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Place and power in Irish farms at the end of the nineteenth century

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Place and Power in Irish Farms at the End of the Nineteenth-Century.¹

In the past two decades, the use of domestic space, the gendering of that space, and, conversely, how physical architecture shaped relationships within that space, have increasingly become a topic of interest.² Following Doreen Massey's suggestion that domesticity was a 'spatial control, and through that, a social control on identity', it is clear that not only relations within the home, but the home itself, are implicated in power relationships.³ In the context of modern British and Irish history, studies of the relationship between domesticity and household space have tended to emphasise the increased demarcation of space along gendered lines (even if its use was often complicated in practice).⁴ The idealisation of the male breadwinner/female housemaker dichotomy was mirrored in the architecture of the home, where modern kitchens were increasingly designed to allow easy household management by a wife and mother without domestic help.⁵ Despite this thriving historiography, thus far explorations of the impact of domesticity and particularly its implications for a spatial analysis of household dynamics have largely been limited to urban environments, even though half the British population still lived rurally in 1850. In Ireland, the pattern is even more striking: only 31% of the population lived in towns by 1901 and only 40% by 1951.⁶ This article examines how far this model of spatial demarcation in the home is applicable to Irish rural households and begins to explore how Irish understandings and usage of space shaped gender relationships on the farm. The complex and central role played by land and its ownership in Irish history, combined with the intricate oral traditions and folk cultures of Irish rural society provide rich layers of analysis which cannot be adequately covered in a single essay. The aim of this article is to help unpick some of the subtle codes of meaning that such a context created and to consider the possible implications for gendered interactions specific to this historical and spatial context.

Within late-nineteenth-century rural Ireland, questions of land ownership and the meanings attached to particular places were undergoing considerable discussion. The ‘land war’ of the 1870s to 90s, saw the National Land League campaign to better the position of tenant farmers and ultimately redistribute land more equitably. The movement, closely tied to nationalist, republican politics, transformed customary resistance to landowners and police into a nationwide agitation against the British state and the landowners who symbolised British rule.⁷ In this context, disputes over rights to a place within the household often reflected broader tensions within the wider family or community over the ownership of a specific property or the appropriate lineage for inheritance. In addition, emigration had particular implications for understandings and imaginings of place, as Ireland, and particularly the farm, came to represent ‘home’ and place for a wide diaspora.⁸ At the same time, modern ideas began to challenge the symbolic imaginary of the Irish landscape, with houses being built on land believed to belong to fairies (and so traditionally left untouched), while increased literacy threatened the oral traditions that kept such customary ideas alive.⁹ It is also noteworthy that the figure of the Irish rural housewife became central to the construction of an Irish national identity at this time, representing the rurality, purity, and ‘tradition’ that were used to support claims to Ireland’s distinctiveness from modernising, urban, and corrupt Britain.¹⁰

This celebration of rural Irish domesticity coincided with changes in women’s labour market participation. At the turn of the nineteenth century, women in rural Ireland increasingly moved out of the paid workforce.¹¹ In 1881, 815,000 women were in paid employment; by 1911 the number had declined to 430,000; the number of female agricultural labourers fell from 27,000 in 1891 to 5,000 twenty years later.¹² This was accompanied by the reclassification of female family members on farms into the ‘dependents’ category on the census; the increase of cooperative creameries that made payments for farm goods to

husbands, rather than wives; and the rise of home economics classes and women's magazines, which placed a higher priority on women in 'domestic', rather than productive, roles. For Joanna Bourke, this period saw the removal of women's economic identity and its replacement with that of the 'housewife', reflecting the growing significance of the ideology of domesticity to Irish farming families. Moreover, for Bourke, this change did not mark a decline in women's social status, for 'housewifery' became an alternative source of power for women in the home.¹³

