THE EVOLUTION OF YEATS’S DANCE IMAGERY:
THE BODY, GENDER, AND NATIONALISM

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Tracing the development of his dance imagery, this dissertation argues that Yeats’s collaborations with various early modern dancers influenced his conceptions of the body, gender, and Irish nationalism. The critical tendency to read Yeats’s dance emblems in light of symbolist-decadent portrayals of Salome has led to exaggerated charges of misogyny, and to neglect of these emblems’ relationship to the poet’s nationalism. Drawing on body criticism, dance theory, and postcolonialism, this project rereads the politics that underpin Yeats’s idea of the dance, calling attention to its evolution and to the heterogeneity of its manifestations in both written texts and dramatic performances. While the dancer of Yeats’s texts follow the dictates of male-authored scripts, those in actual performances of his works acquired more agency by shaping choreography. In addition to working directly with Michio Ito and Ninette de Valois, Yeats indirectly collaborated with such trailblazers of early modern dance as Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Maud Allan, and Ruth St. Denis. These collaborations shed important light on the germination of early modern dance and on current trends in the performative arts. Registering anti-imperialist and anti-industrialist agendas, the early Yeats’s dancing Sidhe personify a romantic nationalism that seeks to inspire resistance to the cultural machinery of British colonization. In his middle career, these collective Sidhe transmute into the solitary figure of a bird-woman-witch dancer, who, resembling the soloists of early modern dance, occupies center stage without any support from men and (to some extent) contests patriarchal assumptions. The late Yeats satirizes the imposition of sexual, racial, and religious purity on postcolonial Irish identity by means of Salome-like dances in which “fair” dancers hold the severed heads of “foul” spectators. These dances blur customary socio-political boundaries between fair and foul, classical and grotesque. Early to late, the evolution of Yeats’s dancers reflects his gradual incorporation of more innovative female roles partly resembling those created by the pioneers of modern dance.
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ABBREVIATIONS

A Collected Works of W.B. Yeats V.3: Autobiographies

ASD Ah, Sweet Dancer

CL1 The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats V.1: 1865-1895

CL3 The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats V.3: 1901-1904

E Explorations

E&I Essays and Introductions

L The Letters of W.B. Yeats

LA&R The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats V.10: Later Articles and Reviews

M Memoirs

Myth Mythologies

P&I The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats V.6: Prefaces and Introductions

SS The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats

Uncoll1 Uncollected Prose by W.B. Yeats V.1

Uncoll2 Uncollected Prose by W.B. Yeats V.2

V A Vision

VP The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats

VPl The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats
Introduction: Yeats and Dance

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

---Yeats, “Among School Children”

I.

At the age of sixty, while evaluating the children’s learning environment at St Otteran’s School in Waterford, Yeats reasserted his idea of Unity of Being through which education should bring about harmonious unity between the body and mind instead of dispensing abstract thinking and discipline. Triggered by both the wasted image of an old Maud Gonne and apprehension for the schoolchildren’s future, Yeats evoked one of his favorite symbols, the dancer who moves in accord with the mystery of being and whirls out the wrongs of fanatic political and religious pursuits. The aesthetics proposed in this poem is one that unifies the body and soul, beauty and wisdom; to Yeats, this unity is best expressed through the metaphor of dance. Here the treatment of the dancer as symbol is one that consciously argues against the subordination of the corporeal to the cerebral, and, instead of writing out the dancer’s human agency, it gestures toward the integration of her/his individuality with her/his art. Read in the context of The Tower (1928), “Among School Children” spells out an affirmative statement about the body that contrasts with the rejection of human flesh in “Sailing to Byzantium,” the caricatured physique of the old poet in “The Tower,” and the raped female body in “Leda and the Swan.” The body in “Among School Children” is not to be bruised or cast away in exchange for cold artifice or superhuman
knowledge; it is in itself the embodiment of art and wisdom. Does Yeats imply that to obtain unison between the body and soul, dance should be part of the curriculum? Maybe he was thinking along these lines even years before “Among School Children” was written. In his 1906 essay “Discoveries,” the poet prescribes voice and dance lessons for a girl with “a shrill monotonous voice and an abrupt way of moving”:

She is fresh from school, where they have taught her history and geography whereby ‘a soul can be discerned,’ but what is the value of an education, or even in the long run of a science, that does not begin with the personality, the habitual self, and illustrate all by that? Somebody should have taught her to speak for the most part on whatever her voice is most musical . . . and have taught her after this some beautiful pantomimic dance, till it had grown a habit to live for eye and ear. A wise theatre might make a training in strong and beautiful life and fashion, teaching before all else the heroic discipline of the looking-glass, for is not beauty, even as lasting love, one of the most difficult of the arts? (E&I 269-70)

While Yeats may seem sexist in telling the young woman to live for eye and ear, his “heroic discipline of the looking-glass” is applied to both women and men, and his main concern resides in how education of the body can help shape one’s personality and how such training can strengthen an actor’s performance. Where the dancing body and images of woman are concerned, the debates among feminists are usually heated. It is especially so when they involve a male author like Yeats whose gender politics have been subject to early criticism and attack as well as to recent reconsideration and acknowledgement of their complexity.¹ Yeats’s ideas of gender are played out, if not further complicated, in his use of dance emblems.

¹ A recent example can be found in Elizabeth Butler Cullingford’s Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry (1996), which provides a feminist-historicist account of Yeats’s often-contradictory gender politics in love poetry and real life relationships with women.
Besides “Among School Children” Yeats also wrote many other poems, plays, and essays that center on images of dance and dancers: these recurrent emblems provide opportunities for exploring the conceptions of the body, gender, and nationalism that underpin Yeats’s aesthetic theory and practice. My dissertation further investigates how the art of dance influenced Yeats’s works, how Yeats and his contemporaries viewed or portrayed dance, dancers, and dancers’ bodies, and how these views and representations interacted with the body politics and gender ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Yeats’s fascination with dance raises questions about his conceptions of the body and of gender. For instance, how does he deposit the dichotomy of word and dance in such antitheses as the soul and body, and masculinity and femininity? Does he privilege one antinomy over the other? And, does he grant the dancer subjectivity and individuality? To treat dancers as symbols, like Yeats’s contemporary symbolist writers Stephane Mallarme and Arthur Symons did, sometimes is to risk suppressing the dancer’s body (usually the female body), individuality, and subjectivity. The de-individualization of the dancer, according to Mallarme, is a prerequisite for the aesthetics of dance: “I mean that the ballerina is not a girl dancing…she is not a girl, but rather a metaphor…she does not dance but rather, with miraculous lunges and abbreviations, writing with her body, she suggests things which the written work could express only in several paragraphs of dialogue or descriptive prose” ([his emphasis] “Ballets” 62). Although the dancer is the vehicle of dance, the implied male spectator controls the power of hermeneutics: “through her always ultimate veil, she will give back your concepts in all their nakedness, and silently inscribe your vision as would a Symbol—which she is” (66). Mallarme’s writings reveal an intriguing attitude toward the ballerina: as much as he praises her for visionary properties, he is reluctant to either acknowledge her corporeal existence (she is not a girl, but some miraculous
being) or treat dance as a serious art form (she is writing, not dancing). Thus, the dancing body is simultaneously elevated and relegated to a moving sign that occupies an uneasy and problematic territory in between the physical, symbolical, and male fantasy worlds. Does Yeats also de-individualize the dancer and depict her as a silent spectacle for male consumption? The dancer in “Among School Children” can be viewed as de-individualized, but the case is far from settled since the dancer is also de-gendered, a being whose autonomous aesthetic achievement renders the spectator/poet gasping at the inadequacy of words to transcribe the dance. The contrast between Yeats’s early play The Land of Heart’s Desire (1894) and middle play At the Hawk’s Well (1917), for instance, also works against any simplistic conclusion about his treatment of dance and dancers. The Faery Child in the earlier play is innocently seductive, speaks frequently in human language and dances in simple movements. The Guardian of the Well, on the other hand, has a hybrid, grotesque body (as Cuchulain puts it “bird, woman, or witch”) that only gives hawk cries and moves in a threatening yet enticing and intricate fashion. The tendency for critics to situate Yeats’s dance imagery firmly in the symbolist tradition and to associate him with the misogyny of that tradition is questioned in my dissertation, which calls attention to the differences among various portraits of dancers in Yeats’s works.  

Lying beneath these different representations of dancers are Yeats’s ambivalent attitudes toward corporeality. In A Vision (1937), Yeats repeatedly uses the “perfectly proportioned human body” as a metaphor for Unity of Being, in which a person has obtained both physical and spiritual perfection. Given his constant emphasis on the human body as an agent for artistic and spiritual achievement (especially so in his later career), Yeats was among the pioneers to debunk the Victorian mindset of chastising the (female) body and relegating it to marginal

2 Frank Kermode’s Romantic Image (1957), Koritz’s Gendering Bodies/Performing Art, and Ellis’s The Plays of W.B. Yeats all rigidly place Yeats’s dance images in the context of symbolism.
cultural space. To use the perfectly proportioned human body as the metaphor for Unity of Being, however, is to play impossible odds against time and nature. Paradoxically, the perfectly proportioned body often denotes an ethereal body that exists outside the human realm, or can only be momentarily emulated by a human being. It is interesting to note that the dancers in Yeats’s early works, such as *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889), *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), and *The Land of Heart’s Desire* (1894), are mostly faeries and their dances occur frequently in the mythical settings. Bearing a semiotic burden as the register of eternal youth and bliss, the dancing body is pitted against its archenemies—time and old age. Since human flesh is destined to decay, the antagonistic tension inevitably surfaces, especially in Yeats’s late poems where the poet’s aged body becomes a locale of mockery, contempt, or triumph.

“How can we know the dancer from the dance?” The answer to this riddle posed by Yeats’s “Among School Children” is probably a sphinx-like smile and a simple “we cannot.” Nonetheless, this difficulty of demarcating the boundaries of the dancer’s body in Yeats’s works proves essential in understanding his use of dance emblems and his surrounding socio-political conceptions of corporeality. This fascination of what’s difficult and enigmatic (if not unanswerable) extends the depth of my query beyond current criticism of Yeats’s dance imagery. To this end I deploy methodological tools developed by theorists of body criticism, dance history, feminism, and visual communication—such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas, Sally Banes, Julia Kristeva, Toril Moi, Jane Gallop, and John Berger.

II.

Frank Kermode’s groundbreaking work *Romantic Image* (1957) launched the serious study of Yeats’s dance imagery in light of the Romantic-Symbolist tradition. Following Kermode’s
work, subsequent scholarship in the sixties, seventies, and eighties confined itself to a limited scope that focused on the Salome figure in Yeats’s later poetry, dance plays, and *A Vision*. With the rising feminist-historicist effort to recast dance history in the nineties, recent scholarship has shown increasing interest in the interdisciplinary study of Yeats, dance, gender, and modernism.³ Amy Koritz’s *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art* (1995), Terri Mester’s *Movement and Modernism* (1997), and Sylvia Ellis’s *The Plays of W.B. Yeats* (1999) all touch on, to a certain extent, the gender issues underlying Yeats’s portrayals of dancers. Placing Yeats’s dance plays within the Symbolist framework, Koritz argues that although Yeats’s drama depends on the dancing body for theatricality, it is culpable of de-individualizing the dancer and effacing the female body (90). While this argument seems to stand true in reference to certain passages in Yeats’s *Essays and Introductions*,⁴ its fallibility lies in its premise to interpret dance “in a purely literary context” (87), excluding a more comprehensive approach to the whole corpus of his works and a consideration of his collaborations with various dancers. Although Mester briefly charts the permutations of Yeats’s dancers as transforming from early Celtic fairies to unattainable women and finally to cosmic dancers (65), she does not explore in-depth the significance of this metamorphosis in relation to larger issues of the body, gender, and Irish nationalism. Supplementing Kermode’s study of the Salome figure in Yeats’s dance plays, Ellis also fails to take into account the complex and multifaceted conceptions and reconfigurations of the body and gender that evolved over the course of his life. This critical tendency to appraise Yeats’s dance emblems exclusively in the later works or exclusively as published final texts has informed a biased reading of the politics that underpin Yeats’s idea of the dance. As David

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³ Amy Koritz’s *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art* (1995), Terri Mester’s *Movement and Modernism* (1997), and Sylvia Ellis’s *The Plays of W.B. Yeats: Yeats and the Dancer* (1999) are attempts to inscribe the often-marginalized discourse of dance into standard critical narratives of modernism.

⁴ Koritz’s arguments are based on her reading of the excerpts from “Certain Noble Plays of Japan” in Yeats’s *Essays and Introductions*. 
Holdeman argues, “interpreting drafts as authoritative components of works” can contribute to conversations about Yeats and modernism (9). To obtain a more holistic view of Yeats’s dance imagery, my dissertation traces the development of his dance symbolism from early to later works and utilizes the Cornell Yeats manuscript materials to map out nuances of this evolution. Participating in these current trends in the interdisciplinary study of Yeats and modernism, this study also investigates the poet-dramatist’s direct and indirect collaborations with various dancers (such as Michio Ito, Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Maud Allan, Ruth St. Denis, Anna Pavlova, and Ninette de Valois), and reads the lives and works of these dancers from a dance historian’s perspective. To fully comprehend the symbolic meaning of dance and dancers in Yeats’s works, we need to recuperate the history of early modern dance and modern ballet that caused a spectacular stir in public and literary circles, along with a drastic change in the status of dance from low-brow entertainment to high art. Yeats’s close associate Arthur Symons for one became a patron of dance and a scholar of the music halls. His enthusiasm prompted Yeats to note in Autobiographies that Symons “studied the music-halls as he might have studied the age of Chaucer” (236). Yeats’s “His Phoenix” aptly records the dance craze of that time: “The young men every night applaud their Gaby’s laughing eye, / And Ruth St. Denis had more charm although she had poor luck; / From nineteen hundred nine or ten, Pavlova’s had the cry” (VP 353-54: 9-11). What fascinated the audience about modern dance were largely its innovations in stage presentations and theatrical effects, and behind all these spectacular props, a solitary female dancer whose artistic and managerial virtuosity made the magic happen. One critic declared, “Cinematic art, multimedia, abstract, performance, interactivity, contemporary dance: at the end of the nineteenth century, Loie Fuller had already invented everything” (Reynolds 161). On the darkened stage, illuminated with multi-colored lights, Fuller wielded lengthy
drapes, creating patterns like fire, lilies, and serpents: using light to project color, she anticipated
effects used later by Edward Gordon Craig and Yeats. Around the time when early modern
dancers, like Fuller, Duncan, Allan, and St. Denis, were enjoying their meteoric success, Serge
Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes was revolutionizing the traditional plot of ballet, producing brilliant
ballets and musical scores as well as prominent dancers, like Michel Fokine, Vaslav Ninjinsky,
Anna Pavlova, and Yeats’s collaborator at the Abbey Theater—Ninette de Valois, who later
founded the Royal Ballet in England.

The phenomenal success of early modern dance and ballet also brought up controversies
pertaining to the heated debate of the woman question that took place as the Victorian era was
drawing to an end. Dancers’ social status was perceived with anxiety and ambivalence: some
viewed them as sexual commodities with questionable moral standard; some praised and
worshiped them as goddesses and artists with ingenious talents. The dancers, while reacting
against stereotypical assumptions about their femininity and reflecting changes in attitudes about
marriage and sexuality, were at times ambiguous and capricious about their views of gender and
the images of women they projected on the stage. Isadora Duncan’s dances, for instance,
oscillate between the poles of dangerous sexuality (as temptress) and inspiring spirituality (as
goddess). Our reading of Yeats’s representations of and interactions with dancers is further
complicated by the fact that early modern dancers, like Fuller, Duncan, and St. Denis were
“proto-feminists” who, according to dance historian Sally Banes, “used space-assertion and other
choreographic strategies literally and metaphorically to sever dependencies from men on stage”
(92). The revolutionary result of Duncan’s solo dances, as dancer Annabelle Gamson points out,
affirms individual woman and liberates female performers physically and psychologically:
“Women were not only taking center stage; they were taking all of the stage—without any
support from men.” To proclaim that modern dancers were proto-feminists is not without polemic, since Fuller and Duncan, much like Yeats, did not trust the suffragist movement or any political organization to solve women’s plight. Whether modern dancers articulate a particular kind of feminism requires further discussion of how they conformed to or rebelled against the dominant sexual politics of their times.

The same ambivalence occurs when we attempt to designate Yeats’s dancers as either self-asserting proto-feminists or ideal creatures born out of male poet/spectators’ fantasies. Are we to read, for example, the Woman of the Sidhe in The Only Jealousy of Emer (1919) as a powerful woman who, dancing to entice the hero Cuchulain, identifies herself as “that bird of prey,” or as a stereotypical femme fatale of the sort that populates the literary landscape of the late nineteenth-century? Does the dancer in “Michael Robartes and the Dancer” simply dance verbally and physically for Robartes? Or, does she subtly challenge Robartes’s masculine heroism with an ironic tone (“And must no beautiful woman be / Learned like a man?”), and by doing so, reject the role of a passive princess waiting to be rescued by the chivalric prince, as scripted in the traditional plot of classical ballet? In addition to scrutinizing Yeats’s and his contemporaries’ views of dancers in relation to their attitudes toward suffragists and opinion-minded women, my dissertation calls attention to the poet’s collaborations with dancers whose views expand the breadth of our inquiry into the interrelation between dance, literary modernism, and feminist movements.

Besides the body and gender politics, my reading of Yeats’s dancers comments on the issue of Irish nationalism that has yet to be explored in the interdisciplinary space of Yeats, dance, and modernism. Although Koritz eventually mentions that Yeats’s dance plays involve questions of

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national identity and Mester states that dance in the early poetry is Yeats’s effort to “create a universal Irish mythology” (40), they do not pursue in detail the subject of Irishness and nationalism. According to Yeats’s Autobiographies, it is clear that folkdance plays an important part in mapping out his project for the Irish literary movement:

We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the uneducated classes knew and even sang, and might we not make those stories current among the educated classes, rediscovering for the work’s sake what I called ‘the applied arts of literature,’ the association of literature, that is, with music, speech, and dance: and at last, it might be, so deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design? (167)

And it is impossible to forget that, when portrayed in Yeats’s works, Irish mythological hero Cuchulain and legend Red Hanrahan are often in the mood to pick up some dance steps. Since Yeats’s Irishness and nationalism occupy an important position in recent discussions of the poet, we can further such conversations by interrogating how the absence or presence of Irishness in Yeats’s dance emblems addresses the issues of Irish nationalism, body politics, and gender ideology.

III.

In an attempt to trace the evolution of Yeats’s dance imagery, I divide the dissertation into three chapters, arranged chronologically. Chapter 1 “Dancing Troops of the Sidhe: Deathless Dancing Bodies and Yeats’s Early Nationalism” discusses the nascent dance imagery in Yeats’s early works. The deathless dancing bodies of the faeries are a focal point where Irish mythology,  

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folkdance, and his vision for the national literary movement converge. Chapter 2 “‘bird, woman, or witch’: Solitary Dancers and Middle Yeats’s Gender Politics” concentrates on the development of dance emblems in his middle career, a period when he often wrote plays for dancers and collaborated with them in the theater. Under the influence of these collaborations, his early Sidhe-Salome figure transmutes into a solitary bird-woman-witch dancer, who embodies, technically and metaphorically, a more powerful feminine principle than her earlier version, the Faery Child. The complicated symbolism of dance in Yeats’s later works is the subject of chapter 3, “Crazy Jane Looking at Salome: Tension between the Dancing Body and Old Age.” Discussions zoom in on the contending forces between performing and looking at the dancing body, played out in the intricate relationship between “fair” classical dancers and “foul” grotesque spectators. These investigations also lead to an analysis of the violation of the male body and gender codes in Salome’s dance with the severed head—a reigning typology occupying the center stage of Yeats’s later plays. Summing up the evolution of dance symbolism throughout his career, the concluding coda “Moving Forward” argues for a reconsideration of Yeats’s idea of the dance as simultaneously participating in the germination of early modern dance and anticipating the current trends in the performative arts.
Chapter 1. Dancing Troops of the Sidhe: 
Deathless Dancing Bodies and Yeats’s Early Nationalism

I.

Compared with the complex, sophisticated dance emblems in his middle and late works, dance images in Yeats’s early works usually convey simpler meanings. The poet takes snapshots of children, common folks, birds, and waves that “dance” and move in rhythms. Juxtaposed with and punctuated through these everyday dance moves are the Sidhe’s fairy jigs under the moonlight. Due to its relative simplicity, critics have paid little attention to the significance of Yeats’s early dance imagery. Kermode’s, Mester’s, and Ellis’s interest in the immortals’ dance resides mainly in its *femme fatale* underpinning, which would be more fully developed in the poet’s later career. They observe that the Sidhe (the Gaelic gods, goddesses, and fairies) are closely associated with Salome—the fatal biblical dancer who, in *fin-de-siecle* literature and artworks, epitomizes the image of the *femme fatale*. While I partly agree with their reading of the Sidhe as an early Yeatsian embodiment of Salome, my interpretation of the early dance imagery centers on its relevance to his early nationalism. Among the critics, only Mester infers a link between Yeats’s dance imagery and nationalism. She states that Yeats’s interest in dance was both “patriotic and mystical”: “He went digging into the myths and legends of the pagan Celts because he felt modern Ireland’s unity depended upon the creation of a common mythology” (31). Yet, she does not explore further the role of dance in Yeats’s cultural nationalism.

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7 Kermode notes “In Yeats’s work, the notion of human sacrifice as the price of the symbolic dance is deeply and seriously embedded. From very early days he associates Salome with the Sidhe” (Romantic Image 74). Mester observes “it was Yeats’s unique achievement to conflate the Sidhe, wind, and Salome into an apocalyptic *danse macabre*” (45). Ellis also sees a link between the Sidhe and “the customary portrayal of Salome” (64).
The nationalist urge to revive Irish culture influenced all of the writers who helped to establish the Irish Renaissance, including Yeats. And although the later Yeats would become more disillusioned, the early Yeats envisioned rural Ireland as an ideal pastoral, not yet fully contaminated by British industrialism: a romantic region populated by fairies, the everlasting forces. Yeats’s project preceded the attempt of later modernists to revitalize their contemporary “wasteland” both in time and complexity: it featured a nationalist agenda with an uneasy colonialist/colonized twist to it. As Declan Kiberd points out in *Inventing Ireland*, Irish Protestant artists like Yeats “turned to geography in the attempt at patriotization” because history was “a painful accusation against their own people” (107). Yeats also turned to the landscape’s ancient inhabitants, the Sidhe.

In Yeats’s retelling of Celtic folklore, the Sidhe embody the deathless spirit of Ireland, safeguard its ancient values, and lure mortals away from what Yeats saw as the corrupt modern values of the British and their Irish colony. These Gaelic divinities, sometimes referred to as the Children of Danu, are revered among the peasants, as “the powers of life, the powers worshipped in the ecstatic dances among the woods and upon the mountains, and they had the flamelike changeability of life, and were the makers of all changes” (Late 68-69). They represent, however, not just the powers of life, but more accurately, the perpetual life-in-death and death-in-life flux, which they express through continual dancing and whirlwind-like motions. In Yeats’s play *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), the legendary Queen Maeve’s dancers are “water-born” mermaid-like fairies (VPl 55: 308). In *The Land of Heart’s Desire* (1894), their bodies are described as “milk-white” and “more light / Than dewdrops on the banner of the dawn” (VPl 208: 410). Made up of air, fire, and water, the fairies are light, fierce, and changeable; the lack of earth element indicates their otherworldly, “unearthly” quality. Young Yeats’s emphasis on
the ethereal bodies of the fairies and the mortals’ longing for them conveys his desire to transcend or even discard human physicality at this stage of his career (at least until the mid 1890s before his first sexual experience with Olivia Shakespear).

The Sidhe’s nocturnal feasts and dances often take place under the moonlight, which, according to Yeatsian symbolism, is sided with imagination, femininity, and Ireland. Lines like “Come away while the moon’s in the woodland, / we’ll dance and then feast in a dairy” are a standard invitation from fairies to fellow fairies or to would-be-kidnapped mortals (VP 707: 9-10). People who pass on the oral tradition of folklore often claim to have seen the fairies “dancing in the moonlight” (Uncoll2 75). By invoking the Sidhe’s moonlight jigs, Yeats simultaneously summons the presence of ancient Gaelic myth and Irish nationalist sentiment. Not only are the Sidhe joyful dancers, they are warriors and guardians of Ireland in Yeats’ Mythologies (1959): some peasants believe that the best of their dead ancestors go on living among the immortal tribe of the Sidhe, respectfully referred to as “the royal gentry” or “the army” to indicate their role in protecting the land and its people in a feudal society. The old man in “The Heart of the Spring” (1897) told the servant boy not to be afraid of the Sidhe because they are the ancient gods “who made the spears of your father’s fathers to be stout in battle . . . And in our evil day they still watch over the loveliness of the earth” (Myth 173).

As a focal point in Yeats’s early works, the dancing bodies of the immortals become a spectacle where contending forces converge and battle against each other—with the usual triumph of imagination, femininity, resistance politics, and mysticism over reality, masculinity, colonization, and orthodox Christianity. The connection of the Sidhe and Irish nationalism, however, can provoke problematic reactions by privileging escapism in the fairyland and its paradoxical foil and counterpart—martyrdom, the kind of sacrificial paradigm that has been
criticized for its detrimental impact on the politics of modern Ireland. Despite this danger, Yeats manages to orchestrate the dancing troops of the Sidhe into a compelling cultural iconography that animates the Irish’s indigenous roots and beliefs, and simultaneously inspires a nationalistic passion to fight against the machinery of colonization.

II.

Just as the peasantry functions as an antithesis and a cure to the degenerate civilization associated with England, Yeats’s construction of the Celtic fairyland seeks to awaken the mystical tradition and, thus, create a cultural ideal for modern independent Ireland. During the course of collecting and retelling Irish folklore, Yeats helps construct a vision of Celtic utopia, the fairyland, where the body never decays and the dancing feet never get tired, where no tears and worries exist, where passions are undiluted and only experienced as “untrammelled hate and unmixed love.” The fairyland is conceptualized as paradise, set apart from the everyday world by its overflowing abundance: “There is more love than upon the earth; there is more dancing there than upon the earth; and there is more treasure there than upon the earth” (Myth 86). Unlike modern, colonial Ireland, this fairyland is an Irish “land of heart’s desire” where the Sidhe’s sovereignty protects the land and its joyous dancers from the invasion of foreign political power and middle-class materialism. Synonymous with freedom, joy, and immortality, the Sidhe offer an attractive alternative for colonial subjects who seek spiritual fulfillment and political empowerment away from the oppressive quotidian world. To choose an “afterlife” in the Tir na

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8 Critics such as Conor Cruise O’Brien and Declan Kiberd blame Yeats for propagating the blood-sacrifice paradigm with his mythologized view of Irish history. See O’Brien’s “An Unhealthy Intersection,” Kiberd’s Inventing Ireland, and Jonathan Allison’s “The Attack on Yeats.”

9 Yeats, “The Untiring Ones,” Mythologies, 79. Yeats states that “Love with them [the Sidhe] never grows weary, nor can the circles of the stars tire out their dancing feet… They danced on and on, and days and days went by, and all the countryside came to look at them, but still their feet never tired” (77).
nOg, however, dictates a renunciation of present human life, which itself becomes the source of agonizing struggle and problematic results.

Yeats’s early narrative poem *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889) underscores these associations of the fairyland with eternal youth and dancing, with the Sidhe’s attempt to steal away mortals, and with the human longing for the fairyland. Relating his story to Saint Patrick, the now old and blind hero Oisin recalls how he encountered the fairies during a deer hunt and how he then spent three hundred years in Tir na nOg. Oisin depicts the preliminaries of the fairyland as follows:

The horsemen with their floating hair,
And bowls of barley, honey, and wine,
Those merry couples dancing in tune,
And the white body that lay by mine; (VP 2-3: 7-10)

Yeats apparently struggled with these lines, which did not appear in the manuscript and the 1889 edition; it was not until in the 1895 collection that Yeats pinned down Oisin’s opening description of the fairyland as consisting of four essentials—the horsemen, bowls of abundance, dancing couples, and the fairy princess Niamh—that reflect the standard imagery of the early Yeats’s portrayal of the fairyland. Those are the same assets Niamh utilizes to successfully seduce Oisin to live with her in Tir na nOg: besides promising to be his wife, Niamh offers him eternal life, wealth, men and women who dance like birds and salmon herds (VP 8-9). After Oisin chooses to be with Niamh, the narrative zooms in on their wanderings to the three islands of Dancing, Victories, and Forgetfulness—corresponding to the three stages of life. The Island of Dancing, on which Oisin spent one hundred festive years, is ruled by a beautiful young wizard whose hand upholds a scepter shining with “[w]ild flames of red and gold and blue, / Like to a

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merry wandering rout / Of dancers leaping in the air,” which men and women kiss and touch with religious devotion (VP 18: 252-54). The dance simile, like the image of the dancing couples at the beginning of the poem, was not added until 1895, which might indicate an influence coming from Yeats’s experience of working with the young dancer Dorothy Paget for the production of The Land of Heart’s Desire in 1894. The young wizard describes the Island of Dancing as a place where “there is nor law nor rule, / Nor have hands held a weary tool”—an anarchical utopia where the phallic scepter of dance rules out bourgeois drudgery and British power (VP 19: 282-83). He preaches:

And if joy were not on the earth,
There were an end of change and birth,
And Earth and Heaven and Hell would die,

Then mock at Death and Time with glances
And wavering arms and wandering dances. (VP 18-19: 269-75)

While joy and dance provide a necessary countermove to time and death, these antinomies do not negate each other, but function more like Blakean polemics, constantly battling each other. Given the basis that time and death, and change and birth are all part of the cyclical existence in the natural world, the dances that celebrate the joy of change and birth, cannot but wind down to the path of time and death, no matter how unwanted. Although young Yeats has seemingly created an alchemical universe on the Island of Dancing where the scepter of dance defies the natural laws, time and death are by no means obliterated, but always exist as formidable enemies on the outskirts. Led by the young wizard, the ritual dances that vehemently mock at time and death also reek of anxiety coupled with triumph:
With one long glance for girl and boy
And the pale blossom of the moon,
He fell into a Druid swoon.
And in a wild and sudden dance
We mocked at Time and Fate and Chance
. . . .
We danced to where in the winding thicket
The damask roses, bloom on bloom,
Like crimson meteors hang in the gloom,
And bending over them softly said,
Bending over them in the dance,
With a swift and friendly glance (VP 19-20: 287-309)

Dance holds the visionary power associated with the ancient druids or wizards.\(^\text{11}\) Dance and glance not only rhyme literally but also metaphorically; the dancers, both men and women, are equipped with the power to gaze into the face of time and mortality.

