

Kate O'Brien in the Theatre

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The New Kate O'Brien

Kate O'Brien first came to public attention through her theatre work rather than her prose fiction. In 1926, the twenty-eight-year-old O'Brien had abandoned her marriage of less than a year and was working for a charity in London. Here her social circle included the actor and fellow UCD graduate, Veronica Turleigh. As O'Brien later remembered:

At this time I was mixing with young actors and writers. I used to talk about the theatre a lot and Veronica Turleigh, who was just out of the Academy of Dramatic Art, very young, bet me a pound that I wouldn't write a play in a month to give to her and I did! She took it to an agent, and paid me the pound which was very decent of her, and he read it and set me twenty-five pounds on its chances, he thought so well of it. I never before or since heard of an agent doing that...it was a young, over-written play, very tragic, very kitchen sink, over-romantic but I do think it had some merit.¹

That period of her life was soon superseded, as O'Brien went on to win acclaim as a novelist, with her 1931 volume *Without My Cloak* scooping the James Tait Black, the Hawthornden, and the Book Society prizes. Her first novel portrays the problems of

¹ O'Brien, 'Self Portrait', quoted in Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), pp.37-38.

bourgeois life in Mellick (a fictional version of O'Brien's hometown of Limerick), and her association with the middle-class was highlighted in the 1945 film *Brief Encounter*, in which Celia Johnson's character wishes to visit a library in order to collect 'the new Kate O'Brien'.²

Yet before she became known as a novelist, it was Kate O'Brien's theatre work that had first seen her exploring the idea of middle-class angst. When she responded to Veronica Turleigh's bet, and completed the play *Distinguished Villa* in 1926, O'Brien created a work set in the London suburb of Brixton, and portrayed the desperate lives led by the aspirational and railway-commuting class. The plot revolves around the aspirational Mabel Hemworth, who boasts that she and her husband 'are known round here as the model of what a married couple should be. We've been married over eleven years, and yet everyone remarks on what a success we are, and what a nice refined home we keep'.³ But the arrival and then potential departure of a female lodger, Frances Llewellyn, makes Mabel's husband realize that he is in fact profoundly miserable. Frances meanwhile has developed a mutually loving relationship with a young man, John Morris, but their plans for a future together are ruined because John is compelled to marry another woman who has become pregnant and (untruthfully) claims that he is the father. The play ends with Mabel's husband committing suicide in the kitchen.

² Quoted by Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, *Kate O'Brien and the Fiction of Identity: Sex, Art and Politics in Mary Lavelle and Other Writings* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), p.101.

³ O'Brien, *Distinguished Villa: A Play in Three Acts* (London: Ernest Benn, 1926), pp.20-1.

Critics felt broadly impressed by this realistic depiction of a social class that was not over-represented on the English stage. As Ivor Brown asked, rhetorically, when reviewing O'Brien's debut play for the *Saturday Review*, 'how many a time have we settled down at eight-thirty to endure until eleven the company of ill-conditioned aristocrats whose only occupation is adultery tempered by epigrams?'. Brown declared himself temperamentally inclined to like any play in which the dramatist had instead opted to 'limit the incomes of the characters to six pounds a week, provide each with the common necessity of doing a day's work [...] I find myself proclaiming a masterpiece before the curtain has risen'.⁴ O'Brien had, after all, attempted to show the frustrations of such six-pound-a-week characters, with Mabel Hemworth's husband pointing to the quietly miserable existence of 'any of the chaps I know': 'Same old life eternally. Eight forty-five train every morning regular. –Same fellows in the carriages. –Same newspapers. –Same jokes. –Same office. –Same slogging. –Same lunch. –Home again. –Same station. –Same walk. –Same gossip in the Avenue. –Ethelberta, do'ye think they're happy?'⁵

O'Brien's play initially appeared for one evening only, on 2 May 1926, at London's Aldwych Theatre, given by the amateur company, The Repertory Players, yet bad luck nearly doomed the work to utter obscurity. As the *Western Morning News* later reported of O'Brien's script, 'On the night before the outbreak of the general strike a remarkable play was produced in London, a play which was undeservingly robbed of its

⁴ Ivor Brown, 'The Theatre: Behind the Lace Curtain', *Saturday Review*, 7 August 1926, p.148.

⁵ O'Brien, *Distinguished Villa*, p.60.

due acclamation owing to the temporary suppression of the newspapers'.⁶ Nonetheless, the theatre producers José Levy and Henry Millar learned of O'Brien's text, and brought it to professional production at the Little Theatre two months later. This time, a great deal of press attention came O'Brien's way. The drama appeared for a two-month run in London, and then toured across England.⁷ One newspaper reported that 'four American producers were already after the American rights to the play', and although that US production never occurred, the play did arrive at the Abbey in Dublin at the start of 1929, where, according to the *Irish Independent* it 'drew a large audience' despite being 'by no means great work'.⁸

Sean O'Casey

The London run of Kate O'Brien's play began on 12 July 1926, and took place concurrently with the arrival of Sean O'Casey's much-anticipated work, *The Plough and the Stars*, in the British capital. That year, O'Casey's drama had its London premiere on 12 May at the Fortune Theatre, and then transferred to the city's New Theatre about two weeks before Kate O'Brien's work opened for its first run. O'Casey's play had gained notoriety for causing riotous protests when premiered at Dublin's Abbey Theatre the previous February, and in the summer of 1926 London newspapers therefore ran advertisements for British production of O'Casey's 'famous play' alongside adverts for

⁶ 'From our London Correspondent, *Western Morning News*, 21 August 1926, p.6.

