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Milesian Rewritings of the Annunciation to the Virgin in 'The Martyr's Crown' via Petronius, Dante, and Shakespeare

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Reading 'The Martyr's Crown' as a parody of the Biblical Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, this article presents a previously unrecognised intertextual source to which the title of Brian Nolan's story alludes: the liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass celebrated on the memorial day of Our Lady of Sorrows. As will be shown, this liturgical source serves as a key for an additional cluster of three interrelated literary echoes in Nolan's short story.

First, 'The Martyr's Crown' is discussed as an ironic rewriting of the Biblical Annunciation story via the Mock-Marian imagery featured in the Paolo and Francesca da Rimini episode of the *Divina Commedia* – an indecent story or fabliau inserted in Dante's epic framework. Secondly, Nolan's tale is examined as a rewriting of the Biblical Annunciation story via Ophelia-related passages from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Thirdly, the story is approached as a rewriting of the ancient tradition of the naughty Milesian tale, as reflected in the 'Widow of Ephesus' episode inserted in Petronius's *Satyricon*.

Within the frame of 'The Martyr's Crown,' the fabliaux- and Milesian tale-inspired mockery of the Biblical Annunciation to the Virgin recurs in the embedded narrative of the widow Mrs Clougherty told by the unreliable narrator Mr Toole. Finally, the article shows how this intertextual cluster is queered in the narrative situation of 'The Martyr's Crown.'

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'In woman's womb word is made flesh'

James Joyce, *Ulysses*¹

Introduction

Reading 'The Martyr's Crown' (1950)² as a parody of the biblical Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, this article presents a previously unrecognised intertextual source to which the title of Brian Nolan's story alludes: the liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass celebrated on 15 September known as the memorial day of Our Lady of Sorrows. Reflecting the seven sorrows of the Holy Virgin Mary – which culminate in the death and burial of her son Jesus – the liturgy of the memorial mass includes the words: 'Blessed are you, O Blessed Virgin Mary; without dying you won the martyr's crown beside the cross of the Lord.'³ This liturgical reference to the Holy Virgin as the queen of martyrs is echoed not only in the title but also throughout the text of 'The Martyr's Crown,' which presents the widow Mrs Clougherty as a parody of the virginal mother of Jesus.

In the frame of Nolan's short story, Mr Toole and his drinking companion Mr O'Hickey encounter a haughty 'young man of surpassing elegance'⁴ who, Toole asserts, was 'born for Ireland.'⁵ Relocating to the pub, Toole explains his strange remark by relating a bawdy tale about how Mrs Clougherty – a 'great skin' in the Irish republican women's paramilitary organisation Cumann na mBan⁶ – seduced an English officer during the War of Independence to prevent him from discovering a group of other rebels she was sheltering. At the climax of his tale, Toole reveals that the elegant but stand-offish stranger they encountered on the street was the supposed offspring of the widow's 'patriotic' act. In the course of this narration, Toole thrice refers to the widow as a 'saint,'⁷ and he declares in the story's final line that 'she's a martyr and wears the martyr's crown to-day.'⁸ By referring to her wearing 'the martyr's crown' in the story's title and final line, Nolan frames the widow Clougherty as a mock-Marian figure.

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Vintage, 1986), 14.292.

² Brian Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' *Envoy* 1, no. 3 (February 1950): 57–62; reprinted in Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 76–80. Further references to 'The Martyr's Crown' in this article will be to this 2013 reprint.

³ <https://www.liturgies.net/saints/mary/ladyofsorrows/mass.htm> (22/12/2023).

⁴ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 76.

⁵ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 80.

⁶ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 79.

⁷ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 77, 80.

⁸ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 80.

Nolan's mock-Marian portrayal of Mrs Clougherty is based on the mystery of virginal conception as the central feature of the biblical Annunciation story. According to the scriptures, the Holy Virgin conceives Jesus Christ as God's word made flesh. In Luke's gospel, the archangel Gabriel appears to Mary and announces her virginal pregnancy as follows:

And the angel being come in, said unto her: Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. [...] Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus. [...]

And Mary said to the angel: How shall this be done, because I know not man?

And the angel answering, said to her: The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.⁹

The biblical virgin gives birth to Jesus as the divine father's word made flesh – God's son born to die as the redeemer of humankind. Nolan's mock-virginal widow Mrs Clougherty, in contrast, conceives a mock-Jesus-like son 'for Ireland'¹⁰ as the result of sleeping with the enemy.

