
THE COUNTESS CATHLEEN AND THE REVIVAL OF THE BARDIC ARTS

by *Ronald Schuchard*

On 24 February 1899 W. B. Yeats signed and dated the preface for the new edition of his *Poems*. The volume contained his latest revisions of *The Countess Cathleen*, a play first written for Maud Gonne ten years earlier and revised now for the opening production of the Irish Literary Theatre in May. After mailing the manuscript, he requested his publisher to run special proofs of the play and print copies for rehearsal purposes, unaware of the several controversies that the play would provoke before, during, and after the performance. As we have celebrated the centennial of that production with a staged reading at Clemson, I would like to revisit the extraordinary context of the first production as a prelude to extricating from all the turmoil what was to Yeats most at stake in founding the theatre and staging his play—the recovery of the lost arts of rhythmic speech and speaking or chanting to musical notes. The history of this recovery, I hope to show, is inextricably intertwined with the twenty-year drama of *The Countess Cathleen* and became part of a poetic and cultural dream of a revived oral tradition that would restore the imaginative arts to the people of Ireland once again.

Even though the Dublin papers had favorably anticipated the promise of an Irish Literary Theatre for months, Yeats's astrological charts forecast days fraught with nationalist and religious friction. Although the play had been in print for seven years, exciting no previous controversy, its religious heterodoxy now attracted the scrutiny of Edward Martyn's religious adviser, who warned of blasphemous content. Martyn, the primary financial supporter of the Irish theatre, was a pious and scrupulous Catholic who had always been suspicious of Yeats's unorthodox religious beliefs, and he threatened to withdraw all support for the enterprise. Yeats was not in the least pleased with this unexpected irritation, anymore than he was with Maud Gonne's double refusal of marriage and the role of Cathleen in Paris before he returned to London to begin rehearsals, or with having to employ English actors and place Martyn's prosaic Ibsenite play *The Heather Field* on the bill with his poetic drama, but to forestall a premature end to the theatrical venture Yeats had to scurry about for sympathetic Catholic clerics to assuage Martyn's fear of public association with a blasphemer. No sooner was the day saved than one of Yeats's bitter antagonists, Frank Hugh O'Donnell, chafing over being rebuked by nationalist groups (at Yeats's insistence) for an unwarranted attack on Michael Davitt, began distributing his notorious pamphlet *Souls for Gold! A Pseudo-Celtic Drama in Dublin*, which accused Yeats not only of being anti-Catholic but anti-Irish as well: "He has no right to outrage reason and conscience alike by bringing his degraded idiots to receive the kiss of the Mother of God before the whole host of Heaven as reward for having preferred the gold of the devil to the providence of the All-

Father.”²¹ The pamphlet provoked a barrage of letters to the press from patriotic Catholics, and the pressure of protest led to a condemnation of the play by Archbishop Logue, who, having read extracts from O’Donnell’s pamphlet but not Yeats’s play, wrote that “an Irish Catholic audience which could patiently sit out such a play must have sadly degenerated, both in religion and patriotism” (CL2 410). In this climate of nationalist and Catholic hostility, Yeats was forced to hire and advertise the presence of thirty policemen for the opening night. In spite of all this turmoil, however, Yeats remained focused on the primary principle of the production, writing in the program notes that “the chief endeavour with Mr. Yeats’ play has been to get it spoken with some sense of rhythm.”²²

It had indeed been a difficult endeavour, more taxing to Yeats than the accompanying theological crisis. He had invited his friend the English actress Florence Farr (Mrs. Emery) to stage *The Countess Cathleen* for him. Farr had directed and played in his *Land of Heart’s Desire* at the Avenue Theatre in London five years earlier, when her young niece, Dorothy Paget, played the faery child, chanting under Farr’s direction her “strange and dreamy” lines. Dorothy, now sixteen, was tapped to play Cathleen; Farr’s friend the English actress and elocutionist Anna Mather agreed to play Oona, Cathleen’s nurse; Farr herself took the part of the bard Aleel and began rehearsals in London, training the principals in rhythmical speech and chanting. In April, Farr journeyed to Dublin to begin stage preparations, give press interviews, and prepare Dubliners for the romantic dramaturgy of the play. “One of the greatest difficulties we have had,” she told the *Daily Express*,

is to find actors who can recite verse properly. Since the introduction of prose plays and the natural style of acting that art has almost disappeared. When poetic drama was the inevitable form, actors were as much orators as actors. It is not, of course, the old style of declamation that we want, but when verse is spoken as prose it is intolerable. . . . But when verse, I mean, of course, blank verse, is properly spoken, it has a charm altogether independent of its meaning.³

Yeats himself wrote letters to the press and gave lectures in London and Dublin on their method, asserting that “our actors must become rhapsodists again and keep the rhythm of the verse as the first of their endeavours.”²⁴ In the midst of these public preparations, however, the Ibsenite George Moore, a founding director of the Irish Literary Theatre, descended upon the London rehearsals. When Moore saw Dorothy Paget and heard Farr’s verse speaking instructions, a vision of financial disaster led Moore and Martyn to depose Farr as stage manager and remove Paget from the role of Cathleen. They replaced her with the English actress May Whitty, who also had the lead in *The Heather Field*, and turned over the stage management to her husband Ben Webster. Yeats, powerless and submissive before this *coup de realisme*, wrote apologetically to Paget, who was demoted to reciting Lionel Johnson’s opening prologue and playing the lesser role of Sheogou:

