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"What secret torture?"¹: Normativity, *Homoeros* and the Will to Escape in Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire* and Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field*

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Abstract:

This paper offers a dramaturgical and comparative analysis of W.B. Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1889) and Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field* (1899) in light of their representation of the tension between the queer and the normative. I focus on characters who feel different and the unease of the normative discourse which insults them and perceives their existence as a threat for traditional family values and as a cause of the family's unhappiness. This tension between the queer and the normative is also what creates spaces that allow new ways to think about gender and sexuality in these plays. I also argue that playwrights like Yeats and Martyn associated with the Revival and the Irish Literary Theatre often used the mainstream and widely accepted cultural framework of the supernatural to express same-sex intimacies in code and to offer a discourse of legitimation for non-normative subjectivities. Both Martyn's and Yeats's plays emphasise the pressure normalcy imposes on stigmatised individuals and the resulting desire to escape to find alternative ways of love, intimacy and happiness. I will refer to the works of contemporary queer theorists including Jack Halberstam, Heather Love, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Didier Eribon, José Esteban Muñoz and Sara Ahmed to demonstrate that these plays can offer "a rich archive of queer historical structures of feeling" (Love 2007, 24).

Keywords: failure, *homoeros*, normativity, supernatural, Yeats

Queer failure [...] is more nearly about escape and a certain kind of virtuosity
(J.E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 2009)

1. Yeats and Martyn: the Pressure of Normative Sexuality, Queer Feelings and the Supernatural as Escape

It might seem unusual to address the theme of *homoeros* in the works of two playwrights who have been strongly associated with

¹ Yeats 1953, 253.

Irish nationalism, conventional and idealised forms of desire and in Martyn's case, celibacy and religious conservatism. Yet many of Yeats's remarks in his *Autobiography* and correspondence suggest that both of these playwrights felt pressured by conventional notions of sexuality and family, and their drama reflects the resulting anxieties and restlessness². Yeats was very much aware that the plays he and Florence Farr were arranging for the season of avant-garde drama in London in 1894 – including *The Land of Heart's Desire* – and later for the inauguration of the Irish Literary Theatre were “studied insults” (2002, 384) for the regular theatre goer, as Yeats explained in his letter to John O'Leary on 28 March 1894. Their insulting nature was due to their implication of homosexual desire, gender reversal and explicit *eros*, which, as Nicholas Grene has pointed out, “were proximate to violence for bourgeois nationalist audiences” (2004, 86). Indeed, both Yeats's and Martyn's drama abounds in homosocial bonds, sexually ambiguous diction, and subverted gender roles. Most of their characters become specimens of excess transgressing boundaries of masculinity and femininity and exhibiting a kind of “gender exorbitancy” (Valente 2011, 172) that characters of authority representing a bourgeois code of value try to contain in the plays. Heather Love once claimed about Walter Pater's works that they offer “a rich archive of queer historical structures of feeling” (2007, 24), and I wish to argue that this is true for Yeats's and Martyn's drama as well.

This paper explores the tension between the normative discourse and non-normative characters in Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire* and Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field*. I use the terms normativity and non-normativity here to refer to the dramatic clash between the conventional/traditional and the unconventional, excluded, dissident or marginalised, which constitute the two main contradictory types of impulses in Yeats's and Martyn's plays. In the works chosen for discussion, the framework of the supernatural can also work to sharpen the tension between characters who safeguard the traditional family and characters who wish to escape from that world as they find it oppressive and insulting. I believe this also helps create spaces for queer readings today, as these plays can help deal with the invisible violence and insults of (hetero)normativity imposed on people who “inhabit norms differently” (Ahmed 2014, 148). Dramatising the tension between the queer and the normative works to deflate the grand narrative of normativity in general, along with its cult of moral prudery and bourgeois respectability, and thus critiques the outdatedness of certain social and theatrical performances. As Susan Harris explained, such Irish plays displayed contemporary cultural anxieties both about the New Woman and the queer man: the threat that they will refuse their social roles and thus heterosexuality as well (2017, 46). What happens in these plays can be accurately described by what Sara Ahmed has called queer feelings: “Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us” (2014 [2004], 155).

The Land of Heart's Desire and *The Heather Field* were written in the realist narrative tradition which is normally in conflict with feminist and queer readings due to its reliance on notions of fixed identity, yet these plays demonstrate that realism is not always a prison for women and non-normative subjectivities, or at least the realist drama written by Yeats and Martyn displays a resistance to the conventional tendencies of realism (Lapointe 2009, 81), similar to Henrik Ibsen's plays. As Gibson Cima has explained, “[f]or late nineteenth-century audiences accustomed to the conventional codes of melodrama, realism made those codes seem strange, for in realism the female actor exceeded the womanly characters or styles of performance behaviour the audience had grown to expect. And in that excess, that visibility, lay power” (1993, 12-13).

²The first part of this essay looks at Martyn in light of Yeats's observations about him rather than looking at Yeats through Martyn's perspective.

Coding illicit desire through the supernatural was common in Irish plays written around the end of the nineteenth century by Yeats, Martyn, John Todhunter and Florence Farr. In the 1890s, Yeats’s relationship with theatre was primarily informed by occult performance. Yeats was drawn towards the art of *travesti* from the earliest days in Bedford Park observing Florence Farr’s virile roles: his fascination increased in the nineties thanks to his interest in the occult and new theatre. Moreover, the magician Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers with his wife Moina performed dressed-up Isis rituals in Paris, where Yeats often visited them. Yeats was influenced by gender-crossing pantomime shows in Dublin and London as well, and by two *travesti* productions in particular: William Poel’s production of *Everyman* in 1901 and Sarah Bernhardt’s role as Pelléas in *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1904. This helps explain why gender fluidity is mostly associated with the supernatural in Yeats. Esoteric science conceives of the human as bisexual, and in fact, as Janis Haswell has demonstrated in her article “Yeats’s *Vision* and the Feminine”, Yeats’s search for his Daimon through ritual performance was a search for the feminine in himself (2012, 291). Harris has also observed that in Yeats’s *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, “the supernatural elements obscure the more troubling aspects of female desire” (2017, 48), while Katharine Worth noted that “the supernatural involves an ambiguous sexuality and was thought of by Yeats as open to a performer of either sex” (2013 [1978], 41). For instance, the Angel in *The Hour Glass* was first envisioned as a woman and Dervorgilla in *The Dreaming of the Bones* might also, Yeats thought, be played by a man (*ibidem*).

