

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: THE WOMEN OF THE ABBEY THEATRE, 1897 – 1925
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The Abbey Theatre was established in Dublin in 1904 as part of the Irish cultural Renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through the efforts of men and women who sought to create a theatre that would produce indigenous Irish drama using native Irish actors and actresses. Although substantial evidence exists suggesting that the contributions of the women involved with the establishment of the Abbey Theatre, such as Lady Augusta Gregory, Annie Horniman, Sara Allgood, and Sarah Purser, were significant, historians of this period have tended to focus instead on the contributions of the men connected with the theatre.

This study highlights the contributions of these and other women to the establishment and perpetuation of the Abbey Theatre from its inception in 1897 until the granting of a governmental subsidy in 1925. Women's contributions are explored in areas of theatrical practice, such as design, management, acting, and playwriting, and are

grounded within the multiple social, political, historical, religious, and cultural contexts of the period.

In addition, several tensions or conflicts existed at the Abbey Theatre in which women played major roles. These conflicts included a clash between the nationalists, who desired to use the Abbey as a political forum, and the artists, who insisted on creating an art theatre; discord between the English and Irish cultures present at the Abbey; and, at the most basic level, tensions between the women and men who worked to create the theatre.

The study concludes that women actively participated in all areas of theatrical practice at the Abbey Theatre initially; that the Abbey utilized women more than any other theatre in Dublin at the time; but that women did not flourish at the Abbey because their roles in the theatre were consistently diminished as the theatre itself became a more commercial enterprise.

The University of Maryland

THE WOMEN OF THE ABBEY THEATRE
1897-1925

by

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Ireland is a country in which the political conflicts are at least genuine: they are about patriotism, about religion, or about money: the three great realities.

G. K. Chesterton, Letter to George Bernard Shaw

Ireland is a country of complexity and contradiction.

There is the Ireland of the travel guide, which might read something like this:

Ireland's siren song begins with the whisper of lush green fields, swells with the clatter of her busy streets, and crescendos with the laughter of her robust people. The "Emerald Isle" is a true jewel—her land an impossibly vivid green encircled with a setting of natural rock fences and dotted throughout with picturesque white sheep; a quiet, peaceful, restful place. Her cities, meanwhile, chatter with the tireless footfalls of pedestrians, the noisy rush of the taxis, and the loud rumble of the trains that crisscross the land, connecting her people throughout the country. The beauty of Ireland is only surpassed by the charm of her people; quick to laugh and ready to smile, the Irish people radiate acceptance, an attitude expressed by the country's slogan *Cead Mille Failte*—a Hundred Thousand Welcomes—and originated in its ancient heritage and culture.¹

But there is also an Ireland as conceived by the English, their onetime conquerors. In this view, Ireland, even though now a mostly independent country, continues to be viewed as an area on the margins of England and English culture, an area that often causes political trouble, an area largely untamable: Ireland and the Irish are different, lesser.

¹ Echoes of such descriptions of Ireland can be found in numerous travel books, such as Thomas Keneally, *Now and In Time to Be: Ireland and the Irish* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991); Rupert O. Matthews, *Ireland in Color* (New York: Exter Books, 1984); Jonathan Tourtellat, ed., *Discovering Britain and Ireland* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1985).

England's current sense of superiority has a potent recent history. "The skulls of the natives [of Ireland] are fabricated of different materials to those of all the world besides," observed W. H. Maxwell, an Englishman in the 1830s, who also noted that the Irish, "like all wild people...are absurdly credulous, and open to the grossest superstitions."² "The extra thickness of their skulls," reported Col. Hamilton Smith in the 1840s, "adapts them to their condition in Life," which included driving rains, roads fit only for native ponies, severe overpopulation, high rents, cold-hearted agents, and whiskey stills.³

Ireland as seen by its own people is yet another, starkly different land. This Ireland boasts a long and vital culture, beginning almost 4,000 years before the Christian Era, with striking art hidden away in burial sites that predate both England's Stonehenge and Egypt's pyramids. By the fifth-century, Irish Christians had created elaborate, superbly carved high-crosses, by the twelfth century, stunning church architecture, and an elaborately hand-illuminated copy of the four Gospels, the Book of Kells.⁴ By the end of the sixteenth century, Irishmen who could afford it were studying at Trinity College, Dublin; the less affluent were learning reading, Latin, and mathematics at informal hedge-schools, local teachers teaching three or four neighborhood children.⁵

² [W. H. Maxwell], *Wild Sports of the West, With Legendary Tales and Local Sketches*, vol. 2 (London: Bentley, [1938]), 59.

³ Col. Hamilton Smith quoted in Henry Newland, *The Erne, Its Legends and Its Fly-Fishing* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1851), 129. For description of Irish life see Maxwell, vol. 2, 1, 150, 285-6.

⁴ Sources on early and medieval Irish culture include Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1995); Maire and Liam de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland, Ancient Peoples and Places*, ed. Glyn Daniel, no. 8 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958); Michael Ryan, ed., *Irish Archeology Illustrated* (Dublin: Country House, 1994); Geraldine Stout, *The Bend of the Boyne: An Archeological Landscape*, The Irish Treasures Series (Dublin: Town House and Country House, 1997).

⁵ For a more detailed description of education in medieval Ireland see Cahill and de Paor; the founding of Trinity College is cited in numerous histories, including Edmund Curtis, *A History of Ireland From Earliest Times to 1922* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1936; reprint, London: Routledge, 2002); for a history of hedge schools see Patrick John Dowling, *The Hedge Schools of Ireland* (New York: Green and Co., 1935); Niall O Ciosain, "Swine-tax and Eat-Him-All-Magee: The Hedge Schools and Popular Education in

All such views of Ireland—and more—can be seen in its quite substantial literature. Oral history, in the form of songs, folktales, and folklore was handed down generation to generation until finally set down in writing. Irish writers—poets, novelists, short story writers—extended this heritage, from anonymous poets of the middle ages, through Jonathan Swift and Thomas Sterne in the eighteenth century; Maria Edgeworth, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross, Thomas Moore, and Speranza (Lady Jane Wilde) in the nineteenth century, and James Joyce in the.⁶ Irish dramatists also flourished, from Oliver Goldsmith in the 1700s through the flowering of the Irish Renaissance playwrights (e.g., W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, Sean O’Casey, and Lady Augusta Gregory) at the turn into the twentieth century.⁷

Irish theatre, too, has had a long and celebrated history. Dublin was the most important of England’s provincial centers of theatre dating from 1637 when Dublin was granted its own Master of Revels.⁸ Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

Ireland,” in James S. Donnelly, Jr., and Kerby A. Miller, eds., *Irish Popular Culture, 1650-1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998).

⁶ The literary traditions of Ireland are documented in numerous sources, including Seamus Deane, general editor, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 5 vols. (Lawrence Hill, Derry, Northern Ireland: Field Day Publications, 1991-2000); Robert Hogan, *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996); Norman Vance, *Irish Literature Since 1800*, Longman Literature in English Series (New York: Longman, 2002).

⁷ See Ernest A. Boyd, *Ireland’s Literary Renaissance* (New York: John Lane Company, 1916); Herbert Howarth, *The Irish Writers, 1880-1940* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958); Andrew E. Malone, *The Irish Drama* (London: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1929; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1965); A. E. Morgan, "The Irish Pioneers (Yeats, Martyn, and Gregory)," in *Tendencies of Modern English Drama* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924); Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to a Nation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997); W. P. Ryan *The Irish Literary Revival: Its History, Pioneers, and Possibilities* (London: by the author, 1894; reprint, New York: Lemma Publishing Corporation, 1970); Cornelius Weygandt, *Irish Plays and Playwrights* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1913).

⁸ Sources on early Irish theatre include W. R. Chetwood, *A General History of the Stage (More Particularly the Irish Theatre) from its Origin in Greece Down to the Present Time* (Dublin: E. Rider, 1749); William Smith Clark, *The Early Irish Stage: The Beginnings to 1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955); Robert Hitchcock, *An Historical View of the Irish Stage; From the Earliest Period Down to the Close of the Season 1788* (Dublin: R. Marchbank, No. 11, Dame-Street, 1788); La Tourette Stockwell, *Dublin Theatres and Theatre Customs (1637-1820)* (Bronx, NY: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1938; reissued, New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1968).

Irish playwrights, such as Goldsmith, Richard Brindsley Sheridan, George Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde, and actors and actresses, such as John Moody, Charles Macklin, Thomas Doggett, James Quinn, and Peg Woffington fed the London stage. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, the Celtic Revival sparked a desire to establish a native Irish theatre, utilizing its own playwrights, actors, managers, etc. This need to create an indigenous theatre set up a tension between the colonial expectations of England and the vision of a new, Irish theatrical tradition.

By the early years of the twentieth century, the Abbey Theatre was the premiere theatre of Ireland. From its opening in 1904, this fledgling theatre encouraged the development of indigenous Irish drama and encouraged unproven playwrights by creating an environment in which they could refine their plays and perfect their craft. Then, the Abbey boldly sent those plays on world-wide tours that promoted Ireland and Irish culture; unexpectedly, they also influenced theatre practice elsewhere. One example of this influence was the Abbey Theatre becoming the practical blueprint for the Little Theatre Movement in America.⁹

Ireland's rich cultural legacy, however, remains haunted by the contradictory versions of its nature, conflicting visions that continue to express themselves in long-standing tensions. Conflicts between the English and the Irish dates back to England's first intervention in Irish politics: the King of Breffney sought Henry II's help to wage war with his neighbor, the King of Leinster, and the foreign troops Henry sent remained

⁹ Important histories of the early Abbey Theatre include Dawson Byrne, *The Story of Ireland's National Theatre: The Abbey Theatre, Dublin* (New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1929; reprint, New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1971); Gerard Fay, *The Abbey Theatre: Cradle of Genius* (Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, Ltd., 1958); William G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre: An Autobiographical Record* (London: Rich & Cowan, Ltd., 1935); Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography. The Coole Edition of the Works of Lady Gregory*, ed. T. R. Henn and Colin Smythe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Lennox Robinson, comp., *Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History, 1899-1951* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, Limited, 1951).

long after the conflict ended. England's colonization of Ireland intensified under Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, a domination that continued into the twentieth century. Alternately "preponderant" and "oppressive" for the first three hundred years of its "internal colonialism," England added severe economic exploitation by the nineteenth century.¹⁰ At this time, according to Michael Hechter, the nation of Ireland emerged and took shape in consciousness: "Until the advent of industrial capitalism, the colonial situation was latent and obscured; thereafter it became clear and manifest."¹¹

Changing relations between England and Ireland evoked changed feeling among its people. The majority of native Irish people deeply resented the English invaders and tried to overthrow British rule at every opportunity. Those Irish who favored the British rule, the Loyalists, were mostly descended from the original English soldiers and their families, sent to Ireland by the British crown. Even among the nationalists, however, there were conflicts, between those who sought primarily political emancipation and those who sought primarily an affirmation of Irish cultural worth: "cultural nationalism is a force in its own right, and one that exists in a contrapuntal relationship with political nationalism."¹² For example, John Hutchinson has argued that, with the fall of Parnell in 1891, came an end to the political movement for home rule in Ireland, its place taken by the growth of cultural nationalists who sought to "propagate their Gaelic ideals." These cultural nationalists would then "promote a vision of a new Irish moral community, until such time as a new wave of political nationalism, drawing on the work of the cultural

¹⁰ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 59 summarizing chapters three and four of Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

¹¹ Smith, 58, summarizing Hechter, chapter 5.

¹² Smith, 74, summarizing chapter 4 of John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

nationalists, could be taken up where Parnell had left off.”¹³ Among colonized people, then, “where political nationalism fails or is exhausted, we find cultural nationalists providing new models and tapping different kinds of collective energies, thereby mobilizing larger numbers of hitherto unaffected members of the community.”¹⁴ The turn into the twentieth century was just such a time of transition, when political and cultural nationalists vied for supremacy.

Intertwining these strains were the tensions between Catholics and Protestants. When English troops settled in Northern Ireland during the reign of Henry VIII, they brought their new Protestant faith with them into a country uniformly Catholic since the fifth century. The bitter struggle that ensued, as the English religion sought supremacy over the Irish, has remained bloody and unresolved for more than four centuries.¹⁵

A final enmity that exists in Ireland is the only one not to have roots in the English/Irish conflict: the tension between men and women. This opposition, common in many cultures, probably gained strength in Irish Catholicism, which stresses the supremacy of the male over the female. Throughout the history of Catholic Ireland, women have been taught that men count, women do not. The precise ways in which issues of church and state intersect those of women and men have not been well explored.¹⁶ Empirical evidence suggests that women often affect—and are affected by—

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Representative works that detail the English/Irish and Catholic/Protestant conflicts include Andrew Boyd, *Holy War in Belfast: A History of the Troubles in Northern Ireland*, First American Edition (New York: Grove Press, 1972); Liam Kennedy, *Colonialism, Religion, and Nationalism in Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University of Belfast, 1996); Oliver Macdonagh, *States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict, 1780-1980* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983); Marcus Tanner, *Ireland’s Holy Wars: The Struggle for a Nation’s Soul, 1500-2000* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Smith, 205.

changes in church and nationhood in ways vastly different from men.¹⁷ Recognized, too, are ways in which women serve as powerful symbols of church and nation, as the very words mother church and motherland quickly capture.¹⁸ Whatever the precise relationships among women, church, nation, and men, strong strains of hostility toward women are often visible just below the surface. This sentiment has expressed itself both boldly and subtly in Irish culture.

One example of this animosity can be found in the popular Irish travel book *Dublin, A Lonely Planet City Guide*. This guidebook lists, among the attractions of the city, many statues that point to Ireland's great traditions. Many are political leaders of Ireland, such as Daniel O'Connell and William Smith O'Brien, or Jim Larkin, described as "trade union leader and organizer of the 1913 general strike, . . . seen in a dramatic pose, throwing his arms in the air."¹⁹ In addition, there are listed three statues depicting women said to be symbolic of Ireland: Anna Livia, Molly Malone, and two unnamed contemporary women. These statues, however, differ from those of the men; they have been given nicknames, unflattering—even disrespectful—nicknames. The statue of Anna Livia, the spirit of the River Liffey immortalized in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, is a fountain that depicts a woman reclined in flowing water; its nickname is "'the floozy in the jacuzzi."²⁰ Molly Malone, the street-seller made famous in the song "Cockles and Mussels," is "rendered in such extreme *dishabille* that she's nicknamed 'the tart with the

¹⁷ Smith cites and summarizes several such studies, 206.

¹⁸ Smith, 207-8.

¹⁹ Tom Smallman, Pat Yale, and Tony Wheeler, *Dublin, a Lonely Planet City Guide* (Oakland, CA: Lonely Planet Publications, 1996), 154. Daniel O'Connell, a lawyer in early nineteenth-century Dublin, was a great political organizer and leader of the Irish Catholics. Through his efforts Catholics gained political clout when they became eligible to be elected to Parliament. R. F. Foster, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 186-7. William Smith O'Brien was a leader of the Young Ireland Party, sentenced to death for high treason; his sentence, however, was commuted and he was transported to Tasmania. Curtis, 316-7.

²⁰ Smallman, Yale, and Wheeler, 238.

cart.”²¹ And the statue of two Dublin women, sitting on a bench with their shopping bags around them, is “dubbed, in typically irreverent Dublin fashion, ‘the hags with the bags.’”²² Despite Ireland’s personification as woman, as Dark Rosaleen or as the *Shan Van Vocht* (Poor Old Woman), women’s participation in most aspects of public life has been marginalized. Where that participation is acknowledged, the recognition itself is skewed. This pattern is longstanding in Ireland.

Beyond the disrespectful nicknames, these statues provide another clue to women’s position in Ireland. The statues erected of men are of *real* men, political or literary men, but the statues to women are of imaginary or symbolic women. Yet real women made contributions to Irish society and Irish culture. In the Irish Renaissance, for example, as Elizabeth Coxhead pointed out, “political, literary and artistic . . . women played a vital part, fought, plotted, planned, wrote, painted, acted, alongside their male comrades as equals, and while most of these comrades were languishing in English gaols, kept the revolutionary spirit alive.”²³

Both the cultural importance of the Abbey Theatre and the Irish tendency to ignore or undervalue the real contributions of real women combine to suggest an interesting but as yet unexplored question: What kinds of contributions did women make to the Abbey Theatre?

Scholars focusing on women’s contributions in other theatres have made astonishing discoveries. Yolanda Gonzalez’s study, “Toward a Re-Vision of Chicano Theatre History: The Women of El Teatro Campesino,” demonstrated that women's

²¹ Ibid., 142.

²² Ibid., 114.

²³ Elizabeth Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin: Five Women of the Irish Renaissance* (Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 1979), 13.

contributions to this theatrical movement were significant but had not been documented.²⁴ John Fuegi's *Brecht and Company* showed that women collaborated with Bertolt Brecht on his plays but were largely ignored by theatre historians.²⁵ Most recently, Cheryl Black in *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922*, detailed the defining contributions of women to Provincetown, confirming that Gonzalez's and Fuegi's works were not capturing isolated instances, and confirming that studies that focus on women can correct the perceptions of the value of women's participation in theatre.²⁶ Black's study found that women's participation was strongest during the theatre's formative years, reason enough for this study to focus on the years between 1897, when the initial idea for an Irish theatre was formulated, and 1925 when the theatre first received a subsidy from the new Irish government.

This study seeks, in the words of Ann Fior Scott, to "make the invisible woman visible."²⁷ Such a study is both timely and necessary. A history of women's contributions to the Abbey Theatre has yet to be written (let alone such a history for the Irish theatre as a whole). In fact, current scholarship on women at the Abbey can only be described as sparse. A few studies highlight the contributions of certain major figures, such as Maud Gonne, Lady Gregory, and Annie Horniman; however, large gaps in the current knowledge exist about all other women in the theatre.²⁸ No scholarly work currently

²⁴ Yolanda Broyles Gonzalez, "Toward a Re-Vision of Chicano Theatre History: The Women of El Teatro Campesino," in Lynda Hart, ed., *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989).

²⁵ John Fuegi, *Brecht and Company* (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

²⁶ Cheryl Black, *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002).

²⁷ Ann Fior Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984). The phrase comes from the title of the book and one of her essays.

²⁸ Studies on Maud Gonne include Margery Brady, *The Love Story of Yeats and Maud Gonne* (Dublin: Mercer Press, 1990); Nancy Cardozo, *Maud Gonne: Lucky Eyes and a High Heart* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1979); Elizabeth Coxhead, "Maud Gonne," chapter in *Daughters of Erin: Five Women of*

exists that treats the dynamics of the women involved with the early Abbey Theatre; nothing examines the reasons for their involvement in the Irish National Theatre; nothing documents their often crucial contributions to the Abbey. At a time in history, when women's studies have yielded such important information, the failure to study the role of women in the foundation of the Abbey Theatre is disgraceful.

Scholars of the period agree that the idea for a literary theatre, which ultimately led to the formation of the Abbey, began in a meeting between Lady Gregory, William Butler Yeats, and Edward Martyn at Dumas House, County Clare, in 1897.²⁹ There they agreed to form the Irish Literary Theatre, dedicated to producing plays written by

the Irish Renaissance (Buckinghamshire, England: Colin Smythe, 1979); Samuel Levenson, *Maud Gonne* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976); Antoinette Quinn, "Cathleen ni Houlihan Writes Back: Maud Gonne and Irish Nationalist Theatre" in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, Anthony Bradley and Maryanne Gialanella Valiulis, eds. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Margaret Ward, *Maud Gonne: A Life* (London: Pandora Press, 1990). The most important of these sources is Quinn because her article specifically treats several of Gonne's theatrical contributions that would later influence the Abbey Theatre. The other sources are biographies that do not focus on Gonne's relationship to the theatre. The most important sources on Lady Gregory and her contributions to the Abbey Theatre include Elizabeth Coxhead, *J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory*, Writers and Their Work: Bibliographical Series of Supplements to "British Book News," ed. Bonamy Dobree, no. 149 (London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1962); Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 196); Mary Lou Kofeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); Daniel Murphy, "Lady Gregory, Co-Author and Sometimes Author of the Plays of W. B. Yeats," in *Modern Irish Literature: Essays in Honor of William York Tindall*, ed. Raymond J. Porter and James D. Brophy (New Rochelle: Iona College Press, 1972) 43-52; Christopher Murray, "Lady Gregory—Coming to Terms," in *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to a Nation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997); James Pethica, "'Our Kathleen': Yeats's Collaboration with Lady Gregory in the Writing of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*," in *Yeats Annual*, n.s., no. 6 (1988), 14-25; Ann Saddlemyer, *In Defence of Lady Gregory, Playwright* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1966). With the exception of Kofeldt, these works highlight only Gregory's contributions as playwright. For sources on Annie Horniman see James W. Flannery, *Miss Annie F. Horniman and the Abbey Theatre*, The Irish Theatre Series 3, Robert Hogan, James Kilroy and Liam Miller, eds. (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1970); Adrian Frasier, *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre*, The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Sheila Goodie, *Annie Horniman: A Pioneer in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1990); Rex Pogsoson, *Miss Horniman and the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester* (London: Rockcliff, 1952). Most of these sources detail Horniman's financial contributions to the Abbey, largely ignoring her efforts at tour management and design.

²⁹ There are many works that detail this meeting and the brief history that follows, such as Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*; Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Irish Literary Theatre, 1899-1901*, The Modern Irish Drama, A Documentary History I (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1975); Hugh Hunt, *The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre, 1904-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Kofeldt, *Lady Gregory: Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance*; and Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*. Gregory recorded the year of this meeting as 1898, however, scholars agree that 1897 was the correct year.

Irishmen about Ireland's cultural heritage. The venture was scheduled to run for three seasons, performing two or three plays each year at various theatre halls around Dublin.

Most of these plays met with a fair amount of success; however, the major criticism by both the patrons and the Irish Literary Theatre itself was that the English actors hired for the performances were simply terrible at portraying Irishmen, their most offensive crime being the lack of suitable rhythms and accents for the Irish manner of speaking. Fortunately, shortly after the close of the third season, W. G. Fay, a professional comic actor turned electrician, and his brother Frank, also an actor and an elocution teacher, formed W.G. Fay's Irish National Dramatic Company. This entirely Irish company of actors drew heavily from dramatic classes held by the political-cultural society of young women called the *Inginidhe-na-hEireann* (Daughters of Ireland) and from the Ormonde Dramatic Society.

Under the tutelage of Frank Fay, these amateurs quickly became an effective acting troupe and were engaged to present Yeats's play *Kathleen ni Houlihan* and George Russell's *Deirdre* at St. Teresa's Hall in April 1902.³⁰ Among the company were Mary Walker, who adopted the Gaelic stage name Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh and Sara Allgood, the two best actresses produced by the early Irish stage. Also in the cast was Maud Gonne, founder of *Inginidhe-na-hEireann* and close personal friend of Yeats; in fact he had presented *Kathleen ni Houlihan* to *Inginidhe* on the condition that Gonne play the title role.³¹

³⁰ Lady Augusta Gregory and W. B. Yeats, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, in *Eleven Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (New York: Collier Books, 1964). At the time of the production Yeats was listed as sole author of the play; Gregory's collaborative efforts were not acknowledged for almost seventy years. George Russell, *Deirdre* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1907; reprint, Chicago: De Paul, 1970).

³¹ See for example Coxhead, *Daughters*, 50.

Yeats and Lady Gregory, impressed by the level of these performances, joined the Irish Literary Theatre with W.G. Fay's Irish National Dramatic Company to form the Irish National Theatre Society (INTS) in August 1902. During the rest of 1902 and throughout 1903 the INTS performed well over a dozen plays at various halls around Dublin. Then, in early 1904, Yeats' good friend Annie E. F. Horniman agreed to acquire the lease on a small property on Lower Abbey Street, fit it up as a theatre, and present it to the INTS rent free for six years. After extensive renovation to the structure, also paid for by Horniman, the Abbey Theatre opened its doors for the first performance on December 27, 1904.³²

From the beginning of the Abbey's formation in 1904, life in the theatre was a struggle. Much of the trouble came from within the theatre itself. Within a year Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh and over two-thirds of the original INTS company resigned because of a policy change, although Nic Shiubhlaigh would return several times over the years at critical times to assist the Abbey.³³ By 1907, Horniman, after serious disagreements with W.G. Fay, withdrew her patronage from the Abbey and established the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester, England. She continued her subsidy until 1909, when a breach of policy caused her to sever both the subsidy and her contact with the Abbey personnel.³⁴ Tours to the United States in 1911, 1912, and 1914 were a major source of income for the

³² The most complete documentation of the early history of the INTS is Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *Laying the Foundations, 1902-1904*, *The Modern Irish Drama, a Documentary History II* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1976). This work details theatrical practice in Ireland from the end of the third season of the Irish Literary Theatre in early 1902 through the opening of the Abbey Theatre in December 1904. See also Byrne, 10-50; Hunt, 32-56; Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 30-38; and Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*, 25-47.

³³ Maire Ni Shiubhlaigh's involvement with the Abbey Theatre is recorded in detail in her autobiography *The Splendid Years* (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., Ltd., 1955). See also Coxhead, *Daughters*, 174-5; Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge, 1905-1909*, *The Modern Irish Drama, a Documentary History III* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1978), 34-40.

³⁴ See Flannery, 18-32; Gooddie, 126-152; Hogan and Kilroy, *Years of Synge*, 166-8; Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*, 85-88.

Abbey, but one that unfortunately diminished with each successive trip. In 1915, Sara Allgood left the Abbey to tour in Australia, not returning to the Abbey stage until the early 1920s.³⁵

But the volatile political climate of Ireland in the early part of the twentieth century presented other obstacles for the Abbey. World War I took its toll on the Abbey financially, for the theatre had to suspend all touring outside the country for the duration of the war. The Easter Rising of 1916 and the Civil War that followed also taxed the Abbey in terms of both money and manpower; the crowning blow was a curfew, implemented in 1920, which forbade people to be out past 8:00 at night.³⁶ At this point the Abbey Theatre nearly closed. Only the tenacity of such women as Lady Gregory and Sara Allgood kept the vision of a national theatre alive until the new government of the Republic of Ireland granted the theatre an annual subsidy in 1925.³⁷

Theatre historians, when writing about those most critical to the formation of the Abbey Theatre, have concentrated on the major male figures of W. B. Yeats, John Millington Synge, Sean O'Casey, Frank and Willie Fay; even minor figures, such as

³⁵ For documentation of the Abbey Theatre's American tours see Edward Abood, "The Reception of the Abbey Theatre in America 1911-1914," unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1963; Adele M. Dalsimer, "Players in the Western World: The Abbey Theatre's American Tours" in *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 16, no. 4 (Winter, 1983), 75-93; Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 97-135; John P. Harrington, *The Irish Play on the New York Stage 1874 1966* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 58-76; Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 108-139. Accounts of Sarah Allgood's Australian tour include Sarah Allgood, "Memories," TMs, 94-5, Berg Collection, New York Public Library and Coxhead, *Daughters*, 200-6.

³⁶ See for example Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre, 1899-1999, Form and Pressure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 69-79; Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham, *The Art of the Amateur, 1916-1920, The Modern Irish Drama, a documentary History V* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1984), 285-7; Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*, 98-120.

³⁷ Most of the standard histories of the Abbey Theatre cited above list the date of the subsidy as 1925; Robinson, however, notes the year as 1924. Mariad Delaney, the Abbey Theatre archivist, assures me that 1925 is the correct year.

William Boyle or Lennox Robinson are often documented.³⁸ The women associated with the Abbey, such as Annie Horniman, Sarah Allgood, or Maire O'Neill, even though very actively involved, are hardly ever given credit for their contributions. But there were significant numbers of women who burned with the passionate fire of nationalism, women who strove for creative and artistic freedom, women who wholeheartedly supported the idea of a theatre that would promote the Irish way of life. Of the Abbey women, Lady Gregory has received the most attention from scholars, usually in the form of dramatic criticism. Her other roles at the theatre have received much less attention.³⁹ Contemporary feminist scholarship has deepened understanding of Lady Gregory's involvement with the Abbey, but even this scholarship has failed to probe Gregory's commitment to the day-to-day administration of the theatre, her crucial management of the first tour to America, or her active participation in the stage direction of her own and other plays.⁴⁰

Early Abbey actresses are usually mentioned only in passing and only in regard to their acting, despite evidence that they filled many roles at the Abbey, from stage

³⁸ See for example Ernest Boyd, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*; Byrne, *The Story of Ireland's National Theatre: The Abbey Theatre, Dublin*; Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Irish Theatre* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1983); Hunt, *Ireland's National Theatre*; Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*.

³⁹ See Elizabeth Coxhead, *J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory*, *Writers and Their Work: Bibliographical Series of Supplements to "British Book News,"* ed. Bonamy Dobree, no. 149 (London: Longmans, Green & co. Ltd., 1962); Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1961); Una Ellis-Fermor, "Lady Gregory," in *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1954), 136-162; C. L. Innes, "Working for What We Believed Would Help Ireland," in *Women and Nation in Irish Society, 1880-1935* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993); A. E. Morgan, "The Irish Pioneers (Yeats, Martyn, and Gregory)," in *Tendencies of Modern English Drama* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924); Murphy, "Lady Gregory"; James Pethica, "'Our Kathleen': Yeats's Collaboration with Lady Gregory in the Writing of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*," in *Yeats Annual*, n.s., no. 6 (1988), 14-25.

⁴⁰ For feminist scholarship on Gregory see for example, Lucy McDiarmuid, "Augusta Gregory, Bernard Shaw, and the Shewing-up of Dublin Castle," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 109.1 (1994), 26-44; Lucy McDiarmuid and Maureen Waters, *Lady Gregory: Selected Writings* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1995); Linda Mizejewski, "Partiarchy and the Female in Lady Gregory's *Grania*," *Eire-Ireland* 22:1 (Spring, 1987), 122-38; Murray, 55-63; Saddlemeier, *In Defence of Lady Gregory*; Maureen Waters, "Lady Gregory's *Grania*, A Feminist Voice," *Irish University Review*, 25, (1995), 11-24.

manager and stage director to wardrobe mistress.⁴¹ Sara Allgood was a particularly active leader of the company on several occasions when there were grievances against the management, most notably when, in 1907, she disclosed grievances that led to the dismissal of W.G. Fay. In the early 1920s, Sara Allgood also led a rigorous fund raising campaign to assist the Abbey in keeping its doors open. Her sister, Maire O'Neill, helped coalesce the fragments of Synge's unfinished play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, directed the first production of it at the Abbey in 1909, and acted the title role.⁴²

Annie Horniman's involvement with the Abbey has garnered some attention in recent years; several volumes document her financial contribution to the theatre and emphasize her relationship with Yeats.⁴³ Seldom is it mentioned, however, that she was intimately involved with the management decisions of the theatre from 1904 to 1907; that she assumed responsibility for the arrangements and advertising surrounding the first tours to England and Scotland; or that she was primarily responsible for the interior design of the Abbey when it was renovated in 1904. She also designed, financed, and constructed costumes for the first productions of Yeats's plays *The King's Threshold* (1903) and *On Baile's Strand* (Abbey opening 1904).⁴⁴

Other women contributed to the Abbey Theatre in other ways and to various degrees. Maud Gonne, although often associated with the Abbey Theatre, never put foot on its stage. Her contribution to the Abbey was, nevertheless, invaluable: she

⁴¹ See for example Allgood, "Memories."

⁴² John Millington Synge, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* in *Collected Works*, 4 vols., Robin Skelton, general ed., *Plays Book 1* and *Plays Book 2*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer, Prose ed. Alan Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, new edn., Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1982). For an account of Maire O'Neill's involvement with Synge's *Deirdre*, see Hunt, 85.

⁴³ For sources on Annie Horniman see note 18.

⁴⁴ William Butler Yeats, *The King's Threshold*, in *The Collected Plays of William Butler Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1952); William Butler Yeats, *On Baile's Strand*, in *Eleven Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (New York: Collier Books, 1964).

established the *Inghide-na-hEireann* and insisted on dramatic lessons as part of the society's meetings; from this organization came many of the great actresses of the early Abbey. Gonne's own example of the power that an actress could command was flawlessly demonstrated in her performance as Kathleen ni Houlihan, a performance upon which future Abbey actresses based their characterizations.⁴⁵

Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, the Abbey's first great tragic actress, helped establish the reputation of the early Abbey's quality of acting.⁴⁶ Other actresses, such as Maire Ni Gharbhaigh, Emma Vernon, Honor Lavelle, and May Craig (the list goes on), all made significant contributions to the Abbey in the area of acting, although these names have been all but lost to the scholars of today.

The early female designers of the Abbey Theatre are even more difficult to discover, for, with few exceptions, no mention of their contributions appeared on any program prior to 1924. Yet several women designed either sets or costumes for the theatre: Annie Horniman designed sets and costumes for two early Yeats' plays; Pamela Coleman Smith also designed sets for early plays by Yeats and Synge; and Dorothy Travers Smith, designing in the 1920s, became the first designer in residence at the Abbey after the national subsidy was granted. Sara Purser designed and executed stained glass windows in the original Abbey vestibule, and Elinor Monsel created a woodcut,

⁴⁵ See for example Nic Shiubhlaigh, 19.

⁴⁶ See for example, T. G. Keller, "The Irish Theatre Movement: Some Early Memoirs," in E. H. Mikhail ed., *The Abbey Theatre: Interviews and Recollections* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1988). Keller was a founding member of the INTS and worked with the Fays and Nic Shiubhlaigh for several years. See also Coxhead, *Daughters*, 173-4; Lennox Robinson, "Pictures in a Theatre: A Conversation Piece," in Michael O hAodha, *Pictures at the Abbey* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1983), 37-38.

“Queen Maeve Hunting on the Hills of Ireland,” as the emblem for the Abbey Theatre, which has appeared on all correspondence, posters, and programs since 1904.⁴⁷

This study proposes to identify the almost one hundred and fifty women who helped create the Abbey Theatre from the theatre’s inception in 1897 until the government granted its subsidy in 1925, and to reclaim the legacy of the most important of these women. During these crucial years, when the continuation of the national theatre was at risk, the contributions of these women equaled, or exceeded, those of the men.

In addition to reclaiming the individual women of the Abbey, the study explores the reasons why these women contributed their time and talents to the pursuit of a national theatre; clarifies the goals that brought them together to create a national theatre; shows how those goals eventually diverged; and, finally, reveals the contributions the women made in the various theatrical areas (directing, designing, playwriting, etc.), contributions that kept the Abbey Theatre solvent until the national subsidy was granted.

The contributions of these women to the Abbey Theatre unfolded within multiple contexts. At the turn of the twentieth century, Dublin teemed with political and social movements that conspired to create an environment that fostered not only the establishment of a theatre but also the involvement of women in its construction.

Perhaps the most relevant was the emergence, in the late nineteenth century, of the Celtic Revival which provided the impetus for a group of artists, linguists, poets, and writers to reach out and embrace a heritage long denied the Irish by their English conquerors. Thus, the Irish people celebrated their ancient warriors, heroes, and mythical past not only in song, but also in art, poetry, prose, and drama. The Celtic Revival sought

⁴⁷ Although mostly absent from the programs, the names of most of these designers, once uncovered, were mostly prominent in other fields.

to celebrate the history of Ireland through retelling the glories of its past and to re-instill pride in a people whose sense of self-worth was undermined by long colonization.⁴⁸

Closely connected to the Celtic Revival was the arts and crafts movement that began in Ireland in 1885. Artists and craftsmen responded to the revival of Gaelic culture by seizing on the images from Ireland's past, such as the ancient mythological literature, the early Christian imagery, and the stately Georgian architecture for inspiration. They subsequently created art works and handicrafts in such diverse mediums as stained glass, needlework, furniture, architecture, woodcarving, metalwork, and canvas. This renaissance of the handcraft industry became a "vital element" in the burgeoning social and political organizations of the time.⁴⁹

Concurrent with the emergence of the Celtic Revival and the arts and crafts movement was a renewed hope in the possibility of freedom from English rule. Despite centuries of British domination, the nineteenth century saw a series of laws passed that allowed the Irish to take more control of their own country. An 1829 law allowed Catholics to hold public office, and suddenly more than three-quarters of the population became enfranchised. For hundreds of years most Irish land had been owned by a few English landlords but worked by Irish tenants who had not been allowed to vote. Then, in 1832 and 1867, additional laws helped establish broader guidelines for elections and led to tenants rather than English landlords handling local affairs. By the early twentieth century, therefore, tenants enjoyed more rights than in the prior three hundred years, and

⁴⁸ See for example R. P. C. Brugsma, *The Beginnings of the Irish Revival* (Groningen-Batavia: P. Noordhoff, 1933); Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber, 1985); T. J. Edelstein, ed., *Imagining an Irish Past: The Celtic Revival, 1840-1940* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art: University of Chicago, 1992); Jeanne Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past: The Celtic Revival, 1830-1930* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980); Ulick O'Connor, *Celtic Dawn: A Portrait of the Irish Literary Renaissance* (London: H. Hamilton, 1984).

⁴⁹ Nicola Gordon Bowe and Elizabeth Cumming, *The Arts and Crafts Movements in Dublin & Edinburgh, 1885-1925* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1998), 79.

the idea of Home Rule for Ireland became suddenly more reality than fantasy.⁵⁰ A wave of nationalism overtook the country, manifesting itself in many ways: political organizations such as the Celtic Literary Society, the Irish National League, Sinn Fein; nationalist newspapers and magazines such as the *United Irishman*, *The Northern Patriot*, and *The Shan Van Vocht*; and dramatic literature such as *The Countess Cathleen* and *Kathleen ni Houlihan*.⁵¹ To encourage nationalist sentiments, nationalist leaders held political rallies, publicized tenant evictions, and used theatrical entertainments as propaganda.⁵² Among these nationalists, there were, of course, competing visions of the nation of Ireland.

Paralleling the rise of these nationalisms in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century in Ireland was the rise of women's suffrage. "The period from 1912 to 1914 can be described as the heyday of Irish suffragism, the movement growing to a membership of over 3000," according to Louise Ryan in an article on women's suffrage and nationalism.⁵³ The word suffragist in Ireland was almost synonymous with feminist, for Irish suffragists were concerned not only with the enfranchisement of women but also with issues such as domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, and double standards of morality. Prompted by the first wave of university-educated women in Ireland,

⁵⁰ See for example Curtis, *History of Ireland*; David Thornley, *Isaac Butt and Home Rule* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1964); W. E. Vaughan, ed., *A New History of Ireland VI: Ireland Under the Union II, 1870-1921* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁵¹ William Butler Yeats, *The Countess Cathleen*, in *The Collected Plays of William Butler Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1952); see also note 19.

⁵² See Antoinette Quinn, "Cathleen Ni Houlihan Writes Back," 42-3.

⁵³ Louise Ryan, "Traditions and Double Moral Standards: the Irish Suffragists' Critique of Nationalism," in *Women's History Review*, Volume 4, Number 4, 1995, 491. See also Leah Levenson and Jerry Natterstad, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Irish Feminist* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986); Cliona Murphy, *The Women's Suffrage Movement and Irish Society in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Wheatsheaf, 1989); Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, "The Women's Movement—Ireland," *The Irish Review* (July 1912), 225-227; Margaret Ward, "Votes First Above All Else: An Account of the Irish Suffrage Movement," *Feminist Review*, 10, 21-36.

suffragists became vocal about their lack of representation in all areas of Irish life. These women sought to influence other women in Ireland primarily by creating an awareness of problems that polite society refused to acknowledge. They did so in different ways: joining political organizations, giving speeches, teaching children, creating native arts.

The late Victorian age also witnessed an increase in mysticism, especially in England. Probably reactions against the new rising power of science and the scientific method, these occult and spiritualistic societies were numerous and widespread. In 1848, the Fox sisters publicly claimed that departed souls survived and communicated with the living, generating a new interest in spiritualism. In 1884, Madame Blavatsky brought the Theosophical Society to London and Anna Kingsford created a Hermetic Society there a year later.⁵⁴ All of these societies promoted a spiritual and metaphysical sensibility that stressed a connection to the unseen world. In March 1888, a new society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, was chartered, with one difference from its sister societies: “For the first time men and women worked together as equals in magical ceremonies whose purpose was to test, purify, and exalt the individual’s spiritual nature so as to unify it with his or her ‘Holy Guardian Angel,’” according to Mary Greer, chronicler of the Golden Dawn.⁵⁵ This blend of mysticism and equality permeated the relationships of the societies’ members and through them a wider sphere in Ireland.

⁵⁴ Mary K. Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1995), 47-8. Additional source material for the Golden Dawn Society and Victorian mysticism includes Diana Barsham, *The Trial of Women: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); R. A. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn Scrapbook: The Rise and Fall of a Magical Order* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weisner, Inc., 1997); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁵⁵ Greer, 1.

Theatre itself in the early 1890s experienced changes brought about by the growing emphasis placed on science and scientific method.⁵⁶ Realism as a stylistic innovation began to appear on the stage in London in 1889 in the translated works of Henrik Ibsen. Works such as *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* abandoned the use of nonrealistic devices, such as addressing monologues and asides to the audience, portraying instead characters whose psychological motivations were clearly expressed in natural-sounding dialogue, with exposition unfolding through conversations between characters rather than through unmotivated monologues.⁵⁷ Stage directions comprised explicit detail, enumerating almost every aspect of the set, costumes, and stage business, in an effort to capture the truth about life.⁵⁸ These plays explored the idea that society, rather than individual characters, was at fault: women shackled by a patriarchal system, a double-standard of morality that turned a blind eye to immorality based on gender. Realistic plays also implied that the solutions to such problems could come only from society when society itself became aware of the social flaws that needed to be corrected.⁵⁹

The controversy sparked by the unconventional nature of Ibsen's plays led to the establishment in London of the Independent Theatre, a small theatre run along the lines of France's Theatre Libre and Germany's Freie Buhne.⁶⁰ These two theatres, established

⁵⁶ Patti P. Gillespie and Kenneth M. Cameron, *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1984), 398-412. For a more expansive treatment, see Edith Melcher, *Stage Realism in France Between Diderot and Antoine* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Bryn Mawr Press, 1928).

⁵⁷ Gillespie and Cameron, 427-431.

⁵⁸ George Bernard Shaw is, of course, the quintessential example, for his stage directions routinely go on for pages.

⁵⁹ Gillespie and Cameron, 406-7.

⁶⁰ The standard source on the Theatre Libre is Andre Antoine, *Memories of the Theatre Libre*, trans. Marvin Carlson (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1964); for the Freie Buhne, see Marvin Carlson, *The German Stage in the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow press, 1972); for the English Independent Theatre see Anna Irene Miller, *The Independent Theatre in Europe, 1887 to the*

in 1887 and 1889 respectively, offered a subscription series to its patrons, in effect becoming private theatres and thus exempt from their countries' censors. The theatres were thus able to offer the most controversial plays available, including Ibsen's. The storm of negative criticism following the premiere of *Ghosts*, in 1891, brought the Independent Theatre and the drama of Realism to the attention of the English theatre-going public and thence to Ireland.⁶¹

At almost the same time, new goals in philosophy and the visual arts tugged in a different direction, providing a counterweight to the growing power of positivism and realism. In the visual arts and literature, impressionism and symbolism fought against realistic representation by supplying only an impression or idea of the subject, requiring the viewer to provide the details. Much like mysticism, these movements emphasized a spiritual or unseen truth. Theatrical practice embraced these influences, which subsequently appeared in both playwriting and design.⁶²

At the turn of the century, then, Ireland was brimming with new ideas: Celtic mythology, Irish nationalism, women's suffrage, positivism, and mysticism. These ideas in turn found expression in a burgeoning arts scene—from handicrafts and architecture to

Present (New York: R. Long & R.R. Smith, Inc., 1931); N. H. G. Schoonerwoerd, *J. T. Grein, Ambassador of the Theatre, 1862-1935: A Study in Anglo-Continental Theatrical Relations* (Assen [Netherlands]: Van Gorcum, 1963).

⁶¹ Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, in *The Best Known Works of Ibsen* (New York: The Book League of America, [1941]). Among numerous studies of Ibsen see Jan Setterquist, *Ibsen and the Beginnings of Anglo-Irish Drama* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1951-1960]); George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Brentano's, 1904; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1994). George Moore, who worked closely with Yeats on the production of *The Countess Cathleen* and who joined the Irish Literary Theatre early on, was a proponent of J. T. Grein and the Independent Theatre; he likely brought its influence directly to Yeats. See D. E. S. Maxwell in *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama, 1891-1980* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984; reprint, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7-9; George Moore, *Hail and Farewell: Ave, Salve, Vale* (New York: Appleton, 1912-1914; reprint, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1985).

⁵¹ Gillespie and Cameron, 483-489; and for Adolphe Appia, Gordon Craig, the impressionists and the symbolists, 492-498.

literature and theatre. Out of this ferment grew Ireland's most important theatre, the Abbey, whose foundation and early years depended on the talents of women, many of whom have all but dropped from the historical record.

To study the women of the Abbey Theatre is difficult, for several reasons. Some collections of papers are tantalizingly out of reach. The bulk of Annie Horniman's papers, according to a letter she wrote to the Abbey Theatre Directors, were boxed up in order to save future historians the trouble of tracking them down; regrettably, this box has yet to be found.⁶³ Sarah Allgood's papers are held in the private collection of her niece, Pauline Hague in California; pending donation to the Berg Collection, they are unavailable for consultation. The Abbey archive is itself still cataloging boxes of materials; therefore, much of these materials remain unavailable.⁶⁴

The most devastating loss to Abbey historians, however, was the fire in 1951 that gutted the building and moved the company to the Queens theatre for fifteen years while the Abbey was rebuilt.⁶⁵ Lost in this fire was untold wealth in plays, prompt scripts, programs, memorabilia, pictures, furnishings, Sarah Purser's windows, and Lily Yeats's tapestry. Loss of the original scripts was perhaps the keenest injury because most of

⁶³ This letter, dated 31 May, 1908, states "The other day I was putting a lot of letters into box files it will save some future historian much trouble." Annie Horniman to the Directors [of the Abbey Theatre], 31 May, 1908, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland. Mary K. Greer reports that Horniman left her papers to Helen Rand and, in a note on Horniman's death, Greer states, "According to a letter from Carnegie Dickson to Yeats, Helen Rand died before Annie, in 1929. Harper, *Yeats's GD*, p. 155. If this is true, the papers—which have not been found—would have gone to Rand's husband, who also received money in Annie's will and may have emigrated." Greer, 366, 455 n. 27.

⁶⁴ According to Mariad Delaney, Abbey Theatre Archivist, Pauline Hague visited the Abbey in the late 1990s and told her that she was donating Allgood's papers to the Berg. According to the Berg Collection Archivist no such donation has been received.

⁶⁵ See for example Hunt, *Ireland's National Theatre*; Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Abbey Theatre: Ireland's National Theatre, the First 100 Years* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 98-101; James White, ed., *The Abbey Theatre 1904-1979* ([Dublin]: The National Gallery of Ireland, 1980).

those written by the early women, other than Lady Gregory, were unpublished and therefore irreplaceable.

Despite such problems with particular material, several excellent sources, both primary and secondary, exist. The two most important archives dealing with this topic are the Abbey Theatre Archives and the Lady Gregory Papers. The Abbey Theatre Archives are located in several collections, housed primarily at the Abbey Theatre and at National Library of Ireland (NLI), in Dublin. These archives contain some two hundred manuscript collections containing copies of several play scripts, business transactions, accounts, and correspondence concerning the Abbey Theatre from 1904 on. In addition, the National Library of Ireland holds collections of papers belonging to most major figures of the Irish National Theatre Society: the Fay Papers, the Holloway Papers, the Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh Papers, papers of Maire Roberts, and the papers of W.B. Yeats.

The major collection of Lady Augusta Gregory's papers is held in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. Various other letters of hers are held in the Yeats and Fay collections in the National Library of Ireland, in the J.M. Synge collection of letters at Trinity College, Dublin, and in the Lady Gregory Collection in the library at University of Georgia in Atlanta. In addition, there are many published books and collections of Lady Gregory's writings on the Abbey Theatre, including Gregory's own account of the founding of the Abbey Theatre, *Our Irish Theatre*; her autobiography, *Seventy Years: Being the Autobiography of Lady Gregory*; her journals, *Lady Gregory's Journals, Volumes One and Two*, and *The Letters of Lady Gregory*, edited by Ann Saddlemeier.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Lady Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Journals*, vol. 1 [1916-1925], Daniel J. Murphy, ed. (Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 1978); *Lady Gregory's Journals*, vol. 2 [1925-1932], Daniel J. Murphy, ed.

There are also numerous manuscript collections and published accounts of the other women chronicled in this study. Sara Allgood's typewritten manuscript, "Memories," a collection of her personal reminiscences, is located with Lady Gregory's papers in the Berg Collection. Although much of her correspondence is scattered in many collections, at the Berg, in the Roberts and the Holloway papers in the NLI, and in a collection of seven letters to Lady Gregory in the Sligo Public Library in County Sligo, the bulk of Allgood's papers are held in the private collection of Mrs. Pauline Hague in California, pending donation to the Berg collection. Most of the correspondence of Maire O'Neill is lost; all letters written by her to J. M. Synge were burned by him before his death. The only extant correspondence is that of Synge to her from 1906 to 1909, collected by Anne Saddlemeier in *Letters to Molly: The Correspondence of J. M. Synge to Maire O'Neill*.⁶⁷

Annie Horniman's primary collection of papers is housed in the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester, in Manchester, England. It contains all her extant papers and correspondence pertaining to her establishment of the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester and ten scrapbooks of newspaper clipping chronicling the history of the Abbey Theatre 1904 to 1910, along with various letters to people connected with the Abbey. In addition, there is considerable correspondence in the Fay, Holloway, and Synge collections, including accounts and salary figures for the Abbey and its tours, and interior design and architectural specifications for the building of the Abbey Theatre.

(Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 1987); *Letters of Lady Gregory*, Ann Saddlemeier, ed., *Our Irish Theatre*, see note 6; *Seventy Years: Being the Autobiography of Lady Gregory* (Colin Smythe, ed. Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 1974).

⁶⁷ John Millington Synge, *Letters to Molly: John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill 1906-1909*, Ann Saddlemeier, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971).

Primary source materials for the rest of the Abbey women are much less extensive. Maude Gonne's correspondence with W.B. Yeats, *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938*, and her autobiography *The Servant of the Queen* are the two relevant primary sources.⁶⁸ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh's papers are in the National Library and include a chronicle of the initial years at the Abbey as well as a one-page account of the early career of Sara Allgood. Her published memoir, *The Splendid Years*, is her recollection of her involvement with the Abbey from its beginning until the Easter Rising of 1916.⁶⁹ Much of her correspondence is located in the papers of Joseph Holloway at the NLI. Holloway's diary, *Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, almost nightly critiques of the acting and all the current "goings-on" at the theatre, is an excellent first-hand account of the Abbey and all its intimates.⁷⁰ Letters of actress Maire Roberts (nee Garvey) are also found in the National Library, although few other primary sources exist for the other women involved in the Abbey Theatre during this period; most references to their work, therefore, must be garnered from the records pertaining to the major figures listed above.

Secondary sources address the women of the Abbey Theatre in varying degrees: older histories tend to gloss over them and their contributions while newer feminist studies focus on their roles in more detail. As the champion of the Irish cultural heritage, Lady Gregory's accomplishments are by far the most abundantly documented. Although works about her are too numerous to recount in detail here, the most valuable are biographies by Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait*, and Mary Lou

⁶⁸ Maud Gonne and William Butler Yeats, *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938*, Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares, eds., (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993); Maud Gonne MacBride, *A Servant of the Queen* (London: Gollancz, 1938).

⁶⁹ See note 23.

⁷⁰ Joseph Holloway, *A Selection from His Unpublished Journal: Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill, eds., (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967).

Kofeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance*, with two very different views of Lady Gregory's achievements; E. H. Mikhail's *Lady Gregory: Interviews and Recollections*, which gives intimate insights to the woman from her friends and peers; and *Woman and Nation in Irish Society, 1880-1935*, by C. L. Innes, which has a very good chapter on Lady Gregory entitled "Working for What We Believed Would Help Ireland."⁷¹

Fewer secondary sources exist on the actresses of the Abbey. Sara Allgood and her sister Maire O'Neill are profiled in a chapter of Elizabeth Coxhead's *Daughters of Erin*, which contains some information on Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh as well.⁷² The National Library also contains complete runs of newspapers, such as the *Evening Telegraph*, the *Freeman's Journal*, and the *Irish Daily Independent* which contain reviews of all of the Abbey productions, many of which give detailed accounts of the performances of these actresses.

Only three books treat Annie Horniman's involvement with the Abbey Theatre directly: *Miss Annie F. Horniman and the Abbey Theatre*, by James W. Flannery; *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* by Adrian Frazier; and Sheila Goddie's *Annie Horniman: A Pioneer in the Theatre*. One additional book, *Miss Horniman and the Gaiety Theatre*, also contains numerous references to her work at the Abbey Theatre.⁷³

⁷¹ For references to Coxhead and Kofeldt, see note 17; for Innes, see note 28; Lady Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory: Interviews and Recollections*, E. H. Mikhail, ed., (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977).

⁶¹ See note 13.

⁷³ See note 18.

The most important secondary sources for Maud Gonne's contribution to the Abbey Theatre include Antoinette Quinn's essay "Cathleen Ni Houlihan Writes Back: Maud Gonne and Irish National Theatre," Elizabeth Coxhead's chapter devoted to her in *Daughters of Erin*, and two biographies: *Maud Gonne: A Life*, by Margaret Ward, and *Maud Gonne*, by Samuel Levenson. Newspaper reports of her performance as Cathleen ni Houlihan in 1902 are also available at the NLI.⁷⁴

An extremely valuable secondary source of both information and rare photographs of several women connected with the Abbey Theatre is *Women of the Golden Dawn*. This volume focuses on the popular occult society of the time, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, whose members included Maud Gonne, Florence Farr, Annie Horniman, and Pamela Coleman Smith. The book gives detailed biographical information about all of these women as well as insights into the dynamics of their relationships, which played a major role in their collaborations at the Abbey.⁷⁵

Clearly, the archives and collections pertaining to these women and their contemporaries are scattered throughout several countries and the length and breadth of the United States. The result is that information about the women of the early Abbey Theatre must be pieced together, bit by bit. Because most of the women are absent from secondary sources, and several primary sources are nonexistent, information about the women must be teased out of existing sources, then reconstructed and reconnected as a group—like a mosaic, piece by glittering piece.

The method of this compensatory, historical study most closely follows the approach of such social historians as Anne Firor Scott in *Making the Invisible Woman*

⁷⁴ See note 18.

⁷⁵ See note 44.

Visible, and Gerda Lerner's *Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights*.⁷⁶ These historians focus on reclaiming women's contributions to history through examining their individual lives within the social context of their times. The study of the women of the Abbey Theatre investigates the women both as part of a collaborative effort and as individual contributors to Irish theatre history. In interpreting the data, I was mindful of feminist theories that stress the influence of class and gender.⁷⁷ Throughout this study as well, I was also mindful of certain patterns revealed in similar studies of women in theatre: for example, as the importance of money in the theatre increases, the centrality of women in it decreases.⁷⁸

The organization of this study draws on the areas of theatre practice in which these women participated and the rough chronology of their involvement. To this end, Chapter Two examines three women who made essential contributions to the formation of the Abbey Theatre before the theatre itself was established. Each successive chapter focuses on the contributions of women to the Abbey in one particular area of theatrical practice—design, management, acting, and playwriting. The concluding chapter contains a summary of the data and explores the implications of those findings.

⁷⁶ For reference to Scott, see note 17; Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁷⁷ Especially helpful in this regard was the summary of the relationship between Marxism and feminism provided by Josephine Donovan in *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1985), 65-90. Perhaps the most well-known *theatre* historian to be guided by such theories is Tracy Davis with works such as *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁷⁸ This idea was woven through much of Cheryl black's conclusion, but it is an idea that has been around theatre since at least the 1970s. See Patti P. Gillespie, "Feminist Theatre: A Rhetorical Phenomenon," in *Women in American Theatre*, ed. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (New York: Crown Publishing, 1981), reprinted from *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64 (1978), 284-294.

CHAPTER 2: THE WOMEN WHO CAME BEFORE

The founding of the Abbey Theatre was a process that began with that crucial meeting of W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn at Duras House in 1898, years before the Abbey as an entity was even imagined. As the idea of a national theatre slowly coalesced over a period of seven years, many people, both men and women, contributed to or influenced the development of this ideal. Some did not remain within the sphere of the organization long enough to see the project come to fruition; however, their contributions were arguably as important as those who worked for the Abbey Theatre after its opening in 1904.

Three of those who made significant contributions between the crucial meeting in 1898 and the establishment of the Abbey Theatre in 1904 were women: Florence Farr, Alice Milligan, and Maud Gonne. Although none of these women had a direct impact on the Abbey after 1904, each helped create the foundations upon which the Abbey Theatre was to rise.

The first woman to influence the formation of the Abbey Theatre without ever working within its walls was Florence Farr (fig. 1), one of Yeats's close personal friends and the one who most shaped his ideas about the theatre. Her influence on Yeats was two-fold: her ideas about the way theatre should look and sound took hold of Yeats's imagination, allowing him to create his ideal theatre based on her theories of theatrical presentation; and her work directly with him on his early productions of *The Countess Cathleen* and *The Shadowy Waters* provided Yeats with models for later productions.



Figure 1. Florence Farr

Thus Farr influenced directly Yeats's perceptions of the theatrical *mise en scene*, perceptions that he in turn implemented at the Abbey Theatre.

Florence Farr was born in England on July 7, 1860, to Dr. William Farr and his second wife, Mary Catherine Whittall.¹ Because William Farr believed in education for women, his daughter Florence enrolled first at the Cheltenham Ladies College in Gloucestershire at the age of thirteen and then four years later transferred to Queen's College in London. Farr did not choose to work toward a regular degree, though the Queen's College records show that she was an above average student with an aptitude for languages, as was evidenced by her marks of "very good" in Latin, and "good" in French and Italian, though only "fair" in German.²

By 1880, she had left Queens and for two years unsuccessfully attempted a career in teaching. During this time she also began experimenting with the amateur theatricals given at the Bedford Park Dramatics Club, a club in which her sister and brother-in-law were very active. Finally, in 1882, Farr began her career in the legitimate theatre, assuming the stage name of "Mary Lester." This gesture was in deference to her father who, although liberal in his views on women's education, disapproved of placing the Farr name on the stage. As Mary Lester, Farr served an eight-month apprenticeship under the actor-manager J. L. Toole at the Folly Theatre on King William Street. She became a professional actress in late February 1883, playing the part of Kate Renshaw, a schoolgirl, in Henry J. Byron's *Uncle Dick's Darling*. In the following months she played steadily in Toole's theatre, including a performance two days after her father's death, on April 14. By the end of May, Farr was performing under her own name at the Gaiety

¹ Josephine Johnson, *Florence Farr: Bernard Shaw's 'New Woman'* (Gerard's Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 1975), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

Theatre.³ She thereafter was billed as “Florence Farr,” although she did revert occasionally to the name Mary Lester.

Farr admits that her marriage in 1884 to the young actor Edward Emery was a disaster from the beginning, and their inevitable divorce came as a relief rather than a shock to Farr and her friends. Her biographical novel, *The Dancing Faun*, sheds some light on her reasons for marriage: “We all have our moments of weakness. In one of these he married this child, who was full of dreams, full of ambition, full of hopes, wild as only those of a young actress who has made her first success can be.”⁴ In another of her books, *Modern Woman: Her Intentions*, Farr (fig. 2) further explained that the Victorian romantic ideal that young girls were made to believe was often the snare that entrapped them: “Not only is first love innocent and valiant, but it sweeps aside all the wise laws it has been taught, and burns away experience in its own light. Young English girls are very apt to mistake a feeling of gratified vanity and the emotion of a new sensation for love of some special man who happens to make love to them at the propitious moment.”⁵ From the beginning the two actors found they were simply unsuited for each other, although the ultimate reason for their separation was, according to the account in *The Dancing Faun*, Emery’s fondness for drinking and gambling.⁶

It was, therefore, very fortunate for Farr that in 1857 the English Parliament had

³ Ibid., 20-1.

⁴ Florence Farr, *The Dancing Faun* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894), 37-38.

⁵ Florence Farr, *Modern Woman: Her Intentions* (London: Frank Palmer, 1910), 33.

⁶ Farr, *Dancing Faun*, 34.



Figure 2. Farr as a young woman.

passed the Matrimonial Causes Act, which allowed civil courts to grant separations and divorces. Under the urging of George Bernard Shaw, with whom she was having an affair, Farr sued for divorce in 1894 on the grounds of adultery and abandonment. (Emery had voluntarily left for the United States in 1888.) Farr received her divorce in February 1895 and thereafter put Emery and the four horrible years of their marriage behind her. She never remarried, preferring a life without restraints. Bernard Shaw recalled, “She set no bounds to her relations with men whom she liked, and had a sort of Leporello list of a dozen adventures, none of which, however, led to anything serious. She was in violent reaction against Victorian morals, especially against sexual and domestic morals.”⁷ Shaw’s intimation of many affairs notwithstanding, only three men can be documented as lovers of Florence Farr: Edward Emery, George Bernard Shaw, and William Butler Yeats.

It is fairly certain that Florence Farr met William Butler Yeats at her sister Henrietta Paget’s house sometime in the late 1880s, possibly in April 1889 when Henry Paget was painting Yeats’s portrait.⁸ Yeats met the Pagets when his father, John Butler Yeats, had moved his family to Bedford Park, a somewhat Bohemian country community half an hour from London; so the Yeats family became neighbors and close friends with the Pagets and with fellow Irishman John Todhunter, a doctor and poet.⁹ It was at the Bedford Park Clubhouse that Yeats first saw Farr act in 1890, in Todhunter’s verse drama *A Sicilian Idyll: A Pastoral Play in Two Scenes* (fig. 3). The experience for him was

⁷ George Bernard Shaw quoted in Introduction to *Florence Farr, Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats: Letters*, ed. Clifford Bax (London: Horne & Van Thal Ltd., 1946), viii. Leporello, a character in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, kept a list of his master’s sexual conquests, which numbered in the hundreds for each country in Europe.

⁸ Mary K. Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1995), 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*

momentous. In his review of Farr's performance for the *Boston Pilot*, Yeats fairly gushed over her acting, her voice, and her ability to speak verse, stating, "Mrs. Edward Emery . . . won universal praise with her striking beauty and subtle gesture and fine delivery of the verse. Indeed her acting was the feature of the whole performance that struck one most, after the verse itself. I do not know that I have any word too strong to express my admiration for its grace and power. . . . I have never heard verse better spoken."¹⁰ From this beginning, Yeats was completely entranced with Farr, as his autobiography relates:

I was soon a constant caller, talking over plays that I would some day write her. She had three great gifts, a tranquil beauty like that of Demeter's image near the British Museum reading-room door, and an incomparable sense of rhythm and a beautiful voice, the seeming natural expression of the image. . . . If a man fell in love with her she would notice that she had seen just that movement upon the stage or had heard just that intonation and all seemed unreal. If she read out some poem in English or French all was passion, all a traditional splendor, but she spoke of actual things with a cold wit or under the strain of paradox. . . . I formed with her an enduring friendship that was an enduring exasperation.¹¹

At some point during this early association, Yeats and Farr became lovers. Yeats, while not explicitly affirming the relationship, nevertheless reported that "she was the only person to whom I could tell *everything*."¹² And Georgia Yeats, writing after her

¹⁰ W. B. Yeats quoted in the *Boston Pilot* in *Letters to the New Island* by William Butler Yeats, ed. Horace Reynolds (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 105.

¹¹ William Butler Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 74-5.

¹² W. B. Yeats quoted in Bax, 33.



Figure 3. Florence Farr in *A Sicilian Idyll*

husband's death, indicates that a brief affair did take place early in their relationship.¹³

The two were certainly inseparable for many years and worked closely both on dramatic productions and on rituals in a popular occult society (fig. 4).

Impressed with Farr's performance of ritual in *A Sicilian Idyll* Yeats introduced her to MacGregor and Moina Mathers, his co-members in the Order of the Golden Dawn, "a Hermetic Society whose members studied the principles of occult science and the magic of Hermes."¹⁴ The society had been officially created in February 1888, and Yeats had been initiated in early 1890, along with his friend Annie Horniman; by July 1890, Florence Farr was initiated as well and spent much of the next few years in the intimate company of the members of the order.¹⁵

In the fall of 1893, Farr was given money by Annie Horniman to finance a season of plays in London. Horniman, who had recently inherited a large sum of money, knew Farr and her extensive theatre background from their association with Golden Dawn; when Horniman decided to experiment with the theatrical world, it was by way of Farr and her expertise. Horniman gave Farr *carte blanche*, stipulating only that her financial backing was to remain secret.¹⁶ Farr then approached Yeats and Shaw to write plays for the season, and selected the Avenue Theatre in London as the venue (fig. 5).

¹³ Johnson, 42.

¹⁴ Greer, 57.

¹⁵ Other members of the Golden Dawn who were also associated with the Abbey Theatre were Maud Gonne and Pamela Colman Smith.

¹⁶ Horniman was afraid that if her relatives, who were staunch Quakers, learned that she was spending her money in this manner there would be great disapproval and serious arguments that she wished to avoid. As a result of the secret pact, neither Yeats nor Shaw learned of Horniman's involvement with the project for several years.

¹⁷ In addition to directing these plays, Farr was the original Louka in *Arms and the Man*.



Figure 4. Florence Farr at about the time she met W. B. Yeats in 1890.

AVENUE THEATRE

Northampton Square, Clerkenwell, W.C.
 Manager - Mr. C. T. H. HELMSLEY

ON THURSDAY, March 29th, 1894.
 (The usual evening at 8.30.)
 A New and Original Comedy in Five Acts, entitled

A COMEDY OF SIGHS!

By JOHN TOMKINSON.

By Geoffrey Brantley Act.	By HENRI COLE
Miss Gledhill	By YONGE STEPHEN
Miss Mary Greenwood	By JAMES WELCH
Widdow	By LONDON
Miss Frances Greenwood	By FLORENCE FARR
Miss Catherine	By MISS FLETCHER
Miss Yvonne	By MISS LEE

Some THE MARRIAGE-BURN AT SOUTHWOOD MANOR
 (The new comedy of 1893)

ACT I. AFTER BREAKFAST
 ACT II. AFTER LUNCHEON
 ACT III. AFTER DINNER
 ACT IV. AFTER CHURCH

Presented as usual with the

THE LAND-HEART'S DESIRE

By G. W. FARR.

