

## Representations of Women in the Abbey Theatre

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Ireland has, of course, long been gendered — by the political nationalist metanarrative and the cultural nationalism of traditional history and literature — as a women victimized by the colonizing English male. For an equally long time, the lives of actual Irish women were arguably colonized by Irish men, at the same time both genders were colonial subjects of England. (Bradley and Valiulis 6)

The drama of The Abbey Theatre was significant in the creation of an Irish national identity. As Ireland strove for political and cultural autonomy from England in the early twentieth century, its literature would provide an arena for national expression and dialogue among its patriots. At times, the drama appearing onstage would turn into drama offstage, as playwrights and audiences struggled to agree upon how to define Ireland. Embedded in this emerging definition of Ireland was the portrayal of women. Women emerge in the Abbey's plays as mothers, lovers, wives, daughters, goddesses, peasants, and wage earners. Within the varied roles they play, women were always symbolically tied, either by the playwright or the audience, to Ireland itself. In examining the presentation of women on the stage, it is possible to glean much information about cultural attitudes towards women in perhaps the most vigorous years of upheaval Ireland has experienced in recent times.

In this essay, I will discuss select dramatic works from William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, John Millington Synge, and Sean O'Casey. Focusing on the representations of women by each playwright, I hope

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to establish a connection between aesthetic principles and the treatment of female characters. Specifically, realism tends to provide a more balanced and focused consideration for the issues of Irish women whereas mythologizing, particularly in the hands of Yeats, is inclined to limit women to the role of emblem. In recognizing Synge and O'Casey as realists, we see that their material primarily concerns the peasantry and the Dublin tenement dwellers respectively. Each pays special attention to the women in these environments and appears to question what a Free Irish State may mean (and what it may not) for these citizens. Yeats and Gregory primarily focus on Irish folklore and mythology, choosing to explore this material — and the mythological women — as a means by which to create an “Irish” literature.

My essay will begin by first examining Yeats' plays. Because “Yeats was essentially...a political writer,” I will then discuss the political context of his plays, namely the roles of colonial discourse and cultural nationalism (Cullingford 235). As the Abbey Theatre developed out of the concerns of cultural nationalists, its narrative will follow. From there, the plays of Lady Gregory, Synge, and O'Casey will be discussed respectively. Finally, I will offer my view that aesthetic does have an impact on representations of women and that realism tends to be more sympathetic of and attentive to women in society.

### **The Theatrical Works of W. B. Yeats**

William Butler Yeats was born into Ireland's Protestant-Ascendancy class during the Victorian Era. He spent much of his childhood in Sligo, a port town in the west of Ireland “where land and sea are intimate,” but also resided in Dublin and London (Brown 2). Though of Anglo-Irish heritage, Yeats believed in Irish nationalism; therefore he was supportive of Irish cultural and political autonomy. He admired Fenian John O'Leary, whom he saw as having an “effective and profound (because moral) authority” in Ireland, and decided to contribute to Irish nationalism through his writing. His active role in Irish culture can be seen through his writing, but he also held political office as a senator of the Irish Free State. While a skillful playwright, Yeats is probably most highly regarded as a poet, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923.

Yeats was also deeply interested in Occultism and it was in this “spiritual craze” that the idea of natural gender differences took on a new meaning (Brown 38). Occultism found that a “spiritual experience involves a female medium and a male spirit or control” (Brown 38). Through Occultism, Yeats recognized that women were needed to provoke male spirituality. He also found that “‘beauty’ was quintessentially a female attribute,” and would mold his female characters accordingly (Brown 41). Beautiful women, often presented with “symbolic power as enchantress, sibyl, or goddess,” recur as icons in Yeats’ work. This image of women remained as Yeats became more involved in Irish nationalism, evolving into tools for nationalist propaganda.

Yeats frequently uses his female characters as emblems for Ireland, a technique useful in promoting nationalism. But when Yeats creates women in this manner, they cease to represent living people; the beautiful emblematic woman is reduced to an object. While all of Yeats’ characters are ultimately symbolic, the gendered values associated with the symbols are problematic: Irish men are encouraged to be heroic, inspired to greatness for love of country; Irish women are marginalized, as they simply stand in for the larger idea of country. Therefore, the Irish woman Yeats venerates, the symbol he creates, must be self-sacrificing, loyal, and morally upstanding as she represents the values Irish men should fight for. Whether based in the mythology or (more infrequently) as representatives of Irish peasantry, Yeats’ female characters are often his moral centers, mothers and lovers of Ireland’s men: that is, they are Ireland itself.

Emer is perhaps one of the best examples of what Yeats believed Irish women should be and what Irish men should esteem. Yeats wrote *The Only Jealousy of Emer* in 1919, yet he showed a clear interest and respect for her much earlier. In his 1902 preface to Lady Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, Yeats comments that Emer is most deserving of remembrance: “proud Emer, Cuchulain’s fitting wife [...] will linger longest in the memory. What a pure flame burns in her always” (“Treasury” 342). Indeed, he later states that he has “filled *The Only Jealousy of Emer* with conviction about the nature and history of a woman’s beauty” (694).

As representative of Irish womanhood, Yeats venerates Emer for her strength of character and sacrificial love. The main theme of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* is Emer's loyalty and love for her unfaithful husband, Cuchulain. Cuchulain lies trapped in madness with Emer dutifully at his side, unable to reach him. She confides that her greatest wish is for Cuchulain to love her as he once did. Eventually, she is contacted, in magic consistent with Irish fairytales, by a Woman of the Sidhe who tells her that Cuchulain can be freed from his madness if she agrees to "renounce his love for ever" (327). Acting in Cuchulain's interest, Emer agrees. The fact that there is no reciprocity in their relationship only enhances Emer's actions; her love is not returned as the women of the Sidhe pronounce, "[he] valued every slut above her [Emer]" (293). The audience feels Emer's heartache over her sacrifice, yet Yeats intends for us to admire her for the courage to make it. Emer is an admirable and noble example of an Irish woman, precisely what Yeats required.

A similar figure of Irish womanhood is found in *The Countess Cathleen* (1892). In this story, the protagonist is a noble woman who acts as patron of the village. The play opens with a peasant family, Shemus Rua and his wife Mary, discussing the famine that has struck the land. Cathleen stops by and gives all she can, yet Shemus is convinced it is not enough; when he later comes across two merchants, devils in disguise, he readily sells his soul in exchange for money enough to eat. Shemus is not alone in this act; many other peasants do the same, and soon there are very few villagers left with possession of their souls — Mary is one of them. When Cathleen discovers what has happened, she tries to buy back the villagers' souls, only to discover that her money is missing. Because Cathleen cannot buy their souls back, she trades her own for theirs. Shortly after Cathleen dies, an angel appears to reassure the distraught peasants that Cathleen's soul is indeed in heaven, as "The Light of Lights / Looks always on the motive, not the deed" (63). Both the majestic Cathleen and the peasant Mary represent Yeats' ideal woman; each are moral centers. Mary counteracts the men around her — namely her husband and son — by her gratitude to Cathleen and her recognition of the evil in the merchants; Cathleen is another moral authority — shown as kind, empathetic, generous, and completely selfless.

*The Countess Cathleen* has a prominent place in Yeats' early career; this play was part of the Irish Literary Theatre's opening in 1899 and

caused Yeats a good deal of controversy over the decidedly un-Catholic ending. Yet Yeats was thinking along different lines: he “told Maud Gonne that the play was a symbol of all souls who lose their fineness and peace in political service [...] the text [...] triumphantly justifies the actions of Cathleen in selling her soul. Political service is vindicated” (Cullingford 48). Cathleen’s service to her people can be seen as a moral message to Yeats’ audience regarding their own political activity – self-sacrifice in the name of community (and country) is a worthy pursuit. This political message would be seen again in Yeats’ 1902 play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* is considered Yeats’ most nationalistic play. He envisions a peasant family visited by a *Shan-Van-Vocht* figure, a poor old woman who, through the love and sacrifice of men like Michael, transforms into the young and beautiful Cathleen. This character is without a doubt an emblem for Ireland — the very title informs audiences that this play is about rejuvenating Ireland. Cathleen enters the Gillane home and tells how her “four beautiful green fields” (symbolically, the four provinces of Ireland: Ulster, Munster, Leinster, and Connacht) were stolen from her, how poor she now is, and how she needs young men like Michael to fight for her (88). The analogy with contemporary Ireland is deliberate — Ireland in 1902 needed patriots who were willing to fight and die for her.

Before Cathleen’s entrance, the Gillane home is preparing for the wedding of their oldest son, Michael. However, these plans all seem to fall apart after the old woman enters and persuades Michael to fight. Yeats employs Cathleen to remind the family, and his audience, of their duty to their country. It is important to note that this duty is considered a moral one; just as the female figures in the other plays, Cathleen is the moral center of this drama. A good Irishman must ensure that the poor old woman, the *Shan-Van-Vocht*, is restored to the beautiful Cathleen. The youthful Cathleen dramatically appears at the end of the play to indicate that male sacrifice is indeed the way to restoration.

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* is typically considered to be a play that celebrates male sacrifice for Ireland; however, this play also demands great sacrifices of women, though this is much less apparent to the audience and to Yeats alike. While the title character, Cathleen, is undoubtedly a figure representing Ireland, Yeats also includes two female characters who are

not emblems, but representations of real women. Bridget and Delia, Michael's mother and fiancée, do not function symbolically in this play; instead, they act as impediments Michael has to overcome in order to follow the emblematic Cathleen. Neither Bridget nor Delia wants Michael to go; they are not willing to make such an immense sacrifice for Cathleen and, by extension, Ireland. Yet Yeats is clearly enthusiastic about Michael's patriotic fervor and so he dismisses their objections.

