



Research Repository UCD

Title	Sex and Nation Women in Irish Culture and Politics
Authors(s)	Meaney, Gerardine
Publication date	1991
Publication information	Meaney, Gerardine. "Sex and Nation Women in Irish Culture and Politics." Attic Press, 1991.
Publisher	Attic Press
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5535

Downloaded 2025-09-07 01:47:41

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information



SEX
AND
NATION

women in
Irish culture
and politics

GERARDINE
MEANEY



UCD
LIBRARY

STORE ITEM

RETURN TO
ISSUE DESK

P 305.40
9415
MEA

12087966 06



SEX AND NATION
Women in Irish Culture and Politics

by

Gerardine Meaney

GERARDINE MEANEY was born in Waterford in 1962 and educated in Kilkenny and at University College Dublin. She is a feminist critic and also writes fiction. Her stories have appeared in newspapers and journals, in the *Midland Review* (1986) special issue on Irish women's writing and in *Wildish Things: An Anthology of New Irish Women's Writing* (Attic Press, 1989). In 1986 she won a Hennessy Award for New Irish Writing. From 1988 to 1989, she was a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University, Belfast and now lectures in English Literature in University College Dublin.

(c) Gerardine Meaney 1991

All rights reserved. Except for brief passages quoted in newspaper, magazine, radio or television reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by any information storage and retrieval systems without prior permission from the Publishers.

First published in 1991 by
Attic Press
44 East Essex Street
Dublin 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Meaney, Gerardine

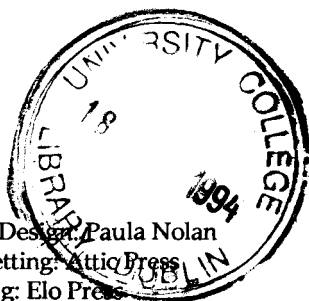
Sex and nation.

1. Ireland. Society. Role of women

I. Title

305.4209415

ISBN 1-85594-015-9



Cover Design: Paula Nolan
Typesetting: Attic Press
Printing: Elo Press

P 305.4209.415

MCA

SEX AND NATION

Women in Irish Culture and Politics

The aim of this pamphlet is to challenge the assumptions made by and about the women's movement in Ireland. It is to some extent a retrospective exercise, an attempt to analyse and respond to some of the ideas put forward in previous pamphlets in this series. It is, more importantly, an attempt to suggest directions in which Irish feminism can move in the future, an attempt to learn from the reverses and successes of the 1980s and to identify opportunities which will be available to Irish feminism in the 1990s.

SEX AND NATION

Many of the previous pamphlets in this series have made the point that, in Ireland, sexual identity and national identity are mutually dependent. The images of suffering Mother Ireland and the self-sacrificing Irish mother are difficult to separate. Both serve to obliterate the reality of women's lives. Both seek to perpetuate an image of Woman far from the experience, expectations and ideals of contemporary women. The extent to which women only exist as a function of their maternity in the dominant ideology of southern Ireland became apparent during the

referendum on the eighth amendment to the constitution. The constitutional prohibition on abortion which was the result of that referendum has proved entirely ineffectual. The number of Irish women seeking and obtaining abortions in Britain has continued to increase. One is tempted to speculate that abortion itself was quite incidental to those who campaigned so vociferously for an unworkable constitutional ban. The only real effect of the eighth amendment has been to compromise any general or 'human' constitutional rights which might give precedence to the woman's rights as an individual over her function as a mother. That such a constitutional amendment was felt to be necessary by conservative groups - and that they were able to mobilise an available reservoir of mass hysteria to achieve it - is indicative of the anxiety which changes in women's role and self-concept have induced in Ireland. The assumption that the law needed to intervene in the relationship between woman and foetus - to protect the so-called 'unborn child' from its mother - is indicative of a deep distrust and fear of women. This distrust and fear is paradoxically rooted in the idealisation of the mother in Irish culture as an all-powerful, dehumanised figure. On the one hand, the 1980s saw the Catholic Church and the Right expend very considerable energy in the attempt to contain women within their traditional role. On the other hand, it was that traditional role which excited precisely the fear and anxiety (in men and women) which the Catholic Church and the Right shared and exploited to induce an electorate to endorse a constitutional compromise of the rights of women.

