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“I am not one of his followers”: The Rewriting of the Cultural Icon of the Virgin in Colm Tóibín’s *The Testament of Mary*¹

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ABSTRACT

Even though the Virgin Mary is one of the most popular characters of *The New Testament*, she appears very little and is almost silently passed over. However, the devotion to Mary has turned her into a powerful icon of religious folklore in many Catholic societies. In Ireland, the Virgin has often been used as a figure for cultural nationalism, characterised by its religious orthodoxy, rigid moral codes and a staunch defense of patriarchy. In *The Testament of Mary* (2012), Irish author Colm Tóibín, a lapsed Catholic and anti-traditionalist intellectual, rewrites the cultural icon of the Virgin and offers a humane, complex and highly subversive portrait of this legendary mother. Exiled in Ephesus, the Virgin feels repelled by the constant visits of her “guardians”, who want her to recount the event of the Crucifixion. It is soon revealed that the apostles are trying to appropriate her voice and experiences, as Mary readily intimates that one of the guardians “has written of things that neither he saw nor I saw” (5). The questions of voice, agency and performance become essential in the reshaping of narratives of cultural identity. Thus, the novel dramatises the importance of articulating one’s own voice through Mary’s urge “to tell the truth of what happened” (82) on her own terms.

1. Introduction

Even though the Virgin is one of the most popular characters of *The New Testament*, she scarcely appears and is almost silently passed over. However, the devotion to Mary

has turned her into a powerful icon of religious folklore in many Catholic societies, where she is the patron saint of several festivities and her devotees believe in her prophetic apparitions and the miracles she allegedly performs. Interestingly enough, the popularisation of the cult of the Virgin Mary in her role as the Blessed Mother has its origins in the Middle Ages.² All through this period, the Blessed Mother served as a model of benevolence and female purity. One typical representation of the Virgin is that of a static woman, clothed in blue or white, her dress hiding the physicality of her body, her hair veiled and her eyes humbly cast down. All these iconic features transform themselves into what Jon Mackenzie identifies as “symbolic structures of living behaviour” (2001: 32). Generally, both the visual representations and the narratives of the Virgin perform and reinforce a set of values and gender imperatives for women, including humility, suffering and subservience.

In his latest literary work, *The Testament of Mary* (2012), Irish author Colm Tóibín³ challenges the traditional characterisation of this legendary mother. In Tóibín’s novel, one important aspect lies in the fact that the protagonist articulates her own story, thereby Mary is given a chance to metaphorically position herself in relation to the official narrative of her life. As Judith Butler explains in *Bodies that Matter*, whenever there is an ‘I’ that speaks, it produces its own effect on the discourse within which it is inscribed (1993: 225). Such is the case of Tóibín’s novel, where Mary’s voice is filled with regret and bitterness as she expresses her contempt for her son’s followers and disciples. Titles given to her, such as the Mother of God, are openly repudiated by Tóibín’s protagonist. In *The Testament of Mary*, no references are made to her presumed virginity, since Jesus’s only father is Joseph.

As a means of contextualising the novel, the significance of the cult of the Virgin will be considered within the cultural tradition of Ireland, Tóibín’s own nation. Additionally, I will attempt to provide a brief overview of the connections between patriarchy and Mariology. Eventually, the analysis of Tóibín’s *The Testament of Mary* will focus on how a new identity is performed by changing several of the core elements of the official narrative of the Virgin, thus transforming the cultural implications of the Marian myth.

2. The Virgin Mary as a symbol of cultural identity in Ireland

In Ireland, a nation that identifies itself as Catholic, the figure of the Virgin Mary can certainly be considered a powerful icon of cultural identity. Through the colonial period and under the yoke of the British Empire, Catholicism became deeply entrenched within the Irish national ethos.⁴ In this context, the Virgin appears to have persisted as a symbol of Catholic faith and resistance against Protestantism, which was associated with British cultural and political dominance.⁵ In this respect, it should also be pointed out how the Protestant doctrine denies the Mother of Jesus a central position in religious mythology:

