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Cuchulain, Yeats's Ideal Courtier

Baldassare Castiglione's Influence on W. B. Yeats and his Cuchulain Plays

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*Folly alone I cherish,
I choose it for my share;
Being but a mouthful of air,
I am content to perish;
I am but a mouthful of sweet air.
(Yeats, *The Collected Plays* 144)*

1. Introduction

The well-known Irish warrior-hero, Cuchulain, is most commonly mentioned in relation to Irish history and national identity, as the legendary Cuchulain was an icon for the leaders of the Easter Rising. However, the figure of Cuchulain in W. B. Yeats's Cuchulain plays is diffuse in its significance, as in creating his ideal Irish hero, Yeats was influenced and inspired not only by Irish issues but other impulses as well. One of these influences was the renaissance Italian author, Baldassare Castiglione and his *The Book of the Courtier*. Although Castiglione had a considerable impact on Yeats, his influence is mentioned almost exclusively in relation to Yeats's ideas on the aristocracy, expressed in his poems, 'To a Wealthy Man', 'Adam's Curse', 'The People' and 'For Anne Gregory'. Yeats also makes references to Castiglione in his prose works, the "Discoveries" (1907) and "On the Boiler" (1939). In this essay, however, I shed new light both on Castiglione's traces in the Yeatsian *oeuvre* and the figure of Cuchulain, demonstrating that the influence of Castiglione's work is particularly marked in the depiction and development of Cuchulain in Yeats's five Cuchulain plays. I also argue that the analogies between the *Courtier* and the Cuchulain plays derive from one source: Yeats's insistence on the importance of the aristocracy, related to his ideas on the mask. The plays used to illustrate my point are *On Baile's Strand* (1903, 1904), *The Green Helmet* (1910), *At the Hawk's Well* (1917), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939). In so doing, I reveal the connections between Castiglione's figure of the ideal courtier and Yeats's representation of Cuchulain in his plays, with special focus on the relationship between the aristocrat and the artist (poet)—an aspect which has so far been ignored in relation to the influence of Castiglione's ideas on Yeats's drama. I also examine Yeats's and Castiglione's concept of recklessness concerning the figure of the aristocrat, and how Yeats and Castiglione immortalized their fictional heroes by devoting a cycle of literary

works to them; how they emphasised the absence of such men in their own times and, in consequence, the nonexistence of the ideal worlds that these heroes embodied.

Baldassare Castiglione's decisive influence on W. B. Yeats has its roots in the Anglo-Irish poet's fascination with the model of the harmonious society of Renaissance Italy (see Fiorenzo Fantaccini 39)¹ on which Yeats wanted the Irish society of his own time to be based. The renaissance author's influence on Yeats can be traced back to Lady Augusta Gregory, his friend and patron, and it bears strikingly on Yeats's aristocratic and national ideals. Ellmann acknowledges that what turned Yeats's attention towards the aristocracy was his becoming acquainted with Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* with the help of Lady Gregory, who, in the summer of 1903, read out to him all four books of the *Courtier* (Sir Thomas Hoby's translation of 1561), thus introducing him to the apparently harmonious and perfect atmosphere of the renaissance palace of Urbino. After 1903, as Fantaccini notes, the Italian Renaissance became an indispensable reference point for Yeats, a model of civilization *at large* to be imitated (35). It is important to note that Yeats undertook the writing of the first part of the Cuchulain cycle precisely in 1903, and was so fascinated with Castiglione's book and its atmosphere that Lady Gregory gave him Thomas Hoby's translation. No doubt Yeats turned to the book many times, as he refers to it later on in his letters and recollections. Yeats's fascination with Renaissance Italy further deepened in 1907, when he joined Lady Gregory and her son, Robert, in a tour of northern Italy, visiting Urbino as well—a tour that, as R. F. Foster explains, “would inspire his imagination from this time on” (qtd. in Fantaccini 36). In *Autobiographies*, Yeats referred to the effect of Castiglione's book on him, confessing that “[a]ll Wednesday I heard Castiglione's phrase ringing in my memory, ‘Never be it spoken without tears, the Duchess, too, is dead’, and the phrase...often moved me till my eyes dimmed, brought before me all his sorrow and my own, as though one saw the worth of life fade forever.” (478) This recollection suggests not only his fascination with Castiglione's book, but it transmits a strong sense of melancholy and sorrow—the sense of the disappearance of a once more prosperous age, when that particular Duchess was still alive. What this passage implicitly draws attention to is Yeats's wish to revive in Ireland an age of a kind with that of the Duchess in Castiglione's time. Out of this desire, Yeats turned to stories and legends of an ancient Ireland to counter a degenerate spirit of petty-bourgeois commercialism in Ireland as he saw it, in his own time. It is in this sense of degeneration of

¹ All references to Fiorenzo Fantaccini's book here are my translations.

the present times that we find the most intimate relation between the personality of Yeats's warrior figure, Cuchulain, and Castiglione's ideal renaissance man.

2. Cuchulain and the Courtier: Ideal Artist-Aristocrats

2.1. Ideas on Class and Art

The influence of Castiglione's idea of the courtier on Yeats's Cuchulain is most striking in both figures as ideal types of nobility and aristocrats who bear a strong relationship to artistic values, especially those of poetry. In a passage in "The Trembling of the Veil" Yeats proposes the idea that three types of men have made all beautiful things in the world: aristocrats, countrymen and artists:

[a]ristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear, and the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness. (qtd. in Arnold Stein 607)

This passage contains several terms which are relevant to Yeats's ideas on class and the attributes shared between Cuchulain and Castiglione's courtier. Yeats on one side descended from an old aristocratic family, the Butlers, while on the other side, from merchants, the Middletons and Pollexfens (Foster qtd. in Donald J. Childs 169). However, Yeats does not mention here the middle class, only the aristocracy (the Anglo-Irish landowners of the Protestant Ascendancy) and the peasantry (a class of Celtic countrymen, once pagan, now Catholic). This is because, as Donald J. Childs explains, "Yeats disregarded the middle class [...], celebrating instead aristocrats and peasants—members of better-born classes whose virtues he combined and expressed in his role as a poet." (169) Interestingly, both the old Irish aristocracy of ancient kings and the new Anglo-Irish aristocracy of Yeats's age were very close to that social class which Castiglione and the courtiers of his book represented in Renaissance Italy: they were land-owning, mid-ranking feudal nobilities. This feudal nobility bears resemblance to that social class which Yeats considered as the model of the new Irish aristocracy. In fact, Yeats wished for a continuity between the old and the new Irish aristocracies, and this will provide the ground for one of the basic influences of the *Courtier* on the Cuchulain dramas.

The above passage suggests that Yeats mostly treated these three types of man as people belonging to absolutely different categories without any similarity between those people. However, what makes Castiglione's courtier and Yeats's Cuchulain ideal heroes for the authors is that they incorporate both the perfect aristocrat and the artist. However, the

courtier can be regarded as an artist in the literal sense, while Cuchulain only in the Yeatsian sense of the artist and poet.

Castiglione's ideal nobleman is expected to appreciate and practise all fields of art, such as music, drawing, painting and poetry. A good courtier should be more than an average scholar in the humanities, and he should have a great knowledge in Greek and Latin, but at the same time, he should write his own poetry in his native language. (Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, 83-93) The latter aspect identifies another important connection between Yeats's warrior-aristocrat and Castiglione's humanist aristocrat: in a way, both become representatives of their nation. By composing poetry in his native language and not in Latin the courtier embodies Italianity, while Cuchulain as an aristocrat might symbolize Irishness, since Yeats, as Seamus Deane notes, defines aristocracy "in each case as a mark of Irishness" (qtd. in Childs 171). It is important to note, however, that Cuchulain's Irishness is an ancient type of Irishness, missing from the society of Yeats's age. This ancient type of Irishness, I assume, can stand for eternal Ireland, and Yeats links the values of this eternal Ireland to aristocracy, considering aristocrats as exceptions to the time-bound values of modern Ireland (Childs 171).

