Frances Power Cobbe and the patriarchs

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Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904), progressive reformer, iconoclastic theologian, lecturer, abolitionist, woman’s advocate, and defender of animals, was born in 1822 at Newbridge House, Donabate, Co. Dublin, into a prominent Anglo-Irish family, distinguished by its service to the British military and the Anglican Church, having produced five archbishops. While virtually forgotten today, she was at the centre of the social, literary, and intellectual circles of note in late-Victorian England. She could count among her friends and acquaintances Matthew Arnold, Charles Darwin, Charles Lyell, Fanny Kemble, the Brownings, Lord Tennyson, Mary Somerville, J.S. Mill, Rosa Bonheur, Thomas Carlyle, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Lord Shaftesbury. In fact, the only eminent figures of the day she expressed regret at never meeting were George Eliot and Harriet Martineau.¹ She was not only famous, but also enormously influential as an activist and a thinker, having, for instance, been instrumental in the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878.² According to Barbara Caine, ‘[i]n her recognition of the connection between the many forms of female oppression evident within the family, the Church, and the intellectual and professional worlds, Cobbe came closer to propounding a theory of patriarchy than did any other Victorian feminist.’³ She is beginning to emerge from her undeserved obscurity, as the last few years have seen renewed interest in her. However, even though Cobbe lived in Ireland for the first thirty-six years of her life before relocating to England, what little that has appeared about her so far takes minimal account, if any, of the impact on her work of her Ascendancy background, its gender implications, particularly.⁴ This is what Ann Owens Weekes refers to as the ‘emotional, psychological, social, and economic deprivations of the statusless woman in the man’s world of Anglo-Ireland’.⁵ Recent critical assessments

suggest that Cobbe’s near-total historical disappearance is due to the difficulties she presents to ready categorization, and her often frustrating ideological inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies. It is my contention that Cobbe’s various modes of patriarchal resistance are at once stimulated and undermined by her experience as an Anglo-Irish woman, including a strain of unregenerate Protestant conservatism, which often erupts in inconvenient contradictions.

An indefatigable advocate for the oppressed and subjugated, including black slaves, animals, and women of all classes, especially working-class girls, her rhetoric in defence of the defenceless was nevertheless diffused through a complex of competing beliefs and allegiances. The discriminatory class and race affinities typical of a Victorian suffragist were complicated for Cobbe by a consciousness of belonging to an especially besieged class in late nineteenth-century Ireland, one marked by racialized sectarian difference. In her study of nineteenth-century Englishwomen active in the cause of animal protection, Moira Ferguson observes that in a revised vocabulary of rights the discourses against cruelty to animals, abuse of women, and enslavement overlapped and elided with one another, contributing at the same time to an updated definition of what constituted Englishness. The ‘Englishness’ under construction in Ferguson’s examination of the rhetorical imbrications among emancipatory causes is a national identity forming and reforming in reaction to imperial expansion. Ferguson contends that the depredations attendant on colonialism, which potentially allied the colonized in the peripheries with other powerless, marginalized communities, constituted a source of anxiety and ambivalence for the white, middle-class, English, Protestant activists in London who were championing women, animals, and slaves at home. However, Cobbe, though she took pride in being unidentifiable as ‘Irish’, lived in the colonial periphery for over a third of her life and was not English, nor was she middle class, but the daughter of a landlord of a sizeable estate with close family ties to British aristocracy. She was brought up by a beloved Irish nurse, taught native Irish children in her role as big-house daughter, lived through the famine, and in 1848 inadvertently contributed funds to the local ‘Cutthroat Club’, which was threatening violent insurrection, targeting the Cobbe family.

