



- 3.0** **Those who Set the Stage**
- 3.4** **Those primarily concerned with Irish culture**
- 3.4.3** **W.B. Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival**

The movement contributed to a sense of national identity, pride in being Irish, and the reassessment of the political status quo.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was born in Sandymount Avenue in Dublin, the son of John Butler Yeats, who afterwards became a distinguished painter. Much of his childhood was spent in Co. Sligo with his mother's family where he developed a lifelong interest in country people and the rural way of life. He was educated in London and at the High School in Dublin, later studying art at the Metropolitan School of Art and the Royal Hibernian Academy School.

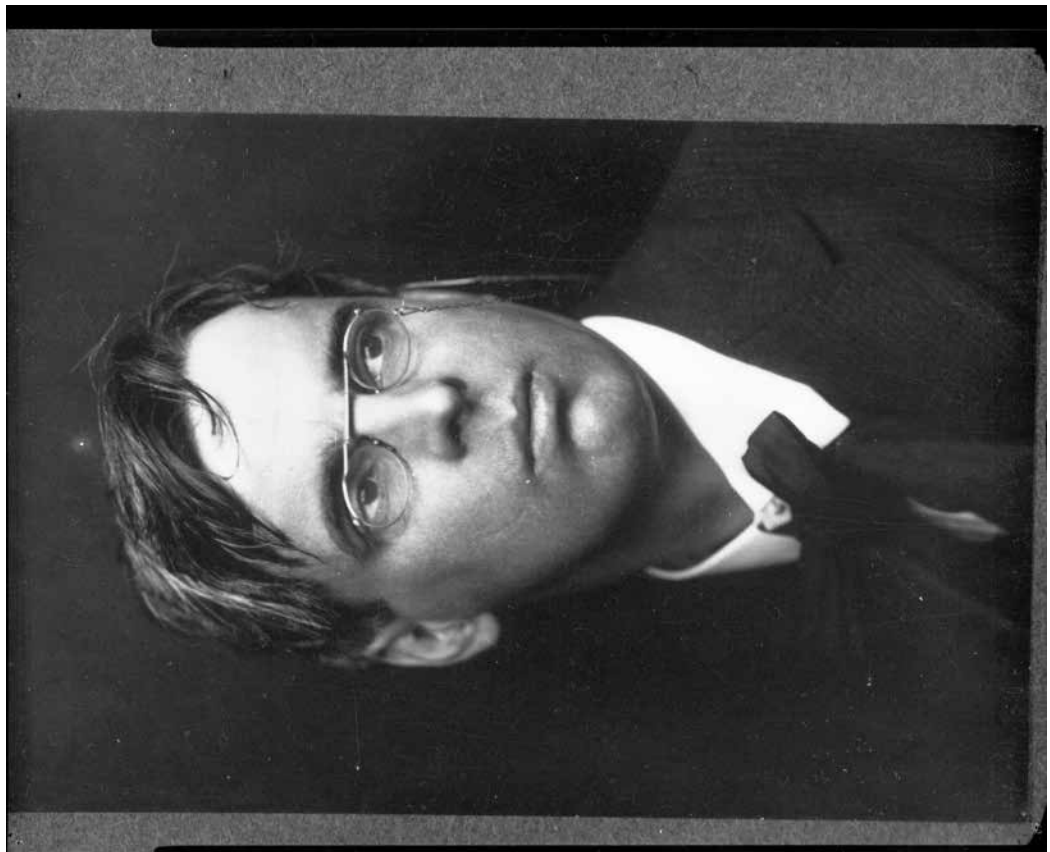
Turning to literature and writing, Yeats came under the influence of the former Fenian John O'Leary and Standish James O'Grady; they directed him to native Irish literature and tradition as suitable sources for literary inspiration, leading to his conclusion that 'the race was more important than the individual'. In 1882 together with O'Leary and Douglas Hyde he founded the National Literary Society which aimed at publicising the literature, legends and folklore of Ireland. Primarily a poet and playwright, his most successful early work was the collection of poems *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889).

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Under the influence of O'Leary and Maud Gonne (to whom he had become emotionally attached), Yeats became involved with republicanism in the course of the 1890s. He took part in a number of the republican campaigns of the time; for instance, in 1897 he joined in the opposition to the celebration of Queen Victoria's jubilee in Ireland, and the following year he helped in organising the commemoration of the 1798 Rising. Also in the 1890s, he worked with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn to establish a distinctively Irish national theatre, their efforts culminating in the Irish Literary Theatre (1898). He wrote a number of plays for the new theatre, most notably *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) and *On Baile's Strand*, both of which were staged on the opening night of the Abbey Theatre on 27 December 1904.

