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“Deposited Elsewhere”: The Sexualized Female Body and the Modern Irish Landscape

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Abstract

Through an analysis of diaries, memoirs, and folklore narratives, this essay analyzes the containment of the female body in the modern Irish landscape. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which Irish communities both literally and through legendry controlled the sexualized female body from the 1850s to the 1920s. The bodies of sexually active women, pregnant and post-parturient women, and dead women who had committed sexual transgressions were fraught with meaning; dangerous and polluted, they were isolated from the rest of the community. The regulation of the female body within the landscape became a mechanism for harnessing troublesome women. By separating and containing the impure and sexual female body, nineteenth-century Irish communities established the modern gender hierarchies that would result in what James Smith has labeled an “architecture of containment”.

Keywords : sexualized female body, gender hierarchy, gender norms, Irish landscape.

Résumé

À travers une analyse de cahiers et journaux intimes, mémoires et récits populaires, cet article interroge la stratégie de contention dont le corps féminin fait l'objet dans le paysage irlandais moderne. Il s'intéresse plus particulièrement à la manière dont les communautés irlandaises, à la fois littéralement et par le biais des légendes, ont contrôlé la sexualité du corps féminin des années 1850 aux années 1920. Les corps des femmes sexuellement actives, enceintes, ou post partum, mais aussi les corps des mortes ayant commis des transgressions sexuelles, étaient chargés d'une signification de danger et d'impureté, et étaient isolés du reste de la communauté. L'inscription contrôlée du corps féminin dans le paysage devint un moyen de garder sous le joug les femmes posant problème. En isolant et en contraignant le corps féminin impur, les communautés irlandaises du dix-neuvième siècle établirent les hiérarchies sexuelles modernes qui ont débouché sur ce que James Smith appelle une « architecture de la contention » (« architecture of containment »).

Mots clés : corps féminin sexualisé, hiérarchie entre les sexes, normes de genre, paysage irlandais.

In November 1984 the Catholic parish of Tynagh, County Galway gathered for a unique ritual: the exhumation and reburial of a woman who had been dead for 150 years¹. Local tradition asserted that the woman, Áine, gave birth to three

1. *Connacht Tribune*, 9 November 1984; Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead: A Study of Irish Funerary Traditions*, Amsterdam, Editions Rodopi B.V., 1998, p. 23.

illegitimate children in the 1830s or 40s and then became gravely ill. Citing her sexual transgressions, Áine's parish priest would not help her or give her last rites. Áine soon died, cursing her priest to the very end. After Áine's death, her priest refused to have her buried in consecrated ground. Áine's neighbors then placed her remains in a "little... plot" outside of sacred land².

According to local tradition, over the years and then the decades following her death, the spirit of Áine haunted the Tynagh priests, who faced bad luck and met early, sometimes mysterious deaths. Many in the community interpreted these strange occurrences as Áine's revenge. Residents of Tynagh preserved the memory of Áine by telling stories of the "curse of Áine" and thus reminding each other of the importance of properly treating the body, even the deviant female body, after death. They also sealed the place of her burial in their collective memory. When the Galway community reburied Áine in sacred ground in November 1984, it attempted to put things right, thus restoring order to the Irish landscape.

The 1984 Galway reburial case brings together the themes of birth, death, women's bodies, and the sacred landscape, encouraging us to think about the ways in which they intersected in Ireland's past. While scholars have studied the importance of Ireland's land and spaces as sites of modern religious regeneration and emerging national identities, few have examined the relationship between place and gender³. Even fewer have interrogated the connections between bodies and landscapes⁴.

Through an analysis of memoirs and folklore narratives, this essay analyzes the containment of the female body in the modern Irish landscape. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which Irish communities controlled the sexualized female body from the 1850s to the 1920s. The bodies of sexually active women, pregnant and post-parturient women, and dead women who had committed sexual transgressions were fraught with meaning; dangerous and polluted, they were isolated from the rest of the community. The regulation of the female body within the landscape became a mechanism for harnessing troublesome women. By separating and containing the impure and sexual female body, nineteenth-century Irish

2. *Connacht Tribune*, 9 November 1984.

3. On the importance of the landscape in modern Ireland, see Gerry Smith, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001; B.J. Graham and L.J. Proudfoot eds., *An Historical Geography of Ireland*, London: Academic Press Limited, 1993; and F.H.A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout, eds., *Atlas of the Rural Irish Landscape*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1997. For the key works on gender and landscape, see Marti D. Lee and Ed Madden, eds., *Irish Studies: Geographies and Genders*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008 and Sheila Bhreathnach-Lynch, *Ireland's Art Ireland's History: Representing Ireland, 1845 to Present*, Omaha, Creighton University Press, 2007, chapter six.