And so, in the critique of domination that Cobbe pursued over several decades, the points of intersection among her uneasy alliances with both the exploiters and the exploited are uniquely unstable. Thus it is that the strident and impassioned opponent of slavery, who was especially exercised about what she considered England’s appallingly misplaced sympathies with slaveholders during the American civil war, could, in an emancipation tract of 1863, speak pleasingly of negroes ‘displaying the peculiarly Christian virtues of placability and patience, in a matter hardly to be paralleled in the annals of the Caucasian race,’ and could also, in an anti-vivisection article written in 1895, assert that ‘a Fuegian who eats

6 Ferguson, Animal advocacy, p. 42. 7 Frances Power Cobbe, The red flag in John Bull’s eye,
his mother and can't count his fingers cannot be pigeon-holed a "Person." This often self-cancelling impulse to pigeon-hole leads to frequent lapses in reasoning, despite Cobbe's vaunted rationalist ethos. Her position on the rights of animals, for instance, vacillates from essay to essay in her many works denouncing vivisection: on the one hand she charges with base hypocrisy an English public that pampers and admires its pets but allows other animals to be tortured on the dissecter's table, yet on the other hand, she avails herself of a hierarchical 'diminishing scale of sensibility' when she wants to distinguish between the justified killing of animals for sport and the inhuman practices of science. Similarly, she draws distinctions between the rights lower-class Italian women were entitled to and those that should be extended to lower-class English women, whose superior Saxon 'race' could potentially overcome the biological determinism Cobbe associated with class, criminality and, indeed, religion.

Even when not blinkered by class or race prejudice, Cobbe's notions of gender could be conservative, if not quite conventionally essentialist. 'If my sex has a "mission" of any kind,' she says in response to being summarily dismissed as a harmless 'good lady' by the Jesuit George Tyrell, 'it is surely to soften this hard old world, such as men (priests included) have left us.' In her autobiography Cobbe declares women to be the 'equivalents' rather than the 'equals of men,' and, looking back on her long and vigorous struggle on behalf of her sex, she concludes, 'I would far rather that women should remain without political rights to the end of time than that they should lose those qualities which we comprise in the word "womanliness".' This startling assertion is followed by an almost equally disorienting discussion of women's superior rationality to men, whose excessive emotionalism leads them to loss of self control and violence. Unlike belligerent men, female revolutionaries, she tells us, will 'accomplish our emancipation by persuasion and reason'. In her 1863 demythologizing attack on conventional Christianity, in which she proposes her own religion of the future, Broken lights: an inquiry into the present condition and future prospects of religious faith, Cobbe writes admiringly of a certain quality of 'manliness' lacking among contemporary moral authorities, especially among so-called 'muscular' Christians, in whom she detects a debilitating 'effeminacy', demonstrating through her own intellectual performance that the more desirable gendered trait is likely to be found in strong-minded women like herself now and in the future. It is Cobbe's lifelong struggle with spirituality that follows from Broken

lights, and her traditionalist, perhaps atavistically evangelical, despair at what she regarded as an increasingly soulless age, which finally estranged her from younger feminists towards the end of her career, most significantly Annie Besant, who reacted to Cobbe’s denunciation of atheism, in the 1884 essay, ‘A faithless world’, as a betrayal, in Besant’s words, by ‘a woman who has done so much to degrade the Bible from [its] unique position.”

While Cobbe strenuously distanced herself from Christianity’s formal institutions, she was unable to sever her ties with basic inherited beliefs or the Christian god, and her abiding conviction in the superiority of the Protestant faith never slackened. What Besant saw as Cobbe closing ranks with the ‘tyrannical Establishment’, marks one of a series of ‘conversions’ Cobbe underwent in her life, often arising from specifically religious crises, as she moved from evangelicalism to agnosticism to theism, with occasionally side-trips to Unitarianism. Always a fervently religious child, at the age of seventeen she experienced her first ‘conversion’, an especially intense, though private, renewal of commitment to her family’s faith, and dedicated herself to studying the bible and the writings of the Church fathers, with the unexpected result that she found herself thrown increasingly into doubt, particularly as regards biblical accounts of miracles. By the age of twenty, in her own words, her ‘efforts to believe in orthodox Christianity ceased’, she became an ‘Agnostic’. She recounts this time as one of lonely wanderings through the Irish countryside, in the course of which her romantic and deeply spiritual sensibilities reasserted themselves; the ‘storm of youth over’, as she describes it, she began to pray once more, and never again lost faith in God, though she had lost faith in Christianity’s holy book and even in its saviour. During this period she had read A discourse of matters pertaining to religion, by the controversial American abolitionist and theologian, Theodore Parker, who rejected Calvinism’s oppressive paternalism as ‘cruel and unreasonable’ and who renounced the miraculous authority of both scripture and Jesus Christ. His vision of a personally authorized religion and of a rational yet loving deity that was both ‘Father and Mother of the World’ comforted and inspired Cobbe, who corresponded with Parker for the rest of his life and edited his fourteen-volume collected works after his death.

