
'to recover his reputation among the people of God': Sex, Religion and the Double Standard in Presbyterian Ireland, c.1700–1838

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how Presbyterian religious belief and practice shaped the operation of the sexual double standard in Ireland. It argues that reputation continued to have a public element into the nineteenth century and highlights the role of religion as a locus around which male reputation was validated, restored and safeguarded. Through a system of surveillance, and underpinned by the gossip network, the Presbyterian church courts in Ireland held men to account for lapses in sexual conduct. Presbyterian men, too, were concerned to maintain clear characters. In their efforts to keep sexual indiscretions private and silence their accusers, some men even resorted to bribery, threats of violence and extortion. Others turned to the church courts to validate their reputations, recognising the place and power of the church as a source of moral authority.

On 27 February 1786, the Presbyterian Kirk Session of Cahans, county Monaghan, met to discuss a 'fama clamosa' that was circulating among its community. Two of their members, Agnes Connolly and Joseph Young (who was also an elder of the Kirk Session), were spotted engaging in inappropriate behaviour on the roadside. Under questioning, the couple confessed that they were intoxicated at the time and that Joseph had touched the 'bare skin' of Agnes' hands, neck and breasts. Both denied that their activities had progressed any further, and Joseph offered to swear an oath to that effect, remarking that 'no member pertaining to his body was ever *in her*'.¹

The responses of Agnes and Joseph to the questions of the Kirk Session are illuminating for two main reasons. On the one hand, the emphasis placed by both parties on the non-penetrative nature of their physical contact reveals much about the ongoing negotiation between church and believer on the boundaries of sexual sin. Framed within the language of the 'sliding scale of sexual misbehaviour', Agnes and Joseph explained that their physical contact had not transgressed beyond acceptable limits. For both parties, penetration was the point at which sexual contact became most problematic. The emphasis on penetration as a measure of sexual sin underpins the second point: the disruptive potential of male sexuality. The response of the Kirk

Session raises important questions about the gendered impact that sexual sin had on the social reputations of offenders. Whereas Agnes received a private rebuke before the eldership for her part in the offence, Joseph was suspended from his office as elder for one month and was ordered to make public acknowledgement before the congregation the next Sabbath.² In scrutinising male sexual misbehaviour, cases such as this bring into sharper focus the role that gender played in the policing of sexual conduct, while also raising questions about the influence of religion in shaping sexual standards.

Focusing on the policing of male sexual behaviour across the long eighteenth century, this article sits at the nexus of new scholarship that reassesses the operation of the sexual double standard on the one hand and the relationship between sex and religion on the other. Keith Thomas' (1959) essay on the double standard described the unequal weight that was afforded to lapses in female sexual conduct. Whereas unchastity in women was a 'matter of utmost gravity', in men it was much 'less a mild and pardonable one', if it was considered an offence at all.³ While Thomas conceded that men's sexual misbehaviour was regarded by some sections of society as 'unrespectable', he maintained that efforts to curtail male sexuality were 'limited' and were more concerned with protecting the chastity of married women and the daughters of the 'respectable classes'.⁴

Successive generations of historians have since challenged and refined different aspects of this concept. Scholars of gender, law and religion have demonstrated the myriad ways in which men's sexual misbehaviour was actively policed by the combined efforts of the family, community, church and state.⁵ Historians of masculinities have likewise refocused attention on the implications that sexual misconduct had on men's social reputations, albeit arguing that it manifested differently at particular points in time.⁶ Whereas the seventeenth-century 'anxious patriarch' was concerned to protect his 'sexual probity' and did so by controlling his own behaviour and that of his household, the eighteenth-century 'polite gentleman' regulated his own conduct through a process of introspection.⁷ The emergence of these different masculine archetypes sits alongside historical narratives that chart a transition in the meanings of honour and reputation, with the eighteenth-century marked out as a turning point.⁸ In contrast to its earlier definition as an honour made manifest externally, measured by the opinions of others and publicly defended, it became a quality mediated by individual conscience, regulated through self-restraint and personal reflection. In other words, while sexuality remained important to men's sense of self, by the eighteenth century, it was less a cause for external policing.

Understandings of the sexual double standard (and its implications for men) can be further problematised by turning to new scholarship that reassesses the relationship between sexuality and religion across the long eighteenth century. This period is generally associated with sweeping changes in sexual behaviour. As the era of the 'sexual revolution', it has been linked with rising rates of illegitimacy, the loosening of sexual morals, and changes in the relationship between concepts of sex and sin. While historians have posited various economic, political and social explanations for these changes, the declining authority of the church is often invoked as an important factor.⁹ This view has been significantly revised by recent scholarship. William Gibson and Joanne Begiato's study of the Church of England (2017) is a case in point. Writing against historical narratives that link changes in sexual behaviour to the declining

authority of the church, they emphasise the unevenness of decline and the continuing use of the church courts by the laity to restore reputation.¹⁰ Important for our current discussion, Gibson and Begiato argue that defamation cases continued to be presented to the church courts because sexual misconduct continued to have important implications for public reputation.¹¹ Their work challenges the chronology of change over time in concepts of honour discussed above, suggesting instead that sexual reputation retained its public character for much longer into the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries.¹²

In a similar vein, Katie Barclay's (2019) recent work on eighteenth-century Scotland has demonstrated how religion continued to play a role in shaping attitudes towards sexual and marital nonconformity. Much in the same way as the case that opened this article, Barclay reveals how Presbyterians in Scotland drew on a 'hierarchy of wrongdoing' against which they judged the severity of their misbehaviour, enabling them to negotiate the boundaries of their offensive conduct with the Kirk. Far from waning over time, external forms of policing (like religious belief) continued to shape sexual standards.¹³

