainey can dance around her less intelligent brethren, her acute awareness of their identity diminishes her own.

The political plexus is rich, complicated and highly contemporary in its pessimism. As Cronin says:

It is a sad comment on the repellent sameness of Ulster sectarianism that the issues Ervine dealt with... remain just as vivid and unresolved in the Belfast of the 1980s.

The difficult question is why did the Ulster Literary Theatre ignore a play of such sophistication and contemporary relevance? The answer may be found in a comment by David Kennedy on a later play by Ervine, *Boyd's Shop*:

64 Ibid., 63.
65 Ibid., 28.
‘Presbyterian Ulster liked this picture of itself’. The picture presented by *Mixed Marriage* is less palatable. Free from sentiment and nostalgia, the play presents a grim image of Orange insularity textured by a mix of half-truths and erroneous assumptions. Woman is imaged as highly rational, unprejudiced and oppressed. The play interrogates assumptions and a reality which is neither mythic or historical and certainly not comic. Another genre within which prejudice is critically examined has been founded and ignored in production.

Sam Thompson’s *Over The Bridge* (1960) rocked the establishment by exposing its rigid and often subtle suppression of freedom which might express a challenge to Unionist supremacy. Paddy Devlin sums up the ethos;

Thompson strove to uncover the mechanisms which manipulated education and the general social conduct of Protestant workers and which determined their position within the general spectrum of society. He expressed his ideology consistently and forcefully, mostly through the minds and tongues of trade-unionists of a pronounced anti-loyalist and anti-establishment persuasion. His philosophy comes through as rational, straightforward, problem orientated.

Thompson’s sectarianism lurks behind the faceless ‘mob’. The mob signifies here, as in *Mixed Marriage*, a world out of control in which the individual joins the abstract. The mob, in turn, is driven by another faceless power, known but unidentifiable. Thompson’s imagery is of the impalpable presence, what Stewart Parker refers to as the ‘seepage’, ‘a kind of fog of religiotics which seeps in everywhere’.

Rabbie: They crawl round the boats and through the workshops fuming the flames of bigotry with their plausible double-meaning talk and it’s the same wherever you go in this country..... nobody wants to know where the actions of a mob begins or where it ends for that matter.

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66 Ibid., 19.
68 The Group theatre management rejected the play on the grounds that it ‘would offend and affront every section of the public.’ For a full account, see Ophelia Byrne *The Stage in Ulster from the Eighteenth Century*, Linen Hall Library, 1997, 46-49.
70 Stewart Parker, Introduction to *Over the Bridge*, Gill and Macmillan, 1970. Future reference (Thompson, *Over the Bridge*).
Fox: You can nail nothing on anybody without proof, Rabbie. That's the law.\textsuperscript{71}

But, for all its Marxist diagnosis, linguistic fluidity and parabole, \textit{Over The Bridge} is, formally, masculine. The structure is highly conventional: Situation - - Crisis -- Denouement. The play is closed. Within this arena, women are sharply focused mirror reflections of their male partners - Nellie is as greedy and self-satisfied as husband George. Martha’s conversation is based on obsessive anecdotes of Rabbie’s persecution for his socialist principles. Victim, Davy Mitchell’s own wife was herself victim of Fox’s power and is long since deceased. Their daughter Marian is the symbolic heroine, destined for the next generation in marriage to Baxter who has had a premature taste of the miseries generated by sectarianism. Dramatically, Thompson uses woman to demonstrate the totality of the social ‘seepage’, as Parker says, ‘through the workplace’ but also through the domestic environs of the backstreet homes Young Marian, symbol of a feminist future responds to Fox’s self-satisfied supremacy, highlighting the male ego’s fascination with power:

\begin{quote}
Fox: Miss Mitchell, I had no need to worry about trade unions or shop stewards, for when I went out to the gate in the mornings to start men, my power was complete. I could see it in the men’s faces. \\
Marian: Your power was complete Mr Fox - but so was the sorrow of men like my father.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

Where \textit{Over The Bridge} becomes caught within the limitations of its own naturalism, Thompson’s final play, \textit{The Masquerade} (1965), operates on the level of symbol and metaphor to powerfully represent sectarianism as a form of fascism through the hypnotic power which the fascist, Frank Major, wields over his two lodgers, a bootblack and a prostitute. As Hagal Mengel comments:

\begin{quote}
Dissimilarities and similarities with the situation in Ulster soon become apparent: the relation between the power structure in that flat in London and the power structure in Ulster is one of abstraction in terms
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{71} Thompson, \textit{Over the Bridge}, 114. \\
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 116.
of metaphor. Thompson spruces such metaphors in a way which makes them representative of conditions existing in the Province.\textsuperscript{73}

The allegorical and the epic blend to allow a formal sophistication which more adequately copes with analysis of sectarianism. Sexuality and gender enter the hegemonic frame. Sexist oppression, woman as sexual slave and object, is a metaphor for other forms of political subjugation. \textit{The Masquerade} is far removed from the rural sectarian hearths of the Ulster Literary Theatre and bridges a gap between them and the contemporary treatments of sectarianism by Graham Reid and Gary Mitchell for whom gender becomes a central symbol.

While the ULT endorsed cultural fusion within the nationalism of the Yeatsian revival, its failure of nerve and its dependence on commercial rather than aesthetic success in becoming 'anti-colonial' is demonstrated by its inability to confront the issues of the second revival, sexuality of both content and form and the rejection of patriarchy. A concomitant or appendage to this in the North is the absence of a single suffragist play despite the propagandist theatre of the Irish Women's Franchise League and Inghinidhe na hEireann, (Daughters of Ireland), the latter having been responsible for the aiding of the early Ulster Literary Theatre productions.\textsuperscript{74}

**Female Absence**

The contemporary work of Irish feminist historians and critics has done much to rectify the traditional patriarchal view of the role of women in the time of the Ulster and Irish Literary Theatres. That women's place was in the home, in service to the family, or outside that domain, as carer for the sick and poor, was the incontestible accepted norm.\textsuperscript{75} The Nationalist construct of woman was vigorously promoted as that of homemaker and spiritual counsellor to the young, the interchangeable motifs being that of hearth and altar. What, until recently, has not been fully acknowledged is the challenge by women in their

\textsuperscript{73} Hagel Mengel, 'A Lost Heritage', \textit{Theatre Ireland}, Nos. 1 & 2, 1982, 80-81.
\textsuperscript{74} Maud Gonne granted the rights of \textit{Cathleen Ni Houlihan} and Maire Quinn performed in it.
thousands to this stereotype. 'While women were not expected to have any public presence at all,' and that has been the received image, in a host of necessarily separatist organisations, they radically campaigned on issues as diverse as Home Rule or the Union, land reform and the Franchise. The debarment of women from most public organisations necessitated the foundation of their own. The act of revisionism is succinctly defined by Margaret Ward who states that, 'because women have been so marginal in the consciousness of those who have researched events, their significance remains hidden.' Women's contribution to history and a changing culture during the early twentieth century has been critically revised and, as stated by Myrtle Hill and Vivienne Pollock, traditional images of passivity and patriarchal definition are 'replaced by a series of more complex images reflecting the actual tensions and contradictions of both individual and collective experience.'

The establishment of numerous significant organisations by and for women at the turn of the century and during the incoming decade is testimony to the resourcefulness and political acumen of women who were denied access to any form of government outside the boundaries of domesticity. While privileged women could avail of higher education, it was not until 1908 that women were accepted into the universities on an equal basis with men.

Within the Ulster Literary Theatre there is little evidence of the presence or influence of women except as relatives of the main players. Occasional and one-off plays by Helen Waddell Josephine Campbell and Patricia O'Connor were performed. Caricatures by Grace Plunkett feature smoke-filled rooms with no female presence except in stage depictions where there is an occasional female presence, almost as a single physical adornment to the male performers.

McHenry alludes to the dearth of women contributors as 'possibly' having been caused by 'the close association with politics maintained by the originators of the Ulster Literary theatre'. She states;

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77 Hill & Pollock, 2.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 10. (For women’s organisations, see Index, Ward).
Not only are practically all the Ulster playwrights men, but they put most of their best drawn characters among the ranks of their own sex. They could not, however, make all of their plays totally without heroines.\(^\text{81}\)

These are pertinent remarks by the only female chronicler of the Ulster Literary Theatre. Bell, Kennedy, Mayne and Mengal do not refer to gender issues within their studies. Given that McHenry conducted her research by interviewing key players within the movement, the lack of comment by them on female participation is further testimony to the status, or lack of it, of women within theatre at the time. Male commentators may hardly be accused of sexist revisionism if the role of women was as negligible as it would seem.

However, the omission of the work of one Ulster poet and playwright from the annals of the Ulster Literary Theatre is obvious. Alice Milligan was a prodigious patriot and advocate of Nationalism. She has been described as being in the ‘forefront of the Nationalist and literary movement, recognised, respected and admired.’\(^\text{82}\)

Milligan was born in Omagh, County Tyrone, and enjoyed a privileged upbringing, liaising with her father on the compiling and publication of texts on matters of local interest, She had an equally privileged education attending King’s College London where she became a member of The Irish Literary Society in 1893. Two years later, back in Belfast, she founded and edited *The Northern Patriot* whose editorial stated the advancement of ‘the good old cause that has braved unceasing persecution for seven centuries.’\(^\text{83}\) While the reasons for Milligan’s departure from the paper after only three issues, are unclear, her fervent nationalism and adherence to the tropes of the Celtic Revival, the restoration through literature of an ancient self-esteem to a new Irish nation, found voice in the establishment of another periodical, *The Shan Van Vocht*. Milligan edited the paper until 1899 and its title and manifesto from the anonymous poem celebrating the 1798 Rebellion, represent the manifesto of the Protestant Nationalist Society, the founders of the Ulster Literary Society.

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\(^{80}\) Collection held by Linen Hall Library, Belfast Theatre Archive.  
\(^{81}\) Dr Margaret McHenry, *The Ulster Theatre in Ireland*.  
\(^{83}\) *The Northern Patriot*, 15 October 1895.
Yes! Ireland shall be free
From the centre to the sea;
Then hurrah for liberty
Says the Shan Van Vocht  

Throughout this period and in the next decade, Milligan moved within the circles of the élite of the revivalist movement. Yeats, Maud Gonne, Standish O' Grady, Roger Casement and James Connolly were associates. For Bulmer Hobson, a founding member of the Ulster Literary Theatre, she was mentor and role-model as a political and literary figure. Of her collection of poetry, \textit{(Hero Lays)} published in 1908, he states; ‘they are unlike any-thing we have seen in Ireland. They strike a new note in our literature.’ Other contemporary commentaries on Milligan's literary status, if tainted by patriotic predilection, testify to the cultural esteem in which she was held. Maud Gonne's autobiography notes a meeting with Milligan in Belfast; 'I thought,' she states, 'Dublin would have to look to its laurels if it were not to be outdone in literary journalism by Belfast.' But, it is Thomas McDonough's eulogy which is best known. In an article on living Irish poets for the \textit{Irish Review} (1914) he writes;

I should like to begin with the best... I have no difficulty of choice... It is meet that this Irish national poet should be a woman. It is meet that she, like so many of the leaders of the Irish Volunteers should be of Northeast Ulster. Alice Milligan, Ulster Protestant, Gaelic Leaguer, Fenian, friend of all Ireland, lover of Gaelic Catholic as of her own kith....is the most Irish of living poets, and therefore the best.

Such high-profile praise, is testimony to Milligan's position as a poet of the nationalist literary movement. Her plays demonstrate a feminism which was subordinate only to the nationalist cause.

The complexities of the alliance between feminism and nationalism in Ireland have been well documented. While Terry Eagleton equates

\begin{footnotes}
\item[84] \textit{The Shan Van Vocht}, Issue 1, Vol.1, January 1896.
\item[85] Sheila Turner Johnston, \textit{Alice, A Life of Alice Milligan}, Omagh, Colourpoint Press, 1994, 67/89/44/66.
\item[86] 'The Peasant' June 1908.
\item[87] Maud Gonne, \textit{A Servant to the Queen} (Unreferenced) Quoted Johnston 91.
\item[88] \textit{The Irish Review}, July/August, 1914.
\end{footnotes}
male/female opposition with that of colonial oppressor and oppressed and the universal 'right of a group victimised...to be on equal terms with others,'\textsuperscript{90} the central dilemma for Irish suffragists was that they were campaigning for a vote to a parliament from which they were seeking independence. Kiberd sees the linkage of Irish suffragism with 'West Britonism' as verging on the 'pathological.'\textsuperscript{91} But this was exactly the essence of the feminist/nationalist dilemma, where women were criticised 'for putting the interests of their sex before that of the Nation.' Ward cites this and the claim by Maud Gonne's Inghinidhe na hEireann (Daughters of Ireland), that to accept enfranchisement by a hostile parliament would be 'humiliating.'\textsuperscript{92} Milligan's close involvement with the Inghinidhe and with Gonne would have ensured that she too shared an ideology which Kiberd dismisses as 'pathological.' Milligan's feminism and particular brand of nationalism are demonstrated in her opposition to a Yeatsian 'Celtic Twilight' dialectic.

Milligan wrote to \textit{United Ireland} following a visit by Yeats to her home in Belfast in 1893. She registered concern about a literary movement which was removed from the reality of struggle; 'Irish literature cannot be developed in any hedged-in peaceful place, whilst a conflict is raging around. It must be in the thick of the fight.' Yeats's response in the following issue is as subliminal as it is patronising and evidences a misogyny which is shrouded in symbol and refers to a 'beauty' which belies the tone and facts of Milligan's correspondence. He writes; 'She ...wrote you a very beautiful letter...It is ...a pleasure to be misunderstood when the misunderstanding helps to draw out such a beautiful letter.'\textsuperscript{93} This arrogance is matched some years later when Yeats requests Milligan to postpone the 1798 centenary celebrations in Belfast so that he may more easily promote his first season of plays for the Irish Literary Theatre.\textsuperscript{94}

Propagandist and idealist again clashed when Yeats tried to appropriate credit for work which he had not witnessed and which had been promoted by Milligan on behalf of the Gaelic League. Milligan replied to

\textsuperscript{91} Kiberd,398.
\textsuperscript{92} Ward, 249
\textsuperscript{93} United Irishman, 16 December-23 December 1893.
Yeats’s admiration, that a play in the Irish language had solicited enthusiastic responses, by chastising him for referring to work which he had not witnessed and in which she ‘had taken part.’ She further categorised Yeats as a ‘West Briton,’ managed to mention the success of her ‘98 celebrations and finally reclaimed nationalist theatre experiments as the initial property of the Gaelic League rather than the Literary Theatre. This is a strong and clever rejoinder, one which could not be patronised with adjectives relating to ‘beauty’.

These encounters are cited to highlight Milligan’s resistance to male appropriation of female intentionality, a process which is further demonstrated by Milligan’s texts and the essentially male response to them. Furthermore, these public debates reflect the mixed ideology of the Revival.

Milligan’s *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, Part One of an Ossianic trilogy, was chosen by Yeats to open the second season of the Irish Literary Theatre at the Gaiety Theatre alongside Edward Martyn’s *Maeve*. *The Last Feast of the Fianna* begins with all the adornments of feasting but in contrasting elegiac mood following the routing of the Fianna at Gabhra. Fionn’s first utterance discards the inadequacies of Grania’s female powers of enchantment in favour of Oisin’s music, the single action which will lift hearts and the feast itself. Oisin’s caoin for the death of his son Oscar has been, he declares, the last of his music-making. Grania chastises him for constantly mourning death and ‘taking no heed to please the living.’ Niamhe appears offering immortality in the land of eternal youth. Oisin is Niamhe’s third choice - in fact he offers himself and in so doing denies his vow to the Fianna, an abdication which is treasonous. Milligan accentuates this portrayal of the bard and warrior as dreamer and irresponsible escapist. He is ‘not wise in the ways of women,’ and, as a ‘dreaming poet,’ he ‘has not learned three things are not to be looked for – leaves in winter, snow in summer, and silence in a woman’. The analogy of dreaming poet and Yeatsian spiritualist is clearly and consistently emphasised within the text. Part two, *Oisin in Tir na nOg*, does not attempt to portray a transformed Oisin. He is as aggressively bored by the joys of

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94 Johnstone, 94.
95 *The Daily Express*, 14-21 January 1899. (Milligan refers to a Tableau which she had staged in Letterkenny the previous summer. Much praised by Arthur Griffith, Yeats plagiarises Griffith’s critic.
96 Ibid.
everlasting youth as he had been depressed in the real world of Part One. To the piping of the fairy women, he retorts;

Silence the music there  
Lest I slay you

Of course, the irony of such an intention in the land of ‘eternal youth’ is obvious. Oisin’s infatuation with Niamhe’s beauty can terminate as suddenly and easily as it began. He falls victim to the same forces of ‘enchantment’ as those which drew him to Tir na nÓg in the first place. With even less ceremony and an even more brutal abdication, this time of Niamhe, he rushes back to Ireland to find his fianna.

Obtuse readings of the texts, and particularly Yeats’s failure to grasp Milligan’s sophisticated irony and veiled parody of male heroism point to a critical obtuseness which cannot accommodate feminist ideology or the irony within which it is couched. While Feeney, mistakenly credits Milligan for ‘producing the first completely Celtic Twilight play,’ Hogan diminishes the text with feminine adjectives ‘graceful’ and ‘slender’ and on another occasion refers to it as ‘consciously or even self-consciously poetic and mystical.’ The Freeman’s Journal, again, diminutively refers to ‘Miss Milligan’s little drama – simply a paraphrase from the old Gaelic story of Diarmuid and Grania’. The Daily Express refers to the ‘charm’ of the piece and states that;

If it has no other merits, it reproduces, at all events, in a vivid manner the main characteristics of the heroic age in Ireland.

Yeats’s esoteric and subjective interpretation again echoes those of the press; ‘Miss Milligan’s little play delighted me,’ he says, ‘because it has made in a very simple way and through the vehicle of Gaelic persons, that contrast between immortal beauty and the ignominy and mortality of life which is the central theme of ancient art.’ If this was indeed the central theme of ancient art, it was certainly not Milligan’s contemporary interpretation of it. To make matters worse, Yeats requested that Milligan write an article to outline the mythical background to The Last Feast of the Fianna. Milligan’s succinct reply

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97 Feeny, preface to The Last Feast of the Fianna quoted Johnston, 100, (unreferenced).
requires no explanation; 'an audience of Kerry peasants would have no need of background information."

Milligan's biographer, Sheila Johnston, relates that it was in the enthusiasm following the first visit by Yeats to Milligan in 1893 that she turned to drama by reworking a novel, *The Daughter of Donagh*. This was submitted to Lady Gregory who rejected the text on behalf of the Irish Literary Theatre by stating that 'Yeats considered that it changed scene too often to be a practical proposition.' Perhaps it was not simply the 'scene changes' which disturbed Yeats.

*The Daughter of Donagh* is an allegory of Cromwellian rule. It challenges colonialism and advocates the de-Anglicisation of Ireland as the single prerequisite to a return to justice and equity. The narrative is linear and based on the exploits of the heroine, Onora. Her father has been evicted from his land and she witnesses his hanging. Her only solace is revenge which she executes by marrying the soldier who has been granted the rights of her father's land.

The representation of Ireland is not that of heroic legend but of an enslaved community whose only hope of freedom lies with bandits who inhabit mountain caves. While the women haggle over food and a man to provide it, the priest describes the landscape as; 'the wilds of Ireland.' There is nothing edifying in Milligan's evocation of past heroism, current colonialism or of the environment in which it occurred. The play is a harrowing rendering of wrongdoing and of a war without possibilities.

Opposition to gender stereotyping is underlined while the archetypal stereotype of the female goddess as object, is subverted and transformed. Onora is active subject, a real and living entity participating within the male culture of the fight for freedom, a stance which, as regarded by Maurice, "for a woman would be 'impossible.'"

Milligan's feminism interrogates the authorised female figure, the conventional representation of woman. Militant feminism is refuted without endorsing the nationalism from which it emanated. But, the double ending prevents closure. On the one hand, the symbolism of the act joins the realms

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99 Ibid.
100 Quoted Johnston, 101-102.
of myth. On the other, the reality of the act, grounded in temporality, creates a state of living death for both victor and victimised, a vengeance not worth wreaking. The reader may accept either or a compromise of the two. Whatever, the ending is feminist in its openness and the text as an entirety, defies Hogan’s simplistic reading of it as ‘a stilted historical melodrama’. Milligan recreates Yeats in the character of Maurice, the West Briton who offers his hand in marriage and is rejected by Onora whose vision is based on vengeance rather than love. Milligan’s portrayal of conventional sexism in Maurice’s misunderstanding of Onora also recalls the relationship between Yeats and Maud Gonne. Onora rejects Maurice and favours the indigenous warrior Seaghan. Besotted, Maurice stampedes on, ludicrously wooing a ‘poor little hand, little white hand, trembling like a wounded bird.’ Yeats would hardly have appreciated the hyperbole.

Conclusion

So, quietly ignored by the Irish Literary Theatre, Milligan was not commissioned or produced by the Ulster Literary Theatre. Yet this exclusion may have been self voluntary. Her poem ‘Fionnuala’, which she contributed to the second issue of Uładh, appeared alongside the very Editorial which signalled the early dissolution of the ULT’s original mission by introducing the ‘provincial’ in opposition to the ‘national’. Milligan’s nationalism would have abhorred even a hint towards a provincialism which dissociated itself from the rest of Ireland. So too, the allegiance of Bulmer Hobson to the theatre movement was short-lived. Bardon cites Hobson’s involvement, as early as 1905 in founding a branch of the militantly separatist Irish Republican Brotherhood. Radical politics of this potency could not find comfort within the Northern theatre movement. So too, Milligan’s feminism, conveniently obscure for Southern critics, would have been scorned by the men of the Ulster movement, if they would have been capable of recognising it at all. The loss to the legacy is significant in terms of the potential formative effect of a

102 Daughter of Donagh 25.  
body of female work. Historically and culturally easy stereotypes are challenged and potentially even transformed in her exceptionally modern analyses. As Milligan’s biographer comments in harmony with Ward, ‘the received view of history is the male view’\(^{104}\) and within a context of historical revisionism, ‘there is little knowledge of the importance of Alice Milligan in a critical period in Irish history.’\(^{105}\) A suitable appendage to this statement might be that, neither is there any knowledge of Alice Milligan as propagandist playwright, the very being which the Ulster Literary Theatre was founded to promote. In the words of Forrest Reid, writing of the achievement of the Ulster Literary Theatre, in 1922, there ‘are only two forms of drama it has as yet mastered – folk comedy and fantastic farce’.\(^{106}\) That brief synopsis might have been enlivened by the inclusion of a playwright of Milligan’s imaginative ability and feminist range.

If Yeats was the prime mover of ‘the split’ which led to cultural polarity, provincialism, the Ulster Literary Theatre’s founding ideology can be seen as anachronistic and an impossible reality within the political climate of the time. It can be surmised that the public response, or lack of it, to *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, in comparison with what might have occurred, was mild. The choice of play points not only to the ‘idealism’ of the founders, but to an element of naivety. Exiled from Revivalism and Modernism, the Ulster Literary Theatre eventually paid no more than lip service to both. The rejection of the sexuality of myth, as defined by Welch, and its substitution by ‘Ulster common sense’ (Kennedy) finds its embodiment in the character of Thompson whose values reinstate the male, the temporal, the farcical.

The social/literary revolution as envisaged by Joyce and Synge did not enter the vocabulary of the Ulster Literary Theatre. The centrality of the feminine form and, in turn, of female sexuality, as characterised by Molly Bloom (*Ulysses*), Nora (*In The Shadow Of The Glen*), and anti-patriarchy in the recreation of identity (*The Playboy of the Western World*) are absent from MacNamara’s parody, *The Mist that does be on the Bog*. While this play parodies Synge’s mannerism, his anthropological exploits are presented as

105 Ibid.
106 Forrest Reid, ‘Eighteen Years Work’, *Times Irish Supplement*, 5 December 1922.
feminine whims of fancy through characters Cissie and Gladys. Male rationality is underlined through the character of Fred who symbolises a broader masculinity, that of Ulster itself. Irish manhood, on the other hand, is epitomised by drunken blether and late night journeys home across the bog, depicting a backward, unindustrialised irresponsible nation.

Finally, in the treatment of sectarianism and the failure to attempt its analysis or accept its power, the Ulster Literary Theatre created a tradition of satirical farce which kept theatre safely confined to rural quaintness, unchallenging images of Ulster, an Ulster which liked to see itself as friendly and benign in its cultures of division. In the words of John Hewitt, they:

Had to shed precisely those elements which lie deep in the life of our people.-Religion and Politics.- Not one syllable has emerged to betray the wee red lamp, or alternatively, the picture of King William on the wall, the concocting of fairy-tales in a local accent.107

It was not until the early sixties in the work of Sam Thompson that the reality of sectarianism was presented to challenge Unionist hegemony. The exception is Mixed Marriage which defines sectarianism by imaging domestic chauvinism and introduces woman as potential subject. The absence of this text from the Ulster Literary Theatre’s programme is further indication of the gradual abdication of their initial ideology.

The political framework, based on the concept of ‘absolute power’, a totally male prerogative, which goes some way towards defining Northern Irish ethnicity, is eventually supported by the drama of the Ulster Literary Theatre, a far cry from the founding ideology. This legacy has been both endorsed and challenged by its inheritors who have had to seek their own methods of dealing with it.

Yet, The Ulster Literary Theatre must be credited with having established the first regional theatre in Ireland. The company’s theatrical, if not political ambition was prodigious. Seasons at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, (1907-1909) were followed by an English tour in 1911 and a tour of the United

States in 1912. While residencies at the Grand Opera House continued until 1934, the name change to the Ulster Theatre in 1915 seems significant. Ophelia Byrne summarises comments by Forrest Reid, Gerard Morrow, (MacNamara), and Sam Hanna Bell, all of which suggest, without detailing, a split in loyalties.\textsuperscript{109} The ULT's achievement in founding and promoting an Ulster theatre genre and movement provided a dubious legacy to future generations. It is one whose language ideology and form has been so firmly instated with sectarianism at its centre, that it has taken almost a century to move beyond its confines to contemplate a contemporary Modernism in Ulster within the work of Frank McGuinness, Marie Jones and Anne Devlin. Sexual hybridity and identity, the man woman and the woman man, a feature of the Modernists Joyce and Beckett in particular, have no space within early Ulster drama. Uncomplicated masculine values of binary opposites present a rational and ordered world which is incontestible.

If Kiberd's revisionist appraisal of the Revival had applied to Ulster and if the ULT had maintained faith with founding ideology, one may only surmise the outcome. Kiberd acknowledges 'the extent to which political leaders from Pearse to Connolly drew on the ideas of poets and playwrights'\textsuperscript{110}. If the 'political leaders' of a new Northern Ireland state 'drew on the ideas of (their) playwrights', the conviction of masculine rule, 'absolute power' and sectarianism were easily absorbable. Without a Modernist movement in Ulster, and without a strong base of Socialism, sectarianism has ruled in metaphor and realism until the nineteen eighties. Graham Reid unravels the nightmare which Ulster had become while Gary Mitchell portrays its daily routine.

\textsuperscript{109} Byrne, 40-41.
\textsuperscript{110} Kiberd, \textit{Inventing Ireland}, 4.
Chapter Two

All the King's Horses and All the King's Men: Patriarchy as a Function of Sectarianism in the work of Graham Reid and Gary Mitchell

Introduction

The comic representation of sectarianism in Ulster Theatre up to the 1960s has been challenged by playwrights who have had to live within its orbit, and chart its movement from the 1970s onwards in Northern Ireland. It is not so much the concept itself, but its fall-out, which they examine. In doing so, their analyses reveal other constituents. Sectarianism may license a host of related prejudices. It may in fact itself be an ancillary of other forces. This chapter examines a monolithic Ulster patriarchy which is presented and deconstructed by contemporary playwrights, Graham Reid and Gary Mitchell.

Both playwrights share a knowledge of working class Protestantism and devise their respective scenarios from that. Reid's mature education brought him, later in life than most, into the middle-class milieu of the respectable face of Unionism. The age differential between Reid and Mitchell reflects the focus, Reid on the 70s and 80s, Mitchell on the march of conflict into the late 90s. Reid's television dramas, The Billy Plays, won popular acclaim because while they represented a Protestant working class culture, the focus never strayed far from the living room and pub. Belfast's Donegall Road provided a 'soap-opera' setting as comfortable as that of Coronation Street. Yet, the distinguishing factor was the background of Loyalist sectarianism.

While Reid examines sectarianism within a broad focus, Mitchell contextualises the resulting mayhem within a very specific location and contemporary framework. Together, they create a continuum of perpetrators and victims of violence. Male perpetrators are matched by female victims whose identities are imprisoned within the structures of a male hierarchy.

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1 See Chapter One.
Their shared understanding of the female psyche depicts one, not in opposition to, but isolated within a male hierarchy. Ervine’s Mrs Rainey (Mixed Marriage) becomes the prototype. The issue of a sectarianism which imprisons as much as it defines identities, seems to have eluded most critics. Reid has been critically assessed and categorised, Mitchell as a newcomer has received less attention. For this reason, their work here, is analysed consecutively.

Reid

Graham Reid creates a sectarian world where its proponents lurk in the shadows of Over The Bridge concocting Stewart Parker’s ‘seepage,’ which permeates every social stratum. It is a habitus of social and ideological relations whose government has lost control. As Desmond Bell illustrates, sectarianism is not treated as a structure of ‘personal prejudice’, a structure which he sees as conspiring with ‘official definitions of sectarianism in deflecting attention from the political realm...the result of an unresolved, post-colonial situation’. Reid’s sectarianism is an abstract which does not adjudicate between victim and perpetrator. In his own words: ‘no one is totally innocent and no one is totally guilty’. Similarly, according to D. E. S. Maxwell: ‘there has been a transmission of government by terror...all injured and injuring, like Shakespeare’s “appetite”, the “universal wolf” that at last eats itself up’. Maxwell continues: ‘public upheaval always at least borders private insecurities, associated, if only as metaphors of each other, within the personality of Reid’s Belfast’. If oppositional elements do not meet in combinations, the injured with the injuring, the private with the public, the male with the female, they collide stridently in Reid’s texts to unleash elements which otherwise might have remained untouched beneath a surface of respectability and stability.

3 Stewart Parker, Introduction to Over The Bridge, See Chapter One.
Christopher Murray contends that Reid ‘stares into the desperate abyss of contemporary life’.\(^7\) In the abyss there is no literal or metaphorical anchor. It is an anarchy of floating and colliding elements uncontrolled, uncontrolling and uncontrollable. The ‘abyss’ can be read as metonym for Bell’s ‘unresolved post-colonial situation’.\(^8\) Reid’s plays have produced a range of critical commentary which borders on the political and, as Maxwell demonstrates, can be enigmatic. He hints without explanation that the political has given way to other forces which remain to be identified:

> When the imagination has fully assimilated it, the present violence may be seen as an outlet of stresses of which it is not the cause, which find expression in politically motivated campaigns for reasons which do not originate in politics at all.\(^9\)

Maxwell’s prescience, although ill-defined, becomes reality in the later decade, within the texts of Gary Mitchell. The metaphorical realism which Reid establishes as a framework for analysis of a latent patriarchy which underlines and informs every aspect of Northern Ireland society has not yet been ‘fully assimilated’. Reid clarifies Maxwell’s theory and develops it. His first play, *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* (1979), is the manifesto for the detailed and more specific analyses of later plays. Together they present and dissect ‘the unresolved post-colonial situation’ which is Northern Ireland. The only exit is via the Liverpool boat, a reality for Eric Alexander in *The Hidden Curriculum* (1982), a possibility for David in *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* and a fantasy for Victor in *The Closed Door*, (1980). Within ‘the abyss’, it is difficult to appreciate Lynda Henderson’s argument on the ‘anthropocentric’ nature of Reid’s vision. Her essay in *Across A Roaring Hill*,\(^10\) necessitates analysis as means of introduction to elements of Reid’s texts which are of central importance to concepts of colonialism, sectarianism and gender.

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\(^8\) Bell.

Declan Kiberd, writing on *Across A Roaring Hill*, ‘baulks’ at the polemical subtitle: *The Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland*. He states that a true Irish intellectual is both Catholic and Protestant...spiritually hyphenated. Why use the word ‘Protestant’ in the subtitle at all? Is it finally less embarrassing than ‘Unionist’?¹¹

Lynda Henderson finds the terminology, ‘attractive’ and flawed.¹² In distinguishing between the intuitive imagination (Catholic) and the rational imagination (Protestant), both ‘are variants of Christianity’ and as such, produce ‘permutations which defy classification on religious lines’. Henderson’s substitute for the religious distinction ‘and one which makes allowance for the recreative interaction between inheritance and individuality, is that between a theocentric and an anthropocentric imagination’, the former based on intuitive belief and lying ‘beyond the use of reason’, the latter a direct descendant of the Renaissance/Reformation and based on ‘man’s capacity to affect his circumstances and shape his destiny’.¹³ If this distinction seems, in Henderson’s terminology, ‘attractive’, its application is less so. Under this terminology, Brian Friel becomes not only ‘theocentric’, but, ‘misanthropic’ and ‘misogynist’.¹⁴ Reid, John Boyd and Martin Lynch are uncomfortably linked as exponents of the ‘anthropocentric’ and, as such, ‘philanthropists’.¹⁵

The anthropocentric ‘is benevolently disposed towards the nature, the aspirations, the errors and struggles of man and remains convinced that those struggles can be attended by success.’¹⁶ A pre-emptive look at the endings of Reid’s plays, without, at this stage, examining their structural relevance in terms of closure, points to the continuation of struggle, of violence, a widening of the abyss and no attention by the success or philanthropy which Henderson advocates as the partner of struggle.¹⁷

¹² Henderson, 197.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Ibid., 202.
¹⁵ Ibid., 199.
¹⁶ Ibid., 199.
¹⁷ At this point I refer to endings and imagery, contradicting Henderson to illustrate that Reid’s work
George Sampson is smothered by his son in the finale of *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, in a literal and metaphorical act which equates with Maxwell’s image of the ‘universal wolf’.\(^{18}\) Dorothy, sister Doris and the whole family are brought together at the end of *Dorothy* for what the audience anticipates as a scene of unimaginable horror. Victor’s reconciliation with wife and mother-in-law in *The Closed Door* is shattered by another revelation of his inveterate lying while the farcical ending of *The Hidden Curriculum* leaves the two thugs Boyd and Allen in their underwear, as the Alexanders flee for the boat. Described by Fintan O’Toole as ‘improbable if dramatic’, this final ‘triumph is pure farce’\(^{19}\) and together with the violence, physical and spiritual, of the other finales, does not realise Henderson’s thesis of human ‘struggle...attended by success’. In Reid’s work, the whole thrust is towards the opposite, the very negation of individual struggle by forces beyond individual control.

The next feature of the anthropocentric imagination is ‘a realism which rejects both image and symbol’.\(^{20}\) A single image predominates Reid’s texts, that of the animal, the dog, the insect, the tadpole and in his males’ references to woman as ‘bitch’. Ruby and Eric, in *The Closed Door*, live ‘like insects in a cave’.\(^{21}\) Doyle likens himself to a tadpole ‘in a tropical fish tank’\(^{22}\) on being invited to George’s house for dinner (*The Death of Humpty Dumpty*). Victor is both a monster and a mongrel and the new bed which Doris purchases for her dog, becomes a recurring and powerful symbol throughout *Dorothy*. Allen’s sexism in *The Hidden Curriculum*, continually manifests itself through the ‘bitch’ reference: ‘If he’d lost his dog, he wouldn’t be whistling at a bitch like you’.\(^{23}\) Acts of male violence against women in *The Closed Door, Dorothy* and *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* are accompanied by varieties of animal imagery. The pornographic image of Caroline, naked with the placard reading ‘Teacher’s Pet’ hung around her neck, combines both sexism and the


\(^{20}\) Henderson, 212.


reduction by it of the human to the animal. So prevalent is Reid’s use of this imagery, that one critic voices a ‘suspicion never far from Reid’s plays, that people are pigs’; while another would have the perpetrators of violence ‘brought in cages to the Peacock Theatre’, and Reid himself, in interview has referred to people as ‘social animals’. It would seem that one critic’s ‘philanthropy’ is seen by others as a notion of society closer in kind to the animal kingdom. So, Reid makes the dehumanising features of his animal imagery particularly relevant to female gender and to victims of patriarchy of whatever form. He condenses that imagery within the narrative of The Death of Humpty Dumpty, to create larger metaphors relating to colonialism and patriarchy.

George Sampson, the History teacher of Humpty Dumpty, is in his late forties and married to Heather. They have two daughters, Judith, aged twenty, Mary who is in her early teens, and a son David, who is in his late teens. George is having a secret affair with colleague, Caroline Wilson. Their love making on Cave Hill one evening is interrupted by a group of paramilitaries who are abandoning a body. Subsequently, they trace George from his car registration and shoot him on his home doorstep. George is paralysed from the neck down. In hospital he is befriended by paraplegic, Gerry Doyle, a working class catholic from the Falls Road. When Doyle dies, his voice tortures George as a very conscious commentary on George’s every fear. As George becomes a schizophrenic mixture of himself and Doyle, the respectable middle-class father and teacher becomes a foul mouthed and embittered misogynist. Wife Heather finds his pornographic diaries and the two realities of the secret past and current reality, leave George in total isolation.

Henderson’s literal reading obscures Reid’s signifiers, image and symbol. George’s own situation becomes part of the imagery. The image maker, through Doyle’s voice has become ‘the eyeless, legless chickenless egg’, the Humpty Dumpty of nursery rhyme and ‘a goldfish. In the end you tip in enough ant eggs to smother the bastard’, an image of George’s final

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26 Death of, 39.
demise. Reid’s compelling and harrowing linear narrative of personal and domestic worlds torn asunder by violence, does lend itself to interpretations such as that of Henderson.

In summation, she states;

In a sharp psychological documentation, Reid shows George’s understandable translation into an insufferably bitter ingrate, who shows a raw courage in refusing the anodyne of persuading himself of the advantages of an invertebrate existence.  

‘Raw courage’ has little to do with the depiction of George as fallen patriarch, and ‘psychological documentation’ does not account for Reid’s creation of Doyle as commentator and George’s mental co-habiter. Perhaps, Reid does not fit easily into the anthropocentric mould at all, and his naturalistic form disguises subtexts which he employs to make broader socio-political statements. Like his animal imagery, numerous historical references interject the text and transform it beyond the level of either psychology or documentation. History mingles with animal imagery to centralise Reid’s theoretical analysis of Northern Ireland. 

