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Yeats and the Mask of Deirdre:
"That love is all we need"

By MANECK H. DARUWALA

The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat.
The desire that can be satisfied is not a great desire. (Yeats)

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth. (Wilde)

Deirdre, written during a very painful period of Yeats’s life, is a civilized form of autobiography. What could not be put down in journals or lyric poetry and could not be ignored becomes drama. Yeats turns here from the mirror to the mask. “The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat” (“Anima Hominis,” Mythologies, 334, 337), may apply equally to Yeats and Naoise. As Yeats says, there is always a phantasmagoria. Here the phantasmagoria includes Celtic myth, politics, chess games, and the literary tradition (or intertextuality—which, like a Greek mask, combines the advantages of resonance with those of disguise). To experience the pleasure of this play—its concentrated impact—may take nothing but the play, visible to a direct focus. But to understand more of the nature of that pleasure, of the play’s power and effect, and how it’s put together, may also take what astronomers call an “averted” or “peripheral gaze,” bringing into view its darker context.

Out of a thousand pages of manuscript Yeats distills the 759 lines of Deirdre.¹ The forthcoming publication of the manuscripts of Deirdre in the Cornell series should be invaluable. But it is clear even from the available text of the play that it is a powerful and subtle blend in which myth (especially Irish myth and political allegory), biography, and literary allusion are identifiable but not separable.

The King’s Threshold and Deirdre may be taken as companion plays, tragedies that follow Maud Gonne’s marriage; Yeats shows us the material defeat of poetry in The King’s Threshold, the defeat of love in Deirdre. He tells us that the original conception of The King’s Threshold, like the one he reverted to, was tragic. Each play deals with power, poetry, and love. In The King’s Threshold the central conflict is between poetry and power (or, as Phillip L. Marcus puts it, between two conceptions of power, the political and

¹. See Virginia Rohan’s “Yeats and Deirdre,” 32, an essay that has been of great value for this analysis.
the aesthetic), with love playing the supporting role; in Deirdre the conflict is between love and power, with poetry playing the supporting role. Both plays share Yeats’s notion of tragic joy: poetry (or aesthetic power) and love triumph although they are defeated; in the grim alternatives their author provides, physical survival, for Deirdre or Naoise or Seanchan, would have been spiritual defeat. To the Musicians of Deirdre “love-longing is but drought / For the things come after death” (126). The mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death says Wilde’s Salomé, to whom the mystery of love is almost as incomprehensible as it is to Conchubar. So the love of Deirdre and Naoise survives death as that of Yeats survived Maud Gonne’s marriage. By 1908, according to R. F. Foster, “their relationship had come nearer to a conventional resolution than ever before” (387). Or, as Yeats put it in his diary in 1909, drawing upon the image he uses at the end of Deirdre (“Eagles have gone to their cloudy bed ...”), Gonne made his other love affairs “but as the phoenix nest, where she is reborn in all her power to torture and delight” (Foster 1386).

Yeats and some of his best biographers and critics have analyzed the aesthetics of deficiency and desire—how personal defeat becomes aesthetic triumph, how hunger like that of Dante or Keats or Yeats becomes great art. The focus of this essay is on Deirdre. As is usual with Yeats, the myth becomes a biography (as Harold Bloom put it) or the reverse.

Deirdre has the concise language and concentrated power of Yeats’s later plays while preserving the idealism of the earlier ones. It is characteristic of Yeats’s later plays that the women he designates princesses keep turning into goose girls. However, in Deirdre Yeats gives us an idealized although, in the context of Yeatsian tradition, an unusual heroine, who says disturbing things like: “I myself— / That do my husband’s will ...” (163-64). Deirdre defers to her husband’s wishes, as Maud Gonne uncharacteristically deferred to John MacBride—including conversion to Catholicism and an agreement, despite having been a conscientious objector, to matrimony. (“Marriage I always consider abominable but for the sake of Iseult, I make that sacrifice to convention ... ” [Foster 284]). Both choices prove spectacularly wrong.

Yeats took his tradition where he could find it, and Deirdre is reminiscent of African masks, Indian sari folding songs, and the mask hung in the groves of Dodona which Yeats remarks upon in later years. The house in the woods besieged by treachery is both a Celtic and a universal theme, and it is sometimes up to the beholder whether to see the Ramayan, the Mahabharat, or the Three Little Pigs (with Conchubar as the Big Bad Wolf) in its literary or mythic ancestry. Yeats gives his Deirdre the questionable origins of heroes and prophets everywhere: “And nobody to say if she were human, / Or of the gods, or anything at all ... ” (14-15). In Deirdre we have the prophecy of Deirdre’s birth and beauty, the rejection of the jealous, old, and possessive king, the wooing of Naoise, the lovers’ elopement, the woodland residence, Fergus’s promise, etc. These are folklore traditions the Irish story shares with the Rajput tale of Prithviraj Chauhan (or of Lochinvar) and the stories of the
Ramayan and the Mahabharat. Deirdre has been described as an elopement tale, and Yeats’s Conchubar also resembles the wicked father or wizard of folk or fairy tales. We have “a child with an old witch to nurse her” (13), an old king, and a young man who “having wooed, or, as some say been wooed” (24), runs off with her. Deirdre herself tells Naoise she has heard “terrible mysterious things, / Magical horrors and the spells of wizards” (289-90). Yeats insists on making his Deirdre as wise as she is beautiful. What is particularly intriguing is Yeats’s positioning of the drama in the context of woman’s lore and vision.

The earlier versions of the Deirdre legend, like Lady Gregory’s, lay bare its fairy tale aspects. Yeats dwells on this fabulosity.

First Musician. I have a story right, my wanderers,  
That has so mixed with fable in our songs  
That all seemed fabulous. (1-3)

Yeats introduces the three female musicians who are Greek chorus, mythic figures like the Fates or Graces, triple goddesses, scholars, and gypsies of the sort described by Glanvil and quoted by Yeats in “Magic” (Essays and Introductions 39-40), substitutes for Lavarcham and the Druids, and female representatives of the oral tradition and of poets everywhere. Yeats talks of poets and writers in Magic as “We who write, we who bear witness . . .” (51). The story of Deirdre, like any number of fairy tales, begins with the prophecy of a birth (by a Druid) and ends with Druid incantations by the sea. Perhaps Yeats alone, like Euripides, replaces this tradition of wisdom (predominantly male, perhaps, but also female, as it includes the visionary powers of Lavarcham and Deirdre) and the magic that is power with an exclusively female chorus; and he goes out of his way to gender and develop the opposition between female wisdom and the male arrogance that dismisses it.

