

Helen Waddell's The Spoiled Buddha: Intercultural and Gynocentric Dimensions of an Irish Play

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Abstract: This paper analyses the presence of intercultural elements in Helen Waddell's The Spoiled Buddha and discusses its importance for the Irish stage as it breaks with the stage conventions of her time. The analyses also reveals Waddell's antipatriarchal protest and the relationship between man and woman against the male dominated world of Buddhist Japan.

Helen Waddell: “The most distinguished woman of her generation”

Helen Waddell (1889 – 1965) was one of the most celebrated scholars of her age – a woman who wrote and lectured her way up right to the top of the male-dominated world of learning between World War I and II. Her book *The Wandering Scholars* (1927) and her other works that followed were pioneering studies opening up new vistas into the world and the literature of the Middle Ages in continental Europe. They also won her international fame in the 1930s, so that she was the first woman to be made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature as well as of the Irish Academy of Letters, she also became a corresponding fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, and she received honorary degrees from the universities of Durham, Belfast, Columbia, and St. Andrews. And that was not all which her achievements amounted to, but from early on in her life Helen Waddell was also active as a translator, especially of Medieval poetry and prose (*Book of Medieval Latin, Beasts and Saints, The Desert Fathers*), and as a versatile writer of stories for children, of wartime propaganda, etc. As a writer, her breakthrough came with the publication of a novel, also in the 1930s. This is well described by M. Kelly Lynch who comments on her success: “After *Peter Abelard* (1933), her only novel, was published, Waddell was lionized – in Dublin as ‘Ulster's darling,’ and in London as ‘the most distinguished woman of her generation’.”¹

The Spoiled Buddha: Its failure with the public and its importance for the Irish stage

I do not want to discuss here these achievements of Helen Waddell's, which are well documented, but I should like to concentrate on an early work of hers which is scarcely remembered today, her two-act play *The Spoiled Buddha* (1915/1919), which will be discussed in the context of her Japanese background and her position as a woman writer. First, however, a few facts about the first performance of the play in Ireland and its publication will be in order: *The Spoiled Buddha* was performed at the Grand Opera House in Belfast by the Ulster Literary Theatre in February 1915. Helen Waddell's brother Samuel, who had already made himself a name as a playwright and an actor under the pseudonym Rutherford Mayne, played the title-role, and, in the words of one contemporary critic, "brought great dignity to the part of the Buddha."² His acting together with the exotic Japanese design and costume made some impression on the audience but did not save the play. Its esoteric, philosophical and symbolic subject was clearly above the heads of an audience accustomed to homely peasant plays and political burlesques³, and its lack of action (one of its few critics speaks of its 'inaction' and 'statuesque posing'⁴) as well as Gerald MacNamara playing Binzuru, Buddha's light-hearted disciple, "with a brogue" caused sarcastic comments.⁵ The play failed and has never been revived, and many copies of the play, which was printed four years later,⁶ were remaindered and were on sale for 'two-pence' in Irish bookshops for years and years.⁷

In contrast to the failure of her play with the Irish public, Helen Waddell regarded her play as important as she persisted in her attempts at having it printed for four years before Talbot Press accepted it for publication. It is my firm conviction that *The Spoiled Buddha* is actually of great significance for various reasons. Most importantly, it was the first play on a Japanese theme written by an Irish author and performed on an Irish stage also preceding W. B. Yeats's Noh-inspired plays.⁸ Also, her play is important as an experiment in dramatic form again foreshadowing Yeats's innovative dramatic technique. Of course, it appears strangely out of place on an Irish stage in 1915 as it breaks with all its current conventions of setting (a Sacred Grove in India and a Japanese Temple), characters (the Buddha, his Disciples, Japanese worshippers), plot (stasis), and theme. We can also assume that Helen Waddell was aware of what she did as she was well informed about the Irish stage of her time, above all through her brother Samuel, one of the leaders of the Ulster Literary Theatre, and his successes within the established genre of the realistic peasant play, without any trace of his Japanese background which he shared with his sister. Therefore, her deliberate break with all the stage conventions of her time should not be interpreted as a flaw in the technique of an inexperienced playwright, but as indicative of Helen Waddell's great courage, independence of mind, and her willed nonconformity already at the earliest stage in her literary career.

The Spoiled Buddha is also significant for other reasons which, however, can only be discussed after accounting for the Japanese dimension of her play. In fact, her play cannot be understood without seeing it as her reaction to the Japanese environment in which she and her eight brothers and a sister grew up as the children of a Presbyterian missionary (who was also a scholar) towards the end of the 19th century. Therefore, we will now have to deal with Helen Waddell's encounter with Japan and Buddhism before we can discuss *The Spoiled Buddha* any further.

