

UNMOTHERLY NATIONS, UNPATRIOTIC MOTHERS: OTHER IRELANDS IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which contemporary Irish women's poetry revises conventional representations of female allegories of the nation. The analysis will show that traditionally female tropes of Irish nationalism inhabit the same cultural location that characterizes the societal position of motherhood according to Julia Kristeva, who argues that mothers assume an important function in regulating the drives and preparing children for entrance into the symbolic order of society, in relation to which they themselves remain structurally liminal. This paper will show that contemporary Irish women poets use these female tropes as a potent site for revising the discourses of femininity and Irish nationalism, either through aligning these abstract, stereotyped female figures with women's lived experience, or by reevaluating them from within their liminal positions.

KEY WORDS: Irish women's poetry, Kristeva, female representations and the Irish nation, rereading Irish traditions.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo examina las formas en las que la poesía contemporánea de mujeres irlandesas reformula las representaciones convencionales de las alegorías femeninas de la nación. El análisis demostrará que los tropos femeninos del nacionalismo irlandés habitan tradicionalmente la misma localización cultural que caracteriza la posición en la sociedad de la maternidad según Julia Kristeva, que considera que las madres asumen una función importante para regular las pulsiones y preparar a los niños para su ingreso en el orden simbólico de la sociedad, en relación a lo cual, éstos permanecen liminares estructuralmente. Este ensayo revelará que las poetisas irlandesas contemporáneas utilizan estos tropos femeninos como un poderoso sitio donde revisar los discursos sobre feminidad y nacionalismo irlandés, bien alineando estas figuras femeninas abstractas y estereotipadas con la experiencia vivida por mujeres, bien reevaluándolas desde los entresijos de sus posiciones liminares.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía de mujeres irlandesas, Kristeva, representaciones femeninas y la nación irlandesa, relecturas de la tradición irlandesa.



Contemporary women poets in Ireland have unanimously criticized maternal allegories of Irish nationalism for offering oversimplified conceptions of motherhood, of gender, and of the nation. In voicing this criticism, these poets have followed two fundamentally different, yet complementary paths. Along with Declan Kiberd's emphasis in *Inventing Ireland* on the vast and continuous impact of the simplification and victimization of "woman" in the discourses of cultural nationalism, women poets in Ireland have either *re-inscribed* these iconic figures with new meanings or, alternatively, *re-evaluated* the silence and passivity that characterizes their conventional portrayal:

The fetishizing, once permitted, affects everything— even the landscape is treated like a reified woman's body— so that, after independence, the actual landscape is slowly transformed by the touristic industries until it conforms to the outlines of the original fantasy. In other words, the Cathleen ní Houlihan of real flesh and blood must impersonate for her lovers the sort of woman they want her to be, and she must leave her own desires unimplemented. In such a nationalism, the "lyric stage" completely overrides the historic concreteness of the revolution. It is made possible by an endless harping on an idealized past, which is used as a distraction from the mediocrity of the present. (Kiberd 294)

In many of her poems, Eavan Boland bestows agency on this icon and makes her tell stories of quotidian existence, hence contesting the inherent abstraction and passivity, which, as Kiberd explains above, impacts on the images of both "woman" and "nation" long after Irish independence. Other poets in Ireland have challenged these allegories while leaving their original qualities unaltered, either through stylistic experimentation or ironic distance. This essay seeks to account for the different positions in Irish women's poetry from the past three decades.

When the discourses of nationalism are amalgamated with those of femininity, motherhood is only one target for simplification. Mother Ireland, Dark Rosaleen, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, and the beautiful young maiden/ old hag of *aisling* poetry come in many variants. Together, these figures present generic and simplified images of women, who can be oversexed or desexualized, and whose motherhood, where applicable, is depersonalized and politicized. Sons are to be produced for the purpose of restoring or consolidating national independence and identity, and daughters to be moulded into the sacrificial maternal roles presented by their mothers, who form an important part of the disciplining body within the system that subdues them. A reading of "Mac an Cheannaí," translated into English by Michael Hartnett as "The Merchant's Son" (15-16), one of 17th-century poet Aodhagán Ó Rathaille's famous vision poems, demonstrates this simplification.

