



**In what ways do Northern Irish poets engage issues of Gender?**

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*“laid out as a passive woman on a bed and mounted.” (Wills 66-67)*

Within Northern Ireland, Nationalist literature has for the most part tended to have a complicated relationship with feminism and gender politics alike. Towards the beginning of the 20th century, many of the main leaders of Nationalist movements sought to consider men and women as unequivocal equals. With the explicit inclusivity of the Proclamation of Ireland, exemplified through phrases such as: “equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens,” and the well-respected Cumman na mBan (an all-female paramilitary organisation) - nationalism and feminism seemed synergic (Pearse, Padraic & The provisional Government of the Irish Republic 1916). However, the relationship between these two ideologies quickly changed and contorted over the greater half of the 20th century. William Butler Yeats’ early play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* illustrates how Irish Nationalism’s association with femininity and womanhood can be alternatively viewed as regressive. Part of an ongoing continuum of expressing women as symbols in Ireland, Yeats’ play depicts the character of Cathleen as a personification of Ireland. In fact, she is an old woman who suddenly becomes young and beautiful when the male protagonist fully devotes himself to the service of protecting her (as Ireland). Through the guise of Nationalism, women are depicted as defenceless, powerless creatures that need to be protected by young Irish men. In fact, Joseph M. Armengol claims that this image of Cathleen filters down into the social expectations of women in Ireland, contributing to, “the making of a nation founded on gendered ideals of female passivity and purity” (12). It is this specific engagement with gender that this essay is particularly interested in; that of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*’s influences as a symbol of Ireland (whether implicit or explicit), on the depictions and expectations of women within Northern Irish poetry. Moreover, the main concern of this essay is the problematic portrayal of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in Seamus Heaney’s poetry, and how it has influenced subsequent interpretations of gender in Northern Irish poets of later generations.

I would argue that Seamus Heaney's poetry is amongst some of the most disturbing and problematic in terms of its relationship to sexuality and gender. Read in its entirety, the themes of life, death, land and femininity within *North's* "Bog Queen" perpetuate these sexist Irish tropes. In this poem, Heaney takes on the persona of a female bog-body, and personifies her as she lays in the ground in a state of decay. As she is resurrected from the ground, her body is maimed and robbed - most notably, her hair gets cut off. Similar to the mythology of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Irish land is feminised and described as waiting for male intervention. In this case, to raise the Bog Queen out "from the dark" (Heaney, Line 53) . Even through a brief description of the poem, it's clear that this poem is inherently sexist in how it presents women. In fact, Medbh McGuckian speaks to her frustration of these depictions in an interview with Clair Wills, claiming that it presents Ireland as, "laid out as a passive woman on a bed and mounted" (66-69). This observation identifies two of the main problems of this poem: women presented as passive beings, who are then consequently sexualised through the male gaze due to this lack of agency.

However, it's important to note another interpretation of gender within "Bog Queen" to get a full understanding of what the poem is trying to achieve. Given that the female narrator is an emblem of Irish land, when a "peer's wife" (presumably an Englishman) decides to permanently unearth and steal locks of her hair, a poignant analogy for colonialism is created (Line 49). It is logical to assume that Heaney is in fact, trying to critique this unfounded ownership of land from foreign settlers, and by extension, the imbalances of power against women. This doesn't, however, mean that Heaney is successful in doing so. In fact, amidst his plight to condemn imperialism, he contradictorily harbours power over women as he writes - silencing them as he speaks for them and mythologising them. According to Patricia Coughlan, Heaney exemplifies, "the fundamentally Oedipal structure of the prince (or poet) who can visit the woman who

embodies power but does not wield it, and gain his power from the encounter” (37). In other words, Heaney utilises the female body as a metaphor for the nation, yet silences them whilst he voyeuristically preys on their pain for poetic inspiration.

In regards to sexualisation of the female body, Heaney emphasises his maleness as a writer by using sexuality as a framework for his poetry with phrases such as, “my body as braille” (Line 5). The image of braille, of things and natural forces running their metaphysical fingertips over women’s bodies, perpetuates the idea that women need to be touched and physically desired before they can be understood. Subsequently, the bog woman’s body then becomes a site of violence in which she can exert no control over whilst she is: “groped”, and, “digested”, by the forces around her (Lines 7, 11). As these pseudo-sexual words are read in tandem with the opening line of: “I lay waiting”, (repeated again in line 16), a sense of the bog woman’s expectation is created - she predicts her own abuse yet is powerless to stop it (Lines 1, 16). A commonality between most poetic techniques used within “Bog Queen” is that they tend to point towards and build upon the absolute lack of agency of the central female figure. As the bog queen lies there anticipating, it suggests that she remains devoid of her own desires, waiting for a male suitor to then imprint meaning and action onto her body. With this in mind, sexuality and violence remain in close contact throughout, “Bog Queen” as everything that preys upon the bog woman does so without her consent or want. This forced sexual advancement, however, creates a concerning dynamic that the critic Ian Gregson aptly describes, claiming that, “the deployment by Heaney to account for political atrocities is especially disturbing... it implies that those atrocities arise from a sexual compulsion” (129). In other words, Heaney doesn’t see women’s bodies as their own, but rather monopolises them as sites of political and sexual poetic exploration to possess for himself.

