Abstract: Despite the current general lack of critical acclaim for the works of John O’Keeffe (1747-1833), this study suggests that the stage comedies of the Dublin-born, London-residing playwright merit examination within the context of the notoriously conflicted relationship between the perceived nations of Ireland and England. Where some have claimed that O’Keeffe’s plays pander to their London audiences by supporting English-constructed, debilitating stereotypes of Irishness, this study instead demonstrates that the comedies implicitly argue against nationalistic prejudice, critique the British government of O’Keeffe’s day, and promote a less restricting view of what it is to be Irish or English, thereby deflating arguments in favor of an antagonistic opposition between the two countries.

Keywords: John O’Keeffe, John O’Keefe, Irish drama, Stage Irishman, musical comedy, farce, colonialism, stage stereotype
STAGING IRELAND: THE SOCIOPOLITICAL IMPORT OF JOHN O’KEEFFE’S COMEDIES

By

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A Thesis submitted to the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in the Major

Degree Awarded:
Fall, 2012
The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of Brittany Hause defended on November 30, 2011.

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Introduction: The Critics vs. Mr. John O’Keeffe

One evening in August 2010, my sister and I walked into the American Shakespeare Center’s theater in Staunton, Virginia to watch a comedy neither of us had ever heard of before—Wild Oats; or, the Strolling Gentleman, by John O’Keeffe. The program provided us little information to go on; we knew to expect Quakers, mistaken identities, and jokes, but that was about it. Our projections for the coming performance, therefore, did not extend much beyond the casual hope that it would be at least somewhat entertaining, and when the first irresistible waves of optimism, goodwill, and hilarity came surging our way off the stage, we were caught completely by surprise. Not only did the show we attended that night amount to one of most successfully funny live productions I had ever seen, but the spirit of friendliness, generosity, and overall humanity that ran throughout the dialogue struck me with unusual force. The entire work seemed to constitute an argument in favor of understanding, forgiveness, and delight, and I, for one, was utterly won over by it. Why, I wondered, had no one ever told me about this wonderful play? Why hadn’t I, as a major in English literature, ever read even one thing by or about this John O’Keeffe? Who was he? And most importantly, had he written anything else I could get my hands on?

The answers to the last two questions were easy enough to dig up. John O’Keeffe, I soon discovered, was a Dublin-born actor and playwright who had spent the first part of his theatrical career, a period spanning about 1765-1780, in the general vicinity of his native city before moving to London at the age of 34. The transfer to England proved permanent, and O’Keeffe remained in the British capital to work in close collaboration with the Covent Garden and Haymarket theatre houses until his death in 1833. The onstage-performance aspect of his career fizzled out before he even left Ireland, due to an unfortunate eye infection that slowly but
inexorably robbed him of his sight, leaving him near-blind for the rest of his life. With his attention by necessity concentrated on the non-visual part of the theatrical creative process, then, it comes as no surprise to learn that *Wild Oats* was far from the only play he ever wrote. During his lifetime, in fact, O’Keeffe was widely recognized for what a contemporary describes as “the happy production of voluble nonsense” (Marshall),¹ a whimsical jocularity that characterizes not only the play that introduced me to his work but most of the estimated seventy-seven theatrical pieces, “primarily comedies, farces, and light operas,” that O’Keeffe released throughout his career (Harvey 19). His propensity for this lighthearted style translated in his day to enormous popularity with theatre-goers, as O’Keeffe’s recent biographer Frederick Link notes that ten of the playwright’s highest-grossing pieces “received nearly twelve hundred performances before 1801 in London alone” (lix).

However, even at the height of O’Keeffe’s popularity in the eighteenth century, his work was essentially excluded from serious literary discussion, since in the critical arena, the five-act play had long overshadowed the briefer forms of comedy that comprise O’Keeffe’s usual offerings for the stage (Link xxx). The lack of scholarly consideration for his work, however, did nothing to hamper O’Keeffe’s success in the popular realm until after his death, when his plays slowly receded from the stage to lie bound and ignored in musty print volumes, just so many outdated curios jumbled in among mountains of similarly obsolete bric-a-brac the Georgian era left in its wake. With the transfer from the playhouse to the library, O’Keeffe’s works came to be wholly dependent on readers of bygone playtexts—literary scholars—for recognition, and for various reasons, such recognition has not been forthcoming for a long while.

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¹ A scan of the full text of Marshall’s *Catalogue of five hundred celebrated authors of Great Britain, now living* can be accessed through the Eighteenth Centuries Collection Online database. The digital copy of the work does not display page numbers, but it may be helpful to note that the entry on O’Keeffe is found on numbers 185 and 186 of the ECCO image set.
As Link notes, those of O’Keeffe’s plays that rely heavily on music or visual spectacle to achieve their emotional effect understandably suffer when confined to printed form (lx), but this issue alone does not account for the near-total lack of critical interest in his work in general. Link suggests that the tendency to draw a sharp divide between what is considered pop culture and what is considered high culture contributes to O’Keeffe’s current obscurity, since his creations fall distinctly into the pop-culture category and are consequently as a rule deemed unprofitable subjects for in-depth study (lx). This type of categorization and offhand dismissal, Karen Harvey and Kevin Pry argue, proceeds more from critical bias than from any innate deficiency in O’Keeffe’s comedies, boiling down to the common but unwarranted assumption that writings of a tragic or somber nature automatically rank higher on the scale of artistic noteworthiness than do comedic pieces (31). It is at least in part due to the fact that O’Keeffe displays an inclination for happy endings and lighthearted plot structures, Harvey and Pry assert, that critics nowadays are disposed to interpret his work as “lacking in social, political, and literary significance” (30). Such an assessment of the man’s extensive dramatic output not only smells somewhat of elitist snobbery but also, in presuming an already-complete understanding of all there is to understand about the comedies, entirely misses the opportunity to examine possible implications of the effect O’Keeffe’s work had on its original audiences. In O’Keeffe’s day, the impetuous jauntiness of his style was greeted occasionally with slight reservation but, in general, the attraction of his lively brand of comedy proved great enough to overcome audience cynicism, vigorously sweeping viewers up into the fun of it all. In this vein, a contemporary reviewer notes that if one were to dispassionately apply cold, critical analysis to O’Keeffe’s work, “it would be impossible to deny that he has passed even beyond the limits of nonsense,” but audience
involvement being what it is where O’Keeffe is concerned, such analysis melts away in the face of the “irresistible humour in his utmost daring” (D.—G. A3).

More recent critics who bother to give O’Keeffe a read, however, often fail to discover the same charm in his work, and not finding themselves entertained, tend to dismiss his creations as altogether unworthy of their time. G.C. Duggan, for instance, sees little to admire in O’Keeffe, maintaining that “[h]is facility leads him to deplorable flatness, his artifices are too obvious, and his specimens of wit, especially of alleged Irish wit, often make one surprised that the human intelligence could plumb such depths” (142-43). In short, Duggan concludes, speaking from the standpoint of the late 1930s, “it is doubtful if a single one of his plays would to-day hold the stage for a week” (142). This last opinion appears to have been shared by most theatrical producers of the twentieth century—if in fact any of them were sufficiently aware of the existence of O’Keeffe’s plays to harbor an opinion against them—since Link notes that before Wild Oats finally made its way back on stage in the 1970s in Dublin and London, “no play of [O’Keefe’s] had been performed in a century or so” (lix). At the time of this writing, the case remains pretty much the same. Out of all O’Keeffe’s scripts, only Wild Oats ever achieves professional performance, and instances of this occurring are few and far between. Aside from the American production I was lucky enough to attend and a modern adaptation of the same work that went up in the Bristol Old Vic last month, O’Keeffe’s comedies languish in silence unstaged.

Despite the resounding lack of current recognition, however, the O’Keeffe corpus does contain much of interest for both the casual theatre-goer and the dedicated student of literature. In particular, I intend to draw critical attention to the thought-provoking implications of O’Keeffe’s position as an Irish writer living in Georgian England. While O’Keeffe did indeed
live in London for most of his life, the most cursory glance into the memoirs he published in his old age testifies to the immense depth of his feeling for his native country. Even among those portions of the *Recollections of the Life of John O’Keeffe, Written by Himself* (1828) that ostensibly concern O’Keeffe’s experiences in London, references incessantly appear to Dublin and to the areas of Irish countryside he once visited as an aspiring artist and actor. In some parts of his autobiography, O’Keeffe’s preoccupation with the land of his birth manifests itself with absurd charm, as when the narrator interrupts his own discussion of Shakespeare’s plays to assert that a certain song from *As You Like It* must have been written by a poet in Ireland, on the dubious grounds that it makes no mention of snakes (94). At other points in the *Recollections*, the narration descends into the quietly and solemnly political, as when O’Keeffe carefully passes along the story a “fine old man” once told him of the self-dooming heroism of the Irish Catholics at the Battle of the Boyne (149). And in addition to asides of these kinds, throughout the memoirs idealized images materialize of the land where “[t]he milkmaid always [sings] her melodious Irish tunes” and “[t]he different families [dig] the potatoe, and cut the turf” in simple generosity and goodness of heart (119-20), so that there can be little doubt that this writer of plays for the London stage rarely stopped thinking of the country he had left behind.

O’Keeffe’s evident affectionate fixation on his native land does, I would argue, significantly pervade his dramatic works, though apparently not many critics agree with me here. Harvey and Pry—among the few who do agree—note that the scholars of Irish literary studies who happen to notice O’Keeffe at all usually declare the Irish elements of his playwriting insubstantial and insignificant (20). Some, like Heinz Kosok, examine the possible impact of O’Keeffe’s Irish nationality on his writing only to conclude that “perhaps contrary to his own conception of himself, O’Keeffe and his works belong predominantly to an English tradition of
the drama” (54). Others, like Duggan, go a step further to assert that not only do O’Keeffe’s works fail to reinforce the playwright’s proud self-identification as Irish, but actually work to the disadvantage of Ireland’s public image in promoting the “curious mixture of cleverness, wit, futility and inaneness that marks the rapid decline into the bathos of the Stage Irishman” of British theater (142). While Duggan concedes that O’Keeffe did not himself produce the worst of the “buffoonery” and “mawkish sentiment” corresponding to the denigrating stereotypes of Irishness that for centuries dominated the British stage, he insists that O’Keeffe was responsible for “creat[ing] a vogue” that led less talented and less informed playwrights to construct their Irish characters as “mere mouthpieces of cheap wit to tickle the ears of the Saxon groundlings” (154). In other words, according to the Duggan camp, O’Keeffe did more to endorse the figure of the Stage Irishman than to counteract it.

