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Gynocentrism and the Absurd: Sexual Contest in Yeats's At the Hawk's Well

by WILLIAM M. NORTHCUTT

In an aphoristic phrase worthy of Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats declared to Olivia Shakespear, "I am still of the opinion that only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind—sex and the dead" (*Letters* 730).¹ At once comic and serious, Yeats's attitude towards sexuality here is analogous to the role of sexuality in *At the Hawk's Well*, his first play modeled on the Japanese Noh form. Sexual desire functions comically and dramatically in the play, linking highly ritualistic and heroic elements with the play's more human, universal components. More importantly, perhaps, *sexuality* is an integral part of Yeats's spiritual and aesthetic beliefs; sexuality in *At the Hawk's Well* serves as a means, then, for Yeats to interconnect his aesthetic and spiritual concerns with his art.

After Pound introduced Yeats to the Noh during the 1915-16 winter at Stone Cottage, Yeats exulted in having "found out the only way the subtler forms of literature can find dramatic expression" ("Notes" 417). He was attracted to the Noh for several reasons. It provided him with a drama free from the type of acting which requires its players to work "themselves into a violence of passion" (*EI* 221). More importantly, he found a form more expressive of the interior subjectivities, a drama which would, as Pound says, hold "a mirror up to nature" without "mimetic" excesses ("Noh" 221)—in other words, a theater free from the constraints of stage trappings or overly expressive acting. Fenollosa, quoted by Pound, says, "the excellence of Noh . . . [lies] in emotion, not in action or externals . . . [or in stage] accessories" ("Noh" 238).² It also implies a theater guided more by internal processes and understanding of symbols than by personality of the actors or by plot, for as Fenollosa writes:

1. I abbreviate here for *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*. I will use the following abbreviations in parenthetical documentation:

At the Hawk's Well *ATHW*
The Autobiography of W. B. Yeats *Autobiographies*
The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese No *Drama*
Essays and Introductions *EI*
"Noh" or *Accomplishment*" "Noh"
"Notes" to *At the Hawk's Well* "Notes"
A Reader's Guide to the Plays of W. B. Yeats *Guide*
The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats *Variorum Plays*
The Poems: W. B. Yeats *Poems*

2. Yeats had been growing tired of the conventional theater business for years, grumbling in "The Fascination of What's Difficult" about "plays / That have to be set up in fifty ways" (*Poems* 93), and complaining about the "mob" audiences, the "hundreds" he calls them in "At the Abbey Theatre," who "mock[ed]" (*Poems* 96) the efforts of benevolent dramatists.

Each [Noh] drama embodies some primary human relation or emotion, and the poetic sweetness or poignancy of this is carried to its highest degree by carefully excluding all such obtrusive elements as a mimetic realism. . . . [Some] intense emotion . . . is chosen for a piece, and . . . elevated to the plane of universality by the intensity and purity of treatment. ("Noh" 279-80)

In mimetic plays the actor's duty, to an extent, is to interpret the meaning of the play for the audience, but in the Noh it is the audience's job to interpret the players' acting, and it is up to the audience to internalize the play's symbology.³ A product of the Victorian sensibility still permeating the London air during the early part of this century, Yeats understood the complexities involved in presenting sexual material explicitly. The Noh, with its reliance on symbology, would allow Yeats to express his sexual theories without upsetting the delicate social consciousness of his day.

