

LADY GREGORY AND YEATS

SYMBIOTIC CREATIVITY

BY MARY LOU STEVENSON

Ms. Stevenson is writing a biography of Lady Gregory.

LADY GREGORY, insofar as she is known, is known primarily as the patron of Yeats. As such she is regarded with that mixed gratitude and denigration felt for someone performing an ordinary and unskilled job and expecting some special recognition. George Moore gives this description of her instructions for his care of Yeats when Yeats once went to spend a few days with him collaborating on a play:

. . . I must be careful not to overwork him, and that it would be well not to let him go more than two hours without food—a glass of milk, or, better still, a cup of beef tea in the forenoon, and half an hour after lunch he was to have a glass of sherry and a biscuit . . .¹

During Yeats' early visits to Coole Park, he was so rundown that, as he wrote, "The toil of dressing in the morning exhausted me, and Lady Gregory began to send me cups of soup when I was called."² There is obviously something ridiculous about anyone appearing before posterity asking for special recognition because of outstanding service providing cups of soup and platters of biscuits.

Lady Gregory did much more. From 1896 when Yeats was thirty-two until his marriage in 1917, he spent every summer resting and writing poetry at Coole Park. He often spent more than the summers. As Lady Gregory's granddaughter reports:

There was a large bed of sedum in the flower garden, by the first vinery; in the summer it was alive with butterflies and I can remember Mamma [Lady Gregory's daughter-in-law] once saying that sedum flowered all the year round and while it was in flower Yeats would be at Coole.³

Yeats himself said of the relationship, "I doubt if I should have done much with my life but for her firmness and care." In 1909 when she

¹ George Moore, *Ave, Hail and Farewell* (New York: Appleton, 1920), p. 297.

² W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 126.

³ Anne Gregory, *Me and Nu: Childhood at Coole* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1970), p. 31.

nearly died of overwork and rheumatism, he defined his relationship to her in his journal:

She has been to me mother, friend, sister and brother. I cannot realize the world without her—she brought to my wavering thoughts steadfast nobility. All day the thought of losing her is like a conflagration in the rafters. Friendship is all the house I have.⁴

We have too Yeats' magnificent tributes to her in his poetry. In "Beautiful Lofty Things" he describes a threat made against her by a dissatisfied tenant:

Augusta Gregory seated at her great ormolu table, Her eightieth winter approaching: "Yesterday he threatened my life. I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this table, The blinds drawn up."⁵

In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" he describes a portrait of her:

Mancini's portrait of Augusta Gregory,
'Greatest since Rembrant,' according to John Synge;
A great ebullient portrait certainly;
But where is the brush that could show anything
Of all that pride and that humility?
And I am in despair that time may bring
Approved patterns of women or of men
But not that selfsame excellence again.⁶

Lady Gregory served him beef tea, was his hostess for many years, and a source of poetic inspiration. Many women have done as much and gotten and expected no more than the dedication of a book, "To my beloved wife," or "To my secret inspiration," or some such personal but non-intrusive recognition. Why give her more?

She is worth a great deal more attention because she did a great deal more, and not all for Yeats. She was using Yeats, just as Yeats was using her. Their relationship is a magnificent illustration of how two people can benefit each other when their needs and their abilities are as complementary as those of Lady Gregory and Yeats. Their relationship permitted each to develop their abilities to the fullest, and if Lady Gregory was not a world famous poet but merely a talented playwright and gifted administrator, the study of how anyone used every ability they

⁴ Yeats, *Memoirs*, p. 161.

⁵ W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 300.

⁶ Yeats, *Poems*, p. 317.

had and thoroughly enjoyed themselves in the process—such a story is bound to be both instructive and delightful.

Lady Gregory managed the relationship. Yeats' father wrote of her, "though it is not easy personally to like her . . . on the whole I am very glad that Lady Gregory 'got' Willie."⁷ And Yeats, at first, had no idea of the benefits he was to receive. He wrote a friend on the occasion of his first long visit to Coole Park in the summer of 1897, "I shall probably be at Tillyra for a month and then go to Lady Gregory of Coombe [*sic*], Galway, and then back here."⁸ He did not anticipate that Lady Gregory and Coole would become important to him.

