

'Insouciant Rivals of Mrs Barton': Gender and Victorian Aspiration in George Moore and the Women Novelists of the *Irish Monthly*

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Without doubt the *Irish Monthly*, which was founded in 1873 as a review of literature, the arts, current affairs and religion, was one of the more significant Irish literary journals of the late nineteenth century. It was one of the first journals to publish the poetry of Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats, for example. The publishing of fiction, however, was one of its priorities, as is witnessed by the fact that when its founding editor Matthew Russell, the Jesuit litterateur, came to review the successes of its first twenty-five years, his first thoughts were of the fiction it had published.¹ During those years the *Irish Monthly* serialised novels by nineteen writers, thirteen of them women. Russell was in no way condescending in his acknowledgement of the contribution of these women writers. Without the support of the prolific and highly-popular Rosa Mulholland, for example, the *Irish Monthly* 'could hardly have been carried on and would probably never have been begun'.

Mulholland herself, who was related to Russell through marriage, had hoped that, in the era immediately before the Anglo-Irish literary revival, initiatives such as Russell's Dublin-based journal would have acted as a counter to the effects of 'the ready English market for fiction [which] draws off our talent and employs it at remunerative images on the themes its daily supply requires'. Attacking Justin McCarthy, the Irish Party parliamentarian, for writing 'perfect English for the English', she concluded somewhat sarcastically:

Yet how can we quarrel with any of these bright spirits if they prefer to live their lives pleasantly and in affluent circumstances in the busy, working, paying world of London, rather than content themselves with the ideally uncomfortable conditions of him who elects to chew the cud of sweet and bitter Irish fancies with his feet in an Irish bog and his head in a rainbow.²

Russell's own hopes for the fiction published in the *Irish Monthly*, much of which was subsequently reissued in book form, had been quite specific. In 1885 he wrote:

1 Matthew Russell, 'Silver Jubilee Retrospect' in *Irish Monthly*, 25 (1897), pp. 1-6. 2 Rosa Mulholland, 'Wanted an Irish Novelist' in *Irish Monthly*, 19 (1891), pp. 368-73.

The very highest aspiration we can make for our periodical is that it may be the forerunner of a Catholic literature in Ireland ... a literature religious to the core which should reflect the majesty and eternal truth of our Faith, and its beauty and poetry as well; Irish, too, to the core – thrilling with our Celtic nature and coloured by our wonderful history.³

In such hopes he must have been disappointed, however. Few of the three dozen or so novels serialised in the *Irish Monthly* in its first quarter century had settings whose Irishness was an important feature of their construction. Fewer still were explicitly Catholic in their intent. Indeed, the handful of specifically Catholic novels published were mostly by English writers who were priests or nuns. By contrast around one third of the novels were apparently bland romantic comedies by women novelists from the Irish Catholic upper middle class.

In fact there was an ideological agenda at work in these novels but one in which concerns of class eclipsed not only those of Catholicism and Irishness but of gender as well. In late nineteenth-century Ireland the Catholic upper middle class aspired to metropolitanism and consequently feared provincialism. The British political connection with Ireland was not perceived as a necessarily negative factor by the class of Catholic doctors, lawyers, merchants and landlords. They were more nationally-minded than nationalists. They certainly subscribed to an Irish sense of national identity but were not separatists. For them participation in a distinctively Irish national and religious identity was compatible not only with metropolitan Victorian culture but also with an imperial, British identity. They therefore viewed the continuing political and social tensions which existed between Ireland and Britain as damaging to their interests. These tensions fed British stereotypes about the Irish and threatened hopes for full Irish participation in Victorian respectability.

Upper middle class Catholics saw their task as being to modify the adverse image which Ireland had been allotted in English cultural discourse. By enhancing the image their country enjoyed within Anglo-Saxon culture they sought to increase not only the esteem in which they were held but their own self-esteem. It was not simply that they wanted to please the English. They wanted to please the English so that they could feel pleased with themselves. Failing that, they aspired to prove, to their own satisfaction at least, that if the English did not feel pleased with them then at least they *ought* to do so.

