The Warped One: Nationalist Adaptations of the Cuchulain Myth

Martha J. Lee

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The Warped One:  
Nationalist Adaptations of the Cuchulain Myth

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DEDICATION

This dissertation and degree belong as much or more to my family as to me. They sacrificed so much while I traveled and studied; they supported me, loved and believed in me, fed me, and made sure I had the time and energy to complete the work. My cousins Monk and Carolyn Phifer gave me a home as well as love and support, so that I could complete my course work in Columbia. To my husband Bob and my daughters, Erica and Kelsey, thank you for everything. Thank you for not making me feel guilty for all the time I had to spend away from you; thank you for allowing me to talk to you endlessly about Cuchulain and all things Irish; thank you for never giving up and for not letting me give up on my dreams. Bob, your belief in me makes me feel like I have wings. Kelsey, you always have my back and you never give up on me; you are my Rory, my best pal, and I adore you. Constance, thank you for letting me talk your ear off and for willingly offering revision advice and friendship. June, from the first day of Dr. Sanders’ Irish Literature class all the way up to the day I defend this dissertation, you have been by my side, cheering me on, holding me up, and challenging me to always reach higher and further and to never ever give up. You are so much more than a best friend, and I would not be here without you.
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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I trace the use of the mythic Irish hero Cuchulain by early Irish nationalists. From 1878 to 1939, Standish James O’Grady, Lady Augusta Gregory, and William Butler Yeats employed this figure for specific political and cultural agendas. Cuchulain makes a fitting symbol for the “poet warrior” stereotype that was purposely and incidentally cultivated during the cultural nationalist phase of the Irish Literary Revival, when writers were beginning to explore the Cuchulain myth to demonstrate cultural and linguistic ideals. Nationalists found in Cuchulain a symbol that could tie the cultural to the political and the political to the martial. O’Grady’s motive for writing about the hero was to demonstrate cultural appreciation, but Gregory saw political possibilities as she tactically employed Cuchulain as a challenge to British scholars who were dismissive of Irish cultural heritage. Yeats’s Cuchulain poems and plays span his entire career and mirror his own fluctuating feelings about the Irish Nationalist discourse.

This study will add to our understanding of the mythological images in Irish literature, culture, and politics, particularly that of Cuchulain. I examine the texts primarily through postcolonial and nationalist lenses to address the political and social agendas of the authors. As members of the Anglo-Irish class, my three primary authors had different and complicated ideas about Irish identity, which I connect to the postcolonial theory of Declan Kiberd, Gregory Castle, and David Lloyd, who explore the hybrid and complicated forms of Irish and Anglo-Irish identity. I also apply Joep Leerssen’s concepts in imagology, the study of national stereotypes and how they emerge.
in order to demonstrate the relation of nationalist agendas to the use of cultural figures. While not a definitive study of all accounts of the Cuchulain myth, this dissertation adds to a growing body of research. Concentrating solely on the use of mythic characters as cultural and political symbols, this study builds on the scholarship of Maria Tymoczko and Ann Dooley and others who examine the cultural and political motives inherent in translation.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Coming................................................................. The Coming of Cuculain

Cu................................................................. Cuculain: An Epic

CP ...................................................... History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical, vol. 1 (1881)

HI 1 ......................................................... History of Ireland, vol. 1: The Heroic Period (1878)

HI 2 ............................... History of Ireland, vol. 2: Cuculain and His Contemporaries (1880)
CHAPTER I:
INTRODUCTION

Cuchulain, with his bravery and generosity, seemed just the sort of figure needed to bring the modern nation to a consciousness of itself. A man who could vindicate honour while a torpor gripped his people was a useful icon as the century ended. (Kiberd, *Irish Classics* 407-08)

The first warp-spasm seized Cuchulain, and made him into a monstrous thing, hideous and shapeless, unheard of. (Kinsella 152)

Cuchulain’s famous warp-spasm—called alternatively spasm, hero-light, hero-halo, hero-flame, torque, champion’s light, and distortion—transforms him and creates an amorphous figure that could be molded according to the aims of the translator; after all, as poet Thomas Kinsella says, he is “shapeless, unheard of.” A number of writers during the Celtic Renaissance or Irish Literary Revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries set out to change that. They wanted to form him into the hero they wanted and, in the process, make him a suitable emblem of the land each envisioned. In this project, I trace some of the more influential early adaptations of the Cuchulain mythos to explore the varying ways Irish writers have made use of the character as a symbol of Irish identity, specifically in their cases for nationalist reasons.

Declan Kiberd opens his seminal work on postcolonial Irish literature, *Inventing Ireland*, by quoting an ethnic joke and turning it into a serious question: “If God invented whiskey to prevent the Irish from ruling the world, then who invented Ireland?” (1). He
goes on to argue that the Irish invented themselves, primarily through the movement of national independence, and that through the literature of Ireland, we can see how Irish society registers “an extraordinary capacity... to assimilate new elements through all its major phases” (1). He contends that the Irish are not concerned with any sort of racial purity, but rather celebrate that “identity is seldom straightforward and given, more often a matter of negotiation and exchange” (1). Cuchulain is the epitome of this notion of identity. He has shaped and been shaped for hundreds of years, reflecting and being reflected by the events of these different ages and by the individual authors and translators who have made him accessible to the world. In exploring the major adaptations of the colonial and postcolonial eras, beginning in 1878 with Standish O’Grady and ending in 1939 with Yeats’s final work, with some attention to the manuscript tradition itself which dates back to the sixth century, we can use Cuchulain as a lens to effectively explore the changing identity of Irish society and politics at the turn of the twentieth century.

This study will add to our understanding of the use of the mythological images prevalent in Irish literature, culture, and politics, particularly that of Cuchulain. There has been no definitive study of accounts of the Cuchulain mythos. Maria Tymoczko’s 1999 book, Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation, explores the way in which translation works as a tool of cultural resistance and reinforcement; however, her focus is largely philological and, though she frequently references the Táin Bó Cúailnge, it is merely one of many examples in her argument. In 2006, Ann Dooley published Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga “Táin Bó Cúailnge,” in which she focused on the entire body of tales rather than specific
characterizations. By focusing solely on the figure of Cuchulain during the nationalist period, this study illuminates the effectiveness of images for a cause. In Ireland, where language is valued, images work to reinforce words. The illustrations in *The Book of Kells* and the murals in Northern Ireland all attest to this concept over the centuries. Visual metaphors are crucial aspects when creating movements—national or otherwise. In order to gain momentum, in order to fix an agenda clearly in the hearts and minds of people, a clear image needs to be associated with it. Cuchulain became this avatar for the nationalist cause. This study will be valuable to future researchers studying the mythological tradition in Ireland, the value of personification, or the methods of formulating a successful cultural and political revolution. In addition, this study adds to the existing scholarship on the nationalist period in Ireland and fills an absence as a study of the image and lore and its use in nationalist contexts.

In this work, I read the figure and lore of Cuchulain in the context of Joep Leerssen’s theoretical frame of imagology—the study of national stereotypes, how they emerge, how they are determined by historical and ideological circumstances—and how the development of national identity may be tied through cultural, literary, and discursive conventions to the figure of Cuchulain. This project will explore the representations of the character Cuchulain by late nineteenth and early twentieth-century authors as an “imagotype,” as Leerssen defines it, a representation of national character. In addition, this dissertation draws on postcolonial studies, especially an understanding of how reactive or hybrid identities form in the development of nationalism and in the wake of
the collapse of the colonial enterprise.\(^1\) All three of the authors, O’Grady, Gregory, and Yeats, were conflicted as members of the Anglo-Irish class with different and complicated ideas of being Irish, ideas I will develop in this study.

In the late 19\(^{th}\) century, a European (particularly German) school of Celticists, including Kuno Meyer, Ernest Windisch, Henri d’Arbois de Jubainville, and Eduard Thurneysen, appropriated the tales as part of their projects to situate the Northern and Central Celtic tribes historically, archeologically and linguistically. The similarity between the descriptions in the Ulster Cycle and Caesar’s reports of the European Celts as well as the similarities in decorative style (often referred to as the La Tene style) led many of these scholars to believe the accounts in the Mythological cycle that the existing Irish had indeed originated as migrating Celts from Spain (aka the Sons of Mil). Though none of this was ever proven and is certainly beyond my purview as a primarily literary scholar, the parallels are intriguing.

Much of the agenda of these early Celticists was philological, which was very common in that time. The study of \textit{Beowulf} was almost exclusively philological until Tolkien’s seminal work in 1936. The desire to understand a language, and by extension, a culture drove them to translate the Irish tales into German and English in a pure form, they did not try to arrange them into a coherent narrative or smooth away redundancies and irrelevancies. That work was left to the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century translators and adaptors, most often in conjunction with the cultural rebirth that we refer

\(^1\) Irish literature is fairly well established in postcolonial studies, despite early resistance among some historian and scholars because of their race, proximity to England, and (often forced) participation in England’s imperial spread. See, for example, William Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, \textit{The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures}. New York: Routledge, 1989.
to as the Irish Literary Renaissance. The work of these European Celticists was especially beneficial for Gregory as she knew German and French better than Old Irish and was able to use these texts as part of her source material.

Ireland can boast the oldest vernacular literature in western Europe. Old Irish tales, including the Ulster cycle of which the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is the central epic, predate *Beowulf*, the *Song of Roland*, and *Nibelungenlied*. Frequent comparisons of the Irish cycles of tales with the classical literature of the Greeks and Romans establish their importance to scholars in evaluating other literary traditions. In the 1880s, Alfred Nutt began using the phrases “Irish Odyssey” and the “Irish Achilles” to describe the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and Cuchulain respectively, descriptions that scholars have continued to use, a usage that connects the Irish tradition to the seminal epics in literary history and further demonstrates their preeminent position in the literature of the Irish people and the epic traditions that dominate most European cultures.

Irish manuscripts that survive from the medieval era include four separate cycles of tales: the Mythological Cycle, the Ulster Cycle, the Fenian Cycle, and the Historical Cycle or Cycle of Kings. Although these categories are a twentieth-century convention, they make the fragmentary, disorganized, and repetitive manuscripts more easily referenced. The Mythological Cycle treats the prehistory of Ireland, including stories of the Firbolgs (aka Nemedians), Fomorians, Tuatha de Danann, and Milesians, the various ancient (and almost certainly mythological) beings who first settled the island and then fought over its dominion. The Ulster Cycle, of which the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is part,
focuses on the court of King Conchubar and his Red Branch warriors in Ulster around the
time of Christ. The Fenian Cycle deals with Finn Mac Cumaill and his fighting troop, the
Fianna, in approximately the third to fifth centuries A.D., and the Cycle of Kings relates
the lives and exploits of various Irish kings from the third century B.C. to the eighth
century A.D. Taken as a whole, the miscellaneous poetry and prose loosely arranged in
these cycles reveal Irish history, part mythology and part fact, from the fourth century
B.C. to the eighth century A.D. ³

The stories of Cuchulain that appear in the Ulster Cycle dominate this study. His
most famous exploits take place in the Táin Bó Cúailnge (Anglicized to the “Cattle Raid
of Cooley”), and that story has become the framework for most versions. There are
additional tales of his life, however, and various translators include more or less of these.
For ease of reference, I will use the term Táin to represent accounts of Cuchulain as a
whole.

The following is a brief summary of the sagas relevant to this study. Maeve,
Queen of Connaught, and her husband Ailill decide that they want the great Brown Bull
of Cúailnge for their own herd. The reasons for their desire vary depending upon the
version one reads, but the important part is that they must raid Ulster to acquire the bull.
Due to unfair treatment of a pregnant—but disguised—goddess Macha, the men of Ulster

³ This information is widely available, but several excellent discussions can be found in
Myles Dillon Irish Sagas (1970); J.P. Mallory Aspects of the Táin (1992); and William
Ridgeway “The Date of the First Shaping of the Cuchulainn Saga” (1905).
are afflicted with the pangs of childbirth when the kingdom is in need. The teenaged Cuchulain, who is immune to the curse for reasons never explained, is left to defend Ulster on his own from the entire might of the Irish army. Maeve has, through bribery and/or alliance, lured warriors from all of the remaining four provinces—Munster, Leinster, Meath, and of course, her own Connaught—to her cause. Cuchulain proceeds to stall the army via both guerilla tactics and, most famously, a series of single-combat challenges. Cuchulain is successful in holding off Maeve’s forces until the rest of the Ulstermen recover enough to fight. Again, this timeline varies between stories. A large battle ensues in which many are killed and an epic clash between Ulster’s Brown Bull and Connaught’s White Bull leaves both dead—emphasizing the futility of war.

During the course of the tales, we also learn much about Cuchulain’s past from the remscéla—a series of stories told to Maeve and Ailill by the ex-patriated former King of Ulster, Conchubar’s stepfather, Fergus. Among other things, we find out about his mysterious birth (his parentage is credited most often to Conchubar’s sister Dechtire or the sun god Lugh); his rocky beginnings at Conchubar’s court during which he defeats one hundred and fifty other boys; the auspicious day on which he first took up arms, killing three formidable enemies of the realm, and voluntarily condemning himself to a short life filled with battle and glory; his courtship of his wife Emer and the challenges he faces to win her from her father; his training at the famous warrior-woman Scathach’s school; and his domination of and relationship with her rival Aoife, which results in a son, Connla, whom he is destined to kill. Some stories typically not included in the Táin include those of his death; the most common version of which has him tricked by Maeve and the children of Calatin by magical means, and despite the love and loyalty of his
wife, his friends, and his mistress, he dies alone but defiant. If these stories sound somewhat disorganized and contradictory, it is because they are.

The oral tradition of the *Táin* makes it different from what we expect of a narrative today, and the order and variation in these tales make them difficult to translate and decipher. The *Táin* is not a linear or comprehensive account but rather it is made up of separate stories, different versions of similar events and characters memorized and related by bards, hence the fragmentary and often contradictory nature of the episodes. For example, Cuchulain kills Findabair, Maeve’s daughter, during his stand at the ford; yet, she dies of a shamed heart in another tale; she is still around at the end of the raid with her mother in yet another episode—all three of these accounts appear in one manuscript.

The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* itself exists in several manuscript versions. The oldest surviving text is in the *Lebor na hUidre (Book of the Dun Cow)*. This manuscript, transcribed by monks in the monastery of Clonmacnoise, dates to the early twelfth century. The language in it, however, leads historians to believe that it was handed down from even earlier oral retellings and is probably even a copy from another manuscript, which did not survive the ravages of time, circa sixth to eighth century. *The Book of the Dun Cow* gives the events in almost outline form, because it was probably intended only as a list of stories that a bard, or *fili*, should know and not the actual stories themselves. Each *fili* was to memorize the sketchy information in the book and then fill in the details with his or her own personal style to create a distinct tale for every listener and for every poet. Unfortunately, time has damaged the *Book of the Dun Cow* to the point that it is difficult to decipher. The *Book of Leinster*, compiled in the late twelfth century, also
contains parts of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, but this version tells the tale differently and in a newer dialect, and may be an attempt to bring together all of the different known versions in one place to prevent them from being lost forever. The tales appear again in the *Yellow Book of Lecan* compiled in the fourteenth century; although this version is fundamentally the same as the one in the *Book of the Dun Cow*, this manuscript is also quite damaged and fragmentary. Two sixteenth-century manuscripts, George Egerton and Eugene O’Curry, are also woefully incomplete.\(^4\)

Translators face many difficulties when working with these documents. The same order of monks that transcribed the *Book of Kells*, with its fantastically illuminated text and artwork, copied the four Cycles of Tales in a variety of ancient and now obsolete dialects. Consequently, translators of these ancient texts must sift through multiple versions of the same tales, interpreting the language itself within complex and confusing symbols on fragmented and damaged vellum. Although one of the scribes who copied the *Táin* in the *Book of Leinster* was quick to point out that he did not necessarily accept the pagan beliefs and lifestyles described in the stories, he nevertheless spent countless hours copying the stories as faithfully as possible. At the end of the *Táin*, he wrote the traditional bardic phrase in Irish: “A blessing on everyone who will memorize the Tain faithfully in this form, and not put any other form on it” (Best and O’Brien 399). After this phrase, he wrote in Latin, “I who have copied down this story, or more accurately fantasy, do not credit the details of this story, or fantasy. Some things in it are devilish lies, and some are poetical figments; some seem possible and others not; some are for the

\(^4\) See Cecile O’Rahilly’s Introduction to *Táin Bó Cúailnge Recension I* for an excellent discussion of each manuscript and the scribes who are assumed to have created them.
enjoyment of idiots” (Kinsella, *Dual Tradition* 8 fn). And yet, marginalia by scribes indicate that they did believe the stories they were transcribing and wished to clarify points of confusion for the readers. One scribe, for example, glossed the Smith’s hound in the story of how Cuchulain got his name by explaining that this hound could not be the same as the one found in the tale of Conganchness, which he treats as factual history, as Cuchulain would have been too old during that occasion (Best and O’Brien 400). This inconsistency in chronology and the impulse of later readers to “correct” or interpret the tales echoes down to the late nineteenth century when the Irish were widely divided on the topics of “native” culture, literature, and language, to contemporary times when we see those same conflicts, especially in the north of Ireland.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the sheer volume of versions, philological examinations are problematic, and academic arguments over which stories are the most authentic difficult to decide; however, most importantly the way is opened for a wide variety of interpretations and appropriations. The variety of versions in the Irish tales allows writers a great deal of flexibility in the way they structure their particular texts, while still remaining “faithful” to the so-called “original.” As Arthurian tales became the Matter of Britain and so open to interpretation and adaptation by individual authors, the tales of Cuchulain become the Matter of Ireland. He is fair game, so to speak, for use in literary and artistic representations of almost any kind.

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The *Táin Bó Cúailnge* itself can be considered a literary masterpiece; it offers hyperbolic characters and situations, such as courageous heroes, beautiful women, love triangles, magic and fantasy, gods and goddesses, battles and bedrooms. More unforgettable than anything else, perhaps, are the characters in the Ulster cycle. Cuchulain is brave and charismatic. He is Hercules, Achilles, and Odysseus rolled into one: attractive and glib of tongue, wise beyond his years, stronger and braver than any other warrior, and yet curiously vulnerable and naïve. Fergus, with his *joie de vivre* and insatiable appetite for ale feasts and women, is a worthy ancestor to Shakespeare’s Falstaff. Conchubar starts out as a young, charming, and wise king, but he discovers his Achilles’ heel in the beautiful but independent Deirdre, and he becomes a bitter, jealous old man who divides his kingdom and loses the love and support of both his stepfather and his son.

Even more fascinating than the warriors and kings, who are the ostensible heroes of these tales, are the women. As Thomas Kinsella states in the introduction to his 1969 translation, “Probably the greatest achievement of *The Táin* and the Ulster cycle is the series of women, some in full scale and some in miniature, on whose strong and diverse personalities the action continually turns; …it is certainly they, under all the violence, who remain most real in the memory” (xiv-xv). Deirdre, with her fierce pride, determined independence, and sorrowful end, has prompted countless retellings in poetry, prose, and drama. Maeve, the arrogant and powerful warrior queen, has lent her name to innumerable features of the landscape, and she still stands as the epitome of free and seductive womanhood. Scathach, through whose academy all the greatest fighters in
Ireland had to pass, and Aoife, her fierce friend and sometime opponent, are warriors who have been described as “Amazons,” but who show more depth of feeling, good and bad, than those man-haters of Greek mythology. Emer, Cuchulain’s wife and partner, is not only beautiful and skilled, but she also demonstrates the importance of being quick-witted and intelligent.

The characters in the Ulster cycle may or may not have been historical personages—historians are divided on this subject—but most certainly, they come alive in their tales and continue to live on in readers’ imaginations. In the words of Eleanor Hull, one of the early translators and scholars of the manuscript tradition:

There is, in most literatures, a meeting-place where the Mythological and the Historic stand in close conjunction, the one dying out as the other takes its place. Only in Ireland we never seem to reach this point; we can never anywhere say, “Here ends legend, here begins history.” In all Irish writing we find poetry and fact, dreams and realities, exact detail and wild imagination, linked closely hand in hand. This is the Gael as revealed in his literature. (Hull, *Poem-Book of the Gael* xxiv)

This meeting place of the “Mythological and Historic” may be ephemeral at the best of times and at others it may blur to complete invisibility, but it is still these stories—true or not—that may help reveal something of the nature of the people who first created them and those who continue to perpetuate them. True or not, historical or mythical, *The Táin* also functions as a geography lesson. Much as Greeks claimed one could learn manners, customs, and skills such as shipbuilding from *The Odyssey*, so could the Irish learn about the place names, their history and etymology by listening to a *fíli* recite *The Táin*. 
Dinnseanchas, or the lore of place-names, plays an integral part in Irish literary tradition and continues to do so in the poetry and translations of both Thomas Kinsella and Ciaran Carson among many others.

Regardless of the historical accuracy of the characters, settings, or events, the tales of the Ulster cycle demonstrate a way of life that has been at least partially substantiated through archeological evidence. Just as one can live in ancient Greece through Homer, so can one understand and appreciate ancient Ireland through the Irish epics, which were handed down orally for centuries. Whether it is true or not that The Táin offers a “window into the iron age,” as Kennith Jackson suggests is really irrelevant because regardless of the literal veracity of the episodes themselves, one can indeed glimpse the culture which produced such tales. Whenever a work is told, transcribed, translated, or otherwise relayed to an audience, some element of the interpreter necessarily comes through. Consequently, one can also see aspects of medieval Christian Ireland in these manuscripts that describe life in pagan “Celtic” Ireland. We can glimpse for a moment the way they lived, the way they loved, the way they fought, the way they thought. As Seamus Deane says, “History passes over into legend and becomes the more history” (Deane, Celtic Revivals 114). In this same vein, all of the adapters since have left their own stamp on the tales.

The adaptations examined in this study, however, attempt to stamp Cuchulain with ideals of a national identity, a national character. “Literary history,” writes Leerssen, “is thus a form of studying the nation’s true character as expressed in its cultural history,”

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6 The “Celtic” nature/ethnicity of the pre-Christian Irish people is still debated by many scholars, but since it is these very attributes that the nationalists, in particular, were trying to revive, I will use the term for the purposes of this study.
but he adds that “notions concerning the nation’s essence or character” are further determined “by ingrained and widely-current stereotypes and ethnic images” (Leerssen 19)—images including those deeply ingrained in the psyche of the Irish as colonists and the British as colonizers. If, as Leerssen argues, any figure of national character in a text is made up of the attitudes of the author as well as those of the receptor audience, then we have to consider Cuchulain, who has been invoked in nearly every era since recorded history in Ireland, in this context, a figure both used by the author to symbolize nation or nationalist ideas, but also read by a culture that would continue to shape the figure. In Inventing Ireland, Kiberd discusses the ways in which the Revivalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries invented a national identity that harked back to a Celtic past as well as forward to a hybrid present. Each retelling that I examine in this study—by O’Grady, Gregory, and Yeats—situates the hero straddling time as Kiberd suggests, connecting mythic time with that of the new audience, and given the historical periods of these retellings, he effectively reflects the evolving ideas of Romantic nationalists, militant nationalists, post-colonialists, and anti-Romantic realists, all Irish.

These translations all cross lines from literal translations from one language to another (Old Irish to English) into retellings, and as such should be examined not merely as translations but as revisions and adaptations. The intertextuality of the source text to the adaptations is a crucial element in the development of the character and perceptions of Cuchulain as symbol. Each retelling is an attempt to reimagine the nation, the translators envisioning an Ireland worthy of respect and political independence. Used thus to construct an image of the nation, the tales of Cuchulain suggest Benedict Anderson’s idea of the “imagined communities” of nationalism, which depend on media
and mass media over old privileged forms of language and meaning—especially as these translators take the old Irish tales and translate them in hopes of popular reading.

Anderson defines the “imagined community” as a socially-constructed group formation. He further defines a nation as “an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign…regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (6-7). The “nation” of Ireland had to be imagined as the people had existed under British rule for over 800 years with the previous governance a remote myth, so it is fitting that another myth personify the concept. Cuchulain is the ideal bridge between the privileged ruling Anglo-Irish class, to which each of these adaptors belonged, and the common masses—he becomes a sort of hyperlink to a “deep horizontal comradeship” despite the differences in class and origin.

In this dissertation, I will trace the use of Cuchulain as a literary representation during the early, mid, and late nationalist phases of Irish history. By examining key texts, from 1878 to 1939, I plan to show that different Irish authors have adapted this figure for cultural and political agendas. The character of Cuchulain, a hero beyond compare who can perform spectacular and bloody feats of war while composing a touching lament for his friend and wooing half the women in the land, makes a fitting symbol for the “poet warrior” stereotype that has been prevalent in Irish literature, art, and popular media for a century or more. The Celtic Renaissance in the late nineteenth century popularized the Cuchulain myth to demonstrate cultural and linguistic ideals, ideals that were appropriated by nationalists at the turn of the last century for plans more political and martial in scope. As I examine various representations of Cuchulain in their cultural and
political contexts, I will also devote some attention to representations of women and of violence, which may indicate both the perceived contemporaneity and ancient (pre-Christian) contexts, as well as the immediate historical contexts of the adaptors.

Kevin Whelan examines the ways that cultural nationalism paved the way for political independence. Whelan points out that, faced with the problem of creating what Friedrich Nietzsche called “a past from which we can spring,” three strategies were available to the early nationalists, strategies he calls the Plutarchan, the mythic, and the rememorative. He elaborates:

The first and simplest, was to generate a Plutarchan version of that history – an edifying story in which all that was not heroic or simple was erased, and in which the achievement of the state became the proper end of society. It could exist only in three forms: the emulatory (as with Pearse, with his recourse to Cu Chulainn and Tone) or the minatory (as with Yeats, who used Grattan, Burke, and Goldsmith in a heroically false genealogy to berate the squalor of contemporary Irish society). Cuchulain is central to this “edifying” and heroic concept but only if the harshness could be tamed; O’Grady does this, for example, by creating an Irishman who buys toys for his children and berates the loutish Vikings in Dublin. Gregory tames his warp-spasm and removes all traces of sex from the tales. Even Yeats, at least in The Green Helmet, endows the character with wisdom and patience that are usually quite lacking.
Whelan continues:

The second was mythic. Recognizing that Irish history was incoherent, inchoate and discontinuous, it sought to transcend its paralyzing contingency through myth, which imposed stability and order on the disheveled, ramshackle reality. In the hands of great masters like Joyce, this mythic version had enormous potential, but it could also cohabit with the Plutarchan model, spawning mundane, congealed versions, as in the Christian Brothers teaching schema. The third version of history was rememorative – seeking to write back in that which had been erased or submerged – as in Daniel Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland* (1925). (96)

As my underpinning, I consider the works of Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Declan Kiberd, all of whom discuss the creation or building of nations in various ways, the chapters on O’Grady and Gregory discuss the beginnings of the cultural nationalist movement in late nineteenth-century Ireland. Many historians argue that without the cultural revival, particularly in literature, a political revolution may have been either nonexistent or unsuccessful. As two of the figures influential to this movement, O’Grady and Gregory used Cuchulain as a means to bring the Irish people to an awareness of their own cultural and literary heritage.

Although European Celticists such as Henri d’Arbois de Jubainville and Ernst Windisch began to work with the Old Irish manuscripts in the mid-nineteenth century, primarily for philological reasons, it wasn’t until the 1870s that an Irishman would do so. Prolific Anglo-Irish writer and editor O’Grady chose to focus on the saga material,
particularly stories of Cuchulain, in a quest to find something in the Irish past worthy of emulation and respect. A member of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy by birth, O’Grady was protective of this political status and the monarchy, while simultaneously relating to Irish cultural history. He worked vigorously for landlord reform as he clearly saw how the greed and absenteeism of his peers affected the local tenants, but he also felt that these issues could be resolved politically within the current Parliamentary system and that to actively work for home rule would be treasonous and counter-productive—indeed, of course, was completely out of the question.

In his aim to “set up national, ‘racial’ archetypes suitable for emulation by all Irish people” (Hagan 4-5), O’Grady seemed to be obsessed with the Irish epic and bardic traditions, and most especially with the stories of Cuchulain. He spent nearly his entire adult life writing about Cuchulain, the first text appearing in 1878 and the last in 1920, but he used the same materials many times over, rearranging and editing. Much of O’Grady’s fixation and stylistic eccentricities have to do with his own divided aims for the literature and his political and personal ambivalence. O’Grady wanted to ‘father’ an Irish national literature, but his concept of what “that literature ought to be and what it ought to do for the country was not limited to the idea that it would be nice if Irish writers wrote on Irish subjects” (Hagan 4). He instead wanted to use the epic narratives to demonstrate what a proud and noble race he and his fellow Irishmen were descended from; he wanted not just a literary background but a “true” history (true according to him, not necessarily factual) of which they could be proud and that they could use to overcome the current lack of civilization and culture—in short, to become noble again. This could be O’Grady’s biggest failing: he tried to “teach” the Irish the way they ought to be and
behave rather than showing the outside world they were already worthy of respect as they were. This attitude makes that much clearer his own divided loyalties; on the one hand, he wishes to identify culturally with the Irish, but on the other, he maintains the imperial attitude toward the “backwards native” who must be taught and led.

The characters of the Ulster Cycle attracted Gregory’s imagination, as shown in her 1902 publication *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. This prose translation arranged a number of confusing, redundant, and illogical tales into chronological order from the birth of Cuchulain to his death. Consequently, the great *Táin Bó Cúailnge* itself is only one part of her book, albeit a major part, rather than the entire focus, just as it illustrates only a few of Cuchulain’s many exploits. Her choice of title and unifying factor is significant. She purposely chose to name the book after Cuchulain, the great warrior who battled all of the other armies of Ireland single-handedly to defend his beloved Ulster, rather than naming it after the cattle raid itself as so many other translators and adapters had done and continue to do. She shifts the focus from plot to people, a move which allows her to develop the well-rounded characters for which her book is acclaimed and to use them for her own personal and political ends.

Although not the first retelling of the tales from the Ulster Cycle, Gregory’s version quickly became significant as the first truly popular adaptation. By bringing

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7 *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* was reviewed in no fewer than thirteen magazines and journals from 1902 to 1904. Although no information could be located on the actual number of copies printed, the book is currently on its fifth edition (1970) with numerous reprints of each edition. The first and second editions were both printed in 1902, with third and fourth editions appearing in 1907 and 1911, respectively. *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore*, which is a 1986 anthology of Yeats’s *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* and Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, is not included in these figures.
worldwide recognition and admiration to the tales, she influenced the direction of early twentieth-century Irish literature. She proved to the world that Irish literature not only had worth and dignity, but also was a goldmine of material that could, and would, be explored by many writers of prose, poetry, and drama. Most importantly, perhaps, she established a historical and literary precedent that would become the norm for these tales until the latter half of the twentieth century. Her stories spawned many more versions, but as nearly all used hers as their basis, they did not add as much to the tradition as might otherwise be expected. The tradition stayed relatively constant until the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies commissioned literal and academic translations from Cecile O’Rahilly in the 1960s and 70s and Thomas Kinsella published his rendition in 1969 (based primarily on earlier versions of the legends than Gregory’s).

Perhaps the most successful aspect of her translation is her characterizations, particularly of the women. She was an astute judge of people and, as she would later prove in her deft handling of the Abbey Theatre, had an instinctive feel for an audience’s tastes. With this in mind, she tamed Cuchulain’s famed “warp-spasm” and made all of her characters more human, more likeable, and therefore easier for her audience to empathize with. As George Butler states, “Cuchulain of Muirthemne is a retelling of an old tale for a modern audience, an audience that cares more for the human than the superhuman or the monstrous. Lady Gregory’s Cuchulain is more human than any of his mythological counterparts and is precisely the sort of hero the Irish Renaissance needed” (Butler 46). Despite her sanitization of some of the barbaric elements of the stories and the characters, especially the women, or perhaps because of it, Cuchulain of Muirthemne became a widely read and greatly admired work, which brought her message, that Irish
literature is dignified and valuable, the extensive attention she, and many others, felt it deserved.

As two of the seminal figures in this period, O’Grady and Gregory paved the way for uses of Cuchulain as a tool in service to the cultural revival. As Maria Tymoczko asserts:

Texts such as those of O’Grady and Gregory, which are heavily oriented toward the receptor audience, often offer considerable evidence about translations as a form of representation and about the adaptation of literary texts and other cultural materials in the interface of cultures. Indeed, such translations are often the most illuminating about the process of constructing representations of Irish culture. (36)

These representations indeed proved critical in the cultural awakening happening during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, an awakening that would eventually lead to an entirely new Ireland—the Free State and eventually, the Republic.

As the cultural revival led the way to political independence, priorities in the new state began to shift. According to Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said, among others, a newly liberated colonial state often perpetuates, even intensifies, oppressive practices of the imperial regime. The result of this transition from colony to Free State

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can be demonstrated through the changing attitudes of Yeats’s works on Cuchulain. Throughout his long career, Yeats went from being a romantic nationalist to a complete cynic about the Irish Free State and, in the end, back to a more romantic (albeit bittersweet) idealist. His was a long and complicated relationship with Ireland. His Cuchulain plays, which span his career and life, aptly demonstrate his shifting attitudes.

Yeats’s use of Irish mythological material was in part a result of his affiliation with Gregory. Unable to read or speak any Irish of his own, he relied on her translations as the basis for most of his own renditions. Almost as obsessive as O’Grady, Yeats used Cuchulain as the primary focus of numerous works; his poems and plays about Cuchulain effectively span his career as the first was written in 1892 and the last mere weeks before his death in 1939. Yeats’s changing purposes in these works suggest his evolving attitudes about Irish politics and culture. Less concerned than some with faithful accuracy to the source materials, Yeats adapted the stories and characters to suit his particular artistic and political needs at the time. In 1892, his poem “The Death of Cuchulain” and, in 1904, On Baile’s Strand, the first of the five-play cycle, show Cuchulain murdering his only son as a direct result of his political loyalty to a demanding and out-of-touch monarch. In some ways the most complicated of these works, The Green Helmet (1910) makes a fool out of the “noble” champions of old with only Cuchulain (traditionally the most violent and reckless of the warriors) showing any sense of restraint. This play, written in a time of great political turmoil, perhaps called for common sense to prevail over military threats. In a clear parallel to the medieval notion of a king being legitimized by the natural world, At the Hawk’s Well demonstrates the need for a leader who is married to the land rather than a stranger, but it also points out that this comes at a great
price. The Only Jealousy of Emer similarly shows the need for great personal sacrifice to triumph over insurmountable odds (brought on by the monarchy); written in 1916 and 1917, these two plays bookend the Easter 1916 rebellion—an event about which Yeats was famously conflicted. After years of civil war and frustrating political service, Yeats wrote his last play, The Death of Cuchulain, weeks before his own death in 1939. A sad and disillusioned champion is sold out and beheaded by a blind man for mere pennies.

These plays aptly demonstrate Anderson’s theories about nationalism, as a nation is not only “imagined,” it is imagined as a community because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (7)

The fool in On Baile’s Strand may think he and the blind man are part of the comradeship that exists between Cuchulain, the king, the warriors and wives, but the blind man knows better. He is the fly in the ointment and, as such, comes around full circle from witnessing Cuchulain’s metaphorical death second-hand through the fool’s narration to being the agent of his physical death. In order to fully become real, the community must perceive itself to be egalitarian and fair, and the outliers like Cuchulain and the blind man must not be allowed to survive.

Yeats’s Cuchulain plays bring Ireland to life—literally—though blood sacrifice in At the Hawk’s Well, On Baile’s Strand, and The Death of Cuchulain. He brings together the Protestant and the Catholic, the peasant and the lord by leapfrogging back to a time
before such distinctions existed or mattered. The Blind Man and the Fool have more power than the king and the champion in *On Baile’s Strand* as the others’ fates have been decided for them, but the two peasants are free to go their own way. In many ways, all three authors harken back to a simpler time away from current conflicts, but O’Grady cannot help but bring religion into his works, anachronistic or not, because he could not imagine a world where that did not matter, but Yeats could and did.

