BEING IRELAND: LADY GREGORY IN CATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master in Arts in the Graduate School of
The Ohio State University

By
Caehlin O’Malley Bell

*****

The Ohio State University
2008

Master’s Examination Committee

Approved by
Professor Joy Reilly, Adviser
Professor Barry Shank

Adviser
Graduate Program in Theatre
ABSTRACT

Scholarship on Lady Augusta Gregory, playwright and co-founder of the Abbey Theatre, overlooks her performance as the title character in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in 1919, the play she co-authored with W. B. Yeats. This performance had many meanings to both the Irish audience, as a possible representation of a new or changing Ireland, and to Lady Gregory herself, as a manifestation of her nationalist affinities. As a member of the Protestant Anglo-Irish gentry, her performance embodied the breakdown of class distinctions within a changing nation. While Lady Gregory, an upper-class widow, worked hard as a cultural revivslalist focused on Irish nationalism, the audience would have been aware of her background and would have had to reconcile that with her portrayal of the character. This thesis examines the many meanings of this event by utilizing biographical and historical information, as well as applying modern theoretical frameworks.
Dedicated to my parents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I wish to thank my adviser, Dr. Joy Reilly, for her constant support and assistance during this process. I would also like to thank Dr. Barry Shank for encouraging me to pursue this topic and providing wonderful feedback.

I also would like to thank my family and friends for their support throughout this process. I could not have succeeded without the encouragement of my family, particularly my mother. My friends, both here at Ohio State and elsewhere, have been amazing. I thank them for all their help, from being a sounding board for ideas to answering my detailed computer questions.
VITA

January 31, 1983  Born – New York

2005  B.A. Drama, The Catholic University of America

2006-2008  Graduate Teaching Assistant, The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Theatre
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronology</td>
<td>VIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Ireland in Turmoil</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Lady Gregory</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: History of Cathleen Ni Houlihan</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Lady Gregory’s Performance</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: The Text of <em>Cathleen Ni Houlihan</em></td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Photographs</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lady Gregory, portrait appeared as frontispiece for <em>Our Irish Theatre</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Scene from the original 1902 production of <em>Cathleen Ni Houlihan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lady Gregory as Cathleen, March 1919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>William Butler Yeats, about the time he met Lady Gregory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Studio photograph of Maud Gonne, c. 1889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Lady Gregory at Coole Park, c. 1915</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHRONOLOGY

ISABELLA AUGUSTA PERSSE GREGORY

1852-1932

1852 March 15: Isabella Augusta born to Dudley and Frances Persse of Roxborough, County Galway
1880 March 4: Marries Sir William Gregory of Coole Park, County Galway
1881 May 20: Son (William) Robert Gregory born

October: Gregorys travel to Egypt

December 2: Lady Gregory meets Wilfrid Seawen Blunt in Egypt
1882 October: Publishes “Arabi and His Household”
1892 March 6: Sir William Gregory dies
1894 Spring: Meets William Butler Yeats for first time

October: Sir William’s Autobiography published
1897 Summer: Yeats spends first of many summers at Coole; they develop idea of an

Irish theatre with Edward Martyn
1898 March 7: Mr. Gregory’s Letter-Box published

May: Visits Aran Islands to collect folklore
1899 January 12: Irish Literary Theatre (ILT) established

May 8: W.B. Yeats’s Countess Cathleen and Edward Martyn’s The Heather Field produced as

ILT’s first performances
1901 January: Publishes Ideals in Ireland

Summer: Writes Cathleen Ni Houlihan with Yeats
1902 April 2: Cathleen Ni Houlihan produced by Irish Dramatic Company, with

George Russell’s Deirdre

October: Cathleen Ni Houlihan published
1904 August 20: Patent for the Abbey Theatre given to Lady Gregory

December 27: The Abbey Theatre opens with Lady Gregory’s Spreading the News, Yeats’s On

Baile’s Strand, J. M. Synge’s In the Shadow of the Glen, and Cathleen Ni Houlihan
1913 November 15: Our Irish Theatre published
1916 April: Easter Rising
1918 January 23: Son Robert shot down by friendly fire in Italy and killed
1919 January 21: Start of Irish War of Independence

March: Lady Gregory performs the title role in Cathleen Ni Houlihan
1921 July 11: War of Independence ends

December 6: Anglo-Irish Treaty signed, establishing the Irish Free State
1923 Yeats receives Nobel Prize for Literature
1932 May 23: Lady Gregory dies
INTRODUCTION

Politics can find power in singular events of performance. One such performance is a production of the Irish nationalist play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* at the Abbey Theatre in 1919. This unique performance starred Abbey co-founder and playwright Lady Augusta Gregory in the title role. In the past hundred years much has been written on Irish independence and on the Irish dramatic movement; yet none of the scholarship addresses this singular event. This was an exceptional moment when the politics of the society were so interestingly embodied within a performance. The performance of *Cathleen* by Lady Gregory may have had many meanings to both the Irish audience, as a possible representation of a new or changing Ireland, and to Lady Gregory herself, as a manifestation of her nationalist affinities.

There has been plenty of scholarship on the Irish nationalist movement and the role of the Abbey Theatre in the cultural movement. Lady Gregory is often written about within that context of her writings, both folklore and plays, or her involvement with the Abbey Theatre. Most scholarship about her is limited to her role at the Abbey or her relationship with the important male figures of the movement, such as her *Cathleen* collaborator William Butler Yeats. In the 1980s, there was more interest in Lady
Gregory as a playwright and political activist in her own right. Yet, to date, only three comprehensive biographies have been written about her.

Lady Gregory was born into the Ascendancy class of Ireland, the ruling class of Anglo-Irish gentry, in 1852. Throughout her lifetime she was to see Ireland go through vast changes. By her death in 1932, Ireland would become an independent nation, the Irish Free State, now called the Republic of Ireland. Lady Gregory through her involvement with the Irish cultural revival and the Abbey Theatre, as well as her lesser known political writings, had an important role in the nationalist movement. This performance can be seen as an example of her dedication to the cause.

Lady Gregory played the title character in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* for three performances in March 1919. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* remains one of the quintessential Irish nationalist plays. The first production starring political activist Maud Gonne has become legendary. First performed in 1902, the play, which is set against the Rebellion of 1798, has been revived many times. Lady Gregory’s performance, as one of many, has not seemed to merit any research. It has been overlooked by scholars and biographers.

Lady Gregory’s performance has meaning to the society and to herself. By performing as Cathleen, the iconic representation of Ireland, she was attempting a new image of the nation. As a member of the Protestant Anglo-Irish gentry, her performance embodied the breakdown of class distinctions within a changing nation. Scholar Ann Saddlemeyer notes, “Certainly some of the conflicts in Ireland were represented in her own life. As a worker for Ireland she was a leader, as a creator she was a teacher, as a
patriot she was a landlord” (39). While Lady Gregory, an upper-class widow, worked hard as a cultural revivalist focused on Irish nationalism, the audience would have been aware of her background and would have had to reconcile that with her portrayal of the character. Her performance, particularly when viewed in relation to the performance of Maud Gonne, which has remained the standard, highlights the tensions and divisions within the nation at that time. Her performance coincided with the beginning of the Irish War of Independence.

The performance also had personal meaning to Lady Gregory. She was making a statement about her identity and her nationalist affinities. When viewed in relation to her nationalist writings and activities, the performance becomes a manifestation of a political conversion. Lady Gregory firmly binds herself to the people and to the nationalist cause. Furthermore, she could have been enacting a desire to see herself more than a widow, a mother, a patron, or a playwright. Being Cathleen allowed her to perform an identity beyond her current one. This performance is unique not only because of her background, but also because she was the co-author of the play. Although Cathleen Ni Houlihan is often attributed to William Butler Yeats, it was, in fact, a collaboration between the two. Through the performance, Lady Gregory may have been making claims of authorship and agency.

The first two chapters will provide a historical context for the event. The first outlines the political and cultural history of Ireland from about 1880 to the establishment of the Irish Free State. In the second chapter, a brief biography of Lady Gregory is provided, with particular emphasis on her early involvement in politics and her foray into
the Irish Renaissance. The third chapter is focused on the play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, with a summary, relevant criticism, and a production history. Finally, the last chapter analyzes the possible meanings of Lady Gregory performance as Cathleen ni Houlihan.¹

¹ Within my text I will refer to the play as *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and the character as Cathleen ni Houlihan. Name is not standardized, so some quotes will use alternate spellings.
CHAPTER 1
IRELAND IN TURMOIL

Ireland’s fight for independence was a long and hard battle. Centuries of conflict between the Irish and the English preceded the ultimately successful independence movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The success of this movement was due to the changing ideals of the ruling Anglo-Irish class and its burgeoning interest in traditional Irish culture. The political movement, a collection of various groups all working toward some sort of Irish autonomy, was largely indebted to the cultural movement which at the same time aimed to revive traditional Irish arts and create a distinctive Irish culture.

The involvement of the ruling class was essential to the political and cultural growth in Ireland. Without the work of members of the Protestant Ascendancy, these movements would not have been as successful. As Adrian Frazier discusses in his article, “The Ideology of the Abbey Theatre,” this Marxist concept is essential to understanding not only the ideology of the Abbey but also the development of Irish nationalism. Frazier writes, “[Marx’s] own political programme depends on the ‘vanguard’ breaking away from the elite and identifying with the working class which it penetrates with its theoretical unmasking of ideology and organizes by means of manifestos for change” (34). Vanguard leaders, such as Lady Augusta Gregory, Charles Stewart Parnell and
Douglas Hyde, began working with the people and through their interest these movements gained momentum.

I. Background

The Ireland that Isabella Augusta Persse was born into in 1852 was suffering the consequences of the 1801 Act of Union which included widespread famine. The Act of Union had removed the colonial government from Ireland, and centralized it with the British government in London. The Act was in response to increasing uprisings in Ireland including the Rebellion of 1798. Terrorized by the British government through martial law and frequent raids, the United Irishmen, led by Irish republican Theobald Wolfe Tone, planned a rebellion for May 1798. Despite the government’s seizure of many of the group’s leaders and the lack of supporting troops from France, the rebellion proceeded. Without leadership and military support, the rebels were quickly defeated in violent conflict. The French came too late; about one thousand troops landed in Killala in County Mayo in August. By October, Wolfe Tone had been captured and the group began to break apart. The spirit of Irish nationalism did not die. Throughout the next century several nationalist groups emerged. The most well-known group was the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) which was founded in Dublin in 1858. The IRB members, also known as Fenians, planned a rebellion in 1867; however the rebellion was poorly organized and many of the leaders were arrested.

By 1870 the country was finally enjoying some stability. Even the Fenian Rising of 1867 could not shake the peace created by economic growth and social stability. The growing manufacturing industry in Belfast, better laws, such as the Poor Law and the
Land Act, and increased emigration gave more opportunities for economic and social growth to the working class (Fitzpatrick 174). However the stability was short lived.

The American recession of the 1870s and the First World War both resulted in population congestion which contributed heavily to the social unrest of the land war and the revolutionary period, when young men and women who would otherwise have been making their way up foreign social ladders instead devoted their enforced leisure and indignation to collective protest at home. (Fitzpatrick, 175)

The economic pressure at home in Ireland also contributed. The rural agricultural industry of much of the country was outdated and archaic. By the late 1870s, unrest between the landlords and the tenants was growing (Fitzpatrick 179). New political organizations geared toward tenants’ rights emerged, most notably the Irish National Land League. Founded in 1879 by Michael Davitt, the League’s mission was to work with local tenant groups to improve their sense of security. The tenure the tenants sought was strengthened through Gladstone’s land acts of 1881 and 1882 and a series of land purchasing acts beginning in 1869 and concluding in 1903. These acts allowed tenants to appeal for rent reductions through a judicious system and provided government loans for land purchases (Fitzpatrick 179-180).

Throughout the Land Wars of 1879-82, the Land League began discussing Home Rule. Home Rule was not a new concept, but under the new direction of Charles Stewart Parnell the movement had focus and power.

The grim and autocratic Charles Stewart Parnell, whose status as a Protestant landlord gave unique bite to his rhetorical assault upon his own class, was able to forge a disciplined populist party united on a far wider range of issues that Home Rule. (Fitzpatrick 180)
Parnell’s party won four fifths of the Irish parliamentary representation in the 1885 elections (Fitzpatrick 181). Parnell united several groups to his cause, non-violent, constitutional independence of Ireland. He was most successful in attracting the Catholic population, pacifying the radical Fenians, and winning over the Catholic Church.

Yet Parnell’s evident success in suppressing factionalism, discouraging seditious conspiracies, and mobilizing popular support left the Church with the option of co-operation or withdrawal from politics. For most Irish Churchmen, the latter alternative was unthinkable. (Fitzpatrick 182)

The Church supported him, because he supported issues important to them. While this alliance was beneficial to Parnell, it alienated him from the Irish Protestants, including Lady Gregory. However when Parnell was pushed out of office in 1890 over an affair with Captain O’Shea’s wife, she was sympathetic. He unfortunately died the next year of pneumonia. However it was Parnell’s success and failure that laid the foundation for the subsequent events, for Ireland and for Lady Gregory. Grote states, “Parnell’s death effectively marked the end of parliamentary struggle for Home Rule; his departure made a completely new approach toward it possible, and indeed necessary” (1).

II. Cultural Changes

While Parnell was leading the Protestant vanguard to a popular nationalism, other members of his class were redefining Irish culture. In the following years, key figures, Douglas Hyde and William Butler Yeats, also Protestant gentry, worked toward creating a new Irish culture. Their interest in Irish folklore led them, through different paths, to a new Irish nationalism. In November 1892 Hyde addressed one hundred or so people on the need for a cultural revival through the Irish language. In his speech, “On the Necessity of de-Anglicising the Irish People,” he argued that “the loss of their language
coincided with a loss of a distinct Irish nationality and Irish customs” (Grote 89).

Douglas Hyde was a Protestant son of a rector from County Roscommon. He was well-educated and interested in Irish language and folklore.

Hyde’s interest in the lives of the ordinary country-folk was somewhat exceptional, because the Irish gentry – and Hyde’s family was part of the Protestant landed class – tended to adopt a very colonial viewpoint. His interest in the native Irish people was compared to the curiosity of the white planter in Africa to the culture of his black neighbours. (Grote 88)

He collected and published volumes of Irish tales, folk songs, and poetry from 1890-1894 (Grote 88). The Gaelic League, which Hyde founded with scholar Eoin MacNeill in 1893, was the first successful organization dedicated to preserving and reviving the Irish language. The Gaelic League was able to bridge the gaps between the various social classes and religious denominations. Their success was a result of their ability to unite anti- and pro-Parnellites and work with the Catholic Church (Grote 96). The League successfully promoted the use of Irish in everyday life and got it added the public school curriculum. It also encouraged interest in Irish culture, promoting Irish theatre, dance, and music through festivals. But the new Irish culture they created was not historically accurate; they were “more interested in eradicating anything English than in faithful reintroduction of formerly existing pure Irish material” (Grote 101). The League included all classes: rural and urban folk, men and women. It was one of the few places that people of all kinds could gather that was not a pub. The Gaelic League was particularly important to women for this reason, because it gave them a creative outlet. “The number of women in rural Ireland who, encouraged by the League’s alternative social life, came to write poetry and stories was remarkable” (Grote 106). While not a member of the
League, the same idea applies to Lady Gregory’s involvement in the Irish nationalist theatre. It was an alternative to the restricted social life of a widowed lady.

In creating the League the founders were looking forward to Irish independence. Scholar Georg Grote states:

The very fact that [Hyde] was willing to wait for a revival of the Irish language until some kind of Irish autonomy was achieved demonstrates that he was still thinking in terms of the Home Rule movement which only one year previously had come to a halt after the death of its chief promoter, Charles Stewart Parnell. Hyde could not have been completely unaware of the explosive inherent power of language as a nationalist tool, but it is more likely that he deliberately played its role down because he defined a ‘Nation’ in his own way: a nation is a community which shares the same language and the same cultural heritage. Hyde never mentioned conditions like a special religious denomination or family background; his idea was ecumenical and reflected ‘Victorian philanthropy,’ yet there was more to it: he could not define nationality along denominational lines because he would not have qualified as a member of this Irish community as he was upper-class Protestant. (90)

His ecumenicalism grew from his desire not to be excluded. Like many nationalists leaders, he faced the dilemma of possible exclusion from the very society they created. Lady Gregory would feel this too.

At the same time that Hyde was working on the Gaelic League, William Butler Yeats was becoming interested in his Irish heritage. Yeats was a Protestant, but unlike Hyde and Gregory, he came from a poorer middle-class family. He spent his childhood in County Sligo before moving to London to go to school. Yeats often romanticized his experiences in Ireland and translated that energy into pastoral poems, and into the formation of an Irish Literary Society in London. When he moved to Dublin in 1892, he founded the National Literary Society with Maud Gonne and John O’Leary.

The new society became an institution of wider cultural importance in that it was open to Irish writers, historians and journalists. It was a place of frank discussion
and debate, and thus the National Literary Society attracted many within Irish society who felt particularly helpless and shocked by the fall of Parnell in 1890 and his subsequent death. (Grote 12)

Yeats’ participation in the nationalist movement was very much tied to his interest in Maud Gonne, an Irish actress and nationalist. He was in love with her and to him she represented Ireland in her sexuality, spirituality and beauty (Grote 15). Prior to his involvement with her, his nationalism was moderate and inclusive, not unlike Douglas Hyde’s. He would in the years to come vacillate between Gonne’s militant nationalism and his own more moderate sensibilities. Grote goes as far as to say, “The political Yeats was not much more than the lover who wanted to impress his love” (17). His interest in Irish nationalism focused more on the literature.

III. A New Theatre

In 1897, the Irish Literary Theatre was founded by Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and Edward Martyn. Their mission was to present new Irish plays.

