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Title	Foreign tyrants and domestic tyrants: the public, the private, and eighteenth-century Irish women's writing
Authors	Ó Gallchoir, Clíona
Publication date	2008-07
Original Citation	Ó Gallchoir, Clíona (2008) 'Foreign tyrants and domestic tyrants: the public, the private, and eighteenth-century Irish women's writing' In: Patricia Coughlan, Tina O'Toole(Eds.). Irish literature : feminist perspectives. Dublin : Carysfort Press.
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	http://www.carysfortpress.com/titles/irish-literature58-feminist-pe.htm
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Download date	2024-04-25 21:14:33
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/1863

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Foreign Tyrants and Domestic Tyrants: the Public, the Private and Eighteenth-Century Irish Women's Writing

There is a widespread consensus among Irish feminist critics and critics of women's writing that Irish literature as an institution has been and continues to be characterised by a marked gendering, which locates women writers in a highly marginal position. Although of course indebted to international feminist theorists and critics, Irish feminist criticism has sought to develop analyses of this exclusion which take account of the often highly specific political, social and cultural conditions which have pertained in Ireland. In this paper I address the recurrent marginalisation of women's writing in Ireland and the tendency, if not to dismiss it as 'unIrish', to fail to recognise it *as* Irish, by analysing the consequences for women's writing of a specific deployment of the concept of public and private spheres in Ireland.

For many commentators, the importance of the public sphere lies solely in the social and political transformation effected by its gradual opening to the majority Catholic population, a process that gathered pace throughout the nineteenth century. This focus makes the issue of women's access to the public sphere, for instance through writing and literary activity, effectively invisible.[1] But it is also possible to discern a growing tendency to deploy the public/private distinction itself as a means to define the permissible lineaments of literary Irishness, with particularly problematic consequences for women's writing. In this essay I will firstly outline how recent uses of the public/private distinction in both history and literary criticism contribute to the marginalization of women's writing in Ireland. This will include a detailed account of developments in the history and criticism of British women's writing in the eighteenth

century, as I will argue that a specific reading of this criticism has contributed to the marginalization of Irish women's writing in the same period. The last part of the essay will explore the potential for alternative approaches with reference to a specific text, Sarah Butler's pioneering novel, *Irish Tales*.

When dealing with women writers in earlier periods, the impact of historical research on understandings of those writers and their society is understandably considerable. As Maria Luddy has observed, the lack of research in social and economic history in Ireland means that the lives of both Irish women and Irish men remain under-researched and insufficiently understood in many important areas. Luddy goes on to say that the lack of research in women's history 'reflects the belief that few substantial sources exist for the history of women' and that 'it also stems from the predominance given to political history within the Irish historical establishment.'[2] This predominance of political history is such that some historians appear to believe that without active participation in the political public sphere women are historically invisible. In a large collection of essays on 1798, for instance, the issue of women's roles in the period is described as a 'silence', which is 'explained' as follows: 'from a conservative standpoint, the idea of politically active women, either loyalist or republican, was repugnant, a violation of the concept of separate spheres which regulated thinking about the proper behaviour of women in the eighteenth century. […] in the aftermath of the rising, women were relegated below the horizon of historical visibility.'[3]

As I have remarked elsewhere, comments such as the above, although they are alert to the constructed nature of the gendered public/private divide, do not acknowledge the extent to which they themselves depend upon the assumption that the nation can only be constituted through membership of and participation in the public sphere.[4] Moreover, the emphasis on the radical and emancipatory aspect of political thought in Ireland in the 1790s fails to grasp the fact that exclusion on the grounds of

gender was not an oversight, but was integral to the radical political agenda: as Catriona Kennedy has written of the classical republican philosophy that was drawn on by the United Irish movement, its 'conflation of the citizen and soldier enabled the movement to transcend class and, perhaps more importantly in the Irish context, sectarian divisions, whilst also limiting the unstable boundaries of the public sphere to men'.[5]

Thus, we are not simply dealing with a lack of research on women's social and economic history which makes it difficult to locate writing by women in an Irish social context. Given that the association between masculinity, public identity and national identity was strategically emphasised in the manner just described, the dominance of political history within Irish historiography not only relegates women to a marginal position, but, one could argue, it is itself a discourse that owes its origins to the same necessarily masculinist construction of the nation and the national public sphere. The dominant practice within Irish history thus clearly contributes to the difficulties that are experienced in attempting to discuss the work of women writers from earlier historical periods.

