

Home-Grown Politics: The Politicization of the Parlour Room in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama

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Abstract:

In Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987), Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) and *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989), and Gary Mitchell's *Loyal Women* (2003), the home and nation become inextricably linked, as one serves as a microcosm for the other. Within the volatile political landscape of Northern Ireland, the private space of the home becomes a public forum for the characters in these plays, almost all of whom are women. Often unheard by the predominantly male presence in Northern Irish politics, these women find their voice in the domestic comfort of their homes, with the support and encouragement of other women. Yet despite this reign over the domestic sphere, the women's perceived power and dominance is continually subverted, through economic, sexual, and political means.

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The parlour room has long been seen on the Irish stage, a physical space that acts as more than a living and dining area for characters: it is a place for political debate, violent confrontation, and familial falling-outs. Plays such as Gregory's and Yeats's *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (1902) and St. John Ervine's *Mixed Marriage* (1911) are early examples of such drama, and tackle political issues still relevant today: religion, nationalism, and the armed struggle. While it is ultimately the men in these two plays who are called to action, whether it be as soldiers or strike leaders, the women also have definite influence over the lives of their men, and add valuable contributions to the parlour room debates. These women, however, are ultimately negatively affected by the men's choices: in *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, a bride is suddenly left at the altar, while in *Mixed Marriage*, another fiancée is shot and killed during a riot¹.

What I would like to examine in this article is the continuation of such parlour room drama in four Troubles-era plays: Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987); Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) and *The Belle of the*

Belfast City (1989); and Gary Mitchell's *Loyal Women* (2003). I contend that the highly-charged political atmosphere of Northern Ireland has further encouraged the breakdown between public and private, which, I argue, has had a greater impact on women than men: this is evident both in the political realities of Northern Ireland, as well as in the theatre of the province. In Parker's play *Pentecost*, the parlour room of a typical "two-up, two-down" terraced house in east Belfast hosts the characters' debate over the 1974 Ulster Workers' Council strike, though the female voices are often occluded by those of the males; Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* examines the effects of war on three generations of the Bell family, while *The Belle of the Belfast City* appraises the impact of politics, police, and paramilitaries on domestic life in 1980s Belfast; and in Mitchell's *Loyal Women*, there is no divide between the public and private life of the protagonist, Brenda, as her home serves as a meeting place, interrogation cell, and punishment room for the local Women's Ulster Defense Association (WUDA). Within the plays examined, all three playwrights depict what Melissa Sihra has noted, how "'home' in Irish drama has remained a precarious space, denoting a lack of security and prone to invasion and penetration. Within this site of instability, women seek agency and subjective accommodation" (2007, 2-3). While the women of these plays certainly "seek agency", they are not always successful in finding it.

Parker's play *Pentecost*², first performed in 1987 as a part of Field Day, examines the emotional and actual ghosts faced by five accidental roommates: Marian, who is coming to terms with the death of her five-month-old son; her soon-to-be-ex-husband Lenny; Marian's friend Ruth, a victim of spousal abuse; Lenny's friend Peter, a native of Belfast who has been living abroad for a number of years; and Lily, the house's recently deceased resident who intermittently appears to Marian throughout the play. *Pentecost* is set during the Ulster Workers' Council strike, in part organized and run by the UDA, which lasted for two weeks in May 1974. The strike eventually shut down the Stormont government, which had only recently entered into power-sharing as a result of the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973. This chaotic series of events serves as an apt backdrop for *Pentecost*, as the tumultuous personal lives of the characters come into focus during the course of Parker's play.

The breakdown of public and private, and the impact of this on women, is apparent almost immediately. While the audience does not witness any of the violence or upheaval taking place during the strike, we do see Ruth's battered and bloodied face, which she painfully reveals to Marian and the audience simultaneously. Ruth has found herself in a cycle of abuse as the frequent victim of her husband David's violent outbursts. Like many women in Northern Ireland, and all over the world, she is unsure of what to do in the situation. While Ruth is frustrated with her marriage and afraid of her husband, she is unwilling to admit defeat, perhaps in part due to her own evangelical beliefs. Her husband's abusive nature has been evident from the beginning of their