⁷ Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life*, p.38.

⁸ 'Irish Girl Typist's Play a London Hit', *New York Times*, 14 July 1926, p.19. J.W.G., 'Distinguished Villa', *Irish Independent*, 28 January 1929, p.6.

O'Brien's *Distinguished Villa*.⁹ That first London run of O'Casey's work came to an end on Saturday 4 September 1926, on exactly the same day that O'Brien's *Distinguished Villa* finished its spell at the Little Theatre.¹⁰

Somewhat inevitably, then, when O'Brien was first introduced in the British and US press she was repeatedly compared with O'Casey. On 14 July, for example, the *New York Times* commented that O'Brien's play was likely to see her 'Share Fame with Sean O'Casey'.¹¹ Four days later, another piece in the *New York Times* announced O'Brien as 'countrywoman of Sean O'Casey'.¹² Meanwhile, in England, the *Gloucester Citizen* described how O'Brien's play *Distinguished Villa* 'is sordid only in the sense that "Juno and the Paycock" is sordid. Indeed, the young Irish playwright, Kate O'Brien, whose first effort this is, and Sean O'Casey, her countryman, have spiritually much in common'.¹³ Another implied comparison perhaps came in the *Northern Whig*'s depiction of O'Brien as 'Yet another Irish playwright', and in the *Observer*'s description of 'Another Irish play'.¹⁴ O'Brien even received a telegram from O'Casey himself, declaring, 'Dublin ventures to congratulate Limerick'.¹⁵

⁹ See 'Theatres', *The Times*, 29 July 1926, p.10.

¹⁰ 'Irish Players', *Irish Independent*, 6 September 1926, p.6.

¹¹ 'Irish Girl Typist's Play a London Hit', *New York Times*, 14 July 1926, p.19.

¹² 'London Stage Notes', *New York Times*, 18 July 1926, p.X1.

¹³ 'London Letter', *Gloucester Citizen*, 3 May 1926, p.4.

¹⁴ 'Another Irish Playwright', *Northern Whig*, 14 July 1926, p.6. 'Dramatis Personae', *Observer*, 25 April 1926, p.15. The Irish playwright T.C. Murray had recently come to prominence in the British theatre, so may also be implicated in these comments.

¹⁵ Quoted in Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), p.39.

In particular, the biographical description of Kate O'Brien that was provided in some prominent newspapers appears to have been shaped by the recent introduction that the press had given to O'Casey. During October 1924 (after O'Casey had seen four of his plays produced at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin), the *Manchester Guardian* reported that O'Casey 'had stood in a labour exchange queue only last week'.¹⁶ In March 1926, O'Casey then arrived in London to receive the Hawthornden Prize for his play *Juno and the Paycock*, and Lady Gregory accompanied him to the ceremony at the Aeolian Hall, where she made a widely reported speech to commend his win. The *Manchester Guardian* reported what Lady Gregory had said, namely that:

At the age of 14 Mr. O'Casey went to work in a warehouse at 4s. a week and afterwards got 9s. a week at a newsagent's. He spent seven years working on the railway, and worked as a builder for some years. His eyesight was so bad in his youth that he was not able to learn to read, and he taught himself to read at the age of 16. When he had saved a few pence he went among the bookstalls and bought Shakespeare, from which time his dramatic education began.¹⁷

Shortly afterwards, that liberally fictionalized version of O'Casey's biography found its echo in the initial reporting of Kate O'Brien's personal circumstances. On 14 July 1926 the *Manchester Guardian* declared that:

¹⁶ 'Plight of the Younger Irish Writers: Lecture by Mr. C. O'Leary', *Manchester Guardian*, 21 October 1924, p.20.

¹⁷ 'Best Literary Work of the Year', *Manchester Guardian*, 24 March 1926, p.5.

The management of the Little Theatre were nonplussed this morning when pressmen came asking for Miss Kate O'Brien, the young Irish girl whose play, 'Distinguished Villa', had last night impressed the audience and critics so favourably. American managers also wanted a word with her about American rights, but she had forgotten to give the theatre her address, and it was only after a long search that she was discovered at her daily secretarial work in the office of the Sunshine League.¹⁸

If O'Casey had been queuing at the Labour exchange, the *New York Times* pointed out that 'Miss O'Brien is a graduate of London's queues, whose lines of patient men and women who wait hours for the theatres to open in order to buy tickets for inexpensive seats. "Many a queue have I stood in", she said today when seen at her employer's office'.¹⁹

There were also, perhaps, some more meaningful connections between O'Casey and O'Brien's early work. For example, the *Spectator's* review of *Distinguished Villa* called attention to the alliterative effect of parts of O'Brien's text ('how grave your glances grew'), something that offered a potential reminder of one of the most striking features of O'Casey's Dublin trilogy.²⁰ And O'Casey and O'Brien had certainly written plays that depicted the moral challenge of a woman becoming pregnant outside of marriage. Furthermore, the main character in *Distinguished Villa* was first brought to life

¹⁸ 'Our London Correspondence', *Manchester Guardian*, 14 July 1926, p.8.