Yeats’s one-act play *The Land of Heart’s Desire* (1894) reiterates these conceptions of the fairyland as a land of youth and joy, and dance as a celebration transcending time and fate, except that the conflict centers on a married woman’s choice to go or not to go with the fairies. Prior to her voluntary abduction by the Faery Child, Mary Bruin often escapes into her reveries of the fairyland, “[w]here nobody gets old and godly and grave, / Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise, / Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue” (VPL 184: 49-51). In Yeats’s

\(^{11}\) Druids are “a learned class among the Celts of Gaul, Britain, and Ireland… they most often appear as wizards, with the power to influence the elements and to predict future.” *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, 95.
works, depictions of the fairyland are slightly modified in various stories to mirror different individuals’ deepest desires. In the case of Mary, she longs to run away from domestic chores and from her nagging mother-in-law, Bridget Bruin; her freedom and independence from the confines of the domestic sphere are gained through regression into the world of the fairies, into dance, and ultimately into death. Unlike people who are involuntarily abducted by the Sidhe, the heroine Mary Bruin intentionally wills her transformation into a fairy. She pleads,

    Come, faeries, take me out of this dull house!
    Let me have all the freedom I have lost;
    Work when I will and idle when I will!

    . . . . .
    And dance upon the mountains like a flame. (VPl 192: 183-89)

The Faery Child’s singing echoes Mary’s longing for the fairyland and answers her prayer, so to speak:

    THE VOICE. The wind blows out of the gates of the day,
    The wind blows over the lonely of heart,
    And the lonely of heart is withered away.
    While the faeries dance in a place apart,
    Shaking their milk-white feet in a ring,
    Tossing their milk-white arms in the air;
    For they hear the wind laugh and murmur and sing
    Of a land where even the old are fair,
    And even the wise are merry of tongue; (VPl 194-95: 236-44)
This song sums up the allure of this other world, with the fairies dancing, time standing still in eternal youth, and the wind blowing—emblematic of what Yeats calls “the vague idealisms & impossible hopes which blow in upon us to the ruin of near & common & substantial ambitions” (CL1 380). The repetitions of this song create a profoundly hypnotic effect on all the people present, including Bridget Bruin. They temporarily transform her from the stereotypical bitter-tongued old woman to a gentle person who offers to warm the Faery Child’s feet and fix her meal. The imaginary world momentarily redeems the imposing tyranny of reality.

The daily battle between Mary and her mother-in-law Bridget reflects the constant tension between imagination and reality, and the contradictory coexistence of traits among the Irish peasants that marks their ambivalent attitude toward the Sidhe. Slanting toward the side of reality, Bridget Bruin would probably agree with the Irish idiomatic expression that calls a good-for-nothing person a “little fairy.” Yeats, on the other hand, is more sympathetic to the desire for freedom and idleness: the dance imagery is interwoven with the bird imagery, associated with freedom and radical innocence in Yeats’s works. For instance, the Faery Child who calls to Mary repeatedly refers to her as a little bird “with crest of gold” or “with silver feet” (VPI 209). Toward the end of the play, Mary yields to the fairy’s calling and dies; the stage direction reads, “Outside there are dancing figures, and it may be a white bird,” indicating her final flight into freedom, away from domestic tyranny (VPI 210: 430). However, in exchange for freedom and joy in Tir na nOg, Mary needs to renounce her human life, which, in spite of inevitable imperfections, glows with her husband Shawn’s adoration and love, and her father-in-law Martin’s good nature and wealth. Molded on the Irish nationalist Maud Gonne, Mary Bruin voices Gonne’s desire for personal and national freedom that both fascinated and frustrated young Yeats: “I began to write The Land of Heart’s Desire… and put into it my own despair. I
could not tell why Maud Gonne had turned from me unless she had done so from some vague
desire for some impossible life, for some unvarying excitement like that of the heroine of my
play” (M 72-73). Just as Gonne’s behavior perplexed Yeats, Mary’s decision to go with the
fairies also leads us to ponder whether she has made the right choice by sacrificing Shawn’s
devotion to her. Mary’s ambiguous statement in response to Shawn’s plea to stay with him also
underlines the vagueness of her longing: “I think that I would stay—and yet—and yet—“ (VPl
209: 420). In the world of the fairies, however, freedom from aging, sorrows, and foreign
powers overrides all other concerns, as the Child’s song promptly ends the play with haunting
refrains about the joy in the land of heart’s desire, leaving no room for Shawn’s grieving.

Not only is the fairyland a sanctuary for married women like Mary Bruin, it is an imaginary
world where Yeats can free himself and Ireland from British rule. Yeats later recorded in his
Memoirs on February 7, 1910, “I would write a poem I had long thought of about the man who
left Aoibhinn of Craiglea to die at Clontarf and put in it all the bitter feeling one has sometimes
about Ireland. The life of faery would be my lyric life . . . In the poem as my dream planned it,
Aoibhinn was to mourn for the dance deserted on the mountain” (241). The poem Yeats planned
on writing is about Cubhlaing Ua hArtacain who, regardless of Aoibhinn’s entreaties, went to
fight and died at the Battle of Clontarf, which brought two centuries of Viking dominance in
Ireland to an end in 1014.12 By tying Celtic fairyland with the Battle of Clontarf, Yeats delineates
two interwoven themes in his early works—the Sidhe and Irish nationalism—that coalesce
spiritual longing with patriotism to bring forth Romantic martyrdom. Reading Mary Bruin’s
story in this intertextuality, her longing for Tir na nOg that defies all matrimonial ties becomes a
trope for Ireland’s struggle for political freedom from its colonial matriarch/patriarch. On a

12 For more information on the Battle of Clontarf, consult Welch’s The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish
Literature (375).
personal level, young Yeats’s decision to center on the Sidhe in his poetic endeavor gestures toward an attempt to bring together the two often-conflicted forces of poetic escapism and nationalist enthusiasm within himself. John P. Frayne notes that these inner contending forces translate themselves into Yeats’s two different—poetic and journalistic—writings: “At the same time that his poetry of the eighties and nineties called for flight, escape, immunity from what he called in his ‘Into the Twilight’ ‘the nets of wrong and right,’ his prose, calling for battle with the enemies of Ireland and the spirit, reflected his efforts to survive in a world from which he could not escape” (Uncoll119). Like his protagonist Mary Bruin, Yeats seems to barter direct involvement with the politics in Ireland for a dream landscape in ancient Celtic mythology. But, Yeats is self-conscious, or at least half-conscious, that his idealism may simply turn into escapism. In The Countess Cathleen, after selling her soul to the devils to save the peasants from starvation, Cathleen tenderly addresses the poet Aleel as one “[w]ho sang about the dancers of the woods / That know not the hard burden of the world” (VPl163: 889-900). She further associates the dancing Sidhe with the pure childlike happiness and the poetic world where there is no harsh reality. The sharp contrast between her selling the soul to save the people and his singing of the fairyland chisels out a gap that can only be tentatively bridged by Aleel’s final action of seizing an angel to verify Cathleen’s entrance into Heaven.

Critics have observed and critiqued Yeats’s tendency to escape into childhood and fairyland in his early works. Frayne argues that Yeats was drawn to Samuel Ferguson’s primitivism “as one means of escape for the individual from his adulthood or for a nation from modern times” (Uncoll1181). But to Kiberd, the sentimentalization of childhood in The Land of Heart’s Desire is highly problematic. He states that Yeats’s early attempt to deny civilization by escaping to the land of the forever-young runs the risk of “founding [itself] on the imperial strategy of
infantilizing the native culture,” which was British in origin.\textsuperscript{13} He further criticizes the same sentiment exhibited among other Revival writers: “Disenchanted with the growing murderousness of their land, they sought relief amidst the scenes of childhood memory, only to discover that the very act of dreaming that dream was itself tainted with the politics of Anglo-Irish relations” (105). Yeats’s regression into childhood and fairyland may seem complicit with the imperialist desire to infantilize and feminize the colonized land; his emphasis on the deathless dancing bodies of the Sidhe, however, challenges that assumption and complicates our reading of his resistance politics. The body, as postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha points out, is a visible sign where domination and subjugation play out their power struggle.\textsuperscript{14} According to The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, the body is simultaneously “the literal ‘text’ on which colonization has written some of its most graphic and scrutable messages” and “the literal site on which resistance and oppression have struggled” (322). Unmarked by worldly hardship and foreign invasion, the fairies’ ethereal bodies symbolize the unyielding spirit of Ireland that has never been and will not be colonized or inscribed by the British.

While Yeats’s use of Celtic mythology constitutes an indirect form of resistance to colonization, his attempt to demarcate the Irish and the British by foregrounding the Sidhe works to undermine the twin forces of industrialism and imperialism. In contrast to his treatment of the Sidhe’s ancient jig, Yeats’s description of dance in England is cast in an unfavorable light—sided with harsh reality in the Yeatsian system. His poem “Street Dancers” (1890) implicitly criticizes the city life and industrialism of London, suggesting that if the street dancers (two ragged children) had known the pastoral life and joyous dance of some southern islanders or of a

\textsuperscript{13} “Childhood and Ireland,” Inventing Ireland, 103.
\textsuperscript{14} “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, 72
“Bedouin’s brood” they would not be dancing and begging in London. The first two stanzas state,

Singing in this London street,
To the rhythm of their feet,
By a window’s feeble light
Are two ragged children bright—
Larger sparrows of the town,
Nested among vapours brown
Far away the starry mirth
Overhangs the wooded earth.

If these merry ones should know,
Dancing by the window glow,
Starry laughter, woodland leisure,
Would they foot so fleet a measure?
Ah no! (VP 731: 1-13)

Although the comparison is not made directly between Ireland and England, the opposition between Yeats’s depictions of the fairy dance in Ireland and the beggar dance in London is self-evident. In the third stanza, the image of the children “in some far lane, / Dancing on the moon’s broad stain, / Watched of placid poplar-trees” also evokes the Sidhe’s moonlight jig (VP 731-32: 14-16). This poem carries on the tradition of William Blake’s critique of industrialism and its byproduct, child labor, in London. The ninth stanza says,

Others know the healing earth,
Others know the starry mirth;
They will wrap them in the shroud,
Sorrow-worn, yet placid-browed.
London streets have heritage,
Blinder sorrows, harder wage—
Sordid sorrows of the mart,
Sorrows sapping brain and heart. (VP 733: 53-60)

The images of “vapours brown,” “shroud,” “blinder sorrows, harder wage”—that summon to
mind pollution, death, and hardship—all work in sharp contrast to the utopian imagery of the
Celtic fairyland where dance, immortality, and joy exorcise those evils. London streets pass on
the heritage of “sorrows sapping brain and heart” that recalls the bleak pictures depicted in
Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” and “London.”

Industrialism, according to Yeats, further brings about the fragmentation of culture in London,
where street dances and extravagant balls usurp lyrical tradition and ancient ritual:
If the London merchants of our day competed together in writing lyrics they would not,
like the Tudor merchants, dance in the open street before the house of the victor; nor do the
great ladies of London finish their balls on the pavement before their doors as did the great
Venetian ladies, even in the eighteenth century, conscious of an all-enfolding sympathy.
 Doubtless because fragments broke into ever smaller fragments we saw one another in a
light of bitter comedy. (A 165)

Besieged by the outside pressure of modernization, industrialization, and imperialism, Ireland
was not far from falling apart as England had done. The emblem of the dancing troops of the
Sidhe becomes a unifying thread for Yeats to knit together ancient Celtic and modern Irish elements into a unified cultural tapestry.

To counteract the imperial forces of modernization and industrialization, Yeats and other Irish nationalists (be they Anglo-Irish or Gaelic revivalists) all turned to the peasantry and its primitivism as part of an “anti-imperialist and anti-metropolitan agenda” (Quinn 48). The peasantry, as conceptualized by the Gaelic League pamphleteer Mary Butler, was “by far the most attractive section of the community, by far the least vulgarized and anglicized” (48). While running the risk of editing out the gloomy reality of the peasantry, this idealized version serves as an index by which modern civilizations are measured. Valued for its sacred primitive energy, the heritage of the peasantry—folklore and folkdance—functions as a powerful means in Yeats’s nationalist project to revitalize Ireland’s ancient spirit:

We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the uneducated classes knew and even sang, and might we not make those stories current among the educated classes, rediscovering for the work’s sake what I called ‘the applied arts of literature,’ the association of literature, that is, with music, speech, and dance: and at last, it might be, so deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design? (A 167)

In this common design, the Irish’s love for music and dance affirms the intimate relation between the peasant culture and ancient mythology. According to Yeats’s review of David Rice McAnally’s book *Irish Wonders* (1888), “Celtic fairies are much like common men and women. Often the fairy-seer meets with them on some lonely road, and joins in their dance, and listens to their music” (Uncoll1 139). Yeats presents the Irish as a people who listen to and pass on the

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15 Deborah Fleming points out that Yeats’s peasant is “[a] man who does not exist,” but an ideal image that embodies noble virtues uncorrupted by modern civilization (6-7).
folklore of the dancing fairies, immersing themselves wholeheartedly in folkdance and priding themselves in mastering every tricky step of the Gaelic jig. The common folk he describes often view dance as having the same status as music and poetry, and even religion. The weaver in “Dust hath closed Helen’s Eye” (1893) proclaims, “His [the blind poet Raftery] poetry was the gift of the Almighty, for there are three things that are the gift of the Almighty—poetry and dancing and principles” (Myth 29). Yeats maps out a similar synthesis of dance, folklore, and music—or the “applied arts of literature” as he puts it—with the fiddler/poet as a revered figure who occupies the center of his cultural nationalism. He credits the “innumerable forgotten poets” for their contribution to the making of Irish peasant life. In his view, their imaginative art of songs, dances, and conversations differentiates the Irish from the British, who are synonymous with “cold, joyless, irreligious and ugly life” (E 205). Although dance is viewed as a powerful weapon to fight back British imperialism, the privilege of poetic utterance over dance is implied: after all, Yeats laid out the blueprint from the viewpoint of a young poet whose involvement with modern dance and ballet had yet to begin.

To call attention to the underestimated lyrical tradition and to claim his own “Irishness” from that heritage became an urgent mission of this young Anglo-Irish poet. As Elizabeth Cullingford points out, the ballad form provides Yeats a wealthy tradition of nationalist writings since the ballad is “long associated in Ireland with both love and patriotism” (Gender 166). In searching for his distinct voice amidst the nationalist movement, Yeats found Samuel Ferguson, whom he celebrated for his revival of the almost-forgotten Celtic material that Yeats believed would allow future poets to “bring thence living waters for the healing of our nation” (Uncoll1 82). When reviewing Ferguson’s early poetry, Yeats praises his “The Fairy Thorn” as the most beautiful Irish ballad written on the subject of “the good people”—the fairies. This thirteen-stanza poem
narrates the story of Anna Grace, who, while dancing and playing with three other girls near the fairy hawthorn, is abducted by the fairies. Upon close reading, we can detect the profound influence of its imagery and theme on Yeats’s poetry of the fairyland. The Sidhe’s calling “Come away” in Yeats’s poems resonates with the first stanza of “The Fairy Thorn” where the three girls, instead of the Sidhe, tempt Anna to sneak out:

Get up, our Anna dear, from the weary spinning-wheel,
For your father’s on the hill, and your mother’s asleep;
Come up above the crags, and we’ll dance a highland-reel
Around the fairy thorn on the steep. (82)

Ferguson’s poem is told from the perspective of the three “survivors” whose apprehension as to what happened to Anna and what would happen next builds up dramatic suspense. The invisible presence of the fairies further enhances this suspense: the girls could only feel the fairies’ “power of faint enchantment” breathing through their beings and heard their “silky footsteps,” but were too frightened to look (82-83). While Ferguson’s fairies are formidably absent, Yeats’s innovative descriptions of the Sidhe emphasize their corporeal presence. Yeats often explores and dramatizes the voice and psyche of the Sidhe, and details their enjoyment in dancing and luring away mortals: this new perspective gives Yeats’s fairy poems a fresh tone different from other popular dancing verses and ballads, and simultaneously creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy that validates the Sidhe’s presence in modern Irish society.

If, as a nationalist poet, Yeats was “expected to produce ‘manly’ verse in order to counteract the colonial stereotype of the Irish as effeminate and childish,”16 his personas in early works such as The Wind Among the Reeds (1899) often defy that expectation by assuming the feminine role of “weaving” metaphoric cloths of poetry or seeking refuge in the embrace of his beloved. To

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16 Cullingford, Gender and History, 11.
assert a masculine style within the framework of cultural nationalism, as Adrian Frazier points out, was itself a paradoxical endeavor—nineties cultural nationalism “was, after all, susceptible to being thought of as an appropriation of the female sphere, ‘culture’”; “begotten by an inflow of Wilde upon an upwelling of John O’Leary, Yeats’s conception was of an elitist, aesthetic, and nonparliamentary movement” as opposed to nationalism’s underlying military nature (9).

Working with his personal love affair and masculine anxieties on the one hand, and Celtic mythology and nationalist vocation on the other, Yeats tactfully tailors his cultural nationalism to subvert the British construction of Irishness as the inferior feminine other—not by negating it, but by redefining it as superior and more desirable than its oppositional masculine Englishness.

In response to fervent nineteenth-century European studies of the Celts—Ernest Renan’s The Poetry of the Celtic Races and Matthew Arnold’s “The Study of Celtic Literature”—Yeats expresses the urgency to define and defend the Celtic element in literature from an Irish perspective. The temperament of the ideal man of genius, according to Yeats, is that of “the ancient hunters and fishers and of the ecstatic dancers among hills and woods”—a revision of Matthew Arnold’s idea of being Celtic as essential to a man of genius (E&I 184). Writing in hope that “the greater delicacy and spirituality of the Celtic peoples” would cure the English middle-class philistinism (xii), Arnold goes on to praise the Celtic genius for his poetic sensibility that borders on “feminine idiosyncrasy,” which, if tapered well, compliments beautifully the disciplined English temperament (89-90). Though not spelled out, Arnold’s endorsement of Celtic melancholy and natural magic reinforces the imperial power-relation between England and Ireland as the masculine ruler and the feminine subordinate.¹⁷ In refuting Arnold’s statement and subtext, Yeats’s strategy is to insist on the superiority and centrality of the Celtic sensibility: whereas extravagant emotions equal feminine idiosyncrasy to Arnold, to

¹⁷ Ibid., 61.
early Yeats it is precisely “‘the vivifying spirit’ ‘of excess’” that creates great arts and heroism (E&I 185). Yeats also modifies Arnold’s blended dispassionate-and-patronizing approach to Celts’ affiliation with nature that conveniently validates the oppositional relation between English/masculine/culture and Irish/feminine/nature. It is not just a bond with nature, Yeats argues, but the intense passion originating from the ancient worship of Nature with ecstasy that makes the ruling characteristic of the Celts, and without this spiritual passion, literature deteriorates into mere “passionless meditations” (E&I 185). This exultation of primitivism works to disparage the modernization and industrialization associated with England, and to defy the British’s belittling criticism of the Irish as infantile and feminine by celebrating and remaking it into a heroic characteristic. One of Yeats’s favorite descriptions of the Irish Celt comes from Douglas Hyde’s *Love Songs of Connacht* (1895): “The same man who will today be dancing, sporting, drinking, and shouting, will be soliloquizing by himself to-morrow, heavy and sick and sad in his poor lonely little hut.”\(^{18}\) The contradictory coexistence of lightheartedness and melancholy in the Irish blood is thus perceived and redefined by the Revival writers as inexhaustible passion and strength—the invaluable momentum for achieving greatness.

What fascinates Yeats about dance is precisely its intense expression of passion and ecstasy that enables a sacred primal connection with one’s origin, as opposed to the British scientific-progressive outlook on humanity. The rituals held by the ancient worshippers of Nature take place in “tumultuous dance among the hills or in the depths of the woods, where unearthly ecstasy fell upon the dancers, until they seemed the gods or the godlike beasts, and felt their souls overtopping the moon” (E&I 178). The “old orgaic dances” provide the worshippers with the power to momentarily enter a trancelike state, imagine “the happy other world,” emulate the

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deity and obtain a nearly omniscient vision (Uncoll2 120-21). In the same article “Celtic Beliefs About the Soul” Yeats mentions the folklorist Alfred Nutt’s comparison of the Greek cult of Dionysus and the Irish cult of the fairies: both cults celebrate “the powers of life and increase, of the powers that can never lay aside the flame-like variability of life” (120). From the sacred knowledge that tells of the continual changes in life, dance and theater were born to the golden age of Greek civilization, and would be born, as Yeats auspiciously speculates, to the Irish. In this grand design, the dancing bodies of the Sidhe become a designated spectacle where changes generate more changes, where ancient and contemporary Irelands converge, and a seed for the Irish Renaissance is sown.

Like the coexistence of antinomies within the Irish temperament, dance in Gaelic mythology (more acutely, in Yeats’s version) is viewed as a paradoxical display of aggressive and sophisticated masculinity, and of sexual and romantic love that harmonize each other in the movements of dance. To the surprise of our contemporary sensibility that usually views dance as a feminine enterprise, Yeats places as much emphasis on the male dancers as on the female, and views dance as part of the making of a hero. This emphasis on dance’s ecstatic prepotency goes in opposition to the utilitarian value of discipline prized by the British. Both Cuchulain (a man of violent action) and Hanrahan (a poet and schoolmaster)—embodiments of two different aspects of the Gaelic hero—enjoy picking up some dance steps wherever they go. Hanrahan, for example, “never had the habit of passing by any place where there was music or dancing or good company, without going in” (Myth 225). In this story, the dance floor became an arena of masculinity where the best dancer/poet dominated and won the girl Oona. Out of fear of Hanrahan’s womanizing skills, Oona’s mother verbally manipulated other young men to lead her daughter away from Hanrahan by challenging their masculinity: “What good are you when you
cannot make the best girl in the house come out and dance with you?” (228). Whether in movement or in repose, the dance master Hanrahan was capable of intimidating and fighting off other young men that competed to dance with Oona. With a song about the fairyland and the dancing queens, he persuaded Oona to go away with him in search of “the Country of the Young” where death is nonexistent. The charming seductive power Yeats assigns to Hanrahan intriguingly conflates the image of the poet with the Sidhe. Another heroic figure, Tumaus Costello, similarly exemplifies the mingling together of lightheartedness and melancholy, and of violent and tender masculinity. While this conception of masculinity seems innovative, the interaction between Costello and his dance partner Una plays out the traditional gender roles scripted in romance, with a slight twist of a disobedient daughter (Una) defying her father and fiancé at the betrothal ceremony for love of Costello. On the dance floor, Costello literally leads and dominates Una, whose “gentle and humble eyes were fixed in love upon his pride and violence” (Myth 201). Yet, as they dance on the mutual exchange of passions replace the conventional gender relation: “while they danced there came over them the weariness with the world, the melancholy, the pity one for the other, which is the exultation of love” (Myth 201). The farewell dances temporarily form a safe haven that frees the lovers from the harassment of the outside world, led by Una’s father MacDermot who belongs to “the Queen’s Irish” that affiliate themselves with the British government (Myth 206). Besieged by British power, the ill-fated lovers Costello and Una can only unite in the fairyland with help from the Sidhe.

In describing Costello and Una’s farewell dances, Yeats presents himself as someone well versed in various dances, and one who longs for an ancient noble Ireland: “They took their place in the Pavane, that stately dance which, with the Saraband, the Gallead, and the Morris dances, had driven out, among all but the most Irish of the gentry, the quicker rhythms of the verse-
interwoven, pantomimic dances of earlier days” (Myth 201). Seeing that Una’s father is of “the Queen’s Irish” and the ball he gives is of European origin, the narrator laments the loss of ancient Irish dances among the gentry, who fashionably acquire the British taste for sixteenth-century European dances—the Pavane (solemn ceremonial dance), the Saraband (sexual pantomime), the Gallead (courting dance), and the Morris dance (pantomime of war).19 Yeats’s persona, the narrator in “Rosa Alchemica,” further displays his love for Gaelic steps that are also steps toward spiritual enlightenment. When informed by Michael Robartes that he needs to learn an antique dance for his initiation into the occult, the narrator confidently states, “I found that the steps, which were simple enough, resembled certain antique Greek dances, and having been a good dancer in my youth and the master of many curious Gaelic steps, I soon had them in my memory” (286). Yeats’s Autobiographies confirms the poet’s love for and training in dance, which he profusely displays in his works: although the date and details are not specified, young Yeats and his siblings (Lily, Lolly, and Jack) took dancing lessons with two girls, daughters of a well-known Pre-Raphaelite painter Thomas Matthews Rooke (66).

In defining Celtic elements and constructing Gaelic heroism, Yeats turns to Irish folkdance as a means to embed his cultural nationalism in the ancient soil of Celtic mythology, as well as a means to subvert British conceptions of Irishness and Irish masculinity. Ultimately in his writings, Yeats invents himself as the legislator of Irish nationalism—a conflated figure of poet, fiddler, and dancer—who sings of the fairyland and gasps in awe of the dancing troops of the Sidhe.

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III.

As the first dancing body to be materialized in a performance of one of Yeats’s plays, the Faery Child dances to interwoven tunes—of dramaturgy, gender, and nationalist politics—that are more complicated than critics have acknowledged. Responding to Florence Farr’s request in 1893, Yeats created the Faery Child in *The Land of Heart’s Desire* for her niece, Dorothy Paget, to debut the young talent’s dancing skills. While writing this play, Yeats admitted that he knew nothing about children, but had his “Irish Theatre in mind” along with his beloved Maud Gonne as inspiration for the role of Mary Bruin (A 220). This play’s attempt to bring dance, poetry, and Celtic folklore into the service of Irish cultural nationalism failed to impress his contemporary critics, who appraised it as a double failure in terms of dramaturgy and nationalism. When first published in print in 1894, *The Land* was considered a closet play—too simplistic and impossible for the stage: “Whether it could ever be successfully put on the stage is doubtful, but certainly only under conditions which do not exist on our stage to-day.”20 This critic accurately anticipated the incompatibility between Yeats’s poetical plays and the reality of contemporary theaters (which did in fact propel Yeats toward the direction of creating an “unpopular theater” for an elite audience). Opening on 29 March 1894 at London’s Avenue Road Theatre, the stage version of *The Land* was also unfavorably received, “attracting general opprobrium and much jeering from an audience who had come prepared for the Avenue’s usual musical hall fare” (Foster 140). Although most of this derision was directed toward Todhunter’s *A Comedy of Sighs* following *The Land* in the programme, Yeats realized that his play “had roused no passions” especially when compared with the great success of Bernard Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* (A 221). Joseph Hone recorded that the premier night was “a complete disaster”: “The German poet Dauthendey, who came with [Yeats], fell asleep from heat and tiredness; he was

unable to answer, when asked by Yeats whether he liked the play” (108). Replacing *A Comedy of Sighs*, Bernard Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* enjoyed a sensational success, which instilled in Yeats both “admiration and hatred”—admiration for its energy and hatred for its unapologetic realism (A 221).

Not only was the otherworldly quality in *The Land* jeered at in London, but it was also frowned upon by Irish critics for its lack of theatrical energy and realism. In *The United Irishman* (May 1901) Frank Fay criticized Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen* and *The Land of Heart’s Desire* as “exquisitely decorated corpses.” To Fay, while Yeats’s poetical plays produced decadent “corpses,” dramatic realism helped awaken and revitalize the national body, and thus was the appropriate style for an Irish national theater: “In Ireland we are at present only too anxious to shun reality. Our drama ought to teach us to face it. Let Mr. Yeats give us a play in verse or prose that will rouse this sleeping land. There is a herd of Saxon and other swine fattening on us. They must be swept into the sea along with the pestilent breed of West Britons with which we are troubled, or they will sweep us there.” Burdened with political agendas, the national theater became an arena where different conceptions of Irish nationalism and different dramatic styles fought each other for the title of the right representation of Irishness. In a letter to John Quinn (May 15, 1903), Yeats explicated his intention to stage *The Land* as an Irish, if not overtly nationalist, play: “I do not know what to think about ‘The Land of Heart’s Desire’ as a play till we have done it in Dublin” (CL3 372-73). The play, however, did not make its premier in Ireland at the Abbey Theatre until 1911, due to potential Catholic nationalist opposition to the character of Father Hart who is portrayed as easily tempted by the pagan Faery Child. This episode highlights Yeats’s lifelong struggle with the accusations of Catholic nationalists.

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22 Ibid., 182.
23 See Jared Curtis’s The Land of Heart’s Desire: Manuscript Materials, xxviii.
suspicious of his Anglo-Irish background. Although the Sidhe are synonymous with youth and happiness, the source of their power is pagan in nature and flirts with black magic, and Yeats’s invocation of them sometimes provoked hostile responses from orthodox Catholics who condemned his use of pagan material as anti-Catholic and therefore anti-Ireland. Yeats’s Countess Cathleen, for instance, was denounced by both political and religious orthodoxy as “slandering” and “heretical” (A 414-15). When defending against the accusations of paganism, Yeats resorted to his fabrication of the Irish peasantry’s religion as a hybrid product of paganism and Catholicism. Among Yeats’s folklore series, his article “The Broken Gates of Death” aroused controversy over the truthfulness of his subject: “Presuming his adversary was a Catholic, Yeats promised him that if he read the remaining of the articles, ‘he will find that the Irish peasant has invented, or that somebody has invented before him, a vague, though not altogether unphilosophical, reconciliation between his Paganism and his Christianity.”²⁴ This reconciliation, nevertheless, is tentative in Yeats’s plays and poetry, where he tends to dramatize the antagonistic encounter between the Sidhe and Catholics. In The Land this enmity is put on center stage when the stage direction reads, “the Child is about to dance, but suddenly sees the crucifix and shrieks and covers her eyes” (VPl 198). The Faery Child’s agitation induces the Bruins to fear the nature of her presence; interestingly, Father Hart (the priest present in the Bruin household) is the last to realize that the Child is one of the Sidhe, and voluntarily takes the crucifix away to calm her. Aside from the obvious religious differences, among the activities the Sidhe enjoy, it appears that singing and dancing bother the orthodox religious people most, whose opposition to paganism is tangled with their objection to dance. Identifying the Sidhe as “fallen angels,” one priest is “scornful of unchristian beings for all their dancing and singing” (Myth 45). In “The Heart of the Spring,” the servant boy expresses a similar, though less

²⁴ John P. Frayne, Uncollected Prose II, 94.
disdainful, anti-Sidhe and anti-dance mindset: “they drink the frothing milk, and begin to dance; and I know there is good in the heart that loves dancing; but I fear them for all that” (Myth 172-73). In The Countess Cathleen, when the poet Aleel relates to Cathleen the story of Queen Maeve and her dancers, Oona (Cathleen’s foster-mother) tries to prevent Cathleen from listening to it, “Rest on my arm. These are no thoughts for any Christian ear” (VPI 57: 326).

