

**“I’ve got a bad wife in the house”: Competing Discourses of Nationalism, Sexuality,  
and Religion in *The Shadow of the Glen***

When Nora Burke leaves her husband and home at the end of John Millington Synge’s 1903 play *The Shadow of the Glen*,<sup>1</sup> her exit disrupts not only the patriarchal order but, more specifically, its Irish implementation, a patriarchy suffused with nationalist tendencies. Accordingly, *Shadow*’s initial performances with the *Irish National Theatre Society* were accompanied by extreme reactions: the spectators interrupted the play, strong public criticism was voiced in the newspapers, and several prominent members withdrew from the theater group.<sup>2</sup> But how could an apparently innocuous play stir up such emotions, be taken as an offense to nationalist ideals, read as an attack on Ireland itself? In order to understand the audience’s consternation with Synge’s drama, we will have to contextualize the play in its turn-of-the-century Irish Revivalist setting.<sup>3</sup> By disturbing the delicate balance between competing discourses of gender, nationalism, and religion, Synge’s play exposes the functioning of these different ideologies in this late colonial setting. Psychoanalysis and its recent applications to postcolonial theory offer a framework in which to analyze the Irish colonial psyche with its instabilities and inconsistencies, thus demonstrating how various contradictory demands are negotiated within the cultural context of the Irish Revival.<sup>4</sup> Reacting to an imperialist ideology which reads the colonial subject as feminine, Irish Revival literature creates a new conception of “Woman” and thus revalorizes the feminized colonial subject in order to create an ideological basis for a new Irish nation state.<sup>5</sup> *Shadow* is particularly

helpful in exploring these ideological tendencies, because it uses and subverts the “Ireland as Woman” metaphor that pervades much of Revivalist thought.

With the rise of the British empire and the emergence of a specifically colonial discourse, the English began to project their own lack onto the colonial subject by establishing the Irish as their inferior other in order to stabilize and assure their own consistency.<sup>6</sup> Because nineteenth century British discourse constructed women as morally superior, i.e., as possessing a more passionate and tender character, but nevertheless politically inept and in need of protection and care, this representation also affected the allegorical construction of Ireland as Woman (with quite similar political results).<sup>7</sup> The equivalent construction of the female as “better” than the male and hence to be protected—and patronized—was mirrored in Irish colonial politics where the Irish were represented as emotional, sensitive, and feminine. As a result, this seemingly positive construction of the Irish as feminine was used to defend and support the colonial project since, following this construction, the Irish were in need of protection.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, such a characterization promoted this submission, masked as much-needed care, of a people who ostensibly could not care for themselves. Moreover, this imagery was all too appropriate, because it implicitly acknowledged the intimate bond between the two cultures, an intimacy easily constructed in terms of marriage, of husband and wife, thus revealing an underlying discourse of colonial desire.<sup>9</sup>

While many Irish reacted to this metaphor by creating a myth of hypermasculinity as they identified with ancient Irish characters such as the Scythian warriors of precolonial times,<sup>10</sup> the feminine trope was also taken up and valorized; completely merged with their subject position, the colonized subjects employed the valorization of a

negatively troped stereotype as a particularly effective mode of a positive subject formation. They could accept this feminine version of Ireland and use it for their own purposes, since such a feminized Ireland was constructed *against* the British, i.e., against linear progress, aggression, capitalism, and individualism. In fact, many nationalists enforced the femininity of Ireland in order to criticize the masculine, rationalist traits of the English colonizer.<sup>11</sup> One of the more pronounced examples was the Irish Revival's return to Gaelic myth and folktales in order to create Ireland as Woman.<sup>12</sup> C. L. Innes reminds us, however, that even the Irish reactions to the allegorical representations of Ireland were not unanimous, since "in general, Irish portrayals of their country [would] fall in two categories: those that depict[ed] Ireland as maiden, and those that depict[ed] her as mother" (15-16). Still, the more sexually explicit female characterization of Ireland as a young woman was mostly employed by the English, whereas the caring and protecting mother figure was preferred by the Irish Revivalists.

Of particular interest in this allegorical construction of the Irish colonial subject as woman is the sexual component—or rather its noticeable absence. In the original versions, Ireland as an innocent young female was often courted (or, at times, raped) by other countries, thus explicitly insinuating the sexual relation (Innes 20); in its Revivalist implementation, however, the Irish woman was more often represented as mother figure and consequently lost all sexual attributes (24). In turn, any appearance of sexual desire corrupted the pure construction of the mother country. As a result, this precarious construction was constantly in danger of collapsing; after all, at the basis of the Irish valorization of the feminine lay a strict distinction between Ireland as Woman, which was in need of liberation, and the Irish Woman, who had to remain subdued to familial (i.e.,

patriarchal) politics. This distinction attempted to sketch two mutually exclusive tendencies onto the same body of the Irish Woman, an endeavor that was prone to fail.

Synge's play portrays the collapse of these two different versions of Woman whereby the female protagonist Nora comes to symbolize Ireland while at the same time remaining a *real* woman. In this way, the play posits an anti-colonial discourse which cannot be separated from feminist issues such as the economic, social, and psychological reality of the Irish peasant woman. Synge's concurrent use of feminist, nationalist, and religious discourses not only helps to invert gender notions and subvert the traditional Irish Revivalist tropes, but also attacks the phallic structure which undergirds that discourse. The audience's reaction marks *Shadow* as the scandalous symptom of an underlying uneasiness between different, incompatible discourses and thus a challenge to a society that desperately attempts to hold on to an imaginary relation of power. In so doing, the play demonstrates in its specific Irish turn-of-the-century context the general function of Woman as an instance which renders the structural impossibility of any possible integration into the patriarchal symbolic.