We must not speak or think as women do,  
That when the house is all abed sit up  
Marking among the ashes with a stick  
Till they are terrified.—Being what we are  
We must meet all things with an equal mind. (Naoise, 206-10)

The men talk of courage but it is Deirdre who displays the greater courage in accompanying her husband to a refuge in which she does not believe. She is wise and intelligent enough to try to prevent disaster but when there is no escape she meets it with physical courage and decisiveness. She is the one who directs Fergus to get help when he tries to rush out into the forest, with a grace that both forgives and saves him. She is ready to go to Naoise’s aid.

2. Synge’s first act presents three women who are aspects of the triple goddess—and a Deirdre who is nature’s child in the tradition of Wordsworth’s Lucy. In fact, Synge was a great admirer of Wordsworth as Yeats discovered after Synge died, and Wordsworth’s influence probably underlies his entire play. But Synge also gives us Owen, who, as a tragic fool playing out the Shakespearean paradox of sanity in insanity, is also a choric voice. Synge’s Deirdre, unlike Yeats’s, makes the decision to return, but for Synge, who knew he was dying, it is Time who is the great enemy.
with nothing but a small knife, she tries to take all the blame for the elopement, and finally, when there's no hope, she outwits the king and accomplishes the difficult task of killing herself with that small knife. Fergus and Naoise's belittling of the prophetic foresight of the musicians and of Deirdre may draw upon Irish resources but it also parallels the usual Cassandra myths and the world of fairy and folklore traditionally dismissed by masculine scholarship or Irish lore dismissed by the scholars even at Trinity College, Dublin. In Yeats's play it proves a fatal mistake. There are few stupid women in Yeats's work, but he seems to go out of his way to make Naoise and Fergus obtuse. (Conchubar is presented as monomaniacal—cunning but not wise.) Fergus belittles what he sees as the fearful female lore of sign reading—“Marking among the ashes with a stick” (208)—comparable to Ille's visionary search (deprecated by Hic) at the beginning of “Ego Dominus Tuus.” They are superficial readers or unravellers of stories. They take words at face value, dismiss the world of woman’s lore or old wives' tales, while the women are more sophisticated interpreters and critics of the complicated relationship between the real and the ideal world, language and reality, art and history.

Virginia Rohan says that in Deirdre Yeats revises away from his Irish sources, from Irish story to European romance or universal fable (it would be interesting to know whether he also revised toward greater self-concealment). Paradoxically, the effect of this refusal to dwell on or to exoticize what is Irish about this story makes it more convincingly so. At home the Irish do not drink green beer any more than Indians add “curry” to their dishes. To take the “Irish”ness of the story for granted is almost to naturalize it, to give it the sort of assurance we like to think of as postcolonial.

Yeats himself, in “The Celtic Element in Literature,” stresses the universality of the Celtic. So the story of Deirdre is the stuff of fairy tales, myth, fable, and folklore the world over, as well as, for Yeats, part of Ireland’s recovered heritage. Phillip L. Marcus, analyzing Deirdre in the Irish aesthetic context in Yeats and Artistic Power, remarks that “the play is concerned self-referentially with the process of art shaping life” (82). He discusses, among other things, the use of the story of Lugaidh Redstripe, his sea mew wife, and the chess game, and Naoise's discussion with the musicians:

The musicians here represent the author within his text, juxtaposing a present act with “an ancient poem.” In Deirdre’s next speech she draws further attention to the literary process, urging “the singing women” to “set it down in a book” and praise Naoise and herself for their own heroic deaths. (83)

We have moved in her speech not only from her present to a future but also from the oral tradition to the literary text—for which it seems the musicians are also to be responsible.

To begin with the origins of the play, Rohan tells us that the span of the play was always the last hour of Deirdre and Naoise’s lives. But “before the play was first performed, on 24 November 1906, Yeats had found it necessary to plan three substantially different versions in order to bring into happy co-existence his heroic national ideal and his personal aesthetic... Work on
the third version did not apparently begin before June of 1906.” (35) The fourth version incorporates postproduction revisions (36).

Perhaps it was the personal aspect that made *Deirdre* so difficult for Yeats, so necessary to rewrite. Maud Gonne, writing to Yeats from Paris on 29 April 1906 says: “What courage you have to begin a great work like *Deirdre* all over again” (*Gonne-Yeats Letters* 229). Rohan says of the third version, which puts the story in the context of European romance and myth, and establishes Fergus’s newly expanded role: “much of the imagery related to passionate love in these pages is strongly negative” and destructive (41). But Yeats came to convince himself that “The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat.” (“Anima Hominis,” *Mythologies* 337). In the final version, the finally shaped mask, love is the only surviving value. Perhaps the play was his valerian. (He imagines the possibility that he seeks in poetry the sort of cure that “constipated cats do when they eat valerian”—quoted in Ellmann, *Yeats* 29). Perhaps Yeats, like Coleridge in his innumerable versions of the Ancient Mariner, was rewriting himself and his changing and turbulent responses to passionate love in the wake of Maud Gonne’s marriage, its spectacular destruction, and the revival of his own hopes. For out of the tempest of these destructive versions and the wildness of the lovers comes the assurance about the value of love, the great—and tragic—calm that *Deirdre* and Naoise strive for and that Conchubar notices in *Deirdre*: “But why are you so calm?” (665)

“Classically simple and intense, the earliest prose scenarios project a play focused on the conflict between the trust established among men by the codes of society and the passionate love of man and woman which does not honour these codes” (Rohan 54). This is not the final focus however; the trust established between men—Conchubar’s honor—proves worthless, and love is all that remains. According to Rohan, the play finally “embodies tragically the destruction of the ‘wild will’ by the forces of constraint—represented in the ‘good willed’ but unaware Fergus and the ‘just’ but vengeful Conchubar” (54). But whatever its earlier versions may have been this is not the play we finally have before us, and Conchubar represents no conceivable justice, whether heroic or unheroic, personal, political or supernatural.

