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by

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**“God damn you, Grandma!”  
Women and Nationalism in Irish Film**

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## Abstract

### “God damn you, Grandma!” Women and Nationalism in Irish Film

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While women have been central symbols in the struggle for Irish independence at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, mainstream Irish nationalist movements have mostly dismissed the concerns of actual Irish women. With a few notable exceptions, women’s experience of the Irish War of Independence (1919) and Civil War (1922) has been likewise ignored. This paper examines the treatment of women in two contemporary films about this period: Neil Jordan’s *Michael Collins* (1996) and Ken Loach’s *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006). To contextualize these films, I first consider three classics of Irish drama and film that use women to promote or critique nationalism: Yeats and Lady Gregory’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*, and Jordan’s *The Crying Game*. *Cathleen* epitomizes the symbolic value of the woman-as-nation, while *Juno*, a critique of this nationalist idea, relies on the spectacle of the titular matriarch’s suffering to make its political point. Despite the opposing politics of the two plays, both reduce their female characters to tropes: symbolic goddess or helpless victim.

*Michael Collins*, I argue, departs from this tradition only by converting such tropes into Hollywood stereotypes. Jordan uses the character of Kitty Kiernan to transform Collins from a dangerous revolutionary to a pacifist hero in order to make a humanist argument for the end to nationalist violence in Northern Ireland. Although Loach's story is similar to Jordan's (two male leads driven apart by the Civil War), he centralizes women in a way that Jordan does not. Loach's socialist aesthetic and broad cultural critique allow his female characters to escape victimhood (though not suffering) by pointedly developing their political agency. Loach's film, therefore, represents a significant intervention in the literature surrounding the Irish conflict, not because it "sides" with the IRA, but because it privileges women's lived experience.

## Table of Contents

“God damn you, Grandma!”: Women and Nationalism in Irish Film .....	1
Works Cited .....	37
Vita.....	40

## **“God damn you, Grandma!”: Women and Nationalism in Irish Film**

In 2006, the jury at the Cannes Film Festival voted unanimously to award the Palme d’Or, the festival’s highest honor, to Ken Loach’s *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Dwyer). The broader public came to no such consensus about the film. Celebrated in Ireland as a national triumph, *Barley’s* sympathetic stance towards early incarnations of the IRA caused uproar in the British right-wing press. In fact, the English edition announced the Cannes win with a headline demanding “Why does Ken Loach loathe his country so much?” while the Irish edition placed Cork native Orla Fitzgerald (who plays Sinéad) on the front cover, proclaiming her “The golden girl who conquered Cannes” (McGill). Critics accused Loach of producing blatant propaganda. Defenders of the film disagreed. Claiming it portrayed the brutal reality of IRA violence, they cited the scene in which protagonist Damien (Cillian Murphy) is forced to shoot an informer he has known since childhood. James Christopher, of *The Times* (London), described the scene as “a raw and affecting moment [that] goes right to the splintered heart of the film.” The execution scene is certainly memorable and beautifully shot. However, I will argue that *Barley’s* true “heart” comes a little later. Near the middle of the film, just before the characters learn that a truce with the British has been reached, Damien’s lover Sinéad is brutalized by the Black and Tans as they look for information about the flying column’s whereabouts. Shocked and vacant-eyed after this traumatic experience, Sinéad screams at her grandmother, who wants to stay in the family’s burned-out cottage: “God damn you grandma! You can’t stay here! You can’t do that to me!... I can’t be as strong as you!... I don’t want to end up like her! I want some kind of a life, Damien!” Unlike the execution scene, Sinéad’s outburst provides a critique of *both* British brutality *and* the IRA’s willingness to perpetuate the conflict, despite its heavy toll on volunteers and



noncombatants alike. The scene foreshadows the complex and compelling position that Sinéad will take on in the second half of the film as the flying column violently splits over the treaty. Yet relatively few commentators noticed this position. Capitalizing on the controversy, the Ulster *Daily Mirror* privately screened the film for Ian Paisley and Barry McElduff (a Sinn Fein Assembly member); neither politician understood Sinéad as complicating what both saw as a pro-IRA message. Paisley referred to her simply as “a red haired Colleen brutalized but unbowed,” while McElduff saw her simply as a female counterpart to Damien, stating “the Sinéads of Ireland are the heroines too.” Yet a closer look at the film reveals significant differences between Sinéad’s story and traditional nationalist narratives. These differences reveal *Barley* a significant feminist intervention in the discourses of Irish nationalism.

*Barley* is the most recent in a long line of Irish texts that rely on female characters to make political points about nationalism. The most famous, of course, is Yeats’s and Lady Gregory’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902). *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), Sean O’Casey’s domestic critique of *Cathleen’s* revolution, also takes a woman as its central character. More recently, Neil Jordan has produced several highly gendered works dealing with Irish nationalism in the context of the ongoing peace process in Northern Ireland, including the critically-acclaimed *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Michael Collins* (1996), an epic biopic that covers roughly the same historical period as *Barley*. The women in all these works conform to limited symbolic or sentimental stereotypes. In Ruth Barton’s words, they “seem burdened by symbolism and lack any organic relationship to the lived experience of their real life prototypes in and outside of Ireland, historically and in the present” (114). Symbolic females are characteristic of nationalist Irish literature; a trope that Irish poet Eavan Boland argues had devastating implications for real Irish women: “Gone was the suggestion of any complicated human suffering.

Instead, you had the hollow victories, the passive images, the rhyming queens” (82). Unlike the earlier texts, Loach intervenes in this discourse and takes great pains to present his female characters as flesh-and-blood agents. Donal Ó Drisceoil, the film’s historical advisor, argues that Loach’s representation of women’s participation in the conflict is a “radical departure... from past portrayals of the Irish revolution” (7).

This paper will consider the extent to which *Barley’s* departure is “radical” by placing it in the context of representations of women in Irish nationalism, on stage and on film. My analysis of this context, of course, is not complete or definitive. Rather than attempting to present an overview of all literature dealing with women in Ireland, I have chosen pieces that I feel best exemplify general trends. These four texts (*Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Crying Game*, and *Michael Collins*) have played a significant role in Irish cultural life. While I discuss each of these works in detail, my primary focus is on the ways in which *Michael Collins* and *Barley* conform to or refigure representations of women in earlier texts. The obvious similarities in the narrative and subject matter of the two films provide convenient grounds for comparison. Both follow the relationship between two men (Collins and his friend Harry Boland in Jordan’s film, two fictional brothers in Loach’s) through the War of Independence (1919-1921) and into the Civil War (1922-1923), where they take opposite sides. Neither film features a central female protagonist, but both present single women as “love interests.” Jordan and Loach split, however, in their analysis of the reasons for the Civil War and in their theories of representing history. Jordan’s film is largely a product of Hollywood, and while he pays great attention to historical detail in the treatment of his male characters, he offers Kitty Kiernan (Julia Roberts) little historical subjectivity beyond her role as Collins’s fiancée. Loach’s fictionalized treatment of the conflict not only ripostes Jordan’s “great men” approach to history, but also emphasizes women’s political agency.

By placing *Barley* in the context of representations of Irish women stretching back to *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and through *Michael Collins*, I hope to demonstrate that Loach is re-working standard tropes in order to empower his female characters and recover real Irish women's historical experiences.

In the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women, and Wicked Hags*, Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward suggest that women in Irish nationalism have experienced a problem endemic to many colonial and postcolonial struggles:

Nationalist movements have usually encouraged women to participate in particular ways. However, once the goal of national independence is achieved the newly established state quickly reaffirms 'traditional' gender roles and excludes women from the sort of political activity they had experienced during the years of national conflict. (2)

Ryan points out how, in men's retrospective accounts of the 1919-1923 conflict, women's participation was "marginalised or sanitised" ("In the line of fire" 48); political women were either represented as "furies" (48) (especially by those opposed to the conflict), or more safely domesticated as "silent, calm, and dutiful" (51) assistants to male militants. Therefore, even though "these women were of crucial importance to a guerilla army and are acknowledged by all the republican autobiographies" (51), they are literarily reduced to dangerous harpies or passive domestic angels.

