

Can Minorities Speak in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*?

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Introduction: *The Hostage* in Dispute

Brendan Behan (1923-64), an Irish playwright who had been imprisoned in his youth for his part in a failed IRA bombing attempt in Liverpool, took London audiences by storm when *The Hostage* premiered at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, in 1958. The play was given 452 performances within two years, followed by runs or revivals later in Paris, New York and Dublin. Alongside Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), Behan's *The Hostage* has been highly regarded by some critics, in that these plays "inaugurate the contemporary movement in Irish and British drama" (Hawkins 23). Some may argue that this could be an overstatement about Behan and his artistic contribution, as the play, for some critics, "panders to English conceptions of the Irish" (Wall 19), and is "structurally such a mess," only "[fitting] the bill for a Christmas show" (O'Toole 247).

However, *The Hostage*, described as "considerably more popular than any other Irish play seen in London in the 1950s" (Harris 135), excited controversy when it was first produced in Dublin in 1969. The controversy lay in the fact that most Irish critics preferred its Irish language original, *An Giall*, staged early in 1958 at the Damer Theatre in Dublin. For these critics this English version—loosely translated from the one in Irish with more characters and different theatrical effects—led to "the destruction of the integrity of the original play" (Wall 29).

Having said this, *The Hostage* is not an exact translation of its Irish original, *An Giall*. The former should be regarded as having been inspired by the latter, in that it has six more characters as well as songs, jokes and distancing effects that are missing from the latter. Alan Simpson, a director who produced *The Hostage* in 1970 with a retranslation from its English version into Gaelic in Galway, recollected that the Irish audience "could not be expected to accept [this version] ... because it did not seem true to the Irish character" (114). Arguably, this "drastically modified" version by Behan and the English producer Joan Littlewood was initially meant "for a London audience and [they] coloured it in a London way" (Simpson 114). Those who strongly favoured the Irish version thus argued that the London production was less provocative and simply "a sanitised compromise between Behan's radically critical views on Ireland and his knowledge of what the Irish theatre could allow" (Pierse 92).

However, these drastically different receptions of *The Hostage* encouraged many postcolonial critics to examine both the original and the adapted versions, and the changes made by the latter.

To evaluate more properly how the English version of *An Giall*, namely, *The Hostage*, presents the “contradictions of the postcolonial relationship,” the play should be seen as a separate work, in that all the new theatrical elements and socially underrepresented characters (Pierse 99) have given the play a different tone. The added elements and alterations, including Brechtian distancing effects and metanarrative, illustrate how Behan intended to unsettle the hegemonic political forces and historiographies that glamorized martyrdom or sacrifice.

The play can be studied as a postcolonial text, in that Behan attempts to illustrate the ignored context in which socially marginalized characters tried to survive, and how they coped strategically with mainstream forces. His play might be seen as echoing the agenda of subaltern studies that questions the domination of the elite and the sanctity of the nation it rules, thus counteracting the exclusiveness not only of nationalism and racialism but also patriarchy. This essay will examine, first of all, how Behan intervened in the “fragmented and episodic” histories of neglected social communities and individuals and their conflicting experiences (Guha 4). It will also illuminate the extent to which the socially disadvantaged characters in the play, for instance, pimps, prostitutes, homosexuals, blacks and foreign sailors, are seen as misfits in a puritanical Ireland—as opposed to the relatively more Bohemian or liberal ethos in Britain and continental Europe. It will delve into how the playwright, by presenting “the IRA action as the work of a lunatic fringe” (Greene 159), dealt with the legacy of the 1916 Easter Rising and questioned the dominance of the nationalist government that failed to curtail communal violence, whether political, economic or sexual. It will further examine whether Behan strategically “save[d] the ... subaltern from misrepresentation” (Bertens 170) by dramatizing how these fringe characters are caught in the toils of despair and giving them a voice.

