

A currency crisis: modernist dialectics in *The Countess Cathleen*

MICHAEL MC ATEER

The Countess Cathleen is the first Yeats play to contain a dialogue between history and the imagination within its dramatic structure and to posit a conception of history particular to the dramatic form. The play dramatizes the story of a noble lady who offers her soul to demons in exchange for their relinquishing the souls of starving peasantry. In their desperation, members of the peasantry offer their souls to the demons in exchange for gold. The play focuses on one peasant family in particular, in which the father, Teigue, is keen to accept the offer of gold made by the demons in exchange for their souls, though his wife Mary resists. Their souls are saved through the final intervention of the Countess Cathleen, though she, like Mary dies. The concluding image in the play is of an angel who announces to the peasantry that, because of her heroic magnanimity, the countess's soul has been saved. Yeats claimed that he first encountered this story in a newspaper article on Irish folklore and traced its source to *Les Matinées de Timothé Trimm* in which Léo Lespès gave it as an Irish story. Yeats praised the tale as 'the most impressive form of one of the supreme parables of the world'.¹

From its first publication in 1892 through the many revisions of the play over subsequent years, the play's historiographic structure would determine its strengths and shortcomings as a dramatic piece. Consideration of the play offered here aims to delineate the form of history intrinsic to the play's formal and thematic elements. In pursuit of this objective, the practice of situating the play's development in relation to Yeats's involvement with Maud Gonne will not be followed on the grounds that it risks reducing the play's historical complexity to the ultimately indeterminable nuances of this relationship. In addition, I do not identify the play's shortcomings with its symbolist obscurity and/or the quaintness of its peasant dialogue and the archaism of its aristocratic speech forms. On the contrary, it will be argued that the dichotomy of the play's speech patterns as developed by Yeats throughout the revisions is one of its great strengths. Its chief weakness, however, lies in the fact that Yeats, following his predecessor Standish O'Grady, by harbouring a sentimental aspiration of reconciling peasant and aristocrat that had the effect of restraining the dramatic conflict latent within the play.² Undoubtedly, this corresponded obliquely to

¹ Russell K. Alspach (ed.), *The Variorum edition of the plays of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 170. ² Adrian Frazier writes of this in terms of 'transvaluation' in relation to the

Yeats's hopes for (and fear of) passionate intimacy with Gonne. However, even if such hopes and fears lay at the root of his dramatic intentions, the play that resulted carried a theatrical meaning extending far beyond this personal obsession, indeed, making of that obsession an economy of symbolism that linked the play into a pattern of historical consciousness characteristic of much European modernist drama in the early twentieth century.

Much reference has been made to the view that the play's genesis lay in Yeats's first encounter with Gonne in 1889 in which "the troubling of my life began"³ Ronald Schuchard refers to the *The Countess Cathleen* as 'a play first written for Maud Gonne,' following Michael J. Sidnell, who has made the case that the final two scenes of the original play were written or substantially revised after Gonne's refusal of Yeats's first offer of marriage on 3 August 1891.⁴ Acknowledging the fact that, in May 1889, Yeats told John O'Leary that he hoped Gonne would play the leading role, and the seemingly conclusive evidence supplied by the dedication to Gonne in the 1892 printed version of the play, Peter Ure has nonetheless disputed the view that Gonne lay at the origin of the play's conception. He offers the somewhat thin evidence of a statement made in a letter to O'Leary on 1 February 1889 (two days after Yeats's first encounter with Gonne) in which Yeats wrote that he had "long been intending" to write a play founded on the tale *Countess Kathleen O'Shea*.⁵ Ure is more convincing when he argues that none of the versions of the play points directly to the figure of Gonne as a woman whose purity of soul is disturbed by political fanaticism.⁶ Indeed, Ure argues that had it done so, the play would have been much more effective theatrically.⁷

This question of Gonne's influence can only be ignored at the cost of overlooking the historical specificity of the play's origins. However, to place it at the centre of an evaluation of *The Countess Cathleen* is to obscure the deeper shifts in historical consciousness within the play that are directly relevant to assessing its strengths and shortcomings as a work of drama. Observing these shifts enable us to position the play in relation to the cultural and political movements that effectively shaped those cultural and political forms internal to the play's dramatic structure.

famine, of 'turning a Protestant moral catastrophe into a miracle of benevolence, and one of the world's remarkable cases of a people's devotion to a faith into wholesale infidelity.' *Behind the scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the struggle for the Abbey Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), p. 14. The difficulty here, however, is a reductionism that leads to the kind of dismissive claim Frazier makes regarding the play's modern relevance, that 'the play is now as insignificant a piece of drama as a press keeps in print.' *Behind the scenes*, p. 3. 3 R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: a life*, vol. 1, *The apprentice mage* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 87. 4 Ronald Schuchard, 'The Countess Cathleen and the revival of the bardic arts,' *South Carolina Review*, 32: 1 (1999), p. 24. Michael J. Sidnell, 'Manuscript version of Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*,' *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 56 (1962), p. 102. 5 Peter Ure, *Yeats the playwright: a commentary on character and design in the major plays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 17. 6 *Ibid.*, p. 17. 7 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

It is significant in this regard that while the dedication to Gonne in the 1892 version of the play commands critical attention, little has been written about Yeats's location of the play in sixteenth-century Ireland in his 1892 version, a period reference he chose to replace with the vague 'old times' in subsequent versions. The significance of the period reference lies in the fact that it is the first occasion in which history is addressed explicitly in Yeats's dramatic writing, marking it off from the immature attempts at poetic drama that preceded it, including the first drafts of *The Shadowy Waters*. The sixteenth century was important to Yeats for many reasons, and carries particular significance for the cultural and economic questions that *The Countess Cathleen* addresses. He felt it was the last period in which European civilization achieved what he termed unity of being, an idea to which he returned with increasing frequency in his later years.⁸ Of more pressing significance to the play's Irish context, however, is the fact that the century ended with the wars following the Spanish Armada of 1588. These wars provided the context within which the indigenous Gaelic order of tribal chieftains would finally collapse, receiving its deathblow in the defeat at Kinsale of 1601, thus paving the way for the major plantations of the beginning of the seventeenth century and the institution of a new civic polity replacing the old feudal system of *tuathaigh*. The events and characters of this period were captured vividly by Standish O'Grady, in works such as *The Bog of Stars*, *Red Hugh's Captivity* and O'Grady's edition of *Pacata Hibernia*, works exerted an enduring if understated influence on the young Yeats.⁹

