

The Witness, the Silenced, and the Rebel—Women in Search of Their Voice: Female Characters in Brian Friel’s *Translations* and Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone*

Bence Gábor Kvéder

Introduction

It appears to have become a commonplace of Irish literary criticism that in *Translations* (1980) Brian Friel dramatizes largely national and historical issues. Referred to as his “most obviously postcolonial play” (Bertha 158), it is known for having the “nineteenth-century plot and setting [that] bore on Anglo-Irish relations in the present” (Roche, *Theatre and Politics* 2). Raising communal awareness, the play concentrates on the “key transitional moment when Irish gave way to English, when a culture was forced to translate itself into a different linguistic landscape” (Pelletier 68). In such a collectively damaging situation, personal problems could easily be overlooked. However, Ondřej Pilný emphasizes that Friel in general was “interested predominantly in individual people and their emotions, in their micro-narratives and their position within the surrounding discourse” (113). Whereas the hardships and traumas depicted in *Translations*, and especially their consequences, are suffered by the characters as members of a community in the first place, this does not necessarily mean that personal issues are missing from the drama.

Even though Martine Pelletier observes that “*Translations* problematizes the relationship between language and identity” (69), it is relatively rarely considered that the latter term can be extended (or narrowed down) to the female characters of the play. It is widely accepted that “the critical interest in *Translations* continues to gain momentum, eliciting increasingly subtle and diverse readings” (Boltwood 151), but scholarly reflections concerning the women in the drama are scarce. Lauren Onkey points out that “critical analyses [. . .] have rarely studied the play’s women characters or the issues about women and colonialism that the play raises” (162) and continues her argumentation by suggesting that “*Translations* resonates into the volatile symbolic and real history of women in Ireland” (162). In this sense, despite the constant presence of communal problems, Maire, Sarah, and Bridget do have their own personalities, characteristic (therefore examinable) features, and potential connotative roles—not only as Irish but also as female human beings.

Translations is a drama that deals extensively with the onset of a new cultural-historical era, connecting the theme of language to that of voice and the ambition to express one’s ideas and basic points of view. These issues, along with women’s rights in general, underwent considerable changes during the one and a half centuries

leading up to the time when Friel wrote his play. For this reason, a 1980s drama depicting the lasting consequences of the type of colonization that takes place in *Translations* and also portraying women as its central figures might offer a relevant point of comparison. Since Friel's work is an example, albeit a very unconventional one, of the "Troubles play," Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* (1985), where the Troubles era actually serves as the backdrop, seems to be a suitable choice for a comparative inquiry. Mary Trotter notes that the Devlin play "recounts the lives of three Northern Irish women whose experiences are shaped by both their own ideologies and those of their fathers, brothers, and husbands" (122), resulting in a personalized plot in the drama. Indeed, the stories of Frieda, Donna, and Josie in *Ourselves Alone* imply presuppositions, circumstances, and conclusions as socially and culturally critical, albeit more detailed, as those in the case of Friel's female characters.

This essay will concentrate on the possible common grounds between *Translations* and *Ourselves Alone*, focusing upon their female characters. The main scope of the analysis is going to be their corresponding, at some points opposing, features and the similar motives conspicuous in the six women both on public/social and on private/individual levels. I attempt to argue the importance of Friel's "heroines" as the prototypes and forerunners of the ideas embodied by Devlin's three female protagonists. Although they are wide apart from each other in time, emphasis will be put on the two plays' contribution to the effective depiction of women's situations and (dis)abilities, as well as on the (im)possibilities of the creation, identification, representation and protection of the individual self within conflict-ridden Irish contexts. In underlining the relevance of the plays, my comparative analysis will search for evidence for the claim that not only *Ourselves Alone* but also "*Translations* [. . .] was a product of the contemporary situation in which it was composed" (Grene 34). My hypothesis is that, despite the 150-year difference between their plots, the portrayal of women's experiences in the two dramas shed similar light on some of the most acute social and cultural problems Irish people during the onslaught of the colonial oppression of their country and Northern Irish Catholics during the Troubles had to face.

Witnessing and Clairvoyance

In spite of having relatively little theatrical space, as her character is far from being central, Friel's Bridget fulfils the minor but indispensable role of the alert witness and analyser of changes taking place in Baile Beag. A piece of evidence for Bridget's significance as a cultural "prophet" is that the physical symptoms of an imminent calamity are shown through her figure. She constantly smells the sweet but menacing odour of the potato blight, a potential sign of the Great Famine, which took place in Ireland a decade after the action of *Translations*. Thus, Bridget stands for "the doomed sense that the potato blight *will* hit Baile Beag, like all the other poor western seaboard areas where the famine was most acute, and that the disaster-mongers are to be proved all too right" (Grene 38; italics in the original). Her importance is increased by the fact that it is her words that draw attention to the approaching disaster:

BRIDGET. [. . .]
 [. . .] (BRIDGET *runs to the door and stops suddenly. She sniffs the air. Panic.*)
 The sweet smell! Smell it! It's the sweet smell! Jesus, it's the potato blight!
 (*Translations* 63)

Readers and spectators of the play “may have had little knowledge of the National Schools or the Ordnance Survey, but everyone would have been aware of the Famine” (Greene 38), so the connotation here is significant.

