

Yeats's 'The Cap and Bells': A Probable Indebtedness to Tennyson's 'Maud'

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ALTHOUGH Yeats claims in a note to 'The Cap and Bells' that the poem had its direct source in a dream,¹ his claim does not preclude the possibility that the poem had an indirect source, that the dream itself was fed with images stored, perhaps unconsciously, in the poet's mind, and that, as a consequence, the poem composed from such a dream would reflect the influence of the source from which the dream was fed. The indirect source of 'The Cap and Bells' may have been Tennyson's 1855 poem entitled *Maud; A Monodrama*. Certain details of imagery, setting and dramatic action, theme, and metre from the first part of Tennyson's lengthy poem are found either echoed or paralleled to such an extent in Yeats's thirty-six line poem as to make coincidence an improbable explanation.

That Yeats was familiar with *Maud*, at least by the time he composed 'The Cap and Bells' in 1893,² would seem certain in view of his obviously thorough acquaintance with the poetry of Tennyson's middle to late period, i.e. from 1842 to 1892. There are numerous references in Yeats's writing to the Tennyson of that period. Some of them were written well before 'The Cap and Bells', and they are invariably critical. His second known published essay praises the 'glamour of radiant words' in *Idylls of the King* but finds lacking the 'beauty at once feminine and heroic'

¹ *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1956), p. 449. Hereafter cited as *Collected Poems*.

² I have taken Richard Ellmann's date of 1893 for the composition of the poem (*The Identity of Yeats*, New York, 1964, p. 287). 'The Cap and Bells' was first published in *The National Observer* on 17 March 1894, according to *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, New York, 1957, p. 159.

of Sir Samuel Ferguson's *Deirdre*.¹ What Yeats found most distasteful, however, was the presence of 'impurities' in Tennyson's work — 'curiosities about politics, about science, about history, about religion'.² He felt that 'brooding over scientific opinion . . . often extinguished the central flame in Tennyson'.³ Presumably, that 'central flame' was the pure and lyrical intensity of Tennyson's early poetry, written under the influence of Keats and Shelley who, according to Yeats, 'intermixed into their poetry no elements from the general thought, but wrote out of the impression made by the world upon their delicate senses'.⁴ When, however, Yeats reviewed Tennyson's last book of poems in 1892, he found something of the 'central flame' again present in lyrics 'charged with that sense of the travail of the world which came to him in its full imaginative significance only when he had dulled with gathering years the too comfortable optimism of the first "Locksley Hall", and cast angrily away in the second his once great faith in material progress . . . and learned to base his dreams alone upon the regeneration of the hearts of man'.⁵

That the young Yeats, himself striving to create a pure art in his own lyric poetry, should have found the early and very late Tennyson attractive is not surprising. But the attraction went beyond purely aesthetic considerations. There were personal affinities between himself and Tennyson to strike a sympathetic chord. Tennyson's early struggle between his personal desire for detachment from the world and the opposing demand for involvement in it — expressed in such poems as 'The Lady of Shalott', 'The Palace of Art', 'The Lotus-Eaters', to mention just a few — paralleled Yeats's own struggle with similar opposing desires and demands in his early life and work. Thus, by 1893, Yeats was in a position to reflect both the aesthetic and the personal likenesses between himself and Tennyson as they were impressed on his mind. That *Maud* should be the poem whose particular impression is reflected might seem highly improbable at first

¹ 'The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson', *Dublin University Review*, November 1886. Reprinted in *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, ed. John P. Frayne, 1970, 1, 95.

² *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*, New York, 1965, p. 112.

³ 'The Symbolism of Poetry', *Essays and Introductions*, 1961, p. 163.

⁴ 'Art and Ideas', *Essays and Introductions*, p. 347.

⁵ 'The Death of Oconoc', *The Bookman*, December 1892. *Uncollected Prose*, 1, 251.

glance, especially since the poem belongs to that period of Tennyson's career of which Yeats was critical and is a poem about which Yeats is silent. But despite its chronological position in the Tennyson canon and Yeats's silence, there are logical reasons why *Maud* would have deeply impressed itself on Yeats's mind.