This article will seek to further complicate this analysis. While Bourke is right to recognise changing attitudes to women's work on the farm, this was often a change in language rather than social practice. In some farming households during the 1890s, women brought in between 40% and 60% of the household income.¹⁴ Moreover, this period was marked by attempts to encourage industry amongst female rural workers, including lace-making, poultry-keeping, dairying, pig-keeping, and a variety of textile-trades. These were all promoted as 'domestic' pursuits and an extension of the female role within the home, even though they brought in an income.¹⁵ Women became further associated with the 'home', leading to a recategorisation of their activities as 'domestic' rather than 'productive', but, except for a decline in field work (which became a preserve of the poor), women's working lives were little altered. The failure of the ideology of domesticity in shaping the work experiences of women in rural Ireland reflected the real social significance that 'working the land' had for Irish beliefs concerning landownership and family identity, explored below.

In order to explore how space was understood and shaped gendered behaviour within the household, this article provides a macro-analysis of the cultural discourses around meanings of space and place at a national and regional level and combines it with a number of individual cases that illustrate the uses of these discourses in daily life, to raise questions about the implications for women's social role and power. The specific examples, whilst not

presented as definitive or conclusive in themselves, allow us to begin to access the cultural, social and economic world in which they were situated. The cases are drawn from over five thousand court records and newspaper accounts that were examined to provide evidence for family life in nineteenth-century Ireland, including criminal cases, divorce and separation suits, breach of promise of marriage and seduction suits, and debt and civil litigation suits.¹⁶ While the nature of the sources tends towards providing evidence of people's experiences during moments of crisis, they often provide considerable direct and incidental evidence on everyday family life. Moreover, and more significantly, the cultural frameworks that were used to explain and understand difficult experiences also informed and provided interpretative narratives for daily behaviours, allowing insight into the mindset, if not always the daily practice, of those involved.¹⁷

The consideration of the negotiation of space is underpinned by ideas from social anthropology, which emphasise the relational nature of space. As Eric Hirsch argues, 'foreground actuality and background potentiality exist in a process of mutual implication'.¹⁸ Landscape therefore becomes a 'cultural process', informed by the physical environment; the meanings attached to that environment by the participant and his or her community; and the meanings attached to the body of the participant in that environment—all of which may be changing and unstable.¹⁹ As a result, there is no single landscape or space with an inherent meaning, but instead a 'series of moments', informed by wider beliefs, previous histories, events, and the individuals involved. Moreover, as John Gray highlights in his discussion of rural Scotland, this understanding of space in turn informs identity, as identity becomes a cultural process undertaken in a particular space. He states: 'in creating places in the hills and forming attachments to them, people also implicate a historicized image of themselves as people *of* the Scottish Borders.'²⁰ As a result, the negotiation of space becomes key to negotiations of identity and power.

Place and Power in Irish Rural Households

The Irish rural population was a diverse group with significant regional variation, extending from poor, landless labourers to large farmers with hundreds of acres of land and significant wealth. The farming class, which made up around 50% of the population, was usually divided by farm size, into small (one to thirty Irish acres), medium (thirty to 100 acres) and large (over 100 acres).²¹ The west of Ireland was dominated by very small farms into the late nineteenth century, while the east was the home to the wealthy ‘strong’ farmer. Indeed Ciara Breathnach has argued the rural west was submerged in varying degrees of relative and absolute poverty, while the east enjoyed the spoils of better land, transport, and market facilities.²² Yet, while the post-famine period was marked by the increased commercialisation of agriculture and the consolidation of landholdings, by 1911 only 14% of farmers had farms over fifty Irish acres; even in rich, high tillage areas, they never made up more than 22%.²³ It is these small and medium farmers who are the primary concern of this article.