Though failing to cater to hardcore realist-nationalist demands, The Land of Heart’s Desire debuts Yeats’s effort to hammer together his dramaturgy and nationalism with the theatrical energy generated from the dancing body. Not only does the Faery Child’s dance appear at the climatic point, she visually occupies the center stage since Yeats instructs that all actors’ movements should be reduced to a minimum except for those of the Child.25 Although he felt defeated by the tremendous power displayed in Shaw’s Arms and the Man, Yeats has already embarked on the search for a better dramatic form to mend the lack of theatrical strength in his plays. As Flannery points out, “Yeats ultimately turned for an answer to his theatrical problems to that first and purest of histrionic artists, the dancer” (207), who would occupy an even greater role in his middle and late plays.

As a representative of the Sidhe, the Faery Child’s presence inevitably invites readings of its underlying Salome motif, and of issues pertaining to gender and the body. While the Child heralds her later mutation—the predatory “bird, woman, witch” in At the Hawk’s Well—the inherent danger and sexual connotation in The Land are deliberately suppressed, if not totally absent. Unlike the later play’s Guardian of the Well, there is nothing sinister or inhuman about the Child’s appearance onstage: she looks like a well-brought-up girl, with dark curly hair, and dressed in “faery green” velvet gown and dancing shoes.26 Her outward beauty and innocence

26 See plate 13 in Foster’s W.B. Yeats: A Life.
win over the hearts of the Bruins and the old priest Father Hart. Yeats’s choice to set the play on a May eve, however, hints at a pagan and sexual undertone since this is the time when female sexuality is celebrated in the ritual dances of the maypole festival. When composing this play, Yeats might have associated the maypole festival—“a practice actually institutionalized by a number of progressive fin-de-siecle schools for girls” to acknowledge their allegiance to Maia, goddess of spring and fertility—\(^{27}\) with Irish folklore about stolen brides on May eves. It is also in May that the legendary Princess Edain (whose story has preoccupied Mary Bruin) was lured away by the fairies. From Father Hart’s viewpoint, Princess Edain and all the girls who feel “[r]estless and ill at ease” are seduced by “some wrecked angel” to release their pent-up energy in quasi-orgiastic celebrations. It is important, he advises Mary, to domesticate her energy for “minding children, working at the churn, / And gossiping of weddings and of wakes” (VPl 185: 66-72).

If the message the Faery Child carries proclaims rebirth in the springtime, it speaks in equal volume the message of destruction and death. Contrary to blessing the Bruin household with prosperity and fertility, the Child snatches “the blessed quicken wood” (supposed to bring good luck to the household) and lures the young bride Mary away from the conjugal embrace of Shawn. The fact that Mary’s death in the human world needs to precede her rebirth in the fairyland delineates the ambivalent nature of the Sidhe as embodiment of life-in-death and death-in-life forces. The same ambivalence, as Kermode observes, is assigned to Yeats’s dancer—a reconciling image that contains “life-in-death, death-in-life, movement and stillness, action and contemplation, body and soul.”\(^{28}\) Paradoxically, this reconciliation seems to perpetually elude human reach until the moment when one’s human existence is renounced, as illustrated in

\(^{27}\) Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity, 244.

\(^{28}\) Romantic Image, 48.
several of Yeats’s quest stories. This paradox partly explains why the majority of Yeats’s
dancers are fairies and immortal beings, especially in the early works that voice distrust in the
human body as vehicle for transcendent experiences.

Treading and lurking in between the realm of life and death, the Gaelic fairies find their fin-
de-siecle counterpart in Herodias and her daughter Salome. Among Yeats’s early works, this
assimilation of Herodias/Salome into the Sidhe imagery climaxes in The Wind Among the
Reeds: Yeats appends a note for the opening poem “The Hosting of the Sidhe,” explaining that
the Sidhe move in the manner of the “whirling winds” associated with “the dance of the
daughters of Herodias in the Middle Ages” (VP 800). Just as those men who fixate their gaze on
Salome would forgo their reason and life, those who look too much at the Sidhe would lose “all
interest in ordinary things” and yearn for immortal beauty and happiness (VP 800-801). Their
alliance, however, is not an arbitrary encounter between two fatal attractions, but a well mapped-
out liaison in the fin-de-siecle cultural setting.

Among Yeats’s contemporaries, Stephane Mallarme, Oscar Wilde, and Aubrey Beardsley
helped resuscitate and reshape the biblical Herodias/Salome into an in-vogue symbolist-decadent
icon that profoundly influenced Yeats’s Sidhe-dancer imagery. Mallarme’s poem “Herodiade”
(1866), as Yeats acknowledges in Autobiographies, inspired his notion of creating an art “as
separate from everything heterogeneous and casual, from all character and circumstance, as some
Herodiade of our theatre, dancing seemingly alone in her narrow moving luminous circle” (247).
The grotesque narcissistic icy beauty embodied by Mallarme’s Herodiade set the tone and
imagery for Wilde’s play Salome (1893), and its famous lines uttered by Herodiade linger on in
Yeats’s late works:

29 Ellis explains that since the time of the Crusades to the fin de siecle, Herodias is sometimes mistaken as Salome;
Mallarme’s Herodiade, for instance, is evidently Salome (10).
The horror of my virginity
Delights me, and I would envelop me
In the terror of my tresses, that, by night,
Inviolate reptile, I might feel the white
And glimmering radiance of thy frozen fire,
Thou that art chaste and diest of desire,
White night of ice and of the cruel snow!

. . . .

And all about my lives but in mine own
Image, the idolatrous mirror of my pride,
Mirroring this Herodiade diamond-eyed.30

Wilde further elaborates on the pathological aspect of Salome’s narcissism that projects her virgin beauty onto John the Baptist (the same rhetoric applies to the description of Salome and her description of him as “chaste, as the moon is” and “cold, cold as ivory”) (19). When the mirror image fails to reciprocate and despises her as “daughter of Babylon,” Salome’s desire turns into thirst for blood and vengeance that causes men to lose their head metaphorically and literally. Obsessed by his desire to see Salome dance, Herod unwittingly promises the head of John to her. Based on Wilde’s play, Beardsley’s drawing Salome with the Head of John the Baptist (J’ai baise ta bouche Iokanaan) (1893) visually captures the climatic moment of Salome holding and staring menacingly at John’s severed head, which Yeats praised for its “visionary beauty,” showing that “an artist has been touched by a visionary energy amid his weariness and bitterness” (Uncoll2 134). Beardsley’s Salome brought him the commission to illustrate the English version of Wilde’s Salome (1894), where the original J’ai baise ta bouche Iokanaan was

30 Yeats quotes part of Symons’s translation of Mallarme’s “Herodiade” in Autobiographies (247).
simplified and re-entitled *The Climax*. Despite or rather because of reviewers’ criticism of this 1894 version as weird, wicked, unintelligible, and repulsive, Beardsley’s illustrations established him as the quintessential decadent artist.\(^\text{31}\)

While critics agree on the significance of the decadent cult of Salome in shaping Yeats’s Sidhe-dancer imagery, it is important to understand that its manifestation in Yeats’s works does not fit into one hegemonic description, but varies in different stages of his career. Nationalist issues, for instance, counterpoise or undercut the decadent influence especially in Yeats’s early works (where the Sidhe-dancer imagery is closer to Mallarme’s symbolist vision than Wilde and Beardsley’s decadent portrayal). After all, decadent literature, according to its spokesman Arthur Symons, is “typical of a civilization grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or in conduct”\(^\text{32}\)—traits that Yeats may find partially desirable, but certainly not the appropriate vehicle for reviving Celtic civilization. Given this context, Yeats’s attraction to the *femme fatale* takes on an intriguing nuance: his Sidhe-Salome, though deadly, possesses redeeming visionary power that Wildean Salome lacks. Whereas the “male modernists’ obsession with masculine impotence and female power” stems from the fear that “women, long subordinated, would in the course of their liberation exact a terrible revenge upon their oppressors,”\(^\text{33}\) Yeats, by conflating the Sidhe with Salome, seems to identify himself and Ireland as a collective *femme fatale* fighting against British oppressors.

In “Rosa Alchemica” (1897) Yeats further elaborates on the association between eroticism, occultism, and nationalism through the interwoven imagery of the Sidhe-Salome, Eros, and the Rose. Based on the alchemical aspiration to transmute all things into “some divine and

\(^{31}\) Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 83.

\(^{32}\) “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” *Dramatis Personae*, 98.

\(^{33}\) Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry*, 7.
imperishable substance” (267), this mystic piece articulates Yeats’s desire to distill passions for spiritual and nationalistic devotion, and simultaneously the uneasiness of that martyrdom in sacrificing the physical and the transient. While brooding about his growing mortality, the narrator is visited by an unexpected guest, Michael Robartes, who looks “something between a debauchee, a saint, and a peasant”—in other words, a perfect embodiment of physical, spiritual, and nationalistic fervor (271). After some struggle in choosing between Christianity and mysticism, the narrator agrees to join Robartes’s Order of the Alchemical Rose. In order for the initiation to take place, the narrator along with other participants have to “join three times in a magical dance,” “tracing upon the floor the shapes of petals that copied the petals in the rose overhead” (286-88). With this magical dance, they succeed in invoking the Sidhe and Eros. As the rhythms get quicker and more passionate, the divinities of the wind are awakened and join the mortals in the dance from which the Sidhe draw their power and substance: “Still faint and cloud-like, they began to dance, and as they danced took a more and more definite shape” (288). This spiritual communion is sealed with sexual consummation between mortals and gods, as Eros appears, crying “Into the dance! There is none that can be spared out of the dance; into the dance! Into the dance! That the gods may make them bodies out of the substance of our hearts” (289). All the elements are further tied together by the color red—the participants in crimson robes, the red Rose, the heart, the flame-like changeability of the Sidhe—that signifies mystical knowledge and undiluted passions. The prevailing red color also hints at a metaphoric blood-sacrifice that takes place in the ritual dance, as the process of attaining mystical vision requires the participants to devote their hearts from which the divinities gain the substance of their bodies. In this magical dance, the boundaries between the mortal (the body) and immortal (the spirit) are shattered; this unity, however, is only possible with a prerequisite sacrificial act of the soma to
the soul. The dance between the mortals and immortals can become a fatal encounter, as the
narrator recalled his dance with an “immortal august woman, who had black lilies in her hair,”
and “who was drinking up [his] soul as an ox drinks up a wayside pool” (290). Yeats’s portrayal
of this immortal woman exudes a decadent influence: the black lilies and the ox simile indicate
the woman’s lethal and bestial nature. This vampirism—from surrendering one’s body to being
depleted of vital energy—denotes an uneasy unification between the body and soul that implies
an enforced sacrificial-act instead of harmonized assimilation. While the “flowers of evil” and
female vampires were nothing new to the literary scene in the 1890s, Yeats’s femme fatale,
unlike Baudelaire’s or Zola’s real-life prostitutes, has a complicated spiritual and nationalistic
agenda to serve. The danger of her sexuality is tactfully transformed and remade into the
overpowering spell of the high priestess-beloved-Ireland to lure male initiates and patriots into
sacrificial rituals.

The symbolism of surrendering the body to the spirit can develop into a formidable cultural
iconography exalted by Irish nationalists: the spirit-Rose-Ireland is personified as a femme fatale
who tempts young men into unconditionally giving their hearts and lives, and who, in turn, shall
receive immortalized glory. As Cullingford points out, “The culture of Irish nationalism offered
a publicly and politically acceptable form for a private obsession with male martyrdom” (Gender
54). The juxtaposition of romantic, mystical, and nationalistic discourses feeds on the force of
passions—romantic, sexual, spiritual, and political—that makes the personification of Ireland an
irresistible representation for most nationalist writers. Yeats dramatizes this conception of
Ireland in Cathleen Ni Houlihan (1902) with the Old Woman luring away young men to rid
Ireland of strangers and to retrieve her “four beautiful green fields” (VPl 223: 172). At the end
of the play, instead of seeing the Old Woman as an old woman, one of her followers Patrick
responds, “I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen” (VP 231: 347-48); it is as though the young men’s sacrificial act enables the Old Woman to regain vitality and substance, and therefore, to rejuvenate and transform herself into the young Cathleen Ni Houlihan. At an ideological level, the Old Woman’s metamorphosis into Cathleen Ni Houlihan articulates the revivification of “an old symbol (Sean Bhean Bhocht/Cathleen)” through her success in obtaining adherents in the dramatic present (1798) and in the present tense of the play’s production, just over a century later” (Quinn 44).

Yeats’s personification of Ireland goes beyond adopting the aisling tradition that addresses Ireland as a Rose and a beloved: his dancing troops of the Sidhe tellingly embody an Ireland that is ancient, deathless, and passionate. As stated in Yeats’s Mythologies, the Sidhe master the art of manipulating “ungoverned feeling for their own ends, so that a father…may give his child into their hands, or a husband his wife” (27). With their gallant dancing and calling of “Away, come away: / Empty your heart of its mortal dream,” the divinities’ power in luring the nationalists/initiates away from British dominance is similar to, and sometimes more fearsome than, that of Cathleen Ni Houlihan. Besides their singing and dancing, the Sidhe’s ability to enchant and kidnap the mortals equally frightens and fascinates the peasants. As powerful as the divinities are, they need help from humans to increase their population, take up chores, and provide entertainment. They like to take away people who are young, good-looking, good at heart, physically well-built, and especially good dancers. Some folks believe that the best and the most capable of their dead live among the Sidhe. To them, it is almost an honor to be kidnapped, a warrant that the person is both physically and spiritually superior: “All who are young enough for any use, for begetting or mothering children, for dancing or hurling, or even for driving cattle” are most likely to be carried away by the fairies (Uncoll2 95). Yeats retells
several stories about splendid dancers being spotted and taken away by the Sidhe in articles such as “Irish Wonders” (1889), “The Prisoners of the Gods” (1898), and “Away” (1902). Free from daily labor and toil, the Sidhe’s activities revolve around extravagant dance parties, where mortals and immortals mingle, and the stolen children learn to dance like fairies. The privilege of being abducted to live in the fairyland often denotes losing human life, or, less seriously, losing some toes. One story particularly captures Yeats’s attention and is retold three times in different essays.34 It is about an old woman being carried away in her youth by the fairies to the village of Ballisodare, Sligo. After seven years she was brought home again, but she had no toes left for she had danced them off. There is no reason given as to why she was brought back: her toelessness signifies an ambiguous existence once in the fairyland and then back in the human world. We can read her toelessness caused by endless dances as a sign of wish-fulfillment—festivities without interruption, or a sign of punishment of overindulgence—like the girl who loved to dance so much that she was given magical red shoes, and once she put them on she couldn’t stop dancing until to the point of literally dropping dead. The stolen-then-brought-back folks represent a conundrum, ambivalently fascinating and fearful, and thought to “bring with them unholy knowledge” (Uncoll2 97).

Although Tir na nOg is seemingly a flawless paradise with all the dancing and feasting that mortals could hope for, the dilemma presents itself to the would-be kidnapped: is it better to live and suffer as a human, or be dead/deathless as a fairy without worries and other human emotions? In “The Cradles of Gold” (1896), Yeats tells the story of a peasant Peter Hearne who struggles with the Sidhe to bring back his abducted wife Whinny. To persuade Peter to let go of his wife, the king of the fairies explains that Whinny is one of them, for whom “no mortal kiss

34 The same story is told with slight variations in “Kidnappers,” Mythologies, 76; “Irish Fairies, Ghosts, Witches,” Uncollected Prose I, 134; and “Irish Fairies,” Uncollected Prose I, 177.
has more than a shadowy comfort, nor the rocking of any mortal cradle, but a fragile music…when the moon has crumbled a little longer, the last affection will die out of her heart and she will become a crowned flame, dancing on the bare hills and in the darkness of the woods” (Uncoll1 417). Peter and his brother Michael, however, keep griping Whinny; the king finally gives in and returns her to the human world. In the king’s depiction, the sentiment of casting away the body and human emotions reads like a precursor of the imagery in “Sailing to Byzantium” (1928) where the heart is consumed by fire and the body is forged into the “artifice of eternity.” A less promising picture of the Sidhe is presented in “Kidnappers” (1893), which describes the fairies as “bloodless” and “doomed to melt at the Last Judgment like bright vapour, for the soul cannot live without sorrow” (Myth 70-71). This statement brings home the polemic of choosing immortality over human affections and sufferings.

The problematic act of renouncing human life to live in Tir na nOg is further complicated by the link between the stolen child and a resistance politics based on martyrdom. As stated in “Rosa Alchemica” only sacrificial acts can eradicate British colonization and reestablish the Sidhe’s sovereignty in Ireland: “Their reign has never ceased, but only waned in power a little, for the Sidhe still pass in every wind, and dance and play at hurley, but they cannot build their temples again till there have been martyrdoms and victories, and perhaps even that long-foretold battle in the Valley of the Black Pig” (281). This presaged battle in the Valley of the Black Pig was part of the Irish folklore for several generations; under British domination, the peasantry invented visions of this great battle “to break at last the power of their enemies” (VP 161). While Yeats at this stage of his career was more eager to embed his nationalism and resistance politics in the mythological Celtic soil, he was aware of the detriment of forfeiting the ordinary for the supernatural. Both at the beginning and the end of “Rosa Alchemica” the narrator’s
ambivalent attitude toward the Order of the Alchemical Rose also leaves the reader with misgivings about the merits of this supernatural world that Robartes and his followers evoke. At the end this enclosed mystic world is invaded by an angry mob of Catholic peasants who probably stone Robartes and his followers to death, a fate from which the narrator solely escapes.

Yeats’s poem “The Stolen Child” (1886) reiterates the ambivalence of this supernatural world, along with the dilemma of choosing between it and the human world. In the first two stanzas, the fairies sing and dance to lure the child away from the world full of sorrows, which they contrast with the blissful life in fairyland:

Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances,
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And is anxious in its sleep. (VP 87: 15-23)

From the fairies’ vintage point, the mortals, although sleeping, are not resting peacefully, contrary to their lighthearted, childlike joy in constant movement. Furthermore, the fairies are luring the child away from a world subjugated to British rule and its consequent political upheavals, as “troubles” often imply the power struggle between England and Ireland. For instance, the personification of Ireland, the Old Woman in Cathleen Ni Houlihan speaks of her “trouble” with the strangers, the British, who usurp her beautiful land (VP1 222-23). In the last
stanza, the fairies succeed in taking away the child; their tone, however, takes on an unnerving twist. It is as though when their job in seducing is done they can speak truly without restraints; they now seem to feel grievous for the stolen child who will never enjoy his human life again:

He’ll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal-chest. (VP 88: 44-49)

The quiet sensations of sounds, movements, and warmth weave together an inviting domestic picture that is previously lacking in their depiction of the everyday world. Although the domestic scene is not as dazzling as fairyland and the movements are not as energetic as the fairies’, the immortals (some may also be stolen children) seem nostalgic for human life. This lament for lost human life voices Yeats’s awareness of the downside of a seemingly irresistible fairyland, and that awareness complicates our assessment of the sacrificial paradigm informed by his romantic nationalism. In the poem “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” (1892) Yeats expresses a similar sentiment. While entreating the Rose-Ireland to come near, he also pleads with her to leave him some space lest he becomes too engulfed in the mythological landscape to hear “common things that crave”—“The weak worm hiding down in its small cave, / The field-mouse running by me in the grass, / And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass” (VP 101. 15-18)—that resonate with the simple pleasures depicted in “The Stolen Child.”

In Yeats’s early works, the consciousness of the quotidian and supernatural worlds, as Annie MacDonnell’s 1895 review puts it, “is ever present in his dreams, not this and that of a dim
future, but one co-existing with and invading the other, each disputing the other’s claims.”

The dilemma of choosing between human life and perpetual youth spent in fairyland delineates a problematic aspect of the popularized Irish nationalism that Yeats sometimes struggles to come to terms with, or capitalizes on. This highly idealized version of fairyland is devoid of human flaws but also human affections, and its spin-off nationalism dictates a terrible price of blood sacrifice that turns the human heart into a cold stone as Yeats later laments in “Easter 1916” (1916). Even before the Easter Rising, this tension between living and sacrificing human life gradually looms large in Yeats’s works, such as The Wind Among the Reeds (1899). Portrayed in a rather different light than that in “The Stolen Child” and other earlier works, the Sidhe’s seductive powers in The Wind become erotic, destructive, and apocalyptical. The implicit sexual energy in The Land of Heart’s Desire surfaces in the opening poem “The Hosting of the Sidhe” (1893) where the fairies, with their burning hair and heaving breasts, gallop through mortal dreams, half-seducing and half-threatening to snatch people away from their deeds and hopes. Whereas the wind blowing in The Land seems like a soothing breeze that “withers the lonely of heart,” the whirling winds in The Wind accompany the trooping Sidhe to awaken desire and to root up mortal dreams. This sexualized version of the Gaelic fairies, as critics observe, coincides with Yeats’s first love affair with Olivia Shakespear in 1896. While this affair helped overcome Yeats’s sexual anxiety and supplied his works with raw power, it did not assuage the temptations of the supernatural world, but rather intensified the triangular struggle between the lover, the beloved, and the Sidhe in The Wind. Following the enticing voices in “The Hosting of the Sidhe” is the speaker’s pleading with them to “be still” in “The Everlasting Voices” (VP 141: 1). Unable to fully answer the call of the Sidhe and yet unable to ignore their voices, the poet/lover

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35 “Mr. Yeats’s Poems,” The Bookman, December 1895, 94-95.
36 Harwood, Olivia Shakespear and W.B. Yeats, 66.
vacillates between enthusiasm and escapism amidst the tangled nets of love, sexuality, spiritual longing, and nationalist calling.

The same vacillation occurs in the speaker’s attitude toward the quotidian world. While at times he longs to “sit on a green knoll apart” from “the wrong of unshapely things” (VP 143: 5-6), he also longs for a peaceful rest at his mortal beloved’s embrace. The most celebratory poem of human life is probably “The Fiddler of Dooney” (1892), which was placed in the middle of the 1899 edition of The Wind and rearranged as the closing poem in the 1909 collection. Placed at the end of the volume, it interestingly counterbalances the claim of the opening poem: Niamh’s calling “Away, come away: / Empty your heart of its mortal dream” in “The Hosting of the Sidhe” loses its holding power over the mortals in “The Fiddler of Dooney.” Contrary to the fairies’ perspective, the fiddler articulates the simple pleasure of music and dance in everyday life:

For the good are always the merry,

Save by an evil chance,

And the merry love the fiddle,

And the merry love to dance:

And when the folk there spy me,

They will all come up to me,

With ‘Here is the fiddler of Dooney!’

And dance like a wave of the sea. (VP 178-79: 13-20)

Yeats deliberately equates music and dance with joy and spirituality, and presents them as a superior substitute for orthodox religion. The fiddler, knowing the “book of songs” by heart, will
be the first to enter the gate of Heaven before his priest cousin and brother. Here the poet validates the quotidian experience in contrast to his early invocation of the Sidhe and fairyland.

IV.

Whether with their calling, fiddling, galloping, or dancing in the moonlight, the Sidhe are powerful enchanters and protectors who steal mortals away from worldly chores to live in the Celtic utopia, and to fight against foreign invasion. While both militant and cultural nationalisms underlie the very phrase “the dancing troops of the Sidhe,” the iconography foregrounds the inexhaustible, passionate energy emitted from these immortal dancers who can unite the Irish under the rhythms of Gaelic jigs. In these mythological dance balls, Yeats presents himself as the legislator of his nationalism, the dancer-fiddler-poet, who not only joins in the ancient dance but also produces modern lyrics and dance steps for Ireland. The prevailing dance imagery in The Rose (1893) illustrates Yeats’s multifaceted symbolism of the dancing Rose, a tapestry woven with threads of dance, the Sidhe, and Irish nationalism. In the concluding poem “To Ireland in the Coming Times” (1892) Yeats views himself as carrying on the poetic tradition of Davis, Mangan, and Ferguson, who “tread in measured ways” and sing to “sweeten Ireland’s wrong” (VP 137: 3). The exclamation “Ah, faeries, dancing under the moon, / A Druid land, A Druid tune!” evokes the central subject matter of this lyrical tradition (VP 139: 31-32). Through the iconography of the dancing troops of the Sidhe, Yeats envisions the continuity and renewal of Irish history and culture, and a unified nation that dances to the ancient Druid tune: “When Time began to rant and rage / The measure of her flying feet / Made Ireland’s heart begin to beat” (VP 138: 10-12).
Chapter 2. “bird, woman, or witch”:

Solitary Dancers and Middle Yeats’s Gender Politics

I

In Yeats’s middle works, the calling of “Away, come away” from the dancing troops of the Sidhe gradually fades out; in place of the early lyricism and romantic nationalism associated with the Sidhe are a more realistic poetics, a more disillusioned nationalism, and a new dramaturgy that centers on the dance. In a letter to George Russell (April 1904), Yeats expressed discontent with what he had come to see as the ethereal effeminacy of such works as The Land of Heart’s Desire: “there is an exaggeration of sentiment and sentimental beauty which I have come to think unmanly” (CL3 577). In terms of Irish nationalism, Yeats became more skeptical of its motives and goals, especially after the Playboy riot in 1907. The creation of On Baile’s Strand (1904) first reflected Yeats’s desire to fashion a more realistic style and to revise his early political belief. Then, in 1913 while staying at Stone Cottage with Ezra Pound, who was working on Ernest Fenollosa’s translations of the Japanese Noh, Yeats discovered an inspiration for the new dramaturgy that would be materialized onstage in At the Hawk’s Well in 1916. Playing the Guardian of the Well, the Japanese dancer Michio Ito brought a new sort of dance imagery into Yeats’s works. His masked transvestism and diverse movement styles (derived from traditional Japanese dance, German eurythmics, Russian modern ballet, and American modern dance) reinforced the guardian’s androgynous, hybrid identity. Besides Yeats’s collaboration with Ito, early modern dancers such as Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Maud Allan moved in their unique ways into Yeats’s oeuvre. What fascinated Yeats and his contemporaries about modern dance went beyond its innovations in choreography and stage presentation: its
center stage was taken over by female soloists who moved in a self-sufficient style without any support from men. Terri Mester observes this influence in Yeats’s middle works: a “real, solitary female dancer” emerges “in the symbolic landscape” (46), who “represents other beautiful women personally and artistically important to the poet” (28). Yeats’s solitary dancers, however, are not confined to the realistic human realm; his early Sidhe-Salome figures transmute into bird-woman-witch dancers, reflecting middle Yeats’s revised poetics and politics. Staged as the central spectacle and driving-force, the bird-woman-witch dancer embodies, technically and metaphorically, a more powerful feminine principle than her earlier version, the Faery Child.

As the dancing troops of the Sidhe metamorphose into solitary bird-woman-witch dancers, their early fight against British imperialism takes on an intriguing twist since the bird-woman-witch dancers now battle against not just imperial governments but also a patriarchal society that views the Sidhe’s sexual and magical powers as marginal and subversive to its domestic ideal. The immortal dancer, who used to steal people away from a degenerate modern colonial Ireland to live in the fairyland, now lures young Cuchulain away from the promised land of youth and immortality in At the Hawk’s Well (1917). The Sidhe’s witchcraft jeopardizes the male-homosocial bond fundamental to Conchubar’s kingdom in On Baile’s Strand (1904); it also indirectly causes Cuchulain’s killing of his son, and consequently his madness. In this perpetual battle of the Sidhe against patriarchal society, Yeats’s identification ambiguously wavers between the two. While his march toward a masculine poetics during the years of 1903 to 1910 inevitably alienated him from the feminine principle of the Sidhe and the romantic nationalism they stand for, he later modified that super-masculine outlook and empowered these immortal dancers by staging them as the central spectacle that visually and thematically controls the movement of the plot.
In *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), the battle extends beyond the supernatural woman versus human man; it rages between the Sidhe and a mortal woman, Cuchulain’s wife Emer, who needs to renounce Cuchulain’s love in order to save his life from the bird-woman-witch dancer. The apparent otherness of the bird-woman-witch dancer raises questions about Yeats’s representations of women; as Amy Koritz argues, this portrayal of the immortal dancer may lead to “the erasure of ordinary women” (95). While Yeats’s immortal dancers may at times run the risk of dismissing women’s experience, in many ways his conception of the dancer was closer to that of progressive-minded modern female dancers than to that of contemporary male writers and choreographers. Just as modern dancers sought to liberate the female body from the constraints of classical ballet and conventional gender codes, Yeats’s multifaceted conceptions of dancers defied the myth of pure, domestic womanhood fostered by Irish nationalists, casting dancers as androgynous, hybrid, and sexually-aggressive women who threaten to disrupt the boundaries of patriarchal society in its vulnerable margins.

II.

Unlike the Faery Child who symbolizes the principles of youth and joy in *Tir na nOg*, the dancing Sidhe in Yeats’s middle works are associated with a more aggressive and questionable femininity—figured as predatory birds, deceivers, and witches—that inspires, allures, threatens, and destroys at the same time. While *The Land of Heart’s Desire* portrays the fairies’ abduction of Mary Bruin to a dreamy, Celtic-twilight atmosphere, *At the Hawk’s Well* presents a perilous sexual seduction that is frustrating and tragic to the hero. This transformation of the Sidhe reflects Yeats’s departure from his early lyricism and Irish nationalist rhetoric: by portraying the immortal dancers as predatory birds and witches instead of goddesses, Yeats dismantles the
sacrificial paradigm established between the male patriots and the beloved-goddess-Ireland; and by rewriting the female body as androgynous and hybrid, Yeats challenges the nationalist imposition of purity, passivity, and domesticity on Irish women.

