

**MOTHERS, MARTYRS, WIVES, AND WHORES:  
" TOWARD A NEW FEMINIST THEORY OF  
SEAN O'CASEY'S GENDER CONSTRUCTS.**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Mothers, Martyrs, Wives, and Whores: Toward a New Feminist Theory of Sean O'Casey's Gender Constructs

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This thesis uses feminist criticism as a means of shedding new light on the Irish political, social, and cultural issues in Sean O'Casey's plays. While traditional critical analysis has often viewed the O'Casey female construct as a symbol of virtue and tenacity, the present study defines these characters more in terms of their patriarchal objectification.

The oppression of people is a dominant theme in O'Caseyan drama. A feminist perspective demonstrates how the colonial system of privilege and oppression is defined not only by gender but also by race and class. Because of Britain's colonial imperialism in Ireland, Irish men have experienced a particular form of persecution as a devalued race. Irish women have been, therefore, doubly oppressed, first by the patriarchal authority within their own culture, and second, by the invasive British government which is also patriarchal. This process, termed "double patriarchy," is a significant force in O'Casey's plays.

Sean O'Casey understood the institution of double patriarchy and railed against it by presenting a

dichotomy of gender construct in his plays: while the women are powerful and stoic in their life pursuits, the men, almost without exception, are irresponsible and inept. Moreover, O'Casey's women are portrayed as pragmatic and firmly grounded in reality. On the other hand, O'Casey's male characters (who represent the patriarchal establishment) are deliberately constructed as one-dimensional, clownish dolts. O'Casey's message seems to clearly define patriarchy as an organized society which breeds war, social economic injustice, and civil strife; since patriarchy is the governing force in organized society O'Casey views men as responsible for Ireland's social desecration.

I dedicate this work to my children, Jillian Kyle and Devin Patrick, without whom my effort would have little meaning.

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CHAPTER ONE  
LINKING THE O'CASEY TRADITION TO  
A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

*I think a poet's claim to  
greatness depends upon  
his power to put passion  
in the common people.*

--Sean O'Casey

*Introduction.*

Of the Irish playwrights whose works have contributed so significantly to world theatre--Shaw, Synge, Beckett, Behan, and Friel come readily to mind--Sean O'Casey and his plays still manage to inspire new and insightful critical thinking. There are several reasons for this. It can be argued that Sean O'Casey wrote some of the most provocative plays of this century and that the texts continue to foster lively critical discussion among theatre intellectuals. One of the more controversial issues has been the form and style of O'Casey's later plays. He sought to establish an alternative form of writing which would fuse the elements of realism, expressionism, and symbolism. These "experiments" stirred controversy among those who had pigeonholed the playwright as a master of realism based on his hugely successful "Dublin trilogy."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Shadow of the Gunman (1923), Juno and the Paycock (1924), and The Plough and the Stars (1926).

Some thought the new form was lacking sophistication while others, like Walter Starkie, thought O'Casey was ". . . groping after a new drama outside the conventional stage." Starkie further speculated that, "At any moment he may make a great discovery."<sup>2</sup>

There is also the issue of O'Casey's political agenda in relation to his expressed narrative. First and foremost, he was a confirmed Socialist.<sup>3</sup> Through shrewd mechanics, O'Casey advanced the "Red" word in his acutely Marxist plays.

Certainly, the texts were infused with an O'Caseyan life-passion for the subject matter. Furthermore, they represented the very essence of the playwright's being; while some of his characters lived the life he lived and spoke the thoughts he thought, others shared his dreams--and nightmares. "It is all very well and easy," O'Casey stated, "to say that 'the

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Starkie was a noted Professor of Italian and Spanish literature at Trinity College at the time O'Casey's The Silver Tassie was rejected by W.B. Yeats and the Abbey Theatre directorate for production consideration. See Starkie's essay, "Sean O'Casey," in *The Irish Theatre*, edited by Lennox Robinson (London, Macmillan, 1939).

<sup>3</sup> I mention O'Casey's penchant for Marxist ideology here only as a means of introduction; it will be examined more thoroughly in a subsequent portion of this discussion.

dramatic action must burn up the author's opinions.' The best way and the only way, to do that is to burn up the author himself" (Krause, 104).

While O'Casey's life-passion is at the very root of his plays, it also bears the brunt of responsibility for much of the controversy surrounding them. Some of his most severe critics suggest that the playwright was blinded by emotion and his plays suffered for it. In his editorial review of The Silver Tassie, produced at the Apollo Theatre, London, 1929, Charles Morgan wrote:

. . . though his dramatic method is a brilliant experiment, Mr. O'Casey lacks the experience or the greatness and generosity of mind to write of war on a spiritual plane . . .  
*. the violence of his prejudices on the particular subject of war has, in this instance, distorted his esthetic vision.*<sup>4</sup>

Even those highly appreciative of the man and his work at least consider that the plays may have been adversely influenced by his obsession with abstract Socialist moralizing. "O'Casey," says Ciarán O'Reilly of the Irish Repertory Theatre Company, "gets in the

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Morgan in his review of the world premiere of The Silver Tassie at the Apollo Theatre, London, 1929. See, The Saturday Review, London, 19 October 1929. Emphasis added.



way of O'Casey."<sup>5</sup>

*Feminism as a Methodology in O'Casey's Drama.*

Feminist criticism has surfaced dramatically in the fields of Irish literature, philosophy, and history since Mary Robinson began her tenure in 1991 as Ireland's first woman president.<sup>6</sup> Still, as a methodology of choice, it is slow to ponder the literary and performance texts of the modern Irish dramatists who have otherwise so significantly contributed to world theatre. Irish women and the events they are associated with in their country have to date been only marginally treated and primarily by historians. Moreover, little has been attempted by way of using feminist discourse to discuss the women of Sean O'Casey's theatre. So, why a feminist theory of Sean O'Casey's plays? The oppression of people regardless of their gender is a dominant theme in

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<sup>5</sup> In 1992, I had the pleasure of interviewing Ciarán O'Reilly and Charlotte Moore, the co-founders of the IRTC, with respect to Grandchild of Kings. Hal Prince directed the production after he adapted O'Casey's autobiographies to be staged. I am grateful to Mr. O'Reilly for his kind permission to quote him here.

<sup>6</sup> The December, 1991 issue of The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies was the first to devote its entire publication to the study of feminism in Ireland, particularly women and Irish politics.

O'Caseyan drama. A feminist perspective demonstrates how the colonial system of privilege and oppression is defined not only by gender (radical-feminism) but also by race and class (materialist-feminism). I propose to illustrate in this thesis how feminist criticism is an invaluable methodological means to shedding new light on Irish political, social, and cultural issues as distinguished through the wary eyes of Sean O'Casey.

Within a feminist perspective, colonization becomes an especially pertinent issue. Colonization is manifest when a foreign government infiltrates and ultimately overrides an already existing "home" government. Groups of people from a foreign country systematically relocate with the intent to subjugate a native populace and overthrow their prevailing cultural, economical, and political systems. The colonization of Ireland by Britain began in the early seventeenth century and continued to gain momentum for the next 300 years;<sup>7</sup> by the mid-nineteenth century, Gaelic strength had given way to English expropriation and domination.

When a society is subjugated by an alien political

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<sup>7</sup> Ulster was defeated by the Earl of Tyrone in 1603.

force, its indigenous population is oppressed. In the case of Britain's colonial imperialism in Ireland, Irish men experienced a particular form of persecution as a race devalued by the encroaching colonial power. Irish women were therefore doubly oppressed, first by the patriarchal authority within their own culture, and second, by the invasive British government which is also patriarchal. This concept, a relatively new one to feminist theory, is termed "double patriarchy."<sup>8</sup> It is ". . . a system under which sexism, the weapon of patriarchal power and its various manifestations, politically, socially and economically oppress women twice over" (Ajayi-Soyinka, 162). Colonial patriarchy is a concept which provides a new criterion for feminist analysis. It looks to issues of race and class as well as gender, as a means of determining how indigenous peoples are segregated from one another. I suggest that by framing O'Casey's plays within the context of double patriarchy, a new means is forged by which to reconcile disparate factions of feminism.

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<sup>8</sup> I was first introduced to the concept of double patriarchy by Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka, whose article, "Black Feminist Criticism and Drama: Thoughts on Double Patriarchy" appears in the Spring, 1993 issue of the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. See pp. 161-76.

Feminist methodology is divided into three distinct modes of representation which support separate political agendas. Whereas radical feminism ". . . is based on the belief that patriarchy is the primary cause of the oppression of women" which, in turn, emphasizes ". . . the notion of a woman's culture, different and separate from the patriarchal culture of men" (Case 63-4), liberal feminism asserts women's parity with men and stresses that both genders can coexist peaceably in a given society. Finally, a materialist-feminist approach embraces a Marxist/Socialist ideology and stresses ". . . material conditions of production such as history, race, class, [and] gender" (Austin, 6). By adopting a materialist position, the Woman as Subject is deconstructed ". . . to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations" (Dolan, 10). That is to say that men and women are not viewed in terms of biological differences, but rather, *despite* these undeniable dissimilarities, women differ from men *more* because the image of women is appropriated by a patriarchal social standard. Women are thereby mystified and represent a construct. It is important to note that, although each of these divisions of feminist theory stands alone as a politic, all three

can intersect to provide a basis for feminist analysis in any given body of dramatic text.

By utilizing a joint radical/materialist feminist methodology in this work, I have achieved, I think, new and exciting readings of O'Casey's plays. While a materialist-feminist critique views men and women from perspectives of gender, race, and class, radicalist-feminism concentrates on women oppressed by patriarchy. What results is an overt feminine uprising, as manifest in O'Caseyan drama. While the men in O'Casey's plays generally comply with their social circumstances, the women often move up and away--more often than not accompanying each other--in pursuit of a better life. So, while O'Casey is deliberate in illustrating how Irish women are doubly oppressed in their culture by virtue of class and racist implications (materialist-feminism), he also empowers them by dissociating them from their oppressive cultural systems (radicalist-feminism).

### *The Historical Context of O'Casey's Plays.*

In order to derive meaning from O'Casey's plays, one must first have a working knowledge of the complicated and tumultuous political, social, and religious history of Ireland. Since Ireland is a country firmly rooted in political and social

patriarchy, Irish women have long been exploited by an oppressive social system. Moreover, the cultural environment is peculiarly hostile as a result of British imperialism, which, until 1923, was the dominating government. Thus, a feminist review of some of Sean O'Casey's most prominent plays is not only timely but also offers a means to bridge the gender gap in a culture that demands unity of its own.

