

Asking Angela: Discourses about Sexuality in an Irish Problem Page, 1963–1980

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THE MANNER IN WHICH IRISH PEOPLE spoke about sexuality changed dramatically between 1963 and 1980. This period coincided with a profound social and economic liberalization that challenged a dominant narrative of Irish society as Catholic, rural, and conservative.¹ The establishment of Radio Téangeolaíochta Éireann (RTÉ, the Irish Television Service) in 1961 provided a new forum for intellectuals and activists of new social movements emerging in Ireland to challenge this Catholic social thinking, offering viewers an alternative discourse with which to interpret their lives.² The problem page or advice column of Angela Macnamara contributed in an important way to this challenge, presenting Irish readers with a modern approach to sexuality and, specifically, to homosexuality. The column reflected the rise and fall of expert voices on the subject of homosexuality and Macnamara's struggle to locate the discussion within a religious as well as a medical context. Ultimately, the letters sent to her and her responses to them demonstrate how in an era of high modernity the distinction between expert and lay audiences had been diminished, indeed, how some letter writers challenged Macnamara's authority as an expert and framed new understandings of their sexuality drawn from a range of new and conflicting voices.³

¹ Rapid social and economic change throughout the 1960s has been attributed to a range of free market reforms introduced in 1958. After decades of censorship, economic protectionism, and insularity Ireland slowly transformed into a modern, urban, and industrial society, a change further encouraged by entry into the European Economic Community in 1973. See Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005), 536–622. Ireland has been theorized as a country that has industrialized late and at great speed. Consequently, like Spain, Portugal, and Greece, Ireland has exhibited a fusion of modern and traditionalist characteristics. See Richard Breen et al., *Understanding Contemporary Ireland: State, Class and Development in the Irish Republic* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), xi, 38–40.

² Tom Inglis, *Lessons in Irish Sexuality* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), 111.

³ My discussion of the power relationship in high modernity is influenced by Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 23. Cas Wouters's discussion of the informalization process also suggests

Born into an upper-middle-class Dublin home in 1931, Angela Macnamara became the most renowned “agony aunt,” or advice columnist, in Irish society.⁴ She studied at a commercial college before taking an administrative post in a Dublin hospital, although she longed to pursue a career in journalism. She married at the age of twenty-two and had four children in the following six years. Macnamara started writing articles on the subject of family life, parenting, and young motherhood for Catholic magazines like the *Irish Messenger of the Sacred Heart* in 1960–61. She also gave talks in schools about the difficulties facing teenagers in an Ireland where the religious mores governing social and political life began to be challenged.

In 1963, when Macnamara was thirty-two, the biggest-selling Sunday newspaper in the land, the *Sunday Press*, accepted a series of her articles on teenage dating for publication.⁵ They generated a huge public response, and Macnamara was invited by the editor to respond to readers’ questions, effectively launching her career as an agony aunt. Her column received more than four thousand letters a year and was published weekly from 1963 to 1980. Such was the popularity of the column that hundreds of letters arrived merely addressed to “Angela Macnamara, Dublin.” She wrote articles for a range of other publications and was a regular contributor to radio and television programs, including the hugely popular Irish television chat show, *The Late Late Show*.

The success of Macnamara’s problem page lay in her having carved a unique niche for herself as a lay sexual expert in the public sphere. The column became her pulpit from which she dispensed advice to readers on sex, sinfulness, and restitution. Even lacking any relevant professional training, she successfully positioned herself as someone skilled in both the religious and medical discourses of the day, and she mediated this expert knowledge to those who sought her advice. As a young married mother she empathized with many of her letter writers. Ordinary readers of the *Sunday Press* had the opportunity to ask questions, seek forgiveness, or question the traditional Catholic dogma that had governed the understanding of homosexuality in the past. At the same time, Macnamara was and still is a devout Catholic.

a narrowing of the gap between social hierarchies (“Formalization and Informalization: Changing Tension Balances in the Civilizing Processes,” *Theory Culture and Society* 3, no. 2 [1986]: 1–18).

⁴ For more on Macnamara’s personal and professional life see her autobiography, Angela Macnamara, *Yours Sincerely* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003).

⁵ The *Sunday Press* was first published in 1949 and closely allied itself to the cause of Irish nationalism and the promotion of the Irish language and culture, including extensive coverage of Gaelic games. It promoted a vision of Ireland built on a romantic notion of the respective roles of men and women in Irish society. Sales of the *Sunday Press* peaked in the mid-1960s with a circulation of 400,000 but declined toward the end of the 1970s. See Mark O’Brien, *De Valera, Fianna Fail, and the Irish Press* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2001), 86. References to Macnamara’s columns in the *Sunday Press* and other newspaper articles will be given by date only in the text.

Her advice was strongly influenced by the Catholic discourse governing sexuality that emanated from the Vatican and was dispensed downward through bishops, priests, religious orders, and lay organizations. She used papal encyclicals like *Humanae vitae* (1968) and *Persona humana* (1975), widely distributed in Ireland, as roadmaps for the faithful as they danced, dated, and fell in love in an increasingly secular Ireland.⁶ Her advice columns reveal that, rather than being imposed from above, these encyclicals were contested and negotiated by Irish Catholics—including Macnamara herself. For gay men this negotiation was carried out within the context of a criminalization of homosexuality. Gay men guilty of gross indecency under the 1861 Offences Against the Persons Act and the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act faced up to ten years in prison. (Lesbian sexual activity was not punished under these laws.) This legislation did not remain dormant, as 455 men were convicted between 1962 and 1972 alone.⁷

THE ADVICE COLUMN AS A BAROMETER OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The birth of the advice column is attributed to the Englishman John Dunton, editor of the *Athenian Gazette*, and dated to 1691. It marked the emergence of a unique form of audience participation in a publication that addressed the lofty ethical concerns of slavery and the mystery of creation. Subsequent publications like the *British Apollo* and the *Review* saw advice columns emphasize personal morality, by which they became advocates of moral standards that opposed premarital sex, sex after menopause, and divorce.⁸ By the mid-eighteenth century, after the success of columnists like Mrs. Eliza Haywood, the reading public had come to expect a woman to hold the position of advice columnist, so much so that many male editors donned female personas to do it. Within these columns the editors, like Gordon Stables in *Boys' Own Paper*, could still obsess about declining Victorian morality and that scourge of adolescent sexuality, masturbation. The Education Act of 1833 had the effect of increasing levels of literacy and broadening the advice column from an almost exclusively middle-class readership to a more diverse one. The

⁶ Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Regulation of the Faith, *Humanae vitae* (Vatican City: Tipografia poliglotta Vaticana, 1968); Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana: Declarations on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* (Vatican City: Tipografia poliglotta Vaticana, 1975).