In an excellent reading of 'The Martyr's Crown' through the lens of the Bakhtinian grotesque, Noam Schiff similarly characterises Mrs Clougherty in mock-Marian terms: 'As the son of a mock-Madonna,' the man who is born for Ireland 'functions as a fake-Messiah, a Jesus-figure born out of the least-immaculate of conceptions.'¹¹ Schiff spotlights textual clues which indicate that the widow Clougherty makes her living as a sex worker:

Mrs Clougherty is referred to frequently as an unfortunate woman, evoking the idea of her possible work as a prostitute. Further support for the idea that Clougherty is presented as a Madonna-whore figure is that, although in the final version of the story Clougherty feigns innocence of having men in her house late at night, in an earlier version [titled 'For Ireland Home and Beauty'] this same figure tells the officers 'there are a few men in the house certainly, why wouldn't there be,'¹² letting

⁹ Luke 1.28–35, in Douay-Rheims Bible: <https://www.drbo.org/chapter/49001.htm>.

¹⁰ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 80.

¹¹ Noam Schiff, 'A Crowning Martyr: Theatricality, Spectacle, and O'Nolan's Carnavalesque,' in *Flann O'Brien: Acting Out*, eds. Paul Fagan and Dieter Fuchs (Cork: Cork University Press, 2022), 131.

¹² Flann O'Brien, 'For Ireland Home and Beauty,' in Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 138.

them understand, whether in earnest or in play (it hardly seems to matter in this kind of narrative) that she is a prostitute.¹³

Another clue to Mrs Clougherty's profession may be found in Mr Toole's statement 'I never seen a woman like her to bake bread,'¹⁴ which Schiff reads as 'a possible subtle jab at sexual reproduction [...], namely, her having a bun in the oven.'¹⁵ Hence, Schiff claims:

the martyr's crown is no other than that bodily orifice that was sacrificed by the mock-religious sexual and birthing acts, the open and transgressive orifice interacting with the outside world, namely, Mrs Clougherty's vagina.¹⁶

Owing to the naughty details presented in Nolan's text, Schiff is certainly right to classify 'The Martyr's Crown' as part of the 'fabliaux or vulgar-joke genre.'¹⁷ A fabliau is a bawdy and humorous short tale remarkable for its sexual and scatological obscenity, with well-known examples of the genre including episodes in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Decamerone* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

By attributing the story's title 'The Martyr's Crown' to the liturgy of the memorial day of Our Lady of Sorrows, the present article complements and adds further meaning to Schiff's identification of the story within the fabliau tradition. Important aspects to be addressed in this mock-Marian context include Nolan's playful rewriting of the scriptural and iconographic tradition of 'aural conception,' the inversion of gender roles, and satirical references to Ireland's semicolonial past. Building on Schiff's reading of 'The Martyr's Crown' as a mock-Marian fabliau, my argument reconstructs a previously unrecognised cluster of intertextual allusions to other bawdy literary genres, traditions, and scenes. I contend that the queering, clowning, and inversion of gender roles in Nolan's tale is not only imbued with the medieval fabliaux tradition in general, but is also evoked through textual echoes of three influential and evocative episodes from this literary tradition:

1. the Paolo and Francesca da Rimini episode inserted in the epic framework of Dante's *Divina Commedia*

¹³ Schiff, 'A Crowning Martyr,' 129. See also Frank O'Connor's reading that the widow Clougherty 'pretends to be a prostitute': 'Introduction,' in *Modern Irish Short Stories*, ed. Frank O'Connor (London: Oxford University Press, 1957, xiv).

¹⁴ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 78.

¹⁵ Schiff, 'A Crowning Martyr,' 130.

¹⁶ Schiff, 'A Crowning Martyr,' 132.

¹⁷ Schiff, 'A Crowning Martyr,' 127.

2. an Ophelia-related subtext from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*
3. the Widow of Ephesus episode in Petronius's *Satyricon*, a well-known example of the ancient genre of the naughty Milesian tale.

Within the frame of 'The Martyr's Crown,' these traditions recur in the nested story of the widow Clougherty as told by Mr Toole – a character inspired by the *miles gloriosus* or braggard soldier, a stock figure from ancient comedy.¹⁸ The miles/Myles pun is most certainly intended. As signalled in the title of this article, I read 'The Martyr's Crown' as a play on the reverberations between Nolan's *nom de plume* 'Myles na gCopaleen,' the genre of the 'Milesian' tale, and the stock *miles gloriosus* character queered in Nolan's story.

I. Biblical Iconography

When the young English officer and his soldiers leave her house, Mrs Clougherty enters the hidden Irish freedom fighters' room, saying: '[w]e'll go to bed a bit earlier to-night, boys; kneel down all.'¹⁹ In Schiff's reading of this scene, 'our Madonna-whore [...] forces the men to kneel in a gesture of prayer,' so that they made 'to genuflect before Mrs Clougherty' in a mock-religious ritual.²⁰ Reflecting on the line from the Lady of Sorrows liturgy that is evoked by the story's title – 'Blessed are you, O Blessed Virgin Mary; without dying you won the martyr's crown beside the cross of the Lord' – one may assume that the men delivered from the British evil by the mock-Marian widow's 'self-sacrifice' kneel down and greet their 'saint-like' redeemer with an *Ave Maria*:²¹

Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

¹⁸ Although Mr Toole 'never rendered military service to his country,' he claims to have fought in the Irish War of Independence in a self-aggrandising manner. Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 77.

