MYTHIC CONTEXTS AND MARGINALIZED FIGURES: UNVEILING EILÉAN NÍ
CHUILLEANÁIN’S POETICS

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ABSTRACT

The following is a discussion of how Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetic strategies are revealed through her representations of myth. Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth as a platform to maintain her enigmatic persona and to convey personal experiences without explicitly disclosing them. She also uses myth to question gender roles in hegemonic narratives. Through close readings I examine how Ní Chuilleanáin depicts women as missing or silenced in traditional myth and also how she amalgamates male mythic characters and marginalized female figures to deconstruct gender binaries and offer the latter a more active role. I also discuss her use of the Mary Magdalene figure and nuns to portray an empowered female figure that functions both inside and outside of the patriarchal order. Lastly, I examine Ní Chuilleanáin alongside Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Medbh McGuckian to compare ways in which they all use myth to represent the female image, particularly in opposition to phallocentric metaphors for the female body.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Eavan Boland
(HI) In Her Own Image (1980)
(NF) Night Feed (1994)
(DV) Domestic Violence (2007)

Works by Medbh McGuckian
(HCC) The High Caul Cap (2013)

Works by Eiléan Ní Chuilleáin
(AM) Acts and Monuments (1972)
(SA) Site of Ambush (1975)
(MS) The Magdalene Sermon and Other Poems (1989)
(BS) The Brazen Serpent (1995)
(SF) The Sun-Fish (2010)

Works by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill
(PD) Pharaoh’s Daughter (1990)
(AC) The Astrakhan Cloak (1993)
(FMM) The Fifty Minute Mermaid (2007)
Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (1942- ) has emerged out of certain patriarchal traditions to become a predominant voice not only in women’s Irish poetry, but Irish poetry as a whole. She rejects Yeats’ authoritative tone in favor of a strategy more in line with Joyce. Like the latter, Ní Chuilleanáin creates images that function as limitless entrances into her oeuvre. Her enigmatic point of view is purposefully ambiguous and does not reveal her intentions. Instead, through her ambiguous perspective, Ní Chuilleanáin creates and upholds secrets. As a result, the reader has to work to make connections between her images, but is sometimes isolated by the poem’s inscrutability.

Examining Ní Chuilleanáin’s mythic representations serves as a platform to discuss her poetic strategy of using myth to negotiate secrets. Contemporary Irish poet Conor O’Callaghan offers a critical view of the topic of secrecy in Irish poetry, although not directly targeting Ní Chuilleanáin’s work. He writes: "In Irish poetry, we place too much value on tact, on secrecy and on suggestion above all else." Perhaps his aversion to secrecy can be attributed to a younger generation of poets who are more interested in exposing the past than keeping parts of it hidden. Regardless, O’Callaghan’s poetry is rooted in full disclosure; he even mocks the topic of secrecy in his collection Fiction, a book full of half-truths. For Ní Chuilleanáin, secrecy is integral to her poetics. Although I cannot argue that secrecy is integral to every woman poet’s strategy, for Ní Chuilleanáin, maintaining a partially veiled point of view is vital to her poems. Secrecy is central to Ní Chuilleanáin’s writing because her secrets disrupt patriarchal forms of representation. It is her secrets that allow for Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems to unfold, layer after layer, with
infinite meaning. Her enigmatic persona promotes a universality that allows her to simultaneously negotiate myth, personal experiences and collective political experiences.

In a 1994 interview with Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, Ní Chuílleanáin states: “I am afraid in one way I am still harking back over family secrets; I found that I wrote a number of poems about family secrets, the idea that I am constantly being asked to tell this story and I do not necessarily want to tell it” (67). This idea of concealing private memories permeates her work. Additionally, the aversion to telling a mainstream story in favor of a marginal one is also a main theme. Through her enigmatic voice, Ní Chuílleanáin pushes back against the need for public disclosure. In particular, her use of myth helps her discuss a personal history and react to a national history without fully revealing her own emotions. By using myth to represent the emotional impact behind a personal experience or to disguise a socio-political standpoint, Ní Chuílleanáin universalizes the moment. In doing this, she offers her readers the opportunity to interpret the moment however they deem fit, inviting them to create their own narrative out of the universalized one. Consequently, Ní Chuílleanáin links her own personal moments to universalized experiences without coming across as banal and confessional and also without asserting her opinions onto her readers. In using myth as a point of entry into her work, Ní Chuílleanáin is able to protect her secrets while simultaneously making her work universally accessible.

Ní Chuílleanáin uses myth to create a contemporary female image that connects to the past. She does this by creating associations between marginalized females and mythic males. In addition, she conveys females from a literary and historical past to represent
people who live both outside and inside history. It is out of that liminal space, between
myth and history, from which Ní Chuílleanáin’s figures emerge.

Ní Chuílleanáin presents figures that move inside and outside of patriarchal
representation because that is also her strategy as a poet. She has adopted some mythic
and literary traditions from her male predecessors, but also from her female
contemporaries. Ní Chuílleanáin’s work has evolved to depict female figures at the center
of her poems, arguably from the groundwork that Eavan Boland (1944- ) has laid both as
a contemporary Irish poet and feminist critic. In addition, similar to Medbh McGuckian
(1950- ), Ní Chuílleanáin uses an enigmatic, ambiguous persona to negotiate personal
trauma. Lastly, Ní Chuílleanáin’s work with myth and folklore parallels Nuala Ní
Dhòmhnaill’s (1952- ) strategies in that both poets use myth to depict hybridity,
transformation and a female subject in process.
CHAPTER ONE

NEGOTIATING VEILED SECRETS: EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN’S PRIVATIZATION OF MYTH

...meaning is made from the rags and threads of memory, fragile, fraying, and capable of being retied according to necessity. Necessity even seems too restrictive a word to describe a poetry that is allusive, mournful, playful, and cryptic, a practice returns over and over to sites of transformation, emerging, in Ní Chuilleanáin’s words, ‘from the shadows of expected masculine forms’. ¹

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry has often been criticized as enigmatic and thus impermeable. Her third person voice lends itself to a removed persona that can be viewed as detached or lacking a genuine connection with the subject of the poem, if there is a subject at all. In Ní Chuilleanáin’s first two volumes, *Acts and Monuments* (1972) and *Site of Ambush* (1975), her poems often have no clear subject, and instead ruminate on ambiguous places and landscapes. As her work develops, however, she becomes more attached to using marginal figures as subjects, specifically saints, nuns, and people living on the outskirts of society. In later volumes, Ní Chuilleanáin’s relationship to a specific subject focuses, yet throughout her oeuvre, she is keen to maintain a sense of secrecy and an aesthetic distance. It is her cryptic persona and desire for secrecy that most interests me.

In the above epigraph, Nicholas Allen refers to “sites of transformation” that emerge within Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry. It is out of these sites that Ní Chuilleanáin creates an aesthetic distance, or gap between poet and reader. In this chapter, I argue that Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth as a vehicle to both create and conceal this gap. Through her

oblique poetic voice, she disguises personal opinions and experiences behind her mythic references. She elides myth, parable, history, religion and folklore, to create a mode of representation that maintains a veil between personal and public experiences. Ní Chuilleanáin uses these mythic sites of transformation to negotiate the political landscape of both her own life experiences and collective, public experiences. In an interview with Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Ní Chuilleanáin states, “I have often found that what I have written always seems to be gathered back again into mythology, so to speak, and yet I almost always start from a moral or political position. I think that does expose the whole nature of language. At a certain point language takes over” (77).

Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth as a form of translation. She uses mythic figures not only to maintain her own privacy and oblique point of view, but also to take private moments and move them through a public lens. She begins with culturally-accepted myths and reveals how certain bodies (mostly women) have been neglected from or silenced within these traditional narratives. As a result, her use of myth not only creates female-centered spaces, but also places females at the center of certain stories, forcing the reader to question previously conceived notions about representation. It is in doing this that Ní Chuilleanáin creates her own discourse that emerges “from the shadows of expected masculine forms.”

Dillon Johnston proposes that Ní Chuilleanáin maintains secrecy to uphold both personal and linguistic intimacy. He writes,

Another justification for secretiveness, not peculiar to Irish poetry, arises in an age when privacy becomes a constantly invaded and shrinking

2 See epigraph.
domain and the language of love and intimacy becomes commercialized and brutalized. Consequently, in the poetry of Ní Chuilleanáin and Muldoon, especially, secrets may be a way of preserving, or even renewing, language’s private origins and functions (xvii).

As an extension of Johnston’s argument, I propose that Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth to maintain secrecy and this becomes vital to her poetic strategies. As a result of her need for secrecy, Ní Chuilleanáin is able to negotiate between personal and public narratives. Clair Wills argues that this negotiation is an integral part of contemporary poetry by women. She writes,

…the link between the political and aesthetic representation hinges on the representativeness of the poetic narrative—the fact that what is being represented is not merely of significance to one individual, but forms a link between a personal and a public or national narrative. My use of the term ‘representativeness’ to apply to poetry here then denotes the process whereby a poem constitutes a political demand, as it stands in for the demands of a marginalized community, in this case women (47).

Johnston and Wills perspectives on secrecy and the privatization of female experience offer a foundation for an analysis of Ní Chuilleanáin’s writing. I will now turn to a Kristevan theoretical lens to help elucidate Ní Chuilleanáin’s enigmatic poetics.
Reading Ní Chuilleanáin’s Mythic Images through a Kristevan Lens

For the purpose of this chapter, I will use Julia Kristeva’s (1941- ) feminist theory to discuss Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetics as a distinct deviation from traditional patriarchal discourse. Discussing Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems through a Kristevan lens, specifically with regards to Kristeva’s terms semiotic and symbolic, is helpful to understanding my proposal of reading through mythic images. In her book, Revolution in Poetic Language, Kristeva argues against “the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified” (21), instead offering that there is a specific, tense, relationship between the two. It is the breakdown of this relationship, an expression of tension between the semiotic and symbolic modes of discourse, which proves useful in understanding Ní Chuilleanáin’s use of mythic images.

Kristeva criticizes the patriarchal form of discourse because it does not accurately represent the intricacies of human drives (27). Through her language of images, Ní Chuilleanáin rejects hegemonic representation because it is restrictive, and instead creates a network of images which simultaneously represents multiple narratives and human experiences. At the heart of her work, Ní Chuilleanáin writes about human existence; however she does it so cryptically as not to pin down exactly what that experience is. Thus, she offers symbols as guideposts for the reader to connect the images and subsequently the bodies within her narratives. As a result, meaning does not stem from the text directly, but rather obliquely via the web of images.

According to McAffe’s interpretation of Kristeva, “The semiotic is the extra-verbal way in which bodily energy and affects make their way into language. The semiotic includes both the subject’s drives and articulations” (17) A binary of the semiotic, “The symbolic is a mode of signifying in which speaking beings attempt to express meaning with as little ambiguity as possible” (17).
Ní Chuilleanáin speaks through images to offer another avenue for meaning-making, alternative to hegemonic discourse. Kristeva writes about the challenge that poetry brings to language, stating “…poetry becomes an explicit confrontation between jouissance\(^4\) and the thetic\(^5\), that is, a permanent struggle to show the facilitation of drives within the linguistic order itself…poetic language reminds us of its eternal function: to introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it” (81). Essentially Kristeva argues that words lack the capability to convey all the poet’s unconscious desires/objectives/intentions. Because the poet needs to use words to convey his/her ideas, he/she is left to confront the failure of words to effectively represent the meaning behind them. Even then, there is no accurate representation of meaning because the tools to describe meaning, words, fail. It is the negotiation between the semiotic and symbolic realms of representation that fuel this struggle. In examining Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry with a Kristevan lens, it becomes clear that Ní Chuilleanáin creates a unique method of expression through an interconnected web of mythic images privatize her own personal experiences and opinions.

As part of her unique poetics Ní Chuilleanáin constructs a gap between image and meaning. She intentionally leaves this gap between the signifier and the signified to offer limitless interpretation. She does this by conveying meaning through her reoccurring images and not necessarily through a linear interpretation of her text. As a result, her poems are best read in succession and in conversation with each other, not isolated and on an individual basis. This is not to say that Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems can only be read

\(^4\) jouissance is a French word that Kristeva adopted to mean psychic and erotic pleasure (McAffee, 16).

\(^5\) Thetic refers to the thetic break that occurs when the subject realizes that he/she is different than other objects. Kristeva argues that occurrence is the springboard for signification and subjectivity (McAffee, 21).
through images, but rather I propose that reading through images is a productive tool in which to penetrate her often impenetrable, cryptic texts. One of the most prominent imagistic motifs to which Ní Chuíleáin ascribes, is mythic figures and references. Her use of myth becomes a platform for endless interpretation because it creates multiple representations that function simultaneously. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh writes, "Like words and images, these tales are always open to renewal and new interpretations" (Female Figure, 62). Ní Chuíleáin’s reoccurring mythic images function as non-verbal representations of unconscious drives. When I say non-verbal, I mean not symbolic representations. There is no singular concrete fear or desire, but rather a myriad of drives including the acknowledgment that some desires cannot be expressed, but simply exist as an image. What makes Ní Chuíleáin’s writing representative of a semiotic form of discourse is that her poetry can be read through the symbols, both in conjunction with and apart from the textual, symbolic discourse. As a result, for Ní Chuíleáin, myth becomes a palimpsest that allows her narratives to function on multiple levels—the personal and the political, the private and national—both within patriarchal discourse and outside of it.

Understanding Ní Chuíleáin’s Enigmatic Language

To enter Ní Chuíleáin’s often inscrutable poetry, I turn to Eamon Grennan's essay, “Real Things: The Work of Eiléan Ní Chuíleáin.” While on the surface it may appear that Grennan criticizes Ní Chuíleáin’s work, upon closer examination, it is clear that he has great reverence for it. However, Grennan does expose the challenges that are unavoidable when attempting to interpret Ní Chuíleáin's work. He writes, "...a reader simply has to hang on to what's given, and enter (with a small act of faith) the
moment of mystery and exhilaration” (287). On the surface, Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems appear straightforward. Her form and technique are not highly experimental, her “strong, straightforward syntax” (284) is deceptively simple; but rather, I argue that it is her removed persona that sets her apart from other contemporary Irish poets. Ní Chuilleanáin rejects the need to fully disclose her opinions and, sometimes, even the point of the poem. As a result, the reader is often left wondering what he/she just read. Grennan writes, "It is often hard to say what a poem ‘means’. The world she creates in a poem has an enigmatic centre: one sees the facts clearly enough, but the purpose and point of these clearly realised facts aren't easy to pin down" (283). As a result, Ní Chuilleanáin’s persona becomes both frustrating and exciting to the reader because, although cryptic, it offers the reader a space to craft his/her own narrative. It is out of Ní Chuilleanáin’s refusal “to pin down” narratives or even representation, that her use of myth as a mode of representation emerges. Ní Chuilleanáin puts a great deal of trust in the reader; she gives the reader the task of deducing how her work functions on multi-levels. With regards to myth, the reader has the task of understanding the figures referenced, understanding the political and social argument behind the mythic characters and acknowledging any related present or past political analogue to the situation. Then, Ní Chuilleanáin adds a third layer, one that is nearly impossible to ascertain without reading interviews and bibliographic information: her personal narrative and/or personal opinion of the situation.