Rosa Mulholland, the most important of the *Irish Monthly* writers, published a handful of novels in Russell's journal, including two of her more famous works, *The Wild Birds of Killeevy* (1878–80) and *Marcella Grace* (1885). Both are designedly Irish in their settings, in accordance with Mulholland's stated policy on the matter of writing fiction. *Marcella Grace*, indeed, is overtly political in its concerns. Nonetheless, Mulholland also shared in her class's anxiety to demonstrate the probity of Irish Victorian virtue. For the most part, however, instead of using the

³ Matthew Russell, 'Irish Literature and Our Twelfth Anniversary' in *Irish Monthly*, 13 (1885), pp 335–43.

opportunity which the *Irish Monthly* afforded of writing romantic comedies of middle and upper class life for such a demonstration, Mulholland chose to publish in book form stories of the respectability of what would have been known as peasant women. Since from a British perspective all Irish people were the same, a flaw in one class was attributed to all. Mulholland's novels of the moral dilemmas faced by the peasantry thus bolstered her class's case for Victorian acceptance. Reviewers credited Mulholland with a special expertise in describing the conditions of the poorer classes.⁴

Mulholland's peasant characters are pillars of conventional Victorian propriety. Their greatest virtue is that they know their place. Ultimately, therefore, neither gender roles nor the position of women in Victorian society are ever seriously challenged in Mulholland's novels. Thus in *Onora* (1900), the servant girl heroine leaves the family for whom she is working when she judges that the young head of the family would imperil his financial position if he were to marry her, as he wishes, rather than a rich girl who has returned from America.

If *Onora* is about a woman anxious to remain respectable, then *Nanno* (1898) and *The Tragedy of Chris* (1903) are about women coping with the loss of respectability. *The Tragedy of Chris* contrasts the experience of two young girls, Sheelia O'Ryan and Chris. Both begin as poor Dublin flower sellers. Chris disappears to London and becomes a 'wicked woman' while Sheelia rises to be the maid of a respectable lady. Loyally, she goes to London to rescue her friend, resists the advances of Chris's keeper and marries a man who has devoted himself to saving good Irish girls from the temptations of a London which, not unintentionally, is seen as having much that militates against Irish respectability.

As both girls begin at the same level it is clearly Mulholland's position that what happens to Chris is not inevitable but the result of her own weakness which, though pathetic, is also culpable. Chris can be pitied and Sheelia may rescue her, but she cannot be rehabilitated and is conveniently allowed to die, overcome with guilt. Mulholland's novel is thus a fable about the consequences for women of straying from the path of Victorian rectitude.

Unlike *The Tragedy of Chris* which charts a fall from respectability, *Nanno* recounts an inappropriate attempt to recover it. An unmarried mother, Nanno leaves her child in a workhouse in Dublin and moves to Youghal where, pretending to be a widow, she becomes engaged to a wealthy, young farmer. The most interesting parts of the book centre on Nanno's conversations about the correctness of her actions with the priest she consults about it. When he tells her that what she is doing is wrong, she quotes the case of Mary Magdalene and asks if she cannot be forgiven. He replies that of course Christ would forgive as he had forgiven Mary Magdalene but that it would be too much to expect any decent man to ignore her past and marry her without her deceiving him as she was deceiving her fiancé. Nanno is left in no doubt about the soundness of this judgement when on returning to Youghal she hears her fiancé criticise a woman

⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 27 November 1903, p. 2 and *Irish Monthly*, 32 (1904), p. 116.

whose husband had discovered she had kept the full story of her past life from him. Nanno calls off the engagement, allowing him think that she loves someone else.