Helen Waddell's Japanese experience: The basis for our understanding of *The Spoiled Buddha*

Helen Jane Waddell was born in Tokyo on May 31st, 1889, the youngest child of the Rev. Hugh Waddell and his wife, Jane Martin, of Banbridge, County Down. Her mother died when she was two, and her father who had married his cousin Matha Waddell returned to Ulster with his family in 1900 and died a year later. Helen got her education at Victoria College and Queen's University, Belfast, but her formative years under the influence of her father spent in Japan left a lasting imprint on her. In her autobiographical writings she often refers to her father as *Sensei* (Japanese master),¹⁰ she describes him as "a sinologue and a saint, the Vicar of Wakefield turned Chinese Scholar", and she continues:

Looking back, the creative memory to me is the murmur of my father's voice, the pacing up and down the verandah in the early light and the household still asleep; the Psalms in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek, the Lord's Prayer in Japanese.¹¹

One can now also understand her later interest in the intercultural world of the Middle Ages. She also recounts that her father called her back to life when she was lying in a coma caused by typhoid fever – by talking to her in Japanese, "the language she had been accustomed to since birth,"¹² and so it does not come as a surprise when she writes: "The richest thing in my life has been Japan – outside books, I mean."¹³

Through her father and his enthusiastic preaching of the Christian doctrine to the Buddhists in Japanese she also got to know much about the Buddhist world. She and her brothers and sister were torn between criticism of Buddhism and their fascination with the world of Buddhist Temples, priests, and pilgrims, but especially with the most impressive bronze statue of the Buddha and the golden statue of Kannon (=Kwannon) the Merciful at Kamakura.¹⁴ Two of the experiences from her childhood which she recounts in later years are of special importance, also to our understanding of her views put into *The Spoiled Buddha*. One description is that of the Daibutsu, the Buddha statue at Kamakura, as awe-inspiring and strongly suggestive of infinity, but, as she says, as

less impressive than a big toad which was her best friend when she was eight: "The massive countenance of the Buddha is the countenance of the man who has achieved indifference: the Toad had the unsought directness, the eternity of the symbol."¹⁵ She also observed that many of the common people preferred praying to Kannon instead of the Buddha. Peasants and pilgrims taught the Waddell children that Kannon the Pitiful never refused a supplication made to her, and she also tells us the story how her brother Billy, longing to have a white rabbit, felt that it was of no use praying to the blue-green Daibutsu at Kamakura where they were staying, but went to the Kannon Temple at night with his sister:

Under the black sweep of her great temple roof a half-burned incense stick sent up a faint spiral of smoke into the moon – steeped air. Billy knelt, clapping his hands together softly. 'Hito Koto Kwannon,' he began; ... and he went on fluently in Japanese.... The rapid utterance stopped. I opened my eyes and looked. Billy was staring at the shrine, his mouth still open, his eyes wide and blank. There was a moment of terrible silence. Then he turned to me. 'I've forgotten,' he choked. 'I've forgotten the Japanese for white rabbit.' ... 'A WHITE RABBIT,' he finished in English, very authoritatively, as one speaks to a foreigner. 'A WHITE RABBIT.' There was not any sound within the shrine... There came no white rabbit. Possibly Kwannon, although a goddess, does not understand English.¹⁶

Here we can observe Helen's and her brother's displacement, torn between their father's Anglo-Irish Presbyterian world and the Buddhist Japanese world surrounding them, and so it may not be as surprising as it may appear at first sight that, in her later scholarly works, she did not deal with England, Ireland, or Japan, but opted for the intercultural but Catholic world of the Middle Ages.

What is also of importance to our understanding of Helen Waddell and *The Spoiled Buddha* is her early and intensive contact with Japanese life, her first-hand acquaintance with the hardship, poverty, and diseases (including epidemics of cholera and typhoid fever) of the poor, who her father particularly cared for.¹⁷ Above all, however, she was struck and personally shocked by getting to know about the low position of women in Japan at the time. It was her Japanese nanny who would make that quite clear to her when Helen asked her questions about her role as a girl:

Was she going to climb Fujisan with the pilgrims? A burst of laughter. Fujisan was not for women to climb; it was far too holy for that. Girls? What were girls? A girl would marry a husband and worship his ancestors, but if she didn't produce a son, then her husband should divorce her and marry a wife who would give him ten sons. Helen took it all in. Wasn't she the equal of Billy and George? It was a challenge that was to recur in an acute form: why was woman not man's equal?¹⁸

As we will see, this final question, and especially Buddhist misogyny, is also central to her play *The Spoiled Buddha*, and we may well regard this play as her attack on it, just as we may partly explain her later career not only as a result of the example set to her by her father but also as a consequence of her drive to counteract the discrimination of women as experienced in Japan early in her life.

