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**“GRANT ME AN OLD MAN’S FRENZY”:
AGE AND RAGE ON THE STAGE**

Alexandra Poulain

As Yeats made clear in his 1923 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, devoted (against all odds) to “The Irish Dramatic Movement,” he considered his involvement in the theater as a crucial part of his literary activity. He was also deeply aware of the various Western theatrical traditions out of which modern drama emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Yeats’s lifelong concern with old age constantly intersects with his fascination with the great Western theatrical figures of old men, from the comic *senex* of classical comedy to the great tragic heroes who endure the mortification of failing bodies and impending madness, in particular Oedipus and Lear. From very early on, his plays explore both the anxiety, even revulsion, which the ageing process causes in him, and an acute awareness of the social violence exerted against the aged. This tension, I want to argue, finds a privileged mode of expression in the theater, perhaps because there is something eminently histrionic in the “frenzy” with which his ageing heroes respond to this social violence, raging against the younger generations’ attempt to disempower and marginalise them.

In the first part of this essay, I look at a number of Yeats’s early plays, which, I argue, recycle the comic type of the angry old man, the *senex iratus* of classical comedy, and ambiguously revisit a theatrical tradition which tends to ridicule and chastise the old. In this tradition, the old man’s anger connotes the failure of self-control which characterises pathological senescence, an incapacity to regulate cravings which ought to have receded with age, a libidinal excess constructed both as grotesque and morally reprehensible. Yeats’s early plays, typically, both reactivate the cultural bias which the type vehicles and question its validity, often subverting the ageist ethos of classical comic tropes by infusing them with tragic overtones. Such plays ultimately expose the effort of younger generations to neutralise the old, relegating them to the status of spectators and, at best, advisors, and denying them any claims to sexual and emotional fulfilment. The second part discusses plays which reinvent the tragic version of the *senex*. Here Yeats does not allow old age to be passively disempowered, but has old men respond in rage to the indignities they are exposed to. Contrary to anger, which can be a rational, reflection-induced response to a perceived wrong, rage connotes a “visceral”¹ reaction, in word or in deed; it is uncontrolled, excessive and often destructive, an expression of intense frustration. In these plays, however, rage is not an object of ridicule, but rather the expression of restored dignity for old age. No matter how ineffective it may

be, it manifests a refusal to be silenced, to be the compliant target of symbolic or real violence. Finally, the third part addresses the two farcical Prologues delivered by strikingly similar, clownish Old Men in two plays written, respectively, at the beginning and end of Yeats's theatrical career: the Old Man of the original, comic version of *The King's Threshold* (1903), which was suppressed in the revised, tragic version of 1921, but returns, angrier than ever, as a farcical double of the ageing playwright, to deliver his theatrical testament in *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939). Remembering Oedipus and Lear, and rehabilitating the *senex iratus* of classical comedy, Yeats makes rage on the stage a modality of resistance to containment and silencing.

I

Yeats's anxiety at the prospect of aging is manifest from the early plays, in which older characters are often based on the comic type of the *senex iratus* of classical Greek and Roman comedy and his later incarnations in the *comedia dell'arte* (Pantalone) and in Shakespeare (for instance, Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*). In this tradition, the *senex*, or "heavy father," is the repository of all forms of power—domestic, economic and political—and the guardian of patriarchy; he presides over the destinies of the younger generations and must be dislodged if they are to thrive sexually and socially. He is a miser and a bully, characterized, in Northrop Frye's words, by "his rages and threats, his obsessions and gullibility"²; he stands in the way of the young lovers, but his schemes are eventually thwarted and love triumphs. The type is usually treated negatively, as a source of fear and an object of ridicule, although Shakespeare's heavy fathers are rather more complex and ambivalently characterised. Chastising the *senex*, exposing his physical and moral failings and thwarting his schemes is a way of pushing against patriarchy and established rules, and making room for a measure of social change. Modern playwrights, however, are faced with a very different situation. Up to recent years and the development of a new interest in "age studies," it was widely assumed that with the rise of industrialisation, as old people retired from full-time employment and became dependent on state-afforded pensions, they were progressively relegated to the margins of society, a phenomenon which Gerald Gruman has described as a hallmark of the modernist lifestyle.³ Although this narrative is being challenged by present-day cultural historians, it clearly chimes with Yeats's perception of the situation in modern Ireland, and his growing realisation that it "is no country for old men"—an anxiety which doubles his sense of marginalisation as a member of the social elite with whom he identifies.⁴ In fact both concerns often merge, and it could be argued that in some cases old age is a metaphor for the old dispensation, the progressively

disempowered Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. In his early plays Yeats borrows freely from the classical comic tradition, but his handling of the type of the senex is eminently mutable and ambiguous. While some plays merely tend to replicate the cultural bias inherent in the type of the senex, others set out to challenge it, and expose the ideological violence that it perpetrates.