Cuchulain, however, is regarded as an artist and poet only in the Yeatsian sense of the word. For Yeats, the ideal aristocrat is the one who can understand and appreciate art, a "small cultivated class [which has an] understanding of the arts and of high thinking." (qtd. in Childs 170) Yeats also confessed that "[e]very day [he] notice[d] some new analogy between [the] long-established life of the well-born and the artist's life." (qtd. in Childs 170) This analogy is manifested in his Cuchulain if we consider the connection between Yeats's interpretation of the poet and the heroic mask.

Yeats believed that a poet is the one who can construct a heroic mask, in order to be "reborn as an idea, something intended, complete" (qtd. in Childs 173), and according to Childs, this heroic mask is itself aristocratic (173). This is Yeats's concept of the poet-aristocrat—a man who is able to reach his heroic-mask. Cuchulain indeed achieves his heroic mask at the end of *On Baile's Strand* when he goes mad and starts fighting the deathless sea which defeats him. After this apparent² failure, in the chronologically subsequent play, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, we meet Cuchulain's mask, Briciu, and the Ghost of Cuchulain wears a heroic mask, which means that Cuchulain assumed this tragic mask through his defeat.

² It is an apparent failure, as the Yeatsian hero has to be defeated in order to rise from the *Anima hominis* (the sphere of ordinary human beings, that is, the terrestrial world) to *Anima mundi*, the sphere of the Unity of Being. It is only in the *Anima mundi* that the hero can fully achieve his mask which is the symbol of unified being (perfection).

More to the point, Yeats's ideas on the poet and the hero are remarkably close to one another; the poet and the hero share the ability to find their heroic mask, and both are subject to a transcendent experience. The only difference between them is that this transcendent experience is achieved through defeat in the case of the hero, while the poet makes his mask through disappointment in the terrestrial world (Nathan 277). Cuchulain embodies an aristocratic poet-hero, as it is Yeats, the poet, who is reflected in the heroic figure of Cuchulain, and it is Yeats's disappointment in the terrestrial world that is communicated to the readers through his hero's defeat (i.e. his death at the end of the cycle when he is humiliatingly murdered by an old beggar man). It follows that in the heroic figure of Cuchulain it is Yeats who embodies the poet.

2.2. Cuchulain: a Noble Warrior-Aristocrat

There are several textual references in the Cuchulain plays to the warrior's distinguished nobility. It is particularly marked by Cuchulain's and his son's connection to the hawk and the allusion to the ancient house where Cuchulain comes from.

The most striking references to Cuchulain's nobility in the five plays are connected to the hawk. This solitary bird is strongly related to the aristocracy in Yeats's mythology and symbolism, as it is predominantly considered as the "sign of nobility, tradition and aristocracy—which conforms to Yeats's ideals of rescuing the heroic and noble past of Ireland" (Padilha 64). Birgit Bjersby also notes that "[w]hat seems to have especially fascinated Yeats about the hawk is the aristocracy of its race." (90) Moreover, it is also the symbol of loneliness, bravery, proud defiance and superhuman or divine power (Bjersby 90).

On Baile's Strand abounds in allusions to the hawk as the proof of Cuchulain's nobility. Cuchulain associates himself with the hawk several times. In his resistance to Conchubar's command he says, "[n]estlings of a high nest, / Hawks that have followed me into the air / And looked upon the sun, we'll out of this / And sail upon the wind once more." (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 170) In this passage, by asserting that the hawks—these noble, solitary birds—follow him, Cuchulain suggests himself as the leader or the noblest among the nobility. This is important because the other, less relevant kings in the play seem to represent another kind of nobility, as they urge Cuchulain to accept obedience to Conchubar and thus become his subject. Even though here the bond is more than an oath of loyalty to the king of Ulster, being rather an affirmation of the sacred nature of the noble brotherhood itself, it seems that what makes the oath-scene sinister in this play is Cuchulain's commentary on the kings' behaviour. If the oath had no negative connotation, Cuchulain as Conchubar's friend

and member of the kingdom of Ulster would accept binding himself into obedience without any sign of wild and passionate resistance. At the point when Cuchulain changes attitude and accepts Conchubar's command, he refers to the kings as to noblemen who have changed: "Are you so changed, / Or have I grown more dangerous of late? / ...It's you that have changed. You've wives and children now, / And for that reason cannot follow one / That lives like a bird's flight from tree to tree.—" (Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 171) With this last line Cuchulain differentiates himself as a free, individual aristocrat from the other kings, and his words suggest that in this play the oath scene is supposed to be more than a simple affirmation of the noble brotherhood. If we consider that it is from this moment on that Cuchulain's weakening initiates, then it may well be that this scene—beyond being a sign of loyalty to Conchubar—is the initiation of the decay of Cuchulain and the old aristocratic values that he represents and that should have been transmitted to his son, the murdered Young Man. It is not by accident that it is only Cuchulain and his son that are connected to the hawk. The association of this noble bird with Cuchulain and the Young Man further indicates that there is a gap between them and the other kings in the play.

It is not only in *On Baile's Strand* that Cuchulain identifies himself with the hawk, but also in *The Death of Cuchulain*. Before being murdered by the beggar, he claims that "[t]here floats out there / The shape that I shall take when I am dead, / My soul's first shape, a soft feathery shape, / And is not that a strange shape for the soul / Of a great fighting-man?" (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 444) Using the term "feathery shape," given that formerly he always identified himself with the hawk, Cuchulain in fact asserted that after his death he would become a hawk, that is, would remain the symbol of nobility even afterwards.

Cuchulain's nobility is also marked by his son's (the Young Man's) connection to the hawk. When Conchubar asks the Young Man whether he is of noble origins, as he cannot speak in the Assembly House if he is not, the son answers: "I will give no other proof than the hawk gives / That it's no sparrow! [...] Yet look upon me, Kings. / I, too, am of ancient seed, and carry / The signs about this body and in these bones." (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 173-4) This statement is followed by Cuchulain's remark which makes it clear that the son tried to prove his nobility by waving the grey feather of a hawk in his hand: "To have shown the hawk's grey feather is enough" (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 174).

Similar to Cuchulain, his son has no fear of death, has noble appearance, distinguished speech and dares to fight Cuchulain. He also has self-confidence, yet is modest with words. Thus, he indeed seems to carry on his father's virtues. Even though this is not self-evident from the play, the fact that Cuchulain wants to make friends with the Young Man might

suggest the desirable but finally unsuccessful bond and continuity between the old and new aristocracy, which could not come into existence due to the growing middle class, or—if we consider the play—as a result of Conchubar’s betrayal.

Yeats’s greatest fear according to which this new aristocracy will accept decay and thus cease to exist can also be seen in the play. At one point Cuchulain declares, “I swear to be obedient in all things / To Conchubar, and uphold his children.” (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 173) This is the moment when Cuchulain symbolically accepts the decline of his own ancestral line, and subjects himself to Conchubar. It seems to be difficult to decide on which side Conchubar stands. According to Cuchulain, Conchubar is as noble as himself, yet Conchubar is the one who forces Cuchulain into obedience, and—though not deliberately and without any certainty as regards the Young Man’s identity—makes Cuchulain murder his only son, by inducing a sudden distrust in Cuchulain towards the Young Man.³ It is important that the death of Cuchulain’s son ensures the throne to Conchubar’s offspring—even though they are unable to govern (according to Cuchulain). Therefore Conchubar seems to incorporate a kind of transition between the two classes and represent the degenerate type of Yeats’s ideal aristocrat.

