CHANNELING CATHLEEN: CROSSING THE THRESHOLD FROM MOTHER IRELAND TO SPINSTER SEAN BHEAN BHOCHT

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ABSTRACT

Channeling Cathleen:
Crossing the Threshold from Mother Ireland to Spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht

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Ireland's ancient roots in the strong, powerful goddess provide its women with a feminist tradition that predates and supersedes its colonial past. Scholars are now examining the disparity between representations of Irish history as strictly male-dominated and those of gynocentric origin. This paper explores the (r)evolutionary relationship of the goddess to the literature of Irish nationalism. From her origin in myth to her representation in song, poem, or story, the goddess has appeared in one avatar or another throughout Irish literature. By revisiting such pagan images as the mythological Sean Bhean Bhocht and utilizing her dual identity, writers contest the dual subjugation of Irish woman by both colonial and patriarchal Christian culture and her constraint to symbolic role as Mother Ireland. As a result, Irish women can challenge restrictive historical and political representations of them as passive and domestic or sacrificial and suffering, contributing to the nation solely through marriage and motherhood. Images require interpretation and this postcolonial, feminist examination re-visions the goddess as a spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht which contradicts the patriarchal version of all women as invisible, voiceless, and virtuous.

The works discussed are written by both male and female, native and diasporan, and in genres from the ancient ballad through poetry of the Great Famine to drama of the fin de siècle Irish Literary Revival as well as short fiction from both early and late twentieth century authors. Each of the works is associated with some form of cultural controversy extant at the time of its creation. Although the span of time covered is extensive, the choice of literature is limited to works that respectively reconsider a fundamental aspect of Irish identity—artistic independence, religion, land, and language—as it is conceptualized by a non-traditional representation of woman, the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht. The results of my examination reveal that the Irish spinster, a woman who loves her country yet chooses to reproduce it with cultural creativity rather than by bearing its children, maintains a unique and invaluable role in Irish nationalism. She has proved herself a significant thread that women have historically sewn towards a unified yet heterogeneous cloak for their country of Ireland.

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PREFACE

One of the great influences of my life has been my Irish grandmother Brigid, whose independence and resolve I witnessed firsthand and also heard about through family lore. As a young girl, she had made three attempts on her own to leave County Cavan for America but had been turned away twice because she had no one to vouch for her here. On the third try she succeeded: there was a male relative who accepted her. Her experience in America was one of hardship, like that of so many immigrants. But it was also one of tremendous resilience, a legacy carried through my mother and now to my own daughter.

The stories my grandmother told me of life in Ireland, coupled with my own visits there, engendered a particular fascination for me in the country's myths. I saw my grandmother's fortitude in those tales of the goddess. And I was captivated by the uniqueness of the goddess's ability to flow from one world to another, in one form or another. She seemed so powerful, so awe-inspiring. But I also knew that both my grandmother and mother were single working parents with broods of children at a time when outside support for that category of society was almost non-existent. As a feminist, I wondered why they married at all and why they had so many kids. I had only to look to our Catholic faith to satisfy my curiosity.

That scrutiny brought me to the image of Mother Ireland, her role in gendered nationalism, and the repudiation of that role by the very roots of Ireland in the goddess. The goddess appears in many avatars in myth, not only as mother but also as old single woman, "Sean Bhean Bhocht," "Cailleach," "Hag o'Beare," or "Dark Rosaleen," who

transforms into a young single maid or queen, "'Cathleen ni Houlihan." These representations have come to symbolize the nationalist link between Ireland's pagan past and its promise for the future.

While the characters of old woman and young maid may seem incompatible, they share one common trait: the implied absence of husband or child. An unmarried, childless woman might seem completely powerless because of her inability to reproduce the nation and refusal to conform to the expected role of wife and mother. However, in her social defiance, the unmarried woman—or spinster—gains a degree of autonomy and authority. Her identity is her own, and not ceded to all-consuming roles of wife and mother to which traditional Irish society restricted her.

The word "spinster" has a conflicting linguistic identity built into it. It is defined as "a woman who spins, especially one who practices spinning as a regular occupation" ("Spinster," 1a). However, it has also come to mean "a woman still unmarried, esp. one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid" (3b). Ironically, the same word that refers to the occupation of spinning and producing an endless thread with the symbolic wheel, or circle, has also evolved into the symbol of a woman with no future.

Despite the tension of these conflicting definitions, they represent a prominent theme in Irish literature about the spinster and her role in society. Although she is not exchangeable in marriage, the spinster need not be severed from her commercial value in employment and social value in nationalism. As the definition of "spinster" suggests, the spinster, who is not relegated to the home, is able to re-produce in her own way—with cultural creativity—as did the ancient pagan goddesses who have gone before, or the spinster Sean Bhean Bhochts who are yet to come.

It seemed appropriate to combine my love for literature with my interest in Irish heritage for this research. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, I argue that the literary depiction of the spinster as the Gaelic "Sean Bhean Bhocht" or combination Old Woman/Young Maid creates a unique role for the Irish old maid as paragon of nationalism rather than pariah of society.

In choosing to discuss the role of the spinster in the literature of Irish nationalism, I hope to bring to light a subject that has not received attention in the canon of literary criticism. I believe this work reflects the curiosity and determination I so admire in the goddesses in my life: my grandmother Brigid, my mother Mary, and my daughter Caitlin, who inspire me to this day.

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INTRODUCTION

Ireland is at a crossroads. Recent and upcoming Constitutional Referenda, along with the declining influence of the Catholic Church, show that the country is facing a time of profound social change. As the people of the Republic assert their agency and reassess their patriarchal approach to government, customs, traditions and societal norms, it is only fitting that they will also examine the depiction of their country in literature. Like any country in the midst of a cultural revolution, Ireland is confronting its old systems and symbols. Some may endure; others will have to adapt or be discarded. Yet, as Irish people deconstruct their history and upend the centuries-old trope depicting the conquest of a feminized country, there is one symbol that should not be abandoned. As her shape-shifting roots make clear, the mythic figure of the goddess, who has endured since she first appeared in folklore, is profoundly suited to adapt to this new and uncertain time. In fact, as a representation, she is uniquely situated to inform our analysis of the cultural evolution of Ireland and is the spiritual guide who can illuminate the past and appropriately usher in the future. Invoking the goddess as a way of navigating the current shifts is not always a clean fit: like any enduring figure, she will inevitably be challenged, and she must adjust, sometimes radically.

Through a postcolonial, feminist perspective, this examination explores the profound gift of the goddess to withstand change. It evaluates the goddess frankly, both channeling and challenging her at times, even re-visioning her, seeing her unexpected reflection in other female literary figures such as the spinster, Mother Ireland and the Virgin Mary, all the while demonstrating her powerful ability to evolve into an enduring

symbol of Ireland, both past and future. This re-visioning of the goddess as the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht, portrayed as the dual figure of an Old Woman/Young Maid, serves to contradict the patriarchal version of all Irish women as invisible, voiceless, and virtuous. The works discussed are by writers both male and female, of native birth and diasporan. Their genres range from the ancient ballad, to the poetry of the Great Famine, to the drama of the fin de siècle Irish Literary Revival, to the short fiction of the twentieth century. Each of the works is associated with some form of cultural controversy extant at the time of its creation. Although the span of time covered is extensive, the choice of literature is limited to works that respectively reconsider fundamental aspects of Irish identity—artistic independence, religion, land, and language—as they are conceptualized by the non-traditional representation of woman as the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht. To fully see the connection between the goddess and the Sean Bhean Bhocht, one must return to the origin of the goddess and trace her evolution, incarnations, and shape-shifting resilience.

The adaptability and longevity of the goddess are already proven. The very sense of agency that the Irish people have been reasserting through political activism owes its origins to the matrifocal, natural realm of the goddess who was revered in pre-Christian Ireland as representative of sovereignty over the land and its people.[1] She has survived the patriarchy of both Church and State, as evidenced not only in folk stories passed

[1] Pre-history and mythology suggest that in the Neolithic era, cults of a mother-goddess existed as well as "divine female agency who was conceived of as the origin of the physical universe itself and of the life forms contained in its landscapes" (Ó Crualaoich 25). See also Duff; Baring and Cashford; Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*; de Paor, *The Peoples of Ireland*.

down through generations but also in geographical placenames, in the country's cultural legacy of art and literature, and in its native language. Her presence is indefatigable. Ireland's ancient roots in the inspirational goddess provide its people with an alternative to the unnatural restrictions and gender imbalance codified in the Christian culture of the country's history. From her origin in myth to her representation in song, poem, story, or drama, the goddess has appeared in one avatar or another throughout Irish literature. Despite the tradition of Ireland as motherland, writers also plant conflicting identities in their work by depicting Ireland with anthropomorphic pseudonyms such as "Sean Bhean Bhocht," "Cailleach," "Hag o'Beare," "Dark Rosaleen" or "Cathleen ni Houlihan," terms which symbolize the link between Ireland's pagan origins, its Christian past, and its promise for future.

Invoking the myths of Ireland and the ability of the goddess to flow from the physical to the natural world, the Sean Bhean Bhocht could shift shape from an old worn woman, or hag, to a young, beautiful maid or, as sometimes depicted, a queen. By revisiting pagan images such as the mythological Sean Bhean Bhocht and utilizing her dual identity as Old Woman/Young Maid, writers evade the categorization of Irish women by both colonial and patriarchal Christian culture. They push back against the colonial and patriarchal need to constrain any female to the role of Mother (Ireland). As a result, the figure of the Sean Bhean Bhocht challenges the restrictive historical and political representations of Irish women as passive and domestic or sacrificial and suffering, contributing to the nation solely through marriage and motherhood. The figure's ability to confront these colonial and patriarchal norms inevitably makes her revolutionary: destructive and regenerative at once.

Challenging representations that are historically embedded requires both deconstruction and interpretation. In this analysis, the goddess and her origin as a shape-shifter receive in-depth review because of her significance as a foundation for Irish spirituality and mythical poetic culture. Pagan beliefs in the natural world and the cyclical, seasonal, order of life, death and rebirth as represented by various goddesses who could flow from one world to another are central to the analysis as well, as is expression of those beliefs in ancient myth, poetry, and folktales. Because of the importance of the goddess in the Irish assimilation of Christianity, the paper focuses on her role as transitional figure. When we see the shift from paganism to Christianity along a spectrum, we understand that the latter was not an inhospitable environment for the goddess. Instead, she survived in both regimes. As Geoffrey Moorhouse describes in *Sun Dancing,* his book about Celtic spirituality, the Irish readily accepted Christian doctrine because they were never asked to relinquish "one of their most profound instincts, which was to see God in everything, and not simply as a supervising deity detached from the natural world . . ." (129). Reverence for Brigit the goddess enabled the Irish to eventually exalt Brigit the Saint. So, too, was the goddess able to morph from pagan to Christian symbol.

No discussion of the Irish transition from matrifocal, polytheistic paganism to patriarchal Christianity—or of the goddess's role in that transition—would be accurate without examination of one of the most spiritually-wrenching events in Irish history: the Great Famine of 1845-52. The unspeakable tragedy of that event created for Ireland the need for a nationalist response. What began as an answer through poetry of lament and loss—like the keening of the mythical Cailleach or the quiet mournfulness of a grieving

Mary, mother of the crucified Jesus—became a literature of rebellion symbolized in the mutable Sean Bhean Bhocht of the fin de siècle play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan,* by William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory. As antithesis to the militancy espoused by the authors Yeats and Lady Gregory, James Joyce proffers a Sean Bhean Bhocht of a different type a short time later in his story, "Clay." Joyce's Maria is a "veritable peace-maker" (83), a spinster who reflects the author's rejection of aggressive nationalism and provides Irish society with the possibility of a more measured approach, one that involved raising the consciousness of the nation through examining its impenetrable relationship to the Church. For that scrutiny, some of James Joyce's work was censored in Ireland, again aligning the representation of the goddess with revolutionary, disruptive power.

But Joyce's consciousness-raising through scrutiny of Church doctrine is how Edna O'Brien, an admirer of Joyce and author of one of his biographies, implements the figure of the goddess for her own dissident purposes to chronicle the Church's subjugation of women as sexual beings. With her depiction of the nun as Sean Bhean Bhocht in her mid-twentieth century story, "Sister Imelda," O'Brien reveals the hypocrisy of the Church's treatment not only of women religious but also of the young women in their charge. Like Joyce, her work was renounced, with her first novel, *The Country Girl*, achieving notoriety as the only book censored in Ireland in 1960. Not only does O'Brien's invocation of the Sean Bhean Bhocht bridge the gap between paganism and Christianity, but the goddess as nun also brilliantly challenges Christianity's chaste view of women—brides of Christ—by contrasting it with the undesirable state of spinster, subverting both.

Edna O'Brien was certainly not the only female writer to face rejection by a provincial Irish society. Although O'Brien eventually achieved great prominence for her prolific writing accomplishments, other lesser-known Irish women authors continued to take pen in hand to relate what they observed as oppression of women in Irish society. With one of the most fundamental aspects of Irish identity being the people's relationship with their land of origin, one that was historically associated with the female (Mother Ireland) and one that had been repeatedly raped through colonization by strangers over centuries, women writers in particular had to deal with a double subjugation. Not until 1976 could an Irish woman own a home outright. Only the Domicile and Recognition of Divorces Act of 1986 abolished the law that upon marriage a woman acquired the domicile of her husband and could have no other domicile during the marriage. With the 1937 Constitution codifying the elevated status of both the Church and woman's place as solely domestic and as mother, the spinster's role as voiceless outsider was firmly entrenched. But writers such as Maeve Kelly incorporated the figure to speak out against this subjugation. In her short story, "Amnesty," Kelly took on the subject by depicting an autonomous, land-owning, single woman as the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht living on her own microcosmic island off the west coast of Ireland. Although Kelly published her story in Ireland in 1976, the first year that an Irish woman could legally own a home of her own, the piece did not become available to a wider audience, specifically in America, until 1991. Kelly's quiet story speaks poignantly of personal agency, and the powerful relationship of the spinster to the goddess and the goddess to the land.

The Irish spinster was a figure employed not only by women writers; she was also invoked as a metaphor for the oppressive forces acting against the Irish as a whole,

making her a universal rather than exclusively feminist figure. The Irish spinster was not always allowed speech. Her voice was suppressed by patriarchal laws that served to devalue it, and it was also silenced by the loss of native language through the colonization that diminished all of the country's communication. The west of Ireland saw a resurgence of Irish language surrounding Douglas Hyde's 1893 Gaelic League, but the English language of the conqueror maintained dominance out of economic necessity. Despite the steadfast presence of the colonizer's tongue, the Irish spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht appears in Martin McDonagh's play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, to reinforce the unique cultural identity of the Irish people through language. The passion with which she expresses the need for the Irish people to preserve their language reinforces the spinster's incomparable value in Irish nationalism. At the same time, her fervor reflects a collective fury on the part of the Irish people for centuries of colonization. McDonagh's Maureen as spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht shouts her objection to the extinction of the native tongue. She is not voiceless.

The literary depiction of the spinster as the Gaelic Sean Bhean Bhocht creates a unique role for the Irish single woman as paragon of patriotism. Far from being the social pariah that is the stereotypical spinster, the Irish single woman as portrayed in these works is the backbone of Irish nationalism. This revision is significant because, as feminist literary critic Molly Mullin expresses in her essay, "Representations of History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Difference," while "[it is] generally assumed that there is one true version of history, [and] it is similarly assumed that there are true, stable meanings and definitions, whether of genders or nations . . ., representations of history must be contested in order to construct an alternative historical and political

consciousness" (34, 39). The shape-shifting Sean Bhean Bhocht, by her very nature, upends the idea of primacy of history, revolting against the need to be defined as one thing or to be made uniform.

While the characters of old woman and young maid may seem incompatible, they share one common trait: the implied absence of husband or child. An unmarried, childless woman might seem completely powerless because of her inability or reluctance to reproduce the nation and refusal to conform to societal and religious expectations for her gender. However, in her social defiance, the unmarried woman—or spinster—gains a degree of autonomy and authority as well as a resistance to being singularly defined—especially by the English language.

The word "spinster" has a conflicting linguistic identity built into it. It is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a woman who spins, especially one who practices spinning as a regular occupation" ("Spinster," 1a). However, it has also come to mean "a woman still unmarried, esp. one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid" (3b). Ironically, the same word that refers to the occupation of spinning and producing an endless thread with the symbolic wheel, or circle, has also evolved into the symbol of a woman with no future: the wheel that, though moving, goes nowhere. Despite the tension of these conflicting definitions, they represent a prominent theme in Irish literature about the spinster and her economic role in society. Although she is not exchangeable in marriage, the spinster need not be severed from her commercial value in employment and social value in nationalism. As the definition of "spinster" suggests, the spinster, who was not relegated to the home and to childbirth, was able to reproduce in her own way. She contributed to the production of society by working to re-produce goods or provide

services for the economic stability of the nation while her married female counterpart reproduced children for societal stability.

Although the spinster in some ways represents the end of a nation because of her biological inability or lack of desire to reproduce it, single women in Ireland found various ways to emulate the literary figure and similarly promote nationalism. Some became the asexual convent nuns who educated young women in the chaste and pure ideals of the Irish family. Others became economically productive in business or in farm work, as family caretakers, as paid domestic help, or as prostitutes. Sometimes the Irish woman was forced to emigrate or imposed self-exile with the purpose of sending money back home to help with preserving the nation. As Other, the spinster was marginalized by society, which placed her in the potentially advantageous position of social invisibility from which to perform her nationalistic duties. The spinster subverts even her very definition. Far from propelling a moving wheel that goes nowhere, she in fact is the propeller of change by challenging oppression.

At the Congress of Black African Writers in 1959, post-colonial critic Frantz Fanon expresses in his speech, “Reciprocal Bases of National Culture and the Fight for Freedom,” that the evolution of a national consciousness cannot be separated from the evolution of a national literature. According to Fanon, by reclaiming his identity through the dignity of stories and traditions, the native becomes invigorated towards a new nationalism. The storyteller figures prominently in that he or she becomes the repository of the new nationalism. Although Fanon points to the invaluableness of the pre-colonial culture, he advocates the evolution of that culture to enable its inheritors to progress past national consciousness to national liberation. The evolutionary development of a culture

from its pre-colonized days through the period of domination, advancing to a raising of national consciousness politically and militarily, and climaxing in a triumphant liberation will naturally result in a different country, a different culture, and a different native from that which originally existed. In its newfound selfhood as an independent nation, the people can look to creating an identity that is not restricted to its ancient origin, or to its pre- or post-colonial existence. Instead, it is enabled by its efforts toward individual freedom to become part of a larger liberation, to become identified with not only a history but also a future.

As feminist critic Robin Morgan noted, "Few peoples have as rich, preserved, and recorded a tradition of gynocratic myths, legends, and religio-philosophical beliefs as do the Irish" (qtd. in Mullin 41). Such beginnings allow for a re-thinking of Ireland's national history and nationalist supporters so that there is no longer a Constitutional assumption that "'woman' can be used interchangeably with 'mother,' and that both are automatically associated with domesticity" (Mullin 42). By looking to the representation of the goddess as the never-ending spiral of life, death and rebirth rather than as sacrificial, suffering or destructive, devouring Mother, the Irish might rid themselves of their repressive past and create a progressive future. This future could result in the different country, different culture, and different native that Fanon suggests is possible—propelled by the image of the spinster at her wheel, with its constant revolutions.

In her book, *Monuments and Maidens*, feminist critic Marina Warner points out that the more a woman is represented abstractly to mean liberty or nationhood, "the more real women are denigrated and consigned barefoot and pregnant to the kitchen . . ." (16). As recent events suggest, the time has arrived for a new dream-vision of Ireland as

inclusive of all women's capability for reproducing the nation—whether in childbirth, or with cultural creativity. This discussion of the nationalist role of the goddess as spinster, a subject that has not received attention in the field of literary criticism, focuses attention on the societal importance of a marginalized segment of real Irish women. Poet Nuala ni Dhomnaill observes in her essay, "What Foremothers?," that ". . . there is a psycho-emotio-imagistic dimension to our being, a feeling soul, which has fallen through the interstices of the mind/body polarities of the dominant discourse so that it has become quite literally unspeakable. A whole realm of powerful images exists within us [women], overlooked by, and cut off from, rational consciousness" (28). By viewing in the spinster an incarnation of the goddess, and by envisioning the goddess as a nationalist symbol not only of the ancient past but of the progressive future, this work gives voice to and space for the expression of that alternate dimension of a woman's being, one that Ireland is carefully and methodically recognizing and allowing to flourish during this post-colonial, post-patriarchal, political and societal (r)evolution.

In doing so, Ireland is paving its path towards a new national consciousness, one that envisions Ireland not as Mother necessarily, nor as Cathleen ni Houlihan draped in "the seamless garment once wrapped like a green flag" (Kiberd 653) around her. Instead, she is envisioned as a "quilt of many patches and colours, all beautiful, all distinct, yet all connected, too . . . Irish or English, rural or urban, Gaelic or Anglo, [native or diasporan, multi-ethnic or -racial], each has its part in the pattern." This analysis demonstrates that the single woman as representative of the ancient goddess spins the thread that eventually brings pieces of the Irish quilt together for all of history. Like the spinster's spinning wheel, this concept is truly revolutionary.

CHAPTER I. INCARNATIONS OF THE SPINSTER

Early Myth: Goddess as Shapeshifter

In her memoir, *Mother Ireland*, Edna O'Brien reminds us that "countries are either mothers or fathers, and . . . Ireland has always been a woman, a womb, a cave, a cow, a Rosaleen, a sow, a bride, a harlot, and, of course, the gaunt Hag of Beare" (11). Other names for Ireland as woman include the Gaelic "Sean Bhean Bhocht" (also spelled and pronounced "Shan Van Vocht"), defined as "poor old woman" (*Oxford*) as well as "Sive Oultach or Siobhan Meiscil . . . who represented the ancient goddess of place or of sovereignty" (de Paor, *Peoples* 253). In its pre-Celtic, prehistoric past, Ireland was a matricentral tribal society with worship of the goddess a primary focus of its polytheistic religion. The goddess was everywhere in nature—in the rivers and fields, sheep and cattle, sun and moon. She represented the natural cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. Although each tree or stream had an individual connection with divinity, polytheism saw nature as a whole—and as holy. "In Ireland, that divinity is unquestionably feminine" (Monaghan, *New* 1).

Glorification of the goddess is borne out in "the continued sacred character into the beginning of historic times of the old Neolithic and Bronze Age burial sites" (de Paor, *Portrait* 43). Evidence of the importance of the goddess is seen in her multiple presence on those sites in the form of ancient symbols, including the limitless circle, spiral, and triskele, or triple spiral, which are found on Neolithic tombs including Newgrange in Ireland. The three main oblong stones of Newgrange, including the entrance stone, are considered to be of "exceptional artistic merit" (Ó Nualláin 11). The triskele's unicursal

graphic, drawn in one continuous line, represents the natural world in birth, death, and resurrection as well as the physical world in sky, earth, and water (Biedermann 318). Because the goddess was very close to the physical and supernatural worlds, flexible borders existed between them so she could regularly shift shape and flow back and forth. Depictions of the pervasive goddess honored her not only for reproductive capability, but for cultural creativity as well. She was revered for healing, poetry, teaching and learning, cooking, weaving, smithwork, and, once patriarchal culture took root, for warfare and militarism as well (Condren 26).

As single goddess, she was related to a particular natural force or element such as a tree or holy well; as Great Mother Goddess, she was sometimes represented as a cow who nurtured the earth with her milk, symbolized in the placename "Paps of Anu" which are high hills in the shape of breasts near Killarney in County Kerry and related to Anann, considered the mother of all gods (Cormac; Rees and Rees 134). Another name for the mother goddess is Matrona, who appears sometimes in a group of three, indicated by inscriptions with the name *matronae*, "the mothers," and portrayed with "baskets of fruit, cornucopias, and babies" (Gimbutas, *Living* 183).

As Triple Goddess, she emerged either as three sisters of the same age but of different skills or, in patriarchal interpretation, as "maiden, mother, and crone" (Conway 4) symbolic of youth, adulthood, old age and rebirth. Regardless of the form in which she was venerated, the goddess represented the unity of all nature in the earth and in its ability to give life and "absorb itself in death" (Marler 1). As such, the goddess occupied that liminal space between the earth and the infinite so that her sacred powers involved not only fertility, motherhood, death and rebirth but also inspiration.

The recorded myths of Ireland, however, diluted the significance of the goddess; instead, the mythology reflects the male figure and his militaristic exploits as dominating heroic stories. “In historical tradition . . . the principal role belongs to colonizers, inventors or male warriors . . . in the ‘geographical’ tales . . . the female divinities fill a much larger place” (de Paor, *Portrait* 43). According to these stories, the male warrior could not assume his rightful place as king unless the sovereignty goddess, often in the form of a hag, enticed him as a mate. If the seduction was successful, the goddess changed shape into a beautiful young queen who symbolized Ireland, and the warrior was deemed king, having demonstrated an incomparable wisdom to accept the hag despite her hideous appearance. The coupling resulted in fertility for the land and justice for its people. In this patriarchal version, the king “became the main agent of fertility” (Condren 24) instead of the goddess.

Over time, this image of a hideous old hag whose beauty and sovereignty is shared only with a just ruler “becomes Ireland—a powerful myth which survived through medieval literature into modern times” (de Paor, *Portrait* 44). In variations of the myth the sovereign goddess appears in other forms such as a cow or sow, as emphasized by Edna O’Brien in the above quote from *Mother Ireland*. Literary depictions of the hideous hag became softened somewhat into the image of a poor old Irish woman, the Sean Bhean Bhocht, “everybody’s poor old granny,” but she always symbolized Ireland as nation.

Sovereign Goddess as Poem of Sovereignty

> Think her not a ghastly hag, too hideous to be seen;
> Call her not unseemly names, ou matchless Kathaleen;
> Young she is, and fair she is, and would be crowned a queen,
> Were the king's son at home here with Kathaleen-Ny-Houlahan.
> —James Clarence Mangan, "Kathaleen-Ny-Houlahan" (1845)

In pagan times, some Celtic bards were women, and women were both the subject and object of much of Ireland's poetry. Ancient legends refer, for example, to the warrior goddess Aoife; Anu, the mother of all the gods; and to the goddess Bridget, symbol of poetry and wisdom (MacManus 151). Women were revered not only for their beauty, but also for their strength and courage. "In the earliest literature, women function as autonomous, often powerful beings" (de Paor, *Portrait* 110). Poems were created to invoke the power of these goddesses, such as the following one to Cerridwen, the goddess of prophetic power and keeper of the cauldron where all inspiration and knowledge are created. The cauldron constitutes a complex image, with a complex background. There is Cerridwen's cauldron in "The Tale of Gwion Bach" in which the magic brew that will confer poetic and magic power is stolen from Afagddu by a young Taliesin. It is to this story that the poet in *Preiddeu Annwn* references, as the cauldron is the origin of his "foremost utterance." But the cauldron is also an object grabbed away by Bendigeiduran in "The Second Branch" of *The Mabinogi* and given (along with his sister Branwen) to Matholwch, King of Ireland. This cauldron has the property of bringing slain warriors back to life.[2] During these bardic times, the cauldron could restore life or

[2] See Ford; Graves 107-108; Haycock 52-78; and Rees and Rees 41-53.

hasten death, so invoking the Goddess Cerridwen was imperative for the acquisition of power, strength, and longevity:

> Oh great Goddess Cerridwen
>
> Goddess of the Cauldron
>
> Goddess of Fertility
>
> Goddess of Inspiration
>
> Cerridwen I invoke thee! (MacManus 150)

Bards in Irish society served as social and political commentators, first in epic sagas recording the conquests in ancient times of gods and goddesses using primarily a prose form. Then romantic verse such as Ossianic poetry—still involving goddesses—gained importance. The structure of the Irish poem consisted of elegy, ballad, eulogy, folk poetry, occasional satire, religious and love poems, and the very popular aisling, or "dream-vision" poem. In that form, Ireland is portrayed as a beautiful woman, a "speirbhean or 'sky-woman'" (Ó Crualaoich 156) who appears to the bard in distress but who promises redemption "when a young liberator would come to her defence" (Kiberd 18). James Clarence Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen," his 1846 translation of an original Gaelic poem, "Róisin Dubh," exemplifies the aisling poem with its lines about woe marking the beautiful bright face of Rosaleen, one of the symbolic names for Ireland. The poet promises to return her to her previous glory wherein she ruled over her land:

> Woe and pain, pain and woe,
>
> Are my lot, night and noon,
>
> To see your bright face clouded so,
>
> Like to the mournful moon.

But yet will I rear your throne

Again on golden sheen,

T'is you shall reign, and reign alone,

My Dark Rosaleen! (37-44)

As evidenced by aisling poems such as "Dark Rosaleen," the role of woman as poet was supplanted by the role of woman as poetry (Galvin 2). Ireland *became* woman in song and story—to be coveted, courted, and conquered.

One of the recognizable examples of Ireland as female and as nation is in the personification of the Sean Bhean Bhocht as "Kathaleen-ni-Houlahan" in James Clarence Mangan's nineteenth-century translation from the Irish of "Caitlin ni Uallacháin." The latter is a late eighteenth-century ballad in which the blind poet Liam Ó HIfearnáin first personified Ireland as Cathleen (Quirici 81; Moloney 1). An excerpt from Mangan's poem appears as epigraph to this section. However, her image became of great nationalistic significance as Cathleen ni Houlihan at the turn of the twentieth century with William Butler Yeats's play of the same name.