Myth is an explanation of a reality; however not one single reality, thus it can serve to represent several universal truths simultaneously. Mircea Eliade writes, "Myth is an extremely complex cultural reality, which can be approached and interpreted from various and complementary viewpoints” (5). It is for this
reason that Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth because it allows for a myriad of interpretations. Thus, what is true for her can also be true for her readers. Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth to negotiate a connection between the personal and impersonal, which for Ní Chuilleanáin is often linked to the political. She confesses, "I would never write a poem without, at some level, relating it to my own ideas about truth and right" (Nordin, 76). As a result, Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth as a buffer between her personal history and the public, political history of Ireland and the world. To achieve this, she navigates the waters between myth and reality, seldom offering a distinction.

To understand Ní Chuilleanáin's fascination with myth and also her choice to use it as a tool to negotiate representation, one must return to her academic roots. At The University of Oxford, Ní Chuilleanáin studied 16th and 17th century history and literature. Her need to maintain an aesthetic distance between poet and reader is influenced by her Renaissance studies, particularly her fondness for translation work. She writes,

For me as a reader, the chasm between cultures is accompanied by the chasm between languages--that second one a chasm indeed, but one it is essential to negotiate. That gap and that bridge are everywhere in the culture of the sixteenth century, a time when translations and etymologies were flagrant and revolutionary tools for Erasmus and Luther, and the seventeenth, when they became witty enchantments for Lancelot Andrewes and John Donne (Acts, 2).

Not only is Ní Chuilleanáin interested in the language gap that emerges out of translation, but also her affinity for cultural differences and traditions is evident throughout her work.
For example, in “A Midwinter Prayer” she weaves together the stories of a medieval knight; Fionn, a hero from Irish folklore; and Jesus Christ. She does so unassumingly, not perpetuating her own beliefs unto the traditional narratives, but rather negotiating the “chasm between cultures.” Images such as windows, islands, half-open doors and veils pop up all over Ní Chuilleanáin’s work as the visual manifestations of her need to create liminal spaces within her poems. She intentionally creates this gap in her poetry because it is how she separates the private and public spheres. It is out of this gap that Ní Chuilleanáin creates a new way of discussing religion, myth and folklore.

**Using Myth to Negotiate Trauma**

One of the fundamental elements of Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetics is her desire for secrecy. She keeps her personal life hidden within her poetry, and she directly acknowledges this. For example, “A Pastoral Life” is about the death of Ní Chuilleanáin’s best friend, Harden Rogers, yet there is no dedication or indication that it is. In a 1994 interview with Haberstroh she states, “There is a poem in memory of her, but I do not know if it would be clear to anybody else either that it is or, if it is, why it is” (68). Angela Bourke argues that folklore helps us to deal with the "betwixt and between—the liminal, the marginal, and the ambiguous, whether in time, the landscape, or in social relations " As a result, Burke proposes that folklore becomes an important cognitive tool. It is through Ní Chuilleanáin’s use of myth that she is able to negotiate her deeply personal, and often traumatic, experiences while remaining partially hidden. This guarded secrecy is clearly demonstrated in “Fireman’s Lift” (*BS*):

Their heads bowed to reflect on her

Fair face and hair so like their own
As she passed through their hands. We saw them

Lifting her, the pillars of their arms

(Her face a capital leaning into an arch)

As the muscles clung and shifted

For a final purchase together

Under her weight as she came to the edge of the cloud.

Ní Chuilleanáin admits that the poem is not only about her visit to Parma Cathedral with her brother and mother to see Correggio’s dome, but also about the nurses who took care of her dying mother. In this poem, it is clear that Ní Chuilleanáin uses the mythic moment, the Assumption of Mary, as a means to discuss her own mother’s passing. She uses religious diction “celestial choirs” and “angelic arms” to transform the domestic atmosphere of her mother’s nursing home. In addition, she uses the awe-inspiring moment of her first viewing of the dome to more accurately convey the reverence she has for those who nursed her mother. Not only does the poet convey her respect for the caregivers, but also she conveys the gentleness with which they provided for her mother. She refers to their “bowed heads” pouring over her mother’s immobile body, as if they were lowered in an act of prayer. Eliade argues, "myth narrates a sacred history" (5). For Ní Chuilleanáin this appears true, as she uses this mythic moment to process her own history, allowing the sacred moment in the well-known myth to inform and convey her personal experience.

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6 The Assumption of the Virgin is a fresco by Renaissance painter Antonio da Correggio. It is located on the domed ceiling of the Cathedral of Parma in Italy. See Figure 1.
In an interview with Nordin, Ní Chuilleanáin states that, "...I am certainly drawn to the question of how one describes suffering and loss, and the answer is often that it is impossible, that one is talking about the unspeakable (Nordin, 75)" For Ní Chuilleanáin, myth is a way to describe the unspeakable. Solely using words to represent a traumatic or transcendental moment does not give the experience justice. Thus, using mythic characters allows the poet an aesthetic distance from the actual event. The mythic character becomes a coded representation of a non-fictional person or event and thus a platform to negotiate those feelings that are unspeakable. For Ní Chuilleanáin, myth becomes a communicative tool that is more productive than language alone.

Coping with and interpreting history both on the micro (family) and macro (mythical, religious, sociopolitical) scale is a theme throughout Ní Chuilleanáin's work. For Ní Chuilleanáin, myth becomes a means for negotiating trauma. As a result, ethical questions revolving around representation emerge. Nordin asks if Ní Chuilleanáin sees poetry as “a kind of testimony”; she responds with a meditation on pictures that she saw as a result of “atrocities in Yugoslavia”:

I remember…seeing terrible pictures of young people lying in hospital morgues and their parents grieving over them, and feeling simultaneously ‘Good Lord, I should not be seeing this’. It is a terrible intrusion that the photographer should be there, and at the same time this must be recorded in its reality. That is the paradox one has to wrestle with…So this idea of whether testimony is a public duty is important, and whether you are falsifying your own experiences if you cut out your own emotions (82).
Ní Chuilleanáin needs secrecy and aesthetic distance. She emphasizes the need for "one's own distance and difference from any comprehension of even the most passionately contemplated past" (Acts, 3). She reveals a certain level of anxiety regarding a full disclosure of any kind, especially personal experience: "Even if it is one's own past, even if it is a past that has been formally handed to one in trust...it must not become too domestically familiar" (3). She needs a buffer so that she can discuss intensely personal subjects from a safe distance. On discussing poems about her sister Máire's death, Ní Chuilleanáin writes: "because they were things I couldn't say directly because of other survivors. And perhaps because I feel strongly and can't write directly. The same is true of the poems about Niall" (Williams, 38).

Angela Bourke states that myth represents "situations that are beyond human control" (Haberstroh, 61). Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth to recognize past events that were beyond one’s control such as war, famine, religious miracles and large scale oppression, but also to help both the poet and reader to process and experience personal events. Ní Chuilleanáin also uses myth to connect the past to the present and the physical to the spiritual world (65). By connecting the physical to the spiritual, she creates an endless opportunity for meaning-making. By using myth, she connects real life experiences to mythic ones. As a result, her poems become more universal, applicable to a myriad of experiences because they act as a vehicle to discuss that which can never accurately be represented: human experience. Ní Chuilleanáin's mythic inclusions act as an allegory for all human experience, first and foremost, her own. Myth becomes the concrete representation of abstract thought.

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7 Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, “Acts and monuments of an uncollected nation: The Cailleach writes about the Renaissance”. 

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I argue that Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth (a concrete representation, or at least, arguably, a well-known, socially accepted narrative) to convey the nuances of human opinions and emotions. Using myth to depict human experiences is often problematic due to the complex nature of representation. Ní Chuilleanáin directly admits this, purposefully leaving her reader with lingering questions to acknowledge that she does not have the answers. Grennan says that architecture appears in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry as, "a solid outward sign of some inward truth" (285); however the same statement can be made for how myth functions in her work. As discussed earlier, myth represents multiple realities. Ní Chuilleanáin's mythic accounts function as a platform for representation and an impetus to discuss underlying social, political and personal issues. Grennan writes, "She keeps alive, by living through in gleaming splinters of her own kind of narrative a whole zone of our collective experience..." (294) Thus, Ní Chuilleanáin creates a delicate balance of her personal experiences with the collective national religious, mythic, folkloric and political experiences.

In a 2007 interview with Ní Chuilleanáin, Patricia Boyle Haberstroh gets at the core of Ní Chuilleanáin’s enigmatic persona:

PBH: In many of your poems and images, once you get to the centre or the core, there is still a kind of mystery.

ENC: Oh yes, I think the centre is never quite there. Or, if I know what is at the centre, I might well choose not to say it because I don’t think that is worth the point.

PBH: The journey or the search is?
This exchange is indicative of Ní Chuilleanáin’s cryptic mode of story-telling, as she never provides the reader with quite enough information. Instead, she uses images to tell the story, leaving many gaps between interconnected bodies and stories. These gaps can only attempt to be fleshed out when the reader connects the images to look at a larger picture. Even then, there is still a great deal of work on part of the reader to understand exactly how the story unfolds. Although reading Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry through images is a way to enter the text, it does not provide all of the answers.

Myth functions intertextually throughout all of her works to create an interconnected system of images that negotiates the liminal space between poet and reader. This web of images (saints, political heroes, martyrs, nuns and figures from Greek, Roman and Irish mythology) not only creates solidarity between the individual bodies, but also helps to elucidate Ní Chuilleanáin’s seemingly enigmatic narratives to the reader. In using an interconnected system of recurring images to create meaning, Ní Chuilleanáin disrupts the normative meaning-making process. For example, in the companion poems, the poet purposefully makes the message inscrutable, forcing the reader to question exactly what is happening. For example, in “The Water Journey”, the reader has no clue as to who the “I” is: “I sent the girl to the well” (although Ní Chuilleanáin equates the “I” to a witch and affirms a

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8 While discussing “The Water Journey” in an interview with Williams, Ní Chuilleanáin states, “The companion piece, now called ‘Passing Over in Silence’ is about the girl and what she saw” (43).
connection with her), or why the girl is tasked with getting water. The reader can only
guess as to why this is such a traumatic experience for the girl:

Her eyes fixed on the level of water
Cushioned in her palms, wavering
Like the circles of grain in wood.

There is something ominous about “The Water Journey,” most exemplified in its
enigmatic last two lines: “She would hardly make it as far/As the well at the world’s end.”
It dances around a larger lesson or warning; however the poet gives no indication as to
what that may be.

“Passing Over in Silence” is a response to the previous poem: the speaker is the
girl from “The Water Journey” (43). Kevin Ray writes, “The threshold is a place of
secrecy, and the secret a threshold in itself, dividing the private from the public” (125).
He goes on argue that what the girl sees in “Passing Over in Silence” “reveals what is
suppressed in ‘The Water Journey,’ what the girl witnessed, out of sight of the woman in
the doorway of the house. It is a poem of secrecy, what the girl saw but could not
describe” (125). We can ascertain that the girl witnessed something unspeakable, because
Ní Chuilleannáin does not allow her to fully disclose to the reader what she saw:

She never told what she saw in the wood;
There were no words for the stench,
The floated offal, the burnt patches.
She kept the secret of the woman lying

9 She states, “In ‘The Water Journey’ it is perhaps that I wanted to identify with the witch, the woman with
power” (Williams, 43).
In the darkness breathing hard,
A hooked foot holding her down.
She held her peace about the man who waited
Beside the lettered slab. He sang:

*I went into the alehouse and called for a drink,*

*The girl behind the bar could not speak for tears,*

*The drops of beer flowed down the sides of the glass;*

*She wept to think of the pierced head,*

*The tears our Savior shed.*

Perhaps the first stanza depicts the girl witnessing an assault. However, in the second stanza, Ní Chuilleanáin combines this traumatic experience with the unspeakable, unexplainable experience of the crucifixion. She links the witness to the assault with the witness of the crucifixion to highlight the trauma of both scenes. As a result, Ní Chuilleanáin uses the girl imagining the mythic experience of the crucifixion to help convey the trauma felt by the assault witness. Ray argues that, “There were no words: a phrase that serves, unrepeated, yet evoked, as a refrain in the poem, a metonymy, I would argue for the poet’s work as whole” (125). Thus, in creating these unspeakable moments, Ní Chuilleanáin admits that some narratives are not meant to be fully disclosed but instead should remain a private experience for those who witness the trauma.

In this poem, Ní Chuilleanáin alludes directly to her need for secrecy, having a character mirror her own desire to remain opaque. Ní Chuilleanáin conveys the girl’s need to testify to a traumatic incident, but her inability to fully disclose it, much like the
speaker in “Fireman’s Lift”. To convey Ní Chuilleanáin’s representation of unspeakable moments, let me return to Kristeva. The inability to fully represent is analogous to Kristeva’s “revolution in poetic language,”\textsuperscript{10} which according to McAffee, “‘shatter’[s] the way we think that texts are meaningful. Meaning is not made just denotatively, with words denoting thoughts or things. Meaning is made in large part by the poetic and affective aspects of the texts as well” (13). Thus, when we relinquish the idea of trying to ‘get’ a certain poem through analyzing the narrative structure, we leave space to ask questions such as why can’t I understand the poem? Am I meant to understand it? Or, is it a private act, meant only to be understood by the subject and not the reader, as in the case of “Passing Over in Silence.”

**Myth/Religion/Folklore: An Amalgamation of Doctrine and Ritual**

As shown in “A Midwinter Prayer” (\textit{AM}), Ní Chuilleanáin incorporates both myth and folklore. Haberstroh writes, "In general, we might distinguish myths from folktales by suggesting that in myth the emphasis is more on human responses to divine worlds and folklore is centered on describing mysteries and obstacles humans face"(61). Thus, myth is more inherently linked with the religious realm and divine intervention and consequence. Although there are more references to Odysseus (Greek mythology) than Fionn (Irish folklore) in her work, Ní Chuilleanáin does not privilege myth over folklore. It is clear that myth and folklore, in addition to religious narratives, are equally important to Ní Chuilleanáin, as her protagonists are often religious figures and/or mythic ones, or marginalized figures that are depicted as mythic. At times, it is hard to decipher if a character is part of a secular mythic tradition or a Christian one. I believe this is no

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Revolution in Poetic Language} (1984) is Kristeva’s book in which she presents her ideas of the semiotic and the symbolic.
accident. Ní Chuilleanáin seems less focused on the ideology behind certain doctrines, but rather the narratives and practices that belong to each. Thus, Ní Chuilleanáin often synthesizes mythic, folkloric and religious narratives. For my purposes, I will use myth in a broader sense to encompass Ní Chuilleanáin's use of myth, folklore and religious references because all function in similar ways.

