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## The Good Terrorist(s)? Interrogating Gender and Violence in Ann Devlin's 'Naming the Names' and Anna Burns' *No Bones*

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to analyse the depiction of IRA female volunteers in Ann Devlin's "Naming the Names" (1986) and Anna Burns' *No Bones* (2001) and to consider the relationship established between gender and violence in these texts. I investigate the extent to which the female terrorists portrayed conform to the "mother, monster, whore" paradigm identified by Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry (2007) in their study of women's violence in global politics and consider what differences, if any, are established with these characters' male counterparts. The ways in which both authors destabilise traditional gender stereotypes is also explored, as is the question of whether these texts might be considered as feminist fictions.<sup>1</sup>

**Key Words.** Female terrorists, IRA, gender, violence, fiction, North of Ireland

**Resumen.** El artículo se propone analizar la presentación de activistas del IRA en el relato "Naming the Names" (1986) de Ann Devlin y la novela *No Bones* (2001) de Anna Burns, y considerar la relación que se establece entre género y violencia en dichos textos. Se investiga en qué medida las mujeres terroristas descritas se ajustan al paradigma de "madre, monstruo, prostituta" identificado por Laura Sjoberg y Caron Gentry (2007) en su estudio sobre la violencia en la política global, y se considera si es que se establecen diferencias con sus homólogos masculinos. Se exploran las formas en que ambas autoras desestabilizan estereotipos de género, así como la posible adscripción de los textos a la ficción feminista.

**Palabras clave.** Mujeres terroristas, IRA, género, violencia, ficción, Norte de Irlanda.

Strong, powerful, militant women loom large in the mythology and history of Ireland, and yet, as Brendan Kennelly has pointed out, "[t]he history, or herstory, of Irish women is rather like that of the Irish language – much talked about but little heard" (1995: xx). From

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I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their thought-provoking comments which enabled me to develop a number of significant aspects in more detail.

Queen Medb of Connaught to Constance Markievicz and from the women of Cumann na mBan to those in the Provisional IRA, Irish women have, over the centuries, demonstrated their unwillingness to shy away from involvement in battle or political conflict and their desire to be acknowledged as actors in History. If the conflict in the North of Ireland has provided fertile territory for novelists writing either what is often referred to as "Troubles Trash" (Patten 1995: 128) or more quality fiction,

there nevertheless appears to be a marked reluctance on the part of writers of fiction to engage with representations of female paramilitaries.<sup>2</sup> This may be related to the fact that women writers of fiction in the North of Ireland, of whom there are not many to begin with, tend to remain preoccupied with the consequences of different types of violence on women rather than considering women as agents of political violence.<sup>3</sup> This paper aims to analyse the depiction of IRA female volunteers in Ann Devlin's short story "Naming the Names" (1986) and Anna Burns' *No Bones* (2001) and to consider the relationship established between gender and violence in these texts. To what extent do the female terrorists portrayed conform to the "mother, monster, whore" paradigm identified by Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry in their study of women's violence in global politics? What formal means do these authors use in order to represent these female characters who participate in political violence? And can these works of literature be considered as feminist fictions?

As Wenona Giles points out, "[d]ifferent kinds of wars permit different kinds of female participation" (Giles 2003: 1) and it is therefore necessary to highlight that the purpose of this article is to focus on literary representations of female insurgents or terrorists, as opposed to female soldiers involved in state endorsed war or state terrorism. In a recent study of the links between feminism, globalisation and militarism, Cynthia Enloe has raised interesting questions about the possibility of demilitarising the military by recruiting more female soldiers (Enloe 2007: 78-9), and her argument, which carefully avoids essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity, highlights the patriarchal attitude which often governs the organisation of war and military.

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2. There are, of course, plenty of examples of fiction in which male (ex) paramilitaries are represented. See among many others Ronan Bennett's *The Second Prison* (1991), Colin Batemans's *Divorcing Jack* (1994), David Park's *The Truth Commissioner* (2008).

