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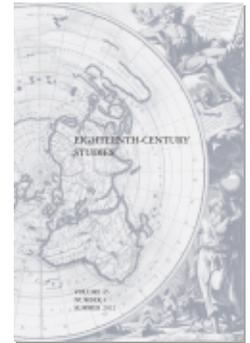
Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry 1540-1780 (review)

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SINGLE TITLE REVIEWS

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Sarah E. McKibben, *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry 1540–1780* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010). Pp. 196. €50.

In this book, Sarah McKibben displays her very considerable scholarly and philological abilities through detailed readings of a body of literature that is little known beyond Irish studies circles, and even there not often accorded sustained critical attention. Whereas previous analyses have tended to focus on the changes in socioeconomic status of the Irish bard as he moved from a privileged position under aristocratic patronage to a state of dispossession in an increasingly anglicized and colonized world, McKibben's primary concern is "the central role of gender in early modern Irish poetry's anticolonial critique" (3).

McKibben analyzes a selection of poems from this 240-year period to show how conceptions of masculinity as invoked by (male) poets transformed over time to address changes in their own and Ireland's power relationship vis-à-vis the English, and how these changes affected the ideological and symbolic roles accorded women in these works, ranging from innocent victim to, increasingly, seductress and whore: accomplices rather than casualties of the colonial subjugators, hence partly to blame for the poet's own impotence in the face of a conquest experienced as emasculation. As McKibben puts it, "[female Ireland's] figuration as compromised and sullied by prostitution and the birthing of 'bastards' metaphorised the compromises and cultural transformation—or adulteration—of Irish people who had to come to terms with English power" (67). She avoids an overly schematic linear narrative by pointing to the ambiguities and contradictions that can mark poems from the same period, even different parts of a single poem; as she notes, "[Ireland-as-woman] functioned at once as a lost dream, a shameful reproach, and a possibility of transformation . . ." (67).

McKibben describes her *modus operandi* as "combining specialised philological and historical scholarship with feminist, queer, and postcolonial literary-critical approaches" (3). The strength of her book, however, lies not in theoretical

explorations but rather in close readings of individual poems, conveyed in a lucid, often elegant prose only rarely marred by infelicitous expressions, such as the repeated references to “colonial transculturation (or mutual transformation of sociocultural forms).” McKibben is especially good when she yokes reflections on particular words or phrases with larger thematic concerns, as when she explains how, in the late sixteenth-century poem “A fhir ghlacas a ghalldacht” [“O man who follows English ways”] by Mac an Bhaird, “the dramatic rhyming opposition of *galldacht* (foreignness) and *alltacht* (wildness) offers two abstract terms by which the larger encounter of cultures may be framed and contextualised” (29). Her lengthy discussion of this poem (24–36) is a model study, foregrounding the importance of satire as a generic component of much Irish poetry in this period, and showing how notions of manliness versus effeminacy could readily lend themselves to an anticolonial critique.

Also very good is her treatment of Aogán Ó Rathaille, perhaps the best-known Irish poet of the eighteenth century. Emphasizing generic and ideological variations in his writings that are too often overlooked, McKibben explores the subtle changes in Ó Rathaille’s work over time that registered the larger changes taking place in Irish society and transforming his own role in it. My one criticism here is that, as with some other poems she discusses, her analysis of “Gile na Gile” (ca. 1714), Ó Rathaille’s great *aisling* [vision poem], is so focused on individual words and parts of lines that we never get a sense of the poem in its entirety, as an aesthetic whole, making it difficult to truly appreciate her claims about its extraordinary power and beauty. Generally speaking, where McKibben quotes fuller sections of a poem, the resulting analysis is much more effective and compelling. Generous quoting from the poetry is particularly desirable because, since there is no accessible modern edition of the great majority of poems examined here, students and nonspecialists cannot readily consult the complete poems for themselves. Fortunately, this is not the case for the occasionally anthologized “Gile na Gile” (see, for example, Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella’s *An Duanaire 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* [1985]).

Given McKibben’s obvious mastery of the Irish language, one wonders why she chose in most instances to use other scholars’ translations, especially since she often indicates that she has “modified” them. The one instance in which there is a discernible rationale for this practice is “Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire” [“The Lament for Art O’Leary”], where the alternation of her own and Eilís Dillon’s translations of a poem composed “within a collective, communal, typically female lament tradition” (100) effectively underscores the existence of a female collaborative community. In poems that often have a number of different versions, one might also wonder why McKibben chose to analyze one version over another. Notations on verbal variants in the endnotes shed little light on the grounds of her selection. On the other hand, in the one instance where different poetic versions are made the explicit subject of her reflections—in her commentary on three post-1607 poems in terms of their intertextuality and their revisions over time (45–52)—the discussion is highly illuminating.

The fact that this study is so text oriented means that, with the partial exception of “The Lament for Art O’Leary,” there is little about the oral and performative aspects of the poems, and nothing about the music that might have accompanied them. The latter is important because in some instances, the tune to which a poem was set must be taken into account to appreciate its full (especially political) import. The reader is left to speculate about how the “endangered mas-

culinities” and the often paradoxical anticolonial stance explored in McKibben’s book become refracted through the act of a male poet performing his work before an actual audience, perhaps including women and/or Anglo-Irish. The absence from her discussion of Turlough O’Carolan, who wrote music and poems in Irish for mostly Anglo-Irish patrons, including members of Jonathan Swift’s circle, underscores these omissions and misses an opportunity to connect this study to areas more familiar to students of the eighteenth century.

But this omission does little to detract from the many strengths of McKibben’s study, which manages to be broadly relevant to a number of scholarly fields despite its rather specialized topic. This breadth is registered in the book’s expressed aims to “stimulate further close reading of early modern texts, promote their inclusion in the classroom, begin to make these texts more accessible, and initiate new conversations about a provocative and fascinating poetic inheritance” (11). One certainly hopes that McKibben’s excellent study will help bring about the realization of these goals.

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Shmuel Feiner, *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, translated by Chaya Naor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010). Pp. 330. \$65.00.

The decline of religious observance in modern Europe—commonly referred to as “secularization”—is a highly contested historical phenomenon. As originally conceived by sociologists more than forty years ago, the “secularization thesis” assumes that the more modern a society is, the more secular it will be. Although there is no denying that the role of religion in some modern societies has become noticeably shrunken, such critics as José Casanova, Talal Asad, and now Peter Berger reject the claim that this decline was inevitable. They have also rejected the structural assumptions upon which the idea of secularization is based.

With the publication of Israeli historian Shmuel Feiner’s *Origins of Jewish Secularization*, we have a work that aims to rehabilitate the beleaguered secularization thesis. Organized chronologically, the book examines the background to the abandonment of religious norms, the denial of beliefs, and the growing indifference to religious authority in six leading cities in Western and Central Europe: London, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Berlin, Breslau, and Prague. Feiner is concerned primarily with the behavioral aspects of secularization and how these reflected changes in Jewish self-definition. In his view, polar differences between the secular and religious orientations account for the emergence of two socially distinct and ideologically charged camps.

Feiner’s main historical claim is that the roots of Jewish secularization extended back to the beginning of the eighteenth century, more than two generations before the cultural revolution of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment). On this point, he repeats the argument made by Azriel Shohet a half-century ago, though Feiner has broadened his study to include the Netherlands and England in addition to Germany. He argues that such marginal groups as *conversos*, neo-Karaites, and