

Intertextuality in Drama: Strategic Remodelling of Motifs and Character Figurations in Synge and O’Casey by Irish Women Playwrights

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In his essay on Irish theatre in the 1990s Christopher Murray discusses intertextuality as a persistent thematic characteristic of modern Irish drama, manifesting itself in the fact that playwrights tend to rewrite their predecessors’ work and “favour[s] the process of composition known as palimpsest” (20). The range of examples following this proposition involves male playwrights from Sean O’Casey (who wrote *The Shadow of a Gunman* after J. M. Synge’s *The Playboy*) to Tom McIntyre’s “recycling of Irish classics” in his major works through Samuel Beckett, who “absorbed Yeats and O’Casey” (Murray 21-22). Notably, no female playwright is mentioned as employing this tendency. True, an investigation of the gendered aspects of the process raises further questions and issues of a wider scope. On the one hand, it is to be remembered that a female tradition in Irish drama established itself only after 1980. Antoinette Quinn’s claim that early twentieth-century Irish woman writers “constituted a continuing and esteemed female presence in nationalist literature rather than a tradition” (900) applies to playwrights as well, for reasons which I could hardly analyse within the confines of this short essay. It seems that the intertextual challenge for woman dramatists is provided by the male tradition. On the other hand, in an inter-gender context, the procedure of borrowing and rewriting tends to involve a thorough interrogation or even reversal of selected aspects of a canonical dramatic text. In her theoretical approach, Julie Sanders distinguishes appropriation as a kind of creative borrowing from and remodelling of an informing source (26) enhanced by a strategic recontextualisation which facilitates writing back to the original in a way to “giv[e] voice to those subject positions they perceive to have been oppressed or repressed in the original” (97-98). Irish woman playwrights’ reworking of elements from canonical male texts which date back to the Revival period often participate in this kind of project, regendering issues and foregrounding gender-related difference from the perspective of their marginalised female characters.

The present paper, focusing primarily on one drama by Teresa Deevy and Anne Devlin respectively, intends to discuss some of the ways in which these authors appropriate and rewrite certain themes and motifs as they are treated in a

couple of Synge's and O'Casey's major works. Their intertextual strategy will be seen as contributing to the re-negotiation of female subjectivity in environments which were heavily dominated by patriarchal values and norms. The two plays under further scrutiny here, "*The Disciple*" (1931) by Deevy and *Ourselves Alone* (1985) by Devlin were written half a century apart from each other, whereas set in politically and culturally different parts of Ireland according to the North/South divide. Nevertheless, the background to the action of the plays is a postcolonial society in each case bearing some notable affinities with the other. Both societies are portrayed in the plays as claustrophobic for women, confronting them with the perpetuation of gendered constraints and gender inequity which seriously affect the young female protagonists' day-to-day life and the prospect of how to shape their future.

Women lived in post-independence Ireland with the main goal of the early twentieth-century suffrage movement having been achieved, because all citizens over twenty-one years were enfranchised under the provisions of the Irish Free State Constitution of 1922. However, contrary to expectations, women's public visibility started to diminish soon afterwards due to the freshly introduced restrictions on their role in the post-revolutionary Irish society, the process being "strengthened by the deepening Catholic ethos and conservative values of the Irish Free State" (Owens 322). For women this meant internal colonisation; now they suffered discrimination and oppression by the Irish male, who, liberated from his former subordinate position, re-constructed Woman as his new-old Other. A significant aspect of the patriarchal discourse on postcolonial identity politics, Gerardine Meaney argues, was the "imposition of a very definite feminine identity as guarantor to the precarious masculinity of the new state" ("Race, Sex and Nation" 51). In the Northern Ireland of the Troubles (1969-1994) sectarian tensions and the organisation of actual paramilitary activities with men in charge resulted in the reinforcement of traditional patriarchal norms and the deepening of the gap between genders as well as generations. To quote from Imelda Foley, the Free State's "dictate of the place of women in the home is replicated by the espousal of loyalty to the men of Ulster" and "[t]he traditional role of women has been perceived as mothers and carers, as unseen supporters of fathers and husbands, keepers of hearth and altar" (24-25).

