

WAKING THE DEAD:
FUNERARY PERFORMANCE, CLASSICAL ADAPTATION, AND GENDERED
EMBODIMENT ON THE EARLY ABBEY STAGE

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Funerary performances loom large in the earliest accounts of Ireland and Irishness that come down to us. In colonial Ireland, unregulated wakes and funerary traditions endured in spite of legal and ecclesiastical attempts to police death's meaning according to the interests of the dominant power structure. By the time Anglo-Irish playwrights re-discovered the mourning practices of the Irish people at the end of the nineteenth century, they had largely been forced into obscurity. William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, and Lady Augusta Gregory's plays frequently and selectively refer to two such vernacular traditions: the *caoineadh* and the Irish wake.

This study analyzes plays produced by the Abbey theatre during its formative years that intermingle observations of vernacular funerary performances in rural Ireland with ancient Greek precedents. I argue that this intertextual brand of theatrical lamentation frequently constructed gender according to certain bodies' imagined proximity to corporeality. Analyzing the onstage presence, or lack thereof, of the predominantly male "dead" body alongside animate, female characters' performance of mourning makes visible the ways in which these performance texts place women in a bind between asserting themselves as particularized, intending subjects in their own right and characters' whose actions are circumscribed by a predetermined social role that is bound up in the flesh.

The Gregory, Synge, and Yeats plays addressed in the following chapters each stage a funerary scenario where women actors are evaluated as appropriate producers and caretakers of human bodies, both living and dead, in relation to classically endorsed, gendered divisions of labor and embodiment. In contrast, idealized masculinity is achieved through the loss of corporeality. This configuration reiterates a platonic vision of mind-body dualism, which defines

human interiority as superior and distinct from human biology. When humans are signified dualistically and the concept of the eternal soul is understood through its binary opposition to the finite body, an asymmetrical relationship emerges that can result in the devaluing of characters aligned with corporeality and physical longevity in comparison to the tragic figure who achieves apotheosis and spiritual survival through premature death. The funerary mode remains a prominent of feature in representations of Irishness today. The Irish obsession with commemorating dead men is perhaps symptomatic of a pervasive cultural tendency to disassociate from human embodiment. This study engages with the status of the flesh when the theatrical trope of masculine death is so frequently reiterated alongside feminine performances of bereavement.

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Introduction: Irish Morbidity and the Ancient Greeks

On June 26, 2015, ABC aired an episode of *The Bachelorette* in which the contestant and her suitors travelled to Dublin during one leg of their exploitative journey to find true love. The American reality show's format dictates that, as the harem of eligible men shrinks, its remaining participants are whisked away on a whirlwind trip around the world. The contestants participate in stereotypical activities associated with each region they visit. The Dublin episode featured a "group date" to an Irish wake. The bachelorette, Kaitlyn Birstowe, pretended to be a corpse and each man took his turn in publically eulogizing her. They went around the coffin saying a few parting words about the motionless woman playing dead, sometimes addressing her directly, sometimes addressing their peers. Most took the opportunity to praise and entertain her—they were still attempting to win her affections and, in turn, the competition. A few men aired thinly veiled grievances. For instance, one suitor claimed that Birstowe had tragically died of boredom after having to spend the previous day with a particularly disliked, frontrunner named Nick. Another contestant, who had recently lost his mother, took the scenario quite seriously and expressed grief at having lost a woman he was beginning to imagine a future with.

Once everyone had said their piece, the bachelorette sat up in her coffin and two traditional musicians entered the scene. They led the group in singing "There's Whiskey in the Jar" while everyone had a drink. They continued on to the Guinness storehouse where one lucky suitor was selected to accompany the resurrected bachelorette to a cathedral. Finally, the two were serenaded by, none other than, the Cranberries. What is interesting about the Dublin episode's crass sampling of Irish stereotypes is that it actually references a very real cultural gravitation towards wakes, funerals, and performances of bereavement that has received increasing critical attention in recent years. The funerary situation presented on *The Bachelorette*

is a gendered inversion of several dramatic precedents that permeated assertions of cultural identity on Irish stages a little more than a century ago. Not only does it invert the sacred trope of feminine bereavement enacted as a reaction to masculine death, it also refers to the comedic convention of a corpse (again, usually male) waking up to disrupt the obsequies enacted by women on its behalf.

This study primarily analyzes plays produced by the Abbey theatre during its formative years that draw upon ancient Greek mythology and drama to emphasize female characters as caretakers of human bodies, both living and dead, in relation to classically endorsed divisions of labor and embodiment. John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and Lady Augusta Gregory's *The Gaol Gate* (1906) emphasize female characters as threshold entities charged with ushering their male counterparts into and out of the physical world. William Butler Yeats' *The Countess Cathleen* (1899) is presented as an anomalistic antecedent to the plays that would come after it. Yeats' play was widely rejected for its insensitive treatment of the famine and its bestial portrayal of the Irish poor. I argue that it also transgressed the sacred binary of feminine bereavement and masculine death by designating a woman as its sacrificial victim.

The prominence of funerary representation in Irish culture has garnered a resurgence of critical attention in the last two decades. Nina Witoszek, Pat Sheeran, Patricia Lysaght, and Angela Bourke are just a few of the scholars examining the origins, significance, and manifestations of Irish peoples' strong identification with death and mourning. Similarly, Marianne McDonald, Fiona Macintosh, and J. Michael Walton have published extensively on Irish playwrights' persistent, intertextual appropriation of ancient Greek, mythological drama. As exhibited by Bernadette Sweeney's *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* (2008), the devalued status of the human body has also been a part of critical debates surrounding Irish theatre and

identity of late. This dissertation brings these fields of inquiry into conversation by asking how a persistent identification with the ancient Greeks operates in tandem with a frequent gravitation towards funerary modes of self-representation. It argues that a highly gendered, classically influenced model of death and bereavement negatively affected notions of corporeality during a critical period in Ireland's history, when cultural nationalism progressed towards the 1916 Rebellion and the Irish War For Independence.

According to editors Mary Ann Lyons and James Kelly, *Death and Dying in Ireland, Britain, and Europe: Historical Perspectives* (2013) was born of an increasing acknowledgement that death and dying have traditionally received little attention as experiential phenomena in their own right in Ireland's historical narrative up until very recently.¹ Lyons and Kelly posit that death's peripheral status may have ironically been linked to its ubiquity in terms of human experience:

its very omnipresence paradoxically facilitated its elision from the historical narrative other than as a collateral consequence of the struggle for survival in times of famine, disease and war, when preoccupation was essentially with numbers, rather than the experience, its register and impact . . . It was integral to the relationship of man and nature—one of the primary vectors of history.²

Death has primarily factored into Irish history as statistical evidence of political unrest, agricultural crisis, and disease. It also asserts itself in conjunction with the archaeological study of funerary monuments. Cairns, tombs, and ancestral gravesites dating back to prehistoric Ireland have been instrumental in creating a plausible, sequential timeline for oral societies over

¹ James Kelly and Mary Lyons locate the critical “rediscovery of death” in the 1960s and 70s when a critical mass of scholars redirected their attention towards death. At the center of this resurgence was Phillipe Aries, whose *Western Attitudes Towards Death* (1973) and *L'Homme Devant la Mort* (1977), published in English as *At the Hour of Our Death* (1981). Although widely disputed on the grounds that both texts prompted a large body of critical response. James Kelly and Mary Anne Lyons, *Death and Dying in Ireland, Britain, and Europe: Historical Perspectives* (Sallins: Irish University Press, 2013), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

thousands of years. The preoccupation with creating graves and memorials continues from the early medieval era all the way into the Victorian period, but as Kelly and Lyons point out, this was “less about death itself and more about memorialization of the dead. In other words, more attention was paid to the design and style of mausolea, memorials, and other graveyard furniture than to the manner in which people died, or to the meaning and impact of death for and upon those who were bereaved.”³

After the 1970s, a shift occurred and projects like “Mapping Death” operating out of University College Dublin and the University of Limerick based “Death and Funerary Practices, 1829-1901” were launched in the attempt to bring the fields of archaeology, architecture, art history, and history together to construct a multifaceted picture of how death might have been experienced in Ireland in comparison to England and other parts of Europe throughout time. My work also brings theatre history into that conversation by asking how the process of dying, postmortem rituals, and grief were typically embodied and received via mimetic performance between 1899 and 1907. My work puts theories about how the living’s interactions with the dead operated to assert community identity and shared ideologies about physical existence through ritualized mourning.

The manner in which a people value human embodiment asserts itself in the rituals developed to demarcate and interpret its loss. Any staging of a funerary scenario demands distinct spatial, emotional, and ideological relationships between living and dead bodies in performance. In some plays actors playing corpses reanimate. In others, bodies exit the stage living and return drowned, silent, and still. Sometimes the dead fail to materialize at all. After being first produced in 1903 and 1906, the two inaugural plays by Synge and Gregory addressed here were frequently remounted throughout the 1930s, once the young company took up

³ Ibid., 2.

permanent residence in two repurposed buildings on Abbey Street just North of the River Liffey in 1904. Interestingly, one of these new Abbey buildings had previously functioned as the Dublin City Morgue, a fact that did not escape the gleeful attention of the press: “the Irish National Theatre was to be established in a Morgue, and judging by the plays they produced, it was the right place to start in.”⁴ This architectural tidbit is especially provocative in light of the fact that the plays addressed in this study foreground female characters whose concentrated theatrical action follows an offstage death. Their performance trajectories revolve around the attempted retrieval and preparation of a male body for burial. The Irish Antigone characters in *Riders to the Sea* and *The Gaol Gate* helped to secure the Abbey’s reputation as a national theatre, form a significant and lasting component of its repertoire, and launched the professional careers of a handful of prominent actresses.

One would think that characters’ designation as survivors in the physical world automatically signals greater access to fulfillment and self-actualization in comparison to the dead bodies in their proximity. When considered in conjunction with negative attitudes towards the corporeal aspects of human existence, the position of embodied survivor becomes more complicated. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz observes that a “profound somatophobia” permeates the cultural output of the ancient Greeks. Grosz defines somatophobia as a fear or derision of the physical body and traces it back to Plato’s claim in the *Cratylus* that, “the word body (*soma*) was introduced by Orphic priests who believed that man was a spiritual or noncorporeal being trapped in the body as a dungeon

⁴ Quoted in Douglas Byrne, *The Story of Ireland’s National Theatre: The Abbey Theatre Dublin* (Dublin: The Talbot Press Limited, 1929), 43.

(*sema*).”⁵ The appetitive, organic body was imagined as an imprisoning thing to be controlled lest it damage or bring about destruction of the essential, spiritual self. This concept of somatophobia is crucial to my analysis of classically influenced, sacrificial dramas. The brand of lamentation endorsed by Abbey audiences during the theatre’s formative years intermingled outsider observations of the agrarian population with classical performance texts to assert the Irish people’s indomitable spirituality after being negatively misrepresented as an essentially carnal race under colonial rule.

British colonialism was ideologically predicated upon the derision of corporeality. Colonial subjects were identified based upon the notion that they were inherently material, bestial creatures. One only has to look at *PUNCH* magazine’s cartoon archive to observe the ape-like caricatures that were commonly circulated by English presses to negatively define the Irish as an animalistic race throughout the nineteenth century.⁶ In contrast, their conquerors viewed themselves as essentially rational, spiritually constituted beings. The status of the human body directly relates to configurations of gender in that femininity has been historically constructed in relation to essential corporeality in juxtaposition to ethereally, intellectually constituted masculinity. The Irish were feminized in relation to the ideologically masculine colonizer. In the attempt to assert the legitimacy of Irish identity and culture, Anglo-Irish dramatists actually reproduced the same top-down, oppositional binaries: mind-body, spirituality-biology, and masculinity-femininity that were enforced under English rule. As asserted by Susan Cannon Harris in *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (2002), the disembodied spirituality achieved in

⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 5.

⁶ *PUNCH* Magazine Cartoon Archive, Irish Cartoons, Accessed, February 13, 2016. <http://punch.photoshelter.com/gallery/Ireland-Cartoons/G0000tcWkXyP4OHo>.

masculine death and signified by feminine lamentation performances became the accepted mechanism through which idealized Irish nationality would be achieved.⁷

The types of bodies allowed to oversee death at a given historical moment—to articulate the personal and communal reaction to the loss of embodiment—are highly telling in terms of discourses of gender. Across cultures, unregulated wakes and funerary traditions endure in spite of political and ecclesiastical attempts to police death's meaning according to the interests of the dominant power structure. The plays examined in the following chapters selectively refer to two such vernacular traditions: the *caoineadh* (ki:nʲə), and the Irish wake. Patricia Lsyaght and Angela Bourke's work on dying, death, and post-mortem rituals in Ireland have been crucial for defining the terms of this dissertation. According to Bourke, the term *caoineadh* refers to both an Irish form of oral, funerary poetry composed and publically sung by women, but also to a series of anti-social actions that mark a period of disorder caused by death within a community.⁸ English travel writers from the Elizabethan period, not understanding Irish, observed the "barbarous outcries" and "hideous howlings" issued from apparently crazed peasant women to punctuate death in rural Ireland.⁹ Divorcing what they witnessed from context or meaning, these writers took the fact that the women responsible for such displays often appeared barefoot and disheveled to be further proof of the indigenous population's lack of cultural legitimacy. Thus, the English derivative, "keening," was born to refer to "a high-pitched, inarticulate moaning."¹⁰ Beyond openly hostile accounts, seventeenth century texts that survive oral *caoineadh*

⁷ Susan Canon Harris, "*Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) 10-11.

⁸ Angela Bourke, "The Irish Traditional Lament and the Grieving Process," *Women's Studies Int. Forum* 11, no. 4 (1998): 289.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁰ Despite its derisive roots, this dissertation uses *caoineadh* and "keening" interchangeably from here on out to reflect contemporary usage. *Ibid.*, 287.

performances, along with less aggressive reports of Irish funerals made into the twentieth century, speak to a highly organized tradition bent on community catharsis. While the performer, “Act[ed] out in her appearance and behavior the disorder brought about by death” she also utilized a recognizable poetic form to guide those effected through the necessary stages of grief.¹¹

Today, appropriate public reactions to the death of a loved one are primarily confined to sadness and praise. As Patricia Lysaght observes in her historical contextualization of the Irish lament, death is portrayed “as an outrage” by glorifying “earthly life.”¹² The traditional caoineadh allotted for expressions of anger at the person or phenomena that brought about the death while also providing space for thinly veiled criticism towards the dead themselves. Criticism of the deceased was often couched in the form of a compliment. For instance, “He did not beat me much.”¹³ The caoineadh provides a formal template for the bereft to complain to the dead about their shortcomings in life and for the negative effects their departure has brought upon the living. There are mythologizing moments of high praise that echo and sometimes intersect with tragic, heroic commemoration, but the Irish lament tradition also allows for interjections of the mundane that prevent the dead’s full-fledged transformation into faultless, abstract objects of worship. The traditional caioneadh mourns the loss of particularized embodiment above all. It makes no mention of salvation or damnation in the Christian afterlife. Therefore, it exists as a syncretic counterpoint to official ecclesiastical inhumation ceremonies during Ireland’s long period of religious conversion and anglicization.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Patricia Lysaght, “Caoineadh os Cionn Corp: The Lament for the Dead in Ireland.” *Folklore* 108 (1997): 68.

¹³ Bourke, “The Irish Traditional Lament,” 289.

Just as they penned their scandalized reactions to graveside lamentation practices, English travelers similarly recorded the more raucous aspects of the Irish wake. Beyond the emotive displays of grief, at some point an atmosphere of misrule pervaded the wake and an array of seemingly irreverent activities ranging from singing, dancing, fighting, playing cards, smoking, and drinking occurred. One early seventeenth century writer's main point of objection centers around the fact that these diversions occurred in the material presence of "such an object of mortality; to which no one [that I saw] showed the least regard."¹⁴ This observation of irreverence to the body as a funerary object is integral to this outsider account. It fails to recognize that during the traditional Irish wake, the corpse is not yet regarded as fully dead.

In *Dying Acts: Death in Ancient Greek and Modern Irish Drama* (1994), Fiona Macintosh articulates death as a process of estrangement from the living rather than an absence of vital signs.¹⁵ This concept of death as a process that includes the liminal period of mourning rather than a single biological moment is crucial to this study. In ancient Greece, the process began when it became clear that death was certain and imminent. It continued until after the thirtieth day rites were performed at the tomb of the deceased. Visible displays of grief were discouraged until after the moment when somatic termination was confirmed. The body was immediately washed, anointed with oil, dressed, and laid out by kinswomen in preparation for the *prothesis* (mourning ritual). The prothesis usually lasted two days during which female mourners tore their hair, scratched themselves, and beat their breasts while loudly chanting formulaic laments.¹⁶ Macintosh observes that such actions bear a striking resemblance to the

¹⁴ Quoted in Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead: A Study of Irish Funerary Traditions*, (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 27.

¹⁵ Fiona Macintosh, *Dying Acts: Death in Ancient Greek and Modern Irish Drama*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994), 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

wake and bereavement practices enacted in Ireland. It is clear that in both ancient Greece and medieval/early modern Ireland, women commonly engaged in a series of disruptive gestures combined with chanting in order to demarcate the liminal period following death. During this time the soul is understood to be in flux between the living and the dead. The living continued to interact and identify with the body as a person on some level until burial.¹⁷

In Ireland, exuberant displays of grief also operated in tandem with an atmosphere of misrule or carnival. Narelle McCoy has written on the close links between death and sexuality exhibited in the Irish merry wake ritual. Mourning was commonly accompanied by large communal consumption of alcohol, and wake amusements of an explicitly sexual nature were enjoyed in the presence of the corpse. McCoy argues that these usually antisocial displays of sexuality also reiterate the marginal status of the *mná chaointe*, or keening woman. The keening woman's exhibition of "divine madness" throughout the mourning period marked her as the liminal conduit between the living and the dead just as the carnival aspects of the wake helped to signify the disruption of everyday life caused by death.¹⁸ The display of carnality was a means through which the living could reaffirm their continued bodily existence and disassociate from the lost member of their community. These riotous sendoffs were constructed to serve the psychological needs of the bereaved. Furthermore, despite the shocked allegations of barbarism made in outsider accounts, merry wakes were not enacted to scorn the dead. Rather, they were thought to benefit the deceased during a difficult rite of passage. Rooted in pagan belief

¹⁷ There are points of contention as to the meaning of this lengthy process, during which many regular activities ceased for an entire month after death in ancient Greece. Macintosh refers to the debate over whether such a drawn out process speaks to a wish to thoroughly loosen the connection between the living and the dead. Others argue that this period of sustained identification between the dead and their mourners asserts proximity, even interconnectivity between two spheres. Ibid., 20-21.

¹⁸ Narelle McCoy, "The Quick and the Dead: Sexuality and the Irish Merry Wake," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 26, no. 4, (2012): 615.

systems intended to appease the dead with food, drink, and entertainment so that they would be disinclined to linger and interfere with the living, Ireland's vernacular-mourning rituals existed sometimes in syncretic conjunction with and sometimes as a counterpoint to official church doctrine.¹⁹

In the fifth century AD, the Roman missionary Saint Patrick described the polytheistic, tribal society he encountered as the last people on earth, whose language remained unwritten. He predicted that when they were finally converted, the world would end.²⁰ Although medieval church documents indicate an opposition to women's caoineadh performances, they often simultaneously offer a contradictory message of acquiescence. For instance, an Irish penitential from the ninth century discourages but allots for public lamentation practices. The document prescribes a penance of up to fifty nights for publically singing over the body of a layperson whereas it assigns a lesser punishment for lamenting individuals of higher status in this way. This included kings but also the clergy. If a parishioner were to confess that they had publically utilized this traditional mode over the body of a "bishop" or "confessor" they were assigned a far less severe penance spanning fifteen nights in order to get back into a state of grace.²¹

After Henry II declared himself king of Ireland in the twelfth century, Anglo-Norman accounts increasingly detail funerary performances alongside the supposedly degenerate sexual practices of Ireland's indigenous population as evidence that such people needed conquering. Geraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) mentions barbarous mourning customs in his *Topographia Hibernica* (c. 1188) and describes multiple accounts of promiscuity and bestiality,

¹⁹ Patricia Lysaght, "Caoineadh os Cionn Corp: The Lament for the Dead in Ireland." *Folklore* 108 (1997): 66.

²⁰ Linda Seidel, "Celtic Revival and Women's Work," in *Imagining an Irish Past: The Celtic Revival 1840-1940*, ed. T.J. Edelstein et al (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1991), 28.

²¹ Lysaght, "Caoineadh os Cionn Corp," 66.

especially among the insatiable woman-folk. It should be noted that Cambrensis' survey was penned specifically for the "invincible King" of England, who also happened to be his uncle. Cambrensis also specifies that despite that fact that Saint Patrick had baptized the Irish, they remained aloof to the basic tenets of Christianity.²² This precedent of cultural debasement was maintained throughout the Elizabethan period of colonization.

The post-Reformation Catholic Church also tightened the reins on its Irish flock from the seventeenth century onward. Its earlier, more moderate articulations of opposition towards preexisting funerary traditions turned vehement. Church documents from the eighteenth century take particular issue with parishioners paying a professional lamenter to preside over their dead. One such example comes from the diocese of Leighlin in 1788. It condemns the "heathenish customs of loud cries and howlings at wakes and burials [that] are practiced amongst us" on the grounds that it goes against the primary principle of spiritual salvation that the Church surrounds.²³ To display excessive grief in this manner was to treat the dead "as if they were not to rise again."²⁴ The treatise ordains that priests were to impose alms, penitent prayer, or fasting on those who utilized the services of a professional keening woman or deliver unpaid funerary performances. It exacts a harsher punishment for the paid lamenters themselves:

But as to such men and women as will or do make it their trade to cry or rhyme at burials, we decree and declare that for the first crime of this kind they shall not be absolved by any but the Ordinary or his representatives and in the case of a relapse, the aforesaid criers or rhymers are to be excluded from the Mass and the Sacraments, and in the case of perseverance in this detestable practice, they are to be excommunicated and denounced.²⁵

²² Gerald of Wales was the illegitimate grandson of Henry II. His family also played a major role in the Norman annexation of Ireland. Seidel, "Celtic Revival and Women's Work," 29.

²³ Quoted in Lysaght, "Caoineadh os Cionn Corp," 67.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

The enduring prominence of quotidian mourning rituals is evidenced by the frequency with which Irish bishops released instructions for dealing with them between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Funerary practices preceding Saint Patrick's arrival into Ireland that were hitherto allowed to unofficially coexist with an Irish brand of Catholicism, were actively if not violently suppressed by the clergy following the Reformation. They were eventually also policed from within the effected Irish population itself. The Great Famine also aided in the process of eradication in that it decimated the Irish population throughout the middle of the nineteenth century. The period of mass starvation, disease, and emigration brought on by the potato blight was particularly destructive to Gaelic speaking areas in the west of Ireland where the population was less Anglicized and whose socio-religious practices remained more syncretic than in other parts of Ireland. Keeping this brief history in mind, Gregory, Synge, and Yeats were not wrong in the assertion that Irish funerary culture had long existed as a subversive arena where an alternate, indigenous history and identity could still be asserted.

In *Talking to the Dead: A Study of Irish Funerary Traditions* (1998), Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran posit that the prominence of a death-centered mode of self-representation in Ireland might lie in the longstanding poetic configuration of the land as a woman married to the rightful chief. As Anglo-Norman involvement in Ireland escalated, especially after Henry VIII proclaimed himself king and subsequent monarchs introduced the plantation system, the traditional sovereignty relationship was disrupted; the chiefs were displaced and their people dispossessed of the land. This incited an extended period of mourning:

Given that the chief codifiers and custodians of funerary discourse were the learned classes, i.e. poets and druids, then the ancient textual representation of the chief as married to the land and the poet as wedded to the chief acquires special significance. The loss of the land and the displacement of the chief was very early encoded in the metaphor of widowhood and conveyed through elaborate tropes of lamentation. It may well be that the anthropomorphization of the country as a woman in bardic poetry lies at the basis of

the funerary tradition. Thus bardic narratives created a prototypal structure for later representations of affliction and despoliation.²⁶

Witoszek and Sheeran also note that post-colonial Ireland has become a favored site for postmodernist deconstruction. With so much energy devoted to demonstrating Ireland as a figment of colonial imagination, less attention has been devoted to uncovering lines of continuity between vernacular performances of identity and memory practiced amongst the emerging nation's subaltern populations alongside the cultural output of its elite classes. Witoszek and Sheeran observe that one such line of continuity lies in Ireland's favored mode of funerary self-representation. My work builds upon the notion that funerary culture is a key paradigm through which Irish people represent and know themselves, aesthetically and socially, but it also probes into the consequences for living bodies when identity is asserted in relation to the dead.

Onstage narratives of heroic martyrdom and spiritual apotheosis can endorse a rhetoric of blood sacrifice by transforming death into its opposite and vice versa. This project asks how the presence or absence of a theatrically dead body affects the oral narratives constructed by survivors in its mimetic or diegetic proximity. It casts a critical eye towards mimetic actions that deride the material and corporeal aspects of human existence as a strategy for dealing with the condition of mortality. When socially elite writers translated disenfranchised Irish people's rituals and lore for audiences in Dublin, London, and eventually America, they intermingled them with classical sources. It is important that we ask what sorts of futures, if any, these frequent, intertextual funerary performances gestured towards for classed, gendered bodies, both living and dead.

The predominantly masculine, sacrificial hero factors prominently in medieval liturgical drama as well as in the apotheosis tradition in Greek tragedy. As noted in *Amid Our Troubles*:

²⁶ Witoszek and Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead*, 38.

Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy (2002), Irish writers have long utilized the multiple layers of meaning offered by classical sources to assert an oppressed identity. Marianne McDonald elaborates on the progression of Irish writers' subversive use of the Athenian canon. The myths took on an incendiary quality— a method for a dispossessed people to express their feelings in regards to the occupiers as well as their own accountability through the multiple layers of meaning provided by an ancient source. McDonald makes a strong case for the emancipating potential provided by contemporary treatment of ancient sources in colonial Ireland. However, her account exhibits some typical blind spots in relation to Ireland's celebrated legacy of classical appropriation.

The works handed down to us by the ancient Athenian tragedians emerged from a fiercely patriarchal society. The consolidation of the Athenian empire, with its emphasis on biological citizen-ship, increasingly removed women from the public sphere. The state usurped their previous social function as public mourners and the foreign policies of the Delian League set the precedent for imperial Rome. The Greek corpus of dramatized myth originally came out of a patriarchal imagining where the nexus of symbols associated with women cluster around sexuality, the body, evil, chaos and death. Thus, comparisons of similarity drawn between Ireland's heroic past and the ancient Mediterranean world are not without potential problems. I argue that we must continue to interrogate the implications for gendered bodies when Irish history, experience, and identity are grafted onto Greek mythological drama.

It is also important to note here, that while the brackets of this study are primarily confined to tragedies written and produced by what would become the Abbey's first directorate after the Irish National Theatre Society was restructured as a limited liability company in 1905, Yeats, Gregory, and Synge were not alone in idealizing women as mourners who would serve

the nation by producing and mourning dead men. Writers and activists working with what Susan Cannon Harris identifies as an “Irish-Ireland” agenda as opposed to an “Anglo-Ireland” one similarly held up feminine bereavement and masculine martyrdom as the romantic exemplary for gendered behavior.²⁷ In *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, Harris points out that the oft contested peasant plays put forth by the Ascendancy classes converged with the work of Irish Catholic writers like Pádraig Pearse in the sense that both presented highly gendered performances of sacrifice and bereavement as the means through which the nation would achieve some form of collective salvation. For instance, at the end of Pearse’s Irish language melodrama, *The Singer*, an outnumbered group of young men are poised to march towards certain death.²⁸ Macdara, the Christ-like leader of the rebellion, prepares to leave his mother and the woman he loves for the final time. An older man sums up the wretched, if irreproachable state Macdara’s mother and sweetheart must maintain upon his departure and imminent demise: “You poor women suffer so much pain so much sorrow and yet you do not die until long after your strong young sons and lovers have died.”²⁹ The women’s survival is not positioned as a triumph, but as a cross to bear. They are left behind to suffer in the material sphere where they broker Macdara’s transition from embodied mortal to spiritual icon.

The period when Anglo-Irish playwrights “re-discovered” the mourning practices of the Celtic people at the dawn of the twentieth century came after they had been successfully forced into obscurity. In the attempt to bring these ancient practices back into the consciousness of Irish audiences and create lines of continuity between the present and the past, Lady Gregory, Synge,

²⁷ Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, 30-33.

²⁸ Pearse also published a short story called “An beana chainte,” which translates to the “keening woman.” “The mother,” and “A woman of the mountain keens her son” are among his poems.

²⁹ Pádraig Pearse, “The Singer,” CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts, University College Cork, accessed July 21, 2015, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E950004001/index.html>.

and Yeats inevitably altered the meaning and social utility of the rituals they read about or observed. In appropriating caíoneadh and wake performances, the Abbey dramatists may have actually put the final nail in such practice's proverbial coffin. I argue that by grafting these acts onto classical precedents, they were further divorced them from their contextual meaning and social usage, especially in regards to materiality. As argued by Lsyaght, the traditional caíoneadh mourns above all the loss of particularized embodiment. The wake operates in tandem to affirm the living's continued corporeality. The following chapters illustrate how a specific brand of idealized bereavement may have in fact placed originally body-loving practices in the service of anti-corporeal ideology.

Chapter one, "Setting the Stage: The Olympians and Danu's Children" provides a comparative overview of Greek and Celtic etiological myths to illustrate how each culture's gendered personification of the natural world expresses a distinct orientation towards human embodiment and materiality. It also provides a historical narrative of how the polytheistic pantheon fared and shifted during Ireland's long period of religious conversion and colonization. Women experienced a loss of status under Athenian "democracy" based upon what was perceived to be an all-consuming physicality. Although women were similarly appraised as being less valuable than men in early Gaelic society, I argue that the remnants of indigenous religion, lore, rites of passage, and social organization reflect a lesser level of anti-corporeality and interconnected misogyny even in their fragmented, truncated, translated, and appropriated states. Chapter one also introduces the figure of the Celtic sovereignty goddess as an important prototype for the feminine embodiment of Ireland character introduced in chapter two in relation to *The Countess Cathleen* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.

Chapters two through four approach funerary performances scripted by Lady Gregory, Synge, and Yeats in the early stages of their dramatic endeavors as entry points for uncovering how embodied subjectivity was being defined in the instance of its loss. Each play is subject to: 1) an intertextual analysis of Greek and Celtic sources, secular rituals, and religious sacraments utilized to mark the passage of life, 2) an evaluation of reception trends that pays close attention to female characters' performance of bereavement, and 3) a comparative analysis of the Irish Literary Theatre and the Abbey's repetitive casting procedures during this period. This final component utilizes Marvin Carlson's concept of the ghosted body in *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2001) in that certain actresses were repeatedly cast across productions as maternal or romantic mourners for dead men.

Moving chronologically, chapter two examines Yeats' much contested play, *The Countess Cathleen*, in conjunction with his and Gregory's wildly successful *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902). Maud Gonne's refusal of the title part in *The Countess Cathleen* and her appearance in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* aligns with these plays' original audience receptions. The first play problematically offers up an aristocratic Anglo-Irish heroine whose Christ-like sacrifice is shown to save a regressively carnal peasantry from selling their souls to satanic demons so that they might obtain food during a period of famine. While *The Countess Cathleen* foregrounded the inherent carnality of Ireland's lower classes, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* demonstrated a poor, young Irish man's capacity to triumph over concerns of the flesh. In her appearance as Cathleen ni Houlihan, Maud Gonne functioned as the personification of colonized Ireland who demands that young men forego bodily existence so that she might be restored to youth and beauty. *The Countess Cathleen* derives from Euripides' *Alcestis* (438 BCE) to invert the trope of transforming masculine death into a regenerative, sacrificial phenomenon through a feminine

performance of bereavement. In both Yeats' play and his Greek source text, women rather than men avoid the trap of forfeiting one's soul by dying. The strong audience reaction to *The Countess Cathleen* speaks to a cultural investment in maintaining certain oppositional binaries, all of which derive from debasing the corporeal in favor of the spiritual.

The concept of interspecies transformation permeates the play in violation of anticolonial efforts to reconstruct Irish identity as essentially spiritual and therefore masculine. Yeats' play renders visible strategies of animalistic debasement first honed and tested by the English in Ireland. It also problematically re-inscribes them. The play's strong audience reaction speaks to a colonized people's wish to disassociate from embodiment to differentiate themselves from other species, thereby asserting their humanity. The fact that *The Countess Cathleen* was rejected by certain critics and audience members on the grounds that it misrepresented Ireland's Catholic peasants as irreligious, promiscuous, violent iconoclasts during a period of famine has been justifiably well documented by Christopher Murray, Paul Murphy, and Susan Canon Harris. The fact that the play designates men rather than women as survivors in the material sphere is less acknowledged as an inciter of audience animosity. I argue that *The Countess Cathleen*'s largest representational transgressions were bound up in its thematic argument that class trumps gender.

Chapter three, "Womb, Lomb, Tomb: Women's Work in *Riders to the Sea*," approaches women's wake and lamentation performances in conjunction with other forms of labor and production. It illustrates how the utilization of textile props and costume pieces reinforce women's continued association with materiality as producers of human bodies, food, clothing, and corpses. The utilization of spinning wheels, and foodstuffs help to mark the women in this play as caretakers of human bodies both living and dead. Synge's play intermingled local lore, observations of daily life, and frequent funerals gathered during his time on the Aran Islands

with classical tragedy to create a landscape permeated by a sense of mythic determinism, where young men would inevitably die in fishing and boating accidents. In it, an old woman, Maurya, and her daughters, Cathleen and Nora, confirm that the last two men in their family have been killed by a semi-personified version of the sea. Michael is already missing when the play commences. Bartley is preparing to leave by boat to sell some ponies on the mainland. After Bartley exits, his sisters examine some clothing pulled off of a corpse found floating far away and sent to them by a priest. Based on the specificity of the garments they made for Michael, they are able to identify the remote, otherwise unrecognizable body as their brother's. The final tragic revelation occurs when a Bartley's corpse is brought back in on a board after being knocked into the sea by his own horses reminiscent of Euripides' *Hippolytus* (428 BCE).

Although now accepted as one of the more important plays in the Irish canon, the initial response to *Riders to the Sea* was mixed. Certain reviewers objected to the onstage revelation of Bartley's corpse at the end of the play as a gimmick. Some of the initial hostility towards *Riders to the Sea* also had to do with the fact that certain audience members were already antagonistic to Synge for his comedic rendering of an Irish wake in *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903). I take the controversial response to *In the Shadow of the Glen* into account in order to better understand *Riders to the Sea*'s initial reception. *In the Shadow of the Glen* features a promiscuous, pragmatic, and dissatisfied young wife, Nora, who fails to produce a facsimile of grief for her dead spouse, Dan Bourke. The elderly Dan Bourke refuses to stay dead, and the ruptured wake gives way to a dysfunctional, patriarchal family unit's destruction. Dan Bourke evicts Nora, but in the play's final moments she reconfigures her exit as a willful act. In doing so, she is shown to forego physical comforts and necessities in order to maintain her freedom. A young, attractive woman removes herself from the audience's material observation whereas an elderly male

remains physically present. This utterly violates the idealized precedent of masculine immateriality we see fulfilled in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *The Gaol Gate*, and *Riders to the Sea*.

Chapter four examines Lady Gregory's *The Gaol Gate*. Gregory's tragedy stages a competitive mourning scenario between two women as they make a series of discoveries about their imprisoned family member. Upon arrival at the prison, they are informed that the son and husband they hoped to see has been executed and buried in a mass grave. The play references both the funerary premise of *Antigone* and the *Visitatio Sepulchri* scenario prominently featured in medieval liturgical drama. It also evokes the Celtic sovereignty goddess figure, typified in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Mary Cahel's maternal performance of grief adheres to the sacrificial model exemplified in the trajectories of Dionysus and Christ to reconfigure a young man's death as a triumphant opportunity for spiritual apotheosis. Mary Cushin's lament for her husband remains more in line with a syncretic caoineadh performance that commemorates a young man's particularized, embodied identity and marks its destruction as an outrage. Although the conflict initially appears to be between the women and a representative of the state, tension ultimately resides between two mourners who wish to control the meaning of a young man's death in divergent ways. Despite Mary Cushin's brief intervention, Mary Cahel asserts her representational power over her daughter-in-law to create a generalized fantasy object in the space provided by her son's absent corpse. Cahel's strategy plunges both women into a state of perpetual identification with an idealized version of a dead man.

The national body and the human body, so often conflated in the Irish tradition, are frequently represented "*in extremis*," as constantly dying a slow death, but not yet gone.³⁰ The wake maintains an identification between the bereft and the dead, placing them in a shared

³⁰ Witozek and Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead*, 1.

liminal space: the dead are not yet gone, the living have not yet moved on, and in their continued state of identification, the past continues to influence, if not determine the present. For the wake to end, the living must detach themselves from the dead, thus allowing them to “die a second time.”³¹ The dramatic scenarios detailed in the following chapters present cases where mourners exit from this liminal space with varying degrees of success. Some are configured as interminably in dialogue with the dead. More specifically, women’s hopes, memories, and identities often remain dedicated to dead men. The persistent identification with loss, its repetitive performance, and the prominence of funerary self-representation may signal a cultural inability to exit from this interstitial landscape. I argue that the prominence of funerary performances appropriated according to classical precedents signals a more widespread cultural rejection of corporeal futurity. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the gaze of Irish theatre has remained retrospective, looking towards what has been lost rather than what remains. In seeking out ghosts and arresting our gaze towards the spectral, we may have lost sight of what remains materially present.

