

Celts and Celticists in Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*

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The Irish Question is really the English Question, and *vice-versa*. The Irish are accused of never forgetting, but that is because the English never remember. The Irish are accused of endlessly repeating their past, but they are forced to do so precisely because the English have failed to learn from theirs.

—Declan Kiberd

Much of the controversy generated by Howard Brenton's infamous representation of British colonial history in *The Romans in Britain* can in retrospect be attributed to familiar political causes. As a result of right-wing indignation, ostensibly prompted by the spectacle of on-stage homosexual rape, the vigorous debate which followed the play's first performances in 1980 concentrated on questions of artistic subsidy and censorship. But it now seems evident that opposition to Brenton's new play had less to do with questions of obscenity or subsidy than with the emerging New Right's need to reshape contemporary political discourse. Brenton, who had challenged the political establishment repeatedly in his earlier plays, had *The Romans* produced with state subsidy, at nothing less than the National Theatre, shortly after Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. As Richard Boon has persuasively argued, "the play became a useful stalking-horse for a number of figures, inside and outside government, who wished both to test and to reinforce the new 'moral climate' of the early eighties."¹

Because critical discussion of the play has often been framed by the terms of the initial debate, little attention has been devoted during the last fifteen years to the political and methodological implications of Brenton's reworking of the history of British imperialism. One of the earliest attempts to investigate the play's historiographical claims was Philip Roberts' 1981 essay, which interestingly, if problematically, demonstrated that the play worked as a documentary. Since Roberts, only Boon and D. Keith Peacock have produced

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analyses of any length,² and both approaches suggest a basic and useful departure from Roberts': whereas Roberts only demonstrates, albeit meticulously, that "Brenton's account . . . is verified by the standard works on the period,"³ Boon and Peacock explore the ways in which Brenton seems to challenge the ideological foundations of such "standard works." In the first book-length analysis of Brenton's plays, Boon argues that the "political cutting-edge" of *The Romans* lies in Brenton's representation of British relations with Ireland, but that its "more profound supra-historical analysis" concerns the nature of imperialism itself:

[The play's] deeper concerns lie in a broader analysis of what happens when an alien culture is brutally imposed on an indigenous one, and in the questions it asks of the whole process by which history is made and used: questions of how the British see themselves historically, of the origins and functions of some of their most sacred mythologies, and of the whole idea of common cultural heritage.⁴

Peacock, likewise concerned with Brenton's depiction of the clash of cultures, argues that Brenton's "demystification of that form of myth-making employed by one race to characterize another" suggests that "it might be English myths concerning Northern Ireland which were, in part, responsible for inhibiting any resolution of its problems."⁵

In other words, although attention to historical "fact" may be preferable to uninformed imaging of the past, Brenton's main concern is metahistorical; *The Romans* explores the shape of historical change and, more importantly, the processes by which history is perceived and preserved. Situating his argument against contemporary British involvement in northern Ireland within the writing of Irish history by invaders, and demystifying the ideological formations which legitimate the material processes of colonization, Brenton documents the evolution of proto-nationalist narratives which struggle to discover a pre-colonial history and to affirm a unified culture.⁶ As the history of the Celts is rewritten by successive invaders, various generations of the dispossessed resist the imposition of colonial ideology by formulating new originary narratives of Celtic identity. The resulting juxtaposition of competing self-refashionings indicates that, in Brenton's understanding of Celtic history, the Celts' struggle against Roman, Saxon and finally "British" invaders is located in a discursive as much as material battlefield.⁷

What needs further scrutiny, however, is a question of fundamental importance to the understanding of the politics of a play like *The Romans*, namely Brenton's problematic subject position as an English writer of Irish

history—whether Brenton's critique of the English involvement in Northern Ireland, however conscious of the processes by which histories are made and written, can be said to offer a significant challenge to received colonial narratives of Ireland and Irishness. On the one hand, it could be argued that the potentially radical character of Brenton's exposé of imperial myth-making is undermined by his disconcerting reinscription of the languages of "Celticism," a term which David Cairns and Shaun Richards adapt from Edward Said's *Orientalism* to describe the colonial discourse of the English in Ireland:

Orientalism [Celticism] depends for its strategy on . . . flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner [Englishman] in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient [Ireland] without ever losing him the upper hand.⁸

Is Brenton able to subvert the "flexible positional superiority" of the colonizer as historian? The 1989 preface to the anthologized version of *The Romans*, read independently of the play, could well suggest that Brenton is patronizingly distanced from his subject-matter; his language and imagery are infused by the imperialist discourse of such Victorian Celticists as Matthew Arnold. As Cairns and Richards observe, Arnold's attempt was to convince the English bourgeoisie of the "usefulness" not of the Celts themselves but of such Celtic qualities as could be "complements to the other qualities of the English."⁹ In "On the Study of Celtic Literature," Arnold distinguishes himself from "Celt-haters" as well as "Philocelts" but consistently maintains a sense of his positional superiority in relation to the Irish. Arguing that the negative aspect of English stability, its philistinism, could be counteracted by a judicious mixing of the spirit of "Celtism," he advises Englishmen to know and appropriate the artistic delicacy and passion of Celtic culture. From Arnold's professedly "disinterested, positive and constructive criticism" emerges a Celt who is above all "sentimental," shy, wistful, and haunted by a "passionate, penetrating melancholy." Naturally, then, the Celt is also "airy and unsubstantial," and "*always ready to react against the despotism of fact*" (Arnold's emphasis). The passion of the Celt is thus seen by Arnold as one aspect of his essential, ingrained irrationality: "balance, measure, and patience are just what the Celt has never had."¹⁰

