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Re-Writing the Irish Gender Paradigm in Seamus Heaney's "Oysters" and Eavan Boland's "How
it Once Was in Our Country"

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Honors Thesis

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In Ireland, a country with a deeply influential colonial past, the social construction of gender roles is complicated. As a country whose cultural development is marked by the antagonistic relationship between history and modernity, post-colonial Ireland occupies a distinct political position where reclaiming home and reclaiming nation are considered synonymous. Hence, gender is a pervasive and necessary lens for examining the development of both a nation and its culture. However, in conflating home making with nation making, both the development of Irish masculinity and the containment of women in purely domestic roles are exacerbated. In an attempt to shed the stringent gendering of the British Empire, post-colonial Ireland instead repurposed a dichotomous gender construction—leaving men vulnerable to the pageant of self-control required by Joe Valente's double-bind of Irish masculinity and forcing women into a purely-domestic, maternal, and romanticized system of feminization as explained by Adrienne Rich. This hostile gender construction pervaded all aspects of post-colonial Ireland and is particularly ostensible in the Irish Literary Revival, an artistic movement that drew from an imagined, mythological past in order to recreate Irish identity. In this paper, I will examine how two contemporary poets, Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland, challenge the antagonistically gendered composition of Irish literature. First, I will argue that Heaney's "Oysters" offers the reader a masculine perspective that confronts the complex "myth of manliness" described by

Valente and recognizes the violence inherent to compulsory heterosexuality. Then, I will consider a feminine perspective through Boland's "How It Once Was in Our Country" where she considers how the political and the domestic replicate one another, and reimagines Irish history as one that traps women in a stifling, romanticized ideology. Both poems argue that because of dependence on an invented past to create a utopian future where men are agents of national sovereignty and women are aesthetic objects and regenerators of nation, the Irish Literary Revival stunted the progress of both artistic culture and the domestic familial dynamic. The only way to reclaim Irish history is to abandon dichotomized gender roles and re-write the Irish gender paradigm.

While biological sex is generally dichotomized, with anatomy labeling people as either male or female, gender is more difficult to define. Gender traits are socially created and refer to the "behaviors and characteristics expected of people based on their biological sex" (Dragowski 1). Gender roles become binarized when those traits used to construct masculinity and femininity are defined in terms of opposites, and then projected onto the sex of men and women. For example, dominance is often described as a masculine trait, so femininity is defined by this trait's opposite—submissiveness. The social projection of gender is more prescriptive than descriptive. As a publically created paradigm, those traits that characterize gender are malleable, and thus easily manipulated by social institutions. Thus, men and women are pressured by society into those gender roles deemed appropriate by their religion, government, nation, etc.

Despite the impermanent and subjective nature of gender roles, they are continually and stringently regulated by society. One mode of such policing is the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality. Adrienne Rich examines those political ideologies that impose and demand heterosexuality in her article, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." According

to Rich, men have historically detained women into domestic and sexually subservient roles. This detainment has prevented female empowerment and mobility. Rich regards heterosexuality as an institution, much like capitalism and racism, writing:

[T]he failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness. (216)

According to Rich's article, the politics of gender and sexuality are not bound to the domestic sphere. Instead, they are continually mapped onto both public and private spaces, and maintained through violence and psycho-manipulation. Kathleen Barry's text *International Feminism: Networking against Female Sexual Slavery* compares the sexual repression and detainment of women to colonization. She argues that from a young age, female gender roles prescribe that women have an obligation to gratify male sexuality. The continual pressure of this dichotomous gendering, where men possess dominance and expect female subservience, forces women into "internalizing the values of the colonizer and actively participating in carrying out the colonization of one's self and one's sex" (qtd. in Rich 214). Both inside and outside of the home, the feminine and women are always the victims of compulsory, patriarchal heterosexuality. This feminine persecution arguably stems from masculine fear that "the autonomy and equality of women threaten family, religion, and state" (Rich 204).

However, while the continual victimization of the feminine both publically and privately is apparent throughout history, the motivations of the masculine are not quite as easily defined as Rich might argue. Instead, the fulfillment of prescribed "manly" traits is complicated, and for some men, impossible. Joe Valente examines the construction of British manliness, its

application to the English-Irish colonial relationship, and the double bind of Irish masculinity in his text, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture*.

According to Valente, British masculinity in the nineteenth century was defined by an “impacted dialectic” or harmonious discord. While women were “defined on a disjunctive basis, as either virgin or whore, spiritual ideal or bodily abject, maternal nurturer or dangerous virago, the fetishized sum or the fearful subversion of all cultural values,” men were demarcated on a more conjunctive basis, and for this reason, there was an intrinsic “internal antagonism” (Valente 6-7). While the duality of manliness was embraced, unlike the strict dichotomy projected onto femininity, achieving masculinity required a fine balance of animalistic urges and self-containment. Valente argues:

Indeed, the manly ideal did not really engage the womanly ideal in that traditional complementary opposition of genders, in which male and female properties look to complete one another, but rather did so in a metonymic if incommensurable relation of whole to part, in which the manly comprehends and commands a morally regenerative tension that the feminine properly lacks. It was the precarious feat of maintaining this dynamic equipoise of forces, rather than the value of the forces themselves, that the enormous social and symbolic authority of manliness ultimately pertained. (7)

