

RE-CLAIMING “A QUEEN OF WOMEN AS OF STATES”:  
FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY AS DRAMATURGICAL SPACE IN  
LADY GREGORY’S *GRANIA* (1912), *KINCORA* (1905/1909), AND  
*DERVORGRILLA* (1907)

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**Abstract**

This article<sup>1</sup> considers how Augusta, Lady Gregory, playwright and co-founder of Ireland’s Abbey Theatre, crafts a dramaturgy of feminist historiographic space across her folk-history trilogy, *Grania*, *Kincora*, and *Dervorgilla*. The article engages with scholars across Irish theatre history, spatial theory, and feminist theory to propose a new vision of a dramaturgy of feminist historiography in Gregory’s plays. Irish women artists and activists intentionally reclaimed and reimagined women from Irish folk history as a method of cultivating women’s space within the national and nationalist imaginations. In her reconceptualization of these histories for the stage, Gregory was envisioning an Irish national drama where women were center stage, and by extension, demonstrated the power of women’s presence within the greater cultural nationalist movement.

**Keywords:** Lady Gregory; Irish theatre; dramaturgy; feminist historiography; space/place.

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## Introduction

Following the 1905 premiere of Lady Gregory's first folk-history play, *Kincora*, an unknown "Dublin Correspondent" reported on an interview with the playwright in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Gregory spoke of adapting this episode of history for the stage: "She then went on to say that although her idea was to make King Brian the leading character in the drama, she found Gormleith constantly emerging" (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 1905, 8). Her use of the verb "to emerge" is particularly evocative, suggesting there was some place from which the queen could come from. Gregory crafted a more hospitable dramaturgical historical space for the queen, opening both a literary and a physical performance space where the woman might command her own narrative. Gregory's reflection in the article further casts Gormleith as a co-creator in the places and spaces depicted in the play, an active agent in reshaping her story in collaboration with the playwright. The author of the article shares his own impressions of the queen: "Gormleith is a veritable creation. There is nothing about her in Lady Gregory's play that is not verifiable in the four masters and the Danish sagas, yet she comes in this play, even to a student of Irish history, as a revelation...it is Gormleith who is the play, and not Brian" (8). Rather than a background figure or passive object of history, witnesses to the Gormleith in *Kincora* observes an alternate history where the queen is central, not the king. I suggest that Gregory's play be read as a woman-centered dramaturgical space where the woman is the subjective agent of her own destiny. New historical perspectives are revealed when women tell their own stories. Women of Irish legend would continue to emerge across Gregory's dramaturgy on the Irish national stage, and this essay explores how Lady Gregory's *Grania*, *Kincora*, and *Dervorgilla*, demonstrate a multilayered dramaturgy of resistance that offers a counter-narrative of women-centered Irish history.

Defined by Cathy Leeney (2010), "a dramaturgy of resistance...is characterized by self-conscious use of recognizable conventions to expose their coercive impacts, and to overturn their stability as makers of meaning" (199). This aligns with Shonagh Hill's work in *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (2019), as she develops paradigm of the feminist genealogy, an alternative, woman centered historiographic framework for Irish drama that interrogates how 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre-makers "mobilized around an action, embodied mythmaking" (24). She defines embodied mythmaking as "reiteration, reperformance, and reinscription of myths on and through the body" as a throughline of feminist resistance to canon-formation (6). In many ways, Gregory's creative mythmaking practice models a feminist genealogy, as she engages the women of Irish folk history to interrogate the limitations of history itself, using the platform of the new Irish national theatre to reframe those histories from an alternate perspective. As a folklorist, Gregory was deeply familiar with both the content of the myths and legends popular during the Revival as well as the politics regarding who told those stories and how.<sup>2</sup> Working under the "weight of the

patriarchal authority associated with Irish mythic and feudal history,” Gregory sought to “unsettle the terms upon which history is conceived” (McAteer 2004, 100; 107). Gregory’s plays advanced what Paige Reynolds (2007) considers to be “the powerful association in the public imagination between nationalism and female dramatic performance” during the first decade of the twentieth century, linking what happens in the cultural place of the theatre with the greater space of Irish cultural imagination in the Celtic revival (77). There were limited spaces for women to participate in the nationalist movement during this period. Women playwrights and performers, then, and the queens and leaders they embodied for the stage, became a powerful public image of Irish womanhood. I argue that Gregory intentionally exploited this link to demonstrate and disseminate an alternative, women-centered Irish history to the public. By choosing to focus on the scapegoated women of Irish myth and history, Gregory further highlights the patriarchal architects of Irish history who blamed women in their consolidation of a masculinist heroic narrative.

My approach to this essay combines methodologies offered by feminist and theatre scholarship, with theories of space and place, to propose a new dramaturgy of feminist historiography in Gregory’s plays. In *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place*, Chris Morash and Shaun Richards (2013) outline the multiple elements that influence the spatial constructions of performance: “Language, the actor and the configuration of theatrical space all work towards production of a space ‘elsewhere’, but the nature of that space is not the same performance to performance, and it will change through different historical periods” (28). I argue that it is precisely these “colliding spaces” (175) in theatre that enabled Gregory to propose these counter-narratives, and that feminist historiography is the product of this “elsewhere”. Further, my own feminist analysis serves as an additional colliding force to this imagined theatrical space, as it is rooted to the present period from which I interpret this dramaturgy of resistance. The texts of Gregory’s plays alone are enough for feminist historiographic reclamation, the original printed texts of *Grania*, *Kincora*, and *Dervorgilla* charting a chronological throughline of women protagonists in Irish history. Yet, these plays were not developed in isolation – all three were intended for performance at the Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theatre. As playwright and co-director of the Abbey, which was carving out its own space and place where the Irish public might define their national identity, Gregory was consciously writing or producing plays that focused on Irish myths and history in support of the mission to develop a body of indigenous drama. Reynolds writes that “women actively participated in the quest to create and stage Irish national drama” (78), and as performers, producers, and playwrights they were foundational to its creation. It is within and among this community that Gregory wrote and produced her plays. The power of performance on the “national” stage and the embodied reclamation of these historic figures by women performers further elevates the “elsewhere” space of feminist historiographic dramaturgy.