The main character in the play is the young Nora, whose husband, the old farmer Dan Burke, has died at the beginning of the play, or so everyone believes. A tramp comes to the house begging for food and shelter. At Nora's request he joins her for her husband's wake, throughout which they do not discuss the deceased but instead talk about the late Patch Darcy, a local shepherd whom both knew and admired. When Nora leaves her husband's corpse in the tramp's care to fetch Michael Dara, her lover-to-be, the tramp realizes that Dan is not dead after all. Upon Nora and Michael's return, their conversation demonstrates the very different conceptions of life they have: while Nora laments her loneli-

ness and the brevity of life, Michael is preoccupied with counting Nora's inheritance. Dan, who sees his expectations of Nora's infidelity confirmed, rises from the dead and turns Nora out of the house, whereupon Michael, who was interested only in Nora's inheritance, refuses to stay with her. Left with no other option, Nora leaves both men and follows the tramp.

In its portrayal of loveless marriage and the economic and social dependency of women, *The Shadow of the Glen* invites comparison with other feminist texts. For example, reading the play against Ibsen's *The Doll's House* (1879), we can discover substantial similarities in characters as well as in plot.<sup>13</sup> Although Nora is a fairly common name in Ireland, it can be no coincidence that Synge's protagonist bears the same name—especially since the first English translation of Ibsen's play was entitled *Nora* (Setterquist 18). Both plays can be construed as female liberation from an unloved husband, an oppressive marriage; having been married off without their consent or any real choice, these women are caught in loveless and unsatisfying relationships. Although the socio-economic settings of the plays are quite different—Ibsen's bourgeois middle-class against Synge's rural peasants—their strong similarity insinuates the same feminist concern: as long as society forces women to be dependent on men, they remain imprisoned and disempowered, no matter what their social status may be.

Yet while such an abstract and general feminist reading of Synge's play relies on the apparent similarities between *The Doll's House* and *Shadow*, it obscures their far more crucial differences. Although Seamus Deane points out how *Shadow* fails to foreground the grim and dismal reality of the Irish peasants since “famine, eviction, military oppression and landlordism, the characteristic facts of late-nineteenth-century

Irish rural existence for the peasantry, [a]re almost entirely repressed features of the text” (59), the reality of rural Irish life *does* serve as a framework for the play. Synge’s stage may present itself as an abstract allegorical tale, his plot may not concentrate on the political, social, and economic particulars of his characters; nevertheless, *Shadow* distinguishes itself from comparable feminist dramas through its Irish setting, so that many features in the play can only be understood when read in this context. While arranged marriage was practiced in most European countries in the nineteenth century, the Irish made a virtue out of this necessity with what came to be known as “familialism.” Under this general term were gathered a variety of practices, all intended to support the unity of the family property.<sup>14</sup> Cairns and Richards describe the manner in which these practices

were directed towards enabling the father to select his heir from amongst his sons and to pass on the farm during his lifetime. Familialism consisted of a number of procedures to control access to marriage, including the imposition and perpetuation of strict codes of behaviour between men and women, general endorsement of celibacy outside marriage and postponement of marriage in farmer’s families until the chosen heir was allowed by the father to take possession of the farm. (*Writing* 42)

Various passages in Synge’s play suggest the strong influence of familialism in Nora’s immediate environment as well as in her own marriage to the much older Dan. When asked why she consented to marrying Dan Burke, she answers: “What way would I live, and I an old woman, if I didn’t marry a man with a bit of farm, and cows on it, and sheep on the back hills?” (19). She also compares herself to other women who were

obviously married under the auspices of familialism; her first reference to Mary Brien indicates the overwhelming compulsion to motherhood: although Mary is younger than Nora, “there she is now with two children, and another one coming on her in three months or four” (20). Her second example, Peggy Cavanagh, illustrates Nora’s own future of aging prematurely: “Peggy Cavanagh, who had the lightest hand at milking a cow that wouldn’t be easy, or turning a cake and there she is now walking around on the roads, or sitting in a dirty old house with no teeth in her mouth, and no sense” (20-1). Beyond presenting to the audience familialism’s effect on women, Nora’s comments also indicate her own desperation with this all-encompassing domestic ideology. After all, when looking at the lives of the women surrounding her, she can easily predict her own fate.

Hence, when taking familialism into account, we can see how Synge’s play not only confronts feminist issues but also challenges the Irish’s perception of themselves. Since familialism implies that all sexual relations are based solely on economic interests, love and romance, passion and desire are all restricted. Arthur Griffith’s often-quoted reaction to the play exemplifies this: “Men and Women in Ireland marry lacking love, and live mostly in a dull level of amity. Sometimes the woman lives in bitterness—sometimes she dies of a broken heart—but she does not go away with the tramp” (qtd. in Lyons 67). Griffith’s hostile comments indicate how Synge’s play was read as an attack on Irish virtue; after all, he had created an unfaithful wife which, according to Griffith, the Irish nationalist, was a most unlikely scenario as “all of us know that Irish women are the most virtuous in the world” (67).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, since Irish nationalism (at least its Catholic instantiation) was closely connected to and partially dependent on familialism, Synge’s

criticism of the May-December marriage had to be read as an attack on Irish nationhood itself.

