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**The Trinity of a new Age: Three struggling Women in  
Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* (1986) and *After Easter* (1994)**

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 would take part in the peaceful marches organised 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 gives voice to three Belfast Catholic women, Frieda, Josie and Donna, who bespeak women's physical involvement in the conflict opposing the two religious communities, supposedly, as well as the Republicans against the British army. Ten years later, she had *After Easter* performed, in which we also find three Belfast Catholic women, Greta, Helen and Aoife, who are older than the first set of girls but who are involved in the conflict on a more psychological level. Throughout her plays, Anne Devlin gives us an insight into the forgotten world of women in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, if the author was said to give a feminist viewpoint on the conflict, she personally asserted that when she writes "more is called up" (Foley 74). Indeed, if Anne Devlin first points out the little room women are offered in her male-dominated Province and the 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 Catholics against Protestants, Republicans against Loyalists, Nationalists struggling against Unionists and, above all, the IRA against the British army. Her conflict becomes one about genders mainly; it is not one about either ideologies or territory. In

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*. She starts from the Bible, which she knows perfectly well, because, for her, the Sacred Book has been misinterpreted and Catholicism misused, notably by Northern Irish men when it has come to justify the conflict. It is up to women to deconstruct these historical misinterpretations and reconstruct them. Along those lines, Devlin does not exclude the fact that both sets of three women might become the Holy Trinity of a New Age. Ultimately, *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter* can lead us to wonder whether God might be 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 inextricably been linked in this part of the world. That is why, Josie and Frieda's father, named Malachy, their brother, Liam, as well as Donna's ex-husband, naturally belong to the provisional branch of this army. Although men only play secondary roles in *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter*, Anne Devlin first shows that Northern Ireland is a male-dominated Province in which women are apparently left with two choices: either submit to men or take part in the conflict.

In an article Imelda Foley wrote, she would say 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* particularly illustrates what this writer means.

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 hunger strike led by Republican convict Bobby Sands in 1981 in Long Kesh, also known as HM Prison Maze, so as to demand the special category status for paramilitary prisoners. On the contrary, 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 to<sup>1</sup> in this club.

The audience will then realize that this club is a male public space in which 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 roles and private spheres, where, they, as Donna suggests, “are all waiting on men” (OA 12)<sup>2</sup>. 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. She has never had any decision-power, having always been manipulated by a patriarchal society like most females born in Republican families in Northern Ireland, according to the author. One reason for this was given by Ann Rea in

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

<sup>2</sup> She is personally waiting on Liam. (OA 13 and 16).

“Reproducing the Nation: Nationalism, Reproduction, and Paternalism in Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone*”. She indeed confirmed 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, this control that Republican men have over Catholic women seems to alienate the latter. Imelda Foley personally thinks 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 observes 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)

Throughout this extract, Frieda sums up the situation of Catholic women in Ulster: their fate is deeply subsumed by men’s.

Yet, as a singer, Frieda is allowed to enter the club where the Republicans meet. In act 1 scene 1, 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 vital space. Then, when she is at Donna’s, she, as well as Donna and Josie, are disturbed by Malachy who has come to introduce Joe, a man who wants to be involved in the Irish Republican Army (OA

20). Therefore, many a time is domestic space, or rather female space, invaded by men on the basis of Republicanism. Moreover, men do not content themselves with controlling their daughters, sisters, wives or mistresses; they have also enticed them into embracing their cause. Effectively, when Josie reveals Donna how far she will go for Cathal O'Donnell, the man she loves, Donna can not but remark: "I'm looking at you but it's him who's talking" (OA12). 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). The masculine cause in question in Northern Ireland is the struggle against the British Army and against the Loyalists.