In *Our Irish Theatre* (1913), Gregory reflected on her intention for the Abbey to tour history plays throughout the country and acknowledged that 'to have a real success and to come into the life of the country, one must touch a real and eternal emotion, and history comes only next to religion in our country' (91). Grounding these imagined spaces of woman-centered Irish history in the evolving place that was becoming the national theatre further imbued these histories with a sense of authority. "To see one's own spaces staged appropriately, in accordance with one's own sense of worth, was...a profoundly political act" (Morash and Richards, 30), and it is through her dramaturgy that Gregory creates a parallel space where Irish women might co-create their own histories as a challenge to patriarchal authority. When read as a chronological cycle, Gregory's *Grania*, *Kincora*, and *Dervorgilla* represent a 1,000-year counter-history of legendary Irish women, a parallel political space in which rebel Irishwomen past and present, young or old, might recognize themselves.

### **Feminist Historiography: Intellectual and Theatrical Spaces**

In her collection of essays, *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), geographer Doreen Massey calls for a feminist interrogation of the theoretical frameworks used to shape our disciplines: "intellectual work as a feminist involves not only working *on* gender but also, and I think in the end perhaps even more importantly, it involves confronting the gendered nature of our modes of theorizing and the concepts with which we work" (12). Though Massey's work focuses on actual social and geographic spaces, I believe this call to action offers potential for transdisciplinary engagement, one that I intend to answer in this essay as I incorporate her theories into historiographic spaces. By analyzing how Gregory questioned and challenged the consolidation of Irish history as a masculine space in her plays, I remain increasingly self-aware of the construction of my own feminist historiographic space through a reclaiming/reshaping of history by foregrounding women's work. As an intellectual, I, too, am caught up in an "ever-shifting social geometry of signification" (Massey, 12) as I reach back through time and excavate new feminist meaning from publications and performance. Hill's definition of interrogative myth, or "liberatory myth in process, which encompasses both creation and critique" (20) not only applies to the content or forms of the plays and performances of Irish women, but also to our own acts as feminist theatre historians intervening in the telling of these histories. I engage in my own act of reviving myths, stories, histories from a century ago just as Gregory and other storytellers during the Revival period reached back into history for sources with which to define their present intellectual engagement with and construction of Irish identities. Irish women artists and activists intentionally reclaimed and reimagined women from Irish folk history as a method of cultivating women's space within the national and nationalist imaginations. In reconceptualizing these histories for the stage, Gregory envisioned an Irish national drama where women were center stage, and by extension, demonstrated

the power of women's presence within the greater cultural nationalist movement. Through my recontextualization of her history plays as a feminist historiography, I, too, seek to reimagine how this play cycle can reveal new methods of women-centered history-telling today.

Gregory was writing within and alongside the multidimensional networks of power and meaning-making during the Revival period. In his essay "Kindness in Your Unkindness: Lady Gregory and History," Michael McAteer acknowledges "the forcefully masculine nature of mythic history...based upon the patriarchal order evident in its tales" popularized by figures such as Standish O'Grady and T.W. Rolleston in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (99). I read this masculine shaping of history, and the influence it had in defining the patriarchal spaces and symbols of Irish nationalism, as an example of what Massey defines as "exclusivist claims to places." Highlighting nationalist spaces/places as an example of this process, she argues that these ideological formations demonstrate "attempts to fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one's own" (Massey, 4). The act of defining Irishness and nationalist identity through male-centered myths and histories inherently disqualifies women from constructing their own identities within this nationalist framework. Rather, their identities were constructed for them. Irish literary scholars Toni O'Brien and David Cairns (1991) echo Massey in their analysis of Irish patriarchal identity formation, writing about the "masculinist drive to invest the female figure with the meaning it favours and fix it" (4). The dominant symbol affixed to women during this period was Ireland itself – Ireland as a woman who needs saving, a woman who might rally Irish men to her cause. Rather than foregrounding women's agency, Catherine Innes (1993) reflects that the dominant interpretation of woman as a nation in need of male salvation "created males as national subject, women as the site of contestation" (3). Women, however, constantly resisted this role of passive icon as they excavated their own heroines from Irish myth and history.

A feminist historiography offers women-centric counter-narratives of Irish history. In her essay "Feminist Historiography and Uses of the Past," Blossom Stefaniw (2020) engages the Critical Race Theory concept of "counter-storytelling" to reconsider how a feminist historiography might serve as an intervention.<sup>3</sup> She writes that "patriarchy continues to shape both the institutional and embodied orders within which feminist historiography...takes place" and emphasizes that "to write feminist historiography as counter-narrative or counter-storytelling...is part of a high-stakes conflict around the use of the past" (260). Gregory's history plays indicate her acute awareness of these "high stakes," of how patriarchal canon and history formation reshapes or silences women, for each of her protagonists challenges the patriarchal symbols assigned to her. Noelle Bowles (2011) argues that her plays directly confront "the patriarchal nature of nationalism which operated to exclude women from active involvement in the formation of the Irish nation and denied them the ability to name themselves as patriots" (116). Gregory was executing her own reconstructive historical project in her plays,

selecting as her subjects three women, often blamed for the misdeeds of men, to emphasize how we construct stories by producing a different version, told from the perspective of the women themselves. Through the subjective experiences of Grania, Gormleith, and Dervorgilla, Gregory was engaged in "the act of telling, archiving, collecting, and persistently repeating counter-stories...the central act of feminist historiography" (Stefaniw, 282). In writing these subjective narratives for the theatre, Gregory was contributing to the movement among Irish women theatre-makers to embody mythic and historic women onstage to imagine what an independent Irish nation *might be*, to be a form of women's national identity formation.

