

VOICING DISSENT

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'What Kate Did': Subversive Dissent in
Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room*

Sharon Tighe-Mooney

Early reviews of Kate O'Brien's (1897–1974) work suggest that she was largely perceived as a popular writer of romantic fiction much concerned with Catholicism.¹ Indeed, many of her critics also thought the same, an impression that is challenged by recent scholarship such as Eibhear Walshe's standard-setting biography on O'Brien, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life*. Terence Brown, in his highly influential study, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, shows that the Irish writers who chose to remain in Ireland in the early decades of Independence had two options available to them: either to perpetuate or to oppose the new state ideology through their art. The author, he writes, 'could furnish the new order with an art, which whether in its self-conscious nativism or idyllic celebration of the rural folk tradition, would nourish the dominant essentialist ideology of the state or, disgusted with the unreality of such programmatic artistic endeavours, he might seek to define his artistic identity in terms of opposition and dissent'.² According to this, we may consider O'Brien as a dissenter, as her work, at many important levels, opposed the new state ideology, despite on occasions appearing to be conservatively implicated in it. Indeed, this conferred on her a certain heroism for, as Brown continues, 'the writer prepared to employ literature and the profession of letters as weapons of dissent' became involved 'in a certain heroism'.³ This heroism involved risking not just their respectability, but also their livelihood, as writers who fell foul of the Censorship Board suffered in terms of their reputation, as well as a loss of income.⁴ As one of those who suffered under the Censorship of Publications Act, it is productive to read O'Brien's seemingly bourgeois oeuvre as more politically inflected, and this essay will explore some of the ways in which O'Brien engaged with literary, religious, social and cultural conventions in *The Ante-Room*, in literary acts of dissent from

the politically determined contemporary mores of her day. O'Brien's use of the romance genre, and the respective characterizations of Agnes Mulqueen and her mother, Teresa, as well as Caroline Lanigan in *Without My Cloak*, will be examined in the context of the contribution of the Catholic Church to constructions of women's sexuality and gender roles.

Determining the genre into which we might easily fit O'Brien's work is problematic, as Eibhear Walshe points out in his introduction to *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*. O'Brien, he writes, 'falls into no ready category, judged as appearing to vacillate between popular fiction and "literature", Catholic conscience and Wildean dissidence, English letters and Irish writing, bourgeois history and feminist fable'.⁵ O'Brien's novels include a family saga, *Without My Cloak*; two novels with strong political themes, *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Last of Summer*; as well as novels dealing with family dynamics and dysfunction, education for women and Irish culture, such as *The Land of Spices* and *The Flower of May*. Also included is a historical novel set in sixteenth-century Spain, and a novel about the lives of two Irish girls who train as opera singers in Europe – O'Brien's final novel, *As Music and Splendour*. The sexual agenda of many of her novels affirms not the inevitable closure of the heteronormative ending, but instead implies the greater desirability of same-sex relationships, whether consummated or not, and interrogates the happy-ever-after expectations of romantic fiction. It appears erroneous, therefore, to categorize O'Brien as a writer of romantic fiction.

In O'Brien's second novel, *The Ante-Room*, set in 1880 and published in 1934, historical and religious realism provides a framework that complicates its simple definition as a love story. O'Brien's manipulation of the genre of romantic fiction here proves fruitful for challenging the perception of O'Brien as a 'safe' writer of popular, romantic fiction. The historical framework works as a distancing device to allow O'Brien to question and comment on her contemporary Ireland and ask whether the hopes and dreams of Independence were realized. The opposing political opinions expressed by Dr William Curran and Vincent de Courcy O'Regan in the novel prefigure the bitter Civil War that broke out as soon as the reins of power had been transferred to Irish hands in 1922. Equally, to suggest as simply romantic the struggles of the individual conscience in situations of emotional crisis, as instanced by Agnes's abnegation of self-fulfilment worked through the medium of personal

desire, moral edicts and sisterly love, is to seriously under-read the psychological complexity of the characters struggling with a changing relationship to a controlling and dominant Catholic Church in Ireland. There is a profound seriousness in O'Brien's engagement with issues of morality, respectability and individual determinism of her time.