¹⁹ 'Irish Girl Typist's Play a London Hit', *New York Times*, 14 July 1926, p.19.

²⁰ 'The Theatre: Crooks and Cockneys', *Spectator*, 6 August 1926, p.11.

by Una O'Connor, an actor who had been trained, and first become known as a performer, at the Abbey, and who would go on to perform in *The Silver Tassie* during 1929 as well as in the 1937 film of *The Plough and the Stars*.²¹

However, as we shall see in this article, that initial press comparison between O'Brien and O'Casey gave a somewhat misleading impression of what O'Brien was actually writing and how her theatrical career would develop. As we shall see in this article, O'Brien's drama showed a recurring interest in dissecting the sexual dilemmas of the English middle-classes, a group whose love lives were not primarily of theatrical interest to O'Casey. Furthermore, even though both O'Casey and O'Brien *were* interested in fictionalizing extra-marital sex, O'Brien initially sought to bring such depictions onto the stage of an English rather than an Irish theatre. Thus, although O'Brien subsequently became famous for being censored in the Irish state, her earliest stage work shows how she was first compelled to adjust to the rules of British rather than Irish censorship. Nonetheless, in later life, O'Brien remained aware of the restrictions placed upon Ireland's theatres, and she would remain a champion of the sexually transgressive figures of the Irish playhouse during her more mature years.

Rather Frank Passages

²¹ In O'Brien's play, O'Connor played Mabel Hemworth with an impeccable London accent – but had earlier in 1926 been seen playing the 'Irish shrew' in T.C. Murray's play *Autumn Fire* at the same theatre. See Ivor Brown, 'The Theatre: Behind the Lace Curtain', *Saturday Review*, 7 August 1926, p.148, and Brown, 'The Theatre: Three Kinds of Playboy', *Saturday Review*, 24 April 1926, p.536. See also Christopher Murray, *Sean O'Casey: Writer at Work* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), p.207.

In *Juno and the Paycock*, Sean O'Casey broached the idea of Mary Boyle's pregnancy with such kid-gloved delicacy that, today, members of the audience are sometimes left bewildered about what exactly the play is revealing:

Jerry (*passionately*). Scorn! I love you, love you, Mary!

Mary (*rising, and looking him in the eyes*). Even though...

Jerry. Even though you threw me over for another man; even though you gave me many a bitter word!

Mary. Yes, yes, I know; but you love me, even though...even though...I'm...goin'...goin'...(*He looks at her questioningly, and fear gathers in his eyes*). Ah, I was thinkin' so....You don't know everything!

Jerry (*poignantly*). Surely to God, Mary, you don't mean that...that...that...

Mary. Now you know all, Jerry; now you know all!²²

The meaning may have been veiled, but it did allow O'Casey's play to appear on the Dublin stage in 1924 and the London stage in 1925. He encountered more problems afterwards when he wrote *The Plough and the Stars* and included a prostitute who was supposed to sing about unmarried pregnancy. O'Casey wanted the prostitute to sing:

We cuddled and kissed with devotion, till th' night from th' mornin' had fled;

An' there, to our joy, a bright bouncin' boy

Was dancin' a jig in th' bed!²³

²² Sean O'Casey, *The Complete Plays of Sean O'Casey*, 5 vols (London: Macmillan, 1984), I, 81.

²³ O'Casey, *The Complete Plays*, I, 214.

However, the Abbey directors demanded that the song be cut in performance, and so the original Irish audiences never saw that provocative, if comically framed, sexual reference. As Lady Gregory noted in her journal on 20 September 1926, ‘Yeats says [O’]Casey said about the song that must be removed from his play, “Yes, it’s a pity. It would offend thousands. But it ought to be there”’. Four days later there was a director’s meeting about O’Casey’s drama, after which Lady Gregory wrote that George O’Brien, the Irish government’s representative on the Abbey board (whose presence came with the Abbey’s subsidy), had also taken offence at that part of O’Casey’s script. According to Gregory, ‘O’Brien sat up in his chair reiterating at intervals, “That song is objectionable”’. Gregory added, ‘We had already decided that it must go, but left it as a bone for him to gnaw at’.²⁴ Shortly afterwards, James B. Fagan directed the British premiere of *The Plough and the Stars* in London, and Rosie’s song was originally included in the typed script that was sent to the British censor. However, the censor placed a big blue cross next to the song, forbidding it from London performance before a British licence could be issued on 13 May 1926.²⁵

When Kate O’Brien’s play *Distinguished Villa* first appeared on the London stage, she wished to deal with a similar theme to O’Casey: the subplot of her play revolves around a woman who has sex with two men and becomes pregnant by one of them. However, O’Brien had to navigate the situation in a different way than O’Casey.

²⁴ Gregory, quoted in *The Years of O’Casey, 1921-1926: A Documentary History*, ed. by Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992), p.284.

²⁵ British Library, Lord Chamberlain’s Collection, LCP 1926/21, *The Plough and the Stars*, fol.II.21.

