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‘A lament for the Fianna in a time when Ireland shall be changed’: Prospective/Prescriptive Memory and (Post-)Revolutionary Discourse in Mythological Gate Plays

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Abstract

This article analyses how Micheál macLiammóir’s *Diarmuid and Gráinne* (1928) and An Philibín’s *Tristram and Iseult* (1929) reimagine the function of mythology in the Free State by infusing their dramatic representations of these legendary marriages with Irish revolutionary discourse of a much later period. In both plays, mythological tropes are retroactively imbued with anachronistic cultural memories of the Easter Rising to provide the newly independent nation with a redemptive teleology.

Keywords: cultural memory, drama, postcolonialism, mythology, Easter Rising.

Résumé

Cet article analyse comment Diarmuid and Gráinne (1928) de Micheál macLiammóir et Tristram and Iseult (1929) d’An Philibín réinventent la fonction de la mythologie dans l’État libre en infusant leurs représentations dramatiques de ces mariages légendaires avec le discours révolutionnaire irlandais d’une période plus tardive. Dans les deux pièces, les tropes mythologiques sont imprégnés de mémoire culturelle anachronique de l’insurrection de Pâques 1916 pour donner à la nation nouvellement indépendante une téléologie rédemptrice.

Mots clés : mémoire culturelle, théâtre, postcolonialisme, mythologie, l’insurrection de Pâques 1916.

In his discussion of the mythologisation of revolutionary sacrifice in Irish politics and literature, Richard Kearney observes that “myth often harbours memories which reason ignores at its peril. Myths of motherland are more than antique curiosities; they retain a purchase on the contemporary mind and can play a

pivotal role in mobilizing sentiments of national identity¹". While Kearney mostly focuses on the politics of prose and poetry, his discussion of the potency—as well as the risk—of literal myth-making is implicitly confirmed in a theatrical context by Richard Allen Cave's comprehensive analysis of W.B. Yeats and George Moore's *Diarmuid and Grania* (1901), Æ's *Deirdre* (1902), Yeats's *Deirdre* (1906), J.M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910), and Lady Gregory's *Grania* (1912), for he notes that in early twentieth-century Ireland, "[d]ramatising the lives of Deirdre or Grania was fraught with creative and moral dangers²". While Cave convincingly argues that, for example, Synge's posthumous play was "skirting close to the winds of outrage and disapproval" in depicting "[t]he *healthy* joys of sensuality" and thereby questioning "the intricate moral climate in Dublin at the time of the play's conception", this article will show that Irish mythological drama that was staged *after* the watershed of the revolutionary period (1912–1923) engaged with equally contentious matters—albeit in the political rather than the moral realm³.

Micheál macLiammóir's *Diarmuid and Gráinne* (1928) and An Philibín's *Tristram and Iseult* (1929), two original plays that were produced by the Dublin Gate Theatre Studio during its first seasons at the Peacock Theatre, serve to illustrate this point. Rather than adhering to the conventional Revivalist mode of recreating something of the grandeur that was Éire, these plays reimagine the function of mythology in the Free State by exploiting the genre's malleability as they infuse these ancient tales with Irish revolutionary discourse of a much later period. Indeed, their politicised representations of undesirable marriages that might be contested through rebellion feature anachronistic cultural memories of the Easter Rising, which serve to vindicate the nation's sovereignty and construct a postcolonial teleology.

Politicised marriages and prospective/prescriptive memory strategies

These nuptial and mnemonic elements both require some initial remarks. With regards to the politicisation of traditional female gender roles, it should be noted that the colonial connotations of political marriages in Irish literature have been well-documented. In her study of the ways in which the Act of Union was metaphorically represented in literary texts, Mary Jean Corbett, for example, observes that "colonial discourses in the nineteenth century were always gende-

1. Richard Kearney, *Postcolonial Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 120.

2. Richard Allen Cave, "The Dangers and Difficulties of Dramatising the Lives of Deirdre and Grania", in Jacqueline Genet and Richard Allen Cave (eds.), *Perspectives of Irish Drama and Theatre*, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, 1991, p. 3.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 9. Italics in original.

red insofar as they naturalized the subordination of some peoples and races to others by a pervasive rhetoric of feminization⁴". Her subsequent analyses establish the primacy of marriage tropes in representing Anglo-Irish relations by showing how "[t]hroughout post-Union fiction, the marriage plot operates as a rhetorical instrument for promoting colonial hegemony in making the private relations of romance and reproduction central to the public and imperial good⁵".

