# Bedbound Beauty Queens: Negotiating Space and Gender in Contemporary Irish Drama

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**Abstract:**
As concepts of nation and national identity are more and more being questioned in the globalised and transcultural environment of contemporary Ireland, the creative and imaginative potential of drama and theatre takes up a crucial position. The performative quality of drama and its theatrical realisation on the stage allows the genre to constantly oscillate between the imagined spaces and places of the text and the real, social, cultural and political spaces and places of its production and reception. Thus, a critical assessment of how theatre and drama imagines and playfully manipulates what it means to be "male" and "female" in a society that has experienced such tremendous economic, social and cultural transformations in the last decade as Ireland can also productively contribute to the necessary discussions of Irish identity in the 21st century.

1 Both, conceptions of gender and of space have become prominent categories for critical analysis in almost all of the fields of the humanities and social sciences. From the political impetus of the feminist movements into the academic circles - first through Women's Studies and later broadened by Gender and Queer Studies - the analysis of the intricate and complex relationships between the sexes, be it in on the level of economic, social and political discourses or in literary texts and other forms of cultural production and expression has become one of the cornerstones of critical scholarship today.

2 Notions of space and place, too, have been lifted from the mere passiveness of the given fact as a priori areas where human beings simply happen to exist. Since the 1950s, scholars such as Erving Goffman, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said and others have time and again elucidated the fact that space and place are social and cultural products. Human beings - through interpersonal and intercultural contact, communication and miscommunication, battling over or supporting certain political, economic, cultural and social forces - actively contribute to the shaping and production of the very spaces and places they inhabit.

3 The ways and the extent to which we are able to partake in these processes, however, are dependent on the dynamics and relations of power. The fundamental question is: Who am I and how am I positioned in relation to the spaces and places, people and forces around me?

4 Drawing from Fredric Jameson's theory of "cognitive mapping",[1] Gerry Smyth starts

[1] The concept of "cognitive mapping" was first introduced by Jameson in his seminal essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984) and later expanded in "Cognitive Mapping" (1988). The concept is intended to enable individuals as well as groups to make better sense of themselves as subjects in the

his exploration of *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* (2001) with a sense that "early twenty-first century Ireland interacts with the imaginative or imaginary sense of a range of spaces that continue to be widely invoked throughout Irish culture" (19). The challenge, Smyth puts forward, would be:

> to produce cognitive maps which enable Irish people to locate themselves in relation to both their own local environments and to the series of increasingly larger networks of power which bear upon those environments. (19)

I argue that with Martin McDonagh and Enda Walsh we have two contemporary Irish playwrights who are attempting to do just that.

5 In my paper, I mainly focus on "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" (1996) and "bedbound" (2000). Although set in two entirely different locales, both plays have a number of striking similarities. Apart from a critical assessment of gender and traditional gender expectations,[2] they problematise violence, familial and generational conflicts between daughters and their mothers/fathers, placing the characters in inescapable spaces (the country cottage and the walled-in bed respectively), creatively mixing past and present. Both plays center on the question of personal identity and availability of choice that is evidently linked to questions of gender and space. What room is there to move, to break free from the prison of history, to be a 'new' or 'different' woman or man in a 'new' or 'different' country? Furthermore, both plays highlight the importance of a critical re-definition and re-positioning of contemporary Ireland, both urban and rural, and thereby contribute to more far reaching discussions of Irishness and Irish identity at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century.

6 One of the pioneers who has forcefully made a case for the inclusion of the category of space in the analysis of theatre, Una Chaudhuri, has argued that "[C]ontemporary theatre is above all a remapping of the possible terrain of subjectivity" (xv). This is not to claim that the contemporary Irish social world is necessarily full of grumpy old hags, disillusioned, bored and violent brutes or physically and psychologically damaged characters, but in its focalizing

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increasingly complex political, social and cultural spaces they inhabit in the postmodern world. With regard to the experience of postmodern city life, Jameson's concept suggests a "dialectic between the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality." (Jameson, "Mapping" 353). In other words and more generally, an individual's self understanding depends on a combination of his or her immediate corporeal experience in the life world as well as the imaginative invocation and reconstruction of all other aspects of this life world, even if they are not part of the subject's immediate corporeal experience.