¹⁹ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 80.

²⁰ Schiff, 'A Crowning Martyr,' 130.

²¹ Although the Angelus evening-prayer is set at 6pm rather than 9pm, one might also read the nightly ritual performed in the mock-Marian widow's house as a mock-Angelus ceremony: before the Hail Mary is prayed, the Angelus starts with 'the angel of the Lord declared unto Mary. And she conceived by the Holy Spirit.' From this vantage point, the arrival of the English officer may be read as a parody of the angel's 'annunciation to the virgin.'

Given the colonial context in which the scene unfolds, the prayer bristles with *double-entendres*. In particular, the line 'the Lord is with thee [...] and blessed is the fruit of thy womb' reinforces the story's carnivalesque overtones, as Mrs Clougherty has just previously been impregnated by the English soldier. In accordance with Nolan's references to the grotesque human body's reproductive function, Mikhail Bakhtin elucidates that:

[t]he essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus. [...] Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths.²²

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body emphasises the orifices through which the human body interacts with the outside world, and, as I shall demonstrate, this concept is key to appreciating the satire of Nolan's bawdy fabliau.

As the following passage from Toole's narration shows, this mock-Marian ritual is part of the Irish freedom fighters' nightly routine during their one-week 'retreat' in the widow's house:

We were there a week. Smoking and playing cards, but when nine o'clock struck, Mrs Clougherty come up and, Protestant, Catholic, or Jewman, all hands had to go down on the knees. A very good ... strict ... woman, if you understand me, a true daughter of Ireland.²³

Although the text remains vague as far as explicit references to sex are concerned, one may infer that Mrs Clougherty appears in the 'men's room' every night at nine to be greeted by a mock-Hail Mary as a form of foreplay to the entertainment to follow: a fetishistic, religious black mass-like performance (comparable to Leopold Bloom's sadomasochistic encounter with Bella Cohen in the 'Circe' episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*) where the widow's male clients kneel down and worship their 'strict' yet 'merciful' mock-Madonna.²⁴ Seen from an intermedial perspective, this imagery

²² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317–8.

²³ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 78.

²⁴ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 78. See Freud's concept of the Madonna-whore complex derived from the Victorian binary approach to womanhood in terms of the angel in the house vs. fallen woman dichotomy. In terms of topical allusion, one needs to mention that Monto, Dublin's former redlight district, was close to various British army barracks. When the British troops left Dublin after the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the foundation of the Free State, Nighttown suffered an



Figure 1: Piero della Francesca, *Madonna della Misericordia* 1444–1465 (Museo Civico, Sansepolcro).²⁵

mocks the Catholic iconography of the Holy Virgin Mary known as *mater misericordiae* – the merciful mother who protects the poor sinners kneeling under her mantle from the Heavenly Father’s wrath (**Figure 1**).

Hailed as the Messiah fighting Roman imperial rule inflicted on The Holy Land, Jesus – as the son of the Holy Virgin – is conceived by the word of the biblical father deity. The young officer seduced by the mock-Marian prostitute Mrs Clougherty, however, is an English invader, who unintentionally fathers an Anglo-Irish mongrel rather than an Irish messiah. For, as Thierry Robin puts it, the Cumann na mBan captain Mrs Clougherty’s child, whom Toole insists was ‘born for Ireland,’ is ‘every bit as British as he is Irish.’²⁶ Seen from this perspective, Clougherty’s son – supposedly, the elegant man Toole and O’Hickey encounter on the street at the

outset of the story – is no more a saviour born to liberate Ireland from colonial rule, than he is a member of the Protestant, pro-English ascendancy representing Ireland’s colonial *status quo*. Hence the gentlemanly dress sense of the ‘young man of surpassing elegance,’ with his ‘stick and the hat,’ his arrogant ‘hauteur,’ his stiff-upper-lip sense of self-control,²⁷ and his patronisingly distanced behaviour or ‘contempt’ towards the Irishman Mr Toole.²⁸

economic crisis, owing to the absence of British clients. Furthermore, Monto played a key role as a hiding place of Irish freedom fighters during the War of Independence. See Kevin C. Kearns, *Dublin Tenement Life* (London: Penguin, 1994), 84–5. After the war, the Roman Catholic Legion of Mary started a campaign to shut down the Nighttown brothels. See Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 169–72, 209–27; Michael G. Cronin, *Impure Thoughts: Sexuality, Catholicism and Literature in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 48–81.

²⁵ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/78/Madonna_della_Misericordia.JPG (28/12/2023).

²⁶ Thierry Robin, ‘Tall tales or “petites histoires”: History and the Void in ‘The Martyr’s Crown’ and *Thirst*,’ in *Flann O’Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 85.