The first play to allude to Cuchulain’s noble physical appearance and the ancient house from where he originates is *At the Hawk’s Well*. The Old Man addresses Cuchulain saying that “[i]f I may judge by the gold / On head and feet and glittering in your coat, / You are not of those who hate the living world.” (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 139) Cuchulain reinforces the Old Man’s assumption by declaring that he is Cuchulain, son of Sualtim and has an ancient house beyond the sea. The adjective ‘ancient’ implies the old aristocracy, that of ancient kings dating back over three thousand years. This self-introduction supports the idea that the Cuchulain of Yeats’s plays embodies the aristocracy of old, heroic Ireland.

In the five plays, therefore, Cuchulain’s aristocratic origin is reinforced by several allusions, mainly to the hawk and Cuchulain’s origins which can be traced back to the ancient Irish nobility. All these references point at the distinction between Cuchulain, his son and the other characters in *On Baile’s Strand*. Even though it is not self-evident from the play, the above passages prove that in *On Baile’s Strand* Cuchulain represents the old Irish nobility of ancient kings, while his son stands for the ideal new Irish aristocracy (the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy) of Yeats’s time, and the two of them embody the continuity between the old and the new Irish aristocracies, which was Yeats’s greatest wish to create in modern Ireland.

³ Cuchulain does not know that the Young Man is his son; in the play, it is only the Blind Man who has certainty of the Young Man’s identity.

However, the other kings represent the real, self-indulgent Irish aristocracy of Yeats's time, as they seem to be against Cuchulain in this play. Moreover, Conchubar, who is a nobleman like Cuchulain, symbolizes that aristocrat who, as Childs puts it, could not transmit his "aristocratic biological genius" (174). It is Conchubar who destroys the bond between father and son in the play, and thus he symbolically destroys the continuity between the old and the new Irish aristocracies as well. Finally, Conchubar's sons stand for the strengthening merchant class, and Cuchulain indeed points at the gap between themselves (Cuchulain and Conchubar) and the sons, declaring that the sons have "[n]o marrow in their bones, and will lie soft / Where you [Conchubar] and I [Cuchulain] lie hard." (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 168)

2.3. Parallels between the Two Heroes: Heroic and Humanist Values

Taking a closer look at Castiglione's ideal courtier and Cuchulain, it is easy to notice visible parallels between their inner and external qualities. This is due to the fact that Yeats and Castiglione had the same ideas on the perfect aristocrat, and this is why Yeats was fascinated with the description of the courtier, and wanted to represent his ideal aristocrat in some of his dramas as well.

In Book I of Castiglione's *Courtier*, Lodovico da Canossa initiates the game whose aim is the depiction in words of the perfect courtier ("*formare con parole un perfetto cortigiano*" [Castiglione, *Il Cortigiano* 28]). As part of this game, he starts to list a series of characteristics which should be desirable in a perfect nobleman. Similar to the Cuchulain of *At the Hawk's Well*, whose nobility is immediately recognised by his appearance, the ideal courtier must be a nobleman as to the first impression he makes on others. Count Lodovico calls his fellow courtiers' attention to the fact how important it is for the courtier to make a good impression, "and how he ought to strive to make a good one at the outset, who thinks to hold the rank and name of a good courtier." (Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* 25) Furthermore, he should appear both manly and graceful. This dichotomy can be seen in Cuchulain as well, who is both a violent and amorous, generous and wise warrior.

One of Cuchulain's greatest virtues is that he is both self-confident yet extremely modest. In *The Green Helmet*, though the other kings appear to be envious of his greatness, he does not seem to be aware of the fact that he is the noblest and the bravest of all, and refuses the helmet. In a similar vein, the ideal courtier is also expected to have a certain self-confidence to achieve great things but he must be modest in his words, or as Count Lodovico phrases it, "[h]ow much more pleasing and how much more praised is a gentleman who carries arms, if he be modest, speak little and boast little, than other who is forever sounding

his own praises and bluster seems to be hurling defiance at the world!” (Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* 37) The same thing happens in *The Green Helmet*, where the characters (except for Cuchulain), including the charioteers, the stablemen and the wives of the kings, praise either themselves or their master or husband. This crowd of quarrelling people can exemplify the general conditions of Ireland in Yeats’s time and the behaviour of the newly emerging bourgeois class which lacks the wise and virtuous, noble conduct of the aristocracy as represented by Cuchulain, who in the play is clearly distinguished from the quarrelling mass of people.

The most visible analogies between the ideal courtier and Cuchulain are their humanist values. Cuchulain, though being primarily an emblem of the Celtic heroic age and representing heroic superiority, bears outstanding humanist values as well, similar to those of Castiglione’s ideal courtier. Wayne A. Rebhorn attributes three characteristic features to the humanists of the fifteenth century: “moral ideals with elegant manners, optimistic ideals of political and social action with aesthetic self-cultivation, and virile, directed energy with grace and refinement.” (qtd. in Kinney 88) These values, to some extent, find manifestation also in the plays of the Cuchulain cycle in the behaviour and, occasionally, speech of the warrior-aristocrat.

Cuchulain’s moral virtues are manifested mostly in *The Green Helmet* where the wild warrior-hero of *On Baile’s Strand* turns out to be a conciliatory hero, trying to avoid any kind of conflict and representing a man of wisdom despite his young age. The central conflict of the play is brought about by the Red Man, who (similarly to the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) challenges the noblemen of the house (Conall and Laegaire), asking one of them to whip off his head and afterwards, allowing him (the Red Man) to whip off his opponent’s head as well, thus offering a ‘head for head’ game. The Red Man is also a creator of discord, as he lays on the ground a green helmet, saying that the best and the bravest of them can wear it upon their head. The gift of the Red Man thus generates an infinite discord and confusion among the noblemen, but also among their wives, charioteers and stablemen. In the midst of this confusion, the only man who can stay calm and endeavours to find a solution is Cuchulain. Examples of his wisdom and conciliatory role can be seen in his refusal of the helmet and his suggestion that the helmet be given to none, throwing it into the sea. More to the point, to put an end to the quarrel among the wives concerning whose wife should enter first the house, Cuchulain declares “[o]ne is as fair as the other, each one the wife of a king. / Break down the painted walls, break them down, down to the floor! / Our wives shall come in together, each one at her own door.” (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 156)

In some of the plays, these moral values of Cuchulain are accompanied by elegant manners, manifested in his way of speaking. For instance, in *On Baile's Strand*, Cuchulain refers to his and his son's nobility when he argues that the Young Man (his son) must be of noble origins, as he speaks highly (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 174) similarly to himself and the other noble kings who are present.

The most remarkable way of indicating Cuchulain's eloquence and his distinguished personality in the Cuchulain plays is Yeats's variation of blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameters) and rhymed verse, which serves to enrich the characterization in Yeats's plays, as Nathan explains it (Nathan, 229). Nathan also points out that, for example, the ballad-like quality of the speech of the chorus in *At the Hawk's Well* expresses human reaction (181), which means that it is related to the present conditions of Ireland and also to the terrestrial world. However, blank verse is a way of speaking in Yeats's drama which connects the characters to the noble past of Ireland. Yeats articulates that "[w]hen I speak blank verse and analyze my feelings, I stand at a moment of history when instinct, its traditional songs and dances, its general agreement, is of the past." (qtd. in Nathan 181) What is more, Helen Vendler explains that in Yeats's drama, blank verse expresses a real drama between two characters (247), and it is also a means of "enunciating true counter-positions" (251), and most importantly, it serves to express the struggle between the two selves of a certain (noble) character. All these functions of the Yeatsian blank verse support the idea that in Yeats's drama blank verse is the most eloquent way of speaking which serves to indicate the importance of certain characters, and this is why only kings and other noblemen use this kind of verse in Yeats's Cuchulain plays. Therefore, the fact that Yeats made Cuchulain speak in blank verse was a way of indicating his nobleness and his connection to the past (the ancient nobility of Ireland).