His Dublin plays were prepared for the Abbey before transferring to London: so he was accustomed to navigating Irish sensibilities first. But her *Distinguished Villa* was prepared for London before subsequently appearing at the Abbey. This meant that, in the first instance, O'Brien was preparing her text for a different censorship regime than O'Casey, as the Irish stage was regulated separately in these matters from the rest of Britain. From 1737, British theatres were subject to a system of prior censorship, and the Licensing Act of that year required that any manager who wanted to stage a play first had to submit it to the Lord Chamberlain. This rule initially applied to London, and British towns with royal residences, but was extended more widely across the country by 1843, a situation that was destined to continue until 1968. By contrast (and despite Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom between 1801 and 1922) Ireland never had a pre-production model of censoring or licensing plays. Instead, half a century after the British Licensing Act, the Irish parliament approved the Dublin Stage Regulation Act (1786), which instituted a regime of patented theatres for Dublin city and county. In preparing to put his work on at the Abbey, then, O'Casey and his collaborators had to ensure that they did not put at risk the permission granted for the premises – the Abbey's physical building in Dublin. Only secondarily, after the work was slated for the London stage, did O'Casey have to worry about acquiring any licence for the dramatic work itself by submitting his writing to the Lord Chamberlain in the British capital.²⁶

²⁶ This potentially meant editing the script for a British production. In 1925 the Lord Chamberlain did approve the printed Macmillan script of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, after the show had appeared in Dublin, without correction (British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Collection, LCP 1925/41, *Juno and the Paycock*). However, the following year the Lord Chamberlain demanded a number of changes to the typescript he received of *The Plough and the Stars* before it could be seen on the British stage: as well as deleting Rosie's song about pregnancy, the British censor also forbade London audiences from hearing Jack Clitheroe's line 'don't mind that old bitch' (British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Collection, LCP 1926/21, *The Plough and the Stars*, fol.I.17); Mrs Gogan's description 'Orange bitch' (fol.III.4); Bessie's descriptions 'bloody' (fol.III.5), 'backside' (fol.III.13) and 'bitch' (fol.IV.17); and Peter's thrice repeated

By contrast, Kate O'Brien needed to make sure that, straight away, the sexual descriptions spoken by her actors would be acceptable to the British Lord Chamberlain, Lord Cromer. Indeed, the opening night of her first work on 12 July was almost cancelled because of the reservations of Cromer, and on the Friday before the piece was due onstage the following Monday, the producers at the Little Theatre had to engage in some emergency negotiation with him. As O'Brien explained after the premiere, her play:

[...] was sent to the Lord Chamberlain last week. Unfortunately, owing to a rush, a copy, containing some rather frank passages, which had been deleted for the production, was used, and the Lord Chamberlain's department said that it would be impossible to pass the play for production on Monday, as it would have to go before the Advisory Committee. On Friday we wrote to the Lord Chamberlain himself, enclosing a properly cut copy and explaining our mistake. He very kindly read it himself on the same day, and communicated his permission on Friday.²⁷

It appears that the Lord Chamberlain's objections were withdrawn because O'Brien, or someone acting on her behalf, made a series of changes to the script, toning down the piece's references to extra-marital sex and to unwanted pregnancy.

'lowsey bastard' (fol.III.15). The British censor also questioned whether the barmen should say 'bloody' (fol.II.13); whether Rosie should deliver her line 'You louse, you louse you [...] If I was a man, or you were a woman, I'd bate th' puss o' you!' (fol.II.16); whether the Covey should deliver his line describing the deaths of the British Lancers in 'a volley from th' Post Office that stretched half o' them' (fol.III.3); Lieutenant Langon's wounded line about 'Everyone else escapin' an' me getting' th' belly ripped asunder [...] My God, it must be me own blood!' (fol.III.18); and Nora's two offstage screams of pain (fol.III.21).

²⁷ 'Irish Lady's Play', *Irish Independent*, 12 July 1926, p.8.

In the play *Distinguished Villa*, the suggestively named character of Gwen Tupman sleeps with two men, Alec Webberley and John Morris, and realizing that she is pregnant, confronts Alec. In the script that was revised on 9 July 1926 for submission to the Lord Chamberlain we therefore find the following exchange between Gwen (who is impregnated) and Alec (who is in denial), in which it is worth noting exactly what is erased:

Gwen. (*Suddenly quiet again*). ~~Look,~~ I tell you I'm going to have your child and all you can do is gasp at me that it isn't true! What good is that going to do? Oh. Alec – I was sporting with you. ~~I know we were both only having a bit of fun—I meant it just like you did.~~ I wasn't a bit huffed when you didn't ring me up – you gave me a good time. and I liked you – but I wanted to stick to John. I'm fond of him – I am, honestly – and I know you're fearfully sweet on Miss Llewellyn – you never made any bones about that. But it's all different now, ~~I'm going to have a baby!~~ We've got to see it through; We must stick together Alec, We will, won't we?

Alec. Gwen. I beg of you to talk quietly. I don't believe, ~~to begin with, that you are going to have a child.~~ [all of this]. It's hysteria. And, ~~secondly,~~ if [it's true] ~~you are~~ I deny that I am responsible. You are engaged to a man whom you like far better than you ever liked me – and – well, I don't want to be rotten – but you know – well, you once admitted to me, when we were friends.....that he....

