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The King's Threshold: Manuscript Materials (review)

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KIELY, Declan, ed. 2005. William Butler Yeats, *The King's Threshold: Manuscript Materials*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. ISBN 13 978-0801441042. Pp. lxi + 620. \$115.

As readers of *Textual Cultures* are aware, William Butler Yeats was a notorious reviser of his own work. He took advantage of any occasion, from the rehearsal and performance of one of his plays to a crisis in Irish politics, to tinker—and sometimes to do considerably more than tinker—with the words on the page. Editors of Yeats's work have long confronted the challenge of how to present reading texts of poems like “The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner”, or “The Scholars”, which were revised so heavily over time that we are left not with a single poem with a few variant readings, but with multiple versions of the poem, each with claims to authority.

The plays, perhaps, present even greater editorial difficulties, since on many of them, Yeats worked collaboratively, both at the composition stage, with Lady Gregory and other colleagues at the Abbey Theatre, and at the rehearsal and performance stage, with the actors in the company. As with almost all works written for performance, Yeats's plays were living documents, changing shape over time, frequently in very significant ways. What is an editor to do, for example, with *The King's Threshold*, an early play first composed in 1903, whose central character heroically triumphs at the end of early published versions, while he dies tragically in later ones?

The best answer, it would seem, is to do what Declan Kiely has done in this recent volume of the Cornell Yeats series, which is to provide for readers and scholars a complete view of the play's evolution. From its first existence as a prose scenario dictated to Lady Gregory in 1903, to its last reworking at the proof stage of the unpublished Macmillan Edition de Luxe in 1931, Kiely's edition reveals the changing shape of the play, particularly as Yeats reconceived it in response to traumatic events in Ireland's national life between 1903 and 1921. What emerges from this careful treatment is a new appreciation for the importance of *The King's Threshold* among Yeats's early

plays, and for its interest as an example of the textual complexity that typifies so many of Yeats's works.

The King's Threshold tells the story of Seanchan, a bardic poet at the court of King Guaire in sixth-century Ireland. In the play, Seanchan has been expelled from the king's table of advisers; in response, he begins a hunger strike at the palace gates to insist on the centrality of the poet in the hierarchy of political power. As Kiely notes in his excellent introduction to the volume, Yeats's use of this material allows him to bridge his early interest in the Irish bardic tradition with his later conception of the poet as a crucial voice of wisdom amidst the clamorings of society.

In this respect, *The King's Threshold* seems to anticipate some of Yeats's later aesthetic and political concerns in a way that other, more widely anthologized early plays, such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) or *On Baile's Strand* (1904), do not. Thus, this edition clarifies in new ways the evolution of Yeats's view of the poet's social and political function. Even more important, the edition provides further evidence that for Yeats "the text" is not the singular fixed object that we find in *The King's Threshold* in *The Collected Plays*, which Yeats himself prepared in 1934 and which has since served as the standard edition. Rather, Kiely's edition suggests that the play is really a process of revision through discrete versions, a history of rewriting that mirrors Yeats's own evolving relationship with Ireland and with his public role as bard.

Kiely has organized the volume to illuminate four periods in the textual history of the play; the first two represent revisions made before 1911, chiefly in response to the play's first performance at the Abbey in 1904. The ending of these early versions finds King Guaire acquiescing to Seanchan's hunger strike and humbly conceding the centrality of the poet in the machinery of the state. One of the fascinating things about these early manuscripts is the extent to which they reveal a collaborative relationship between Yeats and Lady Gregory, who served as his amanuensis. Kiely points out that the "happy ending" of the early versions was Lady Gregory's idea, and that she had to argue for its inclusion with Yeats, who was inclined—even at this early stage—to have Seanchan die.

The play remained in this first version until 1920, when Yeats made another major revision. Yeats was moved to revise the play by the hunger strike of Terence MacSwiney, the Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Cork, who had been imprisoned in Brixton Prison, London. After MacSwiney died as a result of his strike, Yeats altered the ending of *The King's Threshold*; in this revised version, Seanchan dies in the face of the king's intransigence.

Kiely's edition provides a generous selection of photographic reproduc-

tions of the manuscript materials, all of which are skillfully transcribed. The volume also includes useful appendices with staging materials pertaining to the first performance at the Abbey.

It is no longer news—indeed it is probably no longer controversial—that literary texts, particularly the texts of inveterate revisers like Yeats, should be seen as evolving processes rather than fixed products. It also seems evident that the idea of an “authoritative” edition must give way to a multiplicity of editions, each revealing different aspects of a text’s life, identity, and historical contexts. Kiely’s edition of *The King’s Threshold* adds to this happy multiplicity, enriching our understanding of Yeats as a playwright and as an engaged citizen of an emerging modern Ireland.

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MORGAN, Nigel. 2007. *The Douce Apocalypse. Picturing the end of the world in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Bodleian Library. ISBN 13 978-1851243600. Pp. 115. £ 25.00; \$ 45.00.

RUSHFORTH, Rebecca. 2007. *St Margaret’s Gospel Book: The favourite book of an eleventh-century Queen of Scots*. Oxford: Bodleian Library. ISBN 13 978-1851243709. Pp. 114. £ 25.00; \$ 45.00.

The Bodleian Library, Oxford, has launched a new series of short monographs on illuminated manuscripts selected from the rich holdings of the library, comparable to the British Library’s long-standing series of paperback monographs on individual illuminated manuscripts or to the Harvey Miller series of manuscript facsimiles at a reduced scale. The two volumes reviewed here are the first to appear in the Bodleian series, one on the late thirteenth-century Douce Apocalypse prepared by the distinguished scholar Nigel Morgan, the other an eleventh-century Pericope Book assumed to have been the favorite book of sainted Queen Margaret of Scotland (1046-1093) edited by Cambridge graduate research associate Rebecca Rushforth. In both volumes the reproductions of the codices’ illustrations are of a high quality, making these books not only attractive but also useful for scholarly examination.

The books differ in treatment as they do in illustrative content. Both have received considerable scholarly attention: the Douce Apocalypse, one of the glories of English thirteenth-century painting and one of the greatest treasures of the Bodleian Library, has been the subject of a facsimile with commentary by Peter Klein; and Richard Gameson and Louise Huneycutt have both published essential studies on Queen Margaret’s Gospels. Both