The participation of women in the so-called 'pro-life' movement is indicative of an even more complex and contradictory response. Such women seek to perpetuate the idealised virgin/mother figure of woman so that they can be that figure. Such identification offers women one of the few roles of power available to them in patriarchy. The hard struggle for political and economic power and

equality cannot yet compete with those consolations for many women. The attractions of the traditional feminine role, particularly as the Catholic Church defines it, are grounded in a deep loathing of femininity, however, and those women who identify with it are also expressing a form of self-hatred, a revulsion against themselves as women. They are unable to accept themselves as thinking, choosing, sexual, intellectual and complex ordinary mortals and instead cling to a fantasy of women as simple handmaids of the lord.

This inability is the product of centuries of education and socialisation of women into acceptance of restricted lives and poor self-concepts and it is exacerbated in this country by the churches' continuing hold over education. Patriarchy's strongest hold over women is its ability to promote this inner division, which inhibits women's will for change and recruits women damaged by patriarchal ideology to the cause of patriarchy itself and sets them campaigning and voting against their own interests.

The election of Mary Robinson as President of Ireland has been welcomed by many as an indication that this pattern has finally been broken. Certainly the widespread identification by women with a woman who has so consistently opposed the conservative version of Irish womanhood indicates that that version no longer holds the same enchantments, even for the rural women so often seen as its especial adherents. Moreover, the celebration of Robinson's victory as a triumph for Irish women, in which so many women participated, is evidence of a new confidence and spirit of self-assertion. Attempts by political opponents to use Mary Robinson's sex as a weapon against her failed and the knee-jerk response of distrust and loathing of femininity was not forthcoming. The extent of the political fallout from Robinson's election suggests the potential of such a self-conscious and self-confident sense of common cause among women to affect change.

The context in which Mary Robinson's election victory was achieved must be recalled before we become too optimistic about the future, however. The common cause of women obviously benefits when left-wing and progressive groups in general join in alliance. It is difficult to assess the extent to which public disgust at the unedifying spectacle of the Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael campaigns created a protest vote which was not so much for Robinson as against Lenihan and Currie. That such a protest occurred is in itself a hopeful sign, however, and it must be remembered that even prior to the Lenihan debacle Robinson was doing better than anyone would have predicted. Change, then, is on the political agenda, but before it can proceed it is important to assess the reverses of the 1980s, their causes and effects, and to analyse the most pressing issues facing feminism in Ireland in the 1990s.

CONSTITUTING IRISH WOMEN

The choice of the Constitution as the vehicle for the attack on women's rights in Ireland in the 1980s was, as Ruth Riddick has pointed out in this series, entirely in keeping with the spirit of that document and its original authors. The identification of the family (rather than, for example, the individual) as the basic building block of society is more than pious rhetoric in the Irish Constitution. In post-colonial southern Ireland a particular construction of sexual and familial roles became the very substance of what it meant to be Irish.

The Indian political philosopher, Ashis Nandy, has argued that a history of colonisation is a history of feminisation. Colonial powers identify their subject peoples as passive, in need of guidance, incapable of self-government, romantic, passionate, unruly, barbarous - all of those things for which the Irish and women have been traditionally praised and scorned.

Nandy points out that the subject people, in rebelling and claiming independence and sovereignty, aspire to a traditionally masculine role of power. The result is that colonised peoples, often long after colonisation itself has ended, tend to observe or impose strictly differentiated gender roles in order to assert the masculinity and right to power of the (male) subjects. This has been the case, Nandy argues, in his native India. It is readily identified as a trait of fundamentalist Islam and it is not difficult to trace this process at work in the sexual conservatism and political stagnation of post-independence Ireland. Anxiety about one's fitness for a (masculine) role of authority, deriving from a history of defeat or helplessness, is assuaged by the assumption of sexual dominance.

Women in these conditions become guarantors of their men's status, bearers of national honour and the scapegoats of national identity. They are not merely transformed into symbols of the nation, they become the territory over which power is exercised. The Irish obsession with the control of women's bodies by church, state, boards of ethics and judicial enquiries, has its roots in such anxieties, though it is arguable that any form of national identity must constitute itself as power over a territory defined as feminine.

