Studia Metrica et Poetica 4.2, 2017, 31–40

Fin-de-Siècle Yeats: Artistry and affect in "The Cap and Bells"

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Abstract: There have been various interpretations of W. B. Yeats's "The Cap and Bells", but little attention has been paid to those elements of its organization which make it effective as poetry. This article is concerned less with what the poem means than with how it means, through the choice and placement of words, phrases, and images in a sequence that not only tells a story but shapes it so as to engage our feelings. The essence of this verbal artefact lies in the emotional progression, conveyed with consummate skill, from frustrated longing to fulfilment. Comparison between the version that Yeats first published in *The National Observer* in 1894 and the revised version included in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) reveals Yeats's increased technical skill.

Keywords: W. B. Yeats; "The Cap and Bells"; narrative; pattern; parallelism; technique; emotional progression; revision; artistry; tone; poetic development

THE CAP AND BELLS

The jester walked in the garden:
The garden had fallen still;
He bade his soul rise upward
And stand on her window-sill.

It rose in a straight blue garment,
When owls began to call:
It had grown wise-tongued by thinking
Of a quiet and light footfall;

But the young queen would not listen;
She rose in her pale night-gown;
She drew in the heavy casement
And pushed the latches down.

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https://doi: doi.org/10.12697/smp.2017.4.2.02

He bade his heart go to her,
When the owls called out no more;
In a red and quivering garment
It sang to her through the door.

It had grown sweet-tongued by dreaming
Of a flutter of flower-like hair;
But she took up her fan from the table
And waved it off on the air.

'I have cap and bells,' he pondered,
'I will send them to her and die';
And when the morning whitened
He left them where she went by.

She laid them upon her bosom,
Under a cloud of her hair,
And her red lips sang them a love-song
Till stars grew out of the air.

She opened her door and her window,
And the heart and the soul came through,
To her right hand came the red one,
To her left hand came the blue.

They set up a noise like crickets,
A chattering wise and sweet,
And her hair was a folded flower
And the quiet of love in her feet.[1]

"W. B. Yeats begins as a Pre-Raphaelite, comes to think of himself as a Symbolist, and finally sheds that to make himself 'modern'; but he is never a 'Modernist', if by 'modernism' we mean the revolution in English poetry represented by the work of Eliot and Pound". So observes C. K. Stead, who adds that Yeats's Symbolism was drenched in "Celtic glamour" (Stead 1986: 10). In tracking Yeats's laborious progress towards his later style, associated with such enduring anthology-pieces as "Easter 1916", "Sailing to Byzantium",

[1] The text is from Allt, Alspachs 1966 [1957]: 159–161. The poem was first published in *The National Observer*, 17 March 1894, having been composed the previous year.

and "Leda and the Swan", Stead singles out from *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) "The Cap and Bells" as a poem "in which the poet's imagination seems to rebel against the preciousness of the role [that has been] required of it". Stead describes "The Cap and Bells" as "neatly executed..., charming, inconsequential perhaps", yet as marking "the beginning of the end of that ethereal, world-weary Yeats of the Celtic Twilight", because here it "is neither the heart nor soul that wins the lady but the symbols of mundane comedy" (Stead 1986: 135–136).

Whether or not Stead is right in seeing the poem as a pointer to Yeats's development, it is among the most striking of his nineteenth-century compositions, and a stand-out in the Penguin *Poetry of the 'Nineties* (Thornton 1970). Its effect is more than charming, because its execution is more than neat. My aim here is to describe and account for that effect. The gist is simple. A jester sends first his soul and then his heart to a young queen, but she rejects them. He decides to give her his cap and bells, leaving them where she will find them. She takes them lovingly and the heart and the soul are also welcomed and sing to her.

This little story has been variously interpreted,[2] but the poetry resides in the way it is told – the choice and placement of words and images as they echo and chime, and the organization of the narrative as beginning, middle, and end. The responsive reader cares less about *what* the poem means than about *how* it means. Its essence lies in the emotional progression, conveyed with consummate skill, from frustrated longing to fulfilment. Explication – the decoding of a poem into the language of rational discourse – must always be secondary to experiencing the verbal artefact with all faculties alert. These include our sense of form.

