



## **To Maintain Herself and Her People: Patriarchal Colonization in Early Modern Ireland and Women's Responses<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*Women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ireland both reinforced and challenged colonial patriarchy. Suzanne Spencer-Wood defines patriarchal colonial theory as “focus[ing] on analyzing European policies and laws for creating institutional gender segregation of colonized bodies, to conform to the hegemonic Western gender ideology of subordinate domestic women dominated by superior, public men.”<sup>2</sup> In Ireland during colonization, patriarchy was heightened and violence against women was perpetuated against both the settler and native populations. This patriarchal heightening was not only perpetuated by the colonizing force but was expressed as a reaction to colonization by Irish political and religious systems. In this way, Ireland is unique, as both patriarchal systems featured were Western European and played on each other. Violence was also expressed from multiple angles, particularly from religious tensions. Women in Ireland supported the colonial reshaping of Ulster and Munster, defended English colonial holdings, and participated in violent uprising, religious defiance, and the political preservation of the Irish language. This paper argues that through these actions, despite the systems of colonialism and patriarchy that were imposed upon them, women amongst the variety of ethnic and religious groups in Ireland actively engaged in the religious and political conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.*

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<sup>2</sup> Spencer-Wood, “Feminist Theorizing of Patriarchal Colonialism,” 479.

## Introduction

In 1593, the fearsome military leader, pirate, and gentlewoman Gráinne O'Malley traveled to London to petition Elizabeth I for her widow's rights to be observed and to secure the inheritances of her sons. It was a bold ask of the queen, as those two sons were also sitting in an English prison.<sup>3</sup> O'Malley also asked for their release.<sup>4</sup> In some ways, O'Malley's story plays out like one often found in popular culture. She took over the ships and the land of her father, the chieftain of a territory in north Mayo, upon his death. In her own words, O'Malley "[took up] arms to maintain [her]self and [her] people by land and sea" for over forty years.<sup>5</sup> O'Malley is remembered in modern popular culture as the "Pirate Queen," an Irish patriot, and a rebel against the English. This is only partly true. O'Malley was a pirate, building on the traditional career of the O'Malleys and raiding the coasts. She also probably participated in a rebellion against corrupt English governance in west Connacht. But O'Malley also, as mentioned, cooperated with the English when it benefitted her, sailing to London on a couple of occasions to petition Queen Elizabeth. The story of O'Malley, after her death in 1603, became an obscured one. She was a point of embarrassment for the patriarchal Irish, who felt she subverted traditional gender roles, and she became a subject of English mockery as a female leader.<sup>6</sup> O'Malley is much more clearly represented by her ability to survive, both within her indigenous patriarchal society and as a female patriot against patriarchal colonization.

While Irish scholars largely refer to Ireland as a colony during the early modern period and assume that conclusion on behalf of those reading their work, it can be difficult to frame colonization in Ireland in a greater theoretical sense because of the ways it was both incredibly similar to, and drastically different from, later British imperialist ventures. It is similar in that it entailed the stripping of resources, reallocation of indigenous land, and cultural cleansing in the name of "civilization." Where it is different is that the people being subordinated were white Europeans. This is an important distinction to make, as most theories around colonization and women's role in it focus on nations and peoples who are primarily of color and are outside of Europe. It is vital for understanding colonization as a larger picture that, while Ireland was held in subordination and its people were seen as inferior humans, they were never silenced like those in later imperial territorial holdings. Furthermore, much of the work of postcolonial feminist theorists like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Sara Mills, and Suzanne Spencer-Wood focuses on these latter systems of colonization. Their work is still applicable to Irish colonization, but with that caveat.

Colonization in Ireland falls into the realm of these theorists because it was not only particularly patriarchal but also showcased women's participation

3 O'Malley, "State Papers."

4 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*.

5 O'Malley, "State Papers."

6 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 253.

in both perpetuation and rebellion. Spencer-Wood defines patriarchal colonial theory as “focus[ing] on analyzing European policies and laws for creating institutional gender segregation of colonized bodies, to conform to the hegemonic Western gender ideology of subordinate domestic women dominated by superior, public men.”<sup>7</sup> In Ireland during colonization, patriarchy was heightened and violence against women was perpetrated against both the settler and the native populations. This patriarchal heightening was not only perpetrated by the colonizing force, but was expressed in multiple systems, both Irish and English. In this way, Ireland is unique, as both patriarchal systems featured were Western European and played off of each other. Violence was also expressed from multiple angles as tensions, particularly religious tensions. Women took part in the perpetuation of colonization by supporting colonial reshaping and defending colonial holdings from resistance. Women also rebelled against colonization through violent uprising, religious defiance, and the political preservation of the Irish language. Through these actions, despite the systems of colonialism and patriarchy that were imposed upon them, women across the variety of ethnic and religious groups in Ireland actively engaged in the religious and political conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

## Scholarly background

The general scholarship on primary material of the early modern period in Ireland had a difficult beginning in the twentieth century but has been more richly explored in the last few decades. During the Irish Civil War in 1922, the Public Records Office was destroyed, and vital records were lost, though there has been some recovery of documents through transcripts from the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, according to Micheál Ó Siochrú, this general feeling of lost sources has led some scholars to accept this lack of information. While primarily looking at government and official documents and bemoaning what had been destroyed, some scholars have neglected to look for sources that came from less official sources.<sup>9</sup> This is especially unfortunate, as many writings by women from this era come in the form of life writing and religious or literary works, and are therefore missed by those who are solely focused on searching through the ashes of government documents. Despite this loss of information and later stagnation, there was a revitalization of scholarship on general early modern Irish history in the late twentieth century, led by Aidan Clarke, a professor at Trinity College in Dublin. His work focused on understanding the Old English<sup>10</sup> and the state of Ireland during the Commonwealth.<sup>11</sup> He also

7 Spencer-Wood, “Feminist Theorizing of Patriarchal Colonialism,” 479.

8 Ó Siochrú, “Rebuilding the Past,” 383.

9 Ó Siochrú, “Rebuilding the Past,” 383–84.