Gwen. Oh I know, I told you – I remember – but Alec, that was ~~nothing. It was~~
~~only once. Never before or since, never~~ [long, long ago] – and I know – I swear to
you, Alec – that it's you. ~~I know, I tell you.~~ I'm telling you the truth.²⁸

These erasures were evidently designed to enable the play to reach the public stage in London. As Sos Eltis has correctly pointed out, 'The Lord Chamberlain's Office remained wary of theatrical treatments of female sexuality, especially where any explicit reference to biological or medical facts was involved'.²⁹ Hence, the revisions made to O'Brien's original text deleted some of the specific details of Gwen's pregnancy and the acts that led to it (doing away with the lines, 'I'm going to have a baby!', 'you are going to have a child', 'we were both only having a bit of fun', and 'It was only once').

In addition, some of the revisions that were made in order to satisfy the Lord Chamberlain were also made in the text that was prepared for publication in London. This printed text did not need to pass before the eyes of the Lord Chamberlain, although potentially could have been prosecuted for lewdness or immorality under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. Thus, we find a passage such as the following has been corrected for performance on the stage:

Gwen (*Crawling against the armchair by the fire*)

²⁸ British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Collection, LCP 1926/28, *Distinguished Villa*: 'REVISED VERSION July 9th 1926', fol.12.

²⁹ Eltis, *Acts of Desire: Women and Sex on Stage 1800-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.206.

I'm afraid, I don't know anything about a baby! I can't have a baby all by myself – I must be married – ~~I must, I must~~ – I'm [a] respectable girl, I tell you, ~~If I tell this lie to John I'll never be able to be good again – I'll hate my baby!~~ I don't want to be sick, and hurt and ugly – ~~I was a fool ever to go with you – but you~~ said it would be all right – Alec – you swore it was all right.

Alec. Hush I tell you, ~~Don't rave at me~~ [Look here] Gwen. I can't help you [...]³⁰

Most of those alterations also occur in the published version of O'Brien's text, where we find the same passage rendered as follows:

Gwen (*crawling against the arm-chair by the fire*): I'm afraid! I don't know anything about a baby! I can't have a baby all by myself. I must be married – I must, I must! I'm a respectable girl, I tell you. You said it would be all right. Alec, you swore it was all right!

Alec: Hush! I tell you. Don't rave at me, Gwen. I can't help you; it's up to Morris, you see – and he'll do it.³¹

Thus, in the printed text of the play – just as in the version that was staged in the playhouse – we find an erasure of Gwen's regretful thoughts about her potential child

³⁰ British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Collection, LCP 1926/28, *Distinguished Villa*: 'REVISED VERSION July 9th 1926', fols 17-18.

³¹ O'Brien, *Distinguished Villa: A Play in Three Acts* (London: Ernest Benn, 1926), p.55.

(I'll hate my baby') and of her thoughts about sex ('I was a fool ever to go with you'). Kate O'Brien certainly included these words in her original manuscript, but they never reached any audience.

One of the best-known ideas about O'Brien's career, then, is that she was stymied by repressive attitudes in Ireland. As Lorna Reynolds puts it, 'Apart from the damage to her own reputation which the vagaries of the new Calvinism in Irish society caused, Kate O'Brien did not like the illiberal, self-complacent and Puritanic society that developed in Ireland in the thirties and forties of this century'.³² Certainly, in later years her 1936 novel *Mary Lavelle* and her 1941 novel *The Land of Spices* were notoriously banned under Ireland's 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. Famously, *Mary Lavelle* depicts adultery between a married Spanish man and a young Irish woman, as well as an indication of lesbian attraction; whilst *The Land of Spices* contains the line 'She saw Etienne and her father, in the embrace of love'.³³ As Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka writes, an 'important consequence of the ban on *Mary Lavelle* and *The Land of Spices* was that Kate O'Brien became a sort of unofficial hero for those readers – particularly for the artists among them – who felt oppressed by the Irish government's intervention on arts and culture from the 1930s to the 1950s, and for those who disagreed with Irish policies and the role of the church in the following decades'.³⁴ Yet, as we can see from her travails with *Distinguished Villa*, O'Brien had been aware of censorship for longer

³² Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, p.75.

³³ O'Brien, *The Land of Spices* (London: Heinemann, 1941), p.157.

³⁴ Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, p.9.

than that. And if we look at her earliest stage work we can see that it was the rules of British rather than Irish censorship that O'Brien was first compelled to navigate.

Suburban Sex

In addition, although the newspapers' initial comparison of Kate O'Brien with Sean O'Casey may have helped to highlight certain aspects of her work and biography, that association with him ultimately set up some false expectations about the kind of writing that O'Brien was creating and about the overall development of her career. O'Casey's early work, after all, was attempting to chronicle Dublin tenement life, whereas O'Brien's breakthrough play had attempted to describe middle-class existence in a suburb of the English capital. In fairness to the Irish press, its reporters did not generally follow the comparison with O'Casey made by the British and US newspapers. Indeed, the *Irish Independent* saw more of a connection between Kate O'Brien's drama and the work of Lennox Robinson. The newspaper suggested that O'Brien's focus on the middle-class was 'an attempt to give dramatic shape to what is, on the English stage at any rate, new material', but that on the Irish stage such an approach looked less original, with Lennox Robinson having demonstrated 'his fondness for knocking out the front of a redbrick villa for our amusement'.³⁵

At the time that her first play appeared she did consider moving her future playwriting to an Irish location, telling journalists about her plan for scripting a drama

³⁵ J.W.G., 'Distinguished Villa', *Irish Independent*, 28 January 1929, p.6.