⁷ Chrystel Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1999), 207. Homosexuality was decriminalized only in 1993 and an equal age of consent of seventeen established for both hetero- and homosexual activity. Gay men and lesbians now enjoy considerable legal protection against discrimination under the Equal Status Act of 2000. Currently, the final details of a Civil Partnership Bill are being finalized by a government led by Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Brian Cowen that will enable same-sex couples to avail themselves of a range of marriagelike benefits such as property, social welfare, succession, maintenance, pensions, and tax.

⁸ Robin Kent, *Aunt Agony Advises: Problem Pages through the Ages* (London: W. H. Allen, 1987), 7.

emphasis on morality remained, however, though the columns became increasingly specialized into areas of health and beauty and personal problems at the turn of the twentieth century. In the aftermath of the Second World War British problem pages were inundated with women seeking husbands and companionship and expressing a desire for domesticity after the calamity of war. A similar crisis existed in Ireland for altogether different reasons. There was widespread concern at the falling population brought about through a combination of emigration and the reluctance of men and women to marry. This reluctance was largely economic, since Irish parents often refused to hand over property to their children until old age.⁹ By that time male bachelors in particular had often become emotionally incapable of courtship and marriage. An increasing number of men and women, then, resorted to newspaper lonely hearts advertisements to find suitable mates.

Scholarly analyses of the contemporary problem page as a barometer of change have mostly concentrated on courtship and dating. Angela McRobbie's study of *Jackie* magazine, for example, locates the problem page in the code of personal life: the moments of anguish. Here the problem-solving duo of "Cathy and Claire" tackled adolescent girls' fears that they might not feel attractive enough and the subsequent effect on their general popularity among their peers but specifically their popularity with boys.¹⁰ Still, Christien Brinkgreve and Michel Korzec's study of Dutch society illustrates the effectiveness of a problem page analysis as a larger measure of sexual and moral change.¹¹ Their interpretation of the "Magriet Is Here to Help" column from the largest-selling women's magazine in the Netherlands, offering advice on parenting, relationships, marriage, and homosexuality, is set against forty years of social change and shows the ease with which sexual and moral issues were treated in problem pages in the 1970s when compared to earlier decades. Cas Wouters uses evidence from a Dutch monthly magazine entitled *Opzij* and other sexual advice manuals as he charts the shifting lust balance since the 1960s. Prior to this period the sexual needs of women were mainly subsumed under a love or relationship understanding, while men were likelier to be subject to a lust-dominated sexuality. From the 1960s this difference began to change. A similar change happened in Ireland as women openly acknowledged their need for a more satisfying sexual life during the 1970s. This public debate centered on the issue of what Wouters calls the "lust balance question," that is, "when and within what kinds of relationship(s) are (what kind of) eroticism and sexuality

⁹ Mary Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2000), 177; Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998), 197.

¹⁰ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From "Jackie" to "Just Seventeen"* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1991), 94.

¹¹ Christien Brinkgreve and Michel Korzec, "Feelings, Behaviour, Morals in the Netherlands, 1938–78: Analysis and Interpretation of an Advice Column," *Netherlands Journal of Sociology* 15, no. 2 (1979): 123–40.

*allowed and desired?*¹² For Wouters, before the 1970s the answers to these questions lay in advocating sexual restraint for men and an increased sexual confidence among women, but since then there has been a shift toward the discovery of the individual's own sexual desires. The proliferation of self-help manuals and sexual advice columns facilitated this discovery.

The benefit to analyzing Macnamara's column—in comparison with previous research—lies in the large and diverse readership it reached. Young and old, men and women, urban and rural, gay and straight all wrote seeking advice. Macnamara's column facilitates a study of the intersection between private and public moralities in Ireland. While the public manifestations of religious observance remained crucial to Irish men and women and necessary in defining a person's social status in the 1960s, the column allows insight into a space where individuals negotiated their own intimate lives within the constraints of a wider structural context of Catholic Ireland. As individuals solved personal problems they were also shaping the wider social context in which their problems were played out, or, as C. Wright Mills describes it, these "personal troubles of milieu" at the heart of biography were transformed into "public issues."¹³

Macnamara's column became one of a range of resources made available to Irish people in the 1960s that helped them to solve the intimate problems of their lives. According to Anthony Giddens, modern social life is characterized by its reflexivity, where the self is reflected upon, constructed, and reconstructed by the individual throughout the course of life, and individuals are forced to choose and negotiate between a diversity of lifestyle options.¹⁴ What we choose is in turn influenced by the information we glean from a range of sources about possible ways of living. As traditional society gave way to modern social life, individuals often found themselves disconnected from family and community supports, and they sought advice from a variety of what he calls "expert systems." Expert systems, including such things as therapy and counseling, are part of the disembedding of social institutions whereby there is a move or a "lifting out" of a local context and into a broader one constituted across space and time.¹⁵ These systems become essential for individuals as they negotiate the new lifestyle options and often serve as a form of secular confession in modern societies.¹⁶ Yet even these expert systems will disagree—as the Macnamara column reveals—and may offer individuals various paths with no single authority governing all areas of social life as in traditional societies. Thus the Angela Macnamara column can be seen within the context of the rise of these expert systems.

¹² Cas Wouters, "Balancing Sex and Love since the 1960s Sexual Revolution," *Theory Culture and Society* 13, nos. 3–4 (1998): 187–214, emphasis and parentheses in the original.

¹³ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 8.

¹⁴ Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*, 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶ Ibid., 179.

TALKING ABOUT SEXUALITY: NEW VOICES AND OLD

The first letter on the subject of homosexuality appeared in Macnamara's column in 1966. In an interview with Macnamara she revealed that she had already received many letters on the subject since the start of her column, but her editor refused to publish them.¹⁷ This decision is not surprising given the legacy of censorship in the Irish press. The Censorship of Films Act (1923) and the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) had placed legislative boundaries on how Irish people could experience sexuality through film and print. This first letter, dated 18 December 1966, was from an engaged woman who had discovered that her fiancé had had previous relationships with other men. Macnamara reassured her that it should not automatically be an impediment to their marriage in what would be a precursor to the tone of her advice on homosexuality in the future.

It was the second decade of the column that featured many more letters from gay men and their families. This, too, is not surprising. I have elsewhere argued that the emergence of second wave feminist movements in Ireland, Britain, and the United States and the subsequent founding of the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM) in 1974 all contributed to a heightened awareness of homosexuality in Ireland within a context of rights and equality.¹⁸ In her response to a letter of 6 May 1979, for example, Macnamara suggested that it was the public speech about homosexuality itself that was causing much of the confusion among the otherwise heterosexual people who wrote to her. In doing so she inadvertently recognized the success of the IGRM participation in a debate throughout the decade. In responding to a twenty-one-year-old man "convinced beyond doubt" that he was not heterosexual, she responded: "In the last few years homosexual groups have become much more outspoken about their way of life. But it does seem that this outspokenness may also have caused increased anxiety amongst people who are in fact quite heterosexual. Don't rush into any quick decisions about whether you are homosexual or not. Get good professional help and advice first."