10 An ethnic group of people in Ireland who arrived after the Norman conquest. For more discussion on ethnic groups in Ireland during the early modern period please see the discussion on pages six and seven of this paper.

11 *The Irish Times*, “Aidan Clarke Obituary.”

provided a foundation on which current early modern Irish scholarship has been built. It deserves repeating, however, that these works, despite their triumphs, focus almost wholly on men and the writings of men.

Within the last couple of decades, more and more focus has been put on finding, synthesizing, and publishing work about women's history. This research can, at times, be difficult, as women for a large part of Western history were kept from education, and therefore from participating in the systems of writing that become preserved (government, military, literature, law, medicine, etc.). Trying to do this work in Irish history can become all the more difficult, as the conflicts of the last century have destroyed many records and primary material. Still, despite an abundance of research and scholarly work done toward understanding Ireland in the early modern era, little attention has been given to the actions and experiences of Irish women during this time. In particular, Irish and Old English women have been marginalized in the historical scholarship.

The research on women's roles in early modern Ireland features a couple of predominant lines of inquiry within the historical discipline. This area of scholarship on the whole is relatively new, with the first line of inquiry covering general Irish women's history only beginning in the 1990s. Mary O'Dowd is a prominent scholar in this field. She helped found the Women's History Association of Ireland in 1989 and continues researching women in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> Her largest and most recent work is *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500–1800*, published in 2014. The work covers the political, social, religious, and economic roles of women in Ireland and how they evolved during the early modern period. The work takes a broad approach, discussing both the elites of Irish and English society as well as demographic changes for the common people.<sup>13</sup> A second prominent line of inquiry consists of historical books and articles focused on upper class planters and aristocratic women.<sup>14</sup> Here are examinations of larger political structures and the role of New English women as well as Old English elites. These works largely ignore native Irish women and lower-class Catholic women. At best, these works can give insights into the lives of middle to upper class Irish women through the use of chancery court documents or upper-class English writing and draw broad conclusions, but these both are under studied in regard to understanding marginalized women.

However, another line of inquiry is available, English literary analysis, which does cover some of the blind spots, though through a different discipline. The three most prominent scholars in this track of scholarship are Marie-Louise Coolahan, author of *Women, Writing, and Language in Early Modern Ireland*<sup>15</sup>; and Naomi McAreavy and Julie Eckerle, co-editors of *Women's Life Writing*

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12 "Profile: Mary O'Dowd"

13 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*.

14 See the following works: Nolan, *The Jacobite Duchess Frances Jennings and Wilson, Elite Women in Ascendancy Ireland*. These works were collected through "The Bibliography of Irish Women's History," *Women's History Association of Ireland* (blog), April 1, 2022, <https://womenshistoryassociation.com/the-bibliography-of-irish-womens-history/>.

15 Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language*.

and *Early Modern Ireland*.<sup>16</sup> Coolahan's work is a monographic study of Irish women's literature. She pays special attention to bardic poetry, but also has in-depth analysis of the primary sources: petition letters from Irish exiles in Spain, the autobiography of Mother Mary Browne of the Poor Clares Monastery in Galway, depositions from the 1641 uprising, and the autobiography of the Protestant Mary Rich.<sup>17</sup> Of most interest for studying Catholic Old English and Irish women is the Poor Clares autobiography and further information provided by Coolahan about the Poor Clares' translation operations in Dublin. This order of nuns, primarily populated by the Old English and the Irish, were principal in translating both the Bible and their monastic rules into Gaelic Irish in a move that Coolahan calls, "a profound political engagement . . . increasingly associated with resistance to the English crown."<sup>18</sup> Eckerle and McAreavey's edited volume has a collection of essays, specifically about letter writing and social networks.<sup>19</sup> These essays are only about upper-class women and their political networkings, but these are paired with other essays about life writing speaking of the view of "common" Irish people, providing a more complete picture than other edited volumes.<sup>20</sup> Both of these books use a plethora of life-writing sources, which have yet to be examined thoroughly by historians.

Furthermore, while these various lines of inquiry may be drawing on theory and methodology of their particular disciplines, they lack a general connection to the work of feminist and postcolonial theorists. Many do not attempt to understand Irish women's relationships with each other, with men, and within a larger picture of colonization. To access this kind of conversation, one must also survey the work of the last few decades into these topics. One of the largest theoretical frameworks that connects these three relationships—women with each other, men, and colonization—is radical feminism. Radical feminist theory posits a broad number of conclusions primarily aimed at tackling the effects of modern patriarchal structures and addresses history in this way: that the oppression of women "is pandemic, the most fundamental of all historical instances of oppression, and thus a paradigm case of oppression."<sup>21</sup> Given the pervasiveness of patriarchy in the view of radical feminism, the intersectional systemic oppressions of racism and colonialism are also patriarchy-born. Postcolonial feminist theory further criticizes the historical separation of women into "colonizer" and "colonized" roles by patriarchal forces and makes special note of the use of racialized and gendered oppressive actions used in colonization. As Spencer-Wood writes:

16 Carroll, review of *Women, Writing, and Language*, 1423–25; Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language*; McAreavey, and Eckerle, *Women's Life Writing*.

17 Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language*.

18 Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language*, 66.

19 Eckerle and McAreavey, *Women's Life Writing and Early Modern Ireland*.

20 One of the more prominent works used when studying women in Ireland, edited by Myles Campbell, is *Vicereines of Ireland: Portraits of Forgotten Women*. The work is a collection of essays about the wives of the Irish governors. McAreavey is featured in this volume.

21 "Radical Feminism," s. v., American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology, 2023, <https://dictionary.apa.org/>.

Feminist theories reveal that gender and sexual power dynamics are not specific to one historically recorded role, interaction or relationship, but are part of the systematic expression of the institutional structures of ‘patriarchal colonialism.’ Using postcolonial feminist theory, structural feminist theory, and radical feminist theory can reveal the structures and institutions enforcing, maintaining and reproducing patriarchal gender and sexual power dynamics.<sup>22</sup>

Historical inquiry can then both work to support these theories and be supported by them as an interpretive tool.<sup>23</sup> Through these theories historians can uncover a more complex image of societal machinations—particularly, for this paper, of colonization and patriarchy. So while the historical and literary lines of inquiry are fairly comprehensive within their disciplines, this paper goes a step further by bringing together these multiple lines of inquiry and explicitly positioning them within the ongoing conversation between history and theory. It is important to examine the role of women in Irish colonization because of Ireland’s position as one of the earliest examples of English imperialism.

