

. . . the torn black air
Was full of whistling wings, of screams and yells,
Of evil faces peering, of vast fronts
Terrible and majestic, Lords of Hell . . .

(LA, 107)

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A YEATS BORROWING FROM MANGAN

YEATS borrowed more, in turns of phrase as well as in echoes of mood or sentiment, from James Clarence Mangan than even critics specially interested in Yeats's relationship to Irish, as distinct from English, poetry of the nineteenth century have noticed. Such borrowings can be traced, for instance, in poems as different as "The Island of Statues", "In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen", "Byzantium", and "An Acre of Grass", as well as several others. I am concerned here with perhaps the most interesting of all these borrowings. It comes in the last stanza of one of the best poems in the group *Words for Music Perhaps*, "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop":

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.

"A woman can be proud and stiff". At first sight, this is a good example of Yeats's brilliance at using, in his own phrase, "minutely appropriate words". But Yeats here is assimilating rather than inventing.

The source of the line is in Mangan's "The Woman of Three Cows". This is a harangue, adapted from an Irish Gaelic original, directed against a peasant woman who had ideas above her station because she possessed not merely one but three cows. This is the third stanza:

See where Momonia's heroes lie, proud Owen
More's descendents,
'Tis they that won the glorious name, and had the
grand attendants!
If they were forced to bow to Fate, as every
mortal bows,
Can you be proud, can you be stiff, my Woman of
Three Cows!

One notes how skilfully Yeats absorbed, digested, and assimilated his reading. The borrowing, however, reveals much more than this skill alone. The verbal link between "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" and "The Woman of the Three

Cows" enables Yeats to extend the significance of Crazy Jane's words by an implicit cross-reference to Mangan's poem. Mangan's woman is proud and stiff because she possesses more cows than her neighbours; Crazy Jane upholds the vitality of the Irish peasantry by telling the Bishop who, like Yeats's readers generally is expected to remember his Mangan, that even an old beggar-woman with no cows at all can still be proud and stiff "when on love intent". Crazy Jane, asserting the driving force of sexuality, implicitly joins Mangan in mocking the misplaced arrogance of the woman of the three cows, but she is asserting also that there is a proper peasant arrogance.

A caviller might object that Yeats could not possibly expect his reader, even his ideal reader, to have Mangan so much at his finger-tips as to spot such an implicit cross-reference at sight. But such an objection makes the cardinal error of much critical writing about Yeats—that of treating him as primarily a poet, in so far as his poetic art goes, in the English romantic tradition, though dealing of course very largely in themes drawn from Irish history, folklore, legend, and mythology. But Yeats thought of himself as the bard of modern Ireland and, to make this a tenable position, he had, with friends like Katherine Tynan and Douglas Hyde, more or less to *invent* an "important" Irish tradition based on the "Davis, Mangan, Ferguson" of "To Ireland in the Coming Times". Furthermore, as he often asserted, his ideal reader was a "wise and simple" Irish countryman. Taking all this into account, readers of Yeats should not be surprised to discover quite frequent echoes from Mangan to Ferguson (and, in "The Curse of Cromwell", from the one beautiful translation by Ferguson's obscure friend, George Fox). Such borrowings are not plagiarisms. They are the kind of allusiveness always permitted to a poet working within an established and defined tradition. What is ironical is that the tradition, in so far as it is today for Irish readers at least "established and defined", is so largely because of the use Yeats made of it. His borrowings give the Irish poets he borrowed from a vivid contemporary interest for us which it is unlikely, if Yeats had never existed, that they would now possess. D. C. SUTTON.

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