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Ritual Art: Political, Social and Religious Subversion in the Dramatic Works of William Butler Yeats and Aleister Crowley

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The ritual plays of William Butler Yeats and Aleister Crowley question the dominant political, social, and religious values of their time, contravening traditional ideas of ritual as a conservative social force. This study analyses Yeats's Celtic Mysteries rituals and Crowley's Rites of Eleusis according to changing scholarly theories of ritual.

Even though William Butler Yeats expressed a lifelong interest in the occult, he is far better known for his literary accomplishments than his esoteric pursuits; the opposite can be said for his contemporary, the famous (or notorious) occultist and writer Aleister Crowley. Despite the mutual animosity engendered by their personality differences, their spiritual and literary interests were remarkably similar: each man sought to create religious rituals through his art.¹ While early scholars of religion such as Emile Durkheim and Bronislaw Malinowski often characterised ritual and myth as conservative forces, working to preserve and transmit existing social codes and structures, the rituals created by Yeats and Crowley subvert commonly accepted social structures and values rather than conserve them. Their rituals exemplify both more recent scholarship on ritual and the evolving role of ritual in society. Yeats's unfinished Order of Celtic Mysteries rituals² (c.1895) and Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis* (1910)³ function as rituals and works of art that question the dominant political, social, and religious values of their time.

The two men met in 1899 as initiates of the Order of the Golden Dawn, where they derived their basic understanding of ritual (Sutin 68). As a secret society following the Masonic and Rosicrucian traditions, the Order's teachings involved Hermeticism, Cabbala, astrology, Tarot, alchemy, and ritual magic, including methods of calling upon angels and spirits (Regardie). Crowley was active in the Golden Dawn for little more than a year (Sutin 56) before his membership became one of several contentious issues leading to a schism in the order. Yeats continued to work with a branch of the Golden Dawn for much of his life (Graf 21), and Crowley went on to lead another order, the Ordo Templis Orientis (Sutin 225-226). Both men would draw upon the training they received in the Golden Dawn for literary symbols and the foundations of their own rituals.

Yeats borrowed much of the structure for his rituals from those of the Golden Dawn, but his process for creating them also involved a Golden Dawn method of focused concentration on symbols; he called upon fellow-members of the Golden Dawn, including his uncle George Pollexfen and his unrequited-love Maud Gonne, to use "clairvoyance" to help him develop the rituals. He explains, "I did not wish to compose rites as if for the theatre. They must in their main outline be the work of invisible hands" (*Memoirs* 124). Crowley also employed a collaborative process in composing his

rituals, which arose from a night of impromptu poetry reading and musical performance with his lover Leila Waddell: “I read a piece of poetry from one of the great classics, and she replied with a piece of music suggested by my reading. I retorted with another poem.” Crowley describes the exchange as resulting in “a spiritual enthusiasm” (“*Rites: Origin*” 384). Crowley’s *Rites of Eleusis*, a series of seven ritual plays corresponding with the seven classical planets, grew from this artistic exchange. Rather than entirely original compositions, the Rites include borrowings of existing poetry and music and portions of Golden Dawn rituals, combined with works Crowley had previously written.

Yeats’s *Celtic Mysteries* and Crowley’s *Rites of Eleusis* function as religious rituals that question commonly accepted social codes and political values, which contradicts the role commonly ascribed to myth and ritual by early scholars of religion. According to the theories of French sociologist Emile Durkheim, myth and ritual are essentially inseparable aspects of religion (101) that “can only serve to sustain” social values (375). Polish-born anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski adds that myth, as a “primeval reality” that is “embodied in ritual, morals, and social organization,” establishes “the pattern and foundation of present-day life” (141). These descriptions of myth and ritual tend towards conservatism and see myth and ritual as legitimating and reifying agents that support the social structure and values of their culture. As classicist Eric Csapo demonstrates, more recent post-structuralist analyses of mythology broaden the definition of myth and ritual, characterising them as methods of expressing any social ideology; Csapo defines myth as “anything which is told, received, and transmitted in the conviction of its social importance” (278). Adam Seligman, et al., argue that ritual does not express a coherent ideology, but instead conveys “the incongruity between the world of enacted ritual and the participants’ experience of lived reality” (21). According to this interdisciplinary team of scholars, ritual seeks to “repair” the “broken world of experience” by reiterating a possible, or “subjunctive,” reality (30). As I will demonstrate, the rituals created by Yeats and Crowley do not conserve traditional ideals, but work to undermine or replace what they viewed as the dominant values of their societies by enacting an idealised reality.