3. See for example Deirdre Madden's *Hidden Symptoms* (1986) and *One by One in the Darkness* (1996), or Jennifer Johnston's *Shadows on our Skin* (1997).

This patriarchal attitude is ostensibly less present within liberation organisations: a cursory look across the board at different liberation organisations such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the (once) biggest and best-organised paramilitary organisation in Ireland, UmKhonto we Siswe (MK), the military wing of the South African party the African National Congress (ANC) and both the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), the two main military groups which fought against Ian Smith's minority regime during the Liberation war (1965-80), provides evidence of these groups encouraging women to join their ranks and participate in combat. However, despite this inclusive discourse, it has emerged in the wake of these conflicts that women and men had far from equal roles, women rarely reaching the upper echelons of the organisations, their political commitment sometimes belittled and, although this has admittedly not emerged in the Irish context, their being subjected to various forms of sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup>

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4. I do not mean to suggest a homogenisation of these groups which all emerged and fought in different cultural contexts, although the backdrop of anti-colonial ideology is a constant. Tanya Lyons has provided a fascinating study of women within the Zimbabwean paramilitary organisations which undermines the egalitarian discourse of Robert Mugabe in the wake of Independence, giving voice to female victims of sexual abuse within these movements. Zoë Wicomb, a South African novelist and short story writer has tackled this question in her fiction, highlighting the sexual privileges male comrades awarded themselves by raping their female comrades, or, at the very least, expecting them to provide sex on a regular basis. These issues have not emerged in the Irish context, but what has emerged is the suggestion that women's military credentials have been regularly undermined. Margaret Ward suggests that it is "unlikely that many [women] have attained a high military ranking" and she also claims that despite the inclusion of female volunteers as a major innovation in the most recent campaign, the absence of any strong expression of the demands of women precludes any possibility of change and positive evolution; Richard O'Rawe, in his controversial book *Blanketmen* (2005), clearly states in the solitary paragraph devoted to the female volunteers' participation in the prison struggle that the Armagh

Like Miranda Alison, I believe that the failure to engage with all the roles women play in wartime, including their taking up of arms, is to miss “vital pieces of the puzzle of violent human conflict” (Alison 2009: 3). The two authors on whose work I will be concentrating confront these “vital pieces of the puzzle”, although, as we shall see, they distance themselves in varying degrees from essentialist discourses relating to what constitutes the notions of feminine and masculine.

My deliberate use of the word “terrorist” requires definition before I can begin my analysis. As Judith Butler (2004: 4) has pointed out, the term ‘terrorist’ is an ambiguous one, “exploited by various powers at war with independence movements of various kinds’ in order to posit certain states as the “indisputable victim[s]” of violence, quite independently of any acts of violence (subsequently justified as acts of self-defence) they might themselves carry out as a military response. Eileen MacDonald, in her study of female freedom fighters working from within the IRA, ETA, the PLO and other groups, has also highlighted the loaded connotations of the term, sardonically concluding that “[o]nly history it seems can decide who is a terrorist

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women’s dirty protest and hunger strike were detrimental to the ‘cause’, deflecting attention from the men; Begoña Aretxaga in her study of gender and nationalism, *Shattering Silence* (1987), devotes a whole chapter to the controversy surrounding the portrayal of and reactions to the IRA female volunteers’ dirty protest and hunger strike and highlights the way in which it was minimised as “an appendix to the struggle of male prisoners”. She also points out the sort of pressure prisoners’ wives were put under to ensure they remained faithful to their jailed husbands. Finally, Nell McCafferty in her book entitled *The Armagh Women* (1981), tackles on several occasions the undermining of the commitment of IRA female volunteers, concluding that some have even been co-opted by traditional patriarchal discourse within the movement. She also points out, however, as do Eileen MacDonald and Begoña Aretxaga, that in response to campaigning by IRA women, notably Mairead Farrell, the organisation and its political counterpart Sinn Féin, took steps to ensure greater equality within its ranks. See Tanya Lyons (2004: 260-76); Zoë Wicomb (2000: 80-2;123); Margaret Ward (1995: 259-263); Richard O’Rawe (2005: 106); Begoña Aretxaga (1987: 126; 119-121); Nell McCafferty (1981: 88-90); Eileen MacDonald (1991: 135).

