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Gender in Yeats's Poetry

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Abstract:

Yeatsian poetry has always been a rich repository dealing with the complex nuances of "gender" problematics. Yeats was both fascinated by and anxious of the challenging tropes of masculinity and femininity in his society. His poetics and his personal convictions were largely impacted by the women he came across in his life- Gregory (1852–1932), Florence Farr (1860–1917), Olivia Shakespear (1863–1938), Maud Gonne (1866–1953), Constance Markievicz (1868–1927), his wife George Hyde Lees (1892–1968), Iseult Gonne (1894–1954) and Margot Ruddock (1907–1951) among others. The propelling emancipation movements also moulded his aesthetic sensibilities as much as the heroines depicted by the neo-Romantic London poets whom he could challenged in various ways. This chapter seeks to explore how Yeats's encounters with his women had a telling effect on his poetry with experiences including divine veneration as much as dismal frustrations. The chapter further seeks to examine the heterogeneity in Yeats' exploration of "women", particularly in his poetry, that steadily accelerated the process of his self-discovery. The chapter also proposes to shed light on the Yeatsian technique that "lays bare" the very "gendered" nature of his poetry and thereby looks into the metamorphosis from an essentially feminine techne to a "manly" and masculine poetic mode.

Keywords: gender, masculinity, romantic, purity, idealization.

"Gender", today, has become too comprehensive and fluid a term to be ahistorically narrowed down into a specific discursive domain and an exploration of gender problematics in Yeats becomes invested with yet more complexities. Yeats, the timid and nervous "male" with an obsessive preoccupation with unattainable Muse(s), was in a perpetual quest for his anti-self all throughout his literary and political career. Elizabeth Cullingford, the leading 21st century gender-critic of Yeats was right to observe that for the poet 'sex was the supreme trope and guiding philosophical metaphor'¹ and David Holdeman in *The Cambridge Introduction to W.B. Yeats* delineates quite succinctly, as it were, the "gender notions" that were in vogue in colonial Ireland and Yeats's revisions of the existing conventions of writing:

1 Elizabeth Cullingford, "Yeats and Gender" in *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, ed. Marjorie Howes et al (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 168.

Yeats, however, had been conditioned in atypical ways by his sympathies for his mother and by his eccentric father, who, though domineering, was also uncommonly affectionate and who had exposed him to an early age to the emotive traditions of Romantic art. Hence he did not initially react with exaggerated masculine bravado to the threat of British imperialism. Instead he wrote works that explore and challenge gender norms, sometimes opposing heroic, "masculine" women to dreamy, "feminine" men and regarding both with a mixture of fascination and anxiety.²

Yeats's "women" were assertive, creative, uncommonly powerful and atypically robust and Yeats could skillfully ventilate his most challenging insights, often his aesthetic principles, through the women personalities he met who in turn shaped his cultural, political and even spiritual "self". The women who left considerable impact on his life and art were Lady Gregory (1852-1932), Florence Farr (1860-1917), Olivia Shakespear, (1863-1938), Maud Gonne (1866-1953), Constance Markievicz (1868-1927), his wife George Hyde Lees (1892-1968), Iseult Gonne (1894-1954) and Margot Ruddock (1907-1951) among others. Yeats was far from a stereotypical construction of "the heroines of all the neo-Romantic London poets... (who were) essentially men's heroines with no separate life of their own"³ and he was particularly empathetic to the movements propelling emancipation of women, the "Woman Question" that was forming the crux of the then social-realistic dramatists, and the Suffragate movements. Even in doing so he sometimes ended up subscribing to sexist stereotypes in his treatment of women. The present study seeks to explore these heterogeneous nuances of Yeats's exploration of "women", particularly in his poetry that steadily accelerated the process of his self-discovery. The study further seeks to examine the Yeatsian technique that "lays bare" the very "gendered" nature of his poetry itself and thereby look into the metamorphosis from an essentially feminine *techné* to a "manly" and masculine poetic mode.