4. For a notable exception, see Catherine Nash, "Remapping and Renaming: New Cartographies of Identity, Gender and Landscape in Ireland", *Feminist Review* No. 44, 1993, p. 39-57.

communities established the modern gender hierarchies that would result in what James Smith has labeled an "architecture of containment"⁵.

Recently, scholars such as Smith have analyzed the ways in which the twentieth-century Irish state and Catholic Church controlled sexually deviant women. Smith posits that an "architecture of containment", which was comprised of "an assortment of interconnected institutions", most notably Magdalen laundries, isolated the sexually dangerous female body and thus kept the nation pure⁶. Other scholars have explored the ways in which the newly independent Ireland of the 1920s and 30s claimed a particular connection between women and the land. According to Síghe Bhreathnach-Lynch, the feminization of the Irish landscape in the early twentieth century helped consolidate gender norms, affirming that women were "the passive and voiceless embodiment of nature" who must be dominated by men⁷. The regulation of women and the landscape thus helped bolster the new patriarchal state that would deny most Irish women a significant active or public role⁸.

Yet as this essay argues, the containment of the sexualized female body and the associations between women and the landscape long predate the 1920s and 30s. The parallels between the landscape and the female body, as well as the regulation of women's bodies within the landscape, have their origins in vernacular beliefs and traditions (such as fairy belief) that preceded the triumphs of modern Catholicism, the British colonial state, and Irish nationalism. By the mid to late nineteenth century, vernacular traditions, the Catholic Church, and the colonial state coexisted. Each of these systems of authority not only privileged the landscape as a site of power and domination but also regulated the female body, particularly the sexualized female body. As they did so, they paved the way for the "architecture of containment" that would pervade the Free State and later the Republic.

Women's Bodies and the Landscape in Local Beliefs

From pre-Christian times through the modern period, the land has held a special position in Irish history and tradition. The Irish landscape, as Lawrence J. Taylor explains, has long been "pregnant with meaning", serving as "the anchor of personal and collective history [and] the material with which local, regional, or national identity is constructed"⁹. The landscape also became the locus of beliefs

5. James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*, South Bend, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

6. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

7. Bhreathnach-Lynch, *Ireland's Art Ireland's History*, p. 88.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

9. Lawrence J. Taylor, *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics*, Dublin, Lilliput Press, 1995, p. 4.

and practices central to community life. Irish people marked out sacred space in the land, making their topography part and parcel of daily life and religious observances. By the nineteenth century, sites both vernacular and Catholic, including holy wells, Celtic crosses, miraculous statues, apparition sites, medieval church ruins, fairy dwellings, and burial grounds demarcated the countryside¹⁰. Mapping the landscape with the sacred and the profane allowed the Irish people to manage nature and create order¹¹.

The intricate connections between women and the landscape also have a long history in Ireland and elsewhere. While it is nearly impossible to trace the origins of the land-as-woman trope, scholars often place such connections within patriarchal traditions articulating that woman was to nature as man was to culture. Within these traditions the feminized land, like woman herself, was to be surveyed, plundered, and controlled by men¹². As Catherine Nash has argued, in Irish tradition the landscape, like the female body, is “transversed, journeyed across, entered into, intimately known, gazed upon¹³”.

Vernacular traditions, as well as later Catholic and colonial discourses, all made use of such representations¹⁴. Ireland-as-woman was an image popularized by the *aisling*, an Irish-language dream or vision poem popular in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries¹⁵. As Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch explains, within storytelling and legends, the *cailleach*, or “otherworld female”, personified the landscape and the climate – from “the power of the wind and wave... to the pastoral and nurturing fertility forces of plant and animal life¹⁶...” Legends about the *cailleach* were tied to “natural features of the physical landscape”, establishing a firm link between the topography and the sacred feminine¹⁷. Right through the early twentieth century in parts of Ireland, and particularly in the rural and Irish-speaking south and west, legends about supernatural women such as the *cailleach*

10. Raymond Gillespie, *Devoted People: Belief and Religion in Early Modern Ireland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997 p. 88; Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, “The Fairy Belief and Official Religion in Ireland”, in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. Peter Narváez, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1997, p. 199-200.

11. See Narváez, *The Good People*; Barbara Rieti, *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland*, St. Johns, Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991; and Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story*, London: Pimlico, 1999.

12. Gillian Rose, “Looking at Landscape: The Uneasy Pleasures of Power”, in *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, eds. Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp, London, Arnold, 1997, p. 193.

13. Nash, “Remapping and Renaming”, p. 54. For more on the ways in which power has been inscribed on the body, see Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, London, Allen Lane, 1977 and *The History of Sexuality*, London, Allen Lane, 1978.

