

## A Study on the Representations of Women in Plight in Contemporary Irish Theatre

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### Introduction

Since the earliest period of Ireland's national independence, the most powerful controllers of its family life and the role of women have been, despite all their downturns in recent years, 'the pillars of Irish society'<sup>(1)</sup>, the church and the state. In the notorious Article 41.2 of the Constitution, which was powerfully piloted by the first president of the Republic, Éamon de Valera, the natural duty of women was assumed to be that of mothers at home.<sup>(2)</sup> Half a century later, the formal visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland in 1979 and the largest Irish Mass of over 1.3 million people boosted the established Catholic doctrine in Ireland. The Pope's strenuous advocacy of traditional Catholic values about female bodies, his severe censure of divorce, contraception and abortion reinforced this trend. This suggests that no momentous change took place in the fundamental policies by those national controllers on the social status of women between the 1920's and 1970's.

An official apology in 1999 on behalf of the state by Bertie Ahern, the Taoiseach of the time, for clerical sexual abuse in religiously run institutions and the resulting tribunals damaged the prestige of the church and the state.<sup>(3)</sup> But these pillars of the society have never left room for any other socio-political and religious alternative. In November 2015, a group of female theatre practitioners, playwrights and academics launched a protest movement, 'Waking the Feminists', against the poor representation of women in the annual programs of the Abbey Theatre, the Irish national theatre and its administration. One of the points at issue was the archaic subordination of women portrayed in the national theatre, which, they observed, was reflected in the trivial roles of female figures in scripts, performances, theatre operations and management. The protesters sensed that the Abbey Theatre, which operates on an annual grant from the state and is thus a de facto state-operated institution, widely disseminates its views of women among its audiences. Another notable feminist movement involving the Irish theatre has been the 'Repeal the 8th' campaign of 2016. Its proponents and followers have been

calling for the repeal of the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which secures the right to life of the unborn and makes women's choice of abortion impossible in the country. Project Arts Centre, one of the major theatres in Dublin, installed a 'Repeal the 8th' mural on the front of the theatre on the 8th of July. Although the mural was removed as a city planning violation, the mural and the theatre director's initial decision for it drew much public attention. This is another example of the theatre as an arena in which women's perspectives and their desired transformation of society are represented and actively discussed.

In this paper, I investigate popular repertoires in contemporary Irish theatre from the perspective of the relationship between the pillars of Irish society and women, with the assumption that the representation of women in the repertoire reflects their reality. W.B. Yeats, leading a theatre movement in Dublin early in the 20th century, demanded that there should be creative imagination at the centre of the state. Indeed, many theatres, especially the national theatres (the Abbey and the Peacock), are located geographically and psychologically at the very centre of the capital, and have functioned as public arenas where plays and performances provide many in their audience with critical views of the past, objective observations of the present, and anticipatory visions of the future of Ireland. Thus, the representations of female figures in those theatres provide a wide scope for careful observation.

## 1. Clergy figures in contemporary Irish plays

The Irish theatre world in recent years has presented numerous notable portrayals of the clergy, with whom troubled women choose or refuse to connect. Through their depictions of the clergy on the stage, playwrights and directors have provided audiences with ample opportunities to examine the human agents of Christianity as men potentially supportive of women in trouble.

A priest in *Pilgrims in the Park*<sup>(4)</sup> at the Pavilion Theatre in 2004 provided the audience with an opportunity to investigate the extent to which a priest could support women's initiative in solving their personal dilemmas. The play portrays the Pope's visit to Ireland in 1979 and his reinforcement of the traditional Irish "moral fibre of a nation" against "the justification of injustice" (Brady 6). This visit turns out to set the stage for the 1983 abortion referendum. The play lets the audience experience the life of a young girl who is sexually exploited by a priest, becomes pregnant and desires an abortion. Here an Irish priest clashes with his elder brother by allowing an abortion. His expedient and cruel attempt to cover up the abuse of a Christian girl clearly reflects the growing loss of faith in the Irish populace. The priest sup-

ports the victim of sexual abuse, which paradoxically forms subtle complicity in a broad circle of clerical sexual abuse.