When transmuting into the Guardian of the Well, the Faery Child sheds the jolly innocent image of the white bird with silver feet and golden crest, and puts on the solemn aggressive front of the gray predatory bird. This outward metamorphosis crystallizes an internal change in terms of her interaction with mortals, which differs drastically from the early fairytale wish-fulfilled abduction and develops into a complicated power play between immortals and mortals, and women and men. As early as The Shadowy Waters (1906), the gray birds of the Sidhe prefigure the bird-woman-witch dancers in At the Hawk’s Well: they manipulatively guide Forgael toward his pursuit of the “shadowless unearthly woman” (VPl 325: 189) who will bring him to “unheard-of passion, / To some strange love the world knows nothing of” (VPl 321: 97-98), like Niamh’s promise to Oisin. Trapped by the quest/curse, Forgael is unable to enjoy his mortal beloved Dectora’s love and wealth, but takes her to the world of the Sidhe, where death, sexuality, and immortality are intertwined. In At the Hawk’s Well, the hero Cuchulain similarly embarks on a quest for immortality; in order to successfully drink from the well of immortality, he needs to combat against falling into sleep induced by the guardian’s dance. The task seems simple enough, but the odds against him are strong as the old man reminds us: his own search for immortality has kept him to the well for fifty years and the guardian has deceived him with hypnotizing dances every time the fountain has started to well up with water. Waiting/wasting his life away in the hope of obtaining immortality may become Cuchulain’s future as well. Yeats’s verbal and visual presentations of the guardian also ensure that neither Cuchulain nor the audience will mistake her as the harmless fairy child with a charming demeanor and a milk-white
body dressed up in a pretty gown. In this play, the gray bird reaches its final stage of mutation when the guardian emerges from the shell of the black cloak as a hybrid hawk-woman dancer, whose gender identity is ambiguously demonstrated with a feminine dress that hugs the torso and flares from the hips—visually contrasted by her phallic beak and aggressive wings (see fig. 1). With her phallic beak and wings thrusting, the guardian poses physical and sexual threats to the hero whose position resembles that of Leda when raped by the swan: “It flew / As though it would have torn me with its beak, / Or blinded me, smiting with that great wing” (VPl 406: 152-54). According to the old man, the gray hawk that has been leading Cuchulain toward the fountain and simultaneously threatening to tear him apart is “The Woman of the Sidhe herself, / The mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow” whose seduction is double-edged “To allure or to destroy” (VPl 407: 161-64). Her eyes, which “know nothing, or but look upon stone” (VPl 401: 30), have Medusa-like power: “There falls a curse / On all who have gazed in her unmoistened eyes” (VPl 407: 167-68). The taunting blank stare of the guardian epitomized by Michio Ito’s performance is emotionless, yet yields an overwhelming power that turns the spectators into immobile objects. The guardian’s mission is to deceive and destroy men, yet she is the patroness of manly women—Aoife and her Amazonian troop who “offer sacrifice” to the guardian for protection and triumph in the battle (VPl 407: 166).

While the guardian’s grotesque appearance provokes horror in the old man, her aggression incites Cuchulain’s desire for sadomasochistic eroticism that derives pleasure from physical pains and games of domination-submission. Singing from experience and wisdom, the first musician, functioning as the framing chorus, is utterly perturbed by her presence: “O God, protect me / From a horrible deathless body / Sliding through the veins of a sudden” (VPl 409-410: 213-15); instead of seeing a beautiful girl, the musician sees through to the essence of her
Fig. 1. Michio Ito as the Guardian of the Well in Yeats’s *At the Hawk’s Well* (1916).
being—a horrible deathless body—that recalls the early vampire-like woman in “Rosa
Alchemica.” Young Cuchulain, however, responds with an impulse to “hood” this fierce
creature as part of his great hawk collection (VPl 407: 161). He views his pursuit of the bird-
woman-witch dancer as a potential sexual conquest that validates his masculinity: “Run where
you will, / Grey bird, you shall be perched upon my wrist. / Some were called queens and yet
have been perched there” (VPl 410: 218-220). By conquering politically powerful queens or,
even better, powerful supernatural women, Cuchulain can prove himself to be an invincible
superhero. Gazing undauntedly into the guardian’s Medusa-like eyes, Cuchulain places himself
in a dominating position, one that is superior to the old man who cannot even bear her gaze—“I
cannot bear her eyes…they are no girl’s eye” (VPl 409: 207-208). His overconfident super-
masculinity nevertheless serves as both his asset and tragic flaw:

My luck is strong,

It will not leave me waiting, nor will they

That dance among the stones put me asleep;

If I grow drowsy I can pierce my foot. (VPl 406: 139-42)

Ironically, his “luck” does come into play quickly, which does not let him wait too long for the
fountain to well up or for his boasting to become undone by the dancer.

As Cuchulain brags about his luck and masculinity, the guardian’s body starts to manifest
signs signifying the coming of the dance and the welling up of the fountain, which, according to
the old man’s reading, resonate with somatic symptoms of hysteria:

Look at her shivering now, the terrible life

Is slipping through her veins. She is possessed.

Who knows whom she will murder or betray
Before she awakes in ignorance of it all, (VPl 408: 189-92)

The old man goes on to decipher her physiological alteration in relation to the welling up of the fountain: “But they’ll be wet; / The water will have come and gone again; / That shivering is the sign” (VPl 408: 193-95). By coding the movements of dance as somatic symptoms of hysteria and female orgasm, he voices a prevailing mentality of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century medical field that usually disparaged dance as a mere pathological display of hysteria, to which women were highly susceptible. Harry Campbell, for instance, argued that women were naturally drawn to dance because of their evolutionary inferiority and emotional disposition akin to that of “the child and the savage;” their love of dancing was “the outcome of a nervous organization affording a suitable soil for hysteria.”³⁷ To fix the female body as a legible sign, the scrutinizing medical gaze renders the dancing woman as hysterical Dionysian on the one hand, and the domestic invalid woman as angel of the house, on the other; as disparate as they are, both stereotypes present the female body as inherently degenerate and pathological. Reading against the grain, Felicia McCarren’s article “The ‘Symptomatic Act’ Circa 1900: Hysteria, Hypnosis, Electricity, Dance” situates early modern dancer Loie Fuller’s performances in the discourse of hysteria, but argues instead that Fuller appropriates that discourse to poke fun at male-dominated psychoanalytic practice and simultaneously to invent a fluid identity for herself onstage and offstage. Like Loie Fuller, the guardian consciously transforms herself from a girl to a bird-woman-witch dancer whose stylized movement is a literalization of well-timed calculation and self-control, contrary to the old man’s prognosis that insists on her vulnerability to hysteria and self-abandonment.

When the climactic dance takes place Cuchulain again falls prey to the guardian; though not rendering him in physical danger this time, the magic dance emasculates him by draining away

³⁷ Quoted in Dijkstra’s Idols of Perversity, 243.
his willpower. While the dance does not succeed in putting Cuchulain to sleep like it does with the old man, it hypnotizes and dictates Cuchulain’s movements as the musician observes, “The madness has laid hold upon him now, / For he grows pale and staggers to his feet” (VPl 410: 216-17). As the dance goes on, his body is unable to live up to his valiant exclamation “I am not afraid of you, bird, woman, or witch. / Do what you will, I shall not leave this place / Till I have grown immortal like yourself” (VPl 409: 210-12). Instead of focusing on the well, he involuntarily rises slowly, staggers, drops his spear, and goes after the guardian (VPl 410). In the first manuscript, Yeats describes Cuchulain’s reaction when the dance and the welling-up take place simultaneously: “He goes half way to the fountain, then hears the cry of the hawk and runs out after the woman.” In this version Cuchulain is conscious of his freewill to choose between pursuing immortality and pursuing the dancer—he chooses her and even has the physical strength to run after her. In later versions the dance wields more hypnotizing power; it takes total control of his body and willpower: “The Guardian of the Well has gone out. The Young Man drops his spear as if in a dream and goes out” (VPl 410: 223). In a spellbound state, the well of immortality is obliterated from Cuchulain’s mind; he cannot but forego the spear, the last fortress of his masculinity, and follow the dancer’s steps.

The gender dynamic between Cuchulain and the guardian is further complicated by the fact that the bird-woman-witch dancer was actually played by a male dancer Michio Ito in 1916, whose transvestism and blended movement-style worked to the advantage of reinforcing the guardian’s androgynous, hybrid identity. Moving away from early group dances that evoke communal patriotism, the solitary bird-woman-witch dancer tunes in to an intricate mixture of the marionette-like movements of Japanese Noh and the innovative motions of early modern dance. Trained in Japanese Kabuki and later in German eurythmics, and inspired by Russian

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38 See the transcribed manuscript in Bradford’s *Yeats’s at Work*, 180.
ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky and American modern dancer Isadora Duncan, Ito contributed a vital element to Yeats’s dramaturgy with his ingenious movement. Ito’s marionette-like dance fascinated Yeats with its unique pauses at moments of muscular tension, different from the swaying and undulating motions in traditional Western dances (see fig. 2):

The interest is not in the human form but in the rhythm to which it moves, and the triumph of their art is to express the rhythm in its intensity. There are few swaying movements of arms or body such as make the beauty of our dancing. They move from the hip, keeping constantly the upper part of their body still, and seem to associate with every gesture or pose some definite thought. They cross the stage with a sliding movement, and one gets the impression not of undulation but of continuous straight lines. (E&I 230-31)

By restraining both somatic motion and emotional explosion, this movement style intensifies the dramatic effect like an arrow on a tightened bow ready to shoot in the climactic moment. As my use of the arrow metaphor implies, its disciplined, straight-line motions are usually gendered masculine when compared with the feminine swaying and undulating motions, in conjunction with the fact that it is rooted in the ancient Japanese tradition of exclusive male and male-transvestite performers. However, even within this masculine style, Ito has devised two sets of gestures—masculine and feminine—that comprise the basis of his dances (Caldwell 143). The ambivalently androgynous quality of Ito’s (and thus of the guardian’s) dances is also evident in the dances of early modern soloists like Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan. While Sondra Horton Fraleigh reads Fuller’s earthbound, spiraling movement as claiming allegiance with the feminine deity (148), Susan Leigh Foster argues otherwise that early modern dancers’ upward plunging arms and downward shooting legs as “collapsing the phallus into themselves” (15).

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39 Caldwell, 38. Kabuki is a traditional form of Japanese drama including dancing and singing.
Fig. 2. Michio Ito’s Noh-inspired statuesque posture.
In Ito’s androgynous, hybrid dance Yeats found the quintessence of his histrionics: after Ito was recruited by a New York theater in the early autumn of 1916, Yeats commented on the extreme difficulty in replacing him, noting that his “minute intensity of movement in the dance of the hawk” was perfect for the drawing room and his new dramatic art (VP 417). As stated in a manifesto of his new dramaturgy “Certain Noble Plays of Japan,” At the Hawk’s Well is “made possible by a Japanese dancer [Ito]” whom Yeats had seen dance on several occasions (224). Ito’s ingenious movement functions similar to but much more than wearing a mask; he is capable of transforming the space and transporting the audience into a mythical existence: “he was able, as he rose from the floor, where he had been sitting cross-legged, or as he threw out an arm, to recede from us into some more powerful life” (224). His art exemplifies what Yeats attempts to achieve in his dance plays by interacting with the audience on a detached-yet-intimate level: “Because that separation was achieved by human means alone, he receded but to inhabit as it were the deeps of the mind. One realized anew, at every separating strangeness, that the measure of all arts’ greatness can be but in their intimacy” (224). During the course of working with Ito, Yeats gradually incorporated more bodily movements into At the Hawk’s Well. Besides amplifying the guardian’s dance, all the actors’ movements are carefully choreographed to “suggest a marionette” (VP 401). In an early version published in 1917 in Today, there were no stage directions for the musicians during the opening song; in the 1917 edition of The Wild Swans at Coole, there was only one sentence “They fold up the cloth singing” (VP 399). Later versions elaborate on the musicians’ movements as a holistic part of the play’s choreography: they are instructed to pace “with a rhythmic movement of the arms” (VP 399: 8); they also “accompany the movements of the players with gong or drum or zither” (VP 400: 16).
The influence Ito brought in to the performance of *At the Hawk’s Well* went beyond his movement style and extended to lending a shaping hand to Yeats’s dramaturgy. During the course of revising and rehearsing *At the Hawk’s Well*, Yeats was gradually convinced that Ito’s dance could best convey the horror and attraction of the guardian, and decided to magnify the presence of the dance. (There is even an anecdote about Yeats accompanying Ito to study the movements of hawks at the London Zoo. Nonetheless, this story may be a mere fabrication, as Ito told Caldwell that Dulac, instead of Yeats, went to observe the hawk’s cry with him.) In the first manuscript entitled *The Well of Immortality*, the guardian’s dance was only described in words as part of the chorus’s narration; in the second manuscript, Yeats decided to give the dance a physical presence onstage, but the details were not formed yet. The dance took on a more specific shape in the first typescript: the dancer was instructed to move as a hawk and the dance should go on for about two minutes. Yeats cut more verses at the end of the fourth manuscript, highlighting and finalizing the dance as the central spectacle built toward the climax. As Bradford points out, this revision indicates “a fuller dependence on the dance as an expressive means” by cutting the musicians’ verbal description of the dance such as:

Keep me from dancing feet and terrible eyes,

Two feet seeming like two quivering blades,

Eyes long withered and yet seeming young

Keep from me—How should I bear those eyes. (211)

Ultimately, in the final versions the dance and the dancer took over the center stage in the climactic moment, thus forming the prototype of Yeats’s subsequent dance plays.

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40 Hone, 289.
41 Caldwell, 164.
42 See transcribed manuscripts in Bradford’s *Yeats at Work*, 180 and 189.
43 Ibid., 202.
44 Ibid., 209.
During his personal association with Ito from 1914 to 1916, Yeats was also beginning to revolutionize his dramaturgy by adopting the conventions of Japanese Noh to his dance plays, which included sizing down the audience, moving the stage to the drawing room, simplifying the scenery, and centralizing the dance. His experiment with “an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society” where performances were delivered by “half a dozen young men and women who can dance and speak verse or play drum and flute and zither” took a definite shape in his Four Plays for Dancers (254-55). In these plays the dancing body is designated as the central spectacle that unifies various dramatic elements at climax, just like what Yeats observed in a Japanese Noh play: “Instead of the players working themselves into a violence of passion indecorous in our sitting-room, the music, the beauty of form and voice all come to climax in pantomimic dance” (E&I 221). In dance, Yeats found not only an effective theatrical device, but also stylized movements fundamental to performing his dance plays—the kind of “energies that would free the arts from imitation, that would ally acting to decoration and to the dance” (E 258). The minimalism created by employing masks and Gordon Craig’s screen system also works to draw the audience’s attention to the dancers’ and actors’ stylized movements. The use of masks, as Yeats explains in an appended note for At the Hawk’s Well, privileges bodily movements over facial expressions in dramatic art since “expression is mainly in those movements that are of the entire body” (VPl 416). The effect created by the masked dancer is that of a simultaneously natural and artificial, and intimate and detached embodiment onstage. According to Yeats, this kind of paradoxically intimate-yet-detached interaction with the audience is essential to art: “All imaginative art remains at a distance and this distance, once chosen, must be firmly held against a pushing world. Verse, ritual, music, and dance in association with action

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45 Caldwell, 40. Yeats first saw Ito dancing at the home of Lady Morrell in London in 1914.
46 Four Plays for Dancers, published in 1921, includes At the Hawk’s Well, The Only Jealousy of Emer, The Dreaming of the Bones, and Calvary.
require that gesture, costume, facial expression, stage arrangement must help in keeping the
door” (E&I 224). Koritz argues that Yeats’s “insistence on masks, on stylized movement and
nonillusionistic conventions, suggests that while this drama is dependent on dance, and thus on
the body, for its effect…it rejects the individuality of the bodies it uses” (90). Her critique is
partially true: Yeats does suppress the dancer’s individuality. Yet her interpretation of his
minimalist symbolist aesthetics as a misogynist erasure of women’s bodies is an overstretched
argument based on the presumption that only realistic representations of women’s experience are
acceptable feminist representations. In Yeats’s plays, the dancer’s individuality is partially
concealed with her/his face hidden behind a mask, which in turn creates gender fluidity working
to the advantage of theatrical presentations: Ito’s masked transvestism, for instance, enhanced the
wardian’s androgynous identity. In the case of The Dreaming of the Bones, the difficulty of
finding even one suitable dancer for the duet dance renders transvestism a matter of
practicability: Yeats explains that it is essential that the part of Dervorgilla is played by a
dancer—either female or male—whose lines can be relegated to Dermot, considering that the
dancer may not have the training in acting (VPl 777).

All of Yeats’s innovative ideas about the dance, histrionics, and dramaturgy came to their first
fruition in At the Hawk’s Well. Although when first performed in April 1916, in Lady Cunard’s
drawing room, the play was only “half welcome” by the elite audience according to Yeats (VPl
416), some of the invited guests expressed more generous enthusiasm about his theatrical vision
than Yeats had recalled. Edward Marsh, Winston Churchill’s secretary then, praised the play’s
minimalist scenery and use of masks: “It’s the beginning of an attempt to give poetic plays in
such an inexpensive way that they can be done for quite small audiences… I find I can manage
quite well without any scenery at all… The actors wore masks made by Dulac, awfully good,
and I found it quite easy to accept the convention” (Hassall 383-84). T. S. Eliot later commented on the groundbreaking effect of this play, which marked Yeats’s entrance into modernism:

Yeats did not appear, until after 1917 [should be 1916], to be anything but a minor survivor of the 90’s. (After that date, I saw him very differently. I remember well the impression of the first performance of *The Hawk’s Well*, in a London drawing room, with a celebrated Japanese dancer in the role of the hawk, to which Pound took me. And thereafter one saw Yeats rather as a more eminent contemporary than as an elder from whom one could learn.)

Indeed, in *At the Hawk’s Well* Yeats had tightened up the dramatic structure and solved the lack of theatrical energy in his early plays with a modernist choreographic vision. Tracing back to *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, we observe a relative roughness in the design of the dance scene that does not add significantly to the overall theme or plot. The stage directions are not specific as to how the fairy child should move, except stating “She dances” (VPl 200: 311), and the transition into the dance lacks the subtlety of Yeats’s middle plays, for the child announces redundantly, “Put on my shoes, old mother. / For I would like to dance now I have eaten” (198: 284-85) and “Here is level ground for dancing; I will dance” (200: 308). Although not documented as to what kind of dance training Dorothy Paget acquired, we can probably speculate that the fairy child’s dance derived from a combination of Irish jig and classical ballet. According to the child’s song, the fairies “Shake their milk-white feet in a ring, / Tossing their milk-white arms in the air” (VPl 194-95: 240-41): Yeats probably had in mind both the lighthearted Irish jig and the ethereal, airborne movements from classical ballets such as *Giselle* (1841) and *Swan Lake* (1895). The chorus/group dance characteristic of Irish jig and classical ballet, though not materialized onstage, is also present in the fairy child’s song and the stage direction “Outside

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there are dancing figures” (VPL 210: 430). In his middle plays, Yeats gradually omits any indication to chorus dance and, instead, focuses verbally and visually on the solitary female dancer—a hallmark of modern dance pioneered by Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, who consciously sever their dependence on male dancers and take over the center stage (see fig. 3). Besides the omission of group dance, Yeats’s dance plays also lack the ballet’s *pas de deux* (with the exception of the defective version in *The Dreaming of the Bones*), where the most crucial gender-coding event takes place with the male dancer supporting the female. Casting the solo female dancer in a powerful independent role, Yeats’s dance plays are in tandem with the revolutionary aesthetics and gender politics expressed by early modern dancers.

III.

When compared with other similar types of dancers created by male choreographers in the early twentieth century, Yeats’s Guardian of the Well displays a more powerful and unconventional embodiment of femininity onstage. For instance, the power/sexual struggle between the guardian and Cuchulain is in some aspects similar to that of the firebird and prince Ivan in Serge Diaghilev’s ballet *Firebird* (*L’Oiseau de feu*) (1910), yet these two presentations differ in terms of who, the supernatural woman or the prince, gets the upper hand in the end. Both the guardian and the firebird manipulate their prey to get what they want: while the guardian dances to distract the hero from obtaining immortality, the firebird’s scheming entails her own captivation by the prince to prove him as a prospective rescuer of the princess. With the *pas de deux* (dance for two) of the firebird and the prince, the ballet ends with a celebratory note on the taming of the supernatural woman by the hero for the communal welfare. Cuchulain,

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48 I am indebted to Sally Banes’s reading of the *pas de deux* as the firebird’s manipulation of Ivan (97).
Fig. 3. Isadora Duncan’s solo dance *Redemption* (1915).
on the other hand, boasts that he will capture the guardian but fails; his failure also renders him as an inept dance partner whose movements are dictated and impaired by the guardian. At the end, Yeats has to compensate for the unmanning of the hero and his failed quest for immortality by making him resolve to face the Amazonian “fierce women of the hills” and sexually conquers their queen, Aoife (VP I 411: 242). Nonetheless, as we follow his story further in On Baile’s Strand, Cuchulain’s conquest of Aoife seems but a shallow triumph, plotted for the unfolding of the guardian’s curse.

Although composed earlier than At the Hawk’s Well (1917) and The Green Helmet (1910), the third play in the Cuchulain cycle, On Baile’s Strand (1904), thematically follows up Cuchulain’s growth into a middle-aged man, and dramatizes the conflict between him and king Conchubar that leads to Cuchulain’s murder of his own son. The invisible hands pulling all these threads together are again the bird-woman-witch dancer and her fellow Sidhe. Taking place inside the male homosocial society of Conchubar’s kingdom, this play literally excludes the Sidhe’s presence onstage. The onstage or verbal disappearance of the Sidhe from around 1903 to 1910 in Yeats’s plays and poetry corresponded to his assertion of a masculine style, with On Baile’s Strand as a principle manifestation of this new poetics. Yeats appended a note in the 1903 edition of In the Seven Woods, in which he claimed that the “first shape of [On Baile’s Strand] came to me in a dream, but it changed much in the making, foreshadowing, it may be, a change that may bring a less dream-burdened will into my verses” (VP 814). In his preface to Poems 1899-1905 (1906), Yeats again described the revision of his early poetical drama as a search for “manful energy” and for “clean outline, instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret” (VP 849). Yeats’s stylistic revision was further complicated by his retreat from early romantic nationalism and by his critique of Irish
nationalists’ rigid definition of womanhood that reached a melodramatic height with its remonstration against J. M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*. On the premier night of *The Playboy* (January 26, 1907), Yeats received a telegram saying, “Audience broke up in disorder at the word *shift*” (E&I 311). The riot continued: on January 29, there were forty protesters in the theater “to silence what they considered a slander upon Ireland’s womanhood. Irish women would never sleep under the same roof with a young man without a chaperon, nor admire a murderer, nor use a word like ‘shift’” (E&I 311). This episode epitomized for Yeats “the dissolution of a school of patriotism that held sway over [his] youth” because of the hypocrisy of these protesters who, according to a doctor in the audience, had been treated for “venereal disease” (E&I 312). Even one year before the *Playboy* riot, Yeats had started his own fight against this vapor of sexual repression and hypocrisy with his representation of the Sidhe as sexually aggressive bird-woman-witch dancers.

Starting with the 1906 version of *On Baile’s Strand*, the Sidhe no longer uphold their early status as goddesses; they become witches instead. In earlier versions before 1906, Barach (the fool) exclaims, “Nobody knows how lecherous these goddesses [the Sidhe] are” (VPI 458: 11-12); the adjective “lecherous” downplays the status of the Sidhe from early Yeats’s unattainable beloved-Ireland to promiscuous Dionysian goddess. In the 1906 and later versions, Yeats replaced “goddesses” with “witches” when referring to the Sidhe: the fool describes Boann and Fand (the guardian of the well) as “witches” who “come by in the wind” (VPI 461: 25-26). The alteration of the Sidhe from goddesses to witches also occurred during the process of composing *At the Hawk’s Well*. In the first manuscript of *At the Hawk’s Well*, Cuchulain calls the guardian “Goddess, or bird or woman,”⁴⁹ which was revised as “bird, woman, or witch” after the second manuscript. Yeats’s decision to throw into the mix an intriguing nuance—the witch—indicates

⁴⁹ See transcribed manuscript in Bradford’s *Yeats at Work*, 209.
that he gradually portrays the Sidhe in a less simplistic romantic light, and associates them more with destructive Salome-like figures, whose lunar energy is inspirational for the poet, and yet whose changeability and magic are subversive to the laws of patriarchal society. As witches, the Sidhe master the art of trickery and create a false dream of immortality for seekers to chase after. The old man calls them the “[d]ecivers of men” (VPl 405: 126), and identifies himself as the victim “whom the dancers cheat” (VPl 405: 128). At first Cuchulain refutes the old man’s blasphemy: “And who are you who rail / Upon those dancers that all others bless?” (VPl 405: 126-27). However, young Cuchulain’s idealized view of the Sidhe, like young Yeats’s, is soon tarnished when the guardian reveals herself as an androgynous, hybrid dancer whose taunting gaze provokes the hero’s instinct to conquer her otherness and validate himself: “Why do you fix those eyes of a hawk upon me? / I am not afraid of you, bird, woman, or witch” (VPl 409: 209-10).

Read in the context of the Pre-Raphaelite view of women shared by Yeats and his male coterie at Rhymers’ Club (“Woman herself was still in our eyes, for all that, romantic and mysterious, still the priestess of her shrine” [A 234]), the androgynous, hybrid bird-woman-witch dancer presents a deviation from the norm of Pre-Raphaelite goddess-priestess. On the other hand, Yeats’s desecration of the Sidhe reflected an increasing discontent with his early poetics, which is closely associated with these immortal dancers and the fairyland. In The Shadowy Waters, the poet Forgael approximates the bird-woman-witch dancer in his ability to charm and deceive Dectora. Magic and poetic creation are relegated from the supernatural feminine force of the Celtic mermaids to the poet, as Dectora suspects that Forgael has “a Druid craft of wicked music, / Wrung from the cold women of the sea-- / A magic that can call a demon up” (VPl 328: 270-72). Under the spells of Forgael’s harp, Dectora forgets about revenging the murder of her
husband, mistakes Forgael as the great Celtic king Iollan, and vows to follow him to the end of the world. A trace of Yeats’s early lyricism is still palpable in “The Withering of the Boughs” (1900) where the poet recounts the inspiration for his early poetics—the witches and the Sidhe: “I know where a dim moon drifts, where the Danaan kind / Wind and unwind their dances when the light grows cool / On the island lawns, their feet where the pale foam gleams” (VP 203: 12-14). Things in the fairyland seem pleasantly sprinkled with pastel colors in “The Withering of the Boughs,” but the thrice-repeated refrain “No boughs have withered because of the wintry wind; / The boughs have withered because I have told them my dreams” foreshadows the withering of this landscape and the lyrical mood associated with it (VP 203: 7-8). As the Sidhe transmute into predatory bird-woman-witch dancers, the Celtic fairyland they inhabit no longer appears to be a dreamy “land of heart’s desire,” but diminishes into a barren land with “[a] well long choked up and dry / And boughs long stripped by the wind” in At the Hawk’s Well (VP 399: 2-3). Knowledge and life that are usually rewarded at the end of a heroic quest no longer thrive, as the masculine boughs of the hazel and the feminine water of immortality are deprived of vitality. Although the source of immortality—the well—still foregrounds the landscape in At the Hawk’s Well, it is ironically surrounded by signs of decay and the salt-sea wind that dries up life. A masculine saltiness seeps into the fairyland and adds an arid component to the bird-woman-witch dancer who appears to be manly and aggressive. Her femininity is like the hidden well, guarded against mortals’ approach, something that no beings can experience except for the Sidhe:

A secret moment that the holy shades
That dance upon the desolate mountain know,  
And not a living man, and when it comes
The water has scarce plashed before it is gone. (VPl 405: 117-120)

Instead of inviting mortals to dance with them and endowing them with eternal youth, the Sidhe now dance to signal the welling-up of the fountain and, more importantly, to camouflage this moment and lure mortals away from it.

The Sidhe, however, are not the only ones who shut out human beings; a mutual distrust grows among mortals who decline eternal life and question the nature of these immortal dancers. In *The Two Kings* (1913), King Eochaid’s wife chooses a human life and her human husband over the fairyland and her previous-life immortal husband who tempts her to live in the fairyland:

“Woman, / I was your husband when you rode the air, / Danced in the whirling foam and in the dust” (VP 284: 165-67). Despite the god’s argument that immortal happiness is much more desirable than transient earthly pleasure (“Nor can time waste the cheek, nor is there foot / That has grown weary of the wandering dance” [VP 284-85: 182-83]) she insists on the true nature of love as “[s]weetened by death” for there is a “double hunger” for “what is doubly brief” (VP 285: 205-207). In “To a Child Dancing in the Wind” (1912), the image of Iseult Gonne dancing freely without cares and worries amidst the “monstrous crying of the wind” (VP 312: 12) elevates the human dancer above the Sidhe whose whirling wind no longer awakens desire but brings about destruction.

The Sidhe’s doubly-loaded occultist and nationalist message “Destroy, destroy, destruction is the life-giver! Destroy!” (VPl 669: 559-60) in the play *The Unicorn From the Stars* (1908) raises further questions about martyrdom and the violence evoked by Irish nationalists. The vision the protagonist Martin receives from the Sidhe is similar to early Yeats’s depiction of Celtic fairyland, yet with an unsettling military turbulence to it: “All that they did was but the overflowing of their idleness, and their days were a dance bred of the secret frenzy of their
hearts, or a battle where the sword made a sound that was like laughter” (VPl 688: 413-17).

Martin and the beggar Johnny Bocach at first interpret the vision as a prophecy for them to organize a militia, named “the unicorn from the stars,” and join Johnny Gibbons’s insurrection to bring down the lion, the British government. Johnny Bocach is especially obsessed about this military nationalist sentiment, “Who was it the green sod of Ireland belonged to in the olden times? Wasn’t it to the ancient race it belonged? And who has possession of it now but the race that came robbing over the sea? The meaning of that is to destroy the big houses and the towns, and the fields to be given back to the ancient race” (VPl 684: 320-25). Martin, however, later turns his back on the troops and declares that the message of destruction should not be achieved via military violence but through spiritual purgation, which voices middle Yeats’s awareness of how his early romantic nationalism can be misread and appropriated by military nationalism.

Yeats further dramatizes the encounter of rigid nationalist ideology with the force of love in The Dreaming of the Bones (1919), where a participant in the 1916 Rising confronts the ghosts of the notorious pair Diarmuid and Derrorgilla who betrayed her husband O’Rourke and consequently betrayed Ireland, allowing the Normans to attack O’Rourke, thus opening the gate for foreign invasion in the twelfth century. Diarmuid and Derrorgilla are punished to live an existence similar to that of the lustful in the second circle of Dante’s hell—forever swept apart and never able to consummate their love unless one Irishman forgives their sin. Their desire and anguish climax in a dance that highlights the tragic state of their imposed separateness as the young man implores the lovers:

Why do you dance?

Why do you gaze, and with so passionate eyes,

One on the other; and then turn away,
Covering your eyes, and weave it in a dance? (VPl 774: 258-61)

The duet is rendered defective in the way that Diarmuid and Derrorgilla can never physically contact each other, but can only reach out with glances. The young man suddenly realizes that they are the doomed lovers when Derrorgilla wistfully utters, “Seven hundred years our lips have never met” (VPl 774: 263); the lovers’ dance then takes a turn from longing toward despair when the young man cries out “never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven” (VPl 775: 273-74). Unlike the standard ballet pas de deux that peaks with the male supporting the female or the two enclosing each other’s body with embraces, Diarmuid and Dervorgilla’s duet is perpetually interrupted by divine intervention or human incapability to forgive. Orchestrated in such a poignant yet stylistically reserved manner, the dance ends with the pair’s futile gesture of reaching out to each other, only to be swept apart:

They have raised their hands as though to snatch the sleep

That lingers always in the abyss of the sky

Though they can never reach it. A cloud floats up

And covers all the mountain-head in a moment;

And now it lifts and they are swept away. (VPl 775: 276-80)

Even the young man is momentarily touched by the pair’s heartrending fate, and almost “yielded and forgiven it all,” yet still cannot in his patriotic mindset (VPl 775: 281). The playwright is more sympathetic toward the lovers than the young man is, something indicated by the fact that he depicts them being punished for giving in to lust rather than for being traitors. The play’s ending leads us to question the value of nationalism.

