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Manliness and Mother Ireland

The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922. Joseph Valente. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 289 pages.

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<1> Making provocative distinctions between manliness and masculinity, Joseph Valente reveals the gendered ideology that both bolstered and limited Irish nationalism between 1880-1922. In this period, masculinity referred to traits and behaviors such as aggressiveness, strength, stamina, and the possession of “animal spirits.” But manliness, the ideal form of masculinity, had an additional dimension: the ability to curb these masculine behaviors in the name of self-control and spiritual authority. The expectation that men possess but contain masculinity explains why *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857) upholds the norm of English manliness even as it chronicles the feminization of its characters. Valente suggests that in Ireland men were subjected to the prescriptions of manliness—to be strong but controlled, rational but compassionate—without ever being included in the descriptive category of manhood. This created a political double bind: Irish subjects could not acquire political autonomy until they proved themselves to be men, but they could not prove themselves to be men without political autonomy. Accepting the hegemony of the British state made them too passive and subservient, but physically resisting it through revolution made them too violent, too lacking in self-control.

<2> Valente draws upon a rich body of material—historical sources, political cartoons, literary texts, cultural myths, and contemporary psychoanalytic and postcolonial theory—to reveal how the ideology of manliness acquired coherence through the convergence of disparate representations and representational modes. Combining a cultural studies and new formalist methodology, his close reading of literary texts and social forms yields fresh perspectives on political figures like Charles Stewart Parnell, cultural movements such as the Irish Literary Revival, and social organizations like the Gaelic Athletic Association. His approach to Parnell in the first chapter is particularly exciting, for rather than arguing that Parnell either does or does not deserve his iconic status, Valente takes seriously the cult of personality, questioning why so many Irish and English admirers responded to Parnell in a visceral way. Parnell emerges as a national hero in Valente’s account precisely because the Irish politician masters the dynamic of manliness: he hints at deep-seated passion only to control it. Unlike the dramatic Daniel O’Connell who openly displays his masculinity, Parnell was noted for his self-control evidenced by a remarkably calm exterior. Parnell’s political methods—boycotting and parliamentary

obstruction—depend upon the same dynamic: they activate the violent desires of Irish nationalism only to sublimate them. Valente reveals that parliamentary nationalists and more radical nationalists were not simply different positions on a political spectrum: they were intertwined in a dynamic relationship that ultimately bolstered Parnell’s cause.

<3>If, as Edna O’Brien asserts, “Ireland has always been a woman,” Valente reveals that the political and ideological implications of representing Ireland as a women changes as the ideology of manliness coheres within Irish society.⁽¹⁾ In Chapter Three, which considers the genre of the Sovereignty drama, he claims that the Irish Literary Revival inscribes British gender norms into native Irish myths to create an invented tradition that serves patriarchy. Unlike the traditional Sovereign Hag who possesses sexual agency, the symbolic female of revival dramas is desexualized, demanding blood sacrifice rather than sexual union. Adopting the conventions of romantic chivalry, dramas such as *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) and *The Singer* (1915) give men greater agency within the story. But they also sublimate male aggression by endorsing it because it will be ineffective. The violence supported by revival dramas lead to death and martyrdom rather than a better life. Making a broader argument about the politics of genre, Valente demonstrates that the aesthetics of the Sovereignty drama depend upon the ideology it endorses —Maud Gonne’s *Dawn* (1904) feels flat because it rejects the gendered norms that govern the Sovereignty drama—but also that politics are shaped by aesthetics. Here Valente claims that the nationalist movement opposed women’s suffrage in part because the movement subjected real women to the symbolic structure of the Sovereignty drama genre.