The maiden in Ó Rathaille's poem, Éire, has no autonomy from her lover Mac an Cheannaí, the rightful sovereign of Ireland, whom she believes to be held captive overseas. When she learns of his death, she is also instantly bereft of the purpose of her existence. Following a pattern that is common in the "aisling" form, the poem, which Sean Ó Tuama describes as capturing a mood of "unredeemable despair" (113), records a conversation between a male speaker/ poet and Éire. The maiden tells the stranger that she will be denied the pleasures of love until her suitor



comes back from his travels. In fact, her very womanhood is suspended until his return: “she’ll barren become and lie with none till back comes Mac an Cheannaí” (Harnett 15). In the last stanza, however, the poet imparts to Éire the disillusioning news that her love was killed in Spain, which prolongs her plight into an indefinite future and, as the closing lines show, deprives her not only of her slender hopes of happy love, but of her very identity:

Her freckled kin, they’re overseas, the crowds who loved this woman;
no favour, feast, can be had by them, no fondness, love, I witness;
her face is wet, no sleep she gets— black with gloom her aspect—
there’s no relief to come near her till back comes Mac an Cheannaí.

I said to her when I heard her words, ‘The love you knew was mortal,
beyond in Spain his body’s laid and none will heed your heartache.’
When she heard my voice so close beside, her body shook with screaming,
Her soul escaped in one quick flash: my woe, this girl, exhausted. (Hartnett 16)

Even though the maiden’s incapacitation in the poem is not intended as a comment on women’s powerlessness in comparison to men, but is rendered as a consequence of the overall disempowerment of Ireland under colonial rule, as Ó Tuama’s analysis of the poem demonstrates (113-115), the fact that Éire’s fate is so very intricately connected to Mac an Cheannaí’s is nevertheless of core significance not only to this particular poem, but the entire tradition it emerged from. The maiden in “The Merchant’s Son” does not exist in her own right, but is entirely a function of the rightful king of Ireland, the most esteemed of “[h]er freckled kin” overseas. To this man she has surrendered her body, which will remain infertile until he takes possession of it, and her soul, which dematerializes when she learns of her lover’s death. While in this particular rendering of the *aisling* Éire is not conceptualized as a mother, maternity is addressed in the poem, as a function that is entirely contingent on the male to whom the woman is espoused.

For the analysis in this essay, the concept of maternity is relevant in two ways: as an effectuated, if abstract, maternity, when the woman-as-nation trope portrays a maternal figure, but also more generally as a site of origin that is mythologized and obfuscated, echoing Kristeva’s association of the Platonic “chora” with maternity in “Women’s Time” as “matrix space, nourishing, unnameable, anterior to the One, to God and, consequently, defying metaphysics” (191). As a potential provider of offspring (“matrix space,” “nourishing”) for Mac an Cheannaí with no independent existence or identity (“anterior to the One”), the maiden in Ó Rathaille’s poem mirrors important traits of the Platonic receptacle, showing that the “chora” is illuminating with regard to the discourses of maternity both in individualized and generic representations. In accordance with this understanding, Eugene O’Brien’s *Examining Irish Nationalism in the Context of Literature, Culture and Religion* describes nationalistic identification in a way that has strong repercussions with the Kristevan semiotic or Lacanian mirror stage: “in the nationalist imaginaire, a fixed, hypostasized image of the self, be that individual or societal, is held out both as a “terminus ad quem” towards which all identificatory processes should be



progressing, and conversely as a “terminus a quo” from which all deviation should be prevented” (53). This interplay of myth of origin and utopian destiny, according to O’Brien, sets up a performative dialogue out of which national identity is constituted. Consequently, the “nation,” like the pre-Oedipal maternal, defies logical argumentation and linear time:

Nationalistic selfhood creates a people, a Volk, which transcends time and death. The religious overtones of this message, allied to strong unconscious influences, combine to create a linguistic and suasive dimension to the epistemology of nationalism which can never be fully examined in any analysis which is not grounded in literary, linguistic, and psychoanalytic techniques. (20)

Like the Kristevan “chora” of “Women’s Time,” nationalistic selfhood in O’Brien pertains to the realm of cyclical or “monumental” time, as well as defying representation through language. It is mostly in light of this second, more abstract understanding of maternity as a cultural location that “aisling” poems like Ó Rathaille’s, which also often harness the maternal function for political purposes, and their contemporary contestations are relevant in this dissertation.