Although Brenton is obviously less concerned than Arnold with the preservation of English hegemony, his 1989 preface echoes Arnold at several points.¹¹ Acknowledging that his account of Celtic history "is highly speculative and academically suspect," Brenton nonetheless adds that he quite soon discovered himself something of an expert.¹² Having acquired such ethnographic proficiency, however "suspect," Brenton tried "to find a language" for the Celts and turned his

attention to their "mental world." Caesar, he concluded, "thinks like us, that is dialectically, in terms of cause and effect. His mental world is symmetrical, four-squared, logical." To decipher the Celts' inner workings, Brenton turned, like Arnold, to their art. Assuming the "positional superiority" and ostensible objectivity of the colonial anthropologist, Brenton allows himself to claim, on the basis of a limited investigation of a handful of decorative artifacts and poems, an insight into the mysteries of Celtic "mentality":

Writing the Celts, I kept staring at the few examples of their decoration we have, which is off-centre, curled, triangular Then there were the Welsh triads (again, thinking in threes), which are the nearest thing we have to their sense of poetry, and therefore, to their mentality. The triads, are, to us, infuriating. They mention heroes and battles, but without any sense of what we call history. An "asymmetrical view of the world"?¹³

Echoing Arnold, he concludes that the Celtic mind, like its "off-centre" art, is asymmetrical, undialectical, ahistorical, and infuriating—perhaps even "ready to react against the despotism of fact." Brenton thus decided that the language of the Celts in his play should reflect their "cryptic," "maze-like" civilization. Note his unproblematized shifting from the Celts constructed by Roman historians to his own, and his uncritical echoing of Arnold's vision of the passionate, child-like and uncontrolled Celt.

A triple-rhythmed speech, fiery, full of a kind of self-display and relish, an unabashedly bodily self-love (nearly every Roman author could not get over what they did to their hair . . .), and a language hopelessly ill-equipped to even describe the Romans.¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, the play's representation of the Celts seems at first sight to be constrained by the type of Celticist discourse which characterizes the preface. Attempting to give voice to "the aspirations of a defeated people," Brenton projects images of Celtic fortitude and independence; his natives are substantially less barbaric than, for example, Conrad's savage hordes, and this may be the happy effect of his careful attention, as documented by Roberts, to matters of social organization and cultural history. But the play's Celts are modeled on two Arnoldian encodings of the passionate and emotional Celt: on the one hand we find the artistic, melancholy "producer of civility and culture";¹⁵ on

the other, the fierce, angry nationalist, a prototype of the Republican "terrorist."¹⁶ In other words, Brenton situates Celtic resistance to colonial oppression within representational boundaries produced and controlled by the colonizing imagination, and in this sense the Celts in *The Romans* may be seen as little more than versions of an imperial fantasy.

However, Brenton also skillfully demystifies the colonizers' attempts to institute "structures of misrecognition"¹⁷ and, more importantly, counterposes the emergence of a new "'cultural-social' unity" among the colonized, accounting for the existence of a "critical self-consciousness" of the sort identified by Gramsci as a necessary precondition for such unity.¹⁸ The Celts' narratives struggle against the Romans' not only to establish a genre of Celtic history but also to redefine Celtic subjectivity—to replace, as Terry Eagleton puts it, the "nameless, subversive negativity" entailed by colonialism with an "affirmative" or "positive particular culture."¹⁹ Brenton's account of the Celtic response to the Roman invasion is thus partly illustrative of the "independent consciousness"²⁰ attributed to the colonized by such anti-colonial writers as Frantz Fanon, who argued that the colonized subject "is overpowered but not tamed" or "convinced of his inferiority."²¹

It is by writing the invasion as a struggle for the power to represent, and, more crucially, to misrepresent, that *The Romans* seems to complicate and criticize its own reliance on the colonizers' history. However, the competing narratives of both Celts *and* Celticists converge in the twentieth-century sequences of Part Two, becoming assimilated into the conscience of Thomas Chichester, a British army spy whom Brenton initially positions as an agent of empire but who rather suddenly "goes native" at the end of the play. Chichester's dreams and ensuing "conversion" present what are arguably the most problematic aspect of *The Romans in Britain*, enabling as they do a rewriting of colonialism as something which happens to the colonizer. In an interview conducted soon after the play opened, Brenton had explained, with apparent fatigue, that its political stance was unambiguously aligned with the nationalist position on northern Ireland:

What my play says is that all empire is bad. The Republican cause is good. The border is a crime.²²

But his 1989 preface offers this unexpected qualification:

It was called an "anti-imperialist epic." But the subject of the play is really "culture shock" . . . There is no lead character.

There are no "goodies" and "badies." There is no obvious, or usual, "moral message."²³

Although "culture shock" is certainly a core concern in the play, it is less clear that the play's political thrust hovers in the kind of neutral zone Brenton describes or that he is able to avoid constructing a "lead character." The analysis below examines Brenton's metahistorical strategy—his representation of the struggle for historical authorship—with a view to determining how to read Chichester and the postcolonial politics of the play.

The play is divided into two parts which encompass the first century BC, the sixth century AD, and the present (i.e. 1980). Part One documents the accidental destruction of a Celtic village in Britain by the Roman Army, under the leadership of Julius Caesar, in 54 BC—that is nearly a century before the Roman conquest of Britain. Part Two features two plots which develop independently in interspersed scenes. In the twentieth-century scenes, Thomas Chichester waits undercover in a field in Northern Ireland for the man he is to assassinate, O'Rourke (implicitly an IRA man, although Brenton never actually mentions the IRA). At the end of each of these contemporary scenes, Chichester falls asleep and the action of the second plot fades in: set in 515 AD, this sequence describes the destruction of another Celtic village in Britain, this time by the Saxons, during a series of raids.