Even granting that *Maud* contains many of the elements typical of that Tennyson period Yeats criticized, there is in the poem, more than in any other single piece from the period, much that would have favourably impressed itself upon Yeats. The poem foreshadows, through endorsement of the speaker's rage against the 'wretchedest age since Time began',¹ the later abandonment of 'too comfortable optimism' and 'faith in material progress' which Yeats praised in his review of Tennyson's last poems. There are lyrics the imagery of which could not have failed to impress Yeats:

See what a lovely shell,
Small and pure as a pearl,
Lying close to my foot,
Frail, but a work divine,
Made so fairily well
With delicate spire and whorl,
How exquisitely minute,
A miracle of design!

(11, ii, 49-56)

In fact, that very stanza would find a distinct echo in the opening song of Yeats's 1919 play, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, and in the 1929 poem, 'Crazy Jane Reproved'.² The symbolic use which Tennyson made of imagery in his 1855 poem would also have impressed Yeats. Roses and lilies abound in *Maud*; and their

¹ *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 1969, II, v, 259. All quotations from *Maud* are from this edition, hereafter cited in the text.

² The relevant lines from 'The Only Jealousy of Emer' (*The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, 1952, pp. 184-5) are as follows:

A strange, unservicable thing,
A fragile, exquisite, pale shell,
That the vast troubled waters bring
To the loud sands before day has broken.

The same echo is found in the second stanza of 'Crazy Jane Reproved', *Collected Poems*, p. 252:

To round that shell's elaborate whorl,
Adorning every secret track
With delicate mother-of-pearl,
Made the joints of Heaven crack.

symbolic function is not unlike that of the same images in Yeats's youthful poetry, particularly as evidenced in the first published version of *The Shadowy Waters*.¹ Quite obviously then, there are a number of aesthetic reasons why Yeats would have been deeply impressed by elements in *Maud* despite his general criticism of Tennyson's work from the same period in which *Maud* was composed.

After 1889, the year in which Yeats met Maud Gonne, Tennyson's poem, probably already familiar to him and impressed on his mind for aesthetic reasons, would surely have further impressed itself because of deeply personal associations — associations which may, incidentally, account for Yeats's silence concerning the poem. Miss Gonne, a six-foot beauty committed to the Irish Independence Movement who, on her first introduction into the Yeatses' home, vexed the poet's father 'by praise of war, war for its own sake, not as the creator of certain virtues but as if there were some virtue in excitement itself',² would naturally become associated in Yeats's mind with a poem whose title bore her name and whose heroine, described as 'tall and stately' and 'perfectly beautiful', sings 'martial songs' of men 'that in battle array, / Ready in heart and ready in hand, / March . . . / To the death, for their native land' (I, 169-72) to the utter disconsolation of her lover who reproaches himself because he is not of the active, heroic type she praises. The anguished ecstasy of Tennyson's lover throughout the first part of *Maud* is not unlike that experienced by Yeats in his relationship to Maud Gonne. With all of these factors in mind, it becomes all the more plausible that *Maud*, impressed on Yeats's mind, could have served as a direct source in the making of Yeats's dream and as an indirect source in the composition of the poem. Examination of certain elements in 'The Cap and Bells' and their comparison with certain passages from *Maud* strengthens the plausibility.

The central image in Yeats's poem is that of the jester's cap and bells, which, according to J. H. Natterstad, symbolizes the jester's art and serves as a 'transmuting agent' through which the jester offers himself wholly to his beloved, who had previously rejected his soul and heart when offered separately,

¹ *Variorum Ed.*, pp. 747, 754. Cf. Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, p. 82.

² *Autobiography*, p. 82.

and through which he is at last united with her.¹ According to Yeats's note on the poem, the image was presumably suggested in the dream. Although first used in the 1893 poem, the fool with cap and bells would appear in various contexts throughout the poet's work. In the revised edition of *The Celtic Twilight*, Yeats published a piece, dated 1901, entitled 'The Queen and the Fool', in which the image occurs:

I knew a man who was trying to bring before his mind's eye an image of Aengus, the old Irish god of love and poetry and ecstasy, who changed four of his kisses into birds, and suddenly the image of a man with cap and bells rushed before his mind's eye, and grew vivid and spoke and called itself "Aengus's messenger". And I knew another man, a truly great seer, who saw a white fool in a visionary garden, where there was a tree with peacock's feathers instead of leaves, and flowers that opened to show little human faces when the white fool had touched them with his cockscomb, and he saw at another time a white fool sitting by a pool and smiling and watching images of beautiful women floating up from the pool.²