My interview with Macnamara revealed her to be uncertain about counselling people when she herself was working through her own understanding of the issues involved. The sources upon which Macnamara drew in educating herself are crucial in understanding the column. I argue that this "good professional help" referred to in her reply above was principally derived from two sources. In the early part of the decade she placed greater emphasis on

¹⁷ I interviewed Macnamara in January 2008. She still contributes to debates on a range of issues through frequent letters to the *Irish Times*.

¹⁸ For an overview of the establishment of this movement see Paul Ryan, "Coming Out of the Dark: A Decade of Gay Mobilisation in Ireland 1970–80," in *Social Movements and Ireland*, ed. Linda Connolly and Niamh Hourigan (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2007).

a religious discourse that emphasized the control and disciplining of sexual desires. *Humanae vitae* and *Persona humana* provided the framework from which Macnamara mediated this advice to her readers. Later there is a discernible shift to advice derived from medical discourse, primarily the psychiatric profession. This distinction is by no means clear cut, and both often coexisted in her columns. Moreover, Macnamara's advice to those writing about homosexuality was usually couched in the language of self-restraint. The starting point is always that sexuality, specifically men's, needs to be managed and channeled in appropriate relationships. Macnamara was influenced by a body of advice literature that advocated this restraint—an internalized monitoring of one's behavior while recognizing the very different psychologies of men and women that contributed to their different sexual needs.¹⁹

The evidence reveals that Catholic teaching on sexual ethics directly influenced the advice Macnamara dispensed to men confused about their sexual orientation. Central to this advice was a condemnation of all nonreproductive sexual activity. *Humanae vitae* provided the column with this language of self-restraint, advocating chastity and the discipline of sexual drives within and outside marriage. It states: "We take this opportunity to address those who are engaged in education and all those whose right and duty it is to provide for the common good of society. We would call their attention to the need to create an atmosphere favourable to the growth of chastity so that true liberty may prevail over license and the norms of the moral law may be fully safeguarded."²⁰

Angela Macnamara certainly saw it as her duty to create this chaste atmosphere, believing that her column had a duty to tackle human problems on both practical and spiritual levels. The publication of *Humanae vitae* came at a time of dispute among Catholic theologians.²¹ Social changes prompted some Catholic leaders to urge a reconsideration of the church's long-held views on contraception. This reconsideration was motivated by fears of overpopulation, the new roles of women in society, financial strains facing large families, and, crucially, the widespread availability of oral contraceptives. A commission of seventy-two authorized by Pope Paul VI to investigate these concerns reported back to him that contraception was not intrinsically evil and that married couples should be free to decide on the issue themselves. Yet the expectations of a liberalization on the topic were quickly dashed with the publication of *Humanae vitae*, which reaffirmed traditional Catholic

¹⁹ Macnamara recommended several books to her readers: George A. Kelly, *Dating for Young Catholics* (London: Robert Hale, 1963); Pierre Dufoyer, *Marriage: A Word to Young Men* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1963); and Pierre Dufoyer, *Building a Happy Marriage* (London: Burns & Oates, 1963).

²⁰ *Humanae vitae*, 8.

²¹ For a comprehensive analysis of *Humanae vitae* and its legacy see Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991).

opposition to contraception. The document was originally intended as a teaching manual to instruct Catholics, and this was exactly how Macnamara used it. When dealing with letters on premarital sex and the growing calls for the availability of artificial birth control she was unequivocal in her condemnation: “The Pope, directed by the Holy Spirit, has, as visible Head of the Catholic Church told the members of the Church that contraception is objectively wrong,” she wrote in her column of 7 July 1974. The discussion about contraception was not a theoretical one. There was public debate about the liberalization of laws governing contraception, which were repealed in 1974.²² Macnamara believed that the widespread availability of contraception would ultimately lead to the greater exploitation of women. It was all part of Macnamara’s larger defense of Catholic chastity: “If a boy really loves you he will want to protect you,” she wrote on 24 November 1963. “He will control the urge to display his love in a violent physical way until, within marriage, such intimacy is blessed by God.” On 10 May 1970 she wrote: “Objectively, sexual intercourse outside marriage is always grievously sinful. It is forbidden by the sixth commandment.”

The duty to create an environment favorable to chastity was not just a rhetoric espoused by the hierarchy and communicated by Macnamara in her column but was also deployed throughout families, communities, and schools in Ireland. The segregation of the sexes in most aspects of social life meant that couples were monitored so that they would avoid what were called “occasions of sin,” while in private men and women would be responsible for scrutinizing their own behavior for potential sinfulness. The consequences for women who became pregnant outside marriage or whose chastity was in doubt were grave. Shunned by family and community, these women were often interred in so-called Magdalen homes and their babies adopted, often overseas.²³

The message of self-control and the disciplining of sexual urges were especially present in the advice given in the column to the predominantly male readers who were distressed by their practice of masturbation. Masturbation had been of longstanding concern to educationalists and religious leaders who sought to eliminate the practice by instilling fears of both eternal damnation and physical deformity.²⁴ The level of misinformation and ignorance about masturbation revealed in Macnamara’s column is astonishing, as was

²² The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1935 banned the importation and sale of contraceptives in Ireland. The passing of this law, which remained on the statute books until 1974, is also pivotal in understanding the position of homosexuality, as it retained the legal distinction between reproductive and nonreproductive or recreational sexual practice.

²³ Magdalen homes were religious-run institutions for “fallen” women who had children outside marriage or whose chastity was deemed suspect. On the homes see Mary Raftery, *Suffer Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland’s Industrial Schools* (Dublin: New Island, 1999); on Irish overseas adoption see Mike Milotte, *Banished Babies: The Secret History of Ireland’s Baby Export Business* (Dublin: New Island, 1997).