By colonizing Ireland, England was able to assert its authority and impose its values and social norms upon an existing culture it deemed inferior. Religious reformation was a primary concern of Britain as the new ruling party. The English sought to supersede Irish Catholicism with English Protestantism so that the native Irish, long regarded by England as a crude and uncivilized race, could be more easily controlled. Additionally, the Crown believed it had a right to ownership, a prevailing assumption which dates back to the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup>

Of great consequence to English-Irish relations, the Potato Famine of 1845 caused the deaths of 1.5

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<sup>9</sup> During the twelfth century, Ireland and England entered into a barter and loan system whereby the Crown lent funds to Ireland in return for Irish submissions. See, Newman, Peter R., Companion to Irish History, p. 164.

million Irish people due to starvation, cholera and other famine-related diseases. As the governing body, Britain had the opportunity to provide immediate and substantial relief to the Irish but failed miserably in doing so.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the Irish population dropped from more than eight million in 1841 to 6,500,000 by 1850.<sup>11</sup> The Irish blamed the English for the catastrophic effects of the Famine and the two races were rendered irreconcilable. It was in this atmosphere that the neo-nationalist movement stirred, and by 1914 the people of Ireland were once again battling for emancipation from England.

British hegemony and the attendant civil unrest held firm in Ireland until the War for Independence in 1919. This resulted not only in the establishment of Home Rule but also in the partition of Ireland,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Some historians have speculated that Britain deliberately procrastinated its aid to Ireland as a means of mass genocide which would ultimately lead to the complete inhabitation of Ireland by the British. Indeed, there is strong evidence to support this theory. See, for example, Dangerfield, pp. 10-11, and 284.

<sup>11</sup> Dangerfield, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> The "Home Rule" movement in Ireland first began in 1872 under the leadership of Isaac Butt, who sought ". . . the restoration to Ireland of that right of domestic legislation, without which Ireland can never enjoy real prosperity or peace" (Neville, 152). Home

separating the free west and south from the still occupied north. So, while the majority of Ireland was emancipated in 1922, six northern counties remained part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Northern Ireland--Ulster--became a "Protestant State for a Protestant People" (Neville), while the south remained chiefly Catholic. Partition bred more civil unrest and disparate political factions formed. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), for instance, sought to unify Ireland, which had become one Country with two governing States, while the Unionists, on the other hand, fought to keep the prosperous and educated Anglo-Irish north sequestered from the impoverished Irish Catholics in the south. Still other Socialist-inclined parties rallied against the abominable living conditions suffered primarily by the Catholics, and especially in Dublin.

It is easy to see, then, how issues of racism and class divisiveness came to figure prominently in the plays of Sean O'Casey. Because of their conspicuous themes of oppression and social injustice, the texts seem to be particularly suited to a

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Rule was finally implemented in 1920 with the Government of Ireland Act, which also created two separate Irish parliaments in Dublin and Belfast.



materialist/feminist analysis which links O'Casey's narrative to the Irish question.

*'The Divine Mission of Discontent'<sup>13</sup>: The Dominant Impulse in O'Casey's Plays.*

Sean O'Casey grew up in a Dublin tenement during the last part of the nineteenth century. In 1880, the year of his birth, the death rate in Dublin was 44.8 in every 1,000 of the population in comparison with 27.1 in London. On January 7, 1880, The Medical Press stated, "Upon comparison with English, European, and Asiatic cities it appears that Dublin out-strips the world in its unhealthiness."<sup>14</sup> By 1900, the death rate had escalated to 46.0 per 1,000, which prompted an editorial in The Medical Press titled, "The Dublin Holocaust." It read, in part:

The mortality-rate of Dublin City has reached the awful proportion of 46.0 per 1000, while in English cities it is 18.0 or 19.0. . . . The 'tenement' house[s] . . . are, in the majority of cases, the dilapidated wrecks of the mansions of nobility and gentry, and

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase was coined by the revolutionary Irish-Socialist labour leader, Jim Larkin, in a rally to alleviate the abysmal living conditions in Dublin at the early part of this century. Larkin was instrumental in helping to shape O'Casey's political agenda.

<sup>14</sup> The Medical Press, A Weekly Journal of Medicine and Medical Affairs, 7 January 1880, Dublin, Vol. LXXX, p. 12.

their aristocratic dependents, who kept state and squandered their patrimonies in Dublin in the time of the Georges, and these mansions, for the past hundred years, since the Union, have been abandoned and crumbling to ruin. The remaining shells of houses are bought for a nominal sum by speculators and let out to the poor at a profit. . . . (Krause, 4-5)

O'Casey's Dublin was dehumanizing in every regard: babies and young children were fatally afflicted by tuberculosis, enteric fever, and typhoid;<sup>15</sup> prostitution became a viable means of employment for the women of Dublin, which contributed to the health crisis; rats of enormous size infested the tenements. It wasn't until 1908 when Jim Larkin arrived in Dublin that a Socialist cry rang out to liberate the Dublin City-dwellers from the effects of Anglo-Irish racism, patriarchal parochialism, and British despotism:

Why, in Mountjoy Prison there was better accommodation. He had the honour of being there a few times (laughter), and by the way, it was the criminals who were outside, men who carry on a system of brutality and despotism--Christian gentlemen, so-called; and there were the men who denied the right of the working men to combine for the protection of their interests; men and women were brutally murdered under the capitalist system. Such things were happening in Dublin--the greatest Church-going city, he

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<sup>15</sup> O'Casey, in fact, lost eight of his twelve siblings, born to parents Michael and Susan Casey, to diseases brought about by tenement dwelling in Dublin at the turn of the century.

believed, in the world.<sup>16</sup>

The young and idealistic O'Casey became politically involved in the fight to revolutionize the fate of a country which had been, ". . . reduced to economic and political impotence by seven hundred years of British misrule" (Krause, 3). O'Casey answered Larkin's freedom cry by joining his Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, formed in 1913. It wasn't long before Jim Larkin was labeled the "anti-Christ" by Ireland's parochial moral majority, who positioned the labour leader as the enemy of Ireland's national ideals, which included Christianity:

From beginning to end Socialism is anti-Christian and unpatriotic. There is scarcely a single national ideal long cherished by our people of which the Socialism now daily and nightly preached at Beresford Place is not the negation.<sup>17</sup>

The tumultuous conflicts between socialism and clericalism, labour and capitalism, Catholicism and Protestantism, all characterized O'Casey's Dublin. O'Casey, using his gaelicized name Sean O'Cathasaigh,

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Larkin on the occasion of the Board of Trade Inquiry. Krause, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Taken from the article entitled, "From Beginning to End", in the *Irish Catholic* newsletter, 27 September 1913.

began writing political articles which were published by union papers such as *The Peasant and Irish Ireland*, and *Irish Worker*. Under the direct authority of Larkin, O'Casey was appointed Secretary of the Irish Citizen Army, a force whose mission was to protect union strikers from the police. Obviously, then, the young O'Casey had dedicated himself to a Socialist ideology, a commitment which was to last throughout the playwright's life.

While Socialism was always the primary ethical and ideological impulse in O'Casey's plays, the later texts were infused with cynicism directed primarily at Irish nationalists who vehemently opposed the manner in which O'Casey depicted Irish people--the O'Casey male was often characterized as a shiftless, dishonest, obtuse patriarch figure, while some female characters engaged in prostitution, or endured an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. These images were not in keeping with the highly mythologized, parochial-influenced social constructs of Irish men and women. In fact, O'Casey deliberately sought to mock sentimental patriotism in order to shed light on the brutality of war. The pacifist O'Casey fought with intellect and reason and not with what he considered to be imprudent masculine brawn; in this context, he was perceived as anti-

patriarchal--anti-Irish--by his countrymen. His plays were consequently ill-received and ultimately incited their audiences to riot. Hurt and indignant, the proud O'Casey self-exiled to England in 1926, an act which many of his feminine characters mimicked in his plays.

*Reading O'Casey From a Feminist Perspective.*

Effecting feminist readings of Sean O'Casey's plays partially illustrates the playwright's philosophy of gender: women are superior to men in terms of intellectual rational-ability. I take this theory one step further by asserting that the O'Casey female construct was often used as a political polemic,<sup>18</sup> that is one who is deliberately manipulated to reveal the absurdity of patriarchy as a governing power. The Socialist O'Casey used his plays--and their female characters--to advance his own politic, which coincidentally championed women's issues that had to do with social, economic, and political oppression.

In this thesis, I argue that Sean O'Casey was an informed male feminist. He was sophisticated in his understanding of gender differences and questioned the subordinate role women play in a society governed by

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<sup>18</sup> To my knowledge, this terminology has not been used before in the context of O'Casey analysis and so I am fully responsible for using it here.

patriarchy. Moreover, it will be demonstrated how his plays speak to the issue of double patriarchy, which views women as twice oppressed by an indigenous patriarchal society which was, in turn, ruled by a foreign and hostile government. As is evidenced by these plays, O'Casey attempted to enlighten that same society by illustrating how women are subverted by men. By applying feminist theory in reading O'Casey's dramatic texts, new light is shed on both the male and female constructs to show that Ireland's patriarchy--with a highly conservative Catholicism as its primary agent--is an unwholesome choice of political action for both genders. Moreover, men need to see women as positive contributors to their societies rather than products of them.

Each of the three plays I have selected for analysis--Juno and the Paycock (1924), The Silver Tassie (1928), and Cock-a-Doodle Dandy (1949)--represents a distinct period of writing for O'Casey. Considered by many to be his best work, Juno and the Paycock is taken from O'Casey's earlier naturalistic "slum" or "kitchen" dramas. Of the three, it is the one most receptive to a theory of double patriarchy.

My analysis of this play is twofold: first, I look at the relationship between the matriarch, Juno

Boyle, and her "Paycock"/husband, Jack Boyle, to explore the theory of double-patriarchy as it relates to O'Casey's drama. Second, borrowing from feminist psychology, I look at the role the mother figures play in determining the gender identity of their children. In *Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow advanced the notion that, ". . . female identity is devalued by society with the result that women must live through their children" (Austin, 63). In doing so, they continue to raise their male children to believe that their masculinity is dependent on devaluing women. Daughters are forced to accept the position of gender inferiority and will thus continue to produce male children who will ultimately maintain the system that devalues them.

Chodorow's implication is that mothers are more bonded with their daughters than with their sons. And since, ". . . mothers experience a greater continuity with girl children. . . [the daughters] . . . experience a sense of merging with their mothers that somehow persists into later life" (66).

Traditionally, Juno Boyle and her daughter, Mary, have been viewed as tragic figures who, by the play's end, are forced to flee an intolerable situation. A feminist study disputes that norm by suggesting that

the mother-daughter bond empowers them to act rather than react to colonial-imposed oppression. A radical-feminist perspective views the women's exodus as an act of "sisterhood," or a means of self-preservation which honors the need to dissociate from an oppressive patriarchal environment. While the men of the play are responsible for war by actively promoting and participating in the act of it, women rise above it and finally disown any connection with it by leaving *en masse*. Moreover, as victims of double patriarchy, Juno and Mary are subject to parochial (Catholic) and social edicts which manufacture their identities to suit the "common good" of the State. In addition, British hegemony oppresses and devalues the men so that they are impotent in their social, political, and economic endeavors. This, in turn, further represses the women who have no recourse in a system which accords the man principal authority.