The idea of founding an altogether new theatre, however, was more of a necessity than a genuine desire, as all the existing theatres in Dublin refused to stage entirely Irish plays, which had not first been approved by a London audience. (Grote 19)

At that time, the theatre of Dublin and the rest of Ireland consisted primarily of touring melodramas from England. The first production was a performance of Yeats’s *Countess Cathleen*. Prior to the performance, a little printed announcement was circulated; it stated:

The Irish Literary Drama will appeal rather to the intellect and spirit than to the senses. It will eventually, it is hoped, furnish a vehicle for the literary expression of the national thought and ideals of Ireland such has not hitherto been in existence. (qtd. in Ellis-Fermor 37)
The group continued to produce plays on a production by production basis until their success made it clear they needed a permanent company. Yeats made contact with William and Frank Fay, working class Irishmen who had a small amateur production company. Lady Gregory wrote of their hiring, “I hope I shall not suffer too much in the process [because of the group’s inexperience], but I prefer them to English actors as they are in love with their story” (qtd. in Ellis-Fermor 40). The new group renamed itself the Irish National Theatre Society and first performed in local halls, such as St. Teresa’s Hall Clarendon Street in the Ancient Concert Rooms. The first performances were of Deirdre by George Russell and Cathleen Ni Houlihan.

Not only were the plays a notable success and the reviews full of praise, but the literary world of England awoke to the significance of the Irish Dramatic Movement and this led to the interest and help of Miss Horniman in setting up, little more than a year later (in 1904), the Abbey Theatre Company. (Ellis-Fermor 42)

In 1903, the group traveled to London and performed at Queen’s Gate Hall. This visit led to support from Annie Horniman. Horniman was a wealthy English heiress with interest in the arts. She purchased a permanent home, the Abbey Theatre, for the new theatre group and financed their productions for several years. The patent for the theatre was issued on August 4, 1904 to Lady Gregory, as the patent holder had to be a resident of Ireland. The Abbey opened that same year on December 27 with Cathleen Ni Houlihan, On Baile’s Strand, and In the Shadow of the Glen. The new official name was the National Theatre Society Limited.

From the start the company was not without controversy. Indeed, the first production of the group, Countess Cathleen, was met with some resistance. The story,
set during the Famine Era, when aristocracy and peasantry united for survival, is of a Countess who offers to sell her own soul in order to save the souls of her tenants. The play glorifies the Protestant Ascendancy, and many resented the assumption that the lady’s soul was worth more than the peasants. “Given that the landowners of Ireland were predominantly Anglo-Irish and Protestant, Yeats was exacerbating nationalist sensibilities by suggesting that the social hierarchies on earth were given divine confirmation in heaven” (Richards 3). Despite the problems with this performance and subsequent shows, Ireland welcomed the new theatre. In 1902, the year *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was first performed, Arthur Griffith, founder of Sinn Féin and editor of the *United Irishman* said:

> We look to the Irish National Theatre primarily as means of regenerating the country. The Theatre is a powerful agent in the building of a nation. When it is in foreign and hostile hands, it is a deadly danger to the country. When it is controlled by native and friendly hands, it is a bulwark and a protection. (qtd. in Richards 2)

In this way the theatre was building on the cultural discourse started by the folklore writings of the mid and late nineteenth century.

The ideology of the Abbey Theatre was grounded by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. Yeats was the ideological center of the movement. His search for a truly poetic and distinctly Irish drama dominated the direction of the group.

> More than any other individual [Yeats] shaped the aesthetic aspects of the dramatic movement by defining what an Irish poetic drama was supposed to be. He also introduced the theatrical audience to some of its longest-lasting motifs and ideals. (Grote 5)

His influence affected every aspect of the Abbey Theatre productions. The poetic drama that was his goal had to be performed and presented in a manner that matched the
intention of the text. Despite the wide scope of genres and subjects, the design and the acting style remained simple and natural. In this way, the work reflected the independent contemporary theatre activities of England, Norway, and France.

More importantly the group had a particular political ideology. The first two inceptions of the group, the Irish Literary Society and the Irish National Theatre Society, were primarily concerned with presenting and supporting through theatre the concept of Irish autonomy.

The fact that they billed themselves as ‘Irish National’ players, and pooled their own money, are marks of their commitment to communalism, national independence, and democratic practices. That they [mainly the members of the Fays’ acting troupe] asked not just Yeats, but also [Arthur] Griffith and [Maud] Gonne to be on their [the Irish National Theatre Society – INTS] executive board affiliates them with nationalist groups and newspapers that existed to propagandize for Irish independence; most believed they constituted such a group themselves. The members of the INTS meant to bring about their own decolonization, beginning immediately – a core idea of the Sinn Féin at its inception in 1905. (Frazier 40)

Frank Fay notes in a quote from the United Irishman in 1901: “Let Mr. Yeats give us a play in verse or prose that will rouse this sleeping land…This land is ours, but we have ceased to realise the fact. We want a drama that will make us realise it” (Frazier 41).

The Fays and their actors wished to produce and perform simple nationalist drama, whose purpose was to enforce national identity and culture.

It is important to remember these ideals were those of the actors and the producer not necessarily of future directors Yeats and Lady Gregory. Adrian Frazier writes,

A collision between ideologies of the authors and the players was on course from the start: one group was hierarchical, the other democratic; one was all for keeping the many dependent on the few, the other wedded to a new ideology of self-reliance; one was rooted in an aristocracy of land, the other in the democratic labour; one was for the parliamentary Home Rule, the other was sympathetic to
Sinn Féin; one was horrified by Jacobin socialism, the other excited by it. One ‘Cathleen’ weighed against the other: the fear of those whose families had the most to lose in 1798 was opposed by the long anger of those whose ancestors suffered the most in the 1845 Famine. (41-42)²

In the end, the authors won out forcing out those who disagreed and reforming the company into an oligarchy. Although they may not have wanted to admit it, there was not only a class divide but also a religious divide. Catholic authors slowly left or were forced out (Frazier 42). Even Edward Martyn, an upper class Catholic gentleman, was pushed out to make room for Yeats’s ideal.

These founders were part of the new vanguard. While they were in support of a new Ireland, they still held onto their ingrained sense of superiority. Frazier writes,

They would all have voted for Home Rule; however, they would also have thought it right that they should continue to rule at home after the distant day arrived. In short, they could play a revolutionary role vis-à-vis the Union, and the counter-revolutionary one vis-à-vis a domestic democracy. (38)

Frazier supports his theory with a story about an early conflict between Lady Gregory and Yeats in 1898. Yeats was considering assisting Maud Gonne with a plan to create conflict in Western Ireland. Gonne was encouraging tenants to kill the landlords’ cattle so all would be starving. Lady Gregory was appalled by this, feeling it was inappropriate for people in power, the Ascendancy, herself and Yeats, to encourage this behavior. She felt that “it [was] the duty of the Anglo-Irish, once they have done all they can to relieve distress, to teach the starving tenant to die with honor rather than to rob” (Frazier 35).

² The two Cathleens refer to the characters of that name in Yeats’s Countess Cathleen and Cathleen Ni Houlihan. I believe that this mentality Frazier describes of the producers, ie Yeats and Lady Gregory, is representative only of their feelings at the beginning. I will discuss this more in Chapter 4.
Frazier also believes that underlying this response is the Ascendancy fear of losing their property.

**IV. The Radicals**

Two key people were essential to the development of a more radical political discourse: D.P. Moran and Arthur Griffith. They were responsible for creating a non-literary print media interested in defining Irish nationality.

The importance of emerging newspapers in this process of creating a national identity cannot be underestimated. The very fact that a more or less clearly defined group of people is subject to the same news on a regular basis, and particularly in the same common language, has the effect of creating one community, to which each individual feels they belong, despite apparent geographical distances. Readers of any given newspaper thus belong to an imagined community. (Grote 116)

They also believed in a narrower definition of Irish nationalism.

David Patrick (D.P.) Moran started *The Leader*, a newspaper established in response to the *An Claidheanh Soluis*, the Gaelic League’s journal. He felt that the League’s paper failed to provide an intelligent discourse on nationalist issues. He valued the League for posing the question: what is Irish nationality? But he believed in an Irish Ireland, which did not include the Anglo-Irish writers and playwrights of the Literary Revival.

Moran believed in cultural oppositions rather than in creating a cultural fusion with the undeniably existing traces of Anglo-Ireland. He also extended his idea of binary oppositions to the historical chasm between the Catholics and Protestants and thus revived old religious tensions. (Grote 114)

He questioned the inclusive nature of the Gaelic League as a viable long term option for Ireland. Members of the Gaelic League found him too aggressive. In his influential article “The Battle of Two Civilisations,” Moran argued for an Ireland devoid of English
influence and culture. For him, past political leaders had not done enough for Irish culture, and even now, the inclusion of the Irish language was not enough. In using the term “civilization,” Moran is connecting to a larger historical identity, one without a government system. Irishness was for him inherent in the Irish people and not something needing restoration.

Arthur Griffith was considered to be a radical member of the Gaelic League with opinions not that different than those of Moran. He hoped that the League would use its influence for political gain. He did not understand how the League, committed to national identity, could remain uninvolved in politics. He also strongly believed in economic independence as a way to political independence in Ireland. Like Moran, he founded a newspaper the *United Irishman* to spread his ideas. The name of the newspaper, which he began with William Rooney in 1899, was a variation on the Fenian paper *Irishman* from 1847. Unlike Moran’s paper, Griffith always made room for the Literary Movement. He provided space for literary writers, including Anglo-Irish writers such as Lady Gregory.

But more important than Griffith’s paper was his political group, Sinn Féin. He started the group in 1905 with other like-minded League members, more interested in political agitation than peaceful coexistence.

The emergence of the Sinn Féin marked a significant step in the development from an all-embracing and non-violent cultural nationalist phase to violence and radical resistance, which eventually resulted in the armed rebellion against the British administration. (Grote 111)

Although membership was low in the early years, Sinn Féin held an important role in post-1916 Ireland.
V. Rebellion, Independence, and War

Parnell’s constitutional nationalism was revived with John Redmond in 1900. With the support of the United Irish League and the efforts of Chief Secretary of Ireland Augustine Birrell, many reforms were enacted. Unfortunately, the movement did became divided by religion. As the progression toward independence continued, religious divisions widened. In general, the Protestant Ascendancy was against the Catholic Church, land reforms, and Home Rule. More importantly, the growing urban working-class Protestants of Ulster were vehemently against Home Rule and they were as powerful as, or more powerful than, the Ascendancy at the time. The Ulster Protestants were also more violent; they formed several unionist groups such as the Orangemen and the Ulster Volunteer Force who used aggressive methods. Prior to World War I, the Ulster Volunteer Force, the largest group, had 90,000 members (Fitzpatrick 191). In response to the growing threat of independence, the Ulster Unionist Council began setting up provisions for alternative government, and hoarding weapons. These activities prompted the formation of the Irish National Volunteers, whose mission was to protect themselves from the Ulster Volunteer Force. Thinking that the Ulster unionists did not have the manpower or weapons for a dull assault, they did not feel threatened. However, tensions continued to grow between the two groups.

Although Home Rule was approved in July 1914, enactment of it was postponed at the start of World War I. Some saw the war as an opportunity to prove Ireland’s patriotism and ability to self-government, but others saw it as an opportunity to start a
revolution. However,

The immediate effect of war was to divert the most active sections of Ireland’s paramilitary organizations towards the European conflict, without achieving lasting reconciliation between the parties left at home. (Fitzpatrick 194)

The conflict between the Unionist and the Nationalists persisted within the armed services, where the Catholic nationalists barely outnumbered the Protestants separatists.

The activities of those left behind in Ireland were more important to the future of both nations. Radical nationalists saw the war as an opportunity to express their desire for independence while England’s focus was elsewhere. The result was the 1916 Rising.

The plans for a rising began in September 1914 with a meeting of the Irish Republican Brotherhood; including members Arthur Griffith and Patrick Pearse. Planning the rebellion continued through 1915. By January 1915, the seven key men, Pearse, Joseph Plunkett, Éamonn Ceannt, Sean MacDiarmada, Tom Clarke, Thomas MacDonagh, and James Connolly, decided to mount the insurrection of Easter Sunday (The 1916 Rising). The purpose of the rebellion was to take control of Dublin and set up a provisional government, the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic. Members signed a Proclamation, which was read publicly by Pearse on Easter Monday. They planned to receive help from the American organization Clan na Gael, whose members promised to fund the rebellion and sent Sir Roger Casement to help, by procuring arms from Germany (The 1916 Rising). The government did not take the threat very seriously; Birrell’s administration did little to suppress the violence or the conspiracy. Once the ship carrying the arms for rebellion was lost and Casement was arrested, it seems like the plan was unlikely to proceed. Furthermore Eoin Mac Neill, leader of the Volunteers, had
publicly cancelled the group’s orders to participate. The leaders decided to delay, but not abandon their plans; they planned the rebellion for noon Easter Monday (The 1916 Rising). The leaders knew defeat was inevitable, but were willing to be martyrs for the cause.

On April 24, 1916, four battalions of the Irish Volunteer forces seized several areas around Dublin. The commanding battalion with the leaders of the Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizens’ Army, including Connolly and Pearse, occupied the General Post Office building. Smaller groups in Dublin, a total of 1,600 members of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen’s Army, participated in Dublin (Fitzpatrick 198). The locations were not chosen for the ability to stall the government, but for the ability to cause damage to government property and injury to people (Fitzpatrick 198). Other activities around Ireland included marches and parades. The next several days were marked by violence as the number of British troops increased. By Saturday, April 29, the leaders chose to surrender to prevent further deaths and the Rising was over the next day. The cost was high: 132 soldiers and policemen and 318 civilians were killed. Sixty four rebels died in the rebellion and fifteen more were executed later (Fitzpatrick 198). The rebels captured were quickly executed without a proper trial. The government declared martial law throughout the nation.

The original response by the Irish population to the rebellion was disgust, but the response by the government in subsequent days and months polarized the population.

---

3 The National Library of Ireland’s The 1916 Rising: Personalities and Perspectives, an online exhibit, claims a different number of causalities. According to its material, sixteen rebels were executed (this includes Roger Casement), another sixty-four died in the conflict, 132 soldiers and police were killed, and about 230 civilians were killed. One of the executed was John MacBride, Maud Gonne’s husband.
While the new revolutionary elite crystallized in detention, a sentimental cult of veneration for the martyrs developed outside as after other previous failed risings. The conspirators thus achieved their aim of reversing the movement towards Anglo-Irish reconciliation. (Fitzpatrick 199)

Even the more moderate nationalist and some unionists were enraged by the actions of the British government, including the executions, the implementation of martial law, and other atrocities (The 1916 Rising). The nationalists now realized that they needed to use both force and the electoral system. The new Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army, a reincarnation of the Irish Volunteers, succeeded in establishing the Irish Free State in 1922, which later became the Republic of Ireland.

The road to complete independence was not smooth. The six northern counties of Ireland were exempted from Home Rule; the division was meant to be temporary but remains today. During the 1918 election, the new Sinn Féin party, under the leadership of Éamon de Valera, won a majority of Irish parliamentary seats. On January 21, 1919, Sinn Féin parliamentary members met as a “national assembly:” the Dáil Éireann.

Its functions were at first propagandist rather than administrative, and the Republic’s inauguration was designed primarily to win international confidence and a hearing (if no longer recognition) at the peace conference. (Fitzpatrick 203)

Although it took many more years of violence, the meeting marked a new phase in the progression toward Irish independence.

The martial law established during the Easter Rising brought on increased violence. The conduct of the occupying forces, the Black and Tans, named for their uniforms, was appalling. “Both within and outside the martial law zone police and military interference in civilian life became ever more intrusive, with innumerable raids, searches, proclamation of meetings and of societies” (Fitzpatrick 208). After 1919 the
violence got worse and “was superseded in 1920-1 by savage and calculated arbitrariness which shattered the pre-war Anglo-Irish polity” (Fitzpatrick 209). The Irish War of Independence, a conflict marked by guerilla warfare between the British forces and the Irish Republican Army, lasted from 1919 to 1921. In 1920, the new bill was passed proposing two separate Home Rule administrations, one for the six Ulster counties in Northern Ireland and for the rest of Ireland. By 1921, a ceasefire was called and a few months later a new treaty, the Anglo-Irish Treaty, was signed by members of the British government and the Irish Republic, defined by the Dáil. Among the signers were Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins. Finally, on January 7, 1922, the new treaty was ratified and the Irish Free State was established.
I. Early Life and Marriage

Isabella Augusta Persse was born on March 15, 1852 to Frances and Dudley Persse, land owners of a large estate in County Galway, called Roxborough. Her ancestors were varied but all branches had strong roots in Ireland. Some were old Gaelic aristocrats, others Norman settlers from the twelfth century, and others were English settlers who came over in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hill 7). Many of her ancestors had held prominent positions in the Church of Ireland and in the local and central government of Ireland. “En masse, the Persses convey the strong impression of an Anglo-Irish stereotype: vigorous, earthy, uncultivated, rooted in their locality” (Hill 9). The 9,800 acre estate had been in the family since the late seventeenth century (Kohfeldt 9). Lady Gregory’s father was wealthy but not part of the highest social level, the members of the Ascendancy who participated in the national government. Lady Gregory was the twelfth of sixteen children. A devout evangelical Protestant, Frances Persse imposed a strict religious upbringing on her children. While Lady Gregory would remain a faithful Church of Ireland Protestant, she was more open-minded than her mother and her older sisters. From an early age she showed interest in subversive activities. She was interested in Irish poetry, ballads, and the tenants on her father’s land.
Her family was not concerned about her interests. “It is not likely that the idea of her having any thoughts or sympathies different from their own had ever entered the mind of any of the elders of the house” (Hill 12). While she was on good terms with the tenants, Lady Gregory’s relationship to the tenants was not without conflict. Tenant-Landlord relations were strained by the distrust and guilt associated with the famine. Furthermore, the actions of the Fenians, established in 1858, created an atmosphere of increased tension. There was also the perpetual threat of violent uprising in County Galway (Hill 13).