According to Valente, rather than being opposites of one another, the conception of Nineteenth-Century British masculinity exposed the construction of masculinity in terms of wholeness, or the balance of disparate forces, and femininity as the ultimate representation of one defining agent. While the successful equilibrium of the opposing forces defining masculinity promised “enormous social and symbolic authority,” it also left men vulnerable to a temperamental

pageant of self-control. If a man were to display too much passivity, he would be labeled as too feminine and void of those brutish masculine urges at the heart of manhood. While on the other hand, any excessive show of passion or violence stripped him of his humanity, and left him labeled a brute.¹

However, the strategic balancing act that characterized British manliness was not accessible or manageable to non-British men. Any attempt to occupy the central space which defined manliness would leave the non-ruling race falling to either side of the masculine spectrum—either too masculine or too feminine. The Irish, England’s colonial subjects, were both overly masculinized and feminized by this definition. As a colonized people, the Irish were feminized through their seeming submissiveness to colonial rule. Gerardine Meaney asserts in *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics* 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.” (qtd. in Gray 87)

However, any violent attempt by the Irish to overthrow colonial rule made them appear uncivilized, overly masculine, and unable to control their animalistic passions. The British definition of masculinity, which it extended to its colonial subjects, was designed in order to prevent any sort of national or racial integration. As the assumed hegemonic race, the British were the only people capable of achieving their definition of perfect masculinity. Through this complicated gendering, the British sought to maintain control of their subject peoples. Thus, the

¹ Valente, pg. 7

gendering of empire only succeeds through antagonism. Essentially, in the eyes of the British Empire, the Irish were left with two options: fight for national sovereignty and confirm their savagery, or submit to colonialism and remain feminized. This, argues Valente, is the double bind at the root of colonial masculinity—the Irish were never meant to achieve the British ideal.

Despite the exclusivity of this type of manliness, Ireland did not abandon this oppressive gender construction in the fight for nationhood. Instead, the gender construction was internalized, and projected onto the land of Ireland, and eventually, the body of Irish women as a romantic idealization. In the post-colonial setting, Irish nationalists continued to embrace the feminine depiction of Ireland but faced increasing pressure to demonstrate their own masculinity in the face of British denigration. With Britain positing the image of a passive, inferior feminine body on the national landscape of Ireland, and the national identity of the Irish, “Irish nationalists ... took up a compensatory and exaggerated masculinity” (Stevens, Brown and Maclaran 409). This hyper-masculinity produced excessive political violence, especially in the fight for Irish nationalism. It also produced a severe gender dichotomy within the Irish interior, which manifested itself in domestic violence.

While strict gendering had been a struggle for the Irish throughout their colonial history, as the Irish were constantly depicted as either too feminine or too masculine by their colonizer, the stifling paradigm was repurposed through Irish Nationalism. Shelley Feldman asserts in her text, “Feminist Interruptions: The Silence of East Bengal in the Story of Partition”:

The hegemonic process of constructing a nationalist ideology depends upon distinguishing between self and other, us and them, in the creation of a common (shared) identity; women as symbol, men as agents of the nation, colonized space as feminine, colonial power as masculine.” (qtd. in Meaney 125).

Just like British imperialism had sought to “other” Ireland, Irish nationalism sought to “other” the British. However, continuing the binarization of national identities—British or Irish, Catholic or Protestant, man or woman, nation or colony—the nationalism movement pressured the Irish people into strict collective identities. Like colonialism, nationalism is inevitably gendered. In an attempt to create a distinctly Irish culture, a culture arguably stolen from the Irish people through colonialism and the devastation of the Irish Potato Famine, nationalism sought to unite Ireland through both religion and folk culture. But, in doing so, nationalists prolonged the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.

As Ireland pursued national sovereignty, *fin de siècle* Irish literature is marked by a decided turn to the past. Thus, Ireland’s induction into the modern era is filled with paradox. As a one-time colony, the harbingers of modernity like industrialization and capitalism had already infiltrated the island through the presence of Great Britain. However, the Irish literary revival is marked by its romanticism and invented Celtic mythology—themes anathema to modern rationality. Arguably headed by William Butler Yeats, the literature of the Celtic Revival called for Irish unification and revolution. Often militaristic, the masculine narratives prolonged the feminization of Ireland through the mythic representations of the nation as Mother Ireland, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, or Fair Erin (to name a few). The literature of the Irish revival continued to subordinate women into roles of idealistic, domestic femininity. However, such a categorical depiction of women “does not address the multiplicity and diversity of women’s relations to historical processes” (Felski 7). Instead of breaking from the strict gendering implicit to colonialism, Irish modernism recycled it and complicated it with the anti-secular sexual repression of Catholicism.

The Catholic Church assumed a powerful political and social role as the Irish nation emerged. The feminizing of the Irish land combined with Catholic ideology to posit Ireland in the shadow of the ideal, feminine religious image—the Virgin Mary. Through the mode of religion, the gendering of Ireland and Irish people invaded not only the public space, but the values of the home, as well. Meaney writes in her article, “Virgin Mother Ireland”:

The specific role of the Irish Catholic Church in this maelstrom of economic, political, social and psychological forces is rather more than one among a number of regulatory institutions. It is after all sometimes very difficult to ascertain where church began and state ended in regard to the institutionalization of individuals, public health, and education, for example. (128-129)

In the construction of the Irish nation, religion and nation were coterminous. While imperialism was a modernizing force in England, it kept Ireland immobile. However, in projecting the nation, Ireland clung to religion as national identity, and in doing so, stagnated the country’s progress. Ireland was symbolized as a female body that was paradoxically virginal and maternal, the national manifestation of the Virgin Mary. Attaching this image of feminine perfection to the symbolic representation of the nation made the idealized creation of the country unattainable. Instead, Catholicism bred excessive sexual repression and strict body politics. This left the women of Ireland needing to uphold an unattainable ideal through both marriage and motherhood.

