TROUBLING NORTHERN IRISH HERSTORIES:
The Drama of Anne Devlin & Christina Reid

A Thesis Presented to the Honors Tutorial College
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation
from the Honors Tutorial College
with the Degree of Bachelors of Arts in English

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April 2015
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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Carey Snyder, the most thoughtful editor, professor, and Director of Studies a weirdo who read too much Steinbeck in high school could ever be blessed to know. I am immensely grateful for four years of generous support, encouragement, and tea.

To Dr. Heather Edwards, for her introduction into Irish literature and the many hours of goading me into being responsible.

To Dr. Haley Duschinski, whose Human Rights, Law & Justice in Northern Ireland class showed me Belfast.
Chapter One

Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, and Gender(ed) Trouble(s)¹

“The public faces of the Protestant and Catholic paramilitaries… are all men. All the people who talk about religion and the Church are all men. The politicians are all men. Women are never the leaders, the faces, the voices. Ian Paisley and the Pope are basically in total agreement over what a woman’s role in the home should be.”

— Christina Reid

“… it was a female voice coming to try and deal with the past. The women’s sons were on the blanket. Women were in families where their husbands were speaking, and everything that their husbands, sons, fathers did affected their lives so that their lives were effectively hijacked.”

— Anne Devlin²

As even their most obtuse critics observe, Anne Devlin and Christina Reid foreground women’s issues and women characters in their respective works on the

¹ The phrase “Gender(ed) Trouble(s), refers both to Judith Butler’s 1990 groundbreaking queer feminist text *Gender Trouble*, as well as the term “the Troubles,” an Irish euphemism for the thirty year civil war in Northern Ireland. Between 1968 and 1998, over 3,600 hundred people were killed and over 30,000 were injured. During Northern Ireland’s civil rights movement in the 1960s, Catholics organized to end ghettoization, voter discrimination, unfair hiring practices, police brutality, and ethno-religious profiling policies that had conspired to make them a permanent underclass since the British colonization of Ireland. Many Protestants, viewing this movement as a threat, organized in opposition, and both Catholics and Protestants began to commit local instances of violent vigilante attacks in cities like Belfast. When these attacks grew in magnitude to sectarian war between Catholic and Protestant paramilitary groups, the British government deployed security forces ostensibly as peacekeepers, resulting in a full military occupation until the 1990s peace process. Traditionally, historians mark the end of the Troubles with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Melaugh “Background”). Fiona McCann also uses the title “Gender(ed) Trouble(s)” for her 2011 article on Devlin’s “Naming the Names” and Anna Burns’ *No Bones* (“Resisting Conformity” 48).

² Extracted from a 1990 interview with the *Irish Post*, and a 2011 conversation about *The Long March*’s film adaptation for the Belfast Film Festival Podcast, respectively (qtd. in Reid xiii, Devlin “Interview”). Reverend Ian Paisley was, for many, the symbolic religious and political leader of working class Protestants in Northern Ireland from the late 1950s until his death in September 2014. The phrase “on The Blanket” indicates that these women’s sons participated in the 1976-1981 prisoners’ protest against their classification as criminal, rather than political prisoners. Protesting inmates at the Maze Prison argued that wearing uniforms would be tacitly declaring themselves criminals, and thus refused clothing altogether, draping themselves in blankets. The Blanket Protest escalated into the 1981 hunger strike (Melaugh “Biographies,” “Glossary”).
Troubles in Northern Ireland. Along with a very select few of their contemporary Ulster playwrights, Devlin and Reid reclaim literal space for actresses on Irish and British stages, figurative space for complex women characters within the Irish and British literary canons, and theatrical platforms from which to articulate women’s felt history of the Troubles. Writing plays which often directly contradict established narratives of the Troubles through their gendered view of violence, victimization, and the meaning of peace, Devlin and Reid make space for women’s authorship and representation within an intensely sexist Irish literary and theatrical landscape.

Pioneers who prime theatergoers and scholars to be receptive to the work of later women writers, Reid and Devlin are two of the most important figures of twentieth century theater in the Western world. Reid and Devlin’s Troubles plays—the work of and about women from working class, politicized Belfast neighborhoods—illustrate

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3 In the few interviews Reid gives, she routinely takes a moment to counter the accusations of the reviewer or critic who has most recently accused her of devoting too much stage time to women. “As in my upbringing, the men in my plays are often offstage, but in more contemporary settings, such as Joyriders or Clowns, Arthur and Tommy are important characters. Critics never seem to comment when male writers depend on male characters and there are ‘supporting’ roles for women. That’s our tradition, so it’s not criticised” Reid patiently explains in Girls in the Big Picture (Foley 61). In her interview for Girls in the Big Picture, Devlin discusses how much satisfaction she took from making a sexist reviewer watch a scene entirely focused on a roomful of reclining pregnant women from her collaboration piece, Heartlander (Foley 74).

4 “Ulster” is a term “frequently used, mostly by [politicized Protestants in Northern Ireland] to describe Northern Ireland” as CAIN’s Glossary of Terms Related to the Conflict summarizes. “It refers to the fact that the six counties that make up Northern Ireland were (and remain) part of the province of Ulster. Some people, mainly [politicized Catholics], take exception to the use of the term.” A collaboration between the University of Ulster, Queen’s University of Belfast, and Belfast’s historic Linen Hall Library, CAIN is a website devoted to, as compiler Martin Melaugh diplomatically writes, “a wide range of information and source material on the Northern Ireland conflict and politics in the region from 1968 to the present [as well as] some general information on Northern Ireland society.” Because CAIN is generally acknowledged by academics within and outside Northern Ireland to be the most accurate and nonpartisan source for information about the Troubles, I cite information from CAIN’s glossary, background, and biography sections for the benefit of readers who may be unfamiliar with key terms and historical events used in Troubles scholarship. (Melaugh “Glossary,” “About”)
Devlin and Reid’s unique insights into the causes and motivations of those contributing to and affected by the urban warfare of armed Protestants, Catholics, and British occupying forces in Northern Irish cities from 1968 to 1998.

Born in working class Belfast in 1951, Devlin spent her life up until her university years on a street adjacent to the Falls Road and a house in Andersontown, both neighborhoods which demonstrated strong support of the 1960s Catholic civil rights movement, and later the efforts of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (Sihra 161). Critically acclaimed for her 1986 collection of short stories, *The Way Paver*, her screenplays (the most famous of which is Paramount Picture’s 1992 *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights*), and her drama, variously adapted for radio, television, and stage, the plays of Devlin’s Belfast trilogy—*Ourselves Alone*, *The Long March*, and *After Easter*—are particularly central to the aims of this thesis, which compares Devlin’s dramatic disruption of Troubles narratives against that of Reid. Ranging from the candidly to the subtly political in their dialogue, characterization, and narrative arcs, these plays have been well-received by English, American, and international audiences, but notably never produced by the Abbey Theater in Dublin or the Field Day Theater in Derry, Northern Ireland, the two companies most important

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5 The Falls Road and Andersontown are both large working-class Catholic areas in west Belfast (Melaugh “Glossary”). See Figure 1 for a color-coded map of Belfast neighborhoods important to Troubles history. The Provisional Irish Republican Army—“Provos” or PIRA for short—was a heavily armed guerilla organization which split from the Irish Republican Army (a militant group dating back to 1919 which aimed to “end British control of Northern Ireland and to achieve the reunification of the island of Ireland”) in 1969. The main Catholic paramilitary combatant during the Troubles, the Provos were responsible for the deaths of an estimated 1,824 people between July 1969 and December 2001. (Melaugh “Organizations”)

6 It is worth noting that Devlin herself has never felt that *The Long March* fully measures up to the standards set by *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter*: “I never felt *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter* were the complete story, I know there is a third play,” she told Cerquoni in *Theatre Talk* (Chambers et al 123).
in discussions of Troubles theater. “The theatre in the North hasn’t always been
particularly respectful towards its writers,” Devlin told Enrica Cerquoni frankly in
2001, adding that “women dramatists have particularly suffered in the North [...] 
Someone like Christina Reid and myself went to England to get our work done”
(Chambers et al 117). This mistreatment of herself and Reid, she indicates, reflects
discrimination against them not only as women, but as working class women daring to
stage political debates which question republican and unionist ideologies (117). 7

A Protestant born in 1942 Belfast, Reid’s ethno-religious status and her plays
about Northern Ireland’s Loyalist communities definitely did not fit the implicitly
masculine, Nationalist ideologies of either the Abbey or the Field Day Theatre (Reid
vii). Carla J. McDonough begins her biocriticism of Reid’s plays with a pointed
comment about the sexism of the Abbey Theater, stating that from 1984-1989, “the
Abbey Theatre had produced only one play by a woman (and not an Irish woman at
that),” a fact I find particularly relevant considering that most of Reid’s work, and
certainly her Troubles drama, was produced between 1983 and 1990 (McDonough
179). Writing of David Rudkin’s The Saxon Shore, Bernadette Sweeney argues that
Field Day also deliberately overlooked plays “written within and about the Unionist

7 In Northern Ireland, “the term Republican is taken to imply that the person gives tacit or actual
support to the use of physical force by paramilitary groups with Republican aims. The main aim of
Republicans being the establishment of a United (32 county) Ireland.” Although the identifiers
“Catholic” and “Republican,” are by no means interchangeable, within the context of Troubles
literature, “republican” usually denotes a working class Catholic person who in some sense supports the
political aims of the Irish Republican Army and the PIRA’s political party wing, Sinn Féin. The
corresponding term “Loyalist” describes Protestants who give “tacit or actual support [to] the use of
force by paramilitary groups to ‘defend the union’ with Britain.” The words republican and nationalist
are often used interchangeably, but Loyalists are differentiated from unionists in that unionists “wish to
see the union with Britain maintained,” but do not necessarily condone the use of violence to political
ends. Most Protestants in Northern Ireland identify as unionists, but not loyalists (Melaugh “Glossary”).
community” because of the uncomfortable “performance demands [...] placed on Field Day actors and Field Day audiences” (Sweeney 5). Thankfully, the feminist editors of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions* took a different stance on the merits of drama by women and Protestants, collecting the Reid’s work alongside that of Devlin.

The culmination of decades of feminist literary scholars’ frustration with patriarchal systems of canonization, production, and publication in Irish artistic and academic circles, *The Field Day Anthology Volumes IV and V* arguably illustrate new problems as they appease initial concerns about the recovery and promotion of Irish women’s writing. The Irish Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney said of these feminist scholars:

> Their anger and complaints were certainly to be expected when you consider that all the directors of the Field Day Theatre Company—of which I am one—were men, and so were all the editors [...] the first three volumes of the Field Day] anthology was very much a postcolonial reading of the Irish situation and therefore should have been sensitive to the silencings that women and women's writing had undergone, but I think that for everybody involved the pressure at the horizon was from Northern Ireland politics rather than gender politics. (Heaney “Interview”)

Collecting the works of thousands of Irish women writers, however, *Field Day Anthology Volumes IV and V* give relatively little indication as to whether, and how,
these works should be discussed or circulated, seemingly inspired by similar
motivations as Marina Carr’s sentiment in the foreword to *Women in Irish Drama* that
“for now the naming, the announcing, the retrieval is the thing” (Sihra ix). In
categorizing Devlin and Reid along with Marie Jones and Marina Carr as important
contemporary figures in Northern Irish theater, *The Field Day Anthology Volume V*
anticipates a number of critical articles which do little more than agree that Devlin,
Reid, Jones, and Carr (in various permutations) are all, indeed, Northern Irish women