The fact that O'Brien's books were seen as popular and romantic was critically detrimental to her reputation, as popularity is often associated with being 'trashy'. As Walshe writes, 'her popularity with a wide reading audience worked against her, leading to the dismissive categorization of her work as that of a "lady novelist"'.⁶ Brian Moore's comment on O'Brien's literary reputation, cited in Julia Carlson's *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, appears to bear this out: "There was something wrong with you if you were a "darling" writer. In my childhood I knew that the most popular sort of Irish writers, like Maurice Walsh⁷ and Kate O'Brien, were all trashmongers – third rate. I knew that people liked them because they were safe, so I wanted to do something different."⁸ Moore's perhaps rather hasty judgement may echo that of those who have only ever judged her books by their covers. O'Brien's book covers, which feature designs that suggest light romantic reads, misrepresent her work. Although marketed as romantic fiction, the books do not necessarily deliver what the covers promise. For instance, the cover of the 2001 edition of *Without My Cloak* depicts a woman posed in a supine position, dressed in clothes of luxurious material, her hair spread out around her.⁹ Yet in this novel the principal characters are men; the novel follows the lives of three generations of Considine men, Honest John, Anthony and Denis. The cover of the 1959 edition of the same novel is even more misleading, and even quite shocking, given the contents.¹⁰ It displays a naked woman holding a length of material which is draped about her. Such covers suggest titillation, sensationalism and the promise of forbidden sexual encounter, and although O'Brien's work at one level partakes of the romance genre, to read it as only romantic fiction is to miss the many subtleties and interventions her work makes outside the formulaic tale of the obstructed journey to everlasting love.

The impact of the book cover on the reading public's expectation of its content is discussed in Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. Indeed, Radway notes that the disjunction between content and cover is one of the major irritations

for readers of romantic fiction.¹¹ Radway's key study of women readers and romantic fiction in the United States recounts that when choosing a book, readers are deliberate in their selection and do not appreciate misleading advertising or unrepresentative book covers. In Radway's investigation into the attractions of reading romantic fiction, she considers the actual act of reading, as well as the reasons given by readers for choosing romance fiction. In this way, Radway's study takes into account the huge number of readers who derive pleasure and satisfaction from reading romantic fiction and asks what this pleasure can tell us. Radway's research found that one of the main reasons for reading romance novels is to 'escape' temporarily from real-life demands and responsibilities and to gain 'emotional gratification'.¹² She then theorizes that the act of reading allows women to rebel because they are focusing on a private, indulgent experience that blocks out any demands on their attention from others. The typical romantic ending of the heroine's marriage to the perfect man provides room for the fantasy whereby women can temporarily shelve their roles as nurturers and carers of others, with 'happy endings'. In addition, a 'happy ending' provides women with reassurance about the value of marriage and their role in the institution of marriage as they know it within a patriarchal system. On the other hand, critics of romance see the heroine's passive surrender to the strong male as an approval of patriarchy. Tania Modleski, in *Loving with a Vengeance: Produced Fantasies for Women*, suggests that this is because 'many critics tend to take at face value the novelists' endorsement of the domestic ideal and ignore the actual, not very flattering portraits of domesticity which emerge from their works'.¹³ This posits the argument that the genre derives from the false-advertising of patriarchy itself, for, as Radway argues, 'all popular romantic fiction originates in the failure of patriarchal culture to satisfy its female members'.¹⁴ Modleski shares a similar view, arguing that romances act as wish-fulfillments that 'inoculate' women against the problems and dangers they experience in patriarchal societies.¹⁵ In situations where women play the roles of nurturer and carer, women themselves are often under-nurtured and supported. In the Irish context, woman's role as nurturer is enshrined in the 1937 Irish Constitution. Article 41.2.1 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* states: 'In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.'¹⁶ The import of the words 'by her life within the home' is particularly striking. It demands a

selfless dedication on the part of women to the service of others in a private domestic space, the home – a view also promulgated by the Catholic Church, whose Social Teaching principles were incorporated into this section of the Constitution.¹⁷ This self-sacrificing role is evident in the depictions of both Agnes and Teresa Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room*. Agnes denies herself the future that she desires in order to avoid causing pain to her sister, while Teresa fights against relinquishing her hold on life, despite severe bodily pain, until a substitute carer is found for her ailing son.