It is also important that in *On Baile's Strand*, Cuchulain and Conchubar, seen as the representatives of the ancient aristocracy, speak in blank verse as opposed to some of the less important characters who speak in prose and serve "as an ironic, almost burlesque, commentary on the main theme." (Nathan 109) Furthermore, what indicates here Cuchulain's eloquence is also the highbrow ideas he expresses with regard to the future of his ancestral line, as opposed to the Fool's and the Blind Man's trivial dialogues on cooking and eating.

Nathan points out that besides blank verse and rhymed verse, there is a third type of verse, the octosyllabic couplets, spoken by certain characters in the Cuchulain plays (Nathan, 230). These characters are those who belong to the superhuman sphere, such as the Ghost of Cuchulain and Fand (the symbol of unity) in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. This type of verse

“remove[s] the superhuman exchange to a different level from that of the other characters” (Nathan, 230). This variation of the three types of verse and prose speaking—aiming at a rich characterization—also connects the characters to three different spheres of existence, explained in detail in Yeats’s “Per Amica Silentia Lunae” (see pages 27-105). Rhymed verse and prose—symbolizing human reaction and the common people’s commentary on the actions of the principal characters—are the ways of speaking of those belonging to the *Anima hominis* (the terrestrial world), while the octosyllabic couplets—representing superhuman, otherworldly characters—appertain to the *Anima mundi* (or “condition of fire”, the highest sphere where the Unity of Being and perfection are achieved). Finally, blank verse—representing the past and thus the ancient nobility of Ireland—stands for the sphere in between the *Anima hominis* and *Anima mundi*, that is, the sphere of the “condition of air”. It is to this sphere that Cuchulain and the other noble characters belong. Cuchulain—being a Yeatsian hero—must aspire to perfection and thus to the *Anima mundi*, but he cannot entirely achieve it, even though he assumes his mask after his fight with the waves. It is the Ghost of Cuchulain (instead of Cuchulain, the hero) in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* who speaks octosyllabic couplets, but his ghost disappears when Cuchulain loses his heroic mask, which means that Cuchulain cannot reach the highest sphere, and cannot achieve the desired Unity of Being.

Distinguished speech is relevant to Castiglione’s ideal courtier as well, and it is marked by his witticisms (*arguzie*). However, it is important that he use his witticism in his speech carefully and without excess so that he can entertain his audience, without becoming a burden for them, or, on the other hand (not using enough witticism), becoming a boring companion. In Book II of the *Courtier*, master Bernardo says that if the courtier uses too much witticism, he will seem foul of speech: “who are indecent and foul of speech, and show no respect for ladies’ presence and seem to have no other pleasure than to make them blush with shame, and who to that end are continually seeking witticisms and *arguzie*.” (143)

The third value, that is, a “virile, directed energy with grace and refinement”, is also an important feature shared by the ideal courtier and Cuchulain. Michael McAteer also refers to “[t]he Cuchulain of Yeats’s plays...[as a] virile figure,” (69) and this is manifested most markedly in *On Baile’s Strand*, in his brave and enduring resistance to Conchubar’s command according to which Cuchulain has to be bound into obedience to Conchubar, the High King. Initially, Cuchulain shows no fear and represents an unmistakable virile warrior-hero, declaring that he will not be bound. It is also important that Cuchulain is described here as a wild man. The Blind Man says at the beginning of the play that “he [Cuchulain] ran too wild,

and Conchubar is coming to-day to put an oath upon him that will stop his rambling and make him as biddable as a house-dog and keep him always at his hand.” (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 163) Finally, Cuchulain’s virile energy is also manifested in his fearless fight with the waves whom he confronted without any sign of despair.

However, at one point, Cuchulain’s resistance suddenly disappears, due to the fact that his initial optimism regarding the future of Ireland and his own strength and values—which could have been enough to dominate Conchubar and his sons—turns to a sudden pessimism. This is why I do not mention the second value, political and social optimism, among the similarities between Cuchulain’s and the humanist values. The reason for Cuchulain’s change in attitude is that he realises that there is no use fighting against the strengthening merchant class (represented by Conchubar’s sons) and the degenerating new kind of nobility (represented by the other kings and Conchubar). When he hears the kings urging him to enter into obedience to Conchubar, he realises that everything has changed, and this new nobility will never follow the values of the old one (Cuchulain’s race). Hence Cuchulain claims “It’s time the years put water in my blood / And drowned the willingness of it, for all’s changed” (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 171).

Consequently, not only the renaissance, humanist noblemen of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—and among them Castiglione’s ideal courtier—were characterised by moral ideals and virile, directed energy, but also Yeats’s warrior-aristocrat. The only difference between Yeats’s and Castiglione’s hero is that in the depiction of Cuchulain Yeats’s pessimism about the politics and society of his own time is more visible and stressed than in the seemingly perfect depiction of the courtier’s character in Castiglione’s book.

3. Imperfections in Yeats's and Castiglione's Ideal Portraits: a Sense of Degeneration

The focus on Castiglione's traces in Yeats's Cuchulain plays must be supplemented with a reference to the sense of degeneration and melancholy in their works. Though Yeats and Castiglione apparently immortalize their fictional heroes, they are, in fact, stressing a serious degeneration of their aristocratic ideals. This is indicated by either the death of the hero or the allusions to the impossibility of rebuilding an ideal age dominated by the aristocracy. In Yeats's case, this sense of melancholy traces back to his shattered hopes for the creation of a new Irish aristocracy. Likewise, Castiglione's melancholy, expressed in his dedicatory letter written to Miguel de Silva, is also connected to the gradual disappearance of the humanist aristocracy of his time, but Castiglione's sorrows and nostalgias are oriented towards an age very close to him. He experienced the heyday of Urbino and he wrote his book in 1506, when many of the characters depicted in the book were still alive. Later on, when he decided to rework it, he realized that "most of the personages introduced in the discussion were already dead; for besides those mentioned in the proem of the last Book, messer Alfonso Ariosto (to whom the work is dedicated) is also dead, a gracious youth, considerate, of the highest breeding, and apt in everything proper to a man who lives at court." (Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* 1) Duke Giuliano de Medici, Messer Bernardo and Ottaviano Fregoso had also passed away, but what induced Castiglione to rework his book as soon as possible as a homage to that period and its excellent men of letters, was the fact that his Duchess, Elisabetta Gonzaga had passed away by then. It is important to note here that this part of Castiglione's dedicatory letter was that which most fascinated Yeats as well. As Castiglione articulates it,

[b]ut what should not be told without tears is that my lady Duchess, too, is dead. And if my heart mourns the loss of so many friends and patrons, who have left me in this life as in a solitude of sorrows, it is meet that I grieve more bitterly for the death of my lady Duchess than of all the others; for she was more precious than they, and I more bound to her than to all the others. (2)

It seems that while in Yeats, the sense of degeneration is deeply rooted in his condemnation of the rise of the middle class, in the case of Castiglione it would be wrong to claim that the sense of melancholy and decline in his book is connected to the rise of the middle class in Italy of his day; rather, it would be more appropriate to say that his melancholy and sense of degeneration is linked to the fact that, as Yeats puts it in one of his

recollections referring to Castiglione's dedicatory letter, Castiglione witnessed "the worth of life fade forever." (*Autobiographies* 478) For Yeats the worth of life was to achieve cultural and national unity in Ireland on the basis of Renaissance Italy (of which Urbino was an example), and Yeats was fascinated with Castiglione's book because it reflected his ideal types of aristocrats, the perfect conditions for the realization of the Unity of Culture, harmony, and, also, the gradual degeneration of all these components. Thus, Yeats used the phrase "worth of life" in relation to Castiglione's attitude towards his own *Courtier*, because the worth of life means the same for both of them: conserving those little circles of intellectual artist-aristocrats who can help their nation reach a unity of culture. The worth of life, however, was gradually fading for both authors, as a result of the disappearance of the courts and with them, the highly educated humanist aristocrats as well.

