Tracing the Impact of Foreign Influences on Irish Playwrights: Wilde and Yeats

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Introduction

During the late nineteenth century, many Irish playwrights searched for a new form of drama as realistic drama was increasingly felt to be outmoded. The new ideals or methods in drama stem from the development in French Symbolist Movement, begun during 1880 – 1895, which would expand into what might be called anti-realistic theatre. These ideas inflect Symbolist dramatic thinking and show a marked desire for new paradigms of performance drawn from outside conventional theatre. In search for new forms and new themes for theatre, playwrights had looked outside mainstream theatre for models of acting, declamation, movement and staging. As Oscar Wilde (1845 – 1900) and William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939) recognized the limitations of the conventional stage, together with the problematic issues about realistic play, they turned their mind toward the outside sources to generate new concept for the theatre. Maurice Maeterlinck and the French symbolism led by Stephane Mallarmé are among those who are to shape the dramatic background of their drama.

This research is based on the concept that new technique or form of drama emerges very largely from the realizations of forerunners and contemporaries. The aim of this research is to portray the trace of foreign influences in the works of later playwrights as part of the integration between the old and the new: playwrights inherited the knowledge from their ancestor, assimilated it with their own ideas, and finally supersede it. This research will examine how foreign influences such as Maeterlinckian and French Symbolism could be detected in the plays and were used to generate an experimental drama. Thus, this research will show how those playwrights make use of foreign influences to create or evolve a modern technique of total theatre and discuss their use of it to construct their ideals form of drama. In this research, Mallarmé's and Maeterlinck's dramatic theories will be used as ground theories, and discusses ways in which Maeterlinckian and the French Symbolism are considered the core force for the Symbolist drama through comparative and contrastive readings of Symbolist dramatic theories.

Stephane Mallarmé and the French Symbolist Movement

Although his writings are few in number, Stephane Mallarmé, a French symbolist poet, was a driving force for the Symbolist Movement throughout the 1890s, providing a model for other poets and a springboard for new ideas. In J.C. Ireson's essay, 'Towards A Theory of The Symbolist Theatre', he choose to analyze the notion of a Symbolist theory of the drama in which critics claimed to be formulated by Mallarmé. Ireson explains that 'Mallarmé's theories provided the greatest single impetus towards the formation of the experimental forms of Symbolist drama' (1986: 150). Arthur Symons wrote a chapter on Mallarmé, in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, analyzing Mallarmé's idea which could be claimed as the principal theory of Symbolism. He said that art must always be suggestion and evocation, never direct statement. The texts must carry symbolic imageries which are not easily interpreted but rather they were suggestive. 'Remember his (Mallarmé) principle' he wrote, 'that to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create' (2007: 196). Haskell M. Block asserted the similar analysis in his summary of the characteristics of symbolist drama that emerge from Mallarmé's theory of aesthetic: 'The language of drama is poetry rather than prose, evocative rather than descriptive, and relying upon suggestion as oppose to statement' (1963: 102). Furthermore, Block (1963: 102-103) also listed out other characteristics of Symbolist drama that could be looked upon as the principal theory

of Symbolist drama in which later Symbolist playwrights were premised on: drama is the expression of inner life and of mystery; the stage should be 'detheatricalized' by focusing on a spirituality that was to come from the text and the acting.

Maurice Maeterlinck and His Static Theatre

Maurice Maeterlinck was the leader of the European Symbolist Movement who created a new form of drama called 'the static theatre'. Maeterlinck claimed in 'The Modern Drama' that the development of modern drama in his time was in a decline: 'The first thing that strikes us in the drama of the day is the decay, one might almost say the creeping paralysis, of external action' (1904: 153). Therefore, Maeterlinck sought to find a new theory of drama that suggests the notion of a drama outside the known confines of the stage. Maeterlinck wrote a series of symbolist plays characterized by fatalism and mysticism: La Princesse Maleine (1889), Intruder (1890), The Blind (1890), Pelleas and Melisande (1892) and The Blue Bird (1909). Maeterlinck's dramas, known more for their styles than for their plots, emphasized a universal mystery and a sense of impending doom, as well as an awareness of the transitory nature of reality and existence. The general mood of his plays is slow and dream-like. The intention is to evoke an unconscious response rather than an intellectual one and to depict the non-rational aspects of characters and events.