On the occasion of this first visit, Lady Gregory was a widow of forty-five. Yeats described her as "a plainly dressed woman of forty-five, without obvious good looks, except the calm that comes from strength, intelligence and kindness."⁹ Her husband, who had been thirty-five years her senior, had died five years earlier leaving her with a twelve-year-old son and a beautiful but mortgaged estate in Ireland. She proved to be a better financial manager than her husband and within a few years had reduced the mortgages considerably. She was not a very wealthy woman, but after the first few lean years, money was not a worry . . . not until the 1920's when political conditions made land ownership less profitable. She had great energy and a great but well concealed desire for admiration and fame.

In the leisure, and emptiness, left her by her husband's death, she edited his autobiography, saying in the preface that, though her husband had not written for publication, she published so that his name "may be kept alive a little longer, and that for his sake a friendly hand may sometimes in the future be held out to his boy."¹⁰ She proceeded to edit her husband's grandfather's letters—who had been a high official in the British administration of Ireland in the early 1800's. She makes clear that she has the approval of her family, saying that she and her husband talked of publication and began sorting through the letters together. She notes that "Old Mr. Gregory's bust looks benevolently on my la-

⁷ John Butler Yeats, *Letters to His Son W. B. Yeats and Others: 1869-1922*, ed. Joseph Hone (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), pp. 151-52.

⁸ W. B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 284.

⁹ W. B. Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 261.

¹⁰ Augusta Gregory, ed. *An Autobiography by Sir William Gregory*. 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1894), p. i.

bours.”¹¹ The book is well done, but at the end she must again remind the reader that she is not primarily a historian or an author, but a mother. She mentions that old Mr. Gregory went to Harrow, as did her husband, and that their son is there now. She concludes that his “mother hopes that he may put into the work he has to do as much good will as she had brought to this self-imposed task of hers.”¹² If she was going to be an author, she had to present herself as a mother who has taken on the burden of authorship in the service of her family.

Born in 1852 on her family’s large estate in the west of Ireland, as one of sixteen children, ten of whom were more favored brothers, she had been thoroughly indoctrinated into the lessons of woman’s place. As a female member of the landowning class she had been taught that her role was to serve, first of all her family (the male members of her family), and those less fortunate than herself. The Church of Ireland reinforced these lessons. In studying how she came to make full use of her abilities, one has to recognize that she was handicapped by an attitude that made it necessary for her to be indirect and even self-deceptive about her desire for activity and success.

She had always performed charitable duties among the tenants on her family and her husband’s estates. She had visited the sick, given food, money, and firewood, bought crude handiwork she did not really want, and attempted with some success to straighten out legal and family difficulties. Just about the time she needed something more to do, in the early 1890’s, she realized that her dutiful and boring service to the people could be expanded dramatically into something more meaningful to her personally and valuable to the country as a whole.

What was happening nationally was the beginning of the Irish Revival, a great swell of interest in Irish customs, folklore, in the Gaelic language, that eventually inspired and was partially responsible for the great flowering of creative talent at the beginning of the twentieth century, including the work of Yeats, Lady Gregory herself, the Abbey Theatre and all its playwrights, John Synge and Sean O’Casey foremost among them. Even James Joyce can be counted as part of this revival—in reaction against the emphasis on ancient Ireland, but inspired like the rest by Ireland itself as a subject.

The beginning of the Irish Revival came simply to Lady Gregory,

¹¹ Augusta Gregory, *Mr. Gregory’s Letter-Box: 1813-1830* (London: Smith, Elder, 1898), p. 3.

¹² Gregory, *Letter-Box*.

who read Douglas Hyde's *Beside the Fire* and *Love Songs of Connacht*, the first a retelling of Gaelic folk tales, the second a translation of Gaelic poetry, and Yeats' *Celtic Twilight* which is his highly personal account of stories about spirits, ghosts, and other non-rational phenomena he had heard from the country people around his birthplace of Sligo, which is, like Lady Gregory's home in County Galway, on the west coast of Ireland.

Both Hyde and Yeats emphasized the value of this folk knowledge and the eminent possibility of its being lost forever through the encroachments of the English language and English ways of thinking. Lady Gregory's reaction to this discovery of the Irish tradition was complex. She saw immediately that if folklore was indeed valuable, she was in a position to collect a lot of it. And she did. During the remaining thirty-five years of her life, she published eight volumes of folklore, some of them very large, and most of them very popular. But it is doubtful if she would have got from collecting to publishing without some intermediate emotional cover. Yeats provided that cover.

