Trinity ⬡
Women's
Review

"What the hell is it but crumbling masonry": Masculinities and the Fall of the Catholic Big House in Brian Friel's Aristocrats"

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between domestic space, masculinities, and power in Brian Friel's 1980 play, *Aristocrats*. Through a close reading of the domestic space of Ballybeg Hall and the play's male characters—Father, Casimir, and Eamon—the constitution of masculinities within the space of the Catholic Big House is analysed, with particular regard to the complex intersections of class and religion in mid-1970s Donegal that underpin the action of Friel's play. The male characters in Friel's are representative of differing, yet interlocking, iterations of Irish masculinities, each constituted in relation to Ballybeg Hall as a once powerful space.

The fictional setting of Ballybeg is an imaginative space returned to by Brian Friel in many of his works. However, *Aristocrats* (1980), Friel's three-act play, explicitly centralises the imaginative space of domestic life in Ballybeg Hall. Through a

close reading of this domestic space and the play's male characters, the constitution of masculinities within the space of Ballybeg Hall will be examined, considering its unusual status as a Catholic Big House and the complex intersections of class and religion in mid-1970s Donegal that Friel presents in this play. The Big House —a large house and surrounding lands typically owned by a Protestant ascendency family in Ireland—has been an enduring space in Irish literature and culture since the time of the Plantations. Although the Catholic Big House, in which house and land was within the ownership of a Catholic family (for example, Moore Hall in Co. Mayo, the ancestral home of writer George Moore) was less common, it provides a symbolic space in which easy formulations of belonging and power can be disrupted. The characters of Father, Casimir, and Eamon are representative of differing, yet interlocking, iterations of Irish masculinity, each constituted in relation to Ballybeg as an architectural and conceptual space. As a play concerned with the mythologization of and interplay between official and personal history, *Aristocrats* is ripe for analysis of its portrayal of masculinity, a cultural concept that relies heavily on the mythologization of patriarchal power structures. Friel sympathetically articulates the damage the Hall causes to its occupants and those who grew up in its figurative shadow—male and female. While Friel is also concerned with Judith, Claire, Alice, and to an extent, Anna, the Hall exists within an explicit male spatial order. Ballybeg is informed by the presence of the larger-than-life patriarch and a litany of cultural figures (many of whom belong to the Catholic Ascendency class) who may or may not have occupied the space at various points in the Hall's history. Keeping in mind the pluralistic constitution of masculinities, this essay seeks not to assign fixed masculine typologies to the characters of Friel's play, but instead to interrogate their shifting placement within certain designations of masculinity. As theorist R.W Connell asserts, masculinity is not a 'coherent object' (30) but is relational and marked by intersections of geographical place, race, sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, and (dis)ability. While the theoretical basis of this essay is indebted to

Connell's foundational work on masculinities, it is not bound implicitly by Connell's postulations, which are simply starting points for the interrogation of masculinity under patriarchy.

The relationship between masculinity and domestic space is complex. Most philosophical or architectural investigations into the domestic space, such as Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space,* encode the space in feminine or maternal terms while typically assuming a masculine, if not patriarchal, beneficiary of the comfort and safety of the home: 'man is laid in the cradle of the house. And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle' (7), Bachelard postulates. As the concept of the domestic as a separate sphere from the public arena of work and commerce became reified in the Industrial and post-Industrial ages (Gamble 218-19), the home was envisioned as a space of respite for the working man; offering a space to decompress after a busy day at work and protection from the immoral temptation of the public world. Writing on the nineteenth-century American domestic space, Gwendolyn Wright notes that much domestic literature focused on wives managing their husband's public behaviour through the space of home: 'In maintaining a clean, artistic, personalized setting for the family's activities, the good wife was guiding her husband [...] through the "influence" of the home environment' (10). However, that is not to suggest that men have not had agency within the home. As Deborah Cohen argues, men have taken a central role in the design, construction, and decoration of the domestic space. From the mid to the late nineteenth century, home decoration was considered the domain of men: 'Before the 1880s, those who wrote about home decoration largely directed their advice to the man of the house' (157). Much of the research on masculinity and space is centred around the Victorian family home. There is little work on aristocratic domesticity and masculinity, and even less that considers the specificities of the Irish Catholic Big House. As such, Friel's play offers a means through which these complexities can be examined.