In The Death of Humpty Dumpty, George’s identity as father is related to his profession as History teacher and both Doyle and son David acknowledge lessons learnt from him. Doyle learns that the Protestant Volunteers built the first chapel in Belfast and David’s views on John Redmond are supported by his father. The God in the class-room transfers to God in the living room, but not in the hospital ward. As paraplegic, George has lost his ‘empire’ and is ‘stuck in the trenches’. He has become victim and footsoldier, one of his own subjects of historical analysis.

Lionel Pilkington accepts the prevalent view that Reid’s plays deal with the consequences of violence but refutes the same argument which states that the plays are not concerned ‘with an analysis of its politics or history’. Reid’s references to the Protestant Volunteers, the UVF, the Empire, the Unionist Party, are mostly within the context of gender, in scenes relating to son

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27 Henderson, 213.
28 Death of, 45 & 46.
David's first date with a girl, to daughter Judith's marriage, or to George's lost virility. Doyle's first speech, as Pilkington points out, while distinguishing him as Catholic, highlights the contemporary irrelevance of 'the anti-sectarian gestures of the eighteenth century Protestant Volunteers'.

Doyle: There it is, Belfast...The Royal Victoria Hospital where I died. Milltown Cemetery where I'm buried. Doyle's Trinity (pause). Over there's the City Hospital. It used to be the old Union Workhouse. Of course I never knew that. George told me. He also told me that Belfast is built on piles, it has no hard rocky foundations. The Protestant Volunteers formed a guard of honour when the first chapel opened. They even took up a collection. George told me all those things. He was a schoolteacher. We met in hospital. I liked him. His wife and kids were nice, friendly...They were nice people. But I had to be in this (slapping the arm of his wheelchair) before I could meet people like that.

This prologue introduces several contradictions and opposites, the present and past tense, the setting of 'bright sunshine' against the references to hospitals and cemetery, the character and the device of Doyle speaking from the grave, all underlined by the central fact 'that Belfast is built on piles, it has no rocky foundations'. The foundations are of human manufacture. Like the narrative movement of the play itself, from domestic stability to its total fissure, the city itself may be structurally unstable, standing securely one day, sliding the next, like the generosity of the Volunteers during periods of stability manifesting its opposite in the sectarianism of the present day. There are no constants, no certainties and where these do seem to exist, as in George's living room, they are held together by a delicate membrane of lies and half truths. Through the character and device of Doyle, Reid creates a set of images which expand to allow the entire play to become a large single image alongside its compelling linear narrative.

The initial contradictions within Doyle's speech are carried through by further references to history's role within contemporary society. George, the history teacher, disconnects history from the business of everyday life and, in doing so, reveals what will become the material of his own disintegration,

30 Ibid., 5.
31 Death of, 5.
patriarchal sexism. Daughter Judith, like wife Heather, in George's view, have no need of history, as his male needs can be satisfied by 'bare thighs and frilly knickers'. As Pilkington states: 'history is wholly irrelevant to sexual desire' and the same axiom underlines son David's brief discussion of Asquith, Redmond and the Ulster Volunteer Force. David makes it clear that he has achieved a Grade One for his essay, to impress his father and seek permission to ask a young woman on a date. David uses history as a means to an end, in exactly the same way as his father whose history notebooks are, later in the play, revealed to be diaries of sexual exploits with other women. History becomes an instrument of empowerment rather than enlightenment and, in the narrative, a disguise for clandestine activity on the part of the males. David's astute, if fairly innocent manoeuvres, reach serious proportions in George's double-life. In essence David is in training to become George.

The juxtaposition of George's clandestine love-making (when the audience knows that he has pretended to Heather that he was attending a parent/teacher meeting), with the presence of the paramilitaries, links the subversive nature of the two acts, the sexual and the sectarian, the former harmless in itself but devastating in its consequences and in the betrayal of Heather, the latter devastating in its effect on George's subsequent life. One recalls Reid's manifesto, 'no-one is totally innocent and no-one is totally guilty'. Right-thinking, patriarchal George is as guilty as the more obviously guilty paramilitaries. Both lurk in the dim-light which protects personae who cannot be revealed by day. George is shot because they, the paramilitaries, mistakenly, think they can be identified by him. In other words, in the context of the paramilitary act, George is innocent. In the context of the adultery which brought him there, he is guilty. It is this ambiguity which is an early signifier of openness in the text. Pilkington describes, in reference to the biblical terms employed in the conversation between George and Caroline, how these 'suggest ways in which the violence inflicted on George has a certain moral or psychological appropriateness...the pathos of George's suffering as an

32 Ibid., 11.
33 Pilkington, 19.
"innocent" victim of the crisis is complicated by recurring suggestions of its irony. At the same time, sexism and sectarianism have found a single location.

The imagery of the disintegration of George's identity serves to itemise its components which have been shown in operation in the earlier part of the play. George as 'God in the classroom' becomes, in the scene with the headmaster, a pupil:

Martin: You'll be pleased to know that your 'O' Level results are very good George.
George: You mean I've passed.

His role as patriarch has been taken over by David, now 'the man of the house'. But, the most torturous loss, which we have seen in terms of athletic triumph with Caroline ('you've ruined my triple jump') is the sexual, discussed with Doyle and eventually through Doyle's voice becomes the obsession which turns George into an unsocial 'monster'. Doyle links sexual prowess with George's previous authority as school teacher, underlining the loss of both:

Doyle: It's not my hopes I want to raise. To think it used to embarrass me at dances, and in the mornings. (Looking down at himself) Come up and see me sometime. Oh, please sir, don't keep me in after school.

In the scene between ex-lover Caroline and wife Heather, Reid weaves an intricate pattern of double-entendres as George attempts to get his own back on Caroline, performing, temporarily as lord and master over the two women. This is a single moment of intense pleasure for George who enjoys deceiving Heather and embarrassing Caroline in an absurd parody of his former self. Caroline's piano playing is transcribed by George into a metaphor of sexual activity, Heather having played only once or twice since her marriage, Caroline, in George's words, having had 'more time to keep it up'. Caroline retaliates. She informs George that she is to be married to his successor, the

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35 Pilkington, 15-29.
36 Death of, 17.
37 Ibid., 26.
new Head of History. Heather is immune to the subtleties of these innuendos, but Reid places the scene immediately following an explosive outburst by Heather to George. She has not lost credence, while George is shown to direct his anger towards both women although one is not aware of his strategy. Again, the impotence, in every sense, of his current situation is highlighted. Caroline triumphs and by proxy, Heather also. This charade of polite middle-class chatter and tea drinking operates as a symbol of the mechanics of the play as a whole. Every context has another level of meaning. Here, Heather thinks one thing and Caroline another. At the same time, George is back in control intellectually enjoying if only temporarily, a sense of his past power. The reductive and triumphant parting shot by Caroline reverses the power base, with George beaten at his own game. (She is marrying his incumbent, the new head of the History Department).

In another of Reid’s recurring reversals, Willie, an orderly, tortures and bribes George, enjoying the reversal of class power but, more significantly, linking the physical effects of George’s situation with the political: ‘I’m the boss around here. There it is, like a member of the Unionist Party stripped of its power of independent action’. The threat to male sexuality is equated with the similar political threat to Unionist supremacy. While Willie taunts George, his schizophrenic self, inhabited by Doyle’s voice, that of Catholic becomes totally unmanageable, and in Heather’s words, George becomes a coward unable to ‘reach out’.

Heather: Can’t you see what you’re doing to them, George? Can’t you see how much they love you and want to respect you? You’re a coward George. (He looks up surprised) Yes, you’re a coward. You’re a snivelling coward. All this filthy talk, all this nastiness - you’re afraid. You’re afraid to reach out to them. You’re afraid in case they reject you. This way you can make them reject you, and put the blame on them.

This political analogy is echoed by George’s final speech to David without admitting Heather’s ability to rationalise the situation:

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38 Ibid. 45.
39 Ibid., 21.
40 Ibid., 41.
George: I didn’t want to hurt any of you, but I was afraid. I was afraid of becoming an exhibit, I was afraid of being smothered. (Pause) I didn’t want to spit on Judith, I wanted to reach out and touch her, but I couldn’t. I had nothing to reach out with...nothing to touch her with.41

The physical inability to ‘reach out’ has become a spiritual inability. Pilkington interprets the play as one which ‘concentrates on the traumatic suffering of a middle-class Protestant (George), but which is introduced and concluded by a working-class Catholic (Doyle), conveys an impression that the experience of a paraplegic also serves a dramatisation of the social alienation experienced by working-class Catholics in Northern Ireland...the main aspects of George’s trauma serve as a metonymy for the position of Catholics in the North.’42 While not constituting the whole story, the ‘Catholic’ image is certainly part of it and one which, together with patriarchy and sexism reveals the transformation from supremacy to suppressed. Supremacy is Protestant, middle-class, patriarchal and male. Its opposite is expressed by the Catholic, the working class, the child, the female, all of which George becomes. George’s original attitude to women is hypocritical and two-faced. As patriarch, his advice to David is to ‘bear in mind that the girls you take out have feelings too. You must treat them the way you would want a stranger to treat one of your sisters’.43 Immediately, we witness George in performance with mistress Caroline and the introduction of Reid’s favourite imagery:

George: I’m at a lecture on the Pig in the Irish Economy
Caroline: Gee, thanks, that really is a compliment.
George: (rolling on top of her) Well let’s face it, you are a bit of a pig for it.44

The male pleasure of sex is interpreted by George, as some kind of distorted animal behaviour on the part of female. Similarly, the pornographic photograph of Caroline with the placard ‘Teacher’s Pet’ not only serves as an image whereby woman is rendered powerless through pornography, but one in which she is depicted as animal. If George has become Catholic, through the invasion by Doyle’s voice, he has also become close, in his and Doyle’s

41 Ibid., 54/55.
42 Pilkington, 16.
43 Death of, 10.
44 Ibid.
terms to woman. This, for George, is the worst reversal of all.

Doyle’s Voice: Well George, this is it. What are you going to do George? Are you going to let her smother you? She does everything else for you. Now she wants to think for you and talk for you.

George’s only defence against this final ‘humiliation’ in a few blunt words, encapsulates the neatly disguised sexism of the old George in ‘Get up you stupid bitch’. The language also relegates George to Doyle’s status, working class, Catholic and emasculated. The ‘Pig in the Irish Economy’ could well be George himself, and, again there is the juxtaposition of sex and history.

George’s excuse to wife Heather endorses his profession as history expert and relegates Caroline to the role which is actually his, as he rolls ‘on top of her’. Reid combines history and sexism in the personification of George.

Reid’s treatment of women characters is significant in that they are represented as commodities of male discourse. Staff Nurse Connolly serves to highlight Doyle’s gauche sexism beside George’s good middle-class behaviour in the middle of the play.

Doyle: Georgie, the difference between my Sadie and Staff is like the difference between this wheelchair and a Rolls Royce. If I ever get this right leg working, Staff Connolly’s the first thing I’m going to throw it over.

Sister Thompson is, to Doyle ‘the kind of woman you could love without going near the bedroom’. She is the stereotypical strong woman whose sense of authority, in male terminology, must be equated with asexuality. In Doyle’s and George’s view, she is unusual and yet, Reid carefully emphasises that Sister Thompson does have a boyfriend and in another of his reversals, focuses on a telephone row between the two, giving actual evidence of Sister’s own version of the difficulties in coping with the suffering to which she must administer. Her antidote is “to have a row with” her boyfriend. The actual telephone row, like every syllable of Reid’s is pertinent.

45 Death of, 41.
46 Ibid., 26.
47 Death of, 30
It follows Heather's discovery of the diaries, her rejection of George and Sister's confrontation with George on the subject.

Sister: I've told you before, sometimes I'm not fit company. This is one of those times. If I went up there tonight we'd have another big row...What?...No...Do people have to die before I get in a bad mood?...No, I couldn't talk about it...Because you're not involved, you're not part of it...Will you please stop shouting...I'M NOT SHOUTING...I'LL PAY HER FOR THE BLOODY CHICKEN IF THAT'LL MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER (Willie enters) OH GET STUFFED

Here, Sister has become subject and, as previously in the text when she adopts Reid's male terminology in referring to Willie as animal, she approaches the same in juxtaposing the chicken with telling the boyfriend to 'get stuffed'. Sister is an outsider 'from somewhere over the border'. She is also woman in a male world and epitomises, through Reid's signifiers, the woman who has had to become male to survive, has had to deny her own sexuality to survive professionally. In linear narrative terms, Heather's disclosure of the diaries and George's pornography, together with the presence of the 'animal', Willie, ensure that Sister has had enough of male behaviour to endure more of it in the company of the boyfriend and his loving mother. Sister becomes the sole survivor by washing her hands of an intimate male relationship while pledging to stay true, in a professional capacity, to George who is no longer actively male. Heather has rejected him. Daughter Judith has had to reject not only George, but because of him, boyfriend Eric. None of these women can function with men while George is at his most despicable and sexist. In rejecting George, they also have to reject, perhaps temporarily, their other male relationships. Finally, they are left alone and isolated, with the mantle passed to son David who will start the whole business all over again, unless the process is stopped by women, albeit as victims, who have had to endure a terrible catharsis and reinterpretation of the world around them.

Reid's women, in rejection of the male, become subjects towards the end of the play, with Sister paving the way, symbolically and literally. Even Caroline, who can substitute George with his successor, Norman, in her self-
interested objectivity, demonstrates a maleness which has been George's
preserve in the earlier part of the play. For Heather, it is not because of
George's present situation, but his past, that she must reject him to rebuild her
'shattered life'. Judith too, abandons Eric and George, while Sister can no
longer endure her boyfriend's obtuseness. The opposition of male/female co-
exists within a pattern of the disintegration of other social units and takes on
symbolic significance within them. While the nuclear family has disintegrated
dramatically, in *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, Reid uses the same image of
disintegration or deviance from a norm to inform other texts: Boyd and Allen
(*The Hidden Curriculum*) are from broken homes, Doris (*Dorothy*) prefers to
rear a dog than a family, Victor and Doreen (*The Closed Door*), have a
childless marriage, while Dunne is separated (*The Hidden Curriculum*). In the
same text, Frank is widowed and Winnie is spinster. Accepted social norms
have been transgressed without any overt questioning of them. At the
epicentre, women have been betrayed and have to come to terms with the
consequences.

Similarly, a state of siege against the forces of sectarianism becomes a
metaphor of the abnormality of existence, epitomised by the image of the
closed door, by Eric and Ruby's home siege in *The Hidden Curriculum*,
Dorothy's 'imprisonment' in her own home, (*Dorothy*), and the staff room of
*The Hidden Curriculum*, under self-imposed siege in its irrelevance to life
outside. The go-betweens are men of violence. Violence in the outside world
is literal, inside, it is psychological. In *Dorothy*, both are combined. One world
exists by reason of the other to blur in co-existence. (No-one is totally
innocent. No-one is totally guilty. We are social animals.) Both physical and
psychological violence are exclusively male preserves. The female victims, of
necessity, become outsiders. Paramilitary power equates with domestic male
authority and male dominance of women in *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*.
Protestant identity and male sexism enter an equation which becomes fully
realised within the later play, *Dorothy*.

The disintegration of George's original identity shows it as the sham it

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49 Ibid., 53.
was, and in its disempowerment, the suffering mess it has become and caused. Reid makes George, as paraplegic, the human embodiment of a whole range of suppressions including what Pilkington identifies as 'the alienated Catholic'. It could be argued that the coloniser has become colonised and that *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* advocates decolonisation, represented by the smothering of George, as the only solution for Northern Ireland.

In the preface to *The Coloniser and the Colonised*, Memmi states:

> It was probably sufficient to describe with precision the facts of colonisation, the manner in which the coloniser was bound to act, the slow and inevitable destruction of the colonised, to bring to light the absolute iniquity of colonisation; and, at the same time, to unveil the fundamental instability of it and predict its demise. My only merit was to have endeavoured to describe an unbearable, therefore unacceptable, aspect of reality, one which was destined to provoke continuing upheavals, costly for everyone.

The 'instability' rests within the very foundations, the piles on which Belfast has been constructed, and the metaphysical instability as represented by the fate of George. Memmi adds that, 'if colonisation destroys the colonised, it also rots the coloniser'. Sartre, in the introduction to the same, in reference to what he calls the 'death-struggle of colonialism', adds the following:

> A petrified ideology devotes itself to regarding human beings as talking beasts. No one can treat a man like a dog without first regarding him as a man. The impossible dehumanisation of the oppressed, on the other side of the coin, becomes the alienation of the oppressor.

Here is the methodology behind Reid's animal imagery and his use of it to highlight both individual and collective oppression (Doyle, Dorothy, Eric, Heather and Ruby) - in turn Catholic, women, sectarian targets and its employment by potential oppressors, Boyd and Allen, David, George, Willie: all male. George, too, following his own subtle 'dehumanising of the oppressed' endures 'the alienation' of both oppressor and oppressed.

The colony, in *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, exists in George and Heather's living room where the adoring slaves await the arrival home of the

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master. All activity is in anticipation of his arrival: 'That's enough Mary, your father wants to relax when he comes home'. In this initial scene, following Doyle's prologue, Reid can turn a children's squabble into a political image:

Heather: (Looking at the puzzle) Ah, you're doing very well. You've got the wrong head on that body.

Mary: Which one?

Heather: That one. (Reaching out and picking up a piece) His head can't be going left if his feet are going right. Not unless his head is on a swivel or he's a politician.  

The head going left with the feet going right is an image of disjunction underlined by Heather's remark about politicians. The situation has been created by David, whom we later see as the inheritor of George's patriarchy. The jigsaw muddle is an image of George's fate, and, the stability of the living room shows early symptoms of disintegration. Significantly, it is resolved by Heather. In essence, this mini-scene reflects the broader dimensions of the play as a whole. In the same scene, there is direct reference to the Empire, to the concept of imperialism and the ease with which it can either continue or disintegrate. Talking of Judith's boyfriend, George has the following to say: 'I'll be as dignified in my resentment of him as your father was towards me. It's the old Empire Syndrome you know. Let one go and before you know it they're all gone'. The ambiguity here is relevant. In marriage, George has continued the Empire Syndrome. In his daughter's marriage, his personal empire will be diminished rather than extended in the conventional sense, through marriage and the maintenance of the family tree. His individuality will be usurped. We are returned to Memmi and Sartre, to the world of Coloniser and Colonised. The position of the oppressed, becomes the 'alienation of the oppressor'. George's alienation is complete, after his victims have endured his particular brand of oppression. The metaphor has further and deeper connotations.

If George is coloniser and colonised in one, the text is, alongside the 'realism' to which Henderson alludes, subject to another reading entirely.

52 Ibid.
53 Death of, 6.
54 Death of, 12.
55 Albert Memmi.
Annette Kuhn describes the 'realistic appearance brought about, not by a duplication of real world referents, but by certain conventions of signification'. Texts are coded in such a way as to seem uncoded, leaving an audience unaware that it is making meanings and that these meanings can differ. In the dominant text, the closed text, the range of meaning will be limited and 'not determined by the different perspectives of a given audience'. Realism is carried by the dual operation of narrativity and characterisation. As Kuhn puts it, there are two forms of identification:

One is with the movement of the narrative itself, from the disruption of a fictional equilibrium which constitutes its beginning, through the movement towards resolution and then final closure. The other identification is with the narrative’s central character or characters. In these identification processes, the spectator is in varying degrees, depending on the linearity and economy of the narrative and the representation of central characters in terms of their fictional personality traits, drawn into the world of the film.

This is, on one level, the exact methodology of *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*. The narrative moves from domesticity (fictional equilibrium) to its disruption in the shooting of George, to resolution in the discovery of the diaries and final closure in the smothering of George. The other identification with George’s misery, the ‘innocent victim’ syndrome, is again on one level, compulsive. It is this area on which most critics have focused attention, reading the text as a condemnation of paramilitary violence in the North, with Director, Patrick Mason’s programme note suggesting a further dimension:

At first, it seemed ‘a play about the North’, then, after visits to a hospital, it seemed to be about being disabled - life as seen from a wheelchair, so to speak; Finally, in the closing weeks of rehearsal it seemed increasingly ‘a play about victims’, both the obvious victims of bomb and bullet, but also the unseen victims: the family, the hospital staff, the whole community. None of these labels is the play, the play is all these things and more.

This statement says more about what the play is not, than it explains the themes and real purpose within a text whose victims are not so much the very

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57 Ibid., 131.
58 Ibid., 132.
59 Patrick Mason, Programme, *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, Peacock Theatre, Dublin
apparent (George), but all those surrounding him, and particularly, women.

Reid himself has intimated dissatisfaction with some readings of him. As Fintan O'Toole rightly comments: 'He (Reid) senses that he is sometimes patronised as a voice from Protestant Ulster'. Following that, the notion that; 'cowardly assassins should be brought in cages to the theatre', is far from the ideology of Reid's text. Lynda Henderson, too, labels Reid, in a limiting sense, with the Protestant community: 'He is more clearly and singly a social historian of the Protestant working class, who records his observations in a form of documentary drama'. In a recent television interview, Reid apologised for contradicting the interviewer's interpretations, no less than three times. He stated: 'If we don't recognise problems, like what creates a paramilitary, then we are part of the problem'. While not in any way endorsing paramilitarism, Reid suggests that it must be viewed as symptom of a much wider problem.

Lionel Pilkington's reading goes furthest to recognise the role of authority and superiority within the text. He sees the final image of George's death as one 'of the absolute necessity of violence for the maintenance and perpetuation of an identity which takes for granted the notion of a fixed position of superiority'. The violence which Connor O'Malley sees as diminishing the play's 'effectiveness' is, for Pilkington, the central facet of Reid's argument, 'that violence is terrifying but also necessary for the maintenance and protection of a particular notion of identity based on authority'. This is the 'authority' of male Protestant hegemony which also expresses itself in the subjugation of women.

A variety of readings is possible. The openness which in Kuhn's terminology 'permits readings to be made which accord more or less with spectators' (audience's) prior stances' equates with the linear reading of innocent victim of the Troubles. Reid has said that his intention is to 'unsettle apathy'. Addressing a politically broad-based audience he is careful not to alienate while placing signifiers which fracture, in Neale's words 'the unity of

60 Fintan O'Toole, 'The Hidden Curriculum', Theatre Ireland, No.1, 1982, 11.
62 Graham Reid, Four Irish Dramatists, (RTE April 1992.)
63 Pilkington, 25.
position of the reader'. A feminist reading, therefore, sees George not as innocent bystander or victim, nor as a man of 'raw courage'. Identification is with Heather, homebound, articulate and victim of deceit, not a single act of deceit, but a life full of it in serving George's various dominions as patriarch, adulterer, 'God in the classroom', sexual athlete and whatever other visions of patriarchy George might effect. As symbol of the coloniser, colonised and colony itself, emphasised by the very title 'all the king's horses and all the king's men/ couldn't put Humpty together again', George's final and inevitable indignity is in death. Through Doyle's voice, the simplicity of the final nursery rhyme portrays an eerie quality of greed, sadism and power, which echoes the self-satisfaction and total hypocrisy of George's original, pre-paraplegic state. Pilkington sees the ending and the framing of the play by Doyle's voice (Catholic) as conveying 'an impression that the experience of paraplegic also serves as a dramatisation of the social alienation experienced by working-class Catholics in Northern Ireland'. It could also be seen as an image, in its entirety, of the feminine text, open to interpretation and allowing a range of these, against the signifiers which have predominated.

The finale of *Georgie Porgie* is more a final signifier, in feminist terms, of the need for an end to the kind of practice which encourages and sustains male dominion over female, a dominion, which like colonialism, thrives on the bad faith which convinces the oppressor that he is working in the interests of the oppressed. While Doyle's voice replays his version of the nursery rhyme,

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Georgie Porgie pudding and pie
Kissed the girls and made them cry
But when he made his family cry
Georgie Porgie had to die
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and, the nursery rhyme of the title joins the two in acts of sex and colonialism,

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All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.
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Colonialism and sexism are combined as George becomes Reid's symbol of both. In *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, Reid has created a variety of what

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Kuhn calls 'textual gratifications.' The text is open and ambiguous. Adherence to the dominant form of realism disguises feminist ideology contained in the text and allows readings which embody an oppositional ideology, such as identification with George. In *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, Reid presents a manifesto which is deconstructed in future plays and particularly within the text of *Dorothy*. Here, Reid focuses sharply on the role of woman within the disintegrating social structure of Northern Ireland.

**Dorothy**

Dorothy Williams has turned fifty, is married to a Building Contractor, Charles who has done well for himself from 'the troubles'. They have a son, Douglas, who is at Queen's University and the family has moved to a suburban bungalow overlooking Belfast Lough. Dorothy misses the old neighbourhood and is befriended only by sister Doris. Dorothy drinks and smokes excessively. She craves love and attention which she substitutes with Country and Western music. On a night out at Queen's with husband and son, Dorothy drunkenly stumbles around the dance floor to the shame of husband, Charles and son Douglas. Charles describes her as; 'mutton dressed as lamb'. While the men are away for their usual weekends, Dorothy is left alone as always. Stephen, brother of Douglas's ex-girlfriend arrives late at night and is subsequently joined by two paramilitaries, Mike and Andy. Dorothy is taunted, assaulted and raped as retribution for Douglas having jilted Stephen's sister.

Charles and his paid henchmen go off to give Stephen, Mike and Andy 'the hiding of their lives'. Since the rape was not 'an official job', according to Charles, there will be no retaliation. Mike has been tipped off about Charles's intentions. He and Andy return to the bungalow, having left Stephen for the 'hiding'. They tie up Dorothy and sister Doris and wait for Charles and Douglas to return. They have a gun. Lights fade.

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65 Ibid., 40.
67 *Dorothy*, 53.
68 Ibid., 91.
Dorothy’s ‘purpose built prison’ is the bungalow on Cave Hill, which overlooks Belfast Lough and can view ‘the bombs going off six miles away’. Husband Charles is a self-made small-time building contractor whose ambitions to ‘climb the hill’ away from his working-class origins have been, for him and son Douglas, happily realised. They inhabit that rarified atmosphere, geographically and spiritually removed from any sense of community or collective ideology. Douglas is President of the Students’ Union at Queen’s University and Charles’s business is thriving. Meanwhile, Dorothy, as mother and wife, is quietly trying to maintain a grip on her identity.

Deprived of community, Dorothy’s role as wife and mother has been undermined. She no longer sleeps with Charles who, she says, makes her feel ‘like a nympho on an overtime ban’. and she sees so little of son Douglas, that she puns on the relationship; ‘How’s Douglas? Isle of Man, or son of Charles? I see him at breakfast occasionally’. She desperately tries to redeem dignity through outward appearances which concentrate on fashionable looks and dress which in turn keep alive an interior vestige of self-worth:

I’m not giving up on life yet. I like to keep reasonably in touch. Not that anyone in this house notices what I wear, mind you. I bought these black spotted tights for tonight and Charles thought they were seconds.

Through Dorothy’s supreme ‘sovereignty of words’, Reid invests her with a control of language which should be reciprocated by a control of life. She is not the stage Irishwoman or wit. Her language parallels that of George in The Death of Humpty Dumpty, parodying his former dominion over women. She has become the outsider, the perfectionist of the ‘aside’, like George, attempting to retrieve identity, through the dominion of words. Her imagery is either related to sex or to Randy, sister Doris’s dog who receives more human attention than Dorothy.

Dorothy’s mastery of language gives her a positive textual credence which has been denied her in life. She epitomises the intelligent woman who

69 Ibid.
70 Dorothy, 54.
71 Dorothy, 45.
72 Ibid., 45.
has never been allowed voice or control and who must demonstrate the resultant frustration within the limitations of the only thing she has left, sexual identity. Dorothy's night out is disastrous in its directionless plea for love. She wants partners on the dance floor to love her, to show Charles and Douglas the woman who can still be attractive. In a ploy to win their 'approval', what she receives from Charles and Douglas is further alienation. The eventual outcome of a plea for love, a drunken attempt at establishing an identity, is the brutality of rape.

Dorothy is in many ways De Beauvoir's 'Second Sex', the woman who will always face oppression until she comes to terms with a male world. But she never relinquishes the feminine, attempting to achieve the opposition which allows her to voice otherness. Reid defines her position in relation to the male world. Her dignity in the face of horror against male stereotypical bravura, highlights her refusal to give up, or give in to the chauvinism which surrounds her existence.

In the act of rape and its aftermath, Reid posits a feminist dialectic through the voice of Dorothy. She predicts Charles's male response to the rape, where the victim of rape is seen to be more guilty than the perpetrator. Charles asks 'why did you open the door'? This male response is equated to that of other statutory forms of authority, the police and army, and then paramilitaries. Against these woman will always be victim. Reid underlines, as in *Humpty Dumpty*, the inter-relationship of one hegemonic structure to another, the licensing of one authoritarian structure creating another, all male and combining in the subjugation of woman. Dorothy is the spokesperson for the dialectic which is borne out by the response of Charles:

Dorothy: What would the police do...apart from sneer? They never believe you. I've suffered enough humiliation. They never believe a woman.

Reid then returns to an earlier point in the play, to the death of Wilma Thompson, linking it to Dorothy’s metaphorical death through rape; Dorothy continues: 'Do you remember when Wilma Thompson took that soldier to court? Half his regiment turned up and swore they'd been to bed with her.

73 Ibid., 43.
I wasn’t attacked on a dark street. I opened my own front door and I let them in’.

Doris: Opening your front door to a man doesn’t give him the right to rape you.
Dorothy: The rest of the male race gives him that right.\textsuperscript{74}

The ‘rest of the male race’ as embodied by Charles in his almost farcical attempts to please Dorothy on her homecoming, is responsible not only for Dorothy’s resignation from life, but for the turmoil which follows. Dorothy in Charles’s view, can be appeased by flowers, chocolates and a few cowboy records while he reiterates the usual litany: “How’s John? Randy?”. Dorothy’s response this time round is indicative of what life has become for her in a further equation with Randy the dog. She denies her earlier sovereignty of words and mastery over Charles. She gives in: “He sleeps most of the time in his new bed”.\textsuperscript{75}

As Charles and Douglas, against Dorothy’s wishes, seek violent revenge on Mike, Andy and Stephen, the three rapists, there is another demonstration of the monstrous, of Maxwell’s allusion to ‘the universal wolf’ that at last eats itself up. In ignoring female rationality which more clearly sees the reality of sectarian violence which is out of control: ‘Those fellas don’t stop at the sight of blood, they only really start then’ (Dorothy) and her response to Charles’s bribe to his henchmen ‘And you trust them’,\textsuperscript{76} Charles and Douglas become as male in their thuggery as they have been in their domestic treatment of Dorothy. Like George, the vestiges of respectability have been stripped away to reveal patriarchy in its true colours, violent, retributive and not entirely rational. But while the power struggle becomes male against male with only Dorothy representing any sense of ethical values, Reid again shows a world of inversions and contradictions where original motives have become blurred; Mike and Andy find themselves in a muddle (‘This isn’t our sort of job’). Andy has become a paramilitary in order to seek retribution for the death of his father in an explosion. He didn’t like his father but commits murders in his name. Queen’s student Stephen has invented a mirage of stories to get

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 89.
his way with Dorothy, turning rape and his own sexual desire into another form of retribution against Dorothy and Douglas for their treatment of his sister. Charles and Douglas revert to unauthorised violence, against Dorothy's will in retribution for her violation, and in so doing inflict further violence, this time on sister Doris, Dorothy and, eventually themselves. Andy and Mike's ideology and motives become totally confused. Perpetrator becomes victim in their ideological muddle of resentment and socialism. As one of the rapists says, 'You don't know about the bombs and the murders, and the shit we have to live in because of people like you'. And, the whole terrible horror will find a scapegoat in Dorothy. As Mike says: 'Do you know something Dorothy everybody's doing everything for you, eh? Even us, it's because of you we're here too. We'll all have to wear badges, I did it for Dorothy'. The dramatic irony here is that everybody is, indeed, 'doing everything for' Dorothy, or at least, ostensibly. It does not matter to Charles or Douglas that Dorothy does not want retribution, another act of male dominion to answer the original one of rape. Finally the dialectic is turned upside down and Dorothy is to blame for the eventualities. Her attempts at begging attention have created this mess, although the subtext spells out another narrative.

It is through the violent resolution of what Kuhn refers to as 'enigmas set in motion by the narrative' that Reid makes Dorothy a metaphor for public havoc which has gone beyond the boundaries of sectarianism and, in his own words, uses 'sectarianism as an umbrella for other social deviances'. An early remark by Charles, that the troubles are 'a great excuse for every bloody crook in the country', becomes an understatement in the final mayhem where Andy and Mike return to shoot Charles and Douglas. Their earlier concerns about the constitution of their 'type of job', have developed into a psychopathic blood lust. Patriarchy sanctions sectarianism which sanctions unrelated violence, and in turn, sanctions sexism and misogyny. Each of these, singly and collectively, creates the oppression within which, in

76 Ibid., 91.
77 Ibid., 99.
78 Ibid., 98.
79 Kuhn, 45.
80 Graham Reid, Four Irish Dramatists (RTE April 1992.)
Reid’s words, ‘we are not masters of our own destiny’. Nothing could be further from the anthropocentric imagination as defined by Henderson, an imagination which ‘is essentially and inevitably philanthropic’.

**Mitchell**

If Graham Reid examines a government of social and ideological relationships which has lost control, Gary Mitchell over a decade later defines its extinction and replacement by self-elected power bases whose total control is not so much anarchic as in Reid’s work, but firmly fascist. If there is no controlling force within Reid’s ‘abyss’, it is at an optimum within Mitchell’s heart of darkness, *In a Little World of Our Own*, his first stage play. The title itself implies the self-satisfaction of an undisturbed and contented separatism. Its relativity to normality, to structures of social democracy is one of its several chilling features. The text systematically dissolves tenuous links with normality, to create a world apart, within which the inhabitants have constructed their own ethical canon, complete with the resources for its implementation.

Reid’s ‘sectarianism as an umbrella for other social deviances’, becomes an understatement for Mitchell. Sectarianism is the base line, established to such a degree that it is unquestioned and unquestionable. The aftermath of centuries of sectarianism operate centre-stage. The earlier paramilitary school students of *The Hidden Curriculum*, are grown men with families in *A Little World of Our Own*. They are the Monroes of Belfast districts, their absolute power looming off stage and effected textually by their henchmen, Walter and Ray. Enshrined within this world is the ideology of hyper-masculinity.

*In a Little World of Our Own*, the naturalistic setting is the living room, within a family home on the predominantly protestant Rathcoole Estate, North Belfast. The family comprises an ill mother and three sons, Ray, Richard and Gordon. Ray is unemployed, at least officially, Richard is mildly mentally disabled and Gordon is the wage earner, an insurance collector. Outsider

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Deborah is engaged to Gordon and is a born-again Christian. Walter is described as the local ‘Community Liaison Officer for the Ulster Defence Association’. Significantly, the mother does not appear, nor does Monroe, the local God Father figure, or his daughter, Susan. The mother has exiled herself to the bedroom. She has lost control of her three sons, and, of her own house.

The play opens with Walter and Ray discussing an incident at the club. Monroe has been making jokes about Richard’s crush on his daughter Susan. The first line of the text, introduces an apparent element of matriarchal control and male respect for it, as Ray asks Walter; ‘How long have you been welcome in my Mother’s house?’ This is followed by Ray’s assertion that, if Mrs. Wilson, an old woman, (for whom Ray has done one of his favours), had been present, she would have ‘slapped his [Monroe’s] face for him’. This opening scene completes Ray’s apparent awe of the feminine, which, as Walter points out, ‘relates to the old days, the old ways’. Mitchell’s dialogue is sparse and sharply double-edged, rich in sub-text as he develops plot. The transition from ‘the good old days’ is marked by Ray’s account of school boy bullying. The progression towards a more sinister form of violence, legitimised by protection of younger brother Richard’s innocence, is condensed into a single line from Ray; ‘And then, it got easier and easier. You tell Monroe, he’s got a slapping coming.’ ‘Slapping’, as in Mrs Wilson’s unlikely style of retaliation, is a feminine euphemism for Ray’s current form of violence.

Mitchell’s domestic trivia is as focused as his dialogue. The boys have a dishwasher and play cards all day. The language of violence, of persistent ‘slapping’, is upgraded to the catchphrase ‘knock in cunts’. The features of ‘harmless’ everyday violence are already prevalent within the living room. Deborah and Gordon are not only annoyed, but affected by Ray’s behaviour and language. It begins to infiltrate their own behaviour as they have a row about Richard. They are becoming unwitting players in the little world. Its ethos is subtle and infectious.

As the Beast Sleeps, Mitchell’s third play, but an apparent sequel to In

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83 Ibid., 6.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 7.
a Little World of Our Own, portrays the 'Little World' of Rathcoole as it attempts to accommodate the new world of the peace process. The newly redundant paramilitaries of this Loyalist community, represent the variety of responses to the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. Local Commander, Larry, is 'busy' implementing a process which he can neither understand or explain to his footsoldiers. But, he doesn't want to be 'left behind'. Kyle, in turn, leader of the footsoldiers is married to Sandra and has converted to the 'new ways' in the given belief that prosperity will follow a transitional period. Norman has been appointed Officer in Charge of security at the local club and, although sceptical since he has not been given a uniform, has no other staff to manage, and cannot claim the 'dole', carries out his duties with vigour. Freddie, Kyle's best friend, is finding the new lack of status undignified. Alec, the elected politician, heads the hierarchy. He meets with Larry, who meets with Kyle, who meets with Freddie and so it goes on.

As in In a Little World of Our Own, domestic trivia is as relevant as its accompanying dialogue. Again domestic imagery becomes symbolic as Kyle and Freddie, local paramilitary commander and footsoldier, wallpaper for Sandra, Kyle's wife.

Sandra asserts herself as boss and enjoys upsetting gendered stereotypes, choosing Ranger's wallpaper for the living room, pink for the spare room, and a stolen Rangers quilt cover to keep her son quiet. With Mitchell, wallpaper borders, solid fuel fires, quilt covers and who makes the tea, become important signifiers. The frenetic wallpapering symbolises the ideological equivalent, a Loyalist hierarchy, desperate to enforce a peace agreement which is incomprehensible to the grass roots paramilitaries.

Mitchell's second stage play, Tearing the Loom is set two centuries earlier in 1798 during the United Irishmen's Rebellion and in rural Ulster. It adopts the same formula as the first play but has none of the sub-textual richness of its predecessor. Familiar features are repeated and as the norm of history plays dictates, the past is employed as interrogation of the present. The family cottage houses the loom, the means of subsistence, and father

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86 In a Little World, 18.
87 As the Beast Sleeps, Unpublished text, 8.
Robert entices an unwilling son, David, into the family business which has secured its 'mark' from the local ascendancy, the Hamills. Robert's wife has died in childbirth and her mother, Anne, is the existing matriarch. Daughter Ruth has had, in the eyes of the family, an auspicious relationship with local heir, William Hamill. This is past history as it emerges that she is in love with another, Harry, a United Irishman. Son David is a supporter of the Hamill's who are the leaders of the Orange Order.

The text does not move beyond a one dimensional scenario of talking heads who neither engage an audience or convince it of the authenticity of the issues they represent. Robert is supposedly a 'weaver poet'. David's negative reactions imply that he is probably a dreadful poet. Grandmother Anne is the traditional custodian of the hearth, ladling out tea and lighting lamps through monologues of inane folk wisdom, designed for comic relief, within a tradition of Ulster Theatre. Ruth and David share a youthful idealism for opposite political camps. Harry isn't sure of the priorities of his allegiance and decides that he would rather be in love with Ruth than with the patriotic cause. Samuel is clear about his allegiances and methodology – hang and shoot. However, in its bare diagrammatical illustrations, *Tearing the Loom* reinforces Mitchell's contemporary portrayal of Loyalism as divided and subdivided and within which personal or familial loyalties become as confused as their political equivalents. Terrible events occur in these plays and Mitchell 'wallpapers them' within quotidian domesticity. Ray has raped and beaten Susan Munroe, but the principal focus is on the instalation of oil-fired central heating. The death of Susan Monroe, the horror of the rape are forgotten. It is the political consequences of her death and not the rape itself which are primary paramilitary concerns.

Rape, in Reid's *Dorothy* is an act of revenge, which triggers further acts of violence. It is the equivalent of Ray's punishment shootings, and thus, Stephen enlists paramilitaries, Mike and Andy to assist, and to legitimise the act within an 'acceptable' ethos of male violence and authority. Ray's act is identically sourced, in revenge for Susan's treatment of Richard. Sexual gratification is emphatically not a motive. That would insinuate, in Ray's own

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words, 'sex freak' and in turn be proscribed within his own, and Rathcoole's canon law. In both Dorothy and In a Little World of Our Own, the aftermath, the fact of the rape is ignored. Attention is focused on the fact that the victim happens to be Monroe's daughter in one text, and on plans for retribution, in Dorothy. It is the possibility of being caught which is central, and the victims' plight becomes arbitrary. There are some differences, which are class based.

In Dorothy, Stephen, the University student, does relish the sexual act, while his paramilitary cohorts are annoyed that they are operating outside the norms of protocol; 'This isn't our sort of job. If they find out, we're in trouble. They'll kneecap us'. For Charles, his wife's trauma becomes secondary to his contemplation and plotting of retribution for it. He declares that the act is not 'official', (within paramilitary rules), and, there should be no retaliation to his own recriminations. It is not the ethic of the act of rape, or its victims which are of importance, but whether or not the perpetrators and their retaliators may remain undiscovered. Woman is completely secondary and ignored within a process of which she has been victim.

The hypocrisy of masculine authority is Mitchell's central concern and summed up by Walter's comment; 'It isn't always a case of what really should be done, it's more a case of what people think should be done'. The 'people' being the meta-society of the Little World. No-one, not even Deborah criticises the rape, and in another reverberation of her own statement regarding Susan's short skirts and their invitation to male interest, the rape is almost condoned, as it is within Dorothy, because she endeavours to maintain an attractive appearance. In A Little World of Our Own, the act would be forgotten, excepting the relevance of the victim's identity, Monroe's daughter. Mitchell underlines a consciousness of rape, in the words of Sue-Ellen Case, as 'a social patriarchal weapon rather than the perverse action of individual men'. As such, the patriarchal act is somehow culturally acceptable.

Ray is a stereotypical rapist. His mentality dichotomises women into two groups, as Julie A. Allison points out, 'those on a pedestal to be protected

89 Dorothy, 74.
90 Tearing the Loom, 50.
91 Sue-Ellen Case, Feminism and Theatre, Basingstoke, Macmillan 1988, 66.
by men from other men, and whores deserving of rape'. Each view, she states, ‘involves the creation of a power differential, which gives the male power over the female’. The stereotypical rapist expresses exaggerated respect for the mother, as Ray has consistently demonstrated for his, and, as fervently, he denounces women as ‘sluts’ and ‘cunts’. The culture which harbours and promotes rape, is, in Allison’s words, ‘the result of traditions in which males have dominated all political and economic activities’. This domination of every aspect of life operates In a Little World of Our Own. In Tearing the Loom, the hanging of witches replicates rape. Ray’s ideology which legitimises misogyny and male control over supposedly errant females who take up with ‘taigs’ and, insult his brother in the process, is replaced by Samuel’s invocation of God’s will. God is male and William will become ‘a true son of God’ hanging the ‘demon’ who has slaughtered ‘children from Wexford to Down’. Like rapist Ray’s mother, the mothers of these children are deified by Samuel, as ‘heavenly creatures’. The ritual of the hanging is simultaneously, William’s initiation into the male kingdom, celebrated by drinking and his father’s praise; ‘Good man. Good man’. Ray, Samuel and William may see woman as symbol, and abdicate responsibility for personifications which upset the status quo of patriarchy. Likewise, George in The Death of Humpty Dumpty, and Charles in Dorothy, may see their females as less than human beings and existing simply for their gratification.

At the end of Tearing the Loom, Ruth is likened to a demon, supporting the rebellion the equivalent of witchcraft. For Anne, the possession by demons is preferable to a woman possessing political beliefs. Mitchell underlines the hegemony of patriarchy in the act of hanging women as supposed ‘demons’, to be as legitimate as raping them as supposed ‘sluts’. Ruth’s belief in freedom and liberty is executed in the act of taking her own life, rather than allowing Samuel and William to do it for her, a symbolic gesture which reinforces her victimisation and counteracts what Case describes as ‘history’s patriarchal persecution’ of women who ‘threaten the patriarchal class

92 Ibid., 16
94 Tearing the Loom, 66/67.
system'. Ruth's verbal challenges to the dominant culture of colonialism, are endorsed by her resolve to abandon the patriarchy which is encapsulated within the bourgeois polemic of the 'four walls' of the home. She is denied the privilege of her convictions. But in the final scene of gender oppression, there is what Case refers to as 'gender strength.' There is some kind of symbolic victory in refusing the male his conquest, by committing suicide instead. In the contemporary world, Dorothy may well do the same.

If Reid describes a society which is in the process of disintegration, Mitchell completes that process *In a Little World of Our Own*. The machinery of Government is either totally ineffectual or exists to be exploited. References to the police continuously underline the perceived inadequacy of legitimate forces of law and order, and, following the events on Cave Hill, it is Walter, (Community Liaison Officer), who adopts the role of police investigating officer. Throughout the night, he has checked on other houses in the district, visited the hospital and talked to Monroe. We are aware that he has no private means of transport. The 'dole' is unwittingly paying for the rental of the flat in which the paramilitaries hold meetings, and, one suspects, where Ray extracts his confessions, on video, and conducts his torture rituals. The Housing Executive provides the service, according to Ray, which will install central heating after he has wrecked the coal fire system. Mitchell's ingenious irony is well demonstrated by this scene, which takes place the morning after the horrific events on Cave Hill.

Ray: Very funny. I'm going to get the oil in, go central heating and drag this place into the twentieth century.
Gordon: And how are you going to do that when there won't be any money coming in?
Ray: You've just answered your own question.
Gordon: What are you talking about?
Ray: Whenever you go, we'll drop below the income support minimum or whatever the fuck you call it now, and that means we'll qualify for everything that's going.
Walter: I don't think they do that caper any more, Ray.

Ray is busy planning ahead, oblivious as they all are, to the events of the previous evening. He implies that, should the Housing Executive inspector not

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95 Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 74.
concede to Ray's demands, he may end up in a similar state to the fireplace. Ray's 'amoral pragmatism', as Nowlan refers to, is concisely demonstrated, but so too is the innate collusion of Gordon, the respectable citizen and Walter, as always, saying everything and nothing. The traditional sanctity of the Irish hearth means nothing to Ray, or to the others. Again, like the card game and the rape, the only question worth consideration, is whether or not they will 'get away with it'. Mitchell's reference to the wrecking of the fireplace has further overtones. The centrality of hearth and home to the tradition of Irish drama has been well documented. Murray describes the home, the cottage, the hearth, 'as synonomous with Irish drama since Yeats's *Land of Heart's Desire*'. Ray's destructive and manipulative impulses become even more resonant.

But it is in the text of *As the Beast Sleeps*, where ideologies are themselves reversed, that Mitchell conveys the real absurdity of the inversion of social values, upon which his characters have thrived in *A Little World of Our Own*. The series of absurdities, masquerading as logic become even more absurd within the supposedly normalised environment of *As the Beast Sleeps*, in a process of peace. Alec tells Larry, who tells Kyle, who tells Freddie, that the world and life will be fine, given time. The hierarchy, 'the chain of command', replicates the hierarchies of normal society. While the arguments have little credence, years of conditioning ensure that they work. Tactics of mutual male authority are passed down the line. 'I hear what you're saying', is followed by 'I hear what you're saying'. While Gordon may be convinced into knee capping his mentally retarded young brother, Kyle may agree to torture his best friend, Freddie.

Attempts at normalising the society of Mitchell's 'little world', result in tokenism. Jack cooks the books in the club and the bar men are 'putting the arm in'. The police are told that there was five as opposed to thirty five thousand pounds in the safe. While a real world, which depends on five year business plans, floppy disks and pension plans pretends to operate, its absurdity is highlighted by Mitchell's depiction of Norman, the new Officer in

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97 Ibid.
Charge of Security at the club. Norman has been beaten up by Freddie, so begins his auspicious security job with his arm in a sling. When Jack outlines the new rules of National Insurance contributions and Pension Plans, Norman accuses him of planning accidents and 'pensioning' him 'off'. Mitchell places Norman in a bizarre role-playing exercise which reaches its apex when he declares to Kyle, at the door of the local social club; 'This is a restricted area'. The bureaucratic pomposity of the new codes of practice mirror a supposed previous 'ideology' which translates into blatant self promotion. As Norman becomes a fully legitimate bouncer in charge of 'restricted areas', politician Alec, can only talk about good suits and good restaurants. He belittles the footsoldiers' uniform of jeans and T-shirt, and taste for fish and chips. Meanwhile, the footsoldiers are barred from their own club. The transition from the surrealism of the Little World, to supposed normality, is itself surreal.

Finally, the most ironic inversion, is the single fact that is most difficult for Larry to comprehend as he stumbles toward an analysis of his own role within the hierarchy. Over the years of torture in the room at the back of the club, only three victims have been Catholics, and one of these had been handed over by the police. Larry admits; 'All our victims were Protestants'.

This is not so much admission of failure by Larry, as Mitchell's commentary on the sad irony of 'the slaves, who declare themselves free'. It would seem that the sectarian target has been missed, that the perpetrators have become their own victims. And, within the new regime of 'peace', Kyle is enlisted to head the local punishment squad. Normality seems impossibly distant.

Mitchell’s women are not contemporary replicas of Reid’s, but both writers share an ideology which shapes woman as victim. As the Beast Sleeps, presents an exception. Reid's women are subjected to a mixture of forces; tradition, loyalty and a patriarchy which has denied otherness. Mitchell’s young women assert authority, while an older matriarchal generation has given up. This younger generation of assertiveness becomes asphyxiated by a particular brand of male domination, one from which they are fleeing, consciously in Tearing the Loom, secretively, in As the Beast Sleeps, and, allegorically in In a Little World of Our Own

99 As the Beast Sleeps, 25.
100 R L McCartney, QC,MPA, Liberty and Authority in Ireland, A Field Day Pamphlet, Number 9, 1985.
Mitchell’s women are all victims of circumstance and tragedy. The mother in *In a Little World of our Own* has exiled herself from life, from a world in which her values are no longer viable, (the old ways). Susan Monroe is the obvious victim of male psychopathy and Deborah is the heroine who endeavours to remove fiancee Gordon from the rule of Ray, into the safe haven of her kind of normality which, will be based on a veneer of fundamentalist Protestantism. Deborah has been described as ‘the weakest character in the play’.\(^1\) Excepting Sandra, she is one of Mitchell’s strongest characters, determined to fight for values and to negate these if they don’t happen to justify her own ends. In contrast, Ruth in *Tearing the Loom*, ostensibly portrays the strong woman. But juvenile idealism and invective are no substitute for the manipulative and organised discourse in which Deborah specialises. Ruth is one-dimensional in comparison. Deborah may be unlikeable in her addiction to Christianity and her fervour for a bourgeois life with Gordon. Mitchell demonstrates her determination in a whirl of invective around the weaker Gordon. Deborah’s spirit is immobolised only by Ray. She can intuit when to negotiate and when to remain silent in the midst of family rows. She identifies with the mother, imagining her own matriarchal future. Most significantly, she can reverse her own logic to suit the occasion. There is no consistency to her logic, and, like readings of the Bible, she can adapt one set of principles to confirm their opposite.

Mitchell has defined an assertive woman whose careful pragmatism is negated by the reigning patriarch, Ray. Deborah can see all too clearly what is going on around her and its broader significance outside the household. She does not intend to join it;

If you think for one minute that I’m going to get married and live here in this house with your Mum upstairs and your two brothers doing whatever it is that they do, forget it. No chance. No way.\(^2\)

Her dreams of a normal respectable life with Gordon, in a normal little world, disintegrate. Ruth’s dreams, more idealistic and transparent, also disintegrate, through her death at the hands of the Grand Master. Mitchell writes women

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\(^1\) Eamon Quinn, Tinderbox Theatre Company, March 1998.

\(^2\) *Tearing the Loom*, 22.
who envisage better futures and who are thwarted in their attempts at realisation.

Anne, the grandmother in *Tearing the Loom*, and Deborah share female characteristics of shrewdness and passive observation, expressed when it seems appropriate. Both have power over weaker men, Gordon and Robert. These two attempt to protect the status quo without realising that the ethic which they represent has become extinct. The dullness of their very ordinariness highlights the attractiveness of the other culture, the fight for the opposing ideals of Enlightenment and Orangeism in *Tearing the Loom*, and the fight for autocracy in *In a Little World of Our Own*.

The hyperbole of maintenance of the status quo is manifested in Sandra in *As the Beast Sleeps*. Her impatience with husband Kyle's acceptance of the peace process and the absence of its material benefits have soured their relationship. The 'Super Prod' whom she married has become a disappointment. Sandra is not happy and is obviously used to getting her own way. She bosses the men, makes all the decisions and is surrogate male. She is a less than committed mother, never cooks and drinks more than the men. She chastises Kyle for not having covered the furniture with sheets and the ensuing tirade lasts longer than it would take to go upstairs and fetch them. The apex of Sandra's masculinity is in the robbery. No-one would even suspect a woman, least of all husband Kyle. Mitchell completes another inversion, this time in gender terms.

Richard, as Ray's hyperbolic manifestation is a wonderful invention. He inhabits a surreal world in which every problem finds its resolution in 'doing' someone. While Richard's wildly chauvinist and aggressive impulses might be excusable, given his mental disability, the norm of aggression and male dominion, personified by Ray, is echoed continuously and loudly by Richard. Its sheer naturalisation is testimony to the acceptance of the unacceptable, the ethos of this other world. Both manifestations of lunacy are accepted, Richard's because he is retarded, and Ray's because it has become so much part of the norm that it constitutes it.

Mitchell adopts a formula for gender within the texts. Women are matched to less focused, less purposeful men. Harry's sudden abdication of the cause in favour of his love for Ruth, and, Gordon's aquiescence in knee-
capping his brother, are derided by Ruth and Deborah respectively. Where the women are determined, their male counterparts prevaricate. However, the potential for female emancipation is firmly quashed by a higher patriarchal order, that represented by Samuel and Ray, one leader, the other footsoldier of powerful patriarchal regimes. In Sandra's behaviour and actions, Mitchell demonstrates that the female may be the cleverer party and beat the males at their own game. But Sandra has become 'Super Prod', and super male in the process. When she spits on Kyle at the end of the play, Mitchell symbolises the beginning of another sinister episode in Loyalist chauvinism.

The patriarchal form of tragedy suits Mitchell's purpose well. The Aristotelian system where women are denied a voice, and, as Case summarises, are deprived of the 'tragic qualities, cleverness (and) authority of deliberation', applies to both In a Little World of Our Own and Tearing the Loom. Deborah and Ruth are both suitably silenced by respective male oligarchies. Deborah's tragic flaw is collusion with that culture from which, ironically, she wishes to escape. Susan, portrayed by Ray as 'slut', represents, in his terms, the female monster of Greek tragedy. So too, the female demon, personified by Ruth's final manifestation of it, has to be eradicated in order to maintain the social status-quo.

Mitchell controls these elements within an overall authoritative tragic form. Ray, as apparent central protagonist, is eliminated. The public plague has seemingly been purged, and, in the suggestion that through this purification, as perceived by O'Toole, there is 'a sense of hope', the play begins to shift towards the allegorical. While Ray may seem to operate as 'central protagonist', it is Walter, the monosyllabic 'deus ex machina', marauding back and forth and appearing in and out of the text, who is both chorus and protagonist, another analogy to the social distortion where, in this case, individual becomes collective chorus. Walter's sinister dual role is underlined by his key refrains; 'I'm not saying nothing', and, 'things are getting out of hand'.

O'Toole sees the play as 'almost an allegory of paramilitarism', It is

103 Sue-Ellen Case, Feminism and Theatre, 18.
104 Fintan O'Toole, 'Doomed dreams of decency', The Irish Times Second Opinion, 11th February 97.
105 Ibid.
more an allegory of the peace process, a process which is enacting its own
final shoot-out. Monroe's 'non-violent attitude' becomes the controlling force,
paradoxically, in an act of retributive violence. Richard becomes symbol of
choice, between a culture of peace or one of violence. He can stay with his
icon Ray, or live a less colorful life with Deborah and Gordon. The latter
course may be as escapist as Deborah's useful Christianity. But, in his final
rendering of the narrative, Mitchell's most potent allegorical symbol is in
Richard's act of violence, whereby Gordon will have to remain to look after
brother and mother. Deborah is the ultimate loser.

The allegorical title of As the Beast Sleeps, indicates the unease of a
fragile peace process within a fissured Loyalism. Kyle's tragic flaw of lack of
human and political insight converts his professed loyalty to team and family
into the instrument of the destruction of both. He has overseen the
interrogation and beating of best friend and fellow paramilitary, Freddie. In
turn, wife Sandra leaves him, to join the defence of 'the old ways', of
patriarchal sectarianism.

Conclusion

Both Reid and Mitchell focus tightly on the resulting human salvage of violence
and sectarianism. Particularly, in Mitchell's work, domestic scenes
demonstrate the extent of the naturalisation of total abnormality. Reid's
analyses are mere introductions to Mitchell's full-blown social mutations.

It is difficult to predict where Henderson might place him – within the
'theocentric', or the 'anthropocentric'. Given the degree of familial love and
loyalty shared by the brothers, or in O'Toole's terminology, 'the tribe', she
might hazard the 'anthropocentric' label. But the feudal 'theocentricism'
championed by Samuel in Tearing the Loom, his loyalty to the forces of the
Crown, and the adherence to a new manufactured order in In a Little World of
Our Own, do not ease the awkwardness of these categorisations.

Authoritative critics like Murray and Stuart Marlow, may also have
difficulty in placing Mitchell and in retuning their theories of Northern drama.
Murray accuses Reid of 'evasion' and 'avoidance' of 'the troubles' in the early
plays. The Closed Door and Dorothy 'end up as crude melodramas just
because Reid wanted, by eliding the coded, tribalist geography of Belfast, to avoid sectarian issues. Similarly, Marlow echoes this conviction;

No sectarian point was being made about the knock-on effects of violence within a community. The ‘troubles’ as such were kept thematically very much in the background.

The contrary is true in Reid’s diagnosis of sectarianism, the depiction of its historical evolution in The Death of Humpty Dumpty and its virus spreading uncontrollably through the text of Dorothy. The ‘knock-on effects of violence’ are thematically at the heart of Mitchell’s work. Eventually, it is Maxwell’s prescience which must be applauded. He recognised that when the imagination has fully assimilated it, the present violence may be seen as an outlet of stresses of which it is not the cause.

Within the texts, there is an absence of growth among the male characters, and it is they who are the heirs apparent of the various scenarios; William, in Tearing the Loom, the thugs in Dorothy, David in The Death of Humpty Dumpty and Richard in In a Little World of Our Own. The women have been thrown into isolation. Sandra is the exception. She has adopted tactics which are not about growth or liberation. She joins the old patriarchy.

The final words of Ray, as he dies, and of the text, In a Little World of Our Own, are ominous: ‘You’re the man. You’re the fucking man’. Mentally disabled Richard becomes the inheritor.

It is appropriate, that, hovering over these texts is the presence of a landmark, which has been immortalised in poetry, that of Cave Hill.

And the profiled basalt maintains its stare
South: proud, protestant and northern and male
Adam untouched, before the shock of gender

It is here that George Sampson conducts his illicit affair with Caroline, (The

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106 Christopher Murray, Twentieth-Century Irish Drama, 202.
109 In A Little World, 61.
Death of Humpty Dumpty). Ray comes here to commit rape and grievous bodily harm, resulting in the death of Susan Monroe, (In a Little World of Our Own). Dorothy’s spiritual death and actual rape occur in her new bungalow, on the slopes of this hill. Her husband’s “social-climbing”, achieves another metaphorical meaning. The ontology of these texts moves towards an image of ‘the shock of gender’, realised by writers but beyond the comprehension of their protagonists.
Chapter Three

The War in the Heads, the War in the Streets;¹ Issues of Gender in the Work of Frank McGuinness.

Introduction

The feminist debate on whether or not a male may produce feminine work has absorbed critical attention before the instigation of the term ‘écriture féminine’ and long afterwards.² Annette Kuhn acknowledges that, ‘it is possible to argue that feminist work may be produced by men’, but only allows the male house-room when he has wandered in accidentally. Her ‘authorial intentionality’ denies male ‘intentionality’. Elements may be incorporated ‘unconsciously’, or ‘texts can generate meanings of their own...in a dynamic moment of reading or reception’.³ For Kuhn, feminine writing by the male can only be ‘unintentional’ and occur by means of a feminist reading which, logically, must be unintended by the male author. Hélène Cixous criticises the term feminine writing, in favour of one which does not highlight difference so much, but ‘stirs up difference’,⁴ to create another entity which is bisexual, and to which, she feels, women have easier access. The empirical sex of the author is less important for Cixous than the sex of the writing produced. In feminist terms, Declan Kiberd, argues that some modernist masterpieces, of Hardy, Lawrence, Joyce and the later Yeats, have provided the foundations for feminist criticism and feminine writing. In other words, his claim might be that feminine writing originated in the male written literature of the early twentieth century and was appropriated by the feminism of the ‘70s and ‘80s.⁵

² The term originates with the French Feminist Movement and has been defined as; ‘the term for women’s writing, characterised by simultaneity, plurality, and mobility’. See Feminisms: A Reader, edited and introduced by Maggie Humm, Hemel Hemstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, 405. Future reference (Humm).
Certainly, the belief that men are incapable of intentionally feminine writing would necessitate rejecting much of a key modernist masterpiece, Joyce's *Ulysses*.\(^6\) Joyce attempted to demonstrate, by means of Molly Bloom's soliloquy, that feminine thought is significantly different from that of the male and, in his work in general, adopted a consciously feminine approach. In the character of Leopold Bloom, for example, Joyce succeeded in producing a convincing portrait of a new type of man, the feminine man who abhors nationalism, violence and hatred and espouses compassion, generosity and tenderness.

The belief in the redemptive power of the feminine lies at the heart of the work of Frank McGuinness who places himself directly in the tradition of Joyce's Bloom when he says, 'It would only be through a recognition and reappropriation of the feminine principle that revolution in both society and literature could take place'.\(^7\) It is exactly this 'recognition and reappropriation' which is given dramatic form in the plays of McGuinness, particularly in the plays of female absence or lack, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985) and, *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (1992), but also in plays such as *Carthaginians* (1988) and *Mary and Lizzie* (1989) which introduce the possibility of dialogue between the masculine and feminine.

McGuinness sees himself, and may be perceived, as both a Northern and an Irish playwright, and, his background, born in Buncrana, County Donegal, with Derry as his natural hinterland makes border crossings a fact of his early life and, in his work, a metaphor for political, social and sexual transitions. His subject matter and locations alone, identify him with both territories, North and South. The sense of belonging to both allows him to combine and transcend their individual dramatic traditions. His work may be seen as a contemporary version of the very principles which informed the founding objectives of the Ulster Literary Theatre\(^8\) based on 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. At the same time, it presents a contrast to Irish dramatic tradition. Beckett's nihilism or Friel's nostalgia for lost traditions are contested by McGuinness's consistent and unfashionable meliorism (Lizzie Burns in *Mary*.

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\(^6\) I introduce Joyce in preparation for final Conclusion, relating McGuinness to the second Revival and its importance in terms of Ulster Theatre. The subject has been discussed in Chapter One.

and Lizzie, actually describes herself as ‘Utopian’). So, too, the dystopian tones of Reid and Mitchell contrast sharply with McGuinness’s predilection for the combination of the poetic and the vernacular, the potential of language matching the human potential which he portrays within the texts. He does not slot in to either tradition comfortably, but, perhaps provides a new focus for both.

Although many of his characters speak in authentic Derry/Border demotic, their dislocation from normal social structures and behaviour, invokes criticism of these and suggests as yet unconstructed futures. In these plays, there are no conventional family units and certainly no traditional or contemporary hearths. The living room and club or pub are absent. Lost social outcasts create new formations outside the security of tradition, actively, like the rebellious women in Carthaginians, naively as in The Factory Girls, or passively and involuntarily like the men in the plays of female absence. In a Donegal factory, a Derry graveyard, a cell in the Lebanon, or the trenches of the Somme, authoritarian force is challenged by the reality of ordinary people who are no longer able to endure regimes of suffering. McGuinness isolates his characters in locations which are removed from everyday society, in order that they may question and come to terms with the social regimes which are mostly unidentifiable, but govern their lives. His starting point is always that of a situation beyond individual comprehension or control. Would be soldiers arrive at a training camp where there are no trainers, professional people find themselves in a Middle East prison cell and three men and three women camp out in a graveyard. He uses these abnormal situations to push his characters towards recognition, and even recreation, of their own identities, and catharsis through that experience.

McGuinness’s first play, The Factory Girls, introduces concepts of feminism, and attempts to free women whose situation is impossibly locked within a patriarchal framework. The play provides an introduction to techniques which McGuinness will further progress towards an understanding and absorption of a feminine principle.

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8 See Chapter One which outlines the founding ideology of the ULT.
Frank McGuinness’s first play *The Factory Girls*, focuses on the confrontation of five women with management and union to assert their right to work in an industry which has been threatened by imports from abroad. The play is set in his home town of Buncrana, Co. Donegal. Its geographical proximity to Northern Ireland is reflected in the similarities of ethos and politics which affect working lives. The post-war categorisation of women as mothers and homemakers and the subsequent downgrading of traditional female work, in the linen-mills and shirt factories forms the sociological background to the play. As Monica McWilliams, in describing a ‘male-stream’ culture points out, ‘the State’s alignment with the Church helped to institutionalise some of the most extreme forms of patriarchy’ with a development strategy which would attract investment for male employment. The expediency of female employment during the war years could conveniently become a cultural dysfunction in the following decades, a dysfunction which could challenge the traditional ideology of Church and State. While McGuinness’s play contests patriarchal models, his characters are bound by conflicting realities, personal and political, rational and intuitive, to create contradictions which the play itself cannot manage to disentangle and which eventually become a central theme.

The women who have worked in the factory for years have been issued ultimatums of piece work by management. They are expected to produce more and increase quality at the same time. Ellen, who has worked thirty years in the factory, is ringleader and finds refuge in this role which helps to dispel the private loss of her three children who died in one year. She is official spokeswoman and has fought many battles with the union. Given the new regime, the women workers decide to take action. The take-over of the manager’s office is led by Ellen as a scare-mongering tactic to facilitate negotiation and humiliate Rohan, the manager. It is when Ellen naively telephones the new priest to ask him to say mass for the women on Sunday, that she realises the full political relevance of her actions and resultant

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ostracisation by church and community. Subsequently, Ellen’s motivation is shown as deeply personal, and as such, suspect, as the younger Rebecca emerges as the true feminist:

Rebecca: Is it because we’re too scared to stand on our own two feet? You want us scared, Ellen. You think and we think that if you take away your hand we’ll fall on our faces. This time you’re not on your own. We’re in this together.  

Rebecca interrogates Ellen’s hierarchy, as much as Ellen interrogates that of male management. This comes suddenly and rushed towards the end of the play and is not exactly clear as Ellen reasserts her leadership: ‘You should know me by now, daughter. I’m a tougher nut to crack than the other boyos’.  

But, perhaps this is dignity in the face of, and, in acknowledgement of defeat of leadership. The women’s final victory is in fantasy and the fantasy of the fight. Rosemary, the youngest of the women, has claimed that she’d rather ‘have a horse than get married’. That imagery completes the play with Rebecca singing:

When I was on horseback,  
Wasn’t I pretty,  
When I was on horseback wasn’t I gay  
Wasn’t I pretty  
When I entered Cork City  
And met with my downfall  
On the thirteenth of May.  

Rebecca and Rosemary together ‘neigh’ to push back the barrier on the door, and as well, metaphorical barriers, with ‘one almighty heave’, signalling new birth but within a literal defeat. They will fight the good fight against the male hegemony of husbands, management, Catholic Church and community. As single young women, the future is certainly not theirs, but still, worth fighting for. If there is no future for the factory itself, or for the tradition of female employment which the play highlights as truly exploitative, the older women,

11 The Factory Girls, 43.  
12 Ibid., 44.  
13 Ibid., 45.
Ellen and Una, ‘will be carried’ to their ‘grave squealing,’ for dignity and self esteem which has rarely been credited to them.

The device of ‘the party’ or ‘carnival’ which is deployed in later plays to effect communal bonding and dramatic comic interlude, here disintegrates into communal drunken bickering. The symbolic psychic journeys, so painfully traversed in later plays, jolt and start towards the finale of *The Factory Girls*. Fintan O’Toole recognises that the play moves into a new mode towards the end, one which ‘goes against the naturalistic grain of the rest of the play and is neutered by it’.

McGuinness has employed the dominant theatre form of naturalism to contest a dominant ideology which subverts women. It is when the play takes on the further complexity of internal power struggle that naturalism cannot contain it. There are no internalised redemptions or healings and the friction which is discovered outside, becomes another kind of friction among the women within the orbit of their own siege.

The background of male collusion and complicity is spelt out textually, the telephone conversations with the priest and Vera’s husband contrasting with the female support offered by outside friend, Susan, the underlining of the terminology Factory Girls by Vera to manager Rohan; ‘not factory women, factory girls. Factory girls never grow old and they don’t fade away’. Both Rohan and Bonner refer to the women in deprecating terms of animal imagery ‘hyenas, wildcats and lapdogs’. Against this background, woman emerges as subject, to struggle out of silence, first Ellen and then Rebecca to whom the mantle is passed as a younger more radical generation heralds social change.

As the inscription of Olive Schreiner’s poem, the introduction to the text, highlights, love denies freedom but the latter safeguards both:

I saw a woman sleeping. In her sleep she dreamt Life stood before her and held in each hand a gift - in the one Love, in the other Freedom. And she said to the woman, Choose. And the woman waited long and she said Freedom. And Life said, Thou hast well chosen. If thou hadst said Love, I would have given thee that thou did ask for; and I would have gone from thee and returned to thee no more. Now the day will come when I shall return. In that day I shall bear both gifts in one hand.

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I heard the woman laugh in her sleep.\textsuperscript{16}

However, freedom never becomes realised within the text.

McGuinness has, with compassion and empathy signified the social, political and domestic subjugation of women within one period in history. But, as Tracy C. Davis states:

Women's subject matter does not necessarily make a feminist play, and that unless challenges to form AND content converge, conventional dramaturgy can perpetuate and replicate the ideology of domination even when the playwrights personal view...is one of abhorrence.\textsuperscript{17}

This is almost a summation of McGuinness's first stage play, in which freedom only becomes possible within the realms of fantasy and male hegemony is maintained. McGuinness foresees the feminist struggle to emerge from that period. He has yet to find a feminist form within which to contain it.

\textbf{Workshop Strategies Towards Text}

McGuinness's workshop process presents an insight into the dramatic methodology of texts which have been informed by the process, \textit{Caoin} (1989) and \textit{Carthaginians} (1988). In 1989, McGuinness led a one day workshop for members of Ulster Youth Theatre. This formed an introduction for him to the young cast who would eventually perform a commissioned short piece as part of a larger project, based around a dramatisation of Seamus Heaney's poem, \textit{Station Island}.\textsuperscript{18} The project was entitled \textit{Stations},\textsuperscript{19} and, as well as McGuinness, writers Mark Brennan, Jennifer Johnston, Robin Glendinning, Michael Longley and Damien Gorman were commissioned by Ulster Youth Theatre to contribute short pieces which represented a version of the cultural history of Northern Ireland. Each piece would be interjected between sequences of \textit{Station Island}.

\textsuperscript{16} Dedication to \textit{The Factory Girls}.
\textsuperscript{17} Tracy C. Davis, 'Extremities and Masterpieces: A Feminist Paradigm of Art and Politics', \textit{Modern Drama}, Vol. XXX 11, No.1, March 1989, 96.
\textsuperscript{18} Seamus Heaney, \textit{Station Island}, London, Faber and Faber, 1984, 61-94.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Stations} was performed at the Belfast Festival at Queen's, Stranmillis College Theatre, 1989, and at Lombard Street Studio, Dublin, 1990. In 1991, the production was nominated alongside \textit{Dancing at Lughnasa} for the RTE/Bank of Ireland Arts Awards, for category of Best Drama Production of the year.
In the Ulster Youth Theatre workshop, characters were created, their stories told, their secrets revealed. The group was subdivided into individuals, and, members of ‘Enniskillen Together’, a grouping which had been formed following the bombing on Remembrance Sunday. Individuals comprised a yuppie couple whose marriage was in difficulty, a female Country and Western singer an AIDS sufferer and a disabled girl who was in a wheelchair. Through a process of individual hot-seating, the given characters started to produce problems of which they were initially unaware. They became interesting, propelled by a subtext of secrets which were processed by McGuinness. Inner dramas were enacted to climax in a collective ritual line-up for a Marathon Race, in support of ‘Enniskillen Together’. Directed, interrupted and led by McGuinness, the characters share illuminations and begin to focus around Enniskillen, and away from their individual crises and problems.

Elements of this mini-drama signpost core feminist values of the major plays. The literal setting becomes a metaphysical space within which individual psychic dramas are enacted, as in Carthaginians, Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me, and The Factory Girls. McGuinness made the setting of the marathon a clearing house which gave dramatic coherence to disparate psychologies. This physical disengagement from the familiar world, in order to manage it, is a constant device which forms the central structure of most McGuinness’s texts. The manager’s office under siege in The Factory Girls, the locations of home leave in Observe the Sons Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, the Derry graveyard of Carthaginians, the hostage cell of Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me, are manufactured environments for thematic explorations. The removal of the comforting, or, as it may be, uncomfortable regalia of everyday functioning, provides objective space for personal appraisal and readjustment. Like Station Island itself, personal pilgrimage involves reappraisal of self and its relationship to the collective and communal. Unbeknownst to the participants of his workshop, McGuinness was working towards writing about Enniskillen.

20 The Enniskillen bombing, Sunday, 15 November 1987.
The outcome was Caoin, a song for nine voices. A poetic elegy for the victims of Enniskillen, Caoin is a direct descendant of Synge’s keen in Riders to the Sea. In the latter, Maurya’s world is turned back to front:

In the big world, the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that do be old.

Similarly, Caoin reverses images of joy and mourning:

I had a dream about a wedding;  
A woman in her bridal gown,  
Laid out in white, it is her funeral  
The woman in her bridal gown.

Both pieces share resignation in the face of tragedy, Synge’s expressed through Maurya’s final stoicism: What more can we want than that? No man can be living forever and we must be satisfied. McGuinness, in the framing refrain of Caoin, circumvents tragedy with imagery of continuity:

The river hears the morning breaking,  
On the island of this town,  
Asking for sweet remembrance,  
Garlanded, the ribbon crown.

This juxtaposition of imagery where the river and the island become the remembrance wreath, links the temporal with the timeless, absorbs specific tragedy into place and history. It poses the central question of Carthaginians and Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, how do we explain and learn to absorb catastrophe, and how can it begin to be written about, in what shape or form? In the production of Stations, Caoin was preceded by a choreographed piece, The Names, by Jennifer Johnston. The symbolic linking of the Apprentice Boys of Derry and the dead of Bloody Sunday is made through a roll call of the names of both sets of men, the

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21 Caoin is held in the Ulster Youth Theatre Archive, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.
23 Ibid., 67.
24 Caoin, 1.
25 Riders, 72.
device given vogue by Brian Friel in *Faith Healer* (1979), and by McGuinness in *Carthaginians*. The final image of the *The Names* is one of a series of Pietàs, the women mourning their dead, the women left as ultimate victims, like Maurya, condemned to a living death, instruments for the absorption of tragedy. The act of the keen, as expressed in McGuinness’s text is an expression of collective mourning, and perfectly echoes the scene of collective remembrance where the tragedy actually occurred. On stage, one set of people mourn the deaths of those who had, in life, gathered to mourn the deaths of their immediate kin, the men of the Somme. Of course too, the sub-textual references to ‘Observe the Sons of Ulster’ (1986) are there for those who know that play. The keen is pagan, neither catholic nor protestant, its practice is female, its ritual collective. The art of the keen is formal and technical. These are apt motifs for the essence of the work of Frank McGuinness.

During the summer of 1986, with Joe Dowling, Frank McGuinness led a week’s workshop for young actors and actresses in Derry. He has said that he went there with the basis of an idea and that that idea became *Carthaginians*. The group outings to the local graveyard, whose tombstone stories were subsequently recreated, provided textual possibilities. McGuinness, it is said, relished the opportunity to rehearse the obsessions of Derry both in its place and personality, and polish the idiom at the same time. He played with gender changing and Dido’s sponsored suicide originated in the workshop. Death was a recurring theme as was the politics of Republicanism and the changing political balance of Derry itself. The final speech of that workshop week suggests the death of one regime and its replacement by another, of which women are the generators and custodians, a symbolically post-colonial future, which is founded on a feminist principle:

This is a magical city, a forbidden city, a city that people are frightened of. The city is an empire and the empire is Rome. It is a city with ruins and the only way you can find out about it is from the ruins and its graveyard. The graves are guarded by three women and they hold the power of life as well

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27 Ibid.
as dominion over the dead. People have visions and they come to the women to have them explained. The city is Carthage.²⁸

The female custodians of classical mythology are reinstated to link death and life, past and present. The allegory of the Empire’s destruction of Carthage and Bloody Sunday in Derry, is clear. Both rise from the ashes. Like Caoin, specific tragedy must be absorbed into history in the construction of new ideologies. This is the site and principle of Carthaginians.