## Historical background

Building from the vast understanding gained from the scholarship, it becomes clear that one must first have knowledge of the political and religious turmoil that preceded and followed throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries before being able to discuss women’s role in the struggles of the time. Following the reconquest of Ireland in the sixteenth century by Henry VIII, at the beginning of the seventeenth century there were four primary ethnic groups in Ireland. First was the indigenous Irish, who had been on the island since before the Norman conquest. They spoke Irish Gaelic and had a culture unique from the English, Scots, and Normans.<sup>24</sup> The second oldest group was the Old English. The members of this group were Normans who moved to Ireland after the conquest. They had large populations in the southwest territory of Ireland called the Pale. By the seventeenth century they had mostly assimilated to Irish culture, intermarried, become bilingual in English and Gaelic, and remained Catholic, like the indigenous Irish.<sup>25</sup> The two other groups arrived around the same time, in the late fifteenth century to early sixteenth century, right before the reconquest, and did not assimilate. The first of these were the Presbyterian Scots who moved into northern Ireland, primarily in Ulster. They were Protestant and primarily loyal to the Stuart monarchs.<sup>26</sup> Lastly, there were the New English,

22 Spencer-Wood, “Feminist Theorizing of Patriarchal Colonialism,” 482.

23 Further reading on radical feminism and postcolonial feminist theory can be found within these sources: Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” 25–28; and Mills, “Gender and Colonial Space,” 692–719.

24 Coolahan, “Women’s Writing in Seventeenth-Century Ireland.

25 Canny, *Making Ireland British*, 404–5.

26 Coolahan, “Women’s Writing in Seventeenth-Century Ireland,” 1051.

English settlers from a new wave of settlement in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who were primarily viewed as occupiers by both the Irish and Old English. They were Protestant and were generally loyal to the English Crown or Parliament, depending on the political climate in England.<sup>27</sup> While these groups were not always separated by hard ethnic lines, as evidenced by intermarriage and the general mobility of people, their general groupings stayed relatively consistent throughout the early modern period.

The central locations of these groups were often determined by various plantation settlements throughout Ireland. “Plantations” in Ireland resulted from active colonization by the Protestant English, which was characterized by large seizures of land from Irish landowners. The plantations in Ireland began under Elizabeth I but did not become fixtures of English colonization until after the O’Neill rebellion, which ended in 1601. The largest of these during the sixteenth century was in Munster, in the south of Ireland, open for plantation after the land was scorched during the Desmond Rebellion in 1583.<sup>28</sup> The English crown approved just under 300,000 acres to be given to English investors with strict instructions that native Irish tenants were to be removed and English tenants brought in.<sup>29</sup> Some Irish landowners were able to regain their land, but largely the Munster plantation was successful in the eyes of the English, given that the majority of land was thereafter owned by English investors and settled with New English people.<sup>30</sup> Given the enormity of the reshaping the plantations were able to accomplish, they were one of the most prominent facets of colonization in Ireland.

After a series of violent but unsuccessful rebellions in the sixteenth century, culminating in the O’Neill rebellion of 1594–1601, English colonial forces created the plantation of Ulster. The plantation of Ulster was a social, religious, and economic reshaping of northern Ireland. After the defeat and end of the rebellion in 1603, many Irish earls and lords saw no future for them in the current state of Ireland and fled in a 1607 event now known as the Flight of the Earls.<sup>31</sup> The Flight, intended to protect Irish leadership and rally Catholic support in Europe, left swaths of northern Ireland open for settlement and plantation.<sup>32</sup> The plantation of Ulster built on lessons from earlier settlements, including Munster, and would be consolidated under the control of the crown. Investors could only hold small amounts of land to avoid any more regional conglomerations of power. New settlers of Ulster, including New English and Presbyterian Scots, were given instructions about who they could rent property to, as in the Munster plantation, and were also given instructions to build defensive fortifications. As their land was taken by the English, there were designated areas

27 Coolahan, “Women’s Writing in Seventeenth-Century Ireland,” 1051; see also Coolahan, “Ideal Communities and Planter Women’s Writing,” 69–91.

28 Gibney, *A Short History of Ireland*, 29–30.

29 Gibney, 30.

30 Gibney, 30–31.

31 Gibney, 42–43.

32 Gibney.

for Irish people to live in so that they could be easily observed.<sup>33</sup> The mission of the Ulster plantation was a “civilizing” one, with Protestants working to convert and re-educate the Irish population. Protestants made efforts to print propaganda materials in the Gaelic Irish language and students were encouraged to go to the Protestant Trinity College over continental Catholic European schools.<sup>34</sup> English immigration into Ulster was not as fast as the crown had hoped, but by the 1630s the English were firmly settled in northern Ireland.<sup>35</sup>

The English were right to build defensive fortifications in the plantations, though they would not serve well. In 1641 what started as a small gentry rebellion boiled over into an island-wide sectarian massacre. Taking cues from a semi-successful Scottish rebellion, the gentry of Ulster and Dublin planned a rebellion against the English meant to secure a negotiating position with the crown.<sup>36</sup> The plot in Dublin was discovered and was stopped before it began, but in Ulster the rebellion went as planned, beginning on the night of October 22, 1641.<sup>37</sup> The conflict, often referred to as the Ulster rising or 1641 rising, spread throughout the island with the Gaelic Irish massacring Protestants. The English responded brutally, murdering both Gaelic Irish and Old English. Both sides of this violence were widespread, causing even attacks of female monastic orders, like the Poor Clares (discussed below). In response to the violence then felt by both groups of Irish Catholics, the Gaelic Irish and Old English joined forces creating a confederate government and engaging in war with the English until 1649.<sup>38</sup>

Following the Ulster rising and the confederate conflict, 1649 marked another turning point for Ireland with the conquest of Cromwell and English parliamentary forces. After the massacres of 1641–42, the English believed they needed revenge against the Irish on behalf of New English Protestants. Cromwell landed with parliamentary forces in Dublin in August 1649 and set towards reconquering the whole of Ireland.<sup>39</sup> The conflict lasted until 1653 and coincided with both famine and plague, leading to an Irish wartime mortality rate of fifteen to twenty percent of the population. After the war, around fifty thousand Irish soldiers and civilians were sent to work English plantations in the Caribbean, freeing even more land for English settlement.<sup>40</sup> The last conflict of the seventeenth century to hit the island was the Williamite conflict with the Jacobites, but Ireland was fully under English control even in that fight.<sup>41</sup> With these defeats came the end of dreams of Irish independence for the next century.