Ní Chuilleanáin elides the distinctions between myth and religion because she uses an amalgamation of both to convey human experience. Ní Chuilleanáin says she is more interested in rituals and patterns themselves than the spiritual doctrines (Haberstroh, 77); therefore her elisions are not problematic to understanding a particular poem. She is more interested in the "what", the physical experience, than the "why" behind it. As a result, Ní Chuilleanáin also elides folklore in the mix of mythic and religious contexts. In a 2007 interview with Haberstroh, she states "When I read your poetry I think of it not so much as religious, but rather as spiritual". Ní Chuilleanáin responds, "I wish I knew the difference." When asked by Haberstroh if the world of myth and religion elide for her, Ní Chuilleanáin responded with: "...I think that myths I write about are not terribly spiritual in that sense. Also, I think that I have always been interested in different kinds of Christianity...I think, for me, it is very much about the social and psychological organization as well as the spiritual dimension."

PBH: Then you are trying to plumb the significance of rituals.

ENC: Yes, I like to see what it does mean, what it could mean, what it could mean if you moved it. I suppose the other thing, what you say about the myths, it is also folklore or the folk tale element that is very close, in that a lot of religious narrative is very folkloric.
It is not the doctrine that makes myth and religion similar for Ní Chuileannáin, but rather it is the combination of practice and the ritual, the ritual of the act and the ritual of describing the act. For example in, "The Informant" (MS) she intertwines an old woman’s recapitulation of witnessing murder with the miracle of transubstantiation. This relationship is similar to the relationship between lived experience and mythic experiences depicted in the previously mentioned “Passing Over in Silence.” Although sometimes the associations are difficult to discern, in both cases Ní Chuileannáin makes a distinct connection between the ritual of telling and the ritual of experiencing a transcendental act.

**Exploring Ní Chuileannáin’s Politicization of Myth**

Peter Heehs claims that there is much debate regarding history and myth; some regard history as a type of myth, whereas others argue that history and myth function independently of each other (5). He argues that, "it is sometimes difficult to draw an absolute line between fact and fiction" (16). Not only does Ní Chuileannáin negotiate this gap between fact and fiction to process personal experiences, but also she uses myth to obliquely discuss larger political issues. Heehs argues that “myth often allows people to create a vision of the past more meaningful than an accumulation of facts” (Haberstroh, 60). By coding a political statement under the guise of myth, Ní Chuileannáin is able to critique without overtly offering her opinion. In addition, myth provides a familiar platform to understand fact. For example, in “The Second Voyage” (AM), Ní Chuileannáin uses the story of Odysseus’ arduous journey home to discuss Irish emigrants’ inability to return home.

If there was a single
Streak of decency in these waves now, they’d be ridged
Pocked and dented with the battering they’ve had,
And we could name them as Adam named the beasts,
Saluting a new one with dismay, or a notorious one
With admiration; they’d notice us passing
And rejoice at our shipwreck, but these
Have less character than sheep and need more patience.

Odysseus expresses a need to conquer the sea and return home. Ní Chuíleáin’s Edenic references create an association between the exile and his original homeland. The reader questions, who is the “us”? Although Odysseus is the only character mentioned, it appears the speaker is referring to a larger group of exiles, when mentioning the “us passing” and we of “our shipwreck.” Not only does the reference to sheep create a loose association with Ireland, but also the vengeful waves that permit Odysseus from sailing ashore are feminized, arguably a reference to the often feminized Irish landscape and thus Ireland’s rejection of returning emigrants. Ní Chuíleáin relates the poem to the notion of exiles, particularly from Ireland and Italy (Williams, 32), stating that the theme of the exile is a prominent motif in both her poetry and her husband’s. Although there is no explicit reference to Irish emigrants or even Ireland, the Greek myth functions as a coded political argument about exiles, the inability to return home and the Irish diaspora. In addition, the poem functions on a personal level as it expresses Ní Chuíleáin’s own anxieties about attending Oxford and living in Italy and how those experiences affected

11 In “History Gasp: Myth in Contemporary Irish Women’s Poetry” Gerardine Meaney writes, “…the struggle is between an ordering, naming heroic and masculine subject and an intractable feminine ocean which will not be named, ordered, objectified” (109).
12 Macdara Woods (1942-) Irish poet.
her return to Ireland (32). This is another case in which the key to the poem is hidden, unable to be unlocked without a confession from the poet. However, first and foremost, the poem is a critique of Odysseus’ hubris and consequently his inability to return home. Thus, it functions as a complex piece even if the reader is unaware of its personal and political narratives.

In “Pygmalion’s Image” (MS), Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth to discuss her emergence as a female poet. In this instance, she uses the Greek myth in which the sculptor, Pygmalion, carves a woman, Galatea, out of ivory to negotiate her relationship to a larger political issue: her emergence as a female in a male dominated canon. Ní Chuilleanáin writes:

Grass blows westward from the roots,
As the wind knifes under her skin and ruffles it like a book.

The crisp hair is real, wriggling like snakes;
A rustle of veins, tick of blood in the throat;
The lines of the face tangle and catch, and
A green leaf of language comes twisting out of her mouth.

Until this point, the statue has been silent, limited by the masculine instruction out of whom she was created. Ní Chuilleanáin is keen to depict the woman as “real” and alive as a result of the new blood coursing through her veins. Not only is the subject no longer silent, exemplified through the “green leaf of language” that emerges from her mouth, but her new voice is depicted as a threat to her male creator. Ní Chuilleanáin uses the Greek myth of Medusa to depict the newly formed subject’s potential to castrate her creator.
She uses both of these mythic narratives to convey the emergence of her poetics. Through the subject’s violent entrance into language, (“the wind knifes under her skin and ruffles it like a book”) Ní Chuileannáin reveals that she had to rupture masculine forms to create her own mode of representation apart from patriarchal discourse.

Not only does myth function as a means for Ní Chuileannáin to convey coded political arguments, but also her myth functions allegorically. Ní Chuileannáin becomes a negotiator between mythic experiences and factual/lived experiences: Williams writes,

Your poems that refer to history and tradition, whether religious or folkloric, are like something from Joseph Campbell--the idea that under our evident reality there is always a supporting counter-experience of the imagined or spiritual world. And it is the function of the shaman or poet to travel between the two. As a shaman or poet, traveling between the two, you seem to be a seanachai, a tradition bearer (42).

As a tradition bearer, Ní Chuileannáin acts as a translator who intertwines myth with its real counterpart and/or vice versa. For Ní Chuileannáin, religious practice helps her to negotiate her understanding of life and, arguably, she uses myth to do the same. In an interview with Haberstroh, Ní Chuileannáin states: "The way in which religious groupings, like the Confraternity or the convent or whatever, sometimes provide metaphors for life; to me anyway they always seem to provide powerful metaphors, and that could be partly because of my background, the nuns and family and all" (IUR, 38).

Not only does Ní Chuileannáin elide myth, folklore and religion, to represent human behavior, emotions and beliefs, but also she uses parable, allegory and myth almost interchangeably to offer a potential lesson without asserting a strict belief.
Grennan argues that parable allows Ní Chuileannáin "to deal most adequately with the historical, the political, the biographical, the spiritual, and the moral dimensions of experience, without slighting any of them" (290). He proposes that Ní Chuileannáin's work is analogous to parable because, "there is usually something enigmatic about parable...something puzzling about its moral point, something that defies easy explanation" (289) Grennan notes Ní Chuileannáin’s poems "Survivors", "The Ropesellers", "The House Remembered" and "Celibates" as specific examples of parable. In these poems, sometimes there is a coded lesson; however sometimes the message is impossible to ascertain, if even there is one to find. This is also evident in "The Bee and the Rapeseed" (BS):

As the split edge of the apple,

*Pure as her mind*—

She smells

The rapeseed sharply fenced in fields.

The traces of coulter and harrow

Push through the yellow sour blooms.

The native red-ass bee is there before her,

Persuaded away from the cliff and heather.

In this poem, natural images dominate to create sweeping streaks of color and images of flourishing wildlife. The title sounds parabolic; however amidst Edenic references and mechanical imagery it is difficult to understand exactly what is happening. If there is a coded lesson, it appears to revolve around the tension between freedom and enclosure.
The bee, arguably the female subject, is free to move and fertilize. On the surface, she is in control, flying freely: “Clenched against the sky. She rises early; /The planted avenues direct her flight.” unlike the contained rapeseed “sharply fenced in fields”. Although the bee is free to move as she pleases, the rapeseed “direct” her flight, leading her to fertilize up and down the rows in a mechanized fashion. The bee cannot resist the sweet allure of the rape’s honey (not unlike Eve being lured by the apple) and as a result her flight plan is manipulated. Through this coded parable, Ní Chuilleanáin reveals a tension between perceived independence and external manipulation.

Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth to create a semi-structured narrative framework, with a large gap for interpretation. By doing this, she creates a point of departure from which to discuss larger issues. While I agree that often this point of departure is unclear, subsequently making the task of the reader more difficult, I believe that is Ní Chuilleanáin’s objective. This circles back to her style of not creating a whole narrative, but rather leaving gaps for interpretation. Grennan writes,

In some sense, the narrative voice, narration itself, is not unlike architecture, in that it can be a means of establishing the secure ground of the experience which is the poem's subject. It can also create difficulty, however, since it may not be given a visible or comprehensible context: it may simply be there--a story or a picture existing (for us, though presumably not for the speaker) in its own terms only (286).

However, not all of Ní Chuilleanán’s poems are meant to be read allegorically. Just because she often uses myth, this is not to say that every myth is meant to teach a lesson, but rather some poems are meant to be left incomplete. As a result, the reader must
surrender to the fact that some poems are not meant to be understood, but rather exist only in their inscrutable state.

Lastly, Ní Chuílleanáin uses myth to critique and question who and what is important enough to record. As a result, she mythologizes ordinary and marginalized people to expose their mythic qualities. She does this to critique how ordinary people are forgotten in the literature and language of myths. Her oblique voice mirrors the voice of those that are underrepresented: those who remain on the edges of society and are not praised as heroes or even martyrs, but rather dismissed as marginal. More specifically Ní Chuílleanáin does this with women. She subtly inserts women into her poems and makes the reader work to understand the woman's role within the myth. This is why her mythologizing of women as religious and folkloric heroines is vitally important to her work as a feminist poet. By including (and celebrating) the marginalized, Ní Chuílleanáin subverts the patriarchy. I will delve deeper into this topic in Chapter Two.
CHAPTER TWO

MYTHOLOGIZING THE MARGINALIZED: UNCOVERING EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN’S FEMALE FIGURES

Witches, viragos, martyrs, hermits--I do admit their humanity and their femininity; I do not think they have dissolved their women’s bodies because they may be eight feet tall or dressed in knightly armour. I cling to romance almost as tightly as to history.13

Since I am Irish-indeed, since I am human-the world I live in has to include the past as well as liberation from the past.14

As noted in the first epigraph above, Ní Chuilleanáin is keen to represent a spectrum of female figures, including those that are not considered traditionally feminine. She uses female figures from the past and the present, both fictional and factual, to promote an image that transcends the linear boundaries of history, and to reveal that these figures exist both in and outside of the patriarchal order. In the following chapter, I will examine Ní Chuilleanáin’s evolution of the female image, paying particular attention to how she mythologizes15 martyrs, saints, nuns and ordinary heroines. First, I will use the biblical narrative of Noah and the Greek myth of Odysseus to discuss how female figures are marginalized by their omissions from or their silence in patriarchal narratives. I will discuss how Ní Chuilleanáin uses violence to critique traditional heroes. In addition, I will examine how Ní Chuilleanáin depicts the female figure as a violent landscape in order to subvert the male gaze and deconstruct the woman-as-land trope. Next, I will discuss how Ní Chuilleanáin subtly weaves a female narrative into traditional hero tales. I

14 Haberstroh, My Self, My Muse (22).
15 For my purposes, I am using the term mythologize both narrowly to refer to specific mythic heroes and narratives, but also broadly to mean someone that is admired as other-worldly, transcendental, or as having great literary and/or historical significance.
argue that one way in which she navigates gender oppression is by incorporating the female image within phallocentric myths. By creating associations between women and Jesus, Ezekiel and Lazarus, Ní Chuilleanáin negotiates what has previously been deemed patriarchal territory, to offer representations of both sexes that question hegemonic representation. She does not destroy or erase the classical myths in favor of new ones, but rather, she incorporates the information from the original myth while simultaneously including women and other marginalized figures. As a result, she allows the original story to coexist while simultaneously forcing readers to ask: Where are the women? Where are the marginalized people who are equally affected in this situation? In doing this, Ní Chuilleanáin counteracts the tunnel vision readers have had when interpreting myth solely in terms of the hero.

As an extension of my discussion on re-imagining phallocentric myths, I will examine how Ní Chuilleanáin has shifted from using patriarchal narratives in favor of representing mythic female figures. I will use Elaine Pagel’s theory on Mary Magdalene to discuss Ní Chuilleanáin’s depictions of the saint. The chapter culminates with a discussion of Ní Chuilleanáin’s use of the nun, a figure that is prominent and revered throughout her work. I will argue that her portrayals of nuns is mythic because Ní Chuilleanáin depicts nuns as the ideal feminine image, as they are simultaneously rooted in history, but also transcend the boundaries of patriarchal representation.

I will use Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity\textsuperscript{16} as the groundwork to discuss how society conditions us to think about myth. Butler’s theory serves as a lens to

\textsuperscript{16} Butler asserts that gender is a fictional category that the “regimes of truth” (viii) created. Through her concepts of performativity and citationality, Butler argues that individuals have been conditioned by language and culture to repeatedly perform tasks which reinforce gender binaries. This argument is discussed in her book, \textit{Gender Trouble}. 

27
explore some of the ways that myth and gender function in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry. I argue that because men most often play the central role in mythic stories, society is conditioned to disregard women as non-mythic, and potentially irrelevant to the narrative. To combat this cultural inscription, Ní Chuilleanáin uses phallocentric myths to underscore the absence of women in these stories. She creates a mythic gender shape-shifting to subvert, or at least question, traditional mythic figures and their dominance. According to Butler, society conditions us to think a certain way about gender. This cultural conditioning is evident in women’s often passive or absent role in myth. In creating female figures that emerge out of male mythic figures, Ní Chuilleanáin shifts the focus from gender as a marker of what constitutes mythic status and instead offers the marginal figure a more prominent status, perhaps even a mythic one. As an extension of Butler’s argument that gender is culturally conditioned, the promotion of traditional myth is also a product of cultural gender conditioning. For example, if one repeatedly hears that Odysseus is a great warrior who battles monsters and gods to return home to his passive, weaving wife, the idea of man as hero and woman as subservient is perpetuated. However, I argue that through her use of myth, Ní Chuilleanáin challenges the notion of the mythic male figure, not to depreciate it, but rather to make room for the female figure that has been marginalized. In highlighting the women’s role in myth, Ní Chuilleanáin offers a more equitable space for women in both myth and history.