ACT I. THE MARRIAGE-BURN AT SOUTHWOOD MANOR
 ACT II. THE MARRIAGE-BURN AT SOUTHWOOD MANOR
 ACT III. THE MARRIAGE-BURN AT SOUTHWOOD MANOR
 ACT IV. THE MARRIAGE-BURN AT SOUTHWOOD MANOR

Manager - Mr. C. T. H. HELMSLEY

PRICES - Private Boxes, 25 to 50 sh. the pair, 10 sh. the single. Stalls, 10 sh. the pair, 5 sh. the single. Gallery, 2 sh. 6d. the pair, 1 sh. 3d. the single.

Box Office - 11, Abchurch Lane, London, E.C. 4.

Figure 5. Aubrey Beardsley's poster for Farr's season at the Avenue Theatre in 1894.

This experiment at the Avenue Theatre was almost a debacle. Yeats had quickly obliged Farr with the little masterpiece *The Land of Heart's Desire*, written with Farr's niece, Dorothy Paget, in mind; but George Bernard Shaw failed to finish the play he had promised, and a comedy by John Todhunter was substituted instead, with disastrous results. The only thing that saved the project was Shaw's eleventh-hour appearance with his finished play. It went into rehearsal immediately and, on April 21, *Arms and the Man* replaced Todhunter's comedy and saved the venture, along with Farr's reputation as an actress and director.¹⁷ Thus her working relationship with Yeats was firmly established, opening the conduit for her influence on his theatrical practices.

In 1894, Yeats's career as a poet was just beginning: he had published only two sets of lyrics in the *Dublin University Review* in 1885; his first book of poems, *The Wanderings of Oisín, and Other Poems*, was published in 1889; and in 1893 he had published a book of essays, *The Celtic Twilight*. Yeats's first play was *The Land of Heart's Desire*, and therefore, in 1894, Farr (five years his senior) was by far the more experienced of the two both in the ways of the world and in the ways of the theatre. Yeats was able to look to her as his model and mentor.

In 1898, the Irish Literary Theatre, founded by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn, accepted Yeats's play *The Countess Cathleen* for its first production along with *The Heather Field* by Edward Martyn. As a playwright and a major component of the ILT, Yeats "was able to appoint her [Farr] general stage manager for the Society."¹⁸ His motive for doing so was, perhaps, to compensate for his unfulfilled promise to Farr to write a poetic drama for her, though it may simply have been that he had trusted her with

¹⁷ In addition to directing these plays, Farr was the original Louka in *Arms and the Man*.

¹⁸ Johnson, 102.

the production of his first play at the Avenue Theatre, and the trust had been fully justified.

Although her production of Shaw's *Arms and the Man* at the Avenue Theatre was a great success, her direction of *The Countess Cathleen* was eccentric. George Moore, who was directing Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field* (on the bill with *Countess Cathleen*), gave an insightful report of one of her rehearsals in his autobiographical *Hail and Farewell*:

I found Yeats behind some scenery in the act of explanation to the mummers, whilst the lady [Farr] in the green cloak, seated on the ground, plucked the wires [of a psaltery], muttering the line Cover it up with a lonely tune[sic]. . . . while an experienced actress [May Whitty] walked to and fro like a pantheress.¹⁹

Moore and Yeats then sat down together to watch and listen as Farr continued to rehearse *The Countess Cathleen*. Distracted, Farr

who had put her psaltery aside . . . was going about with a reticule on her arm, rummaging in it from time to time for certain memoranda, which when found seemed only to deepen her difficulty. Her stage management is all right in her notes, Yeats informed me. But she can't transfer it from paper on to the stage, he added, without appearing in the least to wish that the stage-management of his play should be taken from her. . . . At that moment the voice of the experienced actress asking the poor lady how she was to get up the stage drew attention from Yeats to the reticule, which was being searched for the notes.²⁰

¹⁹ George Moore, *Hail and Farewell: Ave, Salve, Vale* (New York: Appleton, 1912-14); reprint, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1985), 103-4. Moore's account of this incident must be taken with a grain of salt, for his friendship with Yeats was tenuous at best and Moore would have relished making Yeats seem a fool for hiring Farr as stage manager.

²⁰ Moore, 103.

May Whitty, the “experienced actress,” then walked up-stage to stare with contempt at Farr

who laid herself down on the floor and began speaking through the chinks. Her dramatic intention was so obscure that perforce [Moore] had to ask her what it was, and learnt from her that she was evoking hell.²¹

Moore’s reply to this unexpected pronouncement was “But the audience will think you are trying to catch cockroaches.”²² The company of English actors who had been engaged for the production was extremely exasperated with Farr’s attempts at stage management, which at the time was roughly equivalent to our stage direction. They expected from a stage director something that Farr’s unconventional theories of staging did not provide.

Besides directing *The Countess Cathleen*, Farr also acted the part of Aleel, the Countess’s rejected lover. Though her stage direction was found lacking, Farr’s acting in the production received good reviews, perhaps because of her intrinsic love for sound, which the reviewer for the *Irish Daily Independent* remarked on at length.

The great charm of the acting was the manner in which the music of the poem was preserved. The rhythmic beat and cadence of the verse stole on the ears like music sweetly played . . . Miss Florence Farr was a charming Aleel. Her’s [*sic*] is the best delivery of verse that we have heard upon the modern stage.²³

From the outset of her career Farr believed in the importance of sound, a belief that she finally codified in her book, *The Music of Speech*:

²¹ Ibid., 104.

²² Ibid.

²³ Review in *Irish Daily Independent*, 9 May 1898, quoted in Johnson, 104.

The Vedantists tell us that sound is the elemental correspondence of etheric spaces, the root of measurable things. And our hearing and our speech, the part of the mind that receives impression, can all be resolved into the element of sound-- the strange grey world of sound, flashing or detonating; imperceptibly subduing and mastering, or rearing maledictions upon us, gasping in ecstasy or choking in death, thousand-tongued. The mystery of sound is made manifest in words and in music . . . we are overwhelmed by the chatter of those who profane it, and the din of the traffic of the restless disturbs the peace of those who are listening for the old magic, and watching till the new creation is heralded by the sound of the new word.²⁴

Farr's theories intensified Yeats's own preoccupation with the medium of sound; his verse dramas, a means of extending his poetry into the theatre, focused on language and sound, sometimes to the detriment of the plays' dramatic action.

Reviews of *The Shadowy Waters*, Yeats's fifth play, especially remarked on the beautiful verse—and the undramatic quality of the play. At the play's premiere, in 1904, one newspaper reviewer stated that the legend of Dectora “is teeming with dramatic possibilities; yet Mr. Yeats seems to have gone out of his way to destroy the dramatic quality of it.”²⁵ And *The Freeman's Journal* gave the even stronger critical view that *The Shadowy Waters* was scarcely even a play: “Mr. Yeats describes his play as a dramatic poem. It is more a poem than a play, and as its poetic characteristics are enshrouded in an all-pervading atmosphere of dreamy mysticism, elaborated in the style which Mr. Yeats has made peculiarly his own, it does not lend itself very easily to successful

²⁴ Florence Farr, *The Music of Speech* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1909), quoted in Johnson, 102.

²⁵ *Daily Express*, 15 January, 1904, n.p., Vol III, *Newspaper Cuttings*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

presentation on the stage.”²⁶ Yeats himself, in 1905, while re-writing *The Shadowy Waters*, admitted that “it was the worst thing I ever did dramatically and partly because it was written when I knew very little of the stage and because there were so many old passages written or planned before I knew anything, that the little I did know could not pull it into shape.”²⁷ Yeats, however, inspired by Farr’s ideas, determined to pursue verse drama, despite the negative criticism. Much of his passion for verse and sound originated in Farr’s concepts, but the emphasis on sound was only one area in which Farr was able to affect Yeats’s perception of theatre.

Farr also encouraged Yeats’s fascination with the idea of a minimalist theatre. She was not, of course, the only artist at this time to object to the myriad details of realist or romantic staging practices. Such theatre practitioners as Gordon Craig, Adolph Appia, and William Poel were all advocating the avant garde idea that “less is more,” and Farr’s artistic sensibilities firmly allied her with this innovative theatrical practice. Her own observations, in 1904, on the work of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, a teacher of phonetics and proprietor of a school for dramatic study, faithfully describe the reasons for her inclination toward nominal scenery:

I may not be sufficiently complex but while I am enjoying a spectacle I cannot listen to literature enough to appreciate it. Instead of poetry I should like to hear weird musical instruments. I should like to see a dumb show of diabolical wickedness and intolerable sorrow in magnificent surroundings. But I do not want to listen to the music of a violin or the music of the poets or to any great literature in the midst of lights and constant music. . . . As a matter of temperament my whole attention must be

²⁶ *The Freeman’s Journal* quoted in *Laying the Foundations 1902-1904*, ed. Robert Hogan and James Kilroy (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc., 1976), 113.

²⁷ Letter from W. B. Yeats to Arthur Symons, August 3, 1905, in *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, Allen Wade, ed., 459.

concentrated on one perfect art and not scattered on a thousand luxurious details if I am to feel any keen aesthetic emotion²⁸

Farr was likewise adamant in her reasons for disliking Tree's treatment of the staging.

The Tree Tradition seems to me a little too continuously magnificent. As a room with patterns on the walls, on the carpets, on the ceilings and the curtains, makes us long for a plain space, a stretch of polished wood or white washed wall; so I long for dim shadows and for more of the famous black velvet curtains Mr. Tree provided. . . . I do not think Mr. Tree, and those producers of comic opera who try to follow in his footsteps, realize the value of the plain and the simple as a contrast to the ornate pattern. . . . the decoration of India pleases us less than the decoration of Japan because the Japanese recognize the power of deprivation in contrast to satiety."²⁹

To anyone who knows Yeats's work in the theatre, especially his preference for minimalist set design, this passage conveys how closely his ideas were linked to Farr's, and how her ideas cultivated his in his later practices.

Florence Farr also had a direct impact on Yeat's dramaturgy, through her collaboration with Yeats on the revisions of such plays as *The Shadowy Waters* and *Deirdre*. Their correspondence of this period "continually reveal[s] how great an influence she had on the shaping and re-writing of the early plays."³⁰ In these letters, Yeats often alludes to the inspiration he found in her: "I do believe I have made a great play out of Deirdre . . . I will get a copy made and send it you [*sic*] I think. . . . The first musician was written for you—I always saw your face as I wrote, very curiously your

²⁸ Florence Farr quoted in Johnson, 111.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Georgia Yeats, "Forward" to *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, in Bax, 33.

face even more that your voice and built the character out of that.”³¹ In another, undated, letter he told her, “I have written a coral [*sic*] ode about witches which contain these lines—suggested in some vague way by your letter, only suggested I mean an phantasmal exaggeration of some sentence.”³² Florence Farr never had the power to inspire Yeats’s drama the way Maud Gonne did his poetry, but her influence is present in his work nonetheless.

Perhaps her most important contribution to his dramaturgy was her work on *The Shadowy Waters*, about which he seems to have consulted her constantly as he was re-writing it. Originally produced in January 1904, the play received bad reviews. The *Daily Express* wrote “there is a great deal of weird and intangible dialogue in the piece, which . . . leaves the audience in a thick mist as to what the motive and the meaning may be. . . . Miss Walker spoke her lines in an effective manner, and her efforts may be said to have saved the play from utter condemnation.”³³ Another publication also praised the actors: “great credit is due for a performance that was wonderfully good considering the enormous difficulties.”³⁴

Yeats decided to revive the piece for production at the Theosophical Society convention in July 1905, under Farr’s stage direction. “Florence’s prompt copy shows how extensively both she and the poet rewrote the dialogue and stage directions even as rehearsals had progressed.”³⁵ *The Shadowy Waters* is a difficult play that attempts to

³¹ Ibid., 49.

³² Ibid., 56.

³³ *Daily Express*, Jan. 15, 1904, n.p., Vol. IV, *Newspaper Cuttings*, Abbey Theatre Collection, NLI.

³⁴ *The Figaro and Irish Gentlewoman*, Jan. 23, 1904, n.p. Vol. IV, *Newspaper Cuttings*, Abbey Theatre Collection, NLI.

³⁵ Johnson, 117-18.

dramatize “a pilgrimage and a love story that is all dreams and no responsibilities.”³⁶

The production did not receive good reviews, and Yeats himself was dissatisfied “with the whole production, his writing, the acting, in fact, all except the set constructed after a model designed by H. M. Paget.”³⁷ This dissatisfaction compelled Yeats to begin revisions of the play, immediately, and after the production closed he wrote Farr:

I am working on *Shadowy Waters* changing it greatly, getting rid of needless symbols, making the people answer each other, and making the groundwork simple and intelligible. I find I am enriching the poetry and the character of Forgael greatly in the process. I shall make it as strong a play as *The King's Threshold* and perhaps put it in rehearsal in Dublin again. I am surprised at the badness of a great deal of it in its present form. The performance has enabled me to see the play with a fresh eye. It has been like looking at a picture reversed as in a looking glass.³⁸

While these changes were going on, presumably at Coole Park, Yeats wrote constantly to Farr, keeping her abreast of the changes and sending her parts of the play to critique. “I have been waiting to answer your letters until I could send you a long passage out of *Shadowy Waters*—the first meeting of Forgael and Dectora, but Lady Gregory is too tired with entertaining for me to dictate it for the present.”³⁹ Although *The Shadowy Waters* never became a staple at the Abbey Theatre, it is considered one of Yeats’s important early plays and it enhanced his reputation as a playwright; Farr’s influence, it seems, was indeed far reaching.

³⁶ Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to a Nation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 23.

³⁷ Johnson, 117.

³⁸ Bax, 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

Soon, however, there was to come a parting of the ways; various events and opportunities served to loosen the ties that bound Yeats and Farr. First was a cooling of their passionate friendship, brought about by long absences; Yeats was working non-stop at the Abbey in Dublin while Farr was directing, acting, and writing music for a variety of productions in London. Foremost, however, was Yeats's increasing involvement with the Abbey Theatre and with the two women who already were playing major roles there, Lady Augusta Gregory and Annie Horniman. Though Farr and Gregory had a reasonably good working relationship, Horniman had taken a dislike to Farr. As a consequence, Farr was more and more often excluded from the inner circle of the Abbey Theatre. In October 1906, the directors of the Abbey decided to hire a stage manager to produce Yeats's verse plays and certain other classical productions. Yeats and Lady Gregory were seriously considering Farr for this position, and Yeats wrote to her, "Both Lady Gregory and I have been building castles in the air with you for one of their inhabitants. We mean to get you over to play for us presently."⁴⁰ Annie Horniman, however, vehemently protested Farr's employment by the Abbey. Lady Gregory reported that "Miss Horniman made such objections to our engaging Mrs Emery [*sic*] because of her 'carelessness' &c that I shall let that matter sleep until the new arrangements have been made. . . . I shall talk the matter over with Mrs Emery and tell her the difficulty."⁴¹ Horniman's mounting dislike of Farr has usually been attributed to her jealousy of Farr's relationship with Yeats, though no romantic attachment between Yeats and Horniman has ever been documented. She was, however, very devoted to Yeats's career, both as poet

⁴⁰ Letter from W. B. Yeats to Florence Farr, *Ibid.*, 59-60.

⁴¹ Letter to J. M. Synge from Lady Gregory, in *Theatre Business: The Correspondence of the First Abbey Directors: William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge*, ed. Anne Saddlemeier (London: Colin Smythe Ltd, 1982), 183.

and playwright, so it is possible that Horniman's jealousy stemmed from Farr's influence on Yeats's career rather than from the love affair. Nevertheless, Farr did not receive the position, and her close relationship with Yeats faded gradually as they both pursued their separate careers in the theatre.

Farr's other ventures into the theatre at this time kept her occupied, and probably kept Yeats's attention focused on her despite their having officially gone their separate ways. In 1905, she became a very successful producer, with an extraordinarily well-received premiere production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* in London. In that same year, she also produced a "masque" called *The Mystery of Time*, in which she again experimented with set design that demonstrated the symbolic theatre Yeats described in 1899 as "austere and grave costume and scenery, that . . . may appeal to the imagination alone."⁴² Although they eventually parted company, he to fame as a poet and a leading force at the Abbey and she to an early death in India in 1917, their partnership was certainly one of the foundation stones upon which the Abbey Theatre was raised.

The second woman who contributed to the Abbey Theatre without actually working in it was playwright Alice Milligan, a poet and champion of the nationalist desire for freedom from English rule. William J. Feeney, in his introduction to Alice Milligan's one-act play *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, asserts that this drama "is her only contribution to the Irish theatre movement."⁴³ This statement, however, fails to consider the many aspects of the movement in which the playwright was involved. Certainly *The Last Feast of the Fianna* was Milligan's major contribution---it was the only play of hers

⁴² W. B. Yeats quoted in Johnson, 114.

⁴³ Alice Milligan, *The Last Feast of the Fianna, Irish Drama Series*, Vol. II., with introduction by ed. William J. Feeney (Chicago: DePaul University, 1967), 40.

to be produced by the Irish Literary Theatre (or its successors)---but her other theatrical expertise also influenced the eventual establishment of the Abbey Theatre.

Alice Letitia Milligan (fig.6) was born in Omagh, County Tyrone on September 14, 1866, the third of thirteen children. Milligan's father, Seaton Milligan, held non-Victorian views on women's education (reminiscent of those belonging to Florence Farr's father); as a result, Milligan was educated first at a private school in Omagh, then at the Methodist College in Belfast for her secondary education. After graduating in 1886, she enrolled for a short time at King's College, London, where she studied English literature and history.⁴⁴ Milligan considered her father's liberal views on women's education to be the result of his own preoccupation with history. She wrote of him, "As an historian he saw to it that we knew history and discussed with us children international affairs and literature."⁴⁵ His unorthodox attitude certainly proved a boon to the daughters of his family.

⁴⁴ Sheila Johnston, *Alice: A Life of Alice Milligan* (Omagh, Co. Tyrone, Ireland: Colourpoint Press, 1994), 33 4.

⁴⁵ Alice Milligan quoted in Johnston, 21.



Figure 6. Alice Milligan

At the age of twenty-six, after a series of personal losses among family and close friends, Milligan turned to a career of writing. She became something of a literary Renaissance woman, publishing a novel, *A Royal Democrat*, in 1892, a series of plays and tableaux, and a volume of poetry, *Hero Lays*, in 1908.⁴⁶

Milligan's influence on the Abbey took two separate but related forms. First, in 1893, she met W. B. Yeats in Dublin, and he encouraged her to write plays; she complied, producing *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, *The Harp That Once*, and *The Deliverance of Red Hugh*. These plays, especially *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, had a profound effect on both the playwriting and the acting practices of Yeats's company. The second influence transpired when Milligan, an ardent nationalist, met Ireland's Joan of Arc, Maud Gonne. Milligan became instrumental in assisting Gonne with acting and directing practices that would eventually find their way into the Abbey Theatre.

In 1898, soon after the Irish Literary Theatre announced its intention of producing plays by Irish writers on Irish subjects, numerous plays were offered to the society for production; among them was a twenty-minute one-act play by Alice Milligan, which was ultimately chosen for production. It was performed on February 19, 1900, on the bill with Edward Martyn's *Maeve*, acted by a company of English actors that Yeats had engaged for the production.

Many contemporary sources approved of *The Last Feast of the Fianna*. The little drama detailed a confrontation between the mythological characters Finn Mac Cumhall, his son Oisín, and his wife Grania. Through a compact script Milligan was able to take the essential elements of Irish myth and folklore and successfully weave a story that was at once mythic, poetic, nationalistic, and dramatic—attributes that were exactly what the

⁴⁶ Robert Hogan, "Milligan, Alice," in *Dictionary of Irish Literature*. Revised and Expanded Edition.

Irish Literary Theatre wanted to promote in their productions. The Irish newspaper, *Daily Express*, remarked on the appropriateness of the work: “If the aim of the Irish Literary Theatre is to create national drama it is obvious that the development of Miss Milligan’s method is the proper road to reach ultimate success.”⁴⁷ Joseph Holloway described the play in his diary, “Miss Milligan’s twenty minutes peep into the legendary past . . . was picturesque,” even though he thought the acting deplorable.⁴⁸ And Yeats enthusiastically praised the play in the February 1900 edition of *Beltaine*: “Miss Milligan’s little play delighted me because it has made in a very simple way and through the vehicle of Gaelic persons, that contrast between immortal beauty and the ignominy and mortality of life which is the central theme of ancient art.”⁴⁹

With this contemporary acclaim it is difficult to understand why *The Last Feast of the Fianna* and its author are almost ignored in histories and studies of Irish drama. This neglect is especially puzzling because *The Last Feast of the Fianna* is a landmark play: “*The Last Feast of the Fianna* is the first completely Celtic Twilight play in setting, characters and theme . . . For Alice Milligan there remains the honour of being the first playwright to dramatise [*sic*]Celtic legend for an Irish audience.”⁵⁰ Alice Milligan was thus, alongside Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge, an innovative contributor to the Irish drama, introducing the Celtic Twilight play to the Abbey playwrights and paving the way for Yeats’s later legendary and mythological plays, such as *The King’s Threshold* and *On Baile’s Strand*.

⁴⁷ *Daily Express*, 20 February 1900, quoted in Johnston, 100.

⁴⁸ Joseph Holloway, *Joseph Holloway’s Abbey Theatre: A Selection from his Unpublished Journal - Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, eds. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O’Neill (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 10. Joseph Holloway was Dublin’s most popular architect at the turn of the century. He was also an avid theatergoer who almost never missed a performance in Dublin. His journal details his observations and criticisms for these performances.

⁴⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Beltaine* (February 1900) quoted in Johnston, 101.

⁵⁰ Johnston, 100.

For all the praise Milligan's play received among the critics, the major significance of the theatrical production of *The Last Feast of the Fianna* to the Irish Literary Theatre (and therefore to the eventual formation of the Abbey Theatre) was its poor execution. The bad reviews of the production, specifically the disparagement of the English acting troupe, probably led to the play's current status as a footnote in Irish dramatic history; this flawed performance, however, is the very factor that caused great changes in subsequent productions of the ILT.

Yeats had hired an English troupe of actors to play *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, as he had cast the preceding productions of the ILT, but their blunderings on stage pointed up the bald fact that English actors simply could not achieve the desired effect. Joseph Holloway apparently objected "to the lackluster performance of the English actors."⁵¹ Another contemporary critic, "observed that the English players were startled occasionally by audience reaction to allusions that were meaningless to the performers."⁵² Others suggested that

the performances demonstrated the need for Irish actors. Acquiring such a troupe was more than chauvinism or a bid for the favor of ultra-nationalists. . . . Certainly better interpretation of the plays could be provided by an Irish company familiar with Irish history and legend and mores.⁵³

Yeats himself commented, after the final production of the ILT in 1901, that "there was always something incongruous between Irish words and an English accent."⁵⁴ That such

⁵¹ Joseph Holloway quoted in Introduction to Milligan, 43.

⁵² Andrew Malone, *Ibid.*

⁵³ Feeney, Introduction to Milligan, 43.

⁵⁴ W. B. Yeats quoted in Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years* (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., Ltd., 1955), 5.

an Irish troupe did not yet exist in Ireland was a stumbling block to Yeats and the Irish Literary Theatre, and Yeats's major objective during the years of the Irish Literary Theatre, and later of the Irish National Theatre Society, was to find Irish actors and actresses who could speak verse well. Not until he heard William Fay's Irish players, perform Milligan's *The Deliverance of Red Hugh* in August 1901 for Maud Gonne's women's political group, *Inghinidhe na hEireann* (Daughters of Erin), did he realize the intrinsic rhythm that native Irishmen had for speaking verse. This performance represented a confluence of events that would change the production of Irish theatre-- events that revolved around Alice Milligan, Maud Gonne, and the *Inghinidhe na hEireann*.

Alice Milligan became politically aware at a very early age, listening to her father and even to older children in Omagh talk about volatile political topics such as Home Rule and the advent of the great political leader, Charles Parnell. She became an ardent nationalist and an advocate of all things Irish. Her work as editor of *The Northern Patriot*, an early nationalist magazine, brought her into contact with Maud Gonne on November 13, 1895; Gonne wrote an article for the magazine in an attempt to gain amnesty for several Irish political prisoners. The publication of this article probably led to Milligan's dismissal from the magazine, but she and co-editor Anna Johnston (also known as Ethna Carberry) immediately began another nationalist publication: *The Shan Van Vocht*, a political vehicle that lasted another three years.⁵⁵ Milligan's political contact with Gonne, however, would lead eventually to her further involvement with the

⁵⁵ Johnston, 87. The term *shan van vocht* is Gaelic for 'poor old woman,' a personification of Ireland also known as Kathleen ni Houlihan.

Irish Literary Theatre, through the dramatic productions of Gonne's political organization for women, *Inghinidhe na hEirrean*.

Maud Gonne has been described by historians variously as a rebel, a fanatic, a beauty, and a traitor (fig. 7).⁵⁶ What she seemed to be was a woman so dedicated to a single cause—the freedom of Ireland—that she would sacrifice love, children, marriage, and career for that single goal. In the course of her single-minded pursuit of Irish independence, an unexpected by-product occurred in the theatrical world of late nineteenth century Dublin: the formation of an acting company that became the nucleus of the Abbey Players. And it all began with Maud Gonne's burning need to contribute to the nationalist cause.

Gonne's early life set the stage for many of her revolutionary tendencies, for her mother died when she was only six years old and her father put her in the care of a French nurse, a woman "intelligent and well schooled, with strong republican, equalitarian, and philanthropic sympathies."⁵⁷ This environment, coupled with Gonne's own independent nature, swayed her sympathies toward the Irish peasants who were

⁵⁶ See, for example, Margery Brady, *The Love Story of Yeats and Maud Gonne* (Dublin: Mercer Press, 1990); Nancy Cardozo, *Maud Gonne: Lucky Eyes and a High Heart* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1979); Elizabeth Coxhead, "Maud Gonne," chapter in *Daughters of Erin: Five Women of the Irish Renaissance* (Buckinghamshire, England: Colin Smythe, 1979); R. M. Fox, *Rebel Irishwomen* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, Ltd., 1935); Samuel Levenson, *Maud Gonne* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976); Antoinette Quinn, "Cathleen ni Houlihan Writes Back: Maud Gonne and Irish Nationalist Theatre" in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, Anthony Bradley and Maryanne Gialanella Valiulis, eds. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Margaret Ward, *Maud Gonne: A Life* (London: Pandora Press, 1990).

⁵⁷ Levenson, 15.



Figure 7. Maud Gonne

evicted from their homes by wealthy English landlords and created in her a burning desire to see all of Ireland free from English rule.

Her first personal encounter with the English occurred after her father's death in 1886, when she was sent to London to live with her father's eldest brother, William Gonne. Uncle William's English sympathies and strict running of the household proved intolerable to Maud's high-spirited nature. The first and only clash resulted in Gonne's first use of the theatre as a means to her ends. William, finding Gonne's personal account book not in order, informed his niece that her father had left her penniless and she would either have to be adopted by an elderly aunt or make her own way in the world.⁵⁸

Gonne opted to earn her own living and, having been refused admission to a nursing program because of weak lungs, elected to go on the stage. This attempt soon bore fruit, as Gonne had contacts in the theatrical world. A London actor, Herman Vezin, had seen her in an amateur production in Dublin and assured her she could make a career on the stage if she wished; he gave her his card and told her "If ever you do come to me."⁵⁹ Gonne took him at his word, and Vezin put her in touch with a theatrical agent who immediately got her a position in a touring company, as the leading lady in "an abominable melodrama and *Heartsease*, an English version of *Adrienne Lecouvreur*," a well-made tragedy by Eugene Scribe.⁶⁰

Four months later she sent her uncle "a six-foot poster, printed with her name in foot-high letters, announcing that she would have the leading role in two plays."⁶¹ Uncle

⁵⁸ Maud Gonne MacBride, *The Autobiography of Maud Gonne: A Servant of the Queen*, A. Norman Jeffares and Anna MacBride White, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 56. To avoid confusion, hereafter all citations to this work will be given under the name Gonne.

⁵⁹ Gonne, 59.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶¹ Levenson, 30.

William's response was typically English and Victorian: he asked her to spare the family humiliation by taking a stage name. Gonne replied that "the name belonged to me and I thought I was honouring it by earning my bread."⁶²

Unfortunately the defiance ended abruptly. In her autobiography Gonne wrote:

I had worked very hard at voice production and spent nights and days rehearsing in drafty, dismal, dusty halls and theatres. The day I was to have started on tour found me lying weakly in bed, after a haemorrhage of the lungs. . .and owing a large sum for breach of contract to the director of that ramshackle touring company, which I did not know how to pay.⁶³

She soon learned that her uncle's statements were false and that she was actually a woman of independent means. The episode, nevertheless, made Gonne realize that the theatrical world was a viable agency for her to use when necessary.

Gonne's nationalism first surfaced in 1886 when, after the theatre escapade, she was taken to France to recuperate from her lung ailment. There she met Lucien Millevoeye, a Frenchman whose own purpose in life was to win back Alsace-Lorraine for France and who urged her to leave the stage and make politics her life's ambition:

Why don't you free Ireland as Joan of Arc freed France? You don't understand your own power. To hear a woman like you talking of going on the stage is infamous. Yes, you might become a great *actrice*; but if you became a great *actrice* as Sara Bernhardt, what of it? An *actrice* is only imitating other people's emotions; that is not living; that is only being a *cabotine*, nothing else. Have a more worthy ambition, free your own country, free Ireland.⁶⁴

⁶² Gonne, 60.

⁶³ Gonne, 60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

Gonne, who had fallen deeply in love with Millevoye, heeded his advice and returned to Ireland to work as a political advocate for nationalism rather than as a theatrical performer (fig. 8). Gonne managed to overlap the two spheres frequently.

Soon after returning from her meeting with Millevoye in France, Gonne attempted to join both the Celtic Literary Society and the Irish National League. She was rebuffed by both with the explanation that women were barred from membership in these societies. Undaunted by this set-back, Gonne worked for years on the outskirts of the political movement as a successful public speaker for the societies that would not accept her in their ranks. She had never before attempted oratory, but Tim Harrington, a Parnellite member of Parliament, persuaded her to speak at various political rallies and gatherings. “She had the gift to hold a crowd, and her stage training enabled her to project her voice effortlessly, even in the open air.”⁶⁵ This training and her own innate “tendency to dramatise [*sic*] life, which she freely admitted,”⁶⁶ became her personal tools in the pursuit of a free Ireland. From 1894 onward, she lectured steadily and undertook three lecture tours in America to raise money for The Amnesty Association and to support Arthur Griffith’s nationalist newspaper *The United Irishman*.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin: Five Women of the Irish Renaissance* (Buckinghamshire, England: Colin Symthe, 1979), 27.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁷ Gonne, 222-3. The Amnesty Association worked simultaneously for the release of political prisoners and for the financial relief of their families.



Figure 8. Maud Gonne at about the time she met Lucien Millevoye.

Finally, in 1900, she “at last succeeded in founding *Inghinidhe na hEireann* (the Daughters of Erin). I called a meeting of all the girls who, like myself resented being excluded, as women, from National Organizations. Our object was to work for the complete independence of Ireland.”⁶⁸ And though Gonne had renounced the theatre as a career, she clearly recognized the power of theatre to forward the nationalist aims of her new organization (fig.9).

Although the *Inghinidhe na hEireann* was established as a “political and cultural organization,”⁶⁹ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, an early member of the society, reported that it was primarily a dramatic organization and that “its object was to encourage young Dubliners to write for the stage and to establish the nucleus of a national dramatic company.”⁷⁰ Indeed, the by-laws of the society stipulated that one of its goals was “to discourage the reading and circulation of low English literature, the singing of English songs, the attending of vulgar English entertainments at the theatres and music hall.”⁷¹ To replace those English entertainments, the *Inghinidhe na hEireann* “experimented with inventing an Irish popular theatre, mounting ceilidhe, magic-lantern shows, *tableaux vivants* and one act plays.”⁷² The society’s most significant contribution, however, was the development of native Irish actors in a dramatic class held at the *Inghinidhe* meetings. Maud Gonne herself “used to teach in it all I had learned in my short-lived stage adventure.”⁷³

⁶⁸ Ibid., 266.

⁶⁹ Antoinette Quinn, “Cathleen ni Houlihan Writes Back: Maud Gonne and Irish Nationalist Theatre,” in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, eds. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997.

⁷⁰ Nic Shiubhlaigh, 3.

⁷¹ Quinn, 42.

⁷² Ibid. Quinn’s article gives extensive descriptions of all of these theatrical and para-theatrical activities.

⁷³ Gonne, 176.



Figure 9. Maud Gonne's *Inghinidhe na hEireann*, circa 1905-06.

The amateur dramatics were extremely popular in the organization, and as early as December 1900, Gonne and the Secretary of *Inghinidhe*, Maire T. Ni Cuminn (Quinn), both wrote to Alice Milligan asking for help with a theatre production. Milligan had gained experience with directing tableaux when she assisted in the centennial celebration of the rising of 1798 and, by 1900, was considered somewhat of an expert in the genre.⁷⁴

In a letter dated December 30, 1900, Quinn wrote,

Miss Gonne has asked me to write you with reference to the Gaelic Tableaux, which we are so anxious to have in Dublin. We were so pleased to hear from Miss Kileen that you were interested in the project and had so kindly promised to give us the benefit of your experience and assistance in carrying them out. . . . Miss Gonne tells me you are a perfect wonder at tableaux and I am sure if you will not help us we shall never be able to do them and must abandon the idea altogether.⁷⁵

Gonne herself wrote the same day to urge Milligan to assist them:

I know it is asking a great deal of you to come and help us, but we know how kind you are in helping at such entertainments and you are so clever & have such a genius for dramatic effects that if you came we are certain of a magnificent success. . . . Without your help we feel very much afraid of trying them as none of us have had much experience in tableaux.⁷⁶

Such fulsome compliments to Milligan's theatrical expertise paid off. She journeyed to Dublin to help with the tableaux in spring 1901. She also must have been duly impressed with *Inghinidhe*'s theatrical abilities because, according to Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh,

⁷⁴ The rising of 1798 refers to the unsuccessful Irish rebellion against English rule. During the short lived conflict French soldiers landed in the town of Killala to aid the Irish army.

⁷⁵ Maire T. Ni Cuinn, Dublin, to Alice Milligan, Belfast, 30 December 1900, National Library of Ireland.

⁷⁶ Maud Gonne, Dublin, to Alice Milligan, Belfast, 30 December [1900], National Library of Ireland.

Milligan “had written some plays and it was suggested that we should put on two of her plays *The Deliverance of Red Hugh* . . . then another play *The Harp*.”⁷⁷

Realizing that the society needed additional guidance for such an undertaking, Gonne brought in William and Frank Fay as professional theatre artists. Frank Fay was a drama critic for the *United Irishman* and an elocution teacher, while Willie Fay had performed in various professional troupes before taking a job in Dublin as an electrician. Willie Fay was then currently performing farces in an English music hall, the Union Jack Coffee Palace, with a troupe that included some of the *Inghinidhe* actresses. Disturbed that some of its actresses might play in a venue antithetical to the precepts of the society, *Inghinidhe* “passed a resolution forbidding any of their members to act for Fay in his English farces & for the Coffee Palace.”⁷⁸ Gonne instead “begged them to coach her girls, as they [the Fays] were already coaching a mixed group of amateurs calling themselves the Ormonde society.”⁷⁹ By 1902, the actresses from the *Inghinidhe* dramatic classes had merged with the actors from the Ormonde Dramatic Society to form W. G. Fay’s Irish National Dramatic Company.

It was evidently during this time that Yeats became acquainted with the Fays and their work for he wrote in his autobiography, “I saw William Fay’s amateur company play Miss Milligan’s *Red Hugh*, an historical play on the style of Walter Scott. ‘Yonder battlements’, all the old rattle-traps acquired modernity, reality, spoken by those voices. I came away with my head on fire. I wanted to hear my own unfinished *Baile’s Strand*, to

⁷⁷ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, “Lecture Given to Galway Branch of Women Graduates Association [1948],” D, Papers of Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, National Library of Ireland.

⁷⁸ Letter to W. B. Yeats from Maud Gonne in *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938* 176.

⁷⁹ Coxhead, *Daughters*, 49-50.

hear Greek tragedy spoken with a Dublin accent.”⁸⁰ Yeats was obviously “on fire” because of the production values he had witnessed. Equally important, his viewing of this production may have “inspired his own famous play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.”⁸¹ What is certain is that when Yeats was ready to produce *Kathleen* he engaged the Fays and their acting company for the playing of it.⁸² *Inghinidhe na hEireann*, in this production of *The Deliverance of Red Hugh*, brought “Yeats and the Fay brothers into direct touch; [although] the tableaux vivants probably did little for the freedom of Ireland . . . they assembled the most important figures in the early days of the national theatre, for A.E. (George Russell) was with Yeats at the Antient Concert Rooms that night [in 1901] and Lady Gregory was there too.”⁸³ The convergence of people and events that would lead directly to the establishment of the Abbey theatre was almost completed.

In April 1902, *Inghinidhe na hEireann* sponsored the first production of W. B. Yeats’s and Lady Gregory’s nationalist masterpiece *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, a prime example of the patriotic one-act play the *Inghinidhe* favored. The story is simple but deeply stirring: on the eve of the marriage of Peter Gillane’s oldest son, a poor old woman visits his cottage. She is a wandering woman who speaks of losing her “four fields” to the English and who speaks of the young men who have fought for her through the years, and of the men who must yet fight for her to regain her land. The son, Michael, heeds her cry, stirred by Kathleen’s refrain that those who take up her service

⁸⁰ Yeats, *Autobiography*, 383-4.

⁸¹ Johnston, 102.

⁸² When Yeats and Lady Gregory wrote *Kathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902, the title character’s first name was spelled with a “K” to distinguish it from the title character of one of Yeats’s earlier plays, *The Countess Cathleen*. Years later, Yeats changed the spelling to *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.

⁸³ Gerard Fay, *The Abbey Theatre: Cradle of Genius* (Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, Ltd., 1958), 35.

“shall be remembered for ever;/ They shall be alive for ever;/They shall be speaking for ever;/The people shall hear them for ever.”⁸⁴ He then goes to join the French during the rising at Killala in 1798. After he goes, the younger son, when asked if he had seen the old woman on the path, reports, “I did not; but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.”⁸⁵ The poor old woman is Kathleen ni Houlihan, the embodiment of Ireland itself.

Yeats and Gregory wrote the play after Yeats had a dream

of a cottage where there was well-being and firelight and talk of a marriage, and into the midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself, that Kathleen ni Houlihan for whom so many songs have been sung and for whose sake so many have gone to their death.⁸⁶

When Yeats showed the script to Gonne she was thrilled. She realized that Yeats had finally managed to write the ultimate nationalist propaganda play, in her words, the “most perfect play ever written in Ireland.”⁸⁷ The catch was a stipulation Yeats placed on the piece: either Gonne played the title role or *Inghinidhe na hEireann* could not produce the play. The bait was simply too tempting, and Gonne accepted the role, a role that many believed she actually lived day-to-day in her efforts to free Ireland. It was this convergence of her persona with the role of Kathleen ni Houlihan that created the legendary performances of April 2, 3, and 4, 1902.

Maud Gonne’s entrance into the theatre that first night caused a great sensation.

She arrived late and “caused a minor sensation by sweeping through the auditorium in the

⁸⁴ William B. Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in *Eleven Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1964), 229.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁸⁷ Maud Gonne quoted in Coxhead, *Daughters*, 50.

ghostly robes of the Old Woman . . . ten minutes before we were due to begin. Frank Fay pursed his lips and stamped away in annoyance . . . ‘Unprofessional!’ he called it.”⁸⁸ The performance which followed was attested by all present to be one of the most powerful theatrical experiences of their lives. Maire ni Shiubhlaigh, one of the company’s actresses, remembered the performance as an inspiration to the country:

How many who were there that night will forget the Kathleen ni Houlihan of Maud Gonne, her rich golden hair, willow-like figure, pale sensitive face, and burning eyes, as she spoke the closing line of the Old Woman turning out through the cottage door. . . Her beauty was *startling*. Yeats wrote *Kathleen ni Houlihan* specially for her, and there were few in the audience who did not see why. In her, the youth of the country saw all that was magnificent in Ireland. She was the very personification of the figure she portrayed on stage.⁸⁹

In fact, many were struck with the mesmerizing power Maud Gonne generated in the role (fig. 10). Mary Colum, wife of the playwright Padraic Colum, wrote “to our elders in Dublin it was Maud Gonne’s creation of the role that was significant. Those who saw her on the first night said that when she came on the stage, with her marvelous beauty, her height, and the memories of her militant patriotism, people’s hearts stopped beating, and many, including Yeats himself, wept.”⁹⁰ In a subsequent letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats described Gonne’s performance as “played. . . magnificently, and with wierd [*sic*]

⁸⁸ Nic Shiubhlaigh, 17.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹⁰ Mary Colum, *Life and the Dream* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1947), 112.



Figure 10. Maud Gonne in the title role of *Kathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902.

power.”⁹¹ Joseph Holloway, the well-known Dublin architect and drama critic, reported that

Most of the saying of the mysterious ‘Cathleen’ (a part realized with creepy realism by the tall willowy Miss Maud Gonne, who chanted her lines with rare musical effect, and crooned fascinatingly. . .some lyrics) found ready and apt interpretation from the audience who understood that Erin spoke in ‘Cathleen,’ and they applauded each red-hot patriotic sentiment right heartily.⁹²

And the *All-Ireland Review* stressed the relationship between Gonne’s theatrical role and her more customary role of nationalist orator, making her performance continuous with her politics:

‘The well-known nationalist orator did not address the other actors as is usual in drama, but spoke directly to the audience, as if she was addressing them in Beresford Place . . .she can scarcely be said to act the part, she lived it.’⁹³

From this point on, the public viewed Maud Gonne as Cathleen ni Houlihan, a role with which Gonne also identified herself for the rest of her life.⁹⁴

One legacy of this celebrated performance was its impact on other actresses in the company, and indeed on those future actresses who were in the audience. Maud Gonne set a high standard for playing the Poor Old Woman that many critics would say was rarely met and never surpassed.

Yet because the play was so popular, and because it became a staple of the INTS and the Abbey Company, actresses were constantly being asked to undertake the part.

⁹¹ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, Vol. III, 1901 – 1904, eds. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 167.

⁹² Holloway, 17.

⁹³ Quinn, 46.

⁹⁴ Nancy Cardozo, *Maud Gonne: Lucky Eyes and a High Heart* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979), 220-21.

The first actress to reprise Gonne's role was Honor Lavelle when the play was revived the following year, first in May and again in October 1903 (on the bill with Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*). The results were not promising. An article reviewing the May performance faulted the whole company, saying the play "needed much better acting and stage-management to give it anything like its full effect."⁹⁵ Joseph Holloway, however, singled Lavelle out in a letter to Willie Fay as the ultimate culprit in the production's negative criticism: "*Kathleen Ni Houlihan* fell very flat, chiefly owing to the title role being enacted in too listless a key . . . tell Miss Lavelle to throw more enthusiasm & earnestness into her *Kathleen*."⁹⁶

The second actress to attempt the role was Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, cast as *Kathleen* before the opening of the Abbey Theatre in December 1904. Nic Shiubhlaigh recounts her experiences with the role, including an homage to Maud Gonne's performance:

People have said that through the years my playing of the part has been creditable, but I would like it known that every time I have played *Kathleen* I have modelled [*sic*] my performance on the one given originally by Maud Gonne. Although I have seen many famous actresses play *Kathleen* since, I have yet to know of a performance which surpassed hers on the little stage in St. Teresa's Hall.⁹⁷

After Nic Shiubhlaigh left the theatre in 1905, the part was given to the company's new leading lady, Sara Allgood, who had her own ideas about the role.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Unidentified review in *Newspaper Cuttings*, Vol IV, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁹⁶ Joseph Holloway, Dublin, to William G. Fay, Dublin, 9 October 1903, *Newspaper Cuttings*, Vol IV, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁹⁷ Nic Shiubhlaigh, 60.

⁹⁸ See Chapter 6 for Allgood's conception of the part.

But only eighteen months after her nationalist triumph in *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, Maud Gonne angrily resigned her position as Vice-President of the INTS and *Inghinidhe na hEireann* severed their ties with the organization as well. The reason for this rupture was the Society's shift in focus from producing pointedly nationalist dramas, such as *Kathleen ni Houlihan* and *Deirdre*, to producing plays with artistic or literary merit only. Gonne wrote to Yeats repeatedly during September 1903 of her concerns about this new direction the theatre company was taking. In early September she wrote, "I still think it will be best for me to cease to be the vice president of the theatre Co, I won't undertake any but National fights, & the theatre Co does not seem inclined for such fights."⁹⁹ On September 9 she voiced her annoyance with William Fay's disregard of the nationalist cause, writing, "Of course the theatre is a great disappointment to me & to all the nationalist interested in it, & it is entirely Fay's fault if he is considered anti-national or at least indifferent to national things. . . .He openly discarded a national play, The Saxon Shilling, [*sic*] & repeatedly he spoke slightly of the national societies, without which societies he would never have come under your notice at all. He openly boasted now that he had a better class of public & he didn't care for them [nationalist plays] & wouldn't consider them."¹⁰⁰ Her final letter that month, dated September 25, chastised Yeats for pretending to forget the origins of the National Theatre Company and for seeming to condone Fay's actions.

Fay having succeeded in a certain measure through you & your friends . . . has lost his head & thinks he can insult the National Societies who created him. It was not 'hear say' reports I sent you, to *me* Fay said that he didn't care a D_____ about the Nationalist Societies & other rude remarks. . . .He

⁹⁹ Maud Gonne to W. B. Yeats, in *The Gonne-Yeats Letters*, 173.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

refused a national play that you yourself recommended, he acted for nothing for Unionists & drove hard bargains with Nationalist Societies, he naturally made it impossible for the National Societies to co-operate with him. You forget the existence of the National Theatre Society was originally due to Inghinidhe na hEireann & Cumann na Gaedhal [a men's organization that was precursor to the Sein Fein Party]. . . . It was Inghinidhe na hEireann & Cumann na Gaedhal who financed each of Fay's first attempts at National performances. On each occasion we not only gave him the dresses & scenery we had paid for, but also gave him more than the fair share of profits & even when there was a loss made up something for Fay, not for himself naturally but with the idea of helping the formation of a National Theatre Co.¹⁰¹

Enclosed with this letter was a copy of another letter to Mr. George Roberts, the President of the INTS, tendering the resignation of her office:

I wish to resign my position as Vice-President of the N. T. Society. When I joined the Society I understood it was formed to carry on National & propagandist work by combating the influence of the English stage. I find it has considerably changed its character & ideals & while I shall always be interested and glad of its success, I can no longer take an active part in the direction & work.¹⁰²

The final straw for Gonne came in October 1903 with the Society's production of J. M. Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*, a play in which the representation of Irish peasant women's sexuality diverged wildly from the nationalists' depiction. The play's suggestion that a woman, trapped in a loveless, arranged marriage, could find happiness with a man in an adulterous relationship was considered by the nationalists as a slander on all Irish womanhood. Gonne protested when the play was accepted for production by

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 176.

¹⁰² Photocopy of letter from Maud Gonne to George Russell in *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938*, 178.

the Irish National Theatre Society, calling it “horrid.” To make the production even more galling, she confided to Yeats, “it was forced on the Company by a trick. They were told the reading Committee had accepted it & they had no choice in the matter & yet Russell tells me as far as he knows it was never submitted to the reading Committee.”¹⁰³

At the opening night performance, Gonne walked out of the theatre in the middle of the play, protesting that not only was it a misrepresentation of Irish women, but that it was also the personalization of the struggles of one woman rather than an exploration of the struggles of Ireland. In a scathing rebuttal in *The United Irishman* to a statement by Yeats that the Society wished only to present propaganda in the form of good art, Gonne wrote:

A play which will please the men and women of Ireland who have sold their country for ease and wealth, who fraternize with their country’s oppressors or have taken service under them, a play that will please the host of English functionaries and the English garrison, is a play which can never claim to be national literature. . . . The center of the national life is still among the poor and the workers, they alone have been true to Ireland, they alone are worthy and they alone are capable of fostering a national literature and a national dream.¹⁰⁴

Gonne also wrote a one-act play, *Dawn*, as a refutation of Synge’s play and as “an experiment in combining realism with nationalist political allegory in a play focusing on a peasant heroine.”¹⁰⁵ Though the play was never performed, it was published in the *United Irishman* in 1904. Despite her disappointment with the INTS, Gonne kept in

¹⁰³ Maud Gonne to W. B. Yeats, in *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1838*, 174.

¹⁰⁴ Maud Gonne quoted in Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin*, 54.

¹⁰⁵ Quinn, 51.

close touch with Yeats until his death, and often attended the Abbey Theatre, although she never acted on the Abbey stage; indeed, she never acted again on any stage.

But it was too late. She could not withdraw her inspiration; she could not take back the actresses of the INTS who had gotten their first training at her hands in the drama classes of the *Inghinidhe na hEireann*. Her contribution to the Abbey Theatre was firmly established, though her desire to induce nationalism through the agency of the theatre was only partially fulfilled.

Maud Gonne is probably best remembered as the beautiful woman who inspired Yeats's greatest poetry, though she herself most likely would prefer to be remembered as the "Great Liberator," sharing the title with Daniel O'Connell. Gonne's contribution to the Irish dramatic movement and the Abbey Theatre is her least remembered but possibly most deserved accolade. Alice Milligan's roles as playwright and director, though almost completely forgotten, were essential to the early cultivation of native Irish actors and to the literature of the Celtic Twilight. Florence Farr is remembered mainly as a rather eccentric woman who dabbled in mysticism, the mistress of George Bernard Shaw, and who died an early death in India. But she inspired W.B. Yeats to form his early ideas about theatre and verse drama, and through him inspired the aesthetics of the Abbey Theatre.

It is clear that these three women shared several important traits. They were not ordinary women. Although reared in different parts of the British Isles, all shared elements that were unusual in Victorian society. All three came from upper-middle or upper class families; the fathers of all three were very liberal in their views on the education of women, so all received education that included college-level studies. The

financial circumstances of their families allowed each woman some degree of independence. Maud Gonne was independently wealthy at the age of twenty-one, Florence Farr lived off of a trust fund set up by her father, and Alice Milligan, although she worked throughout her life, was financially secure enough to choose a career in writing and lecturing. Farr and Gonne were English, and Milligan, although Irish, lived much of her life in Belfast among English sympathizers. All three of the women were Protestants.¹⁰⁶

Perhaps the most extraordinary commonality among these three women, however, was their unconventional lives. Farr and Gonne both had extramarital affairs (Gonne even produced two children out of wedlock); both married and divorced relatively quickly. They both also had very close, personal relationships with William Butler Yeats.¹⁰⁷ Milligan never had any documented extramarital affairs, but neither did she marry, an anomaly in Ireland at the turn of the last century. Also unconventional were her fierce nationalist loyalties to Ireland, a trait she shared with Maud Gonne. Although nationalism in women was not considered unconventional in Ireland in the early twentieth century, the intensity of Gonne's and Milligan's patriotism was severe enough to be called exceptional.

These tendencies to flaunt tradition carried over into the women's theatrical lives, for they were all innovators trying to stretch the boundaries of traditional theatre practice. Although almost every area of theatre practice was influenced in some way by these three

¹⁰⁶ The exception was Maud Gonne who, though born Protestant, converted to Catholicism just before to her marriage to Major John MacBride in February 1903.

¹⁰⁷ Farr's affair with Yeats is documented above; no documentation exists linking Gonne and Yeats in a sexual tryst, however, Yeats once wrote to Lady Gregory that Gonne had kissed him "the bodily mouth," suggesting that they did have one sexual encounter during their relationship. Mary Lou Kofeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 129.

women, they were particularly influential in the areas of acting, playwriting, and staging practices.

All three of these women strongly influenced the acting style that finally emerged in the Abbey Theatre. Maud Gonne's influence came directly from her acting the title role in *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, which, as we saw, influenced many actresses at the Abbey Theatre, specifically Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, who wrote that "her interpretation was a triumph of restrained, sensitive acting."¹⁰⁸ It came indirectly from her having established in *Inghinidhe na hEirrean* a dramatic school in which she taught aspiring actresses, such as Maire Quinn, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, Maire Garvey, and Sarah Allgood, who were later to comprise Willie Fay's theatre company. Although Frank Fay became the official acting coach at the Abbey Theatre, Maud Gonne's influence on the acting at the Abbey remained at least as long as the actresses who had passed through her hands. Alice Milligan also affected the acting practices of the early Abbey theatre, primarily through the production of her own play, *The Last Feast of the Fianna*. During the production of this play, it became apparent that a company of native Irish actors was needed for the dramas of the Irish Renaissance instead of the English actors usually hired. This necessity opened the door for Willie Fay's Irish National Dramatic Company, whose actresses had already been shaped by Milligan when she directed *Inghinidhe*'s early productions of patriotic *tableau vivants*. Less directly, Florence Farr influenced the acting style at the Abbey Theatre through her own acting talents and their impact on W. B. Yeats. Because Yeats so admired Farr's acting techniques, he strove to enable her style of non-realistic acting in his verse dramas at the Abbey. Although the realist acting

¹⁰⁸ Nic Shiubhlaigh, 14.

style became the Abbey Theatre's trademark in its Irish peasant dramas, the non-realistic style was also present, used consistently in Yeats's verse plays.

The next area in which these three women influenced the Abbey Theatre was playwriting. A major contribution to that component came from Alice Milligan, whose involvement with the Abbey Theatre, while more subtle than Farr's, nevertheless had a significant bearing on the theatre. While Farr sought to change theatrical practice itself, Milligan aspired to change the political climate in Ireland through drama. The most significant contribution to that change was the innovation of the Celtic Twilight play, of which Milligan's *The Last Feast of the Fianna* was the prototype. The realization of a play that used Celtic myth for plot, setting, and theme, illustrated how effectively these myths could be portrayed on stage and encouraged Yeats, and others, to take mythological characters and events as subjects for their dramas. Indeed, Yeats, George Russell, and John M. Synge used Milligan's model for several of their early dramas, producing some of the most popular plays in the early Abbey's repertoire. Even more directly, Farr assisted Yeats in writing at least two of his plays, working closely with him on revisions of *The Shadowy Waters* and *Deidre*. Her influence on these plays is found both in the language (and particularly in the *sound* of the language) and in the imagery, which she often inspired. It can also be argued that Maud Gonne's play, *Dawn*, had an indirect influence on playwriting at the Abbey. As a refutation of *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Dawn* provided a counterpoint to Synge's comic tale of an unfaithful wife through a stark look at the true plight of the Irish peasants, who were constantly subjected to unjust eviction from their homes. *Dawn* also presented a template for patriotic drama along more realistic lines than *Kathleen ni Houlihan*; its publication in *The United*

Irishman in October 1904 may have stimulated other playwrights in their nationalist offerings. Florence Farr's unconventional ideas about the theatre also influenced Yeats's plays. Because Farr herself was so sensitive to the intricate interplays of sound, her preoccupation became Yeats's preoccupation, which manifested itself in his plays. Dramas such as *The King's Threshold*, *On Baile's Strand*, *The Shadowy Waters*, and *Deirdre*, which were often played in the Abbey's repertoire, have Farr's stamp on them through their language and more particularly through the *sound* of their language. This is especially true of *The Shadowy Waters*, because Farr was so intimately connected with its creation.

Farr's innovations in staging practice were perhaps her most profound legacy to the Abbey Theatre. Her influence on Yeats in the area of scenic design molded his ideas very early in his theatrical career, changing his concepts of how theatre should look and sound. These concepts and practices were then realized at the Abbey because Yeats, as one of the directors of the theatre, quite often had final say about how plays were staged. Productions of *The Hour Glass*, *The Shadowy Waters*, *On Baile's Strand*, *The Well of the Saints* and many others have Farr's imprint on them in the simple style of scene design that she suggested to Yeats. In the 1906 edition of *Samhain*, Yeats wrote that scenery should be "little more than a suggestion—a pattern with recurring boughs and leaves of gold for a wood, a great green curtain with a red stencil upon it to carry the eye upward for a palace, and so on," ideas that strongly echo Farr's criticism of Tree's lavish productions.¹⁰⁹ Yeats's verse dramas and Synge's "artistic" plays were often staged using non-realistic scenery, draperies, and lighting effects, to suggest a symbolic setting

¹⁰⁹ W. B. Yeats quoted in Liam Miller, "W. B. Yeats and Stage Design at the Abbey Theatre," *Malahat Review*, 16 (October 1970): 56-57.

and to evoke the imagination of the audience members to create the theatrical world on stage. These plays stand out as different from the almost hyper-realism of the peasant dramas performed at the Abbey, where real fishnets from the Aran Islands or real dresses from a particular county were sent for to create a “slice of life” effect on stage. Although the verse dramas and symbolic set designs were not typical Abbey Theatre fare, they nevertheless were a respected part of the Abbey repertoire and a fundamental though less well-known trademark of the theatre.

Even before the building had opened its doors, the women of the Abbey Theatre had begun to speak.

CHAPTER 3:
THE WOMEN WHO DESIGNED

At the turn of the twentieth century, set design had only just begun to be an integral part of the theatrical production process. With the advent of realism and spurred on by Richard Wagner's idea of a unified production, settings designed for specific plays began to emerge in the theatres, replacing the stock set and requiring the talents of a set designer for professional productions. Although painted illusionism, with relatively few three-dimensional details, was still the conventional style of design at the majority of theatres in London, other ideas were beginning to emerge as well.

Hawes Craven and Joseph Harker, two English designers who worked for Henry Irving at the Lyceum, created innovative set designs by simply introducing more three-dimensional details onto the painted illusionistic sets. These detailed objects enhanced the painted scenery and created a sense of reality heretofore not found in the English theatre in the late nineteenth century. Working at the boundary of conventional set design, Craven's and Harker's experiments strove to improve realistic detail on stage while still adhering to the standard of illusionistic, two-dimensional, painted scenery. This blending of realism and illusionism came to be called pictorial realism. Harker went on to design for Hebert Beerbohm Tree, whose production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1900 featured live rabbits on stage as well as a carpet of flowers that could be picked by the actors.

At the same time in England, Frank Benson, the actor-manager of the leading Shakespeare repertory company, was experimenting with non-illusionistic set design for

Shakespearean productions. In an effort to recapture the scenic simplicity of earlier theatrical practices, Benson reduced scenic designs to several stock settings, therefore placing more emphasis on his actors. The early 1900s also saw the emergence of Gordon Craig as perhaps the most radical English theatrical designer of the time. Craig emphasized simple, moveable screens to depict all the settings of a play. Other design traits include extreme height (to force a sense of grandeur into simple plays) and a tendency to use right angles and parallel construction to emphasize a non-realistic world.

Set design on the continent during this period offered similar new developments. While the boulevard houses continued to prefer illusionistic sets of the old sort, the French naturalists, led by Andre Antoine at the Theatre Libre, advocated a hyper-realistic style. These scenic designs were characterized by highly detailed settings of lower-class dwellings, in keeping with his choice of producing the new realistic and naturalistic plays. Antoine sought to reproduce as nearly as possible on stage the exact environment for each play, in gritty, realistic detail. In his 1888 production of *The Butchers*, the set boasted real carcasses of bloody beef hung up in the shop. This style of design, emphasizing as it did the importance of the environment on action, reinforced the need for specific sets for each play. The Theatre de l'Oeuvre, under the direction of Aurelien-Marie Lugne-Poe, however, was experimenting with a completely different concept in stage design. Basing his ideas on the maxim "the word creates the décor," Lugne-Poe reduced scenery to simple designs of color painted on drapes of fabric, often commissioning visual artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec to create his set designs.¹

¹ See Andre Antoine, *Memories of the Theatre Libre*, trans. Marvin Carlson (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1964); Oscar Brockett, *A History of the Theatre*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995); Patti P. Gillespie and Kenneth M. Cameron, *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival* (New

At the beginning of the twentieth century, then, there seem to have been three distinct, if sometimes overlapping, styles of set design in England and France, countries close enough to be influential to the management of the Abbey Theatre. The first style encompassed the conventional forms of illusionistic and pictorial realism promoted by Harker and Tree, a style that combined painted scenery with some realistic detailing. The second style, advocated by Antoine, took realistic detail to new levels, producing sets that tried to recreate real life on stage, using three-dimensional objects. The third style comprised the aesthetic, artistic, non-realism as seen in the scene designs of Craig and Lugne-Poe. Although the Abbey became famous for its use of simple, realistic settings, the women who designed for the early Abbey stage seem to have closer ties to the non-realistic school of stage and costume design.

Scene and costume design at the Abbey have not been well studied. Although there are several reasons for this neglect, a primary reason is likely the sparse amount of information in this area. Accepted practice of the day appears not to have deemed it necessary to acknowledge designers; therefore, it is not unusual that the programs of the period 1897-1925 mention designers only in special cases. Too, the staple of the Abbey at this time was the peasant play and the same set and costume elements were probably used over and over for economy's sake, so there was not always a designer for each play. Finally, in their zeal for authenticity, the playwrights themselves often supplied scenic items or costumes from everyday life, again by-passing or taking for themselves the role

of designer. For the first production of *Riders to the Sea*, for example, J.M. Synge sent to the Aran Islands for fishing nets for the set dressing and pampooties, the traditional footwear of the Aran people; likewise, Lady Gregory sent typical dresses from Galway, for use in her peasant comedies, so that the style and colors would be correct.² Such efforts suggest that in many cases there was not a specific designer for either set or costumes but rather a concerted effort by several people to supply the necessary items. At the early Abbey Theatre, mounting the production took precedence over recognition of those involved in its design.

From 1897 to 1925, however, there is documented evidence that several women designed at the Abbey Theatre, either for the productions or for the theatre building itself. Annie Horniman, Pamela Coleman Smith, Edith Craig, Elinor Monsel, Lily Yeats, and Sarah Purser all contributed designs, and there may have been others, although records do not confirm their contributions. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh records that Helen Laird, who acted at the Abbey under the stage name Honor Lavelle, was the original wardrobe mistress for the theatre and “made the costumes which appeared in the first [1902] production of *Deirdre* and *Kathleen ni Houlihan*.”³ Whether these costumes were Laird’s designs was not specified, but if they were, then she holds the distinction of being the first woman to design costumes for the Abbey’s productions. Another instance is

² See Sara Allgood, “Memories,” TMs, 27-28, Berg Collection, New York Public Library; William Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre: An Autobiographical Record* (London: Rich and Cowan, Ltd., 1935), 194-6. For sources on crediting of designers see Cheryl Black, *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Bobbi Owen, *Scenic Design on Broadway: Designers and Their Credits, 1915-1990* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

³ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years*, (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., Ltd., 1955), 64. Nic Shiubhlaigh also states that her mother was wardrobe mistress when the Abbey Theatre opened in 1904 and that she and J. A. O’Rourke cut out and sewed the costumes for the productions. Again, no designer is named, so the possibility exists that Mrs. Walker may have also designed costumes at the Abbey.

Dorothy Travers Smith, who became the first resident scene designer at the Abbey in 1927. According to the Abbey's financial ledger, she was paid 18.17.6 pounds on August 16, 1919, and although records do not show if this money was payment for set design and construction, the possibility certainly exists that she began designing for the Abbey well before 1927.

Women's involvement in set and costume design at the Abbey can be found well before the doors opened in December 1904. Annie Horniman was the first woman to whom costume design credit was given for a production by the Irish National Theatre Society. In 1903, she designed and constructed costumes for Yeats's historical verse drama *The King's Threshold*, the first of three plays Horniman would design for Yeats and the Abbey. Although several historians have disparaged Horniman's artistic attempts at the Abbey, a close look at the reviews of the productions and at contemporary criticism of the designs reveal instead an asset that helped gain attention and respect for the Abbey Theatre.

Annie Elizabeth Fredricka Horniman was born in 1860 into the family of a wealthy tea merchant. Through a private education Horniman studied literature and history, learned music and painting, and became fluent in both French and German.⁴ Her grandfather had made his money by the brilliant innovation of selling tea packaged in little bags rather than loose, and Annie Horniman inherited a considerable sum of money at his death in 1893 (fig. 11). This inheritance made Horniman a woman of independent means in the late nineteenth century and allowed her the financial freedom to indulge her

⁴ Sheila Goodie, *Annie Horniman: A Pioneer in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1990), 14.



Figure 11. Annie Horniman

interest in the theatre, first financing Florence Farr's season at the Avenue Theatre in London and later providing capital for the Abbey Theatre in 1904.

In 1894, she met the young poet W.B. Yeats, during the season at the Avenue, and it was this friendship that propelled Annie Horniman toward her involvement with the Abbey Theatre. Horniman and Yeats shared many interests in art, theatre, and the occult. (They, along with Florence Farr, Maud Gonne, and Pamela Colman Smith, belonged to the occult society The Order of the Golden Dawn.) Their friendship flourished, and for years after their meeting Horniman and Yeats were all but inseparable, as she became his unpaid secretary. Most of all, she encouraged his poetry and his verse dramas, which she felt were works of genius that should be shared with the world. To this end she volunteered in 1903 to provide the costumes and set design for the first production of Yeats's verse drama *The King's Threshold*.

Horniman was actually quite qualified to design for the play. At age thirteen she had "constructed her own miniature stage with scenery and costumed players for whom she wrote dialogs, thus producing her first plays."⁵ From that time on she was an avid theatre-goer who attended plays throughout Europe, encountering set and costume designs by some of the most influential designers of the day. Most importantly, however, she studied at the Slade School of Art from 1882 until 1888. Although her classes taught her that she would never be a good painter, they did help develop her sense of the artistic, of the color and form that created great works of art; it was a sense that she used both in her personal dress and in her costume designs.

⁵ Mary Kay Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1995), 30.