Similarly to Bridget’s mediating role in *Translations*, Josie, “the serious voice” (Olinder 547) of *Ourselves Alone*, “resides in a kind of political middle ground between Frieda’s radical spirit and Donna’s faithfulness, as she is one of relatively few women actually working in the IRA” (Trotter 122). Regarding the female characters’ participation in the conflicts depicted or foreshadowed in the two plays, both women, Bridget and Josie can be seen as remarkably active. Despite her somewhat superficial role as a kind of comic-relief character, Bridget’s connection to Doalty (whose innocent-looking mischief early in the play turns out to prefigure the conclusion of the drama) can easily make her the “manliest” of the three women in the hedge-school—and this particular feature carries some implications for her possible future beyond the plot. Similarly, in Devlin’s drama Josie “is the fighter [. . .], the conscious socialist, the woman who has tried to be as good and patriotic as a man in the guerrilla warfare, but who has mainly been used as a courier” (Olinder 547). However, her figure evokes certain historical questions concerning the potential negligence and misrepresentation of female members of the IRA. As Colin Coulter summarizes women’s participation in the ongoing Troubles, “it has been comparatively rare for women to have directly assumed the role of combatants during the troubles [sic]. While the role that women have played in the political violence of the last three decades has been strictly secondary, their participation nonetheless should not be overlooked” (131). Even though women were indeed involved in the conflicts, their collective image and the tasks undertaken by them suffered distortion and marginalization.

Summarizing the general picture concerning female duties in the IRA, Britta Olinder notes that “in the Republican struggle the role of women is mainly as the messengers and sexual comforters of the real fighters” (547). This is exactly what Josie continuously intends to defy—unsuccessfully. Specifying the problem she experiences, Mária Kurdi highlights that “Josie’s gendered marginalisation [. . .] is accentuated without comforting illusions about her paramilitary service. Josie has been involved in nationalist activities since her childhood, sent out on dangerous errands mostly at night; she took up the inferior job of a courier out of duty to her family as well as to the Catholic community she belongs to” (170–71). The paradox of her situation is that the more she is involved in the actions of the IRA, the less independently can she handle her own personal life and identity as a Catholic woman in Northern Ireland.

Regarding the potential clairvoyant function of Bridget’s counterpart in Devlin, it should be highlighted that Josie “is sleepwalking and feels sick all the time” (Olinder 548; see also *Ourselves Alone* 15), which can be interpreted as the unsettling signs of the psychological damage the Troubles brought about. The negative effects this era had on female members of the Northern Irish society are also emphasized by Coulter:

“The various emotional and material costs associated with the troubles [sic] have evidently taken their toll upon the minds and bodies of many women. The upheavals that recent generations have endured have encouraged nervous disorders that would appear to afflict women with particular regularity” (134). Certain symptoms of this can be traced in Josie’s behaviour as well. Since the Great Famine and the Troubles are undoubtedly perceived as tragic events in the collective Irish mind, the characters of Bridget and Josie reveal the sorrows and hardships Ireland and many of *her* people had to go through.

Woman as Symbol of Ireland—The Silenced Shout

In *Translations* Sarah is the female character whose role can be interpreted in several ways. Approaching her significance in Friel’s play from the most evident perspective, Margaret Llewellyn-Jones notes that “language’s function as a prime element in identity is manifest in Manus’ teaching Sarah, the dumb girl, to speak through naming herself” (24). Besides the relationship between language and identity, the motivating force behind Sarah’s determination to speak is also very personal. Despite the fact that she “loves her teacher but can barely speak her own name, let alone communicate her love” (FitzGibbon 75), Sarah is not discouraged—as long as she has Manus at her side. Considering the cultural importance of speech, critics highlight that “Sarah, only once, manages to use her new-found ability to communicate through language. When Owen asks her who she is, she can state her name and the place she comes from—she can state her identity” (Niel 209; see also Andrews 169). The following are the only words uttered by her without Manus’ aforementioned supervision and help:

OWEN. That’s a new face. Who are you?
(A very brief hesitation. Then.)
 SARAH. My name is Sarah.
 OWEN. Sarah who?
 SARAH. Sarah Johnny Sally. *(Translations 28)*

Such an act of self-identification can happen on multiple levels: by speaking, one can profess to be a person, as well as member of a certain group. In Sarah’s case, her achievement to utter her name confirms her identity as a female human being and as one of the Irish people. Anthony Roche highlights that Sarah and Manus even share a kind of code language: when she sees Maire and Yolland kiss, Sarah lets Manus know about what she saw “through some combination of speech and mime but in a language of her own that he is uniquely equipped to interpret” (*Theatre and Politics* 139).

