

3 | ‘Keening the Nation: The *Bean Chaointe*, the *Sean Bhean Bhocht*, and Women’s Lament in Irish Nationalist Narrative’

Kathryn Conrad

The focus of much Irish feminist criticism has been on the impact of nationalist tropes on the lived experience of Irish women. Less often explored, however, is the way in which the lived experience and practices of historical women have impacted on the development and utilization of symbolic images of a feminised Ireland. In this essay, I will examine a particular form of the trope of Ireland-as-woman, the *sean bhean bhocht* (often rendered in English as ‘shan van vocht’) or poor old woman. The *sean bhean bhocht*, a staple figure of Irish political ballads and satiric poetry from at least 1798 onward, embodies the suffering of the nation: she appears in nationalist literature most often lamenting the loss of her land to the colonial invaders. In this essay, I argue that twentieth-century nationalist writers’ use of the *sean bhean bhocht* figure was informed by the keening, or lament, tradition. I will begin by discussing the historical practice of keening, explaining how the keen allowed women to vocalise criticisms of established authority, and how the keening tradition was seen by those outside of the community. I will then explore how W. B. Yeats, Pádraic Pearse, Maud Gonne MacBride, and Lady Gregory incorporated the keening woman as a trope in nationalist narratives.

Keening, a form of ritualized lament practised in Irish-speaking communities, has evoked both fascination and disdain from individuals outside those communities since the twelfth century (Lysaght, 1997), and drew the wrath of the Catholic Church from at least the seventeenth (Ó Súilleabháin, 1967: 138-43). In popular usage outside of the communities in which it was practised, 'keening' has tended to be synonymous with loud, mournful wailing. Although this was certainly part of the practice, the plaintive, drone-like chant of mourners took place at the end of a verse of 'partly extempore, partly prepared' poetry, usually delivered by the primary keening woman; as Breandán Ó Madagáin notes, the terms for the cry (*gol* or *gáir*) and the verses of the keen itself have tended to be interchangeable (312-13). Lending to the confusion about what actually constitutes a keen is the fact that the keen is not the only form of lament poetry in Irish. According to Ó Madagáin, the vocal music of lament in Irish takes four forms: the keen (*caoineadh*), the learned bardic elegy (*marbhna*) in syllabic metres, the later *marbhna* in stressed metre (a revival of the classic *marbhna* form), and the death song in remembrance of some 'dramatic tragedy' (311). Folklore collectors such as Thomas Crofton Croker, however, were not always so precise in their descriptions, tending to conflate the various forms when recounting them, perhaps because of their lack of fluency in the Irish language. As a result, several collected 'keens' are more likely to have been, in the strictest sense, instances of *marbhna* or death songs, composed often by men.

But the keen was performed primarily by women. Angela Bourke has suggested that the keening woman served as a kind of 'psychopomp who presides over the transition in which the whole community finds itself' (1988: 11). She had, at least during the time between death and burial, licence not only to grieve unreservedly but also to express criticism (Bourke, 1993: 161-75). In the keen, she could articulate the wrongs perpetuated against herself, her community, and/or the dead whom she keened, focusing criticism on anyone who deserved censure, from other keening women to the dead being mourned to the colonial power structure or the clergy.¹ This licence was allowed in part because the women acted out their grief as if

mad: the keening woman often describes herself as dishevelled, often speaks of drinking the blood of the dead and rending her garments, and cares for nothing but the dead whom she keens (Bourke, 1980: 29-35; Bourke, 1993: 165-6).

The primary keening woman (*bean chaointe*) was often a member of the deceased's family, although 'if no relative was talented in this sort of composition another woman was appointed' (Bourke, 1988: 11). Eugene O'Curry notes that the family of the deceased might hire additional keeners as well – usually, at least four (O'Curry, ccc); these keeners were paid with money or in kind, with tobacco, salt, or whiskey (Ó Súilleabháin, 137; Bourke, 1993: 162). The paying of keening women seems to have struck many observers, from at least the seventeenth century on, as inappropriate, and the grief thereby expressed as inauthentic (Bourke, 1988: 11); even Ó Madagáin refers in passing to professionalism as a form of 'abuse' (312). The context of Ó Madagáin's comments sheds some light on this discomfort: he suggests that the 'keen could be a genuine instrument for the heightened expression of personal emotion' (312). His comments, like those by outsiders who condemned the practice, imply a split between emotion and reason, between the intimacy of the expression of affect and the economic considerations of the professional mourner. Since the clergy did not seem to apply such criticisms to themselves, the discomfort seems particularly aimed at rural Irish women who, as both female and uncorrupted by civilization (or, in less flattering light, simply savage), were thought to represent direct access to authentic emotion.

