

## Resisting Motherhood in Thomas Kilroy's *Talbot's Box*

Sean Scully

National University of Ireland, Galway (<S.SCULLY4@nuigalway.ie>)

*Abstract:*

This paper discusses the heretofore unexamined role of women characters as performing agents in Thomas Kilroy's play, *Talbot's Box*. Employing a close analysis of textual patterns, it argues that the first Priest Figure and the Woman represent a collaborative effort by two women to highlight and to resist their confinement into roles of symbolized motherhood. In this aim, they are ultimately unsuccessful. Their relationship is fractured, and its object thwarted by the actions of the play's male characters. We see their suppression as shameful indictment of what it means to be a woman in the world Kilroy is showing us, and by drawing attention to their pain, we are better able to understand why Matt Talbot seeks a life of solitude.

*Keywords:* Matt Talbot, Motherhood, Thomas Kilroy, Women

The plays of Thomas Kilroy have been much remarked upon for their foregrounding techniques of artifice and theatricality, antithetical to the modes of naturalism. Constituent in these discussions has been a shared view among critics that Kilroy's (male) characters are performing subjects, and that what they are performing is an experience of fractious and fracturing identities<sup>1</sup>. Far less critical attention has been given to the exploration of Kilroy's female characters. Anna McMullan's article, "Masculinity and Masquerade in Thomas Kilroy's 'Double Cross' and 'The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde'" (2002) offers a welcome corrective to this neglect by drawing attention to the normative, stabilizing roles that women play in Kilroy's work. The present essay highlights the broader interpretive potentialities of women as subjects in their own right, and posits a new character focus according to which our

<sup>1</sup> See in particular: Sampson 1991; Roche 1994; Dubost 2002, Grene 2002, Murray 2002.

understanding of *Talbot's Box*<sup>2</sup> might be revitalized. It argues that two of the play's characters, the first Priest Figure and the Woman, represent a collaborative effort by two women to highlight and to resist their confinement into roles of symbolized motherhood. In this aim, they are ultimately unsuccessful. Their relationship is fractured, and its object thwarted by the intervention of First Man and Second Man, and by the rebirth of Matt Talbot.

That the Priest Figure and the Woman are worthy subjects for our consideration is indicated by the central theme of Matt Talbot's story, and by the structure of Kilroy's play. The eponymous Talbot is inspired by and to some extent echoes the life of the Venerable Matt Talbot (1856-1925) of (scant) historical record<sup>3</sup>. The real Talbot was a Dublin labourer who, at the age of twenty-eight, gave up the alcohol to which he had become addicted, and lived the rest of his days in a state and spirit of ascetic devotion to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Thematically, the narratives of Kilroy's Talbot and the historical Talbot are organized around questions about what it means to be born and reborn. The Talbot of record has been used as a means to illustrate the teachings of the Catholic Church in Ireland<sup>4</sup>. The rebirth of Kilroy's Talbot is the result of an act of violence against women, committed in the first act of the play. The beginning of the second act in many ways mirrors the opening of the first. The relationship between the two permits us to understand that the violence we have witnessed is exemplary of a condition, rather than a single, isolated act. From this we are able to glean something of the fears and torments which afflict and influence the life and mind of the otherwise largely unknowable Matt Talbot.

*Talbot's Box* opens with darkness (Kilroy 1997 [1979], 9). Darkness is a condition that both fascinates and beguiles. It is a state of statelessness. It is a condition without form. It is an end as well as a beginning. It represents a moment of infinite opportunity and an unbroken expanse of infinite closure. It is blind without the need of sight. It is unity without being. To disrupt it is both an act of liberation and an act of violence against a condition of peace. It has the power both to conceal and to reveal. Darkness is the analogue of pure light. It is a paradox, qualified in the opening line of *Talbot's Box* by the raising of the lights, and by "*the strains of the hymn 'Faith of Our Fathers'*" (9). The intervention by the hymn draws our attention to the darkness as an element of the play. It helps us understand that the darkness is not simply a

<sup>2</sup> *Talbot's Box* was first performed at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin on October 13, 1977 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. For premier and text publication information, see Byrne 2002.