Carthaginians: An Ulster Feminist Prototype?

McGuinness has described Carthaginians as ‘a drama of conversation’.²⁹ The apparently aimless conversations which pass the time of waiting from Sunday to Monday in the life of the play (Wednesday to Sunday in the revised text),³⁰ climb over each other in a highly choreographed dance of language and meaning. ‘The wit and wisdom’ ³¹ of Derry town echo through the graveyard where the six characters have sought asylum from their individual inner mayhem and the public mayhem outside the gates. They harbour ‘the memory of wounds’³² which only a miracle can alleviate. The outward drama of waiting for the dead to rise is paralleled by the inward drama of personal resurrections. Jokes, stories, quizzes rattle on in naturalistic theatrical engagement to relieve the central abstraction of intense and relentless grief.

To analyse the feminine qualities of the text, it is essential to outline the development of the play and introduce its seven characters. Three women sit among the standing stones of a graveyard, and a carefully constructed pile of contemporary refuse, beer cans, plastic bags, etc. Maela lays clothes for her daughter’s grave. Sarah organises dead leaves and Greta tends a dying bird. These gestures relating to death, the graveyard setting, the music of Purcell’s When I am Dead and Laid in Earth, reverberate through the opening dialogue

²⁸ Ibid.
²⁹ McG Trinity Lecture.
³⁰ I refer to the original text except where otherwise stated, Carthaginians and Baglady, London, Faber and Faber, 1988. The revised text is published in; Frank McGuinness: Plays 1, London, Faber and Faber Ltd., 1996. Future references (Carthaginians).
³¹ Ibid., 26.
³² Quotation from Czeslaw Milosz, dedication, Carthaginians. ‘It is possible that there is no other memory than the memory of wounds’.
which moves between idiom and the other in-between speak, the poetic, which flavours the play:

Maela: You can only say that over the dead.
Greta: We’re all dying.
Maela: Sarah pet, you’ll die of sunstroke if you don’t take off that big jumper.33

The graveyard, its omnipresence of death, is transformed into a picnic site when Dido, Queen of Derry, Queen of Carthage arrives with his battered pram-load of supplies. Dido is gay, has never done a day’s work in his life, according to Maela, and for the graveyard refugees, he is the practical link with the out-side world, placing bets for Greta and supplying her with cigarettes, as well as the food and other essentials for the sojourn. He has been Maela’s partner in pub quizzes - ‘Oldie and Goldie’ is their pub quiz title. They share a close relationship despite difference of age and background.

Dido’s flamboyant homosexuality lights the play up in a blaze of colour, language and repartee. McGuinness makes him not only a functional, but psychological ‘out-sider’. He is too young to remember Bloody Sunday so cannot fully share in the inner experiences of the male and female trios in the graveyard. Dido is a pragmatist, making out or trying to, financially and sexually. He is clever and streetwise, and for an audience, provides relief from the crises which are suffered by the other characters. That is not to say that he is immune to suffering. He alone has found mechanisms for its management and an independence and control of his own life, an ability which is lost to the others.

The men drift in, moving gauchly among the women who have staked their sites for the duration of the play. The women reveal their secrets, their private tragedies which have brought them to the graveyard. Maela’s daughter died of cancer on Bloody Sunday. Greta sings of an imaginary lost brother and of becoming male during menstruation. She wants to find her lost self identity. Sarah is recovering from drug addiction. The male secrets emerge slowly, later in the play and through violent confrontation. Hark, in
prison, did not join the hunger strike. Seth is an informer and Paul wishes to join the dead of Bloody Sunday. The men hover around the women. There are pairings of intimacy and confrontation, between Hark and Dido, Hark and Seth, Hark and Sarah, Maela and Seth and Greta and Hark leading to the communal activity of the play within the play, Dido's (alias Fionnuala Gonigle's) *The Burning Balaclava*, and the recital of *The Listeners*, which preludes the bonding of the group in the litany of the dead of Bloody Sunday. For the finale of collective exorcism, the seven form a symbolic circle, which brings the play full circle back to the language of the opening scene: 'To wash the dead. Bury the dead. Raise the dead. Forgive the dead. Forgive yourself.'

The props of Dido's (Fionnuala's) play are laid to rest. The light breaks and the dawn chorus begins. Like the props, the war in the heads and the war on the streets has been laid to rest. Dido's epilogue reproduces the central metaphor of naming. The names of the living streets, the setting for Maela's nightmare journey of catharsis, substitute the names of their dead. 'Carthage has not been destroyed'. And what has happened in between? In Dido's words: 'Everything happened, nothing happened, whatever you want to believe, I suppose'. The six sleep in peace after the Sunday dawn.

Joe Dowling has said that public lives are most vividly drawn through private agonies. In this text, the significance of Bloody Sunday is traced through the agonies of those who have had to endure life in its aftermath. The centrepiece of the litany of the dead, as one critic describes, 'hangs over the play in an ineradicable pall'. And yet another may state that the play 'is impenetrable...for a southerner to follow'. The constant interplay of the literal and the imagined, comic wit and poetry, naturalism and imagism, has made critical reception problematic and inconsistent. David Nowlan shares the

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35 *Carthaginians*, 7.
34 Ibid., 68.
35 Ibid., 70.
36 Ibid.
discomfort of many critics and cannot cope with the lack of explicit detail of the earlier plays:

It is informed by half-realised instincts and local knowledge, which makes the drama less immediately accessible, and the findings of the exploration are a great deal more enigmatic.

Talking of the set, the standing stones and Paul’s pyramid of refuse, he makes the case for a naturalistic setting; ‘We need to feel more at home to get the full thrust of the messages’.  

This hankering for the dominant mode of naturalism and linear development is shared by The Sunday Press critic who declares that the play, ‘is... a bit of a tease so far as plot is concerned, a non-starter for realism, some of its characters are barely outlined and its allegory is farfetched.’ And yet, he continues: ‘It does work in a strange kind of way’. The difficulty here would seem to be a lack of theoretical knowledge with which to approach the play, an unresolved sense that ‘something’ is happening but within an alien framework. Lack of empathy with the characters is highlighted by Seamus Hosey as the play’s central difficulty. ‘This mediation leaves one strangely unmoved. We know too little of these characters to care deeply for their plight’. Against this, David Grant finds that: ‘every character displays a completeness which engages our absolute attention’. Hosey concludes that the comic element ‘is unerring’ and that the play is flawed by the ‘tragic symbols of suffering humanity awaiting salvation’. Michael Radcliffe poses exactly the opposite view that: ‘The play is flawed by its unfocused comic interludes’. But perhaps the craving for traditionalism and the need to categorise neatly is best expressed by John Peter who is unable, comfortably, to place the play in the tradition of Yeats and Synge, or Beckett:

I am in two minds about Carthaginians. I miss the thrust and heat of confrontation which is so essential to theatre; even in Waiting For Godot, an allegedly static play, there’s a sense of opposing wills and needs which

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44 Hosey.  
keeps the play in motion. *Carthaginians*, by contrast, functions as an act of revelation.\(^6\)

Against this, Robin Thurber finds the play:

Brilliantly effective and affective. McGuinness’s theatrical skill as he lures you will-o’-the-wisp, into his lurid world where moments of heightened tragic poetry can be juxtaposed with sharp satire, is breath-taking.\(^7\)

I would argue that the play is in constant opposition to the dominant, in form and content, creating what Annette Kuhn terms, ‘disturbances’ to the masculinity of Western discourse.\(^8\) If the masculine attributes of a text are defined as those of ‘visibility, goal-orientation, linearity and instrumentality of syntax’,\(^9\) these would seem to constitute the very essentials which critics find lacking in *Carthaginians*. So too, the multiplicity of meaning, the plurality, as opposed to unity of the open text may be too problematic for male critics. Only Coveney recognises the sexuality of the text, and its consequent political orientation; ‘Sarah Pia Anderson’s reverberatively eloquent production sustains the McGuinness metaphor of sexual predilection for political orientation’.\(^10\) The play, which left another critic ‘strangely unmoved’,\(^11\) is described by Coveney as ‘one of hauntingly coherent beauty and of sadness, and of a deep defiant joy’.\(^12\) The key adjectives ‘coherent’ and ‘defiant’ themselves defy the other critics for whom the play seems flawed because of its, for them, unrecognised feminine qualities. By inference, the diversity of reception to the text, the lack of comprehension of a ‘feminist text’ may have more to do with the limitations of contemporary criticism than with the work criticised.

Perhaps the most serious misinterpretation of the text was by members of Derry City Council who promoted a cultural festival, IMPACT 1992 and invited Druid Theatre Company’s production, directed by McGuinness himself. On viewing the play during its Galway run, they declared it to be a travesty of

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\(^8\) Kuhn, 11.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Coveney.
\(^11\) Hosey.
\(^12\) Coveney.
Bloody Sunday and called a special Council meeting to consider whether or not to cancel the event.\(^{53}\)

McGuinness leaves reception open-ended. He refuses to lead his audience into linear singular interpretation. So, too, he has introduced a binary allegorical format, that of Carthage and the Empire, as related by Paul throughout the play as he builds his pyramid, and the Christian motif of death and resurrection, emphasised by the life of the play in its adherence to the Holy Week schedule, and embodied by Dido as the Christ figure, stoned for *The Burning Balaclava* and making his farewell to his friends/disciples at the end. This double-allegory releases the audience from specific conclusions and from moral fixed meanings, but may give rise to aesthetic frustration for those whose orientation is 'masculine', as witnessed by the critical responses.

McGuinness further underlines his opposition to the dominant by introducing the O'Casey parody, *The Burning Balaclava*. Its adherence to naturalism cannot embrace complexities of difference so the continual refrain within that text is to kill, people, dogs, whatever. The formal shortcomings, so cleverly presented by the play within the play, serve as commentary on the contrasting form of *Carthaginians* itself. Its cyclical movement, as Tracy C. Davis might say, 'does not reassure and resolve. It provokes and revolves'.\(^{54}\) But disturbance is not only formal. It reverberates within the sexuality of the characters themselves and the textual significance of their sexual identities.

Hark is, on the surface, the archetypal 'male', described as the 'rough man',\(^{55}\) enacting his maleness in aggression and violence. He has left his identity in prison, adopting a new persona, which bears his guilt, naming himself 'Hark' as opposed to Joseph Harkin. His homophobia is pronounced. He responds to Dido's intimate advance, a kiss, with aggression and disavowal. Hark's phallocentricism is contested throughout the text, verbally by Maela and Greta and symbolically by Dido in the sausage scene where he cajoles Hark, 'Pick a sausage, any sausage'\(^{56}\) and proceeds to mash them.


\(^{55}\) *Carthaginians*, 70.

\(^{56}\) *Carthaginians*, 27.
into Hark’s face. McGuinness forces him, as Victoria White recognises, ‘towards the feminine in his relationship with Sarah and the consummation of that relationship. In line with the gesture towards transcendence, Hark does not absolutely refuse to give Sarah a child. The baby is and symbolises man’s coming into understanding with the feminine’. Dido, in comparison, thrives in the full awareness of his own sexual identity. If the men are past defining themselves, Dido’s homosexuality is the only constant and certainty within the text. And it is after the uneasy scene between Hark and Dido, that Dido’s confidence in his sexual identity is asserted and, thus, steers the play. Dido disturbs fixed perceptions of sexuality to make an audience accept him as the Christ figure.

McGuinness’s women represent different aspects of the feminine. They reflect three personifications of the maternal instinct although all are childless. Maela has lost her daughter and Sarah craves a child. Greta mourns the loss of an imaginary brother and has experienced trauma at puberty where she thought she was becoming male, the imagined brother. She has had a hysterectomy at an early age and feels that she has lost herself and her femininity. Greta’s sexual identity is complex. Of the women, she is the aggressor who stands up to Hark. She is independent and challenges female stereotyping. (She has converted her mother’s ‘doll’s house’ into an untidy home for herself). McGuinness here signifies more than an independent woman who combines male and female.

In the attention he pays to the biological, to the trauma of puberty and to Greta’s confused (if it is confused) sexual identity, McGuinness is forcing analogies, not entirely clear, but certainly relating to Freudian theories of the oedipal and in turn, the complex area of feminist psychoanalysis. This leads to the issue of gender difference and language as debated by post-Lacanian feminist theory. Juliet Mitchell in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* posits that Freudian theory is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of it. In turn, the French Feminist movement believed that psychoanalysis could provide an emancipatory theory of the personal and a

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path to the exploration of the unconscious, both of vital importance to the analysis of the oppression of women in patriarchal society.

Lacan's 'mirror' image theory develops Freud's analysis of the oedipal complex. The child's sight of its image in the mirror is the point of rupture or separation from what Lacan describes as the Imaginary, the pre-oedipal state (Freud) in which the child believes itself to be part of the mother and perceives no separation between itself and the world. The 'lack' or loss of the mother and the desire for this existence is repressed to open up the unconscious. The acceptance of this 'lack' coincides with the first acquisition of language and entry to the Symbolic Order where the phallus substitutes the lack of the mother.\(^59\) In both Luce Irigaray's and Julia Kristeva's analyses, the woman who refuses entry to the Symbolic Order is hysteric (Irigaray) or psychotic (Kristeva).\(^60\) As Toril Moi says of Irigaray: 'The hysteric mimes her own sexuality in a masculine mode, since this is the only way in which she can rescue something of her own desire. The hysteric's dramatisation of herself is thus a result of her exclusion from patriarchal discourse'.\(^61\)

Greta relates to the father figure, approaching him for explanation of menstruation. He upholds a male prerogative by sending her to her mother who spins yarns about fairies. Greta's mother would seem to be 'hysteric' or 'psychotic'; she hides under the table with her 'secrets'. Greta's non-alignment with the mother separates her from a female position of subjugation. The ideological separation from the mother is definite and cultural. It is the psychic separation from imagination which is problematic. Greta's menstrual trauma is an analogy of rupture and of the Lacanian primary repression which separates 'the other' from the genderless state of imagination. Greta 'imagines' she had a brother, who, she says is 'herself'. So, too, she 'imagines', through her own blood, becoming male:

\[\text{I thought I was turning into a man. My bleeding was a sure sign. I was certain the next thing after the breasts and the blood would be I'd grow a}\]

\(^{59}\) For analysis of Lacan, see 'From Simone de Beauvoir to Jaques Lacan' in Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics; Feminist Literary Theory, 99/100.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 135
\(^{61}\) Ibid.
beard. Months afterwards, whenever I was lonely, I'd touch my breasts, and say, at least I'll soon have a brother and he'll be myself.\textsuperscript{62}

In her use of language, Greta represents oppositional discourses. She can mimic or mime, in Irigaray's terminology, the male mode and is the only one who can match Hark's male idiom. He refers to her as 'a walking monument to the wit and wisdom of Derry town'. She is also expert at the 'in between speak' or 'poetic' referred to earlier. Her refrain is an example: 'I have only one brother, may God rest his soul. He was drowned in the river...'.\textsuperscript{63}

Irigaray's second option for woman after representation of herself 'as a lesser male' is one producing incomprehensible babble 'any utterance that falls outside the logic of the same will by definition be incomprehensible to the male master discourse'.\textsuperscript{64} Greta's gender dysfunction, of which she is on some level aware, gives her mastery of both masculine and feminine discourse.

Greta is not 'mad' but it is insinuated that Paul probably is. His language, syntax, is disrupted and a clear expression of his pain, the parading of which Greta despises. She enlists her masculinity in refusing to display the emotional. Greta's psychic journey is akin to Maela's literal journey through the streets. Maela, however comes to terms with the reality of her loss. Greta cannot, because hers is the central dilemma of feminist debate, to define is to essentialise, is to become trapped by male logic. In the graveyard she can only meet a vision of herself. She has to learn to embrace the masculine and the feminine more easily within that self. She must break down within herself, what Cixous and Derrida refer to as 'the tyranny of patriarchal binary thought, which encloses the masculine and the feminine in constant opposition'.\textsuperscript{65}

This androgynous symbiosis is embodied clearly by Dido's homosexuality. He is biologically male but embraces the feminine within it and thus, in Lacanian or Kristevan terminology, finds a comfortable place in the Symbolic Order; one of his many responses highlights his security of gender against the uncertainties of the others:

\textsuperscript{62} Carthaginians, 47.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{64} Moi, 135.
\textsuperscript{65} Moi, 105.
I know my kind, Hark. Do you want me to name them? Well, there’s me. That’s all. That’s enough. I know how to use what’s between my legs because it’s mine. Can you say the same? Some people here fuck with a bullet and the rest fuck with a Bible, but I belong to neither, so I’m off to where I belong. My bed. On my own. My sweet own.66

Here McGuinness is thwarting the patriarchy by which Kristeva would see, not only the female, but the feminine male, marginalised. He has placed Greta firmly on the periphery, between the Imaginary, Symbiotic and the Symbolic, a genderless state which is neither male nor female. Within this patriarchal scheme, woman may inhabit either boundary of the frontier, the edge closest to the void, Freud’s ‘dark continent’, or that which turns inwards towards the symbolic to protect it from the void and represent the other unknown, that which is elevated. As Toril Moi puts it: ‘The representatives of a higher and purer nature’.67 McGuinness floats Greta, like an atom in space, around her position of marginality. To return to the earlier analogy, she is exiled in the graveyard in an attempt to enter the symbolic order in which Dido has found security of identity. She could well end up as the baglady of the earlier play, whose irreconcilable conflict between love and hate of the Father has thrown her back as ‘hysteric’ into the imaginary.

As Michael Coveney’s summary of McGuinness’s ‘sexual predilection for political orientation’ suggests, Carthaginians may be seen as an image of ‘forming a new nation’,68 the playwright’s own description of the contemporary process of Ireland, North and South. The graveyard itself is a metaphysical landscape in which the marginalised, male and female, seek psychic and sexual identities in order to understand, come to terms with and manage their lives. In so doing, they form a temporary alternative social order. Masculine privileging of reason, order, unity, lucidity is upset in and by Carthaginians. Its complex layers explode male binary systems through form, language and the representations within the text. In turn, critics have been mostly unable to accept the challenges of the text, a situation which McGuinness has tried to rectify in revision and in his own direction of the play for Druid Theatre (1992). I have remarked elsewhere that the textual revisions

66 Carthaginians, 21.
67 Moi, 167.
are ‘small but significant’. Formally, the most radical change is in the reversal of the recital of *The Listeners* and the litany of the names, which, in the rewrite is the finale of the play before Dido’s epilogue. This crescendo towards the naming of the dead displaces the characters themselves, their private tragedies, to accentuate the momentous public tragedy of Bloody Sunday. In addition, Hark’s blessing, in the revised text: ‘May perpetual light shine upon you’, not only heightens the liturgical element of the ritual but suggests a new Hark. But by far the most radical textual changes in Scenes 1, 5 and 6 are related to Greta’s representation. In the revised text, her refrain ‘I have only one brother’ is deleted from the first scene while McGuinness pays much more attention to more tangible reasons for the women’s sojourn in the graveyard. In Scene 5, Greta confides the experience of the original text to Sarah but in a matter-of-fact way. It is her loneliness in the present and the prospect of future loneliness without children which is at the source of her new refrain: ‘Charlie, Charlie, chuck-chuck-chuck, went to bed with three wee ducks when the sun did greet the morn, the three wee ducks, they were all gone’.

So, too, her ‘miracle’, the vision, is not exactly ‘herself’ of the first text. She tells Sarah: ‘I want myself back...I would like to be what I used to be’. Greta’s truth-telling is human and perceptible in a scene of emotional empathy. She has had a hysterectomy at a young age and cannot have children. (‘And she saw the dead. She saw herself. She saw nothing, for she is nothing. She is not a woman anymore. Charlie, Charlie etc.... No wee ducks. There will be no wee ducks’). And so, Greta’s predicament is presented in very human terms of loss and grief. Greta’s sexuality, as portrayed by the first text, is reduced in complexity, and the feminist allusions are also diminished. In all, the revised text is less universal, more localised in language and representation. This is understandable given the controversy which surrounded the play before its performance in Derry. McGuinness’s special, if sentimental gesture to that particular situation, is in a new final line, solely for Derry audiences:

69 Foley, 36.
70 Frank McGuinness: *Plays I*, 178.
71 Ibid., 373.
Dido: I love youse all. I love you Derry.

There are reverberations of the Ulster Literary Theatre's predicament, where the original ideology had to capitulate to popular demand. Greta's straightforward presentation of her identity in the revised text, underplays, indeed negates, the feminist complexity of her original portrayal, and dilutes the signifiers of feminist content and form.

The play, in revision, is still a feminist text, and still, cannot please all the critics. Gerry Colgan adamantly stated that his reaction to the first production 'has not been changed by a new production'.

The play's ending does not seek to tie up its numerous loose ends. It is, by and large, a work in which the plums are of more consequence than the pudding.

As Eamonn Jordan notes in his conclusion to an analysis of Carthaginians, 'Meaning is held off and references are not tied up. The spectator should not see this as a failure as the very looseness is central to McGuinness's purpose'. In Dido's words, the text is open and McGuinness states this categorically; 'What happened? Everything happened, nothing happened, whatever you want to believe, I suppose'. Both Carthaginians and Observe The Sons of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme passed the test of controversy which was instigated in both cases by a localised sense of ownership of history and of particular tragedies within it. The two plays not only contest that premise, but compassionately deal with the specific tragedy (Bloody Sunday and the Somme) to give it respect and meaning within its temporality and beyond it. It would seem that McGuinness's plays are in a state of constant struggle with not so much, public perception, as preconceptions of them, and, that the controversy is eventually humiliated and annihilated by reception of the text in question. The episode of the tour to Derry by Druid Theatre Company mirrors that of the Abbey's production of

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72 Gerry Colgan, 'Carthaginians in Galway', The Irish Times, 7 February 92, 14.
73 Jordan, 91.
74 Carthaginians, 70.
Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme before it toured to the Grand Opera House in Belfast. In both cases, reception vindicated the integrity of the texts and embarrassed those who had so badly misinterpreted them. The problem of preconception becomes a problem of reception, in the later play, *Mary and Lizzie*, (1989). Its inherent anti-colonialist feminism creates good reason for some to dismiss the play without proper justification.

**The Marxist Feminist Alliance**

For the first production of *Mary and Lizzie*, the Royal Shakespeare Company chose the aesthetic security of their experimental venue, The Pit, at the Barbican in London. The critical response to *Mary and Lizzie* was at best, confused and the play seems to have been understood by a single critic, Richard Allen Cave who says that the play ‘caught most British reviewers off-guard. Confused by the challenge of the new that unsettled their expectations, they responded with coldly patronising aloofness to McGuinness’s subtly brilliant account of Irish history’.77

The thrust of the text is in the interplay of its ‘account of Irish history’ by the journey of the sisters Mary and Lizzie through it, and the power of the feminine psyche, which disrupts and explodes every ideological icon in its path. Hegemonies of Empire, religion, Catholic and Protestant, capitalism and Marxism are linked together and crowned by the primal hegemony of patriarchy. While woman is represented as victim, the sisters’ confidence in their own sexuality is the revolutionary force, which ploughs its way through the carnage of various historic betrayals.

The play is picaresque, in proceeding from confrontation to confrontation. Each of these has its temporal location but transcends it through a dream-like subliminality which universalises specific history and transforms the sisters’ ordinary gestures into poetic discourse. Scene 1, The City of the Women is inhabited by six women who have been betrayed by

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75 BBC, Radio Ulster ran a ‘vox pop’ on the issue of the National Theatre of Ireland bringing a play about Ulster heritage, written by a Catholic, to Northern Ireland, November 1987.


British soldiers. The women, who have waited outside the Irish camps for their men, are exiled to a living death, an existence in which they have no name, stripped of identity by sexual betrayal. These women are simultaneously the configurations of Mary and Lizzie’s still-born sisters whose double tragedy creates resonances beyond the particular. In cyclical form, we meet them at the end of the play, reincarnated as the women of the Russian camps. So, they become symbols, victims of male sexual exploitation, of penury and finally of a political ideology which is, in essence, masculine.

This image of life betrayed, of life stolen, is given its most disturbing manifestation in the encounters with the old woman, the sean bean bhocht, Mother Ireland, who cuts open her pregnant womb to reveal a huge hollow which contains a miniature coffin. The old woman is also mother to the priest, who appears in drag and announces a new religion which is a demonic mixture of Catholic and Protestant, the progeny of Mother Ireland, in the priest’s words: ‘A killing combination of two defunct faiths that can only survive by feeding off each other’. If these are the wasted victims of Irish myth and history, a certain amount of the blame is allocated to British rule, to its instigation of the famine (personified through the fat Irish pig exported to England in exchange for ‘rotten flour’), and to the capitalist greed of the Empire, personified by Victoria who is herself victim of male hegemony: ‘As a child they dressed me in black. It was in preparation. Not for being queen, but for being a woman’. As woman, Victoria can predict England’s post-colonial downfall. As Queen, she is helpless to do anything about it but must conform to cultural/patriarchal expectations which include denial of her femininity. Her prediction of England’s fate is highly contemporary, and the ingenuity of allocating what might otherwise be construed as racism, to Victoria herself and about her own land, is another example of what Richard Allen Cave with some delight, refers to as ‘hitting below the belt, which is not fair, not British, not done’. Like the reversals of Memmi’s The Colonizer and The Colonized, Victoria predicts the ‘monster which eats itself up’.

78 Mary and Lizzie, 11.
79 Mary and Lizzie, 23.
80 Cave, 58.
81 D.E. S. Maxwell’s term. See Chapter Two.
I worry for poor England when the wandering's over. Where will it go then but into itself, and what will it find? A tenement. The England that was wont to conquer others now makes a conquest of itself. Some third-rate isle lost among her seas. How shall we cope? By lying, I suppose.\(^82\)

This epitomises the lie which betrays in each instance of confrontation and contributes to the absolute lie which, in the McGuinness text, underpins every ideology except that of feminism.

Mary and Lizzie dance through this half real, half nightmare world of historical cause and effect, refusing to be harnessed by cultural stereotypes of womanhood, rejoicing in their individuality, their sisterhood, their love and freedom. McGuinness creates, through them, a feminist polemic whose revolutionary potential is unlimited in itself, but, totally limited by the context in which they operate. They find temporary fulfilment in residence with Engels in Manchester. They delight in outraging Marx who is represented as eccentric, selfish and neither likeable nor worldly wise. It is in this central section that McGuinness dramatises what he perceives as a contradiction in terms, an impossible allegiance, that of Marxist Feminism. To look at what happens in this encounter with Marx and Engels in terms of plot and ideology, explains the McGuinness ontology.

Cora Kaplan poses the orientation of radical feminist ideology as variously describing the origin of women's subordination but 'always at pains to point out that the transhistorical, transcultural, transclass character of women's oppression proves that patriarchy is much more fundamental ... than the effects of any given mode of production'.\(^83\) Radical feminism insists on the primacy of gender difference, of patriarchy over all other determinations and does not accommodate a fusion between gender and class within which the priority of sexual difference would be diminished. The union of Marxism and Feminism has been contested by many theorists, including Kaplan. Heidi Hartman's aptly titled essay, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism', proclaims a Marxist trap for feminism. 'Women', she states, 'should not trust men to liberate them...they would not know how; there is no

\(^82\) Mary and Lizzie, 24.

necessity for them to do so.\textsuperscript{84} Juliet Mitchell, herself a Marxist Feminist, recognises that the process of capitalism towards the communism envisaged by Marx and Engels, reduces the distinction between the sexes to the point of disappearance. McGuinness might argue that that very 'disappearance' in the creation of social androgyny is an ideological goal, but not one achievable through Marxism. To dramatise radical feminist theory within the text of \textit{Mary and Lizzie}, he degrades the possibility of a Marxist Feminist alliance. While critics have been upset by this anti-Marxist stance, there seems to be a consistent lack of recognition of the feminine input which McGuinness insists on as the primary edict of any ideology. If sexual politics are not addressed, ideology will be fatuous. Nicholas Woodeson finds the Marx/Engels encounter 'dramatic dynamite but political rubbish'.\textsuperscript{85} Engels's arguments, far from being racist are, he says, "cool, dispassionate and based in demographic truths". So too, \textit{The Sunday Times} critic quotes: 'This is not poetic licence but intellectual fraud; people who haven't read Engels will go away thinking he was a racist'.\textsuperscript{86} He finds the portrayal of Marx, 'ludicrously inaccurate'. Even Cave's perceptive analysis does not grasp the feminist connotations within the text. In claiming the play to be 'truly subversive, revolutionary'\textsuperscript{87} his view is in relation to Irish ideological propaganda. The feminist ideology of the text has eluded him.

In \textit{Mary and Lizzie}, McGuinness is completely congruent with Kate Millet's stance on Engels as revolutionary feminist. Millet comments on Engels' antithesis to patriarchal marriage and the family, that, 'the very fact of his attempt to demonstrate that they were not an eternal feature of life was in itself a radical departure'.\textsuperscript{88} She continues to outline Engelian radicalism, closely akin to McGuinness's own thesis throughout the texts and dramatised within this one: 'sexual dominance became the keystone to the total structure of human injustice ... the historical and conceptual prototype of all subsequent power systems and the fact of oppression itself.'\textsuperscript{89} McGuinness's treatment of

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  \item \textsuperscript{84} Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', (1979), in Humm, 109.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} Nicholas Woodeson, 'Mary and Lizzie', \textit{Financial Times}, 28 September 1989.
  \item \textsuperscript{86} \textit{The Sunday Times}, 1 October 1989.
  \item \textsuperscript{87} Cave, 59.
  \item \textsuperscript{88} Kate Millet, \textit{The Sexual Revolution}, 120-127.
  \item \textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Engels, while respecting his feminist ideology, is complicated. First of all he presents Marx and Engels in bed together as a pair of eccentrics. While the encounter is wickedly funny, McGuinness not only undermines the deified perception of the two figures through a ludicrous discussion of Marx's 'Ode to Materialism', but in placing them, literally, under the statues of the figures history was to make of them, McGuinness is making a point about history's revisionism. As always, he juxtaposes physical and metaphorical images to create powerful statements, in this case the irony of the hierarchical deities, literally on pedestals, which history has made of those whose lives were dedicated to dissolving such hierarchies. Of course too, the literal positioning of the pair together in bed bickering in nightcaps, beneath their stage pedestals, presents an additional layer of irony.

Engels becomes dramatic victim to McGuinness's representation of Marxist patriarchy. He concurs with Juliet Mitchell's evaluation of Engels' anti-patriarchy 'that the family-turned-upside-down' (through the sexual division of labour in Victorian England) should act as evidence of the pristine inhumanity of male rule in a family 'the right way up'. There are no families 'the right way up' or any other way, in McGuinness's text. So why is Engels' ideology finally usurped in *Mary and Lizzie*? His predilection towards women, politically and sexually, is represented as an experience of shared joy and liberation within the text. The explicit sexual scene with Mary Burns represents the vindication of the sexual and the vindication of public demonstration of shared joy and liberation. Marx is horrified, to the extent that his single reaction is: 'My God'. Engels prefers the comfort and company of Marx to that of the sisters and eventually disavows his own principles in negating the sisters, in his preference for Marx.

But, it is Jenny Marx who is the propagator of the dissolution of the revolutionary relationship between Engels and the Burns sisters. She is represented as confused, on the verge of nervous collapse and subjugated by her husband. Her summary of herself 'I am redundant. A useless piece of production, past child-bearing, and there were no sons,' reflects her low

91 *Mary and Lizzie*, 36.
(Marxist) self esteem while she continues to dramatise what might be Engelian anti-patriarchy (to Marx): 'Am I your contradiction? Are we not speaking? My husband and I are in opposition tonight'. This neatly parallels dramatically the antagonism which Engels outlines in *The Condition of the Working Class in England 1844*: 'The first class antagonism appearing in history coincides with the antagonism of man and wife in monogamy and the first class oppression with that of the female by the male sex'. Engels continues to comment, as Jenny Marx has, on 'the welfare and advancement of one by the woe and submission of the other'. Jenny's 'woe' is exaggerated by her pathetic attempt to rise out of submission. In her desperation for a husband's love, she can only destroy the 'love' which has been exhibited between the sisters and Engels. She quotes, incompletely, from *The Condition of the Working Class in England 1844*, to brand Engels racist and, playing on the illiteracy of the sisters, leaving them with no option but to accept that Engels has failed them. In a stance of solidarity and separatism, the sisters reject Engels and refuse him entry to Freud's 'dark continent of women'.

Mary: Change the world, eh? Change us. Change yourself first. Mr Engels is afraid of the dark. We're the dark.

It is the jealous act of one woman against another, not racism on Engels' part, which has promoted instant subversion. Eventually, it is Marx, not Engels or Jenny Marx, who is the proponent of bad faith. In McGuinness's text, Marx espouses the rise of woman and subjugates his wife. He honours the working class and explicitly hates the poor. It is Marx who is the patriarchal husband running a patriarchal marriage. Finally, a dramatic rupture with Engels espouses radical feminism and separatism as the only course of action or being for Mary and Lizzie. They reject the male order of rationality and attempts to control identity. They claim the right to 'jouissance', to reason and desire and to love.

92 Ibid., 39.
94 Mary and Lizzie, 42.

The final scene of the post-Marxist Russian camps, where, in the words of Cave, 'the attitudes of Marx and Engels will become manifest as social fact', completes the cycle of oppression, patriarchy, brands of fascism. The women who have been betrayed by the soldiers of Scene One are the women of a larger act of betrayal in this final scene. And, it would seem, that for McGuinness, Marxism is the substitution of one form of despotism by another.

But McGuinness also disturbs other historical constructs in the representation of the sisters' overt sexuality, Victorian feminist ideology is challenged and its central contradictions unravelled. Here, it is worth quoting Kaplan in full as she traces the subordination of female sexuality back to the Enlightenment:

The negative meanings historically associated with their sexuality have been a major impediment in women's fight for liberation. Historians suggest that the ideological division of women into two classes, the virtuous and the fallen, was already well developed by the mid-eighteenth century. Certainly it received one of its major articulations at about this time in Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). In *Emile*, the possibility of women's civil, economic and psychological independence is rejected because it would also enable the independent and licentious exercise of her supposedly insatiable sexual appetite. It is important to remember that the notion of woman as politically enabled and independent is fatally linked to the unrestrained and vicious exercise of her sexuality, not just in the propaganda of new right, but in a central and influential work of the very old left.  

Kaplan expands this analysis to understand the political legacy and background which informed later feminist thought (in the period), particularly that of Mary Woolstonecraft whose assault on female sexuality is both negative and prescriptive. In the quest for reason, its supposed opposites - feeling, sexuality, pleasure (the 'jouissance' of later feminism) are presented as counter-revolutionary. This would seem to identify McGuinness's thesis, the counteraction of the values of the left at the time. Mary and Lizzie are paradigms of sexuality but of a sexuality which unites with reason. As such, they are total anachronisms. So too, expression of sexual politics is objectionable to Marx who views the sisters as 'whores', whose presence he dislikes in his house. For him, they represent the class quoted by Kaplan

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95 Cave, 60.
96 Kaplan, 33.
above, the fallen. In this representation of the sisters, McGuinness reinstates radical feminism to upset the prudish values of the left in that period. For him, the division of reason and nature is anathema.

The combination of nature and reason is echoed too, in the language and formal exegesis of the text. Cave refers to the logic of the action as 'the logic of dream'. Without literally espousing feminist criticism, he almost defines the feminist text: 'like nightmare', he says, 'the play has a fierce clarity that disturbs precisely because it is so immediate'. 'It appeals', he continues 'to subliminal reaches of awareness in an audience'.97 So too, the formal resonances within this text and Carthaginians, translate Cave's immediacy of nightmare into another context, that defined by Julia Kristeva as 'Women's Time'. Commenting on Kristeva's concept of 'Women's Time', Alice Jardine states that 'female subjectivity would seem to be linked to cyclical time (repetition) and to monumental time (eternity)'.98 The formal cycle of Carthaginians, from initial to final vision within the graveyard, the repetitions of Greta's refrains, and the literal obsessions with reproduction and motherhood continually repeated, place that text within the concept of cyclical time. Kristeva sees linear time as the time of history or political time, masculine in essence and, in Jardine's words, related to project, teleology, departure, progression and arrival, the beginning and ending, the tying up of loose ends, so craved by the critics of McGuinness.

Kristeva outlines another element of time within feminist chronology. She outlines three periods and ideologies, the first demanding equal rights with men, as Jardine puts it, the 'right to a place in linear time'.99 The second phase underlining gender difference, demands the right to remain outside linear time, the right to reclaim cyclical and monumental time. Contemporary feminism, Kristeva argues, demands the reconciliation of both times, the linear historical and the monumental, the identity of sexual difference within the given political and historical framework in which it exists. The analogy with Carthaginians is clear. By resolving mathematical puzzles within the text, the play is set clearly in 1985 and deals with a particular political period, as well as

97 Cave, 60.
a fixed tragedy within a universal. In Mary and Lizzie, McGuinness juxtaposes linear historic time with cyclical time embodied by the psyches of the two sisters. The given historical period underlines the universal symbolic time of the eternal subjugation of women, with Mary and Lizzie symbols of attempts towards emancipation from it, the right to remain outside linear time.

In Kristeva's theory of women's time, there are other resonances which might particularly refer to McGuinness. What she describes as 'monumental temporality, all-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space', in desperation for language, she likens to the various myths of resurrection which she says, 'perpetuate the vestige of an anterior or concomitant maternal cult', in this case that of the assumption, but, as Angela Wilcox has pointed out, in the case of Carthaginians, that of the resurrection of Christ. Within the linear temporality of the graveyard in the eighties, McGuinness subsumes historical time into the cyclical or monumental time of the myth of resurrection, in Kristeva's words creating an 'all-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space around characters whose existence is at once literal and symbolic, and whose orbit is temporal and monumental. This is the principle which particularly governs the text of Mary and Lizzie. While the sisters traverse linear time, they communicate with 'a city of women' who live in the trees. These are the dispossessed, those jilted by centuries of colonialism, abused by British soldiers. The linear blends again with the monumental when Mary and Lizzie meet the women from the Russian camps. Their history blends with the history of their Irish peers and the journey of Mary and Lizzie enters the true frame of the 'monumental'. Particular history is absorbed in both Mary And Lizzie and Carthaginians into a universal or 'monumental' timeframe within which specific locations of linear time both achieve and shed their importance. The texts become instances of formally dramatised feminist ideology.