Yeats’s ambivalent response to ageing is vividly expressed in two closely related early plays, *The Land of Heart’s Desire* (1894) and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902, co-authored with Lady Gregory). In both plays, a young protagonist is torn between, on the one hand, earthly love, a simple life and the prospect of aging, and on the other hand the lure of imminent death and the promise of an idealised afterlife unburdened by the horror of physicality. Both plays dramatize a contest between the living and a supernatural entity who tries to win the protagonist over to the otherworld. In *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, on which I wish to focus here, Bridget is a female version of the ever-angry *senex*, embittered by a life of labour and constantly reminding Mary that “it is wrong / To mope and idle” (VPI 185). “Mother, you are too cross” (182), Shawn tells her at the play’s opening, a cue taken up again later by her husband Maurteen: “Do not be cross” (190); “you are much too cross” (191). The play, however, is not unsympathetic to Bridget, who has legitimate reasons to complain (Mary is engrossed in her book and fails to do her share of the housework) and is not incapable of charity, feeding the fairy child milk and honey; rather, with her constant bitterness and anger, she provides an image of Mary’s inevitable future, once the early joys of love have waned—unless Mary becomes instead so drained of youthful passion that she loses all fighting spirit, as Maurteen speculates:

But do not blame her greatly; (she will grow
As quiet as a puff-ball in a tree
When but the moons of marriage dawn and die
For half a score of times.) (182)

Against the grotesque life-in-death of vegetative stupor which age promises, the play sets the lure of the otherworld,

Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue. (184, 206)

The lines, spoken first by Mary, then by the fairy Child, rupture the dominant pattern of iambic pentameters and figure the intrusion of the supernatural into the fabric of everyday language. The percussive rhythm and dense alliterative structure of the tetrameters, the anaphora and polysyndeton conspire to

construct an alternative, hypnotic voice, as if Mary were being ventriloquized by the Child even before she appears. Crucially, the lines make no positive claims about the otherworld, promising only an escape from the reality of aging which Bridget embodies, but this is sufficient reason for Mary to follow the Child and embrace death. The play's use of the *senex* type is thus eminently ambiguous: on the one hand, the cantankerous Bridget is a foil to the fairy child who offers an alluring alternative to a life of hard work and resentment; yet on the other hand, the play quietly makes the point that Bridget, for all her irascible senescence, embodies the life principle and resistance to the death wish. In the play's reinterpretation of the *senex iratus*, the old woman's anger is ultimately turned inward, as a form of negative energy which keeps her tethered to materialistic considerations and self-punishing practical chores, and incapable of the idealism of youth. Yet *The Land of Heart's Desire*, as indeed *Cathleen ni Houlihan* with the equally ambiguous Peter, implicitly questions the value of such idealism which seeks completion in death, not life, and ultimately destabilises conventional responses to the *senex* type, asking that we revise our assumptions about the pusillanimity of old age.

Another stock character from classical Greek and Roman comedy that resurfaces in the Yeatsian canon is the *senex amans*, the amorous old man. An ugly, jealous old man married to a very young woman, he is frequently cuckolded by a handsome younger man who seduces his wife behind his back. Paradoxically, this comic type occurs in a tragedy in the Yeatsian canon: in *Deirdre* (1907), Conchubar is framed after the classical *senex amans* and his avatar in the *comedia dell'arte*, Pantalone. The plot of the play also closely follows a comic plot: the old king Conchubar has chosen Deirdre for his wife, but she elopes instead with her young lover Naoise. When Conchubar, feigning reconciliation, seizes Naoise and tries to force Deirdre into marrying him, they gull him once again and are eventually reunited, but (this is the tragic twist) in death. The play makes it clear that the difference of age is a central issue, the cause of tragedy itself. The First Musician's expository tale recounts Conchubar's first chance encounter with Deirdre in her secluded house in the woods, "a child with an old witch to nurse her." "He went up thither daily," she continues, "till at last"

She put on womanhood, and he lost peace,
And Deirdre's tale began. The King was old.
A month or so before the marriage-day,
A young man, in the laughing scorn of his youth,
Naoise, the son of Usna, climbed up there,
And having wooed, or, as some say, been wooed,
Carried her off. (*VPI* 346)