A ‘moral economy’ of land-ownership prevailed amongst this group of farmers in the nineteenth century, where people had a strong sense of customary ownership, fair rents and tithes, appropriate usage of land, and a belief that land should remain within a single family over generations.²⁴ Maintaining land within a single family was not always achievable and farms sometimes changed hands frequently. As a result, designating the ‘rightful’ (if not legal) owner of a particular farm was not a straightforward exercise. For example, should it be the family who were evicted a decade ago, or the family who had worked the land since? Similar difficulties arose if a family failed to produce children. Would the appropriate heir to a tenancy be a brother or nephew, or could an incoming wife’s family inherit? These questions were complicated by different value systems. Some families practised

primogeniture; others selected an heir from sons remaining on the farm; still others chose a more equitable form of inheritance, which gave siblings competing claims to land or household resources.²⁵ Likewise, claims to ‘rightful ownership’ frequently depended on the memory of the community, which could go back centuries to long-evicted families. It was also contingent on the place of a current family within that community, whether they were insiders or outsiders, or part of a powerful faction who could enforce their claims.²⁶

The association of land with family ensured that it played a central part in the social imaginary of the Irish farmer and so became implicated in social power relationships. As Donna Birdwell-Pheasant notes, land in Ireland was ‘defined in terms of place’, with the farm known as the ‘home-place’ in the west of the country.²⁷ ‘Place’ in this context referred to spaces that were named and which held the ‘symbolic and imaginary investments of the population’, but it also signified ‘belonging’ and the authority and sense of ownership that ‘belonging’ imparts.²⁸ Being ‘in place’ on the farm was marked by the right to use household and farm resources— to work on the farm.²⁹ Moreover, working the land held social significance in Ireland beyond the economic. Land was viewed not only as a commodity to be bought and sold but as an aspect of familial identity. The act of working the land was the physical manifestation of ownership and belonging, demonstrating that a person was ‘in place’.³⁰

Conversely, being ‘out of place’, or displaced, was to be in a position where claims to ‘place’, ‘belonging’ and ownership were contested, denied or unrecognised, which acted to reduce or remove the authority of the individual or social group.³¹ Marriage customs among farming families in nineteenth-century Ireland were potentially ripe for the displacement of individuals, particularly women, as they moved from natal to conjugal households. In Ireland, as in much of Europe, living in stem families for part of the life-course, especially during periods of property transmission that tended to occur upon marriage, was the norm.³² As

women (and occasionally men who married ‘heiresses’) became part of long-standing households, often moving into farms alongside a spouse’s parents and/or siblings, finding a place in the family network could be a difficult and contested process.

Gender and Farmwork

Women’s work on the farm was central to their integration into farming families, and so became implicated in household power relationships. Women played a substantial role in the farming economy. In addition to their ‘domestic’ duties, such as cleaning, preparing food, laundry and childcare, women were associated with tending animals (particularly pigs and poultry), dairying (both milking and creating products for market), and cultivating the potato patch. The need for flexibility on family farms meant that women could be found harvesting, and digging turf for fuel, and while such practices were becoming less acceptable by the late nineteenth century, in many households they remained a financial necessity. Similarly, men could perform the heavier aspects of ‘women’s work’, such as churning butter, and attending to food as they sat by the fire seems to have been common.³³

This flexibility in gender roles should not be exaggerated. In parts of Ireland, men did not milk cows, seeing it as demeaning, and chickens were particularly associated with women, despite attempts by agricultural agencies to promote large-scale, male-run poultry farms.³⁴ Women were actively engaged with the market, directly selling the products—mainly eggs and butter—that they produced. At the end of the century, this was disrupted on some farms by the rise of co-operative creameries, which made payments to their husbands, ‘the farmer’, to the dismay of many wives, but egg sales remained an important source of money for women well into the twentieth-century.³⁵ In addition, in the later nineteenth century, as social reformers encouraged women to leave the fields, home-based textile

industries, such as lace-making and ‘finishing’ linens, were promoted as a suitably domestic form of income; these industries had some limited success.³⁶ While new models of domesticity shaped the form and classification of women’s rural labour, it is clear that they were still actively engaged in work on the farm.