Ryan and Ward are careful, however, to acknowledge that such representations do not depict historical reality:

As this book demonstrates, many women have shown a remarkable and long-lasting commitment to nationalism. The women who had actively participated in nationalist struggles were not always easily persuaded to return to the domestic sphere; they were not always dupes who could be mobilized in times of crisis and then sent back at the whim of the male leadership. (3)

Ward's seminal work on women's participation in Irish nationalism from 1881-1940, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, demonstrates this reality. During the War of

Independence, Ward emphasizes, the participation of the local “civilian” populations was absolutely crucial, and not at all nonmilitant or apolitical:

Without the support of the people, the small, badly equipped guerrilla army – now facing an immeasurably greater enemy – could never have survived. In the counties where the Republican forces were strongest, the civilian population suffered the worst, particularly when the policy of reprisals intensified. (147)

Women’s political activities became even more complex after the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, which Cumann na mBan (the women’s auxiliary to the IRA) officially rejected.

Ward argues

Recognition of the Republic was inextricably linked with recognition of women’s right to equality... those within Cumann na mBan, while not fully articulating the basis of their political opposition, were conscious of their oppression as women and did have some awareness that this political and social oppression would not be alleviated by those who argued for acceptance of the Treaty. In this limited sense Cumann na mBan’s rejection of the Treaty was at least partly based upon some feminist understanding of its implications. (178)

Despite representations that sought to demonize or domesticate them, then, nationalist women consistently demonstrated their independent political agency and asserted their visions of Ireland. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the male-dominated narratives discussed above, their contributions have been largely ignored in subsequent representations of the conflict.

Despite these problematic representations of actual women’s participation in the fight for independence, it is often remarked that the conflict was sparked by a woman. More accurately, it was probably a combination of several women, both real and fictional, that allowed Yeats and Lady Gregory’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* to be such a success. At the time of its production, the play was attributed almost exclusively to Yeats, but contemporary scholars agree that Lady Gregory was responsible for “most of the dialogue, the plotting, and the resolution of the play” (Merritt 645). Furthermore, the play’s outstanding reception during its run is commonly attributed to Maude Gonne’s

powerful performance in the titular role (Antoinette Quinn 431). Despite the significant contributions of these two women, however, the play offers few liberatory possibilities for Irish womanhood. The female characters fall clearly into two categories: “the charismatic Cathleen who subverts the values of cradle, hearth, and smallholding, and the realist peasant women who lose out to the symbolic woman-nation” (Antoinette Quinn 430). The peasant women, whose property and attachments are private and domestic, are the losers in this formula, whereas the powerful female figure, the one with whom the audience and the men sympathize, is a symbolic phantom. As Elizabeth Cullingford notes, conflating Cathleen with sacrificial death means that “adoration and abhorrence are fused in a symbol that ignores women’s own desire” (“Thinking of Her” 12). Flesh-and-blood Irish women, with actual needs and desires are therefore not eligible for Cathleen’s symbolic status. If such a role is unavailable to living Irish women (with the possible exception of Maude Gonne), their only option is to identify with the domestic peasant women, who as Henry Merritt argues, are equated with lower, materialistic values: “Pursuit of a living woman, the play rhetorically argues, is pursuit of the shallow” (651). It is such a dichotomy that makes *Cathleen* is the most vivid demonstration of the “intersection between womanhood and Irishness” (81) that Boland so deplures.

The problematic representations of women in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* apparently did not worry nationalists (even female nationalists) when the play was first produced in 1902. Antoinette Quinn remarks:

Nationalists, far from being perturbed by this dramatization of the split between the materialist and familist priorities of peasant conservatism and the abandonment of [home and hearth] advocated by physical-force nationalism, were elated by the triumph of the woman-nation. *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which subordinated the interests of women to a sacrificial paradigm of male patriotism and invoked a literary tradition of political allegory, was enshrined as the exemplary nationalist play. (430)

At the same time that this “exemplary nationalist play” marginalizes its (real) female characters, however, its structure reveals the problems it rhetorically poses for them. The ending provides an interesting contrast between Cathleen’s charismatic call to arms and Bridget and Delia’s grief as Michael leaves with her. An audience familiar with the 1798 rebellion (as the original audience was) understands that Michael is almost certainly going to his death. The failure of the 1798 Rebellion is unchangeable historical fact, and despite Cathleen’s assurance that if “[her friends] are put down to-day they will get the upper hand tomorrow” (9) the audience knows that Michael’s death will result in no tangible change during his relatives’ lifetimes. Furthermore, Cathleen’s promised reward to the rebels is that “They shall be remembered for ever,/ They shall be alive for ever,/ They shall be speaking for ever,/ The people shall hear them for ever” (1-4). Such a “payment” excludes the heroes’ wives and mothers, or at least de-emphasizes the emotional and physical hardships they endure. Given this “reward,” it is hardly surprising that Bridget and Delia oppose Michael’s eager self-sacrifice. They, after all, will not be remembered by the songs and stories and will be without a breadwinner besides. Even though the audience is clearly meant to side with Cathleen’s version of Irish womanhood, the play nevertheless allows for the possibility that the binary roles it produces are problematic.

It is precisely the unfortunate situation of the “materialist” peasant women in *Cathleen* that Sean O’Casey highlights in *Juno and the Paycock*. The play is a bitter riposte to the militant nationalism of *Cathleen* and is equally important within the Irish national tradition. In fact, Neil Jordan, when considering the problems of representing Irish history in *Michael Collins*, cites O’Casey as “the first and best revisionist” (*Film Diary* 38). *Juno* mounts a particularly virulent critique through its female characters. Set in a decaying tenement building during the Irish Civil War, the play contrasts the

ostentatious nationalism of the male characters with the quiet practicality of the matriarch, Juno, and (to a lesser extent) her daughter Mary. The two women are trapped as the caretakers of ‘Captain’ Jack Boyle, Juno’s good-for-nothing husband, and her young, crippled son Johnny. While Boyle is a drunk who avoids work at any cost and situates at least one of his creative justifications for his laziness (a supposed antagonism towards priests) in nationalism, Johnny can be seen, in many ways, as an answer to *Cathleen*’s Michael. Like Michael, Johnny has followed The Poor Old Woman straight into the line of fire: he took a bullet in the hip during the Easter Rebellion and later lost an arm in the War of Independence. His character is somewhat sympathetic, but his nationalist fervor does not offer any tangible benefit to his family. Thus, it is easy to side with Juno when Johnny boasts of his sacrifices to “principle” and she tells him “Ah, you lost your best principle, me boy, when you lost your arm; them’s the only sort o’ principles that’s any good to a workin’ man” (214). When Johnny replies with typical nationalistic rhetoric that “Ireland only half free’ll never be at peace while she has a son left to pull a trigger” (214), Juno’s sarcastic reply, “To be sure, to be sure—no bread’s a lot better than half a loaf” (214), suggests the real problems facing the family are material difficulties, for which she alone bears responsibility.

But lest one think of Juno as solely materialistic, the emotional toll that Johnny exacts on her is even more affecting. This toll materializes when the audience discovers that Johnny has betrayed a fellow “Diehard” to the Free State government, a “crime” for which he is summarily executed by the IRA. Juno’s grief forces her into a feminine solidarity that transcends politics when she invokes the mother of the dead “Diehard” that Johnny betrayed:

Ah, why didn’t I remember that then he wasn’t a Diehard or a Stater, but only a poor dead son! It’s well I remember all that she said—an’ it’s my turn to say it now: [...] Mother o’ God, Mother o’ God, have pity on us all! Blessed Virgin,

where were you when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets, when me darlin' son was riddled with bullets? (245)

Unlike Michael, Johnny did not sacrifice himself gloriously for Ireland: his death is simply a sordid tragedy. Susan Harris points out that in the scenes preceding his (off stage) execution, Johnny is an unattractive character: his reaction to Mary's pregnancy is, frankly, selfish. Harris suggests that "[O'Casey's] solution is to follow Johnny's arrest with Juno's lament, ensuring that viewers who remain unmoved by the death of an informer will nonetheless be affected by his mother's grief" (252). Thus, in accordance with O'Casey's critique of sacrificial rhetoric, *Juno* establishes the mother's suffering as a challenge to nationalistic politics in a way that *Cathleen* does not.