After reading *The Celtic Twilight*, she met Yeats once at a literary tea in London. Shortly after, he and Arthur Symons were houseguests at her neighbor Edward Martyn's, and she drove over and invited them all to lunch at Coole. (Elizabeth Coxhead, Lady Gregory's first biographer, suggests that one of the reasons the Irish Renaissance occurred was because the people of talent and energy who eventually came together with such vitalizing results kept meeting each other in a small and fairly accessible social circle in London, in Dublin, and in each other's homes scattered across Ireland.¹³

Yeats did come to lunch. Legend has it that she asked Yeats what she could do for the Irish Revival, and he replied, "Buy Irish Books."¹⁴ Another version has it that he told her she could do nothing. Lady Gregory was not so blind to her opportunities. She invited Yeats to spend a few weeks at Coole in the summer of 1897.

Yeats was then thirty-three, the author of several slim volumes of poetry, plays and folklore, head of various Irish literary societies he had founded in Dublin and London. Through his exhausting and lifelong infatuation with the beautiful nationalist Maude Gonne he was then

¹³ Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait*, rev. (New York: Seeker & Warburg, 1966), p. 39.

¹⁴ Augusta Gregory, *Seventy Years: 1852-1922: Being the Autobiography of Lady Gregory*, ed. Colin Smythe. *The Coole Edition of the Works of Lady Gregory*, ed. T. R. Henn and Colin Smythe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 390.

involved in several anti-English activities. He was scraping out a meager living writing articles and editing for English publishers.

It took a revolutionary stroke of imagination for Lady Gregory to see in him a way to a wider life. After he won the Nobel Prize in 1923, she wrote to a friend:

. . . in the years [Yeats] came here my friends and family in the neighborhood never realized that he had genius, but knew or thought he was a revolutionist, and lamented my folly and obstinacy in having him and other writers in the house instead of the ordinary "country house parties."¹⁵

But of course, Lady Gregory was right, he was a genius, and she was right in knowing, probably unconsciously at first, that under cover of serving him, she would find something of her own.

Why were they so good for each other? I think it needs to be said at the onset what is usually not said, or the opposite inferred: that emotionally and sexually, Lady Gregory and Yeats were a completely "safe" combination. Yeats was and continued to be infatuated with Maude Gonne. Lady Gregory was not interested in marriage. (She wore mourning for the last forty years of her life, a fairly strong declaration that she was not on the marriage market.) She was definitely not interested in sex. Neither was she interested in relationship with an equal.

It is evidence of the great accuracy of her instincts that in balancing her need for freedom and achievement against her need for emotional cover, she unconsciously realized she needed a man to whom she was superior in order to maintain her freedom of action and to whom she was inferior in order for him to be of any benefit to her. She was both superior and inferior to Yeats.

Practically speaking, she was greatly his superior. She was thirteen years older, of a higher social class. (She called him "Willie," he called her "Lady Gregory" to the end of her life.) She could offer the hospitality of a beautiful estate. She was excellent at dealing with people and getting things done. This practical superiority allowed her to feel at ease with him. It relieved her of the necessity of trying to impress him. It even allowed her the occasional luxury of bullying him. (An Abbey actor recalls the chilling experience of hearing Lady Gregory, then seventy-four, telling Yeats, then sixty-one, "Stand up, now, Willie, and do it properly.")¹⁶

¹⁵ Quoted in *The Man from New York: John Quinn and His Friends* by Benjamin L. Reid (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 586.

¹⁶ Gabriel Fallon, "Profiles of a Poet," *Modern Drama*, 7 (December, 1964), 343.

On the other hand, Yeats was her superior. To begin with, he was a genius. He was at the center and often the source of the activity of the Irish Revival. Moreover, he was a man. And even a poor man of good family had access to clubs and political gatherings that were closed to her. And because he was a man, it was assumed that whatever he was doing was more important than whatever she was doing. Service to him was service to the principle of masculine superiority, service to Ireland, and service to literature.

Yeats needed her help in all the ways she could offer it; Lady Gregory needed him as an emotional shield between her and her fear of putting herself before the public in a straightforward bid for attention and admiration.