Place and Displacement

Women who performed their economic role well gained respect both from their family and from the wider community, reinforcing the legitimacy of their position and their place within the household.³⁷ John Duff, when being sued for breach of promise of marriage, noted that he had changed his choice of bride as his new intended had, in addition to a dowry of £800, ‘kept a nice table with plenty on it, and a large decanter of whiskey’.³⁸ His new bride’s reputation for keeping a good table favourably indicated her potential as a wife. In contrast, Mrs Ellen Shanahan of Thurles, who moved into a farmhouse with her husband John and brother-in-law Mickey, found it difficult to make a place for herself. Mickey assaulted her, claiming that her ducks were trespassing on his corn. During the trial for assault that took place in 1911, Ellen complained that she was given no access to household resources; her only source of income was her poultry, and this too had been denied to her. When she was on the stand, her ability to work on the farm— and therefore to establish a place on the farm— was central to the validity of her claims. The defence lawyer asked: ‘Owing to some huff after the honeymoon, you refused to do anything for them, even to cook a meal for them?’ She replied: ‘I did everything I could until they took everything out of the house from me. They left me no handling whatsoever.’³⁹ Numerous other women reported in their domestic violence suits that they were physically denied access to the farm. Most often, this involved being locked out of the farm and forced to seek shelter with neighbours and in barns, or to

sleep in the fields, but it could also include being barred from particular rooms or having their access to household goods or farm resources removed.⁴⁰ In a context where work and access to resources were associated with a sense of place, some husbands attempted to dominate their wives through displacement, denying them access to the farm and its resources and, thereby, the sense of belonging and social authority it entailed.

Incoming men could also experience displacement, although this was mediated due to their social position within marriage. Some of these tensions emerge in the 1898 trial of Philip King for the murder of his family (one of two sensational family murders in that year, and one of six in that decade).⁴¹ In 1895, Philip King married the only daughter of the widowed farmer, Mrs Reilly of Cavan, at which time the farm was made over to him in return for the maintenance of his mother-in-law. From the perspective of his wife and mother-in-law, King performed his role as husband unsatisfactorily, preferring to go shooting rather than digging potatoes, and he refused to pay his debts. This caused constant quarrels, and it became clear during the course of the trial that ‘both women were trying to oust King from the place and on this question sides were taken in the neighbourhood’. Eventually, the marriage broke down. The land (but not the farmhouse) was rented out, and the couple separated due to King’s violence. During his absence from the farm, King refused to maintain his family, despite being sued for desertion. In 1898, he returned to the farm, where he murdered his wife, mother-in-law and two children.⁴²

King found the process of being incorporated into an established family difficult, especially due to his failure to perform his economic role satisfactorily in the eyes of his new family. Yet, whereas women in a similar position received little social support beyond their natal families, King’s position was more ambiguous. As formal head of household, the management of the farm was under his remit, and at least part of the community were willing to recognise his authority through taking his side in the dispute, despite his economic failings.

His place on the farm had social standing, even as it was challenged by other members of his family, who were ultimately successful in ousting him from it. The patriarchal authority bestowed on the male head of household reinforced his place and its requisite authority, putting his female relatives at a disadvantage even on their 'home territory'. Other men, without this form of patriarchal authority, were not always so fortunate. In many legal cases it is apparent that brothers-in-law could find themselves displaced in relation to the new conjugal unit, even where they remained joint owners on the farm.⁴³

Negotiating Kitchen and Farm Space

While a sense of 'place' reflected a person's integration into the family network and the acquisition of the social authority associated with it, family power dynamics were negotiated on a daily basis. Consequently, the use of farm space became implicated in power relationships. Rural housing reflected the diversity of the population, varying from single-roomed 'mud huts' with no windows, to extensive multi-roomed farmhouses. By the 1840s, however, the two- to four-roomed farmhouse, on which this article focuses, was becoming typical in the Irish countryside, making up a half of rural homes in the wealthier regions of Ulster and Leinster, and a third in the poorer regions of Connaught and Munster.⁴⁴ By 1901, this type of housing dominated the Irish rural landscape, providing homes for most farmers and even the majority of rural labourers, due to state investment in housing.⁴⁵ These farmhouses were typically rectangle shaped, from ten to twenty feet long, with a kitchen in the middle, a 'west room' or parlour at the top (unless used as a bedroom) and a bedroom at the bottom in larger homes.⁴⁶ There were regional variations; farmhouses in Ulster were more likely to include a second floor, while some houses (although more rarely) developed 'front passages' to allow circumvention of the kitchen when accessing bedrooms.⁴⁷