Like Butler’s view of gender, myth is also a social construct. Eliade argues that “Myth, then, is always an account of a ‘creation’ It relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely” (6). Thus, if myth is the account of creation, it produces only the patriarchal
version of creation which discounts marginalized bodies. The perpetuators of myth decide which narrative is promoted as truth. Thus, if a body is ignored within myth, and myth “tells only that which really happened, which manifests itself completely,” then marginalized bodies are discarded (6). Ní Chuilleanáin’s role as a poet is to expose mythic narratives for their representational gaps, including those people that they neglect. Through hegemonic constructed myth, we are conditioned to view men as mythic heroes and women as secondary bystanders. Gerardine Meaney writes, “In a context where groups find themselves radically alienated from history—as happened in the aftermath of world wars, to colonial peoples, to women—the space of myth presents itself as a place from which to question and redefine history…even myths of national identity can be founded on difference” (99). Meaney proposes that despite patriarchal conditioning, myth has the ability to convey meaning outside of what has traditionally been promoted. I argue that Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth as a tool of social consciousness to disrupt recapitulated phallocentric traditions by interrogating gender roles and offering female subjects as the central figures in the narratives. As a result, Ní Chuilleanáin creates representation outside of the symbolic order.

Clair Wills critiques Irish myth as a tool for women poets. She argues that myth reinforces repressive stereotypes including the stereotypes that amalgamate the feminine with nationhood. She writes, “the body of the myth thus acts as a container for the body of the woman” (55). Although I do not disagree that patriarchal myths have traditionally repressed women, I argue that Ni Chuilleanáin uses myth to interrogate these cultural narratives. As I said in Chapter One

17 See pg. 7.
truths. Because myth is an explanation of multiple realities (Eliade, 5), Ní Chuilleannáin uses myth to convey a female reality that exists simultaneously alongside a patriarchal one. Although myth was originally produced to convey a single patriarchal reality, Ní Chuilleannáin uses myth to propose a more egalitarian one by using traditional phallocentric myths to resurrect the female image. In addition, myth allows Ní Chuilleannáin to maintain secrecy, specifically with regards to a female history in Ireland. Helen Emmitt writes, "There is in Ní Chuilleannáin's work both the desire to recover and recuperate a feminine and an Irish history that has been hidden or erased and at the same time a desire to keep hidden, and therefore alive and vibrant, what she calls the 'real' or 'secret,' which is something like the convergence of the maternal, the historical, the sacred, and the natural (477). Thus, it is Ni Chuilleannáin’s need for secrecy, inherently linked to a buried female history, which drives her reliance on myth.

In her first two books, Acts and Monuments (1972) and Site of Ambush (1975), Ní Chuilleannáin seemingly depicts the female image as secondary, subtly revealing how women permeate narratives that men have previously dominated. She offers alternative accounts to traditional myths without destroying the original narrative. Ní Chuilleannáin recognizes the marginal role women have played in these narratives and thus offers an empowered feminine image (through a direct depiction of the female body or metaphors for the female body) that coexists with the original phallocentric narrative. More than offering a space for the female image; however Ní Chuilleannáin counteracts the valorization of the hero by offering all marginal figures—not just women—a presence

18 For the purposes of this paper, I will often use female figure and marginalized figure interchangeably. This is not to say that all females are marginalized or that all marginalized figures are female, but rather Ní Chuilleannáin often uses the female image to represent a category of marginalized people, regardless of their gender.
within hegemonic narratives. In the following chapter, I argue that Ní Chuilleanáin addresses the issue of marginalized representation from various angles, weaving the marginalized perspective into myth, both to expose their lack of representation, and also to create analogues between underrepresented figures and their glorified male counterparts. In doing this, Ní Chuilleanáin does not rewrite what does not exist, but rather she empowers marginal figures by simultaneously acknowledging the role they play, alluding to the role that should play, and admitting to the role they actually play. Through her resurrection of women out of phallocentric narratives, (sometimes literally representing female bodies as brought back to life, equipped with an active body and voice) Ní Chuilleanáin deconstructs societally constructed gender boundaries. She does not erase the traditional myths, but rather she creates a space where women both coexist within traditional male-dominated myths and emerge from the male bodies that dominate these narratives. As a result, Ní Chuilleanáin exemplifies women’s reemergence into patriarchal narratives, offering them the opportunity to convey an equally important story.

**Hidden in the Background: Uncovering the Female Image within Traditional Mythic Narratives**

To understand Ní Chuilleanáin’s use of myth, one must trace the evolution of how she uses myth to represent the female figure throughout her work. Her early poems do not explicitly reveal a female image (nor do most identify a male image, either), but rather mysterious pronouns float in and out, depicting enigmatic bodies. Amidst islands, boats and undiscernible roads, her early subjects are rarely detailed and almost never named. As a result, landscapes overshadow the real bodies that linger in the background. However, in the early poems in which Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth, she is sure to name and
define the male hero as an integral part of the story. Although seemingly subversive, she
does this to highlight the female counterparts that are either omitted from the narrative or
unnamed and silent. In the following accounts of Noah and Odysseus, violence is inked
to the marginalized female image, as if it is lashing out against the hegemonic discourse
that has contained it.

In the poem “Survivors” from her first collection Acts and Monuments, Ni Chuilleanán
depicts a mysterious “she”:

She does not know the beasts of prey
Have all been brainwashed. Their ascetic pose
Should last the voyage.

This enigmatic female figure can be inferred as the biblical Noah’s wife, but also
the speaker of the poem if one amalgamates the oscillating “I” and “she”.

Although silent, the woman gazes at her male counterpart: “Of Noah’s ark, I can
see the man himself/Deathmask profile against a late sunrise”. She criticizes him
for putting her in the violent situation. We know nothing about this woman, yet
she is of great importance, as she is tasked with caring for the animals: “Do they
all want to survive? They allow me/To lock their kennels at sunset, feed them”. In
addition, the poem is filled with images of blood; presumably to resemble the
blood of God’s covenant19 to Noah but also the blood conjures images of
menstrual blood pouring forth from Noah’s wife, forcing the female subject to the

19 In Genesis 9: 11 God says to Noah that after all the bloodshed, “I establish my covenant with
you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to
destroy the earth.” (The New International Version)
forefront of the poem. The blood seems sacrificial and there is an uncanny\textsuperscript{20} connection between it and the unnamed female speaker. We see the blood of those sacrificed dripping from her skirt:

Please go easy with the blood.
It’s not as if we had that much to spare;
The human ration has been cut
To a gallon a head, and the heads have been cut
As a temporary measure to me and you.

The menagerie expects a future and you
Crouching on the deck against my knees
Let it drip on my wet skirt
Soak in with dust and rain
Lodged firmly until the blood of the saints

In the traditional narrative, Noah is depicted as a savior; however here he is wounded and cowering at his wife’s feet. As a result, she must carry the burden of both caring for him and for the animals. On one hand, Ní Chuileannáin depicts this woman as the stereotypical domestic caregiver and comforter. However, Ní Chuileannáin complicates this categorization by depicting the woman as vampiric, consuming the sacrificial blood:

While the blood still seeps down
I drink it steadily myself

\textsuperscript{20} I will discuss Freud’s uncanny later in this chapter.
(I have to think of the passengers)

My teeth ploughing in your throat.

The “your” in the poem is unclear; however we are left to assume that is refers to Noah and his wife has killed him because he has proved an inadequate hero. An alternative interpretation to this sacrifice and consumption is that it is not grotesque, but rather, it is an act of salvation. If Noah’s wife is consuming the blood of those sacrificed in attempt to save them, there emerges an association between her and Jesus Christ. Ironically, Noah’s wife remains powerful as her husband crumbles at her feet, an imagistic role reversal from Mary Magdalene weeping at the foot of the cross.

To further uphold the enigmatic female presence in the poem, Ní Chuilleanáin ends the poem with an image of conception and violence. The speaker confesses,

I recall a shining egg-shaped ocean

Foul as a deserted egg;

It weighed down on the sea bed

Like the fat arse of Leviathan

Through the images of blood and birthing, Ní Chuilleanáin depicts a violent, female landscape onboard Noah’s ark. She reveals the pressures his wife felt, not only as the guardian of the animals, but also as a vessel of procreation, as she would have been tasked with birthing a new ancestral line. In doing this, Ní Chuilleanáin highlights the

21 A powerful sea monster from the Old Testament Isaiah 27:1 “In that day, the LORD will punish with his sword—his fierce, great and powerful sword—Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent; he will slay the monster of the sea”. (New International Version)
violence of a phallocentric myth and proposes a narrative that places Noah’s seldom-discussed female counterpart at the center of the poem.

In yet another sea voyage, also from her first collection, Ní Chuilleanáin creates tension between the mythic hero Odysseus and a feminized sea. In this poem, she also uses nature’s feminized violence to reject the hero. This depiction of a feminized landscape creates the framework for the female image which she expands upon and elucidates in later volumes. In “The Second Voyage” (SA), Ní Chuilleanáin depicts a struggle between the war hero and the sea in order to convey Odysseus’ inability to ever return home. Sheila Conboy argues that Ní Chuilleanáin rewrites the end of the Odyssey in “The Second Voyage” to show that Odysseus fails and cannot plant the oar on land, but rather is left fighting a losing battle with a feminized nature (Female Figures, 69). Thus, Ní Chuilleanáin depicts a counter narrative that coexists alongside the traditional Greek myth in order to incorporate the female image. The feminized sea becomes the forefront of the poem. Ní Chuilleanáin writes, “His face grew damp with tears that tasted/Like his own sweat or the insults of the sea.” Ní Chuilleanáin uses the sea as a proxy to reject Odysseus as an unfit hero and thus does not permit his return home, the whole point of his entire journey. As a result, home, synonymous with Penelope, becomes unattainable. Arguably, the sea also becomes a stand in for Penelope. Although Odysseus’ wife is not mentioned in the poem, the sea becomes a means for Penelope to assert her agency against the man who abandoned her for ten years. Ironically, Penelope does not play a major role in The Odyssey either, as she has very little of the epic devoted to her narrative. Instead, all that is known is that she remains in her room, weaving a tapestry to avoid persistent suitors.
In this poem, Ní Chuilleanáin criticizes both Homer and the protagonist of his epic for perpetuating a phallocentric ideology that depicts women as docile, subservient bystanders and glorifies men as heroes. The feminized sea rejects Odysseus because his hubris prevents him from realizing that his actions affect others. Conboy argues that Ní Chuilleanáin revises myth to rewrite the feminine tradition and push back against the male heroic tradition to “emphasizes the folly in men’s attempt to rule the world” (69). Not only is the sea a natural representation of Penelope, but also all of those who are affected by war and discounted. Not mentioned in mythic stories of war heroes is how the war affects those that are not the heroes, but nonetheless suffer from the acts of war.

In “Odysseus Meets the Ghosts of the Women” (SA) women are seemingly in the background of a traditional narrative that glorifies Odysseus. However, upon closer examination, it is via their marginalized status that women play a powerful role within these narratives. Ní Chuilleanáin propagates female empowerment in this poem through her depiction of female action despite their unnamed, and subsequently marginal, status. In the poem, Anticlea and Persephone are named, but the other women amalgamate into a sea of unidentified bodies. The women are silent, yet they rally together to oppose their antihero, eventually driving him away: “A hiss like thunder, all their voices/Broke on him; he fled”. The women unite against Odysseus because he represents glorified violence and war, the very institutions which have killed many of them. Ní Chuilleanáin writes,

He saw the daughters, wives
Mothers of heroes or upstanding kings
The longhaired goldbound women who had died
Of pestilence, famine, in slavery
Although the woman are nameless and represented only in terms of their male relations, they gain agency through their silent disregard towards Odysseus. Ní Chuíleanáin leaves these women unnamed not to further their subjugation. On the contrary, she does so to acquiesce to the reality that although women may be present in hegemonic narratives, they often play a secondary role, one in which they are relegated to an unnamed, silent body. However, Ní Chuíleanáin reconstitutes this marginalized role to convey that these women do not need to be named in order to have a powerful impact within a patriarchal narrative. Nicholas Allen writes, “Her [Ní Chuíleanáin’s] poetry acts as an incantation to voices from the margin; her words are much like a scribe’s asides, her commentary oblique, personal, mysterious” (22). In depicting the group of unnamed women in “Odysseus Meets the Ghosts of the Women,” Ní Chuíleanáin conveys the multitude of marginalized women that were affected by famine, slavery and other forms of repression. She criticizes wars that were started by men but have caused suffering for men, women and children. In rejecting the war hero, by extension, Ní Chuíleanáin rejects violence as whole.

**Women as (Violent) Landscape**

Ní Chuíleanáin uses a feminized landscape in “Permafrost Woman” (*MS*). However, she subverts the traditional Irish trope of woman-as-landscape to convey that phallocentric modes of representations can be re-imagined to place women at the forefront. In this poem, Ní Chuíleanáin envisions the landscape as violent, sexually aggressive and unconquerable to resist patriarchal conditioning. Ní Chuíleanáin states that she situates women at the center of her poems so that men can feel the female gaze, instead of the traditional scenario in which the male
is voyeur and female the object of his gaze. She states, “…I tend to see male faces in my poems as averted. Perhaps because I want to stress that I AM LOOKING AT THEM as usually the woman is being looked at (Williams, 36). Ní Chuilleanáin uses the traditional Irish trope which depicts the Irish countryside as a woman, emphasizing the woman’s gaze and sexual organs as part of the landscape. She writes,

Now, that face he coursed
Beyond all the lapping
Voices, through linear deserts

Unfolds among peaks
Of frozen sea, the wave
Coiling upward its wrinkled grace.

Dumb cliffs tell their story, split and reveal
Fathomed straights. The body opens its locks.

Ní Chuilleanáin makes the male traveler face the feminized landscape’s open vulva, creating a deliberate correlation between the Irish countryside and the sheela-na-gig figure. Ní Chuilleanáin states that the sheel-na-gig “is an image that men made to express their fear of women; if you notice in Irish folklore, the image is found over the

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22 The sheela-na-gig is an architectural image that dates back to the Middle Ages. Usually carved out of stone and found in front of churches in Ireland, it depicts an older female with hands opening an exaggerating vulva. See image (Female Figures, 68). See Figure 2.
doors of churches and in places where it would seem to have a protective function. They are invoking this feminine force to guard them against danger from the outside” (Haberstroh interview, 63). Through his exploration of the landscape and by extension the unnamed woman’s body, this traveler attempts to map and thus conquer the woman. However, it is because of the sheela-na-gig allusion, and subsequently the woman’s critical gaze, that the traveler fails to chart the landscape and conquer the woman’s body. The landscape becomes protected by the sheela-na-gig image cast over it. Thus, the land remains untamed and the female body remains unconquered. As a result, Ní Chuilleanáin rejects the hegemonic tradition of naming, ordering and mapping in favor of a liberated landscape and female image.