Conceived in the above outlined respective contexts, the works of Deevy and Devlin demonstrate interesting affinities regarding their investments in recycling certain motifs and restructuring selected character figurations taken from the male tradition of modern Irish drama which they found anticipating their own concerns, albeit in a different way. For Deevy, Synge could be a predecessor because of his obsession with the issue of seeking individual autonomy against communal limits, while for Devlin O'Casey provided a textual source which scrutinised the implications of the tension inherent in the gender divide as exacerbated by the circumstances of political pressure.

Instances of Deevy rewriting Synge have been noted by several critics recently. In his essay comparing Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* and Deevy's

Katie Roche Anthony Roche contends that Deevy “follows up on Synge’s play in two important ways: by reproducing and extending the dramatic situation of an older man married to a younger woman and by introducing the figure of the Tramp at a key moment in each of *Katie Roche*’s three acts.” At the same time, Roche continues, in both Synge and Deevy the heroine is positioned “within a peasant cottage setting. The house is what she has married into” (“Woman on the Threshold” 19). Investigating the plays further one finds other ideologically grounded differences. Unlike in *Shadow* the Tramp in *Katie Roche* is no romantic saviour of the woman but identifies himself as Katie’s father and asserts his patriarchal rights to discipline her. Finally Katie is taken away by her husband, another replacement for the Syngean Tramp by a patriarchal figure, which indicates that the woman’s fate in the 1930s loses even the last vestige of utopian romanticism Synge’s female character still seems to enjoy, although not entirely freely since there is no real alternative to the bonds of patriarchy. Synge’s Revivalist plays were imbued with the myth of freedom, sustained as part of the decolonising counter discourse which opened a limited vista of resistance even for the female characters but not without showing its dubious nature and fragility. To quote the words of Gerardine Meaney, Annie’s character in *The King of Spain’s Daughter* bears parodic affinities with Christy Mahon in *The Playboy*, because of her “flights into fantasy” and employment of “linguistic embroidery” (“The Sons of Cuchullain” 253) against her limited circumstances and the familial violence she faces. However, Meaney concludes, she has “no place [to go] beyond the historical particularity of the factory and the forced marriage” (“The Sons of Cuchullain” 255) waiting for her, lacking the mythical potential Christy’s new path offers him, which he steps on in control of his miraculously tamed father. Although Deevy’s heroines do not escape becoming bound to a conventional mode of life, we must notice that the heroines’ reaction to entrapment is not at all conventional, and their consciousness of it is not a sign of passivity or acceptance. Katie Roche realises that her only choice is to be brave and develop at least a vocal strength to cope with the romance-free marriage she encounters her new, cold, and unwelcoming ‘home’.

Traditionally, critical analyses of *The Playboy* tend to focus on the self-fashioning of Christy Mahon through inventive fiction and story-telling. A feminist reading of the play, however, like an essay by Gail Finney underscores that Pegeen’s encounter with Christy results in her identification with him, “who in killing his father has accomplished what she too wants metaphorically to do,” and “projects onto Christy [...] the kinds of characteristics that she would like to possess herself” (89). My argument is that the character closest to Pegeen in the work of Deevy is Ellie Irwin, the protagonist of the early play “*A Disciple*.” Like her Syngean counterpart, Ellie is a young girl in want of personal freedom as she is a domestic servant working in dismal circumstances and under the vigilant eyes of a middle-aged adult, Mrs Maher, whose piety coupled with hypocrisy parallels the neglectful and self-centered behaviour of Pegeen’s father. Similarly to Pegeen’s complaints about the lack of heroes in her world, Ellie

shows profound dissatisfaction with the dullness of life she witnesses around her, and longs to be lifted out of it. This, however, can happen only through her imagination: “she immerses herself in a series of pleasing fantasies which enable her to survive from day to day. She builds a world of glory around scraps of scandal concerning the flamboyant actress, Charlotte Burke, [and] the wealthy English socialite couple, the Glittertons [because they] resemble her hero, Coriolanus” in Ellie’s estimation (O’Doherty 105).