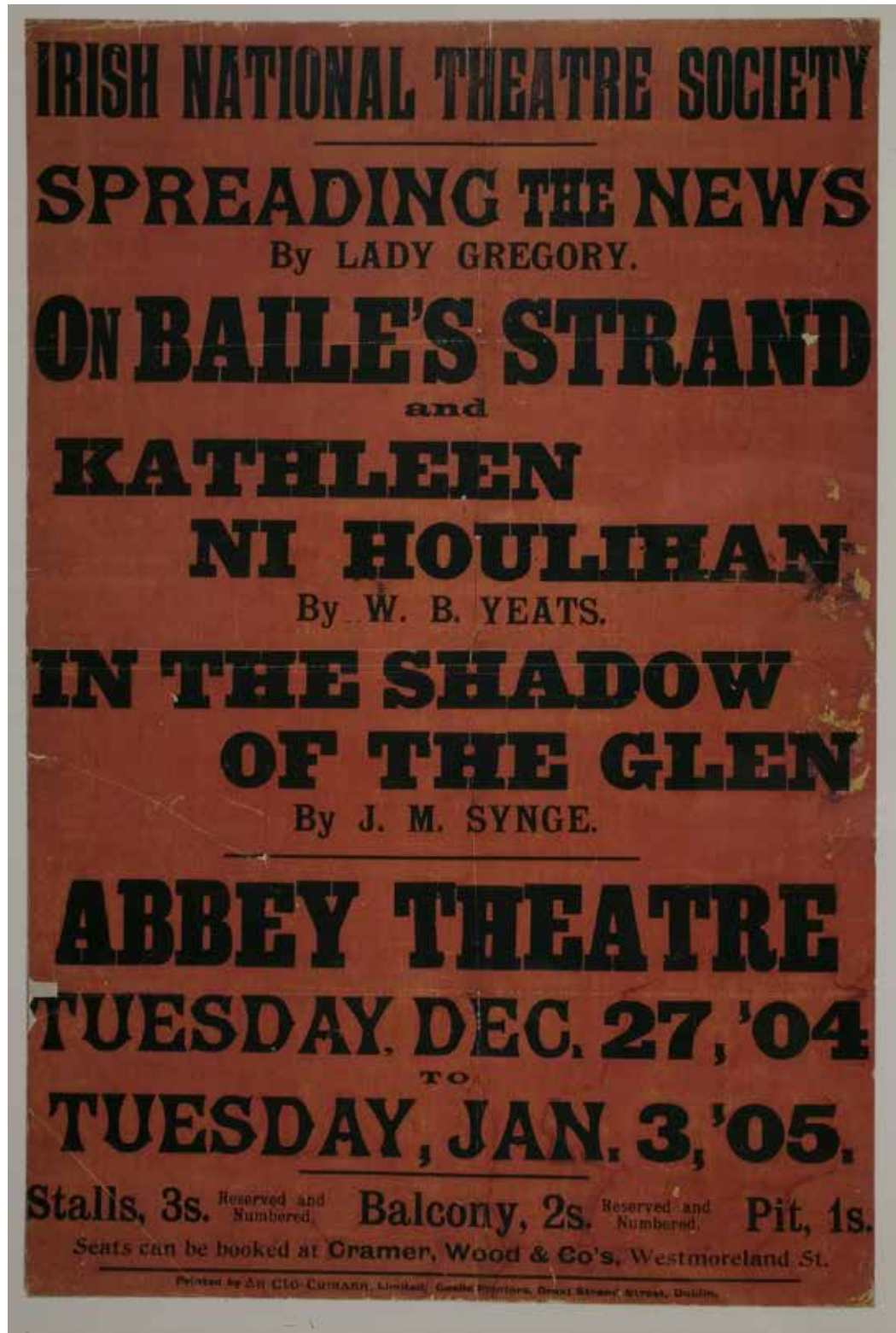
Much of Yeats' work could be interpreted as promoting the ideal of an independent republic free from the taint of anglicisation, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* being his most overtly republican work. Following the 1916 Rising he had a crisis of conscience, wondering whether the play might have inspired some of the participants in the Rising: 'Did that play of mine send out/ Certain men the English shot?' Yeats, however, was probably over-scrupulous, the connection being rather tenuous. Yeats and the Literary Revival did indeed contribute to the formation of the new sense of national identity that was also being promoted by agencies such as the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League. Yeats was but one of a number of forces contributing to the formation of the new Irish sense of national identity, and to the new sense of confidence which would induce some to strive for a new Ireland.

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W.B. Yeats as he was in the period when he wrote *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and as an older and wiser man around 1916. (W.B. Yeats 7002, 7004).