Both the political motives and the devout Catholicism of Irish nationalists contributed to the depiction of the Irish woman and Irish land as fully passive, female entities. They also reinforced the imagined need for Ireland’s redemption through its men. Both of these discourses

heavily influenced the image of the Irish woman. Armengol discusses the inextricable link between nationalism and Catholicism in his article, writing:

Interestingly enough, the Irish mixture between these two different discourses—the religious and the political one—has usually resulted in the construction of a number of stereotypical images of women. Just as Irish nationalism, for instance, transformed Irish women into ‘living’ representations of the myth of Motherland, so Catholicism turned them into ‘living’ Madonnas. (12)

Irish women were meant to both embrace the role of motherhood and renounce the biological sexuality that produces children. They needed to aspire to Mother Mary’s virginal status and her position as a matriarch. However, sexual enjoyment was not part of her reproductive role. She was a vessel meant for the reproduction of nation. This exclusive sexual passivity on the part of women gave the Irish man a violent sexual role. Sex was duty to women and right to man. In combining the duties of procreation and virginity, Irish women were further divided. Meaney argues that “[t]he promulgation of the image of the Virgin Mary as ‘Queen of Ireland’ is on one level just another permutation of the Virgin-Whore dichotomy at the heart of Western culture’s representation of women” (130). The severe dichotomous relationship bred the same type of violation that Britain’s colonization of Ireland produced. Both within the home and in political space, women were the victims of excessive repression at the hands of their husbands, religion, nation, and colonizer.

The tension caused by this fierce gendering is evident in the real-life Nineteenth Century murder of Bridget Cleary. In her article, “Reading in a Woman’s Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland,” Angela Bourke examines the death of Bridget Cleary, an Irish woman from rural Tipperary who, after suffering from a prolonged and mysterious

illness, was burned to death by her husband, Michael, in March of 1895. Utilizing oral legend and refusing culpability, Michael argued that he had not killed his wife but a fairy changeling who had been left in her place, and that the real Bridget was being held captive in a fairy fort. Bridget's death and the folklore surrounding it were hotly debated in both Irish and British newspapers. The murder and Michael Cleary's defense, became powerful pieces of propaganda during the fight for Irish Home Rule, and were touted by the British press as "evidence of general barbarism and savagery in rural Ireland" and a clear indication of Ireland's inability to self-govern (Bourke 557). Bourke argues that both Irish and British newspapers, "in an apparent attempt to disentangle the paradoxes and reduce the anxiety of a society undergoing rapid modernization, polarized the forces at work: tradition against law; country against town; men against women," and in doing so, "subordinated" "the gender opposition which was clearly central to the woman's torture and death," to a "metaphor for the relation between colonizer and colonized" (554). While gender dichotomy is central to Bridget's death, it is not so much subordinated by imperialism as it is reproduced by it. As argued in the previous pages, all external political and national problems are contingent on gendering. Because of the dialectic nature of this gendering, violence often emerges. Bridget Cleary's death is indicative of a gender dichotomy, which being projected onto and recreated within domestic space, exemplifies the gendered clash of an archaic, hyper-religious version of Ireland, and an Ireland confronting modernity.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of Bridget Cleary's death was the fairy legend it was predicated on, and her husband's inability or unwillingness to separate the metaphor of oral legend from the literal world around him. Reports of Cleary's death disagree on who first mentioned fairies in regards to her illness. Nevertheless, Michael Cleary, and the family and

neighbors present for Bridget's torture clung to it as defense. Bourke examines the multifaceted nature of fairy legend in this case, writing: "[the family] may have been lying, or Bridget may have been using the idiom of fairy legend to assert her independence and autonomy or perhaps to protect herself from a violent and impulsive man" (563). As Bourke points out, the function of oral tradition in Ireland was much more complicated and metaphorical. In fairy legend, women and children are generally the victims—swept away and replaced by a defective doppelgänger. These stories are utilized as a way to deal with the painful, the marginal, and the transitional in rural, domestic life (Bourke 10). They functioned as metaphors for childbirth, depression, loneliness, domestic violence, and numerous other difficulties. While women often utilized fairy belief themselves, "they would have encountered its verbal sanctions and imaginative possibilities at every point of stress in their lives" (Bourke 11). Expressing that one has "gone away with the fairies," often worked to women's advantage as a way of relieving oneself from the pressures of the social role of wife and/or mother.