In this novel, Mulholland, perhaps inadvertently, opens up a gap between a Victorian, puritan ethic in which respectability, once lost, can never be recovered and a Catholic ethic which allows room for forgiveness. The arrogant tone of Nanno's remarks at the beginning of the novel as she makes it clear that she is determined to forge a respectable future for herself, is already an indication of how the novelist views her quest. Though she tries to accommodate a Catholic view within it, Mulholland opts for the puritan ethic precisely because Victorianism could only view Catholic forgiveness as a form of moral looseness, the very thing of which Mulholland wishes to avoid giving an impression. Yet she has also to justify what happens in Catholic terms and only succeeds in doing so awkwardly, by portraying Nanno's planned marriage as an affront to honesty and truthfulness, because she does not plan to reveal her past. In *Nanno* ideological tensions and contradictions are very close to the surface.

In general, Rosa Mulholland's novels of life among the peasantry present themselves as moral fables, teaching the necessity of the Victorian social code. From the point of view of writers like Mulholland this was an opportunity to demonstrate a loyal adherence to Victorian standards, both in the sort of novels written and in the sort of code for life advocated in them, rather than an opportunity to question or challenge the position allotted to women within the Victorian ethic. For Mulholland, class concerns came first and precluded any serious analysis of gender or of the patriarchal structures of Victorian society.

For the most part Mulholland's agenda was also the agenda of many of the other women novelists of the *Irish Monthly*. They showed themselves anxious to conform to perceived Victorian standards of action in such romantic comedies as *Molly's Fortune* (1889-90) by M.E. Francis, *The Monk's Prophecy* (1882) and *The Cardassan Family* (1888) by Attie O'Brien, *Eleanor's Story* (1878) by Katherine Roche, *Meg Blake* (1893) and *Bogwort* (1896) by M.E. Connolly, and *A Perplexing Contrast* (1887) and *A Striking Contrast* (1895) by Clara Mulholland. *A Girl's Ideal* (1905) by Clara's sister, Rosa, also falls into the category of romantic comedy, though it was not published in the *Irish Monthly*. All of these novels are works in which convention and stock plots replace realism, as is especially evident when they are contrasted with *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) written by the novelist George Moore, a contemporary of the *Irish Monthly* novelists and a writer they would no doubt have considered more notorious than famous. It is the contention of what follows here that *A Drama in Muslin* can and perhaps should be best read in the context of novels such as those of the *Irish Monthly*. If so, it can be recognised as a remarkable counter by Moore to the studied insouciance which produced these novels.

The romantic comedies published in the *Irish Monthly* concern themselves almost exclusively with the tension between the proprieties of Victorian romantic love and the politics and economics of marriage. Like *A Drama in Muslin*, which in fact antedates some of them, they evince an awareness of the cut-throat nature

of competition middle class women faced for the social and financial security of a good marriage. Yet they continue to insist that fidelity to Victorian standards of romance and respectability will achieve the desired goal without the need for any further effort. They thus eschew any significant examination of the inter-relationship between culture, economics and gender on the one hand and the institution of marriage on the other.

These novels are full of characters like Moore's Mrs Barton. There are ambitious mothers, such as Lady Ashfield in *A Striking Contrast* and Mrs Hassett in *The Monk's Prophecy*, also greedy wives, such as Susan Cullinan in *Bogwort*, and callous lovers such as Captain Calvert in *The Carradassan Family*. And yet the difference is that Mrs Barton, with her ruthless ambition and unsentimental pragmatism, is at least credited with being in touch with the realities of a world where glamour and gaiety mask a struggle for survival. In the novels of Moore's contemporaries who published in the *Irish Monthly*, the world tends to operate under the laws of unsentimental pragmatic reality until, towards the end, there is a change of perspective, a gear shift into a world of fantasy-fulfilment which abides by naïve and sentimental norms. Ironically, it is the pragmatists who are seen, in the end, to be out of touch where fantasy and reality have become inverted. Thus both Lady Ashfield and Mrs Hassett end up having to eat their words about the matrimonial suitability of the heroines of their respective novels.