More telltale examples of futile relationships between vulnerable women and priests can be found in Tom Murphy's *The Wake*, whose first Abbey production was delivered in January, 1998. The production was revived at the Abbey by popular demand the following year. The play was reproduced with a completely new cast and a director in 2016, and won the highest praise from the audience and the critics. Peter Crawley of the *Irish Times* regarded the production as "the Abbey's best show in years".<sup>(5)</sup> In the play, an occasional prostitute is unexpectedly bequeathed a local hotel by her grandmother and causes fierce conflict with her greedy brother and sisters. On the eve of their crucial confrontation, a parish priest pays them a brief visit, but hurriedly leaves the house with an awkward excuse even though he is a personal friend of the troubled family. In his stage directions, the playwright articulated the priest's character as that of an escapist: The priest "is reluctant to become involved in the family problem. (Murphy 145) By making an awkward pretence ("Well, now, please God, we'll sort something out, like. [...] But you'll have to excuse me now", (Murphy 150)) he tries to cover his cowardly avoidance of the family and irresponsibly leaves his followers to fend for themselves. He does nothing but make excuses when a seemingly irreconcilable conflict unfolds right in front of him. The female protagonist eventually holds a wake for her grandmother as a humane gesture, which the priest attends, even singing with a tint of narcissistic delight. At the close of the play, the protagonist utters a solitary sob. Here the playwright's stage direction reveals her effort to overcome her problem by herself:

*Her sobbing continues, becoming dry and rhythmical: grief for her grandmother, for the family that she perhaps never had, and for herself and her fear at this, her first acceptance of her isolation.* (Murphy 180)

Thus, the play celebrates the female protagonist's brave confrontation of her own loneliness, which she had aggravated over the course of her troubled life. For all her struggles, the parish priest remains useless and is a mere accessory to her hard-earned recovery from her socially and psychologically traumatic experiences.

Other relationships between women and the clergy are portrayed by Fr Dolan in *The Shaughraun* at the Abbey Theatre<sup>(6)</sup>, Fr Murphy and a bishop in *The Field* at the Gaiety Theatre<sup>(7)</sup>, the clergy in *Bailegangaire* at the Peacock Theatre<sup>(8)</sup> and Mick Tracey, a one-time

priest, in *Stolen Child* at the Andrews Lane Theatre. Some of the plays were revivals of modern classics and others were world premieres.

## 2. Representations of women in popular repertoires

*The Shaughraun*, by Dion Boucicault, a 19th century playwright, has been a popular program at the Abbey since 1967. Since then, both the Abbey and its twin theatre, the Peacock, have produced the play ten times. In the most recent production at the Abbey in 2004, directed by John McColgan and Martin Drury, the audience saw a priest display his solidarity with women in a difficult situation. In the play, local squireen Corry Kinchela weaves a hostile plot to take a manor from its legal heir, Robert Ffolliott, while treating Ffolliott's impoverished fiancée Arte O'Neal, as movable property to be stolen away from Ffolliott. Father Dolan sees through Kinchela's sinister scheme, and by taking Arte and her destitute cousin Clare under his protection, does everything in his power to defeat Kinchela's plan. The two women cooperate with the priest to foil Kinchela's vily schemes. Moreover, the priest serves as the embodiment of the community's conscience and intellectual authority. When a vicious misdeed by Kinchela becomes known, furious villagers, wielding weapons, advance towards him, revealing a clear intention to kill him. Kinchela desperately pleads for his life before the priest, played by Des Cave, rather cheerfully thrusts himself between the villagers and Kinchela:

Father Dolan (*facing the crowd*). Stand Back! — do you hear me. Must I speak twice?<sup>(9)</sup>  
(Boucicault 325)

As the audience might easily expect, the Father didn't have to speak twice. The stage direction by the author ("*The crowd retire, and lower their weapons*"), requires the villagers to immediately obey the order of the priest, moving meekly back and putting their weapons quietly down. (Boucicault 325) This sequence clearly demonstrates that Father Dolan is supposed to be morally and intellectually superior to the villagers and that the priesthood forms the psychological centre of the community conscience. Thus, the audience witnesses how the priest, as an embodiment of the community's good sense, successfully maintains tight solidarity with suffering women in their opposition to their land-hungry foe.