The need for women to rely on such metaphors, however, highlights the pressure of living in a largely bifurcated and sexually stifled society. With both the domestic and public life of Irish Catholics policed by the guidelines of the Catholic church, those topics deemed immoral or which revealed the imperfection of the Irish woman in comparison to the Mary ideal, were marginalized to an oral subculture. Margot Backus argues that the espousal of Irish women and the virgin Mary is bred from the modernization of Ireland through "the emergence of capitalism and an accompanying reformation of lay Christianity from a predominately community oriented cluster of benevolent magico-ritual beliefs into a political ideology, principally through the dissemination of a 'pedagogy of fear'" (30). Borrowing from Mary Condren, Backus maps the fall of the matrilineal line in Irish folklore after the introduction of Christianity and colonialism

(27-31). According to Condren, pre-colonial Ireland was a more maternally based society, which valued the female goddess and the divinity of childbirth. However, as the patriarchal ideology of Christianity entered the island, it stifled this maternal culture. The myths of Ireland, which once revered the female capacity for childbirth, underwent a “symbolic transference of the creative capacities of childbirth from the bodies of women and a feminine godhead to the bodies of men, whose fundamental act of creative generativity would henceforward be enacted in battle” (Bourke 28). In likening the act of nation building to the act of birthing a child, the female position and its maternal is subordinated to a political one—one romanticized as mother of Ireland.

While the reimagined Irish folk culture of the Nineteenth Century supported the depiction of Ireland as mythologically feminine and idealized, it was decidedly separate from those middle-class values attached to mainstream Catholicism. Although Catholic values sexually repressed Ireland, and dictated a majority of the social systems in the country, it valued the modern press over oral culture. Angela Bourke argues:

In the years following the famine, the propertied middle class accumulated land and commercial assets and dictated a repressive social morality based on a newly centralized, authoritarian, and misogynistic Catholicism, which worked hand in hand with the institutions of the state. [...] The values of the middle class were those of literacy, rather than orality” (557).

The marginalization of oral culture was enforced not only by the class system, but by the religious system in Ireland. Oral culture became a mark of a low-class, archaic version of Ireland so, following Bridget Cleary’s murder, local papers attempted to distance themselves from this folk culture. To the British press, the utilization of oral legend appeared to be an

invocation of a version of Ireland, romantic and emotional, and a clear symptom of irrational, illogical Irishness. The Irish press expressed a more conflicted interpretation, but nevertheless favored middle-class rationality. When reporting on Bridget's death, a Catholic nationalist newspaper, *The Nationalist and Tipperary Advertiser*, both acknowledges the romantic idealization of Irish mythology (the "fairy romances of ancient times in Erin") and distances itself from the "fairy quackery" charged with the death (Bourke 556). This article perfectly demonstrates the clashing values rampant in Irish society—the impulse to revere mythological Irish culture, while appealing to modern rationality.

Surprisingly, although he was the most violent in the expression of fairy belief, Michael Cleary was the least familiar with fairy legend of those family and neighbors present for Bridget's death. His actions indicate the tension he faced being an outsider within his own home, and the pressure he felt to express his masculinity. Bridget's invocation of fairy legend threatened the balance of Michael's masculinity. He both needed to prove himself as a logical, rational Irish man, while valuing the more archaic, folk culture of Ireland. This, however, proved impossible. Michael Cleary murdered his wife. This act of domestic violence signified the moment when black and white binaries ended. Michael Cleary could no longer clearly define his place in the home or in the Irish national landscape.

It was at the moment of Bridget's death when the dialectical binaries of gender, nation, and imperialism converged, and transitioned to internal space—manifested in the home. Whether Bridget was utilizing oral legend to protect herself from an abusive husband, or to allude to taboo topics like depression, Michael Cleary's violence is an indication of the clash of Enlightenment era reason with Romantic oral tradition. While Bridget Cleary's death is fundamentally an issue of gender dichotomy, her husband's actions suggest to Ireland that the

clinging to mythology as an expression of Irish Nationalism is incompatible with a modern landscape.

If, as Rita Felski argues in *The Gender of Modernity*, the narratives of modernity are inevitably gendered, then Irish modernism is undoubtedly masculine. Ireland's compensatory, and often-exaggerated masculinity is bred from its colonial encounter and its arduous reemergence as a sovereign nation. Throughout Ireland's complex and often-tumultuous history, colonialism, nationalism, and Catholicism have all subordinated the feminine to a mere object of historical narrative. Irish women are left without voices in the creation of the nation and the literature of the nation. However, the recent poetry of Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland argue that a country whose only narrative is a militaristic, anglo-masculine narrative can never be whole. Instead, these authors challenge the conception of Irish masculinity and reclaim the feminine in Irish literary history and national culture.

Confronting Dangerous Hyper-Masculinity in Seamus Heaney's "Oysters"

The tension created by Valente's myth of manliness collapses in Seamus Heaney's poem "Oysters." In the poem, the narrator describes indulging in the consumption of oysters with a friend, and reflecting on the same ancient indulgence of the great imperial power—Rome. Amidst his consumption, the narrator is haunted by a sense of guilt and unease. He is unable to balance his overly masculine brutishness with the self-containment necessary to achieve perfect British masculinity. The oysters, representative of the feminine body of Ireland and the forced passivity of Irish women, and the consumers, symbolic of masculine, political and sexual greed, serve important metaphorical roles within the context of Irish political and national discourse. Through this poem, Heaney criticizes the hyper-masculine political powers in Ireland including

imperialism and nationalism, and the carnal greed that has produced violence, both interiorly and exteriorly, throughout the island's cyclical history.

Heaney's poem both acknowledges the conception of the feminine Ireland and analyzes the masculine reaction to this enduring concept. Oysters are the primary representation of the feminine in Heaney's poem. The oyster is a clear symbol of the woman not only because of its physical similarities to female genitalia, but also because of its ability to create a pearl within its shell. Its internal production mirrors the womb's production of a child. As the narrator and his consort consume the oysters in the poem, Heaney writes:

Alive and violated

They lay on their beds of ice:

Bivalves: the split bulb

And philandering sigh of ocean.

