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Jacqueline McCurry

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"Our Lady, dispossessed": Female Ulster Poets and Sexual Politics

by JACQUELINE MCCURRY

POETRY AND POLITICS, like church and state, should be separated," writes Belfast critic Edna Longley (185); in Éire and in Northern Ireland this is not the case: the marriage of church and state in the Republic has resulted in constitutional bans on divorce and on abortion; Northern Ireland's Scots-Presbyterian majority continues to prevent minority Irish-Catholic citizens from having full participation in society. But while men continue to control church and state, women have begun to raise their voices in poetry and in protest.

Northern Ireland's new poets, through the 1960s and 1970s, were exclusively male: James Simmons, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Seamus Deane, Frank Ormsby, Tom Paulin, and Ciaran Carson dominated the literary scene until the early 1980s. In 1982 Medbh McGuckian published her first book of poetry. Since then, she has published two additional collections and achieved international fame, while younger women poets like Janet Shepperson and Ruth Hooley have made their debuts in print. Ulster's female poets are more revolutionary than their male counterparts. Their work consistently realigns our perspectives on the politics of sexuality and on the sexuality of politics.

"Because I go against / The grain I feel the brush of my authority," declares Medbh McGuckian, the first woman writer-in-residence at Queen's University, Belfast (*Venus* 9). McGuckian transcends what one male critic perceives as the Catholic tradition's persistently "schizophrenic view of women which holds that (she) is either Virgin or Whore" (McGuinness 199). McGuckian's most recent volume includes a poem entitled "Scenes from a Brothel," which combines Madonna and prostitute, viewing the female's body as a "scroll," her bones as "armour" (*Ballycastle* 48).

While young male Ulster poets will point to the hypocrisy inherent in the idea of violent priests (John Kelly's "The Saint Gabriel's Day Massacre" depicts "the Reverend Father Monaghan / kneeling devoutly behind his car / with a Gatling gun"), female Ulster poets undermine the very basis of political martyrdom by deconstructing the centuries-old icon of the Virgin Mother (Swift and Mooney 102). Ruth Hooley's "Cut the Cake" is a miniature masterpiece in which puns and renovated clichés make playful that which is otherwise an "icon-shattering," revolutionary perspective on both the Holy Mother and, secondarily, on the concept of woman as frigid and/or as decorative. She feminizes Yeats's "The

Second Coming,” and brings close up and humanizes that which previously stood remote and supernatural:

Our Lady, dispossessed
on some Alpen ice-cap
would not look out of place
in ski-pants, zipping
down virgin slopes
to the sound of music.

But wait for her second
coming round the mountain—
the icon-shattering thaw.
Our immaculate image, white-iced
and frosted for two thousand years,
might melt to nothing more divine
than a seething woman, cheated
out of sex and a son in his prime. (Swift and Mooney 47)

Thus the patriarchy of Catholicism is seen, finally, from a woman’s point of view in poetry. Hooley’s “icon-shattering thaw,” introducing us to the possibility of the Virgin Mary as a “seething woman,” challenges Heaney’s bog mythology which connects Catholic martyrdom to the pagan cult of insatiable earth goddess.

Heaney’s work includes many poems—“Act of Union” and “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” are two of the most obvious examples—in which England is depicted as the imperialistic, aggressive male and Ireland as the victimized female. The myths of Cathleen ni Houlihan and of the devouring earth goddess come to a full stop in Paul Muldoon’s 1983 deconstruction of the *aisling* (Irish vision poem), in which the goddess (from whom the speaker may have contracted venereal disease) is called “Anorexia” (*Quoof* 39). Apart from Muldoon, however, Ulster male poets treat male and female as “fixed and recognizable starting points to be used in getting one’s bearings on a wider scene,” most notably on the sectarian Troubles in Northern Ireland (McElroy 199). Women poets, in contrast, are preoccupied with the more basic discrepancies between male and female perception, discrepancies which underlie all experiences of conflict.

Young male Ulster poets will point to the hypocrisy of Orangemen (militant Protestants), as in Robert Johnstone’s “The Constable’s Complaint”:

They didn’t mind our bullets made of plastic
When killing Catholic girls of ten or twelve,
But now their shock and outrage are fantastic
When they find those bullets coming at themselves. (*Eden to Edenderry* 21)

But again, the female poet seeks not revolt but revolution: Janet Shepperson questions all perspectives of conflict in poems such as “Nuclear Age Pregnancy” and “The Air-Raid Shelter.” Here the current Troubles in Ulster are just another in a series of man-made wars: Shepperson evokes “all the heavy shine / of Britain’s Empire / Seeking glory” during the First World War; she remembers her father’s World War Two air-raid shelter, with its atmosphere of “claustrophobia, dampness / woodlice, the smell of fear,” and she contrasts the male’s

"nuclear darkness" with the "heartbeat darkness" of the womb. Images of fragility battle greyness, control, stiffness, rigidity; the unborn child is "like a trapped bright-feathered bird / beating its baffled wings in (your) cupped hands." The male presence—here simultaneously nurturing and confining—is perpetually in dangerous control of the world (Swift and Mooney 120–21, 124–25).