Accordingly, Synge's play was answered by an anonymous playwright, who rewrote *Shadow* on "appropriate" Irish terms: *In a Real Wicklow Glen* stages yet another Norah, who is (again) caught in a loveless marriage and visited by her former sweetheart, a drunk.<sup>16</sup> Rather than accepting her lover's proposal, however, she considers it an insult and swears, "You will never see my face again with my will" (151). What is important to note in this play is the emphasis placed on Norah's virtue, as well as the overt advocacy of familialism. It is also interesting that she is tempted by a former lover of hers, not a perfect stranger as Synge had it. Obviously, the very idea of an Irish woman leaving her husband for a complete stranger was far too much to bear. The play's conclusion promises the possibility of the husband's death and Norah's consequent marriage to her lover; this seemingly common scenario is depicted by the experiences of her maternal friend Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. Soon after she had succumbed to familial politics, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy found herself a widow, free to marry the man she loved: "I had never seen my sweetheart from the day I married until about a year after . . . and glad I was to marry him" (152). Her character, then, testifies to the fact that subservience to familial rule is eventually rewarded—if only with the death of the unloved spouse.

If *In a Real Wicklow Glen* was to be read as a genuine representation of Irish self-perception, Synge's play could only be received as a bitter insult. He offended the idealized creation of "the peasant" that had been circulating among Revivalist writers and was manifested in much of their work. Edward Hirsch traces the origins of this romantic fiction and shows how this "imaginary Irish peasant" was vital to the nationalist project

of the Celtic Revival, because “by idealizing peasants—and by defining them as the essence of an ancient, dignified Irish culture—the Revivalists were specifically countering the English stereotype” (1120). Moreover, by reference to a pastoral vision of a pre-industrial, rural life, Irish Nationalists could imagine the Irish peasant as authentic and original, natural and romantic, all characteristics which served to represent Irish values as they were constructed *against* British concepts and culture (1120-21). As Hirsch points out, however, few Revivalist writers *knew* the peasants they portrayed in their plays so that they could construct them within an idealized imaginary realm of noble poverty and dignified suffering. As a result, Synge was attacked for rendering un-Irish characters—un-Irish, because his characters did not fit the idealized ones the Dublin audience had come to expect. Having lived in Wicklow and on the Aran Islands, Synge had actually come into contact with the peasants he was to portray in his plays. Likewise, his knowledge of Gaelic, whose syntactic idiosyncrasies pervade his plays, proved his superior understanding of Irish language and customs, in short, his more intimate knowledge of the Irish themselves.<sup>17</sup> His Dublin audience, however, did not know—and did not want to know—the real Irish; they had created an idealized version of the Irish peasant, a version that was supported by the plays of the *Irish National Theatre Society*, such as Æ’s *Deirdre* (1902), W. B. Yeats’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902),<sup>18</sup> or Douglas Hyde’s Irish-language plays. With *Shadow* Synge disrupted this fictitious rendering of the stereotypical Irish and undermined the cultural imaginary that the Revivalist Movement had produced. In short, as Hirsch argues, he “attempted both to revise the Yeatsian spiritualization of the peasant and to undermine and attack the urban middle class’s flattened portrait of the noble Irish farmer” (1126-27). This corruption of the

idealized Irish peasant who was to populate the future Irish state, however, could only be seen as an extreme assault and offense to any Irish nationalist.

As if this attack on national ideals had not been enough, Synge's Anglo-Irish background invited him to observe the similarities between the two Irish colonizers, England and the Catholic Church, a similarity upon which Stephen Dedalus remarks, "I am a servant of two masters . . . an English and an Italian," which he later identifies as "the imperial British state . . . and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church" (Joyce 17). Since familialism was thoroughly dependent on the support of the Catholic Church, Synge's anti-familial stance also had to be read as an anti-colonial gesture—not simply against the British but also against Ireland's other colonizer, Catholicism. Ultimately, then, we not only have the controversial politics of colonized/ colonizer in the Irish male, but also the competition of two colonial discourses, the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church against the rhetoric of the British empire. While Britain was singled out for hatred and attack, the Church's colonial discourse had succeeded so as to disguise its very existence. Far from being regarded as Ireland's other colonizing force, the Church came to be associated with the nationalist movement itself and thus functioned as Ireland's spiritual protector against a Protestant England. Through its alliance with the Church, familialism forced the Irish nationalist to endorse and maintain the anti-colonial gesture against England while concurrently despising and attacking the anti-colonial gesture against the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, in the figure of the Virgin Mary, the Catholic Church was sketched onto the nationalist cause so as to conflate the two: Mother Mary and Mother Ireland, linked in their worries over England's (spiritual, political, and cultural) occupation of Catholic Ireland, merged in the nationalist mind and became one.

In fact, Rome itself began to emphasize the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception during the nineteenth century, which, in turn, “confirm[ed] the image of the Blessed Virgin as uniquely asexual, denying all biological functions” (Innes 38). Accordingly, the Woman as Ireland figure had to be cleared of all aspects of sexuality in order to emulate its religious counterpart. In her discussion of “Women and the Church since the Famine,” J. J. Lee points out how this desexualization of women occurred at a time when the Catholic Church gained increasing power due to an organizational restructuring (39). This conflation, then, demanded the reconceptualization of the allegorical Woman who came to represent Ireland as it required the paradoxical construction of a virginal mother.