Protestant theologians have always had two strong objections to the Mary cult. The first is that there is little or no basis for such a cult in The New Testament. Mary, after all, is mentioned in only about a dozen passages, and usually only in passing [...] The second objection is historical: there is little or no evidence that anything like the Mary cult existed during the first centuries of the Christian Church. (Carroll, 1992: 4)

According to Elizabeth Cullingford, this theological difference between Catholicism and Protestantism may have helped exacerbate the cult of the Virgin in Catholic Ireland, since "'Our Lady' has always functioned as a figure for nationalism" (2002: 209). As already suggested, the devotion to Mary had long been part of Ireland's religious tradition and was closely related with cultural and political resistance to Britain. According to John Turpin, the view of the Virgin as a mother and guardian of the nation stretches back to the 17th century Confederation of Kilkenny which opposed British rule, when "the Virgin was declared the patroness of the Kingdom of Ireland" (2003: 68). Therefore, the Virgin has often been appropriated and identified through Irish history with the politics of nation and identity. As Marina Warner astutely observes in *Alone of all her Sex*,⁶ "the Virgin Mary has been formed and animated by different people for different reasons, and is truly a popular creation" (1978: xxii).

Defined by her ventriloquism of political and cultural values, the Virgin has traditionally been associated with Catholic nationalism in Ireland, since she presumably embodies all the moral virtues to which a God-fearing society should aspire. Viewed as the paragon of purity and benevolence, 'Our Lady' could not but be used as a reminder of the 'deviance' and 'selfishness' inherent in actions such as divorce or premarital sex. In times of cultural modernisation and legal reformation in Ireland, the Virgin has, in fact, been recruited for political purposes. As James Donnelly aptly explains in his article concerning the cultural role of Mariology in 20th century Ireland:

Marian enthusiasts and other Irish Catholic traditionalists had been active politically in the 1970s [...] Their activity persisted on the issue of contraceptives, but it was especially visible and significant in the campaigns over two constitutional referenda: in favour of adding a "pro-life" amendment to the constitution in 1983 and against the removal of the constitutional ban on divorce in 1986. (2005: 239-40)

However, most importantly, the influence of the Virgin extends beyond political and religious discourses, since she can also be considered a powerful element of popular culture in many Catholic societies, where many of her devotees praise Mary as a divinity. The cultural icon of the Virgin is so profoundly embedded in Catholic Ireland that Mary has certainly become a pervasive image of religious folklore. "The plaster virgin", Cullingford also argues in reference to Irish society, "is the epitome of religious kitsch: she is the most familiar of the standard-ized, mass-produced and widely-disseminated devotional objects that dominate both public and domestic spaces" (2002: 186).

Even today in a much more secular and liberal Ireland, the Virgin remains part of the cultural imagery of the country. Despite all the conservative values with which

Mary has been identified, the Virgin, as Cullingford puts it, “may be critiqued and revised, but not forgotten” (209). It may be precisely for that reason that many artists and intellectuals in Ireland have sought to transform and redefine the icon of the Blessed Mother so as to liberate her from the burden of her traditional associations. Such is the case of Colm Tóibín, a lapsed Catholic and anti-traditionalist writer, who, in his latest literary work, turns to the story of Mary in order to create a first-person narration in which his protagonist acquires her own voice and becomes the subject. In doing so, he presents this well-known religious figure in a totally new light.

3. Patriarchy and Mariology

As a sexless adolescent who gave birth to the Son of God, the Virgin Mary, in her semi-divine status, embodies one of the most pervasive constructions of womanhood in conservative Catholic societies. Moreover, the myth of the Holy Mother contains further implications, such as the view of female sexuality as potentially dangerous and impure. The Virgin Mary, as the epitome of purity and ideal femininity, has traditionally served both as a figure of worship and also as an oppressive cultural artifact in order to control women’s sexuality. For instance, Kimberly Myers has remarked how, in traditional Ireland, “having inherited a standard of asexual femininity in a culture where Mariolatry thrives, any expression of sexuality is problematical” (1999: 52). Presumably, in a society that venerates motherhood through the figure of the Virgin, sex is likely to become charged with stigmas and contemplated through the prism of moral considerations.

Furthermore, because of the visual and narrative representations of Mary over centuries, the devotion to the Virgin reinforces other types of gender imperatives that have been deemed natural feminine traits. In this respect, C. L. Innes has drawn a parallel between constructions of femininity and their association with the Blessed Mother, since the cult of the Virgin “endorsed not merely chastity and motherhood as womanly ideals, but also humility, obedience, and passive suffering” (1993: 40). The motif of suffering becomes extremely interesting when one examines the iconography surrounding this legendary mother. As Warner explains, “her tears [...] are collected as one of the most efficacious and holy relics of Christendom. All over the Catholic world, statues and images of the Virgin weep” (1978: 221). In fact, popular themes in Christian art revolve around the suffering and sorrow of Mary, her pain as a symbol of her pure heart.⁸

Many feminist scholars have so far indicated the necessity to be well aware of how the myth of the Blessed Mother has been shaped and perpetuated by male-dominated institutions. In her widely acclaimed work, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett takes the view that “as both the primitive and the civilized world are male worlds, the ideas which shaped culture in regard to the female were also of male design” (1972: 46). Seen in this light, what is taken to be the prime example of female virtue is nothing but a patriarchal fantasy about the ideal type of woman. Establishing the links between Mariology and

patriarchy, Warner also asserts that "it is this very cult of the Virgin's 'femininity' [...] that permits her to survive, a goddess in a patriarchal society. Her cult flourishes in countries where women rarely participate in public life and are relegated to the domestic domain" (1978: 191). Interestingly, Catholic Ireland is no exception to this confluence of patriarchy and Marian devotion, since political and religious institutions praised motherhood while promoting a home-based existence for women, as enshrined in the 1937 Irish Constitution.⁷

The questions of voice, agency and performance become essential in the reshaping of narratives of cultural identity. As an entirely male creation, the story of Mary, with its prominent cultural value, can become a repressive stereotype for women. In order to foster resistance to oppression, feminist critics have often underlined the importance of self-definition to women whose autonomy becomes restricted to social roles such as mother, wife, virgin and so on.⁹ Marilyn Friedman contends that "a particularly *feminist* appropriation of the concept of autonomy requires narratives of women who strive in paradigmatically or distinctively female situations against patriarchal constraints to express and refashion their deepest commitments and senses of self" (2000: 37). In the case of the Virgin, her voice cannot be retraced, but her story can be approached from different angles so as to achieve a more nuanced and complex understanding of this legendary figure. In *The Testament of Mary*, Tóibín dramatises the importance of articulating one's own story as a means to express one's own realities. Precisely, one of the anxieties of Tóibín's Mary is "to tell the truth of what happened" (82). Her urge is for her story to be told on her own terms.

4. The rewriting of the cultural icon of the Virgin in Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*

In this section, my analysis of Tóibín's novel will concentrate on various aspects that relate to the manner in which his heroine contests the traditional narrative of the Virgin, thus reshaping this popular icon of cultural identity. I will also discuss how Tóibín renders Mary's voice intimate and real. In his prose, Tóibín registers universal human experiences such as grief, anxiety and regret in the face of trauma. In the case of Mary, her trauma stems from the personal tragedy of witnessing the brutal execution of her son whilst being unable to offer any help or consolation. In her reading of the novel, Warner also points out how Tóibín enters into Mary's inner conflict, "expressing the anguished struggle between love and doubt, faith and rage, trust and terror" (2012: 10). Displaying his mastery of language, Tóibín's prose in *The Testament of Mary* remains evocative and captivating throughout the narrative, creating a portrait which depicts the subtleties and contradictoriness of a tortured human mind.