Despite a rich tragic heritage (including echoes of *Lear*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and *The Duchess of Malfi* and perhaps even *Troilus and Cressida*, I, ii, 243: “Eagles are gone”), Yeats gives his play a Greek spareness—and less. Marlowe, in a play that spans twenty-four years, represents sixty minutes of stage time in fifty-nine unsurpassed lines of blank verse. *Deirdre* gives us not a year, a month, a week, a natural day—like *Oedipus Rex* or *Antigone* or *Medea*—but one bare hour of life. The lovers die offstage, a discreet brutality reflecting at once Greek decorum and Conchubar’s courtship strategy. We have the conflict between Deirdre and Naoise on one hand and Conchubar on the other as well as the tension between Deirdre and Naoise flanked by the musicians and Fergus in his expanded role. Fergus’s sons, the references to Deirdre and Naoise’s children, Lavarcham, and the Druids are

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all gone—the roles of the latter two taken over by the Musicians and Deirdre herself. Even two of the children of Usna after whom the original story is named have been excised.

Yeats’s distillation of the story into its last hour, its more than Greek focus of time and place and stark contrasts of ivory and ebony, of blood and pallor, concentrates and highlights the action. The very bareness of the stage, the lack of clutter, allows the few objects represented rich interplay. There is the imagery of fire (and of ashes), including the jewels and the brazier, both emblems in the tradition of Pater and Yeats of the human mind and imagination, of art and nature (Daruwala 16). Yeats’s own commentary suggests substituting a symbolic jug (of wine?) and loaf of bread with the mirror (another emblem of the mind and of art) and the brazier: “There is no longer need for loaf and flagon, but the women at the braziers should when the curtain rises be arraying themselves—the one holding a mirror for the other perhaps.” (Plays 391) Art in this play mirrors the artist and not the spectator.

And there is wood in its many incarnations, including a possibly wooden chess set (unlike AE’s set of silver and gold). If Irish “chess” (fichell) is the “wisdom of trees” (Knapp 187) it may contrast with Deirdre’s later mockery of Conchubar’s sapiensness (711).

Yeats says of his Countess Cathleen that “In using what I considered traditional symbols I forgot that in Ireland they are not symbols but realities” (Autobiographies 416). The color contrasts that to Yeats may have been symbols (including alchemical symbols) are to us perhaps too close to the realities of racial and ethnic stereotyping.3 For Yeats they may embody the human chess game played on stage and paralleled by that played by the lovers as well as the shadow play of the mind: “You should have too calm thought to start at shadows” as an earlier version put it (Plays 358). Yeats elaborates the use and potential of shadows on the stage: “perhaps the light that casts them may grow blood-red as the sun sets ....” (396). They fore-shadow Conchubar: “but I may let the king enter as at present when he comes to spy, the shadow of fear become a substance at last ...” (397). Certainly they seem to represent the alien or the other, as well as the world beneath the conscious one. (If Fergus is Conchubar’s—deceived—superego, these foreign figures are his id.) They may suggest Plato’s allegory of the cave. But they may also suggest the ancient Phoenician and Roman associations of Ireland and Libya and strengthen the link with exotic and dragon-associated magic, Libya being a well-known haunt of dragons and the location of St. George’s encounter with one (although Yeats also has native dragons to draw

3. In the end, Yeats actually seems to have played down the racial element—e.g., see the Variorum edition of the Plays (309) or Naosse’s reference to “a dark skin and a Libyan axe” (396). Nor does a narrowly contemporary racial allegory, Libyan politics, or an explicit reference to the Irish involvement in the Boer War seem to apply here. Irish nationalists supposed the Boers as antiimperialist (MacBride was a Boer War veteran), but the native population of Africa, who saw the Boers as even more oppressive, realized that no likely end was going to leave them happier than before. England broke faith with them (as it did with Ireland), and the Boer governments handed down a long legacy of apartheid and racism, giving the world—inadvertently—both Gandhi and Mandela.
upon, e.g., see Rohan 37). There is also the long Irish literary tradition of the “chess” game as well as an English dramatic and structural one going back at least to Middleton (Women Beware Women, The Game of Chess), not to mention sources like the Arabian Nights. Phillip L. Marcus analyzes Yeats’s use of the chess game in Deirdre in relation to his theory of the tragic character and the Irish context (Yeats and Artistic Power 83). And there is the biographical side of myth. Yeats, not an ideal student according to those in authority, “introduced chess into the classroom and spread throughout the school the art of playing it secretly” (Ellmann, Yeats 29). The game becomes in Deirdre an emblem of defiant and understated heroism (understated to the point of showing off). Perhaps the best example of this kind of sprezzatura occurs at the end of Housman’s “Oracles”: “The Spartans on that sea wet rock sat down and combed their hair.” For Yeats, colors represent not only the war with others—which is politics—but the war with the self, which gives us poetry. Deirdre says of her rubies: “Now wearing them / Myself wars on myself, for I myself / That do my husband’s will, yet fear to do it—/ Grow dragonish to myself’’ (Plays 162-65) Pallor is the Romantic sign—in Keats and Coleridge—of death; it is also the absence that signifies being lovelorn or passionate or fainthearted or fashionably ladylike; red the color of blood, courage, passion—and the female cycle. The raddle is a mask that hides fear, but it is also the truth that the face aspires to: “These women have the raddle that they use / To make them brave and confident” (154-55). It is not merely paint but courage, “the face I had / Before the world was made.” Deirdre adjusts her jewels and paints her cheeks but playing chess demands not just the appearance of calm and self-possession but the fact of intellectual concentration on some apparently different object: “The steady thinking that the hard game needs” (473). Lugaidh Redstripe and the sea mew play chess as they wait for the swordstroke although Yeats humanizes Deirdre and Naoise by making them unable to do this, Deirdre’s veins running blood and not sea water. It is also an aesthetic triumph of emotion over stylization. But the ideal (as ancient as Zarathustra) recurs again and again in Yeats, appropriately updated as to the technology of killing, whether as “a dream of eyelids that do not quiver before the bayonet” (“Anima Hominis,” Mythologies 325) or in another superhuman context: “I need some mind that, if the cannon sound / From every quarter of the world, can stay / Wound in mind’s posturing / As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound” (“All Souls’ Night”); the latter however, may have more of an association with an Archimedian mathematical trance.