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting, if perhaps not altogether disinterested account of the life of Matt Talbot, see Glynn 1942 [1928].

<sup>4</sup> See Canavan 1932; Cassidy 1933; Duff 1940.

transition to a beginning, but rather it is vital to the act of beginning. Darkness *is* the beginning. The hymn establishes a relationship with darkness and calls for our active interpretation of what it means to be in a condition of darkness. For some of us, the darkness may seem to signify something that is to be striven against and overcome. The hymn, therefore, might be understood as a welcome intervention by Christ and the Church on behalf of humanity. For others, the darkness may seem to represent the evils and ignorance of the Church itself. What is significant is that the hymn will focus our attention on the negative aspects and potentialities of darkness. We feel that what we desire is light. Only in the light are the beneficent forces of the divine active and present. Only in the light may we find truth. That we hear "*strains of the hymn*" (9) gives us a sense of something that has a communal and a familial, as well as a religious essence. It seems to suggest that the play itself is a component of a condition, a longer tradition that both precedes our theatrical experience and anticipates its future condition, expressed ambiguously both as further dissolution, and as greater unity. We do not have darkness and then a hymn; we have darkness and strands of the hymn. They are inextricably connected, units of the same whole. They ebb together as the light rises, but they are elemental in everything we are about to witness. Their vitality is absorbed, elaborated, reflected, refracted, and challenged in every transition. We see it absorbed in the opening of the box and in the movements of the actors. The bodies of the actors manifest the pieces of the hymn. They testify to its fractured reality but they do not as yet portend any particular resolution.

The box itself sustains this impression of interconnectedness between constituent parts. By preventing the actors from entering and exiting the acting space, Matt Talbot's box posits a fundamental connectedness between the events and the characters in the drama, such that characters are present and are implicated in events, even where they are neither moving nor speaking. The opening of the box reveals "*the PRIEST FIGURE busily manipulating the pedestal into position to one side. On it, statuesque, is the WOMAN, in the costume and pose of a statue of the Virgin*" (9).

Kilroy stipulates that the character of the Priest Figure "should be played by an actress" (Production Details Page). The decision is significant, as is the title under which the actress assumes the vestments of the Church. "Figure" is a qualifier: the word disrupts our efforts to easily assimilate the actress' femininity with the ready ideas of Mother Church by calling into question the Priest Figure's degree of membership within the Church, her capacity for agency, and even her corporeality. Because she is neither "priest" nor "figure" we are called upon to interrogate the possibilities and complexities of her ambiguous title, and to probe its implications for the woman who bears it. For example, the fact that her femininity is incongruous with the priesthood might lead us to the belief that her gender is to be understood sym-

bologically, but the qualifier casts doubts as to her status and station, and so permits us to consider her, if we elect to do so, in the character of a person. Nor does the function of the garments she wears serve to relieve the ambiguity: that she is “*in soutane and biretta*” (9) at once supports her interpretation as priest and also suggests that they are being used to deliberately disguise or prevent her self-representation as a woman. But womanhood is a necessary condition for motherhood, and where its expression is thwarted there must be a corresponding diminution of symbolic effect. To acknowledge that she is a Priest Figure should, therefore, cause us to question not only her position with respect to the Church, but also her position relative to family structures of which she may be a part, and to her own body. The title given to her also demands that we should be conscious of our interpretive choice to symbolize or to particularize her, and it encourages us to evaluate the effects of that choice relative to our understanding of the play, episodically and as a whole.

Examining the play more closely, we see that the ambiguous condition of the word “figure” actually allows Kilroy to give us two distinct Priest Figures, each of whom suggests a condition of being which, while superficially satisfying, is in fact an illusion. The first – the one this essay is concerned with – is an individual woman, symbolized into the role of a mother figure. The second is an articulated institution (the Irish Catholic Church), particularized as an individual father: that is to say as an ‘actual’ priest.