Women playwrights and performers wrote and embodied stories of legendary women to carve out their own space within the movement for an independent Ireland, pushing back against limitations on women in both nationalist rhetoric and everyday life. Mary Trotter (2001) argues that the conservatism of Irish society at the turn of the century relegated women's value to maintaining the household through their roles within the home, as mother, as wife, as daughter (75). Political women across classes had limited avenues for public activism at the turn of the century, as they were often barred from participating directly in political organizations and so intentionally participated in politico-cultural movements as a means of engagement with Irish nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Dramatic performances in *tableaux vivants* and plays sponsored by organizations such as the Gaelic League or the *Inghinidhe na h'Éireann* (Daughters of Ireland) served as modes for women's public engagement in Irish identity-building. Alice Milligan, director of *tableaux* for both organizations and a playwright featured by the Irish Literary Theatre, promoted the use of mythic or historic Irish women in these productions. Through her use of figures such as Maeve, Gráinne Mbhaol (Grace O'Malley), and Dark Rosaleen, she started a tradition of public political performance where women's performance was necessary, therefore securing a place for both women and girls in public nationalist spaces. *Tableaux* were also a powerful political tool in that they were accessible. They were engaging, they could be produced inexpensively, and they did not demand skilled actors or dramatists to perform them. The periodic use of musical and narrative accompaniment added an additional layer of educational motivations behind these events, to integrate people at different levels of engagement in Irish language and culture. Milligan biographer Catherine Morris (2013) writes that she was "acutely aware of the need to create forms of cultural production (such as *tableaux*) that were inclusive of people's complex identities" (Morris, 47).

The *Inghinidhe na h'Éireann* was a radical nationalist women's organization dedicated to political, social, and cultural activism in support of Irish nationalism and feminism. Founded by Maud Gonne in 1900, its membership represented a cross-class alliance of women who sought involvement in the Irish nationalist movement. Ella Young, Irish nationalist and poet, recalls the daily lives of many members in an excerpt published in Margaret Ward's *In Their Own Voice: Women and Irish Nationalism* (1995):



The Society is composed of girls who work hard all day in shops and offices owned for the most part by pro-British masters who may at any moment discharge them for 'reasonable activities.' To be dismissed in such wise means the semi-starvation of long-continued unemployment. These girls dare it, and subscribe, from not too abundant wages, generous amounts for the hire of halls to be used as class-rooms and for theatre rehearsals. (19)

As outlined in Young's reflection, a significant component of the *Inghinidhe's* early work was the development of an Irish dramatic movement: they sponsored drama classes in support of training Irish actors, produced Irish plays, and were well known for the performance of *tableaux vivants*, or living pictures, featuring mythic and nationalist figures that served as a significant source of their fundraising. Early participants in their classes and performances include Maire T. Quinn and Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, who would be founders of the National Theatre Society, and Sara and Molly Allgood who would star in Abbey productions in Dublin and abroad during the first two decades of the company. Nic Shiubhlaigh would debut the role of Gormleith in *Kincora*, which Sara Allgood would take over, in addition to performing Dervorgilla.<sup>5</sup> Mary Trotter (2001) argues that "putting *Inghinidhe na h'Eireann's* dramatic work in the context of its other activities in the public sphere points to how the women's involvement was instrumental to the success of the Irish dramatic movement" (75). To these women, national theatre meant women's participation in an embodied, nationalist, performance tradition. In staging symbols of Irish women, the *Inghinidhe* were asserting their interpretations, as women, of these images, and securing their role as co-creators of their legacies. Far from naïve participants in creating what would become oppressive symbols of patriarchal control, these women were well aware that theatre was becoming a "publicly sanctioned institution in which women might present themselves before audiences if – crucially – those events espoused mainstream nationalist ideals" (Reynolds, 77) and used it to their advantage in order to participate in nationalist discourse. Reynolds argues that Irish women were aware of the power of their bodies and voices in public performance:

Irish women took note of the power of their public performances to generate among audiences the sentiment that might consolidate citizens, as well as to sway the emotions of national audiences and to inflect nationalist discourse in popular ways...how the theatre and dramatic performance might help them to attain a political goal beyond the limited ones allowed them by mainstream nationalism. (80)

Through their performance of legendary Irish women, the *Inghinidhe* were able to publicly ally themselves with the nationalist movement. Performance was a rare form of public politics that they could enact. Yet, even though these women accessed public spaces, the historical memories of their vibrant presence is often made invisible in patriarchal histories. Recent reclamations by feminist historians of the *Inghinidhe's* involvement in the 1902 debut of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, co-authored by William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory, have resisted the instinct to

occlude the embodied labor that resists the written record.<sup>6</sup> Trotter in particular credits the invaluable contributions of the group to the success of the premiere, noting that their involvement as actors, producers and financiers, costumers, and ticket sellers “was highly visible to the audience and to the Dublin community” for whom the *Inghinidhe* had become an active public group during the previous two years (2001, 97). The work of these women, too, continues to emerge to feminist theatre historians today as we seek to develop feminist historiographies of Irish dramatic traditions.

The heroines of Gregory’s folk-history plays reject the meanings with which men choose to define them, just as women playwrights and performers worked to open public space for Irish womanhood. Just as “neither Gormleith, Dervorgilla, nor Grania accept[ed] their consignment to the role of national symbol over which men will fight while they remain passive, allegorical objects, unable or unwilling to act on their own behalf” (Bowles, 130), the embodied experiences of the women architects of the dramatic movement challenge the history that would see them as passive objects upon which male playwrights words might be cast. In his article, “Mother Ireland and the Revolutionary Sisters,” Gerry Kearns (2004) cautions against interpreting symbolic female characters as exclusively icons of a patriarchal Ireland. Focusing on the period from 1890-1924, he reminds the reader that “women often read representations of women as icons of nationhood very much against the grain of the passive interpretations favored by later historians” (443). To dismiss certain female roles completely because they are mythic, and therefore limiting for real women, ignores the interpretive agency of individuals, women included, who might have witnessed these performances and read these characters differently. I do not claim that a woman cannot construct or participate in the consolidation of an image as a patriarchal tool. What I do challenge is the reductive assumption that these symbols might only be interpreted as negative, limiting, or passive icons of womanhood. The ways in which women historically interpreted and employed these roles as liberatory, inspiring, or rallying demands a reinterpretation of the power and meaning behind the myths. This tension between the symbolic “woman Ireland” and the subjective experiences of real Irish women haunts the dramaturgy of 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish plays, including Gregory’s history plays. In addition to the allegory of woman-Ireland, artists were intentionally cultivating images of legendary Irish women for the national stage. The use of figures such as Queen Maeve, Niamh, Deirdre, or Brigit, in addition to the three queens of Gregory’s history plays, is indicative of the revival of Celtic mythology.