14. Nash, “Remapping and Renaming”, p. 44.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2003, p. 10-11.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 28-29.

and the *banshee*, or death messenger, remained closely tied to particular locales and elements within the physical environment¹⁸.

Christian and later colonial Ireland reworked these associations between the feminine and the environment. The colonial system feminized Ireland, categorizing the nation as weak, emotional, and uncivilized. It thus justified English (male) rule. The Irish colonial contest was clearly visible on the landscape. As the English state gained control of the island, it constructed impressive government buildings, roads, and railroads, all of which were tangible symbols of English power and reminders of colonialism's successes. In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial State conducted a massive project to map Ireland through the ordnance survey. This project, as Angele Smith explains, "was an act of colonial domination – mapping was a means for Britain to maintain colonial control over Ireland, making the landscape, its people and past known and quantifiable"¹⁹.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nationalists appropriated representations of the (gendered female) Irish nation, women, and the feminized Irish landscape. Now, the wild, rugged, uncivilized landscape came to represent the "real" (Gaelic, pre-colonial) Ireland; it, like Ireland's women, needed to be reclaimed by nationalist men. Nationalists, argues Nash, clearly linked the landscape and the female body; the nationalist "representation of women fixes their bodies as landscapes of control and signifying use"²⁰. Irish nationalism and, ultimately, the independent Irish State, subjected both the land and the female body, as James Smith's work reminds us, to patriarchal control²¹.

Existing alongside the construction of a feminized landscape in Irish history was an effort to constrain the female body in space and place. By the nineteenth century, people in Ireland and in the Irish Diaspora called on long-standing beliefs and oral traditions to map bodies and landscapes²². They also used beliefs about the landscape to regulate female sexuality. Fairy belief was one of the strongest oral traditions upholding gender norms and dictating female behavior. Popular subjects in storytelling, the fairies were non-human beings that could take human form and meddle in human life. When Ireland's people told stories and legends of the bizarre and the magical, they did more than entertain. Storytelling

18. On the banshee, see Ó Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach* and Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee: The Irish Death Messenger*, Denver, Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997.

19. Angele Smith, "Landscape Representation: Place and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Ordnance Survey Maps of Ireland", in *Landscape, Memory, and History*, eds. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, London, Pluto Press, 2003, p. 71.

20. Nash, "Remapping, and Renaming", p. 50.

21. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*.

22. Fairy belief is well-documented primarily in the Celtic, Germanic, and Scandinavian countries of Europe, as well as in Ireland and the Irish diasporic communities of North America. See Rieti, *Strange Terrain* and Narváez, *The Good People*.

also was a system of education, informing and instructing people on customs and norms as well as proper behavior. It regulated family and community life²³. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that gender is a primary theme in many fairy legends.

Fairy legends frequently place the female body in marginal landscapes and thus at the center of danger or drama. Within oral traditions, women proved especially susceptible to fairy-changeling abduction. According to legendry, unsuspecting mortals (usually women and children) could be stolen away or “taken” by the fairies. Supernatural imposters, or fairy-changelings, then took their place in the human world. As Eugene Hynes reminds us, nineteenth-century Irish people associated fairy-women with “specific places²⁴”; as they did so, they mapped meaning onto the female body and the Irish topography. Women who wandered in forbidden or profane places were particularly likely to be “taken away²⁵”. The dangerous terrain into which women drifted was often liminal space, located on the margins of the town or village²⁶. Peter Narváez has shown that women who picked berries in the Irish diasporic communities of Newfoundland were thought to be courting fairy intervention; berry grounds were known as “liminal zones” of “macro-religious danger and tragedy²⁷”. Stories claiming that fairies stole away women who were out picking berries reveal communal anxieties about women venturing outside of the confines of the home or village. They also express the very real fears that women who walked alone through the berry grounds could encounter abuse²⁸.

Fairy belief, therefore, reflected realities while it constructed an ideal world. It consistently advocated that women remain at home, safely enclosed within the domestic sphere. In a legend collected in Galway by Lady Gregory in the early twentieth century, the dangers facing women who strayed from home are evident:

An old woman from Loughrea told me that a woman, I believe it was from Shragwalla close to the town, was taken away one time for fourteen years when she went out into the field at night with nothing on but her shift. And she was swept [abducted] there and then, and an old hag put into the bed in her place, and she suckling her young son at the time²⁹.

23. For an analysis of the many functions of fairy belief, see Angela Bourke, “The Virtual Reality of Irish Fairy Legend”, in *Éire/Ireland* 31, 1-2, Spring/Summer 1996, p. 7-25.

24. Eugene Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's Apparition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2008, p. 3.

25. For an example, see Linda-May Ballard, “Fairies and the Supernatural on Reachraí”, in *The Good People*, p. 55.

26. On the concept of liminality, see Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*”, in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1967, p. 93-111 and Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1960.

