

Literary Criticism and the Recovery of Banned Books: The Case of Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* Brad Kent

In discussing a given work and writer, one of the critic's implicit objectives is to make a case for or against their inclusion in the literary canon. The political nature of this objective is heightened in the case of previously censored books that have remained relatively marginal and is especially emphatic in situations wherein a novel is banned almost immediately after its publication. Because of the rapidity of the ban, often the book does not receive an initial readership. As a result, the book in question becomes cloaked in a form of silence, its contents known to a select few who are connected in high cultural circles while the mass public remains largely ignorant of its existence.¹

Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* is one such novel. Published in 1936 and banned in Ireland on 29 December of that same year, its Prohibition Order under the *Censorship of Publications Act* of 1929 was not revoked until 1967, when the passage of amending legislation released all titles that had been banned for a time of twelve years or more.² It is therefore not surprising to find that much of the critical work undertaken on the novel has been in the post-1970 period, although the establishment of Irish Literature as a serious field of study, the ever-increasing academic publishing industry, and the institutional acceptance of more women and women writers were further contributing factors. In his history of the Irish novel, James Cahalan makes the additional claim that O'Brien and other female writers of this period, such as Molly Keane and Maura Laverty, began to enter the canon in the 1980s due largely to reprints of their novels by the feminist presses Arlen House and Virago (204). This recuperative work by fringe presses has helped to spark scholarly interest in formerly overlooked and banned works and made them available for classroom teaching.

The academic reception of *Mary Lavelle* that has followed its reissue has been largely positive, suggesting that there has been a significant process of recovery involved in its critical treatment. Indeed, scholars have devoted a large amount of print to discussing the qualities of the book that challenged the dominant cultural mores of the Ireland of 1936. Of particular interest is the book's depiction of sexuality. Possibly because sexual acts and discussions of sexuality are foregrounded and recur with regularity, there is no comment on other potentially subversive aspects of the book. This situation, however, might also be a reflection of contemporary understanding of the legislation, as the *Censorship of Publications Act* allowed that the five member Censorship Board could ban a book if it "is indecent or obscene or advocates the unnatural prevention of conception or the procurement of abortion" (Article 6.1). To clarify matters, "indecent" was defined "as including suggestive of or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave" (Article 2). The result of this, when examining the list of thousands of banned books, is undoubtedly an obsession on portrayals of sexual matters. But such a surface reading ignores the warning of Senator Sir John B. Keane, who during the debates over the impending legislation feared that books would be hidden behind a "camouflage of sex." In effect, the Censorship Board's true problem might be a book's treatment of social, cultural or political concerns, but it would only need to gesture towards the sexual to justify a banning. Critics who therefore fixate solely on the sexual in banned works are at risk of perpetuating the censor's perspective in neglecting other aspects. That is, by focusing critical commentary on only one or two potentially subversive facets of a book, supporters fail to make a significant case for its adoption into the canon of Irish Literature. Why, one might counterargue, should an already crowded canon with other noteworthy and deserving works and writers make place for a book with only one or two points of interest?

By not providing more sophisticated readings of previously censored and currently marginal works, scholars do not adequately recover books that were originally suppressed by the Censorship Board. Indeed, in the course of their work, critics can either hamper or facilitate censor-

ship. Although it would be problematic to say that they are intentionally complicit with censorship, it does reveal how the condition of censorship, the marginalizing of works and ideas, takes its toll on the recovery process. Cary Nelson has demonstrated this to be the case in the United States in a penetrating study of the cultural repression of politically radical artists by society *and* academics. He focuses on the role that scholars must undertake to recover these writers and their works, a role that he plays in advocating for the inclusion of poetry by left wing and black writers that was repressed in the McCarthyite era and its aftermath. Recovery, he emphasizes, is a *process*, one that needs constant attention and revision. In providing a more complex and multidimensional reading of potentially subversive aspects of *Mary Lavelle*, this essay contributes to a similar process.

Furthermore, the analysis that follows challenges the way that Irish literary censorship has been discussed in scholarly studies. To date, it has been almost singularly examined from institutional and societal standpoints, the roles of legislators, special interest groups, the Catholic Church, booksellers, librarians, and customs agents all impressively scrutinized. But, it is rather surprising that while the subject of the Censorship Board's concern is literature and periodicals, there has been very little attention devoted to the banned texts themselves.³ A part of this neglect has stemmed from the fact that the most sustained examinations of censorship have come from historians.⁴ In the most recent of these studies, Peter Martin, perhaps more candidly than his predecessors, admits that while he provides a rather panoramic view of society and the institution of censorship, he stops short of the censored books, believing it beyond the domain of his discipline and thus absolving himself of the responsibility of reading books as he might any other primary text such as a government report or a personal letter (4). This view then implicitly influences the work undertaken by the literary critics who have not provided more nuanced readings of banned books: in effect, it continues to silence them, sidelining the actual writing as unnecessary to understanding how literary censorship worked.

Mary Lavelle begs to be read as a book embedded in censorship for both its banning and its treatment of literature as suspect. Towards the

outset of the novel, having recently arrived in Altorno, Spain, Mary finds herself reminiscing about her home town of Mellick, Ireland, that she has left behind to become a governess for the Areavaga family's three teenage daughters. Her thoughts range from her indifferent father and his stagnant medical practice to her two brothers who, for various reasons, have quit Ireland to work in England and America, and finally to her fiancé, John MacCurtain. Though the recollection of home from abroad might be understandably sentimental or cause one to recoil, Mary describes both Mellick and her family with a cool distance. Her remembrance of kissing John for the first time evokes the expectation of pleasure, yet Mary claims that she felt only relief when their lips parted. The blame for the disappointment masked by this relief is placed upon neither her nor John, but a third party: "Kissing, she had understood from literature, hearsay and innuendo, was a pleasant privilege between two who loved, but until John came, hungrily compelling, no one had ever kissed her mouth" (31). Literature and gossip have therefore shaped her perceptions and expectations, the romantic strain of both leading her to believe in an ideal that is not met by the reality. In this brief recollection, O'Brien acknowledges the power of literature to form people and their beliefs. Mary's subtle placement of blame on literature for its effect on individuals is much the same argument that is often made to justify censorship. In such circumstances, the banning of a book is viewed as a preventative act, one that protects potential readers from what the censor considers harmful words, ideas or images.⁵ That such a moment would occur at the outset of a banned book is, in hindsight, a touch of irony.⁶

