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From the 'Other' Island to the One with 'No West Side': The Irish in British Soap and Sitcom

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In 1997, the BBC's *EastEnders* moved for one week from its customary London location in Albert Square to Ireland so that Pauline Fowler, one of the original and central characters, could trace her long-lost sister, Maggie. By the Sunday 'omnibus' broadcast, the BBC were inundated with complaints, including the Irish Ambassador and an Irish Cabinet Minister; the BBC had formally apologised to those offended by its depiction of Ireland; and Alan Yentob, BBC Director of Television, had directly faced viewers on British television's Channel 4's *Right to Reply* programme. Complaints focused on *EastEnders*' visual representation of Ireland and aspects of characterisation [1]. Yet as *Right to Reply*'s Roger Bolton noted, such imagery was repeatedly taken to extremity in the contemporaneous sitcom *Father Ted* (henceforth *Ted*), but without comparably negative reaction. Indeed, *Ted* has attained cult status (though far from universal acceptance) in Britain and Ireland. In 1999, on a smaller scale, the Irish reaction to *EastEnders* was repeated when *Brookside* introduced a dysfunctional Irish family, the Musgroves, to the Liverpool-set soap.

This essay will try to identify the underlying reasons for Irish upset at 'The soaps that stain' [2], to compare their construction of Ireland with *Ted*, and to explain the mixed reactions to it among Irish viewers in Britain and Ireland [3]. From the outset, I assume that stereotypes are not essentially 'positive' or 'negative', but acquire values only in narrative and cultural contexts. I argue that both *EastEnders* and *Brookside* reproduced a colonial depiction of Irish people, both through stereotypical imagery and in their construction of the Irish family as a sham patriarchal structure. In particular, the soaps' celebration of the feminine depended here on the depiction of the colonised male as a body broken by immanent weakness. In contrast, the farcical humour of *Ted* deploys a similar colonial construction, but allows a critical and reflexive engagement with it [4]. This is not to say that my reading of these texts is the only possible interpretation, but rather it is a suggested explanation as to why Irish viewers reacted so defensively, negatively or contradictorily to these texts.

***EastEnders*: Persephone meets Oedipus**

In narrative form, soaps are open-ended texts, ever-unfolding and changing sets of interlocking narratives 'organized around institutionally-imposed gaps in the text' [5]. 'Paradigmatic complexity' results from a multiplicity of characters in potentially infinite and ever-changing configurations of relationships [6], while genres like sitcom are more circular in form, restoring narrative equilibrium in 'closed', self-contained episodes. Emotional problem solving is a central focus of all soaps, but no solution is absolute.

Hence, soaps can ‘engage an audience in such a way that they become the subject for public interest and interrogation’ [7].

Nochimson argues that US daytime soaps are variants on a non-Oedipal ‘mythic ideal’, the Greek myth of Persephone. This ideal celebrates both pragmatic feminine guile, the negotiation of human relations without resort to a paranoid and fragile Oedipal construction of self-identity, and the agency of feminine desire [8]. The ‘paternal order’ is re-narrated so that heroines see through it to meet their own needs [9]. If the argument broadens to soaps generally, the ‘openness’ of open-ended narratives to multiple interpretations is debatable [10]. Arguably, their valuing of ‘feminine’ characteristics and agency renders them relatively ‘closed’ in meaning, their appeal to women viewers a kind of ‘fit’ with the typically relational, contingent social construction of feminine identity by contrast with the artificially individualist, fixed construction of masculinity. If poststructuralist-influenced feminist criticism has more recently begun to deconstruct the social/cultural category ‘woman’, many soaps actively promote a kind of ‘pop’ feminism in their narratives [11].

EastEnders prides itself on its non-committal depiction of competing social positions. However, it textually foregrounds the ‘feminine’ values of pragmatism over a rigid ‘masculine’ adherence to the ‘rule of law’. *EastEnders*’ Ireland trip, almost a self-contained feature, broke with its normal setting and multiple, interlocking narratives. This extraordinary scenario produced a more melodramatic narrative in which feminine values were heightened, and with a very ‘closed’ narrative ending—at least for those ‘cousins’ introduced and dropped in one week. In the process, however, the myth of Persephone met with a peculiarly colonial version of the myth of Oedipus—with unhappy consequences.

From the outset, the ‘regulars’ were carrying unresolved tensions that framed their new encounters. Strange surroundings extended established themes of uncertainty and underlying unhappiness. The central dramatic scenario—Pauline’s journey to meet a newly discovered half-sister—placed the ‘cousins’ in a contradictory position, extensions to the central *EastEnders* families and yet, at the same time, strangers. Ireland, too, was visually depicted as both familiar and strange (towns as suburban sprawl with no centre, animal markets in the street, uninterrupted countryside in all directions), reflecting a deeper uncertainty concerning the degree and nature of Irish difference. Ambivalence and consequent ambiguity surrounding new characters were resolved through a decidedly Oedipal narrative construction, whose challenging becomes a personal mission for Pauline.