That the real experience of women is to be specifically excluded from Irish national identity is inscribed in the Constitution in which the Republic of Ireland describes itself to itself. Women's 'duties in the home' are constitutionally reinforced.

The most basic 'civil right', the right to life, is constitutionally compromised in the case of women, a circumstance which provides a grim gloss on an observation by one of the architects of the concept of civil liberties - Rousseau commented (ironically in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*) that, for citizenship in his ideal Republic, 'it must be men.' The consequences of the circumscription of one basic 'right' for women has been, as

a series of High Court and Supreme Court judgements have made clear, very specific limitations on the right to freedom of information and free speech. Women, in everything which is specific to them as women, are quite obviously not citizens of the republic.

FEMINISM AND UNIONISM

Irish nationalism may have little to offer Irish women, but what can the relationship be between feminism and unionism? Mary Holland in an 'open letter' in her *Irish Times* column (30 May 1990) to the Unionist MP, John Taylor, articulated, tentatively and sceptically, what has long been a furtive wish of liberal forces in the south - an alliance between those forces and Ulster protestantism. Holland welcomed Taylor's intervention in the dispute over the future of the Adelaide Hospital, the last remaining Protestant hospital in the Republic.

There have been repeated attempts to use Unionist opinion as a lever to put pressure on conservative nationalism to reform. During the divorce referendum the point was unsuccessfully made that a vote against divorce was a vote against pluralism and as a consequence a vote against the unification of Ireland. Since the electorate seems to have responded, not to such abstract principles, but to fear of dispersing family landholdings, it is difficult to make assumptions about the priority of Catholic moral teaching over nationalist aspirations. Nonetheless it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the majority in the south is unwilling to concede that any form of united, federated or more closely integrated Ireland must also be a more heterogeneous Ireland.

A second referendum on the divorce issue seems likely in the near future and it will be interesting to observe how far the southern electorate has moved towards a more pluralist notion of Irishness. It is unlikely

that any such shift in public opinion will be a product of a reconsideration of the northern situation. It is likely, however, that Unionist alienation will be once again invoked by those seeking change as a spectre to ward off the worst excesses of groups such as SPUC (Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child) and Family Solidarity. That invocation has, in the past, created some confusion and misunderstanding of the Unionist position. Part of this confusion stems from a more fundamental confusion in the southern mind between what has become known as 'the protestant ethos' (associated in the public mind with the Adelaide Hospital, compassionate medicine and liberal attitudes to social and sexual matters, in that order) and the perceptions and beliefs of northern unionism. The former is to some extent identifiable with the Church of Ireland, but it really represents the residue of a secular, humanist tradition which was not and is not exclusively of that faith. It is part of a cultural heritage which feminism elsewhere has had to fight, but which in Ireland might be a significant ally if only it were stronger, a little less complacent and a lot less conservative. It added an important leaven to the dreadful dough of the confessional southern state from the 1930s to the 1960s. It is, in many important respects, part of the culture and the self-concept of the Republic.

Northern unionism is a quite distinct entity from this amorphous cultural 'ethos.' It has a different class base and a different denominational orientation. It has no history of aristocratic guilt: politically it has an unrepentant, recent and continuing record of civil rights abuses and intimidation. That record is rooted in a fear of nationalism which glib generalisations about the 'protestant ethos' and reconciliation at best obscure and at worst entrench further. It is not a likely ally of any group in the south and its brand of protestant fundamentalism will not be comfortable with liberalisation. To suggest otherwise is to ignore the facts and to contribute, not to reconciliation, but

to further misunderstanding and antagonism. As Mary Holland, in her address to John Taylor, pointed out 'many, many Unionists' opposed the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Unionists and nationalists appear to be able to make common cause against the extension of UK abortion legislation to northern Ireland. Whatever other divisions there are, Ireland, north and south, is united in its denial of women's right to choose.

It is not just nationalist Ireland which exhibits the traits of sexual conservatism and social stagnation. Unionism is if anything more insecure and equally prey to the sexualisation of political identity, even if this takes different forms. The fundamentalist streak in northern protestantism is as hostile to feminism as is Catholicism. American feminists have had long and bitter experience of evangelical and fundamentalist protestantism's efforts to combat feminism and to use the concept of the right to life of the 'unborn' to restrict the rights of women. If southern Irish feminism has nothing to say to women in the Unionist community in northern Ireland beyond an assurance that they would be worse off if they were Catholics, then it really will have been defeated by nationalism. Preoccupation with the ill effects of nationalism will have induced a moral and political blindness which obscures other ills.

