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Tussles Over Gendered Spaces and Assertions of Female Presence in Anne Le Marquand Hartigan's Play *The Secret Game*

By Catherine Barron¹

Abstract

This paper is an extract from the PhD thesis entitled "Self-Imaging /Self-Imagining in the Woman's Writing (and Painting) of Anne Le Marquand Hartigan", submitted to University College, Dublin in 2004. The essay discusses Hartigan's unpublished play, *The Secret Game* (written in Ireland, circa 1995). In particular, it examines the power-struggling taking place between the sexes in the play over different life spaces, including public / political space, the space of language and the space of the female body. The essay examines how, in order to challenge the spatial disinheritance of women, Hartigan makes use of different strategies to stage statements of female resistance.

Keywords: power struggle, gendered space, Northern Ireland

This essay begins from the premise that, even within the very limited life spaces to which woman has been relegated by patriarchal societies; she has been invaded and controlled. Even the space of her womb has been frequently squabbled over for its property rights. The question then is not only about woman within space but also about woman-as-space. It will not come as much of a surprise then that in poetic expression by women, spatial treatments constitute visible scars which attest to women's ill ease in many life spaces. Attitudes of intimidation and of acceptance or rejection of social exclusion are represented in poetry by women through representations of self-effacement (Moore, 1992; Byron, 1993; Wright 1998; Bradstreet, 1980), of withdrawal into domestic space as a safe harbor but also as a place of incarceration (Rich 1984, Sexton 1981, Jennings, 1979; Gilman 1973; Stone, 1992) and/or through the deliberate abstraction and derisive dismantling of represented public and political spaces (Sitwell 1993; Levertov 1992; Hartigan 1993; Wakoski 1996; Clifton 1987, Dobson 1963).

Spatial treatments in the works of the poet/painter/playwright Anne Le Marquand Hartigan are noteworthy insofar as they often offer departures from the above general tendencies.² In *The Secret Game*, although the political issue of gendered space is part and parcel of the thematic structure, Hartigan does not content herself with a mere forwarding of symbolic illustrations of how woman has been disinherited from various public and private spaces. Instead, she finds alternative ways to state female presence and does so using the very public spaces of theater and language. Nor does Hartigan generally designate the spaces, which the female has traditionally occupied as being places of inferiority or dishonor, but presents them, rather as exemplary spaces of strength, life-sustaining activities, non-belligerence and psychological maturity. Hartigan shows the spaces that woman occupies to be enviable sites (physically, psychologically and socially). Conversely, she often refers to man-made public spaces as undesirable,

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² See Endnote for a brief discussion of Hartigan and her work.

unguided, in need of salvation and counterbalancing, namely with a female principle, in order to inject sanity and healthy priorities into it and bring about a female reining to the male horse-gone-wild. The treatment of space, then, is crucial insofar as it becomes a means of making political statements. In this play, the female refuses to relinquish (anymore) space, and this is expressed multiply: through theme, staging, imagery and language.

As one of her strategies for combating women's spatial disinheritance, Hartigan systematically gives hearing to the female side of a story. The surface-level storyline of *The Secret Game* is slyly mainstream and revolves around the primarily male-engendered games of hostage taking and violence in the name of politics. Coming up through the cracks of that storyline, however, is an ineradicable female presence constituting a form of resistance. As the first scene of the play opens, the female character of Chris has been to the north of Ireland where she crossed over to England. On her way back to the south, she stops at her aunt's farm. While she is attempting to park the car, she is taken hostage by Noel, a gunman (a participant in the Belfast game of endless reprisals) who has taken refuge for the night in the barn. The setting within the barn, with little variation, remains the same throughout the whole of the two-act play; and right from the initial setting of the scene, spatial tussles between the sexes are at the fore. The legal owner of the barn where the gunman has taken refuge is the hostage's aunt. Technically then, the aunt is in a position of authority as regards this space. The gunman, who has trespassed, behaves, however, as though it were he who was in a position of authority, simply by rights of his being male, and that men's needs took what amounts to a natural precedence over any rights of the female.

One way that female presence imposes itself and female life experience is brought to the fore in the play is *via* the character of the hostage's aunt and her unusual theatrical staging. The aunt (who naturalistically is understood to be in the adjacent farmhouse) is superimposed upon the barn scene, wherein she is *present* throughout the whole of the play, encapsulated within a circle of light. In this case, the circle (which I argue elsewhere to be emblematic of woman in Hartigan's work), very significantly, literally contains woman. These are the initial stage directions relevant to the aunt.