This desexualization was another aspect of the rewriting of Irish mythology during the Celtic Revival: Joseph Valente demonstrates in “The Myth of Sovereignty: Gender in the Literature of Irish Nationalism” how the Gaelic myth of the Poor Old Woman, the Sovereignty Hag—which had been a highly sexualized myth representing Ireland as Woman—was taken up during the Celtic Revival and chastised. In the traditional version, the goddess of sovereignty was transformed from an ugly old woman into a beautiful young girl when mating with the prospective king.<sup>19</sup> In the Revivalist versions (such as Yeats’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*), the Sovereignty Hag did not passively await the sexual union with the future king, but instead was changed into an active, but asexual being, usually a mother-figure. Thus, Ireland could be troped feminine and assertive without breaking patriarchal society, with its high stakes on feminine submission, simply by making the old woman asexual. After all, this allegory needed to consolidate a strong and assertive Ireland, ready to rise against its English colonizer, and a feminine and subservient Woman, obeying patriarchal orders. In so doing, Celtic Revivalists achieved

an acceptable middle road: they could validate the Ireland as Woman metaphor without revealing its negative sexual overtones. Moreover, Valente shows how some writers constructed the Old Woman vis a vis a young, materialistic girl so that the girl, the *real* female, came to embody all negative feminine attributes, while Ireland itself could be identified with the old woman. By thus dividing the category of woman into the petty, greedy, selfish girl and the selfless, Phallic Old Woman, the Irish could avoid the problem of dealing with Irish independence in conjunction with female submission. While Joseph Valente's article emphasizes the precariousness and ultimate failure of this distinct dichotomy, it is important for our discussion that such attempts were made by Revivalists so as to maintain this separation. It is against this precarious attempt to clearly distinguish between sublime and mundane Woman that Synge's conflation of the two must be seen as unsettling. In other words, insofar as this distinction is arbitrary and artificially enforced, Synge's play becomes all the more dangerous if we consider it against this already contaminated site of the space between these two constructions of Woman.<sup>20</sup>

This dichotomy is exemplified in William Butler Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, in which the Poor Old Woman is set against Michael's fiancée, Delia Cahel. While the Poor Old Woman is at the center of the play and succeeds in seducing Michael to follow her into war, Delia, who adheres to the very foundations of familialism, only appears *after* Michael is already under the influence of the Poor Old Woman (Valente 199). Thus, the contest over Michael is strongly prejudiced against Delia—she has no hold on Michael when competing with Mother Ireland herself. In splitting the figure of Woman into the powerful Old Woman and the meek and familial Delia, Yeats enacted the clear

division of Woman in its metaphorical construction. Synge, however, proceeded very differently by casting only one female, Nora, in both roles. If Woman were still to represent Ireland, it was Nora who came to embody her country. Thus, Synge forced the audience to identify Nora both with the Phallic Woman and with the oppressed subject of patriarchal familialism. He did not allow the audience a simple disjunction, but forced them to come to terms with the entire impact of gendering Ireland female. This collapse of both female figures into one was further complicated by the way theater had come to represent the Sovereignty Hag. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, an extraordinary success, was played by Maud Gonne, at that time considered the “most beautiful woman in Ireland,” the “Irish Joan of Arc.” Hence, sexual tension was already implicit in the staging of the Poor Old Woman; this unfulfilled (and unfulfillable) sexuality remained repressed and instead was transformed into political energy and enthusiasm. In contrast, Synge’s play staged Nora as a return of the repressed by disclosing the hidden sexual tension in the Woman as Ireland metaphor. Her character fulfilled the sexual potential that Maud Gonne’s stage performance could only promise. In fact, this sexuality was underscored by the actress first cast as Nora: Maire nic Shiubhlaigh brought a highly sensual if not sexual characterization of Nora on stage (Saddlemeyer 63).

While *Shadow* collapses the two Yeatsian female characters, Cathleen and Delia, into one in the figure of Nora, it treats *Cathleen*’s male characters very differently. In his portrayal of Dan and Michael on the one hand, and Darcy and the tramp on the other, Synge divides his male (rather than his female) protagonists into their two opposing categories. In both cases, we have the two familial figures doubled, Bridget and Delia in *Cathleen*, Michael and Dan in *Shadow*. Interestingly enough, however, the familial figure

has switched gender between *Cathleen* and *Shadow*, thereby displaying a gender inversion that is figured in all the different characters and their functions within the plays. The exalted Cathleen, who persuades Michael to leave his bride, is rewritten in the figure of the tramp, thus transforming Mother Ireland into a begging vagrant. While it is apparent that none of *Shadow*'s characters have the dignity and stature of Yeats's protagonists, the tramp still must be seen as representing Ireland insofar as he, and his other, Darcy, succeed in luring Nora away from her husband. They are juxtaposed with the familial characters: Dan, like Delia in *Cathleen*, is too caught up in familial politics to see or understand why his wife leaves. Again, Synge twists Yeats's original plot when Nora follows the tramp's call for a new life, whereas Cathleen offers Michael only war and death. Not only can we read *Shadow* as an ironic allusion to the popular *Cathleen*, we must also observe how Synge achieves a complete gender inversion of the myth of the Sovereignty Hag, thus further destabilizing any (already confused) gender notions among his Irish audience. Considering how successful Yeats's play had been, it comes as no surprise that *The Shadow of the Glen* was not well received.

