

Sexuality, Marriage and Women's Life Narratives in Teresa Deevy's *A Disciple* (1931), *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1935) and *Katie Roche* (1936)

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Abstract. Teresa Deevy (1894-1963) is an Irish playwright who has received increased critical attention in recent years. Deevy wrote some twenty-five plays between 1930 and 1958, and she can be positioned within the post-revolutionary trend of disillusionment articulated by Irish writers such as Frank O'Connor and Liam O'Flaherty. However, Deevy's work deviates from these writers with her striking emphasis on women's oppression within Irish society. This essay examines three of Deevy's plays: *A Disciple* (1931), *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1935) and *Katie Roche* (1936). These plays were challenging at a time when the state was rolling back on much of the emancipatory promise of the revolutionary period and when successive Pastoral Letters castigated the immodest behaviour of young Irish women. Of particular interest and note are Deevy's stage directions, her use of naturalism and her representations of female sexuality. Through her plays, Teresa Deevy was highlighting the shadow side of state nationalism's rural idylls and Arcadian visions.

Key Words. Teresa Deevy, Abbey Theatre, Irish Free State, sexuality, marriage, naturalism.

Resumen. Teresa Deevy (1894-1963) es una dramaturga irlandesa que en los últimos años ha sido objeto creciente de atención por parte de la crítica. De 1930 a 1958 Deevy escribió unas veinticinco obras que se inscriben en la corriente de desencanto posrevolucionario representada por otros autores irlandeses tales como Frank O'Connor y Liam O'Flaherty. No obstante, la obra de Deevy se aparta de la de esos escritores por el especial énfasis que pone en la opresión sufrida por las mujeres en la sociedad irlandesa. El ensayo analiza tres piezas de Deevy: *A Disciple* (1931), *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1935) y *Katie Roche* (1936). Dichas obras supusieron un desafío en una época en la que el estado recortaba las promesas emancipadoras del periodo revolucionario y en que las Cartas Pastorales censuraban la conducta impúdica de las jóvenes irlandesas. Merecen particular atención las acotaciones de Deevy, su utilización del naturalismo y sus representaciones de la sexualidad femenina. A través de su teatro Teresa Deevy pone de relieve el lado oscuro del idilio rural y visión arcádica difundida por el nacionalismo de estado.

Palabras clave. Teresa Deevy, teatro Abbey, Estado Libre de Irlanda, sexualidad, matrimonio, naturalismo.

In August 1931, Teresa Deevy's play *A Disciple* was premiered on the stage of Dublin's Abbey Theatre. Despite being directed

by Lennox Robinson, featuring a strong cast and sharing the bill with the iconic *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Deevy's play received dismal critical

reviews and was quickly exorcised from the Abbey's repertoire.¹ However, despite its wretched reception, the play presented a striking critique of rural Ireland. *A Disciple*, like *Katie Roche* and *The King of Spain's Daughter*, constitutes an intervention by Deevy in the broader political, social and cultural consensus that was being promoted by the Catholic Church and by successive Irish Free-State governments. In these dramas, Deevy explores the ideological tensions that existed in the post-independent state.² These tensions are particularly manifest in her representations of female sexuality and in her portrayal of stagnant rural communities that stifle the vitality and potential of young Irish women. Deevy's work positions her within the post-revolutionary culture of disillusionment articulated by writers such as Frank O'Connor and Liam O'Flaherty; however, her focus on women's experience within the postcolonial order and her engagement with female sexuality and frustration within this context presents an alternative perspective on that period. This essay examines Deevy's representations of marriage, female sexuality and the life options available to women during the 1930s.

C.L. Innes has argued that, in the years preceding the War for Independence, Catholic nationalism 'exalted Irishwomen as emblematic mothers or desexualized spiritual maidens' (1993: 35). Despite the consciousness raising

1. The cast included May Craig, Barry Fitzgerald and Denis O'Dea. The theatre critic Joseph Holloway dismissed the piece as 'all noise and bustle, signifying nothing and most of the audience laughed at the sheer absurdity of the whole thing and kept wondering if the Directors had gone dotty in seeing merit in such a whirlwind of noisy shouting' shouting' (cited in Walshe 2003: 2). In a letter (8/10/1931) to Sean O'Casey, the actor Barry Fitzgerald describes *A Disciple* as 'really very bad' (Krause 1975: 437). The critic in *An Phoblacht* dismissed the 'poor material' (*An Phoblacht*, August 29, 1931, 8).

2. Teresa Deevy (1894-1963) was politically aware and active as is demonstrated by her involvement with the Republican women's group Cumann na mBan and her insistence (despite her family's disapproval) on visiting Republican prisoners in Waterford jail during the War of Independence. This political bent is also demonstrated by her vocal opposition to censorship in the 1930s.