Cathleen prompts Michael to fight by invoking images of immortality (91-2). Yeats is arguing that Michael's sacrifice (for he will most assuredly die in battle) will be worthwhile because he will gain immortality through his courage. However, Yeats does not address what Bridget and Delia are supposed to gain by giving Michael up. Indeed, he hardly recognizes that they are being forced to sacrifice a son and husband. Yeats celebrates Michael's decision to give his life for Ireland, yet does not even acknowledge that Bridget and Delia must also give up part of their lives. For Yeats, Bridget and Delia are essential to the play as devices, nothing more. *Cathleen ni Houliban* functioned as a play that would promote action among the Irish public. Yeats focuses on Michael and Cathleen; Bridget and Delia don't even warrant a consideration. In my mind, this plummets the status of "real" women even lower. Not only are they impediments to men, but they are also portrayed as if there are no real consequences for them when Michael decides to leave. These Irish women are forced to sacrifice unquestioningly, and the toll it takes is definitely not Yeats' main concern.

Yeats is more concerned with themes expressing cultural nationalism. Beyond the obvious celebration of Michael's decision to fight for Ireland, the interplay between his female characters shows his emphasis on nationalism. The audience sees, as Bradley puts it,

[T]wo conflicting narratives of Irish peasant womanhood [...] the charismatic Cathleen who subverts the values of cradle, hearth, and smallholding, and the realist peasant women who lose out to the symbolic woman-nation. [...] *Cathleen ni Houliban*, which subordinated the interests of women to a sacrificial paradigm of male patriotism and invoked a literary tradition of political allegory, was enshrined as the exemplary nationalist play. (44)

Yeats often figures women as moral centers, and also treats female characters who resist that role dismissively. *On Baile's Strand* (1903) and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939) involve powerful and vengeful women from mythology, yet Yeats' portrayal subdues them. *On Baile's Strand* concerns Cuchulain and his past lover, Aoife. Aoife, angry that Cuchulain left her, sends their son to challenge him; after Cuchulain kills the son, he learns the identity of the boy and realizes that he has slain his only child. Aoife is generally considered a "fierce woman," but her fierceness is downplayed by the fact that Yeats does not represent her on stage (159). Aoife plays a vital role in this storyline, appearing in Lady Gregory's tale "The Only Son of Aoife" (likely Yeats' source) ("Treasury" 657), Yeats does not portray her for the audience to see; she is not like Queen Emer, not like Cathleen.

*The Death of Cuchulain* is another play in which strong women from mythology are curiously absent or subdued. Queen Maeve appears in the Ulster cycle as Medb, the queen of Connacht. She is "shown as cruel, jealous, capricious, and promiscuous, as well as very clearly the real ruler of Connacht" rather than her husband Aileel (Jestice 225). Maeve is mentioned in Yeats' *The Death of Cuchulain*, but is also never staged; while vital to the plot, she is denied an appearance. There is also the matter of the Morrígan — a legendary "warrior goddess" who generally appears "as a battle-fury; her name means 'great queen'" (Jestice 239). The appearance of the Morrígan is considered "ominous" as she had "the power of prophecy," and indeed, she appears in Yeats' play and "foretells the death of the hero Cuchulain" (Jestice 239). Yet in his play, Yeats demotes the severe, warrior-goddess to an oracle in the style of ancient Greek tragedies. She is not a "battle-fury" but a stoic symbol of Cuchulain's demise. In the absence of Aoife and Queen Maeve, and in the muted representation of the Morrígan, it becomes clear that Yeats was not attracted to images of fierce and powerful women. Their involvement may be vital due to the plot, yet Yeats chooses to focus on others. These mythological women do not fit the values he associates with his female symbols. A woman who is powerful and willful is not the type of woman Yeats desires when writing for Ireland, and so he alters the mythology to fit his ideal.

In the mythology, Yeats acknowledges the presence of "certain great queens — of angry, amorous Maeve" but chooses not to write them



into his plays (“Treasury” 341). Yeats’ depiction of women is a careful one; and he tends to honor only one type. His female characters most often act as representatives of Ireland; this is a role that must be carefully defined before it is put out to the public. And so, even as Yeats asserts, “women indeed, with their lamentations for lovers and husbands and sons [...] give the stories their most beautiful sentences,” it is only the *Emers* and the *Cathleens* he portrays with vigor (“Treasury” 341).

Yeats’ position on women is complicated and troubling. A glance at Yeats’ life reveals friendships with writers Lady Gregory and Katharine Tynan, an affair with a married Olivia Shakespear, an enduring (and painful) love for the rebel, political activist, and actress Maud Gonne, and close interaction with his sisters — both of whom held their own against their brother while they also held jobs (Brown 47-55). Further, Yeats staunchly defended J. M. Synge when audiences rebelled against his “unflattering” depiction of Irish women. Two things are clear: one, Yeats’ portrayal of women in his plays is narrow and romanticized; and two, he did not surround himself with women who fit his model nor did he require his colleague to portray women symbolically. How then can we reconcile Yeats’ narrow use of women as merely symbols, as exhibited in his plays, with the fact that he had many female friends and family members whose very lifestyle and literature opposes what Yeats would appear to idealize? I agree with Elizabeth Cullingford that Yeats was writing “first and foremost” as a cultural nationalist (vii). He insisted on beauty but he also believed in “the social and political role of the poet, whose perception of beauty inspires rebellion against tyranny” (Cullingford 20). As such, the poet could produce not only literature, but propaganda as well. As a nationalist writer, Yeats employs women as emblems, tools for his political agenda and poetical plays.

### **Colonialism, Nationalism, and Yeats**

As is clear from my reading of Yeats’ plays, the literature of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in Ireland must be understood within the political and cultural contexts of the time. Utmost in such a discussion is the gendering of Ireland in both colonial and nationalist discourses: Ireland was depicted as female by both the colonizing English and the nationalistic Irish. As the British used such a portrayal to emphasize Ireland’s subordinate status, the Irish would



eventually assert their cultural value through the “goodness” of their motherland (and, in effect, have Irish women subordinate to Irish men). This gendered discourse has a long history, and in order to better understand where Yeats’ representations fit into the larger picture, I offer a brief overview beginning with Britain’s colonization.

Irish society and the art it produced is irrevocably linked to the English due to years of colonization. In 1155, the Pope granted Ireland to England in order “to reveal the truth of the Christian faith to peoples still untaught and barbarious” (Ranelagh 33); by 1175, Irish chiefs recognized Henry II as the king of Ireland (Hollis xiv). In 1264, the first Irish parliament met; made up of Norman-Irish representatives, this parliament would fail to “represent the mass of the native Irish people” and existed in more or less the same form for the next five centuries (Ranelagh 39). Further, the Penal Laws of the eighteenth century encouraged subjugation, “work[ing] through religion to suppress the Irish nation,” by banning Catholics from owning weapons, requiring that “they will their lands to all their sons equally,” preventing them from “entering a profession or receiving a formal education,” and by denying them the right to vote in parliamentary elections (Ranelagh 70). Thus the relationship between the English and the Irish had long been one of British domination accompanied by degrading representations of the Irish as a “barbarian and degenerate race” (“Culture” 220). Therefore, colonization (in Ireland as well as other lands) is understood as more than territorial rule; it involved patterns of representation identified as colonial discourse.

Colonial discourse is best understood as the ways in which the colonizer describes the colonized. In his discussion of the colonialist discourse of Orientalism, Edward Said explains how the Orient “helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1-2).<sup>1</sup> Beginning in the post-Enlightenment period, the West consistently projected that which it considered dangerous or immoral in itself onto colonial Others. Said notes that “Orientalism is never far from [...] the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans” (7). This “us-them” dichotomy is divisive in nature and is “a relationship of power, of domination” (5). The colonizer, by virtue of its superior position, gets the privilege of providing the representations. Orientalism is broad

in scope, infiltrating “vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines” and resulting in “European culture gain[ing] in strength and identity” while limiting that of the colonized Other (3).

As Ireland was under the colonial rule of England, the processes of colonial discourse were at work: the colonized (native Irish) were seen “as the repressed and rejected ‘other’ against which the colonizer [the English] define[d] an ordered self” (Cairns 8). Belief in “natural” differences between peoples and cultures was very much in vogue during the nineteenth century, helping to justify imperialism. Racial categories were established that identified a masculine, rational, and honest English race and a feminine, infantile, bestial, sentimental, and magical Irish one. However, this pattern of representation was not limited to the Irish; in nearly all colonial relationships, the conquerors unflinchingly characterize the peoples of their new land as pejorative opposites of themselves. That the feminine was pejorative and the masculine was valorized reflects the values of a patriarchal and sexist society; such a gendered bias affected not only colonized peoples, but women everywhere.

Ernest Renan, a Celt from Brittany, studied philology and “worked to advance the notion of the Teuton [Germanic] as the energetic, brutal warrior complemented by the Celt, the producer of civility and culture” (Cairns 45). Renan’s basic idea, presented in *Poesie des Races Celtiques* (1860), posited that races existed throughout various nations, complementing one another (Cairns 44). Renan used “categories of sexuality” to identify race, finding that “the Celtic race . . . is an essentially feminine race” (qtd. in Cairns 46). Renan’s feminine Celtic race was juxtaposed with the masculine Teutonic race, which included the English. Renan would have a far-reaching impact on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century thinkers and scientists, including Matthew Arnold.

Arnold, a British poet and critic, argued that language was “a racial identifier and the prime determinant of culture” (Cairns 44). In *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, Arnold asserted that the Celtic character was “sentimental [...] quick to feel impressions, and feeling them very strongly” (343). According to Arnold, the Celt was “lively [...] keenly sensitive to joy and to sorrow” and “loves bright colours, he easily becomes audacious, overbearing, full of fanfaronade” (343). And while “the Celtic genius is more airy and unsubstantial” it lacks “balance,

measure, and patience [...] the eternal conditions [...] of high success” (Arnold 344). Therefore, the “Celt’s failure to reach any material civilisation” is due to its innate nature, reflected by its language (Arnold 345). As Arnold was influenced by Renan’s work, he would also find that the Celtic language, and therefore the Celtic race, was a feminine one marked by “timidity, the shyness, the delicacy [...] and] its preference for a retired life, its embarrassment at having to deal with the great world” (Arnold 342-3). However, unlike Renan, Arnold viewed the Celtic language as “the badge of the beaten race” and thought that the “decline of the language itself [was] desirable” (Cairns 46). Thus the Celtic language, and the Celt himself, was subordinate to the higher culture (and therefore, higher race) of England’s Anglo-Saxons.