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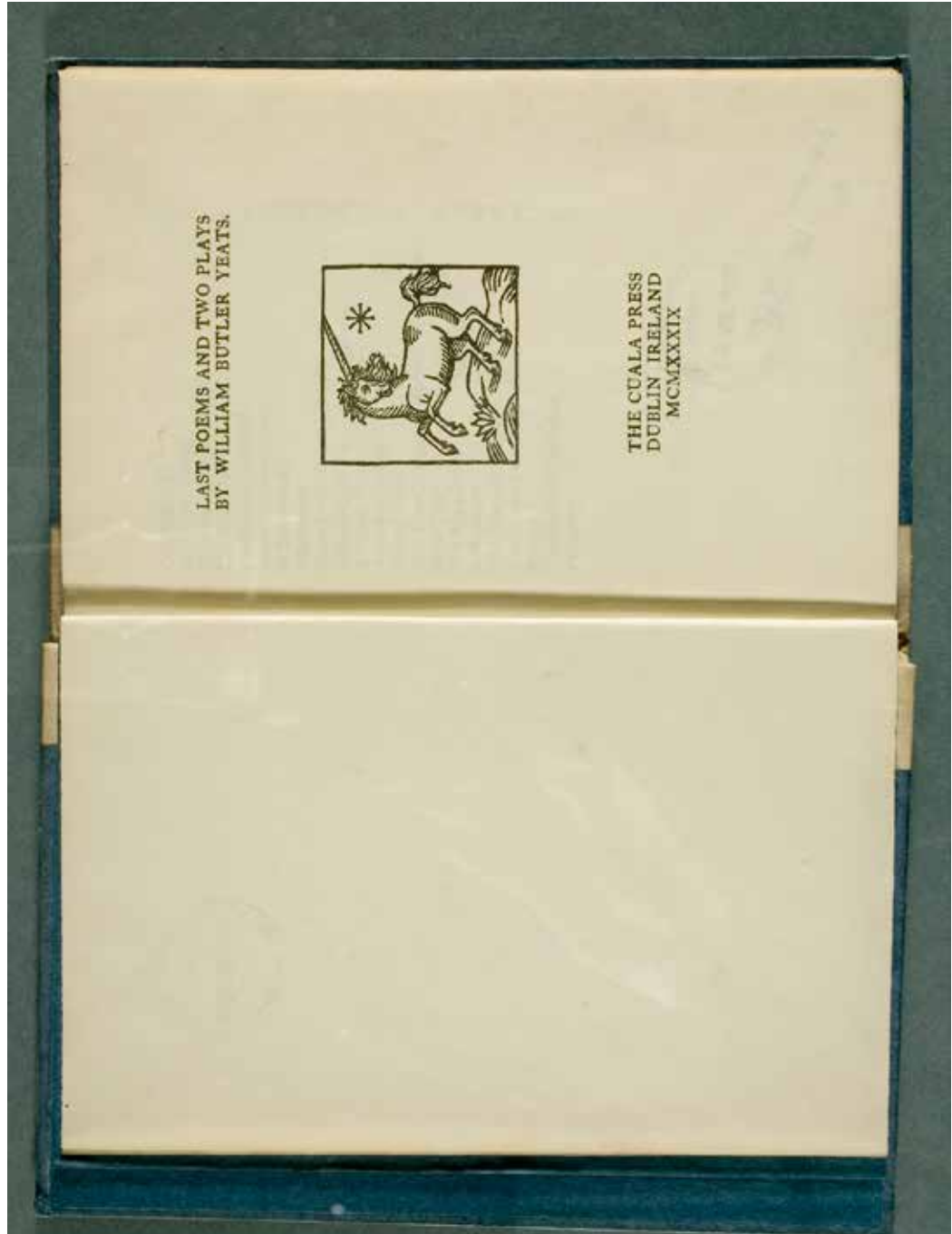
Poster for the opening night of the Abbey Theatre at which Yeats's play Kathleen ni Houlihan was presented. (Proclamations).