FROM CATHLEEN TO REVISIONISM: THE HI-JACKING OF FEMINISM

Precisely because nationalism has proved so hostile to women, feminism offers a convenient cover for those who wish to attack any attempt to understand Ireland's past and present in terms of colonisation and decolonisation as reactionary and inherently anti-feminist. Edna Longley's recent pamphlet in this series, *From Cathleen to Anorexia: the Breakdown of Irelands*, presents itself as an attempt 'to reopen the ever-problematic, ever-central issue of

"Nationalism and Feminism." Re-opening the issue has become a matter of urgency. Longley's focus is literary and, to a lesser extent, historical, though it diverges into an attack on John Hume, who is found guilty of 'fall(ing) into nationalist idiom.' Edna Longley's interrogation of Hume's rhetoric is indicative of the tone of the whole piece: 'Hume likes to stress that he has moved beyond the old definitions. So let us test him on the questions of "Irishness" and "Revisionism."' A whole series of persons and institutions are similarly tested and similarly found guilty of clinging 'to the notion that a "good" or "real" nationalism exists in some zone uncontaminated by the Provos.' This 'nationalism' is effectively indistinguishable from 'Irishness' in the essay and "Irishness" with its totalitarian fringe' is always culpable - British feminism and 'foreign literary critics' like Edward Said and Terry Eagleton are tainted by association with it. That use of 'foreign' seems strange from a writer who advocates the abolition of the concept of Irishness and it should alert the reader to the inconsistent assumptions underlying the pamphlet. On the one hand there is a rejection of Irish nationalism; on the other there is vociferous resistance to analogy or comparison of the Irish situation with that of any other country or group.

Reference is made to a recent collection of essays, *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*. The competing claims of regionalism and European integration framed that collection. Edna Longley knows a good deal about regionalism - but there is no reference in her pamphlet to the European context which has been such a valuable asset to Irish feminism in the last decade. Similarly, attempts to understand Ireland's colonial experience in the context of other countries and cultures marked by a colonial past are derided. (Edward Said would doubtless be amused to find 'Palestinian' used as a generalised term of abuse.)

Edna Longley's campaign against the Field Day group is somewhat jaded and in this essay she tries to revitalise it

by using feminism as ideological high ground from which to throw the same old stones at the same old targets. Field Day is by no means the only exclusively male cultural institution in Ireland. It is certainly not the only one to suffer from the masculine myopia which such a composition induces. Neither is it, however, the monolithic, inward-looking, defensive formation Edna Longley describes. Moreover the work of that group has created spaces for the discussion of gender and nationality of which feminism can avail. (The forthcoming Field Day anthology seems likely to be the first non-feminist anthology of Irish literature to give some visibility to the writing of women.) The analogy between feminism and nationalism made by Terry Eagleton in his contribution to the Field Day series has, as Edna Longley points out, the potential to annoy both elements in his equation. Annoyance value is not to be scorned, however, and an analogy which provokes such antagonism must have touched a crucial nerve. Eagleton's comparison of movements which perceive themselves to be mutually incompatible, even mutually exclusive, upsets the too-easy repudiation of nationalism as reactionary by feminism and the too-easy rejection of feminism as alien by nationalism. For many women, particularly in northern Ireland, both feminism and (at least some variants of) nationalism are positive forces for change in their society.

Edna Longley's denial that it is possible to be both feminist and republican is not only an historical absurdity, it runs the risk of making Irish feminism no more than a middle class movement directed towards equal participation by privileged women in the status quo. Indeed, a feminism which refuses to engage with the hard realities of Ireland can be no more than that. A feminism based on exclusion will continue to be itself excluded. A feminism which participates in the translation of political into moral categories which bedevils discussions of Ireland, north and south, will itself continue to fall prey to such translations.

