

DISSERTATION

ABSTRACT

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LIMITS AND LANGUAGES

in Contemporary Irish Women's Poetry

“Irish poetry” is an inherently equivocal concept characterized by two fissures, one linguistic (Irish-English; standard English-Hiberno English) and the other chronological (oral-written; Old Irish-modern Irish). Central to my project is to show how this bifurcate cultural identity, prominent in Irish literature due to Ireland's history and the politicized concept of “national language,” figures in poetry by Irish women of the last forty years. While I account for the significance of the hyphen in Anglo-Irish as well as in Gaelic-Irish poets, contradictory tensions are traced not only across and along the linguistic divide. In attending to the shift from feminism (Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paula Meehan, Medbh McGuckian, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill) to post-feminism in Irish poetry (Biddy Jenkinson, Vona Groarke, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Aifric Mac Aodha), I illustrate the role that the border between English and Irish has played in these processes.

The dissertation falls into two parts each of which consists of two chapters. Part One explores some of the ways in which poets have confronted the inherited tradition and the feminine stereotypes therein. My argument is that the frequent use of ironic distance and heteroglossia by major feminist poets in the final three decades of the last century has substantially contributed to the current state of linguistic emancipation and political non-involvement in Irish poetry. Part Two explores how women have adapted conventional figures of poetic inspiration and the female muse. I propose that the conscious search for poetic identity and authentic expression has been often achieved through mock paroles and various applications of silence. While the focus is on subversive secrecy, special attention is paid to the transactions across the partition between the two main languages of Irish literature and to the theoretical, as well as practical implications of poetic translation.