The wooden house is surrounded by an oak forest—sacred to the Druids as it was to the Greeks—which is also suggestive, especially at nightfall, of death. (“There is not one of the great oaks about us / But shades a hundred men, “ says Naoise [419-20]. It is as though they have walked into Birnam Wood instead of waiting for it to come to them.) Keats, in “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again”—a poem about the aesthetics of romance and tragedy—seems to equate the oak forest and death and relate them to the

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world of imagination and poetic creativity. Yeats, who appeals to the happy, untragic resolutions of “old Romance” in “a King and No King” and who has his own essay on Arnold, Keats, and Celtic magic, reclaims the “deep eternal theme” from Albion’s chief poet for the Irish national theatre. The Phoenix, which closes Keats’s sonnet, an image of resurrection, has long been identified with the eagle, also a fire- and sun-associated bird (“Eagles have gone to their cloudy bed ...”). The hawk represented the rising soul of an Egyptian pharaoh, and an eagle was released over the funeral pyre of a Roman emperor (see Walker 262). Milton's last Semichorus (1687-1707) at the end of Samson Agonistes (a play Yeats had already used as a model for The King's Threshold) brings together within the space of less than a dozen lines the dragon (and the firedrake or meteor or shooting star), fire, and the eagle identified with the phoenix and associated with literary fame: “And though her body die, her fame survives” (1706). Perhaps AE’s depiction of Deirdre as a “Poor timid dove,” full of “weakness” (28) also roused Yeats (whose initial, uncensored reaction was to hate AE’s play) to his antithetical depiction. AE’s Deirdre, more a Victorian victim who expires gently at the end than Celtic heroine, declares herself “only a woman” and has to be consoled by Náisi: “Poor timid dove, I had forgotten thy weakness” (28). Yeats gives us bareness instead of a play “dense with omens” (Russell 24), eagles instead of (stereotypically slandered) doves. AE’s play may have its virtues, but it is its faults that seem to have inspired Yeats. Yeats’s Deirdre, though a most gentle woman, has emotional depth, courage, intelligence, and visionary and prophetic powers as well as beauty. Considering self-mutilation, she realizes there is no escape from identity and that she is more than her appearance: “Whatever were to happen to my face / I’d be myself.” (367-68). “I am Duchess of Malfi still.” And she manages to kill herself with a small knife. One can understand why Yeats, who preferred “not pale solitary doves but eagles golden-feather’d” (Hyperion II 225-60) and chose to portray both lovers as eagles, did not care for AE’s play but may have been inspired by it—as in: and now for something completely different.

Even if Yeats’s revisions distil and move away from Irish matter, he still arranges his characters according to their relationship to the Irish tradition. He gives us a world of dragon rubies, emblematical chess games, and birds: “The crib has fallen and the birds are in it” (418). Even the interjection of the separate and parallel story of Lugaidh Redstripe features the sea mew (the difference between a seagull and a sea mew being the difference between a play by Chekhov and one by Yeats).

But there is an important distinction between the kinds of magic. Conchubar’s jewels are exotic and utilitarian magic, designed to destroy human will. His magic is alien and bought—like his mercenaries. Yeats could have drawn on numerous native sources for Conchubar’s use or misuse—inspired by false assurances of safety—of Druid spells and magic and incantations (as AE did) but he refuses to. Conchubar, constantly scheming about the perverted use of jewels and hangings, is among those whom Yeats
criticizes in “Poetry and Tradition” (1907) (Essays and Introductions), in which he also discusses the Irish political context, as those who “cannot understand you if you say, ‘All the most valuable things are useless’” (251). His greed is that of a collector, a miser, or an owner, whether of aesthetic or human property. He is not presented by Yeats as the aspiring lover of Deirdre, only as an aspiring husband who sees a wife as property, a slave to be bargained for and bought. As the First Musician puts it: “I have heard he loved you / As some old miser loves the dragon-stone / He hides among the cobwebs near the roof”. (240-42) And the imagery and vocabulary of bargaining and commerce net the entire action. “This bargaining” (619) that so horrifies Naoise and Deirdre at the end of the play is an intimate part of Conchubar’s strategy. His power is bought, mercenaries do his vicarious trapping and killing, because his own warriors will not stoop to it. Conchubar’s values are those Yeats associates with the British Empire, with “Cromwell’s murderous crew,” and to a lesser extent, with men who are born to pray and save. The Irish Daily Independent reports Yeats’s speech at the March 13, 1898, Phoenix Park demonstration: “This year the Irish people would not celebrate like England did last year the establishment of an Empire that had been built on the rapine of the world (hear, hear)” (Collected Letters v. 2 1997 701-702). On April 13, proposing “The Union of the Gael” at the Holborn restaurant, Yeats said:

We hated at first the ideals and ambitions of England, the materialism of England, because they were hers but we have come to hate them with a nobler hatred [applause]. We hate them now because we know they are evil. We have suffered too long from them, not to understand, that hurry to become rich, that delight in mere bigness, that insolence to the weak are evil and vulgar things. No Irish voice, trusted in Ireland, has been lifted up in praise of that Imperialism which is so popular just now, and is but a more painted and flaunting materialism. (702-703)

Conchubar, who tries to force desire where there is only repulsion, who tries to substitute a mechanical magic—his Libyan Viagra—for love, is certainly a materialist.

Do you think that I
    Shall let you go again, after seven years
    Of longing and of planning here and there,
    And trafficking with merchants for the stones
    That make all sure, and watching my own face
    That none may read it? (589-94)

(The dragon stone may owe its origins to Irish legend—or Philostratus or any number of ancient sources. But Yeats emphatically exoticizes it, making it an import into Ireland.) Like the merchants in The Countess Cathleen Conchubar bargains for souls. Each lover tries to sacrifice self for the other, and Naoise rejects Conchubar’s bargain:

Aad do you think
    That, were I given life at such a price.
    I would not cast it from me? (604-606)
Conchubar’s triumph is uncomprehending, cast in the language of property and possession and theft and things, of “The folk who are buying and selling” (“The Pity of Love”) and also premature:

Deirdre is mine;
She is my queen, and no man can rob me.
I had to climb the topmost bough and pull
This apple among the winds. (742-45)

The Musicians who call on us to “Praise the blossoming apple stem” also call upon an image Yeats seems to reserve for depictions of Maud Gonne in his autobiographical prose. The career of Yeats’s Dante (in “Ego Dominus Tuus”) is based, of course, on what Conchubar does not know. The apple on the bough is out of reach and Conchubar’s reaction seems not so much grief as that of a trapper defeated by his prey:

She cannot have escaped a second time! ....
she has deceived me for a second time;
And every common man can keep his wife,
But not the King. (748, 753-55)

But even his last words—concerned with possession and power and display not love—acknowledge that Naiose was the chosen lover: “And letting no boy lover take the sway.”

