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Revolution and Revelation: A Study of the Religiopolitical Lives and Legacies of Two Irish Republican Friends, Maud Gonne and Ella Young

ABSTRACT: Two Irish republican women of the revolutionary period, Maud Gonne (1866–1953) and Ella Young (1867–1956), were lifelong friends, artists, feminists, and activists. Gonne was an adept community organiser, launching creative political protests in Dublin, visiting families experiencing eviction to draw international press attention to the plight of the rural poor, advocating for political prisoners, and organising fellow Dubliners in support of striking workers and hungry schoolchildren. Young travelled throughout Ireland, immersing herself in myth, folklore, and the Irish landscape. She taught children, created new religious organisations, and authored numerous books. Gonne was declared Ireland’s Joan of Arc, and, though she converted to Catholicism in 1903, her religion was a syncretic mix of Catholicism and Western esotericism. Friends described Young as a Druidess and she listed her religion in the 1911 census as Pagan. This transdisciplinary, micro-historical study centres the Gonne-Young friendship and explores the unique relationship between revolution and revelation in their lives and legacies. It illuminates how Gonne and Young adapted characteristics from Western esotericism and Irish myth and folklore to fight what their compatriot Constance Markievicz identified as the ‘double battle’ facing Irish women: the struggle against patriarchy and the British Empire.

KEYWORDS: Ireland, nationalism, republicanism, Western esotericism, Golden Dawn, Inghinidhe na hÉireann, Easter Rising, transdisciplinary

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Introduction

Striving for independence from British colonial rule (1898–1922),¹ a small cluster of Irish advanced nationalist women² burst into action in Dublin, and beyond, agitating for suffrage, social welfare, worker’s rights, prisoner’s rights, and Irish independence from seven hundred years of British rule. Whether they fought the British Empire with the Irish language or guns, their participation in Irish revolutionary politics challenged Victorian gender norms (Pašeta, 2013). Many advanced nationalist women interrupted culturally-defined gender roles in war, the ‘just warriors’ and ‘beautiful souls’ binary that Jean Elshtain (1987) illustrates. Unable to engage in conventional politics until 1918, advanced nationalist women employed diverse strategies to fashion roles for themselves in Irish nationalism.

Maud Gonne (1866–1953) and Ella Young (1867–1956) were leaders among advanced nationalists, but not in a conventional political or military form. Those masculinised patterns of leadership did not accommodate women so they constructed their own moulds, drawing on Irish myth and folklore. In addition to intense political campaigning and subversive action, they amalgamated Western esotericism, their ecopolitical identities,³ and Irish myth and folklore to construct legacies as ‘women of the sídhe’,⁴ allied to the land of Ireland and in a unique position to speak on Ireland’s behalf. In this transdisciplinary, micro-historical study I consider the religiopolitical lives of and friendship between Gonne and Young, illuminating aspects of the maps of reality that underpinned their personal identities and politics. I reveal how their Western esoteric maps of reality allowed them to advance roles for themselves in Irish nationalism. Finally, I propose that they extended some of these strategies to empower their female compatriots.

Interpretative Frameworks and Methodology

The Irish revolutionary period is noted for upheaval in all sectors of society. Diana Burfield (1983), Alex Owen (2004), and Roy Foster (2014) note the increase of organisations responding to these pressures. In Ireland, needs were many and social upheaval opened doors for challenges to social

¹ The revolutionary period is frequently truncated to 1912–1922. I give the initial year as 1898 due to the involvement of key nationalist figures in the commemoration of the 1798 Rebellion.

² Advanced nationalists ‘shared a ... tendency to be more separatist and idealistic than the more pragmatic Home Rule party’ (Lynch 2015, 15). The term ‘advanced nationalism’ collapses ideological and operational forms of nationalism.

³ I adapt Mitch Thomashow’s definition of ecological identity (1996, 2) and discuss it further below.

⁴ Women of the Irish spirit world, such as the sí bean (banshee). Writers anglicized sídhe or sí in modern Irish as ‘fairy’, but the reader should be careful not to equate the sí with popular images of Victorian flower fairies.

norms. Sociologists of religion document the emergence of new religious movements during times of rapid social change (Beckford 1991, xii). Further, religions are not static; they are social constructions always engaged in 'an unceasing struggle between the forces of institutionalisation and disruption' (Beckford 1991, xi). In the case of Ireland in the revolutionary period, nationalist politics adds complexity to this struggle. Yet, in times of social upheaval, new religious formations of belief and practice emerge and, as Angela Aidala (1985) argues, gender must be accounted for when attempting to understand how social change impacts individual participation in both religious and nonreligious movements. While a macro and meso study is beyond the scope of this article, I consider the micro level with a focus on Gonne and Young.

The three dominant religions in Ireland in this period (Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Presbyterianism) and the dominant political actors (such as the Irish Parliamentary Party and Ulster Unionist Council) institutionalised gender norms. A strict Victorian gender binary associated masculinity with strength, logic, bravery, and aggression and femininity with weakness, emotion, passivity, and the need for protection. Louise Ryan notes that the ideal republican woman was 'silent, calm, dutiful' (Ryan 2010, 36). From the Catholic perspective, this image of the ideal republican woman resonates with that of the Virgin Mary. Mary submits to the role of mother: birthing, raising, supporting the mission of and then mourning the loss of, her son. By contrast, Gonne, Young, and their counterparts embraced their growing independence as 'new women' and interrupted the status quo gender regime (Ward, 1995; Hill, 2003). They were no longer willing to conform to the moulds allotted to nationalist women: the dutiful daughter, supportive wife, or patriotic mother (LISD, 2012).

Gonne, Young, and a subset of their colleagues found that their religions of birth did not accommodate their developing political identities and life choices. They sought alternatives. Diana Burfield (1983), Joan Dixon (2001), and Siv Ellen Kraft (2013) admirably explore similar phenomena in the experiences of English and continental women who were attracted to Western esotericism because of the alternative models of gender, sexuality, marriage, and egalitarian leadership that these traditions, particularly Theosophy, espoused. Context matters though, and I argue here and in my scholarship more broadly that the political, social, and economic realities of fin de siècle Ireland under British colonial rule deserve separate consideration.

In this study, I am fortunate that, as Senia Pašeta (2013) remarks, Irish advanced nationalist women such as Gonne and Young intended to be remembered and left researchers rich archival evidence of their lives and their communities. Over the last two decades, historians have unearthed the contributions of Irish women in the revolutionary period, illuminating

how women blurred gender boundaries.⁵ They have documented the political contributions of Gonne, to a greater extent, and Young, to a lesser degree. Mary Greer (1995) in particular details Gonne's short tenure in the Golden Dawn. Despite these efforts, nationalist women's religious beliefs and practices are neglected in historical readings or atomised, focusing on the religion of a single woman rather than seeking patterns. Sociological studies tend to reduce religious diversities that exist across a religious identity into a single category of analysis and divide it from gender altogether. Contemporary politics influence research as well. Due to the legacy of The Troubles in Northern Ireland and tensions around the role of the Catholic Church in the Republic, explorations of the diverse ways that religion and nationalism intersect in the Irish revolutionary period have been limited to sanctioned narratives which tend to universalise, rather than attend to the complexity of difference. Conflict has deep implications for religious transformation, but scholars who study conflict often vilify religion as incendiary and collapse religious diversity into the dominant, male, and notably patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts and traditions.