Political practice assigns meanings to symbols, and the political praxes of women playwrights and performers offers an alternative tradition for these stories. These legendary figures held significance for women beyond performance. Women in the *Inghinidhe na h’Éireann* employed code names of mythic women such as Maeve, Macha, and Emer, while Kearns notes that the *Inghinidhe*, along with women representatives later on in Sinn Féin, were placed under the protection of St. Brigit, Constance Markievicz claiming that “such a



good suffragist should get recognition” (457). If, as Kearns suggests, “alongside the symbols and abstractions of national iconography, we need to consider the political ideals and practices that animate or ridicule those images,” (463) we might also consider the cultural outputs as an alternative animation of stories of mythic or historic women. These women were participating in revolutionary cultural and political experiments at the turn of the century. These were evolving, just as women’s own individual politics and artistic styles were developing. The dominant historical interpretation of these women’s plays and performances as contributing to patriarchal representations *succeeds in the patriarchal desire to silence alternative interpretations of women’s work*. Kearns writes:

The women were not defeated by symbolism. They were beaten down by an alliance of priests and former guerillas who passed laws to restrict their right to work, to control their bodies and to exercise citizenship... themselves, although biased, could bear more than one reading. It was political practice grounded in daily experience that ensured that one of those readings became a silent one. (463)

A closer examination of the records these women artists left behind troubles existing criticism of symbolic women as passive icons. Kearns argues that Irish women “negotiated the symbolic capital of Irish representations of the nation as women,” using this to their advantage (446). These artists were creating a public space, a stage, for women to participate in and become a part of public nationalist imagination. These characters were explicitly used to unite Irish audiences around shared images and stories of iconic women from their shared Irish past. Women playwrights who wrote women for the stage, and the performers who embodied those characters, were participating in a cultural dialogue about what it was to be Irish, and, by foregrounding women, what it might mean to be an Irish woman.

It was this politized space of the theatre, which women had come to use as a place of embodied nationalist storytelling, that Lady Gregory used to reframe Irish history onstage. Aligning my perspective with Trotter’s argument that the Abbey stage was “the literal and figurative site of context for Ireland’s nationalist and theatrical ideals” (103), I perceive these three folk-history plays as Gregory’s women-centered counter-history. In constructing a dramaturgy of Irish history, she embraced “the ‘theatrical element’...[that] rendered feminist political discourse more palatable than it might otherwise have been” (Reynolds, 79), a subversive strategy to fold women’s subjective experiences into the greater nationalist narratives produced on the national stage. Massey emphasizes that “the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages they transmit...are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood” (179). Having considered the constructive agency within feminist space created by women playwrights and performers on the early Abbey stage, I will now examine the various ways heroines in Gregory’s plays break out of the confines of the printed text and occupy new spaces within the greater cultural imagination.

### ***Grania, Kincora, and Dervorgilla: A Transgenerational Cycle***

It is noteworthy that in the first publication of her *Irish Folk History Plays, The Tragedies: Grania, Kincora, Dervorgilla* in 1912 Lady Gregory organized the plays following the chronology of Irish history rather than by the order in which she wrote them. Though Grania is a mythological figure rather than a historic one, her story falls within the timeframe of the Fenian or Ossianic cycle set in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. Gormleith and the story of Kincora in 11<sup>th</sup> century Ireland follows, and the cycle ends in the final year of Dervorgilla's life in 1193. This historiography is doubly transgenerational, marking not only three distinct periods across Irish history, but also representing women from three distinct periods of life. In refiguring the chronology of Irish history through the subjective experiences of a young woman, a warrior-mother, and a disgraced elderly queen, Gregory echoes various representations of triple-goddesses present in Irish mythology.<sup>7</sup> Rather than representing three faces of the same entity, however, Gregory's heroines each communicate to the audience their own subjective experiences in trying to define themselves as Irish women within the contexts of a patriarchal system. Leeney reflects that "Augusta Gregory...challenge[s] and resist[s] the double woman idea, refusing its trapping of woman between the impossible symbol and the always inadequate reality, and putting in its place triple representations, or using other strategies to destabilize binary polarities and interrogate the position of the 'other'" (14). By representing women of different ages, she signals that women are both shaped by and shape their histories across the course of their lives. Gregory is "persistently repeating counter-stories" (Stefaniw, 282) of Irish women claiming their own agency while modelling the capacity to do this at any age. My analysis, therefore, of "these three plays concerning strong people of the world," will follow the order set out in publication – *Grania, Kincora, and Dervorgilla* (Gregory 1912).

By using myths and histories familiar to the public, Gregory was emphasizing the creative capacities of storytelling and history shaping. Leeney argues that "images of women and myth in folklore unlock ways for the woman playwright to critique and re-invent patriarchal representations" (14), therein demonstrating that patriarchal representations are simply one lens through which to tell or read a story. I read three distinct yet interrelated dramaturgical layers of feminist historiography across all three Gregory plays. First, Gregory engages in an act of recovery of these "icons" of Irish myth and history as subjective agents of their own destinies. In selecting three "difficult" women as her subjects, she both challenges "the ways in which women are cast as figures of betrayal in nationalist ideology" while simultaneously "rethink[ing] those versions of history that absolve men from the consequences of women's subjection" as scapegoats (Bowles, 123; 125). She writes characters who perform the act of assigning blame to her protagonists to emphasize the act of blaming itself as mode of storytelling. This leads into the second dramaturgical layer – metatheatrical awareness of the power of storytelling and mythologizing across all three plays; an intervention to

interrogate the instability of narrative embedded within the story itself. Finally, when reading the plays as a cycle ending with *Dervorgilla*, I argue that Gregory directly acknowledges the limitations of her own subversive dramaturgies within the overwhelmingly patriarchal discourses of nationalist culture. This play in particular dramatizes “the power of myth and culture to condemn and the difficulty of finding a counter-discourse” (Leeney, 56), an almost prophetic message that anticipates her own marginalization in the history of the Irish dramatic movement.