99 Ibid.
102 Kristeva, 443-459.
103 Mary and Lizzie, 1.
Female Absence and Male Bonding

Where the women of the trees and camps, in *Mary and Lizzie*, represent the historic victims of colonialism as feminine, the female absence of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* and *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* presents a more complex challenge in terms of gender and feminist exposition. In the first, woman is the object of male contempt and a chauvinistic Loyalism, in the second, a shadowy presence whose changing perspective signposts the private and public change in stance of male, from masculine towards an encompassing of the feminine. The character Edward’s (*Someone Who’ll Watch over Me*), inherent (and educated) Nationalism is as closed as the Loyalism of his counterparts, the volunteers marching towards the Somme. Edward is a journalist from Northern Ireland, captured as hostage in the Lebanon. He is forced to accept difference when he is joined by another hostage, Michael who is English, a University lecturer and a widower. The Ulster soldiers have to accept Pyper who is upper class, an artist and shares neither accent or political orientation with the other men. In both texts McGuinness incorporates changing attitudes towards the feminine as analogous to the private transformations which occur within these male psyches. The extreme masculine/loyalist culture of the sons of Ulster, not only excludes woman but associates her with ‘Papishness’ and ‘Papishness’ with femininity, sectarianism inextricably bound with sexism as we have seen in the work of Graham Reid and Gary Mitchell. Pyper’s story of the ‘Papish whore’ who had three legs is believed by Moore who says that he’s only heard it before in relation to nuns! Anderson, one of the two Belfast representatives of the eight volunteers, addresses the gathering as ‘ladies’ as he ‘spys a Taig’ and McLlwaime’s outlandish impression of Pearse is as an effeminate: ‘He was a Fenian. No soldier. Fenians can’t fight. Not unless they’re in a post office or a bakery or a woman’s clothes shop. Disgrace to their sex!’ And so, Fenians are weak and feminine, loyalists strong and masculine. McGuinness

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104 Frank McGuinness, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, 29.
105 Ibid., 33.
106 Ibid., 65.
equates masculinity with naivety, cliché, reductionism and the ready-made certainties of a protestant ethos.

David Nowlan sees the play, *Observe The Sons of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme* as: ’one of the most comprehensive attacks ever made in the theatre on Ulster Protestantism’.\(^{107}\) Joseph O’Connor contests this view by saying ’It is not an attack on Ulster Protestantism. It is an urgent communication of insight into the nature of political ideologies and allegiances.’\(^{108}\) Cavan Hoey sees the alleged ‘attack on Ulster Protestantism’ as ‘reductive and distorting’.\(^{109}\) In a sense there is truth in both viewpoints, but the text goes further than either acknowledge in that it works to outline a social and spiritual tyranny which eventually the soldiers, in their moments of self-realisation, must understand and react against. At the training camp and the Somme, leadership is as faceless as the faceless and exploitative ethos which has brought them there to be slaughtered, not to die for Ulster but to be the ultimate ‘sacrifice’.\(^ {110}\) They move from fixed ideologies towards a state of anxiety and ultimately, towards realisation of a huge cultural betrayal. Even the known certainties of geographical rootedness, identity, are questionable as the men are isolated from their local identities at the sites of home leave, the rope bridge, the Tyrone Church, the field at Edenderry, (the site of the celebrations of the Twelfth of July for Belfast). They have become the dispossessed with only each other to fall back on. McGuinness exploits the Protestant obsession with place which, as Kiberd comments within another context, is an ‘attempt by those estranged from Catholic spirituality and nationalist history, to find in geography a home for their insecure sense of Irishness’.\(^ {111}\) Away from Ulster, the men keep a tenacious grip on it. Back home, in Part III, this identification with place has been undermined and the pairs are left with only symbols and emblems of place. Their world as manifested by rootedness in place has dissolved, as Mcllwaine expresses it at the field:


\(^{109}\) Cavan Hoey, ‘Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme’, *Theatre Ireland*, Nos. 9/10, 1985, 141.

\(^{110}\) *Observe the Sons*, 10.

McIlwaine: It's no good here on our own. No good without the bands, no
good without the banners. Without the chaps. No good on
our own. Why did we come here to be jeered at? Why did
we come here, Anderson?

Anderson: To beat a drum.\textsuperscript{112}

On home soil, on leave, alone with their emblems, the men confront their
common crises. Fear of the inevitable turns the war in their heads and the war
in the trenches into a nightmare vision of desolation, betrayal and
disassociation. The volunteers become a microcosm of a Protestant
dispossessed, as lost and helpless at home as in the no-man's land of the
Somme and as their Catholic counterparts of the Derry graveyard in
\textit{Carthaginians}. As the men move towards a useless catharsis, McGuinness
echoes other commentators on the protestant ethos.

Marianne Elliot and Robert McCartney both elaborate on the
exploitation of an ethic whose political and cultural adherences are betrayed
by the very forces to which they adhere. Elliot sees that, 'one part of the
nation seems content to remain in a sort of willing servitude, merely to lord it
over another part'.\textsuperscript{113} McCartney's summary serves McGuinness's text well:
'To make the will of authority the will of the people, is to establish the triumph
of despotism by forcing the slaves to declare themselves free'.\textsuperscript{114} This sense
of betrayal, of enslavement is voiced by Pyper and dealt with dramatically
throughout the text. The elder Pyper's prologue embodies the central
contradiction within the protestant ethos: 'the triumph of despotism';

\begin{quote}
Answer me why we did it, why we let ourselves be led to
extermination?...That is not loyalty. That is not love. That is hate. Deepest
hate. Hate for oneself.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

So, too, the volunteers move towards an increasingly intuitive notion of their
own exploitation and in so doing must question their hereditary beliefs.

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Observe the Sons}, 45.
\textsuperscript{113} Marianne Elliot, \textit{Watchmen in Sion: The Protestant Idea of Liberty}, A Field Day Pamphlet No. 8,
Derry, Field Day Company Ltd., 1985.
\textsuperscript{114} R. L. McCartney QC MPA, \textit{Liberty and Authority in Ireland}, Derry, A Field Day Publication, No. 9,
1985, 8.
Helen Lojek describes Pyper as an 'outsider', not only by virtue of his insinuated homosexuality and class difference, but by his own rationalisation and willed exemption from a society which he has viewed as closed. Textually, his homosexuality provides a privileged instrument for analysis and, as Lojek states: 'provides a perspective not a theme'. But it is a central perspective, because the volunteers, recognising immediately and repudiating Pyper's homosexuality, silently endorse difference by electing him leader and mentor. In so doing they have moved towards his kind of identification with chaos and, as Lojek describes it, 'existential outsider'. These men have found some kind of psychic status if they cannot fully understand it or equate with it, but it has allowed them the emotional will to discover Pyper's truth which they recognise as more legitimate than their own. They are too entrenched in values which have enslaved them for centuries, to move towards any real enlightenment or new ideology. But they do perceive and recognise that their certainties have been diminished. In turn, too, Pyper descends from his total outsider status to identify with them. They all shift towards a new range or order in which their differences have been diluted and are certainly less important than at the beginning of the play. Even Roulston, who makes himself an outsider by his fundamentalist literalism and constant reference to the Bible, may capitulate to the radical Pyper to ask him to preach and say the final prayer. As in Carthaginians, a meta-community has found its own brand of truth, and in that discovery has had to shift positions, positions which have been historically and ideologically fixed by external forces. The essential difference between these journeys of enlightenment is that for one, (Carthaginians), new life dawns, for the other life becomes an impossibility. Eventually, Pyper, the outsider, becomes the insider. As sole survivor, his life becomes a death penalty and one dedicated to the memory of his comrades and to the ethos of 'no surrender'. Echoing his parodies of the early

115 Observe the Sons, 12.
117 Ibid.
acquaintance with these comrades, he joins, in his own terms, 'God's chosen'.

Identity has been challenged and confronted and in the words of Philip Orr, there has been 'a breaking of the silence'. His documentary analysis, *The Road to The Somme*, times and analyses the silence which was the Ulster response to exploitation and Ulster's own self-censorship of the events and their aftermath. Orr states, almost in the language of McGuinness:

A strident espousal of glory, traditions, sacrifices and absolutes is entirely different in tone from the mundane but authentic voice of the ordinary human being whom circumstances threw into crucible of violence. Ulster Protestants must make a careful choice about which voice they prefer to listen to, and which kind of history to challenge.

McGuinness's 'kind of history' challenges traditional absolutes, and, in so doing, 'breaks the silence'. The men must accept that they have been led, untrained and unprepared, to a slaughter. In turn, reception must admit and recognise, not only the waste and human carnage of war, but the particular and perhaps unnecessary loss of life, a sorer reality than that of the glory of sacrifice, a soothing myth which makes the awful reality more endurable.

In terms of myth, Eamonn Jordan relies on definitions as justification of events, the abuse of myth as discussed in Chapter One. The 'fluidity' of myth as outlined by Welch, is frozen within Loyalist mythology and McGuinness's text becomes a kaleidoscope of scenarios challenging ideology, the fears, disenchantments represented by the scenes of home leave and compared starkly to the relative peace shared by Craig, the recruit from Derry and Pyper, and symbolised by the two-faced standing stones of Boa Island. (As the men return home for leave, Pyper has invited Craig to spend the time with him in Fermanagh and they visit Boa Island to look at the standing stones, and to share the isolated beauty of the place. They share emotional closeness which may be sexual. The standing stones have two faces, back and front and represent sexual duality).

119 *Observe the Sons*, 10.
121 Ibid.
122 See Jordan, 209.
The reversal of myth in the enactment of the Battle of Scarva and the reversal of history by an act of horseplay within it are beyond the comprehension of the men. That William falls from his horse can barely be contemplated by them. They rush towards avoidance, towards the smell of the Somme and the ultimate enactment of myth, the belief that they are on home ground, fighting for their own territory. McGuinness underlines the masculine interpretation of myth and subverts it by allowing his protagonists the escape of fantasy within it. Their original 'blood lust' has become a death-wish. Like their female counterparts in *The Factory Girls* and *Carthaginians*, reality is too difficult to bear and radical change is far beyond the limited power of their individual human resources.

McGuinness's challenge to given perceptions of Ulster and of its Protestantism operates within a framework which allows individual and collective triumph alongside deeply felt tradition. That tradition is masculine in essence and, to legitimise itself, must open to the feminine qualities which this text endorses. It begins and ends in ideology and personal lives which are uncertain and must be questioned. But the real questioning remains subtextual and the characters themselves are unable to face the truth, as indeed Orr has confirmed, that history too has also been unable to accept another version of heroism. The ambiguity of the final affirmation of dispossession, 'the temple of the Lord is ransacked ... Ulster', suggests that there is recognition and at the same time, denial, a falling back on well-worn ideology. The text therefore questions and also allows the honour of commemoration. Perhaps McGuinness has offered the rationale for that 'ransack' and within this text, given credence to both the preservation of the values of inherited Protestantism and its contemporary interpretations. To break through the surface of iconography, these men have broken down barriers between themselves, between their regional identities and their cultural and political beings. We find them, at the end, almost ready for a new beginning.

Eventually, real and metaphysical barriers blur so that when McGuinness sends the men 'over the top', it is an image so powerful in its connotations and so poignantly literal in its realism, that its reception may be

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123 See Welch, Chapter One, (I Foley).
as diverse as the varieties of disillusionment suffered by the men. McGuinness formalises and gives space to the ritual which can be mythologised. He gives greater space to the reality of deaths which are unwarranted. Both operate in tandem and offer diverse receptions. The elegy for the Sons of Ulster or the interrogation of the autocracy which has informed their meagre lives and sent them to early deaths offer dual responses and readings. The dignity of myth is preserved and the challenge to colonialism is proffered. The march towards the Somme may be seen as the march towards wilful self-destruction, and the inability to chose life. Jordan states that McGuinness needed to end the play chanting the name of the Province 'Ulster'. McGuinness has said that he didn't want to let the men die. But eventually, he is driven towards capitulation, towards an apparent gesture of acceptance of mythologies which have been interrogated throughout the play. The men and audience alike have been forced to interrogate the masculinity of fixed identities which are grounded in a mixture of myth and prejudice. McGuinness’s reinstatement of heroic death for Ulster provides contradictions and readings which are ambivalent and feminist in essence. In reception too, the choice of meaning and its reverberation is open ended. He does not upset an audience whose allegiances have been to the men of Ulster, although he disturbs fixed perceptions, and he does not guarantee solace to anyone. Similarly, McGuinness does not totally undermine an ethos which has underpinned cultural values. He leaves it with respectful questioning and with a deep understanding of its significance.

McGuinness’s text pushes private relationships and their revelations into a highly public sphere. Seemingly small and personal disillusions build to threaten the public image of death for a cause, of lives exchanged for a better future. Finally the audience, like the men, have choices, to accept the ‘darkness’ within the text, the portrayal of the ‘despotism’ at the heart of Loyalism. Or, the text may be read as a poignant and fitting memorial to the bravery of the men of the 36th Division.

The dramatically manufactured and historically correct location of the Somme gives way to that of the Beirut hostage cell in Someone Who'll Watch

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124 Observe the Sons, 69-71.
If masculinity has been a theme of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, it is the interrogation of masculinity which is the theme of *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. The play debates and defines masculinity within a literal framework of imprisonment, within the characteristic setting of McGuinness's work, in environments which are removed from reality in order to question and understand it.

The American, Adam, and Irishman, Edward are joined in captivity by Englishman, Michael. In *Observe the Sons*, where McGuinness creates a representational map of Northern Ireland by placing the regional duos in a geographical crescent around the stage, with a matter of a few actual miles creating distances of differences and of identity, so, too, this crescent shape is drawn by Adam (America), Edward (Ireland) and stage left, Michael (England). Chained to their positions, these are fixed throughout the play. The cultural representations are obvious and as the relationships between the men develop, cultural difference is pronounced and challenged. Adam is the least substantially characterised, more a symbol highlighting the symbolic significance of his captivity, and the dehumanisation which marks the practice and ideology of the unseen captors. Textually, his presence allows McGuinness to draw the key features of Edward, the 'big boy', the nationalist, whose mythologies are as rigid as those of his Loyalist counterparts in *Observe the Sons*, and whose misogyny is as culturally deeply rooted. Edward admits that he doesn't know his wife or children, that, in Adam’s words, he would have married the racing horse Dawn Run, 'except she was a Protestant' and he blithely recalls 'screwing' a woman in Omagh one night to waken up in the sober light to see that 'she looked like a man'. Edward has as little knowledge of the feminine as his Protestant equivalents, and his propensity for denying female gender is continually underlined. Binary opposition is broken. Educated Catholics are as capable of sexism and sectarianism, even if their expression of it is less obtuse and obvious.

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125 McG Trinity Lecture.
127 Ibid, 2.
128 Ibid, 3.
As with Carthaginians, stories, jokes, fantasies, pass the time of waiting and while the imminence of death is always present and becomes a reality for Adam, it is the psychic journeys and their symbolic reverberations which map themes and subtext. Michael's arrival is dramatically presented by McGuinness in a change of key, reminiscent of Dido's entrance in Carthaginians and that of McIlwaine and Anderson in Observe the Sons. Michael's stereotypical Englishness, an Eton accent, and his precision of obsession with his outing to the market 'for pears' to make 'a pear flan',\(^{129}\) (he had invited some colleagues from the University to dinner so that he might 'learn the ropes'), becomes comic within the closed environment of the hostage cell. Michael immediately relates all there may be to know about himself, that he has been made redundant as a lecturer in Old and Middle English and has come to teach at the University in Beirut. The inherent irony of the need for such scholarship within a war-torn extremist Muslim/Christian conflict adds to the absurdity, and, when his apparent femininity is questioned by Edward, he tells that he is widowed but that his mother is still alive.

Jordan's reading of the three characters is over-serious and exaggerated. He states that they have 'no vocation' and are in Beirut 'for the money'. Certainly Michael's motives are based on self-interest, but not mercenary or exploitative. He 'absolutely needs to work' and that need has been denied him within restructuring in his English University. Jordan accuses all three of being stubborn, irresponsible and arrogant. Michael's behaviour and actions would seem to be more driven by innocence, in his replication of Peterborough's High Street with central Beirut, and, in attempting to transfer the niceties of academe to such a crucible of violence and unrest. Yet, he is the epitome of the English gentleman and has tried as best he knows to integrate and learn about the situation, a process which he exactly repeats within the new situation of the hostage cell. Firmly standing his ground, Michael deflects and demolishes Edward's racist attacks through superior knowledge and education and with a finely tuned rationality which has absorbed some of Edward's colloquialisms and propensity for banter. He is becoming stronger by the minute while Adam has given up and Edward's

\(^{129}\) Ibid, 10. When the play was performed for one night at the West Belfast Festival, Sunday 4 August
bravura is waning. His, Edward’s, confusion is at its height when he confidently states: ‘They [the captors] do as they’re ordered. I do as I choose’. This, in the circumstances, is either a hugely metaphysical statement, or that of someone close to the edge of sanity and madness.

Adam, the American, is the least characterised of the trio, because he is symbol, textually, and politically for the captors. He is as much a political pawn within the textual schema as he is hostage, highlighting the irrationality of the condition of all the hostages. While McGuinness here is developing the relationship of English and Irish, the dissonance of coloniser and colonised, Adam’s presence introduces difference and cultural identity as a theme.

The aftermath of Adam’s departure, when we assume that he has been shot, and Edward’s resulting hunger strike, is a signal of cathartic change, within the movement of the text, and for the characters themselves. Maela’s nightmare voyage through the streets of Derry in *Carthaginians*, the discomfort and disassociation of Home Leave for the men of *Observe the Sons* and the collapse of faith for the country and western singer of the *Marathons* workshop are similar preludes to catharsis. These instances lead to renewal, or at least its possibility and that is most pronounced within this text. Edward disintegrates, mentally, spiritually and physically, echoed by his refusal to eat. It is Michael who nurses him towards recovery and new life, which is based on recognition of the fact of Adam’s death, but more so on his recognition of life and the necessity of the inclusion of a feminine consciousness within the male psyche.

Michael adopts Edward’s role as the instigator of high-jinks and fantastic performances. He re-enacts the 1977 Wimbledon Ladies Tennis Final between Virginia Wade and Betty Stove, contesting every protest from Edward with a speed and wit which surpasses Edward’s own high quality repartee. This continues at a breathless pace until Edward has re-adjusted and entered their world again. He speaks of his wife for the first time and Michael asks whether or not he did, or wanted to, sleep with Adam. It is a moment of quiet intimacy and of truth and signifies the change in Edward who has been beaten down reduced and unable to cope. Michael has already

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1992, the audience applauded and laughed at Michael’s first line, ‘I’m so sorry, but where am I?, 9.
dealt with trauma, with his wife’s death. Edward is an outsider to pain and loss and has no resilience to it.

It is within this context that situations from the other texts combine into collective meaning, beyond each one singly. Trauma, and the pain of it, leads to enlightenment and a new way of coping with life and living it. This has occurred within the life of all the texts. The grief and private/public suffering within *Carthaginians*, the loss suffered by Ellen in *The Factory Girls*, and the terrible loss of the foundations of identity in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* are dramatic experiences which, in McGuinness’s texts, are destined to change lives and renew them, for the better. Edward, on the other hand, has spent his life painstakingly avoiding any confrontation, which might impair his superficial and pleasurable relationship with it. He is also an outsider to any comprehension of the sexuality of the world around him and the complexities of that. McGuinness introduces Edward to a totally new life in his leave-taking of Michael. This is double-edged, an entry to a living death without Michael, the ambiguous world of the elder Pyper in *Observe the Sons*, and Edward, has learnt enough, we must assume, to maintain him. He has witnessed the strength and obduracy which Michael, the ‘effeminate’ Englishman has displayed, and he has been nurtured by him and by his values.

The farewell gesture when Edward combs Michael’s hair is a silent communication of emotion. It signifies the shift in lives which has occurred through the journey of the play. Such a gesture by Edward, at the beginning of the play would have been unimaginable. At its finale, he is able to admit to Michael: ‘You’re the strongest man I know’. The final words of the play are: ‘Right, Right’. ‘Good luck’. Monosyllabics underscore the length and depth of the emotional journey which has been travelled by both men and led by Michael. Edward has moved towards some kind of transcendence in his breakdown and has become victim of his own dictum: ‘Save us from all those who believe they’re right’. He has had to challenge his own beliefs and he

\[1^{10} *Someone*, 28.\]
\[1^{11} *Ibid.*, 57.\]
\[1^{12} *Ibid.*, 58.\]
\[1^{13} *Ibid.*, 27.\]
has had to accept that an Englishman has strength of character and of tradition and that these have triumphed. The personal has been politicised.

The critical response to Someone Who'll Watch Over Me was a predictable mixture of praise and reservation, with one critic referring to the play as ‘infinitely thinner than Observe the Sons’ and another describing it as the finest play since Observe the Sons. Of all that has been written on Someone Who'll Watch Over Me, ironically, only ex-hostage Brian Keenan refers to the feminine within the text. He states that McGuinness ‘hints at the female echoing in us all’. And he summarises the theme of the play ‘that brave men are only so when they recognise the female in themselves’.

Employing imagery whose relevance might be totally unconscious, Keenan brings us back in a literal sense, to The Factory Girls when he describes ‘the unseen seam of the feminine sewing the parts together’. This same seamlessness joins all of McGuinness’s work within a uniform dramatic strategy.

CONCLUSION

McGuinness has stated the importance of feminism as an ideology, within the texts and in media interviews. ‘All my plays are studies of sexual politics in a way. When I came to be an adult, feminism was a very exciting, very innovative way of perceiving things and that certainly shaped me’. His academic awareness of feminist criticism is borne out by the texts and his own acknowledgement of influences. While Brian Keenan and Victoria White have recognised the feminine impulse, within the plays, the influences and their exposition generally lack recognition. Most obviously, Eamonn Jordan whose ‘major critical evaluation’ refers to ‘fantasy’ on thirty seven occasions, but never to the feminine or the concept of feminist criticism, highlights the problematic readings and misinterpretations of the work.

137 Interview with Hotpress, September 1990.
138 In conversation with author, I Foley, McGuinness has referred to his appreciation of the French school of feminist thought.
139 Jordan, Jacket blurb.
McGuinness has contended that lack of understanding of the feminine is the central weakness of contemporary art, and, he has subtly enriched his own art with feminist terminology, 'babbies, mirrors, the dark, Jenny Marx as the "mad-woman" in the living room'. He has managed a formal dramatic strategy within which to contain feminist ideology. Most effectively of all, he has populated his plays with powerful characters such as Rebecca, Greta, Mary, Lizzie, Pyper, Michael and Edward who espouse the feminine principle, not as ideological mouthpieces, but as human beings ineluctably driven to it by their circumstances. These plays form an oeuvre which declares that an appreciation of gender issues is necessary to understand the world, and an embracing of the feminine necessary to survive it less painfully.

McGuinness demonstrates an espousal of feminist principles which is not only 'intentional', (to revert back to Kuhn's thesis) but produces a compelling new approach to theatre both North and South, one which will take time to assimilate but whose influence is already obvious in the work of women playwrights and, particularly in the work of Anne Devlin.
Chapter Four

The Girls in the Big Picture: Women Playwrights in Northern Ireland

Introduction

In the UK, positive action by producing theatres and independent companies to rectify a dearth of women playwrights, is more proof of symptom than promise of cure.¹ Worthy examples of programmes of encouragement, in themselves, cannot hope to address the latent cause of the problem. If the traditional female habitus is seen as more private than public, domestic rather than social and individual as opposed to collective, then its product will inevitably seem foreign to a masculine led means of production. In 1991, in Belfast, the three main houses, the Grand Opera House, The Belfast Civic Arts Theatre, and the Lyric Players Theatre, were controlled by all male Boards of Directors. Since then, change has been essential and forced by conditions of funding and the legal requirements of Equal Opportunities policy. Nonetheless, a flourish of women playwrights seems a far off ideal.

In a critique of the situation in the Republic, Victoria White states that ‘the fashioning of national identity’ has been male made. She suggests that an updating of that identity should include ‘feminism and economics. If this happens’, she concludes, ‘the women playwrights will follow’.² In Northern Ireland, the possibility of ‘feminism’ creating an identity, is remote from the current political agenda. The Agreement includes a clause on the promotion of women within politics and the public sector, an acknowledgement of the fact that there may indeed be a problem of representation.³ The clause was

¹ The Royal Court Theatre, London, has adopted a policy of producing 40% of its output by women playwrights. Kabosh Theatre Company (Northern Ireland) has instigated a programme Northern Exposures, dedicated to women practitioners and playwrights, August 1998 and 1999.
² ‘Cathleen Ni Houlihan is not a Playwright’, Theatre Ireland, 18 April/June 1989, 29.
eventually included following hard fought negotiation by the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition.  

This chapter contextualises the work of three women writers, Marie Jones, Anne Devlin and Christina Reid, and the work of Charabanc Theatre Company, within the social and political framework of Northern Ireland. The nexus of work and the conditions in which it has been achieved are inseparable. The chapter therefore begins with an analysis and outline of the Women’s Movement in Northern Ireland. The social and political context is central to the playwrights, whether that context is endorsed or challenged by them. It is also central to an understanding of their texts.

Background to Feminism and the Women’s Movement in Northern Ireland

The cultural constructs which have impeded a development of feminist perspectives in Northern Ireland are those relating to both the Republic’s constitution for Nationalists and fundamentalist Christianity for the majority community. The former’s dictate of the place of women in the home is replicated by the latter’s espousal of loyalty to the men of Ulster. The challenge to the relegation of women as literal and cultural servants, is a challenge to the hegemony of Church and State, and, more importantly in Northern Ireland, to deeply held senses of history and tradition.

Within this panorama of patriarchy, the central dilemma between party politics and feminist issues has plagued the history of feminism in twentieth century Ireland, and in the latter part of this century, in Northern Ireland. The Nationalist/suffragist dichotomy has been discussed in Chapter One, focusing on Alice Milligan, whose nationalism preceded her feminism, in the mistaken assumption that liberation from colonialism equated with liberation from

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4 The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition combines women from all political persuasions and contested the elections for The Northern Ireland Forum in 1996 to gain representation at the Peace Talks.


patriarchy. Decades later, the same issues apply, and women have been victimised for transgressing boundaries of ideological, religious and political difference.

In the North, women's hazardous crossings of party political and sectarian divides have been systematically and effectively quashed by opposing political hierarchies. Single issue campaigns which have united women, have been short-lived and sporadic, as Lynda Walker illustrates, victimised by sectarianism from within local communities. These community campaigns are best exemplified by the demise of the movement of the Peace Women, whose high public profile could not sustain its cross-community dynamic. The Peace Movement was formed in 1976 as 'The Women's Peace Movement', when three children, including a baby were killed by joyriders who had been shot at by the British Army. The female leadership was pilloried by offensive and overt sexism, as well as a thinly disguised sectarianism which masqueraded as political acumen. 'The explosion of female rage' as Bernadette Devlin described the initiation of the movement, was unable to defend itself against the armoury of centuries' sectarian based ideology.

Lack of feminist consciousness throughout the years, has been a source of commentary and some action. Issues of gender equality have not surfaced above those of domestic and familial loyalty. Lynda Edgerton describes the traditional role of women as mothers and guardians, as domestic supporters of fathers and husbands. The female role reflects and endorses values of masculine manufacture. The Northern Ireland Women's

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See also Common Cause: The Story of the Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition Movement (Introduction). Future reference, (NIWC).
See also Edgerton, 61.
12 Ibid., 69.
Rights Movement was born out of 'desperation', one which recognised the constraints of political and cultural traditions on the lives of women. The movement also recognised that, within the sectarianism and poverty of Northern Ireland, the rights of women may have been perceived as 'a luxury'. Twenty years later, the formation of the Women's Coalition in 1996, responded to a similar desperation, and illustrates by its existence and support that the post-feminism of modern Europe has not reached Northern Ireland's shores.

The lack of feminist awareness must relate to women's involvement in political practice at a grass-roots level, rarely achieving the prominence of mainstream governance, operating as Edgerton states, 'under ground rather than over ground'. Such tactics may even undermine the development of an equality agenda by underlining gender stereotyping. Women have organised and campaigned, not only for their own interests, but consistently for those of the general community. As Claire Hackett notes, 'this level of activity is not reflected in mainstream political and social life'. Images of women and children mounting local community protests in support of the Drumcree stand- off highlight the literal relegation to their own doorstep and their lack of representation within the Orange Order. Role conditioning is clearly stated in the faithful loyalty to husbands and sons, mirroring the supportive role of the opposite camp, the Republican.

There is still some hope that change may occur when the realisation that church and locally based sectarian autonomy conspire to maintain a patriarchy of offence against women and sustenance of their obedience within it. Meanwhile, women's attempts to lobby on issues which affect their everyday lives have been branded by their respective paramilitaries as, 'Republican challenges to the state', by Loyalists, or by Republicans, as 'collusion with opposing forces'. The very act of cross-community single gender initiative threatens the patriarchal stronghold.

13 Ibid., 76.
14 Walker, 7.
15 Edgerton, 24.
18 The response of catholic women to internment and rioting is examined by Shannon in another essay, 'Women in Northern Ireland', in, eds., Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert Chattel Servant or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State and Society, Belfast, Historical Studies (XIX), 243.
The formation of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, to introduce the voice of women to the official politics of Northern Ireland, was an expression of frustration and deeply felt ignominy, by some who were exhausted by male perceptions and priorities, whether locally or from Westminster.\(^\text{20}\) The latter's language of negativity spelled stasis for a society which was already locked in competing ideologies, none acknowledging or addressing women, all in a gender specific frame-work of male hegemony. Within this, and in recognition that since 1922 in Northern Ireland there had been a total of three elected women MPs, a campaigning organisation was formed.\(^\text{21}\) The resulting electoral victories are testimony to changing forces, engineered particularly by women who have registered their malcontent and their support of kindred voices which might offer a possibility of female inclusion in the governance of Northern Ireland.\(^\text{22}\)

Within the language and mode of masculine politics in Northern Ireland, it is not surprising that when the Women's Coalition insisted that the Agreement affirmed 'the right of women to full and equal participation', they were initially told that gender issues were not relevant. Eventually, a clause relating to the 'advancement of women in political life', was included in the final text of the Agreement.\(^\text{23}\) The deeply entrenched sexism of Ulster politics is safely hidden beneath years of communal conflict, and challenged most significantly by women. It is an especially difficult challenge when the rest of the world has moved on and male politicians can parade the usual argument that 'women are treated exactly like men'.\(^\text{24}\)

Injustices have been counteracted and highlighted by women in Northern Ireland, largely as traditional supporters of the rights of their menfolk. The injustice against women has rarely been voiced, even by women themselves. As Eileen Evason states as recently as 1991; 'women with a newly growing interest in feminism in Northern Ireland, have nothing to relate

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19 Edgerton, 19.
20 NIWC, Introduction.
21 Ibid.
22 Assembly Elections, 26 June 1998, Monica McWilliams (South Belfast) and Jane Morris (North Down) elected NIWC.
to — no context in which they can place themselves'. The facts of the consciousness of women in the North, are well summarised by Suzanne Buckley and Pamela Lonergan when they state;

Participation in political awareness for Irish catholic women in the North has not led to a feminist consciousness. If any change occurs, it may stem from the stresses upon the traditional family...(which) could cause women to realise the nature of a patriarchal society. Such a realisation might cause them to question their relationship to present political activities.

Perhaps the following anecdote, quoted by Edgerton, surmises the work of women playwrights. The involvement of Edgerton's woman in the Civil Rights Movement is emphasised. Her past activism has led to a disillusioned and remote life, far removed from the ideology for which she campaigned:

On our night out, he goes off to the club. I put the children to bed. I arrange for the babysitter to come and then I get ready to go out. I go to the club, sit down and Peter, when he sees me, comes and buys me a drink. Then he goes off to talk to his friends. I sit all night on my own, and mostly buy my own drink. Then I go home. Peter has to stay, to help clear up the club. I then pay the babysitter and that's our night out.

The final commentary from the female civil right's activist is;

He sits up there in the club talking about when he was in Long Kesh....This house is like Long Kesh to me. At least, he had friends to talk to inside. I'm here on my own staring at these four walls.

Edgerton's anecdote describes a loneliness which is the living fear of Anne Devlin's female characters and a position to which, ironically, they propel themselves. The helplessness which pervades their male dominated lives is a construct of cultural and political socialisation, dependent on traditions of love, motherhood and family. These values provide power and domestic amnesty to men.

The essence of this status-quo is so deeply engrained in Ulster Theatre, portraying women as domestic minders, rarely encroaching upon

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27 Edgerton, 82.
28 Ibid.
their psychologies, or even describing them in terms of lives lived and characters shaped. With the exception of McGuinness, the female psyche has rarely been portrayed beyond a stereotypical version of behaviour which depicts woman as the minder of the hearth and obedient servant to male oligarchy.

Charabanc Theatre Company

A microcosm of the 'desperation' which founded the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement and later, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, is evident within the founding principles of Charabanc Theatre Company. The company's history has been well documented. It deserves summary and analysis here, within the framework of feminist/feminine theatre culture and by virtue of the company's own continual denial of a politically feminist perspective.

Charabanc Theatre Company was founded in 1983 by five actresses who had become disillusioned by their own lack of professional employment opportunities and by their evaluation of the traditional theatre roles which existed for women, in their words, 'as wives, mothers or the background for some guy on stage'. Again, in their words, 'the company was born out of frustration and boredom and the desire to do good work'. The founding manifesto or mission statement expressed commitment to 'presenting plays which reflect Northern Ireland society'. Expressions of cultural or political objectives emerged stiltingly, post reception of their first productions. In the words of critic Jane Coyle, Charabanc began as 'a defiant gesture of self-help'. Energy and self determination were stronger hallmarks than intellectual or political vigour and the emergent formula of work was more informed by commitment to an ethos of social documentation within a vein of 'good craic', well and professionally executed, than by a sense of political or sociological ideology. If terms of reference were vague, allusions to feminism

were consistently negative, although a commitment to writing the lives of women was paramount, in the words of the 1992 publicity brochure, 'putting women's experience to the fore'.

The work originated in a depiction of women in the Belfast mills at the turn of the century, *Lay Up Your Ends*, and continued with a similarly styled and informed version of life in Belfast during the 1949 election when, post Blitz, an emerging working class political of Labour seemed hopeful. *Oul Delph and False Teeth*, the second production, honed elements of socialist ideology and attempted to revise the given role of woman as subsidiary support to 'her man'. It reads at this point, that the influence of playwright Martin Lynch, and his politics of non-sectarian socialism is still central to themes and content, although there is some foregrounding if not championing of women. Charabanc had yet to confirm its voice and stance and *Oul Delph and False Teeth* served as an interim, allowing the company to develop its links with communities and non-traditional venues. For their third collaborative work, Charabanc entrenched a group of women from a cross section of the community, in a reconciliation centre. *Now You're Talkin'* focuses on contemporary women, their allegiances and, more importantly, their differences in terms of class and aspiration. This play witnesses the growing voice and identity of Marie Jones as writer, and demonstrates the beginning of a confidence in terms of collaborative textual structuring.

But, it is the production by Charabanc of a rural play, which is crafted skilfully and moves dramatically, that seals and identifies their vision. More particularly, this text places the company within the genre of an Ulster Theatre tradition, representing the values of the earlier generation of Ulster plays, contextualising in the nineteen sixties and writing from a perspective of the mid-eighties.

*The Girls in the Big Picture* presents women within and across generations and in so doing, would appear to highlight changing values and

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32 Quote from interview with Marie Jones and author (I. Foley), November 1991.
33 Held in Linen Hall Archive.
cultural attitudes. The play is framed by two sets of spinsters, the old clichéd version of the two sisters in the country cottage, mirrored by the accidental version of two young people who have wished to fulfil small ambitions and have not entirely succeeded, who must compromise for the sake of survival and local dignity, a familiar story. Their ambition to open fancy coffee houses and fashion shops has been thwarted and their lives will be as unfulfilled as those of their predecessors. Similarly, any option for male growth is well and truly negated by a girlfriend’s pregnancy, and the usual antics of mothers marrying off daughters, fail miserably. The two spinsters in the cottage, the Tuckey sisters, win out in ensuring one marriage, a tentative one at that, with little real love from the woman, but, economic salvation in securing ownership of the local Mace Shop. Everyone else is left to their own devices, a younger generation volunteering a repetition in contemporary form, of the lives and structures of the preceding generation, mostly a female way of living, alone or with each other, but insistent on matriarchal control. In *The Girls in the Big Picture*, the norms of traditional Ulster Theatre are respected. There is a modicum of narrative and plot development, and there is, most of all, the traditional tenacity of one couple, in this case, women, outwitting another. We are reminded of earlier texts where feuds, domestic and localised disputes are paraded centre stage, as in the work of George Shiels. Here, the difference is that a matriarchy rules from generation to generation. The males have passed on and women’s experiences are foregrounded. While adhering to the form of the traditional Ulster play, Charabanc has reinterpreted gender roles.

In many ways, this Charabanc play represents what they, Charabanc, have represented to Northern Ireland. It is a well crafted replica of a little part of Ulster society. The ‘Basket Tea’ ceremony where the woman’s basket of food is sold off to the highest bidder, with whom she must dance for the evening, represents ritualistic pairing without the nomenclature of the arranged wedding. It is a handy rural mechanism for otherwise awkward social situations. However, the ritual is not entirely successful as the woman who has received the highest bid, Jean, takes matters into her own hands and makes her own decision on marriage. Such independence would have been

unheard of in earlier texts. Matriarchal power replaces patriarchal authority.

The text of *The Girls in the Big Picture* has further ramifications. Since Charabanc and Field Day coexisted, sharing ‘the big picture’ of Ulster Theatre throughout most of the eighties and early nineties, obvious gender comparisons have been noted. Almost binary opposition, in terms of gendered founding membership is matched by opposing ideologies and methodologies. The hierarchical and intellectual base of one, is challenged by the collaborative and intuitive operation of the other. Charabanc’s founding member, Eleanor Methven comments on the generic differences between her company and Field Day;

‘Field Day (was) formed...on a very different basis, on an academic basis, on an aspiration of making a statement. .....We came along from the other end of the spectrum. They had academic and literary heavyweights on their board, and we had local trade union leaders and anybody who had been nice to us along the way. ...But we were always praised for the rawness and the energy. There was just a slight edge of patronisation there.‘

In turn, Harris comments that, ‘the different reception Field Day’s work received’, (sic) ‘was never far from their (Charabanc’s) awareness’.