Perhaps in so diligently searching out what has gone missing and exposing disembodied phantoms, living bodies have become spectral within the collective Irish consciousness. The Irish wake, as it was appropriated on the Abbey stage in the early twentieth century may function as a magic trick where an embodied identity is made to vanish so that it might be replaced by a stock, heroic, spiritualist ideal of humanity. Certain culturally provided performance strategies reconfigure the human form as an abstract symbol that only derives meaning in the aftermath of its own destruction, when it can no longer speak for itself. In this process silent, non-expressive, even absent bodies stand to become more present and real than the actual living, moving, and

³¹ Ibid., 9.

speaking people performing alongside them. This study redirects critical attention back to the physical body within an appropriated funerary tradition that might otherwise codify its erasure.

Chapter 1: Setting the Stage: The Olympians and Danu's Children

Tá Dia láidir is máthair mhaith aige.

God is strong, he has a good mother.

-Anonymous Irish Proverb

The early Abbey dramatists looked towards ancient Greek drama as a vehicle for supplanting theatrical representations that equated Irish identity with buffoonery. Instead they populated their stage with Irish heroes and heroines drawn along classical, often tragic lines. Writing first for the Irish Literary Theatre, the Fay brothers' Irish National Dramatic Company, The Irish National Theatre Society, and eventually the Abbey, Lady Augusta Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and John Millington Synge intermingled ancient Celtic and Mediterranean cosmogonies and heroic sagas as a means of rehabilitating the stage Irishman, but also to reclaim a polytheistic, Gaelic past that they believed had been displaced by colonialism. Appropriating the cultural output of ancient Greece was nothing new in late nineteenth century Ireland. Medieval writers of the Gaelic tradition identified with the Greeks, in part, because the Irish had not been conquered by the Romans, unlike so many of their neighbors.³² Classical and Biblical intertexts permeate folk narratives transmitted through living memory. They also assert themselves in the documents that come down to us from when Ireland's emerging literati began to write down the words and tropes of a long vibrant, oral culture that predated both Christianity and Anglo-Norman involvement according to their writers' shifting whims, contexts, and agendas.

³² Macintosh, *Dying Acts*, 1-2.

When the penal laws outlawed Catholic education at the close of the seventeenth century, hedge schools were set up.³³ Greek and Latin made up the core subjects of their curriculum and travelers commented on the fact that even the most ordinary of peasants could converse in Latin and discuss Greek plays. Initially the sanctioned schools set up by the English during the Cromwellian occupation also included the classics in their curriculum on the grounds that it might help to civilize the native population.³⁴ However, the national school system implemented during the nineteenth century did not include the classics in its curriculum. By then, the classics had been increasingly reserved for the Ascendancy classes and, from within the walls of Trinity, they were often utilized as a comparative testament to Celtic cultural inferiority. However, these sources, so long circulated throughout Ireland, remained entrenched in representations of local life, past and present. Even as nationalists like Pádraig Pearse consciously evoked Irish heroes rather than their Greek counterparts by name for inspiration, they had long been Greco-Irish hybrids.

Still, it may seem strange that the Abbey's managing directors, who conceived their theatre in line with the Gaelic Revival's endeavor to elevate Ireland's indigenous culture, would look towards a distinctly non-local medium as a means of asserting aesthetic legitimacy. Classical texts had often been utilized as a means of supplanting Gaelic culture under the premise of inferiority throughout Ireland's colonial history. From Saint Patrick's arrival in the sixth century onward, outsiders commented on the fact that the Irish had no written language as proof that their culture was illegitimate and their religion heathenish. The earliest Greek literature predates its Irish counterpart by more than a millennium. Like hostile, outsider accounts of Irish funerary customs, the lack of a substantial Celtic presence in the literary archive

³³ Declan Kiberd, "Introduction," *Amid Our Troubles*, vii.

³⁴ Macintosh, "The Irish and Greek Tragedy," *Amid Our Troubles*, 37.

prior to the middle ages was used to substantiate foreign claims of barbarism throughout Ireland's colonial history.

The Greek world's early adoption of the Phoenician alphabet resulted in a literary record that reaches back further than other cultures of Indo-European descent. This phenomenon facilitated the recording of Hesiod's account of universal origins as well as Homer's epic poems surrounding the Trojan War sometime during the eighth century BCE. These literary accounts, hitherto passed down from the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures of the late Bronze Age by exclusively oral means, constitute some of the earliest extant documents of the western world. The bulk of Ireland's earliest legal tracts, conduct literature, and ecclesiastical texts were written much later, in the seventh and eighth century CE. A good amount of saga material also exists in anonymous eighth and ninth century forms.³⁵ The delayed birth of a literary culture in certain parts of Europe meant that Greek accounts from the Archaic and Classical periods have often come to stand in for the etiological thoughts of a vast array of contemporaneous but particularized civilizations. As a result, these sources have come to represent diverse populations as more uniform in their thinking about the physical, mental, and spiritual components of human existence than may actually have been the case. Parallels are useful but not when they inaccurately collapse otherwise distinct discourses of gender and embodiment in the service of hegemonic masculinity.³⁶ These distinctions are important to this study because early Irish law tracts, mythological literature, archeological artifacts, and the remnants of an indigenous

³⁵ Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 12.

³⁶ R.W. Connell popularized the term "hegemonic masculinity" in the 1980s while studying gender in the Australian education system but since then its meaning has been contested in terms of its reliance on fixed identity and reformulated.

funerary culture indicate a lesser level of somatophobia and interrelated misogyny than what is communicated by the cultural output of the ancient Greeks.

Ireland's older deities were neither exclusively male like those incarnations of god that make up the Catholic trinity nor were they the subservient subjects of a Zeus-like entity. To illustrate the distinctions between these two pantheons, this chapter details some of the primary stories associated with a series of goddesses that figure prominently in the Irish pantheon. It compares primordial maternal earth goddesses, Danu and Gaia before introducing the Morrigna triplets. The three sisters figure prominently in the Irish sagas, as powerful personifications of the land, fertility, and regeneration, but they are also associated with war, destruction, and death. They can manifest as beautiful young women, old crones, and various animals. It was only with their approval that rulers came to power and that the people could live in harmony with nature. This multifaceted sovereignty goddess type, whose materiality, sexuality, and reproductive potential are central to her powers, is actually quite distinct from more narrowly defined goddesses of the Greek pantheon. In the latter case, feminine associations with materiality were positioned as a liability rather than a source of strength. Secondly, I take into account the widespread *Sheela na gig* phenomenon to shed further light on female associations with materiality. *Sheela na gigs* are grotesque female figures carved into stones that are worked into the architecture of medieval structures across Ireland. Most often found above the doorways of churches, they are generally squatting to expose disproportionately large female genitalia. The Irish mythological sagas were recorded during roughly the same medieval period of Christian conversion as when the *Sheela na gigs* found their way onto buildings. Their conjunctive study brings pre-modern Irish attitudes towards materiality and gendered embodiment into better view. When collectively considered, these sources indicate that Ireland's female deities served as a

powerful conduit between the human, the natural, and the divine. Finally, I illustrate how Ancient Athens' scripted performance culture problematically reinforced ideologies that were antagonistic to human carnality to show how over-identifying with the Greek pantheon and Attic drama is not without ideological repercussions for corporeality.

Christianity had already been introduced to Ireland by the time its polytheistic founding myths were first written down by monastic scribes. Although no cohesive account of an indigenous creation story remains, much can be gleaned from the archeological record, especially when it is read in conjunction with the syncretic literature that survives a once vibrant, highly organized oral tradition. In spite of the alterations, sanitizing or otherwise, made by its later recorders, vestiges of Ireland's early etiological tales remain. The gendered personifications of the natural world that emanate from Bronze Age Greece and pagan Ireland do exhibit productive parallels: the eighth century BCE poet, Hesiod, describes Gaia, as the material container out of which all life sprang. Similarly, Celtic poetic traditions frequently evoke the image of a cauldron as a kind of cosmic womb from whence all biological life and poetry emerged.³⁷

The Irish goddess Danu, like the Greek Gaia, is primarily regarded for her function as a birthing vessel, home, and provider of sustenance to all life, but she is also the tomb that will inevitably survive, cover over, and reclaim the mortal bodies of her children.³⁸ Maternal earth deities are configured as the material containers from which all life springs, the cemeteries that will eventually reabsorb their dead children, and the transforming agents that can create new life from death. This anthropomorphized imagining of nature reiterates cultural associations

³⁷ Anne F. O'Reilly, *Sacred Play: Soul Journeys in Contemporary Irish Theatre*, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004) 4.

³⁸ Sharon Paice Macleod, *Celtic Myth and Religion: A Study of Traditional Belief, with Newly Translated Prayers, Poems and Songs*, (London: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2012), 48.

surrounding women whose social contribution lies in producing and commemorating life: they are both womb and tomb, incubator and graveyard.

While these maternal goddesses actualize their role through predominantly material means, at the human level, reabsorbing and transforming human life after death requires an active, intelligible performance that articulates the living's relationship to the deceased. Does the role of mourner then offer a rare instance of independent, self-expression for women or does it simply require them to rehearse their own associations with materiality within a culture that derides the flesh in favor of the spirit? Perhaps it holds the potential to do both. By the time the earliest Irish and Greek accounts of the origins of the universe and the exploits of its mythological inhabitants were written down, each version of mother earth has reverted to non-communicative matter. As goddesses they never die, but they can make the transition from vaguely realized subject to object. For the gods' mortal children, the transition from subject to object occurs on many levels at the moment of death, when a being can no longer speak for itself. Their footprint resides in physical effects and the narratives of those who maintain the condition of embodiment.

While Gaia's active role is fleeting in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Danu's, whose name is thought to derive from a root word meaning "earth," is virtually non-existent in the surviving literature that makes up the Irish mythological cycles.³⁹ Her importance is asserted tangentially in the fact that the gods and goddesses who actively populate these narratives are continuously referred to as the *Tuatha de Danaan* (the children of the goddess Danu). If we consider the Irish Danu in relation to her counterparts in the Celtic traditions of what are now England, Scotland,

³⁹ Danu's name takes several interrelated forms through to refer to the same entity. Ana, Anu, Dana, and Danu. The "D" may have been a later addition, but there is general consensus that this character was pre-Christian Ireland's primary ancestry goddess. Macleod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 49.

and Wales, she is likely wed to Bile, the god of death, and mother to Dagda, one of the god-tribes' primary chiefs, and the patron deity of druidism. As mentioned above, much like her Greek counterpart, Danu, the "nourisher," is regarded for her function as a birthing vessel, home, and provider of sustenance to all life, but she is also the tomb that would inevitably cover over and reclaim the physical bodies of her children.⁴⁰

Greek and Celtic etiological tales anthropomorphize and gender the primal elements that combined to produce all organic life in the universe to reiterate the labor divisions of the humans that created them. In the Greek creation myth, a stationary mother earth is wed to an active father sky who rains down on her in an eternal sexual embrace to impregnate her with new growth. In this spatial imagining, the female deity, whose parameters are material and therefore localized, is configured below an ethereal male counterpart whose boundaries have no discernable end. What is also important in the Olympian creation myth is that Gaia is not depicted as realizing her reproductive role electively. She is passively overpowered by the sky-god, Uranus, who envelops her every night, trapping her in reproductive proximity until he is castrated and deposed by their son Cronus as king of the universe. Due to fear of succession, Uranus prevents his children from emerging from their mother, prolonging her pregnancies painfully and indefinitely. Gaia finally devises a plan for her children's liberation. From her body, she invents and brings forth steel to forge the necessary weapon, but she requires one of her children to voluntarily wield it:

As soon as each child was conceived, Uranus kept it well hidden,
Refusing it access to light, deep in the womb of the earth,
and gloated over his action, while Gaia groaned in her travail ...
When Uranus came to her presence, bringing with him the darkness,
and, panting with lust, embraced the mighty body of Gaia,
From ambush Cronus' left hand seized the genital parts of his father.
He reached out his right with the sickle, saw toothed deadly and sharp.
Like a reaper, he sliced away the genitals of his own father,

⁴⁰ James MacKillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.

Flinging them over his shoulder, to roll wherever chance sent them.⁴¹

Not only does this narrative imply that Uranus is able to assume materiality out of the ether to sexually reproduce at will, it also highlights Gaia's elemental singularity in comparison. Such creation myths ideologically advocate the notion that a fundamentally material essence is detrimental to the ability to communicate or physically realize personal intent. In other words, materiality prevents actualization of the self. This seems to intersect with Aristotle's assertion in the *Timaeus* that women's role in human reproduction was a purely passive, material one.

According to Elizabeth Grosz, Aristotle configures the maternal body as,

a mere housing, receptacle or nurse of being rather than coproducer ... he believed that the mother provided the formless, passive, shapeless matter which, through the father, was given form, shape, and contour, specific features and attributes it otherwise lacked.⁴²

Until Gaia gives birth to a son who can physically liberate her from Uranus, the sky god's ability to traverse and penetrate both the celestial and mundane spheres places him in a position of power over the earth goddess. This creates a narrative where Gaia's inherent physicality prevents her from expressing or acting upon her desires in the very domain she constitutes when they fail to be in line with an overpowering male agent's. It also foregrounds the masculine urge to control female reproduction as a primary means of retaining power over others.

Once Uranus is castrated and Gaia has fulfilled her maternal role, laying the genealogical foundations for successive generations of gods to go forth, multiply, and eventually create the human race, she fundamentally recedes from the narrative. These primordial entities are replaced first by their Titan children, Rhea and Cronus, and eventually, by Hera and Zeus. By the time Gaia's Olympian grandson, Zeus, establishes the universal order upheld in Greek tragedy, it

⁴¹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, quoted in Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth* 7th ed., trans. Herbert M. Howe (Boston: Pearson Higher Ed, 2012), 88.

⁴² Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 5.

appears that Gaia has reverted to non-communicative matter. As a goddess, Gaia never dies, but she can make the transition from vaguely realized subject to object. Once the elite members of the Greek pantheon asserted themselves, they moved up and away from the earth that bore them to celestial Mount Olympus.

Where a culture imagines their gods to reside, whether they are located within or outside of nature, is of great ideological importance in regard to attitudes towards materiality and embodiment. The Greek pantheon, referred to by Homer as the "bloodless" gods, came to reside within an elevated, celestial realm.⁴³ Once localized on Mount Olympus, they could look down on the natural world from a heavenly vantage point. This is in contrast to the Tuatha de Danaan who remained on earth and would eventually make their home within it. In their exploits above ground, they are fleshy, they can get fat, they urinate, and they can bleed. Eventually the Dagda, the god tribe's chief, organized an exodus from the world of men. He allocated each god with an underground *sídhe* (ʃi:ðə) mound. From their new abode, later referred to in the folktales of Christian Ireland as "The Land of Women," and "The Land of the Young," the gods would ascend to involve themselves in human affairs.⁴⁴ In this sense, Danu, unlike Gaia, remained the domicile to gods and humans alike. As Christianity became more widespread, the *sídhe* population was increasingly transformed into the fairy folk of local lore but a reverence towards their earlier, more powerful manifestations retained cultural currency in the performances that marked the major transitions of human existence. Rituals surrounding birth and death remained under the control of women and bore the markings of an earlier, polytheistic cosmogony.

Despite contrasting orientations, the Greek deities above and the Irish below, both sets remain involved in human affairs with varying degrees of efficacy. Gender is shown to effect

⁴³ Homer, *The Illiad*, 5.384.

⁴⁴ Macleod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 12.

power differently across pantheons. Athena emerges as a warrior goddess associated with strategy (this is somewhat different than Ares, who figures more prominently as the inciter of berserker rage). She is a virgin that was asexually produced by Zeus after he ingested Metis, the female personification of cleverness, to assume her power. In the Greek corpus of myth, sexuality, physical strength, and military savvy rarely come together in the same female deity. In the *Illiad*, when Aphrodite tries to intervene at Troy to save her human son, Aeneas, she is injured by a mortal fighter and must flee to Mt. Olympus to be healed. Homer disdainfully describes her brief foray into the battle, “Diomedes, knowing her for the coward goddess she is, / none of the mighty gods who marshal men to battle, / neither Athena nor Enyo raider of cities, now at all.”⁴⁵ After wounding her “soft, limp wrist” the Argive captain mocks Aphrodite as she retreats:

Daughter of Zeus, give up your war, your lust for carnage!
 So it's not enough you lure defenseless women
 to their ruin? Haunting the fighting are you?
 Now I think you'll cringe at the hint of war
 If you get wind of battle far away.⁴⁶

Aphrodite's sphere of interest is narrowly defined to sexual desire and when she ventures out of that role she is promptly put back in her place. Similarly Hera, who follows Gaia and Rhea as queen of the gods, is depicted time and time again as having no actual power over her brother/husband. Hera's wishes for Troy are ultimately contingent upon Zeus's approval. Despite resorting to sexual manipulation, deception, and vicariously punishing the countless objects of sexual interest her ever-amorous husband sets his sights upon (many of whom are subject to rape), she can make no direct intervention. For all of her nagging and attempts to thwart Zeus's

⁴⁵ Homer, *Illiad*. 5.371-373.

⁴⁶ Aphrodite is wounded, but she emits “ichor” rather than blood. Ibid. 5.391-395.

plans by indirect means, Hera is ultimately curbed by his threat of corporal punishment and incarceration:

I'll whip you stroke on stroke.
 Don't you recall the time I strung you in mid-air
 And slung those massive anvils down from your feet
 And lashed both hands with a golden chain you could not break?⁴⁷

Uncompromised military power and willful sexuality are rarely depicted as residing in the single body of a Greek goddess. Athena is an androgynous character whose ability to maintain comparable status with Ares hinges upon her continued virginity. Ares, as is clear in his many sexual exploits with Aphrodite, does not have to refrain from sex to maintain his military prowess. Similarly, the sexual exploits of an insatiable Zeus, the most powerful of all the gods, make up a large percentage of the Greek corpus of myth.

In contrast, several powerful female deities come to the foreground and bring together willful sexuality, transformation, regeneration, destruction, and prophesy in the *Thuatha de Danaan's* catalogued exploits. It has been argued that these goddesses came to control spheres of interest similar to those previously attributed to Danu.⁴⁸ Keeping with geographic Ireland's consistently feminine personification, the sisters *Eriu*, *Banba*, and *Folta* are land goddesses who serve as the island's namesakes to this day. The *Morrigan*, flanked by her sisters *Macha* and *Badb* (also sometimes referred to as *Nemain*), is the most prominent and active goddess in Ireland's medieval literature.⁴⁹ Collectively referred to as the *Morrigna*, they, like Danu and Gaia, are associated with the natural world and the cycle of birth and death. These Irish goddesses are not passive personifications of the land and fertility. Their powers of creation and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 14.22-25.

⁴⁸ Sharon Paice Macelod "Mater Deorum Hibernicism: Identity and Cross-Correlation in Early Irish Mythology" *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* Vol. 18/19, (1998/1999), 340-384.

⁴⁹ The number three occupied a place of sacred importance in the Celtic cosmogony and as such a series of triune goddesses emerge. Ibid.

destruction are biological but also have to do with wisdom, prophecy, and sacral kingship. They preside over battle and, like Zeus, they are promiscuous and possess the ability to shape-shift at will. They can appear as an old crone, a beautiful young woman, a warrior, and various animals.

The abundance of the land and military success depended on the sexual union between a potential leader and this sovereignty goddess type. If a chief or hero was tested and failed by rejecting one of the Morrigna's advances, she would ultimately bring about their demise. This is the fate of the Irish hero Cúchulainn that we see dramatized in Yeats' Ulster Cycle plays. On the other hand, in the battle of *Cath maige Tuireadh* (the second battle of Moytura) the Morrigan secures a victory for the Tuatha de Danaan after their leader, the Dagda, sleeps with her. Similar to the *Titanomachy*, in which the Olympians fight and overthrow a previous generation of tyrannical gods, Danu's children must battle with the oppressive Moytura in order to gain control over Ireland. The Dagda's sovereignty depends upon finding union with the Morrigan's materiality. Thus, masculine power remains contingent upon a feminine endorsement. This is not an abduction situation where a god subsumes a goddess and her powers by force. The Morrigna triplets, unlike the passive Gaia, act as unapologetic instigators of sex. Their satisfied libidos are shown to restore a mutually beneficial relationship between the land and its human inhabitants. On the other hand, they bring carnage and famine to those who refuse, oppose, or fail to acknowledge them.

One of the major stories surrounding the Morrigan's sister, Macha, involves her cursing the men of Ulster with the affliction of labor pangs during battle. The king of Ulster fails to recognize her as a goddess and commands that she run in a race against his horses. She is pregnant with twins but commences to win the race. The exertion induces labor and she gives birth in a highly public space, surrounded by men. In retaliation for failing to recognize her

divinity and forcing a private act into masculine space, she curses the king's fighting men to suffer labor pangs in battle. In doing so, the mother goddess is rearticulated as a war goddess. As Linda Seidel argues, this prompts a strange performance wherein male actors must simulate Macha's labor in battle.⁵⁰ Macha's mysterious creative power has been inappropriately forced into public space and in the process her reproductive strength is rearticulated as a failing. The feminine power to generate new life is repositioned as a source of weakness and death by its male performers. Seidel is careful to situate this story's recording in relation to the increasing masculine authority of the Christian Church and the escalation of Anglo-Norman dominance. It is in this environment of masculine appropriation that we must also position the Sheela na gig.

Another entry-point into evaluating societal reverence towards women's life-giving abilities as a source of power lies in the widespread presence of Sheela na gig carvings across Ireland. They are primarily found on medieval church buildings in largely equal distribution across Ireland, and, with less frequency, in other parts of the British Isles.⁵¹ The question as to whether women's reproductive power was viewed as creative, destructive, or both at the time these ambiguous figures were carved remains a subject for speculation. Barbara Freitag counts at least 110 Sheela figures that have been found in Ireland, sixty of which remain situated in medieval architecture. The others have been removed to museums or private collections. These naked female figures are usually positioned over doorways and windows. They are grotesque forms that often squat to reveal enlarged vulvas, which they gesture towards or actively hold

⁵⁰ Seidel, "Celtic Revival and Women's Work," 35.

⁵¹ Though they appear most frequently on church facades, they can also be found at monastic sites, and castles dating from the middle ages. Archeological findings indicate that the castle Sheela was a specifically Irish phenomenon. 39 of Ireland's 110 known Sheela's are tied to castles whereas only one other castle Sheela has been discovered in Wales. There is a problem of dating the carvings themselves since stones were often re-appropriated from earlier locations. Possible evidence for this is that a handful of church Sheela's have been inserted sideways, and in at least one case, in Merlin Park, the Sheela is upside down. Even more ambiguous in terms of dating, are those situated at holy wells. Barbara Freitag, *Sheela na Gigs: Unraveling an Enigma* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3-4.

open with their hands. While the reproductive organs are emphasized, and thus the lower half of the body has associations with fertility, the upper half often appears gaunt. This appears to be a distinct feature of the Irish Sheela. Of the sparse details, lines have often been carved to indicate ribs and wrinkles around the face. The breasts, when present, are not uncommonly depicted as depleted and sagging. The squatting posture and the oft-grimacing face evokes childbirth, but the upper half of the body appears elderly. This perhaps refers to the Morrigna's multiple manifestation as the sexually desirable, fertile young woman and the old crone. The vagina is also represented as a disproportionately large, cavernous hole. This could indicate the cervical dilation that occurs in labor or a grotesque depiction of the post-partum, even menopausal body.

Generally these crude carvings appear to be the work of unskilled craftspeople and the fact that they appear primarily over the thresholds of religious buildings has baffled historians and archeologists since they were "discovered" and documented during the eighteenth century. Some believe them to function as a kind of apotropaic gargoyle or chimera; a sort of vacuum figure positioned at thresholds to attract the evil eye away from potential human victims that cross through, but why this particular form?⁵² Why did the Irish choose an anthropomorphized figure with enlarged, female reproductive organs as their gatekeepers? Perhaps they did not. It is generally accepted that Sheela na gigs represent some aspect of the pagan belief system that persisted in Ireland long after Christianity had been introduced, but how and why they were specifically appropriated on institutional architecture during the medieval period remains in question. A naked female figure boldly flashing an overly developed vaginal region as if it were a weapon to parishioners as they entered a consecrated building has little place in traditional Catholic iconography. This phenomena is even more confusing when considered in conjunction

⁵² Gargoyles are different from the chimera, boss, hunky punks, and sheela na gigs in that they also have a practical function in that they drain water off the roof of buildings through their mouths whereas the other carvings serve only a decorative, symbolic purpose. Bitel, *Land of Women*, 233.

with the Madonna and Child statues that appeared during the same period to remind attendees of the immaculate conception/virgin birth's centrality to the Christian faith.

It is logical to assume that the Sheela na gigs served some contextual purpose in the syncretic belief system that was actually being practiced in conjunction with Catholicism across the country during this period. This is not to say the clergy supported these practices.

Archaeological evidence shows that many figures were hidden or physically filed off of stones. However, the concentration of remaining carvings, the majority of which remain "*in situ*," especially in the interior parts of the country, speaks to the frequency with which they were created and/or incorporated into church buildings across Ireland at one time.⁵³ The debate around the Sheela's origins and appropriating contexts rages on, especially in relation to its connection with depictions of women in surviving literature and contemporaneous legal tracts.

While many scholars argue that the Sheela figures are assertions of an indigenous identity subversively etched into the very sites of that identity's institutional suppression, others, like Linda Seidel, read them as the trophies of conquest: "The conqueror's use of an image of female generative power as a marker of territorial appropriation doubly denigrated and denied local authority. Sheela na gigs can be understood in this way as signs of oppression, insignia of the victorious hero."⁵⁴ The trope of men appropriating feminine spheres of interest and performances is also apparent in Macha's story, "The men of Ulster too had taken over the goddess Macha's cries of pain and incorporated them into a ritual pregnancy of their own."⁵⁵ In a gesture of suppression, the conqueror appropriates powerful icons, collectively revered by the native

⁵³ Freitag, *Sheela na gigs*, 1.

⁵⁴ Seidel, "Celtic Revivals and Women's Work," 40.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

population it looks to destabilize and resituates those icons as grotesque caricatures as a means of neutralizing them.

Using literary evidence to understand the Sheela na gig phenomenon is not without problems. Barbara Freitag pushes against the scholarly eagerness to understand the Sheelas as renderings of the Celtic sovereignty goddesses that appear in medieval texts. As it stands, we cannot know if these carvings are based on their literary counterparts or vice versa. What we do know is that promiscuous sovereignty goddesses played a primary role in the narratives that have reached the present. They have a tendency to possess supernatural powers that are both creative and destructive. We also know that certain medieval texts reference grotesque elderly women whose pudenda reach their knees. References to women who weaponize their genitals though display to thwart men in battle are frequent. Regardless of whether the roots of these feminine representations are one and the same, they all emphasize women's biological role in human reproduction and intermingle reactions of reverence, fearful repulsion, and confusion.

Similar to the debate surrounding the Sheela na gig's relationship to literary goddesses, there is an etymological argument that the Morrigan, whose name translates to "Great Queen" as well as "Phantom or Nightmare Queen" is actually an epithet for Danu and that they are in fact the same figure.⁵⁶ Their mutual associations with fertility and the land still assert themselves in the names for Ireland's topography.⁵⁷ For instance, a pair of twin hills in Killarney are referred to as *Da Chich Anann*, "the Paps of Ana," one of the many variants of Danu's name, just as a similar set of breast shaped hills in County Meath are referred to as *Da Cich na Morrigna* "the

⁵⁶ Macleod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 49.

⁵⁷ Cheryl Herr, "The Erotics of Irishness," *Critical Inquiry* 113, no. 1 (1990): 7.

Paps of the Morrigan”.⁵⁸ James MacKillop asserts that the Morrigna is likely an “emanation” of Ana/Danu so that the godhead eventually manifests in three figures.⁵⁹ A similar phenomenon occurs in the movement from the Old to New Testament in Christianity, where a single divine entity is re-articulated as the Holy trinity wherein the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit come to collectively encompass the nature of God.

Popular sources often primarily associate the Morrigan with her dark and destructive attributes. For instance, in his *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology* (1992), Peter Beresford Ellis describes her as, “The major goddess of war, of death and slaughter [...] Her favo[u]rite shape was that of a crow or raven. She embodied all that was perverse and horrible among the supernatural powers.”⁶⁰ Perhaps it is because the stories surrounding Cúchulainn were some of the most translated and adapted during the nationalist cultural movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that the Morrigan’s catastrophic, sadistic attributes have come to stand in for a more complex sovereignty persona. Allowing these provocative, destructive aspects to eclipse an otherwise expansive entity paints an incomplete picture of both the Morrigan and the collective consciousness that created her. Reading sovereignty goddesses in this way allows their life giving capacity to be displaced by their association with death. To be more accurate, the Morrigan manifests across texts as both maleficent and beneficent.

The Morrigna bring together assertive sexuality, transformation, regeneration, destruction, and prophesy. This indicates that we are dealing with a very different pantheon and cosmogony than that recorded by the ancient Greeks; even more so if the Morrigna triune derives from Danu as Macleod and MacKillop maintain. The Morrigna’s multifaceted powers indicate

⁵⁸ MacKillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, 16.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁶⁰ Beresford Ellis, Peter, *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology* (London: Constable, 1992) 173.

that their producing culture placed the inherent materiality of human existence at its center even as it insisted on the eternal nature of the soul. This is further evident in the earthbound nature of the Irish gods. In contrast, Greek mythology ideologically debases the material sphere and those primarily associated with it in the sense that a progressive narrative shifts away from an earth goddess towards a celestial, monarchical patriarchy that foregrounds Zeus as the embodiment of power, intelligence, justice, and law. While the Irish pantheon similarly endorses a patriarchal monarchy, it also maintains a kind of checks and balances system where female deities retain the ability to endorse or thwart would-be rulers depending on whether those rulers acknowledge their power as personified embodiments of the material world.

While the Olympian pantheon receives extensive and often overlapping treatment by Hesiod and in the Homeric Hymns, creation tales are less explicit and particularly lacking in uniformity when it comes to the genesis of the human race. Some attribute the first humans to Zeus, some to Prometheus. While the circumstances of man's creation remain ambivalent in these early sources there is consistency in the assertion that human mortals began as an exclusively male species across Greek sources. Although his accounts of man's beginnings are varied, Hesiod uniformly attributes the first mortal woman, Pandora, to Zeus. The king of the gods commissioned her as a curse upon Prometheus's beloved race of men. When Prometheus tricked Zeus into eating bones instead of meat at Mecone the thunder god retaliated by removing fire from the trees where primitive man had previously been able to access it after lightening strikes in order to cook the flesh of animals for food. Prometheus stole fire back again for the starving humans. For this second offense, Zeus had chained Prometheus to a rock to withstand constant torture and attacked the livelihood of men once again as a means of vicariously punishing his Titan challenger. This time he compromised man's food source by adding another

consuming mouth. In Hesiod's *Works and Days* Zeus specifically conceives of and crafts the first woman to exist as an embodied curse:

“I shall give them a present to compensate for the fire.
 May they all be merry at heart, forever embracing this Horror!”
 With a nasty smile the father of men and gods told famous Hephaestus to hurry,
 to knead the water and clay,
 To add human speech and strength, to give it a goddess's form
 And the fine lovely face of a maiden.
 Next he ordered Athena to teach her womanly skill to weave a well-built loom,
 Aphrodite the golden he told to crown her head with desire,
 But with heartbreak as well, and all the aching sorrow of love
 Last of all he had Hermes, the herald, the killer of Argus
 To give her thievish morals and to add the soul of a bitch.⁶¹

Pandora is not given a human soul, but that of a greedy animal, lacking in self-control and morality but encased in an attractive exterior so that she might trick men into laboring on her behalf. Hesiod uses the word *genos* “race” to refer to women as an entirely different species from men, who consume but do not contribute to food production:

From her descends the ruinous race and tribe of women,
 who live as a curse of sorrow to mortal men,
 no partners in grim poverty, but only useless excesses.
 ... sweeping the fruit of labor into their own slow bellies.
 Whoever keeps clear of marriage and trouble fomented by women
 and is quite content to stay single, must expect a gloomy old age,
 with no one at hand to attend him.⁶²

Nothing is said to place value upon or recognize the physical effort inherent in cloth production, pregnancy, birth, child rearing, or funerary duties. Hesiod only admits to the necessity of Pandora's descendants on the grounds that a man needs to produce children with a woman in order to have someone to care for him in his old age.

⁶¹ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, quoted in Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, 122-123.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 124-125.

Aeschylus's play, *Prometheus Bound* (480 BCE) takes after Hesiod's account of Prometheus's sentencing and incarceration but offers a somewhat different premise of human origins. Aeschylus's play delineates Prometheus as not only the champion of humans, but as their creator: it was under his divine gifts and tutelage that they differentiated themselves from animals. Prometheus catalogues how he elevated a crude, senseless race from constant toil and ignorance by teaching them animal husbandry, agriculture, medicine, metallurgy, and sailing. Prometheus takes credit for directing the human gaze towards the heavens and making the position of the stars legible to them, thus providing a calendar and a means of discerning divine will. These advances allowed men to supplement manual labor with tools and domesticated beasts of burden in order to aid food production to free them up for art and culture. Aesthetic and intellectual pursuits like literature, mathematics, philosophy, and art are all similarly characterized as gifts from Prometheus, the great benefactor of man.

This narrative designates cultural access as the dividing line between humans and animals. This is similar to Hesiod's account of being endowed with divine inspiration, when the Muses "breathed the inspired art of the poet into him" so that the "stupid rustic shepherds, bellies and nothing more" could realize a higher form of existence.⁶³ The ability to traverse the line between dumb mammals and enlightened beings hinges upon being liberated from the constant struggle for physical survival. Prometheus' first gifts increased food production so that man was no longer constantly shackled to manual labor. No longer exclusively dedicated to hacking out his existence in the natural world, embodied man could finally access his intellectual and spiritual self to achieve full humanity. As is seen in the case of Pandora, however, not every human form is endowed with or allowed access to a human soul.

The Greek corpus of myth, recast by fifth century tragedians amidst the height of the

⁶³ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 30, 25.

Athenian city-state's hegemony over the ancient Mediterranean world, came out of a fiercely misogynistic imagining where the nexus of symbols associated with women negatively cluster around the body, sexuality, birth, and death in juxtaposition to the ethereally, intellectually associated, male citizen population. When the Athenian *polis* (city-state) consolidated power, it usurped women's previous role as public mourner. Pericles (495-429 BCE), ancient Athens' most illustrious statesman, understood the potential power held by those elected to oversee and interpret death for the living. In a funeral oration for fallen soldiers recorded by Thucydides, Pericles offers advice to the newly silenced widows:

And if I am to speak of womanly virtues to those of you who will henceforth be widows; let me sum them up in one short admonition: To a woman not to show more weakness than is natural to her sex is a great glory, and not to be talked about for good or evil among men.⁶⁴

Although they were denied a public role, women continued to be regarded as a necessary evil from within the private sphere. Beyond producing legitimate heirs, elite men's fear of *miasma* (blood pollution) meant that women were still required to clean and anoint a body before burial just as they purified infants after birth. A women's ability to withstand the *miasma* that accompanied the beginning of life also extended to the twin crisis of purification at life's end. Childbirth was regarded as a personal crisis that brought a laboring mother into close proximity to death. A man would not go anywhere near a laboring woman for fear of polluted bodily fluids.

⁶⁵ The fact that childbirth was such an inescapably mammalian process would, if witnessed, also

⁶⁴ Thucydides, "Pericles Funeral Oration," Human Rights Library, University of Minnesota, accessed October 26, 2015, <https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/education/thucydides.html>.

⁶⁵ Childbirth was so central to the prescribed identity of women during the classical period that a Greek girl was not recognized as a *gynē* (woman) until withstanding it. The definition of woman and mother were utterly collapsed. A girl from a citizen family became a *parthenos* or *korē*, a virgin of marriageable age, after her first menstruation. Following marriage and consummation, she became a *nymphē* or bride. Powell, *Classical Myth*, 40-45.

disrupt the fantasy that full-fledged humans were entirely distinct from other live-birth animals.⁶⁶

Thus it was a woman's duty to decontaminate the birthing chamber, newly delivered babies, and the newly deceased in order to keep the world of the living and the world of the dead separate.

In designating the Irish as the cultural heirs to the ancient Greeks, the Abbey dramatists reiterated the human spirit and intellect through its binary opposition to the body. At the turn of the twentieth century, classical and Christian intertexts, already present in Irish lore, were further emphasized as a means of filling the gaps in an inherently fractured cultural memory. The scripts for idealized or inappropriate behavior for Irish men and women being endorsed on the Abbey stage during this crucial historical point speak to discourses of gender that directly effected legislation in the newly forming, independent state. They continue to have circumscribing ramifications for bodies born into Irish-ness today, whether they reside within the geographic parameters of the "motherland" or in diaspora communities where components of an essentialized Irish identity continue to assert themselves, often in exaggerated, overly determined forms.