In this context, what has been achieved in Ireland recently with the publication of the *Field Day Anthology* volumes 4 and 5, on women's writing and traditions, is of immense significance, given the numbers of writings by women the editors have made available to a wider readership, many pieces for the first time.[6] One of the challenges that such a work of recovery presents to us is that of devising strategies for reading and interpreting – for understanding, in other words – the body of work that has been uncovered. It is in part to this challenge that I wish to respond in this essay, by reflecting on the available models for reading eighteenth-century women's writing and by proposing some new ways of reading.

The fact that there have been so few accounts of the work of women writers in the eighteenth century cannot however be attributed wholly to the shortcomings of

historians, particularly because in Britain the subject of eighteenth-century women's writing has been a central topic of research and debate among literary critics for over two decades. Given the shared nature of Anglophone culture in this period, one might perhaps not expect that such a marked contract would exist between a research field which boasts numerous important monographs and hundreds of essays and chapters, and one in which articles number in the handfuls, and in which there is, needless to say, no survey or inclusive account of women's literary activity.[7]

The issue is not merely one of volume, however. As I have suggested, the key issue may be the development of productive strategies or conceptual frameworks for reading little-known texts and it is in this area that the greatest contrast between discussions of women's writing in Ireland and those in England lies. Since the 1980s, critics working on British women's writing have proposed increasingly sophisticated and nuanced accounts of the emergence of women as authors, most of which have a firm socio-cultural and socio-historical grounding. But, as I will outline here, it is perhaps in the very historically-argued nature of these accounts that some of the difficulties in devising an interpretative strategy for eighteenth-century Irish women's writing lie.

Most feminist critics and literary historians in Britain are by and large in agreement in identifying the eighteenth century as the key period for the emergence of professional women authors. Introducing an essay collection on women and literature in the eighteenth century, Vivien Jones quotes an anonymous writer who remarked in 1762 in the *Critical Review* that 'there never was perhaps an age wherein the fair sex made so conspicuous a figure with regard to literary accomplishments as our own'.[8] Statements such as these, which abound in the eighteenth century, are moreover borne out by the facts: as Jones states simply, 'during the eighteenth century [women] began to contribute in significantly large numbers to an increasingly powerful print culture.'[9] What are the precise factors that brought about this historical and cultural phenomenon? Some of the

answers that have been provided, as we shall see, have proved somewhat problematic from the point of view of Irish historical experience, in that many of these accounts associate the emergence of women authors with a particular construction of feminine identity which is in turn related to political, economic and social changes usually regarded as highly specific to the British experience.

We can consider as an example Janet Todd's emphasis on the need to understand the emergence of women authors in the context of a web of interrelated social, economic, political and ideological shifts:

> In its ideologies and assumptions, England in 1660 is recognisably distinct from the modern period, but the England of the mid-eighteenth century is far less so. Between [these periods] are occurring those ideological and conceptual changes that would set the country on the road towards a later middle-class democracy, prepared for industrialisation, and allow it to emerge as the wealthiest European nation, with a trading empire unmatched in history. These changes affected all men from the highest to the lowest classes; in a very different but just as profound way they also affected women. It is no coincidence that during this period they entered commercial literature as producers and consolidated their role as consumers. In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, the writer-hero turns into a woman in the late seventeenth century.[10]

As a reading of this passage will suggest, certain discussions of women's writing and of the emergence in Britain in this period of women as authors involve issues that complicate a straightforwardly 'celebratory' response, certainly from an Irish perspective. Todd's reference to Virginia Woolf reminds the reader of the feminist impulse behind the recovery of women's writing and the documenting of its history, but her account also locates the emergence of women as authors squarely within the mainstream of specifically British historical development, with references to political institutions and economic systems which may have contributed to Britain becoming the 'wealthiest European nation', but under which many groups (including, of course, women) were discriminated against and disadvantaged.

Central to the discussion of where women's writing is to be located in the changing social and political scene as sketched by Todd are the accounts derived from social historians and sociologists of the increasing power of the middle class in this period, and its ideological relationship to new constructions of gender and the family.[11] These accounts relate the economic and political rise of the middle classes to the ideological construction of separate spheres and the restriction of women to a purely domestic private sphere, held to be utterly divorced from the public worlds of economic and political activity. This seemingly regressive development, it has been argued, provided women with an opportunity for literary authority, and thus with a public voice:

> The redefinition of womanhood included a reappraisal of women's proper authority, and women were now seen as having a legitimate authority within the private sphere: including domestic life, emotions, romance and the young girl's moral welfare. When that private sphere became the central concern of a literary genre, women's authority extended to that too.[12]

Although this explanation clearly locates women's professional authorship within a field of constraints, it proved possible nonetheless for other feminist critics like Jane Spencer to argue both that the novel's rise 'was centrally bound up with the growth of a female literary voice acceptable within patriarchal society' (thus acknowledging constraints and the relationship of female authorship to potentially repressive institutions) and also that the novel was 'an important medium for the articulation of women's concerns'.[13] This account, both of British social history and the location within it of women's literary and cultural activity, has proved highly persuasive and influential.