A question then follows: what might have caused *Mary Lavelle* to be banned from Irish society? That is, what is there in *Mary Lavelle* that failed to fit into, or even threatened, the popular and official construct of Irishness? As I have already mentioned, the responses from literary critics are often facile and reductive: *Mary Lavelle* was banned because the title character has an affair with Juanito, the married son of the Areavaga family. More recently, cases have been made that the confession of lesbian love by Agatha Conlan to Mary was even more scandalous and this, coupled with the individualist-feminist undertones of the

book, further contributed to its banning. While both of these possibilities will be discussed, it is necessary to explore some ignored aspects of the novel as also instrumental, all of which seek to undercut the narrative of official nationalism.

On the surface, the statement that *Mary Lavelle* was banned for the adulterous affair between Mary and Juanito seems obvious. John Cronin, for example, only notes that O'Brien "ran into trouble with the Censorship Board because ... she permits her Irish heroine to have a brief affair with her Spanish lover before returning to Ireland" (146). Lorna Reynolds makes a similar claim, though provides a more nuanced reading in arguing that the novel was banned because the Irish girl *willingly* has sex and is not *led* astray (62). Certainly, Mary is the title character and her actions and words will largely affect how the book is read and interpreted. The relationship between Mary and Juanito becomes the focal point for the way in which she realizes her selfhood and the need for individual freedom. Confession of their sexual union is the means by which she will disengage herself from both John and Irish society. A fallen woman, Mary knows she will be forced to leave Ireland and work abroad to support herself. The banning of *Mary Lavelle*, when the book is boiled down to this simple summary, is therefore justified because of the negative model Mary represents for young Irish women whose ideas of love, like Mary's, are formed by the literature they read. But this conclusion fails to recognize the possibility that Mary and Juanito's relationship was threatening in other ways.

On two occasions in his study of Irish censorship, M.H. Adams mentions that some books were objected to by Catholic associations on the basis of their contents advocating "Race Suicide" (19 and 27), yet he never explains to what this term refers. While it implies contraception, the effects that this has on population control, and the opposition of the Church, "Race Suicide" might also be considered a vein of xenophobia, more specifically the fear of racial impurity and miscegenation. Published in 1936, *Mary Lavelle* was received by a world that was on the brink of armed conflict and faced with the upheavals of communism and fascism. These threats were particularly the case in Spain, where the novel is set. In fact, a contemporary review of the book in the *Irish Press*

uses the war in Spain to register displeasure with O'Brien's work, hoping that it might have one positive outcome: the banishment of "that blind alley career of the English speaking 'miss' from Ireland" (M.R.K.).⁷ Fascism was, of course, not foreign to Ireland: the blue shirts formed a visible presence, although they remained a marginal group as the Ireland of 1936 was largely unreceptive to their political ideology.⁸ Ireland was still dealing, however, with the fresh memory of a long period of colonization, a guerrilla war of independence, and the civil war of 1922–23. The need to stabilize the torn post-independence society helps to explain why censorship legislation was enacted. The legislation was also a means for the State and its institutions to construct Irish identity in narrow and puritanical terms, to conceive of Irishness in terms of a singular, as opposed to a plural, noun. Anything, or anyone, that does not conform to this construct is therefore a foreign body that threatens to contaminate the larger society and must thus be banned. In this way, Juanito represents not only pre-marital and adulterous sex for Mary, but a foreign body co-mingling with and penetrating the pure Irish body politic, a point to which I will return in a moment.

The sexual union of Juanito and Mary, however, is portrayed in contradictory terms. Juanito, upset that Mary is leaving Spain to avoid indiscretion, rushes to Altorno and takes her away into the mountains above the town. There, in a secluded spot, Juanito claims he wishes only to talk with her, which Mary repeatedly refuses, preferring to have sexual intercourse. Juanito, giving in to her, remarks that she is seducing him (305–6). Considering it is he who seeks her out on every occasion that they clandestinely meet, and brings her to their isolated place, it is odd that he should place the blame on her. In so doing, Juanito evades all responsibility for his own actions. This scene can be read as an analogue to the shifting of both individual and societal responsibility on to the potentially evil influence of literature as justification for censorship. In effect, Juanito exercises the power and authority he has over Mary, a young, inexperienced woman living in exile, by suggesting that the fault of the act is hers. Mary, partly because of her Catholic upbringing, accepts this responsibility out of guilt, but the exchange also reifies negative aspects of gender relationships by implying that, despite Juanito's

role as the one who has provoked and orchestrated their private meetings, the fault lies with Mary as a woman: she has led the man into temptation and adultery. This possibility is never explicitly suggested in the narrative, nor anywhere in critical works dedicated to the novel. One reason for this might be in the novel's thrust towards O'Brien's claim for the importance of individual freedom, especially for women. By accepting responsibility for seducing Juanito, Mary in effect accepts responsibility for her own choices and her own life. While this acceptance is an important point to consider, it remains problematic because the circumstances leading up to their having sex are manipulated by Juanito. Interpretation of the passage is further complicated by the way in which the sexual act is described.