There is an equally significant connection between fairies and marginalised subjectivities within Irish culture and literature. Charlotte McIvor discusses this connection with regard to George Moore’s novella “Albert Nobbs” in which Alec, the narrator’s fictional interlocutor claims: “A woman that marries another woman, and lives happily with her isn’t a natural woman; there must be something of the fairy in her” (qtd. in 2013, 98). Fairies also carry an ambiguous double-meaning, thus helping to obscure homoerotic contents: “The ‘fairy’ here represents *both* an alibi that allows resumption of heteronormativity *and* the zone of an alternative queer reality” (*ibidem*). As McIvor further explains, by the 1920s, fairies had an established association with both Irish queerness and rural Irish heteronormativity (*ibidem*). Besides McIvor, Angela Bourke also stressed the queer potential of the fairy in that fairies belong to the margins and “their constant eavesdropping explains the need sometimes to speak in riddles, or to avoid discussion of certain topics” (qtd. in *ibidem*). Yeats’s drama in fact abounds in such metaphors of marginality – these are usually symbolic figures which appear in the subtexts of Yeats’s plays or offstage, thus on the margins of the texts, such as the white Unicorn of *The Player Queen*, the Great Herne of *The Herne’s Egg*, the white heron of *Calvary* or the wind-like shape-changing women of the Sidhe in the Cuchulain plays. These symbols pervade Yeats’s drama and they often appear impenetrable, obscure, ambiguous, visible and invisible at the same time, but always strongly associated with forms of desire that society and the other characters in the plays label as dangerous and deviant. Just like the fairies, these other supernatural figures could also be called “quare signifiers” (McIvor 2013, 99) and “metaphorical erotohistoriographical archives” (*ibidem*).

Thus for Yeats, characters belonging to the supernatural realm were not steadily gendered and allowed gender fluidity. Joseph Valente has also discerned the androgynous spirit of Yeats’s famous hero Cuchulain and his relationship with the feminine occult (the women of the Sidhe), which could reflect Yeats’s transition from Celticism that celebrated the feminine imagination to the use of more masculine elements in his work but it also mirrored “his critique of cramped sexual traditionalism of his nationalist compeers” (2011, 175). It is therefore important to acknowledge the role of the supernatural in coding illicit desires and taboo topics, and in the plays it will function as a symbolic space of possibilities and alternative happiness towards which

the protagonists will aspire to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the normative family. However, in my dramaturgical analysis of the plays in the second half of this essay, I will discuss the supernatural only as a useful framework, but my focus will be on queer structures of feeling.

My reading wishes to dialogue with Susan Harris's and Michael Patrick Lapointe's research in particular, who both argued that Yeats's and Martyn's plays "introduce[d] ciphers of *homoeros* into the modern Irish theatre at its inception" (Lapointe 2009, 74). Besides Harris and Lapointe, Adrian Frazier and Eibhear Walshe have also emphasised the latent homoeroticism of the Irish Revival and the Irish Literary Theatre. What is more, Walshe has observed that "[i]t is only with the project of cultural nationalism (and the simultaneous emergence of the emblematic figure of Oscar Wilde) that the homoerotic becomes more possible, and at the same time, more threatening in the formulation of an indigenous Irish literary identity" (1995, 147-148). Even though I build mostly on Harris's and Lapointe's research, I apply a slightly different approach in this study in that I re-examine Yeats's and Martyn's scripts through the lens of contemporary queer theorists' ideas of queer negativity, exploring queer structures of feeling in the plays, such as melancholia, broken intimacies, anxiety, sense of displacement and the will to escape. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love calls these "bad feelings" (2007, 13) or "feeling backward" (4), and highlights the affective power of representations of queer experience as suffering, which is a way of countering stigma by incorporating it: "These feelings are tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire" (*ibidem*). Or, as Jack Halberstam phrased it, such negative feelings work "to propose a relentless form of negativity in place of the forward-looking, reproductive, and heteronormative politics of hope that animates all too many political projects" (2011, 106).

Even though I mention some biographical details, the aim of the article is to provide a dramaturgical analysis of the play texts to open them up for contemporary interpretations, instead of treating them as mere biographical or historical objects. I use the word normativity in this essay in the sense in which Ahmed describes heteronormativity in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, according to which (hetero)normativity "functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape." (2014 [2004], 148). The basis of this sense of public comfort is the traditional family and respectability to which people need to conform in order to experience a "sinking" feeling (*ibidem*). However, the protagonists of the plays, Mary Bruin and Carden Tyrrell, will experience discomfort with normative family roles – they choose to fail in their domestic roles and become failures for their family. As Ahmed continues, "[q]ueer subject, when faced by the 'comforts' of heterosexuality may feel uncomfortable (the body does not 'sink into' a space that has already taken its shape). Discomfort is a feeling of disorientation: one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled" (*ibidem*). Yeats's and Martyn's protagonists display an existential anguish which signals their unease with the normative family that wants to see them happy in their roles as wife and husband. In this respect, they could be described by what Ahmed has called "affect aliens" (2010, 30) in "Happy Objects": "the family sustains its place as a 'happy object' by identifying those who do not reproduce its line as the cause of unhappiness. I call such others 'affect aliens': feminist kill-joys, unhappy queers, and melancholic migrants" (*ibidem*). Fintan Walsh has also applied the term "affect alien" in his essay on the affective power of cross-dressing and Panti Bliss, pointing out that the phobias of dissolution or non-identity lead to the production of such affect aliens "whose daily lives are policed by hatred, fear, shame, rather than just legislation" (2009, 64).

The connection between failure and queer subjectivities has been explored in depth most notably by Halberstam and Love who explain how capitalism and normative society make everyone who differs from them believe that they are failures. Love emphasises that "same-sex

desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility and loss. [...] Homosexuality and homosexuals serve as scapegoats for the failures and impossibilities of desire itself” (Love 2007, 21). Halberstam later added that “all desire is impossible, impossible because unsustainable, then the queer body and queer social worlds become the evidence of that failure, while heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion).” (2011, 94) Martyn’s and Yeats’s plays were very much ahead of their time and reflect key tenets of queer studies today because they dramatise the tension between the discourse that defines what counts as happiness and failure and people whom it labels as embodiments of social failure and the cause of unhappiness for others. Yet, as Harris has discerned, “[i]t is in this realm of failed re/production that Irishness and queerness meet” (2017, 7).

For *homoeros*, I use Lapointe’s definition which makes it clear that it is much more than simply same-sex desire and sexual acts: it implies sexually ambiguous diction and “a plurality of sexual categories, of expanded, yet often vexed, notions of love and male [or female] friendship, and of emotional and spiritual yearning for another member of the same sex. These relational discourses, sometimes marked by an intimacy or intensity usually associated with most standard configurations of heterosexual romance, are also, at other times, marked by anxiety and hostility” (2009, 89.) This ambiguity around the nature of relationships in the plays is crucial and evokes instances of the epistemology of the closet. As Patrick Lonergan has explained in his recent book *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950*, prioritising ambiguity in meaning over precision in Irish plays can create spaces that can allow new ways of talking about difference, sexuality and gender (2019, 147).