The kitchen was at the heart of the rural farmhouse, containing the main door between the farmyard and household, and normally providing access to the other rooms in the house.⁴⁸ Descriptions of rural kitchens of the period— usually compiled by middle-class observers campaigning for social welfare— tended to focus on the ‘poverty’ of Irish homes. They remarked on the lack of furniture, kitchenware and general assortment of dishes and ornaments normally found in the homes of their middle-class counterparts in urban Britain.⁴⁹ Certainly, it appears that the conspicuous consumption of homeware was unusual on farms before the 1890s, when the trade in furniture, floor-coverings and other household goods started to expand in Ireland.⁵⁰ Some homes had dressers and there is evidence that rural homes had started to purchase English ceramics, alongside the traditional, thicker Irish earthenware from the early nineteenth century.⁵¹ However, many homes did not have an extensive range of plateware; David Sleeth, a small farmer, is reported to have eaten his breakfast of ‘stirabout’ out of the pot it was made in, while his wife ate from a small plate.⁵²

The focus of the kitchen was the hearth. The kitchen fire, sometimes located on the gable wall, or on the wall that divided the kitchen from the ‘west room’ (providing heat to both areas), was typically an open hearth or grate. By World War Two, 40% of Irish homes had a range, but as Nicola Verdon notes for England, this was still an aspiration for most rural families into the 1930s (modern stoves were even rarer).⁵³ Food was cooked in pots, kettles or griddles that hung above the fire on hooks, and most homes appeared to have kitchenware for cooking, as well as the pokers, tongs and spades required for the open fire.⁵⁴ Kitchens also contained equipment for dairying, feeding animals, washing laundry, and preparing a variety of food. They may have also contained animals and crops, although this was discouraged by hygienists, and increasingly farmers removed them from the home to outbuildings as soon as they could provide a suitable (and warm) alternative.⁵⁵

The kitchen was a place where men and women performed their roles alongside each other.⁵⁶ On a working farm, it was a place of work and leisure. It was used by men and women who lived within the household to eat and rest, to perform various types of work, and to entertain. Drinking around the kitchen table; telling stories or singing by the fire; and home performances were part of daily life.⁵⁷ Sitting around the fire was a common leisure activity, and many homes appeared to have a selection of chairs and stools for this purpose. Men and women who worked on the farm, but did not live there, took their meals in the kitchen. Ireland had a tradition of male and female transient workers and beggars who moved from house to house, seeking temporary work and shelter, and they too could be found in the kitchen sitting and sleeping around the fire.⁵⁸ In some households, particularly if they were poor or there was a number of children or an elderly parent present, the kitchen functioned as a bedroom.⁵⁹ Evidence from trial reports also suggests it was the place where the different family members of the extended household most frequently encountered each other.

Family dynamics in the kitchen often reflected established power relationships and the tensions that surrounded them. As the anthropologist Katy Bennett demonstrates in an English context, the use of kitchen space is performative, embodying ‘the patriarchal character of farming (through its ownership and routines) and disciplined performances that reiterated (and subverted) its power dynamics’. Following Butler, Bennett explores how the repetition of culturally normative gestures (such as seating placement or preparing food) generates meaning, and so both creates and allows the negotiation of power relationships.⁶⁰ Seating at the kitchen table, for example, could reflect household hierarchies. Many, although certainly not all, homes had tables— a fashion that expanded from the 1890s— but they could be of variable size and quality. Embedded within individual testimonies during the court cases studied are revealing glimpses into the practices of family life. Some families chose to eat meals at the table, but others appeared to have been more flexible and ate at the

fire, or with different members of the household dining in different places and at different times.⁶¹