Before the lovers give in to their physical desires, Mary says that she is aware that because she is a virgin Juanito will cause her pain (307). When it comes, the pain is described in masochistic terms that border precariously between martyrdom and rape:

He took her quickly and bravely. The pain made her cry out and writhe in shock, but he held her hard against him and in great love compelled her to endure it. He felt the sweat of pain break over all the silk of her body. He looked at her face, flung back against the moss, saw her set teeth and quivering nostrils, beating eyelids, flowing, flowing tears. The curls were clammy on her forehead now, as on that day when she came into Luisa's drawing-room from the bullfight. She was no longer Aphrodite, but a broken, tortured Christian, a wounded Saint Sebastian. He held her still and murmured wild Spanish words of love. His heart hurt him as if it might in fact break. How grotesquely we are made, he thought, how terrible and insane are our delights and urgencies. I love her, love her, and yet I tear and break her for my pleasure, because I must, because I love her, because she loves me. (308–9)

The excitement and violence are such that the bullfight is evoked as having had the same effect on Mary. After her first time at the corrida, the reader is told that "the wound of the bullfight was in fact—

though she tried to forget and ignore it—the gateway through which Spain had entered in and taken her” (128). Later, while dancing with Juanito in Altono’s Plaza San Martín upon their first private meeting, this violent equation of Juanito and the *corrida* is foreshadowed: “She thought of the bullfight suddenly, of how it *ravished* her memory. This too she would need to remember” (190, emphasis added). Just as the bullfight represents cultural penetration of Mary’s psyche, Juanito’s physical penetration represents the final stage of Mary’s transformation into one who has ceased to be wholly affected and directed by a single cultural and political entity—in Mary’s case, the norms and mores of Irish society. Cultural and physical miscegenation has therefore tainted Mary, the virginal Irish colleen who has now taken on the ambiguous identity of an exile. One understands why she and John, before she left for Spain, had decided she should not see a bullfight (106), the implication being that it was more he than she who had so decided. Her acquiescence is yet another example of Mary’s submission to male authority, though one she refuses by attending the *corrida* only six weeks into her stay.

In reading the bullfight as a foreshadowing of Mary’s sexual act with Juanito, Adele Dalsimer notes the sexual overtones of its description (36). Emma Donoghue critiques Dalsimer, believing that the bullfight does not foreshadow sex with Juanito for the simple fact that it is Agatha Conlan, the Irish lesbian governess, who brings her to see it (43). However, Donoghue’s hasty dismissal is more evidence of her own ideological and critical investment than a nuanced counter-argument: she notes at the outset of her essay that it is “necessary” to read O’Brien as a lesbian novelist (36). In effect, Donoghue marginalizes those who read O’Brien’s works with an eye to her relationship to Catholicism, Ireland, the upper middle-class, or life as an exiled member of the diaspora, let alone other methods of inquiry apart from identity politics. Donoghue also neglects that it is in fact Mother Liguori whose mention of the position and whose letter of reference for Mary brought her to Spain and Juanito (34–5), just as Agatha brings her to the *corrida*; Mary is therefore led to cultural and physical miscegenation by women who are devout, practising Catholics.

However, the physical miscegenation in Mary's sexual union with Juanito is foreshadowed by a less violent cultural penetration that begins to take effect only one week into her stay: "She had begun to drink wine at dinner, and to dip churros in her chocolate.... She felt a little at home" (75). Earlier, in her first letter to John, she writes: "There is wine on my table always, but I haven't had the courage to try it yet! Nice business if I got drunk! What would you say if you heard that of me?" (9). The fact that Mary, after only one week in Spain, begins to readily imbibe wine without a thought of John and Ireland but instead feels "a little at home" reveals that she has undergone changes induced by the Spanish culture five weeks before the corrida. Finally, Mary's sexual union with Juanito and its link to the bullfight is further anticipated by the marriage of the Irish governess O'Toole to the retired matador-cum-shopkeeper Pepe (269–81). But the coupling of heterosexuals is a means, not an end; it is through the sexual act that Mary irreversibly sets herself on a course of individual freedom.

Again, a scholar attempting to make a case for including O'Brien in the canon runs up against readings that while celebrating the author simultaneously refuse to tease out the careful nuances and sophistication of her writing, preferring to remain fixated on only one or two aspects of her work.⁹ As a result, she remains, as critics justifiably lament, an under-appreciated figure in literary history despite her contemporary importance and achievements. Eavan Boland, for one, regarding O'Brien's past critical reception, states that she "was neither an Irish writer nor a woman writer in the accepted sense of those terms" (19). Eibhear Walshe similarly notes this problem, stating that "[s]he falls into no ready category, judged as appearing to vacillate between popular fiction and 'literature', Catholic conscience and Wildean dissidence, English letters and Irish writing, bourgeois history and feminist fable" (Introduction 1). Says Ailbhe Smyth: "Kate O'Brien suffered a long banishment to the outlying regions of (Irish) canonical acceptability. Not totally dismissed but not considered central either" (26). In an interesting twist, Donoghue writes that "[b]ooks on lesbian literature almost never mention Kate O'Brien's name; it is always as an Irish novelist, closeted in nationality, that she is known" (55). Donoghue's criti-

cal route of interrogating and deconstructing the terms “lesbian” and “Irish” as mutually exclusive is in need of more sustained analysis here. In so doing, she could help to counter the views of Jennifer Jeffers who, while celebrating many of the younger writers of the 1990s, claims that “Irish religious, gender, sexual, and material precedents in fiction that overtly challenge heterosexual culture and regulation are basically nonexistent” (4). Despite such beliefs, homosexuality in Irish literature did not begin with the period of the ‘Celtic Tiger,’ though perhaps O’Brien’s marginal status to the canon has caused many contemporary critics to overlook *Mary Lavelle*, *The Land of Spices* and *As Music and Splendour*.¹⁰

As the discussion above suggests, the secondary plot concerning Agatha Conlan and her love for Mary is cited as the other reason for the book’s banning.¹¹ There is, however, nothing salacious about Agatha’s confession; in fact, though she is normally abrasive towards others, she is quite tender and timid towards Mary. Agatha admits to her: “I told you a lie that day. You asked me if I’d ever had a crush.... And I said I’d never had a crush on a living creature. That would have been true up to the first day I saw you. It’s not true any more.... I thought it quite funny that O’Toole’s romance, and my absurd infatuation—began more or less together” (284–5). The hurt and circumlocution then become focused against Mary’s gentle protests: “I like you the way a man would, you see. I never can see you without—without wanting to touch you. I could look at your face forever” (285). The lesbian love never moves beyond mere words and remains unrequited. This fact, coupled with the relationship’s marginality to the main story-line of Mary and Juanito’s affair, might have kept it safe from the censor’s wrath. Agatha’s avowal could also seem at first glance to be entirely unnecessary for Mary’s movement towards individual freedom. However, Donoghue perceptively remarks that O’Brien’s strategy of diverse presentations of the theme of forbidden love allows her “to make, not a special plea for lesbians, but a grand argument for moral accountability and tolerance” (39). Therefore, instead of distracting from or seeming tangential at best to the main story-line, Agatha’s unrequited love for Mary becomes quite central in its thematically supporting role. Because of this, the banning

of *Mary Lavelle* on the grounds that Mary and Juanito's relationship is immoral makes Agatha's story guilty by association.