The Subaltern in an Anomalous State

Before the essay examines Behan’s attempt to speak for the socially ignored, it should be noted that the Irish Free State—born out of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921—was very much an ethno-religious nationalist entity, supported to a large extent by the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland. Despite the fact that the birth of the Irish nation was largely effected by non-elite individuals and communities, for instance agrarian parties, women suffragists, trade unionists, slum dwellers, the unemployed and the homeless, among others, their experiences and aspirations suffered from “persistent inassimilability ... to the state,” as David Lloyd observes (“Outside History” 418). The cause of such inassimilability of non-elite entities was due to the systematic

transplantation of the imperialist administration in post-Treaty Ireland, as members of the Irish elite—mostly receiving Victorian education—often prioritized social stability and were thus not in favour of political heterogeneity. This undeniably sustained the conservatism of bourgeois nationalists and discouraged more radical social reform in a nation-state that had been fervently pursuing decolonization.

It can therefore be argued that the 1937 Irish constitution resulted from the rule of post-Treaty Ireland by the elite, which granted the Catholic Church a “special position” for its superior moral guidance. This reinforced not only Catholic middle-class values but also the existing marginalization of the underclass. Given the strong Catholic and nationalist ethos, it can be understood that the politically and religiously incorrect experiences of social minorities—otherwise known as the subaltern—could never be justified by the mainstream middle class, despite the fact that some of them might have been more patriotic than those amongst the elite who had vested interests in a nationalist ethos.

However, as Colin Graham points out, social minorities can easily be “subsumed by colonialism, capitalism and nationalist ideology and practice [so] that their oppression leaves them unsullied by these dominances” (106). A certain amount of force is therefore resorted to in order to restrict the undesirable political temporalities of the underclass or those with dissenting opinions against existing disciplinary powers. This often prompts the deprived individuals or communities to continue silencing themselves voluntarily, if they are not able to defend themselves by adopting nationalist rhetoric. Nonetheless, their forced silence can never conceal how “the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous” (Spivak 1995: 26). For postcolonial critics, those who intend to speak for or construct a picture of the subaltern, for example historians and sociologists, may have to be “knowledgeable in the history of imperialism, in the epistemic violence that constituted/effaced a subject that was obliged to cathect ... the space of the Imperialists’ self-consolidating other” (Spivak 1988: 154). The “self-consolidating other” notably includes sexual and ethnic minorities who bear dual disadvantages, when patriarchy and imperialism work hand-in-hand to downplay their presence.

Nevertheless, modern Irish theatre might have presented a different picture or imagination of those on the social fringes given that dramatists can test out their observations or act as their spokespeople. Some of Behan’s predecessors did indeed make such contributions. An example was J.M. Synge, whose portrait of inhabitants of the Aran Islands theatrically relocated native Gaelic speakers from the geographical and political margins of British imperialism to the spotlight of the Abbey Theatre. Sean O’Casey’s Dublin Trilogy featured the urban poor of the early twentieth century, showing how tenement dwellers were economically and socially deprived and displaced in Anglo-Irish politics. Both playwrights created impressive characters who expressed themselves vociferously. Differently from historians who always study people and events from a distance and

write “a scholarly form of fiction,” dramatists provide more diverse views and create vivid roles that the public can access and make judgements from (Thompson 90).

Behan, along with other Irish playwrights with close or personal connections with underprivileged communities, on the one hand portrays their near-invisibility in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. On the other hand, he conveys the experiences and conflicting social memories of non-elite people—often in a cynical way—through the physical behaviour of his characters. That said, by unearthing these minority characters from the subjugation of the dominant forces of British imperialism and ethno-religious Irish nationalism, Behan may be seen as leading audiences to see how Ireland could remain an “anomalous state,” as David Lloyd indicates in his monograph (7). *The Hostage* may therefore be regarded as a loudspeaker, though not necessarily unproblematic, for those surviving in a hidden corner of post-colonial Ireland.

The Hostage: Patriots and Prisoners?