One of the most important figures in Lady Gregory’s early life was her nurse, Mary Sheridan. Sheridan came to the family in the late 1830s and remained with them for forty years. She had been a nursemaid in the household of United Irishmen member, Rowan Hamilton. Of interest to Lady Gregory was her connection to the past and her knowledge of folktales. Mary Sheridan remembered the French landing in Killala in 1798. This event would become the basis for the play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. She also helped Augusta to connect with the culture of the people.

Not the least valuable of the lessons learnt from her was what one might call the folklore side of Catholicism, so that the future Lady Gregory, though all her life she would remain the staunchest of Protestants, could yet enter imaginatively into the minds of the Catholic peasant characters, and transpose the gentleness of Irish saintly legend into religious plays acceptable to Catholic and Protestants alike. (Coxhead 8)

These were the beginnings of Lady Gregory’s interest in the folklore and rebellion.

Indeed, Lady Gregory’s involvement in the nationalist theatre movement was a result of her interest in folklore and literature. Her friendship with William Butler Yeats grew from her desire to provide him with folktales for his writings.
Religion was also paramount in her life. One of most important events in young Augusta’s life was the religious conversion she experienced at age fifteen. She began questioning her faith, but was able to reconcile it. She became increasingly interested in doing good works. She would go “day after day the couple of miles on foot [to the poorest village in the area] with food and comforts, saving her pocket money for such purposes, she visited the sick and clothed the children, and tended to the dying” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 28).

Although the plainest of the Persse daughters, Lady Gregory made a very good marriage to Sir William Gregory, landlord of the nearby Coole Park estate and a man thirty-five years her senior. Sir William was more connected to British politics than the Persses. He had held positions in Parliament and had also been the governor of Ceylon for five years. His politics changed over the years; while he showed sympathy to the people, he was invested in the hierarchical system of Ireland. During his first term in Parliament, he proposed the Gregory Clause to the Poor Law Bill of 1847. The bill only allowed tenant farmers occupying less than a quarter acre to be eligible for Famine relief.

It was designed to reduce the number of people with tiny holdings, but in proposing it William displayed a profound insensitivity to the vulnerability of the poorest in Ireland, for, as it was pointed out in Parliamentary debate, the poorest, who had to relinquish their lease to gain relief in a workhouse, effectively had to chose between having a home or receiving sustenance. (Hill 21)

This bill even had a profound effect on the tenants of Sir William’s estate. He must have seen their suffering during the famine. When he reentered Parliament in 1857, he was more of a Liberal, believing that the peasants should have the ability to own their land. Although he did not favor Home Rule, he strongly supported tenant security and land
purchasing (Coxhead 19). Yet, he was nervous as the Land League developed in 1879. Fearing the shift in power, he rewarded his citizens with dinners and dancing for not joining the League (Hill 37). In 1881, he prepared a pamphlet, which was widely circulated, assessing the current political state of Ireland. He predicted the loss of British power in Ireland (Hill 37). He believed in Catholic Emancipation, stating “I had no objection to a State Church, both in England and in Ireland, but I had the strongest objection to a State Church of the minority” (qtd. in Coxhead 20). While Sir William would be supportive of his wife’s nationalist and folklore endeavors, he remained cautiously in favor of maintaining the Union of England and Ireland. Lady Gregory would struggle with her own feelings of nationalism both during their marriage and after his death, as they often opposed those of her husband.

II. Lady Gregory and Politics

Lady Gregory’s active involvement in politics did not start in Ireland but in Egypt. She and Sir William visited the country in 1881 and there they met Englishman Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and his wife Lady Anne. The political climate of Egypt was tense, as a nationalist movement was growing around Ahmed Arabi Bey. Arabi was a colonel in the Egyptian army, who moved up the ranks, despite his humble peasant background. In the early 1880s, Egypt was a colony of the Sultan of Turkey and was governed by a viceroy, called the Khedive. The Khedive had sold shares of the Suez Canal to France and England to stimulate economic growth. Soon the two countries began asserting political control over the country. The Egyptians were unhappy with the Europeanization of the country and looked to Arabi as one who could reassert Egyptian identity and fight
the corrupt Turkish government (Hill 39). Blunt became very interested in Arabi. After years of traveling in the Middle East, Blunt was aware that colonial rule was not always best (Kohfeldt 58). He was able to get the Gregorys involved in the cause. Sir William was at first hesitant to get involved but soon changed his mind;

But, fortified by an habitual distrust of the French and the Turks and an inclination towards the Arabs, he now saw that British interests would be served by a national government led by Arabi, whom he found to be honest, intelligent, noble-minded liberal, rather than a fanatic, and whose movement he hoped to ‘guide and moderate’. He wrote several letters to *The Times* to assure readers that the nationalists had respectable support. (Hill 40)

However as England got more involved in the conflict, Sir William began distancing himself from the cause. Lady Gregory, for her part, went against her husband and supported Arabi. Her motivation was likely due to her attraction to Blunt as well as her interest in Arabi and his family.⁴ She wrote an article, a small sympathetic piece on Arabi’s family life called “Arabi and His Household,” which appeared in *The Times* on September 23, 1882 (Kohfeldt 63). This was Lady Gregory’s first published work. At this point the military conflict between Arabi and the British troops resulted in Arabi’s defeat. Blunt and Lady Gregory worked to raise money for Arabi’s defense. “Her vigorous petitioning of journalists and politicians for Blunt’s scheme gave her a higher social profile” (Hill 53). Her work attracted the attention of Prime Minister William Gladstone, though they were staunchly opposed to each other. In the end, Arabi pleaded guilty and was exiled to Ceylon, where Sir William’s contacts could make him comfortable (Kohfeldt 64).

⁴ By the end of 1882, Lady Gregory and Blunt had started an affair, which lasted eight months (Kohfeldt 65, 69).
Lady Gregory’s opinions on nationalism did not transfer smoothly to Ireland. She was still opposed to Home Rule, despite her experiences in Egypt and the involvement of Blunt in the movement. He was arrested in 1887 for holding a Home Rule meeting and was jailed the next year. Biographer Judith Hill summarizes Lady Gregory’s political opinions at this time:

To Blunt, in July, Augusta speculated, ‘I think I am growing a little more of a land leaguer & less of a [Anti] Home Ruler – and so would you if you lived in Ireland.’ Her feelings for Blunt may have inspired this change, but undoubtedly her experience in Ireland (something Blunt did not have and which she still held against him), was pushing her forward. She was now becoming one of those few Anglo-Irish who could contemplate change in Ireland and the taking on of a new, less directly powerful, role. She was still a Unionist, but one who wished to accommodate the angry to prevent an escalation of opposition to the status quo…It is not known what William thought of her work; depressed and fearful, he was probably neither encouraging nor discouraging. She no doubt kept her views from him. His influence was waning, and Augusta was relying more on her own judgment. (74-5)

During the winter of 1890-91, Lady Gregory found herself sympathetic to Parnell, particularly because of his public fall. Again, Hill describes Lady Gregory’s political intentions:

Politically she now was an explicit supporter of that strand of Unionism that wanted to see Home Rule killed with kindness. ‘Home Rule is knocked to pieces for some time to come,’ she told Blunt, ‘and we whose homes are in Ireland look forward with hope to a quite unexpected horizon of peace and quietness. And Land Purchase will be growing while politics are sleeping, and by the time the Home Rule idea comes up again the peasants will be “Haves” instead of “Have-nots”, and may safely look after the interests of this country as well as their own.’(80)

Her opinions would change in the coming years.

Lady Gregory’s early writings were mainly nonfiction works, and several of these had political undertones. After her publication of “Arabi and His Household,” she wrote
an article about the Sudan, the new arena of Arab nationalism. She then began a piece called “An Emigrant’s Notebook.” With the increasing conflict during the Land Wars she was feeling like immigrant in her own country. The 11,000-word essay includes various short scenes based on the lives of servants and tenants (Kohfeldt 30). Through her writing of the essay,

She soon realised that her personal Eden was also a collective Eden. The Anglo-Irish, and many of the tenants, could look back on the relative harmony of the years before the Land War with nostalgia and the conviction that it could never be recovered. Her personal fall had mirrored the experience of Ireland. Might not an account of this Ireland without the heroes and villains thrown up by the Land War, but showing people ‘possessing like feelings with ourselves and needing sympathy,’ find a market among those who value Irish romance? she asked herself. (Hill 57)

As biographer Hill, notes Lady Gregory seems to not understand the problem fully.

Ignoring the fact that differences in race and religion had a class basis, she depicted Ireland as a heterogeneous country and argued that diversity did not preclude harmony. It was the paternalism for new times; the paternalism that Sir William was struggling to recover within in himself. (57)

The essay seems to have been edited for publication; all references to particular people and places were removed (Hill 57). However it was not published.

Lady Gregory’s next endeavor was three short stories, written and published between 1890-1894 under the pseudonym Angus Gray. Hill comments:

She found the mechanics of writing difficult, especially linking different scenes, but the finished results suggest she was inspired less by the desire to craft a good story than to explore the problem of the place of her class in Ireland in the aftermath of the Land War and Land Purchase, particularly her own possible role after William’s death. (79)

All stories, “A Philanthropist,” “A Gentleman,” and “Peeler Astore,” exemplified the complexity of relationship between the English and the Irish. “All in all it did not amount
to radical politics, but was a creative engagement with a fluid and complex situation” (Hill 79).

In 1892, Sir William Gregory died, leaving Lady Gregory a widow at forty, and their son, then ten years old, fatherless. His death was very tough on her in the beginning and undoubtedly changed her life forever. As Kohfeldt notes, “Being Sir William’s wife had protected – and limited – her. With his death, the limitations fell away; she kept the protection” (90-91). She was determined to provide her son with a legacy of the Gregory estate, money and reputation, when he came of age. As she began finding her passion, through her involvement in the Irish Renaissance, she struggled to fit into the social circle she had occupied with Sir William. Her nationalist affinities alienated her friends and neighbors. They failed to understand her interest in folklore and her support of organizations such as the Gaelic League (Hill 129).

At the point of Sir William’s death in 1892, Lady Gregory was very Unionist in her views, but within the next decade she would become a nationalist. Just after her husband’s death, Lady Gregory retreated to her mother’s home in Ireland. While there, she wrote her first political piece, a four thousand word essay titled “A Phantom’s Pilgrimage: or Home Ruin,” which was published anonymously in May 1893 (Diaries xv). This essay was written as a response to the Home Rule Bill that was proposed by Gladstone in 1893. In it, Gladstone returns from the dead ten years after the bill is passed to see the results. Instead of finding a peaceful self-ruling nation, he finds “only starving peasantry, beleaguered landlords, lawlessness and contempt even for the Catholic Church” (Diaries xv). The essay is conventional in its political argument and clearly
reflects Lady Gregory’s anxieties as a landlord, trying to maintain the property for her son. Lady Gregory does include characters of multiple backgrounds in imagining of this Home Rule Ireland, as either a political tactic or genuine interest in the disempowered. She clearly has an awareness of the peasantry and looks beyond her own interests. Yet some of her own personal concerns are embedded within the essay. As James Pethica writes:

For if “A Phantom’s Pilgrimage” seems uncompromisingly anti-Nationalist in its aims…it nonetheless hints at the coming change in her political opinions, and shows the world-view that had predominated while Sir William was alive coming under the strain of newly independent self-examination. (xvi)

These tensions between Unionism associated with her class and her sympathies for all people are present in her positive portrayal of Charles Parnell (xvii). Again Pethica summarizes her conflict:

… for in withholding her name from the publication she clearly remained unwilling to commit herself publicly to anti-Nationalism, the cause of Landlord’s rights, or indeed to any constituency espousing the kind of partisanship that might undercut her hopes for a solution fair to all the Irish people. (xviii)

Her own political views were slowly changing.

Following Sir William’s death, Lady Gregory began the task of editing his autobiography which he had started before his death. The primary purpose of the project, to her, was to enrich the Gregory name, for herself and her son, Robert. She began a second project, *Mr. Gregory’s Letter-Box*, a collection of letters to and from Sir William’s great-grandfather. Gregory had been the Under-Secretary of Ireland from 1813 to 1831. By examining these letters and researching eighteenth and nineteenth century Irish history, Lady Gregory came to understand the problems of the nation better
and to reexamine her own political views. She made several pivotal diary entries during this time. An entry from March 1895 reads that James Froude’s *History of the English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* “has opened my eyes to the failings of landlords, & I may say of all classes” (*Diaries* 65). This new found knowledge of Ireland’s history combined with contemporary political issues began to affect Lady Gregory. In editing the letters, Lady Gregory found herself interested in Irish history. Elizabeth Coxhead remarks that the experience was another step along her political conversion.

Nevertheless, in *Our Irish Theatre* she says it was the historical reading needed for this book that turned her into a Home Ruler. “I defy anyone to study Irish history without getting a dislike and distrust of England.” She might more truly have said that it completed the process begun in the nursery at Roxborough, and intensified by the Arabi campaign. But it seems probable that she was unwilling to break completely with Sir William’s policy during his lifetime… (37)

She writes in April about the Land Bill, which would support tenant rights and reform land purchasing laws,

[I] am thankful we land owners have been given even a little time to prepare & to work while it is day – It is necessary that as democracy gains power our power should go - & God knows many of our ancestors & fore runners have eaten or planted sour grapes & we must not repine if our teeth are set on edge – I would like to leave a good memory & not a “monument of champagne bottles” - & with all that I hope to save the home – the house & woods at least for Robert. (*Diaries* 68)

Lady Gregory reveals that she is coming to terms with the changing nation. She also becomes more sympathetic to the cause of the common people. Her interest and concern for the peasantry in Ireland was translating into liberal political action. While she remained within the same societal circles as before, Lady Gregory became more open to the nationalist cause, befriending such figures as Nationalist M.P. Barry O’Brien (*Diaries* xxiii). She also became more at home in Ireland, enjoying her time spent at Coole.
Even as she became friends with Yeats and involved in the Abbey, she continued to write political articles. In 1898, she published “Ireland, Real and Ideal.”

It was her first long article on Irish culture, and, in its definition of what might be called the self-help movements, and her identification of them as characteristic of contemporary Ireland and the main hope for the foreseeable future, it was a substantial contribution to the Revival. (Hill 129)

In 1901 she published *Ideals in Ireland*, a collection of essays by a varied group of writers including Hyde, Moran, Yeats and O’Grady, who was a Unionist.

Her aim was to draw together disparate Irish voices to demonstrate the wealth and versatility of ideas about the distinctiveness of Irish culture and to present this as nationalism which could bypass the political demand for Home Rule. She wanted to inspire the Irish further. “I am…trying,” she told Blunt with disarming naivety, “to help every movement that brings back dignity to the country’ while ‘politicians…do their forty years wandering in the wilderness.” (Hill 149)

The book was very well-received.

**III. Lady Gregory and the Irish Renaissance**

By 1895 Lady Gregory was showing a great interest in folklore. She was aware of the growing interest in superstition and folktales and sent some work to *The Spectator*. Her work was similar to that of Hyde, but there is no evidence that she knew of him or his work at this time (Hill 102). She began making connections with folklorists, such as Edward Clodd.

Within the cultural and nationalist discourse was the literature of a new folklorist movement. The writing of authors such as Standish Hayes O’Grady and Standish James O’Grady, cousins of Lady Gregory, began the renaissance of Irish culture. Gaelic scholar Standish Hayes O’Grady published his translations of old Irish literature in the book *Silva Gadelica* in 1892. In 1883, Lady Gregory and Sir William befriended the new Vicar-
General of Gort, Dr. Jerome Fahy, later Monsignor. Dr. Fahy was an intelligent man interested in history. After discovering some ancient Christian ruins in the moorland of Kilmacduagh, he began exploring the history and legends of the monuments and nearby town. His work, published in 1893 as *History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Kilmacduagh*, can be considered an early publication of Irish history and folklore (Coxhead 26-27). Yeats’s early collection of tales, *The Celtic Twilight* would be considered one of these early folkloric writings. These books coincided with the cultural revival spearheaded by the Gaelic League.

The literary revival allowed Lady Gregory an outlet for her creativity and expression for her interest in the people. Biographer Mary Lou Kohfeldt comments, rather dramatically, on Lady Gregory’s new found interest, “She had at last found her people, her tribe, to whom she was at once both equal, superior, and inferior, giving her great security, great satisfaction in serving them, and great freedom to rise above them” (107). Her friendships with two key figures, William Butler Yeats and Douglas Hyde, cemented her participation in the literary movement. Douglas Hyde was the founder of the Gaelic League, which was devoted to reviving the Irish language and culture. He would become the president of Ireland years later. Lady Gregory attributed the beginning of the nationalist movement, and the Irish theater movement, to Hyde’s Gaelic League. Hyde was fluent in the Irish language and taught Lady Gregory. His play *Cusadh an Sughain, The Twisting of the Rope*, was the first Irish language play to be performed in Dublin. Hyde wrote several plays and often collaborated with Lady Gregory and her partner at the Abbey, William Butler Yeats.
Lady Gregory first met the Irish poet Yeats at a social event in London in 1894. Their friendship began in earnest when she met him again through her neighbor, writer Edward Martyn, in 1896. The two bonded over their shared interest in folklore and nationalism. She invited him to stay at Coole during the summer of 1897.

During the rest of 1897 and 1898 Augusta put herself at Yeats’s service in a variety of ways, gradually establishing herself more securely as his patron. Patronage, second cousin to the landlord-tenant relationship, was something that Augusta instinctively understood. The patron, like the landlord, gives generously and requests carefully. Power should never press, unless debts are not being paid. The patron, like the landlord, relies on others for a sense of achievement and self-worth. This would not be sufficient for Augusta, for she wanted to make her own mark. But she was resourceful and clever enough to exploit the role of patron; she instinctively knew that her service would be repaid, and that she could use her patronage to lay a foundation for her own work. The inherent danger was that her contemporaries would view her primarily as a patron, and this has been the lens through which Lady Gregory’s achievement has often been viewed. (Hill 123)

In the beginning, Lady Gregory was at the service of Yeats. During the early years she collaborated with Yeats on a few plays. Her plays served the duel purpose of keeping the Abbey in business and allowing her to develop her artistic talent. It was also an opportunity for Lady Gregory to work for the people, to tell their stories, educate them, and prepare for political change.