She kept secret her rejection of the faith of her fathers until the death of her mother, a weak and timid but loving woman to whom Cobbe was devoted.

13 Annie Besant, A world without God: a reply to Miss Frances Power Cobbe (London: Freethought, 1885), p. 12. 14 Cobbe, Life, ii, p. 81. 15 Larson, ‘Where is the woman?’, p. 127, fn 5, quotes Cobbe in her preface to Theodore Parker’s Collected works (i, p. xviii), ‘All the power and care and forethought and inexorable loving which we attribute to the Fatherly character is fulfilled in Him. And all the inexhaustible forgiving love and tenderness which a mother’s heart reveals is His, too […]’. Too long has the Catholic Church separated off this Mother Side of Deity into another object of worship; and more fatal still has been the error of the Reformed Churches, who in rejecting the Madonna have rejected all that she imaged forth of the Divine, manscutude and tenderness.'
Then, in an aggressively anti-patriarchal gesture, she declared her theism, scandalizing her father, remembered by Cobbe as having a ‘fiery temper and despotic will’, who turned her out of the house, exiling her to her brother’s farm in Donegal, where she spent a year before she was allowed to return home, and only then in order to resume her housekeeping duties.\(^{16}\) The lone sister to five brothers whose preference and privilege she resented, Cobbe returned from her brother’s farm even more indignantly conscious of the absurd inequities of her helpless position as daughter. Sandra J. Peacock argues that as a result of her mother’s invalidism and despite the many responsibilities she enthusiastically and ably assumed from a young age, ‘[f]ulfilling her duties […] conferred upon her no corresponding rights or privileges, and Cobbe soon learned the limits of her position in the family.’\(^{17}\) When her father died and left the estate to his eldest son, bequeathing Frances only as much money per year as she had been receiving as pocket money, thereby implicitly consigning her to a life of dependence on her brother and sister-in-law, Cobbe left Newbridge for good. In her study of Anglo-Irish women’s autobiographies (a survey that does not include Cobbe’s two-volume work), Elizabeth Grubgeld notes that the theme of the big-house functions ambivalently in women writers’ treatment of it: ‘If the house is conventionally presumed to act as an extension of the self in Anglo-Irish literature, in the writings of many women it acts as a metaphor of that which threatens a self whose pivotal awakening is to its freedom from place.’\(^{18}\) While Cobbe suggests that her own escape was a lucky one, made possible, significantly, through her father’s death, at the same time she never ceased to mourn leaving Newbridge, an event she calls ‘the worst wrench of my life’.\(^{19}\)

This wrench was followed by a tour of Europe and the Middle East, which included Jerusalem, Cairo, Alexandria, Athens, and Rome and from which emerged a collection of essays in 1864, \textit{The cities of the past}, essays that, according to Peacock ‘reveal the complexity of her views of religion, race, and British world hegemony’.\(^{20}\) Certainly her inveterate Anglo-Saxonism, jingoistic support of empire, and belief in Christianity’s ascendancy over any other system of belief suffered no diminution as a result of her travels. In the 1868 essay, ‘The religions of the world,’ she phlegmatically observes that ‘[n]o-one disputes the superiority of Christianity, \textit{such as we have it}, to Islam,’ and that the ‘Chinese religion has long been the despair of Theologians’.\(^{21}\) However, she directs her most thunderous broadsides against Catholicism, ‘the great moral plague’,\(^{22}\) and not against a non-Christian faith. ‘Cobbe judged “races” primarily by their religious beliefs, further refining her hierarchy of racial categories’, according to Peacock,

who describes this ranking as one that 'placed Muslims and Christian Arabs much higher than Indian followers of Hinduism, Africans, and Irish, all of whom she viewed as childlike polytheists'.  

There is an abundance of evidence for Cobbe's anti-Irish sentiments and repulsion towards Catholicism, no doubt deeply ingrained by the anti-papist siege mentality that was her cultural inheritance, reinforced by sometimes traumatic personal experience, but she writes in an 1877 essay, 'The Celt of Wales and the Celt of Ireland', 'happy is the child who has an Irish nurse', and her autobiography portrays touching affection between herself and her Irish nurse, or 'Nanno', Mary Malone, who called Frances her 'darlint'. These recollections also reveal that Cobbe and her brothers found nursery tales of the 1798 rebellion thrilling, and that they 'played at rebellion as children'.