²⁴ Allen Warren, “Popular Manliness: Baden Powell, Scouting and the Development of Manly Character,” in *Manliness and Morality: Middle Class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800–1940*, ed. J. A. Mangan and James Walvin (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University

the needless anxiety young men endured. Numerous letters to the column reflected this concern. The majority of letter writers were worried that they had contracted venereal disease through masturbation. Central to these letters is the hope that Macnamara will confirm their "normality" to them. "I think I may have venereal disease or some other illness," wrote the author of a letter published on 7 June 1970. "I don't think I'm physically the same as others. I do actions alone which have caused the symptoms I have described." Macnamara responded: "Venereal disease is spread almost exclusively through intimate contact with others during sexual relations. The habit of self-abuse is unlikely to cause physical abnormality." Macnamara reassured readers that there was no connection between venereal disease and masturbation, but her use of the word "unlikely" did little to dispel the belief that masturbation could be physically harmful. Other letter writers believed that masturbation caused syphilis, nervous tension, and homosexuality and had destroyed their chances of gaining entry to heaven.²⁵

Macnamara's advice also reflected the growing trend for a more female centered sexuality—and how male masturbation might impede men from fulfilling women's sexual needs. While reassuring her readers that they would be unable to contract sexually transmitted diseases through masturbation, she did warn men that the practice would turn them into selfish lovers and thereby affect their sexual performance in married life. "Yours is the habit of self-abuse," she told one man on 10 December 1972. "This is a normal impulse but it must be controlled and disciplined. So the way to overcome self-indulgence is to set our minds to doing good for others." To another on 7 January 1973 she had this to say: "Masturbation is a form of self gratification which if allowed to rein [*sic*] free would be an obstacle to the ability to love." "The person that has taught himself to give himself sexual pleasure may have difficulty adjusting his attitude and his physical responses so that he can fill the need of his marriage partner," she said to a third on 24 October 1976. It is worth noting that there was only one letter from a woman admitting she had masturbated and was concerned about possible side effects, from 2 October 1977. The widespread fears about contracting venereal disease were also featured in Robin Kent's review of medical problems in British problem pages throughout the 1940s, which shows that many girls were unclear about the sexual activities that would put them at risk.²⁶

Press, 1987); Jonathon Gathorne-Hardy, *The Public School Phenomena, 597–1977* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).

²⁵ 24 March 1974, 28 July 1974, 19 February 1978, and 24 October 1976. This attitude is a legacy from Victorian sexology, which associated masturbation with an array of physical ailments. Fears that masturbation weakened the body, enfeebled the mind, and damaged the moral will of the afflicted were widespread; see Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from Nineteenth Century to Present* (London: Quartet, 1977), 24–25; and Richard A. Posner, *Sex and Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 16–17.

²⁶ Kent, *Aunt Agony Advises*, 156.

The publication of *Persona humana* in 1975 reaffirmed Catholic teaching on sexual morality, including masturbation and homosexuality. The publication of the document came two years after the founding of the IGRM and received widespread coverage in the *Sunday Press*, where the text was reproduced in full on 25 January 1976. The document recognized that some people were homosexual not by choice but by an innate disposition. It advised those in the pastoral field to treat homosexuals with understanding but to offer no moral justification for these acts. This distinction would provide the framework within which Macnamara provided her advice, but it began to change as she came into contact with gay people through her column.

The publication of *Persona humana* gave merely an illusion of uniformity on the issue of homosexuality, since behind it lay tension and disagreement.²⁷ Crucially, the document relied heavily on scientific notions of homosexuality and (re)introduced the concept of sexual pathology at the same time when campaigns within professional bodies in psychiatry sought successfully to remove it.²⁸ With regard to homosexuality, *Persona humana*'s condemnation is uncompromising: "For according to the objective moral order, homosexual relations are acts which lack an essential and indispensable finality. In Sacred Scripture they are condemned as a serious depravity and even presented as the sad consequence of rejecting God. This judgment of Scripture does not of course permit us to conclude that all those who suffer from this anomaly are personally responsible for it, but it does attest to the fact that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of."²⁹ *Persona humana* also placed the criticism for the questioning of church teaching among the young on the "unrestrained licentiousness of so many public entertainments and publications, as well as with the neglect of modesty."³⁰ In an article in the *Sunday Press* from 19 March 1978 Angela Macnamara also laid the blame for the growth of the permissive society firmly on the media and intellectuals. "Our young people are under vicious attack," she wrote, "bombarded by a dizzying kaleidoscope of pop culture, misinformation about the basic nature of human beings, encouragement through permissive magazines, newspapers, TV and books to 'live it up,' treacherously influenced by nihilist intellectuals who are attacking what is most valid and enriching in human experience."

There were other socioeconomic changes at work in Ireland that contributed to these challenges to Catholic social teaching. While a survey of Irish religiosity in 1973–74 revealed high levels of weekly church attendance (91 percent) and an acceptance of papal infallibility (69 percent), the study

²⁷ Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 25–29.

²⁸ Peter M. Nardi, David Sanders, and Judd Marmor, *Growing Up before Stonewall: Life Stories of Some Gay Men* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 40–41.

²⁹ Sacred Congregation, *Persona humana*, 18.

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

also showed that higher levels of education were associated with lower levels of religious belief.³¹ I have elsewhere argued that the expansion of third-level education facilitated the emergence of new social movements crucial in the birth of the women's and gay movements in Ireland, but it is clear that the introduction of free high school level education in 1966 and the expansion of universities and technical institutes positioned education as a key driver in Ireland's modernity, accelerating the decline of church dominance.³² The Censorship of Publications Act of 1967 loosened the restrictive climate governing the media in Ireland and further contributed to a growing openness and discussion of new and controversial ideas, even those that ran counter to Catholic social teaching.

“IT’S ONLY A PHASE”: MACNAMARA ADVISES ON HOMOSEXUALITY

The letters received by Macnamara on the subject of homosexuality increased in the early years of the 1970s. Most were written by individuals who thought of themselves as homosexual, such as this one from 23 September 1973: “I’m a 16 year old boy and feel that I’m not like other boys at all. I’m homosexual. . . . I also have the habit of masturbation. I wonder if these plagues are connected though I understand many young men indulge in this selfishness.” Men wrote in despair because they suspected, rightly or wrongly, that they themselves might be gay: “I enclose a cutting from one of the Catholic newspapers which describes a film now on show in Dublin,” wrote one person on 20 June 1971. “Many of the symptoms described in the article coincide with my own feelings. It has so upset me that I have quit my job and cannot sleep.” Heterosexual people also wrote in, curious to understand this new sexual species that was finding a new voice in Ireland. One letter published on 4 January 1970 asked: “What is a homosexual? There have been films and plays and things in the newspapers etc about people called homosexual, and I don’t know what it means. I hear the other fellows talking about it.” Some women wrote, suspicious that their boyfriends might be gay. The general theme of the letters is one of ignorance surrounding homosexuality at the time and the trauma people felt when it became apparent to them.

Although Macnamara often provided men with medical definitions of homosexuality, she was slow to confirm a letter writer’s doubts about his or her sexuality. The extent to which the homosexual was culpable for his condition formed an important feature of her advice. *Persona humana*’s distinction between a homosexuality deemed to be transitory or curable and a homosexuality deemed to be innate became the basis for her evaluation

³¹ Maire Nic Ghialla Phádraig, “Religion in Ireland: Preliminary Analysis,” *Social Studies* 5, no. 3 (1976): 144.