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33 Gibney, 53.

34 Gibney, 57; 54.

35 Gibney, 58.

36 Gibney, 61.

37 Gibney, 63.

38 Gibney, 64–67.

39 Gibney, 67.

40 Gibney, 68.

41 Gibney, 79–81.



## Politicization of Catholic/Protestant tensions in Ireland

Identity as either Protestant or Catholic in colonial Ireland held political meaning and even determined one's civic status within the colonial state. The focus of this study is the political and social ramifications of the divisions between these two patriarchal groups on women in Ireland, not on their theological differences. While English Protestants had started settling in Ireland several years prior to Henry VIII's arrival, it was only when he conquered territory beyond the Pale that religious tensions started to rise. Conquering Ireland was part of Henry's reformation, though it is also important to note that his potential confiscation of church property and the further economic and political gains of becoming King of Ireland were also strong factors in his decision to take the territory.<sup>42</sup> The political effects of Protestant Tudor policy stripped many Catholic Old English and Gaelic lords of power and wealth, causing them to become more rebellious. There was a brief stagnation in the active attempts at protestantization during the reign of Mary I, but with Elizabeth came a renewed vigor.<sup>43</sup> Elizabethan policy imposed a fee for absence from Anglican worship, required the use of the English Common Book of Prayer, and banned preaching in Gaelic Irish.<sup>44</sup> All of these actions in conjunction with each other solidified Protestantism as a colonizer religion, tying ethnic and cultural identity to religious identity. After Elizabeth's death, and the failure of the O'Neill rebellion, James I banished Catholic priests from Ireland in 1605, but became distracted with problems in England in 1606 and so restrictions were relaxed.<sup>45</sup> Local protestantization did not relax, however, with several Protestant clergies calling for Catholics to be "smitten and utterly destroyed."<sup>46</sup> Colonization was begun in the name of the Reformation, and in that way, the machine of colonization in Ireland was defined politically by factions of religion.

The entanglement of Catholic identity with Irish identity was strengthened in reaction to English repression. It was also entrenched in the Gaelic Irish as an expression of their folk religious tradition and was further strengthened somewhat forcefully by the Counter-Reformation. Irish Catholicism in 1600 was vastly different from that of the Vatican. The early seventeenth century, marked by attempts within the Irish church to reform to Vatican standards, was only met with marginal and slow success.<sup>47</sup> The common Irish were highly traditional and resisted these reforms, preferring spiritual authority to come locally.<sup>48</sup> Their resistance to the church was, in that regard, similar to their resistance to English Protestants. The church became more political as a result of having local authority. As priests returned from training abroad, the slow change came from the top down, with Irish priests preaching anti-Protestantism and therefore

42 Brewer and Higgins, "Plantation to the United Irishmen," 16–17.

43 Brewer and Higgins, 17.

44 Brewer and Higgins, 17.

45 Brewer and Higgins, 17–18.

46 Brewer and Higgins, 17–18.

47 Brewer and Higgins, 18–19.

48 Brewer and Higgins, 18.

anti-English.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the O'Neill rebellion in Ulster allied with Roman Catholicism, stirring the stronghold of Irish resistance to become more politically Catholic.<sup>50</sup> The further politicization of religion also changed marriage patterns in Ireland, drawing an even thinner line between the Irish and the Old English and making Catholic culture more homogenous.<sup>51</sup> With the eventual success of internal reform came the invigorated political fire of Irish Catholicism as the cause became more associated with the larger Counter-Reformation movement.

### **Patriarchy as a symptom and reaction to colonization**

Given that the religion and political machinations in Ireland before colonization were patriarchal and primarily publicly enacted by men, it is clear that Irish society was not egalitarian before colonization, but there were certain rights and abilities women had before colonization that they did not have afterward. Most of these rights had to do with marriage and family. Women had the right to declare the paternity of their children.<sup>52</sup> By doing this, women were able to bind their children to fathers. This could provide subsistence for single mothers, as the father would be expected to provide for the child, or serve to protect children born outside of wedlock from being shunned by landed families who would otherwise ignore them.<sup>53</sup> Under Gaelic customary law, the law that existed in Ireland in somewhat informal terms before the reconquest in the early sixteenth century, marriage was able to be performed without the involvement of the church.<sup>54</sup> Divorce was also an option available to Gaelic Irish women.<sup>55</sup> In the event of divorce or death of their husband, Irish women, under Gaelic customary law, would also be able to claim all of the goods they brought into the marriage as part of their dowry, or if those were unable to be returned, they were granted land as a substitute.<sup>56</sup> These rights, while better for women than some other laws in Europe at the time, were not a full protection of women. While they were given provision at the time of becoming single, whether through divorce or death, they were not given equitable compensation and were only given a settlement equivalent to the value of their marriage goods. Furthermore, women under Gaelic customary law were not able to inherit ancestral land from their fathers.<sup>57</sup>

The ways in which the English restricted the rights of women were often on an interpersonal level. There was a priority from Protestants on restricting whom women could marry. For Protestant women, that meant a law, passed in 1634, that prohibited women under sixteen with inheritances from marrying

49 Brewer and Higgins, 19–20.

50 Brewer and Higgins, 19–20.

51 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 16.