Critics and commentators argue that Yeats's conceptualization of the "Muse" came to be shaped and informed by the Gnostic belief in the supra-human "feminine wisdom" symbolised by the moon and Yeats's supreme personified manifestation of the lunar power was Olivia Shakespear, "the lady who introduced him to "the real experience of what fascinated him so much as metaphor: the sexual union of man and woman"⁴. Olivia Shakespear's beauty "fascinated" Yeats since their first rendezvous on the event of celebration of the inaugural issue of *The Yellow Book Dinner* in April 1894. When Shakespear entered into a loveless marriage with Mr. Henry Hope Shakespear and confided her unhappy plight to Yeats, he immediately took it as an 'invitation to a romantic relationship'⁴ despite his psychological obsession with Maud Gonne. Yeats's trail of thoughts went thus: "after all if I

2. John Kelly, ed., *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46..

3. Denis Donoghue, ed. *W.B. Yeats Memoirs: Autobiography- First Draft Journal* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1972), 11.

4. *Ibid.*, 12

could not get the woman I loved, it would be a comfort even but for a little while to devote myself to another"⁵

In the years following Yeats's first sexual initiation and 'plunge', Yeats seemed to be in a quest for lunar inspiration believing that his poetic style had become too ordinary and prosaic and "would not help me in that spiritualization of Irish imagination I had set before me"⁶ Yeats records further in his *Memoirs*, Olivia Shakespear's responses to questions put to her when she was in a "semi-trance": "He (Yeats) is too much under solar influence. He is to live near water and to avoid woods which concentrate the solar power"⁷

Yeats's "He Gives his Beloved Certain Rhymes" -which first appeared without a title in the Gaelic legend "The Binding of the Hair", where a poet's severed head sings to his young queen with an old suitor- associates the "beloved" with Olivia and the suitor with Mr Hope Shakespear, Olivia's husband. Olivia becomes both the "white goddess" ("I bring my sorrowful rhyme to you/ White woman with the braided hair"⁸ and also the moral priestess, the perception of which Yeats came to have from the Wisdom variation of the White goddess. Couched in the traditionally hyperbolic idioms, both the stanzas of the poem open with allusions to the beloved "fastening" her hair ("bind up every wandering trees" with a 'golden pin") thereby anticipating Yeats's later inclination towards the immutable and the imperishable evident in many of his Byzantium poems. Yeats uses his "Muse" as an instrument to reach that eternal domain. Yeats seemed to be obsessed with the whiteness of the moon and linked his beloved with the same projecting her as the source of the creative Wisdom impulse-("White woman with the numberless dreams/I bring you my passionate rhyme"¹⁰⁹ "A Poet to his Beloved"). In "He Remembers Forgotten Beauty" Yeats again apotheosizes Olivia Shakespear as an emblem of divine beauty and wisdom and a "priestess" of the "White Goddess" who sighs with the sighs of her lover:

And when you sigh from kiss to kiss
I hear white Beauty sighing too
For hours when all must fade like dew.¹⁰

The poem reads like a romantic paean to Olivia Shakespear, yet it attests to grave issues in evoking a lost and faded Pre- Raphaelite past and hinting at a future that will bring forth an eventual apocalypse. Yeats endows upon his mistress a prophetic dimension who can transfigure this transformation from "loveliness" to a time-frame when Beauty's minions, iron-clad, will establish a new kingdom. Yeats therefore goes beyond the traditional connotations of femininity and passive beauty which are merely cosmetic, and delves deep

5. Ibid., 85

6. Dennis, *Yeats Memoirs*, 99-100

7. Ibid.100

8. J. Richard Finneran, ed., *The Collected Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1996), 63.

9. Ibid. 63

10. Ibid. 63

into the quintessential Beauty coupled with spiritual strength and possibilities. The duality of his beloved who exists simultaneously in the real and the supra-real world -orders was premised on Yeats's fundamental Platonic belief (that was buttressed by his interest in magic and the occult) that phenomenal entities of the temporal world approximate *Ideas* of the eternal world.