³² Ryan, “Coming Out of the Dark,” 92.

of the letters from her sexually confused readership and thus influenced the course of action she recommended. *Persona humana* stated: “A distinction is drawn . . . between homosexuals whose tendency comes from false education, from their lack of normal sexual development, from habit, from bad example, or from other similar causes and is transitory or at least not incurable; and homosexuals who are definitively such because of some kind of innate instinct or a pathological constitution judged to be incurable.”³³ Following this distinction, Macnamara categorized the majority of the letters she received as “transitory” even when faced with compelling evidence to the contrary. (Brinkgreve and Korzec’s analysis of Dutch advice columns from the same era in contrast revealed a willingness to confirm an individual’s homosexuality, as to a mother about her son: “You know it, we know it and your son has known it for a long time: he is most probably homosexual.”)³⁴

Central to Macnamara’s advice, however, was the distinction between homosexual tendencies and individual homosexual acts. *Persona humana* argued that while the homosexual person must be treated “with understanding,” the homosexual act is to be viewed as “intrinsically disordered.”³⁵ Macnamara did avoid any direct condemnations of individual persons yet consistently viewed sexual anxiety as a phase and seemed reluctant to confirm any reader’s concern about his or her sexuality. “Some people believe themselves to be homosexual when in fact they may only have tendencies that way,” she wrote on 8 February 1970. “People can certainly be helped to overcome tendencies of this kind and if not curable they can be helped to cope.” Not long before that, on 4 January 1970, she wrote: “Most young people go through a phase when their sexual emotions are developing and they have not mixed much with the opposite sex and they may have an interest in and admiration for a member of their own sex. This is sometimes called a ‘crush’ and is quite a normal phase of development but not a phase to encourage or get stuck in.” And she suggested to a young woman on 26 October 1975 that “perhaps your boyfriend has had feelings of attraction toward other boys, been shocked by these feelings and told himself or has been told by others that he is homosexual.”

Macnamara reassured readers she deemed to be in this transitory stage of homosexuality that these tendencies were indeed a normal feature of sexual development. To overcome these inclinations the readers should not obsess about their feelings and concentrate on other pursuits in their lives. “It seems highly unlikely that you are homosexual,” she told one letter writer on 15 March 1970. “I do hope you enjoy sport, football, swimming etc indeed any outdoor activity is essential for a young man.” She offered this advice to another on 3 September 1972: “One can experience a disordered emotion

³³ Sacred Congregation, *Persona humana*, sec. 8.

³⁴ Brinkgreve and Korzec, “Feelings,” 125.

³⁵ Sacred Congregation, *Persona humana*, sec. 8.

like this without it being an indication of any deep personality upset. Stop talking about it and building it up as a tragedy." And she counseled a third on 6 May 1979: "There is a danger for all of us that we can concentrate so much on the sexual area that we forget that each of us is first and foremost a person. Have you tried to develop other areas of your life?"

For Macnamara sport particularly seemed to offer the young man confused about his sexual orientation an immunization from his homosexuality. By equating sport and the disciplining of the body with moral self-restraint, the column followed a nineteenth-century scientific and educational tradition that blurred the boundaries between muscle and willpower.³⁶ Sport acted as a repressive mechanism on a boy's impulses, guarding him against sexually deviant adolescent ailments. Similarly, the sexual discipline that sport was believed to possess contributed to his future increased productivity and labor power.³⁷ Throughout the column sex was viewed as external to human control, requiring its repression as well as guidance and strategies to overcome it. A letter of 15 November 1970 from a young man reveals this struggle. "I am a young Kerry man who came over to London last month to find work. But I find it quite impossible to avoid occasions of sin. Would it help me to wear a miraculous medal?"³⁸ Readers relied heavily on concepts of instinct, drive, and impulse, demanding what Jeffrey Weeks describes as social prescriptions to rein them in.³⁹ In Macnamara's column these prescriptions were most often hobbies, charity work, and sport. For Michel Foucault, too, sport is an arena where the body is disciplined and trained.⁴⁰ The suggestion to pursue sports and outdoor activities perpetuated the belief that the physical and emotional contact that happened through sport was essentially asexual.

"CONDEMNED BY THE CHURCH"? HOMOSEXUALITY AND SIN

The extent to which homosexuality was sinful was a great concern for many Irish men who wrote to Macnamara. I have argued elsewhere that many Irish gay men struggled to reconcile their obligations to their families and their faith while remaining true to their sexual selves.⁴¹ One letter from 26

³⁶ Mangan and Walvin, introduction to *Manliness and Morality*, 14.

³⁷ Jean-Marie Brohm, *Sport: A Prison of Measured Time*, trans. Ian Fraser (London: Ink Links, 1978).

³⁸ This letter is typical of those from Irish people working in England. The letters from 25 August 1974 and 8 August 1976 focus on the failure of the permissive society and the difficulties for Irish Catholics in remaining chaste and modest in a changing moral climate.

³⁹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1985), 84.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; London: Penguin, 1977), 5.

⁴¹ Paul Ryan, "Coming Out, Staying In: The Personal Narratives of Some Irish Gay Men," *Irish Journal of Sociology* 12, no. 2 (2003): 68–85.

June 1977 exemplifies this conflict between a strong religious faith and a newly discovered homosexual identity but without shame or any desire to change: "I am seventeen and a Catholic, a practising homosexual for the past fifteen months. I do not want to be cured but I want to be a Catholic. I do not feel dirty but am worried and puzzled that my state is condemned by the Church. Did Christ actually condemn homosexuality?" Macnamara replied: "First of all, Jesus did not condemn homosexuality. . . . There is nothing morally wrong in having homosexual tendencies, or even in being so constituted that you have no interest whatsoever in the opposite sex, but the question of moral responsibility arises when you decide what you are going to do about this, how you will cope with it."

It should be noted that letter writers in general were obsessed with their sinfulness. They were concerned about the sinfulness of strapless evening dresses, dancing the twist, going steady without permission, kissing, and abortion (in letters of 10 November 1963, 27 September 1964, 12 December 1965, 10 September 1967, and 26 May 1974, respectively). Macnamara assured her readers that dancing and dresses were only a sin against modesty if they were used in a suggestive way to excite men. Going steady and kissing were not sinful but could lead to sinful behavior and were best avoided, even while God remains ready to forgive all sins, including that of abortion.