The King's Threshold, set in ancient Ireland, is the story of a poet who goes on a hunger strike when he is denied a seat at the King's council table. With a cast of seventeen, it was a substantial undertaking for the INTS, challenging both the actors and the costume designer. Horniman began her work in London, purchasing rich materials that she cut out and then transported to Dublin in the late summer of 1903. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh remembers that Horniman arrived with "imported bales of the most expensive dress materials, engaged a team of English theatrical costumiers, and began fitting us out for the production."⁶ She also recalls that most of the costumes were "richly jeweled."⁷ Horniman herself helped sew the costumes as Jack Yeats's sketch attests (fig. 12). A black-and-white picture of these costumes exists in the archives of the National Library of Ireland, but the picture does not do justice to the richness of the fabric or to the decorative detail. It is this photograph that prompted James Flannery's estimation that the costumes "appear stiff, graceless, ill-fitting and lacking in any sense of unity or style."⁸ He supports this opinion with a similar one expressed by Lennox Robinson that the costumes were "incredibly graceless and ugly, clumsy material cut skimpily and often with mock fur which would not tempt a puppy."⁹ The bulk of the contemporaneous newspaper criticism, however, does not agree with their opinions. *The Daily Express*

⁶ Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸ James W. Flannery, *Miss Annie F. Horniman and the Abbey Theatre*, The Irish Theatre Series 3, ed. Robert Hogan, James Kilroy, and Liam Miller (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1970), 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38, n. 30.



Figure 12. Horniman sewing costumes she designed for *The King's Threshold*, 1903.

reviewer was of the opinion that “in the matter of staging, nothing could be better. The colour scheme was conceived with great taste and the individual dresses were well designed – especially attractive were the costumes worn by the two princesses.”¹⁰ The *Freeman’s Journal* gave even higher praise to Horniman as both costumer and set designer:

The talented lady who has acted as Mr. Yeats’ creative scenic artist has produced for the setting for *The King’s Threshold* a form as complicated and as beautiful as that which dominates a string quartet of Mozart. . . form is certainly the secret of these costumes and this scenery – form and a delicate perception of the beauty and value of colour tones. The costumes are classic in the dignity and beauty of the lines of the draperies, the restraint and harmony of the colours, but the Celtic and romantic influence comes out in the elaborate detail of the rich ornament – the jeweled devices, the embroideries, the designs in precious stone . . . Even the properties are made to harmonise with the central idea . . . the effect is . . . of a perfectly homogeneous composition inspired by rare intelligence and a poetic imagination.¹¹

In fact, the reviewer wrote extensively about the costumes and said very little about the play itself. And although Joseph Holloway did not specifically comment on the costumes or set, he did remark that “*The King’s Threshold* was proved a thing of exceptional beauty to the eye and ear.”¹² It therefore appears that the only negative comments have come after the fact and by men who disliked Horniman and her influence on the Abbey Theatre.

¹⁰ *The Daily Express*, 9 October 1903, in *Irish Scrapbook I*, Horniman Collection, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

¹¹ *The Freeman’s Journal*, n.d. in *Irish Scrapbook I*, Horniman Collection, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

¹² Joseph Holloway, *A Selection from His Unpublished Journal: Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O’Neill, eds. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 26.

The critics' reception of her designs for *The Shadowy Waters* and *On Baile's Strand* also bears out the merit of her contribution in costume design to the Abbey. In January 1904, Yeats' symbolist drama *The Shadowy Waters* was produced at Molesworth Hall, and, although the play itself received rather bad reviews (apparently no one could understand the meaning of it), Horniman's costumes were praised as the one understandable element of the production.¹³ *The Freeman's Journal* dubbed "the costumes. . . a remarkable feature of the performance, and the entire mounting of the piece, set in the dim colours of a subdued green, harmonized beautifully with the motif drama, the action of which takes place on the dark waves of a cold Northern sea."¹⁴

This state of affairs may have insulted Yeats, for when he asked Horniman to costume a third verse drama, *On Baile's Strand*, which was to open the Abbey in December 1904, he stipulated to Horniman that the scheme should be simpler, in order to let the play itself shine forth. The *Dublin Daily Express* reported before the play opened that "Beautiful emotion is not awakened by realistic scenery and gaudy dresses, but arises from beautiful words beautifully spoken, and the costumes and scenery that will be used in 'On Baile's Strand' are designed with the object, properly insisted on by Mr. Yeats, of concentrating the attention of the audience on 'the golden cadence of poesy.'"¹⁵ The unfortunate result of Yeats's stipulations on the costumes was that they were to be the least satisfying to Yeats, Horniman, and the audience at large. The week before the show opened, Yeats and Horniman had a "difference of opinion" about the costumes, as

¹³ Goodie, 56.

¹⁴ *The Freeman's Journal*, 15 January 1904, in Irish Scrapbook I, Horniman Collection, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

¹⁵ *Dublin Daily Express*, 23 December 1904, in Irish Scrapbook I, Horniman Collection, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

witnessed by all the cast and by Joseph Holloway, who recorded the exchange in his diary:

At the conclusion of the play the entire company was recalled on the stage, and an exciting and amusing exchange of difference of opinion took place between author Yeats and designer Miss Horniman. He with an eye on the effect created as an author, and she as the designer of the colour scheme of the costumes. Yeats likened some of the kings to 'extinguishers,' their robes were so long and sloped so from the shoulders. Father Christmas was another of his comparisons. He wished the cloaks away, but the lady would have none of his suggestions. Then commenced a lively scene in which the actors played the part of lay figures, and Yeats and Miss Horniman treated them as such in discussing the costumes. The red-robed kings were told to take off their cloaks, which they did, and then the green-clad ones followed. After much putting on and taking off, and an abundance of plain speaking as to the figures or lack of them among the players, a compromise was arrived at, and the 'grey-fur' on the green costumes was 'made fly,' and the red-clad kings were allowed to carry their cloaks on their arms, though Miss Horniman was of opinion that the red unrelieved, somewhat marred the colour scheme she had intended. . . Candidly I thought some of the costumes trying, though all of them were exceedingly rich in material and archaeologically correct. 'Hang archaeology!' said the great W.B. Yeats. "It's effect we want on the stage!" And that settled it.¹⁶

Horniman's concern about the damage to her color scheme may have been well founded. The reviewer for her costumes in *The King's Threshold* had written at some length about the merits of using a color scheme in connection with the design of a play: "It may seem to many people in these utilitarian days that the idea of a colour scheme in connection with the production of a play is a piece of fantastic irrelevance. But, after all, when we think it out squarely and logically, why not a colour scheme? Perhaps we have not realized how much can be expressed by harmonious combinations of colour, by the

¹⁶ Holloway, 49-50.

exclusion of every jarring note.”¹⁷ The “marring” of Horniman’s color scheme by Yeats, then, may have contributed significantly to the inattention the costumes received in the press. The ultimate result was that Horniman gave up costume design, a job that she truly enjoyed and of which she asked Yeats following the triumph of *The King’s Threshold*, “Do you realize that you have now given me the right to call myself ‘artist?’ How I thank you.”¹⁸ After the disagreement surrounding *On Baile’s Strand*, Horniman confined her attention at the Abbey Theatre to the financial arrangements of the theatre and to the management of its English tours.

Two other women are also known to have designed for the Abbey Theatre during its early years. Pamela Colman Smith, “Pixie” to her friends, was asked by Yeats to design the set for the first production of J. M. Synge’s *The Well of the Saints* in February 1905. She readily complied, with the assistance of her friend, Edith Craig.

Corrine Pamela Colman Smith (fig. 13), born in Middlesex, England on February 16, 1878, to Charles E. and Corrine Colman Smith, had an unusual childhood. Her father’s employment as an auditor for the West Indian Improvement Company required him to travel often, from London to New York and the West Indies; Smith and her mother accompanied him on these trips, though her mother died when Smith was rather

¹⁷ *The Freeman’s Journal*, 8 October 1903, in Irish Scrapbook I, Horniman Collection, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

¹⁸ A. E. F. Horniman to W. B. Yeats, 10 October 1903, Holloway Collection, National Library of Ireland.



Figure 13. Pamela Coleman "Pixie" Smith

young. According to Smith's correspondence, she lived in England until about the age of ten, then moved to Jamaica for several years. Upon their return to England, instead of packing his daughter off to a boarding school, Charles E. Smith preferred to allow her to join Ellen Terry on tour with Henry Irving's Lyceum group. Through this acquaintance Smith began her lifelong friendships with Ellen Terry and her daughter, Edith Craig. It was, in fact, Ellen Terry who gave Smith the nickname of "Pixie."¹⁹ While touring with Irving and Terry, Smith learned the rudiments of set and costume design.²⁰ She also became acquainted with the work of some of the Pre-Raphaelites, such as Sir Edward Burne-Jones (a friend of Ellen Terry) whose influence can be seen in Smith's later work.²¹

In October 1893, Smith enrolled in the Pratt Institute of Art in Brooklyn, New York, with an eye to illustration or teaching. Upon graduation in 1897, she immediately began selling her work and may have had illustrations published in the *St. Nicholas Magazine*.²² During this time she also built a miniature stage and experimented with production design, making sets from cardboard and wood and creating paper dolls with elaborate costume designs (fig. 14).²³

Smith made Yeats's acquaintance in a roundabout way in July 1899, when she

¹⁹ W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Vol. Two 1896-1900* ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly, and Deirdre Toomey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), n. 429.

²⁰ Greer, 406.

²¹ Melinda Boyd Parsons, *To All Believers: The Art of Pamela Colman Smith* (Wilmington, DE: Delaware Art Museum, 1975), n.p.

²² Parsons indicates that correspondence between Pamela Coleman Smith and the editor of the *St. Nicholas Magazine* suggests that Smith did contribute illustrations to the magazine; however, Parsons admits that she was unable to find any of Smith's works in the magazine.

²³ Parsons, n.p.



Figure 14. Pamela Colman Smith with miniature set and costume designs.

wrote to him in hopes of a meeting. Yeats, in a letter to his father, introduces her as “a certain Miss Smith (Pamela Smith) who made a while back some illustrations to ‘The Land of Hearts Desire’ & printed them. . . . She has done some illustration to ‘The Countess Cathleen’ & is now in London & at Lady Gregory’s suggestion I have suggested that she go out & see you some Sunday afternoon & show you her drawings.”²⁴ Smith became a great friend of Yeats and his family, painting several portraits of Yeats, collaborating with his brother Jack on the illustrations for her magazine *Green Sheaf*, and even joining, possibly at Yeats’s urging, the Golden Dawn Society in November, 1901.²⁵

Pamela Smith and her friend, Edith Craig (fig. 15), collaborated as designers on many theatrical projects, several at the request of W. B. Yeats. The first collaboration they designed for Yeats was a production of *Where There is Nothing* for the Stage Society. Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory of their designs and of his own part in the design process:

I thought the design for the Monastery scene extremely impressive. The design for Act I was a little humdrum. To some extent this was my own fault for that Croquet lawn and garden path has been the opening of so many Plays [sic]. Suddenly while I was looking at it occurred to me that it would all be made fantastic by there being a number of bushes shaped Dutch fashion into cocks and hens, ducks, peacocks &c. Pamela began sketching them at once (fig. 16).²⁶

The production, which was finally mounted in June 1904, received mediocre reviews.

Yeats, however, seemed pleased enough with the results, especially with Smith’s designs.

²⁴ W. B. Yeats to Jack B. Yeats, Yeats, *Collected Letters Vol. Two*, 430.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Gould, Kelly, and Toomey, eds., n. 429.

²⁶ W.B.Yeats to Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats, *Collected Letters Vol. Two*, 267.



Figure 15. Edith Craig in 1895.

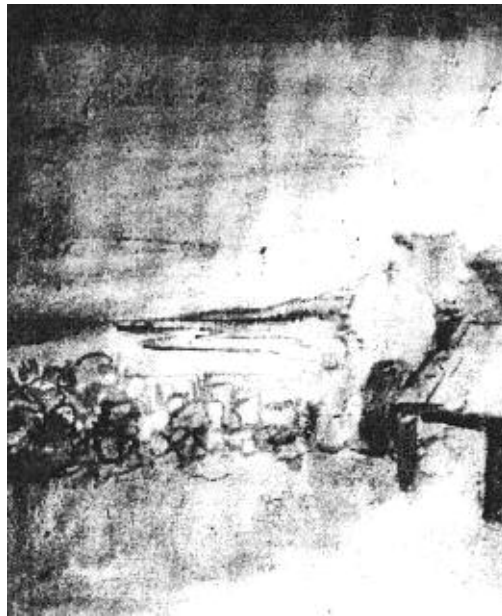
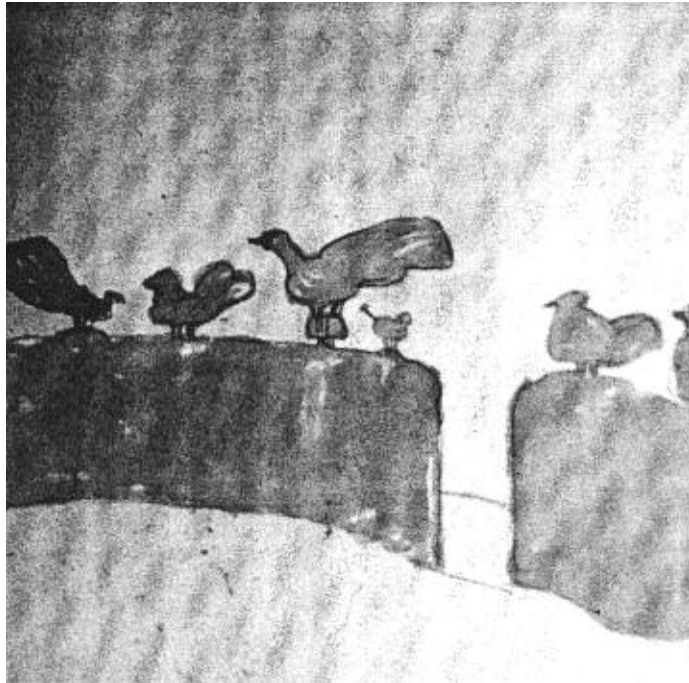


Figure 16. *Above*, Pamela Colman Smith's sketches of "a number of bushes shaped Dutch fashion into cocks and hens, ducks, peacocks"; *below*, her backdrop for *Where There is Nothing*.

Six months later, as the Abbey Theatre was about to open, Yeats again called on Smith. This time her assistance was needed to help him out of a predicament with the set designs for John M. Synge's *The Well of the Saints*, slated to open at the Abbey in early January. Yeats had originally asked his brother Jack for a set design for the play, but six weeks before the show was to go up the designs had yet to appear. In a letter to Lady Gregory, dated November 24, 1904, Yeats wrote, "I am waiting on Jack's designs for

Synge's play, as it may be possible to use some bits of scenery which will afterwards come in useful for Synge. They should come to-day or to-morrow [sic]. Failing this I shall get Pixie Smith who alone seems to understand what I want to make a design, I am extremely anxious now. . . to get designs of a decorative kind, which will set a standard and come in serviceable for different sorts of plays."²⁷ In the end, Smith and Craig did in fact execute the designs for *The Well of the Saints*, though the credit in the Abbey program read "Scenery painted from designs by Pamela Colman Smith and another."²⁸

Interestingly, their design for *The Well of the Saints* is an excellent example of the minimalist style of set design advocated by Florence Farr. Although neither pictures nor renderings of the set exist, the reviews of the production give an idea of the style of the design. *The Irish Times* wrote of the scenery that

It is, we know, heresy to suggest an amplification of the scenery. That, it is said, would unduly distract attention from the literary matter, but there were periods during the performance of Saturday when a little distraction from the long-drawn dialogues would have been a relief. . . .Saturday's play was particularly crude in its scenic equipment. It was a three act play, and in the first and last

²⁷ Ibid., 676.

²⁸ Abbey Theatre Program, February 1905.

the background was a tolerably well-painted mountain, reminiscent more of the west than the east of Ireland.²⁹

This description certainly suggests a minimalist set design, and the review in *The Belfast Evening Telegraph* gives an even clearer indication that Smith and Craig were using innovative techniques just then coming into practice and advocated by Farr and Yeats. “With regard to the mounting of the play, really wonderful effects have been produced by the simplest means. Flat cloths and faint tints suggested surprising semblances of rugged lands and sombre skies.”³⁰

There is evidence that Smith’s and Craig’s designs were influenced also by the ideas of Edith Craig’s brother, Gordon Craig. In an earlier letter to Lady Gregory (regarding the designs for *Where There is Nothing*), Yeats wrote that “Pamela Smith brought round a big sketchbook full of designs for scenery for the Play made by herself and Edith Craig. They were particularly pleased because they know Gordon Craig’s little stage dodges and are using them rather to his annoyance.”³¹ Yeats certainly approved of Gordon Craig’s designs, writing to Craig in April 1901, “I thought your scenery to ‘Aeneas and Dido’ the only good scenery I ever saw.”³² Gordon Craig’s influence on the design of Pamela Colman Smith and Edith Craig may well have made Yeats more receptive to their designs, because it made them more in sympathy with his own ideas of how the *mise en scene* should look. Yeats wrote to John Quinn in New York after the opening of *The Well of the Saints* that “our decorative scenery for Synge’s play has been generally liked. It was . . . though often mistaken in execution, obviously right in

²⁹ *The Irish Times* quoted in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, eds., *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge 1905-1909* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1978), 20.

³⁰ *The Belfast Evening Telegraph*, quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *Years of Synge*, 21.

³¹ W. B. Yeats to Lady Augusta Gregory, W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Vol. III*, eds. John Kelly and Ronald Shuchard, general ed. John Kelly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990-1996), 267.

³² W. B. Yeats to Gordon Craig, *Ibid.*, 53.

principle.”³³ Smith’s and Craig’s design was the last known one executed by a woman at the Abbey Theatre until 1927, when Dorothy Travers Smith became the first resident designer at the theatre.

As it has been shown, women influenced the Abbey Theatre in set and costume design even before there was a theatre; it is certainly not surprising, then, that women were also intimately involved in the design of the Abbey Theatre building itself. Annie Horniman, Sarah Purser, Susan “Lily” Yeats, and Elinor Monsel all contributed to the design of the theatre building in various ways and degrees, from the detailed architecture and furnishings down to the design of the theatre’s logo. All were eager to contribute to the theatre that was hailed as the unofficial “theatre of Ireland,” though the motives for their work varied as greatly as their contributions.

In April 1904, Annie Horniman (fig. 17) wrote to the Irish National Theatre Society, “I am taking the hall of the Mechanics Institute in Abbey Street and an adjoining building in Marlborough Street, which I propose to turn into a small theatre with a proper entrance hall, green-room & dressing-rooms.”³⁴ She then proposed to turn over the theatre to the INTS rent free for their theatrical productions.

After having made the decision to create this theatre, Horniman kept her hand firmly at the helm during the refurbishment of the Mechanic’s Hall, and she commissioned the design work of two other women, Sarah Purser and Lily Yeats, to help her decorate the new building. Almost from the moment she announced that she would

³³ W. B. Yeats to John Quinn quoted in Liam Miller, “W.B. Yeats and Stage Design at the Abbey Theatre,” in *Malahat Review* 16 (October 1970), 56.

³⁴ A. E. F. Horniman to W.B. Yeats, April 1904, Yeats Collection, National Library of Ireland.



Figure 17. Annie Horniman designed the interiors for the new Abbey Theatre.

give the INTS a “small theatre,” Horniman set about making her presence felt in the reconstruction of the old building. By virtue of her pocketbook, she was able to dictate the particulars of virtually all areas of the renovations: engagement of the architect, site manager and artistic designers; selection and purchase of materials; and design of the building and its interior.

Her first task was to hire architect Joseph Holloway, an ardent theatergoer, to renovate the building to her specifications; she also hired Willie Fay, who happily quit his full-time job as an electrician, to be her construction overseer at 30 shillings a week. Although the original buildings were small, the theatre she would build from them would be well appointed (fig. 18). There would be a green room, a small stage “with a proscenium opening of twenty-one feet and a depth of only sixteen,” dressing rooms, and an auditorium that would seat 562 people (fig. 19).³⁵

Throughout the building process, Horniman made it clear to Holloway that she would “have a voice in all decorative details of the theatre from determining the placement of the molding, to choosing the colour schemes in the dressing rooms.”³⁶ Without a doubt she knew how she wanted her theatre to look and how to accomplish that end. Because the theatre was located in Ireland and dedicated to Irish plays by Irish playwrights, Horniman insisted that the work and craftsmanship of the building be done by Irish industry. (This effort may have gone far toward establishing the idea that this was to be a “national” theatre.) Besides employing local contractors, she managed to

³⁵ Hugh Hunt, *The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre 1904-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 58. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh added that the original green room was located off the lobby, but was later opened up to allow for a refreshment bar. Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 57.

³⁶ Flannery, 16.



Figure 18. The exterior of the Abbey Theatre as it looked from 1904 to 1951.

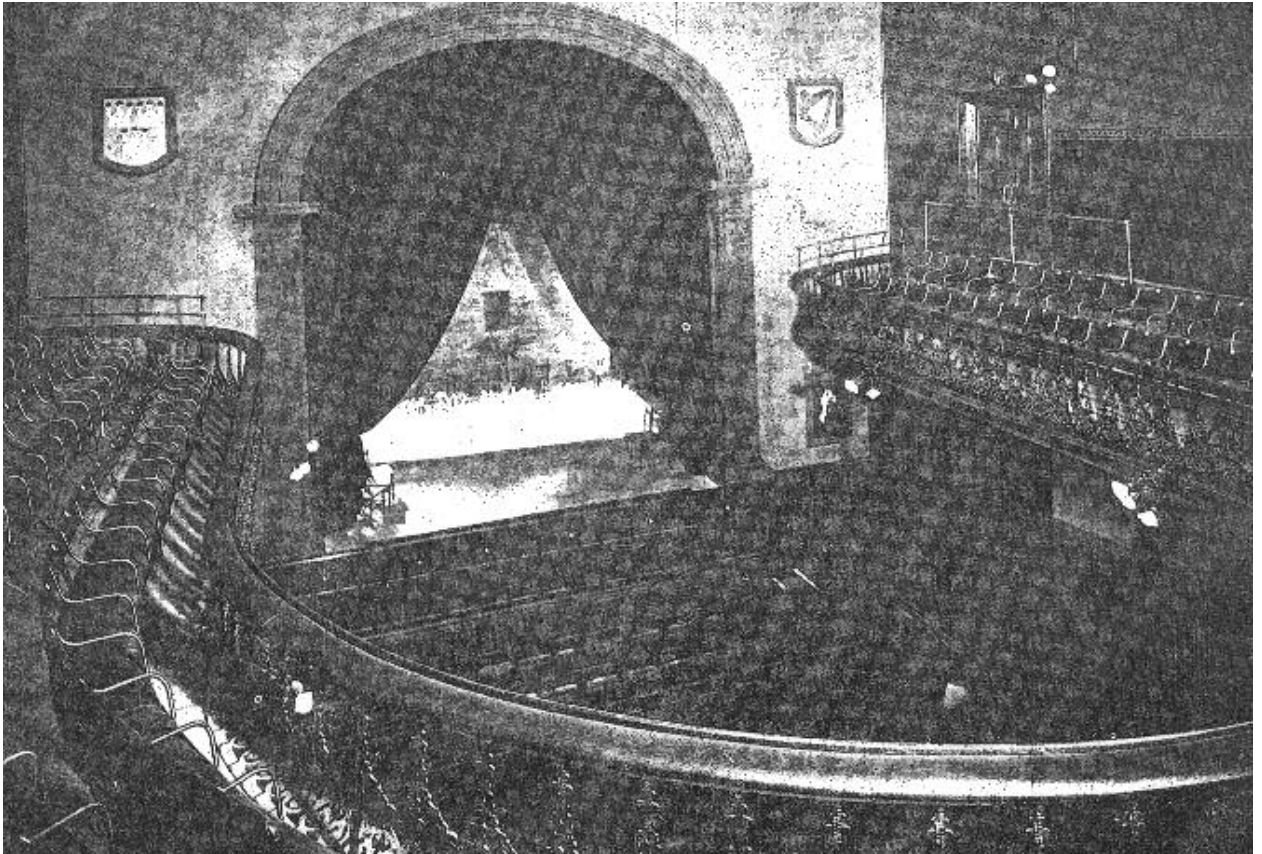


Figure 19. Interior of the Abbey Theatre after Horniman's renovations.

secure almost all of the appointments of the theatre from Irish workers and artists. She commissioned three local artists to help decorate the interior of the Abbey: Jack B. Yeats “to paint all the leading figures in the Society so that the portraits could hang in her new theatre”; Sarah Purser “to design stained glass windows in her Dublin workshops . . . [and] to make two windows and three lunettes for L24;” and Lily Yeats from whom “she ordered embroideries from the Dun Emer workshops to hang on the theatre walls.”³⁷ The only items that she could not get in Ireland were ironwork electroliers, which were “being made in Nuremberg from models specially chosen by Miss Horniman.”³⁸

The two women designers selected to assist Horniman in her attempt to create a beautiful environment for the Irish National Theatre Society were chosen because both were developing reputations as artists of the first caliber, in their respective mediums, in early twentieth-century Dublin. Although Sarah Purser’s reputation as a portrait painter was well established, her stained glass workshop *An Tur Gloine* (Tower of Glass) had only opened in January 1903, but it had already attracted talented and creative artists, such as A.E. Childe, Michael Healy, and Wilhemina Geddes. Likewise, Lily (Susan) Yeats’s Dun Emer industries, which created all types of embroidery and needlework, was a relatively young enterprise, yet Lily and her sister Lolly (Elizabeth Yeats) had already made a name for themselves in Irish textiles.

Sarah Henrietta Purser (fig. 20), born on March 22, 1848, to Benjamin and Anne Mallet Purser, entered life with several advantages most girls of her time and station did

³⁷ Goodie, 62, 66.

³⁸ *Irish News* (Belfast), 15 October 1904, Annie Horniman Collection, *Scrapbook #1*, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.



Figure 20. Sarah Purser

not possess. First was economic stability, for her father ran a successful flourmill while his family was closely connected to the Guinness Brewery. The second advantage was the family's favorable attitude toward education. Sarah's parents decided to send her to a school in Switzerland, "the Institution Evangelique de Mortmirail, near Neufchatel. . . [that] taught a two-year course with home management and French as principal subjects."³⁹

This education, coupled with a reasonable artistic talent, stood her in good stead when, in 1873, her father's mills failed, and she was forced to find a way to earn a living. The two accomplishments whereby a young woman of good family could earn a living in Victorian society were music and art; Purser opted for art. "Music would mean teaching, an idea she disliked; whereas portraiture could be made to pay."⁴⁰ After a brief interval at the Dublin School of Art, Purser pursued her art education at Julien's in Paris, "not in the full sense an art-school, but rather an *atelier*, providing painting rooms, models and criticism from the proprietor . . . reinforced by that of Academicians who looked from time to time."⁴¹ Literally a starving artist for six months in France, Purser returned to Ireland and set up a studio at 2 Leinster Street.⁴² After an exhibition and several good commissions, she was introduced to Lady Gore-Booth who commissioned her

‘to paint Con and Eva, and that went well. Then Lady Gore's brother being at the Viceregal Lodge I was called in there, and he got me a few commissions for portraits in London. They were hung in the Royal Academy, and from that I never

³⁹ John O'Grady, *The Life and Work of Sarah Purser* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 21-2.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin: Five Women of the Irish Renaissance*, (Buckinghamshire, England: Colin Smythe, 1979), 129.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Coxhead, 130.

looked back - I went through the British aristocracy
like the measles.’⁴³

By the end of the 1890s, Purser was eager to expand her artistic horizons in Ireland, specifically in the art of stained glass. With the help of Edward Martyn (a co-founder of the Irish Literary Theatre), she managed to gain some financial support from T.P. Gill, and in January 1903 she opened *An Tur Gloine*—The Tower of Glass (fig. 21).⁴⁴ Although her own interest remained mainly in portraiture, she believed it was important to “provide an environment in which the artists could express themselves, and the apparatus enabling them to do so.”⁴⁵ What made her stained glass unique was the emphasis placed on it as a work of art by *one* artist. Commercial glasswork was apparently accomplished by dividing a window into several parts to then be completed by various artists. But at The Tower of Glass there was a completely different perspective. Purser explained that the difference between her shop and an ordinary commercial glass shop was that

we [sic] hold that each window should be in all its artistic parts the work of one individual artist, the glass chosen and painted by the same mind and hand that made the design, and drew the cartoon, in fact, a bit of stained glass should be a work of free art as much as any other painting or picture. Thus with us, each person gets a window or mosaic panel to do, and does it alone all through, according to his own ideas.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., 131.

⁴⁴ Gill at this time was the secretary to the Department of Irish Agriculture which was administrator to the Dublin Metropolitan College of Art. Purser suggested to Gill to employ A.E. Childe as a stained-glass teacher at the College and she would let him manage her art workshop and act as chief artist-in-residence. The College could then funnel their best students into her workshop when they were ready for employment. Gill agreed to the proposal and Purser began to look for a location for the workshop. Coxhead, *Daughters*, 139-40.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 142.

⁴⁶ Ibid.



Figure 21. Sarah Purser in her workshop at *An Tur Gloine*.

The result was truly a beautiful work of art, full of painstaking care. Purser's correspondence from this period contains many letters, mostly from small-town or village folk thanking her for the splendid windows installed in their churches or cathedrals by her hands.⁴⁷

Naturally, with such renown in her own backyard, Horniman gave the commission for the windows at the Abbey Theatre to Purser, in September 1904, writing, "I accept the contract price of L24 for the two windows & 3 lunettes. Indeed I think it wonderfully cheap."⁴⁸ The design of the windows, however, remained in contention.

Horniman's first design concept for the windows included armorial bearings, but a letter to Horniman from W.B. Yeats suggests Purser's displeasure with that idea. Yeats said he had already broached the idea to Purser but she objected to it "on the grounds of its being like a restaurant."⁴⁹ Purser instead proposed a tree motif, which Horniman was willing to consider, with reservations.

Artistically the tree with its leaves, fruits, & branches & interlaced roots is charming and will do beautifully. I object to any symbolism whatsoever. . . If you require something where you have those circles, why not put the correct heraldic shields of the provinces of the country? . . . anything in writing, such as names must be put in letters which can be read by ordinary people. If you put in Irish lettering it would be decorative I know but excessively irritating to many people, including me.⁵⁰

In a later letter Horniman again agreed to Purser's design, and abandoned the idea of armorial bearings, although she renewed her objection to symbolism in the windows:

If you object to armorial bearings that settles the matter. I do not wish to have any symbols of any sort which are not

⁴⁷ For a full account of the life of Sarah Purser see John O'Grady's *The Life and Work of Sarah Purser*.

⁴⁸ Annie Horniman to Sarah Purser, 19 September 1904, Sarah Purser Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁴⁹ O'Grady, 247.

⁵⁰ Annie Horniman to Sarah Purser, 19 September 1904, Sarah Purser Papers, National Library of Ireland.

already perfectly well-known to the general public or which could be called either religious, occult or pagan. The final decision as to the artistic working must be with the artist but the practical side, as to whether the artist proposes the thing which is what is wanted, certainly must rest with the person who gives the commission. Cannot you put something which will be simply artistic? The lines of the trees go so beautifully, they must not be interfered with.⁵¹

A postscript to this letter reiterates her objection to symbolism and highlights her fear of censure from the Irish public. “To put it brutally – I won’t give myself away by either Church, Mystic, Freemason, Heroic, Irish, English or Patriotic symbolism of any sort whatsoever.”⁵² The five windows (fig. 22) were duly completed by December 13, 1904. They “filled openings in the three-bay lower facade of the Abbey Theatre, lighting the foyer through large rectangular windows at either side of the main door and semicircular fanlights above the lintels of windows and door.”⁵³ These windows remained in the Abbey vestibule until they were destroyed by fire in 1952. While they existed, they were a tribute to the artistic skill of Sarah Purser and the determination of Annie Horniman.

The other artist Horniman chose to help with the interior design of the Abbey Theatre was Susan (Lily) Yeats (fig. 23), one of the most talented craftswomen of the time. Born Susan Mary Yeats on August 25, 1866, a sickly, premature child, she was quickly given the nickname Lily to distinguish her from her mother, for whom she was named. Her parents, John Butler and Susan Pollexfen Yeats, already had one child, a son, William Butler Yeats, and would go on to have three more, despite adverse changes

⁵¹ Annie Horniman to Sarah Purser, 21 September 1904. Sarah Purser Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ O’Grady, 247.



Figure 22. One of the stained-glass windows created by Sarah Purser in 1904.



Figure 23. Lily Yeats as a young woman.

in their fortunes. Although Lily was born into a family of modest wealth (John Yeats was at that time an up and coming barrister), her father was careless with money, entrusting his property to an uncle who later went bankrupt and committed suicide. The family fortunes turned even worse when John Yeats gave up law as a profession and turned to painting. Lily Yeats' childhood was spent shuttling back and forth between the impoverished household of her father and the affluent one of her maternal grandparents, the Pollexfens.

Because of the monetary situation, Lily was taught by governesses at home instead of going to school until the family moved to Bedford Park, a suburb of London, in 1879. Finally, at age 12, Lily was enrolled in Notting Hill High School. This was a progressive school, excellent in its emphasis on admitting students from diverse economic backgrounds and in its stress on academic subjects rather than domestic. She was there, however, for less than a year, withdrawn for reasons of ill health. Lily's education for several years afterward consisted only of stories told by her mother of the history of her home, Sligo, books read aloud by her father in the evenings, and her own reading. In 1883, she was finally enrolled in The Metropolitan School of Art, whose object was to teach not fine art but design for commercial manufacturing with the eventual prospect of suitable employment for genteel women. Again in 1886, the financial circumstances of her father forced a move back to London, and Lily's formal education was over.

The move to London, however, eventually did bring her the genteel employment her family so desperately needed. She made the acquaintance of May Morris, daughter of William Morris, noted designer and advocate of the arts and crafts movement then

popular in England, and was offered a job embroidering with the Morris Company. During her six-year apprenticeship with Morris, Lily learned a great deal about fabrics and colors as well the business side of the embroidery industry. This knowledge, coupled with her skill at embroidery, brought an offer of partnership in an embroidery enterprise in Dublin by Evelyn Gleeson in 1902. Gleeson was an acquaintance of W.B. Yeats and had been the secretary of the original Irish Literary Society. She was interested in the burgeoning arts and crafts movement in Ireland and believed that a small workshop that produced a variety of crafts, such as embroidered tapestries, carpets, and furniture would be quite lucrative. Lily's experience with May Morris made her an obvious choice for partner. Together with Lily's sister, Lolly (Elizabeth Yeats), they established the Dun Emer Industries in 1902, and by 1904 Lily's reputation as a skilled embroiderer had brought her many important commissions both in and outside of Ireland (fig. 24).⁵⁴ With Horniman's insistence on Irish manufacture for the Abbey, it is not surprising that Lily Yeats was "commissioned to make an embroidered panel for the entrance hall" of the theatre.⁵⁵ The original panel was lost in the 1952 fire and no record of its design exists, although examples of Susan Yeats' art do remain, including a panel depicting the Abbey Theatre itself (fig. 25).

A third woman was responsible for another design feature of the Abbey Theatre, one that has endured throughout the almost one-hundred-year life of the theatre. Elinor

⁵⁴ Dun Emer Industries was a two-fold business: Lily managed the embroidery design enterprise, while Lolly established a printing business.

⁵⁵ Joan Hardwick, *The Yeats Sisters: A Biography of Susan and Elizabeth Yeats* (London: Harper Collins Publishing, 1996), 135. This work is the only full account of the lives of these two artisans.



Figure 24. Lily Yeats (foreground) with her embroiderers at Dun Eden.



Figure 25. Tapestry by Lily Yeats depicting the Abbey Theatre.

Mary Monsel (later Mrs. Darwin) was an artist and illustrator in Dublin in the early twentieth century. She was asked by Yeats and Lady Gregory to produce a drawing to be used as an emblem for the theatre. Monsel obliged them on a visit to Coole Park in September 1904, with a design that utilized the legendary figure of Queen Maeve to evoke a sense of Irish nationalism.⁵⁶ Yeats wrote to John Quinn from Coole Park, “I have just got from Miss Monsel who is staying here a very charming picture of Queen Maeve with a big wolfhound to go on the programme. We think of it for a poster later on.”⁵⁷ The woodcut depicts Queen Maeve in the midst of a hunt, reaching over her back for an arrow from her quiver with one hand while restraining an Irish wolfhound on a leash with the other. In the background is a rayed sun rising. The image speaks doubly of Ireland in the person of the mythical queen and in the rayed sun, which is also symbolic of Ireland. This woodcut (fig. 26), printed in black ink on a medium brown background, appeared on the original program cover for the opening productions in December 1904. The logo was also used on the posters for the opening night bill and on the letterhead stationary of the Abbey Theatre. It remains the Abbey Theatre’s emblem to the present day and can be found both on posters and programs for contemporary productions.

Horniman herself executed the remaining architectural designs and color schemes in the Abbey Theatre. The site in lower Abbey Street began as the Theatre Royal Opera House in 1820, although the building was razed by fire and rebuilt in 1872 as the Hall of

⁵⁶ There is almost no information on Elinor Monsel Darwin. She may have been an acquaintance of Lady Gregory’s for her initials appear on Gregory’s autograph tree – a copper beech on the grounds at Coole that her guests carved their initials into. Monsel may have carved hers there on this trip to Coole.

⁵⁷ W. B. Yeats to John Quinn in Kelly and Schuchard, 650.



Figure 26. The Abbey Theatre logo: Queen Maeve hunting with an Irish wolfhound. In the background is a rayed sun, also symbolic of Ireland.

the Mechanics Institute with the New Princess Theatre of Varieties (a music hall) inside (fig. 27).⁵⁸ The layout of this theatre seems to most closely resemble the early nineteenth century provincial theatres of England, such as the Sparrow Hill Theatre in Loughborough, Leichestet; the Georgian Theatre in Richmond, Yorkshire; Fisher's Theatre in North Walsham, Norfolk; and the Theatre Royal in Ipswich.⁵⁹

Horniman was especially concerned with the seating arrangements of the auditorium she was to remodel. An interview with Horniman for the *Dublin Daily Express*, given in December 1904, suggested one of her interests:

The theatre is designed to hold between five and six hundred people, and the seating accommodation is so planned that the number of 'bad seats' will be reduced to a minimum. 'In fact,' said Miss Horniman . . . 'I intend to see to that matter myself, and if I find that there are any seats which are so situated that a clear view of the stage is obstructed, I shall have them removed. I do not think it is fair to take people's money for seats which do not allow them to enjoy the play in comfort.'⁶⁰

Comfort, however, was not her only concern. In her letter to Yeats offering the INTS the use of the theatre, Horniman stipulates that "As the Company will not require the hall constantly, I propose to arrange to let it for lectures and entertainments at a rental proportionate to the seating capacity."⁶¹ She further specified that "the prices of the seats can be raised, of course, but not lowered, neither by the Irish National Theatre nor by

⁵⁸ Micheal O' hAodha, *Pictures at the Abbey: The Collection of the Irish National Theatre* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1983), 14-16.

⁵⁹ For descriptions of these theatres see Richard Leacroft, *Theatre and Playhouse: An Illustrated survey of Theatre Building from Ancient Greece to the Present Day* (New York: Methuen, 1984).

⁶⁰ *Dublin Daily Express*, 15 December 1904, in Horniman Collection, Scrapbook I. John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

⁶¹ A. E. F. Horniman to W. B. Yeats quoted in Lennox Robinson, comp., *Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History, 1899-1951* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson Limited., 1951), 44.

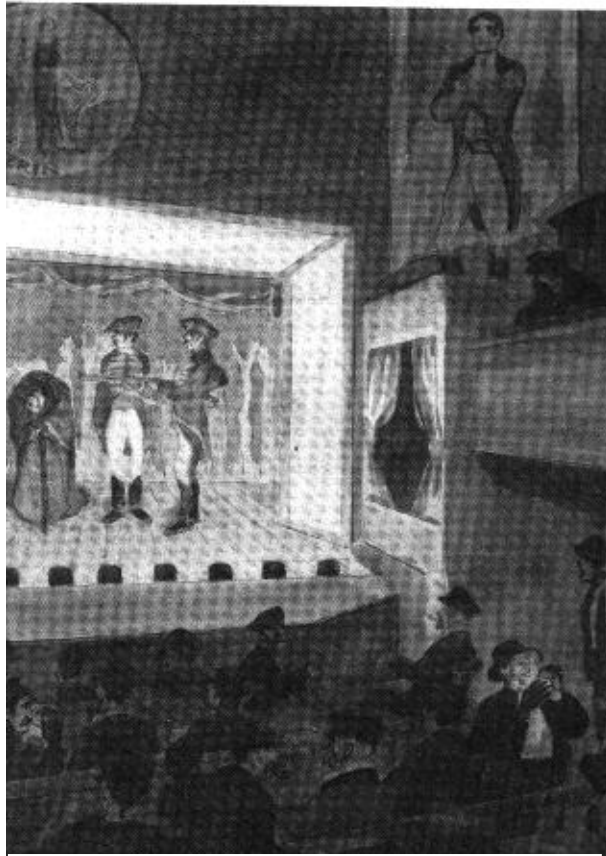


Figure 27. Painting of the Old Mechanics Theatre by Jack B. Yeats.

anyone who will hire the hall. This is to prevent cheap entertainments from being given which would lower the letting value of the hall.”⁶² Horniman insisted that admission prices would not include six-penny seats, customary in most Dublin theatres. To this end, she instructed the architect to install half the auditorium with stall seating, which she probably had seen in the London theatres and for which the Abbey theatre could charge a higher admission (fig. 28). Horniman’s plan would make the Abbey a middle-class concern, effectively denying access to the lower classes. This scheme was, however, antithetical to the aims of the Irish National Theatre Society and would eventually become a bone of contention between Horniman and the Society.

A manuscript note in the National Library of Ireland shows both Horniman’s painstaking attention to the least detail of decorating the theatre and her desire to make the significant choices that would make the theatre a pleasing environment for the patrons and a lasting monument to dramatic art in Ireland.

Pillars brown like wood-work. Capitals and iron supports above copper like balcony, Upper edge of balcony brown like woodwork. Lower edge of balcony green like proscenium. Dado of brown like wood work round the whole theater up-stairs & in the area; edged with a simple stencil. Omit side arches to proscenium, instead put two shield-shaped mouldings to hold shields. These moulding to be beyond the measurements about 3 inches deep & of No. I.⁶³

⁶² Ibid..

⁶³ A. E. F. Horniman, Design notes, D, n.d., Holloway Papers, National Library of Ireland.

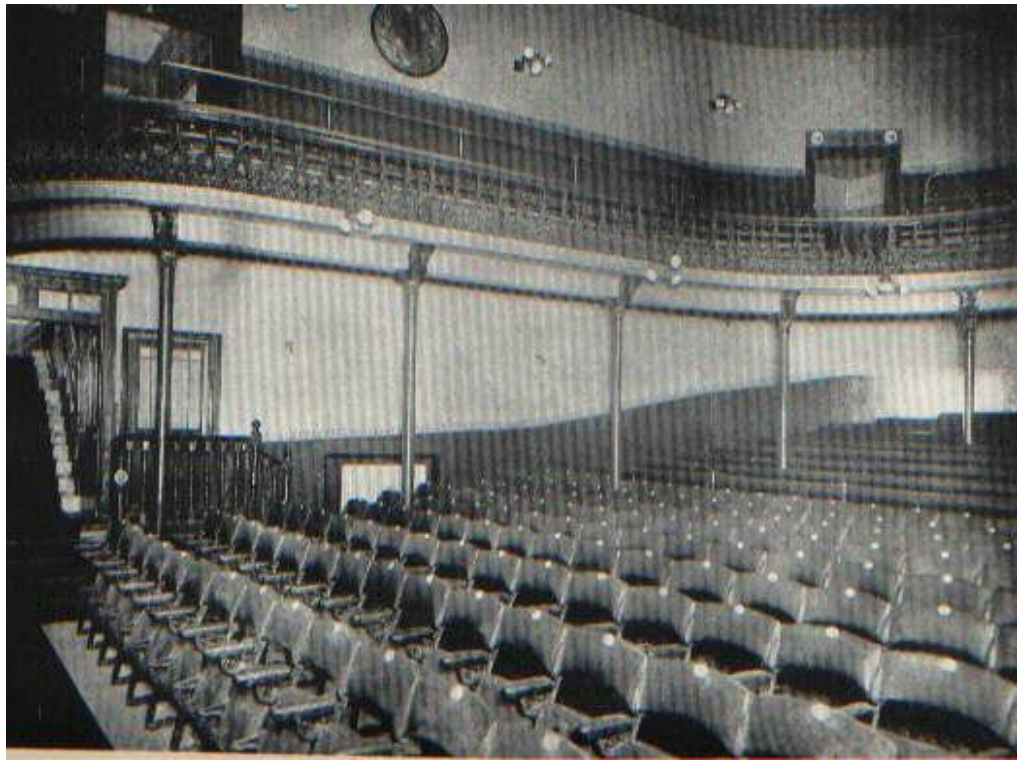


Figure 28. Interior of Abbey Theatre after renovations. Note stall seating in front.

This manuscript note includes Horniman's sketches (fig. 29) of the decorative dados with a raised pattern and legend of their detailing. It continues with specifications for the dressing rooms, green room (fig. 30), and entrance hall (figs. 31).

Dressing-rooms bright cheap wall-paper. Green-room brown paper wall, [sic] matting [matching?] dado with rail, doors & paint green. Entrance hall wall paper with wide frieze. All doors in theatre dressing-rooms & passages to be brown like the wood-work walnut-brown. The paint in the green room to be green for doors, dado-rail, skirting board etc.⁶⁴

Horniman seems to have considered the comfort of the Abbey actors as well, for a year after the opening, realizing the limitations of the small theatre building, she expanded the theatre complex. Nearby stables became available for purchase and were refurbished to provide a new green room, costume storage, and “a small rehearsal stage. [When] more stables became vacant . . . Miss Horniman bought them; these became a scene dock, a paint room, a workshop and six small dressing rooms.”⁶⁵ These dressing rooms were an especially kind addition; Horniman, who realized the demoralizing effect a common dressing area had on the actresses, justified the extension to Joseph Holloway because “it is necessary for a leading lady to have a room to herself & not to use the rehearsal room.”⁶⁶ Such largesse was certainly appreciated by the actresses, and Maire Ni Shiubhlaigh wrote of Horniman, “[she] was generosity itself; she gave wholeheartedly and with an almost embarrassing readiness.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Sean McCann, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (London: The New English Library Limited, 1967), 58.

⁶⁶ A. E. F. Horniman to Joseph Holloway, Holloway Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁶⁷ Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 49.

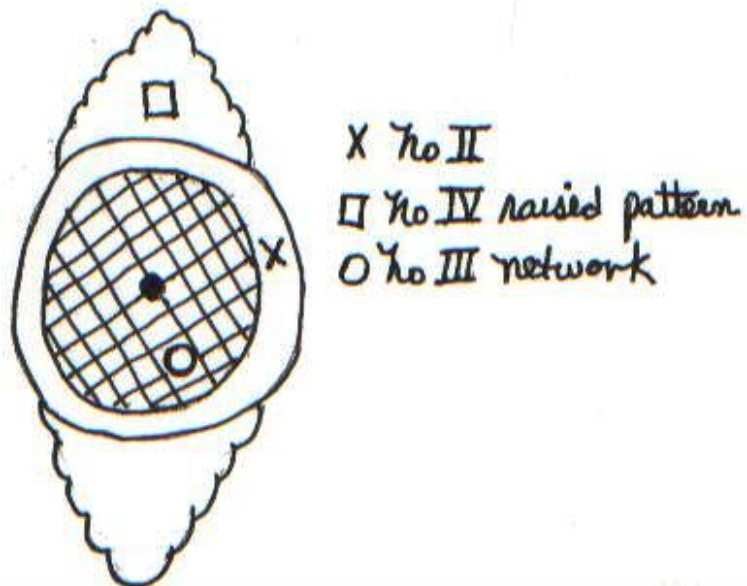
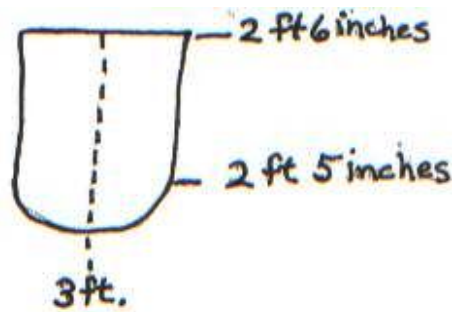
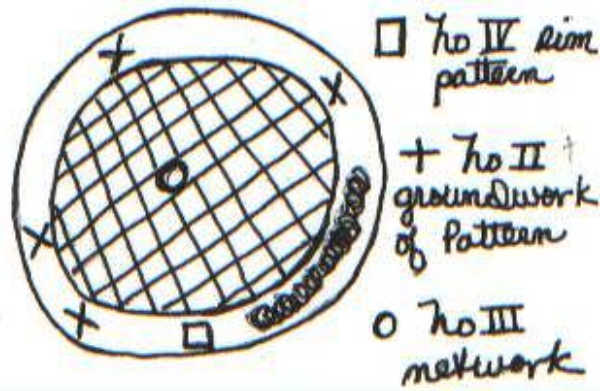


Figure 29. Reproductions of sketches and notes for decorative dados Horniman made while renovating the Abbey Theatre in 1904.



Figure 30. The Abbey's green room, circa 1930.

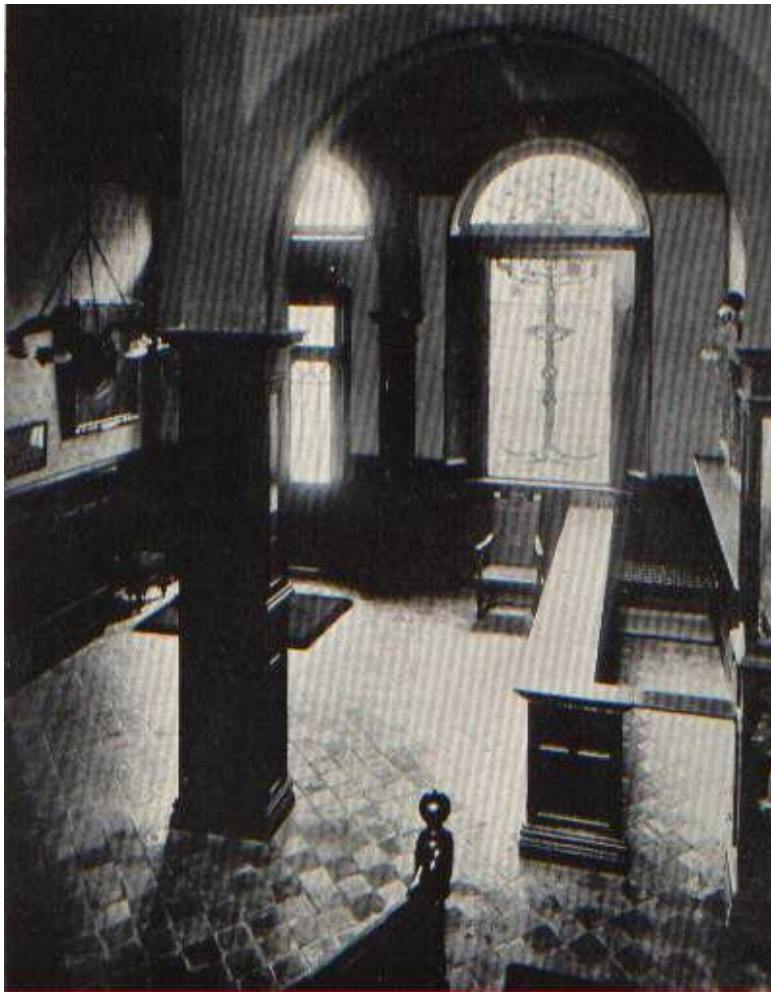


Figure 31. The Abbey's entrance hall, sometime after the coffee bar was installed. Note Sarah Purser's windows in the background.

Horniman's motive for this generosity was probably two-fold, as there were both public and private reasons for her munificence. The public answer, which Horniman was to reiterate throughout the years, was that she loved the dramatic art, and out of this love of theatre, she donated the building. When called upon to testify at the hearing to grant the theatrical patent for the Abbey in September 1904, Horniman was asked if she intended to manage the theatre and gave the reply, "Oh, no . . . I simply make them [the INTS] a present of it. You see, I take an interest in these plays."⁶⁸ There was probably some truth to this answer; Horniman proved with her Avenue Theatre venture (and later with the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester) that she had a great love of the theatre and a desire to create a theatre that would produce plays "with a high artistic ideal."⁶⁹ In September 1904, Horniman wrote to Joseph Holloway, again protesting that her motives in providing the theatre were solely due to her interest in theatre: "An old friend of mine has just arrived from Ireland, she says that I am accused of religious, or political motives, or a wish to make a large fortune! No one seems to guess the simple fact – that I care for dramatic Art."⁷⁰

There is much evidence, however, that Horniman's generosity was prompted equally by her desire to advance Yeats's work and by her close personal attachment to the poet. Although Maud Gonne asserts in her autobiography that Horniman and Lady

⁶⁸ *Evening Mail*, 4 August 1904, in *Scrapbook I*, Horniman Collection, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

⁶⁹ Annie Horniman quoted in Goodie, 61.

⁷⁰ A. E. F. Horniman to Joseph Holloway, Holloway Papers, National Library of Ireland.

Gregory were both in love with Yeats and in fact quarreled over him, no evidence to this effect exists. What does exist is a correspondence between Horniman and Yeats that illuminates their relationship as a close, emotional bond. It is generally well known that Horniman acted as Yeats's secretary for more than ten years, brought him expensive gifts from her frequent trips abroad, and ostensibly built the Abbey Theatre for him.⁷¹ There is, however, also evidence that she took care of him in ways normally expected of a spouse. A letter dated May 14, 1908, reveals quite a domestic scene, as Horniman was apparently tidying Yeats's rooms. She inquired about 'bits of mouldy fur' in his dresser drawers and admonished him that "your undergarments will get moth-eaten and then I'll have to annoy Mrs. Old again with naphthaline."⁷² And a story told by Horniman to Yeats's father, about a witch's prophesy that she would "marry a man from overseas, 'tall, dark, and very thin, with some decorations . . . in order to make him a comfortable home," has often been used as evidence that Horniman was romantically interested in Yeats; the validity of these arguments is, however, problematic.⁷³

What does seem to be unarguable is that Horniman's focus at the Abbey Theatre was on Yeats and the promotion of his work. During her connection with the Abbey Theatre she was constantly trying to find the best way to present Yeats's work to its greatest advantage. The financial subsidy given to the theatre in 1905 allowed the theatre the financial freedom to produce plays (such as Yeats's verse dramas) that might not make money. Her costume designs and construction, using costly and rich materials, were done for his verse plays, to make sure they had high production values. When, in 1906, she began to fear that Willie Fay was incapable of the most advantageous stage

⁷¹ Greer, 297.

⁷² A.E.F.Horniman to W.B.Yeats quoted in Flannery, 13.

⁷³ Horniman quoted in Greer, 297.

management of Yeats's plays, she hired the English manager Ben Iden Payne at a cost of L 500 a year. All of these actions seem to have been done with the sole purpose of promoting Yeats's drama in particular, rather than the Abbey Theatre as an entity.

The women who designed at the Abbey Theatre during this period are not easily comparable in either their personal backgrounds, their involvement with design, or in their motives for designing for the Abbey, although some similarities can be found. In their personal lives, these women have the common characteristics of affluent middle-class families, Protestant rather than Roman Catholic religion, and unconventional lifestyles.⁷⁴ Like the women in the previous chapter, the designing women did not fit the mold of the Victorian woman but rather chose to have careers in business, art, or the theatre. Indeed, it is likely that these women were chosen to design for the Abbey because of their artistic talents rather than in a conscious effort to be innovative. All of the designers had attended art school either in England or abroad; most of them were, in fact, professional artists, which suggests that the directors were following the method of Lugne-Poe, especially in the area of set design. During the first six months, all recorded set designers were visual artists.⁷⁵

These women, however, diverged widely in their motives for their involvement with the Abbey Theatre. Although all presumably believed it an honor to design for the new "national" theatre, to artisans such as Sara Purser and Lily Yeats, these commissions were, in one sense, simply another job for which they were compensated. There is no documentation to show that Elinor Monsel was paid for her emblem for the Abbey

⁷⁴ The only exception to these characteristics may be Elinor Monsel, for whom no biographical information has been found.

⁷⁵ Throughout the early years every set or costume designer noted in the program was a professional designer, a list that included Gordon Craig and Charles Ricketts.

Theatre; therefore, it is unknown if her motive should be put down as a favor for a friend, a gift for the national theatre, or a paid commission. Smith and Craig were pursuing their art, and although they had a close connection to Yeats, Horniman alone seems to have been motivated by a desire to further his career.

Yet despite the disparate characteristics, these early designers, as a group, were instrumental in launching the reputation of the Abbey Theatre as an innovative theatrical enterprise. Innovative because it was unusual for women to design professionally for the theatre during the early twentieth century; therefore, the Abbey's use of them marked it as a progressive theatre. Moreover, although the Abbey became famous for its use of simple, realistic settings, the women who designed for the early Abbey stage seem to have had closer ties to the non-realistic school of stage and costume design. Smith's production designs, therefore, helped establish the Abbey as a theatre open to utilizing the latest design concepts and theoretical approaches to staging. Similarly, Horniman's rich costumes set a standard for design at the Abbey that helped established its reputation for quality productions. Horniman's interior design of the theatre, especially in the seating arrangements, improved the quality of comfort in the theatre and made it comparable to the large, new theatres in England. Her insistence on an almost completely Irish workmanship, utilizing the artistic talents of local notables Sarah Purser and Lily Yeats, persuaded the Dublin community that the new theatre was "national" from the ground up – a somewhat misleading idea that nevertheless went far towards heightening the enthusiasm and popularity of the theatre in general. And Elinor Monsel's logo of Queen Maeve so captured the imagination and emotions of the theatre patrons

that it has endured as a symbol of the Abbey long after the original building was destroyed.

Despite all these contributions, however, women as designers were completely invisible after the opening productions. After Pamela Coleman Smith's designs for Synge's *The Well of the Saints* in January 1905, no other woman was known to be hired or invited to design settings or costumes for the Abbey Theatre until after 1925. Does this apparent retreat from women designers imply misjudgment on the part of the Abbey board of directors or dissatisfaction with the work of the female designers? Most likely neither conclusion is correct. Because professional theatrical designers were still rare, the fact that the Abbey management did not consciously seek women designers during this period is not unusual.⁷⁶ Coupled with the Abbey's tendency to recycle its sets, which reduced the number of design opportunities at the Abbey, and the lack of acknowledgement for designers in program copy, it is actually unclear how many designers, male or female, worked for the Abbey during this period. It may be significant, however, that when the Abbey created the position of resident scenic artist in 1927, the first artist-in-residence was a woman.⁷⁷

The two women who designed the first Abbey productions, however, moved on to other pursuits. After her disagreement with Yeats over the costumes for *On Baile's Strand*, Annie Horniman pursued a career in theatre management, first with the Abbey's touring shows, and, after 1907, at the Manchester Gaiety. Pamela Colman Smith did not design for the Abbey again, despite Yeats's commendation that she seemed "to

⁷⁶ Although the fact that no other female designers were hired during the 1898-1925 period could suggest that the Abbey preferred to hire men rather than women, their track record in other areas refutes this conclusion. Women were, of course, constantly hired as actresses and playwrights, and Lady Gregory acted as the theatre's manager and director throughout the period.

⁷⁷ Dorothy Travers Smith held the position first, followed by Tanya Moscovitz and Norah McGuiness.

understand what I want to make a design,” almost certainly because she was a professional artist and not a theatrical designer. She pursued her own artistic career, illustrating several magazines in Dublin and, in 1909 completing the artwork on the Rider-Waite Tarot Cards. Another reason why women may not have designed more for the Abbey was that after the subsidy was withdrawn in 1910, the theatre was forced to produce commercial drama rather than the art theatre fare of the earlier years. The aesthetic, non-realistic scenic designs Pamela Colman produced for the verse dramas were, therefore, less frequently needed.

The fact remains, however, that women designed for both the opening night performances and the second production at the Abbey Theatre. And even though women as designers would be neglected for the next twenty-two years, they began the theatre’s career very well.

CHAPTER 4: WOMEN WHO MANAGED

The management of commercial theatres during the nineteenth century in Europe and America followed a variety of organizational principles. Early in the century, especially in smaller venues, theatres often organized as sharing companies in which shareholders divided responsibilities and profits in proportion to the shares owned. From around 1865 the sharing company gave way to another managerial form, the actor-manager, wherein the leading actor or actress managed the company of players with or without benefit of a theatre building; this type of organization was found in England, France, Germany, America, and a host of other theatre producing countries. This system worked particularly well because it depended on the actors to draw audiences in a time when few playwrights were producing major works. Audiences were drawn to the theatre to see their favorite actors in a variety of melodramas, farces, adaptations of French plays, and revivals of Shakespearean works. Somewhat later still, director/managers and producer/managers led a company of actors, who were then simply employees.¹

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, reacting against theatres' commercialism, there appeared other kinds of theatres managed along different kinds of principles. The first such theatre to appear, in 1887, was Antoine's *Theatre Libre* (Free Theatre), which was run by Antoine on a subscription basis and presented new works that

¹ See, for example, Oscar Brockett, *A History of the Theatre*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995); Patti Gillespie and Ken Cameron, *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1984).

were not passed by the censors. Three years later, in Germany, the *Freie Buhne* (Free Stage) was formed, a theatre inspired by Antoine's, although operated with different organizational principles. The *Freie Buhne* was organized as a democratic enterprise with elected president and governing council; it was dedicated also to presenting censored plays. And in England, in 1891, J. T. Grein opened the Independent Theatre, another subscription only theatre, that produced mostly translations of controversial plays, such as Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Zola's *Therese Raquin*. The Abbey Theatre would derive its management principles from these independent theatres, though not its theatrical fare.²

The original Abbey group, the Irish Literary Theatre, was managed by its three creators, Yeats, Gregory, and Martyn. When they joined forces with W. G. Fay to form the Irish National Theatre Society, the company was organized along the lines of the *Freie Buhne*, with a democracy that elected Yeats as its president, George Moore and Maude Gonne as Vice-Presidents. The society provided its members with equal voting rights (one vote per member) on all society decisions, such as play selection and membership applications. The change from this democratic format to a limited dictatorship would create the Abbey's first schism in 1905.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women often appeared as theatre managers, especially in England and America; in Ireland, however, there had been no evidence of women as theatre managers since 1732, when an Italian rope dancer,

² See Andre Antoine, *Memories of the Theatre Libre*, trans. Marvin Carlson (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1964); Marvin Carlson, *The German Stage in the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow press, 1972); Anna Irene Miller, *The Independent Theatre in Europe, 1887 to the Present* (New York: R. Long & R.R. Smith, Inc., 1931); N. H. G. Schoonerwoerd, *J. T. Grein, Ambassador of the Theatre, 1862-1935: A Study in Anglo-Continental Theatrical Relations* (Assen [Netherlands]: Van Gorcum, 1963).

Signora Violante, managed a booth theatre in Dublin.³ The women who managed the Abbey Theatre, then, were not unusual by twentieth century theatrical standards but were unique in the Irish theatre tradition. And although women assumed many different responsibilities at the Abbey Theatre, only two undertook management roles during the early years. Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory (fig. 32) held management positions at the Abbey from the inception of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1898 until her death in 1932. Annie Horniman had a more limited, although still vital, role in management, in 1905 and 1906, as supervisor for the Abbey company's tours of England.

The inclusion of Horniman as both financial sponsor and manager created a dual set of tensions at the Abbey. Horniman's English heritage created an English/Irish tension in the microcosm of the theatre that mirrored the greater English/Irish conflict present in the country. This tension often manifested itself as a conflict of ideals, for Horniman's goal was to create an art theatre devoid of politics, while the avowed purpose of the INTS was to create a national theatre for Ireland. In this light, art often came to be seen as synonymous with England and nationalism with Ireland's political aims. Throughout Horniman's tenure at the Abbey Theatre, Gregory and Yeats walked a tightrope, managing the manager as much as the theatre.

³ Robin Jackson Boisseau, "Signora Violante: Forgotten Woman of the Irish Theatre" (paper presented at the Women in Society Conference, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York, 5-7 June 1998).



Figure 32. Lady Gregory managed the day-to-day administration of the Abbey from 1904 until her death in 1932.

Lady Gregory's position as a manager of the Abbey began at the first meeting at Duras House, when she took on various administrative tasks.⁴ Because the organizational structure of the ILT was non-profit, the society solicited donations to fund the initial three-year project. Chief fund-raiser was Lady Gregory, who wrote to hundreds of people asking for funds or pledges, finally securing 300 pounds total from 50 people, herself included.⁵

A second hurdle to the nascent project was a place to perform. Dublin law prohibited commercial performances in buildings unlicensed for theatrical performances. Yeats and Martyn approached the licensed houses, but found them too costly or already rented. The solution was to change the law. Gregory approached William Lecky, an Irish representative in Parliament, asking him to attach a provision to a Local Government bill, then being voted on in Parliament. This amendment to the Local government Bill of 1898 allowed unlicensed buildings to be used for public performances that charged admission.⁶ The Irish Literary Theatre then applied for and was granted permission to use the Antient Concert Rooms for their first productions of *The Countess Cathleen* and *The Heather Field*.

When, at the end of the three-years experiment, the ILT merged with Frank Fay's National Dramatic Society to form the Irish National Theatre Society (INTS), Lady Gregory was named to the Board of Directors, although her primary contribution at this time was as playwright. In 1904, however, when Annie Horniman was unable to secure a

⁴ Lady Gregory learned to manage business affairs at an early age. From her father she gained knowledge of estate management; she ran the household at Roxborough several times; and in 1892, upon her husband's death, she assumed the management of his estate and business affairs. By the time the ILS was formed she had been a full-time administrator for six years.

⁵ In the end, Martyn assumed all financial responsibilities for the productions. Lennox Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History, 1899-1951* (London: Sid gwick and Jackson Limited, 1952), 11.

⁶ Mary Lou Kohfeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 133-4.

license to open the Abbey Theatre because she was not a resident of Ireland, Lady Gregory applied for and was granted the patent, allowing the theatre to open. From this point on she was continually a part of the management of the theatre, marking her trips from her home at Coole Park to Dublin as “a journey that was to become part of the rhythm of her life, tying together the private excitement of Coole and the public excitement of theatre management in Dublin.”⁷ The management structure of the INTS, at this point, was “a purely co-operative one with a committee which would defer to the desires of the society as a whole, each member, whether actor or committee-man, to have an interest in the affairs of the group, the choice of plays, etc.”⁸

At the Abbey Theatre’s opening in December 1904, the Irish National Theatre Society was, in effect, operating as a shareholding company (though there were no real profits to share) in which all company members had an equal say in the running of the company. “All the members of the Irish National Theatre Society were equal, and amateur in the sense of being unpaid; they acted on the evenings of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of each week, and earned their living at various trades by day.”⁹ After the opening, however, “it was considered immediately necessary to establish the organization upon a definite business-like footing without delay,” according to Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh. “It was agreed that the only course open to us was to float a company with each of the player-members of the original society holding shares. The capital accruing

⁷ Ibid., 175.