However, dissenting voices employed similar nuptial metaphors to decry the Union as a violation of spousal relations: as Jim Hansen has observed, contemporary pamphlets and caricatures depicted Ireland as a "confined, threatened, terrorized female", while England was portrayed as "her terrorizing, avaricious, and lustful captor-suitor⁶"—more recent texts such as Seamus Heaney's "Act of Union" (1975) exemplify the persistence of this metaphor. Likewise, Richard Kearney has charted how such imagery of "a vulnerable virgin ravished by the aggressive masculine invader from England" developed into allegories in which the nation became "personified as a visionary daughter or *spéirbhean* threatened by the alien marauder (or inversely, following the same logic, as a shameless hag—*meirdreach*—who lifted her skirts for the invader's pleasure)⁷". As my analysis of two original Gate plays will show, this *topos* was also employed in a post-revolutionary context to articulate a retroactive vindication of rebellion: by representing Ireland's colonial subjugation in terms of an unhappy marriage to a cold-hearted husband, the native bride is shown to have been forced to solicit the help of a valiant warrior, who must then choose between romantic love and loyalty to his liege lord.

In recent years, scholarship in the fields of cultural memory theory and collective trauma theory has also come to reflect on the inevitable impact of colonial subjugation on collective memory, as Edward Said posits in his afterword to *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (2003): "How can we assume that one phase of history does not imprint the next ones with its pressures, and if so, how are they to be discerned, recalled, rebutted, resisted if they are not admitted in the first place?⁸". Postcolonial studies which give affirmative answers to such questions facilitate an understanding of the multifaceted mnemonic structures that underlie the ways in which an oppressed people may implicitly articulate and

4. Mary Jean Corbett, *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 16.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

6. Jim Hansen, *Terror and Irish Modernism: The Gothic Tradition from Burke to Beckett* (2009), Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2009, p. 17. See also Nicholas Robinson, "Marriage Against Inclination: The Union and Caricature", in Daire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (eds.), *Acts of Union: The Causes, Context and Consequences of the Act of Union*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2001, pp. 140-58.

7. Richard Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

8. Edward Said, "Afterword: Reflections on Ireland and Postcolonialism" (2003), in Clare Carroll and Patricia King, (eds.), *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), p. 179.

explicitly commemorate traumatic periods in its shared history. In this way, they acknowledge such episodes—and, in many cases, the enforced silencing thereof—as enduring formative influences that continue to generate identities, since, as Ian McBride has observed, “[i]n Ireland, perhaps more than in other cultures, collective groups have [...] expressed their values and assumptions through their representations of the past”⁹. Such reconfigurations of cultural identities, however, are not straightforward; indeed, McBride contends that “[t]he past has to be reconstructed over and over again, with all the attendant transferences, short-circuits and distortions which that process involves”¹⁰.

This malleability is intrinsic to—if not constitutive of—the *praxis* of drama, for, as Chris Morash and Shaun Richards have argued, “[o]nstage, space becomes place when a specific site is defined by events that occurred there in the past”, so that it is precisely “[t]his tension—between the ontological presentness of performance and the contradictory need to allow the past to inform the present—[which] is one of the definitional structural qualities of the theatrical”¹¹. Such interactions are not limited to a confluence of past and present, but also endow the stage with an additional prospective dimension, since “[p]lace presupposes an understanding of time in which past, present and future can melt into one another, in which the space occupied in the present is also the active site of memories of the past, and anticipations of the future”¹².

