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Yeats and European Drama

Although Yeats's reputation as a writer mainly rests on his position as one of the greatest poets in English literature, drama was one of the abiding concerns of his life. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, he writes that self-discipline is only possible if we can “imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self” (CW5 10). Active virtue, therefore, in contrast with the “passive acceptance of a code, is... theatrical, consciously dramatic” (CW5 10). The related concept of the gyre, made up of two cones – – the primary and antithetical – – symbolizes the dynamic between the opposites that might be seen as dramatic. In addition to the poetic theory on the dynamic between the self and the anti-self (what is essentially dramatic in nature), he was also engaged in the practical theatre business for most of his life, co-founded the Abbey Theatre, and produced many of the plays that were staged there. At the same time, he expressed his ideas on what the Irish theatre should be, what kinds of plays should or should not be produced, and so on. Shifting our focus to the critical study on the subject, Michael McAteer, in the introduction to his book, *Yeats and European Drama*, points out the “pervasive anomaly” in the critical reception of Yeats’s drama that dates back to the time of the earliest reviews. (2) This is evident in two of the early reviews of the play, *The Land of Heart’s Desire*. Whereas the April 1894 review of the work in the *Daily Chronicle* praised the play for separating itself from “the dismal category of pseudo-Elizabethan blank-verse dramas,” June review of *The Bookman Review* is somewhat ambivalent. This attitude endured well into the twentieth century, as could be evidenced in Eric Bentley’s 1947 essay and Richard Taylor’s 1976 study on Yeats’s Noh plays. However, such conflicting criticisms, in which Yeats’s drama is viewed as “anachronistic yet too experimental” derive in part from “a misreading of his interests in folklore, mythology and magic.” (*Yeats and European Drama* 4) These interests include the interest in the supernatural, which are frequently used as the means of resistance to the increasing commercialization in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. In this context, I would like to focus on those essays that express Yeats’s thoughts on Irish theatre, primarily the ones published in *Samhain*, but also some of those published elsewhere. It would also attempt to compare these with the trends in the European drama.