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The Trinity of a New Age:

Three struggling Women in Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* (1986) and *After Easter* (1994)

Virginie Privas-Bréauté

Lyon 3

Anne Devlin, the daughter of late Paddy Devlin, a democrat in favour of social justice between the Catholics and the Protestants in Ulster, is a Northern Irish Catholic playwright born in 1951. A member of the Labour party in Northern Ireland like her father, she took part in the peaceful marches organized at the end of the 1960s to obtain equal civil rights for Protestants and Catholics. In 1986, she wrote *Ourselves Alone*, a play in which she gave voice to three Belfast Catholic women, Frieda, Josie and Donna. It presents women's physical involvement in a conflict between the two religious communities. Ten years later, Devlin had her next play, *After Easter*, performed at the Lyric Players Theatre, Belfast. This play also stages the story of three Catholic women from Belfast (Greta, Helen and Aoife) who are involved in the conflict on a more psychological level. In her plays, Anne Devlin gives us an insight into the forgotten world of women in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, asked to give a feminist viewpoint on the conflict, she asserted that when she writes "more is called up", suggesting that the problem is more complex than the gender issues involved (Foley 74). Indeed, Anne Devlin points out how little freedom women are offered in her male-dominated Province and how little power they have. She also rages against it. She devotes more energy to showing that the Troubles are about women fighting against men rather than to showing the Catholics fight against Protestants, Republicans against Loyalists, Nationalists struggling against Unionists and, above all, the IRA against the British army. Her conflict becomes primarily the fight about genders; it is not the conflict about either ideologies or territory. Strategically reversing the roles of men and women, she intends to give her own version of the history of Northern Ireland, including the impact of religion in the Troubles. Very often, she refers to the Bible, which she knows perfectly well. For her the Sacred Book has been misinterpreted and Catholicism misused, notably by Northern Irish men when it comes to justifying the conflict. It is up to women to deconstruct these historical misinterpretations and to present them in a new way. Consequently, Devlin does not hide the fact that both sets of three women might become the Holy Trinity for the new era. Ultimately, *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter* can lead us to wonder whether God is female.

In Devlin's plays, the audience is presented with Catholic women who have been raised to become faithful wives and careful mothers along the lines of a Catholic education. This is particularly highlighted in *Ourselves Alone* in which Frieda and Josie, two sisters, and their friend Donna, live in Andersonstown. This western area of Belfast has been renowned for being the Catholic "ghetto" of a working-class community in which many men were members of the IRA during the Troubles. Indeed, the Catholic patriarchal system and the Republican movement have been inextricably linked in this part of the world. That is why, Josie and Frieda's father (Malachy), their brother Liam, as well as Donna's ex-husband, naturally belong to the provisional branch of this paramilitary organisation. Although men play only secondary roles in *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter*, Anne Devlin shows that Northern Ireland is a male-dominated province in which women are apparently left with two choices: either submit to man's will or be part of the political conflict.

Imelda Foley wrote that: "Devlin contextualises political conflict as a male construct in which women's lives are governed by orthodoxies that [are] conservative and authoritarian" (Foley 74). *Ourselves Alone* provides a particularly adequate illustration of Foley's words. As the play starts, Devlin warns her audience that the play will take place in a club she qualifies to be "the centre of Republican activity, political and social" (OA 9). She adds details concerning the setting and writes, "the period of Republicanism in the post-hunger-strike days is set by the wall hangings; the traditional prominence of Pearse and Connolly has given way to the faces in black and white of ten men: Sands, Hughes, McCreesh, O'Hara, McDonnell, Hurson, Lynch, Doherty, McElwee, Devine" (OA 9). Through this description, the light is shed on the 1981 hunger strike led by the Republican convict Bobby Sands held at Long Kesh, also known as HM Prison Maze. The strikers were demanding the special category status for paramilitary prisoners. It is significant to note that the hunger strike conducted by Republican women in the Armagh prison, who protested at about the same time for the same reasons, is not even alluded to¹ in this club.