Feminism must interrogate nationalism, must maintain its own interests and women's interests against any monolithic national identity which perpetuates patriarchy. In engaging with nationalist women, it must point out how little nationalism and republicanism have promoted or protected women's interests, how much they have done to denigrate and oppress women. Nonetheless, if feminism in the south continues to regard nationalism and republicanism as contagious diseases and to protect itself from contagion by a refusal to engage with either it will also continue to occupy the political margins and to lose referenda. Instead of increasing the isolation of republican women and pushing them further into a ghetto where violence is the only form of political expression left, there is an obligation to enter some kind of dialogue. Instead of lecturing Republican women on their political and moral failings as women we might pause to listen. Perhaps they could teach us to address those women for whom the myth of Mother Ireland is still a powerful enchantment. Perhaps they know better than academics, writers and pamphleteers how to expose and destroy that enchantment.

Feminism needs to address women in *both* communities in northern Ireland. It will not succeed in doing so by sentimentalising unionism on the one hand and scurrying away from the civil rights issues raised by the treatment of women prisoners on the other. If feminism abroad understands strip-searching as flagrant abuse of civil rights and deliberate sexual degradation, then it is not because it does not understand the circumstances, but because it does understand the principle. It is because it is not so obsessed with distancing itself from one form of political violence in northern Ireland that it has become blind to all others. The involvement of the Council for the Status of Women (CSW) in attempts to improve the appalling conditions suffered by women prisoners in Mountjoy Gaol last year was indicative of the potentially broad range of feminist concerns. What has been revealed



about conditions there reminds us how poor the record of the Republic of Ireland is on civil rights. It is further proof, if it were needed, that where conditions are bad they are usually worse for women. If we could overcome our fear of losing our extremely tenuous hold on political respectability, feminism could launch a campaign for an improvement in conditions for women prisoners - of all kinds, north and south - and the suspension of practices which attempt to use women's sexuality to degrade them. Feminism has reason to fear hi-jacking by nationalist and republican groups, but it cannot allow that fear to paralyse it. Public identification of feminism with such causes and with an anti-pornography campaign which is also anti-censorship would not only raise feminism's profile among sectors of the public which have until now remained unswayed by feminism's arguments. It would allow it to build a base from which to launch the long, difficult campaigns looming - including that for the removal of the eighth amendment to the Constitution.

Moreover, it is time for feminism to ask if it has not already been hi-jacked by its more respectable political allies. Liberal forces in the Labour Party and to a lesser extent in Fine Gael may have been on our side in the battles on divorce and on the abortion amendment, but that support is in the end less significant than the failure of that support to be effective. They helped us to lose. The nomination of and support for Mary Robinson by Labour in conjunction with the Workers' Party, Greens and others was obviously more effective, but feminism cannot afford to lose any more ballots in Ireland and some caution is necessary.

Feminism cannot, in attempting to see women outside their traditional role as symbols of the nation, be content to merely impose a revised role on them, a role as victims of the nation or of history. The work of contemporary continental feminist thinkers, with its emphasis on the way in which we are produced by and produce the dominant

culture and the internal complexities of any programme of cultural and psychological change, may offer a way out of the twin stereotypes into which any analysis of women in Irish culture so easily falls. An analysis which emphasises how deeply we are involved in patriarchal culture and in our idealisation as symbols of the nation denies us the moral high ground - we are not the innocent victims of Irish or any other kind of historical circumstance. Women are not, as Edna Longley suggests in her pamphlet, essentially more peaceable, less dogmatic, uninfected by bloodthirsty political ideologies. Women have been actively involved in every possible variant of both nationalism and unionism. They too have been prejudiced and brought their children up to be prejudiced. Women have supported and carried out violent actions. They have gained and lost from their involvement. If patriarchal history has portrayed us as bystanders to the political process, it has lied. We have always been implicated, even in our own oppression.

A DANGEROUS CONSENSUS

Any analysis of feminism in Ireland needs to take note of an observation by Angela Carter quoted by Clodagh Corcoran in her LIP pamphlet *Pornography: The New Terrorism*:

The notion of a universality of human experience is a confidence trick and the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick.