27. Peter Narváez, “Newfoundland Berry Pickers ‘In the Fairies’: Maintaining Spatial, Temporal, and Moral Boundaries through Legendry”, in *The Good People*, p. 353.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 354-5.

29. Lady Augusta Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland. Collected and Arranged by Lady Gregory*, Lon-

This young woman wanders away into dangerous space while improperly dressed. She thus violates social norms and gendered codes of behavior³⁰. The suggestion that she may have committed a sexual transgression is also evident. This legend's complex message includes the assertion that young wives and mothers must remain safely at home and safely contained within patriarchy.

Similarly, another legend tells of the consequences faced by a woman who is out wandering:

She said she was walking the road and she met four men, and she knew that they were not of this world, and she fell on the road with the fright she got... And for a long time after she wasn't in her right mind³¹...

This woman may indeed have been assaulted by four men on the road, but the attack that she suffers is coded through fairy belief. Here, again, the suggestion is that women who "walk the road" leave themselves open to disaster, returning permanently damaged. The telling of such stories sent a clear message to young women: stay at home, and in your proper place, or else you too may fall victim to supernatural abduction.

In Irish custom, cures for changeling abduction were violent, requiring the physical abuse of the fairy-changeling's body. In order to banish a fairy, people beat or shook it, hit it with a pitchfork, or burned it with a hot shovel or poker. A Kildare legend tells of a man whose wife is "taken away". Every night at midnight, however, she briefly returns to the home to look at their child. The husband, who wants his wife back, assembles twelve local men with forks to come to the house and prevent his wife from leaving after her nocturnal visit. This threat apparently works; the wife stays put³². Another County Clare narrative is more explicit. A young, newly married woman is stolen away, a morose and silent changeling left in her place. The woman's husband does not know what to do, but his mother does:

[The husband's mother] went out to the flax and she said to the [changeling] girl: "you'd best get the dinner ready before the men come in." But when she came in there was nothing done, and [the mother-in-law] gave her a blow with some pieces of the flax that were in her hand, and said, 'Get out of this for a good-for-nothing woman!' And with that she went up the chimney and was gone³³.

don, Colin Smythe Ltd., 1970, p. 109. For a similar example from Newfoundland, see Rieti, *The Good People*, p. 45.

30. Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*. See also Richard P. Jenkins, "Witches and Fairies: Supernatural Aggression and Deviance among the Irish Peasantry", in *The Good People*, p. 316.

31. Lady Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs*, p. 124.

32. Lady Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs*, p. 108.

33. Lady Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs*, p. 122.

After the fairy is banished, the real (human) woman comes back, taking her place in the household and, presumably, behaving more properly from then on. Within legendry, the fairy imposter leaves, and the “normal” wife returns. In reality, of course, a disobedient wife may have been beaten or burned into submissiveness, “returning” well behaved. In her analysis of the 1895 burning death of Bridget Cleary, Angela Bourke argues that changeling accusations masked domestic violence and, fundamentally, served as a mechanism for controlling disruptive women. Cleary, who was reported to be a changeling, was killed when her husband, father, relatives, and neighbors attempted to beat and burn the fairy out of her³⁴.

The real-life communities of late nineteenth – and early twentieth-century Ireland not only used stories and legends to control young women; they also employed physical isolation. As the importance of space and place evolved at the hands of a strengthening Catholic Church and powerful Victorian state, how did the relationship between women and space evolve? What David Miller has called Ireland’s late nineteenth-century “chapel-based” religious landscape had as one of its main goals gender separation: in newly built chapels, women and men sat separately, and, ideally, men inhabited the public sphere while women dominated the home³⁵. At the insistence of the clergy, laborers’ cottages, built by the government in the second half of the nineteenth century, contained separate sleeping areas for girls and boys³⁶.

The colonial state also constructed an architectural system to contain the deviant body. As Dymphna McLoughlin explains, the poor relief system was designed to “alleviate the absolute poverty of the Irish by containing them within the institution of the workhouse³⁷.” Women, however, challenged the system. On the one hand, they entered the workhouses at much higher rates than men; late nineteenth-century poor law guardians complained that the workhouses were overrun with women. More disturbingly, women also used the workhouses to their advantage, sometimes temporarily depositing themselves and their children there and then leaving when they wished³⁸. Viewing women’s mobility and their sexuality as a threat, authorities carefully controlled the space of the workhouse. Men and

34. Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, p. 36–38.

35. David W. Miller, “Landscape and Religious Practice: A Study of Mass Attendance in Pre-Famine Ireland”, *Éire-Ireland* 40:1&2 (Earrach/Samhradh / Spring/Summer 2005), p. 90–106.

36. Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, p. 46.

