A Woman's Brood: Confronting Disparate Memories of 1916 in Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*

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Abstract

In 1926, Sean O'Casey's play *The Plough and the Stars* was staged at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Set during Ireland's 1916 Rising, O'Casey's play interpreted history from the perspective of residents living in a penurious Dublin tenement building and focused in particular on the female experience of the Rising. Antithetical to the lives of revolutionary women in his audience, the production presented a controversial cast of women who challenged nationalist narratives of female support for the Rising. The play, which complicated the official, nationalistic narrative by emphasizing the history of non-partisan communities, was perceived by republican women as a neglectful affront to their lived experiences and failed to confirm their collective memory of the Rising as a nationalist triumph. Female activists led by Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington rioted in the theatre, protesting against what to them was an inauthentic portrayal of Irish women. Focusing on post-riot newspaper correspondences between O'Casey and Sheehy-Skeffington, this article examines the emergence of *The Plough and the Stars* as a vehicle of memory. Concentrating on 1916 as a lieux de memoire, the article argues that O'Casey's play subverted the nationalist, feminist rhetoric of the Easter Rising and provoked conflict between different lived experiences and historical interpretations of 1916. As the play sparked vigorous disputes over the representation of female participation in the 1916 Rising, *The Plough and the Stars* provides unique insight into the theatre's ability to influence the national psyche. By reckoning with notions of authenticity, the article also illuminates the Abbey Theatre as a locus of Irish identity formation.

On 8 February 1926 a full audience awaited the debut of playwright Sean O'Casey's new work *The Plough and the Stars* in Ireland's Abbey Theatre Playhouse. The third in a series of three

plays collectively known as 'The Dublin Trilogy', O'Casey's drama focused on the character of Nora Clitheroe, a young newlywed whose tenement home initially promises the potential for domestic happiness. Set against the events of Ireland's 1916 Rising, however, Nora's life is rapidly reduced to turmoil as her husband chooses to fight with the Irish Citizen Army against British troops. By examining historical events from the perspective of the residents of a penurious Dublin tenement building (and primarily focusing on the female experience), O'Casey illuminated a marginalized history, calling into question the established distinction between honourable heroism and unnecessary destruction. However, rather than unite his audience around a new analysis of the past, the play provoked anger, antagonism, and rioting from the audience. Taking offence from what was understood to be an inauthentic and inaccurate recreation of their lived experience of fighting in or losing family members to the 1916 Rising, riots were incited primarily by Irish republican women. These were led by Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, a nationalist fighter and member of Cumann na mBan, an Irish republican women's paramilitary organization.

O'Casey's gendered characterizations caused unease amongst audience members who, having lived through and participated in the Rising, took offense with the play's interpretation of their own recent history: as the men in the story become willing martyrs for Irish freedom, the play portrayed women as bystanders to violence who succumb to the destruction and loss of life taking place around them. Upon seeing the play, republican women expressed anger at its perceived inauthenticity and its failure to reproduce the women's experience of bravery and sacrifice throughout 1916.

By 11 February, the fourth night of the play's run, a lar-

gescale disruption from protestors in the audience occurred as twenty members of Cumann na mBan, led by Sheehy-Skeffington, rioted against the play (Lowery 30). The second act witnessed 'pandemonium which continued until the curtain fell', as protestors 'shouted, boohed, and sang'. This continued until Act III, when 'a dozen women made their way from the pit on either side of the theater and attempted to scramble on to the stage … and there ensued on stage a regular fight between the players and the invaders' ('Abbey Theatre Scene' 7). The play was stopped as protestors were removed from the stage and the Irish poet and playwright W.B. Yeats came forward to address the audience. 'Is this going to be a re-occurring celebration of Irish genius?', he asked spectators who replied with shouts of, 'Up the republic!' (qtd. in 'Abbey Theatre Scene' 7; see also Lowery 31). As protestors were escorted out of the theatre by police, Sheehy-Skeffington remarked, 'It is no wonder that you do not remember the men of Easter Week because none of you fought on either side' (qtd. in Lowery 31).