Ancient Athens' scripted performance culture evolved to reinforce the idea that the failure to master, if not transcend the desires and demands of the physical body would ultimately result in a clouding of the mind; the body was to be resisted and regulated by the intellect lest it bring about its own destruction. Those individuals cast as being unable to transcend bodily

⁶⁶ Hannah Arendt poses that archaeological and literary artifacts of pre-industrial societies indicate a conceptual need for their creators to assert themselves as different and superior to the other sentient life forms with which they shared the world. The state of embodiment and mortality shared between humans and animals was a thing to be distanced from. The internal, mysterious, and seemingly immaterial components of human existence; the intangible mechanisms that allowed individuals to reason, create, communicate and symbolize, were defined against those parts of the self that were accessible, discernable, and finite: the flesh. The concept of the eternal came into cognitive existence against that which was mortal and therefore impermanent. Human beings, who were figured as sharing a common origin with the gods, consisted also of a part that was eternal unlike inferior life forms. In many accounts of universal origins, women are included as one of the many subspecies with which men were begrudgingly compelled to share the earth. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

function, were not regarded as fully human and therefore barred from citizenship. Citizen men perceived women as subject to physical phenomena such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation that were not entirely under their control. Beyond that, once of childbearing age, young women were characterized as being subject to insatiable sexual desire. As a result, the invention of Athenian democracy, with its emphasis on hereditary citizenship, had increasingly cloistered women within the home, invisible from public view in the interest of removing any doubt about a child's paternity.

Prior to Anglo-Norman involvement, Irish women may have fared slightly better. This is in no sense asserting equality between the sexes; we are still dealing with a male-dominated society, but the active presence of warrior queens and formidable goddesses who are depicted as thwarting the most powerful gods and men throughout Irish mythology speaks to a lesser level of misogyny. Beyond that, Irish law tracts from the middle ages allot for "hostage queens" and dictate that women could divorce on the grounds that their husbands had become too fat to have sex or had publically slandered them.⁶⁷ To be clear, Ireland was already organized as a male dominated society by the time literate Christians reached its shores, but gender was constructed and policed amongst the Gaelic population in distinct ways prior to and during the period of colonization. As Lisa notes, while Brehon law tracts paint a similarly bleak picture for women's rights on some levels, they are also full of contradictions that provide loopholes through some of the most restrictive mandates: "For every law circumscribing women there was another that allowed them considerable liberties [...] throughout the Middle Ages, women's legal disenfranchisement was mitigated by other more flexible rules."⁶⁸ There may be some truth to

⁶⁷ Lisa Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 10-11.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

this, but we must also be careful not to paint a picture of gender equality in Ireland prior to the twelfth century.

Medieval legal texts frequently evoke the concept of the *dire* or honor price to value differently identified members of the population in Ireland. Every child born to a free family was initially assigned the same honor price regardless of sex. The honor price for free children under the age of seven was quite high compared to other members of the population. One text appraises them as of equal value to adult clerics. At seven, a child's honor price became half of his or her father's. When a boy reached adulthood at fourteen he was reassigned a full honor price whereas a fourteen-year-old girl continued to be worth half of her father's until she married and her honor price became half of her husband's.⁶⁹ The free adult male was the gold standard of bodies, so when girls became physically recognizable as women they became legally legible as less valuable bodies. Contradictorily, the *Bretha Crólige*, deals with the legal implications of physical abuses and orders that extra compensations be paid to a woman and her husband if she is injured during a period of fertility or if she is a nursing mother.⁷⁰ While physiologically, a woman's body was thought to be a bad copy of a man's, the ovulating, pregnant, or lactating body achieved a periodic elevation of perceived worth.⁷¹ Women's ability to preside over funerary rituals was another area in which she was able to assert agency.

Let us now return to Ireland's persistent personification as a female body, as both the life giving vessel and the tomb that re-absorbs her children to introduce how this trope was activated

⁶⁹ Ibid., 20-21.

⁷⁰ The *Bretha Crólige* was generally concerned with medical material but in the last seventeen pages includes legal matters concerned with the manner in which a man could legal take wives. D.A. Binchy, "Bretha Crólige," *Eriu* 12 (1938): 1.

⁷¹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, 20-21.

by the Abbey dramatists at the turn of the century.⁷² Colonized Ireland was frequently depicted as an arrested female body; the beautiful young woman abducted and ravaged by a masculine conqueror to disrupt the indigenous sovereignty relationship. No longer married to the rightful ruler, the land has been rendered old and barren through violence and misuse. Yeats and Lady Gregory drew from this tradition to create the incendiary *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. The allegorical title character brings together earlier renderings of Ireland as the beautiful young woman, the mother, the dangerous hag, the inciter of war, and the presider over death. She demands that young men sacrifice themselves so that she might be liberated and restored to youth and beauty.

Colonization has apparently transformed female embodiment of Ireland into a vampire. This traumatized version of the Morrigan demands not sex but death. Gregory and Yeats' play utilizes geographic Ireland's personification as a woman and women's association with the material sphere as an overt anti-colonial call to arms. As the independent state emerged, the female bodies that had been previously used as inciting symbols for colonized Ireland found little place in the public life of the newly imagined nation. As prophesied in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, once the English "strangers" had been turned out of the house, the titular character could stop wandering the roads and return to her rightful place at the family hearth where she cared for and eventually buried the bodies that passed through her.⁷³ Along with the return to her rightful place as woman of the house, Danu/Hibernia/Lady Erin/Cathleen can also get to the business of her other primary occupation: lamenting the young men who died to get her back there.

Given the recent critical attention towards Irish funerary customs along with the

⁷² See Cheryl Herr's aforementioned examination of the consistent anthropomorphization of Ireland as female and its implications for cultural attitudes surrounding actual women's bodies. To imagine Ireland as an arrested female form, to see its hills as breasts, its ancient caverns as wombs and tombs reciprocally associates women with materiality and the natural world. Herr, "The Erotics of Irishness," 1-34.

⁷³ W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: The Plays*, vol. 2, ed. David Clark and Rosalind E. Clark (New York: Scribner, 2001), 88.

representational tendency towards death, dying, and bereavement, favoring Greek tragedy in particular makes sense. I argue that tragic staging convention extends negative ideologies surrounding materiality already evident in the myths as oral and written narratives. Dramatic emplotment, staging conventions, and theatre architecture, evolved for the outdoor City Dionysia festival to reflect the boundaries of male perception in a gender-stratified society that associated women with what was structurally interior, hidden, mysterious, and therefore dangerous. The exclusively male actors came into audience view by crossing through the doors of the *skene*, a low building upstage of the orchestra. The *skene* was increasingly utilized to represent the exterior walls of an aristocratic home (often a palace) and served as backdrop for the actions of the families it housed. Characters came into audience view by crossing out of the domestic threshold. Much of Attic tragedy's onstage action occurs directly outside of the interior, private sphere. The audience was only privy to the terrors that occurred behind the *skene*, or the family home's façade, through sound. Auditory signals communicated the offstage action as it occurred or relayed its aftermath. Fatal violence to the body is not shown through action in Greek drama but communicated verbally by a messenger, who retrospectively relays the violence. The testimony of violence is sometimes accompanied by its irreversible, ocular proof as the mortally wounded body is rolled in on the *ekkyklema*.

In *The Countess Cathleen*, *Riders to the Sea*, and *The Gaol Gate* fatal violence to the body similarly occurs offstage. What is made visible about death and what is eclipsed when we observe such a convention is important. The brand of lamentation endorsed by the Abbey during its formative years intermingled outsider observations of Ireland's agrarian population with classical performance texts in such a way that bodies are gendered in relation to their imagined proximity to corporeality. The following chapters illustrate how relegating acts of mortal

violence to offstage, diagetic spaces may act in tandem with certain lamentation formulas to create stock spiritualist icons in the space provided by the sacrificial victim's absent body.

One cannot separate the aesthetic treatment of Greek tragedy, blood sacrifice, and martyrdom from the Abbey dramatists' dynamic and shifting relationship with discourses of Irish nationalism. Ideally, the value towards life must be high in order to transform violence and destruction of the body into an ultimately regenerative, creative act. Synge would not live to see the Easter Rebellion or the Irish War for Independence but Yeats and Lady Gregory grew increasingly disillusioned with the realities and results of militant nationalism. World War I was followed by the Irish War for Independence that directly preceded internal fighting over the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Lady Gregory lost her only son in World War I, and Yeats felt implicated by the excessive loss of life that his more incendiary plays like *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* may have encouraged. In a late poem "Man and the Echo" Yeats writes a dialogue between a guilty man and his unforgiving reverberation:

I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman's reeling reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked.⁷⁴

Yeats described the process of a poet writing about his own life, "his tragedy," as creating an intelligible, beautiful phantasmagoria out of materials selected from the otherwise mundane and disparate; "he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down at the breakfast

⁷⁴ W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 345.

table, he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete.”⁷⁵ When human life is sacrificed for the sake of a symbol in order for the absent body to become a generalized symbol for future martyrs, the cycle of violence may be destined to perpetuate itself.

The continued appropriation of a sacrificial tragedy, which hinges on the eradication of embodiment, may allow an individual or community to re-dress violent and traumatic acts as creative or regenerative to reciprocally devalue corporeal longevity. The following chapters investigate how this proclivity towards tragedy might relate to Ireland’s consistent personification as a woman—the mistress for whom young men will go out to die and the mythological hag to whom beauty and youth might be restored through similar acts of sacrifice. The plays addressed here often stage a competitive encounter between Ireland as a supernatural woman and “real” Irish women. One promises young men immortality in death via perpetual, celebratory lamentation. The other acknowledges the irrevocable loss of an embodied individual in the material world.⁷⁶ Vernacular funerary performances like the wake and the caoineadh act as a counterpoint to celebratory lamentation performances that transform young men into idealized, disembodied, symbols of essential spirituality. The caoineadh positions the loss of embodiment as an outrage, and the merry wake acts to reaffirm the continued carnality of the living so that they might disassociate with the dead. When the caoineadh is appropriated in order to celebrate bodily sacrifice and the wake is stripped of revelry to reaffirm the living through shared

⁷⁵ Quoted in Herbert J. Levine, *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies*, vol 12, ed. Richard J Finneran (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 80.

⁷⁶ The metaphor of young men dying under the banner of feminine beauty has dangerous implications and often intersects with dramatic trajectories where the femme fatale destroys the tribe in order to render women’s bodies and female sexuality singularly dangerous and destructive. I limit this study to plays rooted in more quotidian representations of life in rural Ireland around the dawn of the twentieth century. In a larger study, the theatrical renderings of more remote characters such as Grania, Deirdre, and Dervogilla, produced during this same period would have to be contended with. Mythological or mythologized, each of these characters share a similar trajectory: She is promised to an older man in marriage but runs away with a younger man that she is actually attracted to or she is abducted with little show of resistance. Either way, these mythological characters factor mainly as the catalyst for masculine competition and bloodshed and are almost always preceded by their lovers in death.

exhibitions of carnality, these practices' are robbed of their previous utility.

Chapter 2: Classing and Gendering the Mind-Body Split in *The Countess Cathleen*

*I dreamed that one had died in a strange place
Near no accustomed hand;
And they had nailed the boards above her face.
The peasants of that land,*

-W.B. Yeats, "A Dream of Death"

When the Irish Literary Theatre first produced *The Countess Cathleen* in 1899, it created quite a stir. W.B. Yeats' parable about an Anglo-Irish landlady sacrificing herself to save her starving tenants from selling their souls to Satan was the subject of heated debate on both sides of the Irish Sea for months prior to its run. On opening night, police lined the theatre's back wall in case the audience reaction turned violent. Although noisy disruptions did not give way to full-blown riot, *The Countess Cathleen* met with a great deal of resistance for representing the Irish Catholic population as a regressively bestial race after Yeats, Gregory, and George R. Martyn famously issued the Irish Literary Theatre's manifesto about correcting the legacy of colonial stage stereotypes. They proclaimed,

We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.⁷⁷

The play chosen to launch the Irish Literary Theatre problematically re-inscribes carnality as an essential component of Irish identity and substitutes an aristocratic woman rather than a man as its sacrificial victim. Representations that highlight a people's inherent corporeality become controversial when the mind and body are configured as an oppositional binary underpinned by somatophobia. *The Countess Cathleen*'s also takes place during a period of famine, shown to cause a starving peasant population to regress toward animalistic physicality. Despite Yeats'

⁷⁷ Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography*, (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1913), 9.

insistence that the play should be read a-historically, his audiences linked it to recent, if not ongoing situations of famine and landlordism.⁷⁸

When the play was staged in 1899, Ireland was still reeling from one of the largest agricultural disasters in human history. Reaching its height between 1845 and 1851, the Great Famine, also known as the Great Hunger, devastated the Irish population. Out of a base population of eight million, over one million are estimated to have died through mass starvation and disease. Another million emigrated.⁷⁹ The fact that *The Countess Cathleen* has been performed with drastically less frequently than the other plays in this study is generally attributed to its insensitive treatment of famine, irreverence towards Catholicism, and thematic attempt to naturalize the sovereignty of Anglo-Irish landlords. This chapter draws attention to the fact that part of the play's fierce opposition was also been bound up in the gendered nature of its funerary performances. *The Countess Cathleen's* representation of death and bereavement violated the anti-colonial stance that Irish masculinity was essentially spiritual.

Yeats originally wrote the play for Maud Gonne soon after their first meeting in London in 1889.⁸⁰ Gonne was a celebrated beauty, public speaker, and nationalist revolutionary who claimed Irish descent on her father's side. Despite declining the part of the Countess on the grounds that it would distract her from her political work, Gonne went on to famously originate the role of Ireland personified in Yeats and Gregory's widely celebrated *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902. This chapter will begin by conducting a dramatic analysis of *The Countess Cathleen*. It

⁷⁸ Adrienne Frazier, "The Making of Meaning: Yeats and 'The Countess Cathleen,'" *The Sewanee Review* 95, no. 3, (1987): 459-461.

⁷⁹ The high mortality rate amongst emigrants and the shortened life spans of initial survivors also factor into population depletion and continued psychological trauma. Christine Kineally, *A Death Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), 2.

⁸⁰ Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin*, 26.

will move on to evaluate the production and reception contexts of the Irish Literary Theatre's first public performance of *The Countess Cathleen* in 1899. Finally, it will return to the figure of Maud Gonne as a linking entry point for a comparative analysis of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Much like Gonne, certain nationalist audiences rejected *The Countess Cathleen* while they embraced *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. This chapter illustrates how *The Countess Cathleen* inverted and transgressed the accepted model of sacrifice later exemplified in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Aside from those differences, both plays maintain a somatophic backdrop of mind-body dualism. According to Colette Conroy,

Within dualist thinking, the notion of the body carries with it a separation from other aspects of humanness. The opposing of body and mind or of body and soul demonstrates a theory of embodiment that posits the body as present, accessible and touchable. This depicts the body as a sort of envelope for those aspects of the self that are specific or unique to the individual and cannot be touched.⁸¹

The former play showcases an Anglo-Irish heiress's triumph over earthly concerns while poor Irish men succumb to the base appetites of their corruptible and impermanent bodies. In contrast, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* follows a young Irish man who will eventually transcend material concerns to claim an essential, spiritual self, unfettered by embodiment via martyrdom. Funerary performances, usually reserved for women, render death legible as regenerative, sacrificial acts. *The Countess Cathleen* jostles the roles of a typically male sacrificial victim and a typically female lamenter that *Cathleen ni Houlihan* reinscribes.

***Alcestis* and the Woman of the Sídh**

In his *Memoirs*, Yeats describes how he wrote *The Countess Cathleen* for Maud Gonne: "She spoke to me of her wish for a play that she could act in Dublin ... and I told her of a story I

⁸¹ Colette Conroy, *Theatre and The Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 18-19.

had found when compiling my *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, and I offered to write for her a play I have called *The Countess Cathleen*.”⁸² In his note for the play, Yeats relays that the first textual source he encountered came in what claimed to be a collection of Irish folklore published in an Irish newspaper. As he further investigated the tale’s origins, he learned that the story derived from a French ethnographic study of Irish lore that had been drifting around Irish periodicals for years. Yeats claims to have eventually found a Christian variant recorded in Donegal about a woman who descends to hell for a decade for the sake of her husband. Once she has lived out her sentence, she agrees to another ten years after being granted permission to save “as many souls as could cling to her skirt.”⁸³

Yeats observed that each version he encountered, whether Celtic or Christian in context, derived from the Greek myth of Alcestis, who agrees to take her husband, king Admetus’s place in death. In the Euripidean play, Alcestis descends into the underworld for what she thinks will be eternity until being unsuspectingly rescued by Hercules. Yeats writes, “I have no doubt of the essential antiquity of what seems to me the most impressive form of one of the supreme parables of the world. The parable came to the Greeks in the sacrifice of Alcestis, but her sacrifice was less overwhelming, less apparently irremediable.”⁸⁴ In *The Countess Cathleen*, Yeats reassigns the role of sacrificial victim to an unmarried, beautiful, aristocratic virgin as opposed to the dutiful wife of the Greek source.⁸⁵ A dutiful wife, Mary Rua, also dies in the play, but her death

⁸² Yeats, *Memoirs [of] W. B. Yeats: Autobiography [and] First Draft Journal*, ed. Denis B. Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972), 41.

⁸³ W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: The Plays*, vol. 2, ed. David Clark and Rosalind E. Clark (New York: Scribner, 2001), 675.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Peter Ure, “The Evolution of Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen*,” *The Modern Language Review* 57, no. 1 (1962): 12-24. Ure details the play’s four major revisions after its copyright performance in 1892. This study is primarily interested in the ILT’s 1899 production, which works from the second major revision.

takes place offstage, receives minimal funerary attention, and is shown to precipitate no positive consequences for the living. The lack of value the play assigns to Mary Rua's life and its loss is problematically bound up in class. Yeats bifurcates the original Alcestis character in order to create Mary, a peasant woman associated with the mundane, and the Countess, a savior figure associated with both Christ and the Celtic sovereignty goddess who restores balance to the land and its people.

The Countess Cathleen's action begins in the house of Shemus and Mary Rua. Here, we learn that a famine has been decimating Irish bodies throughout the countryside surrounding the Countess's castle for some time. The opening dialogue establishes that the emaciated peasants are regressing towards animalistic carnality. Not only are the trappings of civilization slipping away, physical bodies are described as going through various degrees of metamorphosis to reflect the growing prominence of zoological traits. The play's opening lines designate the blight-struck terrain as a landscape knocked out of balance, creating bodies in various degrees of transition towards an existence that is exclusively of the flesh rather than the spirit. The action begins with Mary and her son Teigue, who has just returned to the cottage after looking for his father. Teigue's first lines are, "They say the land is famine struck. / The graves are walking."⁸⁶ He provides his mother with examples of the boundaries between the living and the dead, human and beast, person and dumb-flesh, breaking down throughout the chaotic landscape outside the cottage walls:

TEIGUE. And that is not the worst; at Tubber-vanach
A woman met a man with ears spread out,
and they moved up and down like a bat's wing.

⁸⁶ Yeats, *Plays*, 27.

MARY. What can have kept your father all this while?

TEIGUE. Two nights ago, at Carrick-orus churchyard,
A herdsman met a man who had no mouth,
Nor eyes, nor ears; his face a wall of flesh;
He saw him plainly by the light of the moon.⁸⁷

Moments later, when Teigue looks outside for his father, he sees two owls with the faces of men watching the house. The constitutional balance of the peasantry is being tipped away from the human, intellectual, and spiritual towards the physical, bestial, and bodily.

A dehumanizing chaos is closing in and bodies are changing to express an increasing loss of interiority. The faceless man has no senses with which to experience, internalize, or interact with the world around him. Upon his return to the cottage, Mary's husband, Shemus, relays that the social fabric has been so torn asunder that the dead are left unattended, receiving no wake or funeral: "There were five doors that I looked through this day / And saw the dead and not a soul to wake them."⁸⁸ The funerary rights developed to acknowledge and facilitate the eternal soul's continuation have not been executed. Greek, Celtic, and Christian religion and philosophy designate the soul as the defining component of a full-fledged human being. The absence of such rituals further aligns dead humans with other species of dead animals. The unattended bodies take on the status of a carcass rather than a corpse.

Having failed to obtain any food, a frustrated Shemus curses the beggars who chased him away so as not to have to share their alms. In the play's 1892 version, the Countess does not appear until the second scene. When the heroine does appear, she is languishing within the walls of her estate. She is distressed by the famine but has hitherto found solace in the imaginary world of mythological lore. Her foster mother attempts to draw her into the tale of Fergus but she

⁸⁷ Ibid., 27-29.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 29.

remains distracted by the dearth that she can no longer ignore. This positioning presents the problem of endearing the audience to a heroine of substantial property who has hitherto failed to provide assistance to the starving masses because she felt sad. While she was coping by escaping to a romantic world of bygone days, peasants were dying.

The 1895 revision attempts to remedy this. In it, the compassionate noblewoman returns to her childhood estate to find that the local tenants have been rendered destitute by famine. All subsequent editions, including the one the 1899 production worked from, maintain this repositioning. Yeats likely made this alteration as a means of explaining why the Countess, who we later find has a storeroom full of grain and copious amounts of gold to procure meat and cattle, has not yet been moved to aid the people during an ongoing, deadly period of agricultural despoliation and abject poverty. In the amended version, the Countess is absent and uninformed rather than merely inactive as the people outside her walls are dying of malnutrition. It is only on her journey home that she discovers the dire state of the land and its dependents. This realization immediately spurs her into action.

In the 1899 version, the Countess arrives at the Rua house with a small entourage that includes her nurse Oona and the itinerant poet Aleel in the first scene. Mary observes the appropriate hospitality protocol, but Shemus advises his son to self-consciously affect a pathetic posture to manipulate the Countess into giving them more money. When the poet Aleel plays music, Shemus expresses disgust and refuses to thank the noblewoman for her charity. Following the Countess and her entourage's exit, Shemus expands his earlier curse to encompass all human kind, renouncing his own humanity in the process, and expresses an eagerness to commune with the inhuman beings that lurk outside instead. Mary attempts to prevent Shemus from inviting in the hybrid forms watching the house. He ignores her. In later versions, the stage directions

dictate that he beat Mary for her defiance before issuing his invitation to devils whilst barring the door against human persons:

What ever you are that walk the woods at
 night,
 So be it that you have not shouldered up
 Out of a grave—for I'll have nothing human—
 And have free hands, a friendly trick of speech,
 I welcome you. Come, sit by the fire.
 What matter if your head's below your arms
 Or you've a horse's tail to whip your flank.
 Feathers instead of hair, that's all but nothing.
 Come, share what bread and meat is in the house
 And stretch your heels and warm them in the ashes.
 And after that, let's share and share alike
 And curse all men and women. Come in, come in.⁸⁹

The stage directions dictate that two men enter in response to the invitation. They are dressed as “Eastern” merchants and proclaim that they are travelling on behalf of the “Master of all merchants” to buy souls.⁹⁰

The demon-merchants plant seeds of doubt in Shemus and Teigue about whether they even have souls in the first place: “For there's a vaporous thing—that may be nothing, / But that's the buyer's risk— a second self, / They call immortal for a story's sake.”⁹¹ Shemus, who is immediately won over, responds, “What can it be but nothing? / What has God poured out of his bag but famine? / Satan gives money.”⁹² Shemus readily accepts that his soul does not exist. He does not stop to ponder why such a price would be offered for a nonentity and when the merchants state that they do not believe in charity he ignores the implication that they would not

⁸⁹ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 34-35.

⁹¹ Ibid., 16-17.

⁹² Ibid., 17.

give him money for nothing. Such eagerness indicates that Shemus and Teigue's crisis of faith lies in their failure to believe their own souls have substance, worth, or even existence. After the transaction, Shemus and Teigue are able to nourish themselves and maintain the condition of embodiment. The crises of faith that leads the peasants to forfeit the immortal part of themselves, believed to separate them from other finite other organisms, from wolves and livestock, is made light of since that part does not appear to be worth much in the first place.

Mary recognizes the merchants as the hybrid creatures that previously sat outside the door and refuses to cook for them.⁹³ She reiterates her faith that God will set things right. The demon-merchants predict that her efforts to save her own soul will go unanswered:

You shall eat dock and grass, and dandelion,
Till that low threshold there becomes a wall,
And when your hands can scarcely drag your body
We shall be near you.⁹⁴

Upon this pronouncement Mary passes out, leaving the devilish businessman with the last word. The audience does not hear of Mary again until after she is dead. After Mary faints, the action moves to the woods and the Countess's home for the next three scenes.

The offer to buy the cottiers souls in exchange for gold with which to buy food sets up an ultimatum wherein the survival of the physical self is placed in direct opposition to the survival of the spiritual self; either the soul is sacrificed for the sake body or the body is sacrificed for the sake of the soul. The possibility of symbiotic mind-body coexistence is removed. As the action progresses, the Countess's efforts to feed the vulnerable peasants are undermined when the

⁹³ Yeats play problematically utilizes certain kinds of external appearances to act as signifiers for internal quality or worth. The fact that the demons specifically take the form of "Eastern" males means that Yeats is equating non-white bodies as the natural, physical expression of demonic quality. On the other side, the body of the Countess, the beautiful young, virginal woman, expresses her internal perfection. Hers are the body and soul *par excellence* against which all others are valued as inferior.

⁹⁴ Yeats, *Plays*, 38.

demons rob both her food stores and treasuries in order to maintain the ultimatum between physical or spiritual existence for the peasants.

The action returns to the Rua house after Mary is dead and the surviving characters confirm the demonic prophecy's accuracy. She did in fact die eating weeds like a grazing animal while the merchants remained close at hand. In the 1895 and 1899 publications, the merchants refer to her laid out body as a means of frightening the peasants into commerce with them:

Come deal, come deal or will you always starve
A woman lived here once, she would not deal—
She lies in there with red wall flowers,
And candles stuck in bottles, round her head.⁹⁵

The merchant's lines trivialize the efforts made to show Mary's body respect and delineate the wake house as a transitory space. Prompted by the merchant's use of Mary Rua's corpse as a cautionary object, the peasants come forward one by one to be appraised. Normally, the presence of the corpse demarcated the wake house as a liminal space where normal work and trade was suspended until the body was buried. In this case, Mary's body is appropriated as an inciter of commerce. Mary was able to triumph over the immediate but fleeting corporeal relief offered by the merchants despite poverty and the physical suffering caused by malnutrition. A poor woman rather than a man is shown to transcend her bodily needs to avoid the dehumanizing trap laid by the demons. Although Mary's behavior keeps in line with Catholic protocol, it is ultimately shown to be impotent; her afterlife is never mentioned, and her death is shown to be self-preserving rather than sacrificially regenerative for others.

As the action proceeds, the soul of a middle aged man is purchased for only two hundred crowns on the grounds that he has privately pondered robbery and a young adulteress is bartered

⁹⁵ W.B. Yeats, *Poems*, 75.

down to a mere one hundred. The highest price procured amongst the peasants is one thousand pounds for the pious soul of a poor, elderly, Catholic woman, described as “always ugly.”⁹⁶ After the nameless old woman is paid, she attempts to evoke the name of God and cries out in pain. This causes others to rethink doing business with the merchants. The only male character to escape appraisal and purchase is the wandering poet Aleel. Hopelessly in love with the Countess, he attempts to sell his tortured soul, but the merchants refuse to do business with him on the grounds that he already belongs to another. Aleel exists outside the strata of the settled community as a wandering bard, unfettered by earthly concerns. As will be discussed below, Yeats’ identification with the chivalrous young poet, infatuated with an unobtainable beautiful Anglo-Irish heiress also paralleled his, real life infatuation with Maud Gonne.

When the Countess enters, her soul is appraised at five hundred thousand crowns. The peasants readily accept that the Countess’s soul is worth exponentially more than all of their own combined. In an act that ultimately brings about her own death, the altruistic heroine barter her own soul in exchange for all of the peasants souls put together as well as a sizable sum. A peasant protests: “Do not, do not, for souls the like of ours / Are not precious to God as your soul is. / O! what would heaven do without you, lady?”⁹⁷ The Countess wills the money to the unworthy masses and exits. Moments later, she collapses offstage and is brought back on to give her dramatic final speech before dying in a bloodless swoon. Aleel, Oona, and a collection of unnamed peasants launch into emotional lamentation.

In contrast to Mary, who disappears from the action after the first scene and only returns in the final act as a silent corpse, the Countess actively and dramatically dies onstage in every edition of the play. After signing over her soul on behalf of those who have shown themselves to

⁹⁶ Yeats, *Plays*, 56.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

be unworthy, she exits as the pitiful peasants swarm to kiss her dress. The merchants, aware that this woman will live “only minutes” after forfeiting so great a soul, rush out to transmogrify into birdlike scavengers positioned to catch in their talons her bought and paid for essence to spirit it away to hell.⁹⁸ Aleel remains onstage alone as a storm swells. He attributes it to the opening gates of hell. Oona joins Aleel and the two go back and forth grieving their beloved Countess’s actions until she is brought back on by the nameless peasants and laid on the ground as if dead. She stirs and uses her final breaths to allocate her money fairly among the people before going on to what Fiona Macintosh refers to as the “the Big Speech Convention” in Greek and Irish tragedy.⁹⁹

Keeping in line with this theme of redistributing trajectories generally reserved for the opposite gender, the poet Aleel functions as the lead lamenter. Like Andromache mourning Hector in the *Illiad*, or Clytemnestra in *Trojan Women*, Aleel takes center stage as the aggrieved lover who remembers and immortalizes the Countess to the audience through poetic lamentation. Oona joins him and the foster mother performs a duet of grief with the deceased’s lover. This configuration of bereavement reinforces Yeats’ Christ-like characterization of the Countess. It draws attention to the play’s departure from biblical and classical as precedents in terms of gender. Oona occupies a role reminiscent of Mary, mother of Christ, and Aleel’s role echoes that of Mary Magdalene’s more romantic one. The play also departs from gender norms within the *caioneadh* tradition by configuring Aleel as the primary mourner. Yeats’ play casts a man in Mary Magdalene’s archetypal role and an aristocratic woman in the role of the messiah.

The Countess ascends to the gates of heaven where she receives a personal welcome from the Virgin Mary. Again, the situation of Mary Rua’s afterlife receives no explicit attention as the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁹⁹ Macintosh, *Dying Acts*, 91.

play proceeds. Like Alcestis, who is eventually rescued by Hercules, and Iphigenia, who is displaced with a deer and spirited away after consenting to her own sacrifice, the Countess receives divine protection for her altruistic display despite having done business with the devil's henchmen. The declaration of the angel in the final moments of the play, "The Light of Lights / Looks always on the motive, not the deed, the Shadow of Shadows on the deed alone" reasserts the primacy of the mental and spiritual over the physical and tangible. Meaning of earthly action is determined by its executor's internal motivations. Spiritual intent is immortalized, whereas the immediate, material consequences of actions, those effects the devil trades in, are subject to the erosion of time. They are therefore valued as less important than man's spiritual, intellectual self.

Despite Yeats's self-proclaimed utilization of *Alcestis* as one of his many source-texts, his play's message is in direct contrast with Euripides' play. It also departs from the Greek view of the afterlife on several fundamental counts. Alcestis' sacrifice, although acknowledged, is not the focus of Euripides' play. Rather, it is her husband's ability to nobly extend fraternal hospitality even amidst the recognition of his grief that is rewarded. Heracles rescues Alcestis from the underworld, a place depicted in Greek literature as universally unpleasant and monotonous in order to thank his friend for putting his duty as a host and friend before his own mourning process. Alcestis is resurrected as a comfort to her husband unlike the Countess Cathleen who is directly commemorated and rewarded for her own sake.

In contrast to *The Countess Cathleen*, which celebrates the titular character's incorruptible agency, Greek plays are constructed to emphasize the limitations of human will. They generally hold their characters accountable for the outcome of actions that manifest according to the inescapable vice grip of external circumstances, divine or mundane; what the Greeks called fate, not human will. Unlike Catholic doctrine, which insists that a soul will, after

a possible period in purgatory, spend its afterlife in either heaven or hell, in paradise or torture depending on a soul's moral integrity while it remained in its body, depictions of the Greek afterlife do not offer the same incentives. Regardless of moral quality in thought or deed, all "the exhausted dead" end up in largely the same place as long as they received a proper burial.¹⁰⁰ The Roman poet, Virgil, introduces far more categories for the afterlife than his Greek predecessor Homer. The *Aenied* delineates space for broken-hearted suicides and spaces for those who committed incest or defied the gods. He also introduces the rewarding fields of Elysium and the concept of reincarnation. In short, the Greek's undifferentiated view of the afterlife did not act as an incentive to observe certain behavioral protocols in life. Yeats' play stages divine retribution in the afterlife but only for its one socially elite character whose intent is shown to eclipse deed.

Yeats' play selectively appropriates a Greek source to stage a reversal of the gender roles that Attic and liturgical drama traditionally uphold. *The Countess Cathleen*'s female characters are primarily associated with the soul, premature death, the reception of funerary rights, and the afterlife. The male characters, with the exception of the poet Aleel, are depicted as, in the words of Hesiod's muses, "bellies and nothing more."¹⁰¹ They are left behind to live out a predominantly carnal existence in a dehumanizing, liminal landscape where men can regressively transmogrify into beasts during times of famine. In the figure of the Countess, Yeats tries to reassert the possibility of a female deity who fulfills a sacrificial role usually reserved for young men who most closely resembled Christ and Dionysus at the superficial level. In maintaining the sacrificial model, Yeats also perpetuated somatophobic ideologies that demonized the physical body and configured it as abject from ideal, spiritualist constructions of humanity. Negative reactions to *The Countess Cathleen* in 1899 were as much about the

¹⁰⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 11.581.

¹⁰¹ Powell, *Classical Myth*, 71.

insinuation that class could trump gender as the main criteria for superiority as it was about the play's treatment of famine, Catholicism, and landlordism.

Although Yeats claimed he was trying to reclaim the syncretic world-view he imagined in early Christian Ireland, his first play fails to incorporate early Celtic conceptions of embodied subjectivity into his intertextual experiment. Or more accurately, he only asserts an interconnected constitution of physical and mental self in the aristocratic figure of Cathleen. In "A General Introduction to my Work" Yeats contextualizes his drama and poetry in regards to the religious syncretism he imagined in pre-modern Ireland and wished to reclaim. He nostalgically evokes a period when the Christianity that St. Patrick brought still managed to coexist with Druidism and vice versa: "the umbilical cord which united Christianity to the ancient world had not yet been cut, Christ was still the half brother of Dionysus."¹⁰² One can't help but notice the absence of a Celtic deity from this approximation. Dionysus stands in for the missing Irish deity. This elision extends to the configuration of subjectivity; the Christian and the Classical components effectively snuff out a more interconnected model of subjectivity in favor of Platonic model that places the body and the spiritual self in an antagonist, hierarchical relationship.

In his later work, Yeats's intertextual engagement elevates the status of sensory experience. However, in his first play, *The Countess Cathleen*, Yeats actually reconfigures the human subject in the Platonic sense, where the body is imagined as the imprisoning adversary of the essential, spiritual self. In doing so, he fails to incorporate imaginings of human subjectivity as iterated in early Celtic creation stories as they actually come down to us from the early-Christian period. Anne O'Reilly cites that just as Celtic creation stories and poetic traditions

¹⁰² W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats Vol. V: Later Essays*, eds. William O'Donnell and Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux (New York: Schribner and Sons, 1994), 207.

frequently evoke the image of the cauldron as a kind of “cosmic womb” from whence all life sprang. They also depict the human body as three cauldrons stacked one on top of the other. Reminiscent of chakras in eastern medicine, the first was located in the belly and acted as vessel to physical health and vitality. The second rested in the chest and housed psychic health, and the third, positioned in the head, acted as cradle for the spiritual component of the self. What is important about this imagining, is that these energy centers were not conceived as mutually exclusive entities; when these three cauldrons were aligned, allowing the trinity of body, intellect, and soul to symbiotically flow between and nourish one another, the self was depicted as living in a state of harmony. However, should some trauma occur, disrupting the balanced flow of energies that allowed the united self to thrive—some doubt, shock, illness, or assault, a fragmentation or “soul loss” could occur.¹⁰³ In *The Countess Cathleen*, soul loss very literally occurs, at least temporarily for almost every character. For the Countess, her class trumps the corporeal limitations normally associated with her gender in the sense that she is able to rise above carnality. Her spiritual value is asserted through lamentation performances and divine intervention but does it work the other way too? Can Mary too rise above the essential corporeality of her class? The meager funerary attention shown to her corpse and her memory indicate that she cannot.

Audiences observed the Countess’s death but her physical body disappeared immediately thereafter in a blackout. Just as the merchants wait for their most coveted prize, the Countess’s soul, Yeats orchestrates a Faustian *deus ex machine*. When the light returns, the peasants have

¹⁰³ O’Reilly, *Sacred Play*, 4.

been transported to a rocky mountainside reminiscent of Croagh Patrick.¹⁰⁴ Through the breaking clouds, armored angels descend to proclaim the heroine's ascension on the grounds that her intentions were pure, thus eradicating the damning deed of sale. The play closes as increasing numbers of delivered peasants arrive to kneel in exaltation of their savior.

In contrast to the Countess, who dies immediately after forfeiting ownership of her soul, Shemus and his son Teigue, who sell off their souls in the first scene, seem able to live on indefinitely without them with no discernable damage to their ability to assert themselves through speech and action. Though they enter into the demons' servitude, they do so gleefully and express their reasoning throughout. The alternate reactions to soul loss communicate several things. Firstly, the dichotomous relationship between body and soul is not a quantifiably reciprocal one, nor is that relationship uniform amongst characters in the play. Secondly, certain bodies are able to live on after selling their souls. Others expire immediately after the metaphysical transaction takes place indicating that some characters are composed of more body than soul and vice versa. Finally, it asserts that the Countess's noble birth has made her soul a more valuable commodity than all those Catholic peasants she saves combined. Just as Hesiod describes Pandora as being endowed with a soul that has less value than her male counterparts, certain souls in this play are shown to be worth less than others. While the Countess's spiritual loss is made material in her immediate physical decline, the act of forfeiting their insignificant souls is what actually keeps the peasants alive, albeit in animalistic form.