Micro, transdisciplinary studies can subvert these trends. To substantiate my claims, I consult memoirs, letters, diaries, and other ego-documents, which I triangulate with other primary sources from the social networks surrounding Gonne and Young. Their memoirs, *A Servant of the Queen* (1938) and *Flowering Dusk: Things Remembered Accurately and Inaccurately* (1945), are central resources. In the introduction to their book *Feminism and Autobiography*, Cosslett, Lury, and Summerfield note that 'the study of autobiography explodes disciplinary boundaries ... Autobiography makes trouble ...'. (Cosslett et al. 2000, 1). To negotiate this 'trouble', I take a transdisciplinary approach that is guided by the inquiry rather than by a specific disciplinary discourse (Montuori, 2012). Studying religion in a historical-political context demands a traversing theoretical orientation that embraces complexity, which transdisciplinarity provides (Morin, 2014). A critical feminist theoretical perspective acts as a lubricant between discrete disciplinary discourses.

Finally, two terms need to be defined. The first, 'esotericism', coined in 1828 by the French historian Jacques Matter, is an academic term rather than a label used by individuals (Hanegraaff 2006). Drawing on Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, I define Western esotericism as a collection of interrelated strains or currents within Western thought and religion (Hanegraaff 2006b, 338; 2012, 1-3). Most studies of Western esotericism in Irish nationalism focus on W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) and George Russell ('AE') (1867-1935). The scholarship manifests gendered stereotypes when considering Gonne and Young. While the friendships between Gonne-Yeats and Young-AE are undeniable, writers too frequently position Yeats and Russell as the 'active' adepts seeding Western

⁵ The reader is referred to Margaret MacCurtain, Margaret Ward, Myrtle Hill, Sinéad McCool, Senia Pašeta, Mary McAuliffe, and Liz Gillis.

esotericism in their ‘receptive’ apprentices, Gonne and Young. The intimacy between Gonne and Yeats only amplifies the impact. The influence of Yeats and AE is exaggerated while the generative relationship between Gonne – Young is ignored. In contrast, I foreground the Gonne – Young relationship and situate their religiopolitical pursuits within their broader social networks.

Second, environmental educator Mitch Thomashow (1996, 2) defines ‘ecological identity’ as ‘a dynamic relationship between the profound intellectual concepts of environmentalism and the memories and life experiences which validate them’. While this study predates Thomashow’s context, I modify his definition to generate a conceptual framework to connect subjective ‘memories and life experiences’ of nature in Ireland and the ‘profound intellectual concepts’ that comprise Irish cultural, economic, political, and republican nationalism in the revolutionary period (Thomashow 1996, 2). I maintain the word ‘ecological’ to underscore how the beliefs and practices I highlight are rooted in a relationship with the Irish landscape. Therefore, I propose the term ‘Irish eco-nationalist identity’ as conceptual shorthand for individual, first-hand experiences with the Irish landscape that individuals use to embed complex anti-colonial politics within their lived experiences.⁶

Revolutionary Lives

Gonne and Young were political, social, and religious revolutionaries, but their origins differ from many of their Catholic-born colleagues such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877–1946) and Margaret Skinnider (1892–1971). They were not the first Protestant-born Irish nationalist women. For example, Presbyterian Mary Ann McCracken (1770–1866), sister of the Society of the United Irishman leader Henry Joy McCracken (1767–1798), was an Irish nationalist and a staunch abolitionist who advocated the rights of women, the poor, and the marginalised. To contextualise Gonne’s and Young’s religiopolitical journeys, I provide short biographies of each as well as outlining their friendship before considering how they bridged Western esotericism, their Irish eco-nationalist identities and Irish myth and folklore to empower themselves and their comrades.

Born in 1866 in Tongham, Surrey, Gonne was the eldest daughter of Edith Cook and Captain Thomas Gonne. Gonne was born to wealth and privilege on both sides of her family (Ward, 1990). A younger sister, Kathleen, soon followed. Only later did her family move to Ireland. In 1871, Edith Gonne contracted tuberculosis and died (Ward, 1990). Captain Gonne moved his daughters to Howth, Co. Dublin (Gonne MacBride 1995, 17). An

⁶ I recognise the dubious potential of eco-nationalism, which I explore further in my dissertation (Heath-Carpentier 2019).

American Aunt introduced Maud to suffrage and feminism in her teenage years and a French governess

taught us history, some would say with a republican bias, but it was human history and she taught us to love human beings and to love beauty and to see it everywhere (Gonne MacBride 1995, 25).

This beloved governess valued independence, and Gonne recounts her saying 'Independence, ma Cherie, is the most precious of all things and everyone can be independent' (Gonne MacBride 1995, 26). Towering a full foot over the average woman of her day, Gonne had little choice in whether she attracted attention, as her contemporary, the actor Dudley Digges (1879–1947), recollected (Digges, 1988). Coupled with training in acting, her stature, charisma, and Irish Ascendency manners made her a formidable figure.

Gonne claims her life changed at a hunting party she attended on a large estate during her days as a 'carefree, society girl' (Creed 2008, 4:00). At dinner, the conversation turned to the Land League. The host, who had just evicted a tenant, retold the story of seeing his former tenant and his family, lying in a ditch, the wife on the verge of death. Gonne challenged his callousness and was rebuffed with 'Let her die ... These people must be taught a lesson' (Gonne MacBride 1995, 41–42). She fled the estate the next morning. After Captain Gonne's death in 1886, her inheritance provided the financial stability to realise the independence her governess commended.

A full account of Gonne's accomplishments is beyond the scope of this article, but in brief Gonne published her first nationalist article in 1892 and founded the paper *L'Irlande Libre* in France in 1897. In France that year, two thousand newspaper articles were written about her (Ward 1990, 35). She travelled throughout Ireland, speaking, organising, and aiding Irish peasants during evictions and famine. In 1900, she founded the nationalist organisation *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* with a group of other women, which I explore further herein. She was an effective community organiser and had a reputation as a resourceful advocate for the marginalised. Further, she became known as 'Ireland's Joan of Arc,' a 'Celtic Druidess' and a 'Woman of the Sídh' (Ward 1990, 34–35; Cardozo 1978, 84).

Gonne was prominent figure in Irish politics, fighting for the rights of the disenfranchised and marginalised throughout her lifetime. For example, during the Irish Civil War (1922–1923), Gonne created a hospital for republican casualties in her home and cofounded the Women's Prison Defence League with Charlotte Despard (1844–1939) to garner support for anti-Treaty prisoners and their families (Ward 1990, 134–135). Each Sunday, they would walk through Dublin in their dramatic widow's weeds with prisoners' families trailing them, their march ending with Gonne addressing the crowd.

Entering the world a little over year after Gonne, Ellen (Ella) Young was born in Galgorm, Co. Antrim to Reformed Presbyterians James Bristow

Young and Matilda Ann Russell in 1867 (Ancestry.com 2011). Ella's biographer, Rose Murphy (2008, 11), describes the family as upper-middle class, and passing references to servants in *Flowering Dusk* and entries in census records substantiate this claim (The National Archives of Ireland 1901a; Young 1945). By 1880, the family was settled in the Dublin suburb of Rathmines. Her family valued education for girls and boys. While Gonne was educated at home, Young advanced to the Royal University in Dublin, where she studied economics and law, and later to Trinity College, Dublin. The 1901 Irish census record reveals that she was a teacher and at least two of her sisters were pursuing post-secondary education (The National Archives of Ireland 1901a). Interestingly, Ella is the only member of her household who is listed as speaking both Irish and English (The National Archives of Ireland 1901a). Two sisters, May and Elizabeth, appear in connection with nationalist activities, particularly the theatre (Keogh 1949, 5; Holloway, 1967, 38; Schuchard, 2008, 93).