Behan, born into a working-class family in 1923 when the Irish Civil War was drawing to its close, is one of very few Irish playwrights with a strong family connection to the socialist wing of the Irish Republican movement. Incarcerated by the Free State for his participation in the Civil War, his father Stephen Behan, whom the playwright first saw as an infant through the prison bars of Kilmainham Gaol, was a union leader and member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). His mother, Kathleen Kearney, was, according to Christopher Murray, “an embodiment of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, who demanded the patriotic involvement of all her sons” (149). His uncle, Peadar Kearney, was the composer of the Irish national anthem *Amhrán na bhFiann*, or “The Soldier’s Song.”

At the age of eight, Behan became a child member of *Fianna Éireann*; at sixteen he was arrested and imprisoned in Hollesley Bay Borstal, a reform institution for young offenders in Suffolk, England. After returning to Ireland in 1941 he was soon sentenced to a fourteen-year term in Mountjoy Jail for his involvement in a gunfight at an IRA funeral at Glasnevin Cemetery in 1942. His prison experiences in England and Ireland had the effect of prompting a significant breakthrough in modern Irish drama, in that “Behan brought to the stage for the first time whores and gays, a previously unseen prison population” (Greene 219). *The Quare Fellow* (1954), *The Hostage* (1958), and *Borstal Boy* (1967) are all realistic works about prisoners’ lives and views, sometimes offensive or cynical, on politics, corruption, and sexuality. However, Behan’s imprisonment on both sides of the Irish Sea did not reinforce his republicanism but cultivated his critical observations of the ideologies that reinforce binary modes of human identity: patriots or traitors, republicans or unionists, Catholics or Protestants, blacks or whites, homosexuals or heterosexuals, and so forth.

The Hostage is set in 1960 in a run-down residence whose owner, Monsewer, believes that he is more Irish than English and is still fighting for the cause of Irish independence. Interestingly, Monsewer does not reveal his origins himself. The audience only learn from other characters that “[he] was an Anglo-Irishman” who is not “an ordinary Protestant like ... the plumber in the back parlour next door” but “only works at riding horses, drinking whisky and reading double-meaning books in Irish at Trinity College” (Behan 18-9). By definition his identity remains obscure, since he is neither exactly of Anglo-Irish ascendancy nor is he Irish by birth—“he became an Irishman” (Behan 19), despite the fact that his father could be an English bishop and his mother an Irishwoman.

In *The Hostage*, Monsewer’s house has become a brothel that also serves as a tenement for low-income dwellers and a hiding place for a nineteen-year-old British soldier hostage, Leslie Williams, who has been abducted by the IRA. Leslie, who risks dying any minute, has been seized in reprisal for the sentencing to death of an IRA volunteer in Belfast. Another complication is that Teresa, an Irish country girl of the same age as Leslie, has fallen in love with him. The comical aspects of the play hold out the hope that Leslie may be freed if the English government releases or grants a reprieve to the IRA prisoner in Belfast. However, Leslie is not killed by the republican soldiers who guard him but in the midst of “pandemonium” in the dark during a police raid (Behan 106).

The play was never going to please both republicans and unionists, given that it heaps sarcasm on characters of both political persuasions, and their interactions concerning the hostage are more farcical than serious. Notably, audiences’ mixed reactions to performances of the play, either strongly in favour or hostile, may be seen as implicit exemplification of the lingering colonial mentality that reinforced the collective perception or imagination of an Irish society. Some criticized the fact that *The Hostage*, when produced in London, “contain[ed] no drinking except tea, no wild Irish jigs, no anti-English rebel songs and no mob scenes,” avoided “the age-old ‘Irish question’” and “panders to popular conceptions of the Irish” (Wall 171). Nevertheless, some praised the production for being “entirely in harmony with the exuberant, randy, free-wheeling spirit of the script... [It] was an electrifying reminder of how vital the theatre at its best could be” (Hogan 2013). Behan, who was conscious of the problems arising from these oversimplified critiques, through having been jailed for supporting the republican cause in England and Ireland, might have intended to write a play that questioned the existing patriotic agenda. He employed the distancing effect, a modern theatrical technique that, if effective, breaks the fourth wall of the stage so as to disrupt the audience’s empathy with characters that are in trouble or in love.