of both the suffrage and radical nationalist movements, this trend continued in the decades after the Civil War. According to Margaret Ward, by 1932 'there was considerable agreement between pro- and anti-Treatyites that women's primary role should be that of wife and mother' (2002: 182-183). Certainly, in the culture promoted by the new state, women become increasingly the sites of contestation rather than the agents of their own desire. Louise Ryan argues that women were explicitly identified as 'boundary guards between national sovereignty and the contamination of foreign influences' (1998: 189). For example, in a 1926 sermon entitled 'Foreign Dances and Indecent Dress', Archbishop Gilmartin stated that the 'future of the country was bound up with the dignity and purity of the women of Ireland'.³ In contrast to such prevailing orthodoxies, Deevy presents dramas where the action is pushed forward by sexually vital women. These productions would have been challenging at a time when the state was rolling back on much of the emancipatory promise of the revolutionary period and when successive Pastoral Letters castigated the immodest behaviour of young Irish women.⁴ Deevy's character descriptions and stage directions are unusual in how they depict these female heroines; their sheer physicality is itself an interesting anomaly in a society that was shutting down outlets for such expression of everyday female sexuality. This was a society where religious organisations had pronounced on the 'laxity in that maidenly decorum in dress and in conduct which is the greatest safeguard of female virtue'⁵ and where an educational institution for women saw fit to formulate a 'Modest Dress and Deportment

3. *The Irish Independent*, May 12, 1926; cited in Ryan 1998: 189.

4. For example, in the Lenten pastorals of 1924, the bishops condemned "women's fashions, immodest dress and indecent dancing". See Smyth 1993: 51. Louise Ryan (1998) demonstrates that the views of the Catholic hierarchy were reinforced and publicised in the national press.

5. See the editorial of the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* (May 1926) which is reprinted in the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Tradition*, Vol. V (2002: 154-155).

Crusade'.⁶

Within this context, it is worth considering the character of Nan Bowers in Deevy's *Wife to James Whelan*.⁷ Nan is twenty-one at the start of the play. She is in old plain clothes but she wears no stockings and 'stretches her legs out to the sun'. Even the other characters feel compelled to 'delay to watch her' (Deevy 1995: 30). Similarly striking is the presence of Annie Kinsella in *The King of Spain's Daughter* (2003): she first appears on stage as a young woman of twenty who is attired in the traditional peasant costume of red dress, dark shawl, shoes and stockings. But almost immediately audience expectations are subverted when this conventional figure 'slips her hand up about' the neck of the 'lounging' Roddy Mann and 'gives him a long kiss' (Deevy 2003: 23). Considering the contemporary fervour surrounding public morality and the implementation of a rigorous censorship act in 1929, such stage directions are notable.⁸ The 1929 Act defined 'indecent' as 'including suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave'.⁹ While Julia Carlson (1990) notes that the theatre was not subject to censorship in the same way as novels or films, it is clear that Deevy's dramatic portrayals confront the prevailing consensus regarding the suitable behaviour and dress code

6. See the Mary Immaculate Training College Annual of 1927; the relevant extract is reproduced in the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Tradition*, Vol. V (2002: 155-156).

7. Teresa Deevy's play *Wife to James Whelan* was rejected by the Abbey Theatre in 1942. It was eventually published in 1995 as Teresa Deevy, "Wife to James Whelan: A Play in Three Acts" in *Irish University Review* 25:1. It was produced as a radio play in the 1940s and by a semi-professional Dublin theatre company in 1956. It then disappeared until a recent production in the Mint Theater in New York in August 2010. For a detailed study of this play, see Ní Bheacháin (2011: 91-110).

8. Pilkington refers to a case in 1937 where "a jail sentence was imposed on a young woman (but not on the man) for kissing and embracing in public" (2001: 134).

9. See "The Censorship of Publications Act, 1929", *Irish Statute Book*, Part 1. Available online: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1929/en/act/pub/0021/print.html> [accessed April 17, 2011]

of the 'Irish Maiden'. The stage directions describing Annie's costume suggest that Deevy intended presenting this heroine in a theatrical manner that echoed, then subverted, traditional dramatic conventions. The conservative visual representation combined with the subsequent 'long kiss' results in a perceptual clash between the Irish theatrical peasant girl and the Hollywood heroine. That Deevy would engineer such an ideological and cultural confrontation within the figure of the female protagonist demonstrates her willingness to challenge theatrical orthodoxies and to unsettle audience expectations. Furthermore, even when Deevy's female protagonists attempt to stifle their emotions and their physicality, there are constant eruptions and slippages. Indeed, the eponymous heroine of *Katie Roche* is distinguished by her 'sort of inward glow, which she continually tries to smother and which breaks out either in delight or desperation according to circumstances' (Deevy 2003: 40). Ellie Irwin in *A Disciple* is just sixteen. She is described as 'small and sallow with an air of smouldering fury... Her manner is contemptuous – and there is rage and despair in the look she turns on her mistress' (Deevy 1937: 29). The desire and sexual energy of these protagonists does not allow them to conform to the social and cultural narratives that prevailed; they cannot be contained by peasant stereotypes or the emerging orthodoxies of respectable womanhood in 1930s Ireland. Mutinous women are the very heroines that feature in the dramatic works of Teresa Deevy. The use of theatrical space as a venue for the exposition of female desire and ambition challenged the foreclosure of such possibilities in other public arenas.