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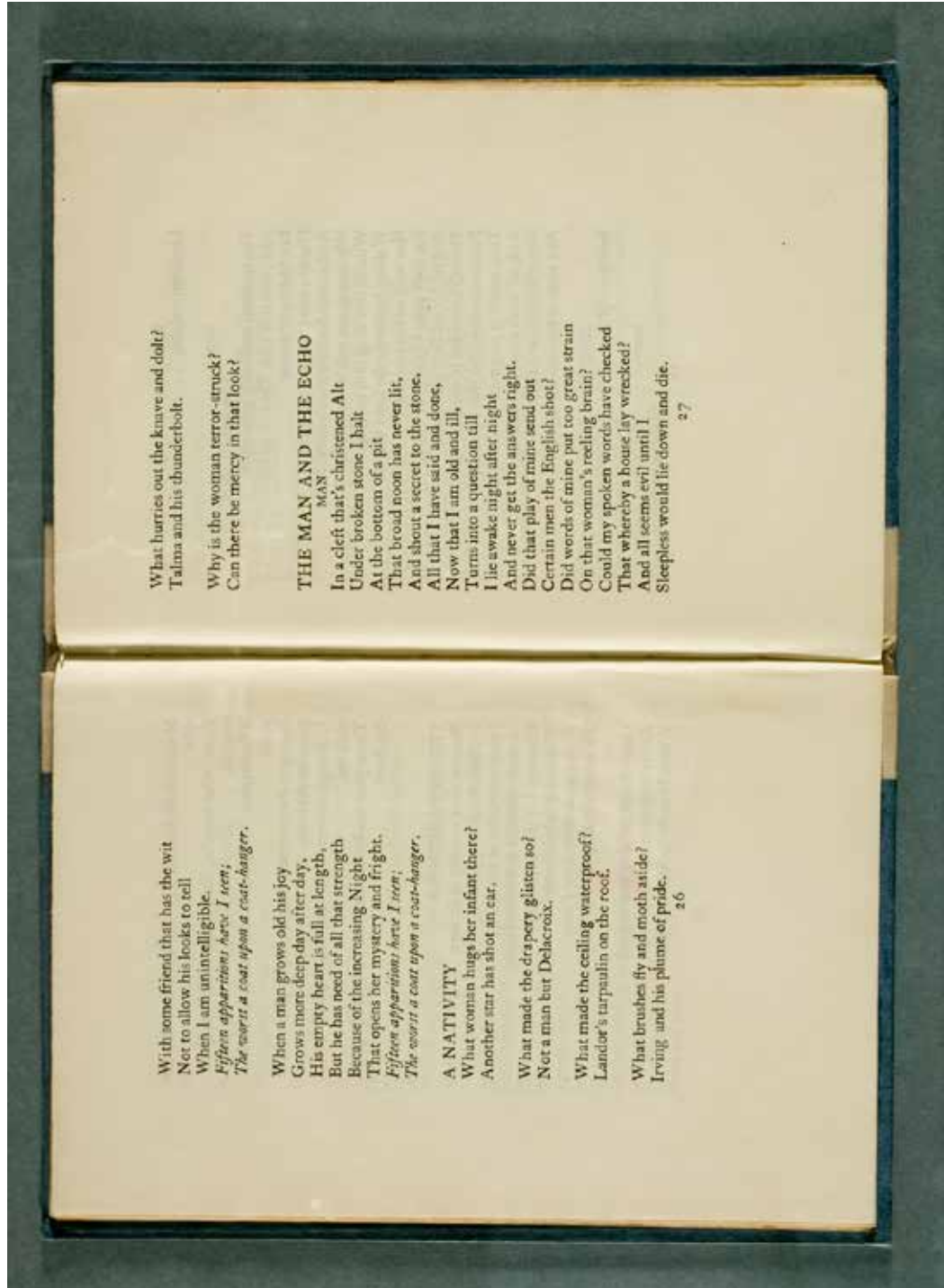
Cartoon of a production of Kathleen ni Houlihan, c.1910.