The Spoiled Buddha: Its intercultural and gynocentric dimensions

In the *Prologue* to her play, spoken by a Buddhist priest, Helen Waddell explains the subject of the play, with the relationship of man and woman at its centre, and its scene of action to the audience:

The play is about Buddha, in the days before he became a god: and about Binzuru, who was his favourite disciple, and who might have become even as the Buddha, only that he saw a woman passing by, and desired her beauty, and so fell from grace. The scene of the first act is the Sacred Grove of Buddha, and the time is five hundred years before Christ was born. The scene of the second act is the outer court of the Temple at Asakusa, which is a great temple in Japan, and the time is the present day ...¹⁹

In Act I we are shown the confrontation between the Buddha and Binzuru, the Buddha's favourite disciple, caused by Binzuru's confession of having been distracted from the contemplation of the infinite by the beauty of a woman. The Buddha pleads for the infinite as the annihilation of all desire to attain Nirvana, while Binzuru regards desire as the essence of life and interprets the beauty of a woman as a glorification of the infinite.²⁰ The Buddha rejects Binzuru's position and, when some women pass by, "tinkling the samisen provocatively", he condemns womankind in no uncertain terms:

Buddha. The Disturber of Integrity is she, the Entangler of the Upright, the Snare of the World.²¹

Binzuru's position is most strictly rejected by Binzuru's rival, Daruma, who has never felt desire and, with the other of Buddha's disciples, wants Binzuru to be cast out. The Buddha, however, who understands the attraction which a woman holds for a man from personal experience (his involvement with the goddess Kannon²² is hinted at), does not do so, he only excludes him from the inner circle of his disciples but he gives him power "to cure all fleshly ills"²³ and assures Binzuru:

Buddha. They will rub thee away, Binzuru, rid thee of unruly flesh. And so, in the end of ages, though shalt achieve Nirwana. Till then – .²⁴

In Act II the time is transposed to the present and the scene is transferred to the grand Temple at Asakusa where we see the bronze figure of Binzuru in the outer court, sitting cross-legged, his hands folded on his stomach, and partly 'rubbed away', while the Buddha, surrounded by his Rakkan, sits in the Inner Temple, the Holy of Holies. Japanese rickshawmen complain of their hard work in carrying heavy Europeans up the hill, sellers of incense complain of the bad times when the people buy hot beans instead of incense sticks, and, interestingly, some girls go to offer their prayers, as some trader remarks, to "Kwannon", not to the Buddha, as "The Buddha maketh no account of women."²⁵ The Japanese atmosphere of the play is intense, the impression is created that the people are only interested in getting their immediate worldly problems solved, and, as we have also seen, the patriarchal bias of Buddhist doctrine is again pinpointed.

When the temple gong is struck and the gates are closed, the statues of Binzuru and the Buddha come to life, and the Buddha joins Binzuru in the outer courtyard. Binzuru complains of the people having nearly rubbed his back hollow and the Buddha confesses that he is tired of sitting, that he found this dull in the last 2400 years, and that he is glad having managed to put the rigid Daruma to sleep and having escaped for this chat. The Buddha's coming to join Binzuru and the light-hearted tone of their conversation including laughter about a profane joke strengthen Binzuru's worldly, human and humane position further. This is also the final impression which we get when the Buddha and Binzuru return to the subject of women and their beauty at the end of the play.

Buddha. (haltingly) Binzuru – was she very beautiful?

(Binzuru eyes him).

Binzuru. Beautiful? As Kwannon.

They gaze at each other and there is a look of final comprehension, before the Buddha returns inside and Binzuru takes up his old attitude.²⁶

Our discussion of the play above leads to the following conclusion: *The Spoiled Buddha* reflects Helen Waddell's childhood experience of Japan and her reaction towards it: her fascination with Japanese culture (especially by Buddhist Temple life and by the impressive statues of Kannon and the Buddha at Asakusa and Kamakura), on the one hand, and her distanced position from it (above all caused by her father's anti-Buddhist preaching and the patriarchal and anti-female bias of Japanese thinking), on the other. She takes a critical stance towards the Buddhist dogma of the annihilation of self and desire as embodied in Daruma's strict position, seems to doubt the possibility and maybe even the desirability of attaining Nirwana, and she certainly sides with life (as she also does with preferring her toad to the Daibutsu), and with the sufferings of the poor and the ill people who look for comfort by rubbing Binzuru's back or by praying to Kannon the Merciful.