Where families sat round the table, people often had customary seats that reflected power dynamics within the family. Notably the head of house sat at the top of the table.⁶² Yet, this custom could be abused. A farmer called Joseph Matchett of Portadown was accidentally poisoned when he took his brother's place at the table. His brother and his wife had quarrelled that evening about housework, and she had laced his teacup with antimony. Just as poisoning was Mrs Matchett's attempt to punish her husband, Joseph's choice of seat may have symbolised his challenge to his brother's authority.⁶³ But seating arrangements could also reflect the love and affection that family members could have for one another. In a happy marriage, particularly in the early years, husband and wife were expected to sit closely together, creating intimacy through ritual behaviour, but also reflecting a belief that marriage was a partnership (if an unequal one). Indeed, proximity between husband and wife was so accepted that in an 1863 *Irish Times* article, 'Hints for Husbands', husbands were warned not to worry if wives sat a little bit further apart in later marriage, as it did not reflect a loss of affection.⁶⁴

Tables could be spaces of negotiation and resolution. After Jane McEntyre's rape by her son-in-law, the local Presbyterian minister sat the family round the table to hear both sides of the event in an attempt at reconciliation.⁶⁵ Similarly, marriage negotiations typically happened while seated at the table, with each family sharing a bottle of whiskey for good luck. In parts of the farming community, 'match-making' marriages were common, where the prospective bride, and occasionally the groom, had very little say in a negotiation conducted between her father or brother and her potential husband's family. In 1912, Katie McCloughlin testified in her breach of promise case that 'The whole arrangement was left to her father, she never said anything.' When pressed by the judge, whether she agreed to the

match, she said; ‘Yes, I was satisfied’, but did not relay how this consent was made known.⁶⁶ Similarly, the physical placement of the characters in the realist painter of rural Ireland, Howard Helmick’s, painting *Matchmaking* (c.1880) highlighted the female’s symbolic lack of participation in this discussion. In this work, the fathers of the prospective couple sit at a table in the centre of a farmhouse kitchen, sharing bread and alcohol, and counting on their fingers. The groom stands by the wall near the door, grasping his hat nervously, but looking on at the negotiation. The mother of the groom sits by the fire, but her head is turned to watch the negotiation behind her. The bride, however, sits with her back firmly to the table, looking in the opposite direction at her spinning wheel. Her mother stands protectively over her, with one hand on her shoulder and another on the table where the negotiation is ongoing.⁶⁷ While every other person in the room is focused on the ongoing negotiation, the bride sits passively awaiting her fate.

It is hard to imagine that real brides would have been so apparently disinterested in practice, but many accounts of such arrangements during breach of promise cases are striking due to the passive role played by the bride and the symbolic reading that witnesses gave to both the use of household space and the material culture within it. For example, a farmer named Gallagher, in defending a breach of promise of marriage suit, described entering his potential father in law’s house and asking which daughter was available for marriage. He preferred the youngest, but was told he could marry the oldest, Catherine. The fortune was agreed and was meant to be paid the following day. A bottle of whiskey was produced and three glasses were drunk. He noted that the mother kept praising her daughter and saying she was the best in the parish. After a time, the parents left the room, and the defendant claimed that the plaintiff, Catherine, came over to him and put her arm around his neck and kissed him. Until this moment, the plaintiff was absent from his account, and her acceptance of the marriage agreement was not expressed verbally, but through her physical demonstration of

affection. Similarly, the emphasis placed on the bottle of whiskey was due to its symbolism in marking the completion of a transaction.⁶⁸

In this context, where women were not expected to participate in their marriage negotiations, their physical behaviours and use of household space became a form of engaging in ongoing negotiations about their futures. Moreover, this was understood by other members of the farming community. In 1869, the marriage of Daniel Coghlan and Ellen McCarthy was negotiated around the kitchen table. This was a marriage arranged by parents, where the couple did not meet until the marriage negotiation, but, as the father of the bride expressed it: 'Oh, there was a proviso—that they were satisfied with each other.'⁶⁹ The two families sat around the table, sharing dinner, while the fathers discussed a suitable marriage settlement. The marriage fell through, and Ellen sued Daniel for breach of promise, but a witness to the proceedings highlighted how space was utilised in the negotiation:

Mr Clarke [lawyer]: They had at that time ample opportunity of becoming acquainted with one another?