Millions of them ripped and shucked and scattered. (6-10)

In this section, Heaney imagines compulsory heterosexuality as a violent act. This image of "millions" of "violated" oysters, consumed while alive is suggestive of a mass rape or genocide. Both men—out of excessive erotic greed and their romantic imagining of Irish women and the Irish land as passive vessels meant for male consumption—have halted reproduction. The oysters are left violated, devoured, "ripped and shucked and scattered." Considering the oyster as being symbolic of a vagina, the men in the poem have violently copulated with multiple women, but have not consummated any meaningful relationship. The use of the word "philandering" emphasizes the casual sexuality of the narrator's oyster intake and its adulterous implications. While their relationships with women are hetero-normative, the excessive objectification of women is unnatural.

The allusion to the empire of Ancient Rome in the poem parallels Ireland's history with another colonizing power and external empire—Great Britain. The Roman Empire, which predates the British Empire by hundreds of years, colonized territories in modern Europe, Asia, and Africa. While the empire was successful for many years, some argue that the fall of the Roman Empire resulted from their excessive greed for territory and goods. In this poem, Heaney is paralleling the ancient greed of the Romans with the modern greed of the British colonial mission. However, what is most interesting is that the narrator is not a victim of the empire, but a replication of it. Heaney writes:

Over the Alps, packed deep in hay and snow,
 The Romans hauled their oysters south to Rome:
 I saw panniers disgorge
 The frond-lipped, brine stung
 Glut of privilege (20-25)

The narrator, a representation of an Irish nationalist, complicates his consumption through conflicting sentiments. While the British and colonizing empire should be the obvious enemy, the narrator is partaking in the same gluttonous enjoyment of empire as they are. He is identifying with his suppressors and realizing the lust for domination and destruction that is innate in all men. This realization reflects the hybridity of post-colonial Irish culture with its influences grounded in both mythic, native nationalism and long-standing external imperialism. The narrator both enjoys the “glut of privilege,” but identifies with the victims of the consumption—the oysters or the feminine. He is both Irish and British—feminine and masculine. He is disgusted with the imperial gluttonous mentality and uses violent words like “disgorge” and “stung” when he realizes his replication of it. In identifying with empire, the

narrator questions his own actions and his own socially constructed identity and is moved to anger. Heaney asserts that the balancing act required of British masculinity is not possible. Instead, it produces a sort of internal antagonism and violence that stunts national progress.

Despite Heaney's disillusionment with violent masculinity, he depicts this violence as something cyclical and enduring because of its routes in political and cultural discourse of the country. The narrator is partaking in the same gluttony as the Romans, and in this, realizes that his replication is violating his allegiance to a feminine, victimized Ireland. Justin Quinn writes in his article "Heaney and Eastern Europe":

He indulges in the pleasure knowingly and deliberately in the hope that the taste, as he says (in borrowing from Richard Wilbur), 'Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb'...Heaney's indulgence in imperial privilege makes him...more complicit with imperial power...Heaney conflates two voices: first, that of a male in sexual congress, and second, that of a colonizing monarch...(100)

In his consumption of the oysters, the narrator is assuming the role of his supposed enemy. However, he realizes his ability to identify with the colonizing power. One cannot both love and destroy something. As an Irishman, the narrator's guilt in consumption comes from a deviance from socially constructed norms. Both religious and political discourse propagated an exaggerated female passivity and reinforced an inflated, violent masculinity, but these exaggerated roles are not compatible. Heaney is criticizing the cultural forces of colonization and religion that formed the violent masculinity and sexuality of the narrator.

When analyzing the poem within a domestic realm, the savage, indulgent consumption of oysters is symbolic of the Irish men objectifying the women of the country. The narrator and his friend are eating the oysters out of indulgent self-gratification, and luxury. The oysters

experience no such pleasure; they are passive victims of rampant masculinity and violent rape. While oysters have the potential to nourish their consumers and produce beautiful pearls, in this case, they are eaten out of sheer gluttony and their ability to produce is stopped. Just as women have the potential to nourish the national identity of Ireland, but are suppressed and contained within their domestic roles. Heaney criticizes this domestic violence. Each man eats more than necessary and leaves the remnants of his destruction scattered about. The men are, essentially, destroying the female and the family. What are left are violated, non-reproductive females.

On a national scale, the poem is symbolic of the masculine powers of both Britain and Irish nationalists violating the body of Ireland. Both interior and exterior conceptions imagine the post-colonial depiction of Ireland in a similar way, “as a bodiless woman whose sexual experiences are never active, but always passively humiliating” (Armengol 10). Like the oysters left violated on the plates, the women of Ireland and the Irish land are passive victims of masculine greed. Paramilitary groups such as the Irish Republican Army and the Orange Order are the perpetrators of the senseless violence against the identity of Ireland. The violence of nationalism and colonialism produce similar outcomes—dead inhabitants and ruined land. The oysters, and “Mother Ireland,” are destroyed and all that is left is a violated empty shell.

While it is easy to vilify the British colonial powers in the colonial Irish landscape, the new Free State’s violence and traditional conceptions of Irish identity and gender roles were largely produced through the actions of domestic forces. Considering Heaney’s poem as a critique of the decidedly outmoded movement from colonial Ireland to the modern, Republic of Ireland is tantamount. Although the country is bifurcated because of the conception of Northern Ireland, the new, free Ireland is still perpetuating antiquated gender roles and barbaric violence.