### **Grania**

Lady Gregory’s *Grania* charts the story of an Irish princess whose decision to “take her own road” (1912, 181) pits her against a patriarchal society and the agents who seek to uphold it. Gregory reflects on her decision to retell Grania’s story in the notes accompanying the published script:

I think I have turned to Grania because...[she] had more power of will, and for good or evil twice took the shaping of her life into her own hands. The riddle she asks us through the ages is, ‘Why did I, having left the grey-haired Finn for comely Diarmuid, turn back to Finn in the end, when he had consented to Diarmuid’s death?’ And a question tempts one more than the beaten path of authorized history. (195)

Gregory intentionally strays from the beaten path of the myth by shedding the magical influences to directly engage how and why a woman would make the choices that Grania did. In emphasizing Grania’s will independent of magical influences, the play instead explores the competing psychological and political motivations of its characters. The tension Gregory presents to her audience is that “between Grania’s will and patriarchal expectations” (Bowles, 126). Her remarks offer an ambiguity towards the dangers a willful woman presents to patriarchal authority, leaving audience to decide whether “the good or evil” prevails in the power of a woman’s will to shape her own story. *Grania* is the only play in this trilogy that was not produced at the Abbey during this period. Written in 1910, Gregory had intended to produce the play, even offering Sara Allgood the leading role. Richard Allen Cave argues that it was Yeats who halted the production, preventing an embodied realization of the text.<sup>8</sup> This legacy of patriarchal censorship of women’s public expression further haunts the play, an additional layer of attempted suppression of an alternative feminist historiography.<sup>9</sup>

Gregory reclaims Grania from her role as a traitor of myth and reshapes her into a young woman attempting to define herself in a world ruled by men. In her notes to the play, Gregory wondered about inherited assumptions regarding Grania’s character: “I do not know if it is because of Grania’s breach of faith, that I never hear her spoken of with sympathy” (199). It is significant, then, that in her play it is not the woman but the men who are inconstant. Speaking through Grania, she writes that it is not women, but rather “it is men that change and turn

as often as the wheel of the moon" (213). From the beginning, Grania refuses to be the victim of the story; she "takes the narrative into her own hands, and re-frames her role in it" (Leeney, 55), keeping true to her desire to shape her own destiny. The play opens on the eve of Grania's wedding to the older Finn. When Grania first recognizes Diarmuid as the stranger she loved as a girl, she refuses to wed not in a breach of faith but rather as a means of preventing one: "What way could I live beside him and my heart, as I am thinking, gone away from him...it would be a terrible thing, a wedded woman not to be loyal – to call out another man's name in her sleep" (188). Diarmuid intervenes, offering Grania protection while promising an enraged Finn that he would not touch her or violate her by sleeping with her or taking her to wife. It is Diarmuid who commits a double treachery, first breaking his oath to Finn and second, by abandoning his new wife in his quest for glory over the King of Foreign. Upon reuniting with Finn on his deathbed, he forgets Grania completely as he says: "It would be a very foolish thing, any woman at all to have leave to come between yourself and myself. I cannot but laugh at that...What was it I brought away from you?" (210). Finn, too, then changes his mind, his desire now stifled and Grania marked merely as "the dead man's wife" (211). Pushed and pulled between the whims of these two men for seven years, Grania rejects being cast aside, refuses to let Finn erase her from his mind as Diarmuid did. She declares:

You are craving to get rid of me now, and to put me away out of your thoughts... But I will not go! I will hold you to your word, I will take my revenge on him! He will think to keep your mind filled with himself and to keep me from you, - he will be coming back showing himself as a ghost about Almhuin...But he will find me there before him! (212)

This time she shapes not only her own narrative, but that of Finn and even Diarmuid in the afterlife.

Gregory further emphasizes the narratives of violence and blame that both Diarmuid and Finn initiate throughout the course of the play as the context within which Grania shapes her own story. This calls attention to the dominant patriarchal narratives that a feminist historiography must work against. Rather than accepting complicity in their own choices, both Diarmuid and Finn blame Grania. While recounting her attempted abduction by the King of Foreign in Act II, Grania admits to Diarmuid that she thrilled at seeing him in a "rage of anger" in coming to her defense. In response, Diarmuid threatens her: "If I had known that, it is likely I would have killed you in his place," (194) implicating Grania in her own abduction and suggesting she used it to snare him into a moment of lust (thereby pinning his own breach of faith onto her). Finn, too, distances himself from any culpability in his actions against the couple by guilt-tripping Grania. When she confronts him for "all the unkindness [he] had done," he refutes any responsibility by replying "It is your fault if I did them" (204). Finn even goes so far as to blame Grania for Diarmuid's death even though he, disguised as the Messenger, prompted Diarmuid to prove himself in battle. Finn asserts that "it

was the love of a woman that brought him down in the end, and sent him astray in the world” (211), absolving Diarmuid while reassigning blame to Grania. This systematic blaming of women provides a transition to Gregory’s second dramaturgical layer – the influence of story.

The stories told about the characters influence their reputations, and those reputations in turn alter the way they shape their stories. This is a key part of Gregory’s feminist historiography because it outlines the ways in which stories can make or break our perceptions of others and how we remember them in history. Grania demonstrates an awareness for this process: “it is certain it is by the respect of others we partly judge even those we know through and through” (197). Finn himself remarks that “it is a story makes great sport among gentle and simple in every place” (202), a statement that suggests stories, whether true or false, have power. This is heightened by his own urgency in recovering Grania, to shed the shame of stories being told about him in losing her. He tells of the significance of his shame in response to stories told about him: “as it a little thing that all Ireland could laugh at the story that I, Finn, was so spent, and withered, and loathsome in a woman’s eyes...but I must live under that wrong and that insult in full sight of all, and among mockery and malicious whisperings in the mouth of those maybe that are shouting me!” (206). Yet, rather than learning from his experience as a victim of story, he uses stories in turn against Grania. He weaponizes the blame he enacts upon Grania, using it to manipulate the story to make her a villain: “it is no wonder the people to hate you, and but for dread of me they would many a time have killed you” (206). In calling attention to the power of stories to make us hate, to love, and to feel shame, Gregory asks us to confront the nature of our own presumptions and to interrogate the stories, and histories, we have been told and who shaped them.