The following article brings these two bodies of work together to explore how Presbyterian belief and practice shaped the operation of the sexual double standard in Ireland across the long eighteenth century. It adds to knowledge in two main ways. First, the Irish Presbyterian case reveals how reputation continued to have a public element well into the nineteenth century and highlights the church as a locus around which male reputation was validated, restored and safeguarded. The unique context in which Presbyterian church discipline operated in Ireland enhanced the place and power of the church to make such interventions. Unlike its parent church in Scotland, the Irish Presbyterian church courts operated without a legal mandate. Presbyterianism in Ireland held the position of a dissenting minority – the Established Church being Anglican. Presbyterianism came to Ireland in the seventeenth century, brought over by Scottish settlers. Successive waves of Scottish migration thereafter helped to create a strong Presbyterian foothold in the north-east counties of the island.¹⁴ Although Presbyterians were a minority in Ireland as a whole, accounting for just 8.1 *per cent* of the population in 1835, they outnumbered both their Anglican and Roman Catholic counterparts in the province of Ulster.¹⁵ As a dissenting minority in a confessional state, Presbyterian standards were not legally enforceable.

Yet, while Presbyterianism in Ireland lacked the backing of legal frameworks, this did not hinder the ability of its church courts to carry out discipline. Adherence to Presbyterian codes of behaviour may have been voluntary, but the overwhelming majority did submit to censure. It is well established that only a small number of church members defied discipline.¹⁶ Moreover, while church discipline in Irish Presbyterian communities did decline over time, its pattern and profile actually had much in common with trends identified in recent scholarship on England and Scotland. Andrew Holmes, for example, has noted how Presbyterian discipline remained stronger for longer in cohesive rural communities, and continued to operate in some areas into the twentieth century.¹⁷ The minutes of the Irish Presbyterian church courts therefore offer an added dimension to the new directions taking place in the historiography of religion and sexuality.

Second, this article paves the ways towards a gendered history of male sexuality in Ireland, highlighting the important resource that is the Presbyterian church courts. Outside of a few pioneering studies of homosexuality in Ireland, little research has been undertaken on the interconnections between masculinity and sexuality across the island more broadly.¹⁸ While masculinity is beginning to emerge as a new area of historical focus in Ireland, it has yet to attract the attention of historians of sexualities.¹⁹ Two reasons explain this neglect. On the one hand, much work on Irish sexuality has been carried out by historians interested in recovering the stories of women. Whereas in Britain, histories of sexuality and gender grew out of the increasing interest in social history, this has not been the case in Ireland. As Mary O'Dowd has noted, 'women's history [was] one of the driving forces behind the development of Irish social history'.²⁰ For this reason, studies of Irish sexuality are often disproportionately skewed towards deconstructing the experiences of women.²¹

The second factor lies in the available primary source material. Historians in Ireland do not have access to the same quantity and quality of source material, particularly church court minutes, as their counterparts in Britain and Europe – a want that owes much to the destruction of the Public Record Office in 1922.²² While the records of the Presbyterian church courts are an important source for Irish historians, they have been largely underused in Irish scholarship. Presbyterianism's position as a dissenting minority, together with its concentration in the province of Ulster, has led to its marginalisation on the grounds of unrepresentativeness. There is a persistent belief that the community's attitudes to sexual morality marked them out as different from their Catholic counterparts, who made up the majority of Ireland's population. Uneven rates of illegitimacy, higher in areas of Presbyterian settlement, has been interpreted by a number of historians as evidence of lax standards of sexual morality. Presbyterians have subsequently garnered a reputation as a permissive, if not sexually promiscuous, religious community, with an unparalleled toleration for pre-marital sexual intercourse by Irish standards. Recent scholarship has significantly challenged and revised these assumptions.²³ In common with the work of Mary O'Dowd and Maria Luddy, my own research has demonstrated how Presbyterian sources offer fresh perspectives on the wider Irish evidence, enriching our knowledge of many aspects of family life, including marriage, childbirth, sexuality and the law.²⁴ This article extends these conclusions and demonstrates how Presbyterian sources provide an alternative and unique insight into the sexual worlds of men in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland.

Focusing on the minutes of the Irish Presbyterian church courts, the following article demonstrates the important role that sex played in determining the social reputations of Presbyterian men in Ireland. It reveals how men's sexual misbehaviour was subject to community surveillance and was regulated through gossip, rumour and public talk. Lapses in male sexual conduct had important repercussions for men's social reputations in Ireland. Recognising the continuing authority of the Presbyterian church courts to make, break and restore reputation, Presbyterian men turned to the Kirk Session when they felt unfairly threatened. Other men took active steps to safeguard their reputations and resorted to bribery, extortion and even threats of physical violence to silence their accusers. In revealing this aspect of men's lives, this article reasserts the place of sexuality to understandings of masculinity in Ireland, while also

demonstrating the central role of the church in upholding the public reputations of its adherents throughout the eighteenth century and beyond.

