Re-Gendering the Nation: Representations of Ireland and the Figure of the New Woman in George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* and George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*

Brendan Fleming
St. Catherine's College, Oxford

Abstract
This paper examines the implications of the concurrence of the Home Rule Movement and the Woman Question for conventional representations of Ireland and the Irish as feminine. The figure of the subversive New Woman was, I propose, imbricated within Irish nationalist discourse to produce a potentially revolutionary figuration of the nation. Such a transgressive image of the nation ruptured the representation of femininity in both British imperialist and Irish nationalist discourses. This paper traces the ways in which this re-figuration of the nation was compromised in *A Drama in Muslin* and *Diana of the Crossways*. In these novels, the radical implications of this re-articulation are ultimately compromised and recuperated within traditional categories of the feminine. However, the compromise is not total. This paper examines the formal and ideological effects in these novels of this ambivalence concerning the re-gendering of Ireland as a New Woman.

> George Meredith wrote in 1889:
>
> The case with women resembles that of the Irish. We have played fast and loose with them, until now they are encouraged to demand what they know not how to use, but have a just right to claim. (1970, 964)

In the nineteenth century, imperialist and nationalist representations of Ireland predominantly figured her as either mother, wife or virginal daughter. The nationalist response to colonial feminisation was often to produce a reverse discourse of overdetermined masculinity (Valente 1994, 192–194; Howes 1998, 16). In this Arnoldian construction the Irish were deemed to manifest the typically feminine characteristics which rendered both women and the Irish dependent on, and subservient to, the control of English masculinity. The Victorian construction of the woman as irrational, emotional, incapable of self-discipline, also marked the limits of Irish representation. The figuration of Ireland within the frame of Victorian ideals of the domestic feminine, in both nationalist and imperialist models, was an attempt to stabilise and obviate a rather more insistent and fractured reality.

According to Howes, "Rather than constituting a point of general agreement and certainty, the common practice of representing Ireland as a woman forms an important site of ambivalence and conflict in Irish national discourses" (1998, 45).

This feminisation of the Irish, by linking them inextricably with the fate of women in the domestic space, contained within it the seeds of its own subversion. The re-articulation of the feminine beyond the domestic domain would inevitably unleash new possibilities in the representation of Ireland. The late nineteenth century was a period marked by a growing anxiety as to the breakdown of gender, racial, and class boundaries (Showalter 1992, 3–6). The political convulsions in Ireland in the 1880s, and the upheaval in the Victorian domestic space, threatened to transgress all these demarcations. The construction of rebellious Ireland as a revolutionary New Woman articulates this twin threat in a single figure. The threatening insistence of the Irish Question in the late nineteenth century became interwoven with the contemporaneous emergence of the Woman Question. Both the New Woman and Ireland challenged the limits of representation and demanded an extension of the franchise in both politics and fiction.[1] The call for Home Rule in Ireland was the obverse of the misrule threatening the Victorian home.

In the late nineteenth century the conventional representation of the Irish as subservient and feminine underwent a significant subversion. The new formation that emerged was based on the *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon of the New Woman.[2] The subversive, destabilising demands of the New Woman were, I suggest, imbricated within the discourse of Irish nationalism to produce a renovated, and potentially revolutionary, new figuration of the nation. It provided an alternative to the models of colonial feminisation or nationalist masculinisation. I propose to chart some implications of this figuration, primarily in George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) and briefly in George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* (1885).[3] They demonstrate how the revolutionary potential in this reconfiguration was compromised in its fictional representation. However, this compromise was not total as it provided a powerful critique of nationalist definitions of femininity. As the Indian critic Radhakrishnan writes:

> ... nationalist rhetoric makes 'woman' the pure and ahistorical signifier of 'interiority'. In the fight against the enemy outside, something within gets even more repressed and 'woman' becomes the mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist history. (1992, 84)

This formulation produces a dissonance, a contradiction in nationalist discourse. Radhakrishnan continues:

> The result is a fundamental rupture ... a radical collapse of representation. Unable to produce its own history in response to its inner sense of identity, nationalist ideology sets up Woman as victim and goddess simultaneously. Woman becomes the allegorical name for a specific historical failure: the failure to coordinate the political or the ontological with the epistemological within an undivided agency. (1992, 85)

I propose that a re-articulation of the figuration of Ireland as a New Woman was a means of addressing this collapse in representation. It provides an alternative to the representation of the Irish as either passively feminised subjects, disempowered and incapable of self-government, or the highly masculinised version constructed by nationalist discourse. It articulates the subversive potential that lies secreted within the Arnoldian construction of the Celtic feminine. I propose to investigate some implications of this renovated and transgressive image of the nation. The imbrication of the New Woman with Ireland, while reconfiguring traditional metaphors of the Nation and Woman in potentially liberating ways, radically problematised them.