I am very sorry but, although you would please me better as the Countess Cathleen than any body else will, I have been forced to give the part to Miss Whitty. . . . You act exactly as I think verse should be acted but you act according to a quite new way, according to a theory of acting which Mrs

Emery & myself alone as yet have accepted. Miss Whitty acts in the old way & will be quite sure of succeeding up to a certain point. . . . She will make her audience cry by the usual stage methods of pathos of manner & expression, but you brought tears to both Mrs Emery's eyes & mine not by pathos but by beauty [of speech]." (CL2 395-6)

Yeats and Farr did what they could to influence Miss Whitty's delivery, even changing her lines as necessary. "She acts admirably & has no sense of rhythm what ever & talks of throwing up her part when ever I make any criticism on her way of speaking," Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory. "She enrages me every moment. . . . I am getting the others to speak with a little, a very little music. Mrs Emery alone satisfies my ear" (CL2 398). In a last-minute attempt to forewarn his uninstructed audience, Yeats printed the two lyrics from the play separately in the program, explaining that they

are not sung, but spoken, or rather chanted, to music, as the old poems were probably chanted by bards and rhapsodists. Even when the words of a song, sung in the ordinary way, are heard at all, their own proper rhythm and emphasis are lost . . . in the rhythm and emphasis of the music. A lyric which is spoken or chanted to music should upon the other hand, reveal its meaning, and its rhythm so become indissoluble in the memory. The speaking of words, whether to music or not, is, however, so perfectly among the lost arts that it will take a long time before our actors, no matter how willing, will be able to forget the ordinary methods of the stage or to perfect a new method.⁵

After the curtain went up on *The Countess Cathleen* in the Antient Concert Rooms on 8 May, the performance met with milder disturbances than anticipated, the loudest by a group of middle-class Catholic students from Royal University, described by Joseph Holloway, Dublin's inveterate theatre-goer and diary keeper, as "an organised claue of about twenty brainless, beardless, idiotic-looking youths" who "did all they knew to interfere with the progress of the play by their meaningless automatic hissing & senseless comments, & succeeded (happily) in showing what poor things mortals can become when the seat of reason is knocked awry by animus, spite & bigotry."⁶ But among this group of students was Yeats's one ideal member of the audience, James Joyce, who applauded vigorously and remembered indelibly in *A Portrait of the Artist* the catcalls and hissing of his fellow students:

- A libel on Ireland!
- Made in Germany!
- Blasphemy!
- We never sold our faith!
- No Irish woman ever did it!
- We want no amateur atheists.
- We want no budding buddhists.⁷

The next day these same students sent a letter to the press, condemning Yeats for representing the Irish peasant “as a crooning barbarian, crazed with morbid superstition, who, having added the Catholic faith to his store of superstitions, sells that faith for gold or bread in the proving of famine.”⁸ Joyce, enraptured as he was by a play that reflected his own internal drama, refused to sign the letter. He was deeply impressed by the chanting of the lyrics, “Impetuous Heart” by Farr as Aleel, and especially “Who will go drive with Fergus now,” chanted “with the thin voice of age” by Anna Mather as Oona:

Who will go drive with Fergus now
And pierce the deep wood’s woven shade,
And dance upon the level shore?
Young man, lift up your russet brow,
And lift your tender eyelids, maid,
And brood on hopes and fears no more.⁹

As Richard Ellmann describes the effect of the lyric on Joyce, “its feverish discontent and promise of carefree exile were to enter his own thought, and not long afterwards he set the poem to music and praised it as the best lyric in the world.”¹⁰ In March 1902, when his fourteen-year-old brother Georgie, sick and dying, asked Joyce to sing the lyric to him, “Jim went downstairs to the parlour,” their brother Stanislaus attests, “and, leaving the doors open, sat down at the piano and sang the melancholy chant to which he had set the verses.”¹¹

The play and its lyrics had become, as Yeats desired, “indissoluble” in Joyce’s memory, and when at the close of *Portrait* Stephen looks up at the wheeling swallows as a long-awaited symbol of departure, he recalls the Countess Cathleen’s dying words and becomes suffused with a “soft liquid joy” as the verses “crooned in the ear of his memory composed slowly before his remembering eyes the scene of the hall on the night of the opening of the national theatre”:

Bend down your faces, Oona and Aleel,
I gaze upon them as the swallow gazes
Upon the nest under the eave before
He wander the loud waters.¹²

And when in the opening episode of *Ulysses* Buck Mulligan impatiently admonishes Stephen to give up his moody brooding, Stephen summons the lyric and carries it with him from Martello Tower to Night Town as he begins his personal odyssey: “His head vanished but the drone of his descending voice boomed out of the stairhead: ‘And no more turn aside and brood / Upon love’s bitter mystery / For Fergus rules the brazen cars.’”¹³

Joseph Holloway was also enraptured by the performance, recounting how, as he followed the play’s progress, “a spiritual, half-mystic, visionary sensation crept over my senses . . . as if I were in fairy land.” Although Yeats thought May Whitty’s performance “effective and commonplace,”¹⁴ Holloway praised her “sympathetic and lovable” manner and recorded that she spoke Cathleen’s lines “with a delicious, natural, sweet-musical cadence expressively and most distinctly.” He further observed that Farr “declaimed all her lines in majestic, beautiful, rhythmic manner grand to listen to—most impressive if

occasionally indistinct.” The indistinctness of Farr’s and Mather’s chanted tones led him to express his only reservation about their otherwise “laudable attempt ‘to lend to the beauty of the poet’s rhyme the music of the voice’”: “Chanting is hard to follow,” he wrote, “until the ear grows accustomed to listening to measured rhythm. Many of the artists failed to allow those in front to clearly understand what they spoke.”¹⁵

