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Court of the Pirate Queen

In the classic *aisling* of early Irish literature, there is a motif of the *spéirbhean*, a woman of immense beauty who is waiting for her true love to return. As the trial begins in Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*, the main petitioner to the court is depicted as such a woman. She is "a majestic maid, / Slender, silky, soft, and sad" (149-150), and she is distraught as she hopelessly seeks a husband. These standard tropes, however, are completely subverted when an "old josser" (358) rebuts her testimony. She is not a sweet, innocent young woman as she claims. The maid does not in fact possess the feminine qualities usually ascribed to a woman who symbolizes the plight of Ireland after the flight of the Earls. Instead, as the trial continues and the verdict is delivered, the maid is more reminiscent of a different historical allusion. The maid of *The Midnight Court* displays fierce, feminine qualities that are similar to the pirate queen Grace O'Malley, not as some helpless woman who is a victim of her fate, but instead as a woman determined to forge her own path in a world otherwise dominated by men.

While the maid breaks away from the typical female character of early Irish literature, Merriman is not casting aside her femininity. The maid rebuts the old man's testimony, explaining his wife would employ all of her feminine "tricks" (710), but none would work on "such a fossilized old sphinx" (679). She would "kiss his lips and squeeze him tight" (705) and "[rub] against him from waist to knees" (707), but "He remained indifferent to all her tricks, / To kisses, caresses, scratches, and kicks" (710-711). The maid is unapologetically feminine and pursues her judicial relief without sacrificing her femininity. This

outward display of her feminine qualities is similar to Grace O'Malley's captaincy of her pirate ship. On one day, O'Malley is delivering her child on board her ship, and on the very next day, she is leading her men into battle against a rival group of pirates (Buchelt). Where others might view an overtly feminine witness as an obstacle to her legal argument, the court does not discount her arguments. Similarly, a group of male pirates are entirely willing to follow into battle their captain, a brand-new mother. The maid possesses this strong feminine agency similar to O'Malley.

The maid refuses to back down to someone who thinks he is better than her. She tells the old man that he is lucky that the court would stop her, otherwise "I'd quickly put you out of action / And beat you down to a vulgar fraction / Till, with a mighty final blow, / I'd send you on your way below" (652-655). She does not just hold her own with threats, however. The maid counters the old man's arguments by explaining it was not his wife who had fooled him but that it was the other way around. The old man had "Promised her, if she'd be his wife, / Breakfast in bed for the rest of her life, / A separate banking account of her own, / A butler, a car, and a telephone, / And every month a brand-new gown, / With a country seat and a flat in town!" (668-673). The old man has no room to complain about being misled by his wife when he was guilty of deception in their courtship as well. The old man belongs on no pedestal. Grace O'Malley would not back down against Queen Elizabeth I as well. O'Malley refused to kneel to Elizabeth as she was queen. Instead, O'Malley viewed her and Elizabeth more as equals (Buchelt).

Not only did O'Malley view herself as an equal to Elizabeth, she also came armed to their meeting with a knife (Buchelt). The maid did not literally bring a knife to court, but she came armed rhetorically to cut this old man to pieces. She tells the man, "Don't fool yourself: it's plain to see / You couldn't exhaust a female flea!" (740-741). She makes a related cut toward the old man's reproductive organ, mocking that "there's more to fear from the prick of a thorn / Than this old cow with a crumpled horn!" (754-755). When Queen Elizabeth's guards discovered O'Malley's knife, she explained she was

armed only for her defense, an argument that Elizabeth accepted (Buchelt). Viewed from that perspective, the maid did only use her rhetorical weapons in her own defense. She was attacked, seemingly out of nowhere, from this non-respondent to the case. In a similar situation, O'Malley would have undoubtedly defended herself as well.

Aside from the direct comparisons between the maid and Grace O'Malley, there are also larger thematic elements connecting *The Midnight Court* and the legacy of Grace O'Malley. The whole structure of the court is feminine, which is much different from how a court in the eighteenth century would operate. The bailiff, the judge, and the petitioner are all women. The nature of the case, the plight of women seeking a relationship, is a feminine concern. However unexpected a court with this composition would be in the eighteenth century, it is almost equally as unexpected that a woman would rise to power as a pirate and treat with another woman as leaders of their respective countries in the sixteenth century.

Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* is "certainly the greatest comic poem ever written in Ireland" (Tuama 149). Alan Titley writes that "[i]t flows like the River Shannon, soars like an eagle, sparkles like the ocean" (58) and is "one of the wonders of Ireland" (58). This eighteenth century poem is still able to connect with audiences today, in part due to the presence of a strong, feminine character who subverts expectations. The maid is not the innocent and pitiful character who first testifies to the court. Instead, the maid is a fully rounded, complex character who has goals and desires completely separate from the male characters in the story. She does not back away from voicing her own opinion, with her own feminine concerns, and her arguments ultimately prevail in Merriman's nightmarish court. The maid is a feminine character who, similar to Grace O'Malley, stands out in a time and place usually dominated by men.

Works Cited

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