A sense of the uncanny pervades the regulars’ arrival. In psychoanalysis [12] the ‘uncanny’, the ‘unheimlich’, is a state of fear stemming not from a narrowly defined Freudian castration complex but from the familiar (the heimlich, the homely) harbouring an unknown which echoes an inarticulate (typically childhood) unknown. Initially, visual ambiguity poses a threat. A scene with a donkey, to complainers suggesting a ‘backward’ Ireland, is visually motivated by the presence of a market in the foreground as the *EastEnders* arrive in a town. Ian’s daughter disappears, only to reappear astride the donkey moments later. Ian’s concern and unease are foreshadowed by his wife’s recent abduction of his other children, and an incident at the airport in which a would-be kidnapper merely returned Lucy her dropped toy. Recurrent visual ambiguity sustains the uncanny, but places Ian’s fears in new figures and surroundings. The tension between familiar and strange passes from Ian to Pauline, from the visual to the verbal. The hotelier refuses to believe that they are mistakenly booked as the ‘Towlers’, but allows them to stay on condition that, should the ‘Towlers’ appear, they’ll move

out. For Pauline, too, the uncanny is a sense of hostility mollified only on the uneasy acceptance of conditions not her own. Village/town, Fowler/Towler, each entails a paradigmatic shift. The familiar becomes uncannily strange, but without being entirely translated into terms set by the Other. The uncanny foreshadows her first encounter with Maggie as, concretised, placed, it externalises her sense of loss—deceased husband Arthur, mother Lou—and trepidation that it will be a disappointing confirmation. Discovering a sister dis-locates part of her own identity—the heimlich becomes *unheimlich*. Elder son Mark's impending sense of loss is materialised, following a frantic rescue search, on discovering his wife Ruth with new-found cousin Conor, cosily sitting by a campfire at a sea cove. Mark's Irish 'double' later commences an affair with Ruth in Albert Square.

Externalisation of loss in Ireland is significant. The uncanny here is over-determined by Ireland's historical construction as both part of the 'United Kingdom' and a neighbouring colony of Britain. For Eagleton, Britain and Ireland have historically shifted between a parent-child and sibling relationship:

The British can never decide whether the Irish are their antithesis or mirror image, partner or parasite, abortive offspring or sympathetic sibling ... If Britain is the source of authority, then it is the parent and Ireland the child; but if both bow to the jurisdiction of the crown, then the two nations instantly become siblings. [13]

Hence, the Act of Union, supposedly a 'voluntary merging', was 'in effect one of annexation and appropriation': 'Ireland, rather like a minor in-law, had too little identity to enter into a marriage [yet] it had all too strong a notion of itself, which was another reason why it required some marital curbing'. The supposed Union of willing parties subordinated the 'dangerously other', the child incapable of self-government and the independently minded sibling [14]. Correspondingly, colonial discursive constructions as absolute 'Other' would always be confounded by ambiguity and ambivalence. As Kiberd argues, the 'Englishman's Celtic Other' was a 'Double', an invented Other into which the childish and feminine were placed—as such they are not 'repressed', hidden, but perpetuated as an extension of the Anglo-Saxon self [15]. The 'Double' feeds a desire for 'difference' but it will always be a barely repressed—because necessarily visible—part of the self.

Maggie and Conor are uncannily like Pauline and Mark, yet strangely threatening in their very being. Pauline seeks to repair her depleted self through Maggie, but worries that her double will reject or be irreconcilably different from her. Is she an exact double, or an Irish double? Mark's unplanned encounter with his double is actually disastrous, as Conor, a (wayward) father and seducer of his wife, possesses what he denies himself (he is HIV positive), the power to reproduce himself in a child. Thus, the childlike Celtic Other has a paternal capacity he cannot share. He looks on helplessly as he is infantilised. The story as a whole, though, revolves around a confrontation between the popularised feminism of *EastEnders* and the Oedipal narrative of colonial Ireland: Ireland as child wins the struggle with Ireland as sibling.

Maggie finally appears, submissive, at the mercy of a selfish and slovenly extended family. Husband Sean is a drunk who had earlier spilt a drink on Pauline at the hotel while lustfully lurching towards her. This establishes an enigma: how can Pauline rescue Maggie from a sham patriarchal family presided over by a drunken inadequate—and so rescue by restoring her self? Already infantilised (like Maggie) by daughter-in-law Brenda when, still wet, she puts paper on the seat of her scruffy van—'I don't want

you to wet the seat’—Pauline suddenly becomes schemer who outwits this sham patriarchy. She achieves this by reconstructing a matrilineal familial continuity. Her warning to Sean that ‘someone will stand up to you’ is followed by a ‘reverse shot’ of Maggie which pulls back to a ‘two-shot’, with Sean standing behind her. When granddaughter Mary ‘stands up to’ him, Pauline remarks that ‘she was just like Lou’. Maggie reminds her of her father, Albert, thus ‘feminising’ Albert while Mary reincarnates the great *EastEnders* matriarch and household head. When Pauline later engineers Mary’s escape by temporarily disabling Sean with whiskey, the myth of Persephone meets the myth of Oedipus. Just as Demeter and daughter Persephone engineered an arrangement both accommodating and transcending Zeus and Hades’ patriarchal arrangement, the *illusion* of patriarchy endures while in reality a serious power shift has taken place. Disabling Sean exposes an imaginary Oedipal patriarchy, the father an overgrown, embittered child who has failed to banish the internalised Father, while Mary is permitted to commence a new life in the matriarchal Albert Square. The pomegranate seeds in this ‘Persephonic’ narrative are the promise in Ireland (Hell!) of a reconstructed, whole self, a classically feminine self in its relational construction through the female other, by contrast with the masculine obsession with separation, individuation by difference. Pauline negotiates the Britain–Ireland, Earth–Hell, parent–child, sibling, masculine–feminine oppositions by rescuing the living reincarnation of her mother. She leaves her sibling/Double to embody an Other, subordinated femininity in a sham patriarchy, itself a weak, feminised Oedipal child claiming individuation from the colonial parent, but forever fragile and prone to exposure.