Several formalised themes and plot patterns are discernible. A very common narrative theme is that which begins with an atomising of duty and affection and then works towards their reconciliation. Stock plots commonly involve features such as difficulties over a disparity in social station, marriage promises, swapped children, unexpected inheritances and righting wrongs.

In the end, all these romantic comedies conform more or less to a pattern in which a figure of innocence and virtue, according to the Victorian perception of such matters, is faced with a dilemma. For example, Dora Neil in *A Striking Contrast* wants to marry Lord Ashfield but she is not of his social station. And Nesta Dillon in *A Perplexing Promise* wants to marry Frank Adair, but feels herself bound by a childhood love pact. At this point a figure representing manipulative pragmatism often proposes a solution, which the innocent figure rejects. The fictional world then shifts gear from realism to fantasy-fulfilment. The dilemma dissolves. Innocence triumphs and pragmatism is wrongfooted. Just as the initial dilemma is often provided by stock problems such as those posed by marriage promises or swapped children, so stock devices, such as unexpected inheritance or an apparent return from the dead, herald the shift of register. Thus Dora Neil discovers she is an heiress all along and Nesta Dillon that Frank Adair is the same person to whom she had pledged herself in her youth, only he has disguised himself.

None of these novels makes an attempt to transcend the clichéd blueprint out of which they operate or to challenge the conventions of a woman's place in Victorian society, with the possible exception of *Meg Blake*, whose main character remains an unrestored victim of the novel's conflicts. Some of the novels are better than others but that is not to flatter any of them. *A Perplexing Promise* may be

marginally less incredible than *Molly's Fortune*, which flounders in a sea of inheritance conditions and appearing and disappearing heirs. Neither, however, amounts to a very convincing presentation of human experience.

At most this fiction had a certain social value in terms of the normalising function it performed for Irish Catholic upper middle class culture. The upper middle class acceptance of the Victorian version of reality in its fiction helped to promote its alliance with Victorian society – in its own eyes, at least. Thus in reviewing *A Striking Contrast*, the *Freeman's Journal* even managed to hint that the Irish saw themselves as being more properly Victorian than others, even the English: 'There is an atmosphere of goodness and affection in the book which is refreshing and which we dare swear is more true to nature than the ... taint of vice by which so many modern novels are contaminated.'⁵

The low literary standard of the *Irish Monthly* novelists was no accident. Rather, it reflected the tragic dilemma of their own class which was caught in a colonial, vicious circle. Their aspiration to have their Irish culture recognised as a valid and valued culture within the parameters of metropolitan British culture was one which was beyond their power to achieve because they had no control over the vagaries of relations between Ireland and Britain. Those relations centred on the land war and agitation for home rule in which the main players were the members of the much more nationalistic lower middle class. The pursuit of realism in fiction thus held no attraction for upper middle class novelists. It could only remind them of the intractability of the dilemma they faced. Their only hope was to make themselves seem as acceptable as possible in British eyes. Nor did the pursuit of such an acceptance leave any room for the questioning of Victorian gender roles, even if they had wanted to do so. A literary output of bland Victorian fantasy was the result.

The economic and social constraints of middle class, Victorian marriage were not without an Irish novelist critic, however. Born into the Catholic gentry of Co. Mayo, George Moore had the ideal pedigree for the Irish upper middle class whose fiction he parodied and whose Victorian marriage values he attacked in *A Drama in Muslin* (1886).

A Drama in Muslin centres on the contrast between appearance and reality: the difference between the glamorous facade of Victorian society life and the frantic scramble for the economic and social security of a supposedly good marriage. This contrast is also evident in the difference between the veneer of romantic propriety the *Irish Monthly* writers took so seriously and the reality of the cut and thrust of what was in effect a marriage market whose supply of marriageable young girls exceeded the demand from wealthy bachelors.

