

W. B. Yeats and Folklore: The Search for an Irish Identity

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Abstract: This paper explores Yeats's use of folklore in the 1880s and 1890s. I think that Yeats uses folklore to cast himself as Irish, so that he, as a Protestant, middle class urbanite, could take part in the nationalist movement. It is also an attempt to forge his Irish identity by showing that the traditional folklore of the Irish peasantry was the inheritance of a universal primitive religion, and that folklore and the occult pointed to the same source. By claiming that the peasant was imbued with the same esoteric, ancient mysticism that he himself had adopted, Yeats drew a link between himself and the peasantry, thus giving himself access to Irishness. His self-imposed role as the artist who revitalizes culture gives him the power to make this link between himself and the peasantry through emphasizing certain aspects of their folktales that appear to show the influence of primitive religion.

Key words: folklore, identity, primitive religion, occult, bard

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제목: 예이츠와 민속: 아일랜드의 정체성 모색

우리말 요약: 이 논문은 1880년대와 1890년대에 예이츠가 민속을 어떻게 활용하는지를 탐구한다. 예이츠는 민속을 활용하여 자신이 아일랜드인임을 강조하며, 프로테스탄트교인이면서 중산층 도시민으로서, 아일랜드독립운동에 참여하고자 한다. 아일랜드 농부들의 민속은 보편적 원시종교의 계승이며, 민속과 신비주의는 동일한 곳에서 파생하다는 것을 보여줌으로써 자신의 아일랜드 정체성을 강조하려는 것이다. 그는 농부들과 자신이 같은 신비주의적이고 전통적인 신비주의를 공유한다고 강조함으로써 자신과 농민층과의 연결 짓고 자신의 아일랜드정체성을 갖고자 한다. 문화에 활력을 불어넣는 예술가로 자처하는 그는, 원시종교의 영향을 보여주는 것 같은 특징을 강조하여 자신과 농산층 사이의 고리를 만듦으로써, 힘을 얻고자 한다.

주제어: 민속, 정체성, 원시종교, 신비주의, 음유시인

저자: 데빈 크리드는 강원도 인제중학교 영어교사이다. 그는 최근 미국 힐스대학에서 경제학과 영문학을 전공하고 우등으로 졸업했다.

The things a man has heard and seen are threads of life, and if he pull them carefully from the confused distaff of memory, any who will can weave them into whatever garments of belief please them best. I too have woven my garment like another, but I shall try to keep warm in it, and shall be well content if it do not unbecome me.

– W. B. Yeats, 1902 introduction to *The Celtic Twilight*

Between 1888 and 1893, Irish poet William Butler Yeats heavily employed folklore in his writings. He used it as source material for his poems, published articles about folklore and reviews of folklore collections, and tried his hand at the latter by compiling three notable collections of his own. Scholars have developed many theories that attempt to explain Yeats's extensive use of folklore, but while many of these may be true, none of them quite illuminates the central concern of the matter: Yeats's Irish identity.¹⁾ The search for an identity stands out as the most important of Yeats's motivations in using folklore.

Some post-colonialists argue that Yeats's turn to folklore and myth destroys his Anglo-Irish identity. Typical of this school of thought, Rached Khalifa contends that Yeats's retelling of the stories of the past creates an Irishness that leaves no room for his Anglo-Irish identity. She claims that "Yeats's emphasis on rereading Ireland's mythical and historical archives had ineluctably led to the marginalization of Anglo-Irishness on the grounds of historical, ethnic, and cultural inauthenticity — that is, "non-belonging-ness." (295) On the contrary, a close examination reveals that Yeats's turn to

folklore is the key to his identity, for it gives him an Irish identity without destroying his Anglo-Irish one. By embracing the English language and his middle-class roots, Yeats does not give up on his Anglo-Irishness, but seeks to incorporate it into the common conception of Irishness.²⁾

This paper will explore the way in which Yeats weaves his “garments of belief” and constructs an Irish identity with which he can identify. A necessary prerequisite to this exploration is a contextualization of Yeats’s project by examining the state of Irish nationalism and identity in the late nineteenth century. This leads to an inspection of Yeats’s struggles with identity by looking at the formative influences in his early life, which were varied since he split his childhood between Sligo, London, and Dublin. His middle class, nominally Protestant, non-Irish-speaking upbringing placed him firmly on the outside of what was generally considered Irish at the time. Yeats’s solution to his identity dilemma was to equate his occult beliefs with the folklore of the peasantry, grounding both in a common ancestry of primitive religion. This link with the peasantry allowed him to cast himself as Irish, while avoiding the awkwardness of his inability to speak the Irish language and his rejection of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Yeats’s embrace of folklore can then be viewed as a personal quest for identity, though it was partly motivated by other factors, such as creating a cultural nationalism, correcting British stereotypes concerning the Irish, and redeeming Irish culture. In the end, rather than destroying his identity, folklore gave him the Irish identity he so desired.