For instance, Leslie, the English hostage, derides the playwright in front of the audience: “Brendan Behan, he’s too anti-British... He doesn’t mind coming over here and taking your money” (Behan 78). The playwright, whose presence is usually invisible in a play, is also

jeered at by an IRA officer that he is “too anti-Irish, . . . We’ll give him what-for for making fun of the Movement” (Behan 78). It can be argued that the characters’ direct speeches to the audience produce comic relief in this abduction story. Incidentally, this technique reminds the audience members of their position as onlookers of current affairs involving the undeserved sacrifices of the underclass that is manipulated by politicians. That said, the distancing effect would allow the audience to reflect on the social hierarchy inherent in colonial and anti-colonial mechanisms—with violence that maintains the “troublesome nature of the Same/Other ethics of colonialism [to be] played out” before and after Irish independence (Graham 84). It could be argued that the play is not just about the abduction of a powerless hostage but says more about those people who are eventually prisoners of their political commitments.

Unheard Voices from the Periphery: Behan’s Attempt

Some nationalist audiences took exception to *The Hostage* because of its criticism of the Easter Rising, which had been celebrated as “paradigmatic, with a sense of the sacred, the timeless, the otherworldly” (Ó Cruaíoch 58). The play not only gives a burlesque portrayal of an ex-patriot, Monsewer, the owner of a decaying house who believes himself still to be fighting in the Troubles, but also depicts how minorities on the lower rungs of Irish society clash with each other. Ironically, many of these people are not fully conscious that the cause of their troubles is their mixed relationship with England, or they may deny to themselves that this is so.

Take Monsewer for instance. He takes the side of the IRA not because he was born Irish but because “he didn’t like his father much, he went with his mother’s people—he became an Irishman” (Behan 19). By definition he was unlikely to be a member of the landed Anglo-Irish Ascendancy but simply the offspring of an English-Irish marriage—his father being an English bishop and mother an Irishwoman. Although Monsewer tries hard to convince himself and others that he is Irish enough—by wearing a kilt, playing Gaelic football, and learning the Gaelic language, his Irish lodgers regard his actions as being pretentious and expedient. In the view of Irish-born locals, his involvement in the IRA’s abduction of an English soldier cannot alter the fact that his upbringing is more English than Irish, because “he went to all the biggest colleges in England and slept in the one room with the King of England’s son” (Behan 18). Monsewer’s adoption of an Irish identity can hardly be convincing, although he wishes to shelter the underclass that has been religiously and politically marginalized. Although his performance of being an Irishman challenges the status quo, his move is more an act of self-deception, since the Irish people around Monsewer never take him seriously but as someone who is simply “[not] right in his head,” as is mentioned right at the beginning of the play (Behan 5).

It should also be noted that some of the protagonists in *The*

Hostage have adopted alternative identities in order to facilitate their missions. In other words, some people can survive and prosper by assuming an identity on the social fringe and concealing their loyalty to Anglophilia or Irish nationalism. For instance, the unnamed sailor who lodges in Monsewer's brothel—without much action on stage—“has been a spy all along” (Behan 105). He plays a pivotal role that leads to the police raid that is the direct cause of the death of the nineteen-year-old English hostage. As the play ends soon after the hostage is shot by accident, this police spy, who has a silent role speaking only a few words in Russian and singing the Soviet National Anthem, is a linchpin of the raid. However, his nationality remains dubious, as he never introduces himself but is referred to as a Russian Communist by Mulleady—his Irish accomplice. He might be an Irishman in the disguise of a Russian sailor. Notably, the Russian phrase he uses occasionally, “Mir y drushva!”, is not entirely correct (12). The correct expression is “Mir y durshba!”, which means “peace and friendship.”