Even their differences were complementary. Lady Gregory lived by a code; she really did believe in the Church of Ireland, in the class structure, in service to family and those inferior to her. But she wanted more freedom than such a structure could give her. Yeats never really believed in anything, but he wanted to. He kept devising various schemes to help him explain the world, direct his actions and give him subject matter for poetry. But Lady Gregory and Yeats both had a basic doubleness about this commitment to their opposites—to their mask as Yeats would call it. Lady Gregory really did not want freedom, she wanted to do what she wanted to do with the supporting structure of family and class firmly around her. Yeats really did not want a code of service—though he carried on at length about his need for it, saying in one of his late poems, “My medieval knees lack health until they bend.”¹⁷ Yeats wanted a structure of belief for its aesthetic and intellectual beauty, not to provide a controlling influence on his everyday life. Lady Gregory and Yeats were both bluffers; they were both manipulators. Their relationship was not particularly warm or loving, but because of their similarities and differences, and within the limits of their emotional peculiarities, it was extraordinarily beneficial to them both.

During Yeats' first visits to Coole, he was very rundown. Yeats said, “Finding that I could not work and thinking the open air salutary, Lady Gregory brought me from cottage to cottage collecting folklore.”¹⁸ Lady Gregory was happy to appear to be collecting folklore for Yeats' health. Stories she collected and recorded appear in the revised version of *The Celtic Twilight* published in 1905, with Yeats giving her credit by say-

¹⁷ Yeats, “The Municipal Gallery Revisited,” *Poems*, p. 317.

¹⁸ Yeats, *Autobiography*, p. 267.

ing, they were told "to a friend" or "to a friend whom he [the storyteller] would open his heart more readily than to me."¹⁹ She got no public credit.

She soon had her chance. An editor asked Yeats to retell the ancient Irish legends. He had no time, and she asked if she might try. These retellings of the legends were felt to be necessary to raise the consciousness of the Irish people about their past glories. She could consider her work service to her larger family of the people of Ireland as well as service to Yeats. She soon produced her two monumental and extremely popular collections, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, published in 1902, and *Gods and Fighting Men*, containing stories of the Fenians, published in 1904. She was delighted with the recognition and assiduously collected every compliment she received on them—as she did with every compliment she received on anything. But she makes clear in the preface to *Cuchulain* that she is only doing her womanly duty. The preface is addressed to "The People of Kiltartan," Kiltartan being the barony in which Coole Park is located. The people of Kiltartan, as she well knew, were not likely to be reading her book, but they were people she was accustomed to serving. "My dear friends," she calls them;

"When I began to gather these stories together, it is of you I was thinking, that you would like to have them and to be reading them. . . . And indeed if there was more respect for Irish things among the learned men that live in the college at Dublin, where so many of these old writings are stored, this work would not have been left to a woman of her house, that has to be minding the place, and listening to complaints, and dividing her share of food."²⁰

Yeats needed her help for other projects. He complained that he and other Irish writers had nowhere to produce their plays. Lady Gregory and Yeats decided to do something about it. They, with Lady Gregory's neighbor Edward Martyn, and Martyn's cousin, the realistic novelist George Moore, collected guarantees, hired English actors, and imported them to act in Irish plays for one week in Dublin for three successive years. The fourth year, 1902, they found a group of Irish amateurs to produce the plays. One of them was *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Yeats' only

¹⁹ W. B. Yeats, "The Celtic Twilight," *Mythologies* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 60.

²⁰ Augusta Gregory, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster. The Coole Edition of the Works of Lady Gregory*, ed. T. R. Henn and Colin Smythe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 5.

popular success and a permanent contribution to the patriotic literature of Ireland. Actually, Lady Gregory had as much to do with writing *Cathleen* as Yeats did, and an examination of their respective contributions illustrates their relationship.

Since the beginning of the theater project, Lady Gregory had suggested dialog and action to Yeats, George Moore and Edward Martyn as they prepared their plays for production. She had written several entire scenarios in English for Douglas Hyde to translate into Gaelic. And she had written one entire play on her own, *Colman and Guaire*, based on a local saint's legend. The play was not produced, and it is not clear whether she showed it to Yeats or others in the theater group for their opinion about possible production.

This play is based on a legend she had heard from the people around her estate. Saint Colman is starving, and a messenger comes to King Guaire demanding food for him. The king does not want to admit any obligation or relationship and says something to the effect that, "if he is really starving and if he is really my cousin, let the angels carry this feast from my table to his cave."²¹ Whereupon two angels appear and carry the feast off to Saint Colman.