relationship, but seems to intensify after he joins the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). As a police officer during the height of the Troubles, David has found himself under constant pressure and stress, as Ruth recounts how “he’s had three good mates killed in his own station, and a fourth one blinded” (Parker 2000, 188). Though this is never an excuse for domestic violence, it is a good enough excuse for Ruth, as she uses her husband’s job to rationalize his treatment of her: “You can’t even begin to imagine the pressure the police are under [...] all the threats and the hatred and no outlet, he comes home coiled up like a spring, he’s frightened of his life, it’s all pent up inside him...” (*ibidem*). Here, Ruth places a national issue (the role of the RUC) above her own personal safety and well-being, as well as that of her unborn children, for David’s violence has caused Ruth to have several miscarriages. The continued occurrence of such private, as opposed to public, violence during the Troubles, is, according to Monica McWilliams, because of a “traditional link between nationalism (both Orange and Green) and their respective Churches [which] has ensured that the ultra-conservative view of women as both property of, and inferior to, men remains strongly entrenched in Irish society” (84). Thus, Ruth’s continued defence of her husband is, to her, an expression of loyalty to both her Protestant faith and Ulster.

Ruth’s loyalty to Ulster is also evident in her personal politics. While listening to Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s radio broadcast on Day 11 of the strike, she becomes visually agitated and upset. As he closes with comments deriding both the strike and the people of Northern Ireland, accusing the province to be overrun with “people who spend their lives sponging on Westminster and British democracy”, “Ruth *springs up in a fury and switches the radio off*” (214). She does not mince her own words concerning the IRA and nationalists, whom she believes to be the true enemies of democracy, declaring that “[e]verything we have and hold, for five long years now we’ve watched it rent asunder, pulverized into rubble by the real spongers, cruel and murderous bastards...” (214). Ruth is clearly passionate about her views, but only expresses them behind the closed doors of the parlour room. Her sparring partner, Peter, is another Protestant from Belfast, but has been away from Northern Ireland, and its politics, for several years: he is more egalitarian than sectarian. He views the strike organizers as “pigbrain mobsters and thugs”, inciting Ruth’s anger even more and livening up their debate (215). But when he is unable to convince Ruth of his politics, Peter unabashedly seduces her, asking, “Supposing we really were to kiss and make up?” (221). In a somewhat predictable plot-twist, their argument ends in sex, creating a patent link between sexual and political domination. Though Ruth may have proved a worthy opponent in their political debate, Peter’s apparent need for control leads him to gain the upper-hand through sex. Thus, while women do attempt to claim the parlour room as a space for equal debate, it is men who still dominate and control.

Ruth's loyalty to her husband and to Ulster is echoed in the ghostly reminiscences of Lily, the deceased former tenant who appears sporadically to Marian throughout the play. Born in 1900, Lily recounts how her husband went off to fight in World War I soon after their marriage. When he returns home impotent due to his injuries, her society and religion expect her to remain married and faithful to him, though the possibility of a sexually fulfilling relationship and producing children is no longer possible. Lily takes pride in her marital fidelity, but sexually and emotionally alone, the temptation of an airman lodging in their home becomes too great: Lily begins an affair with the airman and secretly bears his child while her husband is working in England. Her lover soon abandons her, however, and Lily leaves the baby outside of a church. She contemplates suicide by the Belfast blitz, but her survival through this event makes Lily resigned to "[a] life sentence" (237). She takes the secrets of her affair and illegitimate child to the grave, conflating her loyalty to her husband with her loyalty to Ulster: "At least I never let myself down – never cracked. Never surrendered. Not one inch. I went to my grave a respectable woman...never betrayed him" (231). Unable, or unwilling, to come to terms with her transgression, Lily's public loyalty to Ulster masks her private disloyalty to her husband. Thus, though of very different generations, both Ruth and Lily find it hard to distinguish between their public and private loyalties, conflating their marital unions with the union of Northern Ireland and Great Britain: both must be preserved at all costs.

While Parker peoples his stage with equal numbers of men and women, Catholics and Protestants, it is nevertheless the Protestant women in *Pentecost* who find their private lives most impacted by outside, public forces. Though Marian, a Catholic, does seek a divorce from Lenny, also a Catholic, there is the possibility of a reconciliation at the end of the play. In addition, their child, Christopher, died accidentally as a result of sudden infant death syndrome, while Ruth's unborn children were miscarried as a result of her husband's violence, and Lily's son was abandoned. The public nature of Ruth's and Lily's husbands also leads to external pressure being put on the private lives of their wives: while their marital fidelity definitely has religious undertones, both women are also well aware of their husbands' role in upholding Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom, whether it be through wartime service or as a police officer. Thus, the play demonstrates the problematic nature of Protestant, loyalist women in Northern Ireland. While often seen as a damaging tendency in nationalist culture, the conflation of women and nation leads to a demise in the private, personal lives of unionist women as well.