The audience will then realize that the club is a male public space in which very few women, mainly waitresses and singers, are allowed. In fact, the major part of the play takes place at Donna's house where women can meet. Thus, females are still confined to domestic

¹ Yet, Devlin had referred to it in the same year in *The Long March*, a play she wrote for the BBC.

roles and private spheres where they, as Donna suggests, “are all waiting on men” (*OA* 12)². Anne Devlin depicts Donna as someone who has never been able to live her own life. Reared in a Catholic family, she was married to a man she did not love only because she was expecting his child (*OA* 48-49), and as the play begins, she is confined to her house because she has just had another baby. The point that Devlin is making in her play is that Donna has never had any decision-power, having always been manipulated by a patriarchal society like most females born in Republican families in Northern Ireland. Ann Rea believes that “constraining women to domestic spheres facilitates control of men over them” (Rea 220).

At the end of the twentieth century in a western society which tends to be global the control that the Republican men have over the Catholic women seems to alienate the latter. Imelda Foley observes that:

Devlin’s truth lies in the voice of Frieda, whose life and identity have been forged by her family and particularly by her brother Liam. As she says, she has never had the opportunity to be herself. Identity is preordained by male misdemeanour. (Foley 92)

Indeed, Frieda asserts in the play:

When did I ever have a chance to be myself? My father was interned before I was born. My brother’s in the Kesh for bank robbery. You mention the name McCoy in this neighbourhood, people start walking away from you backwards. (*OA* 17)

Frieda’s opinion seems to sum up the situation of Catholic women in Ulster: their fate is deeply subsumed by men’s.

In Devlin’s play, many a time domestic space, or rather female space, is invaded by men in the name of Republicanism and its ideology. For instance, Frieda, who is a singer, is allowed to enter the Republican club. In act one scene one, she is rehearsing a song there, but is interrupted by men, who are piling up boxes containing bandages for the victims of the conflict. They progressively reduce her life’s space. Then, when she is at Donna’s, she, Donna and Josie, are disturbed by Malachy who has come to introduce Joe, a man trying to get involved in the Irish Republican Army (*OA* 20). Moreover, men do not content themselves with controlling their daughters, sisters, wives or mistresses; they have also enticed them into embracing their cause.

² Donna is personally waiting on Liam. (*OA* 13 and 16).

When Josie reveals to Donna how far she will go for Cathal O'Donnell, the man she loves, Donna cannot but remark: "I'm looking at you but it's him who's talking" (*OA* 12). This line prompted Ann Rea to comment: "Josie's voice has been invaded by that of O'Donnell: she doesn't find a means of expressing her own agency, but rather becomes co-opted by a masculine cause" (Rea 208). For the Catholics in Northern Ireland the masculine cause is the struggle against the Protestants.

Anne Devlin's play reminds us that when the police and the army invaded the Republican areas, women would hammer bin lids on the pavement to warn men that they might be lifted (*OA* 16). One may say they actively took part in the struggle. So, there is definitely a feminine side to the conflict, which was confirmed by the internment of Republican women in the prison of Armagh. In the play, Josie depends so much on men, first her father, then her brother, finally her lovers, that she is involved in the conflict, either conveying information to the Official IRA or planting bombs (*OA* 56). Her sister, Frieda, does not want to participate in any such activities; however, she sings Republican classics in which men are heroes (*OA* 9). As Josie observes, women "are used" by men (*OA* 56). The attitude towards women resembles reification and at times verges on dehumanisation. It is personified by Aunt Cora, Malachy's sister. Her name means "maiden" in Greek, and she effectively embodies the ultimate silent, compliant, suffering woman. In the play, we know that she was seriously injured during an IRA campaign. Frieda relates her story in the following way:

Cora is blind and deaf and dumb and she has no hands, and she's been like that since she was eighteen. [...] She was storing ammunition for her wee brother... He asked her to move it. Unfortunately it was in poor condition, technically what you call weeping. So when she pulled up the floorboards in her bedroom, whoosh! It took the skin off her face. Her hair's never fully grown properly since." (*OA* 24-25)

She is carried at the front of all parades in order to display to all Northern Irish Catholic women what Republicans would call Cora's "patriotic duty".

In a pamphlet entitled "From Cathleen to Anorexia, The Breakdowns of Ireland", Edna Longley explains that there has been an evolution of the role of women in the North. At the beginning of the 20th century they were strong and followed the model of Cathleen Ni'Houlihan, Yeats' personification of a fighting Ireland presented in his play titled after this eponymous heroine. As time went by, women grew weak and progressively lost their identity. That is what Longley understands by "anorexia" (Longley 173-195). Anne Devlin's point is thus to go back

to the Cathleen-like situation since, as the play unfolds, it grows more and more obvious that the struggle Frieda, Josie and Donna have undertaken is about freedom. Their fight shares its objective with the movements active at the beginning of the twentieth century. What is more, Devlin's women secretly intend to transcend the situation they are stuck in.