Like its Scottish counterpart, the Presbyterian church in Ireland claimed the right to exercise control over the lives of its adherents. All aspects of family life came under its purview, including the making of marriage, the regulation of sexual behaviour, leisure and lifestyle. The church exercised control through a system of three church courts, which were hierarchical in their arrangement: the Kirk Session, the Presbytery and the Synod (General Assembly). While each of these church courts dealt with cases of discipline, the bulk of this business was handled by the Kirk Session, which operated at a local level. Offences generally fell into one of three broad categories: sexual offences, such as adultery, fornication and scandalous carriage; breaches of social and religious norms, including drunkenness, slander and profaning the Sabbath; and marital offences, such as irregular unions and bigamy.²⁵

There was an established framework for dealing with cases of discipline. Presbyterians in Ireland tended to follow the guidelines set down by the Church of Scotland in a document called the *Form of Process* (1707).²⁶ A revised version of this disciplinary process was published by the Irish Presbyterian church in 1825 in a section of their constitution, known as the *Code*.²⁷ The Presbyterian *Code* drew a distinction between lesser offences that could be handled privately by the Session, and more serious breaches of communal norms that merited a public rebuke. The minister or eldership were encouraged to handle offences such as 'prophane swearing, sabbath breaking, drunkenness, quarrelling, undutifulness to parents or similar offences' privately with the individual(s) involved. Offenders were required to show signs of sorrow for their past behaviour and promise to amend their ways for the future.²⁸ Suspension from church privileges was a last resort and was extended to offenders who continued unrepentant, or whose cases were aggravated by multiple charges.²⁹ The same leniency was not afforded to persons implicated in cases of 'fornication, slander, habitual drunkenness and other gross offences'.³⁰ These offences were to be immediately investigated by the Session and those found guilty were to be suspended from church privileges.³¹

As I have detailed elsewhere, the Presbyterian church courts in Ireland practised a large degree of latitude in the exercise of discipline.³² Discipline was designed to integrate an individual back into the community and was directed to be appropriate to the offence itself. As Section seven on 'Sentences' made clear, guilty persons were to be 'admonished, rebuked, or cut off from church privileges' in line with the 'nature and magnitude' of their offence.³³ In practice, this meant that serious and 'flagrant' offences were subjected to a public confession of sorrow before the congregation, while other, less serious offences, were resolved by means of a private rebuke before the Session.

The minutes of these proceedings were recorded by an appointed clerk – a role usually fulfilled by the minister. These minutes capture the concerns and decisions of the church courts and form the basis of this article. It is important to note, however, that church court minute books do not survive for every Presbyterian congregation in Ireland. Fewer than twenty such minute books survive for the period before 1800.³⁴ It is unclear whether this is the result of records being lost over time or if those communities simply did not practise discipline. Indeed, it should be noted that the uneven survival of the minutes makes it difficult to assess changing attitudes over time.

Moreover, there were also some differences in both the level and focus of discipline across different Presbyterian communities and at different points in time. As Holmes has outlined, the mechanisms of church discipline depended not only on the willingness of the local community to undergo discipline, but also the enthusiasm of the Kirk Session and minister to prosecute cases.³⁵

These points aside, Presbyterian church court minutes offer a unique perspective into the gendered dimensions of sexuality in Ireland. This is because the church courts were gendered spaces that were composed entirely of men. The minister was joined by elected representatives, known as elders, all of whom were men. While we might expect church discipline to be shaped by male authority, it is widely accepted that they operated in an egalitarian manner.³⁶ As Holmes has argued, 'sin was sin and had to be dealt with no matter the gender of the accused'.³⁷ Indeed, while women may have been more easily identified than men as perpetrators of sexual offences (because of their potential to become pregnant), it is generally agreed that they were not overtly discriminated against in the church courts.³⁸ Men were also pursued by the church courts for sexual misbehaviour. Andrew Blaikie and Paul Gray's quantitative analysis of Irish Presbytery records revealed that almost three-quarters of defendants referred for sexual offences were men. Moreover, male defendants outnumbered women in several Presbyteries in their sample.³⁹

It is this apparent 'gender-blind' operation of the Presbyterian church courts that makes the Irish case so important. Blaikie and Gray's summation 'that it is surprising to find males being held accountable for their sexual misdemeanours' and that 'There is no evidence to suggest why this should be so' is illustrative of the tendency of Irish historians to view gender through the lens of women.⁴⁰ Such an approach neglects to consider that men are also gendered subjects. Presbyterian sources therefore offer Irish historians the opportunity to disrupt and refine current understandings of gender and the sexual double standard. They reveal how sexual probity was important to Irish men, and how male sexuality, like female sexuality, was viewed as a disruptive and problematic force.

Monitoring men's misbehaviour

The minutes of the Irish Presbyterian church courts demonstrate how men were subject to systems of surveillance: where they went, who they were with and what they did, were all monitored closely. The community were essential to the success of this system. Presbyterian women and men were encouraged to put their eyes and ears to the use of the Session. Some took matters into their own hands and actively upbraided their neighbours for behaving badly. For example, in February 1706, the Session of Carnmoney 'commended' the actions of Robert Curry who physically 'drove' his servant man, James Neil, out of the bed of Jane Murray.⁴¹ James was subsequently rebuked for 'indecent carriage' – his offence being in a bed unchaperoned with an unmarried woman.⁴² Likewise, in October 1702, Bessy Russel 'upbraid[ed]' Alexander Wilson for his 'unsuitable carriage towards another mans wife' when she found him sitting on the bedside of Isbel Car.⁴³ According to Isbel, Alexander had tried to entice her into sexual activity by sitting on a chest next to her bed and suggesting that it was 'a convenient time and place to play'.⁴⁴ Isbel complained to Bessy that 'the fool fellow

[i.e. Alexander] would not let [her] be', prompting Bessy to chastise Alexander for his conduct.⁴⁵