From the beginning of the play, Brenton represents the colonizers' power over the Celts partly as a matter of brute force and partly as an effort to seize the ideological and imaginative core of Celtic society. Although the Romans bring no light to Brenton's ancient Britain, they encounter a place of darkness, a nightmare of new beginnings which, for newcomers, demands but also defies articulation: a "Sea of dogs" with "Rabid surf"²⁴—or, as Caesar puts it, a "filthy backwater of humanity, somewhere near the edge of the world."²⁵ The first task of the colonizers, then, is to take command of the means of representation. Caesar is a "Celt-hater" whose goal is systematically to annihilate Celtic culture, but also a Celtacist like Arnold, who, recognizing the hegemonic potential of knowledge, would "know" the Celt to appropriate what he can of Celtic culture for the purposes of advancing Roman civilization. Having slaughtered Celts all over Europe for several years, he is familiar with Celtic rituals and beliefs, and manipulates this knowledge in the interests of his empire. As he informs the young Celtic priest Marban, a new world order has been put in place:

On the mainland I burn your temples. Your priests that will not serve me—I kill. I desecrate their bodies. Desecration according to your beliefs. Head off and burnt, etc. Because

there are new gods now. Do you understand? The old gods are dead. (*Nothing from Marban*). Yes, you understand. We are both religious men.²⁶

As victors, the Romans must force the unknowable into *logos*: the accidental butchering of the village in Part One must be redefined in heroic terms because "Even a little massacre must look like policy."²⁷ The history of the Celts themselves must be subordinated by, and assimilated into, the history of Rome.

However, Brenton is careful not to simplify either the power of the Romans or the helplessness of the Celts. He demystifies the Roman Army, which when it first appears is neither the mass of superbeings imagined by the Celts nor quite the invincible force of history-book and legend. Rather, Brenton foregrounds the arbitrariness of war and the ineptitude of the warriors, who when they are not raping and slaughtering young Celts are made to perform a less spectacular duty for Empire, the digging of toilets. More importantly, Brenton consistently juxtaposes the colonizers' efforts to institute misrecognition against instances of the Celts' own agency and insight. Recall that Brenton had, in the 1989 preface, described a community "hopelessly ill-equipped to even describe the Romans." In the play, however, Brenton's natives are clearly capable of counter-invention. They have dealt with "foreigners," specifically Belgic Celts, for at least thirty years, and have more recently developed entertaining narratives about the Romans themselves: "The sun shines out of their navels. Two navels. And big, very big men. In metal." The leader of the village, the Mother, is scornful of both the stories and the Romans—"Eagles instead of heads to scare the boys. Cocks of brass to scare the girls."²⁸ These cheerful chthonian myths are forced by the arrival of the Romans to give way to new narratives which are at once more "real" and more frightening in their unfamiliarity, but which likewise demonstrate that the Celts are aware of the immensity of the historical moment:

The Roman Army moves through this island. A ship of horror.
Smashing the woods and farms . . . The Romans are different.
They are— . . . A nation. Nation. What? A great family?
No. A people? No. They are one, huge thing.²⁹

The Romans, in other words, bring not only monstrous machines but a whole new world-view, one which seeks to replace the familiar organizational structures and attending loyalties of family and ethnicity with the "huge," implicitly impersonal, oneness and ineluctability of nation. The earlier "invaders" (immigrant Celts from the continent) could be assimilated; it has been possible to foster children with them and abuse their envoys. As long as the Romans are only the beasts of

children's stories, it is possible to assimilate them as well. But the "oneness" of the "real" Roman world is seen to have the power to supplant the oneness or integrity of the community and to violate an intricate Celtic connectedness between the human and the natural.

Brenton articulates this special integrity through the voice of one of the Mother's (foster) sons, Marban, who is training to become a priest. Marban's brothers are murdered by three Roman soldiers, and Marban himself, in the infamous scene, is raped and tortured.³⁰ It is in Marban's prophecy that the history of the Mother's families comes to be written as tragedy, a narrative which undermines the Romans' effort to define the incident as an invasion gone awry and the Celts as a people without history. As a survivor, Marban recognizes the finality of pollution by "the filthy water of Roman ways"; in his account, the Romans have violated "the fitness of things".³¹

Oh the life of the farms will go on. But you'll never dig out
the fear they've struck in you. With their strange, foreign
weapons. Generation after generation, cataracts of terror in the
eyes of your children . . . hatred of the suffering that is bound
to come again . . . They'll even take away death as you know
it. No sweet fields, rich woods beyond the grave. You'll go
to a Roman underworld of torture, a black river, rocks of fire.³²

The process of invasion, as Brenton constructs it, forces the community to recognize the fictionality of its own myths—"The Gods grow small as flies." Marban's prophecy is echoed throughout the play as we see "generation after generation" of Celtic suffering. However, as a historian and visionary, Marban articulates not only loss but a strategy of resistance, articulated as a new mythology:

We must have nothing to do with them. Nothing. Abandon the
life we know. Change ourselves into animals . . . an animal
not yet heard of. Deadly, watching, ready in the forest.
Something not human.³³

All they have to live on now are "Visions. Visions. Stones and visions." In this conjunction of "stones" with "visions" we find the two strains of counter-hegemonic resistance which the Celts will adopt in Part Two: by the end of the play, we will see a new community of Celts with a dual task, to produce children to kill the Saxons and to write the epic of "a defeated people."