and who is not” (1991: 3). I have deliberately chosen this term over “freedom fighter” or “militant” precisely because of its ambiguity and because of its largely negative connotations as I aim to show how subversive literary representations of these female terrorists can undermine the notion of violent terrorism as morally unjustifiable. Indeed, as Timothy Shanahan has argued, “[a]n act of violence, including an act of violent terrorism, is morally justified in consequentialist terms to the extent that it is effective in bringing about sufficiently good consequences” (Shanahan 2009: 120). This is not to suggest that the authors under study necessarily wish to provide a moral justification for terrorist activity, but it is important to note their evident desire to, at the very least, present a counter-discourse to the idea that “asking about the morality of terrorism [is] on a par with asking about the morality of child molestation or of genocide” (Shanahan 2009: 6).

As I am sure it is quite obvious, I have borrowed (and slightly deformed) the title of one of Doris Lessing’s novels for the title of this article. This is not just a rhetorical flourish: The publication of Doris Lessing’s *The Good Terrorist* in 1990 caused some consternation among Lessing scholars, as it has often been perceived as a disavowal by the author of her previous visionary presentations of the possibility of positive change and evolution in society.<sup>5</sup> Set in Thatcher’s England, the novel revolves around the inhabitants of a legal squat in London, a group of misfits who are loosely linked through their association with an anti-establishment group which is desperate for the thrill of terrorist activity (and which tries and fails to become involved in the IRA). Alice Mellings, the main focaliser of the novel, is the eponymous “good terrorist”, although there is a good deal of irony in the title: the adjective “good” does not refer to her ability to be an effective terrorist, but rather provides a moral judgement, thus calling attention to the potential oxymoronic nature of the term. As underlined above, the term terrorist is frequently

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5. Gayle Greene, to name but one critic, expressed her disquiet in her monograph on Lessing: “*The Good Terrorist* is Lessing’s most disturbing novel. What I find horrific about it is the way Lessing seems to turn on her own former beliefs in a mood of savage caricature” (1994: 205).

negatively connoted, and therefore by choosing the adjective “good”, Lessing foregrounds from the very title her tragicomic interrogation of the consequences of living in a political (wo)man’s land in 1980s Britain. It is for this reason that I have borrowed it here. I would like to consider to what extent Devlin and Burns also blur the boundaries between the moral and the descriptive dimensions of the adjective “good”.

Anne Devlin’s “Naming the Names”, as Michael L. Storey has noted, is one of the few Irish literary texts which proffers a representation of a female terrorist and the only short story to do so (2004: 202). Finnula McQuillan, the main character of the story, narrates in police custody her involvement in the IRA and her participation in the murder of a young man whose father is a judge.<sup>6</sup> Having apparently fallen in love with the young man in question, Finnula then leads him to a park where he is murdered by the IRA, and ultimately refuses to divulge the names of the comrades responsible for killing him. In his detailed and very interesting analysis of the story, Storey (2004: 203) analyses Devlin’s division of the narrator into a male self and a female self, signalled in her very name through the interchangeability of the diminutive Finn (with all the connotations of the mythological Irish warrior Fionn Mac Cumhaill) and Finnula (with all the mythological connotations of one of the daughters of Lir transformed into a swan by her evil step-mother). He goes on to highlight the manifestations of what he terms the narrator’s “traditional feminine qualities” and her “masculine side”, focusing on corresponding stereotypical notions of “well-being and vulnerability” and “cold-blooded [...] execution” respectively. For Storey, Finn/ula “is represented as neither woman nor terrorist exclusively” (2004: 206) and he suggests that Devlin’s character is not “entirely free of gender stereotypes” (Ibid). While Storey’s comments on the play on the narrator’s name are interesting, his repetitive use of gender stereotypes and his contention