However, the Todd-Spencer account has not been the only one. The possibility that our choice between models of women's developing authorship is not between mere alternatives, but between more starkly configured opposites, is raised by Nancy Armstrong's much more negative reading of the relationship between the rise of the novel, new ideologies of gender and sexuality and the rise of the middle classes. In her influential 1987 *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Armstrong claimed that '[f]rom the beginning,

domestic fiction actively sought to disentangle the language of sexual relations from the language of politics, and, in so doing, to introduce a new form of political power',[14] She goes on to argue that:

> The struggle to represent sexuality took the form of a struggle to individuate wherever there was a collective body, to attach psychological motives to what had been the openly political behaviour of contending groups, and to evaluate these according to a set of moral norms that exalted the domestic woman over and above her aristocratic counterpart. I am saying the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies.[15]

In Armstrong's work the eighteenth-century feminization of literature insofar as it cloaks politics with psychology, and divorces the subject from the 'openly political behaviour' of groups and communities, acquires a distinctly repressive cast. She sets such feminine and interiorised ideologies and values in a repressive relationship to other, antithetical ones, arriving at a set of oppositions between the domestically-located individual and the group, and between the language of individual feeling and desire and 'openly political' collective behaviour.

In work such as that of Todd and Spencer, as well as in Armstrong's, the association between new ideologies of domestic femininity and the rise of female authorship is, as I have noted, clearly grounded in the context of British social history. Since it does firmly – even inextricably – locate the construction of that femininity which apparently enabled female authorship within a set of economic, social and political conditions to a degree specific to Britain, female authorship in Ireland cannot be conceptualized in exactly the same way given that exactly the same conditions did not pertain in Ireland. The quasi-colonial nature of Ireland in this period, where religious and linguistic differences played a determining role in the processes of conquest and settlement and in subsequent social organisation, cannot be ignored in any account of cultural history or cultural formations.

The critic who pioneered the project of creating a context for women's writing attuned to the specific history of Ireland was Siobhán Kilfeather. In the *Field Day Anthology,* Kilfeather concurs with her British counterparts in locating the rise of the woman author at the end of the seventeenth century, and draws attention to issues such as the wider accessibility of print, the increasingly business-oriented nature of publishing and the role of professional reviewers in creating the milieu in which the female author emerges as a distinct figure. But she goes on to argue that

> It seems to have required something other than the availability of print, however, to produce professional women writers. If we compare the history of women's writing in Ireland with that in France, England and North America, we may observe that in each case there is a sudden explosion of women's writing within a decade of significant political upheaval and social instability; when print has been harnessed to disseminate revolutionary ideas through the nation's imagined community. […] It is not, perhaps, surprising that in each case women's first interest, particularly in their fiction, is to allegorize the period of national crisis.[16]

The emphasis here on political upheaval and social instability as enabling conditions for the emergence of female authors provides an alternative to the location of women's writing within the type of 'narrative of progress' proposed by Todd and others, and thus clearly creates the potential for more appropriately conceptualizing the emergence of Irish women authors. Kilfeather's reference to allegory, however, suggests a construction of private and public in which primacy is given to the 'national [crisis]', and in which the only way for private experience to signify politically is to be overwritten by a national allegory. Thus this model gives visibility to Irish women's writing, but on terms which suggest the relative unimportance of the private sphere with which women have for centuries been associated.

The ambivalent treatment of the private sphere in Kilfeather's model for the emergence of women's writing in Ireland relates, I would argue, to a wider unease among nationalist and postcolonial critics with the private sphere as it has been constructed and

described by British historians and critics. As we have seen, it has been argued that there is an intimate relationship between evolving models of subjectivity and the social and economic development of the British nation: the response of some Irish critics has been to exclude as inappropriate to Irish conditions, therefore, the type of private experience that we typically associate with forms such as the eighteenth-century novel. A potential consequence of this exclusion is the further exclusion of the possibilities for self-expression that were afforded to women by domestic fiction.