52 Sawyer, *We Are but Women*, 16–17; O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 23.

53 Sawyer, *We Are but Women*, 16–17.

54 O'Dowd, "Women and the Irish Chancery Court," 485.

55 Sawyer, *We Are but Women*, 18.

56 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 98–99.

57 O'Dowd, "Women and the Irish Chancery Court," 485.

without parental consent. There were subsequent laws passed in 1708 and 1735 that raised the age to eighteen and then to twenty-one.<sup>58</sup> Inter-marriage between Catholics and Protestants was generally discouraged. Protestant English viewed Gaelic Irish women as unclean, lusty, and corrupt. The two largest plantations of the seventeenth century were intentionally designed to keep the ethnic groups from interacting with each other in order to limit intergroup relationships.<sup>59</sup> For military relationships, even if a Catholic woman converted to Protestantism she would have to “pass an oral examination ‘by a board of military saints’ to prove that her conversion was genuine.”<sup>60</sup>

One of the ways the English Protestants established control over Ireland was through specific laws undermining the rights of Catholic men. A lot of the anti-Catholic legislation in the seventeenth century aimed to limit Catholics’ ability to hold and maintain property, and therefore placed limits on the types of rights typically reserved for men. As O’Dowd emphasizes:

While Protestant patriarchy was bolstered by the state and the established Church through its legislation on marriage and property, the patriarchal control of Catholic men was officially undermined. In particular, the penal legislation approved by the Irish parliament in the late seventeenth century embodied an unprecedented attack on the legal rights of Catholic men.<sup>61</sup>

The penal legislation, also called the Popery Laws, was a series of laws enacted during the reign of William III, between 1695 and 1704. These laws in 1695 prohibited Catholics from joining the army, from sending children to continental Europe for education, from carrying arms, and from owning horses that were valued higher than five pounds.<sup>62</sup> In 1704, the laws were expanded to ban Catholics from holding land for longer than thirty-one years, and stipulating that, upon the death of their father, Catholic children must split their inheritance equally. If one converted to Protestantism, though, then they could inherit the entirety of the estate.<sup>63</sup>

In response to English attacks on the legal rights of Catholic men, internal systems of patriarchy were reinforced within Gaelic culture and Catholic circles. Women in Gaelic society pre-colonization were not liberated by any means, as they were considered dependent on their nearest male relative or husband for their entire lives. Furthermore, during the colonization, law was manipulated by Gaelic Irish men to best serve themselves, as Catholics reacted to attacks on their masculinity from English law. According to Gaelic customary law, women were not able to inherit an equitable amount of land after the death of their husbands, nor were they able to inherit land from their fathers. Gaelic Irish men argued in

58 O’Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 254.

59 O’Dowd, *A History*, 251.

60 O’Dowd, *A History*, 251.

61 O’Dowd, *A History*, 253.

62 “Popery Laws or Penal Laws.”

63 “Popery Laws”.

chancery courts that Gaelic customary law had to be observed. In this avenue of the law, Irish families would be able to hold their land for more generations, and avoid losing land to another family, if the widow remarried.<sup>64</sup> O'Dowd argues that "Gaelic lords appeared determined to embed the male monopoly on land inheritance that prevailed in Gaelic society into the new order."<sup>65</sup> In this arena, it seemed English law would better serve women, as more and more claimed dower rights in English common law.<sup>66</sup> Many of these women were represented by men, usually their new husbands, which raises significant questions about whether the growing use of English law actually served women, or was applied by men instead of Gaelic customary law when it was more convenient. In the response to English emasculation of Irish men, popular culture focused more on controlling women.<sup>67</sup> Catholic clergy also drew from texts produced after the Council of Trent to promote a domestic image of women. Irish Catholic literature was also produced, which promoted domesticity and discouraged women from marrying more than once.<sup>68</sup> Radical feminist theory posits that in the colonial spaces, indigenous men adopt hyper-masculine identities and enforce harsher patriarchal practices.<sup>69</sup> Altogether, Irish men secured and more clearly enforced patriarchy during colonization, though it was on a more interpersonal and familial level.

Reformation added to the level of politicization of identity on an interpersonal level. It thus became more important to consider a potential partner's religion, as opposed to their ethnic background.<sup>70</sup> There were significant legal ramifications for Protestant women who married Catholic men. These women, upon their marriage, lost all right to their property and it was given to the next closest Protestant relative. To further undermine Catholic men under common law, Protestant wives were able to leave their husbands without securing a divorce. Daughters of Catholic men who converted to Protestantism were also able to claim maintenance in chancery court. All of these factors served to make conspirators out of women, though sometimes involuntarily, in the fight for control of land in Ireland during the era of plantation. England seemed to have won this fight, as by 1691 Protestants in Ireland possessed over eighty percent of the land.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Poor Clare Nuns: A case study in religiopolitical effects and resistance**

While sources detailing the reactions of women to these religiopolitical changes are few, we can look at the existence and activities of female monastic orders, especially after the dissolution and criminalization of them by Henry VIII, as evidence of female participation in the politicization of religious identity.

64 O'Dowd, "Women and the Irish Chancery Court," 485–86.

65 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 22.

66 O'Dowd, "Women and the Irish Chancery Court," 486.

67 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 256.

68 O'Dowd, *A History*, 258.

69 Spencer-Wood, "Feminist Theorizing of Patriarchal Colonialism," 488.

70 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500–1800*, 16.

