Modern criticism of harmful constructs imbedded in society comes in many forms. One recent instance is the 2016 animated film *Zootopia*, which confronts issues of social discrimination – particularly racial bias – by means of a city of personified animals who combat the rise of an epidemic which causes usually civilized predators to attack prey. Time has proven that imaginative and symbolic works can be an effective way to raise awareness about a set of issues, and so it follows that a work analyzing gender conventions can also be a tale of kings and castles, battles and tragedy, with just a bit of witchcraft. In William Butler Yeats’s *On Baile’s Strand*, first published in 1903 and performed in 1904, gender functions primarily to start a conversation on the social construction of gender which extends beyond the reach of Irish nationalism.

In the case of early twentieth century Ireland, representations of women were typically relegated to domestic and supernatural spheres, both of which Yeats seeks to critique in *On Baile’s Strand*. The most significant way that Yeats accomplishes this goal is through the inclusion, characterization, and relationship of King Cuchulain of Muirthemne, Queen Aoife of Scotland, and their son Conlaoch who was conceived out of wedlock upon Aoife’s loss to Cuchulain in battle. In her article, Susan C. Harris claims that while there are supernatural women or “Shape-Changers” in the play, “Aoife is not one of them” (481). Further, she suggests that Aoife is instead a “hybrid whose existence threatens the structures that safeguard” the
kingdom of High King Conchubar of Ulad, who as High King exercises power over Cuchulain (Harris 481). However incisive, this reading of the play places an enormous emphasis on Aoife’s character even though she has no lines and never appears on stage. An alternative to this would be to read Aoife’s character as purely Shape-Changer, to acknowledge that Cuchulain is purely mortal, and to classify their son Conlaoch as the hybridized character. Harris’s textual support for a hybrid Aoife is simply that Cuchulain distinguished between the queen and the Shape-Changers, and that her “wild body” is both “female and mortal” (487, 481). However, one could argue that if Aoife was a Shape-Changer, Cuchulain may have been too smitten or swayed by her magic to know the difference, and that a “wild body” is in fact an occult characteristic, not a mortal one. With that in mind, Cuchulain describes Aoife to Conchubar as having a “high, laughing, turbulent head,” and states that “none other had all beauty” as she did, endowing her with traits associated with the siren-like Shape-Changers (Yeats 148). Additionally, it is appropriate to call Cuchulain mortal because he swears fealty to Conchubar and agrees to follow his orders, while supernatural beings are, at their cores, wild and unable to be tamed or controlled. Therefore, Conlaoch exists somewhere in between man and the occult, and while he is clearly a man, he carries some of the traits of his supernatural mother, thwarting the expectation that Shape-Shifters only exist within the female gender. This revelation that a man can have characteristics classically associated with both the mortal and supernatural aspects of the female gender removes the split between male and female traits, and the dichotomy of female archetypes.

This subversion of gender norms expands beyond Conlaoch into a trio comprised of himself, Cuchulain, and Conchubar, representing the desired existence of the supernatural man, the desired existence of the intermediary man, and the domestic man. Although Conlaoch has
one supernatural and one mortal parent, he was raised in the Shape-Changer tradition. His mother had complete control over his upbringing and he had not met his mortal father until the very hour of his demise, identifying him as Yeats’s gender-flipped supernatural character (Yeats 151). Physically and figuratively, Cuchulain is the character who crosses between the supernatural and mortal worlds by lying with a Shape-Changer and ruling over a mortal kingdom, in addition to grappling with the acceptance or rejection the supernatural presence which accompanies the arrival of his son. This characterizes him as an intermediary character and leaves Conchubar as the male domestic character. Harris references Conchubar’s “desire to ‘leave/ A strong and settled country to [his] children’(479)” as evidence that he “uses the domestic, mortal wife/mother to represent all that is material, constructive, and desirable” (481). But perhaps instead of using the “domestic, mortal wife/mother” model, Yeats employs Conchubar himself as the domestic, mortal wife-mother, or rather, husband/father (Harris 481). This paves the way for both dichotomies of female gender to be present in conjunction with Yeats’s new intermediate category, easing the public into acceptance by presenting the system as male; one never has cause to question the presence of Cuchulain within the story. In Harris’s reading, the primary intermediary character is Aoife, who isn’t even listed in the dramatis personae, so this argument of Cuchulain as the intermediary better supports the idea that Yeats was combatting gender norms in On Baile’s Strand (Yeats 141).