The stage is dark. Misty. A circle of light is up on the Aunt. Her place is front left of the stage. The aunt is onstage for the whole play. We half see, we see. It is vague, as in her dream, as down a phone, as through a gauze. She is complete . . . She is in the whole of herself. She is in her own pool of light as in an old photograph (Hartigan, n.d., 1.1.5).

The aunt, then, (and a slice of the life-environment she has created) is on stage at all times. Presumably, she is functioning as a female point of reference and as a symbolic female overseer to this course of events (even though, naturalistically speaking, she is unable to see the other characters and their actions). She is the private encrusted within the core of these scenes of public significance. Here, there is no doubt of a staging of the feminist *private versus public* arguments. In addition, the aunt and her lifestyle (characterized by nurturance and nonviolence), provides a point of contrast to the scene, and the space of sanity she represents does much to make strange the male-driven events

both within the barn and in societies-at-large, making them stand out as clearly male instead of vaguely “human”.

Interestingly, one of the spaces in which woman proves unable to stand her ground in the play is within the space of common language. It quickly becomes obvious that language is a public space and, as such, grants women only meager rights within it. It is certainly worth noting the number of times in the play that the female character is told to “shut up” and the number of times that the stage directions for her indicate “SILENCE”. By this, Hartigan represents the male chasing the female out of the space of language, in illustration of how her rights are automatically superceded by him in his presumptions of superior natural rights.

NOEL. SINGS. Sweetheart, Sweetheart, Sweetheart, . . . you’re not going anywhere tonight unless I say so. You just keep quiet darling, and no harm will come to you . . . Just be a good girl. PAUSE . . . NOEL PULLS A GUN, PUTS IT IN CHRIS’S BACK . . . Shut up . . . Don’t open your mouth. Feel this in your back darling. It’s the real thing . . . You just shut up . . . I can make you shut up I can do what I like with you. SILENCE. Man to woman. HE MOVES AND IS STANDING OVER HER. I can, can’t I? I can take you any way I want . . . This gun speaks a pure language. (Hartigan, n.d., 1.6.11-13)

Specifically, woman is shown to be constantly played out at the symbolic level in language through her belittling, her constant (re-) positioning into gendered subordination, and her silencing. The gun, by its form, is not only a brandished penis but also the capital I—suggesting that man in his normative linguistic acts is constantly assuming the stance of a domineering I to a subordinate (female) you and establishing an aggressor/victim relationship. In keeping with his dominant position in language, the gunman stands (as the stage directions indicate, lording pronoun “I”-like) over her, and his language is shown to be loaded (like the gun he naturalistically holds) with not-so-veiled references to a sexual submissiveness that he and society expect of the female.

It might be added that male-to-female verbal bullying is so familiar to everyone’s ears that it almost goes unnoticed here, simply because it is the register of language which most normatively matches the mainstream storyline, and the realization of this high-tolerance to gender-bullying in language, should make the point of how easy it is for what is normative to be mistaken for what is natural and, thus, be overlooked.

During portions of dialogue when such verbal bullying occurs, there is what may be interpreted as a form of protest, or a warning light, or an indicator of violation. Scenically, the circle of light containing the aunt on stage is illuminated with more intensity, and *her* words, which in contrast to the gunman’s, express life-sustaining priorities (gardening, caring for family members, cooking for health and cure), actually break the surface and become audible. By the effect of contrast, the aunt’s words throw into a negative light and make obvious the gunman’s traits of belligerence and presumptuousness. Throughout the play, speech acts by the character of the aunt continue to break into (and thus to violate? to rape?) the unfolding male-driven scenes. Hers is a contrasting and contesting female point of view (occurring independently to the dialogue taking place within the naturalistic setting of the barn), and it continues to make

itself heard, in an almost haphazard fashion, and does so despite all of the gunman's symbolic ploys to silence and repress the female character of the hostage.

It is also worth mentioning that the gunman and the aunt function in the play as symbolic opposites, and the link between them is constantly being re-established in a movement akin to the swinging of a clock pendulum (this too is of significance). The aunt listens to a recording: the gunman hums the same melody. He telephones: she telephones. And the connection between the two of them somehow causes a surreal contamination (in an inversion of the usual direction of spatial take-over) and a seeping into the male's "within" by the female.