Romantic fiction requires a romantic heroine and while O'Brien's novels appear to have romantic heroines, they are often far from typical, both in narratorial and in psychological terms. Lorna Reynolds, in a journal article about O'Brien, wrote: 'In her second novel, Kate O'Brien created her first *typical* heroine, a girl caught in the conflict between the attractions of love and the restraints of religious prohibitions.'¹⁸ Agnes Mulqueen may be the main protagonist of the novel, but she is not the typical heroine of romantic fiction: her physical attractions are not immediate; the male protagonist with whom Agnes is in love, Vincent de Courcy O'Regan, having met the Mulqueen sisters at the same time (as recounted in *Without My Cloak*), marries the shallow, vivacious Marie-Rose.¹⁹ Moreover, *The Ante-Room* suggests that Marie-Rose is more typical of a romantic heroine. In a scene where the family doctor, Dr Curran, first encounters Marie-Rose, he describes her as follows: 'The classic feminine of polite literature, William Curran thought, the sort of heroine whom lady novelists visualize as holding the hero in the hollow of her little hand.'²⁰ This self-referential device subtly distances O'Brien from stereotypical 'lady novelists', and her heroine from the 'typical' romantic heroine, as Marie-Rose does not have 'the hero in the hollow of her little hand'. At the same time, Nicola Beauman suggests that by 'employing the familiar strategies of popular romance, O'Brien is signalling her allegiance with the traditions of women's writing'.²¹ O'Brien's subtle manipulation of the boundaries of the popular romance genre is evident when she invites her readers to think about her work through a different lens. *The Ante-Room* makes a well-placed reference to Henry James's novel, *Washington Square*,²² making a connection to a writer whose work in many respects could have been termed 'romantic fiction' had it been written by a woman, but whose relation to the romance genre has been read as ironic, subversive and strategic. In James's novel, the heroine, Catherine Sloper, is equally untypical as she is neither brilliant nor beautiful, and

the object of her affections only courts her for her money. Indeed, Agnes even compares herself to Catherine in the conversation about the novel at the dinner table. Agnes and Catherine both refuse to comply with the norms of society in terms of securing a husband, but not in the usual heroic manner, as to remain unmarried is to choose another mode of oppression. It is unlikely that Agnes will marry her admirer, Dr Curran, as she does not love him. Likewise, Catherine refuses to marry Morris Townsend because she realizes that he does not love her. Thus, as Anne Fogarty argues in 'The Business of Attachment: Romance and Desire in the Novels of Kate O'Brien', Agnes's desire 'defiantly resists the demands of the family romance which stipulates that love must end in marriage'.²³

At the end of *The Ante-Room*, Vincent commits suicide as he cannot live without Agnes who, for her sister's sake, refuses to contemplate a future with him. Vincent's suicide frees Marie-Rose from an unhappy marriage, leaving her respectable position in society undamaged. Teresa Mulqueen's attractive, intelligent death-bed nurse, Nurse Cunningham, whose orphaned status has left her financially insecure, decides to marry Reggie, Agnes's syphilitic brother, purely for financial security. Thus, Reggie and Marie-Rose appear to fare quite well in spite of their respective moral 'weaknesses', while Agnes's future remains unresolved. From the viewpoint of romantic fiction, this is an unjust ending, as one of the points of romantic fiction is to reward sacrifice, selflessness, restraint and lack of self-interest, thereby reinvesting an ideology of selflessness among women in economic systems that ask them to perform low-paying or non-paying jobs for the greater good. The novel does not end with Agnes being united with the man she loves. It can be productively argued, therefore, that Agnes is not a typical romantic heroine, as her strength of character and selflessness go unrewarded within the terms of the genre. Accordingly, the ending of *The Ante-Room* is undecided and unhappy; consequently, the novel does not fulfil the terms of a work of romantic fiction, but instead produces an outcome that frustrates the romantic readers' expectations and therefore highlights the actual 'unromantic' outcome for many women. This juxtaposition between the inner terms of the genre and the outer reality of such ideological faith is echoed in the disparity between the public and private lives of the family in *The Ante-Room*. The failures of patriarchy and its own self-advertising are dramatically depicted, as the romantic hero – dashing, devilish and daring, masterful, menacing and magnificent – is replaced by ineffectual male characters. Strength, decisiveness and mastery are

embodied by the female characters, and when these traits appear in males they are evidence of self-important posturing, as opposed to depth and strength of character. The strong female characters in the text suggest that while the outer society may be patriarchal, the inner reality can be quite different, while operating within socially patriarchal constraints. At the same time, no alternative role for woman is presented, as O'Brien does not offer a radical alternative for Agnes, although she leaves her unattached in the matrimonial sense. As Fogarty comments, the fates of characters such as Agnes 'bespeak an impossible yearning for escape rather than an outright attempt at rebellion'.²¹