What little scholarship about Devlin and Reid exists from the current decade
must inevitably address more than twenty years of work which somewhat reductively
figures both playwrights as merely members of the handful of Irish women theatrically
shattering glass ceilings during the late twentieth century. In terms of sheer name
recognition, Reid and Devlin have both certainly benefitted from their positions as
objects of 1990s Irish feminist literary recovery projects, which saw their work
published in anthologies alongside the drama of much earlier writers such as Lady
Gregory, Eva Gore-Booth, and Alice Milligan. Cathy Leeney summarizes the aim of
this specific era of recovery scholarship in the introduction to *Irish Women
Playwrights 1900-1939*: “In co-relation, women’s contribution to Irish theatre writing
needs to be made visible as a counter-tradition that disrupts the totalizing canon of
male authors” (Leeney 4). The position that Carla J. McDonough adopts a bit outside
her contemporaries’ project, however, with the declaration that “[i]n examining the
plays of Christina Reid, [her] objective is not to establish a ‘woman’s theatre’ tradition
but rather to underscore that a male-dominated, male-focused national theatre is at best
telling only half the nation’s story” gestures more accurately at the work I propose to
do in my thesis (Watt et al 180). Reading four of Reid’s Belfast-centered plays against
Devlin’s Belfast trilogy, I argue that Reid and Devlin measure the rhetoric of
republicans, Loyalists, and would-be-peace-makers against the interests and lived
realities of their women characters, finding both the bigoted and the well-intentioned
wanting. Moreover, the characters whose lives Reid and Devlin choose to represent
on stage, as well as the dialogues given voice to in the scripts with which I work
refocus and alter narratives of the Troubles as the time is historically and literarily
chronicled. What would happen, I investigate, if monolithically male-centric Troubles
History was instead composed of “herstories,” among them stories written from Reid
and Devlin’s self-consciously gendered, classed perspectives?8

To this end, Chapter Two examines the patriarchal underpinnings of Protestant
extremism as discussed in Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup* and *The Belle of Belfast City*,
incorporating a parallel reading of Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone* for its explicit
condemnation of violent misogyny perpetuated by the republican movement. These
three plays, with their focus on the communities which both suffered most of the
casualties of the Troubles and enabled the paramilitary groups’ operation through the
cultural production of violent masculinity and bigoted femininity, do not offer

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8 In the title of this thesis, among other places, I invoke Miller and Swift’s concept of “herstory,” as explained in their 1976 *Words and Women*, the idea that “When women in the [Second Wave feminist] movement use herstory, their purpose is to emphasize that women’s lives, deeds, and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued in standard histories,” as well as a more general concept that history is constituted of subjective records, and that the coexisting multiplicity of historical truths can be more accurately discussed in the plural, as “histories / herstories” (Miller & Swift 135, emphasis original).
inspiring resolutions marked by transformative female empowerment. Instead, Reid and Devlin’s surviving heroines flee Northern Ireland for England in exiling anticlimaxes which darkly comment on female postcolonial subjects’ dependence on the uncertain promise of the colonizer’s sanctuary.

Chapter Three investigates the rewriting of the Northern Irish internment period in Devlin’s *The Long March* and Reid’s *Did You Hear the One about the Irishman?*. Prioritizing the experiences of the families and neighbors of the interned rather than the prisoners themselves, Reid and Devlin offer a counternarrative not only to the historical records that mark the death of the republican hunger strikers as the turning point of the Troubles, but also substitute characters who want little to do with extremist politics into roles of heroic martyrdom traditionally occupied by Bobby Sands and the other eight prisoners who died during the hunger strikes at Her Majesty’s Prison Maze. Rejecting the prominent theory of Troubles historians that Bobby Sands’ death won sympathy for the republican cause and began a trajectory toward peace and justice for Northern Ireland, *The Long March* and *Did You Hear* show the blanket protests and internment creating a toxic climate of fear and intra-

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9 Interment, the British strategy for ending terrorism in Northern Ireland, charged British security forces with “imprisoning indefinitely, and without trial, anyone suspected of [paramilitary of any sort, but especially] Republican activity” (Keefe). From 1971-1975, this was the official policy in Northern Ireland, until the British realized that “the policy backfired, radicalizing a new generation of recruits to the republican cause,” as *New Yorker* correspondent, Patrick Radden Keefe observes in his longform piece “Where the Bodies Are Buried” (Keefe).

10 It is worth mentioning that much international exposure to The Troubles is colored by the 2008 film *Hunger*, which won numerous awards at international film festivals, grossed over 1 million at the box office, and appears on many film schools’ syllabi as exemplary cinematic technique for historical filmmaking (IMDB “Hunger”). The lesser known film *Some Mother’s Son*, starring Helen Mirren, takes a more nuanced view of hunger strikes, aligning the audience’s sympathy with the Catholic mothers of the protesting prisoners. Both films, however, privilege a heroic narrative of republican prisoners and figure the death of Bobby Sands as the climax of the Troubles, making him a martyr whose death prompted the British into peace talks.
community policing. In *The Long March*, Helen Walsh’s family is nearly killed by their neighbors for not publicly supporting the hunger strikes; in *Did You Hear the One about the Irishman?* Allison and her lover Brian are murdered, probably on the orders of their own family members, for daring to imagine life uncomplicated by the prejudices of their imprisoned relatives. Bitterly mocking the idea that the British government’s excesses during the internment period were met by uncomplicatedly noble heroism and resulted in peace, justice, or understanding between Catholics and Protestants, Reid and Devlin characterize internment as a period of senseless suffering reaching far outside the walls of HM Prison Maze.

Chapter Four questions the accuracy of political scientists’ characterization of the Good Friday Agreement “as a model of conflict resolution for other intractable conflicts in the world,” drawing chiefly from Reid’s *Clowns* and Devlin’s *After Easter* (Democratic Progress Institute 5). Comparing these post-Troubles era plays’ depiction of women’s mental illness to that represented in *Ourselves Alone*, I argue that for Devlin and Reid’s women, the Good Friday Agreement is a meaningless historical marker, as neither their positions within Northern Ireland’s gendered, classed social hierarchy nor their degree of suffering from psychological trauma have been significantly ameliorated by the so-called peace.

Throughout these analyses, I focus almost exclusively on text rather than form, paying tribute to the tradition within Irish theatrical criticism to privilege playwrights’

11 The most recent iteration of this longheld opinion among men who enjoy deifying Bobby Sands comes from *The Art of Conflict*, a 2013 documentary about the political murals in Northern Ireland, in which narrator / producer Vince Vaughn devotes more time to valorizing Bobby Sands’ heroism than the total time spent discussing women in any capacity.
dialogue over meanings communicated by the physical performance of drama.

Although Sweeney warns in *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* that “[t]he language of the playwright is only one element in a process that includes an almost dizzying number of variables: performance conditions, audience response and interpretations of the material by actors, directors, designers and each audience member,” Devlin and Reid both owe a debt to a tradition of Irish drama which, as Seamus Deane writes, “depends almost exclusively on talk, on language left to itself to run through the whole spectrum of a series of personalities often adapted by the same individual” (Sweeney 2, 1). Devlin herself, though acknowledging her biases as a writer rather than an actor or director, specifically echoes this claim: “In terms of theatrical traditions I inherited a kind of word-culture, which was about arguments and debates in plays. I find that very hard to get out of— the person who speaks the most is the person who wins the argument— and that’s a kind of very old traditional form of theatre” (Chambers et al 114). “I do think text is central,” Devlin summarizes, and to this thesis, at least, the text certainly is the central site of study (114).

Throughout the Troubles drama of Reid and Devlin, women struggle against the roles prescribed for them by sectarian violence, regressive political ideologies, patriarchal conventions, capitalistic devaluations of the poor, colonial legacies, and the misguided morals of their parents and grandparents. As *Joyriders*’ Sandra says of the adults in her Belfast community, “They’re all the same. They ask ye what ye wanta be, an’ then they tell ye what yer allowed to be,” (Reid 175). 12 Dramatizing their

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12 The delinquent behavior of Northern Ireland’s joyriders, who would steal cars, drive them at high speeds, sometimes cause harm to or deaths of innocent bystanders, and provoke the ire of British
characters’ struggles to be people rather than symbols or tropes, Reid and Devlin themselves push against the conventions of multiple male dominated stages, among them Troubles literature and Irish theater. More specifically, I believe that Reid and Devlin’s plays establish a gendered Troubles temporality and lens of historical interpretation, in which men, rather than colonial forces or members of the opposing community, are identified as the Troubles’ aggressors and threats, women’s lives are paralyzed and ended during their neighbors’ internment, and trauma can so dislodge women from history that cease fires become meaningless.

security forces, plagued Margaret Thatcher’s administration in Northern Ireland nearly as much as the activities of the PIRA and its Loyalist counterparts. In the play Joyriders, Reid suggests that joyriders were inextricably tied to the Troubles, often the younger siblings of people involved in the paramilitaries, and that young people turned to both joyriding and terrorist activities because of entrenched poverty, lack of opportunities, and a lack of social services in areas like the Divis Flats, a complex of low income housing in which many juvenile delinquents and members of the IRA grew up (Reid 102).
Figure 1. Map of Belfast neighborhoods particularly important in Troubles history by religious majorities and peace gates, including Falls Road and Andersontown, childhood homes of Anne Devlin. Image uncredited, used in David McKittrick, “Divided City,” Prospective Magazine, 25 May 2011, Web, 24 Apr. 2015.
Chapter Two

Christina Reid, Protestant Extremism, and Autonomous Spaces of Women

“[O]ne of the most noticeable aspects of contemporary writing by women about Northern Ireland is the absence of an imaginatively articulated Protestant or unionist woman’s voice. Where it does appear, unionist ideology is most often represented as masculinist—women being either absent or complicit by their silence,” Rebecca Pelan states in Two Irelands: Literary Feminisms North and South (Pelan 92-3). Pelan, however, is forced to caveat this generalization by acknowledging the plays of Reid, the only Protestant whose work is included in The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing’s section on contemporary women playwrights. Comparing Reid to Devlin, Maria Delgado defensively argues that neither writer has “limited themselves to dramatizing the concerns of their own communities, although both found initial recognition with such works,” pointing particularly to the way in which Reid “interrogates the traditions and loyalties which govern the behaviour of [Belfast’s] fiercely Protestant working classes” (Reid x). Reid’s nuanced staging of working class Protestant women’s experiences of the Troubles makes her one of the most important and singular dramatists of the twentieth century.

13 Pelan theorizes that this absence of Protestant and unionist voices in Irish women’s writing is due to “the particular brand of Protestantism that continues to dominate in Northern Ireland” which “places little value on either the creative arts or on ‘women’s worlds’” (Pelan 99). By “particular,” one can only assume that Pelan means working class, uneducated, politically extreme Protestantism. In addition to a communal Irish Protestant distaste for women’s art, Pelan writes that “the working-class unionist women of Northern Ireland have been silenced even more by a level of national and international political distaste for anything they might have to say as a result of the way in which Northern Protestantism is represented--in much the same way as, say, white South Africa” (99). To most modern audiences, Ulster Protestants clinging to what political theorists characterize as the “siege mentality” of unionism have proved themselves to be on the wrong side of history (95).
Highlighting the complex relationship between Protestant and Catholic Northern Irish women in her 1987 ethnographic study *Shattering Silence*, the anthropologist Begoña Aretxaga writes that “if we deploy the dominant categories of what has been called postcolonial feminism in Ireland we would have to categorize women in Ireland as postcolonial and Western” (Aretxaga 16). Problematizing a conflation of working class Protestant women with their English counterparts, Aretxaga posits that Catholic women could be colonized and Western; their Protestant counterparts could be colonizer and Western. But the status of the Protestant colonizer-Western woman in Northern Ireland would be different from the status of the Western woman in England who would undoubtedly form part of the metropolitan colonizer [...] And furthermore all these categories can be transversed by class and racialized ethnicity (16).

Therefore, “[n]on-nationalist feminism in Northern Ireland,” Aretxaga notes, “has tried to form an autonomous space of women based on the politics of gender identity that sidesteps the pending issues of coloniality, postcoloniality, and nationalism,” an assessment I find helpful for framing discussions of Reid’s *The Belle of Belfast City* and *Tea in a China Cup* because Reid’s protagonists undermine the divisions of colonialism, sectarianism, race, and class, while struggling to think of themselves first and foremost as women (16). These plays, with their at least proto-feminist content, perform political work similar to Devlin’s critique of republicanism *Ourselves Alone*, evaluating Ulster unionism as a movement by examining the treatment of women in
working class Protestant communities. While differences of power among women are acknowledged, gender is a privileged identity, inclining the heroines of *The Belle of Belfast City*, *Tea in a China Cup*, and *Ourselves Alone* toward a particularly feminist kind of disillusionment with the extremist groups perpetuating and rationalizing the violence of The Troubles.