Yeats's parting with Olivia Shakespear, which was an aftermath of Yeats's acceptance of Maud Gonne's invitation to dinner in February 1897, was wonderfully recorded in his *Memoirs*:

My friend [Shakespear] found my mood did not answer hers and burst into tears. 'There is someone else in your as the breaking between us for many years'¹¹

"The Lover mourns for the Loss of Love", a poem admired by Pound for its graceful and easy flow, poetically recollects that sad incident:

She looked in my heart one day
...She was gone weeping away.¹²

Thirty Years after Yeats had parted with Shakespear, he in a series of lyrics regretted having left his satisfying cup "half tasted" in a quest for Maud Gonne that ultimately led to his own destruction. Poems like "The Mermaid", "The Empty Cup" included in Yeats's eleven poem sequence "A Man Young and Old" are directly addressed to Shakespear. In a draft of the poem "The Empty Cup" sent by Yeats to Olivia Shakespear, Yeats laments his "moon accursed" predicament:

A crazy man that found a cup
...
Imagining, moon- accursed
That another mouthful
And his beating heart would burst.¹³

Yeats gave an explanatory note regarding the genesis of the poem in one of the letters written by him to Shakespear that included the above poem as a draft:

I came upon two early photographs of you yesterday [...].Who ever had a like profile?
A profile from a Sicylian coin. One looks back to one's youth as to[a] cup that a mad man dying of thirst left half tasted. I wonder if you feel like that.¹⁴

In his poem "Friends" that Graham Hough rightly acclaimed to be a worthy poet's sincere endeavour to add to the dignity of friends, Yeats acknowledges Olivia Shakespear's "unpassiung cares" as his abounding source of delight and overwhelming ecstasy. Olivia Shakespaer, however, could not become Yeats's classic Muse. As Yeats himself puts it in his

11. Ibid. 89

12. Ibid. 61

13. J Richard, Collected Poetry, 223.

14. John Kelly ed. The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats(London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 721
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Memoirs, she was "too near my soul, too salutary and wholesome to my inmost being"¹⁵ Joseph M. Hassnett observes in *Yeats and the Muses*: "Nonetheless the very nearness to Yeats's soul that disqualified Shakespear from classic Muse status transformed her into an icon of constructive love as friendship".¹⁶ In his 1929 poem, "After Long Silence", Yeats offers his timeless tribute to Shakespear:

...
Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young
We loved each other and were ignorant.¹⁷

Maud Gonne (Madame Gonne Macbride) was both Yeats' s devotion and frustration, wonder and disillusionment, ecstasy and failure. Prof. Norman Jeffares devotes more words to Madame Gonne in *W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet* than to any of Yeats's acquaintances. Edward Mallins' s remark in *A Preface to Yeats* deserves mention in this connection:

No poet has celebrated a woman's beauty to the extent Yeats did in his lyric verse about Maud Gonne. From his second book to *Last Poems* she becomes the Rose, Helen of Troy (the Ledeian Body), Cathleen ni Houlihan, Pallas Athene, and Deirdre.¹⁸

Yeats met Gonne when he was twenty-three in the family house in Bedford Park on 30 June 1889. Prof. Jeffares quotes Yeats ' s reaction in his biographical study of Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: A New Biography* :

I had never thought to see in a living woman so great beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past...Her movements were worthy of her form and I understood at last why the poet of antiquity, where we would but speak of face and form, sings, loving some lady, that paces like a goddess.¹⁹

It is evident that Maud Gonne, was exalted to the status of a super-human divine entity at the very first rendezvous of Yeats with her. Self-willed, independent and a ruthless revolutionary, Gonne had strong belief in violence. Yeats ' s relationship with Gonne was rather enigmatic- he loved her wholeheartedly, but seldom discussed love with her and discussed instead spiritual philosophy, his interest in the supernatural and the mystical and his continuous quest for a belief- system. However, he was constantly driven by the hope that she would marry him and until 1903 when he married John Macbride he placed repeated proposals of marriage.

In Yeats's poetry, Ireland as a nation and Maud Gonne as an ideal often coalesced in an inalienable, organic and holistic form .Indeed, Gonne was a staunch feminist and a strong persona acting on exclusively feminist principles; she was the founder of Daughters of

15. Dennis, *Yeats Memoirs*, 88.

16. *Ibid.*, 33.

17. J Richard, *Collected Poetry*, 265.

18. Edward Mallins, *A Preface to Yeats* (New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1994), 120.

19. A Norman Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography* (New York: Continuum Publishers, 1988), 40.

Ireland. It was with much difficulty that Yeats could insulate her from traditional constrained representations of women as beautiful, mysterious and romantic and create an individualistic and independent poetic beloved.