That the Priest Figure is not one character, but two, is suggested both in the terms by which the first Priest Figure identifies herself, and by the terms by which each Priest Figure is identified by the other characters in the play.

The first Priest Figure assumes the office of Mother Church, and thrice identifies herself with its embodiment. She poses and replies to First Man: “Yes – yes! Mother Church!” (12). Later, she advises First Man to “Return to the bosom of Mother Church” (14); and in the third instance, she replies: “Yes? Over here!” (15), when Woman mentions “Mother Church” (15). This first Priest Figure is addressed by the other characters only as a feminine subject. First Man exclaims to her: “Oh, Mother, Mother, I gave it all up when I was fifteen” (14); moments later, he implores of her: “Oh, Mother, help me over the hump” (14). The Woman, referring to the chains worn by Talbot, remarks: “It is – miraculous. Or rather will lead to miracles when Mother Church –” (15). She is interrupted, then continues: “– when Mother Church will raise this simple man to the calendar of the saints” (15). The second Priest Figure is addressed by the title, “Father” (24, 31, 46-47, 53-56). It is this second Priest Figure who attempts to influence and manipulate Matt Talbot.

The point of demarcation between the two Priest Figures is the aftermath of a sexual congress of the characters, as a result of which Matt Talbot is reborn (13-17). The line denoting the change is given to the First Man, who signals the dissolution of the link between the Woman and the Priest Figure by remarking, “All is forgiven. Good day, sister” (16). The Woman is

not addressed by name or by title before this line. The Woman addresses the Priest Figure only twice thereafter (24-25). The identifier "Mother Church" is not used again. Having positioned the Woman, the Priest Figure addresses her opening remarks to the audience:

My dear brethren in Jesus Christ! We are gathered here this evening to give honour to Matt Talbot (1856-1925). A simple Dublin working man. For years he had been a drunkard. A sinner. But then, my dear brethren, then – at the age of twenty-eight he was touched by the Holy Spirit. He reformed. Gave up the drink – (9)

The repetition of the word "brethren" is significant. By contrast, the second Priest Figure never uses the word, referring instead to his congregation as "My dear people" (24). The term "brethren" serves to draw our attention to the woman underneath the vestments. She wears the symbols of Mother and Mother Church, but the ideas for which they stand are a lie: she knows that what is valued are the symbols themselves, not her. She uses the word only twice more, both times as a means of drawing our attention to her true femininity (10).

The Woman whom the Priest Figure arranges (9) also exists under conditions of imposition. Like the Priest Figure, the Woman stands representative, both of the Church, and of the state of motherhood: she is arranged "*in the costume and pose of a statue of the Virgin*" (9). In the manner of her display, we see these symbolic offices as impositions against her nature: the Woman is not, in fact, a statue, and we know that the actress will not be able to maintain the pose into which she has been positioned, indefinitely. That her position precedes our awareness of her indicates that her condition is not assumed only for our benefit and instruction: what pain she feels is a pain of being, not a pain which arises only from being watched. Nevertheless, Kilroy permits us to understand that under the grotesque imposition, there is some faint glow of her true character, some inner beauty of spirit, which, if permitted to develop independently of the pressures to which she has been subjected, might flourish into something beyond symbolism, something real and meaningful: she is not a statue, but she is "*statuesque*" (9), an elaboration of the priestly "figure". So too is the Woman an elaboration of the Priest Figure herself. The effect is that the Priest Figure touches upon an idea in such a way as to invite reaction, and the Woman develops, explicitly, the criticism implicit in the words of the Priest Figure. She is the step too far, the resisting voice which the Priest Figure encourages to act and challenge, but which she dares not claim as her own.