Among the issues voiced by the aunt on stage, there is the protest at women having too much demanded of them in the child-rearing contract (expressing how her niece Chris's time is occupied) and that if men shared child-rearing and life-sustaining responsibilities fairly, they wouldn't have time and might lose some of their inclination to play at destructive games. The point is that, because of this so-called arrangement, women have their hands tied figuratively (just as the character of the niece, literally, has her hands tied by the gunman) and, consequently, women have been seldom able to be involved in political problem-solving where they are in fact so badly needed to counterbalance the rampant male ideology.

One of the very successful messages of the play is that female presence may be a form of passive albeit effective political action. In the play, the female body itself becomes an adamant, unwavering form of resistance, taking up space and demanding attention, and it does so, for one, by refusing to hide its functions (and the unmaleness of those functions). Menstrual blood, for instance, (usually scrupulously absent from the dominant ideology's spaces of representation) here is given space and visibility. Menstrual blood becomes a presence in both theatrical, visual space as well as in the space of language, by not only being shown but by also being the subject of dialogue. As a trace, as a meaningful sign of female life-experience, the blood spreads, spatially taking up room in the scene as well as taking up narrative time, imbibing the clothes of the actress and the white of the page, catching the light and demanding audience (including male) attention. The presence of menstrual blood is calculatedly subversive, and this stock-character of the gunman is troubled by it. He, by re-enacting a game of cowboys and Indians in adulthood, is symbolically moving in the direction of a bloodletting of a life-depriving nature antithetical to the life-giving significance of menstrual blood. This show of female blood, in the midst of what (on the surface) appears to be a normative androcentric scenario, derails and subverts: it confiscates and spatially invades the scene. Menstrual blood functions as both female speech and as a female weapon, directly countering the symbolics of the male gun. Menstrual blood, then, enacts a spatial take-over; moreover, it does so involuntarily - that is to say, not participating in any power struggle on man-made terms. It is the female body listening to no-one and carrying out its purpose and making room for itself, blindly (just as the icon of Justice is blind, just as the aunt is in a sense blind to what is taking place within a scene wherein she is present). It is the body stepping beyond the submissive behavior that woman has culturally integrated, and it is comparable to a speech act.

NOEL (Noel stands beside Chris looking down) Blood.

CHRIS Blood. Yes. It happens to us. It's part of us.

NOEL Do something about it . . . Bloody woman . . . Clean yourself. It's . . . disgusting
CHRIS You should be able for blood³. You're steeped in it . . . My blood is good. (Hartigan, n.d., 1.10.15).

The confrontation between female reproductive blood and the blood of male ritualized violence brings to the fore another *secret game*—that of Belfast's being not only a stage of male power-struggling, but also a turnpike in the abortion route. In Ireland's *secret game* of abortion, women have had to go north to Belfast, as though visiting, then over to London for an abortion. This, by extension, politically highlights the very odd state of affairs whereby the male-made sport of blood-letting in the name of the Northern Ireland political game could take place nearly freely, out in the open, in the light of day, in the public eye, tolerated in practice even if in theory condemned; whereas, a woman's taking responsibility for her reproductive powers has had to keep out of public sight and out of the public arena of speech. The male activity is illegal in theory but tolerated in practice and excused with all manner of verbal rigmarole; whereas abortion (as woman's management of the reproductive space of her own body) is illegal in theory, untolerated in practice, and granted little hearing in common speech. Men who play at games of social killing are seen as disruptive albeit normal men; whereas women (and doctors) who bring about abortions, are considered criminals and murderers.

NOEL What were you doing in England? . . . I know why you went . . . you went there to commit an evil deed . . . You've got rid of a child . . . a helpless innocent. I hate the likes of you. A murdering woman is an abomination . . . You're a slut, that's what you are . . . Women like you destroy the honour of the world . . . Cunt. (Hartigan, n.d., 1.11. 20-21)

Another of the secret games Hartigan challenges is the way rituals of violence continue to be normalized generation after generation through childhood games. There is a flashback to a childhood game in which the hostage regularly took part. It is ritualized social play encapsulated within the play, showing the mechanics in-the-making of present-day situations of violence, as well as how the terms of gendered spatial take-over are initially established. In this scene, there is a dream-like return to childhood. The female character of the hostage Chris as a child is given (by her male playmates) the task of keeping watch in front of the barn - a pretext in order to keep her busy and, more especially, to keep her out of their exclusively male space of play.

CHRIS (At the foot of the ladder) Can I come up? SILENCE . . . Can I come up now?

CHARLIE No. . . . You keep watch. We need you to keep watch.

PAUSE.

CHRIS I always keep watch.

CHARLIE Girls are good at it.

³ This is an Irish phrasing, meaning that he should be able to cope with blood.