Primarily a writer, teacher, and storyteller, Young taught for the nationalist organisation Inghinidhe na hÉireann and wrote for their journal, *Bean na hÉirean*, which members founded in 1908 under Helena Molony's editorship (Ward 1990, 95). In Inghinidhe and at Patrick Pearse's St. Enda's School, Young taught Irish folklore. She claims that upwards of eighty children, ages 9–18, would press into the Inghinidhe classrooms to hear tales of Cúchulainn, Fionn mac Cumhaill, Wolfe Tone, and the like (Murphy 2008, 43). She appears to have cherished children, teaching and writing for them. Young proudly recounts that, after the Rising, a Dublin shopkeeper exclaimed to her that not one 'boy' she taught in her Inghinidhe courses failed to fight in the Rising (Young 1945, 133). Whether or not this is accurate, Young expresses pride in her role as a teacher and storyteller.

While not a direct combatant, Young was a republican who hid guns in her home and endured raids by the British military (Young 1945, 126–127, 154–156). In her witness statement to the Bureau of Military History, Easter Rising veteran Helena Molony (1883–1967) recounts rushing to Young's house on Holy Saturday 1916 to deliver a letter to her (Molony 1934, 32). Though the contents of that letter is unknown, she says of Young 'I was closely associated with her and she was very much with us but was more of an artist' (Molony 1934, 32). Molony highlights the diversity of roles available to nationalists; as in any military, direct combatant was only one of many.

Young continued to be a prolific writer of poetry and prose, and she was an in-demand lecturer and storyteller. After the establishment of the Free State in 1922, Young toured, and finally settled in, the United States. In 1924, the University of California, Berkeley awarded Young the Phelan Memorial Lectureship on Celtic Mythology and Literature, which she held for a decade prior to retirement (Celtic Studies U.C. Berkeley, no date). Young's *The Wonder Smith and his Son* (1927) and *The Tangle-Coated Horse and Other Tales* (1929) won the John Newbery Medal (American Library Association, 2021). In California, she lived in Halcyon, an intentional

community, alongside friends from the Dublin branch of the Theosophical Society including John and Agnes Varian (Ivey 2013, 9). Later, she relocated to Oceano, CA where she joined the Dunites community.⁷

Gonne's and Young's families do not dominate this study, but a brief note to provide context is helpful. Twenty-two year old Gonne met thirty-six year old French politician Lucien Millevoye (1850-1918) in 1887 when Millevoye and his wife were separated (Ward 1990, 15; Frazier 2016, 42). She had two children with Millevoye, though she never publicly acknowledged them.⁸ In 1903, Gonne married the Boer War hero John MacBride (1868-1916) with whom she had her third child, Seán MacBride (1904-1988). They soon began a tumultuous divorce wherein Young and Yeats collaborated to support Gonne; however, she resided in France to maintain custody of Seán (Ward 1990, 86; McCool 2014, 63-67). When the British executed John MacBride for his participation in the Easter Rising, Gonne returned to Ireland with her family. Young never married. She remained close to her siblings and lived with other women and in communities throughout her life. Biographers speculate that she may have been a lesbian due to brief mentions of women in her writing (Murphy 2008, 6).

Though neither identified principally as a Theosophist, Young and Gonne circulated in Theosophical communities. In *A Servant of the Queen*, Gonne claims she met Blavatsky in London (Gonne MacBride 1995, 256-257). In his assessment of the original attendance book for the Dublin Theosophical Lodge, Monk Gibbon (1957, 30) notes that Maud Gonne attended Theosophical Society lectures and events. Young met Annie Besant (1847-1933)⁹ during a talk Besant gave in Limerick. According to Young, Besant had just joined the Theosophical Society, and their meeting took place around 1889-1890 (Young 1945, 26-27). This timeline roughly corresponds to Colonel Henry S. Olcott's (1832-1907) October 1889 lecture tour of Ireland, where he delivered lectures in Dublin, Limerick, and Belfast accompanied by Besant ('Theosophical Activities' 1889).¹⁰ Soon after, Young became involved in the Dublin branch and met George Russell (AE). Young maintained connections with Theosophy throughout her life. Neither appears to have considered herself principally as a Theosophist.

In the early 1890s, Gonne joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Over time, Yeats had become dissatisfied with Theosophy and he met Golden Dawn founder Samuel Liddell 'MacGregor' Mathers (1854-

⁷ The Dunites was a community of social and religious reformers and artists (Linn 2013).

⁸ Georges (1889-1891) and Iseult (1894-1954).

⁹ Annie Besant joined the Theosophical Society on 21 May 1889 and by 1893 had become a spokesperson for the movement. In 1895, after Madame Blavatsky died, a schism which pitted Olcott and Besant against William Judge (1851-1896) and Katherine Tingley (1847-1929) split the Theosophical Society. Besant eventually became the president of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, serving from Judge's death in 1907 to 1933 (Santucci 2006).

¹⁰ An American military officer, attorney, and journalist, Olcott co-founded and was President of the Theosophical Society.

1918) (Gorski 2006, 1179). Yeats was initiated and encouraged Gonne to explore the Order. In November of 1891, Gonne was initiated under the name *Per Ignem Ad Lucem* ('Through Fire To the Light') (Greer 1995, xvii). She advanced through four initiatory First Order grades to the 3=8 (3rd degree) Practicus grade (Gilbert 2006, 546; Gonne MacBride 1995, 210; Graf 2015, 8-9). Gonne resigned her membership in December 1894 after confirming her suspicion about the relationship between the Golden Dawn and Freemasonry, which she believed supported the British Empire (Gonne MacBride 1995, 211-212). Her disassociation did not prevent her from continuing her study and practice of magic, particularly with Yeats and Young.

Prior to meeting each other, Gonne and Young founded organisations to support their nationalist aims. After meeting with prominent nationalist leaders John O'Leary and Michael Davitt, Gonne determined that 'Decidedly there was no place for women in the National movement' and founded the women's organisation *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland) in 1900 (Gonne MacBride 1995, 95). Ward (1995, 86) assesses *Inghinidhe's* impact:

Had *Inghinidhe* not existed, a whole generation of women would never have developed the self-confidence which eventually enable them to hold their own in an organisation comprised of both sexes.

In the same year, Young also founded an organisation, the *Fine*. Gonne defines the goals of the *Fine* as:

...to draw together for the freeing of Ireland the wills of the living and of the dead in association with the earth and the elements which to her [Gonne] seemed living entities,

and she reveals that the *Fine* offered an alternative to the Kabbalistic, Egyptian, Hindu, and Buddhist leanings of the Theosophical Society and AE's group of mystics, which Young thought were 'not suitable for Ireland's needs' (Gonne MacBride 1995, 335). Little concrete evidence exists about the *Fine* outside of fragments pieced together.¹¹ In *Flowering Dusk*, Young claims that a group, perhaps the *Fine*, considered both physical and magical means to recover the *Lia Fail* (Stone of Destiny) and predicted the Easter Rising.

A small occult society, that worked for years with the object of reaching to the power of the Stone, the Danaan Jewel with which is bound up the Royal Sovereignty of Ireland, was told in the year 1908, that sixteen is the number of the Stone (Young 1945, 130).