Irish Nationalism

In Ireland, the concept of Irishness is very old, dating back at least fifteen centuries to the time of Columbanu (Johnston 32). Despite a multitude

of warring kings that carved up the island, all held their Irish identity in common, for Irishness was a concept originally divorced from politics. Irish identity existed outside of a robust conception of nationalism for centuries, but the revolutionary fervor of Europe in the nineteenth century ensured that in Ireland too nationalism would be tied to identity. During Yeats's formative years there were two primary Irish identities available: Catholic nationalism and Protestant unionism. Despite this clear dichotomy, Yeats rejected his Protestant unionist identity and advocated for the Irish free state, but he did not embrace the Catholicism that usually accompanied the nationalist position. This left Yeats in a difficult position, for he had renounced his given identity while only partially embracing the Catholic nationalist identity. Though he renounced the beliefs of the Church of Ireland, he retained a cultural Protestantism which contradicted his adopted nationalism because of Protestantism's ties to unionism. Yeats realized that in order for his nationalism to have moral force he had to identify with what was often perceived as a central component of Irishness, a cultural Catholicity. This was made difficult by his disavowal of the religious and moral tenets of Catholicism, which led him to hold a different set of cultural assumptions from the majority of the Irish.

Yeats's crisis of identity as it related to nationalism came to a head during the period of rapid political and cultural change in Ireland that occurred during the end of the nineteenth century. Three major cultural projects dominated the landscape of the period: the revival of the Irish language spearheaded by the 1876 creation of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, the formalization of Gaelic games with the 1884 creation of the Gaelic Athletic Association, and the revival of Irish literature which was formalized in 1891 by the Irish Literary Society. These projects all sought to redeem a downtrodden Ireland that had been under British rule for over seven centuries. They were distilled into two national movements,

the linguistic movement led by Douglas Hyde, and the literary movement led by Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory. Yeats's literary movement, including his use of folklore, can be viewed partially as a response to the linguistic nationalist movement, even though Yeats admired Hyde greatly. Hyde believed that Ireland needed to be thoroughly de-Anglicized, and he placed utmost importance on reviving the Irish language. Because he was unable to speak or read Irish, Yeats advanced the notion that an Irish literature could be created in the English language without condoning historical English treatment of the Irish. (Foster 74) In a response to Hyde, Yeats queried: "Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language (*UP* 255)?" In the 1880s, Yeats attempted to launch a national literary movement that would conform to common conceptions of Irishness while still casting him as Irish.

Yeats's Influences and Identity

Reflecting on this period of his childhood, Yeats wrote an autobiographical essay called *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth* in 1914. The picture he constructed of himself was highly suspect, and Foster goes so far as to call it "a disingenuous masterpiece which said far more about him in 1914 than it did about his life from 1865 to 1886." (Foster xxv) Despite the inauthenticity of this work, it reveals two relevant pieces of information about Yeats's early identity. First, by downplaying his family's ties to the Orange Order, a Protestant, Unionist fraternal organization, Yeats revealed his discomfort with his Protestant background. Both the Yeatses and the Pollexfens had ties to the Orange Order, but Yeats removed all mention of these ties in his reveries: "By writing Frederick Pollexfen and John T. Yeats out of his reminiscences, and also marginalizing the role of his Unionist

mother, he obscured the sectarian strain in his upbringing. Whereas exotic variants of Freemasonry permeated his writings, Orangeism left few clear marks. When mentioned, it was portrayed as something alien and unfamiliar” (Fitzpatrick 133). The rest of the autobiography similarly downplayed his early connections with Protestantism, revealing his concern with constructing his identity so as to minimize his Protestantism. Second, the autobiography hinted at a sense of alienation. Louis MacNeice, a friend and fellow poet commented that “When I read Yeats’s account of his childhood I find many things which are echoed in my own or in that of other Irish people I know — in particular, the effects of loneliness, or a primitive rural life; the clannish obsession with one’s own family” (47). Though MacNeice was reading into an already suspect narrative, it is telling that he could still sense alienation, whether Yeats was conscious of it or not.

From 1885 to 1887, Yeats attended the meetings of the Contemporary Club, where he was exposed to both the scholar Douglas Hyde and the journalist John O’Leary: “Yeats encountered two formative influences on his road to discovery: John O’Leary, a Fenian returned from exile with the revivalist goal of restoring Irish self-respect, and the young Douglas Hyde, just beginning his public campaign to save the disappearing Irish folk culture from extinction” (Hutchinson 131). O’Leary’s position as a “free-thinking Catholic” and Fenian provided Yeats a theoretical way he “could ‘belong’ to the new Ireland: a world where like-minded people of both religious traditions could share a pride in an ancient culture, rather than remember the conflicts and dispossessions of the past” (Foster 43). In O’Leary Yeats saw a partial answer to his identity crisis; to be Irish was not to fit a mold but to agitate for an ancient understanding of what it meant to be Irish. After meeting O’Leary, Yeats’s interest in nationalism increased because he realized even someone of his background could embody mainstream Irishness.

Around the same time with his interest in nationalism, Yeats became

fascinated with the occult and esoteric spiritualism. With friends from the High School and art school he began to explore mystic avenues. In 1885 he founded the Dublin Hermetic Society which later became the Dublin Theosophical Society, having fallen under the sway of Madame Blavatsky, the leader of the Theosophists. The Indian philosophy and spiritualism Yeats encountered in these groups influenced some of his earliest poetry. Unhappy with the narrow and theoretical nature of Theosophy, Yeats branched out to explore magic, seances, and rituals, eventually settling on joining the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1889. The Golden Dawn added practical magic to its theoretical concepts, and "With its complicated, eclectic, but strictly defined grades, tests, and examinations, the Golden Dawn approximated to a sort of university. It filled the need for self-education, and provided themes and motifs linked to the imagery of classical and folk myths" (106). Since he never attended a proper university, Yeats approached the Golden Dawn as such, studying hard in order to move up in the ranks.