Although the playwright gives no explanation as to why he carries out espionage for the Irish police, his action brings into question the prevailing master narratives of both Anglophilia and Irish nationalism, because they do not break the vicious circle of violence but, ironically, ignite further sectarian conflicts. It can therefore be argued that this mysterious sailor drives disadvantaged people even further towards the social margin, whereas he himself benefits, perhaps monetarily, from antagonizing both public power and private resistance.

Another politically incorrect yet interesting feature of *The Hostage* is the depiction of homosexuals and bisexuals who include Rio Rita, a homosexual labourer, Princess Grace, his black boyfriend, and Mulleady, a bisexual elderly civil servant with “much homosexual byplay” with the other two (Behan 97). Interestingly, it is the sexual minorities who are more sympathetic to or protective of Leslie, the English hostage, after they learn that the IRA officers are determined to use him for their retaliation for the execution of a republican soldier in Belfast. Notably, Rio Rita tries to mediate between the IRA officers and the hostage and tells the former: “You’ll put a bullet in the back of nobody’s head, mate” (Behan 97). Mulleady also joins the rescue team by saying that “[Leslie] should never have been brought here in the first place... I’ve been saying so all day. It’s illegal” (Behan 97). However, Mulleady’s intention of leading a group of police spies to rescue Leslie is ambiguous, in that Miss Gilchrist rejects him on Leslie’s behalf and persuades Leslie to act against the sexual minority members, including Rio Rita and Princess Grace. Mulleady might have wanted to keep Leslie away from Miss Gilchrist out of jealousy, rather than seek to save him out of wholly disinterested motives.

The sympathy of these sexual minority members for the English hostage—who is “too young to have a vote for another three years”—reveals a humane concern for the helpless victim (Behan 96). Although Rio Rita, Princess Grace, and Mulleady work as police spies, their helping hand for Leslie overrides borders and ideologies, and might have been initiated by their experience of being stigmatized by the

Free State government for their sexuality: “The [republicans] put de Valera in, and he started hunting us,” complains Rio Rita (Behan 21). Their assistance to the English hostage, as people who deviate politically and sexually from the mainstream, also challenges “a national re-imagining of the spaces and boundaries of Ireland” (Barry 164). Noticeably, Behan’s portrait of homosexuals and bisexuals on stage was ahead of Brian Friel’s *The Gentle Island* (1971) and Frank McGuinness’s *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985) and *Carthaginians* (1988). The latter three exposed rather than hid their distinctions (Barry 164).

It might be contended that Behan’s creation of homosexual characters for the London stage in 1958 was a reaction in favour of the then controversial Wolfenden Report, published in 1957, which decriminalized homosexuality yet condemned street prostitution. The timely production of *The Hostage* in London could therefore be seen as providing an opening for audiences to observe the benign nature of those neglected characters and their troubles. For example, Colette, the whore who has been disparagingly referred to by Miss Gilchrist, a self-satisfied social worker, as “a no-class person,” is a practitioner of gender politics and the Catholic catechism (Behan 96). She refuses to provide service to a communist client, for “it’s against my religion to have anything to do with the likes of him” (Behan 12), while she is willing to offer a free five-minute sexual service to Leslie in exchange for any material gift. Moreover, out of compassion for the English hostage, she and Ropeen, another prostitute, do not hesitate to join Rio Rita in persuading the IRA officers not to shoot Leslie in retaliation for the IRA hostage killed in Belfast. Their outspokenness and instant protection of the English hostage suggest how much they want peace more than anyone else does, as Anglophilia, socialism, or Irish nationalism cannot guarantee their desperate desire for peace. The playwright portrays Ropeen and Colette, the two “no-class” women, as having political or religious standing similar to that of the male characters, yet behaving with more humanity.