In the Marian myth, one of the quintessential roles of the Virgin is that of a mother who irradiates unconditional love and infinite compassion. Furthermore, a tenet of Christian faith is the Incarnation, whereby, in the words of Sarah J. Boss, "God himself, through whom all things were created, became part of his own creation when he was

conceived, gestated and born of the Virgin Mary” (2004: 9). Therefore, since God became flesh in the womb of the Virgin,¹⁰ she acquired a semi-divine status as the Mother of God. Interestingly, motherhood is also one of the central features of Tóibín’s narrative of Mary, albeit for very different reasons. In the novel, Mary is constantly haunted by painful memories of the past, most of them related to what happened to Jesus. Emotionally scarred by trauma, she cannot even bear to utter the name of her son, as she confesses that “something will break in me if I say the name” (9). Tóibín’s Mary, as a mother who felt neglected by her son, reveals a painful yet loving attachment to Jesus. She is full of regret: “I should have paid more attention to that time before he left, to who came to the house, to what was discussed at my table” (16). According to Church tradition, the Virgin humbly accepts that Jesus has a sacred mission to undertake with his disciples.¹¹ In *The Testament of Mary*, however, the heroine makes no attempt to conceal her dislike and distrust of her son’s followers, “a group of misfits” (9).

One of the episodes that Mary narrates concerns the wedding of Cana. In the novel, she travels from Nazareth to see Jesus and try to bring him home, as she had been informed that he was to be captured and punished by the Roman authorities. At the wedding, her only intention is to get her son home, but she soon comes to the realisation that it has been all in vain. Enjoying his being the centre of attention, Jesus displays his magnificence, manifest in his rich clothes and grandiose speech. “When I rose to embrace him”, Tóibín’s Mary complains, “he appeared unfamiliar, oddly formal and grand” (46). His coldness and emotional distance becomes obvious in his address to his mother, which Tóibín directly quotes from the Scriptures: “Woman, what have I to do with thee?” (47). By responding, “I am your mother” (47), Mary intends to re-establish their filial relation, but to no avail. To the ecstasy of the crowd and the dismay of Mary, he proudly proclaims himself to be the Son of God, thereby disavowing his parental bonds. As a result, Mary becomes reproachful and bitter about her son’s narcissistic attitude and estrangement from her. Voicing her discontent and consternation, the mother is pained by her son’s indifference to her,

Time created the man who sat beside me at the wedding feast of Cana, the man not heeding me, hearing no one, a man filled with power, a power that seemed to have no memory of years before, when he needed my breast for milk, my hand to help him steady him as he learned to walk, or my voice to soothe him to sleep. (54)

Another noteworthy aspect of this novel is that on no occasion is Mary a direct witness to the miracles that Jesus performs. Though she is present when the event takes place, she claims not to have seen with her own eyes how Jesus turns water into wine at the wedding. Among the commotion and general hysteria, Mary registers this miracle as confusion. She knows about the raising of Lazarus from the dead because her cousin Marcus told her. Mary has no doubt about the veracity of this miracle, but she is nonetheless critical of her son when she declares that “no one should tamper with the fullness that is death. Death needs time and silence. The dead must be left alone with their new gift or their new freedom from affliction” (31). It is soon disclosed that the

revived Lazarus lives now with chronic pain. He hides in the darkness, recognises no one and is barely able to eat or swallow. The righteousness and divine powers of Jesus are thus presented in an ambivalent light. As Eibhear Walshe notes, "in a novel where the god-like qualities of her son are being interrogated, this is, at least, one moment of miracle, of divine intervention but a cruel and destructive one" (2013: 180).

Aware that Jesus has become a celebrity and his deeds a recurrent topic of conversation, Mary remains skeptical, commenting that "for those who gathered and gossiped it was a high time, filled with rumours and fresh news, filled with stories both true and wildly exaggerated" (56). This illustrates that her son's miracles are but a secondary issue for her. What matters to Mary is that she is being pointed at, her house marked, her privacy invaded. Since people recognise her only as the mother of Jesus, Mary strains to reclaim a life and identity of her own. As Edward Hagan explains, "Tóibín's mothers [...] desire their personal freedom to pursue their own goals", despite the fact that "they live in the 'other' world of isolation and anonymity" (2012: 34). In *The Testament of Mary*, the protagonist's world of isolation seems to be her house in Ephesus, where she lives alone in exile and depends on the care of her guardians. Moreover, another revealing moment in this novel takes place in Nazareth when Marcus warns Mary about her need to avoid being publicly seen lest she be arrested. Asserting her personal independence, Mary curtly answers: "I am not one of his followers" (58). Significantly, whereas the official story of the Virgin is interwoven within the narrative of Jesus's divinity, Tóibín's Mary would like to separate herself from it. Mary, as the mother of Jesus but not as the Holy Mother or Mother of God, seeks empowerment by trying to distance herself from her son's influence.