The figure of Ellie Irwin in *A Disciple* epitomises Deevy's concern with female emotional and sexual desire. Of the plays considered in this essay, it is also the one that most digresses from the orthodoxies of naturalist drama. This short one-act play examines the dissonance between the desire for a romantic, heroic ideal and the sordid, frustrating reality that existed for many young women. The play takes place in a rural 'palour' in a 'tumble-down' house. There are just six characters: Ellie, the maid, her mistress Mrs. Maher (who runs an informal domestic

service agency placing servants in middle-class households), an estranged couple Mr. and Mrs. Glitteron, Stasia Claremorris (a woman looking for a work placement) and the murderer Jack the Scalp who is on the run from the police. Ellie is frustrated by her life working for Mrs Maher, a pious but shallow woman, and is fascinated by the stories she reads in the newspapers about couples like the Glitterons (who she perceives to be the epitome of glamour, vitality and sophistication). When the Glitterons arrive in this rural kitchen, Ellie is devastated to see her illusions shattered as she realises the depressing reality behind the glamorous façade. However, she is then excited when the fugitive murderer Jack the Scalp appears in the parlour and, attracted to him, she attempts to seduce him. He rejects her advances declaring himself a respectable man. At the end of the play, Ellie is left despairing and trapped in this awful reality, wishing she had been born in a heroic time. Ellie is a protagonist that had been exposed to the newspaper accounts of the exotic lives of cultural elites in London and the tantalising denouncements by the clergy of foreign dances and clothes. In addition, girls like Ellie frequently enjoyed the utopian narratives presented in imported films. Adrian Frazier notes that “in 1935 in the Irish Free State, 1,271 films were screened and over eighteen million tickets sold – even though Pope Pius XI had declared moving pictures an evil worse than books” (2004: 70). The popularity of American and British films resulted in the mass consumption of cultural representations of romance that did not coincide with the dominant Catholic and state-nationalist discourses that emphasised sacrifice and duty. This disparity was further highlighted in imported popular novels and magazines. In this context, it is unsurprising that the sixteen-year-old Ellie Irwin contrasts the reported lifestyle of the Glitterons with her own claustrophobic existence:

Ellie: By private airie-oplane they went after the wedding from London to Paris, and that not six months gone, and them through and done with themselves, and wanting someone new. ‘Twould pierce you. Like fire they do be darting here and darting there, and we moulding our life away with every day the same shadow falling on the flag–! (Deevy 1937: 32).

Ellie: They’re trampling...they’re conquering, and we ferriting here and ferriting there – and spattering holy water (Deevy 1937: 32).

During the 1930s, there was a general concern that deviant and foreign influences packaged as entertainment would infiltrate and corrupt a susceptible public. Clerical and government rhetoric of the period demonstrate a tendency to link patriotism with morality: that which was considered ‘traditionally’ Irish was portrayed as virtuous while outside influences were described as provocative and immodest. It is the juxtaposition of the two worlds which so unsettles Ellie; neither of the older women express any desire for change although there is an insinuation that Mrs. Maher reads about the lives of the wealthy socialites in the newspapers she claims are “for ornament” (32). In this play, Deevy’s use of a Munster dialect and Ellie’s lively turn of phrase both situate the action and portray the energy of the female protagonist.

The fruitlessness of this existence is what frustrates Ellie but simultaneously her naïveté is evident when she states that it is her ‘falling-star wish’ that she ‘be mixed up with them that do be divorcing in and out’ (33). The arrival of the appropriately-named Glitterons into the rural kitchen ‘between mountain and bog’ (30) of Mrs. Maher signifies a theatrical confrontation between the imagined romantic fiction that Ellie has projected on to the couple and the dark unhappy reality. Following her encounters with both characters, Ellie cannot contain her disappointment: she describes Mrs. Glitteron as ‘a twisting little worm’ (38) and dismisses Mr. Glitteron as ‘snivelling’ (42). However, it is clear that the author’s purpose was not merely to reveal the disappointing reality behind the glamorous ‘glitter-on’ façade so that the audience could return to a sense of superiority and comfort. In this play, Deevy is speaking directly to existing conditions in the new State and she depicts this environment as oppressive, stifling and disappointing. Unlike her later, more traditionally naturalist dramas, *A Disciple* is notable for its Grand-Guignol elements – something that was commented on in the harsh review published in *An Phoblacht* (29/8/1931: 8).

The life narratives available to uneducated serving girls in the Free State were certainly limited. This is a recurring theme in the dramas

of Teresa Deevy. Ellie Irwin is the protagonist who most demonstrates the uncomfortable containment of young women within the limited and limiting narratives available. This character also provides the occasion of the most explicit exploration of how female sexuality is perceived as threatening and deviant. Deevy depicts the male rejection of female sexual desire and expression (and its denouncement as sinful) as farcical. Ellie's physical desire for Jack the Scalp is clearly alluded to in Deevy's stage directions: she describes Ellie as 'feasting her eyes on him' before moving 'close to him' (45). The murderous Jack is 'suddenly nervous' and threatens her with his revolver. The dialogue here is preposterous:

Jack: I...I had no dealing with a woman ever.

Ellie: I'll go with you now through weal and woe. I'll go to the end of the world with you!

Jack: You will not! I was brought up respectable! (Deevy 1937: 45)

This exchange between the two characters is farcical as the fugitive criminal is terrorised by the exuberance and sexual desire of the teenage serving girl. And, although guilty of murder, Jack considers himself 'respectable' because of his celibacy. The sentiments expressed are reinforced when Jack 'bitterly' informs his hostages that Ellie had offered to 'share a bed' with him in the heather. His anger and offence at her desire contrasts sharply with the group's acceptance of Mr. Glitteron's sexual advances towards Ellie earlier in the play. For the other characters, it is clear that only female desire is problematic or considered deviant. The muddled moral code of the company is ridiculed in the following lines:

Jack: (*Turning on him*). Yah – maybe I murdered an odd man or so, but murder'll leave a man his respect – I had no dealings with a woman ever.