Indeed, one of the most prominent dramatic tactics that macLíammóir’s and An Philibín’s plays will be shown to have in common is their explicit articulation of the function of remembrance. In a break with the Aristotelian unity of time, these plays do not simply depict a series of dramatic events that are temporally encapsulated; instead, they problematise the concept of memory in an attempt to designate the future relevance of those events as they unfold. As a result, the historical action of these plays is explicitly endowed with the quality of something *that should be remembered*. This temporal conflation yields a mnemonic strategy that is both *prospective* and *prescriptive*: rather than embodying the persistence and continuing relevance of past events (as many of the mnemonic strategies that cultural memory theorists describe do), it is orientated towards the future and attempts to enforce very specific manifestations of the memories that it is propagating¹³.

9. Ian McBride, “Memory and National Identity in Modern Ireland” (2001), in Ian McBride (ed.), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 3.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

11. Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, *Mapping Irish Theatre*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 80, 83.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 85–86.

13. Consider, for example, Marianne Hirsch’s discussion of postmemory, which “strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 29 No. 1, 2008, p. 111).

Although this conceptualisation would seem to imply a linear temporality—the narrative present is to be recollected in the narrative future—it is actually circular: the vindication of the mnemonic imperative occurs precisely through the act of writing the lines that posit its permanence in the first place. In this sense, prospective/prescriptive memory presents a historiographical Möbius strip in which the prophecy occurs both *after* and *through* its fulfilment: it is a mode of memory that is imbued with a retroactive—and, in the plays discussed below, revolutionary—teleology¹⁴.

■ **“Those that are in my secret thoughts will be remembered in Ireland forever”: Micheál macLiammóir’s *Diarmuid and Gráinne* (1928)**

There are several examples of this complex mnemonic strategy in *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, the very first original play to be performed at the Gate. After their debut at the Peacock Theatre in October 1928 with Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* (1876) and Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Edwards and macLiammóir produced the latter’s *Diarmuid and Gráinne* in English—the original Irish version had served as the inaugural play of the Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe only a few months before¹⁵. MacLiammóir’s version of the myth condenses Lady Grego-

14. This self-consistency also distinguishes prospective and prescriptive memory from Kevin Whelan’s concept of radical memory: although radical memory, too, is orientated towards the future, it is primarily concerned with the emancipation of aborted futures through re-imaginings. Whelan’s “redemptive project to release the unredeemed potential” aims at empowerment: it wants to resolve historical traumas by branching off in new directions, while prospective and prescriptive memories are paradoxical confirmations of historical events precisely as they occurred. For a discussion of radical memory, see Kevin Whelan, “Reading the Ruins: The Presence of Absence in the Irish Landscape”, in Howard B. Clarke, Jacinta Prunty, and Mark Hennessy (eds.), *Surveying Ireland’s Past: Multidisciplinary Essays in Honour of Annagret Simms*, Dublin, Geography Publications, 2004, p. 320; and also his exploration of how “[r]adical memory opens a space for a counterpoint history” in “The Cultural Effects of the Famine”, in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 152. A better analogy might be found in Chris Morash’s use of André Bernstein’s notion of “backshadowing”, which he adopts to clarify why Abbey’s historiography is rife with the tendency to explain “past events [...] in terms of the futures to which they lead, as if those futures were in some way pre-ordained”. ‘Backshadowing’, however, refers to academic over-interpretation rather than the mnemonic or narratological constructs that this article explores. For Morash’s argument, see “The Road to God Knows Where: Can Theatre Be National?”, in Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (eds.), *Irish Theatre on Tour*, Dublin, Carysforth Press, 2005, p. 102.