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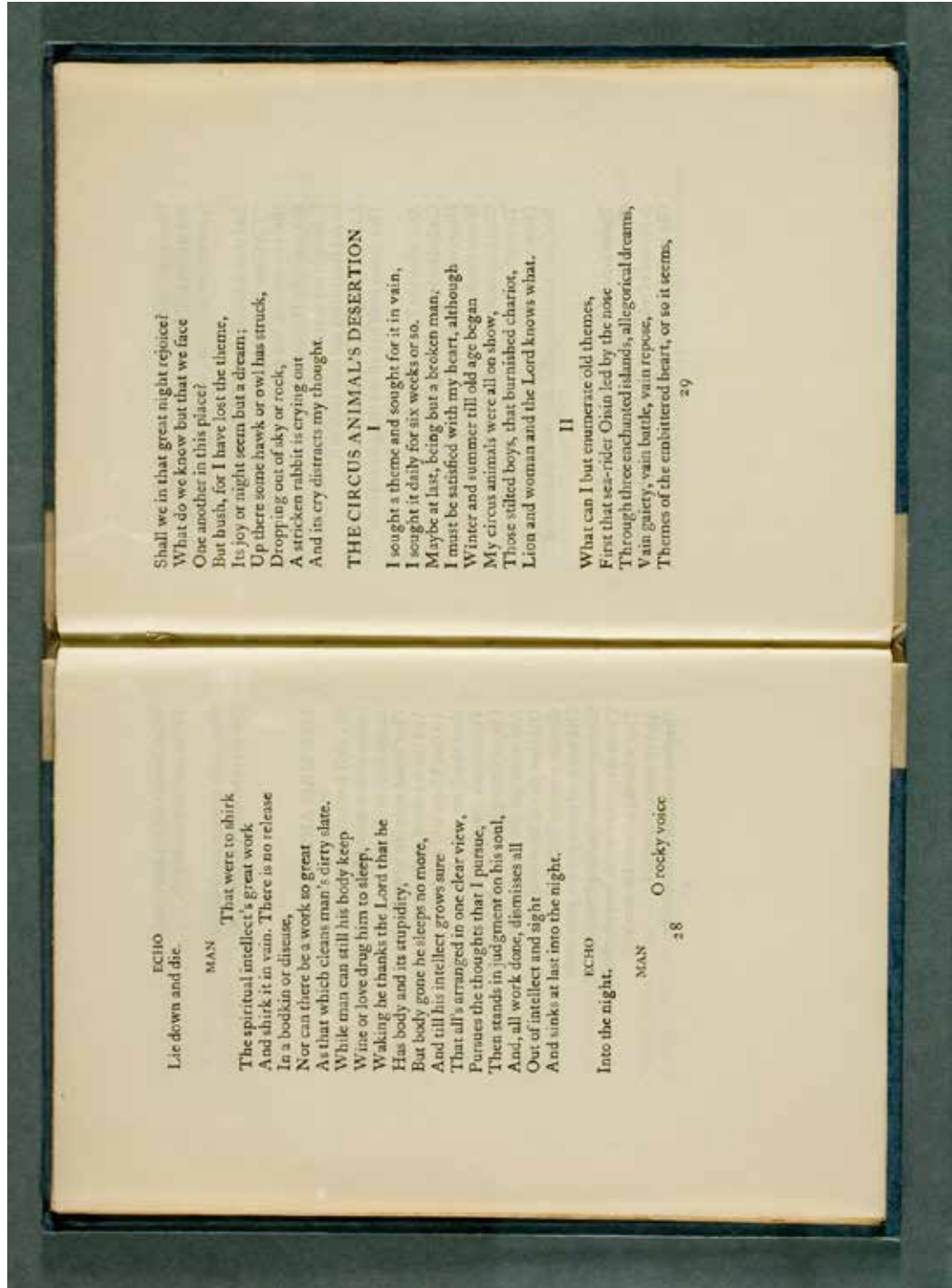
Pages from W.B. Yeats, *Last Poems and Two Plays*, 1939. The poem in which Yeats wonders whether his work influenced the 