Arthur F. Kinney refers to Castiglione's book as *prosopographia* (contrasting it to the *prosopopoeia* of Erasmus's *Folly*), which has two meanings: on the one hand, it might be the vivid description of someone's character; on the other, it can also imply the description of feigned or imaginary characters (Burton, n. p.) Bearing this in mind, we can say that the *Courtier* is truly a vivid depiction of the courtier's character, but considering the second meaning of the term, it can also suggest that this ideal courtier does not exist and never existed, since he is also an imaginary character with qualities impossible to achieve. It is important because while reading the meticulous description of the courtier, the reader tends to think of three possibilities: the ideal courtier is either the duke (Guidobaldo) who, however, is not present; or it is the description of the former illustrious duke, Federico; or else Castiglione painted a self-portrait. Although in his dedicatory letter Castiglione did not deny the latter possibility, he emphasized that he deliberately wished to paint a perfect portrait of those excellent men at Urbino, and that he wanted to give instructions to the similar courtiers in order that they be able to approach perfection—though, as Castiglione puts it, "even if they fail to attain the perfection, such as it is, that I have tried to express, he that approaches nearest to it will be the most perfect; just as when many archers shoot at a target and none hit the very mark, surely he that comes nearest to it is better than the rest." (*The Book of the Courtier* 6) It seems that Castiglione's intention was to give an example to be followed for his generation and the subsequent ones. But this example is modelled on the past which he considered as a period better than the time when he was reworking his book.

Consequently, though Castiglione apparently portrayed a real, existing man, this man existed only in the past. Actually, in the past these exceptional values characterized Duke Federico, but now those types of men do not exist anymore, and this nonexistence is indicated

by the shortcomings (impotence and gout) of Guidobaldo. The same scheme can be seen in the Cuchulain plays as well, since Yeats's Cuchulain was also an ideal which existed only in the distant past, and in the author's time the ideal he is describing is nonexistent—the values of Old Ireland died as well as Cuchulain died at the end of the cycle. Therefore, we cannot say that the *Courtier* or the Cuchulain cycle are mere descriptions of ideal men, because these ideals once existed, and this way these works rather become depictions of disappeared ideal worlds. The only difference between the two cases is that while Castiglione embellished the past—hiding its flaws as much as possible—Yeats, in his five plays, did not aestheticize Cuchulain; he explicitly portrayed his ideal's failures and gradual decline.

Despite the fact that, according to Castiglione's own explanation at the beginning of the book, he intended nothing more than to portray and thus immortalize the singular men of Guidobaldo's time, it is impossible not to notice the almost hidden allusions and signs in the book to the imperfection of this portrait. As Kinney observes,

[t]he fatal difficulty is that, in so shaping Urbino, Castiglione insists on realizing perfectability in an imperfect society, one whose flaws are caught in a discernible time and place and written—at least in manuscript—as a tribute to those participants who will know from the outset that it is successful only as a deliberately willed act of the imagination, a verbal act of *admiratio*. (90)

More significantly, Kinney further claims that what Castiglione did was a “quiet act of creative desperation,” (90) which is manifested in mainly three aspects of the book: the absence of the duke; the fact that, in order to seem perfect, the ideal courtier must put on a mask and disguise himself; and finally, the last book's change in tone and topic.

The *Book of the Courtier* takes place in Duke Guido's time, and the reader is soon informed that he succeeded his even more glorious father, Duke Federico. At the time of Castiglione's reworking of his book, however, both had already passed away. What is most striking in this book is the absence of Guidobaldo, who should be the first among those excellent courtiers and should be present throughout the discussions. This might be considered a foreboding sign as regards Castiglione's attitude to the future. Guidobaldo was Federico's only son and

heir also to all his father's virtues... [b]ut envious of so much virtue, fortune thwarted this glorious beginning with all her power; so that before Duke Guido reached the age of twenty years, he fell ill of the gout, which grew upon him with grievous pain...and so crippled all his members that he could neither stand upon his feet nor move; and thus one of the fairest and most promising forms in the world was distorted and spoiled in the tender youth. (*The Book of the Courtier* 9-10)

This passage clearly explains that Guido would have followed the virtuous and promising life which his father had represented formerly, but this excellent man was disabled by illness. As a result, he became inadequate for and physically incapable of participating in the courtly life. More important here is the fact that Guidobaldo was impotent (Kinney 99), meaning that his death put an end to his family line and thus to the existence of such excellent courtiers as he and his father. Kinney argues that he is absent because “his presence would remind Castiglione’s courtiers that he was the last of the line that made their gatherings possible.” (99) As a result, the almost idyllic atmosphere of the book is, in fact, melancholy and pessimistic about the times to come from the beginning, when the reader first learns the shortcomings of Guidobaldo—it is a sorrowful picture of an age which will probably never return. Eduardo Saccone also stresses that this book is “the record of a vanished world...and a commemorative art that claims to evoke the dead, to substitute itself for life.” (Saccone, *The Portrait of the Courtier* 1)

Another problem with this ideal portrait is that the courtiers can achieve perfection only if they deceive others. This deception is based on the putting on a mask, the so-called *sprezzatura*, which is indispensable for a successful social discourse. The term *sprezzatura* means ‘recklessness’ which, in ordinary understanding, carries a negative connotation: disdain, laziness or nonchalance. But Saccone rightly points out that these negative meanings refer not to what the courtier should do while employing recklessness, but rather to what he should avoid, namely, affectation. In Book I, Count Lodovico explains that “this excellence [*sprezzatura*], which is the opposite of affectation and which for the present we call nonchalance, besides being the true fountain from which grace springs, [...] often leads us to rate his knowledge as much greater than in fact it is.” (*The Book of the Courtier* 38) Although this passage does not mention that what the courtier does is deception, it seems that what is at stake is making his audience believe he is more eloquent and refined than he really is—this is a kind of playful deception. It follows that this excellence is based on an element of delusion, and, what is more, none of the courtiers can be ideal without deceiving others. This aspect might well be regarded as a flaw of sorts, calling into question the perfection of this portrait. Kinney draws attention to the fact that in the *Courtier*, we are warned “not to be ensnared by the desirability of Lodovico’s ideal courtier without reserved judgement.” (102) He continues to explain that “*sprezzatura* disguises the practitioner and may delude him [...], it is [...] deceptive and false—and so treacherous [...]. The art of nonchalance, then, can deceive *both* the actor *and* his audience” (103). By this account, the only way for the courtier to achieve perfection in the eyes of others is through an element of dissimulation between seeming and

being, that is, deception. It also suggests that in order to achieve his aims, the courtier's manners might be more important than his morals—and this is an aspect which further undermines and challenges the virtues and the perfect portrait of our courtier.