71 Darcy, "Stories of Trauma," 205.

One of the aspects of both the folk and Roman versions of Catholicism in Ireland was the existence of female monastic orders. While they almost surely existed before, records of female monastic communities become clearly observed around 1200, existing in this clarity until the reforms brought by Henry VIII after the reconquest.<sup>72</sup> As ordered for all Europe by the Pope, Boniface VIII, in 1298, one of the largest facets of life for women religious in Ireland was the principle of enclosure, or cloistering. This meant that nuns were not supposed to leave the boundaries of their convent and were to separate from all secular factors of their lives: family, community, and laywork.<sup>73</sup> It is not fully clear how seriously this order was taken, as it had to be reordered to different female religious communities in Ireland through to the sixteenth century, potentially another symptom of the uniqueness of Irish Catholicism.<sup>74</sup>

To get a more micro view of patriarchal colonization in motion, outside of marriage and inheritance law but within the idea of religious political identification, one can specifically look at the Catholic Order of St. Clare. This community of women faced, weathered, and defied the storm of religious and political changes in Ireland during the seventeenth century. The order was founded in Ireland in 1625, as recorded by Mother Mary Bonaventure Browne, the third abbess of the Poor Clares in Galway, in her memoir, *Recollections of an Irish Poor Clare in the Seventeenth Century*. The order started with five sisters who were trained by the English Poor Clares in Gravesline and decided to bring the Order to Ireland.<sup>75</sup> Browne wrote her *Recollections* before the Williamite war of 1691, as it was recorded that her belongings were brought back to Ireland and destroyed at that time.<sup>76</sup> Their first convent was in Dublin, but they were only there for two years before being exiled from the city. As Browne writes,

The Deputy asked the Abbess how they dared to set up their grilles and settle themselves in cloister in the presence of the State. . . . She moved all those present to compassion. And although at the beginning he had commanded her and her Sisters to leave the country altogether, he was afterwards satisfied to banish them merely from the city.<sup>77</sup>

From there the sisters, including five novices, established a remote convent in a place they called Bethlehem, near Lake Lough Ree.<sup>78</sup> In the following years the order grew and spread to another town, Drogheda.<sup>79</sup> Their spread was influenced by their move to the countryside, but there were downfalls to their newfound isolation.

While the Poor Clares at this point had suffered persecution, they had

72 Hall, "Religious Women and Lay Communities," 15.

73 Hall, 17–18.

74 Hall, 17–23.

75 Browne, *Recollections of an Irish Poor Clare*, 1.

76 Browne, "Foreword."

77 Browne, 3.

78 Browne, 3–4.

79 Browne, 5.

never experienced outright violence, but this relative safety soon turned. Around 1641–42 the Poor Clares in Bethlehem found out that a group of Protestant settlers were coming to destroy the convent.<sup>80</sup> They asked officials in Galway if they could establish a convent in the city and move there to avoid violence.<sup>81</sup> This plan of action was approved, and the sisters moved quickly to leave Bethlehem. Soon after, a crowd descended on and destroyed the Bethlehem convent.<sup>82</sup> Browne records the aftermath of this, writing that, as revenge, “Not only armed men set out avenging the wicked deed, but also even workers and herdsmen with their clubs and spades. A cowherd would slash a trooper across the back with a cudgel and knock him off his horse, leaving him for dead.”<sup>83</sup> While Browne attributes this solely as revenge for the destroyed convent, it is notable that she marks the year as 1642, about eight months into the Ulster rising, making this potentially just part of the general violence of the moment, especially of Catholics against Protestants.

Once residing in Galway, though, the Poor Clares had to fight for a place to permanently reside, staying with Catholic families for some time before being given a space on Nun’s Island in 1649 (where the current order of Poor Clares in Ireland still live).<sup>84</sup> When the Cromwellian Parliamentary forces started sweeping through Ireland, many of the Poor Clares fled to Galway or other nearby cities so they would not be so vulnerable on their own in village convents.<sup>85</sup> Galway was the last holdout against the forces, but they did eventually break to Cromwell in 1652.<sup>86</sup> In 1653, the Poor Clares largely fled to Spain, with many of the original members passing away while in exile.<sup>87</sup> Sometime between 1670 and 1691, the Poor Clares that were exiled in Spain returned to Galway, though their influence was greatly diminished.<sup>88</sup>

The lives of the Poor Clares in the seventeenth century were filled with resistance to colonizing forces. One of the most notable acts of resistance from the Poor Clares was their patronage of Irish-language translated religious texts. The Poor Clares, the original five having brought English language copies of the *Rule of St. Clare* with them from their training in Gravesline, had it translated into Irish Gaelic in 1636.<sup>89</sup> The act of creating works in the Irish language at this time was a radical act of political resistance. Catholicism was increasingly becoming politicized in relation to anti-English sentiment. One of the responses to this connection was the religiopolitical action of translation of religious texts.<sup>90</sup> This work was also in response to earlier English crown attempts to convert

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80 Browne, 5–6.

81 Browne, 6–7.

82 Browne, 7.

83 Browne, 9.

84 Browne, “Foreword”, 9.

85 Browne, 11.

86 Browne, 11.

87 Browne, 11–17.

88 Browne, “Foreword.”

89 Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language*, 65.

90 Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language*, 66.

Irish people to Protestantism using Irish-language texts.<sup>91</sup> This also fell within an emerging culture of female writing. As Coolahan writes:

Their religious vocation places the Poor Clares' production of texts in a broader European, and gendered, context. Contemporary women religious directed their attention to the vernacular translation of foundational texts, the composition of their lives, obituaries, and chronicles.<sup>92</sup>

At this time much of the writing done by women was very need driven, in tasks such as life writing and depositional evidence from the various risings. While ultimately these texts were translated by commissioned male scholars, the whole drive for these projects of the *Rule of St. Clare* and other related religious documents came from the Poor Clares.<sup>93</sup> In writing her *Recollections*, Mary Bonaventure Browne contributed to a distinctly feminine sphere.

By continuing the tradition of writing in Irish Gaelic, she further took on a particularly religiopolitical voice. Starting in 1540, the Crown dissolved monastic orders in Ireland.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, the founding of the Poor Clares' order more than eighty years after this dissolution was in and of itself also a religiopolitical act on behalf of the sisters. Browne draws this connection herself, writing that:

in the life of our holy mother St. Clare . . . the Moors set about destroying the gates of her monastery and sealing its walls. . . . When King Henry VIII of England fell away from the Catholic faith and dissolved all monasteries and sacred places in his kingdom, he did the same with all its convents.<sup>95</sup>

Browne identifies the Poor Clares and herself with the miracle of St. Clare, believing that prayer would drive away not only those who wished to end their religion but also the larger political force inhabiting the land. Even when their convent was destroyed and when exiled from cities, or even the country itself, the Poor Clares refused to disband and instead continued to follow vocation in defiance of Protestant colonization.

