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Note

Herbert and Yeats: A Provocation

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Yeats's transactions with the Renaissance are familiar enough:[1] the reworking of Ronsard in "When You Are Old"; the vow to "dine at journey's end / With Landor, and with Donne" ("To a Young Beauty");[2] the wish for companions "'Beyond the fling of the dull ass's hoof' (Ben Jonson's phrase)" ("While I, from that reed-throated whisperer");[3] the hints of Spenser and Sidney in "Shepherd and Goatherd"; the quotation from Spenser in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited";[4] the evoking of Hamlet and Lear in "Lapis

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[1]Most of the passages cited in this paragraph are discussed by Tom McAlindon, "Yeats and the English Renaissance," *PMLA* 82.2 (1967): 157–169, and Wayne K. Chapman, *Yeats and English Renaissance Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

[2]*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats,* ed. Richard J. Finneran, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1996), p. 140. On Donne influences, see Chapman, ch. 5, "Yeats, Donne, and the Metaphysicals: Polemics and Lyrics, 1896–1929."

[3]See Judith Colbert, "Masques of Ben Jonson in W. B. Yeats's *The Green Helmet* and *Responsibilities*," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 7.1 (1981): 32–48, and Chapman, ch. 4, "Yeats and the School of Jonson."

[4]See George Bornstein, "The Making of Yeats's Spenser," *Yeats* 2 (1984): 21-29, and Chapman, chs. 3 ("Yeats and Spenser 1881–1902") and 6 ("Conclusion: The Rapprochement with Milton and Spenser, 1918–39").

Lazuli";[5] the praise in the same poem of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, "Where but half-awakened Adam / Can disturb globe-trotting Madam / Till her bowels are in Heat," a demonstration of the workings of "Profane perfection of mankind"; and several uses of George Herbert.[6] But one remarkable instance of affinity seems to have escaped notice.

Yeats's "Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop" concludes with a triumphant rejection of the churchman's advice to "'Live in a heavenly mansion'" of the soul and not in the "'foul sty'" of the body, as Jane cries that "'fair needs foul'":

> 'A woman can be proud and stiff
> When on love intent;
> But Love has pitched his mansion in
> The place of excrement;
> For nothing can be sole or whole
> That has not been rent.'

As an instance of "Profane perfection" in despite of otherworldly aspiration, the poem is in the vein of the poet's inclination to "pitch" his body "Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch" at the conclusion of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," as well as of his audacious question in "A Stick of Incense": "Whence did all that fury come, / From empty tomb or Virgin womb? / Saint Joseph thought the world would melt / But liked the way his finger smelt." The bishop's complacent, holy advice is provocation enough to arouse Crazy Jane's reply.

But as another cause of the poet's framing of the response, consider this rather irreverently witty offering of devotion in Herbert's *The Temple* of 1633:

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[5]See Rupin Desai, *Yeats's Shakespeare* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971).

[6]Chapman notes that among Herbert's poems, "Vertue" influenced "A Friend's Illness," "Jordan (I)" provided the title for the volume *A Winding Stair,* "The Collar" is echoed in "A Woman Young and Old," and "Sunday" furnishes the central image in "Veronica's Napkin" (pp. 155, 167, 176–177, and 257).

MARY
Ana-< *>gram*
ARMY

How well her name an *Army* doth present,
In whom the *Lord of Hosts* did pitch his tent![7]

Herbert's meditation on a crowded annunciation, encampment, and impregnation is not quite what we would expect from the quiet and decorous parson of Bemerton, who habitually concludes his poems of unrest or affliction with submissive, humble tributes to his God. The provocative anagram is more in the vein of his friend Donne's audacious Holy Sonnet 2 (Westmoreland Manuscript), where in a search for the true church, the bride of Christ, among the churches of Rome, Germany, Geneva, and England, the poet asks, "Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights, / Who is most trew, and pleasing to thee, then / When she'is embrac'd and open to most men."[8] But Herbert himself was also able, in "*Love* (III)," allegorically to imagine the sacrament of the Host in holy communion as the bodily partaking of refreshment in a public tavern with the encouragement of a lively and inviting *host,* the figure of "*Love.*"[9]

In any event, in the alchemy of Yeats's imagination, "Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop" responds to Herbert's anagram with an arresting difference in meaning, though with a striking stylistic and tonal affinity, as "'Fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair needs foul.'" Herbert's "In whom the *Lord of Hosts* did pitch his tent" and the rhyme "present" give way to "Love has *pitched his Mansion* in / The place of excrement," and with perhaps an ironic echo of the biblical "In my Father's house are many Mansions" (St. John 14:2).[10] As Herbert surely knew, but Yeats probably did not, the Greek wording at the start of St. John's gospel (1:14) has the verb *eskenosen,* literally reading that the logos "pitched a tent" among us, though translations usually say that the word was made

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[7] *The Works of George Herbert,* ed. F. G. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 15.

[8] *The Divine Poems,* ed. Helen Gardner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 15.

[9] *Works of Herbert,* ed. Hutchinson, pp. 188–189.

[10] All citations from the Bible are from the Authorized (King James) Version.

flesh and "dwelt among us."[11] However, as Herbert also knew in shaping his ingenious anagram, and Yeats himself may well have remembered, the woman in Song of Solomon 6:4 and 10 is "terrible as an army with banners," and also a type of Mary.[12]

In Crazy Jane's inspired formulation, then, the amorous earthly body for all its decay is the locus of a new kind of blasphemous sacrament, as the dipped wing of the antinomies, the one that points down, here governs the outrageous poetic response.

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[11]The Greek reads "kai o logos sarx egenato kai eskenosen en emin." (The Vulgate has "verbum caro factum est, habitavit in nobis.") On the Greek, see Robert E. Reiter, "George Herbert's 'Anagram': A Reply to Professor Leiter," *College English* 28.1 (1961): 59–60. Dwight K. Purdy notes the echo of St. John 14:2, but thinks that "Jane has read the old book carefully enough to reinterpret Jesus's 'place' to mean the manger" (*Biblical Echo and Allusion in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats: Poetics and the Art of God* [Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1994], p. 104). M. L. Rosenthal and Sally Gall likewise believe that "'Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement' refers to Christ's birth in the stable" ("The Evolution of William Butler Yeats's Sequences II [1919–38]," in *Critical Essays on W. B. Yeats,* ed. Richard J. Finneran [Boston: Hall, 1986], p. 226; cited by Purdy, p. 155, n. 1).

[12]As Rosemund Tuve points out in *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 138–140; cited by Reiter, p. 59.