A sense of decline can be perceived in Book IV of the *Courtier*, as it changes remarkably in tone and topic. In this book, Ottaviano Fregoso explains the services of the courtier to the prince. Kinney notes that “Book 4 of *Il Cortigiano* is more somber and more serious...A jarring abruptness shakes us from the setting of 1507 to the time of publication (1528) with a long list of the actual deaths that have intervened, robbing the present of the possibility of continuing forever the *conversazioni* that constitute *Il Cortegiano*.” (110) Therefore, this fourth book seems to be a final look at Urbino and its idyllic, humanist atmosphere. There is no more talk of *sprezzatura*, as what Ottaviano describes here is more important than the act of nonchalance, based on deception and eloquent manners. The purpose of the courtier is to serve the prince and always tell him the truth about everything he needs to know, without fear of displeasing him. More significantly, it is not only in its structure and topic that this book gives us a sense of break, but also in its seriousness, as the first three books abound in witty conversations, which are missing from Book IV. These are the reasons why Saccone calls this book a “virtual destruction [...] of the previous ‘ideal’ of courtly behaviour.” (*The Portrait of the Courtier* 9) More importantly, Saccone rightly points out that “[t]oo many in his books are the passages that reveal the author’s awareness of the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, of seeing his ideal realized.” (*The Portrait of the Courtier* 15)

The impossibility of witnessing the ideal realized, along with the sense of a “quiet act of creative desperation”, are also evident in some of Yeats’s five Cuchulain plays. This sense of desperation in Yeats’s plays is brought about by the lack of continuity between the aristocracy of old Ireland and the new aristocracy of modern Ireland, more precisely, by the fact that this new aristocracy could not come into being. The gap between the old and new nobility, the disdain of the future generations and the lack of the new aristocracy are all represented in the plays. And by representing these aspects of the new Irish society in the Cuchulain plays, Yeats wished to express a constant sense of decline which he witnessed in modern Ireland.

In *The Green Helmet* there are even more possible allusions to the degenerating and desperate conditions of the Ireland of Yeats’s time. At the beginning of the play, Laegaire and Conall intend to send Cuchulain back to Scotland, and their words express a scathing criticism of Ireland. Laegaire and Conall ask Cuchulain to “[g]o into Scotland again, or where you will, but begone / From this unlucky country that was made when the Devil spat.” (Yeats,

Collected Plays 150) Furthermore, they refer to the house in which they live and which can symbolize Ireland, as “a house that has fallen on shame and disgrace.” (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 150) Afterwards, Laegaire changes his mind and mentions a very important aspect. Alluding to Cuchulain he says that “[h]e was born to luck in the cradle, his good luck may amend / The bad luck we were born to.” (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 150) This passage suggests Cuchulain’s inherent nobility which, if transmitted to the future generations, could save Ireland from its degeneration.

However, as we proceed towards the subsequent plays, the hopes for Cuchulain’s role as a possible saviour of Ireland start to fade away. The confident, wild and passionate Cuchulain of *At the Hawk’s Well*, *The Green Helmet* and *On Baile’s Strand*, however, almost entirely disappears when we see him again in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and in *The Death of Cuchulain*. In the former, we find Cuchulain half-dead, wearing his grave-clothes and a heroic mask. It is only by the end of the play that the warrior returns to life, but with this he loses his heroic mask. The loss of his tragic mask initiates Cuchulain’s decline, which will conclude with his death. In this play, Emer foreshadows her husband’s death by predicting what will happen when Cuchulain dies: “The very heavens when that day’s at hand, / So that his death may not lack ceremony, / Will throw out fires, and the earth grow red with blood. / There shall not be a scullion but foreknows it / Like the world’s end.” (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 186) Emer imagines her husband’s death as something similar to the end of the world. Also, Cuchulain’s death would mean the death and final disappearance of the unique individual, which for Yeats meant the beginning of anarchy and chaos. The end of this unique individual is further stressed when Cuchulain claims that he is not “[t]he young and passionate man [he] was.” (Yeats, *Collected Plays* 191) The lack of passion in the nobility was the most dangerous and feared characteristic for Yeats, since, as already mentioned above, it meant that the aristocracy accepted its own decline.

The Death of Cuchulain is remarkable, as it announces that the time of the dominance of the middle class has arrived, and this is indicated symbolically by the six mortal wounds and murder of Cuchulain by the hands of the blind beggar of *On Baile’s Strand*, cutting the warrior-aristocrat’s head for twelve pennies—a highly humiliating end for a noble and great fighting man. What is more, before Cuchulain’s death, Eithne Inguba (Cuchulain’s lover), Aoife (the queen of Scotland, the mother of Cuchulain’s son) and Cuchulain himself make recurring references to Cuchulain’s weakening and the fact that by the end of his life he has also changed. When Cuchulain believes that Eithne Inguba betrays him, he forgives her, and Eithne Inguba reflects on Cuchulain’s generosity declaring that “You’re not the man I loved, /

That violent man forgave no treachery. / If, thinking what you think, you can forgive, / It is because you are about to die.” (*Collected Plays* 441) The phrase “you’re about to die” is mentioned several times as the play proceeds towards Cuchulain’s death. This Cuchulain is devoid of passion and will, and declares that he is too weak, and becomes increasingly resigned to the fact that an old beggar is going to kill him. At the end of the play, the Singer draws a parallel between Cuchulain, the ancient hero and the heroes of Easter 1916 (Pearse and Connolly), who stood where Cuchulain had stood. They could have represented the new aristocracy and could have saved Ireland, but they— similarly to the warrior—were defeated, thus shattering all ideals and hopes for the recreation of a better age in the country.

4. The Heroic Mask and the Mask of Courtesy: Recklessness and the Hero's Anti-Self

Both Castiglione's renaissance courtier and Yeats's Cuchulain are distinguished by their ability to put on a mask (Yeats's anti-self or Daimon⁴) through their 'recklessness' (nonchalance). This disposition makes them artistic, ideal types, and superior to others (this is why, for example, Michael Valdez Moses refers to the courtier as a "Renaissance Übermensch" [266-7]). Not only did the aristocratic society gathered at Urbino make a profound impression on Yeats and his career as a poet and playwright, but also Castiglione's concept of recklessness, *sprezzatura*.

The doctrine of recklessness is so complex and so central in Yeats that we can hardly attend to it too closely. Even though the two authors' use of the word is not always the same, there are two things which are common in both: recklessness is an art which characterizes aristocrats, and it is an inherent gift given by nature to the performer. As already referred to above, in Castiglione's use of the word, *sprezzatura* is the opposite of affectation, and it characterizes the good courtier's every single action, including his speech, writing, dancing and fighting. It means that everything he does should seem to be effortless, because "true art [is] which does not appear to be art" (Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* 35). In so doing, the courtier can achieve grace, without which he cannot reach perfection. Count Lodovico explains that "this courtier of ours must be endowed by nature with beauty of countenance and person, and with a grace that shall make him so agreeable" (28). Saccone in his essay on the *Courtier* emphasises that *sprezzatura* is a "certain grace which we call an 'air' [*una certa grazia e come si dice, un sangue*]" (qtd. in *Grazia, Sprezzatura, Affettazione* 51). The Italian word 'sangue' (meaning blood) is translated as 'air'. Both words express very clearly that grace (*grazia*) "is an attribute, or rather gift" (Saccone, *Grazia, Sprezzatura, Affettazione* 47) which is not given to anybody, but only to singular men. Also, "it is a process, an operation, therefore, that necessarily implies a beginning and an end or, rather, an intention and an object." (48)

When Yeats refers to the three types of men that have made all beautiful things in the world, he says in relation to the artists that they "have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness." (qtd. in Stein 607) We can see that in this phrase, Yeats also considers recklessness as a gift from Providence, that is, an inherent ability. More to the

⁴ Yeats used the word 'Daimon' with two different spellings: 'Daimon' and 'Daemon'. These two terms are interchangeable in Yeats's terminology, both referring to a spirit (the anti-self) which connects a human to God.

point, according to Yeats, being an artist and being reckless are inseparable, and it means that the man who can achieve recklessness must be an artist. Yeats also believes that the artist is reckless, for he is without fear, and in this interpretation Cuchulain is indeed reckless.