37. Dymphna McLoughlin, “Workhouses” in *The Field Day Anthology of Women’s Writing: Volume V: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*, eds. Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain, Gerardine Meaney, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Mary O’Dowd, and Clair Wills, New York, New York University Press, 2002, p. 722.

38. Dymphna McLoughlin, “Workhouses and Irish Female Paupers 1840–70”, in Maria Luddy & Cliona Murphy (eds.), *Women Surviving: Studies in Irish Women’s History in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1989, p. 133–4.

women were kept apart, and unwed pregnant women were separated from other women and children³⁹.

The legacies of this focus on space and geography were significant. By the twentieth century, according to James M. Smith, a newly independent Ireland, with its close linkages between the state and the Catholic Church, implemented its “architecture of containment”⁴⁰. In Smith’s analysis, this system targeted deviant women, and particularly sexually deviant women; his work affirms the civilizing mission’s focus on removing women from public space, keeping women and men apart, and using space to prevent sexual vice.

For late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Irish communities, the regulation of unwed mothers proved particularly significant. Many unwed women who became pregnant left their town or village and sought refuge in a neighboring community; this reality reminds us that such women could not find comfortable places within their own communities⁴¹. Sara Walsh of County Kerry recalled that a local family, ironically called the Bodies, produced women famous for their sexual transgressions. Local children were taught to avoid the Bodies’ residence at all costs⁴². In *The Farm By Lough Gur*, the idyllic rural post-famine upbringing of Sissy O’Brien is disrupted by the pregnancy of an unwed girl. When the girl becomes pregnant, her father banishes her from the household. Forced to take refuge in a pigsty, the girl falls ill. She is allowed to return home only after her baby dies in childbirth, but she is damaged and ruined beyond repair⁴³. These examples demonstrate the literal isolation that sexualized women experienced and elucidate the real-world ways in which communities employed control and containment to regulate female sexuality. Through their tales, rural Irish folk created a metaphorical “architecture of containment” to keep women in line, but they also physically isolated the polluted body if necessary.

Birth, Bodies, and Boundaries

Traditional beliefs and rural customs speak to the importance of pregnancy and birth in rural Ireland; indeed, it is no accident that many victims of fairy abduction (such as the woman in the Loughrea legend above) are pregnant or post-parturient. Fairy belief gave voice to the dangers that confronted women during pregnancy and birth. As David Cressy has argued for early modern Britain,

39. McLoughlin, “Workhouses”, in *The Field Day Anthology*, p. 722-3.

40. James Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries*, p. xiii.

41. Chris Lawlor, *Canon Frederick Donovan’s Dunlavin, 1884-1896: A West Wicklow Village in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Maynooth Studies in Irish Local History no. 29, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2000, p. 36.

42. Richard White, *Remembering Abanagran: A History of Stories*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1998, p. 100-101.

43. Mary Carbery, *The Farm By Lough Gur: The Story of Mary Fogarty (Sissy O’Brien)*, Cork, Mercier Press, 1973 (1937), p. 50.

pregnancy was a “dangerous journey⁴⁴”, one that left both women and infants susceptible to fairy-changeling abduction. Similar views pervaded Ireland centuries later, where the deaths of women and children during and after childbirth sometimes were categorized as fairy abductions⁴⁵.

Irish people's views on the dangers of childbirth are exemplified by several narratives collected by Lady Gregory in the early twentieth century. As a North Galway woman told Gregory: “There are many young women taken in childbirth. I lost a sister of my own in that way⁴⁶”. The woman's pregnant sister tries to cross the local river and is suddenly struck on the face. Her face swells, and after she gives birth, she dies. The woman's sister remembered: “And my mother used to watch for her for three or four years after, thinking she'd come back, but she never did⁴⁷.” Once more, this woman violates her domestic role by leaving the home and venturing into a dangerous landscape. She does so while pregnant, which puts her unborn child and thus the family lineage in peril. Irish legends and narratives thus constituted part of a complex system of coded language and hidden meaning, and they affirmed clear and strict gender boundaries⁴⁸. They also required women to control their bodies and move within the landscape in socially sanctioned ways even as they expressed fears that the female body was not so easily harnessed. While fairy belief urged women, particularly pregnant women or women of childbearing age, to stay safely at home, it also revealed that this was not feasible or desirable for some.

The dangers of childbirth also affected infants. In the early twentieth century, residents of County Limerick explained that even the process of bringing a child to the chapel for baptism was susceptible to evil forces. Along the way, if the woman carrying the child met another woman, she would turn back. And the journey home could be just as precarious. As one woman described, “[r]eturning from the Church the person in charge of the child would not allow anybody [to] touch it or come near it until she had returned it to its mother again⁴⁹”. The path from pregnancy to baptism, like the journey from chapel to home, was infused with an aura of danger. The very real possibility that death would strike mother or child was expressed through alternative beliefs.