The relevance of these events to the play resides in the fact that *The Countess Cathleen* deals with a clash between two orders and two value systems broadly corresponding to the native feudal order of tribal society led by such clan leaders as Red Hugh O'Donnell, and a modern regime of civic polity conducive to the acceleration of commercial activity founded on a profit motive. The play depicts a feudal aristocratic order on the one hand, and a modern order of commerce on the other; a value system based on communal loyalty and one based on individual self-preservation. The countess is presented in such a manner by Yeats that her representative character is deliberately left unclear in this regard – was she to be taken as an emblem of an old Gaelic order or the Anglo-Irish ascendancy that displaced them?¹⁰ Part of Yeats's strategy in combining the ornate

⁸ W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan Press, 1955), p. 291. James Flannery identifies in the countess 'an image of that unity of being that Yeats strove to attain for himself and pass on to his countrymen as an image of unity of culture.' *W. B. Yeats and the idea of the theatre* (London: Macmillan Press, 1976), p. 144. ⁹ For a discussion of O'Grady's Elizabethan histories, see Michael McAteer *Standish O'Grady, AE, Yeats: history, politics, culture* (Dublin: Irish Academic, 2002), pp 81–4. ¹⁰ The point is rarely acknowledged that the figure of Cathleen could just as easily be read as a type of Maeve (drawn from O'Grady's *History of Ireland*), as that of a member of the Anglo-Irish gentry. Commentators have sometimes regarded her too quickly as an Anglo-Irish aristocrat without entertaining the possibility that her name might just as easily have referred to an Old Gaelic tribal leader.

speech of the aristocrat with the names and images of native Gaelic culture was to plant in the minds of his audience the idea that a common set of cultural values united the old Gaelic order of tribal chiefs and the Anglo-Irish gentry class that replaced it; such an idea would help to mitigate, if not entirely obscure, the violence of the historical conflict between the two orders. Thus, on the one hand, we are presented in the play with the setting of a great hall at the beginning of scene two in the 1892 version, in which are hung tapestries representing 'the wars and loves of the Fianna and Red-Branch warriors'.¹¹ On the other hand, the speech of Cathleen and Oona (and in post-1892 versions, Aleel) is tinged with a note of haughtiness that would sound uncomfortably affected to a nationalist-minded audience, and point directly to the speech patterns of the Anglo-Irish gentry. In this expression of Gaelic legendary content through Victorian gentilities and archaisms, Yeats reveals the influence of O'Grady's *History of Ireland*, a work that narrated the heroic saga of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* in a decidedly archaic and ornate style. Like O'Grady, Yeats sought in this combination of anglicized style and gaelicized content the means through which the values of decorum, loyalty and magnanimity, common in their view to Gaelic and Anglo-Irish civilization, could be given cultural expression in order to obscure the historical displacement of the former by the latter, and in order to identify a common enemy against which both civilizations could be united – the bourgeoisie.

History, therefore, is not exclusively a question of the play's content, but is, in fact, written into its form. Indeed, the structural alterations effected by Yeats's revisions to the play correspond to the shift from a late Victorian to a properly modernist form of historical consciousness. Subsequent to the 1899 performance of the play, Yeats's revisions were concerned less with a reconciliation of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish and much more with developing a form of theatre that, in its artifice and 'fascination with what's difficult', demanded a consciousness sensitive to what he regarded as the violation of the human spirit at the heart of modernization processes.¹²

It is significant in this regard that R.F. Foster reads the inclusion of Aleel in the 1899 version of the play as 'a pointer towards the increasingly subjective direction which the play would take'.¹³ This repeats the assertion made years earlier by Ure that the play grew into a portrait of the artist as the rejected lover of Maud Gonne as it evolved through the revisions.¹⁴ Ure sees in this the emer-

¹¹ Alspach, *Variorum plays*, pp 42, 51. ¹² This antipathy to modernization undoubtedly cultivated fascist sentiments in Yeats towards the end of his life, despite arguments made by Cullingford and Howes to the contrary. See, particularly, Yeats's concluding comments in 'A general introduction to my work,' *Essays and introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 526; Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's nations: gender, class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), pp 160–185. The context of crisis, aesthetic and political, within which such sentiments emerged, however, is evaluated purely at an empirical level and, as a consequence, understood inadequately. ¹³ Foster, *Apprentice mage*, p. 209. ¹⁴ Ure, *Yeats the playwright*, p. 26.

gence of a more theatrically compelling play, observing in Yeats's revisions a writer who 'watches out for the worst archaisms in modes of address and speech, gradually eliminates the more self-conscious spots of local color and the weaker and more automatic lapses into Jacobean rhythms'.¹⁵ These observations imply that *The Countess Cathleen* improved theatrically as it moved away from association with Irish political history, and as a sense of antiquity impinged less on its theatrical form. Indeed, Leonard Nathan implies that the identifiably historical nature of the original play was part of its theatrical failure, when he complains of the absence of an 'unorthodox vision of a cosmic struggle between natural and supernatural' controlling the play.¹⁶