Soaps tend to resolve issues of ‘community’ in terms of family, even as they problematise both. *EastEnders*’ ethnic families appear as relatively isolated figures and often return ‘“home”... as if they had never been at home in the Square’ [16]. Only when Pauline discovers Maggie is her full sister does she recognise her family resemblance to Albert and accept her into the symbolic community of the East End. Ultimately, the community is defined narrowly in terms of family: fully integrated figures are analogues of previous family members. Non-blood-related family members and others are outsiders. Pauline conquers the uncanny by exposing the paranoid child–man. Mark temporarily overcomes symbolic impotence by slaying the sham patriarch and identifying himself with his matrilineal family—he punches Sean to make good the escape. The conquering of Oedipus by Persephone superimposes on the sham Oedipal denial of the feminine a colonial version of the Oedipal, confirming the Irish man as childlike, feminine ‘Other’ (and Maggie, the weak woman, and incarnation of the dominated father, remains with him).

Interestingly, Gareth Keogh [17], the actor playing the hotelier, puzzled at the reaction in Ireland, defended his character as ‘not rude, ignorant or stupid but smart, and that was my approach’. This is a variation on a well-worn comic Irishman character, exemplified by Dion Boucicault’s Myles in *The Colleen Bawn* (1867), who uses verbal dexterity to evade his colonial superiors’ attempts to ‘know’ and to dominate him. However, shot composition and editing construct the evasion here entirely from the viewpoint of the already unsettled visitors. Shots privilege the regulars’ interpretative gaze: Pauline enters the van with Brenda in profile as sceptical daughter-in-law Ruth looks on in full view, though in the background; the hotelier’s head looms above the car as we see Pauline, confused at his hostility to her naming his ‘town’ a ‘village’. And when Mary launches a diatribe at her family’s ignorance (‘They think that T.S. Eliot writes musicals and that Jane Austen made cars’), Mark’s reaction shot is the stamp of approval.

Implicit in this discussion is the ambivalent status of the Irish in Britain. *EastEnders'* only Irish characters have come directly from Ireland. Irish people are not a proportion of British society in soaps, but outsiders parachuted in, marked by a 'difference' half-acknowledged, half-disavowed. The BBC's surprise at Irish viewers' reactions indicates an institutional blindness to the Irish in Britain's 'minority' status and the mutually constructive nature of 'British' and 'Irish' identities. For 'realism', soaps must address 'social issues' so that they grow out of, issue from characterisation and relations between characters [18], but for minority groups, issues typically frame characters, without sufficient character development to render them credible. In this case, the problem was compounded by the foregrounding of familial patriarchy, from a producers' viewpoint a 'gender issue', but with an unacknowledged, implicit frame, a colonial construction of violent but morally weak Irishmen.

Brookside: 'thieves in the night'

Channel 4's *Brookside* introduced British television's first Irish migrant soap family, though somewhat accidentally. Writers invented a history involving migration from Dublin only following the coincidental hiring of several Irish actors [19]. The Musgroves first appeared in November 1998 and departed in January 2000. Originator Phil Redmond argues that *Brookside* is not 'issue driven', that 'characters ... can be as extreme in their views as the story, characterisation or reality demands ... the programme itself must not be seen to take any particular viewpoint' [20]. However, *Brookside* has broached many difficult 'issues' from a liberal feminist perspective. In 1995, Mandy and daughter Beth Jordache were imprisoned for murdering wife-beating husband Trevor. Beth died in prison but Mandy was released following mitigating evidence that Trevor raped both daughters. Illiterate mother Niamh Musgrove became the focus for a literacy campaign ('Brookie Basics') in conjunction with the Department of Education and Employment. Redmond replied to the suggestion that this might 'continue the stereotype of Irish people being stupid': 'to have brought up her family and held down a demanding job means she must be quite clever'.

However, *Brookside* is problematic in depicting Irish men—Trevor Jordache and alcoholic father Joey Musgrove as weak and ineffectual, despite Trevor's brutality and Joey's efforts to be household 'head'. Unable to refuse a drink on Lindsay Corkhill's wedding day, Joey is breathalysed and loses his taxi-driver's licence. Trevor's personal and sexual insecurity is clearly the root of his brutality. Like *EastEnders'* Sean, both are child-men, insufficiently mature to be responsible adults. Again, the 'Irishness' of each family is patchily highlighted, their outsider status dominating their presence in the programme. There are two key features here.

First, both narratives depict perverse familial loyalty. When Trevor is buried under the garden patio, sister Brenna requests his signet ring (thus necessitating exhumation), refusing to acknowledge her brother's brutality. Niamh and Joey's son Luke is charged with rape, released following trial, but confesses under threat of Nicky's suicide (drugged, she was confused, and Luke's admission as perpetrator comes over a year later). Niamh prefers familial solidarity to Luke's expulsion, the family leaves, and she relinquishes the modicum of familial security and confidence she has acquired. Following Luke's arrest, Nicky's family attack on the Musgroves had led to the neighbours discussing their presence, highlighting ironies which regular viewers might spot. Jimmy Corkhill (former drug dealer and killer) suggests that they might be operating an IRA 'safe-house', that horses might soon graze on their front lawn; Mick Johnson (a victim

of racism in the past) proposes to evict them. The family exit 'like thieves in the night' (Joey), pushing their van lest they be heard, and confirm the family's tainting with Luke's guilt. The typical soap scenario reverses: intra-familial loyalty excludes the family from the community.