While O'Casey's portrayal of the brutal effects of nationalist violence on an impoverished Irish woman is certainly admirable, *Juno* does not necessarily challenge conventional Irish womanhood. Harris analyzes the means by which O'Casey privileges Juno's maternal priorities:

The power of Juno's maternal love, and her unswerving dedication to solving material problems and ensuring the family's material survival, remains absolutely identified with her role as homemaker... It is exactly this 'natural,' feminine desire to keep the home together at all costs that engenders the bourgeois self-absorption that leads her to discount Mary's attempts at collective action because they adversely affect their individual family unit. (257)

In the process of critiquing idealistic rhetoric, therefore, O'Casey reinscribes essentialist gender identities and "natural" feminine roles. The problems that such restrictive essentialisms present become especially apparent at the end of the play when Mary's illegitimate pregnancy is revealed. Not a single male in the household (or outside of it) offers any support. Indeed, Boyle is openly hostile towards his daughter: "tell that lassie o' yours not to be here when I come back; for if I lay me eyes on her, I'll lay me hans on her, an' if I lay me hans on her, I won't be accountable for me actions!" (240). Yet despite the fact that the feminine is morally privileged through Juno's heroic assertion



that Mary's child will have "what's far better [than a father]—it'll have two mothers" (244), it is unclear how the two women will survive in a society as openly hostile to unwed pregnancies as early twentieth-century Ireland. Their unfortunate situation highlights Ireland's desperate need for social change, and yet O'Casey does not offer any credible alternative.<sup>1</sup> Having discounted "principles," the women in *Juno and the Paycock* are left with nothing.

If plight of the domestic woman provides a sentimental critique of masculine political violence, the stereotype of the politically dangerous female "fury" is another way to use women as a critique of armed revolt. While such representations were used mostly by anti-nationalists during the 1920s, they did appear in Irish works, particularly once militant nationalism had become unfashionable (as in the later decades of the second Troubles). Probably the most well-known use of this trope in modern film is Jude, the "psychotic, sexy and murderous" (Steel 104) IRA volunteer in *The Crying Game*. Jayne Steel analyzes the ways in which Jude fulfills "the desire for representations of, in essence, more 'dangerous' fantasy figures" (103) than the patient, old-fashioned "auxiliary" women, brought on by the IRA's active recruitment of women during the 1960s. While Steel focuses on the ways in which Jude is "pleasurable" (104) to the male viewer, I will consider how Jordan's portrayal of Jude illustrates his political convictions. Specifically, I examine how Jordan uses Jude's stereotypical attributes in order to build an ideal of peace and reconciliation from which she – a politically active woman – must be excluded.

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<sup>1</sup> Declan Kiberd sees this as a flaw in most of O'Casey's drama: "O'Casey's code scarcely moved beyond a sentimentalization of victims, and this in turn led him to a profound distrust of anyone who makes an idea the basis for an action. If this was radicalism, Irish-style, it was a bleak illustration of the old truism that in Ireland 'socialism' never stood for much more than a fundamental goodness of heart. As a dramatist... O'Casey proved no more capable than any of his characters of developing or analyzing an idea" (*Inventing Ireland* 223).

In a film that otherwise deconstructs national and gender identities, Jude stands out as a harsh stereotype. The only female member of Fergus's IRA unit, she is *The Crying Game*'s major villain. The film opens as she uses her feminine wiles to set a trap for Jody, the captured British soldier whom Fergus eventually befriends. After Jody's death, Fergus moves to London and takes up with Jody's hyper-feminine "woman" Dil, with whom he finds a measure of domestic comfort, despite the revelation of Dil's penis. Jude returns, however, to disrupt this contentment, forcing Fergus to agree to assassinate a British politician by threatening Dil. Dil eventually puts an end to the plot by shooting Jude, allowing Fergus to escape what would have almost certainly been a suicide mission. Fergus accepts the blame for the killing and turns himself in, and the film ends with Dil visiting him in prison, implying that their relationship survives the ordeal.

Sarah Edge argues that *The Crying Game* should be viewed alongside

lavish Hollywood productions that we have recently seen in cinemas. From the punishment of transgressing women in *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* (1992) to a new-found masculine identity, based on compassion, respect and love between men, negotiated across films like *Parenthood* (1989), *Hook* (1991), and *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (1991) [sic]. (183)

Such a "new masculinity," Edge argues, requires the sacrifice of the female characters' humanity, because this "alliance between men is developed by a narrative that excludes women, in which the film's resolution is ultimately based on their expulsion and punishment for daring to challenge the naturalized status of patriarchal power and culture" (183). The "alliance between men" developed in *The Crying Game* is explicitly political; Fergus, first with Jody and then with Dil, overcomes his abstract hatred of "the British" through personal relationships. Contemporary transgender theory would, of course, classify Dil according to her unequivocal identification as a woman. The film, however, draws enough attention to her "manhood" (most famously through Fergus's visceral reaction to her penis) to suggest that Jordan sees Fergus/Dil as a feminized male

couple.<sup>2</sup> While the Jordan's depiction of this relationship may be problematic, it is nonetheless sympathetic. The price of this sympathy for the feminized male, however, is the exclusion of the masculinized female. Jordan's pacifist logic privileges Dil's performance of traditional femininity over Jude's performance of masculinity; Dil uses her femininity to make private and nonviolent "safe space" (Rogers 94) for both herself and for Fergus. Dil does not emasculate Fergus, but allows him to remain in "the empowering role of Man" (Rogers 95) while freeing him from the constraints of violent masculinity by reinforcing his rejection of Jude and her violent politics.

Jordan views Fergus's transformation from an IRA militant into a gentle, domestic lover as the best way forward for peace, symbolized in the film by Fergus's refusal at the end of the film to carry out the assassination.<sup>3</sup> Jude, representing everything dangerous about militant Irish nationalism, invades Fergus's domestic "safe space" and forces him, at gunpoint, to once again privilege his political identity. Dil must then step in and "rescue" Fergus by tying him to the bed, constraining him, literally, to the domestic, and by shooting Jude, neutralizing the political threat to their relationship through an act of de-politicized violence. The problem with such a set-up is that there remains no space for politically-active women. Jude may be "overcome by a negative male essentialism" (Rogers 97), but she has relatively little choice; her previous performance of femininity – when she was used as "bait" to trap Jody – went unacknowledged by her IRA colleagues. Jude finds political power *only* through the use of a gun, and she loses her humanity because of it.

In defense of Jordan's portrayal of Jude, Emer and Kevin Rockett suggest that her character is "a logical projection of [Jordan's] schema that, in order for men to survive,

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<sup>2</sup> For more on classifications within transgender and queer theory, see Elliot.

<sup>3</sup> In this argument, Jordan shares his views with a number of Irish artists who seek to resolve political violence by personalizing the political relationships between characters, most notably Bernard McLaverty's *Cal* (1982) and Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* (1996).

they must make female choices while women make male choices” (134). Fergus, they claim, will survive by taking on “the humanist values which can come to the fore once the public sphere of male military activities is abandoned” (137). These values, however predicated as they are on performance rather than biology, nonetheless presume a separation of female/private/domestic and male/public/political spheres. However well-taken Jordan’s critique of dehumanizing institutions may be, *The Crying Game* does not break new ground in its representations of women. Irish nationalism is once again identified with a dehumanized female figure – except in Jordan’s version this woman must hold men at gunpoint to convince them to fight. This representation is significant for the Irish politics of *The Crying Game* which, like *Michael Collins*, rhetorically argues that violence is no longer a relevant solution to the problem of partition. Jordan therefore portrays Jude’s political activity as thoughtless lust for masculine power. *The Crying Game* thus locates all the possibilities for peace and change with domesticated masculinity, while ruling out any possibilities for non-feminine women. *The Crying Game* may be suitably complex to dodge charges of essentialism, but it retains both *Cathleen* and *Juno*’s problematically gendered binaries.