By subverting social gender regularities, Yeats is laying the first stones to pave the way for all personality traits to be acceptable for both men and women. In her analysis of Yeats’s approach to this issue, Harris uses a form of the word “androgyne” in reference to three different characters: Aoife, Cuchulain, and Conlaoch (482, 484-85). She claims that Aoife is androgynous because she poses a threat “to the distinction between the occult and material worlds,” and that
Cuchulain’s “connection with the feminized occult [renders] him androgynous as well” (Harris 482). She finishes by stating that Conlaoch’s “potential as an intermediary figure is marked once again by androgyny; his body is masculine but ‘his head is like a woman’s head’ (508)” (Harris 484). It is worth mentioning that Harris has altered the meaning of this quote by omission. On a later page, she repeats it in full: “His head is like a woman’s head I had a fancy for,” meaning that Conlaoch bears familial resemblance to Aoife, not that his appearance is feminine (Yeats 154). When reading Aoife as purely Shape-Changer, Cuchulain as the gender-flipped version of the female intermediary which Yeats wants to create, and Conlaoch as the male Shape-Changer, the concept of androgyny in the play becomes conflicted. There is a comingling of traditionally gendered qualities between the three distinctly gendered characters, but this is different from androgyny. It disobeys the mindset that certain characteristics belong to specific genders, and that having a personality more aligned with the opposite gender makes a person no longer strictly their own gender but instead a convoluted blend. Aoife can be a woman whether she likes battling or baking or both, and neither make her less of a woman; Yeats suggests this when Cuchulain mounts praises on her as a woman (148). As a playwright, he creates an environment which expands what a woman can be and how she can act, albeit in a fictitious setting. It is relevant to note that the actions of all of the characters in the play are traditionally masculine. The men and Aoife either fight or talk about fighting, and the female chorus is given power in a domestic setting during the oath swearing, even though in traditional society the men would have had ultimate power in the home (Yeats 151). When one creates and situates characters so that different genders and occupations are near negligible in the plot, all that remains is the characters’ personalities, and that personality alone determines which traditionally gendered proclivities each character possesses.
Having confronted the limitations placed on women’s identities, Yeats forms a subtle theme that women could exist in society in an equal capacity to men. Harris’s article, which deals with both Yeats’s *On Baile’s Strand* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, distinguishes between the two by stating that “since the battle for independence is already won” in *On Baile’s Strand* while it is not so in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, “it is the rejection of domesticity that jeopardizes the new nation” in *On Baile’s Strand* (481). Earlier she confirms the opposite for *Cathleen ni Houlihan*; that it is the rejection of “the glorious ideal” which would put the nation at risk (Harris 480). Although is it neat and contained, it is not quite what Yeats is suggesting. Yeats proposes in *On Baile’s Strand* that it is not the rejection of domesticity or the rejection of the supernatural ideal, but rather the rejection of all types of women from society that jeopardizes the new nation. Within the constructs of being either domestic or wild, women are either powerless in society or rejected from it entirely. In *On Baile’s Strand*, all of the female characters are rejected in some way. Aoife is frowned upon for her desire for battle and revenge, and the female chorus is cast out after they are given power to seal the oath, then are likened to witches and rejected from the hearth. However, through several other avenues, Yeats has constructed a story in which he expands the combination of traits women can simultaneously possess in society by presenting them also in men.

William Butler Yeats’s *On Baile’s Strand* sparks a discussion about the social restrictions placed on gender which could have been written with or without the coexistence of the nationalist movement. The existence of an intermediary character in Conlaoch is the first step which Yeats takes to disrupting the accepted gendered traits of Irish society. He subverts those traits by applying individual “feminine” qualities to corresponding male characters and introduces another form of intermediary character in Cuchulain. Yeats removes the limitations of
what characteristics a woman can have while still being considered a woman by others, and warns of the dangers of rejecting women from society. One interesting fact which Harris notes in her article is that in the theater, *On Baile’s Strand* was performed before *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. This supports the ideas that Yeats wanted to create conversation; instead of easing the audience in with a play which generally conforms to societal gender standards, he delivers a stirring, somewhat controversial illustration of the social alternative to being a “traditional” woman or man. Yeats’s play demonstrates the power of creativity when presenting a critique of societal gender norms, an issue which affects the lives all people, whether they be blind peasants and fools or the highest kings.
Works Cited