Agatha's lesbianism is imagined before the reader even encounters her. Seated for the first time in the *café Alemán*, a local meeting place for expatriate English-speaking governesses (most of whom are Irish), Mary's interest is piqued about the absent woman. When she asks who Agatha is, the comments elicited from the others can be read as hints of her lesbianism though it is assumed they are not aware of this aspect of her life—she herself only becomes conscious of it upon meeting and falling in love with Mary. The governesses alternately refer to Agatha as “a lunatic. The worst tempered woman in Spain;” “She's a bitter pill;” “She's a bit of a poser;” “She's just not like the rest of us;” and “One of her sort is quite enough” (84). To this, Mary can only remark, “She sounds queer” (84), meaning ‘odd.’ Agatha is therefore differentiated from the others at the outset. She is also the sole governess to have learned how to speak Spanish and she is portrayed as an *oficianado*—or *oficianada*—of the *corrida*, perhaps making a further case for how perverting and dangerous miscegenation on a cultural level can be to the psycho-spiritual makeup of an individual.

Both Mary and Agatha, the novel's two female sexual deviants, are those who embrace Spanish customs, the implication being that the embracing of a new culture means a letting go of the old. As these two protagonists turn away from Irish culture, their stay in Spain becomes a means for them to shirk the traditional gender roles of mother or nun. Emphasizing this aspect of the novel, Smyth claims that the banning of the book was the result of its move towards a freedom of the individual from the tyranny of society as intertwined with a freedom of the woman from the tyranny of patriarchy:

Kate O'Brien was censored because her heroines expose and, to differing degrees, resist the bondage of patriarchy and all its paraphernalia—family, marriage, property, religion, class, and all the rest of it. They come to knowledge, if not to sweet and lasting joy, through experiences which are not defined or controlled by men. (31)

Though the open rebellion of O'Brien's characters against patriarchy certainly would not have helped her case with censorship, it is not the *sole* reason for the banning. And, although they rebel variously against patriarchy, they do so to different degrees, normally in ways that are quite subtle. Agatha, for example, upon admitting her love to Mary, states: "I know it was wrong; but lately I've been told explicitly about it in confession. It's a very ancient and terrible vice" (285). Agatha's rebellion is not complete: she has not accepted her love for Mary and the naturalness of it, continuing to believe, as the Church does, in its sinfulness. She reiterates this position in their last meeting in the café Alemán, even as she begins to question her religious beliefs: "It can't be such a ghastly crime to—to think about you.... I fell into what my confessor calls the sin of Sodom.... They know their business. And hard cases make bad laws" (297–98). Yet Agatha, whether with a priest or with Mary, has accepted the need to confess. Likewise, Mary states that she will return to Ireland, confess to John and leave. Their rebellions are therefore tempered by subjecting themselves to the approval or disapproval of patriarchal authority. In this regard, Anne Fogarty claims that

O'Brien's involvement with family structures may be seen not only as an attempt on her part to explore the plight of women who are fated to be trapped in domestic relations but also as a reflection of the particular historical era in which these texts were produced. The familism of her novels acts as a commentary on the closed and hierarchical nature of Irish society in the initial decades of the Free State. (103)

Mary Lavelle, though it is not as representative of familism as other O'Brien novels such as *The Ante-Room* or even the convent-set *The Land of Spices*,¹² reveals the necessity of women to quit Ireland in order to break free of its patriarchal nature and its attendant trappings, yet also how difficult it is for those who have physically separated themselves from that society to cast off its psychological shackles. Agatha and Mary appear relatively at ease with Agatha's newly discovered lesbianism, yet they both struggle with it as a sin as defined by the Church. And Mary's individual freedom is realized only once she has had sex with Juanito, a

problematic equation of the need of a male to extricate the female from patriarchal demands.

But Mary's need was not, at the outset, total freedom. Upon hearing of the governess position, she thinks:

To go to Spain. To be alone for a little space, a tiny hiatus between her life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife. To be a freelance, to belong to no one place or family or person—to achieve that silly longing of childhood, only for one year, before she flung it with all other childish things upon the scrap-heap. Spain! (34)

Spain represents a respite from the accepted roles of daughter and wife; a governess exists in a sort of societal limbo outside of either world, this isolation being reinforced by the exile of the governesses of Altono and their private corners of the café Alemán. Yet Mary leaves Ireland to take on another traditional role: the matronly position of governess. The restricted role of wife and mother she would assume in patriarchal Catholic Ireland is therefore substituted for the equally restricted role of governess in patriarchal Catholic Spain.

Indeed, the women of Spain appear as restricted as the women of Ireland. Luisa, Juanito's wife, is accorded much respect because her drawing-room has been featured in *Vogue* magazine. O'Brien tellingly describes it as "*Luisa's* drawing-room" (232, emphasis added), not Luisa and Juanito's: her husband is the upwardly mobile young man in the world of Spanish politics while Luisa is relegated to the domestic sphere. Likewise Doña Consuela, Juanito's mother, maintains this hegemony in her view of men: "They had brains and from them created a world of argument, schemes, dreams and ideas where women need not enter, thank Heaven, and where feminine wisdom must be content to let them move in peace" (44). Instead of supporting the independence and inquisitiveness of her youngest daughter, she worries about what sort of husband they will find the "queer" Milagros (43), and chastizes Pilár, her eldest daughter who is on the verge of coming out in society circles, for eating like the rest of them: "[Y]ou know that bread soup isn't good for your figure! Did you weigh yourself to-day?" (41). Doña Consuela reinforces

the patriarchal gaze and Pilar's obsession with how society will approve her once she is made available—in other words, her value once she is on upper-class society's matrimonial market. The patriarchy of Irish society is therefore not absent in Spain. It does not, however, heavily impinge upon Mary's life and allows her, as an exile apart from the host community in terms of familial and cultural ties, a relative amount of freedom.

