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CATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN, YEATS'S DREAM,
AND THE DOUBLE LIFE OF MAUD GONNE

ADRIAN FRAZIER

IN the 1904 patent application of the Irish National Theatre Society for the Abbey Theatre, W. B. Yeats stated that, if the patent were granted, the plays the society staged would be, as they always had been, literary—not political. But what about its first and still most popular play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*? This play certainly had a propagandizing effect upon its audiences, as many spectators testified before and after the hearings. But Yeats claimed in the patent application that *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was highly personal, not political. His proof was that the idea for it had come to him in a dream.

As I explain in *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* (1990), this origin appeared to some skeptics at the time as legal nicety, red herring, and bare-faced fib all rolled into one. What did Yeats's dreams have to do with a public license to mount plays? To present-day scholars Yeats's patent claim about *Cathleen ni Houlihan* seems no more convincing. The September 1900 manuscripts of the play indicate that Lady Gregory had written most of the play's lines. Her diary indicates that she felt that the play was more hers than his. Yeats privately conceded to her, to W. G. Fay, and to Lennox Robinson as much; but he never stopped publishing the play as solely his own. This looks like a case of sexism and personal bad faith on his part.

But reconsideration of Yeats's relationship with Maud Gonne, from their first meeting in January 1889 to her performance in the title role of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in April 1902, leads one to suspect there might be some truth in Yeats's claim. The facts are known to scholars, but many are still strange enough to be hard to credit by almost anyone.

The dream he had in May or June 1901 was about the sudden appearance in 1798 of a visionary old woman—an embodiment of Ireland—in a cottage in Mayo on the wedding day of the son

of the house, just before the invasion of the French. She comes there to recruit soldiers for the rebellion. Her appearance breaks up the impending marriage, as the groom-to-be (or in fact not to be), follows her out in a trance. At the very end of the play we hear that no poor old woman has been seen on the road, but instead a lovely young one with the walk of a queen.

The implausibility of Yeats's patent claim partly involves the dream itself. Who really dreams of 1798? He ought to be dreaming—if he is like other men—of sex, women, victories, and strokes of luck. Maybe in fact this was one such dream. Certainly Yeats often dreamt of Maud Gonne, and she of him. They wrote letters to each other about these dreams, on the mornings after. Some of them are quite spicy allegories. He uses a spear; she flies (“I went out of my body and was brought away by Lug[h]”)—that sort of thing. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is a dreamlike allegory, written somewhat in the female vampire genre, as often noted.

There would be good reason for Maud Gonne, 1798, and the landing of the French to be mixed up in Yeats's dream in 1901. She had given herself a very forward role in organizing centennial celebrations in 1898; she and Yeats were brought closely together on the steering committees of such organizations, and later on the speakers' platforms. Indeed, when after a considerable interval, Maud Gonne invited Yeats to breakfast in London in April 1896, she began to draw him back into political organization, ahead of the commemorative events of 1898. Her role in these events was mainly to accent the French part in the rebellion. Through lecture tours around France and across America, she raised money for a memorial to General Hoche of the French landing force. She did her best to whip up enmity between France and England. Her idea—truly held, though at this time pie in the sky—was that the French might lend assistance to another attempt to overthrow English rule.

The reappearance of Maud Gonne in Yeats's life signaled the end of his love affair with Olivia Shakespear. That lovely woman arrived one day at 18 Woburn Buildings for an adulterous rendezvous. Her arrival foretold an episode in “The Travail of Passion”: “We will bend down and loosen our hair over you, / That it may drop faint perfume, and be heavy with dew.” Instead of reading her poetry to get in the mood for lovemaking, as was his peculiar

custom, Yeats wrote letters, possibly even a letter to Maud Gonne. After a time Mrs. Shakespear arose from the large chair, broke into tears, and said, "There is someone else in your heart." He tells this story on himself in his *Memoirs*, and apparently thinks that though it is sad it does him no discredit. In May 1898 he published a poem on the incident. It is addressed to Maud Gonne, about Olivia Shakespear, and for all London to read in the May 1898 issue of the *Dome*:

Pale brows, still hands and dim hair,
 I had a beautiful friend
 And dreamed that the old despair
 Would end in love in the end:
 She looked in my heart one day
 And saw your image was there;
 She has gone weeping away.