44. David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 44.

45. Lady Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs*, p. 125.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

47. *Ibid.*

48. See Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, “Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures”, in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1993, p. 1-30 and Bourke, “The Virtual Reality of Irish Fairy Legend”.

49. Recollections of Mrs. Kelly, The Pike, County Limerick, 1929. National Folklore Commission, Dublin, 42, p. 188-189.

Pregnancy and childbirth not only left women open to danger but also left their bodies polluted. New Catholic mothers in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland were considered unclean until they were churching or purified by their parish priest, usually several weeks after they had given birth⁵⁰. Catholic women continued to view churching as "a cleansing process" well into the twentieth century⁵¹. The bodies of unchurched women posed particular dangers. Legendry and tradition cautioned new mothers, particularly women who had not yet been "purified" or churching, to stay at home. Traditions also cautioned unchurched women not to enter other people's homes. Kept isolated and insulated from the daily workings of parish life, confined to their homes, limited to interacting with only their immediate family, and forbidden from taking part in local rituals, unchurched women were marked as others, as beings whose experience of birth made them threatening, infused with an aura of danger and thus best kept away from the larger community⁵². Churching served to remind Irish women that their overall position within the parish community was itself vulnerable and uncertain; because they were female and tainted by the process of birth, women were, at times, ejected from parish life, returning only because the church, priest, and community allowed it.

While historians of modern Ireland have yet to investigate the meanings of the lying-in period and churching, some scholars of early modern England have demonstrated that lay people attributed different meanings to the ritual. At times, churching was about pollution and purification, serving as evidence of women's inferior historical status, contemporary beliefs that intercourse was sinful, and views that women, who took on the dangers associated with birth, were both threatening and vulnerable⁵³. Yet others view churching in a more positive light, arguing that it was a female-centered celebration. David Cressy maintains that churching was a ritual that women demanded and viewed as a ceremony of thanksgiving, not purification; similarly, theologian Natalie Knödel argues that "the practice of churching was by far not an imposition of the male church on women, but something sought after by women themselves⁵⁴". And in the work of Adrian Wilson, churching in early modern England becomes the site of "a zone of

50. Cara Delay, "Churchings and Changelings: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Modern Irish History", forthcoming in *Women in Irish History and Culture*, eds. Maria Luddy, Gerardine Meaney, and Anne Mulhall, p. 15.

51. Linda-May Ballard, *Forgetting Frolic: Marriage Traditions in Ireland*, Belfast/London, The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast, 1998, p. 134.

52. For a comparative analysis, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, p. 110; Natalie Knödel, "The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, Commonly called The Churching of Women", [<http://users.ox.ac.uk/%7Emikef/church.html#intro>]. Natalie Knödel, University of Durham, April 1995 [accessed 13 December 2011].

sexual politics and gendered conflict”, where “women took initiatives and achieved victories⁵⁵.”

Oral histories from twentieth-century Ireland affirm that women interpreted churching in different ways but that, fundamentally, being unchurched was tied to being unclean and isolated. As revealed in the work of social historian Kevin Kearns, Dublin women remembered that they could not wash or comb their hair or even make a cup of tea until they were churched⁵⁶. A Dublin woman’s recollections clearly demonstrated her feelings about being unchurched:

You weren’t clean, not fit to do anything, to cook... you were taboo, like a leper. Nobody then had the courage to stand up and contradict the priest, or what he was saying. There were a lot of things then that we went along with. God forgive me now, I feel angry, VERY angry⁵⁷.

Churching thus provides a window into Irish people’s sentiments about the dangers of birth, the uncertainty of the lifecycle, and the connections between gender, purity, and pollution. The movement of pregnant women, unchurched women, or unbaptized infants in public space was viewed as threatening to the community. Polluted bodies could pollute the landscape; at the same time, the landscape was a mechanism for controlling the polluted body. The ideas of pollution associated with pregnancy and childbirth fundamentally served to marginalize women, regulating their actions, keeping them inside certain spaces and out of others.

However, the physical and social isolation experienced by post-parturient women should be read not exclusively as control and containment but as something more complicated. Women’s experiences of the aftermath of childbirth differed based on region, class, and marital status. In reality, many poor women could ill afford to take time off from economic production; as the granddaughter of a County Derry agricultural worker remembered, “An aunt of my mummy’s gave birth in a field, and went back to work right away. See, in the country areas you had to go back to work the next day⁵⁸.” In 1906, the Belfast Medical Officer of Health claimed that “mothers work in the mills and factories to within a few days of the birth of children, and return to work again as soon as their employers will permit⁵⁹”.

55. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, p. 110.