**Uncovering Mythic Origins: Heroes Birthed from Nowhere**

Another way in which Ní Chuilleanáin highlights the female image is by using the maternal figure to question the origins of patriarchal heroes. In her poem, “A Midwinter Prayer” (*AM*), Ní Chuilleanáin depicts the female figure within a phallocentric narrative of both mythic and non-mythic males to convey the female’s understated role. The poem chronicles a male exile journeying through the winter. Although Ní Chuilleanáin does not specify exactly who this figure is, she compares him to two mythic figures: one from Irish myth and one from Christian myth. She mentions Fionn, the huntsman and warrior from Irish mythology. As a child, Fionn was an exile, forced to live in hiding due to his conception out of wedlock. Fionn is also known for saving the men of Tara from an evil fire-breathing fairy during Samhain

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\(^{23}\) A Celtic festival in which souls of the dead return to the world of the living.
correlating Samhain with “the Last Day”, a reference to Judgment Day\(^{24}\). The poem then shifts to another figure of exile, the greatest mythic figure from the Judeo-Christian tradition, Jesus Christ. The poem alternates between referencing Fionn, Jesus, and the unnamed exile. Although not seemingly the focus of “A Midwinter Prayer”, female figures play a vital role in the poem because they disrupt the narratives of these male figures. The figure of Mary, although confined to one stanza (arguably even one line) of the lengthy poem, interrupts the poem. The male-dominated poem abruptly shifts to reveal a female character: “Touched by cold, the girl gave birth in a ruin:” Although the “girl” is only mentioned in one line, I argue that this mention alters the trajectory of the poem because it forces the reader to think about the absent women throughout the narrative. Fionn’s mother, Muirne, was rejected by her people because she became pregnant out of wedlock; however her struggle is not mentioned in the poem. Mary, barely mentioned, was also ostracized because she was an unwed mother. The exile’s mother, unnamed, is only obliquely mentioned:

—And is that the young son

I carried through the wet and dry months?

Said the mother.

The mother no longer recognizes her estranged son and this makes the reader question what this son has done to warrant rejection from his own mother. Although this poem seems to cast off these three mothers, Ní Chuilleanáin obliquely references them, not to discount them, but to force readers to rethink how they view myth. In particular, Ní

\(^{24}\) According to Christian doctrine, Judgment Day was the day when God would return to judge the souls of the living and the dead.
Chuilleanáin questions the representation of figures that play integral roles in the hero’s life but are marginalized in the hero’s narrative.

**Female Figures at the Forefront: Amalgamating Women and Male Biblical Heroes**

As her work develops, Ní Chuilleanáin’s oeuvre shifts from the general to the particular, in addition to becoming significantly more rooted in the physical. She shifts from depicting enigmatic landscapes and waterways, and unnamed, oblique female subjects, to developing a more intimate relationship with her subjects. To achieve this, Ní Chuilleanáin depicts her subjects in more tangible ways so that the reader feels more connected to that subject. Her representation of women evolves to include very specific stories of real bodies mythologized in the image of religious and/or mythic heroes.

Haberstroh notes, "...as her [Ni Chuilleanáin’s] poetry developed, the women in myth and folklore moved front and centre" (*Female Figures*, 61). I propose that another way in which Ní Chuilleanáin puts the female figure at the center of her poems is by amalgamating ordinary women and male biblical figures in order to deconstruct gender roles.

Ní Chuilleanáin transforms her female subject by shifting her gaze. She creates her female subject as the one who is looking outward, instead of the one that is being gazed at. Part of this transformation involves the amalgamation between the marginalized female figure and the traditional male hero. Eamon Grennan writes: "What interests me, however, and seems to stand at the source of her creative habits, is a gift she has for shifting perspective, for seeing the real, the actual, at an odd but revealing angle. Beyond her great gift for seeing the physical world in and for itself, she has this gift for
transformation, but a transformation that never seems to do violence to its subject” (285-6). Ní Chuillenanáin often makes a close association between the often understated female subject of her poem and a male hero. By doing this, she creates a system of equity between the two figures. She does this not only to emphasize that the male hero has traditionally been praised whereas the woman has faded into the background, but also to say that the female figure is equally notable. In most cases, she does not depreciate the contributions of the male figure, but rather uses his reputation to highlight similar qualities in the female figure. Grennan refers to these moments of transformation as "rapt metamorphosis"(286). I argue that Ní Chuillenanáin creates these transformative moments to dissolve the boundaries between gender. In creating associations between marginalized female figures that emerge out of the shadow of glorified male figures from myth and history, Ní Chuillenanáin is proposing that gender is not a category that defines historical relevance. Instead, she proposes that women are equitable to men based on their ability to perform in the same capacity as men. In addition, Ní Chuillenanáin rejects binaric representations of gender. Grennan quotes Ní Chuillenanáin on her movement towards egalitarian or perhaps androgynous representation: "She has said that dichotomy between masculine and feminine is not for her a very real dichotomy ‘except that I think imaginative literature is constantly transforming and transgressing boundaries and always being interested in ways one can get a perspective which isn't entirely masculine and isn't entirely feminine’” (293).

In “Skeleton Walk” a section from “The Rose Geranium” (MS), Ní Chuillenanáin obliquely reconstitutes the biblical stories about Ezekiel and also Lazarus, swapping the male icons for a female figure. The female subject resurrects bones—whether they are
her own or belong to others (or both) it is unclear. However, what is evident is that the bones have come to life:

The bones wake up, reach
Like tendrils for support
They feel the air in their cavities
Thunder of racehorses comes to them in the earth.

There is an uncanny resemblance to the female subject’s relationship with these bones and Ezekiel’s resurrection of the valley of dry bones\(^\text{25}\). In addition, if one interprets the bones’ revival, “And, lightly rising, they climb aloft on her shoulders,” as a resurrection of the subject’s body, then one can connect this unnamed female figure with Lazarus\(^\text{26}\) and even Jesus. As a result, Ní Chuileánáin’s use of resurrected figures offers a new perspective on the female’s role in myth. In the story of Lazarus, his sisters are observer as Jesus resurrects Lazarus from the tomb. In the story of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and his mother Mary weep at the foot of the cross. In both stories, the women are passive participants in the resurrection. However, in describing the female’s body as the resurrected one (or the one summoning the resurrection, depending on interpretation) Ní Chuileánáin encourages the reader to question gender roles in these traditional narratives. As a result, this resurrection story offers a new space for all gendered, queer and abject bodies not only to exist, but to play a central role.

Ní Chuileánáin’s use of analogues between female figures and mythic male figures only increase in her later volumes. For example, in “The Real Thing” (BS) she

\(^{25}\) (Ezekiel 37:1-14). (New International Version)
\(^{26}\) After being dead in his tomb for 4 days, Jesus went to Lazarus’ tomb, summoned him and Lazarus was resurrected. (John 11: 38-44). (NIT)
creates an association between Sister Custos and Jesus. Sister Custos becomes intertwined with Christ’s history and also Moses’ history, as she “Exposes her major relic, the longest/Known fragment of the Brazen Serpent.”

Sister Custos’ daily charge of taking care of the Brazen Serpent creates her as an analog to both Moses and Jesus. Ni Chuilleanáin states, "Custos means ‘guardian’ so I just gave her that name" (Nordin, 78). Ní Chuilleanáin reveals that her inspiration for Sister Custos and the poem stemmed from her research on "some regulations for the relics, and other regulations for the discipline of nuns" (78). Ní Chuilleanáin creates images that reflect Sister Custos' confinement and liberation. It can be argued that Sister Custos is walled in: "The bishop has ordered the windows bricked up on this side/Facing the fields beyond the city." Through the image of a blocked window, Ní Chuilleanáin exposes Sister Custos as confined (by a direct order from the patriarchy) inside the church. She is unable to see or access the world beyond the window.

Sister Custos is meticulous in her charge of protecting the relic and by extension the community who believes in its power, thus the association with Moses and Jesus. Because of her mythic analogues, but also her restrictions as a nun, she becomes a figure that is simultaneously confined by the patriarchal order and liberated from it. As keeper of the object, Sister Custos has a significant degree of power within the church community. In the last stanza of the poem, Ní Chuilleanáin makes an overt comparison between Sister Custos and Jesus which further illuminates this power and significance:

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27 As noted in the epigraph to The Brazen Serpent, the object is the staff that Moses created to save his people from deadly serpent bites (Numbers, XXI, 6-9).
28 Custos means guardian in Latin.
29 The image of the window is one that reoccurs throughout Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, often symbolizing a hybrid or liminal space that connects and/or divides the domestic world and nature. It is also used to depict a caged subject who is repressed (often by patriarchal conventions) within a domestic interior.
Her history is a blank sheet,
Her vows a folded paper locked like a well.
The torn end of the serpent
Tilts the lace edge of the veil.
The real thing, the one free foot kicking
Under the white sheet of history.

Through her analogy between Sister Custos’ habit and the Shroud of Turin and by metonymic extension, Sister Custos and Jesus Christ, Ní Chuilleanáin unveils Sister Custos’ value. The poet not only puts Sister Custos alongside two major religious figures, but also she offers a space for Sister Custos to write her own history, through the vows she chooses to take up, the power she has as caretaker, and her ability to choose what she believes in.

Sister Custos has the ability to keep this relic under lock and key, thus making her a powerful asset to the church community. Her secrets give her power, and with power, liberation: "The real thing, the one free foot kicking/ Under the white sheet of history."
The free foot, although analogous to the torn part of the relic and also to Jesus under the Shroud of Turin, is Sister Custos' foot.30 Traditionally, Sister Custos’ foot should be contained under her habit, yet Ní Chuilleanáin depicts it as breaking free to demonstrate liberation from containment. The foot becomes representative of Sister Custos’ tangible body, the physical embodiment of the female guardian that is both inside and outside of the patriarchal order. Ní Chuillneanain writes, "Her history is a blank sheet." Whereas

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30 Ní Chuilleanáin writes, “My clearest memory of a really early moment is of the oddity of seeing a nun running, her black masculine shoes and long skirts and her solid ankles” (Haberstroh, MM, 20)
Helen Emmitt argues the restrictions of history on women’s lives: "...in her [Ní Chuílleáin’s] poetry blankness is always the result of an attempt to cover up or veil. History may conceal and enshroud rather than providing enlightenment but the containment it offers is not complete; the real erupts into history" (483). I argue that via the “blank sheet” Ní Chuílleáin offers that, Sister Custos is able to find independence and power within a system of rigid regulations and patriarchal dominance, and thus is able to create her own history.

Emmitt suggests that there is a tension at work in Ní Chuílleáin's poetry that links her need for secrecy to Freud's idea of the uncanny. She argues that there is a dichotomy in Ní Chuílleáin’s poetry between secrets that should remain hidden, but are revealed, and information that remains hidden, but should be unearthed (481). According to Emmitt, "The telling of the story and the need to bury it are, for Ní Chuílleáin, connected to women's lives" (481). Ní Chuílleáin de-familiarizes the familiar by connecting marginalized female figures to biblical and mythic heroes. Women are birthed out of the traditional male figure; however there is something unsettling about Ní Chuílleáin's analogues. The female figure becomes equitable to her male counterpart; however there is something that sets her apart. For example, the association between Jesus and Sister Custos in “The Real Thing” is particularly uncanny. Exemplified via Sister Custos’ “…free foot kicking/Under the white sheet of history” she is situated both inside and outside of history. Sister Custos’ free foot becomes uncanny because that which is thought to be static, preserved under the sacred Shroud of Turin, Jesus Christ’s

31 According to Freud, the uncanny is the simultaneity of something that is both familiar and unfamiliar. Emmitt writes, “When Freud finds that das Heimliche, which means ‘familiar,’ ‘native,’ ‘belonging to the home’ exhibits a meaning ‘which is identical with its opposite, unheimlich,’ that discovery is based on the doubleness of das Heimliche: ‘on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight’” (478).
body, is now mobile, resurrected. However, it is not the Pentecostal depiction, in which rays of light surround his body in an ethereal glow, but rather a kinetic foot, wrinkling the blank sheet. This undead body seems less transcendental and sacred and more disturbing, akin to Frankenstein or a zombie. There is also something subversive happening in “Pygmalion’s Image”. The female statue comes to life and breaks free from her prescribed role, yet Ní Chuilleanáin’s violent imagery, connecting the female subject with the castrating Medusa, creates a threatening air. Both metaphors for women’s liberated voices, the “green leaf of language” in “Pygmalion’s Image” speaks to “the free foot kicking under the blank sheet of history” in “The Real Thing”. Through the unsettling tone that emerges from both poems, Ní Chuilleanáin proposes that by liberating women’s voices and exposing women as equitable to men, there is a threat to the patriarchal order.

Outcast, Preacher and Icon: Ní Chuilleanáin’s Images of Mary Magdalene

Another mythic source that provides entry into Ní Chuilleanáin’s representation of women is the figure of Mary Magdalene. With her book, The Magdalene Sermon and Other Poems, Mary Magdalene becomes a prominent figure in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry from then on. Ní Chuilleanáin writes, "my Mary Magdalene is the Titian33 visionary, not the figure at the foot of the cross” (Williams, 38). Ní Chuilleanáin uses Mary Magdalene as an image throughout her volume to depict marginalized female figures, including references to the Magdalene laundries.34 Ní Chuilleanáin notes that Mary Magdalene is a

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32 See pg 21-22.
33 Tiziano Vecelli (c. 1490-1576) Italian painter. Painted Penitent Magdalene c. 1533. See Figure 3.
34 Magdalene laundries (named after St. Mary Magdalene) were institutions that existed in Ireland from the 18th to late 20th century that housed women whom society deemed unfit. The “penitents” who worked in the laundries were comprised of prostitutes, sexually promiscuous women, unwed mothers,
primary figure in her poetry because she is the patron saint of preachers (Nordin, 79). In an interview with Nordin, Ní Chuilleanáin strategically quotes John Donne on Mary Magdalene: "That she once knew more than the Church did know, /The Resurrection" Ní Chuilleanáin proposes, "she is the female image of the person who knows more than the church knows...she is an important symbol as the woman speaking, as the woman surviving, and I have to say, because of the long hair, there is quite a strong identification." In “St. Mary Magdalene Preaching at Marseilles” Ni Chuilleanáin depicts a free-spirited preacher participating in society whose voice is not hindered by patriarchal conventions. She writes:

Now at the end of her life she is all hair –
A cataract flowing and freezing – and a voice
Breaking loose from the loose red hair
The secret shroud of her skin:
A voice glittering in the wilderness.
She preaches in the city, she wanders
Late in the evening through shaded squares.