The choice to leave a senseless situation--Ireland's civil war--is deliberate rather than forced. The women have maneuvered for themselves an opportunity to move away from and beyond conventional patriarchy with the intent of finding an alternative means of living which will celebrate rather than patronize their womanhood.



In The Silver Tassie, a quintessential study of gender issues, I posit the theory that women are treated as commodities and are awarded to men depending on patriarchal images of manly excellence.<sup>19</sup> The feminist anthropologist, Gayle Rubin, suggests that:

The "Exchange of women" is a seductive and powerful concept. It is attractive in that it places the oppression of women within social systems, rather than in biology. Moreover, it suggests that we look for the ultimate locus of women's oppression within the traffic in women, rather than within the traffic in merchandise (Austin, 45).

In the play, the protagonist, Harry Heegan, endures a metamorphosis of social status; he is at first constructed as an archetypal male hero who possesses all the necessary attributes endorsed by patriarchy: physical prowess, stamina, endurance, masculine good looks, and youthful vigor. However, he is injured in World War I and loses the use of his legs. As a consequence, he is deemed unproductive in a culture which demands male productivity. The system fails him, and he is relegated to the non-entity status long endured by women in patriarchal societies.

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<sup>19</sup> This theory is termed "commodification" in feminist discourse. It is defined by an implied agreement of exchange between the sexes whereby the women improve their chances for upward mobility by identifying themselves as commodities for men to purchase and own.

The women in the play understand the nature of their positioning within the system. When Harry is paralyzed, the only recourse his girlfriend, Jessie, has is to "exchange" herself to another more socially acceptable man in order to have a chance at upward mobility. Patriarchy decrees that as an inferior and subjugated gender a woman's societal role is invisible. Her only chance for upward mobility, then, is to gain it vicariously through the privileged male. But the male must be "productive" in order to maintain his social status. Moreover, when he fails the system (because the system fails him), the women are forced to exchange themselves through a process of commodification in order to assure their visibility.

Finally, in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, I argue that O'Casey viewed the Irish Catholic Church (the right hand of Patriarchy) as primarily responsible for the subjugation and oppression of Ireland's women. From the Church's point of view, the women are visible only in terms of (a) their fiscal contribution to the State/Church through marriage; and (b) their physical and sexual attractiveness, attributes which it views as evil.

Cock-a-Doodle Dandy is arguably O'Casey's most overtly political play and the best representation of

his socio-political (Marxist) ideology.<sup>20</sup> O'Casey recognized that parochialism, and especially Irish Catholicism, sought ways to oppress the joys of life. In the play, the women symbolize that joy by celebrating life with humor, song, dance, and sensuality. Since O'Casey thought that the welfare of Ireland depended on a Socialist political platform, which would result in a new joyful way of living, the women in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy symbolize Socialism. The men in their various positions of authority, on the other hand, represent the existing political system in Ireland, double patriarchy. In their desperate efforts to thwart the women's gladness, they shun the tenets of O'Casey's--and Ireland's--salvation: Socialism. Although as in its predecessor, Juno and the Paycock, the denouement finds the female characters leaving in exile, the theme of war does not figure directly into the formula. Rather, O'Casey manipulates these female constructs to expose yet another degradation of women ruled by patriarchy: feminine beauty is perceived as an instrument of the devil which lures men away from moralistic (Catholic) and civic (patriarchy)

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<sup>20</sup> O'Casey maintained throughout his life that Cock-a-Doodle Dandy was his greatest achievement. The critics didn't agree.

obligations. Men are, therefore, allowed to abuse and mistreat women in order to protect their social standing.

## CHAPTER TWO

### JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK:

#### DECODING THE "MIGHTY MOTHER/FOOLISH FATHER" LINK

*"Humanity is above everything; we are the Leaders in the fight for a new life."<sup>21</sup>*

Sean O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock wrestles with critical questions of women's subordination, class divisiveness, and the relationship between power, gender and social structure. It envisions (at least metaphorically) a social organization whereby women are the governing authority. Consequentially, the play rejects patriarchal ideology in favor of a matrilineal cultural order.

The theory of double patriarchy supports a Marxist ideology which asserts that the status of women deteriorates with the rise of class society. Before British imperialism dominated Ireland there existed a conventional patriarchy which isolated the woman from her society by situating her in the familial home. Since the woman's role as principal child-rearer

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<sup>21</sup> Jerry Devine to Mary Boyle as he proposes marriage to her before learning of her pregnancy. See, Juno and the Paycock, p. 148.

precluded her from entering the work force, she was economically dependant on her husband.

One way in which double patriarchy affected the lives of Irish women was in the inaccessibility of quality education. They could only self-educate in a Church-controlled system which instructed girls merely in how to become productive wives and mothers and, at the same time, taught them to fear their bodies and shun any feelings of sexuality. These teachings were almost always administered by Catholic nuns in a convent setting. E. Brian Titley helps to clarify this point in Church, State, and the Control of Schooling in Ireland, 1900-1944:

The only knowledge of the world available to nuns is derived from reading bishops' pastorals, which describe the 'immoral literature,' the 'dens of seductive vice,' the 'irreligious treatment of the dead at wakes,' the 'drunkenness and delirium tremens,' and all the other horrors of life in the outside world. The result of a convent education is that many of the more emotional and sensitive of our Catholic girls become nuns themselves from sheer fright, as the easiest way of solving the horrible problem of life thus presented to them (144).

Moreover, the Church sanctioned class divisiveness and delegated the education of its congregation accordingly:

The Irish Catholic school system . . . operated schools both for the very rich and the very poor with equanimity. Nonetheless,

it was always recognized that secondary education would be the exclusive preserve of the wealthier classes while the masses would have to be content with less. The Rev. Andrew Murphy, secretary of the Catholic Headmasters' Association, was quite emphatic about this when he wrote that the majority must be engaged in unskilled work, for which, whatever doctrinaires may say, over-much education totally unfits them, if only by making them discontented (152).

At the time that O'Casey wrote Juno and the Paycock, double patriarchy was clearly at work in Irish culture. Not only were women denied any education which deviated from home economics but their class was further persecuted by a culture that favored aristocrats over the bourgeois, a condition resulting from British imperialism. The only way in which women were remotely visible in this culture was through procreation.

O'Casey's Juno Boyle is regarded as one of the most powerful feminine figures in contemporary drama. She is a woman of exceptional strength and endurance, character, and other "male" attributes. Sean O'Casey constructed Juno to showcase her physical and emotional strength, and to reveal by contrast males' tendency to illogical and foolish behavior. Juno Boyle is O'Casey's archetypal Mother/Matriarch, who, as the "New" Irish woman ideal, finds that the only escape from social and political patriarchy is exile. Juno

and her daughter, Mary, leave at play's end to seek a better life where women are no longer repressed by patriarchal rule.

From the feminist point of view Juno's critical fame is predicated on an image of maternal perfection. A.E. Malone, the first historian of the Abbey Theatre movement was also one of the first to define Juno in terms of her motherly attributes:

Juno and the Paycock has its superficial qualities, but it is uplifted and ennobled by the character of Juno. Juno is the great, the universal mother, as great as the greatest mother in drama, even though her influence be limited to two rooms in a Dublin slum . . . .Her son dead 'for his country'; her daughter betrayed by a worthless liar and deserted by a braggart coward; her husband a boasting, lying, drunken wastrel; she rises superior to her slum surroundings and prepares to begin her life-struggle anew (Gallagher, 91-2).<sup>22</sup>

Women in a patriarchy are empowered primarily by their fertility; the more children they produce (especially male children) the more highly they are revered:

Motherhood has often placed abstract woman on a pedestal, but has at the same time left concrete woman in the home and powerless. Reverence, a highly ambivalent expression of awe and fear, but most clearly of distance,

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<sup>22</sup> The quote is actually taken from Ronald Ayling's, "Two Words for Women: A Reassessment of O'Casey's Heroines," an essay in Gallagher's anthology.



does not necessarily result from or lead to the high status or power of the revered object that is symbolically presented (Webster, 143).

Juno, the quintessential Earth Mother, exudes great emotional strength and integrity as she makes certain that her children's needs are satisfied before attending to her own. The feminine characteristics of Juno, then, are viewed in the context of her maternal nature; when the character leaves with her daughter at the end of the play, the act of self-exile is meant to protect Mary. Juno seeks a social order that will celebrate Mary's pregnancy instead of condemning her for falling outside of the severe limitations imposed on women by patriarchy.

O'Casey christened his most powerful female character "Juno" based on her image as the "universal mother" figure. Reference is made in the play to the fact that she was nicknamed after the Roman goddess Juno by her husband, Captain Jack Boyle:

. . . Juno was born an' christened in June; I met her in June; we were married in June, an' Johnny was born in June, so wan day I says to her, "you should ha' been called Juno," an' the name stuck to her ever since (394).

The word "juno" was initially used as a female counterpart to the word "genius" or soul of universal man. Each Roman man had his personal "genius" as a

guardian angel or familiar; each woman had a corresponding female spirit called a "juno."<sup>23</sup> Later in the Middle Ages in Europe, patriarchal vocabularies dropped the word "juno" which by then was solely associated with women, thereby depriving that gender of their souls; thus, the word "genius" became solely associated with men thereby privileging their gender.<sup>24</sup>

In Roman mythology, Juno was the supreme goddess, wife of Jupiter.<sup>25</sup> She was known by several names and each title designated a specific role of guardianship. "Juno Fortuna," for instance, was the goddess of fate, while "Juno Sospita" was the Preserver. "Juno Caprotina" was the goddess of erotic love, and "Juno Populonia" was Mother of the People. Significant to this discussion, "Juno Lucina" was the goddess and

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<sup>23</sup> In this way, the feminine *juno* and the masculine *genius* parallels with the mythological "Muse" who provided the inspiration to the Greek and Roman authors of dramatic texts.

<sup>24</sup> I first came across this theory in Barbara Walker's Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets. For a more informed description of the concepts of feminine "juno" and masculine "genius", please refer to the treatises of French classical theorist, Solomon Reinach.

<sup>25</sup> In Greek mythology, Juno's correlative was Hera, wife of Zeus.

protectress of the pregnant wife and watched over childbirth, protecting mother and child from harm. In paintings, she is depicted as a woman who carries a child in her arms while harboring two more at her feet. It is Juno Lucina that Juno Boyle is fashioned after and the connection becomes the crux of this feminist study.

Juno's protectorship of her children is the fundamental theme of the play. She is the mother of two children, a son and a daughter, which helps to illustrate several points of a materialist feminist ideology. Gender is constructed by society; whereas Johnny Boyle is completely identified with the male-centered concept of war, Mary Boyle's identity stems from an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, a circumstance in which the woman is at fault in a patriarchal society. O'Casey was thus promoting a feminist point of view whereby male and female attributes were socially defined. The concept of war, for instance, was almost solely associated with men whereas the "fallen" woman was blamed for any pregnancy that resulted from premarital sex.