56. Ballard, *Forgetting Frolic*, p. 135.

57. Kevin Kearns, *Dublin’s Lost Heroines: Mammies and Grannies in a Vanished City*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 2004, p. 172.

58. National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), Women’s Committee, Northern Ireland, *Women’s Voices: An Oral History of Northern Irish Women’s Health (1900-1990)*, Dublin, Attic Press, 1992, p. 22.

59. *Ibid.*

For other women, the post-partum period of isolation allowed them much-needed time to rest and recuperate, allowing them to take a break from their daily chores. Many women must have welcomed a lying-in period since "it was the only rest most of them got in their lives"⁶⁰. *A Star Called Henry*, Roddy Doyle's fictional account of life in the early twentieth-century, illustrates such a view; Melody Nash's lying-in period is described as a well-needed reprieve from domestic duties in working-class Dublin⁶¹. Even fictional works, then, demonstrate conflicting attitudes toward churching, and differing views of the lying-in period as either a much-needed rest or a Church-imposed isolation persisted well into the twentieth century.

■ Sex, Death, and Burial

Like pregnancy and birth, death was a significant passage in the Irish life-cycle establishing clear linkages between gender, the body, and the landscape. "Between death and burial", writes Christina Brophy, "the recently deceased and his/her community were in chaotic transition"⁶². Death, like birth, thus required complex and careful rituals, which, in Ireland, traditionally were overseen by women⁶³. Women cleaned and laid out the body, preparing it for the wake and funeral. At the Irish wake, they keened bitter, desolate laments, allowing all gathered to reflect on the tragedy of death⁶⁴. In rural Ireland, women controlled life's passages, managing the processes of birth and death. As a result, they marked themselves as both powerful and vulnerable.

Burial was a ritual that allowed for closure, reconciling the body and the landscape. When those who died were polluted or impure, however, proper burial became impossible. Stillborn or unbaptized children, for example, could not be placed in sacred ground and commonly were buried in *cillíns*: graveyards specifically for unbaptized children, outside of the Catholic cemetery⁶⁵. Similarly, women who committed sexual transgressions were denied entry to sacred ground upon their deaths. Several late nineteenth-century cases from rural Ireland shed light on the ways in which communities continued their attempts to contain and control the female body even after death.

60. Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland, 1926-1961: Discourses, Experiences, Memories*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2000, p. 112.

61. Roddy Doyle, *A Star Called Henry*, New York, Penguin, 1999, p. 29.

62. Christina Brophy, "Keening Community: *Mná Caointe*, Women, Death, and Power in Ireland", Ph.D. dissertation, Boston College, 2010, p. 168-9.

63. Clodagh Tait, *Death, Burial and Commemoration in Ireland, 1550-1650*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, chapter 3.

64. For more on the Irish wake, see Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, "The 'Merry Wake'", in *Irish Popular Culture 1650-1850*, eds. James S. Donnelly Jr. and Kerby A. Miller, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1998, p. 173-200.

65. Ballard, *Forgetting Frolic*, p. 136; Gillian M. Doherty, *The Irish Ordnance Survey: History, Culture and Memory*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2004, p. 130-31.

David Moriarty, the Catholic Bishop of Kerry, wrote in his diary of such a case while touring his parishes in the summer of 1875⁶⁶. Moriarty described a horrific murder in Kiltomy. A local man, John Quilter, had beaten to death his mother and his paternal uncle (his dead father's brother). John Quilter's mother, Honoria Quilter, and his uncle, Thomas Quilter, had been living together, not as brother-and-sister-in-law, but as husband and wife, for nearly twenty years. This violated Catholic prohibitions against consanguinity. The local priest, the Franciscan missionaries, and even Bishop Moriarty himself urged the couple to separate, to no avail. Eventually, the Franciscan missionaries convinced Thomas Quilter to move out of the couple's home. Still, Honoria attempted to reconcile with Thomas, and he seemed vulnerable to her pleas. The couple remained together even after Bishop Moriarty excommunicated them. Only death would sever the ties between Thomas and Honoria: John Quilter, recently arrived home from an extended stay in America, murdered his mother and his uncle in 1875.

In his diary, Bishop Moriarty explained that John Quilter murdered Thomas and Honoria because of the scandal that surrounded their sexual relationship. More interesting to Moriarty, however, was how the community of Kiltomey dealt with the Quilters after their deaths. Thomas and Honoria Quilter were both buried in the local Catholic cemetery. Honoria Quilter's remains, however, were quickly unearched and, according to Bishop Moriarty's diary, "deposited elsewhere"⁶⁷. On October 13, 1875, the *Nenagh Guardian* picked up the story, reporting that "The charred fragments of the body of the murdered woman Honoria Quilter have been refused Christian burial by the people in Kerry"⁶⁸...