In her recent monograph on Colm Tóibín, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan convincingly argues that his play *Ephesus*, the earlier version of the novel, "engages the ability of dominant narratives to overwrite others' individual truths in its imaginative contrast of Mary's personal observations and private suffering with what was to be become the official narrative of her son Jesus's life" (2012: 186). Costello-Sullivan's remark holds true also in the novel, where Mary intersperses commentaries that reiterate "the grim satisfaction that comes from the certainty that I will not say anything that is not true" (5). In Ephesus, Mary feels repelled by the constant visits of her "guardians", who want her to go over the event of the Crucifixion. In their conversations with the mother of Jesus, the disciples openly show their exasperation when Mary hesitates or refuses to say what they want her to attest. She complains that "they want to know what words I heard, they want to know about my grief only if it comes as the word 'grief', or the word 'sorrow'" (80). It is soon revealed in the novel that the apostles appropriate her voice and experiences, as she readily intimates that one of the guardians "has written of things that neither he saw nor I saw" (5). In her testament, this elderly and isolated Mary discredits the canonical word of the disciples and recounts her own story, "knowing that words matter" (104). Therefore, it is only through the articulation of her voice that she can reclaim an identity of her own.

Tóibín's description of the apostles is also highly subversive. Making use of Christian imagery, the author characterises Jesus's disciples as pure evil. In Christian

art, the Devil is often associated with darkness and putrefaction, one of the penalties of the Fall. In this respect, Warner has discussed in similar terms that “the stench of death, its most terrifying signal, is constantly used in Christian writing to describe evil” (1978: 99). Curiously, in *The Testament of Mary*, those who emit a reeking stench are Mary’s guardians. Early on in the novel, when visited by her neighbour Farina, Mary makes an implicit allusion to the putrid smell that the guardians, her only male visitors, leave behind: “It takes me weeks to eradicate the stench of men from these rooms so that I can breathe air again that is not fouled by them” (12). In the eyes of Mary, these two men writing the story of Jesus are cunning and even menacing, as she declares that “there is something hungry and rough in them, a brutality boiling in their blood” (1). Darkness, in a metaphorical sense, is a further trait of the disciples as Mary perceives them. Tellingly, when they explain her son’s supposed mission on Earth, Mary describes them as though they were sinister accomplices in a crime: “I looked at both of them, their eyes hooded and something dark appearing in their faces” (100). Being aware of “the enormity of their ambition” (101), Mary laments that “they will thrive and prevail and I will die” (103). In her search of spiritual communion, Mary visits the Temple and worships Greek goddess Artemis. She can see nothing sacred in the new religion that is being elaborated by the disciples.

In Tóibín’s novel, Mary’s performance – from worshipping Artemis to her disbelief in her son’s task in the world – undermines the canonical narrative of the Virgin. Another instance in which this becomes evident relates to the chair that Mary keeps empty in loving remembrance of Joseph, her deceased husband. It is a reminder of “some years when I knew love. It was left to be unused. It belongs to memory, it belongs to a man who will not return, whose body is dust” (19). Her warm feelings for Joseph are thus manifested in the special aura the chair has acquired. This aura was to be defiled by one of the guardians, who, despite her warnings, pulls out the chair to sit on. Surprisingly, her immediate reaction is to grab a knife and threaten them: “quickly, I found the sharp knife and held it and touched the blade. I did not point it towards them, but my movement to reach for it had been so swift and sudden that it caught their attention” (22). Enraged, she warns that if they ever dare touch the chair once again, she will silently come in the night and slay them both with another knife that she keeps hidden. Needless to say, this “blasphemous” characterisation of Mary could certainly dismay and even offend devout believers. However, contrary to the stereotypical image of Our Lady as a passive, subservient woman, Tóibín’s Mary is assertive and takes action in order to confront male authority. In her determination, Tóibín’s heroine subverts the stereotype of the traditional Virgin Mary who meekly accepts her fate.