In the first instance, their combined force provides the transition from the Priest Figure's speech to the Woman's expression of her desire to get down from the pedestal by allowing us to associate the reborn Talbot with the Woman's own desire to be reanimated. Directly she has invited the Wom-

an's question, "How long do I have to stand like this?" (9), the Priest Figure sets up the Woman's next revelation by saying: "You're supposed to be the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary!" (9). We know it is a setup because the statement would be unnecessary otherwise. Both the Priest Figure and the Woman know who the latter is supposed to be. The heavy stress placed on the sacred title by the use of all three words invites us to understand both that the Woman is not actually a statue of the mother of God, and nor is she a virgin. The Woman's reply, "Don't I know it!" (9), is a wry negation of her artificial position in both senses. From it, we can also deduce the significance of the "*blooded white medical coats*" (9) worn by the two men: it is her blood. That the blood is not simply a means of denoting the characters' role is indicated by the men themselves: they are assistants, not morticians. Their function relative to Talbot is not penetrative, but superficial only: to present a form, a face, to "prepare the corpse for its descent and consequent ascent or further descent, as the case may be" (11).

The pattern between the two women is continued. Resuming her summation of Talbot's life, death, and discovery, the Priest Figure states: "And when they came to take him, they discovered that he had bound himself with penitential chains, chords –" (10). Immediately, the Woman draws our attention to her own corporeality, and permits us to draw a distinction between Talbot's suffering, which was chosen by him, and her suffering, which is imposed upon her: "I'm going to get a cramp if this goes on much longer!" (10), she exclaims. The Priest Figure continues: "Such penance – such prayer – like a strong light, you see, blazing, and then he passed from this valley of darkness into eternal light –" (10). Again, the Woman uses the Priest Figure's cue to draw attention to the more physical reality they share together: Talbot is still very much with them, and his body smells (10). The Priest Figure's histrionic exhortation to "Remain on your pedestal at all costs!" (10) invites a strong reaction from the Woman. The Woman exclaims, "I will not!" (10), and immediately jumps down.

But as well as animating the Woman, the Priest Figure's forceful exertions serve to animate the two men (11). Their animation disrupts the relationship between the Priest Figure and the Woman. Immediately, both become secondary figures. The Priest Figure is no longer able to anticipate and guide speech; instead, she finds herself reacting to the speech of First Man and Second Man. The shift occurs where the Priest Figure instructs the men to "Hurry up back there!" (11). The remark by the First Man, "I thought t'was to be a sorta trial" (11), implies an action – or inaction – which is similar to what we have come to expect from the Priest Figure's relationship with the Woman, but the further development of the pattern is thwarted by the intervention of the Second Man, who remarks: "'Twas my understanding 'twas to be an entertainment" (11). The back and forth of the dialogue is then, for a time dictated by the conversation of the two men. The significance of the

women is not yet at an end, however. The animation of the two men is only a sort of practice birth; it prefigures the rebirth of Matt Talbot. The diminution of the Priest Figure and the Woman is symbolic of the loss of real status experienced by a woman who has performed her birthing function. It is not complete, however, because it is a practiced act, a theatrical device. It lacks a subject upon whom a familial name has been bestowed.

The real apotheosis of their function is expressed as a thinly veiled sexual encounter between the Priest Figure and First Man (13-16), initiated by the entrance of the "attractive nursing sister, carrying chains –" (13). It is worth noting, however, that even where they are at the apex of their sexual expressiveness, the actions of the two women are still being dictated by the two men: without the interruptions by the Second Man, it would be entirely possible to read the encounter between the Priest Figure and the First Man as an act of confession, only; but with Second Man's contribution, it is nearly impossible to miss the sexual connotation. His question, "What's going on around here?" (14), demands that we query what we are seeing, and as if to help us to the right conclusion, he sings snatches of a love song: "A-roamin' in the gloamin', with my bonnie lass from –" (14). That he is "*Rooting about under the trolley*" (14) (an action he has not performed heretofore and never repeats) while the First Man is "*On his knees before* PRIEST FIGURE" (14) will be of further information to the more sexually experienced reader. The details are too specific to be read innocently; but for the Priest Figure, it means that the significance of the act is all on his side. The Woman, likewise, is not permitted to express herself on her own terms. Her statement draws our attention, both to her sexuality and to her chains. Here the chains are functioning not as Talbot's chains, but as her chains. She is initially repulsed by the Second Man (13) only to return again (14). Her second effort is successful, and after a short conversation with the Second Man, she "*throws herself upon the trolley and kisses the figure of TALBOT, passionately*" (15). The act is not a liberating one. The ridiculousness of its execution invites our laughter, which has the effect, not of validating her expression of desire, but of further suppressing it as an act of harmless whimsy. We have placed ourselves in the shoes of the First Man, and as with the Priest Figure, we are not, therefore, simply witnesses to her oppression; we are, ourselves, agents of her oppressed condition.

