

Sarah E. McKibben. *Endangered Masculinities in Irish Poetry: 1540–1780*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010. xii + 196 pp. \$89.95. ISBN: 978–1–906359–50–8.

Following the Elizabethan conquest of Ireland, the hereditary bards, elite outlivers of a way of life swept away by war and plantation, surveyed a civilization in ruins. The “full-sweet voice” (“guth láinbhinn”) of their immemorial culture seemed to have fallen silent. But Irish-language writers’ riposte to colonization was not a swansong but a poetry of electrifying power. Postcolonial critics who imagine that *The Faerie Queene* or the constellation of minor works produced by English settlers in Ireland can give access to the world of the colonized are initiated into that vibrant literary tradition by Sarah McKibben’s elegant and eye-opening scholarship. By combining critically sophisticated readings with lively translations of the originals, moreover, McKibben fills in the essential backstory to subsequent Irish writing in English.

McKibben joins a new wave of Irish-language scholars who are bringing Gaelic poetry into dialogue with Renaissance scholarship more widely. In this historicized, philologically nuanced, and well-paced study, she melds razor-sharp close readings with the insights of feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory, to capture the innovative, engaged, and self-consciously modernizing journey of Gaelic poetry from the Battle of Kinsale (1601) to the late eighteenth century. She frames her analysis within what she calls “the discourse of endangered masculinity.” Defeat threw the bardic celebration of heroic manhood — and the eroticized, homosocial relationship between lord and bard on which it rested — into crisis. But if colonial rhetoric figured conquest as sexual penetration, the “native literati working in their own vernacular traditions — at once European and distinctively Irish — challenged colonial authority with gendered rhetoric no less potent, if far less familiar to anglocentric literary history” (2). The force of this gendered discourse in policing the “seduction” (“mealladh”) of anglicization is perfectly illustrated by an early seventeenth-century poem, “A fhir ghlacas a ghalldacht,” “O man who follows English ways”: the effete youth who swaps his flowing locks for a close-cropped English haircut, and his Irish *triús* for breeches, also exchanges his Irish broadsword for a blunt little rapier wagging sodomitically at his backside.

Soon, however, “a gendered figure that drew at once upon medieval Irish literary tradition and the European inheritance of misogyny, newly burnished by the Counter-Reformation,” would supplant such strategically deployed homophobia

as a way of assuaging the emasculation of a Gaelic nobility rendered spectral by defeat. The personification of Ireland as a whore (“meidreach”) sleeping with the enemy and suckling her bastard litter displaced “unspeakable male shame and vulnerability” onto “that Magdalen, Ireland herself” (61, 64). But, as McKibben shows in a characteristically layered analysis, the genre of *aisling* also offered a way of reflecting on “the fecund hybridity, wayward desire, and questing errancy that would inform complex modes of literary, cultural, and political accommodation in the years to come” (68).

That complexity emerges powerfully from McKibben’s reflections on Aogán Ó Rathaille (1670–1729), a man who — if history had been kinder to his language — would be recognized as one of Europe’s great baroque poets. Ó Rathaille invented a new language for exploring the trauma of subjection and changed Irish poetry into “a repository of affect” (79). His alternatively rapturous and abject “Gile na Gile” defies translation, but McKibben’s dextrous reading captures the way its rococo excess and the physicality of its abstractions create “a paradoxical cross-gendered identification” where “politics becomes a resplendent cultural object” (79, 82).

As McKibben, always alert to cultural intersections, shows, the savagery of Ó Rathaille’s satires underlines his kinship with his contemporary, Jonathan Swift. Meanwhile, his mid-century successors, Mac Craith and Inglis, censured an accommodation with English that they themselves exemplified, through salacious macaronics where lower-class Irish-speaking males gave social-climbing, English-adopting females their violent, sexualized comeuppance. Rape, once the figure of conquest, becomes a fantasy prophylactic against women’s putative propensity to acculturate.

Rather than offering Irish poetry as a corrective to colonial representations, McKibben brings us deep into an autonomous, fluid, and densely textured poetic universe — where Eibhlín Ní Chonaill’s “Lament for Art O’Leary” both creates a space for female expression and legitimizes male control; where Brian Merriman’s “Midnight Court” burlesques and hybridizes a protean poetic tradition. Those who come to McKibben’s work to deepen their understanding of how poetry resists colonization or to discover the early modern origins of Irish writing in English will leave it moved and awed by a masterful work of historical restitution.

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