Peacock contends that the 'Irish were the target of her most vituperative racist rhetoric', but Cobbe's anti-papist vitriol was more steadily concentrated in another direction: she does derogate the Catholic Irish frequently, but never with the ferocious intensity or, more significantly, the consistency that distinguishes her rants against Catholic France. Her anti-Irish statements are rarely so blunt as, 'I intensely dislike France', or '[a]bove all, we distrust French ideas, French phrases, French turns of thought, the pitiless logic, the unattackable dialectics, the sentimental hyperboles of the French writer.'

It is France, and to a lesser degree Italy, that Cobbe blames for the importation into England of 'foreign atrocities', the scientific practices Cobbe represents as the torture of women and animals. Among her list of French perpetrators she names Charcot and Pasteur, though Cobbe also pilloried and actively petitioned Italian scientists. Her most famous anti-vivisection tract, 'The rights of man and the claims of brutes', begins with a mock fairy tale describing dissolve, Mariolatrous France with its 'luxurious delights' and 'gilded temples', some of which screen from public scrutiny an assembly of 'many learned men [...] adorned with tokens of favour of the great prince, and with the ensigns of the noble order called that of Honour,' who conduct unspeakable experiments on the truly 'noble', the 'tame and inoffensive', 'sensitive animals'.

In contrast, while Cobbe makes frequent recourse to many racist clichés about the Irish — that they are dirty, indolent, barbaric and child-like, 'cannot a abide a law', are 'utterly unable to comprehend the nature of veracity', 

improvudent and impulsive, as well as boastful and vulgar, dreamy and clamorous — she defies other stereotypes, especially, and significantly, in regards to the two

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issues most urgently important to her: she maintains that Irishmen (at least as long as they remain on native soil), ‘of all classes are proverbially kind and even chivalrous to their women’ and that they are ‘more kind to animals generally than the English peasantry’. Cobbe, ‘Celt of Wales’, pp 671–2; Cobbe, Life, i, p. 163.

Cobbe, Life, i, p. 146; on the wit of Irish children versus the English student’s more ‘durable’ intelligence; Cobbe, ‘Celt of Wales’, p. 666, judges the Irish mental machinery better oiled than English’, and compares the English mind to the Celt’s, even more unflatteringly, though less explicitly, through the use of ‘beef’ as an adjective, when she says, ‘[t]he Celt may be silly but never beef-witted’. 35 Frances Power Cobbe, ‘The Fenians of Ballybogmucky’, Argosy (1865), reprinted in Frances Power Cobbe, Hours of work and play (London: Trübner, 1867), pp 257–8. 36 See Cobbe, Life, i, pp 33, 138; Cobbe, ‘Celt of Wales’, pp 668, 672–3; Cobbe, ‘Wife-torture’, pp 58–9. 37 See Cobbe, ‘Celt of Wales’, p. 665, in which she states that Ireland’s problems are the result of wrongs committed by England, specifically in this case the deracination of native culture; see also Frances Power Cobbe, ‘The Fenian “Idea”’, Atlantic Monthly 17 (1866), reprinted in Cobbe, Hours, p. 118, in which she admits that ‘the real wrongs inflicted by England upon Ireland are probably as bad as ever disgraced the history of a conquest, in itself without excuse’; Cobbe, Life, i, p. 5, in which she recalls with pride her eighteenth-century ancestor, Archbishop Cobbe, who ‘contended vigorously against the penal laws’. 38 Cobbe, ‘Fenian “Idea”’, p. 119.
Though she angrily condemns Irish ingratitude for improving efforts made by sympathetic landlords, like her father, Cobbe’s essays on Fenianism are distinguished more by dismay and regret than anger, and she sees the Irish falling into the same kind of error that has led traditional Christianity astray, that is, an over-reliance on the fragile human construct of history for central articles of faith, a disabling belief in myths and stories, in the illusions of memory. In the case of the Irish, this meant that they inhabit a world of [...] unreal splendours regretted in the past and utterly unreal and impossible future hopes. They neither see where England has actually wronged Ireland heretofore, nor how her Constitution opens to them now [...] the lawful means of obtaining all just redress [...] they can desire. Instead of this, they are still talking of Tara and Kincora, of Ollamh Fodhla and Brien Boru.

