

*Exhibition*

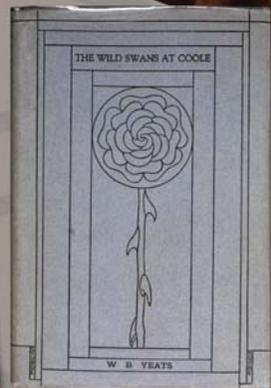
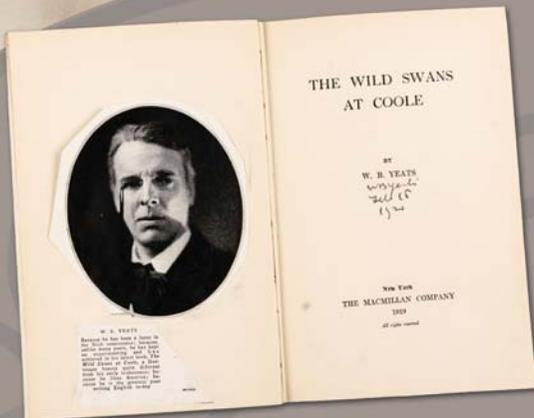
SPECIAL COLLECTIONS  
READING ROOM



**W.B. YEATS  
AND HIS  
MUSES**



Leabharlann UCD  
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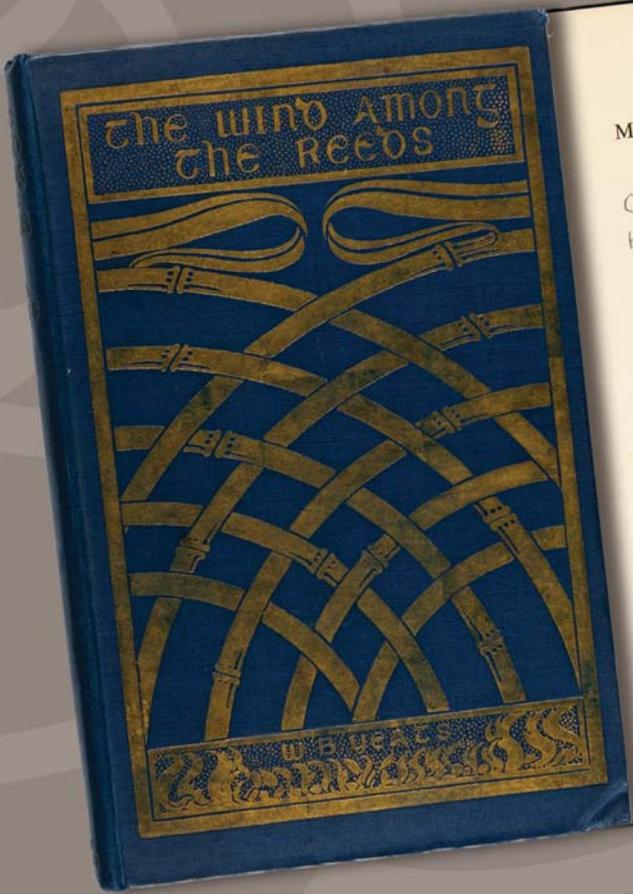
## YEATS AND WOMEN

**J.M. Synge wrote in his Preface to *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) that ‘All art is a collaboration’. This was certainly the case with W.B. Yeats, inspired as he was by a range of extraordinary women to write some of the greatest poetry in the English language. In the case of the five women featured in this exhibit, that collaboration took the form traditionally described as the relationship between Muse and Poet.**

Pre-eminent among these women was Maud Gonne, who first visited the Yeats family household in London when the poet was 23 and she 22. Immediately, he was enthralled, writing that ‘her complexion was luminous, like that of apple blossom through which the light falls.’ The imagery of apple blossom was to colour the poems he started to write about her in what Joseph Hassett rightly terms ‘the most sustained and fully developed tribute to a Muse in the history of literature in English’. Privately, Maud Gonne already had a French lover, Lucien Millevoeye, and an unacknowledged dead child; several years later, she was to bear a second with him, her daughter Iseult. In turn, she was to marry the Irish patriot, Major John MacBride. Accordingly, Maud Gonne was not available to the besotted poet as a sexual partner; instead, she would remain unattainable, the source of endless unfulfilled yearning, and inspire a succession of memorable poems he would write articulating that passion. Years later Maud Gonne noted how much this arrangement suited Yeats the poet, whatever about Yeats the man: ‘you make beautiful poetry out of what you call your unhappiness and you are happy in that.’ Maud’s revolutionary dedication to Irish nationalism was, Yeats felt, his one true rival and they argued passionately about it over the years, though he was not immune to its influence.

The distanced yet powerful relationship with Gonne left room in Yeats’s life for the influence of other women. His candid *Memoirs*, not published until 1972, reveals how he lost his virginity to Olivia





MODERN POETRY

Gives you her oldest  
friend  
1897.