Such escape may be detected in the framing of the novel which sets the events of *The Ante-Room* on three consecutive holy days in the Catholic Church calendar, All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day and All Souls Day, placing Catholicism firmly at the centre of the novel. This frame, however, suggests the possibility for internal dissent as each of these holy days, although outwardly Christian, is historically bound with a past that unsettles the claim of the Magisterium of the Church, as each assimilates pre-Christian rites, and occurs on a day that was originally a pagan feast. Each day, although an opportunity for diligent Christian observances, also provides the ludic possibility of disobedience, for not observing the conventions of the romance novel. Religious realism is markedly featured in *The Ante-Room*, as characters negotiate their own desires via religious dictates and teachings, echoing the conventions of the highly charged Gothic novel, as suggested by the references in the text to sensation fiction novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Indeed, they exceed these conventions by virtue of the theological sophistication with which each main player, and especially Agnes, struggles with the dilemma of human instinct coming into conflict with religious and moral duty. Agnes is not, despite initial appearances, a typical Irish Catholic. While she does embody the internalization of Catholic feeling, the individualistic examination of conscience, as Walshe explains in his biography on O'Brien, is more characteristic of English Catholicism,²² or indeed, of a pre-Christian way of being that did not demand such a straitened existence for a woman, such as the Brehon system of laws that accorded women marital, property and divorce rights similar to those of men.²³ What O'Brien did, therefore, as Adele Dalsimer argued in *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*, was to treat Irish Catholicism 'as an inner, psychological dynamic rather than an external, social force', the latter being the predominant mode of Irish

Catholic practice at the time.²⁷ In explaining Irish religious practice during the period in question, Tom Inglis writes, in *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, that outward appearances of piety outweighed inner conviction, as public displays of religious behaviour were crucial for gaining respect culturally, socially and politically in a country where the Catholic Church held 'a monopoly on morality'.²⁸

When Agnes's uncle, Canon Tom Considine, suggests Mass for his dying sister, Agnes is forced to go to confession, as her feelings for her brother-in-law have 'withheld her, for she was honest, from those practices of the Church which are the routine of a good Catholic'.²⁹ Her pagan desire is thus prayed out of her, as the sacrament gives her courage, when the priest assures her that her love for Vincent, 'with prayer, real prayer ... will die'.³⁰ In *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, Lorna Reynolds writes that Irish society at that time would have assumed that all good Catholics would have 'firmly and successfully subjugated mere human affections to the dictates of their religion'.³¹ But in the text this does not happen, and Agnes's courage and confidence does not last. Indeed, one touch from Vincent is enough to shatter her resolution. Although Agnes's renunciation of love for Vincent at the end of the novel 'accords fully with her Catholic training',³² it is, in fact, her strong sense of duty and obligation to her sister, Marie-Rose, that is the primary factor in her decision not to pursue a love affair with Vincent. For Agnes, the family bond proves too strong to break. She cannot leave aside Marie-Rose whom Vincent no longer loves, as she tells him: 'I think that now I'm the only living soul she feels safe with.'³³ This both breaks with and explicitly plays out the rules of romantic fiction. The selfless, dutiful heroine must, at the end, relinquish her selflessness in order to give in to her desire to have someone for herself, at the last minute swerving away from the real implication of self-sacrifice in the text. Here, Agnes treats the terms of self-sacrifice with utter fidelity, to the extent that she cannot in fact claim the hero for herself. The romantic heroine usually breaks a bond with another woman (who is generally shown to have deceived her) in order to identify with the hero, yet here the bond with the other woman is affirmed, while the hero is rejected. Accordingly, while Agnes works through a religious medium to negotiate her emotional dilemma, it is not the driving motivation for her decision to end the relationship with Vincent.