1916 insurgents is 'The man and the echo'.

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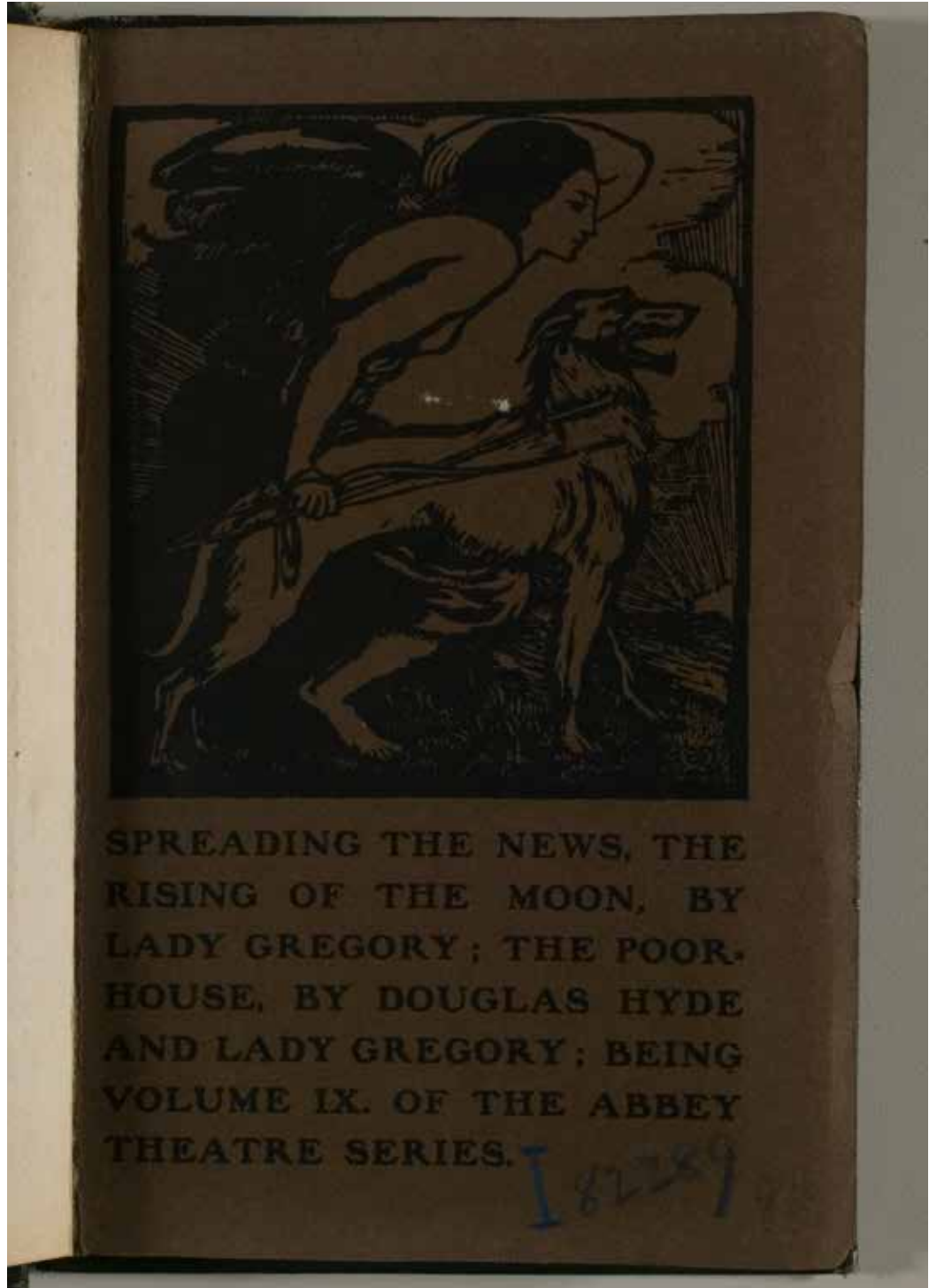
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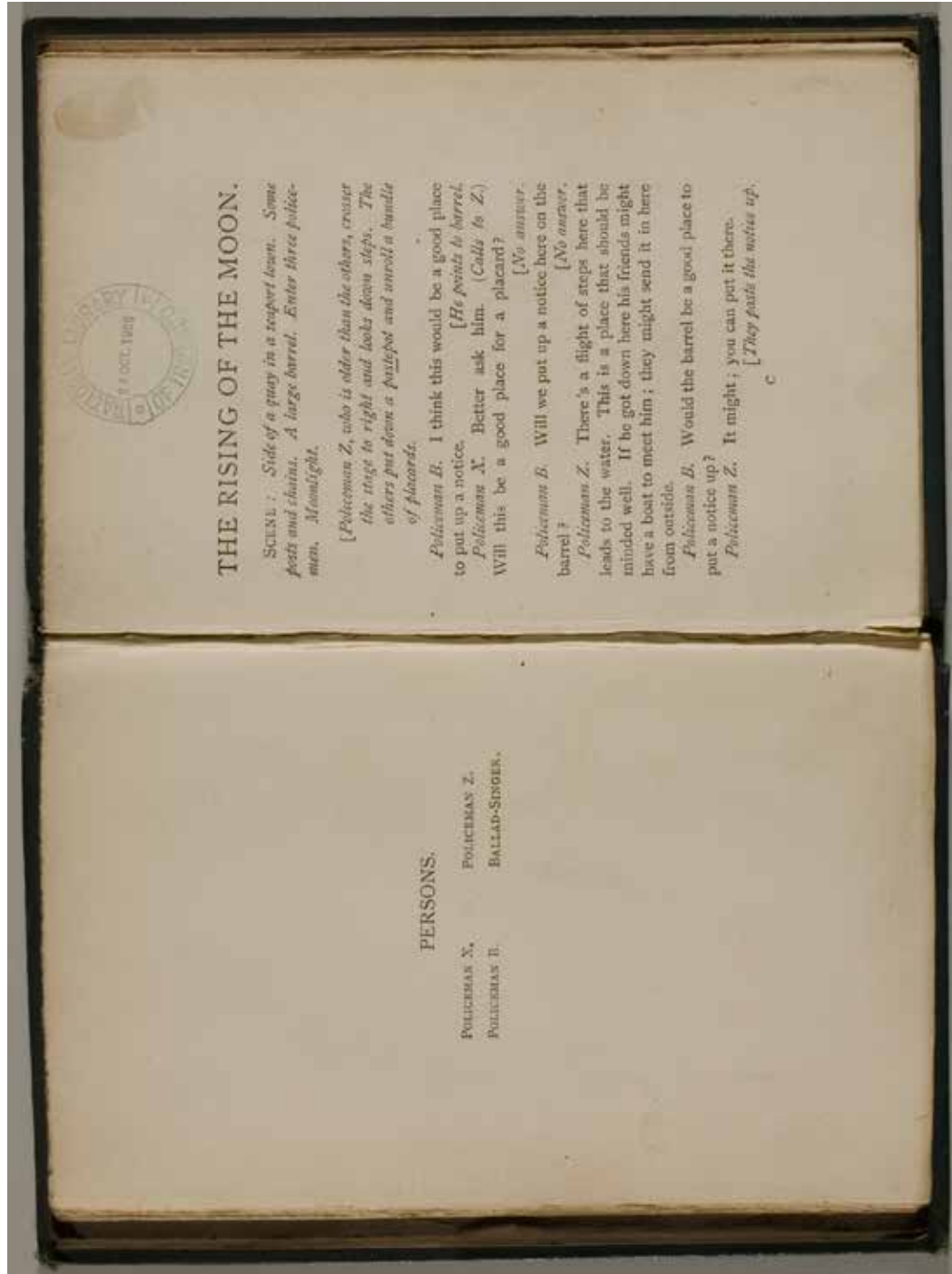