Barren images of a well whose waters bring immortality, a heroic warrior from ancient Celtic myth, a hawk-like woman, and three musicians moving like "marionette[s]" (*EI* 226) serve to keep the action "*always [at] an appropriate distance from life*" as Yeats puts it, in order to trigger in the audience "those profound emotions that exist only in solitude and silence" ("Notes" 416). Richard Taylor says that such a method divides the "attention" of the play "between the universality of the emotion and the nobility of the character who undergoes the experience" (*Drama* 65) so that the play operates by opposition: by distancing itself from life, it is supposed to make the audience understand the human condition; by presenting the heroic, it is supposed to make the audience contemplate the universal *human* condition. For this reason, Yeats makes use of comedy in *At the Hawk's Well*. As Taylor points out, "the most significant characteristic of the No⁴ programme for Yeats was the discovery that its vision of human experience is not limited only to high seriousness: No is rarely performed without its comic counter part, *Kyogen* (playful words)" (*Drama* 77), and "*Kyogen*," he continues "presents . . . the comedy of human imperfection as a contrast to the exalted subjects of the more somber and ritualistic No" (*Drama* 77). Yeats realized that no imperfection was more human than sexual desire, no imperfection more potentially comic than sexuality.

At the Hawk's Well explores the tragedy of human sexual desire in order to combine at once the heroic and comic elements of an entire Noh program into one play.⁵ He employs "playful words" to enhance the comic, thus human, aspects of the play. However, it is easy to overlook the comic aspects because the comedy, like the heroics, depends upon an understanding of the sexual symbology of the play's images. Perhaps, too, Yeats has so tightly embedded this symbology in *At the Hawk's Well*, the critic-audience of our day has failed to

3. Obviously, any audience must interpret the acting and the text of the play. The Noh play does not merely invite the audience to interpret, it forces the audience to do so.

4. Taylor prefers this spelling to "Noh." Except in my citations of Taylor's work, I will spell the word "Noh," which is the way that Yeats, Pound, and Fenollosa spell it.

5. Richard Taylor's *The Drama of W. B. Yeats* discusses the specific ways in which Fenollosa and, therefore, Pound and Yeats misunderstood the intricacies of the Noh. But Yeats never claimed to have followed the Noh form exactly. In "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," he reports that "with the help of Japanese plays 'translated by Ernest Fenollosa and finished by Ezra Pound,' I have invented a form of drama. . . ." The combination of *Kyogen* with the heroic within the same play allows Yeats to claim the "invention" of a new form.

recognize just how primary a role sexuality assumes in the piece.

A reading “on the literal level [which sees] . . . the well [as] . . . one of immortality [and] nothing else,” a type of reading Helen Vendler urges (205), neglects the play’s comedy. For, on one level, the comedy lies in the symbolic relationship of the Old Man to the Young Man and in their symbolic competition to engage in a sexual union with the female godhead in her gynocentric world, and the well represents that godhead. As Reg Skene reminds us, “It is in the mind’s eye that the real events of the play must be seen for the action takes place in some deep of the human mind” (127), and we must understand the play symbolically to understand it at all.

Even before the musicians enter, sexuality asserts itself; from the moment the play begins, we have predominant sexual symbols. It is important to understand that the well represents the female anatomy and that the Guardian of the Well is also female, a point I will discuss presently. Then, the Musicians “call to the eye of the mind / A well long choked up and dry” (399). The dryness of the well represents the unresponsiveness of the female in this place where “the salt sea wind has swept bare” (399), and the barren landscape—“withered leaves” and dry “grey stone[s]” (400) which surround the well—serve to remind the competing characters about the need for regeneration. Amidst this wasteland scenery stands the Guardian of the Well, whose face has a “lofty, dissolute [or wanton] air,” a look supposed to remind us, Skene says, of the “orgiastic nature of initiation rituals and the sense of abandonment with which the hero must assume his role” (128). She is also associated with the women of the Sidhe, who, according to Yeats’s notes to *The Wind Among the Reeds*, are associated with the wind, for “‘Sidhe’ is Gaelic for ‘wind’” (*Poems* 593). He continues elsewhere, “I use the wind as a symbol of vague desires and hopes . . . because wind and spirit and vague desire have been associated everywhere” (quoted in Skene 126); together the Sidhe and the wind represent, I would argue, vague sexual desire, a kind of desire which blows the Young Man away from his goal—union with the godhead.