6. Judges, as representatives of British power in the North of Ireland, and often responsible for the dishing out of heavy sentences to convicted members of the IRA, were considered by this organisation as legitimate targets throughout the Troubles

that Finn/ula is neither a woman nor a terrorist entirely betray the limited perspective from which he views women’s involvement in political violence and lead him to overlook the point Devlin is making. The binary opposites of either/or are precisely what she is aiming at blurring in this short story and this is made quite clear in the reference to Finn/ula’s grandmother having “met De Valera on a Dublin train while he was on the run disguised as an old woman” (Devlin 1986: 98). This is particularly significant as it calls attention to the blurring of gender categories and to the necessity of playing on gender stereotypes in order to outwit the enemy. Finn/ula is both a woman *and* a terrorist and she counts on her victim’s perception of her femininity in order to trap him. Her laconic, emotionless narrative style emphasises the constraint with which she tackles every aspect of her life (professional, personal and military). Her account of her grandmother’s near death at the hands of a crowd of Protestants from the neighbouring Shankill Road is recounted with the same emotional detachment as that of her luring the Oxford student into the park and to his death. There is therefore no evidence of her needing to reconcile a masculine and a feminine self.

Devlin opens up interesting perspectives in the representation of the female terrorist as, although she depicts a character who “splices Eros with Thanatos”, her narrator is no “fantasy female” (Steel 2004: 55) designed to appeal to men.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, she breaks free of the all too common association of women and victimhood to present a female character who actively chooses to join the IRA (outraged by the introduction of internment by the British government) and who also chooses her victim. Sandwiched innocuously between two sentences relating to the student’s interest in a particular history book, the sentences, “I looked at the name and the address again to make sure. And then I asked him to call” (97) clearly reveal Finn/ula’s initiative in this murder. Storey’s use of the passive form when

7. For a longer discussion on stereotypical media and fictional representations of female paramilitaries, see Steel (2007: 171-6) in which she focuses on the ‘Vampira’ and the way in which they have been used, in Britain, “to shield through fantasy the trauma of the violent conflict” in the North of Ireland (174).

he writes “[the Oxford student] has been selected for execution because his father is a judge” (Storey 2004: 202) elides Finn/ula’s active choice to single this man out for murder. Devlin does use a passive construction in the story: “He was chosen. [...] I recognized the address when he wrote to me” (Devlin 1986: 109), but the move from the passive form to the active form here points towards the background rhetoric of the paramilitary organisation as to who constitutes a legitimate target and to the role of the individual members of the organisation in the carrying out of assassinations. The implication here is that Finn/ula has contacted the IRA when she realises who the student is. It is also she who makes the phone call which finalises the outcome on the day of the murder. All of this is indicative of Devlin’s desire to regain agency for this central character, to break with the old order of women in the Republican movement,<sup>8</sup> dismissed as domestics and having nothing to do “but run round after the men and make tea for the Ceilies” (110)<sup>9</sup> and to highlight the failure of police and authorities to take female terrorists seriously: “Already [the policemen] were talking as if I didn’t exist” (109). Far from reinforcing gender stereotypes, Devlin actually plays with them in order to better debunk them. The story opens with the suggestion that Finn/ula is just another ordinary girl waiting for a phone call from her lover: “It was late summer – August, like the summer of the fire. He hadn’t rung for three weeks” (95). These references, along with allusions to and glances at the telephone,

8. Although this might illustrate, as Storey (2004: 205) has suggested, a feminist dimension to Devlin’s text, Rhiannon Talbot (2004: 135-6) has specified that the increase in female volunteers in the IRA did not necessarily correspond to a feminist agenda within the movement, but rather a realisation of the strategic importance of using women as they were less likely to be stopped by army or police.

