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As Elleke Boehmer reminds us, gender has been "habitual and apparently intrinsic to national imagining." National difference, she argues, "like other forms of difference, is constituted through the medium of the sexual binary, using the figure of the woman as a primary vehicle."[1] Moreover,

such gendered national imaginings are not confined to postcolonial nation-building; consider Delacroix's bare-breasted figure of "Liberty Leading the People" or her rather more chastely adorned sister standing in New York harbour. For those who work in Irish studies, Boehmer's observation offers a useful corrective to the prevailing view that Irish cultural nationalism is idiosyncratically dysfunctional in its gender politics and constitutionally antipathetic to feminism. In a similar vein, Joseph Valente's *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922* urges us towards a fresh reconsideration of those figures of masculinity that loom so large in the culture of the Irish revival era and in early Irish modernism.

The originality of Valente's interpretations is rooted in the breadth of his approach. Firstly, he provides an invigorating combination of literary criticism with cultural studies. Exemplary chapters on Joyce and Yeats sit alongside readings of less canonically central figures—Augusta Gregory, Patrick Pearse, and James Stephens—and this literary analysis fuses seamlessly with discussions on the founding of the GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association), early twentieth-century newspaper debates, and the political leader Charles Stewart Parnell. The excellent treatment of Joyce is unsurprising given the innovative quality of Valente's earlier work, and his opening chapter on Parnell's self-presentation and media reception provides a convincing lynchpin for his argument, and it also exemplifies the range of his approach with its deft readings of political cartoons.

Secondly, Valente productively widens his interpretative lens by locating these distinctively Irish cultural productions of masculinity in relation to the prevailing masculine ideals of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century British culture, those ideals that were to be shattered so decisively and tragically in the trenches during the First World War. While this ideology of masculinity took varied forms—muscular Christianity; a pseudo-chivalric ethical code; the sports ethos of the public schools; the imperial adventuring of Baden-Powell's scouting movement—it was underpinned by one principle idea: since men were by nature more vigorous, vital, and animal-like (and women more passive and decorous), it was a more remarkable and valuable ethical accomplishment to exercise the requisite self-control to be civilized and manly. In Valente's words, "The ideal of manhood consisted in the simultaneous necessity for and achievement of vigilant, rational self-control—in strong passions strongly checked" (3). This ostensibly personal ideal was, of course, also a political projection; the manly ideal was simultaneously an English Protestant ideal, tautologically affirming that the Protestant Englishman enjoyed a unique measure of liberty because of his capacity to exercise self-control and assert his claim to such freedoms. The corollary was that those who did not enjoy such liberty had yet to prove they were capable of it. Hence the manly ideal was one attempt at a symbolic resolution to the central contradiction of nineteenth-century British liberalism, a contradiction that arose between the economic imperative toward imperial expansion and the political reality that subjugating other peoples breached the basic principles of liberalism.

As a "metrocolonial" people—simultaneously participants in the project of overseas empire and colonial subjects in their own land—the Irish felt the pressure of these contradictions particularly acutely. At the level of the cultural production of masculinity, this pressure was experienced as a "double-bind," as Valente terms it (see 19–25). An Irishman who practiced the requisite self-restraint demanded by the manly ideal appeared acquiescent to colonial subjugation and thereby failed to achieve the self-possession demanded by that ideal, thus confirming his unreadiness for the freedom licenced by the ideal. What appeared as manly self-restraint in the Englishman looked like the dreamy femininity of the Arnoldian Celt in an Irishman. But an Irishman who challenged his colonial subjugation showed himself to be just as deficient in manliness and unfit for liberty; he demonstrated his failure to exercise control over those inherently violent passions to which, according to the bestializing discourse of much British commentary on Ireland, the Irish were peculiarly prone, the simianized Irishman of *Punch* being only the most egregiously libellous instance. In Valente's argument, the effectiveness of Parnell's political career in the 1880s rested on his canny manipulation of these contradictions, and his embodiment of an Irish version of the manly ideal in his public persona was critical.

My only disappointment with Valente's analysis is this: where one expects to find conservative mimicry of these colonial master tropes (Gregory; Pearse), there one finds it, and where one expects a more radical and ironic counterpoint to this (Joyce; Synge; Stephens), there one finds that, too. Thus the long-standing aesthetic distinction in Irish studies still holds, the distinction between, on one hand, a regressive revivalist confection of folklore and other inherited forms (e.g. the Gaelic Aisling tradition and the Cuchulain myth), and on the other hand, the sophisticated rigor of critical realism, parody, and modernist experimentation. But does the obvious truth that this distinction discloses also efface a more complex situation? While Valente's reading of Gregory ultimately reiterates her conservative cultural politics and very cautious move from unionism to some version of nationalism, it is nevertheless detailed, nuanced, and a welcome corrective to her usual marginalization in the revival story. But while Valente offers some alert and subtle readings of individual Pearse texts, his overall interpretation of Pearse's work is still largely determined by the psychological model derived from Ruth Dudley Edwards, according to which almost every aspect of Pearse's aesthetics and politics is a symptom of repressed sexuality and neurotic anxiety about his mixed English-Irish heritage. Valente takes little account of more recent work, notably Elaine Sisson's *Pearse's Patriots* (2004) and the essays collected by Roisín Higgins and Regina Uí Chollatáin in *The Life and After-Life of P. H. Pearse* (2009), work that confronts the complex amalgam of conservatism and radicalism, parochialism and internationalism at play in Pearse's pedagogical innovations, in his position on language revival, and in his cultural politics. These contradictory currents lead to the peculiar oddness of his stories and plays, which mingle Victorian sentimentality, a confected archaic-heroic manly ideal, didacticism, and bad writing with those discordant Wagnerian and Nietzschean undertones. That distinctively modernist strangeness is largely absent from Valente's readings of Pearse's work. In other words, it is clearly very fertile and necessary to read revival-period masculinity as the fraught working-out of the metrocolonial double-blind, but that reading can also be overly restrictive, since it does not allow sufficient space for the anti-colonial and emancipatory potential that may simultaneously lodge within revival-period writing.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Myth of Manliness* is a work of exemplary scholarship and astute analysis. Fluently written and beautifully presented, it marks an original and very significant contribution to the study of Irish culture in this remarkably formative period.

Note

1. Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 5.