As several scholars have noted, the practice of keening was actively discouraged by parish priests, pursuant to post-Reformation Church legislation (Lysaght; Ó Súilleabháin). The means by which priests dissuaded keening women seems to have been wide, ranging from arguments to spiritual punishments, such as exclusion from Mass and sacraments and even excommunication for repeat 'offenders' (Ó Súilleabháin, 139), to corporeal punishments, as in the story reported by Ó Súilleabháin in which the parish priest attacked three keening women with a whip as they keened the dead on the way to the graveyard (143). Such punishments suggest anxiety about the

power of the Church in the rural community. Lysaght suggests multiple strands to this anxiety: a concern that the practice of keening was a pagan carryover, that the grief expressed was 'immoderate' and 'inconsistent with Christian belief in salvation', and that paying keening women was inappropriate 'abuse' (Lysaght; see also Lomax and Ennis; Cowell). The keening women, on the other hand, did not see a contradiction between Christianity and the keening tradition, given the oral poetry in the Irish language tradition that represented the Virgin Mary as a typical *bean chaointe* in word and deed (Bourke, 1980: 28-32).

Nonetheless, the practice of the keen frequently pitted Irish-speaking women against the representatives of the Church. These conflicts were as likely to have materialistic origins as strictly theological ones; one can imagine the priests' frustration that the money or wares paid to professional keening women in a subsistence economy might have been spent on tithing. Ó Súilleabháin reports a story in which a keening woman locked horns with a priest when the latter implied that her 'wailings varied with the amount of whiskey she got' in payment; the keening woman replied by clearly suggesting that the priest also stood to benefit financially from death (141-2). This story certainly implies that at least part of the conflict between the church and professional mourners was an economic one. Moreover, the keening women's role was a usurpation of the local priest's authority during a key time for Church involvement in the lives of its parishioners. And, of course, the keening women had an opportunity to directly criticise the Church and its agents during the period between death and burial in which the community allowed breaches of usual convention.

Those outside the community tended not to hear those critiques, however. Bourke points out that 'the overwhelming impression is of noise' in outsiders' descriptions of the keening practice; and, as she notes, 'one way of disguising subversive messages is by burying them under other sounds' (1993: 167). Of course, most outsiders also knew no Irish. Croker notes the effectiveness of the keen as a method of expressing disaffection: 'keens are also a medium through which the disaffected

circulate their mischievous principles, and this they do without much attempt at concealment, the Irish language being a sufficient cloak for the expression of seditious sentiments; few, if any, of the gentry being acquainted with it, as they consider it too vulgar and inelegant to form a part of their studies' (1824: 181-82). The *keen* was thus an effective way to express criticisms that would only be accessible to the Irish-speaking community.

Once folklorists began to collect and translate *keens* – however inaccurately they may have occasionally described and reproduced them – one can see the appeal they held for nationalist writers seeking a way to express the wrongs done to the nation. First, the *keening* practice had already been subject to criticism by both the Church and visitors to Ireland, many of whom would have been associated with the colonial enterprise; reclaiming the practice as an authentic, native folk tradition was an obvious political statement against those from outside who might denigrate it. Tying this form of mourning to a celebrated past civilization further legitimated it: for instance, Giacomo Boni, an architect and archaeologist who assisted in the excavation of the Parthenon and directed the excavations at the Roman forum, saw in the *keen* the vestiges of an older European culture with connections to the burial traditions of Rome (26-27). This antiquarian impulse is also evidenced in the work of Eugene O'Curry, who saw in the *keening* tradition a reflection of 'the tradition of the ancient *Cepóg* or *Guba*', the burial rituals practised during the heroic age of Ireland (O'Curry, cccxxiv-v). The focus on the *keen*'s connections to past civilizations simultaneously valorised it and suggested the extent to which current practice was fading, to be saved through its incorporation into print culture. That the practice may have been fading in part because of its rejection by an increasingly bourgeois Catholic laity that was 'consciously modelling itself on a Protestant elite with strong Victorian values' (Lysaght) would have given nationalists, particularly Anglo-Irish nationalists already hostile to what it perceived as the philistinism of the Catholic middle class, further fuel for the fire. Ignored in their appropriations of the *keening* woman as a figure of authentic culture is the role of the professional *keening* woman: writers

either did not know of this aspect of the tradition, chose to see it as slanderous British propaganda, or deliberately ignored it out of concern that it would sully the image of the soulful rural peasant woman as an authentic bearer of Irish grief.

