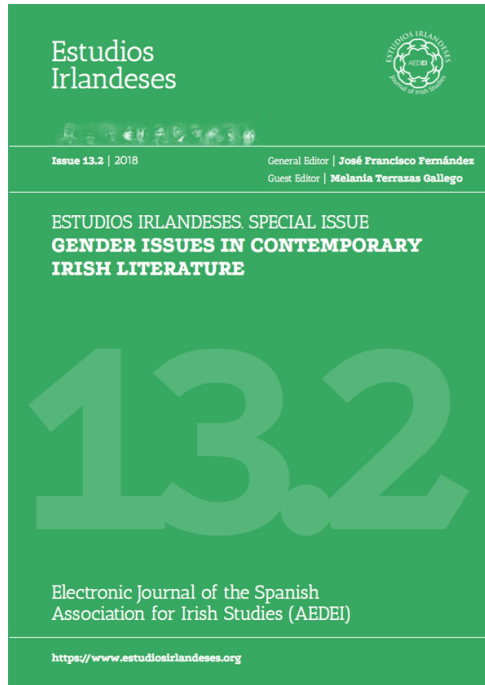


Melania Terrazas, Editor, Estudios Irlandeses. Special Issue 13.2. Gender Issues in Contemporary Irish Literature, 2018, 145 pp.
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Estudios Irlandeses is a peer-reviewed, open-access electronic journal whose first issue appeared in 2005. As the publication of the Spanish Association for Irish Studies (AEDEI), the journal's stated purpose is to contribute to the institutionalization of Irish Studies within Spanish universities, besides being a forum for international scholars. According to Melania Terrazas, the editor of this special issue, the issue's focus on gender in contemporary Irish literature grew out of the AEDEI's 2017 sixteenth annual conference, *Fe/male Challenges in Irish Studies from the 19th to the 21st Centuries* (May 2017), whose thematic concentration was itself motivated by the host of advances within Irish literary studies and publishing since the *Field Day* anthology debacle. Listing a number of recent interdisciplinary studies of Irish culture, Terrazas further says that *Gender Issues in Contemporary Irish Literature* "aims to complement" this work. This idea of complementarity nicely describes the kaleidoscopic array of essays offered here, all of which

offer original explorations into the field of Irish literary culture.

Two of the essays in the issue tackle gender questions in the same author, John Banville. Mehdi Ghassemi and Mar Asensio Aróstagui are the authors of these articles, both of which attempt to complicate the prevailing view of how women figure in Banville's corpus. They are titled, respectively, "The 'Woman' as a Frame for the Self: Femininity, Ekphrasis, and Aesthetic Selfhood in John Banville's *Eclipse*, *Shroud*, and *Ancient Light*" and "The Role of Female Characters in the Narrator's Quest for Identity in John Banville's *Eclipse*".

With recourse to the writing of Jacques Lacan, Paul de Man, and Friedrich Nietzsche, Ghassemi brings something new to Banville criticism by arguing for a particular aesthetic theory he sees Banville working out through his "narrator-artist" figures' quest for artistic realization, and also by arguing for the particular role he sees key women characters playing in relation to these quests. First agreeing with previous critics that Banville's men reduce key women into "receptacles" of their "quest for authenticity", Ghassemi then argues that these same women characters also fulfill the role of "other" in the narratives and, as such, are selves that the men must in fact come to recognize in order for them to move forward. The "narratives foreground [...] the crucial dependence of the self on the other", Ghassemi says, so that the narrators' "narcissistic quest inward ultimately fails to yield any sense of self; they are bound to turn to the other, their narcissistic shell has to be opened". This idea of the opening up of the self to the other-as-woman is interesting; however, it is ultimately but a step in "the process" of the men's "self-aestheticization", as Ghassemi sees it. The process's culminating insight is that "the unified self is

but an illusion”, so that, if there is any “‘truth’ to be found, it is in the medium itself” (textuality/representation), and not in “the movement inwards nor in the penetration of the other”.

Linking Asensio Aróstagui’s article to Ghassemi’s is both her complication of the view of women in Banville’s writing and her argument that Banville’s narrator in *Eclipse* (2000), Cleave, is a self that must learn to accommodate other selves. In her compelling reading of *Eclipse*, Asensio Aróstagui demonstrates how Cleave in his crisis comes to be surrounded by the “spectral” presence of numerous haunting women, so that, at the novel’s close, Cleave has found “his identity as an individual, as a father and as a creator” through a process of cross-gender engagement. In suggesting that Banville’s later writing in particular shows a new treatment of gender, Asensio Aróstagui is in agreement with more than one recent Banville critic, some of whom also point to the author’s pseudonymous Benjamin Black novels as evidence of his later-career attention to gender power dynamics.

Also taking on a giant of Irish letters is María Amor Barros-del Río, whose essay is titled “Thematic Transgressions and Formal Innovations in Edna O’Brien’s *The Country Girls Trilogy and Epilogue*”. The analysis of form across the trilogy and epilogue that the article’s title promises is deeply interesting and perhaps the best part of this wide-ranging essay. However, Barros-del Río also reiterates how much of an influence and groundbreaker O’Brien was (and undoubtedly continues to be), including in the way that she inspired more than one subsequent two-protagonist female *bildungsromans*. Further, while Barros-del Río is thoroughly conversant in *bildungs* theory, some of the points she wishes to make about the trilogy with respect to this scholarship are somewhat murky. For example, she claims at the outset of the article that her argument will be a postcolonial one, but the promised postcolonial analysis never seems to materialize or at least is never alluded to explicitly. Rather, the critic emphasizes the protagonists’ failure to self-actualize. Many Second Wave-era novels by and about women are certainly fraught narratives or likewise (protest) stories of failed or compromised *bildungs*.