The play is set in 1922, the last year of Ireland's Civil War, an epoch otherwise known as "the

Troubles."<sup>26</sup> Johnny Boyle is a nervous, sullen young man who has lost an arm in the war. An informer and responsible for the death of a fellow patriot, Johnny links the family's concerns to the fate of Ireland. On a superficial level, it would appear that Juno's sole concern is to insulate her family from the civil strife in the streets outside of the Boyle domicile. More profoundly, however, Juno is deliberately constructed to reveal not only the absurd nature of war, but more importantly, that Ireland's war is little more than an unfortunate game played out by careless men. Johnny's eventual murder forces a recognition that past actions have consequences in the present and that history is a legitimate entity shaping life. According to Juno Boyle, however, Ireland's history is relevant only in that it is the past repeating itself over and over again at the hands of a reprehensible patriarchy.

A subplot has Mary Boyle involved in an out-of-wedlock pregnancy on which the hope of renewal--physical and spiritual--rests. O'Casey's narrative intimates that Mary's dilemma is more a product of her

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<sup>26</sup> This is in reference to the Irish Civil War which comprised the Easter Rising of 1916 and its aftermath. "The Troubles" continued through 1922 and culminated with Ireland's newly founded Republic.

social circumstance--a young woman striving in a patriarchal culture for upward mobility--rather than as a consequence of immoral behavior according to the rigid mores of Catholicism. She is the vehicle by which O'Casey illuminates the theme of depravity and social oppression, showing that the concept of love is more impotent than important without the proper social standing. She is a wage earner--despite the temporary hiatus she is experiencing in her job as a striker--and is more productive and self-reliant than her perpetually out-of-work father--"It ud be easier to dhrive you out o' the house than to dhrive you into a job" (82)--Jack Boyle. Still, if Mary is to move upward within the patriarchal class hierarchy, she must marry a man of superior station rather than rely on her own initiative.

As an Irish Catholic, she resides with her family in a tenement dwelling in the poorest section of Dublin. Mary meets Charles Bentham, a protestant school teacher, and is enamored with his privileged social status as well as with the wealth and opportunity of the anglicized Irish. When, after a whirlwind romance, Bentham retreats to England without a word of explanation to Mary, she suspects their disparate societal positions as the cause of his abrupt

exit:

*Mrs. Boyle.* . . . What came between the two of yous at all? To leave you so sudden, an' yous so great together. . . .

*Mary.* . . . [wearily]. I don't know, mother . . . only I think . . . I imagine . . . he thought . . . we weren't . . . good enough for him. (129-30)

Despite Mary's youthfulness and vibrant beauty, her fate has been determined by given circumstances. If, in fact, her father loses his very soul (*genius*) to an impoverishment imposed by British colonialism, then Mary's is a double loss. By virtue of her gender she is already socially deemed "soulless" and oppressed by a highly conservative and authoritative patriarchy.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, the poverty which embraces Mary and her family is oppressive enough to suggest that the young woman needs to "marry well" (Bentham) in order to alter the course of her life for the better.

The patriarch of the Boyle household is seemingly irredeemable. Traditional criticism views "Captain" Jack Boyle as an indolent, shifty, cantankerous,

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<sup>27</sup> In Ireland, the Irish Catholic Church is highly authoritative and its priests are generally considered the arbiter in any given familial or societal matter. It is interesting to note here that the Catholic Church does not allow--nor has it ever allowed--women into the priesthood. The very nature of that religion's hierarchy, then, demonstrates the theory of double patriarchy.

conceited man, a pseudo-rhetorician who delights in reciting literary quotes but always manages to mangle them. This illuminates the materialist factor which points up the educational circumstances of the poverty-stricken Irish Catholics. These were people who did not have the option of a legitimate education so they resorted to a means of self-education and, as such, their limited efforts remained unsophisticated.

Boyle is a victim of circumstances demoralized by a lack of personal and cultural identity. It might even be argued that Captain Boyle's *genius* perishes by way of a soul-consuming poverty. While he possesses an engaging tenacity in his primordial instinct for self-preservation, the material conditions of his society render him impotent in his attempts to better his lot in life. This theory is strongly evidenced by O'Casey's rendering of the subplot which has Jack Boyle coming into some unexpected wealth resulting from the death of a distant relative. Boyle was not fond of his deceased relation and is assertive in stating as much. Upon hearing of the death, Boyle says sarcastically, "Sorra many will go into mournin' for him" (100). When he learns of the substantial bequest, however, the Captain states reverently, "Juno . . . Mary . . . Johnny . . . we'll have to go into mournin' at wanst"

(101).

O'Casey's treatment of Jack Boyle is a comical one which dresses the Captain in the exaggerated antics of a Stage Irishman buffoon. To further the comical line, O'Casey uses this opportunity to point out Boyle's literary ignorance:

*Boyle.* . . . .Requiescat in pace . . . or,  
usin' our oul' tongue like St. Patrick or St.  
Bridget, Guh sayeree jeea ayera!

*Mary.* Oh, father, that's not Rest in Peace;  
that's God save Ireland. (102)

Boyle proceeds to write notes against the money that has been promised to him purchasing extravagant furnishings for the Boyle domicile and tailor-made clothes for himself. By the time he learns that, due to a discrepancy in the documentation he will not receive the bequest after all, Boyle is considerably in debt. In a series of comical confrontations throughout much of the third act, Jack Boyle struggles in vain to retain the illusion of his elevated social standing. By the end of the play, however, broad comedy gives way to abrupt tragedy when Johnny Boyle is killed.

Jack Boyle's final appearance in the play places him in the Boyle home, which has been stripped of all its furnishings. He is completely intoxicated and apparently unaware that Juno and Mary have left for



good. Fortified by their gender alliance, the women turn their backs on the political strife in Ireland while Jack Boyle, in a tone of finality, embraces it:

Boyle. The counthry'll have to steady itself  
. . . it's goin' . . . to hell . . . .No  
matther . . . what any one may . . . say. . .  
. Irelan' sober . . . is Irelan' . . . free.  
. . .I done . . . me bit . . . in Easter  
Week . . . had no business . . . to . . . be  
. . . there . . . but Captain Boyle's Captain  
Boyle . . . .Tell me Volunteer Butties . . .  
that . . . I died for . . . Irelan'! . . .  
I'm telling you . . . th' whole worl's . . .  
in a terr . . . ible state o' . . . chassis!  
(156-7)

While Jack Boyle is overtly constructed to provide much of the play's comic relief, from a materialist feminist perspective--which borrows significantly from the tenets of Marxism--he embodies the victimization of an imperialist society. He is a man repressed to the extent of metaphorical impotence. Because of the debilitating constraints imposed by an alien governing force, he is impoverished and completely unable to meet his family's needs. Since, in a conventional patriarchal society, a man is judged by his ability to provide for his family, Jack Boyle is a pathetic representation of his gender. What little manhood he manages to reserve even in the throes of a drunken stupor is completely identified with Ireland's civil war.

Juno is Captain Boyle's antithesis. Basically generous and compassionate, she has worn herself out assuming the major family responsibilities ignored by Captain Boyle. How much waste this involves is clear from a stage direction which emphasizes that under other circumstances, Juno could have been talented and good looking:

. . . She is forty-five years of age, and twenty years ago she must have been a pretty woman . . . Were circumstances favorable, she would probably be a handsome, active and clever woman. (72)

The question of why Juno Boyle remains with her powerless and ineffective husband is a perplexing one. A feminist reading suggests clearly that Juno stays because of her children. As her namesake represents, Juno is the ideal embodiment of maternal concern, disregarding--even negating--those elements that constitute a threat to her domestic milieu. O'Casey entreats us to commend Juno in her martyrdom not only for her matriarchal fortitude, but also because she initiates the means to secure a better life for herself.

As Captain Boyle reveals, his wife was born in June, the month after which the Roman goddess is named. The Boyles married in June, which further supports a connection between the mythological Juno and O'Casey's

matriarch. As the supreme goddess, Juno Lucina was the guardian of marriages and protector of child-bearing women; perhaps most significantly, Johnny Boyle was born in June, a fateful happenstance which further bonded the mother to her son.

The play's climax has to do with Johnny's death and Juno's response to it. As an informer, Johnny Boyle is discovered in his clandestine deeds and murdered for them. When Juno is made aware of her son's death, she sends up a mystical prayer from one mother of a murdered son to another, the Blessed Mother, Virgin Mary:

What was the pain I suffered, Johnny,  
bringin' you into the world to carry you to  
your cradle, to the pains I'll suffer  
carryin' you out o' the world to bring you to  
your grave! Mother o' God, Mother o' God,  
have pity on us all! Blessed Virgin, where  
were you when me darlin' son was riddled with  
bullets? . . . Sacred Heart o' Jesus, take  
away our hearts o' stone, and give us hearts  
o' flesh! Take away this murdherin' hate,  
an' give us Thine own eternal love! (135)

As Juno makes the fateful decision to leave Captain Boyle to start a new life with Mary and her unborn child, Juno is brimming with conviction and self-confidence. There is a tangible assuagement of the hardships she has endured. The two women prepare to leave to make a better world for Mary's unborn child--the pregnant girl/woman protected by the love and care

of Juno Boyle/Juno Lucina:

We'll go. Come, Mary, an' we'll never come back here agen. Let your father furrage for himself now; I've done all I could an' it was all no use--he'll be hopeless till the end of his days . . . we'll work together for the sake of the baby. (136)

Mary's response is, "My poor little child that'll have no father!", to which Juno, with great affirmation, declares, "It'll have what's far bettther--it'll have two mothers" (137). With that, the two women leave the only life they've ever known to start anew, together.

The parallel between the tempestuous familial conditions within the Boyle household and the raging Civil War outside of it determines the primary objective behind O'Casey's construct of Juno: she is, in fact, a political polemic: by finally dismissing Jack Boyle's ineffectual role in her life, she defines Ireland's war as an event orchestrated by an ineffectual patriarchal social structure. Juno Boyle valiantly dismisses both environments and attempts to move forward. The foreshadowing of the birth of Mary's child both signifies and champions a new spirit of hope for the women of O'Casey's most universal play and by extension, an emancipated Ireland.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SILVER TASSIE:

#### UNVEILING THE MASCULINE ANTI-HERO

*. . .lengthen your temper  
for a passing moment, so  
that we may bring away  
with us the breath of a  
kiss to the shell-bullied  
air of the trenches. . .*

<sup>28</sup>

When Sean O'Casey submitted his newest manuscript, The Silver Tassie to W. B. Yeats for production consideration in 1928, the gesture was considered a formality by the playwright who was thought to be solely responsible for the resurrection of the once flagging Abbey Theatre.<sup>29</sup> O'Casey was stunned when The Silver Tassie was refused. The letter Yeats sent to the playwright regarding his decision read in part:

I had looked forward to reading your play . .  
. for I bore in mind that the Abbey owed its  
recent prosperity to you. If you had not  
brought us your plays just at that moment I  
doubt if it would now exist. . . .I am sad  
and discouraged; you have no subject. . .  
*.There is no dominating character, no*

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<sup>28</sup> Harry Hegan to Susie upon his departure to fight in World War I. The Silver Tassie, p. 290.