In addition to being seen as a carrier of authentic Irish culture, the keening woman dovetailed with an already-established trope of feminine Ireland and, more precisely, with the conceit of a complaining *sean bhean bhocht* that had already proven a popular trope for political satire and eventually as a vehicle for political commentary in the magazine of the same name.² The lamenting old woman also evoked the sovereignty goddess of Irish myth, an old woman rejuvenated through the submission of a young man to her (usually sexual) wishes; she is often combined with the *spéirbhean* or spirit woman of the Irish language *aisling*, or vision, poems in which Ireland appears to the poet as a young and beautiful woman. These images of a feminised Ireland combined and absorbed the image of a keening woman, who became an iconic and 'authentic' representation of the suffering of Ireland to be comforted by the devotions of patriot men.

Ultimately, the keening woman was appropriated as a trope by those who, however sympathetic to the tradition, were outside of it. Bríona Nic Dhiarmada argues that 'the position of the Irish language and of women in Ireland up to the Lemass era can be read as analogous. ... both were accorded special status and importance in identity building; both were socially peripheral but symbolically central: both were made to bear others' meanings' (613). In the keening woman, the Irish language and the Irish woman conveniently coalesce. The meanings the keening woman bore took different forms in the visions of different nationalist writers. Cairns and Richards (1991) have discussed the way in which early twentieth-century Irish drama, typified by William Butler Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and Maud Gonne MacBride's *Dawn*, exhibited and reinforced the trope of the *sean bhean bhocht*. More particularly, we can see the trope of the keening woman in these plays. Further, Yeats's *Cathleen* and Pádraic Pearse's short story *An Bhean Chaointe* represent the keening woman locked into both a perpetual state of grieving and implicit responsibility for

the deaths of those she mourns. Pearse's story and Gonne MacBride's play, however, recognize the impact of material suffering, and suggest the relationship between the personal, material, domestic concerns of the individual woman and those of Ireland. Finally, Gonne MacBride's play and Lady Gregory's *The Gaol Gate* and *The Story Brought By Brigit* further combine the keening woman's power as a representation of Ireland with her individual voice, suggesting the extent to which the suffering of individual Irish women is itself political and tied to Ireland's oppression.

Yeats's Cathleen is identifiable as a keening woman in a number of ways. One is the suggestion that her grief is immediate and has led to a state of madness: 'her troubles have put her wits astray' (Yeats, 1966: 224). Some of Cathleen's songs also resemble the keen in their immediacy, as when she sings to herself:

I will go cry with the woman,
For yellow-haired Donough is dead,
With a hempen rope for a neckcloth,
And a white cloth on his head – (Yeats, 223).

She is also positioned as a keening woman through her intimate connection with the dead whom she mourns. Cairns and Richards characterize Cathleen as 'Mother/Nation', presumably to make Cathleen fit the trope of Mother Ireland. But there is no evidence that Yeats's Cathleen is a mother, only that she is a lover: Cathleen tells Michael Gillane, the would-be nationalist martyr, that she has had many lovers, and that 'many a man has died for love of me' (Yeats 1966: 224, 226). Despite the disbelief Michael's father expresses upon hearing this from an old, worn woman, Cathleen is a seductive figure in both senses of the word: she draws Michael away (Latin: *seductio*, to lead aside, to lead away), but she also embodies the powerful, almost sexual allure of the nation as an avatar of the sovereignty goddess. She proposes an alternative to the life that awaits Michael upon marriage: she promises that he 'will be remembered forever' (229). Domesticity – and its accompanying materiality and concern with money – is set up in opposition to the valorised devotion to nationalist ideals. By becoming the lover of the

symbolic Cathleen, Michael Gillane, along with the rest of Cathleen's 'lovers,' can become immortalized in history. By singing laments for Irish patriots, Cathleen evokes Croker's description of the political impact of the keen:

Those criminals whose lives have been forfeited in the cause of rebellion, derive no small consolation from the idea of martyrdom, which they imagine they have attained, and in this they are encouraged by the popular voice, apostrophizing their shade as that of an hero and a patriot. Their countrymen are called upon to revenge their death, and to recover the estates of their Milesian ancestors, whose spirit has alone descended to them; on that spirit and what it will achieve, many verses are frequently bestowed (Croker, 182).