In his early collection *The Rose* (1893) Yeats very skillfully endows upon the rose a symbolic manifestation of both spiritual love and supreme beauty. Edward Larrissy in *W. B. Yeats* categorically asseverates that the 'rose' indeed is a 'compound image expressing unity achieved through different strands of thought and feeling'.²⁰ It combines in it the Rose of Rosicrucian philosophy, an essentially feminine entity symbolised by the eternal beauty every male poet quests for and also the feminine figure of Ireland as a nation. Elizabeth Cullingford in the chapter entitled "The Anxiety of Masculinity" of her seminal book *Gender and History in Yeats's love poetry* very aptly infers that Yeats's "Rose is not a reminder of falling petals, but a Dantesque sacred symbol and an eternally desirable image of Ireland".^{22,21} Indeed Cullingford argues in favour of Yeats's deployment of an alternative revisionist carpe-diem motif which is sceptical of the traditional stereotype that woman's only function is to physically gratify the male libidinal instinct and to procreate. Yeats rejects the conventional credo that beauty would whither like the petals of the rose with the passage of time and holds that it would rather mature and intensify. In "When You are Old", for example, which has for its source Ronsard's "Quad Vons Serez Bien Vielle", Yeats moves beyond Ronsard's conventional association of ageing as an 'erotic threat' and has to address the following lines to his beloved:

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you
And loved the sorrows of your changing face²²

Yeats thus shows his ability to journey from the young appreciation of the gracious beauty of Maud Gonne to the quest for the 'pilgrim soul'. In "The Sorrow of Love", such a pilgrim soul with her 'red, mournful lips' gives expression to the quintessential human misery lying underneath the supreme force of the world. In another "Rose" poem of Yeats, "The Two Trees", held by Virginia Moore as Gonne's favourite among his poems, he implores Maud Gonne to behold the tree of life- "Beloved, gaze in thine own heart/ The holy tree is growing there"²³, but warns her not to gaze in the "bitter glass" for there "a fatal image grows". Critics suggest that the tree represents the Sephirothic tree of the Kabbalah resonating with both good and evil, much in concurrence with Yeats's conceptualization of the feminine in terms of contraries- mutable, yet eternal, passive yet pulsating with tragic intensity; the invigorating tree of life which looked through the 'bitter glass' becomes fatal, morbid and diabolic.

In his collection *The Wind Among the Reeds*, Yeats addresses a host of poems to Maud Gonne either as a passing reference or as the subject matter. In "He tells of the Perfect

20. Edward Larrissy. *W.B. Yeats*. (UK: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 1998), 17.

21. Elizabeth Cullingford. "The Anxiety of Masculinity". *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 24.

22. J Richard, *Collected Poetry*, 41.

23. *Ibid.*, 48.

beauty”, he convincingly asserts that a woman’s gaze can powerfully expunge even poetic beauty, whereas “He hears the Cry of Sedge” is suggestive of an apocalyptic end of the phenomenal world that is deterring the lover-poet to get united with his beloved. “He thinks of those who have spoken Evil of his Beloved” is a sincere endeavour on the part of the speaker-lover to alleviate his beloved from the emotional pangs that she had to confront from her critics. “The Secret Rose” enjoins the other significant Rose poems of Yeats like “The Rose of Battle”, “The Rose of Peace”, “The Rose of the World” and “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” that exalt the mystical Rose as a powerful adversary of the mundane and mortal world. He awaits the very hour of the “great wind of love and hate” and implores the Rose in his concluding lines, “Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows, / Far off, most secret and inviolate Rose”²⁴