Her central concern, however, is with the relationship between man and woman, and she attacks the misogynous side of Buddhist doctrine and Japanese thinking. Made aware of the discrimination against women in Japan during her childhood, she attacks the patriarchal tradition there also making it clear that the men are responsible for placing women in an inferior position and for robbing them of an identity of their own. Consequently, women play only very minor parts in her play and do not speak a single word. In Act I some women just pass by and are only present in the reactions of men, Buddha and Binzuru, while in Act II girls are bypassing Buddha choosing to pray to Kannon instead and, by doing so, at least rejecting male domination. It is interesting that the women who appear in Act I and Act II may be seen as 'harlots', just as Kannon is called 'the Harlot' by the zealot Daruma.²⁷ Their role, however, has developed from passive acceptance of male definition and stereotyped subjugation (in Act I) to active rejection of the male value system embodied in the Buddhist doctrine (in Act II) which is not fully supported even by the Buddha herself, who thus becomes *The 'Spoiled' Buddha* of Helen Waddell's play.

In her play, Helen Waddell formulated her antipatriarchal protest against the male-dominated world of Buddhist Japan as she experienced it in her youth, or, on a more abstract level, we can interpret her play as an attempt to undermine any patriarchal value-system, which is of course not restricted to the Japanese tradition. Male fear of, and desire for, women and the resulting stereotyping of women as the embodiment of lust and evil ('harlots') as we find it in the Japanese world of the play is also characteristic of the Western tradition. Also, the opposition in the play between an undesirable, shady logocentric world of ideas and abstractions, dogma and inhumanity, embodied by the Buddha and Daruma, and a desirable concrete anthropocentric world of human relationships, beauty, love and pity, as embodied by Kannon and Binzuru, transcends the Japanese cultural context, This dimension of the play places *The Spoiled Buddha* in the great tradition of works by women writers who attempted to do away with patriarchal ideas and undermine the male definition of the dominant male the *conditio humana* from a woman's position in the early 20th century. *The Spoiled Buddha* makes us see Helen Waddell as one of the pioneers in this field, too.

Notes

- 1 M. Kelly Lynch, "Waddell, Helen (Jane)", *The Macmillan Dictionary of Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Hogan et al., London: Macmillan 1979, 671-673. Cf. also G. P. Walsh, "Waddell, Helen Jane", *The Dictionary of National Biography. 1961 - 1970*, ed. E. T. Williams and C. S. Nichols, London: OUP 1981, 1041-1042.
- 2 Quoted by Sam Hanna Bell, *The Theatre in Ulster*, Dublin and London: Gill and Macmillan 1972, 44.
- 3 Cf. *ibid.*, 44-45.

- 4 Quoted by Margaret McHenry, *The Ulster Theatre in Ireland*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1931, 37.
- 5 Cf. Bell, 45.
- 6 Helen Waddell, *The Spoiled Buddha*. A Play in 2 Acts, Dublin: Talbot, London: T. Fisher Unwin 1919.
- 7 Cf. Bell, 45.
- 8 W. B. Yeats dictated *At the Hawk's Well* to Ezra Pound at Stone Cottage in January 1916. Cf. Frank Touhy, *Yeats*, London: Macmillan 1976, 156.
- 9 Cf. Walsh, 1041.
- 10 Cf. D. Felicitas Corrigan, *Helen Waddell. A Biography*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd 1986.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 24-25.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 26
- 14 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 15 Helen Waddell to Dr. Taylor, quoted *ibid.*, 30.
- 16 Quoted *ibid.*, 16.
- 17 Helen's mother also died of typhoid fever and Helen also suffered from it but survived. Cf. Corrigan, 19.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 19 Waddell, *The Spoiled Buddha*, 5.
- 20 Cf. *ibid.*, 19-20.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 22 *Ibid.* The nature of K(w)annon and Helen Waddell's possible misinterpretation of this deity is discussed by David Burleigh in his "The Buddha and the Princess Splendour; Helen Waddell's Childhood in Japan", *Ferris Studies* 27 (March 1992), 1-20; here 11-12, 18 notes 43-47.
- 23 Waddell, *The Spoiled Buddha*, 21.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 23-24.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 27 Burleigh ("The Buddha and the Princess Splendour") points out that the Kannon Temple at Asakusa was "adjacent to the licensed brothel quarter of Yoshiwara.... It is quite possible, therefore, that the women who passed through the Temple had come from the Yoshiwara, and were actually prostitutes. The *samisen* 'tinkl(ing) ... provocatively' in Act One suggests this to some extent" (11).