Although George Moore eventually haltingly allowed that the performance was “not in vain,” in that it awakened in him and the audience “a sense of beauty,” he was characteristically more forthright in his expressed dislike of the chanting:

The theories of the author regarding the speaking of verse I hold to be mistaken; I do not think they are capable to realization even by trained actors and actresses, but the attempt of our “poor mummers of a time-worn spring,”—was, indeed, lamentable. Many times I prayed during the last act that the curtain might come down at once.¹⁶

After all the reviews and opinions, it was Yeats’s father, John Butler Yeats, who revealed close to home how mixed were the reactions to Yeats’s verse experiments. “I hope Willie will go on writing dramas and that some time he will prove he can write dramas which are to be *acted* as well as chaunted,” he wrote to Lady Gregory after the final performance. “A lyric or any other outpouring of musical passion is all the more penetrating if the personality uttering it is already familiar to you in a story or drama. *The Countess Cathleen* in itself is such a drama, and I cannot agree with Willie in all his ideas as to the rendering of it.”¹⁷

In this refocused account of the first production of *The Countess Cathleen*, we see Yeats and Farr struggling heroically with the theory and practice of speaking poetic drama and chanting lyric poetry in a sceptical, even hostile atmosphere, but the play was by no means the beginning of their verse experiments. The play serves as a visible nexus of experiments begun years earlier and completed years later, experiments framed by the first and last versions of *The Countess Cathleen*. But at this point some listeners may well ask, “What about the psaltery? You didn’t mention Farr’s use of the psaltery in the production.” The psaltery was not mentioned because there was no psaltery as yet; Farr and Mather chanted to musical notes provided by a harp and violin in Herr Bast’s string quartet, which provided the incidental music for the lyrics and, as Holloway notes, at other “odd times” during the play. George Moore’s notorious account in *Hail and Farewell* of Farr plucking the wires of the psaltery at rehearsals and muttering lines from “Impetuous Heart” is a mocking fabrication and a disingenuous conflation of events that took place over several years.¹⁸ In 1899 the psaltery was still an unstrung image in Yeats’s mind. Let me return briefly to the origin and growth of that image in the 1880s.

The bardic instincts that drove Yeats to revive the lost art of speaking and chanting to musical notes are first apparent in his fragmented reveries over childhood and youth: “Since I was a boy,” he wrote, “I have always longed to hear verse spoken to a harp, as I imagined Homer to have spoken his, for it is not natural to enjoy an art when one is by oneself. Images used to rise up before me . . . of wild-eyed men speaking harmoniously to murmuring wires while audiences in many-coloured robes listened, hushed and excited.”¹⁹ By his late teens his bardic reveries had begun to affect his creative process, and his father, who had carefully superintended the growth of his son’s artistic sensibility, wrote patiently

of his “youth of eighteen” to Edward Dowden: “His bad metres arise very much from his composing in a loud voice, manipulating of course the quantities to his own taste.”²⁰ Yeats was certain that he composed to a manner of music, and in the bardic manner he had already begun to dwell on the vowels, placing strong emphasis on the rhythm, which he hummed over and over for hours in the process of creating. One of the first companions to whom he dared chant was the poetess Katharine Tynan, who occasionally stayed at the Yeats home in the mid 1880s. “I used to be awakened in the night,” she wrote, “by a steady, monotonous sound rising and falling. It was Willie chanting to himself in the watches of the night.”²¹ Yeats soon identified himself with the third-century Irish chieftan, King Goll, who was suddenly possessed by madness in battle and disappeared into a forest. In Yeats’s poem, “The Madness of King Goll,” the lost poet-warrior, “Murmuring to a fitful tune,” discovers an old tympan, an ancient Irish stringed instrument, which he uses to summon the muse Orchil who releases him in poetry of his divine, fitful tune. For Yeats, the poem was a metaphorical idealization of his own creative life, and so closely did his father identify him with Goll that he etched a portrait of his bearded son as Goll tearing the strings out of the tympan in a moment of creative intensity and printed it opposite the poem when it first appeared in 1887.²² Yeats soon began to make that symbolic portrait come to life.

Two years later, the young bard would meet and fall in love with Maud Gonne, and in the early glow of their romance she told him of her wish for a play that she could act in Dublin. He thus threw himself into the composition of *The Countess Cathleen*, reading the earliest drafts to a new friend, Florence Farr, and chanting Oona’s lyric, “Who will go drive with Fergus now.” On 3 August 1891, with three acts completed, he summoned his courage and asked Maud Gonne to marry him: “I sat there holding her hand and speaking vehemently,” he recounts:

She did not take away her hand for a while. I ceased to speak, and presently as I sat in silence I felt her nearness to me and her beauty. At once I knew that my confidence had gone, and an instant later she drew her hand away. No, she could not marry—there were reasons—she would never marry; but in words that had no conventional ring she asked for my friendship.²³