Such critical positions arise from a misunderstanding of Yeats's dramatic project in relation to history. The autobiographical and idealist interpretations of the drama presume the play's indifference to general historical conditions on the basis of his enduring commitment to an anti-realist theatrical form, and his subscription to beliefs regarded as anachronistic to his age. Whether celebrated or criticized on this basis, Yeats's plays are not generally regarded as reflecting the historical realities of his age. In support of this assertion, it is worth considering the most self-consciously historical work of nineteenth century European intellectual activity, *Capital*, in relation to *The Countess Cathleen*. The choice is not arbitrary; Marx's comments on the advent of money as the normative measure of value in an historical moment where commodity production and exchange had become universal, bear directly on the play's concern for gold and exchange. Facile claims such as Nathan's that the play expresses 'the Christian war between divine and satanic wills' are wholly inadequate because no account is taken of the play's historiographic structure.¹⁷ Marx's theory of money provides a means of addressing this shortcoming, not just in illustrating just how alert *The Countess Cathleen* is to those patterns of historical development that have shaped European society since the Reformation, but also in showing how such alertness is registered through a crisis of historical representation within the play.

Marx argues that, with the development of processes of exchange, the universal equivalent form 'crystallizes out into the money-form'.¹⁸ He defines the universal equivalent form of a commodity as the aspect it takes when its value is considered in relation to all other commodities. Money, therefore, arises in the forms that we know today when the level of commodity exchange reaches universal proportions, that is, when the universal equivalent form of commodities becomes economically transparent. Its emergence in the modern form, therefore, particularly in the form of capital, presumes the decline of the feudal system of localized exchange of commodities, within Marx's account. Crucially, he iden-

15 Ibid., p. 28. 16 Leonard F. Nathan, *The tragic drama of W.B. Yeats: figures in a dance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1965), p. 28. 17 Ibid., p. 28. 18 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 183.

tifies as necessary the adaptation of precious metals, gold and silver, for the manifestation of money as the universal equivalent of each individual commodity:

In the same proportion as exchange bursts its local bonds, and the value of commodities accordingly expands more and more into the material embodiment of human labour as such, in that proportion does the money-form become transferred to commodities which are by their nature fitted to perform the social function of a universal equivalent. Those commodities are the precious metals.¹⁹

Of immediate relevance here is Marx's claim that precious metals are 'by their nature' suited to act as the universal equivalent that is money:

Only a material whose every sample possesses the same uniform quality can be an adequate form of appearance of value, that is a material embodiment of abstract and therefore equal human labour. On the other hand, since the difference between the magnitudes of value is purely quantitative, the money commodity must be capable of purely quantitative differentiation; it must therefore be divisible at will, and it must also be possible to assemble it again from its component parts. Gold and silver possess these properties by nature.²⁰

On the basis of this formulation, the precious metals are positioned at the center of the system of exchange that extends to universal proportions; yet they remain outside of this system in that they are fundamentally distinct from all other commodities in their role as the universal equivalent, the 'material embodiment of abstract and therefore equal human labour'. The position of gold and silver, therefore, is dialectically riven in Marx's theory of value, a position on the threshold of feudal and modern forms of economic organization:

Without any initiative on their part, the commodities find their own value-configuration ready to hand, in the form of a physical commodity existing outside but also alongside them. This physical object, gold and silver in its crude state, becomes, immediately on its emergence from the bowels of the earth, the direct incarnation of all human labour. Hence the magic of money.²¹

The final sentence is striking in its own right in the light of the dialectical-materialist form of analysis throughout the volumes of *Capital*, and it points to a

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 183. ²⁰ Ibid., p. 184. ²¹ Ibid., p. 187. For a thorough analysis of the role of money in Marx's theory of value, production and exchange see Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), pp 115–238.

source motivating the revised forms of Marxist analysis to be found in the work of thinkers such as Benjamin, Adorno and Sartre, and, more recently, Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida. For Benjamin, the category of magic is crucial to his understanding of the historical materialist critique.²² Adorno's negative dialectical hypothesis is, to a significant degree, shaped by his belief that the Enlightenment drive to dominate Nature sublimated rather than superseded the shamanic strategies of magical ritual that preceded the rise of the scientific method in Europe.²³ More recently, Deleuze and Guattari have extended the critique of capitalism into the arena of Freud, by reconfiguring the materialist critique in psychoanalytical terms in the process, a strategy that involves the magico-technological mode of discourse they introduce in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*; while Derrida offers us an exposé of the magical and thanatotic within Marx.²⁴ My discussion of *The Countess Cathleen* here is informed by these revised accounts, if they could be called such; however, a more pressing relevance to the play is the manner in which Marx's comments above bring into question the conventional assumption that the play dramatizes the conflict between materialism and spirituality.

In the critical response that the play evoked on its first performance at the Antient Concert Rooms in May 1899, the opposition between souls and gold was universally presumed to be the opposition between spiritual and material values, between good and evil. George O'Neill summed up the negative criticism the performance received in his review of the play for the *New Ireland Review*:

Let us hope that he [Yeats] will gradually come to agree more and more fully with his critics that it was not proper to represent Irish Christian peasants as a set of superstitious criminals, impatient of physical suffering, without trust in the Almighty, without respect for sacred things, without faith in a hereafter, prompt to sell the soul for the body, the spiritual for corporal, the eternal for the temporal. One is tired, and probably

²² Throughout Benjamin's writing, from *The origins of German tragic drama* to the notes of the *Arcades* project, a sense of the magical quality of the sign prevails, most succinctly expressed in 'On language as such and on the language of man,' *One-way street and other writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), pp 107–23. ²³ Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, 'The concept of Enlightenment,' *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), pp 3–42. ²⁴ 'As long as we are content to establish a perfect parallel between money, gold, capital, and the capitalist triangle on the one hand, and the libido, the anus, the phallus, and the family triangle on the other, we are engaging in an enjoyable pastime, but the mechanisms of money remain totally unaffected by the anal projections of those who manipulate money,' Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Athlone, 1984), p. 28. See also Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

tiresome, in returning to a point which has been successfully laboured by so many critics in so many styles – from the fervid rhetoric of Mr. Frank O'Donnell to the sober opining of the *Irish times*. Yet the wrong done was a grievous one, not to be too easily condoned.²⁵