Eavan Boland counters this expropriation and simplification of the discourses of femininity in much of her poetry, advocating the need to record the particularities of women’s lives.¹ Ironically, her first major poetic response to the appropriation of the discourses of femininity in Irish nationalism, “Mise Éire,” a poem originally published in Boland’s 1987 collection *The Journey*, has by now itself gained iconic status. The speaker in this text, Boland’s revision of Pádraig Pearse’s poem of the same name, as Gerardine Meaney explains (199), is a woman poet who seeks to depart from the literary convention that sees “[her] nation displaced / into old dactyls” (Boland 128). Instead, the speaker envisages “a new language” for its representation (Boland 129). Boland emphasizes the importance of replacing “the songs / that bandage up the history, / the words / that make a rhythm of the crime” (Boland 128) with the lived experience of “real” women, including the silenced lives of prostitutes and emigrants:

I am the woman—
a sloven’s mix
of silk at the wrists,
a sort of dove-strut
in the precincts of the garrison—

who practices
the quick frictions,
the rictus of delight

¹ This theme is covered in numerous poems especially in *The Journey*, *Outside History*, *In a Time of Violence*, and *The Lost Land*.



and gets cambric for it,
rice-coloured silks.

I am the woman
in the gansy-coat
on board the Mary Belle,
in the huddling cold,

holding her half-dead baby to her
as the wind shifts east
and north over the dirty
water of the wharf

mingling the immigrant
guttural with the vowels
of homesickness who neither
knows nor cares that

a new language
is a kind of scar
and heals after a while
into a passable imitation
of what went before. (NCP 128-9)

In accordance with Hélène Cixous's and Luce Irigaray's theorizing of the "feminine Imaginary" or virtual feminine as an alternative epistemological paradigm that represents the discourses of gender as designating two autonomous entities,² the remaking of Irish poetry Boland envisages in order to record the hidden lives of Irish women past and present is a long and unsettling process, which will eventually yield a "passable imitation of what went before." However, critics' views on the value of Boland's "Mise Éire" for revising female allegories of the nation have been divided.

Given her choice of words in phrases like "a kind of scar" and "passable imitation" in "Mise Éire," it is not surprising that Boland has been criticized for denying herself the realization of her full creative potential by remaining captive to the old forms and conventions she contests. In "From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands," for instance, Edna Longley argues that the poem "destabilizes Mise but not Éire" (163), suggesting that the poet questions the role of the woman poet, but not the discourses of nationalism or their gendering in cultural representation. Longley's statement is an obvious reaction to the conceptualization of "the woman poet's" (a concept which is itself charged and often used reductively) renovation of

² See Hélène Cixous's and Catherine Clement's *The Newly Born Woman*; Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa"; Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex which Is Not One*; and Alice Jardine's "Gynesis."



the discourses of nationalism in terms of injury and damage, thus implicitly portraying her own project as a diminishment of the established codes. In “Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and the Body of the Nation,” Guinn Batten discusses Boland’s work in similar terms to Longley, highlighting the limitations that the poet’s recurrent contestation of the inherited structures not only of cultural nationalism, but also more generally of language and poetics entails. Batten explains that by giving a voice to the woman-as-object of the Irish poetic tradition in “Mise Éire,” as well as her 1998 collection *The Lost Land*, Boland “turns frequently to that fixed poetic part as it assumes personhood, a process whereby Mother Ireland becomes and ordinary (but therefore exemplary) Irish woman” (178). The critic compares this approach to other poets’ deconstruction of that “fixed part” as a strategy that offers more possibilities for renewal.