Shakespear, consoling himself with the reflection that 'if I could not get the woman I loved, it would be a comfort but for a little while to devote myself to another.' All of the women Yeats was drawn to were no less extraordinary for their intellectual and creative energy than for their beauty: Shakespear was to be the author of six novels. Yeats, who was never to grapple with let alone master any language other than English, was attracted to women with a knowledge of foreign languages, in the case of Shakespear, 'a knowledge of French, English, and Italian literature'. She is the inspiration behind a number of poems in his 1899 volume, *The Wind Among the Reeds*, where she is primarily associated with lunar imagery. One poem recounts what was to become a frequent feature of his writing, a triangular relationship involving one man and two women:

Pale brows, still hands and dim hair,  
I had a beautiful friend  
And dreamed that the old despair  
Would end in love in the end:  
She looked in my heart one day  
And saw your image was there;  
She has gone weeping away.

The poem may describe Olivia Shakespear in the third person; but it is directly addressed to Maud.

Yeats first saw Florence Farr in a play in London; his *Land of Heart's Desire* was written to provide a starring part for her nine-year-old niece; and when he staged his *Countess Cathleen* in Dublin in 1899, Farr was to direct the production and perform the androgynous poet, Aleel, whose 'soft long vowels' sang for years in the memory of James Joyce, who attended the first production. Farr had a profound influence on Yeats in his efforts to develop his poetry as something to be spoken rather than read. For years, they experimented with these possibilities with Yeats speaking his poems to Farr's accompaniment on a stringed instrument known as the psaltery: 'I have just heard a poem spoken with so delicate a sense of its rhythm, with so perfect a respect for its meaning, that if I [...] could persuade a few people to learn the art, I would never open a book of verses again'.

As the poem about Shakespear shows, these relationships with other women were haunted by the palpable influence of Maud Gonne.



1913

Feb 18

18, Woburn Buildings,  
Upper Woburn Place,  
W.C.

My dear Florence Emma : I have  
no words to say for the  
inscriptions. your letters have  
reached me very deeply. I wish  
that George were here to  
be desired that you say about  
the various matters in relation to  
traveling. I wish you would  
write a short essay on the  
subject & get it published somewhere.  
You have probably found it this,  
we have all been looking for.  
Tupper wrote all his poems & music  
& is said to be a good musician.



After the separation from McBride, having converted to Catholicism to marry him, Maud escaped the opprobrium of Irish society by going to live in France, taking her daughter with her. Yeats visited France frequently in these years, drawn by what he termed 'the old lure'. That lure was now redoubled in the strikingly modern beauty of Iseult. Yeats's poems about Gonne's daughter rarely lose sight of the age discrepancy between them, as in the ironically titled 'Men Improve with the Years', where he can only lament that they had not met 'when I had my burning youth.' In the summer of 1917, Maud Gonne (now a widow after the 1916 executions) received a marriage proposal from Yeats; she rejected it. He just as promptly proposed to Iseult; and was similarly rejected.

In September Yeats finally proposed to and was accepted by George Hyde-Lees, a 24-year-old English woman with whom he had conducted occult researches. She accepted, they married and went on honeymoon. But Gonne *mère et fille* were not to be so summarily dismissed. Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory at the time: 'I have betrayed three people' and matters were only salvaged when George Yeats began the automatic writing that will be discussed in the next section. She was to be and remain the wife of a great poet in his fifties, an older and immensely complicated man, and do everything in her considerable power to create the most favorable conditions for him, prolonging both his life and creativity. George spent much of the 1930s accommodating Yeats's strange and complex relationships with other women old and young. When George's husband was dying in Roquebrune in France in January 1939, Edith Shackleton Heald and Dorothy Wellesley joined her at his deathbed.

## THE OCCULT

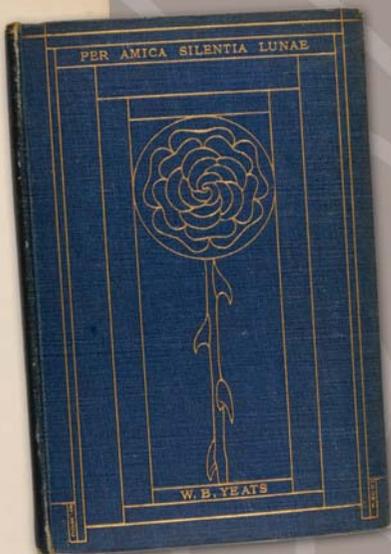
In an essay entitled 'Magic', Yeats writes: 'I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed'. Yeats spent a lifetime seeking contact with the spirit world through occult researches and practices that informed much of what he did and wrote. The path to conventional Christianity had been cut off by his father John Butler Yeats's rebellion;