Yeats clearly understood that some people, including himself and especially Martyn, might not feel comfortable and free in certain social structures and roles created by what we today call (hetero)normativity. For Yeats, the strange, the unconventional was always a source of attraction, interest and sympathy which he represented in most of his works. Yeats sympathised with people who differed from the norm and could not fulfil their desires because of some absurd obstacle created by society or the state, as dramatised most notably in *The Dreaming of the Bones* in which the love between the ghosts of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla is impossible because the Young Man refuses to forgive them for the sin they committed centuries ago by putting the needs of the body (desire) before the nation. At the time of the composition of his early plays, Yeats was frequently in the company of unconventional people, such as George Moore, Martyn, W.T. Horton, William Sharp (aka Fiona Macleod) and the occultist Florence Farr, the British artists Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, and the magician Samuel Liddell McGregor Mathers. Yeats also felt different and had anxiety because of the pressure of normative sexuality, which informed his first-hand experience of performance alongside his occult experiences. Yeats also often criticised both the Irish and British governments for airbrushing non-normative individuals like Oscar Wilde, Charles Ricketts and Roger Casement from their frameworks of recognition. On 2 December 1936, Yeats wrote an outraged letter to his friend Lady Dorothy Wellesley, criticising those people and institutions who used Casement’s homosexuality to shame him:

But suppose the evidence had been true, suppose Casement had been a homo-sexual & left a diary recording it all, what would you think of a Government who used that diary to prevent a movement for the reprieve of a prisoner condemned to death? Charles Ricketts & Lawrence of Arabia were reputed homo-sexual suppose they had been condemned on a capital charge some where [*sic*], what would you think of a profession [*sic*] who insured their execution by telling the middle classes that they were homosexual. [...] I can only repeat words spoken to me by the old head of the Fenians years ago. ‘There are things a man must not do even to save a nation’. (2002, 6737)

Moreover, Yeats was also alert to his friends' anxieties with sexuality which, in fact, he also shared. There is a very interesting passage in his *Autobiography* which demonstrates that Yeats indeed felt pressured by normative sexuality that "mocked at any other life" (1972, 72), as he put it. Yeats was unable to conform and desperately wanted to escape, but he felt entrapped by his love for Maud Gonne. Thus Yeats could sympathise with the anxiety of some of his friends because he also felt different from normative masculinity – unlike his friends, he was never able to engage easily with other women. He even wished to give encouragement to young boys so that they would not feel shame about their difference, because Yeats knew by his own experience how normativity embodied by his friends, especially by the British poet William Ernest Henley, mocked everyone who differed from them. In fact, what Yeats distances himself from in this passage is not simply normative masculinity, but toxic hyper-masculinity which mocks those who are not able to get over an unrequited love and engage in casual sexual relationships with other women. Instead, Yeats identifies himself with a more tender, anxious and melancholy form of masculinity here:

I was tortured by sexual desire and had been for many years. I have often said to myself that some day *I would put it all down in a book that some young man of talent might not think as I did that my shame was mine alone.* [...] *Normal sexual intercourse does not affect me more than other men,* but that, though never frequent, was plain ruin. *It filled me with loathing of myself;* and yet at first pride and perhaps, a little, lack of obvious opportunity, and how *love kept me in unctuous celibacy.* When I returned to London in my twenty-seventh year I think my love seemed almost hopeless, and I knew that my friends had all mistresses of one kind or another and that most, at need, went home with harlots. *Henley, indeed, mocked at any other life.* I had never since childhood kissed a woman's lips. At Hammersmith I saw a woman of the town walking up and down in the empty railway station. I thought of offering myself to her, but the old thought came back, 'No, I love the most beautiful woman in the world'. (71-72; my emphasis)

This passage is followed by Yeats's admiring description of Eva Gore-Booth and Florence Farr both of whom Yeats perceived as queer (Harris 2017, 36). It is also here that Yeats explains that he put his own unfulfilled desire in *The Land of Heart's Desire*, but he imagined that Gonne was taken from him by a girl, not a man, and possibly fantasising the seduction of Gonne as a woman, thus queering his desire for her: "I began to write *The Land of Heart's Desire* to supply the niece of a new friend, Miss Florence Farr, with a part, and put in it my own despair. I could not tell why Maud Gonne had turned from me unless she had done so from some vague desire for some impossible life, for some unvarying excitement like that of the heroine of my play" (1972, 72-73). Yeats also uses the ambiguous phrase "vague desire for some impossible life" (73) which can refer to a spiritual experience but also to a forbidden form of desire. The longing for this impossible life and this unvarying excitement for the unknown and the uncertain once again recall Ahmed's and Halberstam's definitions of loss and failure associated with queer desire, but they also resonate with Heather Love's ideas of impossible love, as Love observed the connection between homosexual love and loss: the link between love's impossibilities and failures and at the same time the "wild hopes for its futures" (2007, 23).

Yeats's perception of Martyn was even more interesting. Martyn was known as a celibate, who opposed physical comforts, criticised the institution of marriage, felt ill at ease in the company of women but who was also greatly influenced by androgynous Greek ideals of beauty thanks to his Oxford education. As F.S.L. Lyons explains, Martyn's mother urged him to find a wife, but his reaction was to choose an "impenetrable bachelorhood" (1964, 12) instead. His mother convinced him to buy a luxurious ancestral mansion in Tulira "to make it fit to receive the ideal wife" (*ibidem*), yet Martyn used the house to receive his intimate friends. His

contemporaries, including Yeats and Moore in particular, noticed that “he was afflicted lifelong with some unexplained psychological anguish” (Lapointe 2009, 76). In his *Autobiography*, Yeats also claimed that he knew he must have much in common with Martyn (1972, 101). Yeats sensed that what hurt Martyn was his repressed desire for his own sex, and wondered “[w]hat drove him to those long prayers, those long meditations, that stern Church music? What secret torture?” (1953, 253) Yeats also refers to homosexuality when he talks about Martyn’s close friendship first with the homosexual Count Stanislaus Eric Stenbock and then with Moore, which also recalls the ambiguous bond between an old lecher and a saint in the subtext of his play *The Cat and the Moon*³:

I have observed in other abnormally virtuous men a tendency to choose friends for the sins they themselves had renounced. Martyn had a good intellect, moderate and sensible, but it seems to me that this intellect has been always thwarted by its lack of interest in life, religious caution having kept him always on the brink of the world in a half-unwilling virginity of the feeling imagining the virginity of his body. He had no interest in women, and Moore would accuse him of a frustrated passion for his own sex. ‘I believe,’ he said to him once, ‘you think sexual intercourse between men more natural than between women.’ I wonder if Moore invented the answer. ‘Well, at any rate it is not so disgusting’. (1972, 118-119)

In fact, Yeats was in a similar half-unwilling virginity until the end of his 20s, as the previous passage has illustrated, so he indeed had much in common with Martyn. Yeats therefore sensed in Martyn a constant desire to escape from his strict religious world and the social expectations that wanted to see him as a married man. Strikingly, he made a similar observation about Wilde in *A Vision* “B”: “I find in Wilde, too, something pretty, feminine, and insincere, derived from his admiration for writers of the 17th and earlier phases, and much that is violent, arbitrary and insolent, derived from his desire to escape” (2015, 112). Yeats also recalled that Martyn “once said the majority of souls are lost through sexuality, had his father’s instincts through repression or through some accident of birth turned, as Moore thought, into an always resisted homo-sexuality” (1972, 119).