Masculinity, in Ireland, as in other patriarchal Western cultures, is taken as a stable, coherent, or normative object

against which other gender identities can be measured. Connell's four-pronged framework of hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalised masculinities are not to be viewed as essential 'male' characteristics but aid in analysing how masculinity is socially and culturally constructed. There is no one way in which masculinity is performed or embodied by Irish men. As Debbie Ging notes, 'remasculinising' (20) the nation after decolonisation and partition was a key symbolic project of the Irish Free State. As such, colonial images of Irish masculinity were eschewed for a Free State Irish masculinity which orbited around the image of the Gael and was underwritten by a Catholic education system and displays of sportsmanship in the GAA (Ging 25). While Friel's play, set in the mid-1970s, denotes that Irish masculinity has progressed from its immediate postcolonial origins, traces of this Free State masculinity exist as an undercurrent. Brian Singleton suggests that determining a clear definition of Irish masculinity is particularly difficult in a post-colonial context, 'given [the] feminization [of Irish men] in the colonial period, subordinated to the hegemonic forces of British law, custom, and practice' (8).

Reflecting the reality of Big House ownership in Ireland, literary representation of the Catholic Big House is slim relative to the representation of those Big Houses under Protestant ownership. Garland Kimmer suggests that Friel consciously plays with the marginal positioning of the Catholic Ascendency (197), referencing Roy Foster's assertion that Ascendency class identity is predicated on Anglicanism (Foster 21). It is evident throughout the play that the O'Donnells are caught between the polarities of the Protestant Ascendency and the Catholic working- and middle-classes. As Vera Kreilkamp notes, Ascendency houses typically signal 'division, not community' (60) and while the O'Donnells' Catholicism may potentially signal a common bond with the wider community of Ballybeg, their authority is ultimately associated with colonial power.

Set design notes and stage directions at the beginning of the text make clear the declining spatial order, as well as the unusual status, of the Catholic Big House. The Hall is described as 'a large and

decaying house' (Friel 251), situated in the County Donegal countryside. Design notes centralise the past grandeur of the Hall: the collapsing gazebo with 'a pagoda roof' (250), suggesting a colonial-influenced architecture and a broken sundial, a decorative, if not anachronistic, object. The set props also add to the declining grandeur: a Victorian writing desk, a marble fireplace and a chaise-longue 'indicate when the Hall flourished' (251). There is a noticeable lack of Catholic material culture in the Hall: save for a crucifix there is little evidence of typical Catholic ephemera such as devotional pictures, statues, or holy water vessels. This encoding of both collapse and difference in the set design is reflected in the play's male characters.

The most obvious example of hegemonic masculinity in Friel's play is the character of Father, who is explicitly linked to the space of the Hall. They are connected by their mutual decay, with their former power and authority frequently asserted and remembered by their younger counterparts. Alice notes her father's physical decline: 'he was always such a big strong man, with such power, such authority; and then to see him lying there, so flat under his clothes, with his mouth open' (289). Father's presence in the space of Ballybeg is, for most of the play, a disembodied, aural one. He has suffered multiple strokes and occupies an upstairs bedroom. However, his presence infiltrates the house through the memories of his children and the technology of the baby monitor, broadcasting his voice throughout the house. This reveals his weakness due to ill-health while also reinforcing the presence he still commands. Via the baby monitor the other inhabitants of the Hall are privy to his laboured breathing and 'incoherent mumbling' (256), as well as to Judith tending to him, gaining intimate knowledge of his body and illness.