More appreciative readings of “Mise Éire” see the juxtaposition of the inherited image of Hibernia with its hidden Other as setting up a performative dynamics that paves the way for the development of an alternative cultural paradigm. In “Irish Women Poets and the Republic of Ireland: Formalism as Form,” Catriona Clutterbuck remarks that “the speaker as female is simultaneously both the icon of Ireland (Mise Éire) that elides the suppressed elements of the country’s history (such as the lives of the whores and emigrants), and herself what is elided (Mise Éire). Therefore the speaker at once models the mask demanded by nation, and the emptiness beneath it,” thus “enacting the very tension between false and true representation which is endemic in the foundations of modern Irish culture” (31).³ Indeed, Boland’s poem is precisely the product of the encounter of the generic image of “the woman” and its Other, the emigrant mother suffering in abysmal poverty or the woman who sells her body to escape the former’s destitution.

Whether one chooses to see the poem as reproducing and perpetuating the traditions it contests or as a successful attempt at revising them, arguably a predominantly oppositional stance as often present especially in Boland’s early work constitutes a necessary and important stage in the process of renovating the discourses of femininity. As Rosi Braidotti suggests in *Metamorphoses*, this revisionist project requires “*working through* the stock of cumulated images, concepts and representations of women, of female identity, such as they have been codified by the culture we are in” (41). And indeed, Boland recurrently revisits the “cumulated images” of women in Irish poetry of nationalism, as well as representing what they exclude. “Mise Éire” is the most widely known, if not necessarily the most effective, example. The poet’s more recent writing deconstructs the concept of “nation” to a larger degree than her work from the 1980s and early 1990s, whereby, according to

³ For similar perspectives, see Gerardine Meaney’s discussion of the poem in “Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics”; Kim McMullen’s “‘That the Science of Cartography Is Limited’: Historiography, Gender, and Nationality in Eavan Boland’s ‘Writing in a Time of Violence’”; Jahan Ramazani’s “A Transnational Poetics”; and Deborah Sarbin’s “‘Out of Myth into History’: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin.”



Michael Böss, Boland's 1998 collection *The Lost Land* marks an important transitional moment ("The Naming of Loss and Love: Eavan Boland's "Lost Land" " 127).

While the speaking voice in Boland's work often seems constrained by the dilemma of at once seeking to identify with the Irish poetic tradition and at the same time also renouncing substantial aspects of it, Medbh McGuckian's and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's more oblique writings review the Irish literary conventions from a less oppositional viewpoint and more implicitly. In "Boland, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin and the Body of the Nation," Guinn Batten describes their different approaches to the woman-as-nation trope:

To Boland's argument that women writers become political when they eschew victimhood while representing those women who remain victims, McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin often present speakers or historical figures who acquire agency through bodily surrender. To Boland's anger that women in Ireland have been historically silenced or absent they offer a poetry that figures silence and absence as replete with strategies for rethinking the course of narrative and of history. (173)

The analysis of the following poems by McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin will show that their writings indeed offer alternative solutions for the emancipation of Irish poetry from the traditions the early Boland contests, based on a revision that occurs predominantly at a stylistic, rather than a conceptual level. However, the strategies employed by McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin in order to achieve this are fundamentally different. While McGuckian's introspective poetry often blurs the boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, as well as other conventional binaries, Ní Chuilleanáin's poems tend to offer complex, multilayered, often prismatic, yet precisely drawn, images of external objects.

Medbh McGuckian's "The Colony Room" (*Drawing Ballerinas* 48) features a speaker who re-inscribes the convention that analogizes the female body to the land as s/he describes the act of love-making between two partners of unspecified sexual identity. The implicit reference in the title of the poem to a private members drinking club in Soho, London, which was established in the aftermath of the Second World War, of which the painter Francis Bacon was one of the founding members, and which was run by Muriel Belcher, creates an ambience that echoes this post-war focus for excentricity, artistic exchange, and gay culture. Overall, the poem questions the conventions of art as well as of sexuality and is representative of the ways in which, as Moynagh Sullivan suggests in "Dreamin' My Dreams with You: Medbh McGuckian and the Theatre of Dreams," McGuckian challenges "Irish literary cultures and traditions, which are fixed in subject-object positions which designate the woman primarily as an iconic mother and as an unchanging structure from which a historical body of male poets may negotiate their relationship to the nation, or the island" (109). The encounter portrayed in "The Colony Room" radically undermines notions of fixed "subject-object positions" and of iconic representations of maternity, as well as questioning, among other binaries, the simplified dichotomy of colonial victim versus aggressor.