Cathleen herself, however, is denied the valorization promised Michael, given the way the literal and allegorical levels of the narrative intertwine: women represent both the distraction provided by the domestic, here in the form of Delia Cahel, and the disruption of the domestic, in the form of Cathleen. Joseph Valente notes that many Irish nationalist dramas use the strategy of the double woman to stabilize normative gender disjunction and stratification. These dramas, he notes, 'all bifurcate the mythic personality of Irish society into an avowedly symbolic woman and a plainly literal woman ... in short, the legitimating and the excluded other of a patriarchal nationalism' (199). Valente argues that Cathleen is the sovereignty goddess who reaffirms the patriarchal order; she is staked against Delia Cahel, Michael's bride to be, the literal woman. But more importantly, I would argue, Cathleen herself is the double woman: insofar as she is the allegorical figure for Ireland, she is valorised, but she is also on the literal level a destroyer of the Irish family. This is *Cathleen Ni Houlihan's* disturbing mixed message: while Cathleen-as-Ireland represents a noble cause, Cathleen herself is a homewrecker. And, as a seductive figure, Cathleen might be held implicitly to blame for Ireland's colonised situation. That is, though Ireland has often been figured as 'raped' by the colonising British, Cathleen-as-Ireland proposes another alternative: her 'trouble' is that she has 'too many strangers in the house' (Yeats, 222)

and, given her tendency to lure young men to her, the suggestion that her promiscuity might have led her to let the strangers in the house herself remains a possibility in the logic of the play.

Cathleen's status as a symbol of Ireland is not enough to save her reputation. It is significant that Michael is to sacrifice himself for 'love of her'; the love is the ideal, not Cathleen herself. With the narrative set up this way, Cathleen remains seductive and therefore disruptive while Michael gleans the glory of historical, heroic immortality for his love of the ideal – that is, he earns the keen by which he will be remembered. The goal advocated by *Cathleen*, then, is transcendence of the material problems and concerns of daily existence in the devotion to a higher cause. This push for transcendence leaves the material concerns presented by the rural environment in which the play is set – those so often evoked in the verses of the traditional keen – secondary to the ideal of nationalist passion. Though the higher passion is inspired by the seductive woman-as-Ireland, the passion, not the woman, is valorised. Throughout the play Cathleen's keen is like a siren song to Michael, irresistibly leading him to his death through its promise of historical and literary immortality. Though Cairns and Richards read the end of *Cathleen* as the rejuvenation of national sovereignty (Cairns & Richards, 129), one must keep in mind that *Cathleen* is set in 1798, and the rebellion announced by the younger son Patrick is to be a failed rebellion – just like all others for which Cathleen's lovers have fought. National sovereignty, then, is only rejuvenated insofar as it remains the highest cause to which one can devote oneself, not insofar as sovereignty means actual self-rule: Cathleen still needs more lovers. If the nation is freed, however, Cathleen and the keening woman on which she is based become obsolete; they are no longer needed to entice men to nationalist devotion.

Cathleen's role as perpetual lamenter is facilitated by a peculiarity of the keening tradition. As Bourke notes, 'laments were remembered and sung at subsequent funerals and ... one lament echoes another' (1988b: 14); even the music of the keen was part of a particular repertory of keening tunes (Ó Madagáin, 317). Keening women, then, would use variations on

the same keening – both music and language – at subsequent funerals. Repeating the keening was born of practical considerations: keening women did not practice the keening outside of the funeral setting and would rarely repeat it, even when urged by collectors (Ó Madagáin, 311; Lomax & Ennis; Cowell; Croker, 101-2; and Lysaght). When the time arose to keening again, then, the women would use traditional formulas, music, themes and phrases from earlier lament situations.

The repetition of the keening parallels the repetition of Irish nationalist historical narratives: in the nationalist narrative tradition, particularly as invoked by such rebel-artists as Pádraic Pearse, each failed rebellion is merely a rehearsal for the final battle. The revolutionary telos relies heavily on a history of rebellions that takes on a cyclical rhythm. Each (failed) rebellion prefigures future rebellions until the final victory. The literary and historiographical narratives of Irish messianic nationalism are eschatological, drawing heavily on the Christian apocalyptic tradition and combining it with Irish myth and legend, as when the Irish warrior hero Cúchulainn becomes a parallel or type for Christ. This eschatological approach is clearest in the historical example of Pearse and his compatriots, who planned their great battle and final sacrifice for Easter Sunday, 1916.