Critics such as Anne Ross and P. J. Keane have suggested that Yeats modeled the figure of the Poor Old Woman, the Sean Bhean Bhocht, on those lines from James Clarence Mangan's poem. And both Mangan and Yeats may have been referring to the metamorphosis of the hag in a Celtic story, "Baile in Scáil, the Phantom's Frenzy" (Murray) into a beautiful young woman, "the deified 'Sovereignty' of Ireland" (Keane 11). Still others[3] suggest that Cathleen's "accessibility in the play as personification of

[3] See Quinn 45, Quirici 81, and Moloney 1.

Ireland was largely due to her conflation with the Sean Bhean Bhocht from the popular 1798 ballad":[4]

Sean Bhean Bhocht

Traditional

"Oh! the French are on the sea," says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

"Oh! the French are on the sea," says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

"The French are in the Bay, they'll be here at break of day,

And the Orange will decay," says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

"And the Orange will decay," says the Sean Bhean Bhocht.

"And where will they have their camp?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

"And where will they have their camp?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht.

"On the Curragh of Kildare and the boys will all be there

With their pikes in good repair." says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

"With their pikes in good repair." says the Sean Bhean Bhocht

"And what will the yeomen do?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

"And what will the yeomen do?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

"What will the yeomen do but throw off the red and blue,

And swear they will be true to the Sean Bhean Bhocht?

And swear they will be true to the Sean Bhean Bhocht?"

"Then what colour will be seen?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

"Then what colour will be seen?" says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,

[4] Sean Bhean Bhocht is Irish for "poor old woman" and is the "Irish spelling of Shan Van Vocht, a personification of Ireland current in the 18th century" (MacKillop).

"What colour should be seen where our fathers' homes have been
But our own immortal green? " says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,
"But our own immortal green? " says the Sean Bhean Bhocht.
"Will old Ireland then be free? " says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,
"Will old Ireland then be free? " says the Sean Bhean Bhocht,
"Old Ireland shall be free from the centre to the sea,
Then hurrah for liberty," says the Sean Bhean Bhocht.

Whatever its particular genesis for the writers, there is no doubt that the image of the Sean Bhean Bhocht originated in the tales of early Celtic goddess mythology, one in which the goddess was inspirational yet independent.

Later Myth and Early Miracle: Brigit the Transitional

Bhí dhá Naomh Bríd ann. Bhíi Naomh Bríd thuas i gCill Dara.
Ach seo Naomh Bríd as an áit seo . . .

There were two St. Brigits. There was St. Brigit up in Kildare,
but this is the St. Brigit from this place . . .

—Donegal seanchaí, Irish Folklore Collection 694:189

In approximately the eleventh century, the name for Ireland, Eire or Erin ("land of Ériu"), originated from the Triple Goddess Ériu who appeared at certain times as a young, beautiful woman and at other times as a long-beaked crow (Monaghan, *New* 116). Brigit, whose name is derived from the northern Celtic goddess Brigantia, meaning "exalted one" (Freeman 97), is yet another example of the Triple Goddess whose two sisters of the same age were also named Brigit; they were venerated respectively as goddess of poetry and learning, of healing, and of smithwork (Condren 49). Evidence of worship of the goddess Brigit is provided in two significant early works: the tenth-

century *Glossary* by a bishop and king of Munster, Cormac mac Cuilennáin; and twelfth-century material by Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) about the veneration of Brigit with a perpetual fire in Kildare. Cormac's text connects Brigit with the Dagda, chief of all gods after Lugh:

> Brigit, that is, a poetess, daughter of the Dagda. This is Brigit the female sage, or woman of wisdom, i.e. Brigit the goddess whom poets adored, because very great and very famous was her protecting care. It is therefore that they call her goddess of poets by this name. Whose sisters were Brigit the female physician [woman of leechcraft]; Brigit the female smith [woman of smithwork]; from whose names a goddess was called by all Irishmen as *Brigit*. *Brigit*, then, *breo-aight*, *breo-shaigit,* "a fiery arrow." (23)

The Dagda was the all-powerful ruler of the Tuatha Dé Danann (tribe of the goddess Danu), who inhabited Ireland before the Milesian invasion of approximately 1000 B.C. (MacManus 7). Since Brigit was his daughter, she too possessed great power over the land and its people, reaffirming her territorial associations. At the same time, her familial relationship connected her with the supernatural aspect of the Túatha Dé Danaan characterized by their occupation of Ireland's fairy mounds, a belief still held today. As the all-powerful god, the Dagda is often represented by an ever-replenishing cauldron; Brigit is also attributed with the eternal, healing, and inspirational power of the cauldron in its manifestation in numerous earthly holy wells bearing her name.

The Brigit we venerate as "St. Brigit up in Kildare," described in the epigraph to this chapter, was born in 452 according to the *Annals of Ulster* (45) and *Butler's Lives of*

the Saints (53-4). However, it must be acknowledged from the outset of any discussion of Brigit the religious that "of all the early Irish saints celebrated in hagiography and cult, Brigit is the most difficult to link to a historical figure" (Cusack 76). Written accounts of secular events did not become accessible until the seventh century, explains Celtic expert Liam de Paor, and details about the fifth through seventh centuries have been "so rearranged for current dynastic and political purposes that it is quite difficult to reconstruct that reality" (*Peoples* 42). In fact, *The Confession of Saint Patrick* and his *Letter to Coroticus* are the only existing fifth-century written works from Ireland (Skinner; Freeman xviii; de Paor, *Peoples* 55). As a result, there is really no proof that Brigit ever existed, which certainly adds to the mystique surrounding her centuries-old reverence by the Irish. Indeed, anti-nativist[5] Kim McCone claims there are "'ten different St. Brigits and fourteen St. Brigs alias Brigits'" (107).

Not until the seventh century, when Cogitosus created the *Vita Sanctae Brigitae* [*Life of Saint Brigit*] does written history include information about the origins of the particular nun who would become abbess of Kildare and a patron saint of Ireland, second only to Patrick *(Butler's Lives* 53). Even this documentation provided by Cogitosus must be scrutinized in light of the circumstances under which it was written: Cogitosus was an Irish monk from Brigit's Kildare monastery who would be motivated to write a

[5] A term referring to scholars who claim that we can know very little of the early Irish oral tradition because all we have are texts written by Christian clergy who were not inclined towards preserving pagan beliefs. In contrast, nativist scholars acknowledge a tolerance to paganism on the part of Christian clergy, who used oral stories of pagan worship as parables to reinforce Christian principles. See Wooding; Cusack.

biography infused with the religious zeal of his place. Too, in this hagiography of Brigit, Cogitosus describes Kildare as a "great metropolitan city" (Cusack 82), thereby imbuing the church at Kildare with a grandiosity that would serve political purposes within the Church hierarchy. By attributing such authority to Brigit and her church, he attempted to establish a counterpart in power and prestige to Patrick's Armagh. His efforts were apparently helpful; the ninth-century *Book of Armagh* includes text which suggests an agreement between Kildare and Armagh for division of religious authority between the two centers. The *Book of Armagh,* also known as the *Canon of Patrick,* was written in "small Irish miniscule" probably by the scribe Ferdomnach at Armagh ca. 807 (Freeman 166; Dunn; CELT). The following material was translated by Whitley Stokes in 1876 from the part of the Irish-Latin *Book* that relates to Patrick:

> There was a difference between the holy Patrick, the Irish Brigitamque [sic] the pillars of the friendship of charity is such, that a single heart, and took counsel they had one. Christ have done many of them is concerned. A holy Christian girl said, "Oh, my Bridget, paruchia be in command of your own with your esteemed as a rule, part of the eastern and western domination in my will. (356)

This version of Stokes's translation has come to mean that Patrick and Brigid agreed upon his sovereignty in Armagh and hers in Kildare:

> The holy man [Patrick] therefore said to the Christian virgin: "O my Brigit, your *paruchia* [monastic territory or parish] in your province will be reckoned unto you for your monarchy but in the eastern and western part it will be in my domination." (Cusack 83)

Despite these early indications of Brigit's high status in Ireland, uncertainty surrounding her existence is furthered by the fact that five Latin texts about her life were edited as late as the seventeenth century, with three of them accepted with the most academic authority: the *Vita Prima*; the *Betha Brigte,* written in both Latin and Irish; and Cogitosus's work, considered the earliest and mentioned above. These later hagiographies refer to Brigit's mother as a Portuguese Christian slave supposedly taken, like Patrick, to Ireland (Freeman 156). Patrick had baptized Brigit's mother, but it was the venerated goddess Brigit who inspired her pagan father Dubhthach, an already-married chieftain from Leinster, to name her. The circumstances of her birth as child of a bondswoman and pagan chieftain can be related to the Celtic tales of mythical heroes, specifically CúChulainn[6] who was also illegitimate, bestowing on each of them a kind of supernatural birth (Cusack 89). In their book, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*, Alwyn and Brinley Rees offer a table of nine characteristics in the birth of a Celtic mythological hero (223-4). CúChulainn's, detailed in the *Táin bó Cúailnge* [*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*]*,* includes only six of the nine, as does Brigit's birth (Cusack 88).

One of the most significant aspects of the mythology surrounding Saint Brigit is that story of her birth. It has been written in early Christian sources that she was born at sunrise as her mother crossed the threshold into her cottage carrying a pail of milk (Rowley 94). The image of Brigit's creation in a liminal space is one that echoes the place of the goddess in the threshold between the earthly world and the supernatural or

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[6] CúChulainn is the fearless and powerful hero of the Ulster Cycle of traditional Irish folktales. See Rees and Rees.

spiritual world. Even the symbolism involved in crossing through the doorway, or "entering the perilous unknown," has a religious connotation since it involves passing from the "profane to the sacred" (Cooper 171). Equally figurative in this legend is the milk carried by Brigit's mother which directly relates to the Great Mother goddess and her representative cow, one of the aforementioned symbols for Ireland.

As a child, Brigit was pious, generous and charitable. Some accounts suggest that she was baptized by Saint Patrick (McBrien 95), while others indicate that she might have met him during her early childhood, placing her age at six when he died (Freeman 155; *Butler's Lives* 1). An enduring tale from her life describes how she gave away her father Dubhtach's jewel-encrusted sword to a leper who had begged for assistance. Dubhtach became so frustrated with her benevolence, apparently at his expense, that he sent her away to a convent. The tribal structure of Celtic paganism, with its goddess- and nature-centered belief system, eschewed the ornate and pompous trappings of the hierarchal Church of the Roman Empire. With that in mind, the story of Brigit's offering her father's extravagant sword to a poor leper holds great significance for the acceptance of Christianity by the Irish pagan. The story endures because Brigit's act represents rejection of the material in exchange for the merciful. It symbolizes the Irish giving up the sword of war for the charity embodied in The Savior, certainly an enduring Christian image.

Stories of Saint Brigit's good works abound. Reminiscent of the Goddess Cerridwen's magical ever-replenishing cauldron mentioned earlier, Brigit shared one with her father the Dagda, and she often multiplied scarce food and ale (a nutritious beverage and safer than water) to donate it to beggars—both people and animal. She

healed lepers, assisted in childbirth, and negotiated peaceful solutions to disputes (*Betha*). In general, hagiographers wanted to involve their readers in a personal way: if they could amaze them with tales of the wondrous miracles of a saint, of deeds imitative of the selfless works performed by Jesus, with dramatic examples from *The Bible* and written in a language glowing in detail, readers would learn to live a pious life of deeper meaning. In the Middle Ages, these hagiographies were also read aloud on the saint's feast day in conjunction with a pilgrimage and celebratory event. The more vivid the tale of a saint's miracle, the more impact it might have on the pilgrim's devotion to the saint. In turn, commensurate contributions would be expected for the shrine and its clerics' upkeep (Bitel 214). The parables served to reinforce Christian doctrine of humility, obedience, faith, and charity.

Although so much of Brigit's past is unconfirmed by historical fact, Cogitosus's account of her establishment as abbess of Ireland's first double monastery at Kildare in 471 (Ghezzi 102) is widely accepted as the most significant documented accomplishment of her life. The *Betha Brigte* describes the connection between Brigit as spiritual "Mary of the Gael" with her sacred place at Kildare:

> On another occasion after that an old pious nun who lived near Dubthach's house asked Brigit to go and address the twenty-seven Leinster saints in one assembly. It was just then that Ibor the bishop recounted in the assembly a vision which he had seen the night before. "I thought," said he, "that I saw this night the Virgin Mary in my sleep, and a certain venerable cleric said to me: 'This is Mary who will dwell among you.'" Just then the nun and Brigit came to the assembly. "This is the Mary who was seen by

> me in a dream." The people of the assembly rose up before her and went to converse with her. They blessed her. The assembly was held where now is Kildare, and there Ibor the bishop says to the brethren: "This site is open to heaven, and it will be the richest of all in the whole island; and today a girl, for whom it has been prepared by God, will come to us like Mary." It happened thus. (22)

Reinforcing the accuracy of her exalted status at Kildare, the new full edition of *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, revised in 1998, emphasizes that: "It was quite usual for the abbess to be the superior of both halves; this, rather than being an interesting indication of the status of women in the Celtic church, reflected the higher social standing of the nuns . . ." (1). Kildare takes its name from the Gaelic *Cill,* or cell, and *dare*, or oak, which represent Brigit's cell under an oak tree. Again combining Celtic symbolism with Christian belief, the tree held great significance for both Christians and Celts, and for druids (priests) in particular. Trees represent a threshold of sorts since they enter the Otherworld of "subterranean space" and connect that space with the earth and sky (Ó Catháin 258). In Christianity, the cross signifies "the tree of life, the *axis mundi*," relating pagan worship of nature with Christian doctrine. The meaning of the name of Brigit's monastery thus evolved into "church of the oak" ("School of Kildare"), by which it is recognized today.

While Cogitosus's biography locates Brigit primarily in Kildare for her miracles and charitable work, both the *Vita Prima* and *Betha Brigte* detail Brigit's religious travels elsewhere in the country, specifically to the north to the Uí Néill clan's areas (Cusack 83). When Brigit ventured into this area, considered Patrick's territory, her role as described in these later hagiographies was as peacekeeper and protector. Although her

church was admittedly subordinate to Patrick's in Armagh, her influence was just as great. Where Patrick had been born in a foreign land, Brigit's birth was native Irish and heroic. She was "the St. Brigit of this place" described by the *seanchai* [Irish storyteller] in this chapter's epigraph. And sovereignty of place takes us back to the ancient goddess *Sive Oultach* or *Siobhan Meiscil* referenced earlier.

Brigit's survival as Irish Saint directly depended on her influence as pagan goddess with her nature-centered, magical authority over the land and natural forces. Brigit's mastery of weather is well-documented in the tales related in all three hagiographies. From the *Betha Brigte* we learn of Brigit's connection not only to sheep but also to her control over wind and rain:

> A certain pious virgin sent to Brigit, in order that Brigit might go to visit her. Fine was her name. From her Cell Fhine was named. She went and remained there. One day wind and rain, thunder and lightning set in. "Which of you, O maidens, will go today with our sheep into this terrible storm?" All the maidens were equally reluctant. Brigit answered: "I love very much to pasture sheep."" I do not want you to go', said Fine. "Let my will be done," said Brigit. She went then and chanted a verse while going:
>
> Grant me a clear day
> for Thou art a dear friend, a kingly youth;
> for the sake of Thy mother, loving Mary,
> ward off rain, ward off wind.
> My king will do [it] for me,
> Rain will not fall till the night,

> On account of Brigit today,
>
> Who is going here to the herding.
>
> She stilled the rain and the wind. (33)

The *Schools' Collection*[7] of the *National Folklore Collection* (*NFCS*) at University College Dublin is replete with references to Brigit's enduring connection with the landscape and Ireland**.** One story told to student Emily Shekleton of County Cavan relates in site-specific detail how:

> On part of Drumbride farm adjoining our house, there is a stone commonly known as St. Brigit's Stone. This stone bears the imprint of knees, elbows, and eyes and is believed to be the place where St. Brigit knelt and prayed to God, to deliver her from the snare of her beautiful brown eyes. They were so beautiful that all who met her fell in love with them. After her prayer, she was allowed to throw her eyes into the stone. She then had to have someone to lead her about on her various missions through Ireland. Even in our own time medals are often thrown into St. Brigit's eyes. ("St. Brigid's Stone")

Although few folktales suggest that Brigit was blind, the majority available in the *NFCS* are similar to Ms. Shekleton's in their allusion to Brigit's beauty, humility and visionary qualities.

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[7] The *Schools' Collection* consists of over 750,000 folktales culled by Irish Free State school children and their teachers during the years 1937-39; to date 250,452 stories from the *Schools' Collection* have been digitized and made accessible at www.dúchas.ie.

The Saint has also been associated with controlling the flow of rivers to allow her nuns to cross unimpeded. As both goddess and saint, she communicated with animals and they obeyed her commands. In addition to her ability to increase supplies of butter, ale, bacon and milk, it has been said that she could control fire (*Betha*; Freeman 156). One tale mentioned in most of the Brigitine resources consulted herein describes her hanging her cloak on a sunbeam. That her "church of the oak" in Kildare is located only a few miles from the hill of Aileen, an ancient site honoring the Leinster kings, undoubtedly connects the pagan Brigit with her religious counterpart although, like so much of Brigit's background, there is no specific documentation to support that suggestion ("School of Kildare").

Saint Brigit's association with the pagan goddess is further exemplified in her feast day of 1 February, also the Gaelic festival of Imbolc, celebrated among Gaelic people as the first day of spring. According to Cormac's earlier-cited *Glossary*, the word *imbolc* is derived from "*ói*, i.e. sheep, and *melg,* i.e. milk. *Óimelc (*"beginning of spring"), i.e. *ói-melg*, "ewe milk," i.e. that is the time the sheep's milk comes" (127). An interesting inference can be made from the story of Brigit's birth wherein she is bathed in the milk carried by her mother. Her feast day occurring as it does on the first day of spring thus promises an abundance of sustaining milk for the people. The date is considered the day halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox in the northern hemisphere. As such, it represents a threshold: one of four times per year when the gates of the Otherworld are opened. Saint Brigit is said to walk the earth on the eve of 1 February, when Irish girls leave outside their cottages small strips of cloth representing the *Brat Brídhe* [St. Brigit's mantle or cloak] so that Brigit can bless them. In the morning, the

girls bring in the cloth and sometimes sew them into their clothing so they will be protected over the next year.

A particularly interesting folk story appearing in the *NFCS* is one translated by Teacher James Cashman of County Waterford that expresses the conflation between the mantle of Brigit, the *Brat Bridhe*, and her ability to both cure the sick and assist animals:

> This is a special feast [Imbolc]. No true Irishman would forget to put out "Brat Brighid on Brigid's eve. This consists of a black strip of cloth which is put out through the window and left hanging outside till morning. Then it is carefully preserved and used in many sicknesses, principal of which is the common head ache. If you wind the cloth around your head the headache will go. It is also put around a lamb that would not take with its mother. ("St. Brigid's Day")

It is at this time of year, too, that one of the most recognizable icons of St. Brigit—the Saint Brigit's cross (see Fig.1)—is woven as well, and placed in the roof of cottages to protect the home from fire for the coming year. Many stories indicate that Brigit weaved the cross from reeds she picked up from the floor of a dying pagan man, possibly her father. Brigit consoled him by explaining to the man the significance of Calvary and the cross; on his deathbed, he was baptized and converted to Christianity (O'Callaghan; Clancy qtd. in Lalor 957). Another origin story for Brigit's cross is succinctly collected by student Roisin Byrne within the *NFCS*. Ms. Byrne writes:

> Brigit was out in the fields herding, and she was teaching Pagans about God. She had no crucifix and she made a cross of rushes. It is very easy to make one. In some old houses in this district there are wooden articles

made in the shape of St. Brigit's cross. They are used for covering a crock of milk which is ready for churning. On top of the cross a white cloth is put, in order to prevent dust getting in to the milk. The wooden cross serves a double purpose. It brings St. Brigit's blessing on the milk and butter, because when she was in Kildare, she was in charge of the dairy, and she has a special blessing for dairy work. People have forgotten that the wooden cross is St. Brigit's, although they are able to make it. The end of a strainer is sometimes fitted into the square hole in the centre of the cross. (Byrne)

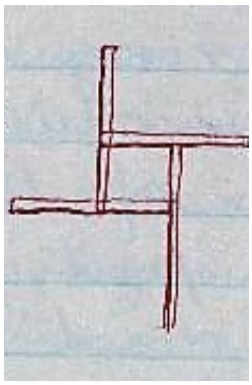

Fig. 1 Saint Brigit's Cross, hand-drawing by Roisin Byrne included with collected story (Byrne).

The Saint Brigit's cross is a wonderful example of the inter-relationship through weaving, "one of man's oldest activities" (Ó Catháin 259), between pagan and Christian beliefs. The duality of purpose of the Saint Brigit's Cross as sacred symbol of a saint or practical product of paganism is evidenced in the enduring respect Brigit the goddess and Brigit the Saint has engendered within generations of the Irish.

It seems appropriate to conclude this chapter about the legendary figure and revered religious who is Brigit with a myth that symbolizes the expansive and enduring effect Brigit has had on the Irish. When Brigit was looking to establish her church at Kildare, she realized she did not have enough land. During an encounter with the King of Leinster who had been out hunting, she asked him for some property but he was not very charitable in response. She asked again, but this time for just as much land as her cloak would cover. The King agreed. One legend has it that each of four nun-sisters took a corner of the cloak in their hands and ran in four directions as the cloak began expanding until the King cried for them to stop. He then promised Brigit some land in reasonable proportion. Another legend has it that Brigit placed the cloak on the ground, and it grew magically to cover acres and acres of land (O'Hanlon). Regardless of the particular version, Brigit managed to gain several acres from the King of Leinster for her church at Kildare, reinforcing her symbolic role as saintly multiplier of resources and sovereign over pagan lands.

As Geoffrey Moorhouse deftly points out in *Sun Dancing*, his intriguing book about Celtic spirituality, the Irish readily accepted Christianity because they were never asked to relinquish "one of their most profound instincts, which was to see God in everything, and not simply as a supervising deity detached from the natural world . . ." (129). Celtic worship of Brigit the goddess, as she manifested herself in the landscape of Ireland and the inspiration it provided, paved the way for worship of Brigit the Saint, "Mary of the Gael." As renewer of light, goodness, and abundance, both Brigit the goddess and Brigit the Saint have had significant positive effect on Irish culture for centuries**.** Her status as daughter of the Dagda and sole female patron saint of Ireland demands a scrutiny of

"prevailing oppositions of the primitive and the modern, past and present, the Christian and the pagan" (Mullin 40). Brigit's ability to bridge those oppositions and serve as spiritual link is what allows her legacy to endure.

Limen Lost: From Cailleach to Cathleen

Another of the Triple Goddesses who would prove crucial to Ireland's cultural identiy is that of the Cailleach Bhéarra. Equivalent to the Sean Bhean Bhocht, she is the "Old Woman" or Hag who is responsible for "mountains, lakes and islands, and cairns [which] are said to be stones that have fallen from her apron" (Rees and Rees 135). According to the *Yellow Book of Lecan* [*Lebor Buide Lecain*], a fourteenth-century manuscript, the Cailleach originated in the Beara Peninsula, considered to be Cailleach country, in the southwest Irish coast. Her influence as the Hag of Beare is more pronounced there since that is where the Milesian Gaeil took over the mythological divine Tuatha Dé Danaan which forced them into their immortal subterranean territory (Rees and Rees 134-5; Ó Crualaoich 29). In Beara the Cailleach had fifty foster children whose descendants became many peoples and races (Rees and Rees 135).

As triple goddess, her legend details how she provided benefits as *bean ghlúine* midwife, *bean feasa* wise woman, and *bean chaointe* keening woman (Ó Crualaoich 29), all of which were vital to the social order. Irish keening (*caoineadh*) is ritual lamenting of the dead which is the oldest form of music in Ireland.[8] The first instance of keening is

[8]"The custom of keening, or lamenting over the dead, is of the most remote antiquity… it was known to the Greeks and Romans who seem to have borrowed it from the Eastern nations,

associated with Brigit's keen for her son, based on the *Leabhar Gabhála*, or *Book of Invasions,* written in the eleventh century: "At first she shrieked, in the end she wept. Then for the first time weeping and lamentation were heard in Ireland." As incarnation of the goddess in her ability to flow from the earthly to the supernatural realms, the Cailleach *bean chaointe* entered a "divine madness" through voice and body that helped the entire community express their grief. It is important to note that the deceased needed to be present during the keening to allow the keening woman to guide its soul to the afterlife. Threatened by this power, the Roman Catholic Church abolished wakes with their vocal lamenting, "thereby relegating the community to the position of silent watchers" which is how we deal with grief today (Rees and Rees 37; McCoy 209).

Because of her connection with winter and her relationship with the supernatural through her power of keening rather than with spring and the rebirth associated with Brigit, the Cailleach gained a reputation for being a witch. Folktales abound with descriptions of her abilities to cast an evil eye or morph into a bird or hare in order to steal a farmer's milk. Of the 250,452 School Project stories digitized by the *NFCS*, 14,676 entail supernatural beings and 209 involve the Hag. Her transformation into the hare accounts for 41 of those Hag stories from across all counties. The common theme among the stories involves the hare stealing milk from a farmer's cows, forcing the farmer or his dog to injure the animal in chasing it away. Returning from the chase, the

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and from the Scriptures we learn it was practiced among the Israelites. The word in the Irish language, as originally and more recently written, is *cine*, and not, as modern orthoepists have it, *caoine*, and this makes it almost identical with the Hebrew word *cina*, when signifies lamentation or weeping with clapping of hands" (O'G).

farmer invariably comes upon a cottage or hut where an old witch resides. The witch haughtily turns away the farmer whereupon he notices that she is nursing a wound in the same area of her body where the hare had been hurt.[9] Although these folktales appear to associate the Cailleach with negativity, the hare carries a symbolism that relates to the moon and its concomitant relationship to fertility and "passionate sexuality" (Biedermann 165). After all, the Cailleach's origin as goddess reminds us that she has had many lovers over many rejuvenations. The very fact that the hare is stealing milk conjures her relationship to reproduction and productiveness for the land which reinforces the Cailleach's value in nationalism.

Like Brigit, the Cailleach's powers also link to the landscape. The Cailleach is responsible for natural land formations, and the rocks that she carried in her apron would form the megalithic structures that dot the British Isles and Ireland. Her reputation as "builder" repeats in several folk stories that discuss her skill with rocks. One tale in particular outlines the Cailleach's methodical approach to the task of building a steeple, with place-specific detail. The story is told to a local schoolboy by a County Mayo resident but appears with similar content in a number of tales that take place in the west of Ireland, close to the Beara Peninsula from where the Cailleach originates. As the tale goes:

> Three miles to the west of Simford [Swinford], there is today to be seen an unfinished steeple which is known locally as "meelick steeple" [Meelick is a village near Swinford]. This steeple is believed to have been built by "Cailleac béarac." When she first thought of building this steeple she was

[9] See *NFCS,* www.duchas.ie/en/tpc/cbes/5199340.

> in Cuillnaughton in the parish of Killasser and she decided in her own mind that she would take three steps from Cuillnaughton and that where she would arrive with the third step, she would build the steeple. Before starting her journey from Cuillnaughton, she filled her three pockets with sufficient stones to build the steeple. Her first step brought her to Renbrack, Carlow, and her second step brought her to the middle of the [River] Moy. There she planted her foot so firmly that her footprint was left on a rock in the middle of the river, where it can be seen this day when the water is low. Her third step took her to Meelick and here she commences to build. She had decided to build the steeple till it reached the sky provided she met with no interference from anybody. The building continued till it reached its present height when unfortunately a passerby who saw her shouted up to her: "Cím do Thóin, a Chailleac béarach."[Translation unavailable but pejorative meaning assumed]. On hearing this the Cailleach became furious, she flung up her arms and jumped to the ground, reaching a spot about 70 feet from the base of the steeple and leaving the imprint of her feet in the ground where they can be seen to this day. (Peyton)

Just as Brigit's impact remains on the stone in County Cavan, the Cailleach's reach lingers over the landscape of County Mayo, nearly clear across the country. Reinforcing *Portrait* author Liam de Paor's suggestion that "in the 'geographical' tales . . . the female divinities fill a much larger place," the effect of the goddess and both Brigit's and the

Cailleach's centuries-old influence are reflected in the placenames attributed to them throughout Ireland:

> Hag's Head, Cliffs of Moher in County Clare; Mish Mountains in Dingle, County Kerry; Paps of Anu, also in County Kerry; Lough Goir, bed of Diarmut and sungoddess Grainne and River Liffey, Goddess Life, both in Limerick; Brigit's Well in Kildare; Dublin, Pool of the Goddess Dub; and River Boyne, for Goddess Boand in Kildare; Loughcrew, "Hill of the Witch" in Meath; Emain Macha, for goddess Macha, mythological capital of Ulaid in Armagh, site of Ulster cycle of folklore; Lower Bann River, "An Bhanna" meaning "The Goddess" from County Down into Armagh; Upper Bann River from Derry to Antrim; River Erne, for goddess Eirne in Donegal; Knocknarea, Maeve's Cairn in Sligo; Croagh Patrick, possibly Crom Cruach in Mayo; Rathcroghan, seat of Maeve in Roscommon; and River Shannon, for goddess Siannan, dividing east and west Ireland. (Mac Giolla Easpaig; Logainm.ie)

These life-sustaining rivers named after the goddesses Boand, Shiannan, Eirne, and Life all flow like nurturing veins through the body Irish.