There are observable similarities between Gonne's reappearance in Yeats's life in 1896 and the dream material on which *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is based. A woman accustomed to wandering the world unexpectedly alights in a domestic setting, breaks up a happy relationship, and recruits a man to join the French in causing a rebellion in Ireland. Beyond these particular similarities, however, is a deeper and more interesting one between Maud Gonne and Cathleen ni Houlihan, the character.

In the play Cathleen brazenly talks about the many young men who have fallen in love with her. The people in the cottage are stunned. Most women do not brag of how many lovers they have had, much less what a bad outcome the love affairs had for the men in question—it was the death of them. But the cottiers were looking at a very old hag. Who could have ever loved *her*? And why? Chivalry it seems. She needs their help; she is a victim; someone has stolen her fields; she requires a defender. The way she obtains such service is by making young fellows fall madly, madly in love with her.

Now this is weirdly like Maud Gonne, though not in the sense that she made no secret of her love affairs. When Yeats first met her, she already—as we know, but he didn't, for she didn't tell him—had a French lover, Lucien Millevoye. Millevoye was

an hysterically vain, Napoleon-worshipping, right-wing politician, busy, when she met him in the summer of 1887, attempting with General Boulanger to create the conditions for a coup and seizure of the government of France. The French gentleman was already married, Catholic, and the father of a son. A month or two after meeting Yeats at the end of January 1889, Maud Gonne was pregnant with Millevoeye's child.

The Irish heiress, twenty-one years old, and the French politician, thirty-seven, had forged what she called "The Alliance." This plan was apparently Maud Gonne's idea. The pair would agree to do all they could to harm England, she for the sake of Ireland, and he for the sake of Alsace-Lorraine. Don't ask what England had to do with continued German possession of these two French provinces after the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. There isn't a good answer. Maybe Millevoeye just hated England because that is what many French people do, or because Wellington defeated his hero, Napoleon, or because England now stood in the way of an alliance between France and Russia against Germany, a long-range strategy for which Millevoeye schemed. Or maybe he just wanted to sleep with Maud Gonne, and so told her what she wanted to hear—i.e., that this was undercover politics, very secret and very deep, and not just sex. Sex was only the way to put a fatal seal on the Alliance. That is the implication of Maud Gonne's recollection in *A Servant of the Queen*.

To advance her side of the Alliance (the capitalization is her way of insisting on the formal status of the sexual relationship as a kind of international treaty), Maud Gonne went around Dublin and London in autumn 1888 and early 1889 trying to get herself into the republican movement so she could help "throw off the shackles of England." She also gave several public recitals of patriotic poetry, such as "Emmet's Death" and Thomas Moore's apposite "High-born Lady." She joined the newly formed Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. Naturally Irish people in the movement were a bit suspicious. Gonne's regular Dublin companion was Ida Jameson, debutante daughter of the whiskey distiller John Jameson & Sons. Miss Gonne herself was obviously English and rich. In fact she was the great-granddaughter of one of the richest men in Victorian England, the wholesaler William Cook, and the daughter of a colonel in the army of occupation

who died in Dublin only two years earlier. Whether spy, provocateur, or thrill-seeker, she seemed dangerous. Yet Maud Gonne had something else too. She may have been “the size of a fine policeman,” as one French journalist remarked, but she was a lot better looking. Through beauty and charm she overcame in short order the initial resistance of men, and the republican organizations of the time were for men only.

Michael Davitt, then MP and former Fenian prisoner and leader of the Land League, was unmoved by Gonne’s overtures, but John O’Leary was obliging. O’Leary was chief of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He could open doors for the lady and did so. Charles Oldham, president of the Contemporary Club, was promptly brought on board; he made an exception for her in the men’s-only rules of this Liberal political discussion club. On 16 December 1888, Douglas Hyde, who would soon start the Gaelic League, was bowled over: “the most dazzling woman I’ve ever seen. . . . My head was spinning.” She came to Hyde for private Irish lessons in February 1889—not long enough to learn much of the language, but plenty of time alone with the young man to complete the intended infatuation.