### **Women in reinforcement, repercussions, and resistance**

Of course, Irish women religious were not the only group of women to take active roles within the various political machinations of the Irish colonization. As members of the colonizing settler group, New English women played significant roles in enforcing the colonial superiority of Protestantism and English law. Preserved official writing or life writing of Irish women is extremely

91 Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language*, 67.

92 Coolahan, *Women, Writing, and Language*, 100.

93 Coolahan, "Irish Nuns' Writing," 63–101.

94 Hall, "Religious Women and Lay Communities," 27.

95 Browne, *Recollections*, 1.

difficult to find, but there is significant evidence of religiopolitical tensions exhibited by Protestant English gentry. It can be difficult to always ascertain colonial structures in the life writing of New English women, but that is at least due in part to the effectiveness of the displacement of Irish people. As Julie Eckerle points out, in various New English women's writing, they emphasized the peaceful tranquility of Ireland and delighted in their kind English neighbors. Eckerle discusses multiple women, including Susan Montgomery, Alice Thornton, and Lady Ann Fanshawe, who all wrote about their ability to engage in English society in Ireland, from architecture to community to education.<sup>96</sup> Eckerle points out that while Montgomery and Fanshawe simply discussed the colonial benefits of their experience, Thornton explicitly made the connection by mentioning "the due ordering of that Barbarous People & their Civilizing them to our good Lawes & government,"<sup>97</sup> in the next few passages from Thornton's discussions of idealized life in Ireland.<sup>98</sup> In this way, New English women heavily participated in, and benefited from, colonization in Ireland, as the new tenants of plantation lands.

New English women also helped to reinforce the colonial systems, either as part of their role as subordinate pawns to marriage politics or through active participation in the othering of the Irish and the Old English. First, while New English women had no formal political or military influence, they were present in the systems of alliances that were built up within groups and between them. New English families, seeing Irish people as inferior, dirty, and unworthy of partnership with English women and thus largely refusing to intermarry, nonetheless saw the benefits of political alliance with converted Protestant Old English families. The New English endeavored to weave themselves into older Irish power structures through relationships with the Old English, as a way to make the English hold on Ireland stronger. This kind of power solidification began during the Tudor reign in the early 1500s and continued throughout the occupation of Ireland. However, it would not have been as prominent, since lands were seized by the New English and traditional titles were vacated by Old English lords fleeing to the European continent.<sup>99</sup>

New English women also participated in colonization, given the role of women in the English household, as they were given the task of raising the next generation with English culture and morals.<sup>100</sup> It is evident that New English children's education kept them firmly in English social networks.<sup>101</sup> Education was important in the religious sphere, and landed New English children were taught by private tutors and their parents as a way to reinforce Protestant teaching. In comparison, many landed Irish and Old English children were educated at convents or sent to the continent for education, as a way of accomplishing the

96 Eckerle, "Women Representing Ireland," 3.

97 Alice Thornton, *My first booke of my life* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 2014), 18, as cited in Eckerle, "Women Representing Ireland," 3.

98 Eckerle, "Women Representing Ireland," 3.

99 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 9-14.

100 O'Dowd, *A History*, 251.

101 O'Dowd, *A History*, 208.



same goal of religious retention.<sup>102</sup> After their education, sometimes even taking place in the home of their future in-laws, was when a girl would be betrothed.<sup>103</sup> Even though at times involuntarily, through relocation, marriage, or education of the next generation, New English women perpetuated and secured colonization in Ireland.

As further reinforcement of colonization, New English women worked during military conflicts in the limited roles they could. New English women were not soldiers but were able to carry messages and munitions in places where they were less suspicious than male counterparts.<sup>104</sup> Protestant women within the gentry also held down several castles during the Ulster rising. Some held out for months of siege, while others commissioned the training and deployment of soldiers to fight the Irish.<sup>105</sup> Some of these women did make agreements with rebellious forces to give up the castles to be able to leave safely, but the number of those who chose to at least fight before that point is noteworthy. This will to defend colonial holdings shows a significant level of personal investment by New English women in gaining the control of Ireland.

Unfortunately, even despite their potential lack of choice in the process of colonization, outside of military conflict, New English women were equally as brutalized as in moments of violent Irish resistance. A large pool of evidence of this comes from the depositions of those who survived the 1641 rising. Many New English women were attacked by the mobs during the uprising. Often, mobs would go through towns and attack any Protestant person they found. Women experienced a sexual dimension to the violence as they were forcefully stripped and abused.<sup>106</sup> O'Dowd notes that rape was almost certainly a factor, despite the relatively little written evidence. In one account of rape of a servant woman, it is recorded that those around her "Thought she would never be well nor in her right mind again the fact was so foul and grievous unto her."<sup>107</sup> Given this level of shame associated with being assaulted, it is therefore likely that most cases were not reported, especially by those in higher social classes.<sup>108</sup> After these acts of violence, women were also victimized by those who saw female refugees and their children as a nuisance. They were told to go home to Scotland or England. In some instances these women were cared for when they returned, but there is evidence that they, especially those coming into urban centers, primarily London, became permanent beggars or were permanently financially affected by the displacement.<sup>109</sup> All of these actions taken against New English women can be seen as a retaliation, if not a disproportionate one, for the role they played in Irish colonization.