Ellie is further disappointed by seeing that the Glittertons are no gold even though their name glitters: they are just as vulgar and ordinary as the rest of the people the girl is acquainted with. In these circumstances the arrival of Jack the Scalp is announced quite like Christy Mahon’s in *The Playboy*. Mrs. Maher says: “Holy Angels save us this night! They’re saying Jack the Scalp is tearing mad—like a man out of his mind with the whole of the police pressing him on—” (32). After entering he threatens the company with his gun but only Ellie receives him fearlessly, taking him for the courageous man she has been waiting for all along, and starts calling him by the name of her chosen, ideal hero, Marcus Coriolanus. Like Pegeen, driven by her own needs she tries to make a hero of the man and liberate herself through him, overdoing even Pegeen’s confession of love: “Wherever you’ll be I’ll be there: I’ll cook your food and mend for you ... Wherever you’ll lie will be a good bed for me if I can lie beside you—” (45). However, Jack the Scalp rejects the girl’s emotional openness out of fear that he would lose his respectability if he succumbed to female advances, evoking the spineless behaviour of Shawn Keogh in *The Playboy*. The fact that the figures of Christy and Shawn become “combined in the person of Jack the Scalp” (Leeney 153), renders his individualised masculinity an illusion. Ellie’s final words echo Pegeen’s lament at the end of *The Playboy*, yet they express more than sorrow over the loss of “the only playboy,” that is an ideal Pegeen was in love with. What Ellie misses from the contemporary world is real manhood: “There is no MAN living now. Small wonder any woman takes poison” (47) she concludes, giving vent not only to personal feelings but also articulating profound disillusionment with the lack of balanced and healthier gender norms. As Cathy Leeney argues, “[a] remarkable aspect of the play is that the myths of sophistication and heroism are demolished, but the heroine stands firm, and asserts not grief but fury and frustration” (154). Viewed in this light, Ellie surpasses Pegeen in *The Playboy* by implying the realisation that narrow-minded hypocrisy works as a damaging factor of social relations in the world of the 1930s, which can also seriously impede female self-development.

O’Casey’s *Dublin Trilogy* pieces have inspired those Irish woman playwrights in the first place whose work is concerned with the marginalised and often fatally engendered situation of women in Troubles-ridden Northern Ireland, a place bearing similarities to Dublin during the 1916 Rising and the Civil War of 1922–1923. In the three O’Casey plays the woman characters serve mostly the revisionist project of the author to debunk male claims to nationalist heroism and patriotic glory as well as to having control over situations which

call for political action in their estimation. Minnie Powell, the young but prematurely aging tenement dweller in *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) has to look after herself without the guidance of a family therefore she invests in building up male heroism not unlike Pegeen in *The Playboy* and Ellie in "*A Disciple*." Given that Davoren, her ideal man and his superstitious roommate have only words, Minnie is the one to undertake a fatal deed and pay with her life although the men do not deserve her sacrifice (see Murray 100), which seems to be O'Casey's primary agenda. *Joyriders* by Christina Reid (1986) begins with young, lower class characters' watching the last bits of a theatre production of *Gunman* in Belfast. Among them, Maureen breaks in tears at the sight of Minnie being shot dead, while by the end of Reid's play she herself falls victim of a conflict between men, her brother and the army, when she tries to interfere. The cause of her unexpected and unmotivated death is evidently related to the Troubles and men's dominant involvement in it, which repeats O'Casey's episode. Foregrounding the figure of the innocent female victim as a shocking motif is present in both the older and the recent wartime plays used to expose the characteristic falsities of male heroism. Like *Gunman* for O'Casey, *Joyriders* for Reid does not remain the last word on the subject of gendered victimhood. A sequel to *Joyriders*, *Clowns* (1996) is consciously set in the year of the 1994 ceasefire according to Reid, who explains that "[t]he play is very much about the difficulty of coming to terms with peace, rather than war, and how hard the peace process is. And Sandra, who left Belfast after Maureen's death, filled with rage and despair, can't make her own personal peace process until she stops looking back and seeking revenge" (Kurdi 210).