Couched in the terse idiom of folktales, characterization is limited to indications of age: the “old” king is antagonized by “a young man, in the laughing scorn of his youth.” The polyptoton (young/youth) and epanalepsis (the repetition of a word at the beginning and end of a line) suffice to establish Naoise’s absolute superiority in the eyes of Deirdre, herself merely out of childhood as the euphemistic phrase “put on womanhood” indicates. The mention of Naoise’s “laughing scorn” also conjures up the ethos of classical comedy, in which the *senex amans*’ claim to remain sexually active is an object of ridicule. The First Musician completes Conchubar’s characterization in generic terms, reducing him to a stock character:

An old man’s love
Who casts no second line is hard to cure;
His jealousy is like his love. (VPI 348)

The aberrant love of the “old man” is pathologized (“hard to cure”) and distorted into the destructive, selfish emotion of “jealousy.” When Fergus attempts to convince the lovers that Conchubar has forgiven them, the Musician insists, twice, that “old men are jealous” (348, 349), and later tells Deirdre:

I have heard he loved you
As some old miser loves the dragon-stone
He hides among the cobwebs near the roof. (360)

The *topos* of the “old miser” rounds off Conchubar’s characterization as a grotesque, pathological *senex* whose claims to love and sexual fulfilment are illegitimate and morally offensive. In keeping with the comic tradition, he is chastised in the end for his incapacity to rein in his sexual urges when he destroys the very object of his desire, and finds himself once more frustrated. Thus the play uses comic conventions to a tragic end and censures the lecherous old man—although it also makes room for a different sort of reading, one more sympathetic to Conchubar. Certainly, Conchubar is cast as the patriarchal villain, who uses his status as High King to prey on Deirdre, spurning neither cunning, betrayal or sheer force to crush young love. Yet the play also repeatedly records the violence with which he is disqualified as a potential lover on account of his age. As we have seen, the First Musician keeps warning Deirdre against the love of old men, using the authority of the gnomic present (“old men are jealous”). When Deirdre tells her own story, the extreme simplicity of the diction reduces the complexity of emotional transactions to a mere question of age:

There was a man who loved me. He was old;
I could not love him. (360)

The short sentences, the absence of coordination, the monosyllabic lines all conspire to give the final verdict (“I could not love him”) an aspect of self-evidence. Yet the value of the negative modal (“could not”) is far from clear: does Deirdre mean that she could not bring herself to love him? Or does the phrase express a cultural ban, the fact that Conchubar, being “old,” is not eligible as a lover, regardless of his personal merits and of Deirdre’s natural inclinations? For all Conchubar’s inequity, there is a certain heroism in his resistance to a cultural bias which would unsex him for the benefit of younger men. Pushing against ingrained cultural assumptions, he persists for years in claiming his right to pursue love, at the cost of destroying the very object of his desire. In the final lines of the play, his loss is reconfigured as triumph:

Howl if you will; but I, being King, did right
 In choosing her most fitting to be Queen,
 And letting no boy lover take the sway. (388)

Although he is defeated in the end, the *senex amans* is granted the final words of the play, and allowed to voice his fierce rejection of the culture’s ban on aged sexuality and agency.

Perhaps the most unequivocally negative *senex* type is to be found in Yeats’s *At the Hawk’s Well* (first performed in 1916, and published in 1917). This “Play for Dancers” picks up the opposition between youth and old age already prominent in the plays I have just discussed, replaying it as the confrontation of the allegorical Young Man and Old Man. The Young Man (later revealed as Cuchulain) has come to the eponymous Hawk’s well to seek immortality, an illusory quest for which the Old Man has sacrificed his entire life; but when the Guardian of the well comes alive and invites Cuchulain into a dance, he chooses to follow her away from the flowing well, confronting the terror of an otherworldly embrace, fully and heroically endorsing his mortal condition rather than enduring it passively in sterile idleness. The Old Man is constructed as a foil to Cuchulain’s youthful audacity; in his desperate attempt to preserve his life he has wasted it away, and now blames everyone for his failure to live a significant life—the Guardian of the well, the unearthly “dancers” who have cheated him time and again, and the Young Man who might steal his due of the miraculous water when it comes. The *senex iratus* is reconfigured as the Nietzschean “man of resentment,”⁵ fuming against the whole world in his frustration but failing to realise that he is its sole artisan. His anger and vulnerability are expressed in terms of a grotesque physicality:

First Musician [*speaking*]. That old man climbs up hither,
 Who has been watching by his well

These fifty years.
 He is all doubled up with age;
 The old thorn-trees are doubled so
 Among the rocks where he is climbing. (VPI 401)