Tóibín also rewrites the Crucifixion scene, crucial in the story of the Virgin, changing key elements of the official narrative. In John’s Gospel, the author pictures himself and Mary on Calvary. Then John – one of the unnamed guardians in Tóibín’s novel – describes the Virgin’s silent vigil at the Cross, where she was united with her son in his suffering. When Jesus dies, Mary mourns his death. According to medieval accounts, the Virgin, once she has lost her son, comes to be considered the spiritual mother of Jesus’s followers and Mother of the Church. “In iconography of medieval

Christendom and later", Warner observes, "she becomes the very embodiment of *Mater Ecclesia*, brimming over with the grace and power of the Spirit, and before whom the apostles sometimes kneel in awe" (1978: 18). In striking contrast to this Virgin who receives the respect and admiration of Jesus's disciples, Tóibín's protagonist, in her powerlessness, finds herself subjected to the authority of her two guardians. Mary's life as a marginal woman, however, may appear more realistic than the popular image of the majestic Virgin, especially if we consider her minor role in the Scriptures and the historical relegation of women.

In Tóibín's novel, the Crucifixion scene acquires a whole new meaning. Disguised with her companions among the crowd, Mary witnesses with horror her son's procession carrying the Cross, his face all bloody and the crown of thorns pushing into his forehead. On the hill, she is horrified when she hears Jesus's howls of pain. Paralysed by terror, Mary and her companions remain still and silent, aware that they could also receive a similar punishment. When she notices that they are being singled out, Mary herself insists that they must escape. Guilt consumes the mother as she confesses that "perhaps I was right to save myself when I could. But it does not feel like that now and it never has. But I will say it now because it has to be said by someone once: I did it to save myself" (85). In contrast to the religious figure of the Holy Mother that all believers turn to when they are in despair, Tóibín's depiction of Mary offers no romanticism, no consolation, no final and comforting union, no self-sacrificing mother. Years later, the sheer violence of the Crucifixion still preys on Mary's mind. Surprisingly, she also reveals that "despite the pain that I felt, a pain that has never lifted, and will go with me into the grave, despite all of this, the pain was his and not mine" (84). Indeed, a recurring image in Christian art is that of statues and pictures of a weeping Virgin holding a mortally wounded Jesus in her arms, the human mother and the divine son united in total suffering. In the case of Tóibín's narrative, her pain is no longer a mere symbol, an artistic cliché, a means to show a pure heart or a communion with God. Mary's pain, filled with remorse and regret, is private and uniquely her own.

The Testament of Mary closes with an episode in which the disciples lay the foundations for the new religion. Without success, they try to convince Mary that Jesus was the Son of God. She feels appalled, "assaulted by their words" (100), when they claim that, by his death on the Cross, Jesus saved humankind. Enraged, she responds that "when you say that he redeemed the world, I will say that it was not worth it. It was not worth it" (102). Mary, understandably, can perceive no good or salvation in the brutal crucifixion of her son. The only solace she may find does not lie in the presupposition that her son's death was heavenly ordained, but rather in the memory of those days when Jesus "was a baby and his father was alive and there was ease in the world" (97). For this reason, Tóibín's Mary cannot but feel repelled by the apostles' insistence on the sacred mission of Jesus, the story that destroyed her son's life and traumatised her existence.

Concluding remarks

Mary, as a mythical figure, has come to receive all types of honorary titles: Virgin, Our Lady, Blessed Mother, Mother of Sorrows, Mother of God, Conqueror of Sins and Queen of Heaven among others. These splintered identities of Mary may validate Warner's assertion that the Virgin is a cultural construct that "has been formed and animated by different people for different reasons" (1978: xxii). In this respect, Tóibín's appropriation of the myth is not an innocent act. As an anti-traditionalist writer who hails from a conservative Catholic society, Tóibín writes a subversive reinterpretation of the story of Mary in his novel. As Richard Schechner points out, "no approach or position is neutral" (2013: 2). Through the articulation of her own voice and personal feelings, Tóibín's Mary presents a totally different identity from the canonical Virgin. Interestingly enough, his protagonist is an assertive woman who openly resents the disciples' authority and disassociates herself from the religion that they are creating. Moreover, another essential aspect of Tóibín's text is that Mary transcends the stereotype, since her identity is not restricted to a God-given role as virgin and mother.