While all the works discussed above take domestic familial relationships as their primary subject matter, *Michael Collins* and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* focus instead on males in the political sphere. The screen time for female characters is necessarily limited. Nevertheless, both Jordan and Loach use female characters to make political arguments. The films’ different representations of women demonstrate the extent to which these directors conform to or critique the confining or dehumanizing narratives discussed above. In particular, a comparison of *Barley* with *Michael Collins* illuminates the feminist dimensions of Loach’s political project, which are absent from Jordan’s treatment of Irish politics and history.

*Michael Collins* was Jordan's big-budget follow up to *The Crying Game*. The film, which Jordan had envisioned for quite some time, turned into an enormously public event in Ireland. Cullingford describes it as "a well-acted, visually attractive, occasionally over-obvious and rather too swiftly paced bio-epic: *Ghandi* at warp speed in the rain" (*Ireland's Others* 90) and goes on to note that, despite its adherence to Hollywood conventions "it caused a popular sensation and was widely hailed as the most important Irish film ever made.... the Irish creative talent, the location shoots with Irish extras and the nationalist subject matter won it a certificate of authenticity" (90). As the title and genre imply, *Michael Collins* tells the story of single male protagonist, one who, to Jordan, embodies "all the contradictions of the period.... There was potential for a drama here that was huge in its scale, sulphurous in its implications and yet intimate in scope" (*Film Diary* 3). Jordan takes great pains to cast Collins as more than a symbol, while using his story to explore the contradictions of Irish history and, eventually, to craft a narrative of the War of Independence and Civil War that is intimately connected to his humanist politics.

Despite some right-wing reactions to *Michael Collins's* favorable depiction of the early IRA<sup>4</sup>, the film argues even more forcefully than *The Crying Game* against militant nationalism. This political position is unsurprising, given that *Michael Collins* was filmed during the tenuous ceasefire from 1994 to 1996, which was broken just seven months before the film's premier by the Canary Warf bombings. Although Jordan takes his subject matter from history, there are obvious political parallels between past and present. While Jordan does alter a number of details concerning behavior of the British during the War of Independence,<sup>5</sup> his most obvious historical license is the depiction of

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<sup>4</sup> For a full discussion of reactions to the depiction of the British in the film, see Elizabeth Cullingford, *Ireland's Others* pp. 89-95.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough analysis of such deviations and their relevance, see *ibid* pp. 89-95 and 216-233.

Collins – the exemplary guerilla – as a kind of pacifist. Cullingford describes Jordan’s Collins as:

An advocate of peace and a statesman who upholds the democratically expressed will of the majority. Jordan was aware that, at the time he died, the historical Michael Collins was busy supplying guns to Catholics in the North, ... but he suppresses this fact in order to claim that his hero died while trying ‘to take the gun out of Irish politics.’ In the contemporary Northern context, Jordan’s alteration of the facts sends a relatively uncontroversial message: if violence was originally necessary in order to get the attention of the easily distracted British, it is now time for it to stop. (95)

Jordan does not skim over British brutalities in Ireland, but he does make it clear that such historical brutalities do not excuse present-day IRA activity, as his film sides unambiguously with the Free State against the anti-Treatyites from whose ranks would spring the present-day IRA.

Because *Michael Collins* adopts the “Hollywood” style of a blockbuster biopic the public/domestic and personal/political dichotomies set out in *The Crying Game* are more firmly entrenched in biology. Kitty Kiernan (Julia Roberts) is a stereotypical Hollywood love interest: feminine, domestic, and apolitical.<sup>6</sup> Despite her lack of participation in the public sphere, however, Kitty serves as an abstract representative of Irish nationalism for the film’s male characters. Because Jordan’s project in *Michael Collins* is both anti-colonial and pacifist, Kitty’s position is somewhat more nuanced than either Cathleen’s or Jude’s, but it is no less problematic. Placed at the apex of an allegorical love triangle, Kitty has little autonomy in her symbolic role and, once she becomes Collins’s lover, she is relegated almost completely to the domestic sphere. The result is a character who is little more than a handsome accessory. Kitty allows Jordan’s Collins to make “feminizing” choices that counterbalance his political violence and

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<sup>6</sup> It might be interesting to note that, while Jordan had reservations about casting big-name American actor Matt Dillon in the role of Harry Boland, he did not have similar “authenticity” reservations about Roberts, at least not as they were expressed in his Film Diary (his concerns were mostly financial). Such a disparity may indicate the extent to which Kitty’s appeal was meant to be universal rather than specifically “Irish.”

reassure the viewer about his good intentions for Ireland, and she thereby reinforces Jordan's political point about the problem of violent revolution. Never, however, is she granted a distinct identity or agency of her own, and in both her limited roles she embodies domesticity, passivity and femininity.

*Barley* was released just ten years after *Michael Collins*, and yet it debuted in a completely different political climate. The peace process had been successful, the Good Friday Agreement had been signed, and the Celtic Tiger economy remained strong. In historical context, funding, budget, and directorial preferences, *Barley* is a radically different film from *Michael Collins*. It was, however, no less successful and no less "Irish."<sup>7</sup> Loach's film was honored on the festival circuit and in Ireland it did well at the box office, coming in just behind big-budget Hollywood blockbusters *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Casino Royale* as the third-highest-grossing film of the year (Van den Berg). Indeed, it was the highest-grossing film ever made in Ireland, and its international success revived the struggling Irish film industry. It enjoyed success on a political level too: in a poll undertaken in 2007 by *The Irish Times*, *Barley* tied with *Casablanca* as the favorite film of Irish politicians.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps because of the political context of the film, critical reception of *Barley* focused less on contemporary parallels with Northern Ireland and more on British policy elsewhere in the world, particularly in Iraq. Loach himself was careful not to push the parallels too far, noting that the screenplay was written before the Second Gulf War and stressing general, rather than specific, thematic parallels:

There are always armies of occupation somewhere in the world being resisted by the people they're occupying. I don't need to tell you where the British now

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<sup>7</sup> For a thorough comparison of both films' "Irishness" (as measured through funding and cast/crew), see McLoone, "Ireland" in *The Cinema of Small Nations*.

<sup>8</sup> "Politicians form a coalition in favour of *Casablanca*." For obvious reasons, *Casablanca* appealed more across the political spectrum and therefore technically "won" the poll.

illegally have an army of occupation and the damage and the casualties and the brutality that is emerging from that. (“Iraq war”)

Despite Loach’s careful phrasing and the resolved situation in Northern Ireland, the film still provoked a level of outrage similar to that of *Michael Collins*. Harry Macadam at *The Sun* (UK) described *Barley* as “the most pro-IRA film ever,” a view which seems to implicitly acknowledge *Michael Collins*’s moderate stance. Still, few commentators took into account *Barley*’s support for the anti-Treatyites. Instead, broader allegations of a “poisonously anti-British” (Luckhurst) agenda made up much of the controversy.<sup>9</sup> Yet *Barley* was sufficiently complicated that even Ian Paisley did not see the film as pure propaganda:

Some have billed this drama as favourable to the IRA. I have no doubt when Shinnars go to the cinema and watch it they will soon begin to feel uncomfortable because the tricky subject of the ultimate betrayal by Irishmen of the ideals of a free Republic does surface. It’s more dissident than Provo.... Better spare yourself the awkward questions from the children and go and watch something that doesn’t provoke the ghosts in the closet.

Other commentators were less willing to delve into the film’s complexities; Tim Luckhurst at *The Times* (London) compared Loach to Leni Riefenstahl (the same comparison was leveled at Jordan a decade earlier).<sup>10</sup> Paisley’s somewhat unexpected analysis, however, points towards a problem that even politically neutral reviewers encountered when considering the film: reconciling Loach’s clear moral sympathy for the rebels’ principles with his bleak and unsparing representations of their violent actions.