Everything about this woman is liberated—her hair, her voice, her body. Ní Chuilleanáin creates her as completely freed from any patriarchal repressions; she is fully embracing her role as a preacher. This Mary Magdalene fluidly negotiates the space between urban societal deviants and mentally ill women. “Both the Catholic public and the religious communities colluded in removing these ‘shameful objects’ from view” (Luddy, 737). In her poem, “Translation” (GMR), subtitled “(for the reburial of the Magdalene)” Ni Chuilleanáin pays homage to the women who were forced into labor in the laundries and forgotten by society. In 1993, a mass grave containing approximately 133 female bodies was uncovered in High Park, Dublin nearby the former High Park laundry. Many of the bodies had no death certificates and could not be accounted for. For more information visit http://www.magdalenelaundries.com/about.htm
and natural environments to reveal her ability to live both within the patriarchal order and outside of it. The image of Mary Magdalene then becomes a motif for all of Ní Chuilleanán’s female figures because she represents a social outcast who lives on the edges of society, but also an independent thinker and teacher. In using Mary Magdalene as an icon in her poetry, Ní Chuilleanán emphasizes the female figure as a speaking subject. She emphasizes the power of the spoken word, as message and parable. The “Magdalene Sermon” becomes the manifestation of the female spoken word. It acknowledges the marginalized figures of society, as Mary Magdalene represents not only a preacher, but also a woman who was shunned from society as a sexual deviant. It is with her book, *The Magdalene Sermon and Other Poems*, which Ní Chuilleanán shifts from obliquely referencing marginalized figures to giving them a voice and body and making them the central focus of her work.

In her book, *The Gnostic Gospels,* Elaine Pagels discusses Mary Magdalene’s role as both within the patriarchal tradition and outside of it. She writes: “Furthermore, as we have seen, the *Gospel of Mary* depicts Mary Magdalene (never recognized as an apostle by the orthodox) as the one favored with visions and insight that far surpasses Peter’s. *The Dialogue of the Savior* praises her not only as a visionary, but as the apostle who excels all the rest. She is the ‘woman who knew all’” (22). Pagels proposes contradictions to traditional orthodox Christianity that present Mary Magdalene as one of the most integral figures in the life of Jesus, more so than his other apostles. However, through historical and cultural coercion Mary Magdalene was outcast as a prostitute and

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35 Her title refers to a collection of ancient texts found in Egypt in 1945 that have since been interrogated by scholars resulting in proposed radical contradictions to the New Testament gospels of Christian orthodox tradition. For more information see *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels.

36 From *The Gospel of Phillip* “…the companion of the [Savior is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples, and used to kiss her [often] on her [mouth]” (Pagels, XV).
sinner. If we accept Pagel’s argument alongside the cultural and historical representations of Mary Magdalene, then she becomes a woman that is both inside and outside of the patriarchal tradition. Much like Ní Chuilleanáin’s other female figures, Mary Magdalene has a role alongside mythic heroes; however that role needs to be closely examined. If we question Ní Chuilleanáin’s Mary Magdalene in light of gnostic views, she becomes another example of a figure that represents the simultaneity of being on the inside and the outside of history. This dual existence connects her to many of Ní Chuilleanáin’s marginalized women. Thus, she represents those who have profound effects on the patriarchy, but also those whose own stories remain enigmatic, living on the edge between history and myth, fact and fiction.

**Mythic Figures Under the Habit: Ní Chuilleanáin’s use of Nuns**

It is out of her work with myth that emerges Ní Chuilleanáin’s fascination with nuns. Seemingly some of society’s most marginalized figures, Ní Chuilleanáin creates the nun figure with a mythic sensibility, revealing her status as a person rooted in history with the ability to move in and out of the patriarchal order. As a result, nuns become the ideal representation of the female image in her work. Due to her reverence for them, nuns emerged out of Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems alongside mythological figures. She writes, “I consciously used mythology, and natural and urban scenery. Unexpectedly I found then, in my late twenties, that the figure of a nun would be standing quietly in the middle of a poem, as in a room in my house, before I had asked her in. At other times, she would be a hermit, or some other recollected female figure, darkly dressed and firm-faced.” (22).

Additionally, nuns were a strong influence on Ní Chuilleanáin because they helped her to express a feminine independence. From a young age, Ní Chuilleanáin was
exposed to nun’s lives and subsequently developed great reverence for them. She notes that her mother was the only married woman she regularly saw. Most women in her life, including aunts, teachers, nurses and maids were “spinsters”; however she is keen to note: “The nuns were the most interesting inevitably; they had uniform, prestige and motivation” (Williams, 30). Ní Chuilleanáin is nostalgic for her childhood experiences visiting her aunts in the convent. She recalls being fascinated by the freedom the nuns possessed, the sisterhood and close community they experienced and also the respect they gained from others, particularly males (MM, 20). Ní Chuilleanáin recalls a story in which her youngest aunt was “quarreling eloquently with her chaplain.” She notes, “I was impressed by her anger and by her command of the French language; looking back, it seems plain that he must have boasted, somewhere, that he could get her to do as he pleased” (20). In addition, she refers to the convent community as, “A warm, fresh complicated world” (20).

Ní Chuilleanáin notes that nuns are often ostracized as outside of traditional femininity. She states, “The feminine as lack and privation, most intensely seen in women who have neither man nor need for man”. She depicts this sentiment in “The Lady’s Tower” (SA) where Ni Chuilleanáin reveals an unnamed female figure, (not necessarily a nun, but quite possibly) who lives apart from society in an enclosed space. In addition to creating the woman as proactive and free as she whimsically moves throughout her tower, Ní Chuilleanáin offers the tower as the lady’s own independent space. The possessive “lady’s tower” [my emphasis] implies her ownership over the dwelling. If there are any other inhabitants, Ní Chuilleanáin does not deem them important enough to mention. Grennan writes, "'The Lady's Tower' might be taken as a
kind of signature piece, beginning with a strongly articulated sense of composed space' (284). Ní Chuíleanáin writes:

Hollow my high tower leans
Back to the cliff; my thatch
Converses with the spread sky,
Heronries. The grey wall
Slices downward and meets

Gradually she takes the reader on a journey through the tower from top to bottom, methodically visiting each room. We see the kitchen, a window, a bedroom and finally the cellar walls. Although she takes the reader on a systematic journey of the enclosed space, the subject of the poem has a great deal of freedom within her containment, exemplified through the ripe natural imagery and the animals’ vigor:

All night I lie sheeted, my broom chases down treads
Delighted spirals of dust: the yellow duster glides
Over shelves, around knobs: bristle stroking flagstone
Dancing with the spiders around the kitchen in the dark
While cats climb the tower and the river fills
A spoonful of light on the cellar walls below.

Although the subject is still in bed, her surroundings, and subsequently her imagination, are very active. This woman is simultaneously contained and liberated within her space.
As a result, she becomes a symbol for Ní Chuilleanáin’s female figures that live both within the patriarchy and outside of it.

Images of nuns in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry function much like mythic figures because they blend the confines of the patriarchy with liberation from it. Nuns are part of the patriarchal order, but also independent from it because they live in an environment where they are not pressured by society into marriage or motherhood. Sister Custos\(^{37}\) is a strong example of the female subject that lives both inside and outside this order: she is a curator and protector of history, but also a challenger to it. By featuring nuns at the center of many of her poems, Ní Chuilleanáin gives a voice to all women, both religious and lay, who were marginalized as the second sex.

Furthermore, Ní Chuilleanáin attributes her own independence as a poet to nuns’ influence. When asked by Williams about her influence with regards to past Irish poets and contemporaries, Ní Chuilleanáin notes her liberation from certain male Irish traditions:

The poet who was my father’s age was Kavanagh,\(^{38}\) and I felt the need to get away from that masculine agenda of rural depiction which Heaney\(^{39}\) somehow continued. Not that I do not admire him immensely, but I feel that in my lifetime as a writer something has been shaken up and freed up. When I started to write, I had to invent strategies for saying “I” in a female persona, and I don’t need to do that now. The nuns were a great help there (Williams, 39).

\(^{37}\) From “The Real Thing.” See pages 43-46.  
\(^{38}\) Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967), Irish poet.  
\(^{39}\) Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), Northern Irish poet.
It is the nun’s legacy which roots them in history and thus makes them a suitable subject for representing a female tradition. Nuns have a distinct female tradition because they are united by custom—not just the essentialized view that because they have a female body they are united under one tradition. By combining what is known about women’s historical customs, in addition to uncovering women’s role in mythic traditions, Ní Chuílleenáin reveals the real bodies of a women’s history. Haberstroh writes:

In many countries, women writers have seen themselves as giving a voice to a stifled feminine past and have tended to ignore the words in which that past speaks for itself. And then, our lives seem discontinuous with the culture of our past: our link with women of past centuries is almost reduced to the bodily fact as essential femininity…Nuns stand aside from this fragmented tradition. Their own succession is not bodily but adoptive and saturated with custom…It is not merely the reiterations of prayer and the persistence of ideas that bind them, but the totality and internationalism of a way of life (MM, 27).

Nuns in particular have a special place in both women’s history and sacred history. According to Ní Chuílleenáin they have a stronger connection to the past, because they uphold the same customs and traditions that nuns have upheld for thousands of years. In addition to perpetuating age old customs, Ní Chuílleenáin also discusses nuns that are independent thinkers and liberal social activists in their outreach. Thus, nuns function

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40 Ní Chuílleenáin notes, “…many nuns are even more highly respected than before, less now for their sanctity and prayers than for their work in the community, of which they have become in some cases the uncomfortable conscience. Their history too has begun to be written, in some cases a painful one, but a story that is entwined with the emerging history of women in Ireland” (Haberstroh, MM, 31).
much like mythic figures in her poetry, because they act as a connection between the past and the present. As a result, the nun is simultaneously linked to 16th century women, but also present-day feminists and activists.

Throughout the evolution of Ní Chuilleanáin’s work, the female image has played an increasingly more dominant role in her poems. Starting with amorphous, vaguely feminized spaces, maturing into feminized landscapes, moving through depictions of women in the periphery of male-dominated myths and finally placing using nuns and mythic women at the forefront of her poems, Ní Chuilleanáin has always valued the female image. As a result, she uses myth to critique how society depicts marginalized figures, specifically women. At times, Ní Chuilleanáin’s female figures are overshadowed by their male counterparts, particularly in her earlier volumes. However, as her work progresses, women emerge out of the landscapes behind male subjects and play equitable roles to men. In some of Ní Chuilleanáin’s most recent work, female subjects are at the forefront of her poems. By examining the trajectory of her representation of female figures, it is evident that Ní Chuilleanáin accurately depicts how women have been traditionally represented in myth and history. In continuing to place women at the forefront of her poems, particularly women who have been traditionally neglected by society (Mary Magdalene and nuns) Ní Chuilleanáin forces readers to question traditional gender roles both in myth and in history and examine how women play a role both within a patriarchal order and outside of it.
CHAPTER THREE

MYTH, MATERNITY AND MOTHER IRELAND: SITUATING EILÉAN NÍ CHUILLEANÁIN ALONGSIDE EAVAN BOLAND, MEDBH MCGUCKIAN AND NUALA NÍ DHOMHNAILL

As an extension of my discussion of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, it is necessary to examine the works of Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Medbh McGuckian. Along with Ní Chuilleanáin, these women have been voices in Irish women’s poetry for roughly the past 30-40 years. Their work has been shaped by and evolved through Ireland’s social and political turmoil, economic boom and recession and most importantly the evolution of the female figure in Irish literature and culture. While it is not my intent to delve deeply into the poetic strategies of Boland, Ní Dhomhnaill and McGuckian, I will offer correlations between some of their works and works by Ní Chuilleanáin to convey that, to some degree, the women are in conversation with each other. The poets share common themes, including mythologizing female figures, depicting mother-child relationships and negotiating the woman-as-nation trope. Despite their differing strategies, all of the poets create a distinct female voice that, to varying degrees, subverts patriarchal representation.

In addition, I will examine how each poet has used myth in her work, and how her respective mythic representations both align with and differ from Ní Chuilleanáin’s depictions. As part of the conversation on myth, it is vital to discuss each poet’s use of water as a female image, the Mother Ireland trope and the woman-as-nation trope. By extension, I will discuss their representations of maternity and how mother/child
depictions are often represented through a mythic lens. All the poets use myth to discuss the complicated nature of maternity and motherhood. In *The Brazen Serpent* (1994) and *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* (2002), Ní Chuileanáin uses myth to depict the inscrutable bond between mother and child, in *The High Caul Cap* (2013) McGuckian uses myth to negotiate her mother’s death and her own origins, and Ní Dhomhnaíll uses folklore and transforming subjects to convey birthing, emergence into womanhood and the complexity of motherhood in *Pharaoh’s Daughter* (1990), *The Atrakhan Cloak* (1992), *The Water Horse* (2002) and *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007). In many of her collections, Boland uses myth to criticize society’s demands for a prescribed female role. However, as demonstrated in *Night Feed* (1994) she does not critique motherhood as part of this patriarchal repression, instead she whole-heartedly embraces it as an integral part of female existence.

Invariably wrapped up within the discussion of maternity will be an analysis of how each writer politicizes the female body, specifically their subversion of repressive patriarchal forms. Boland’s work has set the framework for this, serving as an example for Ní Chuileanáin, Ní Dhomhnaíll and McGuckian. Boland’s unprecedented work in early volumes, *New Territory* (1967), *In Her Own Image* (1980) and *The Journey* (1987) takes the male-created female muse of the patriarchal literary tradition and deconstructs it to offer up a new female identity. Anne Fogarty writes, “Modern Irish poetry would be unthinkable without her presence” (Randolph, xii). In addition, her poetic strategies are particularly important to the subversion of the woman-as-nation trope.

Before I move on to discussing specific poems and subsequent comparisons between these four poets, I will provide some brief insights into their individual œuvres.
According to Peggy O’Brien, McGuckian is, “A remarkable poet...an inventor in her own right, she bravely experiments with language, discovering new ways for it to deviate from the known...to demand a totally fresh hearing.” (XXXIII). It is difficult to make a clear analogue between McGuckian’s work and the other three poets because of her unique and experimental voice. Like Ní Chuilleanáin, McGuckian’s voice is also enigmatic, her references coded and complex. O’Brien writes, “The first principle of her gynocentric universe is to favor ambiguity” (XLVI). Like Ní Chuilleanáin’s, McGuckian’s poetry is inscrutable but rich with images: color, water, the body, architecture, saints and angels, to name a few. Images float in and out of her poems as if the poem itself is a sieve, catching some images and allowing others to float away. One way to read her poems is to trace the connections between these related images. In doing this, over-arching themes such as grief, maternity, beginnings, memory and an obsession with the body emerge. However, taken on an individual level, McGuckian’s poems are almost impenetrable.