On Baile's Strand and the chronologically subsequent play, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, are those plays which show Cuchulain's achievement of his anti-self through recklessness. Like the courtier's recklessness and grace, Cuchulain's *sprezzatura* is also an 'air' (*sangue*), that is an exceptional gift given exclusively to Cuchulain and the other excellent artist-aristocrats, and achieving it is an advancement even in Cuchulain's case. It is a progress, as it begins at the end of *On Baile's Strand* when Cuchulain starts fighting the deathless sea—maddened by the gravity of his deed (he had murdered his own son)—and it concludes at the end of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, when Cuchulain is brought back to life and loses his tragic (heroic) mask, that is, exits his anti-self. According to Yeats's private mythology, "[t]he 'second-self,'...is not merely a different self; it is the 'anti-self,' intent on bringing the 'chosen man to the greatest obstacle he may confront without despair.'" (qtd. in Stein 605) In this regard, Cuchulain in *On Baile's Strand* indeed achieves his second-self, as he confronts the waves without any sign of fear (believing that they are Conchubar who betrayed him, and as a result of this betrayal, he killed his only offspring). As mentioned above, Yeats believed that the artist is reckless because he has no fear, and from this perspective, we can say that Cuchulain is indeed an artist and enters his second-self (his Daimon) with recklessness, though he was defeated by the waves and nearly died. But this fight was also an inner struggle in Cuchulain between human and Daimon—as Nicholas Meihuizen explains, the relation between human and Daimon is an antithetical twinning, which is most evident for Yeats in the distinction between one's everyday nature and one's art (74).

This antithetical twinning or inner struggle between man and Daimon is what makes Cuchulain such a distinguished figure for Yeats. It is a struggle in the depths of Cuchulain's individual mind, the conflict between man and Daimon, that is, between his ordinary self and his anti-self. In the words of Nathan, "[t]he conflict of man and daemon, being in the self, precedes other conflicts and is, therefore, the formative struggle of the hero; the heroic action that issues from it, shapes all future action and is the cause of later conflicts between the hero and the world." (164) This formative struggle between the two selves and the achievement of the anti-self (Daimon) constitute a particularly aristocratic vein for Yeats, and characterize exceptional men only—mostly artists, such as Dante, Keats, or Yeats himself, and mainly his hero, Cuchulain. It is this struggle that we can see in *On Baile's Strand*, when Cuchulain

defeats his human-self (exits his ordinary self), and enters his second-self, whereby achieving a nobler and more distinguished reckless state.

The connection between Cuchulain's loss of his reckless anti-self in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and Yeats's ideas on Ireland's fate is remarkable. In Yeats, recklessness has both a negative (age of anarchy) and a positive sense (freedom of the individual). On the one hand, Yeats was fearful of this recklessness (meaning disinterestedness), because it could result in anarchy in his view. For Yeats recklessness was a condition of life as a kind of chaos, as it meant the disappearance of an ideal world, and the coming of an age when "the centre cannot hold" (*The Works of W. B. Yeats* 159) any more, when "the falcon cannot hear the falconer" (159) (a similar condition we can see in the confusion depicted in *The Green Helmet*). In such an age, an age without manners, individuals become conformists (like Cuchulain when in *On Baile's Strand* he accepts Conchubar's command). Thus, the negative connotation of recklessness in Yeats, is strongly related to Cuchulain who, for Yeats, epitomized the unique individual. But when the age becomes anarchical, this unique individual disappears (this is what Cuchulain's death indicates). The positive connotation of the word 'recklessness' in Yeats is the freedom of the individual and the artistic vein of the aristocrat. Therefore, in the case of Yeats's *oeuvre* it is more problematic to define the meaning of Castiglione's *sprezzatura*, but one thing is clear: as to the positive meaning of the word, Yeats considered Castiglione's ideas, and this is why in both authors recklessness can be related to art and the aristocracy.

In addition to Yeats's ideas on recklessness, his concept of the mask is equally complex, it has multiple meanings, and it can be connected to the mask of courtesy of Castiglione's courtier. Ellmann makes reference to three different meanings of the Yeatsian mask which are worthy of mention in relation to Castiglione's *Courtier*: the mask is a social self; defensive armour and a weapon of attack (175-6) It is a social self, as it "includes all the differences between one's own and other people's conception of one's personality." (175-6) It is a defensive armour, since the chosen man wears it not to be hurt, and finally it is a weapon of attack, as "we put it on to keep up a noble conception of ourselves; it is a heroic ideal which we try to live up to." (Ellmann 175) Castiglione's courtier possesses all three features. The courtier puts on his mask in order to appear an infallible social man, possessing such qualities as good taste, restraint, fine language, charm, likability and sobriety. But the mask of courtesy is also a defensive device, as the courtier is expected to wear it in order not to seem a fool, that is, to hide his shortcomings, including his possible tendency to affectation, pedantry or excessive craving for honour (Kinney 89). The courtier also wants to keep up a noble

conception of himself, and what is more, this is the main purpose of the mask of courtesy, as it is this noble conception that allows him to be part of the aristocratic society of Urbino. According to Kinney, the courtier's mask, that is, *sprezzatura*, "is a saving flexibility that alone cements courts together by centripetal appeal... [but it also] confounds things by infinite centrifugal disguisings" (104). The courtier's mask is, therefore, a disguise, and it again invokes Yeats's concept of the mask of the poet and the hero. As Ellmann phrases it, "[t]he poet looks the poet, the hero looks the hero; both may be deceiving others and they may even be practising a form of deception upon themselves." (176)

In the plays, we can take note of some signs of Cuchulain's self-deception as well. In *On Baile's Strand*—despite his initial, firm resistance—he becomes bound to Conchubar and promises to serve his sons in the future. In *At the Hawk's Well*, the young warrior fails to become immortal, but does not lose his hopes and continues to seek immortality and face his enemies. In *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, it appears that his fight with the waves had a sense, as he achieved his tragic mask. However, his humiliating death seems to suggest that all his struggles have been in vain. This self-deception can be seen in the act of *sprezzatura* as well, which deceives not only the actor (as in Cuchulain's case) but also his audience.

5. Yeats's Self-Dramatization: the Modified Cuchulain-Saga and the Authors' Anti-Selves

Yeats's career was so much affected by his preference towards aristocracy and his interest in the 'mask' that he endeavoured to represent his aristocratic ideals and his ideas on the mask in almost the whole of his *oeuvre*. As a result, though Yeats used the tales of the original saga and Lady Gregory's book, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, he actually transmitted into his plays only fragments of the original stories, and what is more, modified the most important parts (including the chronology of the story, parts of the plot, and Cuchulain's age) so that he can approximate Cuchulain to his own image and communicate his ideas on the 'mask', the opposition between the aristocracy and the middle class and also his disillusion—those aspects which fascinated him even in Castiglione's *Courtier*, and as a result of which there are visible analogies between the *Courtier* and the Cuchulain plays.

One of the most significant modifications lies in the way Yeats presents Conchubar to the reader. According to the saga, Cuchulain and the High King of Ulster, Conchubar have been friends since their youth. In "The Birth of Cú Chulaind" and "The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind" we learn that Cuchulain was, in fact, the son of Conchubar's sister and that Cuchulain was reared at Conchubar's house among his sons, and what is more, Conchubar once offered him his protection and Cuchulain also undertook the protection of the sons (Gantz 137). References to this familiar bond between Cuchulain and Conchubar's family are not emphasised in Yeats's version, and in *On Baile's Strand* Yeats downright presents Conchubar and his sons as hostile figures who represent different values than those of Cuchulain and the Young Man. What is more, at the end of the play, Cuchulain turns against his former friend, Conchubar, as Cuchulain believes that the High King betrayed him in order that he (Cuchulain) would kill his only offspring. Although it is not self-evident from the plays, I believe that Yeats put in the forefront Conchubar as the reason for the death of the hero's son, suggesting that the strengthening middle class and the degenerating new aristocracy of his age made it impossible for the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy (represented by the son) to exist and dominate.