When Christian and Celtic messianic narratives are intertwined, the keening woman becomes a perpetually grieving Virgin Mary, mad and lamenting the loss of her son, only to be freed from the cycle by the Second Coming of the messianic rebel hero. Unlike the traditional keening woman who was hesitant to keening even for folklorists outside of the wake and burial, however, she not only keens at funerals. This keening woman is destined to carry and articulate continually the narrative cycles of historical oppression. Though she carries the narrative, the men – the patriots, the Saviours of the country – are the only ones who can break the cycle.

Pádraic Pearse, one of the more significant perpetuators of the Christian-Celtic tropes of the nationalist movement, wrote a short story called 'The Keening Woman' (*An Bhean Chaointe*) in which this narrative pattern is echoed. In this story, a young man, Cólín, goes on an errand for his father and meets a

woman awaiting her son's return. On the way back from his errand, Cólín stops at the woman's house. Upon discovering the boy's name, the woman begins keening unexpectedly. It is only later when the boy arrives home that he discovers the true meaning of the keen: she is keening her son, whose name was also Cólín. Cólín's father explains that her son was wrongly accused of killing a landlord and died in jail. Since then, she has become 'the most famous keening-woman in Connemara or in the Joyce Country': 'She's always sent for when anybody dies. She keened my father, and there's a chance but she'll keen myself. But, may God comfort her, it's her own dead she does be keening always, it's all the same what corpse is in the house' (Pearse, 204).

As in his other work, Pearse's treatment here is sympathetic to traditional Irish culture and Irish-language tradition; Bourke has described them as counter-propaganda, an attempt to challenge the denigrating stereotypes of the rural Irish-language communities of Connemara (Bourke, 2005). Certainly, the text represents the practice of keening with more accuracy and detail than most. Nonetheless, Pearse reinforces the trope of the perpetually keening woman who must be rescued from her grief by the next generation of politically active Irishmen. The keening woman, Muirne, speaks of her son in the present tense. There is no past for Muirne, only the perpetual present of her grief and loss; in that grief, her 'wits are astray' (198, 224). Even as she keens others in the community, she is always keening her son. The end of the story implies that she might inspire at least Cólín's brother's death as well: the father suggests that the man who really killed the landlord was a stranger from out of town, and the boy Seán suddenly speaks up: 'Daddy...when I'm a man I'll kill that black man' (226). And there is a further suggestion that the cycle will continue with Cólín, since his name is the same as Muirne's son; she is, in effect, already keening him. 'The Keening Woman' is a halfway point between *Cathleen* and Gonne MacBride's *Dawn* in terms of its representation of the keening woman: like *Cathleen*, it locks its primary female character into a cycle of perpetual grieving, of carrying the history of wrongs to her/Ireland in a perpetual state of madness from which she cannot escape. But 'The Keening Woman'

approaches *Dawn* in its valuing of the material concerns of the rural community over some transcendent ideal: the focus of the nationalist interest is on tenant crises rather than the abstraction of sovereignty.

Gonne MacBride's *Dawn* escapes some of the representational problems of *Cathleen* and 'The Keening Woman' through its sensitivity to the problematics of nationalist narrative representations of women and to the link between the metaphorical and literal; that is, Maud Gonne MacBride recognized that the representation of Ireland as a woman had implications for real women, and that real women had an investment and impact on the 'domestic' in both its individual/familial and national meanings. While *Dawn* does reinforce the notion that domestic concerns are women's concerns, it also acknowledges women's value and the centrality of women's concerns within the fight for independence. Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, the editors of *Lost Plays of the Irish Renaissance* in which *Dawn* appears – it was first published in *The United Irishman* – call the play 'a rather imitative piece of patriotic propaganda, which has echoes of *Kathleen Ní Houlihan* and several other pieces' (16). To dismiss *Dawn* as merely imitative, however, is to miss the significant differences between *Dawn* and *Cathleen*. Maud Gonne MacBride's own devotion to nationalist aims and her work on behalf of the evicted tenant farmer families in the West allow her to see women as intimately involved in the nationalist cause. *Dawn* challenges the notion that nationalism and domestic material concerns are separate; in her hands, the keening woman's lament is an articulation of individual and group protest simultaneously.