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My readings of Yeats’s plays are informed, in part, by John Hutchinson’s theories of nationalism. Hutchinson claims cultural nationalist movements “perceive the nation as a spontaneous order and operates as a movement of communal self-help, throwing up informal agencies in order to ‘recreate’ the nation from the grass roots up” (496). This is complicated by the interworkings of state agencies and the integration of the people into education and bureaucracy, however, and since

the state is the locus of political, economic and cultural power in the modern world, any self-help movement is bound to be of limited effect. Cultural nationalism then, unable to unite the group, is increasingly forced to engage in a state-oriented politics in order to embed its vision in the social order. On three occasions Irish cultural nationalism culminated in a political revolt. (497)

It is the third, finally successful, revolt that the turn-of-the-century nationalists facilitated through an effective cultural revolution. The struggles between the aging king, his younger impetuous champion, and the strange young man on the shore in *On Baile’s Strand*, narrated as they were by the blind man and the fool (aka government
bureaucracies and its workers), seem an appropriate representation of these theories at work. Cultural nationalism may be the driving force behind the movement for independence, but ultimately, once it is created, government must intervene, not always successfully. Yeats’s own foray into government as a Senator for the Irish Free State became a driving force behind his cynicism toward Ireland in his later years.

In addition to Hutchinson, in what follows I am also mindful of Edward Said’s analysis of imperialism in relation to the economic and political. He identifies two distinct political movements during nationalist revivals:

1. period of nationalist anti-imperialism – a pronounced awareness of European and Western culture as imperialism, as a reflexive moment of consciousness that enabled the African, Caribbean, Irish, Latin American, or Asian citizen inching toward independence through decolonization to require a theoretical assertion of the end of Europe’s cultural claim to guide and/or instruct the non-European or nonmainland individual.

2. an era of liberationist anti-imperialist resistance that often followed it.

(qtd. in Deane et al, Nationalism 76)

The nationalism that preceded the second phase stood revealed both as insufficient and yet as an absolutely crucial first step. We can witness the likes of O’Grady, Gregory, and Yeats taking these steps through analysis of their various works featuring the character of Cuchulain.

Gellner argues against Said’s opinions of imperialism and the subsequent cultural negation of the colonized. He attributes delayed cultural development by third world
and/or (post)colonial areas to an evolutionary model and a ranking of cultures. “All cultures legitimated, but later ones more so” (3). By implication, then, ancient cultures of the colonies are not as important and/or forgotten through natural process. The reworkings of the Cuchulain myth argue against this interpretation as they explicitly bring the ancient to the modern in order to demonstrate the importance of gaining independence by establishing ethnic ties—a national culture—and thereby uniting the Irish against their oppressors.

Consider, in contrast, Kiberd’s understanding of culture in the postcolonial context. Drawing on Franz Fanon’s work on postcolonial thinking, he discusses nationalism in respect to the Literary Revival’s attempt to form a national culture that would both retrieve a lost history and celebrate liberation from colonialism. Kiberd’s *Inventing Ireland* takes as its theoretical basis the mutually self-constituting character of English colonialism and Irish nationalism. In his account of the reactionary phase in which native elites reproduced colonial structures, however, he sharply criticizes the failure of state nationalism to bring about the political and cultural transformations that decolonizing nationalist radicalism had envisioned. With respect to Cuchulain, Kiberd asserts that the political symbolism inherent in a lone Irishman defending his homeland against usurpers would not be lost on the generation of political and martial rebels at the turn of the last century, but as I hope to suggest in this study, the fascination with Cuchulain as a character and a symbol began before this particular nationalist movement and has continued since.
Luke Gibbons’s definition of the current state of nationalism in Ireland seems particularly apt. He asserts that “Ireland is a first-world country with a third-world memory” (“Celticism” n.p.). Might we imagine Cuchulain is a figure for that memory? A further, more comprehensive examination of the Cuchulain myth would consider the works of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century poets such as Thomas Kinsella and Ciaran Carson in order to compare their use of Cuchulain to the earlier translators, and I will briefly turn to them in my conclusion. The authors discussed herein, however, laid the groundwork for them to follow. The cultural nationalism of O’Grady, the cultural and political nationalism of Gregory, and the blurring of the national with the personal of Yeats made a “first-world” Ireland a possibility but also fed a “third-world memory” by perpetuating the blood sacrifice necessary to create the nation.

As David Greene asserts, “Once it [The Táin Bó Cúailnge] had been established as the national epic, it became the common property of saga-writers who remoulded it to the taste of their period” (98). Many authors since have taken from the Táin what each needed and fashioned the story and the characters according to his or her design; the results are very different texts with similar tales told in dissimilar styles and the same characters with completely different attitudes. Clearly, all of the translators and adapters discussed herein have their own political, cultural, and artistic goals. Standish O’Grady, as a curiously imperial cultural nationalist, sought to “teach” the Irish how to behave. Gregory tried to appeal to early twentieth-century Victorian audiences and inspire the Irish people to have pride in their heritage, especially that of the time before English subjugation, in order to subtly encourage revolutionary activities. Yeats’s long-running
use of Cuchulain reflects his own changing goals and beliefs and moves from explicitly political to more personal versions of the myth.

I titled this dissertation based, perhaps obviously, on Cuchulain’s famous “warp-spasm” and the fact that Gregory changed it to the tamer “hero-light,” which has its own beauty and power. But beyond that, I find that the metaphor for these, and all, adaptations of the myth particularly apt. All of the various translators/adopters of the myth warp Cuchulain and shape him into what they want or need him to be. These tales will continue to be appropriate for years to come as Cuchulain is so malleable; he is easily warped into a variety of symbols. He is the “shapeless” being that Kinsella describes, which also makes him easily molded into what the various authors need.

Literary translation is not usually meant to be an exact and literal equation of words and phrases. The translator must bring to the work his or her own experiences, biases, skills, and agendas. As Kenneth Rexroth states, “[Translation is] an act of sympathy on the highest level. The writer who can project himself into the exaltation of another learns more than the craft of words. He learns the stuff of poetry…. The imagination must evoke, not just a vanished detail of experience, but the fullness of another human being” (37). With this in mind, I will examine how these translators all use the figure of Cuchulain—some more successfully than others—to represent their beliefs about the political and cultural identity of “Ireland.” While the authors’ intent is important, as much as it can be ascertained, the real import of these adaptations and this study on them is to determine the audience for each product, how each was disseminated and received and what effect they had on the audiences at the times of creation—how successfully they used, or warped, Cuchulain to their purposes.
CHAPTER II

WHERE MYTH TOUCHES HISTORY:

STANDISH O’GRADY’S CUCHULAIN

Cuchulain captivated many of the primary figures during the Irish Literary Revival and the rebellions of 1916 and after. Padraic Pearse not only taught stories of Cuchulain to his students, but also he even drilled them in military maneuvers and styled them the “Boy Troop” after the young warriors-in-training of Conchubar’s court. The statue of Cuchulain installed in the General Post Office as a tribute to the sacrifices made at Easter 1916 is an obvious testimony to his symbolic importance to the political movement. The symbol would not have had this influence, however, were it not for the writers who revived stories of Cuchulain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, among whom Standish O’Grady was one of the first.

Leerssen’s work in imagology, the study of national stereotypes as they appear in literature, has greatly informed my reading of all of the source texts, but especially O’Grady’s. It seems as though O’Grady wants not to create a stereotype but to subvert the existing ones (caricatures of drunk Paddy, brawling Paddy, effeminate Paddy…) with one that could be emulated due to his physical and mental strength, interior moral code, and—hearkening back to the Greeks—the quality of Aristos. This image could continue

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9 Cuchulain himself was part of the Boy Troop as a child, but the primary tale in which they figure has them all being slaughtered by Maeve’s army while Cuchulain rests in an enchanted healing sleep during his defense of Ulster in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. 

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to be expanded and shaped to suit the times in which he is needed. Imagology is also concerned in the “images that Other (hetero-images) and ourselves (self-image or auto-image)” (Beller and Leerssen xv). This definition fits the way O’Grady uses the Vikings in Dublin in an apocryphal episode to demonstrate, through contrast, that the Irish were hospitable and generous. This, of course, also evokes the “Other” in a postcolonial sense. In this case, the Other that the British had invented needed to be replaced by a symbol of which to be proud. In its insistence on not creating but imprinting cultural stereotypes to be admired, Imagology is a useful framework for understanding the way in which O’Grady attempts to depict the Irish through his many iterations of Cuchulain.

Despite O’Grady’s importance in his attempts to reclaim and popularize Cuchulain as a national figure, from the outset his attempts would be compromised by his own confused political aims and allegiances. Many, most famously Yeats, have hailed O’Grady as the Father of the Irish Renaissance.10 Although this may be a slight exaggeration, O’Grady was one of the first to employ the myths and legends that would become a major source for many of the writers of the period, and Cuchulain,11 one of O’Grady’s most prevalent characters, would become the symbol for the nationalist revolt. Indeed, even though the quality, consistency, and readability of O’Grady’s work suggest that few may have actually experienced it firsthand, his influence on Revivalist literature, particularly with the myth of Cuchulain, is more substantive and complicated than one

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10 This may have been said tongue-in-cheek or ironically; critics seems to be split on this.
11 O’Grady spelled the name Cuculain (there are many alternate spellings), but for the sake of consistency, I will continue to refer to the character as Cuchulain.
might imagine. Others may not have emulated his style nor even appreciated his subject matter at first, but between his books, pamphlets, essays, and his work for the *All-Ireland Review*, he kept his favored topics in the public eye. As cultural nationalism movements began to grow in Ireland in the late nineteenth century, O’Grady was in the forefront. He disapproved of the ways other writers wished to adapt the texts, such as when George Moore and Æ dramatized some of the tales and even showed the inherent weakness every person possesses, even historical or mythological people. His insistence on the purity of ancient Irish literature, hence the “race” itself, and his political/cultural agenda of making art out of history was not always successful, but that did not keep him from trying. Unfortunately, history does not always lend itself to artistic endeavors; a fact that never slowed O’Grady’s efforts. Throughout this chapter, I examine O’Grady’s confused objectives and the way that his obfuscation led to similarly chaotic methods and genres for his works on Cuchulain. In addition, I hope to show that despite the peculiarities of his work, he was ultimately an important pioneer in the use of Cuchulain as a symbol for the cultural revival in Ireland.

Confused Aims

To understand O’Grady’s ideas and ideals, one must see him in the context of his time and his contemporaries. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a huge increase in the quantity and quality of “Irish” literature—literature that took, as its basis, artistic and cultural traditions of the Irish (and the debatable “Celtic” roots of the

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people.\textsuperscript{13} Although many Irish authors had been successful for years, they were considered “British” with little or no distinction from any other writers from Great Britain.\textsuperscript{14} Ireland had, however, a long and valued tradition of literature—oral and written and often in Irish (Gaelic)—that had been overlooked and was considered the literature of the “peasants,” and hence not important enough to garner attention in other countries.

The Irish Literary Revival aimed to counteract the British association by bringing attention to works by Irish authors about Ireland. O’Grady’s friendships with Yeats and Gregory, themselves two of the most influential figures of the Irish Literary Revival, also served to solidify his standing. In fact, O’Grady associated with most of the significant authors and thinkers of this movement including George Russell (Æ), J. M. Synge, George Moore, and his cousin Standish Hayes O’Grady. In addition, it is important to note that O’Grady greatly admired Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish social philosopher and essayist, whose most famous works include \textit{On Heroes, Hero-Worship}, and \textit{The Heroic in History} in which he claims that the critical role in history is that of the “Great Man” and that history itself is the biographies of great men. This influence is clear even in the titles O’Grady bestows on his “histories” and his focus on the character of Cuchulain.

Much of the success of O’Grady and the Irish Literary Revival hinged on the rich manuscript tradition from which they could draw. Regardless of the historical accuracies or inaccuracies of the legends, the propaganda and literary value of these works are

\textsuperscript{13} While evidence for the veracity of the genetic/ethnic origins of the people of Ireland is inconclusive, for the purposes of this important cultural renaissance, Celtic culture prevailed and, consequently, gave the Irish common foundation to rally around, one that predated the British colonization of the island.

\textsuperscript{14} Jonathan Swift, Sheridan LeFanu, Bram Stoker, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Maria Edgeworth, and Oliver Goldsmith, among others.
undeniable. As Mary Helen Thuente notes, “In calling upon the people to emulate such heroic models from Irish history, the nationalists transformed another motif from oral tradition, the resurrection of the sleeping warrior. However, they sought to awaken an entire nation” (56-57). Although the legends of a glorious past and a united stand against oppression may be distorted, they served the purpose of endorsing unity of political and cultural purpose and definitive action.

As part of this Irish Literary Revival movement (intentionally or not), O’Grady also drew his inspiration from the indigenous lore of Ireland. He was not the only author to use the same materials, characters, and plots for multiple works, as many Irish writers have used bardic literature and manuscript materials as fodder for a lifetime of work. One of the most fascinating things about the Cuchulain mythos is the number of authors who not only write about it/him but how many of them continue to do so over and over again. Yeats, for example, used Cuchulain as the main character, with plots more or less loosely based on actual stories from the tradition, in a series of five plays and two poems spanning his entire career. O’Grady seemed to be obsessed with the Irish epic and bardic traditions, especially with the stories of Cuchulain. Although O’Grady also wrote a number of works set in the Elizabethan period and about more historically verifiable Irish heroes such as O’Sullivan Beare, he returned to Cuchulain repeatedly during his lifetime.

O’Grady spent nearly his entire adult life writing about Cuchulain, the first text appearing in 1878 and the last in 1920, but he basically rehashes the same materials—even going so far as to write the exact same text over and over again in an old-fashioned version of copy and paste. The idea that one major figure represented the entire “history” of the period is also a bit disconcerting but fits O’Grady’s romantic notion of the
importance of “great men.” We can understand and appreciate the use of so-called historical characters as exemplary material rather than a simple catalogue of places and dates; however, O’Grady seems to feel that Cuchulain himself is the history of Ireland. Although in History of Ireland,: Critical and Philosophical, vol. 1 he dedicates the first and last portions to an almost perfunctory list, with slight elaboration, of the “pre-history” and later rulers,\(^\text{15}\) he still devotes about twenty percent of the text to Cuchulain and the Red Branch (despite the fact that the other two Histories already have treated primarily Cuchulain).\(^\text{16}\)

In his fascination with Cuchulain, O’Grady goes far to creating what Leerssen dubs an “imagotype,” a representation of the “national character as it is disseminated and created through literature – both through the beliefs and attitudes of the author(s) and those of the receptor audience. These images may or may not be based in fact, but the imagologist is unconcerned with proving or disproving the veracity of the image, merely exploring the existence and origins of it. (Beller 9)

O’Grady was certainly not concerned with the veracity of the tales, despite the label of “history,” and his Cuchulain was indeed a product of his own desire to create a symbol to be admired and emulated. His Victorian audience also imprints the character with their own brand of cautious heroism. We will see this play out perhaps even more strongly with Gregory’s audience, to whom she gave a great deal of thought.

\(^{15}\) The material is culled mainly from The Mythological Cycle and The Cycle of Kings.

\(^{16}\) O’Grady essentially wrote three “histories” of Ireland, but the sequence and even the titles were quite confusing. History of Ireland, vol. 1: The Heroic Period (1878), History of Ireland, vol. 2: Cuculain and His Contemporaries (1880), and History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical, vol. I (1881).
Cuchulain was certainly an ideal figure to appropriate for many reasons, not least of which is the nature of the character himself in most of the tales. As Kiberd has asserted: Cuchulain, “a man who could vindicate honour while a torpor gripped his people was a useful icon as the century ended” (Inventing, 407-08). The political symbolism inherent in a lone Irishman defending his homeland against usurpers was ideal for this generation of political and martial rebels. As O’Grady was most certainly not advocating any sort of military action, we might think that he would eschew the aggressive symbol of Cuchulain, but I believe that it was the “torpor” to which Kiberd refers that attracted him as much as, or perhaps more than, the military action. O’Grady wrote a great deal about “The Great Enchantment” that he felt had the Irish people in its grip and how this enchantment, or false sense of security, was the greatest contributor to Ireland’s problems—political, social, economic, and otherwise. In an essay titled “The Great Enchantment,” O’Grady claims:

Through suggestion or self-suggestion a man may be flung into such a condition that his senses will cease to discharge their normal functions; in a stone he will see a flashing diamond, and in a flashing diamond a stone; in discord he will hear music, and in the sweetest music a jarring discord. Nations, too, like individuals, may, as the punishment of their crimes and follies, find themselves flung into such an enchanted condition, and suffer that worst loss of all, the loss of reason….¹⁷

O’Grady wrote about and regarded The Great Enchantment in many ways. Ernest Boyd describes O’Grady and his fascination with it:

He contemplated the inevitable fall of the landlord class. He linked this to his studies of the heroic period: in time of crisis, a mental and spiritual debility fell over Ireland, the consequence, apparently, of some past guilt. And now the Irish gentry were “rotting from the land in the most dismal farce-tragedy of all time, without one brave deed, without one brave word.” (qtd. in O’Grady, Selected Essays 180)

O’Grady wrote much about this “Great Enchantment” in The All-Ireland Review; Gregory captured the essence of his concept by combining and synthesizing many of his articles in her work Ideas in Ireland, a collection of essays and ideas from Æ, D. P. Moran, George Moore, Douglas Hyde, O’Grady, and Yeats published in 1900, the object of which was to “show to those who look beyond politics and horses, in what direction thought is moving in Ireland” (Gregory, Ideals 10).

In an editorial note before his section of her book, Gregory explains that O’Grady uses The Great Enchantment as a metaphor for a specific political situation. In 1899, the Childers Commission reported that Ireland was being severely overtaxed, and in an attempt to explore and possibly rectify this situation, twenty-five committees were formed; two years later, not a single committee had even met.18 “The ‘Enchantment’ he attributes this paralysis to has not yet been broken or explained” (Gregory, Ideals 76). He felt that the entire land was suffering under a stupor of inaction and that “the political

18 The cause of this over taxation has, apparently, been lost to history and was never addressed.
understanding of Ireland to-day [was] under a spell, and its will paralysed” (qtd. in Gregory, *Ideals* 77). He blamed this phenomenon not only on outside forces but also on the Irish—aristocrat and peasant, Protestant and Catholic—and the “ancient Irish custom of destroying ourselves” (qtd. in Gregory, *Ideals* 82). In an eerie prophecy of what would become of the Irish economy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (particularly proven by the current financial crises and the collapse of the “Celtic Tiger”), he predicted that his torpor would “leave this land free for the exploitation of tourist tou
tists, and commercial syndicates formed for the promotion of sport in waste countries” (qtd. in Gregory, *Ideals* 81). His lifelong obsession with Cuchulain may have something to do with this concept as there is a clear parallel to the way that Macha’s curse rendered the men of Ulster paralyzed in pain while Conchubar’s kingdom was in danger, but this time, there may be no hero, no Cuchulain, to save the land.

Despite O’Grady’s belief in the Irish as a people “not only as intelligent and spirited as the average, but more intelligent than average” (*Selected Essays* 177) and his frequent practical suggestions for improvement, it was again his own jumble of styles that doomed him to be overlooked and even ridiculed by other figures, political and literary, during the Irish Literary Revival. He mingled stark journalistic style with gloomy predictions and often wildly metaphorical flights of fancy, such as his assertion that “heavy as lead, cold as death, the Great Enchantment obsesses the soul of the land, and not one but all classes lie supine under its sway—supine under the fanning of gigantic wings” (*Selected Essays* 81). These types of analogies might be appropriate for works of
fiction, poetry, or drama, but not for ostensibly serious newspapers such as the *Kilkenny Moderator* or the *All-Ireland Review*.\(^{19}\)

Much of O’Grady’s fixation and stylistic eccentricities have to do with his own divided aims for the literature and his political and personal ambivalence. Gregory famously referred to him as a Fenian Unionist. This apparent oxymoron sums him up perfectly. O’Grady was an Anglo-Irish landlord who was proud and protective of the monarchy and his position in the system. He also recognized, however, the selfish and greedy nature of many of his fellow landlords and argued vociferously for reform up to, during, and after the Land Wars and continuing throughout his life. He wrote political essays pointing out that the Act of Union was in fact detrimental to Ireland, yet in no way did he advocate for Home Rule nor, most certainly, independence. He believed that an Irish block in the Parliament could effect any necessary reforms, and that an entirely separate government would be redundant, unnecessary, and treasonous to the monarchy. In Austin Clarke’s estimation, this inability to support wholly one side or the other\(^{20}\) was detrimental to O’Grady’s success and influence, as he contends: “Had O’Grady taken the last political step of nationalism, he might have had more influence, but he combined his passionate devotion to Irish culture with what might be described as sentimental Unionism” (114). This will-he, won’t-he attitude led many to overlook him.\(^{21}\)

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19 His penchant for using this publication to serialize his own works and to answer personal correspondence, such as thanking miscellaneous people for cards and gifts or having personal discussions, also led to derision by some.

20 Though the Irish political dilemma was most certainly more than a two-sided argument, by this point in Irish history, the debates had begun to take on an “if you’re not with us, you’re against us” logic.

21 Some might argue that Augusta Gregory had a similar contradictory attitude toward British rule and Ireland, but her ideas evolved over a lifetime of study and thought. She began young married life a staunch unionist (though she loved the fanciful Irish tales),
O’Grady’s politics were complicated to say the least. For one thing, he (like many before and since) changed his views as he and the world around him changed, but more importantly, he seemed to grapple with an internal struggle in his inherent beliefs that the landlord class (aristocracy) were the rightful and most practical rulers, while the peasants were naturally selfish and needed to be ruled (though treated better). His attitudes recall the American Confederacy where there were many who recognized the evils of slavery (and even freed their own slaves) but still genuinely felt the paternalistic need to “take care of their people.” Not unlike other slave-holders either in the comparisons between the “happy, well-treated” slaves and the miserable urban poor, O’Grady compared the paternalistic (if misguided) Irish landlords unfavorably to their counterparts in the city. As Patrick Maume interprets it, “Even if the worst charges against landlords were true, they paled beside urban poverty—-for which, he maintained, employers, not landlords, were responsible” (Maume 18). Although O’Grady seemed genuine in his intentions to reform his own class, his condescending attitude toward the lower and middle classes was insulting and prevented him from truly supporting any sort of political independence for Ireland.

Though he continually championed the landlord class, he also recognized their own complicity in the impoverished state of the land and the precarious position of the leasehold farmers. He disagreed, however, with many on how these problems should be addressed. He did not see any hypocrisy in having an aristocratic landlord class as long as

began to lean toward Home Rule while supporting independence for Egypt, and finished her life an affirmed nationalist.
they took their responsibilities to their tenants more seriously. He firmly believed that they would be better for Ireland than urbanite businessmen:

O’Grady held up the military ethos\textsuperscript{22} as an alternative to commercialism. He presented unemployment as the great indictment of capitalism, and called for a vital nucleus of Irish aristocrats to redeem themselves by imitating the martial leadership of their ancestors; not now in battle but in organizing productive work for laborers whose employment would produce neo-feudal solidarity with their masters. (Maume 21)

Though this type of moral and political conflict was certainly not unique to O’Grady, it seemed to result in a similar confusion in his literature.

O’Grady felt most strongly, perhaps, that the history of the Irish indicated a proud and noble race with an ancient heroic ideal, yet he could not seem to make up his mind exactly what race that was—Aryan, Basque or Celt. He contended that the Irish stories that came down through ancient manuscripts and the bardic tradition argued most strenuously for a pure literature, one whose historical veracity (as he interprets this term) and natural quality equaled the highest form of art, and yet he seemed to emulate the poets whose forced or unnatural meter and rhyme he denigrated.\textsuperscript{23} Again, his confusion of aim is reflected in his writing; on one hand, he admired the old Irish writings, but on the other, would criticize them repeatedly, especially with respect to form.

\textsuperscript{22} As a lifestyle of camaraderie and cooperation not advocation of military action against the crown.

\textsuperscript{23} As Castle puts it, “[O’Grady] wanted to use imaginative means to tell historical truth of the sort that was lively, speculative, to some degree fabricated, but \textit{true} to the uniquely Irish spirit of the age being narrated” (\textit{Ciculain}, Introduction, emphasis his, 8)
In essays like the “The Trammels of Poetic Expression,” O’Grady attacks meter and rhyme as artificial and imposed only by custom. He praises Whitman’s freedom from rhyme and meter and asserts that even Plato felt the need to express himself clearly rather than in poetic form:

It is plain that Plato was as great a poet as he was a philosopher. Yet even for his highest and most soaring flights of fancy and imagination he employed unmetrical language… Yet if metre is the natural expression of poetic thought, How [sic] happens it that as his mind rose to the lyric mood, as his thought soared heavenward, his language did not naturally and gradually assume the character of the thought, as the bird that soars or desires to soar beats its wings the faster? …Believing that metre is an artificial mode of speech, I can understand how Plato became a poet without writing in metrical language. (qtd. in Hagan 20)

In this same vein, he admired Hebrew writings because the messages of their “bards” were more clearly transmitted to the people for their lack of rhyme and meter. He also believed that the Romantics started out with the desire to teach moral lessons and hypothesized that this aim would eventually lead them to “break through the flimsy barriers which metre sets up between them [poets] and the hearts of men” (qtd. in Hagan 21).

This prediction of the future of literary form could be self-serving. O’Grady himself wrote very little poetry, beyond a few mediocre pieces that he published in the All-Ireland Review, and the sources from which he culled the saga material were
primarily prose. O’Grady was not above attempting to sway readership to his perspective, so it is entirely possible that his disparaging remarks, given his usual admiration of both Whitman and Alfred Lord Tennyson, of poetry as mediator of tradition could be an attempt to pave the way for his own non-poetic versions of “history.”

Literary critic T. S. Omond took O’Grady to task for his predictions of where literature would go next: “It is his [the critic’s] to say what poets have done, in what forms they have expressed their visions; but he steps beyond his province when he attempts to dictate what, therefore, the future poet shall do” (qtd. in Hagan 20). This condemnation strikes directly at the heart of O’Grady’s theories about history and art. He fully believed that the future course of literature could not only be predicted but even directed as he and Whitman attempted to do. Omond disagreed because “great movements grow themselves” (qtd. in Hagan 21). This fundamental difference between the romantic nationalism … and other cultural theorists, which Omond ascribed to, and the idea that these movements can (and should) be forced, à la O’Grady and Whitman, precipitated an ongoing war of words between O’Grady and Omond appearing in the Gentleman’s Magazine under the pseudonyms Thomas White and Arthur Clive, respectively (Boyd 3).

On one hand, O’Grady approved of Whitman’s artistic purpose (to spiritualize Democracy), yet he also criticized him for pursuing it too assiduously:

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24 Poetry was indeed present in much of the manuscript materials, but it was very complicated and rigid in rhythm, metre, and structure. Kinsella attempts to replicate this in his 1969 publication.
This detraction from his genius, that he works after ideals and models in a conscious manner. His notions on the subject are singularly profound and just, but one is prejudiced slightly against poetry which may be the result of effort, and the striving after a preconceived ideal. Whitman sees that in everyday life one must be natural in order to please, that there is an indescribable charm and freshness about persons who are natural. And so with industry prepense he labours to be so and appear so. (qtd. in Hagan 28)

It is not the poetry he disapproves of here but rather Whitman’s inclination to convey his own philosophy through poetry and his “forced naturalness.” This is especially ironic given O’Grady’s own habit of using literature to convey his personal beliefs about politics, culture, and history and his attempts to force a literature he claimed was culturally natural and organic to become representative of the Irish people.

Despite his seeming contempt for poetic form, he writes passages such as these in his *Histories*:

> From Emain Macha, the strong bole of the Red Branch, run roots diverse, innumerable, ceasing not, but with every shore whence, at a moment, will start forth groves of Irian spears, even mutinous warriors who love the Red Branch. (HI 1, 18225)

> Then, in spite of shame, the moist tear arose too in the eyes of Lewy Mac Neesh [Ferdiad], and he answered brokenly, while with difficulty he suppressed the climbing grief: “O, my Queen, demand aught else that is

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25 See list of abbreviations for a full discussion of O’Grady’s titles.
thy power to ask, or in mine to grant, but against Cuculain, who has my heart’s love, demand not that I lift up my spear, sooner against myself would I draw the hard sword and spill my own life.” (HI 1, 189)

These are just two of many such passages as O’Grady, after the dry recitations in the first few chapters, waxes poetical in the stories of Cuchulain and other warriors.

Renee Fox contends that O’Grady’s methods are groundbreaking and exactly what was needed at that time to bring the past to life while demonstrating that history is a living entity with no end. She claims:

Cobbling together models of historical transmission, Victorian historiographers, romantic poets, and his fellow Irish historians, O’Grady develops an explicitly embodied resuscitative sensibility—an affective historical aesthetic in which the meaning of the past emerges in the historian’s ability to make it a felt, living entity in the present moment—that later, in the hands of Yeats, Lady Gregory, and others, came to underlie the Irish Literary Revival. O’Grady was neither the first nineteenth-century Irish writer to suggest that Irish history was unfinished nor the first to lionize poetry itself as the potential savior of Irish culture, but he was the first to suggest that Irish history’s open-endedness was itself a kind of sensory poetic and was thus rife with revitalizing potential.

(192-93)

While I agree with much of Fox’s assessment of O’Grady’s aims, I am not as sure as she that he was successful in these endeavors. His own inability to let the (his)stories out into the world without rewriting and rehashing the same material over and over suggests that
he was also insecure about the success of his attempts. I do rather admire her description of his works as “historical musing” (192) as expressive of the unsure nature of his ideas. “Musing” suggests a vagueness that describes his confused and redundant texts; it is as if he were speaking aloud to himself rather than composing a linear text that would be useful or logical for readers to follow. Cuchulain had become O’Grady’s ear worm, and every time he thought he had exorcised it by writing and publishing a book, the song would start playing again (and again).

In her discussion of O’Grady’s purpose, Fox claims that he interpreted O’Curry’s ambiguous description of Irish history as “yet unwritten” as an “opportunity to promote a mode of history writing that makes no attempt to be ‘an exact and scientific treatment of facts supplied by our native authorities’” (Fox 195). He claimed that his texts would represent “the only true and valuable method of presenting Irish history to the notice of the world” (qtd. in Fox 195). Characteristically, he insisted that he, and only he, could present the history he thought Ireland needed: “a history that will inspire the imagination,” and he was certain his historiography was “the only way to penetrate the ‘frozen zone of the Irish mind’” (Fox 195-96). I also contend that his imaginative adaptations of the saga material brought the stories to life and, in some ways, introduced them to the world, at least his world of Anglo-Irish parlors, but not to the people who perhaps most needed to believe in a strong Irish hero and a past of which to be proud. It would be left to Gregory and Yeats, as I discuss in subsequent chapters, to really introduce Cuchulain to the wider world as well as the Irish themselves.

In his histories, if the content or genre did not fit his image of what and who the characters and stories should reflect—primarily rollicking tales of bravery, honor, and
loyalty, depending on the characters and story at any given time—then O’Grady denied their very authenticity. In February 1900 in the *All-Ireland Review*, O’Grady likened the Irish dramatic movement to “the tourist movement—‘though on a different plane.’” He did not like to see places of solitude and beauty disturbed by tramping tourists, nor did he like to see the Irish romantic cycles exposed to the general public” (O’Grady qtd. in Sullivan 130). O’Grady quarreled with Yeats over whether the ancient legends should be dramatized. He felt that the stage would not properly reflect the epic quality and magnitude of the tales; consequently, he was quite upset in 1901 when Yeats and George Moore produced *Diarmuid and Grania* and insisted he would never see the play. He did, in fact, attend but “came away more vexed than ever” (Sullivan 131). He especially disagreed with the portrayal of Finn as a mean and jealous man, arguing that this must be “based on an untrue chapter of pretended Irish history, ‘a product of the decadence of heroic and romantic literature’” (qtd. in Sullivan 131). He later (1901) agreed to publish Æ’s heroic drama *Deirdre* in the *All-Ireland Review*; however, when the play was staged in 1902, O’Grady complained that the story should never have been dramatized, as it depicted Conchubar as immoral. As Daniel Sullivan explains, quoting from selections of the *All-Ireland Review*,

O’Grady felt a twinge of remorse that he had been “the first to direct the attention of our students to these things which are now brought to the level

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26 In this tale, King Conchubar claims Deirdre as his own at her birth and has her raised in secret as a prophecy claims she will be the most beautiful woman in the world but also the downfall of Ulster. When she accidentally encounters a young warrior, Naoise of Usnach, they fall in love and elope along with his two brothers. Conchubar swears vengeance and tricks them into returning. He has Naoise and his brothers murdered and gives Deirdre to his enemies, after which she kills herself.
of the streets.” A.E.’s eloquence and poetry, he went on to say, were poured out on dramatizing characters who were neither admirable nor heroic. The Red Branch cycle was a literature for the use of students, poets, or artists, not for the general public: “That literature ought not to be produced for popular consumption, brought down to the streets for the edification of the crowd. It comes to us out of the heart of a pagan and barbaric society, founded upon polygamy and polyandria.” …To attempt to stage the Red Branch cycle would be like attempting to stage *Paradise Lost*. In closing, he warned Yeats and A.E. that they could not succeed in properly dramatising the heroic cycles but that they might “succeed in degrading Irish ideals, and banishing the soul of the land.” (131)

Æ was angered by O’Grady’s attitude and publicly challenged his knowledge of the epic material. In a letter to Yeats, he claims:

He [O’Grady] needs to be pulled up and I have done it with a vengeance. I tell him frankly that he has forgotten all he ever knew about the Red Branch cycle.... I also inform him that he has lost the power to distinguish between what is heroic literature and what is not.... He confuses the big and gigantic with the heroic. I have claimed for drama that no subject is too great for treatment…. I tell him frankly he is not great enough to issue fiats to other literary men and accuse them of decadence in a muddle of confused and contradictory sentences. (qtd. in Sullivan 131)

It was O’Grady’s refusal to see the mythic characters as anything but admirable and his inability to settle on a style that were his greatest deficiencies, weaknesses that were
recognized by many of his fellow writers. He wanted badly to argue that the mythology
he wrote about was accurate and truthful, but at the same time, he wanted it to be
romantic and inspiring—and the two do not always mix. This confusion led to a dreadful
blend of styles in his first volume.

In the introduction to History of Ireland, vol. 1: The Heroic Period, he discusses
his methodology and defines the terms “history” and “archaeology” as he understood and
intended to apply them. Archaeology was the dry gathering of facts, dates, names, places,
etc. whereas history must have “sympathy, imagination and creativity.” “History,”
according to O’Grady, “is the flower of archaeology; it justifies, rewards and crowns the
obscure toil of those patient and single-minded excavators into the buried past” (iv). He
subsequently criticizes the seventeenth-century historian Geoffrey Keating27 for his
manner of simply cataloguing or listing the kings and heroes and relating only one or two
anecdotes about them. Eighteenth-century antiquarian O’Curry,28 on the other hand,
comes under fire for being too ambitious and trying to tell all the stories of all the heroes.

To O’Grady, as Fox points out,

Cuchulain represents not just an Irish heroic ideal but also an Irish literary
ideal, an aesthetic construct whose perpetual reproduction across the
annals of history reveals the energetic capacity of the Irish mind. In

27 Keating was a seventeenth-century Catholic priest whose work The History of Ireland
was primarily a collection of oral legends and myths and tended toward a Romantic view
that glorified the “Gaelic” aristocracy and the Catholic Stuart Dynasty.
28 O’Curry was an eighteenth-century antiquarian whose transcripts of ancient
manuscripts would form the basis of the Annals of the Four Masters among other works
of Irish “history.” His posthumous work On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient
Irish would long be the primary source for historical data on laws and other cultural
traditions of medieval Ireland.
O’Grady’s understanding of history, aesthetics trumps accuracy at every turn, and bardic literature itself—its multiplicity of versions, its tendency to idealize the heroic, its desire to “inflame” the mind as much as to inform it—provides historical insight into the “enormous fecundity and force of the imagination of a people” (O’Grady HI 1:vii; p. 44) who had the capacity to produce and take pleasure in such representations. (200-01)

O’Grady’s romantic and ambitious view of history, especially the history(es) of Cuchulain definitely “inflamed” his mind, but his efforts were not always as successful as he would like, perhaps in part because of his habit of writing in a very dry matter of fact tone. It proved hard to ignite imaginations with his own lists and attempts at fanciful tangents.

O’Grady seems to walk a tightrope between the Keating’s and O’Curry’s approaches—using the first twenty-three chapters of History of Ireland, vol. 1: The Heroic Period to give a dry, factual catalogue of the ancient gods and kings, the alleged origin tales of the modern Irish. He then spends the balance of the book, fully two-thirds of the pages, relating stories of Cuchulain. He gets us through Cuchulain’s boyhood and training in arms to the end of the Táin Bó Cúailnge. The mixture in one volume of the dry historical style with the romantic saga style does not work; one is confused as to whether one is reading a history text or a historical romance. O’Grady believed “this” should be the method of writing the history of Ireland, but which of the two, dry historical or romantic saga, is unclear.

