Reading the Irish Woman

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Conclusion

This study has explored the complexity of cultural encounters in which Irish womanhood has evolved. In the ‘constantly shifting kaleidoscope of give and take’ between cultures, women’s identities were negotiated and re-negotiated in each of the periods and contexts analysed in this study.¹ We have traced the circulation of ideas, fantasies and aspirations which have shaped women’s lives in actuality and in imagination. There are traces in the cultural material of a desire to explore many different ways of being a woman. Attention to women’s cultural consumption and production shows that one individual may in one day identify with representations of heroines of romantic fiction, patriots, philanthropists, literary ladies, film stars, career women, popular singers, advertising models and foreign missionaries. The processes of cultural consumption, production and exchange provide evidence of women’s agency, aspirations and activities within and far beyond the domestic sphere.

In this tangled web of motive and purpose, it is impossible neatly to categorise cause and effect. It is possible to trace the circulation and readership of texts promoting women’s education, for example, but this does not provide conclusive proof of their impact on educational opportunity. Advertisements sold modern appliances by promoting fantasies of new forms of domestic life and personal freedom. Such appliances did change the lives of women who could afford them, but effectively trapped them in a new form of domesticity. Popular films, plays and novels explored real issues for women, particularly in relation to work and opportunities for marriage. The fantasy solutions they proposed to these problems may often have been implausible, but they offered solace to some and space for dissent and change to others. Fantasy is a powerful motivational force and the idea of America, for example, had a profound impact on the actual lives of many Irish women.

These case studies have explored that ‘evolving cultural hybrid’, the Irish woman. Womanhood in Ireland is constructed at the intersection of Irish local concerns and international developments. A complex picture of women’s reading, writing and aspirations emerges which challenges the assumption that Catholic cultural hegemony was the prevailing force in determining women’s roles. The adaptation of European literary modes and genres by Irish-language authors is evident in texts such as ‘Párlaiment na mBan’, which continued to be read in manuscript form throughout the eighteenth century. Simultaneously, there was a flourishing market in the reprinting in Ireland of works by English Protestant ministers, London-based bluestocking women and translations into English of French Catholic texts, which circulated irrespective of denominational differences. When Catholic Church control of social and cultural practice intensified in the post-Famine era, there remained a persistent demand for imported novels, newspapers, plays and eventually films which exposed the readership to different values. Censorship, while vigorous, was not always consistent. Eugene O’Neill’s explorations of sexual repression and familial neurosis were performed to great acclaim due to his Irish Catholic background.

Widely disseminated popular texts indicate the influence of international debates about the appropriate behaviour, education and appearance of women and concepts of domestic life on Irish opinion. This is not a relationship that can be characterised as an opposition between Irish conservatism and international progress. External influences often reinforced the domestic roles of women, from French religious texts in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to Hollywood films in the twentieth. While many of the literary texts were aimed at women of the cultural elite, advertisements, emigrant’s letters, film and radio ensured that women of all classes were by the twentieth century engaged in complex processes of cultural negotiation and exchange.

References to ‘new’ ways of being a woman, the undesirable modern tendencies in contemporary young women and the dangers of women’s fascination with imported ideas and goods were as prevalent in the eighteenth as the twentieth centuries. There was a constant low-level anxiety about the emergence of new and threatening forms of womanhood. Idealisation of domestic womanhood as an unchanging state has been combined with relentless reinventions of good womanhood. There is nothing new about the new woman and nothing static about the role of the housewife.

The assumption that women consumers of imported popular culture participated in a naïve form of consumption which exposed them to corrupting influences was a major preoccupation of Irish cultural commentary from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. This has had an enduring impact on
the academic construction of the cultural past which has tended to neglect and under-value what women actually read. It is only very recently that literary and cultural critics have begun to pay attention to what Franco Moretti described as the ‘great unread’.3

Any analysis of women’s reading practices problematises the dichotomy between the private and the public in women’s lives. From the eighteenth century onwards, reading was for many women an avenue into new forms of culture and education and different types of public access, including political engagement. Consumerism and women’s role as consumers opened up the possibility of women’s engagement with public and civic space.

The Irish woman writer is a fascinating invention, part marketing strategy, part political intervention, negotiating between an identification with Ireland and an international readership. From the time of Sydney Owenson, Irish women used and adapted forms of fiction which were centrally concerned with women’s subjective experience of a broad range of social and historical issues. They invented a persona of the Irish woman writer which appealed to a broad international audience and forged highly successful literary careers.

The process of defining Irish womanhood has, thus, been a key site of ideological tension, from the early reservations about young women reading novels, while encouraging the formal education of girls. In the early Victorian period, Daniel O’Connell’s rhetoric promulgated domestic virtues for women, while the political movement he headed depended on their participation in public protest. The female consumer was a constant focus of official anxiety, but she also performed a key economic function. She was crucial to the modernisation of Irish domesticity paradoxically promoted by the Irish state. On the one hand, women were urged to avoid the dangers of modernisation and preserve what was presented as the indigenous purity of Irish womanhood. At the same time the state-funded electricity company urged women to embrace modern utilities in their homes. Similarly, despite the Catholic Church’s opposition to female emigration, they produced handbooks advising prospective emigrants. The 1930s was a period of retrenchment and conservatism, but also one where more plays by women were performed in Dublin than at the end of the twentieth century. These apparent historical paradoxes indicate the complexity of the interplay between public discourse and personal conduct, ideas and actions, fantasy and reality. The cultural encounters explored in this volume indicate that Irish women were not passive recipients of imposed models of behaviour. Instead they negotiated, selected and at times defied the representations of womanhood presented to them in official and commercially sponsored media.