**Republicanism, Unionism, and Women’s Rights**

“I set out to test republicanism against feminism and feminism won,” Devlin says of *Ourselves Alone* in her 2002 interview with Imelda Foley in *The Girls in the Big Picture* (Foley 73). Reid is less forthcoming about the political aims of her work, but both *The Belle of Belfast City* and *Tea in a China Cup* pit unionism against the interests of women. Depicting her Loyalist beliefs as pro-woman in nature, Vi of *The Belle of Belfast City* reprimands her sister:

[D]on’t try to tell me it would suit you to live in a country where priests make the laws and tell you how to vote from the altar. Where things like contraception and divorce are a legal and a mortal sin. It’s written into their Catholic Constitution. You’re a great one for women’s rights. We wouldn’t have many rights in a United Ireland! (Reid 221)

This position is very similar to the point Frieda makes in *Ourselves Alone* about sexism within the republican movement: “[W]hen there’s a tricolour over the City Hall, Donna will still be making coffee for [Provisional IRA recruits], and Josie will still be keeping house for her daddy, because it doesn’t matter a damn whether the British are here or not” (Devlin *Ourselves Alone* 29). In *The Belle of Belfast City*, Vi’s
point, however, is counterbalanced by her sister’s observations about sexism within the Loyalist camp. “We won’t have many rights here either, if [the Loyalists following Ian Paisley] get the Independent Ulster they want,” Rose contends (Reid 221).

Conceding to Vi that Ulster women have more rights as British citizens than they would under the rule of the Republic of Ireland, Rose nonetheless critiques Protestant extremists for their regressive attitudes toward women:

Their right-wing Protestant Church is in total agreement with the right-wing Catholic Church on issues like divorce and abortion, on a woman’s right to be anything other than a mother or a daughter or a sister or a wife. Any woman outside that set of rules is the Great Whore of Babylon. One of the first things they’ll do if they get their Independent State of Ulster is vote that into their Protestant Constitution. (Reid 221)

Through these sisters’ dialogue, *The Belle of the Belfast City* tests unionism against feminism in much the same way *Ourselves Alone* does. And like *Ourselves Alone*, the narrative of *The Belle of Belfast City* supports the position of the character skeptical of her own community’s commitment to women’s rights, privileging the reading that unionism is incompatible with feminism.

Compared to *The Belle of Belfast City, Tea in a China Cup* does not so explicitly debate the compatibility of unionism and feminism, but does closely examine the ways in which Protestant women explain their politics, juxtaposing women’s Loyalist rhetoric with their lived realities as a way of measuring this
rhetoric’s truth. The older women of the Bell family see unionist men, particularly those who served in the British military, as a bulwark against greedy Catholics trying to steal rights and goods from Protestant women and children. “What I want to know is why kids like Theresa Duffy can get their fees paid to go to a Fenian grammar school, and one of ours has to miss out,” Maisie complains, alleging that the Catholic girl does not deserve the benefits of expensive schooling as much as our Beth, she doesn’t. No good’ll come of this subsidized education, you mark my words. The Catholics will beg, borrow and steal the money to get their kids a fancy education. This country’ll suffer for it in years to come when well-qualified Catholics start to pour out of our Queen’s University expecting the top jobs, wantin’ a say in the runnin’ of the country. (Reid 31)

Repeatedly attributing the loss of Protestant women’s jobs, education, china, and homes (during the Troubles’ neighborhood burnings) to Catholic insubordination, the Bell women believe that the British government has betrayed the surviving womenfolk of Ulster Protestant veterans. Referring to her nephew, a casualty of WWII, Masie asks, “Is that what him and all the others died for, eh? To educate the Catholics so that they can take over Ulster?” (31). Unionism, then, is not so much a feminist cause, but the cause of those who object to Catholics stealing the just desserts of Protestant veterans’ dependents (chiefly women), by bullying the British government through acts of terrorism. The older women of *Tea in a China Cup* abide by the rules and
traditions of the Orange Order as a way of claiming what they see as owed to both them and the memories of their loved ones.

Despite this adherence to tradition by the older women in *Tea in a China Cup*, Beth, the youngest member of the Bell family, is skeptical of the idea that unionism protects and serves the interests of women, relaying to the audience the sacrifices her mother and grandmother make for the cause, many of which contribute to their own oppression as women. When her son is killed in WWII, Beth’s grandmother “scrub[s] boards in a bakery to pay for the white marble headstone and surround,” because the British Army’s compensation only provided for a grave in Belfast (Reid 21). The Bell women’s grief and reverence to Samuel’s memory is contrasted with callous manner in which the military announces Samuel’s injury and death (the officer refers to Samuel as “Number 1473529”), as well as the lack of support from the men at the “Orange Hall” to whom Samuel had wanted to prove himself as a man (15).14 When the clergyman at Orangemen’s Day celebration patronizingly pats the newborn Beth and her mother on the heads and tells Sarah that “[w]omen like you are the backbone of Ulster,” *Tea in a China Cup* implies that this role as the backbone largely entails suffering indignity in silence while demonstrating unconditional support of Protestant men (10). The older Bell women pride themselves on this silence, as it differentiates them from Catholics:

14 Pelan argues that Reid “sharply contrasts heroic male war stories with women’s perception of war as an experience of abandonment, loneliness, and isolation,” an observation I believe to be only partially supported by text, but which points toward the way in which Reid parallels Protestant men’s service in and loyalty to the British military with Protestant women’s obligation and loyalty to their husbands (Pelan 89). In many of Reid’s plays, but particularly *Tea in a China Cup*, marriage is framed as a rite of passage for women, just as military service is a rite of passage for men. Often, Reid’s youngest generation of women takes a dim view of both marriage and the military, seeing them both as glorified forms of suffering.
We don’t go cryin’ poverty and puttin’ a poor mouth on ourselves the way [Catholics] do neither. Did you hear thon oul nationalist politician on the wireless the other day? Tellin’ the world about goin’ to school bare-fut in his da’s cut-down trousers? I would cut my tongue out before I’d demean my family like that.”

Maisie teaches Beth as a young girl, explaining that good Protestant women, even if they’re too poor to afford basic necessities, only work harder so as to remain above “the level of the Catholics, whining and complainin’” (23-4, 25). Never criticizing their political leaders, their neighbors, or their male relatives, the Bell women practice a politicized respectability at their own expense.

**Tea in a China Cup and Women’s Spaces**

The Bell home, although it is for most of the play a women’s only space, functions as a site where patriarchal values are reproduced rather than challenged, and the prejudices of Protestant men are passionately cultivated, gendered, and expressed by the women. “No matter what a man does wrong it’s always some woman’s fault, isn’t it?” Beth asks her mother, amused at Sarah’s attempts to justify her husband’s gambling problems which left them with no money (Reid 38). Predictably, Sarah does not hold her husband accountable for his actions, even when they hurt others, blaming herself with a good-natured quip that “[m]en need lookin’s after, like children, sure they never grow up” (38). Although representatives of male authorities receive very little stage time in *Tea in a China Cup*, the older Bell women serve as reinforcing agents of patriarchal values, chiefly, women’s quiet acquiescence to their roles as
dutiful daughters, sisters, and wives.15 “God help you, child, this is the start of all your troubles,” Sarah cries when Beth begins menstruating, explaining, “You don’t talk to men about that sort of thing, it’s not nice […] there’s a lot of things in life that women have to put up with, you’ll find that out as you get older” (30, 29).16 Instead of a sanctuary or place of liberation, the Bell household functions as a space governed by masculinist priorities, reflecting the marginalization of women’s concerns and position within the larger Northern Irish state.

The scenes between Beth and her Catholic neighbor Theresa, in contrast, carve out a women’s space marked by tolerance, discovery, and empowerment. If a china cup is synecdochical of Beth’s relationship with her mother, grandmother, and great aunt, the overarching symbol of Beth and Theresa’s friendship is a copy of H. G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man*. “No matter how poor we are, child, we work hard and keep ourselves and our homes clean and respectable, and we always have a bit of fine bone china and a good table linen by us,” Beth’s grandmother tells her, characterizing the family’s china as the badge of their Protestant work ethic, womanly fortitude, and

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15 Imelda Foley writes that “the men of Reid’s texts are absent because they have died in the wars, either the Great War or the Second World War, in an effort to save Ulster. Women who have had to continue alone adopt patriarchal values to in ruling clan and home” (Foley 61-2). *Tea in a China Cup*, specifically, can be read as a demonstration of “the irony of a society inhabited largely by women, but informed and led almost totally by masculine values and constructs” (62).

16 Joanna Luft draws attention to Sarah’s use of the word “troubles,” which she believes “forcibly suggests the political nature” of the process of gendering within Loyalist families (219). “Does menstruation signal the commencement for young women of a violent social struggle? Is the discourse around womanhood, around gender, or, more precisely, the language of oppositionality epitomized by gender, a source of the official ‘troubles’ themselves?” Luft asks, linking the “girling” (to borrow Judith Butler’s term) of Beth to the kind of indoctrination that produces sectarian violence (219). “Gendered roles are political roles; the politics of womanhood are the source of women’s troubles, and the politics of oppositionality, nourished on a discourse of gender differentiation, a source of ‘the troubles’ themselves,” Luft concludes.
middle class ambitions (25). Selling her china to Theresa Duffy’s family constitutes Sarah’s most painful concession to the Catholics, and the acquisition of the Belleek tea set through marriage represents Beth’s crowning achievement from the perspectives of the older Bell women. *The Invisible Man*, however, the story of a scientist who dies trying to undo the effects of an experiment which rendered him invisible, gestures toward Beth’s process of extricating herself from the traditions, femininity, class pretensions, and Protestantism obscuring her true self. First mentioned in a yarn Theresa spins about the overzealousness of the nun’s campaign against Catholic school girls’ sexuality—

Theresa: They expelled a girl last year for having a dirty book in her locker.

Beth: What dirty book?

Theresa: *The Invisible Man*

— the novella becomes a private joke between Theresa and Beth, a euphemism for the various aspects of female sexuality from which (female) mouthpieces of patriarchal prudishness shield them (Reid 40). Raised in a fiercely anti-Catholic family, Beth nonetheless draws strength from and finds solace in her friendship with her Catholic neighbor.

Besides providing amusing dialogue to lighten the mood of *Tea in a China Cup*, Beth and Theresa’s friendship allows them to unravel the prejudice and stereotypes about one another they are being taught in every other part of their lives.¹⁷

¹⁷ At one point, Theresa teases Beth to distract her from worrying about an interview: “you told me I couldn’t be pregnant because Joe Maguire had pimples, and boys could only make babies after their spots cleared [which] presented me with a bit of a problem. You see, my da always had spots on his
From childhood, the two bluntly ask each other to confirm or deny stereotypes as outlandish as Maisie’s idea that nuns “always go around in pairs because one of them’s really a man” or the plotline of a book Theresa’s granny read “about a rich Protestant landowner, and all these young Catholic girls worked in his big house and they all got babies” (Reid 27). Theresa and Beth share and keep each other’s secrets, beginning with the hugely important moment in which Theresa promises not to tell anyone that Beth’s mother had to sell her china. In that moment, Beth offers to trust Theresa with the shame of her family, though Theresa is a Catholic, and Theresa vows to respect Beth’s wishes, though she is Protestant. Besides choosing to set aside the tensions between their families and ethnic communities in that moment, Theresa and Beth begin to think together about gender, wondering why their fathers do not treasure the china the way their mothers do and why garments of clothing might be nicknamed “Passion killers” (27) By taking precedence over ethnic qualifiers, their shared identification as women allows their friendship to transcend divided Northern Irish society, forming, to echo Aretxaga’s assessment of non-nationalist feminism, “an autonomous space of women based on the politics of gender identity that sidesteps the pending issues of coloniality, postcoloniality, and nationalism” (Aretxaga 16).