McGuckian's poem portrays two mutually desiring lovers during an encounter in the "colony room," defying the formulaic patterns of male-female relationships



in *aisling* poetry, where a passive woman is the object of the, often unconsummated, desire of a male as described by Richard Kearney in *Postnationalist Ireland*:

After the plantations of the seventeenth century, Ireland became more frequently identified with a vulnerable virgin ravished by the aggressive masculine invader from England: the *Sasannach*. In the *Aisling* poems of the eighteenth century, the ‘hidden’ Ireland was thus personified as a visionary daughter or *spéirbhean* threatened by the alien marauder (or inversely, following the same logic, as a shameless hag— *meirdreach*— who lifted her skirts for the invader’s pleasure). (119-120)⁴

Evoking religious reverence as well as love-making, McGuckian’s poem deconstructs the binary image of “*spéirbhean*” versus “*meirdreach*”:

If you are touching, you are also being touched:
if I place my hands in prayer, palm to palm,
I give your hands new meaning, your left hand calm.

You define my body with the centre of your hand;
I hear through the shingled roof of your skin
your ear-shaped body enter the curved floor-line
of my skin. My hands just skim the cushioned opening,
the glitter of your mouth; all woods, roots and flowers
scent and stretch the map that covers your body.

Less touchable than the birth or continuation
of Ireland, in its railed enclosure, your root-note,
in its sexual climate, your kingdom-come eyes,
year-long, inactive lover, durable as paradise.

Like small shocks in the winter, neck to neck,
the mirrors reflected the coloured ray
the evenings needed most, when the day...
asked for night in that mistletoe way. (48)

Both partners’ touch actively bestows meaning, thereby challenging the “male subject” versus “female object” dichotomy that characterizes the formulaic poetry of Irish nationalism as described by Kearney. In addition, the speaker’s hands are alternately cast “in prayer, palm to palm” and then in a sensual exploration of the other, gliding over “the cushioned opening, / the glitter of your mouth” while the addressee of the speaker’s words and caresses is described in terms of both

⁴ Declan Kiberd also emphasizes the passivity of the woman in “*aisling*” poetry: “The ‘*aisling*’ poets of the eighteenth century had always imagined woman not as an autonomous person but as a site of contest: the wilting ‘*spéirbhean*’ or skywoman lay back and languished until deliverance came from abroad in the person of a gallant national saviour” (362).



religious (“your kingdom-come eyes”) and sexual (“your root-note, / in its sexual climate”) nuances.

In addition to the strong sensual connotations of these lines, the title of the poem and numerous other references also invite political associations. The reference to “the map that covers your body,” for instance, evokes the 19th century anglicization of Irish place names in order to map out Irish territory as part of the British Empire, which in the 1980s elicited various artistic responses, such as Brian Friel’s *Translations* and visual artist Kathy Prendergast’s Body Map series. In the latter, which the poem may draw on for inspiration, fragmented and therefore alienating images of female body parts are blended in with map sections, rendering the conventional association of “woman” with “land” in the Irish cultural tradition as a colonial imposition. In McGuckian’s poem, the representation of the body/map composite is also defamiliarized, as the speaker is “scent[ing] and stretch[ing]” the map that is alternatively constructing, containing, concealing or shielding the lover’s body, hence pointing to the complex dynamics of identity formation, both personal and collective. Because it is “[l]ess touchable than the birth or continuation / of Ireland,” acknowledging the contingencies involved in national identification as well as the representation of national identity, the image of the encounter between self and other McGuckian offers is “durable as paradise,” thus advocating a language of fluidity and transience to overcome the unhelpful fixations of the past, as well as positioning the encounter between the two lovers in a realm apart from concrete material existence, an effect which the image of the lover’s “kingdom-come eyes” further enhances.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s “The Last Glimpse of Erin” (*The Rose Geranium* 24), shows that the objectification of women in Irish poetry of nationalism is a collective undertaking by offering glimpses of the perspectives of poet and an unspecified addressee as well as that of a man holding his baby while his wife is mending his clothes. This merging of different perspectives at a conceptual level is mirrored in the aesthetic dimension in the way in which the island and the swimmer in the poem gradually fuse into one another while the unspecified “you” the speaking voice recurrently addresses is drifting off to sleep. “At the same time as the space between them grows,” Irene Gilsean-Nordin suggests in *Reading Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, a Contemporary Poet*, “the distance paradoxically diminishes, as the island slowly dissolves into the sea” (77):