In *Ourselves Alone*, Anne Devlin develops a metaphor for Ireland colonised by England through women domesticated by men. In fact, "for the women in Devlin's plays, the history of Ireland is a suffocating dream of violence initiated and carried out by men, unsparingly revealed in the gradual and deliberate processes that weave their way in the dark corners of all our rooms" (Anderson 96). The author presents a conflict which opposes men against women, the latter constituting a whole community in the same manner as Northern Irish Catholics, the natives, are a community facing the Protestants, the settlers. What is more, in Devlin's play, women do not want to remain passive and silent. According to Anthony Roche, "*Ourselves Alone* does not flinch before the intimidating male-dominated prospect of Irish politics, but rather rises to meet and challenge it" (1994 Roche 236). In this respect, females first use their bodies to try to get recognition in what the playwright could call a fight for love.

Alexis Greene explains that "western myths and literature have continually eroticized war. In western culture, war and sex have entwined at least since the Greeks went to battle over Helen" (Greene 90). This comment applies to Devlin's first play in which love and war are obviously intertwined. As noted earlier, Josie participates in the conflict because of the Republican men she loves: first Cathal, then Joe. However, the word "love" does not have the same meaning for her and her lovers (Rea 219-220). For the men she loves, it means "to love one's country" and is synonymous with *patriotism*. Yet, men tend to resist love offered by women. For example, in his first words spoken in the play Joe Conran lets Frieda know that he does not want to fall in love with anyone, since he has come to complete a political mission: "I'm very easily seduced. I'm on a job here – I don't want to get involved" (*OA* 28). For the patriotic men who live like martyrs because they fight and sacrifice themselves for their country emotions are a domain reserved for women. Men do not love women, they make love to them, primarily to soothe their male instinct. Therefore, if women want to be considered by them, they have to become their "warrior lovers" as Josie says. Indeed, she explains to Donna that when she is in bed with Cathal, [her] "body's like armour" (*OA* 13). However, in adopting a warlike quality, she loses part of her femininity.

If it is true that “feminist analysis commonly places representations of women between polarised images: Virginal Madonna and sexualised Magdalen” (Lojek 67). If so, in *Ourselves Alone*, Josie would stand for Magdalen, whereas Donna would personify the Virgin. Indeed, the latter character is so much controlled by Liam that she never leaves her house, she does not even dare dye her hair and look pretty for fear he might feel jealous. Therefore, she also loses her femininity to prove how loyal she is to him. Liam, however, cheats on her. Apparently, the word “loyalty” does not mean the same for both sexes. For the men in Devlin’s play, loyalty is shaped by ideologies, for women, it depends on a romanticized perception of love.

While Ann Rea asserts that “nationalism depends for its representational efficacy on a particular image of woman as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal” (Rea, 210), Devlin once explained that in *Ourselves Alone* she “set out to test republicanism against feminism and feminism won” (Foley 73). Yet, Devlin’s first play shows that in aiming at behaving like men so as to be recognised by them, in unconsciously rejecting their femininity, the women – even Donna who has been married twice and cannot be totally compared to a virginal Madonna – fail to represent the ideal of purity (Rea 221).

Ourselves Alone’s title is a translation of the Gaelic name of the nationalist political party in Ireland, Sinn Fein. The party “has inspired generations of Catholic Republicans eager for independence from England” (Lojek 60). But the main characters, the heroes, are women. Like the Republicans who want freedom from the British, women want freedom from men. However, in an analysis of Devlin’s plays, Helen Lojek remarks that “*Ourselves Alone* disappoints because women are vulnerable and helpless” (Lojek 67). Indeed, in conferring too much emotion on women and in forgetting that they are part of a bigger community and cannot constitute a community on their own, Devlin makes women look weak and dependent.