The sexual, gendered distinction between cultures and races was very popular during the nineteenth century and worked to create a hierarchy in which the male was always superior to the female. Renan describes Ireland, rather impartially, as feminine; but as Arnold picks up on this gendering, “feminine” becomes politicized and negative. Arnold’s depiction of the Irish as feminine was in accordance with nineteenth century belief that femininity was the underlying cause for ineffectualness (Cairns 49). Therefore the Irish, as feminine, were seen as a race defined by their “material and political incapacity” and “emotional and mental instability” and were thus naturally inferior to the masculine, capable and stable, English race (Cairns 50).

The Irish were subjected to colonial discourse for hundreds of years. The land was not the only aspect of Ireland that bore the effects of British rule; colonialism also inflected a “psychology of self-doubt [...] linked to the loss of economic and political power but also the decline of the native language and culture” (Kiberd 6). Resistance to colonialism and colonial discourse was persistent throughout British occupation; however, by the eighteenth century, under the leadership of Wolfe Tone, the “opposition had acquired an identity of its own” (“Culture” 222). This identity, in essence, was one of “Irishness,” an emerging identity that opposed British rule and, perhaps more importantly, opposed the British description of the Irish. Thus we see the beginnings of cultural nationalism — an ideology Yeats would help to form.

Cultural nationalism is understood as a counter to the effects of colonization. Nations that were subjected to damaging descriptions

from their former rulers develop cultural nationalism as a way to further the distinction between themselves and their colonizer. However, nationalism offers colonial subjects a positive emphasis on their native culture. It often takes representations provided by colonial discourse, spinning them so that the distinctions between cultures remains intact while pejorative associations become positive. Thus, the portrayal of Ireland as feminine goes from being a marker of ineffectualness to a symbol of all that is good in the home identity.

Modern Irish nationalism had strong roots in the late eighteenth century with figures such as Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen working “to unite the whole people of Ireland” (Cairns 22). The idea of a national identity — not just a cultural one, but an identity defined politically and geographically — slowly emerged in Europe during this time period with an emphasis on the “indigenous folk culture” (Cairns 23). As Cullingford succinctly puts it, “nationalism [is] the belief that humanity is naturally divided into nations [...] and was the cultural twin of romanticism” (1). While Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen were unsuccessful in their uprisings against colonization, the seed of nationalistic thought was planted in Ireland. Yeats’ part in Irish nationalism would appear, not only through several plays and poems, but also through the creation of the Abbey Theatre.

The Abbey Theatre developed over many years. John O’Leary, who was very influential to Yeats, “considered literature essential to nationalism” but also “insist[ed] upon literary quality as well as political correctness” (Cullingford 2). In 1892, O’Leary, with Yeats, would help to create the National Literary Society for the purposes of “promot[ing] the study of legends, folk-lore and literature of Ireland, and to evolve a sense of Irish identity” (Boyce 234). Nationalism required a literature of and from the people, particularly as a refusal and counter to the colonial literature that had previously represented the Irish. Yeats would be integral in building an Irish literature and in establishing an arena in which to receive it.

In 1899, the beginnings for what would become the Abbey took place with the creation of the Irish Literary Theatre. Conflict between Yeats and other key persons would put an end to the Theatre in 1901, but the idea remained (Kavanagh 21). With Gregory and Synge, Yeats would form the Abbey Theatre. On opening night, 27 December 1904,

the company presented four plays: *Kathleen ni Houliban* (Yeats), *In the Shadow of the Glen* (Synge), *On Baile's Strand* (Yeats), and *Spreading the News* (Gregory) (Kavanagh 47). And while the Abbey was a project with many contributors, "the chief energy [...] was Yeats's" (Welch 15).

The Abbey Theatre "was primarily a writers' theatre" in that, beyond nationalism, the theatre was founded on the belief in artistic quality (Murray 15). To be shown at the Abbey, a play had to meet high artistic standards. While I have argued that Yeats wrote as a cultural nationalist, he differed from many other nationalists in that he "wanted nationalism to act as the stalking horse of literature; but there were those who [...] wanted to use literature as the stalking horse of nationalism" (Boyce 241). The artistry would not always please the nationalists who had first supported the Abbey; indeed, at times, nationalism and artistry — the audience and the playwright — would clash. However, the theatre's founders (Yeats most vocally) would defend their decisions and, on occasion, chastise the audience as Yeats famously did for both Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. From its beginnings, the Abbey was Dublin's "brave and combative little theatre" (Murray 11).

The Abbey's stage was both an artistic and nationalistic arena, with the two forces occasionally at cross-purposes. But however much the Abbey insisted on artistic quality, part of its foundation lay in cultural nationalism and "[t]he literary renaissance which then developed, headed by Yeats, celebrated independence as the goal worth fighting for" (Murray 13). Yet according to Yeats and Gregory, the chief aim of the Abbey was "not to humor the audience but to 'educate' it" and they "abhorred indoctrination and propaganda" (Adams 33). Yeats said that the theatre "[did] not desire propagandist plays" but insisted that for a play to be put on at the Abbey "[it] should contain some criticism of life [...] of Irish life by preference" (Adams 33).

Even as Yeats professed to be high-minded in regards to the arts, cultural nationalism was a prominent feature of the Abbey. Further, there is, in my mind, a degree of propaganda to be found in many of the plays — including Yeats' own. Indeed, "Yeats recognized the necessity of propaganda" while remaining adamant about the superiority of art over it (Cullingford 12). Later in his life, Yeats would acknowledge, "I was a propagandist and hated being one. [...] I remember almost the

day and the hour when [...] I saw clearly the unrealities and half-truths propaganda had involved me in” (Foster 134). Yeats’ admission is likely in reference to plays such as *Cathleen ni Houliban* while his intense dislike of propaganda may be due to nationalistic responses to certain plays, such as the infamous *Playboy* riots. And while he recognized that he had perpetuated propaganda, there is nothing to suggest that Yeats acknowledged how it had (mis)used women. Women as emblems for their country is a common theme in the propaganda of the early twentieth century and I argue that Yeats follows in this trend (Grayzel 12).

The feminization of Ireland continued as cultural nationalists took the pejorative representations of themselves and spun them into tools for their own agenda. One such example is Yeats’ use of woman-as-Ireland, as seen in figures like Cathleen. While these new depictions were positive, reverent examples of Ireland, they were still restricting and dehumanizing. The consequences of the feminization of Ireland was that any female representation, whether on stage or in print, was assumed to be symbolic — leaving little room during the height of nationalism for the portrayal of real Irish women. Yeats’ use of the Irish woman and her narrow place in nationalistic society (as a symbol but not as an activist) is an example of nationalism at work. The Irish woman portrayed by classical nationalism was typically an emblem for both motherhood and womanhood, envisioned as gentle, rooted in the “native” folk, suffering due to colonialism, and in need of male action to end that suffering. As Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, “an unmistakable patriarchal cast can be discerned everywhere in classical nationalism, with delays and distortions in women’s [...] rights” (224).

But it is not just Yeats who contributed to this nationalistic patriarchy; indeed, a few prominent Irish women followed in this pattern. Maud Gonne, a constant force in Yeats’ life and work, promoted this type of representation, and her “idea of Ireland as a mystical motherland” can be seen throughout many of Yeats’ plays and poetry (Foster 128). In her own play *Damn*, which was never staged, Ireland was also “gendered according to nationalist ideology” even as this contradicted her own position in nationalist discourse (Bradley 3). She would also, for “political and strategic reasons, not moral,” object to Synge’s play *In the Shadow of the Glen*, in which the main character considers leaving her husband for

another man (Bradley 50). Gonne, though highly involved with political activism herself, promoted the theatrical portrayal of patriarchy and the suffering of “good” Irish women for nationalistic purposes.

Maud Gonne was the president of *Inghinidhe na hEirean* (Daughters of Erin), a “political and cultural nationalist organization,” while simultaneously acting as the vice president of the Irish National Theatre Society (Bradley 39-40). The Daughters of Erin, founded in 1900, were “ideologically orthodox” in terms of nationalism, and were a reaction “to the exclusion of women from politically nationalist societies” (Bradley 40). They distinctly termed themselves as “daughters rather than mothers” of Ireland, hoping to unite in their sisterhood and nationalism (Bradley 41). As Gonne was highly involved in the theatre, the Daughters of Erin would be as well (until Synge’s *In the Shadow of the Glen* prompted Gonne to resign from the Irish National Theatre Society), sponsoring Synge, Yeats’ *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and Gonne’s *Dawn* (Bradley 39-40). However, while this organization believed in promoting women’s rights in political activism, they can be seen as “colluding [in] the iconization of Ireland as mother, [...] helping to deflect attention from the very real distress of many Irish women” (Bradley 41). They did not have a problem with Yeats’ female characters, his emblematic women, but would not tolerate Synge’s portrait of a struggling peasant woman who chooses infidelity over a loveless life.

Another example of women supporting Yeats’ depictions comes from the fact that while “Maud Gonne played Cathleen ni Houlihan at the first performance of Yeats’s play [...] in March 1919 Lady Gregory herself played the part on three consecutive nights” (Cullingford 51). Further, there is evidence that Gregory actually co-authored *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (though it was billed as Yeats’ sole creation), implicating her in Yeats’ marginalization of women (Harrington 439). As Gonne and Gregory played Cathleen, not Bridget or Delia, it becomes clear which woman they supported.

Therefore, Yeats clearly falls in line with the pervasive nationalistic thought that the symbol of woman was useful in promoting Ireland’s autonomy and cultural value. As we have seen, nationalism reacts to colonial discourse by taking established material and turning it into tools for the national agenda; Yeats’ symbolic use of women as Ireland is a result of such an occurrence. And with women such as Gonne and



Gregory contributing to this gendered bias, Yeats was clearly not alone in his portrayal.