<sup>29</sup> Yeats, Lady Augustus Gregory and Lennox Robinson comprised the directorate for the Abbey at this time. The Silver Tassie was O'Casey's first play after his self-imposed exile to England.

dominating action, neither psychological unity nor unity of action. . . .Dramatic action is a fire that must burn up everything but itself. . . .Among the things that the dramatic action must burn up are the author's opinions. It is too abstract, after the first act; but the second act is an interesting technical experiment, but it is too long for the material; and *after that there is nothing*. (Krause, 102-4)<sup>30</sup>

Yeats's highly subjective criticism of the play stems primarily from his own experience as a world-renowned poet whose writing espouses Aristotelian principles of the well-made play. Moreover, I suspect that Yeats had Aristotle's classical "tragic hero" in mind--a concept well grounded in a patriarchal sex gender/system--when he suggested that O'Casey's play was lacking a "dominating character."<sup>31</sup> As the protagonist of the play, Harry Heegan clearly dominates the action; however, he lacks the noble attributes associated with the Aristotelian tragic figure; where the classical hero is brave and highly intelligent, Harry Heegan is ". . . sensible by instinct instead of by reason" (285); likewise, "He has gone to the

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<sup>30</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup> Much of Yeats's writing seems to support this theory. The locus of a cycle of works known as the "dance" plays, for instance, was the Irish folk-hero, Cuchalain, who embodied the essence of Aristotle's "tragic hero."

trenches as unthinkingly as he would go to the polling booth" (285).

A feminist analysis of O'Casey's The Silver Tassie provides for a reassessment of Yeats's criticism. Moreover, patriarchy is signified as a ruling order which fails its principal beneficiaries: men. From a feminist perspective, the action which follows the second act determines that, as a fallen archetypal masculine hero, Harry Heegan is failed miserably by patriarchy, the system that constructed him. As such, patriarchy can be seen to be every bit as harmful to men as it is to women, a concept which questions the existence of the system for *all* concerned.

This theory impacts Irish women in terms of what they must do to achieve visibility and social standing in their rigid male-centered societies. As a cultural system of gender privilege and oppression, patriarchy positions men as producers while the women are imaged as products. O'Casey illustrates this point in The Silver Tassie by commodifying the women through a socially sanctioned process of exchange by and between the sexes; women agree to traffic themselves so long as the contract accords them upward mobility in a culture that does not otherwise acknowledge them. In this way, if the male loses his privileged social status because

he can no longer produce effectively within the system, the woman is forced to further traffic herself to a man better able to satisfy the agreement.

In the play, O'Casey accomplishes a deconstruction of gender categories by presenting the dominant male figure as a man failed by patriarchy rather than as an Aristotelian tragic hero. Yeats, of course, could not accept a male protagonist who did not flatter the patriarchal image of masculinity. If this is so, the play supports some significant feminist theory. For instance, Sue-Ellen Case states:

The feminist in theatre can create the laboratory in which the single most effective mode of repression--gender--can be exposed, dismantled and removed; the same laboratory may produce the representation of a subject who is liberated from the repressions of the past and capable of signalling a new age for both men and women. (Case, 132)<sup>32</sup>

A feminist critique of The Silver Tassie surveys both genders in the context of a patriarchal society. As a result, men as well as women can be considered in light of their culturally imposed victimization: whereas women are recognized as agents of commodification, men are exploited by society's idealized vision of themselves. The idealized male

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<sup>32</sup> Emphasis added.



persona is the one most valued by a patriarchal structure. Consequently, when a man fails to live up to that ideal (for whatever reason), he loses his elevated social status and is rendered powerless. The woman, on the other hand, is constructed for the benefit of the man, usually (because of her physical attractiveness) as an agent of social advancement and sexual gratification, and not necessarily in that order. In order to fulfill both obligations, the objectified woman is "purchased" and then exhibited--a patriarchal strategy which sees the woman as a prize awarded to those men who embody the socially defined (and highly mythologized) masculine hero ideal.

The idea that women are viewed as products of exchange--trophy--in a male-governed establishment first came to light with the advent of feminist anthropology. In her provocative article, "The Traffic in Women," Gayle Rubin sets forth her contribution to the theory as follows:

If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it. . . .To enter into a gift exchange as a partner, one must have something to give. If women are for men to dispose of they are in no position to give themselves away. . . .The "exchange of women" is a seductive and powerful concept. It is attractive in that it places the oppression of women within

social systems, rather than in biology. Moreover, it suggests that we look for the ultimate locus of women's oppression within the traffic in women, rather than within the traffic in merchandise.<sup>33</sup>

The Silver Tassie projects male-centered themes of "machismo" or ultramascularity, which include aggression and war (World War I), athletic prowess (football), and competition (the "Silver Tassie"). The play was mostly intended to express the outrage the pacifist O'Casey felt about war, a male-made social evil which he viewed as moronic. Three soldiers on leave from the front are celebrating the victory of a Dublin football team in which the play's protagonist, Harry Heegan, has scored the winning goal. Through most of the act the second soldier, Teddy Foran, is heard in the tenement above in furious battle with his wife, while the third soldier, Barney Bagnal, is surreptitiously wooing Jessica, Harry's girlfriend. The first act ends with a woman's ironic sigh of relief as the three men leave for the front: "Thanks be to Christ that we're after managin' to get them away safely!" (294).

In the second act, the action takes place on a

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<sup>33</sup> Rauma Reoter, ed. Toward an Anthropology of Women (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 19.

battlefield where men are resting between bouts of conflict. Each man represents various stages of casualty, and throughout the act they chant the dialogue in a monotonous sing-song fashion, lamenting their horror.

The action of the third act depicts a hospital ward where several wounded men are being treated. Harry Heegan has been injured in the war and is paralyzed. He is anxiously awaiting a visit from Jessie, the girl who shared with him the win of the "Silver Tassie." Harry knows that without a successful operation, he will never compete again, either as a football hero or for Jessie's affections. Jessie rejects Harry for another man and the act closes with uncertainty with regard to Harry's fate.

The final act depicts a dance hall where a crowd has gathered to celebrate the latest Silver Tassie challenge. Jessie is now with Barney, who has returned from the trenches a war hero. The young, vibrant couple spend much of the evening trying to avoid Harry, who follows them fervently despite the fact that he is wheelchair-bound. The play ends with Harry and Teddy Foran--both socially rejected because of war wounds which have rendered them non-profitable to the System--lamenting the reality of their new existence. In this

play, it is the men who leave--emasculated rather than empowered--aware that they can no longer exist in the society which once heralded their masculine power:

"Jessie, Teddy Foran and Harry Heegan have gone to live their own way in another world" (363).

Through the manipulation of his female characters, O'Casey illustrates the theory of gender commodification in a patriarchal society. The matrons, Mrs. Heegan and Mrs. Foran, exchange their autonomy, their own personality and sense of self-ownership in order to become socially visible through the institution of marriage. Moreover, the women are "bought" by the males to perform duties in the domicile which primarily benefit the patriarch/y. In the first act, Teddy Foran suspects his wife has been having an affair while he has been away at war. In a rage, he confronts Sylvester Heegan, whom he suspects is sleeping with his wife:

**SYVESTER:** You've no right to be rippin' open the poor woman's life of peace with violence.

**TEDDY:** [with indignation] She's my wife, isn't she? . . . An' you've no legal right to be harbourin' her here, keepin' her from her household duties. (282-3)

Mrs. Foran is viewed in the context of a socially-imposed institution--marriage--which as an extension of patriarchy signifies her gender-dictated oppression.

Teddy Foran's culturally-sanctioned ownership situates his wife as an indentured servant who owes her husband "household duties." Furthermore, Mrs. Foran relinquishes all rights to her own autonomous sexual identity in exchange for marriage. A sexual encounter with a man other than her husband is an unacceptable act, not only because of any immoral implications but also because the act defies the implicit code of ownership between husband and wife.

When, afraid of her husband's violent nature, Mrs. Foran refuses to join Teddy in their flat, he destroys the one item she cherishes above all others--her wedding bowl:

**TEDDY:** I'll teach you to be rippling with joy an' your husband goin' away! Your weddin' bowl, look at it. . . .

**MRS. FORAN:** [appealingly] Teddy, Teddy, don't smash the poor weddin' bowl.

**TEDDY:** [smashing the bowl with a blow of the hatchet] It would be a pity, wouldn't it? Damn it, an' damn you. I'm off now to smash anything I missed, so that you'll have a gay time fittin' up the little home again by the time your loving husband comes back. (283-4)

The bowl represents Mrs. Foran's marriage to Teddy. As a woman who is culturally invisible until marriage, her identity is exchanged for the wedding bowl. The act of Teddy Foran smashing the bowl symbolizes the destruction of his wife's social identity.

O'Casey further demonstrates how Irish women exchange their identities for marriage in the manner in which he titles his characters. While the men in the play are assigned a first name, the married women are not: they are simply referred to as "Mrs. Foran" and "Mrs. Heegan." A woman is given a first name at the time of her birth and is, therefore, recognized as having potential viability in her social system. O'Casey's deliberate omission of the married women's first names, then, recognizes that married women endure a loss of social identity. The younger, single women in the play--Jessie Taite and Susie Monican--are the only female figures in the play who are identified by a first and last name.

Jessie Taite understands the principles of commodification. She wastes no time in "exchanging" herself for the social position another man more powerful than Harry can provide for her. In the third act, as Harry anxiously awaits a visit from Jessie in the hospital, she is discovered outside cavorting under a tree with Harry's old friend, Barney Bagnal, who is now a decorated war hero:

**MRS. FORAN:** She stopped to have a word in the grounds with someone she knew.

**HARRY:** It was Barney Bagnal, was it? Was it Barney Bagnal?

TEDDY: Maybe she wanted to talk to him about gettin' the V.C.<sup>34</sup>

HARRY: What V.C.? Who's gettin' the V.C.?

TEDDY: Barney. Did he not tell you? . . .

HARRY: [intensely, to Teddy] What's he gettin' it for? What's he gettin' the V.C. for?

TEDDY: For carryin' you wounded out of the line of fire. . . .(332)

Like Jessie, Susie Monican exchanges herself for a position of higher standing as provided by a more prestigious male figure. Although the third act hints at a liaison between Susie and Surgeon Forby Maxwell, ("And don't tell me, Nurse Susie, that you've never felt a thrill or left a bedside for a kiss in a corner"), the fourth act overtly depicts the relationship. While Maxwell, also a distinguished war hero, displays his D.S.O. medal at the dance, he is also adorned by the now exceedingly provocative Susie Monican:<sup>35</sup>

SYLVESTER [as Susie goes by]. Susie Monican's lookin' game enough to-night for

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<sup>34</sup> The V.C. stands for the Victoria Cross. It is the highest honour for gallantry awarded in the British Army.