This is a heavy charge to lay against a person claiming devoted attachment to Ireland, since the Stage Irishman that walked the boards of English-speaking playhouses before, during, and after O’Keeffe’s time amounts to a preposterous caricature of supposed Irishness that essentially undermines any claim Ireland might in reality have to independence, self-government, and equal footing with England. The origins of this rudimentary stereotype, so misleading a portrayal of Irish society (Kosok 50), stretch back to medieval times and the beginnings of England’s effort to subjugate its neighbor, when the first English representations of an uncouth Ireland were penned. Writings such as the treatises on Hibernia of the late 1180s by the monk Geraldus Cambrensis work to justify English domination as a necessary civilizing influence via the writer’s emphatically negative fictionalization of Ireland. Geraldus, for instance, as Joseph Th. Leerssen notes, portrays Ireland as “a wild, strange place full of weird and outlandish sights” and home to a society that is, “as far as Giraldus is concerned, a pool of
blackest ignorance, barbarity and superstition” (36). The British monk’s censorious sketch of the supposed Irish nature prefigures in its oversimplicity and sense of smug superiority the portraits of Irishmen that were to later take to the stage for the amusement of an English audience; for instance, Giraldus writes of the Irish, “one must fear their craftiness far more than their warfare; their quietude more than their fierceness; their sweet talk more than their invective; malice rather than pugnacity; treason more than open war; hypocritical friendliness rather than contemptible enmity” (Leerssen 37). The imputations of duplicity, mean-spiritedness, and hypocrisy leveled against the Irish in this piece of invective were not to be found later in every variation of the British theater’s Stage Irishman, since the figure periodically underwent modification, exchanging one set of associated stereotypes for another as dictated by the preferences of the time. The insinuation of the inferiority or naturally subservient position of the Irish people to the English that accompanies Geraldus’ remarks, however, was to remain a constant feature of the Stage Irishman.

And it is this demoralizing, fallacious figure that critics suppose the ardently Irish O’Keeffe to have promoted in his plays. By the mid-eighteenth century, at the start of O’Keeffe’s career, the Stage Irishman, or Teague, had come to generally incorporate “those propensities for violence, excitability, and garrulity” Shakespeare had anticipated in Henry V’s Irish officer, Macmorris, over a hundred years before (Kiberd 235). As O’Keeffe must have known him from his contemporaries’ plays, the Stage Irishman tended to be “tall, strong, pugnacious, and usually courageous, often in foreign military service. The Teague was amorous and fond of women…[and] of drink…and given to Irish bulls or ‘blunders,’ yet he could be shrewd, cheerful, and witty, often reflected in a sort of flipness with superiors” (Harvey 22). Leerssen suggests that from the 1760s on, this caricature lost its vilifying overtones so that
“virtually all Irish characters on the British stage [were] sympathetically characterized,” with “their Irishness [seemingly] meant to contribute to their positive nature” (140), but he goes on to note that a hallmark of this portrayal was the supposedly Irish sense of loyalty to England, and that the Teague, however good of heart, continued to play a less significant or less weighty role than his English counterparts on stage. Often, he seems to have been brought before the audience simply in order to reiterate English opinions in Irish brogue, as a way of bolstering the self-congratulatory notion that the opinions of every right-thinking person on the face of the planet equate to the opinions of the dominant English culture (149). In this way, even the sympathetic variety of Stage Irishman adhered to parameters of characterization as rigid as ever, effectively cementing the audience’s conviction of England’s moral right to rule Ireland (149). I hope to demonstrate, however, in my first chapter, that John O’Keeffe’s brand of Irish-character depiction responds both to the old, antagonistic portrayals of Irishness and to the newer, misleadingly sympathetic portrayals, in a refutation of the idea that to be Irish is to be somehow less than English.

This is not to say that O’Keeffe did not recognize the dramatic and humoristic possibilities of the Stage Irishman utilized in his contemporaries’ plays, nor ever draw on the potential of the character himself; on the contrary, as Kosok points out, the sketch of Thady MacBrogue in O’Keeffe’s early endeavor *The She-Gallant* (1767) approximates a textbook example of the type (50), demonstrating O’Keeffe’s expert familiarity with the concept. In fact, given *The She-Gallant*’s London setting and cast of predominately upper-class English characters, the stylized Irish rusticity of the rambunctious, illiterate, yet trusty “Honest Thady” (*She-Gallant* 1) could hardly stand out more. As amusingly outspoken yet touchingly loyal servant to the sentimental English protagonist Delamour, Thady would seem to represent the
epitome of the sympathetic version of the Teague character so prevalent in English drama. Every line of his dialogue seems crafted to underscore his identity as a lower-class Irishman surrounded by English nobility, but the impertinent, uneducated humor he proffers from this position merely augments his likeability as a character as he spiritedly involves himself in the play’s central plotline, the group effort to rescue Delamour’s young love Emily from the threat of a gruesome marriage her father has arranged for her with the old, malicious, and overbearing Sir Geofry Ginkle—whose decidedly British surname, of course, Thady mispronounces.

As a blatant study of the Stage Irishman, Thady’s very first line makes a mess of both French and English grammar, he fills his speech with oaths of Irish origin, and he sports so apparently complacent an attitude toward violence as to declare that he sees no objection to simply killing Sir Geofry: “...an ould son of a whore that has one leg already in the grave, and if I trip the other after it, is that murther? Oh the devil a murther in that, sure” (3). While Thady is an overt instance of O’Keeffe’s adoption of stereotypical Teague attributes for comedic purposes, however, he also exemplifies the technique of “offset[ing] these stereotypes with more desirable characteristics—pugnacity and mischievousness by basic good nature, decency and loyalty” (Harvey 24). Correspondingly, Thady of course never carries out his suggestion of offing Sir Geofry, but does thoroughly and very justifiably deflate the English gentleman’s sense of self-consequence by knocking him over in a scene that casts the Irishman in an almost heroic light. Though Sir Geofry, feeling empowered by the night-watchman disguise he has ignominiously adopted for the scene in order to spy on his fiancée, is the one to instigate the conflict by insulting and striking Thady with his watchman’s staff, Thady is the effortless victor, and for all the violent tendencies of his usual language, he refrains from physically harming his aggressor in the least with a candid, “I’d scorn to strike you, and you down” (24). The return Sir
Geofry makes for this proof of unpretentious integrity, an attempt to call the law down on Thady’s head, only places Thady in a more favorable light by cementing Sir Geofry’s lack of sportsmanship where Thady has been more than fair. In the end, despite the initial antipathy the “bogtrotting” Irishman encounters in Delamour’s adversaries and even despite the unwarranted accusations of dimwitted, drunken blundering he at one point receives at the hand of his own cherished master, steadfast Thady stands fully validated in the eyes of his fellow characters and shares in the felicities of *The She-Gallant*’s conclusion with as much brash geniality as ever as he celebrates three blissfully impending marriages, including his own.

This single instance of an unmodified Teague character in O’Keeffe’s work, however, is hardly typical of the playwright, since after setting the result of this youthful exercise in dramatic convention out before an audience exclusive to Dublin, not London (Kosok 51), O’Keeffe never again revisited the Stage Irishman in such blatant terms. In short, rather than exemplify O’Keeffe’s usual approach to depictions of Irishness, Thady MacBrogue serves as an specimen of the sort of simplistic cliché the playwright subverts throughout the rest of his work. In the coming pages, I will discuss the ways O’Keeffe’s comedies manipulate the conventions surrounding the Teague figure in order for the author to convey a portion of his personal understanding of his homeland and its people to London audiences. O’Keeffe’s depiction of Irish character, I hope to show, goes beyond the simplistic stereotype-mongering attributed to him by modern critics, and instead acts as a means of overturning prevailing prejudices associated with Irishness.

O’Keeffe’s dramatic work in general, this study will demonstrate, takes a distinctive approach to combatting the audience’s preconceptions of England and Ireland, as the playwright “pleads for moderation while entertaining the audience” (Harvey 42). Far from propagating a
sense of English superiority to Irish in a servile attempt to flatter his way into his London audience’s good graces, as critics like Kosok would suggest (51), O’Keeffe skillfully involves his viewers in his concern and regard for his native country. Refraining from adopting an antagonistic stance toward his British audience, O’Keeffe nonetheless advocates the admission of the Irish people to a position of social and political equality throughout his comedies, as will be seen in the discussions of Irish self-government and political negotiation in the second and third chapters of this study. The argument O’Keeffe puts forward from a humanitarian perspective shines through even in works totally devoid of mention of his original homeland, and its development throughout the plays accentuates just one reason to suspect O’Keeffe has been vastly undervalued in modern academia. If nothing else, I hope this study establishes that there is more of interest in O’Keeffe than has yet been remarked, and that despite the lighthearted laughter—or in fact, because of it—O’Keeffe’s comedies are not undeserving of further inspection by students of literature, culture, and the human condition.
Chapter One: Patrick and Darby; or, What It Is to Be Irish in an O’Keeffe Comedy

O’Keeffe’s 1783\(^2\) musical comedy The Poor Soldier and its sequel, Love in a Camp; or, Patrick in Prussia (1785), revolve around the adventures and misadventures of the principled Irishman Patrick, who O’Keeffe conspicuously marks out as the hero of both the first play’s Irish-countryside romance and the second play’s Continental military farce. Not only do the titles of these pieces refer specifically to the idealized Irish rustic, but critical plot developments are set into motion by his comings and goings onstage, as Patrick’s initial absence from his Irish hometown to participate in the British-American conflict overseas is essential to the set-up of Poor Soldier, allowing the genteel Captain Fitzroy to step in as a contender for the hand of the protagonist’s rural, propertyless, yet lovely sweetheart Norah, and underscoring the importance of Patrick’s eventual arrival on the scene to claim his own. The structure of Love in a Camp hinges to a similar extent on Patrick who, now turned officer and married to Norah, must face the new temptations and ordeals that accompany his increased position of power and detachment from his bucolic roots. Each of the Patrick plays, however, is also noticeably divided into two storylines: one the didactic tale of the adversities and triumphs of the serious-minded protagonist outlined above, and the other a boisterous account of the exploits of his less refined countryman, Darby, a character whose riotous comportment often appropriates, and just as often overturns, stage stereotypes of Irishness in an uproarious bid to steal the show. As in other O’Keeffe comedies\(^3\) that feature a predominately Irish cast of characters, such as The Wicklow Mountains (1796) and The Prisoner at Large (1787), the pointed contrasts in personality that arise

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\(^2\) Dates given for plays indicate the first known performance of any version of the work in any venue. For those plays first performed in London, I have referred to Charles Beecher Hogan, The London Stage, 1660-1800. For those first staged elsewhere, my information was extracted from Frederick M. Link, John O’Keeffe: A bibliography. Wherever in-text citations of Link concern information other than dates, however, unless otherwise noted, I am referring to his introduction to O’Keeffe’s collected works rather than the bibliography.

\(^3\) Here as throughout this thesis, I apply the term “comedy” loosely to any of O’Keeffe’s dramatic works that feature a happy ending, i.e. the near-entirety of his corpus. O’Keeffe made few attempts at tragedy.
throughout the oscillations of the plot between, for instance, Patrick’s operatic desolation in *Poor Soldier* the face of Norah’s seeming attachment to another man and Darby’s rattling banter with the caustic Kathleen both exploit and destabilize British theatrical convention regarding interpretations of Irish identity. In consequence, the usually demoralizing figure of the Stage Irishman takes on a new function in O’Keeffe’s work as the responses it provokes from such characters as Patrick and the unorthodox results it produces in the hands of such characters as Darby contribute to a liberatingly open-ended portrayal of what it is to be Irish. As they compel the audience into a sympathetic complicity with the Irishmen and Irishwomen affectionately depicted, O’Keeffe’s comedies place the Irish population, as an independent entity, on equal footing with the English in terms of both moral agency and natural entitlement, without restricting definitions of either nation to a mutually exclusive set of characteristics.