Whether mythological, legendary, or human, Yeats’ dancers represent an oppositional force to rigid notions of nationality, gender, and religion, just as early modern dancers combat against the
physical constraints of classical ballet and Victorian conceptions of pure womanhood to liberate the female body. This aesthetic and ideological rebellion inevitably provoked antagonistic reactions among various patriarchal institutions that perpetuated the myth of pure domestic womanhood to ensure their operation. Adding to the effect of early modern dance and modern ballet, the anxiety ignited by the meteoric rise of dance halls in the 1890s rose to an apex in the 1910s among orthodox clergy and laity, to whom these crowded public spaces cradled moral corruption, substance abuse, and above all, sexual promiscuity. In his book Modern Dances (1910), the Reverend Don Lugi Satori crusaded to prohibit dance on the ground that “many healthy young women who practiced it became ‘infected by a syphilitic young man on the dancing floor: and that far from being healthful it puts a very severe strain on the nervous system.”

Despite their scorn for the sensual nature of dance, anti-dance advocates often lambasted it with an ironic mixture of contempt and voyeuristic pleasure. For instance, Walter Higgins of the Labour Leader (June 26, 1908) condemned early modern dancer Maud Allan’s performance The Vision of Salome with a puritanical eye scrutinizing for pornotropic detail:

I am inclined to accept the old Puritan judgment of dancing. Miss Maud Allan’s presentation is, beyond doubt, diabolic…her body is tortured into inconceivable postures. One moment she is the vampire, softly lulling her victim to sleep with rhythmical movement of body and gentle waving of hands; next, she is the snake, her sinuating body and piercing eyes holding him spellbound; next she is the lynx, crouched to spring. Always the fascination is animal-like and carnal.

The shape-changing quality of Allan’s dance reverberates with that of Yeats’s Sidhe dancers, who are constantly referred to as the “shape-changers;” both Allan and the Sidhe pose threats to

50 Quoted in Ross’s Moving Lessons, 34.
51 Quoted in Cherniavsky’s “Maud Allan, Part III: Two Years of Triumph 1908-1909,” 127.
patriarchal societies that view their dances as outward manifestations of women’s fickleness and dangerous sexuality. Whereas Higgins labeled Allan’s dance “baleful and insidious” as “the incarnation of the bestial as in Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley,” Yeats praised the visionary beauty of Beardsley’s Salome, and the image of Allan’s Salome left an important imprint on his later works (see fig. 4). The inherent enmity between these anti-dance and pro-dance attitudes was summed up by Arthur Symons’s statement that “The abstract thinker, to whom the question of practical morality is indifferent, has always loved dancing, as naturally as the moralist has hated it” (“The World as Ballet” 387). In the midst of this religious anti-dance haze, Anglo-Catholic Sacramentalists, starting earlier on in the 1890s, expressed a dissension, with which Yeats, Symons, and their fellow Rhymers were closely associated. The ballerinas of the Alhambra and the Empire Music Halls usually met with the Rhymers at the Crown public house after their performances; the group included the Anglo-Catholic Reverend Stewart Headlam who proposed to study dance as a religious activity (Fletcher 54). In Church Reformer (October 1884), Headlam exalted dance as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, ordained by the Word of God Himself;” he went on to debunk both puritanical and sensualist views on the dance: “Your Manichean Protestant, and your superfine rationalist, reject the Dance as worldly, frivolous, sensual, and so forth; and your dull, stupid sensualist sees legs, and grunts with some satisfaction: but your Sacramentalist knows something worth more than both of these.”

In Ireland the cultural impact of dance halls also started to alarm the Catholic Church because of their perceived underlying moral corruption and sexual impurity imported along with foreign music and dance steps from the metropolises of London, Paris, and New York. The Catholic

52 Ibid., 128.
53 Quoted in Kermode’s “Poet and Dancer Before Diaghilev” (148).
Fig. 4. Maud Allan’s dance *The Vision of Salome* (1908).
Church’s anti-dance activities, starting in the 1910s, would reach their final climax with the Irish government’s approval of the Public Dance Halls Act in 1935, which limited dancing exclusively to the licensed halls with licensed supervision (Austin 7). Ironically, part of this anti-dance campaign to ward out foreign influence also became “a primary cause of the disappearance of traditional music and dance in Ireland during the 1930s” (7). As fiddler Junior Crehan from County Clare lamented, the loss of traditional music and dance due to the Dance Halls Act has left the Irish “a poorer people” (16). This animosity between the Catholic Church and the Irish dance and music supplies a central conflict in Yeats’s play The King’s Threshold (1904), where dance joins the poet Seanchan’s protest against the coercing forces of politics, military, and religion. To restore the poet’s right in the court, Seanchan carries out a hunger strike at the king’s threshold. Fearing that the poet’s death would bring notoriety and bad luck on him, the king sends several messengers to dissuade him from the protest. Among them, the monk is most disdainful toward the poet’s protest since the “wanton imagination of the poets” (VPl 285: 434) endorses fantasy and desire that are detrimental to a religious life of “obedience / Discipline, and orderliness” (VPl 291: 547-48). One of the court ladies argues against the monk, “You stirred it up that you might spoil our dancing. / Why shouldn’t we have dancing?” (VPl 291: 550-51).

The relation between poetry, music, and dance is so intimately related that the dancers “cannot dance, / Because no harper will pluck a string” (VPl 286: 459-60), and no musicians will ever play again if the poet laureate dies. The court ladies’ complaint further infuriates the monk, who bellows out: “The pride of the poets! / Dancing, hurling, the country full of noise, / And King and Church neglected” (VPl 291: 562-63). To him, the Dionysian propensity of poetry and dance can only disrupt religious discipline and jeopardize the national body.
Operating under a similar anti-dance rationale, Irish patriarchs in On Baile’s Strand also view the Sidhe dancers as threatening to their political establishments and laws; to exorcize these marginal forces and ward them securely outside patriarchal society, the forefathers devise an elaborate ritual to “blow the witches out.” In this play Conchubar’s kingdom faces two potential adversaries, Cuchulain and the Sidhe, with the latter posing the more potent threat as Conchubar states that “the wild will of man could be oath-bound, / But that a woman’s could not” (VPl 495: 389-90). To ensure that Cuchulain’s wild personality and mighty strength will serve instead of menacing the succession of Conchubar’s future heirs, Conchubar cunningly pressures Cuchulain into taking a loyalty oath, preceded by singing the incantation passed down from “the old law-makers” (VPl 493: 387) who bid them “sing against the will of woman at its wildest / In the Shape-Changers that run upon the wind” (VPl 495: 390-92). This song zooms in on the Sidhe’s changeability and fatality: “The women none can kiss and thrive, / For they are but whirling wind, / Out of memory and mind” (VPl 495: 400-402). The Sidhe’s association with the whirling wind of Herodiades and Salome becomes a trope of mere destruction and desolation. Their vampirism draws substance from their prey; they awaken desire but do not reciprocate. The song foreshadows Cuchulain’s doomed fate to kill his son and fight with waves: “They would make a prince decay / With light images of clay / Planted in the running wave” (VPl 495: 403-405). It also reiterates Cuchulain’s early and future encounters with the bird-woman-witch dancer Fand:

Or they’d hurl a spell at him,

That he follow with desire

Bodies that can never tire

Or grow kind. (VPl 495: 410-13)
For the first time, we learn the secret of Sidhe’s deathless bodies,

for they anoint

All their bodies, joint by joint,

With a miracle-working juice

That is made out of the grease

Of the ungoverned unicorn. (VPl 497: 413-17)

Not only are the Sidhe’s bodies deathless, they are marked with a doubly loaded occultist and nationalist agenda with the grease of the unicorn, emblematic of Ireland (as shown in the play *Unicorn from the Stars*). The word “ungoverned” puns on their independence from both British imperial government and Conchubar’s patriarchal society. Their deathless bodies can never get tired from dancing or lovemaking, but the pain and destruction equate the pleasures they bring: “the man is thrice forlorn, / Emptied, ruined, wracked, and lost” (VPl 497: 418-19). Contrary to the overflowing treasures of youth, dance, and wealth promised in Yeats’s early fairyland, the Sidhe now bring men destruction and barrenness. Not without coincidence, it was in the same 1906 collection, where the status of the Sidhe changed from goddesses to witches, that Yeats included this incantation to blow the witches out for the very first time.

Although the curse of the bird-woman-witch dancer predestines Cuchulain’s killing of his own son, it is the completion of the male-homosocial-bonding ritual that directly leads toward this tragic event. After the incantation, the king, Cuchulain, and other subjects throw in their swords into the fire that seals the male homosocial bond and circumscribes the patriarchal boundaries inside the realm of “the threshold and the hearthstone” (VPl 499: 448) with the wild feminine principle barricaded outside. Then the anonymous young man (no one knows at this moment that he is Cuchulain and Aoife’s love child) shows up to fight the best man in Conchubar’s
kingdom; Cuchulain takes an instant liking to this young man and pleads with Conchubar to spare his life. The tragedy unfolds when Conchubar and others insult the very core of Cuchulain’s masculinity by insisting that the Sidhe have bewitched him. Caught between following his gut feelings to spare the young man and validating his masculinity, Cuchulain gives in to peer pressure from his comrades; after all, he shoulders the reputation as the superhero who killed kings, dragons, and “witches out of the air” (VPl 467: 104). Upon the declaration of a war against the Sidhe (“There is no witchcraft on the earth, or among the witches of the air, / that these hands cannot break” [VPl 517: 669-71]), Cuchulain is trapped in his destiny. He slays the young man, realizes too late that he has killed his only son, descends into madness, and fights the waves (mistaken as king Conchubar). The epiphany that his true enemy is Conchubar and not Aoife nor the bird-woman-witch dancer accelerates Cuchulain’s mental breakdown; it ultimately exposes the hypocrisy of Conchubar’s patriarchal society that, in its attempt to eradicate the wild feminine force and secure male dominance, slaughters the father-son relationship it prides itself on.

Cuchulain’s clash with Conchubar and his fight with the witches play out Yeats’s struggle with his masculine poetics: although Yeats chooses the new style over his early lyricism, the feminine principle of the witches still threatens to surface and upset this new-found masculine power. In “Lines Written in Dejection” (1917), the poet goes on a guilt trip harking back to his past acquaintance with “the wild witches those most noble ladies” (VP 343: 4) and his abandonment of them—“For all their broom-sticks and their tears, / Their angry tears, are gone” (VP 343-44: 5-6). By labeling the moon “heroic” and the sun “timid,” Yeats’s reversal of conventional gender coding expresses doubt and bitterness about his new poetics:

I have nothing but the embittered sun;
This inner struggle with the feminine and the masculine manifests itself in Yeats’s portrayal of Cuchulain. Despite Cuchulain’s display of masculinity, he is more akin to the Sidhe than he would like to acknowledge. As Susan Harris points out, with his wild personality, his dancing, his reluctance to be bound, Cuchulain has “all qualities associated with the feminine Shape-changers” (482). When Conchubar tries to bind Cuchulain with an oath, Cuchulain at first retorts, “I’ll not be bound. / I’ll dance or hunt, or quarrel or make love, / In Wherever and whenever I’ve a mind to” (VP 477: 210-12). The moment Cuchulain succumbs to the ritual to bind himself and banish the Sidhe, he betrays his inborn alliance with that feminine force and thus plots his own downfall.

The irreconcilable opposition between Cuchulain and Conchubar also reflects in their different views on women. As a spokesperson for the rigid laws that lay the foundations of a patriarchal society, Conchubar’s view of womanhood is linked to his efforts to secure the national and domestic spheres of “the threshold and the hearthstone.” To him, an ideal woman is gentle and suitable for marriage; women like Aoife—leading an Amazonian troop and worshipping the immortal dancers—fit the profile of troublesome witches and should be excluded from his kingdom. Cuchulain, on the other hand, praises Aoife’s “high, laughing, turbulent head,” her eyes “full of good counsel,” and her “wild body” as most fitted “to give birth to kings” (VP 487: 316-23). With the absence of Aoife and the Sidhe onstage, Cuchulain’s and Conchubar’s different views on women and the Sidhe can only fill in the holes for us from men’s point of view. This deficiency in women’s perspective in On Baile’s Strand is tentatively mended by the
presence of the women musicians who help performing the male-bonding ritual by singing the song and holding the hearth-fire to blow the witches out. On a first look, these women seem complicit with men in their fight against immortal dancers; however, it is as if they only participate in this ritual half-heartedly since “They sing in a very low voice after the first few words so that the others all but drown their words” (VPl 495: 393). Subjected to Conchubar’s dictation, the women musicians fail to assert their alliance with the Sidhe; on the other hand, their hesitant compliance also falls short in expelling the feminine force that finally breaks into this insular society with the arrival of Aoife and Cuchulain’s son.

IV.

Yeats further dramatizes this power struggle between human women and the Sidhe in his play The Only Jealousy of Emer (1919) where Cuchulain’s wife Emer and his mistress Eithne Inguba band together against the bird-woman-witch dancer, Fand. The power struggle between these three women provides a locale for us to examine Yeats’s gender politics in relation to the various women’s movements of the early-twentieth century. Through their different attempts to expand the female sphere in the socio-political milieu, early modern dance and the feminist movement were bound to converge or clash in one way or another. As dance historian Janice Ross states, “by the first quarter of the twentieth century they [the dancers] would be the physical equivalent of suffrage—emblems of a newly liberated female body functioning in tandem with a newly awakened mind” (28). On the other hand, early modern dancers like Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, and Maud Allan were not political activists; they, much like Yeats, expressed their skepticism about improving women’s position through political agitation. Fuller, for example, “believed in a kind of feminism, a kind that had nothing to do with politics” (Current 326); and
Duncan once told a room full of suffragists and feminists that the vote would not solve women’s plight (Daly 163). In his works Yeats often campaigns against the mingling together of the feminine and political spheres, and sets up an oppositional imagery between dancers and women in politics: while the dancer’s perfectly-proportioned body epitomizes unity of being, the woman in politics is likened to an inanimate stone or a withered body. This polar difference, no doubt, is subject to feminist criticism. Nonetheless, few critics would argue against, if at all, early modern dancers’ contribution to women’s movements. Fuller and Duncan, for instance, exemplified the New Woman by rebelling against conventional gender codes, taking up choreography and management, positions formerly occupied exclusively by men in classical ballet; as a result, they were able to produce new images of women for a growing female spectatorship, undiluted by male authorship. Yeats, in befriending and writing about these dancers, also partook in dialogues that often revealed him as a supporter of women dancers’ artistic achievements and of their proto-feminist outlook.

The convergence and clash between early modern dance and feminist movement in the early twentieth century was probably best (in a historical rather than literary sense) captured in a farcical play Salome and the Suffragettes that dramatizes the meteoric success and controversy surrounding Maud Allan’s solo dance The Vision of Salome.54 In this play, while Allan and the leading British politicians are having tea on the terrace outside the House of Commons, the suffragists attack them with strawberry jam and kidnap Allan. Panic-stricken, Prime Minister Asquith exclaims, “What can I do about Salome? If she does not appear at the Palace tonight there will be a revolution!” (Cherniavsky 154). Upon the suffragists’ demand for “the enfranchisement of women” in exchange for Allan’s freedom, Asquith finally promises the vote

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54 The play Salome and the Suffragettes is mentioned in Cherniavsky’s article “Maud Allan” (154-55). I am still in the process of tracking down its author and date.
to women to diffuse a potential national crisis (154). While this play caricaturizes all the parties involved with a demeaning humor, it does underscore the power of early modern dancers, either in their onstage or offstage personas, to provoke or sway political movements. As Yeats described in the earliest draft of “His Phoenix” (January 1915), “In nineteen hundred eight or nine Maude Allan had the cry;”\(^{55}\) during those two years Allan’s performances swept the high society in London and aroused much controversy over her embodiments of femininity onstage.

The impulse to label women dancers’ performances as either chaste or erotic was ubiquitous among critics and audiences who, conditioned by tensions between Victorian womanhood and the suffragist movement, inevitably translated the dancers’ corporeal movements into political statements. Receptions of Allan’s contemporaries Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan similarly embraced episodes of fame and controversy, pertaining to their aesthetic innovations and representations of femininity. Rising to stardom in the 1890s, Fuller dazzled her audiences (among them Mallarme, Rodin, Symons, and Yeats) with dances of fire, lilies, and serpents created by wielding several-feet-long draperies on a darkened stage partly illuminated by multi-color lights. As an inventor of several modern-stage lighting techniques, Fuller anticipated effects of projecting colors with lights, later used by the theater reformer Gordon Craig and Yeats. One critic in Liberation appraises her contribution to the modern theater: “Cinematic art, multimedia, abstract, performance, interactivity, contemporary dance: at the end of the 19\(^{th}\)-century, Loie Fuller had already invented everything.”\(^{56}\) Her ability to innovate and fascinate derived from a combination of talent and strong will to materialize her own vision of feminism in her profession; as she once wrote to her lifelong companion Gabrielle Bloch, “Equality’s the thing. Therefore make thyself worthy to be any man’s equal” (Current 326). A few months

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\(^{55}\) See The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials, 167.

\(^{56}\) Quoted in Dee Reynolds’s “The dancer as woman: Loie Fuller and Stephane Mallarme,” 161.
before Allan’s controversial debut of The Vision of Salome in London in 1908, Fuller’s The Tragedy of Salome (1907) was exalted by the French critic Jules Claretie of Le Temps as “a vision of a theater of the future, something in the nature of a feminist theater.” Like Fuller, Isadora Duncan revolutionized the conceptions and stage presentations of dance, yet unlike Fuller, her focus was not technical/technological but rather on the reform of the dancer’s body. Dissatisfied with the “sterile movements” of classical ballet, Duncan set out to liberate the dancer’s body from the restricting costumes and movements of ballet that had resulted in the deformation of the body (“The Dance of the Future” 56). The dance of the future, she declared, dedicated itself to the shaping of “the ideal form of woman” by restoring “original strength” and “natural movements” to the female body (61). The image of Duncan dancing barefoot and uncorseted became an icon of women’s emancipation from “the hidebound conventions that are the warp and woof of New England Puritanism,” as she stated after the Boston scandal that caused her performances to be canceled due to her deliberately-exposed breast in dancing La Maseillaise (Isadora Speaks 48). Duncan’s pronounced Dionysian stance that sought to defy conventional womanhood triggered opposing responses from critics: while some disparaged the corporeality of her dances, others downplayed that quality in order to market her as a chaste, and thus genuine woman artist.58 After viewing her Iphigenie en Aulide, dance critic Henry Taylor Parker of Boston Evening Transcript (November 28, 1908) stated, “For though Miss Duncan be bare of feet and legs, of arms and shoulders, there is in her and in all that she does a pervading suggestion of chastity and of a singular and virginal innocence” (Holmes 58); he went on to describe her as a stereotypical fairylike ballerina, “she is as incorporeal as the sylphs, as fairy

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57 Quoted in Richard Current and Marcia Current’s Loie Fuller: Goddess of Light, 182.
58 See the contemporary press receptions of Duncan’s dances in Conner’s book Spreading the Gospel of the Modern Dance, 40-46.
footed as the elves. Her dancing is as intangible, as un-material, as fluid as are sound or light” (60).

The corporeality of Duncan’s dances, in spite of critics’ condescension or suppression, was acknowledged by Edward Gordon Craig and influenced his reform of the theater, which, in turn, altered Yeats’s conception of dramaturgy. In his memoirs Craig credited Duncan for her artistic inspiration: “To the friendship and inspiration of Isadora I owe some of the best designs of these two years [1905 and 1906]” (268). Renee Vincent observes that there are more than one hundred sketches pertaining to Duncan in Craig’s 1904-1905 sketchbooks, where the figures become gradually to “move” and finally to “dance” (43). During their three-year (1904-1906) love affair, Duncan and Craig also collaborated on the project of bringing together dance and marionette theater. Although the project failed to materialize, its idea ultimately informed Craig’s conception of histrionics that privileges movement over speech: “The actors must cease to speak and must move only, if they want to restore the art to its old place. Acting is Action—Dance is the poetry of Action.” Craig’s idea shows the exact opposite of what Yeats thought early on in 1894 in which the actor must cease to act and learn to recite “majestic words” (Uncoll1 325). Under the Duncan-Craig influence (mainly through Yeats’s collaboration with Craig in the 1900s), middle Yeats revised his histrionics to one that depended more on the actor’s physical energy and movement, and one that relied more on the dance to drive the plot forward (though these corporeal elements are still subordinate to words in middle Yeats’s theater). Through his father John Butler Yeats’s and Craig’s personal acquaintance with Duncan, W. B. Yeats, although he never saw her perform, was certainly familiar with her work and revered her

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60 Craig, The Art of the Theatre, 199.
61 John Butler Yeats wrote two letters to his son in 1908 stating his personal encounter with Duncan, “a figure dancing all alone” on the stage in New York (116).
achievement as a dancer. Reminiscing later in “I Became an Author” (1938), Yeats apparently viewed Duncan as an artist of equal rank, and compared his early struggle in becoming an author with that of Duncan’s in her dance career, “In this I was more fortunate than Isadora Duncan who was to write of her first London years: ‘I had renown and the favour of princess and not enough to eat’” (LA&R 300).

Through his collaborations with the dancer Michio Ito, the theater reformer Gordon Craig, and indirectly with the dancers Loie Fuller, Maud Allan, and Isadora Duncan, middle Yeats gained the experience and momentum to rework his theories of the body, histrionics, and the theater. Although his fascination with the dancing body manifests itself in his early works, middle Yeats’s reading of the (female) body articulates a more dynamic aesthetics, compared with his early, more passive description of the body. In an early essay “The Symbolism of Poetry” (1900), Yeats expresses his fascination with the female body: “you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman” (E&I 164). In using the trope of the female body as flower (and vice versa) to describe his early aesthetics of writing, Yeats’s conception is similar to the late-nineteenth-century idea that portrays woman as “the personification of Flora”—beautiful, fragile, and passive (Dijkstra 15). Music-hall and ballet connoisseur Arthur Symons also employs the flower trope in describing the dancers’ erotically-objectified bodies, “Here are all these young bodies, made more alluring by an artificial heightening of whites and reds on the face…offered to our eyes like a bouquet of flowers, a bouquet of living flowers, which have all the glitter of artificial ones” (“The World as Ballet” 389). Nonetheless, Yeats’s conception of the female body continues to evolve into a more dynamic construction, especially when compared with most Victorian male obsessions with
images of invalid, dying, or dead women that reinforce the idea of women’s physical weakness and mental purity (Dijkstra 25).

Middle Yeats’s conception of the body started out as an aesthetics of embodiment, a reworking of the biblical metaphor of “word made into flesh,” and progressed toward the theory of the twenty-eight incarnations with the dancer occupying the paramount position of the fifteenth and sixteenth phases. The poet Seanchan’s theory in The King’s Threshold (1904) illustrates Yeats’s early aesthetics of embodiment:

If the Arts should perish,

The world that lacked them would be like a woman

That, looking on the cloven lips of a hare,

Brings forth a hare-lipped child. (VP1 264-65: 136-39)

In this theory, the female body functions as a mere surrogate to be impregnated by masculine arts, which alone determine the identity of this metaphoric child. Yeats’s later poems “The Phases of the Moon” (1919) and “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes” (1919) discard the conception of the female body as a passive womb, and elevate its athletic, self-sufficient qualities. According to Yeats’s theory (to be elaborated in A Vision), there are twenty-eight types of incarnations corresponding to the twenty-eight phases of the moon, each having its own unique personality and physical traits. As recapitulated in Yeats’s portrayal of the immortal dancer Fand in The Only Jealousy of Emer, the perfectly proportioned body of the dancer (usually gendered as female) symbolizes the unity of being unique to the fifteenth and the sixteenth incarnations. The fifteenth incarnation, as Robartes explains in “The Phases of the Moon,” can only exist outside of the human realm:

All thought becomes an image and the soul
Becomes a body: that body and that soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
Body and soul cast out and cast away
Beyond the visible world. (VP 374: 58-63)

While the first two lines stress the bodied quality of this existence, such an embodiment is too perfect and singular to be born as a human and it inhabits an invisible ethereal body. It is only at the sixteenth phase that this ethereal body reincarnates into “a beautiful man’s or woman’s body” (VP 374: 64). The dancer thus occupies an intriguing locale where the human body and ethereal body, biology and art, and life and death converge.

The dancer’s symbolic place in the Yeatsian system at the same time raises questions concerning his representations of women, especially when it comes to the oppositional embodiments of the dancer and the intellectual woman. According to Yeats, while the dancer exemplifies the unity of being, the intellectual woman has traded her femininity for thoughts that are alien to her nature, and when internalized, turn the living flesh into stone:

Women, because the main event of their lives has been a giving themselves and giving birth, give all to an opinion as if it were some terrible stone doll. Men take up an opinion lightly…but to women opinions become as their children or their sweethearts . . . At last the opinion is so much identified with their nature that it seems a part of their flesh becomes stone and passes out of life. (A 372)

In arguing against women engaging in politics or opinions, Yeats adopts a sexist rhetoric that differentiates the two sexes based on women’s reproductive capability/disability; this analogy of women turning into stone due to political engagements gradually develops into a standard
Yeatsian trope. As a consequence of the Playboy riot and other events, Yeats became increasingly skeptical of political fixations and viewed the new nationalist generation as “a hysterical woman who will make unmeasured accusations and believe impossible things, because of some logical deduction from a solitary thought which has turned a portion of her mind to stone” (E&I 314); though aiming at both men and women who birth forth detrimental abstractions, this critique is built upon the premise of women’s susceptibility to hysteria and malleability. The first stanza of Yeats’s poem “On Woman” (1916) reiterates the message that urges women to banish thoughts because they are not scripted in their gender role:

May God be praised for woman
That gives up all her mind,
A man may find in no man
A friendship of her kind
That covers all he has brought
As with her flesh and bone,
Nor quarrels with a thought
Because it is not her own. (VP 345: 1-8)

This opening crusade for traditional gender coding nevertheless takes a turn in the second stanza, where the poet relates the biblical anecdote of Solomon and Sheba, and how “Solomon grew wise / While talking with his queens” (VP 345: 11-12), especially with Sheba who is extolled for both her intellect and sexuality. The conflated image of Sheba as a cerebral queen and a Salome-like “[p]erverse creature of chance” (VP 346: 41) not only defies the codes of femininity in the first stanza but also reverses the gender roles with her “iron wrought” hardness (VP 345: 17). As the speaker praises woman who gives up her mind in the first stanza, he soon contradicts himself
in the second stanza, praying to “live like Solomon / That Sheba led a dance” (VP 346: 42-43), yielding himself to Sheba’s masculine lead in the _pas de deux_.

This praising for and yielding to a woman with iron-wrought personality and political power undermines the credibility of Yeats’s argument against women in politics. Especially when examining his life, we find that he was often attracted to and befriended powerful strong-minded women, such as actress Florence Farr, socialist Constance Markiewicz, and Irish political revolutionary Maud Gonne (Cullingford, _Gender_ 7). Like Sheba and Aoife, Gonne is depicted by Yeats as a fiery lofty queen and an undying phoenix immortalized in “His Phoenix” (1916). This poem again portrays the antithetical images of the dancer and the woman in politics, except that this time the praise aims at the later, the poet’s beloved Maud Gonne. The first three stanzas are constructed with the same seven-line listing of beautiful women with a one-line rebuttal, “I knew a phoenix in my youth, so let them have their day,” that exalts Gonne’s aristocratic beauty above all those women. In the second stanza, Yeats categorizes the celebrated dancers (St. Denis and Pavlova) and actresses (Gaby and the anonymous player) of the early twentieth century:

  The young men every night applaud their Gaby’s laughing eye,
  And Ruth St. Denis had more charm although she had poor luck;
  From nineteen hundred nine or ten, Pavlova’s had the cry,
  And there’s a player in the States who gathers up her cloak
  And flings herself out of the room when Juliet would be bride (VP 353-54: 9-13)

In the earliest draft of “His Phoenix” (January 1915), Yeats began his poem by listing three prominent dancers—Anna Pavlova, Ruth St. Denis, and Maud Allan—who initially inspired the subject matter of this poem: “Pavlovna is beyond our praise, Gabys a laughing eye / Though Ruth St. Denis has no luck she had an Indean charm / In nineteen hundred eight or nine Maude
Allan had the cry.\textsuperscript{62} Yeats’s account recapitulated the phenomenal success of the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, but later he decided to drop out “beyond our praise” to establish a sharper contrast between the relatively short-lived fame of the dancer and the everlasting prominence of Gonne. Pavlova’s renowned ethereal movement nonetheless has left its imprint on Yeats’s works: the previously-unseen movement of “[p]rancing round and prancing up / Until they pranced upon the top” (VP 331: 17-18) in “Under the Round Tower” (1918) may indicate a ballet influence coming from observing Pavlova’s performances. Early modern dancer Ruth St. Denis was memorialized for her “Indian charm” in Radha (1906) where she emulates the Hindu goddess Radha, delivering a sacred message for her worshipers through “The Dance of the Five Senses.” Although the poet eventually omitted the Canadian dancer Maud Allan in the next drafts, her controversial The Vision of Salome proved to influence Yeats’s later dance imagery profoundly. After assembling these acclaimed women, the poet turns away from them and their patrons with mixed jealousy and disparagement. While Yeats was no doubt fascinated by these dancers and applauded their aesthetic achievement, at times he felt uneasy about their popularity sweeping not only the literary elites but also the bourgeoisie that was rapidly replacing the aristocracy. The inescapable mesh of artistic success and commercialism triggered in Yeats anxiety about the spectatorship of early modern dances: quite contrary to his idea of an unpopular theater without the presence of press or unwanted audience, these dancers’ success relied heavily on press publicity, strategic marketing, and middle-class patronage. The quick pacing used in categorizing the dancers and actresses each in one line reflects the poet’s anxiety and his foretelling of their short-lived fame, contrary to the elaborate praise woven for his beloved. In the final stanza Yeats summons up the image of Maud Gonne who represents the diminishing aristocratic beauty that stands out in the rising mass culture:

\textsuperscript{62} The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials, 167.
There’ll be that crowd, that barbarous crowd, through all the centuries,
And who can say but some young belle may walk and talk men wild
Who is my beauty’s equal, though that my heart denies,
But not the exact likeness, the simplicity of a child,
And that proud look as though she had gazed into the burning sun,
And all the shapely body not tittle gone astray. (VP 354: 25-30)

To the poet, Gonne is the best dancer among all with her proud look, shapely body, and her ability to self-regenerate; her aristocratic beauty will, though not applauded by the crowd, outlive the popular like an undying phoenix. Like the dancer who epitomizes unity of being of the fifteenth and sixteenth phases, Gonne’s body maps out unity of culture “where all superiorities whether of the mind or the body were a part of public ceremonial” (A 274).