Yeats also sometimes mentioned Martyn in the context of transvestism and gender fluidity: “in Martyn the sterility is complete, though unlike Moore he has self-possession [originally “charm”] and taste. He only fails in words. *It is as though he had been put into the wrong body*” (271; my emphasis). In another passage he mentions Martyn with regard to a tale about changes of gender, which was recounted by William Sharp when he told Yeats and Martyn how he had discovered Fiona Macleod in himself, and Yeats noted that this story raised much unease in Martyn:

I found Martyn full of derision over some tale he had told after dinner the night before to Martin Morris, now Lord Killanin, an unsympathetic hearer, and himself. He had been somewhere abroad when he saw the sidereal body of Fiona enter the room as a beautiful young man, and became aware that he was a woman to the spiritual sight. She lay with him, he said, as a man with a woman, and for days afterwards his breast swelled so that he had almost the physical likeness of a woman. (129)

This reaction evokes Erving Goffman’s ideas of identity ambivalence in his 1963 book *Stigma* in which he explains how stigmatised individuals often support the standards by which they are judged as outcasts and freaks: “The stigmatized individual may exhibit identity ambivalence

³ See Lapointe’s discussion of this play in his essay about *The Heather Field* (2009) and Alexandra Poulain’s article (2018).

when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way, flamboyantly or pitifully acting out the negative attributes imputed to them. [...] In brief, he can neither embrace his group nor let it go” (1963, 108). The story of William Sharp and Fiona MacLeod raised a profound interest in Yeats as well, who was eager to know all his life what secret the figure of Fiona stood for in Sharp’s life. Yeats describes that one day when he was with Mathers in Paris, he began shivering, which “was associated in [his] mind with William Sharp and Fiona Macleod” (1972, 105). Yeats then continues: “It is strange, but my mind was full of Sharp and Fiona till this moment” (106).

When Yeats watched *The Heather Field*—which is about the affectionate bond between four male characters and the suffering of the main protagonist because he had to marry a woman – Yeats said he thought of Martyn’s personal life while watching it: “Mrs. Martyn’s attempts to find a wife for her son came into my head” (1953, 253). Yet nationalist critics, such as this anonymous reviewer in *Sinn Féin*, were disgusted with Martyn’s play: “We tire [...] of Mr. Martyn’s weak men and strong women [...] Martyn can do large things in drama, and does not do them because he lets a little devil compounded of perversity and sentimentality run away with him” (qtd. in Lapointe 2009, 82). Even though the play was considered by many as a bad play, Yeats was enthusiastic about it and claimed that “[o]ne passage especially was the most powerful dialogue in modern drama” (1972, 122). *The Heather Field* was also performed together with Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen* in May 1899 in the Ancient Concert Hall in Dublin, inaugurating the Irish Literary Theatre, and since Farr played the bard Aleel (Countess Cathleen’s lover), two very homoerotic plays opened the new theatre.

Yeats, therefore, took sides with this disruptive kind of Irish drama, which Harris called a peculiarly queer Irish dramatic tradition (2017, 19): Yeats was not intimidated when his *Land of Heart’s Desire* failed in London in 1894 due to its portrayal of desire between women. What is more, as Harris has explained in detail, his establishment of the Irish Literary Theatre was a response to this failure and hope to find in Ireland more tolerant audiences: “We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art can succeed” (Gregory 1914 [1913], 8-9).

Casting Farr in the role of Aleel as the Countess’s love interest was part of this project. This performance included intimate love scenes between two women on stage and continued and strengthened the homoerotic aesthetic initiated by *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, as in this play two adult women confessed their love to one another on the stage. In one scene for instance, Farr-as-Aleel reaches in vain for the hands of the Countess but panics as those hands seem to have over-dared: “When one so great has spoken of love to one / So little as I, though deny him love, / What can he but hold out beseeching hands, / Then let them fall beside him, knowing how greatly / They have overdared?” (Yeats 1982, 27) This is also a break-up scene, in which the Countess sends away Aleel, forbidding him/her to look, since looking means loving, as Father Hart also observes in *The Land of Heart’s Desire*: “To look is but to love” (67) The Countess thus tells Aleel:

I kiss your forehead.
And yet I send you from me. Do not speak;
There have been women that bid men to rob
Crowns from the Country-under-Wave or apples

Upon a dragon-guarded hill, and all
 That they might sift the hearts and wills of men,
 And trembled as they bid it, as I tremble
 That lay a hard task on you, that you go,
 And silently, and do not turn your head.
 Good-bye; but do not turn your head and look;
 Above else, I would not have you look”. (28)

This scene resonates strikingly with Love’s description of queer performativity and shame, according to which “queer performativity [is] a gesture of approach followed by a blushing withdrawal” (2007, 59). Love claimed that this dual movement of approach and withdrawal runs through Pater’s work, yet it can be traced in *The Countess Cathleen* and *The Land of Heart’s Desire* as well. Muñoz discusses such performative ephemeral gestures in *Cruising Utopia* and contends that they are able to “transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture” (2009, 67).

Yeats uses the word ‘queer’ in *The Land of Heart’s Desire* to describe the fairy people outside the house – invisible to the audience – who try to lure the newly-wed Mary Bruin to their realm, and Martyn also applies ‘queer’ to describe his protagonist Carden and his intimate male friends. Yeats mentioned this word multiple times in his letters as well in the sense of ‘strange’ and ‘outside the norm’ but with more positive connotations. He also applied ‘queer’ to unconventional/unorthodox people like Ezra Pound, George Moore, Frank Fay and even Lady Wilde. Yeats sometimes employed ‘queer’ to describe his own works too – for instance, in a letter to Edmund Dulac on 13 January 1934, Yeats noted about *The King of the Great Clock Tower*: “The dialogue is in prose but there are lyrics & I think good ones. I think the whole thing is dramatic & queer. [...] It is a better stage machine than any other of my dance plays” (2002, 5994). This remark is striking given that the play was to some extent informed by Wilde’s *Salomé* and created an even more transgressive version of the Salome-story in which the severed head sings.

In Yeats’s time, the word ‘queer’ was used both in the sense of ‘outside the norm’ and sexual deviance. It was in fact John Douglas the 9th Marquess of Queensberry, the father of Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie, Wilde’s lover), who first used it as a slur in 1894 in a threatening letter to Alfred Montgomery after his eldest son Francis had presumably committed suicide fearing the consequences of his relations with Lord Rosebery: “Now the first flush of this catastrophe and grief is passed, I write to tell you that this is a *judgement* on the whole *lot of you*. Montgomerys, The Snob Queers like Rosebery [...] I smell a tragedy behind all this and have already got *Wind* of a more *startling one*” (Ellmann 1988, 402). As Ellmann explains, “[t]he conviction that one son had died in a homosexual scandal resolved Queensberry to make sure that the second [Bosie] did not die in the same way” (*ibidem*). In either sense of the word, ‘queer’ always has a political significance. As Judith Butler has explained in “Critically Queer”: “‘Queer’ derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. This is an invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time. The interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time. In this sense, it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts ‘queer’” (2000, 169). As we shall see, in Martyn’s *The Heather Field*, this is exactly what happens: characters safeguarding the family will use ‘queer’ to insult and pathologise those who differ from them and to form a homophobic social bond against the “queer lot” (1966 [1899], 36).