Within the same anthology of *North*, Heaney yet again engages with gender in a questionable manner in the poem, “Act of Union”. Calling upon the mythology of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the land of Ireland is once again feminised, however in this poem it is sexually assaulted by the opposed English coloniser figure. Mother Ireland is subjugated and exploited by her male counterpart, with the sexual domination and subsequent reproduction serving as an analogy for colonisation. There’s a lot of overlap between “Bog Queen” and “Act of Union.” Most notably, in both poems, Heaney frames women in extremely fragile, vulnerable positions; only to then exploit their suffering through his poetry in order to propagate his beliefs on imperialism. This being said, there are subtle differences between the two poems. Whilst “Bog Queen” depicts women’s overwhelming lack of agency and/or desire, “Act of Union” does so within a more sexually *explicit* context. Although of course, sexual undertones exist in both of these poems, the woman in “Act of Union” is sexually violated in an emphatic and shocking way that differs from “Bog Queen.”

Within “Act of Union” the two ‘characters,’ (for lack of better terms) are engaging in sexual relations wherein the woman has not given consent. It goes without saying that the premise of rape is dehumanising in and of itself, but as Heaney then elaborates upon this conceit his sexist beliefs unravel. For instance, using plosive and violent language such as, “bog-burst”, “boom burst”, and, “big-pain”, it’s clear from the outset the speaker perceives sex as a masochistic way to inflict torture onto his partner (Lines 1.3, 2.4, 2.13). Sex isn’t depicted as a mutual act of connection, but simply a way to dominate and promote ownership over women. In fact, objectification of the female body quickly becomes one of the main focuses of this poem. Mother Ireland is described only through the male speaker’s perception of her body, with the synecdoche in the first stanza reducing her to parts: “your back”, “your gradual hills” (Lines

1.5,7). The only time where she is described in her entirety is the second last line in the phrase, “stretchmarked body”(Line 2.13) . Even though she isn’t debased to mere parts here, there are really no redeeming qualities in the speaker’s description, as there seems to be a sadistic sense of pride in being, “the big pain / That leaves you [Mother Ireland] raw” (Lines 2.13-14). This being said, I believe that Ciaran Carson’s criticism of this poem accurately sums up how reductive and sexist Heaney can be using the aforementioned techniques. According to Carson, an open critic of Heaney’s work, “Ireland’s relationship with England is sentimentalised into something as natural as a good fuck” (185). Whilst his chosen language is crude, Carson demonstrates how Heaney manages to reduce this extremely nuanced subject matter into a fetish-like poem of sexual intercourse. Of course, it must be acknowledged that Carson only takes into account the male perspective of ‘Act of Union’. Whilst, yes, it’s a pleasurable experience for the dominating male character of the poem, it remains a sexually harrowing one for the female Ireland character.

As already established, Heaney’s poetry draws heavily from the Aisling tradition, a common feature of traditional Irish poetry and song in which a female character symbolises the nation of Ireland. However, not all Northern Irish poets subscribed to this idea, especially in the later half of the 20th century. As poets like Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian became acclaimed writers, they openly critiqued and satirised earlier Northern Irish poetry that fed into these sorts of stereotypes. For example, within Muldoon’s aptly named poem, “Aisling” the poet presents a parody take on Heaney’s gendered depiction of Ireland. Written within the historical context of the hunger strikes, Muldoon poses the question of; should Ireland be symbolised by a radiant, attractive goddess such as Cathleen Ni Houlihan? Or the deteriorating disease of anorexia? In Heaney’s earlier poems, Ireland is presented as a certain ‘damsel in distress’ in which fighting for fulfils one’s masculine needs to protect and/or dominate. Contrastingly,