15. The reviewer for *The Irish Times* commented favourably on the production, describing Gráinne as “the ‘vamp’ of Hollywood” and stating that it was “the first serious attempt in this country to stage Irish mythology, and it deserves to be as great a success in the commercial as it undoubtedly is in the artistic sphere”. See “A Fianna Play”, *The Irish Times*, 19 November 1928. Joseph Holloway felt that macLiammóir’s drama was “most impressively played, on the whole, by the company”, and that “[t]he setting was excellent and the dressing most artistic”. Overall, Holloway observed that “[m]ost of the speeches shewed careful writing, but many could be shortened with advantage to the dramatic intensity of the tragedy. MacLiammóir has a great gift of descriptive writing, and the text of his play is studded with such” (in Robert Hogan and Michael J. O’Neill (eds.), *Joseph Holloway’s Irish Theatre*, Vol. I, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, 1968, p. 42). For a discussion of the

ry's classic account from *Gods and Fighting Men* (1905) to four major scenes: the wedding of Fionn Mac Cumhaill and Gráinne in the first act, which ends with Diarmuid's reluctant betrayal of his liege lord; Diarmuid and Gráinne's flight to a woodland dwelling (presumably at Doire-da-Bhoth) and to a cavern at the shore, where he breaks his promise to Fionn and makes love to Gráinne, in the second act; and the hunt for the Boar of Beann Gulbain in the final act, which results in Diarmuid's death and Gráinne's dejected submission to Fionn¹⁶.

The play is not only remarkably lavish in its use of the future tense when referring to events that occur within its narrative arc, but also abounds in instances of prospective mythologising, especially in its opening and closing scenes—and in several instances, this narrative strategy is imbued with revolutionary discourse. At the beginning of the first act, the process of myth-making itself is made ironically explicit when the Wise Woman explains how Diarmuid received his magic star: Gráinne's nurse comments that "[y]ou'd think it was out of an old tale¹⁷". The transformative power of stories being told and retold is likewise accentuated in a more condensed form by Sadhbh, Gráinne's servant, who states that "in Tara every word that is spoken over the fires at twilight has grown to be a fabulous story at the dawn of day¹⁸". The (post-)revolutionary potency of such aggrandisements is revealed when the Nurse is speculating which of the guests who are present at Fionn and Gráinne's wedding are being contemplated by a Wise Woman. Her initial guesses—the High King and Queen—are incorrect: "Ireland will not remember them", the Wise Woman claims, whereas "[t]hose that are in my secret thoughts will be remembered in Ireland forever¹⁹". This intertex-

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Taibhdhearc production and macLíammóir subsequent translation, see Katherine Anne Hennessey, *Memorable Barbarities and National Myths: Ancient Greek Tragedy and Irish Epic in Modern Irish Theatre*, PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2008, pp. 67-79.

16. Lady Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men* (1905), London, John Murray, 1905, pp. 343-99. In addition to the elision of various (mostly violent) episodes that take place during Diarmuid and Gráinne's flight from Fionn Mac Cumhaill in Lady Gregory's account, macLíammóir's play features several narrative divergences: Gráinne sees Diarmuid's magic star when he breaks up a fight between two Fianna captains rather than during a struggle with a pack of dogs; Diarmuid and Gráinne are the only ones who do not drink of the sleeping draught at the feast, which means that Osgar does not encourage Diarmuid to follow Gráinne; Diarmuid tries to reason with Fionn (and finally rebukes him) in the forest, while he avoids this confrontation in Lady Gregory's version; Osgar does not decide to join Diarmuid's cause; the encounter with Ciach of the Fomor is presented in an almost supernatural setting; and finally, Diarmuid is still alive when he is brought home by the Fianna after the hunt, so that Gráinne is present while Diarmuid pleads with Fionn to heal him with his magic powers. For a philological discussion of various retellings of this myth (albeit one which overlooks macLíammóir's version), see James MacKillop, *Fionn Mac Cumhaill: Celtic Myth in English Literature*, Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 1986.

17. Micheál macLíammóir, *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, typescript, MS 41,247/1, Dublin, National Library of Ireland, 1928., p. 3. I have opted to spell the characters' names in accordance with the programme that was distributed during its first run rather than the typescript, which uses Anglicised spellings (e.g. 'Finn' for 'Fionn').

18. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

tual reference to W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), in which the Old Woman sings of how the men who die for her "shall be remembered for ever,/they shall be alive for ever" underscores the political power of mythology: as Kearney observes, "Yeats offered the myth of Mother Ireland as symbolic compensation for the colonial calamities of history. The mythological motherland served as a goddess of sovereignty who, at least at imaginary level, might restore a lost national identity by summoning her sons to the sacred rite of renewal through sacrifice²⁰". In this sense, macLiammóir's enigmatic strategy of embedding the future mythologisation of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, Gráinne, and Diarmuid in historically circumscribed revolutionary discourse offers a temporal variant of the equally paradoxical spatial multiplicity that Morash and Richards observe with regards to the Old Woman's strongly metaphoric role in Yeats and Gregory's play, which allows her to "enter[...] what is effectively the mimetic onstage place of the stage from an offstage space that is conceptual, not mimetic", even as she embodies an "ambivalent temporality²¹".

Just as the play's opening scenes project themselves beyond the confines of the narrative proper, its conclusion, while seemingly bringing an end to Diarmuid's tale in a darkness that is both literal and moral, tries—and fails—to provide closure in a more distant narrative future. Diarmuid's deathbed scene focuses only partially on his own passing, for in a vatic monologue, the fallen hero begins to foretell the deaths of his fellow warriors Osgar, Caoilte, Goll, Cuan, and Oisín. Especially the latter's demise offers a bleak vista of the future, for Oisín, Diarmuid avows, "will live after all of them, an old withered man, making a lament for the Fianna in a time when Ireland shall be changed, an old white broken man bending low with the burden of his sorrow beneath the heavy clouds, listening to the voice of bells²²". This sudden leap into the future is, in fact, eerily similar to the audience's recent past, for Yeats's famous lines from "Easter, 1916" (1921)—"All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born"—echo in Diarmuid's prophecy²³. Moreover, in conjunction with Gráinne's earlier observation that "[m]en, when they fight willingly, fight for dreams and for the shadows of dreams", the play thus reaffirms Yeats's resignation in stating that "[w]e know their dream; enough/To know they dreamed and are dead²⁴". As such, Diarmuid's temporally

20. W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, in *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats*, London, Macmillan, 1934, 1952, p. 86; Richard Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 113. For further discussion of Yeats's ideas about nationalist martyrdom, see, for example, A. Norman Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography*, London, Arrow Books, 2001, pp. 174-5; Cólín Owens, "Martyrdom: A Literary Preamble", in Rona M. Fields and Cólín Owens (eds.), *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology, and Politics of Self-Sacrifice*, Westport, CT, Praeger, 2004, p. 7; and Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 120.

21. Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

22. Micheál macLiammóir, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

23. W.B. Yeats, "Easter 1916", in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, London, Macmillan, 1933, 1950, p. 203.

24. Micheál macLiammóir, *op. cit.*, p. 21; W.B. Yeats, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

projected representation of the decline of Ireland's most famous mythological band of warriors may be interpreted as an *ex post facto* vindication of the Easter Rising: at a time when the Fianna was no more and even Oisín's powers had waned, the only thing that he still waited for was the tolling of the bells on Easter Monday, 1916.

