

6 *Review*

**NOGUEIRA, María  
Xesús; LOJO, Laura;  
and PALACIOS,  
Manuela eds.**

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*Creation, Publishing,  
and Criticism: The  
Advance of Women's  
Writing*

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This volume brings together the perspectives and experiences of a range of writers and other agents in the literary field, in a collection of short essays exploring the cultural forces that determine the production and reception of women's writing in Galicia and Ireland.

The editors describe the book as a 'collaborative effort to analyse one of the most radical literary changes in both [the Galician and Irish] literary systems in the twentieth century: the emergence and consolidation of a large number of women writers since the 1980s' (19). In addition to a preface by Galician poet Luz Pozo Garza and an introduction by the editors, the book is divided into three parts (Poetry, Drama and Fiction), which include contributions from Galician and Irish writers, publishers, theatre practitioners, and critics. The brevity of many of the essays suggests that the editors have chosen to offer as wide a range of voices and opinions as possible (there are twenty-one individual contributions), rather than allow a lower number of contributors to write at greater length. The result is a mosaic of views, personal accounts and critical opinions, rather than a series of extended considerations of the questions raised in the book. It is an appealing and innovative way of compiling a collection on the real-world questions of cultural production, and it provides an insight into the everyday challenges faced by female dramatists, poets and novelists seeking to publish or produce their work in a bilingual setting. The collection layers the personal experience of practitioners and the critical reflections of

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journalists and academics, offering the reader a cross-section of the cultural arenas in question, and creating a strong awareness of the multiple agents and forces at play in the production and reception of women's writing.

The link between Galicia and Ireland may not be immediately obvious to a reader unfamiliar with the culture of these two Atlantic nations. According to Luz Pozo Garza, the two communities share a 'fundamental ethnic Celticism' (xi) and a shared tradition of Celtic myths and folk traditions. The editors further justify the dual focus on these two nations with reference to their geography, their traditionally agrarian economy and history of emigration, their status as 'officially bilingual societies with a vernacular language that has been gradually losing ground to the colonial one', and their Roman Catholic heritage (3). The editors explain that the 'geographical, historical, political, economic and cultural features' shared by the two nations 'serve as a solid starting point for a comparative approach' (3) to the Galician and Irish literary systems. The link is therefore not an arbitrary one, though, with the exception of bilingualism, the book does not specifically address the points of contact identified between the two nations. The editors draw the reader's attention to the upsurge in women's writing in both nations since the 1980s, especially the rise in output of women's fiction, and the under-representation of women in both Galician and Irish theatre, whilst other contributors draw our attention to the conservatism of the two societies in question. These are legitimate associations and the interweaving of perspectives from the two nations creates an interesting tapestry of views on a range of issues pertinent to women's cultural production in both locations. It could be argued, however, that other parts of Europe have also witnessed an upsurge in women's writing since the 1980s, and that many of the issues explored in relation to women's writing are no more specific to Galicia and Ireland than to other nations in the Iberian peninsula and elsewhere in Europe. The promotion of young and attractive female writers by commercially savvy publishing houses; the tendency to focus on the personal life of a woman author rather than on the content of her work; the misconception that women authors are favoured by publishers when in fact they are still vastly outnumbered by men; the tendency to exclude women from anthologies and literary histories: these complaints are widespread, and do not necessarily create a strong and coherent link between Galicia and Ireland.

The most significant contemporary link between the two nations is surely the reality of bilingualism, and the challenges faced by (women) writers working in a minority language. But in fact the linguistic situation is substantially different in the two nations, a fact that is not clearly highlighted in the book. Irish writers such as Mary O'Donnell or Ursula Rani Sarma can write in English and still be accepted into their national canon, whilst Galician writers who write in Spanish, such as Marta Rivera de la Cruz, are rigorously excluded from theirs. This no doubt reflects the fact that, as a stateless nation, Galicia relies more heavily on its language as a marker of identity. Whatever the reasons for the inclusion or exclusion of writers from the national canon, the varying situation must create a significantly different political and cultural climate for writers in the two nations, and impose a different set of demands in each case. And indeed the question of language crops up far more frequently and more prominently in the Galician essays than in the Irish ones, where the issue is barely broached. Fran Alonso, Vice-Chair of publishing house Xerais, writes