As Sheehy-Skeffington assigned ownership of the authentic memory of 1916 to active republican fighters, O'Casey's perceived misrepresentation was attributed to his lack of direct involvement, which was supposed to impede his ability to adequately recall and commemorate the Rising. Sheehy-Skeffington later clarified her belief in the Rising as 'the first time in history that men fighting for freedom had voluntarily included women' (qtd. in Ward), emphasizing that 1916 had been a pivotal instance of gender inclusion in the struggle for emancipation. As such, *The Plough and the Stars* and subsequent female-led riots illuminate the 1916 Rising as a locus of contention wherein individual recollections and the experiences of Dublin's marginalized and impoverished classes conflicted with historical nar-

ratives of courageous rebellion. Different ideas about what constituted authentic reality challenged the 1916 Rising's status as a seminal event foundational to Irish female republican identity. Further complicating notions of authenticity—as a prerogative that relies on public display and presentation for affirmation—, the riots emphasized a specific play's capacity to undermine communal identity. Through an exploration of the Abbey Theatre as a national venue and *The Plough and the Stars* as a vehicle of memory that subverted the accepted national rhetoric of 1916, the remainder of this article analyses the confrontational consequences of conflicting lived experiences and diverging understandings of what constitutes historical authenticity.

The Plough and the Stars and Conflicting Memories of the 1916 Rising

Although it was the first nationally endowed theatre in the English-speaking world, having received a state subsidy of 850 pounds in the newly emerged Irish Free State, the Abbey Theatre was not simply an organ of nationalist ideology. A quick glance at Irish history further clarifies the theatre's position. For example, despite the 1923 ceasefire agreement, groups who opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, such as Cumann na mBan, continued to meet at the theatre. At the same time, however, the nascent Free State government aimed to solidify its position in part through the development of new institutions like the Abbey Theatre (A. Clarke 210).

According to the philosopher Ernest Gellner, 'nationalism is not the awakening of nations', rather, '[nationalism] invents nations where they do not exist' (Gellner 169). As such, the successful invention of a nation is predicated on the government's ability to be identified with and assert its belonging to the

nation (A. Clarke 211). In my view, the theatre can be a potent tool for emergent governments, insofar as it offers a viable conduit for the transmission of the newly invented national identity to audiences. This perspective provides the point of departure from which this article presents its argument.

The Abbey Theatre's subsidy was granted by the Pro-Treaty government and integrated the national stage within the infrastructure of the Free State Administration. As the theatre's work was seen to be representative of the new nation the provocations put forth in O'Casey's play inspired nationalist anger. The protests targeted, in part, his use of female characters to illuminate the failure of the Rising and subsequent emancipation of Ireland to improve the living conditions of Dublin's working class. By portraying weak and dying female characters, O'Casey further disparaged the role of Free State women and called into question their ability to symbolically represent the nation. Thus, as the collective memory of revolutionary Irish women in 1926 foregrounded the courage of female protestors in 1916, O'Casey's derision of the Easter Rising posed a dual problem of identification: Female protestors felt that they could identify neither with the play's portrayal of 1916 nor with the new Republic's 1926 Pro-Treaty government. While, to many, 1916 constituted a shrine for authentic Irish nationalism, O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* called this into question by instead showing 1916 as 'old and unhappy far off days for the nation', its working classes, and, most specifically, working class women (Lowery 9).

The memory of a past event held by individuals and communities is created not only by the event itself; it is also constructed by successive generations as a shared form of cultural knowledge (Confino 1386). In addition, memory is variable and

situated within fluctuating social frameworks, molded by capricious political situations, and located within varying collective communities (Olick et al. 37). The irregular boundaries with which collective memory is marked preclude a universal recollection of the past and allow various groups to construct unique identities in relation to a commonly experienced event (Halbwachs 144). As such, in 1926, when confronted with O'Casey's recollection of the past as a vehicle of memory viewed on a national stage, audiences disagreed that his interpretation of historical events, especially those concerning women, was impartial and authentic. Instead, protestors felt that 1916, as a foundational site of Irish memory, was being disparaged on stage in a play that was seen as an affront to Irish female identity. Labelled by Pierre Nora as 'lieux de memoire', sites of memory are bound in the sense that memory is intentionally created and diffused; plays and other commemorative efforts are not naturally occurring phenomena, but imposed to maintain and substantiate specific sites of memory (Nora 12). By reinterpreting the 1916 Rising, O' Casey thus challenged the narrative of heroic martyrdom, offering a newly constructed lens through which to view the Irish past and reimagine national memory.

O'Casey's play complicated the celebratory ethos surrounding the memory of 1916 by emphasizing the histories of those who did not understand the Rising as necessary for the salvation of Ireland. Because it functioned as a vehicle of transmission for the memory of 1916, *The Plough and the Stars* created anxiety over the new historical interpretations it put forth. According to the French historian Ernest Renan, the stability of a nation, defined as 'a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future', depends on the possession

of rich legacies of memory' (82-83). In the case of *The Plough and the Stars*, the emergence of dissenting memories tested national solidarity as feelings of past sacrifices were called to question. In sum, Irish republicans saw the play as a challenge to Irish nationalism because it showed 'the meanness … the squalor … and the little vanities and jealousies of the Irish Citizen Army' and failed to include 'a single gleam of heroism' ('Right of Audiences' 5). However, for O'Casey himself, the play presented an authentic 'body of truth' ('The Plough and the Stars: A Reply to Critics' 6), which served the vital function of re-inserting neglected histories into the dominant nationalist narrative.