The official nationalism of the Irish Free State, like Spain, was informed by the values of the Catholic Church. In *Mary Lavelle*, the clergy is most visibly represented by an Andalucian priest, Don Jorge, who teaches the Areavaga girls music while Mary chaperones their lessons. Mary notes how, given the subject being taught, Don Jorge's movements around the room and with the girls are allowed a certain liberty. Though his actions are not perceptibly indecent towards his pupils, they are "considerably intensified" when Nieves is instructed; and Mary quickly becomes the object of "unpredictable pats" and "unexpected caresses." This continues until one day she feels "a thick hand pad suddenly and greedily along her neck and shoulder, under her blouse" (131). Horrified, Mary rises to her feet; Don Jorge, noticing this, leaves her alone in the future, but begins to make inappropriate jokes to the girls in Spanish. Mary, though she cannot speak the language fluently, understands the thrust of the priest's words and reports him to Doña Consuela who, along with her husband, relieves the priest of his position. Don Jorge is therefore a sexual predator, one who despite his vows of celibacy and position of authority—or perhaps because of them—makes physical advances towards the Areavaga girls and Mary. The Freudian implication here, when viewed alongside the healthy, developing sexuality of Mary, is that the priest's long-time repression of his sexuality leads to its deviant expression.

If this view is taken, then Agatha's lesbianism can perhaps be explained through her repression via spinsterhood and her devout Catholicism. Unlike Don Jorge, Agatha does not *act* on her desires, but confesses them to and seeks absolution through the Church. The two most obviously religious characters of the novel are therefore posed as threats to Catholic sexual morality. The difference is that while Agatha is sympathetic, Don Jorge is not—in fact, his revelations of Mary and Juanito's affair leads to the already ailing Don Pablo's fatal heart attack (324). Yet

by portraying sexual deviance in supposedly devout characters, O'Brien complicates the generally accepted norms of morality that equate religious devotion with sexual and spiritual purity.

This complication of Catholic sexual morality is also evident in *Mary*. After Agatha has confessed her love for her and noted its sinfulness, Mary, disheartened, claims that everything is a sin. The church, standing before them as they talk, provides a physical reminder of morality:

Mary watched the baize door swing and swing again in the porch of San Geronimo and caught each time the gleam of candles. People going in incessantly to pray, as Agatha so often did, as Juanito too, perhaps. Seeking mercy, explanation and forgiveness because they are so vicious as to love each other, seeking wearisome strength, in the midst of life, to forgo the essence of their own. (285–6)

The Church and its clergy have caught the people in a paradoxical conundrum: they are a shelter from sin and anxiety, yet they are those that define the sins and therefore create anxiety in those who transgress. As such, Mary's seemingly throw-away line that *everything* is a sin is in fact an indictment of both the relativism and subjectivity behind the terms "sin" and the obsessive and ridiculous lengths to which the Church has gone to control individuals. "Sin" is therefore recognized as a construct. An Irish government that controls the populace not only through the matrix of parliamentary legislation but also through the norms and mores of the Church would be rightfully concerned at such a proclamation, a threat to the power and the structure that supports it.¹³ Acknowledgement of the subversiveness of O'Brien's treatment of religion, however, is almost entirely absent from critical readings of the book.¹⁴ For example, Eamon Maher, in an examination of Catholicism as a force in twentieth-century French and Irish literatures, argues that "it is very difficult to detect antagonism to Catholicism in [Kate O'Brien's] works" (93).¹⁵ This is surprising considering that Maher repeatedly makes the connection between Church and State in Ireland and the prominent role of censorship in this relationship, but it is symptomatic of critical readings of *Mary Lavelle*.

Juanito recognizes this double-bind of Church and State and claims that, as he rises to power and importance, he will bring divorce to Spain, thereby effectively ending the mutually-enforcing powerful link between the two structures.¹⁶ Like his father, Don Pablo, Juanito is a radical, a socialist who seeks the betterment of humanity. Yet his vision, as he relates it to Mary, is tempered with a bitter reality:

Utopias are unpleasant, slavish dreams. All that politicians can give is fundamental health and the roots of knowledge. It is for parents and theologians to inject the civic virtues if they can, and the artists to give whatever answer they can to human aspiration. But the real issues will always be unmanageable. There is no such thing as legislation for happiness. (260)

Church and State must be separate, according to Juanito, for politics should have “no spiritual attack or message. The spiritual basis of life must be left alone, unless you can isolate it and know what you are attacking—and how can politicians do that?” (260). Juanito develops his father’s views in a more secular direction; of Don Pablo the reader is told: “He was a loather of institutions, but he believed in the human spirit; he regarded the existent Catholic Church with profound suspicion, but he accorded to its ideal and to much of its tradition an unwithholdable inbred devotion” (61).¹⁷ Given the influence of the Church on State policies in Ireland, the views of the Areavaga men can be read as a threat to the existing power structure at the time of *Mary Lavelle’s* publication.¹⁸ Because the Church did much to inform the *Censorship of Publications Act* and guide the Censorship Board’s action, the banning of the book can also be explained as an action on behalf of this group to protect it from a challenge to its role in society and adherence to its teachings.¹⁹ This argument also works in conjunction with the Church’s and State’s antagonistic relationships vis-à-vis socialism, both of these structures largely casting the leftist ideology in the light of godlessness.²⁰ Having universal tendencies, socialism is also at odds with the parochial and territorial beliefs of nationalism. Given the prevailing nationalism in independent Ireland that helped to create and foster the cultural and economic isolationist policies of the times, those who expounded social-

ist views were bound to be marginalized. In such a context, *Mary Lavelle* was a politically subversive novel.