In an earlier essay, “Irish Archeology” (1876), he declares that one should combine the “science of Niebuhr and the imagination of Livy.” Titus Livius (Livy’s
History of Rome) was considered the premier work of the Augustan era but has since come under criticism for being more legend than fact. Barthold Georg Niebuhr was a German historian who specialized in ancient Rome and is considered the father of modern scholarly historiography. His father, Carsten Niebuhr, was a mathematician, cartographer, and explorer, whose sketches of the inscriptions at Persepolis led to the deciphering of Cuneiform and the birth of Assyriology as a discipline. The combination of their work fascinated O’Grady, as he himself tended to combine fact and fantasy with no real distinction between them.

Many of O’Grady’s problems, besides his divided purpose, perhaps stemmed from his own inability to decide between fact and fiction. In 1876, in an essay called “St. Patrick,” he states his position:

To the critical spirit the first question is—is this true? To the artistic—is it beautiful? Does it satisfy the imagination? For this reason, those personages whom we see in the forefront of every history must be unreal. Even when they have had a real historical existence, their figures, as they have come down to us, are strangely magnified and altered.” (qtd. in Hagan 30-31)

This is typical of nineteenth-century “scientific history” which treated sources with skepticism and tried to find irreducible truths by analyzing sources (usually literary or narrative accounts) to distinguish earlier and later elements, deeming them more or less authentic and considering the author’s point of view and how it might affect his narration.

Niebuhr’s History of Rome was credited with unmasking Livy’s political purposes, so how could one combine both political purpose with genuine historical
narrative? O’Grady clearly felt this was possible, but, as Edward Hagan points out, “the marriage of the two was not happy” (15). For one thing, he always leaned toward the imaginative, no matter what his various claims to the contrary. Castle discusses this as a symptom of O’Grady’s admiration of Carlyle as a “model for the historian who wished to use aesthetic—that is to say, imaginative—means to get to the truth of the Irish past” (2).

Confused Methods and Genres

Just as confused political aims undermine O’Grady’s project, so do his confusing methodologies and genres. Realizing that his technique was not as effective as he would have liked, O’Grady published the pamphlet *Early Bardic Literature* the following year (1879). That essay would become the introduction for the *History of Ireland, vol. 2: Cuculain and his Contemporaries*. He used this space to apologize for the failure in Volume 1 and said he felt he had not made it clear enough that this material was “absolutely historic,” but rather had confused the reader by relating a narrative that was “more in the nature of legend and romance than of actual historical fact seen through an imaginative medium” (31-32). Promising that Volume 2 would remedy this situation, he once again failed to deliver. Volume 2 picks up pretty much where Volume 1 leaves off, relating more exploits of Cuchulain after the *Táin* up to his death. He rehashes some of the same material from Volume 1 (the Deirdre story, for example, is “revisited”) but this time includes copious footnotes (primarily citing Keating or O’Curry, the two authors whose styles he often criticized) in an attempt to authenticate his history.

In 1881, O’Grady published *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical, vol. 1*, once more trying to validate his methods. This text, he claimed, would treat the Irish in a critical rather than imaginative or constructive manner, often using direct quotes from
what he calls “literal translation supplied by competent scholars” (Preface). The majority of the critical and philosophical history repeats verbatim information from the beginning of Volume 1, the so-called archeological portion, but expands on a number of the stories, giving them more of a narrative form than he had before. This resulted in another unsuccessful marriage of history and romance.

For example, the following is the first sentence in both History of Ireland, vol. 1:

The Heroic Period and History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical, vol. 1:

Of the planetary epochs, the Eocene and the Meiocene have slowly receded into the past, their huge cycles having been accomplished, and the Pleistocene, with new tribes of animals, and amongst them one destined to the mastery of the rest, is advancing over North-Western Europe.

While the copy and paste practice is not this blatant beyond the first chapter of the two volumes, there are many other examples of similarities as well as verbatim repetition.

Critical and Philosophical does take the history of Ireland further than the previous two volumes, ending roughly 378 AD with the story of “Niall and the Nine Hostages.” Most of the latter chapters consist of lists of names, dates, and places followed by attempts to validate his sources, many of which are anecdotal or poetic. He asserts, for example, that Conchubar’s Red Branch must have existed by citing a poem by Dūvac mac Ua Lugair, but never establishes whether this was a real person, and if so, if he had simply used characters about whom he had heard as poetic fodder or if he were reciting history (CP 418-420).

29 Though he never names these scholars, most critics agree that his main source was O’Curry’s Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History. Cf. Castle, Fox, Hagan, Boyne, et al.
In a similar vein, the closing section of the volume devotes six more chapters to proving that his history is accurate and verifiable by citing such figures as St. Brigid and St. Columba, (themselves semi-mythical in that the only facts we have are names and occasionally places). After O’Grady attempted to verify his sources as accurate within each chapter throughout the book and spent a final six chapters on further ineffective defense, his attitude comes across as a bit of “the lady doth protest too much.” Of his energetic defense, he says this:

In this part I purpose to retrace the path by which we have just come, and to ascertain to what extent we have been traversing a region of authentic history, and to what extent mere cloud-land, the enchanted world of poetic invention, and religious or heroic myth. Even if the whole of the foregoing narrative should be found to belong to the world of mythology and unverifiable tradition, I think that, for reasons which I have already advanced, no philosophical student will regret the extent to which it has been treated by me. (CP 425)

I interpret this to mean: I have done my best to prove the veracity of this history to you throughout the entire volume, and I will now spend an additional forty pages trying to convince you, but if I am wrong, oh well, it’s been fun.

Recognizing again that his methods were not working, in 1882 O’Grady combined the “history” portions into one volume titled Cuchulain: An Epic. Abandoning the archaeological concept altogether, he narrates Cuchulain’s life in a more typical novel form. By deleting the word “history” from the title, he hoped to convey the story more clearly. By using the word “epic,” he attempts to tie the tales into the Greek tradition. In
O’Grady’s eyes, great civilizations were marked by the presence of epics, and in his works, he wanted to show the growth of a great Irish civilization. Though this text showed limited success, it was still not widely disseminated.

A decade later, O’Grady tried once again to narrate the story of Cuchulain in novel form, this time in a trilogy. He published *The Coming of Cuculain* in 1894. In this book, he details the childhood and early training of Cuchulain that he had already discussed in *History of Ireland, vol. 1: The Heroic Period* and in *Cuculain: An Epic*, but this time in much more detail, adding stories from his own imagination and expanding existing stories. For example, he gives Cuchulain much more emotion and portrays a sympathetic and lonely young boy who merely wants acceptance. *The Triumph of Cuculain or In the Gates of the North*, describing the events of Cuchulain’s middle career and primarily the Táin itself, came out in 1901. The final book did not appear until 1919, but by this time there were other, more readily accessible, and frankly, more readable versions, such as Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, in wide circulation. The final installment, *The Triumph and Passing of Cuculain*, backtracks and again relates much of Cuchulain’s martial exploits, including of course, the Táin, but then goes on to give the stories leading up to and including his death. All these books rehash much of the same material as in the history volumes and *Cuculain: An Epic*, expanding upon some of them, reusing primarily the same text with little enhancement, and adding a “new” story here and there.

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Some critics speculate, though O’Grady apparently never professed this aim himself, that he was trying to appeal to more of an adolescent male audience, attempting to do for Ireland what the stories of King Arthur and Robin Hood had done for England—not an uncommon aim (Seuss 33).

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Many of the new stories were purely from O’Grady’s imagination and often to make a social or political point. For example, he relates a tale of Laeg, Cuchulain’s charioteer, going to an Irish farmstead for food and rest while he is traveling to meet a badly injured Cuchulain. The chieftain is away, and the “overseer” rudely refuses hospitality to Laeg. Laeg, of course, takes what he needs by force and punishes the transgressor. This seems a clear allegory that landowners (i.e. Anglo-Irish) are generous but when not available, the (Irish) overseer shows rudeness and contempt. Ironically, though, it is up to the (also Irish) Laeg to punish him. This inability of the colonists to get along even in their own best interests is another imperial trope demonstrating that the paternal forces must control them for their own sakes, Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” if you will.

Similarly, Cuchulain and the charioteer visit Dublin (Athaclia) and are shocked when they are charged for food and drink; the barman swears an oath to Odin, clearly marking him as a Viking, an obvious anachronism. O’Grady felt much as Yeats did about the greed and obsession with money and commerce, for which he cannot blame the great Gaelic world he depicts nor his own Anglo-Irish ancestors, so he seems to be foisting it off onto the Viking invaders.

Unable to reconcile some of the stories with the message he wanted to convey, O’Grady simply changed them. This, of course, is not unusual; as I will discuss in the next chapter, Gregory makes her women more mild-mannered, tames Cuchulain’s warpspasm to a hero light shining from his forehead, and deletes a potentially scandalous pillow talk episode between Maeve and Ailill. O’Grady, however, was not only concerned with sexual or grotesque matters that might shock and alienate his Victorian
audience but wanted only to portray these heroes as he thought they ought to be. In the Deirdre and Naoise episode, for example, King Conchubar is absolved of all personal responsibility for the death of the Sons of Usnach—he is merely upholding the law; he does not have Deirdre raised in seclusion from a desire to possess the most beautiful woman in the world, but rather to spare her innocent life. When the young Cuchulain takes up arms for the first time, he goes in search of a fight, returning with three human heads for trophies, a herd of live deer, and a flock of swans. O’Grady omits the scene where the women of Emain Macha must come out naked to embarrass the young hero into a calmer state; rather than the usual raucous and ribald tale, his shows only three women appearing, and then only after all the men go inside and out of view, while the women stand in “shame” and cover their breasts with their hands. He does not specifically mention Cuchulain’s training with the warrior women Scathach or Aoife, but allows Emer, Cuchulain’s lawful wife, to bear his son Connlá as well as a completely fictional daughter. O’Grady’s Cuchulain is also, apparently, a good father as he brings his son a toy chariot from Dublin—a far cry from the filicide which typically ends their relationship. It is not Cuchulain’s mistress Eithne (who is relegated to the role of very young family friend) who tries to keep him from entering the imaginary battle that the children of Calatin conjure up to lure him into their murderous trap, but rather a trusted Druid and old childhood friend.

On the surface, the most surprising of all the changes is that of Cuchulain’s weapon. He is famous for having the magical spear made by Manannan the Sea God—the Gae Bulga that once thrown could not miss and would explode into thousands of barbs that could not be removed without cutting open the body of the victim. This is akin
to Excalibur, or a Jedi’s light saber, as every hero must have a weapon that only he can wield. Instead, O’Grady’s Cuchulain favored a simple sling\(^{31}\) and spear, because he felt the unfair advantage such a weapon represents would detract from Cuchulain’s heroic qualities. Ann Dooley claims the Gae Bulga produces “the greatest abasement of the male gendered heroic person” as it pierces the anus and rips through the body (127). Joseph Valente concurs and claims this “combination of lethal destruction and eroticized abjection a singularly instrument of battle or, more precisely, a single battlefield violation of the chivalric code” (“Lost” 220-21). I disagree with many critics that the Gae Bulga gives Cuchulain an unfair advantage, as a specialized weapon is often a key part of a hero’s journey.\(^{32}\) In his quest to create a chivalric and valorous hero, however, O’Grady must “downplay almost to the point of erasure Cuchulain’s signature device of mayhem” (Valente, “Lost” 221). In his mission to simultaneously humanize and deify Cuchulain, O’Grady took many such liberties.

In his essay “Imagination in History,” O’Grady agreed with the view of a Professor Loebell, who claimed: “Imagination was essential to the historical inquirer, not invention but the ability to restore ‘distinctness and coloring to dim and faded forms’” (qtd. in Stark 138). This implies that the “historian” has the uncanny ability to look into the past and know what is fabrication and what is not and how to color in a past about which there is little or no information. Clearly, Standish O’Grady conferred upon himself

\(^{31}\) His sling may be named the Crave Tawl though O’Grady only mentions this title briefly in HI 1 p. 153-161 and the nature of it is never explained.

\(^{32}\) While not a major part of my argument here, it is worth noting that other figures in the tales also have magical weapons, such as Ferdiad’s impenetrable skin of horn. Also, depending on the version of Cuchulain’s birth the translator uses, Cuchulain is a demi-god, and as such it is his right to have a weapon gifted to him by Manannan, God of the Sea.
this ability. Unfortunately, however, his conflicted attitudes about class, culture, and empire continually hampered his efforts.

**O’Grady’s Legacy**

Despite O’Grady’s issues with confused and confusing techniques in conveying his *Histories*, his efforts to reclaim Cuchulain and bring him to the forefront of Irish literature contributed greatly to the cause of Irish cultural nationalism. While his impact on major figures like Yeats and Gregory might be questionable, we should read his work in relation to the broader cultural context. In her autobiography *Seventy Years*, Gregory writes that Yeats was complaining about Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* and the way in which Vasari would interrupt his vivid tales of the artists’ lives with long lists of their accomplishments and creations. He tells her O’Grady had been complaining that Freeman had to consult his own *History of England* to answer a question. According to Yeats, O’Grady turned to him and said, “I thought it a dreadful thing that a man should write a book and not have it all down in his own head. So I went to Dublin and bought a bottle of ink and went to the country and wrote the *History of Ireland* without a book in the house, and I did not consult a single authority I had never to question a fact that wasn’t so interesting that it stuck in my head” (qtd. in Gregory *Seventy* 145-96). The fact that O’Grady wrote a history book without consulting outside sources is, of course, suspect, but even more telling is that he himself uses the exact style Yeats was complaining about in Vasari—a back and forth between fanciful tales and dusty lists.

In addition to the above, it is telling that his own cousin and friend, Gregory, does not list him as one of her sources when constructing *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. She lists
many others, including Windisch’s German translation, Kuno Meyer, O’Curry, and another cousin Standish Hayes O’Grady’s *Silva Gadelica* (*Seventy 392*). The fact that she, apparently, did not choose to cite O’Grady’s *Histories* would indicate that she did not find them compelling or perhaps, truthful, enough as a source herself even though they were so readily available. Regardless of their popularity or usefulness to other translators and writers, O’Grady’s books did continue to fan the tiny sparks of enthusiasm for the Irish mythologies that would flame up in the beginning of the twentieth century. While it is clear that Yeats and Gregory do not appreciate O’Grady’s style, the fact that he was most definitely in their circle and a frequent visitor to Gregory’s Coole Park, means he certainly would have brought Cuchulain to their minds long before either began to feature the character in their own works, proving once more, his value to the culture and Irish literature.

O’Grady, as a cultural nationalist, follows the paths later identified by Anderson, Kiberd and others about imagining or inventing the nation by way of literature, mythology, and culture, but his continued political loyalty to the union and paternalistic attitude toward the Catholic Irish (as opposed to the Anglo-Irish Protestant class to which he belonged) remained problematic and hampered both his literary goals and the quality of his writing. Perhaps Maume, summarizing and interpreting Michael McAteer’s view of O’Grady, says it best: “McAteer sees O’Grady as a dialectical writer trying to hold opposing elements in balance - historical accuracy and literary verve, masculine heroism and feminine art - only to find the supposed opposites collapsing into one another (“Review” 180). It is this collapse that prevents O’Grady from being even more
influential than he was. While he did have some influence on Yeats’s early career and in making the saga materials available and relevant to scholars and others, he was unable to reach any farther. While this may be true for his own literary ambitions, his work has lived on, and in many ways thrived, in the continued presence of Cuchulain both during the nationalist period and up to and including present day. It may also be helpful to turn once again to imagology, which first “aims to understand a discourse rather than a society” (xiii). To understand O’Grady’s discourse, his eccentric and erratic styles, and his insistence on Cuchulain as his primary character regardless of how many times he has told a tale, is a window into O’Grady and his audiences at that time. This illustrates the ways that discourse actually defines the people and the community as they develop historically.

Perhaps R. F. Foster explains it best in his new book Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923, when he calls O’Grady “the eccentric revivalist writer and prophet” and claims that

O’Grady’s political principles followed his own apocalyptic-unionist line, alternately abusing and cajoling the landlord classes, who—he believed—held the key to Ireland’s salvation. But his literary evocation of Carlylean world of ancient Irish heroes in books such as History of Ireland: The Heroic Period had entered the bloodstream of revivalism. (161)

33 The extent of O’Grady’s influence on Yeats is debated among scholars. Yeats himself seemed to recommend O’Grady’s histories “not wholeheartedly” (Pethica 140) but used them for the lack of better options in the 1880s and 1890s while bemoaning the fact that the “best of all” sources [The Táin Bó Cúailnge] lay “untranslated and unpublished on the shelves of the Royal Irish Academy” (qtd. in Pethica 140). The problem with that statement is that O’Grady did translate and publish The Táin Bó Cúailnge, but apparently his version was not good enough for Yeats.
CHAPTER III

LADY GREGORY’S MISSION:

“FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER”

I had done what I wanted; something for the dignity of Ireland. The reviews showed that the enemy could no longer scoff at our literature and its “want of idealism.” (Gregory, Seventy Years 400)

During approximately the same era that O’Grady was writing his works about Cuchulain, Lady Augusta Persse Gregory began a similar pursuit. Hers, however, was much more successful, both commercially and in regards to future influence on the cultural and literary revival. In 1899, the Commission of Intermediate Education undertook a study to improve secondary education in Ireland. When asked for his opinion, Dr. Atkinson, Professor of Romance Languages and Sanskrit at Trinity College, denounced all literary works in Irish as “intolerably low in tone,” with “nothing ideal in them,” and “very little imagination” (qtd. in Gregory, Seventy 391). The Chairman of the Commission, Dr. Mahaffy, though he had not himself read any of the literature, appropriated this attitude and claimed that all Irish literature was “either silly or indecent or religious” (qtd. in Gregory, Seventy 391). As Gregory so eloquently puts it, “This had been a throwing down of the glove” (Seventy 391).

Gregory, in her typical fashion, responded to the implicit challenge by determining to show the world and, of course, the scholars at Trinity College, that Irish literature was not only imaginative, and rife with high ideals, but also comparable, and even superior, to the Arthurian or Roland cycles, or any other Indo-European epics. In
October 1900, she wrote: “I have had an idea floating in my mind for some time that I might put together the Irish legends of Cuchulain into a sort of ‘Morte d’Arthur,’ choosing only the most beautiful or striking… I consulted Yeats, and after a short hesitation he thinks the idea very good, so I will try to carry it out, and am provided with work for the rest of my life” (*Seventy* 391-92). Although she finished *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* within a few years, she did make it her life’s work to translate and adapt the old tales and to use folklore and legends as the basis for many plays.

Besides demonstrating the worth of the Irish sagas, Gregory also “challenge[d] the hegemony then acquired by conservative males in the field of Celtic Studies” (Kiberd, *Classics* 400). By making these tales available to the masses and to other artists, she had, as Kiberd says, “opened up the debate” (*Classics* 400) and prevented these works from becoming the sole property of the privileged few scholars with knowledge of old Irish and linguistic specialists interested only in the grammatical and syntactical issues rather than in the literary and perhaps cultural value of the tales. Although one can argue that Eleanor Hull and Standish O’Grady had already begun this work, it was not until

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34 Some critics and historians claim that the Gaelic League, in response to Trinity College’s aspersions on Irish literature, invited Yeats to publish a translation of Irish poetry and epics, but that he refused due to time constraints. It was only after Yeats refused that Gregory volunteered and was, at first, not taken very seriously. Since her own journals make no mention of this version, and in all other areas, she is quick to give credit where it is due, most particularly to Yeats, I think this story may simply be part of the Yeats mythology. The fact that Yeats did not read or speak Irish is another factor to consider.


36 A contemporary of O’Grady and Gregory, Hull was also president of the Irish Literary Society in 1899. She published *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* in 1898 (with assistance from Standish Hayes O’Grady) and *The Boys’ Cuchulain* in 1904. Neither work was especially well received or widely read, and Hull tended to simply “gloss over or avoid most of the problematic elements in the text” (Tymoczko 72).
Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirtheimne* that these tales captured the imagination of the general populace, not only in Ireland but in England and America as well (Butler 36; Gregory, *Seventy* 400-29; Coxhead 61).

Gregory is one of the best-known and most significant women to emerge from the Irish Renaissance. Although her role in the movement is often relegated to “Yeats’s friend” and patron or “hostess to the influential,” her contributions go much deeper. Along with Yeats, Synge, Æ, and Moore, in the words of Ari Salant, she “aroused the consciousness necessary to create a nation” (x). Despite her numerous specific contributions to Irish literature as the author of over forty plays, various pamphlets, essays and articles, several volumes of letters and journal entries, and as the compiler and translator of Ireland’s epics, legends, and folklore, she is now primarily remembered as a co-founder of the Abbey Theatre and confidante of famous authors. She pioneered the use of peasant speech and syntax that Synge would use so effectively in his later works, and yet he is often credited with this innovation (Deane, *History* 151). While one very rarely reads any account of Gregory’s works or life without constant mention of Yeats, the reverse is not true.

In his *A Short History of Irish Literature*, Seamus Deane mentions Gregory only in connection with Yeats, Moore, Martyn, and others:

Lady Gregory thenceforth became the most important of Yeats’s mentors and collaborators. An Irish nationalist, a collector of folk-tales, a supporter of the movement to revive Irish, and eventually, a playwright (she wrote

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37 For a more detailed discussion of the prevalent misconceptions about Gregory’s life, work, and contributions to Irish literature in general, see Kopper 15-20.
forty plays) and managing director of the Abbey Theatre, she became yet another of Yeats’s heroic figures, although her practical aid and advice made her contribution a deal more specific than that of some of the other heroic shades to which Yeats paid obeisance. (146)

Although he credits her role with the Abbey Theatre and her dramatic works, no sentence about her is completed without reference to Yeats as well. Predictably, he does not give her any recognition when discussing Cathleen ní Houlihan, but rather misleadingly supposes that Yeats wrote it alone. In fact, Yeats conceived the original idea and wrote the old woman’s verse at the end, but Gregory composed the balance of the play. In his recent book The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922, Valente goes to some length explaining this and ultimately concludes that “Yeats probably wrote some of Cathleen’s declamatory set pieces, but the defining elements of the play—its dialogue, action, and political impetus—now seem to belong primarily to Lady Gregory” (Valente, _Myth_ 94).

Deane also gives her no acknowledgment when discussing Yeats’s use of Celtic legends and characters, but credits only O’Grady and Ferguson with influencing the poet’s use of folklore. Similarly, in Salant’s forward to the 1986 edition of A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore: Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry and Cuchulain of Muirthemne, he discusses Yeats much more than he does Gregory and, in fact, most of his discussion of her revolves around her work as it relates to Yeats’s. Even Kiberd, in his seminal work on the cultural and literary construct of Ireland, _Inventing Ireland_, titles his section on her “Lady Gregory and the Empire Boys” (emphasis mine). Despite the critical neglect of her work, Gregory still emerges as a formidable figure in
Irish cultural and political history and especially as her *Cuchulain of Muirtheimne* would inspire Yeats and others to use Irish myths and folktales in their own works for many years. More recent critics are starting to recognize her import to the Revival, not just as it relates to Yeats and her influence on (and with) him, but to the overall movement itself. Valente claims, “In the cultural register, Gregory helped to revivify and popularize the ancient Gaelic myth of sovereignty. Her recovery project not only instituted a signature Revivalist genre, the sovereignty play (for example, Gonne’s *Dawn*, Robinson’s *Patriots*, and especially Pearse’s *Singer*), but also lent blood sacrifice the dignity of a precolonial origin at once native and noble, aboriginal and aristocratic” (*Myth* 94). While the concept of blood sacrifice might be problematic, its accompanying concept of sovereignty would be crucial to the rise of cultural nationalism. In short, Gregory herself was incredibly influential in many ways.

Born into a successful Ascendancy family and marrying into another wealthy Anglo-Irish family, Gregory nevertheless spent most of her adult life supporting and encouraging Irish independence and intellectual freedom. She accomplished her exceptional method of rebellion not through violence or political rhetoric but through literature. Her translations of Gaelic stories, her compilations of the folktales of Irish peasants, her encouragement of others such as Yeats and Synge to use these same legends, myths, and stories as sources for their work, and her role in the creation of the Abbey Theatre all contributed greatly to the cause of Irish nationalism.

Perhaps her most long-lasting and important contribution was the worldwide attention and respect that she brought to the literature of ancient Ireland. Although her reasons were many and complex, her main goal in creating *Cuchulain of Muirtheimne* was
to show the world, especially the scholars of Trinity College, that Irish literature was worthy of respect and admiration for its dignity, creativity, and depth. This objective results in her work’s biggest, perhaps only, weakness according to today’s standards.

Although her translation of the central epic of Irish history was widely admired and emulated, critics often charged that she made it too sanitary: she took away Cuchulain’s warp spasm and replaced it with a “hero light,” and she took wild, fierce, and blood-thirsty women such as Deirdre and Maeve and turned them into meek and polite, certainly less aggressive or crude, colleens. Valente contends that she not only reduces the animalistic nature of Cuchulain’s famed spasm in order to make him more palatable to a Victorian audience (that is part of the reason), but by choosing the words “hero light,” she also lends him a new level of reverence. He states, “With an apparently straight rhetorical face, Gregory here renders Cuchulain’s defining experience, physical engrossment and distortion, as spiritual transcendence. Such a rarefied depiction, in turn, acts to sanctify the bloody brutish trade that Cuchulain plies and epitomizes, leaving him available for revolutionary emulation” (Myth 145). It is a heroic Cuchulain that will inspire audiences and revivalists alike, not a brutish and distorted one, which might have had the opposite effect and “proved” the bestial stereotype of the Irish to be accurate. Gregory’s characters come to life because of her vivid and exciting style, but her females are not as bold or aggressive as they are in some other versions, such as Kinsella’s 1969 translation. It was necessary for her objective, however, not for her personal views of women’s liberation, that she write them this way.
Gregory’s Early Activism

Although it is commonly thought that Gregory did not take an active role in literature or the nationalist cause until after the death of her husband, and that she lived a quiet, demure existence until this time, in actuality she was already unconventional and socially conscious as demonstrated respectively by her extra-marital affair with Sir Wilfred Blunt, to whom she wrote lovely sonnets, and her fierce campaign for Egyptian rights and independence (Tóibín 17-18). Sir William and Lady Augusta Gregory traveled extensively during the early years of their marriage, giving the hitherto shy and scholarly young woman polish, sophistication, and knowledge of other languages and cultures that would serve her well. They spent the winter of 1881 in Cairo, where she first met Sir Wilfred and Lady Ann Blunt. The Gregorys and the Blunts quickly became close friends and the two couples, but especially Augusta and Wilfred, actively supported the cause of Egyptian nationalism, a cause from which Sir William withdrew his support when it became obvious that military intervention by the British was imminent. Blunt sharply criticized Gregory for this action and a rift formed between the two men. Augusta, however, continued to support this movement despite her husband’s displeasure and soon took Sir Wilfred as a lover as well (Kohfeldt 61-65).

Gregory saw no hypocrisy in her attitudes toward the Egyptian and Irish peoples. During this time, 1881-1882, the Land Wars were at their peak in Ireland and tenants were being evicted every day. The use of force to subdue unruly Irish peasants and deny their right to protest unfair evictions did not seem to bother Gregory, who as an Anglo-Irish landlord herself, supported the landlord class in this controversy. After all, her income as well as that of her husband and her brother (who controlled the family home of
Roxborough) depended upon tenant rents and crops (Kohfeldt 79-80). Blunt was adamantly in favor of Home Rule, an attitude that never jeopardized his relationship with Augusta, which after their brief but intense affair, evolved into a long-lasting friendship. Blunt, however, recognized the hypocrisy in her attitude, as well as the reason for it, and wrote in his journal after the Home Rule bill’s 1885 defeat:

> It is curious that she [Gregory], who could see so clearly in Egypt, when it was a case between the Circassian Pashas and the Arab fellahin, should be blind now that the case is between English landlords and Irish tenants in Galway. But property blinds all eyes, and it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for an Irish landlord to enter the kingdom of home rule. (qtd. in Kohfeldt 79-80)

Despite her early insensitivity to these issues, Gregory would eventually become a beloved landlord who treated her tenants with honesty and respect. Her work in gathering folktales from the Irish peasantry may have contributed to her realization that the peasantry had valuable contributions to make, and that their living conditions were often unacceptable, which led in turn to her own considerable charitable works and her attempts to disseminate the folktales of the people. Her attitude toward them may have been paternalistic, even condescending in the typical imperialist manner, but that does not mean her desire to help them was not genuine.

> It was not until after her husband’s death, however, that Gregory truly began to recognize her own depth of passion for the Irish land and its people. Until that time, she continued to ascribe to the prevailing Anglo-Irish politics of her husband. She did manage to showcase her sparkling wit, which become such an integral part of her dramas,
during this controversial time; as tempers flared after the Home Rule defeat in 1885 and Blunt was traveling in Europe, she wrote to him, “I must condole with you on not being in Ireland just now, you would have such a good chance of imprisonment” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 80). She teased him again when he was imprisoned in 1887 for his part in a riot, and (prophetically perhaps) she condemned the current Irish leaders for their lack of creativity, and yet showed the beginnings of sympathy for the issues. She wrote to him in a letter, “You will have to write a poem to yourself in prison, none of the Irish leaders have got the gift.—Oh! I can jest about it in writing but the whole troublous time is very near my heart” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 82). Many years later, she would write *The Gaol Gate*, perhaps thinking of her own time waiting to learn the fate of a man she loved in an English prison.

Despite her lack of interest in the Irish problems during this time, Gregory, back in London with her husband, wrote an article on Arabi Bey, the influential and controversial Minister of War for the Egyptians, which was published in *The Times* on September 23, 1882 (Gregory, *Seventy* 46). At first, Sir William gave her permission to print it; he withdrew this when the British soundly defeated Arabi’s army. Rather than assert her independence, the still somewhat conservative young woman simply cried. Sir William changed his mind again, however, and allowed her to publish the article when it looked as though Arabi would be hanged (Gregory “Arabi”).

The article is interesting, not only as Gregory’s first published work, but also for her presentation of the situation. Rather than using prevailing, bombastic methods of political rhetoric, she presents herself as a powerless woman and uses descriptions of Arabi’s home life and his relationships with his wife and children to elicit sympathy for
him. This strategy is significant as she will use literature similarly to gain subtle support and sympathy during her campaign for Irish independence. As Kiberd says, “[T]he whole experience did a number of things. It launched her as writer, and it opened her mind to the powers of cultural nationalism, which would blossom years later in her work for Ireland” (Inventing 68). Her efforts in Egypt and London, siding with and writing articles in defense of Arabi and the Egyptian bid for liberty from the English, prepared her for her later mission in Ireland.

Although she would continue to play the role of dutiful upper-class wife and would not come into her independent and artistic bloom until after her husband’s death, the seeds of rebellion were planted early in Gregory. As one of sixteen children on the family estate of Roxborough, she was ignored by her parents and in self-defense fostered a love for all things Irish, an attitude that was encouraged by her nurse, Mary Sheridan, and that would last her entire life. As Mary Lou Kohfeldt states in her 1985 biography Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance, “The rebel literature with its intense love of Ireland, its stories of resistance and loyalty, its mourning for lost leaders, gave a warmth and a width and a passion to Augusta’s obscure but urgent feeling of neglect” (5). Even at this young age, Gregory showed her own brand of quiet defiance as she surreptitiously learned all she could of Irish history and folk stories, subjects that were forbidden at Roxborough by her father’s oppressive “despotism and lack of intellectualism” (Kopper 23).

While her twelve years of marriage were apparently a time of duty and decorum, her activities on behalf of the Egyptians and her less than discreet affair with Sir Wilfred prove that Gregory was never completely submissive; even her trademark mourning
attire, which she wore from her husband’s death in 1892 until her own in 1932, seemingly so demure and faithful to his memory, was in itself a type of rebellion. Before his death, Sir William had expressly forbidden her from wearing mourning at all, and instead she wore it for forty years! She used her mourning not only as a form of resistance but also as camouflage. As Kohfeldt states, “Her mourning clothes cast a darkness around her, causing people who did not know her to misjudge her…. If people misjudged her, it was partly her intention that they do so” (90). Kohfeldt goes on to point out that her role as perpetual widow allowed her a kind of freedom: “Being Sir William’s wife had protected—and limited—her. With his death, the limitations fell away; she kept the protection” (90-91). Despite her unassuming and conservative appearance, or perhaps because of it, she discovered that her own genius lay in her ability to work behind the scenes, in her skill in writing prose and drama, and in her talent for organizing and influencing people unobtrusively.

Gregory traveled back and forth between London and Ireland for a few years after her husband’s death trying to find her place in the world, looking, in Kohfeldt’s words, for “an appropriate outlet for her great energy and her great ambition” (99). It was during this time that her childhood love for Ireland began to be revived and she recognized the potential in the evolving political situation, potential for Ireland and the Irish people to redevelop their native culture that had been neglected for so long and for her to be a part of the nationalist and literary movements.

The death of Charles Stewart Parnell, the great political champion who was forced out of office in disgrace over a divorce scandal in October of 1891, triggered a revelation for Gregory. Although during his tenure, she had disliked and opposed Parnell,
she began to see possibilities, as did many others, for alternate ways to fight for Irish nationalism. Parnell’s fight within the existing political system was ultimately as unsuccessful as the many bloody rebellions of the past had been. Perhaps neither politics nor martial action was the answer, but rather the use of literature and intellectualism would awaken the Irish cultural identity and eventually help to win their freedom.

Gregory wrote to Blunt, “Parnell’s death and funeral impress the imagination. …we may see ‘a dead man win a fight’” (qtd. in Kohfeldt 87). Kohfeldt points out that Gregory’s feelings on this matter were hardly unique:

> She [Gregory] too was captivated by the appeal of ‘the lost leader,’ so prevalent in Irish mythology, who at the last pointed a way to a vaguer and more glorious nationalism. The immediate result of the violent passions aroused by the dispute over Parnell’s leadership was a widespread disgust with all politics. People began to search for an Irish national identity apart from politics and turned to Gaelic studies, folklore, poetry, and drama.

(87)

Gregory realized that her rejuvenated interest in Irish literature and language might have value beyond the aesthetic. She also believed that the best way to change the status quo was not through violence or political machinations, but through art. She later wrote:

> That [Egyptian involvement] was the end of my essay in politics, for though Ireland is always with me, and I first feared and then became reconciled to, and now hope to see an even greater independence than, Home Rule, my saying has been long, “I am not fighting for it, but preparing for it.” And that has been my purpose in my work establishing a
National Theatre, and for the revival of the language, and in making better known the heroic tales of Ireland. For whatever political inclination or energy was born with me may be that I saw too much of the inside, the tangled webs of diplomacy, the driving forces behind politicians. (qtd. in Kiberd, Inventing 93)

The Egyptians’ failure to gain their freedom and the part she played in that movement would actually benefit the Irish; she learned from her mistakes and turned her attention to more creative means with which to affect the world.

It was not until she met W. B. Yeats, Douglas Hyde, Horace Plunkett, and other leaders in late nineteenth-century Ireland that Gregory truly found her way. As she says in her autobiography, “Those were the men I was happy enough to meet after I had tried here and there in my lonely months to find work to do for my country. I did not find it in a moment” (Seventy 307). She tried a number of typically feminine ways to make a difference first, such as joining the “Irish Industries,” a society that tried to sell embroidery and needlework from the convents. She was unhappy with this attempt; in her own words: “I didn’t like the sales; I didn’t think they ‘brought dignity to Ireland’” (Seventy 307). Visits to Coole by Edward Martyn, Arthur Symons and Yeats, who had recently published Celtic Twilight, inspired Gregory to begin collecting the peasant stories of Galway, many of which she remembered from her childhood nurse, Mary Sheridan. Gregory tells us in her autobiography:

I found suggestion, inspiration, and the means of expression there. Is there not a tale of a King and his Court who went through the world looking for a wonder worker, a saint or healer, they believed to be living in some far
place; and it was when they had returned after years of the vain pursuit they found he had sat all the while hidden under the rags of a beggar they had seen daily sitting at the door. And I know that even as a child my heart would feel oppressed at some rare moments with emotion, as I saw the snipe rise sidelong from the rush marsh, sunset reflected in its pools, or the wild deer among the purple heather of the hills from which I looked on distant mountain and sea. That feeling came again and again in later years, when some olive-belted hill, or lovely southern plain that well satisfied the eye, filled the heart with a hunger, a pain of longing, I knew not for what. I know now it was the artist’s desire to capture, to express, the perfect. And although fulfillment has fallen far, far short of vision, I know how barren one side of my life would have been without that poetry of the soil, those words and dreams and cadences of the people that helped me to give some echoed expression to that dragging driving force. (Seventy 309)

Gregory not only developed ideas from the Irish landscape and peasantry, but also in some visceral way, seemed to receive her passion, her fire, and her inspiration from them. It took her years of traveling and dabbling in the politics of other nations to bring her back, like the fictional King and his Court, to her muse. Without this powerful connection with Ireland, she surely would not have committed her life to the—to her inseparable—causes of Irish nationalism and literature. It was this love for Ireland, its people, and their stories that would lead to her publication of *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. 
Gregory’s Purpose and Influence

She did not intend for her work to be a scholarly translation; in fact, she admits that she deleted redundancies, chose which versions of each tale to tell, and “added but a connecting sentence when necessary . . . condensed and transposed, and left out some passages that have changed their meaning.” She plainly states, “It was not the work of the scholars to do this, but it was mine” (Seventy 393). She was not attempting to produce a literal translation but a coherent narrative of the epics that had hitherto been, even in translation, a mass of contradictory and nonchronological stories left over from their bardic origins. Although some feel that Cuchulain of Muirthemne is a translation, many refer to it more accurately as an adaptation.

