

SAA 2025 // Seminar 39: Shakespeare and Ireland in the Cultural Imagination

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ABSTRACTS

To De-Anglicize, or Not to De-Anglicize: That is The Question; *The Bell*, Dublin Theatre, and Shakespeare During the Emergency

Bill Kerwin

When the Irish magazine *The Bell* published its first monthly issue, in October of 1940, Ireland was in a particularly stunted place, one where it would remain for years to come. Beset by repression and economic stagnation, and repeatedly choosing policies of isolation, Ireland had descended mightily, shrinking in population and becoming one of the poorest places in Europe. Literary culture was so beset by these forces and by censorship that numerous authors had felt compelled to go into semi-voluntary exile, a pattern that would continue through the 1960s. Sean O'Faolain and his magazine *The Bell* strove passionately against the walls surrounding Irish culture. Bracingly idealistic, O'Faolain insisted that the magazine will show only "Life" as it really is, with a strong bias toward empirical accounts and against abstraction, and he calls for widespread participation, for readers to "ring the bell." The result was a magazine full of great writing and passion—the first issue alone includes Frank O'Connor, Elizabeth Bowen, Jack Yeats, Flann O'Brien, and Lennox Robinson. To read the issues, especially the early ones, is to get a short course into the best Irish writing of mid-century, and to see and feel the parts of Ireland fighting back against repression.

What role did English writing, and Shakespeare in particular, play in this cultural moment? As part of a cultural vanguard in favor of things new but opposed to certain aspects of tradition, what would the editors do with Shakespeare? Was he and all he stood for be seen as another antagonist, a voice of Anglicization, a representative of the past, or was he a resource for creating reaching beyond the walls toward a more vibrant Ireland? This paper will consider those questions, with an eye for what role Shakespeare played in *The Bell* and the Dublin culture around it. The key figures are Sean O'Faolain, Micheál Mac Liammóir, and Sean O'Casey.

The Duke of Ormonde's Collection of English Plays

Tara Lyons

In this paper, I examine James Butler, the first duke of Ormonde's collection of early English drama from two inventories produced in 1685. Since 1912, when the HMC published a *Calendar of the manuscripts of the Marquess of Ormonde*, scholars have had access to a transcription of the 700+ volumes in the duke's collection at Kilkenny Castle (taken 6 Jan. 1684/5). From this list and the manuscript inventory it represents, we know that the Ormonde family had a rich collection of English drama, a detail that makes sense considering their patronage of the Dublin theater after 1662. At Kilkenny Castle in 1685, the folio collections of Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, Margaret Cavendish, and Thomas Killigrew shared the shelves with forty-two volumes of plays. Like many English library inventories from the seventeenth century, Ormonde's catalogue of 6 January did not itemize the dramatic works in these volumes but rather recorded two generic

entries: “Plays 12 vols.” and “Plays 30 vols.” What scholars have not noted before (to the best of my knowledge) is that another inventory of the Kilkenny Castle Library, taken on 6 April 1685 (NLI, Ormonde Inventories, MS 2553), enumerates the contents for all forty-two volumes and a few more. This April inventory reveals an extraordinarily well-curated collection of pre-Restoration English drama, neatly organized into volumes with approximately three to six playbooks per binding. The total number of playbooks comes to 246, which is a number that rivals even Charles II’s royal library collection of plays. My aim in this paper is better understand how the collection of plays was formed and to what extent Butler’s colonial project in Ireland inflected the plays he collected.

Shakespeare and Victorian Belfast: Iconography, Industrialisation, Imperialism

Molly Quinn-Leitch

This paper investigates the relationship between material adaptations of Shakespeare’s own likeness and Victorian Belfast. The six material manifestations of Shakespeare’s person include busts and stained-glass portraits which, this paper insists, reflect an integral set of ideas that are emblematic of Victorian Belfast’s rapidly changing sense of self. These traces epitomise the various religious and social factors at play as Belfast transitioned from an Irish town to a British city during a turbulent century. I will open by paying particular attention to Belfast’s trajectory as an imperial city, separated from the British mainland, and to its rapid industrialization, contrasting with other Irish cities of the time. It is within this rapidly changing Belfast that these Shakespeare objects gain their place in the city.

Next, in my discussion of Shakespeare’s place in Victorian Belfast’s social and cultural fabric, this paper’s exploration of Shakespearean performance history in nineteenth-century Belfast suggests that the theatre was a united space for inhabitants, regardless of class, to receive the playwright. There are four stained-glass windows of Shakespeare, to be found inside the Grand Opera House; at the ‘Shakespear’ House; at the Linen Hall Library; and at Craigavon House. Additionally, there are two busts of Shakespeare; located on Jennymount Mill and a linen warehouse (10 Donegall Square South). Reading these stained-glass windows and busts uncovers how Shakespeare was incorporated into Victorian Belfast’s factories and Protestant households, arguing that these objects adapt the formative Martin Droeshout portrait of the playwright (c.1623). Ultimately, the paper will reveal how material adaptations of Shakespeare are linked to Victorian Belfast’s civic identity. Shakespeare’s material commemoration marks an intriguing sense of industrial, imperial cohesion in the ‘new’ city.

Dragging Shakespeare across the Irish Sea: Peg Woffington and the Circum-National Difference

Madeleine Saidenberg

As Shakespeare hit new heights of popularity and importance on the eighteenth-century stage, the Irish actress Margaret “Peg” Woffington shot to stardom. She was beloved on the London stage for her cross-dressed roles, which straddled gender as well as nationality, masculinity and femininity as well as Irishness and Englishness. As Fiona Ritchie has pointed out, Woffington was instrumental to popularizing women (rather than boys) in Shakespeare’s cross-dressed roles such as Viola, Portia, and Rosalind. In these cross-dressed performances, Woffington thrilled her audience by playfully exposed both gender and nation as constructions – a key moment in Shakespeare’s rise to national prominence in Britain.

We are used to thinking of the ways in which Irishness was mobilized in the cultural imagination from an English perspective. In Ireland, on the other hand, Woffington’s Shakespeare

performances also revealed the tensions underlying nation. This talk will contrast two of Woffington's "drag" Shakespeare performances in London and Dublin, each of which reveal multifaceted and divergent ideas of national culture and Shakespeare's place in it.

Smock Alley Shakespeare: Reclaiming Ireland's Role in the Dramatist's Legacy

Eilís Smyth

There is a long tradition of criticism of the Irish Stage which posits that early Irish theatre was merely a reflection of English stage craft and narrative practices. This well-established school of thinking has constricted analyses of the development of pre-20th century Irish theatre. This paper aims to subvert this traditional understanding of the Irish stage as an extension of the English stage with a specific focus on the performance of Shakespeare at Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Smock Alley was the third Royal Patent Theatre in these islands following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. As at the Theatres Royal in London, Shakespeare was a significant part of the repertoire at Smock Alley throughout its existence (1662-1787); the theatre was, for example, home to the largest extant group of restoration Shakespeare promptbooks and to Thomas Sheridan (a Shakespearean to rival David Garrick). Despite the theatre's apparent importance to studies of early Shakespeare performance, however, there is no comprehensive critical history of the dramatist's legacy on the Dublin stage during this period. This paper considers the ways in which received critical notions have limited our understanding of how Irish theatre makers helped to create Shakespeare as an eighteenth-century ideal and makes a case for a new approach to the early Irish Shakespeare.