The coastline, a swimmer’s polished shoulder heaving
On the edge of sky: our eyes make it grow:
The last glimpse, low and smooth in the sea.

We face the air, all surfaces become
Sheer, one long line is growing
Like a spider’s navel cord: the distance

From your low shoulder lost in the quilt,
An arm thrown forward: a swimmer: your head
Buried in a pillow like a wave.



The white light skirting the cloud pierces
Glass riddled with small scratches and crates
The depths and cadences of a spider's web.

A man is holding his baby and laughing,
He strokes her cheek with a brownstained finger
While his wife sews a wristbutton on his other hand.

The island trimmed with waves is lost in the sea,
The swimmer lost in his dream. (*Ní Chuilleanáin* 24)

As the dynamic, male swimmer in Ní Chuilleanáin's poem is moving away from the land, an image of a submissive maternal figure emerges at the centre of the poem, highlighting the aesthetic process that has reified women in the poetic traditions of nationalism in Ireland. Both land and swimmer are gradually submerged in the man's gaze, moulding the original dynamic image of an athlete receding from the mainland into a passive, dream-like vision, echoing the aesthetics of the "aisling" convention, which tends to simplify and hypostasize, as the example of Ó Rathaille's "The Merchant's Son" demonstrates.

The recurrent reference to spiders in "The Last Glimpse of Erin," which takes its title from one of 19th-century Irish poet and singer Thomas Moore's melodies, "The Coolin," enhances the alienating effect the manipulation of spaces and angles creates. The spider's web, which appears twice in Ní Chuilleanáin's poem, is a reminder of the fact that the picture it presents is constructed and contingent like the precarious product of the spider's subtle craft. The simulacrum of the "spider's navel cord" (my emphasis), furthermore, draws attention to the mythic dimensions inherent in notions of "origin." This is so with regard to individualized, personalized aspects of "origin," in relation to the maternal body, but also concerning collective dimensions of the concept, which are manifest, for example, in the foundation myths upon which the discourses of nationalism are based.

To confirm Batten's aforementioned observation, both McGuckian's and Ní Chuilleanáin's poems implicitly challenge the objectification of women, rather than bestowing agency or a critical voice on the female tropes of nationalism in the Irish cultural tradition, as Boland's work often does (Batten 173). McGuckian's "The Colony Room" sensualizes the simplified and hypostasized images of *aisling* poetry. Like in many of McGuckian's poems, descriptions of external objects in "The Colony Room" blend with references to the speaker's corporeal sensations, thus questioning the delimitation between self and other that conventionally designates a core function of language as a tool for mimetic representation. Ní Chuilleanáin's "The Last Glimpse of Erin" also draws attention to the contingencies in literary representation in her revision of the aesthetics of "aisling" poetry. While drawing images that pertain to the realm of the object world, rather than foregrounding bodily sensations, as McGuckian does, Ní Chuilleanáin's poems are similarly detached from mimesis. "The Last Glimpse of Erin" offers multi-layered, complex and fragmented images that echo and distort familiar aspects from "aisling" poetry. Elements of a dream vision, as well as the juxtaposition of images of woman and land are merged



with other, less conventional motifs, such as the spider's web and navel cord. The mother in Ní Chuilleanáin's poem retains the silence and passivity that characterizes, for instance, the maiden in Ó Rathaille's "The Merchant's Son." However, as Ní Chuilleanáin visualizes those who are implicated in the process of the making of this image of womanhood she also draws attention to its artificiality and thus paves the way for envisaging alternative possibilities. In the following poems, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Rita Ann Higgins also alienate the reader from the Irish cultural tradition of allegorizing the nation through an image of femininity. These poets do so by assuming an ironic distance from the convention they represent.