Gregory adapted and rearranged the tales from various works rather than translating strictly from the ancient manuscripts. Although she could not read the ancient manuscripts, most of the tales has been translated into modern Irish so she piec[ed] together various versions” (Gregory, Seventy 292). She worked with German and French translations completed by European Celticists and a variety of peasant folktales and stories handed down by word of mouth just as the original tales had been; she consulted the medieval manuscripts when necessary to clarify points or to help decide which versions of various stories to include (Gregory, Seventy 392-93). Gregory’s goal was not to produce a faithful literal or scholarly translation, but rather to arrange the tales to create a more logical narrative and to make them both accessible and attractive to the general reading public and thereby prove the literary and popular worth of the old Irish sagas. Hazard Adams states in his biography of Gregory:
Lady Gregory’s arrangement [of the stories in *Cuchulain*] has brought considerable order into the mass of her sources. She has also sharpened and clarified the traditional characters and, as Yeats remarked, given to the women of the stories a special attractiveness. (49)

Although Gregory’s version has been criticized, primarily for the sanitization of the cruder elements of the stories, even her critics usually agree that her organization of the tales and her characterizations, particularly of the women, have been instrumental in bringing old Irish literature a legitimacy and popularity that it had long been lacking.

When her work was first published in 1902, the response was immediate and adulatory. Yeats, in his extremely complimentary “Preface” to her work, states firmly, “I think this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time” (vii). He goes on to say that it is “the best book that has ever come out of Ireland” (emphasis added) because she tells, for the first time, the stories that encapsulate Ireland’s history, spirit, and people “perfectly” (vii). He specifically praises not only the tales themselves and the both universal and specifically Irish messages they convey, but also the language with which Gregory expresses the stories,38 the symbolic and epic nature of the work, the poetry threaded throughout, and the characters themselves, most particularly the women: “angry, amorous Maeve;… Findabair, her daughter, who dies of shame and of pity;… Deirdre who might be some mild, modern housewife but for her prophetic wisdom;… [and] proud

38 Gregory employs a unique linguistic style that she terms “Kiltartanese,” which, in the words of Edward Kopper, “is created by translating from Irish into English while keeping the syntax of the former” (32). Her lyrical style is similar to, but predates and influenced, J. M. Synge’s in his plays about the west of Ireland. Although a type of Hiberno-English, her dialect was more specific to Kiltartan, the area in County Galway where Coole Park is located.
Emer, Cuchulain’s fitting wife” (xvi). Although these women are not unique to Gregory’s translation, they are unique in the way that she depicts them, and despite much recent criticism over her interpretation, Yeats and many others were enchanted by Gregory’s women, such as Deirdre with her beautiful laments and Maeve with her daring aggression.

Many of their peers besides Yeats admired Gregory’s work and did not hesitate to praise it extensively: Synge called *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* his “daily bread” (qtd. in Gregory, *Seventy* 403); William Kirkpatrick Magee (aka John Eglinton) congratulated her on producing “what will no doubt be the ‘authorised version’ of the ‘Irish Old Testament’” (qtd. in Gregory, *Seventy* 403); George Russell (aka AÉ), disenchanted with O’Grady’s version, said that she “swept away [his] prejudices by a dream wind of beautiful pictures” (qtd. in Gregory, *Seventy* 403); Jack Yeats, Douglas Hyde and many others expressed similar sentiments. Not only writers and artists, but also scholars such as the renowned Celtic language professor Sir John Rhys from Jesus College and History scholar York Powell from Oxford acclaimed *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* as a beautiful and influential work. Americans such as Samuel Clemens and President Theodore Roosevelt wrote to Gregory personally to congratulate her on her excellent book. Even Maud Gonne, with whom she had an antagonistic relationship, said that the book was “a real joy to people like myself, who were unable to read the old Irish texts and records” (qtd. in Coxhead 62). According to Gregory herself, one of the most “charming compliments” (*Seventy* 402) came from Eoin MacNeill, President of the Gaelic League who, in later

39 Yeats’s Preface to *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* is worthy of reading for itself, not only for the praise of Gregory’s work (hyperbolic though it is) and Irish epics in general, but also for the beautiful phrasing he employs.
years, would be an organizer of the Easter Rising and Speaker of the An Dail. MacNeill called it “the truest representation of the Irish heroic saga. . . that I have ever seen in English” (qtd. in Gregory, Seventy 402).

Obviously, this fascinating book deeply affected many of the most influential people of the age.

Although the reviews were mostly positive, Cuchulain of Muirthemne did, and has since, come into criticism for its tendency to smooth away the coarser elements that are present in many of the old manuscripts as well as modern translations, most particularly Kinsella’s version. For the purposes of comparison, I will occasionally reference Thomas Kinsella’s 1969 translation as it adheres more closely to the bawdier and bloodier aspects of the tales.

Celtic scholar Kuno Meyer was particularly vocal in his criticism of Gregory’s choices to delete or, at least moderate, some of the earthier, bloodier, and sexier portions of the text (Kiberd, Classics 412). Although Gregory certainly lived and worked in a more prudish era than the current one, her reasons for sanitizing her version were much more complex and significant than simply a reflection of Victorian values. For one thing, she considered the aesthetics of the visual and the...

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40 MacNeill went on to say, “A few more books like it, and the Gaelic League will want to suppress you on a double indictment, to wit, depriving the Irish language of her sole right to express the innermost Irish mind, and secondly, investing the Anglo-Irish [Hiberno-English] language with a literary dignity it has never hitherto possessed” (qtd. in Gregory, Seventy 402). Although perhaps partially tongue in cheek, MacNeill’s comment points to the fact that Gregory was, in fact, legitimizing literature in Anglo-Irish, a hybrid language, not quite English and not quite Gaelic (which the Gaelic League was campaigning to bring back as the official language of Ireland) and yet something entirely, and appropriately, in between for people who spoke English but thought Irish, as the majority of the population did.

41 This project applies strictly to the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century versions of the Cuchulain myths and how the stories were used for nationalist causes. A fuller examination would necessarily include Kinsella’s as well as Ciaran Carson’s more recent versions, so I will address them in the conclusion as a way of moving forward.
beauty of the language. For example, when Kuno Meyer wished she had included a
description of “Etain’s naked body when King Eochaid first caught sight of her. But to do
that I should have had to give up her purple cloak with the drew of green with its clasps
and embroideries. One picture may be more beautiful than the other, I told him, but you
cannot have both together” (Seventy 292-93).

Most obvious was her avowed purpose in producing the book: to construct an
accessible, readable version of the old stories in a form which would be enjoyable and
inoffensive to the plain farmers and peasants to whom she dedicates her work. In the
Dedication to Cuchulain of Muirthemne, she says that she tried “to take the best of the
stories… to give a fair account of Cuchulain’s life and death. …[and to leave out] a good
deal I thought you would not care about for one reason or another” (Gregory, Cuchulain
vi). Although this statement is outwardly a bit pompous and arrogant, assuming she
“knows best” for the “poor peasants,” Gregory may have had an entirely different group
of people in mind. She claims to be writing Cuchulain of Muirthemne for the common
people, but at this time in Ireland, most of the peasants could not read any language,
much less have the means to purchase a book published by John Murray of London.
Perhaps she is pointing a finger at the “learned men” of Trinity College as she says,
“When I went looking for the stories on the old writings, I found that the Irish in them is
too hard for any person to read that has not made a long study of it” (Dedication
Cuchulain v). The people who have not made a long study of Irish, but claim to know
that it is worthless, would be the Drs. Atkinsons and Mahaffys of the world with their
arrogant assumptions that all things Irish must necessarily be tawdry. She pointedly refers
to these scholars in the same Dedication:
And indeed if there was more respect for Irish things among the learned men that live in the college at Dublin, where so many of these old writings are stored, this work would not have been left to a woman of the house, that has to be minding the place, and listening to complaints, and dividing her share of food. (Dedication *Cuchulain vi*)

Given the manner in which she lived her life and the causes to which she dedicated herself, this statement was obviously sarcastic. Taken in conjunction with her earlier statements about the Irish language being “too hard,” and her criticisms of the translations that did exist, she seems to be insulting and taunting the scholars of Trinity College and elsewhere with the fact that a “mere woman” could and would undertake a task that they did not have the ability to tackle themselves.

Besides trying to make the old stories more accessible to others, scholars and general public alike, her other motive for writing *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, as stated in her autobiography, was to demonstrate the dignity in the literature of Ireland. She takes as her motto, “We work to add dignity to Ireland” (qtd. in Coxhead 62). With this in mind, she felt it imperative that the women of the *Táin* not be depicted as overtly promiscuous, violent, or bloodthirsty in order to dispel the common stereotypes of Irish women as perpetually pregnant slatterns (i.e. “A Modest Proposal”) or Ireland herself as a hag devouring her men (i.e. the Shan Van Vocht), or a beautiful, young woman leading men to their deaths (i.e. Cathleen ni Houlihan), or the intractable harlot needing England’s John Bull to tame her. Mary-Elena Doyle agrees with this assessment of Gregory’s agenda:
In this context, Gregory composed her most influential work, her translation of the Ulster cycle, in a concerted effort to forward the nationalist cause; to that end, the text wholeheartedly accepts the passive ideal of femininity…. Yet if Gregory’s Cuchulain shone with the “hero-light” instead of contorting into a grotesque battle frenzy and Deirdre blushed whenever anyone looked on her instead of hurling a ball at her lover Naoisi, then Irish idealism dispersed English charges of Irish buffoonery and barbarism. No controversial new women disturb the pages of Gregory’s *Cuchulain*, and characters who might fit the bill, like Deirdre herself—who not only chooses her own lover instead of marrying the old king Conchubar who has raised her to be his bride, but also demonstrates a marked individuality early on by screaming from the womb—are refashioned to fit the Victorian ideal of the domestic angel. (Doyle 37-38)

The images of fierce, independent women who endure and persevere against the odds have their place and will be used, often by Gregory herself,\(^\text{42}\) in the propaganda of the nationalist movement, but this work, this testament to dignity and grace and serious literature, is not the place for them.

Why would she not use these stories to similarly rouse the consciousness of Irish women to the cause of nationalism? Why would she not strive to create an army of

\(^{42}\) Gregory uses many historical/mythological females such as Grania, Gormleith, and Devorgilla as well as fictional women of her own creation to demonstrate her beliefs in the strength and perseverance of women. As Adams states, “[Her] plays all stress endurance, which is not surprising, considering Lady Gregory’s own life and character and her sense of Ireland’s past and present, which seems to require that she make a myth out of endurance” (65).
modern Queen Maeves such as Constance Markievicz? Because doing so would defeat her first and foremost goal of demonstrating the dignity of the epics. Modern readers can appreciate Deirdre’s defiance and Maeve’s sexual freedom, but her Victorian readers might have been scandalized and possibly even labeled the work obscene rather than inspirational. Many audiences and reviewers vehemently opposed Synge’s 1911 drama *Playboy of the Western World*, claiming that he had “cast a slur on the fair name of Irish womanhood by having the young girls of the district appear in their petticoats” (Deane, *History* 152). How would this public have reacted to Maeve’s openly defiant licentiousness? One must keep in mind that although today’s audiences find the women tame by modern standards (especially in comparison to translations that take a more literal approach), the people of Gregory’s time acclaimed her versions of the heroines as daringly aggressive and independent.

Her depictions of the characters Deirdre and Maeve best exemplify the choices Gregory makes as a translator. Both of these heroines are well-known and important, not only in the epic tradition but also in the folklore and history of the Irish culture. The stories of Deirdre’s defiance of a king and his claim over her and Maeve’s sexual freedom and powerful reign lived on in the lore of the Irish peasantry long after Cuchulain and the other warriors of the Red Branch were all but forgotten. Gregory brings these stalwart heroes back into the public eye, but perhaps more importantly, she establishes the stories and the characters of the Ulster cycle, particularly the women, as popular fodder for the literature of the Irish Renaissance. In the words of Richard Fallis, “Lady Gregory was very skillful in adapting the work of scholars to the style, point of view, and idiom of native storytelling; she was, in fact, the best populizer of legend and
folklore the Irish Renaissance produced” (99). Her talent for quality popularization—and shrewd depiction of especially the women—made *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* a seminal work of the period.

**Sad, Lovely Deirdre**

[…] Sad, lovely Deirdre, who when overtaken by sorrow made no good battle at the last. (Gregory, *Selected Plays* 362)

The most common tribute to Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* pertains to the Deirdre story. As Mark Twain puts it, “We should always be grateful, even if you had given us the Fate of the Children of Usnach alone, that moving and beautiful tale, that masterpiece!” (qtd. in Gregory, *Seventy* 401). Although the story itself is a familiar one, Gregory’s language and the simplicity with which she tells it are lovely. Yeats phrases it best in his Preface to *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* when he says that “if one does not set Deirdre’s lamentations among the greatest lyric poems in the world, I think one may be certain that the wine-press of the poets has been trodden for one in vain” (xv-xvi).

Gregory’s “Fate of the Sons of Usnach” is an exquisite, poignant tale about young love, betrayal, and a woman’s ultimate right to make her own decisions, even if her choice is death. However, most versions of the Deirdre story are much more brutal, less romantic, and more stark in the message that one cannot escape one’s destiny and that love most definitely does not conquer all. Despite the beauty of the tale that Gregory tells and the universality of the trope, her Deirdre is rather meek and mild, much more so than in some other versions, especially the oldest account of the story found in the *Book of Leinster*. Why would Gregory, a woman who rebelled against convention, portray a potentially strong and independent female character as a meek young girl who blushes
when anyone looks at her? It is important to understand the pervasiveness and the significance of the Deirdre story to the Irish before one can attempt to understand Gregory’s representation of it.

Of all the tales in the Ulster Cycle, the story of Deirdre and Naoisi is probably the most familiar. Many versions of this story have been published, in prose, verse, and dramatic form from Sir Samuel Ferguson’s *The Death of the Children of Usnach* in 1834 to the numerous renditions during the Irish Renaissance (most of which, including two of best-known dramas of the period, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* by Synge and *Deirdre* by Yeats, used Gregory’s version as their primary source) to J. J. Jones’s *Deirdre* in 1937 to Thomas Kinsella’s *Longes Mac nUsnig* in 1954 and “Exile of the Sons of Uisliu” in his 1969 *The Táin*. According to Herbert Fackler’s 1978 study of the Deirdre legend, the story is so pervasive in Celtic culture that Alexander Cameron, editor of the *Reliqua Celtica* in 1892, claims that the tale was well-known “over all the lands of the Gael, both in Ireland and Scotland” (9), and Daniel Corkery, author of *The Hidden Ireland*, maintains that “Deirdre is one of the ‘brightest queens in the Irish sagas,’ the central figure of a ‘great tale which would be familiar from childhood even to the common people’” (9).

When Gregory decided to create *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, she states as one of her reasons the fact that the common people had forgotten these old tales and that the peasants remembered “only that they were brave men and good fighters, and that *Deirdre*

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43 For a full discussion of the many published versions of this story including the strengths and weaknesses of each, see Herbert V. Fackler’s 1978 book *That Tragic Queen: Deirdre in Anglo-Irish Literature*. 
was beautiful” (emphasis added Cuchulain v). On one occasion, when she went to the
British Museum to do research and asked for “The Cuchulain Saga” and drew a blank,
she tried asking for “Ancient Irish History”; the clerk excitedly began to say that it was
really quite unfair that the Sons of Usnach were overcome by enchantment. Although
this young man knew nothing else of Irish literature, he knew the basic Deirdre story
(Gregory, Seventy 396-97). Although the “common people” had forgotten many of the
old legends, or at least much of the details, they remembered Deirdre herself. The
popularity of this tale, the many oral and written retellings of it over the centuries, and the
numerous adaptations from it, of which the Arthurian story of Tristan and Is
ielust is
probably the most famous, make it inevitable that many different versions would exist.
The characters and circumstances are similar enough to assume that these stories share a
common origin, but the variations in spellings, place names, and plot details are myriad
(Moore 283).

The tale itself deals in archetypes; where and when it originated is unknown, but
similar stories exist in nearly every culture. The young girl is promised to the elderly
king, but she falls in love with a younger man, who is usually related to the king and
often has supernatural powers of some sort. The lovers run away, the king gives chase,
and the resulting conflict tears the land and the people asunder. As Fackler notes, “The
theme, stated by Conchubar [in Yeats’s play Deirdre]—‘One woman and two men; that
is the quarrel / That knows no mending’—is, as A. Norman Jeffares has suggested, heroic
in conception, for it is also the theme of The Iliad” (113). Not only are classic works
such as The Iliad based on such a triangle, but so also are countless other sagas in many
parts of the world.
In addition to paralleling stories from other cultures, the “Fate of the Children of Usnach” is apparently the prototype for a number of Celtic stories. For instance, the tale of Diarmuid and Grania in the Fenian Cycle is of a young girl, Grania, betrothed to an aging king, Finn Mac Cumaill, but who chooses instead to run away with one of his warriors, Diarmuid. The biggest difference in these two stories is that Deirdre chooses to die rather than survive without Naoisi, but Grania chooses to live on after Diarmuid and become Finn’s queen, just as Helen returns to Menelaus. Gregory’s play *Grania* written in 1909 is based on this story, but in it she will present the female lead quite differently than she does Deirdre. The triangle of King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, and Guinevere, thought to be Celtic in original, has remarkable similarities to the basic plot of Deirdre and Naoisi, except that in this version one’s sympathy tends to lie with the king, whereas usually the lovers are the sympathetic characters. The Arthurian story that is perhaps the most similar is that of Tristan and Iseult in which King Mark of Cornwall sends his nephew Tristan to Ireland to collect his bride-to-be. The young lovers try to flee together, but in the end, the king kills his nephew and Iseult dies of grief. As Deirdre and Naoisi’s story predates all of these in setting and creation, it is apparently the model for the Celtic version of the legend. But what makes this particular myth so ubiquitous? Why is it retold in nearly every culture and every age?

Some historians theorize that the story is representative of the sovereignty myth that exists in many pagan cultures. According to this lore, the goddess as personification of the land must, symbolically or literally, mate with the rightful king in order to convey sovereignty upon him. Ireland especially utilizes this concept in ancient tales and modern propaganda. In the Deirdre story, this balance is upset when the aging Conchubar
appropriates Deirdre for himself and, in so doing, robs her of her rightful choice; the results are tragic (Johnson and Cairns 3).

Another theory places the “Fate of the Sons of Usnach” into the mold of a typical Celtic motif. According to Alwyn and Brinley Rees, many peoples, but particularly the Celts, told and retold two distinct classes of love stories: “Elopements” and “Wooings.” Both of these types demonstrate the “clash between morality and erotic love” (279) and the inevitable results when two men desire the same woman. In “Wooings,” the man is the aggressor and the impediment to the match is often a father figure. Cuchulain’s courtship of Emer falls into the Wooings category because he must overcome many obstacles placed in his way by her father. The rather unique aspect of this tale, however, is that Emer’s cleverness and bravery, qualities that make her worthy of Cuchulain, also help him to prevail over her father’s objections.

In “Elopements,” of which “Deirdre” is a perfect example, typically, the original marriage is a misalliance, the husband/fiancé is old and possessive; the lover, on the other hand, is portrayed as a beautiful, dashing warrior, often with softer, more feminine traits such as charming manners or a lovely singing voice. For instance, in Diarmuid and Grania, Finn is old and has grown children, and he only wants a “suitable” wife. When Conchubar chooses Deirdre for himself regardless of her wishes, he does not do so out of love or compassion, but the selfish desire to have the most beautiful woman in the world as his property. Diarmuid has a “love-inducing” spot on his forehead and is “the best lover of women and of maidens in the world” (Rees 292). Naoisi’s singing is said to be “enchantment and music” (Gregory, Cuchulain 111) to all who hear it. The lover is often related to the husband through the female line, which was an ambiguous position in the
Celtic society because power was often passed through the female line and therefore maternal nephews were often seen as potential usurpers.\textsuperscript{44}

The beloved also has tenuous ties with deities or supernatural figures: Diarmuid’s foster-father and accomplice in elopement with Grania is Mac Óc, a love messenger of the Tuatha Dé Danann; Tristan is sometimes said to be the son of Blanchefleur (associated with Aphrodite) and had to be cut from her womb after her death; Lancelot is the son (or foster-son) of the Lady of the Lake; and Naoisi has the ability to make cows increase their yield of milk, a power usually ascribed to the Tuatha Dé Danann, and is often closely allied with the sea god Manannan. Alwyn and Brinley Rees sum this up:

To generalize: the man upon whom the frustrated wife fixes her affections is, by virtue of his nature and other-world associations, a human personification of the supernatural lover—the beautiful Gandaharva—who interferes with marriages. He is the feminine man—not an effeminate man in whom the female aspects of the male triumph over the masculine—but “a woman’s man.” As Heinrich Zimmer says of Lancelot, “He is an incarnation of the ideal of manhood that exists, not in the world of masculine social action, but in the hopes and fancies of the feminine imagination.” (293)

The transition of many cultures from matriarchal to patriarchal societies, in which women’s opinions are becoming less and less important, make the division between the warrior-king and the romantic lover even more pronounced (Reynolds 13). Sympathy usually rests with the elopers, however, not with the husband, and the lover is considered

\textsuperscript{44} See, for example, Juliette Wood, Miranda Green, Peter B. Ellis
an innocent victim of destiny; the woman in these stories is so possessed by passion that
guilt and innocence become irrelevant, although in Deirdre’s case it is possible that the
monks transcribing the tale projected some Eve-type guilt onto her that was not originally
present (Fackler 21).

The heroine usually compels the hero to go with her through *geasa*, supernatural
bonds of honor, obligation, or taboo, or some other such compulsion. In the words of
Alwyn and Brinley Rees, “Just as ‘Wooings’ depict the mythological inversion of
marriage from the male standpoint, so the ‘Elopements’ may be described as the
mythological inversion of marriage from the female standpoint” (293). The inherently
feminist slant to “Elopements” makes them especially attractive to contemporary
audiences as well as to turn of the century artists—who were beginning to recognize the
increasingly vital roles women were playing in society.

These motifs have also been linked to fertility myths, such as the
Persephone/Demeter/Hades triangle in Greek mythology, to spring rituals prevalent in
many middle European and Mediterranean lands, such as the “Great Mother” and the
“Dying Consort” rites and May Day festivals still carried out today, and to the “Divine
Mother” cults of the Krishnaist form of Vishnuism (Rees 295-96).

One final analysis of the popularity of this basic tale is a psychological one. The
generation conflict, similar to Freud’s Oedipus Complex, reflects man’s fundamental
concern with continuation of the species. When the young man clashes with the older,
presumably less virile, father-surrogate for the sexually awakening young woman, the
natural balance of the regenerative process is upset. As Fackler observes:
The sorrow in Deirdre’s story comes from the destruction of this natural process; if all is flame and fury as Fergus (whose name is literally “virility” and whose function here is impotent vengefulness) burns Emain Macha, the result will be ashes in the future. Thus we are touched by the human pity of the death of the lovers and moved by the deep and disturbing portent of it. (145)

This instinctive concern with mortality and continuation of the species may help to explain the prevalence of this tale in so many different cultures.

All of these explanations of the origins of the basic story and the deeper meanings behind it serve to show the importance that historians, literary critics, sociologists, bards, authors, playwrights, and the reading/listening public have placed on it. It is particularly relevant to Irish culture because, as Ireland is often personified as a woman, any depiction of a mythological woman can carry the connotation of being representative of the land itself. In addition, the especial popularity of the Deirdre story during the Irish Renaissance may be explained in purely political terms. The beautiful young maiden (Ireland) chooses to go with the heroic, young brothers (nationalists) against the wishes of the aging, morally corrupt king (England). The lovers are ultimately unsuccessful in their quest for freedom, as it Irish rebels so often were. In Fackler’s words,

The Irish political situation might predispose its serious thinkers to sympathy for a young man who loves a woman raised in Ireland’s countryside and unrightfully chosen by a king who is depleted, morally declining, and who achieved his throne by (at the very least) questionable
means…. This mythic-nationalist connection is surely one of the keys for the number of modern treatments of Deirdre’s story. (145-46)

The parallels would be obvious to the propagandists of the time who were constantly striving to rewrite mythology in terms of their contemporary goals. As Fergus Kelly asserts, “This, more than anything, is what characterizes all treatments of the Cuchulain story: ‘a technique of exploring contemporary issues by means of narratives set in the past” (qtd. in Kiberd Classics 401). Kiberd elaborates, “That past was sufficiently remote to be tractable to present agendas: and this would in time explain the attraction of Cuchulain for Anglo-Irish writers of English, for he belonged to a period before splits into sectarian and political turbulence” (Classics 401).

Gregory was a masterful propagandist who utilized myth and legend well in her attempts to support Irish nationalism. As a well-read and scholarly woman, very knowledgeable in Irish folklore and certainly familiar with these various myths, why would she not choose to make Deirdre stronger, fiercer, perhaps even win her freedom in the end? Primarily, Gregory had to work within certain boundaries. This tale is so well known that although she could pick and choose from numerous versions in respect to details, Gregory was nevertheless constrained by certain inflexible plot elements; as Hazard Adams puts it, “the story in any form, dictates that Deirdre must die” (65). Because of this inevitable conclusion, Gregory chose not to write any further works featuring Deirdre, but instead she focused on strong mythological characters such as Grania, and historical personages such as Gormleigh, controversial wife of Olaf, the Dane, Malachi, the High King of Ireland, and finally of Brian Boru; and Devorgilla, whose jilted husband sought Norman aid in 1152 and paved the way for the English
conquest of Ireland. As Paul Deane phrases it, “All of these three women, in the words of Gormleith, try to do ‘a great thing and a grand thing’ (Kincora 82), and regardless of the possible outcome, direct the course of their own lives” (51). For this reason, Gregory later chooses to represent these women rather than Deirdre on stage.

Despite the predetermined outcome of the Deirdre tale, she can be, and often is, depicted as a strong, independent woman who makes her own choices and lives, or rather dies, with the consequences of her actions. Her birth, her elopement, her death, all the major events in her life, can be seen as happening to her or because of her depending on how she is written. Gregory’s Deirdre seems to be manipulated by fate rather than to control her own destiny. Certainly Gregory did not believe that women should sit back and allow men to control their fates; she was a woman of action who took matters into her own hands whenever and wherever possible in order to uphold her beliefs and her causes, as can be seen by her unswerving dedication to Irish nationalism, the Abbey Theatre, and the recovery of Hugh Lane’s pictures. However, her Deirdre could not be the free-spirited, bloodthirsty, manipulative adulterer portrayed in earlier versions, but must maintain the character of the gentle colleen in order to sustain Gregory’s purpose of proving Irish literature to be idealistic and worthwhile. Victorian audiences would have been scandalized by the Book of Leinster’s Deirdre and would probably have endorsed Atkinson’s assertion that Irish literature was “intolerably low in tone” (qtd. in Gregory, Seventy 391). Although there may have been a compromise, a way to depict a strong,

45 Gregory fought tirelessly for the return of her nephew Hugh Lane’s extensive art collection from England after his death aboard the Lusitania. A codicil from Lane’s will expressing his wish that the works reside permanently in Dublin was rendered null and void because it was improperly witnessed.
assertive woman without resorting to barbarity or fierceness, Gregory had to be certain that her audiences would not misinterpret her characters; therefore, she paints them with precise qualities to reinforce her purpose.

In order to depict Deirdre as a victim rather than a catalyst, Gregory chose elements of the story that, although undoubtedly beautiful, are more romantic and less crude in tone. For example, in the oldest written version of the story, Conchubar and his court are feasting at Fedlimid the harper’s home when a spine-chilling scream erupts from Fedlimid’s wife’s womb. This terrifying shriek is interpreted by Cathbad the druid as the protest of “a tall, lovely, long-haired woman [for whom] Heroes will contend…. Kings beseech, [and] High queens will ache with envy.” He goes on to tell the company “Derdriu shall be her name. She will bring evil” (10). He elaborates:

Much damage, Derdriu, will follow
your high fame and fair visage:
Ulster in your time tormented,
…
the three sons of Uisliu exiled.
…
Fergus exiled out of Ulster
through your fault fatal woman,
…
Harsh, hideous deeds done
in anger at Ulster’s high king,
and little graves everywhere

— a famous tale, Derdriu. (10-11)

Conchubar’s warriors insist on killing the baby in the womb, but the king wants her for himself: “The girl will be taken away tomorrow. I’ll have her reared for me. This woman I’ll keep to myself” (11). She is raised in a place apart so that “no Ulsterman might see her until she was ready for Conchubar’s bed,” with no one for company but her foster-mother, foster-father and “Leborcham, tall and crooked, a satirist, who couldn’t be kept out” (11). In a typical patriarchal society, the king has the right to choose this woman, raise her for himself like one would raise a cow for slaughter, and claim her when she is sexually mature, presumably good for nothing more than display and breeding. In Celtic Ireland, which historians speculate was in transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society (Reynolds 14), Conchubar’s attitude would be problematic, and the subsequent tragedy reflects the resulting conflict in values.

Gregory’s version ignores this part of the conflict by making the society obviously patriarchal with typically misogynistic views on the helplessness of women. In doing so, she makes both Deirdre and Conchubar more dignified and less blameworthy. Fedlimid the harper simply asks Cathbad for a prophecy and is horrified to hear that his wife will bear a girl child on account of whom “more blood will be shed in Ireland since time and race began, and great heroes and bright candles of the Gael will lose their lives” (104). In response, Cathbad hides her away with only her foster-mother, Leborcham. A woman has been relegated to role of caregiver instead of the powerful satirist that she was with the ability to raise blisters on a man’s face with her words and shame a person literally to death. Rather than scream in defiance at her destiny, Gregory’s Deirdre
meekly hides away until a lost hunter finds the adolescent girl and tells the king about her. Conchubar is no longer guilty of raising Deirdre in captivity, and Deirdre is no longer the defiantly screaming fetus.

Along with the variations in the beginning of the story, one of the most glaring differences in Gregory’s version of the tale is the description of Naoisi that causes Deirdre to fall in love with him. Although this deviation may not pertain directly to Deirdre’s character, it is important because it demonstrates, once again, Gregory’s determination to delete any material that may be construed as offensive or overtly barbaric. Typically, Deirdre sees a raven drinking blood from a freshly slaughtered calf on the snow, and she decides that she will love a man with these three colors: red, white, and black. Although Gregory keeps the color motif, and some references to the blood, the calf, and the raven, she removes the visual effect and the implied barbarity in a girl who would be sexually aroused by the sight of fresh blood. Instead, she simply has the lost hunter tell Deirdre that if Naoisi and his brothers, Ainnle and Ardan, ever saw her beauty they would want her for themselves, which also serves to give them, as males, more responsibility for the eventual outcome, as they will be given again when they meet Deirdre for the first time. He describes the sons of Usnach: “the colour of the raven is on their hair, their skin is like the swan on the wave, their cheeks like the blood of the speckled red calf, and their swiftness and their leap are like the salmon of the stream and like the deer of the grey mountain; and the head and shoulders of Naoisi are above all the other men of Ireland” (108-9). This description may be more pleasant than fresh blood on the snow, but it loses some of the symbolism inherent in the original. The slaughtered calf represents the blood that will be shed on the Táin Bó Cúailnge, of which this tale is a
precursor and a foreshadowing, and the raven represents (possibly is) the Badb, a form of the triune goddess of war, the Morrígan, who is not only instrumental in instigating the war between Maeve and Conchubar, but is also Cuchulain’s mentor and protector, much as Athena was to Odysseus. So, rather than just a “fortuitous concurrence of [Naoisi’s] colours in a homely winter’s scene” (294) as Alwyn and Brinley Rees assert, the blood on the snow episode is pivotal to the plot of the entire Táin Bó Cúailnge and not just a device within the Deirdre story to describe her true love. Although her reasons for removing the graphic blood imagery are probably valid given her objective, Gregory inadvertently reduces the importance of the “Fate of the Sons of Usnach” to her work as a whole; rather than a foreshadowing of the massacres to come, it becomes just a story explaining the presence in Maeve’s army of Fergus, former king of Ulster and Conchubar’s stepfather, and Cormac Connloingeas, Conchubar’s son and heir.

Not only does Gregory minimize the significance of the story to the Táin as a whole, but she also reduces Deirdre’s role to that of a passive observer. Kinsella’s Deirdre goes in search of Naoisi, determined to find him and bind him to her. In the “Fate of the Children of Usnach,” however, the lost hunter returns to Emain Macha, tells the king about meeting “the greatest beauty that ever was born in Ireland” (109), and Conchubar and his men come and carry Deirdre on their shoulders to his court to be his bride. Rather than marry immediately, Deirdre requests that she be given a year and a day to learn the “duties of a wife,” and “the ways of a king’s house” (111). Conchubar grants her request:

Conchubar got a woman teacher for her, and nice, fine, pleasant, modest maidens to be with her at lying down and at her rising up, to be
companions to her. And Deirdre grew wise in the works of a young girl, and in the understanding of a woman; and if any one at all looked at her face, whatever colour she was before that, she would blush crimson red. And it is what Conchubar thought, that he never saw a creature that pleased him so well. (111)

This is a far cry from the Deirdre who stubbornly insists she will be ill until she meets Naoisi and then sneaks away from home to find him (Kinsella 11). There is even one version of the story that depicts Deirdre performing a ritualistic act of masturbation called “flaying” on every standing stone on the journey from her home to Emain Macha (Frost 86-88). Although this version is admittedly rare, and perhaps not even based on any extant legend, it provides an excellent example of the extreme differences with which Deirdre can be portrayed.

In addition to taking the choice to seek out Naoisi away from Deirdre, Gregory makes the decision to elope more of a mutual one. Deirdre usually forces Naoisi to elope with her by invoking geasa, a magical bond of honor, taboo, or prohibition. In Kinsella’s The Táin, the young couple pun flirtatiously until Deirdre asks Naoisi if he is rejecting her. When he answers affirmatively, she forcefully compels him to do her bidding:

Then she rushed at him and caught the two ears of his head.

“Two ears of shame and mockery,” she said, “if you don’t take me with you.”

“Woman, leave me alone!” he said.

“You will do it,” she said, binding him. (12)
Regardless of the trouble that they know will result from their actions, the sons of Usnach are now honor-bound to take Deirdre with them, and when they leave Emain Macha with all their retainers, she is “mingling with the rest” (13).

In contrast, Gregory’s Naoisi seems much more willing to take Deirdre away with him and claim her for his own. In fact, before they meet, his brothers conspire to keep Naoisi away from the king’s new woman, the most beautiful in Ireland, because they know that if “Naoisi their brother would see her, it is for himself he would have her” (112), implying that he is the type of man who always wants the best regardless of the consequences. Their efforts are in vain, however. As Deirdre hears their singing one day while on a walk with her maidens, she runs after them, remembering the hunter’s descriptions of the three brothers and her own dream of them. She calls out to Naoisi, but his brothers try to convince him it is just Conchubar’s wild ducks, until the third time when he turns and sees her: “Naoisi turned back and met Deirdre, and Deirdre and Naoisi kissed one another three times” (113). When she leaves with them, she is not in the midst of the others as an equal, but rather she is carried off on his shoulders just as Conchubar’s men had carried her to Emain Macha. She is no less a trophy to Naoisi than she is to Conchubar. Gregory effectively transforms the story into a “Wooing” by making Naoisi the instigator, overcoming Conchubar in his quest to win Deirdre, rather than an “Elopement” in which Deirdre is the aggressor.