[2] By "traditional gender expectations" I mean the roles and functions usually ascribed to woman and man in a patriarchal system of signification. Challenging these roles (the woman as childbearer and housekeeper taking a subordinate function to the man as head of the household and the family) is a particularly necessary endeavour within the Irish context where these roles and hierarchies and the conflicts evolving from this setup are far from being resolved.

and heightening capacity, the theatrical stage provides a plethora of opportunities to explore the fears and insecurities, hopes and dreams of a world where fluidity surpasses fixedness (both in a concrete spatial sense as well as on the more metaphorical level) and stability of meaning and definition seems like an unattainable fantasy. Chaudhuri also notes: "[E]very play takes place in a place and the varieties of platial experience allowed by the medium of the theatre - and recorded in dramatic texts - far surpass that of any other art form" (21).

7 Since his jump start with "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" nine years ago in Galway, much has been made of Martin McDonagh's dramatic output to date, while his personal antics and strategies of self-stylisation even more have been subject to the occasional sneer or chuckle. Compared to a theatrical pendant of The Pogues or Quentin Tarantino, classified as what Aleks Sierz has termed (for the British stage of the 1990s) as "[I]n-Yer Face Theatre" (2001), accused of raping the Irish literary tradition - all the way from Synge to Beckett - or indulging in "banter (usually meaningless or mundane) and violence" (Wallace 118) are just some of the labels that have been stuck on his plays.

8 Enda Walsh, probably most well known for his first major success "Disco Pigs" (1996) at first glance seems to be a dramatist very different from McDonagh. Most of his plays are set in contemporary urban Ireland (mostly Dublin and Cork) whereas McDonagh's oeuvre, until "The Pillowman" (2003) has largely nourished on the brutal idyll of the Western Irish countryside. Walsh's plots, characters and settings also often appear much bleaker and humorous elements, no matter how dark this humour might be, are hardly to be found in Walsh.

9 Both "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" and "bedbound" centre on complicated familial relationships of two characters - Maureen and Mag in "The Beauty Queen" and DAUGHTER and DAD in "bedbound" and questions of personal positioning and personal identity lie at the core of both conflicts. Of course, especially with regard to McDonagh, a lot more would need to be said about the various male characters, not only in "The Beauty Queen" but in the Leenane Trilogy in general. If one needed an example for the topic of "masculinity in crisis" in contemporary Irish theatre, the likes of Pato and Ray Dooley, Valene and Coleman Connor, Thomas Hanlon or Father Walsh/Welsh would be more than suitable objects of analysis. For the scope of this paper, however, I will focus on the central conflict in the two plays, namely that between DAUGHTER and DAD in "bedbound" and Maureen and Mag in "The Beauty Queen". What complicates these struggles is a continuous blurring of conceptual boundaries and a discrepancy between "reality" and "fiction" in that we can never be sure whether the stories and events that are narrated to us by the characters are "true" (as opposed to imagined).

Furthermore, both plays are set in spaces that one would at first thought not equate with struggle, conflict and violence.

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> I'd like to see Irish theatre embrace the profound change that has occurred: that we are barely a country anymore, never have been and never will be that most nineteenth century of dreams, a nation once again; that our identity is floating, not fixed. I could live a long and happy life without seeing another play set in a Connemara kitchen, or a country pub. (Hughes 13)

The Connemara kitchens that Declan Hughes wants to eternally dismiss as settings for Irish plays have little to do with the kitchen that forms the singular place of action in "The Beauty Queen." The kitchen here is a very unhomely place, virtually a battle field and a prison, an uncanny mixture of a seemingly idyllic past, brutal and claustrophobic present and uncertain future, with a disillusioned "mother" Ireland rocking in her chair, waiting for the news on TV (see illustrations 1& 2). In general the play suggests that if news have no immediate effect on oneself, as long as they do not disrupt everyday life and the already problematic relationship between Mag and Maureen, the outside world is allowed and welcomed to intrude in mediated form, even if it is only "Australian old shite" (BQ[3] 53). None of the characters, apart from Maureen, has any interest in "seeing Ireland," be it on TV or in unmediated form.


Fig. 1.

[3] BQ - "The Beauty Qeen of Leenane", bb - "bedbound"; numbers indicate pagination of the published playscripts.


Fig. 2.