9. Margaret Ward points out how women in the Republican movement were excluded from influential positions, highlighting that they were generally “content to perform unquestioningly whatever services were demanded of them” (1995: 248). This book-length study consistently highlights the fraught relationship between feminists and republicans since the days of the Ladies’ Land League right through to the Provisional IRA.

pervade the story, reinforcing the notion that a banal love story is the central focus. On one level, it is, since Finn/ula ends up falling in love with the young man, but on another level, the phone represents the knell of death for the Oxford student.

Lest the reader should have too much empathy for the Oxford student, he is portrayed, rather obliquely, as a patronising young man who mocks Finn/ula’s accounts of her grandmother’s republican past and who condescendingly praises her, a relatively uneducated woman, for having knowledge of Irish history that he did not enjoy until he became a student at Oxford (98). Moreover, his research interests betray the incommensurability of his Unionist perspective and Finn/ula’s Republican one. This is all the more significant as the street names which Finn/ula recites as a sort of mantra instead of the names of her fellow comrades-in-arms the police officers are asking her for reinforce not only the impact of place on one’s development, but also unite the war-torn Falls Road with other places which have borne the brunt of colonisation and conflict: “Abyssinia, Alma, Bosnia, Balaclava, Belgrade, Bombay” (95).

Anne Devlin’s representation of a female terrorist is particularly interesting as it eschews the “mother, monster, whore” paradigm Sjoberg and Gentry have identified as “imperial hermeneutics [which] police meaning in global politics” and against which feminisms must react through “projects of discursive destabilisation” (2007: 53). Finn/ula McQuillan is portrayed as none of the three and the choice of a first-person narrator renders this “discursive destabilisation” all the more obvious. Although her grandmother is clearly (rather grossly, not to say grotesquely) associated with Mother Ireland,<sup>10</sup> Finn/ula is a single young woman living in a Catholic ghetto displaying “stumps where the buildings used to be – stumps like tombstones” (109), in other words, where the future is stymied and linked only to death. The ordinariness of her life is reflected in the predictability of tea breaks, lunch breaks and the locals’ behaviour and the only concession to monstrosity is her nightmare

10. See Steel (2007: 200-14) for a very full discussion of this over-used trope of a “punitive, hideous and rapacious” (200) Mother Ireland in contemporary popular fiction.

of her grandmother/Mother Ireland successfully wresting her from the arms of her English lover. The fact that this monstrosity is linked to her grandmother and not to Finn/ula herself signals the shift in circumstances and in representation: the romantic ideals of her grandmother's generation have been replaced by a shrewd appraisal of the new political situation which calls for a different sort of involvement and a re-evaluation of women's roles in the IRA. There is no sense in this story of a glorification of violence or of triumphalism, merely a recognition (reinforced by the metaphor of the spider "spinning a new web", "weav[ing] the angles of his world in the space of the corner" in which Finn/ula can "only glimpse what fatal visions stir that dark web's pattern" [118-9]) that acts of violence, even sanctioned by a given organisation, remain an individual affair, neither exclusively male nor female, simply a part of a whole.

The spider's web metaphor is particularly interesting here as it is open to several levels of interpretation. On one level it obviously highlights the narrator's sense of having become caught up despite herself in a web of violence, while suggesting that her actions are to be read not in terms of the binaries which are usually applied to the conflict in the North of Ireland, but in terms of an interconnectedness of many social, political and cultural factors. On a more mythological plane, this spider she observes weaving its web inside her prison cell suggests that Finn/ula is to be seen as an Arachne figure who has challenged the powers that be, has won (so to speak), and must now pay the price. Finally, on a more artistic level, calling attention to the spider's weaving and Finn/ula's response to it suggests that another symbolic reading is also possible: in Ovid's myth, Arachne is punished for having dared to compete with the gods, for having been so proud as to think that she can out-weave Pallas Athena, that her art is superior to the work of the gods, for having flouted authority (Ovid, 125). Through Finn/ula Mc Quillan, the sonority of whose name (quill) draws attention to her role as author/narrator of her own story,<sup>11</sup> yet who

nevertheless cannot explain her actions, Devlin foregrounds the difficulties inherent in the representation of politically motivated acts of violence. In this respect, the allusion to Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral* is significant. A young girl comes into the library where Finn/ula works looking for books to read to her visually-impaired grandmother and when she picks out Eliot's play, Finn/ula's colleague advises her against it, suggesting that it is "too grisly" (99). When she suggests love stories as more appropriate reading, the girl stubbornly maintains that her grandmother is only interested in murder stories. Aside from highlighting a macabre local interest in murder, this intertextual allusion also invites us to read Finn/ula's actions in the light of Eliot's play, that is to say, to see her as an individual struggling against an oppressive authority and quietly accepting her fate.