O’Keeffe is not the only playwright of his day to manipulate and revise his London audience’s preconceptions of Irishness on stage; what is remarkable about his reworking is that he succeeds in the enterprise without adopting an aggressive stance that would force English viewers into a defensive position. Leerssen has remarked on the dangers of scripting in opposition to an “audience’s pre-expectations of a character’s attributes,” stating that “transgressions against this rule of ‘vraisemblable’…often cause[] moral as well as aesthetic dissatisfaction in the public” (86), thus rendering a direct attack on the challenged presuppositions worse than ineffective. O’Keeffe so ably evades such pitfalls in his Irish plays that critics like Heinz Kosok interpret his writing as “avoid[ing] completely the theme that is central to almost all of Anglo-Irish literature…the conflict between Ireland and England” (48). However, while O’Keeffe does, as Kosok notes, refrain from pitting his martial characters against British forces or from using an English antagonist where a French will serve (49), his
comedies implicitly address the issue of the longstanding English endeavor to relegate the Irish to a morally and intellectually inferior position that would justify their parallel relegation to an immutably subordinate status within the British social order. The Patrick plays, *The Wicklow Mountains*, and *The Prisoner at Large* all make recurrent reference to the hallmarks of the Stage Irishman that traditionally reinforced the notion of English superiority, only for O’Keeffe to either cast these characteristics in a more sympathetic light or cheerfully invert them in a way that leaves everyone laughing.

In many respects, for example, Darby and similarly clownish characters like *Wicklow Mountains’* Billy O’Rourke coincide with the preconceptions of Irishness on stage that their original London audiences would have harbored. Darby, in fact, could be considered the epitome of O’Keeffe’s reappropriation of the Stage Irishman; in delightful impertinence, impulsivity, and general hilarity of conduct, the trickster fool of *The Poor Soldier* and *Love in a Camp* stands^4^ nearly unrivaled among the extensive lively ranks of O’Keeffe’s stage creations. Darby’s activities in both plays mostly amount to puckish confusion-mongering, amusingly unsuccessful attempts to woo pretty women, and over-the-top bickering and boasting that lead him and those around him into and out of inadvertent danger. Other characters typically acknowledge his arrival on the scene with a preemptory stab at his motives, so that his seemingly innocuous, “How do you do, Father Luke?” in *Poor Soldier* is straightaway greeted with, “Go away Darby, you’re a rogue” (299), and elsewhere Patrick, with exasperated amusement, refers to his unruly friend as “that villain Darby” (453). Non-Irish characters go a step further in their extemporal assessments of Darby by associating his roguery with his nationality, as when the Prussian soldiers of *Love in a Camp* rage, “you little Irish rascal” (441) or grumble over Darby’s “cursed Irish jokes” (432). Even so, Darby’s constant misbehavior leads to no lasting harm for anyone

^4 Or, more often, jigs, scuttles, and scampers. Darby is anything but sedate.
involved, and in fact, far from allowing the characteristic “clownishness” of the Stage Irishman to “preclude[] him from taking a constructive part in the plot development” (Leerssen 87), Darby not only possesses, as previously mentioned, a rollicking plotline in his own right, but his constant mischief contributes—however unintentionally—in twice clearing the way for a blissful finale for Patrick and his beloved Norah. In *The Poor Soldier*, for instance, by mistakenly issuing a challenge meant for Patrick to the aristocratic Fitzroy, Darby incidentally puts an end to any threat posed to his friend by Fitzroy’s spiteful servant Bagatelle. And in *Love in a Camp*, the audacious lies Darby tells Father Luke incite the priest to exercise his own brand of deception on Patrick, which in turn causes the hero, made desperate by the thought of losing his wife, to rediscover the true force of his attachment to Norah.

Darby’s acquaintances, though superficially disapproving of his madcap behavior, for the most part regard his irrepressible shenanigans with a sort of complacent fondness, so that even when Darby finds himself sentenced to a whipping for sleeping at his post, Patrick and the audience are informed that “from his arch tricks, he’s so great a favorite with [the Prussian] officers, that none of them could bear to be lookers-on” at the penalty’s enactment (408). Of course, O’Keeffe’s audience is in a position similar to that of the officers, and so Darby never receives his whipping after all, or any other kind of punishment, for that matter. The most outrageous of his escapades land him in some trouble from time to time, but he always connives his way out of part of the repercussions and his friends forgive him the rest.

When O’Keeffe makes use of the expected correlation between Irishness and roguery in other plays, it is generally to a similarly lighthearted effect. Every last character in *Wicklow Mountains* is Irish, so naturally none of them have any motive for mentioning the nationality of the Darby-esque character in their midst as the foreigners in the Patrick comedies do, but though
the fact is never verbalized, Billy O’Rourke is a blatant instance of another character who flaunts a comportment stereotypical of the Irishman in British theater. In fact, Billy’s role in *Wicklow Mountains* recalls that of Darby in the Patrick plays, as his social position is humble, his manner is rustic, energetic, inelegant, and insolent, and everyone in his vicinity behaves toward him with a familiarity that indicates their awareness of his frivolous, puerile ways. Billy occupies the lowly post of schoolteacher’s assistant in a small rural schoolhouse, and many of his scenes do feature flippant exchanges with the censorious instructor Sullivan, but for the most part, Billy spends his days evading his master and his work as much as possible. Several passages of the play amount to Billy-centered digressions from the main plot, meandering away from *Wicklow Mountains*’ tale of the morally-upright villager Felix, his discovery of gold in the mountains, and the difficulties that follow his sudden acquisition of wealth to focus instead on Billy’s outrageously impudent antics, as the schoolteacher’s assistant wanders aimlessly from one piece of laziness, petty thievery, or ineffective flirtation to another. It is also in the capacity of loafer and fool that Billy generally crosses paths with the play’s central characters, though his actions do occasionally contribute somewhat to the principal storyline, as seen in his misguided endeavor to abduct and marry a girl destined for Felix’ highborn friend Franklin. The attempted kidnapping is a folly which the other characters rush to terminate but soon forgive, since it was Billy’s preposterously high estimation of his own personal charms, and not malicious intent, that led him to the crime.

In Billy, the malapropism of such statements as “a ruffle on my right hand, and a ruffle on my wrong – no my left hand” (114) exists alongside a propensity for wily wordplay that surfaces in such incidents as his brazen theft of Squire Donnybrook’s fine coat. When, in answer to Billy’s inquiry, Donnybrook states he always “give[s his] discarded clothes to [his] man”
Hause 20

(127), and proceeds some lines later to casually address O’Rourke in passing as, “Billy, my man” (128). Billy considers the coincidence justification enough for his subsequent robbery. Billy’s perpetually audacious behavior sends him at one point briefly to prison, but he escapes in an amusing send-up of supposedly characteristically Irish superstition. Taking Sullivan’s censorious, “I shouldn’t wonder if the ground was to open up and swallow you alive” (166) as his cue, Billy lowers himself through a trapdoor in the cell floor in a histrionic pantomime of being dragged to Hell for constant swearing that utterly convinces Sullivan while equally exasperating the incredulous Donnybrook. Like Darby, Billy ends his play among the other protagonists in an exultant chorus, unpunished despite his self-centered, poaching, duplicitous ways. The appellation “modified Stage Irishman,” which Kosok uses in reference to Darby, would seem to apply to Billy as well, since that character also frequently becomes “in his mischievousness…the source rather than the object of the audience's amusement” (52).

While O’Keeffe’s benevolent sketches of Darby and Billy truly incorporate features of the Stage Irishman into their overall design, other characterizations present in O’Keeffe’s comedies serve to explode the idea that Irish identity should generally be associated with a roguish personality. Most conspicuous, of course, in this arena, is O’Keeffe’s aforementioned use of idealistically upstanding Irish characters as foils to the rascally fools, so that while Darby is off blundering his way into a farcical duel in Poor Soldier, Patrick is proving himself a man of honor to the very officer he has yet to recognize as his rival for Norah’s hand. As the urbane Captain Fitzroy bates Patrick with suggestions of his relative unworthiness to court Norah, Patrick responds with a complete lack of avarice and jealous spite, capping off his artless series of revelations with his self-identification as the man who once heroically rescued Fitzroy on the field of battle. By the end of their conversation, Patrick has on the whole impressed the Captain
so much by his “noble spirit” that Fitzroy romantically exclaims, “there let the embroider’d
epaulet take a cheap lesson of bravery, honor, and generosity, from sixpence a day and worsted
lace” (296).

In the same vein, associations Prussian characters draw between roguery and Irishness in
*Love in a Camp* seem generally to bear up when applied to Darby, but fall flat when Patrick
enters the picture, as when Marshal Fehrbelin mistakenly reprimands the poor soldier for a piece
of trickery of which he was entirely innocent. At this point in the play, for his own mischievous
ends, Darby has caused a completely inappropriate man to be substituted for the groom of a
marriage ordained by high command, but the cold sarcasm of the marshal’s indictment of the
deed—and the quality of Irishness to which he relates it—rings unjust as he tells Patrick with
scorn, “…this very equal match is what you in Ireland I suppose call a good joke, as I know a
practical jest is the leading feature of your countrymen, I’m not so ill-tempered as to quarrel with
your characteristic humour…” (428). While the unrepentant Darby does in fact call the entire
scheme a very good joke indeed (431), Patrick is not amused, and the Marshal’s misfired diatribe
therefore distinctly holds true for Darby alone, and not for all Irish. Along very similar lines, in
*Wicklow Mountains* O’Keeffe juxtaposes the greedy Billy O’Rourke and the vainglorious
schoolmaster Sullivan with, among others, the scrupulous Norah, who will not take gifts when in
doubt of their origin, and the selfless Felix, who does not hesitate to distribute the wealth he
obtains by chance among the needy of his acquaintance. In the same way, while the superstitious
Mary and clown-like Muns number among the tenants of the Esmond estate in *Prisoner at
Large*, so do the quick-witted Rachel and valiantly loyal Jack Connor. Mary and Muns may
cringe away from entering a chamber they consider haunted by a phantom, and Muns may make
contradictory promises without a qualm where there is money to be gained, but Rachel’s calm
never wavers in the face of theoretical ghosts, and Connor, open-handedly generous in every other way, will under no circumstances brook an insult to his landlord.

O’Keeffe also undermines the supposed correlation between Irish origin and rascally conduct by the introduction of non-Irish scoundrels who garner less sympathy than their Irish counterparts. In *The Poor Soldier*, for instance, Darby is favorably contrasted with the even more foolishly swaggering—and much more malicious—Frenchman Bagatelle, and when up against the slow-witted Olmutz of *Love in a Camp*, Darby comes across as an impressively fluent conversationalist despite his typically lackadaisical speech structures. The overreaching and adulterous flirtation Patrick initiates with a disinclined girl while he is still overcome by unaccustomed feelings of power and unrestricted liberty as an officer abroad at the start of *Love in a Camp* seems less condemnable, too, when measured against Olmutz’ and Mable’s truly adulterous late-night rendezvous, and in *The Prisoner at Large*, the tenants’ distaste for their new French lord seems so justified by his dastardly, conniving ways that Lord Esmond, despite his previous abandonment of the estate, comes across as a worthy master on his return. Furthermore, in *Tantara-Rara, Rogues All* (1787), the same disconnect between Irishness and knavery is affected by a slightly different form of juxtaposition. The first scene opens on the English swindler Peter’s declaration, “I am a rogue” (351); the admission is unsurprising, given the play’s title, but the ensuing description of how Peter plans to carry out his double-dealing under the guise of “Irish Tim Carty” casts amusing aspersions on the conventions that would normally interpret a reprobate character as Irish in truth and not merely disguise. In the company of rogues of various nationalities, Peter spends the rest of *Tantara-Rara* fluctuating between his impersonation of an “Irish butler, with [his] jokes, brogue and purple nose” (357) and asides
delivered “in his own voice” (373)—a constant reminder that the connection between Carty’s Irishness and Peter’s roguishness is, in this case, a sham.