²⁷ ‘The young man’s control was superb. There was no glare, no glance of scorn, no sign at all.’ Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ 76.

²⁸ Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ 76.

The words uttered by the Holy Virgin in Luke 1:34 – ‘How shall this [i.e. the conception of Jesus] be done, because I know not man?’ – are commonly interpreted as an assertion of chastity. This implication of ‘knowing’ in the biblical sense of having sex is echoed in ‘The Martyr’s Crown’ when Mr Toole, nostalgically indulging in his (alleged) wartime memories, says: ‘I knew the mother well.’²⁹ Although his addressee Mr O’Hickey is aware ‘that Mr Toole had never rendered military service to his country,’³⁰ the latter claims to have been in Mrs Clougherty’s house and to have ‘known’ the widow when she became pregnant with the young man to be ‘born for Ireland.’³¹ In the context of the widow’s appearance in the Irish freedom fighters’ room after the departure of the English officer – and her exhortation ‘[w]e’ll go to bed a bit earlier to-night, boys; kneel down all’³² – the statement ‘I knew the mother well’³³ may suggest that it was not only the young English officer, but also the unreliable storyteller Mr Toole or his alleged war comrades,³⁴ who spent time with Mrs Clougherty on the day her Messianic son ‘born for Ireland’ was conceived.³⁵ Considering the legal term *pater semper incertus est* (the father is always uncertain), Mr Toole might very well be the unholy father whose doubtful word was, figuratively speaking, transformed into the flesh of the young Irish mock-Messiah.

The uncertainty about the young man’s paternal lineage – whether he is the son of the English officer or of one of the Irish freedom fighters whose lives were saved by the martyr-like sacrifice of ‘Mrs. Clougherty the Saint’³⁶ – is an ironic comment on the contested outcome of the Irish War of Independence: a war triggering a ‘foul’ compromise between Ireland and its colonial lord and master, as represented by the young man. Although Ireland became the Free State in 1922, it remained a dominion of the British Commonwealth, and Irish TDs were required to take an oath of allegiance to the English king. Caught between two possible fathers – the English officer, whose lifestyle and attitudes he mimics, and Mr Toole, the impostor he greets in a patronising manner – Mrs Clougherty’s son represents the collective Anglo-Hibernian post-war identity crisis in a nutshell.

²⁹ Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ 77.

³⁰ Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ 77.

³¹ Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ 80.

³² Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ 80.

³³ Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ 77.

³⁴ The text of ‘The Martyr’s Crown’ leaves no doubt that Mr Toole’s story of him serving in the War of Independence is a fake, that Mr O’Hickey knows about this hoax and yet gives in to an exchange of drinks for a good but invented story. See Schiff, ‘A Crowning Martyr,’ 126; Robin, ‘Tall Tales,’ 80; Marion Quirici, ‘(Probably Posthumous): The Frame Device in Brian O’Nolan’s Short Fiction,’ in *Flann O’Brien: Contesting Legacies*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 58. Although the story is made up by Toole, this does not entirely negate the possibility that he might have ‘known’ the Madonna-whore as one of her p(r)aying clients.

³⁵ Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ 80.

³⁶ Nolan, ‘The Martyr’s Crown,’ 80.

An intertextual analysis of Nolan's rewriting of the Annunciation mystery also needs to be considered from an intermedial vantage point, owing to the fact that this key biblical episode entered Western collective memory through the iconicity of pictorial art. As laypeople were illiterate in the Christian Middle Ages, pictures and sculptures played a key role in understanding the written text of the Bible. Taking the following woodcut (**Figure 2**) as a representative example of this iconographic tradition, Annunciation imagery shows that the Holy Virgin Mary conceives Jesus Christ through the father deity's word. This divine word is symbolised by the Holy Ghost entering the virgin's ear in the form of a dove. The concept may be thought of as a form of 'aural conception' that – like the 'aestho-autogamy' of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*³⁷ – substitutes textual for sexual intercourse.



Figure 2: The Annunciation to Mary, woodcut (c. 1475).³⁸

Through literary rewritings which play it up for different effects and ends, the well-established Biblical symbolism of chaste aural insemination has been carnivalised throughout the centuries by the non-pious eroticism, sarcasm, irony, and parody of authors such as Petronius, Dante, Shakespeare, and Nolan.

³⁷ For an analysis of 'The Martyr's Crown' in terms of O'Nolan's recurrent theme of 'authorship as a male substitute for childbirth,' see Quirici, '(Probably Posthumous),' 52. Quirici draws on Keith Hopper's influential reading of the metaphor of 'aestho-autogamy' in *At Swim-Two-Birds*; Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009).

