In referring to Lady Gregory’s career as a playwright, George Bernard Shaw says, “Yet it never, as far as I know, occurred to her spontaneously to write a play at all… but I feel quite sure that whenever anything was wanted, whether it was a scrubbing brush or an Irish play, Lady Gregory was appealed to as a general housekeeper to supply it...and thus was discovered one of the most remarkable theatre talents of our time.” Though intended as praise, Bernard Shaw’s description of Lady Gregory’s role in the Abbey Theatre diminishes any agency or intention she possessed when creating her plays. She is deliberately relegated to the inherently gendered role of “general housekeeper,” caretaker to male writers of the Abbey such as W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge, and her writing is equated to the mundane act of buying a scrubbing brush. Most prominent in this quote is its tone of genuine surprise at Lady Gregory’s talent, as if the idea of a “general housekeeper” or an Irish woman writing plays of substance is absurd, or at least highly unexpected.

Bernard Shaw’s attitude of belittlement towards Lady Gregory’s talent has unfortunately carried over into critical study of her work, causing literary scholars to commonly overlook her plays in favor of studying her male contemporaries’ works. My thesis project contributes to a renewed scholarly examination and appreciation of her plays. I hope to situate her as a significant contributor to the the Abbey Theatre’s project and the wider Irish Literary Revival in her own right. My investigation of her intentionally crafted plays seconds Bernard Shaw’s statement that Lady Gregory is indeed, “one of the most remarkable theatre talents of our time.”

My thesis project examines eight of her plays—Hyacinth Halvey (1906), Spreading the News (1904), The Rising of the Moon (1903), Cathleen Ni Houlihan (1902), The Gaol Gate (1907), Grania (1912), Kincora (1905), and Dervorgilla (1907)—discussed according to the historical period in which they are set and the gender balance of their characters. Through these plays, Lady Gregory levels a sustained critique of the Catholic Church and the Irish nationalist movement’s oppressive ideologies. She condemns the practice of politicizing Ireland’s rich Celtic folk traditions for the nationalist agenda and points to the nationalist movement’s deliberate misrepresentation of Irish women. In her tragedies, Lady Gregory looks to Ireland’s mythological past for a solution to her country’s inherently flawed ideologies and oppressive attitude towards women. In the tragedies, she ultimately posits that instead of depending on the blood sacrifices of Ireland’s young men, the key to Ireland’s political future lies in the hands of its greatest untapped resource: its powerful women.

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