⁸ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years*, (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., Ltd., 1955), 22.

⁹ Elizabeth Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin: Five Women of the Irish Renaissance* (Buckinghamshire, England: Colin Smythe, 1979), 174.

from the sale of the remaining shares would enable us to carry on as amateurs for as long as it took to establish ourselves as a regular theatrical company.”¹⁰ This limited liability company had a directorate composed of W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J. M. Synge.

The establishment, in 1905, of the Irish National Theatre Society, Ltd., however, had negative repercussions within the society. Ni Shiubhlaigh recorded that it “altered to some degree the spirit which had formerly prevailed within the group,” and that when the Directorate

began to make decisions on certain matters without notifying the organization as a whole, more and more of the players began to refer regretfully to the abandonment of the old policy of co-operation; the fears of others that the national ideals of the movement were in danger of being shelved were intensified.¹¹

From Horniman’s point of view, however, this company, headed by a directorate, was a canny business move, as she explained in a formal letter to Yeats as President of the Irish National Theatre Society.

I am informed that various of the members of the Irish National Theatre Society, yourself amongst them, have formed a Limited Company called the National Theatre Society, Ltd. I highly approve of this for, as I have spent so much time and money on my side, I consider it to be fair that every precaution should be taken by the members towards carrying out the objects as announced by you. I hereby transfer my gift of the free use of the Abbey Theatre (on the same conditions as before) to the National Theatre Society, Ltd., as I consider that the Limited Company will honestly carry out my intentions.¹²

¹⁰ Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 70.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge, 1905-1909* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc., 1976), 57.

To most of the members of the society, however, Horniman's letter alludes to the main condition provided in her gift of the Abbey Theatre, namely that there be no actions taken at the theatre that could be construed as political.

By September 1905, Horniman, in hopes of improving the artistic quality of the productions at the Abbey, offered to guarantee salaries (a sum of 500 pounds per year) for the actors and for Willie Fay as producer.¹³ Yeats, Gregory, and Synge would remain the directors, but without salaries. As this scheme relegated the actors to mere paid employees, it met with much resistance from the majority of the society's members, as recounted by Ni Shiubhlaigh, one of the dissenting actresses:

It was pointed out that the old Irish National Theatre Society had been founded in 1902 on the understanding that its independence as a national movement was to be secured only through the efforts of its members. It would be contrary to these ideals to accept a subsidy from an independent source. If such a subsidy was accepted the individual character of the movement would be completely destroyed. In any event, it was added, the subsidy was unnecessary since the members were prepared to continue working as they were until the company became self-supporting.¹⁴

For those who already thought the society's original nationalist aims had been compromised, Horniman's offer, clearly drew a line in the sand: national theatre vs. artistic theatre. And although her offer was meant to allow the actors the financial freedom to perfect their art, it may indeed have had the ulterior motive of removing the nationalist element.

¹³ This generosity would then allow the actors and Fay to dispense with their day jobs and concentrate wholly on their acting, which Horniman believed would improve with additional rehearsal.

¹⁴ Ni Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 72.

The three playwrights jumped at this chance to take control of the management of the theatre and had, in fact, “been looking for an opportunity to re-organize the company, which had, they felt, too much control over the choice of plays.”¹⁵ At the meeting in which the motion to accept the subsidy was put before the society, Ni Shiubhlaigh reported that “Yeats was adamant. He stubbornly supported the motion. ‘Miss Horniman offers to subsidise [sic] us; we will accept her offer.’”¹⁶ When the motion to accept carried by virtue of a vote of shares, all but four of the original player-members of the INTS withdrew from the society and therefore from the theatre.¹⁷ The dissenting members agreed, however, to remain with the company until the end of the year. After Horniman (fig. 33) began paying the Abbey’s subsidy, she turned her attention to promoting the theatre by arranging a tour of England in the late fall of 1905. The tour had been under the management of Willie Fay; however, when Horniman discovered that the theatre manager in Oxford had refused them an important engagement and Fay had done nothing, she took over the arrangements for the rest of the tour. She contacted the mayors of both Oxford and Cambridge, the vice-chancellors of the universities, and the local ticket agents. She then promoted the Irish players to “everybody that mattered and some that didn’t,” and finally booked the Corn Exchange Hall in Oxford and the Victoria Assembly Hall in Cambridge for the company to play in late November. She also found lodging for the actors at the universities, then traveled on to London to book

¹⁵ Kohfeldt, 180.

¹⁶ Ni Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 72.

¹⁷ Although each member of the society held one voting share, Yeats, Gregory, and Synge, as the directorate, apparently held a greater number. Though the exact number in 1905 is not known, an entry in the National Theatre Society Ltd. Minute Book for 1912 lists Gregory and Yeats as each possessing 188 shares in the theatre. The next highest number of shares was four, held by Sarah Allgood. The Directorate, then, along with the four assenting members, were able to outvote the dissenting members.

St. George's Hall, Langham Place.¹⁸ These developments were seen as a coup for Horniman, even by Willie Fay, who admitted she was a shrewd businesswoman: the owner of St. George's, a Mr. Maskelyne, seldom let his theatre to foreign companies, and Robert Bridges, with whom Horniman dealt in Oxford and Cambridge, described his negotiation with Horniman as "Lions and tigers. Lions and tigers."¹⁹

This first English tour for the Abbey Company was an unqualified success. Of the Oxford performances on November 23, Willie Fay observed, "Down to the Corn Exchange came everyone of note in Oxford from all the colleges. It was the first time we had played to a cultured audience of this kind, who could see that our authors were far in advance of what the ordinary theatre was supplying."²⁰ Fay's observations supply a hint of the English vs. Irish tension in his mention of a "cultured audience of this kind." The company had played to distinguished audiences in Dublin, but the differentiation here seems to suggest that the Irish players considered the English audiences to be more refined or in some manner better than the Irish. Fay's emphasis on the playwrights' being "far in advance" of current dramatic offerings also reinforces the idea that the Abbey was a playwright's theatre, rather than an actor's or designer's theatre. On November 24, Cambridge was likewise receptive to the plays, and audiences during the London engagement embraced the company's efforts wholeheartedly. Horniman wrote to Joseph Holloway that "In London I hear from all directions of people who would have

¹⁸ Sheila Gooddie, *Annie Horniman: A Pioneer in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1990), 83.

¹⁹ Robert Bridges quoted in Gooddie, 83.

²⁰ W. G. Fay quoted in Gooddie, 83-4.



Figure 33. Annie Horniman managed tours for the Abbey from 1905 to 1907.

gone to see the plays if the time had been extended.”²¹

The tour netted L135, a success for Horniman and the company, although critics in Dublin grumbled even about this accomplishment. A writer for *The Nationalist* ventured his opinion of the tour as “a commercial success,” but he continued in a less congratulatory note, again pointing up an English/Irish tension.

According to the promoters it was undertaken in order to raise money which would enable the Company to tour the provinces of Ireland. We should be written down quixotic to object to this arrangement, since the Abbey Theatre, in which the Irish National Theatre Company has been located and, we might add, lost, owes its establishment to British money.²²

Unfortunately, the strife in the press was echoed in the theatre. Immediately after the touring company returned from England, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, Frank Walker, George Roberts, Maire Garvey, and Padraic Colum the left the Abbey Theatre to form a rival company. Horniman expressed her distain for the theatre’s defectors by refusing to have anything to do with them and barring them from even renting the Abbey for performances. Horniman’s primary reason for these actions stemmed from her belief (well-founded) that the seceders were motivated primarily by their political objectives. Because Horniman had often reiterated that politics of any sort were anathema to her, her refusal to support the second faction on these grounds was well justified.²³

Horniman’s actions, however, produced the first major instance of the tension between art and nationalism for the directors. They had, by February, reached a settlement with the Irish National Theatre Society, the name the seceders adopted in order to point out their contention that they were the real INTS and that the National Theatre

²¹ A. E. F. Horniman to Joseph Holloway in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 41.

²² *The Nationalist* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 41.

²³ A. E. F. Horniman to J. M. Synge in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 58-9.

Society, Ltd. was the *new* theatre company. The INST did gain credibility for this idea when the directors allowed them occasional use of the theatre and its sets and costumes, along with some of the surplus funds from the original INTS.²⁴ But Horniman's increasing demands to be part of the theatre's management by virtue of her financial agreement with the National Theatre Society, Ltd. threatened to give the secessionists an advantage, which Lady Gregory shrewdly outlined in a letter to Synge:

[Miss Horniman] demands to see a list of all plays proposed to be played in the Theatre, and will refuse its use if she disapproves of plays, that is, if there are propagandist ones. She has . . . a right to do this but her exercising it just after we had 'agreed' to the opposition playing in the Theatre might put us in a very uncomfortable position. She would . . . object to *The Saxon Shillin'*. . . . It seems as if honesty calls on us to warn the other side about this, but if we do, it may make them refuse any arrangements, for they would get backing if they could say an English woman was exercising censorship, and that they refused while we submitted to it.²⁵

Lady Gregory clearly understood the disadvantage this stigma would place on her theatre company, for she assured Synge,

Of course we should not submit to it, but if we said that, they would say they were being treated unfairly in being expected to do so. All that matters to us is that we should have our conscience quite clear in the negotiations.²⁶

In this same letter Gregory also confides to Synge that "I myself think a propagandist theatre would be very useful, but it is not what [Horniman] spent her money for. But I wish she would let them act what they will, and show their weakness, and fizzle

²⁴ Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 61.

²⁵ Lady Augusta Gregory to J. M. Synge, 20 February, 1906, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

themselves out.”²⁷ Although the INTS (which changed its name to the Theatre of Ireland) did eventually “fizzle out,” it was the Abbey Theatre’s greatest rival for six years; more importantly, it gave an early indication to the Abbey directors of the inconvenience of Horniman’s management. Though art and money won the battle, there was a price to pay.²⁸

Horniman continued to book tours for the Abbey Company in 1906. A spring tour, which included the Midland Theatre in Manchester, St. George’s Hall in Liverpool, and the Albert Hall in Leeds, was a great success, inducing Horniman to book a more extensive tour for the summer months. This second tour was to prove a trial to all concerned, and it was the beginning of the end for Horniman’s management at the Abbey.²⁹

The second English tour of 1906 began in Cardiff on May 27 and from its beginning Horniman, who accompanied the tour along with Synge, was dissatisfied with the conduct of the players, both on and off the stage. Trouble began with the new actresses, Brigit O’Dempsey and her sister, Eileen, and their lack of decorum. A letter from the summer of 1906 reported Synge’s concerns.

There has been a certain amount of demoralization which if discipline is not restored will affect the acting & the reputation of the company in other ways. Both Miss O’Dempseys are tom-boys & rather vulgar. The Miss O’Dempsey who was engaged for small parts is obviously impossible - flirtatious loud and irresponsible I think that everyone is agreed that she must never be allowed into the company again but that she has - outrageous low dresses -

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Sources on the Theatre of Ireland and its relationship with the Abbey Theatre include the chapter “The Theatre of Ireland,” in Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 75-107; and Karen Vandervelde, “The Theatre of Ireland: More than a Rival Company to the Abbey Theatre,” (paper presented at the American Conference for Irish Studies Conference, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland, 26th June – 1st July, 2000).

²⁹ Gerard Fay, *The Abbey Theatre: Cradle of Genius* (Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, Ltd., 1958), 103.

flirtations & an assignation with a stranger overheard by Miss Horniman - show [?] that Fay either does not know what goes on or cannot interfere where an O'Dempsey is concerned. The other Miss O'Dempsey . . . is . . . extremely noisy.³⁰

Horniman's notes on the tour give a vivid picture of a chaotic experience. Brigit O'Dempsey was apparently given a tin trumpet by Mr. Darley, the company's musician, and became incredibly noisy on the trip between Cardiff and Glasgow. The trumpet noise continued at night in Liverpool and Leeds, even after Horniman complained to O'Dempsey about the noise. The proprietress of their lodgings disparaged Horniman herself because the noise of the trumpet and the constant running between rooms had kept the woman awake until 2:00 a.m.³¹

There were other, more serious breaches of decorum by the girls in the company. Several "actors & actresses sitting on each others [sic] knees;" "the company leaning out of the carriage windows and shouted [sic] to the people on the platform;" and "girls [that] would sit with their hair down their backs on platforms when there was a wait. They also conversed with intoxicated men out of the railway carriage windows."³² Although these behaviors may seem trivial, Horniman recognized them as infractions of the strict code of behavior expected from women by English society. It was another instance of the differences between English and Irish expectations, this time regarding accepted decorum. Behavior that might be acceptable in a more tolerant Ireland was completely intolerable in England. And if these behaviors continued, there was the very real possibility that the Abbey Company would acquire a bad reputation based on the behavior of its actresses. Horniman's comments about the matter have often been

³⁰ J. M. Synge, Handwritten fragment, D, [May/June 1906], Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

³¹ A. E. F. Horniman, Notes, D, [May/June 1906], Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

³² A. E. F. Horniman, Memorandum, D, [May/June 1906], Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

dismissed as trivial, unjustifiable concerns; however, her knowledge of English mores and the consequences for disregarding them, made her admonition regarding the actresses' behavior a serious managerial duty.

Horniman also felt compelled, as a manager and sole financial backer, to comment on the problems the company suffered in production. She related in a memorandum to Yeats small details, such as unshined boots, a broken basket, and lost hand props not replaced. Granted, these too may have seemed small concerns; however, they are matters that should have been corrected immediately by the stage manager, in this case Willie Fay. There were larger concerns about the stage management as well, as Horniman spelled out in her memorandum:

Lights. On Monday curtain went up on *Riders to the Sea* with footlights full up white. I hurried round and checked them down to half and the local Stage Manager arranged to put ambers in the next morning. The light outside the cottage in *Kathleen ni Houlihan* was not strong enough -- at Hull it was a dense blue. Only one or two rehearsals were called on tour, while to properly present the pieces rehearsals should have been called constantly.³³

The fact that Fay constantly ignored her criticisms and that she herself was ignored by him when these matters were put before him began her long animosity toward the actor/manager. There was a confrontation between the two in which Horniman described him "driving her out of his room like a 'stray cat driven out of a kitchen.'"³⁴ A letter to Yeats on June 23 revealed her utter frustration with the situation:

Fay tells you one thing and other people another so as to get his own way. The only possible course of action for me now is to resign all connection with the theatre except that I shall hand over to the Directors the money to carry it on. I have been virtually dismissed by Fay and as the

³³ A. E. F. Horniman, Memorandum, D, [May/June 1906], Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

³⁴ Horniman quoted in Goodie, 87.

performances are absolutely under his control, the only way I can practically help the Directors is by putting the power of the purse into their hands.³⁵

Horniman also had concerns about the quality of the acting on this tour. Synge apparently had some reservations also, for he wrote to Yeats that “I do not quite know how the company are acting, everything is done accurately but I sometimes fancy they are getting a little mechanical from so much playing of the same pieces to poor audiences.”³⁶ He also remarked of Willie Fay’s situation, “W.G. Fay by the way is not good just now as he is too much occupied with his love affairs.”³⁷ Horniman’s estimation of the state of the company’s acting, however, was much worse than Synge’s. “At Edinburgh the slovenly appearance of the performance had not improved and, with the exception of Miss Allgood, no one took the trouble to act at all. . . . I have come to the conclusion that I cannot ask the paying public to come to see performances which are liable to become at any moment like those I saw at Edinburgh.”³⁸ And according to Horniman’s figures, the box office bore witness to her concerns, for this second tour lost 220 pounds.

By the end of the tour Horniman, in a bid to get rid of Willie Fay as stage manager, began to form a plan to hire new personnel--a business manager at 200 pounds per year and a managing director at 500 pounds per year. Mr. W. A. Henderson was brought in to take over the administrative duties of business manager at the Abbey, freeing Yeats to write full time. The matter of the managing director, however, eventually caused additional dissension between Horniman and the Directors.

³⁵ A. E. F. Horniman to W.B. Yeats, June 23, 1906, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

³⁶ J. M. Synge to W. B. Yeats, July 2, 1906, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

³⁷ Ibid. Fay was engaged to Brigit O’Dempsey, who was underage at the time and therefore unable to marry him. Eventually the couple eloped to Scotland, where they were married on October 1, 1906.

³⁸ A. E. F. Horniman to W.B. Yeats, July 4, 1906, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

Although she had stated in June that she would have nothing further to do with the Abbey (beyond the subsidy and other financial arrangements), Horniman nevertheless continued to make managerial suggestions, such as the scheme to hire a managing director. Her aim was to reduce Willie Fay's stage manager/director duties to the peasant plays only, which, Horniman realized, he had a talent for directing. The new man, it was also hoped, would, in addition to taking over the stage management/direction of the bulk of the productions, help broaden the base of plays performed to include foreign masterpieces. Although the scheme was originally Horniman's idea, she insisted, in a letter to Lady Gregory that

the engagement of this Managing Director would of course be under the control of the Directors and he must be recommended by some one [sic] of known theatrical position. This wd [sic] remove my objection to touring under the present state of affairs. . . . I should not engage him and he would be responsible to the Directors and I would pay the money for his salary to you.³⁹

In another bid to increase the English nature of the managerial staff, she wrote to Yeats, describing exactly the kind of man who should fill the position as "fairly young, of good manners and such a temper as will make the position possible for him. He must have practical stage experience as well as experience in stage management of all classes of plays. He would need to be able to stage manage anything and be competent to produce all plays except those treating of Irish peasant life."⁴⁰ Chances that a suitable man with such qualities would be found in Dublin were slim, so it was not surprising that the candidate for the position was an Englishman, twenty-five year-old Ben Iden Payne, an actor with considerable experience in the theatre.

³⁹ A. E. F. Horniman to Lady Gregory, December 19, 1906, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁴⁰ A. E. F. Horniman to W. B. Yeats quoted in Goodie, 92.

The arrangement worked, surprisingly, for about six months, with Payne stage-managing Maeterlinck's *Interior; Fand*, a poetic piece by Wilfred Scawen Blunt; and a production of *Oedipus Rex*. *Oedipus* gave Horniman some concern, for Payne proposed to act the title role as well as stage manage, a mistake, she wrote to Yeats, because taking the role away from Frank Fay "will give the 'patriots' a just handle against us & may easily be used to get rid of Payne eventually."⁴¹ Of greater concern, however, was the encroachment of Willie Fay in stage-managing a production of Yeats's *The King's Threshold*, a breach of contract as far as Horniman was concerned:

I considered and still consider that it was a breach of our agreement that the stage-management of King's Threshold [sic] should have been proposed to be called that of a Peasant Play. The play has been produced and in the future can only be revived. If you choose to select Willie Fay to produce your next new play you are free to do so - but if you let him revive any of your verse plays which have already been produced, you will break the agreement. . . . There is a practical issue - it is that I must and will have agreements kept with me to the letter & in the spirit.⁴²

Payne herself, after six months of working with the Irish players, realized that the undercurrent of animosity towards him would never recede, simply because he was English. His resignation, in June, was not a terrible blow to Horniman; on the contrary, she took the opportunity to hire him to manage her new theatre venture at the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester.⁴³ Horniman had finally realized that the Abbey Theatre would never become the art theatre she had hoped for, so she simply moved on to another venue in which she was able to have total managerial control.

⁴¹ A. E. F. Horniman to W. B. Yeats, March 15 [1907], Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁴² A. E. F. Horniman to W. B. Yeats, March 20, 1907, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁴³ Goodie, 100.

Horniman did not, however, relinquish her management at the Abbey immediately. She had approved another tour in the spring of 1907, to Glasgow, Birmingham, Cambridge, Oxford, and London. Again she herself made all the arrangements, as she related to Lady Gregory in April: "I shall go to Cambridge on Saturday & do my best to get some shelter for the week beginning May 20th. Yesterday I was at Birmingham and made arrangements for the theatre of the Midland Institute. . . . When the circulars are ready I'll call again on people. . . . I wrote 19 letters for Glasgow & sent them to Mr. Payne as well as sending him the Glasgow address book."⁴⁴ She continued making arrangements into May, when she wrote, "Cambridge and Birmingham are asking for our circulars and arrangements are completed. . . . I shall see a man about the orchestra for London on Sunday. Tomorrow I shall get a man who will find out for me all about the advertising."⁴⁵ This tour was also successful, especially in London where Horniman insisted that *The Playboy of the Western World* be played, oddly enough because she believed that *not* producing that play would constitute a political act.⁴⁶ And although many of the theatre's personnel took issue with Horniman's management, W. A. Henderson reported after this tour that "the players had been very well treated, getting bonuses at Easter, extra pay for *The Playboy*, and six weeks vacation with salary unstopped."⁴⁷

After this tour, Horniman retreated to Manchester and began work in earnest on producing an art theatre. She remained connected to the Abbey theatre through the subsidy, which she had pledged until December 1910, although an incident in May 1910-

⁴⁴ A. E. F. Horniman to Lady Gregory, 18 April 1907, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁴⁵ A. E. F. Horniman, Postcard to undetermined recipient, 3 May 1907, D, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁴⁶ Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 167.

⁴⁷ W. A. Henderson to Joseph Holloway, 15 July 1907, D, Holloway Papers, National Library of Ireland.

- the final explosion of the tensions between English and Irish expectations--caused an abrupt severing of the ties with the Irish Theatre. King Edward VII died in May, and, when the Abbey did not close its doors out of respect for his death, Horniman wrote to Lennox Robinson (the new managing director who kept the theatre open), "Opening last Saturday was disgraceful. Performance on day of funeral would stop subsidy automatically."⁴⁸ Horniman made good her threat and withheld the June subsidy payment, despite an apology from Lady Gregory.⁴⁹ There ensued a battle to the death over the remaining subsidy payments owed (an amount of 400 pounds). Eventually an arbitrator undertook the matter and found in favor of the Abbey and its directors, directing Horniman to pay the 400 pounds. She paid the sum, but wrote to Joseph Holloway:

the Directors after giving me these months of worry are now demurring at the idea of receiving the 400 [pounds]. Maybe they are afraid of the Press & want to mollify me. It would have been impossible for me to continue any connection with the Abbey; if the Directors had not bought me out [for 1000 pounds at the end of the subsidy period] I should have put it into the hands of Messes Cramers to let. . . as an ordinary investment.⁵⁰

Horniman thus severed all ties with the theatre she had endowed, at a cost to her of about 11,000 pounds. Even her personal ties with Yeats, who had in the end sided with the Abbey rather than with her, were severely strained, although they did eventually renew their friendship. Oddly enough, she remained on good terms with the Abbey actors, several of whom played in her Gaiety Theatre over the years. In 1911, twelve of these actors and actresses, along with W. A. Henderson and Joseph Holloway, signed a

⁴⁸ A. E. F. Horniman to Lennox Robinson quoted in Goodie, 139.

⁴⁹ Goodie, 141. Horniman rejected Lady Gregory's apology as being too ambiguous.

⁵⁰ A. E. F. Horniman to Joseph Holloway, 5 May 1911, D, Holloway Papers, National Library of Ireland.

testimonial in appreciation of all she had done for them and presented her with a silver chalice. Horniman was deeply touched and wrote to Holloway, “it is well that I should have a sign that there is some good feeling in regards to my efforts in Dublin.”⁵¹

Despite later historians’ denigration of her accomplishments, Horniman’s contributions to the management of the Abbey Theatre were vital to the development and long-term perpetuation of the theatre and were so recognized by her contemporaries, even those with whom she had disagreed. Willie Fay, against whom she battled for so long, admitted, “The real sage-femme of the Abbey Theatre, without whose aid it would have been still-born, was Miss Horniman, an Englishwoman who had no concern with Irish literature or politics but only an intense love of the art of drama.”⁵² Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh as well declared, “There is little doubt that if she had not helped us when she did, it would have been many years before we could have emerged from the small halls in which we were playing at that time.”⁵³ A more realistic assessment would concur that if Horniman had not given the INTS a permanent home and the financial backing to survive the early years, the Abbey company would have carried on for a few years, then probably would have folded, as did the Theatre of Ireland (the Abbey dissenters) and other short-lived theatre societies. Even James Flannery, one of Horniman’s most severe critics, states that

Were it not for the Abbey Theatre building, it is more likely that the Irish National Theatre Society would have drifted from hall to hall, as so many of the theatre companies of the time did, without acquiring any focus for its work. . . . Certainly Miss Horniman’s subsidy made possible the development of a repertory company of professional actors

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² William G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre: An Autobiographical Record*. (London: Rich & Cowan, Ltd., 1935), 105-6.

⁵³ Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 49.

which enabled a definite and high standard of proficiency to be reached and maintained . . . and it enabled the Company to make a number of tours to England, without which the name of the Abbey Theatre and the work of its dramatists would not have become renowned throughout the world.⁵⁴

Flannery also credits Horniman with the Abbey's ability to present controversial plays that no commercial theatre could have supported, and he points out particularly that Synge's works and reputation owed a special debt to Horniman's financial generosity.⁵⁵ In fact, once the subsidy was withdrawn, the Abbey had to become much more commercial, producing popular plays calculated to draw audiences rather than the experimental or artistic pieces that provoked controversy.

Horniman's management of the English tours, in addition to establishing the reputation of the Abbey Theatre, also provided a financial boon for the theatre. Almost all money made on them was then used for additional tours to the Irish provinces or simply to offset some of the expenses of the theatre. Horniman wanted the theatre to be self-sufficient and demonstrated how touring shows could promote this self-sufficiency.

The drawback of her attempts at management was to create tension at the theatre, based in her belief that the English way was better than the Irish and that an art theatre was more desirable than a national one. Because all of her management decisions were based on this bi-polarization, she created as much strife as she did art. Horniman, who wrote copious notes to everyone at the Abbey with her suggestions, used red ink on yellow notepaper for these epistles. Lennox Robinson reported that "Synge used to

⁵⁴ James Flannery, *Miss Annie F. Horniman and the Abbey Theatre*, The Irish Theatre Series 3, Robert Hogan, James Kilroy and Liam Miller, eds. (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1970), 33-4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

declare that he grew slightly ill when he saw a yellow envelope in the morning's post."⁵⁶ Her attempts to turn an Irish nationalist theatre into an English art theatre became so frustrating to all concerned that, despite their gratitude for her patronage, everyone, including Horniman, was glad when she turned her complete attention to the Manchester Gaiety.

Throughout the period when Horniman was managing the tours, Lady Gregory's hand was firmly establishing itself in the Abbey Theatre's management, performing such administrative duties as levying fines on actors, hiring and firing actors, and placating the actors' parents when necessary.⁵⁷ These small battles prepared Gregory well for larger ones to come. In 1907, with the first Dublin production of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, all three directors were sorely tested during the rioting that broke out on opening night and continued throughout the week of the production. These riots were caused by the audience's belief that Synge was slandering Irishmen (portraying them as blackguards and liars) and Irishwomen (by suggesting that they would immediately fall in love with a wild young man who boasted of killing his father). The fact that Synge touted the play as "naturalistic and true to life" only incensed the crowds more.

Lady Gregory, Synge, and Yeats all refused to withdraw the play; however, Lady Gregory shouldered the primary responsibility for the initial decision because Yeats was out of the country lecturing in Scotland, and Synge, although present, was ill.⁵⁸ Lady Gregory later explained their resolve as a stand against censorship:

⁵⁶ Lennox Robinson, "Pictures in a Theatre: A Conversation Piece", in Michael O hAodha, *Pictures at the Abbey* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1983), 29-30.

⁵⁷ Kofeldt., 183-4.

⁵⁸ Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*, 54. By this time Synge was already having recurring bouts of illness stemming from the Hodgkin's disease that would eventually claim his life in 1909.

We held on, as we had determined, for the week during which we had announced the play would be acted. It was a definite fight for freedom from mob censorship. A part of the national movement had been, and rightly, an attack on the stage Irishman. . . . But the societies were impatient. They began to dictate here and there what should or should not be played. . . . We would not submit Mr. Synge's work or any of the work we put on to such a test, nor would we allow any part of our audience to make itself final judge through preventing others from hearing and judging for themselves. We have been justified, for Synge's name has gone round the world, and we should have been ashamed for ever if we had not insisted on a hearing for his most important work. But had it been for a far inferior play and written by some young writer who had never been heard of, we should have had to do the same thing. If we had been obliged to give in to such organized dictation, we should of necessity have closed the theatre.⁵⁹

This stance against public censorship was to be reiterated often throughout her career as manager.

The year 1908 brought its own managerial crisis. At the end of 1907, the players and Directors alike became more and more dissatisfied with Willie Fay's management of the Abbey Company. Accusations of verbal abuse and favoritism began in the fall of 1907, and the situation came to a head during a tour to Manchester. Sara Allgood was ill with tonsillitis and unable to perform; Willie Fay substituted his new wife, Brigit O'Dempsey, in Allgood's roles but neglected to inform the audience of the substitution. Synge wrote to Lady Gregory, "Fay did not slip programmes or announce in any way that Miss Sara Allgood was not playing. . . . Miss S. Allgood is not unnaturally very much

⁵⁹ Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography, The Coole Edition of the Works of Lady Gregory*, ed. T. R. Henn and Colin Smythe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 68-9.

annoyed at having Mrs Fay [sic] masquerading in her name.”⁶⁰ Allgood’s annoyance was severe enough for her to make inquiries about other employment. Gregory reported to Synge in mid-December that “Yeats writes ‘I have just had a letter from Miss Horniman in which she says ‘after mature consideration I have come to the conclusion that it is just to tell you that Sara Allgood has ‘written in’ to Mr. Payne.’”⁶¹

Another actor, J. M. Kerrigan, resigned the company specifically because of Willie Fay’s abusive language. “Fay appears to have used violently bad language to Kerrigan,” wrote Synge to Lady Gregory, “and he bases his resignation on that. I have heard Fay on one occasion using impossible and unmentionable language to the scene-shifters so perhaps Kerrigan may have some reason for what he has done.”⁶² Kerrigan was a valuable actor in the company, and the Directors were loath to lose him or the Allgood sisters, both of whom were seriously considering leaving the Abbey. Fay himself brought the matter to a head in January 1908, by sending the Directors a list of proposals for the management of the company, including the dismissal of the present company and their re-hiring them under contract to Fay alone. Other proposals suggest that Fay would have final power to fire actors and that actors would have no right to appeal to the Directors. All three Directors were in agreement that Fay’s proposals could not be accepted, and all realized that when they were rejected, all three of the Fays would resign, resulting in a major re-organization of the Company. But Lady Gregory realized that this was the only path to take, unless the Directors wanted to lose all power at the

⁶⁰ J. M. Synge to Lady Augusta Gregory in William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and J. M. Synge, *Theatre Business: The Correspondence of the First Abbey Directors: William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge*, ed. Anne Saddlemeier (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), 244.

⁶¹ Yeats, *Ibid.*, 247.

⁶² J. M. Synge to Lady Augusta Gregory, *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶³ Lady Augusta Gregory to W. B. Yeats, *Ibid.*, n. 270.

Abbey. She wrote Yeats on January 10, 1908, “Fay is going to leave us on grounds of not being able under existing circumstances to keep discipline in the company – and also that he doesn’t believe we can go on and pay our way. I have not asked him to stay – indeed I think it is probably best for him to go, but I want it to be of course in as friendly a way as possible.”⁶³ On January 13, Frank and Willie Fay tendered their resignations to the National Theatre Society, Ltd., although Frank Fay stipulated that he was resigning his employment, not his membership in the society. Willie Fay’s wife, actress Brigit O’Dempsey, followed suit, and the Abbey quickly began their re-organization process.

In 1909, Lady Gregory was again called on to manage a crisis arising out of a controversial production, this time Shaw’s *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*. Shaw had offered the play to the Abbey in order to get it produced after the censor had banned it in England. Because the English censor had no jurisdiction in Ireland, the Abbey’s directors accepted the play and immediately put it into rehearsal for production in August. Lady Gregory herself directed the production.

A problem arose, however. Lady Gregory received a letter from a government official at Dublin Castle, advising her that the Lord Lieutenant (as grantor of the Abbey Theatre’s patent or license) “feels bound to call your attention, and also the attention of those with whom you are associated, to the terms of the Patents and to the serious consequences which the production of the play in its original form might entail.”⁶⁴ As holder of the license for the theatre, Lady Gregory was then “called upon to deal with the

⁶⁴ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 85-6.

English officials at Dublin Castle, who threatened heavy fines and loss of the Abbey's patent [license] if they gave the play."⁶⁵ The threat of a 300-pound fine for each offence almost convinced Lady Gregory to capitulate because the funds stock-piled by the Abbey were to be used to pay the actors (in the event the Abbey patent was revoked) until they could find places outside the playhouse. Knowledge that those funds might be needed for fines was the only thing to weaken her resolve.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, after a rehearsal of the play, Gregory and Yeats came to the conclusion that they could not back down from this fight any more than they could from the *Playboy* riots. She and Yeats therefore issued a statement for publication, affirming their decision to open Shaw's play because it "is a high and weighty argument upon the working of the Spirit of god in man's heart" and because they believed "if our Patent is in danger, it is because the decisions of the English Censor are being brought into Ireland."⁶⁷ This decision proved to be the right one: the play went on and the Castle did nothing. And the Abbey Theatre's reputation rose within the usually disapproving nationalist circles of Dublin. This episode also highlights the reality that the England/Ireland tension did not disappear with Horniman. With Horniman's departure, the day-to-day tensions eased and the Directorate was able to shift management decisions, especially play selection, toward a more Irish and nationalist fare. As long as Ireland was under British rule, however, the tension remained palpable.

The stage was now set for Lady Gregory's crowning managerial triumph: the 1911 American tour of the Abbey Players. Gregory and Yeats had long dreamed of taking the Abbey Players on tour to America. Gregory wrote,

⁶⁵ Kohfeldt, 212.

⁶⁶ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 93.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

I think from the very first day Mr. Yeats and I had talked at Duras of an Irish theatre, and certainly ever since there had been a company of Irish players, we had hoped and perhaps determined to go to *An t-Oilean ur* 'the New Island,' the greater Ireland beyond the Atlantic.⁶⁸

An American tour was so important to them that they were prepared to "take our reserve fund and spend it mainly on that voyage and that venture," in the event the Abbey seemed in imminent danger of closing its doors.⁶⁹ In fact, rumors of an American tour began as early as 1908 when Charles Frohman came to London to see the players while they were on tour.

Then, in 1911, the time seemed right to make the dream a reality. In 1910, the financial subsidy guaranteed by Annie Horniman had ended, and the Abbey had been forced to pay its own way. It had managed to do so for a year, mainly on short company tours to London; now, as funds were giving out, the chance to make some real money in America was a distinct possibility.

Ironically, Lady Gregory almost remained at Coole Park. She was expecting her second grandchild in early September and wanted to be with her family. So when Leibler & Company, the theatrical agents, originally engaged the Abbey Players, Yeats agreed to accompany them on the tour in accordance with the company policy that "a Director must accompany all major tours".⁷⁰ All arrangements were made for Yeats and the company; then Maire O'Neill married during the summer of 1911 and left the company.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961), 150.

⁷⁰ Directors of the Abbey Theatre, "Statement of Reply to W.G. Fay's Letter of Dec. 1, 1907," D, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

Her starring role of Pegeen Mike in *The Playboy* was hastily filled by a new actress, Eithne Magee, who Yeats believed needed extensive dialect coaching and rehearsal to be made ready for the part.

Yeats wrote to Gregory on the eve of the voyage that “there is nobody in the theatre capable of teaching a folk part to an inexperienced person. . . .One thing I am entirely sure of, that there is no one but you with enough knowledge of folk to work a miracle.”⁷¹ Both Gregory’s expertise in the peasant dialect and her experience with management at the Abbey recommended her as the logical choice to take over the management of a tour that Yeats appeared disinclined to manage. In his original letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats asked her to “take my place in the steamboat on Tuesday,” then stated “*if they want me* [emphasis mine] I can follow next boat.”⁷² When this plan proved untenable, Gregory agreed to follow the company to Boston.

Yeats’ reason for leaving the tour in Lady Gregory’s hands was ostensibly that he wanted to return to Ireland to “look after the second [Abbey Theatre] company formed to carry on in Dublin.”⁷³ In actuality, the second company was formed and trained by the new director, Nugent Monck. Even after Yeats’ return, Monck was the primary force behind the in-house actors. Most likely Yeats’s haste to return to Dublin was because he knew that Maud Gonne was arriving there shortly. In a letter dated September 15, 1911, Gonne wrote to Yeats in America that she would ‘return to Paris [from Italy] next week & I shall come to Dublin in the middle of October. When do you return?’⁷⁴ Yeats sailed

⁷¹ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 97.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Maud Gonne and W. B. Yeats, *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938*, Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), Introduction to letters for 1911, 297.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 302. Yeats’s long-standing, close relationship with Maude Gonne is well documented in their correspondence and in many other sources. White and Jeffares also note in the introduction to the letters for 1911 that Yeats and Gonne “were not meeting as regularly as of old and somehow they seemed

back to Dublin on October 17, the day after *The Playboy* opened in Boston, leaving the Abbey Company under the resolute management of the fifty-nine year old Gregory.

This entire tour can be viewed as a series of decisions by Lady Gregory (some in collaboration with Yeats). Their initial decision to bring the players to America proved to be justified by the financial security it brought to the Abbey Theatre. Liebler and Company, “the producers of the tour. . . covered expenses and returned 35 percent of profits to the Players.”⁷⁵ When the tour, contracted originally for only three months, proved extremely popular in Boston, “Messrs Liebler kept it on for another three months, and almost doubled the subsidy.”⁷⁶ So, by the end of the tour, the Irish Players took a substantial amount back to the Abbey Theatre, a welcome financial relief to the managing directors.

Another management decision that ensured the success of this tour was the careful selection of plays. The company of fifteen actors rotated seventeen pieces during the tour, all chosen as

works [that] dramatized situations peculiar to Irish country life, presented characters whose language and dialect conveyed a truly local flavor, and confronted issues specific to Ireland’s emergence as a modern nation. If they were not all works of genius, the honesty of their portrayal of rural Ireland was compelling.⁷⁷

The repertoire consisted of Synge’s major plays--*Riders to the Sea*, *Well of the Saints*, and the infamous *Playboy of the Western World*; William Boyle’s *The Building Fund*, *The Mineral Workers*, and *The Eloquent Dempsey*; St. John Irvine’s *Mixed Marriage*,

frequently to miss each other” during this period, (297). It therefore may have been imperative that Yeats see her in October.

⁷⁵ John P. Harrington, *The Irish Play on the New York Stage 1874-1966* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 63.

⁷⁶ Robinson, *Ireland’s Abbey Theatre*, 95.

⁷⁷ Adele M. Dalsimer, “Players in the Western World: The Abbey Theatre’s American Tours,” *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 77.

Lennox Robinson's *Harvest*, and T.C. Murray's *Birthright*; Bernard Shaw's *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet*; six plays by Lady Gregory--*The Rising of the Moon*, *The Image*, *The Workhouse Ward*, *The Gaol Gate*, *Spreading the News*, and *Hyacinth Halvey*; and one play written by Yeats and Lady Gregory, *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. Of the seventeen works, then, almost half were written by Lady Gregory.⁷⁸

The audience to whom these plays were aimed was heavily Irish-American, first and second-generation immigrants with close ties to their Irish heritage. Often, especially in Boston, Lady Gregory met old friends and children of friends in the audience.⁷⁹ And Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh and her sister even stayed with relatives while playing in New York.⁸⁰ Therefore, the decision to produce the folk plays rather than the verse dramas was a shrewd one, aimed, according to Yeats, “to try to recreate Ireland in an Irish way” for an exiled Irish audience.⁸¹ Yeats's plays, while poetic and artistic, did not fit into the picture of Ireland that the Abbey Theatre and its managers were trying to convey to these first American audiences. In an interview Lady Gregory admitted, “We plan to come to America again next year with some of the verse dramas, plays that we were afraid to attempt before we were known here.”⁸²

Lady Gregory and Yeats probably collaborated on decisions about play selections for the 1911 tour. They had jointly shared this task at the Abbey for many years, and “as a result they have made few errors in judgment.”⁸³ It is not surprising, therefore, that the

⁷⁸ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh cites a production of *Falsely True* by Johanna Redmond in Boston; however, apparently the critics did not like the play and it was not played on the rest of the tour. Nic Shiubhlaigh, 117.

⁷⁹ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 99-100.

⁸⁰ Nic Shiubhlaigh, 125.

⁸¹ Dalsimer, 77-8.

⁸² Lady Gregory quoted in “A Repertory Theatre,” in E. H. Mikhail ed., *Lady Gregory: Interviews and Recollections* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 60.

⁸³ Ibid., “The Comedy Spirit of Ireland,” 44.

bill of peasant plays and comedies was extremely successful in America. There was only one play about which they had no choice. Although it is probable that *The Playboy* would have been included without any stipulation, “Liebler and Company. . . added as a condition of contract that *The Playboy of the Western World* must be part of the repertory.”⁸⁴

Lady Gregory’s (fig.34) personal management of the six-month American tour consisted primarily of coping with the myriad aspects of the highly publicized demonstrations of outrage that occurred wherever the company performed *The Playboy of the Western World*. The riots had seemingly followed the Irish players from Dublin, and, though the mobs’ reasons for rioting were different in the two countries, the commotion and disruption of the performances remained the same.⁸⁵ Still, because she had already faced down the mobs in Dublin and the English Lord Lieutenant in Dublin Castle, Lady Gregory entered the fray with calm determination, affirming, “I am of a fighting race.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Harrington, 63.

⁸⁵ In New York, and throughout America, the riots focused on the idea that *The Playboy* was another malicious depiction of the stereotypical “stage Irishman” which the Irish were desperately trying to belie.

⁸⁶ Lady Gregory quoted in “Lady Gregory Doesn’t Mind the Fighting Evenings,” in Mikhail, *Interviews and Recollections*, 60.



Figure 34. Lady Gregory at about the time she managed the American tours.

Some protest was made against *The Playboy* in Boston, but Lady Gregory “gave tickets to a group of Harvard boys, who cheered ‘whenever there was a sign of coming disapproval.’”⁸⁷ There was somewhat more opposition in Washington, D. C., where a pamphlet was issued against the players and protest was made by several Catholic priests. Lady Gregory was actually more concerned that one of her actors had been injured in a fall because “a bad performance would worry me more than the pamphlet.”⁸⁸

A substantial challenge, of course, was New York City, where, weeks ahead of the players’ arrival, the *Gaelic American* newspaper had promised “to make every reasonable effort, through a committee, to induce those responsible for the presentation of *The Playboy* to withdraw it, and failing this we pledge ourselves to drive the vile thing from the stage.”⁸⁹ But the Irish-American faction did not realize the bulldog tenacity that was the major part of Lady Gregory’s managerial persona; therefore, the editors of the *Gaelic American* must have found it surprising that rather than backing away from confrontation in New York, Lady Gregory actually welcomed it. One interview recorded her resolve:

‘*The Playboy* is to be put on next Monday. I am glad they are not putting off the fight any longer. . . [Her advisors] thought it possible this might be stopped by letting the enemy know we are prepared, but I thought it better to let them show themselves. They have been threatening us so long; we shall see who they are.’⁹⁰

Opening night, November 28, was actually worse than Lady Gregory anticipated. The disturbance began earlier than it had in Dublin and was much more violent than expected. Soon after Christy Mahon’s entrance, “an extraordinary collection of objects

⁸⁷ Kohfeldt, 229.

⁸⁸ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 105.

⁸⁹ Harrington, 63.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

thudded about the footlights- rolled-up balls of paper, pieces of sticks, a variety of not very fresh vegetables, half loaves of bread, well ripened cabbages and a shower of big, knobbly potatoes, heavy, dusty and hard.”⁹¹ One of these struck Eithne Magee, but apparently did no great harm. At the height of the fracas, Lady Gregory “went round [back stage]. . .and knelt in the opening of the hearth, calling to every actor within earshot that they must not stop for a moment but must spare their voices, as they could not be heard, and we should do the whole act over again.”⁹² The curtain was lowered at the end of the first act while a hundred New York policemen cleared the protesters from the audience. Then, according to Lady Gregory’s instructions, Fred O’Donovan (who played Christy Mahon) announced that the first act would be repeated. This action allowed Lady Gregory, always mindful of turning bad press to good, to tell a New York *World* reporter, “we have appeared before an audience that has demanded an encore of us. We had to play the first act twice. It was a bit tiring, but still it was a compliment.”⁹³

For the second evening’s performance Lady Gregory shrewdly invited former President Theodore Roosevelt to attend the theatre with her, rightly suspecting that the commanding presence of the President would quell any raucous behavior. President Roosevelt originally declined the invitation because his wife was ill, but Lady Gregory persisted: “When I said it would be a help to us, he said ‘Then I will certainly come.’”⁹⁴ The result was a more subdued protest, as Lady Gregory reported:

There was a scuffle now and then during *The Playboy* but nothing violent and always great clapping when the offender was thrown out. . .When we left the box, we found the whole route to the door packed. . . and everyone taking

⁹¹ Nic Shiubhlaigh, 129.

⁹² Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 112.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 112-3.

off hats and looking at him with real reverence and affection. . .It was an extraordinary kindness that he did us.⁹⁵

Subsequent performances in New York were played with little disturbance and “were so successful that the tour was extended again to take in Chicago and four or five extra one-night towns.”⁹⁶

Unfortunately, an even greater trial awaited the players in Philadelphia. The first night *The Playboy* was given, January 17, 1912, there was a minor disturbance and about twenty-five men walked or were escorted out of the theatre. Then, the following afternoon, Lady Gregory learned from Mr. Bradford, the theatre manager,

that we might have to change the bill to-night and take off *The Playboy*. I said that could not be done, but he said it might be necessary. . .that we might all be arrested if we went on. I said I would rather be arrested than withdraw the play and could answer for the players feeling the same. [Bradford] said there was also danger that Shubert, to whom the theatre belongs, might close it. I said that would be bad but not so bad as withdrawing *The Playboy*, for it would be Shubert’s doing not ours, though that might not be much help in the public view.⁹⁷

The Playboy went on as scheduled on the 17th, but on Thursday, January 18th, the company was arrested after the show and arraigned on Friday morning before a Magistrate. The arrest was made pursuant to a “ bill passed [the year before] in the municipality before S[arah] Bernhardt’s visit, forbidding ‘immoral or indecent plays.’”⁹⁸

Lady Gregory immediately called her good friend John Quinn, a lawyer, who managed to expedite the hearing before the judge. Under cross-examination the prosecution witnesses (none of whom had actually seen the play) failed to prove either

⁹⁵ Ibid., 113.

⁹⁶ Nic Shiubhlaigh, 131.

⁹⁷ Gregory, 120-21.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 121.

immorality or indecency in the play. Finally, after a week's deliberations, the judge dismissed the charges. This dismissal was a vindication for Lady Gregory, who believed that her integrity as well as that of her company was challenged with every outcry against Synge's play. When she was asked by a reporter, just after the arrest, "whether I considered *The Playboy* immoral," she replied, "My taking it about was answer enough."⁹⁹

The final significant stop on the 1911 American tour was Chicago, where all the publicity of the riots and arrests had preceded the company. Much negative propaganda was sent out, but it had little effect on the performance given on February 7. The only sinister event was Lady Gregory's receipt of "a threatening letter written in vile language, and with picture of coffin and pistol, saying I would 'never see the hills of Connemara again,' and was about to meet my death."¹⁰⁰ By this time a seasoned manager, Lady Gregory wrote home, "I don't feel anxious, for I don't think from the drawing that the sender has much practical knowledge of firearms."¹⁰¹ The troupe left Chicago on March 5 and quietly traveled east to Boston, gave one final performance there, and sailed for Ireland.

Throughout the tour Lady Gregory's primary managerial strategy was simple tenacity--she had given her word that *The Playboy of the Western World* would be presented and she was loath to renege on her promise. She felt, and perhaps justly, that to close even one performance of *The Playboy* would admit to the play's immorality, admit that they had presented not a masterpiece but a fraud. Lady Gregory simply could not betray her friend Synge's genius by denying it.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 124.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 133-4.

¹⁰¹ Kohfeldt, 231.

Her tenacious refusal to discontinue *The Playboy*, therefore, was as much a matter of personal integrity as it was managerial manipulation. But it was also a brilliant managerial strategy. By refusing to pull *The Playboy* from production, Lady Gregory not only secured considerable free publicity but also increased the demand for the play. Ladies' clubs in the mid-west bought out entire performances to re-sell as benefits for their charities.¹⁰² Even people who did not want to see the play flocked to it to shout it down, paying the admission price for the privilege.

Her most effective management decisions surrounded her attempts to dispel the riots themselves. By hiring the Harvard boys in Boston she was effectively able to silence the protests of *The Playboy* in that city; although it was a strategy she had attempted before with less success, this time it served her well.¹⁰³ In New York she used her social connections with President Roosevelt to help dampen the rioting, a tactic only Gregory, whose social standing was well above Yeats's, could employ. Her decision to repeat the first act of *The Playboy* on the opening night in New York was also ingenious, for while conceding nothing to the rioters' disturbance of the play, it allowed her to manipulate press coverage to her advantage. One of her most effective strategies for dealing with unfavorable publicity throughout the tour was to simply disregard or make light of it as having no importance to herself, the players, or the Abbey Theatre.

Lady Gregory also managed repeat tours to America in 1912 and 1914. Of the 1912 tour she wrote, "this time there were no riots and we were of the happy people who have no history, unless it may be of the continued kindness of America, and of the

¹⁰² Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 129.

¹⁰³ See Gregory's account of the Dublin *Playboy* riots in *Our Irish Theatre*, 68.

growing kindness and better understanding on the part of our own countrymen.”¹⁰⁴ The 1914 tour, however, was not so successful. A brutal Atlantic crossing in February, in which two cast members were injured and one almost swept overboard, set a tone for the tour that it simply could not shake.¹⁰⁵ Despite the fact that the company played to more houses than ever, the tour actually lost money. In fact, Gregory blamed the loss on “‘running from place to place’ and visiting too many small towns,” a management decision for which she held Lennox Robinson responsible.¹⁰⁶ Gregory’s shrewd handling of the 1911 tour, however, demonstrated her management capabilities at their apex. Most of the remainder of her management of the Abbey was spent trying to keep the theatre’s doors open.

During the period from 1915 to 1925 the Abbey’s fortunes spiraled steadily downward, due, in part, to specific events and general problems within the theatre organization itself. The Abbey’s best draw, actress Sara Allgood, left the theatre in 1915 to join a touring company with a production of *Peg O’ My Heart*. When Lennox Robinson left the Abbey after the 1914 American tour, the theatre could not retain a stage manager who could work well with the players, with the result that a new manager was engaged almost every year between 1914 and 1917. This problem led to insubordination on a tour of Limerick and resulted in the disbanding of the touring company on May 24, 1916.¹⁰⁷ Also during this period Yeats distanced himself from the theatre, opting to

¹⁰⁴ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 253.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Hogan, Richard Burnham, and Daniel P. Poteet, eds., *The Rise of the Realists 1910-1915*, *The Modern Irish Drama: A Documentary History*, IV (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1979), 321-2.

¹⁰⁶ Coxhead, *Lady Gregory*, 161.

¹⁰⁷ National Theatre Society Ltd. *Minute Book*, Vol. 3, National Library of Ireland. Lennox Robinson was re-instated as stage manager by the Abbey Directors in 1918, although over the protests of Lady

abandon the country entirely during the years of trouble, leaving Lady Gregory to shoulder the burden of management of the Abbey alone.¹⁰⁸

Coupled with internal problems at the Abbey, the political climate—first of World War I and then the Irish Civil War—created circumstances that greatly hindered the Abbey’s struggle to remain financially solvent. The trials Gregory faced during this period included the Easter Uprising of 1916, in which several of the Abbey actors and actresses took part; fighting in the streets of Dublin, which disrupted performances; and an 8:00 P.M. curfew that closed the theatre down for a time.

Many of these hardships are chronicled in journals that she kept from 1919 to 1930. They reveal not only the extraordinary problems she faced as managing director of the theatre, but the mundane ones as well. Each year she had to renew Lennox Robinson’s contract as stage manager for the Abbey and his contract negotiations of course fell to Gregory who was battling with financial disaster. She wrote:

Harris [the Abbey’s auditor] . . . also thinks he (*Robinson*) [sic] should not be paid full salary when not working, and at first I said he should get it. But later in the day, when I reflected that there are now three blank months in which he would be doing nothing for us, it is hard that our low funds should give him L5 per week. And so when I arrived at evening rehearsal . . . I ‘did the hardest thing first,’ and spoke to him and he agreed to L2 10s., so now all that unpleasant business is off my mind and I can work with him.¹⁰⁹

By 1921, the Abbey was struggling just to stay open. But on March 20, Gregory admitted defeat.

Gregory. See correspondence from W. B. Yeats to Lady Gregory in Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham, *The Art of the Amateur, 1916-1920* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1984), 190-1.

¹⁰⁸ W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 244-55.

¹⁰⁹ Lady Augusta Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Journals*, Vol. 1 [1916-1925], Daniel J. Murphy, ed. (Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 1978), 61.

A meeting with Robinson and Harris in the office and we decided we must close. Even at 9 o'clock curfew we can't carry on but at a big loss and from today it is to be at 8. Robinson will try to get the players into a tour with *Whiteheaded Boy*. Failing that I don't know what we can do for them. It will be very sad.¹¹⁰

The theatre's closing, however, was short lived. An Irish friend in England arranged for a series of lectures to benefit the Abbey. Among the lecturers were Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, and Lady Gregory. Gregory was quite hesitant about lecturing, though she performed well and the reward was a total benefit of L471.9.7 plus an unexpected single donation of L500 by Lady Ardilaun. These funds put the Abbey back in the black, although their troubles were far from over.¹¹¹

In March 1923, the government of the Republic of Ireland sent out an order that "because of the acceptance of the Free State, and the executions and imprisonments, 'it is hereby decreed that the present be observed as a time of National mourning, that all sports and amusements be suspended, that all theatres be closed.'"¹¹² The Abbey, however, stayed open; with their financial impoverishment, if the doors closed, they would never reopen. Their tenacity paid off because the order was rescinded, though a special guard was placed at the Abbey "as we opened last night and W.B.Y. being a Senator make us a good target."¹¹³

The financial woes of the theatre escalated as Gregory fought to keep the Abbey open at any cost. She and Yeats made a proposal to the new Irish government to take

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 65.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 67.

¹¹² Ibid., 70.

¹¹³ Ibid., 71.

control of the theatre in order to be granted a subsidy. Gregory relates in her April 15, 1923 journal entry,

I went with Yeats to the government Offices to see MacNeill. He thinks the government will refuse to take the Theatre over. But they must give us a subsidy, for now Harris has gone and I have been so much away, we have overdrawn so heavily at the bank it will cash no more cheques. I had to speak plainly to Yeats and said I would not go on unless there is a business man put on to watch and control the expenditure.¹¹⁴

By August of that year she wrote again of closing the theatre:

I said, and Yeats agreed, that if we cannot carry on the Abbey we should let it for a few years to a film company and save the money to open again [sic] But I am not without hope that if the London tour comes off we may make money enough to carry on for a while and perhaps pay our way.¹¹⁵

In 1924, there came a small reversal in the Abbey's fortunes. Sean O'Casey, whose *The Shadow of a Gunman* had had a successful run the year before, produced a masterpiece such as the Abbey Theatre had not seen since Synge's death. *Juno and the Paycock* caused long lines at the box office and crowded houses during the two weeks it ran, bringing a hopeful tone to Gregory's entry for June 3: "We have for the first time mortgaged the building to clear off our overdrafts. But business has improved in these last months and we are hopeful for next season."¹¹⁶

She continued to perform her ordinary managerial tasks, such as play selection, and exercised her veto power with gusto. She insisted that she be given a list of proposed plays each year and in 1924 wrote of her displeasure with some selections:

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 73.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 77.

a good deal of rubbish has been put on for next weeks, [sic] *The Suburban Groove*, *Insurance Money* and a foreign play I had never seen or read. I said some more solid work must be taken up. *Playboy*, which he [Robinson] consented to, *Androcles and the Lion* consented to, and then for, I think, the first time proposing a play of my own, I said *The Image* could be given a very fine performance now and the actors had several times asked for it.¹¹⁷

Yeats, however, did not agree with presenting *The Image*, and Gregory wrote of her displeasure with him.

Yeats refused consent, says it has an act too much and is slow in action. Rather a shock to me, my chief play, and one made much of in London and elsewhere. He proposed *Damer's Gold* and *Shanwalla*, but I will not have them, feel too sore. Lennox Robinson agreeing with me, gave in to Yeats, who as a concession said the receipts of *Image* might be looked at to see how they compared with the takings of other plays in old days.¹¹⁸

During November 1924, Gregory was involved in negotiations with the government regarding the subsidy and again hope was high. "I saw Blythe [Minister of Finance] at 11 o'clock. He was very encouraging, and had spoken to the Executive council about helping the Abbey and they incline to it. I told him our need, our actors underpaid, our actor-manager getting only L6.7.0 a week, our building so shabby and wanting repair . . . I asked for L1,000 a year, and L1,000 for repairs."¹¹⁹ She estimated losses at the Abbey during the previous twelve years to be 4,000 pounds, beginning in the wartime of 1915, but also reported that all debts were paid and 500 pounds in the bank.¹²⁰

Finally, in June 1925, the government subsidy of 850 pounds was secured and Gregory wrote in her journal "Two long meetings at the Abbey, one dry business, the other

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 79-80.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 80.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 81-2.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

pleasanter, increasing actor's pay, and charwomen's, from the Government grant."¹²¹ But with the grant came change. Blythe suggested an additional Director, and he proposed George O'Brien, a Catholic, to offset Lennox Robinson. The addition caused no trouble until Sean O'Casey presented the Abbey with another, more controversial masterpiece, *The Plough and the Stars*, in August. Although admitting the play was "excellent," O'Brien had major objections to some of the content. Gregory replied with the same tenor she had taken with the *Blanco Posnet* and *Playboy* controversies many years before:

Our position is clear. If we have to choose between the subsidy and our freedom, it is our freedom we choose. And we must tell him there was no condition attached to the subsidy, and though in connection with it another Director was suggested, I cannot be sure whether by me or Blythe, there was no word at all of his being a censor, but only to strengthen us on the financial side.¹²²

The matter came to a head in a Director's meeting on September 24 in which Lady Gregory took a major role.

Dr. O'Brien making his objections to the play: I, chiefly spokesman, (by request,) telling him Blythe had made no condition whatever in giving the subsidy and certainly no hint of appointing a censor. I told him of our old fights . . . and my refusal (though there was a real threat of closing the Theatre). . . . O'Brien sat up in his chair reiterating at intervals, 'That song is objectionable.' (We had already decided that it must go, but left it as a bone for him to gnaw at.) . . . We told him cuts are usually made in rehearsal . . . and at last got O'Brien to confess, 'I had mistaken my position' (of censor). . . . I then proposed (already arranged) that now we are four Directors we had better bring a rule of majority voting or we might come to a deadlock, two and two.¹²³

¹²¹ Ibid., 85.

¹²² Ibid., 87.

¹²³ Ibid., 91-2.

Until her death in 1932 from cancer, Lady Gregory remained at the helm of management at the Abbey. She had steered the theatre through good times and bad and her force of will was the primary support of the theatre until the day she died.

Historians have esteemed Gregory's role as playwright to be her major contribution to the Abbey Theatre; however, this estimation needs reevaluation in light of her extensive involvement in the theatre's management. Her contributions can be evaluated in three areas: the early work in the trenches, the day-to-day management, and her management of the American tours.

Gregory's work during the early years of the Abbey's formation, 1898-1904, was certainly not glamorous, but it was necessary. Her fundraising efforts, especially among the landed gentry of Ireland, brought not only needed capital but a raised consciousness of what the experiment hoped to accomplish in the way of promoting Irish nationalism and reclaiming an Irish heritage almost extinguished by centuries of English rule. It was also through her social status that she secured the original patent for the theatre, and her social standing became one of her chief management tools. Although her early administrative efforts were slight, they were not insignificant.

Once elected to the Abbey Theatre board of directors in 1904, Gregory's management at the theatre became vital; after the death of Synge in 1908 and the defection of Yeats in the teens, Gregory made most of the major decisions at the theatre. And in almost every *crisis* situation throughout the theatre's history, Gregory was the person in charge. Through the *Playboy* riots, the conflicts with the English authorities, the Easter Rising in 1916, and the governmental curfews of the 1920s, Gregory was at the theatre's helm, making the hard decisions, when necessary, to keep the theatre alive.

Yeats is usually given blanket credit for the theatre's management, although study of specific incidents shows that he is often conspicuously absent. That he received credit when credit was perhaps due elsewhere is probably because of Lady Gregory's attempts to put him in the limelight in order to advance his career in the public eye and, at least in the beginning, to keep herself out of it. This pattern is definitely seen in the early works that they co-authored, but that until recently bore only Yeats's name. That she would repeat this pattern with the management of the Abbey Theatre is not surprising.¹²⁴

Gregory's contributions to the theatre's management cannot be dismissed as marginal. Because of her efforts as manager of the theatre, the Abbey remained solvent throughout the early years; it developed a reputation for producing controversial works and flying in the face of convention (and the English censor); and it earned enough respect from the government to warrant a national subsidy in 1925. In his announcement of the grant on August 8, Yeats boasted, "We have become the first State-endowed theatre in any English-speaking country."¹²⁵

The accomplishments of much of Gregory's management can be traced to her bulldog tenacity and perseverance in the face of adversity. Her most concentrated use of these traits, however, occurred during the 1911 American tour. The results of her management of the tour were both far-reaching and immediate, and although the far-reaching effects of Lady Gregory's management were unforeseen, they were potentially one of her greatest achievements in the theatre. The influence of the 1911 tour on American theatre, for example, has been well documented; scholars point to its positive effect on American playwriting, acting, design, and to a notable degree, the Little Theatre

¹²⁴ See Chapter 6 for details of Gregory's and Yeats's collaborations in playwriting.

¹²⁵ W. B. Yeats quoted in Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham, *The Years of O'Casey, 1921-1926: A Documentary History* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 277.

Movement itself.¹²⁶ Although Gregory cannot claim a direct influence on the American theatre, she did contribute, indirectly, to changes in it.

American playwright Eugene O'Neill, for example, was outspoken in his admiration for the Irish players, saying that "the work of the Irish Players on their first trip over here was what opened my eyes to the existence of a real theatre."¹²⁷ It is clear then that Lady Gregory's decisions regarding the plays presented on the tour affected O'Neill's perception of what was possible on the stage. By choosing to present the simple peasant dramas (rather than the more elaborate verse plays) with the "realistic" acting style that characterized the Abbey players, Gregory allowed O'Neill and others to recognize that drama could surpass the melodramatic and achieve a serious drama hitherto unrealized on the American stage. After seeing the Abbey Players, O'Neill rejected the melodramatic theatrical tradition of his father, James O'Neill and embraced the new type of Irish peasant play presented by the Irish actors. "The Irish plays of Synge and Lady Gregory were to the most sophisticated American audiences a revelation of what the power and beauty of words could accomplish."¹²⁸

These peasant dramas also influenced designers such as Robert Edmond Jones, who wrote animatedly about the simple settings employed by the Irish players:

Neutral-tinted walls, a fireplace, a door, a window, a table, a few chairs, the red homespun skirts and bare feet of the peasant girls. A fisher's net, perhaps. Nothing more. But through the little window at the back one saw a sky of enchantment. All the poetry of Ireland shone in that little square of light, moody, haunting, full of dreams.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Sources for the Abbey Theatre's influences on the American theatre include Cheryl Black, *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Hogan, Burnham and Poteet, Appendix B, "The Abbey in America"; Louis Shaeffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

¹²⁷ Eugene O'Neill quoted in Harrington, 5.

¹²⁸ Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, 429.

¹²⁹ Robert Edmond Jones quoted in Harrington, 71.

Peasant plays such as Gregory's *Spreading the News* or Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* enabled the use of set designs that revealed the possibility of a simple reality on stage, in stark contrast to the illusionist reality often created on a grand scale in nineteenth century theatres.

Similarly, Lady Gregory and the Abbey, at least indirectly, helped shape America's art theatre movement. In America, the "little theatre" or "art theatre" movement dated generally from about 1912, the year after the Abbey players toured. These "little" art theatres were committed to the art of theatre, not the business of it, echoing the Irish National Theatre's stated purpose. The art theatres were also dedicated to innovations in acting, writing, and designing. Susan Glaspell, a founder of The Provincetown Players in 1915, credited The Abbey Theatre with inspiring their theatre's creation, as well as its acting and playwriting: "Quite possibly there would be no Provincetown Players had there not been Irish Players What [George Cram Cook] saw done for Irish life he wanted for American life—no stage conventions in the way of projecting with the humility of true feeling."¹³⁰

Lady Gregory granted an interview to Maurice Brown, founder of the Little Theatre in Chicago, when the players were in Chicago in 1911. Of this interview Brown wrote:

Lady Gregory counseled us wisely and with razor tongue: 'By all means start your own theatre; but make it in your own image. Don't engage professional players; they have been spoiled for your purpose. Engage and train, as we of the Abbey have done, amateurs: shopgirls, school-teachers,

¹³⁰ Cheryl Black, *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 75. Black points out that in this quotation Glaspell is specifically talking about "breaking conventions in acting as well as dramaturgy."

counter-jumpers; cut-throat-thieves rather than professionals. And prepare to have your hearts broken.’¹³¹

Because Brown’s subsequent founding of Chicago’s Little Theatre is credited with the establishment of the American Little Theatre Movement, Lady Gregory’s interview may be seen as a modest contribution to the movement.¹³² In sum, although Gregory cannot claim a direct influence on the American theatre, she did, through her management and motivation, contribute indirectly to the changes in it.

The principal reason for the American tour was financial; in this respect it was an undeniable success, primarily because Lady Gregory’s management decisions constantly kept the Irish Players before the public eye and in the best light possible. *The Playboy of the Western World* was never closed down, and probably Lady Gregory’s insistence that *The Playboy* go on actually kept the tour alive. Leibler & Company specifically requested *The Playboy* in the company repertoire; it is reasonable to believe that if Lady Gregory had withdrawn the show, Liebler & Company would have been within their rights in canceling the tour. Instead, the tour was extended for three months, substantially increasing the financial gain for the Abbey, and, before the company sailed for home, a benefit production was held in Boston that garnered an additional five thousand dollars for the company.¹³³ This contribution to the coffers of the almost bankrupt Abbey could then be laid at the feet of Lady Gregory when she returned home triumphant in March 1912.