Secondly, the Persephone myth again conflicts with the Oedipal. Luke's release precipitates Nicky's crisis. She drinks heavily, and only after forcing his confession can she tackle a seemingly inexplicable hysteria, giving verbal, symbolic form to sensed, corporeal 'knowledge'. She is trapped by an 'imaginary' vision of Luke as rapist, a drug-clouded memory and, psychoanalytically, an inarticulate, pre-verbal stage in which she cannot separate her self from this imaginary self-definition through indistinct Other. He must verbally confirm rape, but Luke's self is fragilely dependent on its rationalisation as 'just sex', likewise an imaginary self-definition denying the Other, in which their bodies are a mutual continuum. Only confirming the rape, acknowledging power and force, will bring them from the imaginary into the symbolic realm. Because his self is imaginarily an extension of hers, her threat threatens his very being [21]. His admission frees Nicky of her enthrallment to the imaginary, and he collapses along with the imaginary mirroring of his fragile sense of wholeness in Nicky. Despite his denying dependence on the Other, Luke is another child-man, Oedipus desperately compensating fear of castration, imaginarily extending himself through and into the Other. Finding a path between life and death, enthrallment in life, nothingness in death, Nicky is Persephone, preserving the myth of male dominance (literally the rule of law that has wrongly acquitted Luke) but eluding the Oedipal triangle.

Free of the imaginary spell, Nicky's drinking and promiscuity are cured. Luke becomes 'feminised', hysterical, emotionally vulnerable. Like Fanon's colonial subject [22], he only sees himself through the Other. Bereft, he threatens suicide, temporarily isolated as a rare moment of overlapping sound editing carries the Musgroves' Christmas sing-song over his broken, pathetic image. Ultimately the family claim him, though, and sham patriarchy gives way to the colonised, feminised subject [23], literally silenced as they leave, held in an objectifying gaze by Nicky's grandmother.

Father Ted: the island with 'no west side'

If the soaps embed the colonial version of the Oedipal within the myth of Persephone, the sitcom *Father Ted* (1995–98) carries the Oedipal to extremity. Although made by the London-based Hat Trick Production and first broadcast on Channel 4 (only later bought by RTÉ), *Ted* was a quasi-Irish production. Its script was written by Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews, originally commissioned by Seamus Cassidy, directed by Declan Lowney, shot in Ireland, and starred an Irish cast.

Ted adheres to the British sitcom format of situation as permanent trap from which characters cannot escape [24]. *Ted* is formally closest to *Steptoe and Son* (BBC, 1962–74), in essence a perverse variation on the Hegelian master–slave dialectic in which self-identity is paradoxical because constructed through the Other, and the slave sees/understands more than the master. Albert and Harold, *Steptoe and Son*, are both master and slave to each other. In their exclusively masculine world Albert plays a quasi-feminine domestic role to Harold's breadwinner, but his guilt-inducing behaviour radically curtails Harold's liberty. Harold, a tragi-comic child-man paradoxically enthralled to his domesticated, feminised father, never destroys his father to reinvent himself. *Ted's* characters are enthralled to an all-pervasive though unstated sense of obligation to perpetuate circular, repetitive lives. Like Harold, Ted's attempted escape

from Craggy Island reinforces enthrallment. While Harold's poignant drama of thwarted aspirations to escape his working-class origins is a direct contemporary of British 'new wave', realist cinema of the early 1960s [25], *Ted's* array of master-slaves and slave-masters occupies a surreal world. The paradigmatic episode shows Ted, unable to sleep, encountering housekeeper Mrs Doyle in complete darkness, tea-tray at the ready:

Ted: But we never get up at night.

Mrs Doyle: Well, you're up now, aren't you, Father? Unless I'm hallucinating from lack of sleep. That's happened before all right.

Ted: I'm just getting my jacket to go for a little walk.

Mrs Doyle: Right, so. [Remains but switches the light off.]

Mrs Doyle will only leave her post if instructed; but to instruct, Ted must be up, legitimating the insanity. His announced walk both avoids and extends her service. Service is both completely voluntary and guilt-inducing. Master and slave are interchangeable. Desire is displaced onto objectified sense of duty. Tyrannical tea, the mediating object between mastery and servitude, has a magical mastery of its own. Insuperable, its avoidance mutates it into another tyrannical but self-imposed duty.

Subservience to Hegel's 'thinghood' reveals a peculiarly Catholic and Irish character distinct from *Steptoe*. The Father to the child-like 'Fathers' is himself a child. They repeatedly undermine the Church (Ted is a barely more legitimate representative) with impunity: drunken Jack with childish rage (attacking a verbose, prodding bishop with a 'Holy Stone'); while 'holy fool' Dougal produces ridiculous observations that occasionally question the fundamental beliefs of Christianity:

God made us all, right? And he's looking at us from heaven ... and then his Son came down and saved everyone ... and when we die we're all going to go to heaven? ... That's the bit I have trouble believing in.

Dougal and Jack act out frustrated childish emotions, but Ted pays the consequences. Neither is properly akin to the 'holy fool' of classical comedy that, by contrast with sitcom, was future oriented, resulting in personal and collective progression [26]. Their non sequiturs, occasional breaches of the island's Catholic stasis, have no consequence. Nominally authoritative, Ted is subjected to his own repressed ego, prone to irrepressible id, but embodied in others.