As above, most critical analyses of Charabanc are not text or production based, but rely on interviews with the central company members, Jones, Methven and Scanlan. While Helen Lojek may conclude that, ‘Charabanc always was its own best interpreter’, the company may have kept a few secrets to themselves. *The Girls in the Big Picture* could be read as a feminist antidote to Field Day’s masculinity. The clever ambiguity of the title replaces the ‘boys’ of the big picture of Ulster theatre and textually, women replace men as the real social activists. The setting of Cloughmartin is as
Ulster and fundamentally Protestant as Friel's Ballybeg is Irish and Catholic. Field Day's intellectualism, its ideology of 'the fifth province of the imagination', is contested by the dominant work ethic which informs The Girls in the Big Picture. And it is the women who slave away while Sidney slides out of his duties, chasing girls and fame as a Country and Western singer. There is a stunning parallel with the cameo love scene between Maire and Yolland in Translations and between Margaret and Paul in The Girls in the Big Picture. Where the former couple communicate without language, through gesture and intuition, the latter engage in a dual of dialogue and verbal innuendo, with Margaret winning the day. Friel's nostalgia for lost traditions in Translations, is paralleled by generational contiguity in The Girls in the Big Picture. The values of one generation are passed to the next while cultural changes, milkshake machines, record players and deep fat fryers are purely superficial.

In many ways, The Girls in the Big Picture allegorises Ulster theatre as a whole and Charabanc as a movement. Far from the fifth province of the imagination, Cloughmartin represents life as it was and is. We are very much in the Province of Ulster and recall the founding manifesto of Ulster Theatre as dictated in Ulad. This leads full circle to the company's continuous denial of the adjective 'feminist'. While some journalists have practically begged for approval of the ready and common assumption that Charabanc is a feminist company, a binary replacement of male with female does not in itself constitute a feminist ideology. Lojek, discussing the ritual of the 'greasing' of 'genitals' in Lay Up Your Ends, summarises the point: 'The issue is power, not gender, and the play presents no idealised female world in which things are better when women are in charge'. While Charabanc's work challenges the social marginalisation of women and women's issues, 'celebrating the lives of women', there is almost a neurosis about the possibility of the company's own marginalisation if the term feminist was adopted. Methven revealingly states,

44 Brian Friel, Selected Plays, London, Faber and Faber, 1984, 427.
46 See Chapter 1.
47 See Misha Berson, 'Theater of War', The San Francisco Bay Guardian, 10 February, 1988. My personal experience here has been that a mention of the concept of Feminism in Northern Ireland drama, often elicits the stock response, 'oh.... you mean Charabanc'.

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‘If we said we were feminist or socialist or any “ist” – it would completely alienate those people back in the community centres in Northern Ireland. It would alienate them completely. So, what’s the point of saying it’. 49 The point is accentuated by Methven, earlier in 1986, to the Boston Globe whose reporter comments that Charabanc’s women do not ‘see themselves as a militantly feminist company’. Methven responds ‘We don’t want to start that sort of war here, of all places’. 50 Within the conservatism of Ulster politics as outlined above it was politically expedient, and politically astute, to deny suggestions of political radicalism or radical feminism. With aims of mainstream acceptance, perhaps a remark by Harris proposes another agenda: ‘The company existed’, she says, ‘because they had a vision of their dramatic futures and worked hard to realise it’. 51

So, Charabanc cannot be accused of not being what they never meant to be. In 1992, they listed as the first of three ‘strands’ to their work, ‘devising plays from and primarily for the community in which we live’. That is exactly what they achieved and their legacy will be the reintroduction of an authentic Ulster voice and, indeed the reintroduction of an authentically Ulster theatre, as non radical and non feminist as the society which they replicated. It could not be anything else if that first ‘strand’ of their policy was to be realised. While I dispute Harris’s claim that ‘Irish theatre has changed course because of the impact of this extraordinary company’, 52 I invoke Lynne Parker’s simple response; ‘quite simply, I hadn’t seen quality like that before in Ulster Theatre’. 53

But, quality alone could not sustain the company and when Marie Jones departed in 1990, the company’s identity as indeed its loyal community audience, started to dissolve. There was a sense of floundering in the choice of material; Darragh Cloud’s The Stick Wife, Neil Speirs’ Cauterised, Lorca’s, The House of Bernarda Alba. 54 Christopher Murray’s suggestion that, ‘Its

48 Lojek, 95.
49 Martin, 97.
51 Harris, 115.
52 Ibid., 117.
53 Ibid., 104.
54 Note Lojek’s mistake in title. She refers to Lorca’s Blood Wedding, 96.
[Charabanc's] demise in 1995 was surely premature', indicates a removal from the contemporary reality of Northern Theatre at that time. Charabanc had become like any other theatre company and the tenth anniversary party loudly stated the changed ideology when Methven, Scanlan and Stella McCusker appeared in lavish ball gowns. What Harris alluded to as their 'dramatic futures', was personified. The roots of community concern and working class allegiance had disappeared as the members sought roles within the broader context of Irish Theatre.

If Marie Jones's departure was Charabanc's loss, it was to her own creative gain as playwright. The constant, collaborative need to write 'of and for the community', had sometimes been criticised as non creative and indeed exploitative of the very communities which the work was intended to serve.

Freed from the essential literalness of the 'here' and 'then' of Ulster life, Jones could develop themes and forms more readily based on the concept of 'what if', operating in the subjunctive territory of the imagination and creating the possibility of imagined futures, an impossibility within the given policy and commitment of Charabanc Theatre Company.

Marie Jones

The textual legacy of Jones is significant and one text in particular, Somewhere Over the Balcony, evidences Charabanc's, by now sophisticated insight of a community turned upside down by violence. It also represents a formal creativity which has been achieved by Jones. In terms of Ulster Theatre, Somewhere Over the Balcony mirrors the 1969 anarchy of form and content witnessed by John Boyd in The Flats.

Christopher Murray, Twentieth Century Irish Drama: mirror up to a nation, Manchester University Press, 1997, 194.
Tenth Anniversary Party, Rosses Court Belfast, 13 May 1993.
A sketch by the Cabaret Company, The After Eights, featured three women with microphones and tape recorders, lying in wait outside houses. 'We're from Charabanc Theatre Company and we need your life story for our next play. We have no material of our own, so we're depending on you.' Belfast Festival at Queen's, 1986.
John Boyd, The Flats, Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1973. Within a time-scale of a single day, there is a mixture of domestic comings and goings, the storing of guns in a bedroom, an army raid, a gathering mob, a shooting and in the middle of it all the mother, Kath, suggests lovemaking with her husband who is in charge of a frantic gun running activity.
Somewhere Over the Balcony is set in the Divis Flats Complex, a literal stone's throw from Boyd's Unity Flats, and, twenty years on, another kind of stone's throw from the apparently absurd chaos represented by Boyd. It is a chaos which, in Somewhere Over the Balcony, has become institutionalised within its community, a living culture whose socially incongruous codes and standards have been communally ratified. The mania of The Flats is positively low key in comparison to the breathless antics of Somewhere Over the Balcony.

Three women, Kate Tidy, Ceely Cash and Rose share a 'normal' day high up on the balcony of the last remaining tower block of Divis Flats. If the image suggests isolation, loneliness and boredom, their reality is far from it. A wedding party turns into a riot, - 'the best dressed riot I've ever seen' remarks Kate. The guests are held under siege in the chapel, forty five chicken salads are ordered while guests play bingo and children climb the statues. Meanwhile, the female trio is under its usual army surveillance from the fifteenth floor. There is a controlled explosion and Kate's worst nightmare of the walls of her flat caving in, becomes reality. A 'dole snooper', disguised as a paratrooper is caught by one of the many Tuckers, there is the continual washing of cars without engines, (kept looking good 'in case the hoods steal them'), and an ambulance and a helicopter are hijacked. Collectors' items, relics of the troubles, including the first binlid of Internment morning, are catalogued for sale to foreign journalists.

Males, young or old are named 'Tucker'. Young Tucker is on voluntary work experience guarding an empty tower block which is haunted by the ghosts of 'two glorious Gloucesters'. The disguised 'dole snooper', alias paratrooper tries to apprehend him. Granda Tucker, who has refused to speak since Internment, hijacks a chopper and declares; 'attention the enemy, this is Commanding Officer...Tucker Allouis Cash of the 21st Ardoyne Battalion'. This Tucker's exploits are crowned by another Tucker who isn't Tucker, who is Tootsie;

Rose: The best man does not look like himself.

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59 Marie Jones and Charabanc Theatre Company, unpublished text, Somewhere Over the Balcony, 29. Future Reference (Somewhere Over the Balcony.).

60 Marie Jones's term for an official from the Department of Health and Social Services.

61 Spelling as in text, 68.
Ceely: That's because he is not himself.
Rose: Who is he?
Ceely: Tootsie O' Hare disguised as Big Tucker O' Neill.
Rose: Where is Big Tucker O' Neill?
Kate: On the run disguised as Tootsie O' Hare.
Rose: Why?
Ceely: Cos Danny didn't want Tucker, he wanted Tootsie.
Kate: So Tootsie is Tucker and Tucker is Tootsie!
Rose: Why is Tucker on the run when he didn't do nothing?
Ceely and Kate: So Tootsie could be Best man, for fuck's sake
Rose: Right!62

These absurdities posing as logic, pile up on each other, until little Dustin, who has not been named Tucker, becomes a social outcast because he is doing well at school and wants to become a computer scientist.

Ceely: I'm all excited so I am... when wee Tucker was wee, big Tucker used to say to him, 'Son what do you wanna be when you grow up', and he would a said, 'on the run, Daddy'. Oh God if he was alive the day he would be so proud of him... he's probably in Bundoran by now.
Kate: (Upset). It's well for you Ceely, my Dustin wants to become a computer scientist.
Ceely: My wee Tucker was just lucky Kate, he happened to be in the right place at the right time.63

All the Tuckers are as remote from the women's emotional or sexual interest as the surveillance squaddies on the roof. The real hero worship is reserved for the canine vigilantes, Pepe and Rambo McGlinchey. They achieve the true acts of heroism simply because they are there and not on the run. Pepe and Rambo are the 'real' custodians of Divis Flats and protect its inhabitants from all outside forces. The two dogs have survived plastic bullets and whatever else, to protect their community. At the end of Act One Kate announces that, 'on a day like to-day, you could be anywhere'. 64 This relentless roll of inversion depicts a community which is well past a form of madness. It has settled more than comfortably into it, a chronic form of institutionalised insanity. While Boyd, in his flats, demonstrated the early symptoms, Jones, in hers, presents the long-term outcome.

How is this received by community audiences whose lives are comically

62 Somewhere Over the Balcony, 26-27.
63 Ibid., 32-33.
paraded as abnormal and close to madness? Jones incorporates all the
elements of traditional comic form. Inversion operates throughout and the
controlling factor of laughter accentuates the ambiguity of reception. This is
not laughter with, and it is not entirely laughter at. It is a resigned laughter
together with a desperate acceptance of life which acknowledges complete
powerlessness. There is no notion here of McGuinness’s psychic journeys
towards redemption. In fact, the only journey will be as far as the Falls Road,
and that does not necessitate getting out of a dressing gown.®

_Somewhere Over the Balcony_ forges a meta-reality, a world of illusion
which is the world of comedy. The difference technically is that there is no
reversion to normality, the comic world of inversion is sustained and the
changed perceptions which are the expected norm of comedy do not occur.
Perceptions remain steadfast and the inversion never reverts. If the illusion of
comic form opens the text, there is no re-establishment of order to close the
text. The illusion inversion persists and is sustained and engrained by the
annunciation of the refrain, ‘on a day like this, you could be anywhere’. There
is a congruence of form and content. The kaleidoscope of activity presented
by the invented lives of the three women, is matched by their hallucinations,
their invention of life and lives around them. The voyage of discovery, through
comedy’s inversion, becomes a voyage of confirmation and reinforcement.

While the trio embarks on an excursion of invention and inversion, they
never return from it. There is an exhausted pause after all the exhilaration.
Tomorrow, there may not be a wedding, but the Tuckers, the dogs, the
useless cars, the empty tower blocks, the surveillance squaddies, and, Kate,
Ceely and Rose, will all be there to start the whole business all over again.
Like every morning, Kate Tidy will sit, Beckett like on her galvinised iron bin
and talk to herself about life and reality as she sees it from the balcony. Life in
Divis Flats has become one unending Comedy.

Edith Kern describes a similar scenario; ‘the morality prevailing is that of
the oppressed, not the rulers, and their liberating laughter belongs to the realm
find ways in which they may respectfully enfranchise themselves within a micro-society from which they are totally disenfranchised. Their limited power is imaginary and in their imaginations. But it is more real than their four walls which cave in. Their power of imagination translates turmoil, poverty, and emotional absence into their opposite. As Kern states; ‘it is the fantasy triumph of the meek and powerless over those in authority’. Here, Jones stage manages an audience into a reluctant critical posture. It is uneasy. The image of a section of society on stage, confronts the audience with its own backyard. The safe stock responses of Ulster Theatre are challenged. There is no easy acquiescence of acceptable formulae. Neither is there an empathy, because the lives and contexts are too far removed, too dramatically manic to elicit normal responses. Perhaps the response is a sense of guilt, an unquiet feeling that we are all responsible and impotent. Certainly, the safety of the comic form becomes positively the opposite and challenges its own norms in Somewhere over the Balcony.

This text represents a watershed, a keen understanding and endorsement of the Charabanc ethos, ‘from and for the community’. It also represents the height of creativity within that vein of naturalism and reality and converts both integral features into their opposites. The borderlines between the surreal and the real, between sanity and madness are totally blurred. For Marie Jones herself as playwright, this text may have presented the challenge, the kind of possibilities which she would confront within differing modes and forms in the future. It is pertinent that her last play for Charabanc was The Hamster Wheel, totally immersed in an ethos of caring within the community, issue-based, community-based and presenting a socially aware consciousness.

Within this terrain, Jones would be forever unable to operate in the subjunctive, in the realm of what might or may be, or might or may have been. Boundered by the limitation of fact, her imagination could only address the depiction of what is or what was. Her invention of a bizarre universe, depicted by three women in Somewhere Over the Balcony, is testimony to the power of her imagination and creative ability which had to develop beyond the realm of

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67 Ibid.
fact and history.

In 1991 Marie Jones and former Charabanc director, Pam Brighton, founded a new company, DubbelJoint Productions. As the title suggests, (DUBlin/ BELfast), the policy was to tour relevant work North and South in Ireland, and, to employ the best theatre professionals from the two territories. Given the joint efforts by the two Arts Councils North and South to liaise on practical programmes, the founding ideology was timely and appropriate. There was no overt political exponent, as such, until much later, when Jones had parted company with Brighton and the founding ideology was suddenly revised to state that DubbelJoint ‘was formed to fill a niche for nationalist plays’.

If Jones’s work with DubbelJoint expounds a nationalist ethic, this is not altogether clear and one wonders how she might respond to the 1999 version of the founding principles, particularly since she left the company one year previously in 1998. Jones definitively searches for a cultural freedom, but one which is beyond the environs of Nationalism, Unionism, Protestantism or Catholicism and certainly beyond the prerogative of male or female. The journeys which inform the essential feminism of McGuinness operate to an extent in Hang all the Harpers, Stones in His Pockets, A Night in November and Women on the Verge of HRT. Liberation is the informing movement and theme, and, it is cross gender and cross community. Closed and colonial values are criticised, whether they belong to one political or gender camp or the other.

While there is truth in Charabanc’s claim of representing both communities, it is a reflection of Northern Ireland’s polarity that their texts reflect one side or the other unless consciously removed as, Now You’re Talkin’, (notably set in a Reconciliation Centre), or, Gold in the Streets, dealing with the effects of emigration. In 1990, for the Belfast Festival at Queen’s Charabanc presented a double bill including Weddin’s Wee’ins and Wakes, a celebration of generations of women on the Shankill Road, and The Blind

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69 In the midst of a debacle about political censorship with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, DubbelJoint’s announcement of its founding principles came as a surprise, and particularly to its founding member Marie Jones. Artistic Director, Pam Brighton stated that ‘Our source of inspiration was the fact that no other company was doing nationalist plays’. She is referring back to the founding of the company in 1991. See ‘Metro Theatre’, Irish News, 23 July 1999.
Fiddler of Glenadauch, a critique of the values of the aspiring middle-class Catholic community. This double bill entertained Festival audiences but notably did not tour to the communities who had seen one play or the other, but never both. It would seem that Jones had tired of such polarity and its constant representation. She escaped professionally and creatively.

Her first play for DubbelJoint was Hang All the Harpers, a collaboration with novelist Shane Connaghton. The broad historical sweep and formal style reflect the Charabanc ethic while tackling a theme and history beyond immediate community borderlines. The play represents a cultural challenge to masculine linear history. Two women and a dog become the narrators of revisionism, and music becomes the bonding ideology which is free from religion gender or politics. In contemporising society, within this text, Jones makes her first move at cross community gesturing. Her character Colin, lives in the protestant Waterside area of Derry and watches as proceedings for a re-enactment of the Siege occur. Wife Pauline thinks he is completely mad when he decides to cross the bridge and participate in the celebrations, perceived by her to be a triumphal affirmation of the real everyday siege 'by taigs'. That Colin ventures with his Lambeg drum across the divide is Jones’s attempt at the kind of reality which was impossible to achieve within Charabanc. It is, however, a complicated reality and one which is never fully resolved. The colonisation of music in Hang all the Harpers, is depicted by Thomas Moore’s recitals in the drawing rooms of the colonisers. Ironically, the final truth may indeed belong to Pauline, that Derry Catholics have colonised the original colonisers, their Protestant ancestry. The Thomas Moore metaphor may have been inverted and updated.

Narrator, Rose is allowed a freedom of conviction which belongs to her wandering, her outsider status. The narrator device itself opens the text and absolves closure. Rose’s ironic message at the end of the penultimate scene becomes finally another kind of message. She says, ‘we are the music makers. We are the makers of dreams’. But, we are not sure in reception, whether that conviction has been dramatically realised. The final assertion of

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71 Hang All the Harpers, 85.
celebration of song and music belongs to Rose alone and supposedly is Jones's statement to the audience;

Rose: God love them...they are the ones locked up in souless boxes...we are free Martha.. and we can still sing from our souls...the soul of our bards ...the soul that they tried to make me ashamed of.god help them. 72

To sing is to be free but that freedom is not a prerogative and is as open to colonisation as any other construct. While Martha and Rose wander free there is another code operating for the rest of their society.

Endings are never easy matters for Jones and are perhaps a leftover from the Charabanc days when the ending the very notion of closure was synonymous with 'making a statement', a sine qua non for them. 73 In Hang all the Harpers, Rose is the authorial voice of Jones, performed by her in the production, and the apolitical stance of a song or of music is seen as the true embodiment of cultural freedom, endorsed and enshrined by Jones. The concept is repeated, in different ways, over and over again, in future texts.

In A Night in November, Colin of Hang all the Harpers is replaced by Kenneth McMillan. The World Cup replaces Derry's Siege celebrations and football replaces the unifying force of music. Like Pauline, (Colin's wife), Sandra, Kenneth's wife is left alone with her sense of bigotry and social self interest. She is more interested in Kenneth's future as a member of the golf club than in the politics governing Northern Ireland. If the idea of liberation is always relative for women, Jones makes the concept positively distasteful. Pauline, Sandra and their Catholic counterpart Mrs Kelly in the Blind Fiddler of Glenadauch, all engage in an endorsement of the status quo, of 'getting on in life'. They are portrayed as endorsers and custodians of the patriarchal world which has imprisoned them, the female versions of the 'colonised' who have become the 'colonisers'.

The interrogation of Protestantism as patriarchy becomes genderless. Its equation with power, personal stultification and social fixity is challenged

72 Ibid., 88.
73 See Martin; Jones states; ' In our third play, Now You're Talkin', we couldn't find an ending. It was about the present. We were frightened of leaving it at a moment where people would say “Ah, that's what Charabanc thinks, that's a statement.” We invited people we trusted to come and see it and asked them what they thought of the ending. People made different suggestions, and we tried them.' 92.
by men, Colin and Kenneth McMillan. Catholicism is represented as liberation,
joy and fluidity, all concepts which Anne Devlin will portray as being denied
within that culture. The version of Catholic culture as presented in A Night in
November is as clichéd as it is untrue. We are expected to believe that
because the home of Kenneth’s Catholic colleague is ramshackle untidy and
disorganised, that life is somehow wonderful for its Catholic inhabitants. They
read books and go to the pictures when in Protestant terminology they should
be cooking meals for their husbands and cleaning the house. If this is the
liberation which the Women’s Movement fought so hard for, and if this is its
affirmation by Marie Jones, then it is a sad day for feminism and, indeed for
theatre in Northern Ireland. While there may be truth in cliché, there may also
be naïveté in its presentation.

Kenneth’s subsequent voyage of liberation with ‘Jack’s Army’, is
credited because he crosses sectarian boundaries into some world of cultural
liberation which is based on football and the concept of always getting drunk.
It is a patriarchal world whether it is Protestant or Catholic and the
representation of Kenneth’s ‘liberation’ remains dubious. Football may be
preferable to golf, and Catholics may seem more easy going than Protestants.
But, the cultural constructs which govern Northern Ireland have hardly been
dissected.

The title of Women on the Verge of HRT itself suggests analysis of a
female condition and attracts audiences by the suggestion of a single
gendered exposition of that condition. Women on the Verge of HRT deals with
levels of fantasy and illusion which Jones removes from a masculine world of
logic and reason. The text is deliberately loose on logic while its technical
strengths control a world of comic inversions, fantasies, contradictions and
opposites. The single reality that the reality of fading female beauty is not
attractive to men of an equal age opens and very nearly closes the text, before
another inversion operates. Like Somewhere Over the Balcony, the final
reconciliation and restoration of order are disrupted by another gesture of
defiance. The traditional happy ending, of marriage within comic form,

74 The Republic of Ireland Football team was managed by Jack Charlton, and colloquially referred to as
‘Jack’s Army’.
75 Marie Jones, Women on the Verge of HRT, unpublished text, 1995. Future reference (Women on the
becomes its opposite, separation.

Anna and Vera are on their annual pilgrimage from Belfast, to singer Daniel O’Donnell’s tea party in Kincasslagh, Donegal. The production opens with an optional video recording of Anna and Vera in the queue with hundreds of other women to be greeted by the man himself who remembers their names as he does the other hundreds, and his actual presence both reinforces and subverts the fantasy element of the pilgrimage. Removed from everyday reality, another form of romantic reality is materialised by Daniel’s actual touching of the pilgrims. It is this factual gesture which obsesses Anna throughout Act One. Dreams may become reality, and indeed have done during the afternoon. In the bedroom of O’Donnell’s ironically named ‘The Viking Hotel’, Anna settles for the night with an effigy of Daniel’s face on her pillow case. She opens a large romantic novel. Vera settles for a large vodka and a tirade against her former husband, Dessie, who has married Susie, twenty five years younger and mother of his first son. Vera has had four daughters and the birth of a son is seen as the renewal or annunciation of virility. As Vera struts chain-smoking and ordering vodkas from the bar downstairs, Anna tries to convince her that life is fine with her husband Marty, although it emerges that they no longer sleep together. Fergal, night porter at the Viking Hotel, is regularly summoned. He is a surrogate Daniel providing more comic inversion. While he indulges in the practical pretence that the visitors are high on lemonade and mixers, he attends to their emotional fantasies, singing songs of love and hope and telling them that they are spiritually and deeply loveable. He invites Vera to watch the dawn.

For Fergal, the dawn is a time of silent wishes, of dreams materialising, and all completely within Fergal’s control, - he is a magician and can make lighted cigarettes disappear, and women’s dreams come true! The background male figures are summoned and Vera’s husband, Dessie, Anna’s husband Marty, and Dessie’s new wife in varying ways confirm the truth of Vera’s conviction that older women are for the scrap heap. Some home truths about Vera’s love are also revealed, that she did not love Dessie. But, the most startling revelation is that both Anna and Marty have secretly colluded in

Verge of HRT).
lives of fantasy and over a long period of time. There is no communication as
the pair indulge in separate occupational therapies, Anna’s in romantic novels
and Daniel’s songs, Marty’s in pornography. The biological and cultural
isolation which Vera has described throughout the text, becomes a shared
isolation and a mutual pact of silent acceptance and despair in the lives of
Anna and Marty. Fergal reappears to quote poetry, kiss Vera, and disappear
in a puff of smoke.76 The song of the finale is almost in protest to all that has
happened, to the inversions and truths, to the fictions and facts, and, of
course, is designed to send an audience off with a warm glow, despite the
revelations to the contrary.

We are women on the verge
And we won’t take ignorin’
No sex hospice for us
We are still up to scoring
So come on sisters
Don’t let them win
We may be over Forty
But we can still sin, sin, sin.77

This finale is as much of a mirage as the carefully constructed details which
have appeared before. The factual exposition is that Anna’s life, carefully
romanticised and therefore protected, has been shattered. That illusion, which
she desperately harboured has hardly led to new independence. This new
illusion, in reception, is sealed by the finale, and the text does not bear too
much analysis in light of this. We are encouraged to simply comply with the
closure, non feminine and didactic to celebrate some kind of dubious victory
which has hardly been demonstrated by the text. Yet, within the world of
theatrical illusion the ending maintains the norm of constant inversion and
illusion. What is to be believed? Is the ending itself an illusion?

In Somewhere Over the Balcony, Hang all the Harpers, A Night in
November, and, Women on the Verge of HRT, form allows and indeed,
instruments the inversions of Shakespearian Comedy. These do not meet
formal conclusions in reconciliation. Instead, they seem to miss a stage in the
process. While this exception becomes the forte of Somewhere Over the

76 Ibid., 48.
Balance, its credibility as a technique weakens in other texts. Individual freedom leaves behind it a real world of stagnation, one which is even more entrenched in its myopia than before the individual’s departure from it. While Colin, (Hang all the Harpers), and Kenneth, (A Night in November), may leave one tribe to join another, Vera and Anna, as middle aged women do not have a tribe to join. The audience is exhorted to celebrate membership of a female tribe which, depends on 'scoring' and not letting the opposition 'win', a conundrum at best.

What Jones may lose in the credibility of closure is championed by her use of dialogue. Its sharp, caustic wit undermines pretention and accentuates an authentic Belfast voice. It is this very authenticity and the textual replication of it which presents Jones with formal difficulties - how to bring characters back to it after experience away from it, (her comic inversions), how to harmonise lives within a broader spectrum, how to convince that individual voyages have collective relevance. Somewhere Over the Balcony is a comic theatrical excursion and maps the social and political ills which govern Northern Ireland. This coherence is attempted but not fully realised in later texts which move beyond the environs of geographical areas and issues into the landscape of ideology.

Nonetheless, the comic form has satisfied creative exigency for Jones, and awaits its mature articulation. That articulation will never espouse woman as independent subject, but it may create a more balanced voice within Northern Ireland theatre. Jones is striving towards a form which liberates. There is a confusion between the textual facts and an objective reality which deny liberation and the playwright’s desire for it. Easy answers and easy endings are not the solution.

Christina Reid’s Protestant Heritage Configurated by Women

While Marie Jones commutes between cultural boundaries, Christina Reid sticks firmly to her side of the tracks. Her culture is that of North Belfast, a culture more than a geographical location and forged and informed by history.

77 Ibid., 49.
by the Somme and the annual revitalisation of the battle of the Boyne. The entrenched world of Somewhere Over the Balcony is endorsed within another culture, equally as myopic and oppressive, and, equally as convinced of the supremacy of its own norms and traditions. While the men in West Belfast are absent because they are all valiantly ‘on the run’ to save Ireland, the men of East Belfast, of Reid’s texts, are absent because they have died in the wars, either the Great War\(^7\) or World War Two, in an effort to save Ulster. Women have had to continue alone and the resulting meta-culture, which, ironically is totally dependent on male values, provides little space for the men who have survived, some for the women who are alone, all dependent on the continuance of traditions of a bygone culture. It is the irony of a society inhabited largely by women, but informed and led almost totally by masculine values and constructs that Reid expostulates and interrogates.

Christina Reid’s first staged text, *Tea in a China Cup*, in its setting, conveys the exact boundaries and limited orbit of the society which she investigates. As Sarah lies, terminally ill, she counts the days, not to her death but to the Twelfth.\(^7\) The walls around her are adorned by portrait photographs of generations of men in army uniform. The sustenance of the informing values, of the joint mythology and reality of war is represented by the china tea-set, an unused but much valued symbol of a brand of class and worth. When the auctioneer declares the set of china about as worthless as the portraits, Reid challenges the worthlessness of the literal inheritance of the unquestioned identity which the objects represent.

The limitations of a culture which demands so much personal endeavour and sacrifice for such little return is defined by constant juxtaposition of death and life and myth and reality. The coffin, ‘the box’, is a recurring image in Reid’s texts. Bodies come home ‘in boxes’, and bodies leave the house and the street ‘in boxes’. In *Tea in a China Cup*, a fortune teller predicts the arrival home of Sarah’s husband ‘in a box’, and announces what Sarah already knows, that she is pregnant. The life of the child to be is

\(^7\) Although common parlance, the term is used by Aunt Cora in *The King of the Castle*, to denote her privilege at losing her man in the more important war, 14.

\(^7\) The Twelfth of July celebrates the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 when King William’s army allegedly ousted Catholic, James.

already juxtaposed with death, and the closed locked worlds of the dead and the living become inseparable. This is a metaphor which Reid employs often, and, within her most recent text, *The King of the Castle*[^1], the continuum of restricted and ‘boxed in’ lives becomes a central theme. Again, the image of the coffin is paramount and the play opens with the wake of Grandmother, attended by Great Aunt Cora, May, and her eleven year old daughter Eileen. Four generations of women are represented within a living room, not as portraits on walls, but as female human beings, alive or in the case of the grandmother, recently departed. The environment is completed by the street with its mound of waste rubble from the Belfast blitz, and the corner shop. The physical environment and its boundaries approximate the emotional and aspirational limitations of the inhabitants.

The title of ‘The King of the Castle’ initially goes to Billy who, of all the children clambering around the mound, ‘the castle’, has the best shop-bought kite. It is the envy of the others and as always with Reid, a symbol, in this case, of obvious flights of desire which will never be realised. Great Aunt Cora has purchased a skipping rope for Eileen, (last week’s fad) and she, (Eileen), is able to exchange it for the coveted shop kite. The permanent fixture of the mound, the ‘castle’ is Arthur who has returned shell shocked and demented from war. His personality and identity have been lost and he exists as some kind of appendage to society, relating neither to children nor adults, scorned by both in different ways. Arthur’s relationship with a previous ‘normal’ existence emerges when May announces that both he and his friend, Stanley Porter were one time ‘sweethearts’ of hers. This is casually mentioned and difficult to integrate within the textual relationships since she is married to an ‘off stage’ man who refuses to appear if Aunt Cora is on the premises. May is expecting a baby and, given that daughter Eileen is eleven, that there is no intervening off spring, a textual gap appears. The centrality of Arthur to both the children on the street and the women in the house is disturbing and not exactly clarified. May makes him a kite because he longs for a real one so much. It is the laughing stock of Eileen and Rose who refuse to give it to him.

[^1]: Christina Reid, *The King of the Castle*, unpublished text, commissioned by the National Theatre for BT Connections, a UK Festival of Youth Drama, performed by Methodist College Drama at the
In turn, Arthur captures a pigeon, ties it on a lead and invents this as his kite. The image is horrifying, the captured bird trying to fly on a noose. The children adopt this act as new mascot and ‘fad’ enshrining Arthur as ‘King of the Castle’. Their kite flying becomes childish in the light of such acts of control and cruelty, and their childishness becomes metaphorical, entering a new phase of expression and ‘play’. Warped values begin to mingle with the symbolic one of the mound itself, what it was, the pile of blitz rubble, and what it has become - status symbol for small people growing up and learning the art of power and control.

Unlike the ‘Tuckers’ of Somewhere over the Balcony, Reid’s men, if living, are referred to as drinking addictive betting husbands, (by Rose in The King Of the Castle and Sarah in Tea in a China Cup). Men, ‘have a weakness for the drink and the bettin’. Sarah continues her statement with the ironic comment, ‘he was only a man, God help him’. The intuitive disregard for the existing male human being and the exaggerated respect for the dead war hero are always counterpointed and the awkward reality of the half-person returning from war is difficult to accommodate within fixed visions and concepts of heroism and masculinity. So, Arthur in The King of the Castle, becomes the central focus. The reactions of those around him define him as much as the tragedy which he has suffered. While the children chastise and spurn him, the adult women term him within generational boundaries. Aunt Cora decisively brands him as having had a Dishonourable Discharge, ‘not able to fight like a real man’, while May, representing an in between generation tries to mention the trials which he may have endured and makes the kite for him, the laughing stock of daughter Eileen and pal, Rose. May’s middle-of-the-road ineptitude is probably worse than the overt disgust of Aunt Cora.

Like memory in Tea in a China Cup, dream and fantasy operate in this text to illustrate young Eileen dancing with Arthur, repeated in the penultimate scene when they actually confront each other and Arthur experiences momentary lucidity in a flashback sequence to the death of Stanley at the Front. As the children kill the pigeon, Arthur visualises Stanley’s death and actually witnesses Eileen, caressing her face and attempting to give some.


82 Tea in a China Cup, 21.
solace. The whole scenario is encountered by Cora and May who believe that Eileen has been molested. Their joint response is assaulted when Arthur states; ‘You’ll be wantin’ Stanley’s dog-tags, sir, he asked if they might be sent home to his sweetheart, sir.' 

Has May been Arthur’s as well as Stanley’s sweetheart? We certainly know that Cora has been in the exact circumstances in a previous war, when her sweetheart’s medal was sent home to her. The innocent union of Arthur and Eileen insinuates a deeper relationship and bond. Is Eileen Stanley’s child? The coincidences which Reid introduces, the litany of pain which cannot be expressed, particularly by Cora, and the insinuation of hidden secrets represent a society whose values were/are submerged somewhere beneath truth. Like the china cups and saucers, superficiality is more important to survival than encounters with truth.

While Rose, Eileen’s pal, replaces Jean in the Corner Shop, her dreams realised, Eileen ‘walks on' 
out of the street, out of its life and its ‘boxed in’ confines. Reid exposes a matriarchy which is as politically backward and conservative as any Irish patriarchy. She describes a poverty of spirit and imagination where occasional apparent gestures of generosity are not generous at all. The subtext presents a female collusion which protects against any implication of truth or freedom. It does not matter whether Eileen is or is not Stanley Porter’s love child. The insinuation that she could be, or that she could be Arthur’s love child is enough. That reality would be too hard to bear on the street. Christina Reid’s reality, that women collude in a general subjugation of humanity is borne out in an early interview in 1984. Relating to Tea in a China Cup, she states;

It’s about women generally, and how they uphold traditions and beliefs which are positively harmful and damaging to themselves, because they’ve had it instilled in them that it’s safer to do this, that this is what women should do, and no matter how unhappy women’s lives are, they tend to recreate the same thing for their daughters; they’re not truthful to their daughters. 

83 The King of the Castle, 28.
84 Ibid., 31.
The generational acts of untruth by and among women is presented by Reid as a universal and, *The King of the Castle*, commissioned by the National Theatre is not singularly Belfast based, although informed by that setting. The analogy of perpetuation of myth and bad faith which encumbers free thought, relates back to broader truths within an Ulster context, and is never far from the surface of Reid's analysis. A glorification of war and the sustained valorisation of its 'victims' or 'heroes' is challenged. In the same way, a sense of roots and belonging within a dubious historical continuum can merge myth and reality to produce a fantasy world of the past and an untrue one of the present. The consequences on individual lives are enormous. Personal identity is lost to Beth in *Tea in a China Cup*, while Dolly in *The Belle of the Belfast City* may live in a fantasised world of golden memory, far removed from actuality. Similarly, the loyal men who have gone to war are exorcised of personal human failings in the romanticism and heroism of their deeds in war, a perfect absolution.

We are reminded of the 'breaking of the silence', the coming to terms with the actuality of the Somme as described by Philip Orr, (see Chapter Three). Voicing the horror is difficult, painful but eventually life enhancing, forward looking. Valorising the martyrdom smothers reality in a backward look where the past is more important than the present and can stifle the future. Reid summarises, in a reworking of the *Ballad of William Bloat*, preserving the final lines as ironic rather than sentimental commentary on all that is wrong with Belfast;

It's to hell with the future and live on the past
May the Lord in his mercy be kind to Belfast

The binary oppositions of women/men, peace/war, home/pub ensure that the two breeds are kept well apart textually and otherwise. This gendered segregation is as powerful as its religious counterpart. When a male is introduced, sectarianism, racism and sexism combine in masculine triumphalism.

86 Reid’s notes to the text allow for settings and street songs which are not singular to Belfast.
In *The Belle of the Belfast City*, young Belle, daughter of Rose who has emigrated to London, is of mixed race. Her presence as outsider, in more ways than one, becomes the device by which Reid may extrapolate the murkier depths of a staunchly Loyalist Protestant psyche. Uncle Jack is a Loyalist politician and described by Rose as 'a gangster, well connected with the Protestant Paramilitaries, and other right wing organisations in the UK'. Innocent acts like the smuggling of sausages from Dublin, by Dolly during the war, become inextricably linked with gender. As well as the Fenian sausages, a statue of Our Lady has been purchased. Jack erupts to define the whole set-up as, 'Women! Women! Temptation! Deception! You’re the instruments of the devil! The root of all evil'. Women and Catholicism are equated, Jack’s sexism is as embittered and deeply grained as his sectarianism. His racism is equally embued with religious connotations, mixed race Belle described by him as ‘the product of ungodly fornications’. The substitution of violence, whether sectarian or racist is equivocated perfectly by Jack’s sister; ‘You love it, Jack. Violence is the woman you never had’. Like Gary Mitchell’s Protestant world, masculinity embraces sectarianism as a function of sexism, and, in Reid’s case, racism also. Christina Reid makes it more than clear that the only way out of a very sectarian historical morass is to get out. She configures change from outside, because it is impossible from within. We are reminded of Edgerton’s factual summaries of women’s lives in Northern Ireland, and we are presented with their truths.

Within this context, it is peculiar to read a response which accuses Reid of sexism. Referring to the absent men of her texts, and, I have defined their absence, *Theatre Ireland* states that ‘they’, (the men) ‘are denied the right to appear in their own defence and dramatically as well as judicially, the play needs their presence. If they are the villains of the piece…. we need to witness the tensions and collisions’. The ‘piece’ goes on to state that Reid’s writing is ‘spasmodically marred by what seems to be a self-conscious effort

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88 Ibid., 18.
89 Ibid., 23.
90 Ibid., 43.
91 Ibid., 57.
to align itself with a sadly stereotypical feminist approach'. This ‘sad stereotypical feminist approach’ is a search for a form which may define the lost lives of women who have worked to maintain that very silence which Orr describes for the men of the Somme. It is a silence which women have perpetuated, possibly against their wills, a form of collusion which could never be described as ‘feminist’, a form of life which denies any kind of freedom and derides it, if it has a chance of occurring. These are the very same values and truths which are central to Anne Devlin’s analysis of a Catholic/Republican ethos which thrives on the exact mythic and historic mix of fact and fiction which is so appealing to Reid’s men and women

Anne Devlin’s Ourselves Alone and After Easter

_Ourselves Alone_ 93 charts the journeys of women who are struggling to comprehend and articulate their frustration, a first step towards liberation. The backdrop of lip service to women’s rights is highlighted as no more than that. The text dramatises a basic hypocrisy in Republican ideology. Catherine Shannon expresses the suspicion that tactical considerations are the primary motivators in ‘persuading a political leadership (Sinn Fein) to address women’s issues. There is a huge gap between stated party policy on women’s equality, and the views and actions of the party rank and file’. 94 In _Ourselves Alone_, that ‘gap’ is as much a female as a male habitat. The women themselves unconsciously collude in their subjugation. It is the ‘gap’ between ideology and behaviour which Devlin scrutinises.