Whereas Brigit's powers connect with the Gaelic festival of Imbolc [1 February], the first day of spring, the Cailleach is associated with winter. In fact, in the folklore of both Ireland and Scotland, Samhain [31 October] to Candlemas [2 February] was ruled by Cailleach, the Hag. On Candlemas Eve, she would sail to Tír na nÓg [Land of Youth] and drink from its fountain, regaining her beauty and becoming Brigit. In both countries the term *cailleach* defined the last sheaf of the harvest season. Some folktalkes link the

cailleach with the fear that young girls have of tying the very last sheaf in case it means they will never be married (Bronach 2). With seven periods of youth, the Cailleach outlived many lovers including Lugh. She could rejuvenate every hundred years as well as shape-shift, most notably from an old hag to a young woman. As sovereignty goddess, the shape-shifting Cailleach appears in the renowned story of Niall and the Nine Hostages as related in *Echtra Mac nEchach (Annals)* and confirmed in "Cailleacha," a County Galway story told by 77-year-old Pat Mannion:

> Niall and his brothers come across a well, guarded by a repugnant hag who demands a kiss for access to the well. Based on her abhorrent appearance, their first instinct is to kill her rather than submit to the demand. Only Niall deigns to kiss her, and at once the hag turns into a beautiful maiden, proclaiming her authority as sovereign queen with Niall and his heirs becoming just rulers of the kingdom (Mannion; MacManus 78; Bray 113).

This transformation of the goddess, the Cailleach, the Sean Bhean Bhocht, from Old Woman to young sovereign Queen reinforces the mythical power of the Cailleach and assures her dominion as sacred Irish female symbol who would become *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the foundation for a later Irish Literary Renaissance that conflated Ireland's culture with nationalism.

CHAPTER II. MYTH INTO MODEL

Poetic Paradox: Famine as Fertility

At no time in Ireland's history have the various incarnations and duality associated with Ireland's identity as female been more significant to and transformative for the nation than during the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1852. Britain's masculine conquest of feminine Ireland was a direct cause of that horrific period in world history. As the rejected suitor, Britain punished the would-be bride with all the means available to a patriarchal society: military force; restrictive laws; a dominant religion; social ostracism; confiscation of land; subjugation of language and culture; and, most profoundly in Ireland's case, economic deprivation.

Christopher Morash, editor of *The Hungry Voice*, the only existing anthology of poetry from Ireland's Great Famine, offers that "history provides us with facts . . . but literature provides us with at least the possibility of a response to those facts" (37). One of the ways in which Ireland responded to its vanquishment was in a traditionally feminine form: poetry. In a patriarchal, colonized culture, nationalism and myth are interwoven with the subjugation and feminization of the outsider, or Other. Ireland was the Other, and women in Ireland suffered the additional penalty of being the other Other.

As colonizer interested in acquiring an "English family of nations" (Lengel 4), Victorian Britain found particularly apt the notion of Ireland as feminine. Ireland was coveted for her metals, cattle and wool as well as her fertile fields of grain. *John Bull*

Britain [10] conquered Ireland because he could: being female, Ireland was considered passive, submissive and easily subdued. The British expressed an "Anglo-Saxon superiority" to the Celtic Irish, whom they considered to be "feminine, childish, addicted to violence" (Curtis, "Anglo" 162), and averse to self-government which made them in need of chauvinistic supervision.

The prevailing literature of the Victorian period reinforced this characterization of Ireland. In 1854, the French critic Ernest Renan describes the Irish as a "domestic . . . essentially feminine race, fitted for family life and fireside joys" (Pt. I). As virile and masculine, Britain represented order and control whereas feminine Ireland represented wildness and sexuality. Matthew Arnold, in his *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, published in 1867, describes the Irish Celt as "sensual . . . , peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy . . . , undisciplinable, anarchical, and turbulent by nature" (36-38). Since Ireland was so feminine in nature, the existing patriarchy of British government and Christian religion allowed that it could not govern itself. Women and children needed to be mastered, if only for their own good.

In some respect it was because of Ireland's ancient tradition of powerful females that the country refused to comply with the British overture. She disdained the courtship,

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[10]Early iconography signifies most countries abstractly as female. Latin origin words ended in the feminine, and association of female and country suggested fertility of the land. The Roman image of female Britannia most often personified Britain. Then John Bull originated as a representative of Britain in 1712 with his most commonly accepted representation occurring in the mid-19th century. Bull was a popular figure because of his "pugnaciousness, independence, courage, patriotism and stoicism" (M. Taylor) as well as his connection to prosperity with his overweight demeanor. He was staunchly against Catholic emancipation in Ireland.

and in 1798 rebelled against Britain's attempted rape. For that the country was disciplined severely. In August of 1800 Britain strengthened his grip on Ireland by passing the Act of Union (Kinealy, *New* 145), ironically named since the word *union* connotes harmony and accord. The Act essentially legalized the marriage by duping Ireland into believing the Union would result in free trade between the countries, an Irish voice in Britain's Parliament, and the emancipation of Ireland's Catholic majority.

Free trade existed but Ireland's economy was primarily agricultural without the advances of modernization or industrialization prevalent in Britain or elsewhere. In addition, Ireland's population had grown from under five million to over eight million by 1841, straining the country's agricultural capability. The conflict between feeding itself and exporting its products became overwhelming. A great deal of confusion arose over government of the country since Irish members of Parliament were situated remotely in Westminster while the ruling lord lieutenant remained in Dublin Castle (Cronin 119). The British Parliament cared little about promoting or investing in Irish industrialization or other development. It needed Ireland primarily as a buffer against French invasion. And Ireland's Catholics were no closer to freedom from the Church of England than they had been before (Woodham-Smith 15-16). The Act of Union actually cemented the power and centrality of the Anglican Church as the state church for the newly-created United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (Kinealy, *New* 146).

This religious division between Irish Catholics untouched by the Protestant Reformation and Britain's Anglicans precluded any fusion between the countries. The enactment of the Act of Union was equivalent to an interfaith marriage to which only the groom consented, and that required the religious conversion of the bride. Ireland

immediately sought Repeal of the Union because promises made for the Act of Union were never realized. From Robert Emmet's 1803 attempt to blow up Dublin Castle, to Henry Grattan's failed efforts for Catholic Emancipation as an M.P. in 1805, to Daniel O'Connell's 1840 Repeal Association for peaceful withdrawal from the Union, to the Young Irelanders more militant approach with their publication of *The Nation* newspaper in 1842, the Irish made repeated attempts to withdraw from the Union (Cronin 113-135). When Britain imprisoned an aging O'Connell, Ireland's latent hero of Catholic Emancipation, the wind was taken out of his and the nation's sails. The Irish had no choice but to resign themselves to the master/slave, colonizer/colonized duality. The rape had been consummated.

It was in this political and social climate that a dejected and demoralized Ireland became subject to the circumstances that would prove so fateful as the Great Famine. In the census of 1841, Ireland's population was eight million; it was considered the most densely populated country in Europe, denser than that of China (Woodham-Smith 31). Over eighty percent of that Irish population was Roman Catholic. However, because of the range of penal laws which had been enacted following Protestant William of Orange's conquest over Catholic King James II in 1691, Irish Catholics had experienced a degradation of their political and social standing in their own country. During the history of those punitive measures, Catholics could not vote, bear arms or worship in their religion; their children could not be educated. Again subduing the feminine, Britain enacted various laws that prohibited Ireland's use of the mother tongue. Although most of those penalizing actions were repealed over time through the Catholic Relief Acts, full Catholic Emancipation was never actualized with the Act of Union. After Daniel

O'Connell achieved a hard-fought Emancipation in 1829 through the mass-movement efforts of his Catholic Association, Irish Catholics finally began to see a loosening of the draconian punishments they had endured for so long.

But Ireland's ever-increasing population and limited industrialization or agricultural modernization made land use and the repeated subdivisions by mostly Anglo-Irish landlords for easy cultivation of the potato a focal point of the country's economic, political, and social condition. Within that context, Britain's Devon Commission was established in 1843 by Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel to "investigate all aspects of land tenure in Ireland" (Kinealy, *This* 41). Peel believed that in order to update the overall economy in Ireland, revisions to land conditions were important. Among other improvements, he wanted to give some reward to outgoing tenants who had made improvements to their land. But the landlords were opposed and Peel's suggested legislation was withdrawn.

With the earlier establishment in 1836 of the Irish Constabulary to quell agrarian protests of the previous decade and the lack of forward movement resulting from the Devon Commission's two years of research, the Irish were primed for the impending Famine that would devastate the rural poor (*New* 149-51). At that point in time, Catholics owned less than ten percent of their ancient land. A large individual tract of property was allocated to a single person on a long lease and he was permitted to sublet it as he pleased (Woodham-Smith 11-21). Much of Irish land had been given over time to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. But living in Ireland was distasteful to most of the British landlords so they appointed agents to manage their property and collect rents from the Irish peasant who subsisted on a tiny subdivision within the landlord's property and on a single crop, the

potato. The peasants were "tenants at will" in that the landlord could evict them at a moment's notice. That fact, coupled with the fact that tenants left their rent in arrears for as many as six or eight months until a potato harvest brought in money, resulted in an Irish peasantry in a perpetual state of dependency—indeed bondage—to the landlord.

Because of their subservience and restricted social status, the Irish developed a reputation for laziness and lack of ambition. Their low standard of living encouraged the young Irish to marry early wherein they would get a small scrap of land, a pot, and perhaps a stool but rarely a bed. The elderly Irish had no other insurance but their children for their old age; as a result, families were large. With a population of eight million, the land was repeatedly subdivided which created an intense competition for it. Rents were extraordinarily high, surpassing those of Britain by 80-100 percent. On such small pieces of rocky land and in a climate as damp and windy as Ireland's, only the potato, first brought to Ireland by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1580, could be cultivated at a minimum of expense but with a maximum return on investment (Woodham-Smith 50). The simple potato, "frequently referred to as 'the lazy crop'" (Kinealy, *This* 15), provided the small Irish farmer with ample nutrition for not only his family but for his livestock as well. The crop was precarious, however, in that it could not be stored from one season to the other. That fact would prove devastating when an unidentified fungus attacked Ireland's potato crop in September of 1845.

Within this economic context there existed a further social impediment for the Irish that exacerbated the damage wrought by the potato fungus. The Irish were considered not only shiftless, but also racially inferior to their British colonizers. "Race was a defining element in nineteenth-century English perceptions of the Irish . . . and this attitude shaped

policy and lay at the root of Irish oppression" (Lengel 1). Scientific racism in the form of phrenology was first developed by German physician Joseph Gall in approximately 1800 and named by his student, Dr. Johann Spurzheim. The practice of studying personality and character, even criminality, based on the shape of the head by reading bumps and fissures in the skull became popularized in early nineteenth century Britain in no small part by the creation of a circle of devotees.

One such admirer of the eventually discredited science was prominent lawyer George Combe who explains in his 1869 book, *A System of Phrenology,* the foundation of the study as established by Dr. Gall. Combe describes his own adherence to the philosophy through first-hand experience with Dr. Spurzheim's experiments as early as 1816. Those experiments suggested that the brain, as organ of the mind, has areas with specific functions, proportional to an individual's propensities. In Combe's chapter on "The Coincidence between the Natural Talents and Dispositions of Nations, and the Developement [sic] of Their Brains," he writes of the Irish that: "The organ of Alimentiveness is larger . . . in the Irish and to this cause is to be ascribed their love of spirituous liquors. The Irish appear to be greatly addicted to spirituous liquors. I have never spoken to an Irishman who has not assured me that idleness, and particularly drunkenness, were the dominant vices of the mass of the Irish population" (442-3). This attitude about the Irish being lazy and inebriated enabled the Victorian British to promulgate a pejorative image of the Irish. In addition, the philosophy behind phrenology and its earlier pseudo-science, physiognomy, gave focus to cranial size and forehead shape which allowed a purportedly evidence-based reason—science—through which to stereotype and discriminate against the Irish population. Phrenology categorized humans

and animals based on facial angles. Prognathous jaws, thick lips, concave noses, wide gaps between the nostrils suggesting porcine ancestors is how the Irishman was depicted in many of the British *Punch* magazine cartoons of the 1840s and '50s. But Sir John Tenniel, principal caricaturist for *Punch* from 1862-1901, did the most to change the Irish stereotype in British cartoons from man to beast. In his "Two Forces" cartoon from *Punch*'s 29 October 1881 issue, he gave the British symbol, Brittania, a facial angle of 92 degrees—showing fortitude and determination—while the Irish representation, Anarchy, had an angle of 68 degrees—especially short, flat, wide and very ape-like. Using an anthropological basis for such depictions in popular British media lent credence to the stereotype of Saxon superiority. [11]

In mockery of his Catholic religion as originating with St. Patrick's conversion of the Irish people, the Irishman was pejoratively referred to as "Paddy" in those caricatures from *Punch* (Taylor *Views*). British poetry reinforced his stereotypical feminine traits by calling him "fair Erin," and depicted his ethnicity and race as follows in this stanza of an 1848 poem, "Erin go Bragh!" by Britannicus:

> Oh! But 'that country doth alter men's natures',
> O History writes, and, by Patrick, it's true –
> Brutalised feelings and monkeyfied features,
> Erin – I fear it is very like you!
> .....
> Moloch and Bel! – if you follow your leader,
> Much like a devil, fair Erin, you look! (Morash, *Hungry,* 33-6, 39-

[11] See Lavater; Combe; and Curtis.

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If Ireland as female refused to submit to Britain as male, then Britain would find another excuse to conquer the country. In 1830, Belgian political economist Gustave de Beaumont observed that "England's largest newspapers . . . 'allow no occasion to escape them of treating the Irish as an inferior race—as a kind of white negroes [sic] . . .'" (Curtis, *Apes* 1). Reinforcing this caricatured version of the Irishman he describes with "monkeyfied features," Britannicus devotes especially livid lines to the stereotype earlier in his poem above: "Erin go bragh!—if bragh may mean braying—//Faith, and your ears are as long as your tail (Morash, *Hungry* 17-18). By the 1860s this typecast of the Irishman in Anglo-Saxon Victorian eyes was firmly entrenched as"completely simian or anthropoid. In cartoons and caricatures as well as in prose, Paddy began to resemble increasingly the chimpanzee, or the orangutan and, finally, the gorilla" (Curtis, *Apes* 1-2).

In further justification for the debasement of the Irish, James Anthony Froude, professor of history at Oxford, later published a brutal polemic entitled *The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (1873). Like the Holocaust deniers of today, Froude claims in his work that there was no large scale massacre by Oliver Cromwell at Drogheda in 1641, based on Cromwell's own letters and one Royalist account:

> Irish histories suggest there was an indiscriminate massacre of men, women and children but Cromwell's own account mentions only men in arms and priests. It is possible that women and children were accidentally killed, but there is no evidence of it from an eye witness, and only general rumors and reports at second hand. (Froude 124)

Cromwell himself called the battle "a righteous judgment of God upon the barbarian wretches" who, Froude later declares, were "more like squalid apes than human beings" (Morash, *Hungry* 27). By publicly describing the Irish as feminine and ape-like, Britain had effectively reduced the Irish to two of lowest forms of existence on earth: female and animal.

Other theories about Irish inferiority referred to the people's moral rather than biological Otherness. Divine Providence was suggested as the cause for the plight of the Irish and the failure of the potato crop. "Plagues, pestilences, famines, wars are used by God as national punishments for sin," according to one Anglican preacher at the time (Morash, *Writing* 91). The British accused the Irish of such sins they considered indigenous to their race as "filthy conversations, the want of principle, the lying, the Sabbath-breaking, the blasphemies, the drunkenness, the robberies, the perjuries, and the murders that pollute and proverbalize [the] country" (93). Indeed, then-head of the British Treasury Charles Trevelyan suggests in his 1848 treatise, *The Irish Crisis*, that The Famine was God's way of teaching a lesson to the Irish. He concludes his lengthy observations on the circumstances surrounding the Great Famine—what he called one of "the maladies of Ireland" to which "nearly every practicable remedy [had] been applied" —with a declaration that "[t]he deep and inveterate root of social evil remained [in the Irish] and this has been laid bare by a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence, as if this part of the case were beyond the unassisted power of man" (201).

Referencing once again Ireland as female by reinforcing the stereotype of Irish fecundity, Trevelyan also asserts in his remarks that: "It is much to the credit of the poor Irish, that now that they have been deprived of the potatoes on which they had been

accustomed to bring up their families, marriages have become much less frequent" (193). With both comments, Trevelyan appears to be justifying the British government's laissez-faire approach to The Famine as one that ultimately benefited the Irish people themselves by limiting their reproduction through divine intervention. In its starvation, the Irish nation lost the feminine characteristic of fertility which was so coveted by the British in their desire to conquer her. Thus Ireland became masculine and consequently more physical. She was no longer associated with nature since her children were dying; as symbol of replenishing land, she was incapable of nurturing any more children. Ireland could now develop her strength and her intellect. With her newfound masculinity, she could be called upon to create armies and fight her conqueror.

In their bardic tradition, using poetry as one of the only means available with which to respond to the atrocities they were forced to endure, Ireland's middle class attempted to incite the people to rise against its oppressors. The work of the Young Irelanders, a group of mostly young middle-class men—some Catholic, some Protestant—advocated for repeal of the Act of Union. In 1842, they created *The Nation,* a newspaper in which articles, ballads and poetry agitated for an Irish Parliament that could better handle the crisis of The Famine than the British who did not have a first-hand look at—nor really cared to see—how the Irish peasant was suffering. Some published works in *The Nation* themselves perpetuated the myth of Ireland as woman, however. With "Tho' the Last Glimpse of Erin With Sorrow I See" from his collection of *Irish Melodies,* Thomas Moore expresses a romantic view of a feminine, golden-haired Ireland which will be defended by her sons:

And I'll gaze on thy gold hair as graceful as it wreathes,

And hang o'er thy soft harp, as wildly as it breathes;

Nor dread that the cold-hearted Saxon will tear

One chord from that harp, or one lock from that hair. (11)

In a profound irony, most of the peasant populace to whom the Young Irelanders appealed were too poor to purchase the newspaper. Some who did hear the poets' words were too weak from starvation to react as vehemently as the Young Irelanders had hoped. Although the paper grew in circulation from 12,000 to 250,000, becoming one of the most widely read among those able to do so, it was nevertheless suppressed in 1848 (Kinealy, *New* 166).

Regardless of its ill-fated intentions, *The Nation* proved to be the place where a woman's voice would at last be heard. Although her societal status as woman necessitated a pseudonymous authorship, in 1848 Jane Francesca Elgee wrote for *The Nation* alongside the Young Irelanders. Under the pen name Speranza, she encouraged the Irish to rise up as many European countries were doing at the time in a quest for liberation. These lines from her 1848 poem, published in *The Nation* as "Courage" then re-titled for publication in 1871 as "The Year of Revolutions," calls for the sad, Famine-stricken Irish people to strike out in similar rebellion as that which was occurring in Germany, Poland, and France:

Lift up your pale faces, ye children of sorrow,

The night passes on to a glorious tomorrow!

Hark! Hear you not sounding glad Liberty's paean,

From the Alps to the Isles of the tideless Aegean? (1-4)

Paradoxically, the masculinization caused by the country's starvation empowered Ireland as woman with the same patriarchal urges that she rebelled against when Britain first vanquished her. Binary politics translate into binary language. The images in the famine poetry published in *The Nation* and succeeding nationalist publications such as *The Irishman* were often vengeful, violent ones, urging peasants to brandish the sword, the spear and the staff, weapons that work nicely for poetic purposes but would not prove powerful against any enemy in the year 1848 (Morash, *Hungry* 28). This stanza from "The Eviction" by Michael Segrave for *The Irishman* appeals for revenge against the British "villain" who is responsible for torching the cottage of his beloved Kathleen—Mother Ireland—and causing her death. The masculine lines of the poem end in stressed syllables, and the images of conflagration, vengeance, and murder are indeed powerful ones:

> The people fly from hill and vale,
> While flames illuminate the sky,
> And learn grim oppression's tale
> With fiery vengeance in each eye;
> .....
> Oh, speak, Kathleen, my darling bright,
> My own adored Cushla-ma-chree!
> Ah, no, thy spirit's ta'en its flight!
> Revenge is all that's left to me.
> "Oh, patience, youth," a voice now spoke,
> 'To-night, at ten, we meet to try

> The villain who has dealt death's stroke,
>
> And by God's light he'll surely die! (Morash, *Hungry* 33-36, 41-48, 275n)

The British further believed that the moral character of the already shiftless Irish would be damaged more by offering charity to them. In his *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, originally published in 1798,[12] Cambridge political economist the Reverend Thomas Malthus theorized on the practicality of providing aid to the Irish with Poor Law relief. What follows are his comments on the subject appearing in the ninth edition of the work, published posthumously in 1888. The available Prefaces to the Second, Fifth and Sixth editions in 1803, 1817, and 1826, respectively, make no mention of Malthus's intent to revise from his original treatise the sentiment expressed in this excerpt from Chapter 4, "Plan of the gradual Abolition of the Poor-Laws proposed":

> If, as in Ireland . . . the people are in so degraded a state as to propagate their species without regard to consequences, it matters little whether they have poor-laws or not. Misery in all its various forms must be the predominant check to their increase. Poor-laws indeed will always tend to aggravate the evil by diminishing the general resources of the country,

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[12] Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, was originally published in 1798 but expanded for subsequent editions through the ninth edition in 1888. Malthus's philosophy about the relationship between poverty, population control, and natural resources in the form of a country's production, would form the foundation for British government attitudes towards Irish relief efforts. Those attitudes would later be supplemented by behaviorist interpretations about providential intervention, moral insufficiency and racial inferiority as causes for the Great Famine. See Kinealy; Gray.

> and in such a state of things can exist only for a very short time; but with or without them no stretch of human ingenuity and exertion can rescue the people from the most extreme poverty and wretchedness. (436)

This popularly-held political theory of laissez-faire, or government noninterference, espoused by Malthus would maintain the status quo of the Irish Poor Law of 1838 so that relief efforts would be funded from the local properties, with responsibility equally divided between landowner and tenant, reinforcing the prevailing belief that "Irish property should take care of Irish poverty" (Gray, "Irish" 2). Such a rigid attitude towards relief that did not adapt to the highly volatile economic circumstances of the day enabled the British government to effectively ignore the plight of the Irish people, by now starving for food.

With no crop and no means by which to pay their rent, the tenants were evicted from their small plots of land and sent into shelters known as "scalps." These were holes in the earth two or three feet deep with a roof of sticks and turf. Peasants had to beg for money for food or coffins for their family members. When the peasants rebelled against the food shortages, Sir Robert Peel pushed [ultimately unsuccessfully] for an Irish Coercion Bill which would establish martial law in a combative district. Again the poets of *The Nation* urged the Irish people to revolt against their oppressor. In an effort to encourage such insurgency, poets often invoked Ireland's mythical history not only of its warrior strength but also of its feminine bardic tradition. In his poem for *The Nation*, "Life and Land," co-editor Thomas D'Arcy McGee pleas for Ireland's countrymen to "make another stand—//Plant your flag upon the common soil—be your motto//Life and

Land!" (Morash, *Hungry* 49-51). The poet summons help for his compatriots from various mythical sources:

> From the charnel shore of Cleena to the sea-bridge of the Giant
> Let the sleeping souls awake—the supine rise self-reliant –
> . . . . . .
> Up, Mononia,[13] land of heroes, and bounteous mother of song –
> And Connaught, like thy rivers, come unto us swift and strong. (52-53, 55-56)

These words fell on deaf ears, unfortunately, because often the landlord had paid for the peasant to emigrate to North America or elsewhere just so the land could be transformed from those small plots to larger parcels for agricultural advancement. The land was barren not only of potato crop, but also of its sons and daughters due to both emigration and death by starvation. It has been said that the most concise explanation for Ireland's Famine was that it was a "convenient, 'natural' way to remove surplus mouths from land more profitable as pasture" (Lengel 2).

All the while that the Irish peasant was starving, the British were exporting Irish cattle, wool, flax, wheat and other crops to Britain, sometimes sharing space on the very ships on which the Irish peasant emigrated. But the British feared that the Irish would emigrate in large numbers to their own country so they did eventually enact various iterations of Poor Laws over the long years of The Famine. Initially the relief efforts

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[13] Cleena is the Anglicized version of Clidna, the goddess most associated with the harbor in southern County Cork (MacKillop 80); Mononia is the ancient name for Munster (Morash 287n).

mandated help only for the destitute who entered workhouses where projects consisted, in part, of installing roads that went nowhere. Despair and desperation drove many into those much-hated workhouses during the crisis years of 1845-48. The Irish Poor Law system was not established until 1838, with the first workhouses available in 1841 and the overall format was not completed until 1846 at the height of the catastrophe. As famine conditions worsened in 1846 and 1847, the influx into the workhouses increased to a point of massive overcrowding. (Kinealy, "Role" 104-122). In that workhouse living environment, many Irish developed famine fever and typhus transmitted through the unsanitary conditions and lice.

Over time, these workhouses became death camps with as many as 2,700 deaths per week (Cozzens 13). Burial pits were created outside into which bodies were dumped from wooden coffins with hinged bottoms so they could be re-used. For a people whose cultural identity is aligned with ceremonial wakes, these deaths went unacknowledged by religious ceremony or sacrament. Again, poetry served as a response to the horror. "The Boreen Side," James Tighe's 1849 poem for *The Irishman,* captures the economic deprivation of the people while cattle were being well-cared for and, most poignantly, it portrays the pain experienced by the famished Irish in not being able to wake their dead:

> A stripling, the last of his race, lies dead
> In a nook by the Boreen side.
> The rivulet runs by his board and his bed,
> Where he ate the green cresses and died.
> . . . . . .
> And there lies that youth on his damp cold bed,

> And the cattle have stall and straw,
>
> No kindred assemble to wail the lone dead –
>
> They perished by landlord law. (Morash, *Hungry* 1-4, 21-24, 275n)

Heretofore, the Irish had been labeled racially inferior, feminine, morally bereft, divinely cursed. Regardless of theory, however, "every one of [the British] saw Ireland as outsiders" (Edwards 1). Even if Ireland had chosen to comply with the Union, her children would be bastards because of the British belief in the impurity of her Celtic blood. As in the Victorian view of gender, Ireland as woman would always be different—never to be equal, forever to be mastered.

Although "few works of art and no architectural monuments" (Cozzens 13) were created during this horrific period of Irish history, The Famine is such a part of the Irish psyche that it is responsible, along with over seven hundred years of conquest of the island, for the melancholic tone and the nationalistic subject of much of its literature. According to Trinity College historian Terence Brown, the Great Famine is said to be responsible for the

> black-humour of so much of [Irish] literature, [Irish] moods of desperation, a sense of national incompletion, silence as the truest language having lost the national tongue, and of hunger as the defining appetite. (Morash, *Hungry* 13)

Adding to that sense is the apparent evolution of the Irish culture in the post-Famine years. By emphasizing a revitalization of its mythical past in the poetry of the Young Irelanders, and with the resurgence to come of the drama of the Celtic Twilight and its mother tongue with the Gaelic League, Ireland attempted to articulate a culture that was

different from that of its British colonizer. In doing so, it neglected one of the most significant characteristics of a colonized culture— that of its own feminization.

In the nationalistic era of the post-Famine Irish Literary Renaissance, heralded by the works of William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, writers invoked the same references to feminine Ireland as did the bards of ancient times, the poets of the Great Famine and, ironically, the very British conquerors who ravished Ireland to begin with. A conflation of woman and nation perpetuated the cultural repression that had already so overwhelmed the country.

Mining the Myth: Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats capture Cathleen

With the play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a collaborative effort of Anglo-Irish William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, Irish drama was established as a dominant force in that revitalization of cultural nationalism begun by the Young Irelanders. National independence from Britain, or Home Rule,[14] was foremost in the minds of many Irish citizens during the post-Famine years constituting the Irish Literary Renaissance at the

[14] See Bourke 390-3. Home Rule was the name given to the political struggle for emancipation from Britain, led by Anglo-Irish Charles Stewart Parnell and supported in Britain by Prime Minister William Gladstone. The Home Rule Bill advocated a Parliament in Dublin to govern Irish domestic policy, while international concerns would still be handled by Britain's Parliament. In 1886 Gladstone made the first attempt to persuade the British Parliament to pass a Home Rule Bill but was rejected, costing him his office. He regained it in 1892, and tried unsuccessfully to pass the Home Rule Bill through Parliament again in 1893. A third Home Rule Bill was passed in 1912, but never enacted.

turn of the twentieth century, when Yeats and Lady Gregory founded the Abbey Theatre in which *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was first performed.

In reaction to its colonization by Britain in stages starting from as early as the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1169 (Cahill 233), Ireland has repeatedly attempted to force out its imperialist rulers. One of the most noteworthy attempts was the 1798 Rebellion which involved support from a French force landing in rural western Ireland, memorialized in the "Sean Bhean Bhocht" song, cited in Chapter I of this analysis, and which serves as the setting of the play. At the time, both Irish and French troops surrendered to the British but the 1798 Uprising became a popular subject for political nationalists who hoped to instigate the Irish people to further action against British rule. Although Lady Gregory and Yeats intended their play to promote cultural nationalism by "organizing for a native population a sustaining image of itself, its uniqueness, and its dignity . . . [the] rescue of a dignified indigenous culture previously submerged by colonial culture," *Cathleen ni Houlihan* became a powerful force in the political nationalist movement as well, requiring police presence during the play's performances (Harrington x).

The ideas espoused by post-colonial critic Frantz Fanon in his earlier-cited speech were later incorporated into the "On National Culture" chapter from his renowned 1968 book, *The Wretched of the Earth.* He emphasizes that, in order for a true national consciousness to evolve, a national literature must evolve with it. According to Fanon, works of the native literati progress from those which mimic the canon so admired by the colonizer to prose and poetry of recrimination against the colonizer. The occupying power initially accepts these literary cries of protest because they actually help control

any possible insurgency on the part of the populace; allowing such angry sentiments to be stated in print actually ensures silence in the streets. Although the native writer begins the literary transformation by reproaching the colonizer in a forum and method acceptable to the colonizer, he inevitably moves toward direct contact with and involvement of his fellow natives. Once that threshold has been crossed, literature takes on the role of soldier in a national struggle. Fanon calls it "a literature of combat, in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation" (*Wretched* 172-3).