Mrs. M.: Ellie Irwin, is that what you are at? Wait till you're dead!! (*seizing hold of Ellie*).
(Deevy 1937: 47)

This comical treatment of a confused hierarchy of sin where the expression of female sexual desire is more degenerate than murder highlights the peculiar public fixation on the former in the Free State. Furthermore, considering the existence of the Magdalen Institutions, Mrs. Maher's subsequent threat to 'tell the nuns' on Ellie is sobering:

it suggests the systemic nature of the repression of 'wayward' young women. At the end of the play, Ellie has no desire to follow Jack and her idealisation of the Glitterons has been undermined by the tawdry reality. There is no redemption through escape with a fellow character but neither is there a solo alternative. Here we have a heroic, proud but flawed protagonist with no access to a suitable narrative; she is truly 'in search of valour'.¹¹ Neither tragic downfall nor valiant achievement is an available narrative option for Ellie Irwin. She is a striking heroine confined in a drama (and a society) with limited choices and sharing a stage with lesser characters.

A Disciple is the text that is most revealing with regards to Deevy's attitude to the theatre as an instrument of social or political change. The theatre, no matter how amateur or informal, is presented as a forum for social dreaming. Ellie Irwin's attitudes and ambitions are influenced by an amateur production of *Coriolanus* that she attended at the local convent. Ellie is engaged by the plot of the play: this she transposes onto her own life and surroundings. She is similarly drawn to the lead actress about whom she fantasises and onto whom she projects her own romantic longings. Ellie Irwin's character illustrates the fluid nature of boundaries between theatrical space and private performance. It is not that Ellie cannot distinguish fact from fiction or that Deevy is arguing against romantic dreaming. While Ellie promptly sees through the shabby façade of the Glitterons and is quickly repulsed by the frigid sermonising of Jack the Scalp, Ellie's dreaming is also presented as the foundation stone of her life force and she is the only character not dominated by church, commerce or emotional fear. Her ability to imagine an alternative existence implies an openness to change and a belief in the possibilities of the future.

10. A 2004 documentary argued that as many as 30,000 women passed through the Magdalen asylum system during the twentieth century (*Sex in a Cold Climate* broadcast on Radio Telefís Éireann in July 2004). See also James M. Smith *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (2007). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

11. *In Search of Valour* was Deevy's alternative title for *A Disciple*.

The use of *Coriolanus* as a dramatic reference point in the life of Ellie Irwin underlines Deevy's concern with theatre as a space for change and possibility. Shakespeare's historical tragedy is set in the immediate aftermath of a society's transition from monarchy to republic. Coriolanus is caught between two worlds, and he finds the new political reality a disappointment. He is ultimately forced into exile because, ironically, he cannot find a place in the new society that he had helped to create. Like Ellie Irwin, Coriolanus is not an entirely sympathetic character: both are proud; they are contemptuous of many of their fellow citizens who they perceive to be foolish and inconstant; and both are inflexible. Ellie's desire to project a Coriolanus-like character onto unworthy individuals like Mr. Glitteron and Jack the Scalp reveals a yearning for a tragic hero and for an uncompromising soldier of the revolutionary period.¹² Surrounded by mundane materialism and empty religious devotion, Ellie's futile longing for an idealistic partner and for romantic escape is central to the drama. However, this longing is fated to end in failure, disappointment and bitter resentment; the two men present include a shallow, lecherous coward and a sexually repressed criminal. The closing lines of the play illustrate this sense that the society depicted is a mean, depressing one and that the past heroic age was a more liberating period.

Ellie: Your coat! (*bitterly*). There is no MAN living now. Small wonder any woman to take poison. Them were best off that were born in the past. Why weren't I born in a brave long-ago time? (Deevy 1937: 47).

Deevy's use of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* subtly adds depth to the psychological profile of Ellie Irwin, and hints at the reason for the initial character description that suggests that she is angry and restless: life in the Free State had not delivered on the optimism of the revolutionary period. Ellie's fascination with

12. Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* concerns a Roman general who is ill fated because his military skills and personal courage are not valued in peacetime. He is unable to rule politically or control his authoritarian contempt for the mob. There is a suggestion that Coriolanus's pride is his tragic flaw: he is unable to reconcile with the Roman people and is thereby doomed.

the tragedy also suggests that the theatre can provide a forum for imagining alternative realities; it facilitates social dreaming even when that dreaming cannot be accommodated by the social matrix that exists.

To use a Shakespearean play as a mirror and a catalyst in this way is not in itself unusual; many dramatists self-consciously allude to other plays to provide an oblique commentary on the plot and characters that they are developing. The fact that Deevy presents Coriolanus's ultimate downfall and death as still having the potential to inspire and comfort audiences is notable in the context of her own dramatic conclusions which are underpinned by a sense of quiet tragedy. Ellie's idealisation of Charlotta Burke, the actress who portrayed Coriolanus in the convent production, is also significant; Burke's flight to London and to a theatrical career represents a remote but appealing narrative of escape:

Ellie: They thought to make a nun of her, thank you, says she, and went to London, and on to the stage – and done well (Deevy 1937: 36).