As indicated in *Pentecost*, men were the main actors in the public arenas of politics, policing, and paramilitarism during the Troubles. The long hours involved in the life of a politician or policeman, or the very likely possibility of extensive periods spent in jail for the UDA or IRA man, meant that women often had a significant degree of independence within the home. As one Belfast

woman states, “this is the change I think there has been with women. [The Troubles have] made them more aware of themselves, that if they’re going to be left alone they’re going to have to be able to fend for themselves, and defend themselves against whoever or whatever comes into their homes or accosts them on the street” (McNamee, Lovett, eds, 1987, 266). Although women may have gained a greater sense of self, this was not necessarily recognized by higher political and social powers; women were still confined to the home, and if they did become political actors, many women felt it was “better to be invisible and making a contribution than to be in the limelight and take the glory along with possible vilification” (Ward 2006, 139). This tendency towards domesticity is echoed in a theatrical context as well: Lisa Fitzpatrick notes how “[i]ncreasingly in the decades after independence, female characters in Irish plays are confined to the domestic space”, a phenomenon that has continued throughout the twentieth century (2007, 84). Of the three playwrights examined here, Christina Reid’s work comes closest to reversing this; indeed, her work exemplifies a potential for feminist theatre which, according to Lizbeth Goodman’s definition, “aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women’s roles and/or to effect social change, and which is informed in this project by broadly feminist ideas” (1998, 199). Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup* and *The Belle of the Belfast City* work in tandem to expose the hypocrisy in both religious traditions’ use of domesticity as a feminine ideal, and demonstrate the damaging effects of masculinist institutions on women.

As Mary Trotter has pointed out, though Irish theatre often sees “the real attention in the family memory drama center[ed] on the patrilineal relationships”, Christina Reid is one of the notable playwrights who has subverted this convention, instead “plac[ing] women’s experience in the narrative foreground” (2000, 165). This is certainly the case in Reid’s first stage play *Tea in a China Cup*³, which explores the traditional gender roles of Northern Irish society in the context of the changing and highly volatile socio-political landscape of 1970s Belfast through the lens of three generations of the staunchly Protestant Bell family. These successive generations are often shown simultaneously onstage, as the audience witnesses the experiences of the Grandmother, daughter (Sarah), and granddaughter (Beth), from the beginning of World War II in 1939 through to 1972, one of the worst years of the Troubles. Though these women are of three very different generations, their individual lives remain nearly indistinguishable, especially when it comes to their relationships with men: all three generations of women find themselves coping with emotionally distant husbands who cannot keep a paycheck in their pockets. Society’s gendered double standard is clearly present in the drama, for while these women are expected to support their men in any and all manners, the men would prefer to dismiss women and their problems, before escaping to the bookmakers or down the pub.

The religious nature of Northern Irish social mores presented in *Tea in a China Cup* demonstrates the influence of both traditions on the restriction

of sexual knowledge and understanding amongst women. The play depicts Beth's and her Catholic best friend Theresa's adolescence in the 1950s, and the outcomes of this experience in the early 1970s. Theresa recounts how "that big lad down the street says those sort of knickers are called [...p]assion killers", but she and Beth are left wondering about what the term actually means (Reid 1997, 27). Reflecting on the incident as an adult, Beth admits that "[w]e knew nothing" (28). An awkward and evasive talk from her mother is Beth's only lesson on puberty and sex, while Theresa's questions are answered with slaps from her mother and orders to go to confession. This sexual ignorance was not, and perhaps still is not, uncommon in Northern Ireland, where the religious nature of education⁴ has meant that sex education is not widely taught in schools. One woman from Derry, speaking in the 1980s, recounts how childbirth was a complete mystery to her, even as it was happening: "I didn't know where I was going to get it out of me. [...] I didn't realise, and after that I just took it all for granted, and out it came – the biggest surprise to me you know. I didn't even stop to think where it was going to come from" (McNamee, Lovett, eds, 1987, 223). A similar account relates how one woman, also speaking in the 1980s, "found out that a sperm gave you a baby [...] when the *Sunday People* did this series, on 'the facts of sex'. [...] For a long time, I'd thought it was *wanting* sex that made you get a baby" (Fairweather, McDonough, McFadyean 1984, 115). The lack of any sexual education, formal or informal, present in this Northern Irish society thus fostered a culture of sexual ignorance, leaving women in confusion over the facts and functions of their own bodies.