Those reviewers less inclined to outrage generally acknowledged *Barley*’s interpretation of history as controversial but focused their reviews on the film’s disturbingly brutal violence, slow pace, and stunning cinematography. Yet those who did

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because such accusations could apply equally to the film’s treatment of Britain’s past behavior in Ireland and its contemporary involvement in Iraq.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Tookey, unhappy with both the film’s political message and austere aesthetics, offered this response to Macadam’s comparison: “That strikes me as harsh. Riefenstahl was far more visually talented.”



offer political analysis of the film were not unanimous in their interpretations. Reviewers in Ireland and the UK (including those who were part of the outraged reaction discussed above) generally agreed that Loach meant the audience to side with Damien (Cillian Murphy) against the treaty. British and Irish reviewers familiar with Loach's work pointed to his reputation as a Marxist, and criticized him for overly sympathizing with the socialist Damien. Chris Tookey at the *Daily Mail* cited visual evidence for this interpretation:

It is a huge weakness of the picture that Loach's sympathies are so overwhelmingly on the side of the more cinematic brother: the handsome, high-cheekboned, dewy-eyed Cillian Murphy, who plays the movie in a near-beatific trance, as though he expects imminent martyrdom.

Even those reviewers who were more favorable towards the film found it one-sided: Anthony Quinn at *The Independent* (London) described *Barley* as "driven by such incandescent purpose and acted with such passion that you'd very much like to give it the benefit of the doubt," even though he claims the film demonstrates Loach's tendency to force "his artistic instincts into the headlock of propaganda."

Reviewers with less political investment in the film, mainly those outside of Ireland and the UK, had much more humanist interpretations. Geoff Pevere at *The Toronto Star* suggested that *Barley* belongs "to a rich subcategory of films in which people kill each other. These are the films that ask what the killing does. How does the soul bear the weight of murder?" Stephen Hunter at *The Washington Post* summed up *Barley's* message as "violence begets violence,...oppression begets violence and... testosterone begets violence," and Kirsten Heysen at South Australia's *Sunday Mail* claimed simply that "*The Wind that Shakes the Barley* can be read as a powerful anti-war statement." Unlike the UK reviewers discussed above, those who viewed *Barley* as anti-war saw Damien less as a Hollywood hero and more as an increasingly dangerous

zealot.<sup>11</sup> Murphy's "dewy" eyes even came into play in at least two reviews: Pevere suggested that they "seem to turn to ice over the course of the film" while Ong Sor Fern at *The Straits Times* (Singapore) described them as "liquidly expressive, shading from youthful idealism to an almost fanatic martyrdom." These interpretations demonstrate the more problematic aspects of Damien's character; his participation in the brutal execution of British soldiers, his (eventual) willingness to shoot an informer whom he has known since childhood, and his unfailing devotion to idealism, even if it means more bloodshed. Certainly, Loach's well-known socialist politics and highly political oeuvre suggest a partisan approach; however *Barley's* unflinching portrayal of IRA violence and focus on divergent political views provide some support for the non-partisan interpretations. More specifically, the secondary characters, and particularly the women, play a significant role in revealing the film's political sympathies.

Loach's communal (and fictional) approach to history and filmmaking makes it difficult to discern conventional "heroic" narratives in his films. John Hill, writing about *Kes*, suggests that while Loach's films may follow male individuals, they are *about* communities and systemic oppression. Contrasting Loach's well-received, low-budget *Kes* with the similar but more popular *Billy Elliot*, Hill notes that "[*Kes*] sets itself explicitly against the conventional drama of individual escape [...] in order to emphasize the *systematic* aspects of economic and social disadvantage" ("Working class hero" 103 Hill's emphasis). In a similar vein, *Barley* might answer Kevin Rockett's assertion that popular Irish films are

ostensibly dealing with social or political issues, but often lose sight of the broader critiques of which they are capable due to the strictures imposed by Hollywood's three-act dramaturgy [...] The demand to place the hero at the

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<sup>11</sup> In this view, they may have been influenced by Murphy's roles as villains in the Hollywood blockbusters *Batman Begins* and *Red Eye*, both of which were released in 2005.

center of the narrative inevitably displaces broader cultural critiques. (“Irish cinema” 24)

The gender of the “hero” is not accidental. That the “individual escape” narrative comes at the expense of female characters becomes clear when Hill discusses *Billy Elliot*: “the goal-centered, linear narrative of *Billy Elliot* is... clearly organized around the achievement of individual male identity” (106). Like *Kes*, and like most of Loach’s other films, *Barley* is about the effects of systemic oppression on the community; in this case that community is the flying column and their supporters. In avoiding a linear, masculine narrative, Loach opens space for a realistic exploration of women’s experience of the conflict.

In *Michael Collins*, however, Jordan approaches his protagonist on a strictly individual level. The secondary characters are only important insofar as they allow Jordan to develop Collins’s interiority.<sup>12</sup> As he edited the film, Jordan worried about the effects of making Collins too much of a hero:

there is something about either the character of Michael Collins or Liam’s portrayal of him that makes him impossible to dislike, whatever the horror of the events he sets in motion. In fact, the reverse could rather alarmingly be true. You admire him for his ruthlessness. (61)

Brutal as his orders may be, Collins himself rarely holds a gun, and does not participate in any of the killing. While the characters in *Barley* consistently commit brutalities on-screen, Jordan emphasizes the moral implications of Collins’s violence through his private conversations. Talking to his friend Harry Boland, Collins explains his views of the British:

I hate them. Not for their race. Not for their brutality. I hate them because they’ve left us no way out. I hate whoever put a gun in Ned Tannin’s hand. I know it’s me, and I hate myself for it. And I hate them so much that I have to do

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<sup>12</sup> Jordan’s development of Collins’s character also relies on a number of other cinematic and narrative techniques, including Neeson’s charismatic performance and Jordan’s “villainizing” of Eamon de Valera, which Cullingford discusses in-depth.

that. I hate them for making hate necessary. And I'll do what I have to to end it.  
(104)

Jordan does not want his audience to approve of Collins's brutality, but neither does he want to compromise his film's anti-colonial stance. His solution is to emphasize Collins's inner turmoil by allowing him to voice his anxieties in a safely apolitical domestic space. If Boland's friendship provides this opportunity in the first half of the film, Kitty increasingly provides it as her relationship with Collins progresses.

As the only major female character in the film, Kitty synthesizes Jordan's historical and ideological storylines. Like Dil did for Fergus, Kitty emphasizes Collins's capacity for compassion: an important counterpoint to the necessary brutality of his masculine politics. Her feminizing role is most apparent in Jordan's *Godfather* homage where he juxtaposes the "Bloody Sunday" assassinations of British intelligence officers (ordered and organized by Collins, though he does not directly participate in the killings) with a love scene between Kitty and Collins.<sup>13</sup> The scene gives Collins a chance to agonize over the violence as Kitty personalizes and feminizes it, comparing the bullets to love letters and asking Collins "do you think they got the message?" The contrast between the tenderness of the love scene, where Collins tortures himself over his use of violence, and the brutality of the executions serves the dual purpose of both humanizing Collins and emphasizing the callousness of the violence. Kitty is passive in this situation, and the lines she delivers are abstract to the point of being meaningless. Because she is

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<sup>13</sup> Luke Gibbons reads this scene as Jordan's riposte to British policies in Northern Ireland which sought to frame the IRA as criminals, mobsters, or "Godfathers." He claims "By reworking the image of the gangster in the light of both recent developments in the genre and the aura surrounding Collins, Jordan's film has, in effect, lifted the crude, sinister associations off the stereotype of the 'Godfather,' thereby depriving revisionist demonology of one of its favorite tropes" ('Framing history,' 51). While such a view may be true of Jordan's historic project, Jordan's view of contemporary IRA activities in *The Crying Game* would seem to demonstrate that he does, on some level, view such activities as criminal. Gibbons reading of the scene, therefore, ought to be confined to Jordan's historical project. More importantly, such a scene contrasts with the present-day IRA as depicted in *The Crying Game*, as it gives Collins's activities a private and interior context that Jude's violence is never granted.

confined to the domestic space and has no involvement in the plan, she cannot offer a substantive critique, only empty platitudes.