The “doubled up” body of the Old Man encapsulates the poetic principle of the whole passage, in which the laboriousness of his progress is suggested by the systematic “doubling” of words (“That old man” / “The old thorn-trees”; “doubled up” / “doubled so”; “climbs up hither” / “he is climbing”) as well as by the doubling of mimesis (the silent movements of the actor on the stage) by diegesis (the Musician’s narrative).⁶ While the latter point is a recurrent feature of Yeats’s dramaturgy, in this particular instance it contributes to the construction of the grotesque, exhausted physicality of the Old Man, creating a redundancy, a ponderousness also inscribed in the prosodic gracelessness of the plodding tetrameters. The play thus invites a very critical reception of the Old Man, revisiting the type of the *senex iratus* and its grotesque avatars in the *comedia dell’arte* to abject the ridiculous, life-denying “man of resentment” and glorify instead the adventurous Young Man—although in the final lyric both are regarded with a degree of irony. This harsh treatment of the *senex*, uncharacteristic within Yeats’s dramatic corpus, comes at a critical time in his personal life, when he may have felt that the time had come for him to embrace the part, though he clearly wasn’t ready for it: significantly, within a few months of the first staging of *At the Hawk’s Well* on 2 April 1916, Yeats, then in his early fifties, was to propose unsuccessfully to the twenty-two-year-old Iseult Gonne (after being rejected once more by her mother), then to marry the twenty-five year-old George Hyde-Lees.

However, when Yeats reiterated his experiment with comic masks and the grotesque imagination in his portrayal of the Old Men in *The Player Queen*, a play started in 1907 as a tragedy but reconfigured as farce and first performed in 1919 (three years after *At the Hawk’s Well*), he revisited the comic type of the *senex* to a very different effect. The final version of this enigmatic, mock-philosophical farce, in which Yeats both allegorizes and parodies his doctrine of the Mask, opens with a comic prologue, a dialogue between two Old Men who are “leaning from the upper windows, one on either side of the street” and who, unlike any other character in the play, “wear grotesque masks” (VPI 715). Katharine Worth detects a parody of Maeterlinck in this scene, “where the Maeterlinckian world of towers and queens and castles glimmers faintly through an alien, sardonic context,” and also sees the passage as anticipating O’Casey’s “sardonic double turns.”⁷ Curiously, she does not mention Beckett, although the passage contains in seed all the hilarity and pathos of his grotesque dramaturgy of the failing body. Anticipating the old couple sticking out

of their dustbins in *Endgame*, only the trunks and heads of the old men are visible, and they are placed just sufficiently wide apart that communication is possible but laborious. The action and dialogue are ritualised; presumably Yeats's Old Men meet every day at daybreak to scrutinize the streets of their town and appraise their physical deficiencies: one of the two Old Men has "better sight," the other "better hearing," but they join forces in their effort to assess the situation, complementing each other in the manner of the proverbial Blind Man and Lame Man in *The Cat and the Moon*. They have stepped out of the public arena and no longer participate in the life of the city, but are mere spectators of the agitation of public affairs which they leave to "the young and the middle-aged" (VPI 716). At the close of the scene, they leave the stage entirely and return to darkness, like puppets to their boxes ("we had best pull in our heads" [716]), for fear they might be implicated in the violent events which are underway in those revolutionary times. Clearly, they have internalized society's attempt to marginalise them to such extent that they withdraw in terror and perform a pantomime of anticipated death and burial: "better shut the windows and pretend to be asleep" (716–17).

The compliance of the two Old Men in *The Player Queen* is unusual in the Yeatsian canon, but the play, with its emphasis on physicality and the politics of (self-) marginalisation it engages, surreptitiously points out the ageist ethos which Yeats identified as a feature of modernity. Elsewhere, in a more tragic vein, Yeats's angry old men do not accept their declining condition passively but rage against the world and the younger generations who would keep them out of it. In these plays, Yeats's *senex iratus* takes after Oedipus and Lear, those tragic heroes for whom the experience of extreme "bodily decrepitude" is the path to a form of alternative "wisdom," expressed as rage against all attempts at silencing and disempowering them.