2. *Anxiety, Normativity and Same-Sex Intimacies in The Land of Heart's Desire and The Heather Field*

In my dramaturgical and comparative analysis of the chosen plays, I focus on two aspects in particular: unease with the traditional family structure and escape to the supernatural, to reading books and to affectionate relationships with members of the same-sex. This will to escape manifested in the protagonists' behaviour is also a will to disturb the normative world. These plays are also full of words expressing motion (riding, dancing, running), a desire to move away and beyond the world that insults and entraps them. In both plays, the characters who offer consolation and an image of freedom for the ones who feel ill-at-ease with conventional ways of living, will continuously insinuate these characters' potential differences, evoking Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas of the epistemology of the closet and mirroring contemporary gossip about Martyn's repressed homosexuality: "After all, the position of those who think they *know something about one that one may not know oneself* is an excited and empowered one" (1990, 80), and this performance of closetedness is always marked by the speech act of a silence (3).

In Yeats's play the setting immediately indicates Mary's unease with the roles assigned to her by society and family: she is standing by the door, reading a book, also signalling her liminal position and her desire to escape. This play uses the supernatural to stage "the complexity and fluidity of female desire" (Harris 2017, 43), and Martyn's play achieves the same with male desire. Mary's mother-in-law Bridget complains to Father Hart that Mary is not following the example she represents of womanhood and motherhood: "She would not mind the kettle, milk the cow, or even lay the knives and spread the cloth" (Yeats 1982, 54) and "[s]he is not a fitting wife for any man" (60), which is the same accusation that Carden gets as a failed husband in Martyn's play. These speech acts are performative and they work to let Mary know that she is the cause of the unhappiness of the entire family because of her failure to reproduce its traditions and line. Yet this play draws attention to the fact that the same formula cannot make everyone happy, which is very similar to Ahmed's discussion of the way the 'happy' family marks the consciousness of those whom it identifies as the cause of its unhappiness (2010, 44-50).

Reading also raises suspicion in the other characters, as it indicates a lack of interest in domestic activities traditionally assigned to women: Bridget, Maurteen and Father Hart all highlight the book as a disturbing object. Father Hart warns her: "You should not fill your head with foolish dreams. What are you reading?" (Yeats 1982, 55) Mary replies she is reading about a woman who was lured into the Land of Faery: a kinder and more tolerant world where nobody gets godly, grave, crafty, and bitter of tongue (*ibidem*), meaning authoritative, know-it-all, manipulative and insulting like her family members. Maurteen commands her to put down the book – this urge to prevent Mary from reading is similar to Martyn's play where the family wants to prevent Carden from visiting the heather field as it brings him to a different world where he can finally fit in.

Mary wants to escape from this dull house and get the freedom she has been denied, to follow her own will: "What do I care if I have given this house, / Where I must hear all day a bitter tongue, / Into the power of fairies?" (61). She begs: "Come, fairies, take me out of this dull house! / Let me have all the freedom I have lost; / Work when I will and idle when I will!" (*ibidem*) The fairy child – who is in fact older than anyone else – promises Mary a kiss and through that kiss freedom and escape from what Mary calls her captivity: "You shall go with me, newly-married bride, / And gaze upon a merrier multitude. / [...] Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood, / But joy is wisdom, time an endless song. I kiss you and the world begins to fade" (69). Ahmed mentions this desire "to leave a certain world behind" (2010, 47) as one of the reasons why the 'happy' family associates everyone who is different from them with a life doomed to be necessarily unhappy. For instance, when the Fairy child appears at the door,

Maurteen and the others immediately assume that she is unhappy because she seems to have no family, hence he lets her in. Maurteen stresses that he (the family) is happy, so everyone around them should also be happy, which is an expression of intolerance for unhappiness and disruption disguised as benevolence and care: “Being happy, I would have all others happy, / So I will bring her in out of the cold” (Yeats 1982, 63). This is the same reason why he also commands Mary to put away her discontent, but without any interest in the causes of her melancholia.

Mary is also weary of her husband’s “drowsy love” (61), but it is only Shawn who takes her anxiety seriously: “Do not blame me; I often lie awake / Thinking that all things trouble your bright head” (*ibidem*). This is a beautiful moment of understanding between them, and Mary calls him the great door-post of the house and herself the branch of quicken wood, but she also tells him that she cannot hang upon the post this branch, meaning she cannot make him happy: “O, you are the great door-post of this house, / And I the branch of blessed quicken wood, / And if I could I’d hang upon the post / Till I had brought good luck into the house” (61-62). Similarly, Shawn claims that he wishes he could be the one who could give her this maddening freedom and bewildering light (62). It is also interesting that Mary does not explain why exactly she cannot make Shawn happy: her failure to conform to conventional social norms remains unexplained, it is marked by silence, which increases the sense of closetedness in the play.

Yet once Shawn mentions that no power can break their marriage, the fairy child interrupts him and sings about “the lonely of heart” and of a happier land, implying that there are other forms of happiness beyond marriage between a man and a woman. She identifies Mary as her kind whose place is elsewhere: “There is one here that must away, away” (63). Mary transfers some objects through the door to this supernatural realm, which, as Harris observed, never return (2017, 40), thus similar to the world of queer people and other socially marginalised subcultures, it is a space that is real yet invisible, or as Leo Bersani has put it, “[i]nvisibly visible, unlocatably everywhere” (1996, 32).

Father Hart gives a very reductive explanation to Mary’s anxiety with her role as wife, hoping that Mary will one day merge into the normative family and society, and will become like the rest: “My colleen, I have seen some other girls, / Restless and ill at ease, but years went by / And they grew like their neighbours and were glad / And gossiping of weddings and of wakes” (Yeats 1982, 56). This is also an expression of hope that Mary will one day get assimilated into the normative family and social structure in which it is easy to supervise and control individuals. What also vexes characters representing normativity is pensive and melancholy women and men, hence Bridget’s remark that Mary is “old enough to know that it is wrong / To mope and idle” (*ibidem*). Maurteen also observes that Mary is repressing something, she is hiding among her dreams like children from the dark under the bedclothes, hence he implores her to put away her “dreams of discontent” (59). In “Happy Objects”, Ahmed mentions this kind of demand as characteristic of the normative family which defines what happiness should be: the demand that people should let go of certain histories which cause melancholia, yet Ahmed highlights the transformative power of such ‘bad feelings’ (2010, 50). Features like melancholia, pensiveness, dreaming and too much interest in books and the arts have long been associated with the threat of homosexuality for normativity. In fact, melancholia can provide a powerful framework to examine the ungrivable losses and hurts associated with marginalised and stigmatised subjectivities. Even though queer critics often argue against treating this link as an essential one, Didier Eribon, Sara Ahmed, Heather Love, David Eng and Judith Butler⁴ have

⁴ For more information on melancholy gender and refused identification see Judith Butler (1997), whereas for racial melancholia see D.L. Eng’s monograph *The Feeling of Kinship* (2010). Eribon’s memoir *Returning to Reims* (2013 [2009]) also explores the connection between melancholia, queerness and change of class.

all discussed the validity of this connection. As Eribon has observed, “there exists a specifically homosexual ‘melancholy’” (2004, 36) which is part of the process of ego-formation caused by “the loss of heterosexual ways of life, ways that are refused and rejected (or that you are obliged to reject because they reject you)” (37). Or, in Ahmed’s words, “the unhappy queer is made unhappy by the world that reads queer as unhappy” (2010, 43).

