ABSTRACT

Reluctant Sons: The Irish Matrilineal Tradition of Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and Flann O’Brien

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My project counters the long tradition of using British categories to define the literary production of Irish authors. Instead, it moves us in a new direction by offering a counternarrative that places authors into an Irish matrilineal literary tradition. To illustrate this matrilineage, I turn to the life and works of Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and Flann O’Brien, complicating their traditional classifications as aesthete/decadent, modernist, and post-modernist and reexamining them in light of Irish nationhood. Beginning with chapter 1, I situate Wilde as progenitor of this tradition, specifically focusing on his appropriation of a mythic maternal creative space in which he forges identity grounded in beauty. In chapter 2, Joyce emerges as the ambivalent inheritor of this tradition. Inspired by the antagonistic relationship he shares with Wilde, Joyce explores the amalgamation of the mythic mother with national identity, ultimately demythologizing it while simultaneously using the Gothic genre as a creative space for a new type of feminine, transformative literary production. Finally, chapter 3 places Flann O’Brien as reluctant “son” to Joyce, deconstructing O’Brien’s use of dialogism and mythic time in order to reconstruct a national Irish identity. Paying attention to the mythic maternal metaphors of each author as a confrontation with creation and creativity within my project underscores a much larger concern—their formal innovations reveal their struggle to recreate themselves and their nation. Ultimately, form offers them a way to affect change through language as it examines shifts in thought about gender, identity, and even nationalism.