Further, Part One concludes with the voice of a minor character, the Slave, who has remained an apparently passive witness to much of the action. Her concluding narrative qualifies Marban's by rewriting the history of the village in ironic terms, the plight of the victim and the invasion appearing as a tedious, even farcical, repetition of the subjugation of one class by another. The Slave is the only "absolute" victim in Part One. Referred to as a "Thing," she does not participate in the tragic loss of the community because she has been denied status in it. In her soliloquy, we discover the true meaning of the stones and visions of Marban's prophecy:

We were clever with stones. All the children. Wherever I am
it's not left me. When they kept me in a pit. When they
fucked me in the forest. When they made me work in a field.
I always knew what stones were near . . . The men from the
ship burnt my home. Now home is where I have a stone in my
hand.³⁴

The Slave's speech on the one hand establishes her new parity with her former owners; the villagers, and by extension all the descendants of the Celts, will only know what the Slave has always known, to be "fugitives and refugees." But the Slave's familiarity with stones undercuts both the pathos and the inevitability of suffering implicit in the history of the Mother's families. Here we find an attempt to write the Celt as a resisting victim who accepts the condition of suffering and whose strategy of resistance is necessarily confined to individual, local acts of self-defense ("home is where I have a stone in my hand"). Marban partly endorses this strategy but recognizes the need for a more organized philosophical base; he thus combines "stones" with "visions." The Celts must, according to Marban, self-consciously undergo a metamorphosis, and in their new identity recognize new lessons in the old stories.

Because these self-refashionings distinctly repudiate the identity which Caesar seeks to impose, Brenton is able to rescue Celtic history and history-making from their inscription within the colonizers' narrative. At the same time, we see both nationalist and Celticist discourses operating in Brenton's representations of the Celts. In "stones" and "visions," the two models of resistance proposed by Marban, we find articulated a variation of the "idealized Gaelic society" which was invoked by the Irish nationalist movement at the end of the nineteenth century. The nationalists on the one hand sought to reinscribe "the essentially feminine race" constructed by Ernest Renan and other Celticists as a "masculine" race of warriors, and on the other hand reappropriated, as a means of creating a Celtic faery-land, the "feminine" delicacy and

otherworldliness attributed to Celts by the colonizers. "Stones" can thus be seen to represent the notion of an armed Gaelic warlord, while "Visions" embodies the Celticist faery-land.³⁵ Marban, then, appears as the peasant/priest who would "forge . . . the uncreated conscience of [his] race,"³⁶ while the Slave assumes the role of matriarch-warrior.³⁷

However, the narratives of resistance which are formulated in the sixth-century scenes of Part Two do not reflect Marban's sense of tragic loss; rather, they echo the Slave's rational, ironic acceptance. Once again, the life of a Celtic village is disrupted by invaders, this time the Saxons, and, like the Roman raid, the Saxon one is attended by confusion, fear and scepticism. All the characters in this section are trapped by the "sickness" of war, a condition in which, as in Part One, rape and patricide become incidental. When Corda kills her father Cai, she recognizes the inevitability of her action:

Sickness travels in the air. Whatever it is out there, the war—travels in the air. We're breathing it. It makes a daughter kill her father—just like that.³⁸

The "sickness" she describes, like the moral degeneracy we had seen in Part One ("the filthy water of Roman ways"), is clearly intended by Brenton to be seen as the major symptom of war, but in the voices in this section—of the Steward, the Cooks, Cai's daughters—we find primarily the cool efficiency and watchfulness of the Slave. The invasion is not unequivocally an imposition; as in Part One, Brenton suggests that war entails dispossession for some and liberation for others. Corda's killing of Cai is in fact an act of resistance—"I hated him. Ever since he lifted my skirts when I was only just a woman" (78). The steward/lover and two cooks of a Roman matron are similarly liberated by being rendered fugitive. The steward, having murdered his tyrannical mistress, celebrates his emancipation:

What kind of animal am I? A survivor. I was a bondsman. I was a servant. I was a prostitute. Goodbye, my dead Lady, goodbye my dead masters. Now I'm free of you. Thank God war has come.³⁹

The mood of the closing scene of the sixth-century sequence is unexpectedly comic, as the cooks and the daughters warily join forces and we see the beginnings of a "'cultural-social' unity" amongst the "dispersed wills" of the dispossessed, working-class Celts.⁴⁰ Like the fugitives in Part One, the Cooks and Cai's daughters quickly adapt to their new condition, establishing a kind of fellowship of survivors, "a bit of an Army," and adopting new identities. Corda

vows to "kill the Saxons" and to become a "mother of killers . . . Children brought up right. Like stoats, like weasels, like otters," equipped to survive in a wilderness.⁴¹ Her militarist interests are complemented by the First Cook's, who decides to become a poet. In this emerging community of poets and warriors we see the growth of a leadership which, again, in Gramsci's terms, forges "a sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation":⁴² the First Cook, Marban's descendant, gives narrative form in the legend of Arthur to the "visions" from which the Celts must now draw inspiration, while Corda echoes the Slave by taking the path of armed resistance.

These two strategies (again, a fellowship of stones and visions) merge in the legend of King Arthur, which the First Cook invents as the play ends. The Cook's account of Arthur reflects a nationalist idealization of the past as well as the pragmatic awareness of the colonized of the fictionality of historical writing:

Actually, he was a king who never was. His government was the people of Britain. His peace was as common as the rain or sun. His law was as natural as grass, growing in a meadow. And there never was a Government, or a peace, or a law like that.