From fundraising, to hiring and firing, to fighting with Dublin Castle and the government, Lady Augusta Gregory was the strength that propelled the Abbey Theatre

¹³¹ Maurice Brown quoted in “Lady Gregory Counseled Us Wisely,” in *Interviews and Recollections*, ed. Mikhail, 74-5.

¹³² E. H. Mikhail, *Ibid.*, 75-6, n. 1.

¹³³ Nic Shiubhlaigh, 136.

forward. Of her Lennox Robinson, who worked with her intimately for so many years, wrote, “We can rightly praise Synge and O’Casey and many another fine Irish playwright, talk of the genius of this player and of that, but without Lady Gregory’s doggedness and determination and belief in the Theatre these people might never have, artistically, existed. Our Theatre would not be open to-day [sic] save for her. Lady Gregory was—is—the Abbey Theatre.”¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Lennox Robinson, Forward to “Abbey Theatre” section of *Lady Gregory’s Journals*, ed. Daniel J. Murphy, 53.

CHAPTER 5:
THE WOMEN WHO ACTED

Contributing to the success of the Abbey Theatre in its early years was the development of a realistic acting style quite different from the style then seen on the English stage and a school of acting where actors learned specific techniques to use on stage. These innovations went far in establishing the Abbey.

Although England had its share of excellent actors in the nineteenth century, such as Squire and Lady Bancroft, Charles Macready, Max Beerbohm Tree, and Henry Irving, there was no school of acting from which actors could learn their craft. Actors typically joined a theatre (or grew up in a company) and learned their trade by watching the other actors work on stage. Early actors had learned lines of business or specific roles that changed little from play to play. In the early nineteenth century, alongside romanticism and the increased popularity of melodrama, a new style of acting emerged, one based on intense emotion and standardized, signifying movements. This romantic style probably arose both from the exaggerated emotions of melodrama and from enlarged theatre buildings that housed up to three thousand people: in order to be seen, actors' gestures needed to be both larger than life and recognizable at a considerable distance. At about the same time, advances in transportation enabled the "star system," where a leading actor or actress, the star, traveled from place to place and inserted himself or herself into the resident stock companies. At its worst the star system meant that the rest of the performers became backdrops, with little done to create individual characters for them, because the plays, indeed some would argue the whole theatre experience, became more

about the stars and less about dramatic characters.¹ No doubt the somewhat standardized emotions and movements of much romantic drama also enabled a star system because less rehearsal was needed when resident actors, diminished in importance, sought simply to accommodate the star.

Later in the nineteenth century, as a network of railroads developed, the star system gave way to a combination system in which acting companies traveled, complete with their scenery. At about the same time, a new kind of drama emerged, one that stressed the importance of physical environment and individual psychology on human motivation and action. Such changes rippled into acting, which shifted away from standardized gestures and individual stars, toward ensemble playing and more nuanced performances. These changes in production arrangements and in drama marked a shift in European theatre from the style called romanticism to that called realism.

The Abbey Theatre emerged at the very time when the shift from romanticism to realism was getting underway. Indeed, the Abbey's departure from conventional (read romantic) acting practices was a great drawing card for the theatre. Its emphasis on "realistic" acting provided an innovation that kept the audiences interested in the little theatre's offerings. Two important qualities marked the Abbey's realism. First, ensemble acting in which there were no stars—plays were cast according to ability, not status. Second, the use of amateur actors who were recruited in Dublin and trained in the theatre.

It is indisputable that the acting style of the Abbey Theatre can be directly attributed to the ideas brought to the INTS by the Fay brothers in 1902. Frank and Willie

¹ Robert Hogan, Richard Burnham, & Daniel P. Poteet, *The Rise of the Realists 1910-1915, The Modern Irish Drama: A Documentary History, IV* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1979), 431.

Fay's ideas of acting were influenced primarily by two of the leading European theatrical theorists and practitioners of acting--Andre Antoine and Constant-Benoit Coquelin.

Although Frank Fay was in sympathy with the theories of Coquelin, he also incorporated elements from Antoine into what became the Abbey's acting tradition.

The influence of Antoine appears in Fay's acting theory as a corollary to Coquelin for Antoine preferred amateur actors untainted by study at the French conservatory. He too advocated acting "naturally" even if it meant turning a back to the audience or speaking softly. Fay, like Antoine, advocated the idea that the actors must intimately understand their characters. Sara Allgood bears this out, stating that "We were always allowed to 'create' the character we were enacting."²

But the stronger influence was definitely Coquelin's. In 1899, Frank Fay reviewed a performance of *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Coquelin's French company, playing at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin. In his review he praised the "life-like playing which it would be almost impossible to get on the English stage."³ A year later he compared this performance to a revival of Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, berating the actors and the stage management for their extraneous movements:

I never saw ingenuity defeat itself so much as in this performance. It is beautifully staged, exquisitely dressed, and charmingly grouped; but the moment some necessary question of the play is to be considered, the attention is distracted on to something else. . . . Sir Peter continually breaks up his scenes by needless moving about, sitting down, and letter writing. What is the use of showing us Lady Sneerwell at her toilet when her words, which

² Ibid.

³ Frank Fay, *Towards a National Theatre: The Dramatic Criticism of Frank J. Fay*, ed. Robert Hogan (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1970), 16.

are all important, for they start the plot, are inaudible and spoken without point or expression?⁴

Even before he began to train the actors at the Abbey, Fay was formulating his own theory of acting, at the core of which was the stillness and naturalness of movement advocated by Coquelin. Somewhat later, Arthur Symon, in *Plays, Acting, and Music* (itself influenced by French practice) admits, “A great part of the art of French acting consists in knowing when and how not to do things. . . . They have realized the art there is in being still, in speaking naturally, as people do when they are really talking, in fixing attention on the words they are saying and not on their antics while saying them.”⁵ This precept was one of Frank Fay’s building blocks for the Abbey’s style of acting. Sara Allgood, recalled her early training:

The Abbey training was, ‘only do what you are intended to do’, [sic] whether it was with furniture, on the stage, or your own handkerchief or scarf. . . . Another thing was the making of unnecessary moves. I remember once making a move during a scene, and the whole rehearsal was held up by W. S. Fay, [sic] and I was asked why I had made that move – if the explanation was satisfactory, all was well; but if not, I was made to feel so embarrassed that I never did it again. We were not allowed to do anything on the stage unless we had a definite and concrete reason for what we did.⁶

Fay also insisted on the actor’s use of Coquelin’s device of “Number One” and “Number Two.” “Number One” is the actor who conceives the character according to how the playwright has drawn the character; “Number Two” is the character realized in the person of the actor. According to Coquelin, there should always be a distance between “Number One” and “Number Two” to allow the actor to control the character

⁴ Fay, *National Theatre*, 47.

⁵ Arthur Symon quoted in Gabriel Fallon, “The Abbey Theatre Acting Tradition,” in ed. Sean McCann, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (Dublin: The National Theatre Society, Ltd., 1969), 111.

⁶ Sara Allgood, “Memories,” TMs, 102, Berg Collection, New York City Public Library.

rather than allowing the character to “possess” the actor completely.⁷ It was this technique of distancing that Frank Fay strove to teach his actors at the Abbey.

One of the greatest practitioners of this technique at the Abbey was Sara Allgood. A fellow actor described a production of *The Two Shepherds* in 1924 when Allgood gave an emotional performance that was nevertheless completely controlled. During an intense farewell scene Allgood crouched downstage on the apron facing the audience, with the actor Gabriel Fallon beside her. He recalled, “We [had] nothing to say but much to feel and show . . . As the scene proceeded she wept. At moments she was literally shaken with sobs, tears visibly coursed down her cheeks. Occasionally she would bring the handkerchief to her face for the purpose of dabbing her eyes.”⁸ In the midst of this harrowing performance, however, Fallon discovered Allgood’s command of the Abbey technique.

Now every time that handkerchief went up thus concealing the movement of her lips she would whisper some witty comment on the acting or the mode of speaking of her junior female colleagues center-stage. . . . Yet Sara’s tears continued to flow, her sobs were audibly heard, and the witty ventriloquial whispers went on. Those who saw the play will recall how much her superb acting contributed to the total poignancy of the scene. Here was an unforgettable portrayal of grief activated by every word and movement of the central scene. But the witty remarks? . . . It was this control, this power of ‘detachment.’⁹

In a conversation with Fallon later, Allgood “confirmed that it was on this theory of acting that the Fays (particularly Frank) had trained her and the early Abbey players.”¹⁰

⁷ Fallon, “Abbey Theatre Acting Tradition,” 113.

⁸ Gabriel Fallon, *The Abbey and the Actor*, (Dublin: National Theatre Society, Ltd., 1969), 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Critics first noted the distinctive Abbey style of acting during the tour of the INTS company in 1903. Allgood recalled in her memoir “all great things are simple things, was one of the first things I was taught at the Abbey Theatre. The greatest stress was laid on sincerity, simplicity, and earnestness. . . . Our lines were spoken simply, clearly, and no ‘stammering’ was allowed. Thus when we made our first London appearance, the dramatic critics were simply astounded and we were acclaimed as most wonderful naturalistic actors.”¹¹ *The Times Literary Supplement* reported that

as a rule they stand stock-still. The speaker of the moment is the only one who is allowed a little gesture. . . . The listeners do not distract one’s attention by fussy ‘stage business’, [sic] they just stay where they are and listen. When they do move it is without premeditation, at hap-hazard, even with a little natural clumsiness, as of people who are not conscious of being stared at in public. Hence a delightful effect of spontaneity. And in their demeanor generally they have the artless impulsiveness of children. . . . Add that the scenery is of Elizabethan simplicity – performance is a sight good for sore eyes – eyes made sore by the perpetual movement and glitter of the ordinary stage.¹²

Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, one of the Abbey’s first leading ladies, contrasts the English acting style of the time with the continental style from which Fay derived his:

The British productions then were indeed marked contrast to the continental ones. It used to be said, especially in the case of the smaller companies, that before an Englishman went on a stage he took a course in military foot-drill. The movements of all the minor actors appeared to be worked out to the minutest detail beforehand to fit in with the

¹¹ Allgood, 100.

¹² Arthur Walkley, *Times Literary Supplement*, quoted in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, eds., *Laying the Foundations 1902-1904* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc., 1976), 61-2.

idiosyncrasies of the ‘star’. [sic] Hence a sort of robot effect; a lack of spontaneity.¹³

From the beginning Frank and Willie Fay realized that the women they had recruited to act in the INTS were in many ways superior to the men. In 1904, Frank Fay praised the women of the theatre: “The fact is Miss Walker, Miss Garvey, Miss Allgood, and Miss Esposito beat the men hollow. When Gwyn wrote about us in the Fortnightly [1903 article by Stephen Gwynn, “An Uncommercial Theatre”], he said the reverse was the case, and he was right; but he would not be right now. I look forward with hope to the future with four girls like these in the company.”¹⁴ Even after they had left the Abbey in 1908, both Fays, in an interview with *The World* remarked on the excellent achievement of the actresses of the Abbey. “Dramatic talent runs wild in the Dublin Streets. . . . We always selected young men and women who had sprung from the peasant class. Every one of them can act native drama. But the women are quicker at it. The women are nearer to other things. . . . We could get more out of an Irish girl in eighteen months than we could out of a man in two years: the girls are more natural, the men more inclined to ‘act.’”¹⁵ One of the major contributions, therefore, of the women of the Abbey Theatre was their ability to act “naturally,” to hold an audience, to realize the potential of the national theatre.

Between 1904 and 1925, approximately 120 women acted on the Abbey stage.¹⁶ Of those, three were instrumental in founding and perpetuating the Abbey from 1904 until 1915: Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh (Mary Walker), Sara Allgood, and Maire O’Neill

¹³ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years*, (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., Ltd, 1955), 9.

¹⁴ Frank Fay to Joseph Holloway, 1 March 1904, Yeats Papers, National Library of Ireland.

¹⁵ Interview with Frank and Willie Fay, *The World*, [1908], Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

¹⁶ See Appendix A for listing of all actresses 1897-1925.

(Molly Allgood). After 1915, three other actresses, Eileen O’Doherty, Maureen Delany and May Craig, became leading players at the Abbey, carrying on the Abbey’s tradition of strong actresses. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh (Mary Walker) and Sara Allgood, the latter considered one of the greatest performers produced by the Abbey Theatre in the twentieth century, were in the earliest productions of the INTS; Maire O’Neill (Molly Allgood) joined them in 1905, and together they helped build the reputation of the Abbey through their talent and dedication to the theatre.

Born in Dublin in 1882 into a family dedicated to both theatre and nationalism, Mary Walker (fig. 35) was a founding member of Maud Gonne’s *Ingidhe-na-hEireann* and a prominent member of its dramatic society. In keeping with the organization’s emphasis on the use of the Irish language, Walker changed her name to its Gaelic form, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh. In 1902, in addition to availing herself of the training by the Fays at the dramatic classes, Nic Shiubhlaigh enrolled in Frank Fay’s elocution class at the Coffee-palace Hall in order to enhance her voice control. She remembers Fay as “a dramatic instructor of genius. . . . I doubt if any productions of Yeats’ early verse-plays could have been as effective as they were without him. He was directly responsible for bringing out the peculiar inflections of the Irish voice, so important in plays of this sort. In preparing plays, he laid the utmost emphasis on the importance of words and made beautiful speech, whether it was the delivery of dialect or the lyrical speaking of verse his



Figure 35. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh. This portrait was painted by John Yeats for the opening of the Abbey Theatre in 1904.

goal.”¹⁷ This training paid off for Nic Shiubhlaigh, for throughout her career critics praised her voice as one of her great assets.

Fay’s acting lessons also bore fruit. Of Nic Shiubhlaigh’s 1903 performance in *The Hour-glass* Joseph Holloway wrote to Willie Fay that

Miss Mary Walker impersonated the Angel in a way that Dante Gabriel Rossetti or Burne Jones would have loved to realize on canvas. Her pose as she stood immoveable at the door was very beautiful & quite after the pre-Rafaelesque manner & her measured delivery most telling. No member of the company has improved so much since I first heard her last year in *Deirdre*. . . She seems to me to be a most earnest student & enters the spirit of each part she plays.¹⁸

Holloway was not the only critic to notice Mary Walker’s improvements. In October 1903, the critic from *The Freeman’s Journal* reported that “The outstanding feature of the performance of Mr. Synge’s play [*In the Shadow of the Glen*] was the acting of Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh. Her portrayal of the young wife [the leading role] was really admirable.”¹⁹ This praise was somewhat unexpected because the critics almost universally disliked the play. The actress recalled that she had been chosen specifically for the part by Willie Fay because of her relative inexperience as an actress and that Fay explained to her that “If you were a more experienced actress you might read into to this part something which, perhaps, was never intended. Be the *mouthpiece* of Nora Burke, rather than Nora Burke. You will be corrected only if you are inaudible or if your movements are wrong.”²⁰

¹⁷ Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 8-9.

¹⁸ Joseph Holloway to W. G. Fay, 21 March 1903, *Newspaper Cuttings Vol. IV*, National Library of Ireland.

¹⁹ *The Freeman’s Journal*, 9 October 1903, *Newspaper Cuttings, IV*, National Library of Ireland.

²⁰ Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 43.

Both the critics and the Fays, however, recognized Nic Shiubhlaigh's talent, for she began to be cast more and more often in leading roles. She elicited praise in *The Sporting Record* in December 1903 for her portrayal of Maire Hourican in Padraic Colum's *Broken Soil*:

Miss Maire Nic Shinbhlaigh [sic], . . . played with a gentle pathos and sense of light and shade of unaffected emotionalism that touched the heart and made her study of the difficult character intensely interesting, as well as dramatically effective. . . . There was a lot of genuine human nature in her part, and the youthful actress conveyed every grain of it by her unaffected, intensely womanly enactment of the role. She has the temperament of an artist, and a fascinating personality that pervades all her stage work, and singles her out from the rest of her clever companions.²¹

And as Dectora in Yeats's *The Shadowy Waters* in January 1904 she was for many the only bright spot in the production. "The part of Dectora is a great one for a great actress. Miss Walker, especially towards the end, did much to show its beauty and dignity . . . indeed great credit is due for a performance that was wonderfully good considering the enormous difficulties."²² Another newspaper wrote simply, "To give those remote speeches of Dectora's as Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh gave them one must be a genius."²³

The rest of the company's actresses, however, also began to receive high accolades for their acting. With the first production of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, Honor Lavelle, Sara Allgood, and Emma Vernon all elicited praise from the press.

²¹ *The Sporting Record*, 8 December 1903, *Newspaper Cuttings, IV*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

²² *The Figuro and Irish Gentlewoman*, 23 January 1904, *Newspaper Cuttings IV*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

²³ *The United Irishman*, 23 January 1904, *Newspaper Cuttings IV*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

Miss Honor Lavelle as Maurya was capital in this scene, and, indeed, throughout the entire piece. Perhaps the most effective bit of acting in the play was the weeping of the daughters in identifying the clothes given to them by the young priest. . . . Both Miss Sara Allgood and Miss Emma Vernon were excellent in the parts. Nothing could excel the naturalness of Miss Vernon's weeping, and she undoubtedly won her way to the sympathy of the audience. As far as we know, this lady has not appeared before in any of the plays of the National Theatre Society, and if this is so the Society is to be congratulated again on its happy knack of discovering talented actors.²⁴

Another newspaper also highlighted the acting of these three actresses.

Miss Sara Allgood as Cathleen acted with a simplicity and sincerity that resembled nature so closely that it ceased to be acting to those who looked on, and Miss Emma Esposito [Vernon], made a very successful debut, as Nora, her sister; and played quite pathetically and unaffectedly particularly in the final episodes of the play. Miss Honor Lavelle, as the half-demented, wholly distracted, old Maurya, gave an uncanny rendering of the part. . . . and was most impressive in the scene with her dead son.²⁵

Born in Limerick, Helen Laird (c.1882-1957), whose stage name was Honor Lavelle (fig. 36), taught at Alexandra College in Dublin in the early 1900s.²⁶ In 1903, she became a co-founder of the Irish National Theatre and her seniority within the society garnered her most of the leading roles until 1904. Her playing of Kathleen ni Houlihan in several 1903 productions, however, lacked the power necessary for the role. A spring production elicited the criticism that the play “needed better acting and stage management to give it

²⁴ *The Freeman's Journal*, 27 February 1904, *Newspaper Cuttings IV*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

²⁵ *Sporting Record*, 1 March 1904, *Newspaper Cuttings IV*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

²⁶ John O'Grady, *The Life and Work of Sarah Purser* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 275.



Figure 36. Honor Lavelle, stage name of Helen Laird, was the Abbey's first leading lady.

anything like its full effect.”²⁷ That autumn Joseph Holloway remarked, “*Kathleen ni Houlihan* fell very flat, chiefly owing to the title role being enacted in too listless a key. . . . Tell Miss Lavelle to throw more enthusiasm & earnestness into her *Kathleen*.”²⁸

Between these criticisms of Lavelle’s *Kathleen* and Nic Shiubhlaigh’s growing skill, it is not difficult to understand why Nic Shiubhlaigh replaced her in the Abbey Theatre’s opening night production of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. Holloway sat in on an early rehearsal of the revival and noted his admiration for the young actress:

Miss Mary Walker, the ‘Cathleen’ of the coming revival of Yeats’s popular play, just arrived in the nick of time to take up her part, and hastily taking off her hat drifted onto the stage as the strange old woman. . . . The sudden transformation from everyday manner into the weird, chanting personality of ‘Cathleen’ was surprising. How Miss Walker as suddenly forgot herself and became the mimic role in a flash, to me, was almost incomprehensible. This young actress possesses just the temperament necessary to thoroughly realize such a part, and a big success is in store for her.²⁹

Nic Shiubhlaigh’s reviews for that performance left little doubt that she was the theatre’s leading tragedienne. *The Freeman’s Journal* remarked that “Last night’s performance was made memorable by Miss Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh’s acting of the title role. It was a rendering of intense sympathy that made the cheers of the audience seem

²⁷ Unidentified magazine article, “‘The Little Countess – Irish Plays,’” 2 May 1903, *Newspaper Cuttings IV*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

²⁸ Joseph Holloway to W.G. Fay, 9 October 1903, *Newspaper Cuttings IV*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library, of Ireland.

²⁹ Joseph Holloway, *A Selection from His Unpublished Journal: Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, Robert Hogan and Michael J. O’Neill, eds. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 46.

irrelevant and feeble as a response.”³⁰ *The United Irishman* reported that in the character of “the Poor Old Woman, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh touched splendid heights of feeling, her beautiful voice and excellent technique, [sic] making the symbolical character not only convincing but enthralling.”³¹ And *The Daily News* dubbed her rendering of Kathleen “one of strange beauty, demanding qualities of voice and gesture rarely combined. Her playing of the difficult part, almost unearthly in its pathos, threw into strange relief the figures of the simple peasants among whom she moved.”³² Finally, Joseph Holloway’s record of the performance affirms that it was

exquisitely enacted, and all present were thrilled by the weird beauty and intense pathos of Miss Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh’s embodiment of ‘Cathleen.’ Anything more strangely pathetic than her chanting as she leaves the cottage I have never heard. Her words sunk into one’s very soul! A painful joy enveloped my senses and left me in an exstasy of misery that was good to feel. Of all the ‘Cathleens’ I have seen, this was the truest embodiment. The sorrows of the centuries were on her brow and in her eye, and her words pierced the heart with grief at her woe!³³

After such accolades, which continued into her 1905 performances, Nic Shiubhlaigh was established as the Abbey Theatre’s leading lady. Even though the company still operated as an ensemble, and Nic Shiubhlaigh was cast in small roles as often as she was in leading roles, she was estimated to be among the top three actors in

³⁰ *The Freeman’s Journal*, quoted in Hogan & Kilroy, *Laying the Foundations*, 129.

³¹ *United Irishman*, [January 1905], *Newspaper Cuttings II*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

³² *The Daily News*, 4 January 1905, *Newspaper Cuttings II*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

³³ Holloway, 50-1.

the theatre.³⁴ She might have made her career at the Abbey had not an unforeseen development precipitated her departure from the theatre in December 1905. The development was Miss Horniman's scheme to subsidize the Abbey and in the end, Nic Shiubhlaigh, her brother Frank, and all but four of the other company players left the Abbey in December 1905.

Nic Shiubhlaigh's departure was, in fact, problematic, despite the strong stand she claims to have made. Correspondence between Nic Shiubhlaigh, Yeats, and Lady Gregory reveals that the actress actually did sign a contract to work under the subsidy scheme after negotiations regarding her brother's salary; but a misunderstanding between Nic Shiubhlaigh and Yeats in December 1905 severed the actress's relations with the theatre for several years. Nic Shiubhlaigh was offered the same salary as Sarah Allgood, but with the stipulation that she became wardrobe mistress for the theatre. The injustice of equal pay for additional work, when Nic Shiubhlaigh was admittedly the theatre's leading lady, was not, however, the actress's main conflict. Her correspondence reveals that the indelicate nature of the position of wardrobe mistress for both women's and men's costumes was the final straw, and in December 1905 she and all but four of the other original INTS actors resigned from the Abbey Company (fig. 37).

It was a momentous decision for Nic Shiubhlaigh's acting career. "Looking back now," she wrote in 1955, "I can see nothing wrong about our decision. It was not made hurriedly, without careful consideration. Although for most of us who took the course of secession, the action meant the finish of any progress we might have been making individually towards international distinction as Irish players--in my own case it virtually

³⁴ Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge, 1905-1909* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1978), 39.



Figure 37. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh
at about the time she left the
Abbey.

meant the end of a career on the stage which might or might not have taken me away from Dublin altogether in the years that followed—I doubt if many of us had any regrets at the time.”³⁵

Nic Shiubhlaigh did, however, express regrets later. She joined the other defectors in creating the rival Theatre of Ireland Company, which produced Irish plays in both English and Gaelic for the next six years. She returned to the Abbey in 1910 to head the theatre’s second company, in preparation for the Abbey’s 1911 American tour. The second company, under the direction of Nugent Monck, would “be something in the nature of a school of acting, [and] would keep the theatre open while the original company was on tour.”³⁶ Nic Shiubhlaigh accepted the offer with the understanding that she would be playing the leading roles in the second company; a turn of events, however, prohibited this return to her old status. “Any hopes I had of playing leads with the Abbey in Dublin were dashed in September of this year [1911]. . . . Maire O’Neill, who shared the position of leading lady with Sara Allgood, became ill, and since there was no one else to fill the vacancy created, I was chosen to take her place on tour in America.”³⁷ After the tour, Nic Shiubhlaigh’s contract was not renewed, by mutual agreement, and, she confessed, “apart from a few engagements I fulfilled in Dublin in later years, I never acted professionally again.” In a letter to Joseph Holloway in June 1932, she wrote,

I do hope I will get a run there for I needn’t tell you my heart is in the Abbey Theatre always. Now that Lady Gregory is gone I might have a chance although I heard from her often and about 2 months before her death I had a card from her . . . so I was very fond of her and I think she was very fond of me at times although she never forgot I left

³⁵ Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 72-3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

the Abbey Theatre and I never forgot it either for I know I made a very great mistake it upset my whole life.³⁸

One result of the defection of Nic Shiubhlaigh and the other actors was an infusion of new talent into the Abbey. With only the Fays, Sara and Molly Allgood, the Power brothers, Udolphous Wright, and Arthur Sinclair remaining in the company, the theatre was forced to recruit new talent actively, which it did without delay. The mass exodus took place in mid-December, but by mid-January William Boyles' comedy, *The Eloquent Dempsey*, was in rehearsal and opened to good reviews in late January.

A second, and perhaps more important, result of Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh's departure was the elevation of Maire O'Neill from bit player to leading roles and of Sarah Allgood from the company's foremost comic actress to its leading tragedienne. Although Nic Shiubhlaigh's contribution to the Abbey as leading actress was significant, both as a skilful practitioner of the Abbey's acting style and as a draw for audiences, her secession from the company may well have been her greatest contribution. In her absence Maire O'Neill was enabled to catch the eye of J. M. Synge, both as actress and amour, while Sara Allgood became the Abbey's star and the most beloved actress in Dublin.

Sarah Allgood (born October 31, 1883) and Mary Allgood (born January 12, 1887), were the second and third daughters of George and Margaret Allgood. That their father was a printing compositor situated the family at the upper edge of the working class.³⁹ When their father died in August 1896, Sara Allgood's formal education, at the Marlboro Street National School, ended. At not quite thirteen years of age, she was apprenticed to Messrs. Walsh and Sons, an antique shop that upholstered furniture for the

³⁸ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh Price to Joseph Holloway, 30 June 1932, Holloway Papers, National Library of Ireland.

³⁹ Elizabeth Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin: Five Women of the Irish Renaissance* (Gerrard's Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1965), 170.

upper classes of Dublin.⁴⁰ Mary Allgood, at age nine, was sent to a Protestant orphanage. Her personality asserted itself quickly, and she ran away from the institution, back to her mother's home. She was next apprenticed to a dressmaker, then to a shopkeeper, but none of these occupations suited her. She worked at Walsh's with her sister for some time, but she left that establishment when hired by the art department at Switzer's Department Store to make lampshades.⁴¹ Sara Allgood characterized her sister as a person who

Could turn her hand to anything without the slightest trouble. She had a flair for cooking, could fix a hat, do a dress over and make it look wonderful, was . . . amazingly quick with her tongue, always ready with the witty answer, full of fun and laughter. She carried no personal worries, and didn't understand them in others.⁴²

Mary Allgood (fig. 38) left Switzer's after several months and resolved to go on the stage, like her sister Sara. To this end she changed her name, so as not to be confused with the elder Allgood, taking the surname O'Neill from an aunt and translating her given name into the Irish Maire. Her chance came in 1905 when Nic Shiubhlaigh's faction left the Abbey. She was first given walk-on parts, graduating to speaking roles in 1906. Her initial salary as a member of the company was 10 shillings a week.⁴³

With Nic Shiubhlaigh's departure, O'Neill inherited two choice roles: Cathleen in Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and the female lead in his *Shadow of the Glen*. Synge had already noticed her and had intervened on her behalf, giving her the role of Nora in

⁴⁰ Allgood, 6.

⁴¹ Ibid., 17-18.

⁴² Ibid..

⁴³ Ibid., 18.



Figure 38. Maire O'Neill (Mary Allgood) painted for the opening of the Abbey Theatre in 1904.

Shadow of the Glen. He wrote to Lady Gregory on March 10, “I have just performed the delicate operation of getting Sara Allgood out of Nora Burke’s part—where she was impossible—and getting Molly Allgood in. Molly A’s voice is too young for the part but she feels it, and has some expression.”⁴⁴

Synge continued his notice of O’Neill, and by the summer they were engaged. This development was disapproved by many of their friends because of the differences in both their ages and social stations. Synge was thirty-five, genteel, Protestant, and college educated; O’Neill was nineteen, working-class, uneducated, and a Roman Catholic. It is difficult to understand what common ground they shared, other than the theatre, and it has been suggested that on O’Neill’s part the attachment grew out of her need for a champion in the theatre.⁴⁵ That he was more attached to her than she to him is strongly suggested by his letters to her (her letters to Synge unfortunately did not survive), which point to endless quarrelling over his attempts to improve her mind and manners. Though her heart may not have been devoted to the relationship, she remained loyal to Synge throughout the three years they were together.

In October 1906, O’Neill was given the part of Mary Cushin in the first production of Lady Gregory’s tragedy *The Gaol Gate*. Her portrayal of the grieving wife led Joseph Holloway to comment that “Miss Maire O’Neill as ‘Mary Cushin’ the wife entered the spirit of the terrible situation, and made the intense grief of the [woman] appear almost real to us.”⁴⁶ The newspaper critics were also impressed with her

⁴⁴ J. M. Synge to Lady Augusta Gregory, 10 March 1906, in John M. Synge, *Some Letters of John M. Synge to Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Dublin: Cuala, 1971), 25.

⁴⁵ Coxhead, *Daughters*, 178-9.

⁴⁶ Holloway, 73.

performance, especially citing her singing of the “caoine”: “A wailing lament for the principal character in the piece . . . is sung with great pathos by Miss Maire O’Neill, who, as well as Miss Sara Allgood, was always equal to the emotional demands of the play.”⁴⁷

In 1907, Synge and O’Neill were to have their greatest triumph in *The Playboy of the Western World*. The play, although howled down in the theatre during its run at the Abbey in January, proved a great success when presented in London in June. Hailed as a masterpiece, this play more than any other established Synge’s reputation as a great playwright, and it secured O’Neill’s reputation as an accomplished actress. Even though chaos reigned during the week that *The Playboy* was given at the Abbey, *The Daily Express* saw enough of it to comment, “The part of Margaret Flaherty is quite a good one, and Miss Mary O’Neill (fig. 39) displayed her undoubted power in impersonating the publican’s good-looking daughter.”⁴⁸ Lennox Robinson, who saw her play the role many times wrote, “In her Pegeen Mike . . . she ran through the whole scale of emotions, she was practical, harsh, playful, loving – everything a young girl can be, right up to her last heartbroken cry.”⁴⁹

That Synge modeled Pegeen Mike on Maire O’Neill has often been suggested, and the two women shared many characteristics. They were both young and comely, with a streak of wildness that suggested a rebellion against societal norms; both had impetuous natures, by turns tender and tough, but with an underlying malice that was not altogether unthinking. They each had a personality that appealed to the type of man who longed to control them, not physically but mentally, through expanding and enriching

⁴⁷ *The Mail*, 22 October 1906, *Newspaper Cuttings III*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁴⁸ *The Daily Express*, quoted in Hogan, *Years of Synge*, 124.

⁴⁹ Lennox Robinson, “Pictures in a Theatre: A Conversation Piece,” in Michael O hAodha, *Pictures at the Abbey* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1983), 38.



Figure 39. Maire O'Neill as Pegeen Mike in the first production of *The Playboy of the Western World*.

longed to control them, not physically but mentally, through expanding and enriching their lives. Synge had already formed the idea for the play and the character before he met O'Neill, but as he wrote the part, he may have overlaid the characteristics of his real love onto his fictional heroine.

Meanwhile, after the ruckus of *The Playboy* had died down, the Abbey cast O'Neill in the title role in *Fand*, in which she received generally good reviews. *The Freeman's Journal* noted that O'Neill "made a charmingly poetical figure, and sang with great delicacy of feeling the delightful lyric 'Beautiful Eyes, Awake.'"⁵⁰ And *The Irish Times* praised her, stating, "Miss Maire O'Neill deserves much credit for her work in the name part. Her acting was really full of spirit, and the songs allotted to her were sung with highly commendable taste."⁵¹ Synge wrote her a little note: [I] "congratulate you about *Fand* though I wish it was a better play and more 'actable' verse. Still it shows you are rising in the estimation of everyone."⁵² *Sinn Fein*, however, took a completely opposite view, declaring that O'Neill was "the most unsuitable member in the company to play the part."⁵³

The following autumn O'Neill's reviews became increasingly complimentary. As her skill grew, so did her reputation, until she had no rival save for her sister. In the October production of *The Country Dressmaker* she was cast in two roles and secured praise for each. "Miss Maire O'Neill's impersonation of Marryanne, [sic] Clohesy's wife, was instinct with realism, being vividly wheedling and vituperative as occasion

⁵⁰ *The Freeman's Journal*, 22 April 1907, *Newspaper Cuttings III*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁵¹ *The Irish Times*, 27 April 1907, *Newspaper Cuttings III*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁵² J.M. Synge to Maire O'Neill, 19 March [1907], in John M. Synge, *Letters to Molly: John Millington Synge to Maire O'Neill 1906-1909*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971), 113.

⁵³ *Sinn Fein*, 27 April 1907, *Newspaper Cuttings III*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

demanded.”⁵⁴ “That clever artiste, Miss O’Neill, as Min, the gossiping daughter of Mat Dillane, deserves the greatest praise. She also gave a fine performance as Maryanna Clohesy.”⁵⁵

The departure of the Fays in 1908 affected O’Neill little. When Allgood was lent to the Gaiety Theatre in April, O’Neill was given the part of old Mrs. Donohoe in Gregory’s *The Workhouse Ward*. Her genius for transforming herself from a young girl to an old crone was recorded by Lennox Robinson:

I have seen her standing in the wings waiting for her cue, cigarette in her mouth, a girl, whispering gaily, raddled and dressed as an old woman but still a girl; then the cue came, the cigarette was crushed out and in an instant every muscle in her body seemed to alter, her face shaped itself exactly to those lines which had looked so absurd, the young voice cracked and she hobbled on to the stage an old Cork country woman.⁵⁶

O’Neill’s role of leading tragedienne would move into real life in 1909 when Synge was diagnosed with inoperable cancer (Hodgkin’s Disease). She spent most of her free time that winter with the playwright, who was trying to finish his version of the Deirdre legend. She would go to his house and read aloud to him what he had written, creating a legend that she “acted Deirdre for him as he lay dying.”⁵⁷ Her efforts spurred him on, encouraged him to write until he was too weak and had to be admitted to the Elpis nursing home, where he died on March 24, 1909. O’Neill was both devastated and relieved: she had been very fond of Synge, and he had done more for her career than

⁵⁴ *The Freeman’s Journal*, 4 October 1907, *Newspaper Cuttings III*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁵⁵ *The Evening Telegraph*, 4 October 1907, *Newspaper Cuttings III*, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁵⁶ Robinson, “Pictures,” 38.

⁵⁷ Coxhead, *Daughters*, 193.

anyone else, but she was relieved also to be released from an engagement that had been difficult and, ultimately, unsuitable. She had inspired his work, and he had immortalized her in both *Playboy* and *Deirdre*. It was an even exchange for which she was grateful.

But her efforts on Synge's behalf were not over. The script of *Deirdre* had not been finished before Synge went into the hospital, and so Yeats, Gregory and O'Neill spent the next nine months collaborating on its final form. Finally, on January 13, 1910, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* opened at the Abbey. Maire O'Neill directed the production and also starred in the title role. The play received mixed reviews, mainly because although most critics thought it not a very good play, they nonetheless wanted to honor the dead playwright. "Deirdre of the Sorrows moves haltingly upon the borderland between intention and achievement, in a dramatic half-world of blurred outlines. It was clearly meant to be a great tragedy, but it was not a great tragedy."⁵⁸ And Joseph Holloway wrote, "As a stage play, I fear Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows is of little worth. Up to a certain point, the last act is dramatic, but there it is allowed to fizzle out drearily in ineffective anti-climaxes."⁵⁹

Of O'Neill's acting, also, the critics were mixed. "Maire O'Neill was a distinct success as 'Deirdre. . . Her acting was always sincere and restrained, and lent interest to the play where it would otherwise have proved excessively dreary."⁶⁰ "Miss Maire O'Neill's Deirdre was singularly beautiful, distinguished, and tragic."⁶¹ "There is the making of a fine actress in Miss O'Neill, since she has the qualities peculiar to the Irish race – emotion, sweetness, depth of feeling. On the other hand, she has not been taught

⁵⁸ *The New Age*, quoted in Hogan, Burnham and Poteet, eds., *Realists*, 20.

⁵⁹ Holloway, 133-4.

⁶⁰ Holloway, 134.

⁶¹ William Archer, quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Realists*, 22.

to realise [sic] the fullness of her power: thus the figure of Deirdre, which, despite its attractiveness is fraught with vigour[sic], becomes shadow-like instead of dominant.”⁶²

Her stage direction, however, received sharp criticism. “In the production . . . of . . . Deirdre of the Sorrows, there occurred lapses of stage direction which moved the most seriously inclined audience in the world to a faint titter. And on the whole one felt that the task overwhelmed the efforts.”⁶³ Most damning was the English critic, William Archer:

I was placed [at the opening of *Deirdre*] where I could barely hear one word in three of the dialogue. . . . It was not merely the difficulty of hearing that had spread a veil between me and the poet’s work; it was the total lack of light and shade in the performance. . . . The general wooliness of touch and sameness of cadence left all outlines indistinct. It was impossible to see the characters clearly, or to realize in any detail the process of emotion.⁶⁴

Although O’Neill had not directed before, Yeats and Gregory may have believed that her close association with Synge gave O’Neill insights into the play that neither of them possessed, making her the best candidate to direct the piece. She probably accepted the post of director for *Deirdre of the Sorrows* because she had been so closely connected with Synge as he created it and in homage to the man who had given her so much affection and assistance. After *Deirdre* closed, O’Neill resumed her acting duties full-time, for she was first and foremost a skillful actress and it was there that she poured her concentration. *Deirdre* was O’Neill’s only foray into direction, and she perhaps did a credible job, given the difficult and imperfect script and her other responsibilities to the production.

⁶² *The Sunday Times*, quoted in Hogan, *Realists*, 21.

⁶³ *The Sunday Times*, quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Realists*, 20-1.

⁶⁴ William Archer, quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Realists*, 22.

O'Neill's acting abilities continued to improve, and, by the end of 1909, she received equal billing with Allgood. In 1910, she was loaned to the Manchester Gaiety for a tour of England, vowing, according to Lennox Robinson, to return to the Abbey with three engagement rings, which feat she actually accomplished.⁶⁵ The only one she accepted was from G. H. Mair, theatre critic for the *Manchester Guardian*, and they were married in June 1911. Their marriage was apparently based on love, and they had two children, Pegeen and John. But only six months after Mair's untimely death in 1926 at age thirty-eight, O'Neill married fellow actor Arthur Sinclair. She continued to move between the Abbey and the London theatres until her death on November 2, 1952.

The final actress to have a serious impact on the Abbey Theatre during this period was its greatest luminary, Sara Allgood (fig. 40). Allgood's gift for both comic and dramatic acting surprised everyone, although it was ultimately her hard work that perfected her craft and enabled her to utilize the Fays' acting methods to showcase her talents.

Even when Allgood's education was cut short and she was apprenticed to the upholsterers in 1896, her ambitions remained strong: "All my young life my sole ambition was to be a singer. . . . At home we were always trotted out to sing our little songs when the family had company."⁶⁶ Allgood also performed for family gatherings.

My first memory is of living in a large, old-fashioned house where I put on plays, in which I always took the principal part, in the back hall with the other small children. I remember there was a railed opening high up in the hall, and at some time or other, I would see to it that I was behind that

⁶⁵ Robinson, "Pictures," 39.

⁶⁶ Allgood, 14.



Figure 40. Sara Allgood, circa 1907.

railing singing a song, or chorus, to the other small actors on the floor below.⁶⁷

Her acting began in earnest when she joined *Inghinidhe na hEireann*, sometime around 1902, and was noticed by Willie Fay during the dramatic classes. She joined the INTS and first appeared with them in the 1903 production of Lady Gregory's *Twenty-five* in a walk-on part. Her early reviews, although not flattering, showed her promise. Of her performance as Brigid in *Broken Soil* (in December 1903) *The Sporting Record* reported, "Miss Sara Allgood, as his [Brian MacConnell's] sister, Brigid, indulged in a somewhat inaudible, monotonous, chant-like style of delivery, too persistently, for my taste; though her acting otherwise was often effective."⁶⁸ In a January 1904 revival of Gregory's *Twenty-five*, however, Allgood is mentioned in a better light: "Miss Sara Allgood, Miss Honor Lavelle [and others] . . . contributed materially to what must be regarded as a very pleasing performance."⁶⁹ Good reviews also followed the February production of *Riders to the Sea*. One commented that Allgood "was excellent in the part [of Cathleen]."⁷⁰ Another praised the simplicity and sincerity of her acting, stating that it "resembled nature so closely that it ceased to be acting to those who looked on."⁷¹

Such progress during this short period of time suggests that Allgood was studying her craft diligently. She related,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁸ *The Sporting Record*, 8 December 1903, Newspaper Cuttings IV, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁶⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 15 January 1904, Newspaper Cuttings IV, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁷⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 27 February 1904, Newspaper Cuttings IV, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁷¹ *The Sporting Record*, 1 March 1904, Newspaper Cuttings IV, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

When he [Frank Fay] took notice of me and asked me to study elocution and learn everything connected with the stage I was delighted. I used to go up to the hall in Camden Street every Saturday . . . and with him I would work on my breathing; my Ah's and Oh's [sic]; my poetry reading; deportment; principles of voice production; the secret of articulation; how to pitch the voice. Then he would make me walk across and up stage, with books balanced on my head for poise; how to make an entrance; how to sit, and so on. He would get so intent on his teaching that time would be completely forgotten I [sic] would work all afternoon, for about five hours, without a stop.⁷²

Lennox Robinson also recalled, "How often have I known her to get to the theatre an hour before rehearsal and, standing alone on the stage, practise [sic] her vocal exercises to a theatre empty save for the chars [charwomen]. Consequently, eventually, she had perfect control of her voice which I admit must have begun as something wonderful, but it was her own hard work which made it unique."⁷³ This work ethic persisted throughout Allgood's career, and her dedication to her craft, as well as her unique talent, made her the most respected and beloved actor at the Abbey.

Allgood's first shining moment occurred during the Abbey Theatre's opening night production of *Spreading the News* (fig. 41). The part of Mrs. Fallon was only a supporting role, but Allgood's flair for comedy asserted itself, and she received excellent reviews. *The United Irishman* insisted that the "chief credit of the success of the piece is . . . due to Miss Sara Allgood. She is exceedingly clever, and lives through

⁷² Allgood, 18-19. Elizabeth Coxhead contends that Allgood's speaking voice was originally plagued with an "ugly Dublin accent," and that Frank Fay's talents as an elocutionist were sorely needed to remedy it. (Coxhead, *Daughters*, 172.)

⁷³ Robinson, "Pictures," 34.



Figure 41. Sara Allgood (left), Bridget O'Dempsey (center), and Maire O'Neill (right), in a scene from *Spreading the News*.

every minute of her part.”⁷⁴ Another review claimed, “her acting of an indignant countrywoman [Mrs. Fallon] was excellent. She has a great fund of spontaneous humour.”⁷⁵ Joseph Holloway was also enthusiastic in his praise: “Miss Allgood was admirably real. Her ‘giving-out-the-ay’ on hearing of the news the neighbors were spreading about her ‘dacent quiet little man’ was very convincingly conveyed, and as the dialogue was capitally true to life the effect was most amusing. Miss Allgood is an actress to her fingertips, and as ‘Mrs. Fallon’ she reached a higher artistic level than heretofore even.”⁷⁶

Throughout 1905, Allgood continued to perfect her acting, with most of her successes coming in comedic roles. After the secession of Nic Shiubhlaigh and the others, however, she was immediately elevated to such major dramatic roles as Kathleen ni Houlihan and Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*, which revealed her capacity as a tragedienne. In an autobiographical sketch for the *Irish Agriculturalist* in 1909, Allgood confessed, “I had wanted it [the part of Kathleen ni Houlihan] for years.”⁷⁷ She also described previous interpretations of the part:

There had been many Kathleens; everyone had played it in their own way. Miss Maud Gonne’s performance (the original Kathleen) I cannot clearly remember, as I was very young at the time. One of the other players who had taken the part before me had, [I] thought, been most struck with the supernatural element in the character. She gave us Kathleen as Ireland, immortal, spiritual, divine, if you will, but Ireland in sorrow, struggling without hope.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ *The United Irishman*, 31 December [1904], Scrapbook I, Annie Horniman Collection, John Ryland Library, University of Manchester.

⁷⁵ *The Manchester Guardian*, [2 January 1905?], Scrapbook I, Annie Horniman Collection, John Ryland Library, University of Manchester.

⁷⁶ Holloway, 51.

⁷⁷ *Irish Agriculturalist*, 20 March 1909, *Newspaper Cuttings IV*, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁷⁸ *Irish Agriculturalist*, 20 March 1909, *Newspaper Cuttings IV*, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland. Sara Allgood’s statement about “not remembering” the 1902 production raises some questions.

Allgood's conception of the part, however, was quite different:

I did not wish to make my audience feel [that] 'Kathleen' called that young man to a [meaningless] sacrifice. When I stand at the door chanting . . . I call into my thoughts all those [who] have died for Ireland. I say to myself [their] deaths were victory. Ireland, too will [be] victorious. I fill myself with joy. 'Dergorvilla,' that is the sorrow of Ireland, 'Kathleen' looks to the future.⁷⁹

Allgood's interpretation of the part, and her skill in acting it, were roundly praised by the critics. One newspaper commented specifically on Allgood's change from comedy to drama:

There is only one character in this piece, and that character was splendidly impersonated by Miss Allgood. [sic] In the Eloquent Dempsey she had a comedy part, and it was so well filled that one would have said that comedy was distinctively fitted her talents. But in the highly dramatic and difficult part of Kathleen Ni Houlihan, she showed abilities of a very different and far higher character. She has a most sympathetic voice and gave the peculiar weird, musical lines at the end of the piece with thrilling effect.⁸⁰

Her acting skills were further stretched in the part of old Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*, a role she worked hard to learn. During rehearsals, Frank Fay wrote to Lady

Although Allgood says she was "very young" at the time of Gonne's performance, she was actually eighteen years old in April 1902; she was only twenty-five at the time of this interview seven years later. Considering how vividly this performance was remembered by everyone who saw it, perhaps Allgood was not present at any of the three performances.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ *Dundalk Democrat*, 24 March [1906], Scrapbook II, Annie Horniman Collection, John Ryland Library, University of Manchester.

⁸⁰ Frank Fay to Lady Augusta Gregory, January 1906, quoted in Coxhead, *Daughters*, 176.

⁸¹ Sara Allgood, Handwritten manuscript at end of "Memories" TMs, n.d., n.p.

Gregory, “ I am too continually teaching Miss Allgood to know if she is good; but Wright watched last Friday night’s rehearsal and says she grips in the part.”⁸¹ Allgood herself recalled the experience of learning the part:

I was promoted to the part of Maurya, a part I studied for three months with Frank Fay. This part of the old Mother was so strenuous, that every time played it, [sic] I get a dry retching. We were doing a 3 day visit to Cambridge. . . . Frank Fay heard of a professor in Cambridge during this visit. Fay heard this man was a hypnotist so he told him about my difficulty, the professor generously asked me and some others to tea [and] he hypnotized me, and I wasn’t upset by the part of Maurya anymore.⁸²

The result of all this painstaking work was great praise when the play was finally presented in spring 1906:

The tragic effect of all this, as played by Miss Sara Allgood, is wonderful. Miss Allgood so thoroughly shows us the process of the heart-broken old woman losing her burden of trouble, because the last trouble has come and for the future she is exempt. The subtlety of the dramatist’s conception is obvious, and Miss Allgood adds to it by the many startling and admirable points of her interpretation. Such an exhibition [sic] of powerful acting is rarely seen in these days.⁸³

When the plays were taken on tour the following summer, Fay wrote again to Lady Gregory, praising Allgood’s talent: “Miss Allgood is doing wonderful work. She is the only one in the crowd who is able to hold the stage against my brother or myself . .

⁸³ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 27 April [1906], Scrapbook II, Annie Horniman Collection, John Ryland Library, University of Manchester.

. she grips every audience in Kathleen and Mrs. Fallon.”⁸⁴ Even Annie Horniman begrudged a backhanded compliment to Allgood regarding her performance on tour: “Sarah [sic] Allgood’s overplaying has another cause besides big theatres – it comes from the terrible drag on her when the rest did not condescend to act at all & she had to make a great effort to keep things going.”⁸⁵ Summer 1906, however, brought a management decision that would threaten Allgood’s position as lead actress.

In July 1906, the Directorate, along with Willie Fay, met at Coole Park to discuss options for the Abbey. One decision they made, prompted by Yeats and backed by Horniman, was to hire an English actress, Florence Darragh, to play the leading roles in Yeats’s verse plays.⁸⁶ Yeats was concerned that Irish actresses, with their Roman Catholic upbringing, could never truly portray sensual passion on stage. The plan was, therefore, to bring in Darragh who was Irish born, but English trained, to provide a less inhibited performance.⁸⁷ When informed by Willie Fay of this decision, while she was still on tour in Scotland, Allgood was upset. Frank Fay wrote to Yeats on her behalf:

Miss Allgood has never asserted herself; she has too much modesty and ability to do so. She has played several parts where she has had to tread in the footsteps of others, better than those who originally played them, incomparably better. Kathleen, Mrs. Grogan, Maurya. You must pardon me if I ask you to wait till I see Miss Darragh act before I know whether she deserves the words you use.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Frank Fay to Lady Gregory quoted in Coxhead, *Daughters*, 176.

⁸⁵ A. E. F. Horniman to W. B. Yeats, 17 July 1906, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁸⁶ Mary Lou Kohfeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 188. Darragh’s real name was Letitia Marion Dallas.

⁸⁷ Coxhead, *Daughters*, 181. Regarding Yeats’s concern about the portrayal of sensual passion, Coxhead made the apt comment that “what sensual passion there was to be conveyed in the plays he had written up to that period, I do not know.”

⁸⁸ Frank Fay to W. B. Yeats, July 20, 1906, Yeats Collection, National Library of Ireland.

Fay insisted that Allgood, despite her accomplishments as an actress, was being judged on her appearance rather than on her merits.

Miss Allgood has been put aside because she had, we shall say, not this quality or that quality; she was not judged as an actress. Now an utter stranger is to be put into a part without your having any guarantee beyond having seen her in one part. . . . You judge her as an actress; Miss Allgood was judged as a woman.⁸⁹

Fay also made a point about Allgood's training and, in the end, reminded Yeats of Allgood's loyalty.

I am in no way upset over the matter except as regards Miss Allgood's position; I have trained her; she has been the one success I have had. She has earned the position of leading actress here by ability and hard work; and I don't see why, so long as the place is what it is, she should be deprived of it. She has stood to you when others who owed you much left you with their heads in the air. If she gets an offer from a manager, you will have only yourself to blame if she takes it and you must not expect me to train people if this plan is to be followed.⁹⁰

Fay's feelings on the matter were so strong that he also wrote to Lady Gregory protesting Allgood's treatment.

I have just had a talk with Miss Allgood. It seems to me that my brother rushed the Dectora business on her & that she replied without having given thought to the matter. I see she is very much depressed at the way she has been treated. It seems to one that Mr. Yeats ought to have written to her & not taken anyone's word on such a matter. Miss Darragh will be like a fish out of water & will make herself or the company look foolish. If we lose

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Miss Allgood, Mr. Yeats will have no one but himself to blame.⁹¹

Fay told her that “I would rather he [Yeats] had taken a part from me than from Miss Allgood, whose support is so vital to us; who has been so loyal; & whom I don’t want to see made appear small before our audience & the ‘intellectual’ ladies who, as far as they could snubbed her when they were in the company.” He also reiterated his anger at her treatment: “she has worked so hard for me & has given back fourfold every bit of teaching I gave her;” and his fear that “Mr. Yeats should be careful lest he drive a very valuable talent away from us.”⁹²

In the end, Darragh was engaged that fall, though not without provoking confusion on the part of Willie Fay whose instructions from the Directorate changed weekly. In frustration, he finally wrote to Yeats, “You asked me in Longford to get Miss Allgood to let Miss Daragh [sic] have Dectora. Act 2. Lady Gregory wrote me in Ennisworthy that you wished Miss Allgood to have her choice of Deirdre or Dectora. Act III. You write this morning & say, Miss Daragh must have Dectora. Now what am I to make of it.”⁹³ Willie Fay also let Yeats know his feelings on the matter, and his opinion of the two actresses in question. “I don’t care a red cent which of them plays either part. . . . I don’t see any means of comparing Miss Daragh with Miss Allgood but they are certainly not equal in experience.”⁹⁴ His private estimation was that “it was like putting a Rolls Royce to run with a herd of wild ponies.”⁹⁵

⁹¹ Frank Fay to Lady Augusta Gregory, 23 July 1906, Yeats Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Willie Fay to W. B. Yeats, n. d., Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Coxhead, *Daughters*, 181.

Darragh's performances were given a mixed reception by the press. Most critics admitted her skill as an actress. "Miss Darragh a distinguished Irish actress, who was specially engaged for the purpose, filled the role with consummate skill."⁹⁶ "Miss Darragh . . . was specially engaged to sustain the title-role [Deirdre], and her impersonation of the heroine was a display of high histrionic powers."⁹⁷ "Miss Darragh is a stately figure, who speaks fine verse with fitting exaltation of style, and her Dectora was an impressive creature."⁹⁸ Other critics were not pleased with Darragh's performances. "An actress, unaccustomed to the methods of the Abbey Theatre, ranted her verse, and was full of mannerism, and not all the brilliant efforts of Mr. Frank Fay and Miss Allgood could retrieve the performance."⁹⁹ Comparisons with Allgood were also forthcoming. "Candidly we did not think very much of Miss Darragh. Perhaps she having been boomed too much, we expected too much. We certainly think that Miss Allgood would have put more life into the part of 'Deirdre.'"¹⁰⁰ Even Joseph Holloway, who at first thought Darragh's performance was "consistent and beautiful, with an undercurrent of intense subdued emotionalism underlying her outwardly seeming calm. Her acting was always skilful, artistic, and dramatically effective," changed his mind after viewing a second performance.¹⁰¹ His revised opinion spoke directly to Yeats's concern about sensual passion for he admitted that "I thought it [*Deirdre*] tame and

⁹⁶ *Irish Independent*, 26 November 1906, Newspaper Cuttings III, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁹⁷ *Freeman's Journal*, 26 November 1906, Newspaper Cuttings III, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁹⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 10 December 1906, Newspaper Cuttings IV, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

⁹⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 26 November 1906, Newspaper Cuttings III, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

¹⁰⁰ *The Leader*, December 1906, Newspaper Cuttings III, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

¹⁰¹ Holloway, 75.

lifeless Sensuality is over the entire play, and nightly-decreasing audiences testify to the lack of interest taken in such-like work. Miss Darragh's 'Deirdre' does not improve on acquaintance; it lacks sincerity and charm."¹⁰² In early 1907, Darragh returned to London and soon joined Annie Horniman's company at the Manchester Gaiety. Sara Allgood was restored as the Abbey's leading lady, a position she did not relinquish until 1915.

By mid-1907, the Abbey recognized Allgood as a draw for audiences and even though the theatre promoted itself as an ensemble acting company, Allgood began to appear in its advertisements. A cardboard announcement for the opening of the Abbey's autumn season in 1907 prominently displayed a circular picture of Allgood on the inside cover. In November 1908, advertisements for a tour to the Theatre Royal in Belfast proclaimed "First Visit to Belfast of the World famous ABBEY COMPANY including the Great Irish Actress SARA ALLGOOD from the Abbey Theatre, Dublin." Allgood would continue to be part of the Abbey's publicity campaigns throughout the 1920s, for any time her name appeared on the billboards, audiences flocked to the theatre.

From early 1907 until mid-1908 was an especially busy time for Allgood and the theatre, because of two momentous occurrences. The first was the opening of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* in January 1907 and the rioting that ensued for the week of its performances. In it she played the Widow Quinn, a role about which she said, "The widow [sic] was scarcely a part to my liking but an actress cannot always choose . . . her part, but must loyally do her best [with] the character allotted to her."¹⁰³ Allgood's part in the fracas was relatively minor and her opinion of the rioters was simple: "I am

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ *Irish Agriculturist*, 20 March 1909, Scrapbook 4, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

afraid my reactions were that the audience were stupid. I felt that if they did not like the play, they should have left the theatre in silence. What a blow that would have been to our vanity!”¹⁰⁴ She also related an incident that occurred during the run of the show that shows both her spirit and her estimation of her own powers as an actress:

On Saturday – the evening of the last performance just before the public were admitted, I [found?] the theatre crowded with police. They were ranged all around the walls and up . . . center of the pit benches. Acting [on] an impulse I rushed on the stage, and passionately informed them that unless they [left] the theatre I would not play that night. . . . [Startled?] by the vehemence of my attack they [looked] uneasily at each other, but of course [they] could only follow their instructions. I did not carry out the threat.¹⁰⁵

The next major event in the Abbey’s history was the departure of the Fay brothers in January 1908. Allgood took a more intimate role in this development than in the Playboy incident. Trouble had been brewing for some time between the Directorate and Willie Fay as stage manager. Horniman had lodged complaints against him as early as 1906 regarding his mismanagement of the 1906 tour, but attempts to replace him as stage manager had come to nothing. The conflict was brought to a head in late 1907, when the company was again on tour. Fay complained constantly that the actors were late for rehearsals and were generally insubordinate to his authority, citing Maire O’Neill (Allgood’s sister) as a primary culprit. When Allgood fell ill and was unable to perform for several nights, Fay took advantage of the situation. Allgood recorded the incident in her memoir:

¹⁰⁴ Allgood, 43.

¹⁰⁵ *Irish Agriculturist*, 20 March 1909, Scrapbook 4, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

The last months of 1907 we were touring in the English and Scottish provinces, in Glasgow [sic] I got ill and the Fays, for some reason known only to themselves, did not announce that I was unable to appear. Mrs. Fay (Miss Brigit O'Dempsey) went on under my name. I read in a notice in the Glasgow Herald, when the company played 'Dergorvilla', [sic] 'Miss Allgood might have been more tragic, and less painful, had she depended on a little more for her effects on stillness.'¹⁰⁶

A notice for the Wednesday performance, in which Allgood did appear reported:

Those of last night's audience who attended Monday and Tuesday's performances, must be considerably puzzled as to the identity of Miss Sara Allgood, whose name has appeared in almost every cast. The truth is, that Miss Allgood, who took the part of 'Dergorvilla' last night appeared for the first time this week, owing to her illness. Her parts have been taken in the 'County Dressmaker' both tonight and Monday night by Mrs. Fay, and in three other plays . . . by Miss Maire O'Neill. Nationalism is all right, but a player, even an Irish National Player, has a reputation to make or mar, and we cannot but feel that a manager is to blame for giving the public no sign when there is a change of cast. From now onwards Miss Allgood, we hope, will be seen in her own roles, and from her performance tonight much is expected.¹⁰⁷

Fay never explained this managerial lapse, which could be put down to either retaliation against Maire O'Neill or a scheme to promote the career of his wife, Brigit O'Dempsey, or simply gross managerial mismanagement. The incident greatly concerned the Directorate, who were afraid that Allgood would leave the company.

Synge wrote to Lady Gregory in December that "Miss Sara Allgood is looking out too I

¹⁰⁶ Allgood, 62-3.

¹⁰⁷ Allgood, 63.

am told. This sounds very bad but I do not think it will come to anything I am writing to Miss Sara Allgood to tell her that there is going to be a meeting in January, and to ask her not to do anything in a hurry. I was not surprised to hear that she had written to Payne [Ben Iden Payne at the Gaiety].¹⁰⁸ Fay's gross managerial negligence, coupled with his loss of control of the actresses on the tour and his subsequent demands to have sole control of the hiring and firing of acting personnel, left the Directorate no choice but to, in effect, force the Fays to resign in January 1908.

The immediate result of this blow to the theatre was the elevation of Allgood to stage manager [director]. The Directorate needed someone to fill the gap, and Allgood, both as senior member of the company and by virtue of her talent and long-term association with the Fays and with their acting method, was the obvious choice. Allgood described her stint as stage manager:

They [the Directorate] asked me to take over the stage-management, and gave me the script of a new play, 'The Man Who Missed the Tide', [sic] by W. F. Casey. . . . At once the company rallied round me; we put an advertisement for some new players in the paper, and out of the answers we got Fred O'Donovan, who made his debut in the above play, he was wonderful. [sic] After some very intensive rehearsals, we opened in February to a bumper house, and that year from February on was the first year we were not in the 'red'.¹⁰⁹

Allgood was loaned to Horniman's Gaiety Theatre in April, for a production of *Measure For Measure*, after which she returned to the Abbey and resumed her duties as stage manager. Her revival of *The Man Who Missed the Tide* in May was well received. The subject matter of the play was upper-middle class life in Ireland, not the

¹⁰⁸ J. M. Synge to Lady Augusta Gregory, 16 December 1907, in *Some Letters*, 63-4.

¹⁰⁹ Allgood, 47.

usual fare for the Abbey. Allgood, as stage-manager [director], apparently did not repeat Willie Fay's style of stage-management; she allowed the actors more freedom to act as individuals. Joseph Holloway wrote, "I may say at once that the acting was more individual and less artistic than under Fay's stage management. Individual actors shone at the expense of the ensemble, and some of the actors were occasionally out of the picture."¹¹⁰ He goes on, however, to admit that "There were two or three great acting successes in *The Man Who Missed the Tide*, and despite the crudeness and uncertainty of construction, the play was generally well received."¹¹¹ Allgood soon gave up stage-management, citing uncontrollable actors as the reason: "The company had become too difficult for me to manage . . . so I asked the Directors to release me, and get someone for the position who would be obeyed."¹¹²

When the Abbey toured America in 1911, Allgood naturally accompanied them. Although her primary role was as actress, she also provided an important element to the company by promoting an *esprit de corps* within the company. During the 1911 tour, she (and others) wrote a letter repudiating accusations against the Abbey Theatre regarding the treatment of the actresses involved in *The Playboy* made in the *Gaelic American*.¹¹³ In January, 1912, still on tour, Allgood wrote to W. A. Henderson, the theatre's business manager, to "give an order for an 'Ardagh' cup in silver we [sic] want to make a presentation to John Quinn for his help to us last week in Philadelphia, [sic] he threw up two most important cases in New York to come to Philadelphia to fight our

¹¹⁰ Holloway, 102.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹² Allgood, 48.

¹¹³ The Evening Telegraph, 16 December, 1911, Scrapbook 11, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

battle, [sic] I have collected some money and I want you to pay about L10, or you may pay a little more and get a fine handsome one, on the style of Miss Horniman's."¹¹⁴

Allgood spent the rest of her tenure at the Abbey promoting the theatre and perfecting her craft. The Abbey used Allgood's reputation whenever possible to secure publicity for the theatre. *The Evening Telegraph*, in an article entitled "The Abbey Theatre: Sarah Allgood's Triumph," reported a large audience attendance in May 1908 and concluded that "the cause of this was perhaps not far to seek. The announcement that Miss Sara Allgood would appear in three plays must unquestionably have had a far-reaching effect."¹¹⁵ Allgood's election as the captain of the theatre's fire brigade also generated publicity for the theatre. A newspaper article titled "An Interesting Photograph: Miss Sara Allgood in Firefighter's Costume" reported that "the management of the Abbey Theatre have requisitioned the services of an officer to instruct the company and theatre staff in the use of their fire appliances. The ladies of the company have taken the thing up enthusiastically." The prominent photograph that accompanied the article showed Allgood in the get-up of a fireman, a costume, the paper assured the reader, "in which she will not appear in public."¹¹⁶ Allgood recalled her being

elected 'Captain of the Abbey Fire Brigade'. The Directors decided that we should be instructed in fire drill so we all had great fun – coming down early twice a week, and being coached by Mr. Murphy. . . . We would all be about the Theatre, when, at a sign from him, I would blow a whistle

¹¹⁴ Sara Allgood to W.A. Henderson, 24 January 1912, Scrapbook 11, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

¹¹⁵ *The Evening Telegraph*, "The Abbey Theatre: Sarah Allgood's Triumph," 11 May 1908, Scrapbook 3, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

¹¹⁶ Unidentified newspaper clipping, "An Interesting Photograph: Miss Sara Allgood in Fire Fighter's Costume," n.d. [c. September 1908], Scrapbook 1, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

and the actors would all run ‘Hell for leather’ to their allotted stations. There was much falling over obstacles and laughter as we would run with the fire hose, and I would run with my fire hatchet, to wherever the fire was supposed to be.¹¹⁷

That autumn it became obvious that Allgood was ready, both personally and artistically, for new ventures. She received several opportunities to act outside the Abbey--from F. R. Benson’s Shakespeare Company, from Herbert Tench to sing folk songs at the Haymarket, and finally, she wrote, “I got an offer to play the part of ‘Night’ in Maeterlind’s [sic] ‘Blue Bird’, in the first London production. Over this I had a great row with the Directors, as by this time I was beginning to learn that I had some financial value, and I really do not think it was fair of the Directors to refuse to let me go.”¹¹⁸

The Directorate was loath to give up their star, and Allgood remained at the theatre until 1915. She described her life in the theatre at this time as

One of routine rather than excitement. I was now permanently a full-fledged member of the Abbey. We played so many nights a week we rehearsed all plays, [sic] both old and new, in the daytime; tours; returns to Dublin, for our season commencing August Bank Holiday. . . . by this time my salary had risen, and so we [she and her mother] were able to move from the city to a sweet little house in Glasnevin.¹¹⁹

Her daily routine shows an insight into the life of Dublin’s premiere actress:

¹¹⁷ Allgood, 64.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 63. Allgood was under contract to the Abbey at this time and the Directors were within their rights to hold her to that contract. She was their biggest box office drawing card at a time when they needed the revenue.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 62.