Grania frames Finn’s own insistence of his love for her as a story. She dismisses him, saying “why would I listen to a story I have heard often and too often” (205). She demonstrates a self-awareness of the powers of storytelling beyond the other characters in the play. Her decision to return to society marks her insistence on continuing to shape her own narrative, her continued survival itself acting as a counter narrative to the blame that Finn’s supporters would lay at her feet. In this way, she is “engaging with the structures of society to disturb the male system of relationships” and, in doing so, “destabilizing existing strictures of power” (Hill 2019, 108; 123). Grania enacts her own feminist historiography amidst a society that would erase her or condemn her as a villain. As she walks offstage, her words can be read as a direct confrontation with an audience who, as Gregory’s note implies, had little sympathy for her: “Is it nor a poor thing, strong men of the sort to be mocking at a woman has done through sharp anguish? Open the door again for me. I am in no way daunted or afraid” (214). Gregory releases Grania even from her own retelling, into the imagined spaces of feminist historiography created through and by this counter-history.

*Kincora*

In contrast to the mythological tale that inspired *Grania*, *Kincora* centers on the historical struggle to unite the clans of Ireland against the Vikings in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. Named after High King Brian Boru's seat of power in Co. Clare, the play was first produced in 1905 and later revised in 1909. The driving force of the play is its queen, Gormleith. The historic figure was an Irish princess and queen, sister to King Maelmora of Leinster and at least twice married to kings of Ireland: first, to Olaf Cuaran, the Viking king of Dublin, with whom she had a son, Sigtrygg Silkbeard; second, to Brian Boru, King of Munster and later High King of Ireland. In both editions of Gregory's plays, Gormleith married to High King of Tara Malachi the Great before her union with Brian. In her accompanying notes to the play, Gregory reports that "in bringing together the Danes for Clontarf nobody had been more active than Gormleith" (1912, 203), placing the queen in the center of political and physical battles for power in Ireland. Gregory complicates Gormleith's label as a "mother of mischief" (1905, 11), reclaiming this difficult woman as a powerful political agent in Irish history while interrogating the processes of gendered blame that mark her as a villain.

Echoing *Grania*, Gregory's Gormleith declares her independence from the patriarchal narratives that would frame her: "I will not listen. I have taken my own way" (46). In reimagining this historic figure for the Abbey stage, Gregory offers an alternative history where the queens were the kingmakers that shaped Irish history. Across all three plays, Gormleith is the character who is most aware of her capacity to shape history, and she is also the least sympathetic. In both editions she appears manipulative and power-hungry, intentionally forging, and breaking, alliances to secure power. She supports kings in one moment and betrays them the next, changing her allegiances but never her quest: power through war in Ireland. Yet, her likeability factors little into her value as a feminist intervention. In fact, she might be stronger for it, for a patriarchal narrative would have us be uncomfortable with a woman who cares little for what we would think of her. Rather than reclaiming her fully from this villainous status, Gregory frames her character within the parameters of the patriarchal society she was raised in. Brian remarks, "You were brought up in a king's house, you knew the rules of every quarrel and of every game. And you were married into kings' houses, and you should know, whatever hand the cards come into, the game must be played out fair" (66). Gormleith uses the tools taught to her by patriarchal society to shape her own narrative within it. Gregory's reclamation of Gormleith, then, is "doubly revisionist: it is a work by a woman who rewrites Irish history, creating a woman who creates a hero" (Bowles, 120).

Gormleith is a mythmaker, a crafter of kings, and great kings are forged in the fires of war. She intentionally disrupts peace talks in the beginning of the play by manipulating the servants of the kings into a quarrel over which kingdom is best. Through simple challenges such as "be sure the best dish is set before the greatest of the kings," she incites a battle amongst the servants, "listening with



enjoyment” and she even “laughs and clasps her hands” when they draw knives (16-19). The infighting spreads to the kings themselves, igniting resentments that lead to the Battle of Glenmama. While Gormleith intentionally prompts fighting with her words, she doesn’t fully manufacture the instability. In performing how easy it was to incite war, both Gormleith and Gregory question – was peace really ever an option in the first place? Gormleith neither hides nor denies her desire to shape the world around her. She recounts her motivations to Brian while ridiculing him for what she perceives as weakness in peace and age:

I came here to see you make your name the greatest in the world – the greatest that ever was the world...We of the high race need never give in to age! Our fathers mated with the gods, and took immortal wives! Do not give in to it, Brian: age is ugly and miserable, withering the hand that has given up the sword!...I will be obedient to you – my pride will be in you – do not keep me in the narrow roads! (53)

Peace would not afford Gormleith the environment through which to shape kings, and the beginning of Act III shows him confining her into the “narrow roads” of domesticity in the palace. She confesses that her loyalty remains with those who grant her the freedom, through conflict, to have a voice.

The image of a woman craving war is a deeply uncomfortable one, not because violence is detestable but because it is not a woman’s place to embrace it. Gormleith sits in sharp contrast to gendered ideals of women as peacekeepers and homemakers. The politics of blame in *Kincora* is, therefore, deeply gendered, marking Gormleith as doubly villainous not simply for her actions but because she dared to commit them as a woman. This is made explicit through the character of Malachi, King of Tara. Former husband to Gormleith, he cautions Brian against Gormleith throughout the play and marks her as the source of war. He cries: “Whatever punishment and whatever judgement may fall ... a heavier judgement must surely fall on this woman, who left a woman’s work, and was the very seed and root of the war” (31). He blames Gormleith for the war not simply for her meddling, but for the audacity to leave behind “woman’s work,” her proper place, to do so. In assigning blame to her, he confirms her power to manipulate those around her, but he does so to absolve the men of their own choices and subsequent actions in war. Rather than recognizing her as an equal, he marks her as out as a scapegoat to blame for continued warring in Ireland. Gregory recounts how blame is still assigned to Gormleith in the revised edition of the play. She recalls: “When *Kincora* was first produced in Dublin, an old farmer came all the way from Killaloe near Kincora to see it, and he went away sad because as he said ‘Brian ought not to have married that woman, but to have been content with a nice quiet girl from his own district’ (204). For daring to participate in the politics of kings, for daring to lead rather than follow as a “nice quiet girl” should, Gormleith is cast as “that woman” in the historical narrative. Rather than confirming this feminine ideal, however, Gregory’s Gormleith “represent[s] a dangerously unpredictable and ambivalent

embodiment of a vilified female energy as it challenged the centralizing hegemonies of church and state" (Leeney, 40).

