The Significance of Femininity in *Saint Joan* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*

Female representations of warriors and nationalism exist throughout the world and various cultures. In the article “Woman or warrior? How believable femininity shapes warrior women” Jessica McCall defines ‘believable femininity’ as “the presence of specifically feminine traits—submissiveness and a yearning to surrender and be dependent on a dominant masculine figure—that work in a text to create a satisfactorily feminine character” (McCall 2). Believable femininity is a significant theme in W.B. Yeats’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, wherein the proverbial heroines respectively serve as symbolic figureheads for nationalism and taking action but because of their gender and feminine characteristics, they cannot actually participate in the action themselves.

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* often takes on the dual role of mother and lover in Irish literature and myth. She is indeed called “Mother Ireland” but she is also often written as the lover of the king, consummating with him for the benefit of the land. However, in Yeats’s play she serves as this “Mother Ireland” while also representing a different type of female figure, “She is a lady in distress, not a superior creature who condescends to favor mortals, as she was in the medieval allegorical tales. She is sorrowful and in need” (Clark 16). This Cathleen is not a sovereignty goddess or a fairy, she is a suffering old woman, full of sorrows; she is not beautiful or powerful, but weak and mournful. This humanity allows her to remain connected to the Irish peasantry in a manner that previous interpretations did not achieve. Furthermore, Yeats’s version of Cathleen “combines almost all of the traditions concerning the Sovereignty, and molds them into one strong figure which becomes the personification of Ireland for the twentieth century” (Clark 405).
As the play begins, Michael is eagerly awaiting his impending marriage to his fiancée, Delia. It is a union that everyone in the parish is looking forward to, as Michael recounts the priest’s words: “He said it was a very nice match, and that he was never better pleased to marry any two in his parish than myself and Delia Cahel” (Yeats 4). The family’s life seems to be adequately happy at this point; they are content with the state of things. However, when they meet the Old Woman, they realize just how discontent they should actually be.

In the following dialogue, the Old Woman shares her lamentations with the family:

BRIDGET. Indeed you look as if you’d had your share of trouble.

OLD WOMAN. I have had trouble indeed.

BRIDGET. What was it put the trouble on you?

OLD WOMAN. My land was taken from me.

PETER. Was it much land they took from you?

OLD WOMAN, My four beautiful green fields. (Yeats 7)

The “four beautiful green fields” the Old Woman has lost are symbolic of Ireland’s four provinces: Ulster, Munster, Connacht, and Leinster. Her lamentations cause an emotional stir within the family, but they particularly strike a chord with Michael, who appears instantly compelled. As she continues her tale, the Old Woman sings an old song about a man who was hanged, Michael asks her what he was executed for, to which she replies: “He died for love of me: many a man has died for love of me” (Yeats 7). This statement perfectly epitomizes the play’s emphasis on willing and honorable sacrifice for the love of country. For the Irish, a mother is someone to make proud, to protect, and to sacrifice for. In this case, the “mother”
figure is Ireland and she has been ravished of all her pride—her fruitfulness and strength diminished by her oppressors. Cathleen’s womanly role of “Mother Ireland” creates a strong incentive for the people to lay down their lives for her sake because they want nothing more than to restore the glory of the country and make their “mother” proud again.

As the Old Woman continues to elicit pity from the family, she tells them, “With all the lovers that brought me their love I never set out the bed for any” (Yeats 7). Though hundreds of men have sworn their devotion to her, none of them have been strong enough yet, which is why Ireland ceases to flourish. Her statement challenges Michael and all other Irishmen, daring them to succeed, to win her love by finally conquering the English. Despite Cathleen’s embodiment of Ireland, her inherent femininity requires men specifically to take action and make sacrifices on her behalf. When Peter asks the Old Woman how they might help her she replies, “If any one would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all” (8). Through the sacrifice of Irish men, Ireland can become vivacious, beautiful, and prosperous once more. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* places an intense, glorifying emphasis on blood sacrifice and martyrdom when committed in the name and remembrance of Ireland. The article “William Butler Yeats: *Cathleen ni Houlihan* as the Point of Sacrifice” provides insight into the Irish veneration of martyrdom: “Irish martyrs became symbols of worshiping due to their unselfish sacrifices, compelling others to respect them and build their future in Ireland from it” (Vukčević 117).

