

## Notes

1. Tilottama Rajan, "Theories of Genre," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Romanticism*, ed. Marshall Brown (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 226.
2. Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997).
3. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: OUP, 1986).
4. Tilottama Rajan, "Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985).
5. Cyrus Hamlin, *Hermeneutics of Form: Romantic Poetics in Theory and Practice* (New Haven: Schwabe, 1998).
6. Alan Rawes, ed., *Romanticism and Form* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
7. David Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994).
8. Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: OUP, 1971).

## "Brand" New Women?

Mária Kurdi, *Representations of Gender and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Irish Drama by Women* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011)

Mária Kurdi's latest book *Representations of Gender and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Irish Drama by Women* is an engaging and stimulating study of twentieth-century Irish drama

authored by women. As the title suggests, Kurdi examines the ways in which women's theatre re-presents Irish female experience in order to "interrogate, subvert and deconstruct conventional gendered norms and female roles" (13) historically constructed in the dramatic work of canonical male playwrights. The growing interest in critical readings of this kind is apparent in a number of recent publications, including *Irish Literature Since 1990: Diverse Voices* (ed. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker, Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009), *Sub-Versions: Transnational Readings of Modern Irish Literature* (ed. Ciaran Ross, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010) and *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives* (ed. Elke D'hoker, Raphael Ingelbien and Hedwig Schwall, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010), all of which contain essay contributions by Mária Kurdi.

In *Representations of Gender*, Kurdi examines the ways Irish women's drama developed through the twentieth-century, especially in relation to the changing concept of women's roles in Irish society. Drawing on the work of contemporary feminist critics, including Melissa Shira, Margot Gayle Backhus and Moynagh Sullivan, Kurdi argues that in the plays of William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge and Sean O'Casey women "appeared as largely phallic constructions in a patriarchal culture" in which "female characters were either pushed to the periphery of these [i.e. male ] relationships, or de-

ployed to evoke ideas about and ideals of Ireland” in order to represent the woman as a “central icon of Irish nationalism” (10). Kurdi sees this demonstrated in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *The Countess Cathleen*, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and *Juno and the Paycock*. According to the author, these plays are to be considered against the wider historical process of the decolonisation of Ireland, which shaped the theatrical characterisation of women in a particular way. During the country’s anti-colonial struggle against the British Empire, female figures often embodied the nation’s desire and/or failure to achieve independence. This is manifested in the representation of women as victimised characters who inevitably face martyrdom in their struggle to achieve self-fulfilment through self-realisation.

In Chapter One Kurdi examines the works of the first female playwrights of the century, Lady Augusta Gregory and Teresa Deevy and looks at the ways in which a new type of female subjectivity emerged in their plays. As co-founder and leading playwright of the Irish National Theatre, Gregory was deeply aware of contemporary representations of women. Considering *Kincora*, *Devorgilla* and *Grania*, Kurdi argues that Gregory refuted the “patriarchal discourse of Irish nationalism” which attributed to women the role of the passive and inferior counterpart of the Irish male. In Kurdi’s view, Gregory formed the character of her heroines in such a way that they could develop a special

kind of female subjectivity which allowed them to assume a more active role in determining their fate in a male dominated world. Kurdi sees this as Gregory’s intention to address the gender binaries principally established by the nationalist discourse of the Irish Literary Revival period (16).

Teresa Deevy’s plays are considered in relation to women’s changing role in the new, politically independent Ireland. Kurdi argues that the victimisation of women deepened as the Catholic Church strengthened its role in Irish society during the 1930s. The patriarchal ethos of the Revival period was reinforced by the articles of the Irish Constitution, which confined women to the private sphere of the family home. In Kurdi’s view, the discrimination and the oppression of Irish women continued by way of internal colonisation within the boundaries of marriage. Three plays are discussed in this chapter, *The Disciple*, *The King of Spain’s Daughter* and *Katie Roche*, all of which address the restrictions of the patriarchal ethos embedded in the new Irish Constitution and in the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Deevy’s indebtedness to Synge’s plays is identified here in a convincing manner, attention being drawn to the fact that Deevy’s aim was to revise the canonical male authors’ representation of women.