By conflating the two different women in Irish nationalist discourse, Synge also implicitly criticized not only the Catholic but also the Anglo-Irish nationalists. Synge, after all, as an Ascendancy writer found himself in the precarious position of belonging to a native elite, whose complex subject position rendered most apparent the complicated gender formation of the metaphor of Ireland as Woman.<sup>21</sup> The Anglo-Irish were in the curious position of being at the same time part colonizer, part colonized; as English, they could easily accept the feminization of Ireland, while, as Irish, they formulated elaborate constructions to justify this view.<sup>22</sup> Yet Synge did not simply advance the well-worn

metaphor but questioned the feminized view of Ireland and, as a result, the Anglo-Irish desire to employ and expand the Ireland/Woman conflation. By examining the metaphoric relation between Ireland and Woman, the play not only criticized a familial gesture that did not realize the social impact of its nationalist metaphor, but also interrogated the nationalist ideology itself, especially as it was used within the Ascendancy class.

In our discussion of the representation of women in Ireland we should also not forget their *real* situation in Dublin at the time the play was written and performed. Dublin, with its large contingent of occupying British soldiers, had one of the largest red-light districts in Europe at the time.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, the Monto must have served as a twofold offense to the Irish nationalist—not only did these Irish women prostitute themselves, they were in large part dependent on and sustained by British troops. In many instances, the British had been allegorically categorized as the “stranger,” and it is Nora who continually addresses the tramp as “stranger,” from the beginning of the play, “Good evening kindly, stranger” (3) until the very end, “You’ve a fine bit of talk, stranger” (27). Ironically enough, then, Synge’s Irish audience was likely to read the tramp as representing the British imperial power, so that they were confronted with yet another version of colonial sexual imagery, namely, the prostitution of Ireland to the British. Nora exemplifies Ireland, but now within a context that most Irishmen would rather forget, namely as the whore to the British.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, this “prostitution” extended to a middle class which had to rely upon the British as its economy was largely dependent on the occupying forces. In so doing, *Shadow* also insinuated the inability of Irish men to care for their women without the help of the colonizer. As a result, the play dramatized

how Irish men had been rendered impotent by the British; they were not the men in their own house.

Thus, we can see how Synge's conflation of the sublime Woman who comes to represent Ireland and the actual female, Nora, offended both the Catholic and the Anglo-Irish nationalist sensibilities by exposing their disavowal of feminism in their embrace of nationalism. Moreover, Synge actually exposes the patriarchal symbolic and Woman's ambiguous role in it during the course of his play. The traditionally dual view of women is illustrated by Nora's husband Dan, who is thoroughly steeped in the Madonna/whore dichotomy; obviously, the woman "in the house" should be an angel, not heard but felt. Thus, when Dan complains to the tramp, "I've got a bad wife in the house" (13), we have to read this comment against the background of this patriarchal discourse.<sup>25</sup> The very existence of feelings renders Nora "bad," i.e., she quickly falls from the angel to the whore position. It does not matter to her husband whether she in fact did betray (or even intended to betray) him; the appearance of emotions, of desire already taints Nora, makes her a fallen woman, places her into the whore position. If patriarchal discourse allows only two positions for the female, the very transgression of one necessarily results in her alignment with the other. After all, if desire in the exalted Woman were accepted, the opposition between the two sides, which is essential for maintaining Revivalist (i.e., patriarchal and nationalist) ideology, would certainly be undermined; consequently, Nora as desiring woman cannot take on the role as sublime Other, because as such she would expose and possibly collapse the precarious gender dynamic. In other words, it is precisely the recognition of Nora's desire, her particular feminine *jouissance*, which escapes any possible integration into the patriarchal symbolic.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, by identifying the two colonial subjects, Ireland and Woman, Synge's play exposes the contradictory position the Irish took in regard to sexual and colonial politics and shows how the celebration of woman's submission and her consequent misery are at the very foundation of Irish self-identification. Yet he achieves this ideological criticism not only through the portrayal of the female other but also in the way he figures men in his play. Synge's portrayal of the male characters attacks the core of the phallic symbolic order, the very basis of patriarchal society. This phallic order, upheld by Dan and Michael, is constantly challenged and disrupted in the play. Interestingly enough, one of the most important characters in this disruption is the dead shepherd Patch Darcy for it is impossible to posit Darcy into any meaningful position within a symbolic which is structured by familial ideology. Ideology functions so as to conceal its own inconsistencies, i.e., it constructs a symbolic that presents itself as consistent; hence, Dan and Michael inhabit an imaginary symbolic, in which all fissures and gaps appear as unreadable, as "outside" of any symbolic production of meaning. Therefore, within the symbolic system of familialism in which Dan and Michael operate, Darcy can only function as a "stain," a meaningless residue which is utterly *not* symbolizable. It is for this reason that neither Dan nor Michael can see Darcy's qualities or understand his appeal to either Nora or the tramp. Both are so completely steeped in their phallicentric symbolic system that the very thought of an alternative, an "outside," seems foolish to them. Accordingly, Dan Burke does his best to maintain the symbolic order—even if it has to be by force. He asks the tramp to "Put that stick here into the bed" (14), a stick which will assure his masculine strength over Nora. However, even this attempt to control Nora cannot save his phallic power—he has lost it to the tramp.