The flame of patriotism is ignited within Michael as he listens to the Old Woman’s woeful ruminations; this evocation of emotion is exactly what Yeats intended to inspire within the audience when he wrote *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. “Michael says no to his fiancée’s love, money and his parent’s advice to devote himself to the old woman who personified Ireland” (Ghadiri 12), Michael abandons everything he has ever known—his family, his beloved, his
home—in pursuit of rescuing Ireland, who is in all respects, a woman he loves even more. Michael’s instantaneous willingness to forsake his entire life for Ireland affirms Clark’s argument that Yeats’s Cathleen “is asking only for the death of the heroes, and for the privilege of dying for her ‘they will think they are well paid’” (Clark 16).

If Ireland were personified through a male figure, the willingness and necessity of sacrifice would not exist, because men typically possess more strength and can therefore protect themselves, whereas women need to be protected and provided for, particularly a frail and pitiful old hag. After Michael decides to join the fight, at the end of the play, Peter asks, “Did you see an old woman going down the path?” to which Patrick responds, “I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen” (Yeats 11). Yeats’s Cathleen embodies two versions of the sovereignty figure: She is the beautiful, young peasant girl of Irish love songs and the sad old woman from a famous nineteenth-century song, “The Shan Van Vocht” (Clark 18).

In Saint Joan, as in most interpretations, Joan’s story is that of the underdog. She is a small, “poor country girl” (Shaw 73) with no real physical power, no social status and no political influence, yet she became a national symbol and a prominent historical figure. Joan does not care for finery or superficial airs, proved by her utterance of the phrase “Dressing up don’t fill empty noddle” (Shaw 76) in order to encourage the Dauphin to fight for his crown. The English might be richer and appear superior, but this does not make them superior—for they do not possess the Godliness and passionate devotion of the French.

When Dunois, the Archbishop, and La Hire begin to doubt her in scene five, it is the common people she seeks comradery with, “I will go out to the common people, and let the love in their eyes comfort me for the hate in yours. You will all be glad to see me burnt; but if I go through the fire I shall go through it to their hearts for ever and ever” (Shaw 112). Her fight is
not for the aristocracy or even for herself, but for the people she shares ties with; it is the love and sorrow of the proletariat which she desires, not the respect of kings and men of power. Saint Joan’s provinciality connects her to the common people in the same way that Yeats’s Cathleen ni Houlihan bonds with the Irish people and this is what solidifies her as a powerful figure in history and religion.

Joan is not able to physically participate in battle alongside the men simply because she is a woman. She serves as a figurehead for the soldiers; she is “the Madonna reborn—a woman of God dictated by the patriarchal hierarchy who holds no power of her own” (McCall 86). Several of the men in the play deride Joan and dismiss her womanhood because she wears men’s clothing. In scene two of the first act, the Archbishop is appalled by her appearance: “This creature is not a saint. She is not even a respectable woman. She does not wear women's clothes” (Shaw 57). She even rejects her own femininity, seeing it as a hindrance of her ultimate goal: “I am a soldier: I do not want to be thought of as a woman. I will not dress as a woman. I do not care for the things women care for. They dream of lovers, and of money. I dream of leading a charge, and of placing the big guns” (Shaw 49).

Despite the jeers of the men around her and her own desire to separate herself from the female gender, her sex is what prevents her from being included in warfare, and also largely contributes to her ultimate execution. As assertive and brave as Joan is, she lives in a patriarchal society, and is therefore subject to the will and control of men. When she first meets with Sir Robert to explain that she is on a holy mission to crown the Dauphin, Robert shouts at her: “It is the will of God that I shall send you back to your father with orders to put you under lock and key and thrash the madness out of you” (Shaw 56). Sir Robert’s statement reveals the total lack of power women and girls had during this period; they were at the mercy of their fathers as
children and then became servants to their husbands after marriage. For a man to “thrash the madness out” of a woman was a societal norm at this point in time and even Saint Joan of Arc was at risk of this gender-based violence.