The colonial context is not present, but Ted is a post-colonial child-man. Incapable of development, he has never completed the Oedipal process, killing and then reinventing the internalised parent as an Other in a developmental, articulated relationship. Dermot Morgan's inarticulate rage and self-restraint as Ted embody the tension between childish anger at a predetermined fate, the desire for change, the inability to effect it. The post-colonial entwines with exaggerated Catholicity—obedience to an internalised greater Other—to make an absurdity that hinges, as successful comedy, on the boundary between plausibility and implausibility. In comedy, the implausible 'works' if there are implicit traces of plausibility according to different conditions of probability from those depicted (for example, transposing the laws of physics from one set of circumstances to another, inappropriate set) [27]. 'Plausibility' in *Ted* depends, however tacitly, on the historical cultural construction of Irish Catholic identity: 'nobody could be *that* stupid—but they *could* if ...' Hence an implicit reflexivity: the offshore island is an elastic trope for the cultural unconscious of its neighbour, a colonial-Catholic inertia where free will is forever enthralled.

For many Irish people in Britain, there was little or no difference between *Ted's* child-man, and the child-man of the soaps. The writers, in one *Irish Post* letter, were cast as 'Uncle Toms' legitimating—being Irish—a British post-imperial taste for paddy-whackery [28]. However, the *Irish Post* indicates widely divergent opinions amongst the Irish in Britain. Ironically, for example, a response to the paper's 'glowing report' on *Ted* quoted co-writer Linehan's remark that *Ted* 'does not portray the *Irish Post* image of the Irish' [29]. Assuming Linehan perceives the paper as uncritical celebration of anything Irish, strangled by hypersensitivity, the differences here point to the cultural complexity of *Ted* and the diversity of the Irish in Britain and Ireland.

Ironically, Bakhtin's concept of 'chronotope' (meaning both the organisation of time and space in texts and its relation to the 'real life' time-space where the work resonates) [30] is instructive here. *Ted* may seem completely devoid of recognisable spatio-temporal co-ordinates—Craggy Island contracts to the size of football fields or magnifies to include a 'Chinese community' (of which *Ted* was unaware). Yet it is historically specific to Ireland in the late 1990s (as, indeed, are the various responses to it). The writers recently described their work as a parody of Irish stereotypes (drunkenness, stupidity, generosity), but add that they didn't know this when writing [31]. In early interviews both denied succession to literary figures [32]—despite critical eulogies which insist on both literary and international popular cultural influences: 'The culturally rich fantasy island where Beckett's apocalyptic absurdism meets Flann O'Brien's rural whimsy ... *Ted* is ... as much a child of *The Young Ones* or *The Simpsons* as any homegrown ancestors' (Stephen Dalton). In comparison, Linehan argues:

It's a sympathetic portrayal of priests. It just shows them to be human. *Ted* ... doesn't have any interest in religion—and most priests *do*. ... And the fact that Dougal is too stupid even to do a Mass—all this is patently stuff that couldn't happen [emphasis in original]. [33]

Dalton's 'analysis' jars with Linehan's concern to avoid embarrassing the Church. He has elsewhere stressed that his parents are still practising Catholics, and that Mathews' uncle is a priest [34]. His quote is full of ambivalence: showing priests 'to be human' is a realist claim, but 'stuff that couldn't happen' throws this into doubt. This suggests a desire to transcend, rather than erase the Catholic Irish culture depicted—transcendence entails avoidance rather than engagement. Realism coexists with surrealism, an irony, rather than a paradox. Irony permits the coexistence of contradictions; paradox cancels one with the other [35]. *Ted* is curiously sympathetic to the Catholic culture from which it grew.

The authors' denial of the literary lineage to *Ted* could be seen to stem from a kind of un-institutionalised post-colonial 'cultural capital'. For Bourdieu, 'cultural capital' is the accumulation of embodied, objectified or institutionalised cultural labour and resources. Education inculcates an elite, 'high' cultural capital—privileged ways of seeing, to appreciate cultural works typically in formalistic terms rather than substantive content—historically a quality of the educated but 'dominated fraction' (i.e. lower in economic capital) of the bourgeoisie [36]. In post-colonial Ireland independent national institutions coexist with an enduring post-colonial sensibility, selfhood viewed through the eyes of the Other. Post-colonial cultural capital is an acquired reflexive sense of the symbolic meanings embedded in discourses and actions resulting from colonial relations. It is an imbued sense which has not been formulated and transmitted through the education system, which does not require a literary lineage to be objectified in creative work, but in whose absence the work is both 'vulgar' and un-legitimated.

Only following their work's critical insertion in a canon of literature did *Ted's* creators redefine their work as surreal parody [37]. Doing without knowing indicates an imbued reflexive sensibility, a 'meta' commentary implicit in the dramatisation. If 'postmodernist' culture, playfully self-reflexive, dissolving the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, corresponds to the emergence of the 'newer post-industrial middle classes' [38], *Ted's* cultural sensibility is a peculiarly *Irish* variant—owing equally to a media-saturated popular culture and to a 'post'-Catholic, 'post'-colonial sensibility (the quotes signify endurance despite the 'post-') pervading Irish popular culture. It is a vulgar work, widely accessible in part because it is not a product of high cultural capital. Whereas Flann O'Brien requires a degree of educated literary competence, the skills required to decode the implicit spatio-temporal co-ordinates in *Ted* are more routinely experientially acquired through saturation in contemporary popular Anglo-American screen culture.