When confronted by a cracked mirror, Stephen Daedalus famously remarked: "It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant" (Joyce 1984, 13). Fragmented, feminine, servile: the Irish subverted the authoritative image of the mirror of imperialist discourse which sought to represent and stabilise them. The problematic question that was Ireland in the late nineteenth century can be traced through a multiplicity of fractured reflections within an economy of colonial specularity. 'Ireland' was the name given to a series of both fictional and political crises of representation at the turn of the century. I propose that the re-gendering of Ireland as a New Woman was in part a symptom of this 'unrepresentability', and an attempted solution. As C. L. Innes writes, "Locked into confrontation with Britain and contestation over the motherland, Irish literature and Irish history have created males as national subjects, woman as the site of contestation" (1993, 3).The rearticulation of Ireland as a New Woman challenges this image of the woman as passive and empty of subjectivity by re-investing her with the revolutionary impetus of the New Woman.

The appropriation of the figure of the New Woman into the discourse of Irish nationalism by Moore and Meredith was marked by a deep ambivalence and anxiety. The re-figuration of Ireland as a New Woman revealed and deepened contradictions inherent in the representation of the feminine within nationalist ideology. Crucial to this ambivalence, I suggest, was the widespread concern among male novelists about the feminisation of literary production and the literary marketplace during this period (James 1884, xv). The New Women they portray are novelists, and symptomatic of this threat. In response, I suggest, the representation of Ireland as a New

Woman by these male novelists becomes compromised and recuperated within a less subversive image of femininity.

A key moment in the consolidation of the Home Rule Movement was the Land War (1879–82). What has received less attention is the degree to which this Land War was also the site of the emergence of this new re-articulation of the New Woman and the Irish land. O'Sullivan emphasises this key point:

> Historically, the New Departure was always described in binary terms, comprising moral and physical force factors. In fact it possessed a problematic third dimension turning on gender which is rarely fully acknowledged. Two years into the Land League, the already unique combination of revolutionary, agrarian and constitutional factions was dramatically transformed by the admission, not only of individual women, but of women as a category. (1998, 185–186)

In response to the possibility that its male leaders would be interned, the League sanctioned the foundation of a Ladies' Land League under the leadership of Anna Parnell. The League reasoned that the British government would not dare imprison women. It was envisaged that The Ladies' Land League would have a purely charitable and ancillary function. However, when the all-male Land League was suppressed, the Ladies' League quickly took over its role and became the first significant women's political movement in Irish history. It was a practical manifestation of the refusal of contemporary women to remain confined within the domestic space and as such signified this re-alignment between figurations of Ireland and the New Woman. When the Ladies' Land League was proscribed by the British government, its leaders were imprisoned, not under the Coercion Laws as were the men, but under an ancient statute covering prostitution. The emergence into the public arena of a radicalised femininity could only be categorised in the language of sexual transgression. When finally the male leaders were released from prison, their first act was to disband the Ladies' Land League as it had become too radical. Its political suppression was matched, as we shall see, by its fictional occlusion. The expulsion of these radical women from the political and fictional arena is symptomatic of some of the contradictions that arise within nationalist ideology when its version of the feminine is exceeded.

For Anna Parnell and the Ladies' Land League, the exploitation of the tenantry was strikingly similar to the commodification of women within the marriage market. She wrote, " ... if the Irish landlords had not deserved extinction for anything else, they would have deserved it for the treatment of their own women" (Parnell 1986, 86). As the daughter of an Anglo-Irish landlord, she was acutely aware of the ambivalence in her position. The

powerlessness attributed to her gender was complicated by her membership of an oppressing class. Her subversion of both gender and class expectations gestures towards a more inclusive nationalism than that which depended on a very narrow definition of femininity.