¹¹ Gonne references an Irish esoteric group in letters to Yeats dated from 1913-1915 (Gonne and Yeats 1992, 321; 327-329). She also notes in November 1915 a 'small circle of people in Ireland... keep the Celtic festivals' (Gonne and Yeats 1992, 361). Aurelia Annat (2016) explores further fragments of evidence.

Gonne herself remembers how Young sought the intervention of the Irish gods in revolutionary politics.

Ella would then talk of the ancient gods and invoke them to help bring back the Lia Fail. Helena Molony and I were often on these excursions and Maureen Fox and Susan Varian (Gonne MacBride 1995, 335).

This may be another cryptic reference to the Fine. Young's establishment of the Fine prior to their meeting demonstrates that her nationalist sentiments were evolving *before* meeting Gonne. Young founded at least one more religious organisation: The Fellowship of the Four Jewels, which she transported to the United States as The Fellowship of Mount Shasta (Kelly 2016, 52).

Both Inghinidhe and the Fine offered members autonomy from male oversight. The Fine was independent from the Western esoteric organisations of the day, at least in governance, though as I demonstrate here, Western esoteric characteristics abound in Young's map of reality and likely reached into the Fine. In Young's view, the Irish did not need to look off the island to Egypt or India for insight. Insight could be found in the land and in the Irish mythic and folkloric traditions. Having said that, Young was a highly educated, middle class woman of Scots Presbyterian descent. She was not exactly traditional druidic material, and her life bore little resemblance to the lives of the rural Irish from whom she learned.

As an English born, Anglo-Irish daughter of the Protestant Ascendancy and a Reformed Presbyterian teacher, Gonne and Young were unlikely to have mixed socially had their political, artistic, and religious proclivities not veered away from their families'. Young reports that she attended one of Gonne's lectures in Dublin in the months before they met (Young 1945, 53-54). On the 27th August 1901, Gonne acted in an Inghinidhe na hÉireann production of two plays by Alice Milligan (Mikhail 1988, 35). Young attended with Phyllis McMurdo (1861-1937), her neighbour who was a Theosophist (The National Archives of Ireland 1901b; Young 1945, 56-58). Young presented Gonne with heather from Slieve Gullion to decorate the stage for the production (Young 1945, 58).¹² In a letter to W. B. Yeats in March 1902, Gonne references a Miss Young weighing in on the stage direction of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (Gonne and Yeats 1992). It is likely the first mention by Gonne of Ella Young. They joined one another's organisations, and their sympathies were united in freeing Ireland from the British Empire and colonialism.

Gonne and Young were in their teens when Anna Parnell (1852-1911) and Ladies Land League (1881-1882) took the helm of the Land War (1879-1882). They began their republican journeys at a time when the average female combatant in the 1916 Easter Rising was still an infant. Their counterparts were a small, but diverse group. They included women from

¹² Slieve Gullion is a mountain in south Co. Armagh.

across the socio-economic spectrum and, while these women were predominantly Roman Catholic, they collaborated with women born into Anglican, Presbyterian, and Quaker families as well. Ward (1995, 50–54, 59) demonstrates that the majority worked by day and spent their nights learning the Irish language, teaching children Irish and myths, cooking for striking workers and the schoolchildren of the Dublin tenements, and engaging in civil disobedience. Through writing, theatre, and nationalist women's organisations like Inghinidhe na hÉireann and the Fine, Gonne and Young taught and mentored their friends. In doing so, they innovated methods of empowering their sisters¹³ for political engagement. They influenced key nationalists such as Helena Molony, Sadhbh Trínseach (1891–1918),¹⁴ Constance Markievicz (née Gore-Booth) (1868–1927),¹⁵ Dorothy Macardle (1889–1958),¹⁶ and the Gifford sisters.¹⁷

Young and Gonne believed that they nurtured Irish nationalism through activities on the physical and spiritual planes. Their friendship grew out of their shared commitments to Irish independence, backgrounds in Western esotericism, and recognition of one another's Irish eco-nationalist identity. When they were in their seventies, they composed their memoirs: Gonne's 1938 *A Servant of the Queen* and Young's 1945 *Flowering Dusk: Things Remembered Accurately and Inaccurately*. In November 1943, Gonne wrote to Young

[I] do wish you were here on this Sacred Land [Ireland] & we could exchange thoughts & read to each other our books full of the memories of the friends & places we have loved (Gonne MacBride 1943, 1).

In *A Servant of the Queen*, Gonne referred to Young as 'a great friend of mine', notably in the present tense (Gonne MacBride 1995, 334). She reserves this accolade for Young alone. After five decades, and across continents, their friendship endured. Gonne counters historian Roy Foster's

¹³ Inghinidhe na hÉireann members referred to each other as sisters (Ward 1995, 59).

¹⁴ Born in Liverpool, Trínseach (Cesca Trench) began studying Irish at fifteen and was an illustrator and artist.

¹⁵ Republican nationalist, Easter Rising military leader, and politician, Markievicz was the first woman elected to the British Parliament, was a member of Dáil Éireann, and became the Minister for Labour for the First Dáil (1919–1922). The latter appointment made her the first female cabinet member in Europe.

¹⁶ A Dundalk native, Macardle became a republican nationalist during the War of Independence and was anti-Treaty during the Irish Civil War. She was a writer, journalist and historian.

¹⁷ The six daughters of the Unionists Frederick and Isabella Gifford became Irish nationalists. All but the eldest, Katherine (1875–1957), were involved in the revolutionary period. Two sisters married men who became leaders in the Easter Rising and became widows when the British executed them: Muriel Gifford MacDonagh (1884–1917) and artist Grace Gifford Plunkett (1888–1955) (McCoole 2014, 1–2). Helen 'Nellie' Gifford Donnelly (1880–1971) fought in the Easter Rising, became a journalist, and later an archivist of the revolutionary period. Ada immigrated to the United States. Journalist Sidney Gifford-Czira (1889–1974), also known as John Brennan, was the youngest (see Clare 2011, 30).

characterisation of Young as a ‘hanger-on’ to Gonne, a position only justified if one assesses the Gonne–Young relationship solely through the lens of W. B. Yeats’s jealousy (Foster 1998, 393). Yeats’ attitude only reinforces the significance of their friendship.

Remarkably, each foregrounds her amalgamation of Western esotericism and Irish eco-nationalist identity in her memoir. Both present esoteric experimentation, eco-nationalist religious practices, and psychic phenomena alongside accounts of their nationalist activities and reflections on politics. This conveys the centrality of these experiences to their ‘struggle of self-making that is autobiography’ (Grubgeld 2004, xi). One cannot fully appreciate their political legacies, individually and together, and the organisations they founded, without understanding their religiopolitical amalgamation. This study launches that inquiry.

Western Esotericism

Drawing on Antoine Faivre’s and Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s extensive dialogue, I define Western esotericism as a collection of interrelated characteristics or currents within Western thought and religion (Hanegraaff 2006, 338; 2012, 1–3). I adopt Faivre’s rubric of these characteristics, which includes universal correspondences connecting the macro and micro, a sense of nature as a living being (living Nature), the use of the imagination as well as mediators to transverse levels of reality and acquire knowledge, and the centrality of transmutation through rituals to gain experience (Faivre 2010, 12). Faivre’s characteristics are evident in Gonne’s and Young’s thinking about the intersection between religion and politics, their attitudes to how they engaged in their political work, and the practices they adopted in undertaking it. In the following, I consider how Western esotericism influenced Gonne’s and Young’s religiopolitical worldviews and were incorporated into their political action to empower other women to challenge patriarchy and the British Empire.