### **Lady Gregory's Dramatic Tragedies**

Lady Augusta Gregory is an intriguing playwright and founder of the Abbey Theatre. Besides being a female writer in a male dominated field, Lady Gregory not only came to literature at a more advanced age than her associates, but she was also the only one of the Abbey's founders "who successfully learned Irish" (Adams 39). Born in 1852, Lady Gregory grew up firmly in the Victorian age as part of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy class. Her childhood was spent in Galway and it was there that she developed, in her own words, "a romantic love of country" (Adams 23). Lady Gregory's nationalism is generally characterized as an outgrowth of her childhood environment. Growing up, Lady Gregory had much exposure to the peasantry surrounding her and the Irish mythology she learned would "provide her the basis for everything she was later to write" (Adams 25). Indeed, it was her translations of primary Irish mythology and her work in the theatre that established Lady Gregory as a writer contributing to the nationalist cause.

Gregory's formal interest in nationalism began after the death of her husband, when her childhood interest in Irish mythology and language led her first to Douglas Hyde and then to Yeats (Adams 29, 31). Hyde, of the Gaelic League fame, is well known for his 1892 speech "On the Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" in which he argued that English culture needed to be removed from Ireland. De-Anglicization would require "reestablish[ing] spoken Irish" (Adams 29), a cause Lady Gregory would agree with as its "chief end [would be] the preserv[ation] of our own nationality" (Harrington 434). The Irish language had long been of interest to Lady Gregory; she had attempted the language twice without much success (Adams 39). However, beginning in 1894, Gregory started her third attempt and mastered the language (Adams 31).

A workable knowledge of the Irish language was important for Lady Gregory in her literary career. She is well known for her translations of major Irish sagas, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904). Not only did the language prove useful in

collecting “authentically Irish” stories from the peasantry, it also helped her to develop Kiltartan — a variation of English speech patterns meant to represent the sound of the folk Irish spoken in Galway. Kiltartan was useful on stage because it took the English language, the language of the colonizer, and transformed it into something belonging to the Irish. Using English words, it replaced standard English syntax with conventions derived from the Irish language. For those Irish who no longer spoke Irish (as was the case for most), Kiltartan gave the plays a more authentic Irish sound.

Lady Gregory would put her literary skills to use with her involvement in the Irish Literary Theatre and then the Abbey. She met Yeats in 1896 and “the chances are very great that Lady Gregory would never have written one line of a play had she not met and been encouraged by Yeats” (Harrington 441). The two collaborated on a number of plays, though her name would only rarely appear next to his. Yeats and Gregory had a lifelong friendship and they shared an interest in “the idea of a literary theatre which would encourage a national movement of the arts, thereby, in Lady Gregory’s phrase, restoring to Ireland its native dignity” (“Introduction” vii).

Though Lady Gregory “did not promote herself as a playwright,” she penned numerous plays during her time with the Abbey Theatre (Adams 9). Among these were two tragedies based in Irish mythology and folklore: *Grania* (1911) and *Dervorgilla* (1907). Both plays involve women as leading characters and put forth issues of infidelity and female responsibility. Gregory’s handling of her female figures is consistent with her assertion that art should be concerned with the “realities of emotion and character” (Adams 34). While her title characters are found in Irish folklore and mythology, she presents them as real people, decidedly not merely symbols, with human motivations and feelings. However, while she succeeds in creating “real” women, they are part of ancient mythology and folklore; her plays do not focus on contemporary issues real Irish women would face and must therefore be seen as distanced.

*Dervorgilla* was adapted from historical events in the twelfth century. In 1152, Diarmait Mac Murchada, described as “ruthlessly cruel” (Ranelagh 34), kidnapped Derbforgaill, wife of the prince of Breifne, for very political reasons (Cosgrove 49). Historians tend to agree that

“Derbforgaill was a willing accomplice in the abduction” and that while her marriage to the prince of Breifne was an unhappy one, her relationship with Diarmait was “assuredly not one of the great love stories of history” (Cosgrove 50). In 1166, Diarmait sailed to England for support after his political enemies gathered to expel him; and according to “The Annals of Tigernach [...] they did so ‘in order to take vengeance on him for Ua Ruairc’s [prince of Breifne] wife” (Cosgrove 50). The main importance of this abduction is that, as he would first bring the English into Ireland, Diarmait “is relegated by Irish nationalist historians to that ultimate circle of hell in the *Inferno* reserved for traitors and informers” (Cosgrove 48). And in Irish folklore, Derbforgaill came to be seen as the Helen-like catalyst for these events; however, fourteen years span the time between her abduction and Diarmait’s expulsion. Additionally, Diarmait had associated with Henry II two decades before and was known on the Norman continent (Cosgrove 48). Therefore, whatever Derbforgaill’s actions, her abduction cannot logically be seen as the reason behind Diarmait’s expulsion or his decision to look to the English for aid. Derbforgaill, well known as a benefactress, died at the monastery in Mellifont in 1193 (Cosgrove 436).

Though it keeps the basic historic outline, Lady Gregory’s *Dervorgilla* stays true to the folkloric (not historic) narrative and does not mention the fourteen years between the offense and the retaliation. Instead, Dervorgilla, explains Gregory, was the “wife of O’Rourke, King of Breffny, [and] was taken away, willingly or unwillingly, by Diarmuid MacMurrough, King of Leinster” (205). This, of course, spurred retaliation by O’Rourke, leaving Diarmuid to appeal to Henry II of England for help, therein bringing the English into Ireland. The folklore thus saw Dervorgilla as the “red-haired woman [...] who] put the great curse on Ireland, bringing in the English” (Gregory 206).

In Gregory’s one-act play, Dervorgilla is portrayed as an old woman, living out her days anonymously at an abbey, well liked among the townspeople for her kindness and generosity. The audience quickly learns that she has “fed old and young through the bad times, giving means and cattle to those the English had robbed” (158). Dervorgilla is then shown coming out of the abbey’s protective walls to give prizes to children in their day “of sport and of mirth-making” (160). And so

Gregory sets Dervorgilla up as a benefactor of the village, kind and caring; Dervorgilla, who feels she must keep her identity a secret from everyone but those inside the abbey, has tried to live with her guilt by helping the surrounding villagers. She is clearly repentant and accepting of blame as she remarks, “I brought trouble upon Ireland” and “I have paid the penalty. For every day or night of pride and pleasure, I have spent a day and a night of prayer and of pain. Will that not bring forgiveness?” (162-3).

The crux of the play comes when the Songmaker, a traveling poet of sorts, sings of Diarmuid and finds that “the changeable wagging nature of a woman” brought “King Diarmuid into his sin and his treachery” (175). He places the blame on her and she, in her anonymity and guilt, cannot argue with his assessment. When her servant Mona lets Dervorgilla’s identity slip, one by one, the children hand back the prizes Dervorgilla had given them. She does not argue with their actions, only assuring them that she has “been here, kneeling and praying, kneeling and praying, fasting and asking forgiveness of God” and that she “take[s] this shame for the shame [...] brought on O’Rourke [...] and] this reproach for the reproach [...] brought upon Diarmuid” (185).

In this play, Gregory portrays a historical woman who has become legendary in Ireland, yet takes care to show Dervorgilla as a real person — that is, someone with motivations and deep emotions — who must ultimately “accept her role as mythic villainess” (Kiberd 92). This acceptance is painful, yet Dervorgilla’s deep remorse and guilt reveal a woman with more depth and character than the original historical account would initially suggest. Gregory is able to deftly craft this portrayal with her emphasis on the real woman while acknowledging the myth she becomes. However, Dervorgilla is first and foremost part of Irish folklore, never to be mistaken with contemporary Irish women no matter how realistically Gregory portrays her.

At first glance, *Grania* is seemingly similar to *Dervorgilla* thematically: both focus on a female character and involve a love triangle in which the daughter of a king runs off with another man (coincidentally, named Diarmuid in both). However, there are important differences to note — namely, that while Dervorgilla clearly repents, Grania is adamant in her refusal to do so.

*Grania* is based not in historical legend but in Irish mythology, specifically a story from the Finn cycle, recounted in Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men*. In this tale, Grania has agreed to marry Finn, a much older man. The night before the wedding is to take place, Grania tells Finn of a nameless man she fell in love with years before; next on stage is Diarmuid, Finn's friend and ally who just happens to be Grania's love interest. Later that night, Grania goes to (who she think is) Diarmuid and confesses her love; however it is not Diarmuid who hears this admission but Finn. Finn becomes angry and jealous, and Diarmuid steps in to protect Grania. Diarmuid takes Grania away with the promise to Finn that he will only protect her; he will not establish a marriage (sexual relationship) with Grania. However, seven years pass, another man approached Grania and Diarmuid's jealousy prompts him into breaking his promise to Finn. Finn discovers this betrayal and sets after the pair. Diarmuid winds up mortally wounded, and on his deathbed he shows greater love for Finn than for Grania. Grania's anger at being a pawn between two men comes out when she discovers it was their jealousy, not their love, which made her the object of their affection. The play ends with Grania taking control of her life.

When Finn first discovers Grania's love for Diarmuid, Grania (reminiscent of Dervorgilla) takes full blame, "It is on me the blame is entirely! It is best for me to go out a shamed woman" (19). Yet this is the last time Grania will express any remorse. When Finn confronts Grania in the final act, she is absolute in her anger towards him. She no longer feels that she has done anything wrong; indeed, according to Grania, it is "the malice you [Finn] showed" that is the real sin, not her love for Diarmuid (47).

Grania's enlightenment comes when Diarmuid is brought back mortally wounded. He does not speak to her, recognizing only Finn. As she cries over him, declaring her love, he tells Finn that only "a very foolish man would give up his dear master and friend for any woman" (58). After Diarmuid is dead, Finn tells her he "will meddle no more with what belongs to [Diarmuid]. You are the dead man's wife" (61). Thus, within the space of a few minutes, Grania realizes that neither man truly loved or cared about her. It is jealousy, which Gregory alludes to throughout the play, that prompted their earlier actions. As Kiberd

finds, Grania “is condemned to only a supporting role in a man’s love-affair with his own image” (94).

