

The Island of Statues: Magic and Alchemy in Yeats's Poetic Drama

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Abstract:

Pastoral poetry was one of the strongest elements that contributed to the basis of Romantic poetry. Both shared a love of nature, distance from city life and supported the political satire of the urban style of life and civilisation. Both were relevant to the early Yeatsian mood due to his reactions to emotional, cultural, aesthetical, mystical and political problems. He created an Arcadian setting for some of his early poems: 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd', 'The Sad Shepherd' and also his poetic drama, *The Islands of Statues*. This paper sheds new light on the use of magic and alchemy in Yeats's *The Island of Statues*, and explores other shreds that contribute to the dramatic fabric of this poetic drama, for example, *The Arabian Nights* and Greek mythology.

Key words: Magic, alchemy, Rosicrucianism, mysticism, art of sculpture, red rose.

'The Tale of the Young Man and the Fishes' in *The Arabian Nights*¹ is one of the essential sources for Yeats's poetic drama, *The Island of Statues*. As in the cited poem, two lovers are fighting to gain the favour of a girl in the tale; one is still a lover, but the other turns to be a husband. The girl in the tale is a witch, while the girl in the poem, disguised as a man, is loved by a witch. The transformation of these humans into stone by magic is a detail found in both the poem and the tale. In the poem, humans are transformed completely into statues or stones; whereas in the tale, humans become half human and half stone like a statue because the lower part of the body is calcified into stone. The island is enchanted in the poem, while the four isles, the lake and the whole city are enchanted in the tale. The enchanted coloured fishes in the tale, that are swimming in the enchanted lake, are substituted by 'Flowers of manifold colour'² in the poem. The superiority of love over magic, however, is the common theme in the poem and also the tale. The lake is also part of the setting in the poem, but it is not enchanted. Both girls wear the attire of men or at least parts of it, such as the sword in the case of the girl in the tale, in one of the episodes of the poem and also the tale.

Principally, the statue, as a type of sculptural art, becomes life fixation of life for human beings at a certain moment in time or history. It is similar to the myth of Tir Na nOg in Yeats's 'The Wandering of Oisín' wherein people are fixed at a youthful age. Magic or art offer this opportunity for immortality; however, Oisín's return from the land of the

immortals and Almintor's transformation from a statue state to being mortal again undermines this opportunity. The enchanted flower of joy seems to be eternal compared to the withered flowers held by the hands of the statues. Nevertheless, the enchantress connects her life to that flower:

And in her eyes a lightless stare;
 For, If severed from the root
 The enchanted flower were;
 From my wizard island lair,
 And the happy winged day,
 I, as music that grows mute
 On a girl's forgotten lute,
 Pass away—

The Island of Statues (EL 94, III, ll. 62-69)

The root of such magic is extending to ancient Ireland and old civilisations. The poet puts on the mouth of the enchantress as he fears that modern civilisation may sever that flower. The symbol of the flower of joy might have been taken from Martin Luther's emblem, and 'the emblem of Luther itself consisted of a white rose, the insignia of joy and peace, surrounded by a golden ring symbolising eternal life.'³

The red colour of the flower might have been borrowed from the four red roses in the hat of Christian Rosenkreutz in the story of *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* by Johann Valentin Andreae.⁴ It can be considered yet another source of *The Island of Statues*. In turn, this story is considered a 'model for Goethe's Faust'⁵. In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats mentions that the Red Rose stands for 'Intellectual Beauty'.⁶ In Rosicrucianism, red colour is extended to include the cross as well:

Christian Rosenkreutz is not only a knight of the Golden Fleece and of the Golden Stone; he is also a Red Cross knight. Allusions to the Garter are behind the composite allusions to chivalrous feasts and ceremonies of initiation in Andreae's work; the Red Cross of the Order of Garter, the Red Cross of St George of England have been absorbed into the German world, to reappear

as 'Christian Rosencreutz', with his red roses and his Red Cross
ensign.⁷

Christian Rosenkreutz is the story's narrator. He attends a wedding of the King and the Queen in a castle. Six Royal Persons and a Moorish character who has executed them are decapitated and put into seven ships that sail to an Island. They suffer alchemical dealings in althamor (furnace) which is placed in a castle tower on that island.⁸ The result is the emergence of the King and the Queen who then return to the castle and reward their guests with the Order of the Golden Stone.⁹ In Yeats's *The Island of Statues*, the death of the queen, the Enchantress, causes the emergence of a queen (Naschina) and a king (Almintor). The decapitated persons who return to life after their deaths in the *Chymical Wedding* can be identified by those stoned persons who return to life after solving the spell of magic set by the enchanted flower of joy. There are seven characters in the story, which is nearly the number in the poem; five sleepers, two shepherds, Naschina and the Enchantress. Originally, the number of characters who suffer death in the poem was seven followed by the death of the Enchantress. The Order of the Golden Stone granted by the queen (not the king) to the guests in the story is identified by the enchanted flower of joy, employed by Naschina, the new queen, to revive those stoned by passing the flower between their lips. The image of the 'Golden Stone' in The Order of the Golden Stone is suggestive of the entire works of Yeats.

The superiority of the female, as represented by Naschina, over men, as represented by the shepherds, suggests the Yeatsian model that is Maud Gonne who practices her authority over her suitors to submit them. The final victory of Naschina by solving the spell is not simply to overcome the enchantress of the Island but rather to confirm the superiority of the female. The inferiority of the masculine element versus the feminine element in *The Island of Statues* emanates from the influence of the Troubadoric tradition on the early Yeats's efforts.

Furthermore, the solving of the magic spell by a female expresses Yeats's belief in the feminine capacity to control the world or at least to herald the danger behind that capacity. Beforehand, the danger behind Naschina's behaviour, which is to urge fight between the two shepherds, is that although she is going to save her lover, Almintor, who has been turned into stone, she is also happy that other men are fighting to gain her love. Here then, she is not completely faithful to her supposed lover, Almintor. Naschina's behaviour recalls the girl's behaviour in the tale of *Arabian Nights*, who is playing the love game with her husband and her lover. This situation might also have been influenced by the image of the

woman depicted in *Arabian Nights*, and it also recalls Helen of Troy, who caused the Trojan War:

The Sleeper. Ah! While I slumbered,
How have the years in Troia flown away?
Are still the Achaians' tented chiefs at bay?
Where rise the walls majestic above,
There dwells a little fair-haired maid I love.

The Island of Statues (EL 101, III, ll. 291-95)

The second Sleeper's reference to Dido's bearing both unfaithfulness to the memory of her husband and the dangerous love that causes tragedies:

The Sleeper. With hungry heart
Doth still the wanderer rove? With all his ships
I saw him from sad Dido's shores depart,
Enamoured of the waves' impetuous lips.

The Island of Statues (EL 100, III, ll. 262-65)

If Aeneas, the Greek, is considered as from the West and Dido, the African, who is considered as coming from the East, the story can be interpreted as stating that East needs protection and love from the West according to Virgil's point of view. This colonial consideration is not obvious in the *Island of Statues*, but it is in the original text of the *Aeneid*. The reference to the legendary King Arthur by the third sleeper deepens the sense of history expressed in the poem and also hints at the dilemma of politics at the end when the sleepers choose their king:

The Third Sleeper. A rover I who come from where men's
ears
Love storm and stained with mist the new moon's flare.
Doth still the man whom each stern rover fears—
The austere Arthur — rule from Uther's chair?

The Island of Statues (EL 101, III, ll. 271-74)

The reference to King Uther and his son, King Arthur indicates the significance of magic or alchemy in the legend. King Uther, Pendragon, was transformed by the magic power of Merlin into the shape of Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, who had been killed, so as to seduce the widow, Ygernia, Gorlois's wife.¹⁰ It was said then that night produced the legendary King Arthur.¹¹ Many transformations occur in the poem, namely, men into stones or statues, stones or statues into men, and the

transformation of the Enchantress into a frog after her death. The new moon indicates the birth of the new queen, Naschina, the shepherdess who is blessed by the god Pan:

The Sleeper. As here I came I saw god Pan. He played
An oaten pipe unto a listening faun,
Whose insolent eyes unused to tears would weep.
Doth he still dwell within the woody shade,
And rule the shadows of the eve and dawn?