Maps of Reality and Correspondences

Faivre (2010) pinpoints correspondences as the first characteristic of Western esotericism. Reality is comprised of layers of material and ethereal realms of existence which intersect or overlay (Faivre 2010, 12). Adepts can decipher or draw on connections between these realms for knowledge or to impact reality through magic. He notes that practices such as astrology derive their meaning from correspondences (Faivre 2010, 12).

Gonne and Young reference these planes of existence, the relationship between them, and the beings that inhabit them. In particular, both describe how political events on earth relate to corresponding events in other realms. In her memoir, Gonne addresses her decision to convert to

Catholicism prior to her marriage to MacBride in 1903. Gonne describes her map of reality and discloses her use of magic in pursuit of Irish independence.

I believe every political movement on earth has its counterpart in the spirit world and the battles we fight here have perhaps been already fought out on another plane and great leaders draw their often unexplained power from this. I cannot conceive a material movement which has not a spiritual basis (Gonne MacBride 1995, 336).

In Gonne's formulation, the Easter Rising has parallels in the spirit world. If human leaders draw power from ethereal events, then immaterial leaders in that space may also be a source of 'unexplained power' (Gonne MacBride 1995, 336). Gonne, a nationalist leader in her own right, made claims to harnessing this energy:

I knew it was possible to break the dividing barrier which separates us from this world and once had been eager to do so in the hope of gaining power to further the cause to which I had devoted my life (Gonne MacBride 1995, 336).

I argue below that some of those attempts to 'break the dividing barrier' played out on stage (Gonne MacBride 1995, 336). For now, though, one may note that Gonne's writing her memoir around 1938, and her reference might reflect both her thinking in the period when the events she was writing about took place and her perspective on the rise of fascism.¹⁸

Evidence that Young contemplated the relationship between different planes of existence and correspondences abound, and her companions considered Young an authority on the subject. In a diary entry dated 6 November 1914, Sadhbh Trínseach writes that she attended a gathering with Móirín Ní Shionnaigh (1883–1972),¹⁹ Markievicz, and Young (Trench 2005, 158–159). Trínseach (2005, 158) recalls a vibrant conversation in which 'Every omen of the downfall of the Empire ... was quoted'. Pinpointing omens that herald a sought-after political outcome reinforces an individual's commitment to act in realising that outcome, as their desire and 'destiny' fuse. In addition, pinpointing correspondences retroactively can make meaning of unanticipated events. In the wake of the Easter Rising,

¹⁸ Gonne's anti-Semitism and Young's apparent fascination with the rise of Fascist leaders has been explored at length by their biographers. For Gonne, see Cardozo (1978, 406–7), Ward (1990, 181–83), and Frazier (2016, 262–63). Rose Murphy (2008, 122–125) provides a comprehensive study and analysis of the statements made by Young in her biography. I also consider this at length in my dissertation (Heath-Carpentier 2019).

¹⁹ Born in England, Móirín Nic Shionnaigh was a poet, writer, and Irish language teacher. She is also found in the primary sources as Olive, Maureen, or Moireen Fox. Before Nic Shionnaigh's marriage in 1917, Young and Ni Shionnaigh lived together.

Markievicz's sister, Eva Gore-Booth (1870–1926), wrote to Young and asked for her assistance in interpreting the astrological chart of the Easter Rising leader Thomas MacDonagh, who had been executed by the British for his role (Gore-Booth n.d., par. 2). Further, she provided her own chart and Markievicz's and assured Young that she was seeking the birth time for fellow leader, Roger Casement (1864–1916) (Gore-Booth n.d., par. 2). Years later, in an interview recorded after the release of *Flowering Dusk*, Young describes being attuned to how a transcendent consciousness connected the macrocosm, microcosm, and human consciousness (Young [1950?], 4:10).

Young was not alone. Sidney Gifford-Czira, the prominent nationalist writer and sister-in-law to two of the Easter Rising leaders, called Gonne 'a goddess, a creature from another planet, and when she spoke you thought she must speak in oracles' (Gifford-Czira 2000, 46). Further solidifying Gonne's persona, Gonne portrayed the title role of Cathleen ni Houlihan in the play co-authored by Lady August Gregory (1852–1932)²⁰ and W. B. Yeats. Gonne and Young melded Western esotericism, symbols from Irish lore and traditions, and their Irish eco-nationalist identities, to fashion identities as 'Women of the Sidhe'.

Young continued to interpret political events through her Western esoteric lens decades after the Easter Rising. During World War II, Young also pondered the rise of fascism. Under the heading 'Lughnassa 1942' in *Flowering Dusk*, she claims she has 'nothing to add' to an article, published on 6 December 1919, in which she maintains that there is a spiritual connection between the individual citizen and the Nation:

Every thought, every act of ours, must help or hinder the Nation to whom we belong . . . the lowliest blade of grass, the poorest soul, today companions itself with angels and archangels in preparation for a storm such as the Tree of Life has never before encountered—makes ready for a blossoming such as the world has never known (Young 1945, 335).

Annat (2016, 203–204) convincingly argues that Young believed that violence and war could birth a new age. I read this conviction as an outgrowth of her Western esoteric inclinations, as in Gonne's Golden Dawn motto *Per Ignem Ad Lucem*—('Through Fire To the Light')—attests. Young extends transmutation, Faivre's (2010, 12) fourth characteristic of Western esotericism, from its traditional locus in individual gnosis (microcosm) to the world (macrocosm). Even 'the lowliest blade of grass' has a role in the macrocosmic transmutation of the world (Young 1945, 335).

The Will, Imagination, and Magic

²⁰ Lady Augusta Gregory was a writer, folklorist, and dramatist. She took a leading role in the founding of the Abbey Theatre and its precursors.

In examinations of the magic in the Golden Dawn, Alison Butler (2004, 213, 222, 225–226) and Christopher Plaisance (2014, 165–174) agree that Imagination and Will are central to the Golden Dawn’s conception of magic.²¹ Reflecting on Florence Farr’s (1860–1917) instructions in the Flying Roll No. 2, Plaisance (2014, 167) notes that ‘the desired effect is directly caused by the imagination as empowered by the individual will’.²² Agreeing, Greer defines the Will ‘as *intent*, focused through the *imagination* and energised by *desire*’ (Greer 1995, 6). Graf (2015, 11; 13) describes how the Imagination is the ‘link between the microcosm and macrocosm’ and notes that the Will is how ‘ritual magicians endeavoured to manipulate nature with great efficacy through controlling the will and imagination’. The Golden Dawn considered Will and Imagination central to the practice of magic.

Gonne, as an initiate in the Order, was fluent in this teaching. Reflecting on her short tenure in the Golden Dawn in *A Servant of the Queen*, Gonne is critical of most members of the Order as ‘mediocre ... the very essence of British middle-class dullness’ (1995, 211). She specifically names Moina Mathers²³ and Florence Farr (1860–1917)²⁴ as exceptions. In an October 1893 letter to Yeats, Gonne requests that Farr initiate her into the Practicus grade if Yeats is not available (Gonne and Yeats 1992, 51). Gonne, AE, Moina (1865–1928) and MacGregor Mathers, and others collaborated on what they variously termed ‘the Celtic Mysteries, the Castle of Heroes project, Druidism, or the Irish Mystical Order’ (Kalogera 1977, 4). The project bridged ceremonial magic with Irish myth and folklore. Farr’s and Gonne’s understandings about the mechanisms of magic were closely aligned, as Gonne’s (1995) memoir reveals.