While the occult filled this experiential gap for him, it also gave him a sense of identity: "An interest in the occult might be seen on one level as a strategy for coping with contemporary threats (Catholicism plays a strong part in all their fantasies), and on another as a search for psychic control. The Irish Protestant sense of displacement, their loss of social and psychological integration towards the end of the nineteenth century, was particularly acute in the Yeatses' case" (50). But while the occult gave Yeats a sense of belonging, it placed him at odds with the Catholicism of his countrymen, and thus on its face moved him farther from the mainstream conception of Irishness. Unconventionally, Yeats sought to use his newfound interest in the occult to make inroads with nationalist sentiment. Yeats's roots in Theosophy helped him manufacture the same sort of revolutionary feeling that the Fenians possessed:

Yeats ... had absorbed from Madame Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* the idea of the imminence of a new epoch to be ushered in by a Messiah figure, and inaugurated with revolutionary violence and war. The messianic belief, the sense of imminent upheaval, the eager anticipation of apocalypse, was also a part of the emotional make-up of the revolutionary patriots in the Fenian movement. Thus, mysticism and revolutionary dreams could be married most happily. (Watson 92)

Merely having the same revolutionary fervor as other Irishmen could only partially alleviate Yeats's feeling of alienation from the core of Irishness, for embracing the occult still placed him at odds with the largely Catholic populace.

Yeats's explorations of the occult and mystical spirituality led him to believe in an ancient, primitive religion that was once common to all men. He thought that this primitive religion had been perverted and obscured by various religious movements, especially Christianity. Though he rejected the Protestantism of his youth and the Catholicism of his countrymen, his religious nature forced him to believe in something:

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. (*Autobiography* 70-71)

Despite the revisionism inherent in Yeats's autobiography, his claim of creating a religion to sate his religious cravings seems accurate when viewed in the context of his explorations into the occult. Yeats's new religion was an approximation of the primitive religion that had been so obscured by Christianity. Louis MacNeice, who experienced similar struggles with

Christianity, claimed that Yeats “craved for a mythology which would be for him what the Virgin Mary and Veronica with her napkin are for the Catholic Irish peasantry” (76). In order to animate his nationalism in the ways available to the peasantry through Catholic mythology, Yeats created his own religion, cobbled together from the occult and the Romantic urges of the dominant poets of the nineteenth century. T. S. Eliot explains that

in Yeats at the age of sixteen (or at least, as in retrospect he seems to himself to have been at sixteen) is operative the doctrine of Arnold, that Poetry can replace Religion, and also the tendency to fabricate an *individual* religion. The rationalistic background, the Pre-Raphaelite imagery, the interest in the occult, the equally early interest in Irish nationalism, the association with minor poets in London and Paris, make a curious mixture. Mr. Yeats was in search of a tradition, a little too consciously perhaps — like all of us. He sought for it in the conception of Ireland as an autonomous political and social unity, purged from the Anglo-Saxon pollution. (44)

Feeling a want of religion, Yeats sought to create his own “garment of belief” by weaving together the various influences of his youth, because of a realization that he could find a place in a nationalist Ireland.

Yeats’s personal religion incorporated elements of the occult and folklore, and he spoke of his mission as an artist in religious language. While the occult provided him with concrete religious experiences, folklore was his scripture: “Folk-lore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine Articles, and the Book of Common Prayer, and well-nigh all the great poets have lived by its light. Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and even Dante, Goethe, and Keats, were little more than folk-lorists with musical tongues” (*UP* 284). As a preserver of the ancient religion inherent in folklore, Yeats took on the role of the priest. In 1901 he writes that “We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith, and we must, I

think, if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and fervour of a priesthood" ("Ireland and the Arts" 203). Feeling the want of religion, Yeats took up elements of the occult and folklore and imbued them with the fervor of a priesthood. Because of the Catholic as nationalist and Protestant as unionist dichotomy, Yeats's search for a religious identity necessarily contained the question of Irish independence. By embracing nationalism and rejecting Catholicism, Yeats both alienated himself from his given identity and did not fully embrace its opposite, which left him with an ambiguous identity.

Yeats's problem became one of connecting his personal religious beliefs with the cause of Irish nationalism, of constructing his identity so as to gloss over his Anglo-Irish Protestantism. The two primary obstacles to the success of his endeavor were the reality of his social standing and his personal religion, for he did not fit the ideal type of nationalism, the rural Catholic peasant. Rather, he was an urban, culturally Protestant member of the middle class, who spent much of his life in London. His unease with this identity was displayed when he tried to downplay the role of Protestantism and the Orange Order in his youth. His personal religion based in the occult posed a more serious problem, however, for it was a repudiation of Catholicism, the religion of the peasant and most of the Irish.