In an even more emphatic deflation of Irish stereotype, the honorable Franklin of *Wicklow Mountains* temporarily exchanges his true identity as “young squire and lord of the manor” for that of “an old, merry, jolly, lying, rattling, singing, wicked, mumping, traveling merchant” (112), adopting an unrefined manner far removed from his usual comportment as he conducts his clandestine investigation into the unexplained source of his childhood friend Felix’s sudden wealth. Though Franklin’s real, morally assiduous and cultured persona is as Irish as that of the peddler he enacts, it seems to fade into the background in some scenes, as when, for instance, Franklin’s peddler dramatically seizes control of the dialogue with some fanciful storytelling. The squire’s alter-ego claims to have once owned a tavern, but to have been cast into mendicancy by the ghost of a horseshoe-thief “choak’d” by the law who

even under ground…couldn’t be quiet with his old tricks, for as the travellers rode by [where he was buried opposite my door]…he’d up with his big fist, out of his grave, and claw off the horses shoes as they galloped over him.—Oh! Oh! says the gentlemen of the country this won’t do, so they opened his grave, and there they found a bushel of horse-shoes snug and airy—however it spoiled my house for nobody would ride near it…. (116)

Bringing a penchant for alcohol into his characterization, Franklin concludes, with a hint at the Stage Irishman’s impulsiveness, that he then “drank off [his] ale and commenc’d traveling merchant” (116). The end of *Wicklow*, in which Franklin reassumes his lordly status and true character to gravely lecture his countrymen and the audience, “…were we to turn our attention a little more to [the causes of Irish poverty], instead of the unhappy necessity of punishing crimes,
we might prevent their commission…” (190), underscores the hyperbolic nature of the bogus traveling merchant, and by extension of the variety of Stage Irishman he represents.

The preceding examples on the whole demonstrate O’Keeffe’s debunking of the concept of the Irish population as characterized by ubiquitous scheming and treachery, but another, contrasting stereotype of Irishness had arisen to walk the British stage by the playwright’s time as well. Leerssen notes that

around the middle of the eighteenth century…the Stage Irishman is integrated by an amelioration which inverts or re-interprets the attributes given to him previously. No longer a craven, heartless, dissembling enemy, he becomes a noble, sentimental, forthright hero, whose loyalty to England is only highlighted by his Irish accent and other markers of non-Englishness. (88)

At first glance, Leerssen’s comments may appear to account for O’Keeffe’s theatrical treatment of Ireland, suggesting that having rejected one form of subjugating stereotype, his work simply falls into another, joining O’Keeffe to the ranks of the primarily “Irish rather than English playwrights” (Leerssen 88) of his day who portray the natives of Ireland as simple, trusty servants to the crown. And in fact, in his memoirs, as he describes his own early enthusiasm for the sight of British nobility, O’Keeffe does make the claim that “affection to their monarch was, and ever will be native Irish” (Recollections 77). This motif finds expression in such characters as Esmond’s generous, faithful tenant Jack Connor in Prisoner at Large and the overtly stereotyped, bluntly loyal manservant Thady Mac Brogue of O’Keeffe’s earlier play The She-Gallant (1767)—a piece which was, as has been noted, written for Dublin audiences (Kosok 51). However, the vast majority of O’Keeffe’s sympathetic Irishmen do not fit into this category, as Darby is certainly no “forthright hero” while the portrayals of Patrick, Felix, Lord Esmond, and
other better-educated characters seem to have most in common personality-wise with the English heroes of contemporary works—such as O’Keeffe’s own lovestruck Delamour of The She-Gallant, or the adventurous Harry Thunder of Wild Oats.

In fact, O’Keeffe persistently refrains from drawing a sharp divide between Irish nature and English nature, and so discounts the idea that the two qualities could ever take on definite enough form for their respective superiority or inferiority to be determined. In this regard, O’Keeffe’s philosophy diverges drastically from that of the Anglo-Irish authors “who thought to combat the negative import of [the English] image [of Ireland]” and yet “in fact agreed with its most basic point: the fact that the ‘real’ Ireland is that which differs most from England” (Leerssen 84). As has been seen, O’Keeffe’s works instead prompt British audience members to identify with the Irish characters on stage, frequently employing in the process a strategy Leerssen remarks wholly new for the period, viz. the “confrontation of the Irishman with ‘real’ foreigners,” such as the Spanish or French, that is “used to show how little he, after all, differs from Englishmen” (149). Just as O’Keeffe sets this tactic to work in the Patrick plays through the deployment of Bagatelle and the sillier Prussian soldiers, and just as in Prisoner at Large he heightens Lord Esmond’s agreeability by pitting him against the slimy Count Fripon, in the three-act comic opera Fontainebleau (1784), O’Keeffe utilizes a foreign setting to humorously underscore the relative proximity of Irishness to Englishness. As Leerssen observes, in this play, “an Irish innkeeper in France…lures English tourists to her establishment…by serving roast beef and other English fare, and trumping up the Englishness (or, at least, non-Frenchness) of her Irish birth” so that when a character asks, “And you are English?” the innkeeper replies, “English! that’s what I am, I was born in Dublin” (Leerssen 149). While O’Keeffe’s Irish characters conspicuously denote their nationality from time to time, so that “in The Wicklow
Mountains, there is much swearing by St. Patrick” (Harvey 23), the functions they perform in the plot and the responses they elicit from the audience are generally equivalent to those of the non-Irish protagonists of English comedies. Christopher Wheatley classes the juxtaposition of a witty heroine and hero with a sentimental heroine and hero among “the recognizable elements” of British comedy of the period (109), and while this device manifests itself in O’Keeffe’s plays in the form of Irish acting as foil to Irish, a crucial point, the basic structure hearkens back to earlier writers of the English tradition such as, for instance, Shakespeare.

Accordingly, the contrast between Darby and Patrick in Poor Soldier frequently recalls the juxtaposition of Benedick and Claudio in Shakespeare’s Much Ado about Nothing, as the sobriety of Patrick and Claudio highlights the foolishness of Darby and Benedick while the humor of the latter pair skewers the self-importance of the first. At one point, even the phrasing of the dialogue in Poor Soldier clearly echoes that of Much Ado: just as Claudio’s overwillingness to play the wounded lover is critiqued by Benedick’s unconcerned, “Alas, poor hurt fowl, now will he creep into sedges” (II.1.178), Patrick’s similar overreaction to supposed evidence of Norah’s infidelity is ridiculed in Darby’s nonchalant, “Ay there he goes singing about the roads like a discarded fowl” (287). In Love in a Camp, further echoes of Shakespeare resound as Darby’s story that Patrick has committed suicide plays a key role in bringing the wayward hero and his wife into a harmonious reunion. Unlike the benevolent falsehood of Hero’s death in Much Ado, Darby’s lie is never believed, but it still contributes significantly to the realization of Patrick’s healthy chastisement and future marital security.

In the same way, other elements identifiable with traditional British drama in O’Keeffe’s comedies work to reinforce the intimation that to be Irish is not to be innately subordinate to England. Members of O’Keeffe’s original audiences who were familiar with his comedic style
would have easily recognized the total lack of malice in O’Keeffe’s characterization of Darby, not only because an affinity for the character is self-evident in his overall role in the Patrick plays, but also because many of Darby’s supposedly “typically Irish” traits surface in non-Irish contexts in O’Keeffe’s work. For his popular *Tony Lumpkin in Town* (1774), for instance, O’Keeffe straightforwardly borrowed, name and all, the English rustic of the title from Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer*. O’Keeffe’s portrait of Tony Lumpkin centers on the impudence, stumbling wordplay, and spontaneity of action that are also to be found in the Irish Darby. In O’Keeffe’s much later comedy *Wild Oats* (1790), Rover, the decidedly moral hero of the play, integrates all of these qualities as he gleefully quotes himself into one illustrious role after another from over a century of British drama. Rover’s reiterated fondness for Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* in particular also harkens back to Patrick and Darby’s adventures in *Love in a Camp*, which feature at one point a reworking of Rosalind’s cross-dressing intrigues.

Incidentally, Flora’s effective adoption of a male disguise in *Love in a Camp* provides a major example of O’Keeffe’s tacit insistence that personal morality supersedes instituted authority. The defiant activity of female characters in the comedies goes hand-in-hand with the refutation of England’s natural right to rule Ireland. As the outcomes of both *Prisoner at Large* and *Poor Soldier*, for example, condone Rachel’s insubordination toward her toadying father and Kathlane’s defiance of Fr. Luke, O’Keeffe overturns the idea that either woman should be constrained to obey her guardian without question due to mere circumstances of birth and social connection. That O’Keeffe should frame the position of his female characters in this way correlates perfectly with his portrayal of Irish characters in general, since from the Elizabethan period, if not earlier, English writing had frequently associated Irishness with femininity in a deprecating fashion (Carroll 381). Rather than respond to such slurs by exaggerating the
manliness of Irishmen or encouraging the repression of the supposed feminine aspect of Irish character, as later Irish nationalists were to do (Kiberd 240), O’Keeffe endows his women with self-assurance and agency. In his Recollections, he states that “Of all Shakspeare’s [sic] plays, ‘As you like it’ was ever my favourite” (92), and his delight in Rosalind’s manipulation of her society shines clear as Flora in trousers similarly brings the relationships of Love in a Camp back to rights. Entirely unperturbed by Fr. Luke’s censure of her cross-dressing methods (443), Flora acts with commendable confidence to avert the violence and heartbreak that momentarily loom on the horizon for Patrick and his companions.

O’Keeffe’s manipulation of the perceived connection between issues of gender and social empowerment came into play even outside the boundaries of the written text of his plays as the Irish actress Mrs. Kennedy took on the role of Patrick in the original London performances of Poor Soldier only to be replaced by a male lead in productions of Love in a Camp. In the sequel to Patrick’s Irish adventures, the protagonist finds himself elevated to a position of authority similar to that occupied in The Poor Soldier by the somewhat arrogant Captain Fitzroy, a man who, while ever ready to deliver preachy depositions of Enlightenment ideals, also initially thinks to appropriate Norah without much concern over her opinion on the match, and who does not hesitate to promise a decidedly unqualified priest a bishopric in order to further his personal undertaking. Fitzroy exits the play on a high note, having relinquished any supposed claim to Norah and actively enabled her marriage to the man she loves, but the more supercilious aspects of his behavior carry over to Love in a Camp to this time find their expression in the once-

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5 The disparity between the casting choices for the role of Patrick in the original productions of Poor Soldier and Love in a Camp, along with the possible implications of these choices for the interpretation of Patrick’s character by the original audience, was pointed out to me in conversation with Dr. Helen Burke, whom I sincerely thank both for this suggestion and others she made throughout the study.
Hause 29

unassuming Patrick. Even though the sequel to Poor Soldier maintains Patrick in his previously-established role as central dramatic hero, as an officer he does betray a sense of grasping arrogance he did not feature as a mere poor soldier. The Patrick of Poor Soldier would never attempt to forcefully acquire the caresses of an unwilling girl, but in Love in a Camp, this is precisely what the newly-minted officer does—and moreover, he initiates his swaggering conversation with Flora without registering any concern over his responsibility toward Norah as a husband. The change in actors that accompanied this change in attitude on Patrick’s part doubtless underscored his altered position, as, far removed from his idealized Irish countryside, the protagonist demonstrated to London audiences that social privilege can have more bearing on a person’s disposition than race or nationality. Fortunately, of course, Patrick comes to realize the callousness of his inflated ego, and learns via Flora’s efforts to refrain from the sort of self-entitled thinking that leads to a disregard for the rights of others, and thereby to emotional and physical aggression.