Finn/ula McQuillan is therefore portrayed as a "good" terrorist in descriptive terms: that is to say, she successfully manages to carry out terrorist acts. In moral terms, despite the incomprehension her act provokes from colleagues and ex-partner alike, the choice of first person narrative fosters empathy for Finn/ula and a degree of understanding, without necessarily portraying her as morally "good". The result is a nuanced, poignant depiction of a female IRA volunteer that indulges neither in sensationalism, nor in manicheism.

Fifteen years after Anne Devlin's "Naming the Names", Anna Burns published her first novel, *No Bones* (2001). This novel charts the childhood, adolescence and early adulthood of Amelia, a native of Ardoyne in North Belfast. Essentially a tale of death, destruction and limited recovery, *No Bones* reveals, often uncomfortably through humour, the fragmentation of the community and of the self in a context of public violence. The incursion of violence into the private sphere is explored through the displacement of the signifiers of war onto the personal realm ("hunger strike" referring to anorexia; "safe house" to a place free from danger for the psychologically fragile Amelia; "battles" to Amelia's fight against alcoholism) and through the depiction of Bronagh McCabe, a childhood friend of Amelia's who has become an active member of a Republican paramilitary organisation.

11. Although the etymology of the name has no bearing on the act of writing, it is possible that Devlin chose it for its sonority, thus calling attention to one of the traditional tools of writing.

Bronagh McCabe makes several appearances in the course of this novel, and is therefore depicted in the different stages of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Also a resident of Ardoyne, her psychological instability does not bring her to turn on herself, as in Amelia's case, but to commit acts of violence against others. Stating that, after a schoolyard incident, Bronagh is "charged as an underage gunman" (76), the teenage Amelia already draws attention to the assumption that acts of political violence are automatically associated with men, an assumption which language invariably mimics and which this novel goes on to challenge.

The genesis of Bronagh's predilection for violence and her involvement in the republican movement is clearly shown in a chapter which recounts Amelia's and Bronagh's experiences in a cross-community Youth Training Programme. Visibly happier working in the traditionally male-dominated sectors of plumbing, carpentry and car mechanics than in typing (the only option open to girls), Bronagh is nevertheless rejected and mocked by the boys working there simply because she is female. The sectarian divide is momentarily bridged as the boys come together in unison to voice their preference for Bronagh "going into the office with the other girls" (109). This moment of unity is short-lived, however, when Bronagh is told by a Protestant that "go[ing] with Taigs" is an "unnatural, bestial act" (111). Her femininity is then called into question by the girls when Bronagh states her desire to ask a boy out. Against a chorus of "Girls don't do that!" and slurs against her appearance – "you're not exactly feminine" (111-12) – and caught in a paradox where she is perceived as either too feminine or not feminine enough, Bronagh, after having endorsed gender codes by changing her appearance to look more attractive (an attempt which yields catastrophic results as she only looks garish), then defies them once she is mocked by resorting to uncontrollable violence. After a telling ellipsis in the text, the next section opens with "The Peelers interviewed everyone in Casualty" (116), thereby revealing the extent of Bronagh's violent outburst. Bronagh's main victim, now in Intensive Care, is the Protestant girl who voiced several insults related both to Bronagh's religion and to her inability to conform to stereotypical feminine norms. The

"Community Pilot Scheme" is closed down as a result of both gender and sectarian discrimination and the seeds of Bronagh's future complex involvement with paramilitary action are sown. The difficulty of reconciling her attraction towards professions and preferences which are stereotypically associated with men with the expectations of gender provides a nuanced background picture against which her later actions must be read.