Ourselves Alone by Devlin borrows, assimilates and transforms motifs from O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) in more subtle ways. Here the central theme is women's re-appropriation of their voice and the control over their body as crucial indicators of the assertion of their subjectivity against male domination in the context of Republican militarism. Devlin constructs a collective of women characters: Frieda and Josie are sisters while Donna is their friend and their brother's partner at the same time. They are sharing the female protagonist's part as they are close to each other, complementary but not oppositional, which results in a "dramatic decentering of emphasis" with hierarchy present only when the men intrude on the scene (Roche, *Contemporary* 176). In the beginning the women appear to be locked in roles defined by the prevailing stereotypes about women in the nationalist community, and function largely as adjuncts "waiting on men" (16), that is serving masculinist goals with their bodies in predetermined ways. Both the father of Frieda and Josie and their brother, Liam treat the women from the position of authority, whose bodies and work they are entitled to exploit while supervising and controlling their movements, relationships and even opinions. Yet, unlike in O'Casey's *The Plough*, Devlin's is not just a compassionate and basically static portrayal of the female predicament in sectarian Belfast during the rather bleak period of the early 1980s following the hunger strikes. The

Devlin play presents dynamic shifts between images of gendered oppression and signs of the strengthening reclamation of the female voice not only to articulate experience but also to question and contest it. For the attempts to reinscribe personal narratives Donna's sexual awakening is a good example. Her affair with a young musician who does not serve the nationalist cause narrowly-mindedly makes her "feel innocent" (83) and reborn, as well as proves enabling so that she can overcome the confusion, neglect and unfounded jealousy that she has been exposed to as a consequence of Liam's paramilitary involvement and long-term internment.

Conspicuously, both O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* and Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* use a title associated with Irish Republicanism, the history of which trails through most of the twentieth century. The former title refers to the flag of the Irish Citizen Army therefore is quite transparent in evoking the spirit of the male-centered mobilising force behind the Easter Rising. *Ourselves Alone*, on the other hand, introduces a counterhegemonic discourse by the very title to signal the woman characters' perception of themselves in the nationalist economy. Ann Rea writes about this title that it "translates into English 'Sinn Fein', the name of the political front of the IRA, [...] but Devlin uses the English translation ironically to draw our attention to the women in the Republican movement, depicting them as 'alone', or isolated, but also as 'selves' who may dissent from the movement's ideology" (208). The name of Gaelic roots is associated with masculine politics, while its iconoclastic appropriation and transformation works subversively: the English words direct attention to problems of the present and not what is already the past and gone, in accordance with Frieda's desperate claim: "We are the dying. Why are we mourning them? (*She points at the portraits of the dead hunger strikers ...*)" (39-40). Similarly to *The Plough*, the domestic milieu to which Devlin's women are relegated and where they try to have the values of privacy respected is constantly violated by activities linked to the conflict outside along with its ideological constraints. It is a highly ambiguous situation: the women find themselves alone as Devlin's title suggests, deprived of political agency while also unprotected in the home by the men who abandon them in the name of higher causes, so their only option is to stand up for themselves. *Ourselves Alone*, to quote Anthony Roche's cogent observation, "dramatises in a predominantly feminist key the resistance to political sloganeering" (*Contemporary* 175): the female characters cannot but learn to strive to assert the importance of emotions and personal ambitions versus the destructive power of abstractions perpetuating the Yeatsian "too long a sacrifice."