In other Heaney poems, like “Bog Queen” and “Punishment,” the poet often reveals how old forms of violence are still prevalent in Ireland.

Considered within the context of Northern Ireland, the men in the poem represent the conflicting political, religious and cultural powers in the province. Northern Ireland is an especially hybridized country. On one side of the Northern Irish identity are the Irish-Catholic Nationalists who yearn to unite Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. These Irish nationalists take their most violent shape in the form of the Irish Republican Army. On the other side are the British-Protestant Unionists who want Northern Ireland to stay under the dominion of Great Britain, again, taking on an especially violent nature in the formation of the Orange Order—a protestant paramilitary group. While it is tempting to view this dichotomy as clearly opposed, the British and Irish of Northern Ireland have a dialectical relationship. No side can claim pure British or Irish nationality because of their situation in the middle of the opposition. They are hybridized figures fighting for a national identity, as well as a personal, non-feminized identity. In “Oysters,” the narrator and his companion consume the oysters separately, but are united in the disposal of the violated shells. Heaney writes:

Our shells clacked on the plates.
 [...]
 And there we were, toasting friendship,
 Laying down a perfect memory
 In the cool of thatch and crockery. (1, 13-15)

The opposing forces of Northern Ireland, the violent IRA and Orange Order, perform separate violence for opposing motives but are united in their mutual destruction of Ireland. While viewing one another as bitter enemies, the groups form a strange companionship because

of their mutual indulgence in “thatch and crockery” or unruly, nonsensical violence. They are not so different because of their mutual transgressions against the feminine body of Ireland.

On one hand, the narrator identifies with the consumption in romantic terms. He relates the language of mythical romanticism and satisfaction with his mention of the Pleiades and Orion. He imagines his palate as a salty estuary. But, his use of violent, cacophonous words like “shucked,” and “crockery” voices his own awareness of the violence in his actions. These dual, conflicting attitudes are representative of the hybrid, and often contradictory identity of many people living in Northern Ireland. Although the Irish nationalists’ goal is to remove Ireland from the dominion of Britain, the long history of colonialism in the country have influenced the Irish people. While poets during the Celtic Revival sought to revert to a romantic, mythical Ireland, in the modern landscape, such a reversion is impractical. The narrator straddles the middle of the binary opposition between colonization and nationalism. He is a product of both ideologies.

The narrator considers how he can transcend the cyclical masculinity of empire and nationalism when Heaney writes in lines 21-25:

And was angry that my trust could not repose
 In the clear light, like poetry or freedom
 Leaning in from sea. I ate the day
 Deliberately, that its tang
 Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb

The narrator’s call for “verb, pure verb” is a plea to the literary community to re-write and re-evaluate the depiction of gendered Ireland in national art. Like Yeats during the Irish Revival, Heaney is seeking to redefine Irish identity. However, his look to the past does not produce the same romantic images as the Celtic Revival. Instead, Heaney focuses on the recurrent evil of the

past and the forces that cause the repetition. He especially focuses on how those violent cycles are replicated in nature. In the new political and cultural climate surrounding Northern Ireland and its uncertain future, Heaney's poetry writes a different identity than the Irish revivalists. His identity is focused on both Irish history, but Irish hybridity as well. There is no one Irish identity and clear-cut Irish gender roles produce more harm than good. Most importantly, however, is the need to stop political violence.

Cyclical masculine destruction and sexualization of Ireland will eventually destroy both the land and the familial dynamic. Extreme feminization creates a victim mentality and extreme masculinization breeds destructive violence. The social, political, and religious structures in Ireland prolong exaggerated gender roles. However, Heaney's narrator's mixed feelings about his gender role highlights a need for gender hybridity or gender balance. Instead of identifying entirely with the oysters or with the gluttonous consumer, the narrator is "moved to verb"—both action and literature. While Northern Irish political identity is still disputed, Heaney argues that Irish nationalists' traditional, outdated modes of moving into the next era are stalling progress. To Heaney, it is important to both preserve unique Irish history while embracing new gender and political attitudes. Without more balanced gender roles, the progress of the country will continue to stall. As a poet, Heaney feels that rather than partaking in direct political discourse, it is the duty of the artistic culture in Ireland to re-write Irish national identity.

Reimagining the Mythic Female in Eavan Boland's "How it Once Was In Our Country"

The literature that came out of post-colonial Ireland is largely masculine—written by male authors who sought to uphold the traditional gender construction of active male and passive, romanticized female. Often these works use women and the bodies of women as

aesthetic objects meant to revive and reinvent Irishness. The feminization of the Irish land persisted throughout Irish literary culture in the forms of Fair Erin, Mother Ireland, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, and the Virgin Mary (to name a few). Through both the construction of historical mythology, and the veneration of childbirth by the Catholic Church, femininity became synonymous with the domestic and nation building. The aesthetic depiction of Irish women held them to a perfected and unattainable standard. It also distanced them from the role of artistic creator; instead, females were the objects of artistic expression. Emer Nolan argues in her article “Modernism and the Irish revival” that “the institutionalisation of the great male modernists in itself, regardless of the politics of their literary practice, served to inhibit later writers, and especially, women” (169). Recent female poets like Eavan Boland have used poetry to rewrite, subvert, and redefine Irish gender construction. In her poem, “How It Once Was In Our Country” from the collection *Domestic Violence*, Boland confronts the mythological representations of women in a domestic space, reimagining the role of women in the construction of nation as active witnesses and victims of a hyper-masculine political ideology.