Gonne’s focus on the Will in *A Servant of the Queen* demonstrates how these teachings continued to shape her worldview more than forty years after her initiation. She deploys the character of her father to introduce the Will. ‘Will is a strange and incalculable force. It is so powerful that if, as a boy, I had willed to be the Pope of Rome, I would have been the Pope’ (Gonne MacBride 1995, 15–16). This is a strong statement given that her father was Anglican. Gonne relinquishes control over her personal life to ‘the Will of the Gods,’ notably in the plural (1995, 308). Gonne describes Young as ‘... an extraordinary woman, very frail in appearance but with an iron will’ (Gonne MacBride 1995, 335). Saying that one has ‘an iron will’ is one of the highest compliments Gonne could have bestowed, as a strong Will was fundamental to Gonne’s self-conception and to magic.

²¹ For reference, I capitalise the W and I in will and imagination to distinguish the Western esoteric meanings of these terms.

²² Flying rolls are instructional texts authored by Golden Dawn teachers (Plaisance 2014, 166).

²³ Mathers, born Mina Bergson in Geneva, was an artist who co-founded the Golden Dawn with her husband, MacGregor Mathers.

²⁴ Farr was an actor, women’s rights activist, magician, and leader of the Golden Dawn.

Ireland as Woman and Living Nature in Western Esotericism

Faivre's second characteristic of Western esotericism, living Nature, presents differently in Ireland due to the colonial context. Faivre (2010, 12) explains living nature:

Permeated with invisible but active forces, the whole of Nature, considered as a living organism, as a person, has a history, connected with that of the human being and the divine world.

The concept of Irish eco-nationalist identity pinpoints phenomenological trends in how individuals conceived of connections between their subjective experiences of Irish living Nature, the mythology and folklore adopted by cultural nationalism, and their commitment to and action towards political and militant nationalist aims. Embracing living Nature assisted Protestant-born nationalists in negotiating the complex politics of Irish identity in this period.

Gonne and Young comprehended Ireland, the island, as divine: a goddess and a mother. This is in keeping with the tradition of depicting Ireland as a woman in the forms of Cathleen ni Houlihan, Roisín Dubh, or Shan Van Vocht. The divinity of Ireland was not just a symbol or an allegory to Gonne and Young. Ireland was a divinity itself.

Gonne defined Ireland as Mother. In *A Servant of the Queen*, Gonne recalls how hushed comments she overheard at her mother's funeral came to mind when she witnessed evictions.

That sentence 'The creatures, God help them, they have lost their mother' came to my mind in 1884 when I saw the evictions, many times after during the wholesale destruction of mud cabins... (1995, 2).

Gonne bridges the suffering of the Irish, the loss of sovereignty of Ireland, and her experience of her mother's death. Ireland becomes Gonne's Mother. Gonne fondly recalls childhood memories of Howth when her nurse took her young charges out on day excursions, letting them swim and play with local children (Gonne MacBride 1995, 17). Her father travelled as a captain in the army, often leaving the girls, as it was customary for her class, in the care of a nurse. Gonne recalls:

The heather grew so high and strong there that we could make cubby houses and be entirely hidden and entirely warm and sheltered from the strong wind that blows over the Heath of Howth. After I was grown up I have often slept all night in that friendly heather (Gonne MacBride 1995, 17).

This period after the death of her mother is critical to understanding her

strong connection to Ireland. What she describes above are the types of experiences Thomashow (1996, 62) designates as critical to the growth of an ecological identity. In Gonne's case, this is amplified by the loss of her mother and the hospitality she was shown by the families in Howth (Gonne MacBride 1995, 17). She presents this version of her Irish eco-nationalist identity in her memoir.

Gonne believed that maintaining a connection to the 'sacred Earth' was critical to maintaining her political energy, particularly when travelling abroad. She writes to Yeats in August 1897:

It seems when I have no work on hand, my mind goes to sleep & I am capable of nothing until the inspiration comes again ... I am galvanised by the great spiritual forces of Ireland for a certain work, & when they ... withdraw from me I can do nothing (Gonne and Yeats 1992, 75-76).

Returning to correspondences, eleven months later in June 1898 a dream inspired her to create a ritual blessing using Irish soil and water to maintain her connection with Ireland:

I seemed to get a distinct order to go to New Grange & to take earth from the House of Dagda & water from the sacred Boyne & give some of each to you & to keep some myself. To look on this earth & water as something infinitely sacred, to carry them with us whenever we left Ireland & they would become to us most powerful talismen for the invoking of our Gods (Gonne and Yeats 1992, 91).

In September, she sent Yeats a small box of earth from New Grange and two vials of water, one from the Boyne River and the other from a holy well at Ballina (Gonne and Yeats 1992, 94). She is experimenting with them herself and encourages Yeats to do as well (Gonne and Yeats 1992, 94). In 1928 and 1940, Gonne maintains that Ireland continues to be 'the all-protecting mother' (1940, 20).

Young recalls AE creating a rhyme for each member of the Hermetic Society describing each one's concept of God so that new members could pick:

My sister, Ella, takes of you (God)
A territorial sort of view:
I think an Island is her notion
Somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. (Young 1945, 35)

In the 1911 census, Young and fellow poet Móirín Ní Shionnaigh listed Pagan as their religion (National Archives of Ireland 1911). Young celebrated the Irish holidays of Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine, and Lughnasa and hosted pilgrimages to mythic sites. When she moved to the United

States, Young's concept of divinity expanded. She relates her ecological view of divinity to poet and philosopher Alan Watts:

The Earth is a great living being, and the Earth is greater than we are. The Earth has many things that we haven't, but we haven't got anything that the earth hasn't got. (Young [1950?], 4:10)

Young extended this conviction into daily practices:

If we went on a picnic she would never touch food until she had poured a libation of wine to 'Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and' - in Gaelic - 'the Great Goddess' (Gidlow 1986, 313).

In the United States, Young retained her conception of living Nature, but the boundaries expanded beyond 'a territorial view' to the broader Earth.

Magical Names and Goddess Symbolism

Irish goddesses and mythic women populated the imaginations of Young, Gonne, and their Inghinidhe sisters. These goddess figures included Ériu, Anu, Boann, Brigid, Macha, Maeve, Fionavar, and Grainne. Many connect to Irish sovereignty in folklore, and their stories link to the Irish landscape, such as Maeve's cairn on Knocknarea, Co. Sligo. Gonne, Young, and other Inghinidhe members drew on the mythological and historical stories of previous generations of 'exceptional' women and used them to negotiate their own claims to participation within the nationalist movement. Maire O'Brolchain (ni Cillín) recalled that Inghinidhe held monthly meetings where members presented papers on these Irish female figures, and these were published in papers in the United States (O'Brolchain 1949, 9). The educational function was central to Inghinidhe.

In the Golden Dawn, initiates received a motto, abbreviated and used as a name, to honour their ritual transformation (Graf 2015, 10). Receiving a new name when taking the sacraments was a common practice in Catholicism as well. Gonne extended this practice into Inghinidhe. She took the name Maeve, and Markievicz took Macha (McCoole, 2003). These names were more than passing fancies or pen names used to hide their identities. Gonne referred to Helena Molony by her Inghinidhe name in a 1943 letter to Young (Gonne 1943, 4). This reveals the longevity of the naming practice among core members.