Reactions to the Controversy in *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Statesman*

On 9 February, following the play's opening night, a critic for *The Irish Times* described *The Plough and the Stars* as 'the high-water mark of public interest'. The same critic stated:

> O'Casey paints the people among whom he has lived until quite recently. While history is being made all around them in scenes of death and destruction, these people live their lives as they have lived them all along—drab and shiftless ('*The Plough and the Stars*: Mr. O'Casey's New Play' 5).

However, because the critic's praise that the play was 'more than realism; it is naturalism—a faithful reproduction of what happened, with the truth of the picture apparent to the dullest imagination', was anything but uncontroversial, O'Casey felt compelled to publish vigorous defenses of his script in *The Irish Times*. Responding to anger regarding 'the representation of fear in the eyes of the fighters', for example, O'Casey contended, 'if they knew no fear, then the fight of Easter Week was an easy

thing, and those who participated deserve to be forgotten in a day, rather than to be remembered forever ('*The Plough and the Stars*: A Reply to Critics' 6).' His recollection of the past, however, was still seen to belittle the bravery and morality of fighters, such that the nationalist fighter Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington felt provoked to publicise a nationalist call to action, which stated: 'The Ireland that remembers with tear dimmed eyes all that Easter Week stands for, will not, and cannot be silent in the face of such a challenge' ('Right of Audiences' 5).

In the weeks following the play's run, O'Casey, Sheehy-Skeffington, and Irish civilians concerned about the production sent letters to the editors of prominent newspapers, including *The Irish Times* and the *Irish Statesman*. Their opinions reveal varying social attitudes towards the play and its effect on the memory of the Easter Rising. A letter to *The Irish Times* noted about the riots that, '[f]rom start to finish the whole thing was a woman's row, made and carried on by women' ('Abbey Theatre Scene' 7), many of whom, like Sheehy-Skeffington were 'prominently identified with Republican demonstrations in the city' (Lowery 37). Rather than seeing reflections of themselves, their actions and memories, republican women saw in the play an offensive and faulty depiction of women in 1916. While the protestors had fought alongside male soldiers and witnessed the deaths of their husbands and sons during Easter Week, O'Casey's women censured the Rising and lamented the death and destruction taking place around them. O'Casey's response to criticism in *The Irish Times* addressed the anger towards the character of Nora Clitheroe, who, dissenters believed, failed to accurately represent Irish women. O'Casey asserted that: 'Nora not only voices the feeling of Ireland's women, but the women of the human race. The safety of her brood is the true morality

of every woman' ('The Plough and the Stars: A Reply to Critics' 6). Sheehy-Skeffington, however, disapproved of this sentiment, suggesting that 'when Mr. O'Casey proceeds to lecture us on "the true morality of every woman", he is somewhat out of his depth'. Sheehy-Skeffington contended that 'Nora Clitheroe is no more "typical of Irish womanhood" than her futile, sniveling husband is of Irish manhood' (qtd. in Lowery 80).

As public representations of Irish women became contested territory, multiple communities operating within a singular historical milieu fought for control over what constituted an authentic understanding of the past. However, in affirming that '[t]he women of Easter week, as we know them, are typified in the mother of Padraic Pearse, that valiant woman who gave both her sons for freedom', Sheehy-Skeffington's response, which here compared Irish women to the sacrificial Virgin Mary, failed to adequately address O'Casey's perceived misrepresentations (qtd. in Lowery 80). Rather than complicate or nuance the play's characterization of womanhood, the ascription of females to the biblical trope merely substituted one generalization with another. In response, O'Casey further transformed the stage into a site of contested memory and subversive reality. He asserted that he 'was not trying, and never would try, to write about heroes', because he could only write about the life and the people that he knew ('Rights of the Audiences' 5). His female characters, as women with critical faculty, scrutinize violence and complicate the idea that women tend to willingly send their men to die. Nora Clitheroe implores her husband to abstain from violence, pleading, 'I won't let you go! … I am your dearest comrade!' (O'Casey, 'The Plough and the Stars' 48). Though O'Casey's women do not embody revolutionary devotion, their bravery is revealed through their willingness to protect each other; as men

die for their country, women are summoned to build a new life from the ruins (Krause 99).