Crowley’s *Rites* directly respond to the repressive social values of Edwardian society and the religion of his family, who were members of an evangelical church called the Plymouth Brethren (*Confessions* 35). In his autobiography, he decries the sexual repression caused by the “current morality [that] interferes with the legitimate satisfaction of physiological needs” (79), as well as the climate of religious intolerance, on which he comments, “It is evidently consoling to reflect that the people next door are headed for hell” (52). Against these ostensibly Christian values, he counters, “Paganism is wholesome because it faces the facts of life” (82).

Yeats was born into an educated middle-class Anglo-Irish family with strong ties to the Church of Ireland; however, because of the influence of his father, his upbringing was nonetheless more rational than religious. Yeats claimed to feel “very religious,” yet “deprived [...] of the simple-minded religion of my childhood” by the “despised” rationalist philosophies he had encountered through his father (*Autobiographies* 115). This critique of scientific materialism is found in both Yeats

and Crowley, as Crowley states, “The ordinary materialist usually fails to recognize that only spiritual affairs count for anything” (*Confessions* 124).

Although Yeats retained his Protestant heritage as a cultural identity (Foster 84), he advocated Irish independence from Britain: a cause more widely supported by Catholics than Protestants. In supporting Irish nationalism, he counters both the authority of the British Empire and the position held by many members of his social class. This position was attenuated, however, by his cultural elitism; he believed an independent Ireland should be led by the educated (and mostly Protestant) upper classes, rather than the (mostly Catholic) working-class and peasantry. His ideal, as Irish critic Seamus Deane explains, was “the peasant and the aristocrat, kindred in spirit but not in class, united in the great Romantic battle against the industrial and utilitarian ethic” (39). As I will show, Yeats’s Celtic Mysteries rituals both romanticise the Irish peasant and working classes and subvert their conservative religious values by elevating their status within the context of occult rituals.

Yeats began working on his ritual system in 1895 (Kalogera 9), inspired by the island of Castle Rock near Roscommon, Ireland. Yeats wrote of the island, where a castle had been built in the early nineteenth century, in his *Autobiographies*: “I planned a mystical Order which should buy or hire the castle [...] and for ten years to come my most impassioned thought was a vain attempt to find philosophy and to create ritual for that Order” (204). This order seems a natural extension of Yeats’s support of Irish nationalism through the Celtic Revival: if Ireland were to proclaim its right to independence through its Celtic heritage, language, literature, folklore, and sport, why should it not also revive in some fashion its native spirituality? In *Autobiographies*, Yeats wrote “have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?” (167). Literary scholar Lucy Kalogera asserts that Yeats sought to create a “uniquely Irish body of occult knowledge and ritual” (27). Yeats felt that such rituals and myths would be more suited for the Irish than those of either the Catholic Church or the Golden Dawn and sought to create an Irish religion that would appeal to the Irish through symbol, art, and a connection with the land rather than through dogma. He wrote that he wanted to “bring again in imaginative life the old sacred place” and found a religion with “a secret symbolical relation to these mysteries, [...] doctrine without exhortation and rhetoric. Should not religion hide within the work of art as god is within his world [...]?” (*Memoirs* 124). Yeats’s Celtic Mysteries were not to be a reconstruction of ancient Celtic religion, but a new creation as syncretic in its nature as the Golden Dawn, with sources ranging across the spectrum of Western philosophy and occultism (Moore 30).