In the words of Sandra Peacock, ‘for Cobbe, history was a feeble prop for both Christian pretensions and Irish delusions.’

The Irish peasant’s regrettable flaws, then, are the same that afflict the faith of Cobbe’s childhood, from which she never fully withdrew her deepest emotional and even intellectual allegiances. Like imperfectly healed scars, the commissures joining the affective and the ideological thicken and warp when the two causes to which Cobbe devoted her adult life, women and animals, are metaleptically transformed into the ‘wronged’ Celt, as happens occasionally in other texts. For instance, in her autobiography, Cobbe takes issue with the case against granting women equal rights that typically proceeds by asking why there has never been a female Shakespeare. She dismisses the question by arguing that a ‘Celt claiming equal representation with a Saxon, or any representation at all, might just as fairly be challenged to explain why there has never been a Celtic Shakespeare or a Celtic Tennyson.’ In an essay written in the same year on behalf of animal rights, the ‘despised animal’ is compared to the persecuted Irish, a comparison that follows one of Cobbe’s curious justifications of fox hunting. It is moments such as these that reveal the cause of animal protection, the final campaign claiming her considerable rhetorical energies, to be the most deeply riven, most compromised by contradictions, the most revealing, perhaps, of the sympathies at war for Cobbe since the days of her privileged yet powerless daughterhood. The powerlessness to intervene in violence and the resultant

traumatic splintering of young Frances’s identificatory impulses emerge most poignantly in her autobiography, written towards the end of her life. Hard upon a brusque dismissal ‘of any comparison between the cruelty of field sports and the deliberate chamber sport of vivisection,’ she admits that ‘of course I disliked then, and always, hunting, coursing, and shooting; but as a woman, I was not expected to join in such pursuits, and I did not take it on myself to blame those who followed them,’ a strikingly uncharacteristic retreat into ‘feminine’, child-like passivity. She says that though she gave up fishing herself, ‘angling scarcely comes under the head of cruelty at all and is perfectly right and justifiable when the fish are wanted for food and are killed quickly’. Yet when watching the ‘bright creatures,’ she ‘say[s] in [her] heart a little thanksgiving on their behalf instead of trying to catch them,’ perhaps seeing in the contingency of their freedom a reflection of her own.\(^{45}\)