The failure of the Young Man and Old Man to drink from the well, in the figurative sense, may be due to their vague sexual desires. The contest, at least, is initiated by them, and this is what makes the situation comic, for, if we understand the characters’ goal to be sexual union with the godhead, we notice by the “playful words,” or *Kyogen*, how inept the two characters are at reaching their goal. Their goal is even *absurd* if we consider the types represented by the two men. On the comic level, the Old Man is a type characterized by impotence and sterility, driven by a desire which he cannot physically fulfill, wracked by age, fear, and an overpowering desire to sleep; the Young Man is a type characterized by impetuosity and the desire to experience after “half a day” (403) that which the Old Man has been trying to experience for “fifty years” (403). Cuchulain is driven by ego and led astray by mortal yearnings.

The characters’ *type* is all important, so that the Old and Young Man can be represented by other characters. “Sometimes the musicians . . . are speaking for the Old Man, sometimes for Cuchulain, and sometimes as a detached third

person," Helen Vendler notes (207). Before the Old Man enters the stage, the Second Musician says, "I am afraid of this place" (401), thus foreshadowing the Old Man's fears of achieving union, fears he expresses throughout. The First Musician, perhaps speaking as Cuchulain, places the Old Man's sexual ability in question, noting the similarity in the Old Man's posture, saying that the fruitless "thorn-trees are doubled so" (401). Furthermore, the Old Man has a difficult time trying to make a fire, a sign of his difficulty in achieving tumescence, for he spends a lot of effort getting the flames going. The First Musician, from the Young Man's point of view, notes that the Old Man shivers "with cold" as he takes up the "fire-stick and socket from its hole" (402). As Ad de Vries states in his *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, a work based significantly on the author's studies in Yeats, "fire" is a symbol of "the essence of life" and, relatedly, of "sexuality . . . erotic life. . . spiritual zeal . . . [and] the imagination" (187-88). Commenting on the Old Man's efforts, the Musicians sing that perhaps it is better to "grow old and sleep" (402), and that is all the Old Man is capable of at the critical moment when the waters surge.

When the Young Man enters the stage, the contest begins, for the Old Man expresses his fears, asking Cuchulain why he has come and if he is "like those / Who are crazy for the shedding of men's blood / And for the love of women" (403-04). We become aware at this moment of an oedipal relationship developing between the two, a relationship which underscores the contest's sexual nature. The "wind" as "vague desire" comes into play again, for Cuchulain tells the Old Man that "a lucky wind" (404) blew him to the barren place. That Cuchulain imagines the wind to have been a "lucky" one indicates the naive ego that he brings to the contest, for at this point he believes himself infallible. When the Old Man tells him that waters will not come, Cuchulain asks, "Why should the luck / Of Sualtim's son desert him now?" (405). Nevertheless, Cuchulain confirms the Old Man's worst fears by letting him know that he has come to drink of that regenerative, "miraculous water" which make one immortal (404). "I seek a well wherein," he says, "Three hazels drop their nuts and withered leaves" (404).

The well is significant as a sexual image in several ways. The water represents immortality, which in spiritual terms means "everlasting existence," but in mortal terms "procreation." The well is associated in the ancient Celtic myth with Cuala's well, an undersea well with regenerative powers and situated in the "land of promise and [perpetual] youth" (De Vries 242). The hazel tree which grows beside the well also suggests sexual symbolism because it is associated with Aengus, "the Celtic god of love. . . [who] held a hazel wand" (De Vries 242). De Vries also says that the hazel branch serves as a divining rod whose function is to find hidden waters (242); thus the withered tree becomes a symbol of the withered sexuality of the Old Man and, since he fails in his efforts, the Young Man as well—at least in his attempts to mate with the godhead in her gynocentric world. The nuts which the tree drops represent the fruitfulness denied the infertile man, for, as Vendler says, "We must remember that the Old Man has never seen the well fill and hazel nuts drop from the tree: he has always through his

cowardice fallen asleep at the crucial moment" (215). Nevertheless, the basic images of the play are elemental—earth, wind, fire, and water, and in their essentiality mirror the elemental nature of sexual desire, portrayed here as that which is "most human, most delicate" and worthy of consideration in the "deep of the mind" (*EI* 224).