Gormleith acknowledges that history rewards those who confirm the dominant narratives. She decries that "there is no praise now but for foolish messengers" (54), confronting the willingness to conform to, rather than challenge, the histories we are told. In both endings, Gormleith refuses to remain within the dramatic confines of the play. By writing her escape from the battlefield of Clontarf in the 1905 version, or her flight from the domestic prison of the palace in the 1909 edition, Gregory liberates the queen from any dramatized form of punishment for her actions. In doing so, her counter-narrative opens rather than closes Gormleith's story and enables her audience to imagine for themselves how the queen might continue to shape the world around her.

### *Dervorgilla*

In *Dervorgilla*, Gregory writes of the clash of a woman's mission to consolidate her own legacy within the formation of patriarchal history. The conclusion to her folk-history trilogy, the primary focus of the play is the power of historical narrative itself. Rather than focusing on a reclamation of the title character, Gregory emphasizes the overwhelming force of the "construction of historical and colonial narrative in which [Dervorgilla] is the perpetrator of her country's ruin" (Ulin 2011, 180). The play challenges the dominant narrative that the titular character, who "was taken away, willingly or unwillingly...[and] put a great curse on Ireland, bringing in the English through MacMurrough, that she went to from O'Rourke," incited the Norman invasion and the beginning of English colonial rule in Ireland (205-206). The play is set outside the Abbey of Mellifont in 1193, the final year of the queen's life. Dervorgilla's primary motivation is shaping her legacy, a mission that is threatened by the arrival of a Songmaker, a representation of patriarchal culture, who would tell of "the thing [that] brings mostly all mischief into the world, the changeable wagging nature of a woman" (162). Gregory argues that the significance lies not in whether Dervorgilla went "willingly or unwillingly," but in the ways in which women are shaped into the villains of history in a masculinist narrative.

In contrast to Grania and Gormleith, who both shape their own stories, Dervorgilla mistakenly believes that "it is not the telling of the story makes the story" (161). Rather than shaping her story herself, Dervorgilla is overwhelmingly concerned with the perceptions of "the people" and whether "a sin once committed can ever be forgiven" (157-158). Gregory's presents the queen as a remorseful, elderly woman, intent on earning back the affections of the people through living as an anonymous philanthropist in a convent. Dervorgilla reflects upon the story of her life:

Four years I have lived and fourscore, and for half my life I ran my own way, and through the other half of my life I have paid the penalty. For

every day or night of pride or of pleasure, I have spent a day and a night of prayer and of pain. Will that not bring forgiveness? Is not that paying the penalty? (156)

Dervorgilla's regret over choosing "[her] own way" is complicated when placed in the context of the trilogy with Grania and Gormleith who both shape and reshape their lives in spite of other people's perceptions of them. In Gregory's version of this story, Dervorgilla reveals that she indeed loved MacMurragh: "It is to him I was promised before ever I saw O'Rourke...Why did they promise me to him and break the promise?" (166). Still, she never confesses going to him willingly, an absence which Gregory uses to hint at the subtextual violence of Dervorgilla's life as a pawn between kings, her love and potential agency eclipsed by her use as a bargaining chip among kings. Gregory challenges the audience to read against Dervorgilla's shame, to recognize it as the result of narratives of blame weaponized against her. Bowles writes that "Gregory urges the audience not to let her bear the full weight of Ireland's invasion; doing so would make Dervorgilla simply another woman whose only feelings are those assigned by patriarchal history and by the nationalism such histories conveniently serve" (125). Gregory's primary focus in the play is to expose the narrative process and, in doing so, provide her audience with the capacity to free Dervorgilla from an unfair narrative of blame. Dervorgilla herself models the act of interrogating the story for the audience. When the Songmaker first sings of Diarmuid MacMurrrough as a traitor, she confronts him saying: "why should you heap blame upon the dead...those that have a good heart and a high nature try to find excuses for the dead" (162). Dervorgilla refuses to let MacMurrrough bear the full weight of blame, just as audience members, too, might now reconsider reasons for Dervorgilla's own actions.

Yet, Dervorgilla seems more willing to challenge the histories of the dead than reshape her own story in life. Unlike the other two heroines who were vigorously unapologetic, Dervorgilla gradually becomes more resigned to her fate throughout the play. In seeking out the forgiveness of others, she accepts that the Songmaker's stories overwhelm her good deeds. Other women, however, see her actions differently. Gregory explicitly demonstrates this through the creation of a counter-narrative within the play. Mona, one of Dervorgilla's trusted servants, offers an alternative version of history that recounts the queen's abduction.

It was not you went to Diarmuid MacMurragh...It was he came and brought you away. There are many say it was by force. There are many that are saying that. That is the way it will be written in the histories... I used to be better pleased myself hearing them say it, than putting the blame on yourself of leaving O'Rourke. (165-166)

Mona claims her own agency to shape history, offering a feminist revision that reassigns responsibility to the men. Mona's admission of preference for this history not only demonstrates that there is an accepted alternative to the patriarchal narratives within the world of the play, but models how other women can help

shape Dervorgilla's legacy. Mona refuses to accept the "swift, unflinching, terrible judgement of the young" (168) that Dervorgilla seems intent to accept. Women might intervene to revise, reshape, and retell other women's stories.