The Golden Dawn provided a template for Yeats’s rituals, but as his work on the rituals progressed, the more he replaced Golden Dawn symbolism with the Irish myth and folklore that would express his nationalistic ideals. This progression is evident in the multiple drafts of each ritual in his notebooks. These manuscripts include a series of initiations organised similarly to the rituals of the Golden Dawn⁴. The first, which corresponds to the Golden Dawn’s Neophyte ritual, has three versions in varying stages of completion. The first version of this ritual involves only three participants: the candidate for initiation, the Teacher (or Master), and the Guide. The second, far

more complex, version involves eight officers and the candidate, who is now called the Wayfarer. The officers in this version correlate with the similar officers in the corresponding Golden Dawn ritual, the Greek titles used by the Golden Dawn are replaced by names that honour Irish peasant or craftsman culture (Herdsman, Soldier, Mason, Weaver) or that define the participants' roles (Light-bearer, Incense-burner, Water-bearer). Despite the new titles, the officers are still similar to those of the Golden Dawn through their roles in the rituals and the implements they use.

The subsequent rituals each centre around one of the four classical elements (earth, air, water, fire), just as do the four elemental grade rituals of the Golden Dawn; however, instead of linking these elements with their Cabalistic correspondences as in the Golden Dawn, Yeats ties each to one of the legendary four Jewels of the Tuatha de Danaan: the Cauldron (water), the Stone (earth), the Sword (air), and the Spear (fire). Yeats's elemental rituals are also performed in a different order than in the Golden Dawn; instead of following Cabalistic order, the Celtic Mysteries follow the traditional order of the elements as they correspond with the cardinal directions, from west through south. These rituals seem to borrow fewer elements from the Golden Dawn than the previous ones: the officer roles no longer correspond with the Golden Dawn officers. It appears that the longer Yeats and his collaborators worked on creating the Celtic Mysteries, the more freed from the Golden Dawn model they became.

This divergence allows the rituals greater accord with Yeats's nationalist ideals by placing greater emphasis on Celtic subject matter. A revised version of the first ritual enacts legends about the successive waves of legendary peoples who fought for and conquered Ireland: an unnamed race, the Formor, the Children of Nemedh, the Children of Parhelon, the Tuatha de Danaan, the Firbolg, and the Children of Mil. The Herdsman compares the Wayfarer to the children of Lir, whom in Irish myth were transformed into swans by their evil stepmother. Like the children of Lir, the Wayfarer is said to be "wandering among the waters and the form of his soul had been broken and he has been put into a strange shape" (quoted in Kalogera 205). Yeats adopts the legend of the waves of conquerors of Ireland and the tale of the Children of Lir and recasts these myths to reflect the ideology of the Celtic Revival. In the last two versions of the initial ritual of the Celtic Mysteries, the officers progressively light and extinguish lamps representing the conquering races of Ireland; they finally vow to protect the flame of the last of the seven lamps. The second version of this ritual also incorporates the traditional Irish symbol of the apple bough, long associated with immortality and used as an emblem of the bards of Ireland (Hull 439). The Incense-bearer carries blossoming apple boughs and places them upon a white altar next to a "lamp of white light" (quoted in Kalogera 213). This lamp seems to be significant on two levels: first, as representative of the current race of people in Ireland (or perhaps all the successive races of Ireland), and second, as representative of spiritual attainment. The placement of the blossoming bough beside it indicates the immortality of the Irish race and the power of beauty and the arts to ensure the spiritual attainment of both the individual initiate and Irish culture as a whole.