During a scene in which Beth and Theresa are both waiting to interview for entry-level positions at the Northern Ireland Civil Service, the women have a conversation demonstrative of non-nationalist feminism’s ability to privilege women’s issues over other vectors of serious injustice. Explaining that a third of the “low-grade face, they never cleared up” (41). This kind of exchange punctuates otherwise highly depressing scenes multiple times throughout Tea in a China Cup.
positions” in the civil service are allocated for Catholic interviewees, Theresa tells Beth that “the Catholic third haven’t a hope in hell of being promoted to the top grades” (Reid 41). This news is not revolutionary to Beth, who remarks that her current firm “doesn’t employ Catholics, at least not in their offices,” and apologizes for that state of affairs (41). Theresa brushes off her apology, reassuring Beth, “[I]t’s nothing to do with you, and anyway, they say it works the other way round in the South,” before announcing her plans to move to London so she may live somewhere not so sexually repressive. In the first of two times she makes this invitation, Theresa offers to share her home with Beth: “Why don’t you come to London with me, and we’ll lead a life of delicious sin and debauchery” (42). Significantly, Theresa leaves Belfast to satisfy her desire for sexual liberation, not for the attraction of fair hiring practices or an end to discrimination she faces as a working class Catholic. Beth’s decision to stay behind and be married is, accordingly, framed in terms of patriarchal oppression, because the women in her family are not allowed to leave home “except to get married” (42). Although an intersectional analysis might describe Theresa as thrice disadvantaged by colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal structures, Beth is trapped by her working class Protestant background in a way that Theresa is not.18

As Beth identifies and addresses the ways in which her family has prescribed an unhappy and limiting life for her, Theresa catalyzes Beth’s epiphanies and eventual shift toward self-interest. On the evening before her wedding, Beth confides to

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18 Carla J. McDonough, in her essay “I’ve Never Been Just Me,” reads Beth’s character arc similarly, describing it as “the development of one woman, Beth, from an obedient daughter and unhappy wife, who ‘faithfully repeated [her] mother’s mistakes’ by marrying a gambler, into a woman who is ready to make her own choices” (Watt et al 184).
Theresa the discontent she feels at having unquestioningly acted in the interests of others. “I’ve been my mother’s daughter, and now I’m going to be Stephen’s wife” Beth muses, “I’ve never been just me. I’ve never made a decision in my life” (Reid 50). Alone in her hotel room the next night, Beth looks at the copy of *The Invisible Man* Theresa slipped into her handbag, a moment which seems especially poignant for its implication that Beth and Theresa have had their lives dictated by the whims of men who for the most part are not themselves present to enforce their rules, acting through proxies instead.19 While Theresa, for the most part, resists the identity intended for her (“I was called after a saint,” she points out, laughing at how ill the legacy suits her), Beth finds herself in a state of existential paralysis as her mother dies, confessing that her “head is full of other people’s memories” (61). Although her status as a Protestant and her later inheritance affords her a great degree of privilege, Beth’s mind is still prisoner to the idea that because she has only ever been a daughter, sister, and wife, her life is not her own.

**Violence and Shelter in *The Belle of the Belfast City***

That subtle stealing of autonomy to the point where women police themselves without male authorities present, *Tea in a China Cup* suggests, is only one form of an

19 McDonough convincingly argues that Reid particularly takes issue with Northern Irish women’s complicity in instilling patriarchal religious values that harm young women: “The desire to keep sexuality enshrouded in mystery or to keep young people, especially girls ‘innocent’ of the knowledge of sexuality is a move which Catholicism shares with Protestantism, at least as Reid experienced it. Reid herself tells of sneaking into a documentary about natural childbirth, a movie that had been determined ‘pornographic’ by the Irish censors. It was at this movie, at the age of fifteen, that she learned how babies are born. She says she knew how babies got into women because a boy on her street had told her when she was about eleven or twelve years old, but she had always wondered how they ‘got out.’ This comment brings up the question of how, if a woman is not allowed to know her own body’s functioning, she is to make reasonable and responsible choices about the world […] Both Beth and Theresa, kept ignorant about their bodies and sexuality, end up making bad decisions about marriage and relationships” (Watts et al 184-5).
insidious array of violence visited upon women in imagined communities tied to paramilitary organizations, an array of power the activist Cathy Harkin calls an “armed patriarchy,” and of which Eileen Evanson wrote in her 1982 study of domestic violence as it related to the Troubles (Foley 82). Evanson saw Belfast working class neighborhoods, both Catholic and Protestant, as constellations of communities where guns and explosives were widely available, and to speak of one’s suffering at the hands of someone within the community was disgracefully and dangerously disloyal (Foley 82).

*Tea in a China Cup* nods to this reality, as Beth’s aunts remark that in life, the corpse they are preparing for burial in front of her “was a vindictive oul bastard all his life, treated his wife and childer like dogs, so he did” (35). In *Ourselves Alone*, however, domestic violence is a constant motif. Frieda draws attention to schisms within the republican movement, reminding her father that the Workers’ Party’s great crime against the Provisional IRA was to say that Bobby Sands, republican hunger striker, poet, and martyr, “beat his wife [...] when he was dying she was so afraid of him she wouldn’t go up to the prison to see him. In fact she wouldn’t go near him until she was sure he was definitely dead” (39).²⁰ Frieda merely repeating that story of Bobby Sand’s violence is enough to provoke her father, who strikes Frieda on the head and attempts to continue chasing and hitting her about the Provo club, Frieda’s place

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²⁰ Pelan notes that “by using domestic violence as a context in which to discuss [Bobby Sands], Devlin goes beyond existing polarized representations of Sands as either a political martyr or a political enemy. The emphasis is altogether removed from Sands as either of these things and is transferred instead to his wife and the issue of domestic violence itself, which, along with various other so-called nonpolitical forms of violence, has gone relatively unchecked in Northern Ireland over the period of the Troubles” (Pelan 88).
of work. Throughout the course of *Ourselves Alone*, women are hurt by men claiming to be heroes—Frieda is abused by the man who takes her in after her father’s outburst, and Josie’s brother threatens to forcibly kill Josie’s unborn child because it is the offspring of a traitor.

In *The Belle of Belfast City*, Aretxaga’s notion of women standing in solidarity as women regardless of intra-gender tensions seems to, for the most part, shelter characters from the coercion of Harkin’s “armed patriarchy.” Emboldened by her aunt and cousins’ support, Janet’s rejection of those who have tried to steal her autonomy is staged very differently than Beth’s frightened “I’ve never been just me” admission to Theresa. Beth trivializes her feelings as “an attack of wedding eve jitters,” that she must repress in favor of her duties as bride and daughter the moment her mother enters the room, transforming it from a space of sanctuary peopled only by herself and her trusted friend into a space where family honor must be upheld (Reid 51). Beth’s singular act of independence does not take place until the end of the play, after all the other Bell women are dead. Only then, without her sense of responsibility to her family members, their internalized sexism, their prejudice, and their outmoded values can she finally auction the contents of her husband’s house, and, the text leads us to believe, move to London with Theresa. The women who of *The Belle of the Belfast City*’s Horner family, by contrast, each encourage Janet to stand up for her own desires rather than submitting to the will of her husband or brother. Confident in the unconditional love of Dolly, Rose, Vi, and Belle, Janet is able to leave her unhappy marriage and directly confront her abusive brother, declaring, “I want a life of my
own. My own! Nobody else’s! Not [my lover’s], not [my husband’s]. Not yours. Most of all not yours. I am walking away from this violence” (244).

**Family Loyalty and Loyalist Bigotry in *The Belle of Belfast City***

Generally, *The Belle of Belfast City* is structured like a kind of dualistic struggle between two politically polarized members of the Horner family, Belle and Jack, in which the other characters are forced to take sides. Rose, Belle’s mother, and Janet, the sister Jack has terrorized since childhood, declare their loyalty to Belle with relative ease, although Rose must first reassure Janet that she has every right to distance herself from Jack’s brainwashing. “He’s only your brother. Not your keeper. Not your God. You don’t need Jack’s permission to do anything. You’re a grown woman,” Rose calms Janet after Janet berates herself using Jack’s punishing language of sin, damnation, and worthlessness (207). Dolly’s decision too, seems fairly straightforward, as she lovingly declares Belle to be a younger incarnation of herself several times, and seems to regard Jack with a mixture of pity, amusement, and exasperation. Dolly insists to Vi that “Jack likes to be the only man. The one in charge. Thought he’d be the man of the house when [Dolly’s husband] died. I soon put him right on that score,” in an effort to sway Vi’s genuinely conflicted allegiances to Jack and the Horner women who band against him. For Vi, the political is intensely personal, as Belle and Jack’s feud causes her to question deeply ingrained beliefs.

Reid’s most powerful commentary about Protestant unionism comes from Vi Horner, the respectable and responsible center of the family, whose management of the family shop provided for her mother and younger sister after Dolly’s husband died,
rather than through Jack, a Loyalist leader who speaks at rallies and holds great
political power. Jack, Vi can admit, has gross personal failings—he is undeniably
racist, sexist, religiously fanatical, and betrays the rest of the family, particularly Belle,
with an unforgivable lack of kinship. Yet when confronted by Rose, Vi claims she
“never had to pretend to agree with Jack’s politics. I’m with him all the way on that”
(Reid 220).

Rejecting Rose’s notion that anti-Catholic prejudice is the same thing as anti-
black racism, Vi uses the language of slavery to describe Protestant Ulster’s position.
“We are bein’ sold down the river because England doesn’t need us no more,” Vi says,
anchoring her comparison of Jack to black political leaders with the assertion that “we
won’t be patted on the head and complimented on our loyalty and patriotism through
two world wars, but now it’s all over [...] what we need now is somebody to shout our
cause an’ our rights from the rooftops” (Reid 220). To undo Vi’s conviction that the
Protestants are victims akin to black Americans (and unionist politics thus morally
justifiable), Reid places Vi in a dilemma where she must choose between her beloved
black niece, Belle, and the racist unionist leadership who consider Belle a dispensable
“black bastard,” the product of Rose’s “ungodly fornications” (229). Vi’s politics,
which initially seem to amount to nothing more than quaint patriotic songs learned in
childhood, understandable respect for her cousin Jack, a practical decision to sell the
UDA magazines her customers read, and a neighborly agreement to make donations to
the Loyalist Prisoners Fund about which her community cares, suddenly take on a
chilling light when viewed in terms of the violent hatred against real people those
politics reify. Although Vi herself is not violent, racist, or intentionally sexist, her unquestioning political support enables those who are. There are no harmless Loyalists, Reid teaches through Vi’s portrayal, and one kind of prejudice feeds another.

Rose presses this point to Vi by drawing her attention to an old memory of what Vi considers the peaceful days “before the [movement for Catholic] Civil Rights started the violence” of the Troubles, a time when Vi misremembers Protestants having “no quarrel with our Catholic neighbours” (Reid 221). “Belfast abounds with half-baked sentimental stories” Rose argues, pointing out that tales of “the good old days and how well we all got on with our Uncle Tom Catholic neighbors” bely the real experience of housing, employment, and voting inequalities Catholics faced, as well as even the darker story of the Horners’ personal Catholic neighbors. Like the Bells of Tea in a China Cup, the Horners’ Protestantism peaked with the annual twelfth of July Orangemen’s parade, in which Vi and Rose’s father put on his British WWII veteran’s uniform and Ulster sash. Vi romanticizes a moment in which Bridie Doherty, a Catholic neighbor who dropped by to ask about the Horners’ sick relative handed Joe Horner his sash as an example of ultimate peace between the communities. Rose, however, contextualizes that moment as symbolic of the Horners reinforcing their status as affiliates of the Orangemen and the British military, two organizations which

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21 The Ulster Defence Association (UDA) was the largest Loyalist paramilitary organization in Northern Ireland. Formed in 1971 from various vigilante groups such as the Shankill Defence Association, the UDA had about 40,000 members at its peak. Using the name “Ulster Freedom Fighters” for its military operations, the UDA maintained a front of producing only political tracts and was not declared illegal until 1992. Boasting a considerable arsenal of AK-47 rifles, Uzi machineguns, machine pistols, home-made submachine guns, handguns, and an unknown amount of Powergel (commercial plastic explosive), the UDA was not fully disarmed until 2010 (Melaugh “Organizations”).
terrorized Catholics with impunity for much of The Troubles. And eventually, when Loyalists set fire to the Dohertys house, the Horners merely helped them move out, never thinking twice about voting for a unionist politician whose slogan read “Don’t be vague. Burn a Tague” (223). The peace Vi seems to recall, Rose says, meant only that Protestants tolerated Catholics if “they stayed indoors on the twelfth of July and didn’t kick up a fuss when the Kick-the-Pope bands marched past their houses, beating big drums to remind them of their place (222-3).

In an idealized world, Vi’s stance of literal sisterhood which again “sidesteps issues of coloniality, postcoloniality, and nationalism,” would signal a triumphant feminist defeat for the forces of “armed patriarchy” expressed as extremist unionism (Aretxaga 16). The Belle of the Belfast City, however, acknowledges no such possibility for women during the Troubles. Vi, in the end, is forced to sell her shop to the Englishman more racist and militantly unionist than Jack. Jack is exploiting Belle’s deaf and mentally handicapped friend for political gain. Dolly has a stroke and never returns to full sentience. Rose and Janet, with their fierce speeches about women’s rights and justice, are ineffectually reading Belfast’s news from London. Belle sings a Loyalist ballad of Belfast, telling the audience how the city’s “bricks they will bleed and the rain it will weep,” how the Protestants will never allow an “all-Irish Parliament at College Green,” and how this attitude is one that essentially declares “to hell with the future and live on in the past” for either Protestants or perhaps Belfast as a whole (250). Although the Horners’ rejection of Jack and his regressive movement which will never take the rights of women seriously is
important, their space of female autonomy can only hold until the next destructive unionist rally. Unionist policing of communal identity cannot allow the existence of insubordinate women, and Vi’s business is targeted until the family must admit defeat and leave Belfast.