The First Man then exclaims: "I've made my peace! Hey, everyone! I'm at peace with the Lord my saviour! All is forgiven! Good day, sister" (15-16). What is being signalled here is his sexual and spiritual fulfilment, achieved by his intercourse with her real body; implicit in this is the assumption that the Priest Figure was simply a means of achieving that end. He does not ask what she got out of the experience. Nor does he permit either of the women to determine the effect of their intercourse; instead, the two men announce the birth of Matt Talbot (17). Thus, the bodies of the two women are appropriated and symbolized again into a state of motherhood, and what would

otherwise have been merely a sexual liaison is therefore defined as a procreative act, resulting in the rebirth of Matt Talbot. Thereafter, the women's identities are not bound to one another, but to Talbot.

Talbot is reborn in the light of truth, but neither the light nor the truth it reveals is uplifting. Instead, the light draws our attention to the fact that Talbot is born into a world where people are in pain:

*With a sudden, startling energy, he rises on the trolley and flings both arms out in the shape of crucifixion. As he does so, blinding beams of light shoot through the walls of the box, pooling about him and leaving the rest of the stage in darkness. The other four figures cringe back, the women screaming. (17)*

This pain is more than the pain of the delivery room: "A high-pitched wailing cry rises, scarcely human but representing human beings in great agony. As it reaches its crescendo it is of physical discomfort to the audience" (17). The unnatural, violent conditions of his birth are symptomatic of a world in which proper affection is wanting. Directly Talbot has been born, First Man callously remarks: "I find the ah – specimen interesting" (18).

Pain is to be elemental in the life of Matt Talbot. The opening of the second act gives us some knowledge of his early years:

*Before the lights go up, the shaking voice of TALBOT can be heard in the darkness, singing snatches of hymns. The lights find him kneeling on his trolley. To one side, a makeshift tenement kitchen. At a table, drinking their tea, the WOMAN, FIRST MAN and SECOND MAN dressed, respectively, as mother, little boy and father of the Dublin slums. While TALBOT sings the FATHER makes rude gestures up at him while the MOTHER tries to restrain the FATHER. (37)*

As with the opening of the first scene, darkness and hymns are linked: here, instead of "strains" (9) we have "snatches" (37). The second Priest Figure addresses the audience (37), but since there is no longer a relationship with the Woman to foreground his remarks, he is very quickly cut adrift from the action. As the scene develops, the Father's anger grows:

*She tries to hold him and they struggle. Cries of "Get off me", "Don't", "Please don't". He begins to beat her, brutally, finally knocking her unconscious onto the floor while he collapses into a chair. FIRST MAN has run forward, petrified, a frightened little boy looking out into the world. (39)*

We can see the parallel Kilroy has created between the two openings in order that we should understand that his women – his mothers – suffer in conditions in which life leaves them. The beating of Talbot's mother early in the second act (39) represents a perverse appropriation of the quest for voice, for liberation from present conditions, as expressed at the beginning



of the play. Here again, the Woman is objectified, but this time, it is in relation to the dishes: in the eyes of the father, both are items of domestic economy, which lack individuality and agency, even in the spheres to which they have been uniquely assigned. Neither their destructibility nor their humanity causes him to exercise greater care and consideration for them; rather, he sees their vulnerability as slights against himself: in his mind, they are not victims, but agents which have conspired to thwart his ambitions and deny him his proper dues (39). We see the effect of his rage join the blood on the white medical coats from the first act (9); we see their unity as a shameful indictment of what it means to be a woman in the world Kilroy is showing us.