Lady Gregory found purpose for her life and an expression of her nationalist affinities. As Hill says:

The appeal of the Irish Literary Revival for Augusta is obvious. It sought the regeneration of Ireland in an arena relatively untouched by political diversions. It was literary. It championed the vernacular and accessible rather than the scholarly and exclusive. It involved a group of dedicated, free-thinking young men, attractive to someone who was becoming disillusioned with the staid society of an older generation in London. There was in every initiative a sense of purpose; a collaborative working together towards what was so obviously needed. And much of what she had begun to touch on – the potency of the Irish language, the value of oral cultural, the distinguishing of Irish history and cultural from British
traditions, the role of the Anglo-Irish in rejuvenating Ireland - was an integral part of the revival. One can imagine that Augusta felt excited by what she read and had begun to think how she might contribute. (108)
I. Image-makers: The Writing of Cathleen Ni Houlihan

*Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is a pivotal play in the history of Irish literature. The play premiered in April 1902 as part of the Irish National Theatre Society. The play, long thought to be the work of William Butler Yeats, was actually a collaboration between Lady Gregory and Yeats. As scholarship on Lady Gregory has developed, more information on the collaboration has come to light. Scholar James Pethica outlines the recent evidence in support of Lady Gregory’s contribution to the work in an article in the book *Yeats and Women* (1997). The *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* manuscripts Pethica examined at the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library support the assertion that Lady Gregory wrote the majority of the script.

Although it was widely known throughout Dublin that Lady Gregory assisted in the writing of *Cathleen*, her contribution was rarely acknowledged in the public sphere. Abbey producer and playwright Lennox Robinson notes that Lady Gregory “had a big part of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*” (Murphy 439). Lady Gregory’s first biographer, Elizabeth Coxhead writes in *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait* (1961):

The naturalness and life of the peasant family…suggest that everything is hers except the symbolic speeches of Kathleen; in a word, that he thought of it and she
wrote it; and this the assertion made to me by the Gregory family, who had many times heard it from her own lips. (68)

In her book on the development of the Abbey Theatre, *Our Irish Theatre* (1914), Gregory writes that she and Yeats “wrote together” *Cathleen* (qtd. in Coxhead 106). Upon Lady Gregory’s death in 1932, the *Manchester Guardian* recognized her contribution: “she collaborated with Yeats in writing the dialogue of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, and the phrasing, as it stands, is hers” (qtd. in Coxhead 216). These acknowledgements were rare. The play was published by Yeats and he often referred to it as solely his creation.

Later in his career, Yeats would tend to forget the obligation he had so publicly and honestly acknowledged [in his dedication of the play to Lady Gregory], and to speak of *Kathleen* as thought it were entirely his own. But when her family protested, and urged her to stake her claim, she always refused with a smile, saying that she could not take from any part of what had proved, after all, his one real popular success. (Coxhead 68)

She was devoted to Yeats and his success; furthermore she was grateful for his assistance on her book *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) (Hill 159). She was conventional when it came to sexual politics.

Prior to this collaboration, Lady Gregory’s role was that of a patron. She provided a place for Yeats to work at her estate Coole and collected folklore tales for his writings. Around 1901 the relationship began to change. Although Lady Gregory had published a number of works, mainly non-fiction pieces, Yeats was only now taking note of her literary ability. She recalls in her autobiography:

[Yeats] was slow in coming to believe I had any gift for writing, and he would not encourage me to it, thinking he made better use of my folk-lore gatherings than I could do. It was only when I had read him one day in London my chapter the “Death of Cuchulain” that he came to look on me as a fellow writer. (Gregory 390)
Thus began their collaboration. In his dedication to her in *Where There is Nothing* (1902), another collaboration, Yeats wrote:

…I never did anything that went so easily and quickly, for when I hesitated, you had the right thought ready, and it was always you who gave the right turn to the phrase and gave it the ring of daily life. (qtd. in “Our Kathleen” 208)

Yeats acknowledged her talent for writing in the everyday speech of the people. She was very accomplished at creating peasant characters because of her interaction with them.

*Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was written during Yeats’s summer stay at Coole in 1901 and was completed by November that year. The drafts at the Berg Collection are notated by Lady Gregory; the end of the first ten pages is marked as “All this mine alone.” Second section is marked as “This with W.B.Y.” (“Our Kathleen” 210-11). Scholars agree that Lady Gregory likely wrote the dialogue of the family prior to the entrance of the Old Woman. Yeats even acknowledged his need for her help in fulfilling his dream.

In a letter to her, he recalls the dream and continues:

…I thought if I could write this out as a little play I could make others see my dream as I had seen it, but I could not get down out of that high window of dramatic verse, and in spite of all you [Lady Gregory] had done for me I had not the country speech. One has to live among the people like you…before one can think [their] thoughts…and speak their tongue. (qtd. in “Our Kathleen” 211)

Lady Gregory’s portrayal of the peasant characters is essential to the dramatic action of the play. Pethica states:

In affirming that Lady Gregory’s ability to reproduce the “country speech” needed for the play was only possible because of her intimate knowledge of the country people and her ability to “think” like them, the passage effectively acknowledges her responsibility not only for the idiom of the peasant dialogue, but also for its internal logic. Yeats, in other words, had conceived the cottage setting in general terms – as a place of “well-being” to be disrupted by Cathleen ni Houlihan’s call – but the realization of the scene was dependent on Lady
Gregory’s greater sympathy for and dramatic sense of peasant life (“Our Kathleen” 211).

Yeats was primarily responsible for writing the character of Cathleen, the Old Woman in the script, his homage to Maud Gonne. Producer Willie Fay affirms this noting that Lady Gregory wrote all “except the part of ‘Cathleen’” (qtd. in “Our Kathleen” 211). Yeats described the dynamic in terms of low art and high art; himself as the accomplished poet, versed in symbolic prose, and Lady Gregory having a talent for the lowly speech of the peasants. Yeats’s analysis of this dynamic both demeans Lady Gregory’s contribution to the work and ignores how well the two styles complement each other in the play. His language on the collaboration reduces the relationship to one of utility by implying that “…he simply absorbed and appropriated her talent for peasant realism as if it were a passively available raw material” (“Our Kathleen” 213). Yeats never acknowledged Lady Gregory’s contribution to the play publicly. He claimed sole authorship of the play in public, using it to his advantage.

*Cathleen Ni Houlihan* achieves its success largely due to the work of Lady Gregory. She establishes the realistic style of the text, through the dialogue of the family. Within this space of realism, Cathleen’s supernatural characteristics are never confirmed. The family members are portrayed in a way which emphasizes their humanity. Lady Gregory probably wrote not only the dialogue of the family prior to Cathleen’s entrance but also much of the dialogue between Cathleen and the family. Pethica claims that Lady Gregory may have also had a hand in the writing of Cathleen’s speeches. He notes that one speech resembles her translation of the folksong “Faired-haired Donagh” which was published in *Monthly Review* in October 1902 (217). Regardless, Lady Gregory’s
interest in and knowledge of traditional Irish ballad influenced Yeats and his writing of Cathleen. Furthermore, the successful integration of the realism with the subtle surrealism of Cathleen can be attributed to Lady Gregory. Yeats’s earlier plays show that he had difficulty smoothly integrating the two styles.

II. The Play

*Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is a very short, but powerful play. The approximately ten-page piece premiered in April 1902 at St. Teresa’s Hall on Clarendon Street in Dublin. Yeats revised the play after that performance. The idea for the play came out of his dream:

One night I had a dream almost as distinct as a vision, of a cottage where there was well-being and firelight and talk of marriage, and into the midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself, that Cathleen ni Houlihan for whom so many songs have been sung and about whom so many stories have been told and for whose sake so many have gone to their death. I thought if I could write this out as a little play I could make others see my dream as I had seen it. (qtd. in Murphy 440)

Set against the backdrop of the French landing in Killala in 1798, the play begins in the home of the Gillane family, who are preparing for the marriage of their son, Michael, to local girl Delia Cahel, which is to take place the next day. The family is speaking of the preparations for the wedding, the money they will receive from Delia’s father, and the greyhound promised to Michael’s younger brother. Then the peaceful household is disrupted by the appearance of a poor old woman. Michael, at the start, is hesitant of her entrance. He says, “I’d sooner a stranger not to come to the house the
night before my wedding” (Yeats 6). Prior to her entrance the woman is spoken about. The younger son, Patrick, sees her out of the window. He also says, “Do you remember what Winny of the Cross-Roads was saying the other night about the strange woman that goes through the country whatever time there’s war or trouble coming?” (Yeats 4).

When she comes into the Gillane home, the poor old woman is questioned by the family about her troubles. She is attempting to recruit men to help her and her friends, the French rid her “four beautiful green fields” of the British strangers (Yeats 7). She demands sacrifice but offers nothing in return. She says:

> It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid.

(Yeats 10)

Slowly she begins to enthrall Michael and, against the crying protests of his mother and Delia, he leaves to join her and her cause. In the final moment, the father, having lost one son, asks the returning younger son if he saw an old woman on the path, Patrick replies, “I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen” (Yeats 11).

The figure of Cathleen is meant to be a representation of Ireland herself. She is calling for help from the young men to protect her “four beautiful green fields,” or the four provinces of Ireland of Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connacht (Yeats 7). It is significant that the character is simply referred to as the Old Woman in the script. The only mention of Cathleen is towards the end of the play, after Michael has said he will go

---

5 See a copy of the play in Appendix A. These citation refer to the text in Modern Irish Drama. See Bibliography.
with her. She says, “Some call me the Poor Old Woman, and there are some that call me Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan” (Yeats 9).

III. Source Material

The figure of Cathleen is a derivation of the traditional Irish figure of the sovereignty goddess. However, the Anglo-Irish tradition, to which Lady Gregory and Yeats belonged, changed the formerly powerful goddess figure into the powerless figure of Cathleen. The changing identity of Ireland, from an independent nation to a colony of England was a major influence on the perception of this ancient goddess figure. The portrayal of women in the Irish Renaissance resulted from the use of the English rather than the Irish language, the changing social conventions to strict Victorian ideals, and the changing literary tastes. Women in nineteenth and early twentieth century society did not hold a lot of power.

The goddess figures of ancient Celtic Ireland were extremely powerful in Irish culture. Goddesses such as the Morrigan and Brigit were strong female figures who dominated the supernatural world in Ireland. Celtic goddesses had many functions so, in some cases, the goddess of war was also the goddess of sex and fertility. As these mythological tales of Ireland were committed to writing by the Christian scribes in the Middle Ages, the goddesses were “euhemerized” becoming “pseudo-historical queens and tribal ancestors” in addition to fairies and saints (Clark 2-3). For example, the feminine ideal of the Medieval and modern times did not include a war goddess such as the Morrigan. In early written folk tales, she is powerful, but her power is never discussed or explained.
Another figure that changes extensively through the developing Irish literary tradition is the sovereignty goddess. In ancient Ireland, the sovereignty figure would sleep with the new king to ensure prosperity to the land. Through the sixteenth century, the king would be ritually married to the goddess of the land at his inauguration. Thus this Christianized sovereignty figure is symbolic. The power of this Ireland figure is further diminished in the late seventeenth century by the Aisling poetry. Aisling poetry was a popular poetic form. The author describes a dream in which Ireland, as a woman, visits him. Ireland asks the poet to help cast out the English and restore a Stuart monarch to her in the form of marriage. She thus is at the mercy of others. The sovereignty of Aisling tradition is a supernatural figure, a speir-bhean (sky woman), similar to a fairy mistress. She is not part of reality but a figure of the supernatural. The poet describes her as a beautiful and erotic woman who the poet lusts after. However the sexual aspects of this Irish sovereignty are missing. She cannot offer sexual favors; she is an otherworldly muse. “She is a lady in distress, not a superior creature who condescends to help mortals” (Clark 6). One positive aspect is her image as a beacon of hope. Even this is taken away in the Irish Renaissance. “In Yeats’s Cathleen Ni Houlihan, there is no inkling of victory, only renewal of the struggle” (Clark 7). Of this new Irish sovereignty figure, Rosalind Clark writes:

She cannot dispense riches, for she has none; or fertility, since that is morally unacceptable; or victory, for that is politically unlikely. She can be seen as young, beautiful but inaccessible, or as a hag, the dispenser of death. (8)
The Cathleen of Yeats and Lady Gregory’s play draws from various Irish sovereignty traditions. That Cathleen is a combination of two traditional figures, the character of the same name from an eighteenth century song and a nineteenth century character from a song, the Shan Van Vocht. “The Shan Van Vocht,” translated to “the poor old woman,” is an Irish song that was translated into English. The original Irish song is a dialogue between an old woman and her young husband, who is regretting his marriage. The patriotic lyrics known today are thought to be written in 1797, but not printed until the 1840s (Bessai 117). Musicologist Donal O’Sullivan believes that the patriotic song was written in response to the French landing at Bantry Bay in 1796.

Oh! the French are on the sea
Says the Shan Van Vocht,
The French are on the sea,
Says the Shan Van Vocht
Oh! the French are in the Bay,
They’ll be here without delay,
And the Orange will decay,
Says the Shan Van Vocht. (Bessai 117)

“The result of this substitution of political words is that the Poor Old Woman becomes the speaker of the patriotic sentiments, and thus is made yet another personification of Ireland” (Clark 168). The defiant voice of the Shan Van Vocht gives new vigor to the sovereignty figure. Furthermore, the militant tone of the song is one of resistance. The speaker is thus merged with the hag figure and the war goddess. The Shan Van Vocht is an old decrepit woman, in the tradition of the Hag of Beare, another Irish sovereignty figure.

Written in the tenth century, “The Hag of Beare,” also known as “The Old Woman of Beare,” is one of the earliest songs in which Ireland is personified as a
woman. Unlike the later Aisling poems and more modern works, she is depicted as “aged, ugly, and lamenting the loss of her many princely lovers” (Bessai 118). The woman can be symbolically mourning pagan Ireland, and regretting strict new Christian Ireland. The Hag of Beare is also connected to the mythological goddesses of Ireland.

One of the several traditions of the Hag of Beare legends is that she had seven periods of youth and renewal “so that every man who lived with her came to die of old age, and her grandsons and great-grandsons were tribes and races.”…As the mother of tribes and races, she connects back to the ancient mother-goddess prototype which in the Irish pantheon is Danu or Eriu. As the wife of many kingly husbands, she echoes the two Medb figures of the heroic tales. (Bessai 120-1)

The two Medb figures are Medb of the Tain Bo Cuailnge, an aggressive warrior woman with many husbands and lovers, and Medb Lethderg (Medb Red-Side) a powerful woman who married the successive kings of Tara (Bessai 121). Diane Bessai argues that the Medb is “red-side” because sovereignty is always bloody (121). She supports this concept of a bloody sovereignty with the tale of Niall, a historic king, found in The Adventures of the Sons of Eochu Muigmedon. In this tale, Niall and his brothers have an encounter with a mysterious hag, who asks for an embrace from all. None accept but Niall, and the hag then reveals herself as the sovereignty of Ireland. She prophesizes that he will be king: “As he had seen her, horrible at first and beautiful in the end, so also is sovereignty; for it is most often won by war and slaughter, but is glorious in the end” (qtd. in Bessai 123). This construct of the king and sovereignty figure also operates within the traditional Celtic goddess, in that the sovereignty in her embrace transfers her supernatural power to the king.
The other major influence is the eighteenth century Irish poem, “Caitilin Ni Uallachain.” The two extant versions of the poem were translated by Clarence Mangan. In the song of Cathleen ni Houlihan, Cathleen is old because she is without her prince. The song is in the Aisling tradition above. Some scholars believe that the poets sang to women as coded patriotic pleas, as in “treason songs.” However others believe that writers would not have hesitated to voice their opinions about the English. O’Sullivan suggests that the patriotic songs were simply written to the tune of popular love songs.

So Cathleen becomes an accidental patriotic symbol and also an accidental noble queen. Clark writes:

> In the eighteenth century, aristocracy is gone and most of the Irish people are reduced to the status of peasants. The beloved of the poet is personified as Ireland, so the peasant women come to be described as noble queens. (174)

This woman then is not far from the idealized peasant of the Irish Renaissance. This further supports that Cathleen of Yeats’s play must be a peasant in order to represent the people.

Mangan’s translated songs also preserve the idea of transformation which is so important to the play. In the poem, “Age and ugliness are contrasted with youth and beauty; renewal of political idealism is symbolized by the transformation of the image of age to the image of youth through the devotion of a royal lover” (Bessai 127). In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, the young son who returns at the end of the play is asked by his father “Did you see an old woman going down the path?” He replies, “I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen” (Yeats 11). This is where the mythological power of the play rests.
While “Cathleen ni Houlihan” was already a well-known name for Ireland, particularly since the nineteenth-century popularization of Mangan’s song of that title, traditionally the country had been given many allegorical names and representations. The remarkable element in Yeats’ play was that it managed to combine so many features of the various traditional conceptions with his own innovations, thereby giving modern Ireland what might be called her definitive personification. Not the least of these elements was the supernatural note which Maud Gonne’s interpretation emphasized, one that had not been present since the aisling of visionary songs of the eighteenth-century. (Bessai 114)

IV. Criticism

In addition to borrowing from the song traditions and mythology, the play also works within an established melodramatic play structure. The Yeats play follows a familiar form of a political melodrama, not unlike the earlier nationalist plays to which the company, Willie Fay and his actors, may have been referring when they suggested Yeats write on the Rebellion of 1798.