As a result, many of the traditional oral stories handed down from native generation to generation become modified and modernized to reflect the native newfound sense of cultural importance. By reclaiming his identity through the dignity of these stories and traditions, the native becomes invigorated towards a new nationalism. The storyteller figures prominently in that she or he becomes the repository of the new nationalism. Although the essence of the traditional story remains unchanged, characters, themes, and morals in these stories become transformed by the imagination of the storyteller and are generally reflective of a common people reaching forward, acting out, and rising up. Indeed, there is an unleashing of passion "at first imperceptibly, then almost savagely" ("Reciprocal"). This unity is threatening to the colonizer because it is in his interest to perpetuate the stultified, stereotypical image of the native as represented in the earliest manifestations of his culture, if only to maintain a controllable status quo.

Few writers of the fin de siècle took on "the oral tradition of stories, epics and songs of the people" (Fanon, *Wretched* 174) from the original language to create a national literature as did Lady Gregory and Yeats. Ironically, they took on the stories from the original language, but then rendered them in the language of the colonizer. As

Lady Gregory describes in her memoir, *Our Irish Theatre*, the authors' intent in writing *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was to "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" (qtd. in Harrington viii). In their effort to bring back honor and dignity to Ireland's cultural history, the authors endow Irish pre-colonial culture with a nobility that is in direct contradiction to the stereotype of the ignorant, bumbling Irishman[15] indifferent to history and culture, just as Lady Gregory expresses in her memoir. Fanon would support the authors' endeavor because of his belief that the reclamation of the native's identity through the dignity of his stories and traditions would invigorate him towards a new nationalism.

Utilizing the Celtic imagery of the sovereign goddess who transforms from a hag into a queen, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* invokes pagan myth as a call for action on the part of the Irish people against British colonization and its enticing materialism. Yeats's character, The Poor Old Woman, surreptitiously enters Peter and Bridget Gillane's home in Killala, a town in western Ireland that is part of the ancient Connacht province, on the day of the 1798 Uprising. As the play opens, the couple's son, Michael, is about to be married. The family is focusing on the bride-to-be's fortune, or dowry, of one hundred pounds that has to be "in Michael's hands" (4) before he can bring her into the house.

In an interpretation of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's work on tribal kinship, feminist literary critic Gayle Rubin explains: "the result of a gift of women [to men in

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[15] This stereotype refers to "the Stage Irishman" who fell into the categories of "lazy, inebriated buffoon …, ingratiating rogue," or "the braggart" (Fitz-Simon 28). The character was popularized in nineteenth-century Britain and the U.S..

marriage] is more profound than the result of other gift transactions, because the relationship thus established is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship" ("Traffic" 542). With this exchange of females as commodities, women have value only in their marketability as objects in the transfer of goods, whereas men become linked in a social system through their connection as partners in a reciprocal exchange of merchandise. A man gives his daughter in marriage to another man in return for another woman, a dowry of money, livestock, or other tangible assets. A kinship or social structure among men results from this exchange, wherein "the women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation" (543). Marriage is essential to maintain this kinship system and, within the structure of marriage, gender divides the sexes into economically identifiable roles requiring "obligatory heterosexuality and the constraint of female sexuality" (545). Because of the male's power in this marriage exchange, the female role is one of subordination.

That Ireland is considered a tribal culture is well-documented in social history. From the early Tuatha Dé Danaan people, ancestors of the Gaels who established Tara, the ritual throne and burial place for the ancient kings of Ireland, to the later tribes of Leinster, Munster, Ulster and Connacht, Ireland's culture has been close-knit (McManus 22). As noted Irish literary critic Seamus Deane reveals, the Irish "homeland was what Europe had been before the Romans conquered it—a place innocent of complex political, economic, and military structures, inhabited by a fierce, imaginative, poetic tribe" (Introduction 12). The notion of tribal kinship, marriage, and its connection to nationalism is on solid ancestral footing in Ireland. With her fecundity, woman became the economic commodity that was exchanged for use in reproducing the nation through

childbirth. Reflecting postcolonial critic Albert Memmi's belief expressed in his 1957 treatise, *The Colonizer and The Colonized*, that "as long as [the colonized] tolerates colonization, the only possible alternatives for the colonized are assimilation or petrifaction" (146), the Gillane family focuses their pre-nuptial discussion on the economic value of the bride and on the material goods that colonization has afforded them. Bridget's comments concern the clothes that Michael will wear for his wedding day:

> BRIDGET: Come over here, Peter, and look at Michael's wedding clothes.
>
> PETER: (*shifts his chair to table*). Those are grand clothes, indeed.
>
> BRIDGET: You hadn't clothes like that when you married me, and no coat to put on of a Sunday more than any other day.
>
> PETER: That is true, indeed. We never thought a son of our own would be wearing a suit of that sort for his wedding, or have so good a place to bring his wife to. (Yeats *Cathleen* 3)

With the British conquest and plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries until the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century, Irish women had no political rights, their inheritance rights were subject to English common law, and their role in society was one of submission to a male-dominated domesticity. Rural woman had an important economic, yet still submissive, role in farming chores such as milking cows, feeding cattle, reaping and setting seeds and even cutting turf (Ó Tuathaigh 26, 28). Responding to Peter's sarcastic remark directed at the trivial dowry he received when they married,

Bridget reminds him of their mutual poverty at that time. Her comments reflect women's restricted economic and social conditions under the colonizer:

> BRIDGET: Well, if I didn't bring much I didn't get much. What had you the day I married you but a flock of hens and you feeding them, and a few lambs and you driving them to the market at Ballina? . . . If I brought no fortune I worked it out in my bones, laying down the baby, Michael that is standing there now, on a stook of straw, while I dug the potatoes, and never asking big dresses or anything but to be working. (*Cathleen* 4-5)

Indeed, the family's delight in having increased their wealth and standard of living under the colonizer is so important that they pay little attention to the "old woman coming down the road" (4). In a manner of foreboding, Patrick reminds them that their neighbor mentioned "a strange woman that goes through the country whatever time there's a war or trouble coming" (4), but the family concentrates nevertheless on when Michael will arrive with the dowry:

> PETER: I hope he has brought Delia's fortune with him safe, for fear the people might go back on the bargain and I after making it. Trouble enough I had making it. (4)

Emphasizing the depersonalization of the bride's exchange as a market commodity, Peter refers to her family as "the people" instead of as named individuals. Too, the value of the bride is equated with her potential ability to bear a son—to reproduce the nation through childbirth—and that becomes part of the negotiations for the fortune:

> PETER: Yes, I made the bargain well for you, Michael. Old John Cahel would sooner have kept a share of this a while longer. "Let me keep the

> half of it until the first boy is born," says he. "You will not," says I. "Whether there is or is not a boy, the whole hundred pounds must be in Michael's hands before he brings your daughter to the house." (4)

Peter's and John Cahel's bartering provides further evidence of the kinship that is established between the men, whereas the bride-to-be, the commodity, has no such connection in the exchange. When questioned by Peter if the bride, Delia, "ask[ed] any of the money for her own use," the reply is:

> MICHAEL: She did not, indeed. She did not seem to take much notice of it, or to look at it at all. (5)

As literary critic Rubin suggests, "the women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation" (543), so Delia doesn't even pay attention to her commodification. Instead, she is supposed to be satisfied with having Michael, a "fine, strong, young man," to look at (5). The first inkling we have that this fine young man will rebel against the assimilation that Memmi notes as the fate of the colonized is Michael's remark that "The fortune only lasts for a while, but the woman will be there always" (5). However, that woman will not, in fact, be his bride. Rather, he will give himself to the woman who represents Ireland, the Sean Bhean Bhocht, the Poor Old Woman whom he sees "coming up the path" (6).

Initially the Old Woman's interruption is treated with the dismissive attitude typical of many societies' treatment of the elderly. Bridget suggests that she "might be some poor woman heard we were making ready for the wedding and came to look for her share" (6). Clearly, however, this Old Woman is not reminiscent of "everybody's poor old granny" (de Paor, *Portrait* 44). She arrives at the Gillanes' house with "her cloak

over her face," and remarks that others haven't traveled as far as she—from another world, perhaps—and yet she hasn't been welcome in homes where the attention has been concentrated on economic issues such as "shearing their sheep" (*Cathleen* 6). The Old Woman has endured hardship, "hard wind," and has gone tremendous distances to remind the Irish of their subjugation, but they have so readily assimilated into the colonizer's culture that they "wouldn't listen" (6).

Finding the Gillane family attentive to her presence, the Old Woman comments that her aged demeanor belies the youthful agitation she feels in her heart, reinforcing the duality of the Sean Bhean Bhocht as old woman/young maid. We are reminded once again by her dialogue with the Gillanes, shrouded in mystery like her cloak-covered countenance, that she is no ordinary Old Woman:

> OLD WOMAN: Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet, but there is no quiet in my heart. When the people see me quiet, they think old age has come on me and that all the stir has gone out of me. But when the trouble is on me, I must be talking to my friends. (7)

Emphasizing the problem she has with "too many strangers in the house," the strangers being the British and the house being Ireland, the Old Woman reinforces her significance to Irish nationalism by suggesting that the "trouble" involved "land that was taken from [her]" by those strangers:

> PETER: Was it much land they took from you?
>
> OLD WOMAN: My four beautiful green fields.[16] (7)

[16] Harrington notes these are the traditional four provinces of Ulster, Munster, Leinster, and Connacht.

The Old Woman sets a macabre tone at the gathering by "singing half to herself" an old Irish tune about "Donough that was hanged in Galway" (7). Yeats indicates in a note on his production that the song had come to one of the original cast members in a dream (7n), much like the aisling poems mentioned earlier. In a dedication to Lady Gregory of his *Plays for an Irish Theatre,* Yeats identifies the genesis of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* as having come to him in a dream as well:

> One night I had a dream almost as distinct as a vision, of a cottage where there was well-being and firelight and talk of a marriage, and into the midst of that cottage there came an Old Woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself, that Cathleen ni Houlihan for whom so many songs have been sung and about whom so many stories have been told and for whose sake so many have gone to their death. (Jeffares 121)

The aisling "dream-vision poem" reference and the witch-like appearance of the long-cloaked Old Woman reinforces the otherworldliness of the mythological figure of the poor old woman, the Sean Bhean Bhocht. Her "singing to herself" is also evocative of the *Sorcières* whom French literary critic Xavière Gauthier claimed

> sing [because] it's the capacity to listen to another kind of speech. They've wanted to make us believe that women didn't know how to talk, write, that they stammered, that they were mute. That's only because they wanted to force them to talk straight, with square words, with rectilinear sentences, within the orthodoxy. In reality, they sing lullabies, they howl, they

> spasmodicize, they murmur, they yell, they moan, they are quiet and even their silence is heard. (qtd. in Duras and Gauthier 192)[17]

Witches' songs and incantations call attention to the voicelessness of women in a patriarchal society. These forms of speech represent an exaggerated but effective way for women to gain some recognition in a male hierarchal environment. The Old Woman's crooning certainly gets the attention of the Gillane family.

We learn that the "Donough" of whom she sings was hanged "for love of [her]" and that "many a man has died for love of [her]" (*Cathleen* 8), but "with all the lovers that brought [her] their love, [she] never set out the bed for any" (9). This version, who Yeats labeled "Ireland herself," is more evocative of the mythological goddess who seduces lovers but takes no spouse than she is of the Great Mother goddess who nurtures the earth with her milk. Literary critic P.J. Keane reinforces this relationship between Cathleen ni Houlihan and the goddess: "One has only to remember Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan to realize that, for good or ill, the goddess is still with us in one avatar or another . . ." (1). The Old Woman's immortal goddess-like ability to travel between the supernatural and physical worlds connects her to the Gaelic "*Leanhaun sidhe* (Leanhaun Shee) or fairy mistress" whom Yeats identifies in his *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland* as:

> a spirit [who] seeks the love of men . . . . Her lovers waste away, for she lives on in their life. Most of the Gaelic poets, down to quite recent times, have had a Leanhaun Shee, for she gives inspiration to her slaves and is

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[17] The English translation for *Sorcières* is Sorceresses or Witches. Gauthier founded and co-edited the French journal *Sorcières* in 1976 and provides this linguistic explanation for the title (Duras and Gauthier 192).

> indeed the Gaelic muse—this malignant fairy. Her lovers, the Gaelic poets, died young. She grew restless, and carried them away to other worlds, for death does not destroy her power. (383)

In fact, Peter becomes so concerned about the Old Woman's state of mind that he suggests her "trouble has put her wits astray" (*Cathleen* 8). Bridget inquires if she is "right . . .? Or is she a woman from beyond the world?" (8). The family wants to offer the Old Woman sustenance in the form of milk and cake, or a "few pence or a shilling" with a "blessing, or [their] own luck will go" (8). In doing so, they express a concern that this Old Woman has the extrasensory ability to change their luck which, connected as it is with the monetary offering, might result in a devastating change to their material wealth. Yeats points here to the transitory nature of all worldly goods, and that in their assimilation, the Gillanes don't give a thought to the possibility that the Old Woman might want something different. What else could be more important than money? But the Old Woman insists that it is not "food or drink . . . or silver" she wants (8). Instead of material things, she proposes assistance of an intangible, ethereal—but everlasting—kind: "If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all" (8).

Having the power of the *Leanhaun Sidhe*, the Old Woman uses the "the touch" of the fairies to cast a spell on Michael (10). Despite entreaties from his mother and father to remember his upcoming marriage and "the girl coming into the house you have to welcome," Michael tells the Old Woman he will abandon his marriage and "go with [her]" (9) to get back her four fields. Invoking her pagan rather than Christian roots, the Old Woman reminds Michael that those who give her their all "will have no need of prayers" (10). Indeed, this Old Woman is prepared to carry Michael away to other worlds

just as the *Leanhaun Sidhe* does. At the end of the play, the Old Woman informs the family that "they that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid:

> They shall be remembered for ever,
>
> They shall be alive for ever,
>
> They shall be speaking for ever,
>
> The people shall hear them for ever. (10)

The ancestral authority of Cathleen ni Houlihan, the Poor Old Woman, Sean Bhean Bhocht or Cailleach, is in her ability to seduce to martyrdom the young men whose cheeks will turn from red to pale for her sake. It is her ability as a "femme fatale" that relates her to the "Triple Goddess at once creative and destructive, benevolent and malign, nurturing and devouring" (Keane 7). But in the patriarchal revision of pagan myths, the destructive, "devouring" aspect of the Triple Goddess such as Ériu, who appeared at times as a young maiden and at others as a long-beaked crow, "the dark bird of the dead," becomes the prominent theme (Neumann 164).

Yeats's Old Woman transforms into a young queen with the rejuvenation of blood sacrifice similar to that required by vampires. Michael forgets all about the clothes that he will be wearing to his wedding day because he "got the touch" (*Cathleen* 10), and follows the "Old Woman's voice" (11). Instead of acquiring the blushing red cheeks of a bridegroom, Michael will acquire "pale cheeks for [the Old Woman's] sake" (10). Instead of lying next to his bride in the warmth of the marital bed, Michael will lie alone in a cold, dark grave. "As blood-exacting queen, Cathleen ni Houlihan assumes the negative aspect of the Great Mother, a Celtic Kali . . . representing 'the insatiable hunger of the

many fecund and life-giving goddesses, whose energies must be constantly replenished and reinvigorated by blood sacrifice'" (Kinsley 145).

While *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is an extraordinarily nationalistic play that "required police to restore order, objections being that it offended Catholic morality by its portrayal of Ireland" (Kinealy, *New* 192), it was written primarily for Yeats's love interest, Maud Gonne, who was an actress, ardent republican activist, and starred as Cathleen in the initial performances of the play. As such, much of her influence is evident in the play, as is Yeats's desire to please her with the militant nature of the dialogue. According to Margaret Ward's biography, *Maud Gonne*, in one of their early encounters, Gonne expressed to Yeats an interest in acting in a play in Dublin. Enamored already of the beauty and high spiritedness of the actress, whose very first meeting would be described by Ward as when "the 'troubling' of Willie's [Yeats's] life had begun," Yeats volunteered to create *The Countess Cathleen* for her (25).

But it was Lady Gregory who introduced the theme of destructiveness of the Old Woman. She suggested the portrayal of Cathleen to mimic the "vampire legends of [Joseph Thomas Sheridan] Le Fanu and [Abraham (Bram)] Stoker" because of her concern that Maud Gonne was "preying on Yeats" (Merritt 1). Despite Lady Gregory's personal motivation in depicting Cathleen as devourer, the fin-de-siècle Victorians' fear of the powerful woman embodied in Gonne's activism threatened masculine culture. Gonne was Yeats's *Leanhaun Sidhe*, the Gaelic Muse who inspires yet destroys the poet at a young age.

Nowhere is the male fear-fantasy of the devouring goddess more symbolized than in the powerful pagan icon of the Gaelic "Sile na gCíoh" [the Irish spelling], Anglicized

as Sheela-na-gig, meaning "old hag of the breasts" ("Sheela-na-gig"). This figure appears as a stone carving on the exterior of many medieval churches and castles built before the sixteenth century around Ireland. One of the most notable examples appears in Ireland's Cavan County Museum and dates from around the late twelfth century. The Sheela-na-gig depicts a hag-like woman holding open her grotesquely large genitalia which reveal a cave-like womb entry. However, publications of the Royal Irish Academy in the mid nineteenth century label the carvings as "charms to keep off the evil eye . . . and stone idols of truly Eastern character" (Andersen 73), with no reference to their relationship to fertility or childbirth. In fact, it was only in the period of the 1930s that academia began connecting Sheela-na-gigs with fertility, perhaps because of the "familialism then being inscribed in the social policies of the new Irish state" . . . and "for the primary identification of women as mothers" (Mullin 36-7).[18] The Sheela-na-gig is also said to represent the Hindu goddess Kali whose interpretation varies between death goddess and "blissful goddess" (Monaghan, *New* 178). Although Kali requires blood sacrifice (usually from goats rather than people), she is still "one of India's most popular goddesses . . .

[18] Article 41.2 of the 1937 *Constitution of Ireland*, passed during Éamon de Valera's governance, stipulates that: "1… the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. 2. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home." (Ireland, *Bunreach*). To date, there have been repeated calls for a referendum on amending this Article. On 8 March 2017, the Irish *Journal* cited the fact that "Three different reports, as well as the 2013 Constitutional Convention and The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women called for an amendment of Article 41.2 of the Constitution to [abolish] or reform the clause" (Hosford).

because she offers a chance to face down [our] terror of annihilation. Once faced and understood, Kali frees her worshipers of all fear and becomes the most comforting of all goddesses."

Interestingly, the carvings began to be defaced or removed during the Victorian period (Keane 113n), when Anglo-Irish gothic writers such as Sheridan Le Fanu with his 1864 novel, *Carmilla*, and Bram Stoker, creator of the 1879 novel *Dracula,* were writing their vampire fiction, strong influences for Yeats and Lady Gregory in their development of *Cathleen ni Houlihan.* The removal reinforces the perceived threat their image posed to Victorian male sensibilities. In an ironic turn of iconic events, the Sheela-na-gig has been resurrected by contemporary Irish feminists as an assertion of their Otherness. Because of the Sheela-na-gig's pagan roots in goddess mythology, feminist critic Molly Mullin suggests that she signifies a continuity for the Irish woman and even permits the establishment of an "Irish feminist tradition . . . that entails a reversal of much more than a negative evaluation of the female body and sexuality. It also demands a revision of prevailing oppositions of the primitive and the modern, past and present, the Christian and the pagan" (40). Regardless of the exact origin and nature of Yeats's and Lady Gregory's Sean Bhean Bhocht figure, we know she was invoked from early Celtic myth for the purpose of eliciting a nationalist reaction on the part of Ireland's people.

A Conscience for Cathleen: James Joyce's Revisioning of Rosaleen

The nationalism that Yeats's Sean Bhean Bhocht encouraged, however, was based on a patriarchal, dichotomous, anti-colonial interpretation of Ireland as Mother—a

mother whose life force is capable of nurture as the beauty or destruction as the hag. It was Yeats's focus on this interpretation of Ireland through folklore and nationalist politics that engendered criticism from an upstart literary figure of the day, James Joyce. At age 20 to Yeats's age 37 when *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was performed in 1902, Joyce believed Yeats had passed his writing prime and had lost his poet's verve by creating in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* such a "little play" (Ellmann, *Joyce* 102). Joyce objected to Yeats's appeasement of Maud Gonne's nationalism as well as Lady Gregory's enchantment with folklore as evidenced in the peasant dialect she contributed to the play, and the Abbey Theatre's financial patroness, Annie Horniman. In his poem, "The Holy Office," published in 1905 as his earliest published work, Joyce refers to the three women as Yeats's "giddy dames" who "console" Yeats "when he whinges/With gold-embroidered Celtic fringes" (British Library). In the context of this poem and of Joyce's disdain for the revolutionary movement, "fringes" refers to the political fringe that Maud Gonne and her nationalist group, Daughters of Erin, represented (Keane 4)**.**

James Joyce admittedly rejected Yeats's portrayal of Ireland as mythical rose whose red, blood-soaked image kept Ireland paralyzed in the past. He believed Yeats and his fellow Celtic Revivalists did not have the creative consciousness to contemplate a green rose. As self-appointed visionary, Joyce held that Yeats was a "tiresome idiot" (Ellmann, *Letters* 147; *Joyce* 239) who relied too heavily on the ancient past and on Irish myth for his writing success—a "man of letters, theorizing when he should have been creating" (*Joyce* 596n). Joyce could not understand, nor could he accept, the image of a suffering, sad rose of Ireland waiting to be redeemed by the blood sacrifice of its sons, as James Clarence Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" continues:

O! the Erne shall run red

With redundance of blood,

The earth shall rock beneath our tread,

And flames warp hill and wood,

And gun-peal and slogan cry

Wake many a glen serene,

Ere you shall fade, ere you shall die,

My Dark Rosaleen

My own Rosaleen! (100)

Instead, James Joyce envisioned an Ireland that would allow an artist, namely himself, to reveal the country's harsh reality so that he could create a new conscience for its race. The word conscience originated circa 1225 through the Old French from the Latin, *conscientia*, meaning "knowledge within oneself, a moral sense" ("Conscience"). Joyce intended to scrutinize the morals of the Irish, developed from centuries of devotion to the dogma of a patriarchal Catholic religion and decades of domination by a militaristic British rule. As priestly poet, his scrutiny would exorcise the old and depict for the Irish people the possibility of a new moral order, free of the religious and poetic strictures imposed by "tiresome idiots." Through his vision, enhanced by both sensory compensation for his limited eyesight and subjective distance of his self-imposed exile in Europe, Ireland would be held up to the light of the artist's watchful, scrupulous gaze.

Still, unable to escape the anxiety of influence exerted by Yeats's dominance on the stage of early twentieth-century Irish cultural nationalism, Joyce would nevertheless incorporate the image of Yeats's Cathleen throughout his works, most notably in his short

story collection, *Dubliners,* and his novels *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake.* However, in those works, Joyce refashions the Sean Bhean Bhocht figure to fit his particular scornful view of Yeats's romantic idea of Irish nationalism. Ezra Pound, another self-exiled writer and champion of Joyce's works, reviewed *Dubliners* in 1914, after a decade of rejection of Joyce's stories by various publishers. That review not only buoys Joyce as an important writer but also emphasizes Joyce's contempt for the blood-exacting Sean Bhean Bhocht of Yeats's creation:

> It is surprising that Mr. Joyce is Irish. One is so tired of the Irish or "Celtic" imagination (or "phantasy" as I think they now call it) flopping about. Mr. Joyce does not flop about. He defines. He is not an institution for the promotion of Irish peasant industries. He accepts an international standard of prose writing and lives up to it. (28-9)

In one of Joyce's *Dubliner*s short stories, "Clay," considered a "boldly experimental story which has had much less than its due" (Parrinder 252), we detect reference to but re-imagining of the Sean Bhean Bhocht. Joyce's protagonist Maria embodies one of the life choices available to single women of post-Famine Ireland as "working celibate" (Kelly, J. 371). Joyce describes Maria as a "very, very small person indeed but she had a very long nose and a very long chin" ("Clay" 83). Her slight stature evokes the fairies of pagan lore whilst her long nose and chin remind the reader of a witch. Reinforcing Maria's liminal aspects of identity as a fairy or witch, the setting of the story is a celebration of All Hallows' Eve, more commonly known in Ireland as the pagan celebration of Samhain and in other parts of the world as Halloween, 31 October. "Ordinary time and space were disordered at Samhain. So a vigil had a special meaning

of keeping an eye of supernatural power day and night" (Ó Súilleabháin 85). Like the feast day of Imbolc for Brigit, Samhain was another transitional period of time and state in that it ended the farmer's year and brought on the dark winter. At Samhain, there had to be a feast with all its ballads, dancing, and joyful gathering of family and friends to portend good omens for the hard time to come.

In Ireland in particular, it was also a time when being alone on a dark road, particularly at a crossroad, would be considered under the realm of the *sidhe* and the dead. Because the date of Samhain represented the boundary between the human world and the Otherworld, "people tended to get together and be close to the fire and a scene of bustle and excitement to avoid the invasion of supernatural power or being led away from human world by supernatural beings." Samhain is a day of connection between Ireland's pagan ancestors and the Christian saints who are heralded on the following day, 1 November, All Saints' Day in the Christian calendar.

Various critical interpretations of Joyce's Maria, based on her name, description, and the story setting, include that of saint or Virgin Mary figure or witch.[19] But these perspectives focus on a patriarchal, stereotypical, even sneering, characterization of Maria as spinster. On the contrary, Maria is gainfully employed as a scullery maid in the convent *Dublin by Lamplight* Laundry, earning a modicum of financial autonomy without marriage: "how much better it was to be independent and have your own money in your pocket" ("Clay" 85), she admits. There is no sense in Joyce's story of the uncomplimentary old, haggard, worn-out witch. Instead, as Maria "stood before the mirror, she thought of how she used to dress for mass on Sunday morning when she was

[19] See Jackson and McGinley; Walzl; Parrinder; and Chace.

a young girl: and she looked with quaint affection at the diminutive body which she had so often adorned. In spite of its years she found it a nice tidy little body" (85). Like the Sean Bhean Bhocht or Cailleach, Maria can straddle the physical beauty of youth as the young maiden and the calendar demarcation of old age as the crone.

Within this timeframe of Samhain, when "by tradition, this is when the fairies travel" (Jackson and McGinley 89), Maria heads off from her convent job for a festive gathering at the home and family of Joe, an adult man whom she "nursed" or cared for as a child. We learn of Maria's significance as the "proper mother" of Joe and his brother Alphy, her charges as nursemaid. "'Mamma is mamma, but Maria is my proper mother,' Joe used often say" ("Clay" 84). As spinster, Maria nevertheless has a maternal role in their lives that is beyond the biological: as "proper" mother, she represents Ireland's procreation not in the physical sense but in the more intangible, ethereal sense of cultural creativity.

Indeed, using the spinster Maria as his voice, Joyce upends many of the Yeatsian romantic depictions of hearth and home. Although Maria is looking forward to celebrating Samhain with Joe and his family, she "hoped that Joe wouldn't come in drunk. He was so different when he took any drink" (84). Joyce had endured an alcoholic father who squandered the family's middle-class earnings, leaving his mother and a large brood of children dependent on others for subsistence. The family's poverty necessitated many household moves over short periods of time. Home life for him was marked by physical abuse: Joyce is said to have jumped on his father's back to prevent him from strangling his mother during a drunken rage (Ellmann, *Joyce* 41). When offered stout or wine at the family gathering, Maria "would rather [Joe and his wife] didn't ask her to

take anything, but Joe insisted." Joe asks his wife "to open some more stout" for him and later in the party Joe "made Maria take a glass of wine" ("Clay" 88). Joyce concludes "Clay" with reference to Joe's sloppy-drunk, teary-eyed reaction to Maria's singing "the old songs," a reaction so intense that "in the end he had to ask his wife to tell him where the corkscrew was" (89). In this, the very last line of his story's text, Joyce suggests the drinking will continue and Maria's fear of Joe's becoming "different" will almost certainly be realized. Joyce's realistic depiction of this family scene contradicts that of the heretofore romanticized notion of Irish domesticity. "The sense of his [Joyce's] family life as warm and tranquil . . . was disturbed for him by his father's irresponsibility" (Ellmann, *Joyce* 293). The violence, ridicule, and pain of isolation Joyce endured as a child provided Joyce with the moral light his *Dubliners* stories, including "Clay," shed on Irish society. Beneath the veneer of the dancing, singing, game-playing Samhain celebration at Joe's home is the spectre of drunkenness and chaos.

Along with the sharing of food and drink during the frivolity of the evening, Maria participates in playing the Hallows' Eve game that purportedly portends the future. The game's blindfolded participants each choose from an array of saucers containing either a prayer book for a life devoted to God, a ring which promises marriage, water that signifies a voyage or, lastly, clay which means death within a year. Sometimes there was a saucer with a coin connoting future financial comfort, but in Joyce's game no coin is proffered, "suggesting that there is no possibility for wealth for anyone" (Jackson and McGinley 92), perhaps referring to Joyce's own painful impoverishment. Again with an eye towards re-visioning romanticized family ideals, Joyce allows Maria the choice of clay [garden soil] even though that "item was often politely omitted" (Jackson and

McGinley 92n), with Joe's wife saying "something very cross to one of the next-door girls and [telling] her to throw it out at once; that was no play" ("Clay" 88). Joyce reminds us that the spinster in Irish society of the day faced the limited life choices symbolized in the Hallows' Eve game: becoming a nun, a wife, an emigrant—or else she dies.