Yeats preoccupies himself with meditations on Maud Gonne’s beauty and its changing modes in poems like “The Arrow”, “The Folly of being Comforted” and “Adam’s Curse” included in his collection *In the Seven Woods*. In “The Arrow”, for instance, he claims that the slightest thought and recollection of Gonne’s youthful beauty pierces his youthful being like an arrow and despite considering Gonne’s mature beauty as mellowed and “kinder”, inflects a dismal note in the poem. The poet, however, strongly defies his reservations about Maud Gonne’s beauty in “The Folly of being Comforted” where he engages in a dialogic interaction with Lady Gregory: (“All that you need is patience/... Time can but make her beauty over again”.²⁵ “With “Adam’s Curse””, argues David Ross in *Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats*, “Yeats’s mature style begins to show itself”.²⁶ The poet very strongly argues that all beings on earth are bound to be inflicted by the curse of Adam, and asserts that beauty, love and poetry- all these faculties need to be crafted and cultivated with assiduous care and meticulous attention. Yeats, however, doesn’t hesitate to pinpoint that his love despite its sincerity and devotion remained unrequited- “Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.”²⁷ What captivates one more are the immortal lines of the poem addressed specifically to Maud Gonne where Yeats’s frustration and futility even seem to part of the “beautiful” pattern of the universe. Among an informal sequence of Yeats’s poems dealing with the theme of Maud Gonne’s middle age, the most significant ones are “Memory”, “Her Praise”, “His Phoenix” and “Broken Dreams”. Yeats’s “A Prayer for my Daughter” is less about his own daughter Anne Butler Yeats, two months old when Yeats began writing the poem and more about Yeats’s take on femininity, beauty and wisdom. The apocalyptic wind perturbs Thoor Balylee and the disturbed Yeats, who had envisioned the “coming” of the veritable anti- Christ in “The Second Coming” in an excited reverie envisions “custom and ceremony as a shield against it- as a means of checking and sublimating the frenzy of the wind”.²⁸ Keeping Maud Gonne particularly in mind, Yeats points at the destructive effects of

24. J Richard, *Collected Poetry*, 78.

25. *Ibid.*, 78

26. David A Ross. *Critical Companion to W.B. Yeats*.(New York: Facts on File, 2009), 36

27. J Richard, *Collected Poetry*, 81.

28. David Ross, *Critical Companion*, 204.

feminine beauty that even encumbers "natural kindness". Yeats cites examples of Aphrodite and Helen who were legendary beauties but were ill-fated or mismatched in love, to borrow the words of David Ross. Yeats had held Maud Gonne as the incarnation of Helen in many other poems like "No Second Troy", "Peace", "A Woman Homer Sung". David Ross cogently sums up Yeats's "prayer" for his daughter which also underscores Yeats's matured conception of beauty and femininity:

Reversing the dynamic of world-addling beauty, Yeats, would have his daughter schooled in heart-winning courtesy. Thus learned she may become "a flourishing hidden tree", her thoughts like linnets dispensing round/ Their magnanimities of merriment." O may she live like some green laurel".²⁹

In "Among School Children", a poem occasioned by Yeats's visit to St Otteran's school, in the capacity of Inspector of Schools. Apart from the Hellenic touches that Yeats endows Maud Gonne with in the poem, what arrests the critical insight of a perceptive reader is the feminine aesthetics (Yeats's favourite trope of "dance") that the poet seems to endorse in the concluding stanza of "Among School Children".

Yeats met Maud Gonne's daughter Iseult Gonne in the summer of 1910 in her house at Normandy and got mesmerized by Iseult's graceful dancing on the seashore that triggered off "To a Child Dancing in the Wind": Iseult found in Yeats an intellectual companion and though critics have talked about the semi-paternal relationship of Yeats with Iseult, it clearly went beyond that. Iseult started becoming Yeats's "object of desire" in "Two Years Later" published in 1913 and in "Presences"(1915), Yeats records the eerie experience of his being visited by monstrous nocturnal "presences", all feminine, and their identities come to be revealed in the last three lines of the poem:

One is a harlot, and one a child
That never looked upon man with desire
And one, it may be, a queen³⁰

Norman Jeffares writes in *W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet*:

To a Child Dancing in the Wind", "Two Years Later", and "Presences" all contrive to contrast Iseult 's youthful innocence with Maud Gonne when young, and this is the obvious trend of Yeats' s thought.³¹

Yeats's relationship with Iseult however deepened in 1916: Yeats spent the entire summer of 1916 with both the Gones at Colleville. Even MacBride's death at the Easter Uprising failed to re-orient the Yeats- Maud Gonne relationship that Yeats had possibly hoped. Yeats records in one of his letters sent to Lady Gregory that he asked Maud to marry him a few days before which remained unreciprocated and Iseult's joyous childhood