With Yeats even less effort was required. On 30 January 1889 she walked in the door of the Yeats family house in London, and walked out with his heart in her pocket, while Lily and Lolly, the Yeats sisters, glowered. She intimated she would like a play in which to act. Yeats offered for her consideration the subject of *The Countess Cathleen*: a rich Irish noblewoman who gives her life, and even her soul, to aid the starving peasantry. This was Yeats’s first frank promise to celebrate her beauty and nobility and make her famous. That was what she wanted, and nearly all she wanted, from Yeats. Having seen what he had seen, John O’Leary would soon warn another young man: *Watch out; she’ll make you think she loves you. But she doesn’t.*

It took Yeats a long, long time to get this fact into his head. All through the 1890s, he had a front-row seat as she charmed the most disparate if not desperate characters: J. F. Taylor, the red-bearded barrister; James Connolly, the married labor leader with children; and Arthur Griffith, the anti-Semitic journalist who walked like a penguin. Griffith was soon addressing Maud Gonne in his letters as “My Queen.” She put him on salary as editor of

the *United Irishman*, over which she thus obtained a unique influence. Here was a wealthy, extremely tall, beautiful, independent woman making use of her sexual capital, and the other kind of capital too, to gain political influence and glory. Would it not be possible, Yeats ought to have reflected, that she was doing the same with him?

Then there was the "slander" he kept hearing from Paris, to which Maud Gonne regularly beat a retreat. Sarah Purser in 1890 told him, "Oh, in Paris I saw your Miss Gonne in a restaurant with a tall Frenchman. She has gone off to die in the South of France." Yeats thinks, "To die!" He doesn't, apparently, ask, "What tall Frenchman?" Yeats began working on a fine poem about another dream:

I dreamed that one had died in a strange place
Near no accustomed hand,
And they had nailed the boards above her face,
The peasants of that land,
Wondering to lay her in that solitude,
And raised above her mound
A cross they had made out of two bits of wood,
And planted cypress round;
And left her to the indifferent stars above
Until I carved these words:
She was more beautiful than thy first love
But now lies under boards.

She received the poem in the post, according to her own recollection, while in St. Raphael on the Cote d'Azur, where she had gone for rest and recreation with her lover Lucien Millevoye and presumably their child, Georges Sylvestre. *Near no accustomed hand! The peasants of that land!* The two lovers had a good laugh over Yeats's premature epitaph. *Willie Yeats thinks I'm dying!* Within a few days she climbed a mountain by herself. It is uncertain that this story is true, but she tells it this way in *A Servant of the Queen*, and apparently thinks it does her no discredit.

People, kind friends, and others tried to tell him. He cried, "Slandorous tongue!"

Out-worn heart, in a time out-worn,
 Come clear of the nets of wrong and right;
 Laugh, heart, again in the grey twilight,
 Sigh, heart, again in the dew of the morn.

Your mother Eire is always young,
 Dew ever shining and twilight grey;
 Though hope fall from you and love decay,
Burning in fires of a slanderous tongue [italics mine].

Talk of that kind was disgraceful. He wouldn't hear of it. He buried the remains of his incredulity—after making a burnt offering of it—in this dozy, seductive, flattering poem. Gonne loved this one, absolutely loved it. What should he think of “Those Who Have Spoken Evil of His Beloved”?

Half close your eyelids, loosen your hair,
 And dream about the great and their pride;
 They have spoken against you everywhere,
 But weigh this song with the great and their pride;
 I made it out of a mouthful of air,
 Their children's children shall say they have lied.

In October 1892 Gonne herself arrived in Dublin on the boat with the body of Parnell; she was dressed in mourning. The costume was not, she admitted, for Parnell, but for a little boy who died of meningitis that August, her ward or “adopted child,” Georges Sylvestre. In the 1890s those were well-known euphemisms for a child either orphaned or born out of wedlock, to oneself or to a family member. To speak of one's ward is also a way of saying, *Please don't ask any questions*, and Yeats did not. Many in Paris knew Gonne was the mistress of the right-wing deputy. If you read the daily paper, you knew that fact. The two were reported as being together at one event after another. Such a liaison between a politician and a woman of beauty and fortune was an accepted—and in Paris—an acceptable situation. In London and Dublin, however, a sexual connection between the two had to be denied, and was by her denied.