Roche also examines the abrupt turning point in the relationship of Sarah and Manus, and concludes that “Manus has taught her well, and it is a deeply ironic tribute to his pedagogic artistry that what she manages to articulate is not her own name, Sarah Johnny Sally from Bun na hAbhann, but his: ‘Manus ... Manus!’” (*Theatre and Politics* 139).¹

1 For detailed analyses of Sarah’s role (as a mediator between private and public spheres of life and as a spy for her tribe) in the love triangle of Maire, Yolland, and Manus, see Onkey 169 and Pine 172.

Onkey takes this line of thought one step further: “Her [i.e. Sarah’s] success at speech is new, and has only been motivated by Manus’ encouragement; without Manus, she has lost her ability and inspiration to speak” (170). At the end, being commanded to speak in Manus’s absence by Lancey, Sarah’s muteness testifies that indeed “he [i.e. Manus] is her only route to language” (Onkey 169). It is at Manus’ departure that she utters her last words in the drama:

(He addresses her as he did in Act One but now without warmth or concern for her.)

MANUS. What is your name? *(Pause)* Come on. What is your name?

SARAH. My name is Sarah.

MANUS. Just Sarah? Sarah what? *(Pause)* Well?

SARAH. Sarah Johnny Sally.

MANUS. And where do you live? Come on.

SARAH. I live in Bun na hAbhann. *(She is now crying quietly.)*

MANUS. Very good, Sarah Johnny Sally. There’s nothing to stop you now—nothing in the wide world. [. . .]

SARAH. *(Quietly)* I’m sorry ... I’m sorry ... I’m so sorry, Manus ...

(Translations 56–57)

Both her “*waiflike appearance*” and the fact that “*she has been considered locally to be dumb*” (*Translations* 11) suggest that Sarah is not likely to overcome the loss of Manus in the foreseeable future, and her “muteness indicates her silenced status as both woman and colonized individual” (Llewellyn-Jones 24). As a subject of the double oppression women in the colonies usually had to face, Sarah can also be associated with the process of attaching feminine attributes to the colonized. Nicholas Grene convincingly states that “there is no doubt that opening the play with the almost dumb Sarah trying to say her name is a potent image for a nearly stifled Irish-speaking community” (38). Sarah is a member but also a representative of her language group. Therefore, when Maire compliments her dress by saying that “green suits you” (*Translations* 60), the connotation of the colour as an Irish symbol is apparent.²

Reflecting the calamities the Irish have to endure, “if Sarah represents the nation’s difficulty with speech, then she is either silent in defiance or fear of the colonizer” (Onkey 170). When she finds herself interrogated by someone who not only represents a menacing power for her but also talks in a foreign language whereas she struggles to speak even her own mother tongue, she remains silent:

LANCEY. [. . .]

(Pointing to SARAH) Who are you? Name!

(SARAH’S mouth opens and shuts, opens and shuts. Her face becomes contorted.)

What’s your name?

(Again SARAH tries frantically.)

OWEN. Go on Sarah. You can tell him.

² I am indebted to Mária Kurdi for drawing my attention to the potential significance of this sentence.

(*But SARAH cannot. And she knows she cannot. She closes her mouth. Her head goes down.*)
 (*Translations* 62)

Since “her ability to speak leaves her when the situation changes” (Niel 209), Sarah’s silence appears to be both accompanied and *enhanced* by her situation. Attributing her muteness to the theme of English colonization, Pelletier notes that the moment when she “reverts to silence upon being questioned by Lancey [. . .] suggests a possible symbolic reading of this character as Ireland, struck dumb through fear and the imposition of English” (67–68; see also Andrews 156 and 169, as well as Roche, *Theatre and Politics* 142). The smile on her face (see *Translations* 63) might contradict total hopelessness, but the fact that then she “*shakes her head, slowly, emphatically*” (*Translations* 63) as a response to Owen’s reassuring words suggests that her muteness might be irredeemable.

The question whether Sarah eventually refuses to speak because she indeed does not have any other chance or because she intends to “exploit” her disability as a kind of passive protestation leads Onkey to note that “her many silences and ambiguous gestures require that we must remain open to a range of explanations for her behavior, especially in a play about ambiguous translations and the problematics of language” (169). In view of her complexity and the apparent symbolism related to her, Sarah has even been likened to the mythical Cathleen ni Houlihan,³ or analysed as one particular example of “a long line of idealized female representations of Ireland” (Harris 35). Lionel Pilkington refers to Sarah as “the shawled girl or Cathleen Ni Houlihan figure” (*Theatre and the State* 212), which is a pertinent observation, all the more so because she is introduced by Friel as a woman of uncertain age (see *Translations* 11). In this interpretation Sarah is an allegorical character deprived of her ability to speak and represent herself on stage at the end of the play—both in theatrical and in national terms.