In his essays on eighteenth-century Irish literature for the Field Day 'Critical Conditions' series, Terry Eagleton differentiates between eighteenth-century English and Irish writing by asserting of 'English sentimentalism' that '[i]n its consumption of private feeling, it draws upon a domestic scene sharply separate from the spheres of work and politics, which was not, as we have seen, the typical experience of family- or clan-based societies'. He goes on to claim that '[t]he self-conscious cultivation of tender feeling belongs in England to a tradition of bourgeois interiority not so marked in the less individualist culture of Ireland, where a Catholic concern with codes of conduct, rather than a complex Protestant inwardness, was for most of the populace the order of the day.'[17]

In *Literature, Partition and the Nation State* (a more theoretically-inflected and more overtly political work than Eagleton's) Joe Cleary presents a critique of certain fictional genres which relies on the work of Nancy Armstrong, and which once again tends towards the conclusion that domestic fiction such as emerged first in the supposedly 'feminized and bourgeois' society of eighteenth-century England is at odds with the depiction of Irish reality. Cleary cites Armstrong to support his description of what he calls the 'romance-across-the-divide' genre (which includes late twentieth-century texts such as the teenage fiction of Joan Lingard, Bernard Mac Laverty's *Cal* and Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*) as 'a strange amalgam of allegorical romance and domestic realism in

which a political tale of the national romance kind and an anti-political tale of escape into domestic privacy are often combined or overlapped – with the former usually being superseded, overwritten or finally cancelled out by the other.'[18] The use of the words 'anti-political' and 'escape' to describe the kind of domestic fiction originally identified by Armstrong suggests that these forms of writing – strongly associated with women's cultural agency and visibility in the eighteenth century – are regarded by Cleary as falsifications of Northern Irish political realities.

The idea that there are sharply demarcated zones of public and private activity, and thus that one could 'escape' the public by taking refuge in private existence is itself, however, open to challenge. Based on her extensive research on women's literary and intellectual contribution to political discussion in the late eighteenth century, Anne K. Mellor for instance writes that

> If women participated fully in the discursive public sphere and in the formation of public opinion in Britain by the late eighteenth century, the assumption that there existed a clear distinction in historical practice between a realm of public, exclusively male activities and a realm of private, exclusively female activities is […] erroneous. At the very least, the concept of a hegemonic 'domestic ideology' propounded by Davidoff, Hall, and others must be fundamentally revised […]. It may be time to discard this binary, overly simplistic concept of separate sexual spheres altogether in favour of a more nuanced and flexible conceptual paradigm that foregrounds the complex intersection of class, religious, racial and gender differences in this historical period. [19]

Mellor sees 'the values of the private sphere associated primarily with women – moral virtue and an ethic of care – infiltrating and finally dominating the discursive public sphere during the Romantic era'.[22] The configuration of private and public in women's writing proposed here by Mellor seems to me one which can be pursued in relation to women's writing in Ireland in this period, as a way of reading which allows both for Irish historical experience and for the expression of a female subject position. I propose therefore to explore this model in relation to the text I mentioned at the outset, *Irish*

Tales, which was published in 1716 and the title page of which bears the name Sarah Butler as author.[23]

Irish Tales has been recognised (albeit not widely) as a significant and interesting contribution to Irish writing in this period primarily because it is 'the first anglophone prose tale to feature early Irish history'.[24] One of the chief sources for the *Tales* is Geoffrey Keating's (or Seathrún Céitinn's) *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (c. 1634), which translates as 'Basis for a Knowledge about Ireland'; although in addition to Keating Butler lists a number of other sources including Bede, Camden, Spenser and James Ware. The use of Keating's history as the source for *Irish Tales* is quite remarkable given the fact that at the time the *Tales* were published Keating's history was not available in a printed translation, or even in print, although it was circulating in manuscript in both Irish and English.[25] In the central episode, Turgesius, a Danish king, is outwitted and captured by the Irish by means of a ruse involving the daughter of Maolseachlin, King of Meath. This episode is found in Keating's text, although the author has elaborated on it a great deal, and creates as her dramatic focus a ill-starred love affair between Maolseachlin's daughter, to whom she gives the name Dooneflaith, and Murchoe, the son of Brian Boru.[26] According to Clare O'Halloran, Keating is 'most responsible for bringing the origin legends of the Gaelic Irish into common currency', and Butler's text thus represents an important mediation of these origin legends which would bring them to the attention of an even wider reading public.[27]

'Making sense of' or understanding *Irish Tales* in relation to the institutionalized canon of Irish writing, without regard to the gender of its author, is not especially difficult. But it is true that reading the text in this way, focusing attention on those elements which have a place within political history and thus within a recognisably Irish social and cultural context, does not allow for a full consideration of the love-plot which is in fact central in the text itself. In order for the text to be interpreted coherently in this

manner, these elements must be read allegorically, as Ian Campbell Ross has done in what is currently the only full-length treatment of the novel, and which is an invaluable source for any discussion of it, including my own. His conclusion is that it is 'unmistakably, a challenging fiction of contemporary political relevance: an Irish, Roman Catholic, and Jacobite work, published in Protestant, Hanoverian England, just four months after the execution of the leading rebels for their parts in the Rebellion of 1715.'[28]