Lady Gregory wrote of Grania’s tale in *Gods and Fighting Men* before her theatrical portrayal. One difference Adams notes between the texts is that, in the play, “at its outset Grania is a more naïve and conventionally romantic heroine” (54). While Grania does eventually take action, the fact that Adams notes this kind of distinction suggests that Gregory is shaping Grania, building her character so that her final moments of actions are more pronounced. Indeed, Lady Gregory writes that she preferred Grania over Deirdre (a mythological woman portrayed by both Yeats and Synge) because Grania “had more power of will, and for good or evil twice took the shaping of her life into her own hands” (195). Grania is certainly a woman of action: she takes initiative by seeking Diarmuid out in the first act and by the third, she has crowned herself and made demands of Finn, “why should I be always a widow that went so long a maid? Give me now the crown [...] as you offered it often enough” (65). She is thus shown as a woman “no way daunted or afraid” and certainly no longer naïvely disillusioned (66).

Gregory ensures that Grania’s anger and refusal to mourn are understandable. Readers sympathize with this character even though she remains distanced within the folkloric world. As a spirited female character, Grania is perhaps more gratifying than Dervorgilla from a feminist perspective; however, it must be noted that *Grania* was never staged in Lady Gregory’s lifetime as she “never permitted” its performance (Adams 52). Abbey audiences never saw this play and therefore never saw Grania as a response to Dervorgilla. A woman who refused to repent and openly challenged men was refused the Abbey stage.

Both *Dervorgilla* and *Grania* concern female characters who must face unpleasant realities. One interesting comparison between the plays is the nature of change in infidelity and in gender relationships. In *Dervorgilla*, the Songmaker attributes the fall of O’Rourke and Diarmuid to the “changeable wagging nature of a woman” (175). The woman receives blame for the love triangle; in *Grania*, it is just the opposite. Grania says, “It is women are said to change, and they do not, but it is men that change and turn as often as the wheel of the moon” (63). In this instance, Grania is referring to inconsistent male love and places

the blame on men, for their roles as “male fantasists leave women no choice but to get real” (Kiberd 95). As Gregory seems to sympathize with Grania and Dervorgilla more than the Songmaker, Grania’s viewpoint has more weight. Further, Dervorgilla has been unchanging for years — spending her time in unfaltering repentance. But the Songmaker’s statement reveals an (apparently male) attitude towards women, that they are fickle and flighty; Gregory draws attention to the perception, and through her portrayal of steadfast women, questions it. Yet again, as *Grania* never made it to stage, Gregory’s perceptive appraisal of such gendered attitudes loses its momentum. The Songmaker, not Grania or Dervorgilla, gets the last word even though I don’t think Gregory agrees with him.

Lady Gregory writes two female figures from Irish folklore yet retains in them human characteristics and motivations. They are not glamorized and she is able to make their plights understandable; while working within the mythology, Lady Gregory’s “characters are people, not gods” (Adams 50). Such a treatment puts realistic women into the theatre even if these “real” women are drawn from Irish mythology. As Adams notes, “[w]ithin the bounds of her own capacity for mythmaking, [Gregory] is a kind of realist” (50).

### **The Peasant Plays of J. M. Synge**

The third director of the Abbey Theatre, John Millington Synge, produced only six plays before his death from Hodgkin’s disease in 1909. His first five plays concern the peasantry and are largely based on his time in the Aran Islands. His sixth play, though unfinished, was an adaptation of the mythological tale of Deirdre. Throughout his work, more than either Yeats or Gregory, Synge shows a great deal of thought for women and their situation within Irish culture. Yet in his depiction of women, Synge was not overly concerned with promoting a traditional nationalist agenda — this provocative aspect of his work would trouble many vocal nationalists.

Synge’s nationalism, while it did not evoke a symbolic Irish woman, was nonetheless as deeply felt as any other member of the Abbey Theatre. However, Synge’s approach to nationalism was unique. Synge rejected any “semi-military [nationalistic] movement” and was always somewhat distanced from other nationalists (Saddlemeyer 47). He assumed “the



inevitability of Home Rule” and therefore felt compelled to try and “see so profoundly into the [Irish] culture that the shape of the future might be discernible” (Kiberd 166). Unlike Yeats’ *Cathleen ni Houliban*, Synge did not see the need to rally the public to military action – which left him open to explore the cultural possibilities and implications of an autonomous Irish state.

Synge first met Yeats in Paris in 1896. At the time, Synge was trying to develop a career, first as a musician and later a linguist, when Yeats famously told him, “Give up Paris. You will never create anything by reading Racine [...] Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression” (Synge 52). Synge would subsequently, beginning in 1898, go to the Aran Islands to experience the language and the people. The Aran Islands, due to their location in the far west of Ireland, felt less impact from the effects of colonialism than the mainland. Therefore, the west of Ireland came to be seen as more authentically Irish; the idea of ancient Celtic culture being more alive in the west was an attractive notion. And throughout Ireland, it was “well known that the ancient Irish laws were remarkably liberal in their attitudes toward women” (Kiberd 178). Synge found that women in the Aran Islands were indeed “‘before conventionality’ in their frank, easy manners, which left them untainted by the false Victorian gentility of the women in [the cities]” (Kiberd 179). And it was these unconventional women that Synge would choose to portray.

*The Shadow of the Glen* (1902) is Synge’s earliest controversial depiction of women. In this work, his character Nora Burke is unhappily married to Dan. While he lies (supposedly) on the brink of death, she and Michael Dara discuss the technicalities of a marriage between themselves (how much money, land, animals each could bring); at this point there is also a tramp resting in the house. Dan suddenly sits up and confronts his wife, sending her out of the house with “Let you walk out through that door [...] and let you not be passing this way if it’s hungry you are, or wanting a bed” (24). The tramp is sympathetic with Nora and leaves with her. After their exit, Dan strikes up a friendship with Michael over whiskey, “I was thinking to strike you, Michael Dara, but you’re a quiet man, God help you, and I don’t mind you at all” (26). Michael, completely

forgetting about Nora, answers, “God reward you, Daniel Burke, and may you have a long life and a quiet life, and good health with it” (26).

This representation of marriage and an Irish wife’s infidelity infuriated audiences. Nora’s and Dan’s unhappiness in their marriage and the fact that Nora was searching for her next husband before her first was dead suggested that not everything Irish was as good as many nationalists wanted to believe. Nora’s sexuality is a major theme in this play; she is clearly unsatisfied with Dan, saying, “he was always cold, every day since I knew him, — and every night” (16). Nora and the tramp discuss a man that was clearly her lover. Before this man’s death, Nora says, “he’d always look in here [...] and it’s very lonesome I was after him a long while (*she looks over at the bed*)” (18). She also laments the fact that she has no children and is getting older; Nora is a woman of limited options, as hers is a loveless marriage, arranged for “a bit of farm” (22). “[T]he emotional and spiritual poverty of her situation” is shown in a very realistic manner, implying that Nora is an accurate representation of many Irish women — much different than the image many nationalists wanted to portray (192).

The frank female sexuality Synge portrayed, along with the theme of infidelity, angered many nationalists whose aim was to rally audiences behind the idea of a moral and culturally correct Ireland (with its symbol as a woman). While she famously walked out of the performance, Maud Gonne was one nationalist who could not possibly object to *The Shadow of the Glen*’s sexual overtones on a moral basis (she had two children out of marriage). Her objection was that it did nothing, in her mind, to further the nationalist cause. Arther Griffith, another nationalist and founder of Sinn Fein, thought the play was decidedly “non-Irish, of Greek origins, and a slur on Irishwomen who were ‘the most virtuous in the world’” (Boyce 244). As Kiberd notes, “[r]evivalism was proving rigidly selective of that which was worthy to be revived and translated into popular versions. Sexuality, it seemed was not to be deanglicized” (182).

By far Synge’s most controversial play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, opened 26 January 1907 at the Abbey. On opening night, the audience rioted; the police had to be called in for the second performance; and it took nearly a week for the actors to give an uninterrupted performance. This play not only offers a realistic account of female

sexuality, but also bends gender lines and portrays an intense violence in both Irish men and women.

In this play, outsider Christy Mahon enters a village, having left home believing he has killed his father in an argument. His confession to the murder only elevates his status among the locals, represented by the town's pub owner, Michael James, his daughter Pegeen Mike, and other local farmers and village girls. Pegeen is engaged to Shawn, a faint-hearted farmer, yet takes an interest in Christy and fights with the Widow Quin over him. In the next act, Christy's father, thought to be dead, shows up looking for his son. As Mahon, Christy's father, sits with the Widow Quin and other locals, Christy wins a race on the beach and is brought, triumphantly, into the pub. Just as Christy and Pegeen agree to marry, Mahon bursts in and begins to beat Christy. In their fight, Christy (supposedly) succeeds in killing Mahon; then, wary of the crowd, the Widow Quin and the other village girls try to help Christy escape the police by dressing him in women's clothing. However, they do not move fast enough and the other villagers have turned against him: Christy is tied up and dragged around, Pegeen lights a torch and threatens him with it. Mahon then shows up, surprising all; Christy is freed but knows his glamour is off — he and his father then leave the village for their farm. Pegeen has the last line, lamenting, "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only playboy of the western world" (146).

In the collection of Synge's plays, Pegeen Mike stands out as an example of a young Irishwoman who, though just as limited as Nora in opportunity, seemingly thinks and acts as a thoroughly independent individual. The audience first encounters Pegeen in her father's pub; however, her father is nowhere to be seen and she is alone when Shawn enters. From Pegeen and Shawn's dialogue and Synge's stage notes, it is clear that Pegeen is in control of their relationship: Shawn is afraid that she may change her mind about their impending marriage and he is persistently timid while she speaks to him "with scorn" (100). She is very vocal and forceful throughout the play, chastising nearly everyone at least once, including her father — a man that is supposed to be an authority figure.