II

Yeats translated *Oedipus at Colonus*, the tragedy of the blind old king-turned-beggar on the threshold of death, after the publication of the first version of *A Vision* in 1925, and the play opened at the Abbey in September 1927. Three years later, after seeing Denis Johnston's production of *King Lear*, he wrote to Lady Gregory in annoyance: "An elaborate verse play is beyond our people. If I dared I would put 'King Lear' into modern English" (CL *InteLex* #5398). This never happened, but when the BBC broadcast a reading of *Oedipus at Colonus* in 1931, Yeats brought together the two heroes in his introductory talk, declaring (somewhat inaccurately): "Oedipus...wanders an outcast from road to road, a blind old man, attended and protected by his two daughters as Lear was protected by Cordelia. So great has been his suffering that the gods have come over

to his side and those that he curses perish, and those that he blesses prosper” (CW2 891). No such consolation is granted to Lear, who dies of heartbreak, yet both heroes are stretched out “upon the rack of this tough world,”⁸ and respond to the horror of their fate by rejecting the posture of the wise old man which would be forced upon them, and embracing instead “an old man’s frenzy” (VP 576). Finding himself doubly marginalised at the end of his life, as a member of the displaced Anglo-Irish Protestant elite with whom he identified and as an old man, Yeats found in the “rage” of the old heroes a radically subversive posture which allowed him to resist marginalisation and absorption within the new order. Encompassing both extreme anger and “frenzy” or madness—Lear’s self-diagnosed “*hysterica passio*,” a phrase Yeats used to describe his own fits of rage⁹—rage occurs in his plays as a modality of political and existential resistance, the deeply histrionic posture which allows the redundant, dispossessed old man to remain on the stage and deflect all attempts at containment.

One particularly pernicious “ageist” strategy that Yeats’s plays identify is that which consists in forcing the old person into the posture of wisdom—the philosophical “sage” who reins in his passions and renounces his ambitions, both sexual and political. While Yeats, especially in the final decade of his life, became increasingly fascinated with the figure of the sage as a philosophical and poetic ideal,¹⁰ his plays of the same period reveal a contrary defiance towards the compulsory wisdom routinely imposed on old people as a means of containment. This is an old ploy, which appears both in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*. Should Oedipus, who is at death’s door, not be buried in Thebes, whence he was expelled in shame by his brother-in-law Creon, it has been prophesied that Thebes should be destroyed. Creon therefore attempts to persuade Oedipus to follow him back to Thebes, but when Oedipus refuses him he chides him for his stubbornness: “Do you want everybody to know, miserable old man, that age has not brought you sense? Do you want to make yourself a byword?” (VPI 875) A few moments later, however, Theseus, the King of Athens, makes the same point to shame Creon: “you who are old and should have learnt wisdom, you have brought disgrace upon an honourable city” (880). The Chorus, finally, attempts to coax Oedipus into a posture of stoic acceptance of imminent death:

Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span;
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied aged man;
Delight becomes death-longing if all longing else be vain. (887)

The wise old man is a highly respectable figure in Greek antiquity, yet Sophocles’ play highlights Oedipus’ heroic resistance to such discourse. He embraces death serenely, but not before cursing Creon, his sons and his former city, bringing the revenge of the gods against them. In *King Lear*, Goneril resorts

The issue of age is central to the debate. The aging process is encapsulated by the image of “water in [the] blood,” which suggests the declining of vital forces, the cooling of passions that Cuchulain recognises in Conchubar but refuses to embrace for his own sake, claiming a right to the intensity and recklessness of youth. Conchubar’s reply, however, points out that Cuchulain is in fact no longer a young man; his concern is the welfare of the next generation, for whom Cuchulain’s “turbulence” (493) constitutes a threat. When all the kings join in to support Conchubar’s demand, Cuchulain finally gives in and takes the oath, conceding: “It’s time the years put water in my blood / And drowned the wildness of it” (493). In *On Baile’s Strand*, of course, Cuchulain is not yet an old man (in fact the whole point of the Cuchulain narrative is that he never gets to be one, since he has chosen an early death as the price for everlasting fame); yet the oath materialises the manifold discursive strategies used to constrain older generations in order to promote the interests of the young. The structuring irony of the play is that by renouncing his own youth in order to protect Conchubar’s children, Cuchulain is driven, tragically, to kill his own son.