The masculinist nature of many Northern Irish social, religious, and political institutions perhaps indicates that it is only "the big lad", or the male contingent of society, who are allowed a working knowledge of sex and sexuality. Though the Grandmother, Sarah, and Beth have strong, close relationships with one another, sex is not discussed: it is the sole piece of feminine knowledge that is not handed down through the generations. Only the youngest women, Beth and Theresa, look to question and challenge the information, or lack thereof, provided to them, signaling a new outlook and more inspired way forward for women of their generation. Theresa especially has a more open and modern outlook concerning sex. She refuses to remain in Belfast under the watchful eye of her mother, where she feels she can only experience sex once married, and goes to London instead: "I'd like to sample it first before I commit myself, just in case it really is a fate worse than death" (Reid 1997, 42). While women in Belfast do – and did – have sex before marriage, the societal, familial, and religious pressure not to do so was keenly felt by Theresa and Beth as they came of age in the 1950s and 1960s.

Men's general control over religious, political, and social institutions thus pigeon-holes women into supportive roles within marriage, allowing them little personal freedom or independence while expecting them to fully support their husbands and children in most aspects. The three generations

of Bell women receive negligible support from their husbands, whether it be financial, emotional, or domestic. When her son is killed on the battlefields of Dunkirk during World War II, Grandmother is left to grieve with her daughter Sarah, while Grandfather tactlessly remarks that "There'll be money to come, you know...". Unwilling to listen to this, "Grandmother *takes some money from her purse and hands it to*" her husband, ordering him "away down to the pub and give my head peace" (20). The women's husbands' obsession with money, and spending it, continues when Sarah, going into labor with Beth, reveals that she cannot even afford a taxi to the hospital: her husband "hasn't been home for two days...not since he lifted his wages..." (22). When Beth herself gets married, she finds that she has "faithfully repeated all her [Sarah's] mistakes": "[m]y father gambled in half-crowns and ten-shilling notes. Stephen [her husband] gambles in thousands of pounds and bits of paper called stocks and shares. [...] if you take away the velvet sofas and the china cabinets... there's nothing there... it's all a lie" (60).

This financial irresponsibility and impropriety is symptomatic of the overall neglect these women have suffered in their relationships with men. Sarah attempts to defend her husband after his death, finding a hollow silver lining in their marriage: "he could have been worse", she tells Beth, "he never lifted a finger to any of us in his life, he just had a weakness for the drink and the bettin'...he couldn't help it, he was only a man, God help him" (38). While this view of her husband as being "only a man" denotes an acceptance of human weakness, it is also a sign of women's collusion with their own oppression: while men are allowed to be weak, women are not. Instead, they continue to support such irresolute men as dutiful wives and mothers, perpetuating the roles assigned to them by men, with the support of Northern Ireland's conservative political, social, and religious ideologies.

This conservatism does not improve with time, as the youngest generation of women in the play face similar male neglect. Their response to this neglect, however, does signal a potential generational shift in acceptance of traditional gender roles. On her wedding night, Beth sits alone in a hotel room as her husband enjoys drinks with clients in the hotel bar, while Theresa must come to terms with an unexpected pregnancy and subsequent abandonment by the father of her child: "I told him I was pregnant on a Tuesday, by Thursday he was gone" (51). But the women of this youngest generation are determined to change their lives, without the assistance or involvement of men: no longer willing to accept the faults and weaknesses of men, Beth and Theresa engage in a definite questioning of previously accepted social and familial norms. Beth furiously questions her mother's coddling: "No matter what a man does wrong, it's always some woman's fault, isn't it?", to which Sarah can only reply that "[m]en need lookin's after, like children, sure they never grow up" (38). Theresa acknowledges that her decision to leave Belfast in search of sexual freedom and experimentation had an unexpected result, but

she does not regret the outcome. She speaks lovingly of her daughter Shauna, and does not mind that “the sight of her scares off prospective husbands” (51). Theresa is content with her life as it is, and sees no need to chase after a man in order to improve it. Reid thus introduces a family unit that is unplanned, unconventional, and unapologetic, yet is arguably the most successful family in the play – there is no drunk or gambling father, and no neglectful husband; in short, it is strengthened, not weakened, by a lack of men and masculinity. While her friend Beth might view marriage, and the Beleek tea set that comes with it, as “a fall-back option [...] a lifeline which is perceived as a conduit to economic security”, Theresa demonstrates that marriage and men are not necessary for a family, and encourages Beth to follow in her footsteps (McNamee, Lovett, eds, 1987, 214). The end of the play shows Beth taking the first steps towards independence, as she leaves her and Stephen’s home and is freed from the societal pressures of marriage when Sarah passes away.