The smile Sarah has on her face before leaving “could be nothing more than a simple gesture of farewell to Owen. But it may also be read as a refusal to be simplified” (Onkey 170), an allusion to the fact that the fight is not over just yet.⁴ In fact, she is the only character who leaves the stage without haste and not in an upset mood (see *Translations* 63). Bidding a terse farewell, Manus, as mentioned before, leaves “*briskly*” (57). Lancey, having threatened the Irish, “*goes off*” (63) with notable vehemence. Frightened by the ominous events, Bridget “*runs off*” (63). Doalty, hinting at his knowing “something” concerning the Donnelly twins’ whereabouts, “*leaves*” (64) in a stern and fierce temper. Being perfectly aware of Lancey’s intentions, Owen also “*exits*” (67) in a hurry. Even Maire, who later returns, briefly walks out in a highly disturbed state of mind (see *Translations* 60). It is notable that Owen decides to join Doalty and the Donnelly twins against the British after Sarah has smiled at him (see *Translations* 66–67). This enhances her role as Cathleen ni Houlihan, the mythical woman figure motivating her men never to stop fighting for what belongs to them. Paradoxically, while she departs with dignity Sarah also serves as the embodiment of an oppressed, muted nation.

3 See, for instance, Kurdi 93.

4 I am indebted to Mária Kurdi for this possible reading of the stage instruction.

In Devlin's play, in contrast with Josie, Donna "plays a more traditional role for women linked to the IRA, as she raises her infant child and waits for her partner, Liam, to be released from prison" (Trotter 122). The predicament she is expected to cope with can be highlighted by a quotation from Coulter's book on contemporary Northern Irish society:

Since the late 1960s tens of thousands of Northern Irish men have been killed, incarcerated and incapacitated. The wives and girlfriends of these men have often had to shoulder the burden of holding entire families together. Women have frequently had to raise children alone and on minuscule incomes. Inevitably, many have had to endure acute and sustained financial hardship. (134)

Donna functions as a fitting example of this. Her plight is further worsened by the fact that she "must handle not only the economic and emotional demands of raising her child without the help of its father, but also her partner's unjustified jealousy and distrust, despite his own affairs" (Trotter 122). Although Friel's Sarah has neither a husband nor a child, her subjugated position and the lack of hope for any actual "breaking out" finds a relevant parallel in the figure of Donna, since both women can be looked at as sufferers of undeserved deprivation, powerlessness, and enforced passivity.

Donna is usually analysed as a victim who is confined to the domestic space—which she hardly ever leaves in the play. She "is [. . .] the long-suffering, patiently waiting woman, [. . .] the comforter, the person who has learnt to adapt herself to a lack of power" (Olinder 547) and one who "draws inspiration from values other than the internalised roles and duties of the unhomely public sphere" (Kurdi 104). What is more, at the end Donna has to remain "bound by domestic ties" (Kurdi 103), which makes her situation even more similar to that of the muted Sarah. Ironically, the home as the source of values most appreciated by Donna eventually proves to be the space she has been imprisoned by all along. However, it is also true that she "incarnates the domestic centre of the play, offering tenancy and support to Frieda's and Josie's more nomadic lives" (Cerquoni 164), creating and strengthening a bond between them which is not yet characteristic of the women's relationship in Friel's drama set well over a century earlier.

Unlike Friel's Sarah, Donna's figure has no allegorical dimension. Closer to herself, Sarah has another counterpart in *Ourselves Alone*, in the off-stage character of Aunt Cora. The sardonic manner in which Frieda describes her points to the harsh ambiguities of the nationalist ideology:

JOE. What happened to your aunt when she was eighteen?

FRIEDA. Oh, the usual. She was storing ammunition for her wee brother Malachy—my father, God love him—who was in the IRA even then. 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 really grown properly since and look—no hands! (*She demonstrates by pulling her fists up into her sleeves.*)

[. . .]

They stick her out at the front of the parades every so often to show the women of Ireland what their patriotic duty should be. But I'll tell you something—it won't be mine!

(*Ourselves Alone* 29)

The McCoys' disabled but respected relative Aunt Cora is characterized by Kurdi as follows: "To underscore the potentially destructive impact of the ultra-nationalist ideology on women in contemporary Northern Ireland, the [. . .] play incorporates an offstage *personification of the Mother Ireland* figure in a mute and crippled woman who used to work with explosive materials to serve the goals of Republican patriotism" (216; italics added). Despite only being talked about, this present-through-absence impersonation of Cathleen ni Houlihan in Devlin's play offers a further parallel between *Translations* and *Ourselves Alone*. Commenting on the complex socio-cultural context in which the aunt is mentioned, Kurdi observes that "it is a shocking paradox that as a woman Cora deserves respect for serving the purposes of male-dominated sectarian ideology best in a state of being physically impaired and silenced forever, objectified into a passive icon" (102-03; see also Olinder 546). In this sense, Friel's Sarah, being a character from a play concerned with communal processes foreshadowing their outcome, prefigures both the *ideologically* paralyzed Donna and the *physically* paralyzed Aunt Cora in that she is the combination of these two types of gendered human inefficiency generated by colonialism.