The historical and geographical setting of the book, when coupled with the events of the story, was also sure to raise nationalist ire. On the surface, claiming that a novel was banned for such a reason seems rather tenuous. However, when one reads the story-line of *Mary Lavelle* against its setting, a counter-narrative to Irish nationalist mythology begins to emerge. In the novel's opening, Mary crosses the Pyrenees with little other than her trunk of modest belongings. The year, the reader is told, is 1922 (xxi). The first letters Mary sends upon arrival in Altorno, to her father, Mother Liguori, and John, are all dated 12 June. Before she and Juanito consummate their relationship, she intends to leave Spain and return to Ireland on 15 October of the same year (280). Upon learning of Don Pablo's death, she delays her departure, though she leaves only a few days after the planned date (341). The time frame of the novel therefore spans the first full summer of Irish independence during which the country was embroiled in a civil war that would last until 1923. The time when Mary has chosen to flee Ireland therefore coincides with the moment at which the nation is at its neediest and symbolizes a young Irish woman derelict in her patriotic duty. Indeed, Ireland's independence becomes an impetus for her own independence. It is somewhat ironic that Kate O'Brien, whose banned books could perhaps be used to illustrate her failure to conform to official nationalism and the State's construction of Irishness, herself worked as a governess in Spain during the period of 1922–23.²¹

In the past, however, Mary has shown some evidence of her commitment to the nationalist cause. During the guerrilla war of independence her brother Jimmy was a member of the Irish Republican Army and "Mary had met him sometimes by stealth, cycling to villages and farms near Mellick on errands for him or his flying column" (25). Jimmy was caught by the authorities, spending the years 1917-20 in a British prison before leaving for California. The lack of emotion and off-handedness with which her errands are described compared to the attachment, slim though it may be, to Jimmy and her older brother Donal, imply that her rebellious acts were not the result of political convictions, but rather

undertaken out of a sense of familial duty, if not love and concern. Mary was definitely not the sort of young woman to join Cumann na mBan.²²

The ambivalence with which Mary regards politics is evident throughout the narrative. Though she lives in the heart of Basque country, she is not interested in knowing much of anything about the national independence struggle of the people and this despite Ireland's recent history. At one point she hints at some knowledge of the regional movements throughout Spain, but she only broaches the subject to alleviate her own discomfort at not being better informed on Irish politics:

[Luisa] had never been in Ireland, but had heard much of its beauty and of the great charm of its people, had read the poetry of Mr. Yeats, had seen the Irish players. She admired the Irish-Spanish hero, de Valera, thought the civil war in Ireland tragic but inevitable, and the Treaty compromise a grave mistake.

Mary hesitated. She felt uninformed and uneasy about this new outburst of fighting.

'Do you then sympathise with the nationalist ambitions of the Catalans and the Basques?' she asked Luisa. (152)

Luisa, surprised that Mary has an interest in Spanish politics (which such a simple question does not necessarily reveal), likewise side-steps the issue, noting that Juanito's political future is in and with *Spain*, as opposed to his having nationalist Basque aspirations. When the opportunity arises for Mary to participate, even passively, in nationalist Basque politics, she shows no such inclination: "She heard the Basque speech in the market place; amusedly once through the oration of a Basque nationalist she heard the names 'Arthur Griffiths' and 'Patrick Pearse'" (128). Mary is *amused* by the nationalist's use of Irish references; she does not go to any lengths to discover what exactly is being said or even why at that moment in time, thereby emphasizing her disregard for politics.²³

Luisa's comments also complicate a point made earlier: in terms of the cultural and physical miscegenation of Spanishness and Irishness, perhaps no one person symbolizes such a mix as Ireland's long-standing prime minister and president, Eamon de Valera. What, then, could pos-

sibly be wrong with Mary's cultural and physical miscegenation? Firstly, de Valera was an American of Irish and Spanish parents who immigrated to Ireland, helped in the nationalist struggle, and led the nation, whereas Mary is presented as a pure (in both the racial and sexual senses of the word) Irish woman who abandons both the values of her society in consenting to have sex with Juanito and the physical space of the nation itself in going to Spain. De Valera can therefore be viewed as moving towards "purity" and expunging the traces of "impurity" while Mary's narrative moves in the opposite direction. Secondly, de Valera was male whereas Mary is female, and Irish women are configured and represented in very different ways in nationalist mythology.²⁴

Much has been said by critics in the field of Irish Studies with regards to the Irish nation and its representation as female.²⁵ In the colonial narrative, female Ireland is there for the forceful taking by male England. The Act of Union, as the term suggests, was therefore heteronormatively naturalized as a marriage of the two nations.²⁶ Likewise, the citizens of Ireland are construed as women, feminized, in need of the steady, rational male rule of the English. In nationalist mythology the Irish nation is still represented as female, only she is there to be defended or taken back by the people.²⁷ The defending or reconquering Irish must beat back the English invader who has either bastardized or cuckolded the Irish, depending upon the tale. In both colonial and national narratives, then, the one consistency is that the Irish nation is *passively female*. Males—either the English invaders or the Irish citizenry—are those imagined and constructed as actors. Women are therefore relegated to the domestic sphere, much as Article 41 of de Valera's *Constitution Act* of 1937 envisioned them, as homebodies, to be the bearers and the transmitters of Irish norms and mores.²⁸ As such, Mary poses a problem to this male construction of the Irish woman in that she leaves the domestic sphere, in fact the whole of Ireland, to become a governess in Spain.²⁹

Mary's abandonment of this domesticity is realized in the sexual act between her and Juanito both because, as already discussed, this act represents her individual freedom from Irish society and its attendant values, and because it occurs outdoors, away from the confines of the

feminized home and domestic sphere. Related to this point, Patricia Coughlan comments:

[O'Brien's] writings not only take an unmistakably oppositional stance towards the general cultural narrowness, prudery and ruralist exclusions of Free State Ireland—the common targets of all dissident writers and cultural critics in the decades between 1920 and 1955 or so—but also institute an interrogation of the forms of oppression specifically visited on women. (60)³⁰

These two aspects of exclusion and oppression converge in the patriarchal political and social spheres of post-independence Ireland, thereby highlighting the regressiveness of the official nationalism.

