Banshee, *an Irish Feminist Newspaper (March 1976 – October 1978): Style and Themes*[*]

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Abstract: *In March 1976 a feminist newspaper called* Banshee *was launched in Dublin. By overtly taking a stand in favour of contraception and abortion and criticising the role and place of the Catholic religion in Irish society,* Banshee *became one of the main vehicles for the emancipation of women. The style and the themes of this publication were unique: original, subversive and funny. In the end, the internal and external tensions created by the different political stands led to the disappearance of the paper in October 1978, but it contributed significantly to the modernisation of the country.*

At the beginning of the 1970s the Irish women's movement became stronger with the arrival of younger and more radical women involved in far-left parties, trade-unions and the Republican movement (Levine 1982). In April 1975 some of them decided to organise a conference at the 'Liberty Hall' in Dublin to draw up a charter on women's rights, based on a British model which seemed new and applicable to Ireland. During the conference, which was held on June 8, 1975, they took the name of 'Irishwomen United' or IU.

A few months later, in March 1976, some IU members decided to launch a newspaper called *Banshee,* on which women alone would collaborate collectively. The publication was created because, according to them, the debate on feminist issues was impossible in the traditional media. If the style and the themes tackled in this publication were similar to those in other European feminist papers of that time[1], one can nevertheless point out some Irish specificities. In fact, by overtly taking a stand in favour of contraception and abortion and criticizing the role and place of the Catholic religion in Irish society, *Banshee* became one the main vehicles for the emancipation of women and the modernisation of the country.[2] The publication was subversive, original and dominated by what can be called 'a discourse of tension', both internal and external, which made the women's movement appear fragile, although its members had a strong sense of solidarity and wanted to avoid power relationships and conflicts.

First, the choice of a Charter was original and interesting: it was practical because it allowed women to unite around a series of clear and simple claims and rights and, in particular, it enabled them to distinguish themselves from male Irish militants who, traditionally, have always preferred proclamation. The IU members were, in fact, inspired by "The UK Working Women's Charter" drawn up at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s by British women unionists. The IU was influenced by trade union methods [3] and decided to widely diffuse its Charter, just like a political tract, by publishing it on the very last page of each *Banshee* issue. By so doing the IU acted like a trade union, claiming its rights and demanding that legislation be passed by the government. Among the seven points in the Charter, the right to abortion was mentioned for the first time. A lot of women across the country signed the Charter and this gave the Women's movement popularity and legitimacy.

By choosing *Banshee* as a title for their publication the IU chose a symbolic name indeed. The paper's name is a pun: a "Banshee" is a malicious fairy and "Ban" means woman in Gaelic. Like other European feminists, Irish women selected a feminine word that has a negative connotation –because the Banshee is actually closer to a witch than to a fairy –made it their own and gave it a powerful and positive meaning too. This title represented a political stance, situating Irish women in a feminine and dreamy pre-celtic world. In fact, in the second issue of *Banshee*, there is the following explanation concerning the title:

> The fairies were a real Stone Age people who inhabited Northern Europe before the arrival of the Celts.

It is stated that the Fairies were also a non-agricultural pastoral people, who had magical powers; their religious and social organisation was matriarchal and based on the worship of nature. Free union ruled and the notion of illegitimate children was non-existent. They celebrated life and believed in the positive reincarnation of the soul. The authors of the second issue of *Banshee* concluded by stating: "The Banshee cries the death of oppression, the rebirth of woman." The reference to a pre-celtic era may appear surprising for a movement whose paper bore a Gaelic name and had Republicans among its members. Nevertheless, a lot of IU members remained suspicious of violent tendencies within the Republican movement. Actually, the title chosen for their paper represents a powerful symbol to express both their attachment to a specifically Irish and Northern European culture and also a desire to distance themselves from the male world; it also represents an aspiration to an ideal of freedom based on a mainly feminine culture, that of the "Fairies". It is important to point out here the use of the generic term "woman" in the quotation, revealing a feminine essence close to nature and anterior to male rational culture.

The launching of *Banshee* was not ignored by the traditional media, and the journalist Christina Murphy from *The Irish Times* welcomed the new paper with these words:

> Banshee – An inspired title – It's not very professional, but very lively and provocative. (*The Irish Times*, 2 August 1976).

It is true the publication was not professional. However, the symbols of the Charter and the title of the paper were powerful indeed and showed the Irish women's will to obtain political autonomy and express themselves poetically, two wishes which were typical of European feminist movements in general and of the Irish women's movement in particular. As the French sociologist Christine Delphy put it in 1993: "Feminism is a place where you can dream". Besides, these desires clearly pointed to a desire to escape from male conceptions of organisation and Irish culture; they were expressed in a way that worried the Establishment, dominated by the authoritarian and highly-hierarchical Catholic Church. Consequently, *Banshee* articles clearly created a discourse of tension.

Because of the clashes of opinion and the strong personalitIES of its members, the IU and its paper *Banshee* bore the seeds of its own demise (Connolly 60): for example, there were republicans supporting the armed fight and women rejecting all forms of violence, left-wing women wanting to integrate feminism into the socialist programme and women who wanted nothing to do with traditional political parties, as well as Catholics rejecting abortion and women in favour of free contraception and sexuality. By letting the different factions express themselves freely in turns in their publication, the IU thought it could reduce the tensions but the organisation eventually disappeared in 1977 and *Banshee* in October 1978. Nevertheless, for two and a half years, the IU managed to publish a paper which tackled new themes, expressed challenging ideas and proposed a more egalitarian vision of society.

Of the four sections always present and announced at the beginning of each issue, "Father Church" is by far the most original and the most interesting. The title is ironical, of course, because usually it is referred to as "Mother Church", a so-called protective and motherly institution. To call it "Father" was to take a radically opposite stance to the nationalist Catholic Eamon de Valera, Irish Prime Minister (from 1937 to 1948) and later President of Ireland (1959-1973). It denounces the patriarchal organisation of the Catholic Church and the minor role devoted to women in the 1937 Constitution.

In the Constitution's reference to women's "life within the home" reveals that the document was drawn up by men, mainly Eamon de Valera in collaboration with the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid. Although Article 2.1. declared that "the State recognises that without the support of the woman, the common good cannot be achieved", and Article 2.2. stated that "mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour", the State gave very little financial and legal support to mothers in the ensuing 40 years, as stipulated in Article 2.2. (Hussey 419). These two Articles categorically situated the life of women in the home and defined it in terms of "motherhood" and "duties". They had no choice and their own motivations were not taken into account.

Banshee tried to contest the repressive and authoritarian Catholic moral code by showing that it was neither "natural" nor an element of Irish identity. Extremely well-documented and critical articles in the section "Father Church" explained the construction of the dogma by the Roman Catholic Church and the role played by the Catholic hierarchy in Irish society. In the first issue, the author wrote provocatively:

> The debunking of the theological support for male superiority, the reclaiming of the Word of God, are surely prophetic tasks of our time. The history of women prophets is a history in which women can take pride. I believe it is our task today.

She solemnly asserts that "the debunking of the theological support for male superiority" is a "prophetic task", implying that this work should be included within the propagation of faith. In fact, it is not a question of rejecting religion, but of reclaiming it in a feminist way, i.e. by integrating the notion of equality between men and women. She adds that the history of religion must be re-read and re-written in order to make people aware of the role played by women prophets, which had been widely ignored by male theologians until then. Moreover, according to the Bible, humans were created in God's image. Consequently, she advocates freeing the creative power attributed to God, and therefore to women, to urge them to assume their share of social and political responsibility, i.e. to turn women into active agents of their own history:

> To be made "in the image of God" could be interpreted as our embodying in some form the same creative potential which men attribute to God, a creative potential which no longer allows us to lie down and let life flow over us as the patriarchal image of God would suggest, but which both enables and challenges us to take full responsibility for our lives.

Here the author subverts Catholic dogma because she views the woman as a thinking subject acting out her own life: she is no longer considered to be passive and limited to reproduction, the education of children and the running of the home, she has creative and spiritual potential too. Furthermore, *Banshee* examines pre-Christian celtic society, freer and in favour of women, thus allowing its readership to discover the hidden face of the official history. For example, the fifth issue informs us that divorce had been allowed under the Celtic Brehon Laws and that it was St Patrick who carried out the sixth revision of these Laws [4], making the man the head of the married couple.

On the whole, Irish women remained rather ignorant of sexual matters in the 1970s because, according to certain authors such as Ailbhe Smyth, Director of the Women's Studies Department at UCD, "the sexual Revolution" did not have the same impact in Ireland as in the USA and continental Europe (Smyth 245). Although the non-married Irish had to wait until 1979 for legal contraception (married couples had been allowed to use contraception since 1973), the first issue of *Banshee* declared that 34,000

women had taken the pill in 1974. Despite being the object of a government ban, *Banshee* tried to give information on this subject, as well as on articles on hetero –and homosexuality. The second issue, for instance, defended total sexual freedom in an article entitled "Beyond the fringe – A view of sexuality", while another article ascribed a political and revolutionary dimension to lesbianism:

> To ignore lesbianism is to ignore the major challenge to invidious sexism which pervades all systems of exploitation, oppression and repression. Thus the assertion of lesbian identity has a political significance and is an important step in the overthrow of the oppression of all women.

What is new in the message of the feminist press, and which this quotation illustrates well, is that feminists insist on the idea that the roots of women's oppression lie in the body and intimacy. Moreover, the emergence of a private discourse establishes a point of rupture with the previous discourse in which feminism had found its inspiration, i.e. the political discourse of the Black American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, of trade-unions and, in the case of Ireland, "The Northern Civil Rights Association" (1967), in as much as it makes sexuality a form of domination and liberation at the same time.[5]

However, the criticism of obligatory heterosexuality imposed by patriarchal society, the rejection of the maternal instinct and the prospect of a sexuality linked to pleasure and distinct from procreation was too extremist a discourse for some Catholics and more traditionalist women participating in *Banshee*. Readers also criticised the stands taken by some authors. For example, in *Banshee* 7, Geraldine Moane reacted to the articles published in the previous issue, which, according to her, reduced the impact of the paper on the population:

> I find more examples of the emotionalism that is putting down the standard of *Banshee* and limiting its appeal. The articles on prostitution [6], our bodies ourselves [7], are all very well for women that have rejected marriage and the Church [...] but for a majority of women, for whom marriage is a very important part of their lives, this kind of article is not going to have any effect [...]. *Banshee* is the perfect excuse to dismiss the whole feminist cause as extremist and irrational.

Here, the reader accused the militants working for *Banshee* of cutting themselves off from the majority of their readers by attacking the institution of marriage, which was widely respected, and portraying it as a sort of prostitution by consent, especially when women were not working outside the home. According to her, such radicalism may have frightened a lot of women and wasn't of any help to the feminist cause. It's true that subjects such as prostitution, abortion, lesbianism and republicanism were difficult to tackle in *Banshee*. But wasn't the editorial board of the publication trying to overturn the values of a self-righteous society, stiffled by hypocrisy anyway?

The Belgian philosopher Françoise Collin said in 1979: "We don't deal with pertinence but with impertinence" (Collin 333). The quotation applies perfectly to the humour used in *Banshee* and the sarcastic remarks directed against all institutions, especially the Pope and the Catholic Church, which could be found mainly in the section entitled 'Red Biddy'. In fact, language allows us to manipulate symbols and plunge into the subconscious, then to transgress these symbols, linguistically and socially speaking. Thus, inverting the discourse usually reserved to politicians' wives, a writer in the eighth issue reported that:

> Mrs Cosgrave's husband [...] left wearing a natty little outfit styled by Jeremy at the "Dandy Salon". He wore a bowler hat from Dunne's stores.

Usually, whatever her place in society, the media portrayed the wife of a Prime Minister only in relation to him. Here the situation is reversed: consequently Mrs Cosgrave is depicted as an important figure. Besides, Mr Cosgrave's clothes seem more interesting than his political speech. The journalistic style is diverted and caricatured in order to emphasize the underlying discourse on the role of women in politics: in fact, they were (and still are) less numerous than men and tended to take on minor responsibilities. This quotation also shows that *Banshee* was trying to make its readership aware of a big difference in how political news was handled, according to whether journalists were writing about female or male politicians: for women, they laid the stress on their physical appearance, for men on their ideas.

Another article ridiculed the robes worn by Pope, who had previously warned feminists about their lack of femininity. In so doing, the authors encouraged their readers to think about the social representations of femininity and masculinity, thus to question the sexual roles attributed to men and women. As an example, in the fifth issue "Red Biddy" is supposed to have seen "the Pope's cat playing in the Holy Father's silk stockings". Of course, silk stockings are usually associated with women's clothing, although this can vary according to countries and historical periods. The paper also printed drawings. For example, in *Banshee 1*, the woman is represented as victim under the boot of "Father Church" who, stepping on her head, prevents her from thinking and dreaming. He is also holding his sceptre as a symbol of prestige and power. This caricature is a good example of the provocative sense of humour of *Banshee* writers. They wanted to show that social values can change and that Irish women should question the basis upon which their society was founded in order to find their identity and liberty by redefining these premises. Also, if one could attack the Pope, a taboo subject in the 1970s, everything was possible. A revolutionary concept is implied in these amusing remarks, which irritated the Church and men in general, because this institution, which comforted them in their domineering position, was being ridiculed.

Banshee also dared to use four-letter words and talk openly about sexuality. The sixth issue accused the magazine *Cosmopolitan* of supporting sexist stereotypes. The IU members expressed their anger in explicit language, for example, "I'm a Cosmo girl! – Fuck me!" This violent and vulgar sentence targets the readers of *Cosmopolitan*

as well as the magazine's editorial staff. It is argued that, by reading the magazine, the former suspend their critical faculty and comply with the feminine image and norms that are imposed on them; while the latter take advantage of the ignorance of the readership and of their models' bodies to sell their magazine. As shocking as it may have been to read those lines for women strongly influenced by Catholicism, such a stance could but force women to react and ask themselves questions about femininity, fashion, diets and sexuality. The eighth and last issue also used humour to warn nuns against the fact that the 'encyclical letter' was not a Vatican condom!

In less than three years the internal and external tensions created by the different political stands led to the disappearance of the movement. Some women had seen the future of the movement in lesbianism and wanted to break away to express themselves more freely. In addition, the frustrations felt by some socialist men, unable to bear any longer their exclusion from IU and *Banshee* meetings, also contributed to the disappearance of the paper. In fact, a small group of male left-wing militants decided to destroy the magazine's premises and equipment, thus precipitating their demise. A lot of members who were already active in other organisations continued their feminist activities in associations such as ADAPT or CHERISH (both founded in 1974) which took care of single parents. However, there can be no doubt that, thanks to their bold and daring political actions as well as their articles in *Banshee*, IU members had contributed to a long-overdue shake-up of Irish society, forcing the Irish to examine taboo subjects and question the dominance of men and the Catholic Church.

Notes

* Text revised by Peter James Harris.

1 See Brigitte Bastiat, *Presses et mouvements féministes : étude comparative France – Irlande – Suisse (1970-2000)*, PhD in Media and Communication Studies, University of Paris 8, June 2002.

2 For my study I analysed the 8 issues of *Banshee* published between March 1976 and October 1978, thanks to Roisin Conroy who allowed me to consult her private archives in June 1999. Roisin Conroy was, with Mary-Paul Keane, the co-founder of Attic Press in 1984 in Dublin, which played a major role in the diffusion of feminism in Ireland. The Attic Press was sold to the University of Cork in 1997 and a collection of the *Banshee* issues was transferred to the Boole Library at the University of Cork in the same year.

3 For example, Anne Speed, who was also part of the ITGWU (Irish Transport and General Workers' Union), was an IU member and wrote in *Banshee*.

4 The Celtic Brehon Laws from the fifth century. B.C. inspired the King of England Alfred the Great in the ninth century in the drafting of Common Law.

5 Marina Yaguello analysed the linguistic influences of the different social movements on feminism in *Les mots et les femmes*. Paris: Payot, 1978.

6 "Prostitution – Legal or otherwise", *Banshee* 6.

7 "Our bodies ourselves", *Banshee* 6.

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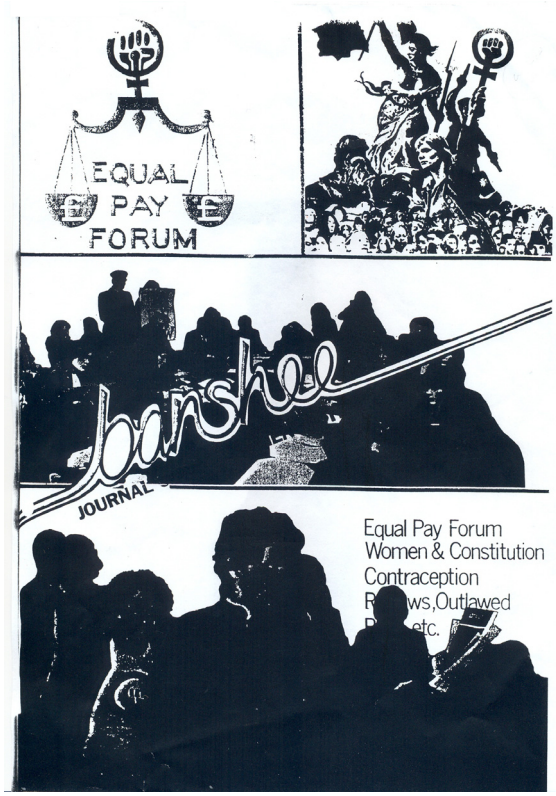

Banshee n°1