In terms of plot the infanticide is the direct consequence of the oath, which compels Cuchulain to fight the Young Man against his will, unaware that he is his father. At an unconscious level, however, the killing of the Young Man is motivated ideologically in terms of a preoccupation with the decay of the race: the sense that the next generation must of necessity be lesser than the present one, that “descent” will inevitably mean decline. Between the 1860s and the 1890s, concern about the supposed dangers of miscegenation and the resulting “degeneration” of the white race, was popularized by the works of Max Nordau, Cesare Lombroso, Oswald Spengler and many others, and in Ireland, this nexus of anxieties was absorbed into the gothic narrative of the decline of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.¹⁵ This preoccupation, which runs through the Yeatsian canon, is couched in mythical terms in *On Baile’s Strand*. At first Cuchulain is unaware that he has a son, and in the early moments of the play he denies having ever wanted one

that marred me in the copying
As I have that clean hawk out of the air
That, as men say, begot this body of mine upon a mortal woman. (*VPl* 485)

Being half-god, half human, Cuchulain has already “marred” the perfection of the godly hawk, and any child of his must continue this catastrophic descent into humanity. In his essay on Yeats and disability, Joseph Valente identifies a conflict between Yeats’s advocacy of a eugenicist ideology, most stridently articulated in *On the Boiler* but already present in many earlier prose pieces, and his relentless exploration of versions of himself as a mentally and physically disabled old man, who participates in the degeneration of the race. “It is surprising,” Valente

writes, “that the double-vision Yeats bore of himself at this point, as both superior and abject, does not seem to have aroused in him any intense cognitive dissonance. After all, he was regularly propounding an aesthetic and an ethos of human disqualification at a time when he was most vulnerable for such disqualification, most subject to the physical and/or mental disability that was its ‘master trope.’”¹⁶ Valente suggests that this aporia is resolved in Yeats’s division of labour, between the non-fiction prose works in which his eugenicist views are expressed unambiguously, and the creative works which accommodate and often celebrate versions of the abject Yeats and his poetic or dramatic avatars. Picking up on Valente’s argument, I would suggest that the “aporia” he identifies is in fact at the very core of the dramatic conflict in *On Baile’s Strand*, and finds its tragic expression in Cuchulain’s accidental infanticide. Cuchulain both performs the “ethos of human disqualification” inherent in his lamenting of the decay of the race and, by destroying his own progeny, identifies himself as tainted by the threat of degeneracy—a point vividly proved by the blind rage in the grips of which he commits the murder, the dramatic equivalent of the fits of madness which Yeats saw himself as being prone to. However, I argue that the murder of the Young Man can also be read in a more positive light, not as a self-punishing gesture, but as Cuchulain’s raging response against the younger generation in whose name he has been made to take the oath and renounce his youthful freedom. In the symbolic economy of the play, the Young Man is a sacrificial substitute for Conchubar’s sons, who must be protected at all cost to ensure the stability of the kingdom. By killing him, Cuchulain unconsciously resists the ageist agenda of the culture he inhabits, and refuses to be restrained and disempowered for the sake of the puny generation that must come after his own.

Similar concerns recur much more explicitly in Yeats’s penultimate play, *Purgatory* (1938), where the Old Man’s murder of his son, which repeats his earlier murder of his father, is meant to cut short the polluted lineage started by his aristocratic mother when she married a commoner, and to put an end to her endless reliving of her sins. Yet again, the fear of degeneration overlaps with a more fundamental intergenerational conflict. We first see the Old Man through the eyes of the Young Man. “Study that tree, what is it like?” the Old Man asks his son as they arrive on the site of the burned house, to which the Boy replies, “A silly old man” (*VPI* 1041), implicitly comparing the old gnarled tree to his father’s grotesquely bent body. Emulating Lear’s daughters, he then abjects his father into the indignity of senility (“you are mad!” [1045]), before attempting to grab his bag of money, even threatening him with physical violence:

What if I killed you? You killed my grand-dad
 Because you were young and he was old.
 Now I am young and you are old. (1047)

In his brutality the Young Man cuts through the ideological smokescreen of the play’s eugenicist discourse and reveals the underlying conflict, an on-going struggle to the death between young and old for the control of material resources. The passage makes shockingly visible the insidious violence which modernity perpetrates against the aged by displacing them from the sphere of economic and financial exchanges. For all its eugenicist, crypto-fascist connotations, the Old Man’s infanticide also performs a radical form of resistance to a modern ageist culture which found an extreme manifestation in the fascist cult of youth.

The rage expressed by Yeats’s tragic old men, which transmutes into actual infanticide Oedipus’ and Lear’s curses against their progeny, is thus characteristically ambivalent, both self-punishing (as an assault against one’s unworthy descent) and self-preserving (as a act of resistance to marginalisation). In his final play, however, Yeats returns to a comic strategy and rehabilitates the *senex iratus*, in all his grotesque ineptitude, as a legitimate double of the playwright, reviving the irascible clown who had appeared in a much earlier play.