The family sees the Fairy child and her kind as the evil Other, yet Mary claims they are also children of God, introducing a voice of tolerance and equality into the narrative of hostility and othering. It is only Mary who describes the people outside the house as ‘queer’: “A little queer old woman dressed in green” (Yeats 1982, 58) and “[a] little queer old man” (60). Since Mary is the only character who is truly interested in and attracted to this world, her use of ‘queer’ gives the word a more positive connotation, seeing difference and strangeness as full of potential and possibility. Moreover, the Child displays an age unorthodoxy – like Woolf’s Orlando, she lives without age: she can put on womanhood anytime as if putting on a dress, and Maurteen notes that it is strange that so young a girl loves old age and wisdom so much. She claims that she is “much older than the eagle-cock [which is] the oldest thing under the moon.” (68) The strangeness of this figure and Mary’s interest in her raise panic in the others, and they hope the crucifix and the priest will protect them.

But the Child is terrified of the crucifix, and gets Father Hart to put it away by gently “caressing him” (66), which borders around another sexual taboo regarding children and the clergy. Once the crucifix is gone, Mary’s seduction begins through dance. The fairy child asks everyone if they love her, and suddenly turns to Mary: “And do you love me too?” (67). She promises Mary to give her more than her husband can, implying that she can offer just as much or even more to a woman than a man. Everyone replies yes to her question, as they see her as a child not a woman, but only Mary understands, as Harris so accurately pointed out, “how many different kinds of love might be implied in that question” (2017, 42), hence she answers “I do not know” (Yeats 1982, 67). I believe it is important that Mary’s reaction is neither fully dismissive nor affirmative, but hesitant. Unlike anyone else, Mary feels embarrassed by the fairy child’s question not just because it is very straightforward, but because in their relationship, it might imply romantic, physical love. Promotion photos for the performance published in *The Sketch* also reveal more about the ambiguous relationship between the two women, as the fairy child’s hands lay on Mary’s body and she looks intensely in her eyes, which Mary allows but her body and confused facial expression displays that she is in a state of transition and hesitation⁵. Yet, as Harris revealed, “[t]he assumption of childhood innocence protected spectators from recognising the play’s adult aspects.” (2017, 44).

Mary is torn between the two worlds: Father Hart warns her to “think of this house and of [her] duties in it” (Yeats 1982, 69), while the fairy begs her to come away otherwise she will never escape from domestic duties and will become like the rest. It is also notable that the prospect of growing like the rest is used both by Father Hart and the fairy but with a very different emotional content: for Father Hart, becoming like the rest is the ideal future for Mary, while the fairy child depicts this as the worst thing that can happen to Mary. The fairy begs her:

Stay and come with me, newly-married bride,
For if you hear him *you grow like the rest*;
Bear children, cook, and bend above the churn,

⁵ See these photographs in Susan Harris’s book (2017, 43).

And wangle over butter, fowl, and eggs,
 Until at last, grown old and bitter of tongue,
 You're crouching there and shivering at the grave". (69-70; my emphasis)

She also promises Mary that unlike her family, she will love her as she is: "I keep you in the name of your own heart" (70). This part of the play is a dramatic competition for Mary's love and attention between Shawn and Father Hart and the fairy child, in which Mary rejects marriage, motherhood and the Church too. Since Yeats himself admitted that he put his own despair of desires in this play, Harris stresses that "the battle for Mary Bruin's soul is inevitably framed as an erotic competition" (2017, 40-41). This fairy child is a queer force also because she is "an anti-reproductive force" (42) which takes women away from their conventional duties as wives and mothers. Father Hart also laments that people like the fairy child are dangerous as they divert people from the normal, traditional path: "And day by day their power is more and more, / And men and women leave old paths for pride / Comes knocking with thin knuckles on the heart" (Yeats 1982, 72).

At the end of the play, the fairy child is standing by the door just like Mary at the beginning: Mary begins trusting her, and begs her to take her to the people of her kind "who ride the winds, run on the waves, / And dance upon the mountains" (71) and who are thus "more light / Than dewdrops on the banner of the dawn" (*ibidem*). The child calls her "little bird" and Mary calls her "Dear face! Dear voice!" (*ibidem*). When the seduction is complete, Mary dies but it is implied that her soul was taken by the fairy child to a kinder world which does not label her as a failure. From Mary's point of view, the fairy child serves as a medium through which Mary can find her own voice and place in the world, which recalls feminist and queer bonds of entrustment. The relationship between the fairy child and Mary is very similar to what Lucia Re described as feminist entrustment: "The feminist relationship of entrustment (*affidamento*) is one in which an older, and usually more powerful and authoritative woman facilitates, through dialogue and friendship, a younger woman's access to a stronger sense of self and of her social and symbolic value as a subject and as a woman, which will allow her, in turn, to express herself, and engage in other creative practices of signification" (2015, 354). This bond between older and younger characters appears in many of Yeats's works given his relationship with women who were half of his age, such as Iseult Gonne and his wife George Hyde-Lees.

Bonds of entrustment pervade Martyn's *The Heather Field* as well, in which four male characters express unease with traditional familial roles, yet they offer each other emotional support to counter the insults of normativity. As Harris explains in *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, in this play "[ea]ch character is given an androgynous sidekick who shares the protagonist's vision and professes unconditional love for his doomed companion" (2002, 42). Harris's analysis does not focus on the homoerotic bonds of the play, therefore I wish to discuss these aspects. The characters' difference in Martyn's play is represented by their admiration for the heather field where they can listen to the waves and wind, thus the invisible land of acceptance is similar to the Sligo-setting of *The Land of Heart's Desire*. The play is also full of over-sentimentalised expressions of love between these men which almost appear to be romantic love scenes expressed through the safe frameworks of brotherhood and friendship, similar to the safe innocent childhood motif of Yeats's play. The young Miles tells his brother Carden: "There is no one in the whole world I love as well as you" (1966, 26) and the child Kit exclaims to Carden: "I love you. Oh, you don't know how I love you, father" (53). Just like in Yeats's play, the younger characters of *The Heather Field* portray a profound admiration for old age and wisdom. They also emulate each other like the women of Yeats's play. As Adrian Frazier pointed out in his

study on the homosociality of the Irish Revival, emulation was a very homosocial act between Martyn, Moore and Yeats too (1997, 21-25). In fact, strong bonds between men have been one of the main tropes of Irish dram – Patrick Lonergan has stressed the presence of “the Irish male double act” (2019, 137) in the Irish theatre tradition, as in Yeats’s *On Baile’s Strand* and *The Cat and the Moon*, or in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. But emotional relationships between three or four men are also frequently dramatised, as in Martyn’s play or in Yeats’s *Calvary* between Christ, Judas and Lazarus⁶.