Yeats's inclusion of the Children of Lir may also reflect this dual significance, as the children can be seen to represent both the Wayfarer and all of Ireland. The use of this myth to communicate political ideology continues into contemporary times, as this story was memorialised in 1971 as a statue in Dublin's Garden of Remembrance, which honours soldiers who died for the Irish cause. According to the tale, the children of Lir were transmuted by their jealous stepmother/aunt who cursed them to live as swans for nine hundred years, retaining nothing of their humanity but their memories, their voices, and their songs (Gregory 124-136). While the story is ancient, the children's plight easily parallels the conditions of Yeats's Ireland: at the time of the rituals' creation, important aspects of Irish culture, including the practice of Catholicism and the Gaelic language, had been outlawed or marginalised by the British to varying degrees since the enactment of the first Penal Laws in the 16th century. Yeats's rituals are conceived as part of a broader movement toward Irish political and cultural independence. Like the apple boughs of the bards, the swan-children's retention of their voices and songs presents an excellent trope for the Irish literary revival.

Yeats's use of ritual to support Irish nationalism is complicated, however, by his social position as a non-Catholic member of the Anglo-Irish middle class. His use of peasant and working-class roles as the titles for officiates in his rituals exemplifies the romanticisation of the peasant that is common in his work, described by Irish literary scholar Declan Kiberd as "the long-suffering mystical peasant" (32). While Yeats sympathised with Catholic suffering, he stopped short of advocating substantial political power for the lower classes. Although he supported nationalism and the ideal of a united Ireland, he viewed with trepidation the primacy of the Catholic majority that a free Ireland would bring (McDonough 250). Therefore, using occult rituals to promote Irish unity both elevates Irish peasants symbolically while simultaneously undercutting their religion. Further, while Yeats did state that the rituals would not be "altogether pagan" and would incorporate Christian symbolism (*Autobiographies* 205), when he describes a fictionalised version of his Celtic Mysteries in a draft of his unfinished novel *The Speckled Bird*, the protagonist declares, "Christianity itself is coming to an end. [...] I think we will give up worshipping one God and worship a great many gods" (183). In his *Memoirs*, he states, "I meant to initiate young men and women in this worship, which would unite the radical truths of Christianity to those of a more ancient world" (124). Had Yeats ever completed this project, it is unlikely that many Christians, Catholic or Protestant, nor rationalists like his father, would have been amenable to these radical truths.

Like Yeats, Crowley claimed that his *Rites of Eleusis* were not anti-Christian, but were a new manner of expressing the "sublime truths of Christianity" (*Rites: Origin* 384). This statement is likely disingenuous, however, as he made it in response to public criticism of his rituals; as with the Celtic Mysteries, any Christian ideas expressed by Crowley's *Rites* are too radical or esoteric to be accepted by most Christians. Instead, the *Rites* profess ideas that subvert the Protestant Christian tradition and Victorian mores in which Crowley was reared: the most obvious is the replacement of Christian rituals with pagan ones. In fact, the *Rites* question the existence of the Christian God. Further, the ultimate manner of approaching god involves ecstatic sexual union rather than asceticism

and self-denial. Moreover, the *Rites* champion a dynamic balance of destructive and creative forces rather than the triumph of absolute good over absolute evil.

The existence of God is challenged in *The Rite of Saturn*, which flatly proclaims “There is no god” (17). At first, the Magister Templi reluctantly declares the absence of God, but after finding the empty altar, stands upon it and, quoting Thomas Hardy, celebrates atheism: “Good tidings of great joy for you, for all: / There is no God; no fiend with names divine / Made us and tortures us” (17). Crowley seems to deny the existence of the authoritarian god of judgment and sin that he first rebelled against in his youth. Later, in *The Rite of Mars*, Mars recites from Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*: “To defy Power, which seems omnipotent; / [...] is to be / Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free; / This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory!” (55). The *Rites* either defy or deny an omnipotent God who is seen as a tyrant, and proclaim instead an esoteric vision of God, the “true God hidden” with whom the aspirant should seek unity rather than offer submission, as does Mars when he declaims, “the God and I are One” (60).