III

The first version of *The King’s Threshold*, first produced by the Irish National Theatre Society in October 1903, opened with a farcical prologue spoken by a decrepit Old Man dressed in “a red dressing-gown, red slippers and red nightcap” (VPI 313). This attire, which bespeaks advanced senescence, conjures up both the clowning tradition and the character of Pantalone in the *comedia dell’arte*, who is traditionally dressed in red. The Old Man speaks not in his own name but, he claims, merely repeats the words he has been taught by his nephew, a member of the cast who turned to him when no one else was available. His monologue constructs a fiction of disempowerment and coercion, whereby the infantilized Old Man is deprived of his own voice and trained to repeat the words of others: “I’ve got to speak the prologue,” “my nephew said,” “I am to say,” etc. Even the fictitious nephew, however, defers to the higher authority of “the poet”: “But as to the big play you are to see tonight, my nephew told me to say what the poet had taught him to say about it” (*Ibid.*). The effect, of course, is burlesque, the sacrosanct word of “the poet” completely deflected by multiple, undignified mediation and distorted by the trivial diction of the Old Man. The authority of the poet is further undermined when the Old Man pursues, “And as to what happened to Seanchan after, my nephew told me he didn’t know, and the poet didn’t know, and it’s likely there’s nobody that knows” (*Ibid.*). Although the Old Man is farcical in his staged senility, the joke is on Yeats himself, the autocratic but ultimately incompetent poet behind the scenes. While he appears to defer to the poet, duly repeating the lines he has been taught, the

Old Man surreptitiously subverts his authority and progressively introduces a counter-discourse of his own, a rambling, uncontrolled discourse of the ageing body in pain which insinuates itself in the cracks of sanctioned speech. His costume (the nightgown, slippers and nightcap) already performs such a breach of decorum, bringing into the public space of the theater the pathological private body of an old man at bedtime. In the early moments of the Prologue the Old Man, who has been putting on an act of total deference to received instructions, interrupts himself to adjust the curtain: "Wait a bit, there's a draught here," he says, again inviting the frail, suffering body of old age onto the stage of high drama.

After he has duly exposed the plot, a trumpet sounds, signalling to him that it is time to leave the stage, but this time the Old Man refuses to be contained, and bursts into a raging rant about the "great ladies and great gentlemen" in the audience who ignore the painful realities of old age, "as if there was no such thing in the world as cold in the shoulders, and speckled shins, and the pains in the bones and the stiffness in the joints that make an old man that has the whole load of the world on him ready for his bed" (313–14). Refusing to leave the stage to the young and powerful, the Old Man instead claims this space of visibility for himself and the grotesque ailments of his ageing body, before trailing off into an indistinct mumble. The inconclusive end of the speech completely subverts the controlled rhetoric that he has been trained to reproduce and leaves open a space for discursive divergence. This is in fact a very apt introduction to the play itself, which also dramatizes a conflict between authority and the rambling counter-discourse of a man at death's door.

At surface level, Seanchan, the fictional poet who starves on the King's threshold to vindicate the value of poetry, is a double of the "poet" mentioned in the prologue, and a spokesman for Yeats himself. Yet in the early, comic version of the play, he is in fact also replicated in the figure of the grotesque Old Man, although the two apparently bear little resemblance. What brings them together most forcefully is that they are both standing on the verge of death, the eponymous threshold: the Old Man is nearing the end of his natural lifespan, and Seanchan, by virtue of his hunger strike, has almost exhausted his vital strength. Paradoxically, this both exposes them to extreme physical weakness and suffering, and frees them from the constraints of decorum and propriety, endowing them with an extraordinary power of subversion in the face of abusive authority. Seanchan's hunger strike is a public performance of contestation of King Gaire's decision to exclude poets from the great council of the State. As he exposes his weakening body to the crowd, thus making visible the symbolic violence perpetrated by the monarch on the artists, his speech is progressively loosened, so that by the end of the play, as the Mayor says in the 1921 version, "he is delirious" (299): literally, straying off the furrow ("lira" in Latin)

of orthodox speech to voice the artist’s truth, his imprescriptible right to participate in the life of the city as the bearer of a counter-hegemonic discourse. While Seanchan grounds his legitimacy in his performance of starvation, the Old Man likewise claims visibility and audibility in the public sphere by theatricalising his bodily infirmities, asserting against all social conventions that “bodily decrepitude is wisdom” (VP 523) and refusing the ageist, ableist consensus which would confine him to parroting or to silence.