In the end Deirdre triumphs by appealing not to Conchubar’s nonexistent compassion but to his misogyny and warped conception of womankind: “Although we are so delicately made, / There’s something brutal in us, and we are won / By those who can shed blood” (672-74). It is a strategy as ancient as Euripides’ Medea (the old “we women are so worthless” speech), and Conchubar in the end is not much brighter than Jason about what women “really” want and cares as little about it. And of course it is Yeats’s final vindication and idealization of love: Deirdre chooses the lover over the warrior (such as he is)—even if it means suicide.

The play concerns the old quarrel, one woman and two men, and has been read as a dramatization of the triangle of Maud Gonne, Yeats, and John MacBride. Phillip Marcus points out the solar myth underlying the story—and we may also see it as an “unnatural” reversal of that myth, with the old king destroying the young man and the queen (or goddess). If there is a survival in Deirdre—a promise of eternity—it may not compare with palpable human happiness.

Some critics and scholars have suggested an affinity between Yeats and Conchubar. Richard Ellmann writes of

Deirdre, began in 1904 and finished in 1907. Here Naisi, “the young, famous, popular man” has carried off the King’s bride because of his “insolent strength of youth,” but is at last trapped and killed by order of the jealous, crafty, patient King Conchubar. Naisi is not John MacBride, nor King Conchubar Yeats, but Naisi is the qualities in Yeats which MacBride’s success made Yeats realize he had suppressed, as Conchubar is the qualities which MacBride made Yeats realize he had overly exalted. (170)
His Autobiographies end in 1902, and from that date until December 1908, when he began a diary, we have no direct recording of his thought or life. During almost six years he wrote only one lyric, “O do not Love too Long.” In a man notoriously indiscreet about self-revelation (his wife would banteringly christen him “William Tell,”) the silence about these years is significant. (167-68)

What we have are the letters and of course the plays, of which Ellmann says: “The five plays which date from 1903 to 1910 are filled with this sense of guilt at having separated himself from ‘the normal, active man’” (169).

And yet by the time Yeats began his Deirdre he had loved and lost and hoped again to win the possibility of Maud Gonne’s love. Yeats may lend Conchubar some of the bitterness and chill and desperation of his loss (“dear, cling close to me; since you were gone. My barren thoughts have chilled me to the bone.” From “Reconciliation”); and he may have been obsessively calculating the possibilities of love with Maud Gonne for years, only to watch her go off with a soldier. But not only is Conchubar not Yeats, he is the concentrated emblem of all that Yeats most despises. Gonne writes to Yeats about MacBride in January 1905: “I am fighting an uneven battle because I am fighting a man without honour or scruples who is sheltering himself and his vices behind the National Cause” (Gonne-Yeats Letters 184). Gonne, unfairly or not, blamed herself (“By my marriage I brought all this trouble on myself, [136]), but Yeats in his play places the responsibility of the return on Naoise and Fergus.

Like his Deirdre, Yeats played the role of Cassandra, trying to warn Gonne in the most extreme terms of the dire consequences of a marriage to MacBride, although even he could not foresee the extent and thoroughness of the disaster. By the time Yeats began his Deirdre it was already clear that the marriage had failed, and Yeats had hope again of being the lover and not the loser; by the time he completed the final version he knew the horrifying story of MacBride’s violence, assaults, and treachery, even of his threat to shoot Yeats, all of which seem to associate him with the role of a Conchubar. MacBride, born the same year as Yeats and Maud Gonne, was certainly no “boy lover”—although Yeats himself may have been said to have played that role once with Maud Gonne.

Yeats, throughout the play, represents Naoise as the chosen lover who also happens to be the husband (long before the advent of or marriage with MacBride, Yeats had celebrated a mystical marriage with Gonne), with no right but what Deirdre’s love grants him. In one of his desperate letters to Gonne, advising against marriage, Yeats claims that this gives him perhaps (and only) the right to speak what he thinks is the truth. Conchubar, on the other hand, seeks to exercise the right to tyrannical enslavement that the law often regarded as the definition of a husband. Gonne’s feminist objections to the institution of marriage long preceded her marriage, but the correspondence of both Yeats and Gonne during this period shows their fury and astonishment at the servile legal status of women, and especially of Irish women.
The parallels then, between Yeats's depiction of Conchubar and what he learned of MacBride seem well developed.4

Yeats felt bitter and disgusted at Irish nationalist support of the husband: “‘The trouble with these men,’ he complained to Gregory, ‘is that in their eyes a woman has no rights.’” (Foster 332). (Conchubar is exactly the kind of man who believes that women have no rights.) He denounced the Catholic code: “for women a code of ignoble submission.” Like his father, Yeats hoped that Gonne would lead a women’s rebellion: “The women’s question is in a worse state in Dublin than in any place I know” (333).

Yeats’s painful sensitization to the situation of Gonne in particular and Irish women in general may well have gone into the shaping of Deirdre. Given Yeats’s state of mind at the time, it seems psychologically unlikely that he would identify with a Conchubar.

In addition to treachery and violence, Conchubar is defined by his hidden hatred and jealousy of Naoise. It was a theme close to Yeats’s experience at the time. In January 1905, Maud Gonne writes to Yeats: “My husband is insanely jealous & utterly unscrupulous ... On one occasion he told me he had intended to kill you ... (January 1905, Gonne-Yeats Letters 186)

Like Deirdre with the Musicians she realizes the value of female solidarity:

When one is in trouble one finds out who are one’s real friends. Of men friends I have found few who have cared or troubled & I have asked help of none—I asked help of no woman either, except of my cousin May, but from a great man I have received help and sympathy, in a degree which surprised me. (March 1905. Gonne-Yeats Letters 195)

Nor is this seen as a relative or contemporary morality. It may have mattered to the more conventional in Yeats’s audience that Deirdre was Conchubar’s (reluctant) fiancee not his bride; to Yeats it would have been a technique irrelevant to love. Yeats’s Musicians are the aesthetic but also the ethical voice of the play (like principles embodied by the lovers them-

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4. See Foster’s outline of the dissolution of the marriage, which is compatible with the composition and revisions of Deirdre:

As early as the honeymoon ... the couple’s incompatibility and MacBride’s drunkenness were spectacularly evident. Gonne returned to Paris alone, and significantly headed for London, where WBY met her, as so often before, at Euston.... by a terrible irony the precipitating cause for its [the marriage’s] dissolution would be MacBride’s molestation of his step-daughter Iséult, for whose protection Gonne had sought refuge in marriage (Foster 286-87).