The two productions of the play at the Abbey in June and in December, 2004 featured Adrian Dunbar, a movie star, and Don Wycherley, a celebrated actor, respectively, in its leading role of Conn the Shaughraun, and both productions met with popular acclaim. But probably

because of the discrepancy between traditional representations of the absolute authority of the clergy and its considerable loss of prestige in recent years, the stage settings depicted an Arcadian village of earlier days. Catholic clerical authorities incurred further damage to their reputations in the following year, when an official Irish government inquiry ended with the publication of The Ferns Report, which made public the unadorned facts of the clerical sexual abuses in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Ferns in County Wexford.<sup>(10)</sup> In retrospect, the Abbey productions of *The Shaughraun* in 2004 served as comic relief when national hostility toward the clergy was aggravated by the negative outcome of the tribunal.

The image of unity between the clergy and women articulately delivered in *The Shaughraun*, namely, the assumption that priests and women should band together as a unified force of civilization, was challenged by John B. Keane's *The Field*. In this play, a bishop delivers a reproachful sermon to his parishioners at the critical moment of a laborious but fruitless murder investigation. Although it is an open secret that Bull McCabe, a local farmer, killed the play's murder victim over ownership of a patch of land, and even the bishop detects an "unappeasable hunger for land" among them, nobody is moved by the sermon to name the killer. (Keane 63) Moreover, even when the bishop, "as His [Christ's] representative", threatens them by suggesting that he has to put the parish under interdict, no one is willing to talk. (Keane 64) The cynical implication of this event is that the church and its teachings had long stopped influencing the lives of troubled parishioners. When Fr Murphy, who is cooperating with a sergeant, asks each parishioner for inside information on the murder, he is rebuffed simply because he cannot connect socially or emotionally with his rural society. Maimie, the wife of the local publican who is expecting her tenth child, when forced by the priest to give information, hysterically and frantically gives a false name of the murderer: "He [her husband] did it... take him away! I'd swear him to the gallows if I thought I could spend a year without having a baby". (Keane 73) In her eager hope of having a year free from conception, Maimie tells the sergeant and the local priest that she would willingly sacrifice her husband's life, and defies the reproachful sergeant: 'I'm serious, Sergeant. I'm more serious than you'. (Keane 73) As a woman who is annually impregnated and therefore, whose reproduction forms part of the work force of the local economy, Maimie is indeed serious about her search for an identity other than that of a baby-making machine. The community's sanctioning of ceaseless reproduction is no different from a post-famine obsession with the fear of extinction and/or of labour shortage. Roddy Doyle recently re-examined the physical and psychological conditions of women trapped in such lives in his *A Star Called Henry*:

Poor Mother. She wasn't much more than twenty [...] but she was already old, already decomposing, ruined beyond repair, good for some more babies, then finished.

Poor Mammy. Her own mother was a leathery old witch, but was probably less than forty. (Doyle 4)

The pervasion revision of the traditional socio-gender landscape in modern Irish drama and novels seems to be exerted both externally, by the still-long shadow the Great Famine has cast over the state (just as the current population of Ireland is still much smaller than that of the pre-famine period), and internally by Roddy Doyle's imposition of a rigid patriarchy that restricts the role of women to that of baby-making machines. Maimie's hysteria in *The Field* can be seen as a part of her quest for a role other than that of womanhood and motherhood imposed on her by her patriarchal society and a desperate desire to take control of her own body. Although she is integrated into her rural society, she struggles for freedom within it. In the face of her quest for an alternative, the priest, whose priority is apparently the maintenance of the accepted social order, is powerless. Likewise, Maggie, the widow who owns the land that triggers the murder, refuses to cooperate with the priest, believing she has to protect her life by herself. By this she means that the priest is clearly unable to help her. Thus, each interview between the priest and his parishioners reveals that they find him completely incapable of addressing the daunting difficulties they face. The emotional separation between the church and its people is quite tangible, and the representation of the women's response to the clergy confirms this.