Thus, *Tea in a China Cup* demonstrates a gendered generational shift, as the younger generation ultimately chooses to operate on their own, without the partnership of men. Though Sarah contends that “[i]t’s not natural for a woman to stay single”, especially in the Northern Irish society depicted in Reid’s play, where marriage and children are perceived as the natural outcomes of a woman’s life, Beth and Theresa demonstrate that emotional, financial, and sexual independence are what is right and best for women (Reid 1997, 52). As Reid and her play suggest, the youngest generation’s choices are all the more radical *because* of the conservative attitudes within Northern Ireland, where a child born out of wedlock and a wife abandoning her neglectful husband were circumstances that came with societal, as well as personal, consequences: Theresa is forced to lie, at her mother’s request, about her circumstances while in Belfast, while Beth finds herself leaving a marriage that her whole family and neighborhood had pressured and encouraged. The public nature of their private lives signifies the breakdown between the domestic and the political arenas: social and religious policies, regardless of their legality, have clearly impacted the private lives of women and the choices available to them.

The tension between women’s public and private lives is also evident in Reid’s *The Belle of the Belfast City*⁵. As with *Tea in a China Cup*, three generations of women are featured onstage: Dolly Dunbar, the family matriarch; her two daughters, Rose and Violet (Vi), and Rose’s daughter, Belle. Though Dolly is a feisty and independent woman throughout her entire life, we are told that when she married “she gave up the stage and did all her dressing-up and singing and dancing just for” her husband Joe (180). In essence, Dolly’s marriage removed her from any public life she may have had, and instead placed her firmly within the confines of the home. Another version of events, given by Dolly’s older daughter Vi, is that Joe took Dolly away from a life of “draughty halls [...] and waited on her hand and foot for the rest of his life” (181). In either scenario, it is apparent that the man is making the decision;

it is not Dolly who runs away with Joe, but Joe who takes her. Yet Joe's true love for his wife is clear, potent, and wholeheartedly returned by Dolly; they are affectionate, caring, and absolutely dedicated to each other throughout their lives. In addition, though Joe may have taken his wife out of the public eye, he was not intent on having a traditional marital relationship. "I was never a housewife", Dolly recounts. "My Joe never wanted that. He was a rare bird. An Ulsterman who could cook" (195). Judging by the interviews and home visits documented by Susan McKay in *Northern Protestants: An Unsettled People* (2005), Joe Dunbar is indeed a rare bird. McKay relates how one woman's twenty-seven year-old son "had to leave soon and needed his sandwiches" (46). Yet instead of making one himself, he "was pacing about in motorbike gear, looking at his watch", waiting for his mother to make a sandwich for him, which she did before "she cut the sandwich in two, and put it in a plastic supermarket bag" for him, as though for a child's school lunch (*ibidem*). Similarly, McKay meets with a man who "was sorry he couldn't offer any hospitality, his wife was away" (140). Though Joe Dunbar may indeed be a "rare bird", Dolly's transfer from public to private life still indicates that the confining of women to the domestic continues in Northern Ireland.

This confinement to the domestic makes it unsurprising that it is two men, Jack and Davy, who are the most politically active in the play, which is set in 1986, around the events of the "Ulster Says No" rally. Jack, the nephew of the family matriarch, Dolly Dunbar, is a unionist politician set to speak at the Anti-Agreement rally, and is also active in National Front activities. Davy, a local teenager, is an enthusiastic follower of Jack's and keeps up with the political and paramilitary activity in the neighborhood. Unlike these politically active men, the women of the Dunbar family only air their political opinions and grievances in the home, which also serves as their place of work and source of income. In the course of a debate between the two Dunbar sisters, Vi and Rose, the playwright Reid succeeds in condemning the entire political system, at least when it comes to women's rights and issues. Vi explains that she votes for unionist candidates because she fears a government run by the Catholic Church, "[w]here things like contraception and divorce are a legal and a mortal sin. It's written into their Catholic Constitution. [...] We wouldn't have many rights in a United Ireland!" (Reid 1997, 221). But Rose points out Vi's error in relying on Protestant political parties to protect her rights as a woman. The connection between the Protestant church and unionist leaders means that their political platform "is in total agreement with the right-wing Catholic Church on issues like divorce and abortion, on a woman's right to be anything but a mother or a daughter or a sister or a wife. Any woman outside that set of rules is the Great Whore of Babylon" (*ibidem*).