The Countess Cathleen thematically maintains that a life of material comfort and security has allowed its heroine access to art. This has fostered a sense of empathy in her that has not been developed in the peasants but it has also caused her body to atrophy due to an

¹⁰⁴ Croagh Patrick is regarded as Ireland's most holy mountain and is a popular site for religious pilgrimage. It is said to be the place where Saint Patrick fasted in 441 AD. Today it remains a popular destination with Catholics but its importance as a holy destination and place of worship stretches back to thousands of years.

overdeveloped ability to identify with the plights of others. When she explains that her doctors have prescribed that she fly to her country dwelling as a means of distracting herself from a heart sickness they feel will cause her death, her nurse Oona explains, “Sorrows that she’s but read of in a book / Weigh on her mind as if they had been her own.”¹⁰⁵ The Countess’s sensitivity to art and beauty, along with her compassion for the poor, designates her as the moral paragon of the play. The fact that Shemus is materialistic, expresses dismay at Aleel’s aesthetic performance in the first scene, and is openly disliked by the poet, further damages his characterization. The Countess is shown to be an essentially spiritual being, whereas the peasants, aside from Mary, are depicted as fundamentally carnal creatures. Mary dies of starvation, a bodily condition in order to save her soul, whereas the Countess is shown to physically collapse upon surrendering her soul. Mary cannot survive without food while the Countess cannot survive without her spiritual sense of identity. This is in keeping with the play’s stance that a person’s level of materiality is contingent upon class.

The representations of Mary and the Countess’s contrasting death and post mortem situations reinforce this reading. Unlike the much-grieved Countess, who actively dies onstage, and is the focus of both wild lamentation and divine intervention, Mary Rua’s own death receives short shrift. In the original play, she dies offstage and is merely mentioned by the merchants. In all publications that came after the 1899 production, Mary’s body is materially present. The stage directions for the final scene read, “*The house of Shemus Rua. There is an alcove at the back with curtains; in it a bed, and on the bed is the body of Mary with candles round it.*”¹⁰⁶ Peter Ure maintains that The Irish Literary Theatre worked with the 1899 script and

¹⁰⁵ Yeats, *Plays*, 32.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

that the 1901 version reflects how it actually manifest as a production. That being said, Mary's dead body was onstage during the entirety of Act III when the play was produced at the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin.

Presumably, Mary did not die in the very spot where she was laid out. Her laid out presence in the alcove, encircled by candles, effectively communicates her transition from subject to object. The audience is aware that her body has been positioned by others who refer to her in the third person past tense. In reality, a live audience would be aware, on some level, that a living actress came to that position of her own volition, but within the dramatic narrative her repositioned body takes on the status of a marionette or a prop. Mary's continued presence as a corpse that has not yet been buried reminds the audience that she remains in an intermediate state where her physical form remains in proximity to the living. The final rights that would allow her to pass into spiritual eternity and the interment of her remains show no signs of occurring in the play. The 1899 audience did not see Mary die but they were able to observe her arranged corpse for the entirety of Act III when the Countess barter her soul away, dies, and is hugely lamented.¹⁰⁷ I argue that Yeats insisted on removing the Countess's corpse because the narrative of heroic apotheosis hinged upon the erasure of a sacrificial victim's physical remains. When a dead character's body continues to be theatrically present as part of the staged action, it exists in tension with an assuaging narrative of immortality.

Uproar or Applause?

¹⁰⁷ In the 1911 remount, Mary's husband and son describe her death as a senseless waste before covering her laid out body. In doing so, they cut the funerary observation short in order to assist the merchants in their business. In comparison to the positive outcome the Countess's death precipitates for the masses, Mary's death is shown to be largely ineffectual for the living across texts and productions. In the world of the play, this seems to be the best can be hoped for if one has been born into poverty. *Ibid.*, 53.

The Irish Literary Theatre's premiere of *The Countess Cathleen* was directed by Florence Farr and worked from the second of what Peter Ure observes as the four major revisions of Yeats' script.¹⁰⁸ A copyright performance of the play had initially been put on at the Athenaeum Theatre in Shepherd's Bush, England in 1892. In the lead up to the Dublin production, the play was hotly debated on both sides of the Irish Sea. London papers sent reporters to cover the opening night. There they encountered a crowd comprised of cultural and political nationalists packed in with University students and titled members of the upper class who had signed on as the Irish Literary Theatre's guarantors. Some were there to protest content, some were there to protest artistic censorship, and some were simply there to be entertained. A deployment of Dublin police officers stood at the back of the hall, where a small stage had been erected, in case the varied energies boiled over. Yeats had requested the police presence on the grounds that the English actors might need protection from the rabble.¹⁰⁹ No doubt though, given Yeats' public relations record following this moment, he was likely aware that the presence of officers would only contribute to the venue's excited atmosphere.¹¹⁰

There are conflicting accounts about the level of disruption that negative reactions to the play actually caused during the run. Joseph Holloway, the avid theatre diarist who would eventually serve as architect for the Abbey theatre building, described a group of twenty "beardless idiots" while the ILT's president T.W. Rolleston maintained that only about twelve students expressed contempt during the opening night and that they did not do so in a wild or

¹⁰⁸ Ure, Peter, "The Evolution of Yeats's 'The Countess Cathleen,'" 13.

¹⁰⁹ Frazier, Adrian, "The Making of Meaning: Yeats and *The Countess Cathleen*," *The Sewanee Review* 95, no. 3 (1987): 451-2.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 467.

irreverent way.¹¹¹ The writer, George Moore, described the audience as howling against the play during the second night of its run. This indicates that the intensity of reaction increased as the run progressed. While literary descriptions number actively hostile audience members differently, they seem consistent in identifying the culprits as young men seated in the gallery. Despite the general registry of unrest, there are also numerous statements maintaining that every hiss and grumble was met with a contrary cheer of support.¹¹² Those who attended to express support also represented a variety of agendas. Arthur Griffith, the editor of *United Ireland* and future editor of Sinn Féin, arrived to protest clerical censorship. He attended the production with a group of men who had preemptively agreed to clap for everything the church might object to. A young James Joyce similarly attended to celebrate the sacred autonomy of artistic expression.¹¹³ As Adrienne Frazier observes, most of these supporters were advocating for art and freedom of speech in general rather than Yeats' play in particular.

The production has been commemorated in such a way that its immediate audience reactions have been aggrandized from moderate hostility into full-blown riots. Despite our inability to assign the specific level of audience unrest with absolute certainty, it is clear that Yeats was already exhibiting a knack for curating strong reactions to his dramatic pursuits. The requested police presence was probably just as much about safety as it was about adding to the tense excitement that the abundance of debates about the play's merit had also helped to foster. The positioning of those that documented the 1899 production, socially, politically, and

¹¹¹Ibid., 452.

¹¹² Joseph Holloway, *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from his Unpublished Journal, Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, eds. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 6.

¹¹³ The play left such an impression on Joyce that he cites it in both *Ulysses* when Buck Mulligan chants Oona's now removed line "Who will go drive with Fergus now?" Stephen Dedalus also remembers Cathleen's dying words, "Bend your faces down, Oona and Aleel" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

physically (in terms of where they were positioned in a theatrical venue that by no means practiced open seating) complicates an authoritative reading of these now remote events. We do know that some sort of observable, negative reaction manifest more than once during *The Countess Cathleen*'s run. As Adrian Frazier observes, while we cannot know the exact nature of the play's reception across audience members within the Antient Concert Rooms, there is substantial literary evidence that the representational value, meanings, and nationalistic implications of *The Countess Cathleen* occupied Dublin presses and academic debates for an extended period before and after it physically manifest before an audience. After sparking a great deal of literary debate and some degree of performative uproar, *The Countess Cathleen* was largely struck from the accepted production canon until a multiply revised version was remounted in 1911 with Maire O'Neill in the part of the Countess. Lady Gregory used the fact that the play received little to no public protest when it was remounted a little more than a decade later as evidence that herself, Yeats, Martyn, and the late Synge had "won the battle" for a literary rather than realistic theatre in Ireland.

The Irish Literary Theatre's utilization of English actors did not help to endear Irish Catholic audiences to Yeats's miracle play. May Whitty played the Countess in lieu of Maud Gonne. The director, Florence Farr, another of Yeats's muses, played the part of Aleel, the wandering bard who is hopelessly in love with the Countess. Joseph Holloway describes the two women's performances:

Miss May Whitty made an ideal "Countess Cathleen," sympathetic and lovable in manner, and spoke her lines with a delicious, natural, sweet musical cadence expressively and most distinctly looking the "rare and radiant maiden" of the poet's dream to the life and always using simple yet graceful and picturesque gestures, and posing artistically yet never artificially in every episode so as to create many memorable and beautiful stage pictures[...] Miss Florence Farr as "Aleel," a bard, declaimed all her lines in majestic,

beautiful, rhythmic manner grand to listen to—most impressive if occasionally indistinct.¹¹⁴

It may be telling that Holloway fails to comment on any of the male actor's performances but mentions several peripheral aspects that colored the performance. For instance, he takes issue with a squeaky door and the overly liberal use of tin thunder claps during the Countess's transmigration into heaven. The fact that Aleel was actually played by a woman is also crucial. Aleel is written as the only male character to escape the merchant's trap. The merchants refuse to purchase Aleel on the grounds that his soul cannot be bought since it already belongs to the Countess. Florence Farr's drag performance further thwarts audience expectations because male actors exclusively transgressed their spiritual identities while women embodied trajectories that fulfilled the ideal performance expectations normally assigned to the opposite sex. The fact that Shemus and Teigue were played by English men only added to the offense certain critics and audience members observed. English actors' enactment of negative Irish stereotypes took on the exact air of minstrelsy that Gregory, Martyn, and Yeats had proclaimed they would correct in the "Manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre" cited above. In short, the initial controversy and protest sparked by *The Countess Cathleen* actually helped to secure The Irish Literary Theatre's notoriety.

Critical Reception Then and Now

Much of *The Countess Cathleen*'s criticism, then and now, has centered on Yeats's irreverent, condescending treatment of religion and his insensitive rendering of rural Catholics during a supposedly ahistorical period of famine. When the play was first published and staged at the end of the nineteenth century, Ireland was still reeling from the aftershocks of one of the

¹¹⁴ Holloway, *Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, 8.

worst natural disasters on human record. Unsurprisingly, after the potato blight incited an extended period of mass starvation, disease, eviction, and emigration which reached its height in the middle of the nineteenth century and lingered still, audiences failed to heed Yeats' vague attempt at temporal distance; the stage directions simply read "The Scene is laid in Ireland and in old times."¹¹⁵ Although Yeats nostalgically imagined a medieval Ireland, populated by wandering bards, benevolent landowners, and jejune peasants as the setting for his play, audiences read it in relation to recent, if not ongoing trauma.

The Dublin premiere proved quite contentious after being preemptively dubbed blasphemous by Frank Hugh O'Donnell in his frequently cited letters to the editor of the *Freeman's Journal*. The play also received a public condemnation from Cardinal Logue. O'Donnell compiled his letters to create the pamphlet *Souls for Gold! Pseudo-Celtic Drama in Dublin*, which he circulated to contribute to the play's controversial opening. The pamphlet raises several valid objections but zeros in most specifically on the blasphemous treatment of religious figures and icons, the Countess's heretical apotheosis, and the general depiction of Irish Catholics as superstitious, materialistic, ineffective in prayer, and prone to apostasy. As Susan Cannon Harris deftly points out, O'Donnell's strong negative reaction to the piece, although mainly focused on its religious inaccuracies and negative representations of dispossessed Irish people, is also highly gendered.¹¹⁶

O'Donnell repeatedly refers to the Countess as the "demented heroine," evoking Victorian ideas about hysterical women.¹¹⁷ He also takes great issue with the minor appearance

¹¹⁵ Yeats, *Plays*, 27.

¹¹⁶ Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, 39.

¹¹⁷ Frank Hugh O'Donnell, *Souls for Gold: Pseudo-Celtic Drama in Dublin* (London: Nassau Press, 1899), 4.

of an adulteress, fails to mention Mary whatsoever, and points out the representational absence of appropriate Irish masculinity several times to prove that the play has inappropriately been marketed itself as Celtic: “Nowhere is there a single gleam of manliness, intelligence, or bare civilization.”¹¹⁸ It should be noted that O’Donnell’s use of “manly” is historically positioned. Using “manly” as an umbrella term to refer to what is considered human and civilized reflects a patriarchal definition of humanity that is not exclusive to Ireland during this period. That being said, its repetitious emphasis in O’Donnell’s letters also reflects brands of nationalism that were heavily invested in reconstructing the idealized Gaelic man after he had been inappropriately feminized through colonial suppression and misrepresentation. O’Donnell goes on:

Mr. W.B. Yeats seems to see nothing in Ireland of old days but an unmanly, an impious, and renegade people, crouched in degraded awe before demons, and goblins, and sprites, and sowlths, and thivishes, like a sordid tribe of black devil-worshippers and fetish-worshippers on the Congo or the Niger.¹¹⁹

He references the displeasing parallels between Yeats’s stage Irishman and the “congo negro” again in his second letter as a means of deflecting the unwanted traits previously imposed on the Irish towards another dehumanized demographic. O’Donnell maintains that no Irish actor should submit to playing these roles as they require them to rehearse damning acts. His second letter ends by proclaiming that no Catholic, Protestant, or nationalist “of any manly race or nation” should serve as an audience member for this play.¹²⁰ Again, O’Donnell mentions the minor appearance of a cheating wife. He fails to mention the trajectory of Mary, shown to place spirituality before corporeal necessity, whatsoever.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 14.

While Mary remains a telling blind spot in O'Donnell's critique, his outrage at Yeats's cavalier rendering of famine, starvation, and class inequity is well founded. His letters reference the soul-selling and soup-buying Irish peasants in order to counter Yeats's insistence that his drama should not be read in the context of the Great Famine.¹²¹ The merchants who appear to profit from the famine, who offer aid in exchange for the renouncement of Catholic faith reference actual aid strategies that coerced recipients' religious conversion. The trauma of the Famine was in no way remote to the Irish consciousness in 1899. Nor was the belief that its catastrophic effects were exacerbated by ineffective and self-interested colonial relief policies. Aftershocks of spoilt crops and evictions continued to wreak havoc upon rural communities in Mayo and Donegal at the turn of the century. Although Yeats insisted that his play was symbolic rather than realistic, audiences could not help but connect a play set in famine-stricken Ireland with recent, if not ongoing trauma.

In *The Countess Cathleen*, Yeats indicates that the peasants, although subject to cruel external circumstances, remain culpable in their own demise. Yeats's inequitable, sanctifying treatment of a prodigal, Anglo-Irish landlady also fails to adequately acknowledge that the Countess's position of wealth and power within the socioeconomic hierarchy, that which has allowed her soul the luxury of growing so great, is the result of empire rather than work or inherent merit. While focusing on the negative physical effect the Countess's elective, spiritual suffering has on her own body, Yeats simultaneously treats malnutrition, violence, and mass emigration, as abstract phenomena when the bodies being afflicted belong to a dispossessed, indigenous population. While the Countess's spiritual loss is made material in her immediate physical decline, the act of forfeiting their insignificant souls is what keeps the peasants alive.

¹²¹ Protestant landlords offered to give Catholics soup in exchange for religious conversion during the Famine. The few that did were derogatively referred to as "souters." Frazier, *The Making of Meaning*, 460-461.

Despite having physically entered into a binding contract with Satan's emissaries, angels appear immediately after the Countess's death to confirm that her soul has already passed through the gates of heaven. This reasserts the play's insistence that internal intent subverts external action, the ethereal trumps the material, and the soul is superior to the corruptive body. The accusation of heresy that Frank Hugh O'Donnell lobs lies in the fact that the Countess's soul enjoys a heavenly transmigration on the grounds that her aims were pure even if her acts were knowingly damnable.

Although contemporaneous protests to the 1899 production had definite merit, they fail to acknowledge that some of the horror experienced by certain audience members was also rooted in the play's failure to confirm gender stereotypes that a broad spectrum of Irish nationalists were becoming increasingly invested in at the dawn of the twentieth century. Taking after Susan Cannon Harris's *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, I argue that women's bodies were rejected as viable objects of sacrifice because they were already functioning as over-determined symbols of fertility, materiality, and reproduction as the Irish national theatre movement emerged from under the Gaelic Revival's discursive umbrella.¹²² The ways in which embodiment and its loss were theatrically formulated, revised, and received via this play illustrate how Irish women were more popularly articulated as producers, caretakers, and receivers of bodies during this period. *The Countess Cathleen's* reception also set a reactionary precedent for plays that failed to fulfill the expectation of male sacrifice and disembodiment as a counterpart to feminine bereavement and materiality. Both the Countess and Mary refuse to naturalize Irish femininity as essentially corporeal. Similarly, Shemus and Teigue fail to escape the demands of embodiment in order to confirm that Irish masculinity is essentially spiritual. One cannot help but wonder what sort of public reaction the play might have evoked had the gender roles been reversed. Would a count

¹²² Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, 3-4.

rather than a countess have been as vehemently rejected as a sacrificial, albeit aristocratic hero? If Shemus rather than Mary had refused to deal with the mephistophelian capitalists, would the oppositional reaction have been as pronounced? I posit that it would not have been.

Cannon Harris observes the gender requirements of sacrificial dramas as they manifest on Ireland's proclaimed national stages at the turn of the century. She maintains that women's bodies resisted being transformed into heroic icons because they had already been essentialized in relation to reproductive biology:

The sacrificial story that gets played out in nationalist Irish drama requires a male victim whose body can be more easily translated. It requires, also, a female counterpart—the mother/wife/lover who accepts the sacrifice and whose body can then fulfill the more “natural” role of transforming that death into a rebirth.¹²³

Of course, the necessity of the male sex in biological reproduction is left out of this imagining. That would draw attention to fissures in the fantasy that male bodies are not also the fleshy, appetitive, secreting organisms they actually are. According to sacrificial protocol, once a man has actually or symbolically fertilized a birthing vessel, he can exit the material universe that is not his natural environment to realize his true, ethereal self in death.

Within this highly gendered, sacrificial model, the survival of the human species hinges upon the cyclical creation and destruction of male bodies. It also requires that women produce, absorb, and regenerate those sacrificial bodies. The denial of material longevity in constructions of Irish manhood manifests, in part, as an attempt to recuperate English portrayals of Irishness that emphasized animalistic carnality as a means of substantiating their imperial project. Yeats' description of Irish peasants taking on zoological traits in both behavior and appearance was therefore particularly offensive. I argue that Ireland was colonized by a somatophobic culture

¹²³ Ibid., 4.

that devalued the organic aspects of human existence and negatively classified members of the population whose identities were ideologically bound up in the corporeal.

The English used representations of Irish carnality to differentiate themselves from the people whose culture they wished to debase, control, and supplant. The English identified themselves as a rational, spiritual, patriarchal people, who exercised control over their physical selves at all times. The Irish were shown to be promiscuous, passionate, wild creatures, femininely ruled by bodily urges. As James Phelan notes, in an attempt to define and describe “an authentic autonomous Irish culture and identity,” the Irish revivalists actually re-activated the same kind of essentialist arguments involving authenticity used against them by the colonizers: “the professed legitimacy of imperial rule and anti-colonial, nationalist resistance rely upon their conflicting claims to what is culturally in/authentic, as authenticity becomes the battlefield for ideological hegemony.”¹²⁴ Similarly, Cannon Harris observes that the Irish nationalist community, “allowed itself to be confined and constrained within the limits of imperial discourse.”¹²⁵ A traumatized party often takes on the behavior of its aggressor. Even as revivalists and nationalists strove to create an autonomous Irish identity, they reproduced an ideological derision of the physical self. In turn, they designated and reified their society’s subalterns on the grounds of their essential, subjectivity draining corporeality.

Drawing upon a framework of imperial and colonial othering as it has been analyzed by Robert Miles and Edward Said, Michael Hayes points out that the process through which women, the rural poor, and travellers have been defined and aestheticized in Ireland throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is uncannily similar to the ways in which the

¹²⁴ James Phelan, “Authentic Reproductions” Staging the “Wild West” in Modern Irish Drama.” *Theatre Journal*, 61. no. 2 (2009): 236.

¹²⁵ Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, 33.

general Irish population was rendered subaltern as part of England's colonial practice; a colonized group is endowed with the traits that have been regarded as the most hated or feared in the colonizing group's more "civilized" society.¹²⁶ As middle class, heterosexual, Catholic men emerged as the dominant demographic in Ireland, those traits previously assigned to them by the English were deflected onto those they wished to differentiate themselves from in the new hierarchy. That being said, in order to divert an essentially corporeal and therefore effeminate imagining of Irish masculinity, nationalistic writers increasingly projected those aspects they wished to distance themselves from onto those designated as their constitutional others.

Paul Murphy argues that Yeats's drama works along these lines to naturalize the dominance of his own Anglo-Irish demographic.¹²⁷ As I have shown above, the Countess's assignment as the sacrificial protagonist of his play effectively communicates that class takes precedence over gender. What could be more offensive to contemporaneous discourses of Irish masculinity than a play that depicted a saintly, female member of the landed gentry saving the morally corrupt, animalistic Irish peasantry from itself? This problematic play remains useful as an early example, although arguably an unsuccessful one, of the particular intertextual recipe that a precursor company to the Abbey was developing at the end of the nineteenth century. Keeping in line with the Greek, Christian, and Celtic models that this play derives from, *The Countess Cathleen*'s heroic characters ultimately forfeit their bodies so that their souls can positively survive. Although the rhetoric of blood sacrifice remains strong in the dramatic material that came after it, *The Countess Cathleen*'s attention to an effective, self actualizing woman, whose actions have immediate, positive consequences for their community and render them theatrically

¹²⁶ Michael Hayes, "Indigenous Otherness: Some Aspects of Irish Traveller Social History" *Eire-Ireland* 41, no. 3 & 4 (2006): 135.

¹²⁷ Paul Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama, 1899-1949* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 14.

worthy of wake and eulogy does not.¹²⁸

Yeats's play is not subtle in its delegation of sympathetic and antagonistic attributes for its characters along class and gender lines. Yeats juxtaposes an aversion to industrious or upwardly mobile proletariats to his celebration of romantic spiritualism achieved through inherited wealth and property. As the twentieth century proceeded, Yeats' work continued to warily associate western modernity with materialism, industrial capitalism, bourgeois society, and the emergence of empirical, rational, scientific, and utilitarian modes of thought. He believed these phenomena encouraged the passive abdication of personal will in favor of the demands of an external collective. Ironically, it is this very abdication of individual particularity that Yeats and Gregory would stage in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902 to endear them to *The Countess Cathleen's* previous critics in 1899.

Let us now return to Maud Gonne, the inspiration for the Countess Cathleen and the originator of the Cathleen ni Houlihan, the allegorical embodiment of colonized Ireland. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* takes place in the Guillane family's modest house in 1798, on the eve of the historical Rebellion against the British. It is also the night before Michael Guillane's advantageous marriage to a young woman named Delia Cahel. Referred to in the script as "The Poor Old Woman," Gonne entered the Guillane cottage as a hunched, itinerant who calls young men to arms so that her colonized body might be liberated and restored to its natural state of youth and beauty. In the script, the bridegroom agrees to forgo his marriage to an actual woman in order to sacrifice himself for supernatural Ireland in the 1798 Rebellion.¹²⁹ The old woman

¹²⁸ Gregory's *Grania, Kincora, Dervogilla*, Synge's *Dierdre of the Sorrows*, and Yeats' *Dreaming of the Bones* are just a few of the plays that draw on Irish history and myth to depict women who step out of passive roles. Across these texts the assertion of female agency uniformly results in increased violence in the community.

¹²⁹ Yeats, *Plays*, 83.

exits the scene promising Michael's eternal glory with, "They shall be speaking for every, / The people shall hear them for ever."¹³⁰ A young boy enters and when questioned about whether he passed an old woman on the path, he responds, "I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen."¹ During curtain call, when Gonne rose back to her natural height of six feet, signaling Ireland's transformation, the Dublin audience erupted into cheers. While certain audience members felt cheated that they did not see Gonne transformed as part of the play action, it seems that some of the pleasure derived from the play was rooted in the knowledge that Maud Gonne's beautiful, youthful body waited behind the artifice of old age and hardship.

Gonne's rejection of *The Countess Cathleen* and endorsement of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is much in line with the general public's reaction to the two plays. While *Cathleen ni Houlihan* demands that men fight and die on her behalf, the Countess herself acts as sacrificial victim on behalf of the peasants she saves. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* restores the gender binaries upheld in the idealized sacrificial relationship that *The Countess Cathleen* inverts. The more successful *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was celebrated for its representation of a poor young man who chooses to martyr himself in order to liberate and restore the feminine embodiment of Ireland to youth, beauty, and longevity. It is also important to note that the *Cathleen ni Houlihan* shared the bill with George Russell's *Deirdre* during its first three show run. Each play frames its titular, female character as the catalyst for masculine violence. Both Deirdre and Cathleen are positioned as the recipients of sacrifice made at the altar of feminine beauty and honor. In *Deirdre*, the sons of Naisce save Deirdre from an unwanted marriage to king Conchubar and in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* Michael Guillane and young men like him fight to liberate Cathleen from a masculine ravager. In both cases, men die in order to protect a beautiful woman from the unwanted sexual advances of a powerful male patriarch.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 93.

Another contributing factor towards *Cathleen ni Houlihan*'s success lies in the fact that, aside from Maud Gonne, the cast was made up of Irish actors with Dublin accents. This immediately signaled a sharp departure from the English players that had been imported as the cast of *The Countess Cathleen*. In contrast, Maud Gonne's casting as Ireland personified in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was a strategic stroke of genius. Gonne's looks and specific brand of celebrity resulted in a reciprocal relationship where her public identity as a woman fused with that of a personified Ireland.

Gonne first met the Yeats family while they were living in London in 1889.¹³¹ Gonne was born in England but claimed Irish roots on her father's side and spent time living in Ireland as a child when her father was stationed there as a British officer. By the time Yeats met Gonne, the beautiful young heiress had already begun her work as a speaker, protesting the English government's eviction campaign in Ireland and offering aid to those afflicted in Donegal. She also combined forces with priests and members of the Land League to organize the release of twenty-seven men kept in terrible conditions in the Portland Gaol on charges of Treason against the British crown. According to her autobiography, her anti-eviction efforts combined with her ability to use her beauty, height, and upbringing as the daughter of an officer to intimidate English soldiers had led to her being referred to as "The Woman of the Sidhe," in Donegal by the time she met Yeats.¹³² The truth of Gonne's claim is as questionable as it is self-serving, but regardless of whether she was actually associated with figures from Celtic mythology by the people of rural Ireland or whether it was wishful thinking on her part, Yeats certainly gravitated towards this association. It is also clear that Gonne had attained a certain amount of celebrity as a

¹³¹ Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin*, 26.

¹³² Maud Gonne Macbride, *The Autobiography of Maud Gonne: A Servant of the Queen*, eds. Norman Jeffares, Anna Macbride White (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 131.

publically acknowledged beauty, a well-known revolutionary for independent Ireland, a recognized orator, and political organizer in her own right despite the fact that she often finds her way into history in conjunction with Yeats much as she does here.

Gonne founded the women's Irish nationalist organization *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (The Daughter's of Erin) in 1900. According to her autobiography, this was in response to the fraternal exclusivity that characterized most other nationalist groups in Ireland at this time. That the group started so soon after Gonne declined the role of the Countess in 1899 on the grounds that acting would take her away from her political work is interesting. The Daughters of Erin frequently utilized theatrical performance as a mode of representational activism. Gonne's frequent appearance in plays and *tableaux vivants* with the Daughters of Erin. This indicates that her refusal to play *The Countess Cathleen* had more to do with content than wariness at acting. The Daughters of Erin often created theatre in partnership with the Fay brothers' who would later form W.G. Fay's Irish National Theatre Company (another important precursor to the Abbey) in 1902. The Inghinidhe's membership drew from middle and working class Irish women who, apart from protesting British army recruitment and encouraging domestic manufacturing, worked to popularize the Irish language and arts through classes and public performances. Its members frequently staged work based on Celtic mythology and recruited male actors from other nationalist groups to produce Irish plays. When the Fay brothers produced *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902, it was in partnership with the Inghinidhe. Not only did Maud Gonne take on the play's lead role, but the Inghinidhe's banners framed the stage.

Beyond his personal infatuation, Gonne's physical appearance and supposed association with otherworldly mythology spoke to Yeats's lifelong interest in Celtic mysticism and the legitimization of what he believed to be Ireland's indigenous culture. Gonne's agenda was first

and foremost nationalistic and primarily regarded theatre as a valuable propagandist tool for that cause. Gonne maintained that theatrical representations that failed to contribute to the fight for political independence, or combat the social injustice that resulted from colonial policy, had no place upon the national stage. If representations of Irish women in particular ventured into morally questionable territory, she viewed them as detrimental to Ireland's case for political autonomy. Her actions indicate that adherence to national ideals was the primary criteria for judging a play's merit; a piece's artistic project or a pursuit of some unacknowledged truth or personal liberty was subservient to its political impact. This is evident in her refusal to play the Countess. She also very publically walked out in protest of Synge's *In the Shadow of the Shadow of the Glen* because it transgressed ideal notions of Irish identity. Gonne, who by no means lived her own life according to conventional rules, was one of the least lenient of theatrical portrayals that ventured away from normalized ideals about idealized femininity in particular.

Some writers have been quick to cast Maud Gonne as an opportunistic, violence inducing temptress, who manipulated Yeats so that he would make her famous while she maintained a long term relationship with a married man back in France. Maud Gonne refused Yeats's frequent marriage proposals and eventually married John Macbride, a soldier and revolutionary who would be executed by the British for participating in the 1916 Rebellion. Maud Gonne's associations with militant nationalism are reinforced by Yeats's immortalization of her as a Helen of Troy Figure in his poetry. One of his most famous works, "No Second Troy" reads,

Why should I blame her that she filled my days
 With misery, or that she would of late
 Have taught ignorant men most violent ways,
 Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
 Had they but courage equal to desire?
 What could have made her peaceful with a mind
 That nobleness made simple as a fire
 With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind

That is not natural in an age like this,
 Being high and solitary and most stern?
 Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
 Was there another Troy for her to burn?¹³³

This paints a very incomplete picture of Gonne as an independent entity. It also simplifies the much more multi-dimensional, evolving relationship she had with Yeats. Even as Gonne's fame increased from her much lauded appearance as Ireland personified, I argue that Yeats also benefit from his collaboration with Gonne. After failing to create a play that would "transcend the questions" that remained too divisive for audiences invested in conflicting ideas about Irish identity with *The Countess Cathleen*, Gonne's involvement in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* helped to endear his drama to a far larger audience. Maud Gonne embodied Ireland in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* as a call to arms against England's colonial rule. Unsurprisingly, she rejected *The Countess Cathleen*, as a piece of pro-feudal propaganda because it was completely at odds with her political agenda.

As Paul Murphy observes, Yeats's drama expresses his antiquarian desire to naturalize the colonial legacy of land distribution and class inequality wherein his echelon of the social strata maintained dominance.¹³⁴ *The Countess Cathleen* clearly operates according to Yeats's personal interests as a member of the Ascendancy class. Ironically, the famine that Yeats uses as the setting to prove the Countess Cathleen's sovereignty is in reality the same phenomenon that restructured Irish society in such a way that Anglo-Irish landowners lost their grip as the dominant power during the nineteenth century. When the potato blight hit Ireland it decimated the dietary staple of its indigenous population. The poorest members of society were the most vulnerable to starvation, eviction, disease, and compelled emigration. This resulted in a loss of

¹³³ Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 91.

¹³⁴ Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy*, 19-22.

rental incomes for the Ascendancy classes as well as the rise of an increasingly powerful Catholic middle class. Irish farmers that survived the famine with slightly more land consolidated the vacated smallholdings. Meanwhile, industrialization and urbanization were also on the rise. Yeats designates the capitalistic, foreign merchants as the play's demonic antagonists to further deflect attention away from the material conditions that allowed the Countess to inherit so much wealth; her ancestors dispossessed the people she now wishes to save. The play's celebration of landlordism and its excessively unflattering portrayal of Shemus reflect Yeats's particular disdain for the upwardly mobile and increasingly prominent petite bourgeoisie as his own class was progressively marginalized.

Aside from the wandering poet Aleel, who is of a different class than the Countess's starving tenants by warrant of his profession, every mortal man is drawn as a vapid opportunist. Shemus is shown to be an irredeemable, abusive, greedy iconoclast. Teigue expresses little resistance in parroting his father. Such characterization deflects attention away from the realities of landlordism and famine by holding members of the starving population accountable for refusing to simply lay down and die like Mary, whose submission to starvation functions as the ideal behavioral model for her class. What Yeats's play attempts to occlude is the fact that the Countess is actually an absentee landlord who cannot even remember where her estate is let alone remain informed about the condition of the people who actually live on it. She does not return to save them, but coincidentally orchestrates her homecoming to tend to a state of unrelated melancholy. While en route, she is confronted by the very real suffering of the people and embarks on a heroic trajectory of increasing isolation and eventual sacrifice.

Like the Countess, who goes to her death rather than actualize her alternate fate as wife to some great chief, Michael Guillane walks away from marriage and all the material benefits it

holds for himself and his family to serve an untouchable, allegorical goddess. He leaves behind the very real woman he would have shared a bed, children, and a long life with for the mythical creature who requires his blood in order to be restored to youth and beauty. In this symbolic consummation, Michael's blood will fertilize and replenish the land Cathleen represents, but a living Michael Guillane will never touch his illusive paramour.

Cathleen ni Houlihan succeeds where her Countess namesake fails; she mobilizes the sacrificial mechanism through which particularized, historically located men can be transformed into fantasy objects. In his earlier play, Yeats jostles stereotypical gender roles within a chaotic, famine struck landscape. The women die and the men are left behind in a hostile material sphere. In doing so, they shirk trajectories of idealized masculinity constructed for their class and gender. Shemus and Teigue refuse to lay down their lives by any means necessary. In doing so, they evade the mechanism that would have transformed them from a historically positioned subject of discrimination—a problematic reminder of the trauma of colonial land distribution—into what Murphy capitalizes as “the Peasant.”¹³⁵ In contrast, Micheal Guillane abdicates personal will, context, and material comforts so that he might die and be remembered as a martyr for independent Ireland in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. His sacrifice and heroic commemoration transforms him into generalized object of worship.

Although *The Countess Cathleen* missed the Irish audience reception mark in 1899 and remains, as Adrian Frazier observes, canonically unimportant in terms of production frequency, its study holds value as an antecedent to the wildly popular *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.¹³⁶ Both Cathleen's are associated with restoring the fruitful relationship between the land and its people.

¹³⁵ Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy*, 2.

¹³⁶ Frazier, “The Making of Meaning,” 452.

The Countess is a benevolent, Christian version of the Celtic sovereignty goddess type that Cathleen ni Houlihan more closely resembles. “The ancient textual representation of the chief as married to the land and the poet as wedded to the chief” noted in the introduction is activated in *The Countess Cathleen*, but Yeats conflates the typical sovereignty trinity by removing the patrilineal chief and endowing the Countess with his function.¹³⁷ The poet Aleel is symbolically married to Cathleen, a hybrid character that functions as both the sovereign ruler and the beautiful, feminine personification of Ireland.

This reallocation of roles does several things that would not be acceptable to nationalist audiences: rather than uphold the metaphor of widowhood and despoliation that Witoszek and Sheeran argue underpins the funerary tradition that permeates Irish literature, drama, and social performance, Yeats play attempts to naturalize the removal of an indigenous patriarch in favor of a matriarch of English descent. One cannot help but think of Elizabeth I, who implemented the plantation system, and Queen Victoria, who ruled the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 1837 until her death in 1901. Victoria was in power when the potato blight hit in 1845 and came to be known in Ireland as “the Famine Queen.” Yeats usurps the very symbolic system used to express dissent by the Irish population over the centuries in *The Countess Cathleen*; Ireland’s land was traditionally anthropomorphized as an arrested female body, ravaged by a colonizer and separated from her rightful mate. Yeats re-appropriates this metaphor of dissent into a vocabulary of conquest. The indigenous Irish land goddess is reimagined as an aristocratic, Anglo-Irish woman and the ancestral chief is eradicated entirely. *The Countess Cathleen* sends the message that a woman of English heritage is more powerful, rational, and spiritual—more recognizably masculine than any man of Celtic stock.

¹³⁷ Witoszek and Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead*, 38.

In *The Countess Cathleen*, the land has become unproductive in the Countess's absence. Her return and sacrifice are shown to restore balance to a wrecked landscape. It also reclaims civilization for the peasants who have regressed into animalistic savagery. Like Elizabeth I, who marketed herself as a virgin queen, the Countess actively rejects the possibility of marriage, sex, and bearing children. In his last efforts to prevent her from signing over her soul, Aleel predicts, "You shall yet know the love of some great chief, / and children gathering round your knees. Leave / you the peasants to the builder of the heavens."¹³⁸ The Countess refuses this alternate fate and goes to her grave an unattainable virgin. Yeats centralizes the Countess's virginity in order to groom her as an acceptable martyr for his audiences. Unlike Mary, who is married, has given birth to at least one child, and worries about feeding her family and herself, the Countess acknowledges no carnal needs or appetites. While the poet Aleel loves her and she cares for him on some level, the relationship will never be consummated. Yeats positions Mary as the Countess's foil in order to further distance the heroine from corporeal identification. Mary is a married woman that has experienced sexual reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth, thus marking her body as an unsuitable site for spiritual abstraction. Mary realizes her maternal role biologically. The Countess abstains from these phenomena to realize a spiritual, maternal role for the peasants when they are reborn, souls once again intact.