The woman portrayed in Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's "Caitlín"/"Cathleen" (*Astrakhan* 38-42), shares her first name with the main protagonist in William Butler Yeats's and Lady Gregory's 1902 play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, which features a *Sean Bhean Bhocht* or Poor Old Woman, one of the literary manifestations of Ireland as a woman. In the play, this figure of Irish cultural nationalism intrudes upon the lives of an Irish family, luring one of their sons away from his prospective marriage and into martyrdom for Irish independence. While she is in the Gillanes's family home, where the wedding preparations are in full swing, the Poor Old Woman recurrently refers to her many lovers from the distant and recent past. At the end of the play, when Cathleen has succeeded in convincing bridegroom-to-be Michael Gillane to join the 1798 rebellion, the Poor Old Woman disappears, and instead Michael's younger brother Patrick sees "a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (Yeats and Gregory 431).

Ní Dhomhnaill's poem, translated by Paul Muldoon, mockingly debases the Yeatsian figure, casting a widowed old woman, who in her vanity and self-deceit nevertheless believes herself to be a beautiful young maiden and only takes notice of what confirms her idealized self-image. In this respect Ní Dhomhnaill's "Cathleen" echoes a central dynamics Eugene O'Brien identifies at the heart of the constitution of national identity, the mechanisms of which "serve to create this mirror, this delusory dyad in which nothing else exists except this specular definition of selfhood" (*Examining Irish Nationalism* 55). This effect is enhanced by the colloquialisms and sarcasms in the description of the Poor Old Woman, a tone which the title of the poem echoes as it casually calls this once-revered figure of Irish nationalism by her first name:

even if every slubberdegullion once had a dream-vision
 in which she appeared as his own true lover,
 those days are just as truly over.
 And I bet Old Gummy Granny
 has taken none of this on board because of her uncanny
 knack of hearing only what confirms
 her own sense of herself, her honey-nubile form
 and the red rose, proud rose or canker
 tucked behind her ear, in the head-band of her blinkers. (*Astrakhan* 38-42)⁵

⁵ In the Irish original: "is fiú dá mba dhóigh le gach spreasán an uair úd / go mba leannáin aige féin í, go bhfuil na laethanta san thart. / Cuirfidh mé geall síos leat nár chuala sí leis / mar tá sé



Ní Dhomhnaill's Poor Old Woman is an image of mutton dressed as lamb. Unlike the woman-as-nation trope in Boland's writings, the "Old Gummy Granny" of Ní Dhomhnaill's poem neither acquires agency nor self-awareness. Rather, it is through the sarcasm inherent in a description that distortingly embraces many of the values that characterize the Poor Old Woman of Yeats's and Gregory's play and the many songs of Irish cultural nationalism preceding it that the reader's attention is drawn to the detrimental impact of the literary trope on the negotiation of female as well as Irish cultural identity.

Like Ní Dhomhnaill's "Cathleen," Rita Ann Higgins's "Remapping the Borders," published in 1996 in *Higher Purchase*, also portrays a debased version of Cathleen Ní Houlihan, who, as Catriona Clutterbuck observes in "Irish Women's Poetry and the Republic of Ireland: Formalism and Form," "enters a Texas Irish Writing conference ceílí as a woman dancing the Siege of Ennis" (34). Like Ní Dhomhnaill's Cathleen, the woman in Higgins's poem stretches the boundaries of the codes of representation for conventional images of the woman-as-nation trope and of propriety as set up, for instance, within Catholicism, for which Ennis was a stronghold during the colonization of Ireland. Accordingly, the "borders" the poem examines are those of the nation and of the woman's suspender stockings, which the overly moralizing speaking voice emphatically denies to have seen during the dance:

In Texas
after a conference
they put on a céilí,
nearly everyone danced,
a few of us Margarita'd.