In her play, Anne Devlin reminds the audience that when the police and the army invaded Republican areas, women would hammer bin lids on the pavement to warn men they might be lifted (OA 16). One may say they actively took part to the struggle. So, there is definitely a feminine side to the conflict, which was confirmed by the internment of women in the prison of Armagh on the basis of Republicanism. In Devlin's 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; however, she sings Republican classics in which men are heroes (OA 9). In the cases of these two girls, and to quote Josie, women "are used" by men (OA 56). The best example we can give of this reification, which verges on dehumanisation, is personified by Aunt Cora, Malachy's sister. If her name means "maiden" in Greek, this woman effectively embodies the ultimate silent, compliant, suffering woman. Indeed, as her brother was the local commander of the Provisional IRA in the 1950s, she was seriously injured during an IRA campaign. Frieda relates her story in the following words:

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)

So as to show all Northern Irish Catholic women what Republicans would call Cora's "patriotic duty", she has been displayed at the front of all parades from that time onwards.

In a pamphlet entitled "From Cathleen to Anorexia, The Breakdowns of Ireland", Edna Longley explained that there has been an evolution of the role of women in the North. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were strong and took model on Cathleen Ni'Houlihan, Yeats' personification of a fighting Ireland in his eponymous play. As time went by, women grew weak and progressively lost their identities. That is what she calls 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 been fomenting focuses on a same objective: freedom. In fact, they 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 puts on stage 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. And, in Devlin’s play, women do not want to remain passive and silent. According to Anthony Roche, in *Contemporary Irish Drama, from Beckett to McGuinness*, “*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.

In an article entitled “Women and War”, Alexis Greene explained 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 to 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*. On the contrary, men tend to resist love from women. For example, when Joe Conran arrives on stage, he immediately lets Frieda know that he does not want to be seduced: “I’m very easily seduced. I’m on a job here – I don’t want to get involved” (OA 28). He has come to complete a political mission. For these patriotic men, who live like martyrs because they fight and sacrifice themselves for their country, emotions are left to women. They do not love women, they make love to them, notably 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 would be 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), then Josie would stand for Magdalen whereas Donna personifies the Virgin. Indeed, the latter 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 get jealous. Therefore, she also loses her femininity to prove how loyal she is to him. Liam, on the contrary, cheats on her. Here again, there is not the same meaning of the word *loyalty* for both sexes. For men, loyalties are the result of ideologies, for women, they result from a romanticized perception of love.

If Ann Rea would assert 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, 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 this ideal of purity in her first play (Rea 221).

*Ourselves Alone* is a play in two acts the title of which translates the Gaelic name of the nationalist political party in Ireland, Sinn Fein. The latter “has inspired generations of Catholic Republicans eager for independence from England” (Lojek 60). But the main characters, the heroes, here are women. And, like the Republicans who want freedom from the British, women want freedom from men. However, in an analysis of Devlin’s plays, Helen Lojek remarked that “*Ourselves Alone* disappoints because women are vulnerable and

helpless” (Lojek 67). Indeed, in conferring too much emotion to women and in forgetting that they are part of a bigger community and cannot constitute a community at large, women are unconsciously weakened in this play.

It is with *After Easter*, her second play that the author manages to reach her goal. The conflict between men and women occurs on a psychological level. Lives are no longer led through relationship with men and the women are dominated by men no longer. 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 completely substitute to men. For example, Helen is the one who personally decides of her love affairs and Greta has been sent to free Ireland. In fact, the enemy in this play is not man but another entity: Catholicism. As Chris Wood related in an article entitled “‘My own Story’: Woman’s Place, Divided Loyalty and Patriarchal Hegemony in the Plays of Anne Devlin”, “the most pervasive form of patriarchal control in *After Easter* is the Church” (Wood 306). Thus, in 1994, it is not against men that women must fight, it is against their religious denomination. Therefore, *After Easter*, the title of which raises Christian matters, also calls to question the place of women as far as religion is concerned.

If men are fighting for political reasons and women for social and even economic reasons at times, Catholicism is another patriarchal system against which women must struggle in Northern Ireland as well as in the plays of Devlin. In fact, religion and politics have intertwined for such a long time in Ulster, 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 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). That is why Devlin’s plays always allude to Christianity to some extent.