A final example of this dramatic strategy, which retroactively endows mythological characters with an awareness of Ireland's later revolutionary history, is the contradictory characterisation of Gráinne: in the beginning of the play, her servant Sadhbh is berated by the Wise Woman as a "child without knowledge without wisdom [*sic*]", and her mistress, too, characterises herself as "[a] good child! Yes that is [...] what they all want me to be in this place²⁵". Gráinne decries this patronising attitude and her unequal marriage to Fionn, bitterly proclaiming that it is a "strange and wonderful thing to be the Bride of an old man whose fame is ranted and raved over the fire by the companies of bloody and brutish hunters or of the gray-haired lipping women"—a vision which she contrasts with her dreams of "see[ing] the clouds that are free chasing each other on the hill-side without²⁶". Gráinne's powerlessness is also evoked through a pastoral image of Ireland: Diarmuid describes her as "a young girl more beautiful than a bough of the apple tree under blossom, one lighter and more swift than a golden fawn of the woods, softer and more sweet than the honey of the bees, wilder and more frail than the cold clouds of dawn²⁷". Fionn, to whom Diarmuid is speaking, is of a different mind altogether: he experiences a terrible dread at beholding his fiancée and wonders at Diarmuid's choice of words; his friend then explains Gráinne's fragility by referring to "the glance of her eyes that tells of fleeting wishes and of passions lighter than a moment's thought²⁸". This image establishes Gráinne as a fatal paradox: she is both vulnerable and powerful, feeble and terrible; and as such, she functions as a rejuvenated incarnation of the Sean-bhean Bhocht, which, in a contemporary context, had proven to be an incendiary emblem of Irish republicanism.

In *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, then, the titular characters repeatedly transcend their mythological roles to figure as historicised symbols of revolutionary struggle. Gráinne's marriage constitutes an individuated equivalent to Ireland's colonial subjugation, while Fionn's dread underlines the capriciousness with which she accepts the martyrdom of future generations for her revolutionary cause. Diarmuid serves to embody this sacrifice, but he, too, exceeds the bounds of the narrative proper by prophesying Ireland's future through imagery that is readily associa-

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25. Micheál macLiammóir, *op. cit.*, pp. 6, 12.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

28. *Ibid.*

ted with the Easter Rising. This innovative rendition of the tale of Diarmuid and Gráinne thus illustrates how mythological tropes could be retroactively imbued with implicit historical markers to provide the newly independent nation with a redemptive teleology.

■ **“The gods, in divine equality,/ Shall touch with immortality/
Their names, that these may nowise pass”:
An Philibín’s *Tristram and Iseult* (1929)**

This (post-)revolutionary intersection of marriage and rebellion is also a key plot element in another early Gate play, *Tristram and Iseult* (1929), which likewise reinforces this problematical combination through very specific memory strategies. The author of this play was An Philibín, a pseudonym of the pathologist J.H. Pollock, whose “dramatic poem” had originally been published in 1924 by the Talbot Press but was only performed for the first time by Edwards and macLíammóir in conjunction with John Galsworthy’s *The Little Man* (1915) and Nikolai Evreinov’s *A Merry Death* (1908) during their second season at the Peacock Theatre in 1929²⁹. Pollock depicts only a very concise episode from the famous legend: his one-act play is set on the ship that is taking Iseult, an Irish princess, to Cornwall, where she is to marry King Mark, the uncle and liege lord of Tristram, who is escorting her. During the voyage, Iseult and Tristram have fallen in love with each other, and Iseult has come to regret her betrothal. In an attempt to bolster her spirit and restrain his own feelings, Tristram tries to convince Iseult of King Mark’s virtues, but she remains unhappy. Afterwards, Brangwaine, her servant, tells her stories about King Arthur’s knights to comfort her, but her efforts, too, are to little avail. When Iseult retreats, Brangwaine sings to the audience: she reveals that she possesses a love potion that she will give to Iseult and Mark after their wedding so that they will win each other’s affections. In the next scene, however, Tristram tells Iseult that he is thirsty; unwittingly, she

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29. The reviewer for *The Irish Independent* stated that “‘An Philibín’s’ one-act dramatic poem [...] was a gratifying proof that courage to undertake what is ordinarily regarded as a hazardous experiment does not always go unrewarded” (J.W.G., “New Irish Verse Play”, *The Irish Independent*, 6 June 1929). Joseph Holloway mentioned that “[t]here were some purple patches of descriptive poetry, but little drama in the episode of the ill-fated pair taking the love potion of ‘Brangwaine’”. The staging was fantastical and the lighting excellent. MacLíammóir and Coralie Carmichael made an ideal pair of lovers, though the dawning of their love was rather talked away in long speeches” (in Robert Hogan and Michael J. O’Neill (eds.), *Joseph Holloway’s Irish Theatre*, Vol. I, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, 1968, p. 47). The songs that were played during the intervals between the three plays were composed by Dr J.F. Larchet but Holloway felt that they were sung rather badly (*ibid.*, p. 48). However, the play’s setting and lighting were to Holloway’s liking: “The elongated, celtic-ornamentesque-like figures that filled the panels of the pavilion of ‘Tristan’s’ ship were amongst the weirdest shapes imaginable, and filled the eye with the barbaric splendour of the time. It is marvellous what Edwards can do on such a small stage, and his settings and lighting and dressing of plays leave little to be desired” (*ibid.*).

