

It Is Not Enough to Have Written the Thing

Margaret Maxwell (University of Aberdeen)

A Review of

Melissa Sihra, ed., *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*

(Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) ISBN-13: 978-0-230-00647-8, ISBN-10: 0-230-00647-7, xix + 341pp.

In a foreword to this volume of essays playwright, Marina Carr, outlines some of the demands of writing for the theatre which have collectively contributed toward deterring women from dramatic writing (the socio-political limitations imposed upon women; the domestic practicalities disproportionately incumbent upon them). Voicing a personal regret that 'plays are not read anymore', she also touches upon the 'problematic [...] messiness' of the theatre (x) which deflects the merit and, more importantly, the survival, of the work from the written play-text onto the success of production, review, and critical engagement. 'It is not enough', she asserts, 'to have written the thing' (x-xi).

Motivated by such concerns, and identifying a number of female Irish playwrights who have engaged with this demanding practice and whose work has been, variously, unsuccessful or successful, either in initial production or in longevity, this collection of essays re-appraises, and, where necessary, attempts to re-establish the importance of their dramatic works. An integral part of this remit is an exploration of the representation of women on the Irish stage, and this encompasses the work not only of the female playwrights identified but also that of several of their prominent male counterparts.

Structurally, the essays are demarcated by time, representing women in Irish drama from the early, mid, and late twentieth-century to the time of writing. Contextualizing inter-chapters provide a cohesive framework, whilst relevant black and white photographs serve to illuminate the discussion. Bookended by fore- and afterwords by prominent practitioners (Carr and actor, Olwen Fouéré), and with an epigraphic quotation taken from Eva Gore-Booth's 1929 poem, *Women's Rights*, the volume is also appended by an extensive directory of over 250 female Irish playwrights, from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries, which gives the lie to the misconception that there are no female Irish playwrights.

Opening the first section of this collection, Paul Murphy reads the bulk of scholarship on Augusta Gregory – posthumously eulogized by Yeats in his poems 'Coole Park, 1929' and 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931', yet denied shared authorship of their joint venture, Kathleen ni Houlihan – through the lens of Nietzschean 'antiquarian' history, which essentially enshrines the work of the playwright, rather than engaging with the socio-political contexts of the work itself. Reading three of her plays as reflections of her own negotiation with both politics and sexuality, he calls, ultimately, for a "'critical" historicization' of Gregory's work in order to free it from 'mummification'.

Velma O'Donoghue Greene foregrounds the work of 'virtually unknown playwrights' Geraldine Cummings and Susanne Day, discussing their one-act realist peasant play, *Fidelity* (1914), which delineates 'an oppressively bleak world of limited choices and rigid social structures' in rural Ireland (44). These limitations are offset by their diametrically opposing protagonists, Kate and Maggie, who, whilst inhabiting conventional and unconventional female roles, respectively, offer comparative 'images of women encountering and attempting to overcome the prejudices and expectations of their society'. The plays of Eva Gore-Booth and Dorothy Macardle, who like Cummings and

Day, were tireless campaigners for women's rights, are the focus of Cathy Leeney's essay. Gore-Booth's subversion of theatrical space and her reinterpretation of the Deirdre myth as means by which to re-configure representations of female identity, and Macardle's destabilization of the domestic space through invasion by supernatural forces form the basis of this discussion.

Interrogating similar concerns, Lisa Fitzpatrick reads three plays by Augusta Gregory, Margaret O'Leary, and Teresa Deevy in terms of theatre as 'mirror up to nation'. The female protagonists of each of these women are seen to be significantly 'out of joint' within their communities, and thus are discussed as functioning as 'disruptive elements' (80) within society. In discussing the extent to which these plays accurately reflect the contemporary status of women, Fitzpatrick concludes that 'increasingly in the decades after independence, female characters in Irish plays are confined to the domestic sphere' (84).

In the second section of the volume there is a shift in focus. Thus, moving away from the resurrection of the work of (often lesser-known) early twentieth-century female playwrights, Anna McMullan discusses the representation of the female body in the work of one of Ireland's best known male playwrights, Samuel Beckett. The essay explores the ways in which Beckett's 'staging of matronly figures exposes a deep-rooted anxiety around questions of embodiment, reproduction, authorship and origin' (97), tracing the shift in emphasis from the 'fleshly matrons' of the early fragment, 'Human Wishes' (1930s), and his first full-length play, *Eleutheria* (1940s), to the 'ghostly shades' (97) of the later plays, *Happy Days* (1961) and *Not I* (1972).