Ultimately, about ten years into the affair, Millevoye's affections passed to a younger beautiful woman. Gonne—bitter, sick, heart-broken—began to dream of marriage to Yeats, and began to tell him so. When they met in December 1898, she took hold of the poet and kissed him, "with her bodily mouth," he weirdly remarks. Then, at last trusting him with the key to the "labyrinth of her days," she told the poet her story—Millevoye, baby boy, baby boy dies, Millevoye, baby girl, Millevoye takes new woman, Maud Gonne and baby girl, all alone now. It was a lot to take in all of a sudden; but, with Millevoye gone, it was Yeats's chance. He could give the woman and child a respectable position in life. All he'd ever wanted was there for the asking.

Great chance? It was a nightmare. All his muse/poet, frustration/creation mechanics were banjaxed. Yeats became suddenly incompetent to speak or act in the normal way of a sexual man—to take her in his arms, kiss her, hold her tightly, and say, *I'll take care of you*. Not to do anything at all was the best and bravest thing he could have done, and do it he did. He let her hang. He continued to see her in Dublin, and to drain the last dregs of the dark cask of her secrets, or at least all that she aimed to decant. He let her say that she had always loved him and wanted to be his (he did not wait long before telling Lady Gregory that bit of news, adding that he had long suspected such was the case), but what she had done had put marriage to him out of the question. This took the words right out of his mouth. Later he put her despair into a poem:

*I knew a woman none could please,
Because she dreamed when but a child
Of men and women made like these;
And after, when her blood ran wild,
Had ravelled her own story out,
And said, 'In two or in three years
I needs must marry some poor lout,'
And having said it, burst in tears.*

Then he waited for her to back down and go away to Paris again. This took two weeks. When Lady Gregory said, *I'll give you money to follow her and to stay there until she accepts your proposal of marriage*, even money was not enough to make him go.

The flip side of a nightmare is the wish-fulfillment dream. In Yeats's summer dream in 1901, a woman who has put on years (too many for Lucien Millevoe), who has had lovers, who is in league with the French, who is always trying to whip up war, who speaks in nationalist clichés, and who has a mystic power over Irish crowds, suddenly becomes a beautiful young woman again, with the gliding walk of a queen. It seems she has bathed in that famous ancient pool that renews the virginity of Greek goddesses.

So, when Yeats says in his patent application, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is not a political play, but a very private literary work that arose from a dream, maybe it was no lie. Whatever *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, as written by Lady Gregory, acted by Maud Gonne, and celebrated by Arthur Griffith, may have come to mean to others, it was something entirely different to him. "Heart-mysteries there, and yet when all is said / It was the dream itself enchanted me" ("Circus Animals' Desertion").

As for Maud Gonne, it is an understatement to say the part of Cathleen ni Houlihan was made for her. It was her own ultimate wish-fulfillment dream. She had only a very problematic, actually, a totally *false*, claim on Irishness; but Yeats's play made her into its embodiment. This was even better than his first effort at flattery in *The Countess Cathleen*, in which she was a pity-crazed, bleeding-heart aristocrat ready to sell all she had, even her soul, for the peasantry. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan* she might inhabit a different order of reality, a symbolic space, both near to and infinitely far from ordinary Irish cottiers, but still she was the impersonation of the spirit of the nation.

On stage Maud Gonne vanished into the character, and the character became Maud Gonne. Here is the contemporary report from the *New Ireland Review*: "The well known Nationalist orator did not address the other actors as is usual in drama, but spoke directly to the audience, as if she was addressing them in Beresford Place. . . . She can scarcely be said to act the part, she lived it. When she entered the little firelit room there came with her a sense of tragedy and the passion of deathless endeavor." In that performance Yeats's own private dream and the dream-work behind it vanished from sight: one could only see Maud Gonne and hear Lady Gregory's dialogue.