Cases also came to the attention of the church courts through the spying and eavesdropping efforts of the community. In June 1838, John McLaughlin, a member of Third Cookstown congregation, county Tyrone, broke down a bedroom door in the house where he worked as a waiter because he suspected that the occupants of the room, Jane Gourlay and James Lane, were engaged in 'criminal acts'.⁴⁶ When he found James with the 'fall of his trousers down' and Jane sitting on the bed, John reacted by physically pulling Lane out of the room.⁴⁷ In addition to their eyes and ears, Presbyterian women and men used the power of their tongues to uphold standards of appropriate conduct.⁴⁸ Gossip played an important regulatory function in Presbyterian communities, providing a platform on which men's sexual conduct could be brought into public focus.⁴⁹

The minutes of the Irish Presbyterian church courts reveal how men's misbehaviour was often made public through community gossip and rumour. The phrases 'fama clamosa' (meaning scandalous reports) and 'fame' occur frequently in the minute books and cast light on the powerful role that public talk played in bringing misbehaviour to the attention of the church. Whereas John Henderson and Janet Donaldson's sexual relationship was discovered by Templepatrick Session in April 1709 on account of the 'fame that went of them about the country', the illegitimate child fathered by Joseph Chambers was made known to Loughaghery Kirk Session in May 1817 on account of a 'fama clamosa' that he was the father.⁵⁰

Rumour and gossip were also used as a way of bringing suspected misconduct into the public forum. For example, when Samuel Bell was called to appear before Route Presbytery on account of 'some talk' that he was 'Jealous with his wife & design[ed] to part house with her', it emerged that his marital problems were actually the result of his inappropriate relationship with his niece, Katherin. When the Presbytery investigated further, it emerged that the pair were suspected of carrying on an incestuous and adulterous affair.⁵¹ While on the surface, the community appeared to have been concerned with the poor state of Samuel's marriage, their gossip actually expressed unease about his relationship with his niece. Gossip enabled the community to hold Samuel to account for his inappropriate behaviour.

Men's sexual misbehaviour was a source of concern to the Presbyterian church courts. As the above section has revealed, communities kept a close watch on the behaviour of their male members and took action when men transgressed acceptable standards. Communities not only used the informal methods provided by gossip to bring bad behaviour into the public forum, they also physically intervened in an effort to prevent further misconduct. Such levels of community interference endured in the Irish Presbyterian community well into the nineteenth century and stand testament to the continuing commitment of the lay community to the principles of the church. The implications of being the subject of public talk and surveillance are explored in the next section.

Implications of a bad reputation

Men whose sexual conduct was the subject of public talk ran the risk of causing permanent damage to their reputations. As Claire Walker and Heather Kerr have noted,

fama carried more meaning than idle talk, hearsay and news; rather, it referred to the 'image of the person formed as a result' of that talk.⁵² Men who courted a bad reputation or who were known for sexual misconduct threatened their standing in society. Historians of England and Scotland have demonstrated how unmarried men faced social penalties for sexual misconduct, including loss of employment, termination of their apprenticeships and even the withdrawal of marriage promises, while married men who failed to keep their conduct in check were reprimanded for failing in their duties as husbands and fathers.⁵³

The minutes of the Presbyterian church courts in Ireland confirm this broader picture. Presbyterian men who bragged to their male friends about their sexual conquests, whether real or fictional, ran the risk of being publicly shamed as braggarts. Such a case appeared before Cahans Session in November 1768 when Mary Gault complained that William Rolland had told his friends that he had 'made her drunk in Monaghan & afterwards ... had carnal knowledge of her'.⁵⁴ William's friends confirmed the truth of the complaint, adding that he told them of his intentions 'to take away [Mary's] character' and that he had 'carnal knowledge of her as often as he pleased'.⁵⁵ Hearing the evidence against him, William offered to swear an oath that he 'never had carnal knowledge of Mary Gault' but admitted that 'he had not clearness to swear that he did not say such things to Edward Walker'.⁵⁶ Although William's boasts were intended to gain the approval of his male friends, the meaning of his 'male talk' changed once it became known outside of its original audience.⁵⁷ His bragging also potentially damaged his chances of future courtships. According to his friend, Joseph Young, he 'would give young girls an advice ... to keep from Wm Rolland's company'.⁵⁸

Men who had built good reputations felt their loss keenly. For some, a history of good conduct could act as a shield against accusations of misbehaviour. In February 1705, John Smaly's reputation helped him fight off an accusation of sexual impropriety. John complained to the Presbytery of Route that his 'reputation was stain'd' by Nola Laughlin who 'fam'd him for attempting to committ adultery with her'.⁵⁹ John's reputation, however, was saved by his previous history of good conduct: 'Divers honest neighbours' appeared in his defence and testified to his 'honest cariage' and freedom from 'presumption of any uncivil cariage' with Nola or any other woman.⁶⁰

Men were also acutely aware that allegations of sexual impropriety could permanently damage the good reputations that they had built over time. When a series of charges 'affecting the moral character of Robert Steen' were 'circulated' around Ballymoney in April 1827, he told the Kirk Session that he 'was most anxious' that they be investigated immediately.⁶¹ Robert stood accused of acting inappropriately while intoxicated with a woman named Mary Dunbar. The exact details of his impropriety varied across the different witness statements, but he was accused of grabbing Mary and drawing her around the kitchen, before pulling her down onto a bed.⁶² That these types of allegations had a damning impact on a man's social standing is indicated by the comment of John Perkin, who testified that he had 'known Robert Steen upwards of sixteen years, [and had] always respected him *until* those reports were circulated'.⁶³ Social reputation could not only be damaged, it could also be lost as a result of sexual misconduct. Far from being a quality internally made, reputation was vested in the opinions of others and could be withdrawn at any time.