The Role of the Artist

Before looking at Yeats's attempts to resolve this tension through folklore, it is necessary to understand his view of the role of the artist in nationalist Ireland. This view informs the ways in which he decided to use folklore to forge his Irish identity. Kiberd notes that Yeats thought the role of the artist was to revitalize culture, which was achieved by returning to the primitive:

“What was most radical in Yeats’s idea of culture was also what was most ancient: his conviction that real culture was a shedding of knowledge and illusions rather than an accretion of them. Hence his wonderful assertion that culture consists not in acquiring opinions but in getting rid of them: withering into truth” (*Irish Classics* 453). This statement of Yeats’s must be understood as part of his response to the consumerism and materialism of Victorian England. A withering was necessary to bring Ireland back to its primitive state where revealed religion was unclouded by the many ideas that had been added to it throughout the course of history. Yeats saw the coming of Christianity as an assault on primitive religion that would result in the triumph of industrialism and materialism. The answer to this degeneration was the poet, who was tasked with “Integrating the spiritual solidarity of the folk with the democratic ideology of progress” which would “inaugurate a new and higher cycle of human history” (Hutchinson 133). Ireland was a unique spot for this regeneration of culture because “Alone, Ireland had retained the full imaginative vision of the folk over the generations” (133). Yeats came to see his role as employing the folklore of Ireland to bring about a renaissance of culture. Yeats believed that he could be the poet who would fashion the myths of Ireland into a primitive vision that would return Ireland to its former glory. This view of the artist’s place in history informed his belief in literature’s power to influence and define nationalism. Through his creative literary powers, he could both paint himself as Irish and advance the cause of Irish nationalism, lending legitimacy to his chosen manifestation of his identity.

Yeats’s understanding of his relation as artist to a potentially independent Ireland informed his conception of national literature as a fundamentally fictive process. Through his poetry, prose compilations, and plays, he thought that he could recreate an Irish nation attuned to its primitive past. Yeats saw “the necessity of a cultural nationalism that posits nationhood as primarily a fictive process — a process, in other words, of *writing*” (Castle 44). Viewing

nationhood as a process of writing lent political power to Yeats's creativity. His gifts as a writer would greatly aid him in establishing an identity as a member of the new Irish state since he would be the one creating it. In 1890 he posits that "There is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature" ("Browning..." 30). This then can be seen as the ultimate way for Yeats to construct his identity. By making the nationhood of Ireland dependent on the writing of a poet tasked with restoring a primitive vision, Yeats cast himself as the final arbiter of Irishness.

Yeats also believed that the Irish writer should promote a national literature that would serve as a response to British stereotypes concerning the barbarity of the Irish. By using myth, legend, and folklore as source material "Yeats and others of his mind summoned up a heroic past in Ireland that was precolonial and self-ruling" (Bradley 11). By creating a literature based on the past of Ireland, Irish writers could both repudiate British colonization and extol Irish virtues. Yeats's emphasis on the poet's role in cultural revival meant that in Ireland the national literature would place a great emphasis on the person of the individual writer. As Kiberd notes "autobiography in Ireland becomes, in effect, the autobiography of Ireland ... [Yeats, George Moore, Frank O'Connor] substitute themselves as a shorthand for their country" (*Inventing Ireland* 119). Nation-building occurred in Yeats's poems, plays, and folklore collections, as well as his autobiography. Thus, through his writing, Yeats intertwined the processes of self-creation and nation creation. Just as the concept of the nation was always changing in this nascent phase, so too was Irishness: "The Irish self ... was a *project*: and its characteristic text was a process, unfinished, fragmenting" (120). By equating himself with the Irish nation, Yeats felt free to create both simultaneously in his writing. The concurrent creation of self and nation meant that Yeats could weave the threads of his life into his own constructed Irish identity and project his own beliefs as those of the nation.

Yeats's Turn to Folklore

Yeats's creation of nation and self could only be successful if it was accepted by the Irish people. His power to create an Irish identity only went as far as the populace was willing to take it. Thus, he still had to overcome two significant obstacles in constructing his Irish identity: reconciling his occult beliefs with the Catholicism of the peasantry, and ensuring that his nation creation did not stray too far from established conceptions of Ireland. To surmount these obstacles, Yeats turned to folklore, hoping to utilize its familiarity in order to cast himself as Irish.

Written folklore was a genre that had been used increasingly in the nineteenth century. Oftentimes, British writers retold legends as an example of good morals, but edited them to remove anything that would offend Victorian sensibilities. Increasingly popular, however, were collections of Irish fairy stories. This trend was started by T. Crofton Croker with his publication of the first volume of *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* in 1825. In 1888, Yeats was commissioned by the celticist John Rhys to publish a collection of fairy stories in this mould. Faced with a looming deadline, Yeats was forced to anthologize the fairy stories that were circulating in print at the time. Kinahan notes that his finished product, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, published in 1888, "was the earliest attempt made by anyone to anthologize the most notable among these published tales" (255). Yeats followed this collection with *Irish Faerie Tales* in 1892 and the magnum opus of his folktale collections *The Celtic Twilight* in 1893. During this time he also published numerous reviews of his contemporaries' folklore collections, as well as articles on the nature and purpose of folklore.

Many scholars argue that Yeats knew nothing of folklore and merely appropriated for his own ends.[3] A more nuanced examination of his treatment of folklore reveals that though he used it to cast the peasantry as preservers of

ancient religion, he did so with an extensive knowledge of and respect for the folk tradition. He even seemed able to convince himself that he did no disservice to the peasantry by his appropriation of folklore. Rather, he viewed his work with folklore as an embodiment of the traditional conception of the bard, the artist who changes his materials for the betterment of all. This understanding furthered his bond with the peasantry, allowing him access to an Irish identity necessary to carry out his cultural and artistic project.