³⁸ *The Mirour of Mans Saluacioun: A Middle English Translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, ed. Henry Avril, a Critical Edition of the Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Illustr. from *Der Spiegel der Menschen Behältnis*. Speyer: Drach, c. 1475 (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986), 66. See also Dieter Fuchs, 'Und das Wort ist Fleisch geworden: die Jungfräuliche Empfängnis und das vorreformatorische kulturelle Gedächtnis in *Hamlet*,' in *Die Entjungferung – Fiktionen der Defloration*, ed. Renate Möhrmann (Kröner: Stuttgart, 2017), 281–302. For a more detailed analysis, see Dieter Fuchs, *Elizabethan Revenge Drama: Cultural Representations, Signifying Practices, and the Rise of Protestant Middle-Class Discourse: Rewritings of the Hamlet-Pattern of the Dispossessed Son*. Anglistik – Amerikanistik – Anglophonie, vol. 28 (Trier: WVT, 2022).

II. Paolo and Francesca

A source for Nolan's parody of the biblical Annunciation imagery is found in Canto V from the *Inferno* section of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, which presents Paolo Malatesta and his sister-in-law Francesca da Rimini together reading the illicit love story of Sir Lancelot and Guinevere. In line with the medieval practice of collective loud reading elucidated by Friedrich Kittler,³⁹ the seductive words that describe the forbidden love between the knight and his queen enter Francesca's aural channel, and the pair engage in an adulterous kiss. Reflecting on this mock-biblical reference to the fathering power of God's word penetrating the Holy Virgin's ear, I would have us focus on how 'The Martyr's Crown' blends allusions to the biblical mystery with echoes of Dante's Paolo and Francesca episode, which casts an ironic light on the biblical Annunciation story.

As Paolo and Francesca read the chivalric romance of adulterous love in each other's company, the seductive words of the worldly text stimulate Francesca's eyes – a case of *concupiscentia oculorum* (lust of the eyes) as the church father Saint Augustine would put it – and ears with bodily lust.⁴⁰ Such a blending of ocular and aural perception is emphasised by the Annunciation imagery. As can be seen on the Annunciation woodcut above (**Figure 2**) and the fresco below (**Figure 3**), the Archangel Gabriel appears as God's deputy and greets the Holy Virgin by quoting the text passage she is reading in the bible: '*Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium et vocabitur nomen eius Emmanuel*' (behold a virgin shall be with child, and bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel).⁴¹ In terms of biblical typology, the Holy Virgin is reading her own story, which is simultaneously enacted by the Archangel's speech act. Performatively 'doing things with words,'⁴² Gabriel's utterance prepares Mary's aural channel for divine verbal penetration by way of the father deity's word made flesh:

³⁹ Friedrich A. Kittler, 'Autorschaft und Liebe,' in *Goethes Werther: Kritik und Forschung*, ed. Hans Peter Herrmann (WBG: Darmstadt, 1994), 285–316. See also: 'When we think about reading, we usually imagine reading silently to ourselves [...]. But in the early medieval period, the reverse held true: oral reading was more common than silent reading. For example, in Augustine's *Confessions*, Augustine visits his friend and mentor Ambrose, and is surprised by Ambrose's eccentric habit of reading silently. [...] Oral reading was a public, social event. [...] In the twelfth century, however, reading practices started to change. Silent reading became more popular, eventually becoming the most common way of reading in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.' Caitlin Smith, 'Read to Yourself, Please: Oral and Silent Medieval Reading Practices,' *The Medieval Studies Research Blog*, University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute (29 January 2015): <https://sites.nd.edu/manuscript-studies/author/csmith58/>. Being written in the early fourteenth century, *Divina Commedia* marks the transitional phase from loud collective to silent private reading culture.

⁴⁰ The aspect of ocular perception in the Paolo and Francesca episode was raised in one of the anonymous reader reports written during the peer review of this article. I wish to express my gratitude for this thought-provoking observation.

⁴¹ Matthew 1.23 & Isaiah 7.14.

⁴² See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spoke by the prophet, saying: Behold a virgin shall be with child, and bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.⁴³

By repeating the text passage which the fresco below (**Figure 3**) locates in the opened Biblical book Saint Mary is reading, the words uttered by God's messenger penetrate the Holy Virgin's aural channel when the Holy Ghost descends to impregnate her through the same bodily orifice.



Figure 3: The Annunciation fresco by Joseph Ernst Tunner (1830), in Church Chiesa della Trinità dei Monti, Rome.

Rather than resulting in chaste aural conception, the illicit romance of Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno V* triggers sexual and (inter)textual intercourse as the act of reading stokes the lovers' passions. This is Allen Mandelbaum's translation of the damned Francesca's seductive confession to Dante the Pilgrim in Canto 5 of the *Inferno*:

One day, to pass the time away, we read
of Lancelot – how love had overcome him.
We were alone, and we suspected nothing.
And time and time again that reading led
our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale,

⁴³ Matthew 1.22–3 & Isaiah 7.14.

and yet one point alone defeated us.
 When we had read how the desired smile
 was kissed by one who was so true a lover,
 this one, who never shall be parted from me,
 while all his body trembled, kissed my mouth.
 A Gallehault indeed, that book and he
 who wrote it, too; that day we read no more.⁴⁴

In the biblical story of virginal conception, the Archangel Gabriel assists the Christian deity to verbally father his only son with the help of the Holy Virgin. In Dante's scene, by contrast, feelings of lust surprise the unsuspecting lovers: the young Paolo usurps the patriarchal position of his older brother when the text of the naughty tale penetrates his sister-in-law's receptive ear. Yet, Dante also subtly re-genders the scriptural scene of 'aural conception' (**Figure 4**). Famously, in Canto V, it is Francesca who seduces the epic hero with her story of illicit passion, causing him to falter, overpowered by emotion, and, ultimately, to experience a 'little death.'