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, she also surreptitiously alluded to Christianity. Indeed, Catholicism is referred to many a time in that play; yet she never confronts or compares it to Protestantism. The audience hears that Josie once wanted to be a “nun” (*OA* 12), she then identifies Cathal O’Donnell with “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. On the contrary, the religious dimension appears more clearly in *After Easter*, in which 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 this conflictual situation 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.

In an interview, the author revealed that Donna, Josie and Frieda had been 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 a Holy trinity, and we

cannot but consider Greta, Helen and Aoife like another trinity of women. On a religious level like on the political one, women have thus substituted to men. Effectively, the mission Greta feels assigned by God obviously resembles that of the Holy Ghost on Pentecost day (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 fairly remarked 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 assimilating Greta with the Holy Ghost, Helen, chief organiser and surrogate male, would be seen like God the father, and Aoife like Son (Foley 96).

Bearing Foley’s argument in mind, we may take into account what Northrop Frye, in a book entitled *The Great Code*, would say concerning God’s gender. He, in fact, explains that “God is a male because he rationalises the ethos of a patriarchal society dominated by men” (Frye 163). Nevertheless, in *After Easter*, Greta buried her father, who died from a heart-attack. This is highly symbolical, in terms of religion, since it may convey the impression that God can die. And if we may go further in this interpretation and take into consideration the symbolic dimension of heart, He may die because He might not believe in love anymore. Furthermore, Deborah Cottreau, who put the play on stage in Canada, remarked and confirmed,

*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).

Thus, if we follow Devlin's ideas, our personal interpretation and Cottreau's comment that women are now in charge of saving humanity, God might be female. Indeed, Devlin proposes to set up a new religious order in which women will play a prevailing role.

Greta's mission is not so much an attempt to secularise religion than a return to the very words of the Bible. In terms of liturgical chronology, after Easter comes Pentecost. This episode is related in the New Testament and explains how all the apostles were given utterance. However, in the psyche of most Northern Irish Republicans and Nationalists, Easter also refers to the Insurrection led by Collins, Pearse and Connolly on Easter 1916. Their aim was to free Ireland from British occupation. Then, the message Devlin wants to deliver is one of reconciliation, since it would be better if this historical event was transcended (that's what she certainly means through the preposition "after" in the title of this play, so as to show the transitional passage) and if the original Christian myth was found again. In this objective, the role of language is utterly important and for the author, only women can voice the matter.

Because Greta left Ireland in 1979 to go to England, she has undergone a kind of splitting of personality, made obvious through the hallucinations and visions she has had since her departure. This fragmentation of her self which mirrors how Irishness must be deconstructed, can also be considered to be the first step towards a recreation of her identity. In fact, the climax of this dual personality was reached when she experienced her death, during which she lost her voice. Coming back to Ireland she finds her voice back, and says "everything I will say from now on is true" (*AE* 17). She thus experiences a psychological resurrection and adds that she must "stay alive and tell the truth" (*AE* 53). That is how she starts criticising the Catholic Church for preventing women to be ordained priests and overtly

disagrees with Catholic dogma on that. According to her, if “a woman can be a priest, God can be female” (*AE* 57); therefore, “women might be loved” (*AE* 57).

It seems that her aim is to rewrite the history and the implication of the Catholic Church in Ulster, an objective in which women would endorse a prevailing role. Anne Devlin once explained in an interview that she thought,

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).

That is the main reason why the audience will find Greta at the end of the play, peacefully narrating an invented story of 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, “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 myth she totally invented, Greta places herself at the beginning of the History of Ireland. Indeed, 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.

Obviously, both plays revolve around the liberation of women, their recognition, and let us say their emancipation from 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). And, in a way, her theatre, which is a political agent, participates to the evolution of the mentalities in the Province. Chris Wood concluded on saying 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 added 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, listen to them.

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