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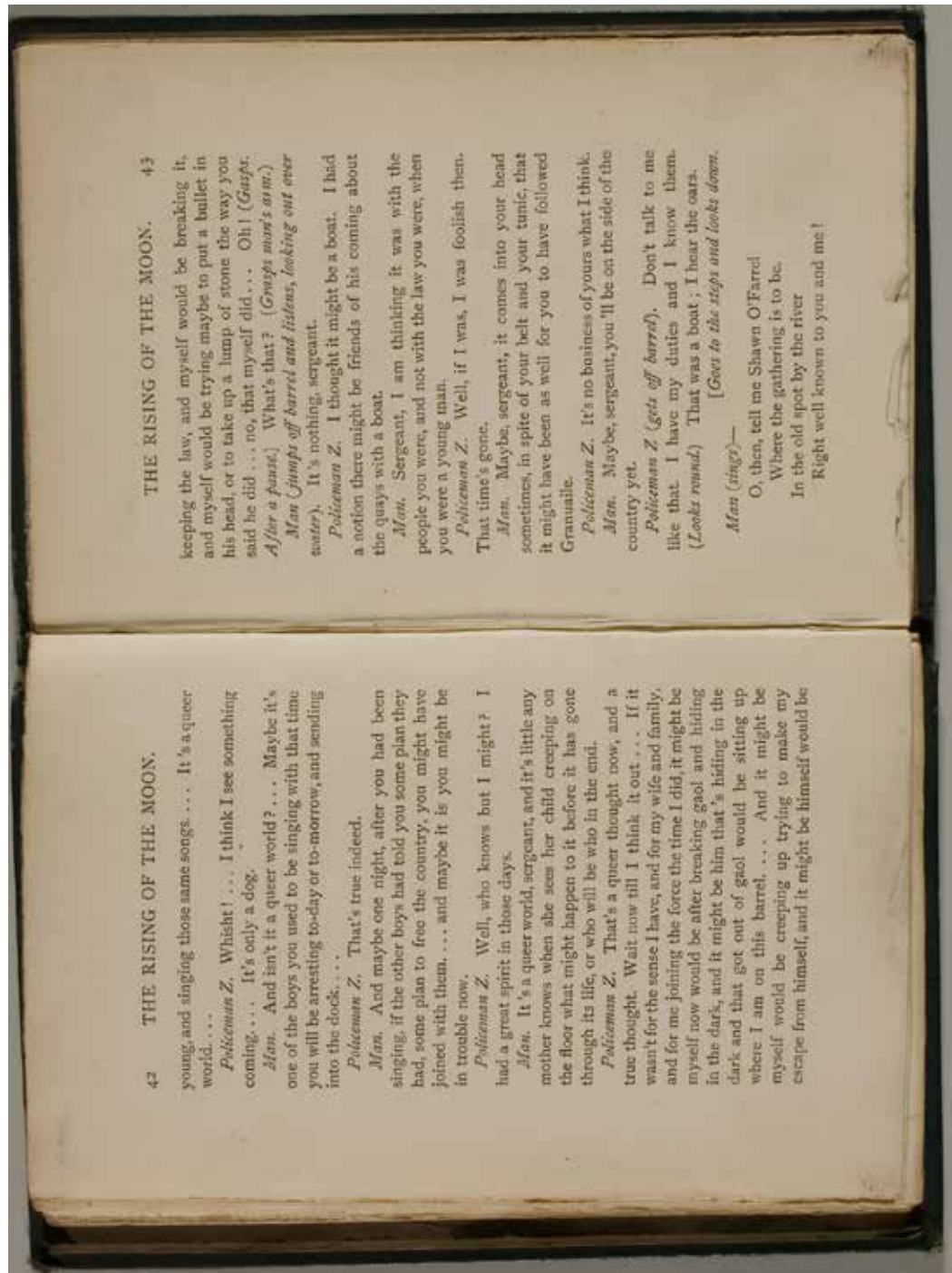
Lady Gregory's play *The Rising of the Moon* (1907) romanticised aspects of the physical force tradition.