The Island of Statues (EL 101, III, ll. 280-84)

The power of art inflicted by the god Pan suppresses the power of lust that is represented by the god Faun. However, the power of love still proves to be strongest at the end of the poem. By love, the supreme magic, Naschina convinces the enchantress to break the spell, an act that suggests that only through love can the riddles of life be solved. The female skilfulness, as represented by the enchantress's making of the spell and Naschina's ability to solve it, leaves nothing to the foolish men who are fighting in vain to attain these superior creatures. Another interpretation of the victory of Naschina is given by Harold Orel:

Naschina, the Arcadian shepherdess, finally overthrew the
Enchantress
of the Island of Statues in the major event of the play.
She did so by
displaying St. Joseph's image on her necklace to the goblin
Queen, who
thereupon vanished. Christ, in other words, had won still
another victory
over the powers of the pagan world.¹²

The motif that is the Christian-pagan struggle recurs clearly in Yeats's 'The Wanderings of Oisín'. The pagan elements in *The Island of Statues*, which point to the pre-Christian era, find their similarities in the *Chemical Wedding*, and the sense of conflation between these elements and the Christian references. In the poem, the god Pan, Aeneas and Dido, Troy and Sibyl are conflated with St. Joseph, whereas in the story, Cupid, Venus, Fortune, the Golden Fleece, the Golden Stone, Hermes, House of the Sun and the Tower of Olympus conflate with the Virgin, the Divine Trinity, and St. John.

The legend of the Golden Fleece shows the effect of magic when gaining gold; however, the witch here demonstrates the malignant side of her personality by killing her young brother to distract her father and

make the elopement with her lover, Jason, successful. A contradiction emerges between this image of the Golden Fleece and the first and fourth provisions of the Order of the Golden Stone,¹³ which was conferred by the King on Christian Rosenkretz; he was endowed the Order of the Golden Fleece as well.

In her quest, Naschina does not save her lover's life only, but the Others' lives as well. The shift from individuality to publicity means that the role of women is not confined to private issues, but can also rule on public affairs efficiently. The end of this verse drama transcends even the philosophy of feminism, which appeals for an equality in power between the sexes. It asserts the preferences of earlier Yeats for politics by making the queen choose the king, not the reverse. The people who elected Naschina as queen of the island acknowledge her superiority over men; consequently, the choosing of the king by the queen becomes a complementary action or a type of decoration.

As an allegory, Naschina can represent the 'Mother Ireland', who chooses her king by free will; the king then sacrifices himself for the sake of that mother. That king is immortalised by being transformed into a statute, the sacred stone in the Celtic religion. The flower of joy, which the questers are seeking, acquires a Rosicrucian shadow, which is the symbol of the rose and represents Ireland in Yeats's poetry.¹⁴ This choosing action, practiced by Naschina, reverses the position of Almintor, as a chooser, so as to be chosen at the end of the poem. This positive action at first seems to be a negative at the end in favour of the feminist point of view, as the hunter turns into the hunted.

Had we searched for the gender of the statues, we would never have found the female ones. Disguised as a masculine quester, Naschina never tries to submit to the deadly test to get the flower of joy, which means that this task is confined to *real* men only. Consequently, that flower resembles a female symbol for which men must fight to attain. The failure of men to gain that flower lays out a broad question about the attainability of women, which then leads to the suggestion of the unattainability of Maud Gonne for Yeats. This early prediction – because Yeats met Gonne for the first time after writing this poem – proves to be true based on the constant unattainability of Gonne for the rest of Yeats's life. The identification between Yeats, as a suitor of Gonne, and Almintor in *The Island of Statues*, as a suitor of Naschina, is verified at the end of the poem and in Yeats's biography, Almintor turns to a husband, but Yeats is still a permanent statute. Almintor lives in life, and Yeats lives in art as Gonne wished for him to be like the poet in Shelley's *Alastor*. Before Gonne, Laura Armstrong was also unattainable for Yeats because she was engaged earlier, and her upper class made her

unattainable for Yeats, who was poor at that time. The difference between their classes was true for both Maud Gonne and Yeats.