These anonymous members were probably alluding to the success of J.W. Whitbread’s 1798 melodramas, Lord Edward, or ’98 (performed in 1894) and Wolfe Tone, written for the centenary of the rebellion in 1898. Since Cathleen is set near Killala in 1798, audiences could hardly have failed to compare it to these two earlier dramatizations. Certainly Yeats, who as president of the Centenary Committee was deeply involved in planning the 1898 commemoration and was at the same time making the initial plans with Gregory and Martyn for the founding of what became of the Abbey, must at least have been aware of Wolfe Tone, if not Lord Edward. (Harris 477-8)

With Cathleen, Yeats intended to write a play for the people and to appeal to this target audience he needed to adapt certain popularized dramatic conventions. The central action of melodrama is a battle between the hero and villain for the heroine. Political melodrama, such as Whitbread’s Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone must fuse together the political agenda with the romantic one. “The contest between nationalists and unionists over the sovereignty of Ireland is thus incorporated into the standard battle between the
hero and villain over the affections and body of the heroine” (Harris 478). At the start of the plays the political agenda of the villain and the romantic agenda remain separate but as the play unfolds the two become confused, and desire for the heroine becomes primary and is the motivation for treachery. In Whitbread’s plays mentioned above, “the villain’s final plot against the rebellion coincides with an attempt to abduct/rape the heroine, literalizing the contest over possession of Ireland as a battle over the heroine’s literal body” (Harris 478-9).

In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Yeats plays with these conventions, following some and departing from others. The Whitbread model reinforces the mythological woman as Ireland construct. The chaste and virtuous heroine of the melodrama primed the audience for Yeats’s Cathleen. Furthermore, the Whitbread model influences Yeats’s conclusion of *Cathleen*.

Melodrama may also have helped Yeats’s audiences accept Michael’s decision to sacrifice his life and happiness for Cathleen as the nationalist version of a happy ending. Michael’s sacrifice, because it achieves the union between hero and heroine that is the primary objective of the melodramatic plot, becomes the desired goal, regardless of the outcome of the battle into which he rushing. Melodramatic convention thus supports a construction of nationalist sentiment in which self-sacrifice on behalf of the cause is an end in itself rather than a means to practical change, and valorizes both the play’s definition of the conflict facing the Irish nationalist and its resolution of that conflict through Michael’s death. (Harris 479)

*Cathleen* departs from the melodramatic conventions in a few key ways. As Harris points out, there is no male villain, instead Bridget the mother is the primary opposing force. In this way, the conflict can be seen as two women fighting for the affections of a man, the inverse of the melodramatic convention. The battle becomes
over Michael’s body, Michael’s life. Cathleen’s association with the supernatural forces a strong polarization between herself and Bridget.

This polar opposition of Bridget and Cathleen dramatizes the impossibility, for those who adhere to Cathleen’s version of nationalism, of both serving Ireland and remaining in the land of the living. According to this paradigm there is no third option: the hero chooses glorious death or ignominious life, and the female characters can only function as sirens tempting him toward one or the other.

(Harris 480)

Gendering the nation as female is significant in terms of sexual politics. The Ireland-as-woman construct serves several functions. Elizabeth Cullingford in her article “‘Thinking of Her…as…Ireland:’ Yeats, Pearse, and Heaney” (1990): “as applied by Irish men it has helped confine Irish women in a straitjacket of purity and passivity; and as applied by the English cultural imperialist it has imprisoned the whole Irish race in debilitating stereotype” (1). The land can be possessed and repossessed; therefore, the gendering it female enforces the patriarchal construction of women as possessions.

Furthermore, the gendering of nation as female results in the gendering of the activist as male, prompting female nationalists to feel excluded from nationalist organizations and activities.

V. Performance History/Response:

_Cathleen Ni Houlihan_ was a wildly successful play in the early 1900s. It became a strong symbol of budding Irish nationalism. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, one of the actresses who performed as Cathleen, said “Even the smuggest and most patronising of critics could find no fault” (“Our Kathleen” 218). The play was first produced as the premiere performances of the new Irish National Theatre Society at St. Teresa’s Hall in Dublin. The Irish National Theatre Society hoped “to continue - if possible on a more
permanent basis – the work begun by the Irish Literary Theatre” (qtd. in Ellis-Fermor 41).  *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was an instant success.  It was one of the plays performed at the opening of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, the new incarnation of the Irish National Theatre Society, renamed the National Theatre Society Limited.  The play was revived many times by the Abbey and also became part of its touring repertoire.

Prior to the first production in 1902, interest in Yeats and his newest work was growing.  On March 30, *The United Irishman* published a letter Yeats had sent to them in response to inquiry about Cathleen.  Yeats wrote:

My subject is Ireland and its struggle for independence.  The scene is laid in the West of Ireland at the time of the French landing.  I have described a household preparing for the wedding of the son of the house.  Everyone expects some good thing from the wedding…Into this household comes Kathleen Ni Houlihan herself, and the bridegroom leaves his bride, and all the hopes come to nothing.  It is the perpetual struggle of the cause of Ireland and every other ideal cause against the private hopes and dreams, against all that we mean when we say the world.  I have put into the mouth of Kathleen Ni Houlihan verses about those who have died or are about to die for her, and these verses are the key to the rest…I have written the whole play in the English of the West of Ireland, the English of people who think in Irish. (qtd. in Coleman 129-30)

The first Cathleen was Maud Gonne, of course, the woman who inspired the play.  Her involvement in the play assured that it would not be viewed as simply entertainment.  As the president of Inghinidhe na hÉireann, or the Daughters of Ireland, she had great political influence.  Yeats was able to get Gonne to commit to the performance in January of 1902 (Coleman 127).  Producer W. G. Fay recalls the production

Our cup now ran over, for, as president of Inginide na hÉireann Miss Gonne was in fact what Kathleen ni Houlihan was in symbol.  Never again will there be such a splendid Kathleen as she; a beautiful tall woman with her great masses of

7 Lady Gregory wrote many of her plays in Anglo-Hiberian dialect called Kiltartan, after the area in Galway where she lived.  She attempted to faithfully reproduce the speech of the peasants around her estate.
golden hair and her voice that would charm the birds off the bough. Her promised appearance assured us of the support not only of her own society but of Cumann na nGaedeal [the Irish League] as well. It was under the auspices of Miss Gonne’s society that our performance was formally given. (qtd. in Coleman 127)

The play was produced by W. G. Fay and Frank Fay, brothers who had an amateur theatre company. The cast for the first performance in April of 1902 was: Maud Gonne as Cathleen, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh as Delia, M. T. Quinn as Bridget, C. Caulfield as Patrick, J. Dudley Digges as Michael, and W. G. Fay as Peter. It was also sponsored by Inghinidhe na hÉireann, the political and cultural organization of which Maud Gonne was president.

The reviews for the play were favorable for the most part. Antony Coleman has put together a production history which includes reviews from the first performance. The Irish Times wrote a short review:

‘Kathleen-Ni Houlihan’ is a shorter work [than Deirdre], developing events which appeal to and arouse patriotic feeling….the author portrays with dramatic intensity that Irishman’s love of country, and this aspect of native character if delineated with keen insight and an evident desire to avoid exaggeration. (qtd. in Coleman 131-2)

The Freeman’s Journal wrote,

Of the piece itself it would difficult to speak too highly. While there is about it a haunting sense of tragedy, it is flooded with the beauty of “old, forgotten far-off things” and of ideals that are never quite lost. If this little play has a fault, - it is that it has too much humour – “comic relief” would be too strong a term. The realism of the scene is perfect. (qtd. in Coleman 131)

Yeats, in writing to Lady Gregory following the first performance, also noted that the beginning of the play, prior to Kathleen’s entrance was possibly too light-hearted.

Kathleen ni Hoolihan was…most enthusiastically received. Its one defect was that the humour of the part before Kathleen came in kept that house in such a

See Appendix B, Figure 2 for a photograph of the original production.
delighted laughter, that it took them some little while to realize the tragic meaning of Kathleen’s part, though Maude Gonne played it magnificently, and with weird power. (qtd. in Coleman 130)

He even considered revising the play to strike “a tragic note at the start,” but ultimately did not change anything. He wrote to Lady Gregory on April 5, “The plays are over. Crowds have been turned away from doors every night, and last night was the most successful of all the performances. The audience now understands Kathleen ni Houlihan and there is no difficulty in getting from humour to tragedy” (qtd. in Coleman 132).

The play had an immediate patriotic effect on the audience. Poet Seumas O’Sullivan recalls seeing the play in 1902: “I was with Arthur Griffith, and I can still see his face as he stood up at the fall of the curtain to join in the singing of what was then our national anthem – and would to God it was still our national anthem – ‘A Nation Once Again’” (Murray 3). Others were concerned about the powerful patriotic effect it might have on the people. Stephen Gwynn writes “The effect of Cathleen ni Houlihan on me was that I went home asking myself if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot” (qtd. in Chadwick 157).

The play was revived in 1904 as part of the premiere performance at the opening of the Abbey Theatre, where it played with Yeats’s On Baile’s Strand and J. M. Synge’s In the Shadow of the Glen.

Another notable production was the 1909 performance in London. During the month of June, the Abbey company performed three plays at the Royal Court Theater in

---

9 “A Nation Once Again” is a song by Thomas Davis. The song express the hope that “Ireland, long a province” will be “a nation once again” (Murray 3).
10 Yeats also express this fear in his poem, “Man and the Echo” written after the 1916 Rising. He writes, “Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?”
London: *Cathleen*, Lady Gregory’s *The Workhouse Ward*, and J. M. Synge’s *The Well of the Saints*. Sara Allgood, who had played Bridget in the original production, played the title role. The play was only performed twice, June 8 and 11, but it had a huge impact on the mainly Anglo-Irish Londoners. Shaw’s response was recorded by Lady Gregory in her journal: “…G. B. S. said his wife ‘howled’ all through, and he said, ‘When I see that play I feel it might lead a man to do something foolish’” (Gregory 444).

Irish literature scholar Una Ellis-Fermor also saw a performance of the play in London in 1909. She describes *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* as the most powerful and memorable performance from that night. She saw actress Sara Allgood in the lead. She was struck by the appearance of this old woman speaking of death in this peaceful home. “The average Anglo-Irishman in the audience, meeting the play as most did for the first time, recoiled vigorously upon his English blood” (Ellis-Fermor vii). She remarks that the play created the possibility of converting the Anglo-Irish or at least evoking sympathy. She also became aware of the unsteady ground upon which Edwardian England rested in 1909, in regards to Ireland.

Ellis-Fermor also remarks on the perception of the play in *The Irish Dramatic Movement*. She found that few understood the historical background of the play. Yet, “The play had been accepted for ten years on its merits as an expression of the worship of liberty and its own racial glory in a subject race and not the nationalism of any particular people” (Ellis-Fermor viii). While the play can certainly be examined as a universal nationalist piece it is, more importantly, a very Irish play.
VI. Actresses

As the original Cathleen, Maud Gonne became the definitive representation of Ireland. Yeats wrote the part especially for her. All other actresses and their performances were measured against her interpretation. Antoinette Quinn argues that the play’s success was due to her performance. She quotes Edward Martyn: “her sheer talent saved the disaster which otherwise must have come to destroy the high poetic significance of the play by reason of the low comedy-man air adopted by another actor” (45). Maud Gonne’s reputation and personality as well as her performance made the play strong. Gonne was a well-known nationalist, noted for her exceptional passion and beauty. She was a popular public speaker and journalist. Her performance strongly reflected her skills as a prominent demonstrator.

The *All-Ireland Review* noted the connection between Maud’s theatrical role and her more customary role of nationalist orator, making her performance continuous with her politics: “The well-known nationalist orator did not address the other actors as is usual in drama, but spoke directly to the audience, as if she was addressing them in Beresford Place…she can scarcely be said to act the part, she lived it.” (Quinn 46)

Indeed she appeared to many the very embodiment of Cathleen. But it was not only Gonne’s performance as nationalist spokeswoman that gave strength to her performance in *Cathleen*; her beauty was also pivotal. Quinn writes:

Maud Gonne brought to the part of the *femme fatale* an erotic charge all the more potent for being covert, her disguised beauty colluding with the dialogue, titillating by its promise of a final unveiling. Her late arrival for the premiere, sweeping through the auditorium in her costume when the audience was already seated, consciously or unconsciously anticipated the play’s conclusion, preempting Yeats’s script. (46)

---

11 “Another actor” refers to W. G. Fay, who was a well known comedic actor and his appearance on stage instantly brought laughter from the audience (Quinn 47).
Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh who performed as Delia recalls the opening night performance, “Maud Gonne arrived late the first night and caused a minor sensation by sweeping through the auditorium in the ghostly robes of the Old Woman…ten minutes before we were due to begin” (17). The audience’s response to her beauty eroticized the national romance. Furthermore, her association with the occult, through the mystical order of the Golden Dawn, to which Yeats also belonged, reinforces the message of the play, the rejection of both materialism and home for the nationalist cause.

Reviews of Maud Gonne’s performance in the first production were mostly positive. Of Maude Gonne, The Freeman’s Journal wrote:

But it was with Miss Gonne, as Kathleen, that the honours of the performance lay. Her interpretation of the part was marked by a very high degree of histrionic power; and her beautiful voice was heard to advantage in the snatches of folk-songs with which her speeches were interspersed….a singularly beautiful little piece. (qtd. in Coleman 131)

Joseph Holloway attended second set of performances:

And as the piece was admirably played, it made a deep impression. Most of the sayings of the mysterious “Cathleen” (a part realised with creepy realism by the tall and willowy Miss Maud Gonne, who chanted her lines with rare musical effect, and crooned fascinatingly, if somewhat indistinctly, some lyrics) found ready and apt interpretation from the audience who understood that Erin spoke in “Cathleen,” and they applauded each red-hot patriotic sentiment right heartily, and enthusiastically called for the author at the end, and had their wish gratified… (17)

Other reviews were less positive. The Daily Express, a conservative paper loyal to England and not interested or supportive of the nationalist struggle wrote the following:

Miss Gonne seems to have at last struck her vocation; a lively imagination and exaggerated emotions, however out of place in politics, are all right in connection
with the footlights. As Kathleen Ni Houlihan,…Miss Gonne deserves high praise; voice and manner being well suited to a rather doleful part. (qtd. in Coleman 132)

_The Irish Times_ wrote “The title role was taken by Miss Gonne whose performance was not without merit, although her part was one which made no very serious demand for acting of an elevated class” (qtd. in Coleman 132).

Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh was Cathleen in the 1904 production at the Abbey and in many of the subsequent revivals. She got her inspiration from Gonne; “I would like it known that every time I have played Kathleen I have modeled my performance on the one originally given by Maud Gonne” (60) Although she did not have Gonne’s personal history and investment in nationalism, her interpretation of Cathleen was also well-received. Joseph Holloway was particularly partial to her performance.

Anything more strangely pathetic than her chanting as she leaves the cottage I have never heard. Her words sunk into one’s very soul! A painful joy enveloped my senses and left in an ecstasy of misery that was good to feel. Of all the “Cathleens” I have seen, this was truest embodiment. The sorrows of centuries were on her brow and in her eye, and her words pierced the heart with grief at her woe! (qtd. in Bessai 129)

12 Holloway also spoke well of the performance of Sara Allgood as Bridget in that production. “She was the good-hearted, kindly, motherly housewife in her every turn, and her love for her big, strong, manly boy, ‘Michael,’ was tenderly and beautifully expressed” (Harris 477). The performance of Bridget is essential to the drama, for the audience must feel the conflict between the earthy wife and mother and Cathleen.
CHAPTER 4
LADY GREGORY’S PERFORMANCE:
“What is needed but a hag and a voice?”

I. The Performance

There is little information available about Lady Gregory’s performance as Cathleen.\(^{13}\) She performed in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* for three performances beginning on March 17, 1919, just days after she turned sixty-seven (Kohfeldt 259). She was filling in for actress Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, who was unable to get into Dublin in time for the opening, due to a prior engagement. Not wanting to postpone, she volunteered, writing in her journal, “After all, what is wanted but a hag and a voice?” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 259).

Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, also known as Mary Walker, recalls in her autobiography, *The Splendid Years*, the incident:

> Years later, when circumstances delayed my arrival at the Abbey for an appearance as Kathleen Ni Houlihan, she horrified Yeats and the company by calmly announcing she would play the part herself. Her interpretation was hardly a flattering one, not only because of her extraordinary sing-song delivery of the beautiful lines. Her appearance, at times oddly reminiscent of an elderly Queen Victoria, can hardly have been in keeping with the character Yeats had in mind when he wrote the play. But her arrival in such fashion as an Abbey Theatre actress, received, to her delight and Yeats’ dismay, widespread publicity, and she often spoke of the occasion afterwards, referring proudly and a trifle pathetically to her appearance as the realisation of a life-long ambition. (30)

\(^{13}\) There was a photograph taken of Lady Gregory as Cathleen. See Appendix B, Figure 3.
There is no other evidence that Lady Gregory had an ambition to be an actress. It is likely she was expressing a particular and significant identity.

Despite her limited acting experience, Lady Gregory was able to make an impression as Cathleen. Hill describes the event:\(^{14}\)

On the night of the first performance she submitted without enthusiasm to the make-up artist who painted her face white with black under the eyes and red inside the lids. On stage she spoke, according to Joseph Holloway, clearly and with assurance, but without passion; she refused to chant the last speech as Yeats would have liked, subtly reducing the nationalist thrill of Kathleen. But the patriotic St Patrick’s Day audience applauded enthusiastically, and she recorded with satisfaction that she had two curtain calls. She went back to her hotel tired and hungry and ate stale bread and butter and drank a glass of milk, as was her habit when alone. (311)

On opening night, she apparently did well. *The Irish Times* wrote a review following the first performance, which appeared in the March 18 edition.