The theme of *Cathleen* is similar. Instead of Saint Colman we have Cathleen representing the spirit of Ireland who asserts her right to service from the Irish people above and outside their everyday life. Lady Gregory was preoccupied with service. Yeats, again and again in his plays, was preoccupied with a dominant mood that controls the whole action of the play and creates its whole world around it. Usually Yeats' plays, though beautiful, are boring, because they reveal no understanding of or interest in other people besides himself—they reveal a mind trying to live on its own involutions. But in this play, inspired by his love for Maude Gonne and his interest in the cause of Irish freedom, Yeats' dominant character is the embodiment of national feeling. Yeats and Lady Gregory's preoccupations reinforced each other at every point.

In the preface to the first published version of *Cathleen*, Yeats describes its genesis:

One night I had a dream almost as distinct as a vision, of a cottage where there was well-being and firelight and a talk of a marriage, and into the

²¹ Augusta Gregory, *The Collected Plays, III, The Wonder and Supernatural Plays*, ed. Ann Saddlemeyer. *The Coole Edition of the Works of Lady Gregory*, ed. T. R. Henn and Colin Smythe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 16.

midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself, that Cathleen ni Houlihan for whom so many songs have been sung and about whom so many stories have been told and for whose sake so many have gone to their death. I thought if I could write this out in a little play I could make others see my dream as I had seen it, but I could not get down out of that high window of dramatic verse, and in spite of all you [Lady Gregory] had done for me I had not the country speech. One has to live with the people like you, of whom an old man said in my hearing, "She has been a serving maid among us," before one can think the thoughts of the people and speak with their tongue. We turned my dream into the little play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.²²

The play has always been attributed to Yeats alone. In 1922 he issued a revised collection of plays containing *Cathleen* and the slight comedy, *The Pot of Broth*, upon which Lady Gregory had also worked. In her diary Lady Gregory noted somewhat sourly that *Pot of Broth* is now listed as "'written with Lady Gregory'" and goes on to say, "rather hard on me not giving my name with Kathleen ni Houlihan that I wrote all but all of."²³ (Lady Gregory always wrote "Kathleen"; Yeats always wrote "Cathleen.") Elizabeth Coxhead says that it was common knowledge in Lady Gregory's family that she had written all of *Cathleen* but "when her family protested, and urged her to stake her claim, she always refused with a smile, saying that she could not take from him any part of what had proved, after all, his one real popular success."²⁴

Besides Lady Gregory's habit of subordinating herself to Yeats, there was another good reason why she did not attempt to take credit for *Cathleen*. Like his earlier play, *The Countess Cathleen*, about a young woman who sells her soul to save the people from famine, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was inspired by Yeats' infatuation with Maude Gonne. One of Lady Gregory's chief duties during the first years of her friendship with Yeats was sympathizing with him about this hopeless love. And as tactless as Lady Gregory is reputed to have been, she was not going to detract from Yeats' credit with Maude Gonne by co-signing a play that was essentially a love letter to her. (Maude Gonne was very pleased with *Cathleen*; she played the role of Cathleen the first time it was produced; she urged Yeats to write more plays like it.)²⁵

Daniel Murphy, editor of many of Lady Gregory's letters, is of the

²² W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russel K. Alspach assisted by Catharine C. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 232.

²³ Augusta Gregory, unpublished journal, typescript, Lady Gregory Archives, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, New York, Book 30, p. 296.

²⁴ Coxhead, p. 65.

²⁵ Coxhead, p. 47.

opinion that Lady Gregory wrote *all* of *Cathleen*.²⁶ I accept Yeats' description in his preface that they wrote it together—though he later forgot his obligation to her. (In 1907 addressing an angry crowd protesting the supposed anti-Irishness of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, Yeats in a flamboyant attempt to defend his loyalty began by declaring, "The author of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* addresses you!")²⁷

I believe Yeats told Lady Gregory about his dream of a cottage, firelight, etc., and that *she* made a play of it. Elizabeth Coxhead states that "in a word, . . . he thought of it and she wrote it; and this is the assertion made to me by the Gregory family, who had many times heard it from her own lips."²⁸ Yeats' dream, crystalizing around the image of Maude Gonne, presented him with the chief character, "Ireland herself," and with the situation, "a cottage where there was firelight and talk of a marriage" that *Cathleen* disrupts by luring the bridegroom off to fight for Ireland. His contribution is central, germinal; Lady Gregory could not have written the play without it. But Yeats could not have written the play himself. He lacked the feeling for the unity of the group that gives the play its power. And, as he says, he could not write the country dialect in which it is written.