The narrative yearns for a prelapsarian utopia: the king is imagined to have suffered like his people, and to have been "mourned" after his death, his reign "remembered. Bitterly. And thought of as a golden age, lost and still to come."⁴³ At the same time, the metafictionality of the text seems to indicate a "critical self-consciousness" which acknowledges the impossibility of such a dream.⁴⁴

In both parts of the play, then, Brenton emphasizes the Celts' agency and at the same time refrains from sentimentalizing their heroic gestures. However, his representation of the Celts never completely escapes the semantic identities produced by colonialism over the years. The poets and visionaries, of course, are reminiscent of Arnold's melancholy Celtic dreamers, but more problematic is Brenton's account of the Celtic warrior. Brenton suggests that the anger of Celtic nationalism is a historical inevitability, and carefully avoids the word "terrorist." However, throughout the play, dispossession is seen to entail an abandonment of the moral strictures of organized social relations—as characters in Part One argue, "If men make you live like an animal—Be an animal!"⁴⁵ Such animal existence, the brute reality of life at the bottom, recurs as generations of Celts are simianized by invaders. Brenton thus suggests that Celtic brutishness can be *accounted for* and excused: he never interrogates the ideologies that inform the perception and writing of "terrorism," the process by which the Celts came to be associated with stones and terror in the first place. The play thus overlooks the

possibility that the "terrorist" (or stone thrower/animal) could be part of the colonizer's *misrepresentational* vocabulary rather than the colonized's voluntary choice of identity.

This omission is especially striking in light of Brenton's alertness elsewhere to the interplay of knowledge and power in the colonizer's writing of history, as we have seen in the case of Caesar. It should be noted, however, that Brenton's representation of Caesar and Chichester similarly mirrors generations of colonial self-presentation of the colonizer abroad. Caesar, although suffering from a toothache and prone to stale metaphors, is a manly man, an adventurer, suave and Shavian, something of a cynic, upper-class. He quotes Terence and has "critical self-consciousness" enough to recognize that his grand invasion has become "a squalid little raid." His obvious egocentricity and fine cruelty have none of the bloodiness or gore that characterize the tyrannies of Brenton's commoners: when Caesar wants to be rid of a sycophantic legate, he has it done off-stage. At the end of Part One, moreover, we are plummeted into twentieth-century Northern Ireland when, in a stylized *coup de théâtre*, the Slave is blown to bits by the modern British army. Caesar reappears in this scene as a senior officer. Like the destruction of the village earlier, the gunning down of the Slave is unprovoked and gratuitous, the result of one soldier's excitability and xenophobia. The modern Caesar, like the Roman, understands that the senseless brutality of the soldier is merely one of the inevitabilities of war. But the modern Caesar unexpectedly has sight of a higher purpose:

That everyday life will begin again. That violence will be reduced to an acceptable level. That Civilization may not sink, its great battle lost.⁴⁶

We could read this statement as a hackneyed and predictable echo of many similar justifications of war,⁴⁷ but Brenton's context unfortunately suggests otherwise: the unavoidable violence of battle, the unthinking brutality of the soldiers, and the world-weary endurance of the speaker invoke the heroic conventions of the bourgeois peace-play rather than the anti-heroism of epic theatre.

The modern Caesar thus appears as a seer of truths, and it is this prophetic voice that we find echoed in Chichester, the British Army agent, in the twentieth-century scenes of Part Two. Like Marlow's Kurtz, Chichester's "immense plans" involve knowing the enemy by becoming the enemy: he has spent three months passing himself off as an Irishman, working on an old woman's farm and "building respect" among the local people. It is immediately evident that Chichester has been empowered by knowledge. He has been able to convince the local people that he is "a friend of the Republican cause" by singing

"a few rebel songs in the local pub." He is able to *become* Irish. Like the Kipling hero, whose superior knowledge (of himself as well of the colonized) enables him to transform his identity, Chichester is able to confound the British soldiers, and presumably the Irish, by "speaking Bertie Wooster" and then rapidly switching to "immaculate Belfast and immaculate Dublin."⁴⁸ As Arnold had distinguished himself from the "Celt-haters" by recognizing an inherently "Celtic element in English nature,"⁴⁹ Chichester sees the need to situate the Irish problem within cultural and historical parameters and thereby to reestablish the ancient bond between English and Celt. Like Arnold again, he calls upon his countrymen to "know" their Celtic origins:

Look at this field. It's like one on my mother's farm, not far from Colchester. The Roman city of Camulodunum . . . one of the sites for King Arthur's last battle. King Arthur! Celtic warlord. Who fought twelve great battles with the Anglo-Saxons. That is, us.

Well-versed in Celtic history, mythology and art, Chichester also professes "a sense" of Celtic metaphysics. Echoing Marban's reference to "the fitness of things," he claims he is following "a kind of order": "A sense—of the order—of things . . . It's a Celtic idea. Pagan." In a passage strikingly similar to Brenton's 1989 preface, Chichester assumes the positional superiority of the colonial historian and ethnologist:

Very fashionable, the Celts, with the arty-crafty. Ley-lines. Druids. But show them the real thing—an Irishman with a gun . . . and they run a mile.