When Yeats revised the play in 1921, after Terence McSwiney’s fatal hunger strike, he followed his initial instinct, which had been to write the play as a tragedy,¹⁷ had Seanchan die at the end and suppressed the Prologue, whose ostensible function had been to justify the comic ending (CW2 686). The Old Man, however, must have kept raging in the wings, and he resurfaces vociferously in Yeats’s final play, *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), written when Yeats himself was on death’s threshold. This time, the angry Old Man is an explicit figure of the playwright. Although he affects to be bound to a higher authority (“I have been asked to produce a play,” “when they told me I could have my own way”), he clearly positions himself as a living anachronism and hence as a force of subversion of the values of the time: “I have been selected,” he claims, “because I am out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the thing is made of.” (VPI 1051). As in the earlier play, the Old Man’s alleged senility frees him from the restrictions of propriety, while an external signal attempts to contain his bouts of rage:

If there are more than a hundred I won’t be able to escape people who are educating themselves out of the book societies and the like, sciologists all, pick-pockets and opinionated bitches...

[*Drum and pipe behind the scene, then silence*]

That’s from the musicians; I asked them to do that if I was getting excited. If you were as old you would find it easy to get excited. (1052)

Just like the trumpet-blast in the earlier play, the “drum and pipe” objectify the authoritative discourse of rationality, which the Old Man pretends to have so well internalised that he claims responsibility for the arrangement. His excitability, however, is not to be so easily contained, and he soon succumbs again to a fit of *hysterica passio*, vituperating against the philistines who have taken over the arts and degraded them beyond recognition. Constructed as an emblem of the old dispensation, the decrepit Anglo-Irish elite now displaced by an emerging class of middle-class boors, the Old Man is the grotesque counterpart of Cuchulain, but while the exhausted hero embraces death, it is left to the

comic *senex*, in his grotesque, raging senescence, to perform a radical rejection of the hegemonic values of the time. Refusing the guise of the wise old man, Yeats masquerades instead as the *senex iratus* whose histrionic gesticulations ensure that he will never be digested by the new order, but will remain a force of disturbance. As a senator and a “smiling public man” working within the institutional framework, the aging Yeats had found that he had in fact very limited effective power. Standing at death’s door, he finds an alternative mode of resistance in the grotesque physicality and “savage indignation” of the comic *senex*, whose unrelenting performance of age and rage on the stage makes him the legitimate, heroic double of the furious Cuchulain.

I have argued that Yeats found in drama a medium particularly well suited to express his preoccupation with old age, and to experiment with modes of resistance against ageist strategies of containment. While his endorsement of the figures of raging old men is most often associated with the late poems, an examination of his drama reveals that this was in fact a lifelong concern, which Yeats pursued with constantly renewed inventiveness, reshaping the venerable *senex* which runs throughout the canon of Western drama into a radical figure of subversion. In doing so, Yeats also challenges the gender politics of his time, and refuses to endorse uncritically the nationalist ideal of virile self-containment promoted as “manliness,”¹⁸ allowing instead his unruly, raging old men to claim full visibility and audibility both on and off the stage of the theater.

Notes

1. I borrow this distinction from Kathleen Woodward, “Against Wisdom: the Social Politics of Anger and Aging,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 17 (2003), 55–67, 65, n. 4.
2. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1957, 1990), 172.
3. Gruman, G. J., “Cultural Origins of Present-Day ‘Age-ism’: the Modernization of the Life Cycle,” in *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology*, edited by S. Spicker, K. Woodward, and D. Van Tassel (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 359–387.
4. In the English context see for instance Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, transl. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 2007), 21 et *passim*.
6. See Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright. Modernism, Anti-Theatricality & Drama* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2002, 2011), 130–33.
7. Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1978, 2013), 155.
8. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1997), 391.
9. See Peter T. Higginson, “‘Down Hysterica Passio’: A Sketch of the Mood-Structure of W. B. Yeats,” *Irish University Review* 28–2 (Autumn/Winter, 1998), 272–280.
10. On this point see in particular Matthew Gibson, *Yeats, Coleridge and the Romantic Sage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).
11. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, 205.

12. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, 215.
13. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, 208.
14. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, 263–64.
15. See Seamus Deane, “Yeats and Degeneration,” in *Studies on W. B. Yeats*, ed. Jacqueline Genet (Paris: CNRS, 1989), 209–222. Though Yeats only started reading Spengler in 1925, anxieties relating to degeneration had long since permeated Irish culture.
16. Joseph Valente, “Yeats, Age, and Disability.” Lecture delivered at the International Yeats Summer School, Sligo, August 2015. I am very grateful to Joseph Valente for letting me read this lecture prior to publication.
17. See Yeats’s note to the revised version, *CW2*, 686.
18. See Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2011).