Figure 4: 'Paolo and Francesca' (1894) by Sir Frank Dicksee, oil on canvas, 130 × 130 cm, which depicts Francesca as the whisperer.

⁴⁴ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. A Verse Translation with Introductions and Commentary by Allen Mandelbaum*. Drawings by Barry Moser (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), Canto V: 127–38.

Like Francesca, Mrs Clougherty reclaims the role of the seductive whisperer in 'The Martyr's Crown.' Mr O'Toole, 'listen[ing] at the stairs,' hears Mrs Clougherty assume a gutty voice to answer the officer who is searching for the wanted men:

'I wish to God there was [men in the house]. Sure, how could a poor unfortunate woman get on without them?' [...]

[A]nd then the whispering starts, and at the wind-up the hall-door is closed and into the room off the hall with the pair of them.⁴⁵

In a reversal of gender roles, it is the mock-Marian widow who usurps the divine power of the biblical deity's patriarchal word as a sexual foreplay.



Figure 5: Mrs Clougherty (Eva Birthistle) whispers in the ear of the English officer (Michael McElhatton) in Park Film's 2007 short film adaptation of 'The Martyr's Crown' (dir: Rory Bresnihan; prod: AnneMarie Naughton). Reproduced with permission.⁴⁶

Representing the power of the British king as Ireland's imperial lord and master and God's deputy on earth in an imperfect way (and thus ironically mirroring Gabriel's role in the Annunciation), the English officer is fooled by the seductive whispers (**Figure 5**) of an unchaste, mock-Marian Irishwoman who refuses to succumb to her subaltern position as a colonised subject. Although Mr Toole repeatedly exclaims, 'Sacred godfathers!',⁴⁷ 'By God,'⁴⁸ and 'Sanctified and holy godfathers,'⁴⁹ a paternal deity in control of the 'divine' power of the word remains notably absent in his tale. Indeed,

⁴⁵ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 79.

⁴⁶ For more information on the film see <https://parkfilms.ie/the-martyrs-crown/>.

⁴⁷ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 77.

⁴⁸ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 78.

⁴⁹ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 78.

through its inversion of the gender roles of the biblical scene of aural conception, 'The Martyr's Crown' deconstructs the phallogocentric concept of the Holy father speaking his son and the world into being.

III. Ophelia

Dante's parody of the biblical Annunciation mystery in the Paolo and Francesca episode is mirrored in an Ophelia-related scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Referring to the Holy Virgin's aural conception in a mock-biblical manner, Laertes admonishes his sister Ophelia not to listen to Hamlet's seductive words of love. Once they enter Ophelia's ear, the words will break her will, and when this is done, Hamlet will penetrate her virginal body:

Laertes: Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain
 If with too credent ear you list his songs
 Or loose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
 To his unmastered importunity.
 Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,
 And keep you in the rear of your affection
 Out of the shot and danger of desire.⁵⁰

Although the saint-like Ophelia remains as chaste as the Holy Virgin, Shakespeare's mock-Marian rewriting of the Annunciation mystery presents the female ear positioned next to a male lover's whispering lips as the primary gateway to carnal lust.

The mock-Marian iconography of *Hamlet* is first signalled when the Danish prince advises Polonius to keep an eye on his daughter because only immaculate 'conception is a blessing,'⁵¹ and also when he sarcastically remarks about Ophelia: 'Nymph, in thy orisons/Be all my sins remembered.'⁵² These Marian allusions are clowned by Hamlet's sarcastic advice to Ophelia:

Hamlet: [...] Get thee to a
 nunnery, go: farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs
 marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough
 what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go,
 and quickly too. Farewell.⁵³

⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, eds. Ann Thompson & Neil Taylor. Hamlet. The Second Quarto. [1604/5] The Arden Shakespeare 3rd Series (London: Methuen, 2006), 1.3.28–33.

⁵¹ *Hamlet* 2.2.181–2.

⁵² *Hamlet* 3.1.88. See also Fuchs, *Elizabethan Revenge Drama*, 219.

⁵³ *Hamlet* 3.1.135–39.