Autonomy through Exodus

*Tea in a China Cup*, *The Belle of Belfast City*, and *Ourselves Alone* all conclude with at least one woman’s exodus to England— in London Beth joins Theresa and Janet joins Rose, while Frieda flees arbitrarily for England, declaring herself to be the wrong kind of Irish for the Republic. “They say there are no women in Ireland. Only mothers and sisters and wives,” Janet addresses the husband she leaves behind (210). Rejecting the archetypal roles which define them by their relationships to men, women who find their own voices must inevitably leave their Belfast communities and Belfast politics, turning back toward the colonizer and source of social stratification to help unravel colonized female identities. “The traditional narrative of colonial politics presents a clash between men— with those in power striving to maintain their control and thus protect their manliness and those without power seeking to attain manhood by gaining power and control. Often this battle is fought symbolically or literally over the body of woman,” Carla J. McDonough writes (183). Perhaps, Reid’s plays, like Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone* suggest, neither republican nor unionist combatants of the Troubles, and neither Catholic nor Protestant peacemakers of the 1980s prioritized the lives of women as individuals. Bleakly, Reid offers her women characters transitory spaces of sisterhood, and then
one last ticket to England if by their mid thirties they are finally ready to make
decisions dictated by neither Orangemen nor Mother Ireland. Finding no sense of self
in Ulster’s centuries old colonial struggle, Protestant women survive The Troubles
only by letting go of their Loyalism and hoping to fare better than the British war
veterans for whom they had adopted unionism in the first place.
Chapter Three

Internment and the Troubles

“You’ve been here so long, Joe, that you think nothing else matters but the Troubles. Well, you’re wrong. Outside of here, in the real world, fellas and girls still go out together. To the pubs, the parks, the pictures. Normal life goes on, Joe, outside these wire fences,” Brian Rafferty tells his brother Joe, an IRA prisoner interned at Long Kesh in Reid’s Did You Hear the One about the Irishman? (Reid 91). Passionately arguing for his right to carry on life outside of the Troubles, independent from Long Kesh’s inmates, Brian articulates a theme parallel to that expressed in Devlin’s The Long March. Reading these plays against each other for the ways in which they represent the role of internment, and more importantly, the communities of those interred, during the Troubles, I will examine the way that both Devlin and Reid decenter the historical narrative of Long Kesh by focusing on characters outside of the prison walls. Implicitly, both Did You Hear the One about the Irishman? and The Long March call for a reconsideration of the term “prisoner,” asking whether those circumscribed by the stories of others are truly free. Just as the women discussed in the previous chapter struggle against heads “full of other people’s memories,” the women in these plays by Reid and Devlin try to find their own voices amidst a set of news broadcasts and competing community pressures constantly calling for them to prioritize the concerns of the imprisoned (Reid 61).  

I do not mean to suggest that the period of internment so rigidly gendered working class Belfast communities into male prisoners and female and child civilians-- certainly women took part in the dirty protests at Her Majesty’s Prison Armagh in conjunction with the protests for political prisoner status of the men incarcerated at Long Kesh. Margareta D’Arcy, an English actress, playwright, and feminist
Her Majesty’s Prison Maze & Belfast Communities

“Long Kesh/Maze has been called both a microcosm and icon of the conflict ‘in and about’ Northern Ireland and thus appears as the most fitting place for its memorialization,” Louise Purbrick argues of The Long Kesh and Maze Prison complex, pointing to the way that all the key protagonists to the [Troubles] occupied some of the space of the prison; they had a place within it; it was built at the behest of the British government and its perimeter patrolled by the battalions of the British Army; prison officers, usually locally recruited, were aligned to Northern Ireland’s security forces; republican and loyalist members of military groups such as the Provisional IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army or the Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association were its prisoners (Purbrick 63).

The site of the men’s dirty protests and hunger strikes which would eventually make international martyrs of those like Bobby Sands, who starved for the republican cause, Long Kesh housed approximately 10,000 of the approximately 15,000 republicans and between 5,000-10,000 Loyalists imprisoned for suspected paramilitary ties during the height of British internment from the years 1971 to 1998 (Moshenska 12, 11).

activist who played several minor characters in the first production of Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup*, writes in her memoir *Tell Them Everything* that “[s]ince the early 1970s approximately 120 women have been incarcerated in Armagh-- for armed rebellion, or civil disobedience, or merely for being known to hold dissident opinions” (D’Arcy 11). Recalling the three months she spent as a prisoner at Armagh in 1980, D’Arcy wrote of the republican women’s no-wash protest, which famously included the smearing of menstrual blood on the walls of prison cells, and of the bodily harm and decay women suffered while protesting for political prisoner status.

Moshenska defends the use of a great range in estimates of Loyalist prisoners interned, writing that “The discrepancy in estimates for Loyalist prisoners is telling, resulting from a common state and
Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward’s collection *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags* points to the outsized effect of internment on communities, particularly in West Belfast. “Internment is of importance for working-class Catholic women because while it virtually paralysed the movement for men, it did not have the same effect for women [...] Women were often at the fore of protests and pickets on behalf of husbands, fathers, sons and partners” one chapter argues, elsewhere looking to the ways in which families were called to support prisoners by smuggling goods in and messages out of prisons, as well as prioritizing the needs of their interned loved ones over their own senses of isolation or hardship (Ryan 168, 158). Mairead Gilmartin, whose husband was sentenced to life imprisonment, discusses sentiments she felt she could not publicly express as the wife of an interned man during the Troubles:

You couldn’t say, like, ‘I feel really lonely.’ I don’t think it was a deliberate thing, that people had chosen not to support each other. I think it’s like, it’s nearly like a sign of weakness when you ask. I remember asking one of my husband’s friends whenever he first got his life sentence, ‘Do you think I’ll be able to do this?’ And I genuinely meant, ‘do you think, knowing me as a person that I can get through?’ And they were saying, ‘Well what do you want, another man?’ [...] Well I went, ‘Oh, no, I’m not even going to ask that question ever again, because it’s too… people don’t understand what I’m talking about when I say that.’ (Ryan 158-9)

Unionist conceptualisation of Loyalist criminal activity as serving rather than destabilising the state: as Loyalist graffiti and murals often declare, ‘Their only crime was loyalty’” (11).
Historically, the experience of internment could have a profound and silencing effect on the families and communities of thousands of prisoners, drastically altering the character of working class Belfast during the 1970s and 80s. Devlin’s *The Long March* and Reid’s *Did You Hear the One about the Irishman?* represent efforts to capture these silenced experiences of this moment in history.

*The Long March, Did You Hear, & the Policing of Communities*

Written as a screenplay for BBC in 1984, Devlin’s *The Long March* reads almost like the transcript of a news broadcast because of its intense engagement with political issues and events from the precise date range of March 30, 1979 to December 18, 1980. Focusing on Helen Walsh, back in West Belfast after a failed marriage in England who undertakes research about the families of the H-Block blanket protesters, *The Long March* is a play about Catholics in Belfast for whom the prisoners’ protest is inextricably both political and personal, regardless of whether or not they agree with the movements’ aims. Presenting a very pointed critique of the British government’s 1974 to 1989 Prevention of Terrorism Acts, Special Courts, and prison conditions, *The Long March* also condemns republican extremism, especially when those with weapons terrorize their own communities into supporting causes in which not all Catholics firmly believe.

In *The Long March*, the daughter of a former Fianne member (paramilitary combatant) turned trade unionist, Helen Walsh is by instinct more in sympathy with civil and human rights concerns in Northern Ireland than the republican political and military movement her father dismisses as the pointless violence of “tribes” (Devlin,
“Non-aligned, and comes from West Belfast?” the lawyer Fergus Sloan skeptically asks about Helen when she first becomes his research assistant, pointedly commenting that despite the Walsh family’s attempts to concern themselves with “bread-and-butter issues” rather than questions of nationalism, they live in a working class Catholic neighborhood over which the Provisional IRA exercises a great degree of control (109, 141). Unlike her parents, who want nothing to do with the Provisional IRA and the Long Kesh hunger strikes, Helen pressures Fergus Sloan to write a book in support of the prisoners receiving Special Category status, reasoning that those convicted by Special Courts, often after being tortured into confessions by the British governments, should be treated as political prisoners, not criminals. Yet Helen is forced to reexamine her convictions as the hunger strikes go on, and families of prisoners resort to increasingly desperate measures to rally support for the republican cause. Pursuing a romantic relationship with Colm, whose cousins are at Long Kesh, Helen quickly realizes that Colm’s commitment to the IRA cause is so single-minded that he regards both his happiness and hers as frivolous distractions.

In this same fervor of single-minded support for the IRA and the hunger strikers, Andersontown’s Catholic families target Helen’s parents as political nonbelievers, and *The Long March* ends with the Walsh family narrowly avoiding having their house burned down by their own friends and neighbors.

Set a few years prior to the events of *The Long March*, Reid’s *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman?* also focuses on the wider impact of mass incarceration in Northern Ireland. An across-the-barricades romance between two relatives of high
profile Long Kesh inmates, *Did You Hear* chiefly addresses the destructiveness of sectarian prejudice between the republican and Loyalist camps. There is no mention of the dirty protests, the hunger strikes, or unjust incarceration in *Did You Hear*, and for the optimistic Brian, Long Kesh functions as a sign of hope for ending prejudice and the Troubles:

Maybe we should put all the politicians on the Long Kesh bus, and drive them round and round the camp till they’ve reached an agreement [... W]here else in Northern Ireland can a Provie wife and a UDA wife take a long look at each other and realise that they’re both on board the same sinking ship. Common ground. Common enemy. And there’s nothing like a common enemy for resolving a family feud. (Reid 77)

Directly undercutting Brian’s optimism, however, and functioning as a dramatic foil for the affectionate teasing between Brian and Allison (the play’s lovers), *Did You Hear* is interspersed with cruel humor delivered by a stand-up comedian. Suggesting that much of Northern Ireland’s Troubles is either caused or enabled by British people’s long history of anti-Irish sentiment, the comedian jokes, “An Irishman and an Irish girl were pushed off the top of the Cave Hill. Who hit the ground first? Who cares, as long as they’re both Irish,” immediately after the audience learns of Brian and Allison’s murders (Reid 96). Hatred and mistrust festering inside Long Kesh, with all its symptoms treated as confirmation of Irish people’s barbarity by the British jailors, proves too strong for Brian and Allison to be able to write their own love story.
For all their optimism, Devlin’s Helen and Fergus as well as Reid’s Brian and Allison achieve neither the personal fulfillment of living free of their families’ coercion, nor the political victory of attaining some small step toward peace or justice. Although Brian and Allison’s relationship can be read as a space of love and surmounted prejudice between members of militant Catholic and extremist Protestant communities, this space is exceedingly transitory, always overshadowed by worry and eventually destroyed by the violent disapproval of Long Kesh prisoners with connections. Devlin kills only her characters’ spirits, (though she does show Helen being physically threatened), trapping Fergus in a loveless marriage and leaving Helen a bereaved artist selling paintings of empty rooms.

Class & Internment

Helen and her partner Fergus are criticized by The Long March’s other characters for their moderate stances and willingness to work with Protestants. Because Helen and Fergus advocate for prison reform rather than radical military or political action, Helen’s republican lover Colm accuses them of being “fool[s]” who are “still playing the game by the rules” when “[t]here’s a war on” (133). Long March suggests that Colm is to some degree justified in his condescending view of Helen and Fergus as well-meaning, but ineffectual, academics who are out of touch with the harsh realities of West Belfast. Colm’s accusation follows a scene in which he is brutalized by the British police at Castleraugh. Later he becomes a victim of the British “shoot-to-kill” policy, murdered by Special Air Service agents.  

