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A purposeful reshaping of a National hero: an analysis of the history and exile of Hugh O'Neill in Brian Friel's play Making History

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ABSTRACT: *This paper reflects on Brian Friel's purposeful reshaping of the history and exile of Hugh O'Neill, the 2nd Earl of Tyrone who led an uprising against the English from 1595 to 1603, with the intention of disclosing the ambiguity of his political life in Ireland. Since O'Neill had collaborated with the English crown before he became the leader of this insurgence, Friel reflects on the complex strategies adopted by this Irish hero to maintain his political power while fighting the colonizers. Having premiered at the time of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the play "Making History" explores the delicate theme of exile and the permanent consequences it has on those forced to die far from their homeland. We argue that O'Neill's behavior in the play places him both as colonized and colonizer, allowing this dramaturgical work to reach both Irish/ Catholic as well as British/Protestant audiences.*

KEYWORDS -*Literature. Theatre. History. Postcolonial studies. Exile.*

Jane Ohlmeyer's recent publication *Making Empire: Ireland, Imperialism and the early modern world*[1] raises an important discussion about the role of the Irish in global imperialism. She argues that although the Irish have repeatedly resisted English colonization in their homeland, one cannot ignore the role that several important Irishmen had in assisting English domination overseas, becoming therefore agents of the Empire. Those familiar with Irish history might know that one of the most threatening rebellions against English rule was led by Hugh O'Neill, the 2nd earl of Tyrone, an insurrection that happened from 1595 to 1603 and failed. Initially, O'Neill had collaborated with the government of Queen Elizabeth I but he became a rebel when his influence over the Ulster province began to cause suspicion to the English crown. Although a significant victory over the English in the Battle of the Yellow Ford (1598) had shown the English the power and commitment of the Irish in their fight for independence, the uprising was suppressed and O'Neill and his allies surrendered in 1603. Their defeat represented the final conquest of Ireland since Ulster, the last resisting province, had been subjugated.

This situation of utter dominance of the English over the Irish made O'Neill and his allies decide to leave Ireland. They secretly boarded a vessel heading to Spain, and from there they moved to Normandy until they finally arrived in Rome, where O'Neill died in exile. The choice to establish themselves there was because they could live protected and acclaimed by Pope Paul V for their loyalty to the Catholic Church in trying to defeat the English Protestants.

Brian Friel's play *Making History*[2] reimagines the life of Hugh O'Neill at a delicate moment of Irish history. Having been written in the context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, this dramaturgical work carefully retells

the story of this national hero from a perspective that can bring reconciliation instead of causing even more problems in such a violent and intolerant context.

Working on the idea of exile, which is an important topic when addressing Irish history and literature, Friel brings to the stage a delicate theme that resonates a series of collective traumas of the Irish people, especially on what regards the Great Famine of the 19th century and the diaspora that originated from it. William O'Reilly, however, argues that Irish immigrants in the Atlantic world should not be considered a diasporic community, because they emigrated from Europe looking for improvement. He writes that "Irish identity in the pre-famine Atlantic world was built more on contemporary aspirations of betterment and improvement than it was on exile and persecution"[3] (O'Reilly387). The inquietation about the suitability of this nomenclature to address Hugh O'Neill's exile in Rome brings the following question: if the Irish in the Atlantic cannot be considered a diaspora community, what should be said about the Irish who emigrated from Ireland in the sixteenth century but chose to remain in continental Europe? How should one address the experience of this historical leader who was forced to end his days away from his homeland? These are the questions have led the reflections of this text.

O'Reilly's statement that Irish men and women in the Atlantic world should not be included in the Irish diaspora is justified by the author with Jack Greene's idea of how the collective self-image of this age before mass print and media was built. According to him, there are four parts that construct this idea: the sense of place, the identification of goals, the insistence on standards and the sense of history [4]. O'Reilly explains that the Irish in the Atlantic world had "no shared goals or standards whatever about a shared place of origin and a shared history – albeit in Ireland that history was, at one and the same time, being repressed, repackaged and rewritten" (O'Reilly387). This lack of connectivity between their goals and places of origin prevents that they be related to each other as a bigger group, but the truth is that the main reason for their flight from Ireland is usually a common factor: religious oppression or religious persecution.