Rose is indeed correct when it comes to the politics of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, Protestantism and Catholicism. Within the legal and political spheres, both religions (and governments) find common ground on issues such as abortion and contraception, which is evidenced in

the tight restrictions on abortion in Northern Ireland (the only region in the UK to have such) and the late arrival of legal contraception in the Republic of Ireland, where abortion legislation remains a contentious, and confusing, issue for doctors and patients alike. In essence, such laws place a woman's bodily and reproductive rights second to men's, a legal status that is echoed in the portrayal of Northern Irish domestic life within Reid's plays. The use of politics and legislation to further promote second-class citizenship for women is thus doubly frustrating, as the enduring connection between the two religions and their affiliated political parties and representatives creates further roadblocks to legislation concerning women's rights and issues: one must convince both Church *and* State to evolve their attitudes before being able to move forward.

This conflation of religion and politics is espoused in the character Jack, who views women as "the instruments of the devil! The root of all evil!" (205). This distrust of the feminine noticeably filters into his politics, as his anti-Agreement speech warns men to "Guard our women [...]est they succumb to the insidious evil that festers and grows in our land. The phallic worship of priests in scarlet and gold. The pagan rites of black nuns. Sisters of satan. Sisters of sin" (242). His connection with the National Front also displays his conservative ideology, this time of a racist bent, which is all the more offensive considering that the father of Rose's daughter Belle is African-American. Indeed, Jack's political machinations seem to have no limit, as he uses the disabilities of a local boy, Davy, who underwent torture and humiliation after his arrest at the anti-Agreement rally, in order to further his campaign against RUC reform. In Reid's play, therefore, Jack is perhaps an indictment of the possible political future, in which the continuation of male-dominated conservative politics could lead to further division and disagreement within the province.

Considering the nature of Northern Irish politics and society, therefore, it is thus not surprising that the men in *The Belle of the Belfast City* have made themselves active in the politics of the province, while the intelligent, able, and equally enthusiastic women are left to debate their views in the private arena of the home. Even this domestic space ultimately comes to be controlled by conservative politicians: after Dolly has a stroke, her daughters are forced to sell the house so that Dolly may live out her final days by the sea. Their family home eventually ends up in the hands of a National Front politician, who plans to use the space for his Northern Ireland headquarters and thus strengthen the organization's bond with Jack and other unionist political leaders. Ultimately, then, though the Dunbar women are seemingly in control of the parlour room throughout the play, this female-dominated space is finally surrendered to the conservative masculinist institutions of Northern Ireland.

As the Troubles were brought to a political "end" with the advent of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, women again remained on the sidelines of politics, though women had been at the forefront of peace movements in Northern Ireland since the 1970s. Although the Northern Ireland Women's

Coalition (NIWC) earned a seat at the discussions table, which was also open to other smaller political parties such as the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP, linked to the Ulster Volunteer Force) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP, linked to the UDA), the NIWC was unable to achieve any long term electoral success⁶. The Agreement itself impacted women in several, albeit often tangential, ways. One of the more contentious articles of the Agreement called for the early release of political prisoners, many of whom had been in jail for several years, if not decades. One woman states that her husband “always expected me to be perfect, I think all men do, but I’ve had to learn to be independent. [...] He still thinks he’s the boss, the domineering one, but he’s in for a shock, we’ve changed that much” (Fairweather, McDonough, McFadyean 1984, 301). The impact of (male) prisoners’ release on their wives, partners, and families is an issue raised in much of Gary Mitchell’s drama, which is overtly focused on the everyday experience of loyalist paramilitaries in their homes and communities. When considering the majority of female characters in Mitchell’s plays, it is hard to imagine that he “found it hard to take women seriously. [...] I took years fighting against it in my own psyche, this thing of not respecting women” (quoted in McKay 2005, 117). If anything, the women in Mitchell’s plays are *more* deserving of respect than the men, as they constitute some of the strongest characters in his oeuvre.

Like the plays of Parker and Reid, Mitchell’s *Loyal Women*⁷ demonstrates the breakdown between the public and private lives of women in Northern Ireland. The play’s protagonist, Brenda, upholds many Protestant values and is a proud loyalist, to the extent that she is an active member of the WUDA. She is a caring and selfless mother and grandmother, and is loyal to her husband, Terry, throughout his prolonged time in prison. This spousal loyalty, however, is not reciprocated: at a party celebrating his release from prison, Terry cheats on Brenda with a fellow WUDA member, Heather. The reactions to Terry’s infidelity points out a gendered double-standard: for men, marital fidelity does not hold the same societal importance as it might for women, and is even considered unnatural. Terry justifies his infidelity by explaining that, “After sixteen years in prison a man has needs... those needs can get out of control and make a man do things” (Mitchell 2009, 32). Yet for a woman on the outside, such “needs” are expected to be repressed and controlled: women’s private affairs become very public knowledge. For women, cheating on their imprisoned husbands or partners signified a betrayal of their entire community and “the cause”, and was also considered sexually deviant. When considering the WUDA itself, this charge holds particular significance: while *Loyal Women* is set in the present (i.e.: the late 90s or early 2000s), the actual WUDA “was disbanded in 1974 following the murder by some of its members of fellow member Ann Ogilby, a married Protestant woman who took parcels to an unmarried prisoner” (Sales 1997, 148).