As has been remarked, in Ireland, institutional discourses used to associate the Blessed Mother with a form of expression for cultural nationalism, characterised by its religious orthodoxy, rigid moral codes and a staunch defense of patriarchy. As a virgin woman chosen by a male God to bear his Son, the Virgin has served as the paragon of ideal femininity. Praised for her compassion and resignation, her selflessness becomes a virtue. Those values, encoded in the canonical representations of the Virgin, perform "habits, rituals and routines of life", which Schechner calls "restored behaviours", whose origin or source may be "distorted by myth and tradition" (2013: 28). In *The Testament of Mary*, Colm Tóibín powerfully contests his own cultural heritage by transforming the pervasive icon of the Virgin Mary through a narrative that undermines the discourse of the Marian myth. More importantly, as he reexamines and imaginatively reshapes some of the most deeply rooted religious dogmas of the Catholic Church, Tóibín draws attention to the imbalances and contradictions attached to the strict moral codes which have historically regulated Irish identity and gender politics.

Notes

1. The research carried out for this paper has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (ref. FPU 12/00565).

2. In relation to the flourishing of the cult of Mary in the Middle Ages, George Henry Tavard has indicated how many poets started to celebrate "miracles attributed to her, or put into verses the story of her life [...]. Trouvères and troubadours, who expressed themselves in the vernaculars of different parts of the Western world, did not lag behind in their praises of the Virgin Mary, protectress of those who invoked her [...]. Along similar lines, the development of religious theater featured accounts of miraculous interventions of the Virgin" (1996: 97).

3. Colm Tóibín was born in 1955 in Enniscorthy, Ireland, in a recognisably conservative, rural and Church-dominated society. Before he started his literary career, Tóibín worked as a

journalist, editor and travel writer. According to Michael Böss, during the 1980s, Tóibín was part of a generation of intellectuals who had "become the voice of the young, urban, antiestablishment Ireland" (2005: 24). In the second half of the 1980s, Tóibín had already gained a nationwide reputation as an outstanding journalist and cultural commentator, with the publication of works such as *Martyrs and Metaphors* (1987), *Walking along the Border* (1987) and *The Trial of the Generals* (1990). *The South* (1990), his first novel, marked the beginning of a successful and prolific literary career.

4. Both Catholic emancipation and Irish resistance to British political dominance have often been part of the same process, which explains the privileged position that the Church attained when independence was achieved in 1922. As Kevin B. Nowlan argues, it was "difficult for many to distinguish between what were Catholic aspirations and what constituted the valid nature of Irish nationalism" (1986: 105).

5. According to Jon Turpin, the struggle for independence was suffused with Marian culture. "Marianism", he remarks, "was a badge of national identity" (2003: 70).

6. In the 1970s, the publication of this revisionist study on the Marian cult provoked great controversy. As Warner herself contends, "I was denounced in Ireland and several reviewers in Britain and the US condemned the book for its attack on Catholicism" (2012: 10).

7. With regard to the stereotypical characterisation of Mary as a mourner, Linden Peach comments how "Mary's role as Mother of Sorrows is linked to her role as Mediatrix, her capacity to intercede with her son on behalf of suffering humanity, which, like the association of Mary with pain and torment, was crystallized in the Middle Ages" (2004: 160-1).

8. A prominent case of official politics calling for women to eschew public life can be found in Article 41 of the 1937 Irish Free State Constitution, which reads as follows: "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. 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 within the home."

9. In this respect, Miri Rubin maintains that, "like all cultural processes, feminist public gestures draw upon the old, subverting or rededicating existing words, shapes and sounds. And so Mary [the Virgin] has been truly rediscovered through a feminist sensibility" (2009: 442).

10. Interestingly, many other myths feature virgin women bearing the son of a god. As Michael Carroll contends, "the motif of the virgin who is impregnated by a god and who gives birth to a hero was part of a great many legends in the pre-Christian Greco-Roman world" (1992: 6).

11. For a concise and detailed account of the Church's official narrative of the Virgin, see *Maria: Pope Benedict XVI on the Mother of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).

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