But Maria "didn't want any ring or man either" (85), she emphasizes. On the tram as she travels to Joe's house in Drumcondra that evening, a "stout gentleman [with a] square red face and a greyish moustache" makes room for her while "none of the young men seemed to notice her . . . , [they] simply stared straight before them," almost in a trance (86). Joyce repeatedly presents his readers with contradiction: old and young, past and future, acknowledging Maria and ignoring her. Based on the tradition of Samhain, most feasting is confined to the home because only "the dead are out visiting" their former dwellings (Jackson and McGinley 89n). Maria is out visiting: her destination is the home she once shared as nursemaid to Joe and Alphy. Ginger Mooney, sub-matron of the *Laundry* "had the notions of a common woman," according to Maria, whereas she herself was not common. Maria is uncommon, "out of the ordinary, unusual" ("Uncommon"). Is she real after all or is she one of the undead, a figure straddling the earthly and otherworldly realms? Like the Sean Bhean Bhocht or Cailleach, Maria could well have had many lovers during many rejuvenations so she is not interested in marriage or the trappings and limitations of traditional Irish society.

Although Joe had asked Maria earlier to move in with his family, "she had become accustomed to the life of the laundry" ("Clay" 84) and preferred her independence. Even more than "accustomed," Maria, as representative spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht, even *likes*

her life at the *Laundry*. “She used to have such a bad opinion of Protestants but now she thought they were very nice people . . . Then she had her plants in the conservatory and she liked looking after them” (84). Through her characterization as spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht who is comfortable in her existence, who looks in the mirror and sees only herself in contradiction to the old superstition explaining that “a grown up girl puts an apple before the mirror and then she lights a candle. She combs her hair and while she is combing, she is supposed to see her future husband peeping over her shoulder (“Hallow Eve”), Joyce re-visions the stereotypical, patriarchal version of the role of the spinster. Maria is indeed the Sean Bhean Bhocht who lives in that liminal space between earth and the Otherworld but she is not the bloodthirsty, devouring, destructive figure of Yeats’s and Lady Gregory’s imagination. Joyce’s Maria as spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht does not choose the water because her ancestral home is Ireland; she does not choose the ring because she has no need for a husband having had so many lovers over her many rejuvenations. Even her initial choice of the clay, “material from which mankind is ultimately made” (Jackson and McGinley 94), is inconsequential for her because she is among the undead.

Reinforcing the pagan roots of the Sean Bhean Bhocht and the disdain Joyce held for the rigid Roman Catholicism of his Jesuit upbringing (Deane, "Joyce" 28), Maria states that “there was one thing she didn’t like and that was the tracts [religious posters and pamphlets] on the walls” (“Clay” 84). Those tracts included material from groups such as the “Association Incorporated for Discountenancing Vice” (Jackson and McGinley 89) whose intent was to proselytize to the young women who resided in the *Laundry*. When she realizes the mistake created by her initial choice of clay during the

Hallows' Eve game, Maria takes a do-over and ultimately picks the prayer book instead of the water or the ring. The Sean Bhean Bhocht or Cailleach is defined as "one who wears the veil" (*Gaelic*) and the evolution of her tradition includes a tenth century poem that describes her as an old woman who enters a nunnery with the memories of having been beloved by many kings (Bray 113). Joyce suggests this could well be the same fate for Maria. Just as the story of Brigit's cross involves the merging of pagan and Christian belief, this connection of the Cailleach to the nun is one that enabled the Irish to transition the Cailleach to the Christian faith.

Ultimately, however, Maria is unaffected as well by the choice of the prayer book since she is already living in a convent, but as a re-visioned Sean Bhean Bhocht: Joyce's Cailleach is an employee rather than a ward of the convent. Although she lives in the convent, the reader does not know for sure if Maria is chaste as the Virgin Mary or in some way fallen as Mary Magdalen since she is surrounded by the prostitutes of the *Dublin by Lamplight* Laundry, described by Joyce in a 13 November 1906 letter to his brother, Stanislaus, as "a wicked place full of wicked and lost women" (Ellmann, *Letters* 130).

In his effort to depict an authentic Dublin, Joyce chose for his story an actual Magdalen Laundry, located on Ballsbridge Terrace near the River Dodder in Dublin, founded in 1855[20] as a Church of Ireland institution (Luddy, *Prostitution* 81). Further elaborating on the *Laundry* in that same letter to Stanislaus, Joyce explains that it was run by "Protestant spinsters, widows, and childless women" with a name that he believed was a "gentle way of putting it" that these women "gather together for the good work of

[20] This date has been cited as 1856 by Smith (26).

washing my dirty shirts" (Ellmann, *Letters* 130). In "Clay," Maria vividly portrays the sheer number of women and the physical demands of their work in the *Laundry* with her comment that the women come in for tea "by twos and threes, wiping their steaming hands in their petticoats and pulling down the sleeves of their blouses over their red steaming arms" (84-85).

There can be no sincere discussion of the fear and contempt with which single women were treated by patriarchal Irish society and its patriarchal religion without acknowledgement of the proverbial elephant in Ireland's executive and ecclesiastical rooms. These Magdalen Laundries in Ireland have been in existence since 1765, first as a Protestant institution[21] (Ireland, An Roinn) such as the *Dublin by Lamplight* Laundry cited in "Clay." The focus and purpose of these early institutions was closely tied to women in prostitution or women regarded as in danger of falling into prostitution, including unmarried mothers. According to Maria Luddy's extensive study of the Laundries as related in "Magdalen Asylums in Ireland 1765-1922,"[22] and her book, *Prostitution in Ireland: 1800-1940*, there were at least forty-one asylums or refuges established in Ireland from the eighteenth century, with at least eighteen of them operating in Dublin and Dun Laoghaire (*Prostitution* 77). Some of these were considered lay asylums, some were religious institutions run by either Roman Catholic or Church of

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[21] The first known Magdalen Home was established in England in 1758 (Ireland, An Roinn).

[22] Paper submitted to the Inter-Departmental Committee, based on Luddy's prior published materials, towards *The Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries*, 5 February 2013 (Ireland, An Roinn).

Ireland administrations, but all were devoted to the "rescue and reclaim [of] fallen women." As a charitable body, the Laundry's very existence relied on donations primarily from other women who wanted to "elevate the fallen woman to an acceptable level of womanhood, to carry out her dutiful role in society without acknowledging her sexuality" (92). These women subscribers would promote the institution through fundraisers or gifted needlework items for resale, but especially through solicitation of items to be laundered. Luddy explains that up to forty percent of subscribers to the *Dublin by Lamplight* Laundry were other women and the laundry work was a substantial support for the future of the institution (106).

The *Laundry* women to whom Maria refers as "common" were undoubtedly "redeemable" rather than "hardened" since the Protestant asylums welcomed only those who could be re-fashioned into acceptable versions of womanhood. According to the *Dublin by Lamplight* promotional prospectus as published in *Dublin Charities,* 1902, the women admitted to the *Laundry* were "inmates . . . received from all parts of the country, or recommended by friends; others gathered in after midnight meetings . . .; [who] must conform to the rules of the house, and attend daily prayers" (qtd in Jackson and McGinley 89). The prospectus continues by stating that "not one per cent of those who leave return to their former evil life." However, the *Dublin by Lamplight* Laundry in fact had a very low success rate, determined by the number of women who returned to their former status as prostitute or other type of single woman outcast. In 1899, around the time Joyce would have experienced this institution, the failure rate was around seventy percent, not the one percent claimed in the *Laundry* prospectus, while the success rate was a mere thirteen percent, with the balance including residents at the home when the

statistics were produced (Luddy, *Prostitution* 91). These numbers suggest that the majority of women from *Dublin by Lamplight* reverted to their previous social status, which might account for Joyce's remark in his letter to Stanislaus that the *Laundry* was a "wicked place full of wicked and lost women" (Ellmann, *Letters* 130). In the early decades of the twentieth century, most Protestant Laundries were closing (Smith xiv) but *Dublin by Lamplight* held on at least until 1911 when records show it with only 21 residents (Luddy, *Prostitution* 81). As to Catholic-run Laundries, no new ones were opened after establishment of the Free State in 1922 but admissions totaled 10,012 women from 1922 until 1996 when the last Laundry was closed (Smith xviii).

Generally the women in these Laundries experienced much better nutrition and self-care, but they were deprived of any sense of agency in that choices were made for rather than by themselves. They were infantilized by the maternalism of the hierarchy; indeed, they were called children by the mothers of the respective religious order that managed the institution, and had their birth names replaced by that of numbers or saints in an effort to eradicate their past lives. Daily routine consisted of prayer focused on repentance for their condition, labor involving needlework or laundry, some recreational activities, and a good deal of silence. "I thought I would go mad from the silence," one Laundry survivor admitted.[23]

Called "Maggies" by the general public, the young women's identities were inextricably linked to that of Mary Magdalen whose own identity was equated with sin

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[23] Taoiseach Enda Kenny met with many Magdalen Laundry survivors after release of *The Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to Establish the Facts of State Involvement with the Magdalen Laundries* on 5 February 2013 (Ireland, An Roinn).

through *The Bible*'s Gospel of Luke 7 (*King James Version*). During Gregory the Great's papacy from c.575-604, Mary Magdalen's reputation as repentant sinner would become fixed for all of Ireland as part of Western Church doctrine. Until the sixteenth century, ecclesiastical teaching conflated the three biblical Marys as one Christian figure: the Mary who anointed Jesus's feet; the Mary from whom Jesus had driven out seven evils and who witnessed his ascension; and the female [sexual] sinner whose tears washed Jesus's feet and whose hair dried them, all became one penitent Mary Magdalen (Cartwright 84; Maisch 44). Despite the fact that most of the female residents of the Magdalen Laundries had no similar back story as the composite Mary Magdalen, they were nevertheless branded with this pejorative nomenclature. Maggies were indoctrinated daily in the ways of repentance for sin. The bleach that infiltrated their lungs would serve the dual purpose of wiping away the stains imbedded in both the shirts and their souls.

Most Maggies toiled in restrictive, cold, unhealthy, demeaning environments for months, years, and decades on end, their labor exploited with no salary or pension benefits to come. Indeed, these were the "wicked place[s]" of Joyce's description. However, the *Dublin by Lamplight* Laundry of Joyce's day did offer money to some women to emigrate and provided a proportional stipend for some women who worked in the *Laundry* for approximately three years, had not been dismissed for cause, and had not left voluntarily within that time period (Luddy, *Prostitution* 87). But that policy was an exception rather than a rule for the Maggies, fourteen percent of whom stayed in the Laundries more than five years, and eight percent more than a decade. Many hundreds checked into the facilities repeatedly for short periods, reflecting their poverty and the Irish state's inadequate facilities for women needing a home (Ireland, An Roinn).

Although the last Laundry closed in Ireland in 1996, sadly it took pressure from a nonprofit social justice group, Justice for Magdalenes,[24] for The United Nations Committee on Torture to examine the labor exploitation of the Maggies as recently as 2011. The Committee rejected the Irish government's reaction that it bore no responsibility for the conditions because Magdalen Laundries were privately run, and ordered an independent study which concluded that there was considerable state involvement in the Laundries after all. The finalized study from Ireland's An Roinn Dli Agus Cirt Agus Comhionannais (Department of Justice and Equality), the *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries*, appeared on 5 February 2013. The Maggies were essentially enslaved in the Laundries by their own families, church and government, just as the Irish people of Cathleen's time, Maria's time, were wards of the British state, often with collusion from those who bore allegiance to Britain for economic, religious, or social reasons.

The *Report* focused on ten major Laundries in existence from the founding of the Irish State in 1922 through the closing of the last Laundry in 1996, although it did provide an overview of Laundry history prior to 1922. That overview relied chiefly on research published in Maria Luddy's works cited earlier, "Magdalen Asylums in Ireland

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[24] Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) was formed in 2003: "i) to bring about an official apology from the Irish State, and ii) for the establishment of a compensation scheme for all Magdalene survivors" After the *Report* results appeared in 2013, the group morphed into Justice for Magdalenes Research (JFMR) to provide education for the general public and support for the Magdalen survivors.

1765-1922" and *Prostitution in Ireland 1800-1940* as well as James M. Smith's *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*. Within the studied Laundries, twenty-seven percent of the women were ordered into the facilities by an array of state employees: judges, probation officers, school truancy officials, social workers, doctors at psychiatric hospitals, or officials at state-funded shelters for unwed mothers and their babies. Some sixteen percent entered laundries voluntarily, eleven percent were consigned there by other family members, and nine percent were sent there on the recommendation of a priest. The *Report* found that until recent decades, judges often ordered women guilty of crimes ranging from shoplifting to infanticide into the Laundries rather than Ireland's male-dominated prison system.

Many nuns were complicit in the degradation of the Maggies; they assumed the young girls were there because they were "fallen women" or had otherwise succumbed to the sins of the flesh or of one of the other seven demons for which the conflated Mary Magdalen repented. The women needed to repair their relationship with God and the only way to succeed in doing so was through hard work and prayer. Like the blood that Mary Magdalen wiped from Christ's body and like the crucifixion itself, the women's stories are like a dark stain onto Irish society for its treatment of these young single girls.

In July 2013, following release of the *Report*, Bill Donohue, President of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, authored the League booklet, *Myths of the Magdalen Laundries,* which refutes not so much the results of the *Report* but rather the media firestorm that prompted the study to begin with. Donohue claims that the nuns provided a useful service by sheltering those "delinquent" young women, and that "drudgery is not torture," so restitution was not warranted. However, then-Taoiseach

Enda Kenny saw fit to publicly acknowledge the State's lack of oversight of the Laundries' adherence to labor laws and human rights. In an Address to the Parliament of Ireland, Dáil Éireann, on 19 February 2013, a full two weeks after the release of the *Report*, Kenny declared that "the State itself was directly involved in over a quarter of all admissions to the Magdalene Laundries. Be it through the social services, reformatories, psychiatric institutions, county homes, the prison and probation service, and industrial schools." For the State's role in the Laundries he pledged taxpayer support for the surviving women. It took a decade to arrive at that point, but the Justice for Magdalenes group had finally achieved its primary goals.

What must have proved even more meaningful to the survivors of these institutions was the Taoiseach's reflection on the symbolism surrounding the Laundries' impact on Irish national identity. His Address continued:

> The Magdalene laundries have cast a long shadow over Irish life over our sense of who we are . . . . As I read this Report and as I listened to these women, it struck me that for generations Ireland had created a particular portrait of itself as a good living, God-fearing nation. Through this and other reports we know this flattering self-portrait to be fictitious . . . . Yes, by any standards it was a cruel, pitiless Ireland distinctly lacking in a quality of mercy. That much is clear, both from the ages of the Report, and from the stories of the women I met. As I sat with these women as they told their stories it was clear that while every woman's story was different each of them shared a particular experience of a particular Ireland judgemental, intolerant, petty, and prim.

Despite his visionary talent, even James Joyce could not have foreseen the eventual magnitude of his choice of setting or that, ironically, his *Dublin by Lamplight* Laundry filled with its defiled women would later become part of a subject so scrutinized and defiled itself. This irony fits nicely into the goal Joyce expresses in a 5 May 1906 letter to his publisher, Grant Richards, that with *Dubliners* he intended "to write a chapter of the moral history of my country [with] Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis" (Ellmann, *Letters* 83). The paralysis embodied in the powerlessness of the Maggies proved a perfect perspective through which Joyce could hold up his mirror to the hypocrisy of Yeats's romantic version of nationalism and the Church's rigid moralism.

Irish literary critic Seamus Deane is among many who acknowledge that Joyce objected to the "folkish, even folksy, elements of the Irish Revival, [but that] he is himself a dominant figure in that movement" ("Joyce" 34). Both Yeats and Joyce wanted to re-fashion the national character but where Yeats was "aristocratic and demanded distinctions between men; Joyce was all for removing them" (Ellmann, *Joyce* 5). Where Yeats presented a romantic view of the rural Irish peasant and their "site of origin," as Irish professor and theater critic Nicholas Grene defines the Irish west (*Politics* 25), Joyce believed Yeats conjured up these caricatured images from his perch as Anglo-Irish aristocracy. Instead, Joyce wanted to compose his "moral history" by using the microcosm that was Dublin, "the world's second-oldest city," (Deane, "Joyce" 38) but one that "had not been presented, or represented to the world" (36)

In his reaction to Joyce's works, Ezra Pound suggests that, though Joyce "gives Dublin as it presumably is" (29), *Dubliners* is not about Irish life. Instead, Pound

proposes that Joyce gives people and things that are applicable to any city; they are depictions of and for the Everyman. If we replace some of the local names, places, and some historical events, Pound proposes, Joyce's work could identify anyone's city or hometown, family member or neighbor. In actuality, based on Joyce's own letters in particular to his brother, Stanislaus, Pound's assessment of Joyce's literary intent is inaccurate. As he did with the naming of *Dublin by Lamplight* Laundry as well as characters in "Clay" and his other works that were based on family members or actual acquaintances, Joyce makes it a point to incorporate real Dublin, real Ireland, with all its institutional flaws and its mire in the mythological. Joyce purposely sets out to be the "conscience in the soul of this wretched race" (Ellmann, *Letters*, 204) by scrutinizing Dublin not as an Everyman town; rather, he examines Dublin for its uniquely Irish nature. Of course, any reader is free to interpret Joyce's meaning beyond what the writer himself insists was his intent, but it is clear from the voluminous documentation about Joyce and his desire to write the "moral history of his race" that he set his sights on the Irish and the Dublin Irish in particular.

Through his examination of the "urban man of no importance, [Joyce] was the first to endow him with heroic consequence" (*Joyce* 5). Maria proves to be an example. As self-described dualistic priestly poet, Joyce expresses as well the dualistic characteristics of Maria as the Sean Bhean Bhocht. On the surface, Maria leads a sterile, "paralyzed" existence like the rest of Joyce's Dubliners. But Joyce's Maria maintains her independence throughout the story, an independence that is coveted by Joyce as the "freedom and integrity of the artist" (Deane, "Joyce" 34). Especially in his later literature such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce describes his art as an embryonic

creation: “the phenomenon of artistic conception, artistic gestation and artistic reproduction (V 1268-71, 184). In a 21 August 1912 letter to his wife, Nora, Joyce elaborates on this image by referring to his creation of *Portrait* as “the child which I have carried for years and years in the womb of the imagination as you carried in your womb the children you love . . . . I had fed it day after day out of my brain and my memory . . .” (Ellmann, *Letters* 202-3). For Joyce, the artist is considered to be “like the God of the creation” (*Portrait* V 1467, 189). But in Joyce’s mind that “God” is both male and female, a “goddess” (Ellmann, *Joyce* 296).

Spinster Maria is representative of the goddess who is capable of cultural rather than biological creation. In fact, Joyce prefers the cultural to the biological creator as evidenced in his conflicted feelings towards his own mother: “When Joyce's mother appeared in his fiction it was always in an ashen and punitive disguise. ‘With thy bitter milk thou has suckled me,’ Stephen Dedalus says, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*” (O’Brien, *Passion’s*). Instead, Maria is the “proper mother” of Joe and his brother Alphy (“Clay” 84), whose contribution to nationalism is the same independence that Joyce requires to become the conscience of his country. To emphasize his belief in the superiority of cultural over biological creation, Joyce invokes the archaic poetic apostrophe in an almost biblical linguistic sense when referring to Stephen’s composition of his villanelle in *Portrait*: “O! In the virgin womb of the imagination the word was made flesh” (V. 1543-44, 191). Clearly Joyce envisions himself through Stephen as goddess-like, capable of giving birth through divine, supernatural means.

Like Joyce himself or Yeats’s *Cathleen*, Maria is no ordinary mortal. However, unlike the Sean Bhean Bhocht of Yeats’s play, she promotes Irish nationalism not

through requiring blood sacrifice to a traditional muscular nationalism characterized by virility and warfare and one which Joyce the pacifist decried (Deane, "Joyce" 36). Instead, like Joyce, her contribution is as a “veritable peace-maker” (Joyce, "Clay" 83). Joyce rebelled against the “grosser forms of nationalism” (Ellmann, *Joyce* 66), believing that Ireland suffered under two foreign masters: Britain and Italy. As a “foreign institution which operates as a political system, disguised as a spiritual one” (Deane, "Joyce" 40), the latter, the Roman Catholic Church, was a more odious ruler because it stole Ireland’s soul. Joyce’s responsibility was to regain that soul through his art and through the independence of self-exile from both country and Catholicism. He was able to express the “unflinching realism” of his literature (Deane, "Joyce" 17) from a safeguarded self-exiled distance in foreign lands. As the “proper mother” of his creativity, Maria, too, straddles the worlds of near and afar. Unlike the women paralyzed by life in the *Laundry*, she operates from the in-between as Joyce does by living overseas but keeping Dublin and Ireland itself in all of his life’s writing.

Through her depiction as spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht, Maria embodies Joyce’s conflict with the Church. The action of the story takes place on Samhain. Will Maria attend mass the next morning, on All Saints’ Day? We are not told. Maria thinks the Protestants who run the *Laundry* are “nice” people after all. Despite her religious upbringing, it is the tracts on the walls of the *Laundry* that is the one thing she doesn’t like. In chatting over the good old days of Joe’s youth, Maria tries to put her peace-making skills to use by suggesting he patch things up with his brother, Alphy, since they had been arguing lately. Joe exclaims that if he ever “spoke a word to his brother again,

God might strike him stone dead" (Joyce, "Clay" 92). In Joyce's pen, this is not a beneficent God.

Joyce's repudiation of the Catholic Church throughout his literary career would provide a foundation for the second Irish Literary Renaissance in the latter half of the twentieth century. It would allow writers such as Edna O'Brien, self-exiled like Joyce, to question from afar the rigid doctrines of the Church that Joyce believed ruled the country. O'Brien would be so influenced by Joyce's work that she would go on to write his biography. Indeed, Joyce's treatment of Maria as dualistic Sean Bhean Bhocht who bestrides motherhood and spinsterhood, paganism and Catholicism, mortality and immortality, would show up in O'Brien's revealing portrait of another subjugated class of Irish womanhood: that of the nun.

CHAPTER III. IMMACULATE MISCONCEPTIONS: THE SPINSTER, SEX AND SELF-GOVERNMENT

Converting Cathleen: The Nun and National Mores

> Uninvited guests . . . should be received in the parlor, not given the run of the house.
>
> —Sister Sandra M. Schneiders, Professor emerita of New Testament and Spirituality, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, California

In a nation whose identity is so linked with Catholicism, the function of the nun in social order has no equal, as Jesuit-educated James Joyce well knew. The nun's reputation as a throwaway, as described below, belies the significance of her responsibility as sculptor of young women's minds in the creation of chaste and virtuous Irish citizens:

> the problem of disposing of surplus daughters was solved [by putting] them in convents . . . A moderate-sized family might easily have as many as five or six daughters, and five or six dowries depleted almost any estate. The usual solution was to put aside dowries for the eldest or prettiest girls and pack the rest off to a convent boarding-school in the hope that they would develop a taste for the monastic life. (O'Faolain 270)

During the nineteenth century, the number of women joining convents soared; between the years 1801 and 1901, the number of nuns in Ireland increased from 120 to over 8,000 (Innes 120), partly due to the glorification of the Virgin Mary. In 1854, the Catholic Church "gave the Immaculate Conception the status of dogma" (Kristeva 139). In doing so, the Church assured Mary a unique place of perfection as to have avoided all connection with the symbols of flesh—men and sex. Although the male hierarchy of the

Catholic Church balked initially at relinquishing any power at all to the nuns, they acquiesced when they designated responsibility for subordinate roles as in education, nursing, and charitable work to the religious women.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of nuns rose to twice that of priests and seven times that of men in religious orders (Innes 120). The convent existed as a society itself within larger society. Class strata were identifiable by the positions nuns held in their respective orders. Some sisters who arrived with large dowries from wealthy families took higher vows, wore garments that identified them with the governing class in the convent whereas novices who came from poorer families became the lay sisters whose situation of birth did not convey honor or high position. They became the invisible, servant, class within the convent, "roughly analogous to that of women as a group in the larger society" (Clear 131). Despite their large numbers and the significant work they did in Irish society, nuns were almost nonexistent in Irish history or literature during the same period.

Within the strictures of the dominant patriarchal culture, a woman's life choice was overshadowed by the cult of the Virgin Mary, or Madonna myth, and the Magdalen myth. She could strive to reach the standard set by the virgin mother of Jesus, or she could "fall" into the role of temptress as Eve and Mary Magdalen had. In the Judeo-Christian faith's creation myth espoused in *The Bible*'s Genesis, Eve's disobedience is the reason for man's downfall. If she had not defied authority by eating the forbidden apple, man would be living in Paradise. In its symbolic feminine role, the Irish internalized that evil, as evidenced in the ancient poem "Eve's Lament":

I am Eve, great Adam's wife,

Tis I that outraged Jesus of old;

Tis I that robbed my children of Heaven,

By right 'tis I that should have gone upon the cross.

. . . . . .

There would be no ice in any place,

There would be no glistening windy winter,

There would be no hell, there would be no sorrow,

There would be no fear, if it were not for me. (Meyer 34)

Because of her responsibility in the fall of man, woman has historically been identified with the evil of sexuality and temptation. In order to achieve salvation, women must "renounce their sexuality . . . because sex and spirituality have become polar opposites in Christian teaching" (Arias 1). With the coming of Christianity to Ireland, the strong, decisive, self-confident goddess such as Brigit was supplanted by the widow, the hag, the Virgin Mary-moral colleen, the nun, or the self-sacrificing martyr-mother. According to feminist critic Julia Kristeva, "a woman has only two choices: either to experience herself in sex *hyperabstractly* . . . as to make herself worthy of divine grace and assimilation to the symbolic order, or else to experience herself as *different*, other, fallen . . ." (142).

Both standards required of women a self-disgust, and belief that in the female, flesh is inherently sinful. No woman can achieve the sublime state of equality with the Virgin Mary unless she rejects her sexuality. As convent-educated feminist critic Marina Warner so succinctly describes in her observations about the Madonna role, "By setting up an impossible ideal the cult of the Virgin does drive the adherent into a position of

acknowledged and hopeless yearning and inferiority" (337). And any woman who succumbs to the sexual commodification that is characteristic of the Magdalen role accedes to being a sinner to be loathed and mistrusted by both society and herself.

Ironically, it is in the position of nun that an Irish woman is able to gain a degree of independence from both myths. Although she exchanges sexual independence for dependence on the orthodoxy of the patriarchal Church, she can control nevertheless the most fundamental aspect of her being—her body. As with holy women of medieval times such as Saint Catherine of Siena or Saint Teresa of Avila who starved themselves to reach a more spiritual state, "the suppression of physical urges and basic feelings . . . frees the body to achieve heroic feats" (Arias 2). The nun is not compelled by Church doctrine to reproduce, nor does she permit herself to act on sexual urges that might result in a commodified life as temptress. Kristeva emphasizes this point by stating:

> an actual woman worthy of the feminine ideal embodied in inaccessible perfection by the Virgin could not be anything other than a nun or a martyr; if married, she would have to lead a life that would free her from her "earthly" condition by confining her to the uttermost sphere of sublimation, alienated from her own body. (149)

Symbolically the nun is married to Christ and wears a wedding band as signifier of her betrothal to Him. But because of Mary's impregnation by the Holy Spirit, the nun never needs to consummate a physical relationship. Thus she remains a spinster whose state "is a typical Christian conundrum, oppressive and liberating at once, founded in contempt for, yet inspiring respect for, the female sex . . ." (Warner 77). Most nuns achieved that respect and high status in society because of their obvious close connection

with the myth of the Virgin Mary, and rejection of the Magdalen myth. Consequently, they claim an important vantage point, primarily as teachers or counselors, from which to promote Irish nationalism. That support usually takes the form of preparing young girls for life as pure and chaste followers of the Madonna myth, wherein they will reproduce the nation and maintain their homes and families in traditional fashion as dictated by the male-dominated Church and State. Or, the nuns could use their positions to encourage emulation of their own choice for a religious life, which represents complete independence from a life of the flesh.

One of the most underrepresented—and fascinating—versions of Irish history involves the transformation of Mother Ireland's image from that of the sovereign Queen and the autonomous goddess Brigit to its association with the Virgin Mary as Mater Dolorosa, or suffering, plaintive, mother. In Anne Crilly's seminal 1988 film, *Mother Ireland*, Crilly provides a unique overview of the origin of Ireland as female and as mother. The film traces Ireland's history of strong, dominant women recorded in the myths of Queen Maeve and details their transformation through colonization by Great Britain and reshaping by the Church. The subjugation of Ireland as country is thus inextricably linked with the subjugation of its women, according to the many influential Irish women interviewed in the film. Journalist Nell McCafferty; filmmaker Pat Murphy; members of the 1914 republican paramilitary organization, Cumann Na mBan; activist and former MP Bernadette Devlin McAliskey; Secretary of Sinn Fein, Rita O'Hare; IRA activist Mairead Farrell, murdered in Gibraltar five days after the film's completion (Crilly, "Banning")—each in turn reinforces the position that post-colonial and feminist

discussions must be joined in the effort to deconstruct Ireland's past and reconstruct its future.

Renowned Irish historian Dr. Margaret MacCurtain OP explains in the film that the Virgin Mary became synonymous with Mother Ireland during the devastating Great Famine, and that image dominated the people's self-perception for decades. Until that overwhelming tragedy, the Irish had not experienced "a punishing God"; as a result, the universal psyche became more "somber, passive, subservient, and sorrowful."

The religious connection to The Famine was reinforced politically by the head of the British Treasury, Charles Trevelyan, who was in charge of all the Irish relief efforts. He suggested that it was divine providence that caused the failure of the potato crop. After so many years of famine and so many deaths, the Irish internalized Trevelyan's explanation for the Great Famine. Initially they looked to their faith for solace and answers to the silence of response from the Irish landscape, represented by the desperate mother who cannot sustain or protect her children.