In a sense, the Countess draws from the Morrigna triune as a sovereignty figure that restores balance to the land, but she also evokes the Christian ideal of the virgin mother. The sexual and warlike components of the Celtic sovereignty goddess type are removed. In the figure of Mary (who strangely shares a name with the mother of Christ) we see that engaging in sex and biological reproduction, even within marriage, robs a character of their ability to realize a role beyond the corporeal. In some ways, Mary's choice of name combined with her progression

¹³⁸ Yeats, *Poems*, 84.

towards death and eventual presence as a corpse draws further attention towards Yeats's reversal of the *pieta* in terms of gender. Mary leaves behind an unrepentant, materialistic husband and son who fail to express any personal grief at her loss. This is in contrast to Jesus, the unmarried, childless son who leaves behind an inconsolable mother and romantic interest in the figure of Mary Magdalene. Yeats's efforts to distance the Countess from corporeality so that she might be accepted as a viable victim of sacrifice despite her gender are undermined by his ferocious insistence on class hierarchies.

Yeats's efforts to create an essentially spiritual, asexual figure, who dies in an elegant, bloodless swoon were undermined, at the most basic level, by the fact that she was characterized as and embodied by an adult woman in performance. Susan Cannon Harris points out that in nationalist drama, the sex of the "bleeding" body takes on major significance. Bodies known to menstruate, become pregnant, and give birth bleed in relation to biological reproduction. In reality, we know that they can also bleed for any number of reasons beyond the gynecological, but on some level, knowledge of these functions remains in the minds of audience members. Whereas the reproductive body bleeds to biologically reproduce, the sacrificial victim bleeds to facilitate spiritual rebirth. Cannon Harris also notes that "sacrificial drama worked for nationalists only when it did *not* allow the victims to 'bleed and die' on stage. Cathleen's death is appropriately bloodless, but its performance in the female body of an actress simultaneously insists on the essentially corporeal nature of human existence. Even though the Countess refuses the role of wife and mother, Aleel's comments about her alternate fate further remind the audience of her body's reproductive potential.

Yeats' first play was rejected because of its inappropriate choice of sacrificial victim along class and gender lines, but also because of its particularly carnal portrayal of the Irish

peasantry. As Paul Murphy points out, Ireland's subaltern class and gender groups were frequently utilized as cultural icons or "fantasy objects" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹³⁹ Writers from the "Anglo-Irish Ireland" and "Irish Ireland" camps (as well as the numerous factions within and beyond these groups) converged in their aesthetic insistence that such disenfranchised characters were central to Irish identity.¹⁴⁰ However, these two groups essentialized women, itinerants, and the rural poor in different ways according to their ideal visions for a future Ireland. Identified subalterns became the representational battleground upon which the ideological parameters of the anticolonial struggle were waged even as they "were becoming increasingly socially marginalized."¹⁴¹ A striking point of convergence between factions lies in the celebrated trope of premature death on the part of heroic young men, which is followed by feminine performances of lamentation. These lamentation performances asserted the deceased as essentially spiritual entities who had succeeded in triumphing over their correlative bodies.

To conclude, beyond its precursor status to *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *The Countess Cathleen* is important because it illustrates the ways in which Yeats was grafting personal experience onto Greek, Celtic, and Christian sources to create an Irish play that foregrounded questions regarding mind-body dualism at this early stage of his dramaturgical development. Both *The Countess Cathleen* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* are underpinned by a celebratory concept of blood sacrifice that ideologically pits the human soul against its correlative, imprisoning, physical form. *The Countess Cathleen* met with opposition because of its irreverent portrayal of famine and religion, but also because it inverted accepted, oppositional discourses of idealized masculinity and

¹³⁹ Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy*, 9-10.

¹⁴⁰ F.S.L. Lyons quoted in Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy*, 4.

¹⁴¹ Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy*, 7.

femininity. This was particularly evident in relation to the paradigm of masculine sacrifice and feminine bereavement the play leaves unfulfilled. The women in *The Countess Cathleen* are shown to triumph over bodily necessity to realize an essentially spiritual identity in death whereas the men in the play are left behind in the material sphere that has come to define them. A character's ability to fulfill ideal expectations of the inverted gender roles they have come to occupy is problematically shown to be contingent upon class. The Countess Cathleen and the poet Aleel are able to complete trajectories traditionally assigned to their opposing genders whereas Shemus, and Teigue fail to execute the sacrificial mechanism that would have transformed a recently dead member of their family into a recognizably nonspecific heroic icon. Thus, they remain trapped in a state of androgynous liminality.

Chapter 3: Womb, Loom, Tomb: Women's Work in *Riders to the Sea*

Weave your winding sheets women, for there will be many a noble corpse to be waked before the new moon.

-Pádraig Pearse, *The Singer*

In pre-Industrial Ireland, during periods of normalcy and continuity, women produced cloth and often sang communally to punctuate the repetitive motions necessary for the process. When day-to-day life was disrupted by death, they took up the *caoineadh*, a different kind of song. In remote communities, child rearing, the production of homespun fabric, and the domestic construction of clothing survived alongside lamentation performances to constitute a major component of women's social identity. Cottage industries and vernacular funerary traditions that were authored and performed by women persisted in parts of rural Ireland into the twentieth century. Although the official last rights were to be publically performed by a priest, there was an interim period overseen by mothers, wives, and sisters, when a body was waked at home. There was also a lamentation tradition that allowed women to cross out of the domestic threshold into the masculine, public sphere to enact grief as the coffin made its final journey to the cemetery. As noted in the introduction, the *caoineadh* refers to both an Irish form of oral poetry composed and publically sung by women to lead the bereaved community in grief, but also to a series of anti-social actions that mark the period of disorder and liminality brought on by death.

Bereavement enters the external sphere in the feminine action of keening in a process that is reminiscent of childbirth in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. Women's funerary singing was often accompanied by a series of repetitive, rhythmic actions that crescendo in intensity to physicalize bereavement like a contraction. Observational accounts describe groups of women crying out as if in physical pain, rocking to and fro, repetitively hitting their own breasts, beating the casket, tearing cloth, and repeatedly falling down. Elizabethan travelers who spoke little to no Gaelic

expressed horror at the shoeless, wild-haired women who appeared to sing and gesticulate at gravesides. Little did these travelers know that they were witnessing the work of professionals, often hired in threes, to perform loss in a highly organized way. These performances guided those in mourning through the liminal stages where a living member of the community is transformed into a dead man and his clothes into funeral shrouds. Synge's play refers to the production of clothing; its symbolic and utilitarian purposes, in conjunction with non-ecclesiastical funerary performances as a means of approximating Irish women's much contested identity during the Home Rule Movement and the Gaelic Cultural Revival.

The women in *Riders to the Sea* are constantly cooking, spinning yarn, and interacting with fabric, even as they attempt to recover and prepare the bodies of male family members for burial. This chapter will begin by conducting a dramatic analysis of *Riders to the Sea* that pays special attention to the production, utilization, and symbolic meaning of textile properties written into the play. Next, I outline Synge's dramaturgical tendency to graft his observations of life and death on the Aran Islands on to classical sources in *Riders to the Sea*. More specifically, I compare funerary scenarios documented in his travel narratives with the wake scenario he creates in *Riders to the Sea*. Next, I evaluate *Riders to the Sea*'s early production and reception contexts, taking into account the fact that they came directly on the heels of Synge's highly controversial comedy, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, which also features a wake. I conclude by analyzing Synge's references to "women's work" to illustrate how the domestic maintenance of familial bodies has been culturally assigned to women, a fact which has contributed to their social marginalization.

The Work of our Hands: Weaving, Femininity, and Grief

Synge's tragedy follows a widowed mother, Maurya, and her two daughters, Cathleen and Nora, as they react to the confirmation that the two remaining men in their family have died. One brother, Michael, is already missing at the play's commencement, while the other, Bartley, is preparing to depart for the mainland despite his mother's protests in order to sell a pony at the fair. As the play drives forward, the sisters identify a geographically remote body as Michael's based on the garments it had been wearing when found. The play ends after Bartley's drowned body is brought back in, shrouded in a sail, and a chorus of keening women enter to underscore Maurya as she lays out her son and articulates her loss.

The play's sparse stage directions specify that along with the white boards that have been purchased to make Michael's coffin once his body is found, a spinning wheel should be present within the cottage setting. The play begins with Cathleen, specified as a woman of about twenty, kneading a cake before sitting down and "spinning the wheel rapidly." Her younger sister, Nora, enters with a bundle of clothes. Their mother, Maurya, remains offstage. The audience learns that the clothes had been removed from a drowned man who had been found on the mainland coast of Donegal. The family resides far south of there, in County Galway. Nora has retrieved the clothes from a local priest for the purposes of establishing whether or not the body they were removed from belonged to their brother Michael. At one point Maurya had six sons as well as a husband and father in law living in this house, but at the onset of the play Michael is already lost at sea and presumed dead. Bartley, the family's remaining man, is preparing to leave the island by boat to sell some livestock on the mainland to provide for his family.

As the play proceeds, it becomes clear that the daughters, whose physical actions center around the spinning wheel, handling fabric, and preparing food throughout the play have been functioning as surrogate mothers whilst Maurya has intermittently been incapacitated by grief.

When Maurya is offstage, Cathleen kneads dough and places it in a pot above the fire. She spins yarn, tends to the fire, and makes sure that Bartley has food for his journey. Both Cathleen and Nora are emphasized as knitters, spinners, and seamstresses throughout. Maurya finally emerges from the bedroom and her daughters chastise her for taking the turf away from the cake that Cathleen is baking. When Bartley re-enters, Maurya refuses to bestow her customary, maternal blessing on his journey in a last ditch effort to prevent him from going on a potentially fatal sea voyage.

Despite his mother's protests, and an increasingly volatile sea looming offstage, Bartley announces that there will not be another boat for two weeks. He lingers in the doorway a moment and exits with, "The blessing of god on you," which Maurya fails to reciprocate.¹⁴² The dialogue indicates that he leaves distraught. The failure to bless Bartley on his journey is immediately shown to function as a potent curse. From the moment he leaves the stage, Bartley is marked and referred to as a dead man: Maurya cries out, "He's gone now, God Spare us, and we'll not see him again," and Cathleen, realizing he's forgotten his food cries out, "And it's destroyed he'll be".¹⁴³ Cathleen and Nora reprimand their mother again for withholding her good word with, "Why wouldn't you give him your blessing and he looking round in the door?" Cathleen cuts a piece of bread off of a loaf, wraps it in a cloth, and orders Maurya to catch Bartley and give it to him so "the dark word will be broken."¹⁴⁴ Even as Maurya obliges, she expresses the unnatural order of the tragic scenario about to befall her yet again, where young men precede elderly women in death: "In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons

¹⁴² John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays: The Complete Plays of J.M. Synge*, (Digireads.com Publishing, 2010), 44.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 44-45.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 45.

and children, but in this place it is the young men do be leaving things behind for them that's old."¹⁴⁵ She is already operating under the assumption that Bartley's imminent death is a foregone conclusion. With that, she hobbles out the door with a stick to keep her steady.

Maurya exits from the maternal, domestic sphere as well as mimetic space. Her daughters remain onstage for the entirety of the action. They are continuously spinning, cooking, and handling garments. Their continued industrious presence means that their characterization manifests in conjunction with domestic materiality. While Maurya is offstage, her daughters investigate the bundle of clothes in an attempt to identify or rule out the geographically remote body as Michael's based upon the garments he wore. The sisters relay that the body itself has been rendered unrecognizable after floating a great time and distance at sea, and that the young priest has procured its attire as their a means of claiming it. The language used to describe the package itself foreshadows the inevitable, tragic revelation encased within: "the string's perished with the salt water, and there's a black knot on it you wouldn't loosen in a week."¹⁴⁶ Upon examining the sinister parcel's contents, the sisters, already emphasized as weavers in the stage directions, recognize their brother's absent body based upon the specificity of the garments they made to protect him from the elements.

The sisters compare the flannel with that of the shirt hanging on the wall but remain unconvinced because that fabric is not homespun. It is upon looking at the number of stitches on an otherwise plain stocking that Nora cries out in recognition, "It's the second one of the third pair I knitted, and I put up three score stitches, and I dropped four of them."¹⁴⁷ Nora realizes that she made the garments their brother Michael was wearing when he died. This helps them to

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 46.

ensure his proper, if remote burial, but their expression of grief is interrupted as they spy Maurya approaching. They agree that she should not be informed of Michael's death while Bartley is at sea and hide the bundle. Cathleen resumes spinning to assert some semblance of normalcy.

Maurya returns shaken after failing again to give Bartley her blessing and his forgotten piece of bread. She has seen Michael and Bartley riding together towards the sea and recalls, "Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say 'God speed you,' but something choked the words in my throat."¹⁴⁸ His brother Michael was following after Bartley on the grey pony "with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet."¹⁴⁹ It is only then that the daughters reveal that Maurya could not have seen their living brother as his body has been found in Donegal. It is not until Maurya returns to the domestic sphere and assumes possession of Michael's recovered clothing that she re-establishes her role as matriarch.

Clothing, feeding, and eventually mourning the bodies of one's children are the trappings of motherhood in this play. While it appears that Cathleen and Nora had taken over much of the clothing and feeding of late, Maurya ultimately reasserts her maternal role as the dominant performer of mourning and bereavement. She articulates the painful, twin experiences of ushering six sons both into and out of life:

six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming into the world—and some were found and some were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them [...] There was Patch after was drowned out of curagh that turned over. I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my own two knees, and I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it—it was a dry day Nora—and leaving a track to the door.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

*[She pauses again with her hand stretched towards the door. It opens softly and old women begin to come in, crossing themselves on the threshold, and kneeling down with red petticoats on their heads.]*¹⁵⁰

It is here that Maurya takes on an authoritative, even directorial role in the remainder of the action. The experience of bereavement she remembers to the audience delineates the repetitive moment of tragic recognition that is about to occur. The above stage directions dictate that she actually cues the women's entrance by gesturing towards the door. They move into the space and cross themselves to join Maurya just before Bartley's body is brought in. He is wrapped in a sail and laid out on the table just like his brother Patch. The red petticoats the old women wear on their heads mark them as ritual mourners and they accompany Maurya in the keen as she takes possession of Michael's clothing. She first drapes them over and then lays them out alongside Bartley's body.

The old women reveal the circumstances of Bartley's death: He was knocked into the sea by the gray pony and carried out to where white rocks are bashed by large waves. The effects of Maurya's withheld blessing are shown to be similar to that of Theseus's misguided curse in Euripides' *Hippolytus*; Theseus's words bring the wrath of Poseidon down upon his son. Mortal violence comes to both Hippolytus and Bartley via a unique combination of equestrian accident and aggressive surf. Both young men are injured offstage and brought back into mimetic space on an *ekyklima* apparatus. Bartley is dead upon arrival. In contrast, the mortally wounded Hippolytus dies onstage after reconciling with his father. Hippolytus is grieved by an immortal, Artemis, who vows that he will be mourned and ritually commemorated by women in perpetuity:

As for you, wretched man, in recompense for these offering I shall give you the greatest honors in the city of Trozen. Unwed girls will cut their hair in tribute to you before their marriage, and throughout the length of time you will reap your reward from the deepest

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 47-48.

sorrow of their tears. And the maidens' care for you will always find expression in song, so that Phaedra's love for you will not slip into silence and die without a name.¹⁵¹

The goddess mandates that he will live on forever by being mourned by young brides on the eve of their weddings. After her proclamation of narrative *athanasia* (or deathlessness), the goddess departs with, "And now Farewell. It is not proper for me to look upon the dead or pollute my sight as men breath their last and die."¹⁵² Much like Greek men, who, in fear of *miasma* left purifying newborn infants and dead bodies to women, the goddess can have nothing to do with the physical realities of death, but everything to do with preserving a disembodied Hippolytus in heroic lore and ritualistic commemoration.

In contrast to the goddess's immaterial signification of Hippolytus's death, Maurya physically interacts with her son's body as she delivers her final, poignant monologue. She sprinkles holy water on Bartley's form, sets his brother's clothes first on and then beside him, and places her hands upon her dead son's feet. As she speaks, Maurya expresses grief, but also relief: "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me."¹⁵³ After much suffering, she has fulfilled all of the duties associated with her gender and she can die. Maurya is pragmatic and verbally astute in recognizing her situation, her role within it, and the parameters of action available to her according to that role, but does this knowledge liberate her in any way? Maurya articulates her repetitive role as a bereaved survivor, but this action merely reiterates her resolution to a fixed performance trajectory that is determined by external forces.

Maurya anticipates what waits for her if her final son should die earlier in the play: "It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drownd'd with the rest. What way will I live and the girls

¹⁵¹ Euripides, *Oxford World's Classics: Medea and Other Plays*, ed. James Morwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Synge, *Complete Plays*, 48.

with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave.”¹⁵⁴ Not only does this statement designate the material sphere where she and her daughters must remain as an unchanging, hostile entity that prevents any new freedoms or possibilities from being realized, it also frames death as a situation to aspire to. Death is Maurya’s means of extricating herself from an embodied existence that is constituted by maternal grief. It is difficult to read Maurya’s repetitive role as the bereaved survivor as a position of power when death is articulated as a thing to be craved.

Maurya’s pragmatics analysis of her situation is also striking because it disrupts the oppositional binary that assigns rationality and critical thinking to men while women are relegated to the province of carnal emotion. Maurya’s physically restrained, articulate response to the deaths of her remaining sons is presented as an anomaly in regard to her role as an aging, inconsolable, widowed mother. This is reinforced in her daughters’ verbal reactions—Nora comments on how inappropriately calm she is. It is also exacerbated by the appearance of the keening women, whose highly physical performance of grief serves as counterpoint to Maurya’s own. The keeners enter without speaking and assume a kneeling position where they rock back and forth, singing dirges that would have been indecipherable to audience members that did not speak Irish (a demographic that included many company and audience members alike). In contrast, Maurya’s grief has been brought to consciousness and encoded into speech via Synge. For the audience, the un-translated keening women express grief through their bodies.

The utilization of textile oriented props helps to mark the women in this play as symbolic mothers who are the designated caretakers of human bodies both living and dead. Homemade garments also serve to identify and mark Michael as a dead man when his body is far away and no longer physically recognizable after floating in the sea for many days. A living Bartley exits the stage a final time wearing Michael’s sweater. He is unknowingly wearing the clothes of a

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 44.

dead man. This foreshadows his return to the stage as a corpse. The male actor's body is repurposed and swaddled in a sail as a kind of personified prop, much like dolls are swaddled and manipulated to represent infants; instead of the object prop being clothed and manipulated to give the impression of human life, the living actor acts as a non-sentient object that is clothed and manipulated by others to give the impression of death. Red petticoats mark the elderly women who enter to kneel and keen downstage of Maurya as ritual mourners just as the red sail takes on significance as a makeshift funeral shroud used to wrap the body of Bartley. This is identical to way in which women donning petticoats entered along with Patch's sail shrouded body many years before while Bartley was swaddled as a baby. In this recalled moment, the parameters of Bartley's existence are entirely fixed and predetermined. Male bodies are swaddled as infants and shrouded as young men. Women's work involves producing, clothing, and caring for those bodies during their brief tenure on earth.

Clothing, feeding, and eventually mourning the bodies of male loved ones are the outward signs of womanhood in this play. Now that her final son has died and her daughters have shown themselves capable of taking on a maternal role, Maurya expresses relief that she can finally have a good long rest. However, despite the fact that Nora and Cathleen have come of age, the prospects of new life remain decidedly absent. This is a major departure from the play's source material. In his travel narrative, *The Aran Islands* (1907), Synge describes the instance when a young woman was breastfeeding her child in the house where he was staying. After making inquiries into the clothes a drowned body had been wearing when it was found, she identified it as her brother's. As she wept for her bother, she continued to feed her child. There is no baby on anyone's knee in *Riders to the Sea* at the tragic moment of recognition. On an island where many of the young men died on the water, a replacement population does not seem to be

sustainable and no prospects for creating new life are made evident in Synge's dramatic rendering. The finality of Bartley's death refuses a narrative of regeneration and provides no alternatives or new possibilities for the play's surviving women. They remain marooned in an existence that was, according to Synge, constituted by maternal bereavement. Just as Cathleen observes, even though they remain in the world, with Bartley's death they are "destroyed."¹⁵⁵ This next section probes more extensively into the adjustments Synge made to his source observations of life and death on the Aran Islands to create *Riders to the Sea*.

Tragedy and the Aran Islands

W.B. Yeats met J.M. Synge in 1886 whilst the fledgling writer was living in Paris. Yeats convinced Synge to return to Ireland to make it the subject of his literary and dramatic endeavors. This was at the height of the Celtic Revival, when nationalistic energy was directed at uncovering, legitimizing, and making Ireland's previously suppressed, indigenous culture available to the masses. Folk tales were collected, the agrarian population observed, and ancient sagas translated from Irish to English and back again. During this process, many parallels were drawn between pre-Christian Ireland and ancient Greece. Both culture's mythologies emphasize idealized women as mothers, food and cloth-producers, and mourners. For instance, the *Odyssey's* paradigm of feminine virtue, Penelope, spends two decades weaving and unweaving the same funeral shroud for her father-in-law so that she could remain faithful to Odysseus, her missing husband, and ensure their son's succession as the ruler of Ithaca. Similarly, Emer, the wife of the legendary Irish hero, Cúchulainn, is celebrated for "her skill at weaving and embroidery."¹⁵⁶ Emer is said to possess the six gifts of womanhood: beauty, a gentle voice, sweet words, wisdom, chastity, and needlework. She also outlives her husband whose death fulfills a

¹⁵⁵ Synge, *Completed Plays*, 47.

¹⁵⁶ Seidel, "Celtic Revival and Women's Work," 22.

prophecy similar to the one delivered to Achilles by his sea nymph mother; his great deeds would garner his everlasting fame but they would also bring about an early demise.

For his part, Synge turned towards the Aran Islands in pursuit of the unspoiled Celt, and it was there that he found subjects for a large percentage of his drama. The theme of women who sustain physical embodiment to perform the role of the long-suffering mourner alongside men who achieve idealized masculinity through premature death asserts itself across Synge's dramatic corpus. In his travel narrative, *The Aran Islands*, Synge describes the parameters of existence for the women and men that lived out their lives in this remote area in the west of Ireland:

The maternal feeling is so powerful on these islands that it gives a life of torment to these women. The sons grow up to be banished as soon as they are of age, or live here in continual danger on the sea; their daughters go away also, or are worn out in th[eir] youth with bearing children that go on to harass them in there own turn a little later.¹⁵⁷

The tragedy is most notably informed by two funerals that Synge witnessed whilst staying on *Árainn Mhór* (Aranmor: The Big Island) and *Inis Meáin* (Inishmaan: The Middle Island) along with several stories he records from local tellers across several extended visits beginning in 1898. The anecdotal picture Synge paints in *The Aran Islands* asserts that Catholicism remains actively informed by pagan belief systems, as do the ritual performances used to punctuate life's rites of passage in this remote area off the coast of Connemara. The book, which largely takes the form of a travel journal, is a conglomeration of first and second hand accounts of life on the island, along with collected folk tales. Synge's documentation of day-to-day life on Aran also speaks to his tendency to observe classical influences in the lore and behavior of the islanders. For instance, one of the book's principal storytellers, a blind man referred to as old Mourteen, explains how fairies were actually angels that belonged to Lucifer at the time of his fall. An

¹⁵⁷ J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands* (Boston: John W. Luce and Company, 1911), 113.

archangel intervened on their behalf so that some remained suspended between heaven and hell. Cast out but not damned, neither angel nor devil, the fairy folk could do great mischief to mortals. Old Mourteen follows up this account with a riddle that bares a striking resemblance to the one posed to Oedipus by the Sphinx: “Did you ever hear what is goes on four legs when it is young, and two legs after that, and on three legs when it does be old?”¹⁵⁸ The alterations Synge makes to transform his source narratives and ethnographic observations into drama further align them with Greek, tragic precedents.

Synge found on these agriculturally resistant limestone islands, where fishing was the main industry, that human existence both depended on and remained constantly threatened by a changeable and unforgiving environment. In *Riders to the Sea*, the ocean, with its dual capacity to give and take life, occupies a role reminiscent of the gods in Greek tragedy, as well as the Celtic Danu/Morrigna entities outlined in the introduction. Synge observed that these islanders, who hacked out an existence that was so largely determined by uncontrollable, natural forces, occupied gender roles similar to those iterated in Greek tragedy. As Elizabeth Coxhead notes in her work on Synge’s time on Aran, “in the wild seas fatalities were frequent, so that men lived under the shadow of death, and women of bereavement.”¹⁵⁹ Although the Greek gods function as the personification of the natural world in Attic drama, and the sea largely remains an abstract phenomenon in Synge’s tragedy. Human destiny is similarly circumscribed by powers that remain beyond mortal control in both cases. Characters labor within unchangeable circumstances that seem to perpetually re-inscribe traditional gender roles in *Riders to the Sea*. Synge’s nonfictional writings evidence his eagerness to find an “indigenous,” contemporary model for an aesthetic project that looked toward equalizing universals rather than particularities.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 32.

¹⁵⁹ Elizabeth Coxhead, *J.M. Synge and Lady Gregory* (London: Longmans & Green, 1962), 10.

Synge's travel narratives evidence a tendency towards a tragic reading of the world, but they also show that the binary oppositions asserted in *Riders to the Sea*, where masculine death is understood against feminine bereavement, are less stringent in the living observations that his play draws from. Both men and women die and receive funerary attention in *The Aran Islands*. Also, although elderly women occupy a special position as they lead the community in lamentation, both men and women, young and old take part in performing their grief. Both men and women die (often in childbirth) and are publically grieved during Synge's time on the Aran Islands, but his dramatic lens remains trained on living women and dead men.

Of the two funerals Synge describes during his consecutive summers on Inishmaan, the first is for an old woman and the second is for a young man who was drowned. While the man's body remained missing, many supernatural tales rose up amongst the islanders in its absence. The mother of a different, previously drowned man had allegedly seen her dead son riding a horse bound for the sea. The man whose funeral Synge attended was said to have caught that horse before departing on his boat for the final time. Earlier on in his stay, Synge witnessed a woman's realization that a body, which had washed up in another county, was in fact her brother's based on the description of the clothes it had been wearing when found. Synge combines these events and the stories that rose up around them so that they happen to a single family in one place and time. This choice maintains the Aristotelian unities of time, space, and action. It also increases the magnitude and finality of Maurya and her daughters' loss.

Elderly women took up the sung lament to lead the community in grief during both funerals, but the two events are markedly different. Synge describes the old woman's funeral in Part II of his book:

While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early bracken, and began the wild keen, or

crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in leading the recitative, seemed possessed with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs.

All around the graveyard other wrinkled women, looking out from under their petticoats that cloaked them rocked themselves with the same rhythm and intoned the inarticulate chant that is sustained by all as an accompaniment.¹⁶⁰

A few lines later Synge assigns meaning to the “inarticulate chant” and the future conflict of *Riders to the Sea* is revealed.¹⁶¹ In this environment, man labors for survival against a hostile and uncontrollable natural world. Synge takes the keen as a general complaint about human frailty alongside the awesome, destructive power of the wind and seas:

This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. They are usually silent but in the presence of death all outward show of indifference or patience is forgotten, and they shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of fate to which they are all doomed.¹⁶²

Synge’s signification of the keen, although far more sympathetic than Elizabethan travel logs, speaks to the limits of his understanding as an Anglo-Irish Dubliner with limited Gaelic, who had studied the classics at Trinity.¹⁶³

In Synge’s reading, the mourners are lamenting their collective fate of mortality rather than the individual who had been their neighbor for eighty years. Although part of the traditional caoineadh’s focus is directed towards the living, and death’s inevitability for all that remain, it also looks towards the deceased as a particularized, irreplaceable person. The late 18th century

¹⁶⁰ Synge, *The Aran Islands*, 64.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 64-65.

¹⁶³ Some writers describe Synge as a Gaelic speaker on par with Lady Gregory who spoke Irish with her servants and tenants while growing up in Galway. Synge, however, did not grow up speaking Irish and describes seeking out Irish tutors whilst on the Aran Islands to help supplement his fragmented knowledge of the language.

Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire (The Lament for Arte O’Leary) is in no way a general protest about the great *agon* between freedom and determinism that permeates Greek tragedy, of life in the face of inevitable death. Its composer and primary singer, Uí Laoghaire’s widow, Eibhlin Dubh Ní Chonaill, provides highly personal information about her husband and their life together. As in many other texts that are thought to derive from caíoneadh performances, the primary mourner addresses the dead person directly as if they were still alive. In the first section of the lament, thought to have been sung over Arte O’Leary’s body at Carrignima, where he had been shot and killed, Eibhlin recalls the nature of their courtship and the kind of home they created together. With surprising attention to the mundane, she describes the physical details of their everyday life; the way they decorated, the kinds of food they prepared, how they slept, and the clothes they wore.

My firm friend
 My eye took note of you,
 My heart took joy from you,
 I escaped from my kin with you,
 Without regret.
 You had a parlour whitewashed and
 Bedrooms cleaned for me,
 An oven heated for me;
 Bread was made for me,
 And meat roasted.
 Managing your household,
 I had tables spread for me,
 Wine drawn for me,
 Beef slaughtered for me,
 Pigs butchered for me,
 Women to knead for me
 Women to pour for me
 I could sleep until midmorning,
 Or later if I wanted to [...]

Dear firm friend,
 You looked well in a hat
 With a band of gold around it;
 A silver hilted sword

And the proud high step
 Of your white-blazed horse.
 The English would bow
 Down to the ground to you,
 Not out of love for you
 But because of their fear of you,
 And yet through them you died.¹⁶⁴

Eibhlin's catalogue of mundane realities celebrates the inherent materiality of earthly life. The lament goes on to mention their pets and children by name and the devastation each will suffer when they learn of his death.

In contrast to the *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*'s highly personal expression of the loss of an irreplaceable individual, Synge's ubiquitous reading of the keen seems to be more aligned with the cathartic function of tragic drama as it is outlined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. In Aristotelian terms, tragedy confronts its audience with their own fragile existence and facilitates a purgation of emotions connected to universals like uncertainty, fallibility, and the eventuality of death. The audience ideally experiences catharsis by empathizing with characters as they are confronted with a revelation of irrevocable loss (*anagnorisis*). Often the major tragic revelation is one of familial death. More specifically, in a large number of extant tragedies, the major moment of *anagnorisis* involves the death of a male youth. *Hippolytus* and *Antigone* include a female character's death, but both plays drive towards more important revelations. Phaedra's suicide propels the action towards Theseus' recognition that his misguided actions have brought about his son's death. Similarly, Creon realizes his sentencing Antigone to death has resulted in his son's suicide.

Many Irish laments for the dead are like *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* in that they take the form of praise and reconstruct the person and the conditions of their death along tragic, if not

¹⁶⁴ Eibhlin Dubh, Ni Chonaill, *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* vol. 4 in *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, eds. Angela Bourke et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 1378.

blatantly heroic and sacrificial lines. However, as Angela Bourke notes, there is also an entire area in the lamentation tradition where the speaker subjects the dead man to criticism. These accusatory moments typically occur after lengthy sections of praise as if to maintain credibility.

Bourke translates one such passage:

He often beat me
With the stoutest stick
But thanks to God
I am done with his company.¹⁶⁵

Women could couch protests at injustices suffered at the hands of the living and the dead within an otherwise complimentary structure. Thus, the social referent resists the rhetoric of blood sacrifice. Instead, it uses interjections of the mundane and sometimes critical to prevent a recently embodied, real and therefore imperfect person's transformation into a stock, heroic icon. Even Eibhlin Dubh ni Chonaill couches insinuations at her husband's stinginess and temper within what is predominantly a love poem: "Though you were stingy / It was only sometimes."¹⁶⁶ Later she comments on how merchant's wives bowed down to him when he went into town because, "they know in the their hearts, You were a great lover, As a foreman on horseback, As a father of children, Until something angered you, Which wasn't so often [...]."¹⁶⁷ Synge's wake plays seem to exist somewhere between lamentation scenarios that emphasize and generalize the human plight of determinism in Greek tragedy and the particularizing Irish caoineadh tradition, but to what end? It seems that this intertextuality acts to re-inscribe gender binaries that essentialize men as corpses and women as mourners left behind in a material world

¹⁶⁵ Bourke, "The Irish Traditional Lament," 289.

¹⁶⁶ Ni Chonaill, "Lament for Art O'Leary," 1378.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 1382.

that is constituted by suffering. Rather than celebrating embodied existence, *Riders to the Sea* formulates its end as a relief.

By the time Synge attended the young man's funeral, he was on much more familiar terms with the local community on Aran. Perhaps by this time, they felt comfortable being less reserved in their grief in his presence, or perhaps the identity of the dead man and the circumstances of his death accounted for a far less measured performance of grief than was witnessed at the old woman's funeral. The young man's funeral is more noticeably a public performance of the disorder and liminality brought about by a promising member of the community's unnatural death. Synge observes that as the procession reached the graveyard, "the keen had lost part of its formal nature."¹⁶⁸ Whereas at the old woman's funeral, he described only elderly women physicalizing and vocalizing grief, he notes both young and old, men and women joined in the display of bereavement for the young man. Perhaps because cemetery space is limited on the small island, as the man's grave was being dug, an earlier coffin was disturbed, and a skeletal body, which turns out to be that of newly deceased's maternal grandmother, was exhumed:

When a number of blackened boards and pieces of bone were being throne up in the clay, a scull was lifted out and placed upon a gravestone. Immediately the old woman, the mother of the dead man, took it in her hands, and carried it away by herself. Then she sat down and put in her lap—it was the scull of her own mother—and she began keening and shrieking over it in the wildest lamentation.¹⁶⁹

The old woman sits cradling her mother's scull until the grave digging is nearly complete. Keeping the scull in her right hand, she uses the other to beat against the coffin and the final crescendo of grief begins. Many of the young women become worn out and have to alternate between beating the coffin and lying down while the young men have grown hoarse with crying

¹⁶⁸ Synge, *The Aran Islands*, 198.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

out. Although Synge borrows from the circumstances of the young man's death and the recovery of his body for the subject matter of his play, the dramatization of mourning in *Riders to the Sea* derives more noticeably from the eighty-year-old woman's more restrained funeral. Synge also resituates the keening to take place within a home rather than in a public cemetery. This relocation is also a departure from classical staging precedents. Greek theatre architecture typically incorporated the *skene* to represent a backdrop of external walls. Synge rests his action in the private, feminine sphere, where babies are born. It is also where bodies are clothed, fed, sheltered, and eventually prepared for burial.

“Bring Out Your Dead”: Reactions to Synge's Wakes¹⁷⁰

Riders to the Sea was first published in *Samhain*, the National Theatre Society's periodical, in October 1903. The publication coincided with the Irish Literary Theatre's premiere of Synge's highly controversial comedy, *In the Shadow of the Glen* at Moleworth Hall on October 8, 1903. *Riders to the Sea* was staged at the same venue the following February. Thus, by the time *Riders to the Sea* was presented for an audience, Synge's work had attained a certain amount of notoriety in the Irish press. *In the Shadow of the Glen* centers on a miserly old husband who suspects his attractive young wife of infidelity. He fakes his own death in order to observe his young wife's behavior during his wake. An itinerant man arrives, and Nora speaks of her husband in an unflattering way before leaving him with the body. While Nora is offstage, Dan briefly re-animates to reveal that his performance of a corpse has been orchestrated as a fact-finding ruse. Nora returns to the stage with a young neighbor, Michael Dara, to discuss their future plans together. With that, Dan Bourke unmask himself as a living man. He hits Nora with a stick before casting her out to wander the roads with the Tramp. *In the Shadow of the Glen*

¹⁷⁰ *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones (1975; Burbank: California, Columbia Tristar Entertainment, 2001), DVD.

begins with the body of a dead man onstage and ends with its reanimation. In *Riders to the Sea*, Bartley exits the stage a living man and is returned as corpse. One play stages a wake that is disrupted by a revelation of life while the other depicts a double revelation of death.

While several notable members of the audience walked out in protest of Synge's comedic treatment of a wake and a woman who shirked her societally dictated duties, the first audiences for *Riders to the Sea* called Synge to the stage to applaud him for his tragic rendering of Maurya, her daughters, and her fleetingly living son. Synge's two plays similarly activate funerary scenarios, but audiences resisted *In the Shadow of the Glen* because it transgressed the idealized constructions of Irish gender that *Riders to the Sea* largely upheld. The strong audience reactions each play provoked when they were produced in close succession help to illustrate what aspects of femininity and masculinity were being designated and juxtaposed during this period to assert Irish identity. *Riders to the Sea* was more successful in fulfilling its audience's desires because it depicted industrious women who were consciously engaged with appropriate domestic labor; the women in *Riders to the Sea* are constantly preparing food, tending to fires, interacted with yarn and cloth. They also appropriately procure and physically prepare a male body for burial. In contrast, *In the Shadow of the Glen* foregrounds Nora, a young wife who has failed to produce children, physically interact with her husband's body, or produce a performance of grief. The only time she interacts with fabric is when she hides a sock, stuffed with money in her pocket and she hands off a needle and thread to the Tramp so that he can mend his own clothes rather than do it herself. Her primary actions include conversing with men who are not her husband and venturing away from home, once temporarily and once permanently.