Yeats continued to see her day after day, reading from his unfinished play. The last two acts of *The Countess Cathleen*, as Michael Sidnell showed us years ago,²⁴ would now show the effect of her crushing refusal. In the fourth act appears the soul-weary Kevin, a young bard “who carries a harp with torn wires,” offering his soul in place of Cathleen’s: “The face of Countess Cathleen dwells with me,” he tells the merchants. “The sadness of the world upon her brow— / The crying of these strings grew burdensome, / Therefore I tore them—see—now take my soul.” When the First Merchant refuses his offer, Kevin asks in despair, before he is led away, “Is your power so small, / Must I bear it with me all my days?” (VP/136). Yes, he must carry his weary soul and his torn harp with him all his days. Yeats now told Maud Gonne that he had a new understanding of the play, that he “had come to understand the tale of a woman selling her soul to buy food for a starving people as a symbol of all souls who lose their peace, or their fineness, or any beauty of the spirit in political service, but chiefly of her soul that had seemed so incapable of rest.” When she suddenly left for Paris, he stayed on in Ireland, as he says, “finishing *The Countess Cathleen* that had become but the

symbolical song of my pity" (*Mem* 47).

During the two-year composition of the play Yeats had other crucial encounters that boosted his growing theories of chanting dramatic and lyric verse—his growing friendship with William Morris, who told Yeats repeatedly that actors in verse plays ought to chant the verse;²⁵ his editing of William Blake, in whose poetry he discovered the great rarity of blank verse, "cadence—that first and last of poetic virtues," which allows for a variety of expression within a regulated form—"its value to literature cannot be disputed";²⁶ and his presence at Florence Farr's production of John Todhunter's *A Sicilian Idyll*, where the beauty of her acting and her incomparable delivery of verse convinced him that it was possible to revive the ancient art of minstrelsy. "I made through these performances," he wrote, "a close friend and a discovery that was to influence my life" (*Aut* 120). For the next twenty-two years Yeats and Farr collaborated in their efforts to return musical speech to lyrical, narrative and dramatic verse. Their first experiments with the chanting of lyrics in dramatic verse took place in Farr's production of *The Land of Heart's Desire*, and their relative success led Yeats to revise *The Countess Kathleen* for the first edition of his *Poems* (1895), changing the name of Kevin to Aleel, expanding the role of the bard, giving him a "small square harp," surrounding him with "fantastically dressed musicians" (his first version of Irish troubadours), and adding the chanted lyric "Impetuous Heart"²⁷—all in anticipation of future staging. The failure of their subsequent plans to open a suburban theatre for romantic drama in London with a production of Yeats's *The Shadomy Waters* temporarily halted their momentum but not their enthusiasm for chanting. When Edward Martyn eventually agreed to provide the financial backing for an Irish Literary Theatre, Yeats went into revision mode once again with *The Countess Cathleen*, anxious to get it spoken with some sense of rhythm.

Yeats and Farr did not allow the crises and criticisms of that historic production to deflate their convictions about chanted verse in the slightest, and one late review by Max Beerbohm, who came from London on behalf of the *Saturday Review*, gave them great encouragement. Yeats's verses, wrote Beerbohm, "more than the verses of any other modern poet, seem made to be chanted; and it is, I fancy, this peculiar vocal quality of his work, rather than any keen sense of drama, that has drawn him into writing for the stage. It is this peculiar quality, also, which differentiates *The Countess Cathleen* from that intolerable thing, the ordinary 'poet's play.'"²⁸ In early summer Farr engaged one of her artistic friends, Pamela ("Pixie") Colman Smith, to design for *The Countess Cathleen* new scenes for future productions,²⁹ and in October Yeats wrote to Maud Gonne that the play was "likely to be acted in New York."³⁰ By the end of the following year, after numerous experiments with technique and notation, Yeats and Farr were ready to take their "new art" before London audiences. On 8 December 1900 Yeats introduced Farr and their method to the Irish Literary Society, where she chanted several poems, including Aleel's lyric from *The Countess Cathleen*. "She and the chanting were a great success," Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory. "I heard people saying 'how beautiful' all about me" (*CL2* 597). The enthusiastic response was greatly encouraging, and four days later he wrote again to Lady Gregory that he was beginning, "you will be sorry to hear, some slight revisions of Countess Cathleen" (*CL2* 602). The revisions, which included a new love scene for Aleel and the Countess at the beginning of Act III, were for his new edition of *Poems* (1901). He would let the text rest for ten years.

In February 1901 Yeats and Farr, together again with Anna Mather in London, gave

a lecture-demonstration entitled “Some New Methods of Speaking Verse” to the Fellowship of the Three Kings, an event that attracted the London press for the first time. As one wag reporter described the lecture: “Having superfluously stated that he knew nothing of music, [Mr. Yeats] proceeded to reveal his new musical art,”³¹ but his friend Henry Nevinson reported in the *Daily Chronicle* that

the poet’s purpose is really to revive the old chanting of ballads and lyrics as it was done by the bards of Ireland and most European countries—certainly by the Homeric rhapsodists of Greece, where Mr. Yeats maintains even the drama was chanted or intoned. Admirable examples of the poet’s meaning were given by Miss Florence Farr and Miss Anna Mather, with the accompaniment of a harp and even so familiar an instrument as the piano, where one felt the lyre, the tympan, and the Pan-pipe alone would have been in place. The effect, especially in some of Mr. Yeats’s own lyrics, was peculiarly beautiful.³²