Additionally, Yeats may also be relying on solar myths to reinforce the sexuality of the play. The symbolical system Carl Jung espouses in *Symbols of Transformation* could help to explain further the significance of sexual symbolism in Yeats's play. "The psychic life-force, the libido," Jung says, "symbolizes itself in the sun or personifies itself in figures of heroes with solar attributes" (202). According to one strain of the Ulster cycle, Cuchulain's supernatural father is Lugh, a solar deity, so that Cuchulain has "solar attributes" as well. In *At the Hawk's Well* the solar equals the masculine and therefore Cuchulain. Significantly, already at the beginning of the play, the sun is on the wane; the First Musician sings that "The sun goes down in the West" (400). Masculine sexuality is on the wane in this world, then, and the gynocentrism of the world is reinforced through other aspects of the solar-mythological elements of the play. As Jung continues, "water and tree symbolism. . . refer to the libido that is. . . attached to the mother-imago" (222). The comedy is reinforced in the play, then, by the men's attempts to assert their waning masculinity.

As the contest resumes, Cuchulain continues to vaunt his belief in his own virility, telling the Old Man that he will not fall asleep as the Old Man does at the crucial moment. Instead, he offers, "If I grow drowsy, I can pierce my foot" (406). Consciously employing *Kyogen* here, Yeats enforces the comic sexuality of the play, for the thought of one piercing one's self frightens the Old Man as much as an encounter with the godhead frightens him. "No, do not pierce it," he howls, "for the foot is tender, / It feels pain much" (406). Again, he urges Cuchulain to "leave the well" to him (407). Cuchulain then teases the Old Man about sterility, telling him, "You seem as dried up as the leaves and sticks" (408). After this tug of wills, Cuchulain and the Old Man, in a naughty schoolboy fashion, decide that they both may *make* the godhead. Cuchulain exclaims, "I'll take. . . [the waters] in my hands. We shall both drink" (409). The Old Man, afraid of missing out on the meeting, answers, "But swear that I may drink the first; / . . . if you drink the first / You'll drink it all" (409). The *Kyogen* becomes even more obvious when the well finally gushes and the First Musician exclaims, "it comes; it comes" (410).

As comic as such an absurd contest might be, a frantic, intensely human desire to avoid the pains of life, of death, underlies the characters' every action. So the comedy begins to darken, for the "vague desires" of the two men lead them astray from their quest for immortality and union with the godhead. The Old Man is once again lulled to sleep, and Cuchulain is led astray by mortal, sexual desire. Here, the role of the Guardian becomes more obvious. She is human, but she serves as a medium for the Women of the Sidhe and carries out the godhead's plan, which is to protect the waters by playing on the weaknesses of the males. At crucial moments, as Vendler says, "the Guardian mirrors the condition of the

Old Man, while . . . in her possession and dance, she . . . mirrors the condition of the aroused Cuchulain” (209). If we understand the men’s quest to be partly sexual in nature, then we see that their efforts to dominate the scene sexually have been futile. The Guardian’s pantomime of their character traits is a way of mocking their feeble attempts at sexual domination and of asserting the hawk’s actual domination of the males. The men’s efforts to achieve immortality through procreation, that is, perpetuating themselves through generation, is fruitless; even Cuchulain’s successful procreation with Aoife proves futile since it indirectly causes the death both of Cuchulain’s son and of Cuchulain himself. For that matter, human sexuality in the play is nothing but disappointing, for human procreation is always the perpetuation of death; one of the musicians, foreshadowing Cuchulain’s death, wonders, “What were his life soon done!/. . . / A mother that saw her son/. . . / Would cry, ‘How little worth / Were all my hopes and fears / And the hard pain of his birth!’” (399).