The fool with cap and bells was to appear much later for the last time in *A Vision*. There, in 'Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends', the image occurs in the description of allegorical pictures, one of which depicts 'a man between a hunchback and a fool in cap and bells',³ found in the book uncovered by Michael Robartes. Significantly, however, the presence of the fool with cap and bells in the 1893 poem is the most overt in a series of echoes and parallels from Tennyson's *Maud*. Unsure of his beloved's intentions toward him, the speaker of *Maud* determines to remain on his guard until her intentions are made clear. He frames his resolution in lines which employ the key image: 'Myself from myself I guard, / For often a man's own angry pride / Is cap and bells for a fool' (I, 249-51). Although the image receives no further development in Tennyson's poem, it is the type which Yeats, always seeking images that could be used symbolically, would have found attractive. Consequently, through reading the poem, the image would have impressed itself on Yeats's mind to be recalled under certain conditions, such as in the unconscious dream process:

¹ 'Yeats' "The Cap and Bells",' *The Explicator*, xxv, 9 (May 1967), item 75.

² *Mythologies*, 1959, p. 115.

³ *A Vision*, 1937 ed., New York, 1965, p. 38.

That a parallel exists between what is a central image in 'The Cap and Bells' and what is merely a passing one in *Maud* would not be sufficient grounds for claiming the latter as a source for the former were there not further links to support the argument. Yeats speaks in 'The Cap and Bells' of the jester's soul which had 'grown wise-tongued by thinking / Of a quiet and light footfall'.¹ The line echoes one from *Maud* in which the speaker thinks 'the dry-tongued laurels' pattering talk / Seem'd her light foot along the garden walk' (I, 606-7). In both poems, the light sound of the beloved's step is juxtaposed with a double-epithet in which the word 'tongued' appears. The beloved of Yeats's poem is an unnamed 'young queen' pursued by a jester or fool. The context of the poem certainly invites identification of the beloved with the 'poeticized image of Maud Gonne'.² Significantly, the speaker of *Maud*, who had earlier resolved not to become associated with the cap and bells of the fool, apotheosizes his beloved as 'Queen Maud in all her splendour' (I, 836).

If, indeed, Yeats's dream was fed with images from Tennyson's *Maud*, one might expect lilies and roses, so prominent in Tennyson's poem, as well as in Yeats's early poetry, to find their way into 'The Cap and Bells'. But, alas, there is not a lily to be found in the poem. The rose, on the other hand, although it was beginning to fade from Yeats's poetry by 1893, does make a disguised appearance. The jester offers his heart to the beloved dressed in a 'red and quivering garment' which symbolizes, according to Natterstad, his 'physical nature pulsing with urgent needs and passions'.³ There might be nothing more here than traditional employment of red as the symbol of passion if it were not for the fact that on the Tree of Life in the Kabbalistic tradition, the sixth *Sephiroth*, which is associated with the heart, is the precise point at which Yeats located his rose on the cover design for *The Secret Rose*,⁴ thereby indicating his identification of the rose with the heart. In light of that fact, it is possible to see, in the image of the jester's heart, the presence in 'The Cap and Bells'

¹ I have followed the text of 'The Cap and Bells' given in *Collected Poems*, pp. 62-3.

² Bernard Levine, *The Dissolving Image: The Spiritual-Esthetic Development of W. B. Yeats*, Detroit, 1970, p. 47.

³ Natterstad, *The Explicator*, op. cit.

⁴ Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, p. 75.

of a symbol, so transmuted as to be no longer explicitly identifiable, which was prominent in Tennyson's poem and appealing to Yeats until just prior to 1893. It is quite possible that the transmutation took place in the dream process. Having called up images from a particular source, namely Tennyson's poem, the dream converted the rose image, no longer consciously acceptable, into an image with which the rose was associated in Yeats's mind. As a result, the rose appears disguised as the 'red and quivering' heart.