Amelia's final (and most disturbing) encounter with Bronagh is recounted from the former's point of view, but with heavy intrusions from the narrator at times. Bronagh, now married and the mother of six boys, is preparing dinner and a bomb attack when a fragile Amelia, still in the throes of recovery from alcohol addiction, arrives at her door looking for information about the murder of her brother. The flippant comment with which the narrator opens this section of the novel sets the terrorist act up as an everyday occurrence: "The build-up to committing murder, as anyone will tell you, takes its toll on a person and Bronagh was no exception to that" (222). In order to prepare for murder, Bronagh craves some "obsessive-compulsive human contact" (222), in other words, sex, and, her husband not being there to supply this, she decides to use Amelia.

Using mainly black humour, Burns emphasises the contrast between this domesticated, loving mother-of-six, the accomplished terrorist and the sexually depraved woman. The scene opens with an image of stereotypical domestic perfection, Bronagh cheerfully preparing dinner for her six boys, a scene marred only, but significantly, by the presence of a five-pound bomb on the table. When Bronagh's youngest son, Wolfe Tone, shows an interest in the semtex, she serenely covers it with a table cloth and the onomatopoeic verb "swish" (223) used to describe the movement, reinforces the image of Bronagh as a traditional mother, protecting her children from danger. The flippant mingling here of domesticity and paramilitary violence highlights the overlap between the public and private spheres and disconcertingly serves as a reminder that violence is just another everyday occurrence in the context of the Troubles.

Bronagh then proceeds to force Amelia to satisfy her sexually and this scene of sexual violation is narrated from Amelia's point of

view. It is significant that the latter perceives Bronagh as a masculine figure:<sup>12</sup> “Bronagh wasn’t some desperate groping *male person* and she herself wasn’t just going through motions” (225, my emphasis). The graphic description of the act abandons the earlier humorous tone and, through this sudden change, draws attention to the seriousness of this unexpected violation. Bronagh is hypersexualised throughout the scene, notably when her tongue is presented as a substitute phallus which penetrates Amelia’s mouth, taking on an agency of its own, in what reads as an oral rape: “Bronagh’s tongue then demanded, pushing itself in further, taking over and expanding to the back of Amelia’s throat” (225). To the hypersexualisation of Bronagh is added an element of monstrosity when one of her sons enters the bedroom to see what she is doing. He sees a face which “looked not like his mammy’s but like a contorted face from one of his kicking, kicking-awake nightmares, and not inches from himself were monster adult thighs and a giant hairy underbum” (Burns, 228). The scene is rendered grotesque through the boy’s perception and the childish vocabulary (“mammy”, “monster”, “giant” “underbum”) used to describe the changes making his mother unrecognisable and monstrous. Bronagh in fact appears as dismembered, perceived only synechdochically by her confused and traumatised son.

On the surface, what lurks behind this blending of the mother, monster, and whore imagery is the suggestion that in order to commit acts of violence, women must adopt aggressive (and stereotypically masculine) characteristics. This is not unproblematic as it marks a return to essentialist, rigid categories of behaviour as inherently feminine or masculine, clearly positing violence as masculine. However, it is worth considering that Burns, even as she appears to be entrenching gender stereotypes, is actually using exaggeration as a technique to