That it was a woman who took the title role in the production of *Coriolanus* suggests that Deevy may be making the political point that while women were instrumental in ousting the former British regime, there was no room now for their anti-colonial militancy in the new state. And like Coriolanus, Burke went into exile where she met an untimely and tragic death; in the words of Ellie, 'she kept to Coriolanus for sure' (36). While such an ending and narrative conclusion is ultimately negative, Ellie presents it as preferable to some of the other narrative possibilities available to women. At the beginning of the play, she refers to one of the pitiable options:

Ellie: Often I look at the ones that come here: women with life in them, and all they ask to be took by someone till they're too old to be took at all (Deevy 1937: 30).

Within this schema, tragic but dignified defeat is superior to fatalism and acceptance. In this, the narrative presented by the play has synchronicity with contemporaneous republican narratives of political defiance. The reference to Burke's theatrical performance in the role of Coriolanus is also notable. It is suggested that there was unease at the possibility of women stepping into men's clothes (and their roles):

Ellie: The nuns wouldn't leave her wear men's clothes, but she made up for that: no one could take their eye from off her face: she carried the house – 'twas only a room, but she carried it easy: no one in the end but was cheering for her (Deevy 1937: 36).

Here, religious authorities are identified as uncomfortable with any transgression of gender boundaries. However, while Burke's inclination to wear male garb is proscribed, her performance is not weakened. Rather she compensates for her outward appearance by conveying her conviction and her passion in a convincing way. It is the memory of this performance that sustains Ellie Irwin.

The marginalisation of a character like Ellie Irwin is mirrored in the attempted occlusion of women from the public sphere in the Free State. Remarkable young women being confined by a lack of appropriate narrative choices were to feature in Deevy's subsequent Abbey productions. In both *The King of Spain's Daughter* (April 1935) and *Katie Roche* (March 1936), the heroines push against the boundaries of custom and convention; in both, the heroines are faced with severe punishment when cajolement doesn't work. It is suggested that, in this world, women's individual happiness and personal choice is dependent on the gift of patriarchal authorities; it is not their right. *The King of Spain's Daughter* centres on a young woman called Annie Kinsella who is being wooed by her father's work partner, Jim; however, she is reluctant to marry and is perceived to be wayward by her fellow characters. The stage directions situate the opening of the play on an overgrown lane that has, on each side, "road barriers with notices 'No Traffic' and 'Road Closed'", indicating a sense of stagnation and the metaphorical dearth of life choices available for the play's characters. Katie Roche is the eponymous centre of a three-act play that opens with the young heroine working as a serving girl. She is the daughter of an unmarried woman she never knew and she bears the surname of the woman who brought her up. Her employer's brother Stan, a man once in love with Katie's mother, proposes to her in Act I. The following two acts focus on their troubled, unhappy relationship. In these two plays, the chief love interests, Jim and Stan, first attempt to persuade and charm the dissident heroines; when this fails, they resort

to verbal threats or depend upon the violent force of the father. Deevy's work lays bare the reality that equality has not been delivered on by the state, and that the inequality that did exist is buttressed by individual communities and by the Catholic Church. When Jim mentions 'settling down' to Annie Kinsella, it is like an ominous 'knell' to her. She considers emigrating for a life of domestic service in London. Jim's reaction, and his threat to call on the power of the father and the priest, demonstrates his collusion with the forces he earlier described as 'cruel' (21).

Annie: Settle down (*A knell to her*) I dunno could I ever get into service in a place in London.

Jim: (*in fury*) If your father heard you were at the crossroad last night – or if the priest heard tell of it – dancin' on the board, an' restin' in the ditch with you cheek agen mine and your body pressed to me (Deevy 2003: 32).

Jim also tells Annie that her father would have her 'crippled' if she attempted to run away. In *Katie Roche*, Stan is similarly inclined. His early attempts to woo and charm Katie are replaced by silent disapproval, physical withdrawal and recourse to the harsh authority of the returned father, Reuben. Following her failed appeal for support, it becomes clear that the father will never stand with Katie against Stan:

Stan: (*Catches her, pushes her towards REUBEN*). Stand over there!

Katie: Is it tell you that and you in a roaring temper!
(*Sure of herself. Turns to REUBEN for sympathy. Meets his angry look.*)

Reuben: (*turns to STAN*). I'd give her a flogging.

Katie: Oh! (Deevy 2003: 114-115)

The central figure of patriarchal authority will not intervene on behalf of the female protagonist. The peripheral male love-interest characters of Michael Maguire and Roddy Mann do not offer any solace or support either. These individuals are presented as weak and self-serving. They desire the female lead character but will disavow her when challenged by the father, the husband or the community.

Like the character of Ellie Irwin, there is a suggestion that both Annie Kinsella and Katie

Roche are uncontrollable. Equally, it is implied that both possess an irrepressible sexuality and a willingness to transgress social norms. Peter Kinsella remarks that Annie is ‘off with Roddy Mann. Philanderin’ with the like of him – that’s all she’s fit for – or any boy she can lay hold of’ (20). Similarly, Katie Roche is reproached for being ‘too friendly’ (115) with local men while her husband is away; she herself explains her ultimate banishment as a consequence of ‘making too free with the boys’ (121). These women who attempt to live oblivious to prevailing codes of sexual conduct are physically disciplined by patriarchal authorities in the form of Peter Kinsella and Reuben Fitzsimon. Significantly, both Stan and Jim are prepared to collude with these patriarchal forces in order to chastise and control the women. Neither can these women expect support or solidarity from the other female characters that are depicted. Indeed, other women (in the form of Margaret Drybone and Mrs. Marks) are similarly keen to police, patrol and judge the behaviour of the deviant heroines. These are harsh, loveless communities that stifle the individuality and vitality of young women who challenge social and sexual norms.