O’Keeffe’s keen disapproval of violence finds expression not only in the conciliatory activities of enlightened characters like Flora, but also in the dialogue of those characters who most nearly conform to the traditional English model of Irish ignorance and barbarity. Sophisticated arguments in favor of forms of violence such as duels or wars ricochet off of Billy O’Rourke and Darby as the clowns repeatedly restate the issue in simpler terms. For example, as Patrick recounts how he was left for dead on the battlefield in America, the idealistic gloss he places over the brutalities of warfare with the statement, “There was glory for you,” is muddied somewhat as Darby responds, nonplussed, “Hem! and so they found you bleeding in your glory?” (281). Billy O’Rourke also exposes the senselessness of violence when he becomes an unwitting mouthpiece against the severities of capital punishment with his remark that “Mr.
Sullivan says [highway robbers] are always gibbeted upon the spot where the fact is committed, hung up in chains, as a warning to the crows, and the sheep, and the seagulls” (136). The seagulls being unlikely to profit much from such a warning, Billy’s statement critiques the state’s approach to crime perhaps even more forcibly than do Franklin’s later words on the subject at the end of Wicklow Mountains.

Elsewhere in Wicklow Mountains, Billy O’Rourke shatters romantic notions of revolutionary or political aggression as well, destabilizing associations of violent insurgency with the Irish character through his own evident desire to remain uninvolved. When Billy’s shrugging impulsivity meets the righteous indignation of politically-engaged radical Redmond O’Hanlon—a stereotyped image of surly rebellion—the contrast is pronounced. O’Hanlon, by his own admission a former Whiteboy (153) and thus presumably a past participant in mob protests and to some degree, acts of countryside terrorism, harbors a self-aggrandizing views of his crimes. At the beginning of the play, his unsuccessful attempts to requisition to dubious ends such weapons from Mr. Sullivan as his horse pistols and blunderbuss (123) culminate in a veiled threat of violence: “mind, Mr. Sullivan, you call me a Defender, and a Heart of Steel, if I am what you say, take the consequence” (123). O’Hanlon never proves such a villain as to realize this threat—in fact, in keeping with O’Keeffe standards, he never proves much of a villain at all, but is rather given the opportunity to explain to the audience “what heavy grievances [the Irish countryside] lay under” to provoke him into action (153), so that his insubordinate stance is viewed with understanding. The suspicion and trepidation Mr. Sullivan expresses regarding O’Hanlon’s violent methods, however, are echoed in Billy’s later response to the man’s rhetoric.

6 Condemnation of the over-harsh penal system illustrated in Wicklow is also achieved in some instances in dialogue delivered directly by the sententious schoolteacher Bob Sullivan, without the necessity of Billy’s misquoting. The preposterousness of the argument Sullivan lays out in favor of capital punishment speaks for itself when he tells the innocent Felix, “True…you’ll be hanged in chains, and as I write in the boys copy-books, that will learn you wisdom in the days of your youth” (162).
As Billy considers enlisting O’Hanlon as an accomplice in his intended elopement with Squire Donnybrook’s daughter, the former Whiteboy breaks into a song overspilling with braggadocio, in which he describes the night of his birth as a time when “The Banshee moan’d! The earth did quake! / A raven sung!—A thunder peal! / For then first throbbed an Heart of Steel” (154). After this little display, Billy decides not to enlist his help after all, declaring, “What a terrible fellow with his rocks and split ravens, banshees and bull-beef—he may take Miss Helen from me, and murder us both and throw us into a quarry, like two dying lovers, and [there]’ll be a ballad made about us” (154). As always, the pronounced contrast between the two very different takes on romanticized violence expressed by characters that incorporate, in different ways, elements of the Stage Irishman, reinforces the fact that no single characteristic or set of characteristics can be ascribed to every person of Irish nationality.

O’Keeffe’s most captivating deployment of Stage Irishman features in opposition of violence, however, is probably to be found in Love in a Camp, where Darby manages to prevent a duel by casting it in terms of supposed Irish barbarity. Leerssen notes that even throughout the sentimentalization of the Teague character in the mid-eighteenth century, “some opprobrium still stuck to the [figure], particularly that of a fondness for fast life and the duel” (60). In Love in a Camp, however, Darby’s position as a stand-in for the Stage Irishman allows O’Keeffe to explode the allegation that the Irish harbor an improper propensity for risk-taking and violence as his character displays anything but enthusiasm for the dangerous transaction. On the contrary, with the simple motive of self-preservation, Darby renders the idea of a bloody fight to the death so repellent to his Prussian opponent that the other soldier calls the engagement off. Though the pistols that were to be wielded in the ostensibly civilized fashion are just as potentially deadly as the “two blunderbusses, charg’d with razor-blades” Darby outrageously claims as customary in
Irish duels (450), the gory savagery of Darby’s image, along with the callous nature of his discourse on possible methods of disposal of the loser’s corpse, prove enough to put the duelist off dueling. The Prussian soldier’s belief in the barbarity of Ireland and the Irish make Darby’s deception possible, but the situation garners its entertainment value from the audience’s contrasting recognition that Darby is flaunting his apparent bloodlust only in an attempt to avert bloodshed. The joke is on those who would maintain the superiority of English civilization to Irish barbarism as Darby unveils a supposedly civilized custom for the savagery it is.

O’Keeffe’s ability to break apart his audience’s expectations of Irishness without disrupting the lighthearted tone of his work is, in short, marvelous, but strangely his genius in this area goes largely unremarked by dramatic critics. The truly impressive aspects of his comedic writing seem totally obscured from the notice of most commentators by a cumbersome preoccupation with the playwright’s more technical failings—his feebleness as a poet, for instance. Finding in his writing “a deplorable flatness” (Duggan 142), scholars give the plays one quick perusal, lay to O’Keeffe’s charge “countless inanities in nineteenth century musical drama” (Nicoll 201), and move on. If such impatient critics were to spare O’Keeffe a second glance, however, they might discover more to his creations than they first assumed. Darby and his cohorts have triumphed over the scorn and prejudice of their audience before; given the chance to speak, they may do so again.
Chapter Two: Lord Esmond in Exile; or, The Malady of Absenteeism in O’Keeffe’s Plays

John O’Keeffe’s creative exertions on behalf of his native land do not end at the destabilization of racial stereotype. Alongside their evident advocacy of the contention that the Irish national identity is to be no less esteemed than the British—or, more specifically, English—national identity, O’Keeffe’s comedies repeatedly broach the question of the source of the economic and political fragility on display in the Ireland of the playwright’s era. For one thing, in those works in which the action takes place in a specifically Irish setting, the dialogue occasionally proffers an explicit statement of the author’s view that his country suffers from a lack of responsible conduct on the part of those in power. For another thing, the same concern surfaces in more implicit terms even in comedies that make no direct mention of Ireland or the Irish, as O’Keeffe develops his plots into illustrations of the notion that the proper relationship between governor and governed can only be maintained as long as tangible, intimate contact between the two parties is also maintained.

According to O’Keeffe, as the distance between landlord and tenant, for instance, increases, the connection between the two naturally deteriorates. Consequently, the removal of the responsible party from a familiar involvement with the needs of his dependent is shown to result in a power vacancy left undefended against misappropriation by whatever vampiric entity might happen along to exploit the rightful governor’s privileges without satisfying the accompanying duties of the position. In O’Keeffe’s comedies, this dilemma can take on the guise of not only the landlord-tenant estrangement described above, but also the more allegorical separation of lover from beloved or of husband from wife. In this way, O’Keeffe’s writing on

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7 The identification of Ireland with female roles traditionally seen as subservient to corresponding male roles—such as that of a wife to a husband—and the ensuing identification of England with the masculine, is, I think, a genuine element of O’Keeffe’s dramatic work. A study of the full implications of the representations of gender in O’Keeffe’s comedies, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.
the whole promotes the idea that the management of any given population is best off in the hands of those who live among that population and share its concerns. That is to say, in the view encouraged by O’Keeffe’s plays, the ideal governors of Ireland are the Irish themselves.

Understandably, O’Keeffe levels his most overt denouncements of the British-dominated system of Irish government at the most notorious symptom of its flaws, absentee landlordism. Also known as absenteeism, the habit displayed by many of Ireland’s landed gentry of carelessly deserting their estates for more exciting milieus was, as Harvey and Pry point out, widely considered in O’Keeffe’s day to be one of the primary causes of Ireland’s difficulties, and many social commentators pounced on the supposed epidemic as a convenient means of explaining away the nation’s relative impoverishment (35-36). Though for O’Keeffe, the discussion does not end there, his voice certainly does lend support to the prevalent complaint against the irresponsible abandonment of Irish estates to the supervision of stewards whose personal investment in the property often proved insufficient to ensure a real concern for the upkeep of the land or the wellbeing of its denizens. In *Prisoner at Large*, especially, this theme comes to the forefront as the protagonist, erstwhile absentee landlord Esmond, learns to overcome the reckless negligence that before the play began resulted in his imprisonment in Paris for gambling debts, thereby threatening both the man’s estate and the man himself with the fate of perpetual atrophy. By the end of the play, Esmond instead develops a dedicated sense of duty and loyalty to his faithful tenants, who, in an instance of sentimental idealization on O’Keeffe’s part, are depicted as having staunchly awaited their landlord’s return without rancor or resentment throughout his mostly self-inflicted exile. As the curtains prepare to fall on the image of the Irish manor restored to rights, Esmond outlines the moral of his story with the sententiously unambiguous lines, “My ruin, I hope, will teach our Nobility, instead of travelling to become the dupes of foreign
O’Keeffe’s optimistic suggestion—the notion that the Irish upper classes might well improve their nation’s situation merely by putting into practice an appropriate consideration for their social subordinates—pivots on the words “stay at home.” The phrase specifies what O’Keeffe means by an Irish upper class in this context; those who merit a position of social and economic prestige in Ireland, it suggests, are the members of the nobility who consider the island their home, and who can hope to govern it properly only because they devote the majority of their attention to it. The estate in *Prisoner at Large* is Lord Esmond’s true home, the place where he belongs, and that is why he has the latent potential to run it correctly.