Beyond the two plays common use of funerary content, each play produced interrelated audience reactions when produced in close succession. A letter to the editor of the *Irish Times*

entitled “National Theatre and Irish Womanhood” printed following *In the Shadow of the Glen*’s premiere condemns Nora for committing a shameful sin and draws parallels to plays set in similarly colonized or Catholic countries that feature characters who commit murder, treason, and a failure to honor one’s mother and father as detrimental to nationalism:

Sir – I have read in several papers the Irish National Theatre Society “proposes to attempt,” as one writer puts it, to give another performance of Mr. Synge’s “Shadow of the Glen” next Saturday evening. I agree with those who say that to represent upon the stage an Irish woman as committing a sin, is to insult the womanhood of Holy Ireland. Such plays ought not to be permitted upon the stage. But it is not only Ireland that is insulted. There are notorious plays which insult other nations, and a good taste as well as our sympathy for morality and national spirit should make us protest in every instance. It is impossible to deny that the people of Egypt, now down-trodden under a foreign yoke, are insulted by the play of “Antony and Cleopatra.” We all know that the heroine of a play is necessarily a typical woman; what insult could be greater than to represent the woman of any nation by a heroine of many lovers who betrays her country! ¹⁷¹

After noting that the murder of Macduff’s children in *Macbeth* is similarly offensive to Scottish humanity, just as *Romeo and Juliet*’s depiction of disobedient children is an insult to Catholic Italians, the writer closes his letter by inviting others who find the play similarly detrimental to the nationalist cause to join him in protest at the O’Connell Street bridge that evening. He notes that he can be recognized by, “his Gaelic League button and the pike which [he] shall carry in his right hand.”¹⁷² The letter equivocates Nora’s exit from a loveless marriage to an act of homicide. It also selectively fails to acknowledge Dan Burke’s deception and violence towards his wife as reprehensible acts. In contrast to Nora’s verbose condemnation, the public performance of an old Irishman faking his death before striking and evicting his wife did not strike the writer’s nationalistic nerve. This letter reiterates that the parameters of ideal womanhood were being

¹⁷¹ R E M, “National Theatre and Irish Womanhood,” *The Irish Times*, October 16th, 1903. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and the Irish Weekly Times (518393358).

¹⁷² Ibid.

recognized and policed along far different lines than Irish masculinity. Clearly this is an extreme response, but even more restrained accounts attest to the plays' controversial nature.

In a general review entitled "The Irish National Theatre" the writer praises *Riders to the Sea* but is critical of *In the Shadow of the Glen*:

His "Riders to the Sea" deals with but a few poor men and women, a drown man, a mother's grief, and the sea, but how vivid, how poignant! I could no more forget it than one could forget *Pecheur D'Islande*.

We regret very much to learn that he has chosen as the theme of his comedy the painful one of the young woman with an old husband and a lover, though no doubt it is designed to throw a lurid light on the loveless, mercenary marriage too common in Ireland.¹⁷³

The play's original casting may have helped to temper some of the character aspects certain audiences found questionable. From 1903-1905 Nora was played by Mary Walker who went by the stage-name Maire nic Shiubhlaigh. It seems that nic Shiubhlaigh was regarded more for her beauty than her force as a performer. In a letter to Frank Fay, Synge writes that her Nora was being problematically overpowered by William Fay's performance as the Tramp, "Miss Walker is clever and charming in the part, but your brother is so strong he dominates the play—unconsciously and inevitably—and of course the woman should dominate."¹⁷⁴ The "Irish National Theatre" review mentioned above describes Shiubhlaigh as possessing a "Virginal Beauty" as the angel in Yeats' play *The Hour Glass*.¹⁷⁵ Her performance as Nora goes unacknowledged in the same piece although the play's morally questionable content is raised yet again. Shiubhlaigh left the Abbey along with many other lead players shortly after Synge, Gregory, and Yeats restructured the company to consolidate artistic control. Molly Allgood, who

¹⁷³ "The Irish National Theatre," *The Irish Times*, October 7, 1903. Proquest Historical Newspapers: The Irish Times and the Irish Weekly Times (518382474).

¹⁷⁴ Quoted in Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin*, 174.

¹⁷⁵ "The Irish National Theatre," *The Irish Times*, October 7, 1903.

went by the stage name, Maire O'Neill, first appeared as Nora on April 17th, 1906. William Fay stayed on as the Tramp alongside his brother Frank, who played Dan Burke. Arthur Sinclair joined the cast as Michael Dara, a character described as “the sneak who had hoped to marry the widow” in the *Freeman's Journal*.¹⁷⁶ The same review asserts that Sinclair is “splendid as the shamming rascal.”¹⁷⁷

One interesting thing about Molly Allgood's casting is that she was contemporaneously slotted into the role of Cathleen in *Riders to the Sea* and Mary Cushin in Gregory's *Gaol Gate* alongside her sister Sara. Molly was frequently cast as the younger, sexually viable character, alongside her older sister, who was often cast as her chaste, elderly superior. As both Cathleen and Mary Cushin, Molly briefly rebels against an authority figure but ends each play as subordinate to her sister's character. Audiences came to recognize this casting pattern and the power relationship between the acceptably abstinent, bereaved maternal figure who ultimately dominates the younger, sexually attractive type. As Cathleen, Molly briefly appeared as a challenger of Maurya's matriarchal authority within the household. Cathleen chastises her mother and orders her to pursue Bartley on his way to the sea so that she can inspect the parcel of clothing sent by the priest. When Maurya returns however, she takes control of the narrative as Bartley's principle mourner whilst Cathleen is silent. In the play's final image, Maurya is center stage, facing the audience directly. It is Maurya who ultimately assigns meaning to death.

Despite the audience's endorsement of *Riders to the Sea* in the theatre, the plays' press coverage was not without criticism. A write-up in *The United Irishman* acknowledged that the

¹⁷⁶ J.H. Cox, "Three Hours' Fun, Triple Bill at the Abbey: Mr. Synge in Another Aspect," *Irish Independent*, October 8, 1907. Irish Newspaper Archive (<http://archive.irishnewsarchive.com/olive/apa/ina.edu/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=IND%2F1907%2F10%2F18&id=Ar00433&sk=1B938B83>).

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

play profoundly affected its audience but criticized the introduction of the drowned man's body to the stage as a "cheap trick."¹⁷⁸ A writer for the *Leader* similarly objected, stating that this staging convention combined with the extremity of Maurya's devastation cultivated an atmosphere like that of a "dissecting room."¹⁷⁹ This discomfort might lie in Maurya's refusal to reformulate her sons' deaths as a regenerative phenomenon for the community as Mary Chahel does in *Gaol Gate*. Rather, she refuses a narrative imperative that rhetorically advocates martyrdom; where an embodied human derives meaning through its own corporeal sacrifice and destruction. It is perhaps difficult to construct an alternative, regenerative story around Bartley's death while occupying the same space as his drowned body. The material presence of the actor's motionless form asserts a grim reality that counters a tale of heroic apotheosis. Maurya derives only perfunctory comfort in the fact that both sons will receive a Catholic burial. Ultimately, she will entrust her son's bodies to a priest who will see to their spiritual rebirth. The priest remains absent from the play however, and was earlier shown to be fallible in his assurance that god would not leave Maurya "destitute with no son living."

The moment where the body is brought to the stage actually keeps directly with the Greek staging convention of bringing out the dead or mortally wounded body on the *ekkyklema*. Ancient Greek theatre generally maintained a backdrop of external walls, where characters crossed out of the domestic threshold, into a more public sphere. In contrast, Synge transformed the public funerals he witnessed on the Aran islands into private wakes. Perhaps the *United Irishman* writer's disapproval at Maurya's failure to make her grief palatable was compounded by the intimacy of the setting. This tight domestic space confronts audiences with the physical

¹⁷⁸ Quoted in *The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge* vol. 1, ed. Anne Sadlemeyer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) 62.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

realities of life and death when a living actor returns as an objectified prop and the same kitchen table that had been used to make a cake earlier in the action is repurposed as a kind of mortuary alter. Synge's relocation of the *caioneadh* is crucial to his appropriation of the source material he found on the Aran Islands. In moving the lamentation performance indoors, and scripting Maurya with a resigned expression of grief, he has robbed the *caioneadh* of part of its meaning and power. These are no loose haired women who momentarily transgress their domestic role to publically enact emotional trauma and disorder. Maurya's performance expresses sadness and acceptance, the final stages of grief, but the "wild" funerary performances Synge witnessed on Aran and the larger tradition to which they refer allot for a far more varied reactionary spectrum in the wake of death. Yes, there is praise and sorrow in traditional lamentation performances, but there is also anger, pain, and terror expressed in language and physicality that departs from everyday communication.

After a brief departure, Maurya and her daughters obediently remain in the feminine space. The stasis of a domestic sphere that is homogenously populated by women is reinstated at the play's end. Her keen is not wild or subversive, it doesn't question her social position, or bring her into the outside world. Maurya's funerary speech signals a detachment from her dead sons, but her actions remain centered around them and nothing is offered to fill the void left in her life now that they are ready to be buried. That her daughters remain alive does not factor into Maurya's retirement as mother and maternal mourner. Maurya's ultimate job is to tend to sons in death, not daughters. Her monologue, although it resists the precedent of transforming her sons into idealized heroes, and death into life, merely expresses resignation towards her role as a mourner. In the play's final moments, Maurya joins the chorus of grieving women kneeling on the stage just as her son joins the generalized ranks of young men born only to die before their

time and be keened by their mothers. Maurya's tenure as a laborer for human bodies has finally ended and she is relieved.

Women's Work in Modern Ireland and Ancient Greece

Textile props and costume pieces perform maternity in conjunction with and sometimes in place of the actresses designated as biological mothers within *Riders to the Sea*. Spinning wheels, cloth, and food form the bulk of props handled by the three women who dominate the action in Synge's domestic tragedy. The prominence of cloth and its link to maternity in this play is not a tenuous one but part of a historical connection between female reproduction and materiality. The earliest depictions of human figures wearing garments come down to us from the Upper Paleolithic period. The plant and animal fibers spun into string and eventually cloth do not usually survive more than two millennia. However, rock and bone carvings of corpulent female forms, known as Venus figures, wearing what archaeologists call a "string skirt" have been found across what is now the European continent. These garments date back to 20,000 BCE, well before peoples of Indo-European descent set up permanent-homes, discovered agriculture, or the domestication of animals. Contrary to the imaginary impulse that the advent of worn string and cloth served a utilitarian purpose like protecting hunter-gatherers from the elements, the garments in the earliest extant images seem to perform a purely symbolic function.

In the most ancient renderings, these "skirts" are worn alone and often do not cover the genitals. Rather they frame them. In these carvings belted female figures are uniformly curvaceous if not obese. Body fat as well as garments that drew the eye towards the reproductive organs marked their wearers as viably fertile. Later, in the Neolithic period, seemingly derivative

images show skirted, Venus figures actively giving birth.¹⁸⁰ The invention of colored thread sometime during the early Bronze Age added yet another layer to the symbolic meaning of dress. Frescoes from Minoan Crete show women picking lily stamen. Also known as saffron, the stamen of lilies were used as a spice, yellow dye for clothing, and as a remedy for menstrual cramps. In classical Greece, the color yellow was assigned to women and goddesses. The playwright Aristophanes was known to negatively insinuate that certain members of the Athenian citizenry were effeminate by portraying them dressed in yellow.¹⁸¹ In Synge's play, red cloth plays a particularly important role as a symbolic marker within a female dominated funerary performance. The red petticoats and the red sail used to wrap Bartley's body help to demarcate the environment as a wake house; an interstitial space where the living briefly remain in close proximity to the dead.

Once the Phoenician alphabet made its way to the Greek-speaking world some time during the 8th century, literature coincided with pottery to emphasize women as cloth producers, as well as mothers and mourners. Hesiod begrudgingly admits to two areas where women hold value: Pandora's one endearing trait beyond being able to produce children was that she was taught "the womanly art of the loom."¹⁸² Aeschylus doesn't bother to include the advent of clothing or funerary traditions in his account of human civilization's origins in *Prometheus Bound*. Bronze Age Ireland lacks a literary record, but the literature of later periods records a rich and highly developed oral culture that stretches back to antiquity. Flax production in Ireland goes back to the Bronze Age and sheep were introduced about 6,000 years ago. Archeological

¹⁸⁰ A clay statuette of a rotund woman giving birth whilst her hands are placed on either side on the heads of wild animals was found near Catal Hüyük, Turkey, ca. 6000 B.C.E. Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The first 20,000 years: Women Cloth and Society in Early Times* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994) 79.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 80-116.

¹⁸² Quoted in Powell, *Classical Myth*, 123.

evidence points towards spinning being practiced 3,000 years ago and early Brehon law tracts that preceded Anglo-Norman involvement in the twelfth century speak to the prominent position weaving and spinning took in women's lives between 600-800 A.D. For instance, if a divorce should occur, a woman was entitled to keep her bride price. This would have included spindles, yarn, and other weaving oriented items.¹⁸³ This indicates that women's sphere of influence extended beyond the biological needs of her living offspring to include the production of cloth. There are practical hypotheses for the roots of these labor delegations. The dangerous work of hunting, deep sea fishing, and metal work put children in harms way, whereas weaving, before it was transferred to the factory, could be conducted within a relatively safe, domestic sphere. The necessary, repetitious motions could be performed with a soft focus that allowed for peripheral child minding. Certain production processes were also communal, allowing for shared parenting scenarios.

That cloth production manifests as an interrelated extension of maternity rather than a separate sphere of influence reiterates women's common association with the corporeal. During pregnancy, women act as the bodily vessels that feed and protect the fetal body while it remains within. Biological gestation, labor, and lactation involve bringing forth physical entities from one's own body. Having fulfilled that role, the postpartum body continues to create products that will go into or around the bodies of their offspring; they craft the food that nourishes them just as they produce the clothing that encapsulates them once they are brought into the outside world. In a sense, mothers create objects in their own, previously gravid image. As their children progress beyond infancy, women's role as physical caretaker includes manipulating organic materials into viable products for nourishment and clothing. After death those same products are repurposed as shrouds and offerings to the dead so that they might rest peacefully.

¹⁸³ Megan Nutall Sayres, *Weaving Tapestry in Rural Ireland: Taipéis Gael* (Atrium: Cork University Press, 2006) 8.

Problems arise when these integral contributions to human culture and society are cloistered and devalued as inarticulate, involuntary, manual labors—even more so when women’s actions and identities are policed so that they cannot realize potential that ventures beyond ideologically corporeal parameters in a “spiritualist” society. The processes of producing, caring for, and commemorating human life are not, nor have they ever been purely physical. Rather, these processes assign meaning and symbolic value to physical bodies and actions. Unfortunately, women’s control over these processes and their public articulation of their meanings have largely been rendered dumb in twentieth and twenty-first century Ireland. At the institutional level, the signification of death was wrenched away from women and placed in the hands of elite men for translation. Professional keeners were a left over from a pagan past that had been progressively eradicated by Christian missionaries and Anglo-Norman conquerors from the fifth century on. They persisted in remote, rural communities that remained less Anglicized like the Aran Islands.

Just as Gaelic revivalists were drawn to the vernacular funerary traditions of isolated Irish people as a link to Ireland’s “authentic” past, there was a push to practice traditional modes of textile production using local materials. In 1902, W.B. Yeats’s sisters, Susan and Elizabeth, (also known as “Lily” and “Lolly”) were recruited by Evelyn Gleeson to set up an artistic collective just outside of Dublin in Dundrum called “Dun Emer” or “Emer’s Fort”. Again, Emer was the legendary wife of Cuchulainn, an Irish demi-god that dominates the Ulster saga. Like Lady Gregory, who had recently published an English translation of the Cuchulainn stories (from which Yeats drew many of his Ulster Cycle plays) the Dun Emer women proclaimed the legitimacy of Gaelic traditions by working with what they identified as indigenous materials and

aesthetic motifs.¹⁸⁴ As Gleeson states in her prospectus, “Everything as far as possible, is Irish: the paper of the books, the linen of the embroidery and the wool of the tapestry and carpets. The designs are also of the spirit and tradition of the country.”¹⁸⁵ Alongside operating a hand press, the guild’s principle mediums included wool and linen worked to represent the zoomorphic figures, Irish Saints, and Celtic knots that derive from pre-Christian artifacts and survive in Medieval, illuminated texts like the Book of Kells.

Dun Emer’s founder, Evelyn Gleeson had been born in England to Irish parents. She had wanted to go to college but University education was not yet open to women so she trained and worked as a painter prior to setting up Dun Emer, where she focused on tapestries and hand woven carpets.¹⁸⁶ Elizabeth Yeats had been a teacher and art lecturer before taking over the collective’s printing department.¹⁸⁷ Susan Yeats had previously worked as an embroiderer and produced a variety of wall hangings, costumes, and fabrics, some of which made their way to St. Louis to represent Ireland at the 1904 World’s Fair. In 1906 a Dun Emer carpet won the silver medal at the International Exhibition in Milan.¹⁸⁸ Gleeson and the Yeats sisters recruited several apprentices and employees to join them in their project and received large commissions for church hangings, religious vestments, decorations for private homes, and specially bound books.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Paul Lamour, “The Dun Emer Guild,” *Irish University Review* 1, no. 4 (1984): 24.

¹⁸⁶ Shiela Pim, “Dun Emer: The Origins,” *The Irish Arts Review* 2, no. 2 (1985): 18.

¹⁸⁷ The Dun Emer Press published several works important to the Irish Literary Revival including Lady Gregory’s *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, Douglas Hyde’s *The Love Songs of Connacht*, and W.Y. Yeats’ *In the Seven Woods* among others. When the Yeats sisters broke with Gleeson, they took the press with them and renamed it Cuala Press. Cuala posthumously published Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, *Poems and Translations* and Yeats’ *The Death of Synge* among other works by the Abbey directors. Of their seventy publications, forty-eight were by Yeats, and only eight were by women.

¹⁸⁸ Lamour, “The Dun Emer Guild,” 25.

Newspapers made frequent reports praising the collective's activity. Judging by the favorable press, Gleeson's success at securing financial backing from Augustine Henry for their endeavor, their large number of commissions, and the fact that Dun Emer work was selected for exhibits that would showcase Irish arts and crafts on the world stage, we can guess that this form of material production was endorsed as an appropriate vocation for women, especially women who wished to contribute to the national cause in some way.¹⁸⁹

Hannah Arendt uses the term *vita active* to encompass three distinct forms of human activity: labor, work, and action. Those forms of activity most connected to the physical survival are devalued against activities that do not refer to biological necessities or directly result in material artifacts. Arendt uses labor to refer to the biological processes necessary to sustain the life of humans as organic, animal beings such as eating, drinking, and protecting bodies from exposure. Work refers to the physical objects that are honed out of natural resources—the alteration of raw materials to create a synthetic world of things that is distinct from natural surroundings. Action refers to activity between men that does not actually result in material artifacts: “action refers to the founding and preserving of political bodies.”¹⁹⁰ Arendt argues that these designations categorized and valued human activity in ancient Greece as well as in modern society. These distinctions carry with them an implicit hierarchy that is underpinned by a derision of human embodiment. Arendt is not alone in recognizing the ideological distinction between work and labor. Hegel defined work as “externalization,” or a process of turning ideas into objects or actions. Similarly, as Joanne B. Ciulla notes, “John Locke distinguished between

¹⁸⁹ Politics were dominated by societies that barred women from membership. The Gaelic League and the Irish Literary Society were exceptions in that they allowed both men and women to join. This fraternal phenomenon spurred Maud Gonne to create Inghinidhe na hÉireann.

¹⁹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.

the “work of our hands and the labor of our bodies” to separate man the maker (*homo faber*) from man the laboring animal (*animal laborans*).¹⁹¹ In all of these imaginings, human activity is categorized and valued based upon the product’s distance from biology and the natural world.

Synge’s emphasis on women’s domestic labor in *Riders to the Sea* reinforces ideals of Irish womanhood and bridges with current legislation in Ireland. The play’s general endorsement by Irish audiences considered alongside *In the Shadow of the Glen*’s public protests illustrate the ways in which women’s identity was being policed to emphasize feminine materiality within nationalist rhetoric during the early twentieth century. When artists like Synge arrested their gazes backwards as a means of asserting a national identity that existed prior to colonization, they activated a myth of pastoral timelessness where men were paid to work outside the home while women were restrained to subsistence labor that could be performed compatibly with pregnancy and child-rearing. Eventually, the Irish constitution was drafted to ensure that reality for many Irish women.

Although Synge’s primary interests were aesthetic rather than overtly political, his plays were produced under the auspices of a self-proclaimed national theatre. Ideologies surrounding gender and Irish identity voiced in his plays circulated amongst early twentieth century audiences that would participate in the Anglo-Irish War for Independence, the creation of the Free State, and the ratification of a constitution that had serious circumscribing implications for women in the newly formulated Republic. Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution states:

1. In particular the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
2. The State shall therefore, endeavor to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

¹⁹¹ Joann B. Ciulla, *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work* (New York: Three Rivers, 2000) 28-29.

Geographic Ireland's personification as a woman and women's association with the material sphere had been utilized as an anti-colonial call to arms. However, as the independent state emerged, the gendered bodies that had previously been inscribed as inciting symbols for colonized Ireland found little place in the public life of the newly imagined nation. As prophesied in Yeats and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, once the English strangers had been turned out of the house, the titular character could stop wandering the roads and return to her rightful place at the family hearth where she produced children and clothing. She prepared food, nursed the sick, and, when necessary, tended to the dead. Along with the return to her rightful place as "woman of the House," Ireland, dualistically personified as the old hag/beautiful young woman, could also get to the business of her other primary occupation: producing and lamenting the young men who died to get her back there.

The Republic of Ireland's 1937 Constitution replaced the one drafted by the Free State government that granted equal suffrage to women in 1922. Among its many changes, Article 41 naturalizes women's placement within the domestic sphere as an inalienable right that is bound up in motherhood. Article 44 acknowledged the special position of the Catholic Church until it was amended in 1972 to recognize other denominations. Divorce remained illegal in Ireland under Article 41 until 1995 when it was amended to allow for the dissolution of marriage under special circumstances. In 1930, the Catholic Church responded to the industrial production and widespread use of condoms with the papal encyclical, "Casti connubi" (Latin for "chaste wedlock"). Pope Pius XI's brief forbade Catholics from using any form of birth control and reiterated the prohibition of abortions. Contraception was banned in Ireland from 1935-1980 when it was legalized with heavy restrictions. In response to the Roe versus Wade ruling in the United States, the Irish government re-iterated its constitutional ban on abortion and it was only

in 1992 that Article 6 was amended to allow girls and women to travel outside of Ireland to legally terminate unwanted pregnancies in cases of rape or incest.

Abortion remains illegal in the Republic of Ireland today with the exception of cases where the mother's life is at immediate risk. Article 40.3.3 reads, "The state acknowledges the right to life of the unborn, and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother" However, as evidenced in the tragic case of Savita Halapannavar in 2012, Irish legislation in practice still seems to encourage that the fetal life take precedent over the maternal one. Halapannavar was a thirty-one year old dentist who suffered a miscarriage during the seventeenth week of her pregnancy and sought treatment at University Hospital Galway on October 21st, 2012. Despite repeated requests for an abortion, health care practitioners did not perform the procedure while a fetal heartbeat remained even though the possibilities of its viability were extremely low. It was later confirmed that the mid-wife on duty stated that Ireland was a Catholic country as a means of explaining the senior obstetrician's decision to the distressed Mr. and Mrs. Halapannavar. On October 28th Savita Halapannavar died of septicemia accompanied by organ failure. The event spurred mass protests, an international demand for an external inquiry into the circumstances of this woman's death, and public outcry for a change in legislation.¹⁹² If a doctor terminated a pregnancy that was later determined to not have been life threatening they would face serious penalties. The risk of reprimand on the part of doctors can encourage a reticence that spills over into negligible inaction in cases like Halapannavar's.

The laws of the land were drafted so that the sexual and reproductive trajectories of Irish women's bodies were ruthlessly policed to perpetuate a hetero-normative, patriarchal family model. In the early twentieth century, Irish women, because they bore the physical effects of

¹⁹² Dalby, Douglas, "Religious Remark Confirmed in Abortion Case," April 11, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/world/europe/religious-remark-confirmed-in-irish-abortion-case.html?_r=0.

sexual reproduction and had few opportunities to work outside of the home, were essentialized as mothers and domestic laborers.¹⁹³ Legislation that limits women in their ability to govern their reproductive fates continues to permeate ideology and practice in 21st century Ireland. Synge's intentions may have been pure, but his work speaks to a paternalistic context. *Riders to the Sea* expresses a devotion to the cult of motherhood that would politically manifest in the Irish constitution.

¹⁹³ The Irish government introduced the Right to Life During Pregnancy Act in 2013. This act mainly re-states that abortion could be allocated in situations where the live of the mother was endangered.

Chapter 4: Absent Corpses and Dueling Mourners in *The Gaol Gate*

There is none so foolish as to love his own death.

-Sophocles, *Antigone*

In Yeats' *The Countess Cathleen*, the theatrically dead bodies that manifest onstage and receive various degrees of funerary attention belong to women. In Synge's tragedy, *Riders to the Sea*, a young man exits the stage alive and is returned as a corpse to be mourned by his mother and sisters. Synge's comedy, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, reverses this trope when the supposed corpse of an elderly man reanimates to cast his younger, childless, wife out of the house on suspicion of infidelity. It might first appear that out of all of the plays examined here, Lady Gregory's *The Gaol Gate* most closely adheres to the idealized precedent of young men exiting an inferior, material plane so that the women they leave behind can commemorate and immortalize them as essentially spiritual icons. On closer inspection, Gregory's play actually places classically influenced models of celebratory death and de-individualizing lamentation in critical conversation with other non-Greek, vernacular funerary traditions.

The intertextual citation of ancient, medieval, and contemporary representations of death in this play produces a highly nuanced orientation towards human corporeality. The contested status of the human body becomes especially clear when this intertextuality is considered in conjunction with the plot's gendered allocation of roles. Of the two lamentation performances *The Gaol Gate* enacts, one exhibits a woman who transforms a dead man into abstract, essentially spiritual hero. The other resists the sacrificial myth making process by placing value upon the material aspects of human existence to acknowledge the end of embodiment as a terrible loss. This chapter illustrates how Lady Gregory's play dramatized the fissures between

representations of death that exalted the masculine soul's release from its corruptive body and an alternate tradition of Irish funerary performance that had been increasingly suppressed by church and state during the colonial period.

The Gaol Gate presents grief as a kind of contrapuntal duet. One voice adheres to a sacrificial model exemplified in the trajectories of Dionysus and Christ to reconfigure a young male's death as a triumphant opportunity for spiritual apotheosis. The other remains more in line with a syncretic caoineadh tradition in that it commemorates a young man's embodied presence and marks its particular loss as a singularly destructive event. This chapter examines the status of the human body as expressed in two divergent representations of feminine bereavement in *The Gaol Gate* by first analyzing the conflict over the material and spiritual representation of a young man's life and death by his mother and his wife. It goes on to analyze the play's intertextual references to classical tragedy, liturgical drama, and observed post mortem performances in rural Ireland as a means of contextualizing the divergent funerary traditions each woman draws from. Finally, I will discuss the ways in which the casting of the two women in the initial run of *The Gaol Gate* intersects with repetitive Abbey casting across productions to reiterate a specific power dynamic that privileges one character type's spiritualist viewpoint over the other woman's more material one to influence the audience's reception of this play.

The play begins as two women named Mary enter through the wings to arrive before the prison walls. They have journeyed through the night and dawn is breaking. As will be discussed later, this setting is immediately reminiscent of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which begins with two women meeting at dawn before the wall of Creon's palace in the hopes of reclaiming the body of a male relative. Mary Cahel is the incarcerated man's elderly mother and Mary Cushion is her daughter-in-law. As will be discussed in greater detail below, the funerary context and the fact

that both women are called Mary also immediately harkens to biblical accounts where bereaved women seek Christ's crucified body at his tomb. A guard appears and the two Marys are barred from crossing the prison threshold. Despite the fact that the women are positioned outside of incarcerating walls, it becomes clear that their individual liberties are far from limitless. They are duty-bound to their kinsmen's bodily retrieval, living or dead. They characterize their venture so far from home as an unwelcome anomaly born of desperation and vulnerability. Both women are illiterate, and having received a letter from the prison, they are compelled to venture far outside of their comfort zones. The two have traveled through the night towards Galway to have the letter's meaning deciphered by a guard at the prison gate just before dawn.

Gregory's play observes classical staging conventions in that she sets her action before an external wall. This is a departure from the other plays addressed in this study. *The Countess Cathleen*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *Riders to the Sea*, and *In the Shadow of the Glen* all stage a funerary scenario within a modest domestic interior, where bodies are laid out and babies are born. This is the sphere traditionally assigned to women and women's work. Gregory's play inverts this in that two women have journeyed through the night to the external gates of a prison. It is the male character, Denis Cahel that remains unseen, incarcerated within, but this does not necessarily signal liberation or elevated status on the part of the women. They initially describe themselves as cold, frightened, and desperate for information. As the play progresses, their physical presence fails to manifest as the boon one might first expect in comparison to the cloistered dead man they remain focused on. The play concludes as one woman vows to spend the remainder of her existence filling Denis Cahel's physical absence with his martyred image while the other remains silent.

On many levels, Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin first appear to be multi-generational clones. They are bound through name, marriage, and shared experience. On closer inspection, however, although they become partners in grief, they commemorate Denis and signify his death in entirely distinctive ways. Mary Cahel exhibits a predilection for laudatory exaggeration where her son is concerned well before she learns that he is dead and her bias only magnifies as the play progresses. She immediately expresses suspicion that Denis has been falsely accused of informing against other men upon his arrest. When her daughter-in-law brings up damaging accounts of Denis's imprisonment and confession, Mary Cahel promptly absolves her son. Mary Cushin acknowledges the rumor that a sergeant coerced Denis' confession by getting him drunk and Mary Cahel proclaims that if that occurred, her son would be blameless. Mary Cushin refers to other neighbor women's proclamations that Denis's testimony caused their own sons and husbands to be arrested for unlawfully firing a firearm and Mary Cahel responds about the general bias of women when it comes to their kinsmen: "There is nothing that is bad or wicked but a woman will put it out of her mouth, and she seeing them that belong to her brought away from her sight and her home."¹⁹⁴ Ironically, as the play progresses, Mary Cahel exemplifies this exact trait in regards to verbally criminalizing other men as a means of exonerating Denis.

Mary Cahel rushes to defend her son and restore him to acceptable parameters of masculinity at every opportunity. Within this restoration, she asserts a mind over matter mentality as central to his identity. Upon arrival at the prison, Mary Cushin cites the material reality of the forbidding prison to make sense of the rumors circulating around her husband: "It is no wonder a man to grow faint hearted and he shut away from the light. I never would wonder at

¹⁹⁴ Augusta Gregory, *Seven Short Plays*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), 176.

all at anything he might be driven to say.”¹⁹⁵ Mary Cushin observes the confining sensory reality that Denis may be experiencing and its possible effects on his state of mind. Her words indicate a concern for his state of being, both psychologically and physiologically. Mary Cahel responds, “There were good men were gaoled before him never gave in to anyone at all. It is what I am thinking, Mary, he might not have done what they say.”¹⁹⁶ Her daughter-in-law brings up what seems to be an acknowledged truth within their community: a man named Terry actually fired the gun that led to several arrests. Mary Cushin asserts that if Denis did in fact name Terry as the perpetrator he would have been telling the truth and therefore justified. Mary Cahel promptly silences her: “Stop your mouth now and don’t be talking.”¹⁹⁷ It becomes clear that Mary Cahel forbade Mary Cushin from bringing the letter sent from the jail to literate neighbors for fear that it might reveal some defaming information about her son. Concern for what might be said about Denis takes precedence over immediately uncovering the facts about his physical condition. Similarly, Mary Cushin’s desire to uncover the truth of Denis Cahel’s alleged crimes is at odds with Mary Cahel’s objective to transmit an appropriately redemptive story about him. Rather than risk a neighbor obtain some potentially damaging information, the two women make a clandestine journey to the jail itself to have the contents of the letter deciphered by a third party.

When the women first learn that Denis has perished, they assume he succumbed to a terrible cold he had at the time of his arrest. Mary Cahel launches immediately into his praise. Her celebratory recollection of Denis is compounded with horror that one so great could die with his reputation besmirched. When the gatekeeper withdraws to fetch Denis’s belongings, Mary Cahel proclaims, “But my boy that was the best in the world, that never rose a hair on my head,

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 175.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 176

to have died with his name under blemish and left great shame on his child. Better for him to have killed the whole world than to have given any witness at all!”¹⁹⁸ For Mary Cahel, the tragedy lies in the fact that the manner of Dennis’s death has marked him as an unsuitable sacrificial victim. Rather than saving others with his own life, it appears that he attempted to do the opposite. Worse still, despite perpetrating an “unmanly” act of self-preservation, Denis appears to have met with a meaningless end. Regardless of whether he had actually committed the crimes he was accused of, it appears that Denis refused to willfully run headlong into pain and bodily annihilation as a means of asserting his true masculinity. He has robbed Mary Cahel of the opportunity to reconstruct her son as a martyr who triumphed over the flesh.

As Mary Cahel is speaking, the stage directions indicate that Mary Cushin sinks to the ground where she begins to rock and keen. Since the script does not include any simultaneous lines for Mary Cushin as Mary Cahel is speaking, it is likely that the actress was required to construct something along the lines of “inarticulate wailing” reminiscent of what Elizabethan travel writers observed in Irish funerals. Mary Cushin underscores the text with a kind of rhythmic, wordless crying until she is prompted by her mother-in-law to join her in verbalized lamentation: “Have you no word to say Mary Cushin? Am I left here to keen him alone?”¹⁹⁹ When Mary Cushin does speak, it is to Denis Cahel directly. In doing so, she places herself in a liminal space where she might still interact with the recently deceased as a conscious, hearing entity. This is in contrast to Mary Cahel who only ever refers to her son in the third person.

Mary Cushin recalls the many nights they spent together and repeatedly asks what will become of her in his absence. Her concern is not for the surviving mythology that will rise up in the space he has vacated. Rather, her thoughts go towards his remaining consciousness, her state

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 181.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

of being as a widow, and the survival of their young child. She opens with, “Oh my dear Denis, my heart is broken you to have died with the hard word upon you! My grief you to be alone now that spend so many nights in my company!”²⁰⁰ The remainder of Mary Cushin’s death song is rhythmically structured by the refrain, “What way will I be,” and attends to the grim reality of her continued material existence without her spouse, co-parent, domestic partner, and primary companion.²⁰¹ Lady Gregory includes the music composed for Mary Cushin’s partially spoken, partially sung lament in the published play’s appendix. She does not include any for Mary Cahel so it is likely that her lines were spoken. During her *caoineadh*, Cushin imagines the walk to mass alone while everyone else has a partner. She speaks of the turf that Denis cut but did not bring into the house and the field he will not be able to sow. She anticipates his dog calling out for him and baking a cake that he would not be there to eat. It is also Cushin that remembers to inquire about her husband’s body and burial when the nameless gatekeeper returns with his belongings. When he comments on the scanty nature of Denis’s clothes and shoes and generalizes him as a poor “mountainy” boy, Mary Cushin bristles:

They had a right to give him time to ready himself the day they brought him to the magistrates. He to be wearing his Sunday coat, they would see he was a decent boy. Tell me where will they bury him, the way I can follow after him through the street? There is no other one to show respect to him but Mary Cahel, his mother and myself.²⁰²

This prompts the further revelation that Denis was hung and buried anonymously in a mass grave. Mary Cushin is devastated by this news and speaks again to her husband: “O Denis, was it they that made an end of you and not the great God at all? His curse and my own upon them that

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 182.

did not let you die on the pillow!”²⁰³ Not only does Cushin continue to direct her speech towards her husband, she couples her curse with God’s against Denis’s accusers and executioners. Angela Bourke observes that “curses and maledictions” are a characteristic element of caoineadh scripts.²⁰⁴ Bourke outlines how traditional Irish laments express sadness but also the denial and rage stages of grief outlined by Elizabeth Kübler Ross in *On Death and Dying* (1969). Mary Cushin’s curse against Denis’s enemies and her mode of addressing her husband directly place her lament within this tradition. Mary Cushin’s direct address to Denis speaks to this stage of denial. She continues to identify with him as a living man before moving forward in the process towards anger. Not only is she outraged that Denis has been cruelly executed, but that the state has orchestrated the erasure of his physical remains.

The place of Denis’s imprisonment is revealed to be his tomb. Contrary to the precedent set by the Marys who kept a vigil at the sepulcher of Christ prior to his resurrection, Denis Cahel’s body will never again materialize for his mother or wife, living or dead. Having been buried in an unmarked paupers’ field behind the prison, his physical remains exist only in inaccessible diegetic space. This revelation is marked by the first of the play’s two major caoineadh performances. Mary Cushin again addresses her dead husband directly. She voices her heartbreak for his solitude in death. She also stresses his lack of mourners and the life of grim solitude and isolation she must endure in his absence:

(*Who has sunk on the step before the door, rocking herself and keening.*) Oh, Denis, my heart is broken you to have died with the hard word upon you! My grief you to be alone now that spent many nights in company!