The part of the Devlin plot which focuses on Josie offers a revised version of the story line depicting the sexual betrayal and bodily humiliation of Mary Boyle in *Juno*. At first Mary seems to be heading for a better future as one taking an enthusiastic part in the trade union movement, while in Josie's situation gendered marginalisation is accentuated but without such comforting illusions. Josie has been involved in nationalist paramilitary activities since her

childhood, sent out on dangerous errands mostly at night: she took up the inferior job of a courier for her father and his comrades out of duty to her family as well as to the larger Catholic community. “More scared” by the job (31) as she becomes increasingly aware of the consequences, she tries to counterbalance the inevitable intrusion of the political into even her private life, the sacred clandestine moments of her intimate liaison with Cathal, a married republican leader. Escaping into fantasy, Josie invents alternative identities to liberate herself from her inferior position and put on the mask of a mysterious other to counter the thought of always being taken for granted by men: “Sometimes when we make love I pretend I’m somebody else ... Sometimes I’m not even a woman” (17). Neglected by Cathal without explanation, Josie enters into a new relationship with Joe Conran, a young intellectual from England who joined the nationalist activists after a thorough vetting. The parallel with Bentham in *Juno* is complicated strategically: Joe is drawn in much greater detail than his counterpart in O’Casey’s work. Joe operates on political as well as personal levels, indicating an even more thorough interconnectedness of these in the 1980s than what appears in the world of the earlier play. Masked as a “political advisor” (50) Devlin’s traitor character, Joe Conran manages to infiltrate the Provos, befriend and then impregnate Josie during his manipulative work in Northern Ireland, only to abandon both the nationalists and the woman quickly once his pro-British political mission has been fulfilled.

Devlin’s Josie suffers abandonment twice, comparably to Mary in *Juno*, yet the differences between the respective fates of the girls are notable, especially with regard to their effects, adding new layers of meaning. Mary, left pregnant by Bentham meets her former boyfriend at her mother’s persuasion, and would be willing to marry him without love as a conventional solution to her shame. Getting a hint of her pregnancy the man, however, rejects Mary out of moral hypocrisy. Devlin sets up a parallel scene in her play: Josie, made pregnant by Joe Conran, has a meeting with Cathal, who now wants to renew their relationship. His unspoken motives are twofold: because of the advanced pregnancy of his wife he needs another woman as lover and, not unlike male warriors in mythology whom the republicans were eager to emulate, he is jealous of the foreigner’s success in conquering the “national” territory of the Irish woman’s body. Importantly, in Devlin’s play it is Josie who rejects the man, moreover, she is proud of being pregnant and draws empowerment from feeling “two hearts” in her body that she can control now through her personal choice (79), since her condition obviously terminates her burdensome political errands.

Both Mary Boyle and Josie have to confront the fact that their child will be fatherless, but under significantly different conditions. In Mary’s case the damaging effect of her desperate situation on her subjectivity is manifest by the loss of her voice; except for a few vague words of fright and lament she has nothing to say let alone do to find a solution. It is the protective Juno who takes the floor, reassuring her daughter that, with herself in charge, the two of them

“will work together for the sake of the baby [and] It’ll have what is far better—it’ll have two mothers” (71). With this coda-like ending O’Casey’s mother-daughter relationship seems to come close to the intra-gender polarisation of women characters in pieces of Revivalist drama like *Cathleen ní Houlihan* (1902). Juno, perhaps not accidentally called after a goddess, displays features of the idealised Mother Ireland figure, though reformed to an extent because she has grown to question, even refuse the dubious values of patriarchy. Nonetheless, the symbolic power enshrined in her famous speech also called Juno’s “prayer” overshadows the situation of the daughter who has to cope with the earthly realities of being an abandoned mother-to-be. In Juno’s speech the spirit of faith is highlighted as triumphant while the violated and degraded female body of Mary is given no real attention.