Esmond’s play also insinuates, conversely, that those who identify themselves primarily with another location could never be apt governors of the Irish, since rather than act with caring sensitivity toward the governed, such foreign encroachers are likely to indulge only in the parasitic exploitation of resources. Thus, in *Prisoner*, very few sympathetic overtones hang about the emphatically French Count Fripon, a figure emblematic of the “foreign sharers” Esmond mentions in the conclusion. Fripon numbers among the Parisians who take advantage of the touring protagonist’s inexperience to underhandedly appropriate his money, imprison him in their city’s jails, and attempt a takeover of his estate during his enforced exile from it. The disagreeable nature of *Prisoner*’s symbolic foreigner is underscored further by his endeavors to compel the tenant Rachel to marry him when her affections are already engaged elsewhere, and by the general repulsion his swaggering attitude and avaricious behavior is seen to inspire in the honorable Irish inhabitants of the grounds. As an unlikable intruder, Fripon’s alien nature
highlights Lord Esmond’s belonging, solidifying the idea that only the Irish should govern the Irish.

Of course, as a prospective stand-in for the Anglo-Irish whose families were of more recent immigration to the country than their tenants, Lord Esmond could be seen as occupying a middle position between Ireland and England, and his conflict with Count Fripon could be viewed as the triumph of British qualities, allegedly shared by all decent Irishmen, over starkly contrasting properties of Frenchness. Leerssen argues that in the many contemporary plays featuring a clash of Irish and French reminiscent of the Esmond/Fripon dichotomy,

what is at issue…is really a projection of the English audience’s anti-French attitude onto Irish characters—a projection which liberates the audience’s own anti-French attitude from its English subjectivity. English values thus become universal values, shared by all the good (e.g. Irish) characters, denied by the bad (e.g. French) ones; in the process, Englishness can become a positive value in itself. (151)

An interpretation of *Prisoner at Large* restricted to these terms would nullify an understanding of the work as challenger to the prevailing London-based views of the English-Irish relationship, reducing the play to merely another eighteenth-century instance of audience-mandated pandering that declines to critique the dominant mindset in any way, however oppressive that mindset might be to the Irish people.

The focus on the relationship between setting and character in *Prisoner at Large*, however, carries heavier implications for a discussion of British rule in Ireland than Leerssen’s reading of otherwise similar plays would suggest. Whatever his family’s history might be, Lord Esmond himself is not only Irish, but he is an Irishman in Ireland. Within the framework of his
initial exile and much-desired return, Esmond’s identity as native Irish overrides any association he might have with other nationalities. Similarly, the Irish context in which Count Fripon is viewed lessens the importance of his identity as specifically French and heightens the significance of his overall foreignness. While O’Keeffe does not alienate his London audience by casting a blatantly British intruder as villain to the piece, the fact remains that any possessive claims staked in Ireland from a distance must be associated with the interloping discourtesy of Fripon rather than Lord Esmond’s natural claim to entitlement. While onlookers are moved to identify with Esmond and his tenants, such identification does not subsume the Irishness of the characters to the Englishness of the audience, but rather works the other way around, drawing the audience into complicity with the author’s view that a non-native government whose center rests outside Irish borders cannot be condoned as the appropriate authority for Ireland, even when the discussion applies to so illustrious a power as the British Empire.

*Prisoner at Large* is not the only O’Keeffe play to verbally denounce absenteeism, and by extension, the foreign administration of Ireland. In *Wicklow Mountains*, the Irish protestor Redmond O’Hanlon justifies his quarrel with the state with a simplified account of the irresponsible behavior of those in power. Indignant in the face of Billy O’Rourke’s apparent apathy for the idea of taking a stand against social injustices, O’Hanlon retorts, “See you not what heavy grievances we lay under—our great landlords spending their money abroad, their stewards patch by patch enclosing our commons, and their parsons with their rich livings leaving us in the claws of their cursed griping tithe proctors” (153). Such overt argument for the maintenance of Irish government within Ireland, and the reinforcement such argument receives through direct embodiment in the relationships of many of O’Keeffe’s characters, makes it
strange for critics to view O'Keeffe as acquiescent to the claims of the established British order. And yet, his work is frequently interpreted in this way by modern commentators.

For instance, a poem O’Keeffe dedicated to King George IV after the 1800 conflation of the Irish Parliament with the British fervently pleads with the monarch to “REPEAL THE UNION!” but Heinz Kosok finds this versified entreaty interesting exclusively due to what he sees as its complete departure from O’Keeffe’s usual manner (45). The political viewpoint outlined in the poem, Kosok claims, “is not in any way borne out by the facts of [O’Keeffe’s] life” (45), which renders the verses, if the critic is to be believed, intriguing little oddities, but of small use to a study of the playwright’s other work. What Kosok seems to mean primarily by referring to “the facts of [O’Keeffe’s] life” is simply that, for debatable reasons, O’Keeffe spent a substantially larger part of his existence in England than in Ireland (45). The geographical aspect of the playwright’s biography, however, cannot be taken to say more about his level of engagement in Irish patriotism than does the near-incessant flow of dramatic writings he produced after first establishing himself in the theatre. Whatever O’Keeffe’s motives for remaining in England as long as he did, Wicklow Mountains and Prisoner at Large demonstrate that he put forward highly public criticism of the system of government in place, and so his lines against the Union do not constitute a departure from his usual message at all.

O’Keeffe’s use of Irish setting in his comedies not only provides a venue for characters to discuss the need for on-hand government, but also underscores the viability of Irish

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8 1788’s Catalogue of five hundred celebrated authors of Great Britain, now living asserts with rather laconic humor that O’Keeffe “owes his genius as a poet, to the accident of having demolished his wife’s nose in a fit of jealousy. This transaction obliging him to quit Ireland, he resorted for subsistence to the profession of a dramatic author in London” (Marshall). While it is true that O’Keeffe and his wife Mary parted ways in 1781 (Link xi), more explicit and more comprehensive sources of biographical information than the Catalogue are all, when it comes to the circumstances surrounding O’Keeffe’s removal from Ireland, much more ambiguous than Marshall cares to be. Marshall does not name the sources he drew on for his blurb on O’Keeffe’s career, but it seems probable that he relied on hearsay more than anything else, and as such, his attribution of a rash, Teague-like temperament to O’Keeffe himself does not entirely convince. In any case, the most intimate sources on O’Keeffe’s life tend to imply that the playwright’s British exile from his homeland had more to do with his emotional wounds than with the law.
independence by depicting a country in no need of outside civilizing influence. When it comes to
*Wicklow Mountains*, for instance, despite the play’s imputations of an economic unrest born of
defective—and remote—administration, the Ireland laid out on stage is a picture of pastoral
charm. In O’Keeffe’s Wicklow, the traveler weary of rambles through peaceful green fields can
expect a “nice clean bed of fresh straw” for the night at friendly inns signaling their hospitality
by “hanging out the turf” (114). The benign tranquility of such surroundings also surfaces in
other O’Keeffe plays that utilize an Irish setting, such as *The Poor Soldier*, which Link notes
embodies in its untroubled rusticity the same fairytale of pastoral innocence and simple
happiness that appears in so many of the visual arts of the period (xxxiv). The implication of
such idealized landscapes as Patrick’s modest, unpolished hometown or Lord Esmond’s tight-
knit rustic community is that an increase in British influence in Ireland would not be an
improvement. If anything, the introduction of more of London’s “civilized” ways to the Irish
countryside would disrupt the natural cordiality already established there. The only factor
detracting from the idealization of Ireland in O’Keeffe’s plays, in fact, is the trouble caused by
the temporary absence of authority figures who have improperly abandoned the country for one
reason or another. In O’Keeffe’s Irish comedies, the return of these characters to their native land
enables the expected happy ending by implying that the idealized community has thus been
restored to completeness. With the inference that the nation is now whole, the conclusion follows
that there is no room in Ireland at rights for extraneous—read: British—arbitration, and no need
for it, either.

The romantic gloss O’Keeffe gives the Irish landscape when featuring it as backdrop to
his stage comedies has not always impressed critics as a means of promoting Ireland’s right to
self-government. On the contrary, Kosok finds little meaning in the playwright’s “arbitrary and
accidental” (47) inclusion of Irish framing elements at all, asserting that the few Irish settings in O’Keeffe are hastily sketched at best and are largely unimportant to the general premise of the comedies that take place within them (47). In addition, reviewers who do find O’Keeffe’s idealization of the Irish countryside noteworthy are not generally much more appreciative of its implications as to the playwright’s political message; Duggan, for one, interprets the portraits of imagined Irish locales as little more than rather hokey exploitations of the playwright’s beginnings for the unthinking entertainment of the audience. As a case in point, Duggan rather grudgingly admits that American theater-goers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “appear[] to have looked upon O’Keeffe’s productions with enthusiasm” (142), only to attribute the circumstance to the early development in the United States of “the illusion of a fanciful type of Irishman and a mythical Ireland” (142) that culminated in the ongoing progression of rampant stereotype on stage and film.

If O’Keeffe’s American popularity is supposed to indicate his complicity with those who would reduce Ireland and the Irish to a trivial cliché, however, then he should by extension prove to have been unpopular among audiences with a distaste for this sort of stereotyping. Duggan’s evaluation of O’Keeffe’s work takes this consideration into account with the insistence that “[v]ery few plays of this Dublin-born dramatist had any considerable vogue in Ireland” (142). Enough evidence exists to the contrary of this claim, however, that the statement could reasonably be seen as more of an indication of Duggan’s personal anti-O’Keeffe bias than anything else. O’Keeffe does not appear to have offended the sentiments of his Irish viewership by his writings during his lifetime. And at any rate, however O’Keeffe’s contemporary Irish

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9Link mentions that The Poor Soldier, for instance, “was widely acted and printed in Ireland” (xxxiii), that O’Keeffe’s “ten most successful plays...were widely performed in the provinces, in Ireland, and in America” (lix), and that by O’Keeffe’s own assertion, his work was generally recognized in Ireland, with the song “Hibernia! Happy Isle,” from his 1770 piece Colin’s Welcome, “for some years enjoy[ing] preference over ‘Rule, Britannia!’ among many patriotic Irishmen” (xvii).
viewers may have interpreted the portraits of Ireland in works like *Wicklow Mountains* and *Poor Soldier*, the fact remains that O’Keeffe wrote primarily for his British audiences in London, a demographic which in many cases had nothing on which to form their opinion of his country but hearsay. It is to these malleable viewers that the idealization of Ireland is addressed, flying in the face of any notion they may have consciously or unconsciously picked up that Ireland could not possibly get on without Britain.