CHRIS You never keep watch. PAUSE I'm bored of keeping watch . . . I'm going home.

CHARLIE Hold on a minute . . . We're putting away all our secret stuff. Then you can come up . . . We're ready now. It's safe for you to come up now.

CHRIS I don't think I'm going to play this game any more
(Hartigan, 1.14.24-25).

The play on the word “watch” is that women, excluded as they are, can but watch, can be but observers (as opposed to participants), are trained into inactivity, into non-interference and non-collaboration with the busily conflict-seeking male world. This scene, then, becomes a subterranean political statement of woman's being needed precisely for the purpose of keeping watch over the activities of man, to oversee them (in much the same way that the aunt is present on stage, positioned more or less as would be an observer or a judge). More than this, the statement is that woman is needed for her perspicacity and to intervene in order to check excessive male behaviors (a role for women that goes steps beyond the aunt's symbolic function).

The admonition by the character of Chris in the above dialogue that boys never take a turn at keeping watch bears similar political undertones, stating that men, in their violent games, are shortsighted and do not keep watch, do not keep in view the global and long-term implications of their actions, implying that they simply play to satisfy immediate urges. In the above flashback then, the female is being played out of the game and being trained not to disturb the activities taking place within an androcentric hub (which figures in contrast to the staged emblematic female circle of presence containing the aunt).

I will sum up these comments by saying that *The Secret Game* stages a number of secret games - all related to male-to-female power-struggling over different types of space - and that the loss of these games results in the real-life exclusion of women from social positions of decision-making (which includes decisions made about woman's own body). First, there is the game of female silencing in language. Second, gendered childhood games are presented as preparatory forms of indoctrination working towards their foreseeable extensions which are the situations of violent armed conflict around the globe - situations in which women are not players or organizers but are most certainly made use of as pawns in the game. Third, the rights of female citizens are shown to be built upon sand and baffled at a whim (i.e. the issue of the gunman's take-over of the aunt's property, as well as his symbolic take-over of the space of the female body—firstly by the gunman's holding of the female hostage and secondly through his (and society's) wanting to control her right to abortion).

Countering these take-overs of the female's rightful share of space, the female is shown to stand (and to need to stand) her ground, and this message is achieved through the symbolic staging of an indomitable female body: that is, there is the physical presence of the aunt on stage in her circle of light and showing an alternate lifestyle turned towards life (rather than death), and there is the visual seepage of menstrual blood into the scene. Indeed, one of the achievements of the play is the effectiveness of these non-verbal statements (necessarily non-verbal precisely because woman is at such a predetermined disadvantage in the space of common language). These statements make several demands: the return of the female's ownership-rights to her the space of her own

body, to a safe domestic life space and to her share of social space (including decision-making and peace-enforcement powers).

In a sense, Hartigan's emblematic female circle turns itself inside out during the course of the play, becoming like an overflowing well mouth. Hence, despite a storyline that initially appeared to give the space of representation over to normative male behaviors and actions, the play gradually achieves a female focus actively endorsing a greater adoption of "female-respecting values" by society as a whole.

Endnote

Anne Le Marquand Hartigan burrows into (domestic) spaces traditionally inhabited by the female and, unlike many of her female writer contemporaries, transforms those spaces into desirable and prolific historical areas, and her narratives most successfully develop there. She never effaces the female but rather enhances her. Minute details surrounding female characters are amplified as though huge blocks of color in a painting. Specifically, female life experience and the expanse of the female body become privileged vehicles of communication in her work.

Where her treatment of public space is concerned, however, she resembles other female contemporary writers insofar as she treats public as an area of ill ease, and develops strategies to make its handling easier. She does this through abstraction or by bringing public space indoors (as she does in *The Secret Game*) to make it more manageable. To avoid being at a disadvantage (as a woman) in the (public) space of language, she adopts symbols, for example, from ancient goddess worshipping societies and systematically avoids the inclusion of symbols from Greek/ Roman mythologies. Judeo-Christian symbols, she challenges and transforms in order to bring them into alignment with her particular brand of female-respecting philosophy.

Anne Le Marquand Hartigan was born and reared in England of an Irish Catholic mother and a father from the island of Jersey. She trained in Fine Arts before moving to her mother's family farm in Ireland. Since the 1970s, she has published four collections of poetry, had plays performed professionally, has written short stories, been included in numerous anthologies, and seen her texts set to music by contemporary composers and performed. The play *The Secret Game* was the winner of the Mobil Oil Prize.

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