In conclusion, magic and alchemy constitute the major part of Yeats's poetic drama, *The Island of Statutes*, and indeed demonstrate the principal concerns for the early Yeats. His esoteric system is based on these elements, which he uses to form his panoramic view of the world later. This poetic drama is full of precursors and subtle hints on the main topics that Yeats does indulge in, particularly, the theme of immortality, the interpreting of history and politics, and the relationship between the sexes. The magical rose in this poem is the prototype of the mystical rose that plays a major role in Yeats's spiritual symbolism in both his prose and poetic writings. Yeats's eternal and endless love for Maud Gonne is represented here by asserting her superiority as the lady in the Trabadoric tradition. The struggle or even the reconciliation between the pagan and Christian cultures is introduced here, indicating an implicit bias toward the former. Art, as a sublime work and indeed a quest for Yeats, is embodied in the sculpture of the statutes. They symbolise the supreme transformation and eternal alteration that occurs within the mortal-immortal equation.

Notes:

¹ J. C. Mardrus, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, trans. by Powys Mathers (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 84.

<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=103495802> [Accessed 23/8/2011].

² Edward Larrissy (EL), *The First Yeats: Poems by W. B. Yeats 1889-1899* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2010), p. 92.

³ Christian Rebis, *Rosicrucian History and Mysteries* (UK: The Rosicrucian Collection, 2007), p. 124.

⁴ See *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, by Johann Valentin Andreae-first day.htm

⁵ Rebis, p.125.

⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1973), p. 253.

⁷ Francis Amelia Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (Google book), p.93.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.127. althantor (التنور) is an Arabic word means furnace, and in this context, it is used for an alchemical process.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Arthurian Biographies Ambrosius Aurelianus-2.htm Copyright ©2001 *Britannia.com*, LLC.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Harold Orel, *The Development of William Butler Yeats: 1885-1900*, Humanistic Studies. No. 39 (U.S.A: University of Kansas, 1968), p. 7.

¹³ The first and the fourth provisions of the Order of the Golden Stone are:

1. You my lords the Knights shall swear that you shall at no time ascribe your order to any devil or spirit, but only to God your Creator, and his handmaid Nature.

4. That you desire not to employ this honour to worldly pride and high authority.

The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz, by Johann Valentin Andreae-seventh day.htm

¹⁴ For the symbol of the rose in Yeats's poetry, see A.N. Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1968,1984),pp. 21-24.

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9. Yeats, W. B. *Autobiographies* London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1973

السحر والخيمياء في المسرحية الشعرية لبييتس: جزيرة التماثيل

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الملخص:

شكّل الشعر الرعوي أحد العناصر القوية التي أسهمت في تأسيس الشعر الرومانسي. ويشترك كلاهما في حب الطبيعة ، والابتعاد عن حياة المدينة ومن ثم الهجاء السياسي للأسلوب المدني للحياة والتحضر. وكلاهما كان ملائماً لبييتس في بداياته الشعرية تبعاً لتفاعله مع المشاكل العاطفية والثقافية والجمالية والصوفية والسياسية. لذلك فإنه قد ابتكر خلفية أركادية لبعض قصائده المبكرة مثل: " أغنية الراعي السعيد " ، " الراعي الحزين " ومسرحيته الشعرية " جزيرة التماثيل " . تسلط هذه الورقة الضوء على تأثير السحر والخيمياء (الكيمياء القديمة) على المسرحية الشعرية لبييتس: "جزيرة التماثيل" ، وتستكشف الخيوط الأخرى التي تساهم في النسيج المسرحي للمسرحية الشعرية هذه مثل قصص ألف ليلة وليلة والأساطير الإغريقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السحر ، الخيمياء ، طائفة وردة الصليب ، التصوف ، فن النحت ، والوردة الحمراء.