The church courts also rewarded good behaviour through the bestowal of testimonials. As was the case in Scotland, women and men in Presbyterian Ireland were dependent on certificates of good behaviour to secure themselves access to the social and spiritual benefits of church membership.⁶⁴ Individuals with questionable characters were not able to move freely between congregations, they could not have their marriages celebrated, nor could they have their children baptised. Testimonials acted as passports to these privileges, and could be denied for a range of reasons, including poor church attendance, lying under accusations of theft or rowing with neighbours.⁶⁵ A key reason, however, was being under suspicion of sexual misconduct. For example, whereas Templepatrick Session refused John Robison a testimonial in November 1701 after he was found in bed with Ann McCanles, Carnmoney Session refused the same to William McFadon in March 1726 on account of his 'offencave' conduct.⁶⁶

In small, rural close-knit communities like those in Ulster, maintaining a good reputation was essential and the withholding of testimonials had far-reaching consequences for the social and economic lives of Presbyterian men. Failure to produce a testimonial could have devastating repercussions for employment prospects, a fact which highlights the wider consequences of sexual misbehaviour. A good example of this can be found in the case of Matthew Mager, who appeared before Carnmoney Session in 1708 in order to procure a 'Certificat' for his son, James, who had recently applied to enlist in the army. Reflecting on James' past conduct, the Session noted that they 'knew nothing ... that should hinder his Testimonial' and because 'the boys carriage was as becometh his profession', granted it 'shewing him to be of Christian parents & of inoffensive behavior'.⁶⁷ Clearly, the Session held a degree of power over James' fate. Imbued with moral authority, the Session had the potential to block economic advancement if there was evidence of indecent carriage.

That the testimonial system proved adept at regulating men's sexual conduct has been shown by historians of Presbyterian Scotland. Blaikie, for example, has noted that the demise of the testimonial system was one of the reasons for the difficulties the Scottish church courts faced in disciplining male offenders.⁶⁸ The Irish case, however, reveals how this system continued and was given new impetus by successive waves of Presbyterian migration to North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁶⁹ Irish migrants were dependent on testimonials to gain access to Presbyterian communities on the other side of the Atlantic. For example, in December 1718, John Alison requested that the Presbytery of Strabane issue him with a new testimonial because he intended 'God willing to go to America', adding that he was currently in possession of a 'Certificate' that 'declare[d] him free of public scandal'.⁷⁰ Likewise, when Robert McKeerighan, a migrant from county Armagh applied for membership to the congregation of Fagg's Manor, Pennsylvania, his testimonial made explicit reference to the fact that he was 'a single young man descended from reputable honest ... parents' who had 'behaved soberly' and was 'free from any scandal'.⁷¹

The evidence presented thus far has revealed how the behaviour of Presbyterian men was the subject of gossip, rumour and talk, and how sexual irregularity had a number of repercussions for men's social and economic standing. Reputation for Presbyterian men was not only clearly important, it was a quality that was externally validated and made in the eyes of their communities. As the above examples have shown,

reputation was not immutable. Men not only had to work hard to build a good reputation, they also had to maintain it. Lapses in sexual conduct, whether real or alleged, carried the potential to destroy and damage the good standing in which their neighbours held them.

Men's strategies to recover and restore reputation

The next question we may ask is, to what extent did Presbyterian men even care about their sexual reputations? Was sexual morality a major source of concern for Irish men? The minutes of the Presbyterian church courts in Ireland reveal that men were anxious to keep good characters and that they were sensitive to being made the subject of gossip and reproach. Some men appealed to the church courts for help when even the slightest blemishes were cast on their reputations. In July 1702, Samuel Cowdon complained to Carnmoney Session that his character had been 'reproach'd' by a rumour that he had lay in bed with Jean McCully, the wife of George McRoy.⁷² Samuel explained how he shared 'some quarts of ale' with a group of friends and being 'over-work't and weary', he 'lean'd' on Jean's bed and 'wrapt himself in his cloak'.⁷³ While he admitted to being on the same bed as Jean, he maintained that the pair were never alone, and that he did not 'touch ... any part of her skin'.⁷⁴ Samuel was clearly anxious to quell any gossip in the community that he had behaved inappropriately with a married woman. Jean later confirmed Samuel's version of events, and he was dismissed from the Session with an exhortation 'not to trouble [them with] every groundless report'.⁷⁵ His 'over-reaction' indicates the destructive potential of sexual irregularity for men's social standing.

Faced with accusations of misconduct, many Presbyterian men turned to the church courts as their first line of defence. When Samuel Fail found himself 'scandalized' in May 1710 by a 'vagrant woman' who claimed he was the father of her unborn child, he immediately appealed to Templepatrick Session.⁷⁶ The unnamed woman had denied she was pregnant and left the area. Unsure where she went, and unable to produce her as evidence to exculpate himself, Samuel reached out to the Session for help in clearing his name.⁷⁷ A desire to stop the spread of rumours that impinged on his sexual reputation also underlay the complaint lodged in June 1702 by William Park against James Mitchell. In his complaint to the Session, James told how he was 'prejudiced' by a report made by William that he had attempted 'uncleanness' with a woman named Ann Boyd one Sabbath morning.⁷⁸ A number of witnesses were called who testified that William, a servant, had been dutifully reading a sermon book on the day of the alleged assault and that Ann had a reputation as a 'common clatterer'.⁷⁹ Based on this evidence, the Session ruled that William was free from scandal and that he was 'to be looked upon as a young man of ... good behaviour'.⁸⁰