Synge shows Pegeen, for better or worse, in command of the men around her. The most notable instances of this occur with Christy and

Shawn; when the two men react cowardly, Pegeen contrasts them, as she remains steady and fearless. When Christy and Pegeen hear a knock on the door, Christy clings to Pegeen and fearfully says, “Oh, glory! It’s late for knocking,” while she simply calls out “Who’s there?” (111). Similarly, when Shawn is told to tie Christy up, he hesitates and asks, “Is it me to go near him [...] Let you take it Pegeen,” and she does so without any qualms (144). Therefore Pegeen is shown as a woman of action while the men around her exude passivity.

The Widow Quin is a woman of action as well. Unlike Pegeen, the Widow Quin has no male figure (whether husband or father) to answer to: she is autonomous and society recognizes her independence. As evidence of this independence, she boasts that “there isn’t my match in Mayo for thatching or mowing or shearing a sheep,” chores that typically belong to men (112). The Widow Quin is also without sexual restrictions; as a once-married woman (therefore legitimately non-virginal) she is rumored to have sexual affairs and can have Christy stay in her home without social repercussions — whereas Shawn and the local priest are concerned with Pegeen being alone with him.

The Widow Quin’s enterprise is furthered by *how* her husband dies. Pegeen tells us that the Widow Quin “hit himself [her husband] with a worn pick, and the rusted poison did corrode his blood the way he never overed it and died after” (112). The comparison between the Widow Quin and Christy is apparent: Christy claims that he killed his father when he “riz the loy [raised the spade] and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull” (106). Their methods are similar and both stood to gain independence; however, the Widow Quin succeeded whereas Christy did not. This is yet another example in which women are more effective than men.

Furthering the picture of male ineptness, it is Pegeen Mike and the Widow Quin, definitely not Shawn or Christy, who “take the initiative in wooing” (Kiberd 176). Taken alongside Synge’s other characterizations of the sexes, Kiberd finds that there is “a masculinization of women and a corresponding feminization of men” (175). Christy is demasculinized when he is dressed in petticoats and when he primps in front of the mirror; these scenes contributed to the explosive reaction many had to *The Playboy of the Western World*. Kiberd notes that “[f]ew men anywhere in the Europe of 1907 could have coped with Synge’s

subversive gender-benders, least of all a group committed to the social construction of precisely the kind of Cuchulanoid heroism which the playwright was so mischievously debunking” (183). With such an attitude, many found Synge guilty of “betraying the forces of virile nationalism’ to a movement of decadence” (Kiberd 184).

While *The Playboy* is Synge’s longest play, it is also perhaps his most complex. And though rioters initially claimed to have reacted over the mentioning of “females standing in their shifts,” there was much more to the general reaction (Synge 143). One of the controversial subjects was the fact that female characters express sexuality and seek autonomy. Synge showed women who take more initiative than the men around them and prove to be resourceful in their efforts to live their own lives. In his play, Synge presents a “human model of Irish womanhood” that “reject[s] the fanciful,” emblematic, and passive women to embrace the realistic (Ritschel 12). This challenge to traditional views of gender roused the audience.

Synge clearly takes care to raise feminist issues in *The Playboy*: as with Nora in *The Shadow of the Glen*, Synge portrays women that are frank, and even aggressive, about their sexuality but, also like Nora, have limited options. These rural women do not have the resources (or perhaps even the imagination) to live a life other than what they have been set up for — marriage, most likely unsatisfying, and farm life. They may be vocal and able to control the men around them, but they do not envision a life outside their village culture and, as Synge shows, this life is not idyllic. At a time when the peasantry was being exalted by nationalists, “Synge put the debate about rural womanhood back on the agenda in the persons of Nora Burke and Pegeen Mike. After all, *The Playboy* starts and ends with Pegeen’s plight as a trapped rural woman in a landscape virtually bereft of enterprising men” (Kiberd 178-9).

As with *The Shadow of the Glen*, *The Playboy* was problematic for many nationalists. As the West was thought of as more authentically Irish, the audiences in the cities, in Dublin where the Abbey was located, were not quick to appreciate Synge’s representation. He was accused of “misrepresenting the life of western Ireland” yet Kiberd finds that the rioters really objected to “the remorseless realism of his portrayal of that harsh life, which [Synge’s] detractors chose to view [...] through a haze of sentiment and nostalgia” (481). The problem most rioters had

was that Synge refused to play along with the traditional nationalist thought; the riots “marked [Yeats] irreparable break with militant nationalism” as their refusal to see the validity in Synge’s art enraged Yeats (Kiberd 225). Interestingly, as much as Dublin audiences objected to the “misrepresentation” of life in Western Ireland, “when *The Playboy* was finally shown in the west, audiences found it unremarkable” — suggesting that Synge was indeed providing an accurate account of their life (Kiberd 481).

Perhaps Synge’s most moving play, *Riders to the Sea* (1902), has a cast that is almost exclusively female. Maurya is an older woman living in the west of Ireland with her two daughters, Cathleen and young Nora, along with her only remaining son Bartley. The play opens with the affirmation that Michael, another son, has died at sea, which has already claimed Maurya’s “husband, and a husband’s father, and six sons” (9). Bartley is soon to follow. While the action concerns what has happened to the men, it is the women’s voices that are important. Synge’s real focus is on the consequences and heartaches these women must face.

Women are the central players and voices in this play: it is Nora’s stitching that identifies Michael’s clothes, affirming his death; Maurya “sees” that both Bartley and Michael are dead (9); and it is a village woman who gives news of Bartley’s death. Male characters are given only a marginal voice as Bartley speaks of practical matters to his sisters before leaving and the townsmen have only two lines, both dealing with the lack of nails for Bartley’s coffin. Synge portrays a bleak life for Maurya and her daughters. Without any male relatives, it will not only be difficult for them to sustain their finances, but the emotional toll is seen through Maurya, who finds that “in the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving” and later she remarks that “there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me” (6, 11). Further, as Nora is too young and Maurya too old and grief-stricken, it is up to Cathleen to take up the role as leader in the household and try to prevent her family’s degeneration.

Robin Skelton sees *Riders* as “a counterblast to Yeats” and *Cathleen ni Houliban* (Harrington 450). Maurya can be compared to the Shan-Van-Vocht, as both are older and rather broken women. They differ dramatically in that the Shan-Van-Vocht (and Yeats) promotes images

of immortality when young men die and leave women behind. Skelton finds that,

Cathleen ni Houlihan mourns the loss of her ‘four fields’ – the four provinces of Ireland. Maurya mourns the loss of her eight menfolk [...]. The ship that brings hope of Irish freedom to Yeats’ characters, bring death to the characters of Synge. (Harrington 450)

Another point of comparison between *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *Riders to the Sea* is that both plays end with the transition of an older woman to a Cathleen. However, Cathleen in *Riders* is not the emblem of Cathleen ni Houlihan. Synge’s Cathleen cannot evoke male passion or rejuvenation. There are no young men left to fight for her. She must survive on her own and provide for what is left of her family.

### **Synge, Yeats, and Deirdre**

Further comparison between Synge and Yeats can be seen in their treatment of Deirdre as both men wrote plays based on her mythological tale. Yeats draws on Lady Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* and Synge most likely did as well. However, I will use Thomas Kinsella’s *The Táin* for my reference of Deirdre’s story, as he compiles a number of sources into one text. In the “Exile of the Sons of Uisliu,” it is foretold before her birth that Derdriu [Deirdre] “will bring evil”; her incredible beauty will cause jealousy and the exile of “the three sons of Uisliu” (10). As King Conchobor learns of her beauty, he hides her for himself, waiting until she is old enough to claim her as his bride. But Derdriu meets Noisiu and decides she must have him; though he is aware of the prophecy, Derdriu shames him into accepting her. “‘Two years of shame and mockery,’ she says, ‘if you don’t take me with you’” (12). So Noisiu and Derdriu go off together and live together for seven years (with his two brothers as companions). Then they are discovered; Noisiu and his brothers are killed and Conchobor brings Derdriu back to live with him. But Derdriu spends a year in which she “never gave one smile, nor took enough food or sleep, nor lifted her head from her knees” (16). Her hatred for Conchobor is strong and her grief intense; eventually, when “a big block of stone was in front of her” Derdriu “let



her head be driven against the stone, and made a mass of fragments of it, and she was dead” (20).

Yeats’ version, simply titled *Deirdre*, was first published in 1907. He shows a woman caught between the young Naoise and the older Conchubar, and she is “blamed” for “stir[ring] up a quarrel” that causes the deaths of many men (187). Deirdre is well aware that her beauty is the greatest factor in her appeal; she accepts blame and offers to “spoil this beauty that brought misery” (187). In the mythology, Yeats sees comparisons between Deirdre’s tale and Helen of Troy: “Deirdre was the Irish Helen, and Naisi her Paris, and Concobar her Menelaus” (853). Keeping within the element of Greek tragedy, Yeats portrays the events as inevitable, though he does not include the prophecy found in the mythology.

Yeats’ Deirdre acts as a dutiful wife to Naoise even when she expresses her concerns that he may be underestimating the likelihood of Conchubar trapping them. She is at once eager to do her “husband’s will” though she is fearful and he dismisses her time and again (180). In writing to Lady Gregory, Yeats (in his very poor spelling) claimed, “Deirdre is the normal, compassionate, wise house wife lifted into immortality by beauty & tragedy. Her feeling for her lover is the feeling of the house wife for the man of the house” (Yeats 854). Here, Yeats expresses in patriarchal terms what he likes about Deirdre: her compassion, wisdom, and love of Naoise. Yeats interprets Deirdre’s suicide as another example of her loyalty to Naoise. After Conchubar kills Naoise, she thwarts him for the second time, killing herself behind the curtain, next to Naoise, and, in doing so, mocking Conchubar. Before killing herself, Deirdre tricks Conchubar into believing she will go with him, but not before looking at Naoise. Her unwavering love for Naoise enforces the idea of the loyalty of women, but she does not have a lot of choice in this play. Yeats’ portrayal emphasizes tragic inevitability and therefore his Deirdre never has the chance to obtain any autonomy.