Although Gregory diminishes Deirdre’s role in the elopement, she makes her part in the return to Ireland more active; unfortunately, the trend of male authority and female submission is continued. In spite of Deirdre’s repeated warnings that Conchubar’s peace offering is a trick and that the sons of Usnach will die if they return to Ireland, Naoisi
simply ignores her or reproaches her for her predictions of evil. Regardless of the beauty and power of the language in Deirdre’s laments for Alba and her prophecies of doom, her words fall on deaf ears and, in the end, are powerless. Although Gregory does not deviate from the typical version in this respect (after all, the sons of Usnach must return to Ireland for the story to come to its inevitable conclusion), she makes a statement about the ultimate inability of both women and words to prevent violence by expanding this episode and having Deirdre reiterate her warnings again and again. Despite Deirdre’s best efforts, Naoisi and his brothers are determined to return to their own land and face whatever and whomever they must. As Fergus says, “One’s own country is better than any other thing” (119). Naoisi agrees: “[A]nd although there were no trouble beneath the sun, but a man to be far from his own land, there is little delight in peace and a long sleep to a man that is an exile” (119). Deirdre is more practical and realizes that it is better to live safely in exile than in constant danger in one’s homeland.

The parallels between the many Irish exiles, voluntary and otherwise, who either, like Joyce, lived away from Ireland but continued to be obsessed with it, or the patriots who left Ireland from the time of the “flight of the earls” in 1607 and later only to return and plan failed rebellions, are obvious. Ireland has a long and tragic history of men and women exiled for military, legal, or economic reasons pining for their homeland, most of whom could probably understand Naoisi’s viewpoint. Deirdre’s point, however, is that women tend to be more practical about these matters and believe that the safety of one’s family must come before love of one’s country. Gregory believed in the power of words to influence the world, as witnessed by her continual efforts for Irish literature and the nationalist cause, but, as a mother, she also understood the need to avoid violence.
Gregory’s Deirdre is also a mother, once again a fact that is not present in other versions of the story, but she and Naoisi give their children to the sea god Manannan to raise in safety before they return to Ireland.

Although she argues and pleads and tries to convince Naoisi and his brothers not to return, Deirdre eventually submits to their will. She continues to utter warnings, but once the group is in the House of the Red Branch in Emain Macha, she relies unresistingly on Naoisi’s protection. In Kinsella’s version, Deirdre, with deadly accuracy and ruthlessness, throws a chess piece at the window and puts out the eye of the man Conchubar has sent to see if she has lost her beauty, but Gregory’s Deirdre goes “into a blaze of red blushes” (128) when she sees the man at the window, and Naoisi hurls the impromptu missile.

Not only is she passive during the captivity in the House of Red Branch, but even in her suicide, Gregory’s Deirdre is genteel. Other versions have Conchubar keeping Deirdre for one year, during which she will neither smile nor laugh nor sing, but only lament the sons of Usnach after their tragic death at the hands of Conchubar’s ally, Eogan mac Durthacht. In frustration, Conchubar offers her to Eogan mac Durthacht, who, as the man who cut off Naoisi’s head, she hates as much or more than she hates Conchubar. She goes with the two men as a “sheep eying two rams” (Kinsella 20), once again implying that women are animals to be slaughtered or sacrificed to men. Rather than be either man’s property, she dashes her head against a jutting rock beside the chariot and so dies a bloody, gory death. Her blood is literally and symbolically on Conchubar. Gregory’s Deirdre goes to the seashore and after another beautiful lament for her loved ones, she stabs herself in the side and flings the knife, which she had borrowed from a
fisherman, into the sea so that “no one would be blamed for her death” (140). Conchubar is saddened by her tragic death; he regrets the loss of Deirdre and the sons of Usnach and admits his own culpability in the tragedy. Although certainly not a happy ending, it lacks the brutal intensity and finality of Deirdre bashing her own brains out on a rock.

Gregory’s “Fate of the Sons of Usnach” is not as other versions, but in losing the gory aspects, she loses much of the power of the tale as well. The stark simplicity of Kinsella’s later translation, for example, forces one to see the tragedy in immediate terms more so than the “pretty” dying scene in Gregory’s version. In exchange, however, she gains much in the way of beauty and poetry. As Synge put it: “What paltry pallid stuff most of our modern writing seems beside it [Cuchulain of Muirthemne ]. Many of the stories, of course, I have known for a long time, but they seem to gain a new life in the beautiful language you have told them in” (qtd. in Kiberd, Classics 412). For example, Deirdre’s reproach of Conchubar as she lay dying is incredible poetry in its own right:

Do not break the strings of my heart as you took hold of my young youth, Conchubar; though my darling is dead, my love is strong to live. What is country to me, or land, or lordship? What are swift horses? What are jewels and gold? Och! it is I will be lying to-night on the strand like the beautiful sons of Usnach. (137-39)

Her lament for the sons of Usnach ends with an oft-quoted line that led quite directly to the title of Synge’s play Deirdre of the Sorrows: “I am Deirdre without gladness, and I at the end of my life; since it is grief to be without them, I myself will not be long after them” (137). The extraordinary compliments she received for this particular section of
her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* were certainly well deserved, for the sheer poetry of the language if nothing else.

It is important to keep in mind that Gregory was not trying to write a propaganda piece for feminism or, directly, for nationalism, but instead she was trying to legitimize Irish literature in the eyes of a very conservative world. A Deirdre who screams from the womb, becomes aroused by the sight of blood, forces herself on an unwilling man and in the process, makes him betray his king, and finally, kills herself in the bloodiest, most dramatic way she can would not have been admired by Gregory’s Victorian audience, but would have been regarded as a barbarian, an uncivilized hoyden who reinforced everything the outside world (particularly England) thought they knew about Irish women.

Gregory’s own views on feminism are better demonstrated in her plays such as *Grania*, often thought to be a somewhat autobiographical allegory. Grania is a woman who does what she wants but, in the end, wisely defers to expedience and marries the king; against all odds, she lives two lives, one full of passion and adventure and one in which she shapes the course of destiny, her own and that of her country. Perhaps that is why some critics feel that this play was so personal for Gregory: she too lived a life of passion in her younger years but willingly sacrificed this aspect and threw herself into the work for Ireland during the second half of her life. As Gregory remarked, “I think I turned to Grania because so many have written about sad, lovely Deirdre, who when overtaken by sorrow made no good battle at the last. Grania had more power of will, and for good or evil twice took the shaping of her life into her own hands” (qtd. in Adams 52-
Regardless of the outcome, it is better to shape one’s own destiny rather than have it controlled for one.

With this story, Gregory achieves her goal of demonstrating the inherent dignity of old Irish literature, even if she had to civilize Deirdre almost to the point of unfamiliarity to do so; Gregory’s Deirdre is elegant, poised and thoughtful—a fitting refutation of the recalcitrant harlot stereotype. The Deirdre story’s undeniable place in the psyche and lore of the Irish makes it pivotal to Gregory’s aim. If she could demonstrate the worth of this well-known tale, even to the most adamant skeptics, then she could persuade them of the worth of the literature as a whole. An added, and not unwelcome, bonus is the political symbolism central to this saga. Gregory purposely stresses the political ramifications of the underdog facing seemingly insurmountable odds by focusing her translation on Cuchulain, and with her treatment of the Deirdre story, she elicits sympathy for Ireland as the weak defenseless female who has been appropriated by the corrupt king[dom].

Angry, Amorous Maeve

But it is the personality of the woman, not of her husband, that is stamped on the story, and it is she who lives on in legend and has given her name to the landscape of Sligo. (Reynolds 14)

In addition to turning Deirdre from an assertive woman who defies her fate and determines to live or die on her own terms to a submissive girl who merely trades one man’s protection for another, Gregory transforms one of the most sexually liberated queens in Irish history into a quieter, less promiscuous woman. Deirdre is essentially a victim and a largely powerless woman with no status other than what her beauty conveys, but Maeve is a queen in her own right, a woman who commands armies and rules over
Connacht with her husband, whose only claim to leadership is as her consort. Although Gregory does not necessarily reduce Maeve’s authority, she very consciously curtails the sexual content in her life and makes her subtly more subordinate to Ailill as she is always mentioned after him.

Maeve is arguably one of the best-known and yet mysterious characters in Ireland. Maeve’s name not only peppers the landscape of Sligo, as Lorna Reynolds remarks, but also many other counties as well. From standing stones and dolmens to mountains and ravines, from Maeve’s cairn in Sligo to Fual Medba in Westmeath to Medb’s Rath in Meath, Maeve’s name is prevalent in Irish geography. Her reputation too both as protector and sensualist has lived on among the people. For instance, the ghost of Queen Maeve supposedly shows herself to pilots in the west of Ireland to protect them from the dangerous coast (Manley and Belcher 271). An old woman once described this apparition graphically to Yeats: The “woman had a sword by her side and a dagger lifted up in her hand and was dressed in white with fair arms and feet. She looked, said the old lady, very, very strong, but not wicked. …[She] ‘had no stomach armor and was slight and broad in the shoulders and was handsomer than anyone you ever saw’” (Manley and Belcher 271). An old man described his encounter with Maeve slightly differently; he told Yeats that in his youth:

[H]e had met once “a queenly, fair, fierce woman who called herself Maeve” and she asked him if he would have money or pleasure. He said

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46 Archeologists are currently exploring her fortress, Cruachan of the Enchantments, with preliminary results that bode well for major archaeological discoveries (Cruachan Af Exhibition).
he would have pleasure and then she gave him her love for a time and then went from him and ever after he was very mournful. He could remember her song of lamentation; it was very mournful and he called her “the beauty, beauty of all beauties.” (Manley and Belcher 272)

When Gregory was collecting stories of Maeve to include in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, she spoke to an old woman in the workhouse in Galway, who told her: “Queen Maeve was very handsome and she used the hazel rod which her enemies could not stand against.” Gregory goes on to relate: “But after that she grew very disagreeable, ‘It’s best not to be talking about her. How do we know it is true? Best leave it between the book and the readers.’ She had evidently some scandal about Fergus in her mind” (*Seventy* 398). Even though her Victorian prudishness would not allow her to speak of Maeve’s exploits freely, the old woman apparently knew the stories. As recently as these recollections in 1902, Maeve’s legend was still very much alive to the peasantry.

Historians are divided on the topic of Maeve’s basis in fact. Some believe that she existed as an actual queen, others that she was a goddess, and still others that there are two Maeves in Irish history: a goddess and a queen (Green 147-48; Ellis 41). A prevalent concept among historians is that the figure of Maeve was an early Sovereignty Goddess who was euhemerized and made a mortal queen in later literature such as the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Wood 130). Numerous aspects of Maeve’s character lend to this interpretation. For example, Maeve’s name in Irish, Medb, literally means “mead” or “to intoxicate,” and one of the main actions of the king at his coronation would be to partake of a ceremonial intoxicating beverage (Ellis 35-36). Another primary function of the Sovereignty Goddess was to mate with the king in a ritual that literally bound him to the
land as personified by her. Ailill’s function as Maeve’s consort suggests this reading as do her physicality and her affair with Fergus, who, as his name literally means “fertility” (Mercier 58), represents masculine power. Maeve’s requirements that her husband be “a man without stinginess, without jealousy, without fear” (Gregory, Cuchulain 176) represent the three functions of kingship: sovereignty, strength, and fertility (Kearney 38) without which the land, and hence the people, suffer. As Anne Kearney says, “Maeve seems to incarnate sovereignty by her lack of jealousy, fear and meanness. In other words, by her independence of mind, her warrior courage, and her fertile sensuality” (39). The etymology of her name, her sexual appetite, and her association with the traditional functions of successful government weigh heavily in favor of the theory that Maeve was once a Sovereignty Goddess reduced in status after the coming of Christianity.

Maeve is also associated with a fertility goddess as her sexual appetite and casual references to urination and menstruation, both of which represent sexual potency in pagan fertility myths, would seem to indicate, as well as her fecundity (Clark 135; Kearney 16-17). Her apparent disregard for her children’s lives and her use of them as mere weapons in her war for the bull are indicative of this interpretation. She never seems to mourn any of her sons, the seven Maines, when they are killed in battle, and she offers her daughter, Findabair, to any and all of her allies in exchange for their loyalty. For a goddess of fertility, children are easily replaced and therefore mere tools for her use (Kearney 24).

In Celtic society, which had no goddess of love such as Venus or Aphrodite, love and sexuality are inextricably associated with the mythological divine mother and deities as personification of the land, both of which roles Maeve fills perfectly. Proinsias Mac
Cana says of Maeve’s goddess-like attributes: “It is precisely in her breaches of propriety that we find the most obvious evidence of Medhbh’s [Maeve’s] divinity; her licentiousness is merely the literary expression of one of the characteristic functions of the Celtic goddess” (84). Although women had the right to choose their own lovers in Celtic society (Ellis 136-37), Maeve’s insatiable appetite and sexual abandon argue for a more mythical interpretation of her character.

Most scholars agree on one point: whether actual queen or pagan goddess, Maeve exists in the lore and psyche of the Irish. As Peter Ellis states: “Doubtless ‘myths’ are created from realities, from moral tales and actual events lost in the recesses of history. Whatever the outcome of such debates, Maeve’s literary role is secure” (42). Maeve’s literary role is indeed secure as she continues to be recognized for her role as instigator of the Táin and warrior/queen/goddess of Connacht. Ellis claims that “Maeve is the most written woman in Irish history, and she is the one to whom people refer most often when arguing for the equality of women and demonstrating an example of strong, emancipated Celtic women” (Celtic Women 42). Although it is questionable whether Deirdre or Maeve has inspired more literary works, the difference in portrayals of the two women is great. Deirdre is usually depicted as the less aggressive heroine; Maeve, on the other hand, is celebrated as a fiercely independent, sexually liberated figure.

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47 This type of sweeping mythic analysis is a bit dated, but I think it illustrates the primary way that Gregory’s work has been discussed in academe. I hope to move the conversation forward in a longer version of this project. A recent article by Tsung-chi Chang in the GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies reads Gregory’s plays through the lens of feminist ethics, but little has been written recently about her translations.
Gregory’s Maeve keeps her independence, to a point, but she loses much of the sexual freedom. On the other hand, Gregory’s depictions of Grania in her translations of the Fenian Cycle of tales and on stage very frankly illustrate Grania’s sexual desire. As Cave states: “It [Gregory’s *Grania*] is… conspicuously modern in tone and feeling, for all its saga-derived subject-matter, because Lady Gregory had the courage to make passion and sexual longing the whole focus of her tragedy” (16). The difference in the way Gregory represents these two powerful women is due, once again, to her reasons for writing each piece. Some critics speculate that *Grania* is an autobiography thinly disguised as mythology and others that it is a feminist declaration of strength, intelligence, and perseverance (Innes 155; Kohfeldt 213). *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, however, was not meant to be a personal purgation or a feminist statement but rather an affirmation of the dignity of Irish literature.

Just as Deirdre must maintain her meek and mild temperament as a shining example of Irish femininity and decorum, so Maeve must curtail her sexual exploits to counteract the stereotype of Irish women as licentious and immoral. High literature such as Gregory was attempting to demonstrate should not be reduced to sexual farce or slapstick. Reynolds argues that *The Táin* is a comedy with Maeve as the leading lady:

She [Maeve] is depicted as a masterful, boastful, willful, power-loving, uninhibited woman, who regards herself as the equal of any man, and one who must be seen to be equal. Hence the battle for the brown bull, which, once added to her possessions, will make them exactly equal to her husband’s. She seems to me a mixture of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and
Harry Percy of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, he who would ‘pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon.’” (13)

There is certainly potential for slapstick humor in Maeve’s exploits, particularly the incident during which Fergus’s sword is stolen during his tryst with Maeve, which, according to Thomas Kinsella is “the source of continual phallic joking” (*Táin* xiv). Humor of this nature, however, would not further Gregory’s cause, but instead might lend credence to Mahaffy’s claim that Irish literature is indecent or obscene.

Other versions of this episode make it quite clear that Ailill knows about Maeve and Fergus’s affair and not only is he not jealous, but he understands and approves of Maeve’s appetites and her tactics. When his charioteer comes back from spying on the couple and stealing Fergus’s sword, Ailill responds, “Fair enough.” They grin at each other, and he says, “She is justified. She does it to keep his help on the Táin” (Kinsella 103). Gregory, on the other hand, depicts Ailill as a more conventional cuckolded husband who, rather than playing a harmless prank on his rival, is angry over his wife’s deception. After they return from their tryst, “Ailill said sharp words of blame to Fergus and Maeve” (200). This more “traditional” reaction would resonate with Gregory’s audience, as most would probably not understand or respect a man who is open about his wife’s sexual appetites nor a woman who sought her own lovers so freely.

The sexual bantering that is so prevalent in the affair of Fergus and Maeve is brought to a comic conclusion in Kinsella’s *The Táin* when Fergus complains that the Connacht defeat is due to “follow[ing] the rump of a misguiding women” (emphasis added 251). Gregory, however, has Fergus simply say that “it is following the lead of a
woman [that] has brought it [the army] into this distress” (267). Although the meaning is still essentially the same, Gregory deletes the explicitly sexual connotation.

Similarly, Maeve offers her “own friendly thighs” (Kinsella, Táin 55-56) to Daire for the use of his bull; an offer which Mac Roth, her messenger, freely repeats. Gregory’s Maeve simply offers her “own close friendship” (178), a proposition that Mac Roth does not repeat. Although one can infer that he made the offer, Gregory’s conscious decision to make the wording less graphic and more cryptic and then not have the messenger repeat it to fix the image in the readers’ minds minimizes the sexual implications.

In addition to downplaying Maeve’s sexual activities, Gregory expands her maternal role. Gregory’s Maeve offers Findabair to anyone who will fight Cuchulain, but the offer is typically downplayed, almost an afterthought. When Kinsella’s Maeve offers the princess to Ferdiad, for instance, Findabair exerts herself to kissing and fondling Ferdiad, and Maeve offers her “own friendly thighs” as well as her daughter (168-69). Gregory is also careful not to include the version in which Cuchulain brutally violates Findabair by “cut[ting] off her two long tresses and thrust[ing] a pillar-stone under her cloak and tunic” (Kinsella, Táin 141). Cuchulain simply cuts off Findabair’s tresses in Gregory’s version, an act which shames her but does not sexually violate her. Also, in Gregory’s version, Findabair’s parents come looking for her and take her solicitously back to camp, but in Kinsella’s The Táín, “some of Ailill’s and Medb’s people” find her, and in the end Findabair “stayed with Cuchulain” (253). There are many inconsistencies about Findabair in all versions of the tales. For instance, although she dies of shame when she finds out that she has been promised to so many different men and that many
men died for her sake, she also leaves either with Cuchulain or Maeve. Similarly, she
marries Fraech in one remscéla, or foretale, and yet she is freely offered to all the other
kings and warriors on the Táin, and she tells her mother that Rochad is the man she has
always loved. Perhaps these inconsistencies are intentional and point once again to
Maeve’s role as a Fertility Goddess. Just as the seven Maines are interchangeable and
dispensable weapons, so there is more than one Findabair, interchangeable and
dispensable as a sexual bargaining chip.

Gregory attempts to soften Maeve’s seemingly callous and voracious use of her
children. In a remscéla that Kinsella does not include in his book, Maeve has a vision of
her son Maine Morgor in danger and goes to rescue him. She is too late; Conchubar has
already killed him, an action that will later give Maeve more justification for her war
against Ulster rather than just greed for the great bull Donn Cúailnge. Perhaps it is the
fact that this incident makes Maeve more human, more maternal and less avaricious that
causes Gregory to include this little known and often excluded tale. Gregory softens her
sufficiently that she can be either admired or reviled (depending on whether one is from
Connacht or Ulster) as the instigator of the great Táin and a fiercely independent warrior
queen. By downplaying the sexual content in Maeve’s life and softening her maternal
role, Gregory made her a more acceptable heroine to a Victorian audience.

Many critics have speculated that Gregory’s own personality and life experiences
led her to choose to delete many of the cruder elements of the Táin, but as her own
autobiography and professional experience show, Augusta Gregory was neither prudish
nor dull. Her depictions of the female characters in the Táin clearly demonstrate the
conscious choices she made as a translator in order to make her version fulfill her stated
objective of glorifying Irish literature and her unstated goal of subtly encouraging independence. The cause of cultural nationalism was served well by *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*.

As previously established, Gregory wrote *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* in direct response to the criticisms of the scholar at Trinity who ridiculed Irish literature as crude and worthless. She was on a mission; she picked up their metaphorical glove and flung it right back in their faces. She did this by publishing a beautifully written, poetic, epic—an epic both lovely in its poeticism and characterizations and exciting in its heroics and adventures. In her own words, she wanted to create an Irish version of the ‘Morte d’Arthur,’ a tale that was as quintessentially Irish as King Arthur and his knights of the round table were unmistakably English. In order to accomplish her mission, she was forced to sanitize the tales, keep the bawdy, the sexual, and the violence out, or at least tame them, smooth over the rough edges, and make her book palatable to a Victorian audience. She also edited out the redundancies and the confusingly different versions of tales. Rather than the bewildering jumble found in the manuscripts, she shaped the episodes into chronological order and told a story, a story about a man, a hero, who would soon become one of the most potent symbols of the cultural and political nationalist movements; she—more than anyone else—provided the causes with Cuchulain.
CHAPTER IV

W. B. YEATS AND CUCHULAIN:

“ONE MYTH FOR EVERY MAN”

Though most famous for his poetry, Yeats also had a prolific career as a playwright. His work in founding the Irish National Theatre, which would become the Abbey Theatre, was critical as was his self-appointed role as a national poet, a role that would be tacitly endorsed with the Nobel Prize in 1923. His continuing value to Ireland is illustrated through the issuance of a coin featuring the author in June 2015 commemorating the 150 year anniversary of his birth.48 Yeats’s fascination with Irish myths, especially those of Cuchulain, led him to use the character in poems and plays that effectively span his career and to declare that “there is one myth for every man” (Essays and Introductions 107). Cuchulain’s was apparently that myth for Yeats. Through Yeats’s Cuchulain plays, we can trace his changing feelings about art, politics, the nation, and even his personal life. Interestingly, the plays have received little scholarly attention with the exception of On Baile’s Strand.49 Reg Skene published The Cuchulain Plays of W. B. Yeats: A Study in 1974, but he primarily focuses on Yeats’s biography, the staging of the plays, and his evolving ideas about drama. Many other scholars have written about

48 Speaking for the government at the official launch June 4, 2015, Central Bank Commission member Des Geraghty had this to say: “Yeats was central to the creation of both our first National Theatre and our first National Coinage and one could hardly think of a more appropriate place to launch a coin celebrating the 150th Anniversary of his birth than the Abbey Theatre” (qtd. in “One of Ireland’s Most Famous Poets” n.p.).
49 See, for example, Doggett “Mixing Everything,” 2006; Cullingford “Death,” Kiberd “On Baile’s;” Harris “Gender, 1995.
one or more of the plays within a larger discussion of Yeats, but an overall analysis of the entire cycle is lacking.

Although I do not think we can fairly call the Cuchulain plays Yeats’s *oeuvre* as they certainly do not represent his whole body of work—dramatically or poetically—I think we can legitimately state that as a subject, Cuchulain is representative of Yeats’s arc of artistic output. His first work on the subject was the 1892 poem “The Death of Cuchulain” (later retitled “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea”), which became the basis of the play *On Baile’s Strand*. His final work was the play *The Death of Cuchulain* written only weeks before the playwright’s own death. Yeats’s work on Cuchulain not only is bookended by death but also somewhat obsessed with death throughout.

According to Ronald Schuchard, Yeats was conscious of his own mortality even in his youth but became even more fixated—a fixation that necessarily included Cuchulain—as his death actually approached:

For W. B. Yeats, however, being *in extremis* was not a bodily state of expiration but a joyous state of mind that he nourished for the last thirty-five years of his life, all in preparation for a single ecstatic moment when his final union with death occurred—a union that required a tremendous store of energy. After serious premonitions occurred during the autumn of 1937, he actively began to stage the approaching personal drama in his poetry and plays, summoning his chosen death-companions—the mythological Cuchulain and his band of fierce horsemen, the heroic Pearse and his Cuchulain cult of 1916—and creating out of dreams and ghostly shades a phantasmagoria through which he could dramatize his
death-vision, one worthy of a poet’s life, worthy of being received into an ancestral night by his oath-bound companions. “Begin the preparation for your death,” he had written in “Vacillation” in 1931, meditating on the self-command that he had exercised since the time of his fortieth year in 1905. (5)

That Yeats chose “The Death of Cuchulain” as the name of his first poem as well as the subject for his last play, would indicate his identification of his own life cycle with that of the character.

Nearly all of these works deal with death in some way. *At the Hawk’s Well* portends Cuchulain’s early demise à la Achilles. *On Baile’s Strand* deals with the death of Cuchulain’s son as well as (at least symbolically) his own. *The Only Jealousy of Emer* crosses boundaries and gives Emer the power to retrieve Cuchulain from the afterlife at great personal sacrifice. *The Death of Cuchulain*, of course, treats his actual death. *The Green Helmet* is a very different work from the others in the cycle, as we shall see, but it also deals with death, and more specifically, self-sacrifice. Not only do these plays reveal Yeats’s obsession with his own, literal death, but perhaps with the death of the cause of Irish nationalism or, later, what he “considered the larger cultural failure of post-independence Ireland” (Cullingford, “Death” 73).

Yeats’s long career included many stylistic shifts and political upheavals, but he remained consistent about his use of Ireland as a symbol and a focal point for his poetry and drama. At a very young age, he committed himself to the cause of Irish nationalism, the near holy crusade to some, the intent of which was to bring independence to the Irish people. At that time, he seemed to believe wholeheartedly in this cause, but he believed
even more strongly in another cause—a cause that was less political, less tangible, less public, but something he felt very intensely about—the cause of good literature. This divided loyalty caused eventual conflict with other Irish patriots; his devotion to nationalism would be called into question then and continues to be debated today.

Reg Skene believes Yeats felt an even more personal connection at least to Cuchulain:

Yeats, like Padraic Pearse, saw himself in the image of Cuchulain. His letters reveal the extent to which the story of Cuchulain absorbed his time and energy during some of the most creative periods of his life. At times of crisis he turned ever to the figure of Cuchulain—the hero who symbolised for him ‘creative joy separated from fear.’ In the Cuchulain plays Yeats created a kind of psychological autobiography. At each of the major crisis points in his own life he wrote another Cuchulain play. The last two works he completed before his death in 1939 were a play and poem about the death of Cuchulain. (Skene 74)

There are certainly parallels to the events in Yeats’s life. Skene points specifically, for example, to his meeting with Maud Gonne and Cuchulain’s meeting with the Hawk Woman of *At the Hawks’ Well*, even though the actual meeting and the play are separated by approximately twenty-four years. For Yeats, though, the political and the personal, like the aesthetic and the historical, are forever linked.

In this chapter, I will analyze Yeats’s five Cuchulain plays, as well as other works when relevant, and map the arc of the plays onto Yeats’s own personal, political, and artistic life, elucidating his dynamic relationship with Irish culture and politics. The early
poems and plays exhibit his commitment to Irish nationalism, and the middle plays especially *At the Hawk’s Well* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer* begin to show a more complex relationship with the cause. He wrote these plays in 1916 and 1917, before and after the Easter 1916 Rising, demonstrating his own complicated stance on the violence. His final play *The Death of Cuchulain* revealed his personal attachment to the character as he himself was dying as he wrote it. These plays have had little critical attention, with the exception of *On Baile’s Strand* as I established above. My work on the plays here and in further projects can fill this lack in Yeats’ scholarship and may suggest ways his works are intimately connected with the nationalist cause over these crucial years in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Art, Politics, and the Nation**

In order to understand Yeats’s fascination with the character of Cuchulain, we must first foreground some of his overall beliefs about art and politics and how both complement (perhaps complicate) his feelings about Ireland, more specifically Irish culture and independence.

Yeats chose his characters and plots based on artistic criteria but also on his own political agenda. He freely admitted to writing many of his early works in an effort to create a model literary style and subject matter for the Irish nationalist cause that he embraced. Referring specifically to a 1929 prose adaptation of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* in a letter to Sturge Moore, Yeats wrote, “I always feel my work is not drama but the ritual of a lost faith” (qtd. in Skene 1). His selection of Cuchulain as the central figure of the five-play cycle is fundamental to this sentiment. About the use of these characters and materials (his own and Yeats’s) as opposed to the more classical figures,
Standish O’Grady says: “I cannot help regarding this age [that of the Cuchulain sagas] and the great personages moving therein as incomparably higher in intrinsic worth than the corresponding ages of Greece. In Homer, Hesiod, and the Attic poets, there is polish and artistic form, absent in the existing monuments of Irish heroic thought, but the gold, the ore itself, is here massier and more pure…” (qtd. in Skene 16). This mass of pure material presented Yeats and others with challenges and opportunities for a lifetime. By choosing Cuchulain as the hero of his life-long dramatic cycle, Yeats hoped to imbue the Irish literary revival (and by extension the nationalist political cause) with characters Ireland could admire and emulate much in the way that Aristotle expected Greek audiences to admire the heroes of Sophocles. Michael Valdez Moses points out that Yeats’s use of Irish mythology follows Nietzsche and that both men consider classical drama central to a rebirth of nationalistic feeling and, not incidentally, good drama:

For Yeats the return of the Irish spirit entails a self-conscious recovery of the Celtic myths and heroic stories of Ireland such as those of Cuchulain, a recuperation not unlike that of Nordic myths in Wagnerian opera that Nietzsche praises as “a return to itself of the German spirit.” If Bayreuth provides modern precedent for an Irish cultural revival, Yeats looks back to classical Greece for inspiration. (564)

Despite his desire to make political statements through his works, Yeats is adamant about never sacrificing art for politics. He had very definite ideas of what drama should be and do. In an article titled “Reform of the Theatre” written for Samhain, a journal of theatrical criticism, he says:
We have to write or find plays that will make the theatre a place of intellectual excitement—a place where the mind goes to be liberated as it was liberated by the theatres of Greece and England and France at certain great moments of their history…. If we are to do this we must learn that beauty and truth are always justified of themselves, and that their creation is a greater service to our country than writing that compromises either in the service of a cause. (Explorations 107).

In Yeats’s estimation, literature could be used for political education and propaganda, for lack of a better word, but never at the expense of the quality of the work.

Yeats believed that Irish literature could become indispensable, just as Greek drama became an integral part of society and politics, not instead of being enlightening and entertaining, but because it was enlightening and entertaining. Moses interprets Yeats’s efforts in a very specific and intentional political light:

Yeats saw his efforts to assist in the rebirth of ancient tragedy as an essential part of a militant cultural and political program to free modern Ireland from imperial British rule. Yeats's literary mid-wifery aimed to establish a free and independent Irish nation that would offer a counterweight to the forces of (English or British imperial) modernity. Though nationalism itself might be said to be a distinctively modern ideology, Yeats hoped to cultivate an independent Irish nation on nominally premodern or non-modern grounds. (562)

Yeats himself claimed that “there is no nationality without literature, no literature without nationality” (Uncollected Prose 224). Despite his references to his own role in the rebirth
of Ireland, not surprisingly, Yeats’s own beliefs went through a number of phases during the forty-eight-year span during which he used the Cuchulain character in his works; these complications can be traced as we analyze each of the texts. Although Cuchulain makes an appearance in a number of poems, this work will focus specifically on the dramas and two poems that are explicitly about the character.

The young Yeats, the Romantic nationalist, saw a wealth of symbolism in the myth of Cuchulain: the hyperbolic Irish warrior immortalized in the newly rediscovered epic *The Táin Bó Cúailnge* represents the tragedy and heroism of the type the early nationalists wanted to embody. The champion of Ulster, Cuchulain defends the borders from invasion by the armies of Connacht, led by the beautiful but treacherous Queen Maeve. Although Cuchulain is successful in defending Ulster against an entire army, he must kill his best friend and countless other brave foes in the process. Yeats quickly recognized the dramatic potential of these stories. As Mary Helen Thuente claims, “In calling upon the people to emulate such heroic models from Irish history, the nationalists transformed another motif from oral tradition, the resurrection of the sleeping warrior. However, they sought to awaken an entire nation” (56-7). By employing the romance and exhilaration of the stories, the nationalists, like Yeats and Pearse, hoped to use the dramatic, hyperbolic tales to stir men and women to action. For example, the ways that Cuchulain’s bravery and honor, strength and skill lead him to victory; he must fight against the army from the neighboring province, who, although not Ulstermen, are still Irish. Maeve’s army even contains a number of Ulstermen who had been exiled from their homeland. Yeats and others could see obvious parallels between the uneven fight of the English army versus the amateur Irish rebels and the Connacht army versus one lone
warrior. To effect a successful cultural and political revolution, the Irish would need Cuchulain-like strength, honor, and skill. The centuries of occupation by the English and the inter-marriages among Anglo-Irish, Irish, and English virtually guarantee the pitting of brother against brother and neighbor against neighbor in the struggle for Irish independence.

Perhaps influenced in part by Yeats’s writings, Padraic Pearse, leader of the Easter Rebellion, made a cult of Cuchulain. He even trained the boys at his school to bear arms and called them the Boy Troop, modeled after the Boy Troop of Ulster, the famous youngsters who sacrificed themselves and died defending the borders of Ulster against Maeve’s army while Cuchulain was injured, allowing him the necessary time to regain his strength. Although Yeats believed passionately in the cause of Irish nationalism until his death in 1939, served in the Irish Senate, and never stopped loving his native land, perhaps it is of this type of horrific loss—as well as those of the many Irish rebels—of which he is thinking when he says, “too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart” (“Easter, 1916” ll. 57-58).

Conor Cruise O’Brien tries to neatly categorize Yeats’s various political phases (while still admitting some complications with this timeline): Yeats’s nationalist phase ran from 1887-1903, the years of John O’Leary, Maud Gonne and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. The years 1903-1916 saw a long period of “detachment from almost all practical politics… by a critique of Irish nationalist politics, and by the formation of the aristocratic attitude which did not find practical political expression until after 1916, when—after a new flare-up of nationalist feeling—he re-entered Irish politics on the right, in the Free State Senate” (42). Yeats went through another period of political
disengagement after the clerical bent of the Senate (not to mention the government’s disinterest in having him serve further) offended him (1928-1933), but he returned to more active and vocal interest in politics with his support of O’Duffy’s Irish Fascists; after the failure of which, he again retreated from any active role in politics. “And always, in the long phases of withdrawal,” as O’Brien notes, “he tended to write of all politics with a kind of contempt, a plague-on-both-your-houses air” (42). That timeline doesn’t seem quite right to me, as when the theatre was very much embroiled in numerous political battles during that crucial 1903-1916 period, Yeats was in the thick of it. And although O’Brien gives a brief concession to this activity, it seems much more important than he gives it credit for. Yeats’s continuous use of Irish symbols in all of his work further points to a failure to ever completely disengage from the political sphere.

Yeats was very young and impressionable, only twenty years old, when he met John O’Leary, and he would continue to be influenced by O’Leary’s brand of romantic nationalism his entire life. As he would write to Ethel Mannin in 1937, “Some day you will understand what I see in the Irish National movement and why I can be no other sort of revolutionist—as a young man I belonged to the I.R.B. and was in so many things O’Leary’s pupil” (qtd. in Cullingford, Fascism 1). Perhaps the most important link between the old Fenian and the young poet was their common belief in the power of verse. Not alone in their confidence in the power of words, certainly, after all, they are both descendants of a country where allegedly even the mightiest warriors were once afraid of poets and where it was believed satirists could literally shame a man to death using nothing but the power of his or her words. Where Yeats and O’Leary were unusual,

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50 Cf. Doggett 563 n2; Cullingford Yeats, Ireland, and Fascism
however, was in their insistence on the primacy of the quality over the message in literature. O’Leary believed strongly that a literary and cultural renaissance was a necessary forerunner to political freedom, yet he rejected the poor, overly sentimental poetry of the nineteenth century. He knew that bad literature would not help their cause no matter how much propaganda it contained, and he also quickly recognized that, in the young Yeats, “here was the great poet Ireland awaited” (qtd. in O’Connor 68).

