

**PLAYS FOR AN
IRISH THEATRE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649181186

Plays for an Irish theatre by W. B. Yeats

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W. B. YEATS

**PLAYS FOR AN
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PLAYS FOR AN IRISH THEATRE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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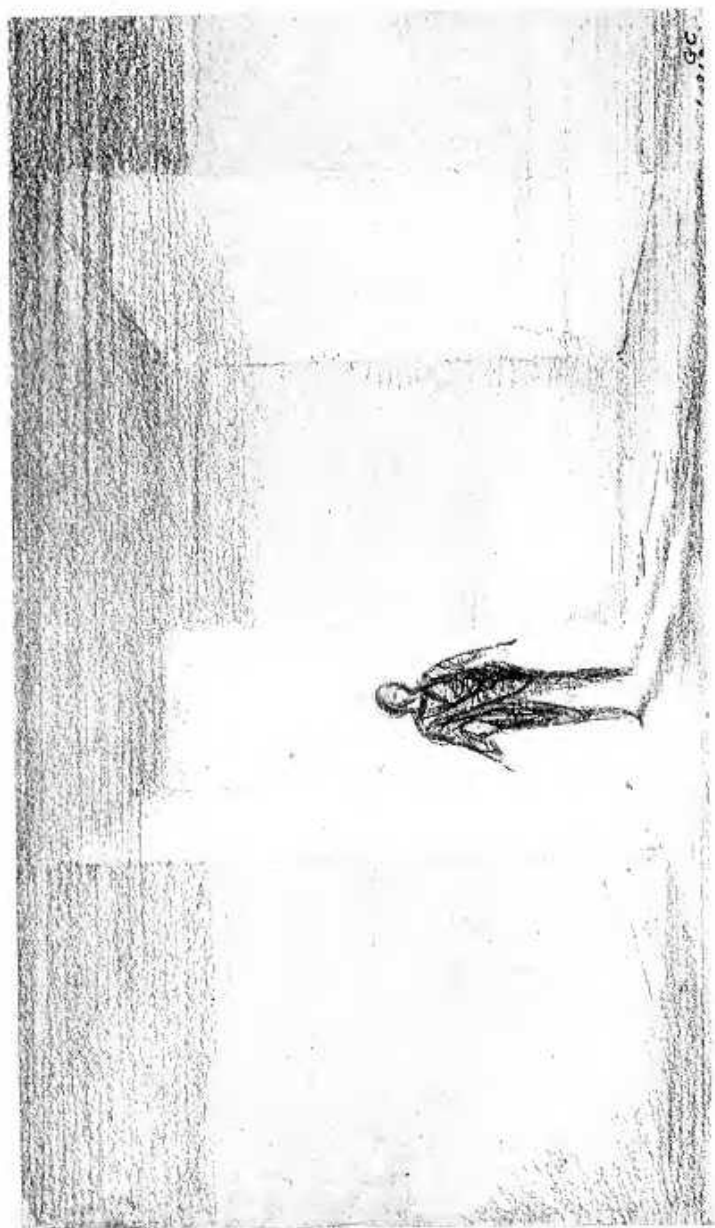
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IN PREPARATION.

RED HANRAHAN; THE SECRET ROSE.



PLAYS FOR AN IRISH THEATRE

BY

W. B. YEATS

WITH DESIGNS BY GORDON CRAIG

DEIRDRE
THE GREEN HELMET
ON BAILE'S STRAND
THE KING'S THRESHOLD
THE SHADOWY WATERS
THE HOUR-GLASS
CATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN

A. H. BULLEN
LONDON & STRATFORD-UPON-AVON
MCMXI

*Printed by A. H. BULLEN, at The Shakespeare Head Press,
Stratford-upon-Avon.*

PREFACE.

IN poetical drama there is, it is held, an antithesis between drama and lyric poetry, for lyric poetry however much it move you when read out of a book can, as these critics think, but encumber the action. Yet when we go back a few centuries and enter the great periods of drama, character grows less and sometimes disappears, and there is much lyric feeling, and at times a lyric measure will be wrought into the dialogue, a flowing measure that had well befitted music, or that more lumbering one of the sonnet. Suddenly it strikes us that character is continuously present in comedy alone, and that there is much tragedy, that of Corneille, that of Racine, that of Greece and Rome, where its place is taken by passions and motives, one person being jealous, another full of love or remorse or pride or anger. In writers of tragi-comedy (and Shakespeare is always a writer of tragi-comedy) there is indeed character, but we notice that it is in the moments of comedy that character is defined, in Hamlet's gaiety let us say; while amid the great moments, when Timon orders his tomb, when Hamlet cries to Horatio 'Absent thee from felicity awhile', when Anthony names 'Of many thousand kisses the poor last' all is lyricism, unmixed passion, 'the integrity of fire'. Nor does character ever attain to complete definition in these lamps ready for the taper, no matter how circumstantial and gradual the opening of events, as

it does in Falstaff who has no passionate purpose to fulfil, or as it does in Henry the Fifth whose poetry, never touched by lyric heat, is oratorical; nor when the tragic reverie is at its height do we say 'How well that man is realised! I should know him were I to meet him in the street', for it is always ourselves that we see upon the stage, and should it be a tragedy of love we renew, it may be, some loyalty of our youth, and go from the theatre with our eyes dim for an old love's sake.

I think it was while rehearsing a translation of *Les Fourberies de Scapin* in Dublin, and noticing how passionless it all was, that I saw what should have been plain from the first line I had written, that tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man, and that it is upon these dykes comedy keeps house. But I was not certain of the site (one always doubts when one knows no testimony but one's own); till somebody told me of a certain letter of Congreve's. He describes the external and superficial expressions of 'humour' on which farce is founded and then defines 'humour' itself, the foundation of comedy, as 'a singular and unavoidable way of doing anything peculiar to one man only, by which his speech and actions are distinguished from all other men' and adds to it that 'passions are too powerful in the sex to let humour have its course', or as I would rather put it, that you can find but little of what we call character in unspoiled youth, whatever be the sex, for, as he indeed shows in another sentence, it grows with time like the ash of a burning stick, and strengthens towards middle life till there is little else at seventy years.

Since then I have discovered an antagonism between all the old art and our new art of comedy and understand