Synge was in the process of writing his *Deirdre of the Sorrows* when he died in 1909. Though he had a complete draft, he would have continued revising if his illness had not intervened. Yeats wrote a preface in which he claims that, had Synge lived, “Deirdre of the Sorrows’ would have been his masterwork” (Synge 148). In his first attempt at a mythological subject, Synge remarked, “These saga people, when one

comes to deal with them, seem very remote; one does not know what they thought or what they are or where they went to sleep, so one is apt to fall into rhetoric. In any case, I find it an interesting experiment” (“Introduction” xx). It is clear that Synge was concerned with finding motivations and personalities for his cast of characters. He needed to know them, as he knew the peoples of the Aran Islands, in order to write them. In this unfinished work, Synge presents mythological subjects with very human characteristics, including a degree of personal choice and autonomy.

In his version of the myth, Synge shows an independent Deirdre stronger than the character depicted by Yeats. The stage notes describe her as defiant towards Conchubor and she sees that he should share the blame for the tragedy, whereas Yeats’ Deirdre accepts the blame herself. Synge’s Deirdre feels that, if Conchubor would simply leave her be, no one would die and she and Naisi could be in peace. Her unwillingness to accept full blame is supported by Synge. When Deirdre and Naisi embrace, Lavarcham asks, “Are you choosing this night to destroy the world?” to which Deirdre replies, “It’s Conchubor has chosen this night” (163).

While Synge follows the mythology, his subject does not appear to be as closely tied to fate as Yeats’. Synge makes it clear that they have choices. Lavarcham gives advice that would do much to prevent the tragedy from taking place, yet Deirdre chooses to think “there’s little power in oaths to stop what’s coming,” prompting Lavarcham to berate Deirdre:

Was there little power in what you did the night you dressed in your finery and ran Naisi off along with you, in spite of Conchubor [...]? It was power enough you had that night to bring distress and anguish, and now I’m pointing you a way to save Naisi, you’ll not stir stick or straw to aid me. (165)

As Deirdre has choices, Synge also presents her as very aware of her fate. She asks Naisi, “Do many know what is foretold, that Deirdre will be the ruin of the Sons of Usna?” (161). In this manner, it is her very awareness of her fate that seems to drive her towards it, a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. Synge does not present Deirdre’s story as fully in the

hands of fate as Yeats does; instead, his characters knowingly choose their paths. And while Deirdre realizes she is fated to take all blame for the deaths of Naisi and his brothers, she refuses to accept it, demanding that the men be found culpable as well.

Synge questions the issues of fate and choice, love and loyalty. His characters do not blindly stumble to their destinies: they cognizantly act in ways that bring about such ends. Synge includes Lavarcham, a strong female character omitted by Yeats, and she, like Deirdre, thinks for herself and possesses the autonomy involved in choice. As the modern feminist viewpoint is chiefly concerned with choice, Synge — in giving choice to his characters, male and female alike — appears to have anticipated this matter.

Synge entered the hospital while working on *Deirdre of the Sorrows* but was clearly still interested in the female perspective within Irish culture. The fact that “he repeatedly sought to engage the nurses on the topic of feminism” suggests to me that he was paying attention to women and their place in society throughout his life (Kiberd 175). His very awareness of women in a changing Ireland sets him apart from both Yeats and Gregory.

### **Sean O’Casey, Staging Dublin**

Of the playwrights studied, Sean O’Casey was younger and much poorer than the Abbey founders. While brought up a Protestant (like Yeats, Gregory, and Synge), he was clearly not a member of the Protestant-Ascendancy class, as he worked on the railways before writing began to pay. His background is reflected in the three plays he wrote for the Abbey: in choosing “the tenement life he knew best” as the setting for his plays, he produced works whose dramatic form is generally considered realism but also borders on naturalism (Murray 8). Concerned with “the pangs of the poor” and how militant nationalist forces affected them, O’Casey distanced himself from cultural nationalism, noting that “the problem of havin’ enough to eat was of more importance than of havin’ a little Irish to speak” (Kiberd 218-21). Though supportive of getting the English out of Ireland, O’Casey was more concerned with economic disparity. Interestingly, O’Casey portrays women as either those most opposed to or most influenced by any sort of idealism. They illustrate his idea that “life is more sacred than patriotic slogans;

human realities are more meaningful than fanatical abstractions, particularly when in the name of the national honour the revolution devours its own children” (Kilroy 93).

O’Casey’s 1923 *The Shadow of a Gunman*, set in 1920 working-class Dublin, involves “urban guerilla warfare” and the people caught in it (Murray 29). Among the tenement are two roommates, Donal and Seamus. Donal spends hours attempting poetics while the other residents believe he is a terrorist hiding out from the Black-and-Tans. Seamus is a pedlar who eventually brings in Maguire. Maguire, unlike Donal, actually is involved with the IRA and leaves a bag of explosives in their room for safekeeping. Meanwhile, Minnie, another tenement resident, stops by and flirts with Donal. A short time later, the Black-and-Tans are canvassing the neighborhood just as Seamus and Donal discover what is inside Maguire’s bag; Minnie, very much infatuated with Donal, suggests that she hide it, for “maybe they won’t search [her room]; if they do aself, they won’t harm a girl” (122). However, they do inspect her room, arrest her, and as Minnie gets caught up in patriotic fervor, she shouts, “Up the Republic,” and is killed by stray gunfire (130).

Minnie’s death is the main event of this play, bringing to light a different view of nationalistic sacrifice than we have seen in any other playwright. As Christopher Murray argues, the “theme of sacrifice and victimization,” shown so positively in Yeats, particularly when enacted by women, is negated: “the romantic features of a war of independence” are replaced “by a harsher reality” (29). *The Shadow of the Gunman* alludes to Yeats when Seamus remarks, “Oh, Kathleen ni Houlihan, you way’s a thorny way” (82). Yeats’ male sacrifice for a female Ireland is completely debunked in this work, as not only does a woman make the sacrifice, but O’Casey exposes the sacrifice as useless.

One of the most telling examples of how O’Casey rejects the idea of sacrifice is in the irony of Minnie’s death. According to Murray, “her motive is to save a man she thinks is a republican hero but she dies in vain for a coward” (28). Donal, who knows she thinks he is an IRA member, lets her believe this just as he lets her take the bombs without argument. In fact, O’Casey’s stage notes emphasize Donal’s cowardice. As Minnie leaves with the explosives, “*she glances lovingly at Donal — who is only semi-conscious [with fright]*” (122). Yet while O’Casey mocks the idea of sacrifice, he makes it clear that “Minnie’s sacrifice, romantic in

motivation, is genuine” and therefore he “balances the anti-sacrifice emphasis in the play with Minnie’s genuine, if totally misdirected martyrdom” (Murray 30). Minnie, though naïve, is a courageous character and is worthy of the audience’s esteem, while the men, especially Donal, are not.

O’Casey’s next play for the Abbey was *Juno and the Paycock* (1924). Set in a poor Dublin tenement, the Boyle family, headed by Juno, struggles during the Irish Civil War in 1922. Jack Boyle is perpetually out of work; his son Johnny has been crippled during the war and so spends the majority of his time in his bedroom (offstage); his daughter Mary — who has a job — is on strike because of “principle” (8). This leaves Jack’s wife Juno to hold the family together. While the Boyle family struggles, Jack gets word that he has a “legacy” coming to him. This news is wonderful to the family: Jack goes on a spending spree and Mary dumps her rather average suitor, Jerry, for the Englishman, Bentham, who gives them the news. However, at the end of the play, we learn there is a problem with the will and the family will not be getting any money. This news is compounded by Mary’s announcement that she is pregnant and that Bentham has left for England. The play ends with Johnny’s death (as his betrayal of the IRA catches up with him) and with Juno’s decision to leave Jack when he fails to be supportive of Mary.

Despite the gunplay and intrigues, O’Casey’s plays are less about plot than about character. As Lady Gregory told him, his “gift is characterisation” — and he undoubtedly created a great character in Juno (Murray 61). Strong, assertive, and capable of tremendous devotion to her family, Juno “tower[s] in significance and moral authority above any of the men” (Murray 70). She holds her family together as best she can, but, even though she is long-suffering, she does not take her family’s foolishness lying down. She is spirited and “heroic in a world of anti-heroes and fools [...] a rock of common sense” (Murray 66).

Juno can appear as a bit of a stock character, the Irish mother who nags her lazy husband while running herself ragged trying to keep things together. This is as much a stereotype as Paddy in the pub. Yet there is a certain amount of truth to this portrayal and, as Murray notes, “there can be no doubt but that the representation of Juno is a gendered one. O’Casey’s admiration for strong providing women, like

his own mother, Susan, lends a certain amount of conventionality to his portraiture” (67). Juno illustrates O’Casey’s “insistence that real heroism often emerges wherever and whenever it is least expected, frequently in women like Juno” (Kiberd 222). If Juno is a hero and a conventional Irish mother, she is not portrayed in a Yeatsian manner as a symbol of passive, ever-loyal femininity. Although it is possible to see her as a “universal mother” Juno is “above all a realistic character who finally becomes symbolic in the most general sense” (Kilroy 112). Juno is not a stand-in for Ireland, but a character who represents real Irish women.

The other female character of importance is Mary. She is similar in description and in action to Minnie from O’Casey’s *Gunman*. O’Casey’s stage notes for Mary assert that “*two forces are working in her mind — one, through the circumstances of her life, pulling her back; the other, through the influence of books she has read, pulling her forward*” (5). But Mary has also achieved a degree of independence; “ever since she left school she’s earned her livin” (61). Minnie is described as “*being forced to earn her living, and to take care of herself*” and she also takes an interest in Donal’s poetry and wishes to see her name “in typewritin” (88, 104). Again, like Minnie, “Mary is ambitious but held back by her environment” (Murray 71). Prompted by Juno, Jerry initially wants Mary back after Bentham’s exit; but Mary tells him about the pregnancy and he quickly leaves. He cannot handle marrying a woman who has “fallen as low as that” and so, Mary — through her own honesty — will be an unwed mother and, likely, a future Juno (66). Both Mary and Minnie are proactive characters, and while this trait ultimately proves to be naïve, it is because of their initiative and sincerity that both win the audience’s respect and approval.