Hamlet's injunction plays upon the fact that in Elizabethan slang 'nunnery' could also be a term for 'brothel.'⁵⁴ The insult, which carries anti-Catholic overtones, reverberates in the *double entendres* that attach to Mrs Clougherty's dual status as a saint and a sex worker. The connection is reinforced through Hamlet's recommendation to Ophelia to 'marry a fool' – that is, a man who would never be wise to her infidelity – an aspect which in the gender-inverted case of 'The Martyr's Crown' may be attributed to the naïve young English officer who is 'whispered' into having (first aural, then vaginal) sex with 'Mrs. Clougherty the saint.'⁵⁵ It may be the young officer's lack of knowledge (in the biblical sense) that leads Mr Toole to call him an inexperienced 'young pup.'⁵⁶

IV. The Widow of Ephesus

Repeated references in 'The Martyr's Crown' to Mrs Clougherty's circumstances as a widow gesture towards yet another intertextual allusion: the Milesian tale of the Widow of Ephesus from Petronius's *Satyricon*.⁵⁷

The Widow of Ephesus is introduced as a married woman who is widely known for her reputation of impeccable chastity, a detail which the very short text foregrounds again and again.⁵⁸ When the chaste matron's husband passes away, she is so desperate that she decides to stay together with – and die over – her late spouse's corpse in the tomb. Next to the tomb, a young Roman soldier is commanded to guard the corpse of a crucified criminal, so that body-snatchers cannot steal and bury it. When the young soldier overhears the mourning widow's sighs, he enters the tomb and offers food and wine. Having refused food and drink for a long time, the meal restores both the widow's health and her sexual appetite. It is at this point that the tale emphasises the

⁵⁴ Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary Of Sexual Language in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature, Volume 2* (London: Athlone Press, 1994), s.v. 'nunnery.'

⁵⁵ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 80.

⁵⁶ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 79.

⁵⁷ Petronius, *Satyricon*, in *Petronius, Seneca, Satyricon, Apocolocyntosis*, ed. & trans. Gareth Schmeling (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020), 68–452. As the Widow of Ephesus episode functions as a clearly marked intertext in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, it is possible that this intertextual allusion in 'The Martyr's Crown' was inspired via Joyce. Attending Paddy Dignam's funeral at the cemetery, the following Widow of Ephesus-related thoughts enter Leopold Bloom's mind: 'You might pick up a young widow here. Men like that. Love among the tombstones. [...] In the midst of death we are in life. Both ends meet. Tantalising for the poor dead. Smell of grilled beefsteaks to the starving' (Joyce, *Ulysses*, 6:757–61). See J. F. Killeen, 'Joyce's Roman Prototype,' *Comparative Literature* 9, no. 3 (Summer, 1957): 193–203; and Jean Kimball, 'An Ambiguous Faithlessness: Molly Bloom and the Widow of Ephesus,' *James Joyce Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (1994): 455–72.

⁵⁸ Petronius, *Satyricon*, ed. Michael Heseltine (London: William Heinemann, 1913), 111–112. Available at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0027%3Atext%3DSatyricon%3Asection%3D111>.

young man's seductive prowess as an act of persuasion, a way with words: 'The soldier used the same insinuating phrases which had persuaded the lady to consent to live, to conduct an assault upon her virtue.'⁵⁹ As a result, the widow and her son-like lover have sex for three days next to the matron's late husband's corpse: 'So they passed not only their wedding night together, but the next and a third, of course shutting the door of the vault, so that any friend or stranger who came to the tomb would imagine that this most virtuous lady had breathed her last over her husband's body.'⁶⁰ In the meantime, owing to the Roman soldier's neglect of duty, and much to his distress, the unguarded corpse of the crucified criminal outside is stolen by body-snatchers. The widow comes up with a pragmatic solution to her lover's problem, one that is as unconventional as the widow Clougherty's trick to save the Irish freedom fighters from being captured and sentenced to death by the English enemy:

The woman, who was no less sympathetic than she was chaste, remarked: 'Heaven forbid that I should see simultaneously the two corpses of the men dearest to me. I prefer to sacrifice a dead man than kill a living one.' After this short speech she ordered that her husband's body be removed from the coffin and fastened to the vacant cross. The soldier availed himself of the wise woman's stroke of genius, and the next day the people wondered how the dead man had managed to get on the cross.⁶¹

The tale's mock-biblical resonances are hard to miss: the wine and food offered to the matron in the tomb function as a parody of the Eucharistic revivifying power of wine and bread. The sexually experienced middle-aged widow making love to a much younger man rather than a young innocent Marian girl giving virginal birth to a messianic boychild may be read as a satire on the biblical Annunciation to the Virgin. The mock miracle of an old patriarch's corpse leaving his tomb and climbing the cross rather than a Jesus-like young Messiah being resurrected from the dead ironically rewrites the passion and resurrection of Christ. And, last but not least, the tomb as an erotic three-day sexual retreat for lovers from the world of the living rather than an abode of the dead may be attributed to the ritual shaming of death at work in the

⁵⁹ Petronius, *Satyricon*, 112. Available at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0027%3Atext%3DSatyricon%3Asection%3D112>.

