

The manuscript of 'The Queen and the Jester'

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IN THE spring of 1966 I had the good fortune to meet Mrs Jeanne Foster of Schenectady, New York. She had known many of the important writers and artists of the early part of the twentieth century and had carefully preserved gifts she received from them, particularly those from her Irish friends. She had, she told me, 'the instincts of a squirrel' when allowing me to catalogue her friends' gifts in 1968.¹

While in the process of arranging her materials I first noted the manuscript of 'The Queen and the Jester' and recognized it as an early draft of 'The Cap and Bells'² which contained lines not noted before. It is, of course, quite a rough version. When I asked Mrs Foster how she came to own the manuscript she told me this charming story. When Yeats was making a lecture tour in the United States in 1913 Mrs Foster was asked by the poet's father, John Butler Yeats,³ to accompany him to hear Willie recite his poetry. She was enthralled by the poet's reading and indeed by his presence, describing him as 'tall, austere, very dark and handsome. He delivered his lines in a kind of chant that made one think he was not of an earthly order.'

When the reading was over, John Butler Yeats invited Mrs Foster to his apartment at the Petitpas restaurant. There they talked of W.B.'s poetry and some of J.B.Y.'s poetic theories which, he felt, had something to do with his son's development as an artist. He told her of his suggestion that the poetic idea

¹ For the present author's more extensive comment on this catalogue in *Eire-Ireland*, Spring 1970.

² W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 1939, p. 71.

³ For a more comprehensive account of Mrs Foster's friendship with the Yeats family, see B. Reid, *The Man from New York: John Quinn*, Oxford, 1968.

should first be written in prose, and turned by degrees into poetry, as a sculptor chips away from a block of stone all that is not his statue. He then told her of making Willie declaim dramatic verse, a practice which J.B.Y. felt had influenced his son's delivery of his poems. To illustrate the gradual development of a poem, he showed her something Willie had written as a boy, which was 'The Queen and the Jester'. When she asked him when it was written, he answered about 1891. This date would seem reasonable, since 'Cap and Bells' (the poem's first published title) appeared in the *National Observer* of 17 March 1894.¹

At the end of their talk J.B.Y. gave the manuscript to Mrs Foster and on 25 December 1968 she gave it to me.

An examination of 'The Queen and the Jester' shows Yeats's capacity for editing his own work. The rather conventional seventh stanza appears in none of the published versions of the poem, and both of the weak choices for a final line are discarded in favour of 'And the quiet of love in her feet'.

The title of the manuscript seems an early indication of Yeats's lifelong interest in the union of opposites, perhaps more clearly indicated in the manuscript than in the finished poem. We might speculate as to why the poet replaced Edane with a less particularized young queen. Perhaps at this time in his life the young queen Maude Gonne was of more immediate interest than one from Celtic mythology.

¹ A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1968, p. 68.

PLATE I



This pencil portrait of W. B. Yeats by his father is clearly dated 1903; it is signed by both W.B. and John Butler Yeats. The sketch was originally given to John Quinn who later presented it to Mrs Foster. Mrs Foster, who died in October 1970, at the age of ninety-one, bequeathed it to Professor Londraville.

The Queen & the Jester.

The youngest that laughed in Melley
 Was in love with the queen Edams
 And he made his Soul talk to her
 And it went & lapped on the pane

In a long & a straight blue garment
 It talked before dawn grey white
 It had been under with ^{the queen's} ~~by~~ ~~dreaming~~
^{on} her foot full quiet & light

And the young queen would not listen
 But rose in her long night gown
 And drew in the brightening chamberment
 And pushed a tray over down.

And he made his Heart sing to her
 And it went in by the door.

In a fluttering, crimson garment
 It sang to her on the floor

PLATE III

so had got a sweet tongue by dreaming
on a flutter of blossoms like hair
But she took her fan from the top
and it away in the air.

He said 'I have cups & bells still
I will give them to her & die'
and when the morning had brightened
He left them when she went by.

She took them up in his white hands
Her lips began to tremble
Her red lips sang them a love song
and the moon turned round to look.

She took them into her chamber
Her breast began to heave
she laid them upon his white breast
and the moon turned round to we.

PLATE IV

She opened the door & curtain
and her heart & soul came through
To his right hand came the red one
To his left hand came the blue.

They set up a noise like caskets
a chattering win & sweet
and her hair was a golden plow
{ and it fell upon her light feet.
{ and it folded about her feet.