Yeats having provided the cottage, Lady Gregory localized it, placed it at Killala, and set the time immediately before the French landing in support of an Irish rebellion in 1798. She thus incorporated the immense emotional response of her audience to the heroic struggle for Irish freedom into their reaction to the play. (Lady Gregory first heard of the French landing in childhood from her nurse;²⁹ she mentions it frequently in her writing; Yeats never mentions it.)

Yeats gave Lady Gregory her central character. In her own plays the emphasis is rarely on the central character but on that character's relationship to the group. But being given a strong central point, Lady Gregory created the warmth and strength of the family group that give content to *Cathleen's* power.

As members of the family hear *Cathleen's* sad story about the loss of her "four beautiful green fields" (the four provinces of Ireland), and the loyalty and death of the handsome young men who have fought for her, they comment back and forth to each other trying to place her: "Is

²⁶ Daniel J. Murphy, "Lady Gregory, Co-Author and Sometimes Author of the Plays of W. B. Yeats," *Modern Irish Literature*, ed. Raymond Porter and James D. Brophy (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Iona College, 1972), p. 47.

²⁷ Mary Colum, *Life and the Dream* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1947), p. 139.

²⁸ Coxhead, p. 65.

²⁹ Gregory, *Seventy Years*, p. 3.

she the Widow Casey that was put out of her holding at Kilgrass a while ago?"³⁰ "Is she right do you think; or is she a woman from beyond the world?"³¹ By the time she goes out asking for followers and chanting:

They shall be remembered for ever,
They shall be alive for ever,
They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever³²

all their deepest sympathies have been aroused—love of home, loyalty to a cause, devotion to the people, and the possibility of something "beyond the world."

There is no way of proving who gave the play its moving ending, but the indications are that it was Lady Gregory. As the old woman goes out, having lured the bridegroom to follow her and fight for Ireland, someone asks a character who has just come in, "Did you see an old woman going down the path?" and he replies, "I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen."³³ This sudden miraculous transformation of someone humble and weak into someone noble and powerful was an archetypal pattern Lady Gregory loved. She used it in several of her plays (*The Marriage with Douglas Hyde*, *The Traveling Man*, *The Gaol Gate*, *The Story Brought by Brigit*). It appears nowhere in Yeats' work but in *Cathleen*.

In some aspects of her life and personality, Lady Gregory resembled the character of Cathleen created by her and Yeats. Like Cathleen, she served Ireland, not for her practical advantage, but for reasons "beyond the world." And like Cathleen's transformation, Lady Gregory's career falls into the pattern of someone obscure and powerless who suddenly turns out to be famous and powerful. Lady Gregory, when half her life was over, suddenly discovered her creativity, became a leader of the Irish Renaissance, founded the Abbey Theatre with Yeats and kept it going through years of stress and battle. If it was appropriate that Maude Gonne was the first Cathleen, it was also appropriate that in 1919, due to the absence of the regular actress, Lady Gregory played the role for three nights at the Abbey, the only part in which she ever appeared.

While Lady Gregory gave Yeats the opportunity to develop to the fullest his role of great poet, Yeats gave Lady Gregory her role. But

³⁰ W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1952),

p. 54.

³¹ Yeats, *Plays*, p. 55.

³² Yeats, *Plays*, p. 56.

³³ Yeats, *Plays*, p. 57.

once having it, she took it over and developed it triumphantly herself. Because Yeats wanted a place to produce his plays, she devoted her energy and ability to the creation of an Irish theater. She raised money, cajoled politicians, hired and fired actors and directors, directed plays, and toured with the company in England and America. She loved it, and she was excellent at it.