He thus claims, "I'm doing my bit to win the war in Ireland," and in doing so declares allegiance with the traditions of British colonial policy. His knowledge enables his recognition that "It's the Celts we're fighting in Ireland," but his purpose is to manipulate that knowledge: "We won't get anywhere 'til we know what that means."⁵⁰

But Chichester's evolving consciousness that he may well be "the problem in Ireland," his sense of bonding with Celtic history, leads him by the end of the play to transcend his historical position and become a visionary:

I keep seeing the dead. A field in Ireland, a field in England. And faces like wood . . . staring at me. The faces of our forefathers . . . stare at me in terror. Because in my hands

there's a Roman spear. A Saxon axe. A British Army machine-gun. The weapons of Rome, invaders, Empire.

Further, he unexpectedly confronts the man he is to assassinate, O'Rourke, with the confession that he is a British officer "from an old English family" and that his mission is to assassinate O'Rourke. As he offers O'Rourke an emotional and personal explanation for his recent understanding of the truth about the English role in Ireland, his former hesitation gives way to acknowledgment of his complicity. Seeing the weapons of Empire in his own hands, the apparent objectivity of his earlier pose as Celticist ethnologist is transformed into a sentimental, pacifist, humanism:

The weapons. I want to throw them down. And reach down.
To . . . the bodies out of the earth. Hold them against me.
Their bones of peat and water and mud. And work them back
to life. Like King Arthur—⁵¹

Knowledge has earlier empowered Chichester to "know" the Celt; it now empowers him to imagine that—"like King Arthur"—he can rescue both English and Irish from history itself. The irony is, as Declan Kiberd puts it and as Brenton is clearly aware, that the "well-intentioned Englishman who thinks that he might be part of the solution turns out to be part of the problem."⁵²

The confrontation between Chichester and O'Rourke thus enacts not only the conflict between empire and native but also the uneasy relationship between the English liberal and Irish nationalism, one inextricably caught up in the languages of Celticism. Brenton's problem is that, in spite of his sensitivity to this relationship, he addresses an audience whose only access to the play, he seems to assume, is through the Englishman. As a result, the Celts and the Irish remain alien and othered, and are eventually absorbed into Chichester's point of view. As I have noted earlier, Chichester falls asleep at the end of each twentieth-century scene, and the action of the play as a whole begins to appear as figments of his imagination. In other words, Brenton grants Chichester a kind of central consciousness and insight not available to any other character in the play, and particularly not available to the Celts. We have seen him from the beginning in a conventionally heroic mode. True to the traditions of British pluck, he jokes as he is being brutalized by the British Army: "Why does the British Army have to be so bloody British? Brains like boots. Balls like King Edward potatoes. Thick as pigshit." Brenton even allows him to claim, with all the cardboard nobility of a police-thriller hero, that he has had "special training to deal with pain. Pain is not the problem."⁵³ Having established Chichester's virility in this

crude fashion, Brenton endears him to the audience by indicating his gentle concern for the old woman whose farm he has been working upon. In the penultimate scene, as he is ruthlessly shot to death on stage, he shouts, "When will peace come? When will peace come? When will peace come?"—and so is contrasted favorably to the cold-blooded nationalists, who reply sternly that "Peace will take care of itself. War will not."⁵⁴ War, Brenton seems to suggest, will continue because the colonized fail to realize that colonizers can have a change of heart.

Brenton does take pains to deflate and critique Chichester's gesture, juxtaposing the ironic commentaries of his captors against Chichester's plea for peace. O'Rourke's immediate interpretation of Chichester's motives counters Chichester's own claim to know Ireland: "I think he may just be an honorable man, having a hard time of it. The assassin, humanized by his trade . . . Is that it, Captain? The horrors of war?" More explicitly, the Woman with O'Rourke rewrites Chichester's version of history, in what is evidently intended to be a pivotal metahistorical narrative:

What right does he have to stand in a field and talk of the horrors of war? What nation ever learnt from the sufferings it inflicted on others? . . . I don't want to hear of this British soldier's humanity. And how he thinks Ireland is a tragedy. Ireland's troubles are not a tragedy. They are the crimes his country has done mine. That he does to me, by standing there.⁵⁵

In the Woman's anger we recognize the voices of the Slave as well as of Corda and Marban, the refusal of the colonized to accept the inevitabilities of tragedy. It is particularly significant that Brenton places the Arthur scene immediately after Chichester's fatal encounter with the republicans: because Chichester's final vision is one of peace, his voice acquires a moral authority which Brenton is then able to redirect to the narrative of Arthur in the final scene.

The question which remains troubling is whether this displacement in the final scene is adequate as a means of "alienating" Chichester's heroic last moments and the positional superiority of nineteenth-century Celticism which this heroism asserts. In Chichester's classic self-recognition we are evidently meant to see the inadequacies of the English liberal/humanist critique of English involvement in Ireland.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, it is exactly this tragic self-awareness—rather than the pragmatic and political awareness of the Slave or the Woman—which serves as the audience's immediate means of access to the emotional life of the play, to its sense of the burden of this history. Brenton has

claimed to have been, during the writing of *The Romans*, both moved by and unsure about how to treat his growing sense of the tragic dimension of his material:

. . . the greatest difficulty I had when I began to write the play is a weighty matter. It was what to do about a sense of overwhelming *sorrow*, a grief for the nameless dead, with which the material of the play is drenched.⁵⁷

Brenton does expose the violence of colonial administration, but it is the colonizer rather than the colonized who comes to recognize and give voice to Brenton's "grief for the nameless dead." Brenton thus grants a special insight and moral stature to the colonizer which in many ways undermine his own decentering of colonial authority. He seems to resist the temptation to emplot Irish history as tragedy, but it is precisely the element of "sorrow" in Chichester's insight, in Chichester's own "grief for the nameless dead," which moves Brenton away from the materialist critique of the colonial enterprise he advances in Part One of the play.