A salient element in the structure of "The Cap and Bells" is the careful chronicling of time: evening, night, morning, night. A night is devoted to the queen's repudiation of the jester's wooing, the following day to the queen's capitulation. But the details by which the passage of time is registered are remarkably evocative: the garden in which the jester walks "had fallen still" (dusk), "When owls began to call" (night), "When the owls called out no more" (towards daybreak), "when the morning whitened" (morning), "stars grew out of the air" (night). We feel the stillness of the garden at dusk, hear the nocturnal calling of owls till they lapse into silence, see the whitening of morning as light replaces darkness, and watch the stars "grow" out of the air,

[2] The following accounts are representative: Ellmann 1954: 121; Natterstad 1967; Bloom 1970: 128–129; Milne 1972: 69–79; Cowart 1979: 38–44; Coltrane 1990: 129–143; Hamlin 1990: 203–205; Wenzell 2007: 20–23.

as though they were blooming in the night sky, like flowers in the garden: the verb not only conveys the stars' gradual brightening but carries the sense of an organic process in a living, magical universe.

Further, the positive associations of "out of the air" are intensified by the contrast with the queen's dismissal of the jester's soul, as she "waved it off on the air", and the fact that in both contexts "air" rhymes with "hair". In the fifth stanza, the jester's heart had dreamed of the queen's "flutter of flower-like hair", a symbol of her beauty; in the seventh stanza, his cap and bells are laid under "a cloud of her hair"; and in the final stanza her hair is "a folded flower", picking up the simile in "flower-like" in a metaphor redolent of tranquillity and closure, since a flower of the right genus folds at night, when the garden is returned to its original stillness.

In fact the last three stanzas transform to positives all the negatives of the first five. The queen, who rejected the heart's singing to her, now sings a love song to both the heart and soul, which respond in kind. The closed window and door are opened and the previously debarred heart and soul enter. In the early stanzas the first emissary had been the soul (wearing blue), and the heart had been the second (wearing red), the parallelism of the lines describing them and their futile missions being very marked: "He bade his soul... / in a straight blue garment... / It had gown wise-tongued by thinking... / But the young queen..." and "He bade his heart... / In a red and quivering garment... / It had grown sweet-tongued by dreaming... / But she...". Now "the heart and the soul" come through the apertures in reverse order: "To her right hand came the red one, / To her left hand came the blue". This not only creates a kind of chiasmus (soul...heart: heart...soul), but gives us clinching alliteration on "right...red" and, with the addition of the definite articles, the satisfying commonplace "heart and soul" of romantic devotion. Window and door are included in the same reversal of order: "on her window-sill /... through the door" becomes "She opened her door and her window". The "wise-tongued" soul and the "sweet-tongued" heart, formerly denied audience, now, in the queen's presence, "set up a noise like crickets, / A chattering wise and sweet". The young queen "would not listen" to the soul before, but now she does. Previously she "took up" her fan to wave off the heart, but now heart and soul "set up" their duet. And the lady's "quiet and light footfall", which had imbued the soul with wisdom, transmutes into "the quiet of love in her feet". In the opening line the jester "walked", whereas these feet are motionless. The serene conclusion is compounded of such echoes.

Within this scheme there are lesser parallelisms and rhetorical constructions. For example, in "The jester walked in the garden: / The garden had fallen still", the second line begins with the two words that had ended the first

line, in the figure known as *anadiplosis*, and each line begins with the definite article plus a noun. "She rose in" and "She drew in" head consecutive lines in the third stanza, "I have" and "I will" in the sixth. "She rose in" is anticipated by "It rose in" of the second stanza. "Grew" in the seventh stanza is preceded by "grown" in stanzas two and five. Alliteration adds aptness to the "flutter of flower-like hair" and the hair as "a folded flower". At the close, we have "And her hair... / And the quiet". The acoustic subtlety of all this elaborate patterning of sound and syntax gives the narrative its resonance, and directs the rise, fall, and modulation of the voice as the poem is read aloud.

Essential to this outcome is the rhythmical expressiveness. The quatrains consist of three-beat lines mainly composed of iambs and anapaests, but with each first and third line having a feminine ending (an extra unstressed syllable), and the second and fourth lines affording the rhymes. In each quatrain, the falling cadences of the feminine-endings tend to hover, awaiting the syntactical completion of the solidly end-stopped rhymes. Metrical variations afford tiny frissons, as in "Of a quiet and light footfall", where the last word is normally accented on its first syllable rather than on the second, which the reader is encouraged to give equal stress, because it bears the rhyme. The same rhythmic ripple occurs in the last word of "She rose in her pale night-gown", also referring to the queen, so that the effect is like that of an embryonic musical motif identifying her.[3]