The criticism is quietly prescient of the rise of hostile tempers that would culminate in the riots that accompanied the opening performances of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* years later at the Abbey Theatre. Fundamental to the criticism of O'Neill, O'Donnell and others was the assumption that Yeats was presenting the 'exchange' between souls and gold as an exchange between the spiritual and the temporal. Certainly, the play does not bear this out, particularly when its 1890s versions are considered in relation to Yeats's occult activities. However, equally flawed is the opinion that negative criticism of the play in 1899 was misplaced because it arose from an interpretation of the play in terms of recent Irish history and that Yeats intended no reference to such history. Terence Brown writes that Yeats 'may have liked to believe that his play was set in an unspecified Irish past made merely poetic by the passage of time'.²⁶ Evidence of the play's development suggests that a historiographic form inimical to the crude didacticism of much criticism of the play is present within its dramatic structure. The presence of this element suggests that original criticisms of the play were flawed not in their literal historical response to a purely 'poetic' play but in the narrowness of their historical reference and their failure to identify the deeper historical pattern within the play's symbolist form.

It remains to consider aspects of the play in relation to the question of historical form and specifically in relation to the functions of gold and exchange. The setting for the opening scene in the 1892 version of the play, later to become act one in printed versions of the play from 1895 to 1908, sets the scene for the subsequent development of Irish drama in its peasant, rural and romantic aspects. At the Inn of Shemus Rua, 'a wood of oak, hazel and quicken trees is seen through the window, half hidden in vapor and twilight'.²⁷ It is interesting to note that this opening scene was originally set in a 'public' house, rather than a 'private' cottage (as in later versions), when considering the play in relation to the orthodoxies of 'kitchen sink' drama that evolved at the Abbey during the first half of the twentieth century. Yeats's decision to change the setting from an inn to a cottage, and to capitalize 'Catholic' in his opening reference to the shrine in 1895 and subsequent versions of the play, indicates his responsiveness to those Catholic nationalist sensitivities that would sharpen during the 1900s.²⁸

²⁵ W.A. Henderson Press Cuttings, National Library of Ireland, Pos7271, p. 249. ²⁶ Terence Brown, *The life of W.B. Yeats: a critical biography* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), p. 127. ²⁷ Alspach, *Variorum plays*, p. 6 ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

The setting is misinterpreted, however, if it is seen simply as a stereotypical rural Irish location. The woods outside the window recall the woods of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, Old Ekdal's warning of the power of the forest in *The Wild Duck*, the symbolic allure of the apple trees for Jean in Strindberg's *Miss Julia*, while also anticipating the symbolic power of the trees in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Indeed, Hamm's opening speech in Beckett's *Endgame* alludes implicitly to the Symbolist stage practice of depicting woods as emblems of the dreamworld of the unconscious, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek fashion: 'What dreams! Those forests!'²⁹ The note of satire here registers the extent of Beckett's alienation from the motifs of 1890s symbolist theatre, while acknowledging a line of influence; whereas *The Countess Cathleen* depicts a forest, *Waiting for Godot* has a simple tree. However, it is also the case that a characteristic feature of Yeats's revisions of *The Countess Cathleen* is a tendency towards a Spartan stage in which the forest comes to be depicted in a simple emblematic form, with pretensions to the misty atmospherics of the nineties discarded. It may be argued, in other words, that the line of development from the symbolist theatre of the 1890s to Beckett's avant-garde minimalism is actually pre-figured in the internal development of Yeatsian theatre.

Through the course of the play's many revisions, a consistent feature was a ritual pattern that inscribed Yeats's occult concerns within the play in a manner that carried strong Oedipal undertones. All versions subsequent to 1892 begin with a mother figure, Mary, alone on the stage as her son Teigue enters. Mary, the husband of Shemus, occupies an important role in the play; she is a pious woman who displays devotion to the Virgin Mary and, in spite of the impoverished condition of her household, she will resist the offer made by the demon merchants. She will also display empathy toward the countess that is not shared by her husband. Thus, she occupies an important role in the three main feminine roles within the play; her own, that of the virgin statue, and that of the countess. Her son Teigue plays a more minor role; he is of one voice with his father on the central question of whether the family should make a bargain with the merchants.

At the outset of the play, Mary worries for her husband as Teigue speaks of a land that is 'famine-struck' and of a herdsman who had 'met a man who had no mouth, nor eyes, nor ears; his face a wall of flesh'.³⁰ This image instigates a dialectic of material privation and imaginative license that develops through the course of the play. In its most basic sense, it is an image of sensory deprivation resulting from starvation, of a man who cannot speak, see nor hear. It may thus be linked simply and exclusively to the experience of famine in rural Ireland. However, it is difficult not to notice a hint of the general preoccupation with mummification and the automaton (the 'unhuman'), in plays such as Maeterlinck's *The Blind*,

²⁹ Samuel Beckett: *the complete dramatic works* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 93. ³⁰ Alspach, *Variorum plays*, p. 7.

Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata* or the *Stationendramen* movement in German Expressionism, in which a failure to see or to speak becomes a pretext for a modernist dramatization of entrapment.³¹ Certainly, the impossibility of communication that the image suggests anticipates the fact that, later in the play, the countess's mother, the aging Oona, senses that that 'it is time I was forgot'.³² When the gardener and then the herdsman come to warn the countess of the destruction befalling her estate, Oona complains that she could not hear the words of either of these servants because 'they stood on my deaf side'.³³ This indicates the critical lack of a 'common currency' at the centre of this play, which is dramatically captured in 'The second coming': 'The falcon cannot hear the falconer.'