11 Mag, however, always tries to make sure that her daughter has as little exposure to the outside world as possible and if Maureen would not need to go shopping once in a while, she would probably have no chance to break free from the claustrophobic environment of the house and the kitchen. The reasons for Mag's insistence that Maureen should not leave her and should not "be out gallivanting with fellas" (BQ 15) are more than dubious and never clarified. Even when Maureen gets to experience life outside the house and the possessive claws of her mother, there is never really a sense of freedom for her. Her sexual encounters with Pato after the party are unmasked as mere illusions. Later, when she finds out that Pato had written her a letter from London to ask her to come with him to Boston, a letter she never received because Mag burns it in her absence, she rushes off to the train station to catch Pato before he leaves. However, the reality of this story too is more than doubtful as Ray, Pato's brother, claims Pato had left by taxi rather than train and is going to marry another woman. Did Pato ever write this letter to Maureen? And if he did, what was its content and why did Mag burn it? As Werner Huber has argued, the question remains as to "whose story can we ultimately trust?" (568).

12 Maureen is a complex character, a middle-aged woman trapped in the prison of stories, unreliable realities, trying to make sense of a world that refuses to be made sense of -

a virgin and a vamp, independent and constrained to stay with her mother, strong and fragile, clear and confused all at the same time (see illustrations 3-6).

Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.

Fig. 5.

Fig. 6.

13 Regardless of her bitterness towards Mag and the fact that, according to Maureen Mag is just "oul and stupid" (BQ 6) and does not know what she is talking about, for a long time Maureen tries to understand her mother's intentions. When Pato has left the house after their supposed sexual encounter, promising to write to Maureen Mag says:

> Mag: He won't write at all. (Pause). And I did throw your oul dress in that dirty corner too!
>
> Pause. Maureen looks at her a moment, sad, despairing but not angry.
>
> Maureen: Why? Why? Why do you…? (BQ 33)

Her question however, is never answered. Instead Mag goes on complaining about her porridge having turned cold.

14 After Maureen confesses to Mag that she sometimes dreams about her mother's funeral, with a man standing next to her holding her waist and smelling of good aftershave, she says:

> Maureen: I suppose now you'll never be dying, you'll be hanging on forever just to spite me.
>
> Mag: I *will* be hanging on forever. (BQ 16-17)

Even killing her mother with an iron poker in the end does not provide ultimate freedom.

Moreover, talking to Ray after the funeral and reflecting on Ray's remark about the rainy weather, she says:

> Maureen: [I]t could have been last month we buried her, and she could have got the last of the sun, if it wasn't for the hundred bastarding inquests, proved nothing. (BQ 52)

This statement again proves that Maureen's feelings towards her mother are not entirely fuelled by hatred. She killed her, but at the same time wishes that there had been sunshine for her funeral.

15 Shortly before the end of the play, Maureen is sitting in Mag's rocking chair - in Ray's words "the exact fecking image of your mother, sitting there pegging orders and forgetting me name!" (BQ 60) As she is sitting in her mother's rocking chair and listens to the radio, an unspecified song by The Chieftains is slowly fading out and Delia Murphy's "The Spinning Wheel" (1939) is played to honour Mag's 71st birthday. Around the middle of the fourth verse, Maureen gets up from the chair, takes the suitcase and leaves the stage. Considering the lyrics of the song, this scene acquires a remarkable significance. The song tells of how a young woman escapes from her blind grandmother to meet her lover who is waiting outside. The two women had been spinning wool and singing traditional Irish songs - specifically mentioning "The Coolin," a song telling of a man who is looking for his beautiful fair haired girl - together with the grandmother always accusing her granddaughter of hitting the wrong notes.

16 As the young woman in the song is able to free herself of tradition, Maureen's exit at the end of the play could be read as a final act of liberation (even if we know from the remainder of the Leenane Trilogy that Maureen stays on). However, as the play suggests, this is only possible with an acute awareness of the multilayered "versions and reversions" (Wallace) of history. One production even made a direct reference to the importance of history for a self-understanding of the Irish today and the problem of the continuing prominence of images of an Ireland long gone (or one which never truly existed by integrating a giant reproduction of a typical John Hinde postcard into the set (see illustration 7).[4] The romantic image of a peaceful cottage set in the pastoral idyll of green fields conjures up a scenery which runs counter to the conflicts between Mag and Maureen and the eventual brutality of Maureen's murder of her mother. Moreover, the fact that the postcard does not try

[4] These postcards were produced in the 1950s and sold well into the 1980s and beyond. Images of country cottages, green fields and young red-haired and speckled boys and girls still dominate tourist brochures and advertisements of Ireland all over the world.

to be anything but a postcard underscores the strong discrepancy between "image" and "reality".

Fig. 7.