It is with *After Easter*, her second play, that the author manages to empower women more effectively. The conflict between men and women occurs on a psychological level. Lives are no longer led through relationships with men, and the women are no longer dominated by men. Men are marginal, textually and subtextually. As Imelda Foley says, “the three women break with the traditional values espoused by the male hierarchy of *Ourselves Alone* and the culture of auxiliary support within which women in Northern Ireland have had to exist” (Foley 98). Women behave like men. For example, Helen is the one who personally decides of her love affairs and Greta believes that she has been given the mission to free Ireland from the British colonisers. In fact, the enemy in this play is not man but yet another cultural concept:

Catholicism. As Chris Wood writes, “the most pervasive form of patriarchal control in *After Easter* is the Church” (Wood 306). Thus, it is not against men that women must fight, it is against male domination in the religious dimension. *After Easter*, whose title refers to the Christian context in characters’ lives, calls to question the place of women in a religious society.

If men fight for political reasons and women for social and even economic reasons, Catholicism is another patriarchal system against which women must struggle in Northern Ireland. In fact, in Ulster religion and politics have intertwined for such a long time that it is barely possible to disentangle them. As Stewart Parker, another playwright from Belfast, once commented, “In Northern Ireland we have neither religion nor politics, but only a kind of fog of religi-otics [*sic!*] which seeps in everywhere. To be a writer is to be a public figure, up there in the trenches with the captains and the clergymen” (Harris 287). Naturally, Devlin’s plays must always to some extent allude to Christianity as well.

In mentioning the Troubles, in using a particular vocabulary and in choosing such a title for her first play, Devlin aimed at conveying the impression that the Northern Irish conflict was mainly political. However, more than once she also alluded to and questioned the role of Christianity in Irish society. Yet, Catholicism is never compared to Protestantism. In *Ourselves Alone*, Josie explains that she once wanted to be a “nun” (OA 12), then identifies Cathal O’Donnell as “a spoiled priest” (OA 12) and claims that “it is easy to be born into the Catholic Church but it is difficult to convert” (OA 42). She thinks that the conflict has nothing to do with dogma and concludes: “there are no personal differences between one person and another that are not political” (OA 19). This last idea is not shared by Frieda who says that religion is part and parcel of the Troubles but does not give any explanation what she means. The religious dimension is further explained when Greta makes it clear that Irishness is made up of three interdependent concepts: Nationalism, Republicanism and Catholicism. According to her, the intertwining of these three notions directly leads to the conflict in Ulster. To find peace in the province, she suggests, it is necessary to first dissociate them all, then deconstruct the concepts and finally re-construct them.

Devlin admits that Donna, Josie and Frieda were conceived as a “trinity of women”: the mother (Donna), the mistress (Josie) and the career-woman (Frieda). The phrase “trinity of women” echoes the Christian idea of the Holy Trinity, and we cannot but consider Greta, Helen and Aoife as another example of such a trinity, this time of more mature women. On the religious level like on the political one, women have thus substituted men. Effectively, the

mission which Greta feels has been assigned to her by God obviously resembles that of the Holy Ghost on Pentecost (precisely after Easter): she must give holy wafers to people in the bus queues in Belfast. Her aim is to reconcile humanity with God through communion. Imelda Foley rightly remarks that “[this] secularisation of religion (taking wafers to bus queues) as symbolised through reversal is repeated by the imagery of the trinity” (Foley 96). In other words, after associating Greta with the Holy Ghost, Helen, the most active and dominant figure, playing the role of a surrogate male (responsible for organizing their lives), would be seen as God the father, and Aoife as Son (Foley 96).

In *The Great Code*, Northrop Frye, explains that “God is a male because he rationalises the ethos of a patriarchal society dominated by men” (translated from Frye 163). Yet, in Devlin’s play, Greta has to bury her beloved father who has just died of a heart attack. The death of the father/Father is highly symbolical both generally on a religious level and specifically in a Northern Irish context which is predominantly defined by patriarchy. Killing one’s own father boils down to killing the Father as well. In her dramatic presentation of the killing of the father/Father, Devlin invites the three female characters to take up his role. Deborah Cottreau, who put the play on stage in Canada, remarks that Devlin overtly hopes for a matriarchal system in the province:

After Easter is a critique of patriarchy ... [the playwright] undermines the predominance of patriarchy throughout the play. ... [It] is a play that replaces patriarchy with matriarchy in a way that not only restores and heals the protagonists but also projects the restoration and healing of the land (Cottreau 199).