An image of individual suffering like Mary's dominated poetry of the period, as discussed earlier in this analysis. "The Dying Mother's Lament" written by John Keegan in 1845 is a heart-wrenching narrative about a mother's mourning. She cries to God and to the Blessed Mother —because she has "felt a mother's misery" (18)—to tell them that she cannot endure "To see my ghastly babies—my babes so meek and fair—//To see them huddled in that ditch like wild beasts in their lair" (13-15). The mother begs God to stop the rain and howling wind of the terrible night so that her children can rest before beginning another day of wandering, searching for food. But God has forsaken this

mother and her babies: she must sacrifice just as Mary did in surrendering her only son. In the last lines of the poem, Keegan writes:

> God did not hush that piercing wind, nor brighten that dark sky;
> But when that ghastly winter's dawn its sickly radiance shed,
> The mother and her wretched babes lay stiffened, grim, and dead!
> (Morash, *Hungry* 22-24)

The suffering of Mary and of Christ himself was equated with the suffering of the Irish people. It was God's will—and indeed His benevolence —that brought The Famine unto Ireland. The Irish needed to accept, even embrace, the suffering in order to achieve a Resurrection like that of Christ or an Assumption like that of Mary. Over time, this image of Mary being lifted to Heaven became conflated with Ireland as a nation rising again (Innes 24).

As a consequence of Mary's influence on Irish nationalism after The Famine, the nun—a woman who loves her country yet chooses to reproduce it with cultural and spiritual creativity rather than by bearing its children —occupied a unique and exalted place in Irish history. It may seem incongruous that the religious woman who adhered to both the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (1854), which confirmed Mary's asexuality, and the doctrine of Papal Infallibility (1870), which reinforced a patriarchal Catholic hierarchy (Innes 38), could plausibly represent a significant cultural contribution to Irish nationalism. However, the nun has proved herself a valuable thread in that "quilt of many patches and colors" (Kiberd 653) that women have historically sewn towards a unified yet heterogeneous country of Ireland**.**

Because of the economic conditions caused by The Famine, the transfer of land was restricted to the oldest son in a family. There was also a dowry system which limited marriage generally to one daughter in a family. That system, coupled with the adoration afforded the Virgin Mary, encouraged the other daughters to maintain chastity and self-sacrifice. Convent life as mythologized in the hagiographies of Brigit became an attractive alternative to domestic service, which had replaced agricultural labor and spinning as the primary employers of women's work after The Famine (Innes 39). "In the religious and sexual systems of the Irish in particular, chastity within the church was valued above marriage or motherhood" (Fitzgerald 5).

In direct opposition to the characterization of the Irishman as a "lazy, inebriated buffoon" (Fitz-Simon 28), nuns reinforced the cultural strength of the Irish through education and charity. Eighty-four percent of convents in Ireland ran schools by 1864, which had a direct and central influence on nationalism by reproducing Irish culture and reducing reliance on British national schools or British aid (Clear 105). Convents became a source of incomparable public influence and power for post-Famine Irish women, mimicking the sovereignty and exalted place of Brigit in Irish society.

Indeed, Ireland's Sisters of Mercy, founded in 1831 and the largest order of nuns in the country, "was established as an autonomous unit with its own governance structure . . . . They were not a unitary Congregation and did not have any central authority . . . . The Sisters of Mercy were organizationally a large number of separate Communities that were united only by heir adherence to the same discipline and Rule. According to the 1926 edition of the Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy:

> The Sisters admitted to this Religious Congregation, besides attending particularly to their own perfection, which is the principal end of all Religious Institutes, should also have in view what is the peculiar characteristic of this Congregation: i.e., the most assiduous application to the Education of poor Girls, the Visitation of the Sick and the Protection of poor Women of good character. In undertaking this arduous but meritorious duty of instructing the Poor, the Sisters whom God has vouchsafed to call to this state of perfection should animate their zeal and fervor by the example of their Divine Master, Jesus Christ, who has testified on all occasions a tender love for the Poor, and has declared that he would consider as done to Himself whatever should be done unto them. (Ireland, CICA, 235)

Regardless of the reality of their powerful position, Irish nuns developed a reputation in international opinion for voicelessness and vulnerability. Like prostitutes, they were considered by many to be "cultural deviant[s]" because they chose—or were forced by economic necessity—not to be defined by a male head-of-household. Their independence from a particular man, whether father, brother, husband or other male, made nuns 'literally incomprehensible as women'" (Clear 27). Although Jesus and the Pope were their titular masters, they vowed allegiance to other women, their autonomous order, rather than to men.

Partly because of their distance from earthly stricture, and partly because they believed themselves deserving of retribution for Eve's original sin—after all, they were responsible for "the first act of disobedience" against God (Cusack 81) —nuns

acquiesced to the requisite humility and subservience of penance. This acceptance of a patriarchy-bestowed collective guilt put the nun at odds with her fellow females. How could they respect her and hold her to the heretofore exalted position when she succumbed to the same restrictions from a "Master" as mother and wife in Irish society?

As a result, within a subsequent postcolonial and feminist context, the nun became fair game for scrutiny of position. During Ireland's later iterations of the twentieth-century literary revival, writers— mostly feminist—approached the subject of nuns' service in order to comment on repressive conditions for women in Irish society. Despite equal rights for women promised in the *1916 Proclamation*, repeated in the *1922 Free State Constitution*, and Irish women participants in the suffrage movement, women's political status declined after 1922 (Ingram 254). Women's domestic role was gradually codified by the marriage ban (1932) which prevented married women from working in the public sector; restrictions on civil service employment (1925) or industrial service (1935); the *Juries Bill* (1927) which exempted women from jury duty; and the *Criminal Law Amendment Bill* (1934) which banned the sale or importation of contraceptives. Then Éamon de Valera's 1937 *Constitution* enshrined the family unit as society's bedrock in Article 41.2 (Ingram 254; see 18n).

Those were the prevailing conditions of the society in which writer Edna O'Brien was raised during 1930s -50s Ireland. Having been educated by the same Sisters of Mercy mentioned above, O'Brien quickly learned that the rigid doctrine of the Catholic Church would only suffocate her. Like Joyce who couldn't breathe either in the repressive early twentieth century Ireland of his young adulthood, nothing much had changed by mid-century. O'Brien, too, became a voluntary exile. Like Joyce, whose

Dubliners collection of stories was rejected by publishers for nearly a decade because of its offensiveness to both Church and State, O'Brien's work was equally maligned for its candid portrayal of female sexuality. Both authors were censored by the Irish government: Joyce for *Stephen Hero* in 1944 and O'Brien for her first published novel, *The Country Girls*, in 1960. In fact, O'Brien's book was the only one banned in the country that year (Ó Drisceoil, "Best" 158-9).

O'Brien has been criticized for concentrating her work on the interior private self, a feminine self more focused on passion and romance than on the political status of womanhood in Ireland (Ingman 253). The purpose of her writing is to titillate rather than testify, some have observed in debates of her work. But the very act of pulling out her pen became polemical. O'Brien defied both State and Church by stepping out of that domestic role encoded by both Constitution and Catholicism and preparing that role for public scrutiny. Her writing served as a protest against the homogeneity engendered by the Yeatsian tradition of Irish nationalism. In focusing on a woman's sexual identity apart from the strictures of the Church or State, she inadvertently allowed a man to explore his own. That would permit a re-imagining of the gendered nationalism that existed in Ireland in her time and would gain her a PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature in February 2018.

As a significant contribution to her oeuvre, O'Brien's 1981 short story, "Sister Imelda," is in part an exploration into the nun's role as independent promoter of Irish nationalism. The origin of the cult of the Virgin Mary readily makes this political connection. Mary achieves in the afterlife an exalted, powerful position as Queen and is often depicted wearing a crown and long, flowing robes. With her Assumption into

Heaven, she was conflated with Mother Ireland and the Sean Bhean Bhocht for the nationalist cause. She is considered "Mother of the divine institution on earth, the Church" (Kristeva 136), and owes her veneration to the goddesses of pagan roots, particularly Brigit. Brigit was considered by the pagan Irish as "'Mother of Christ,' '*Dei Genetrix*,' 'One of the Mothers of Christ,' 'Queen of the True God,' in relation to the Christian deity, and was indeed 'Mary of the Gael'" (Condren 160). The autonomy and creativity of the goddess is directly related to the coming of the Age of Mary. Brigit is said to have carried out numerous acts of heroism on Mary's behalf for which she was honored with a feast day, 1 February. The date is still celebrated in Ireland as St. Brigit's Day, while the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary is honored in the Catholic calendar on the day after, 2 February.

As Joyce did with Maria of "Clay," O'Brien re-visions the Sean Bhean Bhocht by using the character of the nun as Sean Bhean Bhocht to awaken the sensibilities of Irish society to the subjugation of its women. Sister Imelda is introduced to the story as returning to teach at her Catholic convent after spending four years studying at a university in Dublin. Her recent exposure to the outside world sets her apart from the other teachers; she is described as having "more bounce in her walk, more excitement in the way she tackled teaching" (140). The description of Sister Imelda sets her apart in another significant way: she is evocative of the otherworldliness of the Sean Bhean Bhocht with her "pale, slightly long face . . . formidable, but her eyes were different, being blue-black and full of verve" (139). As she enters the classroom on her first day, Imelda imprints the narrator, one of her pupils, with an impression of her as "almost like a ghost who passed the boundaries of common exchange and who crept inside one,

devouring so much of one's thoughts, so much of one's passion, invading the place that was called one's heart" (141). It is clear to the reader that Imelda is no ordinary nun. Enhancing the imagery of Imelda's connection to the Sean Bhean Bhocht's goddess-like ability to transfer from the physical to the natural world, O'Brien refers to the nun's years in Dublin as a "spell in the outside world" (140).

Further establishing the duality that is characteristic of the Sean Bhean Bhocht, O'Brien's nun has lips that "were very purple, as if she had put puce pencil on them . . . , lips of a woman who might sing in a cabaret, and unconsciously she had formed the habit of turning them inward, as if she, too, was aware of their provocativeness" (139). From the start, we know that Sister Imelda will not be the stereotypical religious who demands total obedience, purity, and innocence of her charges. In fact, her classroom motto is "Praise the Incarnate World" (140). As representation of the Sean Bhean Bhocht, Sister Imelda's "looks changed. Some days, when her eyes were flashing, she looked almost profane" (140). Imelda's demeanor suggests a kinship with both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen. From her position as educator, she is able to help foster the ideals of the Catholic Church or, by example, in the repression of that same Church. Whereas the Sean Bhean Bhocht of Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* encourages martyrdom on the part of Irish sons for the nationalist cause, the nun's purpose is to advance nationalism by perpetuating the cult of the Virgin Mary and martyrdom on the part of Ireland's young women.

O'Brien's Sister Imelda as the Sean Bhean Bhocht turns the nun's pre-ordained role of moral example on its head. Establishing a closer-than-acceptable relationship with the unnamed narrator, Imelda does a "reckless thing" by breaking off a flower from its bush

and offering it to her. The broken flower is a metaphor for Imelda's intention to break with the traditions of her teaching vocation, as well as those of Catholic expectations for womanhood. She meets the narrator surreptitiously from time to time, and shares notes and brief physical caresses like a brushed cheek here or a grazed wrist there. The narrator becomes Imelda's "pet" (143), and their bond becomes one of religious and sexual ardor.

At the end of a cooking class, Sister Imelda is "sitting on the edge of the table swaying her legs," in a "reckless" and "defiant" pose (144). She offers the narrator "two jam tarts with a crisscross design on them where the pastry was latticed over the dark jam. They were still warm" (144). O'Brien utilizes the metaphor of the crisscrossed tart as symbolic of both the bread and blood of Christ offered as the Holy Eucharist at Catholic mass, and the name for a "prostitute; a woman considered sexually promiscuous" ("Tart") to reinforce the combined religious and sexual nature of their relationship. In a moment of homosexual eroticism, Imelda watches the narrator eat "as if she herself derived some peculiar pleasure from it, whereas [the narrator] was embarrassed about the pastry crumbling and the bits of blackberry jam staining [her] lips" ("Sister" 144). Their interaction mimics the unconsummated passion that Imelda vows for Jesus, and the unrealized sexual urges that both the narrator and Sister Imelda have sublimated. Their reactions allow the women to adhere to the myth of the Virgin Mary by denying their sexuality.

In rejection of their bodies, the nuns and their students are required to "mortify themselves in order to lend a glorious hand in that communion of spirit that linked the living with the dead" (141). Mortification for the nuns takes the form of self-starvation or flagellation coupled with prostrating themselves before dawn on the cold tiles of the

chapel floor while chanting in Latin. The already underfed girls have to share in the mortification by giving up the occasional treat such as "fairly green rhubarb jam, which did not have enough sugar" (140). Some give up talking entirely. In the winter, their symbolic voicelessness as females takes the form of sore throats that they have to endure to further mortify themselves. The convent education reinforces their original sin and inherent evil of their female bodies for which they must be punished and somehow atone. Imelda and the other nuns set an example of masochism that the young women accept as justice for their intrinsic failings. They learn that sacrifice and "pleasure [are] inextricable from pain, that they existed side by side and were interdependent, like the two forces of an electric current" (145). Self-starvation, sacrifice, and subordination are symbolic of how the Irish woman must suffer in society in general.

Significantly, the narrator dares ask Imelda the very personal question of what color hair she has. She comments on the fact that the students "never saw the nuns' hair, or their eyebrows, or ears, as all that part was covered by a stiff white wimple" (146). Imelda becomes embarrassed at being asked the question, perhaps because, like the ear through which the Holy Spirit is said to have impregnated the Virgin Mary (Condren 165), hair has its own sexual symbolism. According to the noted psychoanalyst Dr. Charles Berg, "head hair is universally a symbol of the genital organs" (73). The nun's habit is intended to obscure all signs of flesh or sexuality except that required for the most fundamental sensory needs. In a seductive, whispered reply to the inquiry, Imelda promises the narrator that she'll tell her the color of her hair "on your last day here, provided your geometry has improved" ("Sister" 146). There is the suggestion of possible

physical intimacy, but the narrator learns that, as with any intimate relationship, there are strings attached. The narrator must offer Imelda something she wants as well.

After the narrator returns from her Christmas at home, during which she enjoyed "gorging" on the cakes and tea she is denied at the convent, and trying on "shoes and silk stockings" (148), Sister Imelda immediately recognizes a social change in her. "'Tut, tut, tut, you've curled your hair,' she said, offended" (148). The narrator has succumbed to the rituals of appearance that accompany a teenage girl's puberty and sexual awakening. Indeed, "the world outside was somehow declared in this perm," she admits (148). In curling her straight hair, the narrator had attempted to look like "Movita, a Mexican star," (148); by doing so, she moves a step away from the ascetic perfection and independence that the spiritual life might offer, and towards the life of the flesh, perhaps even closer to the Magdalen myth. "From then on [Imelda] treated [the narrator] as less of a favorite" (149).

In a scene of reproach for publicly sharing a moment of intimacy with Sister Imelda, the Mother Superior insists that the tear-filled narrator "stand under the clock as punishment" and drink down her untouched cup of "tepid and dusty" milk (150). Kristeva suggests that "milk and tears are the signs *par excellence* of the Mater dolorosa . . . . The Mother and her attributes signifying suffering humanity thus become the symbol of a 'return of the repressed' in monotheism" (143). As female, the narrator must swallow both her tears and the warm milk as a metaphor for the sorrow of motherhood that the cult of the Virgin Mary represents, and that is the future for the narrator. Too, because of her Assumption into Heaven, Mary is considered free from time and death (Kristeva

148). The narrator is asked to stand beneath the clock as reminder of her own mortality. Her punishment reinforces the distance she has from the perfection of the Virgin Mary.

By presenting the nun and the narrator in homoerotic interaction, O'Brien upends the traditions of Catholic convent teaching of the Virgin Mary myth. The flower of womanhood in the convent garden is plucked not by a male suitor looking to combine "the qualities of the desired woman and the holy mother in a totality as perfect as it was inaccessible" (Kristeva 141). Instead, the flower is offered to the narrator by the nun, signifying perhaps an end to the Madonna ideal for both teacher and student.

The Sean Bhean Bhocht is herself transformed in the story. Imelda first appears in the story described as walking with a bounce, eyes full of verve, rather evocative of the young maid figure of the mythological Sean Bhean Bhocht. Towards the end of the story, however, she has grown "irritable and had a boil on her cheek. She was replaced in the cookery kitchen by a younger nun" ("Sister" 152). Imelda has gotten so thin that her wedding band slips off her "marriage finger" and the narrator suggests she is having a nervous breakdown (150).

Like the pagan goddesses she is modeled after, Mary does not die. Instead, she rises into Heaven, while the goddess passes through from one world to the next and comes back again. Imelda first appears to the narrator "almost like a ghost who passed the boundaries of common exchange . . . invading the place that was called one's heart" (141). O'Brien has upset the tradition not only of the Catholic Church but also of the mythological figure of Ireland as woman, as the Sean Bhean Bhocht. The nun experiences a few incarnations in the text—she passes through as a young, vibrant woman, then as an older, weakened, witch-like figure who admits, unsurprisingly, that

her hair is “black” (154). When the narrator encounters her on a bus ride two years after graduation, it is “as if prey to a dream” (155) because it “wasn’t often that nuns traveled in buses” (156). Imelda “looks older, but she had the same aloof quality and the same eyes,” which had last been described as “dark” (141) and “fathomless” (146). In a manner symbolic of the dual identity of the Sean Bhean Bhocht, Imelda leaves the bus accompanied by another nun, and the narrator watches “the back of their two sable, identical figures with their veils being blown wildly about in the wind” (156). The suggestion of an apparition, with the twin forms being blown about by the wind, is evocative of the otherworldliness of the Sean Bhean Bhocht. But the narrator sees them as pathetic figures, “cold and lost” (156). In a gesture of solidarity, she wants to run after them, but realizes that her words will be “inadequate” (157), much like the choices for all Irish women.

However, autonomous as Brigit in defiance of her father, Dubthach, the nun has served the Irish country for centuries in ways under-appreciated and as yet unacknowledged. She has had immeasurable—although imperfect—influence in Irish society. Considered the Other, both voiceless and vulnerable, the nun was marginalized, which placed her in the potentially advantageous position of social invisibility from which to perform her nationalistic duties. The quote from Sister Schneiders, which appears as epigraph in this chapter, represents a succinct summary of the nun’s invaluable contribution to Irish nationalism: “Uninvited guests . . . should be received in the parlor, not given the run of the house” (qtd. in Goodstein). Although the Sister was referring to Vatican investigators of American women religious, the quote can be applied as

metaphor for the Irish nun's individualistic approach to promoting the country's independence from British invaders by reproducing its culture.

Both Edna O'Brien's literature and Anne Crilly's film brought much needed attention to the general plight of Irish women as burdened by the unrealistic expectations placed upon them. In Crilly's film, Mairead Farrell refers to calling out: "Mother Ireland: Get off our backs!" during her time as a British prisoner of war. However, the role of mother is an ingrained identity for the Irish woman that has proved difficult to revise since to date it is still encoded as Article 41.2 of the 1937 *Constitution of Ireland* (See 18n). Challenging as change might be, it is inexorable like the tides of the Irish Sea. The *Report* by CICA, the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, established in 2000 by the Irish government to examine industrial schools run by religious orders such as O'Brien's own teachers, the Sisters of Mercy, also served to scrutinize this ideal of perfection required of women religious by Irish society and by themselves (235). Although current estimates vary, the number of nuns in Ireland and elsewhere has dwindled dramatically over the past few decades.[25] It is clear that the traditional role of nun has morphed in consort with that of the traditional role of woman as virgin or whore, just as Crilly depicts in her film and O'Brien suggests in her story.

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[25] According to the Vatican's Central Office of Church Statistics, in 2015 women religious exceeded by 61% the number of priests worldwide, and are currently in decline. Globally, they have decreased in number from 721,935 in 2010 to 670,320 in 2015 (-7%). In Ireland, female congregants have dropped from 8,953 (2002) to 6,912 (2012), (-23%). Diocesan priests dropped from 3,203 to 2,800 over the same period, a decline of 13%. The Dublin diocese has just two priests under age 40.

Edna O'Brien's treatment of the nun in "Sister Imelda" contests the dual subjugation of all Irish woman by both colonial and patriarchal Church culture, one that Irish feminist literary critic Ailbhe Smyth succinctly expresses in her poem, "Story":

> It took so long to recognize how
> inextricably the one was implicated in
> the other. Denying, repudiating [apostate]
> my Irishness. Borrowing speech,
> life-style, ideas, politics, even lovers.
> A hot potato in my Anglicized
> mouth. Metaphorical emigree. Smooth
> undifferentiated veneer of international
> statelessness.
> Hating my assigned woman-state,
> internalizing patriarchal contempt.
> Denial, refusal [anorexic]
> of my flesh, a metaphor of
> my cultural excision.
> Metaphors can kill.
> No neat theory this. (24)

By taking on the celibate nun's "internalizing patriarchal contempt [and] denial and refusal of [her] flesh" in "Sister Imelda," O'Brien is able to scrutinize rigid Catholic dogma as it limits choices for all Irish women—whether wife, mother, single woman, or nun. Through her story's narrator and Sister Imelda as Sean Bhean Bhocht, O'Brien

successfully examines the restrictive image of both Mother Ireland and Mater dolorosa in contemporary Irish society, but also records its potential for transformation. “Metaphors can kill,” indeed, but through their Greek root word, *meta*, they can also create change and metamorphize, like the Sean Bhean Bhocht.

CHAPTER IV. LURE OF THE LAND

Quiet Courage: Cailleach as Caretaker

> The unexpected tide,
> the great wave,
> uncontained,
> breasts the rock,
> overwhelms the heart,
> in spring
> or winter.
>
> —Moya Cannon, "Taom" (1989)

To transform Ireland, modern writers such as O'Brien needed to deconstruct the conflation of woman as nation so that woman might speak as author rather than subject, poet rather than poem, sexual being rather than abstract symbol. Instead of perpetuating the image of Ireland as political woman-state, later twentieth-century writers would use their cultural creativity to return to a "pre-national consciousness" (Ingman 257), one inspired by the ancient connection of the goddess to the landscape, like Brigit and the Cailleach before them.

As Edward Said expresses in his 1988 essay on "Yeats and Decolonization," a new cultural nationalism cannot flourish without recognition of the significance of the native land to Ireland's identity:

> The literature [of the anti-imperialist movement] develops quite consciously out of a desire to distance the native African, Indian, or Irish individual from the British, French or (later) American master. Before this can be done, however, there is a pressing need for the recovery of the land

> that, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination. (76-77)

After all, it is Ireland's "four beautiful green fields" that Yeats's Old Woman, the Sean Bhean Bhocht, seeks to regain through blood sacrifice on the part of Ireland's sons. It is the promise of redemption through return of her sovereignty over the land that invigorates the "Dark Rosaleen" of James Clarence Mangan's aisling poem. As woman in story and song, Ireland has always been the personification of the Triple Goddess Ériu and her connection to her land. Like Brigit who replenishes in spring and Cailleach who masters in winter, the nature of the goddess is "uncontained." She is the "unexpected tide, the great wave" of the epigraph.

It is through the imagination of Maeve Kelly, author of the short story, "Amnesty," that the traditional patriarchal conflation of woman with Irish land becomes deconstructed. Kelly's 1976 story was not available to an American audience until 1991 when it was published in *Territories of the Voice: Contemporary Stories by Irish Women Writers,* the first anthology of Irish women's writing to be offered in the United States. Until that time, writing by Irish women was inaccessible outside of Ireland (DeSalvo, D'Arcy, and Hogan xiii). Through Maeve Kelly's re-visioning of the Sean Bhean Bhocht figure as spinster, we learn that the feminization of Irish land no longer means the subjugation of its identity as it did during colonization. Kelly approaches the theme of home and land, of Mother Ireland, but not from the traditional nationalist perspective. She does not proffer a Sean Bhean Bhocht who calls for sacrifice on the part of Ireland's sons to overthrow a conquering force, or to rid Ireland of the influence of outsiders. Instead, she depicts the Sean Bhean Bhocht as an independent spinster who cares for her

deaf and mute brother—reversing the traditional image of voiceless female—on their own island off the coast of Ireland.

The sister of the story is clearly evocative of the Sean Bhean Bhocht in her status as outside the mainland in geographic location and other than mainstream in characteristics and behavior. Her occupation is that of fisherman, which in Ireland and in many other cultures is traditionally male. She must haggle over "pennies per pound with the Fish Merchant" on the mainland, drawing on "the steely core of her will" so that he would "not 'best' her" on the price (114). Using the vocabulary of industry such as "steely" and "core," and of dominance such as "will" and "besting," the author's description of the sister reinforces the strength of her independent, rather than submissive, feminine character. We learn that her ability to negotiate with the Fish Merchant regularly brings her a "bagful of money . . . only a fraction of what had been left in the bank" (114).

Despite her responsibility and power, however, the mainlanders consider her one of the "two strange islanders whose days were passed in silence and incomprehension" (115). They cannot communicate with someone so "odd." When she "talked to herself," the mainland farmers hear her words carrying over the estuary as "floating across, disembodied . . . hard to put sense or meaning to them" (115).

As pointed out in the earlier discussion of the Sean Bhean Bhocht as conflation of the pagan goddess and the Virgin Mary/Magdalen myths, the sister's otherworldliness is compounded by her links to Christianity. One Sunday morning on the bank of the river where she fishes, a mainlander hears her singing the Agnus Dei:

> Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us;
>
> Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us;

> Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world, grant us peace. (115)

But we learn that the sister has not attended Mass in years, further emphasizing the merging between pagan and Christian identity of the Sean Bhean Bhocht. As fisherman, the sister's occupation brings her close as well to the religious symbolism relating fish to Christ and his Apostles. In Luke 5:1 of the *New International Version* of *The Bible*, it is written that Christ encouraged Simon to take his boat out into the Sea of Galilee even though Simon, James and John had been fishing all day with no catch whatsoever. With Christ in the boat, however, they caught so many fish that their nets began to break and they returned to shore so laden that the boats began to sink. Awed by this miracle, Simon, John and James became Christ's apostles.

Fish have also been associated in ancient mythology with the goddess and fertility. Because of their existence in the water, considered the realm of the unconscious, fish have a connotation of mystery and eeriness (Biedermann 131), again establishing the sister as symbolic of the otherworldliness of the Sean Bhean Bhocht. The unnamed woman and her brother fish primarily for salmon. In Celtic mythology, salmon is the "main symbol of immortality and wisdom" (Condren 25). Salmon have been associated with such inspiration because of their ability to repeatedly locate their spawning grounds, no matter how distant. But the sister and brother "both hauled in the shimmering young salmon, baulked of their urge to spawn" (Kelly, M. 117). Like the young salmon she catches, the spinster will not reproduce, symbolizing her own mortality. However, that mortality is physical rather than spiritual. As solitary fisherman, the woman "knew the river well" (115). She has developed the keen, almost extrasensory, awareness required

of catching fish that travel through the water quickly and quietly. Such ability to catch an abundance of fish represents an ability as well to see "the divine forces with good spiritual sight" (Fontana 93). Her link with the ancient, pre-Christian occupation of salmon fishing and the supernatural qualities it embodies informs of the woman's relationship to mythical Ireland's Sean Bhean Bhocht.

The island which the sister and brother own contains an "ancient burial mound . . . rising humpbacked near their house" (Kelly 116). There are over a thousand such megalithic tombs throughout Ireland, varied in style but intended as burial chambers for one or more interments and covered by a mound. One of the most celebrated of Ireland's Neolithic passage tombs is Newgrange with its triskele ornamentation (Champneys 66), as described in Chapter I of this analysis. In traditional Irish folktales, the fairies or "*sidhe,* 'people of the mounds'" (Tracy 1) inhabit these chambers. The *sidhe* can flow back and forth between the world of the living and the mound of the dead, hence the term "passage tomb" that is used to identify them. They are considered "the undead," and symbolize "the power of the past to invade and act in the present . . . to take back the land they [the Anglo-Irish] had stolen" (2). Because of their similarity to the pagan goddess, some Irish still believe that the *sidhe* could leave the mounds to "interact or interfere with the living people with whom they shared the Irish landscape"; as a result, farmers circumvented these areas when they ploughed their fields or planted their crops.

The description of the sister as "odd" and "talking to herself" is reminiscent of the Old Woman Sean Bhean Bhocht in Yeats's play who "sings to herself" in witch-like crooning. As a result, we are never quite sure if she herself could be one of the *sidhe* or "undead" (1) who has perhaps risen from that burial mound on her island. When she

chastises her brother for "grinning foolishly . . . so that [people] thought he was an idiot" (Kelly 116), he retreats to the mound for solace, "picking at its protruding stones, grunting angrily" (117), as if he is going home to the Great Mother Goddess for nurture. There is a mountain in County Kerry called the Da Chich Annan, "Breasts [Paps] of Anu," named for the goddess Anu or Danu, considered "the mother of the Irish gods" (Monaghan, *Encyc.*117) and cited in Chapter I of this paper. The twin contours of the mountain represent the life-giving nourishment that the Irish equate with the goddess and earth.

Realizing the importance of communing with the earthly symbol of the goddess, the sister accepts the brother's "complaining about me to the dead" because she believes that "if the dead are not invoked they are deader than dead" (Kelly 117). Her willingness to repeatedly re-invoke the dead represents her goddess-related belief in rebirth. As Sean Bhean Bhocht, she is a literary representation of the past acting in the present, and of the cycle of life and rebirth.