The banning of *Mary Lavelle* can therefore be explained for multiple reasons. One should not assume that the censorship of the book was merely due to the consensual adulterous sex between Mary and Juanito or its portrayal of lesbian love.³¹ The novel, in closer, more nuanced readings, reveals a work that functions in many more ways against the official nationalism of 1930s Ireland: the stance against the marriage of Church and State; the negative portrayal of Catholicism; the appeal of socialism to the intellectual and wealthy patriarchs; the dereliction of one's duty to the nation especially in a time of crisis; and the dangerous cultural and physical miscegenation that occurs when the barriers of isolationism are not in place.

Kate O'Brien was well aware of how malignant censorship can be, both in its official and unofficial forms. Discussing *La Celestina*, a book Milagros has read much to Mary's surprise, Milagros tells Mary: "You should read it a little, even if it shocks you" (134). Milagros is allowed to read anything she wishes because, she notes, her father is an anarchist. "You see, I really think that a part of him believes that most people, let alone, are potentially good—especially Spaniards!" (135). Her joke aside, Milagros strikes against the major reason behind much censorship: the protection of the people from knowledge in the belief that they will not be able to cope with it. In banning Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*, the Censorship Board refused to allow the definition of Irishness

into the realm of dialogue. Out of anger and frustration, O'Brien would follow up the banning of *Mary Lavelle* with the publication of *Pray for the Wanderer*, a book that lashed out at Irish society and censorship in its portrayal of "a writer who is rejected by his native land and in turn rejects it" (Cahalan 210).³²

In the case of a book such as *Mary Lavelle*, while the official report might state that it was banned for sexual obscenity, the critic owes it to both his or her self and his or her readers to probe deeper. Scholars must provide more sophisticated readings of banned books, especially when, as is the case in Ireland, large amounts of government files are either missing or held back by the Department of Justice. The lack of available diaries and journals on the part of those involved in the censorship process to allow a more concrete and obvious glimpse into the decision-making of censorship only heightens this responsibility on the part of the critic.³³ Without such intellectual work, the process of recovering formerly banned books and justifying their place in the canon will continue to be delayed.

Notes

- 1 The exception to this rule is the case of a cause célèbre. In Ireland, such examples include Sean O'Faolain's *Bird Alone*, Eric Cross' *The Tailor and Ansty*, and Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*.
- 2 The logbook in the Censorship of Publications Office notes that an appeal was lodged on 6 July 1951. However, the only comment made is unrevealing: "That this application be dismissed."
- 3 The exception to this rule is a couple of recent studies that focus on the cultural and literary aspects of censorship (Kent; Szmigiero).
- 4 The main historical works on Irish literary censorship are Adams; Martin; Ó Drisceoil, Paseta.
- 5 On this subject, Maurice Girodias says: "In other words, the good people ... must be kept in blissful ignorance of the universal nature of sex, and, above all, of the legitimate nature of eroticism" (131). Girodias had some vested interest in his point of view: he was the son of Jack Kahane, the founder of Obelisk Press, and was himself the founder of Olympia Press, which took over from Obelisk as Paris' noted publisher of risqué and sexually charged literature after his father's death (St. Jorre). Walter Allen supports Girodias' libertarian views, attacking censorship and questioning the role of the censor: "So far as I know, none of the people who write about and against pornography admit to having been cor-

- rupted by it themselves; they merely believe that others are weaker and will be. In the absence of evidence, one can only be one's own guinea-pig" (144).
- 6 The banning of books in Ireland was related to sales and distribution. Individuals who already had the books in their private holdings were not subject to the police coming into their homes to take them away. Publication was fairly unaffected due to the fact that a good number of books written by Irish writers were published abroad and therefore out of the jurisdiction of the Irish Free State.
- 7 Contrast this to the positive review of *Mary Lavelle* in the London-based *Times Literary Supplement*: O'Brien's "impression of things Spanish, and of the effect that they might have on a very innocent and unprepared young woman, is one of the most attractive things about this quietly told story of romantic passion" (Williams).
- 8 See Cullingford for a good account of this group.
- 9 Even the most recent essay on *Mary Lavelle*, while providing a new approach to the novel in examining its transnational feminism, remains trapped in the tendency to read it through the lens of gender (Tucker).
- 10 Other Irish books long predating the Celtic Tiger with significant homosexual material include John Broderick's *Pilgrimage* and Maurice Leitch's *Liberty Lad*, the latter of which was banned by the Censorship Board shortly after its publication. An earlier lesbian, though less overt, example is Molly Keane's *Devoted Ladies*, published under the pseudonym M.J. Farrell.
- 11 Emma Donoghue is the main proponent of this view.
- 12 This is the case, at least, in terms of the Irish family, although the Areavaga family could be read as a Spanish analogue. Admittedly, Mary thinks about her family but they feature more as background than a primary concern.
- 13 Howard Gardiner, a Jesuit priest who argues for the Catholic viewpoint on censorship, states: "Authority, as the necessary instrument by which the parts of the societal whole may conspire to a common end, is an object of love.... Coercion is never pleasant for those being coerced and, quite obviously, coercion can overstep proper bounds and turn into injustice and tyranny. But coercion that is exercised as a means to prevent the frustration of the common good is as worthy of respect and love as is the authority it is designed to uphold" (22–3). His book largely functions as a plea for people to acquiesce to authority, specifically the mutually reinforcing authority of both Church and State, and allows for the status quo, which he believes is divinely ordained, to remain unchanged and unchallenged.
- 14 Tasmin Hargreaves is a notable, if tempered, exception, remarking on how O'Brien's characters function within their Catholic belief-system: "Like all her novels, *Mary Lavelle* is pervaded by a sense of Catholic morality, but in *Mary Lavelle* as in *That Lady* it does not act as a complete deterrent to the heroine's need for personal freedom. In this sense, Kate O'Brien's novels are unorthodox; her heroines are driven by personal need and they struggle to reach modes of