Thus, Alice Barton, a diligent and respected convent schoolgirl, finds that in the outside world a different standard of values applies from that which obtained during her education. Her beautiful sister, Olive, is considered a much more marketable proposition by their mother than she is. Later, when Mrs Barton tries

⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 25 October 1895, p. 2.

to deter Captain Hibbert, a suitor for Olive of whom she disapproves, their conversation is pointedly juxtaposed with that of the negotiations between Mr Barton and his tenants. And when the girls go with their mother to Dublin for the social season and Lord Lieutenant's ball, Olive's new clothes are described as being from 'the armouries of Venus'⁶ and Mrs Barton reflects that, 'In the great matrimonial hunts women have to hunt in packs.'⁷

Mrs Barton tries to supplement the attractiveness of Olive's beauty by falsely hinting that she also has a fortune of £20,000. However, her efforts to induce Lord Kilcarney to propose to Olive backfire and he ends up engaged to Violet Scully, a school friend of Alice and Olive. Mrs Barton's humiliation results from her failure to triumph in the hunt. There is no doubting, however, that her cynicism is a justified response to the harsh realities of life, unlike her rivals in the novels of the *Irish Monthly*, who suffer because life turns out to be more civilised than they had imagined.

The critique of the configuration of Victorian marriage and gender roles presented by *A Drama in Muslin* extends to questioning the value of the marriages of even those apparently lucky few, like Violet, who manage to secure what is considered to be a suitable husband. Unlike the *Irish Monthly* heroines whose lives, up until their marriages at least, are full of activity, marriage in *A Drama in Muslin* heralds a life of pampered indolence, not of fulfilment. Mrs Barton's tragedy is that she regards such a life as the apogee of success and all her energy goes into trying to secure it for her daughters:

'Keep on trying, that is my advice to all young ladies: try to make yourself agreeable, try to learn how to amuse men. Flatter them; that is the great secret; nineteen out of twenty will believe you, and the one that doesn't can't but think it delightful ... A husband is better than talent, better even than fortune – without a husband a woman is nothing; with a husband she may rise to any height. Marriage gives a girl liberty, gives her admiration, gives her success; a woman's whole position depends upon it.'⁸

A Drama in Muslin was part of George Moore's advocacy of modernity. As with several of his novels with English settings, that advocacy took specific shape in *A Drama in Muslin* around the issue of gender. The novel is an attack against Victorian marriage conventions and their novelistic expression, and against the craven deference given to them by the Catholic upper middle class. Whether or not Moore read all the *Irish Monthly* novels himself, he was certainly well aware of the ambience which had produced them. *A Drama in Muslin* is thus an attack on Victorianism in a specifically Irish context. But it is equally an attempt on Moore's part to normalise the modern conventions and values with which he seeks to replace Victorianism. It skilfully deconstructs one mentality in order to

6 George Moore, *A Drama in Muslin* (1886; Gerrards Cross, 1981), p. 162. 7 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

replace it with another. It is an irony then that Moore did not even manage to eradicate all the conventions of the Victorian romantic comedy from his own narrative technique, as is evidenced by his use of a stock device found both in *A Drama in Muslin* and in Attie O'Brien's *Won by Worth*.

In *Won by Worth* the forty-year old Captain Arthur Crosbie is in love with Mary Desmond, who is much younger than he is. It is only when Crosbie nurses her brother through a bout of smallpox that she notices him. And her attention turns to love when Crosbie himself is badly wounded and she has to nurse him back to health. And yet this stock bedside romance plot is the very one to which Moore resorts at the end of *A Drama in Muslin* in order to provide Alice with a happy future as a married woman in the relatively free atmosphere of London. For it is at the bedside of a seriously-ill Olive that Alice and Edward Reed, the local doctor, come to know and love each other. In at least one respect then Moore's novel retreats from parody to reliance on the fictional forms he so obviously despised. This aspect of Moore's feminist novel thus offers proof in microcosm of the ironies, ambiguities and complexities which attended the issue of gender in nineteenth-century Ireland.