Up at 7:30 in the morning, with breakfast at 8:30; then out to the garden to do a little digging or planting, or maybe feed the few hens we kept in a hen-coop. . . . off to catch the bus by 10:00 to get to rehearsal by 11 a.m. We rehearsed until 1:00; a break for lunch and back to rehearse at 2:30 to 4:30 p.m.; home for 'high tea', and back at 7:15 to get ready for the night's performance. It was generally a pretty full-time job. Sometimes I did not go home after the afternoon rehearsal, but got Miss Martin to make a meal for me while I rested either in my dressingroom, or on the couch in the Green Room.¹²⁰

Inevitably, Allgood's talent and personality led to a "restless urge," and she opted for the role of young Peg in a touring company of *Peg O' My Heart*. The initial tour was in Ireland in 1915, but she was offered the chance to take the show to Australia and "in January, 1916, I sailed from London for 'Down Under.'"¹²¹

After four years of "exile," Allgood returned in May 1920 and began playing almost immediately in *The Whiteheaded Boy* in London and Manchester.¹²² Although she did not return to the Abbey stage until 1923, she was prominent in the attempts to keep the theatre open when it fell on hard times during the Civil War of the early 1920s. She was one of the organizers of the Matinee Fund in 1921 (fig. 42), a performance intended as a benefit for the continuation of the Abbey while the Civil War raged and curfews closed the theatre's doors. In a letter to Yeats she explained the scheme:

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Allgood, 94. A full account of Allgood's years in Australia are found in Coxhead's chapter on the actress in *Daughters of Erin*, including the facts of her marriage to her leading man, Gerald Henson and the birth and death of their daughter Mary, on January 18, 1918. There is, however, one addenda to her account. Although Allgood's "Memories" recounts some details of the trip as well, she made no mention of the child; most interesting, however, is a penciled in notation at the top of page 95, by Allgood's niece Pauline Hague: "No mention of her two children here, Mary & John who both died." Apparently Allgood had a second pregnancy later in 1918, although her bout with influenza (which killed her husband) may have caused a premature or stillbirth of the second child.

¹²² Ibid., 95-6.

I think the whole object of the matinee is to keep the Abbey open. At present I believe the players are all managing to exist on one third of their salary but its [sic] the poor Abbey that can't pay other expenses and I imagine that when the players draw their one third there's hardly anything left to go on with. Captain Harwood has most generously given us use of the theatre free. The orchestra has promised to play for us. . . . So if we manage to keep down expenses we ought to be able to give a fairly good sum to the Abbey.¹²³

Allgood enclosed the rough draft of a circular she would send out to members of Irish Clubs and personal friends in England, informing them of the matinee and urging them to donate.

¹²³ Sara Allgood to W. B. Yeats, 12 March 1921, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.



Figure 42. Poster for the 1921 Matinee Fund benefit performance.

We old players of the Abbey Theatre are giving a matinee for its benefit in the Ambassador's Theatre on April 6 and ask for your help. The Abbey Theatre, the oldest repertory theatre, has been in continued existence since its opening in 1904. During the war when we were unable to play outside Ireland we were unable to play and pay our way, but the 'curfew' regulations in Dublin of the last twelve months have been the cause of a loss of over L800 – which must seriously hamper a theatre with so small a capital. We therefore ask our friends to help us to make up at least a part of this loss.¹²⁴

The sum raised by the matinee performance of *The Whiteheaded Boy* was 84 pounds, 11 shillings, 7 pence, although Lady Gregory credits the matinee also with influencing donations given to the theatre that spring, particularly the generous gift of L500 from Lady Ardilaun.¹²⁵

Sara Allgood's final contribution to the Abbey Theatre during this period was her creation, in 1924, of the title role of Juno in Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (fig. 43). This play, more than anything else at the time, kept the Abbey viable and put it back in the spotlight. Audiences flocked to see the play and to see Allgood in the part. The play opened on March 3, and by March 8, Holloway recorded, "I attended the Abbey matinee and there heard that crowds were turned away last night, and that booking was complete for to-night. . . .Lady Gregory was up and was astonished at the house."¹²⁶ Holloway thought Allgood's performance excellent, with "great moments of heart-

¹²⁴ Sara Allgood to W.B. Yeats, 12 March 1921, Enclosure, The Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

¹²⁵ *Lady Gregory's Journal* quoted in Lennox Robinson, comp., *Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History, 1899-1951* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, Ltd, 1952), 123.

¹²⁶ Holloway, 227.



Figure 43. Sara Allgood in the title role of Juno in *Juno and the Paycock* in 1924.

rending sorrow” in Act III.¹²⁷ Fellow actor Gabriel Fallon, however, praised her entrance in Act III, which followed a very comic scene and set up the audience’s expectation for more laughter. Without uttering a word, Allgood entered the set, and, Fallon wrote, “It is no exaggeration to say that her appearance literally *compelled* the audience to a frozen silence and held it there. Not a word was spoken by her. She did not even sigh. Her movements were few; she made no gesture. She simply opened the door, came in and sat down; and as she did so, tragedy sat at the elbow of every member of the audience.”¹²⁸

When the play opened in London in 1925, Allgood went with it as Juno. She would have preferred to stay at the Abbey, but they would not sign her to a contract. She wrote to Fallon from London, “I wonder if you know that before I got this offer, I asked the Theatre for a loan and offered to pay it back at so much per week, and also to sign a contract to stay with them for two years; why won’t they realise [sic] that I’m an asset to them and keep me?”¹²⁹ Allgood did return to the Abbey from time to time, always drawing crowds to the theatre with her appearances. Finally, in 1940 she moved to the United States and in 1945 became an American citizen. She made many films over the years and was nominated as Best Supporting Actress for *How Green Was My Valley* in 1941. She died in Beverly Hills, California, in 1949.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 226.

¹²⁸ Gabriel Fallon, quoted in Coxhead, *Daughters*, 212.

¹²⁹ Sara Allgood quoted in Coxhead, *Daughters*, 213. Gregory and Yeats may have believed that Allgood’s salary would have over-taxed their already strained budget. According to the minutes of the Directors’ meeting the year before, on 1 June, 1924, “it was decided to pay the following members half salary. Miss Allgood, Miss Delaney, Mr. A. J. McCormick, Mr. A. Shiels.” National Theatre Society Ltd. Minute Book, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

Throughout the Abbey's history (1904-1925) there were approximately one hundred and twenty other actresses employed by the theatre. Most who remained with the Abbey for any length of time did so because they were able to grasp the Fays' principles and put them into action on the stage. Although most were less celebrated talents than Nic Shiubhlaigh, O'Neill, and Allgood, many nevertheless deserve mention, for without them the Abbey could not have continued with the consistent quality of acting that established its long-term reputation. Without some of them, the Abbey would have closed its doors with the departure of the Abbey Company on the 1911 American tour.

One such actress was Eileen O'Doherty, one of Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh's younger sisters. She was not a member of the second company, having been hired by the Abbey in 1907. She had, however, consistently improved in her acting and had risen from bit parts in 1907 to the leading role in *Birthright* in 1910. At the play's opening, *The Freeman's Journal* reported, "We would like to single out for praise the work done by Miss Eileen O'Doherty as Maura Morrissey, the mother in the play. Miss O'Doherty made a study of her part, which, although the word seems out of harmony with so subdued a character, we must call brilliant."¹³⁰ When the play was revived in 1912, just after O'Doherty return from the American tour, the critics were even more appreciative of her acting achievements:

We can forget everything but the acting of Miss Eileen O'Doherty as Mother Morrissey in *The Birthright*. . . . Nothing like the acting of Miss O'Doherty has been witnessed in Dublin for many years. It is not too much to say that the young artiste made the play. The awful silence that followed the curtain-fall was because of her and her

¹³⁰ *Freeman's Journal* quoted in Hogan, *Realists*, 47.

tragedy. The vented cheers that followed the silence were for her too.¹³¹

She remained with the theatre until the end of the 1913-14 season.

Another such actress, Eithne Magee, joined the Abbey in January 1910 and began her career there as Leagerie's Wife in *The Green Helmet* in February. She played small roles until September 1911, when Maire O'Neill dropped out of the tour. Magee was elevated to the part of Pegeen Mike in *The Playboy of the Western World*. The rioting was actually worse during the play than it had been in Dublin, but Magee took it all in stride. An interview she gave after the first night's performance in New York attested to her spirited portrayal of Pegeen:

'Afraid?' she laughed – she's a typical Irish girl, merry-eyed and frank – 'I'm not a bit afraid. The more they hooted and yelled and threw things the harder I worked, I was determined that they wouldn't make me stop and they didn't. I was so absorbed in the play that I didn't distinctly realize that I had been struck. I remember a slight blow on my head but I was delivering a rather long speech and didn't pay any attention to the blow. A moment later I realized that something was in my hair and I put up my hand and drew out a potato.¹³²

Magee took smaller parts on her return to Ireland, but was among the company when it toured to America again in 1912 and 1914. She performed at the Abbey off and on until 1920.

Several of the Abbey's most prominent actresses came out of the Abbey Theatre's School of Acting, which Yeats created in response to the theatre's first American tour in 1911. This school allowed the Abbey to remain open during the 1911-1912 season, when

¹³¹ Jaques quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Realists*, 180.

¹³² Eithne Magee, *Interview in The Globe and Commercial Advertiser*, [28 November 1911], Scrapbook 11, Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland.

most of the regular players were absent. In an address to an Abbey audience on September 8 Yeats explained:

While our company is away the school of dramatic art, lately founded at the Abbey Theatre will carry on its work. We have placed at the head of it for this autumn Mr. Nugent Monck, an Irishman of imagination and energy, who has learnt his art of the stage under Mr. Poel, of the Elizabethan Stage Society. . . . Our object is to train players to express the mind, and to copy the life of Ireland. Mr. Monck, with the help of his pupils . . . will give certain productions at the Abbey Theatre – perhaps a classical play. . . . We hope that in the course of time we shall have trained in this way a second company which will play at the Abbey when the main company is away.¹³³

The advent of this company infused fresh blood into the Abbey, and by 1913 they were proficient enough to join forces with the first company for a six-weeks engagement at the Royal Court Theatre in London.¹³⁴

From the school's opening, students such as Helena Moloney, Nell Byrne, Violet McCarthy, and Nora Desmond began to receive favorable reviews. In *MacDaragh's Wife* critic W. J. Lawrence judged, "There was more picturesqueness and surety of touch about the Second Hag of Miss Moloney, but unfortunately, after the long opening colloquy, she had little to say and nothing to do."¹³⁵ And, in *A Little Christmas Miracle*, he proclaimed that her portrayal "of the warm-hearted Bridget Cassidy proved of eminent service to as [sic] affording the necessary highlight in a picture characterized by inspissated [sic] gloom."¹³⁶ He also singled out Nell Byrne in the piece, affirming that "In the difficult and delicate *role* of the Strange woman, Miss Nell Byrne brought her powers

¹³³ W.B. Yeats quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Realists*, 134.

¹³⁴ Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Realists*, 239.

¹³⁵ W. J. Lawrence quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Realists*, 173.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

of imagination to bear with considerable effect, and struck the right note by maintaining the character throughout on a plane of ideality.”¹³⁷ Violet McCarthy received high praise from the *Evening Telegraph* critic for her performance in *Red Turf*:

The part of Mary Burke, which was filled by Miss Maire O’Neill when the play was first performed in Dublin, was taken last night by Miss Violet McCarthy, a young actress who possesses qualities of grace manner, sweetness of voice and declamatory power that should win for her a place on the stage equal to that now occupied by the lady whose place she filled last night. In fact it may be said she is another Maire O’Neill. . . . Miss McCarthy is a very clever artiste who can enter into the spirit of the part she has to play.¹³⁸

Equally good recognition was given to Nora Desmond for portrayal of Mrs. Grogan in *The Building Fund*:

The success of the play depended on the performance of Nora Desmond, who gave a remarkable portraiture of the miserly old woman, Mrs. Grogan. In voice, action, and gesture she was the old woman to the manner born. Her study reminded one forcibly of a somewhat similar portrait by Miss Maire O’Neill in the *Riders to the Sea*, and in other respects too she resembled her. Her acting certainly gave promise of a distinguished future and it would hardly be surprising if Miss Desmond proved to be one of the leading ladies of the Abbey.¹³⁹

By 1916 several other actresses appeared who filled in during the increasingly frequent absences of Allgood and O’Neill. Although Maureen Delany (fig. 44) debuted in 1914 in *The Lord Mayor* while still a student at the Abbey School and had been singled out in the press for her performance as the Lady Mayoress, she was not seen

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ *The Evening Telegraph* quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Realists*, 173.

¹³⁹ *The Irish Times* quoted in Hogan, *Realists*, 174.

again on the Abbey stage until the February 1916 revival of *Blanco Posnet*. In October 1916, she played a plum role in the production of *Nic*, prompting Holloway to write, “The big acting success of *Nic* was undoubtedly the ‘Mrs. O’Carroll’ of Maureen Delany; she was delightfully explosive.”¹⁴⁰ She continued to play comic parts with some skill until, in 1926, she was given her chance to create the dramatic role of Bessie Burgess in the original production of O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars*.

May Craig (fig. 45) was another actress who began at the Abbey early on, disappeared, then returned to the stage. Craig originated the small part of Honor Blake in the 1907 premiere of *The Playboy of the Western World*, although she was thereafter not seen at the Abbey until October 1916. She rejoined the Abbey to play Raina Petkoff in the Abbey’s first production of Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*. She began to play leading roles in the 1920s, playing the title role in *Ann Kavanagh* in 1922, and by 1925 she was playing Sara Allgood’s parts in *The Country Dressmaker* and *John Bull’s Other Island*. In 1926, she created the role of Mrs. Gogan in *The Plough and the Stars* and became the only Abbey Theatre member to act in the original productions of both plays that caused rioting in the theatre.

In 1919, Lady Gregory joined the ranks of the Abbey actresses for several performances of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, providing audiences with a new perspective on her talents. Her debut was actually another instance of Gregory’s determination to put the theatre’s well-being before her own. On Saturday, March 15, Gregory arrived at the Abbey to find the bill for the coming week changed from the scheduled *Kathleen Ni*

¹⁴⁰ Holloway, 189.



Figure 44. Maureen Delany began her career at the Abbey School of Acting.



Figure 45. May Craig

Houlihan to The Rising of the Moon because Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, who was to have played Kathleen, had an engagement in Manchester and would not be back in Dublin until Wednesday. Gregory's view, as recorded in her journal, was that it was

a bad moment to make a change, when we are already weak with the loss of players. I left a card for [Lennox] Robinson asking him to come round, and told him I would rather myself play Kathleen than let it drop (after all what is wanted but a hag and a voice?). He said it was 'splendid' of me, and we arranged a rehearsal for today, but my heart sinks now; remembering the words will be the chief difficulty, and I could joyfully welcome Maire Walker should she return, yet if all goes well I shall be glad to have done it.¹⁴¹

Gregory's journal confirms that she was in two minds about performing, for again, on the morning of the performance she wrote, "Yesterday morning to the Abbey and rehearsed *Kathleen ni Houlihan* feeling very nervous about it, and wishing Maire Walker would suddenly appear and do still wish it—though I think I would be disappointed afterwards if she did."¹⁴²

Walker did not appear and Gregory did go on (figs. 46, 47), and recorded the experience the next morning:

My face was painted with grease paint—white with black under the eyes and red inside the lids—dreadful! Luckily my own hair is grey enough without a wig. And I had got a slight cold so I was a little hoarse and felt miserable. When I went on to the stage it was a shock to find the auditorium was black darkness, I thought for a moment the curtain was still down and hesitated. But I got through all right, only once Shields had to prompt me. He was kneeling beside me so it

¹⁴¹ Gregory, *Journals*, I, 55.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 56.



Figure 46. Lady Gregory as Kathleen ni Houlihan. Gregory agreed to play the role stating, "What is needed but a hag and a voice?"



Figure 47. Lady Gregory as Kathleen ni Houlihan and Arthur Sinclair as Michael Gillane in a scene from *Kathleen ni Houlihan* in 1919.

didn't matter. Seaghan was behind the fireplace, book in hand, but didn't have to use it.¹⁴³

Gregory received two curtain calls "all to myself," and, although she still dreaded the idea of performing a second night, was happy that "the actors seemed pleased, and Mrs. Martin (the charwoman) came and hugged me with enthusiasm."¹⁴⁴ She went to her hotel, however, "very tired and hungry, and the fire out, and had stale bread with butter and a glass of milk."¹⁴⁵

The newspaper reviews of Gregory's opening night were approving. "Vivid and impressive," was the estimation of *The Evening Herald* critic.¹⁴⁶ *The Irish Times* considered "her interpretation of the weird character was skillful and artistic."¹⁴⁷ And *The Evening Telegraph* also remarked on the striking nature of Gregory's performance and complimented her poise on stage.

Lady Gregory last night might have been expected to be nervous, but she displayed little sign of perturbation, and her study of the poor old woman was impressive. At the close of the little play, she received three "curtains," though only a thin sprinkling of the audience seemed to have any clue as to her identity.¹⁴⁸

Although she claimed to be even more nervous, Gregory's second performance went smoothly, "without prompts and had my own two curtains. . . . Millington [business manager] thought there was 'more thrill' in my performance than."¹⁴⁹ Yeats, Maud Gonne, and her daughter, Iseult, were in the audience that night and Yeats's grudging

¹⁴³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 58.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ *The Evening Herald* quoted in Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham, eds., *The Art of the Amateur, 1916-1920* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1984), 193.

¹⁴⁷ *The Irish Times*, Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ *The Evening Telegraph*, Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Gregory, *Journals*, 58.

comment was that the performance ““was very nice, but if I had rehearsed you it would have been much better.””¹⁵⁰

Despite her preoccupation with readying the Abbey’s next offering, *John Bull’s Other Island*, Gregory was forced to play Kathleen once more, owing to Maire Nic Shiughlaigh’s extended absence.

Miss Walker was to be back to play Kathleen and I was glad to have that strain off, but knowing we should take no risks I got to the Abbey at a quarter to 8 and found consternation and a telegram from her to say that she had missed her boat, so I had to tumble into the cloak and skirt and get Miss Magee to grease paint me, and I played the part better and with more confidence than before, though it was a small audience.¹⁵¹

This performance was Gregory’s last. Nic Shiubhlaigh performed the next evening, although Gregory was somewhat critical of her performance. “Millington asked after her performance if she hadn’t grown very poor and theatrical? I said she had so struck me, but I had thought it was perhaps professional jealousy.”¹⁵²

Although the list of actresses could continue, the final major actress of the period to be considered here is Eileen Crowe (fig. 48). She joined the Abbey in the autumn of 1921, although “she took her work so carelessly, an hour and a half lateness for a rehearsal was nothing to her,” according to Lennox Robinson; however, he continued, “from the first audition she gave me, I knew we had an actress and a voice and then suddenly she knew she was an actress, pulled up her socks and worked like a demon at her profession.”¹⁵³ She began, of course, with small parts, and by the time she was cast

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 59.

¹⁵³ Robinson, "Pictures," 45-6.



Figure 48. Eileen Crowe joined the Abbey as an actress in 1921.

in *Juno and the Paycock* in 1924, her acting skills had progressed. “Eileen Crowe as ‘Mary’ presented every side of the character cleverly and realistically, and her singing of the duet, ‘Home to our Mountains,’ with her mother at the hooley was deliciously droll.”¹⁵⁴ In a 1925 revival of *The Hour Glass*, on a double bill with *Fanny’s First Play*, Crowe took on two roles previously filled by Sara Allgood. “From ‘Angel’ [in *Hour Glass*] to ‘Dora’ [in *Fanny*] was a big jump, but she cleared it well, realising [sic] both roles adequately.”¹⁵⁵ Of her acting Robinson wrote “Eileen Crowe I often think a better ‘Juno’ than Sara Allgood because more ‘slum’ without the poetry which Sara couldn’t resist bringing into the part.”¹⁵⁶ In 1925, she married fellow actor F. J. McCormick, and she remained acting at the Abbey until the theatre burned in 1951.

The actresses of the Abbey Theatre from 1904 to 1925 were a diverse group of women, but in the degree of their artistic talent and their ability to grasp and reproduce the Abbey style of acting, each was unique. Some stars shone brighter, both on the Abbey stage and on international stages, but all attained a great degree of expertise in the art of Irish acting. It was this high level of proficiency in the theatre’s female practitioners that played a large part in creating and sustaining the reputation of the Abbey Theatre throughout the early years of its existence.

Although these women were exceptional in their talents, they did share several characteristics. They were, almost exclusively, Roman Catholic and working class. Most had little formal education. The other women of the Abbey were predominantly middle or upper-middle class, well educated, independent, and Protestant. This dichotomy could support the supposition that acting was the least desirable role for women at the Abbey

¹⁵⁴ Holloway, 226.

¹⁵⁵ Holloway, 246.

¹⁵⁶ Robinson, "Pictures," 43.

Theatre, and therefore was relegated to women of a lower class. In England, certainly, even in the early twentieth century, actresses were considered not entirely respectable; therefore, women of upper class homes who did go on the stage, were often deemed an embarrassment to the relations and sometimes lost to all contact with the family.¹⁵⁷

Another explanation, however, also presents itself. The original aim of the Irish Literary Society was to present native Irish drama and all of the plays that were produced initially by the Abbey were of this type. Native Irish drama fell into two distinct types—verse drama concerning myths and legends of Ireland and peasant dramas concerning everyday life in rural Ireland. The Abbey Theatre's acting style evolved from the specific needs of these types of drama. The Fays' ideas on acting in these plays, it will be remembered, favored actors and actresses from the lower classes. As Willie Fay said, "We always selected young men and women who had sprung from the peasant class. Every one of them can act native drama. But the women are quicker at it. The women are nearer to other things."¹⁵⁸ In order to successfully portray native drama with the degree of authenticity required by the Abbey, the Fays believed the actors and actresses should possess a lower-class background.

As a group, the actresses' major contribution to the Abbey Theatre was their role as interpreters for the theatre's playwrights. They were talented artists on the stage and through their skilful portrayal of the masterpieces of Gregory, Synge, Yeats, and O'Casey, these women gave the Abbey Theatre its reputation for cutting-edge drama and innovative performance techniques. The Abbey Theatre's status in the international

¹⁵⁷ See Chapter 2: Women Who Came Before for a detailed report of the reaction of Maud Gonne's family's when informed that she had become an actress.

¹⁵⁸ *The World*, Interview with Frank and Willie Fay, [1908], Scrapbook, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

theatre community was established largely on the skills of its acting troupe, and particularly on those of its women.

Individual actresses also contributed specific talents or assumed roles other than that of actress in an effort to either enhance the reputation of the Abbey Theatre or to maintain its existence. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh's early efforts as an actress at the Abbey caught the attention of Dublin audiences and helped draw them to performances when the repertory was small and her popularity was the impetus for much of the theatre's attendance. Her early departure from the Abbey stage, though unfortunate, nevertheless made way for two other actresses of note, giving them their chance in turn to develop a following and to expand their repertoires in the theatre.

Maire O'Neill's contributions to the Abbey theatre were twofold. First and foremost she was an excellent purveyor of the Abbey's acting style, second only to her sister. Her expertise in portraying the powerful, dynamic characters of Nora Burke and Pegeen Mike went far towards establishing the Abbey's reputation for a distinct acting style. Second, and perhaps more important, was her relationship with J. M. Synge and the profound effect she had on his work. Her inspiration for the characters of Pegeen Mike and Deirdre helped Synge create the masterpieces that made him great, and the Abbey its renown as the birthplace of his work.

Although Sara Allgood's major contribution to the Abbey Theatre was obviously her acting skill, she proved to be an asset in several ways not normally acknowledged. She was one of the most popular players in the theatre with the other actors and staff; the company looked to her as a leader on many occasions; and she helped promote an *esprit de corps* within the company. Allgood was very popular with all of her fellow actors, a

popularity that certainly extended to the male faction in the theatre: over the years she received numerous proposals of marriage, including one from Frank Fay.

Allgood also often put the best interests of the theatre before her own, as evidenced by her willingness to step into the breach when the Fays left and she took over the stage management duties. She did not enjoy this role in the theatre, but she carried it out creditably and with some degree of skill. Later she was instrumental in organizing the cast of *The Whiteheaded Boy* in London to give the benefit matinee for the Abbey; an action that did nothing to further her own career but that showed her concern for and dedication to the theatre that had given her her start. Maire Ni Shiubhlaigh wrote of Allgood, “what I shall always remember of Sally is her generosity – and her kindness.”¹⁵⁹

Of course, Allgood’s major contribution to the Abbey was her skill in acting and specifically in exemplifying the Abbey Theatre style of acting. The naturalistic school of acting envisioned by the Fays found one of its great practitioners in Allgood, of whom it could be said that she made the style of acting as much as the acting style made her. Her talent was recognized internationally and was instrumental in advancing the Abbey’s reputation as a theatre of distinction in the early twentieth century.

¹⁵⁹ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, “Recollection of Early Career of Sara Allgood,” D, n.d. Holloway Papers, National Library of Ireland.

CHAPTER 6:
WOMEN WHO WROTE: LADY GREGORY

Before the Irish Literary Theatre opened in January 1899, Dublin audiences had been viewing the same popular fare being seen on stages in Europe and America. The three licensed Irish playhouses (the Royal, the Gaiety, and the Queen's Royal) were, in fact, roadhouses featuring English, French, and American touring companies performing standard dramas of the late Victorian period. Seldom were any plays produced that incorporated Irish subjects or local talent, the only exception being an occasional play by Dion Boucicault such as *Arrah-na-Pogue* and *The Colleen Bawn*.

The Royal and the Gaiety, the two first-class theatres, generally booked different types of productions. The Royal favored a variety of light entertainments: dramas such as Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons* and his adaptation of Dumas fils' *Camille* and Walter Firth's *The Man of Forty*; Robert Buchanan's comedy *Sweet Nancy* and the farce *Young Mr. Yarde* by Harrold Ellis; operas and musical comedies, such as *The Bohemian Girl*, *The Daughter of the Regiment*, *The Belle of New York*, and *The Skirt Dancer*, and even occasional classics, such as Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Antony and Cleopatra* and Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*.¹ The Gaiety tended to engage companies featuring farce and melodrama. Its management presented such fare as *Charley's Aunt*, Sardou's *La Tosca*, and an American comedy, *Our Irish Visitors*. In addition were performances of light opera by the D'Oyly Carte Company and the George Edwardes Company, who performed *A Runaway Girl* on two separate visits.² In 1899, the Gaiety

¹ Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Irish Literary Theatre: 1899-1901* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc., 1975), 10-11.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

also imported Jean Coquelin's company from France to perform *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Tartuffe*, and *Les Precieuses Ridicules*.³

The third licensed theatre, The Queen's Royal, or more familiarly, the Queen's, was a second-class theatre, featuring works well below the dramatic standards of the Theatre Royal and the Gaiety. The Queen's favored broad patriotic pieces written by its manager, J. W. Whitbread, in the style of Boucicault, and the extravagant, illusionistic melodramas popular in the late nineteenth century. Although popular, these plays offered little substance to the patrons who thronged to the Queen's. Joseph Holloway recorded his views of several of these productions from 1895 through 1899; most were unfavorable. *The Bandit King*, in 1895, he determined to be "a drama written round four trained horses. . . . The piece was rot."⁴ Similarly, he panned the American import *One of the Bravest*, complete with "a realistic fire scene, including fire engine, etc. complete. The play, in fact, seemed to have been written round this tableau. The piece, like most American dramas, has no plot to speak of, and plenty of knockabout, grotesque characters."⁵ Several other dramas were praised for their spectacular production values but criticized for a lack of dramatic worth.

What Dublin theatergoers were not seeing in any of their theatres was the new drama then springing up throughout Europe--in Ole Bull's Norwegian national theatre, in Germany's Freie Buhne, in Andre Antoine's Theatre Libre. All of these theatres were experimenting with dramatic form, with the ideas of realism and naturalism, with ideas of theatre as an instrument for social change, and with ideas of a drama written for a

³ Ibid.. These performances would draw praise from Frank Fay, then a reviewer for *The United Irishman*. Coquelin's influence on Fay and the Abbey style of acting is detailed in Chapter 6.

⁴ Holloway quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *Irish Literary Theatre*, 14.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

national audience. Almost simultaneously in the late 1880s in Norway, Russia, Germany, and France, European theatres had begun producing serious drama that was national in the sense that it looked inward to the people and problems of their particular societies for the subject matter of their plays.

Only ten years later, in 1897, did Dublin emerge as part of that list of countries determined to produce a body of national dramatic literature. At the meeting of Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats, and Edward Martyn at Duras House in 1897, Gregory and Yeats conceived a plan to promote the writing and production of plays based on Irish life, written by Irishmen for the Irish people. After almost two years of planning and preparation, The Irish Literary Theatre opened and presented productions of Martyn's *The Heather Field* and Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*. In the following year the ILT produced Martyn's *Maeve*, Alice Milligan's *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, and George Moore's *The Bending of the Bough*. In the final year of the "three years' experiment," the theatre produced a collaboration by Moore and Yeats, *Diarmuid and Grania*, and a one-act by Douglas Hyde, performed in Irish, *Casadh an tSugain (The Twisting of the Rope)*.

After the Irish Literary Theatre dissolved, Gregory and Yeats, in a determined effort to keep alive the idea of an Irish theatre, formed their alliance with William and Frank Fay. In 1902, their acting company, now called the Irish National Dramatic Company, produced two Irish dramas, *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, attributed to Yeats, and *Deirdre*, written by George Russell. And in 1903, amid two of Yeats's verse plays, Padraic Colum's *Broken Soil*, and J. M. Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*, a woman's voice spoke again, officially, as a playwright for the newly christened Irish National

Theatre Society. Lady Gregory's play, *Twenty-five (A Losing Game)*, appeared on the company's first tour to London in May 1903; it was not, however, her first produced play.

Although not commonly acknowledged at the time, Gregory co-authored many of Yeats's early plays. *Diarmuid and Grania* was the first such collaboration in 1900, although just how extensive Gregory's contributions were is unknown. Gregory modestly claimed, "I began by writing bits of dialogue, when wanted. Mr. Yeats used to dictate parts of *Diarmuid and Grania* to me, and I would suggest a sentence here and there."⁶ Yeats, however, gave Lady Gregory more credit in a letter to her dated December 1909, calling the play "your *Diarmuid and Grania*."⁷ At the very least Gregory prepared the synopsis of the legend of Diarmuid and Grania that Yeats and Moore used in the writing the play.⁸

Gregory also "helped to fill spaces in *Where There is Nothing*," a fact attested to by Yeats's dedication of the work to Gregory:

I offer you a book which is in part your own. . . . You said I might dictate to you, and we worked in the morning at Coole, and I never did anything that went so easily and quickly; for when I hesitated you had the right thought ready and it was almost always you who gave the right turn to the phrase and gave it the ring of daily life.⁹

Later, in 1907, when they began rewriting *Where There is Nothing* as *The Unicorn from the Stars*, Yeats gave credit for the writing entirely to Gregory.

⁶ Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography. The Coole Edition of the Works of Lady Gregory*, ed. T. R. Henn and Colin Smythe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 53.

⁷ W. B. Yeats quoted in Daniel J. Murphy, "Lady Gregory, Co-Author and Sometimes Author of the Plays of W. B. Yeats," in *Modern Irish Literature: Essays in Honor of William York Tindall*, ed. Raymond J. Porter and James D. Brophy (New Rochelle: Iona College Press, 1972), 44.

⁸ William Becker, introductory notes to *Diarmuid and Grania*, *Dublin Magazine* (April-June, 1951), quoted in Murphy, "Lady Gregory, Co-Author," 52, n. 2.

⁹ Yeats quoted in Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 53.

I asked Lady Gregory to help me turn my old plot into the Unicorn from the Stars. I began to dictate, but since I had last worked with her, her mastery of the stage and her knowledge of dialect had so increased that my imagination could not go neck and neck with hers. I found myself, too, stopped by an old difficulty, that my words never flow freely but when people speak in verse; and so after an attempt to work alone I gave up my scheme to her. The result is a play almost wholly hers in handiwork.¹⁰

Kathleen ni Houlihan, usually touted as Yeats's one true stage success, seems to have been also, at least in part, Gregory's work. Yeats's idea for the play came to him in a dream, but he found that he did not have the tools to make it come alive on stage. "I thought if I could write this out as a little play I could make others see my dream as I had seen it, but I could not get down out of that high window of dramatic verse, and in spite of all you had done for me I had not the country speech. . . . We [emphasis mine] turned my dream into the little play, Cathleen ni Houlihan."¹¹ Lennox Robinson, long-time director and playwright at the Abbey also claimed that Gregory "had a big share of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*."¹² And although Gregory herself never claimed authorship of the work publicly, her journal complained, "I see in a list of Yeats's plays Unicorn as before Pot of Broth now put 'as written with Lady Gregory.' Rather hard on me not giving my name with *Kathleen ni Houlihan* that I wrote all but all of."¹³ Written in a penny schoolbook in Gregory's hand, just as her other drafts and final copies, the manuscript copy of *Kathleen ni Houlihan* also affirms Gregory as the sole writer of the piece.

Other collaborations with Yeats included both prose plays—*The Pot of Broth* and *The Hour-glass*—and several of his verse plays—*The King's Threshold*, *On Baile's*

¹⁰ W. B. Yeats quoted in Murphy, "Lady Gregory, Co-Author," 46.

¹¹ W. B. Yeats quoted in Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 53-54.

¹² Lennox Robinson quoted in Murphy, "Lady Gregory, Co-Author," 46.

¹³ Lady Gregory quoted in Murphy, "Lady Gregory, Co-Author," 47.

Strand, and *Deirdre*. Indeed most of Yeats's early plays were either collaborations with Gregory or works almost solely her own, but bearing Yeats's name. That Gregory took little or no public credit for these works is puzzling, until her early and middle years are examined, for Gregory did not begin her career as playwright until she was forty-nine years old. Those early years shaped her character and affected her view of herself; they also did much to explain her attitudes toward men in general and Yeats in particular.

Isabella Augusta Persse was born just after midnight on March 15, 1852. Her parents, Dudley and Frances Barry Persse, were already raising eight children of their own, plus three from Dudley Persse's first marriage. The birth of another daughter was, according to Gregory, therefore, not an exciting event, not even a happy one for Frances Persse, who only placed value on her sons. This attitude was not all that unusual for the nineteenth century where "girls were considered an inferior order of beings."¹⁴

That Lady Gregory was aware of her mother's preference for boys is evident in the beginning of her autobiography, whose first chapter, tellingly, unfolds in third—rather than first—person: "And although her [Gregory's] mother had four sons of her own, besides a stepson . . . she liked boys better than girls and wished for more sons than daughters, and so was sorry this was not a boy."¹⁵ Frances Persse felt the disappointment keenly, a feeling that perhaps led to a certain recklessness in the care of the new baby: the baby girl was accidentally laid under a quilt and forgotten until she was almost dead.

Persse was not without feeling, however: "The mother said she would have been sorry

¹⁴ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815-1897* (New York, 1898), in *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France and the United States*, eds. Erna Olafson Hellerstein, Leslie Parker Hume, and Karen M. Offen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1981), 23, commenting on her sister's birth in 1819, "I heard so many friends remark, 'What a pity it is she's a girl!' that I felt a kind of compassion for the little baby . . . I did not understand at that time that girls were considered an inferior order of beings."

¹⁵ Lady Augusta Gregory, *Seventy Years: Being the Autobiography of Lady Gregory*, ed. Colin Smythe (Gerrard's Cross, England: Colin Smythe, 1974), 1.

for such a loss, because the other children would have been disappointed at not having a new baby to play with.”¹⁶ Gregory heard this story often during her childhood, reinforcing the idea that she was little liked or wanted by her mother because of her sex. Worse, Frances Persse had saddled her daughter with a name the child detested, “Isabella Augusta,” after her godmother. Gregory early came to dislike the name Isabella because her siblings teased her with a rhyme about “Isabella and her gingham umbrella.”¹⁷ She was instead always called Augusta, a name she also objected to because it sounded too dignified.¹⁸

The Persse family was very well to do and had lived on the huge estate of Roxborough in the western county of Galway for five generations. The family owned several properties throughout Ireland—a house in Burren, a cottage on Lough Corrib and an estate on the River Corrib—and visited them throughout the year. Despite her family’s wealth, however, Gregory grew up in a rather austere atmosphere under the strict eye of her mother, a sharp manager who “for all the large expenditure and the plenty, even luxury, in food . . . would not willingly allow a fire to be lighted in the schoolroom until the dahlias had been cut down by the frost.”¹⁹

Frances Persse’s ideas on education for girls were constraining, although consistent with the generally accepted position of English society in the mid-1800s:

The aim of education is to fit children for the position in life which they are hereafter to occupy. Boys are to be sent out into the world to buffet with its temptations, to mingle with bad and good, to govern and direct. The school is the type of the life they are hereafter to lead. Girls are to dwell

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mary Lou Kofeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 14.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 5.

in quiet homes, amongst a few friends; to exercise a noiseless influence, to be submissive and retiring. There is no connection between the bustling mill-wheel life of a large school and that for which they are supposed to be preparing. . . . Any strain upon a girl's intellect is to be dreaded, and any attempt to bring women into competition with men can scarcely escape failure.²⁰

Gregory's mother was in sympathy with this sentiment, as Gregory's autobiography revealed, "The Mother, 'The Mistress', as she was called by all, children as well as servants . . . did not consider book learning as of any great benefit to girls."²¹ The result was that Gregory and her sisters were taught by "a procession of amiable incompetent governesses. A little French was learned, and many scales and exercises on the piano made music seem for many a day a hard enemy."²² Even when the governesses petitioned for better schoolbooks they were told "to wait until the girls could answer all of Mangnall's questions, and of course they never could. Religion and courtesy, and holding themselves straight, these were to her [Frances Persse's] mind the three things needful. French, perhaps also. . . . She was less indulgent to the girls than to the boys."²³

Dudley Persse, "The Master," also favored the boys, allowing them activities prohibited to the girls. Although riding and hunting were usually considered accomplishments for young ladies in upper class houses, at Roxborough they were not. At about the age of fifteen or sixteen, Gregory did manage one hectic ride behind the hounds:

Hunting might have been a temptation, had it not been forbidden to the girls at Roxborough, for the impulse towards the gay exercise of youth took her [Gregory] riding

²⁰ Elizabeth Missing Sewell, *Principles of Education, Drawn from Nature and Revelation, and Applied to Female Education in the Upper Classes* (New York, 1866), in Hellenstein, Hume, and Offen, 69-70.

²¹ Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

with the brothers she had been used to follow at their other sports, over many stone walls across country, sometimes with an occasional pack of harriers, and once, only once, with the foxhounds, when a triumphant run ended on the very lawn of Roxborough in full sight of her astonished father.²⁴

There is no evidence that Gregory ever rode again.

The sons of the house also “had more money in their pockets than the girls, given for the shooting of mischievous pests.”²⁵ Dudley Persse was also much more lenient with his sons when it came to allowances. In order to earn their sixpence allowance, all the younger children were required each week to learn by heart a Bible verse. Gregory recalled that she had been refused her allowance one week due to a slight mistake in repeating her verse; however, on another occasion a younger brother’s recitation was more readily forgiven:

“‘In the beginning,’ said my father.
 ‘In the beginning,’ said the child.
 ‘God made the heavens and earth’
 ‘Yes.’
 ‘Good boy! A prize!’”²⁶

Religion was a major influence on young Gregory, for her parents were staunch Protestants and the Bible was read twice everyday. Gregory recalled, “Religion was taught by the Mistress. The children were questioned after morning prayers on the Old Testament chapter that had been read. . . . In the evening they were sometimes examined from a card beginning: ‘What sin have I this day committed in thought, word and deed?’²⁷ On Saturday nights “‘the Monday books,’ as the children used to call them,

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Kofeldt, 20.

²⁷ Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 10.

were all hidden away . . . and in their places would be found Mrs. Sherwood's *Stories on the Church Catechism*, which had its attractive chapters, and her *Henry Milner*, which was dull, and *Ministering Children* which laid in at least one little reader the foundations of philanthropy."²⁸ These texts were the children's only amusements on the Sabbath, for they were forbidden to work or play, although they were allowed to walk about the grounds. This intense religious background led Gregory's to believe, at age fifteen, that she had been saved. She describes this conversion still in the third person as: "she rose up from her bed at peace with God. All doubt and all fears had gone, she was one of his children, [sic] His angels were her friends."²⁹ Her religion manifested itself "perhaps more by degrees to the practical, the philanthropic, than to the spiritual side, for she gave up a good deal of her time to works of charity, taking the poorest village on the estate . . . as her especial care."³⁰ Such philanthropy would continue throughout her life.

Charity and service to others, especially men, was part of the catechism Gregory learned from an early age. Even as a child she dutifully looked after her four younger brothers until they were too old to tolerate her care. She would, however, continue to care for one or the other of her nine brothers. In 1876, the Mistress chose her to accompany and nurse her brother, Richard Persse some twenty years her senior and suffering from tuberculosis.³¹ Gregory regretted leaving the "large household, the comradeship of the boys, the great plenty, the fireside comfort, the winter shooting parties . . . for a quiet hotel on the Riviera, monotonous walks beside the invalid's chair,

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

²⁹ Ibid., 14.

³⁰ Ibid., 16.

³¹ Kofeldt, 35.

or drives on dusty roads.”³² Her compensation was several weeks in Italy, whose language and people she quickly grew to love. During the autumn of 1878, before her third winter in Cannes, “a younger brother fell ill with pleurisy; it was before the day of trained nurses, and his younger sister [Lady Gregory] was with him night and day.”³³ Her brother Gerald recovered, but that same autumn her father died unexpectedly. Her eldest step-brother, Dudley Persse, inherited Roxborough; Frances Persse, as widowed step-mother, no longer had a position in the household, took a house in Dublin for the remaining children at home.³⁴ Gregory meanwhile again accompanied her brother Richard to the south of France.

They returned to Roxborough the following summer, where Richard succumbed in September 1879. Augusta Persse was not, however, done with serving the men of her family. “My half-brother, Dudley . . . then needed my care and Algernon, that brother who had taken over the management of the estate, had gone through a hard and anxious time and was glad of my help.”³⁵ Sir William Gregory, owner of a neighboring estate, noted her selfless devotion to her family. “Once, during this time, my mother had a visit from Sir William in Dublin, and he spoke to her with some indignation of the life I was kept to, a life of self-sacrifice he thought it. I did not feel it so. My heart was in Roxborough, the fields, the hills, the villages. I still found opportunity in the mornings

³² Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 19.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Whether Dudley Persse *films* forced Frances Persse to leave Roxborough is unknown. As the eldest son, Dudley, at fifty years old, inherited all the property and most of the family money (Dudley Persse *pere* left only 10,000 pounds to be divided between the surviving younger children). Persse *films* was, however, not legally bound to provide for his step-mother and half-brothers and sisters, and it was his right to ask them to leave. That he would do so was not unexpected—Dudley Persse *films* had left Roxborough in the early 1850s after a disagreement with his father and was afterward always distant with the family. Kofeldt, 39, 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

and on our drives to see and help some of the poor people.”³⁶ So might Augusta Persse’s life have continued, except for the intercession of this same Sir William Gregory.

The first meeting of Augusta Persse and Sir William Gregory occurred at Roxborough during a cricket match in spring 1877, although “he always declared he had seen me as a child and had said to my mother ‘that is the prettiest of all your daughters.’”³⁷ The meeting in 1877, however, made more of an impression. Lady Gregory remembered the encounter vividly:

There was a long table in the dining-room where guests were being given lunch, and I came in and went from chair to chair seeing that their wants were supplied. Sir Willam came late, was brought in and put in almost the only place left empty; it was at the head of the table. I, as I came to him, a stranger, for he had but just returned from his five years’ government of Ceylon, felt a little shy, most likely I blushed as was then my habit. I think I must have been looking rather nice, for . . . on the day that had such an influence on my fate I had worn a Paris dress . . . and a Mrs. Heath hat. I kept that hat for many years, a black and white straw with bunches of corn ears and poppies.³⁸

Sir William engaged her in conversation “with all his great charm of manner, and I sat next him for a while, glad of an opportunity of talking about Ceylon, as one of my brothers had thought of going there. After lunch also we walked and talked for a good deal of the afternoon.”³⁹

Gregory seemed very interested in the youngest Persse daughter, thirty-six years his junior, and soon afterward invited her and Richard to dine and stay at Coole, his estate only seven miles away. During this visit he gave Persse a pearl ring from Ceylon and her brother Richard grumbled afterward that Gregory had “talked more to Augusta than to

³⁶ Ibid., 27.

³⁷ Ibid., 22-3.

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁹ Ibid., 23.

me.”⁴⁰ Although the two did not meet often after that visit, Gregory did call on her repeatedly during her winters in Cannes, where Persse began to admit her feelings for him. “I had got to like him very much. He cared for the things I cared for, he could teach me and help me so much. But although at that time I cannot say the thought of marriage did not occur to me . . . yet it did not fit into the life that seemed planned out for me.”⁴¹

That “life that seemed planned out” was her tending to her brothers and managing their affairs at Roxborough. Gregory visited Roxborough sometime after Christmas “to say goodbye, as he was going abroad for the rest of the winter. He looked ill and was, I thought, depressed, and when he said goodbye I felt sad and lonely.”⁴² Persse tried to assuage her sadness by renewing her efforts at local philanthropy, persuading herself that service to others could fill the emptiness left by Gregory’s departure. An unexpected letter, however, changed her circumstances.

One morning soon afterwards . . . there was a letter for me, from Sir William, and chancing to turn it over, I was surprised to see it was sealed, which was unusual. . . . I opened the letter. It was written from London, and in it he asked me to marry him. I felt extraordinarily happy and serene, happy in the thought of being with him, of serving him, of learning from him.⁴³

The difficulty, of course, was Augusta Persse’s duty to her brothers. “I had said in my answer to him I could not leave Roxborough until there was someone to take my place there. I could not walk out of the door leaving the two brothers who needed me.”⁴⁴ She then informed him that she couldn’t marry until her brother Algernon had gotten a wife

⁴⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁴¹ Ibid., 26.

⁴² Ibid., 27.

⁴³ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

(which he would not do until 1887). Gregory was furious and wrote that “he had determined I should go with him on the journey he had planned for the spring to Rome, Athens and Constantinople, and he thought I was being made too much use of by my family.”⁴⁵ He then traveled to Dublin to meet with Persse and her mother, where a solution was found in the form of an uncle’s widow and daughter who needed a home. The Gregorys were married in London on March 4, 1880. At twenty-eight it was her first marriage; at sixty-three it was his third (fig.49).

The match was considered quite brilliant by all Dublin and London society, despite the considerable age difference, for Sir William Gregory was wealthy, cultured, and well liked by his peers. In the twelve years of their marriage the couple traveled a great deal, to Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, France, and Egypt. When in London they moved in the highest social circles, and Lady Gregory made many of the connections that would later serve her and the Abbey Theatre so well. It was a happy marriage, although not a particularly passionate one. William Gregory’s great love had been his second wife, Katherine; Augusta Persse was looking for a companion whom she could serve. Their relationship, therefore, was more formal and social than

⁴⁵ Lady Gregory quoted in Kofeldt, 43-4.



Figure 49. Augusta Persse at the time of her marriage to Sir William Gregory.

passionate, but still very much in keeping with the ideal of Victorian marriage that stressed service as well as emotional satisfaction.⁴⁶

Lady Gregory would, however, discover the two loves of her life within the first two years of her marriage. The first was her son, William Robert Gregory, conceived only five months after his parents' wedding and born on May 20, 1881. Lady Gregory's diary entry for that day reads, "Luncheon party, bowers, Oranmores, Mr. Gough, Power Trench, A. Moore, F, O'Hara. At 9:00 Baby was born."⁴⁷ Although she would come to love him dearly, Lady Gregory scarcely saw the child during its first year, for he was sent to Coole when he was two months old while his parents set off for the Continent. After a brief visit in September, they left to spend the winter in Egypt. There she found the true love of her life, Wilfred Scawen Blunt.

The cause that brought the two of them together was Egyptian Home Rule, and both were passionate in their desire to see the Egyptian people rule in their own land. They also became passionate in their private lives. On their first meeting Blunt described Lady Gregory as "a quiet little woman of perhaps five and twenty, rather plain than pretty, but still attractive, with much good sense, and a fair share of Irish wit."⁴⁸ Blunt, a poet and owner of a grand English estate, Crabbet, was also something of a loose cannon, and extremely handsome. The knowledge of his many love affairs did not daunt Gregory, who would join their ranks in 1882. Blunt's account of this liaison acknowledges the part politics played in exciting their passion:

⁴⁶ Kofeldt, 40. For a detailed discussion of marriage in the Victorian era, see Estelle B. Freeman and Erna Olafson Hellerstein, "Introduction to Part II: Adult Woman: Personal Life," in Hellerstein, Hume, and Offen, 118-133.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁸ Wilfred Scawen Blunt quoted in Elizabeth Longford, *A Pilgrimage of Passion: The Life of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt* (London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1982), 191.

This naturally drew us more closely than ever together, and at the climax of the tragedy by a spontaneous impulse we found comfort in each other's arms. It was a consummation neither of us, I think, foresaw, and was a quite new experience in her quiet life. . . .to both of us the passionate element in our intercourse at this time proved a source of inspiration and of strength. It was under its influence that I was able to carry on that hardest public battle of my life, the rescuing of Arabi [the Egyptian nationalist leader] from the vengeance of his enemies – she working with me and advising and encouraging.⁴⁹

The affair was actually not consummated until December 1882, at Crabbet Park.

Gregory's diary entry for December 9 was marked by an "elaborate curlique, a cross between an X and a W and the words, 'Wilfrid in the evening.'"⁵⁰ She wrote twelve love sonnets about her affair with Blunt, recording her love, her fears of discovery, and her preparation for being replaced by another lover.⁵¹ The affair lasted until August 1883, when the Gregorys were about to return to Coole and Blunt was preparing to leave for India. Blunt's diary for this period acknowledges the sonnets and describes their last night at Crabbet on August 6:

She wrote them for me as a farewell to our passion and put them in my hand the morning that we parted after a last night spent together in the room over the bow-window at Crabbet . . . and they tell all our love's history that needs the telling.⁵²

Gregory's diary reveals another meeting on August 8; Blunt came to lunch and the day's entry contains two small Xs. The affair did end though, with Gregory going to Ireland shortly afterwards.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Kofeldt, 65.

⁵¹ Ibid., 66-7.

⁵² Wilfred Scawen Blunt quoted in Longford, 194.

⁵³ Kofeldt, 68-9.

The next nine years were busy years for Lady Gregory, who moved in a cycle from Coole in the summers to London or the Continent during the rest of the year. One year they went to India and Ceylon. Then, in March 1892, two days after their twelfth wedding anniversary, Sir William Gregory died. Although their marriage had not been touched by passion, there had been great love, and Lady Gregory wore black mourning clothes for her husband for the remaining forty years of her life.

With William Gregory's death, Lady Gregory's life changed yet again, to one of independence. She had the maintenance of the estate, the education of Robert, and the preservation of her social status to attend to. For the first time in her life she got to make her own decisions. It was during this period that she began to pursue writing in a more than casual way. During her marriage she had written two articles for *The Fortnightly Review*, "Through Portugal," and "Glimpses of the Soudan."⁵⁴ And in 1891, *Argosy* had published "A Philanthropist," written under the pseudonym Angus Grey.⁵⁵ Now she began again to write and publish. She first wrote *A Phantom's Pilgrimage: or Home Ruin*, a pamphlet opposing Home Rule. She readied Sir William's memoirs for publication, writing a preface for it as well as documenting the years after his return from Ceylon in 1877. Still writing as Angus Grey, she published another story for *Argosy*, "A Gentleman," in 1894. In 1897, she brought out the well-received *Mr. Gregory's Letter Box*, a book based on the correspondence of her husband's grandfather, circa 1813. She had earlier written to Blunt, "It is easy to write 'situations' or conversation, but the trivial parts are the difficulty, getting people up and down stairs, or in and out of the house

⁵⁴ Colin Smythe in Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 297. n.2.

⁵⁵ Kofeldt, 86. Colin Smythe, editor of Gregory's *Seventy Years*, reports this magazine's title as *Living Age*.

gracefully.”⁵⁶ Her move from prose fiction to playwriting would take care of that particular difficulty.

When Lady Gregory met W. B. Yeats in 1897 she was trying “to find work to do for my country.”⁵⁷ In the early 1890s, stirred by Yeats’s *Celtic Twilight*, she had gathered legends and folklore among the people of Galway, and was now further encouraged and guided in this effort by Yeats; these folk tales and poetry would eventually become the basis for many of her plays. Their idea for an Irish Literary Theatre coupled with her other interests in the folklore and the Irish language, all part of the Irish Renaissance that was emerging, gave her the focus for the rest of her life’s work. “And so I found my work in Ireland and could claim comradeship with other workers. The threads of new interests began to be woven into the pattern of my life. The theatre, the folk legends, the language.”⁵⁸

In July 1898, Yeats and George Russell were invited to Coole for the month; Yeats remained until September. She described him affectionately at this time as “A most brilliant, charming, loveable companion, never out of humour, simple, gentle, interested in all that went on.”⁵⁹ Gregory needed a new person to serve and Yeats was the best candidate available. Gregory was quick to assume Yeats as her particular “cause” when Yeats’s friend, Katherine Tynan wrote to Gregory, “He never had the slightest idea of looking after himself.”⁶⁰ Gregory then fussed over his meals, made sure he had beef broth to strengthen him before he appeared for breakfast, drove him in the fresh air collecting folklore, and even installed him permanently in the best upstairs

⁵⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁵⁷ Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 307.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 321.

⁵⁹ Gregory quoted in Kofeldt, 117.

⁶⁰ Katherine Tynan quoted in Kofeldt, 116.

bedroom.⁶¹ Gregory later wrote of that time, “His healthiness, both of mind and body, increased while with us.”⁶² It was the beginning of a relationship that fell just short of marriage, with all of the benefits of companionship and none of the constraints.

Gregory and Yeats were already collaborating on the folk tales and legends of Western Ireland, and the pattern of their working relationship was being set. Gregory reported that “if I was typing in the drawing-room suddenly [Yeats was] bursting in with some great new idea, and when it was expounded, laughing and saying: ‘I treat you as my father says, as an anvil to beat out my ideas on.’”⁶³ Upon this anvil such plays as *Diarmuid and Grania*, *Where There is Nothing*, and *Kathleen ni Houlihan* were forged, and, as is the custom, the blacksmith and not the anvil took the credit for the creation. Gregory would, however, have it no other way. Yeats had much promise as a writer and visionary at this juncture, and anything she could do to further his fame and fortune she would do, including writing his plays. Her role in these early years of the theatre was, as it had always been, to serve.

Gregory had continued her fiction writing even while writing plays with Yeats and in 1902 published the first volume of Irish epic tales, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. The companion volume, *Gods and Fighting Men*, would be published two years later. With these tales, the Irish equivalent of *Morte d’Arthur*, “I had done what I wanted: something for the dignity of Ireland. The reviews showed that the enemy [England] could not longer scoff at our literature and its ‘want of idealism.’”⁶⁴ She would continue to publish

⁶¹ Kofeldt, 116.

⁶² Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 313-4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 400.

volumes of folklore until 1920: *Poets and Dreamers* (1903), *A Book of Saints and Wonders* (1906), and *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920).

Gregory believed that she was destined to write (fig. 50). “If I had not met Yeats I believe I should still have become a writer, because my energy was turning to that side, and I had got a certain training in the editing of the *Autobiography* and the *Letter Box*.”⁶⁵ Yeats, however, did not encourage her writings in the beginning. “He was slow in coming to believe I had any gift for writing, and he would not encourage me to it, thinking he made better use of my folk-lore gatherings than I could do. It was only when I had read him one day in London my chapter the ‘death of Cuchulain’ that he came to look on me as a fellow writer.”⁶⁶ She does credit Yeats with giving her freedom and opportunity to write, and with affording her preparation for playwriting:

As to playwriting it came as if by accident. I think my preparation for it had been in great part that London life, that education in talking. For what is the substance of drama but conversation clipped and arranged? I have also told in *Our Irish Theatre* of my preparation in working with Yeats. ‘He who loseth himself findeth himself’, for I had no thought of any personal benefit to myself when I helped in his work.⁶⁷

Gregory certainly did find herself as playwright: in the next twenty-four years she would write thirty original plays and five translations of foreign masterpieces. All but two, *The Jester*, a three-act wonder play written for her grandson’s school, and *Grania*, written in 1910, were produced at the Abbey.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 390.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 411-12.

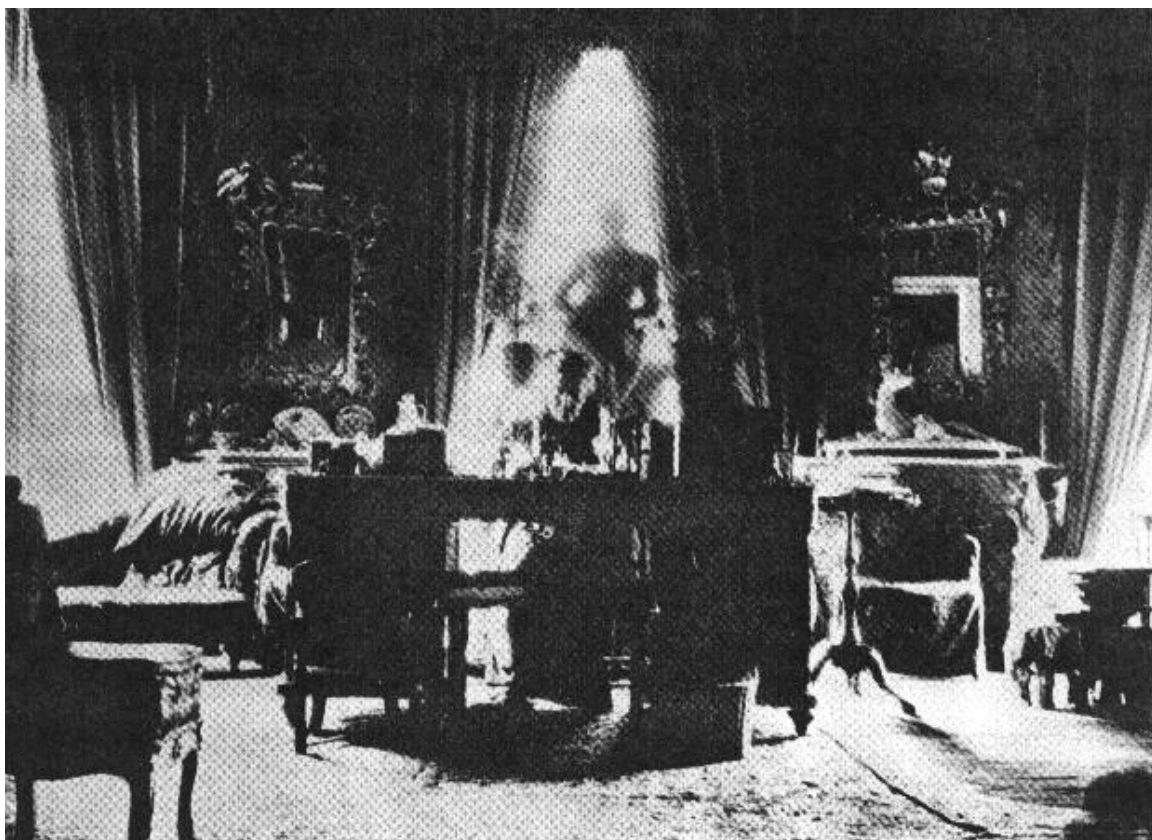


Figure 50. Lady Gregory at her writing desk at Coole Park.

Lady Gregory's first acknowledged play, *Twenty-five*, was written in 1902, "a rather sentimental comedy, not very amusing (fig. 51). It was useful at the time when we had so few, but it was weak."⁶⁸ Even if not a very good play, it was sorely needed by the Abbey Theatre. "We had less than half a dozen plays with which to begin our enterprise."⁶⁹ *Twenty-five* was scarcely noticed in the reviews, either in Ireland or in London. Joseph Holloway wrote of it:

The homely nature of Lady Gregory's play *Twenty-five* was in great contrast to *The Hour Glass*, but the vital incident – the game of cards – scarcely proved convincing. It is hard to imagine a man who is being turned out of his home, sitting calmly down to play at cards for such high stakes . . . and taking the winning of such large amounts in such a matter of fact way. This is the weak point in the piece, and, occurring where it should be the strongest, it militated greatly against the complete success of the clever little work. The dialogue is very natural right through, and the characters cleverly suggested.⁷⁰

Gregory herself was not satisfied with the work and successfully reworked it as *The Jackdaw* in 1907.

Her next comedy was a success. *Spreading the News* (fig. 52) opened the Abbey Theatre on December 27, 1904, along with Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*, *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, and Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*. This little comic gem became the most popular of her comedies and was extremely well received on opening night. *The Freeman's Journal* wrote, "Lady Gregory's new 'Comedy' relieved the atmosphere of

⁶⁸ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 57.

⁶⁹ Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 316.

⁷⁰ Joseph Holloway, *A Selection from His Unpublished Journal: Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, Robert Hogan and Michael O'Neill, eds., (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 22.

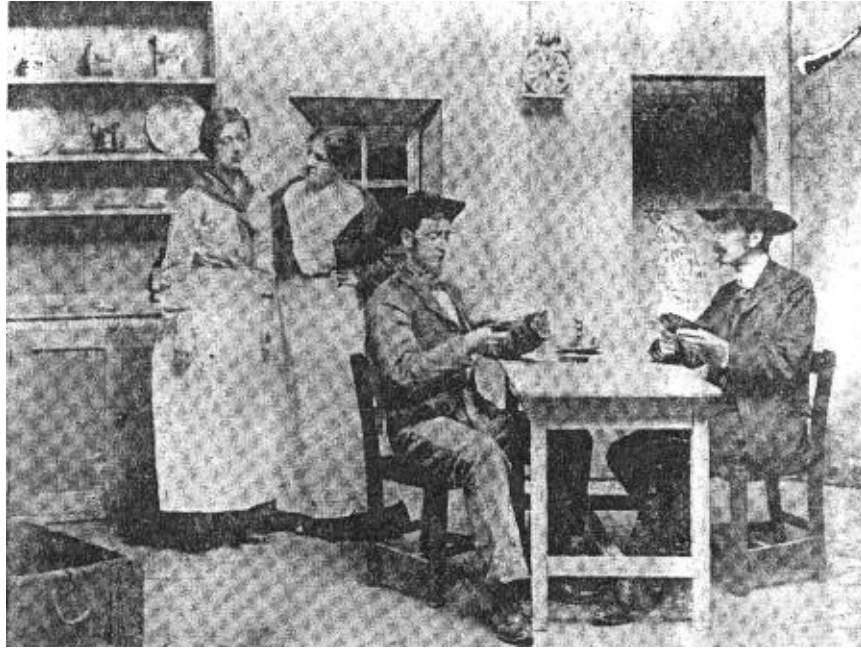


Figure 51. A scene from *Twenty-five*, Gregory's first acknowledged play.



Figure 52. A scene from *Spreading the News*, presented on the Abbey Theatre's opening night, December 27, 1904.

tragedy [from *Kathleen ni Houlihan*]. It is a farcical comedy of a humour somewhat akin to Lover's, but dependent for its situation, not on the blundering stupidity of the 'Handy Andy' type, but on the tendency to innocent exaggeration."⁷¹ Joseph Holloway's opinion was that the "merry, homely, little farce by Lady Gregory . . . caught on at once. . . . and as the dialogue was capitally true to life the effect was most amusing."⁷² Willie Fay, the stage manager for the play, later called *Spreading the News* "the first and most uproarious of the many delicious half-hours of fooling with which Lady Gregory was to enrich the repertory of the Abbey Theatre."⁷³ And Lennox Robinson, financial manager and Director at the Abbey for more than forty years, wrote in his history of the theatre that "her second comedy had no sentiment in it and was tremendously amusing. In one stride she had achieved a small masterpiece."⁷⁴ There were, of course, detractors, as Gregory herself pointed out:

I heard it [the play] attacked at that time on the ground that Irish people never were gossips to such an extent, but it has held its own, and our audiences have had their education as well as writers and players, and know now that a play is a selection not a photograph and that the much misquoted 'mirror to nature' was not used by its author or any good play-writer at all.⁷⁵

The years 1906 and 1907 saw four more comedies, *Hyacinth Halvey*, *The Canavans*, *The Jackdaw*, and *The Rising of the Moon*, all well received by audiences and

⁷¹ *The Freeman's Journal* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *Laying the Foundations*, 129.

⁷² Holloway, 51.

⁷³ William Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre: An Autobiographical Record*. (London: Rich & Cowan, Ltd., 1935), 164.

⁷⁴ Lennox Robinson, comp., *Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History, 1899-1951* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, Ltd, 1951), 46.

⁷⁵ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 57.

critics. Holloway reported that “Lady Gregory’s extremely amusing farce of country-town life, entitled *Hyacinth Halvey* . . . went like wildfire from first to last. If anything, it is funnier than *Spreading the News*.”⁷⁶ *The Freeman’s Journal* “noted that ‘the risible faculties’ of a ‘large, cultured and fashionable audience’ were kept employed.”⁷⁷ Gregory received somewhat less favorable criticism for *The Canavans*, although some was still positive. *The Freeman’s Journal* gave the most in-depth review of the play:

Here . . . we have a piece that is a play, and it was very nearly being an exceptionally good play. It is clever enough; the dialogue is admirably vivacious; the characters are foiled against one another with real dramatic skill; the humour is spontaneous and wholesome; the caricature restrained and effective, and the sarcasm mordant, yet genial. The only fault is that the story does not bear the expansion of three acts, and the almost dazzling promise of the opening is disappointed in the weakness of the climax. . . . As it is, one is very loath to find any fault whatever with a piece which created so much amusement from first to last.⁷⁸

The play did not, however, impress Joseph Holloway, who wrote, “Lady Gregory’s comedy was nothing more or less than an extravaganza of the type popular in the days of my youth, without the enlivening music. . . . There was nothing convincing about it. . . . The piece was simply too childish for grown-ups.”⁷⁹ In 1907, Gregory revised *The Canavans*, and wrote of it, “Some call it farce, some like it the best of my comedies.”⁸⁰

The Jackdaw, a re-working of the plot of *Twenty-five*, premiered in February 1907, shortly after *The Playboy of the Western World* had caused rioting at the Abbey. Holloway was better pleased with this Gregory play, remarking that

⁷⁶ Holloway, 70.