As Jude made clear in *The Crying Game*, there is no room for feminine political actors in the political/domestic dichotomy. Although Collins must retreat to Kitty's domesticity in order to demonstrate his humanity in the face of the unceasing brutality of guerilla warfare, Kitty can have no political stakes in the struggle, for if she did the domestic space would no longer be safely apolitical. Kitty's awkward position is most apparent in the scene in which the characters learn that a truce has been reached with the British. Collins and Boland have taken Kitty to the sea-shore and Collins is sitting back after dinner, watching whimsically as Boland and Kitty dance. A messenger comes hurrying towards him, and when the man asks Collins where he has been, Collins berates him, saying "for God's sake, would you give me one free night to be a human being!" This domestic, non-political setting, associated primarily with Kitty, allows Collins to have some form of humanity (emphasized by his passive situation in the scene) that he cannot have in the political sphere. Collins might gain a "complete" humanity through the merging of masculine and feminine, but Kitty must remain strictly feminine in order for the process to work.

Women are treated quite differently in *Barley*. This difference ought to be evident even in the visuals of each film. Despite her universally-panned Irish accent, Julia Roberts did successfully lend her star persona to *Michael Collins*. An image of her allowed Jordan to portray "the epitome of romanticism" (*Film Diary* 41) by filming "a woman in a period hat waving goodbye to her lover as the train draws him away" (*Film Diary* 41). In contrast, there is little that is romantic about Sinéad's appearance and Loach does little to highlight Orla Fitzgerald's natural beauty. Her hair appears in heavy, unwashed curls through most of the film, and her clothing is loose-

fitting, in heavy, muted fabrics. The only scene in which Sinéad's femininity is visually highlighted is after she has had her hair shorn by the Black and Tans. The long white scarf that she wears at the as she dances suggests purity and even a visual allusion to the Virgin. Yet femininity in this scene is not idealized or pure; the scarf reminds viewers of Sinéad's brutal interrogation, an attack that was rife with threats of sexual violence and that emphasized her vulnerable position in the conflict. When, later, Damien gently loosens the scarf and uncovers Sinéad's shorn head as the screen fades to black, the implication of a consensual sexual encounter is clear, but the romance of the visuals is undercut by the image of Sinéad's shorn head (even if it is now cleaned up) as a reminder of the brutal violence that she has faced. There is little romance, therefore, in *Barley*, and Sinéad, unlike Kitty, is physically marred by the violence.

Sinéad, though, is not just a victim. In fact, she plays a vital part in the resistance movement. In her role as a courier (as a member of Cumann na mBan) she enables almost all of the attacks by the flying column, carrying both messages and arms. While she never uses a gun, she does support the use of physical force. Nevertheless, Sinéad does not, like Jude, become a "pawn" (Rogers 97) or a caricature of masculine power. Instead, she takes advantage of the political possibilities in the midst of the upheaval to attempt to create a female-dominated political space. Unlike any of the examples discussed above examples, Sinéad is not simply domestic, symbolic, or monstrous. Instead, Loach presents a female character whose political principles are shaped by her identity as a poor woman. Because she occupies a position not commonly explored by other nationalist narratives, Sinéad provides an important opportunity to explore the feminist implications of *Barley's* interpretation of history.

While most reviewers were dismissive of Loach's treatment of female characters,<sup>14</sup> questions of gender surfaced in an unexpected demographic. In 2007 *Barley* was shown, in conjunction with the black comedy *Adam and Paul*, for a group of Polish immigrants,<sup>15</sup> and at least one Polish viewer suggested that there was an interesting gender dynamic in the two films:

What I think from those films about Irish men is that they are not very close to reality at all [...] They are either fighting for an idea, a dream, like in *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, or they don't engage with real life at all, like the characters of *Adam and Paul*. It's the women in both films who have a much truer sense of reality. ("Not a quiet man in sight")

I will develop this reviewer's point and argue that the women's reality suggests political interpretation of *Barley* that is more complex than simply "pro-IRA propaganda" or "anti-war humanism." Loach and Lavery go out of their way to portray the women's lived experience of the conflict, and their portrayal of an oppressive political situation has complications that can only be explored through the female characters. Loach's film therefore differs vastly from both *The Crying Game* and *Michael Collins*. It represents women as political agents in both private and public settings and uses their position on the periphery of the Irish political spectrum to critique individualistic male-dominated nationalisms.

*Barley's* structure demonstrates just how significant women are to its political project. In contrast to *Michael Collins*, whose female characters occupy peripheral domestic spaces, *Barley* is structured around women and feminine spaces. Paul Lavery,

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<sup>14</sup> The "Popcorn Panel" (Craig Courtice, Sarah Lazarovic and Robert Cushman) at the Canadian *National Post* had one of the most sustained discussions of the film's women: Lazarovic proposed the topic: "What of Sinéad, her mother, and Nan [Peggy]? I really loved the scene where Nan decides to stay put in her gutted house. So sad, and so revealing. All the women suffer so much in this film." Cushman replied "I liked that scene too, but I didn't find the romance with Sinéad very compelling; it was like she kept appearing out of nowhere on a bike to deliver bad news and then was off again." Their conversation roughly sums up the views of most critics, who found the women's position pitiable, but remained unconvinced of their importance.

<sup>15</sup> The screening was in preparation for "the first travelling Irish film festival in Poland" ("Not a quiet man in sight").

the film's screenwriter, acknowledges this centrality in his discussion of writing a historically accurate film:

As memory was passed from one generation to another Peggy [Sinéad's grandmother] was the key to finding the other characters. From her and from her daughter Bernadette...and granddaughter Sinéad,...we could get a sense of the role played by the local population in the war, particularly the women, which had to be integral to the script.... So Peggy's farmhouse, and the three generations of women who live there, became the root of the story. (Lavery 12, my emphasis)

It is not difficult to discern these women's centrality: the action of the film opens at the farmhouse with Micheal's murder; the turning point of the film comes when the characters receive news of the truce (again, at the farmhouse); and the film ends as Sinéad, again standing in front of her home, learns of Damien's death. This centrality is not simply domestic, for Sinéad and her family make appearances at almost all of the key political moments of the film. For example, Sinéad's role as a courier means that she brings news of the raid on the barracks, the weapons for the attack on the British Auxiliary Forces, the news of Chris's betrayal, and the announcement of the first hostilities of the Civil War.

The female-centric structure of *Barley* means that the "women's sphere" is a complex space, and the film constantly troubles the public/private divide. Peggy's farmhouse becomes a violently political location; it is searched twice by the British (and eventually burned down), then searched by the Free State soldiers, and, finally, becomes the site where Sinéad learns of Damien's death. The intrusion of violence into the home has its basis in historical fact.<sup>16</sup> Lavery, however, discussing the screenplay, emphasizes the political dimensions of the conflict, asserting that women's attachment to their homes is not a natural outgrowth of their femininity, but a calculated political stance:

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<sup>16</sup> "Those who suffered the worst were those who remained at home. The *Interim Report* of the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland proclaimed 'the sanctity of the family home is violated' by the 48,474 raids which were carried out on homes during that one year" (Ward, *Unmanageable* 143).



I imagined someone like Peggy as a child, experiencing eviction during the Famine, and then again in her thirties during the agricultural depression of the 1870s, perhaps with children. The Famine had such a catastrophic effect, and was in many ways the product of Ireland being a colony...Peggy has lived through so much injustice and pain she is a rebel to her marrow. She is absolutely opposed to British rule and under no circumstances will she allow herself to be evicted for a third time. (12)

Peggy's resistance is at once political and personal, public and domestic. While Damien and the other volunteers repeatedly suffer humiliating searches at the hands of the British forces, Peggy's life is an even longer drawn-out experience of systemic exploitation. Lavery does not view Peggy's refusal to leave her house as passive tenacity, but as a statement of political rebellion.