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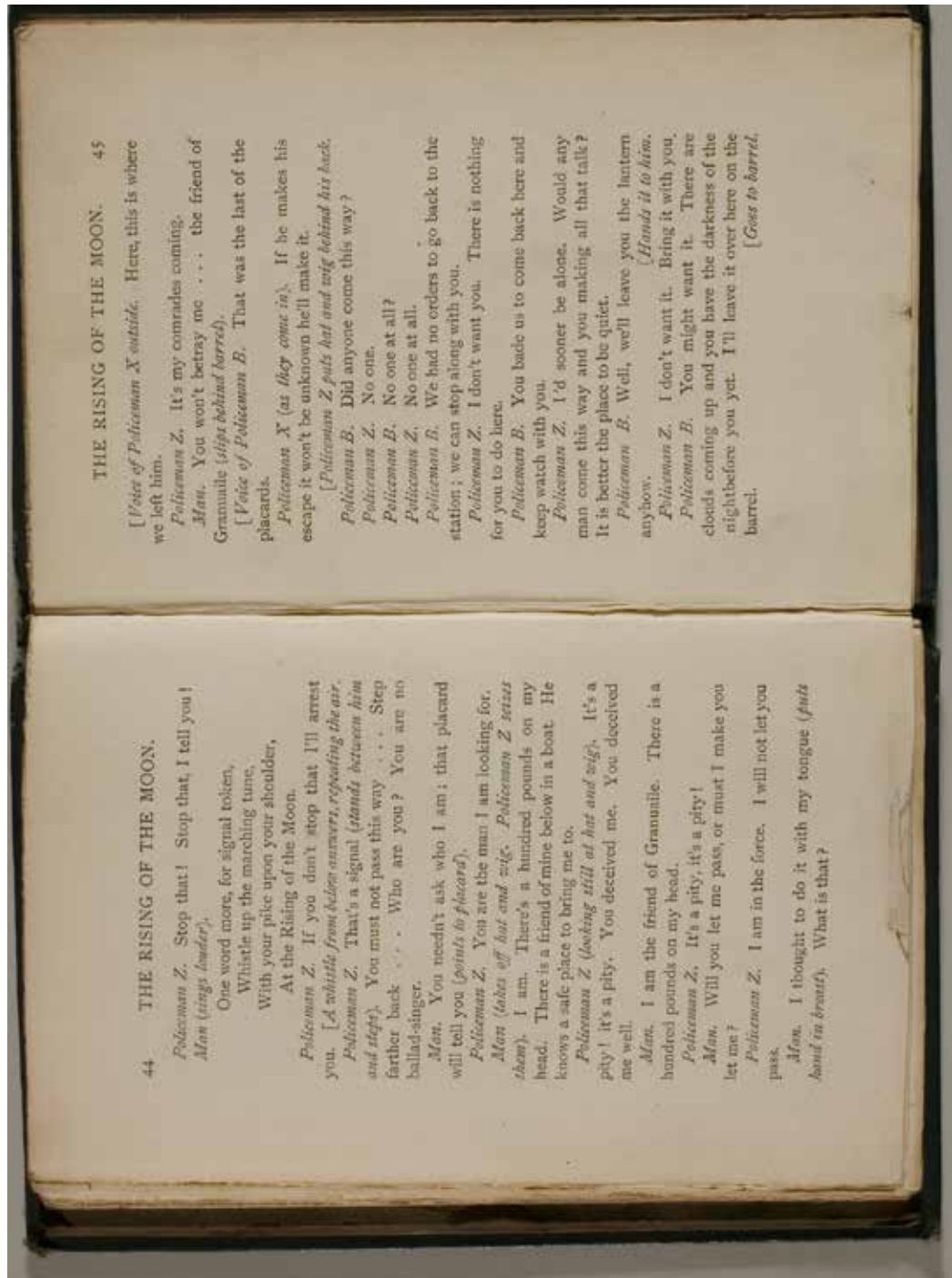
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