Yeats also learned a great deal from O’Leary. He was already a gifted poet, but O’Leary exposed him to a whole world of myths and legends, translations of ancient Irish tales that he would use as source material for his poetry and drama his entire life. It was after he met O’Leary that he turned away from his early poems—such as “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” “The Sad Shepherd,” “The Indian upon God,” and “The Indian to His Love” with the very conventional Romantic themes of English pastoral verse—and began to write poetry with Irish themes, which would be his mainstays for the rest of his career. As Richard Ellmann states:

By drawing his native landscape inside him, he has at hand a group of symbols to which he feels related by personal experience and, because of legendary and historical associations, by the experience of his race…. There was in Ireland also a developed literature, of power and beauty, which until the middle of the nineteenth century had remained almost unknown in Europe because of a lack of translations from the Irish. This literature consisted of sagas, prose stories, and poems, some of them written as early as the eighth century, some as late as the eighteenth
century, which gave literary, mythological, and historical associations to every part of Ireland. (16)

By exposing Yeats to the translations of O’Curry, Ferguson, and Curtin, O’Leary hands the young poet a wealth of ready-made symbols to manipulate in the dual causes of nationalism and literature and validates the use of legends and folktales that Yeats himself already knew and loved from his childhood in the west of Ireland. Late in his life, Yeats would say of O’Leary, “To him I owe all I have set my hand to” (qtd. in O’Connor 71). Along these same lines, Yeats would go on, of course, to profit from Gregory’s translations of the Cuchulain myth and collections of folk stories.51

Very soon after his association with O’Leary, Yeats published his first major work, *The Wanderings of Oisin*, in which he makes use of an Irish saga about, appropriately enough, a Fenian warrior, Oisin, who rides away with Niamh, a fairy lover, and stays with her in the Other World where he does not age for three hundred years until he returns to Ireland seeking his old companions. Although Yeats weaves several layers of symbols into the poem, and it is not as obviously nationalist as some of his later pieces would be, there are clearly symbolic references to Ireland and its status as England’s colony. As Ellmann puts it, “The chained lady whom Oisin has to liberate in the second island bears a strong resemblance to Ireland in English chains, and Oisin’s ‘battles never done’ suggest the never-ending Irish struggle for independence” (18-19). According to

51 Yeats may have also been influenced by Standish O’Grady, whom he “called… the father of the Irish Renaissance in a moment of exaggeration” (Kohfeldt 30), but given their disagreements over dramatising the myths, and the fact that Yeats frequently misquoted his work, there is some doubt as to whether he actually appreciated O’Grady. Yeats also figured him in “Beautiful Lofty Things” as “supporting himself between the tables / Speaking to a drunken audience high nonsensical words.”
Ellmann, the symbolism in this long narrative poem breaks down occasionally as there are some inconsistencies, but this simply proves that the young poet was not yet in full command of his skills (20).

In the same year that this poem is published, 1889, Yeats met his own “fairy bride,” as Maud Gonne arrived on his doorstep in London and “step[ped] into Niamh’s shoes” (Harwood qtd. in Toomey 145) and lodged herself forever in Yeats’s heart and imagination. His association with Gonne strengthened his nationalist resolve as this was a cause about which she was nearly obsessed. His friendship with Maud Gonne would also lead to one of his more fervently nationalist dramas, *The Countess Cathleen* (*The Countess Kathleen*). He wrote the part of the countess specifically for Gonne when she “spoke to [him] of her wish for a play that she could act in Dublin” (Yeats qtd. in Jeffares and Knowland 1), and he based the plot on what he assumed, erroneously as it later turned out, was a folktale from the west of Ireland.

Set in the time of the Great Famine, the play portrays Countess Cathleen selling her soul to “English merchants” in order to save the local peasants. The merchants, representatives of “[Satan], the greatest merchant of all” (*The Countess Cathleen* 3), offer gold in exchange for souls to tempt the starving natives into betraying their beliefs. The Countess Cathleen personifies Ireland as it should be; her self-sacrifice, bravery, and compassion are the attributes that the Irish need in order to survive with their souls intact. As Marjorie Howes points out, “Cathleen embodies the idea of the nation: an idealized set of beauties and virtues, a continuous link to a pure and originary past which awaits revelation in the present, that which must be protected and venerated at all costs” (56). The two Eastern merchants represent England, and “no one reading or watching the play
could have failed to make the equation between England and the materialism that was prevalent in Ireland at the time. England is, after all, east of Ireland” (Howes 51). The merchants are there to take the very souls of the Irish people, just as England has stolen their hopes and dreams for centuries. Of course, the soul that is most valuable to them is that of Ireland herself in the person of Cathleen.

In short, Cathleen is willing to sacrifice everything she has to protect her people from starvation and damnation, but because of the trickery of the merchants, her wealth and natural resources are not available. England has stripped Ireland of her assets for so long that there is nothing left for the natives. The countess dies in the end, but she goes to heaven despite having sold her soul to the devil. The enslaved and abused Ireland passes away only to be born again in eternal bliss; Cathleen (Ireland) has won and the merchants (England) have lost.

Theatre riots and demonstrations in later years (i.e. against J. M. Synge’s and Sean O’Casey’s works) would infuriate Yeats as he felt forced more and more often to make a choice between his nationalist views and freedom to produce good drama without political implications. For Yeats there was no choice: literature must not be a slave to propaganda, regardless of one’s political stance. This attitude would lead him eventually to frequent problems with hardline nationalists such as Arthur Griffith and, not inconsequently, to a period of cynicism about the cause itself and the single-minded pursuit that characterized many of its proponents.

Meanwhile, however, he became the darling of the nationalist cause in 1902 with the production of his most obviously propagandist piece, *Cathleen ní Houlihan*. This play, a collaborative effort between Yeats and Gregory, would, according to many
(including Yeats himself), send men out to bleed and die for Ireland. Set in Killala in 1798 at the time of the Wolf Tone Rebellion, the play depicts a young Irish man, Michael Gillane, sacrificing himself on the eve of his wedding for the sake of Ireland. The Shan Van Vocht as mother and Cathleen Ni Houlihan as temptress convince the men to act. Ireland comes to the village in the person of the Shan Van Vocht, or poor old woman, to rouse the natives to martial action. She lures a young Irishman, Michael Gillane, away to her service on the eve of his wedding by appealing to his sympathy and his pride. She talks of her weariness and sorrow that she has no friends to help her regain the land that was stolen from her. She appeals to his sense of adventure and glory. At the end of the play, the Shan Van Vocht has disappeared and in her place is a young girl with the “walk of a queen” (*Collected Plays* 132). The old hag has transformed into Cathleen ni Houlihan, the symbol of a free and victorious Ireland. She is the archetypal springtime goddess, but she demands death rather than sex. It is blood rather than semen which will regenerate the land in this version of the myth. As Cullingford states, “The male myth of woman as pure mother demanding sacrifice of her sons suggests an unconscious fear of the all-powerful mother of infancy, and implies that in the political as well as the sexual sphere the mother will demand the death of her lover as the price of his gratification” (*Gender* 68). Yeats effectively conflates the myths of sovereignty and blood sacrifice (a theme he will revisit in *At the Hawk’s Well*); he combines fear of the all-powerful mother goddess with desire for the goddess of sovereignty who will restore Ireland to prosperity and freedom after intercourse with the rightful king.52

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52 See page 66 in Chapter III for a definition of this myth.
Although *Cathleen ní Houlihan* is arguably the most effective of Yeats’s “propaganda” pieces, it is certainly not, as O’Brien suggests, Yeats’s swan song for the nationalist cause. O’Brien’s theory also presupposes that the production of the play was a single event in 1902; whereas, in reality, the play was continually revived in numerous Irish and American Theatres, it was the featured attraction for the grand opening of the Abbey Theatre, and, in fact, was on the bill at the Abbey on Easter Monday 1916 (Cullingford, *Fascism* 52-53). An actor from the Abbey, Sean Connolly, was the first man shot during the Easter Rising, which perhaps lends more credence to the question Yeats poses in “The Man and the Echo”: “Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?” Even a cynic like George Bernard Shaw, after seeing *Cathleen ní Houlihan* for the first time, said, “When I see that play I feel it might lead a man to do something foolish” (qtd. in Cullingford, *Fascism* 52).

If *Cathleen ní Houlihan* is Yeats’s most blatantly propagandist work, “Easter, 1916” is certainly his most political work in the sense of commemorating a national event or tragedy and seems to function as both propaganda and memorial. Yeats struggled with the knowledge that he may have contributed to the deaths of these men; he wondered all his life if he were culpable for the sacrifice of so many patriots. When he poses the seemingly rhetorical questions in “Man and the Echo,” he is not only asking this in reference to *Cathleen ní Houlihan*, but also acknowledging a more long-term responsibility. In an unpublished draft of *A Vision*, he wrote: “Now I began running through the years from my youth up and measure[d] my responsibility for an event that has been a grief to me and many mother[s]” (qtd. in Cullingford, *Fascism* 85). Despite his insistence that good literature, art, must come before the propaganda, and that politics
must not interfere with the quality of the written word, Yeats adroitly managed to marry the two for many years.

When he clashed inevitably with nationalists such as Griffith and the Sinn Fein over, for example, the right of the Abbey Theatre to perform plays that were not strictly Irish or political in scope, Yeats responded in a series of articles published in *Samhain*. He said if he were compelled to write “nothing but drama with an obvious patriotic intention…I would have lost, in a short time, the power to write movingly upon any theme. I could have aroused opinion; but I could not have touched the heart.” He continues to say, “Literature is, to my mind, the greatest teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values… Literature must take the responsibility of its power” (“An Irish National Theatre” 390).

Despite this seeming contradiction in his insistence that what he produces is merely good literature while also taking credit for influencing others, perhaps to their detriment, this is rather typical Yeats as his ego convinces him of the power of his work, perhaps rightly so. It was this very power, this ability to touch the heart, that made Yeats so very successful in influencing the people and the politics of his time. Yeats himself once asked, “Can we not unite literature to the great passion of patriotism and ennoble both thereby” (qtd. in Manganiello 23-24)? In his never-ending fascination with Cuchulain, Yeats attempts to do just this. In the sections to follow, I will make connections between the creative works of Yeats—primarily his Cuchulain plays and poems—and the political and personal landscape in which he produces them, and in so doing, trace Yeats’s dynamic relationship with Ireland.
“The Death of Cuchulain” or “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea”

In 1892, Yeats published the poem “The Death of Cuchulain” in the volume *The Countess Kathleen and Various Myths and Legends*. Also within this book was the play *The Countess Kathleen*, discussed earlier, as well as several of the blatant nationalist rose poems and “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” which is still widely considered one of his greatest works and one of the first to call on his love for the landscape and atmosphere of County Sligo. “The Death of Cuchulain” was later republished in 1925 as “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea,” a more applicable title as Cuchulain does not actually die during this situation; his later death is both more heroic and symbolic, qualities that Yeats will use when his own death is imminent in 1939. It is interesting, however, that he begins his engagement with the myth with the “death” of Cuchulain, describing a situation that takes place near the middle years of Cuchulain’s life.\(^{53}\) He begins not at the beginning but rather *in medias res*. This suggests that either he does not yet have the intention to depict the life of Cuchulain throughout his own life or that his appreciation for Greek drama led him to this idea, beginning not only the poem in the middle of things but the whole series as well. Perhaps this episode in the longer narrative particularly fascinated him.

Although some details vary between the poem and the later play, they both essentially tell the story of how Cuchulain kills his only son while defending the shores of Ulster from an unknown young man. In the poem, Cuchulain’s wife, Emer, is the boy’s mother, but she is angry because Cuchulain is with his mistress, so she incites her

\(^{53}\) Neither Yeats nor I believe in a factual, historical basis for these legends, but for ease of use, I will refer to Cuchulain’s life span as it is depicted in the most common of the manuscript materials. As Cuchulain’s fate was to die young (around 17 according to some mss sources), middle is a very relative term anyway.
son against his father and bids him go and challenge the man who cannot give his name except at sword-point.\textsuperscript{54} Cuchulain reluctantly fights the young man even though he is instinctively drawn to him; with his dying breath, the boy confesses his identity. In his anger and despair, Cuchulain turns to the sea “And fought with the invulnerable tide” (ln. 92). The play reverts to the saga tradition and makes the warrior queen Aoife the boy’s mother.

In 1892, when Yeats first published “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea,” he was very much under the influence of nationalists like O’Leary and Gonne. In 1891, Yeats made his first of many unsuccessful marriage proposals to Gonne, and he and O’Leary were working together to combine the Young Ireland movement with various literary societies. The poem unites a sense of power with one of futility, which may have represented his true feelings about his relationship with Gonne and the nationalist movement. One can passionately desire something while not truly believing it can come to pass.

In his book \textit{Standish O’Grady’s Cuculain: A Critical Edition}, Gregory Castle points out that Cuchulain himself is an iconic hero but also one that demonstrates similar insecurities within the Revival itself. He represents the “virtues of an ancient, chivalrous warrior, but he also embodied the tension, contradictions, and anxieties of Irish colonial culture— anxieties that lay at the foundation of modern Irish decolonization” (29). Castle goes on to point out that it was not only Cuchulain’s martial prowess and indomitable

\footnote{The idea of a geis (geas, geasa) is very common in Irish mythology. This is a sacred obligation one is under to do or not do a certain action. For example, Cuchulain must never eat the flesh of a dog or give his name to anyone except at sword point. Fergus must never refuse an ale feast.}
spirit that Revivalists like Yeats and O’Grady sought but also the recklessness that would lead him to fight the sea itself, a recklessness that seeks to work out the “contradiction and tension… that appealed to Revivalists such as Yeats, who like O’Grady, sought to realize in the present moment the heroic world of Cuculain in ways that sustained its temporal singularity” (29-30, emphasis his). It is this same tension between individuality and nationhood that marks not only Cuchulain but also Yeats’s feelings about nationalism at this early stage in his evolution.

He reinforces his own nationalist bent at this point by the fact that he first published the poem in 1891, as “The Death of Cuchulain,” in the United Ireland, the weekly newspaper founded by Charles Stewart Parnell. The poem even appeared on the same page as an advertisement for a booklet titled “The Words of the Dead Chief.”55 As Elizabeth Cullingford puts it:

“The Death of Cuchulain” advertises Yeats’s Celtic Revivalist wares as blatantly as the adjacent column advertises Pure Coffee and Clerical Hats. Yeats’s proprietary brand is a vision of Ireland derived from the heroic sagas, mediated through the prose of Standish James O’Grady, the poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson, and the folklore collections of the American scholar Jeremiah Curtin. (“Death” 53)

Yeats felt that the fall of Parnell created “a political vacuum, and began ‘to bid for that forsaken leadership’”56 through his literary-political activities, including strategic appearances in Parnell’s old publication” (Cullingford, “Death” 53).

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55 A reference to Parnell who was commonly called “The Chief.”
This printed link of the fallen Anglo-Irish politician and the great mythological hero was no accident. Yeats told Joseph Holloway in 1905 that he had “Parnell in mind when he wrote On Baile’s Strand. ‘People who do aught for Ireland,’ he said, ‘ever and always have to fight with the waves in the end.’

This idea that Parnell can be represented through Cuchulain seems an oxymoron as the two could not have been more different in style (words v. force) or background (Anglo-Irish politician v. Celtic warrior), but as is often the case, Yeats yokes two ideas together to create layers of meaning and symbolism in his work; he combines the political with the personal, a loss of leadership that would inevitably lead to loss of the future. The Irish were left leaderless without Parnell and Cuchulain is left without an heir to carry on his line. It also points to the subtle shift in Yeats’s attitude toward the nation. By 1905, only a few years after writing the poem, he was already commenting that the political struggle felt hopeless.

The story he tells in the poem is quite different from other contemporary and later versions. For one thing, this predates his relationship with Gregory, who becomes his primary source for the sagas and uses oral versions rather than the written manuscript stories that would soon become more well known. His primary source for the original version was American folklorist Jeremiah Curtin’s Myths and Folklore of Ireland (1890); this differs a great deal from the bardic version of the tale “The Death of Aoife’s Only Son,” which was not available until Meyer published a translation in 1904. In the bardic version, Cuchulain is aware of his son’s identity but kills him anyway because he must in order to fulfill his duty to Ulster. Although this adds to the pathos of the story, Yeats’s
version is more in line with Greek tragic tradition. He also uses Emer, Cuchulain’s wife, as the scorned mother who forces her son to attack his father and die in the attempt.

Traditionally, it is Aoife, the warrior woman Cuchulain conquered and subsequently abandoned during his training with Scathach, who fills this role. While this has most scholars puzzled, thinking perhaps, as A. N. Jeffares does, that it was merely an accident, Cullingford speculates that it adds to the association with Greek tragedy. The use of Cuchulain’s abandoned wife and young mistress returning with him allows “subtle allusion to Aeschylus’s family drama Agamemnon, itself a work haunted by the father’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia” (“Death” 56-57). This itself is no accident as he himself says: “When Lady Gregory wrote her ‘Folk History Plays’ and I my plays in verse, we thought them like Greek plays” (qtd. in Cullingford, “Death” 58). Yeats cited Greek tradition often in order to validate the Irish parallels. It was important also, from a nationalist standpoint, to associate Irish with the Classical Greek tradition in order to separate themselves even more from the English tradition with its insistence on roots in Troy and Rome.57

This poem was written during Yeats early years, when he himself was starry-eyed in love, with the cause of Irish nationalism and Maud Gonne. His subsequent forays will show a man who has become increasingly bitter and cynical with both of his loves, the seemingly futile nationalist movement, or perhaps more clearly with the methods of the movement being debated endlessly, and a woman who would marry Boer war hero John MacBride, a “drunken vail-glorious lout,” but not the poet.

57 Cf Cullingford, “The Death of Cuchulain’s Only Son” for an excellent discussion of the multiple cultures that utilize the father slaying his son motif.
These feelings continue to morph with the changing tide of nationalism and Yeats’s relationship with it, and his decision to move on from Gonne and marry another woman.

On Baile’s Strand

Yeats retells the episode from the hero’s life in “The Death of Cuchulain” in the 1904 play On Baile’s Strand, expanding on the characters themselves as well as the details of the story. This time, however, he uses Gregory as his primary source, and as a result, the play is closer to (though still quite different from) the manuscript versions, while still telling a tale of imperialism and the cost of blind obedience.

In the play, King Conchobar specifically summons the great warrior to the shore in Cuchulain’s own home territory of Dún Dealgan (Dundalk), not to his own “great ancient house,” Yeats points out in the stage directions, but rather to “an assembly-house nearer to the sea” (162). It is a neutral site but also a liminal one as shorelines frequently are. As the play opens, Cuchulain is his own man, but that status will change. Conchobar requires Cuchulain to swear an oath of fealty to him. Cuchulain resists this as he feels it is unnecessary; he has proven his loyalty and valor many times, but Conchobar requires it. Cuchulain eventually takes the vow, but is then immediately called upon to uphold his word by fighting a young stranger, a young man who has arrived on the shore from “Aoife’s country… to weigh [his] sword against Cuchulain’s sword” (173). As is more in keeping with the manuscript tradition and Gregory’s version, Yeats reverts to Aoife rather than Emer as the scorned lover who sends her son to fight his father. Although Cuchulain is reluctant to fight the young man, whom he quickly admires and finds vaguely familiar, Conchobar orders him to do so and he kills the young man. It is not
until the fight is over and the boy is dead that a Blind Man tells Cuchulain that he has killed his own son. The fighting itself takes place off stage and is relayed through the words and actions of a Blind Man and a Fool as well as three singing women. Again, as in the poem, Cuchulain turns to the sea to vent his rage and grief.

Janet Frank Egelson points out that On Baile’s Strand has many of the same elements of “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” but differences in development and emphasis. The play stresses Conchubar’s fears about succession when he chides Cuchulain repeatedly about his lack of heirs and the need for children to carry on the line. Egelson compares Conchubar’s insistence on Cuchulain’s oath to the way Herod tried to bind Christ. However, they both must die: Christ submits for our sins and Cuchulain “hurls himself in the teeth of fate” after causing his own son’s death, albeit unwittingly (81). I believe the play to be more blatantly political than Egelson’s Christian allegorical reading suggests. Postcolonial readings such as those by Cullingford, Kiberd, and Rob Doggett are more convincing and more in line with Yeats’s “detached” phase defined by O’Brien. Their interpretations, like mine, complicate O’Brien’s opinion, however, by demonstrating that the play functions not as a direct critique of nationalism but as a more nuanced form of Yeats’s evolving opinions of it.

Egelson reads this play as a Christian allegory and argues that Yeats merges the two symbols: Cuchulain and Christ. Though the Christ figure “symbolized purification though renunciation, it stressed human inadequacy.” According to Egelson, Yeats felt “the Christ-like road to perfection was one of self-denial” (77). Cuchulain, on the other hand, was more subjective and “creativity, self-sufficiency, joy, and sexuality were the attributes of the subjective self, which Yeats thought of as transcendental, capable of
being heightened beyond all bounds to become one with God” (77). For these reasons, she believes the Cuchulain symbol to be more in tune with Yeats’s own beliefs of the individual and national “self.” To prove her argument, she offers the following: Christ rose after three days and Conchubar claims that Cuchulain will “brood / For three days” (ln. 82-83). The people of Jerusalem worried that God might exact vengeance for Christ’s execution, and Conchubar fears that Cuchulain might “raving slay us all” (84). I find this evidence rather thin because three is a mystical number in many beliefs, and if he had wanted to strengthen this reference, he might have included that Cuchulain fought his son for three days and nights before slaying him, which was part of the Jeremiah Curtin translation Yeats used for his first iteration of this story (Cullingford, “Death” 57). Also, the idea that Cuchulain might slay everyone in his uncontrollable anger (the famous warp spasm) is a recurring one throughout all of the tales, even from the time he gained his arms as a child. Ultimately, political readings of the play are more convincing than Egelson’s.

In his article “On Baile’s Strand: W. B. Yeats’s National Epic,” Kiberd asserts that this play may well have aptly demonstrated the Abbey Theatre’s aims to reconcile the mythical and the mundane with art, but ultimately, it also showed that such “accord may be impossible in the world of action, and by implication, in any emerging Irish state” (260). The fusion of Conchubar’s administrative sense with Cuchulain’s “imaginative power” would be ideal for the sake of the state; however, the two are further apart than ever by the end of the play. “This divide is due largely to the king’s coercion of Cuchulain, his refusal to found their treaty on a basis of mutual consent or to concede that ‘a free gift was better than a forced’” (Kiberd, “On Baile’s Strand” 260). Kiberd goes on
to point out the similarities of the play with the historical conflict between Richard II and Bolingbroke and read parts of it against Shakespeare’s *Richard II, Henry IV* and *V*, and *Macbeth*, further stressing that concept of blind obedience by a king’s subjects (i.e. the Irish in this case) can have tragic political and personal repercussions.58

Yeats—similarly to Gregory—saw the attitudes of the British Scholars in Ireland as demeaning and ignorant. Professor Dowden of Trinity College, a man who saw nothing of value in Irish literature and was the “leader of the efficiency-worshiping literary critics of the Victorian age,” valorized Bolingbroke (Kiberd, *Inventing* 269). Yeats saw more to admire in the deposed Richard II. As he put it, “The popular poetry of England celebrates her victories, but the popular poetry of Ireland remembers only defeats and defeated persons” (qtd. in Kiberd, *Inventing* 269). In this vein, Kiberd asserts that *On Baile’s Strand* is a reimagining of that Shakespearean conflict as a “clash between Cuchulain and Conchubar, ‘a wise man who was blind from very wisdom, and an empty man that thrust him from his place and saw all that could be seen from very emptiness’” (Kiberd, *Inventing* 269). Yeats saw Richard as the center of the meaning in the play. “If Bolingbroke epitomized the failure of triumph, then Richard embodied the triumph of failure” (Kiberd, *Inventing* 269). As this was the philosophy of so many Irish rebels, including most importantly the leaders of the Easter Rising, one can see the applicability and potential responsibility that Yeats later felt. He especially admired the way that Shakespeare tapped into the common man: “Every national movement, as in Elizabethan England, has risen out of a study of the common people, who preserve

58 Cf. Friedman, Baton R. “*On Baile’s Strand to At the Hawk’s Well*: Staging the Deeps of the Mind.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 4.3 (1975): 625-50 for further analysis of the Shakespearean influences on these plays.
national characteristics more than any other class” (qtd. in Kiberd, *Inventing* 270). By conscripting the most English of English playwrights to the Irish cause, Yeats essentially flipped the script.

Kiberd also believes that, in the play, Conchubar represents the middle-class Catholic elite who will settle for domesticity and peace, the “new Cromwellians” who will step in for the Anglo-Saxon and worship efficiency at the expense of all else. Cuchulain is the violent nationalist who must be tamed once his energies have been put to use. He points out that this is a familiar problem in postcolonial societies: “how to contain those violent forces that once secured the integrity of the nation and now, if left uncurbed, threaten its peace” (“*On Baile’s Strand*” 263). He discusses how the Blind Man and the Fool know more about what’s going on than anyone else, which is often the case with subjects and their masters, and they seem to have a desperate need to “translate” Cuchulain’s story. The text is, in a way, created by the Blind Man and the Fool; Cuchulain himself is “‘one of the exorbitant dreams of beggary,’ fulfilling at once the proletarians’ need to worship a hero and their equal urge to humiliate such greatness” (266). This gibles perfectly with the familiar Irish trope of nobility in the face of inevitable defeat. The fact that his sacrifice is for naught, however, contradicts the old “hero as noble martyr” trope seen in earlier works like *Cathleen ní Houlihan* when the rebels’ sacrifice was seen as necessary and admirable (though ultimately unsuccessful).

Similarly, Doggett claims that overall the play represents the “questions of a colonized people whose sense of identity is inextricably bound with empire, whose history is not one tale but a tangle of multiple stories, silences, erasures, buried myths of heroism and tragic defeat…” (*Mixing Everything* 545). Like Kiberd, he draws on the
Shakespearean parallels to make his point. The Fool (a common Shakespearean trope) with his naïve insight asks questions about beginnings and endings, past and present in order to get “the hang of the story” (545). Doggett moves on to more common postcolonial ground when he uses Matthew Arnold’s theories about race to discuss how the play depicts roles of Celt and Anglo Saxon (emotion v. reason) in a seeming convivial joining represented by the Fool (emotional Celt) and the Blind Man (pragmatic Anglo Saxon) in the beginning of the play. This cooperation is fraught with tension as the Fool continually complains that the Blind Man makes him do all the work and that he is hungry, a state which, Kiberd points out, resonates with Irish audiences not far removed from famine. By the end of the play, the Fool knows the Blind Man has tricked and betrayed him, but continues their partnership based on mutual need, because the Fool does not have enough sense to find food and the Blind Man needs the Fool’s eyes to guide him, a parallel to the co-dependent nature of imperialism and colonization.

Kiberd goes on to cite the theories of scholars such as Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Abdul JanMohamed to demonstrate how the play depicts the complicated psychology of colonialism and the way in which both colonizer and colonized gain their sense of identity through and against the Other. In this case, this psychology is represented by Conchubar’s need to oppress/control Cuchulain and Cuchulain’s simultaneous need for and resistance to such control. Doggett calls on the theories of Asha Varadharajan, who draws heavily on the work of Theodor Adorno and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to show how the play functions not to celebrate Irish martyrdom but rather to show how Cuchulain represents the “silencing” of the subaltern. Doggett claims that we must recognize that his play “seemingly retreats from the material fact of
colonization into essential notions of Irish identity, a form of strategic negation, a manifestation of subaltern consciousness that registers empire’s co-dependent logic but which does not fetishize the subaltern as heroic victim” (562). Cuchulain chooses to refuse the role forced onto him by committing “suicide.” The play resists glorifying political revolution (if Cuchulain had slain Conchubar) or symbolic failure (if Conchubar had executed Cuchulain). Conchubar’s vision of a settled nation is dependent on Cuchulain accepting his part as underling; instead, he symbolically refuses his role as bondsman and “opts out of the equation, achieving, in an act that refuses both sublation and sublimation, a negative affirmation of his own autonomy” (563).

Summarizing, Doggett argues that On Baile’s Strand does not simply fetishize nativism or a national position, but rather points out the complicated co-dependent relationship between colonizer and colonized, while at the same time, remaining true to the spirit of the character and avoiding the overly nationalist message that would be drawn had Cuchulain turned on and slain (or been slain by) the imperial power as represented by Conchubar. It is at this point that he asserts Cuchulain himself reclaims his independence by choosing suicide over bondage, death, or even martyrdom.

Doggett reads the play as more complicated than some do and resists the urge to simply situate it, like many have done, as a transitional work shifting Yeats’s attention from the overly emotional and nationalist tone of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into a phase that becomes more critical of militant and cultural nationalism.

On Baile’s Strand does not offer the quiet comfort of nationalist melodrama, nor does it affirm the Celt’s tragic nobility. Rather, it tells the story of colonization and its legacy, fixing the audience’s gaze upon the
death of an Irish hero who, by refusing to play the role of a tragic or heroic revolutionary bondsman, reminds of “the possibility of what is better,” the possibility of a new story of Ireland. (Doggett 563)

Though Yeats himself claimed that the early part of the twentieth century marked a departure from an “exaggeration of sentiment and sentimental beauty” (Letters 434) that marked his work in the 1890s, and that On Baile’s Strand itself marked a shift to verses with a “less dreamed-burdened will” (Variorum Poems 814) than his more blatantly militant works such as Cathleen ní Houlihan, this play still functions as a critique of colonialism and a depiction of the need for cultural rather than simply political nationalism. Perhaps this play does mark a shift in tone and style, as scholars such as Conor Cruise O’Brien have suggested, but I believe that a close reading reveals Yeats’s still evolving ideas about Irish nationalism and expresses his frustrations with the various cultural and political movements.

My own analysis builds on the work of critics like Cullingford, Kiberd, and Doggett, but leans toward the symbolic and the postcolonial. I believe at this point Yeats is conflicted; he feels loyalty to Ireland but is concerned about the violence, which may be why it all takes place off-stage, and is narrated almost exclusively by the Blind Man and the Fool. The Blind Man represents the reason and logic of the imperial powers while the Fool represents the romantic feckless Celt delineated by Matthew Arnold. The two are drawn so openly they are almost caricatures, and in fact, even wear masks to make them more “grotesque” (162). The Blind Man has the ideas, takes the food away from the Fool “after [he has] stolen it” in order to cook it, and unbeknownst to the Fool, to keep it for himself. Again, this situation would certainly resonate with an Irish audience to whom
famine is always a specter looming over them and would also remind them of the sight of English ships leaving with the food they produced. The Blind Man distracts the Fool with words, empty words and empty promises. He tells him the story of Cuchulain and how he was coming to the shore to make an oath to Conchubar. It is at this point that the symbolism of the Blind Man gets complicated; yes, he represents the logic and authority of government, but he can also be seen as a critique of cultural nationalism that sought to “distract” with stories of ancient heroes that had no applicability to the real world of colonial Ireland or the Fool’s very material problem of hunger. The Fool himself, in his naïveté, can fulfill a similar role; his blind faith in his companion and in Cuchulain himself seems short sighted and unrealistic. His short attention span as he flits from one topic to another and cannot seemingly get the “hang” of the story as the Blind Man narrates it indicates the short-sightedness of many nationalists as well as, conversely, perhaps those who might give up too easily.

The Blind Man, however, seems more focused and tells the Fool, “If you listen to what I say, you’ll forget your stomach” (165). This again points to this idea that dreams and stories can make one forget about practical matters but also that the imperial powers often soothe restless subjects with empty promises of better times to come (i.e. the continuing assurance of eventual “home rule”). The Blind Man, then, rather than simply representing either the English or cultural nationalists may be some sort of amalgam of the two, the intelligentsia described by John Hutchinson as those who, through British education systems and state recruitment for local bureaucratic positions produced “an attachment to British Imperialist values that in the late nineteenth century suffused educated Catholic society. Irish national sentiments, of course, lived on, but in reality
Irish educated society was geared to English cultural and political norms and tacitly held its Gaelic heritage in contempt” (492). This would coincide with Kiberd’s claim that this play criticized the middle-class Catholic elite who would become the new ruling class (to the consternation of Anglo-Irish such as Standish O’Grady, who hated this play) (Kiberd, “On Baile’s Strand” 262-63). Doggett agrees and says this play was “motivated also in part by his growing antipathy for Catholic middle class who were the primary audience for sentimental nationalism and increasing disconnect with more political and military nationalism” (547).

While the characters of the Blind Man and the Fool are richly suggestive and layered, one might be tempted to interpret the characters of Conchubar and Cuchulain in a more straightforward manner. Conchubar is clearly the ruler and so represents the prevailing hegemony of the time (the British state). Cuchulain, the rather unwilling participant in this oath-swearing, represents the colonized. In hindsight, this becomes even more ironic because one of the most controversial stipulations in the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty was the loyalty oath the Irish were forced to swear to the English monarchy even though they were granted full governmental freedom; the stipulation was a major cause for the civil war between those who thought this was the best they could get for now and would continue to fight diplomatically for total freedom and those who outright refused to pledge any allegiance to a “foreign” king. Of course, Yeats wrote this play nearly twenty years before that treaty was created.

In the saga materials, Conchabar alternates between a wise and benevolent ruler and a jealous, spiteful man. He displays fear and jealousy quite clearly in On Baile’s Strand when he says to Cuchulain:
But every day my children come and say:

“This man is growing harder to endure. How can we be of safety with this man That nobody can bid or bind? We shall be at his mercy when you are gone; He burns the earth as if he were fire, And time can never touch him. (167)

He uses his “children’s” words to relay fear of an unruly subject, of a man no one can tame. The continued mention of Cuchulain’s freedom, however, freedom to “dance or hunt, or quarrel or make love” reminds Conchubar that time has “put water in [his] blood,” and that he no longer can have that liberty (167). Cuchulain claims that they would be “spoken of / in many countries” and that the “new Irish” were different: “I do not like your children—they have no pith, / No marrow in their bones, and will lie soft / Where you and I lie hard” (167). This is another reminder of what age has taken from the king, and symbolically, what the English system has taken from the Irish in creating this new middle-class Catholic elite, people with no “pith” or “marrow.” Again, hindsight overlays this with irony considering that Yeats would spend his later years obsessed with his own sexual and poetic virility.

Conchubar, however, continues to reiterate to Cuchulain that he has what the warrior does not—a legacy, children to whom to leave his kingdom and “set upon the throne” (167). Clearly a foreshadowing of the coming of Cuchulain’s own son, this also suggests recurring themes of colonialism: the paternal attitude of the imperial powers for the child-like colonials who must be governed, ruled, and controlled for their own good;
and the lack of an indigenous heritage to pass down as the colony’s culture gets stripped away.

Similarly, references to the Act of Union come up when Conchubar says to Cuchulain:

I am High King, my son shall be High King;
And you, for all the wildness of your blood,
And though your father came out of the sun,
Are but a little king and weigh but light
In anything that touches government… (167)

The Act of Union, like Cuchulain’s oath to Conchubar, was meant to bind England and Ireland together, but the balance of power was always very clearly with the British, their efficiency and pragmatism were needed to control the “wild and unruly Irish,” like they were often depicted. Conchubar continues to berate Cuchulain for his reluctance to take the oath, a promise that he says will combine their strengths:

You are but half a king and I but half;
I need your might of hand and burning heart,
And you my wisdom. (170)

Again, this seems to describe a partnership of equals, pooling their strengths for the good of the many, but Conchubar’s previous statements negate that equality and make it clear that he will be in charge, just like the Act of Union was supposed to be a joining of equals but was never enacted as such.

The “partnership” of the Blind Man and the Fool continues to mirror this one because the Blind Man had the wisdom and practicality and was needed to rein in the
more foolish (i.e. Celtic) notions and frivolity. When the Fool discovers he has been tricked and the Blind Man has eaten all of the fowl he stole for them, he exclaims, “You have eaten it! You have told me lies” (178). The Blind Man replies, “What would have happened to you but for me, and you without your wits? If I did not take care of you, what would you do for food and warmth” (178)? The Fool, however, begins to see that he has been used and retorts, “You take care of me? You stay safe and send me into every kind of danger” (178). Their exchange mirrors that of Conchubar and Cuchulain as the Blind Man and the king claim to take care of the Fool and the warrior, while these two vacillate between loyalty and awareness of the inequity of their partnerships.