Witness: Yes. They first sat at one side of the table and they were removed to the other side of the table and remained together again. (Laughter) At least I found them so removed, after I had absented myself for a while.

Mr Clarke: Did they remain up all night?

Witness: I left them at one side of the table and when I came back again they were at the other side of the table.

Mr Clarke: Still together, like love birds?

Witness: Still together.

In this case, the witness used the couple's movement across the table into a more intimate situation as evidence of a successful marriage negotiation. Moreover, rather than answering the lawyer's question about what time they went to bed, the witness responded by reiterating this physical movement across the table, presumably because, for this witness, this was a more important piece of evidence of a successful match.

In another case thirty years later, the same situation was taken to prove that the marriage settlement was doomed from the beginning. The defendant was asked:

Lawyer: Was there any love-making going on?

Witness: No, she was at one side of the table and I was at the other. (Laughter). The table was between us. (Laughter).

Mr Justice Johnson [Judge]: Was there anything on the table?

Witness: Yes, a bottle of whisky. (Laughter).

The Foreman of the Jury: Was there any ping pong? (Laughter).

Witness: No.

Mr Justice Johnson: Nothing but whiskey and love. (Laughter).⁷⁰

Through controlling her physical placement at the table, the plaintiff in this case indicated her displeasure with the negotiated marriage. It was a non-verbal but nonetheless significant expression of her desire, in a context where women had little formal authority. As the use of table space held symbolic meaning, women's ability to manipulate dynamics around them provided an opportunity to exert some control over the events that took place and the decisions that were made there.

Placement in front of the fire was also significant, where being invited to sit at the fire meant being incorporated into the family, and sitting closest to the fire was a position of honour.⁷¹ In Helmick's painting described above, the mother of the groom is seated in this position. This is also made evident in a particularly amusing case from Limerick in 1876, where two families occupied the same two-roomed farmhouse during a dispute over breach of promise. In this case, after the marriage settlement (which settled the groom's farmhouse on the new bride) was signed by the courting couple, the groom married another woman and took her to live in the same farmhouse. The wronged woman and her family occupied the house, along with the newlyweds, to stake her claim in the property and the man. When describing events in the house after the occupation, Mary Fox noted of the two parties that: 'We used not to cook our food on the same fire. We used often meet during the day, but we never sat down to the fire together in the evening.'⁷² The sense of family created through sharing a fire meant that it was inappropriate for warring factions to meet in that space. Such symbolic resonances, were created due to the meaning given to different household spaces through the repetition of everyday behaviours. These meanings were in turn informed by the gendered bodies using that space, which carried their own significations created by broader cultural codes around gender, labour and domesticity.

Conclusion

Understanding space as a cultural process informed by the interaction between physical environment, people, and the cultural and symbolic meanings attached to both, provides insight into negotiations for power within Irish farming families. In an Irish context, productive labour on the farm was imbued with symbolic meaning, endowing and marking a

person's claim to farm resources, their sense of belonging, and the associated social authority. As a result, despite the rise of the ideology of domesticity during the late nineteenth century that re-categorised women's work as 'domestic', labour continued to give women considerable social authority. At the same time, the meanings attributed to particular spaces, such as kitchens and tables, were historically contingent and gender sensitive, drawing on customary beliefs and the meaning created through everyday behaviours. Moreover, women could use their familiarity with such spaces to negotiate for power albeit in a constrained form.

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⁴⁰ Examples include: Provincial Court of Armagh, *Belfast Newsletter* (9 April 1866); Ballymena Quarter Sessions, *Belfast Newsletter* (27 June 1868); Matrimonial Court, *Irish Times* (21 January 1876); Longford Wife Murder- Sentence of Death, *Irish Times*, (17 December 1891). This is also very common in a Scottish context, see Katie Barclay (2011) *Love, Intimacy and Power: marriage and patriarchy in Scotland, 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 188-90.

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