What way will I be going back through Gort and through Kilbecanty? The people will not be coming out to keen you, they will say no prayer for the rest of the soul.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Ibid., 183

²⁰⁴ Bourke, "The Traditional Irish Lament," 289.

²⁰⁵ Gregory, *Seven Short Plays*, 181.

The focus remains on the material realities of the life Mary Cushin will face as the ostracized widow of an executed informant. Beyond this listing of mundane concerns, which Patricia Lysaght observes as a common motif in the Irish lamentation tradition, Cushin also emphasizes that she grieves the particular loss of a lover and partner:

What way will I be the Sunday and I going up the hill to the Mass? Every woman
with her own comrade, and Mary Cushin to be walking her lone! . . .
What way will I be in the night time, and none but the dog calling after
you?²⁰⁶

Her dirge ends with a metaphor of seasonal regeneration, citing that Denis's name was blackened in the fall and that it would fail to be re-born again in the spring with, "Your name never to rise up again in the growing time of the year."²⁰⁷ Angela Bourke notes that in women's lament texts, the speaker often "claims nature as witness" to her suffering.²⁰⁸ This detail locates Denis' death in the fall rather than the spring to distinguish it from trajectory of resurrection shared by Dionysus and Christ. Both the City Dionysia festival and Easter celebrations annually locate the death and re-birth of a sacrificed, young, male deity in the spring. Mary Cushin articulates Denis's irrevocable loss and firmly rejects any possibility of re-birth or narrative apotheosis. She produces no assuaging fiction that would transform his death into a regenerative event as Mary Cahel does.

It is only after the revelation of Denis's execution that his mother rises to claim narrative authority. She finds that the other local men arrested alongside Denis have been set free before she makes a leap of logic, which the prison guard fails to validate or rebuke before he exits, shutting the gates behind him:

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 182.

²⁰⁸ Bourke, "The Traditional Irish Lament," 289.

MARY CAHEL. Then the sergeant was lying and the people were lying when they said Denis Cahel had informed in the gaol?

GATEKEEPER. I have no time to be stopping here talking/ The judge got no evidence and the law set them free.²⁰⁹

From the spotty information provided by the guard, Mary Cahel asserts that counter to the story that has been circulated in their small, rural community, Denis Cahel died without incriminating others and that the other young men allowed him to take the fall for their crimes. This spawns the second and final lament that ends the play. Upon her deduction that Denis had not spoken against his neighbors as they had proclaimed, Mary Cahel ends the play pledging to spread the story of her fallen son's sacrificial heroism for the rest of her days.

Once the prison guard clarifies that Denis has been executed and interred in a pauper's field, Mary Cahel publically remembers a hearty, flawless male specimen that runs counter to the sickly, incarcerated man previously referenced: "It is he that was young and comely and strong, the best reaper and the best hurler. It was not a little thing for him to die, and he protecting his neighbor!"²¹⁰ After the revelation of Denis's execution and anonymous burial, it is clear that any material evidence that might contradict the sacrificial narrative Mary Cahel is inclined to construct has been removed. Mary Cahel utilizes the space vacated by Denis's violently executed body as well as the wide gaps left by the gatekeeper's perfunctory narrative to transform his death into a willful, sacrificially regenerative act. All that we learn from the gatekeeper about the evidence presented at the trial is that Denis was arrested near the scene of the crime, he was identified by his footprint, and that after "no witness was given against the rest worth while," the

²⁰⁹ Gregory, *Seven Short Plays*, 184.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

men that Denis allegedly informed against were set free.²¹¹ When Mary Cahel rises to ask the gatekeeper for final confirmation that the people were lying about Denis being an informant, he refuses to verify or deny anything. He exits through the gate and locks it after him. For Mary Cahel, this is confirmation enough and she weaves an exalting tale of self-immolation out of these scraps of information.

After dismissing any evidence against her son, Mary Cahel unleashes the idealizing memoir that she has been yearning to transmit:

One word to the judge and Denis was free, they offered him all sorts of riches. They brought him drink in the gaol, and gold, to swear away the life of his neighbor! Pat Ruane was no good friend to him at all, but a foolish, wild companion; it was Terry Fury knocked a gap in the wall and sent in the calves to our meadow. Denis would not speak, he shut his mouth, he would never be an informer. It is no lie he would have said at all giving witness against Terry Fury.²¹²

Mary Cahel's third person account recuperates Denis from a Judas figure, motivated by material concerns, to a Christ-like martyr. In contrast, Mary Cushin is still mourning Denis Cahel as a particularized person whose corporeal loss precipitates emotional distress and materially destructive consequences for herself and her young son. Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin both author a commemorative funerary performance for Denis Cahel in the wake of his biological demise and physical erasure, but to contrasting purposes. In short, one woman remembers a man while the other creates a celebratory fantasy in his absence. While Mary Cushin's *caioneadh* performance provides a counterpoint to the popular rhetoric of masculine blood sacrifice, it is Mary Cahel who has the final word about what Denis Cahel meant in life and in death.

As Cathy Leeney argues, the two very different laments that rise up around Denis Cahel's death, held in tandem with the perfunctory guard's account and the inaccurate story

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid., 184-185.

circulated by self-preserving neighbors, lay bare the mythologizing process that holds the dual potential of transforming a man into a savior or a pariah.²¹³ The true details of Denis Cahel's death and what brought him to the prison in the first place will never be entirely knowable to the two women. They receive only second or third hand accounts from biased neighbors and a curt prison employee. The contrasting meanings each lament assigns to Denis Cahel's death are held in tension to expose the processes that churn historical events into memories and circulated narratives. They also show how these mechanisms shape new identities for the surviving characters. Denis Cahel's death transforms one woman into a bereaved widow, concerned with the realities of her physical survival. This same event transforms the other into an apostle whose concerns manifest as immaterial.

Mary Cushin responds to the loss of her husband and his body with pragmatic bleakness, whereas Mary Cahel transforms the death of a disempowered man into an instance of spiritual apotheosis; resurrecting his good name and immortalizing him as a martyr who died refusing to name those actually responsible for the crimes he had been accused and convicted of on pain of death. She vows to end her days proclaiming the story of his heroism throughout the countryside, thus securing his mortality in song and lore. Mary Cushin's sorrowfully pragmatic list of all of the physical activities Denis will not be there to perform precedes Mary Cahel's excessive recuperation of her son as a savior figure. The latter transforms the destruction and erasure of an embodied Denis into a moment of triumph.

In short, *The Gaol Gate* follows two women in their gradual recognition that Denis Cahel, the living son and husband they sought to retrieve from the Galway prison, has been executed and buried in an unmarked grave. The series of tragic revelations that make up the plot

²¹³ Cathy Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights 1900-1939: Gender and Violence on Stage* (New York: Peter Lange Publishing, 2010) 26-27.

initially appear to magnify the similarities between the two women; beyond their shared name, each can be identified as the widowed mother of a single son. They hail from a small, rural community, lack literacy, and have limited means of survival. Keeping the centrality of both characters' maternal status in mind, it is integral that neither woman's child ever materially manifests as part of the staged action, living or dead. The boy Mary Cushin left at home is described as "barely out of the cradle" but never named and the space Denis leaves behind lies at the center of the play. In *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation*, Christopher Murray points out that, "There is a vacuum where the tragic hero ought to be."²¹⁴ Murray uses this absence to declassify *Gaol Gate* as a full-fledged tragedy but I argue that the material absence of a sacrificial victim is actually an extension of the *ekkyklema* and *apotheosis* conventions so central to Greek tragedy.

Fatal violence occurred offstage during the festival Dionysia. Victims would be brought back onstage either near death or already dead depending on their centrality to the plot. For instance, Phaedra's suicide occurs entirely offstage whereas Hippolytus is brought back in after being mortally wounded. After absolving his father, he dies onstage and receives funerary attention from mortals and goddesses alike. In part IV of the *Poetics*, Aristotle maintains that part of the draw towards observing mimetic performance lies in the fact that audiences derive pleasure from watching events that normally cause torment if witnessed in reality: "Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to see when produced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and dead bodies." In early twentieth century Dublin, some of the most popular sacrificial dramas insisted not only that violence to young men's bodies occur offstage, but also that their death and post mortem were relegated to diegetic

²¹⁴ Murray, Christopher, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 58.

rather than mimetic spaces. For instance, in Gregory and Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the dead men the titular character demands as sacrifice for her regeneration remain hidden. In setting the action on the eve of the failed 1798 Rebellion, the audience is aware that when Michael Gillane pledges himself to fight for the feminine embodiment of Ireland, he seals his death. Michael's sacrifice is further confirmed by Cathleen ni Houlihan's offstage transformation into a beautiful young woman.

As discussed previously, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was unprecedentedly endorsed by a vast cross-section of audiences who frequently came to figurative (and sometimes actual) blows over dramatic performances that failed to adhere to the highly gendered parameters of national identity they heterogeneously endorsed. According to Susan Cannon Harris, "Sacrificial drama worked for nationalists only when it did *not* allow the victims to 'bleed and die' on stage."²¹⁵ If *Cathleen ni Houlihan's* success of is any indication of Dublin audiences' appetite in the early twentieth century, sacrificial drama's efficacy hinged upon the erasure of bleeding, violated bodies so that a purified, spiritual image of humanity could rise up in their place. *The Gaol Gate* hinges on the complete material absence of its sacrificial victim. It was also very well received. Joseph Holloway describes multiple rounds of applause following its performance to packed houses during its opening run.²¹⁶

In *The Gaol Gate*, not only does deadly violence to a young man's body occur offstage, but the audience is also denied ocular proof of that violence after it occurs. As will be shown below, if Denis Cahel's abused body were allowed to materialize as Bartley's does in *Riders to the Sea*, it would act as a tangible counterpoint to the narrative his mother produces in order to

²¹⁵ Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, 9.

²¹⁶ Joseph Holloway, *Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, 73.

transform her abused son into an essentially ethereal, incorruptible hero. Cahel uses her position as mourner to recuperate Denis as a perfect sacrificial victim, whose elective death will act as an inspiring template for multiple generations of young men to come. In reality, neither woman nor the audience will ever know the degree of agency Denis Cahel exerted during his incarceration and eventual execution. The information obtained from the prison guard is biased and full of holes. Mary Cahel promptly fills these gaps with an assuaging narrative about her son's altruism and spiritual triumph over concerns of the flesh. Alternatively, Mary Cushin utilizes the Irish lamentation form to categorize her husband's execution as an unequivocal loss. Her song looks towards the painful effects of his material absence and the difficult realities she will soon face as a widow left to raise a young son in a hostile environment. In short, both women author Denis Cahel's funerary performance in the space provided by his body's physical absence, but to markedly different ends.

The Gaol Gate premiered at the Abbey in October of 1906. It is one of the few contemporary tragedies penned exclusively by Gregory who was more prolific in the comic genre. *The Gaol Gate* was Gregory's first tragedy and one of her personal favorites.²¹⁷ According to Christopher Murray, Gregory seemed to consider tragedy a less challenging genre to write. Beyond the fact that comedies make up the bulk of her dramatic output, Gregory's diaries and correspondence archive indicate that she felt lighter content was needed as an alternative to the other work being produced at the Abbey. Designating Gregory's dramatic corpus as primarily comedic is somewhat misleading in its simplicity however. The fact that her dramatic gaze often turned towards the process of mythmaking means that a cynical undertone permeates much of her comic work. *Spreading the News* (1904), *The Jackdaw*, *Hyacinth Halvey*, and *The Rising of*

²¹⁷ Joan Newlon Radner and C  il  n Owens, eds., *Irish Drama, 1900-1980*. (Washington, D.C: Catholic University Of America Press, 1990) 31.

the Moon all rely on characters who collectively, and with varying degrees of complicity, transmit both partial and full out fallacies as truth. Unchecked myths are allowed to snowball and by the play's end, they create a new reality. *The Gaol Gate* similarly exposes the mythmaking process but positions it as an assuaging reaction to irrevocable loss rather than a precipitator of comedic resolution.

Most of Gregory's other more tragically leaning plays are situated in historically remote if not mythic pasts. Aside from *Cathleen ni Houlihan* which takes place in a single cottage setting, plays like *Dervogilla* (1907), *Kincora* (1909), *Grania* (1912) and are sweeping productions populated with expansive lists of aristocratic characters.²¹⁸ Their epic plots span years, and in the cases of *Kincora* and *Grania*, they occur in multiple settings. In contrast, *The Gaol Gate* observes Aristotelian unities in that it is comprised of a single action that takes place in a single place and time. Its *dramatis personae* are comprised of only three: Mary Cahel, Mary Cushin, and an unnamed prison guard. As I will discuss in more detail below, *The Gaol Gate* heavily derives from Greek tragedy, especially *Antigone* as well as medieval liturgical drama. One major departure from Aristotelian convention lies in class representation. Writing about a century after the Greek theatre's pinnacle, Aristotle observed that tragedies are conventionally populated with characters of great social stature. The tragedies that survive from the fifth century B.C.E. are characteristically populated with gods, demigods, and aristocratic heroes of divine lineage. Servants and messengers also appear, but they are not usually central to the tragic plot.²¹⁹ Audiences were to watch characters of elite social status make mistakes and come to

²¹⁸ Although *Grania* was not produced at the Abbey, it was published together with *Dervogilla* and *Kincora*. Augusta Gregory, *Irish Folk-History Plays: the Tragedies* (London: Knickerbocker Press, 1912).

²¹⁹ In comparison to Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides enlarged the roles of non-elite characters in his work. For instance, the nurses in *Medea* and *Hippolytus* have substantial speaking roles.

realize their terrible, often fatal consequences. These instances of *hamartia* (a mistake or “missing of the mark”) caused the likes of Oedipus, Hercules, Creon, Jason, and Theseus to irrevocably fall from great heights.²²⁰ In witnessing heroes being brought so low, the Athenian citizens sitting in the audience were to empathetically experience *catharsis* because they recognized themselves in the tragic characters observed on stage. When elite male citizens observed, for instance, a great king become the most despised creature in all the land, they were hit with the revelation that they too could experience such a catastrophic fall. From this angle, catharsis, generally translated as the emotional purgation of pity and fear, hinges on a socially dominant audience’s ability to recognize themselves in the main characters’ experience of a tragic revelation (*anagnorisis*).

Lady Gregory reassigns the role of sacrificial victim to a young Catholic man and the role of protagonist is bifurcated between two disenfranchised women, identified in relation to the victim as mother and wife. This reallocation of roles is important because it reflects the symbolic centrality of Ireland’s socially subordinate classes and the competition for control over the image of subaltern types. Paul Murphy argues that from 1899 to establishment of the Republic in 1949, the roles of the Peasant, Wandering Tramp, Small Farmer, Mother, and Wife were consolidated and politicized as fantasy objects across representational mediums as the demographics they claimed to represent remained socially subordinate:

there is a consistent link between political hegemony and its ideological legitimization through the essentialization of subordinate or, to use Antonio Gramsci’s term, ‘subaltern’ class and gender groups. The hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies in this period were frequently structured around the representation of subaltern groups as cultural icons or, to use Jacques Lacan’s phraseology, fantasy objects...²²¹

²²⁰ Powell, *Classical Myth*, 74.

²²¹ Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy*, 2.

Lady Gregory stages this representational conflict as a dead man's survivors compete for control of his symbolic legacy. Two recognizable versions of longsuffering, Irish womanhood vie for the position of chief mourner. The winner, Mary Cahel, asserts the primacy of the maternal relationship in terms of kinship bonds. Her dominance over Mary Cushin also allows her to repurpose Denis as a fantasy object. He functions as a masculine archetype whose sacrificial trajectory asserts the native population's essential spirituality. Mary Cahel repurposes a dead Denis to disrupt the colonizer's insistence on Irish people's all-consuming carnality.

Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin share the role of protagonist in the play, but as the action progresses they increasingly differentiate themselves. Mary Cahel emerges as the more dominant character. Mary Cushin ultimately is made subservient to her mother-in-law. As the mouthpiece of an authoritarian state, the gatekeeper initially functions as the women's common enemy. Upon his exit, the antagonistic relationship transfers to the two women when it becomes clear that their commemorative goals for Denis diverge.

The funerary scenario and the power relationship between two women collectively placed in conflict with the state, but also with one another is particularly reminiscent of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Sophocles' text ghosts Lady Gregory's play in several ways. At the most basic level, both plays feature women who attempt to enact appropriate funerary protocols for criminalized, male relatives. Both plays begin with two women meeting outside of gates at dawn in the hopes of reclaiming the body of a dead relative. Antigone and her sister, Ismene, are aware that their brother is dead, whereas Cahel and Cushin are informed as part of the action. Both sets of women are barred by the state from obtaining their kinsmen's body to orchestrate the appropriate burial rites. Although the stakes vary, in both cases they must defy an authoritarian, patriarchal state in order to realize their role as mourners. Antigone physically defies her uncle Creon by

burying her brother and faces death as a consequence. Mary Cahel does not succeed in retrieving her son's body but assumes control back from the gatekeeper in terms of narrative. In a less overt way, she also faces death in that she abandons shelter and certain sustenance to wander the roads unprotected, spreading the story of Denis's martyrdom.

The situational reference to Antigone and her sister Ismene reinforces these Irish women's otherness in the sociopolitical sphere as well as the asymmetrical power relationship that finally arises between them. Antigone manifests as the more dominant sister who must be removed as a threat to the patriarchal order embodied in their uncle Creon.

Just as Antigone and Ismene are the cursed daughters of an incestuous marriage, *The Gaol Gate's* main characters are not powerful people shown to fall from great heights. The play focuses on the reactions of two poor, disenfranchised Irish women as they are dealt a fatal blow. This is a major departure from Greek plays that center on aristocratic male protagonists like Creon, Theseus, or Jason's moment of *anagnorisis*. Rather, two women who were already hacking out a difficult existence have been rendered destitute. Mary Cushin acknowledges these bleak material realities whereas Mary Cahel increasingly moves away from them. By the play's end, Mary Cahel has repositioned Denis's death as his and her greatest glory. In its concluding moments she is referring to a folk icon with global appeal rather than a localized son. Mary Cahel constructs a fantastic future where she will wander the roads singing his praises. Her vision of what will come pays no attention to bodily necessity: "I to stoop on a stick through half a hundred years, I will never be tired with praising!"²²² As Cathy Leeney observes, in these final moments, when Mary Cahel transforms Denis Cahel into a messiah, she is also transforming herself into a Cathleen ni Houlihan figure; the mystical hag who wanders the roads perpetuating

²²² Gregory, *Seven Short Plays*, 185.

and commemorating young men's blood sacrifice.²²³ This intersects with the role Artemis plays in *Hippolytus*. The goddess closes Euripides play by reformulating a slain young man into a perpetually revered constellation in the heavens.

As previously stated, there is debate surrounding the presence or absence of the tragic hero in *The Gaol Gate*. Its inter-textual layers work in tandem to complicate the designation of the tragic hero in purely Aristotelian terms. Christopher Murray asserts that the play turns upon the conspicuous material absence of the heroic figure. Dawn Duncan argues against Murray and describes how the Marys' journey bares many markers of the mythic hero's in that there is an initial call to action, a coming together with an ally, a journey through the "dark forest," a meeting with a gatekeeper, an encounter with death, and finally a return to the living where the hero brings back a boon to the community.²²⁴ The heroic quest results in a transformation of consciousness; in venturing into the unknown abyss, and by being severely tested along the way, some form of salvation is achieved. Odysseus, for example, journeys to the underworld to achieve valuable advice about how to return to Ithaca, defeat his wife's suitors, and reclaim his life as its ruler. Aeneas makes a similar pilgrimage to speak to his dead father and receives valuable information about his duty to found Rome. According to Joseph Campbell, the mythic hero acts in the service of something greater than himself, and in doing so reaches maturity. Some argue that the purpose of the classical heroic quest convention tracks a masculine coming of age story; the neophyte male breaks from the domestic, maternal sphere by venturing into the unknown. Upon being severely tested, he gathers knowledge of himself and returns to his community where he can take his rightful position. In Lady Gregory's play, Mary Cahel must

²²³ Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights*, 14.

²²⁴ Dawn Duncan, "Lady Gregory and the Feminine Journey: The Gaol Gate, Grania, and the Story Brought by Brigit," *Irish University Review* 34, vol. 1 (2002): 135.

take this journey to return a redeemed Denis Cahel to his community as an exemplary icon of heroic masculinity on his behalf.

The Homeric heroic quest combines with the Celtic hero's journey in Mary Cahel's transformation into a sovereignty goddess type. The Celtic hero has an encounter with a Morrigna type, often initially in the form of a wandering hag. It is only in gaining her approval that he can achieve greatness and the land may flourish. The major difference here is that the Celtic journey hinges on the consummation of Ireland as woman and the successfully tested chief's union. As noted in the introduction, the Morrigna triad can manifest as old crones or as beautiful, reproductively viable young women. This intertextual component makes the power structure between the two women in this play even more interesting. Oddly, it is Mary Cahel that uses the same name as her son whereas Mary Cushin appears to have retained her maiden name. This nominal choice is more than a neutral means of differentiation. It asserts that Mary Cahel is the primary woman in Denis Cahel's life. When combined with her final resemblance to Cathleen ni Houlihan, not only does Mary Cahel occupy the role of mother, but also supplants Mary Cushin in her role as primary mourner and bereaved wife. Mary Cahel ends the play in a position of power. Mary Cushin ends the play by obediently gathering up Denis's clothes, as Mary Cahel commands, before silently following her offstage.

Elements of liturgical drama also factor as one of the many intertextual layers that operate in tandem in this play. Cathy Leeney concedes that Gregory's play references Sophocles' *Antigone* in that it begins with two disenfranchised women meeting outside the gates of an oppressive patriarchal institution, but focuses her analysis on the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, as the guiding formal model for *The Gaol Gate*. This central scenario of medieval religious drama, enacted by priests and nuns, depicts the meeting between the three Marys and an angel in front of

Christ's empty tomb on Easter Sunday. Medieval cycle dramas are thought to have grown around the *Quem Quaeritis* exchange, which translates to "whom do you seek?" When the women arrive to anoint Jesus's dead body with spices and perfumed oils, the angel's wording foreshadows that they will find a living man in the place of the expected corpse.

It is linguistically interesting that Gregory's play blatantly refers to the *Quem Quaeritis* exchange in that "whom do you seek" has no direct translation in Irish as it lacks a relative pronoun; "whomever, who, whom" has no correlative in Irish. Rather, something like "what man" or "what body" would have to be used. Rather than using a generalizing pronoun, Irish linguistically demands a more concrete syntax when referring to human beings. The "whom do you seek?" wording actually only appears verbatim in the non-canonical Gospel of Peter, but other accounts included in the New Testament confirm the presence of the women as mourners. Matt, Mark, and Luke's Gospels identify the women who come from Galilee to witness Jesus's crucifixion and anoint his body as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. The angel asks, "Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here, but he has been raised."¹ The women hurry to announce the resurrection to the eleven remaining apostles and all but Peter fail to believe them.

In other canonical gospels Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb alone where Christ appears to her. For instance, in the Gospel according to John, Mary Magdalene is weeping because she has discovered that the tomb is empty. Two angels appear and ask her what is wrong. She replies that she does not know where the body has been taken. She turns to see Jesus but does not immediately recognize him. She asks him to show her where the body has been hidden. When she recognizes him, he tells her that she must "let go of him" so that he might join his father. In other words, she must not tether him to the material world of women when he must ascend to the

masculine, celestial realm. The communion once shared between the living Jesus and a mortal woman must be supplanted so that he can achieve his rightful place in the heavens as his father's son. Although Jesus was born of a woman, he only briefly passes through the feminine mundane so that he might ascend to essentially masculine ethereality. According to Mary Cahel, Denis follows a similar trajectory.

In Lady Gregory's play, rather than an angel, we have a prison guard. Also, two rather than three Mary's appear in contrast to much of the New Testament. Cathy Leeney observes, "Gregory's choice of two Marys then suggests identification with the two Marys of Gospel accounts: a maternal figure of an older generation, and a sexualized wife/lover, and the play develops their contrasting responses to Denis' fate based on this opposing binary."²²⁵ Mary Cushin mourns her husband as a man, and the dirge she sings speaks to his irrevocable loss and physical erasure whereas Mary Cahel claims her son's death as a successful transition into disembodied sainthood. The older woman resolves to transmit his sacrificial trajectory as a model of idealized masculinity for future generations of young Irish men to revere and aspire to. The sexualized woman ends the play ineffectively while the desexualized, elderly mother comes to occupy a well-established, mythic type previously embodied in the character of Cathleen ni Houlihan: "I to stoop on a stick through half a hundred years, I will never be tired with praising."²²⁶ With this line, Mary Cahel asserts herself as the recognizable, itinerant crone who wanders the roads praising a young man's premature death as a glorifying, transcendent, act. When Mary Cahel repositions herself as Cathleen ni Houlihan, the sexual nature of previous incarnations of the sovereignty goddess type are further deflected on to Mary Cushin. This

²²⁵ Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights*, 28.

²²⁶ Gregory, *Seven Short Plays*, 185.

bifurcation of carnality and power further enhances the binary between the real and the ideal, the material and the spiritual.

Although utilizing very different strategies, both the gatekeeper (the embodiment of the patriarchal state) and the play's dominant female figure orchestrate an erasure of Denis Cahel as an embodied, particularized individual. The gatekeeper, acting as the institutional mouthpiece, generalizes him as one of the rural poor: "Those mountain boys do be poor" and a non-descript criminal that deserves to be blotted out of human existence and memory: "Those that break the law must be made an example of. Why would they be laid out like a well behaved man?"²²⁷ The quick execution and anonymous interment literally throws Denis's physical remains into a generalizing pit of similarly de-named, criminalized dead men. Mary Cahel constructs an idealized hero by allowing a recognizable, but non-verifiable narrative of sacrifice to rise up in his place. One agent uses Denis Cahel's death and the absenting of his body as a cautionary example, the other, an aspirational one. In contrast, Mary Cushin assigns negative social utility to Denis's loss.

The casting of the Allgood sisters in this play reinforces this reading. As I will illustrate below, repeatedly casting and co-casting Sara and Molly Allgood across Abbey productions exemplifies many of the facets outlined by Marvin Carlson in *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. In terms of audience reception, during a given performance, an actor's body is haunted by previous incarnations of the role they are currently playing (by themselves or other actors), the roles they have played prior to the one in question, and by details of their personal or public lives known to the audience. They are also ghosted in relation to other actors with whom they have frequently worked. In other words, the theatrically performing body functions as a palimpsest of multiple performances in the minds of regularly attending audience

²²⁷ Ibid., 183-184.

members. Modeling itself off of traditional repertory companies, the Abbey cultivated a finite group of actors whom they recycled across multiple roles and productions.

Abbey audiences had already become familiar with Sara Allgood in maternal roles before she originated the role of Mary Cahel in October of 1906. She had appeared in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* as Brigit Gillane since 1904. As Bridgit Gillane, she existed as the mundane counterpoint to the mystical Cathleen who persuades Bridgit's son to join the rebellion of 1798 on the eve of his wedding day. The young bridegroom foregoes earthly concerns; he walks away from an advantageous marriage to an actual woman, in order to fight and die on a compromised symbol's behalf so that she might be restored to youth and beauty. The play's living women are shown to be ineffective antagonists to the supernatural Cathleen's proposition. Their protests fall on Michael's deaf ears as he goes into a kind of trance and pledges himself to join the ranks of young men who would die in the 1798 Rebellion. Sara shifted into the dominant role of Cathleen Ni Houlihan prior to *The Gaol Gates* opening in 1906. She also took over the role of and Maurya, Synge's mourning matriarch in *Riders to the Sea* in February of that same year. Returning to Carlson's theory of the actor's ghosted body, Sara Allgood's performative form was frequently recycled and encoded as a tragic matriarch but also as Ireland herself. The character of Mary Cahel is also the recognizable hybrid of Brigit Gillane and Cathleen Ni Houlihan; the aggrieved mother is transformed into the "phallic woman" who entices young men to premature death with the promise of eternal glory in song and lore.²²⁸

With Sara moving up the Abbey ranks, her sister Molly came to occupy some of the roles recently vacated by actresses who left in protest when Synge, Gregory, and Yeats reformulated the Abbey as a limited liability company in 1905. Molly came to find a niche of her own in the

²²⁸ Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights*, 31.

sexualized character of Nora Burke in Synge's notorious *In the Shadow of the Glen*. With Sara now performing as Cathleen ni Houlihan, her younger sister Molly was slotted into the role of Brigit Gillane despite being, as Synge remarked, "too young for the part."²²⁹ As previously mentioned, the non-supernatural women in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Brigit Gillane and Delia Cahel, stand no chance against personified Ireland's demand. She demands male bodily sacrifice for the sake of a beautifully restored, ageless female body. Brigit Gillane tries and fails to keep her son in the land of the living when the phallic woman promises mythic immortality in exchange for his corporeal annihilation.²³⁰

Before originating the part of Mary Cushin, Molly also appeared as Cathleen, one of Maurya's daughters in *Riders to the Sea*. In each of these dramatic scenarios, Molly takes on the role of a realistic woman who verbally reacts to a male family member's death but whose interjections are ultimately overshadowed by characters played by her elder sister: Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Maurya, and Mary Cahel. Molly's appearances as Nora in *In the Shadow of the Glen* also prepared *The Gaol Gate* audiences to view her as a sensual, carnal character in contrast to the celibate if not utterly chaste roles occupied by Sara. When the sisters appeared together in the same production this power dynamic remained intact: Sara's casting frequently reiterated her position as chief mourner and Molly was repeatedly cast as her subservient.

Keeping in mind the ghosting process that was occurring on the bodies of Sara and Molly Allgood during *The Gaol Gates* original production, let us return to the *Visitatio Sepulchri* scenario as it operates in tandem with Greek and Celtic precedents concerned with post mortem scenarios. An asymmetrical power dynamic is being inscribed upon the bodies of these

²²⁹J.M. Synge, *Letters to Molly: John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill 1906-1909*, ed. Anne Saddlmeyer (Cambridge: The Belknap Press at Harvard University, 1971) xix.

²³⁰ Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights*, 31.

performers as they are recycled in relation to one another. The dramatic climax in the *Vistatio Sepulchri* occurs when Christ's vacant wrappings are brought before the audience as ocular proof of Christ's resurrection.²³¹ The clothes that once encased Denis' body are similarly brought to the stage by the prison guard. The primary difference lies in the fact that the biblical Marys find the tomb empty whereas these Irish women find a tomb that has been unceremoniously filled; they came seeking Denis's temporary domicile but discovered his permanent, and sadly inaccessible grave.

As Leeney observes, in Mary Cahel's hands, these cloths become holy relics. They act as symbols of Denis Cahel's sacrifice and heroic transformation having died for the others' sins:²³²

It was he that was young and comely and strong, the best reaper and the best hurler. It was not a little thing for him to die, and he protecting his neighbor!
Gather up, Mary Cushin, the clothes for your child; they will be wanted by this one and that one. The boys crossing the sea in the springtime will be craving a thread for memory.
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Never mind that the initial corporeality of Jesus' resurrection is a fundamental component of the Christian miracle: albeit transfigured, Christ walks and talks. He asks the frightened disciples to touch his wounds. Christ's tomb is empty, signifying his resurrection but Denis Cahel's grave remains decidedly occupied. Christ's vacant funeral shroud signals the presence of Christ's living body in the world whereas Denis's meager clothes are a symbol of his living body's continued absence from it. Gregory's play departs from its Christian precedent and lays bare the fissures in conflating Christ's crucifixion and bodily resurrection with the republican rhetoric of blood sacrifice that replaces bodily destruction and absence with a regenerative narrative and swaps a lost man with a symbolic hero.

²³¹ Ibid., 28.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Gregory, *Seven Short Plays*, 184.

In her final lines, Mary Cahel vows to spend the rest of her days hobbling through the countryside with cane in hand proclaiming the story of Denis Cahel's greatness in death. As she exits the stage after this proclamation, Mary Cahel has been transformed into Cathleen Ni Houlihan and Mary Cushin into the abandoned young bride, Delia. Mary Cahel's tale sets a heroic precedent for future martyrs and, as such, comes to occupy the role of the phallic woman just as Cathleen Ni Houlihan does:

They shall be remembered forever,
They shall be alive forever,
They shall be speaking forever,
The people shall hear them forever.²³⁴

The *Visitatio* functions as the play's guiding structure but the decidedly immaterial nature of Denis's resurrection and the thematic references to *Antigone* produce a nuanced intervention into the myth-making process that the play delineates. The crux of *The Gaol Gate* lies in the differences between the narratives constructed in the space provided by Denis Cahel's absent body. This is where Lady Gregory's under-acknowledged prowess as a dramatist is most apparent.

Of the forty-two plays Lady Gregory wrote, thirty-six were staged from 1903 to 1927. Despite this sizable body of produced work, Gregory has received less critical recognition for her dramatic contributions than the men she worked alongside. It is true that Gregory's plays became less popular as the twentieth century progressed. Her formidable administrative prowess is often celebrated as her major formative contribution to the Abbey. True, the theatre's original patent is in her name and she saw the company through rough nascent waters to secure its place as a federally funded institution in 1925. Beyond her managerial work, Gregory's English translations of Irish mythological sagas and collected folk tales tend to receive more recognition

²³⁴ Ibid., 267-270.

than her dramas. Yeats did not speak Irish, and Synge, although he studied the language was less proficient in the literary translation of its more archaic forms than Lady Gregory. Both Yeats and Synge dramaturgically drew from her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), a translated adaptation of the Ulster cycle, and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904), a re-telling of the Fenian cycle. The Fenian saga focuses on the exploits of the hero Finn Mac Cumhaill and the Fianna, the Irish warrior class that succeeded the *Tuatha de Danaan*.²³⁵ Yeats' *On Baile's Strand* (1904), *Deirdre* (1907), *The Green Helmet* (1910), *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), and the *Death of Cuchulain* (1939) all draw from Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. Synge's final play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, also draws from this work.²³⁶

Gregory's literary work made Irish mythological and folk material more readily accessible to Yeats and Synge. Both men celebrated her skill as an adapter, writer, and creator of dialect. Even so, their praise can render her literary work supplementary in a larger narrative about the creative genius of two great men; beyond helping to create and sustain a venue and

²³⁵ Yeats acknowledges his debt to Lady Gregory in an appendix note entitled "The Legendary and Mythological Plays" with "The greater number of the stories I have used, and persons I have spoken of, are in Lady Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men* and *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* [...] I cannot believe that it is from friendship that I weigh these books with Malory, and feel no discontent at the tally, or wish to make the circum[unsub]stantial origins of my own art familiar, that would make me give them before all other books to young men and girls in Ireland." Yeats, *Plays*, 674.

²³⁶ The Ulster cycle revolves around the Irish demigod and hero Cúchulainn. Like many of his Greek and Christian counterparts, Cúchulainn, is the son of a god, Lugh, and Deichtine, a mortal woman. For better or worse, Cúchulainn swears his loyalty to his mother's brother, King of Ulster, Conchubar Mac Nessa. In many of the tales that make up the saga, Conchubar factors as an abuser of his patriarchal power, reminiscent of Agamemnon or Creon. The Ulster cycle also features Deirdre, often referred to as "Deirdre of the Sorrows." Deirdre figures as pre-Christian Irish mythology's most prominent tragic heroine. Deirdre is reminiscent of an Irish Helen in that she elopes with the handsome, young Naoise to avoid marrying a much older king Conchubar. This self-affirming act of defiance sets off a chain of events that ultimately results in massive violence and the total burning of a kingdom. Although it is thought to be far older, Deirdre's lament for the sons of Usnach appears in medieval manuscripts as early as 1238. Along with Emer's lament for Cuchulain, Deirdre's lament for her lover and his brothers remains a canonical piece in the poetic caoineadh tradition. Yeats' published his *Deirdre* in 1907. Synge composed *Deirdre of the Sorrows* as he was dying in 1909. After Synge died, Yeats worked with his late friend's fiancé Molly Allgood to finish *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. When the play was produced in 1910, Molly Allgood appeared as Deirdre and her sister Sara appeared as Lavarcham, Deirdre's foster mother. Once again, this reiterates their aggrieved mother-daughter casting in *Gaol Gate* and in *Riders to the Sea*. It also required Molly Allgood to rehearse her actual bereavement surrounding Synge's death within a theatrical role.

platform upon which their dramatic visions would be embodied, Gregory also provided them with a sizeable portion of their source material which they could then fashion into their own art. Gregory's proficiency as a dramatist fades into the background when her administrative and adaptive work are emphasized instead. Her work has also failed to achieve a significant position in the Abbey's modern repertoire. Christopher Murray points out that Yeats' many literary tributes to Gregory may have actually had a "mummifying" effect on her commemoration.²³⁷ Yeats' biographical accounts transform her into a kind of monument like her house at Coole or the original Abbey building, neither of which still stand today. She becomes part of the scenery as a brilliant, collaborative patroness to Yeats and Synge rather than a formidable, independent creator of aesthetic content. Lady Gregory clearly had a mind of her own. As illustrated above, her mind was quite capable of grasping the trope of masculine sacrifice and feminine bereavement and dramatically commenting on it in a complex and dynamic way.