<4>In the fifth chapter, James Joyce emerges as one of the few Irish writers who challenges the dynamic of manliness by exposing it as an ideology to struggle with rather than a myth to embrace. Reading *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915), *Dubliners* (1914) and the “Cyclops” episode from *Ulysses* (1918-1920), Valente argues that Joyce reveals how colonization mediates gender expectations. Joyce represents Dublin’s unique position as a border zone that merged imperial and colonial culture, and, in the process, describes an oppressive, self-defeating “metrocolonial manliness.” “Counterparts,” from *Dubliners*, which considers the distinctive gender expectations of the office, the pub, and an arm-wrestling contest, is one of many examples of how Irish men such as Farrington become subject to an impossible double-bind. In each setting, Farrington can display either masculine virility or manly self-possession, but in no case can he display both. The tragedy of the story is that there seems to be no escape from his position. As Valente suggests, the story concludes with Farrington “creating a ‘counterpart’ in thwarted manhood” by beating his son, Charlie (219). Valente’s interpretation of the “Cyclops” episode suggests that the tragedy extends further: not only do men inflict the burden of metrocolonial manliness onto the younger generation, they direct it outward towards racial ‘others.’ But even if Joyce offers no escape from the colonial double bind, Valente argues that Joyce resists the norms of manliness by uncovering the relationship between seemingly oppositional characters such as Farrington and his Anglo-Irish boss, Mr. Alleyne, or the Citizen and Leopold Bloom. Valente claims that the exposure of these relationships, and the logic of manliness that they suggest, insists that the terms of normative manhood must be changed. Whether Joyce’s writing actually helped change the terms of manliness remains unanswered within the book.

<5>Common threads link the distinct chapters, so that the very structure of the book bears out Valente's argument that historical convergence yields ideological coherence. Returning to key figures like Parnell, Lady Gregory, John Synge, and Patrick Pearse over the course of several chapters, Valente reveals how their political positions reverberate across Irish culture and throughout the historical period. Together, the chapters create a nuanced portrait of Irish culture and politics grappling with an imported ideology. Reassessing the relationship between the Irish Literary Revival's cultural nationalism and Parnell's political nationalism, Chapter Two claims that the myth of manliness unites seemingly disparate national movements. The fourth chapter examines the revisions to the Cuchulain cycle as an 'invented tradition' of Irish manliness that *On Baile's Strand* (1903) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) render visible as 'invented.' Valente concludes by turning to Yeats, suggesting that his desire for collective manhood pervades both his poetry and his politics.

<6>The book's great strength is its ability to reveal doubleness, even double binds, without creating the rigid dichotomies that sometimes paralyze the field of Irish Studies. In Valente's hands, Irishness and Irish manhood is anything but unitary. Gender expectations change over time—the 'invented traditions' of the Sovereignty drama and Cuchulain cycle are two pertinent examples—and vary according to class where Yeats's embrace of aristocratic culture accompanies his espousal of manliness. A sense of the weight of colonialism emerges, and yet Valente carefully tracks a variety of responses to this burden. Like manliness itself, Irish culture appears less as a static entity and more as a dynamic.

<7>The richness of his argument raises questions about its scope. Presumably other colonial subjects are caught in a similar political double bind. More comparative work, or additional studies, could help determine the extent to which manliness shapes colonial nationalism more broadly. Do other colonies, like Ireland, embrace the norms of English manliness, or do they adopt what Valente calls "colonial hypermasculinity"—and its pitfalls— instead (143)? The book also raises questions about English literature and culture in the period. Valente frequently returns to Thomas Hughes, Thomas Carlyle, Thomas Arnold, and Charles Kingsley as the primary theorists of English manliness. These figures make sense given that their work on manliness intersects with their prejudice against the Irish. As Valente suggests, they were "the major exponents of Irish feminization and bestialization" (14). But these writers were no longer writing in the period that Valente studies. Does the dynamic of manliness change in England between 1880-1922? The figure of the dandy lurks in the background of the book, "a travesty of manliness," that calls for additional exploration (57).

<8>Overall, the book convincingly demonstrates how gendered norms shaped British imperialism and Irish political resistance. *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922* implicitly makes the case for studying the cultural exchanges between England and Ireland, not just noting their political and cultural differences. Moreover, its nuanced, textured argument reveals the continued importance of examining the intersections of gender, class, and colonialism.

Endnotes

(1)Edna O'Brien, *Mother Ireland*. New York: Plume, 1999. 1. (^)