Dervorgilla, unlike the other heroines, does not escape the confines of the play. Instead, she remains onstage, alone and abandoned by those whose forgiveness she had hoped to earn through her good works, haunted by the menacing "voice of the Songmaker...heard coming nearer, singing" (168). She has realized, too late, that "a vagabond's song that was born in a minute" will not "vanish away like a wisp of smoke," but can indeed survive through the ages and shape how she is remembered (164). Gregory speaks to the audience through Dervorgilla's realization of this process: "It was of no use, my name was in men's mouths" (165) is not an admission of the futility of counter-narratives, but rather an acknowledgement of the desperate necessity of them. In hiding away and seeking forgiveness through others rather than constructing her own narrative, Dervorgilla overestimates the power the mouths of men have to confirm her legacy as a faithless, treacherous woman. Mona, however, does not. Though Dervorgilla appears alone onstage, Gregory has proposed an alternative through Mona – that one day, perhaps, other women might reshape the queen's legacy on her behalf. Gregory's feminist historiography offers counter narratives told from the mouths of women, as a means of expanding and reshaping Irish history.

## Conclusion

In *Grania*, *Kincora*, and *Dervorgilla*, Lady Gregory intervenes with a dramaturgy of feminist historiography that opens up a woman-centered space within Irish history. Through her recovery of these women in history and her confrontation with the power of storytelling, she "resists a dramaturgy of synthesis...leaving dramatic structures open, reflexive and unresolved to the last" (Leeney, 21). In examining these plays as a trilogy, I read them as a cycle that confronts the conflict of women's will against the power of patriarchy. When taken together, Lady Gregory reflects on her vision to offer a week of historical productions for students: "I hoped then and I still hope that we may give a week or more in every year to a sequence of history plays, that schoolboys and schoolgirls may have their imagination stirred about the people who made history, instead of knowing them but as names" (Gregory, 200). This dream has yet to be realized over a century later. Though 2024 saw the Abbey premiere of *Grania*, *Kincora* has not been performed at the national theatre since 1914, and *Dervorgilla* was last performed as a staged reading in 1991. Taken together, all of the stories are not uplifting but realistic considerations of what women face in nationalist culture. Gregory foreshadows not only her own attempted erasure from the histories of the dramatic movement, but also the future interventions of theatre scholars and historians in reclaiming her legacy as a central artistic influence in the Revival period. Just as Gregory reclaims the stories of these queens from patriarchal history, so, too, must historians and practitioners continue to revise and reshape

Irish dramatic history to recognize and celebrate the contributions of its women as more than just names. Just as Gormleith emerged from history by Gregory's hand so, too, might Gregory emerge to have her story find its rightful place in Irish national dramatic history. More women's stories are out there – it is time again for us to listen.

### Notes

1. Research for this article is partially derived from my ongoing doctoral research at Trinity College Dublin under the supervision of Dr. Melissa Sihra.
2. For an examination of how Gregory situated her prose folklore contributions into the political climate of the Revival, I recommend Michael McAteer, "Kindness in Your Unkindness': Lady Gregory and History," *Irish University Review*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2004, pp. 94–108.
3. I acknowledge the debt of theoretical intervention by key CRT scholars in theorizing the concept of "counter-storytelling" employed by Stefaniw in her paper. As a fellow white feminist, I echo Stefaniw's own acknowledgement that this connection between counter-storytelling and feminism is not new, but one which white feminists "have historically failed to make" (263). I therefore repeat Stefaniw's citation of black feminists Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, Audre Lourde, and bell hooks as core sources for feminist and CRT scholarship.
4. The dissolution of the Ladies Land League in 1882 was a blow against women's public political agitation. In the 1890s, women could have joined auxiliary branches of overt political organizations such as Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Parliamentary Party, but they would not have been considered equal to men. Further, Mary Trotter notes that women's work would have been devalued because of her gender. Politico-cultural organizations afforded women greater opportunities for leadership roles during this period. For further reading, see Trotter, 2001, 73-99. For further reading on the Ladies Land League, see Ward, 1983, 31-39.
5. Though beyond the scope of this paper, I want to highlight the embodied performances of these Irish actors as an additional spatial layer that should be analyzed to add further depth and nuance to women's dramatic interventions during this period. In particular, the work of Catholic and working-class actors, for whom acting was also a means of employment in addition to artistic expression, is often occluded from the literary focused histories of the Abbey. Elizabeth Brewer Redwine excavates the legacies of their performances as co-authors of text in her book, *Gender, Performance, and Authorship at the Abbey Theatre* (Oxford University Press, 2021).
6. For detailed accounts and critical analyses of the dramatic work of the *Inghinidhe*, I recommend Trotter (2001), as well as Hill's *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), Paige Reynolds' *Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Catherine Morris' *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival* (Four Courts Press, 2013).
7. For details on representations of Irish goddesses, read Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland* (Harper & Row, 1989). For an analysis of how Gregory adapts these representations in both editions of *Kincora*, see Chapter 1 of Cathy Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights, 1900-1939: Gender and Violence on Stage* (Peter Lang, 2010). For a comparative analysis of how both Gregory's heroines and those of her contemporary Eva Gore-Booth can be read as "icons of a new vision of womanhood" (103), I recommend

Marisa Glaser, "Dethroning the Goddess, Crowning the Woman: Eva Gore-Booth and Augusta Gregory's Mythic Heroines," *New Voices in Irish Criticism* 4, edited by Fionnuala Dillane and Ronan Kelly, (Four Courts Press, 2003,) 96-104.

8. Richard Allen Cave presents his recovery of this story in great detail in his essay "The Dangers and Difficulties of Dramatising the Lives of Deirdre and Grania," in *Perspectives of Irish Drama and Theatre*, ed. By Jacqueline Genet and Richard Allen Cave (Rowman and Littlefield, 1990), 1-16.
9. September 2024 marked the Abbey's reclamation of *Grania* for the national stage, a programming choice that lends relevance not only to the folk-history plays but to a desire to reclaim Gregory as a founding playwright. Directed by Caitriona McLaughlin, *Grania* ran on the Abbey Mainstage from 21 September-26 October 2024.

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