Many advanced nationalist women whose activism was reared in Inghinidhe believed their political participation was consistent with Irish custom as embodied by these historical/mythic women (O'Brien 1932, 1995, 156). As Inghinidhe member Constance Markievicz proclaimed in 1909:

The first step on the road to freedom is to realise ourselves as Irishwomen - not as Irish or merely as women, but as Irishwomen

doubly enslaved and with a double battle to fight (Markievicz 1909, 14).

Fighting the British Empire and patriarchy was an ambitious feat. Fusing Imagination with transmutation, Faivre's fourth characteristic of Western esotericism, was the first step (Faivre 2010, 12). Individual transmutation into an 'Irishwoman' as Markievicz noted was signified by taking a new name. It meant casting off the gender roles they perceived as imposed by the coloniser and adopting native traditions, fusing their personal independence with Ireland's. There was a notable romanticising of ancient Ireland, but historical accuracy was not the goal. Romanticising the past was a means to Imagining the future.

When Inghinidhe spoke of the Irish goddesses, Margaret Ward (1995, 58) maintains that they 'stirred the imagination and aroused more emotion than a thousand meetings or earnest resolutions ever did'. Young describes the process best as she recalls Patrick Pearse's pedagogy:

Knowledge of the old legends and of saintly lives might foster such a fellowship [of the 'hardiness of Cu-Cullion, and the Christ-heart of sympathy with all living things], dramatic representations could give body and colour and a chance to image oneself in nobler guise and be for some moments the saint or hero chosen as exemplar (Young 1945, 81-82).

Imagination is central to Pearse's pedagogy, not unlike Waldorf Education, founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925).²⁵ Pearse (1916) says:

The story of Joan of Arc or the story of young Napoleon means more for boys and girls than all the algebra in all the books. What the modern world wants more than anything else, what Ireland wants beyond all other modern countries, is a new birth of the heroic spirit (16).

Eight years before St. Enda's School opened in 1908, Inghinidhe members engaged in this practice. Through adopting and being referred to by their Inghinidhe names, members amplified characteristics they admired in themselves. While not all nationalists who feminised Ireland or deployed Irish goddesses in poetry or prose had esoteric leanings or republican intentions, Gonne and Young did. They adapted esoteric practices, such as using naming to symbolise an individual's transformation, into their nationalist political advocacy activities.

²⁵ Steiner was a Theosophical Society member who moved on to found the Anthroposophical Society. In 1919, he launched a school based on his vision for education in Stuttgart, Germany.

Theatre and Ritual

Inghinidhe also staged plays and silent tableaux vivants where they portrayed mythic and historical women. Catherine Morris (2010) highlights the significance of tableaux vivants in Ireland before and after the Treaty. Empowerment came not only from being inspired by the heroic deeds of mythic and historic women. Morris astutely observes that identifying with the oppression experienced by these figures as Irishwomen, in Markievicz's sense, built confidence and feminist and nationalist identities. The silent form of 'living pictures' referenced English suppression of the Irish language and the 'disempowerment, bodily torture and silence' connected the stories of mythic and historic women to the lived experiences of Inghinidhe members (Morris 2010, 135). Joan of Arc was a powerful model for Gonne and Markievicz. Markievicz created a costume to portray Joan at the 1914 Daffodil Fete for the Irish Women's Franchise League (Arrington 2015, 114). A reading of Inghinidhe productions through the lens of Western esotericism illuminates how acting and magic may have intertwined when Gonne was on stage.

In reflecting on European theatre in this period, Daniel Gerould and Jadwiga Kosicka (1980) use the terms symbolist and occult interchangeably to describe theatre that walks the line between performance and ritual. Edmund Lingan (2006, 23) notes that playwrights such as Yeats capitalised on 'their studies ... to help them depict spiritual events in dramatic form'. If Yeats could write with this background, Gonne could utilise her training in a performance just as well and admitted to trying to do so (Gonne MacBride 1995, 336).

The Golden Dawn's magical system includes invoking beings from other realms (Howe 1978, xiii).²⁶ Yeats believed that the ancient Irish gods and goddesses responded when called on (Brown 1996, 222). Kalogera (1977, 99-100) asserts that Gonne saw the Celtic Mysteries she collaborated on with Yeats as 'a sort of mystical Clan na Gael'. Gonne exited the Golden Dawn prior to achieving the level in which she would have learned the finer points of ritual construction and magic. Nonetheless, she continued with auxiliary practices such as divination, astral projection, scrying, and trance meditation. In November 1898, four years after she resigned from the Golden Dawn, Gonne wrote to Yeats, 'I had been invoking Maeve' (Gonne and Yeats 1992, 96). Further, while rehearsing for the title role in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in March 1902, Gonne tells Yeats that she and her cousin, May Gonne, were given the correspondences between the colours and the planets for Celtic Mysteries from the Celtic Gods (Gonne and Yeats 1992, 152-153). For Gonne, depicting the personification of Ireland on stage could never be simply acting.

²⁶ In this context, I use the terms deity, female aspect of the divine, and mythic-historical character interchangeably as Inghinidhe drew on all three.

Young describes such a moment. Inghinidhe produced Alice Milligan's *The Escape of Red Hugh* in 1901. Gonne recited the legend on which the play was based. Young recalls:

The raised curtain showed her, seated in an ancient carved chair, with an illuminated parchment book on her knee. She had a splendid robe of brocaded white poplin with wide sleeves, and two little pages in medieval dress of black velvet held tall wax candles on either side of her. The stage was strewn with green rushes and branchlets of blossomed heather (Young 1945, 57-58).

Graf (2000, 10) describes rituals in the Golden Dawn as including 'symbolic apparati that were used to elevate consciousness'. When an accomplished ritual magician, such as Gonne, takes on the guise of a storyteller or goddess, theater has the potential to shift to ritual.

Compatriots applauded Gonne's performance in Milligan's play and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. After attending the play, Joseph Holloway (1967, 17) notes that Gonne embodied the part with 'creepy realism' and chanted rather than spoke her lines. A reviewer from *New Ireland Review* wrote that Gonne 'did not address the other actors as is usual in drama, but spoke directly to the audience She can scarcely be said to act the part, she lived it' (Frazier 2013, 233). Gonne's Irish eco-nationalist identity and Western esoteric roots fuelled her nationalism, and in the theatre, these mixed and influenced Irish theatre-goers.

Influenced by Gonne and Young, Inghinidhe members drew on mythic and historical women as exemplars to embolden themselves and fuel their political work. Central to Inghinidhe's mission was harnessing the stage for Irish freedom. In writing about and portraying historic and mythic Irish women, they gained the agency to assert themselves as Irishwomen fighting for Irish freedom and women's rights.

Conclusion

Gonne's and Young's legacies as republican nationalists are more routinely acknowledged today than in previous decades thanks to the labour of Irish women's historians. Gonne's Western esoteric roots and Irish eco-nationalist identity are ignored, positioned as 'colour commentary', or attributed to Yeats. Steele astutely declares:

[Gonne] has been compartmentalised as a scarlet woman who betrayed the hero MacBride or a frigid goddess who led the famous poet by the nose unwillingly through politics, or some bizarre eccentric combination of the two, and not simply what she was, a remarkable person (Steele 2001, 139).