One of the sexually provocative characters that confront the audience is Princess Grace, the black boyfriend of Rio Rita, a homosexual. Contrary to the other characters who have a proper name, “Princess Grace” is a self-given name probably inspired by the American actress Grace Patricia Kelly, who became Princess of Monaco after marrying Prince Rainier III in 1956. Interestingly, he is also called “King Kong,” a masculine name given by Rio Rita when someone asks about Princess Grace’s real name, probably to impress his friends (Behan 29). Apart from these interchangeable nicknames, a notable feature of this male character is that he “parades through [the stage]” a large banner with the words “KEEP IRELAND BLACK” on it (Behan 79). This can be seen as a strategic counteraction to the emerging British far-right political group the White Defence League, founded in 1957, and its fascist anti-immigration rhetoric that aimed to keep England white. Although the country seems to have been emancipated from English rule, it remains culturally and politically homogeneous: “the Irish nationalism itself becomes the means of

maintaining British cultural hegemony” (Lloyd 3). The dominance of the Catholic Church, incidentally, maintains a social ambiance that is “usually xenophobic in character” (Deane 682).

These cultural traits may be seen, on the one hand, as patriarchal symptoms; on the other hand, they are rooted in the English imperialist mentality in order to maintain the distinction between the dominant group and ethnic/sexual minorities. That the playwright dramatizes the fears of the stigmatized minorities might reveal how Irish people have internalized Caucasian and heterosexual superiority and accepted the forced inferiority of those living on the social and economic margin. Princess Grace, the flamboyant black man with a feminine nickname, although not exactly playing a transgendered role, challenges all the hegemonic conventions that might be used to circumscribe him/her. That said, he/she is not a comic character but a catalyst that unsettles the given social perceptions about how one should properly behave.

Behan’s intention of questioning or toppling these hegemonies is further exemplified by a scene in which everyone gathers to read a news report about the IRA hostage in Belfast: “[the] Irish, British, and Russian flags lie on the ground” (Behan 79). Arguably, the disrespectful treatment of national flags ultimately subverts social conventions and stereotypes prompting people to be more subservient rather than reflecting who they are.

Another cultural stereotype that the playwright questions is the actual practice of the Irish storytelling tradition and the position of Irish Catholicism in everyday life. When Leslie asks Teresa, his girlfriend-to-be, to “tell ... a story—the Irish are great at that, ... to pass the time,” Teresa frankly replies: “I don’t know any stories, [and] ... you’ve a long night ahead of you” (Behan 69). Interestingly, Teresa does not meet the (English) expectation of being a good storyteller, while Irish cultural nationalists have often propagandized Irish folklore as something that can be used to de-Anglicize Ireland. Specifically, what draws Teresa and Leslie together is neither Irish folklore nor Christianity, as Leslie is not as familiar with “the Blessed Virgin” as Teresa is, since he was brought up in an orphanage.

These two powerless individuals share an identity as loners caught up in an unresolved British-Irish colonial relationship in which the IRA and the English troops remain belligerent towards each other. Their affection and desire for each other destabilize the commonly held view of how every Irish household should function. Teresa and Leslie, who grew up in orphanages in Ireland and England respectively, typify people who could not express themselves if the playwright had not attempted to give them a stage or at least characters to speak for them. Nevertheless, as a young couple they have no choice other than to take a leap in the dark, which ends with Leslie meeting his death as a hostage. Teresa, while grieving for her lost love, is sober enough to identify Patrick, an Irish Republican who looks after the house/brothel yet is the initiator of Leslie’s troubles: “It wasn’t the Belfast Jail or the Six Counties ... but your lost youth and your crippled leg. He died in a strange land, and at home he had no one” (Behan 109). In other words, it is the obsession with Irish history that

kills not only Leslie the English orphan but many who are sacrificed for an outdated cause.