The strategy is similar to Conrad's in *Heart of Darkness*, although Brenton's representation of the tragedy of the colonial process initially seems to answer and even repudiate Conrad's:⁵⁸ the colonized rather than the colonizer suffer tragic loss, and the tragedy is not that an abstract Necessity obliges the heroic messenger of civilization to conquer the savage, but that a concrete historical process, the growth of the nation-state, results in the brutal subjugation of established, civilized communities. However, in Part Two of the play, the tragic dimensions of Chichester's voice come to dominate the entire history of the oppression of the Celts, and his self-recognition is foregrounded in such a way that the politics of imperialism are eventually marginalized and contained. In this manner, Brenton offers a moral resolution to what he initially suggests is a political and historical conflict.

Notes

My sincere thanks to James Hurt, John Rickard, and Glynis Carr for their incisive comments on early drafts of this essay.

1. Richard Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1991) 209. Conservative hostility to the play did have serious financial consequences: *The Romans* has received only one professional performance since its first run. For comprehensive accounts of the controversy, see Boon

173-180 and Philip Roberts, "The Trials of *The Romans in Britain*," *Howard Brenton: A Casebook*, ed. Ann Wilson (New York: Garland, 1992) 59-70.

2. Philip Roberst, "Howard Brenton's Romans," *Critical Inquiry* 23.3 (Autumn 1981): 5-23; Boon 173-211; D. Keith Peacock, *Radical Stages: Alternative History in Modern British Drama* (New York: Greenwood, 1991) 127-134. See also John Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* (New York: Grove, 1983) 204-209. More recently, Hersh Zeifman has included a brief analysis of *The Romans* in his survey of Brenton's history plays, as has Janelle Reinelt in a broader analysis of Brechtian historicization in Brenton's work; see Zeifman, "Making History: The Plays of Howard Brenton," *British and Irish Drama since 1960*, ed. James Acheson (New York: St. Martin's, 1993) 139-140; Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994) 25. Brenton's historical drama has attracted critical attention: see for example Michael X. Zelenak, "The Politics of History: Howard Brenton's Adaptations," *Theatre (Yale)* 18.1 (1986): 52-55 and W.B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1992) 158-169. But few critics other than Peacock and Roberts offer detailed discussions of *The Romans* as a history play.

3. Peacock 7.

4. Boon 183.

5. Peacock 128-9.

6. Brenton's exact position in relation to traditional nationalist and Marxist interpretations of the situation in Northern Ireland is difficult to pin down. On the one hand, *The Romans* is consistently alert to the class dynamics at play in the interaction between the colonizers and the colonized, although Brenton nowhere suggests that common class interests alone might solve the problem. On the other hand, Brenton does not consider Unionist claims at all, an issue which preoccupied Marxist analysis during the 1970s (and the 1980s, after Brenton wrote the play). Brenton's *collapsing* of ethnicity, his focus on the "Celtic" nature of the conflict, would suggest that he wishes to emphasize the nationalist argument that a recognition of common kinship bonds—not merely common class interests—could unite warring Protestants and Catholics (who remain, at any rate, absent from the play). Brenton's unequivocal criticism of British rule, his argument throughout that the colonizers are responsible for the entire situation, is also consistent with the nationalist interpretation. For a useful introductory review of these and other approaches, see John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

7. It is interesting that Brian Friel's *Translations*, which treats similar concerns, opened in Derry just a month before *The Romans* opened in London. Friel's play was the first production of the Field Day Theatre Company, of which he was a co-founder. The essays in the Company's anthology, *Ireland's Field Day*, although written a few years after *The Romans*, provide an excellent analysis of such "warring historical narratives"; Field Day Theatre Company, *Ireland's Field Day* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1986) 112.

8. David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988) 47-8.

9. Cairns and Richards 47.

10. Matthew Arnold, *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R.H. Super, 3rd Ser. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1962) 343-47. See Cairns and Richards 43-51 for an analysis of Arnold's Celticism.

11. All quotations from Brenton's preface and from *The Romans in Britain* are taken from the revised edition of the play included in *Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1989).

12. Brenton writes: "I did find after a few months of research I could hold my own in an argument with a professor about whether the eaves of Celtic roundhouses were, or were not, painted and decorated with gods . . . the academic world is as full of bullshit as any other, including mine!" (ix).

13. Brenton ix.

14. ix.

15. Cairns and Richards 45.

16. See Terry Eagleton's discussion of the problematic ways in which "the aesthetic" continues to be deployed as a "disinterested mythic solution to real contradictions" in Ireland today:

In the stalest of Arnoldian clichés, the poetic is still being counterposed to the political—which is only to say that the "poetic" as we have it today was, among other things, constructed to carry out just that business of suppressing political conflict . . . This bankrupt Irish Arnoldianism is particularly ironic when one considers that the title of Arnold's own major work, *Culture and Anarchy*, might well have been rewritten as *Britain and Ireland*.

Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward W. Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990) 33.

17. A term which Louis Althusser, developing Lacan, uses to describe an oppressed group's internalization of the identities conferred by the ruling classes. See "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" and "Freud and Lacan" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).

18. Gramsci writes of "the importance of the 'cultural aspect,' even in practical collective activity":

An historical act can only be performed by "collective man," and this presupposes the attainment of "cultural-social" unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world.

Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintan Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971) 349.

19. Eagleton 36-38.

20. Cairns and Richards 12.

21. Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1963) 42.

22. Qtd. in Boon 183.

23. Brenton vii-viii.

24. 5.