Rebellion and Emigration

In Friel it is not only Sarah who can personify Ireland in a rather obvious and effective way. Llewellyn-Jones highlights the other option by pointing out that Lieutenant Yolland "falls in love with Maire, Manus' sweetheart, partly due to his over-romanticised and thus feminized view of Ireland" (23; see also Roche, *Theatre and Politics* 140). Being the hopeless idealist he proves to be, Yolland "is the only English character who truly appreciates the looming loss of a centuries-old way of life in the parish" (Russell 169) and "describes his encounter with the Gaelic language as a revelation" (P. Müller 110), so he is eager to find the (nearly) perfect embodiment of the culture he has been enchanted by. It is emphasized by Onkey that "Friel's depiction of Maire should keep us from evoking the symbol of woman as nation without also enumerating its problems for women in national and colonial rhetoric" (171). As an alternative embodiment of Cathleen ni Houlihan—a figure who has to face aggression, too—, she is the female character in *Translations* who becomes the most aware of harsh, and apparently even lethal, physical violence emerging between the locals and the intruding forces. The fact that she "is bereft when her man is needlessly taken away from her" (Murray 105) indicates the cultural and personal shock she undergoes due to the imminent, escalating conflict between the Irish and the colonizing army. Maire's incoherent, rhapsodic, rambling thoughts and fragmented sentences after Yolland's sudden disappearance express the effect of this on her:

MAIRE. [. . .]

Something very bad's happened to him, Owen. I know. He wouldn't go away without telling me. Where is he, Owen? You're his friend—where is he? (*Again she looks around the room; then sits on a stool.*)

I didn't get a chance to do my geography last night. The master'll be angry with me. (*She rises again.*)

I think I'll go home now. The wee ones have to be washed and put to bed and that black calf has to be fed...

My hands are that rough; they're still blistered from the hay. I'm ashamed of them. I hope to God there's no hay to be saved in Brooklyn. (60)

Although Maire clearly alludes and directly refers to recent events, the stage instructions unmistakably describe her movements as hectic, signalling that she is in a temporarily unstable state of mind. Furthermore, the way she organizes (or rather fails to organize) her words and her speech lacks cohesion indicating that she is deeply shaken by the situation.

Looking at Maire as a possible impersonation of Ireland suggests a parallel with “Frieda, the youngest and wildest of the characters” (Trotter 122) in *Ourselves Alone*. Similarly to Maire, in Devlin's play “Frieda, who is most explicitly against violence, is the character we see exposed to violence repeatedly” (Olinder 549). The acts of abuse she suffers mainly from her father (see *Ourselves Alone* 26, 38–40, and 86) and her lover, John McDermot (see *Ourselves Alone* 81–82) “are violent expressions of men's frustration when their power over a woman's, whether a daughter's or a lover's thoughts, words or actions, is challenged and they feel threatened in their fundamental beliefs and experiences” (Olinder 549). As a woman Frieda is, not unlike Cathleen ni Houlihan, hurt and dispossessed by male intruders, but dares to protest against their mistreatment.

One further common feature between Maire and Frieda can be noticed in the ultimate responses to their plight. The former, after Yolland's presumable death⁵ and Manus' leaving Baile Beag, stays alone. She wants to start learning English, which shows that Maire is the most independent-minded one of the three women in *Translations*: even though her success depends on Hugh as her tutor, she is willing to start a completely new chapter in her life—which will probably end with her becoming an emigrant. Frieda's behaviour bears resemblance to Maire's from this perspective, too: in *Ourselves Alone* she is the one who, “at the end of the play, [. . .] arrives at the conclusion that she will rather be lonely than suffocate” (Olinder 548; see also *Ourselves Alone* 90). Raising the comparison onto a communal-national level, it is the hardships, within the cultural frames and connotations of 1833, that Maire intends to abandon since “her wish to learn English is not to reforge it within an Irish context, but to escape to America” (Llewellyn-Jones 24; see also Andrews 171 and *Translations* 20). Regarding Frieda, “it is the political situation in terms of sectarian warfare, social conflicts, and the victimization of women that she is leaving” (Olinder 550), as she

⁵ Richard Rankin Russell strongly suggests that Yolland is murdered by two off-stage characters, the Donnelly twins (see, for instance, 24, 27, 84–85, 155, and 188).

does not want to follow in her “aunt’s self-sacrificing footsteps” (Trotter 122). Thus, in the end, both Maire’s and Frieda’s paths lead them away from their homeland and from the crisis their people are troubled by—although their future remains uncertain.