called *The Silver Roan*, which would be set in Limerick and would be concerned with the Limerick Horse Show. But that play never emerged for the public.³⁶ Instead, in 1927 she produced as her second play *The Bridge*, a drama set in a house in the English countryside where another Englishwoman endures the frustrations of sex. This time, the lead character is Lisa Mordaunt, who feels bored with her husband. He, in turn, feels born with her, and flirts with Lisa's friend. Other relatives feel similarly sexually unfulfilled, until a visiting Irish engineer arrives on the scene. Lisa then realizes that she loves this newcomer, but ultimately decides that she cannot leave her husband.³⁷ Evidently, elements of the plot recycled what O'Brien had done with *Distinguished Villa* (which also saw a stranger arriving in an English household and making a married couple aware of the romantic possibilities outside their marriage). However, her second play did not achieve the acclaim of O'Brien's debut, with critics pointing to a kind of awkwardness in the dialogue. One Irish critic complained that the characters of *The Bridge* 'talk in a stilted, bookish way', whilst an English critic declared that O'Brien should not 'labour so hard after an epigrammatic smartness in dialogue, which she rarely attains'.³⁸ In the end, the script never transferred beyond a limited run in a London fringe venue.³⁹

Despite those critical comments, in her next solo-authored theatre script, O'Brien returned to an English setting, and again set about imagining the sexual frustrations of another Englishwoman. This tightly plotted play, called *Gloria Gish* and written in about

³⁶ Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, p.39.

³⁷ 'The Bridge', *The Era*, 8 June 1927, p.4.

³⁸ *Irish Independent*, 2 June 1927, p.8. 'Entertainments', *The Times*, 1 June 1927, p.14.

³⁹ *The Bridge* appeared in London at the Arts Theatre Club, an organization set up for dramatic short runs and possible transfers elsewhere, which had opened on 20 April 1927. In the first weeks of that club, the actors performed as their third ever show O'Brien's *The Bridge*, for just six performances (including a matinee), from 31 May to 4 June 1927.

1931, is set in the prosperous suburb of Surrey during the 1920s. It revolves around a beautiful married woman from Ealing, Gladys, who is a kind of modern-day Helen of Troy and who wishes to become a movie star. She begins an adulterous affair with a figure going by the phallic name of ‘Vivien Rodd’, who apparently intends to produce films with her in them, claiming that he will turn her into the next ‘Gloria Gish’ (a fictional composite of Gloria Swanson and Lilian Gish). The play shows how Vivien plans to seduce Gladys by getting her alone in his apartment:

Judy – She’ll be worth waiting for – you’ll see. Where are you going tonight?

Vivien – Dining at my flat.

Judy (*casually*) Party?

Vivien (*looking at her straight*) No.

Judy (*with a soft laugh*). Ah, Viv! What am I to wish you? Bonne nuit?⁴⁰

After this scene where Vivien explains his scheme, O’Brien intended that her audience would see the start of his planned seduction of Gladys, with the stage direction specifying that ‘*Vivien takes her suddenly and kisses her. She yields at once to him, their kiss is long and close. When they move apart their manner has changed, has grown passionate and uneasy*’. Gladys then promises Vivien, ‘We’ve hours and hours before us’, and they steal away to have sex, leaving Gladys’s husband abandoned.⁴¹ Nonetheless, towards the end of the play, Vivien Rodd forsakes Gladys, and the narrative suggests that perhaps Gladys’s husband will be able to repair the marriage. Yet that expectation is denied

⁴⁰ O’Brien, *Gloria Gish: A Comedy in Three Acts*, National Library of Ireland, MS 36,179, fol.93.

⁴¹ O’Brien, *Gloria Gish: A Comedy in Three Acts*, National Library of Ireland, MS 36,179, fol.97

during the final moments of the play, when Gladys receives a telephone call from a second film producer, 'a very charming and wealthy man'.⁴² As Gladys's own husband remains within earshot, she plans what is presumably another adulterous liaison, with this producer who calls her 'lovely', and who responds to her desire for 'cheering up' by inviting her out to meet him in town.⁴³

Sadly, this drama, *Gloria Gish*, was never performed onstage, and remains one of the unpublished jewels of the O'Brien archive. Instead, in 1931, the publication of her first novel *Without My Cloak* heralded a formal change in direction, selling 50,000 copies in only a few months, and ensuring that from then on she would be known primarily as a novelist rather than a dramatist. Today, few people remember O'Brien's playwriting. Indeed, like her contemporaries Norah Hoult and Teresa Deevy, O'Brien's finely wrought writing in general became scandalously neglected during the later twentieth century, as critics of Irish literature focused on a canon of largely male writers.

An Irresistible Force

O'Brien did, nonetheless, retain her affinity with the theatre for many years. As Anthony Roche has correctly observed, her second novel *The Ante-Room* (1934) owes a great deal to Ibsen, and as Roche puts it, 'the lessons learned as a dramatist by Kate O'Brien found their way into her writing of prose narrative'.⁴⁴ Yet when her novelistic

⁴² O'Brien, *Gloria Gish: A Comedy in Three Acts*, National Library of Ireland, MS 36,179, fol.75.

⁴³ O'Brien, *Gloria Gish: A Comedy in Three Acts*, National Library of Ireland, MS 36,179, fol.137.