The emphasis of the comedy then shifts to the absurdity of two men hopelessly trying to enforce their “withered” phallocentrism on a gynocentric world. The men’s vague desire to dominate the world, and their belief in eventual success, is checked at every point in the play. As *At the Hawk’s Well* opens, the Musicians unfold “a cloth” embroidered with a “gold pattern suggesting a hawk,” so we know that the Women of the Sidhe, represented by the hawk, dominate the opening of the play. The well, representing the spiritual world and female sexuality, dominates as the primary symbol of the play. Several times the Old Man rails against the Guardian and to the well for their unresponsiveness to his overtures. When the Guardian and the well have responded, it has not been due to his efforts. He complains,

You had that glassy look about the eyes
Last time it happened.
Do you know anything?
It is enough to drive an old man crazy
To look all day upon these broken rocks,
And ragged thorns, and that one stupid face,
And speak and get no answer. (403)

His fears of the “unmoistened eyes” (407) is as much a testament to his inability to arouse the Guardian as is the Young Man’s inability to catch the Guardian as she dashes away from him. When Cuchulain flexes his braggadocio ego, at one point declaring that he would “hood” the hawk if he could “bring it down” (407), the hawk checks him with a cry, hinting to him that his mortal strength and desires have no place in the gynocentric world of the hawk’s well. She demonstrates her strength in the end by showing how, with a flitting dance through her medium, she can so easily bend Cuchulain’s will as to make him forget his reason for being there. As the play closes, the Musicians unfold and refold the cloth, letting us know that the hawk has controlled the action throughout.

Now, to read the play as controlled, in a sense, by sexuality does nothing to destroy the importance of the well as an emblem of immortality because for Yeats the issues were related. Writing again in 1927 to Olivia Shakespear, Yeats

tells her that he had experienced a mood of both “spiritual excitement, and. . . sexual torment,” two emotions he knew to be “somehow inseparable” (*Letters* 731). He felt these moods to be inseparable because of their relationship to the “unity of being” he espouses in *Autobiographies*. Moreover, as Taylor explains,

Yeats believed that all human or temporal activity is in a constant state of movement between the extremes of primacy . . . and antithetical . . . being. (*Guide* 8)

To develop toward one’s antithetical being is to achieve what Yeats calls “unity of being” (*Autobiographies* 125). More specifically, “unity of being,” Taylor says, consists of

the perfect balance between the opposing forces which determine our existence and between which man endlessly moves. . . . For this reason, Yeats’s central characters often find themselves at . . . crises of self-identification in which they must choose between opposed aspects of their natures and desires. (*Guide* 14)

In *At the Hawk’s Well* Cuchulain represents the heroic mortal in a critical state of being, for he cannot achieve “the perfect balance” between his desires for a mortal union and his desire for a union with the godhead. A solar hero, he cannot dominate in the gyno-lunar world. And the “lucky wind” that blows him into the barren landscape and represents “vague desire” also represents his flitting inconstancy of purpose. Cuchulain suffers from the same problem as those “men who cannot possess unity of being” that Yeats discusses in *The Trembling of the Veil* (*Autobiographies* 166). As Skene remarks, the “hawk is Cuchulain’s totem animal, his daemon, his external soul” (137), and of course Cuchulain is unable to dominate his daemon in *At the Hawk’s Well*. And this struggle to achieve unity of being, to dominate one’s daemon, is as much a sexual struggle as it is a spiritual struggle. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Yeats says:

When I think of life as a struggle with the Daimon. . . .my imagination runs from Daimon to sweetheart, and I divine an analogy that evades the intellect. . . . [I]t may be ‘sexual love’ which is ‘founded upon spiritual hate’. . . an image of the warfare of man and Daimon. (*Mythologies* 336)

Yeats also associated immortality with sexuality and the unity of being. In a later poem, “Solomon and the Witch,” Sheba talks of her sexual union with Solomon, a union of two opposites, a union which would cause the “world to end” (*Poems* 177). The world’s end is not apocalyptic here; it would, instead, remove the two lovers from temporal reality. In *At the Hawk’s Well* Cuchulain’s failure to drink from the well signifies his failure to reconcile himself to his antiself, spiritually, sexually, and creatively.