Moving beyond contemporary fiction to contemporary drama, José Lanter’s “Groping towards Morality: Feminism, AIDS, and the Spectre of Article 41 in Thomas Kilroy’s *Ghosts*” describes the circumstances surrounding the composition of *Ghosts*, which is a re-writing of Henrik Ibsen’s play of the same name. Lanter also situates Kilroy’s *Ghosts* in relation to some of the playwright’s other metafictional revisions, of works by Anton Chekhov and William Shakespeare, for example. Kilroy’s *Ghosts*’ connection to Article 41 is clearly Lanter’s primary focus beyond the circumstances of the play’s composition, with the critic suggesting that Kilroy was attracted to the dynamic of family dysfunction in Ibsen’s play, as this was relevant to his wish to insist that the limitations that the Irish Constitution imposes on women, with its language regarding women’s proper place being in the home (Article 41), are a recipe not for domestic harmony, but the opposite.

Following Lanter’s article (which is placed as the first article in the issue) is Maureen O’Connor’s “‘Informed Love’: Human and Non-Human Bodies in Tim Robinson’s Ethical Aesthetic”. In her article, O’Connor builds on recent criticism that sets out to grasp the qualities of Robinson’s ecocritical practice. She is able to do this by moving beyond considerations of landscape and geology in Robinson’s writing and by focusing instead on animals in his work. Specifically, drawing from Jos Smith, O’Connor describes Robinson’s writing style as a kind of “deep

mapping” of place that anticipates, as O’Connor says, “the recent material turn in environmental philosophy and ecological humanities which recognizes the multiple agencies across the nonhuman world”. O’Connor presents the field of the new environmental materialisms in ample detail, perhaps somewhat at the expense of analyses of Robinson’s work, but making of her article an excellent resource for anyone wanting an introduction to this new direction in ecocriticism.

The work of student and recently post-graduate authors is also represented in *Gender Issues in Contemporary Irish Literature*. This includes “The Modernisation of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: Identity and Gender in Irish Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*”, by Alicia Muro Llorente, “Beauty Magazines’ Discourse in the Dystopian World of Louise O’Neill’s *Only Every Yours*”, by Ekaterina Muraveva, and “Translating Characters: Eliza Doolittle ‘Rendered’ into Spanish”, by Edurne Goñi Alsúa, drawn from her recently defended dissertation. Each of these articles stands as a work that will undoubtedly eventually appear in a more sophisticated vein. For example, in the case of “The Modernisation of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: Identity and Gender in Irish Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*”, Muro Llorente struggles a bit with her topic’s difficulties, in that her argument about how Murdoch’s updated female characters successfully escape various forms of male domination rests partially on a female character whose miserable suicide constitutes a component of this “escape”. Ekaterina Muraveva’s piece, for its part, begins with a lengthy presentation of her “methodological tools”, i.e., a review of theory, much of which readers will be already familiar with and all of which would have been better incorporated as needed, as her argument progressed, given that the task at hand is an article and not a thesis. Further, while Muraveva’s analysis of beauty “discourse” is strong, it probably could have been put to better use, given that Louise O’Neill’s *Only Every Yours* is a young adult novel whose feminist dystopianism is naturally heavy-handed. Goñi Alsúa’s piece compares six translations of George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, with particular attention to which Hispano-phone dialects were chosen to approximate the effects of Cockney English, and also with attention to the “personality” of Eliza Doolittle. Goñi Alsúa argues that, with the exception of one of these translations, Eliza’s personality is rendered less “insecure” than in the original, either “ruder”, more “vulgar”, or more “independent”. The journal should be commended for being a venue for vibrant new voices such as these.

The final section of this special gender issue of *Estudios Irlandeses* takes the form of two brief personal essays, the first by Rob Doyle titled “Male Trouble – Writing about Men in Feminist Times”, and the second by Evelyn Conlon, “Gender Issues in my Work”. In discussing his first novel, *Here Are the Young Men*, which is drawn from his teenage years in the 1990s, Doyle explains that his intention was to present the contemporaneous “lad culture” climate of toxic masculinity, wholly unedited. He was duly relieved, he recounts, when the novel was understood not to be misogynist but rather that which it was intended to be, a frank representation of the gender values of the time period. Doyle states that “As a teenager in the nineties, I didn’t like men.... My attitude to the culture around me was one of loathing and fear”. According to Doyle, his latest novel, *This Is the Ritual*, similarly delves into a “terrain of sexual disarray and anxiety”. “All vital fiction,” he entertainingly claims, “is a hotbed of thought crime”. For her part, Conlon describes an early publishing success that was followed by a brief fallow period, as she found that her fiction was deemed irrelevant by a succession of editors. She then turned to writing what she calls “bad poetry”, but eventually returned to the short story following an inspiring experience at a National Writers’ Workshop where Eavan Boland and Bernard MacLaverty were in attendance, amongst

others. Her point is that Irish publishing finally caught up with the actual lives of Irish women, which had already been central amongst her interests as a writer—interests that the editors who passed over her work were not yet primed to recognize as valid. Once she achieved success, Conlon recounts that she was frequently asked if she were a “feminist writer”, wondering why it was not clear that she is a writer who is a feminist. Further, that the impetus behind the question was often to find out whether or not she was “anti-man”, the question was really about men and not women, as Conlon says. Conlon still often finds herself being asked about Irish male writers when traveling abroad, a circumstance that, probably rightly, she “suspect[s] is not reciprocated”. Most broadly, Conlon’s piece is a wonderful description of her career, interests, and works.

This excellent special issue of *Estudios Irlandeses* demonstrates its breadth and vitality as an Irish Studies forum. That the journal is open-access is a great boon for all.