The aforementioned idea of repackaging and rewriting history is a fundamental part of Brian Friel's play *Making History*, which premiered in Derry's Guildhall in September 1988. It depicts the Gaelic chieftain Hugh O'Neill in two moments of his life: at the occasion of his third marriage, followed by the attempt of the Gaelic Lords to expel the New English from Ireland, restoring their pre-colonial power as leaders of their people; as well as in his final years of life as an *émigré* in Rome.

Amongst the main characters of the play there is Bishop Lombard, whose ambition is to write the history of Hugh O'Neill and of the Ireland of his time. During their exile in Rome, when he presents his elaborated annotations that have been compiled, organized, and interpreted for years, the bishop says:

> LOMBARD: You and I were to have spent the afternoon on this.
> O'NEILL: What's that?
> LOMBARD: My history. (He laughs). 'My history'! You would think I was Thucydides, wouldn't you? And if the truth were told, I'm so disorganized I'm barely able to get all this stuff into chronological order. (Friel327)

It is interesting to notice that he mentions Thucydides, the Greek historian who is believed to first have described the Greek's dispersal in the world with the word "diaspora" [5]. Friel's choice on this matter, which could be seen as a careful one, intrigued this reflection about the idea of diaspora in *Making History*. The fact is that Friel's reimagined Hugh O'Neill chooses to escape Ireland to save his life, because in his homeland he is being hunted down by virtually all the groups of the island:

> I lived like a criminal, skulking round the countryside – my countryside! – hiding from the English, from the Upstarts, from the Old English, but most assiduously hiding from my brother Gaels who couldn't wait to strip me of every blade of grass

> I ever owned. And then when I could endure that humiliation no longer, I ran away! If these were 'my people' then to hell with my people! The Flight of the Earls – you make it sound like a lap of honour. We ran away just as we ran away in Kinsale. We were going to look after our own skins! That's why we 'took boat' from Rathmullan. That's why the great O'Neill is here at rest – here – in Rome. Because we ran away (Friel 333).

O'Neill found himself in such a difficult situation because he had played for the two sides, having contributed for the establishment of what would become the English empire over Ireland, as well as supporting the Irish in a rebellion that attempted to restore power to the Irish and to save their language, customs and culture. This contradiction is expresses by O'Neill himself in the play:

> I have spent my life attempting to do two things. I have attempted to hold together a harassed and a confused people by trying to keep them in touch with the life they knew before they were overrun. It wasn't a time of material ease, but it had its assurances and it had its dignity. And I have done that by acknowledging and indeed honouring the rituals and the beliefs these people have practiced since before history, long before the God of Christianity was ever heard of. And at the same time, I have tried to open these people to the same strange ways of Europe, to ease them into the new assessment of things, to nudge them towards changing evaluations and beliefs. Two pursuits that can scarcely be followed simultaneously. Two tasks that are almost self-cancelling. (Friel 299)

The character is aware of his double game, demonstrating the impossibility of pleasing both countries and their respective groups. This awareness, on the other hand, also depicts Hugh O'Neill's agency within the dominating sphere of English colonization. While Lombard romanticizes Hugh O'Neill's life and deeds, the Tyrone chieftain urges him to be truthful in his account, therefore including his behavior as "a schemer, leader, liar, statesman, lecher, patriot, drunk, sour, bitter émigré", requesting him to record his "whole life" (Friel 330).

This acknowledgment from the character Hugh O'Neill reinforces the historical account of his life as a faithful servant of the English crown and the leader of a rebellion that attempted at removing the power from the English. Alfred Webb explains that the historical Hugh O'Neill fought side by side with the English more than once: "He served in the English army during in the Irish wars, was present at the Smerwick massacre in 1580, cooperated with Essex in the settlement of Antrim, and the Ulster wars, and was more than once commended for his zeal in the Queen's service" [6](Webb).

The Smerwick episode took place on 10 November 1580 and consisted of "the brutal massacre of six hundred Spanish and Italian papal troops on the order of the English Lord Deputy Arthur Grey"[7] (Orr1). The fact that the real-life O'Neill witnessed such brutality and remained supporting the English crown to the point of being given possession of the southern part of Tyrone in 1584 (Webb) demonstrates how he had an ambiguous behavior towards the English and the Irish throughout his life, having spent part of his teenage years fostered by a family of English aristocrats. The temporary flexibility of his confessional identity, represented in the play by his marriage with Mabel Bagenal, a protestant young lady, could be interpreted as an attempt for him to get closer to England, except that Mabel ends up converting to Catholicism in a few months. And her conversion does not erase the fact that the character O'Neill did get married by a Protestant bishop, causing an uproar among his most faithful Catholic supporters.