On 25 March 1886 the *Pall Mall Gazette* published an article entitled "The Best Hundred Irish Books: A Clue To The Maze Of History" (*Pall Mall Gazette* 1886, 11). This was a series of key volumes with which to understand the Irish Question. It concentrated mainly on historical and political works. However, it claimed that "The novelist who portrays national character and manners is in some degree an historian too, and must not be forgotten" (*Pall Mall Gazette* 1886, 11). It is as part of this widening discourse on Ireland that *A Drama in Muslin* and *Diana of the Crossways* must be read. Both deal with historical events which are then used to comment on contemporary Irish affairs. *A Drama in Muslin* concentrates on the immediate past, the Land War, as a means of contextualising the contemporary debate over Home Rule. The serialised publication of *A Drama in Muslin* between January and June 1886 appeared concurrently with the debate around Gladstone's Home Rule Bill. *Diana of the Crossways* is an historical portrayal of Caroline Norton and her role in the Repeal of the Corn Laws. The connection between her narrative and contemporary Irish affairs is less specific than Moore's. However, Moore's explanation of his choice of material is equally applicable to Meredith's Diana. Moore writes, "The history of a nation as often lies hidden in social wrongs and domestic griefs as in the story of revolution, and if it be for the historian to narrate the one, it is for the novelist to dissect and explain the other...." (1981, 203–204).

Both novels critique the Irish Question through a representation of feminine interiority. It is against this background that one must read *A Drama in Muslin* (1886). It is one of the most significant, and problematic, fictional representations of the figuration of Ireland as a prototypical New Woman. Set during the Land War, the novel concerns the entry into the marriage market of a group of young women who are the daughters of Anglo-Irish landlords. The novel critiques the social oppression of women and the analogous struggle of the tenantry for economic and national independence. It portrays this through the developing consciousness of Alice Barton, who represents the emergent New Woman. Disadvantaged in the marriage market, she seeks compensation in an inner, artistic realm and a career as a writer. It is through her dawning awareness of the social and political oppression perpetrated by her class that she becomes a nationalist. Consistently throughout the text, the fate of the young women, 'the muslin martyrs', is equated with that of the tenants. Women, through their exchange as property in the marriage market, are represented as being analogous to the oppressed tenantry.

Such an equation between the condition of the women and tenants, and the implied figuration of the nation in the seemingly progressive portrayal of Alice Barton, is not quite as radical as it seems. By thus representing Alice , Moore carefully marginalises more subversive images of femininity. Cecilia, whose homoerotic love for Alice is deemed too threatening, is doubly erased as she is both literally disfigured and represented as a lesbian hysteric. The character of Mrs Lawlor, whose unconventional sexual liaisons and masculine demeanour signify a further disturbing possibility of female desire, is quietly expelled from the text. The novel progressively attenuates its initially radical image of the New Woman. Moore writes:

> For as the gates of the harem are being broken down, and the gloom of the female mind clears, and grows keenly alive to the sensations and ideas of modern life, it becomes axiomatically sure that Woman brings a loftier reverence to the shrine of Man than she has done in any past age, seeing, as she now does, in him the incarnation of the freedom of which she is vaguely conscious and which she is perceptibly acquiring ... but beneath the great feminine tide there is an under-current of hatred and revolt.This is particularly observable in the leaders of the movement; women who in the tumult of their aspirations, and their passionate yearnings towards the new ideal, and the memory of the abasement their sex have been in the past ... forget the immutability of the laws of life, and with virulent virtue and protest condemn love ... and proclaim a higher mission for woman than to be the mother of men .... (1981, 195–96).

This qualified account of the New Woman undermines the more radical implications of aligning it with an account of the land agitation. Significantly, even though the novel is avowedly concerned with women and is set against the Land League agitation, it never once mentions the Ladies' Land League. The attempt to renovate the trope of Woman as Nation is subverted as the text fails to follow through the implications it inaugurates. Having established Alice as a representative New Woman and embodiment of the emergent Irish nation, the text then represses it. Alice marries, emigrates to London, and becomes a mother. Having begun as a refiguration of the New Woman and Irish nationalism, the novel recuperates her into its opposite by domesticating her and transforming her into an image of maternity complicit with British imperialism.