In Chapter Two Kurdi examines how female playwrights from 1980 to the present have managed to challenge traditional representations of the female body as the symbol of moral val-

ues and/or sexual desire. The female dramatists of this period address the problem of ageing and its effects on the body in a manner which allows them to contemplate different kinds of female subjectivity. The plays analysed in this chapter are Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed*, Emma Donoghue's *Ladies and Gentlemen*, Marie Jones' *Women on the Verge of HRT*, Gina Moxley's *Danti Dan*, Stella Feehily's *Duck* and Marina Carr's Midlands trilogy. Kurdi offers a subtle analysis of the ways in which women's experience of pregnancy, rape, incest, homosexuality, teenage violence, domestic abuse, HRT and death "complicate the boundaries of gendered subjectivity" (41), first formulated at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the next chapter the performative aspects of female identity formation are discussed, with special attention to the carnivalesque elements of women's plays. Kurdi groups together Miriam Gallagher's *Shyllag*, Paula Meehan's *Mrs Sweeney*, Emma Donoghue's *Ladies and Gentlemen*, Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed*, Marie Jones's *Women on the Verge of HRT* and *Weddings, Weening and Wakes*, as well as Marina Carr's *Low in the Dark*, *By the Bog of Cats* and *Woman and Scarecrow*. According to the author, in these plays performance "enable[s] the female characters to expose the means of objectification" (70) in order to subvert the inherited stereotypes.

There is a distinct shift from the Republic to Northern Ireland in Chapter

Four, through an interesting analysis of female (-male) relationships. Kurdi examines the extent to which female genealogies, or indeed the lack of them, have conditioned the lives of heroines. The plays which Kurdi chooses to analyse include Christine Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*, Jennifer Johnston's *Christine*, and Ann Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter*. Kurdi claims that the sectarian divide and the militant culture of Northern Ireland during the Troubles reinforced the patriarchal character of both the Catholic and the Protestant communities. This resulted in the further victimisation of women in the public and the private spheres. Plays by Southern Irish playwrights, including Marina Carr, Patricia Burke Brogan, Gina Moxley and Stella Feehily, are also considered in this chapter in order to help the author demonstrate the influence of the Catholic Church on the lives of Southern Irish communities.

Chapter Five, on storytelling and narration, discusses women characters' use "of storytelling to expose and contest the delimiting effects of dominant, oppressive metanarratives and discursive practices" (128). Once again, Kurdi emphasises that female characters become creative subjects who, through narration, take an active role in shaping their stories, lifting them out of the dominant patriarchal discourse. As illustration, a detailed analysis is provided of several Northern Irish plays, including *Some-where over the Balcony* by Marie Jones, *Tea in a China Cup* by Christina Reid

and *Christine* by Jennifer Johnston. These are analysed alongside *The Mai* by Marina Carr, *Shyllag* by Miriam Gallagher and *Treehouses* by Elizabeth Kuti.

The intercultural nature of contemporary theatre provides the main theme of the following chapter, which is divided into three parts. The first centres on the revival of ancient Greek and Celtic mythology in contemporary women's theatre and the second focuses on the indebtedness of women's drama to the works of Samuel Beckett and Brian Friel, while the last section looks at the influence of world literature on modern Irish plays by women. While this chapter is a valuable contribution to the understanding of these plays in a broader cultural context, the thematic cohesion between this section and the rest of the book is somewhat weak.

Kurdi returns to the main theme of the book in the final chapter, which examines the effects of spatial relations on identity formation. It is argued that women playwrights use space as means to indicate the entrapped nature of the female experience. The spatial restrictions of location emphasize the difficulties with which the protagonists are faced in their effort to attain an independent female subjectivity. Kurdi argues that in the plays of Marie Jones, Teresa de Lauretis, Elizabeth Kuti and Marina Carr, both public and private space are alluded to as locations of entrapment and displacement.

While *Representations of Gender and Female Subjectivity in Contempo-*

*rary Irish Drama by Women* is a true celebration of women's theatre, a number of questions arise in relation to the plays discussed in the book. The study uses a clear theoretical framework for the analysis of the plays, but the extensive use of this framework leaves no room for the author to evaluate biographical information relating to the playwrights she considers. For instance, three out of the four Gregory plays analysed in the book – *Dervorgilla*, *Kincora*, *Grania* – are the playwright's most autobiographical works. Therefore, it cannot be argued with certainty that Gregory's sole intention with these plays was to refute the patriarchal discourse of Irish nationalism. Gregory's biographer, Elizabeth Coxhead, found that it was the playwright's inner conflicts that were dramatised in these plays in order to address some of the emotional struggles of her past.\* Gregory was a prominent member of the Protestant Ascendancy class and these plays contain her comments on Ascendancy culture as a whole during the period of the Irish cultural revival. This is an important point also in relation to Yeats's plays. It is argued in the book that the figure of the Countess Cathleen "embodies the landowner and the sacrificial martyr" in order to symbolise the nation (6). This point is highly problematic, especially as the work is then compared to one of Yeats's last plays, *Purgatory*. In both plays Yeats specifically considers the fate of the Protestant Ascendancy