Unlike those imagined by the writer and political activist Peadar O’Donnell, Deevy’s communities are hostile places, without even a buried communal solidarity.¹³ Neighbourliness is underpinned by self-interest, jealousy and resentment.

Michael: (*Resentful, watching her*). Anyway he gives you plenty of money. You were never dressed like that. You never looked better (Deevy 2003: 105).

Although Michael admits he would never commit to Katie because of her shadowy origins and her ‘want of a name’ (61), he is aggrieved that she married another. He pushes her to admit that she is sorry that she married Stan and is angry when she refuses to revoke

13. See Donal Ó Drisceoil (2003: 62-70) Ó Drisceoil notes that “neighbourliness, or communal solidarity and mutual self-reliance,... is the dominant motif in [O’Donnell’s] fiction” (63). Ó Drisceoil concludes that O’Donnell’s fiction “always portrayed strong women’ and that much of his work celebrates the ‘triumph of neighbourliness through activism and struggle’ (68).

her decision. In O’Donnell’s fiction, communal strife is a result of internecine rifts and bitter civil war politics; in Deevy, the discord seems to emanate from class and gender tensions. Within these communities, it is difficult to escape from the roles that have been assigned as a result of background or gender, and to attempt to do so is to attract censure and rancour:

Michael: He might be grand enough, but he’s not for you. What we’re born to – that’s what we’ll be. (*Moves nearer, lowers his tone*). Everyone here knows about you... an’ they don’t hold it agen you till you’ll be putting on ‘side’... so you’d like to be grand... ho!
(Deevy 2003: 65)

It is clear that Katie’s background is used to sanction her when she refuses to be contained by her assigned status. The desire to create an identity beyond that permitted by the community is also a feature of *The King of Spain’s Daughter*. Annie Kinsella wishes for a romantic epic life and this dreaming is scorned by the other characters. Mrs. Marks verbalises this communal discomfort and unease:

Fie on you then! Did you think you needn’t suffer like the rest of the world? Did you think you were put here to walk plain and easy through the gates of heaven? (Deevy 2003: 35)

Deevy’s heroines exist without familial comfort or support; both Annie Kinsella and Katie Roche are motherless, without siblings and with hostile fathers. Certainly, Annie Kinsella’s desire to escape is frustrated by lack of opportunity and by fear of the consequences of being caught. The only resistance that survives is the ability to re-imagine this grim reality and create a romantic ideal from an unpromising actuality. For example, Annie Kinsella creates an alternative narrative around her forced marriage to Jim: she represents this solid, meek man as a potentially passionate lover ‘who might cut your throat’ if he was jealous. Katie Roche contemplates her orphaned background using a narrative popularised in Biblical and mythological stories: she figures herself as the abandoned orphan who is possessed of a noble, aristocratic lineage.

In both *The King of Spain’s Daughter* and *Katie Roche*, marriage is portrayed as something sordid and as a constant source of disappointment to women. The romantic image

of the wedding celebration in *The King of Spain's Daughter* is subverted by the dark commentary of Mrs. Marks:

They say he wanted her money. They say it was signed and settled before ever he seen her. Well, she'll have her red carpet and all her fine show for her poor heart to feed on. That's the way (Deevy 2003: 21).

In this, Mrs. Marks is suggesting that the wedding itself is little more than a charade that masks the baser economic forces at play. She notes that thinking of her own wedding day is 'a thought that would sadden anyone'. From this perspective, the wedding day is the penultimate event in a woman's existence: looked forward to in anticipation and a source of nostalgia once past.

For twenty years you're thinking of that day, and for thirty years you're lookin' back at it. After that you don't mind – you haven't the feelin' – exceptin' maybe the odd day, like today (Deevy 2003: 22).

Yet despite Mrs. Marks's bleak evaluation of marriage as an institution, she is appalled by Annie's reluctance to marry and she is keen to see the deviant behaviour of Annie punished. For Katie Roche, her married relationship with Stan is also a state that deprives rather than sustains; Deevy portrays the marriage as a prison where Kate's intellectual, social and physical needs are subordinated.

Within the societies depicted in these dramas, there is a dearth of employment opportunities for women.¹⁴ It is this harsh reality that forces both the main protagonists and the other female characters into stifling and narrow roles. As there are few alternatives to marriage, Katie Roche considers entering the convent. Other than marriage or the convent, the only other life choice open to Katie is to remain as a serving girl to Amelia. However, life in domestic service gave few rights to workers. Katie's plans and free time are dependent on the whims of her employers.

14. This depiction is consistent with societal conditions in the mid-1930s. Unemployment was high. With the introduction of the Conditions of Employment Act (1935), the government had the power to limit the number of women workers in industry.