Still working under cover of helping Yeats and the theater, she decided that Yeats' poetic plays needed comic relief. She wrote about his plays:

But the listeners, and this especially when they are lovers of verse, have to give so close an attention to the lines . . . that ear and mind crave ease and unbending, and so comedies were needed to give them rest. That is why I began writing them . . .³⁴

The first play she presented to the theater group was a comedy, *Twenty-Five* produced on March 14, 1903, the day before her fifty-first birthday. Having established the necessity of writing comedies, Lady Gregory went on with great delight to other forms: tragedy, folk history, wonder plays, and filled in, whenever other plays were needed, with translations from Molière and other continental playwrights. As unlikely as it might appear from the study of her character, from her necessity to serve, her self-deception about her desire for activity and admiration, Lady Gregory was a true artist and an excellent playwright. Her comedies are delightfully funny; her tragedies are genuinely moving. She was also very popular. In the eight years from the opening of the Abbey in 1904 until 1912, there were 600 performances of Lady Gregory's plays and translations (and this without giving her credit for Yeats' plays upon which she collaborated), 245 performances of Yeats' plays, 182 of John Synge's plays.³⁵

Lady Gregory always gave Yeats credit. When John Synge died in 1909, she wrote to Yeats about him, "You did more than anyone for him, you gave him his means of expression. You have given me mine, but I should have found something else to do, though not anything coming near this."³⁶ She dedicated her first published collection of her

³⁴ Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography. The Coole Edition of the Works of Lady Gregory*, ed. T. R. Henn and Colin Smythe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 52-53.

³⁵ Joseph Holloway, *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from His Unpublished Journals: Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, ed. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 283.

³⁶ Gregory, *Seventy Years*, p. 388.

plays to Yeats saying, "I dedicate these plays to W. B. Yeats, one for every day of the week, because he likes them and because he has taught me my trade."³⁷ This is somewhat of an exaggeration since it is clear that Lady Gregory quickly achieved a mastery of the actual business of playwriting, of dialogue and structure, that Yeats never achieved.

Yeats gave Lady Gregory credit too. He wrote magnificent poetry about her courage and her beneficial influence upon others. But he was also ready to take credit, as in the case of her contribution to *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Lady Gregory's daughter-in-law gives another example. According to her, Lady Gregory stage-managed the Abbey's production of George Bernard Shaw's *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet* . . .

and made it the success it was. Y. never saw it acted until the last dress rehearsal. Then, realizing that all the English and Foreign critics had collected and that there was a stir, he asked her to let him take the rehearsal, saying he wished the reporters to think that he had stage managed it, and she is so used to giving way to him that she agreed.³⁸

In his prose writing, Yeats often analyzed Lady Gregory's character accurately, but what he always leaves out is a recognition that she, like he, was also a creator. He was like a child unable to recognize the existence of a parent aside from the parent's role of service to the child. He did not detect under "all that pride and that humility" the will to freedom and creativity. In *A Vision*, his private mythology in which he linked personality to phases of the moon, he placed her, along with Queen Victoria, in Phase Twenty-Four. Such people serve a code:

All is sacrificed to this code; moral strength reaches its climax. . . . There is great humility—"she died every day she lived"—and pride as great, pride in the code's acceptance, an impersonal pride, as though one were to sign "servant of servants." There is no philosophic capacity, no intellectual curiosity, but they are a part of the world and that world is accepted . . . and though they can stand utterly alone, indifferent though all the world condemn, it is not that they have found themselves, but that they have been found faithful.³⁹

Lady Gregory immediately saw what was lacking in this otherwise faultlessly correct assessment of her personality and exclaimed indig-

³⁷ Augusta Gregory, *Seven Short Plays* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1909), p. i.

³⁸ Quoted in *Biography of Lord Dunsany* by Mark Amory (London: Collins, 1972), pp. 73-74.

³⁹ W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 169-70.

nantly in her diary, "With Queen Victoria! . . . But I don't think she could have written 'Seven Short Plays!'"⁴⁰

Likewise, Lady Gregory did not see to the heart of Yeats' personality. She appreciated his writing because it was an expression of freedom but never recognized the depths of exploration out of which it came. Though she collaborated with him on *Where There Is Nothing*, in which the hero puts out the light of the eye and the mind and the sun and moon because "where there is nothing, there is God,"⁴¹ she never experienced the dazzling shock of knowing what it was like to live in the wild landscape of Yeats' imagination.

Though the relationship between Lady Gregory and Yeats was of immense benefit to both, it was not, in itself, a thing of beauty. In their thirty-five years of friendship, there was much enthusiasm, much intellectual interest, many shared hopes and fears, but little intimacy and little love. Yet within their limitations, it allowed them both to develop their abilities to the fullest.

⁴⁰ Gregory, *Journal*, Book 31, p. 15.

⁴¹ Yeats, *Variorum Plays*, p. 1150.