Maeterlinck explained his ideas on the static theatre in his essay 'The Tragic in Daily Life' (1905) that in drama, as he conceived it, it was the words that were not said which mattered. Furthermore, not only just the unsaid words, but also the little action in drama could present effective and intensive picture of inner life. From this notion, he invented a new breakthrough type of theatre that went opposite to the conventional theatre as he aimed to 'replacing action with inaction, events with eventlessness, and dialogue with a semantics of silence as expressive as any of Symbolism's most sophisticated poetic constructions' (McGuinness, 2000: 1). His theory of static theatre stems from his belief that man is powerless against the forces of fate. Combined with his fascination in puppets, androids, and shadow theatre, Maeterlinck found that the marionette is an excellent example for representing the powerless of man against the higher force as the marionette is guided by strings and operated by a puppeteer which represents fate. They were not to allow the stress of their inner emotions to compel their movements. His new discovery was the beginning of the new era for the theatre. The mystic atmosphere and the childish, simplistic, almost absurd language of his play truly challenge the existence of the realistic theatre. Symons wrote that 'Maeterlinck's theatre of marionettes […] is the reaction of the imagination against the wholly prose theatre of Ibsen, into which life comes nakedly, cruelly, subtly, but without distinction, without poetry' (1909: 77).

Wilde's *Salomé*

This one act play is based on a Biblical episode of Princess Salomé, a stepdaughter of Herod, who falls in love with a prophet, Jokanaan, and utters her uncontrollable desire to kiss him, which the prophet rejects. Herod begs Salomé to entertain him by dancing and offers her anything she might wish in return. After she has finished the Dance of the Seven Veils, she requests the head of Jokanaan on a silver platter as a reward which Herod first refuses, but then reluctantly grants. Salomé seizes the head passionately, addressing Jokanaan as if he lived and triumphantly kissing his lip. Overcome with revulsion, Herod orders the soldiers to kill Salomé.

'French airs play all round *Salomé*' Worth wrote, 'Flaubert's *Hérodias* was an inspiration […] so too Moreau's painting' (1986: 99). We could not be altogether sure of the source in which Wilde conceived of as *Salomé*; however, many critics believe Wilde's inspiration for his version of *Salomé* may have been Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* (1869) and Maeterlinck's play *La Princesse Maleine* (1889). Sammells wrote that 'Wilde draws on […] Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine* in deploying the atmosphere and devices of an emergent Symbolist drama' (2000: 72). With his association with Mallarmé's theories on poetry and literature, the notions that Wilde learned from Mallarmé were to shape Wilde's outlook. It is thus no surprise to find that there is a shade of Mallarmé's *Hérodiade,* an unfinished lyrical drama telling the tale of Hérodiade ' marriage to Herod, in Wilde's *Salomé*. Many elements in *Salomé* show its closeness to *Hérodiade*: Jokanaan's refusal to be touched by Salomé is reminiscent of Hérodiade's refusal to the touch of the nurse in Mallarmé's poem, the similar characteristics and appearances of Mallarmé's Hérodiade and Wilde's Salomé. Furthermore, both characters are portrayed as supremely beautiful, akin to the goddess, proud and unsympathetic.

While the influence from Mallarmé in *Salomé* shows in the closeness of the overall plot story and the characteristics of the leading character, the influence from Maeterlinck laid in the theatrical style, technique and the context. *Salomé* stands out from Wilde's other dramas and has a strong connection to Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine,* most obviously in its mood and atmosphere. Raby has emphasized the influence on Wilde of Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine* in his book, *Oscar Wilde*: 'Maeterlinck's insistent use of color, sound, dance, visual description and visual effect offered Wilde a theatrical vocabulary more complete and more innovative than anything the London stage could demonstrate' (1988: 105).