His power is related to his professional and personal judgement. His disembodied voice switches from confusion to strident authority as he relives old court scenes and family issues. Father's voice infantilises Casimir: at the end of Act I Casimir is cradled in Judith's arms like a child and his fear is further evidence of Father's ability to police the domestic

space through his voice. His voice, articulating his judgement, also bleeds into the memory of the house. In Casimir's recounting of W.B Yeats' alleged visit to the hall, Yeats appears to ventriloquise Father and his emotional coldness. Yeats, apparently disappointed with the lack of paranormal activity in the Hall, accuses Father of betrayal. This word is most readily associated with Father through his accusation of betrayal toward Judith, suggested to be due to either her involvement in the Battle of the Bogside or her status as an unmarried mother. Father's ghostly return to the study, in the climax of Act II, draws out the underlying chaos of the play: characters shout, chairs are overturned. When Father collapses, it is Eamon—the self-made symbolic son of the house—who rushes to catch him. The two of them fall together, signifying a collapse of the Hall and the O'Donnell family patriarch.

Casimir is the 'only son of the house' (254), a status that is troubled by Casimir's relationship to his father, as well as the presence of Eamon. Casimir is described in the stage directions as different and peculiar. His physical movements mark him out as such: they are 'rapid, jerky, without ease or grace' (255). The directions stress that Casimir is not to be made comedic or pathologized by the actor. As the directions state: 'He is a perfectly normal man with distinctive and perhaps slightly exaggerated mannerisms' (255). However, Casimir's characterisation, psychological woundedness, and status as son of the Catholic Big House, places him immediately as an outsider. The existence of his German wife Helga, and their children, is questioned throughout the play. If they do exist, Casimir occupies a non-dominant role within that family too, as Helga is 'the real bread-winner' (272) while his children refer to him as the '*kinder mädchen*' (278), meaning 'the nanny', which places him in a caring, domestic, even maternal, role. However, this feminised coding does not in turn suggest that Casimir embodies complicit, subordinate, or marginalised masculinity. Casimir's relationship to Ballybeg, like his relationship to normative masculinity, is complex. Casimir can only relate to the space in its idealised past. Casimir's relationship to the hall disrupts a linear and logical mythologization of the

space, although it amounts to its own unique myth of the house as a hub of Catholic Ascendency culture and a repository of the safe childhood memory of his mother. Casimir is exhilarated by any memory or recollection of his childhood. The Chopin pieces that Claire plays on the piano allow him entry into an idealised past centred around his mother. Casimir's blurring of reality and idealised memory is evident in his interactions with Tom, the researcher staying with the family, who seeks exact details of the illustrious history of the house and information about family members. Tom and his research represent hard, unassailable fact, while Casimir represents the complexity of human memory.

Recalling Deborah Cohen's point about men's responsibility for home decoration in the Victorian era, Casimir's mythologization of the Hall acts as a form of imaginative interior design. Most of the decorative objects and furniture in the study are explicitly linked to men, many of them cultural figures of the Catholic Ascendency that Casimir ascribes to the collective memory of the Hall. The study is associated with John McCormack, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins (represented by a stain on the arm-rest of a chair), G.K Chesterton (represented by the foot-stool), Daniel O'Connell (represented by the chaise longue); George Moore (represented by a candle-stick); Hilaire Belloc (represented by a Bible), and W.B Yeats (represented by a cushion on the chaise longue). This male mythologization may be due to Casimir representing the end of the O'Donnell genealogical line (Singleton 56), a reality highlighted by the uncertainty over the existence of Casimir's children.

Supporting the connection between the Hall's hegemonic masculinity and Father, Casimir occupies a more comfortable position in the domestic space after Father's death. He openly refers to the impact of Father's behaviour on his psyche. Father clearly influenced Casimir's thinking of himself as peculiar, telling him as a child that he was privileged to be born in a Big House rather than in Ballybeg village: 'Fortunately for you, you

were born here and we can absorb you' (310), Father tells Casimir. The use of 'absorb' illustrates both the all-encompassing protection of the Big House, as well as the danger of its suffocation. This revelation, articulated by Casimir to Eamon in Act III, highlights the complexity of the relationship between domestic space and identity formation. Casimir is not simply a 'peculiar' young boy born into a normal home. The peculiarity of the Hall as a marginal Catholic Big House trying to assert itself as a hegemonic power has had clear psychological effect on Casimir. Although now living a life geographically and financially different from his forefathers, Casimir remains a product of the Hall and its symbolic power.