The denial of the heteronormative ending for Agnes explicitly subjects the family unit, dependent on marriage and motherhood,

to scrutiny. Following Catholic Church Social Teaching guidelines, the State safeguarded the institution of Marriage in the 1937 Constitution. Article 41.3.1 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* states: 'The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack', while Article 41.3.2 stated: 'No law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage.'²⁴ In a country where divorce was sanctioned by neither Church nor State, the wives depicted in O'Brien's texts negotiate positions for themselves within these twin pillars of patriarchal mandates. The pagan possibility of divorce haunts *The Ante-Room* through the repressed aspects of the structuring holy days, and the unhappy wife in *Without My Cloak*, Caroline Lanigan, attempts an escape from her less than ideal circumstances. In Catholic teaching, the sacrament of marriage is imbued with solemn promises, as Pope Pius XI's 1930 encyclical on Christian marriage, *Casti Connubii*, indicates:

By the very fact, therefore, that the faithful with sincere mind give such consent, [that is, to marriage] they open up for themselves a treasure of sacramental grace from which they draw supernatural power for the fulfilling of their rights and duties faithfully, holily, perseveringly even unto death. Hence this sacrament ... adds particular gifts, dispositions, seeds of grace, by elevating and perfecting the natural powers.²⁵

In *Without My Cloak*, Agnes's aunt, the unhappily married Caroline Lanigan (nee Considine), having fled her marital home to seek refuge with her brother in London, explains her expectations of marriage to her potential lover, Richard Froud. She tells him that before her marriage, a priest explained that 'the sacrament of matrimony would give me grace to be a good and happy wife. I didn't know what he meant. But often afterwards I wondered what I had done wrong that I hadn't been given that grace. Oh, Richard, I prayed so much!'²⁶ In this context, Caroline has not, in her terms, received this grace, and in her own eyes has been deemed unworthy by God for the receipt of the 'particular gifts' to fulfil her 'duties'. From the believer's perspective, therefore, a failed marriage was a source of personal failure and divine disregard. Moreover, Caroline has no recourse to changing her situation, as divorce in Ireland was not socially acceptable and, after Independence, not legally available. Karen Armstrong's view, in *The Gospel According to Woman*, is that in circumstances where marriage is imbued with such high expectations, 'marriage has been

transformed into an earthly paradise; expectations are raised for both men and women that cannot possibly be fulfilled. For woman particularly, as marriage is her only world, this is catastrophic.¹⁷ The text indicates that Caroline's marriage had been a social triumph, but personally empty: 'Her marriage had been staggeringly correct and had come to pass without the least manoeuvring ... [James Lanigan was] a fine fellow, of distinguished appearance, and coming of dignified middle-class stock.'¹⁸ The word 'staggeringly' is striking, implying that Caroline's marriage is so suitable with regard to James's status, looks and prospects as to be almost exaggerated in terms of its perfection as a union. In this way, the contrast between outer appearances of exemplariness and Caroline's inner unhappiness is established. Moreover, 'staggeringly' conveys unsteadiness, which suggests the instability of Caroline and James's marriage. In a similar vein to Agnes, Caroline is unable to extract herself from familial bonds and returns home, as is expected of her. The impact of Caroline's unhappy situation is depicted in *Without My Cloak* in terms of her decline from vivaciousness to bitterness, while in *The Ante-Room*, Caroline's sister, Teresa Mulqueen, in reaction to an inadequate husband, lavishes all her love on one of her children.

Teresa Mulqueen is first introduced in *Without My Cloak*, and in that novel the narrator writes: 'The only great love that Teresa had known was the maternal. Passion for a man, though she could have felt it, had never come her way.'¹⁹ Consequently, Teresa deals with her unsatisfactory union with Danny Mulqueen by investing all her emotions in her son, Reggie. In the text, Teresa's husband, Danny, is described as having 'no appearance to speak of ... He was stupid and without viciousness, very much the sort of "in-law" that turns up in most families at one point or another.'²⁰ As Reynolds argues, Teresa 'is one of the many Irish women who have tried to compensate themselves for an inadequate husband by lavishing all their tenderness on a son'.²¹ Danny, is aware of where Teresa's heart lies and is 'jealous of the lifted look that Reggie could bring to the tortured woman's face'.²² Hence, in the initial portrayal of Teresa, that well-known cliché, the 'Irish Mother', is dramatized. Aine McCarthy, in ' "Oh Mother Where Art Thou?" Irish Mothers and Irish Fiction in the Twentieth Century', writes:

The most cursory examination of the representation of mothers in Irish fiction reveals three widely, almost obsessively, reproduced stereotypes: Good Mammy, an idealized mother figure (dutiful, self-sacrificing paragon, devoted to God and family,

provider of selfless love and good dinners); Moaning Mammy, her negative counterpart (whining or silent martyr, drained by her feckless/alcoholic husband and enormous brood of children); and [the type that Irish-American novelist J.T. Farrell (1929) dubbed] the 'Smother Mother', a dominant matriarch who insists on her children's adherence to her principles.⁴³

Although O'Brien depicts various mothers who include elements of all of the above - as well as absent or dying mothers - in her fiction, there is generally a satirical gap in the portrayals that allows for a break with character stereotyping. Teresa 'had built for her wasted son a life that was safe from life'.⁴⁴ Her single-minded mothering of Reggie has allowed him to avoid confronting his syphilitic condition. He shuffles through the novel in a sort of limbo and also avoids dealing with the implications of Teresa's cancer. In exercising her power over him, Teresa denies Reggie his own power. Anthony Roche elaborates on this further in '*The Ante-Room* as Drama' when he writes:

It is in the wasting away of Teresa's body that her symbolic power is greatest and that she is able to induce guilt for the denial of that body for so long. The classic compensation in Irish Catholic terms for the woman's withdrawal from the husband after marriage and the transfer to the son, the male body over whom she may (as mother) exercise power.⁴⁵

Accordingly, as Armstrong writes, 'Guilt makes a woman feel she is important and that her actions count and have a significance which, in reality - where women are so often thrust on to the sidelines of life - they simply do not have.'⁴⁶ Teresa's power has been misplaced, and as she lies dying, she recognizes her mistake in sheltering Reggie: 'For she saw that her method of making his spoiled life liveable had been a mistake.'⁴⁷ By revealing Teresa's realization of her mistake, the self-sacrificing mother who needed to fulfil the aspirations of the Irish Constitution for the family departs from her blind convictions, thus undoing the fidelity and faith needed to protect the State that requires support from the very women it fails to support. Agnes's excessive faith contrasts with Teresa's loss of faith, but both undermine the romance architecture that supports an ideology that discriminates against women's own self-determination.

At the end of *The Ante-Room*, Agnes Mulqueen's future is as uncertain as it was when the novel opened. Conventional romantic love is denied to her and if Radway's readers' definition of romantic fiction is considered, which is 'that an unhappy ending excludes a

novel that is otherwise a romantic love story from the romance category',⁴⁸ then clearly *The Ante-Room* cannot be described as romantic fiction. Neither is there any 'escapism' involved for the reader, as Agnes, at the end of the novel, is left to live with the heart-break caused by Vincent's death. This will be done in private, as her love for him cannot be acknowledged publicly. Denying the usual 'happy ending' to Agnes is, therefore, a radical move to make in a patriarchal society. Moreover, the questioning of expectations of marriage in dramatized personal, religious and legal terms, in the representation of Caroline Lanigan, further augments the interrogation of the family. Teresa Mulqueen's dying epiphany introduces a different sort of radical departure. Dalsimer writes: 'As mothers, Kate O'Brien's characters, denied education, careers, even political opinions, frequently lost themselves in the lives of their children.'⁴⁹ Armstrong has argued that limited roles for women have had a negative impact on their lives and on the lives of their children. She writes: 'The life of self-sacrifice which defines the way a woman functions in the male world can be not only infantile but damaging to other people. It can be a ferocious form of blackmail and a destructive assertion of the rights and claims of the ego.'⁵⁰

In O'Brien's work, mothers are represented as regressive or negative forces in their children's lives, as freedom is only possible for O'Brien's heroines away from the control of or in the absence of their mothers. At the same time, O'Brien, in her explorations of women's roles in the cultural context, recognized that Irish women were inculcated to such mothering practices by their own restrictive roles in society, as dictated by Church and State. Although religion is central to *The Ante-Room*, there are no romantic notions of divine support for Agnes. Her Christian and social duty, combined with sisterly love, proves to be stronger than romantic love. It is Agnes's human strength of character rather than the strength provided by a divine source that informs her decision not to pursue a relationship with Vincent. Dalsimer wrote that O'Brien, 'although painfully sensitive to the negative effects of Irish Catholicism upon her as a woman and a writer ... treats it with the utmost credibility and respect',⁵¹ even though, as Eamon Maher points out in *Crosscurrents and Confluences*, 'she made no secret of her agnosticism'.⁵² In *Pray for the Wanderer* and *The Land of Spices* especially, O'Brien, as Walshe argues, contrasted 'the cultural insularity of the Irish Free State with the enlightened, European Catholicism of her imagined bourgeoisie. She began to differentiate between the "Eternal" Roman Catholic