⁴⁴ Anthony Roche, 'The Ante Room as Drama', in Eibhear Walshe, ed., *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), pp.85-100, p.89.

work did appear in the mouths of actors it tended to bring distinctly underwhelming results. In 1936, for example, her novel *The Ante-Room* was dramatized by John Perry for production at London's Queen's Theatre, and was largely regarded as a failure. P.L. Mannock of the *Daily Herald* wrote rather wistfully, 'On the whole the play failure I regret most during 1936 was Kate O'Brien's "Ante Room". It wanted strengthening in several ways, but its texture was fine'.⁴⁵ Similarly, in 1949, O'Brien herself decided to dramatize her seventh novel *That Lady* (1946), and when it arrived in production at New York's Martin Beck Theater this historical drama set in Spain also proved a critical failure. The *New York Times* critic, Brooks Atkinson, who expressed a preference for more formally experimental fare – such as that which Sean O'Casey was now creating – declared, 'Miss O'Brien's writing is commonplace. She says the stock things with no distinction [...] "That Lady" is ordinary stuff'.⁴⁶

By the late 1950s, then, O'Brien grew more recognisable as a commentator about theatre rather than as a writer of plays. In 1958, the organizers of a tourist-friendly tourist event in Dublin, *An Tóstal* ('a gathering') had welcomed the submission of a new play by Sean O'Casey, but they then balked at the Catholic hierarchy's hostility towards O'Casey, and asked him to make 'structural alterations' to his work. Predictably, O'Casey took umbrage and withdrew the piece, with such developments reported

⁴⁵ Mannock, 'Which Play Failure did you most regret?', *The Era*, 31 December 1936, p.16.

⁴⁶ Brooks Atkinson, 'At the Theatre', *New York Times*, 23 November 1949, p.18. Atkinson had been a great supporter of Sean O'Casey throughout the previous decade. By contrast with Atkinson's cutting remarks about O'Brien, two months earlier he had reviewed a revival of O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* which he praised as an early example of a 'trend of the drama [...] away from naturalism', and as a play 'by an Irishman who had Irish music ringing in his head'. Atkinson, 'The Silver Tassie', *New York Times*, 4 September 1949, p.45.

excitedly in the press.⁴⁷ In county Galway, Kate O'Brien kept an eye on these events, and on 21 February 1958 wrote a wry response in the *Irish Times*. She commented:

The Tostal Council will not have heard it, but during these days we in the West keep hearing a noble growl from a grave under Ben Bulben. And indeed, indeed, we have disgraced ourselves again.

Ah, what is the use? Cast a cold eye. And, horsemen, pass by – we entreat you.⁴⁸

Here O'Brien was evidently quoting Yeats's 'Under Ben Bulben', but she was also citing the famous words that Yeats had spoken to the rioting audience members during the first run of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* at the Abbey: 'You have disgraced yourselves again; is this to be the recurring celebration of the arrival of Irish genius?' Having had two of her own novels banned in Ireland, O'Brien must have known something of the frustration articulated by O'Casey, about whom she continued to describe in admiring terms. Indeed, in 1962, four years after the fuss over *An Tóstal*, O'Brien told one reporter that like 'our other great writers, George Bernard Shaw and Sean O'Casey', she intended to return to live in England, which she then did.⁴⁹ The following year, in 1963, she gave a lecture in London in which she praised O'Casey, along with Joyce and Shaw, as being 'the giants'.⁵⁰ Yet, by the mid-twentieth-century, her admiration was not entirely reciprocated. Perhaps O'Casey had noticed O'Brien's recurrent concern with the English

⁴⁷ 'O'Casey Bans Festival Production', *Irish Times*, 24 August 1961, p.6.

⁴⁸ O'Brien, Letters, *Irish Times*, 24 February 1958, p.6.

⁴⁹ 'Famous Novelist Home in Limerick', *Limerick Leader*, 28 April 1962, p.3.

⁵⁰ 'Irish Writers Recognised Abroad', *Irish Independent*, 9 December 1963, p.3.

middle-class, and told Frank McCarthy that O'Brien 'shocks me a little with her pretensions. But then writers have to earn a living, & it's a hard job nowadays'.⁵¹

Nonetheless, in old age, O'Brien's thoughts about the theatre repeatedly appeared in the Irish media. Perhaps most notably, in autumn 1969 O'Brien attended the Dublin birthday celebrations for the co-founder of the Gate Theatre, Micheál Mac Liammóir, which involved the two of them appearing together on television for what the *Sunday Independent* described as 'one of the most moving "Late Late Shows" ever'.⁵² Her subsequent correspondence reveals the depth of her warmth and affection for Mac Liammóir, who had recently been suffering from ill health. As O'Brien wrote to him:

Ah, dear boy, how good you are – which is part of what I was trying to insist on over the birthday celebrations. But I expect as many people love you – and that's a great many – know as well as I do that the base of all your graces and gifts lies deep, deep in your goodness [...] Anyway, in a few hours from now, during the dawn of Wednesday, 3rd December (Feast of St. Francis Xavier) I shall have completed all of 72 years in human life. Extraordinary. Such an extraordinary waste of time which one ought to have understood was short and precious. However, there it is, gone – and much of it seemed so good while one was in it. Oh – I've been interrupted too often + now it's late and the fire is dead. I'll continue when I've entered my 73rd year. Meantime – you know all my wishes for

⁵¹ O'Casey, *The Letters of Sean O'Casey: Volume II, 1942-1954*, ed. by David Krause (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p.1021.