Though Brenda remains sexually loyal to her husband and thus loyalism itself, another woman, Adele, calls her loyalism into question when she begins

a relationship with a Catholic man, who is suspected of being in the IRA. Be-goña Aretxaga notes that if women transgressed expectations of sexual fidelity to their own, whether they be Protestant or Catholic, these women could be “shamed publicly by tarring and feathering or by shaving off all hair” (1997, 152)⁸. This was almost exclusively a punishment for women, often enacted by women, perhaps proving Eileen MacDonald’s point that “there is no level of violence that a woman will not commit” (1991, 231). In the play, Adele is questioned by the WUDA about her relationship with the Catholic man, and threatened with this punishment should she not stop seeing him. Though Adele finally cooperates with the women and promises to end the relationship, she is nevertheless subjected to tar-and-feathering. The loyalist punishment for her transgression is shown to shocking effect in the play, perhaps all the more alarming because it takes place in the parlour room, which is decorated for the upcoming Christmas holiday. Instead of such drastic consequences being acted offstage, Mitchell insists that the audience witness Adele’s torture. The assault on the audience is both visual and auditory – not only do we witness as “HEATHER and JENNY pour the tar over ADELE” and watch as it “burns into her hair, head and skin”, we also witness Adele’s prolonged screaming as she struggles to escape this onslaught (2003, 101-102).

Though the women of the WUDA seem to be in control of the parlour room space, the audience learns that Adele’s punishment has come at the behest of the male UDA leaders. Indeed, the UDA men enact control over the women’s whole organization, from its choice of leadership to its punishment squads. When Maureen expresses her desire to retire from her commanding position in the WUDA, her replacement choice, Gail, is vehemently rejected by the men. Maureen remarks how this is because Gail is “not the friendly, sociable, politically-correct face that they want. She scares people. She scares most men for flip sake” (79). Though Brenda believes these qualities should work in Gail’s favor, “[y]ou always need a strong leader, especially one who could stand up to the men”, Maureen again emphasizes that “they won’t let it happen”; clearly the men do not want the possibility of being overruled, or for the WUDA to be run by a woman who may not heed their orders (79).

Though the women are in charge of Adele’s punishment in the parlour room, the UDA men continue to linger in the background of the women’s activities. Brenda warns Adele that if she does not stop seeing her Catholic boyfriend “[t]he men will take over. And they will do really, really bad things to you” (97). Indeed, when Maureen and Brenda first discussed the need to bring Adele in or questioning, it is evident that her punishment could have been much worse, and even of a sexual nature: Maureen recounts how “[t]hey wanted to send her [Adele] up to one of their punishment squads. That wouldn’t be right. [...] Some of the men wanted to do worse than that. There are many ways a woman can be marked. Brenda, they could ruin that wee girl’s life” (90). Within Northern Irish, and in this case specifically loyalist, society, women thus colluded with men in

their own repression. Again, however, this repression is linked to an expression of loyalty, for by turning against other women, these women become the *most* loyal to their men, church, and nation. Thus, even though the women of the WUDA are powerful and in control, this dominance is still largely restricted to the parlour room and, not unlike *The Belle of the Belfast City*, this domestic control is ultimately wrested from the women, as it is the men of the UDA who are truly in charge of what happens within this space.

Brenda, however, does ultimately rebel against the omnipresence of masculinity. Though she has been loyal to her marriage and to Ulster, she plans to divorce Terry and is intent on leaving the WUDA, thus cutting all ties with paramilitaries and paramilitary organizations. Her experience as a single mother and new grandmother has led Brenda to change her priorities: "I used to have a list it read like this: protestants, Ulster, the Queen, Britain and fuck everything else but I changed that list to me, my mum, my daughter and her daughter and that's the way it will stay" (85). This second list is significant in its gendered make-up, as it is clear that men are thoroughly excluded from her new list of priorities. While Brenda's immediate future is unclear (the play ends after she stabs a fellow WUDA member, Heather), the audience can be certain that she is determined to be independent of the conservative masculinist institutions of Northern Irish society.