Subsequent essays by Eamonn Jordan and Rachel O'Riordan also focus on female representation within the work of male-authored drama (Frank McGuinness and Stewart Parker, respectively). Engaging with a number of McGuinness' plays, Jordan explores his 'genuinely complex' (134) female characters' use of mask and language as means of misrepresentation, arguing that throughout the playwright's drama 'subjectivity [...] is never fixed or coherent, but split, fragmentary, provisional' (142). O'Riordan offers a reading of Parker's history play, *Northern Star* (1984), examining the ways in which his female characters 'challenge the entanglements of sexuality, myth, heritage and politics' (144). Whilst her encapsulation of 'the essence of the female' as 'the womb' (147), in discussing this play, is manifestly reductive, O'Riordan's reading nonetheless makes cogent points about Parker's female characters who, 'frequently subvert emblematic images of Irish womanhood and Irish mythology' (149).

Returning to the reclamation project, Mark Phelan's essay attempts to 'recover' the histories of three female Northern Irish playwrights whose drama has been 'written out of the Irish canon' (109). This discussion encompasses: Alice Milligan, whose 'indefatigable suffragette and Nationalist' political activity, Phelan claims, equates her with her 'Northern counterpart', Maud Gonne, and whose plays and tableaux vivants represent a 'vital, if neglected, dramaturgical contribution to the Irish Revival'; Helen Waddell, whose play, *The Spoiled Buddha* (1915), was a polemical critique of the 'institutional misogyny of organized religions' and who was repeatedly sexually discriminated against over a lecturing post at Queen's University Belfast; and Patricia O'Connor, whom Phelan contrasts with southern playwright, Teresa Deevy, discussing the reluctance of male reviewers to engage with the overtly political message of her play, *Highly Efficient* (1943), and reading this as a reflection of their refusal to allow women agency.

The final part of this volume focuses on the work of a number of contemporary female playwrights, charting the ways in which female experience and representation has changed. Firstly, Enrica Cerquoni focuses on Anne Devlin's play, *Ourselves Alone* (1985), in order to explore her 'aesthetic of the disappeared'. Examining the subjection of the female protagonists within a patriarchal state, this reading explores their state of 'internal exile' (166) by juxtaposing the spatial constrictions imposed by that domestic space, 'the room', with the protagonists' 'more permeable rooms of inner existence' (161). Also exploring female issues of domestic subjugation, whilst drawing links between marginalized female characters from the pens of Synge and Yeats with those fashioned by contemporary female playwrights, Anthony Roche's illuminating essay examines an Irish language play by contemporary Irish writer, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne. Utilizing the concept of the liminal, Roche explores the play's fluid integration between the 'Nintendo' present (180), the nineteenth-century past, and the timelessness of the folkloric Otherworld which allows for the empowerment of the main protagonist.

In a broad-ranging essay which encompasses the work of a number of contemporary female playwrights, Brian Singleton explores their dramaturgical challenges to the 'essentialized iconic and mythical woman of the early nation's male imagination', which produce, conversely, female characters who are liberated from the 'mythical country kitchen' and 'reconfigured' elsewhere (186): the 'displace[ment] from the hearth' (193) of Ioanna Anderson's *Nora in Words of Advice for Young People* (2004); the 'collapse of home as place of authority' in Hilary Fannin's *Doldrum Bay* (2003). In similar vein, the final chapter of the volume, that of editor, Melissa Sihra, provides an overview of the drama of Marina Carr, which highlights the ways in which Carr's female protagonists reflect 'the transition to modernity for women over the last century' (206). Reading Carr's play, *On Raftery's Hill* (2000), impressively, as a 'radical rewriting' (212) of Gregory and Yeats' co-authored *Kathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), Sihra foregrounds Carr's determination upon, and confidence in, her own authorship, from the beginning of her career as a playwright, contrasting this with the palimpsestic experience of Gregory a century earlier.

This volume undoubtedly fulfils its declared intent of widening the debate concerning the representation of women on the Irish stage and in exploring (as Sihra says of Carr's work) the 'transitions which [Irish] women have negotiated throughout the last century' (208). Its most striking achievement is the exposure of little-known work by female playwrights and the appended directory is an inspired move which provides an invaluable resource. Where the inclusion of male playwrights is, certainly, an integral and welcome part of the discussion, their location exclusively and overwhelmingly within the second part of the volume is, perhaps, unsatisfactory: the placement of temporally-grounded, contextualizing inter-chapters suggests a framework which fails to accommodate these middle chapters.

This criticism notwithstanding, each author engages diversely, meticulously, and insightfully with the overarching remit. In actively inviting further research on the drama of passed-over or undervalued female playwrights, as well as calling for revivals of their work, the volume as a whole offers a space in which to re-sound, and re-evaluate, female voices which have, hitherto, been elided, or whose work struggles for survival amongst the 'problematic [...] messiness of Theatre' (x).