The way Martyn describes Carden and the way he behaves and talks transgress conventional boundaries of masculinity. By appearance, he conforms to social conventions of masculinity, as he is a “powerfully built man” (1966 [1899], 21) and talks about practical business issues. Yet his gestures are marked by tenderness towards the other male characters: as soon as he enters, he smiles at his friend Barry Ussher and expresses his anxiety caused by the fear of losing him and his support: “No, you must believe in me, and inspire me with heart” (22). Harris notes that since “the play depends on the audience’s sympathizing with Carden” (2002, 42), it is surprising that the play was received much more positively than Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen*. Even though Carden’s masculinity is unconventional in the play, the play’s first performance was more or less successful because Martyn built Carden into the position of an idealist through his mystical connection to the land and through the opposition between him and his wife (44). This means that for nationalist audiences it was acceptable that Carden chose the love of the land instead of a physical relationship with his wife, refusing the needs of the body for an ideal, which yet again illustrates how the mystical and the supernatural can work as a shield for homoerotic contents.

The tender relationship between the play’s male characters is constantly criticised and mocked by the five characters who represent normativity: Carden’s wife Grace, two doctors, and Lady and Lord Shrule who care only about money, appearances and order, and who ridicule the world of art and books that the four male characters cherish so much. Grace complains to Lady Shrule that Miles “is certainly amiable, but vexes me occasionally with his foolish admiration for my husband” (Martyn 1966 [1899], 36). She also observes about Carden’s close relationship with his best friend Barry Ussher that “[w]hat you two have to say perpetually to each other puzzles me” (29). She expresses his concern to Lady Shrule too: “Yes, and to have that fellow Ussher, too, dropping in to complete the mutual admiration society! Oh, I always disliked him” (36). Grace is also afraid that these bonds will provide a bad example to the child Kit, hence she calls two doctors to try to heal and pathologise Carden.

Just like Father Hart trivialises Mary’s anxiety, Grace reduces Carden’s unease with normative life to imaginary sufferings: “Really it becomes too provoking when you begin talking about those imaginary sufferings and aspirations of yours. What on earth have you to suffer? You are in good health are you not? Were you not more than fortunate to have married as you did? Have you not independent means? What can a man like you aspire more to?” (31). This very much resembles the way discourse uses insult to mark the consciousness of queer people, which Eribon sees as performative utterances:

Insult is more than a word that describes. It is not satisfied with simply telling me what I am. [...] That person is letting me know that he or she has something on me, has power over me. First and foremost the power to hurt me, to mark my consciousness with that hurt, inscribing shame in the deepest

⁶ For a queer reading of Yeats’s *Calvary* see my latest article “Yeats’s Queer Dramaturgies: Oscar Wilde, Narcissus, and Melancholy Masculinities in *Calvary*” (2020).

levels of my mind. This wounded, shamed consciousness becomes a formative part of my personality. [...] In any case, insult is a performative utterance. Its function is to produce certain effects—notably, to establish or to renew the barrier between ‘normal’ people and those Goffman calls stigmatized people and to cause the internalization of that barrier within the individual being insulted. (2004, 16-17)

Grace’s remarks about Carden have the same function as what Eribon has defined as insult. It is also a gender reversal in the play, as the woman plays the role of the normative authority here. Grace also insinuates that Carden is mad simply because he is different, which, in fact, will indeed make Carden believe he is mad. This is how interpellation and insult work: making the insulted believe he insults the world and not vice versa. Carden points this out too: “Ha – ha – I suppose people of her type think everyone who differs from them, mad” (Martyn 1966 [1899], 32). Grace mocks any other life, as Yeats would have phrased it. Carden also articulates how normativity controls and molests people and denies the rights of those who do not wish to obey: “It is really too bad that I should be molested thus perpetually with unsolicited advice. All my acquaintances seem to consider it incumbent upon them to interfere in and direct my affairs just like their own. One would think I had no right to do anything” (41). Carden also expresses his desire to escape: “I will live my life as I want, and I will take dictation from nobody” (*ibidem*). Grace complains to the doctors and the Shrule family that Carden “always seemed to me odd and ridiculous: for he never cared for society, never went to races, dances, or tennis parties, you know, like other people” (34). She continues calling Carden and his family queer people: “He is such a queer creature. You cannot imagine how strange his ideas are” (35). Lady Shrule agrees: “He never loved you, Grace. He is a terrible man. These Tyrrells were always a queer lot” (36). They also observe that Carden has no interest in women at all, even though Lady Shrule thinks “it is impossible that a man can exist without loving some woman” (35). This lack of interest in activities traditionally assigned to men and Carden’s indifference towards women signals that he is different from normative notions of masculinity.

But friendship, brotherhood, reading and the heather field offer consolation for these insults. When Grace arrives, Carden’s reaction is annoyance and he begins reading. Carden tells Ussher and Miles that “two friends such as you ought to compensate for what I have to bear from others” (42). The heather field offers a similar escape from what Carden calls his life of pain and unrest as a husband: “Oh! There is magic in those mountain breezes! [...] I hear in its waves those voices floating back to me” (45). Yet Carden explains this to the doctors who immediately diagnose him as mad, as he claims that for him his current life is only a dream, and his real life is there in the heather field: “Miles, I often think that my life of pain and unrest here is only a dream after all” (27).

It is his most intimate friend Barry Ussher who tries to save him from the medical discourse and calls him away: “Really, Carden, I don’t see what you gain by discussing your ideas with people who can neither understand nor sympathise with them. Come, come away” (46). It is also Ussher who reproaches Grace for her plan to pathologise Carden and the child Kit, and compares Carden to Joan of Arc and Socrates to stress that there is nothing abnormal about him: “Did not Joan of Arc declare she heard voices calling on her to accomplish a work which proved to be one of the most wonderful and practical in history? Was not Socrates firmly convinced that he was in the habit of receiving admonitions from his daemon?” (48). Ussher also summarises the cruelty of normativity which wants to contain the unconventional behaviour of people like Carden: “To take him away from all that he loves—his free life on the mountain, his intimate delight in nature, his interests and occupations without which life would become for him meaningless—can you understand the cruelty of this?” (50). Ussher also warns Carden

that it is dangerous to go to the heather field, which Carden sees as a betrayal of their bond of entrustment and finds their disheartening attitude the most unbearable (41): “What do you mean? Are you too going to join the enemy?” (55). This recalls the protagonist Cumhal’s lines in Yeats’s “The Crucifixion of the Outcast” in which Cumhal is mocked and crucified by everyone because of his effeminacy: “Outcasts, have you also turned against the outcast?” (1908, 19). In Act III, in which Carden is already tamed and domesticated, not daring to visit the heather field anymore as he is watched by the medical gaze of the doctors and police officers, Miles and Ussher form an alliance to defend Carden: “Oh, I know you [Grace] have much to endure, but I cannot remain here and listen to such denunciation of what my brother holds nearest to his heart” (Martyn 1966 [1899], 62).