Unlike Dermot Morgan's earlier work, *Ted* is not satire, yet it reaches subtle levels of social and cultural commentary, perhaps because it lacks direct targets. There are thinly veiled references to real people in *Ted*, but it approximates a biting social commentary when most absurd. Thus, *Ted's* ridiculous Chinese impersonation insults the island's Chinese community and inadvertently licenses other nakedly expressed prejudices, including a middle-aged woman ranting at the Greeks for inventing 'gayness'. To atone, *Ted* compiles a slide show to celebrate the island's 'ethnic diversity'. He includes Emperor Ming from *Flash Gordon*, a black visitor whose name he has forgotten, and the Great Wall of China, seen 'from anywhere in the world'. He concludes that 'fascists dress in black and go round telling people what to do, whereas priests ...', but cannot finish! *Ted* merely exposes his ignorance, and, in turn, a neurotic concern with his selfhood. Seeking a mature self, modern, liberal, knowledgeable and tolerant of the Other, he reveals a childish, unformed self incapable of dialogical engagement with the Other because it lies between the colonised subject's childish mentality and the supposedly fully formed national consciousness of a mature, independent state. Effectively he 'others' himself in the gaze of the Chinese, who anyway describe his show as 'crap'.

Such ironies situate *Ted* 'chronotopically' in the late-1990s Irish Republic, a buoyant economy founded on inward corporate investment combined with a post-colonial mentality of incompletely articulated and unfulfilled desire born of an historically childlike subordination. Failure to recognise an 'alien' presence and comically ignorant mis-recognition resonate both with the current row over the recognition/non-recognition and placement of asylum seekers as refugees and the newly necessitated importation of immigrant workers. *Ted's* 'logic of the absurd' provides a more sophisticated, subtle interrogation of identity and post-coloniality than any liberal treatise against prejudice. This is not a totalistic argument for an enduring post-colonial mentality in a wealthy Western economy [39]. *Ted's* encounter here comically depicts post-colonial childish inner rage, directed inwardly and outwardly for misrecognition of an incompletely formed adult, failure to excuse him his ignorance. Nominally a white European adult, *Ted* claims to know the Other through his act of mimicry, but undermines his claim through blatant ignorance. *Ted's* attempted reparation brilliantly depicts a paradoxical master-slave dialectic along the lines: 'I know you better than you know yourself, but should I fail to recognise you, forgive my ignorance.'

Ted is clearly a masculine text. Its characters are predominantly male, but it is also formally 'closed', lacking the paradigmatic complexity and openness feminist scholars see as characteristic of 'women's genres'. It is also written from a masculine perspective.

While the ‘Persephonic’ paradigm of feminine guile dominates the soaps discussed above, *Ted*’s only regular female is implicated in the island’s schizophrenogenic Catholic culture. Mrs Doyle’s insistent offer of tea/sandwiches/praise, only to scold/deny/ridicule the recipient, echoes Scheper-Hughes’s controversial account of the cultural roots of mental illness in rural Ireland [40]. Using Bateson’s ‘double bind’ [41] theory she explained how parents set children (boys more often than girls) conditions for parental care (submissiveness and submission to parental needs) but, when conditions are met, children are punished with ridicule and parental ignorance of their needs. *Ted*’s imaginative dramatisation of a residually colonial mentality is a decidedly masculine one [42]. Indeed, as Llewellyn-Jones argues, Mrs Doyle extends the ‘grotesque’ tradition in Irish humour—a way of containing the ‘dread of the mysteries of reproduction’ [43]. Here, the feminine is both servant and symbolically castrating hag. While feminine guile resolves the otherwise circular Oedipal narratives in the soaps, in *Ted*, the feminine contributes to the perpetuation of the Oedipal child–man.

Conclusion

Ted gives a place to that part of the unconscious of contemporary Ireland—the colonial, Catholic child–man—repressed in a supposedly liberal society and modern economy [44]. As *EastEnders*, *Brookside* and the critical responses to them demonstrate, the Irish child–man is alive and well in the imagination of both Britain and Ireland. In the absence of any ‘normal’ context or visitor to gauge Craggy Island’s ‘abnormality’, it is a miniature version of Ireland itself, the little blind Oedipus within. The Ireland of Craggy Island and the ‘real’ Ireland, whose contemporary fiction of modernity requires both a recognition and denial of the inner ‘Other’ by placing it in ‘the past’, form the final master–slave dialectic.

EastEnders and *Brookside* explode the sham patriarchy of a pre-modern Ireland through the feminine narrative, reproducing a colonial image of the weak, childish Irishman. Craggy Island, populated almost exclusively by variations of this figure [45], is a self-reflexive text that keeps in focus (without the definitive resolution of the supposedly ‘open’ soap text) the repressed of contemporary Ireland. *EastEnders*’ ‘doubles’ are historically over-determined ways of containing the uncontainable, distilling and locating in the colonial those repressed parts of the (imperial) self. As Ireland’s offshore ‘Other’, Craggy Island locates, but does not contain or resolve in the past that colonial construction of self which haunts the ‘post-’. In episode one, Ted recalls that the ‘west side’ of the island had fallen into the sea! With ‘no west side’, the madness that might be contained there simply pervades the rest of the island.