Peggy's domesticity, therefore, is a form of nationalism, not a barrier to it. While *Cathleen* presents nationalist ideals and material comforts as inevitably separate, *Barley* represents them as intertwined. Because her position in society embodies this connection, Peggy's nationalist feelings are incredibly enduring. Not only has she survived famine and numerous economic upheavals, but she shouts back at British troops and refuses to kneel before them when Sinéad is questioned. Sinéad's public expression of political commitment is her inheritance from her grandmother. It is therefore a mistake to read Teddy's invocation of Sinéad's domesticity at the end of the film uncritically. Teddy, by this time the voice of the patriarchal Irish Free State, addresses Damien: "Sinéad loves you... you're meant for each other... you should have sons and daughters and teach them to be gentle and happy." The idyllic scene that Teddy paints is not separate from Sinéad's radical politics, as he implies, but a part of them. Damien's capitulation to this domestic ideal would mean the sacrifice of everything that he and Sinéad had fought for. By silencing Sinéad's political voice, Teddy evokes the Catholic patriarchy of the Free State government against which Sinéad and Damien are fighting. He places Sinéad back in a safely domestic space in order to attempt Damien to give up

his radical views. Loach, though, refuses to reiterate this narrative of feminine domesticity. Instead, he portrays Peggy, and especially Sinéad, as political agents who deserve a chance to shape the policies that determine their domestic conditions.

To develop this argument, Loach and Lavery not only politicize domestic spaces,<sup>17</sup> but also feminize the public sphere. Their most significant intervention in this regard is a scene set in a Republican court, which they frame as a feminine space. The scene shows the first split between Damien's ideals and Teddy's pragmatism. The two brothers disagree when the judge, Lily, rules against a wealthy IRA supporter who has been charging what she calls "extortionate" interest rates on loans to his poor neighbors. The resulting debate pits the female authority of the court against the male-dominated IRA. The lines of the debate are drawn visually as Lily, Sinéad, and an unnamed female clerk, all three in official uniform, line up to face Teddy. When Damien and Dan step in to defend the court's decision, their argument is a defense of a political system run almost entirely by women.

The court scene, and particularly the character of Lily, might have been drawn directly from an anecdote about Aine Heron, a solicitor in the Republican courts that Ward describes in *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*:

A money lender, who was also proprietor of a grocery shop, had brought a case against a number of women who had borrowed money to buy food from his shop and failed to repay him. The two justices [Aine Ceannt and Aine Heron] calculated that he was getting 800 percent interest on his investment and they dismissed the case, announcing that they wanted the system of money lending discouraged. But Austin Stack, Minister of Home Affairs, refused to accept this verdict, telling them that their duty was to uphold the law and not to condone departures from it. Aine Heron appears to have been a person of compassion and spirit, who refused to be overwhelmed by the rigmarole of court etiquette. On another occasion she angrily told a barrister who was aggressively cross-

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<sup>17</sup> *Michael Collins* also features a multiple invasions of domesticity, most notably during the aforementioned Bloody Sunday assassinations, when the targets are attacked as they go about their daily business.

examining a witness that she would not allow brow-beating, adding ‘You must be fair, this is not a British court.’ (141)

Loach and Laverty recreate this historical anecdote in order to dramatize the new Irish political order. Through the courtroom scene, women’s participation in politics becomes a touchstone for the Republican ideals within the film. It is not accidental that Lily rules in favor of a poor woman and against a wealthy landowner: the women in the courtroom represent the ideal practices of a free society. Yet the disagreement with Teddy also displays some of the fault lines in this new society if power structures remain unchanged and “the important political decisions remained in the hands of male administrators and politicians” (Ward 142). The women in *Barley* not only challenge patriarchal norms, but actually create their own political spaces.

Kitty’s political symbolism, in contrast, is entirely defined by the men around her. Her emblematic role is visually and thematically underscored roughly halfway through the film. Collins, Boland and Kitty take a group outing to the seaside, and as they walk down the boardwalk, Kitty tells the two men that earlier in the day she had bet on a horse named “Irish Republic.” The men laughingly compare the horse’s fifty-to-one odds to the relative numbers of English and Irish soldiers in Ireland and conclude that the fifty-to-one seems optimistic. “Optimistic or no,” Kitty replies, “she won.” Naturally, Kitty’s tale proves prophetic, and the men learn of the truce as Kitty’s winnings buy them dinner. The fact that this pivotal moment occurs in the context of the love triangle is no accident. Walking down the boardwalk, talking about “Irish Republic’s” big win, Kitty is arm-in-arm with the men on either side of her. In the preceding scene, the men argued playfully over who would take her to the seaside, suggesting that competition for her has already begun to drive them apart. Her position in between them in the boardwalk scene, talking

about the “Irish Republic” with which she has aligned herself, foreshadows the political strife that the Civil War will bring.

When Kitty’s domestic and symbolic roles become intertwined, they do so in a way that disempowers Kitty as a character. Kitty, in fact, openly encourages Collins and Boland to bond homosocially over her, as she says to Boland when he asks where their relationship stands: “You without him. Him without you. I can’t imagine it.” In Jordan’s screenplay, her position is made even clearer: “Boland: A three-legged race.../Kitty: And anyone runs too fast, we’ll all fall down” (133) Of course, a three-legged race would require only two participants: Boland and Collins – Kitty disappears from her own analogy. Kitty’s actions – the main one being her choice of Collins and subsequent defense of him – do not demonstrate any sort of political agency; they are entirely personal. As Collins departs for the treaty negotiations, for instance, Kitty walks hurriedly through a crowd of jubilant Dubliners, who wave prominent tricolors. She is here both a part of the crowd – an image that aligns her with the nation – and separate from the political implications of the mass celebration: she is not celebrating, but attempting to meet Collins.

While Kitty herself is not politically active, her eventual “choice” of Collins has allegorically political implications because it comes in the context of the treaty negotiations. The timing provides Jordan with a personal motivation for Boland’s anti-treaty stance, but, more significantly, it reinforces his positive representation of Collins’s support for the treaty. Kitty, still symbolic of the nation, chooses Collins even as Collins chooses the treaty: both Kitty and the country are now in his possession. Kitty as a symbol is more than an aesthetic trope; her role as representative of the Irish nation has important consequences for Jordan’s political project. These politics are most obvious when Kitty accepts Collins’s marriage proposal on the eve, it is implied, of the vote on

the treaty. Her acquiescence foreshadows the majority vote for the treaty and underscores Jordan's conviction that violence is no longer the preferred method of the Irish people. In this capacity, Kitty's domestic and political roles merge and she becomes the representative of an Irish populace that is pacifist, domestic and, most importantly, supportive of Collins's new kind of conciliatory politics.

By the end of the film, Kitty can only serve as a melodramatic device to highlight the tragedy of Collins's death, the political implications of which are spelled out to the audience by text superimposed over historical footage of his funeral. Thus, in the end, Kitty has become a de-politicized figure of grief: a mourner for the martyr Collins. Kitty's feelings about the circumstances of his death – beyond personal grief – are never explored. Her position does have political significance, however, in light of Jordan's argument for nonviolence: Kitty becomes a way for the audience to identify with the domestic facets of Collins's character. Unfortunately, Jordan never expands Kitty's character beyond the symbolic or sentimental representations that fit her neatly into his humanist portrayal of Collins.

Asked to compare the two films, the only criticism Loach had of *Michael Collins* was Jordan's interpretation of public acceptance of the treaty:

The only point where we might be different is that Neil referred to the democratic justification for accepting the treaty ... But that election was under what the British called the threat of immediate and terrible war so it was a very flawed election. There was hardly a mandate for the treaty. ("Come out fighting")

It is therefore interesting to note that Loach also uses female characters to argue for his interpretation of the treaty vote. Unlike Jordan, however, Loach gives these characters actual political reasons to voice their dissent. Sinéad's part in the argument about the treaty is both political and personal: "My cousins are on the streets of Belfast, burned from their homes by Loyalist mobs. There's refugees all over Dublin. You know what

this treaty means for them? Instead of sectarian gangs, they'll now face those same thugs armed and uniformed by the British state!" Sinéad can seamlessly connect her own family's experience to a broader social problem (refugees) to a systemic injustice (the presence of British forces). Her elegant analysis of the situation makes her stance all the more persuasive.