And it is because his father was violent that we understand Talbot's desire for solitude: he is afraid that he might become his father. Talbot knows of his "bad temper" (50). He knows that he hates (46). He feels that "It takes another to bring out the worst in everyone" (22), and where he expresses anger or irritation, it is always directed against the Woman, or the Priest Figure (20, 22, 47-48, 51, 57). We know that in some place inside him, he already is his father. Matt Talbot lives only a life of isolation so that he may escape himself, but he believes in the possibility of a better world; he imagines a world in which the light reveals people living in peace, and where we hear honest work rather than hymns. Here, the actions of man have been turned to good account:

The old man worked at the bench, shavin' the yella timbers in the sunlight. An' the boy used help him. They worked together. They niver spoke. No need for words. Nuthin' was heard but the sound of timber. Then wan day – wan day, the boy left. He put down the tools outta his hands. Again, nare a word. The old man came to the door with him. They kissed wan another. Then the mother came like a shadda from the house 'n she kissed the boy too. Then the boy walked down the road in the dust 'n the hot sun. An' way in the far distance of the city he could hear them, the sound of the hammers 'n they batin' the timbers inta the shape o' the cross. (63)

But we do not live in that world; not yet. For Kilroy's Talbot, darkness was the only condition to which he could aspire as a being of the world: "Beggin' your pardon, Father, I think meself the darkness is Gawd" (47).

As the play ends, "*The great doors of the box are closed from without by the two MEN and the WOMAN who stand looking in through cracks in the walls from which bright light comes which illuminates their faces*" (63).

And we are left to wonder whether the light bodes well or ill for the future.

#### *Works Cited*

- Byrne Ophelia (2002), "Thomas Kilroy: A Bibliography", *Irish University Review* 32, 1, Special Issue: "Thomas Kilroy", 176-190.  
 Canavan J.E. (1932), "Matt Talbot: 1856-1925", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 21, 84, 513-530.

- Cassidy J.F. (1933), "Matt. Talbot: A Great Penitent", *The Irish Monthly* 61, 720, 374-379.
- Dubost Thierry (2002), "Kilroy's Theatre of the Conflicted Self", *Irish University Review* 32, 1, Special Issue: "Thomas Kilroy", 10-17.
- Duff Edward (1940), "Saint in Overalls: The Lesson of Matt Talbot", *The Irish Monthly* 68, 807, 490-500.
- Glynn Joseph (1942 [1928]), *Life of Matt Talbot*, Dublin, Catholic Truth Society of Ireland.
- Greene Nicholas (2002), "Staging the Self: Person and Persona in Kilroy's Plays", *Irish University Review* 32, 1, Special Issue: "Thomas Kilroy", 70-82.
- Kilroy Thomas (1997 [1979]), *Talbot's Box*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press.
- McMullan Anna (2002), "Masculinity and Masquerade in Thomas Kilroy's *Double Cross* and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*", *Irish University Review* 32, 1, Special Issue: "Thomas Kilroy", 126-136.
- Murray Christopher (2002) "Thomas Kilroy: The Artist and the Critic", *Irish University Review* 32, 1, Special Issue: "Thomas Kilroy", 83-94.
- Roche Anthony (1994), "Kilroy's Doubles", in Id., *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 189-215.
- Sampson Denis (1991), "The Theatre of Thomas Kilroy: Boxes of Words", in Jacqueline Genet, R.A. Cave (eds), *Perspectives of Irish Drama and Theatre*, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, 130-139.