It is apparent that Yeats had a significant knowledge of Irish folklore. In “Irish Fairies, Ghosts, Witches, etc.,” a short article that appeared in the Theosophical journal *Lucifer* in January 1889, Yeats quotes the folklore collections of Thomas Crofton Croker, Lady Wilde, Patrick Kennedy, David Rice McAnally, and John O’Donovan, and displays a thorough knowledge of the texts. Though Yeats was unable to read collections that had not been translated from Irish to English, it is quite clear that he had a knowledge of relevant source material and collections at this point, less than a year after he researched and wrote his first folklore collection *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* in the summer of 1888. Edward Hirsch, who has written extensively on the subject, affirms Yeats’s mastery of folklore at this time: “Yeats’s list of sources indicates that, after reading for *Fairy and Folk Tales*, his knowledge of antiquarian collections was close to, if not already, definitive” (“The Poet as Folklorist” 13). W. P. Ryan, who attended a lecture Yeats gave in 1888 at the Southwick Irish Literary Club, also affirms Yeats’s extensive knowledge of folklore: “Some of us thought till then that we had a very tolerable acquaintance with the ways and doings of the Irish fairies, but Yeats’s lecture . . . was something of a revelation to us — in fact he spoke as one who took his information firsthand” (*The Collected Letters* 71n). Despite having started researching folklore anthologies mere months before this lecture, Yeats appeared knowledgeable enough to make his listeners think he was already collecting stories in the field.

The next year, Yeats criticized folklorist David Rice McAnally's book *Irish Wonders* in much the same way that modern scholars have criticized Yeats. He says that McAnally is not correct "in leaving the accurate, reverent way, to dress up his fine tales in a poor slatternly patchwork of inaccurate dialect and sham picturesqueness. Had he told them word for word, or even in common literary English, he might have produced a book that students would turn to for years to come. Instead, he has made his whole work smack of the tourist's car" (*UP* 138-139). The heart of Yeats's critique lay in his determination that McAnally did not accurately portray the peasantry. Instead, McAnally constructed a sham, idyllic version of the peasants whose stories he was relating. Later in the article, Yeats reveals that he has already started collecting stories from the peasantry: "The writer of this article, though he has not gathered folk-tales in Colooney, has done so within two miles of it, as well as reading most, if not all, recorded Irish fairy tales" (139). Yeats is no longer an armchair folklorist, for he has taken to the countryside. In 1891 he wrote that "I am here [Whitehall near Clondalkin, County Dublin] looking for stories of the fairies and the phantoms." In the same article he also revealed that "I have been away in County Down, looking almost in vain among its half-Scotch people for the legends I find so plentiful in the West. ("The Celt in Ireland" 53). These instances place Yeats in three of the four corners of Ireland by 1891, for Colooney is in the province of Connacht, Down in Ulster, and Clondalkin in Leinster.

Yeats's project was not to accurately record the stories of the peasantry, but to animate their stories and draw out their mystical spirituality and vestiges of primitive religion. Yeats did believe that these elements were present in the folk tales, however, so his collections did not simply consist of creative revisions. His conception of himself as a creative force who tried to wither into truth and promote a renaissance of primitive religion necessitated that he would take some liberties with folklore. In order to create both

Ireland and himself through the retelling of folklore he must have held to a different standard of accuracy and authenticity in folklore.

Yeats thought that his role as folklorist was to provide in writing “fair equivalents” to the stories that were told orally by the peasantry. He expresses this doctrine in an 1890 letter to the *Academy*: “I am inclined to think also that some concentration and elaboration of dialect is justified, if only it does not touch the fundamentals of the story. It is but a fair equivalent for the gesture and voice of the peasant tale-teller” (*UP* 174). In making the transition from oral story to written word, the writer had to do something to emulate the way in which the storyteller told the story. Merely putting the exact words on the page would not accomplish this, so stylistic measures had to be used to create a similar effect in the written word that was evoked when a master storyteller plied his craft. Hirsch explains it this way: “Yeats’s argument is that an oral folktale rendered in written form needs a comparable literary style to make it live. In the absence of gesture and speech, the necessary conditions which the contemporary folklorist would subsume under the heading of “performance,” the tale is but a husk of its former self, and an uncharacteristic husk at that.” (“Coming out into the Light” 4) For Yeats, the fundamentals of the story were the kernel of primitive religion contained in them. This justification for altering folktales is the point where Yeats’s creative force entered, allowing him to insert his own conception of Irishness into the mouths of the peasantry and subsequently identify with it.

Yeats’s approach to folklore signaled a shift in the way folklorists viewed authenticity, proof of the power of his role as the artist: “As O’Shea and Thuente imply, Yeats’s creative approach to the preservation of folklore redefined the way authenticity was conveyed in the representation of traditional cultural texts — it was no longer a matter of accurate transcription or translation but rather of evoking “fair equivalents” governed as much by an aesthetic as by an anthropological authority” (Castle 55). Here, Yeats’s

role as a creative poet was realized, for he transformed how the Irish viewed the authenticity of folklore. The move toward the aesthetic and away from the burgeoning anthropological analysis of folklore championed by folklorists such as John Rhys and Henri D'Arbois de Jubainville was necessary for Yeats to make the connection between the folklore of the peasantry and primitive religion. Once the focus was shifted from scientific accuracy to an aesthetic of fair equivalents, Yeats was free to draw out the occult elements of the folk beliefs of the peasantry.