The contrast between the sister as incarnation of the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht, isolated by society and geography on her pre-colonial island, and the mainland's Fish Merchant as symbol of materialist post-colonial Ireland, is vividly portrayed in their haggling over a price for the salmon. The Fish Merchant greets her "rubbing his hands together to control his greed" (117). She permits him to brush her hand quickly, but suggests to herself that he "keep his handshaking for others like himself who value money for its own sake, never for the new net it might buy, or the maiden heifer or the sack of flour against the winter's greed" (117). Although she attempts to hold fast to her asking price, the Fish Merchant demeans her by advising that she "go and buy [herself] a

new hat . . . or one of those nice new dresses the ladies all wear now" (118). She feels mocked by his comment, observing that the Merchant's "smile was a lure away from the quick deceiving hands . . . with a voice that has the gravelly meanness of [his] soul" (118). Like the men who degraded women's participation in the Land League political organization of 1881[26] by labeling them unfeminine and unnatural (Innes 113), the Fish Merchant cannot abide the threat to his masculinity and power accompanying it that her independence displays. He tries to subjugate her, to keep her in her place, by attacking her sense of femininity.

When the Merchant offers her a small amount over half what she asks for and she rejects it, he turns his back on her. Like the salmon in her sacks, "she was caught. Filled with an old and terrible humiliation" (Kelly 118). The humiliation of over seven-hundred years of colonization of Ireland comes rushing back to her, as does the old and terrible humiliation she experienced in the same market years earlier as a young maid. Along with the recollection of Britain's conquest of Ireland as its rape and the Act of Union that did everything *but* promote unity and accord between the two countries, she recalls the shameful sense of inferiority thrust on her people by Britain's disparaging "Paddy"

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[26] The Land League movement attempted to concentrate public attention on Anglo-Irish landlords or their agents who arbitrarily evicted poor tenant farmers after The Famine and "grabbed" the land for re-rental at usurious rates. When Charles Stewart Parnell, one of the advocates for Home Rule, and other leaders of the Land League were arrested, his sisters Fanny and Anna and several women established the Ladies' Land Leagues in both North America and Ireland to continue the campaign. Participation in the Ladies' Land Leagues gave women a presence on the political stage for the first time. See Kinealy, *New*; O'Brien and Cruise; and Kiberd.

caricatures. She remembers clearly that it was 1939, the beginning of the second World War but also "the end of the hungry 'thirties when Dev [Prime Minister Éamon de Valera] had tried not to pay the British the land annuities on the repossession of Irish farms" (118). Britain retaliated with "a tax on Irish imports designed to recoup the amount, which in turn provoked Irish tariffs on British imports" (Ó Drisceoil, "When"). Thus began the nearly decade-long Economic War between the two countries that impoverished the mainland as well as her island. She calls it the year of "the end of everything and the beginning of everything . . . when her father and eldest brother were drowned" (Kelly 118).

During her remembered trip that year of 1939 to the same market to sell new potatoes, all she hears amidst the confusion of the "soft talk and grinning men . . . [m]arket full—sweat, smells, laughing, teasing, arguing" is the repeated plea: "You should have a pretty dress to wear" (118). The sister encounters a man, possibly a tinker[27] engaging in "Tinker talk," with "white teeth in a brown face and blue eyes laughing like the river on a sky blue day" (118). He laughs *at* her—at her innocence, at her naiveté in

[27] The tinker, or Irish Traveller, belongs to a distinct ethnic group within Ireland. They have their own language, beliefs and social customs which have been made stronger over time due to their exclusion and marginalization from mainstream "settled" society. The word "Tinker" refers to their occupation as tinsmiths and metalworkers and was derived from the Irish word "ceard" (smith) or "tinceard" (tinsmith). Because of their nomadic lifestyle, the word is now generally used in a derogatory sense. As of the 2016 Census, the number of usual residents present in the State and enumerated as Irish Travellers increased by 5.1 per cent from 29,495 to 30,987 with Dublin having 6,006 Travellers, the largest number in any county (Ireland, An Phríomh-Oifig Staidrim).

selling the potatoes and getting "little more than the price of seed" for them (119). But he, too, asks her why she doesn't have a pretty dress. He calls her a "pretty girl" and insists that she "should wear pretty clothes" (119). Evoking the relationship between the young woman and the *sidhe* who reside in the burial mound on her island, the word "pretty" is associated with fairies. Yeats wrote in a 21 June 1899 letter to a friend, Dora Sigerson Shorter, that he tries "to avoid the word 'fairy' because it has associations of prettiness. *Sidhe* [sic] or 'gentry' or 'the others' is better. The Irish peasant never thinks of the fairies as pretty. He thinks of them as terrible, or beautiful, or just like mortals. . . . . She would fear them or honour them but not 'love them'" (Wade *Letters* 321-22).

In her incarnation as mortal being, the young woman succumbs to the headiness of that summer day and her youthful inexperience and goes off with the tinker. "She took his hand and fell into the clamour of the town" (Kelly 119). The author metaphorically describes the seduction of the sister as the rape of the pre-colonial river by the post-colonial town:

> But the town received the river. It swallowed up the river, wrapped itself around her, cossetted her with bridges, arched in loveliness. It twisted round her curves, locked her into canals, buried her in slobland. It taunted her with garbage, sent the gulls screaming while they scavenged. It used her and abused her, then turned its back upon her when angry and swollen she beat at its doors. (119)

Like the rape of Ireland by its British colonizer with the duplicitous Act of Union in 1800, the sister is duped into a liaison that will serve as an awakening to her subjugation as female. When she arrives at the dock to meet her brother, her pockets are empty from

having purchased a new dress, and her "mouth still tasted the ice cream and the kisses, the kisses and the ice cream, the ginger ale and kisses, the kisses and the ginger ale" (119).

Her brother is surprised but delighted to see her with a new pink lace-edged dress, covered with a print of butterflies and flowers. The image of the pink printed dress evokes the duality of virginity reflected in the color white and sexuality reflected in the color red, combined to represent the transformative loss of her innocence. Butterflies symbolize "transformation and immortality" (Fontana 78), as does the Sean Bhean Bhocht. Coupled with the flowers which represent "creation" (104) and youth, "carnal lust and the whole realm of the erotic" (Biedermann 135), the print on her dress evokes the girl's relationship to the purity and innocence of the Virgin Mary and the sexuality of the Mary Magdalen. It relates her equally to the maid and harlot embodied as the Sean Bhean Bhocht.

The gravest humiliation for the young woman, however, comes unexpectedly from her mother. She slaps the sister hard and calls her a name when she learns of her indiscretion at the market. The parish priest is called in to softly inquire about the sister's virginity; the sister never forgives either her mother or the priest. Over the next months, the mother scrutinizes her to watch for signs of pregnancy,[28] and shows relief when the

[28] This would be a terrible fate for any young woman. The British *Offences Against the Person Act,* 1861, Sec.58/59, became the legal position of the 1937 Constitution making abortion illegal in Ireland (United Kingdom). A 1983 referendum created a new Constitutional Article 40.3.3, or 8th Amendment, permitting travel abroad for an abortion and receiving abortion information in Ireland but maintaining equal rights for both mother and fetus (Center for

sister's "flesh fell off her and she grew thin" (Kelly 120). She would remain thin for the rest of her life, never marrying or giving birth except to the "steel core" her humiliation spawned.

Her mother's reaction informs us of the greater betrayal the sister feels in the hypocrisy of Catholicism's rigid requirement of sexual abstinence, of sexual ignorance in fact, on the part of its women. Maria Luddy examines this subject in her 2007 essay, "Sex and the Single Girl in 1920s and 1930s Ireland," which includes the time of the sister's market visit. According to Luddy, the extant societal belief that "England and its culture might be the source of moral corruption, [but] once independence is achieved the focus on women, and their moral regenerative powers, becomes central to the idea of the Irish nation" (81). The patriarchal Virgin Mary/moral colleen and Mother Ireland constructs of both Church and State resurfaced throughout this Free State period.[29] Luddy asserts that there was no greater threat to these moral images representing woman or nation than that of the unmarried mother. Regardless of how the sister conceived a baby, she would have become a danger to both the State and the Church. The prevailing perspective suggested that sexual promiscuity, or even the behavior of a "poor girl" whose sexual ignorance resulted in a pregnancy by a corrupting agent, could result in the young woman's banishment to an institution.

Reproductive Rights). On 25 May 2018 the Irish voted overwhelmingly for repeal of that Amendment (Bardon).

[29] See 18n on Article 41.2 of the 1937 *Constitution of Ireland*, passed during Éamon de Valera's governance.

As evidenced in newspapers from the mid-1920s through the '30s, this moral decline was attributed to the availability of the automobile, movie houses, and dance halls as lures for young girls into immoral behavior (82). The market where the sister meets her "corrupting agent" would serve as just such a luring environment as well. If the sister had become impregnated by the tinker, even as "poor girl" innocent victim, she would have brought terrible "'shame' to the nation and to [her family]." If she had no family support, which could well have occurred because of the belief that "the rise of illegitimacy levels was attributed to a loss of parental control and responsibility during the [1922-3] period of the war of independence and civil war," the young woman might even fall into prostitution. As a worse fate than banishment to an institution, prostitution was acquiescence to the Magdalen myth and identity as "a force of moral pestilence to the public" (Report qtd. in Luddy, "Sex" 86). Ironically, then, it is not the seduction that influences the sister so dramatically; it is the humiliation she experiences with "the mother's hard looks at her in the months that followed" (Kelly 120).

Like the pagan goddesses she is modeled after, the sister's fertility is represented in the "birth of her steel core," the birth of strength and intellect. It is with this intellect that she outsmarts the Fish Merchant years after that summer day of awakening and transformation. She promises the Merchant, the symbol of the vanquishing colonizer, that she'll sell the salmon on the street for small change if he doesn't give her the asking price. She reminds him that the other fish sellers— all men—are so lazy that when the fish are running they are drinking down pints in the local pub. These ordinary Irish men don't have the keen sense, or supernatural relationship, that she does with the fish. They are mainlanders, "swamped," as Fanon describes (*Wretched* 73), by their need to identify

with the colonizer. On the other hand, she is an individual, not subject to the colonizing force of man or nation. The sister barters exhaustively until the Fish Merchant offers her seven shillings a pound, more than she initially asked for. Suggestive of the sister's role as incarnation of the Sean Bhean Bhocht, the Fish Merchant remarks that "one day . . . the old hag will kill herself with work" (Kelly 120).

The sister is not unnerved now by the "Tinker Talk" of the marketplace or derogatory comments about her femininity as she was when a young maid. She realizes the power of her goddess-like strength and uses the materialism of the colonizer to her own ends. In still another suggestion of the Sean Bhean Bhocht's transformation to a young queen, the sister locates "Regina's boutique," a dress shop on the market street. She ignores the window "mannequins who stared haughtily over her head" like the colonizers who had expressed a Saxon superiority to her people. She disregards the label of "Lady Muck" sarcastically stamped upon her by one clerk and asks another for "a pink dress . . . with butterflies and flowers" (121). The sister purchases a flowered dress with the extra money she gained in her match of wits with the Fish Merchant. The dress gets wrapped up in a "white bag with the word REGINA printed in blue and a silver crown over the R." The name "Regina" comes from the Latin meaning "queen" ("Regina"). Its use in this setting conflates the materialism of the mainland dress shop whose logo evoked the Queen of the United Kingdom and its Dominions, titular "Queen Mother" of the colonizing country, with that of the Sean Bhean Bhocht, Cailleach, or sovereign goddess who shifts shape from an old hag to a young queen. The color and glorified position of the Virgin Mary are reiterated as well in the logo of the shop, to remind

women that by spending there they are closer to the identity of the Virgin themselves, an identity revered and emulated by the Christian women of Ireland.

The clerk recommends that the sister purchase a separate butterfly brooch since the dress is designed only with flowers. This dress is different from the one she purchased as a young girl, as she is different from who she was then. Although flowers symbolize youth, they also symbolize "the transitory nature of all earthly beauty" (Fontana 135), reminding us of the impermanence of material goods and, perhaps, the impermanence of the colonial influence for the future of Ireland. Upon seeing the butterfly pin, however, her brother "held it in his palm as if it were a real one ready to lift its wings for flight" (Kelly 121). It is the butterfly pin that is removable rather than printed on the dress that suggests the mutability of the Sean Bhean Bhocht to transform from the physical to supernatural world; that emphasizes her immortality; that reinforces the ongoing metamorphosis that is characteristic of the Sean Bhean Bhocht.

Clearly, the sister has established herself as identifiable with the strength and willfulness of the Sean Bhean Bhocht. However, she is a Sean Bhean Bhocht of a different kind. Her primary concern is tribal: she worries only about her and her brother's welfare on their island. Her sense of nationalism as personified by the Sean Bhean Bhocht cannot be compared with that of the character in Yeats's play*, Cathleen ni Houlihan.* Because the mound is part of her island, it doesn't matter to her if it is "the property of the nation" (116). When visitors arrive from Britain and America, they offer the sister "big money for the island" but she is outraged at "the cheek . . . the nerve" of the offer from "a stranger!" (116). Those who offer her money can, she adamantly announces, "buy the whole country, but they won't buy my island" (116). The image of

the Sean Bhean Bhocht in Kelly's story does not bear a conventional relationship to the nationalist politics of Yeats's figure. She is evoked to connect Ireland's pre-colonial state, when woman was revered as goddess having natural, intuitive power, with an entirely new sense of nationalism, one that includes the female perspective, one that counts in the experience of the Other. Kelly's image of the Sean Bhean Bhocht is that of spinster concerned foremost with survival and independence.

The story's last scene of the sister's return to the island is one bathed in images of rebirth. The island is described as "an emerald rising from its blue setting . . . , turf smoke [was] rising from the chimney straight up to the blue sky" (122). References to land consist of turf, the ancient natural fuel derived from bogs that still exist mostly on Ireland's outer islands, and the emerald, a stone of deep, rich green traditionally associated with Ireland, the "Emerald Isle," and symbolic of water and fertilizing rain. Although this Sean Bhean Bhocht will not sell out Irish land to foreign money or Irish customs to foreign influence, she acknowledges the mutual dependence of the island on the materialist mainland in purchasing the pink dress. However, she emphasizes that "the pink dress was not now a rent flag thrown on a burial mound. It was a song of triumph, a declaration of peace" (122)

The emerald also symbolizes "faith and hope" in Christian imagery (Biedermann 117). The sister decides to wear her pink dress to church on Sunday, to pray for the soul of the mother who humiliated her when she was the young maiden. The sister personifies the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht's rejection of the old way of thinking, one represented in the rigid doctrines of the Catholic Church followed by the mother and the priest who shamed her. Instead, she chooses to focus on the Christian teaching of forgiveness, and

on the goddess force for healing. For the sister, there is only "one kind of defeat and that had nothing to do with ideas" (Kelly 122). As embodiment of a new nationalism for Ireland, she recognizes the overwhelming importance of survival in the form of good health, sustenance, and the maintenance of her island, a microcosm of Ireland itself. Still, she believes there is a part of being that surpasses survival and it rests in the "sweetness" of "forgiveness" (122). Having triumphed over the defeat she risked at the turn of the Fish Merchant's back, the sister can experience the true joy of life, "the sweetness that smoothed out lines . . . and lifted the corners of her mouth" (122).

To overcome the experience of its colonization by Britain, Ireland has the opportunity to transform itself, like the mutable butterfly, and experience instead the joy of rebirth. In forgiving her mother, the sister can at the same time forgive the tinker man who seduced her, the Fish Merchant for his greed, and perhaps even Britain for its colonization. The spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht of Maeve Kelly's story envisions the ancient land of the goddess Ériu as an articulation of a new cultural nationalism that encourages forgiveness for the future rather than punishment for the past.

CHAPTER V. SPEAKING SPINSTERHOOD

Cultural Conservator: Preserver of Language and Lore

Creative independence, religion and native land were not the only aspects of Irish identity that post-literary revival writers attempted to re-vision towards a new cultural nationalism. As postcolonial critic Edward Said continues to emphasize in his essay, "Yeats and Decolonization":

> The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes, myths, and religions, these too are enabled by the land. And along with these nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonized identity, there always goes an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language. (79)

Renewing the struggle to strengthen Irish cultural identity through native language usage is a significant theme in Martin McDonagh's 1996 play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Ireland had suffered a dramatic loss of language under the colonizer. According to Reg Hindley, geographer and author of *The Death of the Irish Language: A Qualified Obituary* (1990), there was not one singular cause which prompted the "long slow death of Irish among the people" (11). Instead, there were a number of factors beginning with the Penal Laws enacted in 1691 after Protestant William of Orange took the British throne from Catholic King James II, wherein Irish Catholics could not vote or hold public office, nor could they bear arms or worship in their religion. Irish Historian Christine Kinealy explains the dramatic effect of those Laws on the native language:

> The Penal Laws were designed to weaken irrevocably what little economic and political power the Catholic gentry had left. Culturally they were also weakened, as the Irish language and Irish poetry and literature were marginalised. English, and to a far less extent, Scots Gaelic or Dutch were the languages of the new master class. Irish increasingly became the language of the poor native Irish. (*New* 119-120)

It became more economically feasible for any Irish who wanted to advance in society to acquire English as their primary language. “The maintenance of linguistic separation from English speaking Britain and its colonies was no longer practicable and found no significant support” (Hindley 11).

Within this setting of a weakened Irish language there was a second, post-Famine, Home Rule struggle from the 1870s to the 1890s. Progress towards Home Rule would allow Ireland to govern herself internally with a Parliament of her own while remaining under the British Parliament for international concerns. After Home Rule's leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, became embroiled in personal problems, the movement split, leaving an opportunity for nationalists such as Anglo-Irish educator Douglas Hyde to appeal to the Irish to strengthen their cultural uniqueness and identity. The demise of the Irish language played a significant role in Douglas Hyde's nationalist urging. "The census of 1851 showed 319,602 persons whose sole language was Gaelic, and 1,524,286 who spoke some Gaelic (perhaps only a few words) in addition to English; by 1891 the respective figures were 38,121 and 680,174" (Hindley 25). Because of the dramatic drop in native speakers, Hyde and six others established the Gaelic League in 1893 which attempted to revive the Irish language as a source of national pride and identity. Unlike

the Celtic Literary Society, the Gaelic League encouraged women to join as well (Innes 43). Although the Gaelic League was founded as a nonsectarian and apolitical organization, "its purpose fit[ted] nicely into the newer nationalism" (Orel 329).

In his groundbreaking essay, "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland," Hyde emphasizes the need for the Irish to acknowledge their own background as "one of the most classically learned and cultured nations in Europe" (1) rather than neglect that history and imitate everything that was British. Hyde made public his resentment of the Irish who, despite their rich history of cultural traditions, dropped their own language and literature for that of the British, while at the same time expressing utter disdain for the country they sought to emulate. That contradiction, Hyde claimed, prevented the Irish from developing on their own merits "anything good in literature, art, or institutions" (2).

Written as an Address to the Irish Literary Society in 1892, Douglas Hyde's remarks serve as a precursor to post-colonial critic Frantz Fanon's 1968 treatise, “On National Culture” included in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth.* Because the colonizing power has no reason to encourage the evolution of native culture, Fanon explains, it was imperative for the natives themselves to defend and renew their culture. And Fanon believes there was no other better way to do that than to actively struggle for liberation from the colonizing power. "The first necessity is the re-establishment of the nation in order to give life to national culture,” according to Fanon (178). The Young Irelanders initiated this struggle for renewed nationalistic consciousness through culture when they established *The Nation* newspaper. But even as the publication efforts of the Young Irelanders, the literary efforts by Yeats and Lady Gregory, and the linguistic efforts by Hyde fostered a new cultural consciousness, Fanon’s work suggested that those

efforts had not yet been good enough. According to Fanon, this national consciousness needs to evolve into a national liberation. As Fanon details in his explication of the evolutionary steps involved in the liberation process, the intelligentsia must go from being consumers to producers of literature that ultimately urges action on the part of the natives against their oppressor (173).

In the Address, Hyde reminds his fellow Irishmen that there was a time when "every well-to-do farmer could read and write Irish, and many of them could understand even archaic Irish . . . In order to de-Anglicise ourselves we must at once arrest the decay of the language" (3), he insists. The Gaelic League established by Hyde served to dramatically increase Irish pride, coinciding both in time and purpose with the establishment of the Abbey Theatre and the literary revival prompted by Yeats and Lady Gregory. Although Hyde claimed an apolitical purpose for the Gaelic League's efforts, his essay urged a political message when he suggests:

> We can, however, insist, and we shall insist if Home Rule be carried, that the Irish language, which so many foreign scholars of the first caliber find so worthy of study, shall be placed on a par with—or even above—Greek, Latin, and modern languages in all examinations held under the Irish Government. (3)

Thus Hyde's words encouraged more than a call for the Irish to preserve their language and traditions in dancing and music. In fact, those words reverberated in Frantz Fanon's concern that "the native rebuilds his perceptions because he renews the purpose and dynamism of the craftsmen, of dancing and music, and of literature and the oral tradition" (*Wretched* 173). By rebuilding national perceptions, Hyde helped to create a

literature of combat that Fanon espouses, whether he liked it or not. Despite Hyde's original intentions, the Gaelic League attracted political nationalists who became increasingly militant. Just as Yeats's play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, sent out "certain men the English shot," (Yeats, "Man" 469), Hyde's organization for the fostering of cultural pride through language and the arts evolved into a political association through its involvement in a series of campaign efforts to encourage the Irish language in many aspects of Irish life. Over time many of the organization's members participated in the militant Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), or Fenians, originally founded in 1858 (Kinealy, *New* 171). The increasingly political leanings of the group led to Hyde's resignation in 1915, followed by some members' active involvement in the 1916 Rising.

The militant activity of the Rising caused an overreaction on the part of the British government, embroiled as they were in the Great War and wanting to extend conscription to Ireland in 1918. Since Home Rule discussion had been suspended during the War, the British were especially concerned when Dáil Éireann, a self-constituted Irish parliament, was formed in 1919, in part as a reaction to the suggestion of conscription. As a result, the British government de-legitimized the purportedly non-political Gaelic League in the same year (Bourke and McBride 392; Kinealy, *New* 191).

Still, the legacy of the Gaelic League is an enduring one: the 2011 Census for the Republic of Ireland found that 1.77 million people—roughly 41 percent of the population aged three and over claimed to know Irish, even if only passively. Those respondents who reported speaking Irish on a weekly basis outside of school number 110,642, or about 2.5 percent of the population (Bourke and McBride 338).

The preservation of native language as a nation builder, a sentiment expressed by both Hyde and Fanon, resonates through the character of the spinster Maureen in Martin McDonagh's black pastoral play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. McDonagh's play was first performed in Galway, Ireland in February 1996 and a few weeks later it opened in the West End of London. The play moved to New York City's Broadway in 1998 where it won four prestigious Tony Awards. Although the work is set in modern-day Connemara, Galway, the scene is suggestive of the isolation of a rural western town in ancient tribal Ireland. According to prominent Irish professor and theatre critic, Nicholas Grene:

> In Irish pastoral, the west of Ireland or Ireland as a whole have been conceived as sites of origin, where we as readers/audience come from, but no longer are. We are separated from that source as the adult is from the child, as the emigrant is from the country of his/her birth. (“Ireland” 2)

With the kitchen of its small cottage containing a "box of turf" and a "window with an inner ledge above the sink . . . looking out onto fields" and its mix of religious and pagan icons in the form of a crucifix and “tea-towel . . . bearing the inscription ‘May you be half an hour in Heaven afore the Devil knows you’re dead’” (McDonagh 3), we are reminded of an Ireland of long ago, an Ireland of Yeats's sentimental description. The only clues we are given that this cottage might be any different from Peter and Bridget Gillane's cottage in Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is the presence of "a small TV down left, an electric kettle and a radio on one of the kitchen cupboards" (3). McDonagh brings the audience to that familiar “site of origin” that Grene describes. However, he “deliberately subverts the audience’s expectations by adding references to contemporary living” as he does with the television and electric kettle (Rees xv).

Although the settings of Yeats's and McDonagh's plays are similar, the family units depicted are vastly different. The traditional nuclear unit consisting of mother, father, and children in collaboration, so characteristic of colonial rural Ireland, gives way in McDonagh's play to a bifurcated representation of family, that of mother and daughter alone and in conflict. Instead of representing "Ireland herself" as an incursion into the familial dynamic, one that has assimilated the culture of the colonists as Yeats's Old Woman did, McDonagh writes Ireland as a spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht whose image is embodied in the alter egos of mother and daughter. Mother Mag represents the old, ignorant Ireland that has assimilated the colonizer's culture, as post-colonial critic Albert Memmi describes, while daughter Maureen symbolizes an Ireland that roots itself in native language and love of land. By unifying the oppositional characters of hag and maiden in one image of the mythical Sean Bhean Bhocht, McDonagh enables us to understand the conflict between pre- and post-colonial culture that exists among the Irish today.

McDonagh uses the duality of his female characters, Mag and Maureen, to express his own conflicts about Irish national identity. Having been born in London of Irish-Catholic parents who returned to Sligo and Connemara with their sons every summer during childhood, McDonagh reinforced his own liminality in a 2001 interview with *The Guardian*:

> The only place I've had any grief is here in London from a few English punters going on about how I was taking the piss out of Irish people. "How does he respond to the inevitable accusations of cultural stereotyping?" I don't even enter into it. I mean, I don't feel I have to

> defend myself for being English or for being Irish, because, in a way, I don't feel either. And, in another way, of course, I'm both. That's exactly what the work arises out of, and it's interesting to me that it tends to be English people who have problems with that. But, ultimately, I don't really feel I have to defend anything, really. (O'Hagan)

Irish literary critic Fintan O'Toole comments in his 2003 interview of McDonagh for the *New Yorker* that his "plays are quite literally mongrel: they are written in an English that uses Gaelic syntax and yield oddly coiled sentences like 'When it is there I am, it's here I wish I was, of course'" (42). With a voice that is neither wholly Anglo nor wholly Irish, like the Hiberno-English hybrid English of Joyce and Synge, Shaw and Friel, McDonagh writes Mag and Maureen as characters who reflect a similar linguistic blurring of self and national identities. His plays reflect a conflict between home, represented by pre-colonial Ireland with its Gaelic tongue, and away, represented as the forced migration of the Irish to Britain or America or elsewhere for monetary or basic survival reasons.

Growing up listening to his older brother's popular music, McDonagh was most drawn to that of a punk-rock group, the Pogues, which combined an aggressive physicality with the storytelling of traditional Irish songs. Through their music, McDonagh realized he "didn't have to discard his Irish heritage; he could make use of it instead" (42). He saw that the Pogues were able to "destroy the crap side of Irish folk" but through their lyrics they were also able to express a love of country. That lesson taught McDonagh that he could do the same thing with his writing, by "taking the parts you love and destroying the parts you hate."

Having been raised Catholic and having attended Catholic schools to age sixteen when he dropped out (42), McDonagh's play also satirizes the rigid teachings of the religion with its emphasis on the Virgin Mary-moral colleen or mother image and repression of sexuality. Characteristic of the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht is her resemblance to the harlot who has many lovers but no spouse. In McDonagh's play, there is no male character for or mention of a spouse for Mag; for all we know, Maureen could have been the product of Mag's earlier harlot-like promiscuity. Mag and Maureen have qualities evocative of both pagan and Christian imagery. Ireland is symbolized as the harlot who has achieved redemption and Mag's name is derivative of that of Mary Magdalen, the prostitute who is remembered as having been cleansed of sin and present at the crucifixion of Jesus.

As an Anglicized version of the Gaelic "Mairin," a form of the name "Mary" ("Mary"), Maureen represents Ireland as the Virgin Mary whose most treasured possession has been violently taken from her by an evil power. In Maureen's case, we find that the treasure is Ireland's language. By not introducing a husband for Mag or father for Maureen to his play, McDonagh reinforces the combined imagery of Christianity's Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary and the mythological spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht who had lovers but no spouse.

Utilizing the distinctive ability of the Sean Bhean Bhocht to flow between the physical and supernatural worlds as hag and young queen, coupled with the contrasting imagery of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalen, McDonagh is able to bridge pre- and post-colonial Ireland to comment on both. In that way, he accomplishes what Fanon

recommends for a newfound selfhood as an independent nation with an identity that is restricted neither to an ancient origin nor a post-colonial existence.

Maureen is depicted as the stereotypical spinster, "a plain, slim woman of forty" (McDonagh 2) who enters the opening scene laden with market shopping bags that symbolize the weight of her responsibility for caring for her infirm mother, Mag. We immediately get a sense of the supernatural aspect of the Sean Bhean Bhocht when we meet Mag, "a stoutish woman in her early seventies with short, tightly-permed grey hair and a mouth that gapes slightly," as she is sitting in her rocking chair, "staring off into space" (3). Both Mag's name and far-away expression are evocative of the "Hag o' Beare," a synonym for the Sean Bhean Bhocht, the poor old woman.

McDonagh's characters are mongrel as well, as evident in the very first scene that presages the black comedic events to come. When an argument erupts over the choice of radio station, we immediately learn of the incongruity and conflict that exists between mother, Mag and daughter, Maureen:

> *MAUREEN bangs an angry finger at the radio's "on" switch. It takes a couple of swipes before it comes on loudly, through static - a nasally male voice singing in Gaelic. Pause.*

The audience understands that the Gaelic language comes into the home in an arduous, intrusive way —through static and nasal tones. It takes work for the Irish to listen to their native language, and it is made to sound unrecognizable, even foreign. In fact, Mag gets so frustrated at the sound of the radio that she suggests Maureen lower the volume:

> MAG: Is the radio a biteen loud there, Maureen?
>
> MAUREEN: A biteen loud, is it?

MAUREEN *swipes angrily at the radio again, turning it off. Pause.*

MAG: Nothing on it anyways. An oul fella singing nonsense.