- behaviour and thought which are true to themselves, even if, at times, this means going against the teaching of the Catholic Church. All Kate O'Brien's major novels describe love (be it heterosexual adultery or homosexual love) which in orthodox terms is illicit and forbidden and which is therefore deeply problematic" (xvii).
- 15 Like many of the critics already discussed, Maher attributes the book's banning to the combination of Mary and Juanito's adulterous affair and Agatha's confession of lesbian love (101–5). One might assume that these are further moments of antagonism to Catholicism despite his claims to the contrary.
 - 16 Adele Dalsimer reads the critique of official nationalism in terms of the Spanish State and the fascist struggle (33), something that would be in keeping with Juanito's and Don Pablo's views. While this is an excellent though under-argued reading of the novel, Dalsimer does not allow for the possibility of reading these political views as analogous to Irish society.
 - 17 Even Doña Consuela views this secular socialism as seeking "the overthrow of the structure onto which all whom she loved and believed in had fought their way so courageously" (59). It is interesting to note here that it is the wealthy men who can afford to have such reformatory/revolutionary views, while Doña Consuela reveals her unease at changing the status quo. Her perspective could perhaps be interpreted as a gender-specific response as it has been formed under hegemonic rule.
 - 18 For a broader sociological examination of the Church and State relationship, see Inglis. The classic historical study of the subject is J.H. Whyte's monograph. James M. Smith's excellent work details the harrowing abuse of power through the Church and State relationship in post-Independence Ireland's Magdalen Laundries. Adams also discusses the influence of the Church on the State's institutional censorship (17–21). Kieran Woodman notes how the Catholic press (represented by several magazines such as *Catholic Bulletin*, *Irish Rosary*, *Catholic Mind*, *The Standard*, and *The Leader*) was influential in public debates before and after the *Censorship of Publications Act* was passed (53–7). In a chapter devoted to Irish censorship in his book *Obscenity and the Law*, Norman St. John-Stevass pithily comments: "If ignorance is equated with virtue the policy of the Irish censorship is defensible. It can only be understood when one appreciates the extreme puritanism of Irish Catholicism. As in Victorian England, so in contemporary Ireland art is criticised from the standpoint of morality and a rigid system of sexual ethics" (187). One policy that affected the Catholic Church in a manner that it perceived as negative was the *Emergency Powers Act* of 1939 which, amongst other things, censored sermons, papal speeches and edicts that threatened Irish neutrality by commenting on the Allies, the Nazis, or the "godless" communists. Donal Ó Drisceoil discusses this in great detail, providing several examples of the censorship of Catholic communications (*Censorship in Ireland* 220–33).

- 19 The Censorship Board was composed of five members. At the time of the banning of *Mary Lavelle*, one place was reserved for a Catholic priest, another for a Protestant churchman. This was merely unofficial policy, however, as nothing pertaining to this arrangement was enshrined in the legislation. The three lay seats were held by a variety of people, but the Knights of St. Columbanus, a conservative Catholic organisation with direct ties to the Hierarchy, held much influence. The Knights' control was most notable in the 1940s and 1950s when it dictated the work of the Censorship Board. During this period, the annual bannings of books increased almost ten-fold over the two decades of its operations. The height of this frenzy occurred in 1954, when over a thousand books were banned from sale in Ireland. For more on the Knights of St. Columbanus and the Church's control of Irish institutional censorship, see Whelan.
- 20 This notion of the Church being against socialism should not be construed as being against charity, for the Church is well-represented in such organisations as the St. Vincent de Paul Society.
- 21 For a brief account of O'Brien's time as a governess in Spain, see Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* pp. 28–31.
- 22 Directly translated, Cumann na mBan means "Society of Women." The organization was formed in response to the activities of the anti-colonial all-male Irish Republican Brotherhood, the forerunners of the Irish Republican Army. It allowed women to participate in armed resistance to British rule. For more on gender and resistance to colonialism in an Irish context, see Ward.
- 23 Given the more recent relationships between the IRA and ETA, the link made here in a book published and banned in 1936 is certainly historically interesting.
- 24 For a more general study of this phenomenon, see Innes.
- 25 For the classic studies detailing the role of literature in the colonial feminization of Ireland and in the process of decolonization, see Cairns and Richards, and Kiberd.
- 26 For an excellent analysis of contemporary literary reactions to the Act of Union, see Ferris, *Romantic National Tale*, "Irish Novel."
- 27 The best-known literary example of this *aisling* tradition is W.B. Yeats' play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*.
- 28 Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis argue that women, because the childcare role is often *placed upon* them, become important as cultural transmitters (9). Pnina Werbner and Nira Yuval-Davis state: "It is possible to argue . . . that the exclusion of women from citizenship was an intrinsic feature of their naturalisation as embodiments of the private, the familial and the emotional. It was thus essential to the construction of the public sphere as masculine, rational, responsible and respectable" (6). By portraying the nation as female and the citizens as male, the national narrative reified gender roles, bestowing activity to males and passiveness to women, thereby allowing a justification for the exclusion of women from the political sphere. Article 41.2.1 of the Irish Constitution is explicit in

- this matter: “In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.”
- 29 Eibhear Walshe argues that O’Brien’s exploration of the feminized domestic sphere is evident in all of her novels, although her writings rarely, with the exception of *That Lady*, explicitly link the private with the political. He notes the privacy of Agatha’s apartment as one such place in *Mary Lavelle* (“Lock Up Your Daughter” 158). The ladies’ section of the café Alemán and Mary’s own room are further possibilities suggested in the novel.
- 30 Anthony Roche makes the same point of O’Brien’s concern with gender above that of nation (95).
- 31 Compare this to Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, which was famously brought to trial in Britain in the years prior to the publication of *Mary Lavelle*. For an excellent account and analysis of Hall’s book, the subsequent trial, and the censorship of modern literature, see Parkes.
- 32 See also Kiely (122).
- 33 The one exception to this is the collection of Christopher J. O’Reilly’s papers in the archives at St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra. The papers reveal his decision to be in favour of or against banning books before meetings, but they do little to shed light on the reasons behind bannings in the majority of cases. This is because his system of cataloguing shuns much narrative and discussion, preferring to list the works with a series of symbols that simply note his initial opinions and the Censorship Board’s final decisions. The notebooks also consider only a fraction of the books evaluated by the Board during his tenure. For a published edition of these papers, including some thoughtful introductory analysis, see Kelly.

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