Miss Walker, who was to have appeared as Cathleen in “Cathleen Ni Houlihan,” was unable to take her place owing to a concert engagement, and it was intended to substitute “The Rising of the Moon” but Lady Gregory volunteered to play the part, and her interpretation of the weird character was skilful and artistic. Lady Gregory intends to fill the vacancy until Miss Walker returns on Wednesday. (7)

Yeats’s reaction was less enthusiastic. He attended the second performance with Maud Gonne. Lady Gregory records in her journal that Yeats “said coldly that it was ‘very nice, but if I had rehearsed you it would have been much better’” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 259).

Lady Gregory recalls that she was asked about Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh’s performance. She writes that someone inquired whether Nic Shiubhlaigh “hadn’t grown very poor and theatrical? I said she had so struck me, but I had thought it was perhaps professional jealousy” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 259). Lady Gregory makes light of her performance and does

\(^{14}\) Despite the amount of details, Hill is not clear about her sources.
not acknowledge its powerful meaning. Biographer Elizabeth Coxhead was able to speak to two people who had seen the performance.

I have talked to two people who remember the performance. To her niece, Ruth Shine, it remains the finest Kathleen she ever saw. She may be considered prejudiced, but Mr. Brinsley Macnamara’s dispassionate verdict is that it equaled Sara Allgood’s interpretation. Lady Gregory seemed, he says, completely to overcome the physical handicap of being small and dumpy; one noticed only the fine carriage of her head and her noble brow. (176)

Overall, it appears that Lady Gregory performed the role satisfactorily, but she clearly broke with the established tradition of the role. As biographer Judith Hill notes, “That Augusta saw the part differently is clear when, in 1919, she played Cathleen on the understanding that all that was needed was ‘a hag and a voice,’ and she played an ambiguous old woman whose time would come off-stage in the uncharted future” (158-9). The political climate of 1919 as well Lady Gregory’s own uncertainty about this changing nation caused the performance to be unique.

Limited criticism has been written about the event. Only a few biographers and scholars have commented on the importance of Lady Gregory playing Cathleen. Biographer Mary Lou Kohfeldt surmises that the role of Cathleen “epitomized [Lady Gregory’s] own metamorphosis from obscure widow to guiding spirit of the Irish Renaissance” (259). C. L. Innes, in Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935, also examines the performance:

Despite the humorous self-deprecation of that comment [about only needing “a hag and a voice”], her taking the role, her translation [of Padraic Pearse’s Gaelic poem “Mise Eire”], and her poem [“An Old Woman Remembers”] suggest that Lady Gregory had come, like Maud Gonne, to see herself as a kind of embodiment of Ireland, with the right to speak on Ireland’s behalf. (160)
Innes raises two very important concepts: embodiment and voice. Both are necessary in examining this event. Yet these two authors have failed to see the full impact of this event, which reaches far beyond a possible assertion of embodiment and voice.

Theatrical performance cannot be looked at in singular isolation. Embedded within Lady Gregory’s performance is the memory of every other Cathleen, the performances of other actress: Maud Gonne, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, and Sara Allgood. Whether the audience members saw performances of these other Cathleens, as Yeats did, is irrelevant. With a play so culturally important as *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, the character in the text, and the character in performance are pervasive in Irish culture. The original performance by Maud Gonne was the marker against which all others were measured. The difference in Gonne and Lady Gregory both on and off stage is important to understanding the personal and political meaning possible here.

II. Lady Gregory and Maud Gonne

Maud Gonne was not just an actress; she was a prominent political figure in Ireland. Although she fought hard for Ireland’s independence, she spent more than half of her time from 1890-1916 in France (Innes 129). She led a very non-traditional life, having two children out of wedlock with lover Lucien Millevoye. Later she married John McBride, but separated from him shortly after in 1906. She was booed at the Abbey Theatre because of her separation, despite the fact that it was motivated by McBride’s drunkenness and brutality (Innes 130). She was the publisher of the French paper *L’Irlande Libre* (1896-7) and the founder of Inghinidhe ne hÉireann, the nationalist group the Daughters of Ireland, who had sponsored the first production of *Cathleen Ni*
Houlihan. She was also an active protestor and public speaker. Furthermore, she was extraordinarily beautiful and had a noticeable passion and presence.\textsuperscript{15}

For many including Arthur Griffith who affectionately called her ‘Queen’ or ‘Queenie,’ she was not the ‘servant of the Queen’ (Cathleen ni Houlihan) as she designated herself in her autobiography, but the Queen herself, and Maud Gonne’s chosen mode of appearance, habitually dressed in long, flowing robes, often accompanied by one of her enormous dogs, did much to enhance that image. (Innes 131)

All came to see her as Yeats did, his own, their own, beautiful Cathleen.

Maud Gonne was born to a wealthy Englishwoman and an English army officer. Her mother died when Gonne was young and her father passed away when she was eighteen. Gonne experienced an early life very differently than Lady Gregory. She was educated in France and traveled extensively as a young woman, often acting as the hostess to her father’s associates.

Her pleasant, privileged life at the viceregal court in Dublin contrasted with some especially cruel evictions which she and some had ridden out to see on a lark; her brief experience with a detested English guardian who severely rationed her liberty and her money had made her hate England, and like Augusta as a child, love the Ireland that was oppressed…With her extraordinary beauty, her wealth, and her great courage, flouted the conventions of Victorian England. She had a streak of strange rigidity of the terrorist. She was willing to lie, and she was willing to incite other people to kill. (Kohfeldt 112)

Gonne became interested in Ireland after her father was stationed there in 1882. Her political ideology was developed further through her relationship with Millevoye. Gonne converted to Catholicism in 1902, the same year she appeared as Cathleen. As indicated in the above quote, Gonne dressed herself like a queen, but not any queen, clearly a Celtic and Catholic queen. The flowing garments and accompanying dogs create the image of a rustic goddess or queen. Like many prominent members of the nationalist

\textsuperscript{15} See Figure 5 in Appendix B for photograph of young Gonne.
movement, she had to fight against her background. In reference to the play and the meaning of being Irish, scholar Georg Grote makes a telling remark:

The message echoed Maude Gonne: an active political stand was required to be Irish and this in turn made up for a non-Irish family background. In Maud Gonne’s case, as well as in Hyde’s and Yeats’s [and Lady Gregory’s], compensating for one’s family background was a necessity in order to be accepted as truly Irish. (28)

Gonne succeeded in becoming one of the quintessential symbols of Irish nationhood due to her political activism and her theatrical performance as Cathleen.

But her performance in Cathleen could have easily gone the other way. Scholar Mary Trotter writes:

Theatrical performance potentially could have broken the balance Gonne constantly negotiated between her presentation of the nationalist cause and her representation as an “extraordinary woman.” She hoped her reputation as a nationalist figure would make the play more political, but it could easily have made her political activity seem, in retrospect, pure theater. (94)

As a political actor, Gonne had to balance three identities: that of the character in the play, that of the actor, and that of the political activist (Trotter 95). Lady Gregory would likewise have to deal with these various layers in her performance.

In contrast, Lady Gregory was described by some, including Yeats, to be like an elderly Queen Victoria. There are a few similarities between the British queen and Lady Gregory. Lady Gregory wore mourning clothes for her husband her entire life, black from top to bottom, except for weddings, when she wore purple (Kohfeldt 297).

Biographer Elizabeth Coxhead makes particular notice of her choice of dress.

‘Such a pity she had to choose to dress like Queen Victoria,’ people have said, and her small stature and increasing plumpness heightened the resemblance. Certainly she was no admirer of the Famine Queen [Queen Victoria], and could
have had no notion of imitating her, but both were widows, and both wore the rigidly conventional garments of the time. (39)

In addition, Lady Gregory had a stately presence not unlike a queen. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh recalls her

…presiding maternally at one of those lavish suppers she loved to hold in the theatre on first nights; or, in different circumstances, drawing up her short rather bulky figure, squaring her shoulders and smiling rather grimly in a thin-lipped manner in face of opposition. (31)

Hill notes Nic Shiubhlaigh portrays a woman devoid of feminine charm and full of desire to always be in control (177). Nic Shiubhlaigh also uses the comparison to Queen Victoria in her account of Lady Gregory’s performance of Cathleen: “Her appearance, at times oddly reminiscent of an elderly Queen Victoria, can hardly have been in keeping with the character Yeats had in mind when he wrote the play” (30). Many others have mentioned that Lady Gregory also came across as condescending. Coxhead quotes two other recollections which enforce this perception:

‘I met her twice only,’ says Gerard Fay, ‘both times at the theatre when I was playing a small part in The Hour-Glass. She was so like Queen Victoria (to my eyes) that I almost called her Your Majesty. And the fantasy was not too far-fetched, for she had a queenly way with her and she ruled the Abbey for years.’ The same regal impression was received by Michael MacLiammoir, who says in his autobiography All for Hecuba: ‘Although the gentle frost of dignity, as of some royal personage, never left her manner, she was always kind, always courteous, always encouraging.’ (207)

Even Maud Gonne makes the analogy in her autobiography (321).

The association may not have been completely negative. Hill notes, “Equally, one suspects, the Queen Victoria slot was a convenient place to put women of authority and power, especially when, as Augusta did, they tried to exercise it by retaining the feminine virtues of apparent submissiveness to men, unruffled calm, unstinting kindness”
The similarities between Lady Gregory and Queen Victoria, whether true, highlight Lady Gregory as other than Irish, as a conservative Anglo-Irish authority figure. She was upset with the comparison. In her journal, she remarks on choking when a dinner guest compared her to Queen Victoria; she called it an “overpowering analogy” and a “bewildering comparison” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 296).

Within this comparison of Maud Gonne and Lady Gregory is the invisible Yeats; although not directly involved, his presence is undeniable. The character of Cathleen ni Houlihan came from his dream. In addition, his perception of both Lady Gregory and Maud Gonne was essential to the public’s perception of them, as well as their understanding of their own identity. Yeats’s extensive poetry about Gonne certainly did much to create her public image as a beautiful, erotic and ultimately unattainable woman. His poems led others to think of her as he did. She was a vision of Ireland. While as Cathleen she was sexually repressed, in reality she was a strong sexual woman. In female archetypes she is seen as whore or lover, but she is also the political activist, a very unique role. Yeats did not find Gonne, the activist, feminine enough (Hawkins 95). Thus in creating Cathleen and having her in the role, he is able to play out his ideal fantasy of her. In the context of the misogynistic Irish culture, Hawkins states, “Women came to be seen, not as revolutionary helpmeets and political inspirations…but as femmes fatales who, even if dedicated to Irish freedom, could dangerously distract their men from the cause” (95). This is the position Yeats put Gonne in as Cathleen.

This is in opposition to Yeats’ perception of Lady Gregory; she is strictly a mother figure in his eyes. “The overall sedateness of her appearance suggested a mother-
image, and her role within the Abbey as mediator between eccentric playwrights and actors fitted well with this perception” (Grote 53). Certainly, in the early years of the Abbey she was a facilitator, mediator and manager. Lady Gregory also often treated Yeats as a son, catering to his every need. He was more favored than her own son Robert (Kohfeldt 203). When Yeats stayed at Coole, she went to great lengths to make him comfortable, creating a silent atmosphere for him to work in and serving him the best food and wine (Kohfeldt 204). She affectionately called him “Willie” but he always called her “Lady Gregory” (Kohfeldt 117).

The distance he maintained from this maternal figure indicates that Lady Gregory’s social status remained present in their interactions. Yeats felt that she was a distanced regal figure, despite their close friendship. He groups her in his book *A Vision* with Queen Victoria. She is to him asexual; she was a widow, a hag, herself, without youth or a lover. Her biographer Hill notes:

He gave the impression of being cautious about his middle-aged hostess; his subsequent *Dramatis Personae* description of his early impressions of Augusta carefully evoked a woman without beauty, vivacity or sexual appeal: ‘Lady Gregory, as I first knew her, was a plainly dressed woman of forty-five, without obvious good looks, except the charm that comes from strength, intelligence and kindness.’ He was first drawn to the promise of folklore. (Hill 109)

His first interest in her was utilitarian; she provided a place for him to work and recover, in addition to folk material for his work.16

In the sense that all women are defined through their relationships to men, Lady Gregory is in a unique position. Those primary males who would define her were deceased. Through her performance of Cathleen, Lady Gregory may be rebelling against

---

16 Lady Gregory was, of course, also using Yeats. He gave her access to important literary and political figures. He also gave her something to do, an outlet for her creativity and her desire to help Ireland.
this asexual role in favor of one that is more powerful and sexual. In life, Lady Gregory was no chaste mother. She had an affair with notorious womanizer Wilfrid Blunt while married and, after her husband’s death, had a relationship with American lawyer John Quinn. However to a man like Yeats she would always be a maternal figure, because of her constant support of men in keeping with the traditional role of women.

His opinion of her, or at least his representation of her in the public sphere, can be exemplified in his reference to her in his Nobel Prize speech. In 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. In his speech, he acknowledged the contribution of Synge, who was deceased, and Lady Gregory. He referred to her as “an old woman sinking into the infirmities of age.” Lady Gregory, though over seventy, was hardly sinking into old age. She wrote in her journal, “He described me as ‘an old woman sinking into the infirmities of age’ (not even fighting against them!)” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 278). Yeats was convinced to change this language through the argument that his comments would weaken her value as a playwright by insinuating that she had gone mad. But as he had already sent copies of the speech to newspapers, he made only a small change; it now read “a living woman sinking into the infirmity of age” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 278).

It is important to remember that Lady Gregory was a woman of her time and was by no means revolutionary in her views on gender. The people she admired most were men. She had little in common with other nationalist women such as Gonne and Constance Markiewicz; she never invited them to her home (Murray 56). She was not even in support of women’s suffrage. This is not to say that she did not believe in
powerful women. A number of her plays have strong central female characters.

Christopher Murray writes that “her political unconscious was matriarchal” (55). Her insistence that she would not take credit for Cathleen at the expense of Yeats is also indicative of her conventional view on men and women. As Hill argues, she felt she owed him for his assistance with her work and she was devoted to his success (159). On a journal from 1900, Lady Gregory scribbled an insightful comment about Yeats’s perception of her. “I dreamed that I had been writing some article & W.B.Y. [Yeats] said “It’s not your business to write – Your business is to make an atmosphere” - ” (qtd. in Hill 150). It shows her ambition, her possible guilt for having that ambition, and her fear that Yeats would not accept her in that new role.

One can surmise that she may have felt constrained by this maternal image of herself. This performance of Cathleen allowed her to enact this conflict and try another role. She can be the seductress, the woman who wins the man, even if it is, or because it is, in the name of Ireland.

III. Identity and Theory

Lady Gregory’s performance is also an expression of identity. Lady Gregory is a woman, a widow, a Protestant, and Anglo-Irish. All these identifiers make her a person of little importance within Irish culture and the Irish nationalist movement. She is the other, in her identity as Protestant Anglo-Irish, and the unmarked, as woman. Through the performance of Cathleen, she attempts to become marked and to become the same as the audience. She wishes to be seen as a valued member of the nationalism movement and claim some authority associated with that title. In performing in Cathleen Ni

---

17 This terminology is borrowed from Peggy Phelan’s Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (1993).
Lady Gregory is also attempting to represent her similarities to her audience, to the working class Irish Catholics enjoying the show. However, just performing this representation of Ireland cannot make her Irish. Lady Gregory continued to maintain many of her Ascendancy ties. Unlike Maud Gonne, who attempted to erase her Anglo-Irish heritage, Lady Gregory staunchly remained a Protestant and for many years continued friendships with the Anglo-Irish and British elite. Certainly, in her early widowhood, this was for the benefit of her son. But by 1919, her son had died in World War I. While she had grandchildren, for whom she wished to maintain the family fortune and Coole, she was less concerned about her social status. She ultimately was aware of the changing nature of the world. Coupled with the 1916 Rising, this knowledge and freedom could have resulted in a desire to appear like a “true” nationalist. Furthermore, the recent tumult may have been the impetus for her performance. With the country dividing she may have had a strong desire to affiliate herself with the nationalists.

The performance allowed her to attempt to represent herself as those watching, more similar to the rebels of 1916. But ultimately this oneness, this sameness cannot be achieved. As Peggy Phelan writes, representation makes the other be the same through reproduction, but performance cannot guarantee that change because it is both representation and reproduction (Phelan 3). Lady Gregory is representing a character, Cathleen, and reproducing every other performance. In her attempt at unity she actually highlights the differences. Her otherness becomes more apparent.
This performance also allowed Lady Gregory as *unmarked* to be *marked*. Phelan explains:

> Within this psycho-philosophical frame, cultural reproduction takes she who is unmarked and re-marks her, rhetorically and imagistically, while he who is marked with value is left unre-marked, in discursive paradigms and visual fields. He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks. (5)

The theatre performance as a cultural event of personification makes the actress marked by the gaze of the audience, or in gender politics the gaze of the men.

Yeats’s discomfort with the performance may be the result of the marking. He is no longer marked as the male normative viewer, and as the author of the play. Lady Gregory becomes the marked, and may have more power because of it. The marking of an actress like Maud Gonne is less threatening because is a fetishization. Yeats’s creation of Cathleen becomes a proprieterial representation. ”The image of woman is made to submit to the phallic function and is re-marked and revised as that which belongs to him” (Phelan 17). Furthermore, the man realizing that he is not all, is not the same as the woman, desires to be all, through ownership and performance. “Performing the image of what he is not allows him to dramatize himself as ‘all’” (17). Creation through writing, as well as performing, can be a dramatization of the man as all or whole. Thus, through Cathleen, Yeats can claim ownership of his desired Maud Gonne and make himself “all.” This completeness seems to be a desired union with Gonne, or his romanticized Cathleen. Lady Gregory presents a Cathleen so different from these images that it clearly upsets Yeats.
Lady Gregory, unaware of these tensions, is likely attempting to both see and redefine herself. Phelan writes:

Identity cannot, then, reside in the name you can say or the body you can see – your own or your mother’s. Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other – which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being. (13)

Thus Lady Gregory’s performance becomes one of the singular moment of the declaration of identity. In performing Cathleen, she is both resisting the other and claiming the other. Her resistance is shown in her interpretation of the role. She breaks with the established performance conventions, choosing not to mimic the performance by Gonne. She is alternately claiming the other through her insistence on performing and the fulfillment of the promise. The loss discussed by Phelan is the source of the tension.