Not all the characters in *The Hostage* suffer as badly as Leslie and Teresa but some are able to speak out from the social corner where they are hidden. For instance, Patrick, the caretaker of the house/brothel, has serious doubts about the necessity of the Easter Rising and jeers at Monsewer, who considers himself to be a present-day nationalist willing to kill for “the old cause” (Behan 5). For Patrick, “the days of the heroes are over this forty years past. Long over, finished and done with” (Behan 5). It can be assumed that Patrick, who had been jailed for nine years in England and a few more in Ireland, is akin to the playwright who had similar experiences. Nonetheless, by drawing a contrast between Monsewer and Patrick, Behan might have wanted to highlight the IRA as being anachronistic and indulging in the glory of the past, given the reality of the 1950s and the fact the Irish government had been openly denouncing IRA activities. The mixed social attitude towards the IRA might be due to an incompatible generation gap, for Monsewer and Patrick are members of the IRA from an older generation, whereas the Officer and the Volunteer are “the New I.R.A.” (Behan 5).

Arguably, if Monsewer and Patrick have contributed anything heroic, their maintenance of the house as a shelter for the socially disadvantaged should count. Nonetheless, there is irony in that Patrick, the “ex-hero” who lost a leg during the Easter Rising, has reconsidered the imperative of martyrdom for Ireland. When the IRA officer demands the “ex-hero’s” cooperation in keeping the English hostage in the brothel, initially Patrick refuses, albeit in vain, because “[the officer is] all running for a hero’s death ... You’ve never been in prison for the cause” (Behan 53). To counteract his demand, Patrick asks for the same rent as what he charges every lodger. Monsewer has also become less romantic and acts more pragmatically in running his business as either a brothel or a temporary shelter for the disadvantaged. The difference between Monsewer and Patrick lies in the attitude of the former who would like to shelter whoever he believes has been “in prison for the cause”—with free rent for life—while Patrick, his more hardheaded housekeeper, takes in anyone who can afford to keep the house going.

Interestingly, the prostitutes might be seen as being more open-minded and courageous, if not more heroic, than Monsewer and Patrick by comforting the sexually desperate and lonely with their bodily offerings. Meg Dillon, who assists Patrick in running the brothel, claims—without the slightest sense of guilt—that, by offering sexual services to working-class clients, a prostitute is not socially unmentionable or religiously unredeemable but no less vital than an IRA fighter: “If I’m a whore itself, sure I’m a true patriot” (Behan 23).

An intruder in this brothel is Miss Evangelina Gilchrist, a social worker with a name that has Christian overtones, who “take[s] insults in the name of our blessed Saviour” and attempts to save the sinners from this “Sodom and Gomorrah” (Behan 27). Her condescending attitude, when examined in the social context of the 1950s, reveals the

continued domination of the Catholic middle class over peripheral communities/individuals at an institutional level. Similarly, Mulleady, whose name sounds like “My Lady”—a Catholic address to the Virgin Mary—and who has a liaison with Miss Gilchrist who is working for the St. Vincent de Paul Society, represents the conservatism of the Catholic elite. Although Mulleady has “much homosexual byplay” and is probably a bisexual man (Behan 97), their presence is symbolic of the Catholic orthodoxy that segregates the middle-class elite from the disadvantaged through the use of religious bigotry. It can be argued that while Mulleady assumes the role of police spy informing against IRA activities, Miss Gilchrist functions more or less as a religious policewoman who intervenes in the lodgers’ everyday lives. These two characters are probably equally despised by Behan, in that they collude with the powerful and impose an intangible yet overpowering discipline over powerless individuals.

Another noteworthy character is Kate, a pianist who is only just seen by the audience, sitting “at one end of the passage area with the piano half on stage and half off” (Behan 8). Her soft piano music, performed live as background music, is not at all in keeping with the tension built up by the prolonged detention of the English hostage. Interestingly, her performance seems unaffected when “Free-Staters [fight] against Republicans, Irish against English, homosexuals against heterosexuals” (Behan 78), and she at times takes orders from actors who demand certain melodies to go with the concurrent incidents. For instance, when the police raid the house, the pianist is instructed by the playwright to perform “sinisterly” (Behan 107). Politically speaking, Kate is even more marginalized than the other characters, who can at least be explicit about their political leanings. Although she performs almost solely in a corner of the stage and does not seem much affected by the ongoing turbulences, her own voice is virtually unheard. As she is almost unseen by the audience, she might therefore be symbolic of those individuals or communities struggling at an even remoter or non-presentable edge of Irish society.