The description of the novel as Roman Catholic and Jacobite is based on the novel's depiction of 'Gaelic Ireland and [its use of] the struggles of the Gaelic Irish against the Danes as an analogy for eighteenth-century Irish patriot nationalism.'[29] Ross thus invites us to read the heroine Dooneflaith's resistance to the advances of Turgesius as an allegorical representation of the resistance of Catholic, Jacobite Ireland to Protestant, Hanoverian rule:

> What, Wed a Tyrant! one whose wicked Hands have ransacked our Holy Temples, demolish'd all our Altars! burnt all our Churches, and raz'd our Monasteries, Ravish'd our Nuns, slain our Pious Priests, and thrown the very Sacred Host it self to the Dogs; whose Tyranny has Murder'd our Nobles, and fir'd our Towns and Cities! Can such an one be thought a Match for her, whom you with Pious Care have taught to hate! Oh! rather, Sir, (upon my knees I beg it) take back this wretched Life you once bestow'd me.[30]

The 'Jacobite' interpretation may appear irrefutable, based on passages such as that just quoted. However it does not acknowledge, firstly, that vast swathes of the text are given over to demonstrations of chaste and virtuous love between Dooneflaith and Murchoe which have little relevance to this seemingly central concern. Furthermore, this reading of the novel does not take account of the fact that the foreign tyranny of the invader, Turgesius, is matched by the domestic tyranny of the two Irish fathers, who are ultimately equally as culpable in the tragic conclusion of the love affair.

Although based on Irish historical sources, the matter of Butler's text is effectively wholly invented, in that there is no historical source for the relationship between the daughter of Maolseachlin and the son of Brian Boru (in fact, as Ross points out, the Maolseachlin whose daughter was the object of Turgesius' desires preceded by a century the Maolseachlin who occupied the position of King of Ireland for periods both before and after Brian Boru; in Butler's story Maolseachlin I and Maolseachlin II are collapsed into the same figure).[31] The relationship to which the bulk of the narrative is devoted, therefore, is entirely a product of Butler's imagination. So too are the tender speeches which the lovers exchange (or which they utter aloud in solitude to express their longing), and which result in the novel featuring a striking amount of direct speech.

In her Preface Butler rather disingenuously remarks that

> *although I have cloath'd it with the Dress and Title of a Novel; yet (so far I dare speak in my own behalf, that) I have err'd as little from the Truth of the History, as any perhaps who have undertaken any thing of this Nature.* […] *What I have added, is only the Love and Amorous Discourses of* Murchoe *and* Dooneflaith. (n.p.)

Since the love plot and 'Amorous Discourses' in fact make up the bulk of the text, to refer to them as the 'only' addition undermines these apparent claims to historical accuracy. Butler does have a patriotic point to make about these amorous discourses when she pre-empts possible objections to their eloquence:

> *Some (upon what Grounds I know not) would needs have their manner and way of making Love, which I have brought as near to as I could to our modern Phrase, to be too Passionate and Elegant for the* Irish*, and contrary to the Humours, they alledge, of so Rude and Illiterate a People.* (n.p.)

She then launches into a two-page defence of Irish learning and civility which, however hackneyed such a gesture was later to become, is certainly remarkable for its appearance in such an early novelistic text. One might note, however, that her conclusion to this defence is ultimately to assert the freedom of artistic licence and creativity:

> *From what has been said, (tho' not a Tenth part of what might be on this very account) I hop'd I might have the liberty to dress their words in as becoming a Phrase as my weak Capacity could frame, or the time that I did it in would allow.* (n.p.)

Although patriotism features in Butler's comments on her text and on the language of her characters, therefore, her apparent intention seems to be to produce 'becoming phrases' which will convey the virtue of her characters and provide an aesthetically pleasurable experience for her readers.[32]

Dooneflaith's virtuous eloquence is clearly a form of resistance to the unwelcome attentions of Turgesius, but the specifically sexualized nature of Turgesius' tyranny and the resistance to it that she offers demands attention in itself, in terms other than the allegorical representation of Jacobitism and Hanoverianism. Dooneflaith is exposed to the advances of Turgesius, receiving no protection from her father, who could not 'in any way forbid his Address, knowing how dangerous a thing it might prove, to stand in competition with so mighty and powerful a King' (6). Left to her own devices, Dooneflaith has only her command of language as a weapon against Turgesius, and when he banishes Murchoe and then insists on knowing the cause of her grief she has to display remarkable social and verbal skills:

> My Lord (said she) you urge me to do that, which I fear when perform'd, will displease you. 'Tis not but that I know the Honour you are pleas'd to confer on our Family in vouchsafeing to cast your Affections on me, who so little deserve them; nor is it, but that I have confidence enough in your Kingly Word, that makes me thus scrupulous; but so it is, unless with an Oath you confirm that you will grant my Request, I shall still keep the cause of my Grief to myself. (12)

Turgesius is understandably taken aback and 'strangely perplexed in his Mind, to see one, whom he thought he might have commanded, make Capitulations with him, and so much distrust the word of a Monarch, that no less than an Oath would serve to confirm her' (12). Turgesius claims that had Dooneflaith 'not gotten an absolute sway over his heart, he wou'd never have condescended to a thing the most powerful Prince shou'd

never have gained from him' (12). This exchange draws attention to the discourse of romantic love, in which social rank is set aside in favour of the dictates of the heart; Turgesius' ultimate lack of concern about whether or not his feelings are reciprocated however makes a mockery of his representation of himself as a slave to love, and forces Dooneflaith into an even more unambiguous statement of self-assertion. When Turgesius says he will swear to grant her request on the condition that 'she would allow him to love her, and give him leave to hope, that in time his Passion might be rewarded' she replies (13):

> My Lord […] you pretend to grant my request, and tell me my Power is absolute, and yet you confine me to that, which perhaps, of all things in the World is opposite to my quiet; as for your loving me, it lies not in my power to hinder; and as for your hopes that your Passion may be rewarded, is a thing that I can willingly suffer, so that you will not by your Power and Authority urge me to Marry you against my consent, and withall, that you would recall the unhappy Murchoe, whom I know you have banish'd only for my sake. (13-14)

In Keating's history, the daughter of Maolseachlin (who is never named) is a very shadowy figure. She features only in a very short paragraph in which we are told of how advantage was taken of Turgesius' desire for her to plan an attack on the tyrant and his followers. Fifteen young warriors were disguised by dressing them as young noble women, supposedly 'Dooneflaith' and her ladies-in-waiting, who were to be presented to the Danes: caught off their guard and plied with alcohol, the Danes were easily overcome. The daughter of Keating's history is thus only useful as a means to arouse Turgesius's lust, and thus enable the Irish to plan their surprise attack; she has no individual character or agency whatsoever. The contrast with Butler's text is marked, the inescapable conclusion is that one of the key effects of Butler's retelling of Keating's narrative is to create a central female character who possesses a distinct subjectivity and a will which she is capable of expressing and asserting.

Irish Tales thus shares with many other female-authored texts of the eighteenth century a belief in female virtue and its potential for socially beneficial influence. Were this virtue merely to be cast in opposition to the evils of the foreign tyrant, one could happily conclude that female concerns and 'Irish' concerns simply mirror one another. But this is not in fact the case. There is, in addition, a distinct contrast drawn between the 'private' virtue of both Dooneflaith and Murchoe, and the way in which it conflicts with the 'public' concerns of their powerful fathers. As I have already remarked, the tragedy of the lovers does not lie solely at the door of Turgesius. Both Maolseachlin and Brian Boru play ambivalent and sometimes outrightly destructive roles in the lives of the two young lovers.

Firstly, as we have seen, Dooneflaith's father Maolseachlin is initially reluctant to oppose Turgesius, for reasons of pragmatic survival. Secondly, it is emphasised from the outset that the love between Murchoe and Dooneflaith is regarded by the power-seeking and ambitious fathers primarily in terms of its potential strategic use, not only in their resistance to Turgesius, but also in their quest for power over one another. Maolseachlin is thus initially pleased that his daughter is pursued by Turgesius, but when Turgesius appears to yield to his rival, Murchoe, Murchoe's own father Brian Boru refuses his consent to the marriage, as his pride is affronted bythe fact that Maolseachlin initially considered Murchoe a less suitable match than the Danish invader. This leaves Murchoe, 'who had never yet known what Disobedience to his father was, and had never broke the least of his Commands', in a 'miserable condition', as he must either 'lose the love of his Father, or that of his Mistress, both equally destructive to him' (27-8).