Though he claimed that he was only making fair equivalents, Yeats also consciously sought to create with the folk material he was given. According to Hirsch, the creation of the mythical bard Red Hanrahan was one such instance: "Yeats wanted folk-like stories but his aggressive affirmation that he had himself *created* Hanrahan also implies an aesthetic of innovation addressed to the reader of a modern literary rather than an ancient folkloric text." ("Yeats, Folklore, and Fiction" 884) In applying this agenda of creation, "Yeats's response to the myth materials was far more involved than those of the writers who were concerned merely with improving them aesthetically or morally: it was an act of personal interpretation and personal expression." (Marcus 248) By imbuing folktales with his own personal expression, Yeats created both Ireland and his own identity, and in the process combined the two. This constituted a breakthrough in folklore writing:

he went beyond them and introduced an important new approach. So rich a body of traditional stories offered the poet abundant potential means for self-expression. They could serve him as allegorical vehicles, sources of symbols, "objective correlatives" for his own feelings and ideas. A story in its received form might prove suitable for interpretation, might fit perfectly the elements he wished to express; or some modifications of the original might be required, either rearrangement of existing features or addition of entirely new elements. The subjectivity of the personal content would be

balanced and controlled by the public, traditional nature of the myth ... [this approach] was not found in Irish literary tradition before Yeats." (240-241)

The limiting factor of Yeats's self-creation was the "traditional nature of the myth," or the public conception of the tale. As long as he did not change the common understanding of the story, he could make whatever modifications he liked. He could not change the folk stories so that they would be unrecognizable, but he could insert ideas into them that did not seem to be completely foreign, such as the vestiges of primitive religion. Thus, folklore became Yeats's avenue into Irishness.

The Link Between Folklore and Primitive Religion

Yeats's interpretation of folklore allowed him to view the Irish peasantry as the guardians of the ancient, primitive religion which was also evident in his occult beliefs. This gave him an Irishness to hold onto while still being a culturally Protestant, middle-class, non-Irish speaker living in London. Yeats embraced folklore as an answer to the conflict between his occult beliefs and the Catholicism of the peasantry, allowing him to obscure his Protestant unionist identity in favor of a nonCatholic, nationalist Irish identity. Folklore contained a suitable amount of ambiguity so that Yeats could craft it, thereby creating a personal identity as well as the Irish state. In this way, Yeats used his power as the artist to create a nationalist Irish identity that included himself.

Yeats's obsession with folklore arose out of concerns other than an interest in folklore. Specifically, Yeats was attracted to folklore because he thought that it corresponded with his occult beliefs: "delving into the works of Celtic scholars and apologists — Petrie, Arnold, de Jubainville, Renan and Rhys — Yeats discovered an ancient Ireland corresponding to the esoteric findings of occultism" (Hutchinson 130). This "discovery of a corpus of pagan myths and

legends preserved in the folk literature of the Western peasantry ... converted Yeats to a crusading literary revivalism (130),” meaning that his encounter with folklore preceded his idea to create a national literature. After he determined its use, folklore became the basis for Yeats’s literary projects: “For Yeats, however, the most important aspect of Irish folklore was that it could be used to provide the basis for a new Irish literature” (“The Poet as Folklorist” 20-21). Yeats saw folklore as a means towards the end of creating a national literature that would affirm his claim to Irishness. This urge emerged from his interest in the occult: “Yeats’s cultural nationalism was the outcome of a complex dialectic between reason and revelation (extending in his case over three generations) that impelled him first into mystical cults before he stumbled on an elitist literary revivalism as the solution to his search for meaning and status” (Hutchinson 128). The occult did not give Yeats enough of an Irish identity; he had to do the hard work of creating a literature based in folklore to link his occultism with Irish nationalism.

Yeats started to notice that folklore and occultism both pointed to the same source around the time he published his first folklore collection, *Fairy and Folk Stories of the Irish Peasantry*. In an 1889 article he notes that

When reading Irish folk-lore, or listening to Irish peasants telling their tales of magic and fairyism and witchcraft, more and more is one convinced that some clue there must be. Even if it is all dreaming, why have they dreamed this particular dream? Clearly the occultist should have his say as well as the folklorist. The history of a belief is not enough, one would gladly hear about its cause. Here and there an occult clue is visible plainly. (*UP* 130-131)

These clues and hints of the occult in the folklore of the peasantry became much more definite in the following years. In an 1897 essay he summarizes his position on the matter: “When Matthew Arnold wrote, it was not easy to know as much as we know now of folk-song and folk-belief, and I do not

think he understood that our ‘natural magic’ is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of Nature and that troubled ecstasy before her, that certainty of all beautiful places being haunted, which it brought to men’s minds” (“The Celtic Element in Literature” 175-176). Here, Yeats clearly identified the core of folk belief to be the ancient religion of the world, thus linking the occult and folklore through a common heritage.

