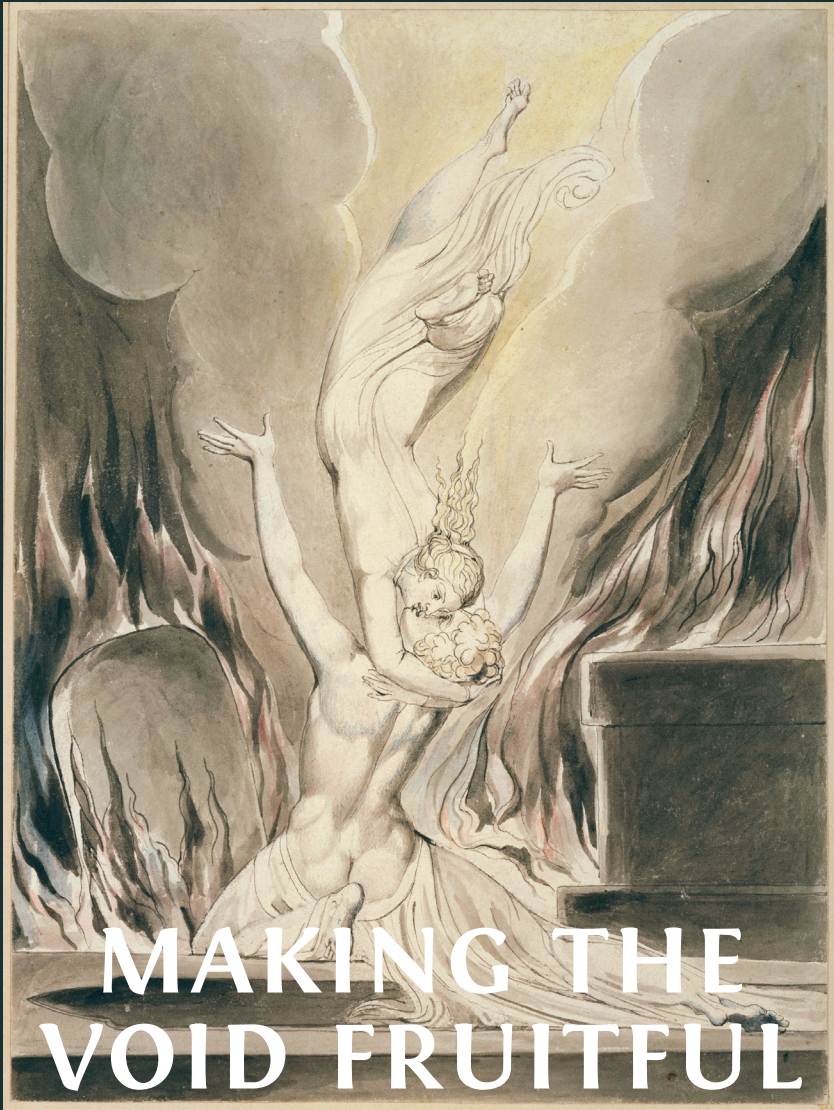


PATRICK J. KEANE



# MAKING THE VOID FRUITFUL

Yeats as Spiritual Seeker  
and Petrarchan Lover



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# Preface to Part Two

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As noted in the General Prologue, my emphasis in both parts of this book is on the poetry. As for the love poems discussed in Part Two: though I am, of course, aware of the distinction to be made between an author and the 'speaker' of a poem, I refer to 'Yeats' and 'Maud Gonne,' rather than, as the more discreet Yeats does, to a 'Poet' and his 'Beloved'. My justification is that Yeats really wants us, under all the camouflage, to know who he is, as man and poet, along with the identity of the Muse and living woman who inspired him and simultaneously broke his heart

Though I try in what follows to read the poems *as poems*, attending to the variety of lyrical forms deployed by Yeats, in my focus on Maud Gonne I sometimes necessarily fail to do justice to the poems in their entirety. That is most obviously true in the case of four major poems in which Maud figures significantly, but whose presence does not begin to exhaust their richness and complexity. These four are 'The Tower,' 'Among School Children,' 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' and 'A Prayer for my Daughter.' My second epigraph, taken from Part II of 'The Tower,' neglects the splendid first and third movements, though both have been discussed earlier. Maud figures in three of the eight stanzas of 'Among School Children,' leaving five stanzas on which I am silent, a barely forgivable omission in the presence of what is one of Yeats's indisputable masterpieces. Of the nine stanzas of Yeats's great debate-poem, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' in many ways the central text in Yeats's canon, Maud's presence is restricted to just two stanzas. But they happen to be the penultimate stanza and, by implication, the rhapsodic finale.

