



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

### Supervisor's Report:

#### Lenka Pichrtová Bc. "The Role of Gender in Selected Irish Plays" MA Thesis

The selected topic of this thesis is one that has increasingly been a focus in Irish Studies over the last twenty years and as the accumulation of new critical work on masculinity suggests, the interactions between gender, culture and society continue to be a field of exciting critical work. Given the strong body of work on gender and Irish theatre, the title of the thesis is rather vague offering little sense of what Ms Pichrtová would like to add to that debate. The hypothesis is clear: that each of the three plays mark new frontiers in the representation of sex and gender (12). This is undertaken primarily through plot and character analysis with little focus on the theatrical/performance qualities of the plays or their reception.

Chapter one is mainly constructed as a socio-historical overview of gender politics in Ireland with reference to useful recent sources. These are certainly adequate to the task, although it might have been useful to consider Myrtle Hill's *Women in Ireland: A Century Change* (2003) or work by Ailbhe Smyth available in the Irish Studies collection as well. The introduction is informative and generally lucid; the handling of the gendering of Irish cultural and political narratives is effective, and the articulation of the project's objectives is succinct. That said a number of issues arise:

1. A coherent rationale for the selection of plays is never offered. Undoubtedly these are important works in the canon of Irish drama, but the implicit assumption is that these are game-changing works in that canon, reflecting or perhaps even initiating some wider changes in attitudes to gender. Some justification of the selection and reference beyond it (the three plays are largely treated in isolation) is wanted to prop up the claims made for the texts.
2. There are points at which historical chronology and detail is blurred. For instance, in the abstract/summary references to the impact of the Celtic Tiger precede reference to the plays selected (none of which were composed at the time of the so-called Celtic Tiger). Distinctions between cultural criticism, historiography, religious politics and lived experience tend to be flattened out in favour of the blanket generalisation that "The central interest of Irish culture has always been the effort to define a unifying national metanarrative and identity." This develops in Chapter 1 into, a perhaps unintended, suggestion that the people of Ireland suddenly awoke in 1990 to a brave new world of diversity and modernity, whereas a more nuanced approach might have noted the liberal achievements of the 1970s and the gender battles of the 1980s as vitally preparing the ground for the belated liberalisation of Irish society in the 1990s.
3. Finally, the introduction of Judith Butler's philosophy of gender is apt and a potentially incisive critical tool. However, from what I can see, it is never actively deployed in the rest of the work, apart from on page 109 Butler is briefly mentioned before the repetition of a long quote used before. It is unfortunate that the promise of a theoretically inflected approach was not followed through and this might warrant some time at the defence.



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The ensuing chapters on Gendered Space, Proud Mad Women and Emasculated Males feature detailed and extended analysis of the three plays that is well wrought, perceptive and usually anchored by reference to historical context as opposed to abstract reflection. The final chapter on Performing the Body touches a subject of growing importance in Irish theatre studies. The effort to engage with this is commendable. Ultimately the treatment of the subject is slightly uneven attempting to acknowledge recent developments in performance (which largely come after the plays explored), to deal with social and cultural repressions of the body in Irish history, and finally to read the body in the selected plays. The term carnivalesque is loosely applied to McGuinness's *Carthaginians* and to Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* while there seems a good deal less to say about Carr's *The Mai* here. Ms Pichrtová is certainly capable of excavating the plays as texts, but as performances they are not really examined. It would be useful to discuss her objectives in this chapter further at the defence, to explain her use of Bakhtin and whether she could comment further on the performances of body these plays gave rise to.

With regard to research the project draws on substantial and worthwhile sources and shows good intellectual initiative. A recognition of context and consideration of the implications of context is manifest throughout. For the most part sources are used descriptively. Ms Pichrtova seems more confident in synthesising the opinions of others, rather than assessing them or challenging them. Consequently perhaps there is a tendency to over quote both in the main text and occasionally in footnotes. I would caution against the light and sometimes cross referenced use of serious sources – for instance on page 58 H el ene Cixous appears via Leeney and McMullan's *The Theatre of Marina Carr*, Bahktin gets one citation and the rest clearly comes via Eamonn Jordan.

Overall the linguistic level of the thesis is good. There are some repetitions and occasional errors – “tabooization” (in the abstract) does not exist – but the text is quite clean, while expression is at times a little cluttered or awkward. The organisation of the thesis is clear, appropriate format has been consistently used although it is advised to restart footnote numbering at each chapter to avoid huge footnote numbers, and normally one prints single sided pages for such a document.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work “very good” / 2 depending on the result of the defence.

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Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD