

“I am the Lord of the Dance,” Said He: Deconstructing Toxic Masculinity in Michael Flatley’s

Lord of the Dance

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Irish dancing is both a percussive and lyrical form of dance, as it incorporates the use of loud, tipped hardshoes as well as ballet-like softshoes. Ireland’s rich cultural history is woven within the stories of Irish dance, and has evolved since its conception as a symbol of Irish nationalist resistance against British colonial rule. More specifically, the role of Irish dance in national politics can be traced back to an Irish céili (a group dance) and social event held in the Bloomsbury Hall in London in 1897 by the Gaelic League. About a century later, Michael Flatley and Jean Butler’s *Riverdance* premiered as an interval performance act during the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest (Stanca 183). Shortly thereafter, Flatley created a new show, *Lord of the Dance*, which premiered in Dublin in 1996. Unlike *Riverdance*, a plotless celebration of Irish dance and other dances of Celtic origin, *Lord of the Dance* contains exclusively Irish material with a distinct plot. Moreover, *Lord of the Dance* has no female lead, but two dueling women: Saoirse the Irish Cailín, and Morrighan the Temptress. Meanwhile, Flatley portrays the heroic Lord of the Dance as an outlet for his monster ego to run riot (Casey 10). *Lord of the Dance* serves as a site for Flatley to assert his masculinity as an expression of diasporic identity conflict. This is reflected through examples of hegemonic masculinity, sexualized gender hierarchies, and Sherry Ortner’s female-nature/male-culture paradigm.

Michael Flatley was born the son of Irish immigrants and grew up in Chicago. Flatley did not start competing within the world of Irish dance until age 11; he rose to secure a World Irish Dance title by age 17 in 1975 (Stanca 185). As Stanca points out, along with Flatley’s

accomplishments in amateur boxing and flute performance in his youth, Flatley believes that his greatest accomplishment is his modernization of Irish dance and the subsequent globalization and increased popularity of the traditional art form and sport (185).

Lord of the Dance is an Irish music and dance production that follows the conflict over control of the fictional “Planet Ireland” between the Lord of the Dance and the dark lord Don Dorcha. The show opens with The Little Spirit, an androgynous being dressed in a gold bodysuit who invokes the Lord of the Dance and his followers with the tune “Lord of the Dance” on a tin whistle. Peripherally, there is also a storyline of love versus lust in the Lord of the Dance’s inner conflict between choosing Saoirse, the Irish Cailín (commonly known as the “good girl”) and Morrighan the Temptress, a seductive gypsy woman (commonly known as the “bad girl”). The stories draw from both Irish folklore and Biblical references. For example, “Lord of the Dance,” is a contemporary hymn in the Catholic tradition.

Michael Flatley’s expression of masculinity is a social and performative manifestation of his diasporic identity conflict. As Natasha Casey points out, “American popular culture during the past decade or so has reinforced distinct and often contradictory images of Irishness, images that simultaneously reject and encourage historically familiar stereotypes” (11). This collective identity conflict arose from contested views of “whiteness” in United States immigrant populations throughout the 20th Century. Although the white skin of the Irish made them “eligible” for membership in White America, it did not guarantee their admission into such a category due to racial stereotypes constructed by British imperialism (Casey 15). In response, Irish America adopted a racist psyche, excluding members of other races in their subculture in order to assimilate into Anglo-American culture. Paradoxically, Irish Americans were racist to

other minorities in response to the discrimination they faced for decades. In her article “Riverdance: The Importance of Being Irish American” Natasha Casey explains this diasporic identity conflict,

“From Irish America’s participation in the nineteenth-century New York draft riots to the recent and well documented contemporary conservatism, misogyny, and homophobia of high profile Irish-American groups—“hyper-whiteness” as Lauren Onkey usefully termed it—all highlight the success of membership drive that began over three hundred years ago” (16).

However, once Irish Americans gained theoretical membership into Anglo-American culture, they opted to return to the essence of their heritage, their Irishness. The conflicting duality of being both American and Irish is thus reflected in the art and works of Irish Americans such as Michael Flatley. An article appeared in *New York Times* highlighting this phenomenon in *LOTD*, calling it “something like an Irish ‘Triumph of Will’” (Casey 18).

As previously noted, *LOTD* contains exclusively “Irish material,” therefore excluding other dances of Celtic origin and people of color. This places Flatley into this dual White American-Irish category. In order to further assert this dual cultural identity, Flatley expresses masculinity by way of placing characters within the female cast, namely Saoirse and Morrighan, into sexualized and racialized gender roles. Within *LOTD*, several scenes illuminate constructs of hegemonic masculinity, sexualized and racialized gender hierarchies, and the female-nature/male-culture paradigm.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity

R.W. Connell describes hegemonic masculinity as the cultural dominance of masculinity

characterized by aggression, emotional restraint, and heterosexuality. In western patriarchy, there exists a certain prescribed form of masculinity to which men aspire in achieving their sense of masculine personhood. However, as Connell points out, "... 'Hegemony' does not mean total cultural dominance, the obliteration of alternatives. It means ascendancy achieved within a balance of forces, that is, a state of play. Other patterns and groups are subordinated rather than eliminated" (184). This cultural ideal of masculinity is, in reality, not an attainable goal. Rather, it is based a set of practices that men to which men will subscribe in order to situate their gendered selves in society.

In contrast, "There is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men" (183). Within this framework, women subscribe to forms of femininity that perpetuates the globally dominant position of men and the subordinate position of women. Connell also points out, "To call this pattern 'emphasized femininity' is also to make a point about how the cultural package is used in interpersonal relationships. This kind of femininity is performed, and performed especially to men" (188). Emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity are expressed through polarized masculine and feminine performances of gender, as demonstrated in Flatley's *Lord of the Dance*.

Making sound often translates to power in Irish dancing. In "The Warriors" and "Warlords," Don Dorcha and the Lord of the Dance train their soldiers for battle to control Planet Ireland. Throughout each of these "training sessions," the male cast's feet move faster to create louder, more complex rhythms. Don Dorcha (the dark lord) and the Lord of the Dance instruct their armies by examples of their dance skills and leadership. In contrast, the only scene in which only the female cast dances in hardshoes is in the dance titled "Breakout." In

“Breakout,” the female cast, led by Saoirse, performs a treble jig (also known as a “heavy jig” performed in 6/8 time signature with hardshoes) in traditional Irish dancing dresses. When Morrighan the Temptress dances onstage to confront Saoirse, Saoirse and her followers rip off their dresses to reveal their spandex shorts and sports bras. They then perform a faster treble jig, interrupted with moments of swiveling back and forth and strutting across the stage. While the female cast makes noise in this scene, it is not an assertion of power. Rather, this treble jig is a continuation of the female cast’s expression of heteronormative sexuality. In an attempt to “out-sex” Morrighan the Temptress, Saoirse and the female cast must disrobe and dance, appearing alluring to both the audience and the Lord of the Dance. Moreover, the steps performed in “Breakout” follow a continuous treble jig rhythm, providing little variation such that the female cast may demonstrate their creativity in their rhythmic skills. After “Breakout” is over, the Lord of the Dance kisses Saoirse, makes sexual purring noises at her, and takes over the stage with his army to perform “Warlords.” Even more, Flatley pauses several times throughout “Warlords” to ogle at Saoirse and kiss her while his soldiers dance. Once again, Flatley’s dominating expression of masculinity trumps the leadership of Saoirse over the female cast.

Throughout *Lord of the Dance*, Flatley’s feet are often featured as the focal point of each dance in which he performs. In contrast, the camera focuses more on the spatial movements of female cast members. For example, the female cast performs a slip jig in “Cry of the Celts” whereas Flatley dances a treble reel. This slip jig-treble reel distinction between the male and female casts continues throughout the show, except in cases where the entire cast dances together. A slip jig is a dance in 9/8-time that is performed almost exclusively by women in the Irish dance tradition. Danced in softshoes, the slip jig is characterized by large spatial

movements and an effortless, gliding motion by the dancer; the camera focuses on this overarching gliding motion of the female cast rather than their feet. It is often considered the more ballet-like form of Irish dance. In contrast, Flatley performs a treble reel in his introduction to the audience. A treble reel is a type of Irish dance performed in hard shoes to 4/4-reel music; it is often a type of dance in which the performer shows off their rhythmic skills. In this solo performance, the camera focuses primarily on Flatley's feet and rhythmic skill, going as far as filming his feet from below the clear stage floor. This distinction between the soft, graceful female cast and the rhythmic and powerful Lord of the Dance as well as the focus on the Lord of the Dance's feet demonstrate yet another example of Flatley's quest for hegemonic masculinity.

The Fallen Gypsy

Saoirse and Morrighan fight for Flatley's attention in a sexualized and performative manner, showing the clear distinction between the "good girl," a blond, mostly demure woman, and the "bad girl," a gypsy woman with dark hair and consistently sexual dance moves throughout *LOTD*. This dichotomy follows Catharine MacKinnon's theory that men sexualize hierarchy. As she points out, "...male power takes the social form of what men as a gender want sexually, which centers on power itself, as socially defined. Masculinity is having it; femininity is not having it. Masculinity precedes male as femininity precedes female and male sexual desire defines both" (418). In this context, the Lord of the Dance sets the sexual standard for himself, Saoirse, and Morrighan simultaneously. This sexualization of hierarchy coupled with colonial racism places Morrighan and Saoirse into subordinate gender roles.

Morrighan is first introduced to the audience in a dance titled "Gypsy," a solo in which she performs a reel in softshoes. However, there are several elements to this dance that

distinguish her from the rest of the female cast introduced in “Cry of the Celts.” First, the instrumentation of “Gypsy” includes an oboe, an instrument with a “non-Irish” sound. Also, the title “Gypsy” racializes Morrighan into the category of “Traveler Woman.” Historically, traveller women “were identified as passive objects of male exchange as engaged in fortune telling and dealing in magical and/or medical potions or philters” (Helleiner 276). This stereotype arises from the racial categories constructed by British Gysiologists, as travellers were deeply stigmatized within the colonial framework of Ireland until the late 20th Century. At the same time, rural women in Ireland in the early 20th Century experienced a sort of domestication as Ireland gained more political and economic independence; these newly “domesticated” women were seen as weak and needing protection from the seemingly dangerous gypsy race. As Helleiner points out, “A heightened class/ethnic boundary between Travellers and non-travellers was expressed in gendered terms...accounts hint at a degree of exoticism and male desire for the Traveller woman” (279). Subsequently, gypsy women became objects of society’s collective exotic and erotic sexual fixations. Thus, Saoirse and Morrighan represent the domesticated Irish woman and the exotic, sexualized Gypsy woman. Throughout “Gypsy,” Morrighan waves her arms, flips her hair, and swivels her hips in such a way that may sexually attract the Lord of the Dance. The racialized and gendered nature of her dance further suggests Flatley’s diasporic identity crisis: he must place the other characters of the show into rigid stereotypes in order to assert his own masculinity and Irish ethnicity.

Two scenes in which Saoirse and Morrighan battle for the Lord of the Dance’s affection provide insight into Flatley’s delineations of race and gender in *LOTD*. After Saoirse and the rest of the female cast have performed a slow treble jig for about one minute, Morrighan

confronts Saoirse and engages in a short dance battle with her. In response, Saoirse and the rest of the female cast disrobe and finish the dance in a sort-of defeat of the “temptress.” Morrighan exits the stage and Saoirse gains the attention of the Lord of the Dance at the opening of the next dance, “Warlords.”

“Stolen Kiss” opens with Saoirse gracefully performs a slip jig in what seems to be a final attempt at winning the affection of the Lord of the Dance. She initially succeeds, as the Lord of the Dance enters the stage and they perform a partner dance. The music shifts from a slip jig to a treble jig, demonstrating a gendered music change. The Lord of the Dance caresses Saoirse’s face throughout their dance, denoting a dual veneration of and attraction to her. Shortly into their dance, Morrighan enters the stage and distracts the Lord of the Dance with her hardshoe dancing. They begin to dance, while Saoirse looks visibly jealous. Saoirse then interrupts Morrighan and the Lord of the Dance, Saoirse and the Lord of the Dance finish their affectionate duet, and kiss.

These two scenes demonstrate Saoirse and Morrighan’s sexualized characteristics as defined by masculine constructs of heterosexuality. Moreover, Morrighan’s gypsy identity is congruent with Irish racial stereotypes about traveller women. Traveller women are seen as more sexual, exotic beings whereas the “traditional,” white Irish woman is less sexual, domesticated, and demure. Morrighan and Saoirse’s characters are defined by their relationship to the Lord of the Dance rather than by their individual stories, as Flately sexualizes the gender hierarchy of dominant men over submissive women in *Lord of the Dance*. One may argue that Morrighan’s aggressive or assertive sexuality connotes agency, but the way she expresses this sexuality seem to only fit the purpose of seducing the Lord of the Dance. Racial stereotypes and sexual gender

roles delineated by the Lord of the Dance's affection reflect the ways in which Flatley places himself at the peak of a micro-societal hierarchy. In an attempt to negotiate his subordinated position in society as the son of Irish immigrants, Flatley constructs a sexually and racially dominant Lord of the Dance.

Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?

Women and all things feminine are typically associated with nature; femininity is devalued within a patriarchal society. In her essay, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," Sherry Ortner argues that because women are both subordinated and associated with nature, "We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature" (213).

Within this model, through woman's body and its functions, social roles, and subsequent psychic structure, female subordination is ascribed to woman's association with the earth; this separates women further from the public sphere and the creation of culture. Similarly, as in the case of male high chefs or fashion designers, "...the high chefs are almost always men. Thus the pattern replicates that in the area of socialization—women perform lower-level conversions from nature to culture, but when the culture distinguishes a higher level of the same functions, the higher level is restricted to men" (216). This nearly universal secondary status of women entrenches them into rigid and gendered social expectations.

In line with the ubiquitous "mother Ireland" trope in Irish culture, this phenomenon is reflected in female Irish dancing style as a whole. As Foley explains,

"Young female dancers, in particular, have dominated the prescribed national aesthetic of high frontal and large spatial movements. With their curled hair and heavily embroidered

dance costumes, they are considered representative of the *national* perception of Irish step dance” (36).

Female Irish dancers typically perform gender in a traditionally feminine fashion. As demonstrated in *Lord of the Dance*, the female dancers wear feminine costumes, seemingly float and glide through large spatial movements, and present themselves in such a way that is meant to be visually pleasing to their male counterparts. As previously noted, this sense of femininity is arguably the result of R.W. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity.

The women—nature paradigm is demonstrated through the opening scene of *Lord of the Dance*, “Cry of the Celts.” The entire show opens with a foggy landscape depicted onstage, from which the golden Little Spirit character emerges. The Little Spirit plays the Catholic hymn, “The Lord of the Dance,” surrounded by the female cast lying on the stage floor. The women, arranged in sleep-like positions, are arched in such a way that one may not notice that they are there until the Little Spirit sprinkles glittery magic dust on them so they may rise and begin to dance. Four minutes into the first scene of the show, the female cast slowly rises, swaying into the initial position for the dance. The foggy landscape coupled with the female cast lying on the ground suggests that the female cast is part of the landscape; the female characters are associated with the land from which they rise.

Two minutes later, as the female casts disappears from the stage, Flatley bursts out of a compounded spotlight center stage. He emerges from this excessively bright beam of light to perform his solo, full of complicated rhythms and arrogant gestures of artistic prowess. After about one minute of his solo as the Lord of the Dance, the entire male and female cast dances

onstage from the wings. As the cast dances onstage, Flatley seems to direct them as if he were the creator of the world in which his character dances. He spins in a circle, arms outstretched, while the cast spins in a circle around him. He is the clear leader of the dance troupe, dramatically crawling and clawing towards the front of the stage for the finale. During the last several moments of this scene, Flatley stops dancing to *strut* across the front of the stage, pretending to control the cast's movements. Juxtaposed with the passive introduction of the female cast, Flatley's abrupt and powerful introduction suggests that he has the agency in the creation and management of Planet Ireland. While the women come from a foggy landscape, Flatley and the male cast dance from the spatially "above" areas of the stage. Men, and in this case, Flatley, are more closely associated with the creation of culture. Flatley is the leader and creator, whereas the female cast acts as the collective bearer of this fictional culture.

Towards a Feminist Vision of Irish Dance

What would a feminist vision of Irish dance include? For the purposes of this study, I argue that a more "feminist" Irish dance embraces diversity and inclusion as well as female leadership. As Jill Raymond and Janice Wilson describe feminism, it is "a powerful homeopathic remedy which goes beyond the symptoms to the deeper causes of our troubles: the imbalance between masculine and feminine energies, manifested in the ills of patriarchy" (Treichler and Kramarae 9). Although feminism is a multiplural discourse, feminist theory at its core seeks agency for oppressed or marginalized populations. Within the context of Flatley's expression of diasporic identity conflict and subsequent toxic masculinity, a more feminist Irish dance would embrace female leadership and cast members of color. The casts of *Heartbeat of Home* and the Trinity Irish Dance Company exemplify this vision of Feminist Irish dance.

Heartbeat of Home premiered in October 2013 in Dublin, nearly 20 years after the premiere of Butler and Flatley's *Riverdance*. According to the show's website, "it follows the casting of world class dancers...who are not only at the top of their profession in Irish but also in other dance forms" (*Heartbeat of Home*). Choreographed by David Bolger and John Carey, *Heartbeat of Home* is a celebration of Irish dance coupled with a multicultural fusion of Latin, Afro-Cuban, and other forms of percussive dance. The identity construction of characters is left ambiguous, ridding the show of the toxic racial and gendered stereotypes of *Lord of the Dance*. The cast is also more racially diverse than that of *LOTD*. This show follows the leadership of Ciara Sexton, an Irish dancer who rose to fame through her portrayal of Morrighan the Temptress in *LOTD*. Sexton, in a way, transcends the stereotypes associated with Morrighan through her strong leadership in *Heartbeat of Home*. Rather than fitting into the sexualized gypsy role, she demonstrates agency and power in her central role in this multicultural celebration of dance.

Similarly, the Trinity Irish Dance Company, based in Chicago and directed by Mark Howard, follows similar trends of female leadership, diversity, and this sort of "dance androgyny" in their performances. Most notably, their choreography titled "Push" features four dancers performing an acapella treble reel, two female and two male. The male dancers wear kilts, high socks, and a t-shirt while the women wear armor-like black shirts with black leggings. The dancers perform an intense battle of rhythmic skill and physical stamina. In this visual role-reversal in costumes and equal sense of power between men and women, this scene follows a feminist vision of Irish dance. Throughout the rest of the show, young women act as the leaders of most dances or share leadership roles with male cast members. While potential for growth

remains within the broader culture of Irish dancing in terms of female leadership and diversity, these two examples demonstrate a shift in the popular discourse on and construction of modern Irish dance.

Conclusion

Through expressions of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, racial and gendered stereotypes of gypsies, and the woman-nature/man-culture paradigm, Michael Flatley negotiates his conflicted Irish-American identity. Because of Flatley's origins as the son of Irish American, working-class parents, he constructs the character of the Lord of the Dance as a dominant, masculine character and thus paints female characters as subordinated beings. However, there are several examples of feminist visions of Irish dance that exist today that may offer an alternative to Flatley's "modernization" of Irish dance. As an Irish dancer myself, I recognize that something as culturally rooted as Irish dance will always be bound up in sometimes toxic norms or restricting conditions. However, when embraced as a site of expression and acceptance, Irish dancing may transcend the toxic stereotypes and gender roles about women and traveller women as they are reflected in *Lord of the Dance*.

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