That many Presbyterian men turned to the Kirk Session when their sexual probity was questioned is important because it further underscores the power of the Presbyterian church courts to make and break social reputation. It should be remembered that the Irish Presbyterian church courts held no legal authority, and that their resolutions were not legally enforceable. Presbyterians in Ireland had the option of making their complaints heard before the Anglican ecclesiastical courts, which did have legal authority. That many chose the former route stands testament to the central place that the Kirk played in restoring reputation – a fact that was intensified by the small,

tight-knit nature of Presbyterian communities in Ireland. For Presbyterian men, it was the Presbyterian church courts that offered the best means of restoring their social credit. That being cleared of wrongdoing before the Kirk Session held more weight than a pardon elsewhere is indicated by the actions of men who used the Presbyterian church courts to publicly announce their exculpation. This appears to have been the motive behind Andrew Walker's complaint to Aghadowey Session in January 1711 that John Torrence had given him 'great offence' by reporting he had the 'French pox'.⁸¹ His reason for bringing the case to the Session was that the 'private means' he had employed to remove the scandal had been unsuccessful.⁸²

Presbyterian men who owned guilt sometimes tried to avoid having their cases publicised in the church courts. Evidence exists that reveals how some men tried to convince the women with whom they had committed fornication to conceal their names from church notice. For example, when Jean Riddel appeared before Cahans Session in June 1754 and owned the sin of fornication, she named John Moor as the father of her illegitimate child. Asked by the Session why she had not admitted this beforehand, she confessed that 'she had at [John Moor's] request before delivery of the child sworn to conceal his being [the] father of it'.⁸³ Others attempted to avoid making public confessions of their sins. When John Harvey admitted a charge of premarital fornication in March 1712, he 'pleaded' with Carrmoney Session to allow him 'to appear on a Lecture day' instead of before the full congregation on the Sabbath (which was usual practice). His request was refused by the Session because 'it was not the way to recover his reputation among the people of God'.⁸⁴ Both of these men were clearly concerned about the public consequences of their sexual misbehaviour. While the church courts acted as a space where male reputation could be made, they also provided a forum where it could be broken. Some men therefore made attempts, however, limited, to protect their reputations in the short term.

Other men went to great lengths to keep their illicit activities secret and resorted to bribery. A number of cases in the Presbyterian church court minute books reveal how men offered to pay for the financial upkeep of illegitimate children in exchange for the mother's silence. This is what happened in the case of Mary Main and Michael Paul, who were cited to appear before Templepatrick Session in January 1704 for adultery. Whereas Michael denied all guilt, Mary claimed that Michael had 'bid her [to] father the child on one [John] Johnston and not trouble him with it and he would give her ten shillings for so doing'.⁸⁵ Michael persisted in his denial until June 1712 – eight years after his initial appearance, when he appeared and admitted guilt. Asked by the Session why he 'now comes freely ... to confess', Michael replied that he was moved by the 'conviction and terror of his conscience' and claimed that he and his family had been punished by God for his lies: 'viz extream poverty ... that one of his hopefull Children was suddenly struck blind, and the other turn'd an idiot'.⁸⁶

Bribery was also a tactic used by Andrew McKeown, who was accused by Jean McCullan in January 1704 of fathering her illegitimate child.⁸⁷ While Andrew confessed that he was guilty of fornication with Jean, he denied paternity and claimed that the child was 'brought forth ... a month before his time'.⁸⁸ Jean offered to swear an oath that 'she never knew any man carnally' except Andrew and offered more details on when, where and how many times the act had taken place.⁸⁹ Jean's testimony was strengthened by the evidence offered by Alexander McKeown, who alleged that

Andrew had 'desired him to bid Jean McCullan to father the child on some out of the kingdome and to go to the County of Down to her brother' and he would 'maintaine the child albeit it was not his own'.⁹⁰ That Andrew would have offered to financially maintain another man's child is not very likely. Moreover, it is notable that he was prepared to pay to make the problem go away. It was not the financial burden of fatherhood that underlay his denial; rather, he appears to have wanted to keep his indiscretion secret. As Gibson and Begiato have argued, fathering illegitimate children carried a 'high reputational risk' and such men were reluctant to bear the shame of unmarried parenthood.⁹¹

Other men threatened women to keep their secrets and colluded in the purchase of abortifacients. In November 1704, Grizzell Matthison told Templepatrick Session that she had originally named Thomas McConnell as the father of her child because she feared that the actual father, Thomas Lauchlin, would 'beat her' if she disclosed it.⁹² In Carnmoney, Sarah Campbell told the Session in April 1713 that John Wilson, the married father of her second child, had 'given her two pieces of money to the intent she might get herbs and other things toward the destroying of the child'.⁹³ Such extreme actions further underscore how sexual irregularity impacted men's public reputations.

Concerns about sexual reputation were so widespread that it provided a means for women to exploit men's anxieties for financial gain.⁹⁴ Such a case came before Carnmoney Session in October 1706 when Elizabeth Morton accused William Johnston, a married man, of being the father of her child.⁹⁵ When William was interrogated by the minister, he 'utterly deny'd' the accusation and 'said it was malice whereby to defraud him of some money'.⁹⁶ The case was returned to the Session four years later in August 1710 when Elizabeth's mother appeared and claimed that she and the midwife had heard Elizabeth name William as the father during childbirth.⁹⁷ Jane Strain also appeared as a witness and alleged that William had instructed her to tell Elizabeth 'to go to her Uncles & bring forth ye child & he would give her something', adding that 'she should not want if she would not trouble him'.⁹⁸ The Session renewed their investigation and William called a number of witnesses to back up his story that Elizabeth was out for money. John Murray, for example, testified that he had overheard Elizabeth trying to extort money from William's wife, Agnas Russell, in Belfast. According to John, Elizabeth asked Agnas for twenty shilling and promised to 'never trouble him with it'.⁹⁹ The case was subsequently referred to the Presbytery of Belfast who ruled that there was not enough evidence to prove paternity.¹⁰⁰

As the above examples attest, the Presbyterian church courts functioned like a court of public opinion, providing a space where men's reputations could be made or broken. Recognising the power of the church as an influential site of public moral authority, men turned to the Kirk Session for help when their reputations were placed at risk. Accusations of sexual misconduct carried damaging consequences and the validation of the church court was an important form of protection. At the same time, others tried to avoid having their cases investigated because they were concerned of the public impacts that would follow.