Irish feminism has sometimes perforce played such tricks. In the 1980s it appeared to progress, where it progressed at all, by stealth, disguising its demands for women in assertions of human, individual or civil rights. The problematics of asserting women's rights as an

extension of 'universal' human rights (themselves only tenuously conceded by Irish political and religious culture) dominate Clodagh Corcoran's excellent essay on pornography. The analysis of the cultural and social significance of pornography will be familiar to readers of Andrea Dworkin and Susanne Kappeler. (The difficulties and shortcomings of Dworkin and Kappeler's work is outside the scope of a pamphlet such as this.) The factor which gives Corcoran's essay its wider significance for Irish feminism is its application, in a specifically Irish context, of the dangers inherent in concepts of universal rights or liberties which are blind to gender:

Liberals intellectualise vaguely about 'freedom,' 'human rights,' 'freedom of expression.' They speak of these 'freedoms' as though they were a common experience for women, and hope we won't see through such hypocrisy.

That the rights of man may be and are exercised in our society through the denial of the rights of woman is the fundamental lesson of pornography. It is a hard lesson for the Irish women's movement for it has derived support from and even argued its case in the protectively anonymous language of 'humanism.'

Clodagh Corcoran's image of the Irish public man, addressing 'large meetings on censorship,' pointing towards illusory freedoms, could be transposed onto Eavan Boland's portrait of the Irish literary man, trading 'in the exhausted fictions of the nation' and allowing 'these fictions to edit ideas of womanhood and modes of remembrance.' Such a writer is perceived by Boland as constructing his voice out of the silence of women:

Long after they rejected the politics of Irish nationalism [Irish poets] continued to employ the emblems and enchantments of its culture. It was the culture, not the politics, which informed Irish poetry: not the harsh awakenings, but the old dreams.

A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition

Those old dreams, 'Dark Rosaleen, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, the nation as woman: the woman as nation', have become for Irishwomen the sign of their invisibility, of 'the power of nationhood to edit the reality of womanhood.' Boland acknowledges that 'some of the poetry produced by such simplifications was, of course, difficult to argue with. Something was gained.' As a poet who still wishes to be part of the Irish tradition, Boland must nonetheless admit, 'what was lost was what I valued.'

It may be a shocking thought for some that the Irish woman reading Irish writing finds in it only a profound silence, her own silence. It is certainly a painful thought for an Irish woman writer and the talents of many of them must have been dissipated or lost in evading such pain. The exclusion of women was constitutive of Irish literature as it was constitutive of the Irish Republic. In her pamphlet Boland confronts that exclusion, but even her title, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition*, is testament to its disabling legacy. 'Mise Eire,' her own poem from which Boland takes that title, revised Pearse's poem of the same name. Pearse's refrain of 'I am Ireland' became, in Boland's poem, 'I am the woman.' The myth of Mother Ireland was countered by an insistent feminine subjectivity. Eavan Boland's LIP pamphlet counters another cultural cliché: Yeats's 'terrible beauty' is contrasted with a vision of 'terrible survival.' (The centrality of the Famine rather than the vagaries of nationalism to Eavan Boland's sense of her identity as an Irish woman writer is an interesting indication of the

different shape Irish history may take when women have reconstructed their part in it.)

The common insight of Clodagh Corcoran and Eavan Boland is that even where Irish literary and political culture opposes the dominant ideology of church and state it often merely re-presents the emblems and the structures of that ideology in more 'enchanted' forms. One consequence of this is the cultural hegemony which the women's movement has found particularly difficult to shatter.

REWRITING THE SCRIPT

If women are to renegotiate their relation to Irish culture, much work needs to be done. The work of analysing and theorising women's relation to Irish culture, of criticising and changing that relation, of providing a critical, political and historical context for Irish women's writing is an exciting and necessary task which, as yet, has scarcely begun. The work undertaken by feminist scholars elsewhere can be of invaluable assistance in this task and can expand the horizons of Irish sexual and national identity.

The American feminist critic, Nina Baym, has discussed the way in which nationalism influenced and often constituted the definition of 'American Literature.' That definition was produced by (male) academics eager to legitimise not only American culture, but also their own status as professionals and the equals of their European counterparts. As Nina Baym points out 'the search for cultural essence' which ensued excluded women and ethnic minorities almost entirely, working on the basis that the experience of these groups is not 'normal', i.e. masculine, white, 'the same', and is therefore 'inessential.' On these criteria, the work of white, male and predominantly middle class artists was regarded as that

which best expressed the essence of American culture. Work by such artists and writers was thus deemed to be not only the mainstream, but the best.