Dawn features a rural woman (Bride) who is widowed when her husband tries to defend their land and whose son dies in jail. She is evicted from her land, and is devoted to regaining it and to seeking vengeance for her dead husband and child. As in *Cathleen*, the action she inspires is only implied: the action we see is the death of her daughter Brideen, the threats of the Stranger (the landlord), Bride's keening and prophecy of the dawn which will herald freedom, and the devotion of her son to her cause. What makes this play so different from *Cathleen* is

the logic of its allegory. Though one can easily read *Bride* as Ireland, the Stranger as English landlords, and her sons as patriots, it can and must also be read literally as a play about a woman who loses her land and whose sons and neighbours help her to win it back; the relationship between literal and symbolic is synecdochal. *Cathleen* can never be read simply as a 'real' woman, but *Bride* can. The inseparable literal and allegorical interpretations of *Dawn* suggest the strong connection between small- and large-scale domestic concerns, that of the house and family and the domestic concerns of Ireland as a state. This connection is emphasized by the setting: all of the on-stage action takes place around *Bride's* house. While this is true also of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Michael must escape his house to carry out his nationalist duty; in *Dawn*, national concerns are located in the domestic and the focus is on regaining control of the literal and symbolic house. The needs on both levels are for self-determination and for control of one's land, practical concerns that Gonne MacBride saw as essential both to the rural communities for which she had worked and to the nation as a whole.

The women of *Dawn* serve as the connection between the local and the national, the material and the ideal. *Bride* is the particular link, serving as both the head of her household and the figure for a rebellious Ireland. Though she is grieving throughout much of the play for each new death, she, unlike *Cathleen* and *Muirne* of 'The Keening Woman,' is able to change her song. The grieving turns to prophecy; *Bride's* 'eyes which saw things we could not see' (75) show her the rising of the new dawn. Her final song(s), though mimicking the cadences of the traditional keen, are specifically said to be 'sung' in the text (82, 84) – as opposed to the keen, which she 'caoins' (79). The words that inspire the devotion of her son and her neighbour are those of a song of triumph, not those that remember defeat, as in *Cathleen*. Rather than invoking the trope of the perpetually keening woman, Gonne MacBride presents a woman who voices an independent protest, a criticism of the impact of abuse on her, her family, and her community. Though *Bride* herself does not fight for her cause, she is a powerful woman in her own right, sovereign over herself and her domestic space on both the

literal and allegorical levels. The keen in *Dawn* is a voice which expresses the mutual dependency of these two realms; it connects the figure of Ireland-as-woman with an Ireland of women.

Perhaps the most complex use of the keening tradition in nationalist narrative, however, comes from Lady Gregory's plays. Although she influenced Yeats and collaborated with him on *Cathleen*, her own work shows a different sensibility when dealing with similar themes. Particularly noticeable is her sensitivity to the importance of narrativity and change, to the tendency for repetition to forge historical 'truths', and to the centrality of women in the process of the narrative construction of history.

The earliest play incorporating the keen is Gregory's *The Gaol Gate* (1909), a short play set in Galway city. Two women, Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin, come to Galway Gaol to discover the fate of Denis Cahel, who has been jailed there for a crime never explained in the play, except to mention that it involves a gun (6). The women carry a letter sent to them by the gaol; illiterate, they fear its contents and only trust the gatekeeper of the jail to read it to them. The women are concerned about the rumours that Denis has informed against his friends in order to free himself from blame. When the gatekeeper arrives, he reads their letter, informing them that Denis has died. They begin to keen; but they then discover that Denis has been hanged by the authorities as a direct result of his refusal to inform on his neighbours. The women's song turns to celebration that 'Denis Cahel died for his neighbour!' (10).

The women's primary focus on the immediate problem of gossip and reputation suggests the possibility that they are only vaguely aware of the larger political context in which Denis is caught. They understand that informing means helping the British police: Mary Cahel at the beginning of the play says that they should be quiet and 'let the sergeant do his own business with no help from the neighbours at all' (6). But when they discover that Denis went to the grave without informing, Mary Cahel celebrates his silence by speaking the unspeakable, releasing the name of at least one of the men against whom Denis would not inform: 'It is no lies he would have said at all

giving witness against Terry Fury' (10). Her speech to some degree undermines Denis's silent sacrifice – albeit within the 'safe space' of her own community.

On the other hand, women's tale-telling, so often culturally construed as malicious and superficial gossip, is here shown also to be powerful and redemptive. The man himself dies in silence; it is the women who tell the tale, sing his praises, and redeem his reputation. Although they speak Terry Fury's name, they do so to put the record right. *The Gaol Gate* demonstrates the importance of oral history in a community where literacy was rare. The play makes clear that women, the primary lamenters of the dead, are the authors and bearers of that history – connected, like the keening Marys at the crucifixion, to a painful present but also involved in fashioning a hopeful future.