Yeats modified the chronology of the story as well. While in the original saga "Bricriu's Feast" (Yeats's source of *The Green Helmet*) is towards the end of the story, Yeats placed it at the beginning of the cycle (it is the second drama after *At the Hawk's Well*). It seems that the reason for this change is that Yeats wanted to express a gradual degeneration

and loss of hopes for Ireland's future in his cycle of plays. "Bricriu's Feast" and Yeats's *Green Helmet*, however, highlight the greatness and the bravery of the still young Cuchulain, and therefore it would not have suited Yeats's purposes if he had placed it at the end of the cycle, after *The Only Jealousy of Emer*.

One of the most remarkable Yeatsian additions to the saga is that he composed a new Cuchulain story with *At the Hawk's Well*, and put it at the very beginning of the cycle. This new Cuchulain story is particularly important, as it indicates Yeats's intention to form Cuchulain into his own image, and use him as a means of expressing his ideas on the mask and the aristocracy. This play was Yeats's first attempt at using actual physical masks and, also, his first Noh drama. Interestingly, this Japanese Noh-form has a lot to do with Yeats's Cuchulain as well as with the *Courtier*. The reason for this connection lies in the fact that Yeats's turn to the Noh and Castiglione's book both derive from the same source: Yeats was attracted by both the *Courtier* and the Noh due to his fascination with the aristocratic values and the mask. Not that Yeats turned to the Noh because he had become acquainted with the *Courtier*, but he was fascinated with both of them, because they reflected exactly those ideas which interested Yeats throughout his career. The Noh is a noble form, and the mask is its basic element. As Nathan articulates it, "[t]he Noh that Yeats found in the Pound redaction of Fenollosa's work was a courtly form, depending for its effects on a subtle stylization that replaced action with recitation, mimicry and gesture." (165)

The Noh attracted Yeats—as did Castiglione's *Courtier*—because originally it was strongly connected to the Japanese noble courts and the aristocracy of the 14th century. As Yeats explains it in his introduction to Pound's essay, "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," "[t]he Noh theatre of Japan became popular at the close of the 14th century, gathering into itself dances performed at Shinto shrines in honour of spirits and gods or by young nobles at courts" (n. p.). Thus, the subtle and aristocratic Noh performances were originally a kind of homage to the dead similarly to the subtle and eloquent game of the courtiers and court ladies of Urbino to the disappeared golden age of Duke Federico, or Castiglione's eloquent book as a homage to those beloved courtiers and to Elisabetta Gonzaga.

Yeats believes that even the physical masks of the Noh have philosophical importance, and he is firm in believing that the mask is a work of art, similarly to the courtier's perfectly elaborated mask of courtesy. Being noble and wearing a mask are discernible also in Cuchulain, though Cuchulain was not made an aristocratic figure by Yeats because Yeats had read the *Courtier*, but because Yeats was fascinated with the values of the old aristocracy, and as a result he became amazed by Castiglione's ideas and the Noh form as well (and, in fact, he

used the hawk symbol for the same reason). I argue that this is the reason for the analogies (nobleness; elevated speech; mask as a work of art; subtle stylization; emphasis on mimicry, gestures and recitation; a kind of elitism) that exist between Cuchulain, the Noh theatre (especially the Noh actors, such as Ito Michio, who fascinated Yeats with his noble and reckless movements) and the perfect courtier.

Yeats alters the original saga also in order to communicate the fact that Cuchulain is his second-self. What is more, it is more accurate to say that Yeats creates his artistic personality through Cuchulain; Cuchulain is the figure who lives out of Yeats's imagination—thus Cuchulain is Yeats's mask. Bjersby explains that Yeats “was never presumptuous in comparing himself to Cuchulain. There was always a certain modesty and awareness that Cuchulain was in a way a mask he liked putting on so, as to be able to play a heroic, tragical part.” (103-4) Bjersby mentions a significant autobiographic element in relation to *On Baile's Strand* in which one of the stage directions makes it clear that Cuchulain was something over forty years of age (*Collected Plays* 166). Yeats was then forty-one, and Bjersby notes that “[a]ccording to the saga, Cuchulain was 27 years of age at his death, but in Yeats...grows older along with Yeats himself.” (79) Bjersby proposes the hypothesis according to which Yeats's “dramatization of the life of Cuchulain was at the same time a self-dramatization.” (75) Cuchulain seen as the self-dramatization of the author is particularly interesting if we consider that Castiglione himself makes reference to the fact the he might have painted his self-portrait with the ideal courtier (*The Book of the Courtier* 6). If we take into account that the reckless Cuchulain was for Yeats his own anti-self—his opposite who could achieve perfection through his recklessness—then, we can come to the conclusion that the ideal courtier could have been the portrait of Castiglione's second-self.

All these insights return us to the fundamental connection that Yeats saw between the humanist aristocracy of Renaissance Italy and the old nobility of Ireland. Fantaccini rightly points out that it was through Castiglione and his *Courtier* that Yeats finally comprehended that the historic era he was searching for was exactly the Renaissance (Fantaccini 37).

6. Conclusion

The foregoing examples do not include all the aspects that could be mentioned in relation to Castiglione's impact on Yeats, but they serve to delineate the extent and the reason for this influence—a parallel which reinforced Yeats's concept of the Unity of Culture based on the Renaissance period; refined his style by having recourse to the Noh, and completed his system of symbols of the aristocracy; gave a concrete form to his theories of the role of the poet, the aristocrat and the artist. All these changes and refinements in Yeats's career as an artist can be traced back to one summer when Lady Augusta Gregory introduced the poet to the courteous atmosphere of Castiglione's book, which from that moment on markedly influenced his poetry, prose and verse-drama with Cuchulain in its centre. It was through this impact that Yeats was induced to create the theatre of the anti-self, that was, as Nathan notes, a "compound of melancholy and joy, shared by hero and audience, and growing out of the hero's defeat and his mocking defiance of the human condition that defeats him." (156) The dramatization of Cuchulain's life (or the self-dramatization of Yeats's own life) is exactly this compound of melancholy and joy, and this compound is easy to be perceived in *The Book of the Courtier* as well. Both heroes are defeated by the human condition; Cuchulain is humiliatingly murdered by a beggar for twelve pennies and the *Courtier* begins with a listing of characters who are already passed away and thus becomes both an obituary of and a eulogy to those noblemen and noblewomen, especially the Duchess. Moreover, it could be argued that if the Cuchulain cycle is the model of Yeats's theatre of the anti-self, then, the *Courtier* is like the *prosopographia* of the anti-self, since the ideal courtier employs dissimulation, seeming the opposite of what he is in reality. This cycle of four books, thus, proves to be the anti-self, the opposite of what it is declared to be at the beginning: it is not a mere description of an ideal man, nor is Urbino a utopia. Rather, this cycle of books, like Yeats's cycle of plays, is the depiction of a disappearing world or an already disappeared one. In the perfection of the picture of the courtier and in the heroic career and passion of Cuchulain, a continuous degeneration is being delineated. Both seem to be an ideal picture, representatives of a once more illustrious, golden age, but in fact, these ideals were already shattered in the time of the authors; these fictional heroes, the perfect courtier and the warrior-aristocrat Cuchulain, were vanished ideals, symbols of the authors' privileged but already non-existing world: human faces, familiar memories and desolate places (*Collected Plays* 144)—all but a "mouthful of sweet air." (*Collected Plays* 144)

7. Works Cited

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