Church and the narrow-mindedness of the new Irish Catholic state.⁵¹ Thus, while O'Brien respected the rights of others to have the buttress of faith in their lives, she called for a religion that appealed to the intellect as well as to the heart. In that regard, O'Brien's interest in Irish Catholicism was a subversive one, testing faith and fidelity not only in her characters, but also in narrative structures and the expectations attaching to genre. We could speculate that the European religious perspective provided by her schooling shaped her intellectual engagement with Catholicism in that she questioned the tenets of the faith, which is also manifested as a testing of form. Indeed, many of her characters, as Maher writes, went on to 'break free of their Catholic upbringing to do things that could imperil their eternal salvation'.⁵⁴ He continues: 'the raising of these issues was a bold step at a time when a Jansenistic distrust of the flesh was prevalent in Ireland and when the Censorship Board was particularly active'.⁵⁵

In the *Ante-Room*, there is an implied criticism of the Ireland of 1934 in that O'Brien did not provide an imaginative alternative outside that of wife and mother for her heroine. Echoing the respectable or desirable choices available to women at the time (outside of being a nun), there was no alternative to life within the family in the text. However, while there appeared to be no future for Agnes in this text, in having her reject the role of wife and mother, O'Brien set the tone for her future work, as she began to engage with and challenge the prevailing culture by imagining and creating the possibilities of alternative roles for her untypical heroines outside those prescribed by Church and State. The banning of two of O'Brien's books confirms the radical engagement with patriarchal ideals perceived by the contemporary body politic. Walshe explains her subversive approach: '[O'Brien's] strategies of attack were much more sophisticated, locating her novels within the culture that sought to marginalize her, intellectualizing her religious and moral dissent, respecting and at the same time opposing the true nature of the Catholic paternalism that attempted to outlaw her.'⁵⁶

O'Brien's talent lay in probing images of female stereotypes that questioned the perception of human beings as homogenous, just as 'lady writers' do not all write in the same manner or about the same subjects. Appearances can be deceptive and the fact that Kate O'Brien engaged with stories of love, or what may appear to be traditional or conservative issues, certainly does not mean that she cannot be considered a heroic, subversive dissenting voice.

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NOTES

1. For example, a review of *Mary Lavelle*, a novel banned on grounds of obscenity by the Irish Censorship Board in December 1936, cited it as a 'superior type of romantic novel' (P. Craig, Review of *Mary Lavelle*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 June 1984). The reviewer of the reissued 1985 copy of *That Lady* wrote that the novel was 'written in Kate O'Brien's usual romantic manner' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 5 July 1985). In the 1984 Arlen House preface to *The Ante-Room*, Eavan Boland reads O'Brien's interest in the bourgeois as representing her acquiescence to the religious and cultural codes of her class, thereby deeming O'Brien as essentially conservative. See E. Boland, 'Preface', in K. O'Brien, *The Ante-Room* (Dublin: Arlen House, 1984).
2. T. Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–1985* (London: Fontana, 1985), pp.312–13.