Lady Gregory returned to the subject of the importance of women's oral history in her 1926 play, *The Story Brought by Brigit*. As in many of the nationalist works mentioned above, a woman carries the story of oppression through the years. But *The Story Brought by Brigit* has a new twist: Brigit carries not the story of Ireland's oppression, but that of Jesus' oppression. The play is the story of Jesus' final days in Jerusalem, with a cast of characters remarkably similar to that of early twentieth-century Ireland. Joel, a 'boy from the mountains,' obviously mirrors Pearse. Gregory's own nationalist politics are demonstrated quite clearly in this play: her sympathies lie with the non-violent parliamentarians. That Joel betrays Christ implies the physical-force nationalists' betrayal of Parnell and the ideals of the parliamentary Irish Home Rule Party. The play's suggestion that the story of Christ's life repeats in Ireland nineteen hundred years later bears a resemblance to other Irish messianic nationalist narratives: the similarity between the narratives implies that the goal of salvation – Irish independence – lies in the future, awaiting another manifestation of the Saviour. Gregory's account differs, however, in a number of significant ways – most notably, in its representation of women's roles.

Like Pearse, Joel figures his nation in feminine terms: 'Instead of a bondswoman our country will be a free woman!'

(286). But, while Christ's mother is a keening woman and representative of the oppressed people, she is one of many. The woman who carries the story of the death of Christ and oppression of the Judeo-Christians is Brigit. Gregory's keening women share the news of Christ's life and death with Brigit. When Mary, the mother of Christ, arrives, the keen begins; the play reinforces the oral tradition in which Mary was a keening woman. Unlike the perpetually keening women who appear in other nationalist writings, Brigit and the other keening women also witness the saving grace of the martyred Christ. Their position as lamenters allows them to be among the few who witness the Ascension.

The Story Brought by Brigit, then, places the keening women in a privileged position: they sing Christ's praises, witness his martyrdom, lament his death, and witness and celebrate his redemption. Brigit, as one of the women, carries the story to Ireland. The parallels between the Christian and Irish narratives imply a critique of the men both in the play and in Gregory's Ireland, those who succumbed to personal politicking and monetary concerns; the play celebrates the women who tend to the human needs and concerns of the crucified Christ and, by implication, those who sympathized with Parnell's human failings. Like real keening women, the keening women in this play direct the grief, which both emerges from personal loss and also has political and religious implications. The keening women serve as prophets unheeded; neither madwomen nor seductresses, they are rather ministers of the Christian faith. The repetition of the betrayal and martyrdom, then, is the responsibility of male political figures who do not heed the lessons of the Christian story. Gregory's keening women imply a critique not only of the colonial power structure, but of the nationalist response as well. Gregory works to reclaim the power of the keen as protest and the keening woman as an essential and valued member of the community.

To recuperate keening uncomplicatedly as a wholly pre-colonial, anti-patriarchal folk form would be both to ignore a long history of cultural exchange between Ireland and other nations and to overlook the fact that keening women's power to criticize was limited to the time of the lament. Nonetheless, the

keen, like ritualized lament in other cultures, has had an important and powerful place in its community, a place acknowledged and appreciated by the Irish nationalists who appropriated the form. From the example of the keening women, we can trace a trajectory to contemporary feminist writers and activists as well, who have maintained what is perhaps most important about the keen: its ability to direct grief and anger against its source, to point out the persistent connections between the individual and the collective, between personal suffering and national ideology.

Works Cited

- Boni, Commendatore Giacomo, *Hibernica: Notes on Some Burial Places and Customs of Ancient Ireland*. Translated from the 'Nuova Antologia.' [Director of Excavations in the Roman Forum] (Dublin: HMSO, 1906).
- Bourke, Angela [Partridge], 'Wild Men and Wailing Women.' *Éigse* 18 (1980): 25-37.
- , 'Working and Weeping: Women's Oral Poetry in Irish and Scottish Gaelic.' *Women's Studies Working Papers* No. 7. Dublin: UCD Women's Studies Forum, 1988.
- , 'Performing--Not Writing,' *Graph* 11 (Winter 1991-2): 28-31.
- , 'More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry,' *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan N. Radner (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1993).
- , 'Beyond the Boundaries of Fact: Oral and Literary Fictions in the Modernizing of Connemara.' Plenary address, Ireland Beyond Borders (American Conference for Irish Studies National Meeting), 14 April 2005. South Bend: Keough Institute for Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame.
- Cairns, David, and Shaun Richards, 'Tropes and Traps: Aspects of "Woman" and Nationality in Twentieth-Century Irish Drama', Johnson & Cairns 1991.
- Cowell, Sidney Robinson, ed., *Songs of Aran: Gaelic Singing from the West of Ireland*. Folkways Ethnic Library (FM 2004) Monograph