Muldoon points to the absurdity of this gendered patriotism, poking fun at how delusional it can be when one becomes too committed to their nationalist inclination to protect Ireland from threat: “it’s all much of a muchness” (Line 10). Thus, “Aisling” allows the myth of nationalism to be broken down and reformulated in order to show the broken promise of patriotism. It’s hard to romanticise fighting for one’s country (or for one’s Aisling) when it results in, “a saline / drip into his bag of brine” (Lines 14-15). Edna Longley agrees, claiming that “in blaming the hunger strikers’ emaciation on their idealised cause... The Irish Nationalist dream may have declined into a destructive neurosis” (189). If the Nationalist purpose is so intimately associated with the gendered pursuit of demonstrating one’s masculinity, when this guise falters - what is left? Essentially, this is what Muldoon is attempting to question, emphasising the futility of sacrificing so much for one’s country. For instance, the clear irony in the fact that the Irish hunger strikers are supported by kidney machines in the Royal Victoria Hospital - a healing force for Nationalists named after a British Monarch. As Edna Longley writes, “‘Anorexia,’ is thus Cathleen Ni Houlihan in a terminal condition,” in which the idealisation of Nationalism becomes difficult to maintain (189).

Moreover, another poet who opposes the traditional binaries of gender in Northern Irish poetry is Medbh McGuckian; one of the only female poets within the very male-dominated poetic milieu of Ulster at the time. In a literary sphere that was so sustained by religious and national images of the mother, McGuckian’s subversive depiction of femininity was inherently politicised and othered. This being said, since McGuckian’s poetry has often been critiqued as abstract and conceptual, explicit references to Northern Irish politics or myth (in this case, Cathleen Ni Houlihan) aren’t common across her anthologies. Rather, she tends to focus on gender in a broader sense, investigating the societal expectations placed upon women regarding

identity and motherhood whilst the presence of Cathleen Ni Houlihan lingers in the subtext of her poetry. Harking back to Armengol's earlier quote, he believes that the meek image of Cathleen Ni Houlihan within literature filters down into societal expectations of Irish women. I would argue that McGuckian's poetry is, to an extent, a response to these presuppositions, and attempts to configure what femininity looks like within its own right.

Whilst the earlier Northern Irish poets silenced and spoke for women, McGuckian provides a space within her poetry for nationalist women to exist as people with agency, identity and sexual autonomy. Instead of the synonymous symbol of Cathleen Ni Houlihan as nationhood, Medbh McGuckian subverts this, describing the nation/nature itself that inflicts pain upon women. For instance, McGuckian redefines women's bodies viewed in moments of violence and pain in her early poem, "Eavesdropper" (originally named 'That Year' in the 1982 publication) as she relays the loss of innocence present alongside a girl's first menstruation. With this interpretation in mind, the repeated references to "red and white" presumably allude to the anticipation of waiting for blood to appear on the white of the sanitary towel (9). Nevertheless, the essence of this poem arguably lies within the line: "It was like a bee's sting or bullet / left in me, this mark, this sticking pins in dolls" (9). It's important to note that if one is to remove a bullet, a pin prick or a bee's sting from one's skin, it is left scarred, bruised or altered. All of these actions done to the body mark changes that cannot be reverted once implemented, and each cross physical boundaries that consequently lead to pain; similar to menstruation. Thus, these allusions to suffering insinuate a relationship to female development, as the "red and white... trickle[s] slow", imitates blood leaving the womb (9). At its core, "Eavesdropper" depicts pain being internalised by women from external, natural forces, creating a new relationship between suffering and the female body that most Northern Irish poetry hadn't previously acknowledged.

Consequently, McGuckian prohibits female suffering from existing solely as a redundant poetic trope, but allows it to operate as a very real, intimate experience. For example, in Heaney's "Act of Union" pain is inflicted upon the woman in a dominating and predatory manner in which the woman cannot speak. Contrastingly, the woman in "Eavesdropper" calls for "curtainings and cushionings", whilst undergoing her traumatising experience (9). Female pain is visceral, personal and exposing in such a way that necessitates comfort and solace.

In conclusion, Cathleen Ni Houlihan has informed Northern Irish literature for decades and across generations. Whilst the older generations have used the Mother Ireland image as a scapegoat for their thinly veiled sexist ideals; the poets in more recent years have redefined and reformulated what Cathleen Ni Houlihan actually signifies. Previously, Cathleen was used to silence women, erasing them from political and literary discussions by sexualising her, by emphasising her purity and passiveness. Of course this presence of the submissive woman in literature has negative societal effects. As Clair Wills notes, "the requirements of purity within the family and the nation have forced women into... restricted modes of behaviour in order to conform to the Catholic and nationalist ideology of femininity" (66,69) Later poets then aimed to amend these unfortunate consequences, pushing back against the earlier perceptions of women as submissive. Specifically in the work of Medbh McGuckian and unlike before, women are allowed to exist as engaged and present even within moments of pain and suffering.

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