24 Ellison and Smith trace Special Air Services and Royal Ulster Constabulary’s shootings of unarmed civilians in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 80s, investigating whether evidence confirms what
parents, though neither have the same kind of street credibility, also reprimand Helen and her “university friends,” meaning Fergus, for trying to persuade others of their moderate views without living “on the Falls Road” themselves (140). Although Colm and Helen’s father have very different views on the H-block protests, *Long March* devotes time to monologues from each of them about the hardships they faced growing up as poor young men in West Belfast. Fergus and Helen, both of whom live in Stanmillis, a neighborhood in South Belfast near the Botanic Gardens and Queens University, have the luxury of analyzing The Troubles from a place out of the republican-Loyalist-Royal Ulster Constabulary cross-fire.

Helen’s generation of university-educated Catholics, though certainly not above criticism, ultimately seem to be tragic figures struggling toward small victories proscribed by those who resent them. “Have you no responsibility for what you owe the people who fought for your right to an education?” Helen’s father demands in a passionate scene, declaring that if he would have “had half her chances” rather than being forced to leave school at age eleven, he would “have made something of” himself (119-20). “You can’t blame me for that!” Helen reminds Joe, insisting that his experiences should not dictate her life (120). “It happened to you, not me,” Helen repeats, “It happened to you!” (120).

Northern Irish people widely believed, “that a shoot-to-kill policy was in operation in Northern Ireland, and that it was being used as a tactic when circumstances seemed opportune” (130). “The fact that suspected republican activists were being killed by special undercover units as a result of intensive surveillance seemed [to] point in the direction of a consistent policy,” Ellison and Smith write, arguing that there was at least “tacit support” from the British government for the SAS and RUC to kill suspected paramilitary (mainly IRA) affiliates whenever possible, even if the suspects were unarmed at the time (130, 133).
By the end of *The Long March*, Helen is no longer the vulnerable woman trying to defend herself against charges of failure, bitterly reminding her father, “I played it all the way along the line your way. I went to university. I did a law degree. I didn’t go to art college” (119). She has taken time to mourn Colm’s betrayal and death and pursued her interest in painting as a career. Looking out at the moon, she reflects with newly acquired wisdom, “I still remember that time when we thought we were beginning a new journey: the long march. What we didn’t see was that it had begun a long time before with someone else’s journey; we were simply getting through the steps in our own time [...] we never had a time which we could call our own” (155). Belatedly realizing that her fight for the rights of the hunger strikers is an inherited one, a form of paying the debt her father has raised her to believe she owes to her working class republican roots, Helen concedes that despite her advantages, her life has never been her own.

In *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman*, class appears as one of the most important analytical angles for understanding internment in Northern Ireland. Brian and Allison make several jokes at the expense of Allison’s family for belonging to the “Protestant Ascendancy” (Reid 74). The relatives of Henry Sinclair, a high-profile Loyalist politician or “well-bred gangster” in Allison’s words, Allison’s family can largely afford to ignore the political struggle taking place in Long Kesh (76). Allison’s working class mother-in-law, however, is situated much differently. Because Allison’s sister-in-law “married into the middle classes” and “got herself out of those mean back streets,” she makes excuses each week to avoid taking Allison’s mother to see Hughie,
Allison’s brother-in-law and “one of [Long Kesh’s] most notorious inmates” (73, 72). Hughie’s “arrest has forced [Allison’s sister-in-law] to look back to what she came from,” Allison says condescendingly, but at the same time recognizes how awful the process of visiting the prison is (73). As a volunteer at the tea counter on visiting days, Allison gets a sense of Long Kesh, but as she says herself, the job is “doing [her] middle-class bit. Mingling with the lower orders, the undeserving poor, from behind the safety of a tea urn on a counter” (73). Because she does not agree with the aims of Protestant extremism in the way that Helen in *The Long March* truly believes in the rights of the republican protesters, Allison’s felt debt to her community can only be paid in vaguely patronizing charity work like running the tea counter once a week for visitors to Long Kesh.

Allison’s father blames the Troubles almost entirely on class, recalling his own decision to choose a comfortable lifestyle over fixing unfair hiring practices at the family business:

There wasn’t a Catholic employed in the place. Protestants all. From the managing director to the old man who swept the floors. [...] When word got around that I’d shortlisted a Catholic woman for canteen manageress, I received a delegation from the men. The message was very clear. Don’t even consider it or we shut down the plant. The same day, I was summoned to my father’s bedside. He was propped up with pillows. Half paralysed. But *his* message was also very clear. One more stunt like that and he’d bring my cousin George in as head of the
family business. Whatever damn fool ideas I’d picked up in Oxford, I could forget them [...] I had a sports car. An expensive social life, here and abroad. All paid for by my father’s factory with its loyal Protestant workforce. I wasn’t about to rock that gilt-edged boat for lost causes. (Reid 80-1)

In *Did You Hear*, the middle class is not made up of hapless university graduates like Helen and Fergus, but bosses who are complacently culpable in perpetuating inequality. “What is happening now in this country has come about not just because of greedy politicians, but because of people like me,” Allison’s father admits (Reid 81). Among those “greedy politicians,” Allison counts her uncle Henry, who she believes has “deliberately harmed” people, rallying poor Protestants like her incarcerated brother-in-law into support for the Loyalist cause (81). Though the fathers of Hughie Boyd and Joe Rafferty “were in the Union together,” married women who were twin sisters, and vowed to “change the world” together, “no matter what happened,” Hughie and Joe grow up poor and fatherless, following the directives of bosses and politicians who lead them into the camps of opposing paramilitaries (86). Exploring intermarriage and friendships between Protestants and Catholics, *Did You Hear* suggests that The Troubles result not from blind prejudice, but a socioeconomic hierarchy which the “Protestant Ascendancy” is slow to change (74).

The kind of middle class Allison’s father and uncle represent is very different from the middle class of Helen and Fergus, who were educated through Labour government grants and hope to use their professional privileges to deliver justice for
working class Catholics, but Allison and Brian feel a similar kind of generational
difference between themselves and their parents as Helen and Fergus. More inclined to
causes of peace and justice than the trade union movement to which Helen and Brian’s
father belonged, this generation seems to have no qualms about socializing in mixed
Catholic-Protestant company. Yet all four live in a world not quite ready for tolerance,
an attitude exacerbated by the experience of internment, which keeps the Troubles’
sectarian violence fresh in the minds of everybody in Belfast.
Chapter Four

Madwomen, Trauma, and the Troubles

“If I tell a doctor I am having religious visions, he will tell me that I am ill; and that is closure. If I tell a nun I am having religious visions then we can agree we both are ill and at least begin the conversation on an equal footing,” Greta explains, appealing to her cousin as both a spiritual guide and fellow woman when she is haunted by voices and ghosts in Devlin’s *After Easter* (Devlin *After Easter* 25).

Paralleling an earlier scene in which an English doctor threatens the end to Greta’s independence as an adult if she cannot communicate her sanity with linear logic, Greta and the nun’s exchange differs in its acceptance of mental illness as the premise of a larger story rather than grounds for imprisonment. In Belfast, among her Catholic sisters and the sisters of the abbey, Greta’s visions and voices are accepted as a “state of grace” rather than a danger to others or a marker of weakness (28).

First performed in 1994 in the middle of Northern Ireland’s peace talks, *After Easter* is a sort of sequel to Devlin’s first play, *Ourselves Alone*, which was set during the tense months of the 1980s hunger strikes. Although both plays foreground three sisters, all of whom have complications in their love lives rendering them effectively single for the duration of the story, and one of whom sees visions of the devil and suffers from a kind of anxiety-induced asthma, *Ourselves Alone* can be generally characterized as a political play and *After Easter* a psychological play. In this chapter, I will explore *Ourselves Alone*’s Donna and *After Easter*’s Greta as subjects affected by “feminine madness,” the working class republican incarnations of imprisoned and
silenced Victorian “madwomen” that fascinated late twentieth century feminist critics (Foley 99). Donna and Greta, I argue, represent feminist reconfigurations of the “madwoman” as speaking subjects, invoke tropes of Gothic literature long used by Irish writers to grapple with landscapes of political terror, and question official narratives of Northern Irish peace by illustrating the psychic damage of armed patriarchy enabled by sectarian Belfast.

This task of examining official narratives of Northern Irish peace is also creatively undertaken by Reid, in her play Clowns. Set just before the signing of the Good Friday agreements, Clowns revisits the juvenile delinquents of Reid’s earlier play, Joyriders, inquiring into the three surviving characters’ lives eight years after they witnessed their friend’s murder by police shooting. Whereas Joyriders is a naturalistic, highly political story of four friends from the Divis Flats (a poor apartment complex occupied mostly by republican Catholics described as “the worst housing development in Western Europe”) working in a government sponsored youth program, Clowns focuses on the emotional paralysis of Sandra (Reid 102). Although Tommy, Arthur, and Sandra are materially better off than they were at the time of Joyriders, Sandra is haunted by the ghost of Maureen, who is physically present on stage for the majority of the play. Like Devlin’s Greta, Sandra must return from England to Belfast, seeking kinship and the exorcism of her demons.

The ghost of Maureen, however, is less a demon in the way that Donna and Greta describe their visitor to be, and more of an extension of her character from Joyriders, a lost friend whom Sandra cannot bear to let go. Sandra’s haunting, then,
stems from a lack of closure, a sense that no matter how far away she leaves Belfast, or how loudly Belfast’s politicians declare ceasefires, Maureen, and by extension, Sandra, remains a victim of the police state, male entitlement, and class discrimination. Sandra, in both *Joyriders* and *Clowns*, points out that though the police might eventually retreat from the Catholic neighborhoods of Belfast, the peace agreement does not signal the release of chains forged during The Troubles. Maureen, in many ways, functions similarly to the female spirits of Ireland who visit dreamers in traditional Irish aisling poems or drama, bidding Sandra back to unfinished duties in Ireland.25

Moving from the political to the psychological in content and progressively away from the naturalistic in form, Devlin and Reid both use sets of plays about haunted Belfast women to tell the story of The Troubles. Contrasting similar sets of characters in times of sectarian violence and what the newspapers lauded as peace, Devlin and Reid resituate The Troubles from the streets to the mind, suggesting that official declarations of peace are in large part the fiction of the entitled. Greta and Sandra suffer from intrusive thoughts and presences, indicating that the Good Friday Accords did little to free women like Donna from feeling as though their minds were not their own, even after the paramilitaries had been disarmed and the British soldiers sent back to England.

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25 In the introduction to *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*, Melissa Sihra describes the aisling as “an allegorical form that became especially popular among Irish poets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Gaelic word means ‘vision’ or ‘dream image’ and evokes a beautiful young woman as metaphor of Ireland.” Yeats and Gregory’s famous Irish nationalist play *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* can also be seen as a reworking of the aisling in which the spirit of Ireland takes the form of a wandering hag who calls a young man away from his bride in order to defend his country (Sihra 5).
Feminine Madness and the Troubles

“These dual images of female insanity—madness as one of the wrongs of woman; madness as the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality—suggest the two ways that the relationship between women and madness has been perceived. In the most obvious sense, madness is a female malady because it is experienced by more women than men,” Elaine Showalter writes in *The Female Malady*, offering schizophrenia and post traumatic stress disorder as examples of cultural shorthand used in twentieth century art to signal fractured, feminized society (3). Showalter especially emphasizes the close ties between feminine madness and post traumatic stress disorder, pointing to the coining of the term “shell shock” as doctors’ way of masculinizing the prevalence of “war neurosis” among British Great War veterans that closely paralleled symptoms of hysteria for which doctors had been treating women centuries earlier (170). “When all signs of physical fear were judged as weakness and where alternatives to combat—pacificism, conscientious objection, desertion, even suicide—were viewed as unmanly, men were silenced and immobilized and forced, like women, to express their conflicts through the body,” Showalter writes, arguing for a view of trauma as something rooted not only in violence, but in a society with rigidly prescribed gender roles as well (171).

Certainly, the suffering of Donna and Sandra, who live through much violence to which they are expected to react in specific, womanly ways, makes sense on a realist level. But *Ourselves Alone, Clowns*, and *After Easter* gesture toward a larger
symbolic violence done to colonized Ireland, war torn Belfast, and stiflingly patriarchal working class neighborhoods. Greta is not directly impacted by the Troubles in the same way Donna and Sandra are, but all three women have the same kind of fracturing violence visited upon their psyches.