⁵² 'Late Late Tribute to Great Man of Theatre', *Sunday Independent*, 26 October 1969, p.4.

you, pet - + how I resent this wretched suffering, + so deeply love + admire your
gaiety of spirit –
Love + kisses –
goodnight, sweet prince –
Kate.⁵³

O'Brien would die in 1974, and her final years were far from comfortable, as she struggled with both alcohol and poverty. Yet she continued to champion Irish theatre during that final, difficult decade of her life, and her theatrical advocacy was still influential enough to appear in the press. For example, in 1969 she wrote an *Irish Times* article mourning the death of the actor Brid Lynch, an Abbey theatre actor from Kerry. O'Brien observed that Lynch 'gave a very special and precious gift to the art of the theatre – in Ireland, and wherever in the world she played for Ireland [...] in her death Ireland has indeed lost a rare and special child'.⁵⁴ At the start of 1970, O'Brien praised 'the peculiar strength of Irish acting' in the *Irish Times*.⁵⁵ In the same newspaper she subsequently lauded the radio for giving her the freedom to listen 'to Beckett – in uninterrupted peace'.⁵⁶ But it was the management of the Gate Theatre that remained the subject of some of her highest theatrical praise. In 1971 she wrote in the *Irish Times* about her delighted reaction to:

⁵³ O'Brien letter to Mac Liammóir, National Library of Ireland, Mac Liammóir papers, MS 41,303/1 correspondence with people mostly associated with the theatre.

⁵⁴ O'Brien, 'Long Distance', *Irish Times*, 3 November 1969, p.10.

⁵⁵ O'Brien, 'Long Distance', *Irish Times*, 5 January 1970, p.8.

⁵⁶ O'Brien, 'The Great BBC Row', *Irish Times*, 2 March 1970, p.14.

[...] the reports that came over of Dublin's Theatre Festival. Now, taken all over, it seems to be pretty damn good. The high light of course was the most happy, and almost unhoped-for, re-opening of the Gate Theatre. That was indeed an occasion – and how fortunate for those who were there to see and rejoice in it! Michael and Hilton back again on their old stamping ground, all newly beautified and refreshed for them.⁵⁷

One might perhaps find it counter-intuitive that Kate O'Brien, whose own dramatic writing had focused upon achieving a realistic stage effect, would become so insistent a supporter of Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards, two men at the Gate, as Ben Levitas puts it, who 'revelled in the opportunity to present full-blooded expressionist productions, opening by degrees to a wider vocabulary of theatrical presentation, and specifically intent on exposing naturalism as merely another formal style'.⁵⁸ Yet, as we have already seen, O'Brien had a longstanding interest in connecting the stage world with a set of transgressive sexual energies, and evidently felt drawn Mac Liammóir and Edwards, who are correctly described by Eibhear Walshe as having 'survived, and even flourished, as Ireland's only visibly gay couple'.⁵⁹ O'Brien felt a great affinity with Mac Liammóir and Hilton, and praised them in the *Irish Times* by saying that:

⁵⁷ O'Brien, 'Long Distance', *Irish Times*, 7 April 1971, p.10.

⁵⁸ Levitas, 'Modernist Experiments in Irish Theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. by Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 111-27, p.120.

⁵⁹ Eibhear Walshe, 'The Importance of Staging Oscar: Wilde at the Gate', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, ed. by Nicholas Grene and Christopher Morash (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.217-30, p.218.

[...] they are an irresistible force, and that what they have given to Ireland is irrefutable and forever. They will please forgive me if I say of them, both such mad artists, that they have been a most strong educative force in the too-green island. Ireland owes to those two men far more than she can ever measure – and now thank God, she is going to go on to owe them more. The Gate is back, and that is extremely important and good news for Ireland'.⁶⁰

Mac Liammóir read those words 'with delight' and he and Hilton Edwards wished to thank 'dearest Kate' 'a thousand times for remembering us'.⁶¹

Thus, Kate O'Brien may have felt disillusioned with the direction that de Valera's Ireland had taken, as she expressed in novels such as *Pray for the Wanderer* (1938) and *The Last of Summer* (1943). But she continued, demonstratively, to cherish and champion the actors, directors, and theatre makers of the Irish stage. As a young woman, she had explored the subversive potential of the stage by writing dramatic descriptions of female sexuality, whilst in older age she supported the disruptive energies of the Gate Theatre. She did much of her theatrical work in England, wrote plays about English settings, and needed to adjust her drama according to the dictates of the censor in London. Yet her non-fictional writings about theatre reveal her continuing commitment to the drama of

⁶⁰ O'Brien, 'Long Distance', *Irish Times*, 7 April 1971, p.10.

⁶¹ Mac Liammóir to O'Brien 7 April 1971, National Library of Ireland, Mac Liammóir Papers, MS 41,288/20.

her home country. As Mac Liammóir wrote to her, on behalf of himself and Hilton Edwards, ‘we both thank you, and you so far away too!’⁶²

⁶² Mac Liammóir to O’Brien 7 April 1971, National Library of Ireland, Mac Liammóir Papers, MS 41,288/20.