The imagery carries the poem's complex tonal register. When the queen dismisses the soul and the heart, the details of her actions are specific and realistic: she denies the soul admission by drawing in the heavy casement and pushing the latches down, and she takes up her fan from the table to wave off the heart. Yet the pictures of the soul, dressed in ethereal blue, standing on her window-sill, of the heart in "a red and quivering garment" singing to her through the door, and of both in the last stanza chattering "like crickets" have elements of the bizarre that border on the comic. The image of the heart, clad in "quivering" blood-red, blends the physiological and the gothic, while casting over them an hallucinatory shimmer. However figurative the "heart" and the "soul" are taken to be, the images are unremittingly pictorial, though we may have trouble visualizing the soul, as distinct from its "straight blue garment". Yet the surrealistic strangeness does not detract from the lyrical flow of feeling. The fairy-tale loveliness of the queen herself is lightly sketched through her "flutter of flower-like hair", her "quiet and light footfall", suggestive of youthful

[3] There is a complete metrical analysis of the poem, employing the Russian Formalist approach, by Bailey 1975.

grace and slimness, and her "red lips", while mention of her "pale night gown" and "her bosom" enhances a mildly erotic allure.

One more detail of Yeats's story-telling strategy is worth noting. In the opening stanza the object of the jester's adoration is simply "her". This arouses our curiosity: to whom does this pronoun refer? It is not until the third stanza that she is identified as "the young queen". And of course the setting – the wooer below in the garden, his attention focused on the young woman's chamber window above – borrows some of its glamour from Romeo's night-time courtship of Juliet.

Further repetitions and oppositions are woven into the fabric of the verse. The heart is arrayed in red, the colour also of the queen's lips as she sings to it. The young queen's footfall is "light" but her casement is "heavy" and after the jester has bidden his soul to rise "upward" and stand "on" her window-sill, she pushes the latches "down", and later she waves the heart "off". She lays cap and bells "upon" her bosom, "Under" a cloud of her hair.

Significantly, the above account of the poem's intricate design is based on the text that Yeats included in *The Wind Among the Reeds* in 1899. His first version, published in *The National Observer*, 17 March 1894, lacks much of this technical virtuosity.[4] It begins:

> A Queen was loved by a jester,
> And once, when the owls grew still,
> He made his soul go upward
> And stand on her window-sill.

No scene is set. The jester is not depicted as walking in the garden, so the poem's final line cannot offer a contrast with his movement or return us to an initial evening stillness. Curiosity is not aroused by the withholding till the third stanza of the beloved one's identity, since the information is given at the very start. In the early version "her" in the fourth line has a clear referent: when he revised, Yeats shrewdly retained the pronoun, though now it became proleptic. The *anadiplosis* of "the garden: / The garden" is missing. The second line of the early text makes "the owls", rather than the garden, "still", so that there is less romantic colouring from *Romeo and Juliet*, and the time-scheme signalled in Yeats's revision by the owls' calling and reverting to silence is obscure. The parallelism involving the owls ("When the owls began to call" and "When the

[4] The text can readily be reconstructed from the Variorum collation in (Alt, Alspach 1966 [1957]: 159–161), where it is clear that the version printed in *The Second Book of the Rhymers' Club* (1894) contained only trivial variants from the version in *The National Observer*.

owls called out no more") is absent. So also are the parallelisms in referring to the soul ("He bade his soul", "It had grown wise-tongued by thinking") and heart ("He bade his heart", "It had gown sweet-tongued by dreaming"). In the *National Observer* printing, the heart is bidden to "go to her, / When the bats cried out no more", and this is the first mention of these squeaking creatures, connotatively so less apt that the owls.

The second stanza originally ran:

> In a long and straight blue garment
> It talked ere the morn grew white
> It had grown most wise with thinking
> On a foot-fall hushed and light.

Here the soul evidently talks for a considerable time, and "ere the morn grew white" detracts from the quickening of dramatic expectancy in the alliterating "And when the morning whitened", as the scene is set for the crucial, plot-changing gesture. Yeats's revised version avoids the prosaic mention of talking by simply indicating that the soul is "wise-tongued", whereas "most" in "most wise" is mere padding for the sake of the metre. "On a foot-fall hushed and light" has none of the metrical subtlety of "Of a quiet and light footfall", and it was only after "hushed" had been replaced by "quiet", that the line anticipated, and so gave extra resonance to, "the quiet of love in her feet" of the close.

Originally, in stanza three, the queen's casement was not, in contrast to her footfall, "heavy" but "brightening", so there she shuts it at daybreak, with the result that a reader remains uncertain about the chronology. But it is in the seventh stanza that the inferiority of the *National Observer* version is most obvious:

> She took them into her bosom,
> In her heart she found a tune,
> Her red lips sang them a love-song,
> The night smelled rich with June.