When we look at Patch Darcy from Nora's point of view, a very different character emerges. In the dynamics of the play, Darcy functions as an absent other who is idealized by both Nora and the tramp; in fact, their very relationship is founded upon their common interest in Darcy. Thus, we can read Darcy's madness and death as an indication of his inability to exist within this given symbolic system, and it is Darcy's very proximity to madness that testifies to his existence beyond the symbolic order exemplified within the play.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, both Nora and the tramp appear as "fools"; because they exhibit emotions and react to loneliness, their sanity is questioned. At one point in the play, both are likened to Patch Darcy: the tramp comments on the possibility that he would "have been locked into the Richmond Asylum" (8) just as Darcy "went queer in his head" (17). Nora also is compared to Darcy; when she tries to explain her feelings to Michael, he wonders "What is it ails you this night, Nora Burke? I've heard tell it's the like of that talk you do hear from men, and they after being a great while on the back hills" (19-20). Thus, Darcy's appeal to Nora and the tramp is that he allows them to create their own relationship to a symbolic that circumvents Dan's and Michael's imaginary construction of a consistent symbolic. By attesting to the inconsistencies in the symbolic, its nonsensical character, Darcy offers consolation—his character allows Nora to create a phantasmatic relationship to the symbolic insofar as he "patches" over the gaps that exist within the symbolic. To Nora, Darcy stands in for the Other; in his very absence, he allows Nora to create a relationship with the symbolic.

If we compare the different manner in which Dan Burke and Patch Darcy are described by others we can detect an interesting inversion. Throughout the play Dan is characterized as a man who has already been dead symbolically for quite some time

although he is still alive physically. This is emphasized not only by his feigned death, but also by Nora's comment that "cold would be no sign of death with the like of him, for he was always cold, every day since I knew him . . . and every night" (5)—obviously insinuating Dan's symbolic death. Thus, while Dan may fake his real death, he has already died symbolically: both Nora and the tramp are not really concerned with him during his wake, but rather talk about Darcy. The fact that Darcy is not actually in the play—and still figures centrally—emphasizes the mirror construction of Dan and Darcy.<sup>28</sup> Darcy is in a similar—though inverse—situation. Darcy may have died the real death, but he is not dead symbolically; rather, he remains at the center of Nora's and the tramp's thoughts: "God spare Darcy; he'd always look in here and he passing up or passing down, and it's very lonesome I was after him a long while" (9). Unlike her husband, Darcy understands Nora and helps her face and understand her desires. Consequently, his impact stretches beyond the grave; the desire that he sparked in Nora gives her the ability to confront Dan and leave.

It is at this point that the Lacanian concept of "between the two deaths," developed in the seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, is helpful to our understanding of the play. While the "real death" denotes the actual biological demise of the physical body, the "symbolic death" describes the conclusion of a process of mourning and the survivor's acceptance of the dead's passing—it is "the one that you can still set your sights on once death has occurred" (295). We then can distinguish two modes by which a person can be between the two deaths: the first mode is represented by Dan Burke insofar as the subject is alive physically, but is already forgotten by his surrounding and therefore might as well be dead; the other character between the two deaths in the play is Patch Darcy who is symbolically alive while he has long been biologically dead.<sup>29</sup> This

terminology allows us to explicitly juxtapose these two men in their relationship to Nora: while Dan may be her husband and alive, this reality is of little value to Nora; instead, it is Patch Darcy who enables Nora to accept the chance given to her when Dan throws her out and leave her “dead” life for good. The dichotomy between Dan and Darcy is further reinforced by its repetition on a different level between Michael and the tramp. The tramp becomes a younger version of Darcy, just as Michael is the young version of Dan. While the tramp is the one to finally offer Nora an alternative to her familial life, Michael is securely situated on the side of death. This distinction becomes most obvious in their different treatment of Nora: the tramp talks and listens to Nora, whereas Michael is only concerned with money, only interested in Nora’s inheritance.

Interestingly enough, Nora is also a character between the two deaths: she also has died symbolically, but we must interpret her differently than her husband; Nora’s symbolic death has potential in a way that Dan’s can never have. While Dan is dead to any feelings or emotions, Nora is dead only to the familial rule to which she completely submitted earlier—her symbolic death must be read as an escape from a patriarchal order which restricts desire, emotions and, ultimately, life. She thus enters a realm which may be outside the symbolic when seen from Dan’s point of view; from her own, however, she only acknowledges different rules and orders. As such, she resembles Sophocles’s Antigone as described by Lacan: he argues that Antigone is “between the two deaths,” thus enabling her to become the ethical heroine of the play who teaches Creon the fallibility of his laws (270-83). Accordingly, we can see how Nora offers an alternative to the presumably universal law of familialism—far from failing the familial law and excluding herself, Nora must be seen as creating a new law of love and community, a law

which allows human beings to interact beyond the inflexible boundaries as they are created by the familial structure embodied by Dan.<sup>30</sup>