Fixated on the possible occasions of sin, as were the individuals to whom she offered her advice, Macnamara took on the role of mediator in deciding whether Catholics should be counseled to seek the sacrament of confession. My understanding of the Macnamara column is as a confessional space itself, where the truth of Irish sexuality was exposed and transformed into discourse. Such spaces were extremely rare in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s. Macnamara's columns allowed readers to confess their sexual deviations in greater detail than they would be likely to do in the sacrament of confession. For example, a young man who received money for having sex with a homosexual man explained to Macnamara in a letter of 29 January 1978 that he had been unable to tell this sin in confession and subsequently was unable to receive Holy Communion. Here, she coached the man as to a possible wording that would minimize his embarrassment when speaking to a priest. With 66 percent of Irish Catholics attending confession at least once a month in this period, the column played a crucial role in enabling letter writers to return to the sacrament once Macnamara had adjudicated the potential sinfulness of the act and suggested a solution.⁴²

The column served as an expert forum wherein Macnamara presided over the sexually naive, the confused, and the sexual transgressive in a manner entirely reminiscent of Foucault's description of the purpose of the official sacrament of confession: "It is a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one

⁴² Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, "Religion in Ireland," 129.

does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority that requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile.”⁴³ The tone of Macnamara’s advice itself demonstrates how much she saw her role as a pastoral one not unlike that of a priest to a confessor. Accordingly, although the teachings of the Catholic Church influenced Macnamara’s advice on homosexuality, the biblical condemnations in Leviticus 18:22 and Romans 1:27 did not find a place in the language of her column. Similarly, Macnamara’s column did not rely on a legal discourse in answering readers’ letters. This was most unusual. Gay men were subject to harassment, arrest, and prosecution in Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s. The publication of names in newspapers convicted for gross indecency led predictably to job losses and alienation from family and friends.⁴⁴

PATHOLOGIZING HOMOSEXUALITY: CAN IT BE CURED?

Many of the men who wrote to Macnamara did so seeking reassurance and comfort but also advice on how to manage and cure the distress they felt by their homosexuality. So it is noteworthy that her almost exclusive reliance on religious experts in the early years of the column declined while psychiatry increasingly became the expert voice. Although the American Psychiatric Association had removed homosexuality from its register of psychopathology in 1973, the profession was still deemed to be the best qualified to guide gay men out of homosexuality in Ireland.

The belief that homosexuality was a sexual pathology was unquestioned. In the Dáil (Irish Parliament) in 1977 the minister of health, Noel Browne, questioned the minister of justice, Gerry Collins, on whether the government had any intention of reexamining the law against gross indecency. Browne, described by the *Irish Independent* in an article of 14 December 1977 as “one of the country’s top psychiatrists,” cited the mental health consequences of the criminalization of homosexuality.⁴⁵ He argued that “Irish society creates formidable emotional problems for homosexuals. It ridicules them, calls them names and is suspicious that they might seduce children.” Browne claimed to have seen the psychological consequences of this stigma in his own practice.⁴⁶ The questions he posed to the minister were part of a strategy to gain the support of six Dáil deputies so as to underwrite his private member’s bill to decriminalize homosexuality. No deputies on the government or opposition benches were willing to do so.

⁴³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1:61–62, parentheses in the original.

⁴⁴ Hug, *Politics of Sexual Morality*, 207.

⁴⁵ *Dáil Éireann* (Parliamentary Debates), vol. 302, 13 December 1977.

⁴⁶ On Browne’s political and professional careers, including his psychiatric practice, see his autobiography, Noel Browne, *Against the Tide* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986).

It is significant that although the IGRM was founded in 1974, Macnamara only once recommended the organization, and only after psychiatry, in a 15 May 1977 reply to a reader who had speculated about whether the organization could be helpful.

Q—I am a 19 year old boy and I have never told anybody about my problem. I am a homosexual. This is the first time I have ever expressed this. I have been aware of it for about 5 years. I never engaged in any sexual acts with anyone yet. I saw a TV programme about it and I saw how the Gay Rights Movement helps people like me. What would you advise me to do?

A—Some experts claim a person cannot be definitely classed as a homosexual before the early twenties. I think you would benefit from a talk with a counsellor or psychiatrist who would help you discover your basic orientation. It would be premature to consider that you are definitely homosexual and then concentrate on the homosexual community for most of your friendships. Many members of the Gay Rights Movement are conscientious in helping others to discover their true sexual orientation and direct them to counsellors who are qualified.

This quotation again reveals the key role of the media in changing attitudes toward homosexuality in Ireland. The program this letter writer was referring to was a documentary made by RTE and presented by journalist Cathal O'Shannon, and that included footage taken of gay men socializing at an IGRM disco in Dublin. This was revolutionary programming for the state broadcaster.

Macnamara's personal views on homosexuality also changed over the duration of the column. In my interview with her Macnamara suggested that at the time she was "frightened by it [homosexuality] and frightened by the moral implications and felt a little bit horrified by it," but through private correspondence with members of the IGRM she acknowledged that she "began to talk with them and became more informed myself." She described her replies to gay men in the final years of the column as "compassionate."

There are limitations as to what we can glean from the letter writers and Macnamara's advice to them. The column gives us no indication as to how people interpreted the advice they were given or if they acted upon it at all. Still, it is helpful to view the audience of the column, both letter writers and the general readership, as an active audience, making sense of the advice within the reality of their everyday lives. We can understand the advice of the column as mirroring either the ideological dominance of Catholic social teaching or the psychiatric expertise in Irish society at the time. Nonetheless, coexisting with these preferred readings were oppositional and negotiated ones. In the following letters, for example, we see Macnamara advising both psychiatric and spiritual direction, but in my

interview she stated that she was often reluctant to do so because people were "quite anxious about psychiatry; . . . it just meant the same thing: they weren't normal, [and] that was frightening." On 8 February 1970 she wrote: "A person who is worried about this [homosexuality] should consult a doctor, who will refer him to a psychiatrist if that is found to be necessary. . . . In all cases medical and spiritual help should be sought." On 4 April 1971 she wrote: "It is essential that you talk to a doctor, a spiritual director or a prudent counsellor. . . . It is difficult to help an adult who is deeply homosexual, but even he can be helped to cope with his own condition and to find some degree of happiness." And on 13 March 1977 she wrote: "Some people go through homosexual phases in their lives but with counselling discover themselves to be heterosexual."

Macnamara's column was not the only Irish problem page in the decade suggesting referrals to the psychiatric profession. In 1973 the tabloid *Sunday World* was launched, and its Dear Linda column was even more explicit about what course of action to take, as, for example, on 2 February 1975, when advising a twenty-one-year-old man claiming to have gotten himself into "a type of homosexual habit." "Psychiatric help is what you need for a problem of this sort. Don't shy away from the word. There will be a psychiatric department attached to most of the hospitals in and around Cork. Be sure to keep your appointment and don't let cold feet stop you at the last minute. And remember for any bad habit that you get into use the AA motto—'A Day at a time.'"⁴⁷

The *Sunday World* also ran a series of articles on homosexuality in October 1973 that generated letters both from men anxious about their sexuality and from organizations suggesting help and counseling for them. In a letter to the paper of 21 October 1973 the Legion of Mary, a lay Catholic organization, announced the start of discussion groups in Dublin for those believing themselves to be homosexual and "anxious to discuss their problem in an informal, understanding and constructive atmosphere," assuring readers that the meetings were "nondenominational and strictly confidential."⁴⁸ For some men meeting similar men at these meetings only confirmed their homosexuality, and so they rejected the notion. "Trevor," in a letter of 28 October 1973 to the paper, explained his position: "I developed tendencies towards my own sex and even at this stage in my life (32) I am still trying to fight it. Thank God I have tried to stay on the straight road. I have never had any relations with or met another homosexual. I have tried retreats,

⁴⁷ The *Sunday World* was launched in 1973 and would mark the end of the dominance of the *Sunday Press* of the Sunday newspaper market in Ireland, with its unique combination of sport, gossip, and entertainment (O'Brien, *De Valera*, 132).