<sup>35</sup> D.S.O. is an abbreviation which stands for the Distinguished Service Order. It is almost, but not quite, as great an honor as the Victoria Cross.

anything.

*SIMON.* Hardly remindful of her one-time fear of God. (350)

Susie Monican, in fact, is the best example of gender exchange. The process is summed up in an exchange of a different sort between the women objectified, Jessie and Susie:

*JESSIE.* Poor Harry!

*SUSIE.* Oh nonsense! If you'd passed as many through your hands as I, you'd hardly notice one. (363)

Susie admits, then, to moving from one man to the next in a manner of exchange. Moreover, by not referring to the men by their names, Susie seems to imply that her involvement with them was for purely mercenary reasons.

O'Casey's treatment of Harry Heegan, however, most exemplifies how patriarchy fails its primary agents. Throughout the course of the action, Harry undergoes a complete transformation from mythologized masculine hero to fallen man. Through this evolution, the process of female commodification is revealed.

Before Harry Heegan makes his first entrance he is set forth as a man of extraordinary strength. As the play opens, Harry's father, Sylvester Heegan, is extolling his son's masculine prowess to a companion, Simon Norton:



**SYLVESTER.** I seen him do it, mind you. I seen him do it.

**SIMON.** I quite believe you, Sylvester.

**SYLVESTER.** Break a chain across his bisseps! [With pantomime action] Fixes it over his arm . . . bends it up . . . a little strain . . . snaps in two . . . right across his bisseps! (267)

The two men continue their deification of Harry through several speeches:

**SIMON.** The day he won the Cross Country Championship of County Dublin, Syl, was a day to be chronicled.

**SYLVESTER.** In a minor way, yes, Simon. But the day that caps the chronicle was the one when he punched the fear of God into the heart of Police Constable 63 C under the stars of a frosty night on the way home from Terenure. (268)

Upon Harry's entrance we learn that he has just won for his team the Dublin football championship for the third straight year. Consequently, the prize, the "Silver Tassie" cup is made the sole property of the Club. Harry's entrance is heralded by the love-struck Susie Monican:

**SUSIE** [who has been looking out of the window, excitedly]. They're comin', they're comin': a crowd with a concertina; some of them carrying Harry on their shoulders, an' others are carrying that Jessie Taite too, holding a silver cup in her hands. (285)

Harry is described as ". . . twenty-three years of age, tall, with the sinewy muscles of a manual worker made

flexible by athletic sport" (285). Most importantly, his relationship with Jessie is founded on the tenets which govern the construct of the Objectified Woman: good looks (for sexual gratification) and male superiority (for social advancement). The stage directions which characterize Jessie read:

Jessie is twenty-two or so, responsive to all the animal impulses of life. Ever dancing around, in and between the world, the flesh, and the devil. She would be happy climbing with a boy among the heather . . . and could play ball with young men on the swards of the Phoenix Park. *She gives her favour to the prominent and popular.* Harry is her favourite: his strength and speed have won the Final for his club, he wears the ribbon of the D.C.M. *It is a time of spiritual and animal exaltation for her.*<sup>36</sup> (286)

Jessie is very aware of her physical attractiveness and knows that she must use her good looks to her advantage, that is, to gain status within the parameters of her social circumstances. Additionally, she is well aware of Harry's position as the masculine hero, the most "prominent" and "popular" man about town. Harry is chosen by Jessie. It is ironic and telling that Jessie possesses many of the same attributes which have earned Harry his social status: she is young, attractive, and vibrant and by the nature

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<sup>36</sup> The emphasis added here is my own.

of these characteristics, she gives the impression that she can rise to any challenge; she is popular, although it is unclear how much of her popularity stems from Harry's reputation; and she is bright and resourceful, intuitively knowing what she needs and knowing how to get it.

In fact, Jessie's apparently innate cleverness is seemingly superior to Harry's intellectual aptitude which, despite his physical perfection, is lacking:

He isn't naturally stupid; it is the stupidity of persons in high places that has stupefied him. He has given all to his masters, strong heart, sound lungs, healthy stomach, lusty limbs, and the little mind that education has permitted to develop sufficiently to make all the rest a little more useful. (285)

Rather than using her own intelligence to assist a higher social status, she relies on Harry's position as the idealized masculine hero. Consequently, she is perceived as Harry's "girl," and is accredited his social standing.

The issue of identity further emphasizes patriarchy as a system which fails the men who support it. As the third act opens, Sylvester Heegan and Simon Norton are wards of the hospital, languishing in beds marked numbers 26 and 27, respectively. Susie Monican (who has evolved from a religious zealot to a seemingly

dedicated nurse) enters and moves about her patients, addressing them by their assigned number rather than by their given names. The significance of this would be lost if it were not for the fact that Susie is familiar with these men; the fact that she knows Sylvester and Simon and yet refers to them by their bed numbers is eloquent testimony that as men fall victim to the consequences of patriarchy, so too their contribution to that society is no longer viable; identity, therefore, becomes unimportant:

*SUSIE.* How is twenty-eight? . . . .It's ridiculous, Twenty-six, for you to be in bed. . . .look at the state of your quilt. . . .Yours is as bad as his, Twenty-seven. . . .Would you like to go down for a little while into the garden, Twenty-eight? (319-20)

"Number 28" is Harry Heegan, the same man Susie was smitten with in the first act:

I don't mind what Harry does; I know he means no harm . . . .Harry's different. . . .It's his way. I wouldn't let anyone else touch me, but in some way or another I can tell Harry's different. (290)

As a result of a war injury, Harry is paralyzed from the waist down. The once glorified Golden Boy who used to epitomize the Masculine Hero ideal is now the Fallen Man. Both constructs are products of patriarchy. As a man who has lost the use of legs which once carried him to heights of manly

athletic achievement, he has lost his social standing; he is less productive, less useful to society. He is more a number, less a man.

Harry is further identified with the theme of oppression when, in the fourth act, he sings a negro spiritual for a group of people at a dance hall. The scene seems to have been an afterthought for O'Casey for it seems out of place in the context of the action which takes place during this, the last act of the play. Yet, it was important enough for the playwright to include the negro spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." As a melody which was sung by black slaves during their subjugation in the American South, the song unavoidably connects Harry to his social circumstances.

A feminist reading of The Silver Tassie positions the masculine hero, Harry Heegan, as a victim failed by the system which constructed him: patriarchy. Moreover, the women in the play are seen as exchange commodities. Whether or not a feminine identity survives patriarchy is dependent on how successfully the woman is able to exchange herself for cultural visibility.

Ironically, as the paralyzed/impotent Fallen Man, Harry symbolizes the isolation that women have long

experienced as the culturally perceived inferior sex.

Susie attests to this in her final speech:

Jessie, Teddy Foran and Harry Heegan have  
gone to live their own way in another world.  
Neither I nor you can lift them out of it.  
*No longer can they do the things we do. . .*  
.It is the misfortune of war. As long as  
wars are waged, we shall be vexed by woe;  
strong legs shall be made useless and bright  
eyes made dark. But we, who have come  
through the fire unharmed, must go on living.  
. . .Come along, and take your part in life!  
(363)

W.B. Yeats said there was "nothing" to be found in The Silver Tassie after the second act; this feminist analysis contends otherwise. One of the reasons Yeats disqualified the play was apparently because he perceived a lack of an "ideal" male hero. From a feminist point of view, it is precisely this lack which makes the play an ideal vehicle for an exploration of the value systems of patriarchy.

While the theme of war is deserving of the scores of analyses so far devoted to it, other aspects of O'Casey's play are worth close consideration. The laboratory of feminist dramatic theory opens wide new possibilities for theoretical analysis and production consideration of The Silver Tassie, a play which has long been considered unproducable.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### COCK-A-DOODLE DANDY:

#### THE MYTH OF POWER AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER

*"Lift up your heart, lass: we go  
not  
towards an evil, but leave an evil  
behind us!"<sup>37</sup>*

In 1937, Éamon deValera, then President of the ruling political party "Finna Fáil" (Soldiers of Destiny) revised the Irish Constitution to include special references to the Catholic Church. The preamble of the Constitution began, "In the name of the Most Holy Trinity" and reference was made to the Church's "special position . . . as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens" (Neville, 209). In response, the Catholic Church modified its position as a completely autonomous authority which had always acted independently of socio-political platforms and, instead, joined forces with the State. In recognizing the Church as a political system to which the majority assented, the State accorded to the Church hierarchy positions of power within its governance. Priests were held in the same regard as public officials and each represented

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<sup>37</sup> Lorna to Loreleen as the two women leave in exile. Sean O'Casey, Cock-A-Doodle Dandy, p. 485.

various aspects of the Irish government.

The Church used its authority to impose a rigid parochial familialism which was defined to some extent in the 1937 Constitution which claimed sovereignty over all of Ireland. It read, in part:

The State recognises the Family as the natural, primary, and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law . . . .The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.<sup>38</sup>

The Constitution demonstrates a continued struggle for identity in Ireland. Éamon deValera was promoting a new governance--Fine Gael (United Ireland)--with the goal to unify the southern Republican parties and the northern Unionists.<sup>39</sup> A new Irish identity crisis emerged as a result, which served to further confuse an

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<sup>38</sup> Article 41.1, subsec. 1-2, and Article 41.2. *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, (Dublin: Government Publications Office, 1980), 136-38.

<sup>39</sup> As a result of the Irish Civil War, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was introduced in 1923, which begrudgingly supported the emancipation of all but northern Ireland from British imperialism. With most of their constituency subscribing to the Protestant faith (the Church of England), the northern provinces remained loyal to the Crown and began its own separatist movement so that it would be answerable only to Britain and not to the Constitution of Ireland.



already complex Irish "nationality." Moreover, as evidenced by the following excerpt, the Constitution seems to define Irish women as properties of the State:

*In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman [sic] gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.*<sup>40</sup>

A feminist interpretation views the Constitution as a mandate by the Irish government which refuses to acknowledge the woman's freedom of choice. Rather than choosing whether or not to work outside the home, the Constitution assumes that the Irish woman will defer to the State's implied ownership. An aspect of State ownership asserts that the woman's domestic role is a "duty" or obligation rather than a choice made by the woman to stay in the home.

As properties of the State, Irish women are expected to contribute to the "common good" of their society by producing children. A patriarchal/parochial power system mythologizes the "mother" as a married woman who is "chaste, passive, and invisible" (Mullin, 46), and who lives only vicariously through her exalted

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<sup>40</sup> Subsec. 1-2, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, p. 38. Emphasis added.

husband and their offspring; the non-mother is constructed to represent the marginalized unmarried virginal woman who completely lacks a sexual identity. As dictated by the Catholic Church, the act of sexual intercourse is for procreation only. The unmarried, childless woman, then, is perceived to be asexual--a neuter--in the context of a parochial system.