Yet Yeats seems to have conflated the folk belief of the peasantry with his conception of primitive religion. He projected his own beliefs on a peasantry that probably would not have held them:

Though Yeats was convinced that he found in the ancient Irish sagas support for his assumptions about the spirituality of the pagan Celts, the sagas gave no more than ambiguous hints about the philosophical system which underlay that spirituality or the rituals in which it found expression. In his attempt to reconstruct the culture and beliefs of ancient Ireland, Yeats augmented the material gained from Celtic sources with ritual and philosophy whose source might at first seem remote from the ancient Irish Celts ... Yeats had little doubt that the beliefs prevalent in Hindu tradition, and among the Greeks of Homer’s time, were essentially those held by the ancient druids. (Skene 4)

In his folklore anthologies, it appeared that “The chief purpose of his editing was to assert the seriousness of Celtic supernaturalism. In order to align this supernaturalism with his own occult interests, he projected onto the Irish peasantry a determinedly sacerdotal mysticism; underplaying their Catholicism but emphasizing the ‘pagan mystery’ of fairy symbolism.” (Mattar 46) Yeats realized that this ancient religion contradicted the Catholicism of the peasantry, but his peasantry was an idealized construct, not beholden to the reality of the Irish peasant. In this way Yeats’s conception of the peasantry was similar to the mainstream conception of the peasantry, for both were idealized to a great extent, though the mainstream conception was more

concerned with valorizing the peasant as a response to negative British stereotypes. Yeats too wanted to redeem the peasant, but he was intent on this because of its implications for his identity: "One powerful motivation for Yeats's folklore compilations and other work of the 1890s is a desire to preserve and thereby redeem an authentic Irish folk culture. His interest in the purity and preeminence of a folk culture can be credited in large measure to a belief in the innate spiritualism and mysticism of the Irish peasantry" (Castle 41). The primary reason for Yeats's use of folklore was constructing his own identity.

With the link between folklore, primitive religion, and the occult established, Yeats was then able to identify with his idealized peasantry, allowing him to be Irish while writing in English, not embracing Catholicism, and believing in the occult. This idealized peasantry was just as inaccurate a representation of the peasantry as the mainstream conception. Though he revered what he thought the peasantry stood for, Yeats was primarily interested in using them to give meaning to his search for identity: "Yeats was not so much interested in the peasant as in what the peasant appeared to represent ... As a poet, a Protestant, and occultist, and an agnostic in search of a truer faith than Christianity, Yeats remade the peasants to some extent to fulfill needs of his own" ("The Poet as Folklorist" 24). He became excited by the idea that he could conflate his personal religion with a perceived primitive religion in the peasantry, allowing him to identify as Irish in a time when nationalism was critical to Irish identity. Yeats was intrigued by the folk beliefs of the peasantry, but more for their similarities to his own beliefs than any value they had in themselves: "the folk-beliefs and superstitions of the country people enabled him to make a satisfying link with his own theosophical beliefs. The spiritual, the visionary and the occult are fit subjects of concern for Irish writers, because the true Celtic nature, shown in the stores and visions of the peasantry, is in intimate contact with the occult"

(Watson 96). The supposed link between the Irish peasantry and primitive religion allowed Yeats to view himself as Irish and avoid the “awkward fact of the peasant’s devout Catholicism” (96). By intertwining his identity with the identity of Ireland through creating a national literature founded upon the beliefs of the peasantry, Yeats was able to alleviate his crisis of identity: “Yeats benefited from his conscious attempt to link himself with the nationalist movement. Clearly it eased the sense of marginality arising from his Anglo-Irish birth, giving him a sense of belonging which in turn lent his art confidence and a sense of direction” (99). Rather than destroying his identity through retelling Ireland’s mythic history and stories, Yeats gained an identity by embracing his construction of the peasantry as preservers of an ancient, primitive religion. In his autobiography, Yeats claimed that this approach was convincing to Lady Gregory. He reports that she told him “I have longed ... to turn Catholic, that I might be nearer to the people, but you have taught me that paganism brings me nearer still” (*Autobiography* 242). Even if she did not make this statement, it perfectly encapsulates what Yeats was trying to accomplish by linking folklore and the occult. Construing the peasantry as pagan by bringing out the elements of primitive religion in folklore was Yeats’s way of identifying with the peasantry and casting himself as Irish.

Using his creative power as the artist, Yeats found it easy to read his own beliefs into folklore. In an 1893 article published in the *Speaker* he claims that “There is no passion, no vague desire, no tender longing that cannot find fit type or symbol in the legends of the peasantry or in the traditions of the scalds and the gleemen” (*UP* 285). He thought it a simple task for the artist to discover whatever he liked in folk beliefs. He was even more explicit in his unpublished 1937 introduction to his own work, in which he writes that “I can put my own thought ... into the mouth of rambling poets of the seventeenth century, or even of some imagined ballad singer of

to-day, and the deeper my thought the more credible, the more peasant-like, are ballad singer and rambling poet.” (“A General Introduction for my Work” 516) Since his thought became the thought of Ireland through the creative renaissance of culture, it also became the thought of the peasantry, and the deeper the thought, the more like the thought of the peasantry it became. Yeats believed that he had effectively become one with the peasant, establishing a claim to Irishness.