Baym identifies the myth of the artist as hero, struggling against the odds to create his 'own' work as the myth which legitimised the 'artist' for American culture, reshaping 'him' in the familiar mould of a culture which valorised action and 'truth' and was ambivalent about art and artifice. Art became macho. The writer became the prototypical hero, his writing a pioneering exploration of new territory which he made his own. Effectively, he became a literary imperialist.

The myth of the Irish artist is a different myth, but it is equally masculine in its terms and equally concerned with the legitimation of a particular view of national culture. Two forms of the myth of the (literary) hero predominate. He may be a 'true son' of 'Mother Ireland': this view has very much gone out of fashion. The current myth of the literary-subversive-in-exile (epitomised by Joyce) is no less masculine in its terms, however, and has certain similarities with the American myth, for he too is a 'son' escaping from the 'nets' of 'Mother' church, 'Mother' Ireland and, perhaps, 'Mother' tongue.

If the male Irish writer must speak from this Oedipal place of exile, what position as speaking and writing subject is available to the Irish woman? According to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill:

We've all internalised this patriarchal thing. It would be a lie for me to say that I'm out of the woods, because I'm not.

Graph 1 (1986)

Ní Dhomhnaill here echoes the imagery of the French novelist and theorist Hélène Cixous. Cixous sees language as an agent of the internalisation of 'the whole patriarchal thing' and argues that 'as soon as women begin to speak they're taught that their territory is black: because you're



Africa, you are black, your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous.' The image of the feminine as a colonised territory has now become almost banal, but Cixous's association of language and colonialism is particularly resonant in an Irish context.

For both Ní Dhomhnaill and Cixous the language of patriarchy colonises women's self-concept and world view. It presents the masculine as the norm and the feminine as an aberration. Words abound for experiences which are exclusive to or predominantly those of men. The public domain, which was for so long the domain of men, is also the domain where discourse proliferates. The private domain, women's traditional 'sphere,' is very often the realm of the oblique and unspoken. (Compare, for example, the proliferation of technical vocabularies in the twentieth century - mechanical, electronic, computer languages and jargon - with the scarcity of words relating to the experience of childbirth.) How then can women use language, particularly how can women write, without succumbing to the inherent masculine bias in the languages of patriarchal cultures? According to Ní Dhomhnaill the woman must write - and the man who would break out of the strait-jacket of patriarchal repression and 'linguistic schizophrenia' must write - in 'the language of the Mothers' which she calls Irish.

This latter assertion has caused considerable controversy. Ní Dhomhnaill herself admits, 'there's a level of hurt involved in the language.' This is especially so for women. The question of Irish identity and the question of feminine identity often - as we have seen - have mutually exclusive answers. Moreover the political exclusion implicit in this valorisation of the Irish language is undeniable and runs the risk of a return to the same old insular Irishness. The most productive way to understand Ní Dhomhnaill's assertion is as an attempt to revise the significance of the language she chooses and to assert that she has a choice. The use of Irish by a woman poet to write

in ways which challenge the basic assumptions and myths of patriarchy is an attempt to wrest authority, not only from patriarchy and misogynist myth, but from that formulation of national identity to which the Irish language and the silence of women were fundamental. That is an exercise which can only be beneficial to those many women writers in Ireland who do not see Irish as their mother tongue and who instead grapple with the problem of looking back through literary mothers who are as often as not Anglo-Irish and excluded from that narrow definition of Irishness which Ní Dhomhnaill challenges.

ANALOGIES: THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Women on either side of the political divide in Ireland share with the women of many developing countries the burden of the social and sexual conservatism which stifles societies which are insecure in their origins and haunted by civil strife. If we look for analogies to the position of Irish women, it might perhaps be to the Arab nations where, as in Ireland, women are too often the scapegoats of national and religious identity. We must be wary, however, that we, from our position on the margin of European culture, do not colonise other women's marginality, their history, literature and experience, for our own ends. European feminism poses certain problems for third world women who perceive it to be ethnocentric in its approach to the specific cultural and economic dilemmas of women in the developing countries. It is important to keep those reservations in mind, even as we look forward to becoming part of new European feminist movement.