⁴⁸ The self-defined mission of the Legion of Mary, with a membership of ten thousand in Ireland in the 1970s, was the sanctification of its members by prayer and participation in apostolic works and the provision of a corps d'elite at the disposal of ecclesiastical superiors. See Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*, 53–57 on lay Catholic organizations.

novenas and [a pilgrimage to] Lourdes, asking God to show me some light for the future. I feel for me it (the Legion of Mary meetings) would be like asking an alcoholic in for a jar [of beer], nevertheless good luck to them in their work." Similarly, Macnamara recommended that her readers who thought they might be homosexuals contact what she called the "Thursday Discussion Group," although she gave no further details about the group's aims or affiliation. For other men there appeared to be no hope, no cure, and no recovery from their homosexuality, as this extraordinary letter of 23 April 1978 to Macnamara suggests:

Q—I'm a young man, homosexual and completely alone with no friends or social life. My life has been a misery, I can no longer face each day. I intend to take my life. The purpose of this suicide letter is to say I'm sorry to everyone.

A—I wish I had your name and address. If you see this would you please write to me privately enclosing a stamped addressed envelope and I shall put you in touch with a caring and concerned person.

The fate of this young man remains unknown, but Macnamara most often recommended private correspondence when there was a need for urgency, as above, or when letters were deemed too explicit for publication.

TALKING BACK: DISSENTING VOICES IN MACNAMARA'S COLUMN

By the mid-1970s the Catholic Church and the psychiatric profession's views on homosexuality were being challenged on several fronts. The media was again central. The strategies employed by women's groups in harnessing the power of the media to garner publicity provided a blueprint for IGRM campaigns. The appearance of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (IWLM) on *The Late Late Show* in 1971 marked a shift in how sexuality was spoken about and brought previously private decisions about marital sexuality into the public domain. Crucially, women themselves were now talking about their own bodies in defiance of the religious and legislative discourses that had previously claimed jurisdiction over them.⁴⁹ In the same year the IWLM's importation of contraceptives into the Irish Republic from Northern Ireland in defiance of the 1935 legislation banning the sale and importation of contraceptives generated international media coverage.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Legislation that had affected women's intimate and public lives included the prohibition of divorce in 1925. In 1937 articles 41.3.1 and 2 of the Constitution of Ireland went further still and declared that no law could be passed that would permit the dissolution of marriage (Hug, *Politics of Sexual Morality*, 18). Women were restricted from taking civil service examinations in 1925 and sitting on juries in 1927. The "marriage bar" preventing married women from working in the civil service remained in place until 1973.

⁵⁰ Linda Connolly, "From Revolution to Devolution: Mapping the Contemporary Women's Movement in Ireland," in *Women and Irish Society: A Sociological Reader*, ed. Anne Byrne and Madeleine Leonard (Belfast: Beyond the Pale), 556.

In my interview with Macnamara she revealed how her own views on contraception had also changed. Though believing the introduction of contraception would bring increased exploitation of some women, she recognized that for married couples being unable to regulate their families was a source of conflict and unhappiness. "And I began to think that in some way this must be regulated so that only married people could avail [themselves] of contraception and I was sure that I was accepting eventually of the need for it, and you know my own life showed that too it was extremely difficult to show your full affection in a marriage . . . without its arguments in that whole area."

The campaign for the legalization of contraception challenged a deeply held belief that saw sex purely as an instrument of procreation. Only after this change had been achieved could a discourse of sexual pleasure and nonreproductive relationships be validated. More radical organizations like Irish Women United (IWU), founded in 1975, became the springboard for the formation of single-issue campaigns like the Rape Crisis Centre (1977), the Contraception Action Programme (1976), and Women's Right to Choose (1979).⁵¹ Irish lesbians, who first began to press for rights through the women's movement, broke to form the Liberation of Irish Lesbians in 1978.⁵² Media coverage of the development of the incipient gay movements in Britain and the United States and the work of the fledgling IGRM called into question Catholic teaching on a range of nonprocreative sexual practices.

This coverage alerted Catholics to arguments contradictory to the position laid out by the Catholic Church and communicated by columns like Macnamara's. One letter of 27 January 1974 illustrates the influence of foreign media in Ireland and the alternative truths about sexuality that they offered Irish people. It also reveals that the priest remained the final authority on questions of sexual pleasure and the body for Macnamara:

Q—I enclose a cutting from an English magazine, it is about masturbation. I compared to your article on the subject and found it confusing that one problem page condemns it and another one says it is an essential part of sexual development.

A—The truth is that masturbation is a natural inclination and like all other natural inclinations it must be controlled and disciplined. I have been assured by two priests at least that my original statement on the matter is correct.

In Ireland the Catholic Church's teachings on sexuality had long remained unchallenged as the undisputed "truth" about sexual deviation. One letter writer criticized Macnamara for advocating psychiatry.

⁵¹ Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2002), 137–42.

⁵² Joni Crone, "Lesbian Feminism in Ireland," *Women's International Forum* 11, no. 4 (1988): 343–47.

This letter of 10 January 1971 illustrates the conflict between traditional Catholic teachings and the rising power of the psychiatric profession in the field of sexual ethics. It reads: "In your suggestion that a person suffering from depression see a doctor, I take it you have in mind a psychiatrist? I dispute that such a person has a role to play in a Christian community. It strikes me that psychiatrics set themselves up as purveyors of happiness and usurp, to some extent the confessor. Perhaps it would be best to suggest a saintly priest be sought out. I'm inclined to think that what nowadays we like to call an illness is really a spiritual malaise."

There is also evidence that loved ones close to the person concerned about homosexuality were reluctant to accept the Catholic or psychiatric definition of them as disordered. Perhaps Irish gay men and their friends and family did not accept this advice passively but actively resisted efforts to promote psychiatric treatment. In one letter of 26 October 1975 a girlfriend grapples with reconciling the revelation of her boyfriend's homosexuality and her religious faith: "I don't know whether it is a sin or not or what I should do in this situation. . . . He is good at his work and very kind to his people at home. I can't believe that he is a bad person." In another letter of 2 April 1978 a mother seems genuinely surprised that her gay son isn't lonely, unhappy, or crippled by guilt: "He seems quite happy in himself, knows other homosexual people and leads what seems to be an enjoyable social life."