⁷⁷ *The Freeman’s Journal* quoted in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, eds., *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge, 1905-1909* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1978), 64.

⁷⁸ *The Freeman’s Journal* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 69.

⁷⁹ Holloway, 77-8.

⁸⁰ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 59.

I found Lady Gregory's new comedy in one act, entitled *The Jackdaw*, in progress, and the audience enjoying it very much. . . . To me the whole appeared a mad, merry farce frankly played in a farcical spirit by the company, but Lady Gregory styles it a comedy, and there you are. As one of the Directors of the company, she calls the tune, and you have to dance to it, or police will be called in.⁸¹

The Irish Times remarked that the acting on opening night may have detracted from the play:

There was a small, but an appreciative audience, and the amusing situation which the piece develops appeared to meet with much approval. The comedy, however, is somewhat unconvincing. At any rate that was the impression conveyed, but this view may have resulted to some extent from the difficulty of following out the various ideas contained in it owing to the unnecessarily rapid rate at which some members of the cast delivered their lines.⁸²

The Irish Independent commented on the same problem. "The dialogue--or what could be heard of it--is bright and mirthful, but the plot is hardly what one might expect a writer of Lady Gregory's abilities to work upon."⁸³

Gregory's last comic play of 1907 was *The Rising of the Moon*, also styled as a patriotic or history play. The piece may be based on an incident Gregory heard about when she was young, regarding the escape by boat of Hamilton Rowan, a Protestant landlord forced to flee Ireland with a price on his head. Her old nurse would tell her

of his escape from prison in which he was aided by his heroic wife and of the boatman from whom he tried to hide his face until they said, 'We know you very well, Mr. Rowan, and the reward that's on your head and there is no fear that we will betray you.'⁸⁴

⁸¹ Holloway, 88.

⁸² *The Irish Times* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 172.

⁸³ *The Irish Independent* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 173.

⁸⁴ Gregory quoted in Kofeldt, 23.

It was the only controversial play Gregory wrote. *The Irish Times* denounced it as unpatriotic.

If there is one body in this country which more than another Irishmen of all classes feel a just pride in it is the Royal Irish Constabulary, and any attempt to hold up its members as cowards and traitors is certain to be bitterly resented. . . . The metamorphosis effected in the case of this worthy officer of the law , in the course of a few minutes, is quite remarkable. From being a man burning with zeal to do his duty, and faithfully fulfill his oath, he becomes first a rank coward in face of danger, and secondly a man whose sense of duty is undermined by the recital of a few songs. . . . With all due respect to Lady Gregory this is not a fair portrait of the typical Irish constable, and the Irish public will be most reluctant to accept it.⁸⁵

Other critics, however, disagreed. Holloway reported it “a splendid little piece.”⁸⁶ *The Freeman’s Journal* was most complimentary. “An excellent little curtain-raiser, depending, of course, almost entirely on the chat -- spirited, pointed, witty -- between the ballad-singer and the policeman, while the situation . . . is extremely funny. There isn’t a word wasted, and interest, excitement, and uncertainty are worked into a climax which is exceptionally clever and telling.”⁸⁷

The Workhouse Ward (fig. 53), written and produced in 1908, was Gregory’s last true success with comedy. The little play was immensely popular and quickly became a staple of the repertoire. The other six comedies, written over the next seventeen years, met with cooler receptions. *The Image*, *Coats*, *The Bogie Men*, *Damer’s Gold*, *The Wrens*, and *Hanrahan’s Oath* were all dismissed as slight efforts on Gregory’s part.

⁸⁵ *The Irish Times* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 173.

⁸⁶ Holloway, 88.

⁸⁷ *The Freeman’s Journal* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *Years of Synge*, 174.

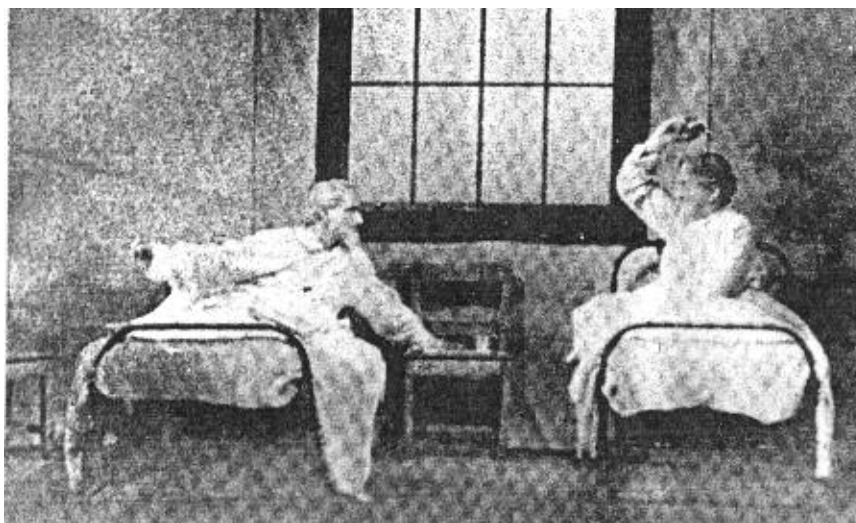


Figure 53. A scene from *The Workhouse Ward*, written originally as *The Poorhouse* in 1903.

Hanrahan's Oath elicited especial condemnation from several critics, including Joseph Holloway who wrote,

I thought as I listened to such drivel that it was a sad thing to think that the concoctor of such wearying balderdash was the one who chose the fate of pieces sent to the Abbey. . . . Oh, the dreariness and the blasphemy of it all! After this 'comedy,' an Abbey audience can stand anything.⁸⁸

Even worse was the censure from the critic for *The Sport*:

There is no other way of describing 'Hanrahan's Oath,' the latest and worst of Lady Gregory's one-act efforts to, presumably, cultivate and enlighten Abbey patrons. There are half-a-dozen characters, all more or less apparently tainted with lunacy, and the only thing to be said in favour of the piece is that it is sufficiently short to prevent the audience from becoming similarly touched. . . . In the course of the babbling blatherskite one manages to learn that Hanrahan took an oath of silence. It is to be deplored that the authoress did not do likewise -- and keep it.⁸⁹

Despite the disastrous critique of her later work, Gregory's reputation as a master of comedy remained intact, resting on the short masterpieces the Abbey Theatre relied on heavily during their first years.

In addition to her thirteen comedies, Gregory wrote folk-history plays, tragedies, and wonder plays. Although she had doubts about expanding to other genres, Gregory felt compelled to do so.

Perhaps I ought to have written nothing but these short comedies, but desire for experiment is like fire in the blood, and I had had from the beginning a vision of historical plays being sent by us through all the counties of Ireland. For to have a real success and to come into the life of the country, one must touch a real and eternal emotion, and history comes only next to religion in our country.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Holloway, 196.

⁸⁹ *The Sport* quoted in Holloway, 285 n.1.

⁹⁰ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 57-8.

In his history of the Abbey theatre, Lennox Robinson affirmed that Gregory “tried and very nearly succeeded in making what she called ‘Folk-History Plays’ popular. they were to be part of the noble Irish theatre she and Yeats had dreamed of.”⁹¹

Of the three folk-history plays, *Kincora*, *The White Cockade*, and *The Deliverer*, *Kincora* received the best reviews.⁹² The play retells the story of Brian Boru, the High King of ancient Ireland and his wife, Gormleith, who betrayed him and brought him to his death. Gregory confessed she “made many bad beginnings, and if I had listened to Mr. Yeats’s advice I should have given it up, but I began again and again till it was at last moulded it in at least a possible shape. It went well with our audience. There was some enthusiasm for it, being the first historical play we had produced.”⁹³

The press was extremely receptive to *Kincora* and very complimentary to the playwright. *The Evening Herald* reported that it was “not only a great advance on her previous tentative efforts at dramatic construction . . . but in several respects the best play produced under the auspices of the National Theatre Society.”⁹⁴ *The Evening Mail* stated, “it is not too much to say that in their repertoire they have no play which is stronger, more dramatic in its story and in the manner of its telling, or more likely to win a lasting popularity.”⁹⁵ *The Freeman’s Journal* spoke highly of Gregory’s use of language in *Kincora*:

To fit such a story and character into a prose play would have seemed an impossibility. But Lady Gregory’s prose, in its best moments, offers new material to sustain the argument that the distinction as to form between prose and

⁹¹ Robinson, *Ireland’s Abbey Theatre*, 50.

⁹² *The Canavans* and *Dergovilla* could also be categorized as folk-history plays, although usually the former is considered with Gregory’s comedies and the latter with her tragedies.

⁹³ Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 58.

⁹⁴ *The Evening Herald* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 24.

⁹⁵ *The Evening Mail* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 24.

poetry is an unreal one. Some of the speeches have the afflatus of the best blank verse, without its measure. If she has failed to some extent to vitalize or build up with sufficient complexity the chief male characters of the play, she has utilized the minor characters skillfully to supply a chorus to her theme. . . . Some of the dialogue among them is full of wistful wisdom and the real poetry that so often emerges in rustic speech.⁹⁶

Gregory wrote only two tragedies, *The Gaol Gate* in 1906 and *Dergorvilla* in 1907. Although *The Gaol Gate* is now considered one of Gregory's masterpieces, it was not appreciated at the time of its first production. *The Daily Press* regarded it "a work of mournful type," while *The Irish Times* declared it "a rather unconventional, not to say unconvincing, piece of work."⁹⁷ Even Joseph Holloway was not pleased with the play and wrote, "Lady Gregory's tragic incident *The Gaol Gate* impressed by the excellence of the playing rather than by the excellence of its dramatic quality."⁹⁸ The only positive report came from *The Freeman's Journal*, affirming that "into that one act is thrown an all but infinity of the deepest pathos."⁹⁹ Despite the poor notices, Gregory's tragedy was placed in the company's repertoire and given repeatedly for the next twenty years.

Hailed as Gregory's best work to date, *Dervorgilla*, styled as a tragedy but also belonging to the folk-history category, received excellent reviews in 1907. "Now the play itself is far the best that Lady Gregory has yet accomplished. It is interesting not alone by reason of its subject and the method by which it is dealt with, but there is in it a really wonderful contrast of character that deeply interests the sympathetic spectator and listener."¹⁰⁰ Lennox Robinson cited it as "a small masterpiece."¹⁰¹ The story concerns

⁹⁶ *The Freeman's Journal* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 24-5.

⁹⁷ *The Dailey Express* and *The Irish Times* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 66.

⁹⁸ Holloway, 73.

⁹⁹ *The Freeman's Journal* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *The Years of Synge*, 66.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

the medieval queen of one of the Irish kingdoms. Dervorgilla, wife of the King of Breffney, who fell in love and eloped with the King of Leinster, a neighboring kingdom, in 1152. When the King of Breffney attacked Leinster in reprisal, Leinster asked England's King Henry II for assistance. Henry obligingly sent him an army, thus beginning the English occupation of Ireland. Gregory's play, set towards the end of Dervorgilla's life, employed the premise that the slandered queen had lived happily in anonymity, but as soon as her true identity was known, she became an outcast in a community for whom she had cared for many years. Gregory may have written the play to expiate some of the guilt she was feeling at the time. "Dervorgilla I wrote at a time when circumstances had forced us to accept an English stage-manager [Ben Iden Payne] for the Abbey. I was very strongly against this. I felt as if I should be spoken of some day as one who had betrayed her country's trust."¹⁰²

The last group of plays Lady Gregory contributed to the Abbey was her wonder plays. These five plays, *The Golden Apple*, *The Dragon*, *The Jester*, *Aristotle's Bellows*, and *Dave*, were full of wonderment: a cross between fairy-tale and fable, they were produced at the Abbey Theatre at a time when childhood wonder and happy endings were at a premium.¹⁰³ The first, *The Dragon*, was produced in 1919 (although Gregory had written it in 1917), at a time of great upheaval in Ireland. From the Easter Rising of 1916 the Anglo-Irish war raged in Dublin; even worse was *The Terror*, the military occupation by the Black and Tans, English soldiers who were sent to maintain order but who terrified

¹⁰¹ Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*, 50.

¹⁰² Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, 58.

¹⁰³ Of this group *The Jester* was never performed at the Abbey Theatre and *Dave* was not written until 1927. They therefore fall outside the scope of this dissertation and will not be discussed in this chapter.

the inhabitants with unwarranted violence.¹⁰⁴ On the heels of the Terror came the Irish civil war, so that the years between 1916 and 1923 were a time of fear and not fantasy. Gregory's wonder plays gave the Abbey patrons a reprieve from the harsh realities of their lives.

It was also a time of uncertainty at the Abbey Theatre. According to Lennox Robinson, a Director at the time, the year 1919 was a watershed for the theatre, a time of bringing in new blood, both on the stage and behind the scenes. New actors were hired, after several name players left in 1918, and new playwrights were sought. He counted a revitalized Lady Gregory as part of the new blood (fig. 54).

In the same year a new Lady Gregory appeared. She had in 1904 created her comedies and tragedies of Kiltartan. . . . She had made her Folk-History Plays, she had adapted Moliere, but now she was to write her Wonder Plays, whose scenes are laid half-way between Clare-Galway and Fairyland. The best of these three plays is *The Dragon* (1919), almost as good is *Aristotle's Bellows* (1921), slightly less good is *The Golden Apple* (1920). These are plays for children of all ages from seven to seventy.¹⁰⁵

Robinson especially praised Gregory's use of character. "If Shakespeare evoked great players, these plays of Lady Gregory called forth genius in actress and actor."¹⁰⁶ Gregory was pleased with the audience response to her newest work. "And at the end great applause and many calls for 'Author' - and I made my bow more confidently than when I had last done so as *Kathleen ni Houlihan*."¹⁰⁷ Joseph Holloway also enjoyed this play. "The *Dragon* proved a fanciful, genuine folklore-fairy play, full of homely wit and

¹⁰⁴ The soldiers were so called because their uniforms combined these colors.

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*, 120.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁰⁷ Gregory quoted in Kofeldt, 260. Gregory refers to the several performances in March 1919 when circumstances forced her to appear on stage in the role of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. See Chapter 5 for details of her performance.



Figure 54. Lady Gregory's career as playwright was rejuvenated by her wonder plays.

delicate fancy. . . . The children in the audience enjoyed the wonder play immensely. . . . It is an ideal children's play."¹⁰⁸

Holloway was similarly complimentary to *Aristotle's Bellows*. "The first production of Lady Gregory's three-act Wonder Play, *Aristotle's Bellows*, was a great success, and the players were called at the end and also the author. It is a whimsical fairy play with snatches of unaccompanied songs interspersed with droll effectiveness. . . . I congratulated Lady Gregory on the success of the piece."¹⁰⁹ Holloway was, however, less sanguine about *The Golden Apple*, writing, "Lady Gregory's play in three acts, *The Golden Apple*, for Kiltartan children, was staged for the first time on to-night at the Abbey, and proved full of fantastic wonderment and droll and poetic touches in many instances, but on the whole the many scenes seemed scrappy, and the ending tame and lame."¹¹⁰

Throughout the early period of the Abbey Theatre Gregory had translated works for the theatre to perform. Because the theatre's patent specified that only works on Irish subjects or foreign masterpieces could be performed on the Abbey stage, it was difficult to continuously present fresh bills; therefore, in 1906, the directors decided to produce Moliere's *The Doctor in Spite of Himself*. Willie Fay related their attempt to find a suitable translation:

I ventured to suggest that Synge and I take the best English version of *Le Medecin Malge Lui* that we could find and rewrite it between us so that it would at least 'speak.' Then up rose Lady Gregory, and said, 'I will go home to Gort this day and I will make a translation in the Galway dialect that I have used in my own plays, and then it will be sure to suit our people.' And so she did. And when she brought

¹⁰⁸ Holloway, 204.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

the manuscript it was not a bit like the dead literary English of the standard translations that are used in the schoolroom. It had every bit as much vitality as her *Spreading the News* or *Hyacinth Halvey*, and behind it were all the power and imagination of the world's greatest master of comedy. It was a revelation of what can be done in colloquial dialect.¹¹¹

Gregory was an accomplished linguist, fluent in French, German, Italian, and Gaelic; therefore, it was really common sense that she should translate the work from the French; it was her particular understanding of the Irish audiences that made her decide to overlay the Kiltartan dialect onto these comedies. The resulting production was well received by both audiences and critics. Fay recalled the audience's reaction one memorable evening. "I remember one evening, at one of the most amusing passages, some of the audience laughed in a way which nearly made me forget my lines. . . . [Usually] it is the laughter of people who know the world and its ways. It has not the frankness, the gaiety and spontaneity that you find in a child's laughter. Yet that was just the quality of the laughter on the occasion of which I am speaking, and it was genuinely disconcerting, simply because it was so delightful."¹¹² Yeats was particularly pleased with Gregory's effort, remarking to Joseph Holloway that "he was tickled at the idea of the audience wanting the author out at the end of the farce, and thought Lady Gregory's translation the finest he had ever seen of any of Moliere's plays."¹¹³

The newspaper accounts of this first Moliere piece are somewhat subdued, but, as Robert Hogan points out, "Although the Abbey produced some of its more memorable and popular plays in 1906, the newspaper accounts of the productions are disappointingly unilluminating. . . . In short, the year's journalism sheds little light on either the quality of

¹¹¹ Fay and Carswell, *Fays of the Abbey Theatre*, 193-4.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 196.

¹¹³ Holloway, 70.

the plays or the nature of their playing.”¹¹⁴ *The Freeman’s Journal’s* characteristic comment was that “continuous peals of laughter testified to the risibility of the farce.”¹¹⁵ *The Irish Times’* report was a little more loquacious regarding Gregory’s translation, stating that she “presented a dialogue which is easily acted, while all the humour of the original is faithfully preserved.”¹¹⁶ In addition, Gregory translated three more of Moliere’s comedies during the course of her life, *The Rogeries of Scapin* in 1908, *The Miser* in 1909, and *The Would-be Gentleman* in 1926. All were well received and became, in time, staples of the Abbey repertoire.¹¹⁷

Lady Gregory quickly emerged as a major playwright at the Abbey, offering mostly comedies with a strong showing also of tragedies, wonder plays, and translations. In addition to her own plays, she co-authored a number of works, including several well-known ones for which Yeats received credit.

Gregory’s tendency to self-effacement may have developed early in her life when her deeply religious mother instilled in her such values as the primacy of men and the necessity for serving others. Her family’s wealth and social position, as well as its values, enabled her marriage to an older wealthy man, a neighbor, whose own wealth and social position assured Gregory’s. When widowed, her interest in Irish culture and in writing surfaced, encouraged finally by Yeats with whom she shared enthusiasm for a truly Irish theatre. Contemporaneous accounts make clear that her strengths as a playwright lay in her abilities in language, her quick wit, and, later, her ability to draw

¹¹⁴ Hogan and Kilroy, *Years of Synge*, 64.

¹¹⁵ *The Freeman’s Journal* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *Years of Synge*, 65.

¹¹⁶ *The Irish Times* quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, *Years of Synge*, 65.

¹¹⁷ Gregory also translated Maeterlinck’s *Interior* which was played at the Abbey in 1907 and Sudermann’s *Teja* in 1908.

strong and believable characters, assessments in keeping with those of contemporary scholars who have studied her plays as works of drama.¹¹⁸

What earlier scholars have failed to credit sufficiently is the role of Gregory-as-Playwright to the success of the Abbey Theatre. Although the value of her plays as literature has been amply documented, what has not been credited is their value as a theatrical commodity. One of Lady Gregory's primary contributions as a playwright was the number of plays she produced at the Abbey Theatre in a very short and very critical time. During the early years, the Abbey suffered from a shortage of producible material because the type of drama needed was not readily available. The theatre's patent required it to produce either Irish plays or foreign masterpieces. Because the theatre's intent was to present indigenous drama that would fuel a nationalist spirit in Ireland, the former was preferable. The problem was that there were very few playwrights producing native drama in Ireland, and although most of them belonged to the Irish Literary Theatre, they alone were not sufficiently prolific to sustain a full theatrical season.

Gregory's emergence as a playwright in 1903 boosted their ranks, and, by 1904, she was their major producing playwright. Of the four plays produced during the opening week of the Abbey Theatre—*On Baile's Strand*, *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, *Spreading the News*, and *In the Shadow of the Glen*—three were her works or collaborations. Between 1905 and 1908, of the thirty new plays produced on the Abbey stage, almost half (thirteen) were either Gregory's or collaborations with her. In 1906,

¹¹⁸ For complete analyses of Gregory's plays see Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1961); Ann Saddlemeier, *In Defence of Lady Gregory, Playwright* (Dublin: the Dolmen Press, 1966); Mary Lou Kofeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); Lorna D. Young, "In Retrospect: Lady Gregory's Plays Fifty Years Later," in *Lady Gregory, Fifty Years After*, ed. Ann Saddlemeier and Colin Smythe (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987); Christopher Murray, "Lady Gregory: Coming to Terms," in *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997).

she wrote two of the four new plays produced; in 1906, she wrote or translated five of the seven new plays presented; and in 1907, she wrote or collaborated on five of the nine new productions given. By 1908 her surge of dramas had slowed somewhat, and she produced only one translation and one new play out of the ten original productions that year. Gregory's body of work from 1904 to 1908, however, became staple fare at the Abbey. Of the thirteen plays written during this five-year period, at least ten went immediately into the repertoire and were revived often during the next twenty years. Gregory's plays thus provided the theatre with exactly the kind of fare it sought to further the aims of the nationalist movement and to strengthen the revival of Irish culture.

Playwright Gregory's second major contribution was her body of comedies, written specifically to fill a need because most of the other Abbey dramatists were writing other forms of drama. "My own comedies were written simply because at the time comedy was so much needed."¹¹⁹ Few comedies other than Gregory's were produced before 1913; the exceptions were William Boyle's comedies *The Building Fund* (1905), *The Eloquent Dempsey* (1906), and *Family Failing* (1912), J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, and George Fitzmaurice's *The Country Dressmaker* in 1907. *The Scheming Lieutenant*, a farce by Richard Brinsley Sheridan and *The Suburban Groove*, billed as a "mild satire," by W. F. Casey were the only other comic plays produced during those years. During that same period, 1903 to 1913, Gregory wrote eleven comedies (eight one-acts, one two-act, and two three-acts), most of which were immediately put into the theatre's repertoire. They are almost all peasant comedies and went far towards establishing the Irish peasant play as the genre of the Abbey Theatre, a

¹¹⁹ Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 316.

third major contribution of Gregory although one usually credited to Synge.¹²⁰ That is, Lady Gregory as much as anyone provided the kinds of plays with which the Abbey gained its reputation for indigenous Irish drama. A fourth contribution, then, in a very real sense was the consistent number and popularity of Lady Gregory's plays that sustained the Abbey during its critical early years.

As a result of Gregory's successful and prolific writings, she became one of the Abbey Theatre's major box office assets. Annie Horniman pointed out this detail to Yeats in a letter dated November 1906. "If *The Canavans* was not ready you were most wise to withdraw it. Lady Gregory's work must be well treated -- she is the best 'draw' of the lot of you. I am so proud of her because she makes the people laugh in a witty manner."¹²¹ *The Daily Express* gave a similar opinion a year later.

Lady Gregory's plays have established themselves among the most popular in the repertoire, principally because of the gift of real humour which sparkles within them. This new play [Dervorgilla], however, finds her in a serious and distinctly tragic vein, only to prove convincingly that the penetrating insight into character and characteristics and the facile and winning expression of them which she has employed in her previous writings have not failed her in her latest writings.¹²²

Yeats echoed this idea a month later in his Proposal to the Directors. "The popularity of the Theatre at this moment depends upon two writers Mr. Boyle and Lady Gregory; I do not say that individual plays by other writers have not assisted them but these are the only two writers who can be counted on to draw audiences."¹²³ Willie Fay

¹²⁰ From 1914 until 1925, when the Abbey began to accept comedies from other playwrights, her primary focus changed to her wonder plays, and she penned only two more one-act comedies.

¹²¹ A.E. F. Horniman, to W. B. Yeats, November 26, 1906, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

¹²² *The Daily Express*, November 1, 1907.

¹²³ W.B. Yeats, Proposal to the Directors, December 2, 1907, Fay Papers, D, National Library of Ireland.

also esteemed Gregory's work as a principal asset to the theatre, even over Yeats's. In an interview with an American newspaper, Fay reported

I find that in this country you associate Mr. Yeats most prominently with the new Irish literary theatre. He is one of the leaders to be sure, but we have other, and I think, greater dramatists, Mr. Yeats being more poet than dramatist. First, I should place Mr. Synge . . . then comes William Boyle. . . . Then, of course, there is Lady Gregory, who writes the most charming comedies. . . . The work of each is distinctive, but all are striving to interpret the Irish spirit to voice its aspiration, its sorrow and its joy.¹²⁴

Even Yeats's father, John B. Yeats, respected Lady Gregory's work above the others at the Abbey. "The directors of this theatre are Lady Gregory, Mr. Singe [sic], and my son. Lady Gregory, to my mind, is the most skillful dramatist of them all."¹²⁵ Years later, Mary Colum, wife of playwright Padraic Colum, recalled that

we young people were enraptured with Lady Gregory's writing. . . . It was the same with her plays: they made an immense appeal to us; some rich emotions not obvious on the surface of her relations with people went into her work, as well as a great knowledge of local Irish life. . . . There was something in her plays that went right into the hearts of her audience in the theatre.¹²⁶

Gregory's unflagging support of Yeats was yet another of her contributions to the Abbey Theatre. This support took several forms in addition to her co-authorship or even authorship of several of his plays. Mary Colum, who knew both Yeats and Gregory, claimed that "It [was] very doubtful if Yeats could have produced as much work as he did without her help."¹²⁷ Gregory's care for his physical comfort during his summers at

¹²⁴ *The Evening Telegram*, 22 February 1908, in Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

¹²⁵ John B. Yeats, quoted in *New York Times*, 16 March 1908, Fay Papers, National Library of Ireland.

¹²⁶ Mary Colum, *Life and the Dream* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1947), 124. Mary Colum was the wife of playwright Padraic Colum and was therefore an intimate of the Abbey circle.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 126-7.

Coole was then one facet of her assistance. Gregory's insistence on the best food and surroundings allowed Yeats the time, free from worry about mundane household and monetary concerns, to devote himself to his writing, which led to their many collaborations. But Gregory's refusal to take any credit for their successful early collaborations, such as *Kathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Pot of Broth*, contributed to the Abbey in yet another way. It bolstered Yeats's reputation as a man of the theatre and gave him the mantle of its leadership. This leadership role at the Abbey was, in the early years of the twentieth century, probably a benefit to the theatre because most leadership positions were filled by men and were expected to be so, despite the conspicuous exceptions such as Maude Gonne. Because a man headed the Abbey it gained a legitimacy that it probably would not have had with a woman at its head. Gregory contented herself with giving Yeats all the glory in order to advance his career as playwright and manager; only later, after his status was assured, did she allow their collaborations to bear her name as well as his. These later collaborations were much less successful and, therefore, did not bestow credit so much as assure blame for the failures.

Although men were the accepted leaders, as Mary Colum, Gregory's contemporary, said, "a certain amount of outstanding leadership [in Ireland] was feminine: on the political side there was Maud Gonne and Countess Markievicz. . . . But it may be that history will decide that the most remarkable was Lady Gregory -- in fact, she very likely was one of the most remarkable women of her time."¹²⁸ Gregory assumed leadership at the Abbey later, after Yeats had tired of the responsibility and moved on to other interests. Her contributions led Colum to this estimation of her worth, not just to the Abbey Theatre, but to Ireland itself:

¹²⁸ Ibid., 117.

She was a great woman, a real leader, one of those who woke up Ireland from the somnolence and lassitude it was too prone to fall into. . . . It is almost certain that, but for Lady Gregory, the Irish national theatre would have remained a dream, or ended in being that failure that so many hopeful undertakings in Ireland became.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Ibid., 126-7.

CHAPTER 7:
OTHER WOMEN WHO WROTE

Although Lady Gregory's plays were a staple of the Abbey Theatre from 1904 until her death in 1933, the plays of other women also appeared on the Abbey stage during that period. Submissions arrived at the Abbey regularly after the theatre opened in 1904 (even though the management was unable to pay its playwrights until 1910). After 1905, Gregory, Yeats, and Synge reviewed all plays submitted and, although they solicited the opinions of the Fays, selected all plays produced. Among those selected by the Directorate between 1905 and 1925 were thirty-nine plays written by women. Lady Gregory wrote twenty-four of those; twelve other women wrote the remaining fifteen plays.

The first woman other than Gregory produced on the Abbey stage was Winnifred Mable Letts (1882-1972). Letts, born in Manchester, England was educated at St. Anne's Abbots Bromley and Alexandra College, Dublin. Besides the two one-act plays that she wrote for the Abbey, Letts also produced a three-act play for the Gate Theatre, although she was most well known for her poetry, fiction, children's tales, and *Knockmaroon*, a book of reminiscences.¹

Letts's first offering to the Abbey was a brief one-act play entitled *The Eyes of the Blind* which was accepted, along with Yeats's *Deirdre*, in early 1907, premiering on April 1. So short a piece as to be called "an incident" by one reviewer, the play concerns a murderer who enters a blind man's cottage. During the course of the evening the blind man reveals that he knows of the murderer's crime; as a consequence, the murderer gives himself up to the authorities.

¹ Robert Hogan, ed., *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, Revised and Expanded Edition, 842.

The play received mixed reviews. One critic called it “perhaps the most finished one-act play in the repertoire of the theatre.”² *The Daily Express* reported that the play was “favorably received,” although

Like all recent pieces produced at the Abbey Theatre, the new work is merely in the nature of a dramatic sketch, the intensity of which is in parts cleverly developed. The dialogue is good considered all around, but the writer falls into the mistake of giving it at times too much imaginative colouring. Otherwise the little work is clever of its kind, but unsatisfying by reason of its abruptness.³

Another reviewer praised Letts’s dialogue as “good, and quite true to nature, though Shaughnessy [the murderer] introduces more imagery into his conversation than we are accustomed to hear from Wicklow peasants.”⁴

Joseph Holloway’s judgment was that “Miss Letts has the sense of the theatre, and her dialogue is strong and effective. Her ideas are weak at present, but I believe she is very young, so they will develop all right in time no doubt.”⁵ A year later, while talking to W. A. Henderson [the Abbey’s Secretary] and Yeats, Holloway discovered that there had been an argument between the Fays on the opening night of Letts’ play; as a consequence “all the company were in a very nervous state. Miss Letts’ play got a very bad interpretation.”⁶

Despite the travails of the production, the play was quickly revived, playing on April 20 as curtain raiser to W. S. Blunt’s *Fand*. This second performance also garnered

² Review of *The Eyes of the Blind*, by W. M. Letts (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman’s Journal*, 22 April 1907.

³ Review of *The Eyes of the Blind*, by W. M. Letts (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Daily Express*, 2 April 1907.

⁴ Review of *The Eyes of the Blind*, by W. M. Letts (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Times*, 2 April 1907.

⁵ Joseph Holloway, *A Selection from His Unpublished Journal: Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, Robert Hogan and Michael J. O’Neill, eds, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 91.

⁶ Holloway quoted in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge, 1905-1909* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1978), 205.

reasonably good reviews. *The Daily Express* again sent a critic, who reported that Letts “shows considerable promise, and the dialogue is fairly well managed. She will do better things.”⁷ The *Atheneum*’s critic was astute enough to remark that “Miss Letts’ first attempt at dramatic work . . . reveals her as, in some degree, a disciple of Mr. J. M. Synge.”⁸ Letts herself, in an article years later, pointed to a production of Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* as the inspiration for her first play.⁹ Yeats himself may have seen something of Synge in her work, for he told Holloway on March 16 that the Abbey “had got two strong plays that would create as much dissention [sic] as *The Playboy* when they were produced. . . . Miss Letts . . . is the authoress of one of the two plays which Yeats referred to when he spoke of two strong plays the company had in pickle for Abbeyites.”¹⁰

Letts had more in store for the Abbey, although her next play failed to meet the promise of *Eyes of the Blind*. *The Challenge* opened on October 14, 1909, starring Arthur Sinclair, Fred O’Donovan, and J. A. O’Rourke, the Abbey’s best actors. The story revolves around an elderly man, Charles Caulfield, who sits in his moldy old mansion in 1890. He has just procured the diary of his sweetheart of forty years before when an old acquaintance arrives. Their dialogue reveals that the acquaintance took advantage of Caulfield’s true love by kissing her. Caulfield challenges his friend to a duel but dies before the signal is given.

⁷ Review of *The Eyes of the Blind*, by W. M. Letts (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Daily Express*, 22 April 1907.

⁸ Review of *The Eyes of the Blind*, by W. M. Letts (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Atheneum*, 27 April 1907.

⁹ Hogan, *The Years of Synge*, 175.

¹⁰ Holloway, 89.

The most severe criticism was leveled at Letts' plot. "The motif so far transgresses all human experience or likelihood that passages which were intended to be intensely dramatic and pathetic excited laughter only."¹¹ *The Freeman's Journal* concurred, stating that "there is a strong suggestion of comedy in the attitude of the two old men engaging in a duel over an event which occurred generations before."¹² Both newspapers, however, praised Letts' dialogue, although they also gave the credit for the good reception of the piece to the excellence of the acting.

The next play written by a woman and produced at the Abbey was Johanna Redmond's *Falsely True*, which played on September 4, 1911, at the Abbey during a special performance for the theatre's manager, W. A. Henderson. The play never appeared on a regular bill at the Abbey Theatre; however, it enjoyed two performances by Abbey casts during the fall of 1911, just before and just after the Abbey players sailed to America on tour.

Johanna Redmond was the daughter of John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party; whether this connection influenced the Directorate's decision to present the work, however, is unknown. The play was originally produced on March 6, 1911, at the Palace Theatre in London, with the cast of Sara Allgood, W.G. Fay, and Fred O'Donovan, where it received at least one glowing review.

[*Falsely True*] tells the story of a young Wicklow man who, after Emmet's rising, found himself in prison, and, to save a younger brother[,] turned informer. It sets forth his emotions, and those of his father and mother in a situation which, to an Irishman, is among the most tragic; and it ends with the lad leaving his home for no man knows where, until 'the red stain on his hands' has been wiped away.

¹¹ *Irish Times* quoted in Hogan, *Synge*, 305.

¹² Review of *The Challenge*, by W. M. Letts (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 15 October 1909.

There are only three characters, and it is over in twenty minutes; but after the opening scene, which is principally expository, it is written and played with a passion that carries all before it; and when the curtain had fallen last night it had to be raised again and again while the actors – and eventually the author – bowed their acknowledgements of the applause. . . . The whole thing was stamped with sincerity.¹³

When the play was subsequently produced in Dublin on April 17, 1911, at the Rotunda, however, the critics were not so appreciative.

A little story like that told in Miss Redmond's homely style would cause a tear-drop as you read it in the quiet of evening. When it is served up to us in theatrical guise it leaves us cold. I have no fault to find with it, because it is familiar and commonplace and undistinguished. As a play it is simple, intelligible and coherent. But it is not at all great, and never approaches greatness. The language is often soaring and sometimes cloudy. And the theme has been used by other writers for dramatic purposes to much better advantage.¹⁴

The piece was staged at the Abbey for Henderson's farewell, possibly because Redmond was on the Benefit committee; its subsequent staging in Boston during the early days of the Abbey's first American tour may have been a matter of convenience because it had been recently rehearsed and, therefore, was readily available when other pieces were still being readied.¹⁵ *Falsely True* had its single production on tour on October 9, 1911, and was thereafter never played again. Maire Nic Shiublaigh wrote of this production that

¹³ *The Pall Mall Gazette*, quoted in Robert Hogan, Richard Burnham, and Daniel P. Poteet, eds., *Rise of the Realists, 1910-1915*, *The Modern Irish Drama: A Documentary History*, IV (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1979), 148-9.

¹⁴ *Irish Independent* quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Rise of the Realists*, 149.

¹⁵ The company was rehearsing Eithne Magee to fill the parts left vacant by Maire O'Neill.

On Monday, October 9th, we gave a quadruple bill, consisting of *Falsely True*, a one-act play by Johanna Redmond . . . *Lady Gregory's Jackdaw* and *The Workhouse Ward*; and Yeats' *Hour-glass*. We had good audiences for all these plays but the Press, while still maintaining the pleasant attitude in which it had greeted our earlier work, was for the first time not altogether harmonious [sic] in its praise. Critics began to advise the company. The suggestion was to 'stick to the good plays done so well'. . . .Some of the other productions did not impress, it was stated, and would not be popular.¹⁶

And the newspaper critics were not very complimentary toward the piece. From *The Boston Globe* critic who wrote that it "had a graphic, pitiful realism" that necessitated "the absorbed and sympathetic interest of the audience," to the *Boston Transcript* that stated baldly "Miss Redmond is no dramatist," the American opinion was that the play was of little dramatic worth, and Lady Gregory wisely withdrew it from the repertoire.¹⁷ Redmond would produce several other plays for the Dublin and London stages, although nothing else for the Abbey. In January 1913, she married Max Green, the Chairman of the Irish Prisons Board, after which she no longer wrote for the stage.

Elizabeth Hamilton Moore's only Abbey Theatre production, *A Little Christmas Miracle*, reflected the author's interest in the English miracle play. In 1907, Moore had published *English Miracle Plays and Moralities*, a scholarly work that addressed the development of the medieval theatrical production of miracle and morality plays. Produced by the second Abbey company on December 26, 1912 (while the first company was again on tour in America), however, her contemporary miracle play drew lukewarm comments, although its primary reviewer, W. J. Lawrence writing for *The Stage*,

¹⁶ Maire Nic Shiublaigh, *The Splendid Years* (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., Ltd., 1955), 117.

¹⁷ Quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Rise of the Realists*, 413.

suggested that the play and the players acquitted themselves well, while the faults of the production should be laid at the feet of the stage manager, Lennox Robinson.

As the first work of a new Abbey playwright, this gave indications of sterling promise, albeit it introduced us once more to our old friend, the Long Arm of Coincidence. It was a daring experiment in a Catholic country to bring the Blessed Virgin on the stage as the *dea ex machina*, and if the outcome was not disastrous, it was because the logical issues were seriously shirked. In avoiding disaster all possibility of success has been negated, but the fault, as we shall see, lay with the producer, and not with the author.¹⁸

Lawrence continues with a detailed summary of the play's story: On Christmas Eve, on the stormy coast of Ireland, a ship is foundering because of the work of two "wreckers" who prey on the ships and a third, Michael O'Halloran, who takes revenge on the vessels for the loss of his daughter who eloped with a ship's captain years before. Halloran has sworn an oath against this betrayer that cannot be forsworn until the Virgin Mary comes to him and demands his forgiveness. This night a sailor is brought in, half-drowned, and O'Halloran recognizes him as the captain who eloped with his daughter. O'Halloran is about to kill the sailor when a strange hooded woman appears at the cottage door with a baby. She enters, sings the child to sleep and, as the murder is about to be resumed, reveals herself as the blessed Virgin who then provides the gathering with a sermon as the curtain descends.¹⁹ Lawrence's chief criticism lay with Robinson's staging of the final scene of revelation.

Here we have a magnificent situation, which in the hands of a [Max] Reinhardt might be made to possess high spiritual power, bringing home to the heart the divinity of forgiveness. . . . At the moment of divine revelation some striking physical transfiguration of the Blessed Virgin

¹⁸ W. J. Lawrence quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Rise of the Realists*, 206-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

should be indicated, either by a rapid change of costume or a flood of well-directed light. It was surely a mistake to preserve the semi-gloom of the scene until fall of the curtain. Mr. Lennox Robinson's scheme of staging was here wholly at fault.²⁰

The Abbey did not revive Moore's work, however, nor were any other plays by her accepted, although she wrote at least one other, *The Dove Uncaged*, published in 1912. She also wrote a volume of poetry, *Fountains of Ablutions and Other Poems* (1921), and three novels, *Cupid's Attraction* (1923), *Virgin Crowned* (1928), and *Pharoah's Lady* (1931).

The year 1913 was, however, an exceptional one in terms of the number of female playwrights produced at the Abbey. Three plays, all tragedies, by four women were produced during that year. The first was *The Home-Coming*, by Gertrude Robins, which opened on April 10. The second, *Broken Faith*, by Suzanne Day and Gertrude Cummins from Cork, premiered on April 23. And in October a tragic work titled *My Lord*, written by Mrs. Bart Kennedy, debuted in the theatre.

The story of *The Home-Coming* was a familiar one: an avaricious old couple murders a rich stranger, only to discover he is their long lost son. Robins' treatment of the tale utilized two twists on the usual story, the first of which was setting. Rather than rural Ireland, Robins' set the scene in Galicia, a change that may have been predicated on caution. Robins was likely aware of the furor surrounding the production of *The Playboy of the Western World* and the ensuing riots in 1907; Synge's controversial story revolved, in part, around a fabricated parricide. Because her own tale concerned parents killing a child, Robins may have believed it prudent to remove the action to the

²⁰ Ibid., 207-8.

Continent. The second change was in the motivation for the murder. Traditionally the couple murders the stranger and takes his money for themselves. Robins added the O. Henry twist that the murder was committed and the money stolen to send to the son so that he could come home.²¹

The play received bad reviews, criticized for its dramatic qualities as well as its production values. "If budding dramatists will write grim, darkened-stage sort of drama why don't they choose a theme that has not been done to death? One found little original about 'The Home-Coming' . . . except the name," wrote the critic for the *Irish Daily Independent*.²² He continued at length, lamenting the shortcomings of the second company's actors and designers.

It was thirty minutes stuffed with incongruities, for which the authoress . . . was not altogether to blame. . . . They [the actors] paraded as Polish peasants and spoke Abbey English. . . . Mr. Sean Connolly wore immaculate overalls and brightly polished black boots. Even Miss Helena Moloney could make little of the mother Loweski. For a lowly, ill-fed ignorant peasant woman she looked decidedly robust, and had a nice taste in shapely brown boots.²³

The *Evening Telegraph* was much more complimentary to Robins, although just as disparaging to the actors. "There is remarkable power in the construction," was the foremost praise, and "although the plot is not new, it is an exceedingly difficult one to put in to [sic] the compass of a one-act play, and we feel it due to Miss Robins to say that she has succeeded in doing so without a trace of loose or slovenly technique."²⁴ The critic suggested that the length of the piece was its major flaw and that Robins should

²¹ Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Rise of the Realists*, 246.

²² Review of *The Home-coming*, by Gertrude Robins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Daily Independent*, 11 April 1913.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Review of *The Home-coming*, by Gertrude Robins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin) *Evening Telegraph*, 11 April 1913.

have expanded it to full-length. "The difference in motive is sufficient to make the treatment of the theme extremely difficult. Detail in characterization would have made us thoroughly understand the mother, and would have compelled our sympathy at close. But fineness of detail is precisely what is most difficult to get in such a play when it is compressed into one act."²⁵ This critic blamed the actors, and Helena Molony in particular, for the faults of the production.

We might have pardoned Miss Molony for this [not supplying the details of character] for it is by no means an easy thing to achieve; but we do think she might have handled the denouement better than she did. Miss Robins had written a remarkably strong curtain but Miss Molony hardly gave the value to the irony of the mother, throwing down unread from the heap of notes which will bring her son to her, the passport which shows that it is her son whom she has murdered.²⁶

From these conflicting opinions it is difficult to gauge the merit of the play, though the consensus seemed to be slightly more positive than negative.

Within two weeks of their production of *The Home-Coming*, the second Abbey Company had put up another play, written by Suzanne Day and Gertrude Cummins. Suzanne Rouvier Day, born in Cork in 1890, was an ardent feminist all her life and led a very active political life. In 1912, she was elected Guardian for the Poor Law Board and, in 1913, was elected Secretary of the Munster Women's Franchise League. In addition to the two plays she wrote with Geraldine Cummins, Day wrote several other plays, though the majority of her writing was non-dramatic. In 1916, she published *The Amazing Philanthropists* (a thinly disguised account of her work with the Poor Law Board), and

²⁵ Review of *The Home-coming*, by Gertrude Robins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin) *Evening Telegraph*, 11 April 1913.

²⁶ Review of *The Home-coming*, by Gertrude Robins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin) *Evening Telegraph*, 11 April 1913.

two years later, recounted her experiences as a nurse in France during World War I in *Round About Bar-le-Duc. Where the Mistral Blows*, a travel account of Provence was published in 1933.²⁷ Day died in 1964.

Geraldine Dorothy Cummins, also born in Cork in 1890, was the fourth child and first daughter of a professor of Medicine at the National University, Ireland. Her own education, however, was not formalized. “According to modern standards,” Cummins wrote in an appendix to *Swan on a Black Sea: A Study in Automatic Writing*, “my own education was negligible. I never went to school. Three of my younger sisters and I received instruction successively from two uneducated resident English governesses and finally a French mademoiselle. Later to satisfy my hungry imagination I sought and found for myself the Cork Public Library. I eagerly searched its catalogue and read voraciously mostly fiction and Irish tales and plays.”²⁸ Cummins was a suffragette and founded, along with Suzanne Day and Edith Somerville, the Muenster Women’s Franchise League. In addition to the two plays produced at the Abbey, Cummins wrote a third play with Day, *The Way of the World*, and one play by herself. She also penned the novels *The Land They Loved* (1919) and *Fires of Beltaine* (1936), both with feminist themes; a book of short stories, *Vanity Show* (1959); and a biography of novelist and short story writer Edith O’Enone Sommerville in 1954.²⁹ The largest body of work produced by Cummins, however, concerned psychical research and, according to Cummins, “fifteen of my twenty-two published books have been ‘transmitted’, or

²⁷ Robert Welch, ed. *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, ed., s.v. “Day, Suzanne R.”

²⁸ Geraldine Cummins, “Personal Background,” in *Swan on a Black Sea: A Study in Automatic Writing: The Cummins-Willett Scripts* (London: Routedledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 147.

²⁹ Robert Hogan, ed. *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, s.v. “Day, S[uzanne]. R[ouvier].”

produced by ‘automatic’ writing.”³⁰ These “transmissions” include *The Childhood of Jesus* (1937) and *After Pentecost* (1944), and several books “communicated” by an early Christian named Cleophas.³¹ Cummins was married for ten days in 1920 to fellow author Austin Clarke. She died in 1969.

Day and Cummins collaborated on two plays produced at the Abbey, one in 1913 and one in 1917. Their first play, *Broken Faith*, was a tragedy and premiered on April 24, 1913, along with George Fitzmaurice's *The Magic Glasses*. Unexpectedly, the latter play received much less critical attention than Day’s and Cummin's offering.

Broken Faith details the story of an abusive husband, Michael Gara, and his long-suffering wife, Bridget. Gara is a drunkard, a good-for-nothing husband who will not work and whose wife and children are starving. Gara depends on a man named Reilly to recommend him to a co-operative society that will assist him; Gara, however, finds out that the society is non-existent and vows to get even with Reilly. Bridget taunts her husband, saying he's not man enough to take on Reilly, so when Gara does kill Reilly, he schemes to frame his wife for the crime. Bridget agrees to the deception if Gara will agree to take the children and go to America. Gara refuses, and Bridget reneges on her promise to take responsibility for the crime. The police then come and arrest Gara, leaving Bridget to care for the children alone.

The Irish Citizen, a suffragist newspaper, gave the most favorable review of the play, calling it "a sordid tragedy, redeemed by the heroic character of the woman, as indeed we should expect to find in the work of a lady who adds no small share of

³⁰ Cummins, “Personal Background,” 147.

³¹ Welch, *Oxford Companion*, “Day, Suzanne R.”

dramatic ability to her well-known feminist and philanthropic activities."³² *The Freeman's Journal's* reception was also generally favorable, although it also suggested improvements that could have been made to the work.

The second company of the Abbey Theatre produced two new plays, both of merit, last night. . . . The first play, 'Broken Faith,' is an extremely fine piece of work, and though it might be somewhat improved in construction, shows undoubted skill in characterization and dialogue in its authors. We should have liked a somewhat quicker action in the beginning of the play. Although the dialogue is so clever as to prevent us being wearied, we would have brought the wastrel husband of Bridget Gara sooner on the stage. But after his entrance, the whole could not be better managed. The contrast in this act between the mother of Michael the Wastrel, and his wife is worked out with a sure hand. . . . The crisis is managed cleverly.³³

The critic went on, however, to point out several other weaknesses, especially in the scene where Bridget confronts Michael about taking the children with him.

The authors allow their cleverness in dialogue to run away with them. Its quality . . . is more suited to comedy than to tragedy and the audience were not held by it. The devotion to skill in dialogue fathser [sic] weakens the end, not only for this reason, but because the action is not swift enough. Nor do we think the denoument is quite satisfactory. . . . What we have said is merely meant to suggest improvements, and not to convey the impression that the play is not a strong one. We hope to see much more of this excellent work form these two ladies.³⁴

The *Irish Daily Independent*, however, was much less complimentary, being particularly critical of the language.

³² *Irish Citizen* quoted in Hogan, Burnham, and Poteet, eds., *Rise of the Realists*, 250.

³³ Review of *Broken Soil*, by Suzanne Day and Geraldine Cummins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 25 April 1913.

³⁴ Review of *Broken Soil*, by Suzanne Day and Geraldine Cummins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 25 April 1913.

There seems to be an idea prevalent amongst would-be dramatists that anything they write will have its chances of being produced at the Abbey theatre enhanced by the introduction of plenty of dialogue of the damn, blast, and bloody order. It sounds as strong, you know, so powerful; it makes for such realism! And for preference let the characters be Irish peasants and let the principle character be the most degraded, most revolting specimen. . . . Let the theme be land-hunger and greed and murder and the scene laid in a laborers kitchen with the stock furniture . . . and there you have the materials for an Abbey drama!³⁵

"I don't suggest," the critic protested, " that the authors of 'Broken Faith' proceeded along those lines. In fact I am at a loss to know what line they took, whether one lady wrote one act and the other lady wrote the second."³⁶ The plot also, in his estimation, was severely lacking. "The authors may have hid at the back of their heads some idea of showing the nobility and self-sacrifice of women, as depicted by Bridget, as against the baseness and selfishness of man, as depicted by her husband. But the whole thing was too absurd for discussion."³⁷ Day's and Cummin's next play for the Abbey, the comedy *Fox and Geese*, would be much better received, but it would not appear until 1917.

The third play written by a woman and produced at the Abbey Theatre during 1913 was the one-act *My Lord* by a Mrs. Bart Kennedy, about whom little is known except for her address at the time she wrote for the Abbey. Her dramatist's fees of L8.8 for the three performances in October were sent to Gold Hill House, Golden Green, Tonbridge.³⁸ Her husband, however, whose name she chose to use instead of her own, was well known in literary circles in the early twentieth century. Bart Kennedy had

³⁵ Review of *Broken Soil*, by Suzanne Day and Geraldine Cummins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *The Irish Daily Independent*, 25 April 1913.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Abbey Theatre Account Book, 173, Abbey Theatre Collection, National Library of Ireland.

published a popular travel book, *A Tramp in Spain, from Andalusia to Andorra*, in 1904, and Mrs. Kennedy may have used his name deliberately to assume popularity by association.

My Lord premiered on October 16, 1913, to lukewarm reviews. The play takes place in "My Lord's" bedchamber in his castle in Ireland. "My Lord," whose real name is never given, is dying and attempting to secure the votes of his tenants for his nephew to succeed him in his Parliamentary seat. The tenants troop through the bedchamber, every one of them declaring for the other candidate. When the Lord's foster brother also declines to vote for the nephew, "My Lord" dies. *The Freeman's Journal* was most complimentary in its criticism. "It might properly be designated as a dramatic episode. It takes few minutes in the telling. The subject of the tale is so tragic that to an Irish audience there is the risk of it appearing crude and unfinished. The Clarre Election story is familiar history here, and what this play shows us is the terror of the time – it does this effectively. . . . Mrs. Bart Kennedy has constructed her little play with a skill that is suggestive of more ambitious effort."³⁹ Another critic declared "clever acting is the chief attraction in the one-act play. . . . An element of humour is introduced into the weird death-bed scene by the answers of the peasants to the lord's questions. The scene depicting the death of the lord . . . is very powerfully portrayed [sic]."⁴⁰

This "element of humour," however, coming at a tragic point in the play, did not sit well with most of the reviewers. Other critics objected to its inappropriate nature, the critic from *The Irish Times* being most outspoken on what he found objectionable in the

³⁹ Review of *My Lord*, by Mrs. Bart Kennedy (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 17 October 1913.

⁴⁰ Review of *My Lord*, by Mrs. Bart Kennedy (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Independent*, 18 October 1913.

play. He prefaces his critique with the remark, "It may at once be said that the piece lacks dramatic strength, and bears the impress of the litterateur rather than that of the dramatist. It would doubtless grace the pages of a high-class magazine, but it does not adorn the stage."⁴¹ After a short synopsis, the reviewer explained the faults of the piece in detail:

It is all very thin dramatic fare. It makes a picturesque scene, but nothing more. The characters are vaguely drawn; they stalk the stage like ghosts. It is recognized that it is almost easier to write a three-act than a one-act play. The brief glimpse we have been afforded of the author's work shows that there is promise in it, but it will be developed only with more, a good deal more, experience. The actors did as well as they were allowed.⁴²

After *My Lord* closed, The Abbey Theatre produced no other work by a woman (excluding, of course, Lady Gregory) until *Fox and Geese* in February 1917.⁴³ Day's and Cummin's second effort for the Abbey Theatre was a three-act comedy (with elements of farce) that featured three husband-chasing women who scheme to marry a prosperous bachelor by hook or by crook (fig. 55). It opened on February 2, 1917, to reasonably good reviews, despite an unfortunate incident on opening night. Leading actor Louis O'Connor first missed his cue, causing the play to have to begin again. Once on stage O'Connor fainted from illness and had to be taken from the stage. He was able to continue the performance, but it probably affected the reception of the piece. One newspaper said little more than "'Fox and Geese,' a farcical comedy . . . is a trivial but amusing play, and could be made entertaining, but it did not get a fair chance last

⁴¹ Review of *My Lord*, by Mrs. Bart Kennedy (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Times*, 17 October 1913.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The only exceptions to this statement are plays brought in by other companies or organizations that hired the theatre. One interesting note is a bill of shows given on February 1 and 2, 1915, a "Grand Dramatic Entertainment for the funds of the Irish Brigade," which contained the first production of *Arthur's Widow*, a play "created" by Sara Allgood, supported by Mr. Charles T. Waters.

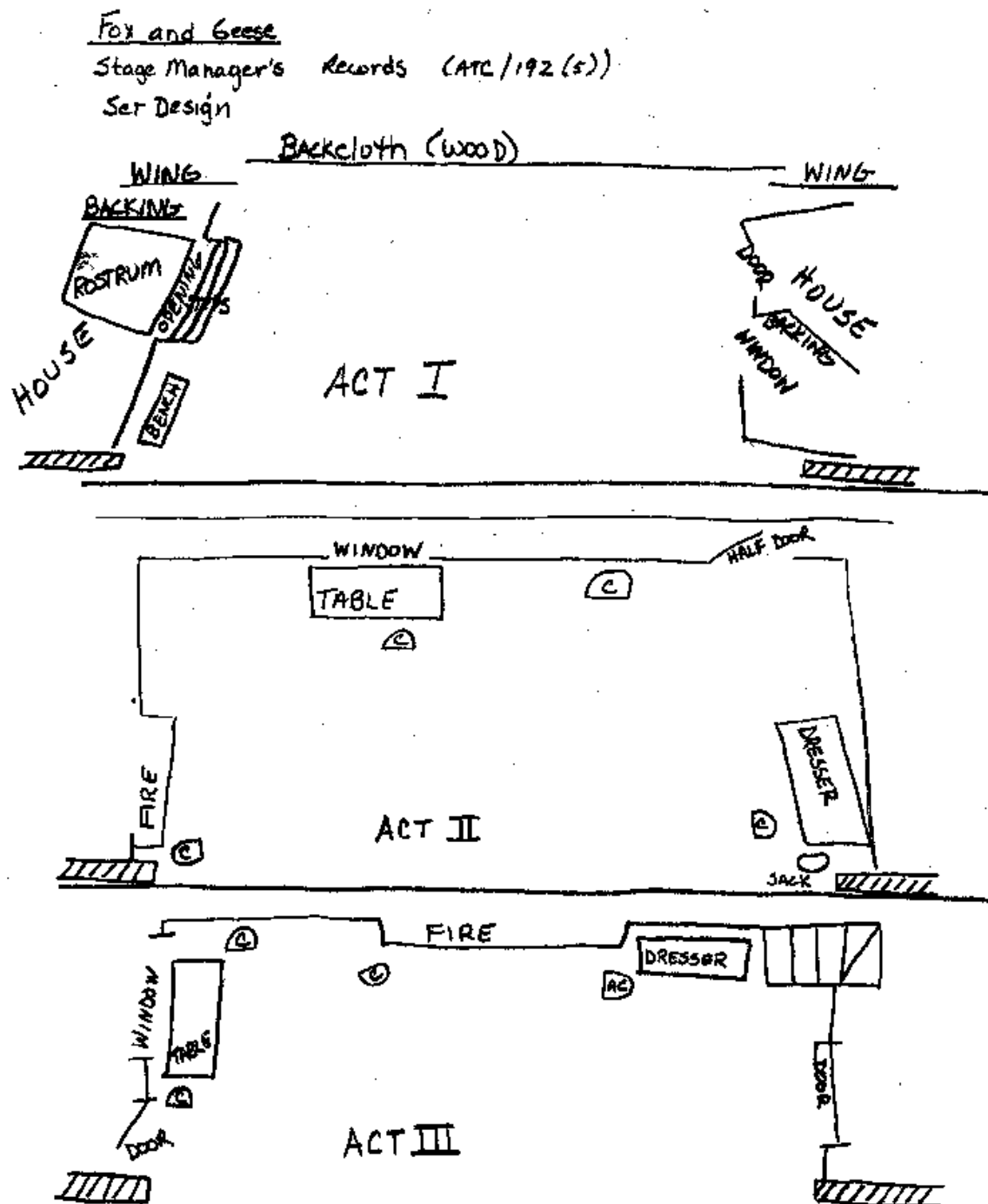


Figure 55. Reproduction of floor plan for Day's and Cummins' *Fox and Geese*, which opened at the Abbey on February 17, 1917. From Stage Manager's sketch; designer unknown.

night."⁴⁴ Another paper, though generally favorable, also had several criticisms of the plot and dialogue.

The play . . . is in three acts. It is comedy for two acts and farce in the third – very stagey farce, in which a 'ghost' plays the principal part. . . Action in every scene, helped by racy dialogue, wins success for the piece. Sample of dialogue – 'He'd frighten maggots from a corpse with that ugly face on him.' There are whole sentences in the closing passages that could be eliminated – altogether or framed in such a way as to be less offensive to the susceptibilities of a mixed audience. Farce becomes offensive when it makes play with subjects that are held to be sacred in many households. There are lines, on the other hand, greater in imagery and in felicity of expression than anything Synge or Lady Gregory ever wrote.⁴⁵

The most favorable review came from *The Irish Times*, whose critic spoke of the piece in nothing but glowing terms, exhorting, "'Don't miss it,' is the best criticism of 'Fox and Geese.'" He goes on to compliment Day's and Cummins' dialogue and action.

But of more importance than the well-constructed plot, its natural development, and the climax of the concluding line, is the rich wording of the play. It is too good for the reality of countryside talk, but it is a legitimate idealizing of its germ and in consonance with Abbey traditions. It is at least on a level with any of the old Abbey comedies, and is not dependent upon accent. For instance, . . . Malachi . . . finding himself the victim of innumerable presentations, exclaims 'It is like a holy well I am – hung round with offerings,' and there are many other gems of simile for him and for others.⁴⁶

Both plays by Day and Cummins were praised for their rich and realistic dialogue, and, although their plot for *Broken Faith* was generally criticized, *Fox and Geese* was

⁴⁴ Review of *Fox and Geese*, by Suzanne Day and Geraldine Cummins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 3 February 1917.

⁴⁵ Review of *Fox and Geese*, by Suzanne Day and Geraldine Cummins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Independent*, 3 February 1917.

⁴⁶ Review of *Fox and Geese*, by Suzanne Day and Geraldine Cummins (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Times*, 3 February 1917.

complimented on its construction. These two plays proved the only ones ever to appear on the Abbey stage by this playwriting team.

Fox and Geese had broken a five-year hiatus from female playwrights (excepting Lady Gregory); throughout the rest of this period, however, the Abbey more consistently produced works by women. Between the production of *Fox and Geese* in 1917 and the granting of the subsidy in 1925, female playwrights offered eight new plays--two produced in 1918, and one each in 1919, 1920, 1922, 1923 and 1925. Of these eight, three were written by a single woman, Dorothy McArdle.

Before McArdle's first offering in December 1918, the Abbey produced a rather well received tragedy, *Aliens*, by Rose McKenna. McKenna was a well-known author of short stories in Dublin in 1918 when she submitted *Aliens* to the Abbey Theatre. The narrative involves Kathleen and her brother Fergus who were sent away to school; when they return to their seacoast home, they are markedly different from their neighbors. A marriage is arranged for Kathleen with Patrick Kane, a Scottish gombeen man [absentee landlord], a marriage that is financially advantageous but personally abhorrent to Kathleen. The night before her wedding Kathleen and her brother answer a call to rescue a boat foundering on the sea. Kathleen drowns and thus "the sea provides . . . an eternal refuge from the dreaded match."⁴⁷

The Irish Times called *Aliens* "a straightforward little piece and its theme is credible."⁴⁸ It criticized the title for being too obscure and suggested that the amount of profanity could be reduced, as could the phrase "I don't understand." The newspaper also

⁴⁷ Review of *Aliens*, by Rose McKenna (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Times*, 13 March 1918.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

noted that the author was called at the end of the play and took her bows accordingly.⁴⁹ *The Irish Independent* agreed that "the audience were quite enthusiastic over this half-hour's wishy-washy melodrama, and called for the author who bowed."⁵⁰ Despite the public's delight with *Aliens*, *The Irish Independent's* critic suggested that it was a sketch rather than a play and criticized it roundly as "blather by a pair of mooners."⁵¹

The *Freeman's Journal* was more favorable to *Aliens* than other newspapers, although it too cited problems with the construction of the play. "The play is of stirring interest, but the catastrophe could be more skillfully led up to, and more powerfully presented. The plot and construction follow lines that are natural and effective, and there is a real strength in the scene between the aliens."⁵²

Such accolades were not forthcoming when the Abbey produced *Brady* by Mrs. Theodore T. Maynard at the opening of the 1919-1920 season. Mrs. Maynard was the second woman to use her husband's name instead of her own, perhaps for similar reasons. Sarah Casey Maynard's husband was a well-known poet and scholar in the early twentieth century, and the use of his name instead of her own may have gotten the attention of Gregory and Yeats. According to the reviews of *Brady*, the work itself may not have been outstanding.

The *Freeman's Journal* gives the most complete description of the play. The initial criticism is that "Mrs. Maynard . . . wrote with her eyes on her audience rather than her characters, with the result that, though some of her shafts get home, the comedy as a

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Review of *Aliens*, by Rose McKenna (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Independent*, 13 March 1918.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Review of *Aliens*, by Rose McKenna (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 13 March 1918.

comedy remains an inextricable tangle of loose-ends."⁵³ The reviewer admits that Maynard has "good raw materials of comedy" in the characters of Tom Brady (an artful dodger type), his "doleful stepsister," and a rich prospective fiancée as well as in the situations of the play dealing with Brady's "troubles with inspectors and bookmakers, his schemes to capture Limping Jim's daughter and 'put the ring on L3,000;" however, he also points out that

Drama . . . consists in the right handling of raw materials, and it is here Mrs. Maynard fails. She simply shoots the stuff on to the stage, and leaves it to the audience to sort it out for themselves. Instead of a play one gets a series of episodes which are unrelated except for the fact that Brady appears as the central figure in each, and gives a fresh exhibition of his ability to 'wangle' his audiences no less than his neighbors. Mrs. Maynard can write fresh and pointed dialogue; she has a keen sense of humour and when she realizes that comedy is something more than cross-talk she ought to do capable work. At present she resembles an architect who can design a rather attractive room, but who in building a house simply repeats the rooms a dozen times, blandly ignoring such details as doors, passages, and staircases.⁵⁴

But it was the *Irish Times* that summed up the fate of Brady most succinctly: "It would be assigning to the piece a measure of appreciation beyond its real merit to say that it is likely to appear frequently in future programmes at the Abbey."⁵⁵ Although Sarah Casey Maynard wrote no more plays, she did write several volumes, including an account of Robert Falcon Scott's expedition to the South Pole, titled *Scott and His Men* (1910), two biographies, *Princess Poverty*, *The Story of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi* (1941) and *Rose of America* (1943), and several children's books.

⁵³ Review of *Brady*, by Mrs. Theodore Maynard (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 5 August 1919.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Review of *Brady*, by Mrs. Theodore Maynard (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Times*, 5 August 1919.

The next woman to write for the Abbey Theatre during the 1904-1925 period was also, with the exception of Lady Gregory, its most prolific. Dorothy McArdle's three plays, produced between December 1918 and February 1925, were all very well received by their audiences. Although the press was somewhat more critical of *Atonement* than of her other two plays, taken as a whole, McArdle's body of work acquitted itself better than many of the Abbey's stage offerings.

Dorothy Macardle (fig. 56) was born in 1889 to Sir Thomas Macardle and his wife. Macardle was owner of Macardle, Moore & Co. Ltd, a brewery in Dundalk, and the family was well-to-do by Dublin standards. Dorothy Macardle's education at Alexandra College in Dublin from 1907 to 1911 led to the granting of her Teacher's Diploma in 1914 and subsequent employment by Alexandra College as an English lecturer. Her republican sympathies led her to encourage her English classes to read and produce the plays of Yeats and Synge. She was active in several political organizations, including the Women Prisoner's Defense League and the Fianna Fail. Her arrest in November 1922 for her political activities resulted in her termination from Alexandra College, although she did return to work there after her release from prison.⁵⁶

The first of Macardle's plays, *Atonement*, opened at the Abbey on December 17, 1918, to approbation by audience but censure from most critics. *Atonement* tells the story of revenge and final atonement for the sins of the fathers: Shaun Farragher, on returning from America, suspects a neighbor, Daniel Huggard, of murdering Shaun's father.