The dialogue between Mary and her son at the start of the play is interrupted when Shemus, her husband, enters from the forest outside, where he has been searching for food. His name, Shemus Rua, or 'Red Seamus', carries an echo of the rebel leader of Ulster, Red Hugh O'Donnell, who was defeated at the battle of Kinsale. He appears as a strong man who is nonetheless on the verge of despair because of the famine conditions in which the people find themselves. His symbolic role is important, in his gesture of stamping on the broken shrine in the opening act of the play, just before the merchants enter their household. He takes up a role opposite to Mary in the welcome he gives to the merchants and his willingness to bargain his soul for the gold they offer. His welcome of the merchants, both males, forms a mirror image to the empathy between Mary and Cathleen.

With the entry of Shemus onto the stage at the beginning of the play, an oedipal triangle is established within which the identities Shemus, Mary and Teigue are framed. This frame, however, constantly threatens to disintegrate in the face of those elements, libidinal and economic, standing outside it. The piety of Mary for example, is rooted in her identification with the Virgin Mary, an identification that raises the possibility of incest while simultaneously placing such a possibility under the interdiction of taboo. Under the guise of an appeal to the Virgin Mother, Mary expresses her desire for the enclosed circle of mother-father-son. The appeal to the Virgin displaces the subliminal eroticism of such a desire unto the external world of the forest. The threshold of the cottage, therefore, acquires a heightened symbolic resonance in the play, in the manner in which it marks off the space of incestuous familial enclosure yet simultaneously placing all erotic energy outside this space. It is highly significant, therefore, that when the merchants enter the cottage for the first time, the Virgin shrine falls to the floor. After the first performance of the play in 1899, great offence was taken at the image of Shemus kicking the broken shrine to pieces, on the grounds of blasphemy. Perhaps the real motive for such offence lay not

³¹ For a discussion of *Stationendramen* and *Schreidrama* in European expressionist theatre see Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: a literary guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp 136–64. ³² Alspach, *Variorum plays*, p. 59. ³³ *Ibid.*, pp 63, 67.

so much in theological blasphemy as in its 'threat to the family', its admission of erotic desire into the private circle of family life; with the smashing of the shrine, the taboo displacing the sexual energies of the family triangle is neutralized, by energies symbolized at one level in the presence of 'demons' on stage.

The second movement of the play centres on the countess's visit to the cottage. She is the central character of the play; her personality is portrayed as wistful and dreamlike, though she gives whatever practical help she can to assist this beleaguered community. Her diction is soft, and her presence on stage appears weighed with sorrow. In versions of the play subsequent to 1908, Cathleen's visit is preceded by Shemus cursing first the beggars and then the rich, while Mary pities the rich, making biblical reference to 'the needle's eye at the end of all'.³⁴ Shemus's double curse of rich and poor in post-1908 versions indicates Yeats's sharpening sense of 'double-vision' subsequent to the rows of the Irish National Theatre Society and the *Playboy* debacle of 1907, but it also points to a maturing sense of his age as an antithetical moment in history for which the ironic sensibility was most appropriate. Mary's expression of pity displays Yeats's need to defend his class and its values within circumstances that grew increasingly unsympathetic and recalls Standish O'Grady's appeal for a unity of peasant and landlord against the rising middle-classes in Britain and Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century.³⁵ The discrepancy between the aristocratic code and the material circumstances of the peasantry is highlighted in Shemus's disgruntled response to the elevated music coming from the forest that signals the arrival of the countess. In post-1908 versions, he asks: 'Who's passing there? And mocking us with music?'³⁶ This discrepancy is invested with a low-level dramatic intensity in the scene of encounter between the countess and the inhabitants of the cottage. Emphasis is laid here upon the threshold as border, as the point of contact and separation between the interior world of the cottage and that which lies beyond. Shemus welcomes the countess and Aleel in, commenting:

This threshold worn away by many a foot
Has been passed only by the snails and birds
And by our own poor hunger-shaken feet.³⁷

In conversation with the countess some lines later, he states:

I fell but now, being weak with hunger and thirst,
And lay upon the threshold like a log.³⁸

These allusions to the threshold invite a variety of readings. First of all, they point to an increased privatization of human experience in which what lies beyond

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65. ³⁵ Standish O'Grady, *Toryism and the Tory democracy* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1886). ³⁶ Alspach, *Variorum Plays*, p. 57. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

the domestic dwelling appears increasingly inhospitable, thus making of that dwelling a more private space. Secondly, this privatization is implicitly linked to privation; symbolically, in his hunger, Shemus lies upon the threshold, the boundary marking a private space. The image will be used again in Yeats's play *The King's Threshold* where the poet Seanchan starves himself to death on the threshold of the king's court in protest at his dismissal from the court. Thirdly, the threshold suggests a limit experience, the point beyond which one can only travel at the risk of annihilation. Emphasis on the threshold, therefore, points to the close proximity of death and what is, in one sense, literally unspeakable; that is, a surrender to the 'demonic' in which all boundaries, material and emotional, disappear. Finally, underlying all these senses of threshold is the sense of epochal transition, in which the forms of a civilization have outlived their material content, while new forms are yet to emerge. The threshold, in other words, is both a rune of psychic containment and historical upheaval, an emblem of the transition from the feudal to the modern era in European history and the psychic disturbance consequent upon this, a disturbance heightened by the arrival of the merchants on the stage.