Imagery is not the only link between 'The Cap and Bells' and *Maud*. There are striking parallels in setting and dramatic action. Yeats's poem is set in the garden of the beloved, located below her window. It is to the garden that the jester comes in hopes of winning her affection. The same setting and action occur in a stanza from *Maud*:

Maud has a garden of roses
 And lilies fair on a lawn;
 There she walks in her state
 And tends upon bed and bower,
 And thither I climb'd at dawn
 And stood by the garden-gate

(1, 489-94)

Like the jester in Yeats's poem, the speaker of *Maud* enters the garden because of its location: 'Maud's own little oak-room . . . looks / Upon Maud's own garden-gate' (1, 497-504). From their vantage point in both poems, the lovers gaze longingly at the window which gives access to their beloved. It is from the garden that the jester first sends his soul then his heart ascending to the queen. The action echoes in reverse an imagined one in *Maud*. Tennyson's speaker imagines, as he looks up to the window, that his beloved descends to him:

And I thought as I stood, if a hand, as white
 As ocean-foam in the moon, were laid
 On the hasp of the window, and my Delight
 Had a sudden desire, like a glorious ghost, to glide,
 Like a beam of the seventh heaven, down to my side,
 There were but a step to be made.

(1, 505-10)

In both poems, the lovers' desires are unfulfilled; the window does not give access to the beloved. In *Maud*, the window has

been closed and the beloved asleep throughout the speaker's vigil. In 'The Cap and Bells', the beloved, actively rejecting the jester's offered soul, 'drew in the heavy casement / And pushed the latches down' in annoyance. Although Yeats conceives the situation differently, the parallels are unmistakably present.

There is also marked similarity in theme between 'The Cap and Bells' and *Maud*. The speaker of *Maud*, in lines which Tennyson maintained express the 'central idea' of his poem,¹ affirms his willingness to die because 'sullen-seeming Death may give / More life to Love than is or ever was / In our low world' (I, 644-6). The same theme, a central one in Yeats's poetry, is dramatized in 'The Cap and Bells' by the jester's decision to make a last offer of himself to his beloved:

'I have cap and bells,' he pondered,
'I will send them to her and die.'

In offering himself to the queen through his art, the jester, who has already given soul and heart, dies because what is left of his being goes into the last offer. He gives himself totally in a final plea for acceptance even though it means his death. When, indeed, the queen accepts the cap and bells, accepts the jester's offer of his total self through his art, he is, Harold Bloom's recent reading notwithstanding,² resurrected. Both his soul and heart reappear, are also accepted, and 'set up a noise like crickets, / A chattering wise and sweet'. Yeats's poem carries to full realization what is only thought by the speaker of *Maud* who, hearing his beloved approach in the garden, thinks that her acceptance, even if he were dead, would bring new life:

She is coming, my own, my sweet;
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;

¹ Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, 1898, I, 404.

² Bloom reads 'The Cap and Bells' in the context of 'that central Yeatsian image, out of the Decadence, of the dancer with the severed head' and concludes that the reappearance of the jester's heart and soul does not suggest a revival of 'the presumably deceased jester,' (*Yeats*, New York, 1970, p. 129). To view the jester's choice of death as 'a kind of self-castration' (p. 128) which does not bring a resurrection and final union with the beloved seems to me to do violence to Yeats's intention, especially since the idea that frustrated human love will find consummation beyond death is a pervasive theme in Yeats.

My dust would hear her and beat,
 Had I lain for a century dead,
 Would start and tremble under her feet,
 And blossom in purple and red.

(1, 916-23)

One could also argue that the image of the jester's 'red and quivering' heart was formed from the above stanza, that in the dream process there occurred a fusion of the above lines in which the speaker's heart beats, trembles, and blossoms in red, and that the single image found in Yeats's poem is the result of that fusion.¹

Finally, there is a similarity in metre between 'The Cap and Bells' and the particular stanza in *Maud* from which the setting and dramatic action were drawn. Yeats wrote 'The Cap and Bells' as a ballad, using the same form he had used in several earlier poems, such as 'Moll Magee' and 'Father O'Hart'. The quatrains are written in accentual verse with three primary stresses per line and a varying number of unaccented syllables. In the rhyme lines, two and four, the third stress always falls upon the final syllable giving emphasis to the rhyme. It is significant that of the many verse forms used in *Maud*, the one used in the stanza describing Maud's garden and the speaker's vigil should also employ a three-stress line. One should not forget, however, that Yeats does not claim that the verse form was dictated by his dream. In his note, he states that after the dream which gave the subject-matter, he dreamed another 'trying to make out its meaning and whether I was to write in prose or verse'. But because the second dream was 'confused and meaningless', the decision to write in verse was presumably a conscious one.² However, if the subject-matter given in the initial dream had been influenced by Tennyson's poem, it is possible that the choice of verse-form actually