**Traps of Loyalty in *Ourselves Alone***

Writing of American black communities in 1985, Beth Richie argues that when public authorities cannot be trusted, women in minority communities fall into a “trap of loyalty” that demands they “go to great lengths to show solidarity with men, even when it means denying their pain and compromising their safety” (36-7). After the era of both the Stop Snitchin’ campaign and Marissa Alexander’s conviction, Richie revisits and divides the “trap of loyalty” into three elements:

1. the obligation that Black women feel to buffer their families from the impact of racism in the public sphere; (2) the pressure to live up to the expectation that they, as Black women, will be able to withstand abuse and mistreatment more than other members of their households; and (3) an acceptance of the community rhetoric that argues that Black women are in a more privileged position than are African American men (including those who abuse them) (36).

This concept of the “trap of loyalty” is a useful frame of reference for analyzing *Ourselves Alone*, which focuses on a West Belfast community that had only recently organized a Catholic Civil Rights movement parallel to that of black Americans in the 1960s, were similarly targeted by police violence, and held a similar disadvantaged position within British socioeconomic hierarchies. The sisters’ aunt Cora serves as a
haunting reminder of the exact extent to which women are expected to loyally
sacrifice for the good of West Belfast, the republican cause, and the betterment of
Catholic men. Cora, Frieda explains, “is blind and deaf and dumb and she has no
hands, and she’s been like that since she was eighteen,” when Cora was injured
“storing ammunition for her wee brother Malachy—my father, God love him—who
was in the IRA even then” (29).26 “Unfortunately it was in poor condition, technically
what you would call weeping. So when she pulled up the floorboards in her
bedroom—whoosh! It took the skin off her face. Her hair’s never really grown
properly since and look—no hands!” Frieda tells a new IRA recruit, adding bitterly
that their community “stick[s Cora] out at the front of the parades every so often to
show the women of Ireland what their patriotic duty should be” (30). The wages of
women’s loyalty, Frieda indicates, will result in unpaid servitude to their father and his
friends at best, though these men would also be proud to see each of the three sisters
deprived of her senses and rendered silent for the good of a united Ireland.

*Ourselves Alone* later explores the complex network of loyalties by which
Malachy expects his paramilitary splinter organization as well as his daughters to
faithfully abide. Witnessing Frieda’s conversation with John McDermot, a member of
the Workers Party, Malachy physically pulls Frieda away, pushes her across a room,

26 Cora greatly resembles a real figure, the aunt of the famous IRA sisters Marian and Dolours Price.
“Bridie Dolan, who lived with the [Price] family, had been horribly disfigured at twenty-seven, after
accidentally dropping a cache of gelignite in an I.R.A. explosives dump. The blast blew off both of her
hands, and permanently blinded her” Patrick Radden Keefe writes for The New Yorker. Suggesting that
the Price sisters viewed Bridie similarly to the way the men of *Ourselves Alone* viewed Cora, Keefe
records, “‘It was never a case of ‘Poor Bridie,’ Dolours’s younger sister Marian told the journalist
Suzanne Breen, in 2004. ‘We were just proud of her sacrifice. She came home from hospital to a wee
house with an outside toilet, no social worker, no disability allowance, and no counselling. She just got
on with it’” (Keefe).
strikes her on the back of the head, and attempts to punch her in the stomach. Accusing her of undermining his authority, Malachy vows that he will cast Frieda out before he will allow her to fraternize “with the people who condemned Bobby Sands,” (39). Fleeing the scene, Frieda suggests to John that her brother might kill her when he is released from prison. Just as stories of Geraldine Sands’ victimhood incite rage rather than support from Bobby Sands’ republican followers, Malachy’s violence toward Frieda will provoke only echoed and escalated violence toward her, because women’s disloyalty is seen as more threatening than abusive men in this community. Unable to rely on police or social services, because, as Frieda tells the IRA recruit earlier “what the Brits have done to my family would make you weep,” Frieda is forced to cast her lot with John McDermot (32). John McDermot, however, manipulates and abuses Frieda as well, demonstrating the vulnerability of minority women should they choose to transgress the obligations of the trap of loyalty.

Donna, *Ourselves Alone* implies in several scenes, experiences violence at the hands of both her lover, Liam, as well as the authorities from whom she is protecting him. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Donna experiences symptoms resembling either post-traumatic stress disorder or schizophrenia, seeing visions of the devil and suffering from anxiety-induced asthma attacks. In these visions, the devil clearly stands in for Donna’s first husband or Liam, haunting her in particularly intimate ways:

The devil’s back. He was lying with his head on my pillow this morning. [...] I didn’t really get over my asthma attacks until my husband was interned. And I haven’t seen the devil since. (*Pause.*) Until this morning, Liam bent over and
kissed me goodbye as he was leaving. The trouble was he blocked my mouth and I couldn’t breathe through my nose so I kept having to break away from him. When he’d gone, I closed my eyes and tried to get some sleep before the child woke. That was when I heard the door open. I thought Liam had come back so I opened my eyes, and there he was, the devil. If he had any hair at all it was red. He climbed on top of the bed and put his head on the pillow next to me. (53)

These visits, which had stopped for the duration of Liam’s internment in Long Kesh, recur as soon as Liam is physically present within Donna’s house to penalize Donna for any perceived failings or moments of faithlessness. The particular scene quoted here takes place just before a major fight between Donna and Liam, in which Liam violently accuses Donna of not loving him enough, and then wants to have sex immediately. When Donna, frightened by Liam’s mercurial transition, rebuffs his advances, Liam immediately leaves to fool around with a barmaid at the club, demonstrating an emotionally abusive and manipulative double standard at the center of their relationship.

Donna is the only woman of Oursevles Alone to admit to symptoms of mental illness, but she is also the sister (in-law) who speaks the least, the sister who never appears outside her own home, and the sister defined entirely by her relationship to the men in her life. These four points are not coincidental, though an impression of how an “armed patriarchy” and “trap of loyalty” influence Donna’s state of mind must be inferred from Frieda and Josie’s observations of the sisters’ family and community.
Like Cora, Donna does not openly discuss the violence she has suffered, but her mind reacts with symptoms of illness from the trap of loyalty just as Cora’s body bears its scars and disfigurement.

**Escape, Clowns, and the 1994 Ceasefire**

Set on the eve of the Provisional Irish Republican Army’s ceasefire in August 1994, Reid’s play *Clowns* reconvenes three of the four teenagers of *Joyriders* at the place where their friend Maureen was shot by police, a location Arthur has since turned into a fancy restaurant in an area that has been modernized and gentrified. Sandra, who has been working as a comedian in England through the intermittent years, returns to help Arthur and Tommy celebrate the business’s grand opening. Although all three bear the effects of growing up very poor, Catholic, and delinquent in the Troubles, *Clowns* focuses on Sandra’s near psychological breakdown. By the time Sandra arrives in Belfast, she feels the presence of her dead friend so strongly that at times she seems if not possessed by Maureen’s ghost, at least much more preoccupied with the world of the dead than the living, explaining:

> It started with dreams. Awful dreams. I left Belfast to make them stop. And they did, for a while… a long while… out of sight, out of mind… I was doing all right. Never gave that day a second thought. Over and done with… all in the past… out of sight, out of mind… Only the dreams came back. Not when I was sleeping… when I was awake. In broad daylight when I was on a bus or in a shop and suddenly I could see it… Maureen running towards the car… the look on her face… she held out her hands… I lifted her up… the blood wouldn’t
stop… over her, over me […] It began to happen more and more. I was afraid to go out. Scared to death I’d end up in a loony-bin, locked away with the blood and the dreams for the rest of my life. An then I found a way to make it stop. I stopped looking at Maureen, I stopped looking at the blood. I looked around the street, around the room… made myself remember the edges… Stupid details […] The more I filled my head with all the daft edges… the less I could remember her lying in the middle of it all… I couldn’t see the blood any more… until tonight. I should never have come back. (Reid 336)

Sandra describes these visions of Maureen, however, as both malady and coping mechanism, adding a depth to their friendship only hinted at in Joyriders. “I missed her,” Sandra says,

“I missed her just bein’ around.. talkin’ daft… makin’ daydreams. I was always putting her down, making fun of her. She was stupid and romantic, and sometimes she got on my nerves that much, all I wanted was for her to go away and give my head peace. And then she did go away, and it was like there was only half of me left. I started to imagine her as she might be if she hadn’t… I began to see her… It was only glimpses at first… out of the corner of my eye. She’d be getting on a bus, or crossing a road… or I’d look in the mirror and for a second I’d see her face instead of mine… It wasn’t scary, like the dreams. It was nice. She looked happy. I was happy (337).
In language coded as almost erotic in places, Sandra finally talks about her sadness, loneliness, and deep love for Maureen to her friends, trying to parse out the characteristics that genuinely belong to her, and the mannerisms and thoughts which belong to Maureen.\(^{27}\) Although England functions as a site of sanctuary to which women must flee to become fully autonomous in *Tea in a China Cup, The Belle of Belfast City,* and *Ourselves Alone,* Sandra’s exodus has only made her more reliant on the illusion of companionship within her own mind, more focused on the Troubles in Belfast. Like Beth’s in *Tea in a China Cup,* Sandra’s head is full of other people’s memories, memories so fully fleshed and vivid that they distract her from her own reality.

Whereas Arthur and Tommy are frightened and confused, and Maureen’s younger brother, Johnny, is mocking of Sandra’s condition, Arthur’s mother Molly understands and affirms Sandra’s experiences. “You’re not crazy. You were caught in a war,” Molly reassures Sandra, “There’s a fancy name these days for what happened to you. In my day, it was called shellshock. You carried your best friend in from a battlefield” (337). Advising Sandra not to “lock [the memories] away no more,” Molly seems to offer Sandra a way out of her developmental paralysis. “You can’t go on all your life bein’ sixteen and mad with shock and grief and anger,” Molly insists, arguing for a kind of ceasefire within Sandra’s mind (337). By drawing attention to Sandra’s suffering that only increases in magnitude with distance and time from the initial event

\(^{27}\) Johnny, Maureen’s insufferable hoodlum of a younger brother, mocks the depth of emotion with which Sandra remembers Maureen, cruelly asking, “Used to feel each other up in the entry at the back of the YTP, did yous?” But Sandra can in many ways be read as queer, mourning the death of the love interest whose body she cradled in death (Reid 333).
of her friend’s murder, *Clowns* draws attention to the outsized effect of police brutality and sectarian violence on children who grew up during the Troubles.\(^{28}\) Begging a broadening of the geographic scope and extension of the chronological timeline of the Troubles, Sandra’s symptoms of mental illness speak for thousands of secondary victims of the Troubles whose narratives are left out of official histories.

*After Easter, Peacetime, & the Irish Gothics*

“In England they lock her up if she’s mad but let her go if she’s political. In Ireland they lock her up if she’s political and let her go if she’s mad,” Helen says of Greta in Devlin’s *After Easter*, neatly summarizing *After Easter*’s commentary on the discrepancy between English and Irish views of what makes a woman worthy of imprisonment.\(^{29}\) Speaking of dreams and visions, Devlin herself testifies to the importance of irrational thoughts “because they are so totally original” (Chambers et al 112). “If you have grown up with that sense of watching your tongue in any situation to avoid certain difficulties, if you feel under public surveillance and you want to keep some space where nobody knows what you are thinking and where you are not being scrutinized for your opinions,” Devlin continues, describing a set of conditions definitely applicable to Greta’s upbringing and monitoring by doctors and

\(^{28}\) In March 2015, Ulster University published a study that estimated 30% of the population of Northern Ireland suffered from mental health issues, and half of these cases were linked to the Troubles in some way (BBC News: Northern Ireland).

\(^{29}\) Collapsing the distance between the vulnerability of the madwoman and the woman activist, Margaretta D’Arcy testified to the extent of control the English state enabled by the security rationale of Northern Ireland had over her at the time of her arrest in 1979. Anxiously waiting to see whether the state will classify her as a prison-bound political liability, D’Arcy hopes that the male British authorities in charge of her case do not pronounce her psychologically disturbed: “They had complete power. If I were put into a mental hospital, they would give me ECT; of that I was sure.” (D’Arcy 17).
family, “then the area that would be prolific in your mind is going to be dreams” (112). Scrutinized by doctors in London and police in Belfast, Greta’s visions become more radical and complex, compelling her to give communion at the bus station and hold a conversation with her father’s corpse.