They had their disbelieving critics, too, including Lady Gregory, who wrote in her diary the next morning that it was “amusing enough—but only a ‘fad’—Mrs. Emery’s voice is better in ordinary reciting, and Miss Mather hasn’t much voice at all. Yeats didn’t give a regular lecture but warmed up after criticism . . . & said, in answer to one [critic] that all lyrics were sad, & that all the finest poetry was the fruit of an austere sadness.”³³

The lecture was actually a set up for a proposed production of *The Countess Cathleen*, as revealed shortly afterwards in a letter by Pixie Smith, who wrote to the American author Albert Bigelow Paine about meeting Yeats at a London studio tea hosted by Mrs. Stuart Erskine, editor of the *Kensington* magazine:

W.B.Y. was there and he is a *rummy critter!* . . . Then W.B. began to talk! folk lore—songs—plays—Irish language—and lots more—reciting a sort of folk song which was splendid! And not stopping for interruptions made by Mrs. E[rskine] *pig*—who made silly remarks: it *was* fun!...He most excited about Countess Cathleen [in] my theatre! And wants me to give a performance of it to the “Brotherhood of the Three Kings” a crazy Irish sort of literary society! Won’t it be fun?!!!!³⁴

And in late May Pixie Smith did indeed stage scenes from *The Countess Cathleen* in her new theater, the Henrietta Theatre, probably using her earlier designs. “Yeats came & saw part of “The Countess Cathleen,”” she wrote to Paine, “and seems *much* pleased with the theatre!”³⁵

It was clear to Yeats and Farr (and their friends) that they had to move beyond the harp and piano as accompaniments to the chanting. When Lady Gregory returned in May from a two-month trip to Yugoslavia, she found Yeats “still interested in his chanting”³⁶ and presented him with a one-stringed Montenegrin lute, which was employed immediately at chanting sessions during his regular Monday evenings in Woburn Buildings. “I am delighted about the one stringed lute,” he wrote to her on news of its purchase. “One string should do much to restrain the irrelevant activities of the musician.”³⁷ Farr began to bring to these

evenings several young actresses who would soon be trained in the new art as members of the Golden Violet Order of Troubadours, and Yeats began to train as chanters several poets—T. Sturge Moore, Laurence Binyon, Robert Bridges, and even Roger Fry, the art critic. William Rothenstein, who was a regular at Yeats's chanting sessions, described the atmosphere: "When Yeats came down, candle in hand, to guide one up the long flight of stairs to his rooms, one never knew what company one would find there. There were ladies who sat on the floor and chanted stories, or crooned poems to the accompaniment of a one-stringed instrument."³⁸ It was in the midst of these activities that the musician and instrument-maker Arnold Dolmetsch came to their rescue.

Before Yeats and Farr approached Dolmetsch, they had tried speaking through music, using a harp, organ or piano, "until," says Yeats, "we got to hate the two competing tunes and rhythms that were so often at discord with one another, the tune and the rhythm of the verse and the tune and rhythm of the music" (*E&I* 16). They were seeking a musical method of recording their personal declamations, and they wanted a musical accompaniment that would enhance but remain subservient to the poetic rhythm. Dolmetsch, who thought quarter-tones and less intervals the especial mark of speech as distinct from singing, persuaded them to write out what they did in wavy lines. As they practiced this method, Dolmetsch began experimenting with various stringed instruments. Keeping in mind the symbolic as well as practical aspects of their needs, his first designs were similar to a small harp. Dolmetsch then spent several evenings listening to Yeats chant his poems in his strange, trance-like states—not to set the poems to music, but to record the "absolute rhythm," as Ezra Pound would later call it, of the poet reading in a moment of passionate intensity. He subsequently taught them to regulate and record their speech with ordinary musical notes.

In the summer of 1901 Yeats wrote to Robert Bridges: "Dolmetsch has interested himself in the chanting—about which you ask me—and has made a psaltery for Miss Farr. It has 12 strings, one for each note in her voice. She will speak to it, speaking an octave lower than she sings" (*CL* 91). Dolmetsch worked closely with Farr over the summer to perfect both the method and the instrument. The completed psaltery-cum-lyre, made of satinwood, has twenty-six strings, thirteen notes with their octaves in juxtaposition, and contains all the chromatic intervals within the range of the speaking voice. On 6 October Dolmetsch wrote to Farr: "The psaltery is finished. It has gone through many tribulations, but it is now perfectly satisfactory, and, I think, very pleasant to see. I must have a good long talk with you about it."³⁹ By the end of December Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory with delight that Dolmetsch had told him "'the chanting' is now quite perfect in theory & only requires a little practice. He says it is 'a new art.' We can now make a perfect record of everything" (*CL* 139).

