

Men, the Presidency and Molly Bloom

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I accept that candidates have to caricature both themselves and the issues in fighting an election. Five caricatures, not five people, are asking to be made President. But of all the simplifications going around, the most gross is the description of Derek Nally as a "man" and the other candidates as "women".

All that those words say is that one human being has such-and-such chromosomes and genital bits, and the other one has the other chromosomes and the other bits. What else anyone means when the concept "man" or "woman" is used wells up from the very depths of personal and collective experience.

The concepts will have been formed by how well your mother and father loved you - long before you remember, even - and where you were in the family, and the kind of standing you had at what school, and whether you were poor or rich, and how traumatic or not your sexual life has been, and how bosses have treated you, and whether you have been betrayed by someone you thought was a partner, and what age you are, and whether you like yourself in general, and whether you have dependants or are dependent, and how much you have learned about the history and the present circumstances of men and women in the world, and what you read when you were young and forming your ideas, and so on and so forth more or less indefinitely.

The concepts are also formed by the general culture around you. And the shockingly primitive, and - frankly - ugly state of the discussion of these concepts in seemingly modern Ireland has been one of the revelations of this campaign. Students of sociology should be following Derek Nally around and taping the comments people make when they say they're going to vote for him because he is a man.

BUT JUST because someone saying, say, that they're not going to be bossed around by a thing in a skirt, or that politics is "no place" for a woman, is, offhand, a non sequitur doesn't mean the comments aren't worth further discussion. Who knows what they would turn out to mean, or what hurt is seeking expression, if the words could be teased out?

The fact that some men, when they do get a chance to tease things out, express little more than the most repetitive dislike and fear of women shouldn't put anyone off. It is true that we women have to watch the infant discussion of male/female relations starting off, even, couched in male terms. Power, money, control, all those - and who has most of them. Who owns what. Who owns whom. That's one obsession. Another is the preservation of male discourse against the way women think and talk.

I've heard the kind of ostentatious contempt with which Vincent Browne responded to Dana on RTE Radio the other night used by domineering husbands to their wives. I'm a man, they're saying. I know about big male things like the redistribution of wealth. You're just a stupid, boring woman. I never thought to hear it used with impunity on a radio station my licence fee is paying for.

Then there is the old-fashioned them-and-us scenario, trotted out on the occasion of an election with several female candidates though never during elections where the candidates are largely or exclusively male. I see Derek Nally reported as playing to that gallery with the following remark: "Over the past seven years we've heard a lot about mna na hEireann. You'd think there weren't any fir na hEireann." This is a considerable insult to Mary Robinson, of course. But above all it is ineffably, achingly silly, and I presume Mr Nally knows it. Still, he's no fool. In present-day Ireland, that must be how you get votes. Invent a nation of pathetically neglected males.

I despair, when I see the daily manifestations of hostility to women. I give up on the antique attitudes that are prevalent in the public world. But a creative interplay between the concepts "men" and "women" is possible on other levels. There is hope of coming at these profound things in a more subtle way than they're habitually handled in journalism and politics.

Marvellously enough, anyone walking around the centre of Dublin between now and the end of October will be able to see a most sophisticated and affectionate meditation on maleness and femaleness, right there in front of them. I refer, of course, to the prize-winning Nissan Art Project - the quotations in pink neon from Molly Bloom's soliloquy, flowing across the stone and brick of some of the city-centre buildings.

One of the texts that went towards forming the notion of "woman" for a lot of us was this great soliloquy (which I take as genuinely the musings of a woman, since Joyce studied at the feet of Nora Joyce). Many the boy and girl went straight to the end of Ulysses in the hope of being thrilled and informed by the "dirty" bits.

So even very unliterary people have an image of Molly. They know that she lies in all her rich and weighty womanliness in her nighttime bed in Dublin, and rambles the world in her head. The men - Leopold and Stephen - being men, ramble the actual city.

To take her subjectivity and put it up there in the objective, male world - on Trinity College, City Hall, and the Clarence Hotel, on office-buildings and over a bookies' shop and along the strong containing walls of the Liffey - to displace slogans and exhortations and the assertions that commerce makes through advertising and replace them with her stream of consciousness - infused with feeling and unashamedly derived from personal experience - raises many questions.

What is the public world, what the private? What is male, as opposed to female? Why is pink handwriting so funny when it is proposed as public art? And can't people see, when they can see that, that women in public life - for example, women running for the Presidency - are facing settled beliefs about their role, and when these views are challenged, fear and hatred come running out from the corners of public discourse, like rats dislodged in a barn?

There's much more to be said about the Molly Bloom neons. I thank Nissan and IMMA for making it possible for artists Fran

Hegarty and Andrew Stones to put them up. I wish they weren't temporary and remained in place for the dark evenings, glowing lipstick-pink. They are about night, and the sexuality of beings. They also play with notions of James Joyce as he is used by academia and by the "heritage" industry. The quotations are placed to play with the idea of cityscape. They play with the Ulysses text: Bloom sold advertising, for instance.

Above all, unlike statues or fountains, they respond to what we bring to them ourselves. They console me, a bit, for the licence this election has given for the expression of anger towards women. What are women to do? I ask myself. Stay in bed? But look what a seat of power Molly's bed is . . . But then, maybe that's what they have against us . . . A new soliloquy starts.

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