Ussher appears as an older, more authoritative figure who has managed to escape and who can thus serve as a teacher for the younger Miles. Ussher teaches him through his stories about Carden’s difference, which recalls bonds of entrustment between older and younger people. Ussher also employs ambiguous diction – for instance, he reassures the anxious Miles: “I fear I also find difficulties cultivating the tastes that are congenial to me” (17). But to Miles Ussher embodies freedom: “Well, in any case you seem able to live as you please. You have always means to travel, and never want for anything” (18). Yet Ussher suggests that he has lost happiness when Carden married Grace and hints at the ambiguous relationship between him and Carden which was broken by Carden’s marriage. This marriage appears as the greatest grievance/betrayal in their relationship, which Ussher calls a strange and unnatural choice and sees it as a betrayal of their intimacy: “Grace would probably have made an excellent wife for almost any other man, but for your brother—well, it might have been better if he had never thought of marriage at all” (18-19). Miles does not understand what he is referring to which increases the sense of closetedness in the play: “Well, you see, Carden and I had been intimate so long. We had been brought up together in fact, so that I fancy I understand him better than anyone” (19). Ussher continues his nostalgic recollections: “Oh, he always did so fascinate and interest me. What poetry he put into those days of my youth—the days that are dead” (*ibidem*). It is also Ussher who describes Carden as an inherently dissident man: “Ah, foolishly his wife and her friends thought they were going to change Carden to their model of a young man, but a latent, untamable nature was not to be subdued. Its first sign of revolt against suppression was when he began his vast work in the heather field” (20).

When Ussher and Carden bring up Carden’s marriage at the beginning of the play, it becomes clear that it is a painful point for both men and has decreased the intensity of their intimacy. Carden blames Ussher’s warnings about the marriage for his unhappiness, which leads to a heated quarrel between them. First, Ussher gets angry and wants to leave: “I was wrong ever to have interfered with my advice. Never will I do so again” (23). But then the stage direction indicates that he changes to a more tender and emotional tone and says: “I hope, Carden, at least I may never be to you the cause of ill luck” (*ibidem*). Towards the end when Carden shows signs of madness, he believes he is ten years ago when he was about to marry Grace despite Ussher begging him not to, and he re-enacts the scene but decides to take Ussher’s advice not to marry (64). Carden’s marriage to a woman is a trauma for both men. It pervades Martyn’s play and marks the relationship between its sensitive and sentimental male characters with an atmosphere of unrealised potentials, closetedness and failure. These moments in the play evoke Love’s ideas of broken intimacies and moments of failed or interrupted connections, and she maintains that this impossibility of love is part of queer historiography (2007, 24).

Ussher also serves as a mentor for Kit who also falls in love with the heather field and keeps asking his father to come out with him to enjoy it. He is also obsessed with flowers, described as

pensive looking and wears a sailor suit. The young Kit and the older Ussher have an interesting conversation about masculinity, as Kit understands that he will only have rights if he becomes a man. This passage also plays with the ambiguous connection between becoming a man and becoming masculine, and it can be interpreted in both ways:

Kit (*with impatience*): Oh, how I wish I were a man.

Ussher: Alas, are you not much better as you are? Why do you want to be a man?

Kit: Because then they could not prevent me from doing what I like. I should be a sailor and find out what is beyond the great sea father and I are always looking at from the heather field. (Martyn 1966 [1899], 39)

When Carden asks him if he brought flowers from the heather field, he answers ambiguously: “They have not yet come out” (63), implying also the repressed, unrealised aspects of Carden’s life who cannot go to the heather field anymore, as he is watched by doctors and police officers. But the play ends with Carden and Kit holding hands watching a rainbow above the heather field talking about man’s speechless desires: “Oh, mystic highway of man’s speechless longings! My heart goes forth upon the rainbow to the horizon of joy!” (66). This is very similar to the final scene of Act II which ended with Miles and Carden embracing one another, uttering each other’s name (32). *The Heather Field* is therefore very much about accepting loss: Carden has lost the world from which he wanted to escape – the normative family and social roles with which he could never identify – but by the end of the play he also loses the heather field which offered consolation for his life of suffering as a husband. In a way, his intimacy with Barry Ussher is also lost because of his marriage, yet this bond is not fully broken, even though it has to remain unfulfilled and marked by a history of regrets, shame and hurts which Carden tries to transform into an alternative form of happiness through bonds of friendship. In the words of Muñoz, “[t]o accept loss is to accept queerness” (2009, 73) and it does not mean hiding in the closet or disappear, but “to veer away from heterosexuality’s path” (*ibidem*), which Carden clearly achieves in his own way even though he is forced to remain within the family.

3. Conclusion

These two plays and their ‘affect alien’ protagonists can thus convey queer structures of feeling and demonstrate the importance of histories that hurt. As Ahmed phrased it: “A concern with histories that hurt is not then a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return. If anything we might want to reread melancholic subjects, the ones who refuse to let go of suffering, who are even prepared to kill some form of joy, as an alternative model of social good” (2010, 50). Mary’s and Carden’s social marginality can indeed mirror the experience of queer historical subjects and is able to speak to contemporary queer subjectivities as well, who inhabit norms differently and who have to bear the pressure imposed on them by normativity. These two plays subvert conventional gender roles and portray complicated same-sex intimacies through the safe frameworks of the supernatural, brotherhood, familial bonds and childhood, all of which work to obscure the more complex desires closeted in the texts. The relationship between characters of the same-sex and the transformational energy that arises from these intimate relationships also speak to the importance of queer bonds of entrustment in coming-out narratives. Thus *The Land of Heart’s Desire* and *The Heather Field* can be read as love letters to anyone who feels different from the norm, who has difficulty in living up to the social expectations that restrict their freedom, and who refuse to become like the rest despite the inevitable consequence of becoming failures in the eyes of normative society. Through Carden’s

and Mary's unease and unrest, the plays reveal how restrictive society's notions of success and happiness can be for some people. What counts as failure for the rest of the characters becomes an alternative success story for Carden and Mary: their victory lies exactly in becoming a failure for the family, in unbecoming⁷ respectable wives and husbands. Both Carden and Mary put pleasure and their own interests in front of national and social considerations, and replacing production/reproduction with pleasure is a crucial non-normative queer strategy (Harris 2017, 24). Because of these topical messages about difference and the pressure of normativity, it does not seem an exaggeration to call these plays queer dramas.

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⁷I use this word here in the sense that Jack Halberstam applies it in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011, 2): to intentionally refuse or fail to become something that is expected by society.

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