Among the opposing characteristics in Maire and Frieda, the most obvious one might be that Maire is unable to act on her own: men like Manus, Yolland, and eventually Hugh prove to be indispensable helpers in her world. Unlike her, Frieda “demands to be acknowledged as a person in her own right” (Olinder 548). The reasons behind their decisions to emigrate are also different. Her main source of income being agricultural work, Maire’s wish to leave “is no doubt motivated by Baile Beag’s strained economic and social conditions” (Boltwood 172), while Frieda, as an urban artist, seeks a spiritual kind of liberation abroad. Furthermore, Frieda also represents feminist ideas, being “the one to realize that the present fight for freedom and independence is a fight for men’s freedom and independence, leaving the women out of account” (Olinder 549). To state that Maire’s personal conviction has such a gender-specific element would be an exaggeration since she is a tormented lover rather than an early propagator of female rights, but her free-minded decision anticipates Frieda’s choice of a new life. The step Maire is planning to take is coupled by her eagerness to overcome the obstacle of a foreign language:

HUGH. Yes, I will teach you English, Maire Chatach.

MAIRE. Will you, Master? I must learn it. I need to learn it. (*Translations* 67)

Unlike for Maire, this linguistic barrier is non-existent for Frieda’s generation, due to the language change which was starting at the time when *Translations* is set:

DONNA. Have you somewhere to go?

FRIEDA. England.

DONNA. Why England?

FRIEDA. Why not? It’s my language. (*Ourselves Alone* 89)

Maire’s decision “articulates a free-floating readiness to abandon Ireland if not her Irishness” (Boltwood 172), which, in comparison, appears to take great courage and determination: as the title of Friel’s drama also suggests, at this point in history Gaelic language was still an organic, indispensable part of Irish identity. In the 1980s the element of language was no longer a marker in this aspect, so Frieda does not deny her Irishness when she considers English her mother tongue. Her character as an aspiring independent artist can also imply that women were gaining more space within society 150 years after the era in *Translations*.

Maire’s intention to emigrate is her “revolt” against the lasting changes brought about by colonization, which also makes her the most enlightened, broadest-minded person within her community. Richard Pine says that she is “one of Friel’s most successful creations” (115), while Elmer Andrews considers Maire “the character who most strongly and consistently questions the traditional ‘Irish’ habits of mind, the conventional ethic of ‘belonging,’ the primacy of ‘nation’” (173), underlining that she

“is the play’s principal spokesperson of the forces of modernisation” (174).⁶ Arriving at a similar conclusion, Grene refers to her as “the moderniser, the advocate of English and progress” (37; see also Russell 161). Frieda is given a similar role by Kurdi, who summarizes her character and importance as a peaceful propagator of development:

Of Devlin’s three women characters it is Frieda who succeeds most in awakening herself and trying to awaken others to the fixities of the system which promotes the reproduction of stereotypical attitudes and responses. Emphatically, she protests against outdated customs and practices of the nationalist heritage like the cult of martyrdom for their potential to destroy lives, women’s and men’s alike. (102)

Both Maire and Frieda can therefore be considered the leading “social philosophers” in their own cultural environment. The former belongs to the people of Ireland on the verge of total suppression, while the latter to the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, but both are the representatives of something innovative and forward-looking. Furthermore, “emigration is a constant temptation” (Lojek, “Sense of Place” 186) to overcome the respective, politically generated crises in both plays, reflecting the answer thousands of the Irish sought or gave to the challenge of poverty and ideological deprivation. In this regard, deciding “to leave her birthplace for the loneliness necessary for an artist to create original works away from the asphyxiating limitations of the milieu ruled by militant ideologies” (Kurdi 103), Frieda proves to be a descendant of Maire in *Translations*.

From Subjugation to Sisterhood

The marginalization of female characters is more emphasized in *Translations*. As exemplified above, they can very rarely be seen acting on their own: their space is restricted by the constant presence of men, thus none of the three can actually be given a comprehensive description without also mentioning their respective male companions in some detail. At the same time, a kind of double colonization of women appears in both plays, so the three heroines cannot achieve ultimate freedom in *Ourselves Alone*, either. As Kurdi notes, “by focusing on a female trio with their personal differences the Devlin drama reveals that a radical break with the society which entangles them in various confining nets can never be an option for all women” (103). While Frieda manages to leave, both Josie and Donna are doomed to remain in Northern Ireland—and take responsibility for the consequences of their situation, comparably to the two staying female characters in *Translations*. For instance, although “she denies being brave” (Olinger 547), Josie’s fate is similar to the unseen (but subtly implied) future of Bridget in Friel’s play: both women are likely to remain close (if not necessarily directly connected) to the traditionally masculine principle of military activity and public conflicts, mainly influenced by significant male characters, Doalty and Malachy,

⁶ For a detailed analysis of Maire’s principles concerning progress, see Andrews 173–74.

respectively. Indeed, “the pregnant Josie is taken home by her father, which raises doubts about her freedom in the future. Yet it seems that she is no longer just his ‘mate’ in the organisation, a shift is taking place towards the private in their relationship” (Kurdi 103; see also Kurdi 172). The following exchange supports this possibility:

MALACHY. Take your hands off her!