17 Enda Walsh's play "bedbound," although structurally very different from "The Beauty Queen," touches similar terrains. In "bedbound" we encounter a middle-aged DAD and his DAUGHTER together in a small bed which is completely enclosed by four walls. Whereas the claustrophobic and repressive atmosphere in "The Beauty Queen" is mainly evoked via language and character interaction, the stage design in "bedbound" crassly alludes to the fact that both characters are trapped: "There is a large box in the centre of the stage made of plaster board. Suddenly the wall facing the audience crashes to the ground" (bb 9; see illustrations 8 & 9).

18 Throughout the play, DAD and DAUGHTER perform scenes from the father's life from storeroom boy in a furniture shop to successful furniture salesman in Cork and Dublin with DAD playing himself and DAUGHTER complementing the scenes by playing those characters her father meets.

DAUGHTER: Ever think of getting a wife yourself?

DAD: A wife? And what the fuck would I be needing with a wife?

DAUGHTER: To do the cooking, boss.

DAD: And by fuck but Dan Dan was making some sense! Recalling a young quiet thing who clung to her Mam in the Bingo Hall, I make my moves. I spot her reading some romantic tacky book. Clear my throat to be heard above the bingo scribbling, my first words are, 'You should marry me, you know'.

DAUGHTER: Congratulations, boss!

DAD: Why thanks very much Dan Dan! I enrol her in an evening class entitled 'Create your own Dinner Parties' […]. Mister and misses me and her. Her done up like a porcelain doll, me like a life-sized action man!

[…]

Then I spy him […].

DAUGHTER: I'm a friend of Bernard's. Marcus Enright.

DAD: […] An ex-barrister, he tells me he's going to open a furniture shop in Dublin. How his two sons share his interest in

DAUGHTER: Quality furniture.

DAD: I fucking hate him. I want to open his face with the corkscrew I carry around. […] I vow to see his business fucked. I promise to gobble him up and shit him out. Fuck it, I need an ally though!

DAUGHTHER: *in her own voice* Ya need a son!

DAD: I go at the wife all doggy style. Grabbing her round arse in my prawn cocktail stained hands with the dinner party and no doubt Marcus fucking Enright in full swing down below. It's my first ever fuck. Never had the time, interest, want before until now […]. I jiggle about for all of two minutes before shooting my load. 'Never doubt the potency of my sperm, woman!' Nine months later and it's all push push pushing! 'Til out it drops! Not a son at all but a girl!'

DAUGHTER: Hello Dad!

DAD: Fuck! (bb 23-24)

DAD is ashamed of his daughter and his wife whom he only sees as the producer of his misfortunes (first the father wanted to have a son, but the mother gave birth to a girl and later the DAUGHTER fell into a ditch and contracted polio). Furthermore, he gradually loses ground in his business career after having to give up his furniture stores in Dublin (due to

competition pressures) as well as failing to be the first person to open three new shops in a day). Blaming one of his assistants for this particular failure, he brutally dispenses of him. He pursues his business interests brutally, and uses people as he pleases. All that counts for him is success and he will do anything to achieve it - not even shying away from homosexual intercourse with one of his potential business partners. He returns to Cork and begins to build walls inside his home, gradually enclosing his wife and daughter in the bed to hide them from himself and the outside world. The DAUGHTER spends all her time in the bed with her mother, being read to from a romantic novel about a young girl on a horse in a lush and pastoral landscape. His wife eventually dies in the bed leaving his daughter there alone (until he joins her shortly before the play begins). Trying to recover her own past, the daughter continuously urges her father to tell her about his life.

Fig. 8.

Fig. 9.

19 At the end of the play, the father's narrative arrives at the moment shortly before the play begins, when he finds his wife dead, carries her out of the house and afterwards joins his daughter in the bed. The bed just like the kitchen is at first glance not necessarily a space that evokes conflict and violence but might rather conjure up ideas of home, comfort and shelter. Furthermore, in a patriarchal system of signification both places would most likely be considered female rather than male spaces (like the pub, the factory, and the like). In the two plays in question, these traditionally gendered zones of comfort and stability become battlefields where conflicts between generations, between tradition and future possibilities are played out.

20 Like Maureen in "The Beauty Queen," the DAUGHTER in "bedbound" has been deprived of her own life and identity. Her memories of the outside world end at the moment she falls into the ditch and is subsequently placed into the bed. All she hears is the voice of her mother reading to her and the thumping noises from beyond the bedroom walls, but she does not know who they come from or what they mean.