Published reactions to the play were not limited to O'Casey and Sheehy-Skeffington. While Sheehy-Skeffington claimed to speak for all Irish womanhood, other Irish women also contributed their opinions to the *Irish Statesman*. Brigid O'Higgins, a Dublin resident, contributed a letter to the editor entitled 'The Plough and the Stars: As a Woman Saw It', in which she remarked that O'Casey 'gives a critical, cynical, and impassioned picture of … the Dublin slums." O'Higgins went on to say that O'Casey, 'does not shrink from portraying tenement life as he knew it himself' and shared her impression that, 'the man is honestly striving for truth and is seldom far from it'. While O'Higgins shared the view that 'O'Casey has shaken our smugness; he has ruthlessly dispelled that convenient smokescreen which would shut out from our comfortable drawing rooms the awful reality of a side of Dublin life that men and women … are up against', she also lamented that 'for O'Casey … 1916 only meant war' and that the playwright had missed 'the soul of the insurrection—a simple people's sublime act of faith in themselves and their right to nationhood'. Closing her letter by affirming, 'those of us who are not fashioned in heroic mold are deeply indebted to the author of *The Plough and the Stars*, for he is the defender of the rights on the poor, weak, and unheroic' (qtd. Lowery 82), O'Higgins praised O'Casey for bringing neglected memories to prominence, thus situating herself starkly at odds with Sheehy-Skeffington.

Other letters also grappled with Sheehy-Skeffington's ideologically charged dissent. A woman named Kathleen O'Sullivan, in her letter to the editor, wrote in favour of 'the street girl and consumptive child', who 'may not have knit themselves into

the heart of the tragedy … but … were more real, more germane to the life O'Casey depicts for us than the tragedy that over shadows them' (qtd. in Lowery 86). Conversely, O'Sullivan also indicated fear that in the character of Rosie Redmond, 'O'Casey is in danger of giving us a stage slum dweller, not too far removed in conception from the stage Irishman' (qtd. in Lowery 87), offering criticism resonant of Sheehy-Skeffington's. Though Sheehy-Skeffington and republican female protestors maintained that their demonstration was on behalf of Irish womanhood whose collective, national identities had been insulted, letters like O'Higgins's and O'Sullivan's make clear other Irish women held more nuanced views which encapsulated a necessary criticism of O'Casey's failure to sympathize with republican ideology, but also understood the value of his revisionist approach to 1916.

Conclusion

A critic's judgement that *The Plough and the Stars* was 'a woman's play, a drama in which men must die and women must weep' clarifies the crux of the female-led riots incited by O'Casey's Play ('*The Plough and the Stars*: Mr. Sean O'Casey's New Play' 6). While O'Casey's fictional women succumbed in the face of the deaths of their revolutionary husbands, republican women had actually participated in the Rising and thus demonstrated their ability to respond to loss with greater fortitude (K. Clarke 192). The play, which aimed to recalibrate nationalist accounts of 1916 by inserting the history of non-partisan communities into official narrative, was perceived by republican women as a neglectful affront to their authentic experiences and collective memory of the Rising as a nationalist triumph. Collective memory, according to French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs, 're-

tains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping memory alive' (Halbwachs 143). Sheehy-Skeffington's scrutiny of the production as a 'leprous corpse,' incapable of bearing 'the body of truth' (qtd. in Lowery 77), illuminates the fervency with which republican women refused to accept O'Casey's depiction as a valid conception of the memory of Easter Week. The play became a target for the republican women's anger; like Sheehy-Skeffington's metaphorical leprous corpse, protestors understood O'Casey's work not only as a deceased body unable to communicate their recollections of the past, but as a locus of contagion threatening the vitality of their collective memory and identity.

In light of this, it may be asked how one may seek to reconcile competing memories that are mired in conflicting ideologies and incompatible understandings of what constitutes the authentic past. Perhaps the answer lies not in the play itself but in its greater resonances for the meaning of authenticity and what constitutes authentic Irish experience. Questions of authenticity arise when communities find themselves in struggle for recognition, seeking national or cultural affirmation and validation of their experiences and histories (Handler 3). In Ireland, the multitude of experiences formed in the aftermath of 1916's revolutionary week gave rise to competing claims for recognition and historical legitimacy. In 1926, the controversy surrounding Sean O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars not only provided a platform for competing realities and lived experience; it also but posed critical questions whose long-term implications continue to resonate: Who inherits authentic truth, and who has the right to interpret history?

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