In actuality, very few of O’Keeffe’s plays feature an Irish setting, but even in works that contain not one Irish character, the societal implications of the plot remain the same. In *Wild Oats*, for instance, the various dilemmas confronted by the central characters all stem from a common source: the selfish abandon displayed by Sir George Thunder years before in briefly linking himself in matrimony to a woman unsuspecting of his transitory motives, then immediately deserting her once the momentary consummation he desired was achieved. In the first scene of the play, Sir George’s lackey, John Dory, expresses the view that any misfortunes to come the knight’s way can be imputed to “that rouge’s trick you play’d Miss Amelia, by deceiving her with a sham marriage…then putting to sea, leaving her to break her heart, then marrying another lady” (3-4). Though Sir George blusteringly remonstrates, an aside to the audience moments later makes it clear that he agrees with his servant’s judgment, and although he believes—incorrectly, as events will reveal—that the marriage ceremony he underwent with Amelia was not legally binding, he sadly admits that his guilt over the deception has negatively impacted his life since, acknowledging that “[w]hen my conduct to poor Amelia comes athwart

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10 Kosok numbers the extant O’Keeffe plays with “a distinctly Irish setting” at a meager three (45), all of which are discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, Kosok goes on to say, “Even if one includes in the list [of works with an Irish setting] O’Keeffe’s early ‘brief dramatic sketches or pantomimes’, written for the Irish stage and now lost, and his pantomime *Harlequin Teague; or, The Giant's Causeway* (Haymarket, 1782) with its wholly fanciful scenery…the total is very modest in comparison to the numerous plays whose setting is simply given as ‘London’” (46).
my mind, it’s a hurricane for all that day” (5). His second wife having long been deceased as the
play begins, Sir George has nonetheless failed to locate the first woman he wronged, and is
manifestly unaware of how great the ramifications of his misdeed have proven for Amelia, who
after Sir George’s abandonment bore his child, lost the infant—in the most literal sense—during
a militant outbreak in the West Indies, and now lives in poverty in England with her brother,
menaced by their rapacious neighbor Farmer Gammon. The audience, however, sees all and
understands that a happy ending can only be achieved once the knight has returned to his original
wife and resumed the responsibilities he wrongly shrugged off years earlier. Much as Lord
Esmond’s deliberate estrangement from his estate proves detrimental to both himself and his
tenants, exposing them all to exploitation by nefarious characters, Sir George’s intentional
abandonment of his wife leads to difficulties for himself he did not foresee and plunges her into a
state of emotional and economic crisis that exposes her to attempts at extortion from other
characters, highlighting O’Keeffe’s political views even in the absence of any mention of
Ireland.

Perhaps the greatest turmoil caused by Sir George’s duty-shirking is represented in the
quest of the self-styled Jack Rover, *Wild Oat’s* protagonist and the unknowing son of Sir George
and Amelia. It is Rover’s desire for reunion with his parents that sets the plot in motion, as the
story centers around the misunderstandings and misadventures that accompany his boisterous,
rambling search through England in the guise of a highly enthusiastic stage actor. Though
Rover’s rambunctious personality and near-incessant tendency to weave quotes from popular
playtexts into his conversation generally leave bystanders perplexed and amused, the true
emotional consequence of Rover’s separation from his parents materializes unequivocally in an
exchange the protagonist makes with the big-hearted, dim-witted farm boy Sim. When Rover
jokingly threatens Farmer Gammon with the vivid, “by heaven I’ll beat thy blown-up body till it rebound like a tennis ball” (31), Sim, overreacting, leaps to his father’s defense, and the spontaneous action so moves Rover that he allows his stagey persona to flicker a moment, revealing in the interim an underlying sadness born of his disconnected condition that even Sim recognizes as deeply authentic:

Rov. Though love cool, friendship fall off, brothers divide, subjects rebel, oh, never let the sacred bond be crack’d betwixt son and father. Thou art an honest reptile—(to Sim) I never a father’s protection knew—never had a father to protect.

Sim. Ecod, he’s not acting now. (38)

By the conclusion of *Wild Oats*, Sir George, Amelia, and Rover have finally found one another and recognized the true nature of their relationship, and with the restoration of the family and Sir George’s reassumption of the position of responsibility he should never have abandoned, all is made well. The forgiveness Amelia and Rover effortlessly extend to the man who forsook them echoes the easy reacceptance of Lord Esmond on the part of the tenants of *Prisoner at Large*. In addition, the regret that has plagued Sir George over the desertion of his rightful wife for a more economically advantageous connection is finally replaced by a sense of belonging as he rectifies Amelia’s situation and discovers in the acquisition of Rover as a son a benefit of dutiful involvement that during his absenteeism he had not even realized existed. Almost as much as Lord Esmond, Sir George serves as a warning against absentee landlordism and an example of the many advantages in remaining where one’s duties lie. By physically departing from the most important object of his responsibility, leaving her to hardship undefended, alienating himself from any knowledge of her condition, and cutting himself off from the
rewarding relationship he is meant to share with her, Sir George Thunder fails to fill his ideal role until the end of the play. As the curtain falls, however, the firmly-reestablished connection between Sir George and Amelia successfully figures the proper integration of protector and protected, encouraging as ever in O’Keeffe the value of a government closely knit to the governed populace.

The same basic principle finds expression in Poor Soldier and Love in a Camp in the implications of Patrick’s fluctuating position in relation to his hometown and beloved Norah. While Patrick is no landed aristocrat, he does metaphorically possess a portion of the Irish countryside in the figure of Norah, toward whom, as intended fiancé and later as husband, he is uniquely accountable. Poor Soldier, however, begins with the conspicuous absence of the title character from his hometown, a circumstance other characters view with varying levels of disapprobation. Norah, in particular, is left in a very difficult set of conditions by her lover’s absence, as Patrick’s enlisting in the armed forces fighting in America has rendered her unwillingly single and vulnerable to the attempts of her uncle to marry her off to the propertied Captain Fitzroy. Norah’s melancholy sigh, “Well, if Patrick had’nt [sic] forsook me, I shou’dn’t now want a companion” (277) casts Patrick’s decision in a censorious light that echoes the clownish Darby’s artless summary of the situation: Norah has grown indifferent to those around her, he remarks, “since her own sweetheart, Patrick, run away from her and lifted for a soldier” (266). Even Father Luke, the unfeeling uncle whose mercenary attempts to dominate Norah’s future are what caused Patrick to despair of his desired marriage in the first place, views the protagonist’s decampment as a sign of a weak personality, saying that the decision he hastily made “one day, full of ale and vexation” (273) to take himself off for the army demonstrates his thoughtless nature. When Patrick finally returns to Ireland, Darby levels the same implicit
accusation at the poor soldier himself, telling him, "’’Twas a shame for you to turn soldier, and run away from [Norah]’’ (280), to which Patrick rather spiritlessly replies, “Cou’d I help it, when her ill-natur’d uncle refus’d me his consent, and she wou’dn’t marry me without it” (280). While Patrick’s conduct on the battlefield overseas is portrayed as highly commendable, his reason for leaving Ireland at all—a simple weary surrender in the face of the difficulties that confronted him there—is depicted as less admirable, and the implication is that he should never have exchanged his true duty for other, however much more promising, enterprises abroad.

Where Poor Soldier emphasizes the negative consequences of absenteeism for those left behind on Irish soil, Love in a Camp posits an explanation as to why those in positions of authority over Ireland are so apt to ignore their duties in the first place. As discussed in the first chapter of this study, Patrick’s character seems to undergo a change from the first of his plays to the second that corresponds with his acquisition of new levels of power as officer in a military camp in Prussia. Though in the interim between the events of Poor Soldier and its sequel, the protagonist has married his Norah, when Patrick’s homeland and wife are both far out of sight, his patent unconcern over the responsibilities attached to his end of the marriage contract threatens to dissolve the connection forever. In other words, Patrick’s physical removal from the object of his commitment leads him to ignore that commitment altogether, so that where Poor Soldier saw him as a dedicated, if somewhat helpless, lover, Love in a Camp initially portrays him as a promiscuous flirt whose feelings of self-entitlement as an officer lead him into overreaching behavior toward the flower-seller Flora. It is only when the true nature of his comportment is illustrated in more blatant terms by Darby’s ridiculous scheme to abduct Flora that Patrick realizes the folly of his adulterous inclinations. Having allowed himself to be alienated from his wife by more physically immediate interests and a sense of freedom from any
personal consequences from such neglect, Patrick exemplifies the potential flaws of a
government centered away from its subjects and insulated from being directly impacted by the
conditions of their existence. In the musical number that ends *Love in a Camp*, Norah jumps in
after the warning “Oh, maidens take care,” to emphatically add, “Nor trust to your charms, / 
When once from your arms, / You suffer your spousey to run” (455), a moral which offers little
hope for ongoing responsible management on the part of a governing body as removed from its
people as the British upper-classes were from the Irish masses.

Not only O'Keeffe’s comedies set in Ireland, then, but O'Keeffe’s work in general
critiques both absentee landlordism and the larger issue of British government of Ireland. The
pattern of abandonment, reunion, and restoration seen in *Prisoner at Large*, *Wild Oats*, and the
Patrick plays surfaces in O’Keeffe’s writing as early on as the 1767 version of *The She Gallant*,
which commences with the protagonist Delamour’s return to London from a jaunt to Paris and
“the sparkling beauties of the Louvre” (1) to discover that his Emily has in his absence been
unwillingly affianced to another man. It is only with the restoration of Delamour to his original
status as Emily’s fiancé that harmony and happiness can be resumed, just as in other O’Keeffe
plays happy endings are only enabled by the return of Lord Esmond to his estate, Sir George
Thunder to his wife, or Patrick to his hometown. Through dialogue, plot, and setting, O’Keeffe
prompts his British audience to recognize a government native to Ireland and situated in Ireland
as the only proper government for Ireland, achieving through humorous entertainment a
reassessment of the dominant regime.
Chapter Three: Tol-de-lool!; or, Happy Endings for All on O’Keeffe’s Stage

Despite O’Keeffe’s evident dissatisfaction with the state of Irish politics during his lifetime, his plays overall exude a sense of joie de vivre that transcends conflicts born of nationalistic division or social class. Even for comedy, and musical comedy at that, the tone of his writing is exceptionally blithe, sketching out an optimistic view of human beings as fundamentally good at heart, however foolishly they may behave from time to time. In the O’Keeffe pattern of things, therefore, the most problematic of situations generally sort themselves out as the perpetrators of the troubles at hand come to realize the folly of their ways and relent from their selfish schemes, ultimately joining the other characters of the plays in typically celebratory endings that refrain from dividing the cast into heroes and villains when all is said and done. In addition, even on the rare occasions O’Keeffe’s antagonists do not repent and enter into a newborn harmony with those around them, the playwright lets them off relatively easily; as will be discussed, punishment and retribution are not seen in O’Keeffe’s work as ends in and of themselves, and so the comeuppance received by even the most appalling offenders against justice and freedom goes no further than what is required to simply nullify the threat such characters pose to the happiness of everyone else. In the end, general contentment is secured simply by a sense of goodwill so widely shared as to serenely override the few dissenting voices that would inflict on the majority a stifling definition of liberty as the exclusive privilege of a supposedly superior minority. While O’Keeffe’s comedies, in other words, do not encourage violent insurrection against the establishment as a means of advancing the rights of the Irish people, they nonetheless promote greater freedoms for any oppressed populace by depicting the subjugation of one society to another as unreasonable, unjustifiable, and, happily, destined to crumble in the face of enlightened thinking and simple integrity.
That early reviewers frequently admired the nimble exuberance with which O’Keeffe delineated his positive outlook (Kosok 42) is perhaps most notoriously evinced by William Hazlitt’s commentary on the playwright, which claims that “[t]here is no labour or contrivance in his scenes, but the drollery of his subject seems to strike irresistibly upon his fancy, and run away with his discretion as it does with ours” (Nicoll 176). Due to O’Keeffe’s unrivaled production of “light, careless laughter, and pleasant exaggerations of the humorous,” Hazlitt somewhat famously asserts, the Dublin-born comic could easily be considered “‘our English Moliére’” (Nicoll 176). Assignation of an English nationality to O’Keeffe notwithstanding, Hazlitt’s label is not an unfitting appellation for the playwright even the adversarial Duggan recognizes as having reinvigorated his era’s London stage by “introduc[ing] wit, rapid movement and living people” to theaters attended by “a public jaded with false sentimentality, bilious with Germanized pastorals, and in revolt against a twaddling romantic opera” (142). O’Keeffe’s wonderfully lighthearted tone constituted, in short, his greatest popular asset with his original audiences and reviewers, allowing him to share his perspectives with a wide viewership in terms they could comfortably swallow. As “a figure who contributed as much or more than any other eighteenth-century playwright to the cause of laughter” (Link lxi), O’Keeffe contributed simultaneously to the connected cause of increased understanding and sympathy across perceived national borders, and audiences responded with unsuspecting enthusiasm.