The ecstatic manner of achieving this unity also defies ascetic Protestant values; when the characters in *The Rite of Jupiter* cannot directly approach the divine source without abandoning their natures and being wholly absorbed, they follow the wisdom of the Sphinx, representing for Crowley divine ecstasy, who advises they “invoke the Father [Jupiter] to manifest in the Son” (34). This choice seems to echo Jesus’ statement, “no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (*Holy Bible, KJV*, John 14:6), but Crowley, in his typically subversive fashion, draws his manifestation of God not from Christianity, but from Classical myth: Dionysus. Dionysus also characterises ecstasy: the method for humanity to commune with the divine.

The entire cycle of plays promulgates the value of balancing opposing forces. For example, in *The Rite of Mercury*, Mercury is Hermes Trismegistus, renowned as the author of ancient texts of magical wisdom. The probationers in the rite honour him for his wisdom, but when they call him “All Good,” they are corrected by Virgo’s declaration that Hermes “[is] Not Good alone, Brethren! But all complete in the perfect Equilibrium” (98) and “between the Light and Darkness did he stand” (99) “the winged heels are fiery with enormous speed, / One spurning heaven; the other trampling hell” (101). Thus, God should be honoured for embodying balance, not only the good.

The final play, *The Rite of Luna*, most specifically links enlightenment with sexual ecstasy. Pan attempts to seduce the virgin goddess Artemis, whose silence is a sign of her virginity. The god Pan challenges that her silence equals withholding divine knowledge, and decries the disharmony she causes: “Silence and speech are at odds; / Heaven and Hell are at stake,” and calls her to “Reveal us the riddle, reveal! / Bring us the word of the Lord” (121). Artemis submits to his pleas and he tears down the veil, which represents both her virginity and divine mystery, linking sex and spiritual enlightenment.

As with Yeats’s *Celtic Mysteries*, Crowley’s *Rites* perform the sociological functions of ritual, but instead of sustaining existing social values, they present transgressive values and undermine what

Crowley saw as restrictive Victorian mores, especially those of the Puritanical religion in which he was raised. While tame by today's standards, the very depiction of pagan rites violated the conventional values of Crowley's time. In its review of the *Rites*, *The Looking Glass* called Crowley's magical order "a blasphemous sect whose proceedings conceivably lend themselves to immorality of the most revolting character" (quoted in Brown 22). Exaggerated reports inspired by the sexual imagery of the *Rites* were published by the tabloid press, which suggested that the performers were having sex in the dimly lit room, and one reviewer claimed a performer had "embraced" and kissed him (Brown 22).

Theatrical performances have often challenged social values, but, as rituals, Yeats's and Crowley's works move beyond presenting their ideas to a passive audience to requiring active participation. Crowley's audiences may have come expecting avant-garde theatre, but Crowley wanted to give them an experience more akin to a religious service. As with many religious rites, portions of the service were hidden from the assembly; the action taking place in a number of the *Rites* is not in full view of the audience. Crowley staged the *Rites* with multiple veils, frequently separating the performers from the audience and delineating sacred spaces or levels of reality that the uninitiated cannot access. Further, Crowley requested that audience members wear clothing in symbolic colours to each performance, to behave as would be appropriate for "the most solemn religious ceremonies," and to observe silence, not only as a matter of theatre etiquette but as a manner of "obtaining effects" (Crowley, quoted in Brown 5). These desired effects involved achieving altered states of consciousness through "rhythmic music, repetitive prayers, and hypnotic poetry [...] dim light, veiled action, and flickering flames [...] incense and perfumes" (Brown 26). Near the beginning of each rite, audience members were presented a "Cup of Libation" containing "a mixture of fruit juices, alcohol, an infusion of mescal buttons, and either morphine or heroin" (Brown 8).