Michael Scott staged a revival of *The Field*, and his production visually reflected this separation.<sup>(11)</sup> The audience saw a magnificent pulpit in centre stage with the congregation squeezed to its right. Gerard Walsh's Bishop, gloriously clad in clerical vestments, sonorously delivered his lines in an operatic voice without casting a glance at his congregation. The spotlight was directed at the bishop, and darkness engulfed the other characters, symbolizing the bishop's self-centred, complacent worldview and religious narcissism. The director's sarcasm is quite clear here: At the point of spiritual crisis in the parish, the clergy spent most of its time spreading its authoritative creed and rhetorical codes, instead of directly addressing the reality of the local parish and addressing the wants and needs of the local population that gave rise to the crisis. Maimie exemplifies their needs through her hysteria as she searches for an alternative to her community-imposed role as a nonstop baby-making machine. Thus, both *The*

*Shaughraun* and *The Field*, in different ways, reflected today's twisted relationship between the clergy and troubled Irish women.

### 3. Alternatives to 'the pillars of Irish society'

The spring line-up of the Abbey/Peacock programs in 2016, the year of the centenary celebration of a nationalist insurrection for independence, epitomized the contemporary representations of the estrangement between 'the pillars of Irish society' and troubled Irish women and their wretched conditions: Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, William Shakespeare's *Othello*, David Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue*, Sean P. Summers's *Tina's Idea of Fun*, Phillip McMahon's *Town Is Dead*, Mutaz Abu Saleh's *New Middle East*, and Ali White's *Me, Mollser*. Nora Clitheroe in *The Plough and the Stars* loses her sanity after she is prematurely delivered of a stillborn child and her husband falls in battle. There is no clergy figure to help alleviate her agony in the play. Desdemona in *Othello* is murdered by her jealous spouse. Bernie and Julie, a mother and her daughter in *Cyprus Avenue*, are brutally killed by their tormented sectarian husband/father. A girl in *New Middle East* is buried alive by an armed soldier. Mollser in *Me, Mollser* catches a fatal disease. Tina in *Tina's Idea of Fun* is anguished by sour relationships within her family. Ellen, in her late 60s in *Town Is Dead*, loses her long-time flat and hesitantly takes up temporary residence with her sister. All female protagonists in these plays are in situations of distress, misery, and even death. No state authorities or clergy emerge to alleviate their distress, and their very absence characterizes these plays.

In the theatrical representations of troubled women, 'the pillars of Irish society' rapidly diminish in magnitude and importance, giving way to alternatives that accentuate women's own choices to connect with supportive males. *The Field* exemplifies how the portrayal of the clergy on the stage is affected by the portrayal of womanhood and motherhood because of the church's significant role in promoting the established concept of woman and motherhood. It seems that the emotional alienation of women from the clerical agents of the Christianity has gradually become highlighted in contemporary plays, such as the portrayal of the priesthood as mercenary in Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*, in which a female protagonist observes, "there's nothin' like money to make the clergy fervent" (Murphy 35).

If that is the case, we can see the one-time priest, Mick, in *Stolen Child*, a play by Yvonne Quinn and Bairbre Ni Chaoimh, as an updated representation of this alienation.<sup>(12)</sup> He was once so popular a priest that there were always long queues outside his confession box, yet he was, from the perspective of the local bishop, too liberal to remain at his post, and he found he had

to leave his priesthood to help people in difficulty. Even while outside of the system of the church, he keeps faithful to traditional clerical vows. Quinn and Ní Chaoimh's portrayal of the character's criticism of the church is persuasive because he understands the church's current internal affairs and maintains his intellectual detachment as a professional detective (which is successfully conveyed by the restrained acting of Malachy McKenna). Before he joined the priesthood, he imagined that 'the whole point of the church was to help people', but after a while, it dawned on him that 'helping people was a bit of sideline' and that the prime concern of the church was 'protecting itself' and simply 'surviving'. (Quinn and Ní Chaoimh 63-4)