Last but not least, her slow piano music virtually amplifies the existing distancing effects through which the audience can only be made more aware of the conflicting ideologies that trouble these Irish characters. That said, the dissonant acoustic effects caused by soothing piano music in the background of many fighting scenes strategically reaffirms the theatrical metanarrative that the playwright has devised to keep the audience at one remove from the diverging political sentiments. Meg’s chanting showcases a meta-narrative through which other characters unexpectedly distance themselves from the play by either instructing what Behan should do as a playwright or criticizing him. In particular, Meg appears to be wiser than Behan: “The author should have sung that one” (Behan 78). The IRA officer, the English hostage and Patrick all drop their political differences but comment on Behan with cynicism: “He doesn’t mind coming over here and taking [the audience’s] money... He’d sell his country for a pint” (Behan 78). Although these fleeting comments from characters cannot prevent violence nor challenge the blind patriotism that turns victims into

martyrs, the distancing effect somehow interrupts the power game in which authorities embrace the sacrifices of their followers. The well-being of the suppressed and silenced would always be their last consideration.

Conclusion

The Irish rebellion had indeed prompted the non-elite to stand up and speak out, which is how the characters in the brothel in *The Hostage* appear to the audience. It is also noteworthy that the brothel in Behan's depiction is "a place of escape from history" for its working-class patrons (Lacey 139), in that they can momentarily acquire some form of pleasure from someone else without much effort. Nevertheless, the tragic end of Leslie Williams, the young English orphan, results from the IRA's patriotic pretences and hardline English militarism. The people connected with the brothel, despite expressing their opinions for or against the IRA, are still confined to the lower rungs of the society. They are severely subjugated by more powerful forces, such as owners of the media, for they can only receive updates from newspapers, and are even spied on by their own people. Their right to speak is continually circumscribed by the foreign and Irish elites who internalize the colonial legacy and are not willing to serve members of, in their view, the underclass community.

Similarly to O'Casey's *The Dublin Trilogy*, which features the destitution of tenement dwellers who are politically manipulated at the height of the Irish rebellion in the early twentieth century, Behan's *The Hostage* tracks the same privation enforced on the same powerless community four decades later. *The Hostage* relentlessly yet journalistically unearths not only the realities that mainstream society has denied but also contradictions in the republican propaganda. This social problem drama explains why the playwright, as he claimed in an interview, was not eager to have "friends on both sides" nor wished to "find political solutions" but "mirror what happens to the people involved" (Allsop 91).

The play begins with "the blast of an off-key bagpiper," and ends with *all* characters singing "The Bells of Hell Go Ting-a-ling-a-ling," which concludes that death is "for you but not for me" (Behan 5, 109). "The Bells of Hell Go Ting-a-ling-a-ling" is an airmen's song from World War I. It is a satirical parody of another popular army song, "She Only Answered 'Ting-a-ling-a-ling'." Giving the whole play a satirical overtone, the off-key music and the unsettling lyric constitute an irony in that the nationalist propaganda from both sides of the Irish Sea eventually tramples humanism and intellect. The deaths of the two hostages in Belfast and Dublin are not simply the consequence of revenge but presage similar cases resulting from clashes between the colonial and anti-colonial powers, as shown later in the Northern Ireland Troubles. The "Bells of Hell" would continue to ring in a moribund and hypocritical society that embraces violence, epistemic or physical, individual or communal. The social minorities, or the most

deprived classes, would not dare to speak from the heart, nor be accurately spoken for by any political party.

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