The discussion about the historical reading of the role of Ireland in the age of imperialism, either of colonized people or of colonizing partner have led us to argue that Hugh O'Neill's experience portrayed in Brian Friel's

play provide evidence of the double role of important Irishmen in the process of colonization, as agents and subjects. This perspective corroborates what Tim McMahon [8] defends about the matter, which is: the reality is that the Irish should not be studied within the binary of "being either colonizer or colonized"; they should be seen as both (309)

Friel's play is set in 1591, in the final decade of the century that

> some historians claim, was 'the most warlike' in European history. Although the violence of local lords against each other was less endemic than earlier, conflict among a small number of players defending or asserting imperial dominance, was exacerbated by religious tension between Christian and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants [9] (Burbank, Cooper150).

The play portrays the conflict between the clans, most notably by Harry's warning about the disputes between the Devlins and the Queens, to which O'Neill has to attend, as well as by O'Donnell's report on the mischiefs they have done to O'Rourke of West Breffny or about his desire to poison his rival O'Doherty. Lombard explains that this continuous violent dispute amongst Gaelic chieftains is what is preventing Spain to send its support to their rebellion because they are "constantly at war – occasionally with the English – but always, always among themselves" (Friel261). Friel manages to add a hint of humour with O'Donnell's response to this comment: "Constantly at war? Jesus, I haven't an enemy in the world" (Friel261).

It is not just O'Donnell who fails to acknowledge the violence perpetrated by his own people on his own people. Bishop Lombard also fails (by choice) to acknowledge the domestic conflicts and betrayals between the Gaelic chieftains. Lombard's ambition is to cover Hugh O'Neill's life in glory, highlighting his leadership in Ireland, barely acknowledging his four wives, in spite of O'Neill's claims to give predominance to Mabel. Lombard is attempting to portray O'Neill as a hero because "Ireland is reduced as it has never been reduced before – we are talking about a colonized people on the brink of extinction" (Friel334). The bishop's urgency to forge a hero for Ireland in O'Neill's history makes him deliberately ignore certain aspects of the chieftain's life to mold him into the format needed. Lombard tells O'Neill:

> This isn't the time for a critical assessment of your 'ploys' and you 'disgraces' and your 'betrayal' – that's the stuff for another history for another time. Now is the time for a hero. Now is the time for heroic literature. So I am offering Gaelic Ireland two things. I'm offering them a narrative that has elements of myth. And I am offering them Hugh O'Neill as a national hero. A hero and the history of a hero (Friel334-335)

O'Neill's acknowledgement of his choice to leave his homeland to save his own life, when compared to the reflections brought by O'Reilly allow ones to wonder: could O'Neill be interpreted as a member a pre-modern Irish diaspora? Independently from his role in colonial enterprise and his Protestant wedding with Mabel Bagenal, it would not be incorrect to include him in the group of Irish who evaded the island in the 16th century leaving their homeland due to their confessional identity. It is O'Reilly who explains the reason:

> What did change in the course of sixteenth century, however, was a consequence of growing English involvement in the political life of Ireland and of confessional conflict. Members of Ireland's Old English families started to withdraw their sons from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, choosing instead to send them to Catholic universities in continental Europe. (O'Reilly391)

This illustrates how the confessional conflict progressively motivated the Irish to abandon their ties with England and became closer to the Spanish, to the French and to the Portuguese, which would later result in Irish emigration to the Americas and reinforce even more their agency within the empire.

Discussing Ireland in the age of colonialism, either as agent or subject, provides an interesting reflection about the manner in which historians portray this position. And the understanding of what is history is one of the key elements of the play. Lombard believes that it is a narrative, "a kind of storytelling" for which "imagination is as important as information" (Friel 257). He wants to depict the Flight of the Earls in a poetic and epic approach, whereas O'Neill claims that he should write the truth, which is: that they were badly defeated.Aside from this, O'Neill, at the same time that he desired to preserve the Gaelic means of living, their very own existence as a group and of their culture, he pledged allegiance to English monarchy in order to be allowed to maintain his authority over the people and the land.

Brian Friel portrays Hugh O'Neill in an ambivalent and controversial way. The hero of the Earls' rebellion, whose mission was to defend the interests of the Gaelic people (legitimacy over their lands, over their people and the ideals of the Catholic faith), married a Protestant young lady whose brother was the Queen's Marshal. He had sworn fidelity to the English crown at the same time that he secretly negotiated with Spain the demise of the English colonists.