The 'Jacobite' reading of the tale is further complicated by the fact that the novel does not end with the defeat of the invader brought about by means of the deception involving Maolseachlin's daughter. In spite of the courage and valour that Murchoe

displays in the successful attack on the Danes, he discovers that he is not to be rewarded by the granting of consent to his marriage to Dooneflaith:

> It was some days e'er [Murchoe] return'd [from assisting the Irish troops], but to his great misery; for now Maolseachelvin [sic] having the prospect of a Crown in his sight, and having stomach'd *Bryan*'s denial of their Marriage before, firmly resolv'd that interest should not bring him to consent to it now. (78)

Ian Ross has suggested that the unhappy ending of the love story in *Irish Tales* relates to Butler's concern with historical accuracy. In her Preface, Butler remarks that the tragic end is 'contrary to the Custom of most who write these sort of Essay', but that she has 'constrained' herself as she can 'find no Authority to the contrary' (n.p.). But it is surely equally as significant that there is no 'Authority' for the love story to begin with: there is therefore no more historical sanction for a tragic love story than there is for a happy love story.

The conclusion of the novel with the Irish defeat of the Danes at the Battle of Clontarf is thus overshadowed by the depiction of both Maolseachlin and Brian Boru as power-hungry and manipulative, with Maolseachlin first insisting that Brian Boru 'be humbled, and fall a low Petitioner for the Love he once rejected' (83). Although Brian Boru initially appears willing to satisfy Maolseachlin's desires for a suitably humble change of heart, once having succeeded in deposing Maolseachlin as King of Ireland through his military successes against the subsequent waves of Danish invasion, he shows his true colours and calls Murchoe to his castle in Thomond in order to separate the lovers. Disgusted at the melancholy state into which Murchoe lapses, his father upbraids him for drowning himself in tears 'like a Woman' (103), and ignoring the needs of his country. Brian Boru dismisses the claims of romantic love in favour of those of pride and ambition:

> Make thy self worthy to be my Successor; what? can the sprightly Murchoe lie dissolving in Tears, when all the Land is almost drown'd in Blood? Think on a Crown, think of a Monarch's Power, and see how poorly Love will shew to these. (103-4)

When this approach is unsuccessful, Brian promises once again that if Murchoe will 'shew himself once more in the Field, and, according to his Custom, come home laden with Victory' (105) he will at last grant his consent to the marriage. Dooneflaith is however unhappily accurate in her foreboding that 'the Victory which you [Murchoe] are going to win, will be cause of Joy to all Ireland, but my unfortunate self' (117).

Moreover, although the novel concludes by describing the manner in which the 'warlike and Ancient Kingdom' of Ireland freed itself from 'the Tyranny of its mortal Enemy the *Danes*' (130), the Battle of Clontarf, as portrayed in the novel, is not simply a tale of Irish heroism and Danish villainy. It is firstly depicted as arising partly out of a feud between Brian Boru and the King of Leinster, who throws in his lot with the Danes. It is also made clear that the unresolved rivalry and hostility between Brian Boru and Maolseachlin has a negative impact on the course of the battle, as Maolseachlin initially refuses to participate:

> He, remembering the Affront of Bryan, who made him be Depos'd to make way for himself, as soon as the Signal was given, stood off with his men, and was only a Spectator of the most bloody and terrible Fight that was ever acted on the Tragic Theatre of *Irish* Ground. (123)

Given these circumstances, the fact that Murchoe dies in the course of heroic efforts which are portrayed as changing the course of the battle seems an indictment of the self-serving actions of the leaders of the Irish. So too do the numbers of the dead, which are, interestingly, given at the end of the account as a combined total for both sides: 'In all the Slaughter on both Sides, that Day, amounted to seven Thousand seven Hundred Men, besides Kings, Princes, Commanders and other Noble-Men' (128).

Although the novel appears to celebrate successful Irish resistance to foreign invasion, there are also strong grounds for reading it as a reflection on the destruction

that springs from the crushing of private virtues in favour of public power. One could say therefore that it is as much a call for the *internal* reformation of Irish society as for patriotic resistance to foreign power: the 'tragic theatre of Irish ground' is tragic at least partly because private virtues and female virtues are overridden in favour of public identities, from which power is derived within this society. According to this reading, and in contrast to the paradigm proposed by Nancy Armstrong, the collective action of the Irish nation would be strengthened and enhanced by the cultivation of private virtues by both men and women. Dooneflaith's moral excellence provides a lesson in these virtues, and suggests therefore that female subjectivity can be the ground from which to shape an identity which has both public and private dimensions and which can seek both individual fulfillment and membership of a community. What I hope to have shown through this reading is a model for reading eighteenth-century Irish women's writing which is alert to both its Irish and its female contexts, and which creates the potential for continuities with Irish women's writing in other historical periods.

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[1] See for instance Joep Leerssen, 'Monument and Trauma: Varieties of Remembrance', in *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 204-222. This essay makes use of the concept of private and public spheres to describe the transition from a 'Gaelic Ireland' of the eighteenth century, 'hermetically sealed off from a public forum' (214), to the Catholic 'nation' of the nineteenth century, defined as such using the terms of Benedict Anderson, thus emphasising the importance to nation-making of the public sphere of print.