In “Woman or warrior?” McCall states that: “It is through the signifiers in the text of the character’s femininity that her existence as woman is qualified. There is only text and her creation through it that allows her to become a woman, with all the feminine qualities that word implies, to the reader” (McCall 2). Shaw’s play succeeds in providing signifiers of the titular character’s femininity, as Joan is prevented from actively fighting in the war because of her gender, which causes her to feel aggrieved by her sex. Nonetheless, she also feels affectionate and motherly towards her male comrades, which is an inadvertent qualification of her own femininity. Women have been mothers and possessed maternal instincts since the beginning of human existence and though Joan quickly dismisses it, her desire to comfort Dunois like “one of the village babies” (Shaw 103) adheres to societal views of women as nurturers. The significance of Joan’s femininity in reference to her power as a figurehead is apparent not only throughout Shaw’s play, but also within the vast amount scholarly and historical research dedicated to her life and influence.

Joan’s femininity—the only aspect of herself which she seems to resent—is what makes her such a powerful figurehead for France and the Catholic religion. Joan is typically associated with the values of virginity and humbleness and in the Christian world, due to the importance and adoration of the Holy Virgin Mary, virginity is exclusively attached to a female figure. Shaw’s play does not stray from this association, and in one of the earliest moments of the play, Poulegny makes a bold remark to Robert: “I should as soon think of the Blessed Virgin herself in that way, as of this girl” (Shaw 55). Poulegny is a learned, respected man; his direct comparison
of a peasant girl to the Virgin Mary places sacred significance on her as a female figure to be venerated and admired. As a holy virginal figure, Saint Joan becomes a powerful icon for both men and women. Women can aspire to become like her and take comfort in their shared femininity, while men’s adoration of her compels them to serve and protect.

The point of sacrifice is equally significant in Saint Joan as it is in Cathleen ni Houlihan, but in contrast to Cathleen’s request for sacrifice, Joan’s becomes a martyr herself instead of relying on the deaths of others for her cause. Joan of Arc was sentenced to death on grounds of heresy because she was a woman who stood firm to her religious and political beliefs. In comparison, mothers are expected to sacrifice everything for their children and Joan cares about her country with the same passion of a loving mother. She maintains her devotion until the bitter end, despite the pain and torture inflicted upon her: “If you hurt me I will say anything you like to stop the pain. But I will take it all back afterwards; so what is the use of it” (Shaw 127)?

Although she could not physically fight alongside the men, Joan gives up her life for her country just as a solider does. McCall’s argument that Saint Joan is only a figurehead for nationalism rings true throughout the play, as she is hindered by her femininity. However, Joan’s courageous act of self-sacrifice in the name of God and country elicits her transformation from a passionate, ecclesiastical mouthpiece, to a glorified embodiment of dedication and nationalism. In a sense, Joan’s martyrdom is what finally allows her to actively participate in her own fight. Through her simplicity and wholehearted determination, “The Maid” serves as a remarkably inspirational figure for the people, even to those who doubt her, as the Steward remarks in the first scene of the play, "She puts courage into us. She really doesn't seem to be afraid of anything” (Shaw 51).
"Cathleen ni Houlihan" and "Saint Joan" provide strong heroines who explicitly exhibit McCall’s concept of believable femininity while also creating powerful representations of nationalism. Saint Joan and Cathleen ni Houlihan are not majestic, supernatural figures; they are neither queens nor goddesses, but natural, provincial women who identify with the common people. Their provinciality elicits love, trust, and devotion from the people, fueling a passionate desire to follow, protect, adore, and most pointedly, to sacrifice. Joan fights against society’s expectations of women and gives up her life for what she believes in. If she had been a man it is likely that her intense devotion and eventual martyrdom would not ultimately lead to canonization because men already had respect and power during the time she was alive. Although her femininity hinders her both physically and socially—due to the societal standards of the period—she was a woman who fought against the grain, who strived to make change and this is what makes her such an intriguing symbol of nationalism. As a withering old woman, Yeats’s Cathleen ni Houlihan does not display the personal strength and devotion that Saint Joan does; however, she gives the downtrodden, common people of Ireland a relatable and sympathetic figure to fight for. Through these legendary female figures, Yeats and Shaw individually create hope for the masses by showing them that through sacrifice and dedication, it is possible to create change, instill freedom, and ensure a better way of life for everyone—even a peasant girl or an old woman.
Works Cited