3. *Ibid.*, p.313.
4. In the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, books and magazines were banned on two basic grounds, that they were either 'indecent or obscene' or that they advocated contraception and abortion. The Act, an extract of which is quoted in Samuel Beckett's article, 'Censorship in the Saorstát', reproduced in J. Carlson (ed.), *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer*, stated that 'the word "indecent" shall be construed as including suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave'. See J. Carlson (ed.), *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.142.
5. E. Walshe, 'Introduction', in E. Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), p.1.
6. E. Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p.110.
7. Maurice Walsh (1879-1963) was a writer of fiction and a native of Co. Kerry. His novels and stories are mostly romantic adventures, sometimes with a historical setting, that engage with country life, its tensions, disputes and genialities.
8. Quoted in Carlson (ed.), *Banned in Ireland*, pp.117-18.
9. K. O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, 3rd edn (London: Virago, 2001). This will be the edition referred to hereafter, unless stated otherwise.
10. K. O'Brien, *Without My Cloak* (London: Panther, 1959).
11. J. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1984).
12. *Ibid.*, p.96.
13. T. Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1982), p.22.
14. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p.151.
15. Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, p.43.
16. *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Second Amendment edn (Dublin: Government Publication Office, 1942).
17. The close relationship between papal encyclicals and Articles 41 of the 1937 Irish Constitution on The Family can be seen in the 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* (On the Restoration of the Social Order). The purpose of *Quadragesimo Anno* was to adapt and develop the doctrine outlined in an earlier encyclical, *Reveri Novarum* (Of New Things or Of the Conditions of the Working Classes). The political context was the Great Depression, the threat of communism and mounting totalitarian movements. Pope Pius XI (1922-39) wrote: 'Mothers, concentrating on household duties, should work primarily in the home or in its immediate vicinity. It is an intolerable abuse, and to be abolished at all cost, for mothers on account of father's low wage to be forced to engage in gainful occupations outside the home to the neglect of their proper cares and duties, especially the training of children.' *Quadragesimo Anno* (15 May 1931), Section 71a, in C. Carlen, *The Papal Encyclicals 1903-1939*, Vol. 3 (Ann Arbor, MI: Pierian, 1990), p.426. Likewise, in *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.2.2 states: 'The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home' (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41.2.2). For an account of the construction and composition of the Irish Constitution, see D. Keogh and A.J. McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937* (Cork: Mercier, 2007).
18. L. Reynolds, 'Kate O'Brien and her "Dear Native Place"', *Ireland of the Welcomes* (September/October 1990), p.3-1.
19. O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, pp.423-4.
20. K. O'Brien, *The Ante-Room*, 2nd edn (London: Virago, 1988), p.93.
21. Cited in A. Fogarty, 'The Business of Attachment: Romance and Desire in the Novels of Kate O'Brien', in Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing*, p.105. See N. Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1963).
22. H. James, *Washington Square*, in *The Bodley Head Henry James*, Vol. 1 (London: Bodley Head, 1967), pp.195-392.
23. Fogarty, 'Business of Attachment', p.110.
24. *Ibid.*, p.116.
25. Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, p.50. Walshe understands this in the sense of the individual examination of conscience as typified in the novel, *Brideshed Revisited*, by Evelyn Waugh. I am grateful to Catherine Smith, University College Cork, who provided me with Walshe's interpretation of this term. See E. Waugh, *Brideshed Revisited* (London: Penguin, 1981).

26. D. Ó Corráin, 'Women in Early Irish Society', in M. MacCurtain and D. Ó Corráin (eds), *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension* (Dublin: Arlen, 1978), pp.1–13.
27. A.M. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1990), p.21.
28. T. Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, 2nd edn (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), p.67. For an example of questions printed in the pages of the *Irish Messenger of the Sacred Heart* that reflect the concern with rules, see M. Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* (Dublin: New Island, 2000), pp.183ff. See also L. Fuller, *Irish Catholicism Since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), pp.30–2.
29. O'Brien, *Ante-Room*, p.34.
30. *Ibid.*, p.89.
31. L. Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Cerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), p.118.
32. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien*, p.21.
33. O'Brien, *Ante-Room*, p.264.
34. *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Articles 41.3.1, 41.3.2.
35. *Casti Connubi*, Section 40, in Carlen, *Papal Encyclicals*, p.397.
36. O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, pp.191–2.
37. K. Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1986), p.290.
38. O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, p.41.
39. *Ibid.*, p.372.
40. *Ibid.*, pp.38–9.
41. Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien*, p.45.
42. O'Brien, *Ante-Room*, p.8.
43. A. McCarthy, ' "Oh Mother Where Art Thou?" Irish Mothers and Irish Fiction in the Twentieth Century', in P. Kennedy (ed.), *Motherhood in Ireland* (Cork: Mercier, 2004), p.97.
44. O'Brien, *Ante-Room*, p.19.
45. A. Roche, 'The Ante-Room as Drama', in Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing*, p.96.
46. Armstrong, *Gospel According to Woman*, p.218.
47. O'Brien, *Ante-Room*, p.25.
48. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p.99.
49. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien*, p.xv.
50. Armstrong, *Gospel According to Woman*, p.207.
51. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien*, p.25.
52. E. Maher, *Crosscurrents and Confluences* (Dublin: Veritas, 2000), p.93.
53. Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, p.77.
54. Maher, *Crosscurrents*, p.104.
55. *Ibid.*, p.104.
56. Walshe, 'Introduction', in Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing*, p.8.