(LIAM *lets go of JOSIE's arm.*)

MALACHY. I'm the father here, son!

LIAM. What's wrong with you? She's carrying Conran's baby!

(MALACHY *puts his arm around JOSIE.*)

MALACHY. My baby now. (*Pause while he looks around.*)

Josie's going to live with me from now on. Isn't that right, love?

JOSIE. (*Hesitant*): Yes.

MALACHY. This baby's my blood. If anyone harms a hair on its head...!

(*Ourselves Alone* 88)

Although she has presumably always been closer to her father than Frieda, Josie's reconciliation with Malachy is a climactic moment in the play. Olinder comments on this scene by highlighting that “her [i.e. Josie's] father steps in to protect her. To save her child, to save life which is now her priority, she does not resist getting into his power again” (548). At this point Josie is aware of the fact that loosening the ties with the official activities of the IRA is the only way for her to strengthen her relationship with her loved ones: instead of spending time with or craving for Joe Conran or Cathal O'Donnell (see, for instance, *Ourselves Alone* 15–17), now she has to take responsibility for her baby. Thus, “it is true that she returns into her father's patriarchal power, but at least she manages to get away from the power of her two lovers as well as her commitment in the Republican movement” (Olinder 548). By this time she must have realized that it is in her private life, rather than in a public or national role, that she needs solidarity, assistance, and solace. Friel's Sarah has from the very beginning depended completely on Manus, while Donna is hardly able to separate her life from that of Liam, which makes these women stay and inevitably accept the presence (and burden) of male superiority. However, it does not automatically mean that their voice is destined to be totally suppressed—and silenced—in the late twentieth-century Northern Irish context, as proven by Josie, who stays but takes her life in her hands.

The on-stage female characters, altogether six in number, in Friel and Devlin can rightfully be seen as exploited and/or forsaken by men. In *Translations* none of the three can cope with their plight without the assistance of men. The paradox of their situation is that the problems caused by the false decisions and sometimes downright aggressive behaviour of the men around them can only be solved or moderated with the help of male characters. In *Ourselves Alone* “all three women survive these ‘treasons,’ relying on their individual and *communal* strength as women to see them through these personal and political crises” (Trotter 123; italics added). The reason behind their eventual success from this point of view is to be traced through the way in which “Devlin constructs a close-knit collective of the three women in the play: Frieda and Josie are sisters while Donna is their childhood friend and also their

brother's partner" (Kurdi 100). The growing sense of being sisters to each other is further enhanced by the fact that "the women's trio organises itself on the basis of equality and solidarity" (Kurdi 100), indicating that Devlin's play argues for the idea that outer violence can be balanced and compensated by inner peace—which is most likely to be achieved through the experience of sisterhood.

Even though "numerous women have participated in the campaign of insurgence orchestrated by republicans since the early 1970s" (Coulter 131), "Devlin's women" are right to "seek [. . .] palatable fulfilment: a place to be themselves, a place where they will not be perpetually waiting for their men, and a place far away from the Provos [i.e. the Provisional IRA], the UDA [i.e. the Ulster Defence Association], and British soldiers battering on their doors" (Watt 33). Llewellyn-Jones also highlights the ambiguous connection between military activity and women's life when she notes that in Devlin's play "an atmosphere of 'tribal' conflict makes separation of emotional and political loyalties virtually impossible, although the women want to resist it positively" (84). This is the step that female characters in Friel's work are practically unable (or disabled) to take: they either join the ensuing fight (Bridget) or accept the role of witness by remaining largely passive (Sarah) or leave the homeland (Maire).

The feeling of sisterhood that could help female characters find a kind of remedy against their (present and impending) miseries is missing from *Translations*: in Friel's play, except for when Maire says to Bridget that she "saw your Seamus heading off to the Port fair early this morning" (21) and the compliment she makes on Sarah's green dress (see *Translations* 60), they hardly even talk to each other. This suggests that the observation that "Friel's women may occasionally flout authority, but they rarely perform it" (McMullan 143), can be applied to *Translations* as well. The "heroines" in *Baile Beag* have to endure the imminent calamities separately, i.e. literally on their own. The absence of a unifying force, accompanied by a sense of uncertainty, is reflected through Hugh's final words addressed to Maire:

HUGH. [. . .] I will provide you with the available words and the available grammar.
But will that help you to interpret between privacies? I have no idea. But
it's all we have. I have no idea at all. (*Translations* 67)

While "in *Ourselves Alone* women are confined within physical and ideological rooms, but carve out more permeable rooms of inner existence" (Cerquoni 161), none of Friel's female characters can yet create such interior spaces for themselves, therefore their options and chances are far more limited than those of Devlin's heroines a century and a half later.