Similarly, Yeats hoped that his rituals would provide a meaningful spiritual experience for their participants, but unlike Crowley, Yeats intended his rites to have no audience. Instead, everyone present would be an active participant throughout the entire process. In his instructions for the rituals, Yeats specifies, "There may be as many members [of the order] appointed to each office as is convenient, but only one may be present at the ceremony" (quoted in Kalogera 214) indicating that, unlike a theatrical performance, there would be no spectators present for the rituals, but only active participants.

Both men saw art and religion as tandem forces. Crowley directly compares the "mental state of him who inherits or attains the full consciousness of the artist" with "the divine consciousness" (*Absinthe* 16). Quoting Algernon Swinburne, he calls for divine truths to be "clothed round by sweet art" in order to reignite their "vital force" (*Rites: Origin* 384). In comparing poetry and religion, Yeats called the "laws of art [...] the hidden laws of the world" which "can alone bind the imagination" (*E&I* 163) and compares the power of the artist with that of the magician (*E&I* 49). Crowley intended to use the art form of theatre to create states of religious ecstasy for his performers and his audience. He compares the "ecstasy" and "intoxication" he and Waddell experienced in creating the *Rites* to that experienced by actors performing the Mass in Wagner's *Parsifal* (quoted in Brown 6), thus, directly

linking religious ritual with artistic performance. Similarly, sociologist Robert Boccock links religion and art in *Parsifal*, but argues that it is not genuinely sacred ritual, because “it does not involve the use of priests, that is, ‘real’ sacred figures who can ‘really’ consecrate the bread and wine in the Mass” (158). Thus, for Boccock, true religious ritual must be performative in a real sense; its actions must not simply display an experience of the sacred, but actually create such an experience for its participants, who can never act as entirely passive viewers, as might the audience of a play.

Unlike a performance of *Parsifal*, which Boccock attests cannot be an actual Mass because it is not performed by a priest, the primary performers of *The Rites of Eleusis*, Crowley, Waddell, and Victor Neuburg (another of Crowley’s lovers), were all trained in occult techniques and reputedly experienced in entering trance states. During the performances, they reportedly entered into altered states of consciousness that provided them greater artistic ability, which may indicate the rituals’ efficacy (Brown 17-18). Crowley and his assistants believed they were not only enacting myths, but that they were also literally embodying and communing with the deities they invoked (Brown 17), meeting Csapo’s qualification that religious ritual should “arguably” contain “intention to sway nature or the divine will” (157). For the performers, if not all of the audience members, the *Rites* provided a genuine religious experience.

Yeats's Celtic Mysteries were never finished or performed, as his attention turned to writing more traditional plays for the Irish Literary Theatre. He abandoned the project altogether perhaps because Gonne married another man (Kelly 669); however, shortly before his death, he told Gonne that he wished they had completed the rituals (Levenson 384). Had the rituals been finished, his goal was to provide a "ritual system of evocation and meditation--to reunite the perception of spirit, of the divine, with natural beauty" (*Memoirs* 123).

Like much of Yeats’s work in support of the Celtic Revival, the Celtic Mysteries sought to use imagery from Irish myth and folklore to support Irish nationalism. As rituals, however, they move beyond presenting unifying nationalist imagery; they additionally provide a venue for nationalist action because Yeats, as an occultist, believed that ritual use of symbols literally had magical effect (*E&I* 28). He considered symbols “the greatest of all powers” (*E&I* 49) with the ability to link individual minds to the greater mind of “Nature” (28). Further, Yeats’s rituals would have created another venue for active participation in Irish liberation, not only from British rule, but also from the dominant religions, both Catholic and Protestant. While Yeats claimed to combine the best of paganism and Christianity, it is likely that had he finished the Mysteries and put his rituals into practice, public response would not been any more positive than it was to Crowley’s *The Rites of Eleusis* a decade later.