Having examined early modern dancers’ representations of femininity in relation to Yeats’s portrayals of the dancer and the woman in politics, we can better analyze the contention between the three women Emer, Eithne, and Fand in The Only Jealousy of Emer. In this triangular struggle, Emer exemplifies the virtuous, self-sacrificing wife extolled by patriarchal society; Eithne, a submissive mistress content with her inferior lot to Emer’s; and Fand, the aggressive, narcissistic supernatural woman who claims Cuchulain for her own spiritual completion. With Cuchulain exhausted from fighting the waves and lying close to death, it comes down to the power of these three women to either call him back to life or speed him on to the afterlife. At Emer’s request, Eithne calls to Cuchulain and revives his body with a kiss, only to find that a changeling, Bricriu of the Sidhe, has usurped his body. With Eithne leaving the stage at this moment, the plot indicates that this battle is to be fought between Emer and Fand—a reprise of the encounter between the patriarchal domestic ideal and the wild feminine force in On Baile’s
Strand. Emer’s belief that “all the enchantments of the dreaming foam / Dread the hearth-fire” again anchors the fight against the Sidhe on the domestic symbol of the hearth-fire (VPl 539: 113-14). This fire ritual fails to barricade the Sidhe as it does in On Baile’s Strand: Bricriu, who inhabits Cuchulain’s body, is able to set forth a “ransom” for releasing Cuchulain’s spirit if only Emer can renounce his love forever (VPl 545: 159).

Bricriu, however, is not the only member of the Sidhe that Emer needs to wrestle with; Fand, whose ethereal body cannot be harmed by Emer’s knife, also enters the stage to seduce Cuchulain’s ghost with her dance (VPl 549-51). Fand asserts her presence with movements that are carefully calculated to flirt with Cuchulain’s desire by prolonging but not consummating it with erotic pantomime: “The Woman of the Sidhe moves round the crouching Ghost of Cuchulain at front of stage in a dance that grows gradually quicker, as he slowly awakes. At moments she may drop her hair upon his head, but she does not kiss him” (VPl 551: 219). As the tempo of the dance quickens, Cuchulain is awakened. He recognizes her as the guardian he encountered earlier in At the Hawk’s Well:

I know you now, for long ago
I met you on a cloudy hill
Beside old thorn-trees and a well.
A woman danced and a hawk flew,
I held out arms and hands; but you,
That now seem friendly, fled away,
Half woman and half bird of prey. (VPl 553: 239-45)

Cuchulain is suspicious of Fand’s present affability and insists on her dangerous otherness as a hybrid bird-woman, which Fand strategically refutes by emphasizing her sexual desirability as a
woman. Instead of running away from him as in At the Hawk’s Well, she now invites him for a **pas de deux**:

> Hold out your arms and hands again;
> You were not so dumbfounded when
> I was that bird of prey, and yet
> I am all woman now. (VPl 553-54: 246-49)

Compared with her early appearance in At the Hawk’s Well, Fand’s humanity as a woman is enhanced in this play: instead of giving out hawk cries and moving around like a hawk, she speaks and behaves like a human. Nonetheless, the womanhood she represents is still set apart from that of Emer and Inguba, as her costume and movements convey an artificial, metallic feel:

> “*Her mask and clothes must suggest gold or bronze or brass or silver, so that she seems more an idol than a human being. This suggestion may be repeated in her movements. Her hair, too, must keep the metallic suggestion*” (VPl 551: 219). Cuchulain identifies the metallic light radiated from Fand with the light of the full moon:

> As when the moon, complete at last
> With every labouring crescent past,
> And lonely with extreme delight,
> Flings out upon the fifteenth night? (VPl 551: 222-25)

As Yeats explains in a note that the “invisible fifteenth incarnation is that of the greatest possible bodily beauty, and the fourteenth and sixteenth those of the greatest beauty visible to human eyes” (VPl 566), Cuchulain apparently views the immortal dancer as having obtained the perfect existence of the fifteenth phase, with her body and soul perfectly harmonized. Paradoxically, this greatest bodily beauty is disembodied, or at least not of the human body but some ethereal
material. Fand’s statement further complicates the nature of her existence: she explains to Cuchulain that she has not yet reached the perfect incarnation, “[b]ecause I long I am not complete” (VPl 551: 226). She is not incomplete due to her aloneness but due to her desire for him, and she can achieve the fifteenth phase only when she and Cuchulain consummate their relationship: “When your mouth and my mouth meet / All my round shall be complete” (VPl 555: 262-63). Theoretically, Fand already possesses immortality and an ethereal body of the fifteenth phase; her need for Cuchulain underscores a prerequisite of an antithetical male, physical force in order to obtain completion. However, this kind of union seems to contradict the pure, self-sufficient existence of the fifteenth phase; or, maybe it is all part of Fand’s trickery to seduce Cuchulain, as the Sidhe are “dexterous fishers and they fish for men / With dreams upon the hook” (VPl 549: 205-206). The ambiguity is left unresolved since Fand’s scheme is cut short by the intervention of Bricriu, god of discord, who urges Emer to renounce Cuchulain’s love in exchange for his life.

Although Emer appears to win the battle against the bird-woman-witch dancer with her virtuous self-effacement, it is Bricriu who stages the event with a self-serving agenda to frustrate his enemy Fand. Arguing that in The Only Jealousy “It is this female sexuality that must be erased from the lives and experiences of ordinary women and thus from which the ordinary woman must be in turn erased” (96), Koritz criticizes Yeats as “bent on reassuring himself that real women, human women, are not like women who dance” (100). While Yeats does differentiate the bird-woman-witch dancer from Emer and Eithne, and Emer indeed sacrifices her desire to rescue Cuchulain, Eithne’s sexuality is not negated but even triumphs over Fand’s at the end. Upon Emer’s renunciation of Cuchulain’s love, he comes back from the world of the Sidhe and cries out for the embrace of Eithne (“Your arms, your arms!”) (VPl 558: 258). In this play
the power struggle between the mortal and the immortal, and women and men grows more complicated: the god plays the puppeteer maneuvering both the mortal and the supernatural women by pitting them against each other, and the mortal man being traded as a mere commodity. The fact that Fand’s dance occurs not exactly at the climactic moment but Emer’s renunciation does also downplays Fand’s dominance in The Only Jealousy, whereas her dance in At the Hawk’s yields more controlling power over Cuchulain and the movement of the plot. The vocalizing of Fand’s desire and the counterbalancing of her power by Emer and Eithne underscore middle Yeats’s increasing emphasis on the corporeality and humanity of the dancer whether she be a supernatural or a human woman.

V.

Spinning and moving in between the realms of masculine and feminine, sexual and spiritual, life and death, middle Yeats’s solitary dancers challenge our interpretations of the body and gender by dismantling the binary operations imposed by patriarchal ideology. To read the dancers’ marginal status in Conchubar’s male-homosocial society in relation to their paramount position in Yeats’s theory of the twenty-eight incarnations enables us to map out the evolution of Yeats’s poetics and his critique of Victorian and Irish nationalist conceptions of pure womanhood. Far from being an aesthetic object on display for male consumption, Yeats’s dancer asserts her presence, transforms her identity, and voices her desire in an autonomous manner much like early modern dancers’ assertion of independence from male dancers and choreographers. Diametrically opposing the puppet-like existence of the first phase that is physically and mentally maneuvered by “some hidden magical breath” (VP 382: 13), the dancer of the fifteenth phase embodies unity of being, the state of complete self-realization in “The
Double Vision of Michael Robartes” (1919). Dancing in between a Sphinx and a Buddha, the girl seems to have “danced her life away, / For now being dead it seemed / That she of dancing dreamed” (VP 383: 22-24). In this life-in-death and death-in-life infinite moment, the human agent, the agency of dance, and the action of dancing become one unified, three-dimensional existence spinning into eternity. Both the Sphinx and the Buddha look at the girl with detached wisdom and compassion, untainted by male objectifying gaze: “O little did they care who danced between” (VP 383: 37); to them the individual agent is not important as long as the cosmic dance continues. The girl also moves in a self-sufficient style, expressing her subjectivity instead of posing herself as a seen object: “And little she by whom her dance was seen / So she had outdanced thought. / Body perfection brought” (VP 383: 38-40). Robartes, however, is unable to detach himself from sexualizing the dancer who “fling[s] into [his] meat / A crazy juice that makes the pulses beat” as though he had been undone by “Homer’s Paragon” (VP 384: 53-56).

The interlocked threads of spiritual revelation and sexual danger continue to weave themselves into Yeats’s later dance imagery, which simultaneously exposes a tension between the dancer and the spectator: while the dancer may maintain a detachment from or be unaware of her onlooker, the spectator often cannot reach the transcendent state of the Sphinx and the Buddha. Before I explore this tension between the dancing body and spectatorship in the next chapter, “Crazy Jane Looking at Salome,” I want to discuss briefly the opening poem “Michael Robartes and the Dancer” (1920) in the same-titled volume Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921) as an intersection between this chapter and the next. Thematically connected with the closing poem “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes” in The Wild Swans at Coole, “Michael Robartes and the Dancer” self-mockingly undermines Robartes’s masculine chauvinism that urges the dancer to “banish every thought” (VP 387: 48) in order to obtain bodily perfection and live in
“uncomposite blessedness” (VP 387: 46). Reiterating Yeats’s antithetical portrayals of the dancer and the intellectual woman, Robartes’s argument is challenged by the dancer’s flat, ironic voice that questions his wishful thinking with curt remarks such as: “May I not put myself to college?” (VP 385: 18); “And must no beautiful woman be / Learned like a man?” (VP 386: 25-26). As a speaking and thinking subject, she refuses to accept the no-crossing boundaries between the female body and the intellectual enterprise presumed by Robartes. Although the presence of her voice does not necessarily negate Robartes/Yeats’s sexist campaign against women engaged in intellectual or political pursuits, it complicates our interpretation and calls for a multifaceted reading of Yeats’s representations of dancers, and the tension between performing and looking at the dancing body that gradually looms large in his later works.
Chapter 3. Crazy Jane Looking at Salome:

Tension between the Dancing Body and Old Age

Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,

--Yeats “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”

Alas! There is no Fairy Child today and “I am older than the eagle cock—who
blinks and blinks on Ballygawley Hill—And he is the oldest thing under the
moon--” I really have started on the final stage of Shakespeare’s seven Ages with
hearing-sight-memory-failing... (Oh! terribly, terribly old in the morning!)\(^6\)

--Dorothy Rhodes

I.

In 1971, when she was in her late eighties, Dorothy Paget Rhodes, who played the role of the
Faery Child in The Land of Heart’s Desire in 1894, lamented the disparity between her old age
and her early role as the immortal dancer from the Country of the Young. Four decades before
this former fairy child’s lament, Yeats in his early sixties also began to express his despondency
about the increasing weight of age in poems such as “The Tower” (1925) and “Sailing to
Byzantium” (1926). Despite the fear of both physical and creative decrepitude that made him
question anxiously, “What can I but enumerate old themes?” (VP 629: 9) in “The Circus
Animals’ Desertion” (1939), late Yeats reinvented himself by resuscitating his “circus animals,”
devising fresh voices, and collaborating with dancer Ninette de Valois and actress Margot
Ruddock to put on new shows. These reflected a growing tension between the aged body and
creativity that also played out in the apocalyptical nature of Yeats’s later dance imagery,
transforming what he now deemed as the “[v]ain gaiety” of the early immortal dance in The

\(^6\) Quoted in Josephine Johnson’s “Florence Farr: Letters to W.B. Yeats, 1912-17,” Yeats and Women, 287.
Wanderings of Oisin (VP 629: 12). With the dancer spinning at the center of unity of being and unity of culture, A Vision (1925) articulates Yeats’s desire to transcend mortality by rendering the body a legible sign in the theory of the twenty-eight incarnations, and to explain the inscrutable upheavals of human history via supernatural laws where order and chaos are all part of the cosmic dance. While Yeats’s later dance emblems have received considerable scholarly attention, critics’ emphasis on the interrelation between Salome imagery and unity of being tends to dismiss the evolution of these emblems, and, as a result, to disregard the tensions and nuances accompanying that transmutation. Kermode’s observation that the dancer functions first as an embodiment of the fifteenth phase and later as a “sexual symbolism” dominant after the “Supernatural Songs” is too general (Romantic Image 59). Reading Yeats’s Salome imagery in the Symbolist-Decadent nexus, Ellis’s analyses also fail to account for the metamorphosis of that imagery from early to late. As I have argued in previous chapters, Yeats’s early dances occur to the tune of Irish nationalism and then transmute into the solitary bird-woman-witch dances of the middle works; the dancer in his later works becomes a Yeatsian Salome dancing with or before men’s severed heads—a reigning typology occupying the center stage of such plays as The King of the Great Clock Tower (1935), A Full Moon in March (1935), and The Death of Cuchulain (1939). If Sheba’s leading Solomon in Yeats’s “On Woman” stages a gender-reversal in the pas de deux, this Yeatsian Salome’s dance furthers that subversion by having the female dancer support only a synecdochic fragment of her male partner—his head. This chapter will investigate the significance of this sadistic violation of the male body and associated Yeatsian ideas about gender that remain unexplored by critics.

The prevailing violence and violation in Yeats’s later dance symbolism, juxtaposed paradoxically with the image of the dancer as the embodiment of unity of being, voices the
poet’s struggle with physical decrepitude and his reaction to early-twentieth-century warfare. The return of Herodias’s daughters and the suggestion that “[a]ll men are dancers and their tread / Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong” (VP 430: 49-58) in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” (1919) echo Yeats’s early iconography of the dancing troops of the Sidhe, but the purpose of their steps is not to free Ireland but seemingly to answer a primal call of chaos and political revolution. Meanwhile, on a personal level, a violent (and at times satirical) subversion of conventionality also takes place: old age is no longer content with repose and spirituality, but dances to the frenzied beat of desire and lust. This is especially evident in the works of the 1930s: bold startling narrative voices, like those of Crazy Jane and the Wild Old Wicked Man, profess sexual desire in old age and mixed feelings toward the dance. These voices complicate customary readings of the interwoven Yeatsian tensions between youth and old age, the body and soul, and between performing and looking at the dancing body. Though commenting on the dancer’s “double-edged” power that leads the poet either to unity of being or to an apocalyptic “danse macabre” (28), Mester does not explore the tension between that power and its implied spectator, a tension especially evident in Yeats’s Crazy Jane poems and later dance plays. Crazy Jane and several other old women and men represent both the aged poet and the aged dancer who now look (back) at young dancers and at immortals with mixed bitterness, nostalgia, desire, and exhilaration. The gender and power relations implicit between these onlookers and the dancers are often ambiguous and ambivalent. Crazy Jane’s gaze in “Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers” (1929), for instance, is curiously androgynous. The poet projects his own dream-narrative onto this female persona; and she becomes a spectator who occupies an active male position while the objects of her gaze are relegated to a passive female position of the sort that John Berger identifies in Ways of Seeing.
The Yeatsian dancer, however, is not always a passive object of a spectator’s gaze. Like the bird-woman-witch dancer, the dancing queen’s fixed stare intimidates and immobilizes the king in *The King of the Great Clock Tower*. While the queen in *A Full Moon in March* veils herself from the suitors’ view, her dropping the veil prefigures an active participation in the dance with the swineherd’s severed head. In this Salome-like dance, the boundaries between the classical body of the queen and the grotesque body of the swineherd are shattered to give birth to unity of being and unity of culture.

Stylistically, Yeats’s Salome continued to derive influence from early modern dancers Michio Ito, Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Maud Allan. Structurally, the role of dance in Yeats’s plays gradually changed from its early subordination of dancing to words to its later privileging of dance over verbal expression, something that has become more recognized and emphasized in recent revivals of his plays. Yet, on his contemporary stage, the dramatist often encountered the limitations of finding the right dancer to materialize his vision, except for Michio Ito in his middle career and Ninette de Valois later on. De Valois’s keen perception and virtuosity in modern ballet restored Yeats’s enthusiasm for the theater and brought great success to performances of *Fighting the Waves* (1929) and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*. When she left the Abbey Theatre, Yeats found himself once again frustrated by his inability to find a suitable dancer to play the role of Emer in *The Death of Cuchulain*. In this play the Old Man’s distain for Dega’s ballerinas voices Yeats’s frustration with the fissure between his own and a more prevailing vision of the dance, positioning him as an important precursor of a number of important current dancers and dance theorists.
II.

While the early Yeats’s dancing Sidhe and middle Yeats’s bird-woman-witch dancers tend to embody perfect states of being, late Yeats zooms in on processes of becoming, in which dancers engage in a perpetual struggle with their antithesis—either a spectator or a potential partner. Recalling Blake’s erotic apocalypses, where conflicting antinomies are united through physical or metaphoric intercourse, Yeats’s thinking similarly depicts progress toward unity of being as a sexual power struggle, leading toward “a reality which is concrete, sensuous, bodily” (V 214). Through the violation and assimilation of the classical body of the dancer and the grotesque body of the spectator/partner, personal and socio-political hierarchies undergo revolutionary changes through rituals of simultaneous desecration and consecration. What transpires in the amalgamation of the dancer and her antithesis also illuminates Yeats’s anxiety toward the grotesqueness and impotence of old age; the symbolic castration in Salome’s dance and the unmanning slaughter in warfare become allegories for the battle between the dancing body and old age.

In “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” this apocalyptical tumult is conveyed through the satanic iconography of Herodias’s daughters riding on the whirling winds to gather heads. Its parallel imagery—Loie Fuller’s dancers whirling long draperies and all men dancing to barbarous music—further intensifies the eerie relation between dance, eroticism, apocalypse, and warfare. Beginning with the poet’s lament for the transient nature of “ingenious lovely things” (VP 428: 1), the first section of the poem paints a gloomy picture of the “dragon-ridden” days of war and slaughter that obliterate those magnificent artifacts (VP 429: 25). The second section swerves structurally and thematically from the first section’s anxious, personal inquiry; it answers the previous dilemma with an impersonal, yet prophetic tone. In contrast to the first section’s formal
ottava rima, the second section, composed of various meters and line lengths, mimics the rise and fall of the floating cloth of Fuller’s dances (see fig. 5):

When Loie Fuller’s Chinese dancers enwound
A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,
It seemed that a dragon of air
Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
Or hurried them off on its own furious path;
So the Platonic Year
Whirls out new right and wrong,
Whirls in the old instead;
All men are dancers and their tread
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong. (VP 430: 49-58)

Contemplating dragon-ridden days, Yeats recalls the serpentine imagery created by Fuller’s dancers whirling around long draperies, which seemed to be generated by some hidden supernatural power. Like Fuller’s dancers, humanity dances to the violent beat scripted in the Platonic Year, marking simultaneously the end of the new and the return of the old. The rhythmic order inherent within chaos underlines Yeats’s conception of apocalypse, as he states in A Vision (1925): “Tragic and happy circumstance alike offer an intellectual ecstasy at the revelation of truth, and the most horrible tragedy in the end can but seem a figure in a dance” (231). In “A Prayer for My Daughter” (1919) this apocalyptic dance is anticipated with mixed apprehension and excitement: watching over his newborn daughter, the poet imagines “in excited reverie/ That the future years had come, / Dancing to a frenzied drum, / Out of the murderous innocence of the sea” (VP 403: 13-16). In The Herne’s Egg (1938) the cyclic meaningless
Fig. 5. Loie Fuller’s dance *La danse du Lys* (1900).
battles fought between Congal and Aedh are choreographed to resemble stylized movements: “The men move rhythmically as if in a dance; when swords approach one another cymbals clash; when swords and shields approach drums boom” (VPl 1012). The dancers now move to the heavy metallic beats of percussion—produced either by gong, cymbal, or drum—creating a rather different melody from that played by ethereal flute and zither in Yeats’s early works. As a new era takes shape, the inexplicable cosmic dance turns violent and its music turns jarring, which summons to mind the turmoil of warfare, especially the First World War and the Anglo-Irish War.

On a figurative level, Fuller’s dancers also pave the way for the appearance of Herodias’s daughters in the final sixth section, since Fuller viewed herself as following in the footsteps of the biblical dancers Miriam and Salome (upon seeing her serpentine dance, author Armand Silvestre commented, “I dreamed of Salome before Herod”). Fuller’s dragon of air continues to raise more whirling motion at the end of the poem, punctuated by the more sedate philosophical queries of the third, fourth, and fifth sections. In these three sections, the poet observes the dance of humanity with a cold eye and self-mockery, agonizing over the significance of individual contributions to the advancement of civilization. In the face of human and supernatural destruction, this “secret meditation” at times turns on itself, becoming a “labyrinth” in which the poet is imprisoned (VP 431: 69-70). Or, it brings about a nihilist rage “[t]o end all things, to end / What my laborious life imagined, even / The half-imagined, the half-written page” (VP 431: 81-83). In spite of its ironic mockeries, the fifth section ends with a sense of moral urgency to “[m]ock mockers” and to “lift a hand maybe / To help good, wise or great/ To bar that foul storm out” (VP 432: 108-111).

64 Quoted in Current’s Loie Fuller: Goddess of Light, 79.
Ethical inquiries soon give way to the apocalyptic vision of the sixth section, where evil forces (rather than the good, wise or great) initiate actions. Starting with a horrific vision—“Violence upon the roads: violence of horses” (VP 432: 113)—the final section mirrors and elaborates the prevailing violence associated with the Sidhe-Salome imagery of the second section. The startling announcement that “evil gathers head: Herodias’ daughters have returned again” (VP 432: 117-18) simultaneously harkens back to Yeats’s early dancing troops of the Sidhe and heralds his later Salome who demands and dances with a severed head. The imagery of “[a] sudden blast of dusty wind and after / Thunder of feet, tumult of images” (VP 433: 119-20) conflates these mythological riders with the trooping soldiers, as supernatural and military forces fling all things into the chaotic vortex of the whirlwind. The soothing breeze in The Land of Heart’s Desire and the whirling wind that awakens sexual desire and nationalist sentiment in The Wind Among the Reeds become doubly destructive in this poem. This “leveling wind” (VP 432: 97) not only annihilates monuments of intellect, but also turns the existing order into a “labyrinth” (VP 433: 121). Amidst the dusty debris, all are blinded physically and spiritually, incapable of distinguishing between the eroticism and the rage implicit within the cries of Herodias’s daughters: “And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter / All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries, / According to the wind, for all are blind” (VP 433: 122-24). The poem ends with the anecdote of Lady Kyteler’s devotion to an evil spirit Robert Artisson in the fourteenth century, which symbolizes the prevailing massive or petty evilness of the past and present in this poem. Like the poet lost in the labyrinth of his own making and those blind to the nature of Herodias’s daughters, the “love-lorn” Lady Kyteler’s devotion to the “stupid” “insolent fiend” reiterates the difficulties of comprehending an apocalyptic moment (VP 433: 127-28). Yet, the poet cannot resist envisioning regeneration after the “wind drops, dust settles” (VP 433: 128-29).
112); ultimately he sees evil and violence as part of a death-in-life and life-in-death dance that is not subject to human comprehension. The cyclic, all-encompassing nature of history prompts him to note “Are not those who travel in the whirling dust also in the Platonic Year?” (VP 433).

This conception of history as cyclic alternation between thesis (order) and antithesis (chaos) underlines Yeats’s exposition of Salome’s dance in _A Vision_ (1925): “When I think of the moment before revelation I think of Salome—she, too, delicately tinted or maybe mahogany dark—dancing before Herod and receiving the Prophet’s head in her indifferent hands, and wonder if what seems to us decadence was not in reality the exaltation of the muscular flesh and of civilization perfectly achieved (V 273). Reading against the grain, Yeats remakes the Decadent symbol Salome into a dancer of the fifteenth phase who embodies unity of being and unity of culture at the delicate transitional moment between perfection and deterioration. Building upon middle Yeats’s emphasis on corporeality, this exaltation of the muscular flesh forms the basis of unity of being, for, as the poet notes, “has not Dante compared Unity of Being, the unity of man not of God, and therefore of the antithetical tincture, to a perfectly proportioned human body?” (V 258). Not only is the perfectly proportioned body a metaphor for unity of being, it is also the foundation for unity of culture, epitomized in ancient Byzantine civilization, where “religious, aesthetic, and practical life were one” as a “lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body” (V 279). The corporeality and visibility of the human body continue to inform later Yeats’s aesthetics: “Masterpieces, whether of the stage or study, excel in their action, their visibility… Our bodies are nearer to our coherence because nearer to the ‘unconscious’ than our thought” (E 446-47). His exaltation of Salome’s muscular flesh recalls his earlier praise for the sinewy body of Michelangelo’s work in “Michael Robartes and the Dancer” (1920):
How sinew that has been pulled tight,
Or it may be loosened in repose,
Can rule by supernatural right
Yet be but sinew. (VP 386: 34-37)

Although the renowned muscular bodies of Michelangelo’s work are usually male, the examples illustrated in “Michael Robartes,” his sculptures “Night” and “Day,” are figured as female and male respectively. Almost identical in terms of their height and shape, the female figure “Night” looks like a replicate of the male body of “Day,” furnished with voluptuous breasts. With her muscular flesh similar to that of Michelangelo’s “Night,” Yeats’s Salome also takes on androgynous physical traits. By mapping unity of being and unity of culture through Salome’s muscular, dancing body, Yeats subtly complicates the phallocentric tradition of mapping the universe exclusively through the male body, exemplified in Leonardo da Vinci’s drawing “The Vitruvian Man.”

As a sexual, racial, and religious other in a primarily Christian era, Salome nonetheless stands side by side with Christ in the Yeatsian system as the epitome of physical and spiritual perfection. In A Vision, Yeats compares Salome’s dance with both the Christian Galilean revelation and the pagan deification of Roman emperors:

I see her anoint her bare limbs according to a medical prescription of that time, with lion’s fat, for lack of the sun’s ray, that she may gain the favour of a king, and remember that the same impulse will create the Galilean revelation and deify Roman Emperors whose sculptured heads will be surrounded by the solar disk. Upon the throne and upon the cross alike the myth becomes a biography. (V 273)

65 Michelangelo’s painting of Adam on the Sistine Chapel roof exemplifies the muscular male body, which Yeats describes in “Under Ben Bulben” as the “[p]rofane perfection of mankind” that “[c]an disturb globe-trotting Madam / Till her bowels are in heat” (VP 638-639).
This idea of unity of being, or “[p]rofane perfection of mankind” as Yeats describes it in “Under Ben Bulben” (VP 639: 52), nevertheless implies a male creator and a deterministic view of history. In this deterministic universe, Salome’s, Christ’s, and the Roman subjects’ impulse to gain the favor of a king, either spiritual or political, becomes a preordained action scripted by some divine will, rather than an action carried out by individual agency. From early Yeats’s reading of the Sidhe’s white, unicorn-greased, dancing bodies as incarnations of ancient Ireland to his reading of Salome’s dark, lion-greased, dancing body as an erotic-political apocalypse, we see the poet’s impulse to construe the body as a legible sign of its socio-political milieu and of a deterministic divine plan. This same impulse manifests itself in Yeats’s later works in the recurrent myths of Leda and Helen of Troy, who engender the rise and fall of civilization. Just like the dancer in “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes” who “never gave the burning town a thought” (VP 384: 57) and Helen of Troy who “desires so little, gives so little that men will die and murder in her service” (V 132-33), Salome who holds the Baptist’s head in her indifferent hands prefigures the rise of a new era. Paradoxically, this new era symbolized by Salome’s dance both parallels the rise of the Christian era and undercuts it with paganism that deifies the Roman emperors as well as Christ.

In the 1920s, Yeats’s portrayal of Salome adheres more or less to the (pseudo-) biblical narrative in which she dances before Herod and then receives the Prophet’s head; in Yeats’s later plays in the 1930s, she does not dance until she receives the head. The gender dynamic thus focuses less on Salome and the spectator (Herod) than on Salome and her dance partner (the Prophet’s head). Before exploring this intimate and complex relationship between dance partners in section III, I will first focus the discussion on earlier tensions between dancers and
spectators, tensions that become more intricate as the aged poet/spectator introduces different ways of looking at the body.

In *The Tower* (1928) this tension surfaces as the poet tries to come to terms with the deterioration of old age, displacing libido into artwork and intellect. “Monuments of unageing intellect” (VP 407: 7-8) are preferred over the sensual world of young lovers in the opening poem, “Sailing to Byzantium.” An afterlife of dancing without worries in Tir na nOg is no longer desirable; instead, the speaker prays to the holy fire to consume his heart and body away, and, like the mythical phoenician, regenerate him from the ashes as a golden bird. Yet, unlike the phoenician, the golden bird will not die and revive again, but become part of the “artifice of eternity” (VP 408: 24). In the following poem “The Tower” the poet’s rage is not so much against the human body as the decrepitude of old age, described as an “absurdity” and a “caricature” in the opening lines (VP 409: 1-2). The apparent incompatibility between passionate creativity and physical deterioration makes the poet agonize over the choice between the singing school of poetry, and the philosophical school of Plato and Plotinus. After reluctantly asking the Muse to go pack, he holds on to the “mighty memories” of the “[o]ld lecher” Hanrahan (VP 413: 104-105), whose expertise in dance and sexuality will be resurrected in later poems in the personas of Crazy Jane and the Wild Old Wicked Man. Written in the same year as the publication of *The Tower*, Yeats’s essay “The Censorship and St. Thomas Aquinas,” however, disapproves of “the Platonizing theology of Byzantium,” the kind of philosophical school he advocates earlier in “Sailing” and reluctantly chooses in “The Tower” (Uncoll2 478). Protesting against the Censorship of Publication Bill that would prohibit “indecent” works “calculated to excite sexual passion,” his essay deliberately promotes “an art of the body” exemplified in Michelangelo’s work (Uncoll2 477, 479). In contrast to the art of the body, the
Byzantine artifice of eternity is described in an unfavorable light: “The mosaics of the Apse
displayed a Christ with face of pitiless intellect, or a pinched, flat-breasted virgin holding a child
like a wooden doll. Nobody can stray into that little Byzantium chapel at Palermo...without for
an instant renouncing the body and all its works” (Uncoll2 478). This preference for the body
over Byzantine artworks prepares the reader for the exultation of the dancing body in the next
poem “Among School Children.”