Like Father, Eamon appears to embody some aspects of hegemonic masculinity, as his violence towards Alice and his conflict with male outsiders to the Hall suggests. However, Eamon's class position and anxiety over his status within the house belies a sense of woundedness, in a manner similar to Casimir. While Casimir's relationship with Ballybeg is refracted through his memories of his parents, Eamon's relationship is formed by what the house represents to the community and his outsider status within the house itself. Eamon, by his own admission, was 'nurtured' (276) on the myth of the Hall by his grandmother, who worked there as a maid. The impact of this myth has been a 'permanent pigmentation' (276) on him, suggesting a contentious yet unalterable relationship between the Hall and Eamon. Eamon represents most clearly a postcolonial masculinity as articulated by both Singleton and Ging.

Eamon's official entry into the Catholic Ascendency through his union with Alice formalises his inherent connection to the Hall. Eamon's upbringing by his grandmother, after his parents emigrated to Scotland, illustrates both his connection and distance from the Ascendency family. Both Eamon and the O'Donnell siblings have faced the loss of one or both parents at an early age. Yet, any connection to the Hall is complicated by the distance the family routinely imposes on him. Alice's insistence that Eamon is 'local […] from the village' (271), to add credence to her claim that the O'Donnell

family are part of the community, is countered by Eamon's repeated articulations that he is not *of* the Hall as well as his differing response to the space.

Eamon takes on the role of provocateur within the Hall. Continuously remarking upon the discrepancies in the Hall's collective memory and mythology, his dialogue runs as a counter-narrative to Casimir's. He calls into question the veracity of Casimir's historical account to Tom by likening the study to 'Madame Tussaud's' as well as to 'a mine-field' (274), hinting at the fabrication of Casimir's memory as well as at the danger of this memory. Eamon also views himself as the protector of the Hall. He is particularly threatened by Tom's presence there, which he feels is a breach of the Hall's boundary. He articulates this through a discourse of burglary: 'In case you'll [Tom] loot and run. Nervous that all you'll see is […] the make believe' (296). Tom is hence a transgressor, a threat to the house, its belongings, and memory. When Judith makes clear her plan to abandon the Hall, Eamon again inserts himself as its protector. His anxiety about the boundary of domestic space speaks to his own anxieties about his outsider-status. However, by the end of the play has come to some sort of détente with his relationship to Ballybeg, surrendering his ownership of the space and articulating the complexities of Irish masculinity:

> What the hell is it but crumbling masonry […] Don't you know that all that is fawning and forelock-touching and Paddy and shabby and greasy peasant in the Irish character finds a house like this irresistible. That's why we were ideal for colonizing (318).

While the image of 'crumbling masonry' can be read as a reference to the decay of the house, it may also be suggestive of the damaged psyches of the Hall and of the damaged and damaging masculine roles available to Irish men within a patriarchal, postcolonial state.

At the close of the play, Friel offers an ambivalent ending. There is little promise that Ballybeg Hall will return to its former

glory. Similarly, there is no hope that the house will be enlivened and reoccupied by a marginalised group such as the daughters of the house or the local Catholics of Ballybeg village. Eamon's attempt at symbolic ownership is conceded at the end of the play. Friel's play ends in a kind of stasis that is perhaps befitting of its subject matter. Both Singleton and Chu He assert that Friel's play has a positive, productive ending: signalling of the inevitable end of the patriarchy of the Big House (Singleton 56) and marked by 'hope and a new start' (He 56). Yet, the ending of Friel's play suggests neither matriarchal future nor neat ending. The women of the house are equally ambivalent toward the Hall as their male counterparts, the division of the Troubles continues, and the family home, a repository of the maternal memory, is effectively abandoned. *Aristocrats* reveals the complexities and nuances of Catholic Ascendency identity as well as of postcolonial Irish masculinity. Through the symbolic image of the Big House near the end of the twentieth century, and a consideration of the close relationship between masculinities and domestic space, Friel's play seems to suggest that though the metaphoric masonry may crumble, memories and traces of structural power remain.

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