Both Yeats and Crowley used what early social scientists considered a conservative medium—ritual—to contravene and attenuate the common values of their societies. Because the social values their rituals express are desired rather than actual, the rituals demonstrate the tension, as described by Seligman, between the “subjunctive” world of ritual—a world that enacts an unattainable ideal—and the existing social order (26-7). Through ritual, Yeats and Crowley are each creating a “shared,

illusory world” (26), which involves participants in contravening the values and social structure of their contemporary society. Seligman argues, however, that participants in ritual are not necessarily consciously analysing the incongruities between their ritual ideal and their lived reality (28), whereas Yeats and Crowley, by intentionally creating rituals as works of art, present these incongruities through conscious choice.

This difference may be examined through religious studies scholar Catherine Bell’s analysis of the history of scholarship on ritual and the effects this scholarship has had on the practice of ritual in contemporary society. She argues that the abstract concept of “ritual” as a cross-cultural phenomenon has been created by the scholars who have studied it (herself included), and their research has in turn affected the way people view ritual: “Belief in ritual as a central dynamic in human affairs—as opposed to belief in a particular [...] liturgical tradition [...]—gives ritualists the authority to ritualize creatively” and “gives legitimacy” to “invented” rites (264). This relativistic view of ritual empowers individuals to create or modify rituals while “undermining some forms of traditional ritual authority” (263). When the concept of ritual itself becomes authoritative, no longer must ritual be ordained by God or cultural tradition.

One of the earliest scholars Bell lists as responsible for creating the modern concept of ritual is Sir James Frazer (263), the author of *The Golden Bough* (1890), who was familiar to both Yeats and Crowley. Crowley’s understanding of the history of myth and religion was largely influenced by Frazer (Bogdan 91), and Yeats, himself a folklorist, compared Frazer with other folklorists he had read (“Celtic Beliefs” 417). Bell discusses a trend toward espousing the value of individuals revising and creating rituals, but she locates most of this evolution in the late twentieth century. Yeats and Crowley, influenced by the cross-cultural view of ritual, are thus early participants in this process of undermining traditional sources of ritual authority. This shift departs from the model they found in the Golden Dawn, whose founders denied responsibility for writing its rituals, and instead appealed to a mysterious coded document as a source of occult authority (Fennelly 291-292). In stark contrast, Yeats and Crowley instead proclaim themselves, as artists, best qualified for creating ritual. As artists who created rituals without appealing to any authority beyond their own spiritual inspiration, Yeats and Crowley may be viewed as forerunners of a larger trend.

In creating occult rituals that express Irish nationalist ideals, Yeats uses ritual to question British political authority and religious sectarianism, while negotiating his complex social position as an Anglo-Irish supporter of Irish independence. Crowley, in a less subtle manner, uses pagan rituals to directly confront conservative religious values and sexual mores. Their rituals, intentionally created as works of art, challenged existing political, religious, and social values while seeking to establish new ones.

Notes

¹ Their dislike for each other was mutual: Yeats called Crowley “a quite unspeakable person” (Collected Letters, To Lady Gregory, 25 April 1900), whereas Crowley, in his novel *Moonchild*, characterizes his fictional Yeats—whom he calls “Gates”—as an evil magician (170).

² Yeats’s ritual order never received an official title and has variously been called the Order of Celtic Mysteries, The Castle of Heroes, and the Irish Mystical Order. I will refer to the rituals collectively as the Celtic Mysteries. The rituals, while never completed or published, are transcribed in Lucy Shepard Kalogera’s 1977 dissertation, “Yeats’s Celtic Mysteries,” which is the source for the rituals I cite throughout this essay. The original manuscripts are located in the National Library of Ireland.

³ Crowley’s Rites of Eleusis were performed in London’s Caxton Hall over the course of seven weeks in 1910 (J.F. Brown 5) and were published in Crowley’s periodical *The Equinox* in 1911.

⁴ I draw my analysis of the Golden Dawn rituals from the scripts provided in Israel Regardie’s *The Golden Dawn* (1974).

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