Men's sexual behaviour was a recurrent source of concern to the Irish Presbyterian church courts. The behaviour of Presbyterian men was closely scrutinised by the Kirk Session, as well as by their friends, neighbours and family members. Using their eyes, ears and tongues, Presbyterian communities held men to account for lapses in their

sexual conduct. Men were also deeply concerned about the impacts that their sexual indiscretions could have on their reputations. While some turned to bribery, extortion and threats of physical violence to protect themselves, others appealed to the church courts for help. Faced with rumours of inappropriate sexual conduct, men recognised the power of the church to restore, safeguard and validate their reputations.

This article furthers the historical study of gender and sexuality in two important ways. First, this article has highlighted the explanatory potential of Presbyterian sources for understanding the gendered dimensions of sexuality in Ireland. While it is not the intention of this article to downplay the moral stigma that unmarried women in Ireland faced, it stresses the need to craft a more nuanced understanding of the double standard in Ireland. Men become visible in the minutes of the Presbyterian church courts as gendered subjects: their sexual lives were placed under scrutiny and their sexual transgressions had tangible impacts on their standing in society. While a double standard certainly existed, we should be cautious in applying it as a rigid framework against which we measure the relative experiences of women and men. Just as historians of marriage and the family now agree that patriarchy is a malleable force, and that relationships between husbands and wives were determined in a flexible matrix of power relations, the same can be said for the operation of the double standard. As Rebecca Ann Barr, Sean Brady and Jane McGaughey have argued, applying gender enables 'historians to interrogate the presumption of a naturalised relation between maleness and power' more broadly.¹⁰¹ The sexual reputations of Irish men were not invulnerable by virtue of their being male.

Irish Presbyterian sources are therefore important vehicles through which we can modify our understanding of the double standard in Ireland. On the one hand, they enable us to evaluate men's experiences across the confessional divide. The anxiety that Presbyterian men felt about their sexual reputations was mirrored in the fragmentary evidence of the men who petitioned the ecclesiastical court at Killaloe.¹⁰² There, as across Ireland more widely, men tried to keep their sexual indiscretions private. Further research is required, but it is likely that sexual reputation was a source of concern for Irish men irrespective of religious tradition. As O'Dowd has argued, while a 'plurality of masculinities' existed at any one time in early modern Ireland, 'across the ethnic divide, [men] demonstrated their belief that one of their main responsibilities was the care of their family'.¹⁰³ Presbyterian sources present further evidence of similarities across the confessional divide than differences.

On the other hand, Presbyterian sources offer historians in Ireland the opportunity to further challenge and disrupt accepted narratives in Irish historical studies. As my own work on courtship and sexual behaviour has shown, Presbyterian sources modify Irish understandings of claims to exceptional chastity.¹⁰⁴ Focusing as they do on men's sexual misconduct, Presbyterian sources bring into sharper focus the intersections between gender, religion and sexuality. The minutes demonstrate the continuing importance that sexuality played in determining reputation – a concept that was important to the identities of men and women in Ireland. Presbyterian sources therefore add a new analytical layer to our understanding of the operation of the double standard in Ireland.

This article also contributes to wider debates in the historiographies of British masculinities through its emphasis on religion as a way of understanding men's

gendered sexual experiences. A key point advanced across this article is that the sexual reputation of men continued to have a public element well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and was legitimised through their relationships with the church. That Presbyterian men turned to the church courts when their social reputations were at stake evidences the place and power of religion as a vehicle for external validation. This argument poses a challenge to the narratives of change over time that chart the emergence of the eighteenth-century ‘modern’ and ‘secular’ polite gentleman, marked by his system of internal policing, self-restraint and introspection. Indeed, one of the issues with the politeness model is its lack of engagement with religion. As Karen Harvey has pointed out, the ‘history of eighteenth-century masculinity bears the stamp of older stories of secularization’ and tends to ‘divest [eighteenth-century] men of their faith’.¹⁰⁵ The Irish case reveals how religion continued to play a powerful role in the making and breaking of reputation. It therefore provides a further critique of the shift from ‘anxious patriarch’ to ‘polite gentleman’ and reasserts the place of religion to understanding sexual attitudes across the long eighteenth-century. A strong case can thus be made for incorporating the Presbyterian case not only more firmly into the Irish context, but the broader comparative framework of the family, sex and marriage in Britain.