The alternative to the priesthood that Quinn and Ní Chaoimh propose in *Stolen Child* is quite practical: Mick Tracey is a private detective, who makes good use of his strengths as a good listener and a trustworthy confidential adviser, skills cultivated in his confession box during his career as a priest. Now that he is free from the dysfunctional system of the church, he can serve as a supportive confidante to oppressed women. The cynical outcome is that Mick Tracey, a private detective of the comic strip type (obviously named after the character in the newspaper cartoon by Chester Gould, Dick Tracy) is realistically more competent than Fr Murphy and the sergeant in *The Field* and clearly contrasts to them in that he efficiently copes with those who evade the law and morality. Maintaining the benevolent spirit and morality of Christianity, Mick Tracey goes back to his initial ambition, "helping people". With all his skills and inside knowledge of the clergy, he exerts himself to help Angela, who was adopted as 'a sort of baby lottery' under the instructions of relentless nuns, to unite with Peggy, who was physically abused and constantly humiliated into submission in an industrial school run by a Catholic church. (Quinn and Ní Chaoimh 70) Here the solidarity between Mick and Angela in finding a way out of her difficulty is the woman's choice. She seeks a committed supporter to help her in her longtime distress and chooses Mick. She freely chooses to allow a close connection with a supportive man of faith and worldly wisdom. Thus, the play highlights the message that improvement in the human agents of Christianity is urgently needed and that the direct initiative for solving women's difficulties should rest with women.

## Conclusion

In Sean P. Summers's *Tina's Idea of Fun* and in Phillip McMahon's *Town Is Dead*, female protagonists find their solace and solutions for their problems in human relationships within their families and community. Just like in *Stolen Child* and *The Plough and the Stars*, the absence of the clergy or the statesmen are remarkable in both plays. This telltale tendency

indicates that female figures in contemporary theatre, especially women in difficulty, try to find ways within their network of relationships, whether domestic or social, to overcome their hardships. There, the traditional 'pillars of Irish society' do not play an active part. They are rather represented as minor accessories to the daily commerce among people, and they are gradually giving way to alternative parties who empathetically support women in difficulty. In this process, troubled female protagonists increasingly exert their own initiative to find and choose supportive lay men for solace and assistance. Through their productions, contemporary theatres in Ireland have been disseminating portrayals of the fraught relationship between troubled women and the pillars of Irish society, along with subtle signs of current changes in women's subjectivity.

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#### Notes

- (1) Basil Chubb. *The Government and Politics of Ireland* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.96., and also Diarmaid Ferriter. *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005), p.481.
- (2) Hayes, Alan and Diane Urquhart, eds. *Irish Women's History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.71-3.
- (3) Emilie Pine. *The Politics of Irish Memory* (Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.18.
- (4) *Pilgrims in the Park*, written by Jim O'Hanlon and directed by Jim Culleton, was first performed at the Pavilion on the 15th of November 2004.
- (5) The Irish Times, 'The Wake: Performance and design as pure poetry', June 28th, 2016.  
<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/the-wake-performance-and-design-as-pure-poetry-1.2704007>
- (6) *The Shaughraun*, directed by John McCoolgan and Martin Drury was staged at the Abbey Theatre from the 28th of May to the 31st of July 2004, and back to the theatre by popular demand from the 24th of November 2004 to the 26th of February 2005. The play celebrated its world premiere at Wallack's Theatre, New York, on the 14th of November, 1874. See *Selected Plays of Dion Boucicault*. Ed. Andrew Parkin. Irish Drama Selections 4. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987. p.258.
- (7) *The Field*, directed by Michael Scott, was staged at the Gaiety Theatre from the 30th of June to the 26th of July 2003. The play was first produced at the Olympia Theatre on the 1st of Nov. 1965.
- (8) *Bailegangaire*, directed by Tom Murphy, was staged at the Peacock Theatre from the 26th of September to the 8th of October, 2001. The production was back to the theatre by "popular demand" and staged from the 12th of June to the 20th of July, 2002.
- (9) There is a question mark after "do you hear me" in the unpublished script of *The Shaughraun* for the Abbey production. See p.70. The page numbers may be different when it is published.
- (10) Marie Keenan. *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.201.

- (11) *The Field*. Dir. Michael Scott. Dublin: The Gaiety Theatre, 2003.
- (12) *Stolen Child*, written by Yvonne Quinn and Bairbre Ní Chaoimh and directed by Bairbre Ní Chaoimh, was first produced at the Andrews Lane Theatre in 2002, and back to the theatre by popular demand from the 29th of April to the 10th of May, 2003.

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