The first gesture of the countess is to empty her purse of whatever money remains and to promise Shemus twice the sum should he come to her house the following day. This contrasts with the money offered by the demons to Shemus in the scene to follow; the countess's gesture appears purely hospitable, whereas the merchants' offer of gold is framed within a system of exchange. However, upon further reflection, this contrast is not as simple as it appears initially. Certainly, Cathleen's concern for the predicament of a starving peasantry and the selfless nature of her gesture are Yeats's way of conveying his belief in the magnanimity of the aristocracy as the sign of the fitness for rule. With an almost bohemian fragrance, Cathleen dispenses with her wealth, motivated by what was for Yeats one of the most refined and inexpressible of human emotions, the feeling of pity. However, from the position of Shemus and his family, her gesture is underwritten by a contradiction that makes the contrast between her and the merchants less straightforward. In dispensing with her wealth, Cathleen sets the values of human emotion above those of practical necessity. Shemus, however, has no choice but to accept her gift; he is driven by the basic human instinct of self-preservation. Nonetheless, in accepting Cathleen's money, he defers to a feudal aristocratic code in which values of sentiment are placed above pragmatic self-interest. The sentimental self-abandonment of Cathleen, therefore, rests on the foundation of the peasants' practical self-preservation. Consequently, an exchange does, in fact, take place when Cathleen offers her money to Shemus; in exchange for practical relief of him and his family, he must defer to an order of nobility and sentiment in which practical self-interest occupies a subordinate role. In view of this, it is over-simplistic to regard her as the heroic alternative to the mercenary demons.³⁹

³⁹ In one of his final essays 'A general introduction to my work', Yeats reveals that he thought

There is certainly a strong symbolist quality in Cathleen's dialogue with Mary at this point in the play in versions published between 1895 and 1908. The resonance of Villiers-de-l'Isle Adam's *Axël* is felt when Cathleen speaks of being the owner 'of a long empty castle in these woods'.⁴⁰ The same anodyne quality we find in 'The wanderings of Oisín' is evident here; Cathleen admits to wrapping herself round 'with music and sweet song' in an attempt to hide from 'the terror of the times'.⁴¹ She reveals to Mary that she has 'lost [her] way'. At its most basic level, this indicates that the countess has not traveled through the wood for many years, indicating that she has been out of contact with the inhabitants of this and the neighboring cottages for a considerable time. If we regard the countess as an emblem of Anglo-Irish civility, her statement becomes evidence of the withdrawal of the landed gentry from intimate contact with their 'people' that Standish O'Grady bemoaned in *Toryism and the Tory Democracy*.

However appropriate this allusion might be, it does not obscure the broader sense of *unheimlich* that Cathleen's statement intimates, a sense carried in the obvious psychic symbolism of the forest and the subtle dialectic of memory and forgetfulness at play in the dialogue between Cathleen and Mary. There is a notable intimacy between the two women that suggests a sister solidarity contrary to the division in class: Cathleen apologizes to Mary for the music that plays while people are starving; while Mary tells Cathleen how to find the castle she seeks. Mary, therefore, directs the countess towards the element of continuity she seeks in the face of the crisis of famine; she outlines for Cathleen the trace of historical continuity, the 'green shadowed pathway' and 'a trodden way among the hazels'.⁴² This mnemonic trace, however, is caught in a self-woven web of irony; it leads the countess through the delirium of the forest, the symptom of those forces of history, libidinal and economic, that has shattered the possibility of commemorative continuity. Thus, while an image of recollection, this pathway induces the same anodyne effect as the music, thereby serving opposing desires to recollect and forget. It is the element of form and continuity within the formless primitive chaos of the forest and also a means of forgetting, a way out of the nightmare of history surrounding the countess. Yet even in this evasion of the unpalatable present, this pathway is a sign of those forces of history Cathleen seeks to escape. It is a dormant trading path, anticipating new forces of commerce that render the feudal life of the court redundant – the castle to which it leads lies empty.

There follows the song of Aleel, revised in post-1908 versions as 'Were I but crazy for love's sake,' during which Cathleen and Oona depart, then followed

of the countess 'as medieval and thereby connected her with the general European movement,' *Essays and introductions*, p. 525. This indicates strongly that the play is located historically in the period of transition from feudal to early modern society and that its orbit is European rather than uniquely Irish in its dramatic context. 40 Alspach, *Variorum plays*, 21. 41 *Ibid.* 42 *Ibid.*

by Aleel. Their departure paves the way for the next movement in the play, wherein the demons, the merchants of the east, enter the cottage. Reflecting the contrast between Cathleen's empathy with Mary and Aleel's disdain of her husband Shemus, Shemus acts as the catalyst for the entrance of the demons while Mary resists. In the versions between 1895 and 1908, speaking of the Mother of God who 'cannot hear the poor', Shemus anticipates a communication breakdown between the Countess and her servants that becomes apparent later in the play. He speaks of Satan pouring 'famine from his bag' and has in mind to pray to him 'to cover all this table with red gold'.⁴³ The image of gold is, of course, central to the play and it carries specific occult connotations for Yeats. In the ritual of the wayfarer's entrance recorded in 'Notes for a Celtic Order of Mysteries' that Yeats formulated with Fiona MacLeod (William Sharp), Gonne and Annie Horniman, gold represents the sun on the Philosopher's stone, thereby connecting to the masculine principle of the solar hero. Red is the colour symbol on the western axis of the circular colour spectrum devised for the ritual entrance of the wayfarer in the third part of the proposed rite of initiation for the Celtic Order.⁴⁴ In conjunction with this alchemical aspect is the sense of a shift from Cathleen's idealism to the merchants' materialism. In the light of Marx's discussion of money in volume one of *Capital*, the advent of the merchants in the play can be viewed as a moment of historical transformation conveyed through the form of occult ritual pattern. Thus, it is not incredulous to suggest that the colors may allude to revolutionary (red) transformation of society with the advent of money (gold) as the universal equivalent form of commodities.⁴⁵