25. Brenton 46. Part One of the play, perhaps not coincidentally, brings to mind Marlow's small essay on the Roman invasion of Britain in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—compare, for example, Marlow's images of "sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages . . . cold, fog, tempests, exile, death": Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness, Youth and Two Other Stories* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1924) 49. Marlow's many later descriptions of the incoherence of Africa are recaptured in the opening scenes of *The Romans* as well as in the war scenes of Part Two.

26. Brenton 49.

27. 51.

28. 13-18.

29. 20.

30. In the original version of the play, based on the rehearsal script and published by Methuen in 1980, Marban is raped on stage by the Roman soldier. In the revised version in *Plays: Two*, the soldier "attempts" to rape him (35; see Boon 327). The distinction seems pointless; it is clear in both editions that Marban is penetrated and that the Third Soldier loses his erection. See Robert F.

Gross's perceptive analysis of the rape scene in "*The Romans in Britain: Aspirations and Anxieties of a Radical Playwright*," *Howard Brenton: A Casebook*, ed. Ann Wilson (New York and London: Garland, 1992) 76-80.

31. Brenton 48.

32. 54.

33. 54.

34. 56.

35. See Cairns and Richards 42-57, especially 48-51. Brenton's representation of Marban and the play's emphasis on the Celtic connection with the land must be read in the context of the nationalist movement's idealization of the peasantry. Both tendencies described here—towards the creation of a warrior-race and towards the creation of a Celtic faeryland—were united in their attempts to locate "the pure peasant as the quintessence of the nation." Further, the role of this pure peasant was inextricably linked, in Catholic Irish discourse, with that of the priest:

For the nationalist intellectuals . . . the essential literary function of the peasant was to show forth an image of the Irish in which avoidance of the English vices was achieved through acceptance of the rigid moral guidelines of Irish Catholicism as enforced by the priest.

See also Cairns and Richards 71: while the role of Catholicism came to be redefined in subsequent years, "the Irish essence" continued to be located in the figure of the peasant, in whom, it was argued, true original Celtic heritage had been preserved.

36. James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1976) 253.

37. Brenton's interesting feminization of Celtic and Irish resistance in *The Romans* deserves more examination than I can provide in this essay. The more militant voices in the play—that of the Mother, the Slave, Corda, and the Woman—are female. On the one hand, this reflects Brenton's increasingly painstaking efforts to develop female voices in his work. However, as his annoying use of generic titles for his women characters suggests, Brenton's women are neither complex nor articulate, appearing rather as single-minded pragmatists. In any case, the colonial strategy of "feminizing" the colonized has a troubled history, as reflected in Matthew Arnold's work as well as in Ernest Renan's designation of the Irish as "an essentially feminine race" (see Cairns and Richards, Chapter 3). For a particularly interesting discussion of the sexual politics of *The Romans*, see Robert F. Gross's "*The Romans in Britain: Aspirations and Anxieties of a Radical Playwright*."

38. Brenton 79.

39. 78-80.

40. Gramsci 349.

41. Brenton 93.

42. Gramsci 418.

43. Brenton 94-95.

44. Brenton has argued that the legend of Arthur is a deliberate attempt by the Celts to salvage national prestige:

I believe that Arthur was invented some terrible evening in a ditch for a good historical reason. He was needed. He gave voice to the aspirations of a defeated people, the once and future king.

Qtd. in Roberts, "Howard Brenton's Romans" 13. Note the consistency between Brenton's interpretation of the legend and that suggested by one of the "standard works" which Roberts cites, L. Alcock's *Arthur's Britain: History and Archaeology AD. 367-634* (Allen Lane: Penguin, 1971).

Alcock speculates that the legend emerged because "a defeated people cherish tales true and false, sober or exaggerated" (qtd. in Roberts 12-13).

45. Brenton 6.

46. 57.

47. Both Boon and Peacock read the modern Caesar's justification of the shooting of the Slave as Brenton's means of demystifying conventional vindications of military aggression. Peacock adds that Brenton draws attention in this scene to the racial myths which underpin imperialism. However, it should be noted that Brenton attributes the racist rhetoric to the soldier rather than to Caesar.

48. Brenton 63.

49. Arnold 341.

50. Brenton 67.

51. 89-90.

52. Declan Kiberd, "Anglo-Irish Attitudes," Field Day Theatre Company, *Ireland's Field Day*, 99.

53. Brenton 63-66.

54. 90-91.

55. 90.

56. Peacock, for example, argues that Brenton demonstrates that "the humanist can never provide the solution to Ireland's problem": Chichester, he writes, "is incapable of taking radical measures and therefore simply attempts to rearrange and make more palatable the present situation." See Peacock 133.

57. Brenton x.

58. (This analysis is influenced generally by the Brechtian critique of Aristotle and more specifically by Augusto Boal's analysis of the *Poetics* in *The Theatre of the Oppressed*). In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's ultimate affirmation that Kurtz is "a great man" is predicated on his ability to demonstrate the coincidence of peripeteia and anagnorisis in Kurtz's submission to "the horror," that is to turn Kurtz into a tragic hero. Marlow's affirmation in turn enables *Conrad* to displace the epic/documentary tendency of the narrative—the critique of Empire piously launched in the early stages of Marlow's travels—by foregrounding the element of pathos in Marlow's account of Kurtz's tragic recognition. The history of the exploitation of Africa then appears as Necessity. Conrad thus avoids the political and ethical questions initially raised in Marlow's narrative by exploiting the sympathy conventionally granted to the tragic hero.