More stringently and transparently than any other Northern playwright, Devlin contextualises political conflict as a male construct in which women’s lives are governed by orthodoxies which may be more conservative and authoritarian than those which the male leadership purports to replace. Her work introduces woman as subject representing a variety of responses to a web of Republican imagery and symbolism which defines their lives.


Supposedly fixed realities are subverted and interrogated through plot, character analysis, language and form so that received traditions are juxtaposed against feminine alternatives.

_Ourselves Alone_ portrays the lives of three young women in West Belfast during an eight month period in the early eighties and after the 1981 Hunger Strike. Donna is the permanent resident of the domestic setting, is separated from husband and young son, and partners Liam who is at the end of a five year sentence and due for release from Long Kesh. They have a daughter, Catherine. Liam’s sisters, Frieda and Josie use the house to advantage. For Frieda, it is a drop-in centre which relieves the tedium of life with her maiden aunts, one of whom, Cora has survived an explosion in which she has been severely damaged, physically and mentally. (This has occurred during the earlier IRA campaign of the fifties). For Josie, it provides convenient privacy for the conduct of a long-running clandestine affair with Provisional IRA leader, Cathal O’Donnell, who is married and lives in the South of Ireland. The house is a ‘safe house’ for the Provisionals and Josie’s excuse for living there is to assist Donna with child-rearing. She is actually in active service to the Provisionals, sleeping by day, on missions by night. Malachy is father of Frieda, Josie and Liam and local Commander of the IRA.

Into this scenario arrives English Joe Conran, a freedom fighter for a variety of international campaigns and having trained at the British Army’s academy, Sandhurst. He is a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin and is married to a woman from the Nationalist Bogside in Derry. His sister is married to a British Army Colonel who is based at Sandhurst and has served in Northern Ireland. Conran has offered his services as Political Adviser to the IRA. Josie is nominated as his interrogator, has an affair with him, and, at the end of the play is pregnant with his child as he is revealed as a British agent. Frieda has an affair of convenience with John McDermott, a Protestant ‘sticky’.

She decides to leave Belfast to pursue a singing career in London. Brother Liam has been released during the textual time-scale, and, while back home with partner Donna, is conducting an affair with bar-maid of the local Club the official meeting place and social centre for the Provisionals.

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95 A ‘sticky’ is a derogative term for the political grouping which severed links with IRA militarism and became The Workers Party.
This simple plot outline itself reveals a series of frictions and contradictions between appearance and reality, (Conran’s and Liam’s differing but significant duplicity), between motivation and its representation (Josie’s domestic arrangements), and between nature and nurture, (Conran’s background and life).

The central theme of *Ourselves Alone*, the interrogation of exclusive and fixed ideology is confronted in the first scene. Frieda is rehearsing the ‘Republican classic’, ‘The Men Behind the Wire’. ‘Armoured cars and tanks and guns Came to take away our sons’. The establishment of a female voice within the lyrics is immediately undermined by a switch to male protest; ‘Every man should stand beside The men behind the wire’.

The feminine passivity of onlooker and victim is isolated against the exhortation to male action. The immediate encounter between Danny and Frieda and then, between Frieda and the two men who are stacking boxes in the club, establishes the tenor and reverberations of the text as a whole.

Frieda: Hey wee fella, what have you got in your box?
First Man: Cotton wool balls.
Frieds: I always thought there was something funny about you
First: See you wee girl, come the revolution, you’ll be the first one up against the wall!
Frieda: Well, I hope it’s in the nicest possible way.96

Here, the juxtaposition of sexual innuendo by the female and unwitting sexual retort posed as political, by the male, very cleverly demonstrates a gendered linguistic supremacy, which is within the female domain.

Opposing forces again operate during Frieda’s renewed attempt at ‘The Men behind the Wire’. The ‘fast and lively tempo’, asserted by Frieda’s rendering is a response to the fact that Danny may allow her own composition inclusion for performance on the night, but not yet. Frieda’s repertoire is a male prerogative. Perhaps, more important is the resonance of Danny’s response to Frieda’s tone; ‘You’ll have to work hard against that tempo’. The composite of the text is reflected in those words which are literal and metaphorical. Frieda must indeed ‘work hard against’ a ‘tempo’, and that ‘tempo’ may be translated into the hegemony against which all the women

96 *Ourselves Alone*, 14.
must 'work hard', for survival and some level of independence. Contradictions rule in language and dialogue. Also, Frieda, literally, is becoming barricaded in by the boxes, the physical essentials of the Republican struggle. She has no physical space, mirrored by the lack of emotional and psychological space which she craves. Devlin is insinuating the textual construct of the play, and defining difference.

Frieda is the only female within a male environment, a point she refers to later in the text. Her presence among the male fraternity of the Club, is sanctioned by her ability to belt out Republican propaganda, which is distasteful to her on two counts, because the lyrics valorise men, and because their popularity precludes the possibility of ever promoting her own compositions. Ironically, her own lyrics for her song, The Volunteer, emulate the sentimental republicanism she so vocally despises. Capitulation to the dominant cannot guarantee the acceptability and stardom which Frieda pursues. The subtext insinuates that, as local girl, she will be applauded for renderings of orthodox material, but never for her own creativity.

This first scene introduces all the elements of juxtaposition which govern the text. It ends with an innocent request by Frieda, for sugar, as opposed to cotton wool balls. For the men, sugar is an essential ingredient of explosives, for the women, the basis of the recipe for home-made wine. Even the essentials of everyday subsistence have a gendered relevance. Devlin has introduced key elements which resurface later in the text. The supremacy of masculinity, and its service by the female is established, as is its attempted but futile rejection by the female. Republicanism, internment and their related mythologies are exclusively male preserves, requiring the unquestioning support of women. In less than forty lines, and within a naturalistic framework, Devlin sets in motion a discourse of contradictions and opposites which inform the text as a whole. This introductory scene is an example of the most evocative and skilful within Ulster Theatre.

Devlin authorises oppositional readings of Republican mythology through the voice of Frieda. The Hunger Strikers, whose images adorn the

97 Ibid., 13-14.
98 Ibid., 18.
99 Ibid., 36.
walls of the Club have replaced those of the seventies, of Pearse and Connolly, presenting a contemporary image of nationalist martyrdom and highlighting the seamless continuity of heroism from 1916 to 1981. Frieda’s denial of the concept when she states, ‘we are the dying. Why are you mourning them’ is preceded by another reference to metaphorical death, addressed to her father;

You know something, Father? You’ve been burying your friends since ‘sixty-nine. But, do you know something else, your friends have been burying you!

Martyrs are portrayed by women as wife beaters; (Bobby Sands beat his wife, says Frieda), the living and the dead are burying each other in the muddle between masculine ideology and female reality.

The depiction of Aunt Cora as emblem of sacrificial heroism, crowns this process of binary imagery. At the age of eighteen, Cora was storing ammunition in her bedroom for young brother Malachy, (now father of the girls, Josie and Frieda), the statutory female auxiliary role again personified. The ‘weeping’ supply exploded and she was left ‘blind and deaf and dumb and she has no hands’. In Frieda’s words, ‘they stick her out at the front of the parades...to show the women of Ireland what their patriotic duty should be’. Cora’s condition enlists her sister and Frieda as carers, thus destined to spinsterhood. Three women are potentially relegated to life-long conditions which have been instrumented by a single man, and, a communal patriarchal ideal. Cora’s provision of imagery for the cause is converted by Frieda to its horrific reality. Silence and especially female silence seems to be a precondition of Republicanism. Brendan McGurk describes Cora’s condition as ‘silence, it is unspoken and unspeakable’, and, ‘symbol of his, (Malachy’s) control of the female, both linguistically and physically’. So too, Malachy’s condemnation of Frieda reinforces his predilection for female silence, even at the cost of annihilation.

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100 Ibid., 39.
101 Ibid., 39.
102 Ibid., 29.
104 Ourselves Alone, 39.
McGurk makes another important analogy, the objectification of the female body within 'male nationalist ideology'. Having fulfilled its duty, the body, like the female psyche is rendered functionless, redundant. One culture’s heroine is another’s victim. This representation of patriarchal ownership of the female body reaches its apex in the finale. Josie is pregnant by Conran, informer and double agent. In a twist of irony, Devlin portrays father Malachy as a Mrs Boyle replica, asserting his rights of blood ownership over the unborn child; ‘This baby’s my blood. If any-one harms a hair on its head...!’ The image of protection coupled with violent threat is apposite, but finally, Josie, like her aunts and Donna, is condemned to male custody. With the exception of Frieda who will emigrate to England, the repression of an entire female family has been ensured by Malachy, the ‘freedom fighter’. However, in an almost absurd scenario of chauvinism, it is brother Liam, representative of the new generation of freedom fighters, who tries to exert authority and ownership over the female body. He insists that Josie should have an abortion. Not only is this assertive ownership an offence to feminism and the rights of women, contextually placed by Devlin, but an offence to Republican policy on the issue of abortion. Patriarchal values may shift to suit the occasion, and the final irony is that the conflicting views of father and son about sister and daughter’s pregnancy, both represent opposing but equally patriarchal domination of the female. Again, the female voice has been silenced, ignored. The concept of ‘the women’s right to choose’ is heresy within this environment where any and every choice is a male prerogative.

Male/Female Relationships

The dramatisation of the female characters and their relationships with men, whether sexual or as blood relatives, is a dramatisation of patriarchal

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05 McGurk, 54.
06 Ourselves Alone, 88.
07 Ibid., 87.
08 Sinn Fein’s policy regarding abortion was first mooted in 1984 in relation to the referendum in the South of Ireland (calling for a ban on abortion). The Workers Party campaigned against the referendum. In 1986, The Ard Feis voted by a margin of two votes for a pro-choice resolution which was reversed the following year. See Shannon, 250.
oppression coupled with an element of female complicity. Both Donna and Josie represent Edgerton’s loneliness, Josie perhaps more personally culpable because of her University education. She has been a foot soldier for the IRA from building barricades in 1969, to transporting bombs ten years on.

Her political motivation is more personal and sexual than ideological. Cathal O’Donnell, a Provisional leader from the South, became role model and lover when he instructed her in the techniques of barricade building. Ironically, she was also learning the more metaphorical art of barricading her life. She waits for O’Donnell’s unannounced appearances, and deludes herself with fantasies of a future, fantasies which are crushed by Frieda’s information that O’Donnell has been in the North for some time, and has been flirting with her. Josie’s linguistic idealisation of piling telegraph poles and debris as barricades, is more apparently a function of sexual attraction than political ideology. It emerges that her sympathies might be more socialist than totally Republican, but these are also tainted by personal jealousies. Josie is prone to the private, and to personalising ambiguities of the armed struggle. Her interrogation of Conran becomes an interrogation of her own personal commitment and internal motivation as she outlines the facts of her background. In another of Devlin’s reversals within the same scene, Josie’s socialist principles are transcribed as materialistic jealousy.

In Josie’s personal interrogation of a Republicanism which involved childhood day trips to Bodenstown, without ever seeing the shops, she expresses a bitterness which is personal and political. The credence of her politics is destroyed by her willingness to accept the materials she envied in teenagehood and which are now provided by Conran - perfume and weekends in Dublin hotels. Conran’s duplicity is expert, professional and textually explicit. Josie’s is more suspect, and as metaphor perhaps more treasonous than Conran’s. His professional act of treason is pitched against Josie’s to herself.

A confused muddle of education, political indoctrination and cultural socialisation, all dependent on her need for sexual love, Josie is portrayed as a convenient and willing dupe of the apparently attractive or ‘sexy’ elements of

109 Ourselves Alone, 19.
110 Ibid., 45.
Republicanism. Both O'Donnell and Conran exploit her thinly veneered vulnerability. Secrecy and the 'silence' which McGurk refers to within another context, are the fabric of her existence. The underground nature of her life, pledged to public silence and a private life of fantasy, is mirrored in her daily sleep walking around Donna's house. Josie has willingly and officially enlisted to this half-conscious life. She is deeply unhappy and rushes from exploitation and rejection by O'Donnell to another version of it with Conran. The ease with which she may commute from one to the other, given her expressed pain at rejection by O'Donnell is itself suspect. Here, as poignantly as in the brutal image of Cora, ambivalence and contradictions lead to tragic conclusions. Exactly like Cora's dutiful obedience, Josie's activism a generation later, becomes the source of her victimisation:- which will not be celebrated in parades, but will be paraded daily in community gossip and anecdote. Indeed, as Shannon suggests, her life, in the final exposition of plot, may be in danger.\textsuperscript{111}

If Josie's life is one of half-conscious ideological confusion, Frieda's is one of fully conscious exploitation. She joins the Workers' Party in open retaliation against her father's politics and constraints on her life, and defies the communal politics of a community supporting the Provisional IRA. She does not conceal the fact that she is moving in with John McDermot for purely economic reasons. If Josie and Donna's subjugation is a cultural construct, Frieda's provides the other limitation on women's freedom, poverty. She distributes leaflets which she has not read and freely marauds her relative anarchy. She is exhausted by her own identity which has been forged by male family, her brother Liam and father Malachy. She is on the voyage out throughout the text and is the voice of retaliation and anger. Unlike Josie's educated but unconscious collusion, Frieda's single-minded offence to the dominant is based on a mixture of socialist principles and personal ambition, both of which she will strive to fulfil in essential exile. She cannot get far enough from West Belfast, and, even the move into McDermot's flat in the University area provides another cause for intimidation, this time from

\textsuperscript{111} Shannon, 252.
Protestant neighbours.¹¹²

In comparison, Donna is immediately the passive victim accepting whatever deal life in West Belfast hands out to her. But, there are complicated enigmas in her life and psyche and she is never what she seems. Freedom and bondage are fused within her life. She can neither live with or without partner Liam and her interpretation of their relationship is always ambivalent, summarised by her own acknowledgement of some satisfaction in the fact that Liam is in prison....he won’t get ‘lifted’ by the security forces! Ironically, he is safe in prison.¹¹³ The insinuation is that Donna might be happier without dependence on a continuously absent partner, but the circumstances ensure the impossibility of such an ironic freedom. Her inability to secure independence is due to a process of socialisation which forced her initially into an unhappy marriage, and then, into a relationship which does not allow her the dubious privilege of the title ‘prisoner’s wife’, but burdens her with all the protocol related to it.

Donna’s acceptance of local orthodoxy makes her publicly invisible and a private psychological mess, addicted to tranquillisers and to being trampled upon. Her house is as much subjected to exploitation as she is personally. The constant traffic in and out is not authorised by her. People arrive and are not to be questioned. Even simple domestic pleasures such as hair dyeing, become larger issues. (If Donna arrives to visit Liam with dyed hair, he will, she jokes, ‘think’ that she’s ‘running after some-one’).¹¹⁴ Suspicion and jealousy exist inside and outside the prison boundaries, Liam controlling Donna, wherever he is. Similarly, as the girls enjoy a glass of home-made wine (product of illicit sugar), panic ensues as Malachy arrives leaving them money ‘to buy chocolate’, treating them as children, on the one hand and responsible custodians of a safe house on the other. Reality and perceptions are in constant flux, emphasised by simple reversals. O’Donnell ‘smiles’ when his ulcer causes pain and Josie asserts that ‘she is getting better at smiling at soldiers.’¹¹⁵ Conran’s response summarises the confusion which

¹¹² A brick is thrown through the window of McDermot’s flat. A note states, according to Frieda, that ‘this is a Protestant street’, 80/81.
¹¹³ Ourselves Alone, 20.
¹¹⁴ Ibid., 24.
¹¹⁵ Ibid., 31.
is the outcome of constant contradictions throughout the text; 'if you smile to deceive, how will I know when it's for real', doubly ironic given his own duplicity. No-one can be sure of anything and Devlin juggles perception and reality to illustrate central contradictions between the real and the political, the patriarchy of colonialism and the more apparent patriarchy in the homes of West Belfast.

The Sociology of Violence as Represented by Ourselves Alone

Violence is never far from the centre of these lives. In *Ourselves Alone*, not a single act of violence is perpetrated by the security forces. Yet, violence is a way of life, occurring with regularity within the confines of home and Club. It is always a function of control and always exerted by men. In sociological definition this violence has been hidden for reasons relating directly to 'the troubles', that victims could not contact outside forces, anathema to their community, and ensuring that, if they did further punishment would ensue. Terror within four walls might lead to public victimisation if declared.¹¹⁶ The first study of domestic violence relating to the Troubles, was published by Eileen Evason in 1982, contemporaneous with the writing of *Ourselves Alone*. Evason quotes, a now historical syllogism, which was forged by Cathy Harkin, a women's rights activist, that women have been living within an 'armed patriarchy'. Evason's evaluation of 'hidden violence', states that 'power gained outside the home may be deployed within it, adding an extra dimension to all the means which men normally have for oppressing women and engendering fear'.¹¹⁷ A more recent report, post Agreement and ceasefires, states that, 'many women living in the North are convinced that violence has not gone away - it has just moved indoors to the private domain of living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms'.¹¹⁸

It is impossible to assess whether the increase in reported instances of domestic violence post ceasefires 1995, relates to increased violence, or a

¹¹⁶ As quoted in the Introduction to Shannon's, *Women in Irish History*, 'violence against women is doubly difficult to report and escape from when it becomes a life-threatening act of political disloyalty.' 14.


freedom to report such instances within a new environment which frees women from the offence of 'political disloyalty'. The long-term nature of domestic violence, whatever its proportions has been an endemic component of women’s lives throughout the years of unrest. Perhaps, Angela Courtney of Northern Ireland Women’s Aid Federation summarises Devlin’s own depiction of quotidian domestic violence. Linking violence in the home with a high level of violence in society, she states:

The issues are the same: domination, power and control. Violence has become a way of life. There is an inability to negotiate and also an acceptance of violence as a way of solving problems. The under-lying value base is the same – you can’t have the brutalisation of society for 30 years without it causing a change in attitudes.\textsuperscript{119}

The recurring incidents of violence in \textit{Ourselves Alone} illustrate Courtney’s assessment of violence as a single means of problem solving and, as a means of further underlining male domination and control over lives which might otherwise trespass the boundaries enstated by men. The ‘inability to negotiate’, is pertinent in terms of \textit{Ourselves Alone} where there can be no sense of, or opportunity for the kind of enlightened androgeny toward which, for example, McGuinness’s characters are propelled in a voyage of discovery and liberation. There is no space, literal or metaphysical, for expression, thought or any kind of mutual understanding. Republicanism and its support are unchallengable dominants. Violence is the means by which male hegemony is maintained.

The textual incidents of violence are numerous; Liam’s threatening of Donna at knife-point, Liam’s threat to Josie’s unborn child, Malachy’s attack on Frieda, and McDermot’s threatening behaviour towards her. In addition, McDermot is attacked by Malachy’s men. While these incidents are related, Devlin furnishes each with another layer of meaning which authenticates textual ambivalence. With the exception of McDermot’s beating by Malachy’s men, (for trespassing political boundaries by entering the Provisional territory of the Club), violence is domestic. Notably, McDermot is spared serious injury by Frieda’s fabrication of the arrival of an Army patrol, an ironic twist, with the

\textsuperscript{119}Ibic.
legitimate forces of law and order or the forces of imperialism, becoming guardians of female interests.

Violence is mostly related to knowledge or suspicion of female transgression, political or sexual, either of which threatens male oligarchies. Liam threatens Donna at knife-point, because her previous expedient marriage is seen as a rejection of him. The fact that he was indulging in a series of affairs while training over the border at the time, and is currently enjoying an affair, evades his consciousness. Even from the confines of prison, Liam’s violent tendencies threaten, articulated appropriately by Frieda’s linguistic combination of the vernacular and the metaphorical; ‘When our Liam gets out of the Kesh, he’ll probably kill both of us’. But, it is Liam’s violent posturing over Josie’s unborn child, which is most male in its sense of ownership and Liam’s belief in his triple authority as male, Republican and brother. The ease of language with which Devlin allows such intrusive and unspeakable righteousness, insinuates the cultural acceptability of such chauvinism;

Liam: Kill it. I want you to kill the child
Josie: But it’s my baby – it doesn’t matter about anything else.
Liam: It’s his child.
(Liam grabs Josie’s arms.)
Liam: Do it. Don’t force us.121

This dominion crowns the series of others relating to violence. While Josie herself, Donna and even Malachy, contradict Liam’s assertions, the scene leaves one with the feeling that had it been physically within Liam’s power to ‘kill’ the child, he would have indeed done so. There is some biological dominion still within the female’s jurisdiction.

Status and the appearance of some kind of esteem become central. Devlin’s cultural bastions of deceit and untruth are voiced by Donna whose concern is that Josie may discover that the real truth of her life with Liam is not what is apparent. Donna: Please, Liam. Please lower your voice. She’ll think you don’t love me and then it’ll be difficult for me to feel good about myself and

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120. *Ourselves Alone*, 41.
121. Ibid., 87/88.
I'll have to leave here for shame and I've nowhere else to go. Again, reality and the propensity for its denial are primary features. While Liam may threaten Donna physically, she is less concerned with the actuality than the perceptions of it. Longing for love transmutes into a form of bondage which implicates female in a collusion of possessiveness and insecurity, all dictated by the sovereign culture of patriarchy, and its inherent and understated violence. Malachy can give his daughters money for chocolate in one scene, and beat them up in the next. Violence is not retributive, but a means of control, textually articulated by one of Malachy's henchmen; 'have you no control over your daughter'. Even the politically sophisticated McDermot, strikes Frieda when she suggests that flight from the Republican ghetto has not provided her with inner liberation. Domestic violence is a norm, unremarkable because of that, but insidious in its relativity to normal life. Devlin portrays it as as much an everyday feature of life in West Belfast as the pints drunk in its clubs.

**Language and Form as Feminist Signifiers**

Devlin's use of language and form is her controlling device. Amidst an apparent mayhem of fast shifting seemingly unrelated scenes, a formal strategy presides. The motion of the text flows as sporadically as the lives of the women themselves who have so little control over their destinies or their everyday existence. Again, opposing forces of reality and fantasy, love and bondage, revolution and subjugation jostle for expression. Ideological tensions between the masculine construct of Republicanism and its feminine opposition, the quest for personal and individual freedom, are matched by a linguistic tension between feminine and masculine.

Through the language of the women in their intimate moments of mutual soul-bearing, Devlin creates oases within the text, displacing the dominant form of naturalism and its concomitant masculine language. As Anthony Roche has pointed out, 'there are only two occasions throughout on

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122 Ibid., 54.
123 Ibid., 39.
which all three women are together’. But, on those occasions, while ideological difference is expressed, it is subverted by an ease of togetherness, a gendered communality which expresses itself through the domestic business of Act 1 Scene 2, and, in discussion and sharing of their emotional and literal plights at the end of the play. Significantly here, they have all three lost partners although Donna has taken on Danny as replacement for Liam. Danny is the musical director of Frieda’s singing in the introductory scene. He makes her feel ‘innocent’ presumably, because unlike Liam, he is untainted by Republican activism. But, it is in female dialogue or soliloquy that the poetic language of the feminine is most apparent, and the eloquence of inner lives highlights the meanness and irrelevance of the male life surrounding them.

Donna, confused in love and life, transforms a superficial inadequacy into eloquent symbolism. Subjected to external forces, and a psychopathic partner, she speaks with poetic authority and then, at the end of the play, with astute logic, when Devlin gives all the women space for individual finales of eloquence and meaning, in comparison to the stunted eruptions of Liam and the stage Irish sentimentality of Malachy. Donna’s recurring nightmare vision is of the devil beside her in bed; (‘He was lying with his head on my pillow this morning’). The obvious equation of Liam and devil is reiterated at the end of the play when Liam must leave yet again, but like Donna’s interpretation of the devil image, it, (he) ‘never goes away’. Donna’s articulation of the dream sequence, is also repeated in the reality at the end of the play. In dream, she states; ‘I didn’t have the strength to struggle any more’. Her finale is equally prescient and Chekovian in its resignation.

I think I may have lost the capacity for happiness.....All my life I felt I had to run fast, seek, look, struggle for things or hold on to things or lose them...... I felt for the first time the course of things, the inevitability. And I thought, no, I won’t struggle any more, I shall just do. And all that time- longing- was wasted because life just turns things out as they are. Happiness, sadness, has really nothing to do with it.\footnote{127}

\footnote{125} \textit{Ourselves Alone}, 83.
\footnote{126} Ibid., 53.
For Donna, Devlin imbues a luxury of language which is lacking in her existence, a reminder of possibilities unachieved, but certainly, given her innate erudition, achievable. So too, for Josie, love is a fantasy of language and image. As much as Frieda longs for liberation, Josie dreams of meta-worlds which are odd nights spent with O'Donnell. She translates the experience into fantasy, an exotic removal from the every-day; ‘that bed is like a raft and that room is all the world to us’. Josie deludes herself about the relationship because life has little else to offer in West Belfast until another outsider, Conran, comes along. He may be able to provide more realistic means of transport, but again, Josie is as duped by him as she has been by O'Donnell. The raft image is pertinent. Temporary escapism leaves Josie with a life-time’s loneliness, a perpetual waiting and painful longing for the next appearance of the O'Donnells or Conrans.

Frieda’s final speech, the finale of the play summarises in language, the distance between male and female. Where the men may only express solidarity with literal images of martyrdom and rebellion, (the hunger strikers, ‘The men behind the Wire’), the women are capable of a poetic imagery which unites them. Like so much of the text, this finale represents opposing forces, female freedom notably imaged by the moon and stars, the intangibility of that freedom, matched by ‘catching phosphorescence’, and an abstract sensual joy. This moment is interrupted by the literalness of men shouting, exerting a ludicrous ethical code on nude bathing;

And we sank down into the calm water and tried to catch the phosphorescence on the surface of the waves...and the moon was reflected in the sea that night. It was as though we swam in the night sky and cupped the stars between our cool fingers. And then they saw us. First Liam and then John, and my father in a temper because we’d left our bathing suits on the beach. And the shouting and the slapping and the waves breaking over us.

Female freedom and shared symbolic sensuality are framed by masculine ethics. But, there is also an element of female complicity within the abandon as the speech opens with Donna’s declaration that she will marry ‘Liam

127 Ibid., 89.
128 Ibid., 16.
129 Ibid., 90.
McCoy, one day’. Again, Devlin ensures that there are textual reverberations, in this case, Frieda’s romantic and feminine evocation, recalls an earlier remark by Malachy, that Frieda ‘has a mouth like the QE2’.[130] The vulgarity of the analogy in the light of her ability for eloquence is apposite. The suggestion of an alien political allegiance materialises at the end of the play, preceding the ‘phosphorescence’ speech when Frieda expresses her desire for England as opposed to Ireland in literal terms of language; She will emigrate to England, because, ‘It’s my language’. [131] Frieda’s metaphorical asphyxiation by Ireland, ‘I’d rather be lonely than suffocate’, is paralleled by Donna’s literal attacks of asthma during Liam’s periods of parole, and accentuated on his release. Through a progression of images of death, the dead burying the living, the living death of individuals, ‘we are the dying’, and Josie’s willingness to ‘die for an impossibility’, Devlin presents a single accumulative image of collective social and cultural asphyxia. Odd momentary relief from the condition is expressed in a feminine language of intangible abstraction, rafts, phosphorescence, the catching of falling leaves. Significantly, of the three women, Josie, who has subverted her feminine self, has least participation in the discourse of feminine language.

Devlin’s formal exposition matches the linguistic pattern. The frenetic hopping from one locale to another, and to different male/female pairings, reflects the undirected psychic unease of the women. The pattern shifts within a stated time-frame of a period of eight months, but the sense of linear time is not apparent, nor important to the text. The action shifts from Club, to Donna’s house, McDermot’s house, Josie and Joe in a Dublin hotel, Frieda and McDermot in Botanic gardens, back to Donna’s house where the British Army arrive to seek out Liam. The flux is accentuated by a preponderance of suitcases and people on the move continuously. There is no domestic or ideological base for most of the characters, except Donna who has given up the struggle of life. Josie is constantly packing, while Frieda, according to McDermot, ‘packs her case three times a week’.[132]

The form is binary, circular and linear, one informing the other. The

[130] Ibid., 26.  
[131] Ibid., 89.  
[132] Ibid., 80.
finale, representing an image of Scene 2 where the women are enjoying the female domesticity of hair dying and drinking home-made wine unites the women in momentary private and emotional communion. The shouting of the men on the beach, in Frieda’s reminiscence is mirrored by the earlier and more literal intrusion by Malachy and Conran into Donna’s home. Devlin implies through form, that domestic privacy is as much an impossibility as emotional space, and that both are equated. Coming full circle in feminine language, other more linear and masculine elements are recalled. Male intrusion on family members is as offensive as that by the British Army into Donna’s house. Both sets of intrusion are identical and equally imperial. The family intrusions frame the text with the British Army’s intrusive surveillance occurring mid-way, one reverberating on the other. So too, the pleasure and relative happiness of the community of women as depicted by the second and final scenes, is interrupted throughout the text by short expositions of male/female discourse. As Devlin emphasises through the voice of Donna; ‘We’re all waiting on men’.133 She then demonstrates the outcome of that ‘waiting’ in a series of encounters between the pairings.

The oddest of these occurs in Scene 4, Act Two between Frieda and McDermot in Botanic Gardens. The setting, outdoors and out of West Belfast, is as textually dislocated as the occasion is thematically bizarre. Cynical Frieda and politically astute McDermot are deliriously catching the falling leaves of Autumn, ‘for every one you catch you have one happy day next year’.134 Significantly, Frieda’s romp with nature is framed by male intrusions which are, in Devlin’s arrangement, more symbolic than literal within a scene which is itself textually symbolic. While Frieda is counting leaves, McDermot is busy accounting the Workers’ Party’s latest vote in North Belfast135. The masculine/ female opposition is distinctly clear. Frieda announces that a man has been following her; ‘he was blocking the only way out’. This obvious analogy to her relationship with McDermot is suitably derided by him, and as easily as he colludes with the police who have been called by residents complaining that the pair have been ‘causing a disturbance’, McDermot

133 Ibid., 16.
134 Ibid., 67.
135 Ibid., 65.
colludes in an act of treachery against Frieda, less obviously brutal than Liam’s against Donna, or Conran’s against Josie, but dismissive in its insinuation of Frieda’s state of mind; ‘She was depressed, so I took her out to catch leaves’. The simplicity of female antics whether catching leaves or phosphorescence, is ruined by individual and collective male. Finally, as Frieda’s path has been obstructed by a man following her, she is accused by the police of ‘causing an obstruction’. Devlin’s overall formal strategy is telescoped into a single scene, the innocence of any free female activity obstructed and pronounced wrong, whether it be hair dyeing, catching falling leaves, drinking or nude bathing. A male conspiracy of police, army and republicans rules every waking and abstract moment.

Two formal techniques operate alongside each other, the linear development of plot, of male/female relationships and their negative outcomes, arched by the feminine circularity which has been described above. This represents an unusual achievement, a text which is both masculine and feminine, but not feminist, although dealing with feminist issues. Neither does it present the androgyny, the union of gendered opposites, which defines other texts. There is no internalised combination of or meeting between the opposing forces of gender in form or language. A separatism is skilfully enforced to underline the vast lacuna, ‘the gap’, between patriarchy and its challenge by women, not least authorially. The dominant mode of naturalism is interspersed with moments of écrite feminine, always highlighting a submerged potential. But, a ‘potential’ is all that it is, suffocated and asphyxiated by masculine imperialism. Devlin triumphantly employs and controls the masculine dominant form, in order to subvert it.

Roche, in discussing the Chekovian ‘decentring of emphasis, politicised by Brecht and taken on by women’s theatre as a precondition of performance style and often of creation through collaboration’, finds difficulty in the non-feminist stance of Josie in her interrogation of Conran. Josie, as I have outlined, has moved closer to surrogate male than woman and denies her femininity within the overriding silence imposed on her. She is symbol and outcome of the hegemony which Devlin outlines. Josie is willing victim and

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136 Ibid., 65-67.
137 Roche, 238.
dupe.

Roche finds the male/female hierarchical juxtaposition, as personified by Josie, offensive to a feminist form. He states; ‘Josie’s position has no place within this feminist environment’. The fact is that there is no ‘feminist environment’. Roche does not further define his irritation. In fact, the ‘hierarchical’ posturing of Josie’s interrogation is usurped by the male hierarchy of O’Donnell and Josie’s father, Malachy, who have been surveilling the proceedings in the dark. Josie’s apotheosis within the republican movement is subverted, again by males who do not, and would not allow her such autonomy, or indeed, authority. Again, ironically, she is personally held accountable for Conran’s treason, (in the finale), while the men abdicate responsibility. She herself is unaware of their surveillance, the watched watching the watched. Roche is unwilling to acknowledge and is therefore disappointed, that Devlin has not created a feminist text or a ‘feminist environment’. Both are impossibilities which is what the text is about.

Her sub-text states repeatedly and clearly, that a feminist text cannot be created from an examination of the culture and controls of sexist determinism which govern the lives of women. A thematic and feminist exposé does not necessarily constitute a feminist text. Roche’s assumption of such becomes problematic for his analysis, an analysis which is as male and assuming as Devlin’s own males, and ignores the binary approach which she has instigated throughout the text. His disappointment is a function of Devlin’s ability for fissure and disruption which create an unusual formative mixture defying mainstream and even feminist structures and analysis. When the text contradicts the basis of Roche’s analysis, he fails to see that these very contradictions are central to theme and exposition.

Helen Lojek, comparing the function of the outsider in Frank McGuinness’s Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme, and Devlin’s Ourselves Alone, also criticises the gendered dichotomy within which, ‘men are out; women are in’. I challenge the assumption that ‘women are in’. They simply represent a possibility for difference, socially, morally and politically within the closed and ghettoised realities of Devlin’s environment.

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As Greta queries in *After Easter*, ‘Why does everything have to be so literal?’ *Ourselves Alone*, relates with integrity to the facts of the environment of Northern Ireland, as outlined above. To comply with post-feminist theory would deny the truth of factual evidence. Lojek cites Jill Dolan’s general thesis in reference to *Ourselves Alone*: the strategy is ‘not to abolish gender categories, but to change the established gender hierarchies by substituting female values as superior’. Devlin neither substitutes nor superiorises female values. She highlights gendered inequity as it affects a particular community which is in the process of waging war on the inequities of imperialism. It is this very irony which becomes Devlin’s theme. Inclusion and some balance between opposites is an impossible illusion within Devlin’s environment. To criticise her for an expression of exposition of dichotomy and the aforesaid impossibility of pluralism or revisionism, is to miss the exact point of the text. The ‘feminine’ is disregarded and insulted culturally to the extent that a feminine text is contextually an impossibility.

Again, from another cultural environment, Julia Pascal criticises the fact that in *Ourselves Alone*, ‘women’s lives are lived through men’[139]. Pascal witnesses an offence to her feminist sensibilities, in the same way as Roche confronts an offence to feminist form. Both responses emanate from a predeterminism which obscures relativity. For Pascal, the realities of the lives of women in West Belfast during the early eighties cannot be understood in relation to her experience of European post-feminism. She assumes the cosmopolitanism of European feminist values as a shared global culture, reaching as far as West Belfast. Edgerton’s knowledgeable depiction of a ‘feminist backwater’[142] is more relevant to reality. Similarly, Roche would prefer to see the values of feminist criticism and form adhered to by Devlin’s text. Devlin is writing from a feminist consciousness, but about an environment and society which precludes such a luxury. Her text, thus

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[140] Lojek-DWI, 64.

[141] Julia Pascal in *City Limits*, 4 September 1986. She asks ‘is it feminist? The three women continually define themselves through their men’. Pascal’s abhorrence at such feminist deviance, not understanding its relativity, is summarised by her final sentence; ‘Overdosing on oestrogen can be bad for a woman’s health.’ Devlin would agree, but in this synopsis, text and sub-text have become confused.

[142] Edgerton, 61.
highlights gender difference bilaterally, without any possibility of an overall feminist combination.

**Historical Evidence**

The fact that *Ourselves Alone* has been endorsed as historical evidence of the status and role of women in Northern Ireland, and during the eighties within a particular political culture authenticates its veracity and Devlin's polemic. Shannon states that the lives of women during the Troubles were unnoticed and undocumented until the eighties. She recognises the ideological and oppositional debates within the text as those of the times, and waged also 'between revisionist and anti-revisionist historians' as much as currently by critics such as Roche or Pascal who very much wish to endorse feminist readings. Shannon states that 'the play does indeed personalise and render concrete the atmosphere of the time'.

Shannon states that Devlin presents stereotypical republican women who are not completely representative. But the view that republican compatibility with feminism is problematic, (at that time) must be accepted. In Shannon's terminology, Devlin was not 'unique' in her assessment that 'the ideology, structure and tactics of contemporary republicanism were inimical to the best interests of women'.

The admission that the Republican struggle not always insinuated a fully fledged struggle against all forms of oppression, and that it may in fact endorse the repression of women has never been fully realised. Simple equations abound and, in sociological terms the relativity of feminism may be misunderstood, particularly by those writing outside the confines of Devlin's environment. Those who find the landscape of *Ourselves Alone* deficient in feminist terminology and exposition inhabit another system of cultural politics which rarely applies to Northern Ireland. A valorisation of the myth of civil war as feminist, is properly undermined by Anne Devlin. Such a concept would be inimical. The idea that the 'war' has bred and instilled a feminist self-

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144 Ibid., 253.
determination, the faith of some commentators, is undermined by Devlin’s evidence. Comfortable assumptions that ‘a Republican feminist agenda presents a tangible and powerful vision of a future Ireland which brings equality to all its citizens’, are refuted. At least this statement is followed by the moderated admission that ‘Sinn Fein is still a male-dominated party, and as such cannot always be trusted to make women’s interests a priority’.