[2] Maria Luddy, Section Introduction, 'Women in Irish Society, 1200-2000', *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing vols 4 and 5: Women's Writing and Traditions*, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2002), 5: 461-3,461.

[3] Kevin Whelan, 'Section VI: Introduction', in *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective*, ed. Thomas Bartlett et al. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003): 469-77, 470.

[4] See my *Maria Edgeworth: Women, Enlightenment and Nation* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2005): 3-5.

[5] Catriona Kennedy, '"A gallant nation": Chivalric Masculinity and Irish Nationalism in the 1790s', in *Public Men: Masculinity and Politics in Modern Britain*, ed. Matthew McCormack (Palgrave, 2007): 73-92, 77-8.

[6] These volumes represent a major corrective contribution to this area. The criticism of the anthology voiced by some, for its emphasis on comprehensive coverage rather than selection based on aesthetic and literary criteria, might perhaps be understood in the context of the dearth of historical research and the aim in certain sections to 'indicate the range of sources available to historians'. Luddy, Section Introduction, 'Women in Irish Society, 1200-2000', *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* 5: 461-3, 461.

[7] The few but invaluable pieces which focus specifically on the topic of eighteenth-century women's writing in Ireland include: Bernard Tucker, '"Our chief poetess": Mary Barber and Swift's Circle', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 7 (1992): 43-56; Elizabeth Kuti, 'Rewriting Frances Sheridan', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 11 (1996): 120-28; Siobhán Kilfeather, 'Origins of the Irish Female Gothic', *Bullán:*

An Irish Studies Journal 1 (1994): 35-45; Leith Davis, 'Birth of the Nation: Gender and Writing in the Work of Henry and Charlotte Brooke', *Eighteenth-Century Life* 18 (1994): 27-47; Ian Campbell Ross's article on Butler's *Irish Tales* will be referred to in detail below. Note that, as a search of the MLA bibliography will reveal, research on writers such as Sheridan, Barber and Mary Davys locating them in a British context far exceeds pieces discussions of these writers from an Irish perspective.

[8] Quoted in Vivien Jones, 'Introduction', *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700-1800*, ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000):1-24, 1.

[9] Jones, 'Introduction', *Women and Literature in Britain*: 1.

[10] Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing and Fiction 1660-1800* (London: Virago, 1989): 14.

[11] See for instance Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Classes*, revised ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

[12] Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986): 21.

[13] Spencer, ix.

[14] Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987): 3.

[15] Armstrong, 5.

[16] Siobhán Kilfeather, 'Section Introduction', 'The Profession of Letters, 1700-1810', *Field Day Anthology* 5: 772-7, 772.

[17] Terry Eagleton, *Crazy John and the Bishop: and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1998): 87.

[18] Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 115.

[19] Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830* (Indiana University Press, 2002): 7. See also Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Eve Tavor Bannet, *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 2000).

[22] Mellor, 11.

[23] No reliable information can be given as to the identity of Sarah Butler. It is speculated that she may have been the widow of a Captain James Butler, killed at the Battle of Aughrim: see *Field Day Anthology* 5: 830. Given that this Sarah Butler was associated with the Williamite forces and that the *Tales* appear to have Jacobite sympathies, this has however been questioned (Ian Campbell Ross, personal communication).

[24] Siobhán Kilfeather, ed., 'The Profession of Letters, 1700-1810', *Field Day Anthology* 5, 772-832, 782.

[25] The earliest printed English-language translation of Keating's history is Dermod O'Connor's *General History of Ireland* (1723).

[26] As Butler's spelling of some names is inconsistent, and other renderings such as 'Maolseachelvin' appear to have arisen from errors in transcription, I have followed the forms used by Ian Campbell Ross: '"One of the Principal Nations in Europe": The Representation of Ireland in Sarah Butler's *Irish Tales*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 7 (1994): 1-16.

[27] Clare O'Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate and Cultural Politics in Ireland c.1750-1800* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004): 17.

[28] Ross, '"One of the Principal Nations in Europe"': 3, 4.

[29] Ross, 7.

[30] Sarah Butler, *Irish Tales* (London: E Curll and J Hooke, 1716): 52-3. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

[31] Ross, 8-9.

[32] One of the features of the speech in *Irish Tales* is that it often scans as blank verse. This suggests a familiarity with dramatic verse, including Shakespeare. Maria Luddy has pointed out that this would indicate a very high level of education, available only to women of high social rank (personal communication).