In *Diana of the Crossways,* Meredith outlines an Irish New Woman within a wider exploration of the contradictions within the processes and technologies of modernity, especially the expansion of the railways. The advancing Woman Question is figured through this new technology. Diana writes of herself, "We women are the verbs passive of the alliance ... we

conjugate a frightful disturbance. We are to run on lines, like the steam-trains, or we come to no station, dash to fragments" (Meredith 1980, 64). This is a novel obsessed by speculation (Boumelha 1991, 198). The question posed by the New Woman is imbricated with the financial speculation regarding railways. Boumelha has shown how the representation of Diana is problematised by the multiplicity of discourses which surround her: diaries, memoirs, and gossip (1991, 198). She resists representation. Paradoxically, it is through the technological modernity she rejects that she is figured: "I am utterly solitary, sustained neither from above nor below, except within myself, and that is all fire and smoke, like their new engines" (Meredith 1980, 73).

Boumelha sees the book as primarily concerned with the representation of a woman's interior life and its impact on the public sphere (1991, 198). The real life Caroline Norton on whom Diana is based probably leaked the news of the repeal of the Corn Laws to the press. The betrayal of a government secret by Diana marks this transition from the private to public. This emergence into the public arena is seen to be initially catastrophic for Diana, but ultimately facilitates her marriage, thereby re-inserting her into the domestic. Both *Diana of the Crossways* and *A Drama in Muslin* end with the marriage of their prototypical New Women. This is clearly symbolic of the union between Ireland and England. The naturalness and appropriacy of such fictional and political unions is figured in their fecundity. In both novels the symbolic suppression of the implications of the New Woman is ambivalent. In their conclusions, men are temporarily banished and a tentative gesture is made towards an all-female dispensation.

Both these novels trace the emergence of woman from the private to the public. The New Woman signified a transgression of the simple demarcation between the private and the public and demonstrated how they interpenetrated. These novels assign to women an interiority usually denied them but ultimately recuperate it into a domestic and imperial interior space. By doing so, they acknowledge this new agency of women while simultaneously suppressing it. Its political repression, as exemplified in the figure of Anna Parnell, was matched by its fictional occlusion. These figurations of Irish New Women are, I suggest, compromised by their being masculine representations.[4]

A Drama in Muslin constructs a feminised interior space to counter the exigencies of history. As Alice and her new husband prepare to leave Ireland, they witness an eviction. Shocked by the scene, they decide to pay the rent due. Oblivious to the hypocrisy of their gesture when confronted with the reality of the Land War, they remark:

> 'Of humanity we must not think too much; for the present we can best serve it by learning to love each other'. Then Edward put his arm about Alice and drew her towards him. The painful incident

> they had just witnessed had already borne fruit ... the lovers leaned back in the shadow of the carriage.... (Moore 1981, 324)

The relentless move inward in this passage attempts to negate political realities. Similarly, in the domestic sanctity of their London home, news of the burgeoning Home Rule movement in Ireland is deflected into a more literal, domestic rule of the home. The construction of that inner space by Alice, which initially seemed liberating, mutates instead into the confined domestic one of home.

The traditional representations of the nation as mother, wife, or virgin, while seeming to empower women, actually displace them outside history into the realm of myth. This effectively re-inscribes the woman as devoid of agency. In attempting to reconfigure the nation through the image of the New Woman, such tropes are fatally undermined. The nationalist appropriation of the revolutionary potential of the New Woman into its version of femininity now roots those formerly ahistorical images in a history and a politics. Due to the concurrent emergence of the Home Rule movement with the figure of the New Woman, the conventional representation of Ireland as passively feminine was no longer feasible.

I have suggested that these radical re-figurations of Ireland as a New Woman were compromised in their fictional representation. Nevertheless, by destabilising nationalist and imperialist representations of the feminine, they prompt a re-evaluation of the ways in which the Woman Question re-articulated images of Ireland.[5]

NOTES

[1] The relationship between the political and fictional franchise, and the representation of women is to be found in Moore (1885). Pykett brilliantly places Moore's metaphor within the wider contemporary debate over naturalism (1992, 167–88).

[2] For details of the origin of the term 'New Woman', see Jordan (1983, 19–21).

[3] For a further discussion of these two novels, see Stone (1972, 66–85) and Ledger (1997, 133–42).

[4] A more extensive study of the figuration of Ireland as a New Woman would need to contrast the masculine representations in these novels with those of women novelists.

[5] An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the conference 'Sexing the Nation', held at Cheltenham and Gloucester College on July 3, 1998.

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