Elsewhere Shepperson contrasts "flailing, twittering, bobbling" female swimmers with "grim . . . sharp, purposeful, unflinching, businesslike" males; the women are "like sparrows"; the males are "sleek water rats." Another female speaker associates her engagement ring ("a constriction which tightens / as stitches do in a wound") with the "stubbornly separate" man who gave it to her. He is "uncompromising . . . clenched . . . facing me with differentness . . . challenge" (Swift and Mooney 123 and 126). Thus, while Hooley shatters religious icons, Shepperson exposes man-made war and destructive male history. Images of rigidity and violence are pitted over and over again against images of liquid fragility. Males are separate "with their quota of furrows / to plough dead straight"; the female element is "interlacing, blending." Male history is powerful, but "she / will fight it if she can, / though her weapons are only flowers" (Swift and Mooney 123 and 125).

In a recent interview, Medbh McGuckian echoes Shepperson's idea of flower as weapon: "It's impossible not to see the poetry as a flower or defense mechanism . . . to heal wounds, to bridge divisions" (*Irish Literary Supplement* 21). In her first volume of verse McGuckian is *The Flower Master* with a utopian wish to "be born again into that warless world" as a "turn-of-the-century gardener" (49). Just as Shepperson perceives that male history has "trapped (us) in an old dead pattern," McGuckian suggests that all of history is a male fiction. "The Folk Museum," published in 1988, details two diametrically opposed perceptions of "The Mother's Cottage": "The old boy in his official / green blazer and tie" explains to the female visitors that the long-dead mother, who was forced to move to a tiny cottage to make room for her son's bride, was "happy, she didn't mind / the loss of space." Rita, Alison, Mary Rose, and Fionnuala, however, feel a personal and sorrowful connection with the woman as they examine her dishes and utensils, her old apron, and her sagging bed; they "bustle out" of the cottage, "leaving him to his story" (Bradley 416).

Reclaiming her story from history is a dominant aspect of McGuckian's work. In a poem entitled "The Soil-Map," she renews ancient Irish matriarchy, the remnants of which are reflected in Ulster's eighth-century epic *The Táin*. Through a re-vision of her namesake, the warrior Queen Medbh, McGuckian takes possession of her homeland and usurps the male power of naming:

I have found the places on the soil-map,
Proving it possible once more to call
Houses by their names. Annsgift or Mavisbank,
Mount Juliet or Bettysgrove: they should not
Lie with the gloom of disputes to interrupt them
Every other year, like some disease
Of language. . . . (*Flower* 30)

What McGuckian calls “the gloom of disputes” might well be Ulster’s sectarian Troubles; certainly the term refers to a male conflict that disrupts the lives of women.

A recent McGuckian poem entitled “Sword-sonnet” also weaves the territorial politics of Ulster mythology with male-female conflict. A seaside house, she writes, could be christened “‘Peace Cottage’ / or the Welsh for ‘towards Ireland’, to forget how Adam means / Red, or at Tor Head, Deirdre died of grief” (Swift and Mooney 20). Again, as in Shepperson, male destruction (the bloody Red Hand of Ulster) is juxtaposed with female sorrow (Deirdre committed suicide—by smashing her head to bits rather than marrying a man she detests—in County Antrim, near Scotland).

Sexual politics in McGuckian’s poetry is often subtle or implicit. In “Death of a Ceiling,” for example, she expresses a lack of parallelism between male and female experience with a lack of parallelism in diction as she thinks of “the element that suits him, and mine” (*Ballycastle* 27). In much of McGuckian’s work, emotional clustering replaces logical progression. Liberation from linearity is both exhilarating and unsettling as in “The Blue She Brings With Her,” which McGuckian says was “written for a mother whose son was destroyed in the Troubles” (*ILS* 21). Conflict here is not discursive but resides in a series of disturbing images: a mirror “bites,” a log “falls to ashes with a sudden crash”; gold-patterned dishes are “blood-kissed” and “show themselves for a moment like wild creatures” (*Ballycastle* 30).

Certainly poetry is the literary genre most dominated by men, but male critics like Dillon Johnston and James Simmons are off the mark when they insist on looking for linear progression, clearly defined movement, and predictability in McGuckian’s work: Johnston finds “interpretation tortuous” (261); Simmons, in an especially sexist outburst, calls her “a tease” who writes “alluring nonsense” (27). Hooley’s phrase, “our Lady, dispossessed,” can accurately be applied to the female poet as well as to the Virgin Mother; to the pregnant woman who sees two world wars, sectarian violence, and nuclear war as sections of a male continuum; to an epic warrior named Medbh; and to a fatal beauty named Deirdre.

In a poem called “Ode to a Poetess,” McGuckian hints that dispossession can also refer to the near-absence of women that men desire: “What they ask of women is less their bed, / Or an hour between two trains, than to be almost gone” (*Venus* 12). But in her latest volume McGuckian takes witty revenge on the four-hundred-year-old male tradition of the sonnet in English: she writes a sonnet of fifteen lines and calls it “On Not Being Listened To” (*Ballycastle* 51).

Ulster’s young women poets question sexual assumptions, realign religious perspectives, and undermine the foundations of male sectarian politics. Preoccupied with the basis of all conflict, McGuckian, Hooley, and Shepperson seek not revolt but revolution—and perhaps their “dispossession” signals a new freedom from history and a movement towards autonomy: Ulster’s Troubles continue, but female voices have begun to achieve at least an artistic sovereignty for the province of Northern Ireland.

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