brings the love potion, and both drink of it to fortify their respective oaths to King Mark. The potion's effect is swift: the lovers swoon, only to wake up in the throes of their impossible love. At the conclusion of the play, Brangwaine returns to contemplate their tragic yet divinely sanctioned fate.

In several ways, *Tristram and Iseult* mirrors *Diarmuid and Gráinne*: in both plays, a young girl is forced into an undesirable marriage that is averted through magical means, with Gráinne feeling herself being dragged "[f]rom one prison to another" on her wedding eve, and Iseult realising that she has lived a sheltered existence that has made her delicate yet passionate, stating that

[...] all my life
Lay fenced about with care, like some frail plant
In a walled garden, whose bright flowers burn
Against a constant sun; being plucked from thence,
The roots are bleeding³⁰.

Iseult's longing for her native land might likewise be gleaned from her reaction on seeing swallows flying around the ship: she wonders whether they "have looked upon the tumbled roofs/Of Dublin, or have even bred beneath/The shadow of my turret"—indeed, her greatest desire is to turn the ship around and sail back to Ireland³¹. Taking these pastoral yearnings into account, Iseult's fear of "a throne/That hath and unknown quality and a king/I have no knowledge of" resembles the sense of oppression that also frustrates Gráinne before she becomes enthralled by Diarmuid's star. Indeed, this initial subjugation is reinforced by another parallel with macLíammóir's first play, when Brangwaine describes her mistress Iseult as being "but a child³²".

While Iseult does not choose to rebel against the marriage that has been imposed upon her, she loses this sense of duty when she drinks of the love potion. In light of her subsequent denial of her betrothal and her elopement with Tristram, both Gráinne and Iseult thus manifest Cathleen Ní Houlihan's revolutionary potential: their youth and frailty turns into a powerful magic when they become threatened, which allows them to rally the true heroes of Ireland (Diarmuid, Tristram) against the encroachment of their liege lords (Fionn, Mark), and they must break their feudal bonds in doing so. More specifically, Brangwaine's song combines these ostensibly contradictory elements—a forbidden love that seeks to wed masculine martyrdom with the feminine promise of national rejuvenation—through an intertextual link to W.B. Yeats's "The Rose Tree" (1921). Brangwaine describes how "[t]he subtle women, in their wisdom haste,/To pluck

30. Micheál macLíammóir, *op. cit.*, p. 16; An Philibín, *Tristram and Iseult*, Dublin, Talbot Press, 1924, p. 12.

31. An Philibín, *op. cit.*, pp. 12, 28.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 20.

out of the sacrificial sod/A blood-red flower”—an image of martyrdom that Yeats had imbued with the legacy of the Rising by using Patrick Pearse’s voice to state that it is as “plain as plain can be/There’s nothing but our own red blood/Can make a right Rose Tree³³”. In An Philibín’s play, this image is adapted to show how, through druidic magic, women have the power to “chant the birth-song of the springing day” as Ireland becomes young again³⁴.