The disturbance consequent upon a transgression of threshold limits is captured in Shemus's violent gesture – smashing the shrine – just before the merchants enter the cottage. The 'bond is crack't' and the idea that the new order of bourgeois mercantilism personified in the merchants involves dehumanization or even a Nietzschean post-humanism, is captured in Mary's fear-ridden assertion to the merchants; 'you are not human.' This sense of the unhuman is recurrent throughout the play in its many incarnations. In scene one of the 1892 version, Mary speaks to Shemus of her fear of the 'wood things'.⁴⁶ In versions between 1895 and 1908, she observes that the merchants pour out wine 'as the wood sidheogs do'.⁴⁷ Here Mary reveals her belief in the totem, which is indicated from the outset in the position occupied by the virgin shrine within the household. In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer explained the totem in terms of a primitive belief

43 *Ibid.*, p. 29. 44 National Library of Ireland ms. 13568, part 3. 45 Notwithstanding the specific esoteric context of the proposed rituals of the Celtic order of mysteries, it is nonetheless significant that in the rite of the cauldron, the wayfarer takes an oath in which he promises to bow his head 'before no God nor Spirit except such as sacrifice daily to Eternal Man, for Man only is the eternal labourer,' National Library of Ireland ms. 13568, part 1. This runs close to the Marxist concept of the primacy of labour, perhaps suggesting the kabbalistic aspect to Marx's own work. 46 Alspach, *Variorum plays*, p. 22. 47 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

in the possibility of externalizing of the soul. He offers this as an explanation for an aspect of the rite of passage common among tribes with a belief in totemism, in which a boy of puberty undergoes an initiatory rite involving the pretence of killing him and bringing him back to life. Frazer believed that this expressed a tribal belief in the transference of the boy's soul to his totem.⁴⁸ The relevance of this to *The Countess Cathleen* is that it links totemic belief to a process of exchange in which the spiritual entity takes on a material, even inanimate form. Mary's revelation of totemic belief is also, of course, invested with the kind of significance explored in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, but it is, perhaps, more important to recognize that her belief is expressed in the context of a situation of exchange the centre of which is money.⁴⁹ Thus, identifying her attitude as straightforward primitivism is unsatisfactory – Mary's attitude is deeply, if opaquely, implicated in the crisis of modernity that runs through the play, which is most disturbingly captured in the suggestion that people are commodities, exchangeable things in the world.

Through Yeats's revisions of the play over many years, a distinctive occult pattern of initiation emerges and becomes more tautened in later versions. The aspect of dehumanization that connects the play to a modernist aesthetic is framed within this occult pattern. The play commences with the archetypal family triangle of mother, father and son. This triangular structure is then doubled (and disturbed) when the countess, Aleel and Oona enter the cottage. Following their departure and the destruction of the virgin shrine, the two merchants arrive at the cottage. Their twin features and parallel actions are employed by Yeats visually to create an unsettling atmosphere in order to suggest how, during the course of their initiation, the participants' forms of vision become unsettled. The audience sees this in the gender difference of responses to the merchants within the household: Sheamus and Teigue welcoming them as trading men, Mary warning them away as demons.

This difference is complicated by the fact that while the men cannot see beyond the illusion of the demons' initial appearance as material creatures interested solely in material activity (trade), Mary sees through the illusion of this material appearance to the 'reality' of the merchants' non-material natures, beings from a world beyond material perception. In later versions of the play, Mary not only attributes supernatural powers to the merchants but also believes that they are 'not of those who cast a shadow.'⁵⁰ This, of course, draws on folklore regarding spirit creatures that Yeats would have encountered in numerous sources. In this particular context, however, Mary's assertion acquires an additional significance consonant with the occult structure of correspondence shaping the play. The shadow becomes the insubstantial supplement to the materiality of those

⁴⁸ James Frazer, *The golden bough* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), p. 692. ⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London: Norton, 1950). It is worth reminding ourselves in this context of the shortcomings of a-social oedipalization as illustrated by Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, pp 51–67. ⁵⁰ Alspach, *Variorum plays*, p. 41.

'real' figures in the play, the vaporous signifier of their solid substantiality. Consequently, the absence of the insubstantial shadow does not simply indicate the ghostly nature of the beings standing before Mary; it also highlights the irony that her own material solidity is signified by something as vaporous and insubstantial as a shadow, a supplement that, like the threshold, marks the border between material historical certainties and an invisible spirit world. Indeed, a parallel between the shadow, understood in this manner, and the threshold is evident in the First Merchant's rebuttal of Mary's invocation of God:

Pray, you shall need Him.

You shall eat grass, and dock, and dandelion,

And fail till this low threshold there seems a wall[.]⁵¹

The threshold and the shadow both admit contact between inner and outer worlds; the wall closes off such contact. Thus, Mary is imagined here as literally engaged in a purely material, animal existence. This brutish reduction to physical necessity is concentrated in the image of the wall that admits no redeeming contact with a realm beyond the 'despotism of fact,' a realm suggested in the ethereality of shadow. This, however, serves only to remind us that this wall is no more substantial than the merchants; like them, it ostensibly embodies the triumph of materialism, but only at the cost of admitting its own spectral, illusory nature. The wall in this instance is, unlike the threshold, an illusion.⁵²

Yeats's strategies of doubling, therefore, are not evident simply in the overt twining of the merchants; they are also present in a more discreet process of *Darstellung*, in which the demons, as figures whose ghostly natures are revealed in their shadow-less aspect, 'mirror' the living characters, whose shadows mark their materiality. This web of oppositional correspondence grows more thickly with the realization that the merchants are embodiments of an ethos of materialistic self-interest destined to replace the elevated spirituality of the countess. These occult procedures of shadowing and doubling might be conceived in terms set out by Derrida in his critique of Lévi-Strauss, particularly given the congruence of the play's primitivist aspect and the objects of Lévi-Strauss's study in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* and *The Savage Mind*. This would appear even more plausible when the historiographic implication of this dialectic of shadow is considered: namely, how it manifests a simultaneity of primitive and modern, apparently failing to provide conditions for a linear chronology in the process. Certainly, the interaction of structure and play, center and periphery, presence and absence,

51 *Ibid.*, p. 49. 52 One might counter that Yeats appears to grant this image a more substantial reality in versions subsequent to 1908 when he replaces 'seem a wall' with 'becomes a wall.' Alspach, *Variorum plays*, p. 49. What this actually indicates, however, is Yeats's more forthright sense of Mary's imagined incapacity to distinguish reality from illusion; in pre-1908 versions, the word 'seems' points to her sense that what she sees may be an illusion, a sense that is absent in post-1908 versions.

within which Derrida's critique is framed, bears resemblance to the forms of parallel, inversion and, finally, exchange, within the play.⁵³ The remarkable (and overlooked) aspect to this play, however, is that its infinite play of material and insubstantial correspondences, with their undoubted sources in kabbalah, is so deeply shaped by conditions of material privation and historical disjunction.