In January 1905 the insecurely stitched-together MacBride marriage finally began to unravel in public ... (Foster 330).

[Yeats] had long been hearing rumors about the marriage ... But the truth was spectacularly shocking. On 9 January (1905), having had an interview with May Bertie-Clay, WBY wrote to Gregory. He was still reeling at the catalogue of MacBride’s crimes: violence, sexual abuse, threats to the children. Two days later he wrote in even greater shock, having heard details about MacBride’s seduction of the seventeen-year-old Eileen Wilson (Gonne’s half-sister) and his molestation of the eleven-year-old Iséult, “the blackest thing you can imagine” (Foster 330-31).

Yeats told Lady Gregory, MacBride “had even threatened to shoot him ‘some while back’—‘the only cheerful news I have had in days’, ... ‘it gives one a sense of heightened life’” (331).

Yeats casts Conchubar as appropriately jealous and violent, an unprepossessing Hephaestus / Vulcan with his net, except that what is high comedy in Greek myth is high tragedy in the Irish. (“Later in “A Prayer for My Daughter,” Yeats, in the context of his old love for Gonne, revives the image of Vulcan in Venus’s inexplicable choice of a husband.”)
selves, or like Seanchan). And they are, with all their wanderings, and their experience of the variety of human nature, universal and unwavering in their praise of love. As Yeats said, in the context of creating the new Irish drama: "I believe that literature is the principal voice of the conscience, and that it is its duty age after age to affirm its morality against the special morality of clergymen and churches, and of kings and parliaments and peoples" (Ellmann 134). In both Deirdre and The King's Threshold, Yeats sets this literary voice of conscience against the power of “Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law” who are the enemies of poets (King's Threshold 71), and the soldier in The King's Threshold is one of those men of action who may well have been described as a “vainglorious lout.” MacBride offered to shoot Yeats, but writing well may be the better revenge.

In a sense Deirdre is the cry of the heart against necessity; a play about wish fulfillment as well as loss and bitter reality. Yeats presents himself or the persona of his poems as full of self-reproach about hesitations in love. But Conchubar is a man of determined and unwavering action, or at least of vicarious action, by fraud and force. He regards Deirdre as a possession, never considering that she might refuse to be the prize of war. He does not confront his rival head-on, and his mercenaries do all the trapping and killing. (The net, the hunt, and the trap are also dominant images in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, later translated by Yeats.) He murders Naoise by treachery and aspires to rape. Naoise, on the other hand, despite his failings of insight, is his total antithesis: a lover who gives up all for love—not once but twice in the story. The lovers' final choice repeats the first one, after each one tries to sacrifice the self for the other. And yet, despite his heroism, Naoise in Yeats’s version of the story, even if he dies in action, is emphatically not defined as a man of action. At least that is not the mask he aspires to:

What need have I, that gave up all for love,
To die like an old king out of a fable,
Fighting and passionate?
What need is there for all that ostentation at my setting?
I have loved truly and betrayed no man.
I need no lightning at the end, no beating
In a vain fury at the cage’s door. (125)

In Yeats’s version it is not the man of war Deirdre chooses—but Naoise, twice over, in death as in life. Having lost the woman who was the love of his life for fourteen years (a lunar and mythic number, the years of exile in the Ramayan, of Jacob's servitude for Rachel, and twice the length of Naoise and Deirdre’s love), Yeats gives us a play about the triumph of love, sets “it down in a book / That love is all we need” (461-62).

Naoise refuses life in a few moving lines:

And do you think
That, were I given life at such a price,
I would not cast it from me? O my eagle!
Why do you beat vain wings upon the rock
When hollow night's above? (604-608)
Naoise’s quiet lack of ostentation is itself high style, and he is here his own chorus. And the calm of mind that Milton seeks to inspire in his audience is aspired to—at least in appearance—as both style and strategy by Deirdre. Manoa’s claim at the end of Samson

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt…. (1721-22)

sounds like Hamlet or Yeats instructing their players: tragic actors do not break up their lines to weep, although only Yeats (and perhaps Nietzsche) would insist that Hamlet and Lear are gay.\footnote{For a detailed analysis of Yeats’s evolving aesthetics of tragedy and of Yeatsian aestheticism in the political contexts of his time and place, see Philip L. Marcus’s indispensable Yeats and Artistic Power. I owe thanks to Phillip Marcus for his many valuable suggestions and for allowing me to draw on his profound knowledge of Yeats. I also owe thanks to Donald G. Watson, chair of our English department.}

Yeats’s Naoise—in true tragic tradition—is both heroic and imperfect. But while Naoise has many faults, Conchubar has no virtues—not even those of physical courage or leadership. He does not share the archaic warrior code of Naoise or even Edmund in Lear; as king, he can, like a tourist on safari, delegate the hunt. While not exactly Mrs. Packletide, he reminds one of the stories of great white hunters posing with the prize their “native” escorts have trapped or killed. The play is about buying and selling and commercialization, about bought power and the attempted “bargaining,” even for love. The imperialist analogy is not a random one.

The first part of the play consists of suspenseful guessing about Conchobar’s motives by the players—not the audience—but Conchobar’s motives are mysterious to the others not because they are complex but because they are so simply without scruple or sensitivity. Shelley tells us that the secret of morals is love; what the secret of love is no one seems to know. Naoise and Deirdre represent, in the end (as in the beginning), the fairy tale conviction “that love is all we need.” How can Naoise whose standard is “I have loved truly and betrayed no man” (444), or Deirdre who knows “That love is all we need” (462), or even Fergus who thinks he lives in a world where promises are kept, understand Conchubar? If Deirdre and Naoise belong to the old, idealized, nature-associated world of love and honor and song, and Fergus to the world of honor and good intentions, the sort of ideal that Yeats is trying to recreate with his new Irish theatre, Conchubar belongs to the “real” world that replaced them, to the treachery and lack of honor that destroyed the Red Branch and to the values—if one may call them that—that Yeats saw as threatening the future of Ireland. Personal and political allegory are not always distinct in Yeats’s plays, especially those written for Gonne; and Herbert Fackler has argued that the political allegory of Deirdre as Ireland and Conchubar as England was probably not lost on the audiences of the Deirdre plays:

Did not—the logic of the association runs—the English usurp rule? Did they not lay false claim to Ireland’s beauty, so often symbolized in female form? And did not heroes of Ireland, knowing well the odds and probable outcome, continually attempt to rescue Ireland out of passionate love?\footnote{Fackler 145-46.}
One may argue that Deirdre and Naoise represent that Romantic Ireland that dies for love, lovers more practical people can only see as emblems of destructive love or emblems of "All that delirium of the brave." But Yeats’s play ignores the tradition of blaming Deirdre for the destruction although Fergus touches upon it, in language reminiscent of “No Second Troy” or “Reconciliation”: “Men blamed you that you stirred a quarrel up / That has brought death to many” (349-50)—as though women were designed to sacrifice themselves merely to keep the men from quarrelling. Shaw denounced the cult of female “self” sacrifice in The Quintessence of Ibsenism and the hypocrisies of pretending that the victim somehow enjoyed it. Or as Maud Gonne writes to Yeats on 7 May 1907 about some of those who rushed to champion MacBride: “They considered that a woman’s life should not count, if by sacrificing it they could keep their hero, their one fighting man intact” (240, original emphasis). Yeats’s Naoise refuses this long tradition of female sacrifice even as Conchubar bargains for it. It is this refusal that makes Deirdre high tragedy but not horror—unlike the end of Jude the Obscure.

Contrasted with Conchubar’s traffic in utilitarian magic, Deirdre’s powers may be called natural and native—here Celtic—magic. She is a visionary closely associated with the natural world and the imagery of wild things and birds. And the jewels Naoise gives Deirdre—central to the aesthetic and emotional contrasts of the play—come from symbolically different, Celtic, sources.

My husband took these rubies from a king
Of Surracha that was so murderous
He seemed all glittering dragon ... (160-62)

Conchubar, as king, stays home and bargains for jewels taken from Libyan dragons. Deirdre and Naoise, like the Musicians, are wanderers. Deirdre’s jewels are from a dragonish but human source; as she paradoxically puts it:

Were we not born to wander?
These jewels have been reaped by the innocent sword
Upon a mountain, and a mountain bred me ... (342-44)

They are symbols, and their end is aesthetic; they confer no power or courage but what comes from within her. (The contrast here is not even so much that of good versus bad magic as of the natural or humanistic versus the “unnatural” arts.) Although emblematical of blood (and perhaps of the female cycle and magic) and meant to keep the color up, they may instead heighten the contrast. Yeats preserves the strong color contrasts of the original story. In Lady Gregory’s version they are the primary colors of fairy tales: the red of blood, the white of snow, the black of a raven’s wing. The flaunting of the rubies and the raddle in Yeats’s play suggests a kind of sprezzatura, a show of courage before the mind can call the color up. Despite the softening provided by this being Naoise’s wish, they are war paint and weapons, the equivalent of the ritual arming of the warrior.

Yeats, even at his most Irish, is generally an internationalist. Between Conchubar’s imported and exploitative magic and Deirdre’s Celtic and prophetic
magic, Yeats positions the musicians, women of the world, artists who draw on their universal experience of human nature and many poetic traditions.

Words and symbols, poetry and magic are for Yeats inextricable. Yeats’s fascination with the magic and poetry that are power began early, and the Golden Dawn later made careful distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate uses of magic. Alestair Crowley, arch conspirator (Foster 104), had to be fought off in part by Yeatsian vision—although with happier results than in the case of Conchubar’s craft and Deirdre’s prophetic vision. Foster compares the Golden Dawn to a kind of university (106), pointing out its attraction for creators and artists (and scientists). Certainly if the Musicians have knowledge it comes from their widespread wanderings and experience—and like Yeatsian magic it gives them metaphors for poetry.

Conchubar seeks magical power, but not like a student of the Golden Dawn, “through study and practice” or “self-purification” or the transformation or rebirth of the self. The power he seeks is over others, not himself. In fact he remains obdurate at the end and unlike, say, Creon at the end of Sophocles’ Antigone or even Synge’s Conchubar—he learns nothing and nothing changes him. He does not evoke the great mind or memory by symbols, he simply seeks to manipulate by charms (28). He seeks power without knowledge or wisdom, and the hangings and jewels are simply objects and means to other ends. He has no use for symbols—which are all-important to Yeats: “I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half consciously by their successors, the poet, the musician, and the artist” (Essays and Introductions, “Magic,” 1901, 49). These are represented in Yeats’s play by Deirdre and the Musicians. In fact the characters in Yeats’s play may be organized, like the characters in Wilde’s “Salomé,” by their attitude to symbols. Here again “Salomé’s” veils are to Yeats what Gogol’s Overcoat supposedly was to Russian writers. As Herod says: “It is not wise to find symbols in everything that one sees. It makes life too full of terrors” (Wilde 419). Not finding symbols, on the other hand, or not reading them right, Yeats suggests, may make life too short. From Conchubar who has no imagination, to Fergus who resists his, or Naoise who follows the wrong interpreter or critic, to the Musicians and Deirdre who are artists and visionaries, the ability to read and correctly interpret signs lies at the center of this brief play. Conchubar himself is not so mysterious a text or mask; he speaks of “watching my own face / That none might read it” (593-94), but only Fergus among all his court takes it at face value. His is a unique and perverse reading of Conchubar’s benevolence based on his own good intentions. (The news of Deirdre’s return is met in this play with the kind of horrified amazement that seems to have universally greeted Gonne’s engagement to MacBride. One did not need prophetic foresight to measure the chances of a happy ending.) And once the characters find themselves in the wooden house

7. See Richard Ellmann's “Overtures to Salomé” and Rodney Shewan’s Oscar Wilde: Art and Egoism.
at the opening of Yeats’s play, the unfolding of the action is the suspense (for the actors not the audience, as in Sophocles’ _Oedipus_) provided by the progressive interpretation of signs—absent as well as present—the major absence of course, being Conchubar’s presence.

Yeats attributes to his artists, these musicians, the hesitation and tentativeness (_Deirdre_ 120) he associates with the modern poetic imagination: “Unlike the rhetoricians … we sing amid our uncertainty” (“Anima Hominis,” _Mythologies_ 331). Fergus and Naoise who need to justify and prove their actions and keep their courage up speak in certainties. Perhaps they are dreaming and acting by other scripts, of a king’s word, of a story where, as Naoise says, “when we give a word and take a word / Sorrow is put away, past wrong forgotten” (307-308). And of course Conchubar never hesitates or questions his own actions.