As argued in Chapter Two, Ní Chuilleanáin creates female figures alongside traditional male mythic figures to convey women’s equitable status. Although Boland also places women at the forefront of her poems, she uses a different strategy. Boland rejects patriarchal language and traditions, she candidly states, “Myths are made by men.”^41 Whereas, Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth to rediscover the role of marginalized figures, Boland seems weary of myth and its patriarchal conditioning. However, this is not to say that myth does not appear in Boland’s poetry, but rather that she uses myth to critique phallocentric mythic traditions. Boland often critiques myth because it relegates the female body to a metaphor; whereas Ní Chuilleanáin and Ní Dhomhnaill use myth to

^41 In her poem, “Making Up” from her collection *In Her Own Image* (1980).
express the female figure breaking free from such metaphors. Clair Wills asserts, “Boland…does not so much represent female experience as trope it” (58), Wills goes on to argue that Boland uses the Mother Ireland figure to emasculate men. Furthermore, O’Brien categorizes Boland as, “overtly political…in relation to gender and the nation” (XLI). Like Boland, Ní Chuileannáin also subverts patriarchal tropes to shift the gender power dynamic. Both she and Boland navigate the politics of the male gaze; however I argue that Ní Chuileannáin does so in a more elusive manner, characteristic of her enigmatic poetic voice.

Like Boland, Ní Dhomhnaill is more overt in her politics; she does not use coded language in the way Ní Chuileannáin and McGuckian do, which makes her poetry more accessible to the reader. Although Ní Chuileannáin’s tone is much more reserved and arguably reverent than Ní Dhomhnaill’s sardonic and playful persona, the two share themes and subject matter. One of the biggest analogues is their mutual infatuation with transformation and hybridity. In particular, Ní Dhomhnaill’s collection, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, resonates with Ní Chuileannáin’s collections, *The Girl Who Married the Reindeer* and *The Sun-Fish*. Both of Ní Chuileannáin’s collections feature hybrid people, animals and spaces which echoes themes in Ní Dhomhnaill poetry, especially her work with mermaids. Although Ní Chuileannáin’s poetry is much more cryptic than Ní Dhomhnaill’s, the two share commonalities through their mutual fondness of myth, folklore, traditions and also their representations of family.

**Watery Wombs: The Emergence of Women’s Voices**

Water becomes a unifying symbol that fuels the conversation among Ní Chuileannáin, Ní Dhomhnaill, McGuckian and Boland, as it conveys the female
emergence into society both on the literal, physical and literary level to express the birth of a female voice. Water flows and permeates and sometimes destroys. Controlled by the lunar cycles, it is cyclical and ebbs and flows, often in a regular or circular pattern. In her earlier volumes, Ní Chuileannán’s voice becomes like water. It moves through male spaces carving out room for female voices without destroying the groundwork that is already there. In her poetry islands represent the marginalized figure and water flows between islands to separate them from established land formations. Thus, water functions as both a uniting and dividing force that connects or severs the marginalized voice from the rest of society. In addition, water is often associated with the womb, as it represents an amorphous space that harbors life, thus the analogue with a distinctly feminine voice. There are many water-based life forces associated with the female body including menstruation, the creation of placenta and lactation. It is no coincidence that Ní Chuileannán, Ní Dhomhnaill, McGuckian and Boland all use water imagery in their poems to discuss journeys and transformations. Whether it is Ní Dhomhnaill’s mermaids, Ní Chuileannán’s islands and ships, McGuckian’s fascination with the womb, or Boland’s journeys to the underworld, all these women use water to discuss an emerging female identity from a gynocentric beginning.

In particular, the water imagery in McGuckian’s newest volume, The High Caul Cap relates back to the water imagery in Ní Chuileannán’s early volumes. The HCC cover reads: “The caul was superstitiously regarded as a good omen and so kept at the hearth as a preservative against drowning. This symbolic gesture helps us to fathom the water imagery in this new volume, which traces the decline and death of the poet’s mother.” As in Ní Chuileannán’s early volumes, water functions as a destructive,
cleansing and isolating force. By connecting the water images in McGuckian’s volume, one can connect seemingly disparate narratives to convey an overarching theme, in this case the loss of McGuckian’s mother. McGuckian explores this topic in her poem, “The Spirit of the Mother” (HCC). Like in many of McGuckian poems, in “The Spirit of the Mother” she places a strong emphasis on the body and body parts. She writes,

Her elbows are lifted, peaked elbow,  
soaring elbow, till her hoisted elbows  
swathe her head, discharged  
from a different crouch.

Images float in and out of this poem, much like the feelings of weightlessness that Ní Chuilleanáin creates in “Fireman’s Lift” (discussed in Chapter One), also a poem about the poet’s relationship with her dying mother. In this poem, McGuckian oscillates between images of the free-flowing, moving body and tightly encapsulated body:

a primitive crust,  
heaving and folding,  
encapsulated  
in her own spatial pale.

Those sealed lids, which can never yet  
have been opened, startled,  
fix the visitant with their ravening stare,  
and tighten their lock.

42 See pgs. 9-10
close-knit, close-valued,
on her constant slant
from ground to sky
no longer possessable.

The subject is in awe of the mother’s sleeping body. Through her reverent cataloguing of each body part, the subject breathes life into the subject’s “terminal members”. It is clear that the “spirit of the mother” dwells within the speaker. This allows the speaker to animate each body part, enabling her to create a lively body, despite its dying state.

Whereas Ní Chuilleanáin writes in coded layers to help maintain an elusive point of view, McGuckian creates flashes of images, loosely held together by a broad, but concrete, theme—in this case, the mother’s dying body. At times, it is easy to get lost within McGuckian’s poems because her images are so disjointed and complicated, albeit beautiful. Whereas biographical insight sometimes acts as a key to unlock a particularly challenging Ní Chuilleanáin poem, insight from the poet is also helpful for understanding McGuckian’s cryptic poems. In an interview with the Irish Echo, McGuckian states that The High Caul Cap is about her mother’s “slow and dancelike departure” and the “loss of one’s earliest house.” From this revelation, it is clear that the images of the home, the womb, and water that pervade the volume, connect to McGuckian’s feelings of loss associated not only with her mother’s death but the disconnect that occurred when she was severed from her mother’s womb.

Maternity: A Common Thread
Maternal relationships are not just a subject that Ní Chuilleanáin and McGuckian share, but rather mother/child relationships are a predominant theme in Ní Dhomhnaill and Boland’s poetry as well. Although their depictions of maternity differ, all four of the women incorporate coded and direct maternal references. Peggy O’Brien writes, “Mothering seems to be culturally so different in Ireland that it has never felt like a marginal role” (LI). This statement is supported in the countless, honest depictions of maternity demonstrated in all of the women’s poetry that convey the complexity and tenderness of maternal relationships.

As discussed in previous chapters, Ní Chuilleanáin’s poems never fully disclose the subject’s story; instead there always remains a veil, usually comprised of images or mythic references, which protects the speaker’s secrets from the reader’s analysis. Boland, however, almost always offers the reader a full disclosure. Sometimes this confession is an overt call to action for gender equality, but other times her direct approach is tender and sentimental. In Boland’s poem, “Night Feed” (NF) the speaker invites the reader into the intimate space of her baby daughter’s nursery. In doing this, Boland erases all distance between speaker and reader, offering the reader full access to the mother’s thoughts, fears and desires. She writes:

This is dawn.

Believe me

This is your season, little daughter.

The poem becomes a carpe diem poem, as the mother uses nature to show her daughter everything the world has to offer. Not only does the mother let the reader into her child’s
bedroom, but also she exposes to the reader her own hopes for her child. The mother is completely vulnerable and in utter amazement of her baby:

I crook the bottle.
How you suckle!
This is the best I can be,
Housewife
To this nursery
Where you hold on,
Dear life.

Boland subverts the common phrase ‘hold on for dear life’ to convey that, in holding on to her mother, the child is the mother’s whole life. There is no critique of the domestic act of waking in the middle of the night to nurse a child. But rather, Boland uses the beauty of nature to convey the reverence she has for the role of “Housewife” and mother. The cosmos and earth support the union between mother and child. It is as if the ritual act of the “Night Feed” becomes an integral part of the whole earth’s existence, exemplified through the series of natural images blossoming or returning to their hibernating state, including the opening daisies, “mercurial rainwater,” setting moon and erect poplars. The speaker states, “Earth wakes/You go back to sleep,” as if satiating her daughter’s hunger is what keeps the world turning. The poem exposes an intimate connection between the subject and nature, which blurs the lines between the exterior natural world and the vulnerable nursery. Although Ní Chuilleanáin uses images of nature throughout her work, nature often functions as a metaphor for isolation. Overgrown ruins, weeds, waterways, islands and sublime mountain peaks are all repeated images that she uses to convey a
person’s isolation and, by extension, their marginalized status. However, Boland does not use natural images to further subjugate marginal figures, instead nature becomes a place of strength from which a subject can reclaim her voice and status as an active participant in society. As a result, Boland’s uncensored exaltations surrounding maternal experience set the framework for others women poets to both embrace and critique motherhood.

For example, in “The Battering” from her collection *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992), Ní Dhomhnaill depicts an evolution in the representation of maternity, revealing not only a mother’s love, but also her contentious relationship with her child. Ní Dhomhnaill’s cynicism seeps through her poetry exemplified through her sardonic tone and the way in which she exposes the gritty side of domestic spaces, parents and children. Typical of Ní Dhomhnaill poems, she uses folklore to negotiate human experiences. She uses images of the natural landscape to convey a relationship between mother and child. Nature, or at least the fairy fort, becomes sinister. The mother must protect her child from that which lies within the fort; when she cannot, she travels to the fort and rips her son from the fairies’ breasts and also from custody of the “tall, dark stranger”. The mother becomes both the child’s protector from the outside world and the person who cannot shield her child from the world’s demons. As a result, she is both terrified and envious when her son suckles at other women’s breasts:

Of the three wet-nurses back in the fort,

two had already suckled him:

had he taken so much as a sip from the third

that’s the last I’d have seen of him.
When re-living the previous night’s events, the mother reveals her rage when fighting to get her son back: “I told him to get off-side fast/or I’d run him through”. Here, Ní Dhomhnaill not only reveals rage, but also a mother’s unyielding strength when it comes to rescuing her child. Ní Dhomhnaill exposes a holistic representation of the mother figure that is both gentle and nurturing, but also slightly hysterical. Her candor reveals to the reader a completely honest, full disclosure. The mother is filled with passion, demonstrated through her unbridled efforts at saving her son, but also, the mother seems to have rage towards her son, exemplified in the sinister final lines of the poem:

As things stand,
I’ll have more than enough trouble
trying to convince them that it wasn’t me
who gave my little laddie this last battering.

The climax of the poem is cryptic. One reading suggests that the mother would rather kill her own son than have the fairies take him from her. Another even more sinister reading reveals that the mother has been beating her child, “this last battering” implying that someone has beaten the child on more than one occasion. It is possible that the mother is mentally ill and has dreamed up the fairies as a coping mechanism to justify her own child abuse. By including this confession, Ní Dhomhnaill reveals the complicated nature of motherhood, which is not always the tender experience as described in Boland’s “Night Feed”. However, I argue that it is Boland’s candid maternal depictions established in her early works that allows Ní Dhomhnaill to depict the realistic and complex representations of motherhood in her more recent volumes.
Mother Ireland: Negotiating the Complicated Woman-as-Nation Trope

In addition to depictions of motherhood, each poet has her own way of negotiating the Mother Ireland trope and by extension the issues surrounding the female figure as nation and as landscape amalgamation. In Ní Chuílleanáin’s “Permafrost Woman” (as previously discussed in Chapter Two),\(^{43}\) the woman is encapsulated in the landscape. However, like the woman from “Pygmalion’s Image” who is seemingly frozen in stone, this woman is also able to reject her male oppressor from a confined space.

Ní Dhomhnaill’s descriptions of mother as mountain in “Hag” (PD)\(^{44}\) also connect with Ní Chuílleanáin’s woman-as-landscape/nation poem, “Permafrost Woman” in that the landscape becomes politicized, sexualized and violent. Similar to the empowered and (borderline violent) mother in “The Battering”, Ní Dhomhnaill depicts the woman and mother in “Hag” in a seemingly threatening manner. This woman is representative of the Mother Ireland trope. The poem’s title appears to be a direct allusion to Cathleen Ní Houlihan.\(^{45}\) If one associates “Hag” with Cathleen Ní Houlihan, she becomes a major threat to the role of family in Ireland. In the play, Cathleen Ní Houlihan entices the young man to leave his family and instead fight for her (Ireland). As a result, the hag image is linked to national pride, but it also functions as a promotion of organized violence and a threat to the family unit. In Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem, the female subject, the mother, dreams that she has turned into a mountainous landscape: “Once a dreamt I

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\(^{43}\) See pgs. 37-39.

\(^{44}\) Translated by John Montague.

\(^{45}\) Title character from Yeats and Lady Gregory’s play, *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (1902). In the play, an old woman arrives at the home of the male protagonist. She inspires him to leave his fiancé and instead go and fight for Ireland’s liberation in the United Irishmen Rebellion (1798). At the end of the play, the old woman transforms into a beautiful young woman. Since the play’s inception, the figure of Cathleen Ní Houlihan has been a symbol of nationalistic pride and has been used as a trope in Irish literature to promote the woman-as-nation ideology. For more information see Quinn’s chapter in *Field Day*. 
was the earth,/the parish of Ventry its length and breadth”. Her body is sexualized as part of the earth, as if she is impregnated by the land itself:

the swell of my flank,
the side of the mountain
my shanks and backbone,
that the sea was lapping
the twin rocks of my feet
the twin rocks of Parkmore
from the old Fenian tales.

Not only is the woman transformed by the land, but also she is infused with the culture. She becomes the setting of “Fenian tales”, part of the Irish folkloric tradition. Although the mother wakes from her dream to discover she has not transformed into the Irish landscape, her dream and by extension the poem itself, is an aíslinge and foreshadows what is to come. In the next stanza, the woman’s daughter has faced her mother as a mountainous hag:

‘What’s wrong?’ ‘O, Mam, I’m scared stiff,
I thought I saw the mountains heaving
like a giantess, with her breasts swaying,
about to loom over, and gobble me up.’

Like the female subject in “Permafrost Woman” (MS) who subverts her male oppressor’s gaze by turning her gaze on him, the mountainous “Hag” subverts the gaze of her child.

46 Meaning “dream” or “vision”, it was a genre of Irish language poetry developed in the 17th and 18th c.
Furthermore, the mother has become aggressive, wanting to devour her child. On one level, Ní Dhomhnaill is conveying the complicated relationship between mother and child. On another level, she is depicting Ireland as a violent mother who threatens her posterity. If we see the hag as Ireland, the child becomes a threat its traditions and culture. Furthermore, the poem can be read through a feminist eco-critical lens to convey that the feminized earth is striking back at her posterity for the threat it poses to her existence. This concept is a derivative of some of Boland’s early ideas on feminist politics in poetry.