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Notes

1. Cahans Kirk Session minutes, 27 February 1786 (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, hereafter PRONI, CR3/25/B/2).
2. Cahans Kirk Session minutes, 12 March 1786 (PRONI, CR3/25/B/2).
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6. See, Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 152–85; Bernard Capp, ‘The Double Standard Revisited: Plebeian Women and Male Sexual Reputation in Early Modern England’, *Past & Present* 162 (1999), pp. 70–100; Harriet Cornell, ‘Social Control and Masculinity in Early Modern Scotland. Expectations and Behaviour in a Lowland Parish’, in Lynn Abrams and Elizabeth Ewan (eds), *Nine Centuries of Man: Manhood and Masculinities in Scottish History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 183–202; Elizabeth Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 8–10.
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 12. Gibson and Begiato, *Sex and the Church*, p. 96.
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 23. See, Leanne Calvert, "'He came to her bed pretending courtship": Sex, Courtship and the Making of Marriage in Ulster, c. 1750–1844', *Irish Historical Studies* 42 (2018), pp. 244–62, here, pp. 245–47; S. J. Connolly, 'Illegitimacy and Pre-Nuptial Pregnancy in Ireland Before 1864: The Evidence of Some Catholic Parish Registers', *Irish Economic and Social History* 6 (1979), pp. 5–23; Dympna McLoughlin, 'Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', *Irish Journal of Psychology* 15 (1994), pp. 266–75; Blaikie and Gray, 'Archives of Abuse', pp. 61–84; Holmes, *Shaping*, pp. 225–6; Mary O'Dowd, 'Women in Ulster, 1600–1800', in Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds), *Ulster Since 1600: Politics, Economy and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 51–3.
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 29. *Code*, pp. 67–68.
 30. *Code*, p. 68.
 31. *Code*, p. 69.
 32. Calvert, “From a woman’s point of view”.
 33. *Code*, p. 78.
 34. Holmes, *Shaping*, pp. 168, 172–74.
 35. The minutiae of the differences in doctrinal belief among the various strands of Presbyterianism is not the focus of this article. See Holmes, ‘Community and discipline’, pp. 266–77; Blaikie and Gray, ‘Archives of Abuse and Discontent?’, pp. 61–84.
 36. Blaikie and Gray, ‘Archives of Abuse’, pp. 71, 76; Holmes, *Shaping*, p. 224; Rosalind Mitchison and Leah Leneman, *Sexuality and Social Control. Scotland, 1660–1780* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 237–38; Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 178.
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 42. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 5 February 1706; 9 November 1705 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
 43. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 27 October 1702 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
 44. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 27 October 1702 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
 45. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 27 October 1702 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
 46. Third Cookstown Kirk Session minutes, 12 June 1838 (PRONI, T2750/1).
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 51. Minutes of Route Presbytery, 20 February 1705 (PHSI).
 52. Claire Walker and Heather Kerr, ‘Introduction. New Perspectives on *Fama*’, in Claire Walker and Heather Kerr (eds), *‘Fama’ and her Sisters*, p. 11.
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56. Cahans Kirk Session minutes, 2 March 1769 (PRONI, CR3/25/B/2).
57. Foyster, *Manhood*, p. 43.
58. Cahans Kirk Session minutes, 26 January 1769 (PRONI, CR3/25/B/2).
59. Minutes of the Presbytery of Route, 20 February 1705 (Presbyterian Historical Society, Belfast, hereafter PHSI).
60. Minutes of the Presbytery of Route, 20 February 1705 (PHSI).
61. Ballymoney Kirk Session minutes, 20 April 1827 (PRONI, CR/3/1/B/4).
62. Ballymoney Kirk Session minutes, 20 April 1827 (PRONI, CR/3/1/B/4).
63. Ballymoney Kirk Session minutes, 20 April 1827 (PRONI, CR/3/1/B/4).
64. Mitchison and Leneman, *Sexuality and Social Control*, pp. 34–35.
65. Ballykelly Session denied John Townsley access to 'father's privileges' in 1804 until hereconciled with his brother, as also Frederick Curry in 1808, until he produced a letter exculpating him from charges of theft. Templepatrick Session refused James Young atestimonial because he frequently 'deserted ordinances'. See, Ballykelly Kirk Session minutes, 1 January 1804; 8 May 1808 (PHSI) and Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 28 April 1702 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
66. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 5 November 1701 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1); Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 28 March 1726 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
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70. Strabane Presbytery minutes, 3 December 1718 (PRONI, CR3/26/2/1).
71. 'Certificate of Robert McKeerighan (Armagh), 21 June 1783' copied in Fagg's Manor Kirk Session minute book, 1740–1803 (Presbyterian Historical Society, USA)
72. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 22 July 1702 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
73. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 22 July 1702 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
74. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 22 July 1702 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
75. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 19 August 1702 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
76. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 4 May 1710 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
77. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 4 May 1710 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
78. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 7 July 1702 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
79. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 7 July 1702 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
80. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 7 July 1702 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
81. Aghadowey Kirk Session minutes, 9 January 1711 (PHSI).
82. Aghadowey Kirk Session minutes, 9 January 1711 (PHSI).
83. Cahans Kirk Session minutes, 14 June 1753 (PRONI, CR3/25/B/2).
84. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 26 March 1712 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
85. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 25 January 1704 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
86. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 29 June 1712 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
87. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 25 January 1704; 2 February 1704 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
88. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 2 April 1704; 30 April 1704 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
89. Jean alleged that they had sexual intercourse on Ballyclare fair day in Andrew's family home, his mother being abroad, his brother at work, and the father being 'about the house'. See, Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 30 April 1704; 30 May 1704 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
90. See, Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 7 May 1704 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
91. Such bribes ranged from between 11 shillings to 5 pounds. Gibson and Begiato, *Sex and the church*, p. 91.
92. Templepatrick Kirk Session minutes, 26 September 1704 (PRONI, CR4/12/B/1).
93. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 8 April 1713 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
94. Capp, 'Double standard', pp. 79–88.
95. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 9 July 1706; 6 August 1706; 7 September 1706; 5 October 1706 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
96. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 5 October 1706; 11 January 1707 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).

97. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 13 August 1710 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
98. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, November 1710 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
99. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, November 1710 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
100. Carnmoney Kirk Session minutes, 12 November 1710 (PRONI, MIC1P/37/4/9).
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