Devlin’s truth presides in the authorial voice of Frieda whose life and identity have been forged by her family, and particularly by brother, Liam. As she states, she has never had the opportunity to be herself. Identity is preordained by male misdemeanour;

When did I ever have a chance to be myself? My father was interned before I was born. My brother’s in the Kesh for bank robbery. You mention the name McCoy in this neighbourhood, people start walking away from you backwards…Nobody knows you. Nobody knows you exist.

When Frieda adopts the spurious political mobility of Liam, she is ostracised. While Liam may be a Provo one day, a ‘stickie’ the next, a member of the INLA, or a member of Sinn Fein, Frieda is completely ostracised by him for her tentative links with one of his old causes. For women, political agendas become gendered. They might all adopt Donna’s approach, and unconsciously, they do exactly that. For Donna, life is a waiting game ‘we’re all waiting on men’. There is no luxury of ideology for these women, and certainly no possibility of empowerment within a regime which cannot even begin to recognise that women deserve a life and independence of their own. Joseph Lee’s statement that Irish people have a ‘capacity for self-deception on a heroic scale’, is easily transferable to Devlin’s portrayal of Northern Republicanism in the eighties.

The mode and discourse of Ourselves Alone, is heightened and exaggerated within After Easter. The two texts operate as companion pieces, with the latter enscribing an ideal of personal fulfilment which is remote

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147 Ibid.
148 Ourselves Alone, 21.
149 Ibid., 16.
and intangible within the relative cultural confines of the former. Life lived beyond the territorial boundaries of Northern Ireland, Frieda’s dream in *Ourselves Alone*, is Greta’s reality in *After Easter*. Exile presents another series of dichotomies which have to be read within the context of a culture left behind, and the new one’s relativity to it.

**After Easter**

Conventional plot analysis is not applicable to this text, which deploys characters within a range of situations and relationships whose symbolism is more important than narrative and inner journeys more relevant than the linear story of what happens. The female trio of *Ourselves Alone* is replicated by three blood sisters who are older, in their mid to late thirties and comprise Greta who is married, has eleven year old twins and a new baby and lives in Oxford, Aoife who, like Greta is a teacher, has five children and lives near Toombridge with husband, Damion, and, the youngest, Helen, who is a commercial artist and lives in London. Helen is not married. Their mother, Rose, runs a small drapery business from the front of the family house on the Falls Road. Michael, the father is from a rural background originally, and Aoife lives in his old family home. The family is completed by Manus who is twenty-four and lives at home with his parents.

Greta has had a nervous breakdown and has been institutionalised. On release, she is taken by sister Aoife to the third sister, Helen, who lives in a modern apartment and adopts the life-style of a career woman living in London. The trio departs to Belfast when they hear that their father has suffered a heart attack. Greta visits an aunt who is a nun, steals a chalice and communion to distribute to the people of central Belfast, Helen’s hired car is vandalised in the grounds of the Royal Victoria Hospital, and brother Manus is harassed by the British Army as he delivers First Communion veils for his mother. Michael dies and during the wake, there is a disturbance outside the home during which the family seeks protection under a table. The finale occurs one week later on Westminster Bridge where Greta and Helen try to manage a drunken dispersal of their father’s ashes into the Thames. The narrative, as such, provides an excuse for metaphysical exposition which is just barely related to textual incidents. The dominant naturalism of *Ourselves*
Alone is replaced by an internalised focus on psychic development, one which carries the themes and symbolism of abstracts alongside an extreme fixation with the everyday business of the text.

As the title implies, the text deals with personal resurrections, as always with Devlin, tinged with irony and levels of meaning. The hegemonies of religion and nationalism, replacing that of republicanism in Ourselves Alone, are interrogated by the socialist politics of the father, and, exorcised by Greta to attain her 'resurrection'. Nationalism is portrayed as a construct of defeated idealism, and religion as an extreme which manifests itself in Greta's madness, her psychotic possession by spirits on the one hand, or a secularised function of economics on the other, more related to community economics than spiritual well-being. Whichever extreme is master-minded by the dictatorship of the Catholic church. The hegemony of nationalism is also represented as a hierarchical lost cause. Both religion and nationalism create communal subservience and private mayhem, which are in constant opposition to any recognisable norm, which in turn becomes the central theme of the text. Absolutes are challenged to reinstate Greta's personal equilibrium, and by implication, a harmony, or tension of co-existence of competing values finally represents the public and private freedoms which cannot be achieved by literal escape mechanisms. Devlin combines character, form and language to reconstruct Greta's sense of identity and through that process to present Devlin's own world vision.

Character and Identity

If gendered contradictions between male hierarchies and female dispossession pervade Ourselves Alone, ambivalence and contradictions site themselves within the character of Greta in After Easter. The other characters become the symbolic props of her psychic excursion, challenging or reinforcing her depositions on life, and, by their presence, creating a dramatic surface for Devlin's authorial exposition. Patriarchal control is replaced not exactly by matriarchy, but by cultural definitions which can either be endorsed or challenged. The lives of the sisters are not gauged against or defined singly by male authority. A more subtle form of rounded social conditioning
has exerted influence. All three sisters live very different but equally schizophrenic existences, none of them happy, but representing different levels and expressions of awareness of fissure. Greta's fractured psyche relates to her personal inability to match her artistic ambitions, to co-exist within an English culture, and to come to terms with her family upbringing and particularly a religious education which was contested by her father's Communism. This is paralleled by Helen's manufactured identity. She talks with an American accent because for social and political reasons, she does not wish to be identified as Northern Irish in London. Aoife, on the other hand, is obsessed with Irishness, almost to a degree of racism and defines her identity by nationality. Even astronomy adopts an absurd Nationalist relevance for Aoife who interprets the Pleiades as the Plough, 'the symbol of the Irish Citizen Army'. 'You're Irish. Not Greek'. Helen and Aoife represent opposite extremes of nationalist consciousness, while Greta floats helplessly around the issue, unable to find comfort or compromise. The introductory scene between Greta and psychiatrist, Campbell outlines Greta's discomfort with her Irish identity in England and an unwillingness to remedy the situation by mixing with other ex-patriots;

Campbell: Why don't you meet with some other Irish people?
Greta: I don't know any, I live in Oxford...Anyway, it seems a bit vulgar, you know to go out looking for people who have the same or a similar accent. Oh I know it's something you English do all the time, but frankly that's a good reason for not doing it.\(^\text{153}\)

Miserable within one cultural context, Greta is unwilling to alleviate it by blending with another. This literal explanation has metaphorical relevance, the dichotomy between one culture and another, the polarity of opposites never achieving coalescence. Greta cannot live contentedly either in England or in Northern Ireland and plays one off against the other. Aoife explicitly reinforces the concept within the confines of her nationalist perspective, 'the English and the Irish cannot love each other'.\(^\text{154}\) Polarity of nationhood is matched by a religious segregation which is expressed through Greta's psychotic obsession

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 15.
\(^{153}\) Ibid., 4.
and its comparison with the vocational religion of her aunt Eilish who is Prioress of a convent in Belfast. Greta has no institutional links with Catholicism and has brought her children up as Protestant. Yet her hallucinations are principally of religious images. On Pentecost Sunday, seven weeks after Easter, she witnesses tongues of fire.\textsuperscript{155} On the feast of the Purification, she accidentally sets her hair on fire while lighting candles for a dinner party. On her birthday she has seen the devil, 'dressed like an old priest'. The image becomes a golden globe. Greta's hallucinations are a source of envy for Eilish who describes the psychosis as 'a state of grace', one person's madness, another's dream of sanctity. Eilish urges Greta to seek the protection of a religious order, to begin by taking Communion. Greta literalises the advice by stealing a communion chalice from the local monastery and distributing wafers to the people in a bus queue in the centre of Belfast. This secularisation of religion, as symbolised through reversal, is repeated by the imagery of the Trinity. Greta does not simply interpret the flame imagery, she actually believes that she is the Holy Ghost. Helen, chief organiser and surrogate male could be seen as God the father, with Aoife as Son. It is not so much the gender reversal which is important as the secularisation of religious mythology. Aoife dutifully attends Sunday mass, Helen of course, does not. As always, Greta inhabits the margins of extremity. She wants to become a nun, at one moment, and, steals a chalice from the church the next.

Sexually, the trio displays the same pattern in relation to men. Helen is almost surrogate male in her emotional detachment. She only has affairs with rich married men where her independence is secured by their married status. She is ruthlessly matter of fact about her male behaviour, 'I don't have visions; I have sex'\textsuperscript{156} and role reversal, like her American accent is expedient rather than natural. In an usually confessional moment, she reveals that she would like to have a relationship with a particular male, but the complications are too enormous and life is easier without such commitment. Helen skilfully avoids Aoife's curiosity and instead of showing any evidence of love, asserts her usual control.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{155} These incidents are reported in Greta's encounter with Eilish, 21-30.
\textsuperscript{156} After Easter, 16.
Aoife: Is he important to you?
Helen: If I went away he would fall apart.
Greta: Are you likely to go away?
Helen: Yes he lives with someone else.\(^\text{157}\)

Devlin here combines disparate elements within a few lines. Firstly, it is the male who is proffered as victim while the female is in charge, and secondly, the linguistic use of 'went away, go away' insinuates more than simply leaving a relationship. It is a physical separation which insinuates a much wider movement, into a different territory. Helen’s strategic objective is self-preservation at whatever expense, denying the possibility of love in order to avoid pain and loss. In every sense, this is the antithesis of the movement within *Ourselves Alone*, where the women become literally and metaphorically ‘barricaded in’.

While control is asserted and the business of life superbly managed by Helen, there is little sign of internal happiness. The other end of the spectrum is the quotidian boredom of attachment which is Aoife’s lot. She brightens the conventionality of her life in Toomebridge with fantasies of affairs. She uses the flowers sent by Greta as a tease to her husband and a sort of relief mechanism for her own tedium. The pretence that the flowers are from a lover who ‘was going to arrive and take me away’\(^\text{158}\) is dispelled by a phone-call from the mother, the voice of reality and convention. Aoife envies Helen’s life, but is completely incapable of replicating it. She would like to insert a little of Helen’s style into hers by converting the barn in Toomebridge into an inner city apartment; ‘she has a great flat – I mean she lives in a white loft with maple floors and blue drain pipes. I can’t wait to get home and do our barn up’.\(^\text{159}\)

The interior design notion is almost as preposterous as having an affair. But, the literalness which Devlin imbues on both is almost humorous, through the juxtaposition of the cultural diversity of a cosmopolitan capital, and, the closed society of rural Northern Ireland.

Greta’s sexual relations are not centre stage in her mind. She has no ambition for Aoife’s fantastic affairs, or indeed for regaining the passion of

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\(^{157}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{158}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{159}\) Ibid., 8.
husband George who is himself having an affair. This element of her life is, like others, adrift. Her description of the loss of her husband’s love is pragmatic and remote, as detached as Helen’s. Greta relates to Eilish, nun and aunt, the conflicting identities with which her husband has to cope; ‘He was a Marxist historian. He thought he’d found an emancipated woman, and instead he’d got a Catholic mystic’. Significantly, she describes the aftermath in terms of compartmentalisation, that she shut off her grief, ‘in another room and, lived in the outer room of (my) life’. Again, the causes of Greta’s dysfunction are related to segregation and an inability to combine emotions or experience within an entity. But, the remarkable quality of Devlin’s insight in character analysis here, is the generosity given to male characters.

Unlike *Ourselves Alone*, this text does not blame or accuse. Personal responsibility is not a gendered issue, and, through Greta’s journey, we see its necessary acceptance by an individual, free from the monoliths which have controlled the women of a previous decade, and within a particular regime, in *Ourselves Alone*. Lives are no longer led through relationships with men, and, they are, most certainly, not led by them. Men are marginal, textually and subtextually within *After Easter*. The three women refute identification through sexual relationships. In their varying ways, they represent a break with the traditional values espoused by the male hierarchy of *Ourselves Alone*, and the culture of auxiliary support within which women in Northern Ireland have had to exist. Devlin achieves this by exiling Greta and Helen to England, where they must confront and become aware of issues larger than the war in West Belfast. Within a broader cultural spectrum, they must broaden their own outlooks and accept responsibility for the conduct of their lives. In order to do that effectively, inner journeys must parallel that of the literal escape across the Channel.

The character of Rose, the girls’ mother, embodies a rich mix of similarity to and difference from them. She displays no intellectual or emotional enlightenment. Nationalism, for her, is an operational function, not an ideology, a condition of rioting, surveillance and daily nuisance. Religion is the arbiter of whether or not she will be granted a school uniform franchise to

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160 Ibid., 26.
augment her trade in First Communion and christening outfits. The abstractions of nationality and religion, which so deeply torture Greta are Rose's daily utensils, pragmatic instruments of the economy of her small business. When Greta's city centre expedition with the chalice comes to light, Rose's response is unrelated to any concern about her daughter's mental health or the effect of the incident on Greta's chances of custody of her children; 'I might as well close the shop. Are you trying to put me out of business?' Rose is as capitalist as her husband is communist. While inhabiting two diverse worlds, Rose's self-centred interest in making money is generically close to Helen's motivations in life. Ironically, Helen, the business woman, describes her mother as having, 'cash registers for eyes'. (Significantly, it emerges that while Rose sends clothes to Eilish's orphanage, Helen has been secretly sending money). But, it is Aoife with whom Rose is closest. Culturally, they share the same space, but Rose's personal limitations do not allow her to acknowledge the wider limitations whose recognition frustrates Aoife's closed life. Greta's condition, it is insinuated, may be partly a function of Rose's violence and expressed lack of love for Greta in childhood.

While Rose's form of nurture has shaped her daughters in different ways, Devlin exploits the features to ironic effect. Rose is comfortably socialised within the very constructs which they, (her daughters), struggle to interpret and defy. Characters become symbolic beyond their minimal narrative functions, and, opposition is not between male and female, but within a female matriarchy. The occasions of male appearances provide another excuse for a presentation of opposites. Manus, the girls' brother is gay, and Paul Watterson is a Catholic policeman! Michael's resurrection from the coffin is a Joycean joke, on Devlin's part. She exploits the occasion, or Greta's hallucination to emphasise the textual theme through the words of Michael; 'Everything equals everything else. I don't believe in hierarchies'. The text itself defies hierarchies through the representations of the sisters' individual

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161 After Easter, 8.
162 The first scene introduces Greta in a mental hospital recalling her childhood; 'My mother used to scream. She'd run up the stairs after me and pull my hair. She'd shout "Nobody loves you. Nobody loves you". And I'd think it doesn't matter because I love me. I don't need anyone.' 1.
163 After Easter, 59.
characters and their bonding, in an opposition which they so creatively manage.

**Madness, Language and Form**

The function of feminine ‘madness’ has been addressed by feminist critics, mostly in relation to nineteenth century literature, and particularly to the text of Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*.\(^{164}\) It is not accidental that Anne Devlin chooses the mode for her contemporary analysis of a society adrift from its own stated norms of democracy and pluralism. Madness, as personified through Greta, is the classic madness which has been analysed by feminist critics, and relates closely to their interpretations of psychoanalytic treatments.\(^{165}\) Greta’s asphyxiation or oppression is related to her early family life, unloved by her mother, reverting to self love in adulthood, and as a girl, to a series of cultural oppressions resulting from religion and a Freudian father fixation. Her innate disruptiveness has been silenced for so long that it erupts in anti-social behaviour, storming out of dinner parties, sitting down in front of buses and distributing communion to shoppers.

Juliet Mitchell describes this behaviour in terms of the ‘pre-oedipal’ (the mother/child separation), and the ‘oedipal’, the relation to the father. It is the interaction of these, in later life, which may cause conflict, and indeed, psychosis, when present reality becomes difficult to bear. Greta’s bus-sit-down, her overwhelming revulsion to the patterns of roses, recalling her mother, Rose, as well as her religious visions, all represent what Mitchell defines as the symptoms of the female psychotic, ‘rejecting present reality and replacing it with a delusion that contains a grain of truth from some reaction to a past event’.\(^{166}\) Greta’s marriage to a Marxist historian, also replicates what Phyllis Chesler refers to as ‘the incest taboo’, the preference for “daddy”, followed by falling in love and/or marrying powerful father figures’. Chesler


refers to this as 'the sine-qua non of feminine identity in patriarchal society'. Devlin gives madness a voice, which has not been the privilege of nineteenth century counterparts, and which insistently sites Greta's predicament as a function of patriarchy, as described by Feminist analysts above. Devlin's portrayal, evidencing her own theoretical knowledge of feminist criticism places her alongside Frank McGuinness whose perceptions of Feminist theory have been outlined in Chapter Three. It is perhaps not entirely accidental that the two women who suffer most, psychologically, from patriarchy, and who endeavour most to overcome sexism and misogyny, share a name as well as an ideology, Greta.

The espousal of a feminist critique of psychoanalysis, as portrayed by Devlin's Greta, is matched by a consistently feminine language and a formal shape which defies linearity. If feminine language, to take a single example, may be defined as, 'open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body, i.e. the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-conceived, oriented, masterly or "didactic" languages', then, Devlin's language consistently matches that long roll call. Firstly, verbalisation of the unconscious is her norm throughout, relating visions, talking to the dead and constantly reliving abstracted interpretations of the past. Simultaneously, silence is Greta's secret weapon, one which she endorses strategically in the introductory scene, where everyone else's screaming ensures that she is 'very quiet'. Greta may also move from silence, to announce that she 'is breaking the rules', defying hierarchies and asserting her right of articulation, as opposed to silence. The concept of 'breaking the rules' becomes linguistically important, as Greta opposes that hegemony of silence which is so deeply engrained within her psyche. She breaks the rules without telling, and the family is unable to assimilate the consequences, literal, in the offence against the Catholic church, and metaphorical in terms of Greta's journey.


McGuinness's Greta in *Carthaginians* is similar to Devlin's Greta in background and renunciation of it, although McGuinness's Greta does not openly dysfunction to the degree of Devlin's.

Nina Baym, 157. Baym is citing Christiane Makward. For Baym, this description encapsulates the views of those most related to the idea, obviously, HÉlÈne Cixous and Luce Irigary.

*After Easter*, 1.

Ibid., 13.
The 'simultaneity' as 'opposed' to 'masterly' didacticism, is constantly underlined by Devlin. Opposing forces operate, not in a mode of tension, but of strict irrational contradiction. Student sit-down protests of the seventies, repeated by an individual in the eighties, become events of suicide. The difference between politics and madness is a matter of numbers. The safe environs of the Royal Victoria Hospital, become the playing fields of thugs and joy-riders. Rose not only knits, but drags Aoife into a collusion, by constructing a fisherman's jumper which will never be worn by husband Michael. Linguistic and formal oppositions eventually become the property of the family members, who wear First Communion veils as the British Army invades their back-yard, and, in very mundane textual reality, surpass themselves, in an evocation of imagery which would seem to be more Greta's preserve.

Helen: There's a carpet of snow in the front seats.
Aoife: It's snowing?
Helen: No. It's raining broken glass.

Of course, the 'broken glass' referred to, is literal, accentuated by Aoife's response, but, there is the beginning of a transferral of Greta's language to the sisters, lessening the emphasis of Greta's dysfunction and inability to harmonise. Devlin unites different modes of language to an almost imperceptible blend where there is little distinction between Greta's feminine language and the eventual discourse of the other sisters. This movement is most marked formally when, towards the finale the family is united under a table because of disturbance outside. Greta becomes more literal than the others and actually exerts some authority. As mother Rose is accused of a series of personal wrong doings, by son Manus, it is Greta who intervenes. Within this exposition of Manus's declaration of homosexuality and another literal contestation regarding Helen wearing the sacrosanct jumper which has been knitted for Michael, Greta stands up for the mother who has perhaps been one of the causes of her psychosis. This generosity of spirit from Greta, marks a departure, a new beginning for Greta. It may leave the other members of the family with more to think about. It is when the fissures between the supposedly 'normal' family members erupt, that Greta comes into
her own territory, one which has been lost and adrift for a very long time. Through language, the ambivalence between reality and imagination is underlined;

Greta: I was dreaming....it was raining.
Helen: It is raining. Look. What does that mean-when the outside and the inside are the same, I wonder?172

Here, Helen is stating Greta’s position. Greta has reached a state of awareness and contiguity, where, for the first time, internal and exterior worlds operate in some kind of harmony. This is finally expressed in the fusion of imagery of the final scene where Greta may express joy and exhilaration in a coalescence which is both intellectual, personal and literary. She may recite ‘On Westminster Bridge’ and easily juxtapose it, comically with the literal present. It is a scene which takes the characters away from West Belfast, and allows them to celebrate a victory over past lives, a liberation which is also a kind of exorcism, of their father, in distributing his ashes, and one which also allows Greta to quote literature, and to absorb it through meaningful contemporary references;

Earth has nothing to show more fair - than the new M16 building over there.
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by a sight so touching - as the homeless on Westminster Bridge.173

Here, past and present, reality and literature, and old and new lives are combined. In comparison, it is, eventually, Helen who has harboured and ignored opposites who, must also, as well as Greta, face her life. Her expression of these feelings and their relativity to her external and internal world are articulated;

The worst thing I did was to squander a great gift. I took my gift, which was very powerful and I used that power to seduce and dominate. When I should have used that power to create and free.174

Devlin here, realigns the supposed ‘madness’ of Greta with the very

172 Ibid., 66.
173 Ibid., 71.
174 Ibid., 73.
assimilated world of Helen into a picture which combines varying world views and opposites into a unity. In a beautiful movement of formal achievement, Devlin shifts the emphasis from one sister onto another and, in so doing, shifts the textual emphasis onto another level, formally embracing all characters in a future, whether abstract or lived. When Helen states, 'It’s my memory that stops me from seeing. I’m concentrating on forgetting', Greta becomes formally liberated.

After Easter’s finale shows Greta at the end of her journey and rehabilitated with her baby, narrating a story in which all the imagery of the preceding text comes into play, but in a mood of acceptance and quiet calm; ‘I could hear all the waters of the forest rushing and it filled my years with a tremendous sound’. 175

Within Devlin’s rounding of the two texts, comparisons are made between individual and public worlds, between illusion and reality, and between gendered oppositions which are the source of discrepancies and conflict. Most emphatic is the distinction between patriarchy and its opposition by the lives of women within these texts. The confusion and pain, textually exemplified, is matched by a corresponding artistry, that of Devlin’s which exhorts an order upon disorder, a cohesion upon chaos. Lojek has cited Heaney’s formula, and it is entirely pertinent to Devlin, and quoted here in relation to Ourselves Alone and After Easter; ‘The quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political and domestic obligation’, 176 as Lojek states, becomes the quarrel which Devlin resolves textually, and within Greta’s psyche. She has managed to escape, on the one hand, and to understand the limitations of freedom, on the other. It is the integrity of escape and its essential follow through, the process of assimilation and that of exorcism which are central to the process. In form and language, Devlin has demonstrated the religious, political and, indeed the domestic circumstances which have deterred lives from fruition and, which, in another sense, relate back to a form of theatre in Ulster which she formally repudiates.

In After Easter, the language and ontology of Rose, in its distinction

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175 Ibid., 75.
from the contemporary recalls a more traditional mode of discourse, which belongs to the home hearths and kitchen sinks of an earlier era in Ulster Theatre. In undermining traditional form, and introducing highly contemporary lives, Devlin is highlighting difference. Form and language engage to usurp an earlier naturalistic mode of presentation whose texture could not contain the ideological issues or imaginative extremes which are represented in these texts. Rose represents simplicity and conformity to hegemony, while all else within Devlin disputes it. It is a vindication of the death of old terminologies and myths relating to the female. It is an assertion of real women, not altogether perfect, but striving for voice and social acknowledgement.

These texts, *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter*, present an integrity of imagination and a cultural honesty which predict political developments much further down the road.\(^{177}\) Anne Devlin herself has said that, for her, *After Easter* represents a ‘female universe in Ireland’.\(^{178}\) The texts certainly represent a different universe, one which is gender based and investigates the divisions within Northern Ireland in gender terms.

**Conclusion**

Some male commentators from the South of Ireland, suggest that women playwrights in the North have benefited from a UK axis.\(^{179}\) What remains as a geographical and theatrical lacuna, is the home territory of Northern Ireland. Despite notions of privileging between jurisdictions, South or in the UK, the North’s own record is indefensible and few signs of nurturing the woman playwright have emerged in three decades. It is hardly a fact for pride in achievement that in the same three decades from the seventies through to the end of the nineties, only three women have become known or established as Northern Ireland playwrights. Gender considerations pale into insignificance within managements which are constructed to deliver commercial value and

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\(^{177}\) This idea will be developed in the Conclusion. It relates to Devlin’s own remarks about the peace process.


\(^{179}\) Roche, 229.

which have shown little evidence of appreciation of the positive power of theatre within society. There is not evidence of action depicting the fact that audiences are predominantly female and may, on occasion require some acknowledgement of that. That there are only the stated three established women playwrights is symptomatic of the governing means of production within theatre, and, more so, of the governing facts of existence within Northern Ireland.

The political vacuum which has been created and inhabited almost wholly by men is matched by a theatre establishment which has been controlled by men. The female voice is foreign and easily dismissed whether in theatre or in politics in Northern Ireland. It is easier to avoid than confront a culture of male hegemony. It is much easier to remain on the margins.

Within this scenario, it is hardly surprising that it is the community theatre movement which fosters women writers who, like Edgerton's women may achieve and feel confident within collaborative frameworks. This is the fortuitous background of Marie Jones who perhaps may never have written a word without the initial co-operation and encouragement of mentors and peers alike. Her development is more akin to that of the women playwrights who have developed through the more feminine network of community theatre where their work is not part of a hierarchical structure and is not so dislocated from the domestic and everyday circumstances of their lives. The women in Community Theatre in Northern Ireland do not have to enter competitions or hire agents in order to progress. If they had to, they would not exist.

Anne Devlin, Marie Jones and Christina Reid share an urban Belfast. They also share a politic while representing differing political perspectives whether they be Nationalist, Republican, Unionist or Loyalist. Their voices merge in a single statement which transcends identities based on religion, education or even gender. While they all three incorporate gender issues, their ideal reaches beyond those definitions and stretches towards new language, new modes of being and new constructions of society. They are

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180 Audience research indicates that 60% of theatre audience is female, Women in the Arts: A Survey, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1995.
181 Christina Reid and Anne Devlin do not live in Northern Ireland. They both emigrated to England during the eighties.
182 There are many women who have written for Community Theatre in Northern Ireland in recent
endeavouring to find forms and mechanisms of expression which may contain their visions. They have at the very least, conveyed the views of women, and their views of women's lives within Northern Ireland, sometimes not an exact equation.

Anne Devlin summarises the collective voice which the trio presents;

We are, all of us, disparate communities, at home within it when we are ill at ease with everything else. I believe that in voicing our differences in our books and plays and poems we are already building the peace.\textsuperscript{163}

Devlin, Jones and Reid contradict cultural hegemony. While terms 'pluralism' and 'inclusivity' dominate current political parlance in Northern Ireland, their effective reality is remote. The misogynist voices of Christina Reid's Jack, Anne Devlin's Malachy and Jones' Marty, thunder on into the Millennium. Jack says; Women! Women! Temptation! Deception! You're the instruments of the devil! The root of all evil! Malachy says to his daughter; I'll leave you alone alright. I'll leave you so you wish you've never been born.\textsuperscript{165} On the subject of communication between husband and wife, Marty says; I've been there 25 years haven't I. The train robbers didn't get that long. ...I've never lifted a hand my hand to you, yet...What do you want me to do, sing to you.\textsuperscript{166} Again, we are reminded of Edgerton's lonely woman who sits silent, 'staring at four walls' while her husband is in the club, 'talking about when he was in Long Kesh'.\textsuperscript{187}

While the concept of 'feminisation' must be central to the parlance of 'pluralism' and 'inclusivity' within the context of Northern Ireland, its realisation seems a long way off. In the meantime, we can only work towards an environment in which 'the girls' no longer have to struggle for a part in 'the big picture'

\textsuperscript{163} Fortnight, No.326, March 1994, 38.
\textsuperscript{164} The Belle of the Belfast City, 23.
\textsuperscript{165} Ourselves Alone, 39.
\textsuperscript{166} Women on the Verge of HRT, 43.
\textsuperscript{187} Edgerton, 82.
Conclusion

The narrative plot of this thesis presents an unintentional irony. The form is circular, distinctly unfeminist. But, the circle has not closed. Within a small gap of closure rest future possibilities. In Northern Ireland at the turn of the millennium an uneasy peace reigns. Loyalist murders Loyalist and Republicans maraud with base-ball bats. Violence has turned inward, not so much 'the wolf eating itself up' as the cubs devouring each other while the beast sleeps in a little world of its own. If these are the final vestiges of 'the war on the streets', then 'the war in the heads' suggests a more prolonged business of harrowing anger, psychological loss and indeed, hope for future potentialities. In the writing of theatre, these expositions lie within the orbit of the women playwrights, particularly Marie Jones and Anne Devlin who have already established forms within which to address metaphorical and perhaps, real solutions. Frank McGuinness has consistently espoused a feminist form of non-closure to advocate new mores for new societies.

Within a new political language of 'pluralism' and 'inclusivity' in Northern Ireland, our contemporary playwrights have heralded the need for strategies and have introduced a concomitant language of implementation. This has not always been appreciated or understood by critics and perhaps a new language of criticism is as important as the new language and forms which our playwrights are moulding.

Reverting back to an early article (1987) which purported to 'excavate' old forms of Ulster Theatre while criticising current output, Philomena Muinzer was to demonstrate how plays about Ulster 'share a body of themes which become part of an inherited dramatic fabric, which then prejudices new political analysis and new creative thinking alike'. Playwrights from Northern Ireland were accused of doing 'little to analyze the events, let alone to suggest a resolution of a crisis which is coming to be accepted as somehow endemic and inevitable'. The actual article did nothing to describe 'an inherited dramatic fabric' and less to highlight how 'new political analysis and creative thinking' are 'prejudiced'. There was no analysis of form as introduced by the

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propitious editorial blurb. Muinzer's outpouring of textual atrocities is in her words, evidence of the 'habitual regression of the writers' mind'. Their obsession with the past is described as 'a self-conscious trait'. This style of criticism is predominant from neighbouring cultures more cosmopolitan than Ulster. In terms of feminism, external criticism assumes a status quo which is socially absent. Such assumptions like Muinzer's, mirror those of feminist and other critics who ignore relativity and seem to expect radical and revolutionary writing from the most conservative outpost of Western society, Northern Ireland.

The post-colonial hegemony of sectarianism has overshadowed and annihilated an insurrection of socialism and, while feminism and socialism are not interchangeable, and, indeed, historically represent uncomfortable partnerships, in Northern Ireland the impossibility of one has denied the potential of the other. While the ideological possibility of a theatre which interrogates colonial hegemony found substance in the early work of the Ulster Literary Theatre and its adherence to the values of the Enlightenment, both audience reception and political hegemony, the latter personified and enacted by WB Yeats, dictated a new brand of cultural colonialism. 'The citadel' was built to house rather than challenge, to erect a monument to local values and to obstruct external influences. It worked well. The Moderns, Joyce, Beckett and Synge, their recreations of identity, were kept at more than arm's length and no filtration of new ideology was possible.

Kiberd in reference to the South of Ireland, could translate North almost a century later and his words might be mine:

The imagination of these art-works has always been notable for its engagement with society and for its prophetic reading of the forces at work in their time.²

The cultural/political terrain of Ulster might have been radically altered if the ULT had not suffered rejection by W.B. Yeats. It has taken a century to come full circle to the recognition of political values of equality and pluralism, almost the exact language of 1902 in a contemporary Ulster in a new millennium.

The patriarchy which has reigned to obstruct the implementation of these values for a century has been the subject of this thesis. The contemporary work of Frank McGuinness, Anne Devlin, and Marie Jones reinstates the exact ideology of the Ulster Literary Theatre in contemporary terms. And, while formal exorcisms are still contested by some critics who refute the introduction of new forms to deal with new realities or potentialities, a feminine voice has been defining the gender and tenor of solutions to the 'problem' of Northern Ireland.

When Muinzer complains in 1987 that drama in Northern Ireland has not provided 'solutions', she is absolutely right. One wonders what 'solutions' she may have had in mind, and particularly at her distance from the problem. When Sam Thompson in the sixties presented the horrors of sectarianism as social-realism, he changed the face, if not the form of Ulster Theatre. There was no retreating back over that bridge and at the same time, no form in which to develop dramatic challenges to hegemonies of religion, class and patriarchy. The ideology of the literary revival in the South of Ireland has been well and truly obviated. The epic theatre of Brecht had never taken root in Ireland North or South and as such, created a void of form which had to be addressed.

The metaphorical qualities of literature, more than new forms of drama are endorsed particularly by Graham Reid who in the eighties, was not writing 'solutions' but diagnoses of social ills. His depiction of Northern Ireland as some form of animal kingdom is imaged by one character after another and no-one is entirely innocent or guilty, as 'the wolf eats itself up'. That imagery depicts a middle class Unionist culture at its last ebb in *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*. The play becomes an enlarged metaphor of colonialism, unresolved colonialism within which deceit and hypocrisy partner patriarchy. Reid's 'sectarianism' as 'an umbrella for other ills' is expertly metaphorized within a middle class culture whose safety has been usurped from within rather than without although the surface textual reading of the shooting of George (The Death of Humpty Dumpty) and his paraplegic existence does allow an easier conditioned reception. In *Dorothy*, Reid parades the 'umbrella' horrors of sectarianism centre stage in scenes of multiple rape. Here, within the form of
naturalism, he presents another metaphor of patriarchy in domestic and paramilitary madness, the territory of Gary Mitchell.

But, Mitchell, some years down the road of Ulster Theatre no longer needs the metaphor. Reality speaks for itself and the naturalistic form of Ulster Theatre fits perfectly, with extreme comfort. Mitchell’s community is cosy and warm within its own definitions which parallel democratic society without ever eliding with it. There is no need for ‘solution’ here, because there is no conflict within the ‘Little World’. In Loyalist Rathcoole Mitchell’s footsoldiers of the troubles are as content as Marie Jones’ female victims in the Divis Flats of Somewhere Over The Balcony. So, inverted abnormal worlds provide perfect material for the naturalistic form and contemporary undercutting irony. The textual compulsion to portray a parallel universe where these distorted values operate within a sort of meta democracy creates compelling and chilling drama for local audiences. To present ‘solutions’ within this context is mistaken as evidenced in Marching On (2000), when Mitchell gave the RUC father, (separated from his son and living in Portadown during Drumcree), a big speech about loyalty, tradition and family. The total sense of form is broken. Subtextual irony is devoured by textual sentimental endings.

Real ‘solutions’ because they cannot exist are metaphorically Anne Devlin Marie Jones and Frank McGuinness. They depend on new forms and expositions within their work. Continuously these playwrights create and recreate societies within societies, communities who are ostracised and individuals who are long past the accepted norms of social endurance. They pioneer imaginative territories to invent spaces which are distanced from the here and now of naturalism. They create possibilities of ‘solutions’. McGuinness’s meta communities, (Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, Carthaginians Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me), Anne Devlin’s unlike sisters in After Easter and Marie Jones’s social itinerants (A Night in November, Hang All the Harpers, Women on the Verge of HRT) all seek and find new lives while the texts prescribe new life for Northern Ireland.

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3 Reception of Mitchell’s work is different outside Northern Ireland where the ironies are not so apparent and text and production are received as representation a ‘real’ Northern Ireland rather than a distinct and small part of it.
The potential of a new society is matched by the creation of new dramatic forms. These are open-ended, metaphysical, stretching the psychic journeys of characters and audience alike. The form seems essential to the absorption and transcendence of tragedy moving beyond its literal representation. The social zoo so exactly imaged by Graham Reid, and Mitchell's tamer but equally horrific versions of it are humanised by McGuinness, and Jones when they remove characters from it, by Devlin when she places her characters into it, temporarily in order to come to terms with their damaged lives, a sort of psychological live flash-back.

The social representation of women either as victims or isolated matriarchs is matched by the naturalism of the Ulster genre. Both Frank McGuinness in *Factory Girls* and Anne Devlin in *Ourselves Alone* are bound by the form. They cannot shift their female characters beyond the form's masculine boundaries. Both texts make feminist statements in their exposition of patriarchy but the naturalistic form and, indeed the socio/political reality which it represents, prevents the formal openness of the feminist text. Like Christina Reid's literal emigrations towards freedom, McGuinness shifts his future characters out of their familiar environments to achieve psychic liberation within a freer open feminine form. *Mary and Lizzie* exemplifies the feminist form in their open-ended journey, while Devlin strives towards the form by combining psychological journeys and social criticism. She and Christina Reid represent the patriarchy of Republican and Loyalist 'freedom' fighters within which there can be no liberation for women. Like McGuinness in *Carthaginians*, Devlin images a psychic freedom which involves for Greta (*After Easter*), an exorcism of the past, and future public and private regenerations.

The similarities of these two texts highlight the movement forward in Ulster Theatre. Both illustrate the limitations of naturalism. *Carthaginians'* 'The Burning Balaclava' and *After Easter*’s literalism of language ascribed to Rose and Aoife relate back to earlier idioms and forms. In so doing, they set in motion comparisons and demonstrate the necessity of change, of new language and form to describe new ontologies. In both texts, personal resurrections symbolise potential public renewal. The security of the hybrid identities of Manus (*After Easter*) and Dido, (*Carthaginians*) provides a fixed
point of social comparison and generates gender as central issue. The narrow ground of Catholicism is criticised and revised within a bigger picture of metaphor and meaning. But more importantly, the finales articulate and underline the form. Dido’s leave-taking spells out textual form;


And in After Easter, Helen, the supreme self manufactured economically successful and socially integrated fake describes the form of the text;

I forget for a moment what it is I’m supposed to see and that’s when I achieve it. That’s when I come closest, when I grasp the possibilities before the walls or the rooms I’m supposed to see assert themselves.  

McGuinness underlines diversity of audience reception while in similar terminology, Devlin asserts the necessity of removing given boundaries of perception. Marie Jones enjoys popular success by employing stereotypes to interrogate fixed perceptions of identity and within her particular comic form, to manage social transformations. It is a comprehension of gender as central to the impasse of Northern Ireland which distinguishes and unites these playwrights. They create possibilities by means of more complex theatrical forms

Within a supposedly ‘post feminist’ Europe, as Charabanc Theatre stated in the eighties, ‘we don’t want to start that sort of war’, one which almost twenty years later would neither be fashionable or credible and perhaps as much of an anachronism as the ideology of the Ulster Literary Theatre at the beginning of the last century. However, gender is still a political issue within Northern Ireland and cultural feminisation will take time. Our playwrights have heralded the need for new forms, are in Muinzer’s terms, ‘evacuating the museum’ and indeed have demolished the ‘citadel’. Now, a new language of criticism is essential to describe new dramatic language and forms.

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4 Carthaginians, 70.
5 After Easter, 74.
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