29. Ibid., 204.

30. J Richard, Collected Poetry, 154.

31. A Norman Jeffares. *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography* (New York: Continuum Publishers, 1988), 110. Volume-X, Issue-III

absorbed his thought and being. In the succeeding days, Yeats developed a strong passion for Iseult and proposed to marry her only to be refused which resulted in ironically titled poem "Men Improve with the Years". Iseult married one Francis Stuart in 1929, a marriage, which, like her mother's was unsuccessful. Yeats addressing her in "Why should not Old Men be Mad?" regretted Iseult's subjection to a distinctively feminine role abandoning her scholarship: Iseult remained Yeats's "marmorean Muse" which he was to later elucidate in the theory of "anti-self" or Daimon that upholds unsatisfied passion as the progenitor of splendid poetry. Iseult Gonne, for Yeats, became an emblem of the Derridean enthronement of deferral of pleasure and desire.

Florence Farr, an actress whose speech was to Yeats as sonorous as "music" mesmerised Yeats with her performance in the play "A Sicilian Idyll", acting out the role of the priestess Amaryllis to the Greek Moon Goddess Selene. Yeats's affair with Farr was short but intense and meaningful. He praised Farr in his *Autobiography* pointing out her "three great gifts", her tranquil beauty, incomparable sense of rhythm and beautiful voice. Farr, gradually turned out to be Yeats's lover, his compeer in occult studies, a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, but could not really become Yeats's Muse. She remained merely a captivating reciter of his lyric verse; Yeats acknowledges the importance of Farr in his life in the dedicatory lines of *In The Seven Woods* (1906). Yeats, however excluded Farr from "Friends" and he mentioned in his *Autobiography* that his relationship with Farr was "an enduring friendship, that was an endearing exasperation...".³² Yeats paid his tribute to Farr, however, in "All Souls' Night":

On Florence Emery I call the next,
Who finding the first wrinkles on a face
Admired and beautiful³³

Yeats also modelled the character of Aoife, the "fierce woman", in the play *On Baile's Strand* on Florence Farr, where Aoife as a "New Woman" becomes victorious in exacting double revenge- by blinding the warrior Cuchulian in love despite his being her "military rival" and also by overpowering his fancy which drove him to kill his own son. Little wonder that Farr inspired Yeats to create the robust heroine Aoife, whose charisma and magnetic fervour propelled Yeats to discover his own anti-self. In his book *Yeats: The Poetics of the Self*, David Lynch observes in this connection:

The real stuff of the Yeatsian drama is the murderous ambivalence women feel toward the men they love best, a drama of adoration and loathing that is summed up visually in the pillar-stone to which Aoife blinds Cuchulian.³⁴

Constance Gore Booth who married Count Casimir de Markievicz in 1900 was a rebel by temperament against her own class-the Anglo Irish landed gentry- and spent her entire life from 1908 for the welfare of Ireland. An active revolutionary, who took part in James

32. W.B. Yeats. *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 122.

33. J. Richard, *Collected Poetry*, 92.

34. David Lynch. *Yeats: The Poetics of the Self* (New York: Chicago University Press, 1979), 80.

Connolly's transport workers' strike in 1913 and the Easter Uprising of 1916, she was one of those "strong women" who accelerated Yeats's search for his anti-self.. Yeats bemoans her fallen state in "On a Political Prisoner" and in "Easter 1916", Yeats regrets the metamorphosis she had undergone.

Yeats's acquaintance with Margot Ruddock, actress and poet, took place in 1934 and in the following year she frequented Yeats often and discussed matters related to her poetry with him until she went to Majorca and became a victim of stress and schizophrenia. While Yeats was in Palma with Purohit Swami, Ruddock's sudden visit to him amazed him to the extreme, the experiences of which he came to narrate in "A Crazy Girl". In fact, in another poem "Beautiful Lofty Things", Yeats brackets Margot Ruddock with Lady Gregory and Maud Gonne for her heroic courage and fortitude that often helped her overcome her shortcomings and limitations. In 1937, Yeats even made arrangements for Ruddock to be the chief speaker in three BBC broadcasts of his poems for her amazing skill of switching over from speech to music and vice versa. Yeats also dedicated the poem "Sweet Dancer" to her where he registered his deep admiration for her. Ruddock died in 1951 and old Yeats in "Man and the Echo" in a regretful tone recalls his earlier bitter-sweet experiences with Ruddock, particularly his advice to her to improve her poetic technique or to stop writing eventually:

Lady Gregory, the woman of letters devoted her entire life in making the geographical locale Coole a peaceful realm for writers to gather, discuss and engage themselves in creative exercise. An active connoisseur of art who impregnated the erstwhile idle drawing room at Coole with works by her literary friends Douglas Hyde, George Moore, Theodore Roosevelt, J. M. Synge, the earliest of Yeats, Lady Gregory was one of the intellectually agile "women" acquaintances of Yeats who collaborated with him works like *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Pot of Broth*. The emotional space (a motherly, sisterly, friendly and even brotherly one) that Yeats had for Lady Gregory was well evident in Yeats's response to the letter that informed him of her cerebral hemorrhage on February 3, 1903 which he records in his *Autobiography*:

This morning I got a letter telling me of Lady Gregory's illness... She has been to me mother, friend, sister and brother. I cannot realize the world without her- she brought to my wavering thoughts steadfast nobility.³⁵

Yeats asserts the sincere kinship that he had for Gregory who could ennoble the vital energies of his mind and allowed Yeats to journey beyond conventional gender parameters. In "A Friend's Illness", he moves beyond bodily existence to exalt Gregory to a "soul".

If women acquaintances have influenced Yeats's human self and being, they, Yeats's perception of "gender" and "sexuality" has nonetheless influenced his craft. Elizabeth Cullingford in her essay "Yeats and Gender" included in *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats* charts the journey of Yeatsian poetics from a "romantic, emotive and feminine one to one embracing the "masculine" and manly idiom. Cullingford notes the late nineteenth

35. W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*. 122.
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century Yeatsian penchant for the tender and malleable poetic mode that was to change later. She exemplifies Yeats's "He Wishes for the Clothes of Heaven" as a supreme instance of such a poetic mode characterised by Yeats's prostration and abasement before the beloved. Yeats unflinchingly unfurls himself as the "poor" man at the beloved's feet, thereby underscoring Yeats's feminine idiom for the very poetic process- "stitching and unstitching", loosened syntax, repetitions that lure and produce hypnosis and a desire for the unattainable. Cullingford further states that Yeats's reading of Nietzsche in 1903 and his theatre-experience led him towards a "manly" poetics that increased the energy of his lyric Muse. Maud Gonne was always robust and politically active, but the way her femininity was represented in poems like "No Second Troy" or "Leda and the Swan" bespeaks the Yeatsian celebration of her individualized solitary beauty rather than 'a static avatar of Eternal beauty or an unindividualized Rose". Yeats abandons the feelings of abjection and the frustrations of unrequited love and gives the poem a "manly" touch in condensing the syntax, injecting stress and energy between the lines and incorporating a colloquial diction. The lines in "No Second Troy" perfectly fit in with the reversed poetic paradigm and upholds Yeats's beloved as an alternative Helen. Cullingford opines in this regard:

"She transgresses all the stereotypes of femininity: she is violent, courageous, noble, fiery, solitary and stern; her beauty is a weapon- "a tightened bow"- rather than a lure".³⁷³⁶

She adds, however, that such an Amazonian female agency like Gonne has hardly any role to play in the modern world- either nationalist or feminist .Yeats acknowledges the extraordinariness of the "woman" in the poem but denies her "action" and the futility of her power is addressed. This "manly" idiom percolates even in poems like "A Prayer for my Daughter" that buffets the claims of absolute female autonomy suggesting how obsession with beauty wreaks havoc in women's lives clearly hinting at the unsuccessful marriages of both Maud Gonne and Iseult Gonne. If in "Michael Robertes and the Dancer". Roberts fails to discover his anti-self as the Dancer, the educated and trained New Woman refuses to submit herself sexually to him, in "Leda and the Swan. The poem is a direct dig at the Catholic sexual ethic prevalent in post-treaty Ireland and the Irish idealization of "purity" and "virginity" in woman. This dig on the hollow conception of purity of a woman came to be continued in his Crazy Jane (who was neither a mother nor a virgin) poems that was to follow later. Yeats's self-discovery came full circle when he could become conscious of the "androgyny" of his nature that established all writing as forms of sexual activity, in which male and female spatial borders blur and coalesce into a harmonious whole.

36. Elizabeth Cullingford. "The Anxiety of Masculinity" in *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 176.
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