As for the style of writing, the repetition of simple phrases in Wilde's play may have had its origin in Maeterlinck's play. This concept was mentioned by many critics. Bird claimed that Wilde's style of writing 'have been influenced by the repetitive incantations adopted by Maurice Maeterlinck' (1977: 81). Nevertheless, there are some elements in their intentions that marked the differences. While 'Maeterlinck makes extensive use of the repetition of simple phrases, which lends a dream-like quality to the verbal texture' (Raby, 1988: 105), Wilde employs the repetition technique in order to lay out many of central ideas, symbols, motifs and the characteristics of each characters: the beauty of Princess Salomé and her admirers, the symbolic meaning of the moon and its color; the child-like characteristic of Salomé and her desire to kiss Jokanaan. In *Salomé,* the mode of repetition is established during the introduction, in the scene which the Young Syrian and the soldiers introduce the key motif of Herod's and his obsession with Salomé, along with the

introduction of the main symbol, the moon. The play begins with the repeated phrases from the Young Syrian:

FIRST SOLDIER: The Tetrarch has a somber look.
SECOND SOLDIER: Yes; he has a somber look.
FIRST SOLDIER: he is looking at something.
SECOND SOLDIER: he is looking at someone. (1940: 10)

In Salomé's scene after she encountered with Jokanaan, the several repetitions of the phrase 'I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan' marks the state of mind of Salomé, showing her childish, obsessive desire, as though in a trance, to kiss Jokanaan's red mouth. Thus, the use of repetition sometimes foreshadows the outcome of the play as well as creating the intensity, which marked the contrast between Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine* and *Salomé*. The Page of Herodias repeats his warning many times to the Young Syrian about the terrible outcome of being possessed by the beauty of princess Salomé, which echoed Herodias's warning to Herod: 'You must not look at her'.

Yeats's *A Full Moon in March*

Yeats's *A Full Moon in March* is profoundly influenced by Maeterlinck and Wilde. The barely conscious characters along with the tragic plot of passion and death in *A Full Moon in March* recall the tragic fate of Maeterlinck's Princess Maleine and Wilde's Princess Salomé. Even though Yeats stated his dislike of Wilde's *Salomé*, claiming that the play lacked tension in action, and the dialogue was 'empty, sluggish, and pretentious' (Ellmann, 1967: 23), he eventually went to see the performance in 1905. Despite his dislike, the play surely occupied his thought as a drama with similar plot was written around forty years later. In his letter to Dorothy Wellesley, he stated his discontent with his new play and described it as 'a fragment of the past I had to get rid of' (1954: 843). *A Full Moon in March* was a revised version of *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934) as Yeats was not satisfied with the number of character in the first version, claiming that the play has an unnecessary character: 'there are three characters, King, Queen and Stroller, and that is a character too many' (1966: 1311). Thus, he redesigned the play, giving the Queen a speaking role, eliminating the character of the King in order to gain the greater intensity by keeping only the essential characters, which are the Queen and the Swineherd.

A Full Moon in March tells a story of the Swineherd who has come through 'dust and mire' at full moon to sing so well as to win the kingdom and the Queen's heart. Yeats always rejected the influences from the French and Wildean version, claiming that his version was drawn from the old Gaelic legend. At first, there is a faint notion of this legend in *The King of the Great Clock Tower*; however, the later version very much leans on Mallarmé's *Herodiade* and Wilde's *Salomé* than on the Irish myth. Bradford pointed out in *Yeats at Work* that 'this Irishizing almost disappeared' (1965: 291). Even Yeats himself admitted that the process of combining the Gaelic legend into a dance play had brought his Queen closer to Wilde's Salomé: 'In attempting to put this story into a dance play I found that I had gone close to Salomé's dance in Wilde's play' (1966: 1311).

Worth (1986) emphasized that Yeats's play has the same French background as Wilde's play in term of inspiration. She referred to Mallarmé's unfinished poem, *Hérodiade,* as one of the source of Yeats's inspiration, and pointed out the closeness

of the cruel 'winter of virginity' in Yeats's Queen and Mallarmé's Hérodiade. Worth (1986) also found, in both *Salomé* and *A Full Moon in March*, dramatic devices that anticipated with the total theatre. The dramatic devices that Worth referred to are music, light, movement, costumes, speech, and dance which should be mixed, blended and perfectly collided in order to establish a whole and indivisible staged entity or in other word, the total theatre.