Greta’s illness, rooted though it might be in a very real sense of cultural schism, discontent, and post-partum depression, and resulting in her institutionalization, gives Greta’s mind a kind of radical freedom. Like Donna, Greta receives the last monologue of the play, but whereas Donna can only gesture at the possibility of past moments, Greta closes *After Easter* with a note of profound hope. “I got on the stag’s back and flew with it to the top of the world,” Greta tells the baby she rocks *(Devlin *After Easter* 75). “And he took me to the place where the rivers come from, where you come from… and he took me to the place where the rivers come from, where you come from… and this is my own story” (75). Greta’s mind, affected though she might be by the Troubles and her exile in London, is a place of profound creativity, and her story is her own in a way that sets her apart from both Reid and Devlin’s other characters.

*After Easter*, in many ways, asks what Belfast’s Catholic women are meant to do after the Good Friday Accords, when the days of their oppression and the potential to be caught in the crossfire of the Troubles has supposedly ended. This idea that Belfast is at peace is, of course, belied by the incident in which Greta’s brother is nearly shot by policemen, the shelling happening near the Flynn household the night after her father’s death, the assassinations happening near the hospital and just as
importantly, the way Belfast’s Catholics view themselves as survivors—“We have the faith of the killers and the guilt of the spared,” as Greta puts it (56).

In one scene, the Flynn women remind Manus, the only son, just how vulnerable Belfast’s peace and their lives are after Manus’s encounter with the soldiers who threaten him and call him anti-Irish names.

**Helen:** That officer just gave us three possible reasons for shooting you. You defied a road block; you might have been armed; it might have been an ambush. The sort of thing you read about in the newspapers all the time. No one would have batted an eyelid in England.

**Manus:** You’re hysterical!

**Greta:** We were in a backyard, Manus— they could have opened fire and asked questions afterwards.

**Aoife:** And no one would have known our story.

**Rose:** When you’re dead it doesn’t matter.

**Greta:** Because we wouldn’t be alive to tell it. Do you understand, Manus, all we have to do is stay alive and tell the truth? (Devlin *After Easter* 53).

Against this landscape of political terror during official peace, *After Easter* gestures toward the possibility of the future, but reads in other places like a Gothic tale in which the heroine is always threatened with imprisonment, male violence, and dread heralded by symbols of the occult.

Tracing the tropes of Gothic literature, Morin and Gillespie generalize that “A ‘gothic’ text combines, among other things, supernatural figures and events with
medieval Catholic Continental settings, an interest in the Burkean sublime, and a beleaguered heroine seeking release from the imprisonment—physical and otherwise—of a depraved and tyrannical male family member” (Morin 3). With its heroine running back to Catholic Belfast from her unfaithful Protestant husband and country who would like her institutionalized, Greta’s constant visions of supernatural beings and cinematic screams of horror, and the coding of even very political events with Catholic iconography, *After Easter* can read like a late twentieth century reworking of the Gothic text, an effort to “register atrocity,” as Morin and Gillespie argue gothic literature always functions, in Belfast through poetic language (2).

The Jacobin gothic, as Niall Gillespie characterizes it, has a particular kind of resonance with *After Easter*’s Northern Ireland. “[T]he typical narrative is one where the domestic sphere is destroyed by government forces, the victim’s accumulated capital and means of production are damaged, and the protagonist is forced into the public sphere— he or she is politicized,” Gillespie writes, description that could be applied easily to families affected by the Troubles, especially Catholic families facing violence from British soldiers mobilized into an occupying, supposedly peace keeping force throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s (Morin 63). “Jacobin gothic was not an attempt at fabulist fiction— it sought to relate the actual. The horror it described was not of the imaginative variety; it was what the Jacobins perceived Ireland to be at that moment” Gillespie writes (63).30 This description seems applicable to *After Easter* as

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30 Gillespie expands on exactly what history occasioned the production of Jacobin gothicism, writing with which the English colonial government put down the Irish Jacobin rebellious stirrings. “In essence, a severe de facto martial law was applied to Ireland. The methods to pacify the country were particularly brutal, even by the standards then prevailing in war-torn Europe. Collective punishment
well—supernatural visitations occur within the realm of the real, as manifestations of Greta’s fractured consciousness or group visions provoked by stress—Helen admits to Greta that in her apartment, she sees “[w]ings and eyes of light [falling] through the rooms. Swirling and falling and gathering, passing through the roof and walls,” but she knows that this vision does not come from the apartment itself (Devlin *After Easter* 74). “[T]he place is inside me. I carry it wherever I go. And so do you,” Helen firmly tells Greta, acknowledging the part of themselves that is “magical” in its freedom from the awful realities of Northern Ireland in which they were raised (74).

was the norm (General Lake opined ‘nothing but terror will keep them in order’), and the civilian population was indiscriminately targeted, with little attention paid to guilt or innocence. With habeas corpus suspended and the magistracy indemnified, Ireland’s judicial protections (never particularly strong) were obliterated. Central to Dublin Castle’s policy of coercion were five groupings: the regular standing army; a mercenary force drawn from continental Europe; and three indigenous bodies, the yeomanry (effectively the propertied in arms), the militia, and the Orange Order (an organization founded on the principles of supposed racial and sectarian supremacy and possessing, by early 1798, the tacit support and financial sponsorship of government). These entities, under full or partial state control, were increasingly used to disarm and harass the popular oppositional forces (the Jacobins and advanced Whigs). The disarming was savage […] The most common methods used, as contemporary loyalist sources inform us, were picketing (where the sufferer was forced to stand barefoot upon a sharp object), triangling (the whipping of a bound man), pitch capping (the pouring of a dome of burning tar onto the head, which, when cooled, was removed, tearing off the hair and scalp), roasting (the burning of flesh), pricking (non-fatal bayoneting), the salting of raw wounds, rape, gang rape, extrajudicial execution, half-hanging, hanging, digital mutilation, the cropping of ears, and what we now term waterboarding. […] This extensive violence turned the Irish landscape into a gothic landscape, and it was as a gothic landscape that it was perceived by both Irish Jacobins and advanced Irish Whigs” (Morin 59).
Chapter Five

Closing Remarks

“The history, or herstory of Irish women is rather like that of the Irish language—much talked about but little heard,” Brendan Kennelly quips in the anthology *Ireland’s Women: Writings Past and Present*, adding a more serious note that Irish women writers are “still victims of men’s language—the clever, unconscious tyrannies and urban manipulations effectively implanted in its uses” and are only recently beginning to undo the damage of centuries of erasure by sexist literary landscapes by finding a way to write through their own mothers rather than into the trap of the overdetermined Mother Ireland (Donovan et al xx). Kennelly edits his section of *Ireland’s Women* with evident appreciation for herstories written “with passion and conviction from [women’s] own perspective, jolting many Irish men into recognition that the world and everything in it, including its languages, do not belong solely to them (xxi). This “jolting” is especially necessary for women who draw their subject matter from the Troubles, for Troubles literature is a genre in which the still male-dominated, male-centric Literati immediately cast writing as canonized Historical Literature or what Eve Patten dubs “the sprawl of Troubles trash,” forgotten with the publication of the next dime novel incorporating an IRA subplot (Patten 129). Although she is writing of fiction, rather than drama, Patten’s logic for separating worthwhile literature from Troubles trash makes larger statements about what kinds of Troubles stories are valued.
Identifying Robert McLiam Wilson as a charismatic, talented Northern Irish writer, Patten draws attention to Wilson’s authorial style of detachment in his 1989 *Ripley Bogle*, the care he takes to distance the novel, set in Belfast and London and following the protagonist from the 1980s back to the 1960s, from Wilson’s obvious inheritance of Troubles subject matter. Patten praises *Ripley Bogle*’s nonlinear structure, Wilson’s farcical “send-up of the love-across-the-barricades tale” and other Troubles tropes, by which I presume Patten means the relationship between the Catholic (eponymous character) Ripley, and the Protestant Deirdre, which culminates in Ripley performing a home abortion on Deirdre with a paintbrush, attempting to initiate sex immediately after what is obviously a traumatizing experience for her, and then very soon escaping to study at Cambridge (Patten 137).

Although Ripley is a complicated, unreliable narrator who very rarely describes another human with any degree of respect, the way he interacts with and discusses women is particularly callous. Deirdre commits suicide, Ripley’s young neighbor impales her vagina on a fence, Ripley’s mother is described as a grotesque and abusive sex worker, a neighborhood woman is tarred and feathered as an excuse for Ripley’s otherwise unredeemed stepfather to demonstrate humanity, and contemptible series of Cambridge women with whom Ripley sleeps are both indistinguishable from one another and disposable. What does Patten imply by identifying a novel like *Ripley Bogle*, inundated with flat women characters who exist only as peripheral sufferers of men’s casual cruelty or catalysts for a male protagonist’s journey, as Troubles Literature at its apex? How might a Literati,
showering *Ripley Bogle* with the 1989 Rooney and Hughes Prizes, the 1990 Betty Trask and Irish Book Awards, and two separate adaptations into stage plays, evaluate the realist, woman-centered theater of Devlin and Reid, which was being produced (at least as texts, if not as stage productions) at the same time?

In testimony to the compelling nature of Reid and Devlin’s drama, and due in large part to the timely rise of Irish literary feminism, both playwrights have evaded the damning label “Troubles trash” in a literary scene which favored witty misogyny and flippant ahistoricism for Troubles canon fodder. The writing of herstories is always a radical act, and the obstacles Reid and Devlin’s Belfast drama overcame for representation on the stages and in the written record of Northern Irish history are troubling, to say the least. Certainly, Devlin and Reid have earned their place among Lady Gregory, Alice Milligan, Marie Jones, Marina Carr, and others in a tradition of Irish women’s theatre still developing its own languages and perspectives, writing out of tyrannies obvious and subtle. But Devlin and Reid are especially important for their work’s potential to jar and reclaim, seizing power from patriarchal processes of meaning-making.

Without ever losing sight of their characters’ humanity, dignity, and personal pain, both Devlin and Reid write drama which presents new sets of herstories, in which women may evaluate communities and ideologies on the premise that women’s needs are central, not ancillary, to political movements. Devlin’s Frieda can pull Bobby Sands from his pedestal and Reid’s Allison can laugh bitterly at the idea of internment doing anything but inconveniencing and endangering women, a
reclamation not only of the power to record history, but to interpret it. Reid’s Sandra and Devlin’s Greta are suddenly possessed with the power to invoke a temporality of trauma, time organized around the idea that political ceasefires are only as useful as the pain they discontinue. There is a kind of irreducible destabilizing energy at work in the Belfast plays of Devlin and Reid, a bearing of witness to poor women’s suffering, and a promise to rectify wrongs done through narrative moments of possibility, moments where characters’ prescribed roles open instead of closing.

“After Easter we came to the place,” begins Greta’s final monologue to the infant in her arms in After Easter, a play which begins with a psychiatrist preventing Greta from mothering her children and defining her own reality, insisting patronizingly that “a bus is a very substantial thing,” evidence of Greta’s unfitness no matter how she tries to explain that if she would have “sat down in the road with twenty people,” she would have been arrested. A mere difference in numbers, Greta tells the doctor, can evoke new possibilities even in so stable a category as the bus’s solidity (Devlin After Easter 75, 3). “The difference between insanity and politics is only a matter of numbers,” she surmises, a conclusion substantiated many times by both Devlin and Reid’s outrageous descriptions of Protestant units dragging their orange unionist sashes to WWII, Jack’s opinions toward Belle being considered sane and political because he is not the only racist in the city, and the burning of the Walsh house becoming imbued with political meaning rather than the act of people taken leave of their rationality (3). A mere question of numbers transforms a bus from solid to nonexistent, and a woman’s body from dead to alive. Positioned as a seanchaí with,
as Devlin’s stage directions instruct, “the traditional empty chair” placed nearby, Greta rocks a baby, perhaps the baby she worried was no longer hers in the beginning of *After Easter* (another moment of possibility), and tells the infant about how she saw a mysterious, self-healing stag, on whose back she flew “to the top of the world” (75). But the miraculous part are the last words, foreshadowed by her staging, “and this is my own story” (75). After the Easter Rebellion has declared parts of Ireland free and parts British, and after the Good Friday Agreement has set some Irish freer and pronounced others dead, *After Easter* shows only a woman (rocking a child who may be imaginary, in a role that may be Mother Ireland, or could be nothing like motherhood at all), speaking and knowing what it means to own their stories. The plays of Devlin and Reid are necessarily unsettling, speaking gendered histories into being, and offering new ways to perform and understand both womanhood and the Troubles.
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