This analysis of Nora helps us to understand the ending of the play, an ending on which much of current *Shadow* criticism focuses. Synge's Nora departs as abruptly as does Ibsen's; however, their final scenes are quite different. Ibsen's Nora has contemplated for a long time if and how she should leave; when she finally does, she explains her reasons in a long monologue to Helmer. Synge's Nora is not allowed to decide to go on her own; rather, she is thrown out by Dan. Consequently, some critics strongly criticize the playwright's lack of concern for the well-being of his heroine, since they believe that Nora knows her fate when she wonders, "What good is a grand morning when I'm destroyed surely, and I going out to get my death walking the roads?" (26). They accuse Synge of sacrificing Nora while leaving the masculine position intact. Cairns and Richards, for example, argue, "Nora may be allowed to author her own discourse but only from a position of powerlessness, and her exit leaves the stage to a male society which slips back into its security ("Woman" 52). Although Nora is given very little choice in the play, we can still read her exit in a more positive light; as a matter of fact, her very decision to follow the tramp out on the road becomes Synge's most biting critique. Nora knows her fate but still abandons her home: no matter what this future may hold for her, it will be better than her dead life with Dan. In fact, it is this seemingly more positive ending in *The Doll's House*, the satisfying closure after Nora's door slam, that is retroactively questioned and uncannily undermined when read against *Shadow*. While Ibsen implies that *his* Nora leaves Helmer for a better life (though the audience can imagine her eventual conditions), Synge's Nora is all too well aware of her

dismal future. It is the very fact that Nora is leaving *although* she knows how bleak her future will be that provides the more scathing criticism of patriarchal society in Synge's play.

Moreover, what Cairns and Richards seem to overlook is the fact that both Michael and Dan are rendered lifeless and womanless in the end. Their connection is one of monetary interests and lack of understanding for passion and desire, the same attributes that have been connected with symbolic death throughout the play. The final irony, then, lies in the very comfort of their pretending that nothing happened, while Nora's exit has indeed disrupted the very basis of their symbolic universe. They do not know it, but when Nora leaves they are already impotent and dead. Returning to our initial premise that Nora functions as the allegorical representation of Ireland, we can see now how the conclusion of *Shadow* suggests that Ireland's liberation and independence are only possible once the country overcomes its familial and patriarchal constraints. In creating Ireland as Woman, the Irish nationalists produced a complicated metaphor whose internal tensions were borne out in Synge's drama. Failing to consider the feminist implications of the allegory, their hostile reactions to the other side of their construction were unavoidable as the play revealed what was at stake in this metaphor. By critically disrupting Dan's and Michael's symbolic universe with Nora's departure, Synge also undermined the larger symbolic structure of Irish nationalism. His nationalist audience, however, achieved an awareness that Dan and Michael did not: the audience's protests testified to their understanding—however unconscious—that *The Shadow of the Glen* had indeed challenged their Revivalist project by exposing the inner gaps and fissures of its ideological foundation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Synge initially entitled his play *In the Shadow of the Glen*, but changed it later to *The Shadow of the Glen* for the first book publication, 1905, and thereafter.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of the initial reactions and a documentation of the subsequent controversy, see Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *Laying* 74-85 and *Abbey* 9 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Irish Revival describes the cultural movement which, beginning in the 1880's, attempts to overcome late British colonialism by opposing it with a nationalist discourse which returns to Gaelic roots and origins; among the most prominent areas are sports (Gaelic Athletic Association), language (Gaelic league), and literature (Celtic Literary Society).

<sup>4</sup> Early connections between psychoanalysis and postcolonialism can be found in the works of Octave Mannoni and Frantz Fanon; more recent critics include Ashis Nandy and Homi Bhabha. Slavoj Žižek uses Lacanian theory to treat the specific problem of nation states throughout his work especially in *Tarrying With the Negative*. In his recent article, Joseph Valente offers a Lacanian reading of the Irish Revival in which he traces the figure of the phallic woman in its various instantiations in Revivalist plays; I am much indebted to his analysis and his exemplary use of Lacan for understanding Irish history and literature.

<sup>5</sup> While early postcolonial theories failed to consider issues of gender within the colonial context, more recent studies have foregrounded the similarity between the discourses of gender and race; furthermore, they have begun to explore the role of women in the colonial situation. The specific Irish case for the turn of the century is extensively treated in David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland*.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the this process, see Bhabha on the functioning of the stereotype as colonial fetish in “The Other Question.”

<sup>7</sup> C. L. Innes’s *Woman and Nation* describes the different metaphorical constructions of the mother country Ireland. She foregrounds how the feminine construction was initially limited to the Celtic race but consequently extended to the Irish nation itself, which lead to the well-known allegorical creation of Ireland as Woman (either as helpless girl or suffering mother).

<sup>8</sup> An example for a positive depiction of the Irish as feminine that nevertheless endorses the colonial project, see Matthew Arnold’s “On the Study of Celtic Literature.” Also, see Cairns and Richards for a detailed discussion on the feminizing discourses of Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold in *Writing Ireland*.

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of the construction of the colonial other as different enough to justifiable be oppressed yet similar enough to be the object of fetishistic desire, see Bhabha, especially “The Other Question” and “Of Mimicry and Men.”

<sup>10</sup> See Ann R. Jones and Peter Stallybrass for an overview of early accounts that read the Irish as Scythians.

<sup>11</sup> This can be seen throughout Yeats’s work, in which he continuously emphasizes the values of nature and spirit against a materialist and mundane world, a tendency that is especially obvious in his “The Celtic Element in Literature” (1898), but also in much of his poetry, particularly *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).