15. In the Free State, domestic service (like most female-dominated work) was largely unregulated

Furthermore, her employer Amelia feels she has the right to decide if the dance following the regatta is suitable for Katie. Amelia's life is also restricted. As the unmarried sibling, she is patronised by both Stan and Mrs. Drybone; her opinions are dismissed by both, and her dependent status is alluded to at key junctures. Katie seeks intellectual and vocational fulfilment through her husband's occupation as an architect. It is one of the key reasons that she decides to marry him. She imagines she will share his work with him and will have a positive impact on his career. However, Deevy demonstrates that the alteration in status has merely limited Katie further and that, in most ways, her life is unchanged from the time she lived in the house as a serving girl. Indeed, even the superficial changes she makes to the household's décor are disliked and dismissed by Stan. The paucity of choices open to many women in the Irish Free State within the realms of marriage, employment and travel are also explored in *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1935). Unlike the society depicted in *Katie Roche* (1936) where the social codes are often not openly articulated, Annie Kinsella is faced with blunt ultimatums from her father:

Peter: Will you marry him now, or go to the factory? Five years there, or your life with him? (Deevy 2003: 33)

Annie's response conveys hopelessness and weariness. Marriage seems to be the lesser of two evils. The lack of deserving marriage partners and the dearth of lifestyle alternatives is alluded to, but the continued threat of being 'bound' to the factory is ever present:

Annie: (to Jim) I might as well have you. (Low) Who would I ever meet would be fit for me? Where would I ever find a way out of here?

Peter: Well, I'll keep the card, fearin' she'd change (Deevy 2003: 33).

and women workers were often exploited by their employers. This issue exercised individuals such as Louie Bennett and Maura Laverty, and organisations such as the Irish Women's Workers Union. This activism eventually led to the formation of the Domestic Employers' Association. These two groups worked to agree on 'a common code governing hours of work, annual leave and a minimum accommodation standard'. See Rosemary Cullen Owens, *Louie Bennett* (2001), Cork: Cork UP, 104-107.

The status of single women is also treated in this play; it is explored in the dialogue surrounding the position of Jim's two unmarried sisters who live in the family home and who have served Jim since their mother died. The existence of these characters is incidental to the narrative. It seems Deevy uses them to make a point: they illustrate the vulnerable position of single women in the society under scrutiny. When Annie agrees to the marriage proposal, Jim mentions that he will tell his unmarried sisters to begin looking for 'a room in the town'. Annie is repulsed by this statement and threatens to call off the wedding. Jim's reply indicates the value placed on single women within the community:

Jim: Will you go back on me so?

Annie: Leave Molly and Dot stay where they are.

Jim: I will not.

Annie: What harm would they do?

Jim: They'd be in it – spoilin' the world
(Deevy 2003: 30).

Single women are vulnerable in this society, dependent on the goodwill of relations. Although Jim's sisters have functioned as housekeepers for him, it seems they have no rights to the family home and can be evicted at a moment's notice. Furthermore, Deevy suggests that women are possessions to be passed between families within this social framework. When Jim tries to intervene on behalf of Annie, Peter is quick to remind him that he has no rights:

Peter: Do she belong to you? (*Pause*) Do she?
When she do you can talk (Deevy 2003: 25).

Social norms and discourse in this world are premised on the elision of women's autonomy and agency. Here again the female character becomes a site of contestation rather than an empowered participant in the discussion regarding her rights and her future. Her situation, alert to the norms of naturalist drama, is constrained by familial and social realities.

Deevy's heroines in *A Disciple*, *Katie Roche* and *The King of Spain's Daughter* are confined and policed by oppressive communities and social orthodoxies. It has been noted that the dramatic endings to these plays witness these young women seemingly accept their fates within the strictures and confines of conventional society; they accept their lot as unhappy wives and mere instruments of

patriarchal authorities.¹⁶ As such, these plays deploy the naturalist trope of the trap where characters are confined and defeated by their environment and their backgrounds. This seems to have been a conscious choice on the part of Deevy who would have been familiar with the 1903-4 Griffith / Synge debate that centred on whether an Irish woman would abandon social norms (even theatrically) to abscond with a tramp.¹⁷ Furthermore, Deevy was also acquainted with the controversial choice of Ibsen's heroine Nora in *A Doll's House*. That she chose to do something entirely different with her female protagonists suggests that Deevy registers this dilemma in a radically different way. This is a dilemma that confronted not just Teresa Deevy but other Irish intellectuals of the 1930s. The writer Frank O'Connor recounts a pertinent anecdote in *The Lonely Voice*. Here he recalls a debate between himself and Peadar O'Donnell regarding the conventional ending of the latter's novel.¹⁸ In the novel, a woman who is unhappily married to a 'miserable' shopkeeper supports the leader of a local co-operative movement against clerical and petit bourgeois interests. However, she does not leave her husband and remains in this depressing and loveless marriage. O'Connor challenged O'Donnell on this conformist conclusion:

I argued with O'Donnell that she should have run away with the leader of the co-operative movement. O'Donnell replied – quite correctly I fancy – that she would not have done this. I argued – also correctly, I hope – that by this time it didn't matter what she would have done in real life. The logic of the novel had taken

16. See, for example, Walshe (1995) and Leeney (1995).

¹ 17. For an extended analysis and comparison between Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* and Deevy's *Katie Roche*, see Roche (1995).