class. In *The Countess Cathleen* he employs the Faustian trope to highlight the doomed nature of the countess's intention to offer herself as an aristocratic sacrifice to demons in order to ensure the salvation of the 'lower' souls of the peasantry. In *Purgatory* (1938) the playwright laments the loss of the Big House culture following the Irish War of Independence in 1919–21 and the Irish Civil War of 1922–23, which destroyed many Protestant Ascendancy homes previously functioning as custodians of high art. It would have been interesting to see some analysis of less overtly biographical plays by these dramatists, such as *The Image*, *The Full Moon* or *Hyacinth Halvey* by Lady Gregory and *The Pot of Broth* or *The Land of Heart's Desire* by Yeats, in order to discover the true nature of their representation of Irish women.

The inclusion of *Grania* in the long list of plays discussed in the first chapter of the book brings to the fore another problematic issue. Uneasy about the strongly biographical nature of her play, Gregory refused to let it be produced in her lifetime. The question arising here is that of reception. What is the relationship between text and audience? To what extent is it possible for a play to challenge or subvert socially accepted norms of representing womanhood if the play lacks a receptive audience? Other Gregory plays enjoyed a much wider popular appeal and were produced more often – especially *Spreading the News* and *Hyacinth Halvey*.

*Halvey*. Would not her peasant plays be more certain indicators of the playwright's success (or perhaps, failure) to subvert canonised representations of Irish women on stage? The question of audience is relevant in relation to many of the authors discussed by Kurdi in the book. It is by no means possible to give detailed accounts of productions in a book which focuses on gender theory and modern drama, but some information about the reception of the lesser known plays, especially those of Elizabeth Kuti, Miriam Gallagher or Theresa de Lauretis, could have helped support Kurdi's claim about these playwrights' intention to change the course of twentieth-century Irish drama.

Talking of audience, the case of Marina Carr is most striking. Carr is one of the most successful playwrights of the post-1990 era, whose plays appeal to wide audiences both in and outside Ireland. In line with contemporary critical trends in gender studies, Kurdi claims that by representing Irish women as sexually liberated, violent and agnostic, who care for no man or religion, Carr and other contemporary female artists manage to free their female characters from "the traditional masculine narrative of nation building" (41). While the latter argument seems valid, is it not the case that male playwrights of the same period, Martin McDonagh for instance, were trying to do the same? Is it not the case that in an Ireland exposed to the vicissitudes

of transnational liberal capitalism McDonagh reinforced the century-long portrayal of the Irish male as violent as he was trying to construct an alternative image to the self-confident, economy-focused Irishmen of the Celtic Tiger period? As far as women playwrights' depiction of violent and abusive women on stage is concerned, were these female playwrights not following in the footsteps of male dramatists? How much room is left to argue that female playwrights were doing something radically distinctive in Irish theatre; or, how far might it be the case that they merely continued to adhere to masculine narratives imposed upon Irish literature by their male contemporaries? The commercial value of theatre comes into play here. It would be interesting to continue the investigations initiated by Patrick Lonergan in *Theatre and Globalisation: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) to find out the extent to which the choices made by Irish male and female dramatists during and after the Celtic Tiger period were conditioned by issues of the global market appeal of a distinctive Irish theatre product. Is it possible to argue that Irish female playwrights "turned violent" in order to sell their plays in the theatre, against the backdrop of a general adjustment in the cultural representation of violence in western society during the nineties, which stemmed from the movies of Quentin Tarantino and the widespread

commercial success they enjoyed? Could the graphic representation of violence be a major factor in the commercial success of some of these plays, including those of Marina Carr? More particularly, how far does *The Bog of Cats* pander to the ridiculing of the so-called 'white trash' culture that spread globally from the United States of America during the 1990s (through the medium of mainstream television products such as *The Jerry Springer Show*), under the guise of Carr interrogating feminine identity in contemporary Ireland? More detailed analysis of production history and the context of a globalised Irish society in the Celtic Tiger era would be required to illuminate the issue.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, Mária Kurdi's *Representations of Gender and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Irish Drama by Women* is a thought-provoking and very valuable contribution to the study of Irish literature. The author engages with gender criticism in a convincing manner and provides detailed analyses of plays written by twentieth-century Irish women. Given the depth of the author's engagement with contemporary critical material and the reader friendliness of the phrasing, the book is to be warmly recommended for both academics and students of Irish literature.

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*Note*

\*Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory, a Literary Portrait* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), pp. 146–47.