But what does Lady Gregory lose in this presentation and what does that loss do to her? She is not, nor can ever be, like the Catholic Irish middle-class/peasant audience. And while she did not go through the efforts of Gonne to create a new image, she seems to be stuck between the two worlds. Her strong faith and loyalty to the Church of Ireland and her desire to secure a future for her family ensured that she remained linked to the Ascendancy class. Indeed, at this point in her life she was devoted almost exclusively to the Abbey Theatre and her family. She rehearsed Cathleen between attending meetings about the Lane pictures and directing rehearsals for Shaw’s John Bull’s Other Island (Kohfeldt 259). It may have been her increasing age or the political climate that prompted her to take the role.
Phelan also identifies the desire to self-see by the object. In performing Cathleen, and opening herself up to multiple gazes, Lady Gregory may be enacting a desire to self-see, which is always impossible, but nonetheless always desired. Jacques Lacan defines it as such: “I am unable to see myself from the place where the Other is looking at me” (qtd. in Phelan 15). However, because one cannot see oneself, one must “detour through the other” by means of a gaze (Phelan 23). Yet to maintain this gaze, and ultimately self-see, one tries to be what the other wants to see, and becomes then not oneself. This dynamic is particularly strong in live performance (Phelan 18). Lady Gregory being so marginalized throughout her life may desire that gaze and the hope for the understanding that goes with it. She was invisible in the Persse household and, as a widow, she was a marginalized member of the community.\(^\text{18}\) Only through her involvement in the Abbey was she able to be someone of note. But even in that position she was relegated to a place on the periphery of the artistic movement. She was the worker, not the artist. Only recently have scholars examined her contributions as more than that of a supporting patron.

**III. Replacing Cathleen ni Houlihan**

In *Cathleen*, Lady Gregory was embodying both the tensions inherent in the play and tensions particular to her performance. The tension between the Irish women, the earthly beings, against the supernatural Cathleen is the crux of the play, the main conflict upon which the drama rests. It is a conflict between home and country which everyone, including Lady Gregory, was facing during this era. Her performance, while aligning her with the independence movement, is also full of tension. For her, *Cathleen* provided an

\(^{18}\) But ultimately it is her widowhood that allowed her to be able to participate in the movement.
opportunity to enact a role that was denied to her. The denial and the enactment, which ignores the denial, is the source of tension. For the audience, she is embodying class tension. While Lady Gregory worked hard to establish her position in Irish society, as a cultural revivalist and champion of the people, a role she sincerely desired, the audience would still have been aware of her background and denied her complete involvement in and identification with Ireland. Through the performance, then she comes to symbolize something very negative: the Protestant aristocrat taking over Ireland. As a woman, Lady Gregory becomes a Protestant woman inhibiting the woman who is Ireland. She almost displaces the traditional Celtic Cathleen in favor of herself, a cosmopolitan Anglo-Irish lady.

Lady Gregory’s performance can be seen as a moment of surrogation, as defined by performance studies scholar Joseph Roach. In his book *Cities of the Dead*, Roach discusses how societies create and re-create their cultural identity through the intersection of memory, performance, and substitution (2). This process operates through surrogation: “In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric” (2). Surrogation is thus a form of substitution which, like any substitution, is never perfect. In other words, “Performance…stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire to both embody and to replace” (Roach 3). This perfectly describes the performance of Cathleen by Lady Gregory. She attempts to embody Ireland and to replace Ireland the colony, with this new Irish Republic. The concept of surrogation works within the collective memory, the memory
of the society in which the performance is presented. “Because the collective memory
works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever
succeeds” (Roach 2). This failure or loss can have a profound effect on the previous
performers and the audience. Roach explains that the process of surrogation “may
provoke unbidden emotions, ranging from mildly incontinent sentimentalism to raging
paranoia” (2). The dissatisfaction of the incumbent can lead to “improvised narratives of
authenticity and priority” or “full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin” (Roach 3).

Surrogation thus provides a framework through which we can examine Lady
Gregory’s performance as Cathleen and make some assumptions about its effect. As
noted above, there are very few recorded responses to Lady Gregory’s performance. The
effect of the audience and the collective memory of Ireland must be theorized with the
limited information known. Certainly the importance of the figure of Cathleen ni
Houlihan has been well established. The people associated the figure with Maud Gonne,
and thus the people would perceive the performance as a substitution of that embodiment.

With performances of Cathleen by actresses such of Maud Gonne, the persona of
Ireland is a Catholic (peasant) woman of native Celtic origins. As a substitute, either for
a real or simply perceived vacancy, Lady Gregory redefines Ireland, as Anglo-Irish
Protestant. This type of displacement can be disturbing for the audience, as it was to
Yeats. Yet this surrogation can be seen either as a full displacement or as an addition.
Acceptance of the performance by Lady Gregory can indicate a cultural change in the
social network. Irish identity is then redefined as a Catholic and Protestant, Irish and
Anglo-Irish. However, as Roach suggests, surrogation can stir up tensions (2). It is
possible that the performance visualized tensions embedded within the collective movement. The image of a different Ireland, in the particularly strong form of Cathleen ni Houlihan, could have upset many people. In fact, the years after Lady Gregory’s performance were marked by violence. Even after the signing of the treaty, which granted limited independence to Ireland, the country remained in a state of violent chaos.

Georg Grote tries to claim that Cathleen as a nationalist figure is inherently authentic: “…Kathleen’s image changed according to the needs of contemporary Irish politics. She always fulfilled the role of a unifying national symbol and bore traits and characteristics with which many Irish people could agree” (217). If this is taken to be true, and Yeats is one of the exceptions, Lady Gregory’s performance then is a positive representation of the new Ireland. The audience would then react with exuberance to Lady Gregory’s performance. While it is known that she received two curtain calls, that is not sufficient to establish Lady Gregory’s Cathleen as the new archetype.

V. Claims

Lady Gregory could not only be hoping to change and/or try out a new identity but also making claims of ownership, authorship and authority. Lady Gregory’s generosity toward Yeats prevented her from openly claiming authorship. She “could not take from him any part of what had proved, after all, his one real popular success” (Coxhead 68). It is also possible that she felt limited in her ability to make claims of ownership given her social position as a widow, but more likely that she was acting like a traditional woman, deferring to the man. And while she was a successful playwright, Yeats was more widely acknowledged as a talented writer. Given that Yeats frequently

---

19 My emphasis.
drew upon *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* for authority, Lady Gregory may have attempted to do the same through this performance. She does admit in a journal entry in 1925 that she wished to claim ownership; it was “Rather hard on me not giving my name with *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* that I wrote all but all of” (qtd. in Hill 160).

For Yeats, the claims of authorship led to authority. He used them to gain respect and prestige. He used the authority of the play to quell a crowd which was protesting Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*. He yelled, “The author of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* addresses you.” As many might discount his words based on his background, as an artist and an Anglo-Irish Protestant, he needs the play. “In his claim to have created a play which was within the realms of the ancient Celtic traditions Yeats was successfully trying to camouflage his Anglo-Irish origin” (Grote 26). The association with Cathleen a figure so embedded within the national conscience allows him to overcome the obstacles of his background.

Lady Gregory through her performance may be claiming authorship of the play. The purpose of this can be both to enrich her body of literary work and, of course, to claim some of the authority associated with the play. An association through either authorship or performance, her substitution for acknowledged authorship, gives her greater importance as a speaker. Lady Gregory then has a perceived authority and right to speak on Ireland’s behalf. Similar to the way the authority of authorship functions for Yeats, the embodiment of the role allows Lady Gregory to move beyond her background. The claims also reflect a desire for agency and a possible acknowledgement of the power of the play. That is not to say that Lady Gregory is taking responsibility for the deaths of
the Easter Rising rebels, but that she is aware of and recognizing the part the literary
movement played in the political movement and the subsequent violence.

The fact that Lady Gregory’s first performance was given on St. Patrick’s Day is
significant. The performance of an Irish nationalist play on the feast of the country’s
patron saint unites the country. While Saint Patrick is venerated within both the Catholic
and Protestant faiths, as a figure, he is more often associated with the Catholic faith. Yet,
the saint was recognized by members of the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland.20
Thus, the performance of Cathleen becomes both an identification with Catholic
members and a statement of unification for the country. But it also challenges the power
of the Catholic and mystical Cathleen. Lady Gregory’s performance undermines the
message of the play, because by breaking with the performance tradition, it challenges
the idea of a unified nation.

VI. Political Conversion

Claiming authorship allows the play and the performance to be part of Lady
Gregory’s political conversion. Performing the role allows an almost complete corporeal
union with Ireland. If this were to have occurred earlier, say in 1904, Lady Gregory may
have been bonding herself to Ireland; however in 1919, three years after the Easter
Rising, she is clearly saying more than that. Her message is political; a statement in
support of independence. Hill writes:

She had harboured subversive political ideas of some form since she was a young
person and, instead of avoiding the problem of finding some way to reconcile her
social position with her the evolving circumstances in Ireland as most of her

---

20 To this day, the flag of Saint Patrick’s is one of the few neutral flags of Ireland; it denotes neither support
of Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland.
contemporaries did (in the end a good proportion would leave), she never stopped trying. (211)

Her political involvement, her non-fiction work, and her cultural work, as outlined in Chapter 1, reflect a slow conversion to nationalism.

Lady Gregory’s travels during her marriage, particularly to Egypt and India, gave her a unique perspective on nationalism and her own situation as a member of a ruling class. Hill remarks on her 1886 journey to India:

> On this journey to India Augusta discovered an empathy for the unresolved lives of British-Indians, doomed to live between English and Indian cultures in a twilight of their own. She was sensitive to their sense of exile, and to the very varied, sometimes conflicting, roles they had to play…One senses that these observations sharpened Augusta’s awareness of her own intermediate Anglo-Irish position and helped her eventually to find a positive role for herself in the emerging independent Ireland of the twentieth century. (69)

Soon after this trip, Lady Gregory’s friend, Wilfrid Blunt joined the Irish National League in London and came to Ireland to publicize nationalism. Lady Gregory was sympathetic to Blunt, but he was not allowed at Coole; Sir William did not support his views. Over the next few years her loyalty to Blunt and her interaction with her tenants strengthen her political ideals and made her more sympathetic to the national cause.

Clearly the event with the most profound effect on her was the Easter Rising and the subsequent conflicts in Ireland. She was deeply affected by the deaths of the rebels, some of whom she knew. Hill writes:

> She was challenged by their bravery and idealism, and inspired by their fearless act in defying authority: ‘It seems as if the leaders were what is wanted in Ireland - & will be even more wanted in the future – a fearless & imaginative opposition to conventional & opportunist parliamentarians, who have never helped our work even by intelligent opposition.’ She could not help regretting that these had not ultimately been on the side of intellectual freedom, their side: ‘…I keep wondering whether we could not have brought them into that intellectual
movement.’ Those brief, fiercely burning lives had in a stroke put the intellectual movement into shadow. (287)

The struggle for independence could no longer be achieved through non-violent manners.

The Easter Rising made the conflict violent.

Yeats and Augusta would never recapture the sense of mission for their intellectual movement after the rising. Augusta admitted to Quinn in September that a broader vision now eluded her: ‘We are proud, all of us, of being “loyal” – but to an idea, a vision, perhaps a king if he by chance is an outward sign of it. And in this jumble and confusion in Ireland it is hard to keep the idea, the vision of the perfect, always before one.’ With the return of conviction politics and the allure of ideology in the country their plea for a non-political coming together could never now be popular and would have to be revised. The Literary Revival had been superseded as a cutting edge movement. They both knew this, but Augusta, not wanting to leave Ireland for any length of time, would feel the strain of the situation more acutely than the freer-moving Yeats. (Hill 289)

Lady Gregory did feel the effects of the Rising more than Yeats and it made her stronger. Hill writes:

Over the next two days Augusta developed the idea that the deaths of the young idealists could still have a revolutionary effect on government. She saw that they challenged those left behind to formulate a fuller manifesto than the narrow nationalism of the Sinn Féin. This was expressed in an unpublished essay “What was their Utopia?” “One would so gladly hear [their plans for the better governance of Ireland], for these men who proclaimed their promise to all the citizens of Ireland of ‘religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities;’ who promised ‘to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation equally,’ must certainly have shaped the some scheme in detail by which to work out these general principles.” The formulation of the plans was the next vital, and she put the onus of Eoin Mac Neill, the most important surviving leader, to “give full testimony”. Writing this she also powerfully evoked the poet-soldiers with this intense but unknowable vision (for more intense, she declared, than any more politician could hope to aspire to), what had been lost with their deaths. (Hill 288)

Her opinion on groups such as the Sinn Féin changed. “In the years after the rising, when the Sinn Féin was in the ascendant, Augusta could support it, not because she was suddenly converted to Griffith’s narrow conception of nationalism, but because she had faith that
Sinn Féin would produce the right political circumstances for change” (Hill 275). She was looking for someone, some group to take the struggle to the next level and succeed in establishing a free Ireland. “Augusta met Sinn Féin’s political challenge more than half way. She valued its idealistic element, and, aware of its popularity, welcomed its elected members’ responsibility to the electorate” (Hill 308). She was becoming a Republican and supported Éamon de Valera. But she was also greatly concerned by the violence. She wrote a series of anonymous articles that were published in The Nation. These articles, published between October 1920 and January 1921, outlined for The Nation’s English audience the atrocities being committed by the Black and Tans (Innes 160). “It was an exceptionally brave act, for the Black and Tans repeatedly rifled through letters in Gort post office and she was, if discovered, clearly a target” (Hill 316). While she removed names and distinguishing details, it was widely known that she was the author. Lady Gregory surmised that these articles, which so clearly illuminate the abuse by the British forces and affirmed her support of the Irish, protected her daughter-in-law Margaret and possibly herself (Kohfeldt 269). Margaret and many of her English friends were returning from a tennis party in May 1921 when their car was ambushed (Kohfeldt 268). Margaret was the sole survivor, and she was sent a message the next day saying that she was saved because she was a Gregory (Kohfeldt 269).

In June 1921, a truce was declared and the fighting ceased. It was then that Lady Gregory made one of her strongest statement. “I wish to put myself on the side of the people, I wish to go to prison, I think even to execution (though I will not take a life)” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 269). When the treaty was signed in December 1921, Lady Gregory
was hopeful, expressing a desire to have “peace in her time” (Innes 160). The treaty established Ireland as a dominion within the British Empire.

Augusta, for all her support for the Treaty, was transfixed by the republicans. She was unable to demonise de Valera whom she thought honest and idealistic. She was also critical of the Treaty, telling Yeats ‘I feel tilted towards the republican side by those clauses that must be swallowed – the oath that will be taken insincerely by all but two Trinity TDs, & that preposterous Governor-General who will be but a fly-paper for the vulgar.’ She would eventually characterise the alternatives, both aiming at a republic, as passion (republicans) versus patience (Free State). She saw clearly that it was means rather than ends that were at issue, something that became obscured as the two sides rapidly acquired conflicting political identities. (Hill 324)

All these quotes support the political transition Lady Gregory experienced throughout her life.

Unlike Cathleen’s other author, Yeats, Lady Gregory was strengthen by the events of 1916. Yeats lost his political idealism after the Easter Rising. Grote states, “Yeats considered the revolutionaries ‘innocent patriotic theorists…who had devoted themselves to an abstract idea of sacrifice, the cult of blood, the belief that the nation needed to be redeemed by martyrdom’” (199). This violence was an affront to his claimed pacifism and he denied responsibility for the Easter Rising (Grote 203). However, his response in the poem “Easter 1916” shows the inner turmoil he was experiencing. The changing political climate in Ireland and his marriage to Georgie Hyde Lees caused him to withdraw from public life, becoming less involved in national politics and the Abbey Theatre. He spent some time in the United States touring and then retreated to the West of Ireland (Grote 204). He did go on to serve as a senator in the Dáil from 1923 to 1928. Yet, his poems reflect the nostalgia he felt for the way things were.
VII. “Working for What We Believed Would Help Ireland”

There is of course the possibility that Lady Gregory’s performance in Cathleen Ni Houlihan was solely born out of her devotion to the Abbey Theatre. She may have simply wanted the show to continue and avoid cancellation. However, as noted in The Times review of her performance, Lady Gregory could have easily substituted another performance for Cathleen, but she chose instead to produce Cathleen. Regardless, her commitment to working for Ireland, for its independence and for its people was the center of her life. A strong work ethic was a defining characteristic of Lady Gregory. As her good friend John Quinn states, “These three phrases sum up Lady Gregory – work to be done, purpose to be served, objected to be gained” (qtd. in Hill 124).

Work was important to Lady Gregory and was the foundation for most of her involvement in the Irish Renaissance and the Abbey Theatre. This ideology was born out of religious dedication. Throughout her life, Lady Gregory was aware of her duty to people, to help them in any way. As Yeats writes in his Autobiographies, she “never lost her sense of feudal responsibility, not of duty as the world generally understood, but of burdens laid upon her by her station and her character” (qtd. in Hill 179). This is particularly strong in relationship to her commitment to Irish revival and to the national theatre she founded. “Through her work she was to exorcise whatever guilt was accrued by her Anglo-Irish connection” (Murray 41). Hill notes that this ethic was rare:

Her commitment to purposeful work was made against a background in which women of her class were not expected to work. It was an achievement to have to work; she relished her duty rather than resigned herself to it. She was aware, too, of the alternative: ‘everyday babbling.’ One gets the feeling that she felt that men might indulge in both work and babbling; for her and her female contemporaries it was either or. (180)
Thus in stepping in for Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, Lady Gregory may have simply been taking pleasure in her work and exhibiting her devotion to the Abbey Theatre and its audience. However, I believe her performance meant more.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Lady Gregory’s performance in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is unique regardless of the validity of these proposed meanings. However, I argue that many personal meanings can be read into this event. For Lady Gregory, the performance was a part of her continuing political transformation that began as a child and was developed during her marriage. Her nationalism was fueled by her involvement in the literary movement and the artists she met there. It was enhanced by her devotion to the land and to the people of Ireland and her idealistic belief in free unified nation.