highlight common perceptions of violent women. After all, it is the psychologically fragile Amelia who reads Bronagh’s behaviour as masculine, a point of view the otherwise quite intrusive narrator neither endorses nor rejects. Moreover, the description of a personified “Action Man [...] in fatigues, his plastic rifle at the ready, [who] was peeping over at the two women from a single shelf that ran the length of the wall” (227) even adds a disturbingly parodic dimension to the scene, portraying the male soldier as an impotent peeping tom. Furthermore, Bronagh is depicted as the only successful, “good” terrorist in the novel, all her male counterparts portrayed as incompetent alcoholics, gamblers or bumbling fools. Interestingly, Burns’ female terrorist does not quite correspond to the “mother/whore” category as Sjöberg and Gentry present it. Bronagh is not a woman pushed to violence in order to protect her young. Neither is she a sexual slave to a man (Sjöberg & Gentry 2007: 49), nor an “erotomaniac” (47). It is not sexual arousal that pushes her to violence, but rather her involvement in violence which heightens her sexual arousal.<sup>13</sup> She is certainly presented as momentarily “sexually deviant” (46), yet her sexual deviance is not much different from that of other characters in the novel who are not involved in paramilitary violence (see the chapter entitled “Troubles, 1979” in which Amelia’s brother and his girlfriend try to rape her and the chapter “Babies, 1974” in which a twelve year old girl pushes around a toy pram with her dead baby, a product of incest, in it). It would be more prudent to suggest that Burns is concerned to depict the many dysfunctions besieging this community during the Troubles: political, social, cultural, physical, sexual and psychological. It is therefore no exaggeration to suggest that Burns, in this satire of the Troubles in the North of Ireland and, in particular, through the character of Bronagh, is “seizing control of language, images, symbols, and narratives” in order to find “new strategies for dealing with [...] women’s place” in political violence (Hendin 2004: 201).

12. An earlier version of the following analysis was developed in my article “Gender(ed) Trouble(s): Resisting Conformity in Anna Burns’ *No Bones* and *Little Constructions*.” Online publication, Université de Lille 3, 2011. [http://cecille.recherche.univ-lille3.fr/IMG/pdf/Conformismes\\_et\\_resistances-2.pdf](http://cecille.recherche.univ-lille3.fr/IMG/pdf/Conformismes_et_resistances-2.pdf) (47-53)

13. The way in which the stress of participation in political violence potentially heightens the need for sexual release is in fact a common trope in fiction dealing with male paramilitaries in the Irish context. See for example Gerald Seymour’s *Harry’s Game* (1975).

Eileen MacDonald has highlighted in the conclusion to her book *Shoot the Women First* that “the view of violent women as especially aberrant appears to be well entrenched” (1991: 241). This is an opinion she occasionally appears to share, such as when she asks whether female terrorists are “warped, or mad, or evil” or whether “something [has] happened to them to make them such misfits in the world of women” (233). It seems to me, following Sjoberg and Gentry, that these are not the questions that should be asked, and that Devlin and Burns do not entertain such queries. In their portrayals of Finn/ula McQuillan and Bronagh McCabe, these authors undermine and play with the binaries associated with masculinity and femininity, and in so doing, invite reflection on the manner in which the international policing of what constitutes feminine and masculine behaviour, in other words, what is appropriate for women, fractures at the point where women become politically violent agents. What both authors show is that the endemic violence which characterised Belfast during the Troubles has a devastating impact on every aspect of life and spills over to contaminate the private sphere, traditionally associated with women. Finn/ula and Bronagh are very different characters, but both have grown up in a highly dysfunctional environment and both have freely chosen to

join the IRA. In portraying this choice and their acts of violence, Devlin and Burns challenge the “ongoing bias in gender discourses in global politics which resist recognizing women’s capacity to engage in violence” (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007: 22). Whether or not these texts can be considered as feminist fictions is another question. There is a certain degree of ambiguity in Anna Burns’ character, the representation of whom slides dangerously close, as we have seen, to a violent monster/whore image. In contrast, Devlin’s character is much more sober, although unlike Bronagh she “only” facilitates rather than commits a terrorist act. I would suggest that the very choice of portraying these female terrorists is already a political one, and that presenting them as rational, reflective beings, as Devlin does, or as larger-than-life, sexually violent beings, as Burns does, at worst forces the reader to critically engage with stereotypes of violent women and at best invites the reader to go beyond gender essentialist discourses which posit women as necessarily non-violent beings. This may not make for a particularly joyful reading experience, but moving out of our comfort zone is the price we must pay if dominant discourses are to be challenged through fictional representations.

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