<sup>12</sup> Exemplary here is Yeats’s appropriation of the female mythical figure as a symbol for Ireland. See Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, especially 55-72.

<sup>13</sup> See Jan Setterquist on the relationship and potential influence of Ibsen on Irish drama; for his comparison of *Shadow* and *The Doll's House*, see 16-26.

<sup>14</sup> For the principal study on familialism, see Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball, especially 98-122 and 202-231.

<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, Synge had already altered the story from his source in terms of Nora's fidelity; this becomes obvious when comparing Synge's play with the folktale he collected in *The Aran Islands*. In this story, the unfaithful wife is caught with her lover "lying together with her head on his arm" (60); the tramp has merely the function of observer and narrator while the husband's suspicions are thoroughly justified.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Hogan and James Kilroy suggest Arthur Griffith as the possible author (*Laying* 47), which is further supported by the fact that Griffith constantly errs in calling Synge's play *In a Wicklow Glen* (see his letters in Hogan and Kilroy, *Laying* 77-80 and *Abbey* 13-14).

<sup>17</sup> For Synge's knowledge of Irish language and customs, see Declan Kiberd; for a specific reading of Synge's use of Gaelic syntax and imagery, see Mary C. King, esp. 67-86.

<sup>18</sup> Although recent scholarship has shown that *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was co-authored by both Yeats and Lady Gregory (in fact, it is suspected that the latter wrote as much as two-thirds of the play), I will continue to refer to it as Yeats's play as the issues with which I am concerned display his personal philosophies and biases.

<sup>19</sup> For a history of this myth and its many variants, see Proinsias MacCana, Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, and Margaret MacCurtain.

<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Valente shows how Yeats implicitly criticized familialism: “By endorsing blood-sacrifice in such strong and strongly masculine terms, Yeats freed himself to criticize the familialism that was, for the Irish people-nation at large, its ideological counterpart” (201); Synge, then, shifts the focus from the masculine anti-colonial stance to the feminine anti-familial and thus underscores Yeats’s more covert critique.

<sup>21</sup> The Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class had a special interest in supporting a Celtic-Gaelic definition of Irishness (i.e., a concept of Irish identity *before* the influence of the church), since such a definition could be constructed so as to include them.

<sup>22</sup> The problem that Ascendancy writers faced when treating religious subjects is perhaps most apparent in the reactions to W. B. Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen* (1899). The play was offensive on a variety of levels: not only was the idea of the peasants selling their souls for gold perceived as blasphemous, the countess’s soul was worth all the peasant’s souls combined—an idea congruent with Yeats’s yearning for a Celtic aristocratic society but highly insulting to much of the audience.

<sup>23</sup> According to Richard Ellman, the 1857 *Encyclopedia Britannica* described the Monto, the brothel area in Dublin, as “the worst slum in Europe” (367), and Joseph O’Brien points out that turn-of-century Dublin, though much improved, still counted among the cities with the largest number of prostitutes (191-2).

<sup>24</sup> During the 18th century, Richard Kearney points out, a later version of the myth constructed the female allegory of Ireland as “a shameless hag . . . who lifted her skirts for the invader’s pleasures” (21).

<sup>25</sup> Although the gender dynamics get played out differently here on account of class as well as national differences, the phrase *does* resonate the “angel in the house” metaphor that had been a dominant image of women throughout the nineteenth century.

<sup>26</sup> While it may seem that we are in danger here of conflating the personal with the cultural, our use of a specifically Lacanian logic of psychoanalysis allows for such a connection, since the Lacanian subject only comes into existence in its encounter with the social and therefore is always already a social subject. For a reading that counters the common criticism of psychoanalysis as ahistorical, see Joan Copjec.

<sup>27</sup> Psychosis can be understood as a foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father, i.e., of the symbolic universe of language and culture. For a discussion that relates madness with a movement beyond the symbolic, see Lacan’s “On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis.”

<sup>28</sup> This mirror construction is also expressed metaphorically by Dan and Darcy’s opposite relationship to their animals. If we read the title of the play as an allusion to Psalm 23, we can read Darcy as a reference to the “Lord as shepherd.” In such a reading, Darcy, who dies rescuing his sheep, is cast vis a vis Dan, who owns sheep, but does not really care for them—just as he does not really care for Nora. Moreover, if we consider *Shadow* against the tradition of the pastoral, we can detect an interesting political implication in two characteristic topoi—nationalism and anti-Catholicism. Spenser’s *The Sheperde’s Calendar*, for example, offers an early illustration of a pastoral which is both anti-papal and nationalistic (Patterson 106-31). Ironically, Synge’s play retains the anti-Catholic stance but rewrites the pro-English sentiments within a pro-Irish, and consequently anti-

English, ideology (Spenser's imperialist attitude towards Ireland should not be overlooked here; see Jones and Stallybras).

<sup>29</sup> In Lacan we find Polynices and Hamlet's father as examples of men who have not been properly mourned, not been properly buried and thus remain between the two deaths. For our discussion, we need to extend the definition from a person who is not mourned properly to include those whose process of mourning is still continued as someone who is symbolically alive, i.e., "between the two deaths." As such, Patch Darcy is symbolically alive, since Nora and the tramp remember and mourn him.

<sup>30</sup> In his discussion of *Antigone*, Lacan he suggests that although she is consistently represented as "outside" of Creon's law, Antigone ultimately succeeds in influencing Creon so as to establish her own rules (320).

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