The Similarities and the Differences

Salomé and *A Full Moon in March* inhabit the strange world, at once naïve yet emotionally intricate, of fairy-tale or folklore. However, at a deeper thematic level, the differences are marked. Despite many similarities from their forerunners in term of form and technique, Wilde and Yeats built a lot of their own symbolic events in the plays. For instance, there are two major devices in both plays that help establishing the symbolic action, which are the domination of the moon and its color and the dance of sexual adoration. In analyzing those devices and those symbolic moments, we should be able to clarify the similarities and the differences between *Salomé* and *A Full Moon in March*. Thus, the process of analysis will identify their affinities with the French and Belgian Symbolist dramatic theories, and demonstrate the notion of how Wilde and Yeats assimilate those theories into their plays.

In *Salomé* and *A Full Moon in March*, there is a symbolic function in the moon and its color which is to make the characters who are so obsessed by it seems like puppets moved by some forces outside themselves. This notion seems to connect and stem from Maeterlinck's theory of 'static drama'. He believed that men are completely powerless against a higher force, which exercised its will upon the world. Therefore, in his drama, the actors are to speak and move as if they are controlled by an external force, having fate as puppeteer. Thus, the characters are dominated by their surroundings and are unable to control the events in their own lives. There are plenty of examples in both plays in the fate of each character. One of the characters in Maeterlinck's *Princesses Maleine*, Princess Uglyane, is a suitable example as she is completely dominated by her mother, and barely has a voice in the play at all. In Wilde's version, Salomé begins as the cool, chaste, aloof figure. But when she lays eyes on Jokanaan, his appearance ends her cold virginity, a chastity that she celebrated in the moon. She completely surrenders to the powerful feeling of passion and desire, letting herself be engulfed by sexual desire which has a supreme power over her. Similar to the Young Syrian, he also falls under the spell of Salomé's beauty. He is aflame with passionate love which claimed him the ability to control his emotion. In the anguish of his despairing love for Salomé, he finally stabs himself and dies at her feet.

In *Salomé*, there are some mystic forces and fatal connection between what happen to the characters and the moon which constantly changes from brilliant silver to 'red as blood' (1940: 37) and then to black when it is blocked out by 'a great black cloud' (1940: 47). All the metaphorical descriptions of the moon, described by each character, serve to move on the drama, to suggest, in images as well as words, the emotional state of each character, increasing the tension, and foreshadowing the outcome of the play. The moon is described as blood red by Herod before the dance of the seven veils, which reveals his fear for the evil omens and the tragic incident that Jokanaan had prophesied. Thus, the red moon also foretells the bloodshed incident of Jokanaan which will take place after Salomé finishes her dance.

In the play, Salomé is attracted to the qualities of the moon which are 'cold and chaste'. She also associates herself with the moon and refers to it as a virgin: 'I am sure she is a virgin, she has a virgin's beauty. […] She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses' (1940: 14). Therefore, when Salomé surrenders to her own passion and does whatever it takes to get a kiss from Jokanaan, she is no longer 'cold and chaste", but becomes "a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers' (1940: 24). While Salomé is brooding over the severed head, the black cloud is passing in front of the moon and completely hiding its light, foreshadowing the tragic end of Salomé. Her death is literally brought about by the moon. In the final scene, the moonbeam shines onto Salomé one last time, revealing the terrible kiss which provokes Herod to order his soldiers to kill Salomé.

Even though the moon in Yeats's play does not have the same function as in *Salomé*, it has a symbolic meaning which partly closes to the moon in *Salomé*. The full moon stands for perfect beauty and unmixed spirituality, represented by the Queen. Thus, the image of the Queen laughing her crazy laughter and of her shivering after kissing the severed head under the full moon in March recalls the moon-mad woman Herod imagines: 'like a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers […] she reels through the clouds like a drunken woman' (1940: 24). Furthermore, Maeterlinck's concept of the puppet or being control by the more powerful force is still visible in Yeats's play. In *A Full Moon in March*, Yeats transferred the domineering power of the moon to the voice of two attendants and to the sound of the drum-taps. The attendants oblige to supply all voices and are responsible to reveal and conceal the Queen by opening and closing the inner curtains. Thus, they settle the action in the play through their songs, dialogues, and the sound of the drum-taps.