The opening describes two of the musicians as Fergus belies his golden tongue and the motivation for the return goes back to the simplicity of legend. Yeats ingeniously dwells not on the motive (therefore not encouraging a close examination of it—unlike Synge) but the Musicians’ incredulity (like ours) at the lovers’ return. The center of the conflict is not that different from that in _The King’s Threshold_, the split between power and wisdom. Fergus, torn between censorship and admiration (a situation that parallels that in _The King’s Threshold_), tells the musicians:

- I know myself, and him, and your wild thought
- Fed on extravagant poetry, and lit
- By such a dazzle of old fabulous tales
- That common things are lost … (106-109)

He dismisses their song as trivial, rarely a good sign in a Yeatsian character:

- Come now, a verse
- Of some old time not worth remembering,
- And all the lovelier because a bubble.
- Begin, begin, of some old king and queen,
- Of Lugaidh Redstripe or another; no, not him,
- He and his lady perished wretchedly. (115-20)

It’s not that Fergus doesn’t know the obvious and ominous literary parallels, he just refuses to take them as serious or relevant, a flaw in interpretation. Fergus chooses—fatally—to forget:

- I can remember now, a tale of treachery,
- A broken promise and a journey’s end—
- But it were best forgot. (183-85)

The musicians and Deirdre exercise the human arts of poetry and vision. Conchubar relies on his jewels not for their beauty but for power over others—to bend or force the human will. His magic is tyrannical, unnatural and alien. The First Musician describes Conchubar’s foreign mercenaries: “they are such men / As kings will gather for a murderous task / That neither bribes, commands, nor promises / Can bring their people to” (83-86). Fergus replies: “Conchubar’s fame / Brings merchandise on every wind that blows …” (88-89).
Deirdre, casting Conchubar as the wicked magician or wizard in fairy tales, refers to "terrible mysterious things / Magical horrors and the spells of wizards" (289-90). The jewels are imported and utilitarian, designed to destroy human will, sewn into the embroidery of the bed:

First Musician: There are strange, miracle-working, wicked stones,
Men tear out of the heart and the hot brain
Of Libyan dragons....
I have seen a bridal bed, so curtained in,
So decked for miracle in Conchubar’s house,
And learned that a bride’s coming. (267-69, 277-79)

Conchubar himself knows the things a king may not be seen to do, and unlike the lovers who give up all for love he has no intention of risking even his power for his ends. As he puts it later, he wishes to reassure the people that he has not done what he has done:

... that they may know,
When I have put the crown upon her head,
I have not taken her by force and guile.
The doors are open, and the floors are strewed
And in the bridal chamber curtains sewn
With all enchantments that give happiness
By races that are germane to the sun. (571-76)

By contrast the bridal bed and chamber of Naoise and Deirdre are described by Deirdre as the natural world:

Do you remember that first night in the woods
We lay all night on leaves, and looking up,
Where the first grey of the dawn awoke the birds,
Saw leaves above us? (489-92)

Deirdre, Naoise, and the Musicians are wanderers—and better off so. In "Magic" Yeats writes: “Our souls that were once naked to the winds of heaven are now thickly clad, and have learned to build a house and light a fire upon its hearth, and shut-to the doors and windows” (Essays and Introductions 41). Conchubar’s wooden house is not a shelter but a trap. But in the end myth and folklore and literary tradition come together in Deirdre to both mask and dramatize what is personal, and Yeats’s passage may also have a deeper personal significance. In the desperate February 1903 letter to Gonne, Yeats reminds her of a passage (dated December 12, 1898) in his diaries about their spiritual encounters:

I have dreamed of my friend many times but only once when her spirit came to me at Coole & bent over me did her lips meet.>On the morning of Dec. 7 I woke after a sleep less broken than my sleep is commonly and knew that our lips had met in dreams. I went to see her & she said “What dreams had you last night?” I told her what had happened & she said “I was with you last night but do not remember much,” but in the evening she said some such words as these. “I will tell you what happened last night. I went out of my body. I saw my body from outside it & I was
brought away by Lug & my hand<outside it and I was brought> was put in yours & I was told that we were married. All became dark. I think we went away together to do some work.” There are other entries [similar] concerning this & earlier visions of mine. Now I claim that this gives me the right to speak. Your hands were put in mine & we were told to do a certain work together. (Gonne-Yeats Letters, 164)

[This would make Yeats a stand-in for the sungod, the Irish King, and Maud Gonne Ireland]

Yeats spoke then, and although he wrote little lyric poetry in the years that followed, he spoke in Deirdre, perhaps more freely for the mask of drama. He gives us a world where lovers die for each other and for love rather than marry another, a tragic world not quite moulded to the heart’s desire. Deirdre and Naoisi do not choose to die, and the play is not a Leibestod or an “I wish we were dead together to-day.” Deirdre is also different in quality from the early elegiac love poems to Maud Gonne “lamenting the death that he imaginatively projects” (17-18) as Jahan Ramazani puts it. Deirdre and Yeats, like any lovers, want a complete resurrection. Now, even in the grave, perhaps, all may not be renewed (as a later poem, “Broken Dreams,” hopes). Deirdre and Naoise share a spiritual love incomprehensible to a Conchubar, one that outlasts a mere lifetime. But the body matters. The moving passage about their first night together is Yeats’s letter on the spiritual marriage trying to avert what he sees as the catastrope of MacBride, but in a form that has put on the immortality of the flesh and the stage. What may have been seen perhaps as unconscious psychological manipulation in a private letter is now art. Threatened by Conchubar (as Yeats was by MacBride), waiting and playing chess, Deirdre says:

Do you remember that first night in the woods
We lay all night on leaves, and looking up,
When the first grey of the dawn awoke the birds,
Saw leaves above us? You thought that I still slept,
And bending down to kiss me on the eyes,
Found they were open. Bend and kiss me now,
For it may be the last before our death.
And when that’s over, we’ll be different;
Imperishable things, a cloud or a fire.
And I know nothing but this body, nothing
But that old vehement, bewildering kiss.

[Conchubar comes to the door.] (489-99)

Despite all the beautiful songs of his chorus, Yeats knows that Eternity is in love with the productions of Time. The last lines parallel the personal lyric “a King and no King”:

And I that have not your faith, how shall I know
That in the blinding light beyond the grave
We’ll find so good a thing as that we have lost?
The hourly kindness, the day’s common speech,
The habitual content of each with each
When neither soul nor body has been crossed.

Eternity, even if one could count on it, may be a sorry substitute for human love.