This inequity is quickly shown to Cuchulain when he is forced to battle the young man to whom he has already been drawn. Cuchulain’s loyalty to the newly sworn oath is tested immediately as Conchubar commands him to battle with the unknown youth, the young man who, in a case of dramatic irony, we know is Cuchulain’s own son. He must destroy the very thing the king censures him for not having—progeny of his own. This command is also rather ironic since Conchubar claimed the oath was meant to keep the peace. This again may be a foreshadowing (or reverse echo) of Yeats’s refrain in “Easter, 1916:” “For England may keep faith.” In this case, Conchubar almost immediately betrays Cuchulain by forcing him to do the very thing he said he would not do, fight. Despite—or perhaps partially because of—Cuchulain’s growing admiration for the stranger, Conchubar commands that he kill him: “I will not have this friendship. / Cuchulain is my man, and I forbid it” (177 emphasis added). When Cuchulain reacts to this and seizes Conchubar saying, “I will not have it… You shall not stir, High King. I’ll hold you here” (177), the idea of rebelling against his own king is so anathema to
Cuchulain that he turns to the young man whom he had previously admired and accuses him of enchanting him with witchcraft. This unquestioning loyalty in the face of extreme duress has more to do with Cuchulain’s character than any sworn oath. This is proven when he turns to the waves and begins fighting them rather than attacking his king; there is no vow in his mind at that moment of extreme psychological distress after learning that he had inadvertently killed his own son, there can only be an innate loyalty that prevents him from killing Conchubar in his rage.\textsuperscript{59} Though he “sees Conchubar’s crown on every” wave as he strikes them down, he does this instead of striking the living man. His rebellion is merely symbolic as he directs his rage to these representations of the king.

Though this is a noble gesture, I do not believe it is intentional suicide as Doggett claims but rather his desperate attempt to lash out at something other than his king and his knowledge that no man is a match for him. Cullingford agrees as she points out: “...the intensity of a father's agony is correct: Cucúlin has destroyed his sole genetic link to the future, and his homicidal rage threatens the whole community. Only the bitter tide can withstand his passion” ("On Baile’s Strand" 57). Doggett claims “Each wave has been divested of its crown, but the sea itself cannot be destroyed” (“Mixing Everything” 557). He sees this an example of the fruitlessness of martyrdom, and since it’s being narrated solely by the fool, as a parody of other works, like Cathleen ní Houlihan, that glorify such martyrdom. I believe the narration by the Fool points out that it is only the Irish, the colonized, who can truly empathize with Cuchulain’s loss and attempt to reconcile the continued relationship with the hated authority. Doggett agrees, however,

\textsuperscript{59} In some versions, Conchubar has druids enchant Cuchulain to fight the waves, but in the original 1904 text as well as the 1906 revision, it is Cuchulain himself who turns to the waves.
that he turns his sword to the waves in a sudden understanding of his own position and the unassailable position of Conchubar/imperial powers that will not be defeated easily, or possibly at all. It is this very frustration that led to nationalist movements in general and revolutions in particular. This does not represent a “death wish” by Cuchulain, but rather demonstrates the depth of Cuchulain’s despair and his inherent belief in his own invulnerability.

Many critics wonder at Cuchulain’s “sudden” capitulation in the matter of taking the oath of fealty to Conchubar (Doggett 563). There is nothing sudden about it; he came there expecting to swear fealty, and although he fought it, resisted it in form, he knew he had no choice. These critics are ignoring the saga material with which Yeats was working, and although Yeats himself ignored it when it suited his purposes, the primary objective was to get Cuchulain to fight the stranger on the shore, a battle he would have taken on for his king in any case but is now being forced to do so. It was important to Yeats, however, to show this surrender, if you will, to the audience, thereby making an anti-imperial statement. This is a man no one can control, he is only agreeing to the oath in respect for the mutual relationship between king and subject, uncle and nephew. His job, regardless of any oath, is to protect the borders. By having Conchobar order Cuchulain to kill Conla, Yeats forces a message onto the audience, a message that being under the control of another, larger power is dangerous and leads to filicide. The irony is that he kills his son and heir, the one who would be capable of continuing the colony’s legacy.

The complication of symbols in this play seems to indicate, as C. L. Innes suggests, that Yeats is beginning to understand the “essentially derivative nature of anti-
imperial nationalism” (qtd. in Doggett 547). By adopting the binary logic of empire, the colonials were in danger of replicating the very system they sought to overthrow and silencing dissenting voices in the quest for native authenticity and purity. Yeats seemed to implicitly at least understand these concepts at this time and had this in common with many other postcolonial writers in Africa, India, Australia, and elsewhere. This represents, as Edward Said puts it, “an absolutely crucial first step [toward] a more openly liberationist movement” (“Yeats” 10). In the analysis of this play, we can see Yeats’s romantic nationalism begin to weaken as he recognizes the complicated nature of colonialism and the limitations of blind adherence to any cause. The Irish may indeed be fighting the very tide itself, and there are no easy answers or queen-like figures to confer approbation.

*The Green Helmet: An Heroic Farce*

Although much has been written about the collection *The Green Helmet and Other Poems*, very little critical attention has been paid to the play *The Green Helmet* included in that volume. The play is quite different from Yeats’s other Cuchulain plays in that Cuchulain acts rather out of character. It borrows as much or more from the trope of the medieval beheading game, such as depicted in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” as it does from the Irish sagas. Although it loosely follows two stories, “Bricriu’s Feast, and the War of Words of the Women of Ulster” and “The Championship of Ulster,” both of which were included in Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirtheimne*, the connection is somewhat tenuous. In “Bricriu’s Feast,” Conchubar and his court are invited to a feast at the home of one of his warriors, Bricriu of the bitter tongue as he is known for stirring up trouble, they agree only if he is not present. Through a series of clever tricks, Bricriu still
manages to set three men—Cuchulain, Conall Cearnach, and Laegaire Buadach—arguing over who should get the “champion’s portion” of the feast and, therefore, be tacitly recognized as the preeminent warrior of all Ulster. Their quarrel spills over to their charioteers and wives as each argues forcefully for his or her master or husband. In this version, Conall and Laegaire break down the walls of the house to allow their women to enter first, but Cuchulain tops them by lifting the whole house to allow Emer entry. It is finally at the advice of Conchubar’s chief judge and poet, Sencha, that they ultimately divide the champion’s portion among all of the diners and decide to settle the matter later. This leads into the second story.

In “The Championship of Ulster,” Sencha and Conchubar devise a plan to decide who among the three warriors should be the champion. They first send Cuchulain, Conall, and Laegaire to Connacht to consult with Queen Maeve and King Ailill. After a series of challenges, all of which Cuchulain clearly wins, Maeve decides to trick the men so that she and Ailill will not be implicated in any further quarrels or make any of the Ulstermen angry. She gives Laegaire a bronze cup, Conall a silver cup, and Cuchulain a gold cup but tells them each to keep it secret until they return home. Each goes away happy, thinking he has won. Despite the demonstration of the clearly superior gold cup during the subsequent feast at Emain Macha, Conall and Laegaire refuse to concede.

Conchubar and Sencha send the three men to Curoi, who is famed for his wisdom and his magic. The first two nights, Conall and Laegaire are unsuccessful in keeping watch on the dun, or fort, as both are defeated by the specter of a giant. Cuchulain keeps watch on the third night and defeats multiple (three nines) shadowy figures as well a great worm and a giant. They return to Emain Macha with Curoi gone and the
championship still undecided. A mysterious figure comes there and proposes the beheading game; he excuses Conchubar and Fergus for their kingship. Laegaire accepts the challenge, cuts off the stranger’s head, but is nowhere to be found when it is his turn to be struck the next night. Conall accepts and goes through the same process. Cuchulain takes his turn, strikes off the stranger’s head, and is waiting patiently for his reprisal the next night. The stranger, of course, does not cut off Cuchulain’s head but instead changes into his usual form—Curoi—and proclaims Cuchulain the Champion of Ulster. Cuchulain’s willingness to sacrifice him echoes, perhaps, his eagerness to take up arms as a child even though Cathbad prophesied that he would be covered in victory and glory but suffer an early death. It is preferable to sacrifice one’s self than to suffer ignominious defeat, and this in turn, echoes the willingness of the Irish rebels (over time, but particularly in 1916) to die for the cause rather than live in subjugation. The overall message embedded in all of these examples glorifies death and sacrifice over all.

*The Golden Helmet*, a prose precursor to the play in question herein, was first performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1908. Revised to a lyrical form and renamed *The Green Helmet*, it appears in the collection *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* in 1910 and was also performed at the Abbey in February of that year. Yeats claims it is based on Gregory’s version of “The Feast of Bricriu” and is meant to serve as an introduction to *On Baile’s Strand* (qtd. in Jeffares and Knowland 221). It is unclear when he changed the title. In letters to Gregory in 1909 and 1910, he mentions rewriting the play, and on January 10, he referred to it as *The Golden Helmet*. In July 1910, he is excited that *The English Review* has agreed to publish it and he refers to it as *The Green Helmet* (qtd. in Bjersby 31 n2).
The following exchange between the Red Man and Cuchulain lends to the belief that he uses the color green as more archetypically Irish for the publication in an English journal. Bjersby concurs: “We cannot but suspect this to be an allusion to the permanent enmities between Ireland and England—something that is even more conspicuous in the first version the play, the prose drama *The Golden Helmet*, in which Ireland and its problems are freely alluded to” (83).

**RED MAN.** I demand the debt that is owing. I demand that some man shall stoop down that I may cut his head off as my head was cut off. If my debt is not paid, no peace shall come to Ireland, and Ireland shall lie weak before her enemies. But if my debt is paid there shall be peace.

**CUCHULAIN.** The quarrels of Ireland shall end. What is one man’s life? I will pay the debt with my own head. (Emer wails). Do not cry out, Emer, for if I were not myself, if I were not Cuchulain, one of those that God has made reckless, the men of Ireland had not love me, and you had not held your head so high… What do you wait for, old man? Come, raise up your sword!

**RED MAN:** I will not harm you, Cuchulain. I am the guardian of this land, and age after age I come up out of the sea to try the men of Ireland. (qtd. in Bjersby 77-83)

The connection with Ireland is made very clear in *The Golden Helmet* but less so in *The Green Helmet* where the Red Man says he has simply come to the land to “choose its
champion” (159). The only mention of Ireland specifically is when Cuchulain first meets him and says: “Or if the waves have vexed you and you would find a sport / of a more Irish fashion, go fight without a rest / A caterwauling phantom among the winds of the West” (152). However, changing the title word to green makes the allusion to Ireland clear without being too obvious, a subtle suggestion that is more Yeats’s style.

Yeats bases his versions on Gregory’s but the similarities are superficial. In this play, Cuchulain is the voice of reason, for example, which is a role unique to this work as he is usually the epitome of wild, martial passion that is frequently out of control. To summarize, Cuchulain returns from Scotland (presumably from training with Scathach though it is never directly stated) to find Conall and Laegaire cowering in a house by the sea. When Cuchulain enters, they tell him their tale: a mysterious “high, wide man… with a red foxy cloak, / With half-shut foxy eyes and a great laughing mouth” (150) had come two years before and proposed his game. Conall cut off the man’s head; the stranger proceeded to pick up his head, which was laughing at Conall from the ground, and return to the sea promising to come back in twelve months for his turn at the game. When he returned in twelve months, Conall and Laegaire hid in the house until he went away. Now, twelve more months have elapsed and they expect him back, and so they are again hiding in fear. When the he does return, Cuchulain has words with him, and the Red Man simply gives them a helmet. Although he hopes to incite quarreling over the Champion’s helmet, Cuchulain defuses the situation by turning the helmet into a drinking

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60 Although some differences will be noted between The Golden Helmet and The Green Helmet to illustrate certain points, unless otherwise noted, this section deals with The Green Helmet.

61 This allusion is important as we will see when discussing At the Hawk’s Well.
vessel. The Charioteers and wives also come into the house arguing vociferously over which warrior is the best. Eventually, the Red Man reappears and Cuchulain offers up his head to the ax. As is the case in typical beheading game stories, the Red Man does not cut off Cuchulain’s head; the whole thing has simply been a test.

Some of the differences between the source material and Yeats’s version are quite telling. Most significant is that Cuchulain continually acts as peacemaker. This is not a role one usually associates with Cuchulain. He tries his best—unsuccessfully for the most part—to prevent any controversy. When Conall and Laegaire both try to lay claim to the helmet, Cuchulain takes it, fills it with ale, and says,

I did not take it to keep it—the Red Man gave it for one,

But I shall give it to all—to all of us three or to none;

That is as you look upon it—we will pass it to and fro,

And time and time about, drink out of it and so

Stroke into peace this cat that has come to take our lives.

Now it is purring again, and now I drink to your wives,

And I drink to Emer, my wife. (153).

His attempts are foiled, however, when Laegaire notes that Cuchulain drank from it first, and the argument starts anew.

Just as in Gregory’s version, the charioteers, servants, and wives participate in the quarrel. Cuchulain tries to keep peace by ordering the servants and charioteers to cease and not be goaded by the Red Man’s words again. When the wives try to enter the house, jostling for position as the first woman to enter represents the wife of the best warrior, he again intercedes. In a similar scene as in Gregory, the walls of the house must be broken
down so that all three can enter at once, but rather than eclipsing his compatriots and lifting the house, it is Cuchulain’s idea to keep all the wives on equal footing. Although Cuchulain tries to maintain that none of the wives is superior to the others, Yeats gave Emer the only song. In *The Golden Helmet*, all the women sing, but in *The Green Helmet*, Emer is given prominence by being the only woman to do so and “by raising her song, now a pure lyric, above the level of plot. She is a true mate for Cuchulain” (Jeffares and Knowland 98). Despite his own efforts to the contrary, Cuchulain’s words and actions as well as Emer’s, do raise them above the other characters.

Emer is personally elevated to heroic status when she protests Cuchulain’s impending sacrifice proclaiming, “It is you, not your fame that I love” (158). As the position of the charioteers, servants, and wives is solely dependent on the standing of their lords and masters, this is a telling admission. It also seems to fly in the face of Yeats’s use of Emer as the antagonist in “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea,” especially as that was a purposeful change that went against all of the saga material and may be what led him to change Emer for Aoife in the later play since he said this play was meant as an introduction to *On Baile’s Strand*. As in many cases in Yeats’s life, he may be thinking of Gonne here. He considered her a hero but was also cognizant of the fact that she could become a “shrieking Virago” at times (Cullingford, “Death” 56).

Jeffares and Knowland agree with the heroic nature of Cuchulain’s actions in this play and highlight some specific changes Yeats made between the two versions. In *The Golden Helmet*, when he offers his head, “Cuchulain states his motive: ‘The quarrels of Ireland shall end.’” But in this version, as Bushruí points out, he offers his head because a wrong has been done and someone has to right it, and to honour a guest. Cuchulain’s
gesture is an act of pure heroism, without thought of material gain, for himself or anyone else” (Jeffares and Knowland 98). Although heroic self-sacrifice is not new to Cuchulain, the idea of doing so for no gain to king or country is unusual. He is painted here more as peacemaker than warrior.

John Rees Moore, arguing that this is the last of Yeats’s plays in which a hero received unqualified approval, comments:

Cuchulain is a match for the Red Man not because he could defeat him in an epic battle—he obviously could not—but because his confidence in his own destiny is so great that he can afford to be careless of his life… In Yeats’s other plays about Cuchulain, the hero is in one way or another at odds with sovereign authority; he is, or seems, eccentric—an outlaw in conflict with the conventional wisdom of society. In The Green Helmet, he is the central authority, for a triumphant moment anyway. The uncrowned king is actually crowned; the hero in a public ceremony receives divine sanction.” (Masks 158)

Moore is correct in his assertion that this is the only play in which Yeats allows Cuchulain to triumph. Even in victory, he typically faces ultimate defeat. The waves defeat him in On Baile’s Strand, fate in At the Hawk’s Well, and of course, death itself in The Death of Cuchulain.

Why is this the only play in which Cuchulain comes out on top? After all, he had many victories in his life, especially during the Táin Bó Cúailnge, but Yeats never wrote about any of those events. Perhaps the answer again lies in the title. The subtitle, An
*Heroic Farce*, is interesting. What is farcical? Is it the nature of self-sacrifice that Yeats thinks absurd in some way? Yeats himself defines farce rather differently than most:

A farce and a tragedy are alike in this, that they are a moment of intense life. An action is taken out of all other actions; it is reduced to its simplest form, or at any rate to as simple a form as it can be brought to without our losing the sense of its place in the world. The characters that are involved in it are free from everything that is not a part of that action; and whether it is, as in the less important kinds of drama, a mere bodily activity, a hair-breadth escape or the like, or as it is in the more important kinds an activity of the souls of the characters it is an energy, and eddy of life purified from everything but itself.” (qtd. in Bjersby 82)

Yeats’s definition mentions nothing of humor or parody, though these are the qualities that typically make something a farce. As in most of his Cuchulain plays, he uses a significant moment in the hero’s life, one of “intense life,” one that often correlates to an event or turmoil in his own and distills it to a concrete image.

Reg Skene believes that Yeats is ridiculing the idea of self-sacrifice because he is disillusioned with the cause of art in the service of nationalism, as this play was written soon after the Playboy riots gave Yeats contempt of the mob reaction. He points out that Yeats was in Scotland, as Cuchulain had been, when he returned to deal with the disruptions caused by the Abbey’s performance of Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* and that the actions of the “heroes,” Conall and Laegaire, and their servants and wives echo those of the Dublin crowd (79). In his estimation, “The brawlers who disrupted performances at the Abbey that week certainly provided a model for the
quarreling pack of charioteers and stable-boys in *The Green Helmet*” (80). He further proves his point by quoting Conall’s speech in *The Green Helmet* referring to the charioteers and servants: “There do you hear them now? Such hatred has each for the each / They have taken the hunting-horns to drown one another’s speech / For fear the truth may prevail” (152). The mobs who rioted and protested Synge’s play were full of hatred, partially because they wanted to deny the “truth” he depicted. Conall goes on to say that Cuchulain would be better off returning to Scotland than staying in Ireland, “this unlucky country that was made when the devil spat,” where neighbor wars with neighbor (150). Certainly, the riots disillusioned Yeats on the ability of the people to understand art, but they also empowered him.

Yeats called for a debate about *The Playboy* on a Monday night and that was when he quieted the crowd by reminding them that he was the author of *Cathleen ní Houlihan*. Mary Colum reported, “The audience, remembering that passionately patriotic play, forgot its antagonism for a few moments and Yeats got his cheers… I never witnessed a human being fight as Yeats fought that night, nor knew another with so many weapons in his armory”” (qtd. in Skene 81).

It was on the stage of the Abbey that night that Yeats realised in his own life the heroic ideal he had always embraced—the ideal of the laughing lip, the steady heart, and hand that scatters life like a gambler’s throw. And it was his courageous stand that night that secured for the Abbey he right to the title of Irish National Theatre, while maintaining its strong stand against merely propagandist plays. The *Green Helmet* was truly his” (Skene 81).
I am certain that he finally felt that power that night—the same power Cuchulain had to ease tempers and make compromises and not just fight in *The Green Helmet*.

Bjersby agrees that this play is Yeats exorcising certain political views, but more with an eye toward Maud Gonne’s attitude rather than the common people’s:

Politics and nationalism were themes always in Yeats’ mind, not the least so on account of this frustrated love. He could not forget the fact that politics had kept him and Maud Gonne apart. *The Green Helmet* may even be an attempt to interpret to Maud Gonne his own political attitude. He wrote in his journal after visiting her in 1908: “To-day the thought came to me that P.I.A.L. (Maud Gonne) never really understands my plans, or nature or ideas. Then came the thought—what matter? How much of the best I have done and still do is but an attempt to explain myself to her? If she understood, I should lack a reason for writing and one can never have too many reasons for doing what is so laborious.” (qtd. in Bjersby 84)

This attitude seems more like that of the Cuchulain of *The Green Helmet*, philosophical and sanguine, rather than the Cuchulain who would fight the very waves in frustration and despair. At this point, at least, Yeats seemed rather content with the results of his own artistic output. He seems to be comfortable as the noble champion crowned by the Red Man with

…the laughing lip

That shall not turn from laughing, whatever rise or fall;

The heart that grows no bitterer although betrayed by all;

The hand that loves to scatter; the life like a gambler’s throw;
And these things I make prosper, till a day come that I know,

When heart and mind shall darken that the weak may end the strong,

And the long-remembered harpers have matter for their song. (159)

The heroic farce of *The Green Helmet* reflects two significant moments in Yeats’s life: the disillusionment but also empowerment that came to him partially as a result of the Playboy riots and other nationalist disagreements and his increasingly (though temporary) sanguinity at his now totally platonic relationship with Maud Gonne. As long as he had “matter for his song,” he was content and entering into a phase of his work that was even more prolific than usual.

*At the Hawk’s Well*

After a hiatus of six years, Yeats wrote and produced another Cuchulain play in 1916. Again, he plays rather fast and loose with the source material. In this work, he conflates the traditional myth of sovereignty with the ideas of a magical elixir of immortality and a story from Cuchulain’s youth, “How Cuchulain Gained His Arms.” While doing so, he also introduces more context for his earlier works such as *The Green Helmet* and *On Baile’s Strand*. This play represents the beginning of Cuchulain’s heroic career when he makes a conscious choice to enter the fight and, in doing so, condemns himself to a short life filled with glory but also pain. Yeats had become embittered at this point in his career, angry at the Irish audiences and the narrow views of the nationalists. So this play, more than any of the others, “idealizes idiocy” (Friedman 560).

As the play opens (more about the unusual sets, etc. to follow), we see only an old man on a barren windswept hill sitting beside a dry well and a black-cloaked female figure guarding the well. This is the well of eternal life, the fountain of youth. The old
man has been sitting there for fifty years trying to drink from it, but it has only filled with water three times, and each time he was asleep, waking to find the rocks damp but no water present.

Cuchulain comes to the hill in search of this well of immortality. He vows to drink from the waters and even offers to share with the old man; with all the arrogance of youth he exclaims, “I will stand here and wait. Why should the luck / Of Sualtim’s son desert him now? For never / Have I had long to wait for anything” (140). He is distracted, however, by the cry of a hawk emanating from the guardian’s mouth, but according to the old man, not uttered by the guardian, as she is apparently just a tool, a husk for the “Woman of the Sidhe” to possess. The old man then tells Cuchulain that there is a curse upon any who “have gazed in her unmoistened eye” (141). The curse may be that he will never win and keep a woman’s love, hatred will always be mixed with love, his woman will kill their children, or he himself will kill them. In the story “How Cuchulain Gained His Arms,” Cuchulain’s choice is whether to live a long and happy life of peace or to die young covered in glory. He, à la Achilles, chooses a short glorious life. In Yeats’s version, his choices are to give up on the well of eternity and live a long life of ease and comfort “An old dog’s head on his knees, / Among his children and friends” or to chance the curse of the Sidhe (143).

Although Cuchulain chooses to continue his quest for immortality, the mesmerizing dance of the hawk woman distracts him again, the old man falls asleep and the well fills and empties, leaving both the young man and the old unsatisfied once more. A cry of “Aoife! Aoife!” and the sounds of swords and shields catch Cuchulain’s attention, and the old man tells him that “She has roused up the fierce women of the hills,
Aoife, and all her troop, to take your life, / And never till you are lying in the earth / Can you know rest” (143). Ignoring the old man’s wisdom, Cuchulain shoulders his spear and marches away crying, “He comes! Cuchulain, son of Sualtim, comes!” (144). The audience, familiar with the story, knows that Cuchulain will be cursed; he will sleep with Aoife in a type of sovereignty ritual that is very common in Irish mythology, and their doomed, violent, sexual encounter will result in a son whom Cuchulain will kill on Baile’s Strand.

Ireland has long been stylized as female, and though this was in large part due to imperial propaganda and the need to see England as male, strong and dominant, and Ireland as weaker and submissive, Yeats used this to his advantage in Cathleen ní Houlihan, most famously, but in this tale as well. If Ireland is a woman, represented here by the hawk woman (hag) and her avatar Aoife (beautiful young queen), then Cuchulain must both conquer her and mate with her in order to join his life with that of the land and fulfill his role in the traditional sovereignty myth. According to Denis Donoghue, “A symbol is the simultaneous embodiment of being and value” (n.p.). At this point, Yeats was married to the idea of Cuchulain as a symbol, seeing it in large part as his own personal myth. The best way to distill the myth and the symbol, to embody the being and the value of it, was in dramatic form.

It was at this time that he began experimenting with the Japanese Noh theatre with its spare sets, stylized costumes, masks, dancing, and singing as the best dramatic form for this purpose. As Baton Friedman puts it:

For Yeats, then, heroic and aesthetic experience converge. And *At the Hawk’s Well* reflects this convergence. Bloom suggests that Yeats deduced from his reading in Noh… what his Romantic precursors had vainly sought, a form for dramatizing their intricate sensibilities. While ‘sensibilities’ seems vague in this context, Bloom is offering an important perspective on Yeats’s dramatic achievement. Romantic drama had repeatedly failed because of the inability of its practitioners to find ways of staging the deeps of the mind. Yeats found a way. (648)

*At the Hawk’s Well* was the first of Yeats’s Cuchulain plays to make use of his Japanese Noh style, in which he introduces incredibly spare sets, which he feels allow the audience free rein to use their imaginations, and masks:

We are accustomed to faces of bronze and marble, and what could be more suitable than that Cuchulain, let us say, a half-supernatural legendary person, should show to us a face, not made before the looking-glass by some leading player—there too we have many quarrels—but moulded by some distinguished artist? It would be a stirring adventure for a poet and an artist, working together, to create once more heroic or grotesque types that, keeping always an appropriate distance from life, would seem images of those profound emotions that exist only in solitude and silence. (Yeats, *Plays and Controversies* 419)
To paraphrase Bloom and Yeats, it seems that the masks are the perfect vehicle for Yeats to convey the intricate sensibilities and the profound emotions inherent in his current style of dramatic myth-making.

The stage directions for the play call for only a patterned screen, two lanterns, and a few musical instruments. At the first showing, which took place in a drawing room (the ideal locale according to Yeats), they also used a chandelier that was already in the room, and Yeats called it “the most effective lighting” because it is “the lighting we are most accustomed to…. The masked players seem stranger when there is no mechanical means of separating them from us” (136). As the play opens, the first musician carries in a folded black cloth; the other two musicians enter and slowly unfold the cloth, on which is a gold pattern suggesting a hawk. They chant as they enter:

I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind,
And I call to the mind’s eye
Pallor of an ivory face,
Its lofty dissolute air,
A man climbing up to a place
The salt sea wind has swept bare.

The remainder of the play follows this stark beginning with only the musicians, who act as a type of Greek chorus, Cuchulain, the old man, and the guardian of the well, who never speaks and is covered by a black cloak. A square of blue cloth represents the well,
and the action unfolds through dialogue, the narration of the musicians, dance, and a few off-stage shouts.

Yeats, working out his frustration with the narrow viewpoints of the hardline nationalists, sees Cuchulain as an embodiment of them, a man willing to throw his life away for a dream, and of himself, making a conscious choice to work in the way that he knows best. He is also the old man, a man who is past his prime in life and is waiting… waiting for the waters of immortality to arrive or the hawk woman to accept him as worthy. He dictated the play quickly to Ezra Pound in February 1916 and performed it for the first time in London on April 2, 1916, twenty-two days before the Easter Rising took place (Brown 223). Yeats, despite his belief in the Occult, had no prophetic powers, but his frustration and disillusionment with the movement had been building for some time, and given his relationship with Padraic Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Maud Gonne, and Constance Markievicz, among others, it is entirely possible that he knew the rebellion was being planned. It was something of an open secret among nationalists as it was supposed to take place all over Ireland on the same day.63

He was also disillusioned with his Irish audiences after the “philistine attacks the Abbey Theatre and Synge… had encountered in Dublin” (Brown 223). Yeats and Gregory had imagined an ideal audience; in the mission statement for their Irish Literary Theatre, which would become the Abbey Theatre, they declared that they “hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory” (qtd. in Kopper 51). Instead they were constantly being harassed for plays “not

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63 Although the rising was planned all over the island, it was called off via a code published in newspapers the day before. The Dublin contingent went forward with their plans anyway.
Irish enough” or not in the Irish language or unbecoming of Irish people, and so on and so forth. In 1914, he wrote a poem called “The Fisherman,” in which he hoped to find “an ideal Irishman, country-bred, ‘wise and simple.’” Perforce he had admitted that such a man ‘does not exist’ for he is ‘A man who is but a dream.’” Yet the poet records how he cried:

Before I am old

I shall have written him one

Poem maybe as cold

And passionate as the dawn. (Brown 223)

And yet, because his ideal audience did not exist, Yeats produced his very Irish play *At the Hawk’s Well* in the drawing rooms of London society elite such as Lady Cunard and Lady Islington with audiences that included T. S. Eliot and Queen Alexandra. Yeats was hoping to recreate the same type of audiences as the Shogun elite in Japan with their knowledge and insight. Although he had claimed in 1915 that he would refuse a knighthood, he was not above fraternizing with “Society” when it suited his aims. He was disappointed again, however, as the English audience could not fully appreciate the mythic meaning behind the play as they had no knowledge of Irish mythology or—most likely—of Yeats’s other plays about Cuchulain. They could not know that Cuchulain’s actions here would lead directly to his doomed fate, that he would go from Aoife’s country home to face the Red Man, filicide, and his own death at the hands of a blind beggar.

As Yeats had made Cuchulain his own personal myth, however, *At the Hawk’s Well* seems an appropriate play for this shift in focus and venue. According to Friedman,
Cuchulain at the climax of *At the Hawk's Well* stands not on the brink of achieving his quest, but of embarking on further adventures. He seems, as Helen Vendler observes, actually to choose between the achievement and the adventure. Aware of the water entering the well—“He has heard the plash; look, he has turned his head”—he nonetheless leaves it to pursue the Guardian. (646)

Yeats needed to pursue the guardian, he needed to prove, to himself if to no one else, that he was still capable of “embarking on further adventures.” The Noh form and the use especially of dance seemed to have rejuvenated the increasingly bitter Yeats and given him a new passion for the theatre.

He couldn’t know, of course, that the drama that was to take place in a few short weeks in Dublin would awaken a new passion (and very mixed emotions) for the nationalist cause and would profoundly affect Ireland’s and his own personal stories. The Rising “would prove a defining moment for the nation, a moment of renewal of a kind Yeats had deemed impossible” (Brown 225). Yeats’s previous works on Cuchulain had proclaimed a heroic but tragic destiny for the hero, but this most recent play showed how that destiny came to be, not by chance or accident but rather by a conscious choice. The Rising, likewise, “was set in motion by a small group of insurgents and by a mysterious process of transformation which recruited them to a destiny of heroic proportions. It was as if the magical, occult dance of the hawk-girl in *At the Hawk’s Well* which determined Cuchulain’s destiny, had an equivalent in the lure of Cathleen ní Houlihan as she sent men to their deaths that would alter everything for ever” (Brown 224-25).
In the early years of the twentieth century, Yeats was an unabashed nationalist, though as time went on, he started to see the futility, even harm, that the binary, us v. them, attitude could have, and so his brand of nationalism evolved. By 1916, he had become even more disillusioned with the fanatical nationalists but also more determined than ever to be the voice of the nation. As always, he struggled to find the balance between art and politics.

Yeats stands out among the poets of this century who have attempted poetic drama because of his life-long struggle to make the drama serve both his own and his country’s purposes. From *Vivien and Time* (1884) to *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939) he labored at the often uncongenial task of giving voice (or mask) to conflicting attitudes within the scope of a dramatic action. The dramatic discipline he came to see as a necessity for his own development as a man and poet, and as a possible means of transforming the vulgar or sentimental patriotism he despised into a defense of the Irish heroic ideal which could arouse his country-men and earn the respect of his literary friends and rivals too. (Moore 150)

Although Yeats could not know the sacrifice that the Easter 1916 martyrs would be making soon after, this play makes an incredible statement about the “terrible beauty” of sacrifice in the name of a cause—the cause of Irish independence for the rebels and the cause of martial glory for Cuchulain. If the Rising had not taken place, what would have become of the Irish movement? If Cuchulain had not chosen as he did, who would have defended Ulster from Maeve’s army? While Yeats the dramatist was disappointed in the reception and narrow viewpoints of his audiences and the nationalists, he would soon
designate himself the voice of the Irish nation. *At the Hawk’s Well* shows Cuchulain making a conscious choice, the more dangerous but morally superior one: to enter the fight but doom himself in the process.

*The Only Jealousy of Emer*

If *At the Hawk’s Well* depicts sacrifice in the name of personal glory, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* portrays total self-sacrifice in the name of love. The only of Yeats’s Cuchulain plays that focuses as much or more on other characters, this play acts as a sequel to *On Baile’s Strand*. After Cuchulain has fought the “invulnerable tide,” he is trapped between this world and that of the Sidhe, between life and death. It is up to his wife, Emer, to save him but at great personal cost. Just as this play depicts personal sacrifice, it is also one of the more personal for Yeats, as it has more relationship to his new marriage than to politics.

Again, Yeats is effectively conflating two different stories from the life of his hero. In most versions of the tale, including Gregory’s, in which Cuchulain kills his son, Cuchulain simply does not die from fighting the waves; there is no real explanation, he just survives it. There is another story, however, titled “The Only Jealousy of Emer,” in which the usually tolerant wife of the promiscuous Cuchulain gets jealous when he consorts with the goddess Fand. In her anger, Emer and fifty women of Ulster threaten Fand with spears, after which she returns to her husband, Manannan, and Cuchulain to Emer. The druids put a spell of forgetfulness on them both so that Emer would forget her great jealousy and Cuchulain his time with the Sidhe. In the “Death of Cuchulain” episode from Gregory’s book, Emer asks Eithne Inguba, Cuchulain’s mistress, to go to him and keep him from leaving his place of safety as Maeve and the witch daughters of
Calatin were planning to trick and ambush him. By combining parts of all these stories, Yeats creates a powerful play about love and sacrifice. Rather than for a cause, however, this is about self-sacrifice on a personal level. Perhaps Yeats is thinking about his own current happiness as he wrote parts of this play with his new bride, Georgie Hyde-Lees, in 1917 during their automatic writing sessions; this successfully marries his love of the occult with his own life as well as that of his hero.

On November 3, 1917, in a letter to Gregory, Yeats mentioned that he was writing a new Cuchulain play, which was being greatly influenced by “what he had lately been feeling” (qtd. in Brown 261) and in January 1918 announced that he had finished it. “The intervening weeks had seen the poet and his wife earnestly engaged on the psychic experiment in which the play itself…had figured as a significant preoccupation” (Brown 261). Though initially regretful about his marriage, the automatic writing experiments that began on their honeymoon and continued for many years brought Yeats much satisfaction and a renewed sense of energy and purpose in his work.

Another of his Japanese-style Noh plays, The Only Jealousy of Emer, like At the Hawk’s Well, utilizes a Spartan set with stylized costumes, masks, dance, and a musical chorus. The action picks up moments after the events of On Baile’s Strand with Cuchulain lying near death and his wife Emer desperately trying to save him. She calls his mistress Eithne Inguba to coax her lover back to the world of the living. It is revealed, however, that the “figure of Cuchulain” is actually Bricriu, the god of discord, a trickster type figure in the Celtic pantheon, and he wants to make a deal with Emer. The “Ghost of Cuchulain” is in the fairy world with Fand, who by implication, is also the hawk woman Cuchulain met in At the Hawk’s Well. Bricriu, in his desire to thwart Fand’s wish to keep
Cuchulain with her, tells Emer that Cuchulain can return if she will renounce all hope of future happiness with her husband. In order to save him, she must ultimately lose him.

Yeats is perhaps thinking about his own tumultuous love life as this play feels more personal than the others. He proposed to Maud Gonne’s daughter Iseult in August of 1917 only to be refused again. He traveled with Maud and Iseult to Southampton in September from where they hoped to return to Ireland. Although they were allowed into Britain, authorities cited the Defence of the Realm Act and refused to allow the two women entry into Ireland. Exiled, Iseult began a promising job as a librarian in London, but Maud was in a “white heat” (qtd. in Brown 247). Yeats proposed to Georgie in September and was married in October. Domesticity suited Yeats, and in Georgie, he found a satisfying sexual and creative partner. His own fairy-woman, Maud, was left behind as he settled into marital happiness for many years. Even though Emer renounces Cuchulain’s love in order to save him, and Georgie stays with him, I believe it is of his steadfast wife Yeats is thinking while he writes this play.