The dance scene is always regarded as the most important part in both plays. The function of the dance carries symbolic meaning. Wilde did not provide any details of how the dance scene should be. In the text, he simply stated 'Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils' (1997: 38). It is then left to readers to imagine what the dance should be. Nevertheless, the form of her dance should go along with the context of that scene in which her dance is supposed to please Herod, so that he will grant her the reward. Sammells argued that Salomé dances for herself, not for any other characters. She is 'a distinctive, unsettling version of the assertive New Woman whose cause we have seen him championing elsewhere' (2000: 75). To some extent, she might dance for both herself and Herod. Salomé dances in order to expose the other part of herself; to strip off the virgin version of herself, and to embrace the real Salomé whose heart is full of passion and desire. And at the same time, she dances for Herod as to fulfill both herself and Herod's wish. From this notion, her dance should be something directly sensual and erotic on view in the dance in order to capture the gaze of Herod and to reveal her inner passion.

On the contrary, Yeats's play provided a suitable amount of description for the dance scene. Yeats's stage direction describes the dancing part that: 'Queen takes up the head and lays it upon the ground. She dances before it – a dance of adoration. She takes the head up and dances with it to drum-taps, which grow quicker and quicker. As the drum-taps approach their climax, she presses her lips to the lips of the head. Her body shivers to very rapid drum-taps. The drum-taps cease. She sinks slowly down, holding the head to her breast' (1997: 629). The image of the Queen and her

dance suggest the supernatural powers of a woman poised between the two dimensions which are the living and the dead. Despite Yeats's rejection of the similarity, Raby commented that 'Yeats's use of the dancer suggests a process of refining through successive experiments, until he reaches the purity of his last definition. It does not seem far from the kind of theatre Wilde was intuitively making' (1988: 116).

Nevertheless, there are significant points that mark the differences of the two dance scenes. Yeats claimed in a letter to Olivia Shakespear that 'it is more original than I thought it, for when I looked up *Salomé* I found that Wilde's dancer never danced with the head in her hands' (1954: 826). 'But in his (Wilde) play the dance is before the head is cut off' (1966: 1311), Yeats explained in the preface to his play. So, the timing of the dance scene certainly affects the symbolic meaning of the dance. Yeats's Queen did not dance in order to seduce her admirer and lure him to grant her wish like Salomé, that why Yeats commented on Salomé's dance as 'a mere uncovering of nakedness' (1954: 827). The Queen's dance, according to Yeats, was 'a long expression of horror and fascination' (1954: 827).

In Yeats's play, there are three episodes of the dance: the first is right after the beheading scene, the second part of the dance is after the severed head sings, and the final part is after the Queen laughs her crazy laugh. Yeats explained in his letter about the dancing part that 'she first bows before the head (it is on a seat,) then in her dance lays it on the ground and dances before it, then holds it in her hands' (1954: 827). Each episodes of the dance holds different meanings due to the symbolic moments that are worked through the Queen and the Swineherd. Before the dance scene, she drops her veil, which is the symbol of her virginity. The act of dropping the veil represents her sexual surrender which is similar to the act of stripping veil after veil during the dance of the seven veils and kissing in the final scene of *Salomé* which indicates the end of her virginity. Yet, the Queen's act of dropping the veil is accompanied by a sense of shame, symbolized by her standing with her back to the audience. While she holds the severed head in her hand, the Queen declares her love for the Swineherd through her song.

The bowing before the dance and her action of placing the severed on the throne shows her acceptance of the Swineherd as the new King. The second part of the dance is associated with the Queen's feeling which contains a mixture feeling of, as Yeats claimed, 'horror and fascination'. She might be fascinated by the severed head's song, and, at the same time, be horrified either by the fact that the severed head can sing or she has killed the only man whose song is able to stir her heart: 'The Queen in her dance moves away from the head, alluring and refusing' (1997: 629). While dancing, she laughs her crazy laugh for the absurdity of her situation. The final part of the dance represents the sexual union of the Queen and the Swineherd, which also synchronizes with the increasing rhythm of the drum-taps. She takes the severed in her hands, dances with it, and makes love to it. The dance scene end with the image of the Queen holds the severed head close to her breast and, as the Swineherd predicted, sinks 'in bridal sleep' (1997: 627).