The much-ridiculed aged body reappears toward the middle of the volume in “Among School
Children” (1926) as an “old scarecrow” (VP 444: 32), a sixty-year-old public man, who smiles at
the schoolchildren and evaluates their learning environment. In the second stanza, the speaker
becomes introspective, drifting from the schoolchildren to muse over “a Ledaean body” known
in his youth (VP 443: 9). In the third stanza, this inner vision is punctuated by the presence of a
schoolgirl who evokes past and present images of Maud Gonne as an innocent child and an
emaciated woman, along with images of the poet’s own youth and old age. The progression
from these reveries to the poem’s famous epiphany poses intriguing questions about the identity
of the anonymous dancer in the final stanza, and about the relation between the dancer and the
poet/spectator. In these reveries, the female body occupies a problematic territory highly
susceptible to violence and sexual domination: the Ledaean body recalls the rape in “Leda and
the Swan” (1924), the schoolgirl is innocent and vulnerable, and the old Maud Gonne is literally
wasted away by abstract thinking. Only by transporting Gonne back to her childhood does the
poet feel attracted to her image again: “And thereupon my heart is driven wild: / She stands
before me as a living child” (VP 444: 23-24). This alleged father-daughter relation juxtaposed
with that between the stepfather Herod and the stepdaughter Salome brings out some Freudian
issues that complicate our reading of spectatorship. Maybe the thought of this alleged relation
disconcerts the poet so that he subconsciously alters it in the fifth and seventh stanzas into a mother’s anticipation and admiration for her son, and the nun’s worship of the Son. This purifying process is sublimated in the final stanza where personal images and relations are distilled into a universal poetic affirmation of unity of being:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (VP 445-46: 57-64)

At this moment of exultation, the poet/spectator glimpses a higher state of consciousness that transcends Michael Robartes’s sexualized chivalric view of the dancer, and approximates the detached wisdom of the Buddha and the Sphinx in “The Double Vision.” In this visionary world, dualism between the body and soul dissolves, and all components coexist as one unified organism. Existence is transported back to the pre-fallen Edenic state where labor does not denote drudgery. Here labor is part of a harmonized existence, dancing gracefully and blossoming naturally into the tree of knowledge and life. Condensed from the images of Gonne, the schoolgirl, and all the mythological and human dancers that Yeats ever encountered or invented, the anonymous de-gendered dancer becomes a larger-than-life symbol that temporarily redeems the poet’s physical inadequacy and the harsh reality surrounding the schoolchildren. This euphoric vision, however, does not permanently cancel out the poet’s struggle with old age,
nor does it alleviate the gloomy reality facing the Irish schoolchildren. As Stephen Coote comments, “The Ireland in which Yeats’s schoolchildren were growing up was far removed from such ecstasy” (486). After investigating St Otteran’s School in 1926, Yeats noted what was to become the subject matter of “Among School Children”: “Topic for poem. Schoolchildren, and the thought that life will waste them, perhaps that no possible life can fulfil their own dreams or even their teacher’s hope.”

Spurred by this discrepancy between the reality of children’s education in Ireland and his vision of unity of being, Yeats avidly advocated in his Senate speeches an improvement of the learning environment and an education that always placed the child before any ideological concerns (SS 112).

Yeats’s next collection of poems, The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933) further explores unity of being and unity of culture by dramatizing dialogue between the body and soul, youth and old age, rebirth and deliverance, and dance and spectatorship. Physical and psychological inadequacy is the center of much agonizing contemplation in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (1927), as My Self recounts the toil of growing up:

The ignominy of boyhood; the distress
Of boyhood changing into man;
The unfinished man and his pain
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness; (VP 478-79: 45-48).

While My Soul advocates a final deliverance from the cycle of rebirths, My Self prefers to “live it all again” (VP 479: 57) despite life’s difficulties, love’s frustrations, and old age’s sufferings. This cyclic process of birth, old age, death, and reincarnation is best expressed through the movement of dance, as the speaker comments in “Mohini Chatterjee” (1929), “Birth-hour and death-hour meet, / Or, as great sages say, / Men dance on deathless feet” (VP 496: 17-28). The

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66 Quoted in Stephen Coote’s W. B. Yeats: A Life, 486.
theme of regeneration out of or through decay features prominently in Yeats’s later works: from consuming the body away with holy fire to dancing on deathless feet, the motif of reincarnation is entwined with issues of the body, gender, and sexuality. “Byzantium” (1930) repeats the imagery of the golden bird and the purgatorial fire of “Sailing to Byzantium,” yet its vision gestures toward regeneration instead of renunciation. This process becomes the focal point in the fourth stanza, where the “blood-begotten spirits” are “[d]ying into a dance, / An agony of trance, / An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve” (VP 498: 30-32). Unlike the tangible fire in “Sailing” that burns away the body and remakes it into the artifice of eternity, the fire in “Byzantium” is immaterial, purifying the agony of the spirits from both within and without. When composing “Byzantium,” Yeats might have been inspired by a Noh play where a girl’s ghost is consumed by the flames of her conscience, and which ends with “the dance of her agony” (V 231). In a letter to Olivia Shakespear, he defined the four ages of man and civilization as “First age, earth, vegetative functions. Second age, water, blood, sex. Third age, air, breath, intellect. Fourth age, fire, soul” (L 826); the dance of fire thus signifies a final purgation of the soul and civilization. Upon “[m]arbles of the dancing floor” (VP 498: 36), the impure “complexities of mire or blood” (VP 498: 24) are broken and purified through a ritual dance.

The purgatorial fire in “Byzantium” may draw some of its imagery from Fuller’s “Fire Dance” (“La Danse du feu”) (1897), which manipulated fabrics and lights to emulate the effect of fire and of being consumed by flames (Current 99). According to Kermode’s reading of Fuller’s dances, her “progressive extinction of the dancing body was a necessary component of her success as an emblem of the Image, out of nature. The imagination of the spectator fed upon her, independently of what she intended” (“Poet” 159). Kermode’s theory, like Mallarme’s, insists
on the disappearance of the dancing body as the hallmark of a symbolist and modernist aesthetics of impersonality that assigns hermeneutic power to the act of looking instead of to dancing. In Yeats’s works, however, the act of looking at and interpreting the dance does not always occupy such a comfortably unchallenged position.

Crazy Jane’s gazing at and reading of the dancing pair in “Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers,” for instance, is saturated with anxiety, ambivalence, and sexual tension:

I found that ivory image there
Dancing with her chosen youth,
But when he wound her coal-black hair
As though to strangle her, no scream
Or bodily movement did I dare,
Eyes under eyelids did so gleam;

*Love is like the lion’s tooth.* (VP 514: 1-7)

This opening stanza intriguingly echoes the murder scene in Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” (1834):

. . . . . all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
The psychotic self-assurance of Porphyria’s lover, however, is downplayed by the presence of an onlooker-speaker in Yeats’s poem, yet the tension and suspense increase since Crazy Jane is unable to tell whether the dancers’ movements constitute an act of affection or murder. This prevailing ambivalence inherent within the triangular relation between the old female spectator and the dancing pair resembles Yeats’s struggle with his position as an onlooker in a dream recorded in a letter (March 2, 1929) to Olivia Shakespear:

Last night I saw in a dream strange ragged excited people singing in a crowd. The most visible were a man and woman who were I think dancing. The man was swinging round his head a weight at the end of a rope or leather thong, and I knew that he did not know whether he would strike her dead or not, and both had their eyes fixed on each other, and both sang their love for one another, I suppose it was Blake’s old thought ‘sexual love is founded upon spiritual hate.’ (L 758)

The materialization of this dream vision into words underwent substantial revisions, however, especially in the opening stanza. In the earliest draft Yeats began the poem with a prosaic recounting of his dream, “I dreamed & saw them dancing there / Love is like the flower of the lily / Some Some sort of ancient Indian dance.”

Although in later versions Yeats left out the reference to some ancient Indian dance and to the violent dance in his dream, David Clark rightly observes the influence of the “apache dance” that originated in the Paris of the 1880s on Yeats’s composition. Depicting a domestic fight between two men and a woman, this dance derived its name from the supposed ferociousness of the Apache Indians. With the female dancer “strenuously embraced” and “thrown roughly all over the place,” this dance was characterized by

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68 Ibid., xxxviii.
69 Dance History Archives <http://www.streetswing.com>
macho displays of violence and domination, which at times resulted in the deaths of women dancers due to broken backs and necks.\textsuperscript{70}

In the second stanza Yeats rewrites his dream narrative by staging the female dancer, instead of the male, as the one who draws a knife “to strike him dead” (VP 514: 8-10). This alteration not only makes the pair’s relation egalitarian, equally active and fatal, but also reverses the gender dynamics of the original Apache dance (in Yeats’s poem, the female dancer’s motion of drawing the knife reflects a more masculine role than the male dancer’s act of strangulation). The tension again builds around the ambivalent motivation between play and murder, love and hate. Upon witnessing both acts of play/murder, Crazy Jane does not dare to stir, scream, or intervene; she chooses to be a silent outsider/accomplice and leaves it to fate. Considered in relation to the fact that Yeats decided to erase his presence by substituting a female persona in later drafts, the position Crazy Jane occupies in this poem raises questions pertaining to the nature of her spectatorship. According to John Berger’s study of visual communication in \textit{Ways of Seeing}, the female body in the visual arts is usually presented in ways that reinsure the dominance and ownership of the male spectator/patron, and when a woman looks, she looks at herself being looked at by the implied male spectator. In other words, there is no authentic “female gaze,” but always an internalized male gaze masquerading as female. In “How do women look?” Rosemary Betterton points out the same dilemma: “woman as spectator is offered the dubious satisfaction of identification with the heterosexual masculine gaze, voyeuristic, penetrating and powerful. This may offer the pleasure of power and control, but at the expense of negating women’s own experience and identity;” on the other hand, “women’s pleasure is bound up with a narcissistic identification with the image of the female body, usually shown to be desirable but passive” (219). In “The Father’s Seduction,” Jane Gallop also insists on the

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
interchangeability between oculocentrism (the privileging of sight over other senses) and phallocentrism (415). Her introduction of pleasure (that is largely ignored by phallocentric theory), however, provides a useful non-essentialist mode for analyzing spectatorship: “A consideration of pleasure would introduce a few nuances in the theory (‘nuanee,’ from nue, cloud). A consideration of pleasure might cloud the theory, cloud the view, reduce its ability to penetrate with clarity, to appropriate” (421). What transpires then in Crazy Jane’s look at the dancing pair? Is her look a simple disguising of the male poet/spectator’s, or does it cloud that view and in some way validate her experience and identity as a woman? In the first two stanzas, her voyeuristic pleasure is presented as a sadomasochistic fascination with a display of passion and fatality, rather than as an objectifying gaze. The penetrating phallic power traditionally assigned to the spectator is only tentative, since Jane’s attempt to comprehend the duet dance is constantly clouded by anxiety and ambiguity. The questions presented in the third stanza reinforce that ambivalence: “Did he die or did she die? / Seemed to die or died they both?” (VP 514: 15-16). The concluding lines, however, transform Jane from a passive spectator to an active would-be participant in the dance:

God be with the times when I
Cared not a thranen for what chanced
So that I had the limbs to try
Such a dance as there was danced. (VP 514-15: 17-20)

In spite of threats of violence and death, Jane yearns for her corporeal presence in the dance instead of watching passively. While this desire may not constitute her as an entirely authentic female spectator, it allows her to avoid seeing in the manner of a male gaze that relegates the female body into a desirable yet passive object of desire.
Read in the context of the series of Crazy Jane poems, Jane’s desire to join the dance also validates her advocacy of old women’s sexuality and her experience as an Irish peasant woman. Composed later but placed right before “Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers” in Words for Music Perhaps, “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop” (1931) stages a debate between Jane and the bishop, who chastises her desire and insists that only a religious life suits an old woman’s “flat and fallen” breasts (VP 513: 3). Jane retorts, “Fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair needs foul” (VP 513: 7-8)—a truth “[l]earned in bodily lowliness / And in the heart’s pride” (VP 513: 11-12). Jane’s insistence on the codependence of fairness and foulness later becomes a central theme in Yeats’s play A Full Moon in March, where the fair classical dancer is simultaneously repelled by and attracted to the foul grotesque swineherd. Jane goes on to celebrate excrement and defilement in a way that pokes fun at the classical mode of bodily representation as an enclosed whole:

‘A woman can be proud and stiff

When on love intent;

But Love has pitched his mansion in

The place of excrement;

For nothing can be sole or whole

That has not been rent.’ (VP 513: 13-18)

Coming from an Irish peasant woman, the bawdy celebration of defecation and copulation coincides with what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as “grotesque realism” in Francois Rabelais’s work (18). Just as Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais’s body politics registers his revolt against authoritarian Stalinism, Yeats’s use of folk material and Rabelaisian poetics articulates his rebellion against “a monologic and humorless version of Irish postcolonial identity as Gaelic,
Catholic, and sexually pure,” imposed by conservative bourgeois politicians and clergy. The “proud and stiff” phallic image places Crazy Jane in the company of the powerful androgynous bird-woman-witch dancer of Yeats’s middle plays, and opens the way for the audacious lewd peasant women and men of his later works. The anonymous female speaker in “Consolation” (1927), for instance, sounds very much like Crazy Jane’s predecessor in her candid preference of sexual pleasure over wisdom:

O but there is wisdom
In what the sages said;
But stretch that body for a while
And lay down that head
Till I have told the sages
Where man is comforted. (VP 534: 1-6)

Contrary to the proud bawdiness in this final version, the earliest draft of this poem reveals a relatively modest and suppressed tone: “Till I have murmured in your ears / Where life is comforted.” Yet, compared with “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop,” the final version of “Consolation” is already less graphic in reference to genitalia.

His increasingly explicit language charts the evolution of Yeats’s attitudes toward the aged body and sexuality. This is especially evident in the progression from suppressing to articulating old men’s desire. Written around the same time as “Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers,” “Those Dancing Days are Gone” (1929) reads like a sarcastic reply from an old man to Jane’s desire to join the dance:

Come, let me sing into your ear;

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Those dancing days are gone,
All that silk and satin gear;
Crouch upon a stone,
Wrapping that foul body up
In as foul a rag: (VP 524-25: 1-6)

Like the bishop, the old man urges the old woman to relinquish her dancing days, and to rest her foul body in an appropriate cultural and social setting. The tone is especially bitter in the earliest draft, where the narrator describes the old woman as a “sorry crone” whose “old carcass” is no longer dressed up in a ballroom gown but covered up in a foul rag. This contemptuous portrayal of the aged body mirrors the old man’s self-mocking condescension:

A man may put pretence away
Who leans upon a stick,
May sing, and sing until he drop,
Whether to maid or hag: (VP 525: 19-22)

Recalling the speaker’s self-portrayal in “Sailing to Byzantium” as “[a] tattered coat upon a stick” and his denunciation of the youthful sensual music, the old man in this poem privileges wisdom and words over sensuality and dance. In “After Long Silence” (1929) “the supreme theme of Art and Song” also dominates the elderly lovers’ conversations (VP 523: 6): “Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young / We loved each other and were ignorant” (VP 523: 7-8). But the vanished libido of such old men resurfaces notably in New Poems (1938), where dance and erotic energy invigorate Yeats’s characterization of old male personas. This renewal of poetic creativity, as critics have observed, sprang from two important events in 1934: in April, Yeats underwent the Steinach rejuvenation operation that restored his sexual competency; in

73 Words for Music Perhaps and Other Poems: Manuscript Materials, 507.
September he met the actress Margot Ruddock whose looks and voice captivated the poet’s imagination, and who later played the speaking part of the dancing queen in *A Full Moon in March* (ASD 23). Both poems “Sweet Dancer” (1937) and “A Crazed Girl” (1937) foreground the passion and madness Yeats associated with Ruddock’s image as a dancer and a poet—“That crazed girl improvising her music, / Her poetry, dancing upon the shore, / Her soul in division from itself” (VP 578: 1-3). In this crazed dancing figure, Yeats rediscovers “[a] beautiful lofty thing, or a thing / Heroically lost, heroically found” (VP 578: 1-8) that brings to mind his praise for Maud Gonne in “His Phoenix.” Juxtaposed to this tribute to Ruddock’s passion and classical beauty is an unlikely, yet indispensable, celebration of the antithetical Rabelaisian bawdiness in “The Wild Old Wicked Man.” Rejected by a religious devotee, the wild old wicked man sends her away and turns to prostitutes “[w]ho understand the dark; / Bawdy talk for the fishermen; / A dance for the fisher-lads” (VP 588-89: 31-33). The short four-line poem “The Spur” (1936) anticipates and replies to a reader’s condemnation of the wild old wicked man’s outrageous licentiousness:

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attention upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young;
What else have I to spur me into song?” (VP 591: 1-4)

Yeats exclaims that the exuberant energies of lust and rage are exactly what the old poet needs for creating poetry. The concluding rhetorical question subverts conventional associations of old age with decrepitude and resignation, and leads us to redefine the boundaries between fairness and foulness, and the classical and grotesque modes of bodily representations. Utilizing the Bakhtinian concepts of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford’s
Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry has provided me with a methodology for analyzing late Yeats’s poetry. My following section intends to build upon her groundbreaking study of Yeats’s body politics and to extend the discussions to his later plays.

III.

Yeats’s later plays center on the relationship between “fair” female dancers with bodies recalling those attributed to such dancers by the classical ballet and the “foul” or grotesque bodies of their male partners (and of Yeats’s implied spectators). The socio-political implications of this antithesis between fairness and foulness are also depicted in the relationship between the apathetic queen and the semi-savage in The King of the Great Clock Tower (1935), and between the cruel queen and the swineherd in A Full Moon in March (1935). Both plays dramatize the convergence of such antitheses in Salome-like dances, with the result of an overturned hierarchy between the classical and the grotesque modes. Cruel with whimsical desire, these queens dance with severed heads and thus resemble Salome holding John the Baptist’s head. Yeats’s Salome, however, does not dance to please Herod in order to get her end of the bargain nor does she demand the head for vengeance. If Wilde’s Salome, as Dijkstra points out, dramatizes “the struggle between the bestial hunger of woman and the idealistic yearnings of man” (396), Yeats’s Salome (as Dijkstra does not point out) reverses that association of woman with the body and man with soul by staging the dancer as a virginal queen and the man as a semi-savage or foul swineherd. To use Bakhtin’s terminology, the self-contained enclosed body of the queen indicates the classical mode of bodily representation while the semi-savage and the swineherd exemplify the grotesque mode that celebrates bodily orifices and excrement as the fertilizer of life (18-31). The essentialist associations (either of woman
with the grotesque and man with the classical, or vice versa), however, are called into questions in Yeats’s plays. While the earlier Yeatsian dancer is associated with the self-sufficient perfection of the fifteenth phase in his theory of twenty-eight incarnations, that ethereal existence no longer suffices in his later plays. In The Only Jealousy of Emer, Yeats has already begun to voice a need to reclaim the physical realm for the spiritual through Fand’s seduction of Cuchulain; while Cuchulain identifies her as having obtained the perfect incarnation, Fand explains that she is not complete because she still desires him. Fand’s longing is further elucidated as a desire for “desecration and the lover’s night,” as Yeats’s puts it in A Full Moon in March (VPl 989: 185). Or, in Harold Bloom’s words, “Yeats overtly chooses the grotesque as creative mode” to produce apocalyptical parody in The King, A Full Moon, and The Herne’s Egg (421). Depicted in a hyperbolic pornotropic style, the queen’s dance with the severed head enacts a ritual of simultaneous desecration and consecration. This Salome-like dance signifies the breaking down and merging together of the antithetical forces between the classical and grotesque modes, and high and low social classes at the moment of spiritual or political revolution.

The King of the Great Clock Tower (1935) foregrounds the tension between the spectator and the dancer, and the classical and the grotesque, through the triangular struggle between the king, the queen, and the stroller. Closely associated with the linear conception of time and mortality, the king of the great clock tower is predestined to fail in the task of becoming the queen’s partner, who, as the opening song suggests, comes from the changeless realm of Tir-nan-oge where “every lover is a happy rogue; / … No thought has he, and therefore has no words, / No thought because no clock” (VPI 991: 2-5). The beginning stage direction also indicates that the dramatic conflict is centered on the polar oppositions of the queen and the stroller: “The Queen
should wear a beautiful impassive mask; the Stroller a wild half-savage mask. It should cover the upper part of his face, the lower part being hidden by his red beard” (VPl 991). Like Salome receiving the Prophet’s head in her indifferent hands in A Vision, the queen is portrayed as an indifferent mysterious woman who wandered into the king’s court one day and was crowned as queen, but never spoke to him or anyone. Evoking both the ivory image of the female dancer in “Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers” and the death-in-life and life-in-death figure in “Byzantium,” the king’s description of her as “an image made of wood or metal, / A screen between the living and the dead” foreshadows the final moment of revelation (VPl 993: 26).

Antithetical to the queen’s virginal beauty, the stroller—a poet, dancer, and semi-savage—recalls the image of Red Hanrahan as a master in poetry, dance, and sexuality. Having received a prophecy from Aengus (the Gaelic god of love) that the queen will dance to him, he will sing, and they will kiss, the stroller has left his wife and come to see the queen whose beauty he has been praising in lyrics (VPl 997).

Infuriated by the stroller’s audacious proclamation and frustrated by the queen’s indifferent silence, the king orders the guard to behead the stroller and implores the queen to revenge the stroller’s insult:

A stroller and a fool, a rambling rogue
That has insulted you, laugh, dance or sing,
Do something, anything, I care not what
So that you move—but why those staring eyes? (VPl 999: 103-106)

The queen’s gaze unnerves the king, but she finally breaks the silence and starts to sing in a puzzling manner:

He longs to kill
My body, until
That sudden shudder
And limbs lie still (VPi 1001: 111-14).

The ambiguous pronoun “he” can refer to either the king or the stroller, which makes the sudden shudder allude either to the king’s murdering intent or an anticipated intercourse with the stroller. It also evokes the rape scene in “Leda and the Swan”—depicted as “a sudden blow” and “[a] shudder in the loins”—that links political apocalypse with sexual violence and monstrous insemination (VP 441: 1, 9). The queen continues to sing,

    O, what may come
    Into my womb,
    What caterpillar
    My beauty consume?

The thought of being impregnated by the stroller terrifies the queen, who will metaphorically consume him in order to give birth to a new life. As the caterpillar metaphor implies, for the queen to transform into the final stage of existence like a butterfly, she must not only renounce her virginal body but also assimilate the stroller’s grotesque body. The king, however, cannot comprehend her words; instead, he lays the head of the stroller upon the throne and coerces the head to sing. The queen, as prophesied by the divinity, begins to dance. The king insists on misreading her dance as a mockery of the stroller: “Dance, turn him into mockery with a dance! … Dance, give him scorn for scorn, / Display your beauty, spread your peacock tail” (VPi 1001: 122-27). Blinded by his authoritarianism, the king perceives her movement as dictated by his instructions, not knowing that he is a spectator without any power to interfere. The queen then dances with the severed head by placing it upon her shoulder; it starts to sing, foretelling the
consummation between the living and the dead—“Crossed fingers there in pleasure can / Exceed
the nuptial bed of man” (VPl 1003: 138-39). After the finish of this song, the queen begins to
dance again, the clock strikes, and she kisses the lips of the head at the final stroke. At this point,
the king finally comprehends the meaning of her dance and draws his sword to kill her, but she
“lays the head upon her breast, and fixes her eyes upon him. He appears about to strike, but
kneels, laying the sword at her feet” (VPl 1003: 151). Though dismembered and fragmented, the
stroller’s body miraculously outgrows itself in death and permeates the enclosed boundaries of
the queen’s body through dance and a kiss.

This myth of regeneration through dismemberment and death preoccupied old Yeats, who
explained to Olivia Shakespear that The King of the Great Clock Tower deals with the moment
of “the slain god, the risen god” delineated in the “resurrection of Christ and Dionysus” (L 826).
Juxtaposing the Dionysian pageant to revive the god with the moment of Christ’s resurrection,
Yeats’s play The Resurrection (1931) lays out the paradoxical idea of unity of being as
simultaneously a perfectly proportioned human body and a semi-mythical body resurrected from
its fragments. The opening song depicts the death of Dionysus followed by the violation of his
body—his heart being torn away by Athena—that becomes the source of his resurrection as a
star (VPl 903). To reenact this ritual of rebirth, his followers drink blood from a goat torn into
pieces (VPl 905: 27) and dress themselves as women for the sake of “self-abandonment” (VPl
915: 173-74). This ritual climaxes in an orgiastic dance: “Though the music has stopped, some
men are still dancing, and some of the dancers have gashed themselves with knives . . . a man
and woman are coupling in the middle of the street. She thinks the surrender to some man the
dance threw into her arms may bring her god back to life” (VPl 915: 177-84). Either through
self-inflicted pain or erotic pleasure, the spectacle feeds on the individual body and at the same
time the subjugation of that body to supernatural power. Upon witnessing this display, the Greek (one of Christ’s disciples) comments disparagingly, “I cannot think all that self-surrender and self-abasement is Greek, despite the Greek name of its god” (VPl 917: 223-25). By condemning their self-abandonment and transvestism as female, foreign, and monstrous, the Greek dismisses the Dionysian power as a mere grotesque body of collective otherness: “All are from the foreign quarter, to judge by face and costume, and are the most ignorant and excitable class of Asiatic Greeks, the dregs of the population. Such people suffer terribly and seek forgetfulness in monstrous ceremonies” (VPl 915: 187-89). Recalling the mystical dance aimed at evoking the Sidhe and Eros in “Rosa Alchemica,” this dance, also composed of “some kind of ancient step” (VPl 927: 359-60), grows quicker and quicker upon the proclamation that “God has arisen!” (VPl 927: 353). The god that has been resurrected by the Dionysian ritual is Christ whose corporeal presence unsettles all his disciples: the incredulous Greek reaches out to touch Christ’s body only to find that “[t]he heart of a phantom is beating!” (VPl 929: 392-93). The Greek’s shock and dismay parallels that of the king of the great clock tower at the sight of a singing severed head. Deriving from his belief that “my Christ, a legitimate deduction from the Creed of St. Patrick as I think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body” (E&I 518), Yeats’s rather literal and heretical treatment of the resurrection insists on Christ’s corporeal presence as a perfectly proportioned body like that of Salome and as a revival of the Dionysian myth. Anticipating hostility from orthodox Christians, Yeats instructed that The Resurrection should be performed in a drawing room like his dance plays since “its subject-matter might make it unsuited for the public stage in England or in Ireland” (VPl 901).

The King of the Great Clock Tower not only draws on the myths of Dionysus’s and Christ’s rebirths, but also interweaves them with the conception of Christ in the Virgin Mary’s womb by
the Holy Spirit and Leda’s rape by the swan. In the second story line of insemination or rape by divinities, the female body becomes a register of ambivalent sexual purity and transgression. Like the Virgin Mary and Leda, the queen of the great clock tower functions as a conduit through which the divinity fulfils his will or prophecy. In this deterministic universe, individuality is only a matter of allegory:

THE KING. What is your name?

THE STROLLER. Enough that I am called
A stroller and a fool, that you are called
King of the Great Clock Tower. (VPl 995: 32-34)

The stroller cannot escape the fate of decapitation, nor can the queen decline the dance with his severed head. The question of agency gives way to the question of how much one is allowed to share with the knowledge and power of the divinity, as Yeats speculates in “Leda and the Swan”: “Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” (VP 441: 13-14). Read in this light, the queen and the stroller are relatively superior instruments than the king, and consequently more capable of putting on the divine knowledge and power. Like the bird-woman-witch dancer in At the Hawk’s Well, the queen’s gaze (either out of her own or the divine will) intimidates and immobilizes the king who has no choice but to surrender the sword, symbolic of his masculinity. The spectacle of her embracing the severed head (which looks like a bizarre mating ritual of biting off and consuming the head of her partner) also links her closely to the Decadent dancer Salome. Commenting on the queen’s dance with the severed head, Yeats states, “In attempting to put that story into a dance play I found that I had gone close to Salome’s dance in Wilde’s play. But in his play the dance is before the head is cut off” (VPl 1010). The different timing of Salome’s dance in Wilde’s and Yeats’s plays suggests that the
focus shifts from the relationship between Salome and the spectator (Herod) to that between the dancer and her dance partner (the Prophet’s head). While the Wildean Salome dances to manipulate Herod into promising her the Prophet’s head, the Yeatsian Salome dances with a severed head according to her scripted role in the divine plan.

In a letter (August 1934) to Olivia Shakespear, Yeats again expressed joyful contentment with his innovation of Salome’s dance and the reception of The King:

> It has proved most effective—it was magnificently acted and danced. It is more original than I thought it, for when I looked up Salome I found that Wilde’s dancer never danced with the head in her hands—her dance came before the decapitation of the saint and is a mere uncovering of nakedness. My dance is a long expression of horror and fascination…

> It has turned out the most popular of my dance plays. (L 826-27)

A significant part of this success was attributed to the performance of Irish dancer Ninette de Valois, for whom Yeats rewrote The King into a verse version in 1935 and to whom he dedicated the play. Born in County Wicklow, Ireland, where the housemaid taught her the first steps of Irish jig, Ninette de Valois later joined Diaghilev’s renowned Ballets Russes in 1923, and was recruited by Yeats when he saw her working as the choreographer in the 1927 revival of On Baile’s Strand at the Cambridge Festival Theater. Before seeing it, Yeats did not have high expectations for this adaptation, with “[t]he fool and blind man masked, and elaborate dancing of the witches and strange lighting,” and thought it would be a “bore” (L 721-22). Nonetheless, the performance clearly impressed the dramatist, who later invited de Valois to found a school of ballet at the Abbey and perform in his Four Plays for Dancers (de Valois 104). This decision proved to be a watershed event in restoring Yeats’s faith in dance plays. After finishing Four

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74 The dedication reads, “TO NINETTE DE VALOIS ASKING PARDON FOR COVERING HER EXPRESSIVE FACE WITH A MASK” (VPl 991).
75 See de Valois’s memoirs Come Dance with Me.
Plays for Dancers (1921), and certainly after the Japanese dancer Michio Ito left for New York, Yeats almost forwent the idea of writing dance plays, since it was extremely difficult to materialize the kind of dance he envisioned for his plays: “Should I make a serious attempt, which I may not, being rather tired of the theatre, to arrange and supervise performances, the dancing will give me most trouble, for I know but vaguely what I want. I do not want any existing form of stage dancing, but…something more reserved, more self-controlled” (Four Plays 88). De Valois would be the only dancer able to accomplish Yeats’s vision of the statuesque style exemplified in Ito’s performances.\(^76\) After collaborating with de Valois on At the Hawk’s Well, Yeats was once again beaming with renewed enthusiasm for the theater; he addressed the designer and composer Edmund Dulac in a dedication: “I saw my Hawk’s Well played by students of our Schools of Dancing and of Acting a couple of years ago in a little theatre called ‘The Peacock,’ … [seeing] that Guardian of the Well, with your great golden wings and dancing to your music, I had one of those moments of excitement that are the dramatist’s reward” (VP 831).