The image of Josie feeling two hearts in her body overtly echoes and recontextualises Juno’s words about the unborn baby of her daughter to be raised by two mothers. Josie’s newly-found empowerment is emphasised by her uniting the separate roles of the two women in O’Casey play, those of humiliated victim and symbolic Mother Ireland as inspired carer and guardian, in one self-assured female subject reclaiming agency. At the same time the hierarchy within the mother-daughter dyad as it appears at the end of *Juno* is replaced by the more equal, sisterly relationship of Josie, Donna and Frieda in *Ourselves*. Complete freedom, however, would be illusory for Josie in the circumstances as she is taken home by her father, which contrasts Captain Boyle’s moralistic indignation at his daughter’s fate, while counteracting Liam’s order that the baby should be killed. The intra-gender split between the women in O’Casey is paralleled by another kind of intra-gender while also intra-sectarian split in Devlin’s play between the men. Josie’s father and Liam see “the fetus as an issue of patriarchal authority” (Rea 214) and engage in a verbal battle over ideas while disregarding the corpo-reality of mother and child. The female body pregnant with a hybrid life is present in O’Casey too, but with Devlin it becomes invested with the direct role of providing another kind of means to undermine and potentially erode the unity of paramilitary activism. Juno argues for peace largely as an abstraction but Josie, by carrying a new life with unflinching courage, contributes to the disruption of the seemingly homogeneous nationalist narrative. While the conclusion of *Ourselves* does raise the question of the renewal of patriarchal rule over Josie, her father now at least treats her as a daughter and not just a “mate” to work with serving paramilitary goals, which marks a shift towards introducing private values into their relationship and, thus, suggests hope for future change.

To sum up, the Deevy and Devlin plays reconfigure Synge’s and O’Casey’s female characters by endowing them with ambition to search for autonomy and venture resistance or even realising their own aims in contrast with their relatively subdued counterparts in the respective pieces by the two male authors. Showing the potential for female self-assertion, the women writers create “a new or revised political and cultural position” from which, to use Julie Sanders’

words again, they “highlight troubling gaps, absences, and silences within the canonical texts to which they refer” (97). By comparison, the female-authored plays reveal that Pegeen in Synge and Mary in O’Casey were formed still bearing traces of the stereotypes of women constructed in early twentieth-century society and literature, presented as helpless victims or lamenting losers in the shadow of male claims to heroism, however false, or as representatives of spiritualised, abstract femininity. In his above cited article Murray implies a further crucial function of intertextuality beside the thematic as it works in the genre of drama. Updating the predecessors, he says, “is not just another way of defining tradition but is also a useful way of describing the procedures of Irish writing in a post-colonial world” (Murray 21). Taking up this cue, I conclude from my investigation that the fantastic/mythical and the naturalistic mode that Synge and O’Casey chose to deploy are complicated by Deevy and Devlin to achieve different effects in plays that recycle similar themes to those of their male predecessors.

In the context of early twentieth-century Irish decolonisation involving hope for national renewal, the use of the fantastic/mythical mode proved to be an authentic form of representation enabling potential renewal for the individual male (if not the female) as the case of Christy Mahon exemplifies. With national freedom regained this mode had lost its artistic viability since amid the grim social realities of the post-independence period it might have suggested cheap escapism if not worse than that. Portraying the 1930s, Deevy demythologised the possibility of individual freedom in the sense of being free not only regarding motility and authority but also from preconceptions and hypocrisy, for both women and men. The naturalistic mode deployed by O’Casey is not totally missing from but becomes stylistically varied in Devlin’s *Ourselves*, which introduces more irony and ambiguity in the language as well as visions and hallucinations to articulate the woman characters’ psychic landscape. Brian Singleton has noticed a trend in the 1990s Irish theatre world undertaking “the examination of the early revival” (260), the essence of which is to revise themes and techniques of the past in light of the altered representational needs and shifts characteristic of the present. I think that by its politics of intertextuality, women’s drama can be seen as contributing to this revisionist project in a singular way. Concerning Garry Hynes’s 1991 production of *The Plough and the Stars*, Singleton writes that it “stripped the play of its comic accretions, and questioned the legacy and injustices of post-independence politics. [...] O’Casey’s women became bonded by their labour and their struggle to keep family intact” (260-61)—not unlike Devlin’s. Therefore, women playwrights’ reshaping the work of their male predecessors can be seen as a significant aspect of today’s wider cultural scene involving efforts to reinterpret the values of the past for an ever-changing present.

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