This makes *Ted* both harmless—as direct satire it is toothless [46]—and a necessary play with the colonial child–man which its immaturity represents. Paradoxically, it is sufficiently mature to be reflexively immature. Critic Graham Linehan angrily remarked that this valuable social asset was being stymied as RTÉ recently rejected *Ted* co-writer Mathews’ commissioned radio show:

RTÉ is terrified of letting people speak with their own voices, rather than have an uncle and an aunt sitting on a stage swapping anecdotes—nonsense and light laughter after a church social type of thing. They’ve got to grow up—no, grow down (in age) along with the rest of the country. [47]

Ted also differs, therefore, from the more recent sitcom by Irish writer Owen O’Neill, *The Fitz* (BBC, 2000), attacked by British and Irish critics alike for its formless display

of mad, uniformly red-haired Irish people. Poor sitcom because of the absence of logic in the characters' submission to their own imprisonment, it also lacks *Ted's* delicate balance of plausibility and implausibility, *Ted's* desired escape forever thwarted by his child-man internalisation of all-encompassing interdiction.

Finally, those responses to *Ted* from the Irish in Britain (exemplified by letters to the *Irish Post*) that include it with the soaps, or indeed are more hostile because of the Irish credentials of the authors, do not simply reflect an absence of the cultural capital with which to 'decode' it 'correctly'. Rather, those negative responses cite personal or collective experience as their basis and exhibit an understandable fear of the self always being constructed in stereotypical terms over which they have no control. Such affective, visceral responses reflect an enduring internalised post-colonial legacy that perpetuates a defensive posture towards any external threat to an already fragile selfhood. On the other hand, those responses to the *Irish Post* which strove to explain the differences between *Ted* and the soaps displayed a sophisticated reflexivity in reading the text, suggesting significant class and possibly generational differences among readers, and the Irish in Britain generally. Thus, following the controversy over the Musgroves, one reader suggested that the family might be shown watching *Father Ted* to relieve them from their miserable soap existence [48].

NOTES

- [1] 'They [the programme makers] portrayed the Irish as drunks, idiots and unintelligent people and unfriendly'; 'a bit stupid, heavy drinking, there were donkeys running around in the streets. We were one step short of having people tripping over leprechauns.' In apologising, Yentob, too, focused on imagery: 'I think the storyline was fine, I think that they got the tone and a lot of the images often wrong.' All from Channel 4's *Right to Reply*, 27 September 1997. BBC1's *Points of View*, 1 October 1997, also aired numerous complaints. Some, especially from political figures, appear to have ascribed to the programme a political responsibility and power to assist positive and mutually respectful Anglo-Irish relations.
- [2] *Irish Post*, 12 February 1999, one of several articles following the Musgroves' arrival in *Brookside*.
- [3] Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester University Press, 2000) notes that the 'Christmas Special in 1996 on RTE's Network 2 achieved an audience of 975,000, almost a third of the Republic's total population' (p. 186), but later reviews a widely divergent range of positive and negative responses amongst the Irish in Britain (pp. 196–197).
- [4] This is not to reverse the established distinction, in media and cultural studies, between the 'open', progressive form of the soap and the 'closed', conservative form of the situation comedy. See John Fiske's *Television Culture* (Methuen, 1987), but also more recent feminist works which depict the soap genre *in itself* as critical feminist cultural praxis: e.g. Martha Nochimson, *No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject* (University of California Press, 1992). On the supposedly inherently conservative nature of situation comedy, see Jane Feuer, 'Narrative Form in American Network Television', in *High Theory/Low Culture*, ed. Colin McCabe (Manchester University Press, 1986).
- [5] Robert C. Allen, 'Introduction', in *To be Continued ... Soap Opera Around the World*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Routledge, 1995), p. 17.
- [6] Allen, 'Introduction', p. 18.
- [7] Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps* (Polity, 1991), p. 4.
- [8] Nochimson extends a focus on feminine pragmatism versus masculine rigid adherence to the 'rule of law' in her analysis of gender differences in reasoning. She deems two aspects of the myth significant: Demeter's brokering a deal with Zeus, following the abduction of her daughter Persephone by Hades (Persephone will spend two-thirds of the year with her, and the other third with Hades). Secondly, the agency of Persephone's desire, for, though tricked by Hades into eternal marriage by eating a pomegranate, it is her *desire* for the symbolic fruit that entraps her. Nochimson, *No End to Her*, pp. 205–206.