As explored in these plays, Northern Ireland's deep-seated religious traditions, Catholic and Protestant alike, have shaped the roles and structures of both the public and private lives of men and women. In *The Belle of the Belfast City*, the character Janet summarizes the place of women in Northern Ireland: men are "[a]fraid of women. Afraid we'll tempt you. Afraid we won't. They say there are no women in Ireland. Only mothers and sisters and wives" (Reid 1997, 209-210). This pigeon-holing of women into domestic roles can be attributed to the prevalent male attitudes listed by Janet: women are often seen exclusively in terms of sexuality, which both entices men and encourages them to repress the female contingent of society in all its forms. Within the public sphere, the sectarian nature of the Troubles meant that "legislation in the field of employment rights has shifted the emphasis to tackling religious and political discrimination", rather than gender discrimination (Mahon, Morgan 1991, 61). Such legislation perhaps further discouraged working-class women especially from speaking out for their own rights, as it would have significantly affected their working-class male counterparts. Thus, the struggle simply to gain an active role in the male-dominated political process has meant that raising women's concerns is often postponed or avoided: for example, the NIWC put such issues as abortion on the back burner, seeing their priority as solely "woman's participation, and campaigning on reproductive choice would not have contributed strategically to that end" (Fearon 1999, 27).

The struggle for women to resist being pigeon-holed into the domestic, and to be regarded as individuals in their own right, is still an ongoing one in

the Northern Irish working-class community explored and written by Stewart Parker, Christina Reid, and Gary Mitchell, and a struggle these playwrights were forced to acknowledge and write in order to engage with the issues facing their society. Their plays demonstrate how the home and nation have become inextricably linked, as one serves as a microcosm for the other. Often unheard by the predominantly male presence in Northern Irish politics, the women in *Pentecost*, *Tea in a China Cup*, *The Belle of the Belfast City*, and *Loyal Women* find their voice in the domestic comfort of their homes, rather than the public arenas of politics and paramilitarism. Against the changing landscape of Northern Ireland, the plays thus highlight the relatively silenced position of women within the province: as men became involved in the “active” roles the Troubles provided, namely as politicians, paramilitaries, and police, women retained the parlour room as their personal debating space, a segregation of space which reflects the gender imbalance within Northern Irish politics and society. Yet despite this reign over the domestic sphere, the women’s perceived power and dominance is continually subverted, through economic, sexual, and political means.

Following from this, it is evident that Parker, Reid, and Mitchell ultimately reflect distinct and separate debating spheres for men and women in their drama. In *Pentecost*, men are active and involved – Ruth’s husband David is an RUC officer and Peter has been involved in the Civil Rights movement in America – while the women are confined, emotionally, physically, and even spiritually to the home. The youngest generation of women of Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup* seek to challenge the domestic and marital roles assigned to them by their conservative society, while the female characters in *The Belle of the Belfast City* seek to reclaim the political power of the parlour room as they actively debate with one another, and occasionally the male politico Jack, though this space is ultimately wrested from them. Gendered space continues to play a role in Mitchell’s *Loyal Women* – while the women take control of the political possibilities within the parlour room, making it the setting for WUDA meetings and punishment squads, we learn that it is ultimately the men of the UDA who are behind many of their actions and decisions. Within these four plays, then, is a reflection of the continued male dominance of public space, but also the encroachment by men into the traditionally ‘feminine’ space of the home. Even though this private sphere is a space of debate and action for the women, it is still limited and confining, and thus echoes of the general place of women in Northern Irish politics and society over the past forty years.

Notes

¹ Jimmy Fay’s 2013 production of *Mixed Marriage* at the Lyric Theatre Belfast altered this ending, with Ma Rainey, the hopeful mother-in-law, also falling victim to the rioters’ violence.

² *Pentecost*, in Parker 2000, 169-245; subsequent references are quoted in brackets.

³ *Tea in a China Cup*, in Reid 1997, 1-66; subsequent references are in brackets.

⁴The majority of schools in Northern Ireland are either “controlled” (run by the state education board, and therefore reflecting a Protestant ethos) or “maintained” (run by the Council for Catholic Maintained schools).

⁵*The Belle of Belfast City*, in Reid 1997, 177-250; subsequent references are in brackets.

⁶The PUP is the only party of the three to still have any real electoral impact, though this is still quite limited.

⁷Mitchell 2003; subsequent references are in brackets.

⁸This punishment technique is still in effect today: in March 2012 a young mother’s grave was tarred and feathered, and in August 2007 a man was tarred, feathered, and tied to a lamppost with a placard around his neck describing his offence: “I’m a drug dealing scumbag” (Peterkin 2007).

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