In this sense, Iseult’s elopement becomes emblematic of much larger concerns, for although the story arc of *Tristram and Iseult* is even more temporally compressed than that of *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, the ending of An Philibín’s play is similarly characterised by an attempt to transcend the narrative present. It is Iseult who enables this digression: as she leaves the stage with Tristram in the final scene, she declares that her escape from bondage is not merely a personal victory but rather the fulfilment of a teleological imperative: “Come, let the stars, who, with benignant eyes,/Beheld the first espousals of our race,/Look upon this—the sweetest and the last!³⁵”. Her departure is followed by Brangwaine’s return, who ends the play with a song that endows the lovers’ fateful encounter with an almost metafictional quality when she observes how the gods “choose out that hour wherein/We rest, to strike us, who awakening find/Our peace was but the passage of a dream³⁶”. This radical divergence from narrative constraints is further reinforced by Brangwaine’s closing lines, which are both prospective and prescriptive: after foretelling how “in sea-washed Brittany,/As vapour, breathéd on a glass,/These, Love’s poor pensioners, must die”, she declares that “[t]he gods, in divine equality,/Shall touch with immortality/Their names, that these may nowise pass³⁷”.

In retrospect, then, the entire play might seem to have been little more than a brief excerpt—Tristram and Iseult’s subsequent adventures, and even their deaths, are reduced to a few lines of verse—yet it is precisely this act of condensation that endows the preceding scenes with an emblematic status. On the ship that bears them away from their native land, Tristram and Iseult rebel against their liege lord—if not a foreign oppressor—but this defiance also marks their submission to a tragic fate that is rendered in terms that evoke the Easter Rising. Brangwaine’s song provides the mnemonic strategy that resolves this paradox: by sketching the future completion of the lovers’ narrative arc and their ultimate demise in the present, her vindication of their impossible love through the future consecration

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33. *Ibid.*, p. 33; W.B. Yeats, “The Rose Tree”, in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, London, Macmillan, 1933, 1950, p. 206.

34. An Philibín, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

of their names becomes imminent. Her *prospective* reflection is simultaneously a *prescriptive* act of memory that is left to the audience—rather than the gods—to perform.

■ Conclusion

In outlining the memory strategies that complicate several emblematic love triangles in two original mythological plays that were produced at the Dublin Gate Theatre during its early years, this article has shown how such novel reimaginings of the tales of Gráinne and Iseult could absorb the political discourse of Irish republicanism even as the mnemonic artificiality of this process is explored. By infusing these mythological tales with a distinctively modern historical awareness of Irish rebellion in their plays, macLíammóir and An Philibín confronted their audiences with a complex mode of memory that is simultaneously prospective and prescriptive: even as narrative confines are either condensed or expanded to a point that almost effects their abolition, mnemonic imperatives proliferate, transforming the dramaturgical conventions of Irish mythology into a politicised realm of futurity. In this sense, they confirm Richard Kearney's contention that in experimental postcolonial texts such as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), "[m]yth is revealed as history, history as myth" in a way that "shows us that our narrative of self-identity is itself a fiction—an 'epical forged cheque'—and that each one of us has the freedom to re-invent our past³⁸". Such plays thus extend Chris Morash and Shaun Richards's argument that the Gate "was producing a conceptual space that refused to be constrained by geography or politics" during the contentious Free State years into the temporal realm.³⁹ This also signals an important shift from pre-revolutionary mythological drama, for if, as Richard Allen Cave has argued, the anguished characters in Lady Gregory's *Grania* (1912) "sense that they have stepped out of time without achieving the transcendence which is their goal", the exact opposite applies to the heroes and heroines who are featured in these two Gate plays: firmly embedded in their distant epochs, they nevertheless articulate a cathartic awareness of their mnemonic potency in shaping Ireland's postcolonial future⁴⁰.

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38. Richard Kearney, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

39. Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 24. This also illustrates Elaine Sisson's claim that, "[d]uring some of the most turbulent years of the emergence and foundation of the State", the Gate's directors "were determined to introduce and promote experimental voices as part of their education as artists and performers, but also as a bulwark against conservatism and increasing cultural isolationism" ("A Note on What Happened": Experimental Influences on the Irish Stage, 1919-1929", *Kritika Kultura* Vol. 15, 2010, p. 144.)

40. Richard Allen Cave, *op. cit.*, p. 15.