The Ireland for which Sinéad is fighting is more than a symbol; her politics are informed more by her own experience than by her male companions, and the principles for which she is fighting are not abstract.<sup>18</sup> Actress Orla Fitzgerald touches on Sinéad's politics as she explains her character:

She's not just a sweet country girl. She's clued in to what's going on and the consequences. A lot of the volunteers were thinking 'We'll just get the Brits out,' and not thinking of the aftermath, whereas she's planning for the future. She wants a proper democracy and equal rights for both men and women. She's aware that the war against the British presents a real chance for social change. But she's also aware [...] that there is a real risk that a political solution will lead to a capitalist, conservative government and that the real opportunity for social change – especially for women – will be missed. (Lavery 25)

Fitzgerald's interpretation of her character demonstrates that Sinéad's politics and the desire for "some kind of a life" that she expresses in the film are intimately connected. In this reading she is more similar to Dan than to Damien; her nationalist and socialist politics originate in her experiences rather than the other way around.

In providing a critique of exploitative institutions, therefore, Loach merges public and domestic roles that are distinctly separate in earlier visions of Irish nationalism. This merging is not unique to Sinéad, although it is through her that it is principally expressed. Damien, too, is troubled by the blurring of public and private boundaries, particularly when he is called to play the role of executioner. With a bitter irony that borders on panic, he notes that his medical profession ought to make him opposed to violence: "I

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<sup>18</sup> It is strange to think of Loach as an optimist, but compared to O'Casey, he seems to be (at least on this point).

studied anatomy for five years and now I'm going to shoot this man in the head." Even more significantly, Dan and Damien's socialist convictions are strengthened when Damien is called to treat a child dying of malnutrition. It is evident, therefore, that the men's convictions, too, are rooted in actual human lives – despite Damien's idealism. Sinéad, however, is closer to the real-world implications of their principles than either man because of her positions in both the public and private spheres; it is *her* brother who is murdered, *her* house that is burned to the ground, and *her* lover who is executed.

Because she has a political voice in *Barley*, Sinéad can also critique the narrative of male-centric martyrdom employed by both *Michael Collins* and *Barley*. The critique may be subtle, but it is nonetheless present – and may perhaps account for some of the divergent views on the film. While Sinéad is willing to risk capture and death in her capacity as a messenger, she sees the end goal of the struggle as a political and economic system that offers her “some kind of a life.” She makes her goals explicit as she sees the toll the violence is taking on Damien, saying “I want time with you Damien O'Donovan.” Sinéad's response to her torture and humiliation at the hands of the Black and Tans, therefore, is to reject Peggy's patriotic stoicism which would confine her to a static life of being exploited: “You can't stay here! You can't do that to me! ... I'm not as strong as you Nan... Jesus, Damien will you take me away from here. I want to have some kind of a life, Damien!” In her moment of despair, Sinéad rejects Ireland altogether. Her position makes perfect sense if her devotion is not to an abstract ideal of a “Free Ireland,” but to a practical, functional government that will protect both her political and domestic interests. For this reason, Sinéad has no interest in martyrdom. Her position, which is no less political than Peggy's refusal to move away, provides an important contrast with Damien's steely death-wish at the end of the film.

Sinéad's distaste for martyrdom reflects her political goals, but her participation in the conflict also critiques the gendered nature of sacrificial Irish nationalist narratives. The British soldiers cut Sinéad's hair – a humiliation that is accompanied by the threat of sexual violence. The intimacy of this violence is apparent when Sinéad keeps her shaved head covered in public and it is only in the private space of the bedroom that she allows Damien to unwrap the scarf. Sinéad's sacrifice, therefore, is a domestic one based in humiliation – an embarrassment that ought not to be revealed in public, much less memorialized in song and verse. Her suffering is therefore in stark contrast to Damien's noble and formal execution, which is carried out with strict military protocol – down to Teddy giving the order. Damien's is the formal, masculinized martyrdom that will become the stuff of nationalist legend, as Yeats's Cathleen has promised. Sinéad's will be remembered as a moment of humiliation – if at all.

The sacrificial rhetoric which Sinéad rejects is highly masculinized, as Ward shows:

As the cult of martyrology has always been a powerful motivating force in Irish history and it has always been men who have paid the supreme penalty, this sacrifice of male lives for the national cause has obscured the continual yet less dramatic sacrifices made by women working for the same cause. It has also perpetuated an artificial distinction between man the leader and woman the auxiliary, not least in the consciousness of women themselves. (*Unmanageable* 193-4)

It is therefore not the suffering itself that Sinéad rejects; her resolve remains steely throughout the film. It is, rather, the exclusion on which such rhetoric is predicated. Traditional nationalist narratives will force Sinéad back into the domestic sphere even as Loach dramatizes her patriotic suffering onscreen.

While *Barley* does differ significantly from *Michael Collins* in its interpretation of the motivations behind the anti-Treatyites during the Civil War, the most significant differences between the two films are artistic. Jordan focuses on an individual male



protagonist, a choice which unfortunately comes at the expense of the female characters. Loach's communal approach to history and filmmaking, however, provides space for the exploration of marginalized positions in society, namely, those of women. The difference between the two filmmakers' approaches can be best summed up by the one scene in *Barley* that addresses Michael Collins's role in the conflict: Collins appears as part of a newsreel summarizing the treaty negotiations before a packed theater. The audience refuses to accept this historic event passively; they begin shouting back at the screen and arguing among themselves about the implications of Collins's political decisions. Narrative authority is therefore taken away from the historic figure and restored to the common people. The story, for Loach, is not about a singular individual, but about a community.

Within this community, *Barley's* female characters (especially Sinéad) have the most seamless connection between their political views and their lived experience. This human position allows for an unusually complex exploration of the conflict. Through Sinéad Loach not only critiques imperialist and capitalist oppression, but also challenges masculine traditions of nationalism; she is shown to be marginalized both by the capitalist patriarchy of the Free State and by Damien's continued dedication to violence and eventual martyrdom. Sinéad therefore acts as a fulcrum on which to balance interpretations of the film, because her vulnerable position reveals the problematic aspects of both sides of the Civil War. Not militant, like *Cathleen*, nor pacifist, like *Michael Collins*, Loach's film explores the gray areas of violent political struggle, and women's positions, on the edge of the public/private divide, provide the best access to these areas.

A comparative analysis of *Barley* must, however, take into account the context of the works preceding it. 2006 was, after all, a very good year to be Irish. Loach could

avoid accusations of furthering violent discord in the North and, while his implied critique of the capitalist structure underlying the Celtic Tiger would be borne out with its collapse in 2008, popular visions of Ireland's economic prosperity allowed such a critique to be relatively unthreatening. While Yeats, Lady Gregory, O'Casey, and even Jordan were working in heated political climates, Loach had fewer pressing short-term political concerns. So while previous artists may have explored nationalism at the expense of female characters, Loach enjoys a temporal distance from the conflict that they do not.

Still, *Barley* provides an important correction to more mainstream productions. Loach's small-budget, independent approach confirms Kevin Rockett's assertion that Ireland needs "a filmmaking practice which is sufficiently eclectic to allow both small and large scale productions to flourish" ("Irish cinema" 24). A consideration of *Barley* that places it in the context of earlier and more mainstream pieces demonstrates the importance of this diversity. Loach portrays an emblematic and highly-contest moment in Irish history and nationalist tradition, and therefore offers *Barley* as ripe for comparison with other nationalist narratives. John Hill suggests this approach is symptomatic of Loach's "capacity to 'provoke' audiences and critics and, in so doing, to intervene politically within the public sphere" (*Ken Loach* 221). The Irish labor movement obviously plays a large role in Loach's Marxist interpretation of history, but his broader socialist approach also allows working-class female characters to speak for themselves. Because Irish women have been historically excluded, demonized, or domesticated by nationalist literary traditions, Loach's approach has particularly feminist implications. While it is true that Sinéad historically loses her war, Loach refuses to frame this loss as passive or inevitable. Boland writes "I knew that the women of the Irish past were defeated. I knew it instinctively ... What I objected to was that Irish

poetry should defeat them twice” (82). By presenting their experience as a valid critique of nationalist conventions, *Barley* allows Irish women at least one type of victory.

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