Now, while Cuchulain has difficulties in achieving unity, the play’s sexuality actually helps Yeats to achieve a unity between his aesthetic beliefs and his spiritual ones. *At the Hawk’s Well* is highly imagistic in that the play’s objects, the well and its waters, the cloth, the barren tree, and even its characters as types, relay the message of the play as much as rhetoric and action; as Pound says of the image, it is “a vortex or cluster of fused ideas and is endowed with energy” (“Affirmations” 375). Imagism is a poetics of immortality and sexuality, and, as I have shown, the “cluster of fused ideas” which radiate from the images in Yeats’s play connects sexuality, immortality, and Yeats’s spiritual beliefs. In

1913's prose poem "Ikou," Pound's first attempt at documenting the imagist doctrine, the poet links imagism with the kind of spirituality that Yeats also espoused.

It is in art the highest business to create the beautiful image; to create order and [a] profusion of images that we may furnish the life of our minds with a noble surrounding. And if—as some say, the soul survives the body . . . then more than ever should we put forth the images of beauty, that going out into tenantless spaces we have with us all that is needful—an abundance of sounds and patterns to entertain us in that long dreaming; to strew our path to Valhalla; to give rich gifts by the way. (*Personae* 251)

James Longenbach points out in *Stone Cottage* that in Yeats's notes to *The Wind Among the Reeds* the poet says that "The image—a cross, a man preaching in the wilderness, a dancing Salome, a lily in a girl's hand, a flame leaping, a globe with wings, a pale sunset over still waters—is an eternal act. . ." (32); here, Yeats clearly associates the imagistic nature of his play with eternity, so that the imagistic-eternal in the play mirrors the immortal-eternal that the characters are trying to achieve. That Yeats would also associate imagism and images with sexual desire is no accident either, for imagist poetics, if we can judge by much of Pound's work during this period, is a poetics of sexual images and sexual desire. In "Coitus" (1913), Pound writes of the "gilded phaloi of the crocuses / . . . [which] are thrusting at the spring air" (*Personae* 13). In "Heather" he employs sexual symbols similar to those Yeats uses in *At the Hawk's Well*—fire, liquid, and trees; Pound writes of "the petal-like flames" which float around him while he stares at "The milk-white girls / [who] Unbend from the holly-trees" (*Personae* 113). These are the images that Pound strews behind him eternally; the energy radiating from the cluster of images Yeats strews along the immortality theme of *At the Hawk's Well* is also sexual.

Finally, *At the Hawk's Well* is a play of singularity, for once a moment is passed, it is never relivable. Cuchulain's failure forces him to live in the world of temporal reality. But Cuchulain's failure is not one of mortal failure, and this is where we must separate the tragedy of the young Man from the Old Man; Cuchulain has noted the Old Man's example. After the water flows, the Old Man realizes that he has wasted fifty years. "You have stolen my life" (411), the Old Man complains to the godhead; and he urges Cuchulain to stay, telling him that they have "nothing more to lose" (412). The Old Man's barren existence and sterile urging convince Cuchulain to forge into mortal battle and mortal sexuality so that Cuchulain's tragedy is one of virile action. Cuchulain leaves the gynocentric immortal world of the well in order to dominate, at least for a time, Aoife, who lives in the gynocentric mortal world. If we understand *At the Hawk's Well* in both its spiritual and sexual implications, we can comprehend the play in terms of its "moral heroism" (206), as Vendler says is only possible by a *literal* reading. For in the end Cuchulain gives himself completely to the frailties of humanity, rushing off to conquer Aoife, and, as a result, propitiating his own death in both the actual and Elizabethan sense of the word. With this final act, an indirectly sexual one, we must see Cuchulain as heroic, taking that "salmon leap" as he does into humanity, yelling, "He comes! Cuchulain, son of Sualtim, comes!" (413).

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