The argument raises some women-centered questions which are critical issues to feminist theorists. For instance, how are women to become conscious of themselves as a collective source of power when they are themselves polarized within their social circumstances? In segregating the female gender into mother and non-mother by virtue of their status as dictated by patriarchal norms, and as property owned by the State for the betterment of the State, the binary opposition of "mother/non-mother" equates with that of "producer/non-producer." As such, the matriarchal figure is sacred as a contributor to the common good, while her antithetical construct of the non-mother is seen as a sexless non-entity, a non-contributor. How then is the woman who resists the *status quo* perceived by the Catholic Church? If she is proud and confident, if she makes herself highly visible, if the marginalized "virgin" is acutely aware of her own

sensuality/sexuality (which she cherishes as a single characteristic belonging to a greater life passion), how is she positioned in a community which bows to clerical authority? Moreover, how does the female non-contributor reflect the ideology of a severe religious authority: Irish Catholicism?

A feminist reading of Sean O'Casey's play Cock-a-Doodle Dandy attends to these issues. It is O'Casey's most overtly political play. In it, the Catholic Church and its hierarchy as an extension of patriarchy is pitted against its feminine subjects in a contest for social identity. In O'Casey's "Nyadnanave,"<sup>41</sup> the Catholic Church and all of its patriarchal authority figures are satirized as an unreasonable means of governance.<sup>42</sup> It seems that the playwright is in defense of the women--observed from the Marxist point of view as an oppressed class as well as an inferior gender--in the context of their cultural circumstances.

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<sup>41</sup> Nyadnanave is the fictional place where the action in Cock takes place. In Gaelic, the term can be translated to mean "Nest of Saints", a definition which could hardly go unused by the satirically inclined O'Casey.

<sup>42</sup> To further illustrate this point, the chief antagonist in the play answers to the name of "Father Domineer." The character will be discussed at some considerable length later on in this discussion.

The themes of the play, written in 1949, champion a:

. . . rightful joy of life and the proper dismissal from all consideration of those who would fetter it. Employing a gay mixture of symbolism and wild humour . . . O'Casey filters through his natural cynicism as lively and amusing a slice of fantastic drama as one can imagine.<sup>43</sup>

As Eugene O'Neill stated in summary of his own play, The Great God Brown, the prevailing theme in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy has to do with, ". . . the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity" (O'Riordan, 298). In O'Casey's chimerical play, the characters define O'Neill's philosophy. Whereas the female characters are vibrantly depicted and espouse a full-bodied zest for life, the males are once again ascribed cartoonish characteristics as they bumble their way through misguided antics of propriety as dictated by patriarchal authority.

Michael Marthraun is an elderly farmer and owner of a lucrative bog who has married Lorna, a woman much younger than himself. Loreleen, his daughter from a previous marriage, has come to visit Marthraun and his

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<sup>43</sup> This quote was taken from a review of the play by George Jean Nathan. It appears in O'Riordan's text, A Guide to O'Casey's Plays, p. 297-8.

new wife after living in London, the "undherworld,"<sup>44</sup> for several years. The two women, together with Marion, maid to the Marthraun household, form a fast bond and the cantankerous Marthraun becomes increasingly suspicious of Loreleen's motives for returning home, especially in light of how her presence has affected Lorna.

As Marthraun attempts to go through the daily management of his business--which includes intermittent encounters with business rivals, town clergy, and local peasants--he begins to doubt a paternal claim to Loreleen, believing her bewitched by the devil in the guise of a Cock sent to do anti-Christian deeds. The Cock represents a focus of unifying, transforming social power. The instrument of repression to which the Cock is opposed is best represented by the stern, puritanical Father Domineer, the parish priest who symbolizes clerical dominance.

Marthraun convinces townsmen of Loreleen's "true persona," and the men set out to have her spiritually exorcised and physically exiled. Loreleen is

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<sup>44</sup> In the play, Michael Marthraun accuses Loreleen of bringing the "blast from th' undherworld, England," with her which is to blame for all the evil doings in their community. (p. 475)

ultimately physically attacked by the community. She is beaten, nearly raped, and thrown at the feet of the unscrupulous Father Domineer in an attempt to force her to confess to sins of the flesh and mind of which she is innocent. The play ends with the three women-- Loreleen, Lorna, and Marion--leaving together in search of a community which rejoices in life rather than suppresses it.

At first glance it would appear that O'Casey is relying heavily on the same formula applied to Juno and the Paycock. The female characters again emerge as the heroes of the play, while the men share attributes of the bumbling, dim-witted Stage Irishman. There are, however, significant differences. For instance, while none of the male characters in Juno possess qualities of personal integrity, one of the major male figures is not so one-dimensional. The messenger, Robin Adair, in fact, represents O'Casey's political consciousness.<sup>45</sup> This is made evident by some interesting mechanical devices.

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<sup>45</sup> Traditional O'Casey criticism identifies the Cock with O'Casey because of the way the fowl is depicted to represent an idealistic, utopian way of life. I believe while the Cock embodies O'Casey's life passion, he mostly symbolizes the playwright's "Red" philosophy, his commitment to the tenets of Socialism.

First, in an expressionistic context, the Messenger not only acts as the interpreter of the play's given circumstances but also appears to be responsible for them. He is the ubiquitous harbinger of O'Caseyan cynicism with an eye on the havoc he wreaks, a droll balladeer whose assignment is to watch things fall as they may. In nearly every instance of mystical mayhem generally perceived to have been caused by the Cock, Robin Adair appears as if from nowhere, playing a merry tune on his accordion. In one riotous scene in which the Cock is ". . . tearin' the house asundher" (464), and ". . . peckin' th' holy pictures hangin' on th' walls" (465), the Messenger rushes into Marthraun's house to quiet the commotion. Whereas all others are fearful of the fowl and its apparently cabalistic peculiarities, Robin Adair takes the lead of the Cock, who ". . . follows the Messenger meekly, stopping when he stops, and moving when the Messenger moves" (465). Clearly, O'Casey uses the Messenger to orchestrate the events of the play.

I interpret this scene as an allegory in which the relationship between the Cock and the Messenger expresses O'Casey's Marxist ideology. O'Casey assumes that those ignorant of Marxist ideology view Communism as an evil politic and, therefore, one to be feared.

It is, rather, according to the playwright's point of view, a sensible and necessary political arrangement which seeks to protect the common good for all the various factions of society. Issues of class were critical to the Marxist philosophy of the 1940s, the era in which O'Casey wrote Cock. Thus, when the Messenger leads the Cock from the house, instead of destroying displayed icons of the Catholic Church, the bird stands quietly confident as the fearful spectators scrutinize him. The Messenger addresses the Cock's harmlessness:

Looka, lovely lady, there's no danger and there never was . . . Instead of shyin' cups and saucers at him, if only you'd given him your lilly-white hand, he'd have led you through a wistful and wonderful dance (465).

The maid to the Marthraun household, Marion, joins forces with Robin (her love interest in the play) when, after admiring the Cock, she proclaims, "Sure, he's harmless when you know him" (465). Thus, O'Casey is asking those ignorant in the ways of Socialist doctrine to at least become informed enough so as not to fear the unknown, a condition which the playwright believes has the potential to breed contempt in a collective.

It is perhaps no accident that "Robin" Adair and the maid "Marion" share the same names as the mythical pair, Robin Hood and his Maid Marion. As folklore



would have it, Robin robbed from the rich in order to give to the poor. Hence, further fuel is added to the theoretical fire I present here, that the relationship between the Cock and the Messenger is an allegory for O'Casey's interpretation of Marxism.

O'Casey relies heavily on the symbolism of color in the play. His manipulation of the colors red and black (primary colors of the communist party) is an obvious assertion of the playwright's position that the political state of Communism is "good" in juxtaposition with the "evil" state of parochialism. This is evident in how O'Casey "dresses" all that he targets as representative of his Socialist ideals.

In the first instance, before the action of the play begins, the stage directions state that "The house itself is black in colour, the sash and frame of the window in it is a brilliant red" (459). Some critical speculation has suggested the Marthraun house represents Ireland.<sup>46</sup> If this is so, then O'Casey has encased the central structure of the play--Marthraun's

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<sup>46</sup> I first came across this assumption while browsing through John O'Riordan's rather informal synopsis of Cock in A Guide to O'Casey's Plays. In his analysis, O'Riordan suggests that the audience views the house "as representing Ireland" but he doesn't clarify his position in any manner. Still, the hypothesis is an interesting one. See, O'Riordan, p. 323.

house--in symbolic Socialism. This gesture supports the theory that O'Casey views Marxist rule as "good," and better suited to the "common good" of Ireland.

Upon its earliest appearance--immediately following the soft strains of an accordion played by an unseen player (Robin Adair)--the Cock is described as having ". . . A big crimson crest" which "flowers over his head" in addition to "crimson flaps" which "hang from his jaws" (459). Moreover, if Loreleen is the harbinger of O'Casey's ideology, than it is significant to note here that, at her entrance, she is wearing a green dress (symbolizing Ireland), ". . . with dark red flashes on bodice and side of skirt." Additionally, her hat ". . . sports a scarlet ornament, its shape suggestive of a cock's crimson crest" (461).

The crucial theme of the play--gender--is evidenced by how O'Casey positions the women as the "good" force confronting the established "evil" parochial patriarchy.

The question of why Lorna marries Marthraun evokes a feminist discussion of class issues. She is much younger than the crotchety old patriarch and she possesses a loveliness and spirit of youth which dismay the puritanical element in the play. Patriarchy determines not only a woman's social status, but in

this case, presents the woman as property to be bartered by men. In a telling scene in the exposition of the play, Marthraun discusses the terms of his marital agreement with a cohort, Sailor Mahan:

**MAHAN:** An' anyway, why did you insist on marryin' her, an' she so young; an' she so gay? She was all again' it herself.

**MICHAEL:** She consented to it, at last, didn't she?

**MAHAN:** Ay, when you, her father, an' th' priest had badgered th' girl's mind into disordered attention over th' catch she was gettin'. (460-1)

The scene continues in the same vein only to disclose that Lorna's dowry provided her new husband with money enough to invest in land which, in turn, made Marthraun a wealthy man:

**MICHAEL:** . . . An' what did I get for them but a scraggy oul' bog of two hundhred acres?

**MAHAN:** An' you're makin' a good thing out of it since turf came into its own. It's made you a Councillor, a Justice of the Peace, an' th' fair-haired boy of th' clergy. (461)

The State is represented by a parochial patriarchy: Catholicism. As property of the State, Lorna is a product to be bartered by those who profit most from the existing government: the men ("when you, her father, an' th' priest had badgered th' girl's mind into disordered attention over th' catch she was gettin'"). Moreover, the woman as State property

surrenders her own personal property to the man who "buys" her (as in the case of Lorna's dowry to Marthraun), and that property in turn elevates the man to a more significant social status ("It's made you a Councillor, a Justice of the Peace, an' th' fair-haired boy of th' clergy").