It could be suggested that in Devlin’s dramatic world God might be figured as female. It would be a logical and rational figuration of the society and its ethos dominated by women. With Greta as a new embodiment of the God figure, one could also speak of the birth of a new, secular convent comprising all the women united against the patriarchal system in Northern Ireland.

Greta’s mission is not so much an attempt to secularise religion as to return to the very words of the Bible. In terms of liturgical chronology Pentecost comes after Easter. This episode is related in the New Testament and explains how all the apostles were given utterance. However, in the collective memory of most Northern Irish Republicans and Nationalists Easter also refers to the Insurrection led by Collins, Pearse and Connolly at Easter 1916. Their aim was to free Ireland from British occupation. The message Devlin wants to deliver is one of reconciliation, since it would be better if this historical event were transcended (“after” in the

title of this play may refer to the transitional passage), and if the original Christian myth were founded again.

Greta, who left Ireland in 1979 for England, lives in two worlds with the sense of split personality, experiencing hallucinations and visions which she has had since her departure. This fragmentation of the self, which mirrors the difficulty in defining Irishness, can also be considered to be the first step towards a possible recreation of her identity. The climax of the development of this dual personality is reached when she experiences symbolic death, during which she loses her voice. Coming back to Ireland, she regains her ability to speak, and declares “everything I will say from now on is true” (*AE* 17). She thus experiences a psychological resurrection and confesses that she must “stay alive and tell the truth” (*AE* 53). That is how she starts criticising the Catholic Church for preventing women from being ordained and overtly disagrees with Catholic dogma on that. She is convinced that God has abandoned women in Northern Ireland. Therefore, according to her, if “a woman can be a priest, God can be female” (*AE* 57); that means that “women might be loved” (*AE* 57).

It seems that Devlin’s aim is to rewrite the history of Ireland and to redefine the contribution of the Catholic Church to the creation of Ulster; it is an objective in which women should endorse a prevailing role. Anne Devlin once explained:

Women are still expected to carry out the domestic story, and men are expected to carry out the epic story, and I do not believe in that. There is a way of rewriting the epic, which in my view belongs more to women [than to men]. They are the creators of life and I think that is very significant (Chambers 120).

The women in Devlin’s plays have a role to play in both politics and religion since religion and politics are intertwined in Northern Ireland. Their voices need to be heard, their stories need to be listened to. Therefore, at the end of the play Greta peacefully narrates an invented story about the origins to her newborn:

After Easter we came to the place. It was snowing in the forest and very cold in the fifth month. My mother and I were hunting. [...] I looked up and saw it suddenly, a stag, antlered and black, profiled against the sky. [...] It leapt through hundreds of years to reach us. [...] And then the thaw set in – I could hear the stream running, and the snow began to melt. [...] So I got on the stag’s back and flew with it to the top of the world.

And he took me to the place where the rivers come from, where you come from... [...] and this is my own story. (*AE* 75)

For Elizabeth Doyle, the “woman becomes the mythmaker at the end of *After Easter*. It is not the soldier or the revolutionary that can change society but the storyteller” (Doyle 39). Precisely through the narration of a fictional myth Greta places herself at the beginning of the History of Ireland. For Margaret Llewellyn-Jones, “a key feature in Irish contemporary drama is both disruption of realist form and the reworking of mythic and folk elements as a means of deconstructing ideologies of language, history and gender through performance” (Llewellyn-Jones 8). More than their bodies, women’s voices are a key factor to reach freedom.

Anne Devlin’s two plays revolve around the theme of the liberation of women, their recognition and emancipation from the three patriarchal systems: Nationalism, Republicanism and Catholicism. According to Foley, *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter* present “an integrity of imagination and cultural honesty that prefigure later political development” (Foley 103). In a way, Devlin’s drama, which has a significant political agenda, participates in the evolution of the mentalities in the province. Chris Wood notes that Devlin’s plays portray “a world full of divided loyalties, patriarchal power structures and violence towards women who don’t accept their role in society, but there is one thing that cannot be taken away from them: their voices. Telling their stories” (Wood 307). He adds that “perhaps one day, their story will gain a male audience and the struggles will cease. Until then, the story continues” (Wood 307). In Devlin’s plays, women are the voices of Ireland, or rather Northern Ireland. Language, be it oral or written, is therefore the key for the liberation of these females. It is up to men, but also to the Catholic Church now, to hear, and above all, to listen to them.

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