⁶⁰ Petronius, *Satyricon*, 112.

⁶¹ Petronius, *Satyricon*, 112.

Bakhtinian grotesque.⁶² The trope of the tomb as a reproductive womb⁶³ elucidates the widow Clougherty's trick to save the lives of the freedom fighters trapped in the claustrophobic 'tomb-like' room to be searched by the enemy, which results in her carrying the British officer's offspring in her womb.

V. Mr Toole's Story

In closing, I will consider how the frame story of 'The Martyr's Crown' not only parodies but also queers the biblical Annunciation imagery explored throughout this article. In the story within the frame, Mr Toole is a supposed witness to the widow Clougherty's saintly and patriotic carnal act and, implicitly, a potential yet uncertain father of the mock-messianic young man 'born for Ireland.'⁶⁴ Through its parody of the Annunciation to the Virgin as a variant of speaking life into being, however, the frame story presents Mr Toole as the narrator of the widow's mock-Marian tale whose unreliable, rather than divine, words penetrate Mr O'Hickey's ear instead of a woman's.

First, Mr Toole stimulates the ear of Mr O'Hickey by giving away some naughty details of his Milesian/Mylesian fabliau. Similar to the way the inserted story implies that the widow Clougherty makes a living by selling sex in exchange for money, Mr Toole tells – or rather 'sells' – the full text of his erotic tale in exchange for drinks at the pub. Like the widow Clougherty's sexually charged whispering as a way to offer her body in a 'martyr-like' exchange of sex, the mock-godfather Mr Toole sells the story of the widow Clougherty in exchange for bodily *jouissance*.

Owing to the disinhibiting power of alcoholic drink – like the mock-Eucharistic wine consumed by the Ephesian widow in the tomb – Mr Toole and Mr O'Hickey end up in an implicitly 'queer'⁶⁵ narrative situation. Penetrating Mr O'Hickey's ear, Mr Toole's titillating story takes on homoerotic connotations. In this context, the men are described as 'working at' their phallus-shaped 'bottles'⁶⁶ to get access to the stout – which is covered with a layer of sperm-white froth – as they engage in the pleasant

⁶² Although the Ephesian widow is repeatedly referred to as an icon of chastity, her sexual performance in the tomb at least implies that the matron may be considered a hypocritical mock-virgin-like prostitute such as Widow Clougherty 'the Saint.' According to James N. Davidson, the necropolis next to the ancient metropolis was part of the ancient red-light district: '[s]ome of the prostitutes lining the streets will have had beds in the brothels nearby, others may have made do with the nearby cemetery itself, enabling [...] to concoct a gross combination of two extramural activities, mourning and whoring.' James N. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 80.

⁶³ See James Joyce *Ulysses*: 'Bridebed, childbed, bed of death, ghostcandle. [...] mouth to her moomb. Oomb, allwombing tomb' (3:396–402).

⁶⁴ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 80.

⁶⁵ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 79.

⁶⁶ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 80.

memory of the merry widow: 'Mr Toole poured out his stout with unnecessary care. [...] Mr O'Hickey, also careful, was working at his own bottle, his wise head bent at the task.'⁶⁷ Such *double entendres* suggest a more vulgar reading of the scene as connoting an image of two men having masturbatory sex while whispering a naughty tale to each other in the dark tomb-like room of the pub. Although suggested in a tongue-in-cheek manner, the result of this performative act is left to the reader's imagination. Hence the deferral of the expected climactic ending of the story via the six asterisks at the end of the paragraph:

* * * * * *⁶⁸

Conclusion

As this article has shown, Nolan's short and seemingly straightforward story 'The Martyr's Crown' is sustained by a complex palimpsest of comic, tragic, and Milesian tales. Thus, to arrive at a deeper understanding of this text, we must attend to a set of references to biblical and classical mythology, which include the liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass of Our Lady of Sorrows, Dante's depiction of the damned lovers Francesca and Paolo, Laertes's warning that Ophelia not listen 'with too credent ear' in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*,⁶⁹ and Petronius's mock-biblical Milesian tale of the Widow of Ephesus. Considered separately, these liturgical sources and literary echoes, once recognised, imbue the naughty details, *double entendres*, and narrative situations of Nolan's tale with new parodic dimensions. However, taken as an intertextual whole, this palimpsest is integral to the construction of the tale and the way it operates, as it compels us to read 'The Martyr's Crown' not only as a bawdy travesty of Irish war narratives but also as a richly intertextual queering of the biblical Annunciation to the Virgin, in which the materiality of the Bakhtinian grotesque body sheds an ironic light on a foundational document of phallogocentric discourse.

⁶⁷ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 80.

⁶⁸ Nolan, 'The Martyr's Crown,' 80.

⁶⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.3.29.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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