Murray poses that some of Gregory's waning dramatic popularity lies in the fact that Irish audiences increasingly regarded what came to be known as her Kiltartan dialect as artificial if not embarrassing as the twentieth century progressed. Some of the wariness towards Gregory's dramatic language as an authentic representation of working class vernacular lies in her firm status as a member of the Irish-Ascendancy, but also because her dialect refers to a culture and mode of speaking that had been rapidly dismantled throughout the 19th century. According to Murray, "[...] the truth of her language, its fidelity to a particular region, refers to an age and a culture now long gone."²³⁸ By the time Gregory began producing drama, the number of native Irish speakers (bilingual and monoglot) had dwindled to a small minority of Ireland's population. Those that remained often lived concentrated in isolated, rural communities in places like

²³⁷ Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, 37.

²³⁸ Ibid., 46.

Donegal and the Blasket islands located in the west of the country. However, the linguistic practices of even the most remote communities would not remain untouched by economic pressures that rendered fluency in English, the language of commerce and power, a necessity for survival.

Carolina Moreno lists several of the frequently alleged reasons for the accelerated linguistic shift that occurred in Ireland during the nineteenth century: beyond massive fatalities caused by famine and the ongoing cycle of permanent emigration that ravaged the Irish-speaking population, seasonal work opportunities in English speaking areas of Scotland, Ireland, and England made English proficiency compulsory for many rural laborers. The advent of railway connections between Belfast and Dublin, both English-speaking commercial hubs, occurred alongside the implementation of the national school system. The national schools banned the use of Irish in educational institutions. These concurrent phenomena worked together to secure English not only as the official language of commerce and power but also as the dominant mode of everyday communication.²³⁹ The 1851 census was the first to document language usage in Ireland. Its results stated that Gaelic speakers made up only twenty-three percent of Ireland's total population.²⁴⁰ The 1901 and 1911 censuses marked a continued increase in English speakers. That being said, the English that the Irish spoke at the turn of the twentieth century remained marked by the language it supplanted. As T.P. Dolan suggests, the characteristics of

²³⁹ Carolina P. Amador Moreno, "Remembering Language: Bilingualism, Hiberno-English, And The Gaeltacht Peasant Memoir." *Irish University Review: A Journal Of Irish Studies* 39, no. 1 (2009): 76-89.

²⁴⁰ These results have since been disputed for underplaying the amount of Irish speakers.

Hiberno-English (the Irish dialect of English) reflect the political, cultural, and linguistic history of two nations, Ireland and England.²⁴¹

Even as Lady Gregory was observing the usage of English by Irish speakers around the turn of the twentieth century, the cadences of the bilingual population she had absorbed were rapidly shrinking. Much of Gregory's ethnographic observation took place in the area surrounding her home in Gort, which lies near the border of southern Galway and northern Clare. She supplemented her observations by rigorously studying Irish not only as a means of translating Ireland's mythological sagas, but also to gain a better understanding of the dynamic interplay between the two languages. Lady Gregory's outsider observations of spoken vernacular should neither be regarded as a neutral reproduction of Hiberno-English nor as an all-encompassing representation of language as it was spoken across various regions and locales during a period of rapid linguistic and cultural change. That being said, although Lady Gregory's cultural positioning should be taken into account, it does not singularly render her work devoid of sociolinguistic value. Gregory's Kiltartan dialect may have been a synthetic reproduction of the everyday speech she observed among rural, bilingual Catholics, but this does not mean that her dramatic dialogue was rendered arbitrarily. As I will demonstrate below, much of the syntax and grammar utilized in her plays corresponds to other studies of Hiberno-English as it was documented during Lady Gregory's lifetime and also as it continues to be investigated today.

The funerary rituals that Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin animate reflect competing orientations towards physical embodiment and its loss. Similarly, the language they speak is infused with an imagined proximity to corporeality. Irish, Hiberno-English, and Standard English each encode and acknowledge the organic human body in distinct ways. I argue that the grammar and syntax of Irish is rife with phenomenological description. The physical body occupies a

²⁴¹ Terrence Patrick Dolan, *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), xix.

more central place in its lexicon and acts as an acknowledged filter through which consciousness and the external world come into contact. Christopher Murray characterizes the Irish language as “concrete” rather than abstract.²⁴² That being said, Hiberno-English retains some of this fleshiness and attention to the interconnectivity of sensory experience and consciousness that Standard English often does not.

If one looks at the collection of Hiberno-English idioms P.W. Joyce collected in *English as We Speak it in Ireland*, they are rife with phenomenological description. This work is particularly useful in that Joyce was compiling phrases for his book around the same time that Lady Gregory was beginning her linguistic studies. For instance Joyce roughly translates the expression, “My eye is in whey in my head” to “it *is* whey.”²⁴³ This expression not only acts as a semiotic definition but it also outlines the sensory process necessary for that signification. There are also many expressions that utilize facial features to express emotional or physical states of being. Joyce notes that there are a considerable amount of phrases that cluster around the head: “He is a bad head to me” can mean, “he treats me badly.”²⁴⁴ Similarly, prepositions like “in” and “on” often operate in tandem with possessive pronouns to communicate about physical states of being. Joyce records the phrase “I am in my standing” or he “fell out of his standing” add possessive pronouns where Standard English, “I am standing/he fell” would not.²⁴⁵ This construction emphasizes physical action’s ownership. In doing so it also points to the interconnectivity between mind and body.

²⁴² Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, 44.

²⁴³ P.T. Joyce, *English as we Speak it in Ireland* (London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1910) 24.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 32.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 23.

The preposition “on” [the body] similarly communicates interaction between external phenomenon and internal, cognitive experience. Joyce observes the idiomatic usage of the Irish preposition *air* in conjunction with personal name or pronoun “to imitate injury or disadvantage of some kind, a violation of right or claim.” For instance, “what is on you” can mean “what ails you” or “she had a nose on her” means the subject did not look well.²⁴⁶ When Mary Cahel ponders Denis’ innocence she states, “... and the boy have no blame on him at all” and when she reprimands her daughter-in-law she phrases it, “There is wonder on me, Mary Cushin, that you would not be content with what I say.”²⁴⁷ As noted, Joyce was compiling his sources from across Ireland around the same time that Lady Gregory was collecting folk tales around Gort and much of his data corroborates certain aspects of Gregory’s dialect.

Hiberno-English idioms are rife with references towards the physical body. Markky Filpulla cites the phrase, “You put your nose in and us churning” and translates it to standard English as “You appeared while we were churning.” The former emphasizes action; the subject didn’t simply appear, they actively inserted a part of their body into the space. Similarly, “They never asked me had I a mouth on me,” is understood as they failed to ask me if I wanted anything to eat or drink.²⁴⁸ As seen in the previously mentioned, attention towards bodily features manifests frequently in idiomatic phrases. We see this tendency when Mary Cahel silences her daughter-in-law with, “Stop your mouth now and don’t be talking.” Funerary idioms are also quite common. Joyce notes that when any commodity is supplied plentifully, the simile

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 31.

²⁴⁷ Gregory, *Seven Short Plays*, 176-177.

²⁴⁸ Joyce, *English as We Speak it in Ireland*, 31.

“like snuff at a wake” could be utilized. He also sites the term “underboard” to refer to the liminal state of a corpse between death and internment.

There is also a grammatical emphasis on the present tense. Hibern-English syntax often states how you are experiencing the past in the present moment; rather than saying “I have eaten” or “I had eaten” in Irish, you would say something that translates to “I am after eating.”

Gregory’s drama is full of this construction, so much so that it is referred to as the “Kiltartan infinitive.”²⁴⁹ Mary Cahel’s line to the gatekeeper, “It is to speak with my son I am asking, that is gaoled these eight weeks and a day” is just one of the many examples of this construction in *The Gaol Gate*.²⁵⁰ There is also a tendency in Irish to use coordinate clauses where Standard English would demand subordination. The result is that Gregory’s dramatic dialogue is rife with coordinating conjunctions (and, but, for, or, nor, so, yet). For instance, “O, Mary, what place will we bring him to, and we driven from the place that we know?”²⁵¹

As previously stated, caoineadh performances and domestic wakes endured despite active colonial suppression to supplement institutionally sanctioned responses to death in the early twentieth century. Similarly, the English that was spoken by the indigenous population asserted an alternate linguistic heritage as illustrated in the examples above. I argue that Lady Gregory’s use of language in this particular play is in no way incidental. Rather, it reinforces the distinction between her characters. Each acts as a mouthpiece for competing ideologies surrounding sacrifice, gender, bereavement, and the role of materiality in human existence. The vestiges of the Irish language, pre-Christian narratives, religious beliefs, and rite of passage traditions, communicate an ideological stance that is far less hostile to corporeality than spiritualist, even

²⁴⁹ Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, 46.

²⁵⁰ Gregory, *Seven Short Plays*, 179.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

somatophobic models of sacrifice endorsed by ancient Greek mythological drama and certain strands of Christianity. The idealization of the essentially spiritual, young man is reiterated in the sacrificial figure of Christ.

The concreteness of Irish vernacular asserts itself within an imposed language. Irish idioms point to the interconnectivity between physiological and cognitive experience whereas Standard English seems to grammatically and idiomatically displace bodily experience in comparison. This makes sense because it ideologically expresses a system of binaries that pit the mind against the body. Lady Gregory's play reinforces the tension between the reification and abstraction of human subjects that exists when languages with distinct orientations towards materiality are combined. Just as Irish strategies of signification and grammar rules are reflected in Hiberno-English so too do Irish funerary performances that mark death as an outrage find their way into a somatophobic discourse that reproduces death as a triumph/boon for the community. The play's funerary scenario simultaneously refers to Greek tragedy, medieval liturgical drama centered on the *Quem Quaeritis*, and non-institutionalized, formulaic performances of mourning which originate in pre-Christian Ireland. Each of these forms indicates a distinct but intersecting reaction to masculine death as it is encoded into feminine bereavement. Gregory's dialect actually does well to reinforce the tension between these forms.

Mary Cushin's non-generalized expression of loss briefly interrupts Mary Cahel as she orchestrates her son's rebirth as an immaterial abstraction. As noted by Angela Bourke, texts that survive traditional caoineadh performances facilitate what Elizabeth Kübler Ross identifies as the emotions that are necessary for the grieving process to be completed.²⁵² Denial, anger, sadness, and acceptance all must play a role for the bereft to successfully exit the liminal,

²⁵² Quoted in Bourke, "The Irish Traditional Lament and the Grieving Process," 289.

mourning period. The lament that Mary Cushin begins to construct derives more closely from this tradition. It is, however, interrupted by Mary Cahel's Anglicized mode before it can be successfully completed.

The Gaol Gate shows how the manner of Denis Cahel's death and post mortem, his closeted execution and anonymous burial, robs these women of the traditional period of mourning. Bourke delineates this period as, "after the body has been laid out and before it is covered with earth in the cemetery—it is of disruption of the social order and this disruption is presided over and acted out by the lamenter."²⁵³ Robbed of the wake and burial scenario, Mary Cushin and Mary Cahel create hybrid performances of grief. Mary Cushin's initial reaction is composed to music included in the appendix for *Seven Short Plays by Lady Gregory*, to echo the stylized, rhythmic singing and sobbing that punctuated address to the dead in traditional lament performances. Her distraught speech to her dead husband's absent corpse, and her vehement condemnation of his enemies, is where the real pathos of this play resides. Cushin's performance is also much in line with the formulaic aspects of the caíoneadh, which functionally usher the bereft through the period of disruption and marginality brought upon the living when a member of their community dies. This is even more pronounced when that death is abrupt and violent. Before she can reach the final stage of acceptance however, she is interrupted by Mary Cahel's sanitizing account of martyrdom. Ultimately, Mary Cahel's signification of her son's death propels both women into a period of perpetual lamentation because it prevents a personalized acknowledgement Denis's particularized loss. In failing to truly address the trauma of death, they will perpetually remain in communion with a generalized dead man. This play enacts the clash between bereavement strategies that acknowledge loss of life as an outrage and those that reformulate it as a boon. The latter exhibits how a man who would not be corrupted by bodily

²⁵³ Ibid.

concerns is reborn as an essentially spiritual ideal. This play also rehearses the ways in which an authoritarian, colonial state helps to manufacture disembodied icons of masculine sacrifice under which its detractors would eventually nationalize. Its policy, as voiced by the gatekeeper, of “a long rope and a short burying” attempts to erase and dehumanize young men; to bury them with no more ceremony than one would livestock, but this erasure actually facilitates Mary Cahel’s perpetual brand of abstracting lamentation.

Abstraction is defined as the action of withdrawing or secluding oneself from worldly or sensual things towards contemplation of the spiritual. It is also a synecdochical process of finding common characteristics amongst otherwise diverse sets of people, objects, or events. True, death may be the great equalizer, but life is not and should not be commemorated as such. Mary Cushin and Mary Cahel perform an intriguing dialogue between particularizing and generalizing commemoration strategies for Denis Cahel. Perhaps some return to the concreteness exhibited in Ireland’s displaced language and funerary culture might facilitate a return to the living. In other words, it might help to complete grieving processes that are otherwise ongoing.

Conclusion

The prominence of funerary self-representation in Irish culture has garnered a resurgence of critical attention in the last two decades. Nina Witoszek, Pat Sheeran, Patricia Lysaght, and Angela Bourke are just a few of the scholars examining the origins, significance, and manifestations of Irish peoples' prominent identification with death and bereavement. The devalued status of the human body has also been a part of the critical conversations surrounding Irish theatre and identity of late. This dissertation brings these fields of inquiry into dialogue. It sheds light on the ways in which this obsession with representing a highly gendered model of death and bereavement affected notions of corporeality in relation to national identity during a critical period in Southern Ireland's progression towards political independence. These plays took part in a cultural revolution that preceded a military one beginning with the Easter Rebellion of 1916.

As noted in the introduction, British colonialism was ideologically predicated upon the derision of somatic existence. Colonial subjects, were identified based upon the notion that they were inherently carnal, bestial creatures. Their conquerors viewed themselves in contrast as essentially rational, spiritually constituted beings. The status of the human body directly relates to configurations of gender in that femininity has historically been constructed in relation to an essential corporeality in juxtaposition to ethereally, intellectually constituted masculinity. The Irish were feminized in relation to the ideologically masculine colonizer. In the attempt to assert the legitimacy of Irish identity and culture, Anglo-Irish dramatists actually reproduced the same oppositional binaries about the body and the mind, biology and spirituality, femininity and masculinity that were enforced under English rule. The disembodied spirituality achieved in masculine death and signified by feminine lamentation performances became the accepted mechanism through which idealized Irish nationality would be achieved.

This project began with the question of how a persistent identification with the ancient Greeks operates in tandem with frequent gravitation towards funerary modes of self-representation in Irish theatre. More specifically it asks how these two representational tendencies contributed to discourses of human gender and embodiment during a time when sacrificial dramas were performed with increasing frequency. The case studies that comprise this dissertation illustrate the ways in which adherence to a highly gendered model of death and bereavement effected audience reception. They also collectively illustrate how a certain brand of theatre grafted vernacular mortuary practices on to classical models of dramatic lamentation.

The previous chapters approached funerary performances scripted by Lady Gregory, Synge, and Yeats in the early stages of their dramatic endeavors as an entry point for uncovering how embodied subjectivity was being defined in the instance of its loss. One key aspect of these theatrical events that did not fit under the brackets of this study, are the women who actually performed bereavement for audiences during this period. Thomas Postlewait stresses that beyond playwrights, any number of people, all with distinct intentions and positions, contribute to the plurality that is a physically manifest play.²⁵⁴ In a larger work, the women who consistently acted as the embodied interpreters of death and bereavement would have to be written into the historical narrative as authorial agents.

The lines between the personal, public, and theatrical lives of these play's producing agents are pronouncedly blurred between the dramatic literature and personal accounts that survive these theatrical events. As it was making its start in the early 1900s, the Abbey operated with an extremely small pool of writers and actors. Within this compact group, real-life familial and romantic relationships were often reiterated in theatrical performance. Personal relationships between performers and playwrights influenced dramatic content as well as casting. This

situation provides a unique opportunity to hold the documented lives of these actresses up against their theatrical casting, sometimes in roles that they took over and played for decades and sometimes in roles written specifically for them. Three key actresses were repeatedly addressed in conjunction with the plays focused on in this dissertation: the sisters Sara and Molly Allgood, and the well-known revolutionary, Maud Gonne. Sara, Molly, and to a lesser extent Maud Gonne repeatedly acted as the embodied interpreters of what death meant in Ireland during the early twentieth century.

Comparative analysis of personal documents alongside contemporaneous dramatic literature, stands to shed light on the extent to which these plays were written to emulate the particularized women these dramatists knew and sometimes loved, or as a means of exerting control over a subject whose desires and behavior did not always align with the playwright's wishes for her. The secondhand accounts of these women in and out of character in the popular press can also shed some light on the extent to which these dramatic characters acted as constitutive components in the lives of the women who embodied them. If these plays were conceived as a means of actualizing a kind of Pygmalion fantasy, where the muse's actions manifest as an extension of the artist's desires, it is important that we examine the extent to which classical drama influenced these Abbey playwrights' depiction of idealized womanhood. This sheds further light on what sorts of performance potentialities were being presented as ideal, transgressive, or even possible for gendered bodies on Ireland's nationalized stages as a result of this dramaturgical engagement.

Chapter two discussed how Yeats wrote *The Countess Cathleen* for the Irish feminist and revolutionary, Maud Gonne soon after their first meeting, but she declined to appear in its Dublin premiere in 1899 on the grounds that it would take her away from her political work. Despite the

reasons she provided to Yeats for refusing the part, Gonne went on to perform in a variety of theatrical roles of her own choosing. Gonne founded the *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland) in 1900.²⁵⁵ The *Inghinidhe* devoted much of their nationalistic energies to the dramatic movement. The group helped to sponsor Yeats' and Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*'s premiere in 1902 and it was their banner that stood next to the stage during the performances. It was also Gonne who originated the play's heroine, a character that draws upon Gaia, Danu, the Morrigna, and Eriu as the feminized personification of Ireland who calls young men to arms so that her colonized body might be liberated and restored to its natural state of youth and beauty. Gonne appeared as Cathleen ni Houlihan at the height of her popularity. At the time of its premiere, Gonne had achieved celebrity status as a celebrated beauty, public speaker, and activist. According to her autobiography, she had come to be referred to as "the woman of the Sídh" for her work against evictions in rural Donegal. The Sídh were the supernatural creatures of Ireland's indigenous pantheon. This pantheon consistently configured the earth as a female entity. Of course, we will never know for sure whether Donegal natives actually referred to Maud Gonne in this way. It could be a self-serving anecdote crafted by Gonne. In either case, it is clear that she viewed herself as a kind of protector of Ireland's indigenous people and frequently appealed to them to take military action against the English. Yeats took advantage of Gonne's popular association with Irish mythology, wherein Celtic earth goddesses function as both material personifications of the land as well as sovereignty figures who incite men to violence.

²⁵⁵ Gonne had taken elocution lessons after her father had been stationed in Dublin in 1882 when she was 16. After being told (incorrectly) by her legal guardian that her father had left her penniless after his death, she applied to a theatrical agency and signed with a touring company but had to withdraw after collapsing from a hemorrhage during rehearsals. When Gonne was recovering an aunt confirmed that Gonne's father had in fact secured a private income for her when she came of age. Following this revelation she did not return to the theatre aside from *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*. Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin*, 24.

In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*'s premiere production at Molesworth hall in 1902, Gonne first appeared in a rural family's doorway as a hunched, elderly woman. A young man agrees to forego his impending marriage to fight and likely die for Cathleen's liberation from the masculine colonizer. After exiting, she is restored to youth and beauty. Apparently, when Gonne rose back up to her natural height of six feet, the Dublin audience erupted with cheers. The shifting celebrity of Maud Gonne in relation to her allegorical association with Ireland and her militant nationalist politics leading up to the Easter Rebellion and the Irish Civil War is highly telling in terms of how acceptable femininity was being constructed, policed, and symbolically utilized during this time.

Gonne's public reception is an intriguing entry-point into the implications of consistently configuring the compromised nation as a woman and taps into the theatrical trope of the objectified female body as a catalyst for violence. Gonne's status as a cult personality shifted when she defied the parameters of her associative role as pure, passive Ireland, who relied on men to act on her behalf. After filing for divorce from her husband John Macbride, another public darling who would later be executed for fighting in 1916, she was hissed by the audience when she took her seat at the Abbey.²⁵⁶ Her turn as Cathleen had helped to establish the national theatre, but when her personal life failed to be in line with that idealized role, she was shamed. Gonne's public reception and her continued representation as a Helen of Troy figure speaks to the hyper masculinity that emerged in post-war, post-colonial Ireland. Although her social and political agenda took her away from an official role at the Abbey, she continued to captivate Yeats personally and aesthetically for many years to come. After refusing Yeats' multiple

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 59.

marriage proposals or to dilute her stance on militant nationalism, the poet increasingly associated her with an Irish Helen, as is evident in one of his famous poems "No Second Troy."

As the political violence of the twentieth century progressed, female characters consistently functioned to precipitate internal violence in Irish drama. The Abbey produced numerous plays that foregrounded mythological and historical women whose defiance of the patriarchal order is shown to have disastrous consequences for fighting men. Gregory's *Dervogilla* (1907) and *Grania* (1912) reiterate women who dare to defy the masculine order to organize their own sexual affairs.²⁵⁷ In both plays, women inadvertently perpetuate violence by acting upon their desires. Even less sympathetic is Gregory's *Kincora* (1905). The play depicts Brian Boru's war mongering wife, Gromleith, as actively sewing discord for discord's sake. Synge's posthumously completed *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910) and Yeats' *Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) similarly scapegoat impassive women and the men foolish enough to succumb to them as responsible for the centuries of internal fighting that left Ireland vulnerable to foreign invasion. In short, just as Pandora unleashed all suffering unto human kind, and biblical Eve is culpable for original sin and the loss of paradise, treacherous women were similarly held responsible for Ireland's history of internal squabbling and foreign invasion.

While Gonne was only formally involved with the Abbey for a brief period, the two career actresses who figure prominently in this study are the sisters, Sara and Molly Allgood. Two of the Abbey's most prominent performers to date, each consistently played multiple roles in all of the plays discussed in the preceding chapters for at least two decades.²⁵⁸ The sisters first

²⁵⁷ *Grania* was published in 1912 but never performed during Gregory's lifetime. Cathy Leeney cites Richard Cave's argument that Yeats's opposition to *Grania* lead to it not being produced. This may have had to do with worry about public reaction after the *Playboy* reaction. Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights*, 44.

²⁵⁸ Molly Allgood became a company member in 1906 and continued with the Abbey until 1918. Sara Allgood remained a company member from 1904-1928.

entered into the dramatic movement via Gonne's *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* group.²⁵⁹ After appearing in small parts while the company was still performing in Molesworth Hall, Sara first received recognition on the Abbey stage as Mrs. Fallon in Gregory's comedy, *Spreading the News*. In 1904, Sara took over the title role in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* following The Irish National Theatre Societies' founding actresses' exodus. She went on to originate Molly Byrne in Synge's *The Well of the Saints* in 1905 and took over Honor Lavelle's role as Maurya, Synge's tragic matriarch in *Riders to the Sea* in 1906. During that same year, she originated the role of Mary Cahel in *The Gaol Gate*. It was with Sara in mind that Sean O'Casey would later write the iconic role of Juno in *Juno and the Paycock* (1918). Until she left the company for America to focus on film in 1928, Sara consistently appeared as both Synge and Gregory's aggrieved mothers, Maurya and Mary.

Her younger sister, Molly, joined the company just as Sara was asserting herself as its new leading lady after its senior actresses, Honor Lavelle, Maire Quinne, and Máire nic Shiubhlaigh (Mary Walker) seceded from the company in protest of the previously egalitarian dramatic society being reformulated as a limited liability company. This move relegated actors to the status of paid employees under the direction of its primary writers, Yeats, Gregory, and Synge. Like Maud Gonne, these women resented the authoritarian move and took issue with the fact that the new directors' goals were artistic before they were nationalistic.²⁶⁰ The nineteen-year-old Molly shrewdly took advantage of the performer vacuum and quickly became a rival to her sister in the scramble for evacuated roles. As a means of distancing herself from Sara professionally, Molly adopted the stage-name Maire O'Neill. Ironically, in light of this gesture at

²⁵⁹ Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin*, 172.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 174.

autonomy, the sisters were often cast as family members. After a few bit parts, Molly began playing Cathleen, daughter to her sister's Maurya, in *Riders to the Sea* in 1906. Their younger sister Annie also appeared with them as one of the keening women but she did not ultimately pursue a professional acting career. Years later, Molly would also play the role of Maurya.

Within her inaugural year at the Abbey, Molly originated the role of Mary Cushin, the daughter-in law of her sisters' character, Mary Cahel in *The Gaol Gate*. She also took over the part of Nora Burke in *In the Shadow of the Glen* and entered into a romantic relationship with Synge soon after becoming a paid member of the company.²⁶¹ The two became engaged, and remained so until Synge died of lymphoma in 1909. Molly would also take over the role originally intended for Maud Gonne in *The Countess Cathleen* when it was finally produced at the Abbey for the first time in 1911. Shortly after Synge slotted Molly into the role of Nora Burke, a young wife tasked with burying her much older husband, his letters to Molly begin. From his earliest correspondence with Molly in 1906, Synge displays a tendency to identify both himself and those close to him with his dramatic characters. It is only in the first three letters that he addresses Molly by name or signs off using anything other than an alias. In his first two notes from July 16th and 18th, Synge addresses her by name, but by July 19th Synge uses a series of pet names. He refers to her as his Heart, treasure, and pet, but most predominantly as his "Changling"—a possessive pet name he chronically misspells. He also refers to her as Pigeen and Nora, her characters in *Playboy of the Western World* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*. He signs his July 19th letter "Your old Tramp alias Dan Burke!"²⁶² It is clear early on in their

²⁶¹ The Abbey Theatre Archive, accessed December 30, 2015, http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/archives/person_detail/11837.

²⁶² J.M. Synge, *Letters to Molly: John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill 1906-1909*, ed. Anne Saddlmeyer (Cambridge: The Belknap Press at Harvard University, 1971), 4.

relationship that he identifies as both the romantic wanderer and the stodgy old man of *In the Shadow of the Glen*.

The earliest few letters are fairly mundane:

July 16th, 1906, Glendalough House, Glenageary, Kingston

Dear Molly,

I saw Frank Fay today and heard from him that you had come back to Dublin instead of going to Sligo, and that you had gone now to Balbriggan for a week. I have been wondering what had become of you it seems strange that you would not send me a line to tell me where you were. If I had known you were in Dublin I might have seen you on Saturday . . .²⁶³

Although his inquiries about Molly's whereabouts seem innocent enough she had scrawled "Idiotic" across the top of the letter.²⁶⁴ His queries about Ballbriggan, a small resort town north of Dublin, are likely a passive aggressive probing for information about Molly's interactions with Dossie Wright, another company member who had family there, and who Synge considered a dangerous rival for Molly's affections. From the very first, Synge's letters are instructional if not authoritative and frequently prone to jealousy. In the early days of their correspondence he returns again and again to her alleged rendezvous with Wright. I will quote the following letter at length because it is highly illustrative of the dynamics of their relationship in its early days:

Glendalough House, Glenageary, Kingston, 20th of July, 1906

My Dear Little Changling [sic]

I am writing this to you in bed at one o'clock as I am not able to sleep and won't have time to write to you tomorrow as I am going to Wicklow to see my old mother. I got your second letter this evening. It seems to have been a different occasion of walking with Dossy Wright that I heard of.—some time when he had [Brigit O'Dempsey] on one arm and you on the other—so I was more hurt than ever. As for your excuse you are as well able to keep on your feet as any one I know, and even if you weren't a sprained ankle is a trifle compared to what you have made me suffer. Why I have felt the whole things so

²⁶³ Ibid., 1.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

much is, of course, that it seems as if you have been doing all the little things you know I cannot bare as soon as ever you get away out of my sight. Don't you want me to have full trust in you, changling? Don't you know that a suspicious love is more degrading than ennobling? And yet every time I am beginning to trust you fully—I always trust you in one sense—you do some foolish thing that upsets everything again [...] I have had a lot of trouble and lonesomeness in my life, changling, and for God's sake don't disappoint me now. Perhaps you think I am too strict, but it is really only a little outer dignity and loyalty that I ask you for beyond what I have got already. [...] This is d[ul]ly philosophical but it's a roundabout way of saying you must see Dossie hanged before you take his arm again.²⁶⁵

Synge ends by insulting Molly's handwriting before signing off. Thus, in the course of a single letter, he manages to accuse Molly of lying, express jealousy, condescendingly explain the nature of love and loyalty, and makes a jab at the disparity in their education levels. Apparently, Synge held onto his grudge against Dossie for quite some time. In a letter from a few years later he expresses glee that his old rival had recently been bitt by a dog.

Synge's paternalistic tone probably arose from their contrasting status within the Abbey hierarchy—he was a managing director and premiere playwright, she was a young actress—as well as a significant age gap. When they first became romantically involved Molly was not yet twenty and Synge was thirty-five. His health was already declining due to what had not yet been diagnosed as lymphoma.²⁶⁶ Their differences by no means ended with age. Synge, who had studied the Classics at Trinity College Dublin, was the agnostic son of Protestant landowners. Molly was from a working class Dublin family and although her father was a Protestant, she had been indoctrinated into her mother's Catholicism. What little formal education she had was obtained during her brief placement in an orphanage after her father's death was supplemented by becoming involved in culturally nationalistic groups like Maud Gonne's Daughters of Erin.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 6.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., xiv.

Unfortunately, aside from the occasional, often angry word Molly has scrawled onto letters that she found exceptionally infuriating, her responses to Synge can only be inferred from the playwright's point of view. One of the largest examples of Molly's own words is found on a letter she received from Synge on October 16th, 1906. The angry note she writes across the top in pencil is lacking in punctuation and remained in Molly's possession until she sold the letters to Synge's nephew many years later:

you may stop your letters if you like. I don't care if I never heard from you or saw you again so there! & please don't let thoughts of me come into your head when you are writing your play. It would be dreadful if you speeches were upset I don't care a 'rap' for the theatre or anyone in it the pantomime season is coming on & I can easily get a shop; in fact I shall go out this afternoon & apply for one.

M. Allgood²⁶⁷

In perhaps a protective gesture, Synge ordered that her letters to him be destroyed as he lay on his deathbed. Synge's nephew Edward Stephens eventually purchased the surviving letters from Molly and found among them, a copy of the playwright's will along with an envelope that contained a lock of hair that Molly had cut from his head upon his death.

Although both Allgoods appeared across the spectrum of comedy and tragedy, the sisters are often remembered for their performances of mourning, and more specifically, for mourning dead men. Sara made her name playing aggrieved mothers while her younger sister rose to prominence playing bereft women from the younger generation; sometimes as the sister of dead men, but more frequently as the mourning lover, a role that she would reiterate in life as Synge's fiancé at the time of his death. Similarly, Sara's portrayal of Maurya in *Riders to the Sea* and Mary Cahel in *Gaol Gate* proved sadly prophetic when she lost her only child as an infant 1918. That same year, her husband and fellow actor, Gerald Henson, perished in an influenza outbreak

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 37-38.

while they were touring in New Zealand. In a letter to Lady Gregory Sara wrote, “He was taken off to the hospital and died a week later. I am nearly distracted, he was so good and devoted to me, I feel utterly lost without him.”²⁶⁸ Like Denis Cahel, the young man she mourns in *Gaol Gate*, Sara’s husband was buried in a mass grave far from home.²⁶⁹ Sara Allgood never married again. Both of these actresses were frequently called upon to interpret death during theatrical careers that spanned decades. They mourned lovers, husbands, brothers, and children in and out of character. They also outlived every male member of their families. Harry and George Allgood, Sara and Molly’s brothers, were killed within weeks of one another in 1915. Molly’s only son, John, was killed in 1942 while training as a pilot for the R.A.F. The intersections between art and life are provocative here but questions arise when travel writing, plays, and biographical accounts intersect to essentialize women as mourners; Molly Allgood, as Synge’s bereft fiancé, has been granted a much larger position in history than the professional actress who went by the stage name Maire O’Neill. It is true that her relationship with Synge and his death were a prominent part of her life. It was not however, the only part of a life. Maud Gonne and the Allgood sisters had large lives that included but extended far beyond mourning dead men.

The previous chapters approach theatrical funerary performances scripted by Lady Gregory, Synge, and Yeats in the early stages of their dramatic endeavors as an entry point for uncovering how embodied subjectivity was being defined in the instance of its loss. Each chapter’s dramatic analysis examines the working relationship between Greek and Celtic sources, secular rituals, and religious sacraments utilized to mark the passage of life as they were appropriated in each play. As the work progressed, it became increasingly clear that the lines

²⁶⁸ Coxhead, *Daughters*, 205.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

between religious and secular funerary rituals were inherently intertwined with classical intertexts thus complicating ideological configurations of mind: body duality.

As they come down to us, rituals surrounding death carry polytheistic roots and operate in tandem with Ireland's long period of religious conversion and colonization. Keeping these contexts in mind, I examined the interrelated success of each piece in its original production context. The more closely each initial production adhered to the acceptable model of women commemorating a young man's death as an act of sacrificial martyrdom and spiritual immortality, the more enthusiastically it was received by audiences. The presence of the corpse onstage complicates fulfilling a spiritualist audience's desire for accounts of rebirth and resurrection. Both *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Gaol Gate* removed the corpse entirely and were enthusiastically applauded. *The Countess Cathleen* and *In the Shadow of the Glen* transgressed this model and were initially rejected by a significant portion of their Dublin audiences. Although much revered today, the initial reaction to *Riders to the Sea* was also complicated in the sense that conservative theatregoers were already wary of Synge for his incendiary *In the Shadow of the Glen*. Certain reviewers also took particular issue with the manifestation of Bartley's corpse in *Riders to the Sea*. Some dubbed the physical revelation of a theatrically dead body as a manipulative trick despite its adherence to classical tragic convention. Maurya's inability to produce an assuaging account of heroic apotheosis also contributed to audience uneasiness.

Beyond the presence and status of the corpse, each play fulfilled or intervened upon audience expectations involving masculine spirituality and feminine materiality in distinct and complex ways. Yeats' *The Countess Cathleen* derives from Euripides' *Alcestis* to invert the trope of transforming masculine death into a regenerative, sacrificial phenomenon through a feminine

performance of bereavement. In both plays, women rather than men avoid the trap of forfeiting one's soul by dying. The strong audience reaction to *The Countess Cathleen* speaks to a cultural investment in maintaining certain oppositional binaries, all of which derive from debasing the corporeal in favor of the spiritual.

Each play addressed above premiered in Dublin during a span of seven years and is set in rural Ireland. Thus, my analysis of rituals surrounding death and dying does not include urban environments. They are also outsider accounts of the indigenous population. To be more specific, they are representations of poor, rural Catholics as crafted by cosmopolitan Anglo-Irish writers for urban audiences. These plays are useful sights of inquiry in that they speak to conflicting ideologies surrounding Irish identity as the possibility of political independence from England came into view as a potential reality. I acknowledge that although elements of the supernatural pervade these texts, all of the plots manifest in a version of agrarian Ireland not too temporally distant from the plays' original production contexts.

This study argues that certain strategies for commemorating death render survivors unable to truly deal with the past. Narratives of sacrificial martyrdom reconfigure death as an occasion for celebrating the triumph of the spirit over the corruptive flesh. The end of biological existence becomes the mechanism through which appropriate victims may be preserved and revered in perpetuity by the living they leave behind. Generalizing funerary narratives act to transform recently embodied, male members of a family or community into fantasy objects in these plays. In doing so they prevent survivors from every truly dealing with the specifics of their loss. Rather, a bereaved party attaches to a symbol of triumphant spirituality that occludes the particularized corporeality it is meant to commemorate. This plunges the living into a stasis where they cannot adequately exit from the liminal period brought about by death. Instead, they

remain focused on and in communion with a sacrificial icon that has risen up in the place vacated by a dead loved one.

When funerary performances singularly reconfigure death as birth, life as death, and absence as presence, it means that fundamental aspects of parting such as loneliness, rage, uncertainty, and fear cannot be fully acknowledged. Despite disparaging accounts from English travelers, Irish funerary traditions, and *caoineadh* performances in particular, actually fulfilled vital psychological necessities in the minds and bodies of the bereaved. They facilitated the necessary stages of grief so that the living could exit a marginal sphere where they continued to identify with the dead. Death is a process of disassociation wherein a living person becomes fully dead in the eyes of the community in stages. In order to come through to the final stage of acceptance, the loss of the recently living body has to be acknowledged. The centrality of the corpse in Irish funerary culture acted to affirm the living community in contrast. The removal of the corpse in the highly gendered model of sacrificial drama favored by Irish audiences between 1899 and 1906 speaks to an aversion to materiality, both in life and in living reactions to death.

The prominence of funerary self-representation and the insistence on over-determined gender roles commonly derive from a societal aversion to corporeality. Celebratory concepts of death also speak to a tendency to marginalize certain members of Irish society by emphasizing their carnality at the expense of their imagined capacities for spirituality and intellect. This same process of somatophobic dehumanization characterized the English in their imperial pursuits from the twelfth century onward. It also permeated the worldview and cultural output of the polytheistic ancient Greeks. This dissertation focuses on a brief flash point in Ireland's history. It examines the prominence of funerary representations on nationalistically charged stages in the years immediately preceding the Easter Rebellion and the Irish War for Independence. Not only

are these plays some of the most recognized in the Irish dramatic canon, their gravitation towards the mortuary represents one of the key components in Irish identity as it continues to be recognized today.

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