Although Georgie’s mother tried to keep details of Yeats’s past with other women from her—especially the fact that he had just proposed unsuccessfully to Iseult before her—Ann Saddlemyer suggests that Georgie was no “naïve rebound” and that she was quite aware of what she was getting in her older husband (qtd. in Brown 248). Many scholars credit her own cleverness, knowing Yeats’s fascination with the occult, with suggesting they try automatic writing on their honeymoon and unexpectedly finding she had a genuine talent for it. As Terence Brown says, “It was a gift she was to exploit to remarkable effect in the early years of a marriage which might otherwise have foundered” (252). Brown also cautions, however, against over-simplifying their
collaboration as simply a ploy on her part. “What probably began as a wifely stratagem, at once sexually alluring and suggestive of hidden feminine powers (to which Yeats had always been susceptible) became a way of life—arduous, demanding, psychologically risky as well as fruitful” (Brown 252). His new reality as a married man with a genuine partner brought Yeats many new works and also an “imaginative and personal empowerment” he had long been seeking (Brown 253).

The otherworldly nature of Sidhe represents his early perception of beauty, aesthetic and ascetic ideals of his youth and early perception of women. Emer and Eithne Inguba represent the living world in a more mature and sensual outlook of beauty and womanhood. Since Yeats had finally given up on both Maud and Iseult and married Georgie, this is a time to explore the reality versus the abandoned fantasy. Cuchulain returns not to the arms of his wife, however, but to the youthful ones of his mistress Eithne Inguba, who herself says in the play, “Women like me, the violent hour passed over, / Are flung into some corner like old nut-shells (187). She knows that she is but a passing fancy for Cuchulain and that Emer is the one that “in the end… [he] will love best” because she is the one who “loved him through the years when love seemed lost” (187). It is Emer’s love and willingness to sacrifice herself for him that saves Cuchulain from both the fairy world and himself that makes her the hero of this tale and adds to the pathos. Moore concurs while situating the play within Yeats’s larger world view:

Perhaps in The Only jealousy of Emer the suffering is most convincing, because here the emphasis is not on the warlike Cuchulain but on the loving Emer. In order to rescue Cuchulain from the country-under-wave where he is in danger of being permanently enthralled by Queen Fand,
representative of the ideal beauty he is always seeking (when he’s not
fighting), Emer must give up any chance of ever again being loved by her
husband. She finally makes the sacrifice, and Cuchulain is returned to the
time-bound world of memory, desire, and frustrated aspirations. The first
thing he asks for is the comfort of the arms not of Emer but of his young
mistress. There could hardly be a more forceful demonstration of Yeats’
constant theme: commitment to an ideal—of beauty, or power, or
freedom—involves the inescapable penalty of being deprived of one’s
humanity. Here Cuchulain is saved from death by Emer’s humanity, not
his own. (153)

Here Emer represents both Georgie and Yeats himself. In order to give up the fantasy of
Maud Gonne, he must return to the real world with a real woman who will love him for
who he is. That comes with a price, however. Brendan Kennelly points out that “Emer is
the only true heroic woman in Yeats’s Cuchulain plays; her heroism is manifest not in
self-assertion but in self-effacement, and her most heroic moment is her moment of
greatest personal loss. She retrieves Cuchulain by losing him for ever” (19). Skene points
out that Cuchulain’s championship in The Green Helmet comes from self-sacrifice and
not conquest and that Emer’s will too when she is “called upon to act out of a love totally
free of personal desire and hope of reciprocation. The change she undergoes in The
Green Helmet [when she claims it is him that she loves and not his fame] is a preparation
for that test” (153).
While writing this play in collaboration with Georgie and the Communicators, Yeats is also beginning to put together the metaphysical beliefs that he will outline in *A Vision*, his name for the spirit guides. He categorizes all of the people in his life as well as the characters in the play according to the twenty-eight phases of the moon, and it is clear through this that “these characters share their categories with Yeats, Iseult, Maud, and George respectively, so that Yeats’s play must be read, if we are to follow the author’s intentions, as a ramifying study of archetypal representations of himself and the three women he has loved in elaborate interrelationship” (Brown 263). Brown further points out that although the Yeatses are happy at the time this play was written, given his penchant for “emotional and erotic affairs with attractive younger women,” this idea that a wife’s love may involve self-immolation and her preparedness to give him up when necessary is telling.

As always, however, Yeats can use the personal as a way to explore larger themes. According to Donoghue, Yeats saw myth as “something of the force of what Kenneth Burke calls ‘the temporizing of essence,’ the presentation, in the form of story and the mode of time, of local truths so fundamental as to appear perennial” (n.p.). To Yeats, then, the myth of Cuchulain—and in this case of Emer as well—was his own personal myth, but it was also representative of the Irish experience. Although his more fervent nationalist days were behind him at this point, he is still very much aware of the politics and quickly escalating tensions in the country. When this play was first written and performed in 1919, the Irish War of Independence was in full swing. W. B. and

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Georgie had moved from London to Dublin, where they rented a home from Gonne while waiting for their country home in County Galway, an old Anglo-Norman castle Thoor Ballylee, to be renovated. It was here during this period that Yeats would write some of his more cynical poetry such as “The Second Coming” with its rough beast and the “best [who] lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity (ln. 7-8). Some critics feel that the worst he refers to here are the Irish rebels and the violence that was being inflicted on the country during the War of Independence and the subsequent Civil War (Sanders n.p.). This castle would figure heavily in Yeats’s poetry and become a symbol to him of permanence and time, ancestry and descendants. This is fitting as his daughter Anne and son Michael were born during this time, in 1919 and 1921 respectively.

Yeats also shows his disillusionment with his audience during this time—that Irish audience for whom he had such high hopes were becoming even more entrenched into a (perhaps necessary) antipathy for all things not-Irish. While he reflected that in his notes on *At the Hawk’s Well*, he gets even more pointed in the notes he published with *Four Plays for Dancers* in 1921: “While writing these plays, intended for some 50 people in a drawing room or a studio, I have so rejoiced in my freedom from the stupidity of an ordinary audience that I have filled *The Only Jealousy of Emer* with convictions about the nature and history of a woman’s beauty” (*Plays and Controversies* 440).

He goes on to say:

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65 *At the Hawk’s Well, The Only Jealousy of Emer, The Dreaming of the Bones, and Calvary*
In writing these little plays I knew that I was creating something which could only fully succeed in a civilization very unlike ours. I think they should be written for some country where all classes share in a half-mythological, half-philosophical folk-belief which the writer and his small audience lift into a new subtlety. All my life I have longed for such a country and always found it quite impossible to write without having as much belief in its real existence as a child has in that of the wooden birds, beasts, and persons in his toy Noah’s ark. I have now found all the mythology and philosophy I need. (qtd. in Brown 441)

Although he has found his mythology, he is still seeking the ideal audience. Perhaps this is partially why he shifts his focus at this point in his career to the more spiritual/metaphysical concepts of *A Vision* and away from theatre. For the next few years, he and Georgie would spend a great deal of time alone engaged in their spiritual/literary partnership, and he would not write another Cuchulain play until 1939.

*The Death of Cuchulain*

Although Yeats did not write any new material about Cuchulain during the 1920s and early 1930s, he did spend some time shaping the existing works, publishing them in 1934 in the order he preferred for his *Collected Plays*. Rather than the order in which he wrote them (as I have discussed them herein), he arranged them in the chronological sequence of Cuchulain’s life: *At the Hawk’s Well, The Green Helmet, On Baile’s Strand,* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer. The Death of Cuchulain* was added posthumously to the “new Edition” of his *Collected Plays* in 1952.
As previously stated, Yeats equated his own life with that of Cuchulain and was also rather obsessed with death, primarily his own. When his health began to fail in the fall of 1938, he and Georgie went to the South of France. In August, however, he had seen a revival of *On Baile’s Strand* performed at the Abbey, so with these two thoughts in his mind, it was natural that he would turn to Cuchulain for his final two works. As he was creating the play, *The Death of Cuchulain*, he wrote to Dorothy Wellesley that Cuchulain was “a heroic figure because he was creative joy separated from fear” (qtd. in Brown 375). This seems a fitting image for the dying Yeats; he finished the play January 22, 1939, six days before he died (Marcus 4).

In the saga materials, Cuchulain meets his death at the hands of Maeve’s army; she has returned to get her vengeance for her defeat during the táin. She is accompanied by Calatin’s daughters, three witches whose father had been killed by Cuchulain, and they use various enchantments to get Cuchulain alone, separated from his companions. This time there will be no single combat. Several of the people in Ulster recognize that there is trickery, including Emer and Cathbad, the druid, but Cuchulain will not be deterred, despite numerous bad omens and warnings. It is then that Emer sends Eithne Inguba to try and keep him occupied with sex to give the other warriors time to come to his aid, but he will not be distracted. After being mortally wounded, he ties himself to a standing stone so that he can die fighting. Even so, the host is afraid to approach him until they see a raven (avatar of the goddess of war, the Morrigu) land on his shoulder and know that he is truly dead.

Yeats takes this noble epic death—a man who can only be defeated by magic and trickery and refuses to go down, an appropriate end for the mythic warrior—and imbues
it with his own sense of bitterness and sexual frustration. In the play, Cuchulain is again tricked, Eithne is unsuccessful in persuading him to wait for reinforcements, and he ties his mortally wounded body to a standing stone, but his ultimate demise comes at the hands of the Blind Man from *On Baile’s Strand* who cuts off his head for twelve pennies. Here, I believe we see more Christian symbolism than was present in *On Baile’s Strand*, as Egelson has suggested, but he is betrayed for mere pennies instead of thirty pieces of silver.

Conall Cearnach comes and avenges him by beheading six of the men who slew him. Yeats also brings other women from Cuchulain’s life into the scene as Aoife comes upon him before the blind man, and during a poignant exchange about their dead son, ties him more securely to the pillar with her scarf. As Brown asserts, the scene is “ambiguously sexual; love and hate mingle in their last, confessional conversation together” (375). Emer enters after he is dead and does an elaborate dance raging against the six heads of the killers and “mov[ing] as if in adoration or triumph” with Cuchulain’s severed head in a scene that Richard Cave claims acts to “depersonalize… the self which exactly complements Cuchulain’s own inner progress” (383). This scene is also evocative of Salome with the head of John the Baptist, and Yeats would surely have been familiar with Oscar Wilde’s 1891 play. In Gregory’s version, Emer insists on being buried with Cuchulain in an act of immolation like an Indian Sati. Yeats denies her this deed of selfless abasement, which is somewhat surprising given how heroic his Emer is in *The

66 In 1907, Yeats lobbied hard to have the actress Florence Darragh to play the title role in the Abbey premier of *Deirdre* because had been so impressed by her *Salome* (*Uncollected Prose* 124). I am grateful to Ed Madden for suggesting this connection.
Green Helmet and The Only Jealousy of Emer. Perhaps he is again thinking of his own life and impending death and the young wife he is leaving behind.

As if the parallels between Yeats’s life and that of his hero were not clear enough, this play opens with a monologue from “a very old man looking like something out of mythology.” He tells the audience that he has “been asked to produce a play called The Death of Cuchulain. It is the last of a series of plays which has for its theme his life and death. I have been selected because I am out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the thing is made of” (438). He goes on to talk about how old he is and his ideal audience, which is not more than fifty or a hundred; he begs them “not to shuffle their feet,” bemoans “this vile age,” and professes that the audience must be familiar with the “old epics and Mr. Yeats’s plays about them” (438). He explains that Emer will dance because “where there are no words there is less to spoil,” which seems an odd confession from the poet himself. He expresses his love for a proper dancer, tragi-comedian dancer, the tragic dancer, and then goes into an odd rant about spitting on Degas’s dancers with their “short bodices, their stiff stays, their toes whereon they spin like peg-tops, above all upon that chambermaid face. They might have looked timeless, Ramses the Great, but not the chambermaid, that old maid history. I spit! I spit! I spit!” (439). This odd rambling introduction seems somehow appropriate given Yeats’s own predilection for myth-making, the demand for the perfect audience corresponds to his disillusionment with past audiences, and the final tirade even displays his rather condescending attitude toward the lower classes. The devolution from mythic beginning to irrelevant ranting mirrors Cuchulain’s legendary life to undignified end.
The pity and fear in *The Death of Cuchulain* result from the heroic, sacrificial death of the hero who ties himself to a pillar in order to meet death standing, a death that was fated but still comes too soon and too ignominiously; it also comes from the interaction between Cuchulain and the other familiar characters such as Aoife, Emer and Eithne Inguba. The terrible deed in this play, that of the blind man beheading the helpless, dying hero for twelve pennies, is done in full knowledge and awareness by the murderer. The tragic sacrifice—a theme that haunted Yeats—of Cuchulain symbolizes literal issues that Yeats’s Irish audience would easily understand:

Like the last work of Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, which Yeats adapted for the Abbey Theater in 1927, *The Death of Cuchulain* dramatizes the apotheosis of the tragic hero, who willingly resigns himself to death and transfiguration. It fittingly concludes in the present day (1939) with the literal monumentalization of Cuchulain as *the* heroic political symbol of the modern Irish nation. (Moses 577)

Yeats brings this symbol even more to the foreground with the ending of the play.

The musicians sing:

Are those things that men adore and loathe
Their sole reality?
What stood in the Post Office
With Pearse and Connolly?
What comes out of the mountain
Where men first shed their blood?
Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
He stood where they had stood?

No body like his body
Has modern woman borne,
But an old man looking on life
Imagines it in scorn.
A statue’s there to mark the place,
By Oliver Sheppard done.
So ends the tale that the harlot
Sang to the beggar-man.

These lines refer specifically to the statue of a dying Cuchulain that was raised in the General Post Office as a memorial to the sacrifice of the men and women in the nationalist cause. Metaphorically, these words indicate Yeats’s own sense of culpability in their inevitable sacrifice.

Yeats’s interpretation of this final work is made clearer in letters. According to Phillip Marcus, “In a 1938 letter about his ‘private philosophy,’ Yeats wrote ‘the sensuous image is changed from time to time at predestined moments called Initiationary Moments…. One sensuous image leads to another because they are never analysed. At The Critical Moment they are dissolved by analysis and we enter by free will pure unified experience. When all the sensuous images are dissolved we meet true death’” (qtd. in Marcus 6). He further explains that “this letter suggests that Yeats structured The Death of Cuchulain around a series of ‘critical moments’ in which various ‘sensuous images’ from Cuchulain’s past are analyzed and, presumably, dissolved” (6). This seems an
accurate analysis given the way that Yeats brought back the important figures from Cuchulain’s past (and by extension, his own), especially the women, and ended the action with the ritual cleansing dance of Emer.

The dance is not actually the end of the play, however. The stage goes dark and when the lights come back up, the stage is bare except for the three musicians playing the music of an “Irish street fair of our day” and singing:

The harlot sang to the beggarman.

I meet them face to face,

Conall, Cuchulain, Usna’s boys,

All that most ancient race;

Maeve had three in an hour, they say.

I adore those clever eyes,

Those muscular bodies, but can get

No grip upon their thighs.

I meet those long pale faces,

Hear their great horses, then

Recall what centuries have passed

Since they were living men.

That there are some still living

That do my limbs unclothe,

But that the flesh my flesh has gripped

I both adore and loathe.
Are those things that men adore and loathe
Their sole reality?

Not only does this scene demonstrate that Yeats feels that the myth of Cuchulain is still relevant in the Ireland of his times, but it also has eerie echoes to his most nationalist poem “Easter, 1916.” Meeting the “long pale faces” is like meeting those with the “vivid faces… from “counter or desk.” The questioning of men’s sole reality as things they adore and loathe brings to mind his questions in the final stanza wondering when “will it suffice” and “was it needless death after all?” It also reminds me of the oxymoron of the “terrible beauty.” The final two stanzas of the song bring this relationship even clearer into view as he specifically references the Post Office, Pearse, and Connolly. The fact that the tale was told by a harlot to a beggar-man brings home, in the final words of the play, his disillusionment with the final efforts of the movement, the “needless death” and, perhaps even more so, his utter dismay at the way the Irish Free State was being run. His noble vision of the mythologizing heroic Cuchulain is reduced to a whore’s tale. The playwright has moved from an ideal of a Romantic cultural nationalism to a postcolonial disillusionment.

Yeats began his poetic career as the “last of the Romantics” (qtd. in The Last Romantic), evolved to a more mature but still idealistic nationalist, but ended more cynical and bitter about the way that the Irish “nation” began. His use of the character Cuchulain throughout his life parallels these changes in his personal and political feelings as well as the maturity of his art. He saw himself as “a man / Violent and famous” (“Cuchulain Comforted” ln. 1-2) whose job it was to raise a nation to self-consciousness, to rouse men to action with his words, but in the end, found that “life can grow much
“sweeter” (CC 12) if he would but “make a shroud” (13) as the dead themselves, the Irish martyrs, know that the “rattle of those arms make [them] afraid” (15). In the end, he knew his job was to “sing and sing the best” (19) he could, to memorialize those who were “by kindred slain / Or driven from home and left to die in fear”’ (21-22). In the end, they all “changed, changed utterly” and “They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds” (25).

As Kinsella describes Yeats near the end of his life and career:

With Yeats preoccupied with violence, the spectacle finally is of a mentally active man, at the end of a long and productive speculative career, handling the patterns of human behavior on as large a scale as he can…. Yeats’s last books show a man at the approach of death, finding the place of violence and meaninglessness in man’s best efforts; recognizing that man’s brutality is important, and that it is important to accept it and try to understand it. This has nothing to do with condoning it, but the ‘sweetness’ arising from acceptance is easy (apparently) to mistake for approval. *(Dual Tradition* 80-82)

This play, especially, demonstrates Yeats’s acceptance of mortality, his own of course, and others, but it also shows that violence begets violence. In this case, we see a man capable of incredible violence being permanently silenced by a blind man. One cannot see, but now the other has no more senses at all, so that his lifetime of violent acts has truly made a “stone of the heart.”

The fact that Cuchulain is tied to a stone and more than likely already dead makes the blind man’s act performative but not brave. Some felt that the sacrifice of the Easter
rebels was unnecessary and performative. There are many ways to interpret that opinion, but if the performance was being put on by the British in an effort to make a statement, to teach the Irish a lesson, it backfired. The pitiful nature of Cuchulain’s beheading also backfires in the play, as all the women who have loved him gather to mourn him and as his glory lives on just as Cathbad predicted, or at least in the plays by Yeats. While all of the Cuchulain texts produced by Yeats make comments on his personal life and his thoughts on Irish politics, I think it is this one that is most clearly an allegory for Yeats’s life and career. More than anything, I believe all of the Cuchulain works by Yeats give us a glimpse into the complicated relationship Yeats had with love and nationalism.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

“The lesson of Irish history: things don’t get lost,
they get translated” (Kiberd, interview)

During the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, Ireland experienced two revolutions. The first was a cultural revival during which various cultural markers, such as language, sports, music, dance, theater, and literature were transformed and reclaimed as specifically Irish in origin and content. The second revolution was political and embraced some of the concepts from the literature of the cultural revival, such as the philosophy of blood sacrifice.

The cultural revolution paved the way for the political. In order to achieve decolonization, the Irish needed to “imagine” a new community, in the words of Benedict Anderson, a community that hearkened back to a distant past before the British colonized the island. If they were to construct an idea of “Irishness,” a concept that had been made into an insult as the British sought to distinguish the Irish “other” from themselves, then they needed something on which to base it, and that something was provided in large part by the writings of O’Grady, Gregory, and Yeats. Unlike in their other colonies, appearances did not really distinguish the Irish from any other group in the British Isles, so the British constructed their otherness [or difference] through their own literature and media. This tradition of stereotyping the Irish extends back to Edmund Spenser’s allegorical references in *The Faerie Queene* and, even more so, his pointed descriptions
of Irish as licentious lewd cannibals in *A View of the State of Ireland* in 1633, continued with the “Stage Irish” figure of British theatre, and found further expression in pictures of Irish as dark and bestial in newspaper and magazine illustrations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Through this tradition of representation, the British created stereotypes of the Irish as uncivilized, immoral, drunks and lechers.

The three authors discussed herein sought to subvert these stereotypes by bringing ancient tales of heroes found in medieval manuscripts dating as far back as the twelfth century to their contemporary Irish audiences. Ironically, all three were of the Anglo-Irish landlord class, who typically thought of themselves more British than Irish. Standish O’Grady believed, however, in the dignity and worth of the Irish, even though he did not advocate for political independence. Lady Augusta Gregory came to believe in the cause of independence through a gradual process, but also long defended the dignity of the Irish and especially Irish literature. W. B. Yeats had the most complicated relationship throughout his life as he went from passionate love for Ireland nationalism to criticism of the bloody wars. His governing concerns (and his criticism of the direction of the Irish government) as a senator in the Irish Free State led to a cynicism, though he turned back to a more personal connection near his death. Regardless of their personal feelings about the political processes, all three were instrumental in giving birth to a cultural awakening primarily through their translations of the Cuchulain myth.

If Kiberd is right that “Writing is an alternative to violence” (interview), then perhaps O’Grady, Gregory, and Yeats did more than signal a cultural revolution that would eventually result in military and political ones. In a public interview conducted by Tom McGurk at Notre Dame’s O’Connell House campus in 2009, Kiberd further posited
that “words are the weapons of a disarmed people. You cannot win an argument by sheer military force, you can only win it by the power of your discourse. Irish writing has always been in a double voice – not just meant to be heard at home but also heard abroad.” By reclaiming the myths transcribed in Old Irish, a language only a few scholars could interpret, and putting them into contemporary Irish (as Meyer and O’Curry did), and then from contemporary Irish into English, as Gregory and some of her predecessors did, they were effectively claiming triple speech.

While he seemed very clear about his desires, O’Grady’s aims actually were muddled and confused. He wanted to give the Irish something of which to be proud and to emulate, but he was also very aware of his status as part of the upper class. This arrogance led to the belief that he could “teach” the Irish how to be rather than accept them as they were; his was a very paternalistic (imperial) attitude. This confusion resulted in a jumble of styles and repeated attempts to improve upon the previous attempt, as if he were privately drafting not publishing version after version with slightly different titles. As a result, he essentially wrote three “histories,” all of which heavily featured Cuchulain, often even using the exact same scenarios and language; he later wrote two novels Cuculain: An Epic and The Coming of Cuculain. His writing styles and revisions reflected the confusion in both his agenda and methods, as he mixed an objective dry journalistic style with soaring flights of fancy and expression, as though in the Gothic tradition of the sublime. He wrote Romantic histories in which the beauty and inspiration mattered more than accuracy or at least faithfulness to the manuscript materials.

Gregory took these same tales and used them to demonstrate the worth of Irish literature to the public at large and specifically to supercilious professors from Trinity
College, who believed there was nothing of worth in Irish literature. She set out to tell a story, Cuchulain’s story. Unlike O’Grady, she did not plan to write a “history,” and so was also not constrained by facts or any ideas of historicity, but she still was much more faithful to the actual tales. Since the manuscripts themselves had confusing, redundant, and even variant details of most stories, however, she was able to pick and choose which versions and details to relay. The result was the first popular and widely disseminated rendition of these ancient tales and important glimpses into the “indigenous Irish.” Not only did her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* prove the dignity of Irish literature, as she had proposed, it also made these stories available for others to use and adapt. This book, probably more than any other text, helped further the cause of nationalism by disseminating the story of the hero who would become the primary symbol of the cultural and political movements.

W. B. Yeats had possibly the most complicated relationship with Ireland and Irish nationalism, which was reflected in his long running and complicated use of Cuchulain as a character in poetry and drama throughout his career. As a young man, Yeats fell in love with Maud Gonne who was a passionate advocate for Irish nationalism, and he followed her lead. He wrote a number of nationalist poems and plays including his first Cuchulain play during this time as well. He would go on to write four plays more with varying symbols often reflecting his own mercurial attitude toward the cause. In the final play, *The Death of Cuchulain*, written just weeks before his own death, Yeats seems to identify with his hero in a more personal way than ever before, making Cuchulain his avatar expressing a life worth living but a death that felt meaningless and futile.
A more comprehensive examination of the Cuchulain myth not focused on the nationalist era, as this project has been, would certainly consider the works of Austin Clarke, Cecile O’Rahilly, Thomas Kinsella, and Ciaran Carson. Austin Clarke, as most young poets of the early twentieth century, emulated Yeats in many ways. His early works took Irish saga material as their base, as had Yeats’s. Although he turned to different subjects and themes in his later career, he continued to use Irish bardic techniques. Combining these techniques with frank and sexual subject matter actually brought him closer to the original bards than any other author until Kinsella. Clarke’s use of the tales in *The Sword of the West* (1921) and *The Cattledrive in Connaught and Other Poems* (1925) were critically acclaimed, but as Kinsella notes, he abandoned this style for twenty years, not returning to bardic techniques until *Ancient Lights*, in which he used half-rhymes and internal assonances in a Gaelic manner (*Dual* 95-96). Seamus Deane says that Clarke’s “somewhat noble, but broken, career” was a disappointment (Deane, *Revivals* 145). Undeniably part of this Cuchulain literary genealogy, and inevitably part of a longer, future version of this project, Clarke’s works arguably failed to have the kind of impact or continuing cultural focus that Kinsella’s work has had. Likewise, Cecile O’Rahilly’s scholarly work sponsored by The Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies in the 1960s and 70s has been invaluable academically but had little impact on the wider public.

Deane contrasts Clarke’s “broken” career to Kinsella’s, which he claims is “a testimony to the enabling strength of a tradition, of a sense of continuity which is greater than the sense of fragmentation” (*Revivals* 145). As newly formed postcolonial regimes give way to more measured approaches, the most difficult obstacles to overcome are often economic. This is especially true of Ireland, which, due to its physical proximity to
England and the continued presence of the British in the north, had nearly inextricable ties to its former colonizers. The post-World War II era saw a rise in global nationalisms, the idea that no nation-states exist in a vacuum and that despite the toppling of the European empires, many colonies/colonizers, allies/foes must work together to survive in the current international economies. It would be constructive to examine the way that Kinsella uses Cuchulain to shape a new, international Irish identity while perpetuating, in many ways, the old stereotypes of the Irish as violent and aggressive.

Numerous translators have used the Book of Leinster manuscript as it is the best preserved, but for his 1969 rendition, The Táin, Kinsella goes back to the older and, in his opinion, better version from the Book of the Dun Cow. Kinsella, in his attempt to legitimate Irish literature of the past, produces a faithful translation leaving in, and even celebrating, the earthier, sexier, bloodier aspects of the tales. His version reflects the literary values of the times in which he lives. Just as Lady Gregory’s works are products of a more prudish era, Kinsella’s are a product of a more violent, sexually liberated and unconventional age that is self-consciously striving to break away from the works of the immediate past.

During archival research on Kinsella at the Emory Manuscript and Rare Books Library (MARBL), I was able to examine troves of invaluable materials such as personal correspondence, his notes about various projects, and longhand drafts of pages of The Táin. It was there that I learned that Kinsella is vehemently Irish in his identity and opposed to being considered Anglo-Irish or British in any way. Kinsella claims that his translations are an effort to give Ireland’s past back to the nation, a responsibility to his own history and culture; he himself is a product of postcolonial attitudes. Born in
suburban Dublin in 1928, he grew up during the oppressive De Valera state and witnessed the coming of the Republic in 1949. He was intimately involved in the new economic agendas of the 1950s and 60s as private secretary to T. K. Whitaker. Kinsella eventually moved to America, the only place he could get a university job, which would allow him to publish poetry and translations full time while also continuing to work toward a goal of legitimizing Irish literature as a course of study in universities. Despite their very different approaches to the sexual and violent material, Kinsella’s and Lady Gregory’s goals were not so different after all—both were striving in their own ways and in their own times to bring respect to the Irish epic materials and Irish literature as a whole.

Kinsella’s version of the characters and the tales reflect both the earlier manuscript tradition and the era during which he is working. Kinsella, however, claimed to have no overt political or social agenda and to have “worked hard to stay free of all such accidental matters” (personal correspondence), but instead is ostensibly creating his translation for purely literary and aesthetic reasons. It is impossible, however, for anyone to be completely devoid of personal biases no matter how subtle. The Táin had effectively become the “national epic,” and as such was free to be adapted to the tastes and needs of various periods. Kinsella, as so many before him, quite successfully took from the Táin what he needed and fashioned the story and the characters according to his design; the results are very different from previous versions such as those of O’Grady,

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67 T. K. Whitaker was the Secretary of the Department of Finance, and in 1958 Ireland adopted his plan that encouraged foreign investment in Ireland at a time when the economy was in dire straits. Kinsella later satirizes these policies in his poetry despite a continued personal relationship with Whitaker, who helped him get a grant to work on The Táin and to whom he dedicated An Duanaire.
Gregory, and Yeats. Despite using the same or similar tales, Kinsella employs a distinctive style and depicts the same characters with different attitudes—attitudes that more clearly reflected Ireland in its contemporary form, post Republic.68

In 2008, Ciaran Carson became the first major author from Northern Ireland to produce a translation of *The Táin*. Northern Ireland, as a contested land battered by violence and terrorism over the years, has long been a microcosm of the seething resentments caused by colonization, partition, and religious persecution—issues which plague today’s world more violently than ever. Cuchulain, as a figure who can and has been claimed by both sides in the ongoing struggle, represents not only what can tear apart a land but what can conceivably reunite it as well. Praising Kinsella’s version and claiming that his own should be seen as a tribute to Kinsella, Carson never fully explains his reasons, or the necessity, for a new edition. Coming ten years after the Belfast Agreement, however, Carson’s translation can be seen as an attempt to mythologize the violence of his homeland, thereby distancing current events from the violence of the recent past.

In personal correspondence with Carson, he insisted to me that his version is not intended to replace Kinsella’s but to honor the work that came before and stressed to me the sentence in the introduction where he states, “And for better or for worse, my

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68 Ireland’s progression to freedom came about in stages: The Free State offered a measure of political freedom but was still a dominion of the British Commonwealth and owed fealty to the king (1922-1948). They became the Republic of Ireland in 1949, breaking all political ties with the Commonwealth. The constitutions of both the Free State and the Republic clearly stated that the six counties in the north were included in the definition of “Ireland,” but that they were exempt from the laws of the Irish government; the peace accords of 1998 changed this and allowed the people of the north to declare themselves citizens of Ireland, Great Britain, or both.
translation will be seen as a commentary on Kinsella; I hope it will also be taken as a 
tribute” (xxv). He does, however, claim that he felt there were areas to expand or improve 
upon. In response to my question about his decision to take on the project, which was 
commissioned by literary critic Marcella Edwards for Penguin Classics, he says,

The translation would never have happened had it not been commissioned. 
I did hesitate a little - but not too much - before I took it on. When I did 
begin to look at the Old Irish originals it seemed to me I could do things 
that Kinsella had not done. Besides the many ambiguities in the texts, 
which can be construed in several ways, there was the crucial question of 
register, and especially the black humour which runs through the 
narratives, which I felt Kinsella did not sometimes appreciate; or he failed 
to register it. I was not so much concerned with topicality as that mix of 
genres and styles which I describe in my Introduction.

Carson does blend more humor into his prose as well as modern terminology (even 
slang), which, mixed in with the more stilted language of the originals can be quite funny. 
He often refers to a person as “your man,” for example, a ubiquitous term in Irish 
conversation today.

One editorial choice that Carson makes that is quite different is to include the 
remscéla only as end notes rather than sprinkled throughout as they came up naturally. 
He says he wanted to “cut straight to the chase… Kinsella’s approach cluttered the 
beginning of what is by itself a complex narrative, and I wanted to lead the reader straight 
into that. Certainly, as a reader of the Kinsella, I felt that the remscéla were something of 
a distraction” (Interview). While certainly a valid choice, he the fills his own text with
copious footnotes on the etymology of names and places that themselves, one might argue, are distracting and "clutter" the flow.

Some common themes in Kinsella and Carson are cultural geography and the origins and meaning of names, which corresponds to an older type of Irish poetry called *dinnseanchas* or "the lore of place names." *The Táin* is practically a geography lesson in itself, as I discussed in the introduction as well as the chapter on Gregory, there was a popular folkloric memory of older place names; the loss of such names during the Anglicization of the land when the British created new maps makes these lessons even more valuable to the Republic and the North. Both the similarities and differences in Kinsella and Carson's adaptations will make for fascinating and important scholarship, especially given the ever-changing relationship between the Republic and Northern Ireland and the appropriations of Cuchulain by both sides in their struggles.

Carson’s Cuchulain is complicated though by a recent upsurge in Unionist claims on the hero. Some Northern Irish historians assert that an ancient people, known as the Cruthin, populated pre-historic Ulster and were subsequently chased into Scotland by the invading European Celts. By this logic, the Scots who settled the Ulster Plantation in the seventeenth century were simply reclaiming what was originally theirs (Adamson). By identifying Cuchulain with both Ulster and the Cruthin, the Unionists can employ him as their own hero, one who symbolizes a lasting relationship with Great Britain. The Irish nationalists of the early twentieth century would surely disagree as they had appropriated Cuchulain as the epitome of the Irish stand against imperialism. The famous murals of

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69 According to Brendán Ó Buachalla, serious historians do not give much credence to this theory, but further research may change ideas.
Northern Ireland perfectly epitomize this dichotomous nature of the warrior as he appears equally in Unionist and Republican illustrations. Examining Carson’s rendition as well as these pictorial and other representations brings the discussion of Cuchulain up to the present day and explores his continued usefulness as a symbol for the twenty-first century. A fuller examination of the ongoing and multiple uses of Cuchulain in Irish culture would examine these murals (for both sides) in Belfast, Derry, and Armagh, as well as other cultural forms, such as comic books in Belfast, and even a recent advertising campaign by Guinness that features Cuchulain in a hurling match.

To close, I would like to turn back once more to Kiberd’s invaluable contributions to the study of how the Irish invented themselves. In a recent interview, he expressed the concept of the variant shades not just of Yeats as the following quote states but also in the tales and styles that all these authors use and how they work together to create an ever-shifting Ireland both then and now. During the interview, Tom McGurk claimed, “There were many Yeatses and he reinvented himself every 10 years.” Kiberd agreed responding:

Not only that, when he published his poems, he sometimes rewrote them and when people complained that they didn’t “get” his poems, he said: “they do not know what is at stake; it is myself that I remake.” Yeats actually saw the Irish self a bit like the Irish nation as a project, a work in progress, it was something still to be achieved, Yeats actually believed the cliché unfinished business about the self, about the human personality… Ireland will reinvent itself whether you try and assist the process or not but it is definitely a work in progress and what is so fascinating is that now, in
a multicultural Ireland, we have to try to understand the cultures that are being brought in and respect them but also the ways in which our own traditional culture may interlock.

This “cultural interlock” seems a fascinating and hopeful way to move forward with the study of how literature—especially, in this case, adaptations of the Cuchulain tales—contributes to our understanding of shifting national and cultural identities. This is especially true in today’s climate of hyper-nationalism, a term that has been coopted to mean only people who look and sound like the powerful can gain any agency at all, rather than the way it was used by colonies in the early to mid-twentieth century.

This study of translations and adaptations of the Cuchulain myths in the nationalist period in Ireland will help further the conversation about the role of literature in nationalist movements, specifically in Ireland but more broadly in all current and former colonies. All of the works by the primary authors I discuss herein had their parts to play. Standish O’Grady’s histories, while not notable in literary terms perhaps, did usher in the use of saga materials, especially the stories of Cuchulain, as important to the cultural revival. Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* brought these stories to the world by making them popular, white-washing parts such as the role of strong women and Cuchulain’s bloodier feats and warp-spasm, but doing so in order to satisfy her Victorian audience.

Yeats was less concerned with the cause of demonstrating that Irish literature was worthy of reading and studying and more with his own personal and political relationships. His use of the Cuchulain myth essentially bookended his career as the first came about in 1892 and the last mere weeks before the author’s death. Yeats was also not
concerned with being faithful to the tales—even the redundant, fragmented versions from the manuscripts—but rather used the character as a type of avatar. He was not the warrior type, perhaps the type Gonne was attracted to given her marriage to one of the eventual 1916 martyrs, but Cuchulain was the ultimate warrior. While Yeats could not swing a sword, he wielded his pen to more powerful effect. His five-play cycle reflected not only his own life, but also his perspective on the cultural and political revivals of the times, from his romantic nationalist leanings of his youth, to his concern about the use of violence, to his disillusionment with the government as it was first instituted.

All together these texts can help us understand the ways that mythic figures may function in emerging nationalist and postcolonial contexts. Countless critics have established the power of myth, and this study adds to that body of knowledge by demonstrating the power a specific myth, tales of Cuchulain, had to generate a revolution. Leerssen has “highlighted cultural expressions as a central and guiding aspect of political nationalism, rather than as merely a by-product” (Netherlands). The “cultural expressions” used by these three authors indeed added to—if not created—a cultural revival that led inexorably to political independence.
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