The community's treatment of Honoria Quilter's body brings up intriguing questions: why was she denied a sacred burial while Thomas was allowed to remain in the graveyard? In Bishop Moriarty's diary, he consistently described Honoria as stubborn and persuasive, suggesting that she, not her husband, refused the dictates of Church and community. By rejecting the advice of the Catholic clergy and refusing to follow local norms or uphold the sexual order of the village, Honoria severed her connection with her community. Her friends and neighbors uttered the last word in the matter when they unearched Honoria's bones. Not content to let her death be punishment enough, some people felt it necessary to eject her from the community permanently, displaying her body in a way that shamed her, damned her, and publicized her sins.

The 1895 murder of Bridget Cleary also exposes the connections between women's sexual behavior and the treatment of their bodies after death. Bridget Cleary, who was murdered by her husband, father, and cousins in rural County

66. Entry from 7 October 1875. Bishop David Moriarty's Diary at the Kerry Diocesan Archive, Killarney.

67. *Idem*.

68. *Nenagh Guardian*, 13 October 1875.

Tipperary, was a glamorous, alluring, stubborn, and willful woman. Angela Bourke argues that Cleary may have been infertile and was rumored to be having an extra-marital affair⁶⁹. Bridget Cleary, like Honoria Quilter and Áine, the Galway unwed mother who was denied a sacred burial, transgressed local norms, and particularly sexual norms. After Bridget Cleary's death, her husband, Michael Cleary, buried her body in a shallow grave, where the police discovered it several days later. Michael Cleary and several of Bridget's relatives who had been involved in the murder were arrested and brought to trial. Local authorities, however, faced a dilemma: with Bridget's family in prison, they did not quite know what to do with Bridget's body. After several days, no one in the village would come forward to claim Bridget's body or to arrange for her burial. The community, after this woman's death, made a statement about her scandalous life. The police finally buried Bridget Cleary on the very edge of the cemetery, just outside of consecrated ground⁷⁰.

■ Conclusion

The legacies of nineteenth-century Ireland's focus on space, gender, and geography were significant indeed. The notion of the polluted female body that could be dominated and mapped like the landscape itself persisted through independence and well into the twentieth century, when the newly strengthened Catholic Church, supported by the native Irish state, employed new tactics in their campaign to control landscapes and bodies. The results would bring scandal to Ireland when the outrage of the Magdalen laundries became public. Created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Magdalen laundries were asylums for transgressing women; after Irish independence, they "increasingly served a recarceral and punitive function⁷¹", harnessing thousands of women of varying backgrounds who did not conform to the ideal of Irish womanhood.

In 2003, the *Irish Times* published a story on a Dublin Magdalen asylum. When it was sold in 1993, the bodies of 155 former female inmates were exhumed. These women, whom James Smith calls the "nation's disappeared", had lived and died without notice in the laundry, their bodies placed in unmarked graves on the laundry grounds. After the 1993 exhumation, however, 22 bodies remained unaccounted for; these bodies were quietly cremated, and the story was kept secret for ten years⁷². When it became public, the controversy of the Mag-

69. Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*.

70. Joan Hoff and Marian Yeates, *The Cooper's Wife is Missing: The Trials of Bridget Cleary*, New York, Basic Books, 200, p. 352.

71. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, p. xv.

72. *Ibid.*, p. xvii and 136-137.

Magdalen asylums caused Irish society to confront the ways in which the bodies of deviant women were “deposited elsewhere” by the State, the Church, and ultimately the Irish people.

Yet we must remember that the control and containment of the sexually polluted body was not created with Irish independence. Both the landscape and the female body had long been sites of meaning. In Irish tradition, each could be fertile or barren; each could be sacred or profane. Each was necessary for the regeneration of community life; each consistently was mapped and stamped by patriarchal authorities.

The connections between space, place, and the female body remain under-researched in Irish history, however. We still know little not only about how women’s bodies were restricted but also about how women may have negotiated or resisted the harnessing of their “deviant” bodies. In her work on nineteenth-century workhouses, for example, Dymphna McLoughlin has demonstrated that many poor women, rather than being “limited and contained”, used the workhouses to survive⁷³. At the same time, nuns were constructing buildings such as orphanages, Magdalen asylums, and hospitals (as early as 1834, the Sisters of Charity, led by Mary Aikenhead, built St. Vincent Hospital in Dublin, the first Catholic hospital run by Catholic nuns in Ireland)⁷⁴. We must recognize, then, that women were not always passive victims. Perhaps there was an architecture of containment that served to clearly mark out women’s place; if so, however, it seems clear that women themselves helped construct this architecture and, in some cases at least, were able to navigate around it.

73. McLoughlin, “Workhouses”, p. 726.

74. Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1987, p. 126).