⁵⁶ Sinead McCooile, *Guns and Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol, 1916-1923* (Dublin: Stationary Office, Government of Ireland, 1997), 47. Macardle was actually held in three different jails – Mountjoy, Kilmainham, and North Dublin Union. McCooile also lists Macardle's first name as Dorothea.



Figure 56. Other women who wrote for the Abbey Theatre:
Above, Dorothy Macardle; *below*, Kathleen Cruise O'Brien, whose pen name was Fand O'Grady.

Shaun's sister is to marry Huggard's son and inherit all the family property, a sign to Shaun of an attempted atonement for the murder. When Shaun goes to the Huggard house (purpose not explained), Huggard attempts to shoot him and mistakenly kills his own son instead. On opening night the audiences gave "quite an enthusiastic demonstration of favor and the gifted young authoress was called forward to receive hearty and prolonged applause."⁵⁷

All the critics acknowledged the audience's positive reaction to the play, but nevertheless were critical of both the play's subject and construction. The subject was deemed "morbid drama . . . the staple food of Abbey audiences."⁵⁸ Another critic called the theme of the play "one too intensely painful almost to dwell upon, and . . . intensely powerful in its realism." He went on to say that "one would rather, of course, that our young and aspiring playwrights could see their way to conceive subjects less gruesome and more wholesome."⁵⁹ All of the critics remarked on the lack of credibility in the plot, summed up by one asking "whether in the wildest districts the crime which forms the mainspring of the piece would have to clamour for such a personal vengeance as is attempted."⁶⁰

The construction of the play was likewise questioned. *The Evening Telegraph* suggested that "there is a superfluous second scene in that second act, with much flourish of a revolver," and that the dialogue required revision:

⁵⁷ Review of *Atonement*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 18 December 1918.

⁵⁸ Review of *Atonement*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Independent*, 18 December 1918.

⁵⁹ Review of *Atonement*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 18 December 1918.

⁶⁰ *The Irish Times* quoted in Hogan and Richard Burnham, *Art of the Amateu, 1916-1920*, The Modern Irish Drama, A Documentary History, V, (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1984), 151.

The dialogue is curiously uneven. The fact that the author comes from Dundalk may account for the sprinkling of northern words such as 'wee' and 'forebye.' They should be cut out for the scene is laid in Kerry. Also I think that practically all the characters announce . . . that they will go 'raving mad' – all save old Father Huggard, who being mad already, has no occasion to make such a statement.⁶¹

The Freeman's Journal was the most complimentary of the newspapers reviewing the play. "Miss MacArdle shows really remarkable ability in her contrasts of character, ingenuity of situations, and cleverness of dialogue. The last, however, is overburdened [sic] with quite unnecessary verbiage – some of the scenes are prolix and unconvincing, and almost the entire of the scene in which Shawn produces the gun from the old chest . . . could be greatly shortened if not entirely eliminated."⁶² Another critic summed the play up by proposing that MacArdle "presented us with a thrilling story, but a poor play. Two smiles and one good line occur in the three acts."⁶³

Katherine Frances Purdon's nativity drama, *Candle and Crib*, was produced just after Christmas, on December 27, 1920. Purdon was a novelist who usually wrote about urban life, although by the time she wrote for the Abbey she had also produced a children's book called *The Folk of Furry Farm*. The simple plot of *Candle and Crib* is reminiscent of a children's tale: It is Christmas time and an old couple is preparing to welcome home their son and daughter-in-law. This young couple is traveling from Dublin to Ardenoo by different trains, he alone, she with their new-born child. The old mother is disappointed that there has been no word from the son, and she blames the

⁶¹ Review of *Atonement*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Evening Telegraph*, 18 December 1918.

⁶² Review of *Atonement*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Freeman's Journal*, 18 December 1918.

⁶³ Review of *Atonement*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Independent*, 18 December 1918.

uncertainty of the mail. The son arrives unexpectedly, looking for his wife and child. The old man rushes in to tell of the wondrous sight he just beheld in the stable. They all go out to find the young wife, with child on her breast, asleep in the hay.⁶⁴

Purdon's flawed dramatic structure drew most of the censure from the critics. J. J. Rynes, a critic who wrote for several newspapers under the pseudonym Jaques, stated in *The Evening Herald* that "The subject was delicately and reverently treated, but the development was rather crude."⁶⁵ W. J. Lawrence, of *The Stage*, roundly criticized Purdon's lack of drama:

Candle and Crib is indubitably a novelist's play, and presents most of the faults of its order. Armed with a knowledge of Miss Purdon's capability as a writer of stories of city arab life, one was prepared to find in her play a delicate sense of character and engrossing dialogue, but one was not prepared for the lack of dramatic instinct and the inexpert handling. No uglier or more irritating form could be devised for the evolution of a theme than a single act split up into four short scenes. Crushed into such a mould, the play resolves itself into a series of tableaux with words rather than into a well-knit drama.⁶⁶

In early 1922, the Abbey eagerly accepted Dorothy Macardle's one-act *Ann Kavanagh*, which opened in April (fig. 57). The play addressed the difficulty of a mixed marriage (a Catholic to a Protestant) at the time of the 1798 Rebellion. Miles Kavanagh and his men, as part of the Irish Rebels, are chasing a British soldier whom they resolve to execute when he is captured. Ann, his wife, interferes with this plan because a friend of hers was captured and killed under similar circumstances. She tries to hide the man, and, when he is eventually captured, pleads for his life based on humanitarian and not

⁶⁴ Jaques, quoted in Hogan, *Art of the Amateur*, 265.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ W. J. Lawrence, quoted in Hogan, *Art of the Amateur*, 266.

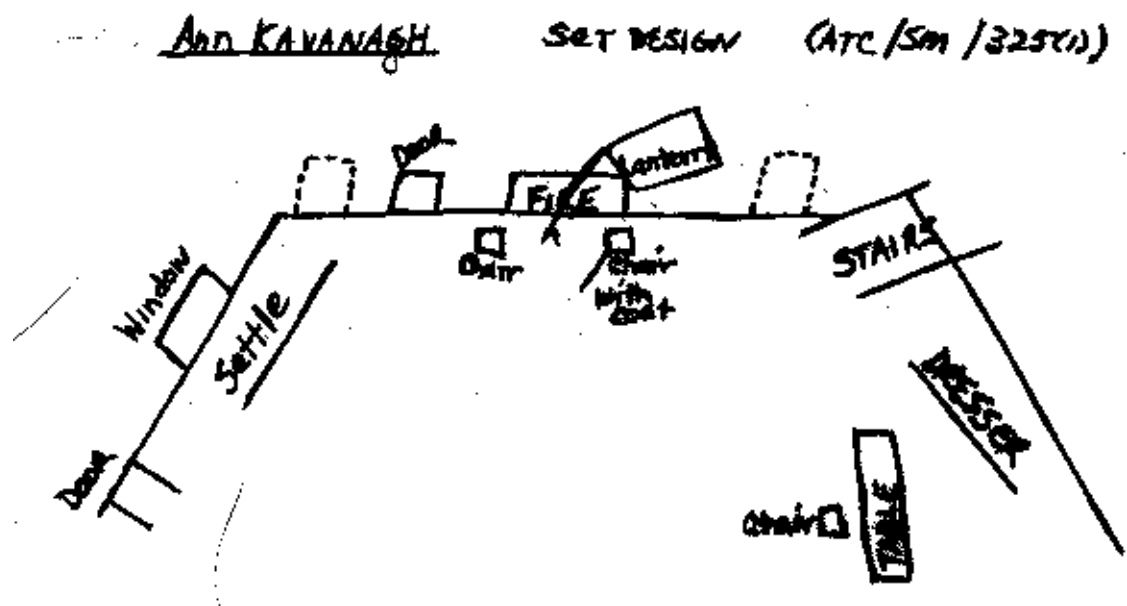


Figure 57. Reproduction of the floor plan for Dorothy Macardle's *Ann Kavanagh*. From Stage Manager's sketch; designer unknown.

political principles. Miles wavers, but when pressed by his men, agrees to the execution. Ann's pleas have, however, caused Miles to reconsider his political beliefs and his final line reveals his new sympathies.

The little play earned accolades of both audiences and press. "'Ann Kavanagh' is a short and powerful sketch of the '98 Rebellion period, with the ever present problem of the mixed marriage for its tragic note. . . . As short as the piece was it gripped the audience, and it was heartily applauded, there being a peremptory curtain call for the authoress."⁶⁷ In an unusual turn of events, Jaques complimented the work:

See 'Ann Kavanagh.' It is one of the greatest plays yet made for the Abbey stage by a woman. It is twenty minutes of lantern drama, pulsing in every minute. It is great in its brevity, in its strength, in its realism, in the might of its onward rush, in its forceful yet natural development and in its terrible inevitability. Dorothy McArdle is the author. Her newest work, applauded last night with a fervor that was discerning and sincere, marks a distinct advance in technique. . . . Since a Grand Guinol play of the French War I have seen nothing equal to this 'Ann Kavanagh.'⁶⁸

Other critics were, however, not quite so enthusiastic. A correspondent for the *Gael* offered a more mixed response:

Not that Ann Kavanagh is not a good play. There is skillful draughtsmanship, the dialogue rings true, and its twenty minutes' action is swift and cumulative. But though things may happen in a single moment in our own lives which will be remembered for an eternity, the mimic life of the stage will never enter into the depths of our consciousness in the time occupied by Miss Macardle's [sic] little play. But we

⁶⁷ Review of *Ann Kavanagh*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Times*, 7 April 1922.

⁶⁸ Review of *Ann Kavanagh*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Independent*, 7 April 1922.

are grateful for the promise revealed in it , and hope it is an augury of bigger things.⁶⁹

F. J. H. O'Donnell, also a writer for the *Gael*, admitted, "The play certainly has grip and grasp in it, but I thought occasionally it bordered near the melodramatic."⁷⁰

The following year Kathleen Cruise O'Brien's *Apartments* was produced at the Abbey. O'Brien (fig. 56), who wrote under the pseudonym of Fand O'Grady, was very well connected in Dublin. Her father was David Sheehy, Nationalist member of Parliament, and her sister was Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, the leading suffragist in Ireland. Kathleen Sheehy had married Cruise O'Brien, a journalist, who died around 1920, several years before she wrote *Apartments*. In 1923, she was raising her son, Conor Cruise O'Brien, alone and working as a translator of Gaelic. She wrote no other plays (although an edition of *Apartments* was published in Gaelic), and her sole motivation for writing for the Abbey may have been monetary.

Apartments received reasonably good reviews in the Dublin press. *The Irish Times* was the most appreciative, stating, "This amusing little one-act play . . . has very real merit, though it shows in places signs of unpractised [sic] work. Miss O'Grady should certainly continue to write comedy. Her dialogue is excellent, and her situations are extremely funny."⁷¹ *The Evening Herald* was more mixed, though still positive enough in tone to encourage the new playwright:

Apartments, the new piece by Fand O'Grady . . . may yet be burnished up into rollicking farce, and as such may be classed as genuine goods. As comedy it falls flat. Mrs. Mccarthy(played by Miss Sara Allgood) runs a boarding-house, and living in it are her husband, two bob-haired

⁶⁹ *Gael*, May 1, 1922, quoted in Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham, eds., *The Years of O'Casey, 1921-1926: A Documentary History* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 76.

⁷⁰ F. J. H. O'Donnell quoted in Hogan and Burnham, *Years of O'Casey*, 76.

⁷¹ *Irish Times* quoted in Hogan and Burnham, *Years of O'Casey*, 148.

children, and their maiden aunt, and in addition a male teacher, a female teacher, a student, and a young married couple. Off the premises she helps to run a pawn-broker, a book-seller, a grocer, and sundry others in trade. . . . She does this by pledging the lodgers' property on the principle of pawning Peter's to pay for Paul's. . . .Of course, *Apartments* is a thing of laughter. It rarely ceased crackling through the play. But it is a one-woman piece. Miss Allgood was the one-woman, and soon she had used up every motion, gesture and expression to convey alarm, distress and subterfuge. . . .The repetition of situation almost to duplication in the action was the weak point of the piece. The author can do better.⁷²

Following the production of *Apartments* in 1923, the final play offered by McArdle, *The Old Man*, opened on February 24, 1925, to mixed reviews (fig. 58). Abbey manager, Lennox Robinson, was hardly enthusiastic about its production from the beginning. He wrote to Lady Gregory in early January, "I've sent back Miss MacArdle's [sic] long play, saying we wouldn't do it but would do *The Old Man* instead. It's quite short and can't hurt us as the long dreary show would have done."⁷³ Although Robinson considered *The Old Man* short, it was a two-act drama about the 1848 rebellion that would prove to be more successful with audiences than critics, although it did find some favorable reviewers.

Miss Dorothy Macardle's two act play, 'The Old Man' . . . was a dramatic success. Even those who may find fault with its theme, the glorification of the pursuit of political rainbows by unreasoning youths, must admit that Miss Macardle has written . . . something that might have happened as it does in the play. It is a well constructed play.⁷⁴

⁷² *Evening Herald* quoted in Hogan, *Years of O'Casey*, 148.

⁷³ Robinson, quoted in Hogan and Burnham, *Years of O'Casey*, 264. The title of the "long, dreary show" Robinson sent back to Macardle is not known, though it might have been *Asthara*, her three act verse play previously presented in Dublin in 1918.

⁷⁴ Review of *The Old Man*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Times*, 25 February 1925.

The Old Man SET DESIGN (ATC/sm/326(3))

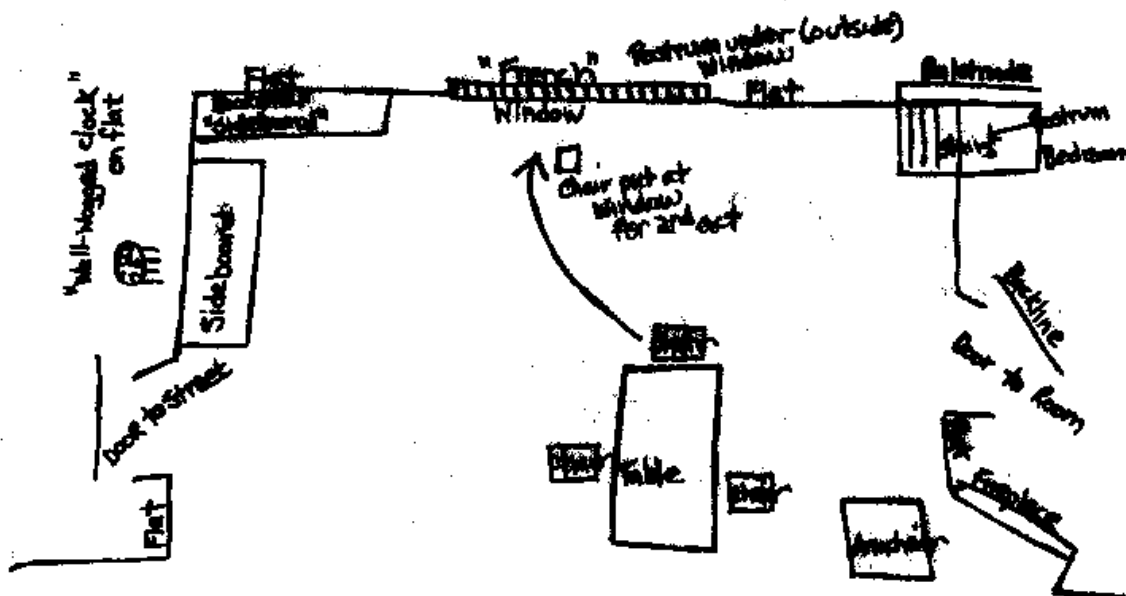


Figure 58. Reproduction of the floor plan for Dorothy Macardle's *The Old Man*, her final play produced at the Abbey Theatre. From Stage Manager's sketch; designer unknown.

Macardle's characterization of the Old Man, a grandfather who tries to save his grandson from a foolish rescue mission and ultimately gets him shot, was praised specifically. "In 1803 the old man was full of his grandson's desire to die for Ireland, but he has lived to see that it was all talk. . . . The contrast between the dreams and the reality, with the dreams still inclined to assert themselves, is beautifully drawn by Mr. Fitzgerald [Barry Fitzgerald as the Old Man]. It is not easy to fathom what was in the playwright's mind, but the fact stands out that the play is called 'The Old Man' and the wise grey-head is its hero."⁷⁵

The Irish Statesman gave a reasonably favorable review that noted, "It plays well, and the audience took to it."⁷⁶ The *Statesman's* critic, Susan Mitchell, did, however, take issue with the ending of the piece.

The moral – for a moral is everywhere intended – is that the young man's vision is a truer guide than the old man's dream. It may be so, the Abbey audience felt it so, but the last words of the play, natural perhaps in the mouth of the murdered boy's sister, 'they did not go (to rescue Mitchel) because they were afraid,' let down an audience wrought up to enthusiasm for the beauty of self-sacrifice. It was a false note and a bad curtain. It led off from the true theme of the play, and broke up unpleasantly the concentration of the audience upon it.⁷⁷

Joseph Holloway, who did not see all of the play, noted reactions of several other theatergoers: "McNulty whom I saw go out said he [Barry Fitzgerald] played the part . . . without the slightest trace of comedy. The play he thought but poor stuff. . . . John Burke thought the play poor and the acting ditto. T.C. Murray . . . wasn't so condemnatory. . . .

⁷⁵ Review of *The Old Man*, by Dorothy Macardle (Abbey Theatre Company, Dublin), *Irish Times*, 25 February 1925.

⁷⁶ *Irish Statesman*, 7 March 1925 quoted in Hogan, *Years of O'Casey*, 265.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

To Lawrence it was pure drama, nothing more or less. The piece had gripped him, he added."⁷⁸

The play also had its detractors. The most unfavorable of the reviews appeared in the *Dublin Magazine*.

It is reasonable to suppose that an allegorical parallel is to be drawn between the events portrayed and current politics; certainly that is the impression left upon the mind. The propagandist intention is very obtrusive, the characterization is slight, and the whole atmosphere definitely melodramatic. Emotion is roused, but it is not satisfied, and that, it must be supposed, is the deliberate intention of the dramatist. Such an intention must defeat drama, and drama is not achieved. The play will not enhance the reputation of Miss Macardle.⁷⁹

Macardle did not have any further work produced at the Abbey, although she went on to write, from 1930 to 1961, several works of fiction – *Stories of Ireland*, *Fantastic Summer*, and *Dark Enchantment*; and a more important body of non-fiction – *The Irish Republic*, *Tragedies of Kerry*, *Uneasy Freehold*, *Without Fanfares: Reflections on the Republic of Eire*, and *Shakespeare, Man and Boy*. *The Irish Republic* is her most respected work and became a standard textbook in Irish public schools. Her most popular work, however, was her ghost story, *The Uninvited*, which was made into a very successful film in 1941. Macardle never married but rather remained politically active for the rest of her life, concerned mainly with refugee children after World War II. She became first Vice-President and then President of the Irish Association of Civil Liberties from 1949 until 1951, and died in 1958.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Holloway quoted in Hogan, *Years of O'Casey*, 265.

⁷⁹ *Dublin Magazine*, May 1925, quoted in Hogan, *Years of O'Casey*, 265-6.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Between 1907 and 1925, women wrote thirty-nine plays produced at the Abbey Theatre, including the twenty-four penned by Lady Gregory. The fifteen plays not written by Gregory were as varied as the twelve women who submitted them, probably because the Abbey accepted scripts for consideration from anyone who wanted to submit a play. The resulting contributors, therefore, encompassed a variety of people from all walks of life writing on a wide range of subjects.

About Elizabeth Hamilton Moore, Gertrude Robins, Mrs. Bart Kennedy, Sarah Casey Maynard, and Katherine Frances Purdon little is known beyond the plays themselves. Moore and Purdon produced sentimental Christmas plays that usually could find a market in the Yuletide season; Casey wrote peasant comedy that was the stock-in-trade of the Abbey; and Robins and Kennedy wrote tragic tales, one a retelling of an old tale, the other a political vignette. All of these plays fell within the scope of the Abbey's typical fare; none of them, however, was well received by the critics.

The strongest common element among these twelve women was their position as writers in other venues. Of the twelve, only four (Robins, Kennedy, Redmond, and O'Brien) had no prior writing experience. Letts wrote poetry, MacKenna penned short stories, Day and Cummins both produced novels. In addition, Day wrote short stories while Cummins composed a biography and many texts with a spiritual theme. Maynard wrote a history book and biographies of saints, as well as children's fiction; Purdon too turned out children's books, in addition to novels. Moore contributed a scholarly work and several novels. Macardle was the most prolific of all, writing political history, novels, short stories, and scholarly works. Of these writers, three had several plays produced by the Abbey. Winifred Letts and the playwriting team of Suzanne Day and Gertrude

Cummins both had two plays each produced at the Abbey; Dorothy Macardle was produced three times.

Several of the women who wrote for the Abbey had political connections, wrote plays with political themes, or both. Despite Annie Horniman's directive to the contrary, the Abbey continued to have ties to politics and to produce plays with political themes. As we have seen, opening night at the Abbey saw produced one of the most political, if not baldly propagandist, plays written by a woman: *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*, with a performance of the title character modeled closely on the original one by Ireland's most politically active nationalist woman. Several of Lady Gregory's other plays-- such as *Rising of the Moon*, *The Gaol Gate*, and *Dergorvilla*-- had political themes as well. Two of these twelve women, Johanna Redmond and Kathleen Cruise O'Brien, had political connections: Redmond through her father and O'Brien through both her father and her sister. Of the fifteen plays written by women other than Lady Gregory during the period, five had political themes.

Common also to these women was the distinction of social class, as all appeared to have come from the middle or upper classes. Letts and MacArdle were associated with Alexandra College in Dublin. MacArdle, Redmond, and O'Brien's social connections suggest that they moved in an upper level of Irish society. MacArdle was an intimate friend of Maud Gonne and Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, who was also O'Brien's sister. Redmond's father was the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, also suggesting a high social status. Day and Cummins were noted publicly for their philanthropic work, a common avocation among the affluent classes; also indicative of Cummin's social standing was her father's vocation as a professor. All of these women, with the

exception of O'Brien, appeared to write as vocation or avocation, suggesting they possessed means beyond their own earnings; in Ireland, working women seldom wrote plays for a living.

The plays written by these women may seem insubstantial when compared with the 200 new plays produced at the Abbey Theatre from 1907 to 1925. Providing the proper context for their work, however, allows the plays to be viewed from a different perspective. An important aspect in determining the value of the contribution of the women's plays is the assessment of their merit. As the reviews of the period have shown, the overall quality of these plays was probably poor. Such an estimation, however, is not unusual when measuring worth of new drama; most plays written during any given period are not particularly good and are quickly forgotten. There were, however, among these fifteen plays, some that did have artistic merit. Several of the plays were revived more than once at the Abbey. Three of the women had more than one play produced at the theatre, and the percentage of women playwrights with more than one work mounted at the Abbey is only slightly less than that of the male playwrights produced more than once. Several of these women also produced plays at other theatres during this period, indicating, perhaps, that their works were appreciated elsewhere in Ireland.

Most often the critics' complaints about these plays fell into two categories—moral and technical. Comments regarding the foul language and gruesome situations chosen by the playwrights were leveled against most Abbey writers, male or female. Critics may have been more incensed, however, by the women's use of these themes and language than by the men's because it affronted their expectations of women's writing. The criticism of the women's technical capabilities almost always indicated that these

women were writers of story, and not wrighters (meaning craftsmen) of drama. They wrote in a literary rather than a dramatic mode; therefore, their dialogue was good, but their plotting was flawed.⁸¹

An even better context for assessing the value of these women's contribution is in comparison with the other women writing for the theatre elsewhere in Ireland during the time period. The evidence that follows was compiled from *The Modern Irish Drama*, a documentary history series edited by Robert Hogan, and allows this comparison.⁸²

Hogan's history indicates that a total of thirty-nine women playwrights were produced in Ireland between 1907 and 1925. Of these thirty-nine women, thirteen, or thirty-three percent, were produced at the Abbey Theatre.

No other theatre company in Ireland produced nearly as many works by women. Running a very poor second to the Abbey in productions of women's plays were the Irish Theatre and National Stage Company and the Independent Theatre Company. The Irish Theatre and National Stage Company produced Johanna Redmond's Irish peasant comedy *Honor's Choice*, in June 1911 at the Queen's Theatre in Dublin and then, in September, a bill of three one-acts also at the Queens: *The Coming of Aideen* by Mary Costello, *Pro Patria* by Johanna Redmond, and *A Hospital Ward* by J. Malachi Muldoon. The Independent Theatre Company, one of the most prominent companies after the Abbey, produced two plays by Norah Fitzpatrick. The first, *Home Sweet Home*, was

⁸¹ The same criticism could certainly be said of W. B. Yeats's drama. See Chapter 2 for critical assessments of Yeats's plays.

⁸² Hogan's six-volume work spans the years of the Irish Literary Renaissance from 1898 to 1926 "in an attempt at a comprehensive survey of the modern Irish theatre." Hogan, *Years of Synge*, Introduction, 8. As part of this survey, Hogan's volumes all include appendices containing a list that "attempts to give the date of the first publication, the date of first production, and the original cast of *the most significant plays of the Irish Dramatic Renaissance during these years* [italics mine]." Hogan, *Years of Synge*, Appendix: Anglo-Irish Drama, 332. By using Hogan's thorough research into the plays of the period as the baseline to define the "significant" works of the period, the following evidence is proffered.

written in 1908, with the company's founder, Count Casmir Markievic, and the second, *The Dangerous Age*, in early 1912. Then, in September of that same year, the company produced a one-act play by Suzanne Day, *Out of Deep Shadow* at the Gaiety. The Theatre of Ireland, the other prominent theatre company in Dublin, mounted only two productions of plays written by women with Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *Expiation* at Molesworth Hall in 1910, and Jane Barlow's *A Bunch of Lavender* in 1911.

Another way of assessing these women is to compare their contribution with that of the male playwrights at the Abbey during the same years. During this eighteen-year period, when thirty-nine plays by thirteen women were produced, there were 164 plays written by fifty-five men also produced by the theatre. As with the women's plays, the Abbey produced most of these plays only once and few were revived; most of the playwrights themselves were also produced only once at the Abbey, although twenty-eight of them were produced more than once. The most frequently produced male playwrights were Lennox Robinson and George Bernard Shaw with twelve plays each. Lady Gregory was the leading playwright during the period, with twenty-one plays produced.⁸³

During the same 1907 to 1925 period, there were 356 new plays produced throughout Ireland. The Abbey Theatre produced 198, more than half of all the plays produced. The total number of playwrights was 211, of which 172 were men and 39 were women. The total number of playwrights produced at the Abbey Theatre was, therefore, a little less than thirty-five percent or one-third of the total number produced in Ireland. More significant, however, is the fact that of the 172 male playwrights, only thirty-two percent were produced at the Abbey, while almost thirty-five percent of the

⁸³ For other statistics on the playwrights, see Appendix C.

women were produced. Women, therefore, accounted for about twenty percent of all of the new plays seen at the Abbey Theatre, including Lady Gregory's work, over the course of this eighteen-year period.

Having placed these women and their plays in context, their contributions to the Abbey, and the Abbey's contribution to them becomes clearer. First, the women who wrote for the Abbey provided the theatre with a fresh perspective. The majority of plays accepted at the Abbey were written by men, from a male viewpoint. The women, however, were often able to bring a different point of view before the audience, by treating similar subjects from a female perspective. Macardle's *Ann Kavanagh*, for example, tells a political tale from the woman's viewpoint and questions the male's unblinking motto, "duty before dishonor." That the Abbey actively sought to include a female voice in its offerings is apparent because, in 1913, when Lady Gregory did not produce any new plays for the theatre, four other women were produced.

These women also helped increase the body of new works available when the Abbey needed to complete a bill. Because most of their works were short one-act plays, the Abbey had more flexibility in presenting them. The theatre could produce them with longer works and advertise a full bill. It could also play them with pieces from their repertoire, yet still advertise a new work to draw Abbey audiences.

It is also certainly noteworthy that one-third of all women who wrote stage-worthy material in Ireland from 1907 to 1925 were produced at the Abbey Theatre. If the field were narrowed to include only playwrights producing works in and around Dublin (those who might logically submit plays to the Abbey), the percentage grows to an impressive fifty percent. With the exception of the actresses, the playwrights had the

greatest number of women contributing to the Abbey. The reverse was also true: The Abbey Theatre, more than any other theatre in early twentieth century Dublin, promoted the writing and writing careers of women. With this encouragement of women's writing, the theatre also promoted its own image of an innovative force in Dublin.

Although the Abbey Theatre was primarily known as a forum for nationalism from the first production of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, it also became, inadvertently, a forum for the feminist voice in Dublin. This platform was certainly not as strong as the nationalist one; however, it was present and seen primarily in the works of some of these women playwrights. *Broken Faith*, written by the suffragists Day and Cummins, had the most well-defined feminist theme of the plays of this period. The play criticizes the Irish stereotype of the self-sacrificing woman and suggests that women should rebel against abusive men. Dorothy Macardle's *Ann Kavanagh* rejects the stereotypical male reaction to a political execution, proffering in the end the superiority of the woman's point of view. And Rose McKenna's *Aliens* takes the theme of the arranged marriage and presents death as preferable to life in a loveless marriage.⁸⁴ By providing an outlet for these feminist works, the Abbey succeeded in maintaining its reputation as a forum for new ideas and differing points of view.

The contributions of the thirteen women produced at the Abbey Theatre were, therefore, significant to the growth of the theatre in several ways. Their works promoted a different viewpoint for the Abbey audiences; they allowed the Abbey to continue to produce new works when established playwrights fell short; and they helped establish the Abbey's reputation as an innovative theatrical enterprise. Most importantly, these

⁸⁴ In 1903, J. M. Synge also explored the theme of the loveless, arranged marriage in *In the Shadow of the Glen*. The play generated outrage with its perceived slur on Irish womanhood, as audience members declared no woman would never voluntarily leave such a marriage.

women helped promote the idea of the Abbey Theatre as a forum for Irish voices both male and female. Their presence on the Abbey stage forwarded the idea that this theatre sought to use Ireland's resources for a nationalist drama without discrimination regarding gender. Lady Gregory's contributions began the policy; the additions of the twelve others continued it.

CHAPTER 8:

THE WOMEN OF THE ABBEY THEATRE

In December 1925, the Abbey Theatre held a coming-of-age celebration commemorating the theatre's twenty-one years of existence in Dublin. Patrons and old friends were invited and, as the gala event included several nights of performances of old standards, past actors and actresses were asked to assume some of their old roles for these productions. Even Frank and Willie Fay were invited to return to the theatre to play for this milestone event.

There was, however, one actress who was not invited back to fill any of her old roles. Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh wrote to Joseph Holloway after the celebration:

Well our 'Coming of Age' is over and we have discovered we were quite forgotten in fact--we died quite a number of years ago [sic] I was certainly very hurt at the truly spiteful way, we were treated why were we invited if we were of so little importance. . . . I received a letter from Lady [Gregory] the next day. . . . She asks me to please forgive her for omitting my name. She remembered playing or trying to play Kathleen ni Houlihan but she forgot the name of the player she understudied [sic] indeed [sic] I wonder she allows my portrait in the vestibule. She also said she thought she had mentioned my name for how could she forget me (I don't know) till the reporters came to her and asked permission to include my name in the list.¹

Yeats also slighted Nic Shiubhlaigh with respect to the casting of the evening's plays.

I have just received an answer to my letter of the 20th [December?] when I got my card of invitation and saw in the evening papers the plays to be produced. I wrote to Mr. Yeats asking to be allowed to play either Nora [*In the Shadow of the Glen*] or the Angel [*The Hour-Glass*]. Today I get an answer written on the 2nd Jan. saying when he got my letter he saw Mr. Robinson but it was too late if we had known a week or two earlier, we might have given

¹ Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh to Joseph Holloway, n.d. Holloway Papers, National Library of Ireland.

you one of your old parts for the celebration, I am sorry.
 WYB. Well, you see how much was really thought of my
 offer to play.²

Nic Shiubhlaigh's outrage at being overlooked by the Abbey Theatre after her seminal efforts to promote its establishment could be seen to stand for all the women of the Abbey who have not been acknowledged by historians for their contributions.

Before the Abbey even opened, three women were influencing Yeats: Florence Farr shaped Yeats's ideas on theatrical practices—such as the use of sound, the style of acting, and the look of the *mise en scene*; Alice Milligan pointed the way for Yeats's use of Celtic themes in drama, as well as the advantages of using Irish actors in Irish plays; and Maud Gonne lent him her nationalist reputation. She also shaped the theatre's earliest acting techniques by both performing and teaching

Beginning with the Abbey's opening, more women contributed to its reputation. Annie Horniman's gift of the theatre building itself ensured the perpetuation of the Irish National Theatre Society; her design of the interior spaces and her decision to use all Irish workmanship increased the nationalist reputation of the project and allowed women artists to contribute their talents to the theatre. The stained glass windows, tapestries, and logo (still used today) were all the work of women. Women's set and costume designs, after the style of Gordon Craig, helped set the Abbey's reputation for innovation at the theatre.

During her entire career with the theatre, Lady Gregory managed legal conflicts, day-to-day administrative decisions, and financial difficulties in order to keep the theatre's doors open. Both she and Horniman managed tours for the Abbey Company,

² Ibid.

which both enhanced the theatre's financial situation and extended its theatrical reputation outside of Ireland.

The actresses contributed not only their proficiency in the distinctive acting style of the Abbey but their interpretation of lasting Irish characters. Individual actresses, such as Sarah Allgood, Maire O'Neill, and Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh also contributed to the perpetuation of the theatre: as inspiration for a play, as box office drawing card, or as the acting company's unofficial leader and promoter of *esprit de corps*.

The many women who wrote for the Abbey presented the audiences with a female point of view to counterbalance the male perspective. Indeed, the number of women produced argued for the Abbey's reputation as an innovator. The relative brevity of their works allowed the theatre versatility in scheduling their plays. In addition, Lady Gregory's extensive body of plays sustained the theatre by providing it with works to produce and creating specific genres when needed. Her collaborations with Yeats not only contributed to the growth of the theatre in its early years but also positioned him as both playwright and manager.

During the twenty-one years of the Abbey Theatre's existence, and including the seven-year period immediately preceding its opening night, so many exceptional women played major roles at the theatre in widely differing ways that it is easier to see them as individuals rather than as connected as part of a group. Although their great diversity makes it difficult to summarize the attributes of all, some of their shared characteristics are evident.

The women of the Abbey Theatre can be profitably grouped initially as actresses and everybody else. Actresses comprised the largest group of women at the Abbey,

numbering approximately one hundred and twenty over the entire twenty-seven year period of this study. The actresses also shared four characteristics not consistently found among the other women. First, they were, with only three exceptions, Irish.³ They were also Roman Catholic, lower class, and not well educated. Their lower class status and poor education meant that they had little choice but menial or low paying jobs. Work as an actress, therefore, probably seemed easier and more profitable than other occupations, especially when the Abbey began to pay a working wage in 1905.

Women in other areas of the Abbey Theatre—the writers, the managers, the designers, and the earliest women—were all Protestant, upper class, well educated, and not so consistently Irish. The Abbey Theatre was to them an avocation, a cause, or an artistic experiment. With the exception of the actresses, no one made her living at the Abbey. Lady Gregory, despite her years of devotion to the theatre, never received a salary or a stipend for her work as manager or Director; her only payment was royalty fees for plays produced after 1910. Of the fifteen who made major contributions, most were Irish, but a few were English, and one was an American.

Given the contributions enumerated above, an obvious conclusion suggests itself: although not generally acknowledged either in the early twentieth century when the Abbey flourished or in the early twenty-first century by theatre scholars, the Abbey Theatre was unique in Ireland because of the number of women it utilized and because of their influence on the theatre in all areas of theatrical practice. From 1897 to 1925, at least 150 women contributed to the Abbey Theatre. Women who wrote for the Abbey numbered almost half of the women then writing producible plays in Ireland.

³ The three non-Irish actresses at the Abbey during this period were Florence Darragh, Mona Limerick, and Cathleen Nesbit, who were all English.

Approximately one hundred and twenty actresses were employed at the theatre, native Irish actresses who interpreted the theatre's works better than the men, according to Fay. Women in design produced costumes and sets; another created the interior design of the theatre. Others then decorated it with stained glass and tapestry. One woman designed the theatre's logo. Three women directed productions. Two women managed the touring shows, again better than the men, judged by contemporaneous records. One woman financed the entire theatre building. One woman managed the theatre from its inception until the end of her life. All of these women made the Abbey Theatre what it became.

Another obvious conclusion is that almost every major movement of the time can be found in Ireland at the Abbey Theatre—and these movements arrived at the theatre first through its women. Between 1897 and 1925, the Abbey became the nexus for these movements: nationalism, the Celtic revival, the art and independent theatre movements, the arts and crafts movement, the suffragist movement, and mysticism.

Nationalism appeared early on at the theatre, with Maud Gonne as Kathleen ni Houlihan and her nationalist society, The Daughters of Erin, as actresses. The Celtic revival originally appeared in Alice Milligan's *The Last Feast of the Fianna*. The non-realistic, symbolic designs of Gordon Craig, representative of the art theatre movement, appeared at the Abbey first through the hands of Pamela Colman Smith and Edith Craig. The principles of realistic acting, found in the independent theatres in France, were first applied by The Daughters of Erin under the instruction of Maud Gonne. The arts and crafts movement arrived with Sarah Purser's stained-glass windows, Lily Yeats's tapestry, and Horniman's theatre building, furnished by Irish workmanship. The sentiments of the suffragist movement emerged at the Abbey in the plays of Suzanne Day

and Geraldine Cummins. And mysticism appeared at the Abbey through its influence on Florence Farr, Maud Gonne, Pamela Colman Smith, and Annie Horniman, all members of the mystic cult, The Society of the Golden Dawn.

It seems safe to conclude as well that the women of the early Abbey Theatre were drawn to the theatre by their need to participate in the growing revival of Irish culture and heritage. This participation manifested itself in two ways: through art or politics.

Women thus aligned themselves within distinct factions—those primarily interested in the art and culture of Ireland and those primarily interested in nationalist politics. Many of the early women, especially those who became actresses, were drawn to the Abbey by their desire to aid the nationalist cause. Spurred on by the political rhetoric of the Home Rule advocates, yet denied access to “men only” political organizations, women all over Ireland searched for an outlet for their nationalist zeal. Maud Gonne provided one such outlet in *The Daughters of Erin*, combining art and politics to create the perfect political tool: theatre. Gonne’s own performance of *Kathleen ni Houlihan* stood as evidence of the power theatre could wield. The assumption that the Abbey was to be a “nationalist” theatre drew these women to it in their effort to spread nationalist propaganda as Gonne had bid them.

The other faction—those interested in art and the cultural revival of Ireland— included Annie Horniman, whose motives were certainly not related to Irish politics. Her idea, rather, was to create a theatre dedicated to producing experimental, artistic, thought-provoking plays. That these plays should be written by Irishmen and about Irish subjects mattered less to her than that they have artistic merit. Her commitment to a theatre building with wholly Irish workmanship, however, argues that she was at least dedicated

to promoting the ideal of an Irish theatre with Irish interests at its core. Her enthusiasm for Irish workmanship sent a miscommunication to the nationalist women, a miscommunication that sowed the seeds of the bitter dispute that split the Abbey apart in 1905.

The two types of women—artist and nationalist—were drawn to the Abbey because of the perceived aims of that theatre; as quickly, the different factions split apart to promote their own agendas. Although each faction's ultimate goal was to promote Ireland through the means of theatre, the specific goals of each faction—the means of promoting Ireland—were decidedly at odds. The nationalists viewed the theatre as a political platform to supply Ireland with high rhetoric and propaganda that would inspire the people to insurrection. The artists regarded the venue as an art theatre, dedicated to promoting Ireland through the culture and heritage espoused in their literary dramas. This fundamental divergence resulted in the withdrawal of the nationalists in 1905 and the subsequent rise of the artists at the Abbey.

This struggle for control of the ideal of the Abbey, although seemingly drawn along class lines, was more pointedly a bid for power, and this power struggle was orchestrated by the Abbey's women. All of the nationalist women, at the time of the rift in 1905, were actresses of the lower class. Horniman and Gregory alone represented the artistic faction of women, and both were affluent and socially superior to others associated intimately with the Abbey. Predictably, in such a class struggle, the lower classes lost. When the nationalists left, in December 1905, however, all actresses did not flee. Two women remained in the company, and probably neither politics nor art influenced their decision. Sara Allgood and Maire O'Neill understood immediately the

implication for their careers that the departure of Nic Shiubhlaigh, Garvey, and the others created. Now the only experienced actresses in the company, they were assured of any leading roles they cared to request. Similarly, with the nationalist faction out, Horniman was free to turn over play selection to the Directorate—Gregory, Yeats, and Synge, the three playwrights whose works could then be selected without committee vote.

Although the departure of the nationalist faction in 1905 ensured the Abbey's development as an art theatre, it also created two new factions within the women's hierarchy at the Abbey: the managers and the actresses. The actresses, now secure with a living wage at the theatre, devoted themselves to perfecting their craft and furthering their marketability on the stage outside of Dublin. The managers, secure in their power of play selection, focused their attention on creating the ideal Irish art theatre—dedicated to producing works that they deemed worthy. Lady Gregory's oft quoted statement sums it up: "He who pays the piper, calls the tune."

When Horniman's subsidy was withdrawn in June 1910, the Abbey Theatre reluctantly became a commercial enterprise, with the result that women's roles shifted yet again. Financial concerns never encountered before worked both to hinder women's contributions and to enhance them. The three areas most affected by this change were management, design, and playwriting.

The role of women in management at the Abbey, both in administration and in stage direction, had always been strong because of Lady Gregory's constant involvement in both aspects and Horniman's financial management of the theatre. Few other women, however, laid claim to management roles. Only two other women directed at the theatre before 1910, and after the theatre went on a paying basis, none other than Gregory staged

plays for the rest of the period. The business manager, except for Horniman, had been a position held by men at the Abbey, and this also remained true throughout the period.

With the departure of Horniman's resources, employment opportunities for women declined, not only in management, but in scenic and costume design as well. Although there are no records of female designers after 1905, there is documentation of male designers before 1910. After 1910 the theatre was in such financial straits that it could hire no designers, regardless of gender. The greatest impact commercialism had on the women of the Abbey, then, was to reduce their employment prospects—except in two categories: acting and playwriting.

Opportunities for women playwrights, however, expanded with the loss of the subsidy; consequently, after 1910, more plays by women were produced than ever before. The reasons for this shift were two-fold. Because the theatre suddenly had to pay its way, it had to re-evaluate its policies regarding play selection. Having operated independently as an art theatre for five years, during which time it produced verse plays, translations of foreign works, and several controversial Irish plays, the theatre reluctantly admitted that it no longer called the tune alone and that audiences' tastes in drama were now as important as the Directorate's. Beginning in 1911, at least one new work by a woman other than Lady Gregory was produced each year. When these plays began to appeal to the Dublin audiences, the theatre increased their number, producing four between December 1912 and December 1913.

A second likely reason for the increase in female playwrights was Lady Gregory's decline in writing. Busy now with management of the theatre and, in 1911 and 1912 of the American tours, Gregory wrote fewer plays than before. With this decreased volume

of prospective plays, the theatre needed to find replacements that would prove popular fare, as Gregory's works had. The answer was other women's plays, providing the same sort of perspective as Gregory, if not the same technical expertise. The Abbey, therefore, produced a much greater variety of women's plays after 1910 than before.

Another hitherto ignored contribution of the women of the Abbey Theatre was their use of the theatre as a platform for feminism. Although feminism at the Abbey was never as strong as the theatre's support for nationalist sentiments, there is clear evidence that many women involved with the Abbey supported the widespread suffragist movement in Ireland, lived unconventional lives that bespoke feminist tendencies, and wrote plays with feminist themes. The strong force of the nationalist cause likely obscured the feminism at the Abbey.

Nonetheless, throughout the period of this study, women connected with the Abbey Theatre were also connected to the suffragist movement. Alice Milligan, Annie Horniman, Sarah Purser, Pamela Colman Smith, Suzanne Day, and Gertrude Cummins were all self-avowed suffragists. Playwrights Dorothy Macardle and Kathleen Cruise O'Brien were intimates of Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, the suffragist leader of Ireland, the former as close personal friend, the latter as sister. And although the words feminist and suffragist were not quite interchangeable, these women were certainly interested in women's issues and causes, both those of feminism and suffragism.

Others, although not labeled suffragist or feminist, led extremely unconventional lives that bespoke their willingness to question the prevalent Irish stereotypes of marriage, motherhood, sex, and gender roles. Florence Farr, considered the model for the New Woman, was divorced, had several affairs, and established a career as theatre

manager and director. Lady Gregory had two affairs during her lifetime, one after only eighteen months of marriage; she never remarried after her husband's death, preferring the independence of a single woman. Maud Gonne also had an affair and produced two children out of wedlock; she married and divorced, despite having converted to Catholicism, and remained a dynamic, public figure in Ireland until her death. All of these women took issue with the prevailing strictures society placed on women's behavior, and while they did not overtly call for change in the system, they provided, by the examples of their lives, a feminist sensibility at the theatre.

The most direct link to feminism at the Abbey occurs in the feminist themes of women's plays at the Abbey. Although present in some of the early plays of Gregory, these ideas are much more prevalent in the works of the later playwrights, especially in those with suffragist sentiments. The feminism of these plays is mostly understated, tucked carefully into the stories of the plays, as a seed is tucked just beneath the soil, allowing it to germinate and grow almost unnoticed.

Class also separated the nationalists and the feminists. The nationalist women, with the exception of Maud Gonne who left the Abbey circle early, were actresses of the lower classes. Their energy was spent in the nationalist cause, both inside and outside the theatre. As part of their lower class upbringing their behavior was expected to be even more circumspect than that of their social betters. If indiscretions in behavior occurred, they were secreted not shouted. To risk public censure was to risk reputation and livelihood. The feminist cause, therefore, was much more dangerous than the nationalist on a personal level, for even though these women could and did risk their lives for their country without loss of reputation for behaving outside the comparative social norms set

for women, to champion openly a lifestyle such as Maud Gonne's would court financial and social ruin. The suffragists and feminists at the Abbey, then, were, almost to a woman, upper-class, because the double standard of indiscretion was more acceptable for them than for their social inferiors.

Another reason why feminism did not take a stronger hold at the Abbey may ultimately be placed at the feet of its strongest women, Gregory and Horniman. In a study similar to this one, on the women of the Provincetown Players, Cheryl Black asserts that "these women [who began the Provincetown Players] composed not merely a group but an overlapping, interlinking, intimately woven network of mutual support."⁴ Black further credits this network not only with fostering an atmosphere of welcome to all women but also with producing "singularly felicitous collaborations among women. New plays by women offered strong acting roles to women; plays by and about women attracted female directors, female critics, and female audiences."⁵

No such network, however, can be said to exist within the Abbey Theatre's organization after its first year of operation. During the first year, when the Abbey was operating under the regulations of the INTS, a fledgling network of women did exist in which women in all areas of the theatre encouraged and helped each other in order to get the theatre up and running. From mid-1904 until mid-1905 this network welcomed women to the theatre organization in more areas of production than it would again until well after 1925. Gregory, Horniman, and Yeats all sought the best for the emerging theatre and thus welcomed women into its ranks as actresses, designers, and managers. This *esprit du corps* evaporated, however, after the subsidy changed the atmosphere of

⁴ Cheryl Black, *The Women of Provincetown, 1915-1922* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 145.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

the organization from non-commercial to commercial, from the unity of comradery to its bisection into management and employees.

Most responsible, perhaps, for this loss of a women's network were Horniman and Gregory, for, as the only women aligned with management, they were the two best positioned to make choices that would assure a strong cadre of women working in the Abbey. There were probably several reasons why they neglected to continue actively seeking out women's contributions for the theatre, although the foremost one was likely that women were not the primary issue on their agenda.

Both Gregory and Horniman were dedicated to furthering the career of W. B. Yeats as poet and playwright, and their participation in the Abbey Theatre was grounded in this objective. All their energies, therefore, went into encouraging Yeats and creating the best showcase for his talents; almost certainly for that reason alone Horniman financed the theatre building. Both women may have also had hidden agendas where Yeats was concerned; both were reportedly "in love with him," and evidence that both women took care of his daily housekeeping needs, one in London and one at Coole, is incontrovertible. Horniman's behavior, however, demonstrates how this attitude may have actively discouraged women from participating at the theatre. Her refusal to endorse Florence Farr as a director at the Abbey after the departure of the Fays, whether based on grounds of jealousy or on grounds of personal dislike (stemming from a disagreement within the Golden Dawn society), suggests that Horniman was simply not interested in promoting either women or a feminist agenda within the Abbey. She did encourage the company's hiring of the actress Florence Darragh, although evidence

persuades that Darragh was acting as a spy for Horniman.⁶ After 1907, however, Horniman's influence at the Abbey waned, so that, even had she wanted to, she could not have promoted a women's network at the theatre.

Gregory's influence at the Abbey, however, lasted throughout the period and until her death in 1932. Had she wished, she could have turned the Abbey into a feminist forum, such as Provincetown, or at least promoted women and women's works to a greater extent. Her choice to focus instead on the advancement of Yeats and to encourage various other male playwrights and designers is not surprising given her early family background. Gregory, as shown earlier, was never fond of women. Although several of her plays have strong women characters, her view of the world, learned at her mother's knee, was that men counted, women did not. Ironically, she spent most of her life proving her mother wrong: she made a brilliant marriage, she wrote and published over sixty literary works, and she created a theatre whose legacy continues into the new millennium. Unfortunately, she also helped to perpetuate her mother's world-view through her choice to encourage men's rather than women's contributions at the Abbey.

Evidence points to several reasons why Gregory chose to assist Yeats's career. First, was probably her genuine admiration for his work with folklore, in *Celtic Twilight*, as well as his early volumes of poetry. Gregory recognized his talent as a writer and sought to encourage his writing through offers of the domestic stability available at

⁶ In a letter to Darragh, dated 18 August, 1906, Horniman warns the actress about people in the Abbey company, telling tales such as Sara Allgood being "only fitted for peasant roles," and "Frank Fay's learning is really a number of . . . well remembered magazine articles." She also suggests to Darragh that "If you ever come across anything which you consider that I should know please let me be informed direct." Annie F. Horniman to Florence Darragh, 18 August, 1906, Abbey Theatre Correspondence, National Theatre of Ireland.

Coole. Yeats's vision for a revival of Celtic heritage and culture through the creation of an Irish theatre was obviously attractive to Gregory also. Her own interest in the peasants at Roxborough and Coole, their oral histories, and the Gaelic language laid the foundation for her attraction to the idea of a theatre written specifically about Irish themes and by Irish hands. Although she had no experience with theatre practice until she met Yeats, the idea of theatre as an object to revive the Irish culture excited her imagination at their meeting in 1897 and persuaded her to assist Yeats's venture.

Another, more personal reason for Gregory's adoption of Yeats and his cause was the need for a male figure in her life. In 1897, Gregory's son Robert was about to begin his first term at Oxford, leaving Gregory without a male figure to care for for the first time in her life. Yeats was convenient and conveniently in need of mothering, as evidence of his visits to Coole illustrate. Gregory could, therefore, easily insert Yeats into the position left vacant by her son and continue to fulfill her mission of service.

Gregory's choice to focus on Yeats and his career may not have been the only reason why women were not more encouraged at the Abbey during this period. Gregory may, in fact, have discouraged the involvement of women other than actresses, possibly from a need to remain the dominant female power at the Abbey. After Horniman's final departure from the Abbey circle in 1910, no other woman gained a position of power as manager, director/stage manager, or designer until 1927 when Dorothy Travers Smith was hired as the first resident scene designer at the Abbey. Her hiring may have been predicated on her status as wife of Lennox Robinson, but she was the first of four women who would, in the years after Lady Gregory's death, hold that position. After Gregory died in 1932, a variety of women were given opportunities at the Abbey: other women

playwrights' works were accepted, women scenic designers were hired, and an actress who began her career on the Abbey stage in 1924, Ria Mooney, became the theatre's manager and premiere director.

Why this sudden wealth of talented women only after 1927? Several possibilities exist. That women of similar talents were not available in the early teens and twenties is certainly a possibility, though a remote one. That financial problems prohibited the hiring of additional personnel until after the subsidy was granted is also a distinct possibility. That Gregory herself disliked women in general and preferred to work with men is a certainty, according to her autobiography. These factors point toward the conclusion that, although Gregory initially welcomed women to the theatre, once she assumed control with Yeats and Synge, she determined to retain her place in the Directorate by refusing to allow rivals access to the upper levels of the Abbey's management.

From the outset, then, the Abbey was inundated with conflicting tensions: the nationalists and the artists, the English and the Irish, the Catholics and the Protestants, the lower and upper classes, those who wanted the subsidy and those who did not. These tensions were, in addition, all overlaid by a further conflict—one tied to gender. While the theatre was a strictly amateur enterprise, women's participation in it was strong. Once it shifted toward commercialism, however—in 1905 when Horniman's subsidy exploded the sharing company and again in 1910 when she withdrew its support—women's participation in the theatre shifted, and in several areas declined radically. The nascent network of mutually supportive women gave way before a hierarchy in which Horniman and Lady Gregory assumed power but did not seek to share it with other

women. Throughout the period of this study, women at the Abbey, except for the actresses, lacked sustained support for their efforts.

Despite this lack of sustained support, the fact remains that women played quite prominent roles in all areas at the Abbey Theatre during the years of its conception and establishment. The women of the Abbey Theatre wrote, directed, acted, designed, and managed; they introduced into the theatre new political, social, cultural and artistic ideas; they created an atmosphere of innovation and diversity at a time when other Irish theatres were inclined to create neither. What they did not do was engender recognition for their achievements.

Perhaps it was a good thing that the accomplishments of these women were for a time marginalized; otherwise they too might have suffered the fate of the Dublin statuary: abstracted, belittled, labeled for public scorn. Perhaps the time for acknowledgement of these women's contributions to the Abbey should be now, when scholars are emphasizing women's roles throughout history and acknowledging that these invisible women had a voice, but no one was listening to it. Perhaps now is the time, as Lady Gregory wrote, "when the small rise up and the big fall down . . . when we all change places at the Rising of the Moon."⁷

⁷ Lady Augusta Gregory, *The Rising of the Moon*, in *Great Irish Plays* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1995), 586.

APPENDIX A:
WOMEN OF THE ABBEY THEATRE, 1898 – 1925

This list attempts to provide a comprehensive record of all women who contributed to the Abbey Theatre in any capacity between 1898 and 1925. Sources include Lennox Robinson's Casts of First Productions in *Ireland's Abbey Theatre*, Robert Hogan's *The Modern Drama Series*, and Abbey Theatre Scrapbooks and programs.

Annie Allgood*
Sara Allgood*
T. Bairead*
A. Barden*
Cathleen Bourke*
Una Bourke*
Margot Brunton*
Nellie Bushel
Peggy Buttimer*
Crissie Byrne*
Nell Byrne*
Joyce Chancellor*
Nora Close*
Edith Craig#
May Craig*
Eileen Crowe*
Mildred Connmhaigh*
Ann Coppinger*
Helen Cullen*
Geraldine Cummins+
Florence Darragh*
Suzanne Day+
Maureen Delaney*
Nora Desmond*
Eva Dillon*
Lini Doran*
Kathleen Drago*
Beatrice Drury*
Beatrice Elvery*
Valentine Erskine*
Vera Esposito* [Emma Vernon]
Edna Fardy*
Florence Farr*
Mrs. Frank Fay*
Ethel Fletcher*
Joan Fitzmaurice*
Kathleen Fortune*
Maidha Gallagher*

Mary Galway*
 Maire Garvey* [Roberts]
 Lady Augusta Gregory*+
 Maud Gonne*
 Margaret Guinness*
 Doreen Gunning*
 Dora Hackett*
 Christine Hayden*
 Annie Elizabeth Frederika Horniman#
 H. Hutchinson*
 Lillian Jago*
 Belle Johnston*
 Norma Joyce*
 Eveline Kavanagh*
 May Kavanagh*
 Irene Kelly*
 Mrs. Bart Kennedy+
 Betty King*
 Annie Kirby*
 Honor Lavelle* [Helen Laird]
 Winifred Letts+
 Mona Limerick*
 Dorothy Lynd*
 Dorothy Macardle+
 Cathleen MacCarthy*
 S. MacEoin*
 Rose MacKenna+
 A. P. MacLiam*
 Eithne Magee*
 Florence Marks*
 Mrs. Martin
 Rosamund Martin
 Sarah Casey Maynard+
 Marion McCarthy*
 Violet McCarthy*
 Maeve McIntyre*
 Maire McIntyre*
 Maeve McMurrrough*
 Dora Melville*
 Alice Milligan+
 A. Mistéal*
 Helena Moloney*
 Elinor Monsel#
 Ria Mooney*
 Elinor Moore*
 Elizabeth Hamilton Moore+

Pearl Moore*
 Cathleen Mullamphy*
 Muriel Munro*
 Cathleen Murphy*
 Gertrude Murphy*
 Irene Murphy*
 Sheila Murray*
 Mary Nairn*
 Kathleen Nesbitt*
 Mai Neville*
 M. Ni Cathmhaoil*
 Maire Ni hAodha*
 Una Ni Leigh*
 E. Ni Muiris*
 Maire Ni Pherols*
 C. Ni Riain*
 Eithne Nic Shiubhlaigh*
 Maire Nic Shiughlaigh* [Mary Walker]
 Una Nic Shiubhlaigh*
 Margaret Nicholls*
 Kathleen O'Brien*
 Kathleen Cruise O'Brien+
 Maura O'Byrne*
 Mona O'Byrne*
 Columba O'Carroll*
 Una O'Connor*
 Bridget O'Dempsey*
 Kathleen O'Dempsey*
 Eileen O'Doherty*
 Maeve O'Donnell*
 Sheila O'Grady*
 Agnese O'Higgins*
 Annie O'Hynes*
 Eileen O'Kelly*
 Maire O'Neill*
 Alice O'Sullivan*
 Sheila O'Sullivan*
 F. Peallai*
 M. Perolze*
 Katherine Frances Purdon+
 Sarah Purser#
 Maire T. Quinn*
 Johanna Redmond+
 Sheila Richards*
 Lilian Roberts*
 Gertrude Robins+

Nora Shannon*
Mary Sheridan*
Mona Shiel*
Pamela Colman Smith#
Nell Stewart*
Joan Sullivan*
Maire Sweeney*
Aiofe Taafe*
Beatrice Toal*
Sheila Tyreconnell*
Rose Vernon*
Gertrude Wareing*
Esme Ward*
Isabel Warrington*
Elaine Woodrow*
Susan Yeats#
Elizabeth Young*

* Denotes actress
+ Denotes playwright
Denotes designer

APPENDIX B:
PLAYS WRITTEN, CO-WRITTEN, OR TRANSLATED BY WOMEN
ACCORDING TO DATE OF PRODUCTION BY THE ABBEY COMPANY¹

1900

The Last Feast of the Fianna, Alice Milligan

1901

Diarmuid and Grania, George Moore, W. B. Yeats, and Lady Augusta Gregory

The Twisting of the Rope, Lady Augusta Gregory and Douglas Hyde

1902

Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Lady Augusta Gregory and W. B. Yeats

The Pot of Broth, Lady Augusta Gregory and W. B. Yeats

1903

Twenty-five, Lady Augusta Gregory

The King's Threshold, W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory

1904

The Shadowy Waters, W. B. Yeats and Florence Farr

Spreading the News, Lady Augusta Gregory

On Baile's Strand, W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory

1905

Kincora, Lady Augusta Gregory

The White Cockade, Lady Augusta Gregory

1906

Hyacinth Halvey, Lady Augusta Gregory

The Doctor in Spite of Himself, trans. Lady Augusta Gregory

The Gaol Gate, Lady Augusta Gregory

Deirdre, W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory

The Canavans, Lady Augusta Gregory

1907

The Jackdaw, Lady Augusta Gregory

The Rising of the Moon, Lady Augusta Gregory

The Eyes of the Blind, Winifred M. Letts

Interior, trans. Lady Augusta Gregory

The Poorhouse, Lady Augusta Gregory and Douglas Hyde

Dergorvilla, Lady Augusta Gregory

The Unicorn from the Stars, Lady Augusta Gregory and W. B. Yeats

¹ List compiled from Kofeldt's biography and Lennox's history.

1908

The Rogueries of Scapin, trans. Lady Augusta Gregory

Teja, trans. Lady Augusta Gregory

The Workhouse Ward, Lady Augusta Gregory

1909

The Miser, trans. Lady Augusta Gregory

The Challenge, Winifred M. Letts

The Image, Lady Augusta Gregory

1910

Deirdre of the Sorrows, J. M. Synge, Lady Augusta Gregory, W. B. Yeats, Maire O'Neill

Mirandolina, trans. Lady Augusta Gregory

The Travelling Man, Lady Augusta Gregory

The Full Moon, Lady Augusta Gregory

Coats, Lady Augusta Gregory

1911

The Deliverer, Lady Augusta Gregory

Falsely True, Johanna Redmond

The Marriage, Lady Augusta Gregory and Douglas Hyde

1912

MacDaragh's Wife, Lady Augusta Gregory

The Bogie Men, Lady Augusta Gregory

Damer's Gold, Lady Augusta Gregory

A Little Christmas Miracle, Elizabeth Hamilton Moore

1913

The Home-Coming, Gertrude Robins

Broken Faith, Suzanne Day and Geraldine Cummins

My Lord, Mrs. Bart Kennedy

1914

The Wrens, Lady Augusta Gregory*

1915

Shanwalla, Lady Augusta Gregory

1917

Fox and Geese, Suzanne Day and Geraldine Cummins

*Produced by the Abbey Company in London.

1918

Hanrahan's Oath, Lady Augusta Gregory

Aliens, Rose MacKenna

Atonement, Dorothy Macardle

1919

The Dragon, Lady Augusta Gregory

Brady, Sarah Casey Maynard

1920

The Golden Apple, Lady Augusta Gregory

Candle and Crib, Katherine Frances Purdon

1921

Aristotle's Bellows, Lady Augusta Gregory

1922

Ann Kavanagh, Dorothy Macardle

1923

Apartments, Kathleen Cruise O'Brien

1924

The Story Brought by Brigit, Lady Augusta Gregory

1925

The Old Man, Dorothy Macardle

APPENDIX C:
NEW PLAYS PRODUCED AT THE ABBEY
AND IN IRELAND BY
GENDER OF PLAYWRIGHT^{1*}

Year of Production	No. of Women Produced at the Abbey Theatre	No. of Plays by Women Produced at the Abbey	No. of Men Produced at the Abbey Theatre	No. of Plays by Men Produced at the Abbey	Total Plays Produced at the Abbey Theatre	Total Number of Plays by Women Produced in Ireland
1907	2	6	5	5	9 ⁺	7
1908	1	3	8	8	11	4
1909	2	3	6	7	10	5
1910	2	5	7	7	11 ⁺	8
1911	2	4	5	6	9 ⁺	9
1912	2	4	6	6	10	10
1913	4	3	10	10	13	7
1914	0	0	12	14	14	1
1915	1	1	6	5	6	2
1916	0	0	5	10	10	3
1917	2	1	11	10	11	3
1918	3	3	7	6	9	7
1919	2	2	10	11	13	3
1920	2	2	9	9	11	3
1921	1	1	4	5	6	2
1922	1	1	8	10	11	1
1923	1	1	5	6	7	3
1924	1	1	5	7	8	3
1925	1	1	4	5	6	1

¹ This table is compiled from Hogan's *The Modern Drama* series.

* This table does not include either plays produced in Gaelic or translations other than those written specifically for production at the Abbey Theatre. Plays in Gaelic were not generally accepted for production at the Abbey until 1938; the only exception was Douglas Hyde's *An Tincear Agus an T-Sidheog* (The Tinker and the Fairy), produced in February 1912. The information on the "Total Number of Plays by Women in Ireland" is meant to reflect plays that could have been accepted at the Abbey during the 1907-1925 period.

⁺ Denotes inclusion of one or more collaborations.

APPENDIX D:
WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS PRODUCED
IN IRELAND 1907-1925¹

A. M. Buckton
Una Burke
Jane Barlow
Mary Costello
Geraldine Cummins*
Mrs. J. B. Carrickford
Moireen Chavasse
Dorothea Donn-Byrne
Suzanne R. Day*
Florence Eaton
Alice May Finny
Kathleen Fitzpatrick
Norah Fitzpatrick
Lady Augusta Gregory*
Eva Gore-Booth
Blanche Jackson
Mrs. Bart Kennedy*
Winifred M. Letts*
Annie J. W. Lloyd
Dorothy Macardle*
Rose MacKenna*
Sarah Casey Maynard*
L. McManus
Alice Milligan*
Elizabeth Hamilton Moore*
Kathleen Cruise O'Brien*
Anastasia O'Neill-Foley
Constance Powell-Anderson
Katherine Frances Purdon *
Johanna Redmond*
Gertrude Robins*
Molly F. Scott
Blanche St. Albans
Nellie Standish-Barry
Helen Waddell
Sheila Walsh

¹ This list was compiled from Hogan's *The Modern Drama Series*.

* Denotes affiliation with the Abbey Theatre

APPENDIX E:
ABBEY THEATRE PRODUCTIONS FOR WHICH
DIRECTING CREDIT BY WOMEN CAN BE
REASONABLY ESTABLISHED, AND THE DIRECTORS*

1899

The Countess Cathleen – Florence Farr

1905

Kincora – Lady Augusta Gregory

1908

The Man Who Missed The Tide – Sara Allgood

1909

The Miser – Lady Augusta Gregory

Deirdre of the Sorrows – Maire O'Neill

The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet – Lady Augusta Gregory

* The Abbey Theatre did not list directors in their programs until 1910 (when they began to list them as producers). Before 1908, Willie Fay directed most plays, although individual playwrights had the option of directing their own works. Directing credit, therefore, can only be established through letters, memoirs, or journal entries.

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