In versions of the play prior to 1908, the first encounter between the merchants and the household of Mary, Shemus and Teigue is followed by three more acts. In subsequent versions, Yeats converted these acts to scenes, added a short penultimate scene and substantially revised the dialogue and settings. The overall effect was a greater stylistic tightness, with the symbolism of speech, gesture and image becoming more concentrated, creating a dramatic effect more consonant with intensity and artifice of the European experimentalist theatre. Throughout the revisions, a sense of ritual pattern remained. Act two remained concentrated around a dialogue between Cathleen, Aleel and Oona that formed a parallel to the opening triangular exchange between Mary, Shemus and Teigue. Through the intervention of their servants, the gardener and peasants, the disturbance following the arrival of the merchants is communicated to Cathleen. The attitudes of hostility and welcome, within the circle of Cathleen, Aleel and Oona, to what lay beyond the boundary of their court reflects the attitudes of Mary, Shemus and Teigue to the forest beyond their household in act one. Each intervention by a subordinate in act two deepens Cathleen's sense of anxiety in a manner akin to that experienced by Mary in act one. Act two is full of esoteric reference; the herdsman is a figure include in the plan for ritual initiation for the Celtic Order of Mysteries and recalls the herdsman referred to by Teigue in act one, who claimed to have seen a man whose face was a wall of flesh. The fruit to which the gardener refers in his conversation with the Countess carries occult significance; the exchange strongly prefigures the concerns of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, particularly the relationship between Ranyevskaya and Firs, her footman.⁵⁴ This prepares the audience for the merchants' first encounter with the Countess in act three, preparing the way for the climactic gesture of Cathleen's self-abandonment in the final act when the audience is returned to the cottage of Shemus and the body of the dead Mary.

In conclusion, while it is not possible here to provide a full analysis of the later acts in regard to the dialectical form of exchange in the play that this paper has attempted to highlight, it can be stated that Cathleen's sacrificial act is only

⁵³ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences,' *The languages of criticism and the sciences of man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1970), pp 247–65. ⁵⁴ Firs has a deeply affectionate devotion to Ranyevskaya, but his struggle to communicate with his lady due to a deafness brought on by old age is also an oblique echo of Oona, whose deafness prevents her hearing the gardener's words to Cathleen. Like Oona, Firs is pre-occupied with the idea of being forgotten. Anton Chekhov, *The cherry orchard*, trans. Michael Frayn (London: Methuen, 1978), pp 8–9, 67.

comprehended fully in terms of that form. Hers is foremost an act of exchange, hardly immune from the ambivalences in the play surrounding gold; its esoteric alchemical significance and its centrality to a system of exchange that would appear to render such significance obsolete. Marjorie Howes is only partly correct in arguing that while the countess's sacrifice reveals the magnanimity of the aristocracy, it also reveals an assumption of their inherent superiority over the peasantry, one aristocratic soul being worth more than countless peasant souls.⁵⁵ This reading leaves in the background the nature of the exchange that takes place. If Cathleen's soul is as rare and priceless as gold, it comes to occupy a position at the centre of a system of exchange in which reproducibility and price have the effect of commodifying even rarity itself.⁵⁶ Cathleen's gesture, selling her soul to the devil in order to save the souls of the peasantry, is a Faustian conclusion to a feudal aristocratic ethos within which such Faustian spirit would flourish and is a noble surrender of nobility itself. For no matter how selfless her motivation, Cathleen gives her 'soul' to merchants; her spiritual self-sacrifice allows the advance of a new ethos of pecuniary atavism. Her rarefied act is the moment of flattening of value itself in a newly emergent system of interchangeability. Commenting on Marx's writing on money in *Grundrisse*, Antonio Negri observes:

The more fundamental the representation of value in the figure of money, the more fundamental is the refutation of value, the radicality of its inversion. Communism is not the realization of the interchangeability of value, the being in force of money as a real measure. Communism is the negation of all measure, the affirmation of the most exasperated plurality – creativity.⁵⁷

It might be objected that Cathleen's redemption at the play's conclusion, in which, upon her death, angels take her to Heaven, reinstates the notion of sacred value at the point in the play where it appears on the verge of collapsing. It may have been that Yeats was not prepared to envisage the full implication of what he imagined theatrically and that this awkward conclusion represented a pulling back from disconcerting consequences similar to the way he revised the conclusion of *The King's Threshold*. In any case, the vision of the angels only occurs after the countess has made her pact with the demons and has died. Whatever we make of it, the salvation of her soul does not dispel the catastrophe of all value equalized that her pact (and her death) involves. Whether it unconsciously alludes to the 'exasperated plurality' that Negri envisages beyond all measure is another matter.

⁵⁵ Howes, *Yeats's nations*, p. 61. ⁵⁶ For Marx's comments on rarity as a necessary quality of gold as money, see *Grundrisse*, p. 176. ⁵⁷ Antonio Negri, *Marx beyond Marx: lessons on the Grundrisse* (London: Pluto, 1991), p. 33.