In 'A Prayer for my Daughter,' Maud is implicitly, and almost explicitly, present throughout. But the poem, as its title indicates, is about the poet's infant daughter, with Maud hovering as a counterexample of what he wishes for his child. While no one disputes the aesthetic beauty

of the 'Prayer,' its cultural and sexual politics have stirred controversy. Yeats has been attacked by some readers, feminists in particular, for objectifying, even dehumanizing his daughter. He prays for her to 'become a flourishing hidden tree/ That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,' birds having 'no business but dispensing round/ Their magnanimities of sound.' In his patriarchal, programmed future for his daughter—including being brought by her bridegroom to a house where 'all's accustomed, ceremonious'—thought, certainly 'opinion,' is rejected in favor of 'merriment' and the soul's recovery of 'radical innocence.'

By contemporary standards, even by some standards of 1919 elevating the then New Woman, Yeats's conservatism certainly seems retrograde. But even critics offended by the poet's alleged misogyny or by his obvious neo-Burkean Anglo-Irish reverence for tradition, custom and ceremony, have to acknowledge the exceptional beauty of 'A Prayer for my Daughter,' along with the awkward paradox that the very aspects most likely to offend some readers are precisely the poetic and structural elements that make the poem as beautiful as it is. In addition, the 'Prayer' itself supplies the appalling counterexample to organic stability: the litany of actual (Maud's) and mythological bad marriages, which are the disastrous alternatives to the kind of life and marriage Yeats wishes for Anne. Finally, if a man cannot be paternalistic when he is praying for an infant daughter, born in a time of violence, when *can* he be paternalistic?

I touch on these issues here because I pass over them in my later discussion of the poem as beyond the range of my present Maud-centered subject. Though I hasten to add that I can certainly see why some might find these considerations, here restricted to a father's protective or 'patriarchal' stance toward his infant daughter, relevant to the issue of a male poet's projection rather than accurate portrayal of the adult woman he makes his Muse. Notably, seven years after he'd prayed for his daughter to be 'Rooted in one dear perpetual place,' Yeats 'liberated' her by imaginatively celebrating that daughter's rebellion against social conformity and parental authority. Told by his wife that she had chastised their daughter, then seven, for being seen with a boy with a bad reputation, Yeats was so disturbed yet delighted by Anne's reply—'Yes, but he has such lovely hair and his eyes are as cold as a

March wind’—that he decided to put her reply, aesthetic individualism triumphing over communal ethics, ‘into verse’ (1926 Diary). The result was the poem ‘Father and Child.’

Advancing Anne, for the song’s sake, to adolescence, Yeats transforms the threatening ‘wind’ of the ‘Prayer’ into the still dangerous but exciting wind of sexual awakening. He also converts his role as scolding father to that of empathetic poet, overturning in the process poet-priest George Herbert’s ‘The Collar’—which begins, ‘I struck the board and cry’d “No more”,’ and ends with Herbert as ‘Childe’ submitting to ‘My Lord.’ Here is ‘Father and Child,’

She hears me strike the board and say  
That she is under ban  
Of all good men and women  
Being mentioned with a man  
Who has the worst of all bad names;  
And thereupon replies  
That his hair is beautiful,  
Cold as the March wind his eyes.

The child’s independence and her unanswerable response are reinforced by the fact that ‘Father and Child’ is the opening poem of Yeats’s ‘A Woman Young and Old,’ a concentrically structured sequence that ends by elegizing ‘Oedipus’ child,’ the archetypal female rebel, Antigone.