. . .

MAUREEN: It's too late to go complaining now.

MAG: Not for nonsense did I want it set.

MAUREEN: (*pause*): It isn't nonsense anyways. Isn't it Irish?

MAG: It sounds like nonsense to me. Why can't they just speak English like everybody? (3-4)

It is Mag of the older generation—the defeated, colonized Ireland—who chooses to relinquish her Irish identity and culture. Over a century earlier, Douglas Hyde admonished the Irish for what Mag so readily acquiesces to: "in Anglicising themselves, they ‘have thrown away with a light heart the best claim which we have upon the world's recognition of us as a separate nationality'" (1). Mag cannot recognize the value of building her nation through preservation of the native language; she prefers to assimilate with the English—be "swamped" (*Wretched* 73), as Frantz Fanon describes.

The conflict continues with Maureen steadfast in her emphasis on maintaining the Gaelic language. In adhering to the principles espoused by Douglas Hyde, the spinster Maureen may be revisiting that time in Ireland when “every time a child spoke Irish, her stick [worn around the neck] was marked with a notch by teacher or parent, and punishment doled out accordingly” (Bourke 306):

MAUREEN: Why should they speak English?

MAG: To know what they're saying.

MAUREEN: What country are you living in?

MAG: Galway.

MAUREEN: Not what county!

MAG: Ireland.

MAUREEN: So why should you be speaking English in Ireland.

MAG: I don't know why.

MAUREEN: It's Irish you should be speaking in Ireland. (McDonagh 7-8)

The conditions for women in eighteenth-century Ireland, when *Cathleen ni Houlihan* takes place, with its hard labor of subsistence farming and restricted social structure still characterize the rural Ireland of Maureen's day. Mirroring Maureen in her obstinacy on the subject of language, Mag reminds Maureen of the economic dependence of the Irish on Britain, and the importance of speaking English as the means to access a way out of the poverty and social limitations of life in the rural towns of western Ireland (Hindley 11). She attempts to counter Maureen, but ultimately demurs:

MAG: (*pause*) Except where would Irish get you going for a job in Britain? Nowhere.

MAUREEN: Well, isn't that the crux of the matter?

MAG: Is it, Maureen?

MAUREEN: If it wasn't for the English stealing our language, and our land, and our God-knows-what, wouldn't it be we wouldn't need to go over there begging for jobs and for handouts?

MAG: I suppose that's the crux of the matter.

MAUREEN: It is the crux of the matter. (McDonagh 8)

Postcolonial critic Albert Memmi also addresses the connection between loss of language and economic restriction in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. If the colonized individual wishes to obtain employment or "exist in the community and the world, he must first bow to the language of his masters" (151). Memmi points out the alienation that the colonized feel in their own country because the colonizer has replaced native highway designations, street markings, bureaucratic and government forms with his own language, making the colonized person "feel like a foreigner in his own country" (Deane "Joyce" 38). As representative of the colonized, Mag has become inured to these linguistic usurpations on the part of the British.

Frustrated and angry at Mag's submission to the colonizer's ways, Maureen "slops the porridge out" and tells her she is "oul and . . . stupid" (McDonagh 9). Unlike Mag, Maureen clearly understands the message behind Memmi's question: "By what else is the heritage of a people handed down? By the education which it gives to its children, and by language, that wonderful reservoir constantly enriched with new experiences" (148).

In further emphasis of her frustration with Mag's ready acquiescence, Maureen repeatedly refers to the word, "crux," alternatively defined as "cross" ("Cross," 3), suggesting that the Maureen equates Britain's colonization of Ireland with Christ's crucifixion. The word "cross" is also defined as a trial or affliction (4), and clearly Maureen intends to show Mag that Britain's encroachment is Ireland's affliction. In Christian imagery, it is Ireland's "cross to bear."

Throughout the play, we are reminded that Mag suffers from a "urine infection" (McDonagh 16) and disposes of her waste down the kitchen sink rather than the bathroom toilet. We are not told if she is reacting to the memory of her experience in a

colonized rural Ireland where, “even by 1946, only one farmhouse in five had any form of toilet, and only one in twenty had one indoors” (Beale 21). In another evocation of the Christian imagery of Mary Magdalen, Mag’s infection and her willful disregard for common sanitary practice does suggest she is attempting to purge herself of sin represented by the infected urine, possibly from her earlier promiscuous behavior, or possibly from the subconscious sin of acquiescing to the colonizer. A crucifix hanging on the wall adjacent to the kitchen sink in which she discards her urine serves as a powerful symbol of the redemption she seeks.

Maureen's symbolism as Virgin Mary is carried throughout the play as well, particularly in her interaction with Pato, her childhood sweetheart who returns temporarily from Britain where he has been working in construction. After attending a going-away-to-America party for Pato's uncle, Maureen torments her mother with lustful banter:

> MAUREEN: (*To* PATO) You'll have to be putting that thing of yours in me again before too long is past, Pato. I do have a taste for it now, I do. . .
>
> PATO: Maureen . . .
>
> *She kisses him, gets off* [his lap], *and stares at MAG as she passes into the kitchen.*
>
> MAUREEN: A mighty oul taste. Uh-huh. (McDonagh 33)

Mag cannot resist in later taunting Maureen about her claim to have had sexual intercourse with Pato. She feels threatened because Pato wants Maureen to join him in a

move to Boston. Mag's overwhelming dependence on Maureen will not tolerate any change in the status quo of their relationship.

MAG: I *do* want a shortbread finger.

MAUREEN: Please.

MAG: Please.

MAUREEN *gives* MAG *a shortbread finger, after waving it phallically in the air a moment.*

MAUREEN: Remind me of something, shortbread fingers do.

MAG: I suppose they do, now.

MAUREEN: I suppose it's so long since you've seen what they remind me of, you do forget what they look like.

MAG: I suppose I do. And I suppose you're the expert.

MAUREEN: I am the expert.

MAG: Oh, aye.

. . .

MAUREEN: You know sure enough, and guessing me arse, and not on me face was it written. For the second time and for the last time I'll be asking, now. How do you know?

MAG: On your face it was written, Maureen. Sure that's the only way I knew. You still do have the look of a virgin about you and you always have had. (*Without malice*.) You always will (64-66).

However, Maureen's significance to the play is not in her attractiveness to the opposite sex, or in her potential ability to marry a suitor and reproduce the nation by

having his children. Rather, her character is firmly entrenched as the spinster who will carry forth the traditions of Ireland in other ways—by encouraging the native language, by maintaining tradition and continuity of order. In exaggerating her sexual experience, Maureen just emphasizes her fated role in the new nationalism as conflated image of the androgynous Sean Bhean Bhocht and the Virgin Mary.

But this spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht does not call for sacrifice or wait for redemption. She is sacrificer and redeemer in one. She gives herself to the nationalist cause of promoting the Irish language, and by her sacrifice Ireland's cultural identity is saved from the indignity that Douglas Hyde so eloquently warned against: "We must arouse some spark of patriotic inspiration among the peasantry . . . and put an end to the shameful state of feeling . . . which makes young men and women blush and hang their heads when overheard speaking their own language" (3). Maureen is the modern spokesperson for Hyde's sentiments of a century earlier. She serves as reminder that the Irish language is a nation-builder, a source of national pride. McDonagh reinforces that with the playing of the song, "The Spinning Wheel" (Murphy and Waller), during Maureen's romantic interlude with Pato:

> Mellow the moonlight to shine is beginning
>
> Close by the window young Eileen is spinning
>
> Bent o'er the fire her blind grandmother sitting
>
> Is crooning and moaning and drowsily knitting (1-4)
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The maid shakes her head, on her lips lays her fingers
>
> Steals up from the seat, longs to go and yet lingers

A frightened glance turns to her drowsy grandmother

Puts one foot on the stool, spins the wheel with the other (33-6)

The song's lyrics set a scene implicative of the co-dependency and conflict between spinster Maureen and her mother, Mag, as represented in the image of the Sean Bhean Bhocht of the song. At once a hag-like grandmother and a spinster young maid, she looks back to the Ireland of her origins, and ahead for escape to a different life. Just as Eileen of the song, Maureen is a spinster conflicted between her responsibilities to family and tradition and chance for greater opportunities elsewhere.

Like Maureen, many men and women in post-Famine Ireland did not marry at all. "Until very recently, Ireland had the highest proportion of single people in any European country. In the 1930s, 55 percent of women and 74 percent of men in the 25-34 age group were single," and that high number continued through the 1960s with "the majority [living] alone, while others lived with elderly parents or in sibling groups" (Beale 30). Women living in the country had a choice between waiting for a local bachelor to become ready to marry or leaving for Dublin or overseas. Unlike sons, daughters were not economically required to stay on the farm—and primogeniture meant they were unlikely to inherit it. "Unless they were pressurised to stay and care for an ailing parent" (33), they would find attractive the opportunity to get a job in the city or abroad and exert some control over their lives. In her role as cultural nationalist, however, Maureen laments the ones who escape. The continuing dialogue with Pato reinforces her contribution as the Sean Bhean Bhocht and promoter of Irish nationalism, since she offers an alternative:

MAUREEN: That's Ireland, anyways. There's always someone leaving.

PATO: It's always the way.

MAUREEN: Bad, too.

PATO: What can you do?

MAUREEN: Stay? (McDonagh 35)

Maureen phrases her nationalism as a question, recognizing that Pato has a choice to leave or stay, reflecting the Irish conflict between relinquishing the homeland of heritage for the economic and social advantages of life in Britain among other destinations. Just as both of McDonagh's parents expatriated to London for financial reasons yet later retired to Spiddal, a small village in Connemara (O'Toole), Maureen insists that Pato acknowledge the tribal value of the land and the language he is leaving behind:

> PATO: Of course it's beautiful here, a fool can see. The mountains and the green, and people speak. But when everybody knows everybody else's business . . . I don't know. (*Pause*) You can't kick a cow in Leenane without some bastard holding a grudge twenty year. (McDonagh 35)

Despite the material trappings of the twentieth century with radio, television, and indoor toilet, life in Maureen's and Pato's rural Ireland is still overwhelmingly provincial. Even as politicians were extolling the virtues of family life in rural Ireland, and expressing a romantic view of a countryside "'bright with cosy homesteads,' the people of the west were streaming away, leaving the traditional way of life as fast as they could" (Beale 35). Pato's lament reflects the concerns of large numbers of Irish, both men and women, who emigrated from the western region of the country.

But the scene in which “The Spinning Wheel” plays is also one of foreshadowing. We are reminded here of the strong connection between the Sean Bhean Bhocht and witches and vampires, as well as of her supernatural ability to transmute into other forms. In a folktale from County Wexford, the Cailleach is described as taking on the appearance of an unusual —or “uncommon” as Maria of Joyce’s “Clay” is portrayed — small bird who sounds its arrival in the village with an equally unusual cry that is evocative of the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht and who is, like the blind grandmother “crooning and moaning” in witch-like song:

> A little bird comes with the cuckoo and the swallows in Summer. It usually stays around Carrigbyrne Rock (near Adamstown) during that season, and it is generally known around that locality as the "Calick a Tooma" (Caileach na Túirne). It is called that because its cry resembles that of the old spinning wheel when in motion. It flies very gracefully. It has a small body, a big head, a very short beak, and a big neck. It lays its eggs on the ground. It lives on flies. It gathers them in it crop [sic] until it wishes to eat them. It leaves us about the same time as the other birds of Passage. In no locality except that of Carrigbyrne is the bird known as the "Calick-a-Toorna." (“Cailleach na Túirne”)

Reminiscent of McDonagh’s own mother’s repeated playing of the song while McDonagh was a boy (O’Toole), Maureen mentions to Pato that her mother loves the piece but they both agree that it is a "creepy oul song" (McDonagh 32):

> PATO: She does have a creepy oul voice. Always scared me this song did when I was a lad. She's like a ghoul singing. (*Pause*.) Does the grandmother die in the end now, or is she just sleeping? (33)

The dramatic foreboding depicted with words such as "creepy" and "ghoul" and the question of whether or not the grandmother dies at the end evokes the mythical power of the Sean Bhean Bhocht and her ability to transform, especially from an old hag to a young queen, and traverse from one world to the other and back again.

Just as Yeats portrays the Sean Bhean Bhocht as both romantic hero and otherworldly vampire, McDonagh presents Mag and Maureen from a similar dualist perspective. Although Maureen sacrifices her life to care for her elderly mother, we learn that she repeatedly scalds and disfigures her mother's hand in fits of rage. Maureen's rage has its roots, as do many of Ireland's troubles, in an experience with Britain. When she was twenty-five, Maureen left Ireland like others before her. In Britain, she found work cleaning offices but was ridiculed by the colonizer with such phrenology-based phrases as "backward Paddy fecking," and "the fecking-pig's backside face on ya" (43, 44). Maureen's only relief from the humiliation is in the form of friendship with a black woman, another subjugated class from another colonized territory of Trinidad, who has to explain the swearing that Maureen "didn't even understand" (44). As Memmi describes:

> If communication [between colonizer and colonized] finally takes place, it is not without its dangers . . . The colonized is saved from illiteracy only to fall into linguistic dualism . . . Possession of two languages is not merely a matter of having two tools, but actually means participation in two psychical and cultural realms. (150-1)

After such humiliation in a language so different from her native tongue that she "didn't even understand" it, Maureen expresses her inability to participate in the psychical realm of linguistic dualism with a nervous breakdown. She spends a month in Difford Hall, a British "nut-house [with] a lot of doolally people" (McDonagh 43). Like the abject witch who is kept on the fringe of society, "the woman who does not conform to societal expectation and who possesses feminine qualities that are not safely contained, invisible, in a domestic environment . . ." (Ross 4) gets placed in society's margins.

Oonagh Walsh's essay on epigenetics and the Great Famine, included in the *Women and the Great Hunger* collection of 2016, refers to studies that show "the Irish were disproportionally over-represented as inpatients in comparison with other migrant groups" admitted to asylums in Britain, Canada, and Australia, the countries that in addition to America most often accepted Irish immigrants during The Famine (175). Walsh's extensive research suggests that The Famine's after-effects for the Irish people involve psychological and physiological "changes in their genetic expression which do not involve alterations to genetic code but whose effects may persist over several generations." These changes occurred as a direct result of the starvation and post-traumatic stress of that momentous event. Because Maureen is not comfortable with the linguistic and social duality forced upon her by her colonizers, she becomes further identified as Other in her madness. Clearly, Maureen's identity is so linked with her native language and land that she returns home.

As discussed earlier, Yeats's image of the Sean Bhean Bhocht as the poor old woman who becomes "a young girl [with] the walk of a queen" (*Cathleen* 11) requires the promise of sacrifice on the part of Irish men. In an interesting satiric turn on Yeats's

figure, and one that reinforces the power of the spinster to promote Irish nationalism, forty-year-old Maureen is transformed into the "beauty queen of Leenane" after a night that celebrates the emigration of Irish men to other shores while she remains in Ireland:

> PATO: Sure, I have no control over me hands. They have a mind of their own. (*Pause.*) Except I didn't notice you complaining overmuch anyways, me stray oul hands. Not too many complaints at all!!
>
> MAUREEN: I had complaints when they were straying over that Yank girl earlier on in the evening.
>
> PATO: Well, I hadn't noticed you there at that time, Maureen. How was I to know the beauty queen of Leenane was still yet to arrive? (McDonagh 36)

The conflict between dependence and independence as reflected in that between mother Mag as the hag, and daughter Maureen as the queen, comes to its climax when Mag intercepts a note that Pato has written to Maureen from Britain. In the note, he acknowledges both Maureen's virginity and his impotence in that they never consummated their relationship that evening after the party:

> All it was, it has happened to me a couple of times before when I've had a drink taken and was nothing to do with did I want to. I would have been honoured to be the first one you chose, and flattered, and the thing that I'm saying, I was honoured then and I am still honoured, and just because it was not to be that night, does it mean it is not to be ever? (49)

Although Pato attributes his impotence to alcohol, we question whether this particular incident occurred because of Maureen's embodiment as the Sean Bhean

Bhocht. Because male culture endorses a dichotomy in the Sean Bhean Bhocht between the devouring, destructive qualities of the Great Mother goddess and her life-giving creative force, Pato may have experienced impotence as a result of his fear of Maureen as Dark Mother, "the flesh-eating sarcophagus voraciously licking up the blood seed of men" (Neumann 149). In his subconscious fear of castration, Pato refuses to cooperate by providing Maureen with the very thing the Terrible Mother wants, namely, the offering of the phallus (202).

The violent imagery associated with the Sean Bhean Bhocht as destructive goddess carries through in Maureen's reaction to Mag's revelation of her daughter's past. In humiliating her, Mag manifests the same characteristics of the colonizer who subjugates by shaming the identity of the colonized. Maureen can no longer abide the servitude and repression exacted by her mother, the symbol of colonization; the intergenerational conflict between dependence and independence climaxes in bloody interaction between the two.

In a final act of rage, Maureen makes use of the fireplace poker that is so old it is probably as ancient as the cottage, and which traditionally represents the comforts of home and hearth. The poker is "good and heavy and long," one that is capable of clobbering "half a dozen coppers . . . just for the fun of seeing the blood running out of them" (McDonagh 55). Instead of murdering police, however, Maureen exacts her anger on her mother and the colonizing force she represents. She uses the material symbol of domesticity to murder the symbolic material of domesticity—mother. Mag accepts the colonizer's tongue as her own, despite Maureen's entreaties to the contrary and Douglas Hyde's admonition that "had the Gaelic race perceived what was being done, or had they

been once warned of what was taking place in their own midst, they would, I think, never have allowed it. When the picture of complete Anglicisation is drawn for them in all its nakedness Irish sentimentality becomes suddenly a power and refuses to surrender its birthright . . ." (2). Maureen refuses to surrender her birthright; unlike Mag, she will not allow complete Anglicisation and takes back her sovereignty.

As Irish literary critic Declan Kiberd expresses in his chapter on "Mothers and Daughters" from *Inventing Ireland*, *The Literature of the Modern Nation*:

> The ritual killing or replacement of fathers by sons is the stuff of legend as well as of social progress: though it may have begun in the tragic mode, it is by now a tradition so extensive that there is a place within it for comedy, such as the masterpiece by Synge [*Playboy of the Western World*]. The son must challenge the father to become a man. What daughters must do in order to become women is more problematic: killing the mother could hardly be enacted in any recognizable comic mode. (395)

Fostering a new cultural nationalism for Ireland by representing the mythical Sean Bhean Bhocht as spinster, playwright McDonagh contradicts the "stuff of legend" of the patriarchy with his scene of matricide. The audience was so stunned during the play's London performance that it cried out "Stop! Don't do it!" when Maureen begins beating her mother (O'Toole).

But as symbol of colonizer, Mag has to go, and McDonagh has created a sympathetic audience. From the earliest scenes in which Mag incessantly complains and issues commands, to the climactic scene where Mag burns the letter from Pato asking Maureen to come to America with him, the playwright sets us up for identification with

Maureen. After Maureen murders her mother with the poker, there is no retribution from the police or from the community. Justice does not come in the usual manner, through patriarchal systems and laws. The month-long inquest fails to establish Maureen's responsibility for the murder.

At the closing of the play, Maureen returns after the funeral to the kitchen of the cottage she once shared with her mother. But the last scene echoes the supernatural nature of the Sean Bhean Bhocht that appeared in the first, when Mag is seated in the rocking chair "staring out into space" (McDonagh 3). This time, however, it is Maureen rocking gently in the chair, listening to a modern song by the popular Irish group, The Chieftains, that is coming in clearly on the radio. Instead of the static and background noise described in the opening scene, "the announcer's quiet, soothing voice is heard" (84). We are led to believe that Maureen as the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht has set the stage for a resurgence of Irish language usage.

Maureen is not punished in society's customary manner and that leaves us with the uncertainty that she, as the Sean Bhean Bhocht, is one of the "undead." The popular, modern Chieftains's song is followed immediately by the pre-colonial song, "The Spinning Wheel" that featured so prominently in McDonagh's play as evocative of the Sean Bhean Bhocht figure. When Maureen gets up from the rocking chair, she glances back to see it still moving. It is as if Mag has returned from the grave and will once again inhabit the cottage, and perhaps her daughter's mind or body in some form. The symbiotic, supernatural relationship of mother and daughter, hag and maiden, will endure. As Maureen suggests to Mag earlier in the play:

MAUREEN . . . I suppose now you'll never by dying. You'll be hanging on forever, just to spite me.

MAG: I *will* be hanging on forever!

MAUREEN: I know well you will! (24)

The ambiguity of this last scene points again to the unity of the nature of the Sean Bhean Bhocht as pagan goddess. We are never sure that Mag and Maureen aren't one in the same person or spirit. "There is an eerie collusion of Maureen and Mag, a blurring of borders between self and Other . . ." (Diehl 106). Those blurred boundaries signify not only the difficulty the Irish have in separating their identity from that of the colonizer, but of creating a unified identity of their own amidst encroaching modernization and globalization. With such intrusions of worldly materialism as the radio station that brings in popular music, the television showing "only Australian oul shite" (McDonagh 75), the "framed picture of John and Robert Kennedy" (3) from America on a wall of the cottage, and the kitchen tea-towel inscribed with the clichéd slogan so coveted by tourists, the west of Ireland is losing its identity as the "site of origin" that Nicholas Grene refers to in his remarks about Irish pastoral literature.

Maureen expresses a similar confusion at the end of the play as to whether she wants Ray to tell his brother Pato that she, "the beauty queen of Leenane" (83), says hello or goodbye. Her confusion and the uncertainty of her identity as a combination of Mag and Maureen translates into McDonagh's ambiguity as the bard who speaks through the Sean Bhean Bhocht. The playwright seems unsure about the future of Ireland now that the romantic Yeatsian notion of her as Mother Ireland has been dispelled. His work represents as ongoing the struggle between Maureen and Mag and between pre-colonial

and post-colonial Ireland. But it is “The Spinning Wheel” that plays on the radio until the lights fade to black in the play. Like Eileen of the song, who “longs to go and yet lingers,” McDonagh leaves us with the impression that the spinster Maureen, the Sean Bhean Bhocht, looks forward at the same time she looks back.

CONCLUSION

Looking ahead towards a new cultural and political nationalism requires upending a centuries-old trope: the conquest of a feminized Ireland. It calls for deconstructing the country's history in a careful way, retaining and reimagining it so that the pre-colonial baby is not discarded with the post-colonial bathwater. It may seem incongruous to invoke a metaphor of birth in a paper concerning itself as this does with re-visioning as spinster Ireland's traditional symbol of mother. However, it is that precise image of Ireland-as-mother that also connects the goddess with her themes of cultural creativity and rebirth. And the goddess is central to the cultural future of Ireland, as represented and envisioned by the Irish writers addressed in this paper. Regardless of their gender or country of origin, each writer's distillation of the Irish in his or her blood generated a unique elixir for the growth of Irish society.

With their *Celtic Folklore and Fairy Tales Anthology* and their stage dramas of ancient heroism, Yeats and Lady Gregory brought the goddess mainstream to readers and audiences, even though Irish folk knew she was always there: in the earth-stream. The *NFCS* highlights the embedded nature of the goddess in Ireland's oral history by preserving thousands of stories of her, remembered by people in their seventies and eighties and passed along to schoolchildren who have shared them for generations to come. These storytellers are people born into families who had lived through the Great Famine, who in turn might have read the poetry of *The Nation* and been moved by the anguished pleas in John Keegan's, "A Dying Mother's Lament," or responded to the call to arms of Speranza's "Courage."

While Yeats and Lady Gregory focused on revitalizing a post-Famine nationalism by reaching deep into the country's wellspring of folklore, James Joyce conferred dignity upon the urban man and woman suffocated by the moralizing of that very post-Famine parochial fervor. Joyce's scrutiny would offend a nation so raw from the effects of its colonization by both Church and State that his work could only be continued from afar. And yet Joyce carried the country in his soul, as he did the goddess whose inspiration he drew upon for his art. There was no exile for him from the voice of his ancestral home. That voice whispered and sometimes shouted from the pages of his writing. It shows up in Maria of "Clay" whose independence of spirit in "not wanting a ring or a man either" reminds us of how Joyce depended on the goddess for his cultural creativity.

That freedom to breathe, to create, to build a body of work, to provide insight, originates in the life force of the goddess. Joyce said as much in his autobiographical *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. That he found his own voice away from the silencing, stultifying, systems of politics and parochialism in his own country enabled other Irish—especially the Other, female Irish—writers to speak with a voice that had been particularly muffled in the past.

Like Joyce, Edna O'Brien had been stifled by those same systems of Church and State because her words, too, provoked unwanted self-reflection from Irish society. Like Joyce, she repudiated the Roman Catholicism of her upbringing; like Joyce, she went steps further by reminding the Irish—indeed, the world—of the sexual, sensual nature of all womanhood, regardless of station in life. O'Brien and her characters were the embodiments of the goddess within, who did not have to explain away, hide from, or apologize for her sexual prowess. Just as the Sean Bhean Bhocht of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*

who knew "many a man ha[d] died for love of [her]," but "with all the lovers that brought [her] their love, [she] never set out the bed for any" (8-9), many of the women in O'Brien's works experienced the sexuality of their goddess origin.

Believing they could not achieve creative freedom within their own country, Joyce and O'Brien left and, ironically, touched their homeland with a far greater freedom: a legacy of Irish writing. The scrutiny they applied to Irish society from outside it, and the suppression of their words from within it, gave voice to the quiet:

> Certain kernels of sound
> reverberate like seasoned timber,
> unmuted truths of a people's winters,
> stirrings of a thousand different springs. (12-15)

Moya Cannon's poem, "Taom," excerpted above, speaks of the creative freedom of words springing at last like seeds from Brigit's garden after the wordless winter of the Cailleach. Cannon calls them "territories of the voice//that intimate across death and generation." They are the territories that Joyce and O'Brien explored and opened for settlement by writers who were themselves just then emerging from winter.

The international women's movement of the 1960s-70s, for which O'Brien's writing had become foundational, permitted women to look at themselves less abstractly than they had been depicted and treated for centuries. The "kernel of sound" coming from short story writer Maeve Kelly was first uttered when she was well into her forties. At a time in Irish literary history when only one in ten books was authored by women, Kelly's work in 1976 received the same critical dismissiveness as Joyce's and O'Brien's. Where Joyce and O'Brien dared to renounce restrictive Catholic morality, Kelly, too, dared to

take on taboo subjects such as the ultimate silenced woman: the battered. Echoes of Kelly's sense of the vulnerability and suppression of women are heard in "Amnesty." Although her story's narrator is nameless, like the goddess, she is not voiceless, for she speaks instead of her mute brother. In doing so, she speaks for all Irish women, expressing her independence and love for her land.

In concluding this analysis about the strengths and sounds of the spinster goddess who has been instrumental in the (r)evolution of Ireland as nation, it seemed important to choose a work about how the goddess symbolizes through language the merging of the old order with the new, Ireland's pagan past with its promising future. Written by a disaporan who himself straddles two territories, Martin McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane* promises through the spinster Maureen that Ireland's speech will never be suppressed again. Like Yeats's Old Woman who has "no quiet in [her] heart," the mutable Sean Bhean Bhocht of McDonagh's play will never be muted.

As the character Maureen looks over her shoulder in the final scene of the play, she sees the empty chair rocking back and forth signifying the omnipresence of the goddess, who will always be with us in one avatar or another. Regardless of the material form in which she exists, or the country from which she writes, or the number of partners whom she chooses to take—or not take—the goddess will always be the repository for cultural reproduction. And like the Old Woman who "sings to herself," the goddess will not be silenced.

By re-imaging Mother Ireland as the spinster Sean Bhean Bhocht, these writers have themselves given birth to a new historical tradition for Irish women. Through

writers who have given a platform to the female voice, Irish literature has depicted a culture truly different from that of the country's repressed past.

Although it has taken over a century and a half, Ireland's struggle for freedom has coincided with the path outlined by post-colonial critic Frantz Fanon. After the conflict of colonization, he writes, "there is not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonized man" (*Wretched* 178). And woman. As recent developments make clear, Irish government is recognizing the need for Irish women to express their identities apart from Ireland as mother as an excuse for Ireland as warrior. Since that threshold has been crossed through the impact of literature, the Irish woman can be historical instead of solely mythical.

Over the decades since Yeats and Lady Gregory transformed the Sean Bhean Bhoct into nationalist symbol *Cathleen*, Irish women have been—slowly but methodically and with great insight—recovering the power imbued by the goddess in their very nature. Returning to their innate roots, they are disentangling the cocoon of patriarchal society and re-fashioning a cloak to match the promise of the *1916 Proclamation of Poblacht Na h-Eireann* to them—to "IRISHWOMEN"—for "the unfettered control of Irish destinies to be sovereign and indefeasible" (Ireland). Embodying the spirit of the ancestral goddess of sovereignty, *Sive Oultach* or *Siobhan Meiscil*, Irish women have helped elect their first female President and her female successor, the first-ever President to be born in Northern Ireland. They made their voices victorious by reclaiming their ability to choose contraception, divorce, and primacy of a specific religious belief. The strength of their activism has compelled the Irish government to acknowledge its role in the subjugation

of women for decades in the Magdalen Laundries and has brought down the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution.

If recent events are any indication, Irish women are taking back their goddess-given sovereignty. With pen in hand, they are writing their own versions of themselves apart from the accepted roles of mother, nun, mistress, or working celibate. In listening to the sounds of poets such as Moya Cannon, there is a possibility for yet another Irish Renaissance, a new dream for an Ireland inspired not by a mythical goddess who calls to arms but rather by an historical goddess who inspires creativity and action. That is the threshold of Brigit and the Cailleach through which Irish women cross every day as they channel—and challenge—Cathleen.

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