Mary’s idealism seems to come to an end through the course of the play. She begins the play believing in principles, but “the play shows how useless ‘principle’ is in the face of chance, error, and what Juno calls ‘the stupidity o’ men’” (Murray 57). As Mary’s faith in principle fades, she and Juno become more closely aligned; Juno’s decision to help raise the child, as it is “far better” to have “two mothers” than a father (71), shows her resiliency and resolve in the face of family trouble. Within her practicality and her place as the “moral center of O’Casey’s play,” Juno becomes “a celebration of those wives who pick up the pieces in idealism’s wake” (Kiberd 223).

*The Plough and the Stars* was the last of O'Casey's plays to appear in the Abbey in the 1920s. Produced in 1926, *The Plough and the Stars* concerns Easter Week 1916 and how a cast of characters in a Dublin tenement experienced it. The Irish nationalists who rebelled in 1916 had become martyrs in the eyes of many Irishmen. O'Casey's characteristic depiction of war as wasteful and full of cowards, not heroes, outraged many audience members; once again, as he had done for Synge, Abbey producer W. B. Yeats had to step in and defend O'Casey's genius. By this period in time, Yeats had distanced himself from militant nationalism and was increasingly concerned with artistry, not propaganda. (He had also had mixed feelings about Easter 1916, as evidenced by his poem of the same title.) Yeats defended O'Casey on the grounds of artistry, observing that O'Casey was an extremely talented playwright and that his vision of Irish life would be played on the Irish stage whether nationalists liked it or not.

While *The Plough* is a complex and lengthy play, it is once again character-based. Nora Clitheroe is newly married. Her husband Jack is a commander in the Irish Citizens Army. Nora is afraid for her husband and unsuccessfully tries to keep him by her side. Other residents in the Clitheroes' tenement include Bessie Burgess (a drunken street vendor); Mrs. Gogan, a woman with a sick child, who tends to loot in order to feed her family; and several single men. Eventually, Jack is killed and Nora's premature baby dies — pushing Nora into an intense grief that quickly turns into madness. During the next days, while “half o' th' city must be burnin,’” most of the cast is holed up in Bessie's room, trying to avoid being noticed by the soldiers below (201). Nora, in madness, goes to the window looking for Jack. When Bessie tries to pull Nora away, Bessie is shot and killed.

In this play, Nora is an Irish woman unwilling to sacrifice her husband to the cause of national freedom. Through her, O'Casey rejects any notion that women encourage their men to fight to the death, as Nora cries “I can't help thinkin' every shot fired 'll be fired at Jack, an' every shot fired at Jack 'll be fired at me [...] An' there's no woman who gives a son or a husband to be killed — if they say it, they're lyin', lyin', against God, Nature, an' against themselves!” (184). This repudiation is a direct response to the popular image that men alone are “the chief sufferers” of war and that “women willingly send their men out to die”



(Kilroy 95). Nora does everything she can to keep Jack away from the violence, including intercepting a letter from the ICA, yet he leaves, seemingly bored with her antics; theirs is clearly a failed relationship and anticipates the failure and destruction war creates on physical lives. Nora, opposed to the destruction she sees around her, unwittingly winds up acting as the agent of Bessie's destruction. She is "at times aggravating and at times entirely sympathetic," Murray argues; "[h]er humanity resides in this contradiction, and makes her all the more impressive as a dramatic creation" (110).

In *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Casey portrays women overwhelmingly as homemakers and caretakers. This might be viewed as "somewhat sexist," but we see, as Murray suggests, that by differentiating "masculine and feminine values" O'Casey shows that "war and destruction of life are [...] destructive of the home, fertility, and new life" (108-9). The masculine war destroying the feminine is in direct contrast to the *Cathleen ni Houlihan* idea of the masculine war saving the feminine Ireland. O'Casey's women therefore do take on some symbolism, but they are firmly rooted in the actual experiences of Irish women.

The character Bessie is an entertaining example of a poor Dublin woman. Constantly bickering with Mrs. Gogan, Bessie — the tenement drunk — becomes one of O'Casey's central characters. She is the last person one would anticipate heroic action from, but, in O'Casey, "anti-heroes begin to earn their ironic heroism" and Bessie continuously "grows larger in stature," a process that culminates with her death (Kilroy 98). It is Bessie who becomes the ultimate caretaker, and thus the ultimate example of womanhood. And as Bessie dies, it is clear that "the main victims of the war rise to become the main heroes. This patten is repeated in all [of O'Casey's] plays as some of the women die for their neighbors and others live to rebuild a new life out of the ruins [...] this is the only kind of untainted heroism that O'Casey recognizes" (Kilroy 98).

In his dramatic work, Sean O'Casey attempted to show, among other things, an Irish woman that had not yet appeared on stage. His portrait of working-class Dublin women is closest to Synge's vision of peasant women in the Aran Islands; however, O'Casey brought the realities of Dublin to the Dublin stage. As O'Casey was once among the working-class who could not afford the Abbey's price of admission (Murray 16),

his own dramas forced the Abbey's Dublin audience to think of the Dubliners not among them. He rejected all Romanticism and stuck to what was distinctly modern and realistic about the situations of Dublin's poor — men and women alike. O'Casey's women are not offered any alternative to the lives they already have; he does not and cannot offer them plausible choices and stay true to their realities in the Dublin slums. What he can do, and does, is show women who “are the Ireland of tenacious mothers and wives, the women of the tenement — earthy, shrewd, laughing, suffering, brawling, independent women” (Kilroy 98).

### Conclusion

“In the literature of the emerging nation, women reverted to being a site of contest rather than an agent of her own desire. ‘No nationalism in the world has ever granted women and men the same privileged resources of the nation-state.’” (Kiberd 406-7)

In discerning how women were portrayed by writers of the Abbey Theatre, it becomes clear that a relationship exists between choice of aesthetic principle and the depiction of women. Realism creates a space for actual women and their experiences of daily life; Yeats' plays, based in mythology but serving nationalistic purposes, define women narrowly in terms of emblems for Ireland. Even while the events were unfolding, as Kiberd notes, feminists like Francis Sheehy-Skeffington “developed a comprehensive critique of nationalist hypermasculinity,” and detected a “misogynistic streak” within the national movement (362-3). When the literature is highly nationalistic and symbolic, women are devalued as metaphors to offset an active male.

Yeats “clearly argued for an Irish literature of conviction, against the art-for-art's sake approach” (Foster 125). Deliberately supporting a political cause, Yeats created dramas intended to bring Irish mythology back into the collective social memory and entice his audience with Ireland's past glories. Within his choice of subject matter would be certain types of mythological heroes and heroines, not a random sample but those figures that would be useful for his purposes of cultural nationalism. Therefore, the characters Yeats portrayed on stage served

not just dramatic purposes, but, more importantly, social and nationalistic ones. Yeats' representation of men is as symbolic as his portrayal of women — however, there is a marked distinction between the values associated with male and female symbols. Yeats' male symbols are active defenders and patriots; they are participants, courageously battling to save the female Ireland. Women function as metaphors for Ireland — a passive, inanimate idea which ultimately diminishes their humanity. In Yeats' symbolism, men grow larger while women are reduced. And so, it is not just the act of using the sexes symbolically, but the values associated with such gendered symbols, that result in a distortion and marginalization of women.

Lady Gregory intended to help revive and refurbish Irish folklore and thus restore "Ireland's dignity." Her female characters are developed, yet even as Lady Gregory concentrated on character development, her focus was always Irish culture — not the women within it. Due to their positions in the mythology, neither Dervorgilla nor Grania could be found in early twentieth century Ireland and so, while they may be a study of human character, they do not reflect the modern Irish woman.

Synge focused on the peasantry of the Aran Islands and endeavored to bring these people to the stage as authentically as he could. He Synge was very much a realist, but he was also a feminist. He recognized women and their concerns and consistently brought them to his stage. Synge was highly aware that nationalists did not always acknowledge the issues women faced — specifically, the problems of women in the Western Isles. His plays can be set against Yeats' and Gregory's in that they dismiss the idea of Cathleen (or any mythological woman) as Ireland and replace it with the realistic figure of a struggling peasant woman. Synge tells his audience that Nora and Pegeen are the real representatives of Irish womanhood — and that these women are struggling, not just due to English rule, but also because of their lack of opportunity.

O'Casey is very similar to Synge as he too wrote realistically and examined issues of lower-class women. O'Casey looked to the Dublin tenements for his characters and persistently questioned the validity of war and the propaganda which supported it. Women, while they are being saved in Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, are ravaged by war in O'Casey's plays. He looks to society and, in classic Realism, holds a mirror to

what he sees. O'Casey finds courageous women in the tenements and portrays them through one disaster after another.

The representation of women, in a nation emerging from colonial rule, often reflects an idyllic male image of womanhood generally conservative in nature. Yeats and Gregory fall within this category, while Synge and O'Casey are exceptions to the rule. This conservatism is not unique to the Irish experience with post-colonialism, but as Ireland was one of the first nations to gain independence, its literature sets the precedent. Yet when Ireland gained its independence, women in Ireland did not: "through the decades after the Civil War, woman's role was redefined in purely maternal and domestic terms [...] [r]emarkably few women spoke out against the repressive laws" (Kiberd 403). Indeed, when looking at post-colonial societies, it is imperative to look at women's rights and position within them; and one avenue is through literature, as "the curtailment of the rights of women [...] manifested itself in a return to a more traditional portraiture of masculinity and femininity in creative literature" (Kiberd 406).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> While there is debate among some about whether to consider Ireland as part of the colonized world (due to its physical proximity to England, representation in Parliament, and undoubtedly the white skin shared by the Irish and English alike), Said — like myself — does include the Irish among England's Others (*Culture* xi).

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