Premiered at the Abbey Theatre on August 13, 1929, Fighting the Waves, a prose version of The Only Jealousy of Emer, also enjoyed an immense success. Besides the initial climatic dance of Fand, this new version both starts and ends with dances to showcase de Valois’s dancers, Dulac’s masks, and George Antheil’s music (VPI 567). Depending mostly on the dances for theatricality and for portraying the characters’ psychological interiors, this production of Fighting the Waves foreshadowed the recent trend of reproducing Yeats’s plays by translating verbal descriptions of dances into visual presentations onstage.\(^77\) In this play Cuchulain’s madness is aptly portrayed in dance moves that show him battling against waves that are also

\(^76\) In her memoirs de Valois states, “I was the first to achieve this distinction after Mr. Itow—and I even succeeded in wearing his costume” in At the Hawk’s Well (105).

\(^77\) Discussions of recent revivals of Yeats’s plays can be found in my coda.
represented by dancers. In his crazed mind, they are not waves but figures of his enemy,

Conchubar: “A man wearing the Cuchulain mask enters from one side with sword and shield. He dances a dance which represents a man fighting the waves. The waves may be represented by other dancers” (Vpl 530). Using dancers to symbolize waves and Cuchulain’s frenzy, the opening dance anticipates techniques later used by expressionists and modern dancers such as Martha Graham. The finale also enhances Fand’s human emotions through a dance that “expresses her despair for the loss of Cuchulain” (Vpl 564). The detailed stage directions reflect the influence of de Valois’s virtuosity in modern ballet and choreography on Yeats’s layout of the dance scene: “As before there may be other dancers who represent the waves. It is called, in order to balance the first dance, ‘Fand mourns among the waves.’ It is essentially a dance which symbolizes, like water in the fortune-telling books, bitterness. As she takes her final pose of despair the Curtain falls” (Vpl 564). These innovative dance scenes generated a warm reception for Fighting the Waves. The most excited person was probably Yeats himself; in a letter to Shakespear (August 24, 1929) he stated, “Everyone here is as convinced as I am that I have discovered a new form by this combination of dance, speech and music. The dancing of the goddess in her abstract almost non-representative mask was extraordinarily exciting” (L 767-68). After more than three decades of laboring and struggling with snide criticism, the dramatist had indeed come a long way from his early, unfavorably received The Land of Heart’s Desire (1894) to the aesthetic triumph and public success of his later plays, which were made possible by de Valois’s dance techniques and choreography. As a collaborator, de Valois was highly perceptive of Yeats’s artistic vision; in an interview she told G. M. Pinciss,

Yeats in rehearsal was searching for a style to suit his language and his inspiration, and for me it was only a question of understanding what had inspired him and then letting the same
feeling and approach inspire me… I would sit on a chair on the stage in *The King of the Great Clock Tower* for the best part of fifteen minutes behind a mask but one had to feel something, one had to have a certain reaction to what was happening on the stage. (390) Contrary to being an unthinking vehicle of a male-prophesied plan in a male-authored play, de Valois, while trying to fit into the scripted role, was in charge of the choreography and of her interpretation of the role.

Yeats continued to collaborate with de Valois on his next play, *A Full Moon in March* (1935), a revision of *The King* that furnished the queen’s role with a speaking part for the actress Margot Ruddock to act in.78 (Since de Valois did not have any training in acting, she declined to act the speaking part). By specifying that “When the inner curtain rises for the second time the player who has hitherto taken the part of the Queen is replaced by a dancer” (VPl 978), Yeats solved the technical problem of having Ruddock act in the first part and de Valois dance in the coda. Whereas in *The King* the second attendant is the surrogate of the queen’s singing voice, the agency of the queen increases in *A Full Moon* since the audience can hear the queen’s direct speaking voice. In a letter (11 Oct 1934) to Ruddock, Yeats expressed his contentment with *A Full Moon* as a superior play than *The King*: “The old version of the play is bad because abstract and incoherent. This version is poignant and simple—lyrical dialogue all simple” (ASD 23).

*A Full Moon in March* is more than a stylistic revision of *The King*; it intensifies the sadomasochistic relation between the dancer and the spectator/partner by editing out the role of the king and by polarizing the differences between the queen and the swineherd. Opening with a song about “the dung of the swine” sung by the attendants (VPl 979: 10), *A Full Moon* is verbally littered with excrement. As a signifier of the Rabelaisian grotesque, excrement is

78 Yeats met Margot Ruddock in September 1934, with whom he collaborated in the theater and to whom he dedicated several poems.
elevated as fertilizer, “an essential element in the life of the body and of the earth in the struggle against death. It was part of man’s vivid awareness of his materiality, of his bodily nature, closely related to the life of the earth” (Bakhtin 224). By juxtaposing the dung of swine with the “crown of gold” in the refrains (VP 979: 15), Yeats sets up simultaneously the opposition and interdependence between the low foul grotesque and the high fair classical modes that climax in the queen’s dance with the severed head of the swineherd.

After the opening song, the swineherd enters, claiming that he comes to win the queen’s hand in marriage by singing her a song at a full moon in March. While the queen replies that “None I abhor can sing” (VPl 981: 40), he curiously beseeches her to observe his foulness:

Queen, look at me, look long at these foul rags,
At hair more foul and ragged than my rags;
Look on my scratched foul flesh. Have I not come
Through dust and mire?

... My origin more foul than rag or flesh. (VPl 981: 41-49).

Surprisingly, the queen is not repelled by his foulness, but permits his song. At the same time she warns him of her cruelty: many suitors have come for the same purpose, she states, but most of them were “killed or maimed” because their singing put her in a rage (VPl 982: 61). By describing herself “[c]ruel as the winter of virginity” (VPl 982: 66), the queen evokes the imagery of Mallarme’s poem “Herodiade” (1866), which continues to influence Yeats’s portrayal of Salome in his later works. The enclosed virginal body of the Yeatsian Salome incurs male speculation and anxiety in terms of its sexual purity and transgression. In Yeats’s
play The Herne’s Egg (1938), for instance, the protagonist Congal interprets Attracta’s virginity and her commitment to be the Great Herne’s bride as proof of her sexual abnormality:

Women thrown into despair
By the winter of their virginity
Take its abominable snow,
As boys take common snow, and make
An image of god or bird or beast
To feed their sensuality: (VPl 1016: 62-67)

Congal applies the same logic to debunk Ovid’s Metamorphoses as a euphemist treatment of women’s deviant eroticism:

Ovid had a literal mind,
And though he sang it neither knew
What lonely lust dragged down the gold
That crept on Danae’s lap, nor knew
What rose against the moony feathers
When Leda lay upon the grass. (VPl 1016: 68-73)

The presumption leads to his and six other men’s rape of Attracta to “do her a great good” by “melting out the virgin snow, / And that snow image, the Great Herne” (VPl 1028: 113-15). This extremely disturbing sexual violence is insidiously complicated by Attracta’s half-conscious consent since in her trance she thinks of them as the Great Herne itself. Described as “[a] doll upon a wire,” “traveling fast asleep / In long loops like a dancer” (VPl 1021), Attracta appears to be a mere marionette maneuvered by the puppeteer, the Great Herne. Nonetheless, she insists on her purity and has those men admit it in the supposedly divine presence of the Great Herne (only
ambiguously presented as the sound of thunder). What transpires then on Attracta’s wedding night—rape by seven mortal men or conjugal consummation with the Great Herne, or both—reinforces the fuzzy distinction between literal or allegorical readings or even misreadings of the female bodies raped by divinities in mythology. The play ends with a farcical pronouncement that Congal, after being killed by a fool according to Attracta’s prophecy, will be reincarnated as a donkey; even though Attracta attempts to give him a human form through intercourse with her servant Corney, the mating donkeys pre-empt her effort. The ending lines “All that trouble and nothing to show for it, / Nothing but just another donkey” (VPl 1040: 181-82) further mock the attempt to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, the classical and the grotesque, and the solemn and the derisive.

In A Full Moon, the boundaries between these binary oppositions are more definite in terms of Yeats’s presentations of the queen and the swineherd. Like the stroller in The King, the swineherd wears a half-savage mask showing only his beard, yet unlike the stroller, he consciously defies identification with the lover-shepherd-poet of the pastoral ideal. When the queen expects “[s]ome novel simile, some wild hyperbole” to praise her beauty (VPl 983: 81), he replies, “when I first heard your name. / I rolled among the dung of swine and laughed. / What do I know of beauty?” (VPl 983: 83-85). Not only does he disparage the queen’s beauty, he declines the offer of her kingdom—a parody of the golden apple contest where Paris declines Hera’s promise of power and Athena’s promise of wisdom, but chooses Aphrodite as the fairest for the prize of Helen. In turn, the swineherd promises the queen “[a] song—the night of love, / An ignorant forest and the dung of swine” if she renounces the throne (VPl 983: 92-93). The deliberately repeated image of swine-dung (not the dung of any other animal) works to signify the most defiled and unclean state associated with biblical contexts (Leviticus XI). With his
close association with excrement, the swineherd thus belongs to the caste of the most unclean and undesirable in a socio-political hierarchy—in other words, the polar opposite of the politically powerful queen. This traditional alliance between the high (aristocracy) and the low (peasantry) reflects what Cullingford calls Yeats’s “aristocratic populism,” which deliberately rejects the middle class and the value system associated with it (Fascism 72). While the queen is infuriated by the “[c]omplexities of insult” (VPl 984: 98) and demands his decapitation, her movement curiously complies with his request. The stage direction “Queen leaves the throne and comes down stage” (VPl 983: 93) is a literalization of her descent from the crown of gold to the dung of swine. Knowing that the queen demands his head, the swineherd laughs and recounts a story of a woman being impregnated by a drop of blood, which foreshadows the penetration of the queen’s body by his blood. This folk story simultaneously disgusts and fascinates the queen, who is overwhelmed by the vision: “A severed head! She took it in her hands; / She stood all bathed in blood; the blood begat. / O foul, foul, foul!” (VPl 985: 119-121). Her movements continue to contradict her words: ordering the swineherd to be gone, she nonetheless “turns towards him, her back to the audience, and slowly drops her veil” (VPl 985: 123). By dropping the veil she values as the last fortress shielding her face from his eyes, the queen opens up her enclosed body and initiates the presaged Salome dance.

At this point, the inner curtain is closed for the dancing queen to replace the speaking queen. The attendants start to sing about “[a]n ancient Irish Queen / That stuck a head upon a stake” (VPl 985: 124-25), which reiterates the folk story and remakes the female character into a horrifying head-huntress who upholds a phallic symbol of female power and male fear of castration. As the curtain parts, the queen, holding the severed head of the swineherd and bathing in blood, starts to sing:
Child and darling, hear my song,
Never cry I did you wrong;
Cry that wrong came not from me
But my virgin cruelty. (VPl 987: 154-57)

By addressing the swineherd’s head as both child and lover, the queen brings us back to a primal sacrificial ritual to the Mother Goddess and, in the more recent past, to Yeats’s Cathleen Ni Houlihan, who tempts young men into forfeiting their lives for nationalistic ideals. Intriguingly, the queen is not the one who demands the sacrifice, but her “virgin cruelty” does; this division between her self and her virgin cruelty bespeaks a supernatural presence that dictates her purity as a prerequisite of being a divine instrument through which the cruelty of sacrificial acts channels. Instead of the immortalized glory of martyrdom, the decapitated swineherd is rewarded with the queen’s dance of coronation that places the head upon the throne (VPl 987). The severed head reciprocates with a song about Jack and Jill—Jill murdered Jack, tore out his heart, and hung it beyond the hill; like the resurrection of Dionysus, Jack’s heart ascends as star at a full moon in March (VPl 988). The queen’s movements reflect the subtle changes of her desire and emotion toward the severed head: “The Queen in her dance moves away from the head, alluring and refusing” (VPl 988: 177). Then she suddenly laughs and “takes up the head and lays it upon the ground” (VPl 989: 179); this dethroning movement signifies her final realization of the swineherd’s promise of a lover’s night amidst swine-dung beyond the realm of physical beauty and political power. Instead of enacting a coronation, she now dances “a dance of adoration” by taking up the head as a dance partner (VPl 989: 179). The dance grows quicker, engendering the final moment of erotic political apocalypse: “As the drum-taps approach their climax, she presses her lips to the lips of the head. Her body shivers to very
rapid drum-taps. The drum-taps cease. She sinks slowly down, holding the head to her breast” (VPI 989).

In this Salome-like dance, the boundaries between the high and the low undergo re-mapping: the swineherd’s foul body is consecrated as the seat of reason—the head and the ascending star—while the queen’s virginal body is desecrated by the swineherd’s blood. The procreating body resulting from the convergence of the queen and the swineherd indicates the triumph of the grotesque mode that outgrows itself through defecation, dismemberment, and copulation. This celebration of the grotesque deconstructs the mind-body hierarchy by privileging the creative materiality of the body over reason and deliverance from rebirth. Tracing the evolution of Yeats’s conceptions of the body, we find a progression toward reclaiming the physical realm for the spiritual. Fand’s ambiguous desire for Cuchulian in The Only Jealousy of Emer receives a forthright reading in the attendants’ closing song in A Full Moon:

SECOND ATTENDANT. Why must those holy, haughty feet descend

From emblematic niches…

. . . . .

What do they seek for? Why must they descend?

FIRST ATTENDANT. For desecration and the lover’s night. (VPI 989: 180-85)

Building on a Blakean erotic apocalypse of conflicting opposites and a Rabelaisian celebration of the grotesque, Yeats’s iconography of Salome’s dance with the severed head further articulates a subversive voice that challenges the imposition of official ideology. (Not without coincidence, Yeats classifies both Blake and Rabelais as “The Positive Man” of the sixteenth phase in A Vision). Earlier, in 1927, in a Senate debate over the Industrial and Commercial Property (Protection) Bill, Yeats compared James Joyce’s Ulysses with Rabelais’s works in defending
against the approval of this bill that would impose censorship on Irish authors before they could secure copyright in Ireland (SS 147). Though not quite agreeing with the style of these two authors, Yeats viewed the bawdy grotesqueness in Joyce’s and Rabelais’s works as a display of exuberant heroic energy that could be easily dismissed as obscenity by official censorship and religious orthodoxy. Through peasant characters like Crazy Jane and the swineherd, Yeats translates socio-political lowness into the lowness of bodily functions, and vice versa; the celebration of lowness and foulness, or in fact highness and fairness, satirizes the imposition of sexual, racial, and religious purity on postcolonial Irish identity.

IV.

Yeats’s fight against official and prevalent constructions of Irishness peaks in his last play *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), where the focal point shifts from the peasantry to his earlier idea of an unpopular elitist theater as a model for the Irish national theater. Before the main plotline takes place, the play is framed with an extensive prologue narrated by a quasi-mythological old man, who mediates between the mythological past and Yeats’s presence in the dramatic present. Being “out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the thing is made of,” the old man can defend Yeats’s conception of an unpopular theater more adequately and candidly than the playwright himself (VPl 1051). The old man speaks with unapologetic outrageousness:

I am sure that as I am producing a play for people I like, it is not probable, in this vile age, that they will be more in number than those who listened to the first performance of Milton’s *Comus*… If there are more than a hundred I won’t be able to escape people who are educating themselves out of the Book Societies and the like, sciolists all, pickpockets and opinionated bitches. (VPl 1051-52)
While this comment may be offensive (especially in its denigration of opinionated feminists), it attacks middle-class insidious respectability and hypocrisy, the kind of bourgeois hypocrisy that rallied against Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*. The voice of the peasantry also joins in the critique in this play through “the beggar-man, Homer’s music” performed by “a singer, a piper, and a drummer” picked up on the streets by the old man (VPl 1052).

At this point, the focus of the old man’s speech narrows down to the increasingly centralized role of the dance and the reigning typology of Salome’s dance with the severed head in Yeats’s later plays:

> I promise a dance. I wanted a dance because where there are no words there is less to spoil. Emer must dance, there must be severed heads—I am old, I belong to mythology—severed heads for her to dance before. I had thought to have had those heads carved, but no, if the dancer can dance properly no wood-carving can look as well as a parallelogram of painted wood. (VPl 1052)

Tracing the development of Yeats’s dance plays, we find that the role of dance has gradually changed from its early subordination to words to its later supremacy over verbal expression. The last dancer onstage, however, does not evolve from the typical Yeatsian dancer of the fifteenth phase: Emer’s old age, domesticity, and humanness are diametrically opposed to the supernatural, wild qualities of the Sidhe or Salome. In an early draft Yeats suggests that the old man wears “perhaps some such mask as that worn by the old man in the Hawks Well;” read in this context, it is apt that the dancer in this play is Emer instead of the bird-woman-witch dancer who has deceived him in *At the Hawk’s Well*. The minimalist vision of Emer dancing with a parallelogram of painted wood necessitated finding a suitable dancer to materialize it, which proved to be exasperating: “But I was at my wit’s end to find a good dancer; I could have got

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79 *The Death of Cuchulain: Manuscript Materials*, 27.
such a dancer once, but she has gone; the tragic-comedian dancer, the tragic dancer, upon the same neck love and loathing, life and death” (VP1 1052). In a draft of the prologue Yeats specified that the intended dancer for Emer’s role was Ninnette de Valois because of her virtuosity and Irishness (“we loved our own”).

By taking a line from Yeats’s poem “I am of Ireland” (1929) as the title of her memoirs Come dance with me (1959), de Valois in turn claims her affiliation with Yeats’s nationalism and the Irish folk tradition. This poem, “developed from three or four line of an Irish fourteenth-century dance song” (VP 830), centers on the repeated calling of a female dancer who sounds like the Sidhe or a personified Ireland:

'I am of Ireland,
And the Holy Land of Ireland,
And time runs on,’ cried she.
‘Come out of charity,
Come dance with me in Ireland.’ (VP 526: 1-5)

Sadly, there was only one “outlandish” “solitary” man who answered the calling, only to find that “[t]he fiddlers are all thumbs” (VP 526-27).

Yeats experienced similar frustration when fighting for de Valois to be the dancer in The Death of Cuchulain; against his high-minded insistence, he recorded in a draft, other people would settle for “the chamber maid” like those in Dega’s paintings. Through the old man’s voice, Yeats conveys his disparagement for Dega’s ballerinas in the final version: “I spit three times. I spit upon the dancers painted by Degas. I spit upon their short bodices, their stiff stays, their toes whereon they spin like peg-tops, above all upon that chambermaid face. They might have looked timeless, Rameses the Great, but not the chambermaid, that old maid history. I spit!

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80 Ibid., 39.
81 Ibid., 39.
I spit! I spit!” (VP 1052). Yeats’s disapproval of Degas’s dancers zooms in on their bodices, stiff stays, and their toes—and is similar to Isadora Duncan’s criticism of the ways that traditional ballet deforms the female body. His particular contempt for the chambermaid face in Degas’s paintings, however, articulates a problematic approach to class politics that, in battling against industrialism and the bourgeois mindset, tends to overlook the reality of the working class being weighed down with labor. Yeats’s dislike of a Degas’s painting that “showed the strongly marked shoulder-blades of a dancing-girl, robbing her of voluptuous charm” (A 290) concurs with Theodore Reff’s more sympathetic statement that “the dancer in Degas’ work is often an embodiment not of feminine charm but of the lower-class woman’s struggle for survival, burdened and deformed by her labors” (219). While Yeats’s romanticized view of the dancer certainly risks suppressing the harsh reality most women dancers experienced at the turn of the century, his main grudge directs itself toward Degas’s belief that “Cynicism is the only sublimity” in his representation of the dancers’ social status.\(^{82}\) In his fight against bourgeois thinking, Yeats appeared to de Valois as “a heroic legendary figure—a Cuchullain fighting more than the waves; for Yeats fought prejudice with passion, ignorance with irony, criticism with humility… He told me that artists could only give of their best if the world permitted them the patronage of a leisured aristocracy” (110-11). The same patrician outlook prompted Yeats to envision a collaboration between T. S. Eliot and de Valois: “I would rejoice if a rich betrothed man asked Mr. T. S. Eliot and the dancer Ninette de Valois to pick a musician and compose a new marriage service, for such a service might restore a lost subject-matter to the imaginative arts and be good for the clergy” (E&I ix).

The framing narrative that articulates Yeats’s idea for the dance plays ends with the old man’s spitting upon Degas’s paintings; the curtain falls and the stage gives way to the mythological

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\(^{82}\) Quoted in Yeats’s Autobiographies, 290.
past in Ireland (VPl 1053). Cuchulain’s mistress Eithne Inguba enters to deliver a message from Emer to Cuchulain, saying that he should ride out and fight the battle even if he may die. Cuchulain, however, suspects that Eithne has falsified the message by hiding Emer’s letter so that he will die in the battle and she can choose another lover without fearing his violence. At this point of confusion, Morrigu, the war goddess, enters to foretell Cuchulain’s death through Eithne’s mouth; with the head of a crow and black wings, Morrigu recalls the image of the bird-woman-witch dancer in Yeats’s middle plays. Still convinced that Eithne has lied to him, Cuchulain nevertheless rides out to fight. The scene quickly cuts to the fatally wounded Cuchulain, discovered by his former mistress Aoife, mother of the son he killed in On Baile’s Strand (VPl 1057). Though Aoife intends to revenge her son’s death, she helps Cuchulain fasten his body upon the stone so that he can die upon his feet like a hero. Aoife’s plan to interrogate and then kill Cuchulain is interrupted by the blind beggar from On Baile’s Strand, who claims that he will cut off Cuchulain’s head for the reward of twelve pennies (VPl 1061). The scene cuts again to Morrigu, who holds Cuchulain’s severed head, surrounded by the heads of his six enemies; she then announces her arrangement of Emer’s dance (VPl 1061).

As the last of Yeats’s women to dance with a severed head onstage, Emer is more of an anti-Salome than a Salome figure in terms of her old age and her wifely devotion to Cuchulain. Yet, Emer’s dance, like the queen’s dance with a severed head in The King and A Full Moon, is also dictated by external forces—first commanded by the old man and then by Morrigu. Her role as a patriarchal domestic ideal is congruent with her part in The Green Helmet and The Only Jealousy of Emer. She dances to rage against Cuchulain’s opponents like she has always done as a dutiful wife when he was alive: “She so moves that she seems to rage against the heads of those that had wounded Cuchulain, perhaps makes movements as though to strike them, going
three times round the circle of the heads” (VPl 1062). The movement of prostrating herself in
front of his head is the ultimate gesture of reverence for Cuchulain as a Christ-like perfect man:
“She then moves towards the head of Cuchulain; it may, if need be, be raised above the others on
a pedestal. She moves as if in adoration or triumph. She is about to prostrate herself before it,
perhaps does so, then rises, looking up as if listening” (VPl 1062). Yet, the ambiguity of Emer’s
dance colors the ending. With no dance partner (and not even holding a severed head), she
becomes a solitary dancer similar to that of Yeats’s middle plays. The widowed Emer is no
longer bound by marriage vows, nor does she submerge herself in a symbolic union with the
severed head like the queen who embraces the head in The King and A Full Moon. Static and
motionless, her final movement allows her to perceive a death-in-life and life-in-death moment:
“she seems to hesitate between the head and what she hears. Then she stands motionless. There
is silence, and in the silence a few faint bird notes” (VPl 1062). Standing still in between
Cuchulain’s head and his reincarnated form as a bird whose sound comes faintly from afar,
Emer, after some hesitation and faltering, seems to have at least put on the divine knowledge that
enables her to comprehend the event.

The somber ritualistic feel of Emer’s final statuesque posture is abruptly interrupted by the
loud music of the ending song sung by the three ragged street performers. This device brings the
audience back to the dramatic present and simultaneously back to the Rabelaisian mood of Crazy
Jane and Wild Old Wicked Man poems, which deconstruct binary oppositions between classical
and grotesque, heroic and trivial. Originally sung by the harlot to the beggar-man, this song
professes her desire for the “muscular bodies” of Cuchulain and other Gaelic heroes (VPl 1062:
202). Since they are but ghosts now, she “can get / No grip upon their thighs” (VPl 1062: 202-
203), and can only settle for those living men whose bodies she “both adore[s] and loathe[s]”
Oddly juxtaposed with a flashback to the rebels of the Easter Rising, the harlot’s lust for the heroes’ bodies ambivalently coalesces with Cathleen Ni Houlihan’s call for young men’s sacrifice. The relationship between the harlot and the dead heroes also enacts a revised Salome dance of “desecration and the lover’s night” in terms of gender dynamics. Like the illegibility of the intercourse between humans and divinities that underpins The Herne’s Egg, the harlot’s relations with the heroes both can and cannot be deciphered literally and metaphorically. While Bloom reads the harlot-hero relation as that of the muse-artist (432), Ellis views the harlot’s song as Yeats’s intent for “reckless modern energy to sound the final note” by elevating the jig over Emer’s dance (318-19). Besides or beyond their readings, I propose to read the harlot-figure as a transmutation from Yeats’s Sidhe-Salome figures and the dancer of the fifteenth phase who have now descended from Tir na nOg, as devised by some unintelligible supernatural force, to reclaim the physical realm for early Yeats’s spiritual and nationalistic ideals.

V.

From the first dancer onstage, the young and immortal Faery Child, to the last dancer, the old and mortal Emer, the gradual process of desecration or indeed consecration of dance imagery reveals Yeats’s changing attitudes toward the body, gender, and Irish nationalism. Contributing largely to this evolution are Yeats’s direct and indirect collaborations with various modern dancers, collaborations that both reflected and reshaped his thinking. In terms of onstage collaborations, the playwright was often exasperated by the task of finding suitable dancers, something Flannery pinpoints as Yeats’s “ultimate limitation as a dramatist” (209). Although difficult to materialize on his contemporary stage, Yeats’s vision of dance plays is certainly not
ill conceived, but innovative in terms of its movement style and stage presentation. To argue for a reconsideration of Yeats’s idea of the dance as futuristic, my conclusion views it as both participating in the germination of early modern dance and anticipating the future of modern dance with its emphasis on muscular tension and stillness, qualities that feature prominently in works by Martha Graham.
Coda: Moving Forward

The dancer of the future will be one whose body and soul have grown so harmoniously together that the natural language of that soul will have become the movement of the body... She will dance not in the form of nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette, but in the form of woman in her greatest and purest expression.

---Isadora Duncan, “The Dance of the Future”

Delivered in 1903 to the Berlin Press Club, Isadora Duncan’s speech “The Dance of the Future” would become a watershed manifesto in laying out the tenets of modern dance, tenets that revolutionized the corporeal and social-political movements of the female body. Written twenty-three years later, the exhilarating final stanza of Yeats’s “Among School Children” uncannily reverberates with Duncan’s vision of the dance as articulating the harmonious union between the body and soul. Although not as affirmative and prophetic in tone as Duncan’s declaration of the new role bestowed on women dancers, Yeats’s representations of dancers evolved from a more traditional ballet-inspired Faery Child, to the androgynous, solitary bird-woman-witch dancer of the middle plays, to the indifferent Salome dancing with a severed head of the later plays, and finally to the old mortal Emer of The Death of Cuchulain. The shift from the Faery Child to Emer reveals a gradual dismissal of conventional male-authored sylphs and fairies in favor of more innovative female roles partly resembling those created by the trailblazers of early modern dance, like Fuller, Duncan, St. Denis, and Allan. Whereas the traditional marriage-plot of ballet is reflected in the characterization of the fairy child—“I’ll soon put on my womanhood and marry / The spirits of wood and water” (VP 203: 342-43), the widowed state and old age of Emer reflect a broadened view of women’s experience. Similar development is demonstrated in the career of such pioneering modern dancers as Ruth St. Denis
and Martha Graham, who transcended the role of youthful prima ballerina and participated vigorously in performance and choreography into their eighties.

Besides revising gender roles onstage and offstage, early modern dancers brought forth new movement vocabularies and styles that, in contrast to the traditional gravity-defying techniques of ballet, utilized the human body in its various states of consciousness—from primitive earthbound motions to stylized statuesque postures. To Yeats, the statuesque postures in particular constituted the kind of dance he envisioned for the theater, as he stated in Four Plays for Dancers (1921), “I do not want any existing form of stage dancing, but… something more reserved, more self-controlled” (88). Characterized by moments of muscular tension and stillness, this movement style links Yeats not only with such collaborators as Michio Ito but also with a more recent pioneer of modern dance, Martha Graham (see fig. 1 and 7). After collaborating with Yeats on At the Hawk’s Well, Ito went to New York and eventually worked with the young Graham on the Greenwich Village Follies (1923) and Nuages et Fetes (1929); these collaborations’ influence on Graham are rarely acknowledged by critics. But in the guardian’s stylized movements, and Emer’s earthbound motions and statuesque stillness, we can see some prefigurings of Graham’s vignettes.

Yeats’s innovative conceptions of the dance and histrionics, while difficult to materialize on his contemporary stage and rarely understood by his contemporaries, have begun to receive their due in more recent revivals of his plays. Stressing the importance of controlled bodily movement in Yeats’s plays, Mary O’Malley, artistic director of the Lyric Players Theatre, states that “Movement, whether it is in the form of gesture, standing still, walking or dance, is so much

83 Graham’s disciple Bessie Schonberg points out that the deep influence of Ito on Graham is rarely mentioned (Martha Graham 12). Mester’s observation that “Graham’s symbolist dance theater and her collaborations with Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi drew on the expressionistic style of Yeats’s Noh plays” leaves out their mediator Ito who made the link possible (157-58).
Fig. 6. Martha Graham (right) in *Primitive Mysteries* (1931).
an integral part of these plays that players must be as proficient in movement as in speech” (663). James Flannery, an avid advocate of the Yeatisan theater, pronounces in “Action and Reaction at the Dublin Theatre Festival” that “Yeats in more ways than one is a dramatist of the twenty-first century rather than the twentieth” (661). By translating verbal description of the Dionysian dance into a performance onstage, Flannery’s production of The Resurrection in 1965 continued the trend started by Ninette de Valois’s choreography for the revival of On Baile’s Strand and by Yeats’s own revision of The Only Jealousy of Emer into Fighting the Waves. This gradual expansion of the dance in revivals of Yeats’s plays is congruent with the dramatist’s late emphasis on corporeality and stylized movements. Praising Yeats as “structurally, verbally and visually brilliant, the most significant European playwright of his era,” director Ray Yeates also points out that with our current technical facilities and knowledge of drama “Yeats’s type of theatre is very acceptable now.”

Through timed pauses and stillness, Yeats’s conception of stylized movements reinforces the intensity of one single image (usually the dancer). Such an aesthetics of stasis embraces the ancient Japanese Noh tradition and simultaneously looks forward to the next generation of Western performative arts—H. D.’s cinematic stasis, Samuel Beckett’s theater, and Martha Graham’s modern dance.

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