¹ Both Allen R. Grossman, *Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats*, Charlottesville, 1969, p. 189, and F. A. C. Wilson, *W. B. Yeats and the Tradition*, 1958, pp. 251-2, have suggested that the blue and red garments of Yeats's soul and heart may have their source in William Morris's 'Defence of Guinevere' (ll. 22-38). However, the choice of blue and red may have been reinforced by Yeats's Rosicrucian studies. Hargrave Jennings, *The Rosicrucians, Their Rites and Mysteries* (3rd ed., rev., 1887) points out that in the Rosicrucian tradition blue and red were the two original colours standing for matter and spirit (I, 220 ff.). That Yeats reverses the significations of the colour does not invalidate the Rosicrucian influence.

² *Collected Poems*, p. 449.

used was unconsciously influenced by the form used in the garden stanza of *Maud*.

Quite obviously, no single echo or parallel cited here, considered in isolation, would justify the claim that Tennyson's poem served as a source, even indirectly, for 'The Cap and Bells'. Considered individually, each similarity, no matter how distinct, could be dismissed as mere coincidence and nothing more. But taken collectively, the echoes and parallels form a pattern of associations between the two poems which make coincidence improbable. That a poem, containing elements which would have impressed themselves on Yeats's mind for both aesthetic and deeply personal reasons, could have been drawn upon in the unconscious dream process for imagery, outlines of setting and dramatic action, as well as theme is altogether possible. Examination of 'The Cap and Bells' and its comparison with passages from *Maud* suggest that the possible is, in fact, probable, that *Maud* is the indirect source, via Yeats's dream, for 'The Cap and Bells'.

It should be noted, however, that the indebtedness to Tennyson does not prevent 'The Cap and Bells' from being a distinctly Yeatsian poem. None of the elements which Yeats found objectionable in Tennyson are reflected, and that excludes a great deal of *Maud*. Despite its sporadically lovely lyrics, *Maud* is burdened with much that marks it as a period piece. Designed as 'the history of a morbid poetic soul under the blighting influence of a recklessly speculative age',¹ the poem is filled with contemporary allusions — reflections on current economic practices and references to the Crimean War. These would not have appealed to Yeats who, in 1893, was consciously excluding such elements from his own poetry. Only those elements which could be woven into a distinctly Yeatsian poem were drawn upon in the dream and subsequently found themselves in 'The Cap and Bells'. The poem has a timeless appeal which Tennyson's does not. It seems to suggest the distant past, 'seems to parallel', as noted by Bernard Levine, 'the initiation of a romantic courtier into the sacred ritual of courtly love'.² The Tennyson elements become, in a sense,

¹ Quoted in the notes from *Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley, Boston, 1958, p. 533.

² *The Dissolving Image*, p. 48.

purified and are absorbed into the totality of the poem without making their presence obtrusive or violent. Consequently, the reader is taken by the careful balance of image against image, of symbol against symbol. The tightly woven structure of the poem, its clearly focused dramatic progression from stanza to stanza, its totality gives 'The Cap and Bells', despite its indebtedness, a beauty uniquely its own, uniquely Yeatsian.

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11th April 1972

Dear Sir,

Alethea Hayter's article on 'Xanadu at Lyme Regis' was full of interesting suggestions. An imaginative association between 'Kubla Khan' and *Persuasion* is an exciting idea: Coleridge's 'Huge fragments . . . rocks . . . deep romantic chasm . . . down the green hill . . . forests ancient as the hills . . . ancestral voices', Jane Austen's 'dark cliffs . . . fragments of low rock . . . green chasms between romantic rocks' etc. etc. in chapter XI of the novel.

What Miss Hayter does not make clear is that the landscape around Lyme Regis actually is like this, specifically at Pinny, which Jane Austen mentions by name, a detail which Miss Hayter omitted from her selective quotation, with the effect that the 'green chasms' appear to be a feature of Lyme Regis's 'sweet retired bay'. As anyone who has trod Jane Austen's footsteps will know, the 'green chasms' of Pinny are westwards along the coast; they will also have been struck by their romantic grandeur; and it seems much more likely that it was her memory of the scene itself that prompted her description, rather than any taste of 'Kubla Khan'.

Yours faithfully,
BRIAN SOUTHAM

The Editor,
Ariel.