The lack of the "upon"–"under" antithesis is relatively unimportant. But the stanza is rhythmical bric-à-brac, without fluency or cohesion. Its last line tells us that the season is summer and the air fragrant, but it seems tacked on, gauchely furnishing a rhyme with the equally inept "In her heart she found a tune". Moreover, this conventional reference to the queen's heart seems maladroit in a poem in which the jester's heart is personified as a virtual member of the dramatis personae. The revised stanza, in contrast, is perfect, with its

appealing metaphors, "Under a cloud of her hair" and, where the time is of the essence, "Till stars grew out of the air", and the repetition, missing from the original version, of stanza five's "hair"–"air" rhyme within this positive context enhances our response. "I believe in technique as the test of a man's sincerity", averred Ezra Pound (1960: 9). Both versions of "The Cap and Bells" recount the same basic series of events, but by lavishing such technical artistry on his reworking of the text, as the century drew to a close, Yeats gave it a poetic quality that it did not have before.

"The Cap and Bells" originated, according to Yeats, in a dream – which explains both its hallucinatory character and its emotional potency.[5] Dreams are despatches from the whole personality, dramatizing our most inward impulses, feelings, anxieties, conflicts, hopes, wishes, moods, and values.[6] "The Cap and Bells" engages with the poet's deep-seated preoccupations, and it expresses them through a mini-drama – characters, settings, and events. Emotion finds its "objective correlative" in story. It is not hard to guess that informing "The Cap and Bells", jostled in *The Wind Among the Reeds* by numerous soft-focus poems to "his beloved", is Yeats's infatuation with the regal beauty Maude Gonne. As all-round entertainer – singer and story-teller as well as clown – the court jester is an apt surrogate for the poet. Since dreams literalize the figurative, the jester can offer the young queen his heart and soul, depicted as separate entities, while still living to make the final gift of his cap and bells, which seem more than "the symbols of mundane comedy": they are the insignia of his very identity. In *The Wind Among the Reeds*, only one short poem intervenes between "He Gives his Beloved Certain Rhymes" and "The Cap and Bells", but the jester bestows not the products of his art and craft but the emblems of his essential self. "I will send them to her and die", he decides. Does "and die" merely register desperation,[7] or is this an act of ultimate sacrifice? The vagaries of dream logic prevent us from being sure. The queen lays the cap and bells upon her bosom and sings them a love-song, and in the poem's closing stanza the disembodied heart and the soul chatter a

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5 Yeats wrote: "I dreamed this story exactly as I have written it... The poem has always meant a great deal to me" (Allt, Alspach 1966 [1957]: 808). Bloom believes that "Ellmann, considering Yeats's revisions of the poem, is rightly skeptical of the poet's claim that he wrote the poem exactly as he dreamed it" (1970: 128), but this distorts Yeats's statement: he says that he dreamed the "story" as written, not the words of the poem in which he relates it. The essence of what happens is unaffected by the verbal changes.

6 Hall 1966; Stevens 1996. These are among the best of the scores of books on this topic.

7 Meaning something like "If this final gesture is unsuccessful, I shall die" or "I shall do this even if it means that I die".

duet. If there is death at the close, it is a consummation devoutly to be wished. Love has been requited. The passage from yearning to fulfilment is complete. And the achieved blend of wisdom and sweetness in the singing of the soul, which thinks, and the heart, which dreams, does indeed seem to intimate a new-found poetic power.

Yeats's distinguished biographer, R. F. Foster, writes that "The Cap and Bells" "presents the fulfilment of love as loss of potency and of life itself", but the feeling evoked at the end is far more positive than this formulation suggests.[8] The jester's last act has resulted in success, as Stead's comment implies, not defeat.[9] If we prefer to read the mini-drama as tragedy, it must be of the uplifting kind attended by catharsis, "all passion spent". Yeats himself asserted that his dream "was beautiful and coherent, and gave me the sense of illumination and exaltation that one gets from visions" (Allt, Alspach 1966 [1957]: 808). Whether or not we wish to believe, with David Cowart, that the jester "who has loved his royal mistress unrequitedly in life achieves a mystical union in death", the poem's ending is suffused with an "exaltation" akin to bliss (Cowart 1979: 38).

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[8] Foster 1997: 215. Bloom also believes that "the jester chooses death, or at least a kind of self-castration" (1970: 128) and regards the jester at the end as "presumably deceased" (1970: 129).

[9] Ellmann also puts the emphasis on the fact that the queen "yields" but, unlike Stead, adds that this is "when the jester sends what is most essential and individual in him" (1954: 251). Ellmann notes that Yeats used to claim that "The Cap and Bells" showed the way to win a lady and "He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" the way to lose her.

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