The voices of female authors during the postcolonial literary canon formation in Ireland are decidedly missing. When considering the romantic poetry coming out of the Celtic Revival, it is useful to consider the relationship between the subject narrator and his object. Often, these poems boast a male subject whose revolutionary spirit seeks to unite his worthy cause with the resistant, mythological feminine object. However, quoting David Lloyd’s critique of *The Spirit of the Nation* in his *Nationalism and Minor Literature* (1987), Guinn Batten writes:

Lloyd concludes that Irish cultural nationalism was misled by the Enlightenment dream of an ‘archetypal or representative man’ (the gender is deliberate) who could at once represent the nature and the ‘total essence of the human’ (16-17).

Yet if Lloyd is correct-that the drive toward canon formation misshaped a masculinist and nationalist mission in the cracked looking glass of its Enlightenment and English romantic models - then we can well imagine how that mistaken purpose has affected the writings of women who were doubly estranged, through gender bias as well as through postcolonial disempowerment. (171)

Women were absent from the national formation of literature except for in the forms of the imaginary and idealistic. Instead of being represented by the “archetypal or representative man,” women were forced into the interior or the home. This meant that a masculine perspective largely drove the formation of postcolonial Ireland. Boland recognizes the disempowered nature of women in this construction of national literature and in her work *Object Lessons* “concludes that ‘given the force of the national tradition and the claim it made on Irish literature’, only a ‘subversive private experience’ could now offer to the political poem ‘true perspective and authority’” (qtd in Batten 172). Thus, Boland’s poems often focus on the role of women in the home and how their trapped experience in the domestic mirrors the outward political struggles of Ireland. Boland then reclaims the role of women as writers and undermines the mythological and objectified representations of the feminine throughout the Celtic Revival.

Just as the symbolic representations of Erin, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, and the Virgin Mary thrived in the national creation of Ireland, so does Boland’s mermaid in the stifling, deep boundaries of the ocean blue plate described in “How It Once Was In Our Country.” Boland’s poem begins with the speaker contemplating a decorative blue plate whose edges demarcate the boundaries of home, and by extension, domestic national borders. However, these boundaries are imagined as an ocean and are related to a drowning, suffocating space. Boland writes:

In those years I owned a blue plate,

blue from the very edges to the center,
 ocean-blue, the sort of under-wave blue
 a mermaid could easily dive down into and enter. (lines 1-4)

The speaker examines the plate in a nostalgic way. The colloquial use of “those” is allusive and abstract. The reference to this non-specific time highlights temporality, and the ambiguity and malleability of history. Rather than recalling “those years” exactly, the speaker’s focus is on a blue plate—an artifact, and all that is seemingly left of this period. In examining the plate, the speaker moves from the outside to the center, creating restrictive boundaries. The blueness of the plate is likened to the ocean, but rather than being compared to the beauty of the ocean, the plate appears to the speaker as an “under-wave” blue. This under-wave color elicits a sense of a dark and imprisoning atmosphere. The mythological thrives in this space, and Boland writes, “a mermaid could easily dive down into and enter” (4); however, the speaker cannot. This section particularly recalls the mythological representations of femininity in Ireland, and how those representations are inaccessible to the average woman. The plate serves as a sort of interior within the domestic interior; we can think of the plate in numerous ways—as an island, a piece of land, a home, and finally an object within the home. The reader is then pulled into the most interior space within the home. However, the under-wave colors, or the depths depicted by the narrator’s plate are unreachable to her. She instead imagines a mermaid, an idealistic depiction of femininity, diving into the deepest part of the plate with the farthest boundaries seemingly moving inward to follow her. In this section, Boland argues that mythological representations of femininity do not function practically within the home. Instead, they serve as an aesthetic and obscure ideal for Irish women.

The plate described by the speaker is not used for consumption, as most plates are, and is instead presented as a sort of mirror. As the speaker continues to examine the plate, Boland's line enjambment depicts the object both as reflective and geographical. Boland writes in the second stanza:

When I looked at the plate I saw the mouth
of a harbor, an afternoon without a breath
of air, the evening clear all the way to Howth
and back, the sky a paler blue farther to the south. (lines 5-8)

In the first line, the plate appears to be both an aesthetic and reflective object. Considering this line alone, when looking at the plate, the speaker sees "the mouth." The plate then, is at eye level with the speaker and is most likely viewed as a mounted, visual decoration. The plate in this sense becomes a sort of preserver of fable—the speaker is not using the plate in a functional way. She is instead using it as a reflective surface where her own forced silence is projected outward as the image of her mouth. The narrator examines herself as an aesthetic object using the plate as a medium for this analysis. In this section, Boland argues that rather than producing a complete, gender-inclusive narrative that would expand the narrator and the nation's voice, the literature of the Irish Revival instead forced women inwards—into the most silencing spaces of the home.

In line 6, the narrator imagines the plate divided into two distinct regions--north and south. This mirrors Ireland's division into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The reflection of the speaker's mouth becomes the mouth of a harbor, "an afternoon without a breath" (line 6). Again, in imagining breathlessness, the poem creates a stifling and oppressive tone. While someone at the mouth of a harbor should be looking outward to expansiveness, the

speaker instead looks to the sky and moves her attention from the north of Ireland, Howth, to the south of Ireland and back. These implicit borders won't allow the speaker to imagine the boundaries outside of the plate. The creation of these borders continually traps the speaker in an oppressive, domestic setting. As she stands breathlessly, she is again subjected to a type of forced silence. She is only able to look at the harbor, or the prospect of the world outside of the domestic, but cannot join this aspect of society.