He pleased the English for the sake of his own existence, never acknowledging his commitments as something that should be respected and honored. Although his wife converted to Catholicism a few months after their marriage, he did marry her in a Protestant church, defying his friends and allies. And after the Gaelic army's failure at Kinsale, having supposedly been betrayed by one of their own, he spends years in hiding in Ireland and ends up emigrating to Rome with bishop Lombard and Harry, where he marries his fourth wife and where he lives a miserable life of sorrow and regret.

In the same way that the Romans did, the English not only gave lands and authority to the New English occupying Ireland during the realm of Queen Elizabeth I, but also allowed the local relationships of authority and hierarchy of the Gaelic leaderships to keep existing, as long as they were faithful to the crown. Hugh O'Neill says this when he is preparing his submission letter to the Queen. He says "she knows that the only way she can rule Ireland at this point is by using someone like me. She hates me – but she can rule through me provided she has control over me" (Friel310). In this same letter he also acknowledges that their rebellion is unnatural and that he promised her to help "in the abolishing of all barbarous Gaelic customs which are the seeds of all incivility" (Friel 312).

When O'Donnel asks O'Neill if he is writing his submission, he replies: "What's the alternative? The life of a soured émigré whingeing and scheming round the capitals of Europe" (Friel 310). This reluctancy to emigrate, combined with the suffering he faces in his final years away from Ireland, a country he had to leave to secure his own survival, allow a possible understanding of O'Neill's representation in *Making History* as part of an early version of the Irish diaspora.

His confessional identity was not the sole reason, but it was the main motive for which O'Neill left Ireland. And instead of establishing himself in Spain, where Ireland's partners in arms were, he chose to settle in Rome, the city whose ruins recall a fallen empire, a Christian one.

The title of this paper calls the reshaping of Hugh O'Neill purposeful because it places him at this intersection of the establishment of empires, in-between the colonizer and the colonized. One interesting feature of this representation is indicated in the rubrics of the play, which provide the information about O'Neill's accent. Throughout the majority of the play, he speaks with an accent that is very close to the English one, but changes

to his Tyrone accent in many moments, most notably at the end. The rubrics read: "When O'Neill speaks he speaks almost in a whisper in counterpoint to Lombard's public recitation. His accent gradually fades until at the end his accent is pure Tyrone" (Friel338).

The fact that Friel writes that the accent faded could be read as O'Neill, throughout the play, choosing to use the English accent over the Tyrone but returning to it eventually, meaning that the Tyrone accent is his true place of speech. This, however, does not invalidate his numerous allegiances to the English crown (in the play and in history), nor does it invalidate his true love for a Protestant woman, whose death during childbirth deeply moves him until the very end. Brian Friel reinforces the idea of compassion from the audience through the sad event of someone's wife dying while giving birth to their child.

At this point, it is significant to remember that Friel was part of a group of artists called the Field Day Company.Their purpose was to offer literary works to form a"fifth province", onethat would be added to the four geographical provinces of Ireland (Connacht, Leinster,Munster and Ulster)as an imaginary place, a "fifth province" of the mind where the political and religious disputes are resolved.To reach such a place, however, a person should discover it for oneself and within oneself, as it is"a place for dissenters, traitors to the prevailing mythologies in the otherfour provincesthrough which we hope to devise another way of looking at Ireland,or another possible Ireland" [10] (Friel qtd. in Gray 7).

For the Field Day Company the recreation and resignification of Ireland and of Irish history should be the momentwhen everything from politics to literature should be re-written, as described by Elmer Andrews: 'if the individual and the world are substantially (though not entirely) constitutedthrough language and if, therefore, 'identity' and 'reality' are fictional constructswhich continually elude full representation, then there is always the possibilitythat both the individual and the social reality in which he is inscribed can bereinvented' [11] (Andrews 164).

Thus, Friel's reconstruction of Hugh O'Neill's political and personal life in *Making History* as an ambiguous and problematic character offers a place for reflection and possibly for reconciliation in the context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. He could be seen as a character towards which both Protestant Unionists and Catholic Irishcould be sympathetic to. And by potentially inserting him, though his exile, as a member of the early Irish diaspora, the audiencecould also be taken to a place of shared memory and collective trauma, a time when all Ireland was suffering together becauseof the sameproblems, a group of people who endured persecution and famine together and who survived together.

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