To publicize their plans to spread the art in public recitals, Yeats began writing his essay, "Speaking to the Psaltery," in which he declared his intention to "to write all my longer poems for the stage, and all my shorter ones for the psaltery, if only some strong angel keep me to my good resolutions" (*E&I* 19-20). In it he affirmed his long-held convictions and announced his unswerving belief in the multiple values of this bardic art—its heightening of a poem's unique lyric rhythm, its accuracy, through fixed notation, in unfolding the personal emotional tone of the poet within the poem, its ultimate power of bringing poetry and rhythm "nearer to common life." As his essay neared completion, Yeats had Dolmetsch

in for the evening. He listened to Yeats far into the night and met the morning with a notation regulating the declamation of the first lyric from *The Countess Cathleen*. The musical notation was included as an illustration for Yeats's essay in the *Monthly Review*.⁴⁰

Then, on 10 June 1902, in the hall of Cliffords Inn on Fleet Street, Yeats, Dolmetsch, Farr, and her two neices Dorothy and Helen Paget gathered to launch the new art with a lecture-demonstration on "Speaking to Musical Notes." A specially printed and widely circulated handbill had been received with great curiosity by the press, which, describing the program as "so unlike the age," gave it unusual notice.⁴¹ Literary London was there, attests Pixie Smith, "packed like herrings in a box."⁴² Dolmetsch took the chair and provided musical explanations. Yeats, in his flowing purple tie gave the lecture, and Farr with the Misses Paget in green and purple robes held their psalteries like lyres as they spoke, lilted and chanted Yeats's "Impetuous Heart" and lyrics by AE, Blake, Shelly, Swinburne, Lionel Johnson and Arthur O'Shaughnessy. Yeats was jubilant after the lecture and wrote to Lady Gregory on his thirty-seventh birthday: "My lecture was a great success. People were standing up and many could not get in. . . . We have spent the money on new psalteries and on charming dresses for our troubadours to speak in. Dolmetsch is now making little tunes for my Wandering Aengus and some of my other things to be spoken to" (*CL* 3 200).⁴³

With that illustrated public lecture the "new art" was formally launched to mixed praise and scepticism among friends and members of the press. It is not within the scope of this lecture to recount the tremendous effort and energy that Yeats and Farr put into their applied art of literature for the next ten years, though some of their activities have been reconstructed elsewhere.⁴⁴ From 1902 to 1904 they worked mightily in London and Dublin to establish their verse speaking methods on platform and stage, and from 1905 to 1907 they toured the provinces of England, Scotland and Ireland, giving scores of lectures on "Literature and the Living Voice," literally living out their dream of reviving the oral tradition and restoring an ancient "spiritual democracy"—one that would make imaginative literature once again accessible to all the people through the living voice of actors and reciters. In 1907 Farr even took the psaltery and their theories on American tour, returning to join Yeats in exerting an enormous influence on Pound and the Imagists, who finally revised their modernist aim of displacing an aural with a visual paradigm of poetry.

On 16 February 1911, after ten years of public and private appearances with the psaltery, Yeats and Farr gave what would be their final lecture-demonstration together at the Little Theatre, London, in a program entitled "Ireland and the Arts of Speech." Things had begun to change, and Yeats was again in a restless, revising mood. Maud Gonne reproached him that summer: "as for the rewriting of your Abbey plays, you have not IMPROVED them at all & I hate to think of 'Countess Kathleen' being rewritten" (*G-Y* 301). After the play was revived at the Abbey Theatre on 14 December, with Molly Allgood playing Cathleen, she wrote more softly that she was sorry to have missed it: "it must have been a beautiful performance from all I hear. I expect it will often be played, so I hope I have a chance of seeing it next time I am in Ireland." As Yeats revised the play for his new edition of *Poems* (1912), Farr, desirous of hiding her aging beauty at fifty-two, suddenly told Yeats of her plans to leave London for a position as headmistress of a Tamil school for girls in Ceylon. She gave her final solo performance on the psaltery to a spellbound audience at the Clavier Hall on 18 July 1912. In September, Harold Monro wrote London's farewell to the mistress of chanting in the *Poetry Review*: "We can but regret our loss of so fine an artist, and

hope that there are others who may have learnt something from her, and who have sufficient restraint and self-surrender to submit themselves, after her manner, to the cadence and rhythms of poetry, becoming for the time being, a sensitive medium for their conveyance to an audience, rhapsodist rather than exponent, instrument rather than representative.”⁴⁵ Yeats, revising *The Countess Cathleen*, now discarded the original lyric, “Who will go drive with Fergus now?” and gave it a new place in *The Rose* in the 1912 edition of *Poems*,⁴⁶ but he kept “Impetuous Heart” in its old place in scene two. Farr’s last act before sailing was to present to him the Dolmetsch psaltery, the object most symbolic of their twenty-two year collaboration. After her departure in September 1912, the month the new edition of *Poems* appeared, he must have realized that Aleel’s lyric, “Impetuous Heart,” would no longer work in *The Countess Cathleen*. He thus replaced it with a new lyric, “Were I but crazy for love’s sake,” but he could not bring himself to remove “Impetuous Heart” from the play. In perhaps his final revision, as seen in *Poems* (1913), he appended it unobtrusively, but with no foreboding sense of terror, to the end of scene four. The lyric was finally still. Five years later, Mrs. Emery died of breast cancer in Ceylon.