In her earlier volumes, Boland promotes the idea that in order to create something new, one must destroy the old. She criticizes the female muse in Irish poetry. In her essay, “The Irish Woman Poet: Her Place in Literature” Boland states, “The poem I inherited contained passive, ornamental images of women. This was particularly true where the woman in the Irish poem in any way suggested the generic, the national, the muse figure” (Randolph, 76). As a result, Boland created a new way of representation equipped with an active female subject liberated from the static tropes of the male-dominated literary canon. In more recent volumes she circles back to these ideas in an effort to reinforce a strictly female history. In her volume, Domestic Violence (2007), Boland’s poem “To Memory” is an ode to the Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne.47 By honoring the mother of muses on her own terms, she is able to detach from a patriarchal line of interpretation where muses were silent women who inspired men, used throughout history and literature to further subjugate women. This muse is not man’s creation. Boland rejects phallocentric representation in her characterization of the “motherless

47 Mnemosyne, goddess of memory and mother of the nine muses in Greek mythology.
landscape,” arguably a direct subversion of the Mother Ireland/woman-as-land trope. The poem weaves together images of nature, cycles of childbirth and seasonal change to convey a strictly matrilineal line and a distinctly female form of representation. There is no mention of the male sex, but rather the poem exists in a gynocentric universe.

Mnemosyne and the female speaker function alongside each other, perhaps amalgamating into one person. In attempt to reconcile their current status with their historical representations, Boland reveals their past limitations to acknowledge a female literary tradition. She writes,

This is for you, goddess that you are.
This is a record for us both, this is a chronicle.
There should be more of them, they should be lyrical
and factual, and true, they should be written down
and spoken out on rainy afternoons, instead of which
they fall away; so I have written this, so it will not.

The title, “To Memory,” acts not only as a tribute to the goddess, but also it forces the reader to remember women’s struggle to claim her voice. For Boland, it is important to write down the female tradition as not to forget the repressive traditions against which both the muse and the female poet emerged. The speaker reveals anxiety about the dissolving tradition, perhaps fearful that her past struggles will be forgotten. However, she has charged herself with documenting the past. As seen in many of Boland’s poems, her speaker is tasked with creating, maintaining, and in this case memorializing, a female literary tradition.
Like Ní Chuilleanáin, Boland demonstrates a movement from depicting repressive, patriarchal symbols to re-envisioning female role models. There is the trap, however, in using any kind of metaphor to represent the female body, as any singular representation is limiting. However, Boland’s first person perspective allows her to oscillate between the Mnemosyne figure and the real body of her female speaker. By using both the mother figure and the muse figure, Boland is able to reconcile personal and collective experience. Clutterbuck argues that Boland’s poetic strategy is to negotiate between “the artist’s necessary dilemma of representative authority in recovering the voice of the Other, as she brings that voice from outside to inside history” (72). She goes on to say that Boland’s self-consciousness is vital to her poetic strategy. Although some people criticize Boland’s self-conscious persona and her use of an all-assuming “I”, I support Clutterbuck’s claim that Boland’s “I” is not singular, but rather depicts a collective experience without diminishing female experience to sameness (73). In “To Memory,” Boland simultaneously represents one woman and all of the female figures who were historically repressed by patriarchal literary tradition.

As we see by the end, the poem is not only an ode to the goddess of memory, but a plea to maintain a female tradition. The female subject implores another mother, the mother of muses, to protect a gynocentric history and literary tradition. Boland writes:

and I am telling you this: you are after all
not simply the goddess of memory, you have
nine daughters yourself and can understand.
Although Boland is certainly not the only female Irish poet to negotiate the liberation of the female image as a muse, arguably she was the first and most direct. Her work to radically change the female image from its confined space in the patriarchal tradition, including woman-as-landscape, woman-as-Ireland, silenced women and unnamed women, to placing it at the forefront of poems has been invaluable to the Irish poetry tradition and women’s poetry in general. As a result, she created the framework for Ní Chuileánáin and Ní Dhomhnaill to write liberally about resurrected female bodies.

**Mythic Transformation: Female Resurrections in Ní Dhomhnaill and Ní Chuileánáin’s poems**

There is something reverent about the way Ní Chuileánáin uses myth, perhaps due to her religious references and analogues; whereas Ní Dhomhnaill’s playful and often sardonic use of myth and folklore overtly reveals the darker side of human nature. Instead of elevating everyday experiences and people to mythic grandeur, Ní Dhomhnaill reveals the complications of urbane experiences by having mythic characters commandeer their seemingly ordinary lives. Although her style is arguably much more accessible and direct than Ní Chuileánáin’s, Ní Dhomhnaill also uses myth to depict marginalized lives as significantly more complicated than they are presumed to be.

Rebirth, resurrection and mythic transformation is a common theme in both in Ní Dhomhnaill’s “The Death and Rebirth of the Mermaid” \(^{48}\) (*FMM*) and Ní Chuileánáin’s “Site of Ambush” (*SA*). Both poets use the idea of the body-in-process between two places or identities. As discussed in Chapter Two, Ní Chuileánáin creates analogues

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\(^{48}\) Translated by Paul Muldoon.
between male biblical figures such as Jesus, Lazarus, Ezekiel and her female subjects, not only to elevate their status, but also to show a female resurrection. This resurrection depicts not only an emergence of a more equitable identity, but also the emergence of the female voice as teacher and poet. Like Ní Chuilleanáin’s girl who is resurrected out of the water in the last section of “Site of Ambush,”

When the child comes back
Soaked from her drowning
Lay fast hold of her
And do not let her go

Ní Dhomhnaill also depicts a maiden’s emergence from water. In both cases, the girl’s resurrection offers a fresh start. She is not only liberated from the previously oppressive and/or violent space, but is given a new, more active role. Arguably, both resurrections depict a female re-entrance into society and also language.

In Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem, the girl emerges from a war-torn Ireland, where children senselessly die alongside men and are forgotten. In Ní Dhomhnaill’s poem, the young girl breaks free from her mother, journeys through a sexual awakening, dies and then emerges as a new woman. It can be argued that the mother is a metaphor for Ireland. As discussed earlier, the nation is often depicted as a mother and this “very spiteful and hardhearted mother” demonstrates nationalistic qualities such as conservative values and an adherence to patriarchal structure, further supporting her comparability with Ireland. Through the girl’s rejection of her mother, Ní Dhomhnaill rejects patriarchal tropes and representation. However, Ní Dhomhnaill is careful to represent the split between mother
and child as violent, revealing the coded argument that a split from the nation (or the literary canon) is also violent. The mother beats her daughter for seeing the shepherd who encourages her beauty:

When her mother heard what was going on
she took a horsewhip of horsehair and beat her round the dunghill with it
and there are witnesses to that day who would swear on the Bible
she broke the leg of a bed on her back.

In depicting the mother as violent, Ní Dhomhnaill creates a split between mother and daughter to foreshadow the daughter’s need to reject her origins and reemerge as a new subject.

It is not a coincidence that the mermaid girl goes through her own *bildungsroman* “down under a currach” in the water. As discussed earlier, water plays an important role in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry, as it represents a space for transformation. She writes:

by the brow of the cliff. All about them were sea pinks
and the tang of the tide. That was when
what happened happened. There mermaid became a woman,
the mermaid who had until then been only a girl.

This sexual awakening mirrors the girl’s conception and birth within a watery womb. She must again return to water, copulate and then re-emerge. This second conception marks a definitive split from the mermaid’s mother, because the only way for the girl to become an independent subject is to be reborn completely apart from her mother’s womb.

Whether it is due to shame, fear of consequence or desire for intimacy, the act of sex is
unspeakable. The speaker cannot detail the copulation, only “what happened happened. The mermaid became a woman.” She is reminiscent of the young girl in Ní Chuilleanáin’s “Passing Over in Silence” (BS): “She never told what she saw in the wood; …She kept the secret of the woman lying…She held her peace about the man who waited.” Although in Ní Chuilleanáin’s poem, the unspeakable act is implied to be a rape, in Ní Dhomhnaill’s it is consensual sexual act. This concept of unspeakability is linked to representation, specifically to a female language that does not always have a clear sign to signifier relationship.\(^{49}\)

Throughout the poem, the young girl is reminiscent of the Greek Narcissus, as she is always wanting to catch a glimpse of her reflection and admire her own beauty. Ultimately, her desire to look at herself in the bathtub is her demise: “Her mother seized the opportunity and tipped her into the bath/and the mermaid was left without her beauty or indeed her life.” Her lover rescues her and “in the name of Satan, the children of Adam and Eve,/didn’t he raise her from the dead, like a zombie,” The mermaid must die and be re-born in order to enter back into a society as a speaking, independent subject. However, her restored voice is not the same as it was previous to the resurrection: “and there was always a certain impediment that always stayed with her.” The speaker also notes that a “hardness” would sometimes come over the woman’s body, as if she were made of wood. In depicting these side-effects of the mermaid’s transformation, Ní Dhomhnaill is satirizing the female’s re-emergence into society. She is saying that in order for a woman to have her own poetic voice she must become dead to the patriarchal world and resurrect with an entirely unique voice.

\(^{49}\) See discussion of Kristeva pg. 4-6.
In a more comedic resurrection, in “Opening the Tomb” \((FMM)\)\(^{50}\) Ní Dhomhnaill creates a clear analogue between Jesus and her great-grandmother. This resurrection echoes back to Ní Chuilleanáin’s female subject in “Skeleton Walk” whose analogues to Lazarus and Jesus I discussed in Chapter Two.\(^{51}\) However, this resurrection is much more playful than the one Ní Chuilleanáin depicts in “Skeleton Walk.” In addition, Ní Dhomhnaill is blunt about creating a gynocentric resurrection; whereas Ní Chuilleanáin handles gender roles in a more subtle manner. In “Opening the Tomb,” everything is centered on a matrilineal line, the empowerment of the female figure, and female-centered tasks. The female subject is specific to note that her great-grandmother’s tomb is situated “On my aunt’s land.” There is no mention of any man’s ownership of the land, which is important to note given the woman-as-land trope in Irish poetry. What makes this metaphor even more problematic is that a man almost always owns the land, thus with the implication that man owns woman. Ní Dhomhnaill is specific to reject this tradition by clearly demarcating the space as female from the second line of the poem.

In addition, the “strong and sharpwitted” grandmother is honored with food and drink, as if she were a mythic deity. Ní Dhomhnaill turns her resurrection into a festival:

We laughed and celebrated,
Caught with the wonder of it,
We gave out poitín,
Mince pies and apple pies
To the crowds that came to see.

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\(^{50}\) Translated by Paul Muldoon
\(^{51}\) See pages 42-47
The tomb becomes akin to a domestic space for familial celebration. After the festival of food and drink ceases, the grandmother demands that the guests clean her tomb so that she may return to it. She has very strict guidelines for cleaning the tomb:

We would have to close the tomb
On the third day
And she gave us all our orders
To scrub it and polish it
Top to bottom
And to leave no speck
Of dirt or dust in it.

Ní Dhomhnaill’s mention of “the third day” is a clear reference to Christ’s resurrection; however the grandmother’s resurrection is distinctly feminine. Although the cleaning creates the tomb as a domestic space, there is a certain magical element to the process that undermines a domestic marginality. This is exemplified through the threat that “If there fell a scrap of dirt/…This world would get possession/Of the place.” The subject is specific to convey that the resurrected woman is in power: “As she had strictly bidden us.” her followers adhere to the grandmother’s demands for cleaning and closing up the tomb. In addition, the speaker states, “And we followed the directions/She had laid down for us” for securing her legacy: “‘The Great Mother’s Funeral Games’.” By introducing a powerful and respected matriarch as the subject of this resurrection poem, Ní Dhomhnaill subverts (and potentially satirizes) the Christian resurrection. This female-centered one is not about martyrdom or redemption, but rather about celebrating the female image and domestic space, female lineage and family customs. Unlike Ní Chuilleanáin’s female
subject from “Skeleton Walk” who resembles a female Jesus, Lazarus or Ezekiel, Ní Dhomhnaill’s subject in “Opening the Tomb” completely recreates the phallocentric narrative to create a distinctly female narrative.

Through examining these poems, it is clear that although they have different poetic strategies, Ní Chuileánáin, Boland, Ní Dhomhnaill and McGuckian all place female figures at the center of their poems. Comparisons can be made between subject matter, themes and approaches, specifically the rejection of patriarchal repression through the depiction of liberated female voices and bodies. Throughout their work, each poet uses myth to interrogate patriarchal metaphors such as the Mother Ireland figure, woman-as-landscape trope and woman-as-nation trope. In addition, the complicated ways in which these poets depict maternal relationships not only reflects their personal views about maternity and motherhood, but also extends to reflect their views on Ireland as a nation. As a result, the poets are able to expose and critique the relationship between the patriarchal literary tradition and a newly established female literary tradition.
CONCLUSION

Ní Chuilleanáin uses myth not only as an effective way to negotiate secrets and reconcile a personal and public history, but also to validate and give a voice to marginalized figures. She uses myth as a teaching tool, unveiling how traditional myth can be destructive, as its deep-rooted ideologies condition society to believe certain socio-political narratives. Ní Chuilleanáin exposes how questioning mythic stories—who is included, who is omitted, who is vocal, who is silent, what values are perpetuated—allows myth to serve as a powerful platform for discussing identity. Thus, Ní Chuilleanáin’s work becomes relevant not only to other contemporary poets, but also to Women’s, Gender and Queer Studies scholars.

Ní Chuilleanáin uses depictions of marginalized and mythic figures to free herself from the gender debate. She does not promote binaric representations of gender, but rather creates figures that function both within the patriarchal order and outside of it. Most clearly depicted through her fascination with and representation of nuns, Ní Chuilleanáin arrives at depicting an androgynous, liberated spirit born in a patriarchal tradition, but with the ability to transcend it. As a result, her poetry is able to do the same. It is tied to the Irish literary canon because of its roots in myth; however through questioning culturally indoctrinated mythic images and narratives, Ní Chuilleanáin is able to use myth as a tool for social consciousness.


Fitzpatrick, Nicole. “‘The Importance of Breathing’: An Interview with Conor


Heehs, Peter “Myth, History and Theory”, *History and Theory*, vol. 33, no. 1 (1994)


Figure 1.

Correggio’s Assumption of the Virgin (1530)
Antonio da Correggio [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons
Figure 2.

sheela na gig
Figure 3.

Tiziano Vecelli (c. 1490-1576) Italian painter. Painted *Penitent Magdalene* c. 1533. Titian [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons
CURRICULUM VITAE

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CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"Is Twitter the Future of Contemporary Poetry?: Understanding Conor O’Callaghan’s Revolutionary Tweets"
American Conference of Irish Studies and the Canadian Association for Irish Studies
Latitudes: Irish Studies in an International Context
University College Dublin, June 2014

PUBLICATIONS

“‘The Importance of Breathing’: An Interview with Conor O’Callaghan”

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