In the third stanza, the speaker considers the type of woman and country that can survive in the silencing blueness of the plate. Boland writes:

Consider the kind of body that enters blueness,
made out of dead-end myth and mischievous
whispers of an old, borderless
existence where the body's meaning is both more and less. (lines 9-12)

In the poem, the body that enters the blueness is the mermaid—a bifurcated woman and a mythological creation. This mermaid enters the blueness, diving deep down away from the borders of the plate, and does not procreate. However, the speaker does not point this out. She is more because of her ability to thrive underwater and less because of her inability to reproduce. Boland's use of the word body can and does refer to numerous bodies within the Irish context—the body of literature from the Irish revival, the body of women, and the split body of the Irish land—all of which can be likened to the divided body of the mermaid. The Irish Revival is more because of its supernatural considerations, but less because it silences the voices of women. It only gives one side of the narration needed to complete Irish identity. The imagined conception of a united Ireland is a “dead-end myth,” as its applications to real women are impossible. The speaker writes, “whispers of an old, borderless/ existence where the body's

meaning is both more and less” (lines 11-12). However, the speaker clearly does not believe that a non-divided existence is possible for Ireland. While the body of the country may mean more if united, there is a forced hybridity implicit to the island. Similarly, while the Virgin Mary or other idealic, feminine Irish representations might be attractive, they are not real and cannot add to the country. Boland is arguing that the union of Ireland, and the uniting of the Irish women with their fabled ideals is not possible or natural.

Boland defends the Irish woman, who, trapped within the home, witnessed both the disruption of the family and the nation in pursuit of imagined unity. In the final stanza of Boland’s poem, the inability of Ireland and Northern Ireland to unite, as well as the inability of women to live up to their idealistic counterparts is likened to a demonic and predatory female sexuality. This closely relates to the literature coming out of the Irish Revival, which often portrayed the feminine body of the nation as obstinate and out of sync with its superior male ethos. For instance, in W.B. Yeats’ poem, “To a Man Young and Old,” Yeats writes in part III:

A mermaid found a swimming lad,
 Picked him for her own,
 Pressed her body to his body,
 Laughed; and plunging down
 Forgot in cruel happiness
 That even lovers drown.

Here the female subject attracts her male victim and ultimately kills him with her insensibility. She is out of sync with the “swimming lad” and in choosing him subjects him to a “cruel happiness.” To Yeats, men are the victims of the unruly ideal. Ultimately, the mermaid cannot

win; in uniting with her male counterpart, she kills him. Here the masculine is victimized and the feminine is likened to the passionate and foolish.

However, the speaker in Boland's poem sympathizes with the mermaid who stays within the depths to avoid the trauma at the surface. Boland acknowledges the hyper-sexualized mermaid as portrayed in Yeats' poem, but considers the flaws inherent to forced unity of the ideal with the actual. In the final stanza, Boland writes:

Sea trawler, land siren: succubus to all the dreams

land has of ocean, of its old home.

She must have witnessed deaths. Of course she did.

Some say she stayed down there to escape the screams. (lines 12-15)

The residents of both land and sea are accused of ending the dream of unity. Both perform the same act separately—bating people into the ideal conception, but in turn causing their deaths.

Unlike the romantic feminine depictions of Ireland calling her sons to fight for the union of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the mermaid is trapped within the depths of confinement witnessing the violence of a misremembered unification. All the while, the narrator is a woman within her home considering the violence inherent to attaching this ideal to the Irish woman. She is left silent and is only a witness to the conflict between the actual and the imagined.

Boland criticizes the canonical body of Irish Literature that developed during the post-colonial period. While the authors took on a revolutionary tone and likened the entirety of Ireland to the dutiful man defending Fair Erin's honor, they were instead further dividing the island. Batten argues:

What keeps the wished for unity always at one step removed is precisely the expansion of what is perceived to be a unified, individual subjectivity at the

expense of a community that is thereby only further removed from, and further sutured by, the rise of the newly postcolonial subject. (171).

In removing the authentic female narrative from national discourse, the country is continually dividing itself by othering the feminine. With the mythological ideal occupying the entire domestic space outside of the home, Irish women were forced into the home to grapple with their inability to offer their voices. Using her poetry as a subversive tool, Boland argues that a country that divides itself by gender will never unite. She fights for the all-inclusive, domestic, and authentic narrative to Irish subjectivity that is innately hybridized.

Conclusion: Gender Unification

What is most evident in both Heaney and Boland's poetry is the need for less-stringent gender prescriptions in Ireland. As Heaney's narrator struggles with the militaristic hyper-masculinity necessary to reclaiming the feminine Irish body, Boland's narrator grapples with the same masculinity silencing the voices of women. While attempting to remove itself from its colonial attachments, Ireland instead continually divides itself by clinging to an imagined, unified subjectivity and an anti-secular definition of Irishness. If, as Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, the concept of the nation is inwardly imagined and projected by its occupants, then the projection of the nation needs to be more inclusive and hybridized. Rather than trying to unite the nation through an imagined collective subjectivity, Ireland instead needs to address the innate hybridity of Irishness.

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