When in later years Yeats had occasion to look back upon his plays in prefaces to new collections and editions, or to reflect upon them in memoirs or poems, it was *The Countess Cathleen* and various personal moments in its composition or performance that most came forward. In the preface to *Plays and Controversies* (1923), he averred that *The Countess Cathleen* “was written when I was little more than a boy, and that it gives me more pleasure in the memory than any of my plays. It was all thought out in the first fervour of my generation’s distaste for Victorian rhetoric; that rhetoric once away, every poetical virtue seemed possible.”⁴⁷

The greatest poetical virtue to Yeats, as we have seen, was always the music and cadence of speech. When in *Dramatis Personae* (1935) he recalled the 1899 performance in Dublin, he confessed that “Nothing satisfied me but Florence Farr’s performance in the part of Aleel. Dublin talked of it for years, and after five-and-thirty years I keep among my unforgettable memories the sense of coming disaster she put into the words [immediately after chanting “Impetuous Heart”]: “. . . but now /Two grey horned owls hooted above our heads” (*Aut* 417). But of course he kept the sharpest memory for *Last Poems* (1939)—the memory of that devastating moment of refusal in the middle of writing the play in 1891—a moment that set the play in restless motion for twenty years. When he began to enumerate old themes in “The Circus Animal’s Desertion,” the memory and the dream it fostered required their own stanza:

And then a counter-truth filled out its play,
The Countess Cathleen was the name I gave it;
 She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away,
 But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.
 I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,
 So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
 And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
 This dream itself had all my thought and love. (*VP* 629-30)

NOTES

1. The text of O'Donnell's *Souls for Gold!* is printed in an historical appendix, "The Countess Cathleen Controversy," in *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*, Vol. 2, ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly and Deirdre Toomey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 674-80, here p. 677; hereafter abbreviated *CL2* and cited in the text.
2. *Beltaine: The Organ of the Irish Literary Theatre*, ed. W. B. Yeats, Number One to Number Three (May 1899—April 1900) rpt. in one volume (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1970), p. 7.
3. *The Daily Express* (Dublin), 5 April 1899, p.5.
4. *The Irish Literary Society Gazette* (London), I (June 1899), 6. Yeats lectured to the Irish Literary Society on 23 April, speaking "on the 'Ideal Theatre,' with special reference to the Irish Literary Theatre." The lecture and title were revised as "Dramatic Ideals and the Irish Literary Theatre" for delivery to the National Literary Society (Dublin) on 6 May. On 27 January 1899, Yeats had written to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*: "We have forgotten that the Drama began in the chanted ode, and that whenever it has been great it has been written certainly to delight our eyes, but to delight our ears more than our eyes" (*CL2* 349).
5. *Beltaine*, pp. 7-8.
6. Joseph Holloway, unpublished journal, "Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer" (National Library of Ireland, MS. 4151), this entry included but mistranscribed in *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from his Unpublished Journal*, ed. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 6. A complete microfilm of the journal is in the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University (MF 1584).
7. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Seamus Deane (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 246.
8. The letter, dated 8 May 1899, appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* on 10 May. Most of the letter is reprinted in Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce*, new and rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 753-4. The remainder of the letter and the names of the students are given in Wayne K. Chapman, "The 'Countess Cathleen Row' of 1899 and the Revisions of 1901 and 1911," *Yeats Annual* No. 11, ed. Warwick Gould (London: Macmillan, 1995) pp. 108, 119 n. 10.
9. *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 65; hereafter abbreviated *VPI* and cited in the text.
10. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 67.
11. Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1958), p.134.
12. *A Portrait of the Artist*, p. 245; *VPI* 163.
13. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 9. At the end of the Circe episode, Stephen "murmurs thickly with prolonged vowels" broken lines from the lyric when Bloom awakens him from his drunken sleep (pp. 608-09).
14. *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 417; hereafter abbreviated *Aut* and cited in the text.
15. *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, pp. 7-8.
16. George Moore, "The Irish Literary Theatre," in *Sambain*, ed. W. B. Yeats (Dublin: Sealy Bryers and Walker, 1901), p. 12. In a footnote to Moore's criticism, Yeats responded: "I do not want dramatic blank verse to be chanted, as people understand that word, but I do not want actors to speak as prose what I have taken much trouble to write as verse. Lyrical verse is another matter, and that I hope to hear spoken to musical note in some theatre some day."
17. *Letters from Bedford Park: A Selection from the Correspondence (1890-1901) of John Butler Yeats*, ed. William M. Murphy (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1972), p. 47.
18. In *Ave* (1914), the first volume of *Hail and Farewell*, ed. Richard Cave (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1985), Moore states that Edward Martyn "had come to tell me that Yeats had that morning turned up at rehearsal, and was now explaining his method of speaking verse to the actors, while the lady in the green cloak [Farr] gave illustration of it on a psaltery. At such news as this a man cries Great God! and pales. For sure I paled, and besought Edward not to rack my nerves with a description of the instrument or the lady's execution upon it." Moore says that he subsequently "found Yeats behind some scenery in the act of explanation to the mummings, while the lady in the green cloak, seated on the ground, plucked the wires, muttering the line, Cover it up with a lonely tune" (p. 103).
19. *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 14; hereafter abbreviated *E&I* and cited in the text.
20. *J.B. Yeats Letters to His Son W.B. Yeats and Others*, ed. Joseph Hone (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), p. 53.
21. *Twenty-Five Years* (London: Smith, Elder, 1913), p. 190.
22. The portrait appeared as an illustration for Yeats's "King Goll. An Irish Legend" in the *Leisure Hour*, September