We are moving towards a Europe which will be more integrated, but will nonetheless place feminism in a political context far more diverse than anything we have previously experienced. Political alignments and the locus of power are shifting and those changes offer opportunities

to escape old political polarities. Ireland is not the only European country where feminism and nationalism are in conflict. It is worth noting that one of the first groups which demonstrated in large numbers against the new, united German state were women protesting at the threat to abortion and childcare facilities, previously guaranteed in East Germany. The resurgence of nationalism and ethnic strife in eastern Europe makes it more urgent than ever that feminism not only re-examines its relation to nationalism, but that it actively seeks to change the nature of national and ethnic identity and how we experience them. A particular construction of sexual identity has, in Ireland and elsewhere, given form and substance to national identity. Women have been denied a role in the life and history of nations and been reduced to symbols of the nation. As women claim and change their role and seek a different identity for themselves as women, they will also change the meaning of national identity. According to Eavan Boland, 'Irish poems simplified most at the point of intersection between womanhood and Irishness.' Irishwomen, now that they are breaking their silence, will complicate and change Irish culture at precisely that point of intersection. The double marginality of Ireland - European, but sharing a history and experience with post-colonial states elsewhere, never quite one thing or another - may yet provide a space in which Irish women can make and say something different of ourselves as women and of the many traditions which are our burden and our inheritance. No longer the territory over which power is exercised, women, in exercising power, may redefine the territory.

REFERENCES

- Baym, Nina (1986) 'Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women,' *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed Elaine Showalter, London: Virago
- Boland, Eavan (1987) 'Mise Eire,' *The Journey* London: Carcanet
- Boland, Eavan (1989) *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition* Dublin: Attic Press LIP Pamphlet
- Cixous, Hélène (1976) 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' trans Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.1: 875-99
- Corcoran, Clodagh (1989) *Pornography: The New Terrorism* Dublin: Attic Press LIP Pamphlet
- Eagleton, Terry (1988) *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature: Nationalism, Irony and Commitment* Derry: Field Day
- Kearney, Richard, ed (1988) *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s* Dublin: Wolfhound
- Longley, Edna (1990) *From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands* Dublin: Attic Press LIP Pamphlet
- Nandy, Ashis (1983) *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* Delhi, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Ní Dhomhnaill, Nuala (1986) Interview with Michael Cronin, *Graph* 1 (Oct)
- Riddick, Ruth (1990) *The Right to Choose: Questions of Feminist Morality* Dublin: Attic Press LIP Pamphlet
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques 'Discourse on the Origin of Inequality' *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans GDH Cole, rev ed JH Brumfitt and John C Hall London: Everyman (2nd ed) (1973)

LIP PAMPHLETS FROM ATTIC PRESS

Feminism and Eastern Europe

Ines Rieder

Glass Slippers and Tough Bargains:

Women, Men and Power

Maureen Gaffney

Sex and Nation:

Women in Irish Culture and Politics

Gerardine Meaney

Ancient Wars:

Sex and Sexuality

Ethna Viney

A Kind of Scar:

The Woman Poet in a National Tradition

Eavan Boland

Has the Red Flag Fallen?

The Fate of Socialism in the 1990s

Helena Sheehan

Pornography:

The New Terrorism

Clodagh Corcoran

Ireland:

Between the First and the Third Worlds

Carol Coulter

The Right to Choose:

Questions of Feminist Morality

Ruth Riddick

The Politics of Seduction

Trudy Hayes

From Cathleen to Anorexia:

The Breakdown of Irelands

Edna Longley

ATTIC PRESS

44 East Essex Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

Gerardine Meaney
SEX AND NATION
Women in Irish Culture and Politics

Responding to earlier LIP pamphlets, Gerardine Meaney reflects on the relationship between national and sexual identity and the problems posed by nationalism for feminism in Ireland.

LIP, provocative polemical pamphlets on contemporary issues and controversies, by Irish women writers, thinkers and activists.

'A fitting and brave development; it's more Lip we want, indeed.' **THE IRISH TIMES**



ISBN: 1 85594 015 9

Price: £2.99

Cover Design: Paula Nolan

ATTIC PRESS