- Series. New York: Folkways Records, 1957. 33 rpm sound recording and liner notes.
- Croker, T., *Crofton Researches in the South of Ireland* (London: John Murray, 1824).
- , 'The Keen of the South of Ireland: As Illustrative of Irish Political and Domestic History, Manners, Music, and Superstitions.' *Percy Society, Early English Poetry, Ballads, and Popular Literature of the Middle Ages*. Edited from Original Manuscripts and Scarce Publications. Vol. XIII. London: Percy Society, 1844.
- Gregory, Lady Isabella Augusta, *Collected Plays*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (New York: Oxford UP, 1970).
- Hoagland, Kathleen, ed. *1000 Years of Irish Poetry* (Old Greenwich, CT: Devin-Adair, 1947).
- Hogan, Robert, and James Kilroy, eds, *Lost Plays of the Irish Renaissance* (New York: Proscenium Books, 1970).
- Holst-Warhaft, Gail, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
- Irish Humorous Poems: Comprising 'Moore's Melodies,' 'Shan Van Vocht,' 'Fun of the fair,' 'Gallant Sarsfield,' 'Croppy boys,' 'Rory of the Hills,' 'The Ould Sod,' 'Erin Mavourneen,' 'City of Limerick,' 'Fineen the Rover'* (New York: Worthington, c.1841).
- Johnson, Toni O'Brien, and David Cairns, eds, *Gender in Irish Writing* (Milton Keynes, England and Philadelphia: Open UP, 1991).
- Lomax, Alan, and Seamus Ennis, eds, *Irish Folk Songs – from the Western Counties of Eire*. Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music (New York: Columbia Masterworks, 1951). 33 rpm sound recording and liner notes.
- Lysaght, Patricia, 'Caoineadh os Cionn Coirp: The Lament for the Dead in Ireland.' *Folklore* 108 (1997): 65-82. Full Text Accessed via Periodicals Abstracts Online.
- MacBride, Maud Gonne, *Servant of the Queen*, ed. Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1994).
- MacBride, Maud Gonne, *Dawn*, Hogan & Kilroy, 1970.

- MacManus, Seumas, *The Story of the Irish Race* (Old Greenwich, CT: Devin-Adair, 1921).
- Milligan, Alice, ed., *The Shan Van Vocht / An t-Sean Bhean Bhocht: A national monthly magazine* (Belfast: J. W. Boyd, 1886-99).
- Nic Dhiarmada, Bríona, 'Looking Forward, Glancing Back – Irish Language Writing in the New Millennium', *Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, eds. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006).
- O'Curry, Eugene, *Of the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish: A Series of Lectures Delivered by the Late Eugene O'Curry, MRIA*. Ed. W. K. Sullivan. Vol. I. (London: Williams and Norgate; Dublin: W.B. Kelly; New York: Scribner, 1873).
- Ó Madagáin, Breandán, 'Irish Vocal Music of Lament and Syllabic Verse.' In *The Celtic Consciousness*, ed. Robert O'Driscoll (New York: George Braziller, 1981).
- Ó Súilleabháin, Sean, (1967) *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork: Mercier Press).
- Pearse, Pádraic, *Plays, Stories, Poems* (Dublin: Helicon Ltd., 1980).
- Repeal of the Union quadrilles. : Composed for the piano-forte on the occasion of the liberation of Daniel O'Connell, and his compatriots from the Richmond Penitentiary.* (1844). London: H. Thomas.
- Valente, Joseph, 'The Myth of Sovereignty: Gender in the Literature of Irish Nationalism.' *English Literary History* 61.10 (1994): 189-210.
- Yeats, William Butler, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan, The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

I am indebted to Angela Bourke, who was generous with her work during the earliest stages of this project. Research for this article was completed in the Irish collections of the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

¹ See especially Croker, 181-82; Ó Súilleabháin, 137-38, 141-42; Bourke, 1988: 13-14; Bourke, 1991-2: 31; Bourke, 1993: 161-75; Ó Madagáin, 313-15.

² See, for instance, Milligan, 99; see also Hoagland; *Repeal*, 1844; *Irish*, c.1841.