The attraction of O’Keeffe’s buoyant style has not, however, impressed more recent critics to the same extent it apparently impacted O’Keeffe’s first audiences and reviewers like Hazlitt. On the contrary, many modern commentators seem to view the unstintingly lively tone of O’Keeffe’s comedies as proof against the overall significance of the plays, suggesting that such seemingly carefree tendencies must negate any serious implications the scripts could have.
Some react to the oft-quoted comparison of O’Keeffe to Molière with frank disbelief, as in Allardyce Nicoll’s pointed remark, “What prompted Hazlitt thus to eulogise so highly that prolific writer of farces…can hardly be decided…” (176)\(^1\), imputing not only a technical inferiority to O’Keeffe’s work, but a lack of complexity or profundity sufficient to warrant a comparison to the comedies of the French master. Molière’s depictions of the varieties of human nature are often tinged with a dark and scornful acrimony, after all, while O’Keeffe’s merely display a wide-ranging affection for the human race.

Actually, as this study has already demonstrated, O’Keeffe’s depictions of character and plot enforce viewer complicity with the playwright’s progressive politics just as far as audience members choose to accept the stories he tells and, by unavoidable extension, the underlying assumptions that serve as conditions for the stories’ development. Though O’Keeffe’s plays endorse a revisionary stance toward the state of English-Irish affairs in his day, however, the lack of bitterly resentful overtones connected to his argument apparently tends to lull present-day readers into the belief that the plays must not be in disagreement with the British government at all. Kosok, as mentioned in the first chapter, asserts that O’Keeffe “appears to go out of his way” to avoid depicting the Irish in contention with the English (48), not only in such matters as his decision to align Patrick’s military activity in *Poor Soldier* with the British forces fighting colonial revolutionaries in the War of American Independence, but also in his simple demurral from portraying British citizens as enemies of Irish characters in any grave terms. Rather than reflect an obsequious insincerity on O’Keeffe’s part, however, the playwright’s choice to refrain

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\(^1\) Nicoll resumes his gripe with the notorious accolade some pages later in the caustic remark that “the farces of this writer seem to have no great claim to attention, in spite of Hazlitt’s discovery in them of Molièresque qualities” (185). See also Duggan’s skeptical reception of Hazlitt’s appraisal (142) and Kosok’s shrugging toleration of the claim despite his interposed opinion of O’Keeffe as, on the whole, “fairly typical of a whole cluster of eighteenth-century writers” (42). Other critics such as Harvey and Pry, defenders of O’Keeffe’s right to a place in the annals of Irish literature, find the remark interesting chiefly for the irony of the misidentification of O’Keeffe’s nationality (20).
from vilifying the British comes across as representative of O’Keeffe’s aspirations for human interaction in general, as he suggests that governmental change can be achieved without overt hostilities, as long as those who recognize that change should take place broadcast the message to those who do not yet understand, much as he does through his plays.

For this reason, in O’Keeffe’s comedies, agents of change work through the explicit illustration of their arguments rather than through the violent overthrow of their opposition. In some of O’Keeffe’s earliest work, for instance, when *The She-Gallant*’s Florimel dons her brother Delamour’s outfit to pantomime an illicit nocturnal visit to Sir Geoffry Ginkle’s reluctant fiancé Emily, the trick convinces the crotchety knight that he will never be able to control Delamour and Emily’s feelings for each other, despite his earlier repeated attempts to dictate the mindset of his intended. Florimel’s brief deception thus establishes in Sir Geoffry’s mind a truth that he would probably never have acknowledged had such action not been taken, and, having finally recognized the folly of his tyrannical insistence on Emily’s unwilling hand in marriage, Sir Geoffry allows the girl to rejoin her true love, Delamour, instead. The success of Florimel’s scheme is rendered unequivocally satisfactory in that it realizes the innately correct relationships between various characters without harming any of them in the process; Sir Geoffry is only chastened insofar as he is granted edifying insight into the way he has appeared to other characters since the start of the play, and with Florimel’s further revelation that it was she, not Delamour, who paid Emily the nighttime call, the central pair of lovers can enter into their marriage with honor untarnished.

The proposition in *She-Gallant* that the natural order of relationships can be restored simply by disseminating an appreciation of the ideal situation to all parties involved finds expression throughout most of O’Keeffe’s comedy. In *Poor Soldier*, for instance, Patrick
overcomes Captain Fitzroy’s rival claim to Norah simply by convincing Fitzroy of his fitness to be Norah’s husband. Once Fitzroy recognizes both the mutual affection Patrick and Norah feel for each other and Patrick’s moral quality, he ceases to be an obstacle to the protagonist’s happiness and instead enables Patrick’s marriage by circumventing the objections of Norah’s uncle to the match and raising Patrick to an officer’s rank. In *Wild Oats*, similarly, all is made right through a simple recognition of the underlying relationships of the characters, as once real father-son and husband-wife ties are acknowledged, all previous attempts to force unnatural connections on the characters in question, or to take advantage of their seemingly unallied positions, dissipate.

In the overwhelmingly congenial scenarios that end O’Keeffe’s plays, even those whose characters primary role was, previously, to unduly curtail the liberty of other characters frequently contribute to the establishment of a happy ending. Just as Captain Fitzroy facilitates the harmonious conclusion to *Poor Soldier*, Sir Geofrey Ginkle willingly helps effect Delamour and Emily’s marriage in *She-Gallant* himself, even after the realization that he has been duped by their friend. The conversion of supposed enemies to allies is achieved partly through indications of their evolving self-awareness, so that after his blustering confrontation with the honest Thady MacBrogue, Sir Geofrey remarks with surprising open-mindedness, “indeed I must do [Thady] the justice to own, that he exercis’d some of the generosity of an *Irishman*, by not pounding me to mummery, when he got me down, which I can’t deny but I deserved” (*She-Gallant* 17). In the same way, *The Son-in-Law* (1779) features an initially domineering father with the telling name of Old Cranky whose laughable attempts to keep his daughter Cecelia from her desired match in favor of other suitors more to his liking terminate as he comes to realize he values his daughter’s happiness over any other consideration. Cranky’s seeming inflexibility and
the distress it causes his daughter are replaced by more amicable interactions with an ease that would be surprising if it were not for the prevalence of other such characterizations in O’Keeffe’s work:

*Cra.* …Cecilia, I will be obeyed—and therefore I insist that you take—

*Cec.* Oh, dear sir!

*Cra.* The man of your choice.

*Cec.* Dear, kind papa! (Link *Plays* 35)

Such optimistic portrayals of authority figures initially exercising their power over others incorrectly but eventually learning to moderate their authority or relinquish it to more fitting decision-makers encourage hope for a peaceful transition from the defective form of government O’Keeffe sees over Ireland to a more reasonable, less restrictive form of national organization. Unlike many of the works of his successors to the Irish stage, O’Keeffe’s comedies do not support a militant reaction to British oppression, so that O’Keeffe could never have cause to mournfully wonder, as W.B. Yeats would nearly a century later, “Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?” (148). Instead, as has been noted in his characterizations of the residents of England and Ireland, O’Keeffe’s plays refrain from classing the English and Irish peoples as inherently different on the individual level, deflating arguments in favor of an enmity based on supposedly mutually exclusive national traits. In *Poor Soldier*, O’Keeffe allows Fitzroy to expound these views at some length after Father Luke mentions the possible objection Norah’s identification as Irish Catholic could pose to a union between herself and the British captain. Fitzroy grandiosely declares,

My dear Sir, be assured I am incapable of an illiberal prejudice against any one, for not having first breath’d the same air with me, or for worshiping the same
Deity in another manner. We are common children of one parent, and the honest man who thinks with moral rectitude, and acts according to his thoughts, is my countryman let him be born where he will. (273)

Statements like this one and the “plea for moderation and co-operation [on which] the curtain falls” in Wicklow Mountains (Harvey 35) reflect the attitude O’Keeffe embodied in his personal life, as indicated by the employment of both a Catholic priest and a Protestant pastor in the ceremony for the dual-religion O’Keeffe marriage (Link ix), but more importantly, such declarations demonstrate that there is more to the characteristically happy O’Keeffe conclusion than a mere indolent preference for cheeriness as the easiest tone to write.

O’Keeffe’s faith in the possibility of a nonviolent resolution to the social and governmental problems of English dominance over Ireland does not negate his plays’ implications that such a resolution is in urgent need of fulfillment. There can be little doubt that O’Keeffe desired to see a change in the way his native land and his adoptive country interacted, or that he promoted such change in his work. His confidence in the imminent possibility of such change through human ability to forgive and rise above old injustices is repeatedly promoted in the conciliatory measures that usually encompass all characters in the conclusion to his comedies. Even when some disaffection remains, as in the case of the hypocritical and imperious Quaker Ephraim Smooth of Wild Oats, it is one-sided and ineffective against the prevailing spirit of goodwill that O’Keeffe envisions as mankind’s natural state. Just as Smooth exits Wild Oats disabled from further malignant action by nothing more than the realization that everyone has seen through his attempts to restrict their behavior to a code he does not deign to follow himself, O’Keeffe seems to suggest that the forces behind detrimental institutions can, and will, be counteracted through a simple increase in the understanding of the general population. If this
hope sounds ludicrous today, in the face of all the old animosities that persist in Ireland even now “as if preserved in amber” (Leerssen 455) despite centuries of attempted reform, we should remember that O’Keeffe did not have our gloomy knowledge of the conflicts that were to engulf Ireland in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If he had, the jovial confidence to O’Keeffe’s writing that some critics take as an indication of his flippancy toward social and political struggles may not have been as much in evidence. In any case, while O’Keeffe’s hopes for his country have proven regretfully unsubstantiated thus far, the bright enthusiasm for life and living that accompanies them still has the power to stimulate and interest today, if given a chance.

If we lived in the sort of world in which O’Keeffe’s flamboyant optimism were considered as worthy of serious reflection as Swift’s seething indignation or Joyce’s cynical despondency, it is possible that there would be no need to discuss the nationalistic themes tackled in this paper, because interpersonal conflicts sustained by nothing more than supposed national divisions would not exist. But we do not live in that sort of world, and very probably never will. All we can do is attempt, as have O’Keeffe and so many others throughout history, to expose and overturn the lies that keep people from recognizing their common ground. It may well be that O’Keeffe was mistaken in trusting to the goodness of human nature to overcome all past aggressions and injuries, but that does not mean that his proposal of mutual understanding and forgiveness in the aftermath of national conflict should be dismissed entirely as unattainable. Humanity on the whole may never reach the heights of generosity and benevolence O’Keeffe hoped for, but as long as there are people who attempt to overcome the ostensibly insuperable partitions erected between themselves and their fellow human beings, unthinking hostility and
ignorant oppression will not reign unchecked. The world is not perfect, but with John O’Keeffe in it, it is a better place than it would be without.
Works Cited


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