- [9] Nochimson, *No End to Her*, pp. 120–121.
- [10] In discussing ethnic minorities in *EastEnders*, Christine Geraghty qualifies her general endorsement of the ‘openness’ of soap texts, ‘Social Issues and Realist Soaps: A Study of British Soaps in the 1980s and 1990s’, in Allen (ed.), *To be Continued*, pp. 66–80.
- [11] Charlotte Brunson, ‘Identity in Feminist Television Criticism’, *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Charlotte Brunson, Julie D’Acci and Lynn Spigel (Oxford University Press, 1997).
- [12] Nicholas Rand and Maria Torok, ‘The Sandman looks at “The uncanny”: The Return of the Repressed or of the Secret; Hoffmann’s Question to Freud’, in *Speculations after Freud: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani and Michael Munchow (Routledge, 1994), pp. 185–203.
- [13] Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (Verso, 1995), p. 127.
- [14] Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 130.
- [15] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Jonathan Cape, 1995), pp. 41–42.
- [16] Geraghty, ‘Social Issues’, p. 71. This was the fate of an earlier Irish character on the Square, Aidan, who first arrived as an apprentice footballer for Walford Town football club, became injured, then homeless, and ultimately returned to Ireland. He was a complete isolate as an Irish person in London, parachuted into the Square and dispatched just as suddenly.
- [17] RTÉ radio’s *Today with Pat Kenny*, 23 September 1997.
- [18] David Buckingham, *Public Secrets: EastEnders and its Audience* (BFI, 1987), p. 15.
- [19] According to Executive Producer Phil Redmond in an interview (interviewer anonymous), headed ‘The Irish in Soaps’, published on the Mersey Television: website <www.merseytv.com>, 7 December 1998.
- [20] Phil Redmond, *Phil Redmond’s Brookside: The Official Companion* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1987), p. 7.
- [21] This analysis is partially inspired by Daniel Beaumont’s reading, ‘King, Queen, Master, Slave: the Master/Slave Dialectic and The Thousand and One Nights’, in *Neophilologus* 82 (1998), pp. 335–356, of Shahriyar’s beheading of his wives in *The Thousand and One Nights* as a symptom of his fixation at the level of the imaginary. ‘It is in so far as the wife, the other here, is the site of Shahriyar’s alienation that he kills her’ (p. 347).
- [22] See Geraldine Moane, ‘A Psychological Analysis of Colonialism in an Irish Context’, *Irish Journal of Psychology*, vol. 15, no. 2/3 (1994), pp. 250–265.
- [23] On the feminising, infantilising dimensions of colonisation, see Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: The Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Oxford University Press, 1983).
- [24] As confirmed by the authors in Nicky Fennel, ‘Interview: Father Ted’, *Film West* no. 25 (Summer 1996), pp. 38–40.
- [25] John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–1963* (BFI, 1986).
- [26] David Grote, *The End of Comedy: The Sitcom and the Comedic Tradition* (Shoestring Press, 1983).
- [27] Jerry Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd* (BFI, 1987), pp. 39–44.
- [28] Dennis Keegan, *Irish Post*, 6 April 1996.
- [29] Raymond J. Boyle’s letter, *Irish Post*, 6 May 1996, apparently in response to Martin Doyle, ‘In Good Faith’, *Irish Post*, ‘The Craic’, 9 March 1996, pp. 1, 3.
- [30] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, translated and edited by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (University of Texas, 1981), p. 253.
- [31] G. Linehan and A. Mathews, *Father Ted: The Complete Scripts* (Boxtree, 1999), p. 8.
- [32] See their comments in Fennel, ‘Interview—Father Ted’, p. 39.
- [33] Both quotations from S. Dixon and D. Falvey, *Gift of the Gag: The Explosion in Irish Comedy* (Blackstaff Press, 1999), p. 60.
- [34] ‘Two Priests and a Nun Go Into a Pub’, BBC Radio 2, 22 April 2000.
- [35] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (Routledge, 1994), pp. 62–63.
- [36] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).
- [37] Linehan and Mathews, *Father Ted*, p. 8.
- [38] Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism* (Routledge, 1990), p. 20.
- [39] Liam Kennedy, in ‘Modern Ireland: Post-colonial Society or Post-colonial Pretensions?’, *Irish Review* no. 13 (1992–93), pp. 107–112, shows how the post-colonial pretensions of modern Ireland entail a paradoxical collective aggrandisement, an indulgence of a childlike divestment of responsibility in an imaginary romantic identification with Europe’s ‘other’.

- [40] Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (University of California Press, 1981). See also, Tom Inglis's analysis of the development of the social and cultural 'mother' archetype in modern Ireland in *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* (Gill & Macmillan, 1987), pp. 187–214.
- [41] Gregory Bateson, 'A Note on the Double Bind', *Family Process* 2 (1963), pp. 154–161.
- [42] Yet its obviousness as a televisual text, its grotesquery, unsettlingly draws attention to this, by contrast with the 'early postmodernist', Flann O'Brien who according to Keith Hopper disguised an undercurrent of misogyny with metonymic displacements. See his, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* (Cork University Press, 1995), pp. 56–107.
- [43] Margaret Llewellyn-Jones, 'The Grotesque and the Ideal: Representations of Ireland and the Irish in Popular Comedy Programmes on British TV', in *Frames and Fictions on Television: The Politics of Identity within Drama*, ed. Bruce Carson and Margaret Llewellyn-Jones (Intellect, 2000), p. 132.
- [44] On Ireland's embarrassing inner, pre-modern 'other', historically located in 'the west', see Patrick Sheeran and Nina Witoszek, 'Myths of Irishness: The Fomorian Connection', *Irish University Review* vol. 20, no. 2 (1990), pp. 239–250.
- [45] I realise this is a rather 'Catholic' argument for the necessity of suffering to redemption. As a theoretical crutch, I cite David Marc's analogous argument for the satirical potential of the decidedly incorrigible *Beverly Hillbillies* who never adjust to the individualist, consumer culture world of 1950s America: *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), pp. 39–63. Of course, these figures are also in the tradition of the 'comic Irishman', men who are boys who just never grew up. See Maureen Waters, *The Comic Irishman* (State University of New York, 1984).
- [46] Eamonn McCann argues that the success of contemporary Irish comedy stems from its 'delicious hint of something hazardous combined with a certainty that it means no harm': 'The New Funny-bone of Europe', *Belfast Telegraph*, 19 December 1999.
- [47] Quoted in Deirdre Falvey, 'The Radio Show that Never Was', *Irish Times*, 'Weekend Supplement', 29 July 2000. The programme was to be a spoof of Irish radio, the pilot including a sketch in which a group of ex-paedophile priests are interviewed about their plan to tackle their guilt by forming a jazz band. RTÉ claimed it would not appeal to 'our audience'.
- [48] *Irish Post*, 20 March 1999. See also the discussion of responses to *Ted* in Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*, pp. 195–197, 204.