In jig time
everyone knew everyone.
After the Siege of Ennis
a woman asked me,
'Could you see my stocking belt
as I did the swing?'

I was taken aback.

Me, thigh, knee, no,
I saw nothing.
I saw no knee
no luscious thigh
no slither belt,
with lace embroidered border
that was hardly a border at all.

de mhórbhua aici agus de dheis / gan aon ní a chloisint ach an rud a' riúinn í féin. / Tá mil ar an ógbhean aici, dar léi, agus rós breá / ina héadan. Is í an sampla í is fearr ar m'aithne / de bhodhaire Uí Laoghaire" (*Astrakhan* 38-40).



I swear to you
I saw nothing,
not even the worm
lying on his back
waiting to penetrate my tongue. (*Higgins* 38-39)

Highlighting the tension between the reality of the Texas céilí event and the speaker's biased and limited perception, Higgins's poem, like Ní Dhomhnaill's "Cathleen," points to the contingencies of nationalist discourses. This effect that is enhanced by the speaker's recurrent emphasis on the permeability of the "border" of the woman's stocking belt, thus portraying Cathleen Ní Houlihan as a woman who is sexually available and therefore defies the codes of behaviour for women set up in poems like Ó Rathaille's "The Merchant's Son," which views Éire's sexuality as a mere function of Mac an Cheannai's. The juxtaposition in "Remapping the Borders" of two diametrically opposed female figures, that of the sexually permissive dancing woman and the prudish speaker, both mirrors and defies the binary categorization of women into *meirdreach* versus *spéirbhean* that Richard Kearney's analysis of the discourses of nationalism in *Postnationalist Ireland* addresses (119-120). While the speaker emphatically dissociates herself from the licentious céilí dancer, the ambivalent reference in the closing lines to the luscious pleasure of tequila drinking blurs the boundaries between the two images, thus echoing the recurrent reference to contingent borders in the poem.

The poems discussed in this essay form part of a considerable body of writing by contemporary Irish women poets that takes issue with the woman-as-nation trope for reifying female corporeality and silencing women's voices. Especially in the poetry of Eavan Boland, female allegories of the nation are a recurrent theme. Poets like Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, while only occasionally addressing the female allegories of Irish cultural nationalism explicitly, offer interesting new perspectives through questioning at a more fundamental level the aesthetic and stylistic conventions of portraying women in their poems. Apart from "The Colony Room," "The Soil-Map" (published in 1984 in *The Flower Master*) and "The Aisling Hat" (from McGuckian's 1994 collection *Captain Lavender*) are among the foremost examples of poems in McGuckian's oeuvre that address the woman-as-nation trope explicitly.⁶ Some of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's work shares with Boland's a concern with representing the silenced lives of women of the Irish past, which can also be seen as a reaction to the stereotyped, generic images of women in the Irish cultural traditions.⁷ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill often revisits the pre-colonial, Celtic war-and-fertility goddesses, such as the Morrígan, in her work, thus exploring an alternative

⁶ For a further discussion of this poem, see Moynagh O'Sullivan's "'Dreamin' My Dreams with You': Medbh McGuckian and the Theatre of Dreams."

⁷ This is particularly true of *The Magdalene Sermon*, an entire collection dedicated to religious institutions in Ireland to which unmarried mothers were confined from the mid-19th century until the last Magdalene Laundry closed in 1996.



strand of images of women, which are less desexualized and more ambivalent than the representations of women in Irish cultural nationalism.

Contemporary Irish women poets' responses to the woman-as-nation trope may take the form of a protest that remains closely attached to that which it seeks to change as in Boland's early work. Alternatively, poems may offer a more implicit exploration of the possibilities and limitations of this image at an aesthetic level as in McGuckian's and Ní Chuilleanáin's writings, or they may be tinged with irony and sarcasm as is the case in Ní Dhomhnaill's and Higgins's texts. Given that the cultural history these contemporary versions of Hibernia object to is characterized by a hegemonic and prescriptive attitude concerning both content and mode of representation, the plurality of voices and styles in these contemporary renditions of the woman-as-nation trope can be regarded as their foremost strength.

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