On the other side of the conflicts of the seventeenth century, Irish

102 O'Dowd, *A History*, 208–9.

103 Eckerle, "Elite English Girlhood in Early Modern Ireland," 159–63.

104 O'Dowd, "Women and War in Ireland," 94.

105 O'Dowd, "Women and War," 92–93.

106 O'Dowd, "Women and War in Ireland," 98.

107 Trinity College Dublin MS 830, f. 172 as cited in O'Dowd, "Women and War," 101.

108 O'Dowd, "Women and War," 101.

109 O'Dowd, "Women and War," 98–100.

women, as well, were especially involved, serving roles they would normally not have had access to. The turmoil of the popular uprising gave women a unique opportunity to lead. For instance, during the rising, women were recorded to have led mobs. Groups of women were also recorded to have acted independently, harming Protestants.<sup>110</sup> These female Irish instigators also did not discriminate the gender of their victims, though it can be assumed there would not have been the sexually violent actions as there would have been in male-on-female violence. Women also fought during the conflict against Cromwell and Parliamentary forces.<sup>111</sup> These women were often called “she-soldiers” and gained a special notoriety amongst Protestant forces. It is unclear how prevalent these “she-soldiers” were but there is enough to say that these women existed and were more than just mythical imaginations of Protestant soldiers.<sup>112</sup> They were said to carry long knives “being about halfe a yard in length, with a hook and point at the end made not only to stab, but to teare the flesh from the very bones.”<sup>113</sup> These moments of violence perpetrated by women speaks to a desire amongst Irish women to defend Ireland and its interests. They show that the conflicts and political machinations of the early modern period in Ireland were not just affecting or affected by men, but also women.

### Colonization as an act of patriarchy

What is noteworthy beyond the minutiae of individual action or the records of conflicts is the pervasiveness of patriarchy throughout the colonization of Ireland on a conceptual level. Both of the societies, the English and Irish, coming into contact and conflict in this area of space and time were patriarchal. In that way it is difficult to definitively say to what level individual women in Ireland were affected by heightened patriarchy during the colonization period. What can be said for certain is that the act of colonization in Ireland was pervaded with misogyny and patriarchy.

Firstly, the conceptualization by the English of Ireland as effeminate and weak leads to an understanding of colonization as an act of harmful masculine domination. Ireland itself had been characterized and somewhat mythologized as a feminine figure in early Irish literature.<sup>114</sup> Ireland as a feminine also pervaded colonial writing from English authors.<sup>115</sup> On the English side of the metaphor, however, was also messaging about the conjunction of Ireland as a woman that needed to be dominated. This language was so pervasive in English colonial writing that even New English women also used this kind of language in their interpersonal letter writing.<sup>116</sup> Several metaphors characterize this idea of Ireland as feminine. First, there is the idea of Ireland as a woman in need of fertilization

110 O’Dowd, “Women and War,” 95–98.

111 O’Dowd, “Women and War,” 94–95.

112 O’Dowd, “Women and War,” 94–95.

113 A. Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel*, as cited in O’Dowd, “Women and War,” 95.

114 O’Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 252.

115 Nic Eoin, “Sovereignty and Politics,” 273–76.

116 Eckerle, “Women Representing Ireland,” 4.

by English colonizers. This metaphor is packed with penetrative imagery and portrays Ireland as a land needing to be transgressed upon. It also comes from the late sixteenth to mid seventeenth century, meaning it was used during the more volatile moments of Irish colonization. Another metaphor in the colonial discourse was Ireland as a daughter of England, the father. This is a later image, from the eighteenth century, perhaps created during the more peaceful times. Ireland as a daughter still puts it in subordination but in a communicatively condescending way rather than a physically violent way.

Furthermore, the English used the perceived lack of women's rights in Irish society as a reason to colonize and civilize Ireland, though it is clear that this reasoning was more an excuse made in retrospect than a legitimate cause. Most of England's assumptions of women's oppression came from the discrepancies between the aforementioned English common law and Gaelic customary law surrounding women and property. The English used these differences in law to argue that Ireland needed to be colonized and brought under common law to protect Irish women. To their credit, many Irish women agreed that English common law was better for them, with even Gráinne O'Malley arguing as much to Elizabeth in her aforementioned petition. It is, however, the English's conflicting views on women in Ireland that showcase their lack of concern for any kind of societal change and highlight a more materialistic desire for colonization. As O'Dowd points out, "In Elizabethan literature, the Irish woman was portrayed as lustful, licentious, deceitful and lacking in personal and domestic hygiene. Consequently, she was unsuitable as a spouse for a civilized Englishman or as a mother to his offspring."<sup>117</sup> The English even went so far as to blame the failures of early plantations on the promiscuity of Irish women. Even Irish women who converted to Protestantism were suspected of only doing so for profit from Protestant men.<sup>118</sup> So in reality, English men did not care for Irish women, and therefore did not care to fight for their betterment in society. Therefore, English patriarchal colonization gave little care for women at best, and actively supported and propagated negative images of women, at worst.

## Conclusion

In 1983, Audre Lorde said in her monumental speech, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," that "As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression."<sup>119</sup> Lorde argues here that it is patriarchy which separates women into groups like "colonizer" and "colonized." She argues that, historically, the women in the "colonizer" group are still being oppressed by the men within their group but that, because they are a part of the group with power,

117 O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 251.

118 O'Dowd, *A History*, 251.

119 Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 26.

they aren't at the bottom either; they work to enforce the systems that keep them above other groups and other women. New English women weren't liberated by any means; they lived in an extremely patriarchal society which kept them dependent on male relatives. New English women in Ireland, though, were told through subliminal patriarchal messaging that they were more virtuous than Irish women. They were told there was a group below them. New English women, then, had a difference from Irish women that was used as cause for separation and suspicion to benefit colonization efforts.

Therefore, with Lorde's argument, it could be said that the separation experienced by the women in Ireland added to the vulnerability they felt in colonization. Without New English women's cooperation in colonization, it is easy to imagine that the reshaping of Ulster and Munster would not have been near as complete. Without this cooperation, too, perhaps New English women would not have been victimized during the 1641 rising, and thus the English fire of retaliate-and-reconquer would not have been sparked. And while it is ultimately unrealistic to suggest that it could have been any other way, it is important to understand women's active roles in the colonial and political machinations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ireland because of the alternatives. It is important to note the discord sewn between women in a patriarchal colonization. Without the division of women and participation of colonizer women, Irish colonization would not have been as successful as it was. Through this patriarchal system, too, these women, no matter the group they came from, also experienced religiopolitical violence. Despite these colonial systems, violent actions, and patriarchal conceptions imposed upon them, Irish women resisted, and despite the patriarchy imposed upon them and the violence they suffered, New English women helped to reinforce the systems that benefitted them.

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