Marian Scholtmeijer has suggested that ‘if the object of feminism is to defeat androcentric culture, then animals offer an ideational model for ontological defiance’.\(^{46}\) The complex and multiple ontologies Cobbe at once inhabited and defied may account for her anxiously overdetermined vivisector, who figures as, simultaneously, and somewhat confusedly, the brutal wife-beater, the heartless slave-owner, the Caliban-like savage familiar from imperial typology, the slick, arristé professional, as well as the wicked priest of the Spanish Inquisition, and is associated with republicanism and the fall of the Second Empire.\(^{47}\) Cobbe’s anti-physician discourse was rooted not only in an abhorrence of the rising professional middle class, associated with scientific progress, but also in her ineradicable religious convictions: a Christian distaste for scientific materialism, the privileging of the body over the soul, as well as a racialized animus against Catholicism. Even her impassioned rhetoric on behalf of the most helpless victims of unchecked materialism is potentially undone by a version of the doctrine of election. Not every animal is saved. Cattle are denied the sympathy and protection extended most urgently to dogs and horses; Cobbe accords those for the complexities of identity the Anglo-Irish child negotiates, p. 76. \(^{45}\) Cobbe, Life, ii, pp 561, 560. \(^{46}\) Marian Scholtmeijer, ‘The power of otherness: animals in women’s fiction’, in Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (eds), Animals and women (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 232. \(^{47}\) The frequency of such analogies prevents a full account here, but for some examples of comparisons between vivisector and wife-beater, see Cobbe, ‘Criminals, idiots, women, and minors’, Fraser’s Magazine 78 (1868), pp 783, 793, fn; and Cobbe, ‘Wife-torture’, pp 64, 72; slave owner: Cobbe, ‘Zoophilic’, p. 280; and Cobbe, Red flag, p. 4; savage and ‘monster’: Cobbe, ‘Wife-torture’, p. 65; Cobbe, ‘Rights of man’, p. 597; and Cobbe, Life, ii, p. 606; middle-class professional: Cobbe, ‘Rights of man’, pp 588–9; Cobbe, ‘Zoophilic’, p. 283; and Cobbe, Life, ii, p. 607; priest of the Spanish Inquisition: Frances Power Cobbe, ‘Mr Lowe and the Vivisection Act’, Contemporary Review 29 (1877), p. 340; and Cobbe, ‘Zoophilic’, p. 288. One scientist whose irredeemably evil nature is explained by Cobbe identifying him as a red Italian is Dr Schiff of Tuscany; see Cobbe, Life, ii, pp 563–4. Significantly, she refers to vivisection in this same text as ‘hydra-headed’, a pejorative conventionally used to describe the restless mob, p. 632.
metonyms of the Anglo-Irish world special status. Disapproving of ‘vegetarian error’, she believes, ‘[w]e may slay cattle for food,’ but extols those ‘creatures we love and who return our affection,’ specifically the ‘noble horse and friendly dog,’ those creatures to be counted foremost among ‘the orders of animals [to whom] we are in a much nearer relation, for these are the servants given us expressly by God, and fitted with powers and instincts precisely suiting them to meet our wants,’ a placing of animals in divinely-ordered service to humanity that would seem to be giving succour to the enemy. She insists that ‘till a man has learned to feel for all his sentient fellow-creatures, whether inhuman or in brutal form, of his own class and sex and country, or of another, he has not yet ascended the first step towards civilization,’ yet sees no inconsistency in constructing her own elaborate ‘scale of sensibility’ to determine levels of obligations to people and animals alike. Even as she inveighs against the latitude granted male doctors to gleefully torture women and animals, hunting and other masculinist field sports identified with the Ascendancy are spared her criticism, are, in fact, defended, if somewhat unconvincingly. She claims it would be ‘absurd and Quixotic to interfere with the vivisector if he never did anything worse to animals than the sportsman or farmer do every day,’ that it is illogical to compare ‘fox hunting, rabbit guns and Strasbourg geese’ to ‘the cutting up of living dogs and cats in a laboratory’, and that ‘fox hunting and coursing and duck-shooting’ may be excused on the basis that ‘the sympathy of the sportsman is with his hounds and horse, or his grey-hound or retriever’. In a discussion of another pair of actively suffragist, animal-loving, Anglo-Irish women, the novelists Somerville and Ross, Bi-ling Chen sees their representations of the fox hunt as ‘expos[ing] the fatal power the privileged have over the underprivileged’. What, then, does it mean for Cobbe to deny the fox redemption?

48 Cobbe, ‘Rights of man’, p. 598; this assertion follows a story of her father’s from the Mahatta wars, when he witnessed ‘various revolting scenes of famine, wherein the sacred cows of the Hindoo temples were standing gorged to repletion […] while the starving population lay dying and dead of hunger all around’, p. 592. It is worth remembering that Cobbe was a witness to the Irish famine. 49 Cobbe, ‘Mr Lowe’, p. 343; Cobbe, ‘Ethics of zoophily’, p. 503; Cobbe, ‘Rights of man’, p. 601; this last essay refers to horses as those ‘noblest and most sensitive of creatures’, p. 588, and devotes several paragraphs to the unparalleled virtues of the dog, which Cobbe pronounces ‘peculiarly beneficent’, ‘endowed with a capacity for […] devotion whose parallel we must seek only in the records of the purest human friendship’, endowed with ‘wondrous instincts’, and ‘evidence of the Creator’s goodness’, pp 601–2. 50 Frances Power Cobbe, ‘Dogs whom I have met’, Cornhill Magazine 26 (1872), p. 977. 51 Cobbe ‘Mr Lowe’, pp 345, 342. 52 Cobbe, ‘Zoophily’, p. 287. 53 Bi-ling Chen, ‘De-mystifying the family romance: a feminist reading of Somerville and Ross’s The big house of Inver’, Notes on Modern Irish Literature 10 (1998), p. 17.