Young is depicted as an awe-struck, mediocre poet who took the Celtic twilight too far. Irish and American writers celebrated or derided her as a

Druidess.²⁷ When Young arrived in the United States in 1925, the *New York Times* headline stated: 'Elfland sends an ambassadress to us' (Jewell 1925, SM12). Accounts de-emphasise or ignore Young's republican nationalism and her role in the development of feminist and republican nationalist identities in women such as Molony, Markievicz, Trínseach, and Macardle. This study addresses these oversights and aims to open a generative dialogue on the broader scope of their legacies. In doing so, I have considered some of the ways that Western esotericism impacted Irish women's nationalism.

When Gonne founded Inghinidhe na hÉireann in 1900, it was the first women's nationalist organisation since the Ladies' Land League. The Fine and The Fellowship of the Four Jewels were religious organisations built on a native Irish eco-nationalist framework. Neither was subordinate to other Western esoteric traditions that were cerebral (Theosophy) or that incorporated Kabbalistic and Egyptian elements in their ceremonial magic practices (Golden Dawn). Young's practices are more akin to contemporary eco-feminist Wicca than to the Golden Dawn. They have Western esoteric characteristics without being ceremonial. Inghinidhe na hÉireann trained a generation of advanced nationalist women in Irish language, mythology, and history and in the practice of community organising, journalism, writing, canvassing, and public speaking that would serve them in future, as demonstrated by the dominance of Sinn Féin in the 1918 election (Ward 1995, 135-137; Pašeta 2013, 262). In the April 1909 issue of Inghinidhe's newspaper, *Bean na h'Eireann*, the editors emphasised their conviction that offering examples of Irish womanhood rather than imported English ones was critical to the formation of Irish young women:

The English atmosphere it brings with it, and the false and mean standard of life that it inculcates is the real evil. The chance of marrying a very rich, and very much titled suitor, the triumph of being able to hold a larger number of fellow-creatures in servitude than your neighbour - these are the paltry ideals set before our young Irish women. Before OUR women! Before the women of THIS nation - Eire - who have such a civilisation behind them, and would have such a glorious ideal of Life and of their destiny if they could only be again awakened to a conception of it. This is the work Bean na h-Eireann has set out to do... (Inghinidhe na hÉireann 1909, 8).

Drawing on historical and mythic Irish women as exemplars to help form independent Irishwomen, in Markievicz's model, was a clear aim of Inghinidhe. The maps of reality and practices that Gonne and Young adapted from and devised based on Western esotericism aided the cause of Irish freedom and women's equality. Their aim was transmutation,

²⁷ The Irish poet Padraic Colum and others frequently called Ella Young a 'reincarnated Druidess' (Colum 1931, 4).

individual and political, first for themselves and then for their fellow Irishwomen.

In the late 1970s, theologian Carol Christ delivered an address *Why Women Need the Goddess*. Utilising Geertz's definition of religion as 'a system of symbols which act to produce powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations', Christ deliberates on the ramifications of the masculine hegemony over the symbolism of the divine (Christ 1979, 274). Christ examines the psychological, social, and political impacts of a male godhead and concludes:

...I [Christ] argued that in cultures where God is symbolized exclusively or primarily as male, maleness is consciously and unconsciously understood to be divine. In such cultures it feels true, right, and just for females to be subordinated to male power. In such cultures, no one questions the right of fathers and husbands to demand obedience from wives and daughters, nor do people find it remarkable that religious and political leaders are male or that men make laws that women must obey (Christ 2012, 246).

Christ's argument can be extended to the Irish colonial context as well. Begoña Aretxaga discusses how gender (masculinity/femininity) is used rhetorically to describe political relations between coloniser/colonised (England/Ireland) and as justification for Empire (Aretxaga, 2005). She concludes:

The Irish, like women and in the same way as savages or primitive peoples, appeared in colonial discourse as incapable of government; something to which the English, with their rational (masculine) nature, were perfectly suited (Aretxaga, 2005, 97).

As Irishwomen, Gonne's and Young's Irish eco-nationalist identities coupled with their Western esoteric worldviews provided them with tools to unhinge what Markiewicz, noted above, dubbed in a proto-intersectional²⁸ analysis, the 'doubly enslaved' nature of Irish women's experiences (Markiewicz, 1909, 14). Utilising this combination, Gonne and Young activated the Wills and Imaginations of their comrades to fight Markiewicz's 'double battle' (Markiewicz, 1909, 14).

Since Christ published her article, scholarly debates have unfolded over if and how new religious movements and religions featuring female images of the divine empower women (see Aidala 1985, 310–311; Palmer 1993, 352–353). Examining four marginalised religions in the nineteenth century United States context, Mary Farrell Bednarowski finds that how a religion genders its divine is one of four characteristics linked to the status

²⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 1244) developed the theory of intersectionality to challenge 'traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood' as discrete phenomenological categories. Kathy Davis defines intersectionality as the 'interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination' (Davis 2008, 67).

of women within that religion. Bednarowski found that ‘a perception of the divine that de-emphasised the masculine either by means of a bisexual divinity or an impersonal, nonanthropomorphic divine principle’ increased women’s leadership and status (Bednarowski, 1980, 209). Robert Ellwood and Catherine Wessinger’s (1993, 81–83) findings resonate with Bednarowski’s and further determine that the lack of formal ordination in the Theosophical Society facilitated greater access for women to serve in leadership roles.

Gonne and Young founded organisations that were exclusively or predominantly women-centric with women leaders, writers, speakers, and artists who highlighted historic and mythic Irish women. They affirmed the divine nature of Ireland and Irish soil itself. They reclaimed the symbol of Ireland as woman, prominent in both colonial and nationalist depictions, and they positioned Ireland as triumphantly confronting her oppressors, sometimes failing and being suppressed, but always rising up again – just as Irish women did in their fight against disenfranchisement and misogyny.

Christ argues that elevating female images of the divine ‘means the defeat of the view engendered by patriarchy that women’s power is inferior and dangerous’ (Christ 2012, 248). Christ states:

The symbol of the Goddess as an independent power suggests that women have the right to make their own decisions. Women can reflect and envision, set goals and attempt to achieve them – without checking first with male authority figures (Christ 2012, 248).

As Christ describes, Gonne and Young sought to interrupt the patriarchal and colonial symbolic structure that they believed was inherited from British colonial rule. While they were mistaken in attributing misogyny solely to the English, their assertion and aim to rectify it had an impact on nationalist women nonetheless.

Gonne attests to the power of sisterhood in *Inghinidhe* in reply to accusations that she risked little in protesting against the British when her fellow, working class, sisters risked much.

I had taught *Inghinidhe* the meaning of the word Solidarity. I knew that we were all equally resolved that any injury to one was an injury to all and, so long as any of us had means, we would never allow any of our members to suffer (Gonne MacBride 1949, 5–6).

Gonne’s intention and reality may have differed, but the women of *Inghinidhe* and the *Fine* continued friendships long after the establishment of the Free State. For example, Young encouraged Macardle to write during an excursion to the Hill of Howth. During the Civil War, Macardle authored stories while imprisoned in Mountjoy and Kilmainham Gaols, and ‘The Return of Niav’ particularly demonstrates Young’s influence. Macardle (1956) wrote Young’s obituary for RTÉ.

In this transdisciplinary, feminist micro history, I centre the Gonne-Young friendship to generate a nuanced interpretation of the influence of Western esotericism and Irish eco-nationalism on Gonne's and Young's religiopolitical agendas, actions, and legacies. This brief discussion demonstrates the impact of both women on Irish nationalist women through the organisations they founded and the mentorship they offered. They lived lives fighting Markievicz's 'double battle' and assisting others to do the same.

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