Conclusion

Despite the similarities and the closeness in term of form and technique, both Wilde's *Salomé* and Yeats's *A Full Moon in March* have their own originalities. Tydeman distinguished the originality of *Salomé* from Maeterlinck's play in his book, *Wilde: Salomé*. He explained that 'whatever his Maeterlinck affiliations in terms of verbal structures and textures, Wilde rarely resorts to the slow trance-like vagueness of the Belgian. Much in *Salome* is dynamic, clear-cut, hard-edged, brilliant' (1996: 8). Both Wilde and Yeats had simply taken the symbolist techniques outlined by Mallarmé, Maeterlinck, or Wilde in Yeats's case, to its furthest reach. They did not imitate their forerunners or each other's works: they absorb those techniques, adjust them, and apply them into the plays.

Yeats believed that the beauty of drama lay in its stylization, its unity of images, and in its concentratedness. Therefore, in *A Full Moon in March,* he tried to capture that beauty by presenting a unified image in which all scattered emotions were heightened and then collected in the kissing scene. Serpillo in his review on two plays asserted similar idea. In *A Full Moon in March,* he concluded that 'discord has become identity, thought and will are indistinguishable, and emotional and spiritual wholeness are finally achieved' (2009: 240-242). *Salomé* is also presented as an image, but with scattered emotions. *Salomé* could not create a unified image like Yeats's play since its feeling spills out on all sides as each characters have their stories and their climaxes moments: the Young Syrian commit suicide after ignored by Salomé; the Page of Herodias's reaction in the suicide scene of the Young Syrian; Salomé in the kiss scene; and Herod in the last scene when he overcomes his own passion and orders to kill Salomé. Nevertheless, the mixture of feeling and the recklessness with which it turns against itself are such a powerful, memorable force.

Yeats's *A Full Moon in March* could be seen as a new version of Wilde's *Salomé*. It focuses on the same major theme which is the passionate love relationship between the sexes, and uses the similar plot. However, Yeats's version shows his attempt to simplify the theme of both plays, which is about love and sin. Yeats uses only two mains characters, apart from the musicians. The Queen stands for the eternal feminine and a pure soul that needs to complete her being by uniting with her opposite, while the Swineherd is the male principle and a pure body that needs to be sacrificed, so that the body and soul will finally reunite through the kiss. The simplicity and the less character help Yeats to strip bare their relationship during the confrontation of the two sexes. Thus, painted scenery is substituted by speech and music and much of the effect depends upon the dance of the Queen carrying the severed head.

In term of their dramatic theories, the difference between Wilde and Yeats's theatre might be the fact that each took the role of playwright differently. Pease's essay 'Aestheticism and Aesthetic Theory' suggested that 'Wilde consistently stressed that it was the critic's job to find social and political meaning in art' (2004: 100). Thus, while Wilde wrote drama because of the artist's obligation to expand the knowledge of self-conscious or the art of expression, Yeats wrote drama to fulfill his own desire. While Wilde's technique was to use the old forms made familiar and agreeable to the audience through fine acting, Yeats attempts to invent a new form by reducing the role of acting in order to have audience focus only on the context of his drama.

Yeats was always considered the spiritually coherent as the most significant part in his drama. He explained in his letter to Edmund Dulac about his reason for wanting to re-write *The King of the Great Clock Tower* that 'I don't like *The Clock Tower* which is theatrically coherent, spiritually incoherent' (1954: 830). However, theatrical coherence should be a prime consideration in composing a play. The greater complexity in spiritual theme or in symbolic meaning is possible to pursue such intellectual constructs in a reading of the text, but difficult for the acting or to comprehend by looking. Thus, his method or his type of aristocratic drama requires a higher knowledge and intense concentration from audiences in order to fully experience and understand the language of Yeats's theatre which heavily relies on the prime medium of communication as dance, song and mine. Those points might be the reasons why Yeats's dramatic style did not receive much popularity like his poetry or become a great impact onto later generation as his style seemed to fade away during the late twentieth century.

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