Loreleen is the protagonist in the play, and she most represents the O'Caseyan politic in her high-spirited individuality, an attribute judged harshly in a woman who is part of a patriarchal culture. O'Casey describes his feminine archetype as a woman who has ". . . an air of her own. A jaunty air it is, indicating that it is the sign of a handsome, gay, and intelligent woman" (461).

As the play's feminine hero, Loreleen is bewitching in her earthy beauty, enough to induce lust as well as superstitious fears in the hearts of her father, Michael Marthraun, and the rest of the male community. In one scene, two men (identified as First and Second Rough Fellow) follow Loreleen out of her yard like a pair of dogs on the scent of a bitch. As they close in on her, the "lusty" crow of a cock is heard in the distance:

**FIRST ROUGH FELLOW:** (With awe in his voice)  
What's happenin' to her? A cloud closin' in  
on her, flashes like lightning whirlin' round

her head, an' her whole figure ripplin'!

**SECOND ROUGH FELLOW:** (Frightened) Jasus, she's changin' into th' look of a fancy-bread fowl!

**FIRST ROUGH FELLOW:** It's an omen, a warnin', a reminder of what th' Missioner said last night that young men should think of good-lookin' things in skirts only in th' presence of, an' undher the guidance of, old and pious people (462).

Indeed, the old and pious crawthumper, Shanaar, who understands a man's need to "possess" a woman nonetheless equates her physicality--which is responsible for luring men into lustful deeds--with evil:

Women is more flexible towards th' ungodly than us men, an' well th' old saints knew it. I'd recommend you to compel her, for a start, to lift her bodice higher up, an' pull her skirt lower down; for th' circumnambulatory nature of a woman's form often has a detonatin' effect on a man's idle thoughts. . . .a man's measure of virtue is now made with money, used to buy ornaments, bestowed on girls to give a gaudy outside to the ugliness of hell. (466)

While a woman's physical beauty is equated with "the ugliness of hell" according to men, women view their bodies as works of art of the highest order. "When you condemn a fair face," says Loreleen to Father Domineer, "you sneer at God's good handiwork" (485).

At the play's climax, both genders conspire to produce much fantastical merriment and mayhem. As men

and women participate in a lively dance indicative of new feelings of repressed sexuality, women are suddenly seen to sprout horns, as exemplified by the stage direction, ". . . the cock-like crest in Loreleen's hat" rises ". . . higher as she begins to move in the dance" (476). At the peak of excitement, a loud clap of thunder followed by a long, lusty crow from the Cock precedes the ominous appearance of Father Domineer, and, in an instant, both genders are restored to their patriarchy-imposed positions of opposition.

Father Domineer convinces the men of his constituency that the Cock must be exorcised from Loreleen, after which, she must be banished. The priest condemns Loreleen to exile but, before she goes, she admonishes Father Domineer in a taunt which subjugates his self-imposed power: "You are laying your curse . . . not upon a sin, but on a joy. Take care a devil doesn't climb up your own cassock into your own belfry" (485)! As Loreleen leaves, she is joined by Lorna and Marion. Like Juno Boyle and her daughter, Mary, the three women join forces to secure a place where life is celebrated and not quashed.

During a 1958 interview, Sean O'Casey was asked why the women in his plays are accorded abundantly more courage than his male characters. He replied:

Women must be more courageous than the men. Courage doesn't consist in just firing a pistol and killing you. I wouldn't call that courage at all, I'd call it stupidity.

When asked to clarify his position on the concept of "courage", the playwright continued:

Fortitude--and patience--and understanding. . . .In life, women are more courageous than men . . . because they are much nearer the earth than men are. Men are more idealistic, stupidly idealistic. They're not as realistic as women. The woman has to be nearer the earth than the man. (O'Riordan, 16)

As instruments of exile, O'Casey's courageous women in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy go fortified in the belief that they leave behind only vilification and harassment, elements of patriarchy. O'Casey has proclaimed elsewhere that "the loneliness of an exile among strangers is nothing like the loneliness of a man exiled among his own people."<sup>47</sup> As is evident by reading the play from a feminist perspective, the playwright acutely understood the alienation experienced by the Irish woman whose identity is firmly rooted in a familialism dictated by religious patriarchy.

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<sup>47</sup> O'Riordan, p. 327.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION: RE-VISIONING O'CASEY

*She had died without one  
murmur for attention;  
unbreakable, tireless,  
and quite confident.  
Indomitable woman.*

-- Sean O'Casey<sup>48</sup>

Since gender stereotypes abound in Irish literature, this discussion of gender construct in the plays of Sean O'Casey is not the first of its kind. However, research seems to indicate that discussion of these dramatic texts are typically carried on from a strictly patriarchal point of view. When issues of race, class, and gender are explored, the analyses seem to be conducted by men who fail to acknowledge the "man's world" that Ireland is.<sup>49</sup> How, then, can the Irish woman's experience be considered from anything but a patriarchal perspective?

While O'Caseyan criticism is generally recognized

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<sup>48</sup> In the chapter titled, "Mrs. Cassidy Takes a Holiday," from O'Casey's autobiography, *Inishfallen, Fare Thee Well*. The excerpt refers to the death of O'Casey's mother, Susan Cassidy.

<sup>49</sup> The most prominent critical scholars of O'Casey's theatre are Robert Hogan, Ronald Ayling, and David Krause. Collectively, the respected works of these three prolific men make up the bulk of O'Caseyan criticism.



to espouse a woman's point of view, analyses rooted in patriarchy tend to look at the women only in terms of their femininity. A case in point is Ronald Ayling's essay titled "Two Words for Women: A Reassessment of O'Casey's Heroines."<sup>50</sup> As the title of the article suggests, Ayling's treatment of some of O'Casey's most significant female characters relies heavily on conventional "heroine" implications. These women are viewed in the context of their gender specificity as determined by a male-centered point of view. For instance, some of Ayling's criticism reflects on the characters' feminine dress as their only means of aesthetic and spiritual expression:

The sensitivity of the young women in O'Casey's plays is shown *most clearly* in their dress sense. . . . However trivial they may seem, Minnie's pompoms, Mary's ribbons, and Nora's new hat are all outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual aesthetic sense. (Gallagher, 93)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See the anthology of essays, Woman in Irish Legend, Life and Literature, S. F. Gallagher, Ed., 1983. I acknowledge that Ronald Ayling is a first-rate author of Irish/O'Casey criticism, and I am hugely indebted to him for the knowledge he has so generously shared. Ayling's critical insight is one of the reasons why his article presents an ideal opportunity for me to demonstrate how Irish criticism is infused with patriarchal codes of representation.

<sup>51</sup> Emphasis added.

What Ronald Ayling seems not to realize in his analysis is that, as a critic focusing on the way female characters' dress themselves, he is ignoring the more compelling attributes which define women. Whether intentional or not, Ayling's criticism appears to correspond to that aspect of patriarchy which labels women as frivolous creatures. This response accentuates the patriarchal perception of women as objects of adornment for men. In this way, intelligence, resourcefulness, keen wit, and other non-gender specific characteristics, are neglected in favor of the woman's physical attractiveness. According to Ayling, "O'Casey projects these qualities [of a women's dress sense] as the natural and, often, the only possible expression of the latent artistic sense of the tenement women" (93). A feminist analysis of O'Casey's plays, on the other hand, would hesitate to interpret a woman's pretty bow or festive hat as the best representations of her "sensitivity" or "artistic sense." Feminism seeks to move away from socially imposed gender clichés and move instead toward identifying women with their cultural limitations as seen from a historical perspective. Feminist methodology, then, truly attempts a "reassessment"--a re-vision--of O'Casey's dramatic texts.

The analyses I have made here are not intended to be definitive. Rather, I hope to have provided an alternative point of view to those more traditional criticisms which concentrate on O'Casey's changing manipulations of form and structure, and which view characterization from a strictly Irish perspective. When a dramatic criticism of O'Casey's plays concentrates solely on dramatic form, or when analyses are framed within the context of the plays' Irishness only, gender issues--primary concerns of feminism--are disregarded.

O'Casey's Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, for instance, is a play perfectly suited to a feminist reading, yet critics have essentially treated it in terms of its structure. Also, the circumstances surrounding The Silver Tassie--that it was O'Casey's first dramatic venture after his self-imposed exile, Yeats's rejection of the text, and O'Casey's marked departure from realism--have masked the feminist overtones of the play.

Ironically, to the less critical eye, O'Casey might seem misogynistic in his designation of his female characters, especially in how their identity is determined by patriarchal classification of wives, mothers, martyrs, and whores. However, if O'Casey is

seen to operate from within the framework of a traditionally male-defined female perspective, his women prototypes actively mock patriarchal codes of conduct--either by direct confrontation (The Silver Tassie), or by completely rejecting them (Juno and the Paycock and Cock-a-Doodle Dandy)--as limiting the potential of both genders. From a feminist perspective, empowerment, not oppression, becomes one of the key elements of O'Casey's dramatic texts. Some of the female characters acknowledge their own predicament, and, instead of putting up a futile fight against the system, exploit themselves through commodification as a means of improving their chances for upward mobility; still others are strengthened by same-gender alliances enough to leave their oppressive cultural conditions and seek a more humane existence. In nearly all cases, however, the O'Caseyan female is reasonable and rational in her endeavors to assert visibility and social status/significance in her culture.

Clearly, then, Sean O'Casey understood the institution of patriarchy and railed against it by presenting a dichotomy of gender construct in his plays: while the women are powerful and stoic in their life pursuits, the men are, almost without exception,

irresponsible and inept in their commonplace existence. Moreover, O'Casey's "closer to the earth" women are realistically grounded in pragmatism. On the other hand, his male characters--who represent patriarchy as the organized society--are deliberately constructed as one-dimensional, clownish dolts. O'Casey's message seems to clearly define patriarchy as an organized society which breeds war, social economic injustice, and civil strife; since patriarchy is the governing force in organized society O'Casey views men as responsible for Ireland's social desecration.

O'Casey--who would, I think, celebrate Mary Robinson's election as President of the Republic of Ireland were he alive today--clearly views women as superior to men in their ability to rationalize and solve problems; as evidenced by his written word, women symbolize O'Casey's hopes for a different and better society. Only in this way can masculine might defer to feminine reason, and war--a direct product of patriarchy--cease to exist.

While Sean O'Casey clearly celebrated womanhood, his female characters are nonetheless strong for their non-gender specific attributes. Feminist theory re-visions the plays of Sean O'Casey as evidenced, I hope, by the analyses set forth herein. As such, new light

has been shed on the old dogmas which have up until now dominated the arena of O'Casey criticism.

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