THE VARIORUM EDITION OF YEATS'S PLAYS

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IN 1956, SHORTLY AFTER COMPLETING the manuscript of The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, I began working on a variorum edition of the plays of Yeats that I finished in the spring of 1964. The book is dedicated to the memory of Peter Allt with whom I had collaborated on the poetry-variorum from 1947 until his tragic death in 1954. My purpose in this paper is to discuss some of the major editorial and bibliographical problems encountered during the years of composition from 1956 to 1964.

The first was that of a basic text. For the poetry this problem was easy: shortly before his death Yeats had revised his poetry and signed pages for a de luxe edition to be published by Macmillan and Company Ltd. But World War II intervened and it was not until 1949 that the handsome, two-volume, final revised edition of the poetry was published. Ready to hand, therefore, was an authoritative basic text for the poetry-variorum.

But there was no such final revised text of the plays. The best seemed to be the London Macmillan edition of The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats (1952). The plays in this edition and its New York Macmillan counterpart of 1953, with the exception of A Full Moon in March, The King of the Great Clock Tower, The Herne's Egg, Purgatory, and The Death of Cuchulain, were reprintings with few and unimportant changes of The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats (1934) that Yeats had carefully revised. The user of the variorum-plays must use

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his own judgment in assessing the slight textual changes between the editions of 1934 and 1952, as well as those between the edition of Nine One-Act Plays in 1937 and the edition of the collected plays in 1952.

The second problem was page set-up. Because the set-up of the poetry-variorum had apparently met with approval, I decided to use it again, and although it could not be strictly followed in all the plays (some of these I discuss below), I was on the whole satisfied with it. A sample page — the first page of 'Cathleen ni Houlihan' — will make the set-up clear.

CATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN

1902

Persons in the Play

Peter Gillane
Michael Gillane, his son, going to be married
Patrick Gillane, a lad of twelve,

Bridget Gillane, Peter’s wife
Delia Cahel, engaged to Michael
The Poor Old Woman
Neighbours

Interior of a cottage close to Killala, in 1798. Bridget is standing at a table undoing a parcel. Peter is sitting at one side of the fire, Patrick at the other.

1. Peter. What is that sound I hear?

2. Patrick. I don’t hear anything. [He listens.] I hear it

3. now. It’s like cheering. [He goes to the window and looks

PRINTINGS

Samhain, October 1902; 8, 16, 17, 22, 29, 34, 36, 42, 45, 69, 84, 89, 97.


EPIGRAPH ‘Young she is, and fair she is, and would be crowned a queen,
Were the King’s son at home here with
Kathaleen-Ny-Houlahan!’ 8.

1 The textual evidence suggests that Yeats probably did little more than select the nine plays.