In *Translations*, as Christopher Murray notes, "the key scene [. . .] is when Maire and Yolland exchange place names as an expression of their lovemaking. [. . .] Most Friel critics have seen this love scene as the heart of the play" (103). In *Ourselves Alone* the most significant, central moments are those during which the three women have the opportunity to enjoy some privacy and talk freely about themselves, each other, and their connections with the rest of the (male-dominated) cast. Frieda's monologue about their transcendent solidarity provides the most fitting example of this:

FRIEDA. [. . .]

I remember a long time ago, a moonlit night on a beach below the Mournes, we were having a late summer barbecue on the shore at Tyrella.

[. . .]

We three slipped off from the campfire to swim leaving the men arguing on the beach.

[. . .]

And we sank down into the calm water and tried to catch the phosphorescence on the surface of the waves—it was the first time I'd ever seen it—and the moon was reflected on the sea that night. It was as though we swam in the night sky and cupped the stars between our cool fingers.

[. . .]

We lay down in the sandhills and laughed. (90)

Not only does the above comparison allude to the importance of language barriers in Friel's work, but it also draws attention to the fact that his women are unable to form any kind of alliance; Sarah, for example, even spies on the love scene and betrays Maire's choice to Manus (see *Translations* 52–53). In contrast, Devlin's female characters can always count on one another and, to an extent, manage to escape from total subjugation.

Conclusion

The fact that Devlin's female characters are much more likely to find some remedy for their hardships than the women in *Translations* can be explained by the considerable time gap between the two plots. Friel ends his play with a rather pessimistic tone as regards his "heroines," which might function as a further sign of ultimate suppression as the whole country is threatened by becoming "translated" into a British identity.⁷ Although Bridget will presumably follow "the insurgent figures in *Translations* (Owen, Doalty and the Donnelly twins)" (Pilkington, "Reading History" 506) and have some role in the impending fights between the Irish inhabitants and the British troops, Maire's determination to leave for America and Sarah's helplessness signify that in the 1830s women did not have the opportunity and means to unite against double oppression in an efficient way. The respective situations in which the three female characters find themselves at the end of *Translations* are not as promising as those in *Ourselves Alone* and their presumable fates imply less confidence and hope.

Devlin's heroines, through "their loving companionship and the strength of their shared memories" (Kurdi 104)—and despite the tempestuous, unstable conditions caused by the Troubles—, can make paths in life potentially successful or, at least, moderately bearable. As Trotter points out, "there is no question that these women will continue to fight" (123). Accordingly, the ultimate tone of *Ourselves Alone* can

⁷ I am indebted to Zsuzsanna Csikai for this comment.

be considered positive, since “not only does it give voice to women’s perspectives, it finally shows their emotional, psychic solidarity with each other” (Llewellyn-Jones 84). Projecting this conclusion to the public spheres of life, Kurdi notes that “*Ourselves Alone* [. . .] sets a final scene in which the young female characters [. . .] share an epiphanic, also lyrically charged experience of transcending the gender constraints of the self-fragmenting sectarian society in which they live” (100). In contrast, the potential fates of Friel’s female characters ominously suggest a future of loneliness and/or further subjugation.

If the oppression of women in Ireland during the first half of the nineteenth century can indeed be portrayed by a “Troubles play” written in 1980, the analysis of Friel’s three female characters may also add some fuel to “the frequently impassioned critical debates” (Boltwood 151) about *Translations*. Despite not being the protagonists of the drama, the experiences embodied by Maire, Sarah, and Bridget can be compared with the experiences of women who suffer from the long-lasting consequences of the nineteenth-century colonization of Ireland. Helen Lojek notes that in 1985 “Devlin created an ensemble piece, with major roles for women” (335), accentuating that “her forthright exploration of parallels between social/political patriarchy and familial patriarchy was unusual at the time” (“Troubling Perspectives” 335). Thus, the connotations of the intricate system of father-daughter, brother-sister, and male lover-female lover relationships in the drama are worth looking at in other analyses. Outlining a general framework for the play, Enrica Cerquoni remarks that “theatrical presentation [. . .] succeeds in laying bare the operations of power, and the omissions and divisions involved in the construction of womanhood within an Irish historical and cultural context” (168). Consequently, not only can Frieda, Donna, and Josie represent diverse attitudes towards the circumstances of the Troubles, but they also inspire an examination of rendering Irish women’s subjugation during the earlier periods of colonial history. As this essay has attempted to highlight, Devlin’s heroines may be considered the cultural descendants of Friel’s female characters.

In conclusion, it can be noted that, at some points in history, a nation’s state of political affairs and its people’s collective mind can be analysed quite effectively by taking account of the plights and chances of women as represented across time. Regarding Irish communities past and present, the ways in which the six female characters depicted in Friel’s *Translations* and Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone* are enabled (or disabled) to cope with the prescribed gender roles imposed on them, their nationality, and their lives as human beings are highly expressive of the main cultural and social concerns generated by colonialism and its aftermath.

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