> DAUGHTER And we stay awake…me and her. And I can't sleep so she talks and talks! Sometimes not making sense but sometimes making pictures with her words and words become my life as I try to fill the space, for what pictures do I really have but the four fucking walls that you've given me, you fucker! (bb 32)

She is also unknowing with regards to the reasons why she is hidden from the outside world. It is only through the ensuing "play," when DAD joins her in the bed, that she gradually realizes the course of events and the underlying reasons. Hers is not a prison of history trapped between traditional expectations and personal longings in a world dominated by images and simulations rather than a coherent sense of reality, like that of Maureen. As she is physically disabled, she does not fit in the world picture of her father, and neither does his wife. They have both become useless tools in the father's pursuit of fame and economic success. Threatened and ultimately beaten by the forces of a globalizing economy, the father fails too and voluntarily imprisons himself in the box he had built for his wife and daughter.

21 In "The Beauty Queen," Maureen finds herself trapped, locked up but at the same time strangely attached to her mother. Despite all the hatred and verbal as well as physical violence, the two women stay together and try to battle it out. The death of one and the possible escape to freedom of the other stands at the end. Reconciliation is not an option.

22 In "bedbound" physical violence is taken off the stage and placed into the realm of narration and the play-within-the play of the characters. DAD and DAUGHTER engage in brutal verbal exchanges. At various times, the DAUGHTER leaves her role as supplementary characters and addresses her father directly. The silent moments between the violent ranting

and those attempts at establishing a relationship beyond the mere connection as players are the most interesting ones as here, reality slowly creeps through the walls and forces the two characters to face up to each other as father and daughter. In the beginning, this results in panic and refusal:

> DAD I've got nothing to talk to you about.
>
> DAUGHTER We're talking now!
>
> DAD Yeah but about nothing!
>
> DAUGHTER It's filling the gaps, isn't it?!
>
> DAD It's making the gaps! If we didn't talk there would be no gaps! There'd be quiet! A great big field of quiet! That's what I want! (bb 14)

And later into the play:

> DAUGHTER What is it, boss?
>
> *DAD begins to panic a bit and covers himself with a blanket. The DAUGHTER is immediately nervous.*
>
> DAUGHTER Is that all we're doing then? Daddy? Dad? (bb 20)

For both the father and the daughter, the re-enactment of the events leading to their current state of affairs might be, in Clare Wallace's words termed a theatrical version of a "talking cure" (Wallace 119). Having confessed his crimes, the father eventually finds reconciliation with his daughter.

> DAD And this is me talking. This is really me talking now. And I don't have words for you. I don't have the right words for you love. I just want to sleep and get back to the silence but I can't.
>
> […]
>
> *Slowly the daughter leans to her DAD. She kisses him softly on the forehead. He then kisses her. They sit back and look at each other. She listens to the silence for a bit.*
>
> DAUGHTER I'm in the bed. The panic is gone and all that's left is ta start over. I get that tiredness turn to calm…and I give into sleep. I let go. Go. (bb 33-34)

Demands towards contemporary Irish drama to move away from its focus on language and to more performance-based approaches negate the performative potential of language, stage design as well as the expressive force of the mere physical presence of the actor or actress on stage and his or her use of language.

23 As most critics and scholars agree, it is impossible today to perform "Ireland" as one coherent whole, but rather only bits and pieces of a fragmented society. Cognitive mapping of

the subject self in all its facets and in relation to the immediacies of contemporary experience as well as the rich but at the same time dangerous archive of cultural history in a rapidly transformed society first and foremost require an acute awareness of this fragmentation. The theatrical problematisation of the conflicts between past and present, the highlighting of reality as being constructed and unreliable and the challenges of a social space that has rapidly changed might be a helpful contribution to overcome what Tim Robinson in a programme note for a production of "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" has termed "the Connemara in the skull"[5] and at the same time to come to grips with "the underbelly of the Celtic Tiger" (Llewellyn-Jones 6).

[5] www.connemara.net/words/tim-robinson/. This is both an interesting inversion of the title of another McDonagh play that is part of the Leenane Trilogy "A Skull in Connemara" (1997) as well as a cross-reference to Lucky's speech in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" (1953). The phrase sums up neatly the haunting presence of the past in Irish culture, a past, however, that should not be simply discarded, but further explored and creatively employed in mapping contemporary Irish cultural identity.

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