- 1887; reproduced in *Yeats Annual* No.4, ed. Warwick Gould (London: Macmillan, 1986), plate 16. But see above (at the end of Alma Bennett's paper) where the illustration is again reproduced.
23. *Memoirs: Autobiography—First Draft: Journal*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 46; hereafter abbreviated *Mem* and cited in the text.
24. Michael J. Sidnell, "Manuscript Version of Yeats's 'The Countess Cathleen,'" *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 56 (1962): "Thus the internal evidence of the first published version supports an account of the play which sees the first three scenes (or acts) as substantially fixed before Yeats was refused by Maud Gonne [on 3 August 1891], and the two last as written, or much revised, after this disappointment" (p. 102).
25. "I once asked Mr. William Morris if he had thought of writing a play," Yeats wrote in "The Theatre" (1900), "and he answered that he had, but would not write one, because actors did not know how to speak poetry with the half-chant men spoke it with in old times" (*E&I* 168). "I owe to him many truths," Yeats later wrote, "but I would add to those truths the certainty that all the old writers, the masculine writers of the world, wrote to be spoken or to be sung, and in a later age to be read aloud for hearers who had to understand swiftly or not at all and who gave up nothing of life to listen, but sat, the day's work over, friend by friend, lover by lover." *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 221.
26. *The Works of William Blake*, ed. Edwin J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats, Vol. I (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), pp. 182-3. Yeats wrote in his own copy of this section, "The Symbolic System," on 3 May 1900, "the greater part of the 'symbolic system' is my writing." See Allan Wade, *A Bibliography of the Writings of W.B. Yeats* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958), p. 224.
27. The manuscripts of Yeats's transformation of the lyric, originally entitled "The Lover to his heart" and dated 19 November 1894, and incorporated in the 1895 revision of *The Countess Cathleen* as "The Wind that blows by Cummen Strand," are included in *The Countess Cathleen: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Michael J. Sidnell and Wayne K. Chapman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 359-65.
28. "In Dublin," *Saturday Review* (13 May 1899); rpt. in *More Theatres* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), pp. 140-44. Beerbohm went on to say that Whitty, Farr and Mather "all delivered the verses well, giving to them the full measure of their music; and I know not when I have found in a theatre more aesthetic pleasure than I found in listening to them" (p. 144).
29. On 16 July 1899 Yeats's father wrote to him: "Of course I shall be delighted to see Miss Pamela Smith, and shall be most keen to see her designs from *The Countess Cathleen*." *Letters from Bedford Park: A Selection from the Correspondence of John Butler Yeats*, ed. William M. Murphy (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1972), p. 54.
30. *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938*, ed. Anna MacBride and A. Norman Jeffares (London: Hutchinson, 1992), p. 113.
31. J.R. Runciman, "At the Alhambra and Elsewhere," *Saturday Review*, 22 February 1901, p. 237. As Runciman summarized Yeats's lecture, "Poetry, when spoken, [Yeats] said, lost its rhythm; when sung, he said, one could not catch the words. Therefore he proposed something between singing and speaking: a kind of free chant with no fixed time and in no fixed scale. We were given some specimens of this, and I have scarcely yet recovered from my extreme surprise. . . . Of course the ladies who recited the poems for Mr. Yeats did their work (I presume) as Mr. Yeats wanted it done; but it seems to me that the thing should not be done."
32. *Daily Chronicle*, 18 February 1901, p. 5.
33. *Lady Gregory's Diaries 1892-1902*, ed. James Pethica (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 303.
34. Letter of 17 March 1901 to Albert Bigelow Paine, Huntington Library. The short-lived *Kensington: A Magazine of Art, Literature and the Drama* (seven numbers, March-September 1901), published Yeats's story "The Fool of Faery" in the June number.
35. Letter of 28 May 1901 to Albert Bigelow Paine, Huntington Library.
36. *Lady Gregory's Diaries*, p. 305.
37. *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, Vol. 3, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 59; hereafter abbreviated *CL3* and cited in the text.
38. "Three Impressions," *The Arrow: W.B. Yeats Commemoration Number* (Summer 1939), p. 16.
39. Letter of 6 October 1901 to Florence Farr, University of London Library, Senate House.
40. "Speaking to the Psaltery" appeared in the *Monthly Review* for May 1903, where the musical illustration is identified and attributed to Dolmetsch opposite p. 96: "Lines from *The Countess Cathleen* with Mr. A. Dolmetsch's notes for musical reading to the psaltery." The essay was reprinted in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903) and expanded in 1907 for inclusion in vol. III of Yeats's *Collected Works in Verse and Prose* (Stratford-on-Avon: Shakespeare Head Press, 1908), and later in *Essays and Introductions*.
41. A copy of the handbill is in the National Library of Ireland, bound in MS. 12145. It included the announcement that "The Lecture will be given in order to start a fund for the making of Psalteries for these purposes."

42. Letter of 12 June 1902 to Lady Gregory, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
43. The notations for “The Song of Wandering Aengus” and other lyrics are included in the expanded version of “Speaking to the Psalter,” *EC&I* 23-7.
44. See my “W. B. Yeats and the London Theatre Societies, 1901-1904,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 29 (November 1978), 415-46; “The Minstrel in the Theatre: Arnold, Chaucer, and Yeats’s New Spiritual Democracy,” *Yeats Annual No.2*, ed. Richard Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 3-24; and “‘As regarding rhythm’: Yeats and the Imagists,” *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies*, vol.2, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 209-26.
45. *Poetry Review*, I (September 1912), 424.
46. As Yeats stated in his notes to *The Countess Cathleen* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912), “the change for dramatic purposes has been made for no better reason than that the audiences—even at the Abbey Theatre—are almost ignorant of Irish mythology” (p. 123). At the same time, he was writing his poem “A Coat,” in which he discards his earlier mythological style “covered with embroideries / Out of old mythologies” (*VP* 148).
47. *Plays and Controversies* (London: Macmillan, 1923), p. vi.