Performing as Cathleen was also an opportunity for Lady Gregory to enact a different identity and make claims of authorship. She was able to claim some of the power related to the figure of Cathleen, which was both inherent in the actual character and in the persona of the character as developed by Maud Gonne. In addition, Lady Gregory was able to make claims of authorship and obtain some of the authority enjoyed by the play’s supposed sole author, W. B. Yeats.

Furthermore, the performance may have had a strong effect on the audience, as it highlighted the tensions present in Ireland during the outset of the Irish War of Independence. Lady Gregory’s position as a Protestant landlord cannot be ignored.
Despite her involvement in the literary revival and work for the Abbey, a people’s theatre, her background was part of her identity and present within her performance.

This discussion is, of course, not an exhaustive analysis of the possible meanings of this performance. It has only touched on the topic and a deeper discussion may reveal more angles. I have not addressed many of Lady Gregory’s writings; indeed, an examination of her plays may reveal further insights. I have been limited by access to materials, including Lady Gregory’s journals after 1902. While there is considerable literature about Lady Gregory, the majority of it is about her role as patron of men, such as Yeats, or as founder of the Abbey Theatre.

Discussion of this performance is important to current scholarship on Lady Gregory. Her performance in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* emphasizes her involvement in Irish politics which has often been overlooked. This analysis presents a complex woman, who despite her strong regal presence, constantly struggled with her identity and her place in Ireland. But ultimately she was beloved by the Irish people; her books and plays were well reviewed, her work with the Abbey was admired by many, and her legacy generously acknowledged upon her death. Her gravestone reads “She shall be remembered forever,” an alteration of the line “They shall be remembered forever” from *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. 
APPENDIX A
THE TEXT OF CATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN

Persons in the Play
PETER GILLANE
BRIDGET GILLANE, Peter's wife
MICHAEL GILLANE, his son, going to be married
PATRICK GILLANE, a lad of twelve, Michael's brother
DELLA CAHEL, engaged to Michael
THE POOR OLD WOMAN
NEIGHBOURS

Interior of a cottage close to Killala, in 1798. BRIDGET is standing at a table undoing a parcel. PETER is sitting at one side of the fire, PATRICK at the other.

PETER. What is the sound I hear?

PATRICK. I don't hear anything. [He listens.] I hear it now. It's like cheering. [He goes to the window and looks out.] I wonder what they are cheering about. I don't see anybody.

PETER. It might be a hurling.

PATRICK. There's no hurling to-day. It must be down in the town the cheering is.

BRIDGET. I suppose the boys must be having some sport of their own. Come over here, Peter, and look at Michael's wedding clothes.

PETER [shifts his chair to table]. Those are grand clothes, indeed.

BRIDGET. You hadn't clothes like that when you married me, and no coat to put on of a Sunday more than any other day.

PETER. That is true, indeed. We never thought a son of our own would be wearing a suit of that sort for his wedding, or have so good a place to bring a wife to.
PATRICK [who is still at the window]. There's an old woman coming down the road. I don't know is it here she is coming.

BRIDGET. It will be a neighbour coming to hear about Michael's wedding. Can you see who it is?

PATRICK. I think it is a stranger, but she's not coming to the house. She's turned into the gap that goes down where Maureen and his sons are shearing sheep. [He turns towards BRIDGET.] Do you remember what Winny of the Cross-Roads was saying the other night about the strange woman that goes through the country whatever time there's war or trouble coming?

BRIDGET. Don't be bothering us about Winny's talk, but go and open the door for your brother. I hear him coming up the path.

PETER. I hope he has brought Delia's fortune with him safe, for fear the people might go back on the bargain and I after making it. Trouble enough I had making it.

[PATRICK opens the door and MICHAEL comes in.]

BRIDGET. What kept you, Michael? We were looking out for you this long time.

MICHAEL. I went round by the priest's house to bid him be ready to marry us to-morrow.

BRIDGET. Did he say anything?

MICHAEL. He said it was a very nice match, and that he was never better pleased to marry any two in his parish than myself and Delia Cahel.

PETER. Have you got the fortune, Michael?

MICHAEL. Here it is.

[MICHAEL puts bag on table and goes over and leans against chimney-jamb. BRIDGET, who has been all this time examining the clothes, pulling the seams and trying the lining of the pockets, etc., puts the clothes on the dresser.]

PETER [getting up and taking the bag in his hand and turning out the money]. Yes, I made the bargain well for you, Michael. Old John Cahel would sooner have kept a share of this a while longer. 'Let me keep the half of it until the first boy is born,' says he. 'You will not,' says I. 'Whether there is or is not a boy, the whole hundred pounds must be in Michael's hands before he brings your daughter to the house.' The wife spoke to him then, and he gave in at the end.
BRIDGET. You seem well pleased to be handling the money, Peter.

PETER. Indeed, I wish I had had the luck to get a hundred pounds, or twenty pounds itself, with the wife I married.

BRIDGET. Well, if I didn't bring much I didn't get much. What had you the day I married you but a flock of hens and you feeding them, and a few lambs and you driving them to the market at Ballina? [She is vexed and bangs a jug on the dresser.] If I brought no fortune I worked it out in my bones, laying down the baby, Michael that is standing there now, on a stook of straw, while I dug the potatoes, and never asking big dresses or anything but to be working.

PETER. That is true, indeed. [He pats her arm.]

BRIDGET. Leave me alone now till I ready the house for the woman that is to come into it.

PETER. You are the best woman in Ireland, but money is good, too. [He begins handling the money again and sits down.] I never thought to see so much money within my four walls. We can do great things now we have it. We can take the ten acres of land we have the chance of since Jamsie Dempsey died, and stock it. We will go to the fair at Ballina to buy the stock. Did Delia ask any of the money for her own use, Michael?

MICHAEL. She did not, indeed. She did not seem to take much notice of it, or to look at it at all.

BRIDGET. That's no wonder. Why would she look at it when she had yourself to look at, a fine, strong young man? It is proud she must be to get you; a good steady boy that will make use of the money, and not be running through it or spending it on drink like another.

PETER. It's likely Michael himself was not thinking much of the fortune either, but of what sort the girl was to look at.

MICHAEL [coming over towards the table]. Well, you would like a nice comely girl to be beside you, and to go walking with you. The fortune only lasts for a while, but the woman will be there always.

PATRICK [turning round from the window]. They are cheering again down in the town. Maybe they are landing horses from Enniscrone. They do be cheering when the horses take the water well.

MICHAEL. There are no horses in it. Where would they be going and no fair at hand? Go down to the town, Patrick, and see what is going on.
PATRICK [opens the door to go out, but stops for a moment on the threshold]. Will Delia remember, do you think, to bring the greyhound pup she promised me when she would be coming to the house?

MICHAEL. She will surely.

[Patrick goes out, leaving the door open.]

PETER. It will be Patrick's turn next to be looking for a fortune, but he won't find it so easy to get it and he with no place of his own.

BRIDGET. I do be thinking sometimes, now things are going so well with us, and the Cahels such a good back to us in the district, and Delia's own uncle a priest, we might be put in the way of making Patrick a priest some day, and he so good at his books.

PETER. Time enough, time enough. You have always your head full of plans, Bridget.

BRIDGET. We will be well able to give him learning, and not to send him tramping the country like a poor scholar that lives on charity.

MICHAEL. They're not done cheering yet.

[He goes over to the door and stands there for a moment, putting up his hand to shade his eyes.]

BRIDGET. Do you see anything?

MICHAEL. I see an old woman coming up the path.

BRIDGET. Who is it, I wonder? It must be the strange woman Patrick saw a while ago.

MICHAEL. I don't think it's one of the neighbours anyway, but she has her cloak over her face.

BRIDGET. It might be some poor woman heard we were making ready for the wedding and came to look for her share.

PETER. I may as well put the money out of sight. There is no use leaving it out for every stranger to look at.

[He goes over to a large box in the corner, opens it and puts the bag in and fumbles at the lock.]

MICHAEL. There she is, father! [An OLD WOMAN passes the window slowly.]
She looks at Michael as she passes.] I'd sooner a stranger not to come to the house the night before my wedding.

Bridget. Open the door, Michael; don't keep the poor woman waiting.

[The Old Woman comes in. Michael stands aside to make way for her.]

Old Woman. God save all here!

Peter. God save you kindly!

Old Woman. You have good shelter here.

Peter. You are welcome to whatever shelter we have.

Bridget. Sit down there by the fire and welcome.

Old Woman [warming her hands]. There is a hard wind outside.

[Michael watches her curiously from the door. Peter comes over to the table.]

Peter. Have you travelled far to-day?

Old Woman. I have travelled far, very far; there are few have travelled so far as myself, and there's many a one that doesn't make me welcome. There was one that had strong sons I thought were friends of mine, but they were shearing their sheep, and they wouldn't listen to me.

Peter. It's a pity indeed for any person to have no place of their own.

Old Woman. That's true for you indeed, and it's long I'm on the roads since I first went wandering.

Bridget. It is a wonder you are not worn out with so much wandering.

Old Woman. Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet, but there is no quiet in my heart. When the people see me quiet, they think old age has come on me and that all the stir has gone out of me. But when the trouble is on me I must be talking to my friends.

Bridget. What was it put you wandering?

Old Woman. Too many strangers in the house.
BRIDGET. Indeed you look as if you'd had your share of trouble.

OLD WOMAN. I have had trouble indeed.

BRIDGET. What was it put the trouble on you?

OLD WOMAN. My land that was taken from me.

PETER. Was it much land they took from you?

OLD WOMAN. My four beautiful green fields.

PETER [aside to Bridget]. Do you think could she be the widow Casey that was put out of her holding at Kilglass a while ago?

BRIDGET. She is not. I saw the widow Casey one time at the market in Ballina, a stout fresh woman.

PETER [to Old Woman]. Did you hear a noise of cheering, and you coming up the hill?

OLD WOMAN. I thought I heard the noise I used to hear when my friends came to visit me. [She begins singing half to herself:]

I will go cry with the woman,
For yellow-haired Donough is dead,
With a hempen rope for a neckcloth,
And a white cloth on his head,-

MICHAEL [coming from the door]. What is it that you are singing, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. Singing I am about a man I knew one time, yellow-haired Donough that was hanged in Galway. [She goes on singing, much louder:]

I am come to cry with you, woman,
My hair is unwound and unbound;
I remember him ploughing his field,
Turning up the red side of the ground,
And building his barn on the hill
With the good mortared stone;
O! we'd have pulled down the gallows
Had it happened in Enniscrone!

MICHAEL. What was it brought him to his death?

OLD WOMAN. He died for love of me: many a man has died for love of me.
PETER [aside to Bridget]. Her trouble has put her wits astray.

MICHAEL. Is it long since that song was made? Is it long since he got his death?

OLD WOMAN. Not long, not long. But there were others that died for love of me a long time ago.

MICHAEL. Were they neighbours of your own, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. Come here beside me and I'll tell you about them. [Michael sits down beside her on the hearth.] There was a red man of the O'Donnells from the north, and a man of the O'Sullivans from the south, and there was one Brian that lost his life at Clontarf by the sea, and there were a great many in the west, some that died hundreds of years ago, and there are some that will die to-morrow.

MICHAEL. Is it in the west that men will die to-morrow?

OLD WOMAN. Come nearer' nearer to me.

BRIDGET. Is she right, do you think? Or is she a woman from beyond the world?

PETER. She doesn't know well what she's talking about, with the want and the trouble she has gone through.

BRIDGET. The poor thing, we should treat her well.

PETER. Give her a drink of milk and a bit of the oaten cake.

BRIDGET. Maybe we should give her something along with that, to bring her on her way. A few pence or a shilling itself, and we with so much money in the house.

PETER. Indeed I'd not begrudge it to her if we had it to spare, but if we go running through what we have, we'll soon have to break the hundred pounds, and that would be a pity.

BRIDGET. Shame on you, Peter. Give her the shilling and your blessing with it, or our own luck will go from us.

[PETER goes to the box and takes out a shilling.]

BRIDGET [to the OLD WOMAN]. Will you have a drink of milk, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. It is not food or drink that I want.
PETER [offering the shilling]. Here is something for you.

OLD WOMAN. This is not what I want. It is not silver I want.

PETER. What is it you would be asking for?

OLD WOMAN. If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all.

[PETER goes over to the table staring at the shilling in his hand in a bewildered way, and stands whispering to BRIDGET.]

MICHAEL. Have you no one to care you in your age, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. I have not. With all the lovers that brought me their love I never set out the bed for any.

MICHAEL. Are you lonely going the roads, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. I have my thoughts and I have my hopes.

MICHAEL. What hopes have you to hold to?

OLD WOMAN. The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house.

MICHAEL. What way will you do that, ma'am?

OLD WOMAN. I have good friends that will help me. They are gathering to help me now. I am not afraid. If they are put down to-day they will get the upper hand to-morrow. [She gets up.] I must be going to meet my friends. They are coming to help me and I must be there to welcome them. I must call the neighbours together to welcome them.

MICHAEL. I will go with you.

BRIDGET. It is not her friends you have to go and welcome, Michael; it is the girl coming into the house you have to welcome. You have plenty to do; it is food and drink you have to bring to the house. The woman that is coming home is not coming with empty hands; you would not have an empty house before her. [To the OLD WOMAN.] Maybe you don't know, ma'am, that my son is going to be married to-morrow.

OLD WOMAN. It is not a man going to his marriage that I look to for help.

PETER [to BRIDGET]. Who is she, do you think, at all?
BRIDGET. You did not tell us your name yet, ma'am.

OLD WOMAN. Some call me the Poor Old Woman, and there are some that call me Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.

PETER. I think I knew some one of that name, once. Who was it, I wonder? It must have been some one I knew when I was a boy. No, no; I remember, I heard it in a song.

OLD WOMAN [who is standing in the doorway]. They are wondering that there were songs made for me; there have been many songs made for me. I heard one on the wind this morning. [Sings.]

Do not make a great keening
When the graves have been dug to-morrow.
Do not call the white-scarfed riders
To the burying that shall be to-morrow.
Do not spread food to call strangers
To the wakes that shall be to-morrow;
Do not give money for prayers
For the dead that shall die to-morrow....

They will have no need of prayers, they will have no need of prayers.

MICHAEL. I do not know what that song means, but tell me something I can do for you.

PETER. Come over to me, Michael.

MICHAEL. Hush, father, listen to her.

OLD WOMAN. It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-checked now will be pale-checked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid. [She goes out; her voice is heard outside singing.]

They shall be remembered for ever,
They shall be alive for ever,
They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever.

BRIDGET [to PETER]. Look at him, Peter; he has the look of a man that has got the touch. [Raising her voice.] Look here, Michael, at the wedding clothes. Such grand clothes as these are! You have a right to fit them on now; it would be a pity to-morrow if they did
not fit. The boys would be laughing at you. Take them, Michael, and go into the room and fit them on. [She puts them on his arm.]

MICHAEL. What wedding are you talking of? What clothes will I be wearing to-morrow?

BRIDGET. These are the clothes you are going to wear when you marry Delia Cahel to-morrow.

MICHAEL. I had forgotten that. [He looks at the clothes and turns towards the inner room, but stops at the sound of cheering outside.]

PETER. There is the shouting come to our own door. What is it has happened?

[NEIGHBOURS come crowding in, PATRICK and DELIA with them.]

PATRICK. There are ships in the Bay; the French are landing at Killala!

[PETER takes his pipe from his mouth and his hat off, and stands up. The clothes slip from MICHAEL'S arm.]

DELIA. Michael! [He takes no notice.] Michael! [He turns towards her.] Why do you look at me like a stranger? [She drops his arm. BRIDGET goes over towards her.]

PATRICK. The boys are all hurrying down the hillside to join the French.

DELIA. Michael won't be going to join the French.

BRIDGET [to PETER]. Tell him not to go, Peter.

PETER. It's no use. He doesn't hear a word we're saying.

BRIDGET. Try and coax him over to the fire.

DELIA. Michael, Michael! You won't leave me! You won't join the French, and we going to be married!

[She puts her arms about him, he turns towards her as if about to yield.]

OLD WOMAN'S voice outside.
They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever.
[MICHAEL breaks away from DELIA, stands for a second at the door, then rushes out, following the OLD WOMAN'S voice. BRIDGET takes DELIA, who is crying silently, into her arms.]
PETER [to PATRICK, *laying a hand on his arm*. Did you see an old woman going down the path?

PATRICK. I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.
Figure 1 Lady Gregory, portrait appeared as frontispiece for *Our Irish Theatre* (Courtesy of Colin Smythe)
Figure 2. Scene from the original 1902 production of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, with Maud Gonne in title role

Figure 3. Lady Gregory as Cathleen, March 1919
(Courtesy of Colin Smythe)
Figure 4. William Butler Yeats, about the time he met Lady Gregory  
(Courtesy of The Bettmann Archive/BBC Hulton)

Figure 5. Studio photograph of Maud Gonne, c. 1889  
(Courtesy of National Library of Ireland)
Figure 6. Lady Gregory at Coole Park, c. 1915
(Courtesy of Colin Smythe)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler. "'Thinking of Her ... as ... Ireland': Yeats, Pearse, and Heaney." Textual Practice 4 (Spring 1990): 1-21.


Harris, Susan C. “Blow the Witches Out: Gender Construction and the Subversion of Nationalism in Yeats’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *On Baile’s Strand*.” *Modern Drama* 49.3 (Fall 1996): 475 – 489.