Yeats believed that the precedent for his creative reworking of folktales lay in the figure of the Gaelic bard. The bard was an especially attractive figure to him because it was a folk form that he could embody, an ancient affirmation of his role as the creative artist:

By the late 1890s, Yeats had discovered, in the Irish bardic tradition, a model for the native intellectual whose deracination and hybridity led ultimately to a new conception of social authority. And in the bard’s isolation from “the common affairs of men,” he discovered a precedent for the Revivalist who strove to bring to consciousness the spiritual realities he shared with the peasantry. In *Stories of Red Hanrahan and The Secret Rose*, collections of folkloric fictions published in 1897, Yeats laid claim to a bardic authority, with a characteristic emphasis on the bard’s mystical capacity. (Castle 70)

Embodying the bard gave Yeats an even stronger claim to consciously recreate folklore. It is important to note that he came to this concept of the bard after he had already been reshaping folklore in his original three collections. Discovering the figure of the bard excited him because the bard affirmed what he had been doing with folklore: “It is not surprising, then, that he was strongly drawn to the figure of the bard, who similarly fashioned and refashioned traditional materials in the creation of new traditional texts.” (68) Yeats thought that the role of the ancient bard validated his constructed role in modern society, that of the poet who encourages withering into truth.

The image of the bard allowed him to make his various interests harmonious: “Wisdom, magic and poetry were connected disciplines for Yeats, for his view of the poet’s role in society was essentially shamanistic. He admired the druidical bards of ancient Ireland and wanted to emulate them” (Skene 2). Yeats’s identification with the bard was the culmination of recreating his own identity so as to appear Irish, and once again, folklore served as a tool for furthering his own ends.

A model example of Yeats’s approach to folklore can be found in the story “The Golden Age” from *The Celtic Twilight*. Yeats tells this story in the first person, inserting himself into the narrative as both the collector of folktales and the bard. By placing himself near Sligo he links himself to the peasantry through place. He claims that he “had longed for a message from those beings or bodiless moods … who inhabit the world of spirits.” His longing is soon fulfilled when he is visited by a black dog and a pink dog, which immediately reminds him of a “peasant belief about two faery dogs who go about representing day and night, good and evil.” By connecting his own longing with the supposed beliefs of the peasants, Yeats draws another link between himself and peasantry. But this animal sign is not enough for him, for he craves a more human link. Yeats’s longing is again fulfilled, for a man appears and begins to fiddle. Yeats claims that though he is unmusical, “the sounds filled me with the strangest emotions. I seemed to hear a voice of lamentation out of the Golden Age.” The man speaks no words, yet Yeats is filled with the thoughts of ancient primitive religion, the lamentation from the “Golden Age.” By using the word “seemed” Yeats acknowledges the ambiguity of the experience, and this allows him to insert his own belief into the music of the fiddler. He goes on to describe what the voice seems to tell him, that “we are imperfect, incomplete, and no more like a beautiful woven web, but like a bundle of cords knotted together and flung into a corner.” These sentiments could almost be

construed as Catholic, for the Church teaches that man is fallen and incomplete without God. Yeats inserts fairy language into this sentiment, however, changing its meaning: “the world was once all perfect and kindly, and that still the kindly and perfect world existed, but buried like a mass of roses under spadefuls of earth. The faeries and the more innocent of the spirits dwelt within it” and grieve for fallen man (*The Celtic Twilight* 89-90). By putting the fairies in the place of God, Yeats subverts the Christianity of the peasantry and inserts paganism.

This story especially exhibits Yeats as the creative bard, for he is not merely retelling a story related to him by a peasant. He creates most of the story by interpreting the fiddle music as a primitive, pagan vision. He takes the place of the peasant who experiences the supernatural and then relates the story to a folktale collector, in this case the reader. Yeats becomes the peasant, for the song of the fiddle causes him to enter a reverie of faeries singing for humanity, an element of primitive religion. In this story, Yeats successfully obscures the Catholicism of the peasantry and brings out the primitive elements of their beliefs. He first identifies himself with the peasant through the occult omen of the black and pink dogs, and after establishing the link between folklore, primitive religion, and the occult, he becomes the peasant when he hears the faeries sing to him. Once he identifies with the peasant, Yeats can solve his identity crisis.

Criticisms of Yeats’s lack of adherence to modern anthropological standards for folklore miss the mark. It is clear that Yeats of the late 19th century had a completely different agenda in mind, that of crafting an Irish identity for himself, and that he largely succeeded in this. Thus, the post-colonialist argument concerning Yeats’s destruction of his own identity is nullified as well. Yeats was able to use folklore to create an Irish identity that would include himself, lending him legitimacy and an enduring place in the Celtic literary revival.

Notes

- 1) Theories include: a reaction against British colonialism (Declan Kiberd, Oona Frawley), Yeats's monetary well-being (F.S.L. Lyons), correcting negative British stereotypes of the Irish (Sinead Garrigan Mattar, George Watson), redeeming Irish folk culture (Gregory Castle, Anthony Bradley), rediscovering primitive religion (Sinead Garrigan Mattar, Frank Kinahan), raising up art over science (Edward Hirsch), giving poets source material (Yeats himself)
- 2) It should be noted that Yeats came to embrace his Anglo-Irishness later in life and did not feel the need to cast himself as distinctly Irish. This paper only deals with the Yeats of the 1880s and 1890s.
- 3) See Lyons, Kinahan, and Mattar for just a few of these critiques.

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