¹ 18. While O'Connor does not identify the novel in question, it is likely he is referring to O'Donnell's *On the Edge of the Stream* (1934) although the heroine is married to the local school principal rather than a shopkeeper. Despite its conservative ending, the heroine and the community confront patriarchal authority and achieve an important moral victory. Donal Ó Drisceoil notes of the novel that while O'Donnell's fiction 'had always portrayed strong and resourceful women... here he is taking a further step with a frankly feminist message' (2001: 91).

over. Neither of us, I think, mistook the other's point of view. We both realised that what I wanted was another version of *The Lake*. I was interested in his two characters as individuals, even if the community lost them. He, the more genuine novelist, was interested in the community and could not take the decision that would deprive it of the sort of men and women he admired. He preferred that life should go on underground (2003: 143).

Such anti-romantic realism reflects the post-revolutionary mood of disillusionment. It could be argued that revolutionary fervour and optimism had given way under the pressure of state nationalist hegemony.¹⁹ Resistance is portrayed sympathetically but it cannot overcome the forces that it challenges. O'Donnell's view that the heroine 'would not have done this' is indicative of his commitment to the naturalist form. All that was left were small, individual acts of resistance; within his narrative fiction, at least, political and cultural recalcitrance had been forced underground. Joe Cleary argues that this type of commitment to a genre where "social protest is typically smothered by a pervading climate of entropy and fatalism" is ultimately negative and infers that these communities are paralysed beyond repair (2004: 234). However, the existence and depiction of social protest in such inhospitable conditions is, in itself, an important sign of resistance. Activists such as Peadar O'Donnell considered the political ramifications and potential of their literary works; indeed, O'Donnell referred to his fiction writing as "just a weapon" (cit. in Ó Drisceoil 2003: 67). Yet such a general acceptance of the naturalist form could limit and constrain audiences, rather than provide a site of imaginative liberation. Nevertheless, while failed social protest and its fictional representation may not result in a radical altering of political and social realities, it does bear witness to alternative visions. It was itself a response to the conservatism of 1930s Ireland. Deevy's achievement lies in her use of naturalism to demonstrate that recalcitrant agency can survive in inhospitable terrains.

19. Frank O'Connor also refers to the 'veil of resignation' that characterised the closing of Daniel Corkery's *The Threshold of the Quiet*. Here, the heroine forsakes resistance and enters the convent.

Indeed, while Deevy's heroines do eventually succumb to the systems of control and authority that dominate, it is their will and life force that impresses rather than their ultimate subordination. Annie Kinsella refuses to be psychologically bowed by the forces that compel her to enter a loveless marriage. She fancifully positions Jim as a romantic, epic figure who might kill for love. In the closing exchange between Annie and Mrs. Marks, there is also the suggestion that the former will not be contained by the social constructs available to her within the community.

Annie: (*to herself*) I couldn't bear I'd be no more than any other wife. (*Distant cheering is heard, ANNIE listens, looks away towards the river; flashes*) It won't be all they'll say of me: "She married Jimmy Harris" (Deevy: 2003: 35).

As is illustrated by the above extract, the conclusion of this play may appear conservative but it is not unproblematically so. Neither the play nor the society it depicts can completely contain a character as volatile or as recalcitrant as Annie Kinsella. While the conclusion of *The King of Spain's Daughter* is unsettling for a contemporary audience, the ending of *Katie Roche* is even more disquieting. Deevy had moved from the fantastical, theatrically flamboyant antics of Ellie Irwin and from the barely concealed recalcitrance of Annie Kinsella to an acceptance of naturalistic narrative where, more than the previous protagonists, Katie Roche is likely to be curtailed and atrophied within the plot resolution offered.

Despite their conservative endings, Teresa Deevy's dramas succeed in exposing the shadow side of the Arcadian visions articulated by political and religious leaders within the Irish Free State. Her dystopian communities do not offer redemption or tangible hope for the struggling protagonists; in this, they ultimately limit rather than encourage systemic change. However, her unvarnished portrayal of these communities must have challenged audiences and unsettled the moral certainties that dominated within Free-State culture. The sexual and emotional desire of her female protagonists confronts the hypocrisy and effects of public pronouncements of Church and State, and complicates the stereotypes of simple rural women who were content with their lack of social mobility and the dearth of

employment options available to them. Through her plays, Deevy illuminates these rural milieus and interrogates the thinly-veiled power networks and structures that maintained the status quo. The plight of individual characters within the plays is suggestive of a broader social, cultural and political malaise. Within an Irish context, engagement in revolutionary struggle in the period between 1916 and 1922 did have a politicising impact on many activists. However, the defeat of the anti-treaty side in the Civil War and the subsequent alienation of those activists who resisted being reconciled to the new order resulted in a complex situation. Individuals who had dared to dream of a radically different social order based on gender and class equality found themselves at odds with both the compromise settlement and with the new state. Increasing alienation from the Free-State administration as it failed to deliver on social

change, escalating poverty, the repression of cultural expression and the fragmentation of the revolutionary movement meant radical activism was driven underground. The new government struggled to establish order and stability in the aftermath of a bitter civil war and against the backdrop of the ghostly Republic that had not been achieved. The promise of equality and liberation that had energised the independence struggle was therefore suspended within the newly-formed state, and Deevy's work reveals the despair that existed in individuals throughout the country and illuminates the informal structures of control that buttressed inequality and oppression. On the stage of the National Theatre Society at the Abbey, her portrayal of women's sexuality, marriage and life choices constituted an intervention into the conservative consensus that dominated in the Irish FreeState.

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Received 12 January 2012 Last version 14 February 2012

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