Sometimes the precise nature of the sexual problem referred to in the column is unclear. The effect is that Macnamara seemed to be speaking directly to an individual through the column and ignoring the wider readership. One letter writer wrote to Macnamara on 10 December 1972: "For as long as I can remember I have had this habit . . . I read in an American magazine that a woman had the same habit and she did really bad things . . . I'm 15, please tell me if my problem can be cured." Sometimes the problem was deemed too explicit to be discussed openly in the column. Macnamara's response to one letter on 2 April 1971 was as follows: "Intimate problems like yours are quite unsuitable for publication. Please write privately." At other times the nature of the problem is perhaps assumed to be understood by the broader readership. A letter of 21 January 1972 read: "I am a man in my middle thirties who everybody might think is living an ordinary happy life. But secretly my life is most unhappy. I have suffered for years. Please ask some kind priest of your acquaintance to say a Mass for me that I may soon be living a holy, happy and normal life."

Although popular devotion to the Catholic Church seemed to reach fever pitch during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland in September 1979, changes to the sexual life of Ireland were well under way. The considerable legislative gains for women in the decade had, I believe, raised the expectations of women in the workplace, in the home, and, particularly, in

the bedroom.⁵³ These expectations are reflected in the number of letters to the column at the close of the decade from married women who revealed a high level of sexual dissatisfaction with their husbands. Steven Seidman has identified this trend in modern America as a result of the increased sexualization of love and marriage.⁵⁴ Women sought a sexuality that was more female centered, and the success of love and marriage was increasingly determined by the sexual satisfaction of both partners, particularly women. Wouters also identifies the same trend in his study.⁵⁵ Indeed, from the 1960s both “respectable” and unmarried women throughout the Western world became more vocal and contributed to public debate in which they discussed their sexual desires and argued for a relationship that would be both loving and sexual. In Ireland, in contrast, this debate happened only among married women. The pursuit of sexual satisfaction among women marked the end of the separation of sex from marriage of the sort best illustrated in the “Bishop and the Nightie” episode in 1966, when a married woman was publicly chastised for alluding to sex with her husband on Irish television.⁵⁶ For Irish radio agony aunt Frankie Byrne too, her replies reveal a similarly changing moral landscape. A letter from an “eligible bachelor” and her response are insightful.

Dear Frankie: I've been trying very hard to meet a girl who could meet my standards and whom I would ultimately marry. There's nothing more than I wish than to marry and settle down with a nice sensible settled wife. I know that I will make a perfect husband.

Frankie: A professional housekeeper might not object—if the salary and home comforts were acceptable—but I suspect that the man who says he's looking for a nice, settled, sensible wife means that he's really searching for an unpaid housekeeper with a civil tongue in her head. I'm afraid women are more demanding and difficult to please nowadays than they used to be.⁵⁷

Homosexuality would also benefit from the growth in a more liberal Irish sexual culture. Macnamara's tone grew steadily more conciliatory in

⁵³ On these legislative changes see Pat O'Connor, *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1998), 32–80.

⁵⁴ Steven Seidman, *Embattled Eros: Sexual Politics and Ethics in Contemporary America* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 28.

⁵⁵ Wouters, “Balancing Sex and Love,” 188.

⁵⁶ The incident happened when popular television chat show host Gay Byrne was asking a newlywed couple about their honeymoon and whether one woman could remember what she wore to bed on the first night of her marriage, to which she declared that she wore nothing at all, incurring the wrath of the bishop of Galway. On the “Bishop and the Nightie” scandal see Inglis, *Moral Monopoly*, 231–32; Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*, 217–18.

⁵⁷ This letter is taken from Patrick O’Dea, *Dear Frankie* (Dublin: Mentor, 1998), 92–93. No date of broadcast is given, but Frankie Byrne’s radio show was broadcast between 1963 and 1985.

the late 1970s, especially when compared to the more uncompromising message that she communicated to her readers in the 1960s and in the early 1970s. Her reply of 2 April 1978 to a mother distressed at the news of her son's homosexuality illustrates this message but also the strength of patriarchy in Irish homes.

Q—Our son is twenty one years of age and has just informed us that he is homosexual. We are horrified, I feel absolutely numb. His father's reaction was to tell him to leave home immediately. He has done this. What could we have done that caused this?

A—In telling you that he has homosexual tendencies your son has been honest and has shared something that is very important in his life. For too long we have condemned out of hand the person whose sexual tendencies are not the norm. However, the fact remains that there are many people who are this way and who lead lives of great integrity, responsibility and love. . . . Contact your son and assure him that your love for him is not conditional and you want him to know that home will always be home for him.

Inadvertently, Angela Macnamara's column had become a force for sexual change in Ireland. By refuting articles published by British magazines that spoke of a different truth about sexuality, Macnamara was responsible for new language that was incorporated into the debate taking place within the public sphere in Ireland. The expectations of the readership of the *Sunday Press* had also changed. By 1980 the Macnamara column, though changing, remained too old-fashioned for the editor, who was keen to compete with more salacious problem pages in the Irish and British tabloid press. Macnamara was encouraged to change the tone of the column. She refused, and her career as an agony aunt came to an end.

CONCLUSION

Angela Macnamara's column represented a unique space within which to speak publicly about sexuality in 1960s and 1970s Ireland. The initial success of the column can be attributed to the changing media landscape throughout the 1960s, which recognized women as a specific constituency within the traditional Irish newspaper. Men also wrote to her, though, confused about their sexuality. Yet while Macnamara and the *Sunday Press* articulated a predictable reverence for the pronouncements of the Catholic Church and its bishops, it would be incorrect to view the column merely as a mouthpiece for Catholic social teaching. The language used by letter writers and by Macnamara herself revealed a combination of expert teaching on sexuality from both clergymen and psychiatrists, often competing with and contradicting each other in the search for the truth about homo-

sexuality. There is no doubt that readers of the column used her advice in a similar way. The column gave men and women access to a language of sexuality that was not otherwise freely available in Ireland. The language of these “experts” on sexuality eventually filtered back into lay discourse, transforming it and, ultimately, modernizing it. Readers of the column became as knowledgeable as these experts, lay or religious. They became more critical too, demanding advice that ran contrary to the Catholic social teaching upon which Macnamara had originally based the column. Macnamara also changed. Her replies on moral issues such as homosexuality and contraception changed not as a result of any attempt to become as “modern” as the Ireland around her but due to the exposure of debates within her family, the column, and wider media discussion of new social movements in Ireland.