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that Galicia 'exists in constant trepidation, wanting to move forward, but without abdicating what is most dear to it. In this situation, Galicia displays an astonishing creative and fictional capacity, possible only because we have our own language' (37); academic Mercedes Queixas Zas insists that 'being a writer today in Galician is not only a commitment but also an act of resistance. Being a woman writer in Galician implies also having to go the extra mile, consciously or unconsciously' (91); and dramatist Cristina Domínguez describes Galicia's linguistic situation as 'bipolar, with two languages sharing a space and pushing, one to survive while the other, shored up by the media, constantly reminds us of its hegemony and power' (147). As academic Helena Miguélez shows, the link between cultural and linguistic normalisation is an intimate one in Galicia (124), as language and the literary system are brought into mutual service to a nationalist agenda. No Galician-born writer writing in Castilian is featured in the collection, whilst Celia de Fréine's essay on Irish women playwrights spans works written in both English and Irish. Though she addresses the development of Irish-language theatre, national identity seems not to be at stake in the same way. In spite of its organisation by genre rather than nation, the book does not therefore always create a convincing dialogue between Ireland and Galicia, though the association of the two nations remains an interesting one.

The real strength of the book lies in its topical and wide-ranging interest in the realities of the cultural field within which writers operate. From a lack of funding to the unavailability of performance venues, from the harshness or indifference of critical reviews to the publisher's rejection slip, the tough realities of getting into print or onto the stage take on a political resonance for female authors consistently battling against a reductive definition of 'women's literature'. The revisiting of many of the issues that have long preoccupied feminist critics in relation to women's cultural production reveals an ongoing tension between those who resist being 'ghettoised' as women writers, and those who consider that women's writing should be specially promoted in order to counterbalance the dominant male culture. The issue of quality is addressed by a number of contributors: Galician publishers Fran Alonso and Francisco Castro are eager to point out that the success of women writers in recent years has been a 'cultural fact' rather than 'just a publishing phenomenon' (Alonso, 36), and that their works are 'of value on their own' (Castro, 95). Castro goes on to say that, in his view, 'a literary system is healthier when governed only by authorial parameters or those regarding the objective quality of the products offered for sale, and not by gender quotas' (99). This appears to be a view supported by most of the contributors to the volume, though Irish playwright Colette Connor reflects bitterly on the relative absence of female authors and the lack of active support for new female talent in Ireland, particularly when readers and theatre-goers are predominantly women. Noting that a number of successful recent Irish novels by male authors feature strong female characters, Connor concludes that 'patriarchy has decided to zoom in on woman for its subject-matter', and that 'these *emperors* have no clothes other than those created for them by woman' (171; emphasis in the original). In this way, Connor creates a somewhat reductive homology between patriarchy and the cultural field, which is elsewhere revealed as a place of tensions and contradictions – as the very projection of strong female characters by male authors might arguably suggest.

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These tensions are brought to our attention in Mary O'Donnell's reflections on Irish women's drama. She writes that when Marina Carr, the only successful Irish woman playwright of her generation, staged her most recent play at the Abbey theatre, it was 'thoroughly and seriously mulled over by frequently unenthusiastic critics that one suspected were reluctant to be too harsh on the woman who is apparently the *chosen* female of her generation. This is not good for Marina Carr. A brilliant playwright such as she deserves to be critiqued in an open field in which consciousness of gender and her virtually solitary position in this matter, is not a consideration' (203). The personal experience of Ursula Rani Sarma also creates an interesting perspective on this issue. An Irish dramatist of Asian origin, Sarma writes of her initial surprise that 'when my plays were discussed, they were framed within the context of my gender, age, ethnicity or nationality' (175). She goes on to observe that this focus on identity has been actually been beneficial to her career: each individual classification – as a young female Irish of Asian-descent writer – has furnished her with a specific opportunity in the form of a special commission or an opportunity to work on a particular project. However, when a journalist asked her whether she did not 'feel an obligation as a female playwright to cover so called Irish *women's* issues' (176; emphasis in the original), Sarma writes that this made her think deeply about the 'role of the artist and about the way societies need to classify art within the identity of the artist [...] I immediately resisted the idea that my gender would carry with it an expectation of the content of the work itself' (176). Sarma's experience is instructive in the context of the book's concerns, because it reminds us how identity-conscious is the cultural field within which writers operate. This consciousness may be limiting to the extent that women writers feel obliged to write in particular ways for particular audiences, or find that critics expect their work to conform to certain expectations of women's writing – a point that crops up in several of the essays – but it may also generate opportunities for writers willing and able to take advantage of them.

In sum, *Creation, Publishing and Criticism: The Advance of Women's Writing* is a stimulating and very readable set of reflections on the cultural field of two small European nations. In spite of the fact that essays range in focus from the metacritical to the autobiographical, they sit comfortably side by side, generating an enjoyable variety of tone and emphasis. The problems they raise in relation to women's cultural production are not new, nor are they necessarily expressive of a cultural situation which substantially differs from that of other Western European nations; but the dual emphasis on gender and language in the context of two bilingual societies is both creative and well-conceived.