## PROLOGUE

MY DEAR "MAURICE"—You will remember that afternoon in Calvados last summer when your black Persian "Minoulooshe," who had walked behind us for a good mile, heard a wing flutter in a bramble-bush? For a long time we called her endearing names in vain. She seemed resolute to spend her night among the brambles. She had interrupted a conversation, often interrupted before, upon certain thoughts so long habitual that I may be permitted to call them my convictions. When I came back to London my mind ran again and again to those conversations and I could not rest till

v



but Yeats's need to believe and a hunger for the spiritual life led him to seek and devise an alternative system of beliefs. Yet his mystical pursuit had certain core practices: the belief in symbolism as an active force and a hierarchy which worshipped a Goddess rather than a God. Yeats's involvement in the occult was intimately bound up in his complex relationships with a series of women who shared these beliefs. As Roy Foster notes in his biography of the poet, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (which Yeats joined in 1899), 'attracted a high proportion of unconventional woman acolytes', seeking escape from the constraints of Victorian respectability and access to a certain mode of power and influence. Approximately half of the members of the Golden Dawn were women, nor were they debarred from positions of authority. Florence Farr progressed within the Order to becoming the officer in charge of rituals (Praemonstrix). When Yeats had to take an exam to advance to the second order of the society, his examiner was Farr. Yeats briefly brought Maud Gonne into the Golden Dawn and joined his friend AE in advising her that her dead son could be reincarnated by conceiving a new child at the grave of the deceased – the successful outcome was Iseult. She and Yeats also conducted a spiritual marriage which channeled his frustrations at the lack of a physical one.

All of the women who inspired his poems were involved in the occult. But the most fascinating and far-reaching of those relations involved George Hyde-Lees, who had been involved with Yeats in occult researches for over five years before they married – 'a very flirtatious business', as the poet perhaps rather unwisely remarked to George's mother. When the honeymoon was not going well, George – in an inspired move which cannot fully be explained – began the automatic writing which was to consume the energies of both for over five years and which resulted in his prose book, *A Vision* (which was effectively co-authored). Her creative output was prodigious: 'inspired' by the Instructors who came to convey messages from the spiritual world and to bring Yeats 'metaphors for poetry', she responded to her husband's excited questioning with a total output of 3,600 pages of automatic script and related documents. During that time, he became a father when he and George had a daughter, Anne, in 1919, followed by son Michael in 1921. Yeats never wanted the study of the occult to result in a fixed set of beliefs: it was the pursuit that led him on, in its unique fusion of sexuality and spirituality.





## II

On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. 'No' was the answer, 'we have come to give you metaphors for poetry'.



## THE MUSES

In his book, *W.B. Yeats and the Muses*, Joseph Hassett has persuasively argued that Yeats drew on a belief in the Muses as a source of inspiration for writing his poems. In her New Yorker article in 1996, dance critic Arlene Croce observes that the Muse 'is easier to call up and celebrate in language that assigns gender to nouns than in one that does not' – such as English. She makes an exception for Irish writers, specifically Yeats and Joyce, 'whose passion for language and purposeful connection to classical models obliterated all constraints.' The Muses in the classical tradition were the nine daughters of Zeus and the goddess of memory Mnemosyne, said to inspire poets to create their writing. This concept, part of Yeats's movement away from English models of writing poetry and from the belief systems of Christianity, fused in his view with the notion that, as Hassett puts it, 'his poetry arose from an influx of knowledge or power from beyond his mind'.

In his usual eclectic fashion, Yeats's concept of the Muse was also informed by the Gnostic belief in a divine feminine Wisdom principle symbolized by the moon. Maud Gonne fulfilled all of the qualifications for a Muse figure, from Yeats's point of view, especially the two most identified as essential by Arlene Croce: 'beauty and mystery and of the two mystery is the greater'.

In casting himself in the role of a lover, Yeats was also drawing on the courtly love tradition, best embodied by Petrarch's love of Laura, idealized and unattainable. That unattainability became the driving force behind much of Yeats's poetry, what 'Ego Dominus Tuus' describes as a 'hunger for the apple on the bough/Most out of reach'. For, as Robert Graves puts it in his study *The White Goddess*: 'A poet cannot continue to be a poet if he feels that he has made a permanent conquest of the Muse, that she is always his for the asking.' A related Renaissance concept is the idea that the poem confers immortality on the subject. Yeats draws on this tradition not only to reflect that, though the real Maud Gonne may age, she will acquire immortality in and through his poetry. He goes further to assert that he can see beyond the mere physical beauty that all are awed by to discern her true spiritual beauty, the 'pilgrim soul' that makes them kindred spirits. In 'The Folly of Being Comforted', a 'kind' friend (is Yeats being ironic?) points out: "Your well-beloved's hair has threads of grey/And little



The Folly of being Comforted

One that is ever kind said yesterday:

Your well beloved's hair has threads of grey  
~~And little shadows come about~~  
~~and there are crows feet round~~ about  
his eyes.

Time can but make it easier to be wise,  
Though now it is hard, the trouble is increased;  
And so be ~~wise~~ <sup>patient</sup>, wise & patient friend.

But heart there is no comfort not a ~~grain~~ <sup>grain</sup>;

Time can but make her beauty over again  
Because of that great nobleness of hers;

The fire that stirs about her when she  
Burns but ~~the~~ <sup>more</sup> clearly; O she had not these  
ways

When all the wild summer fogs in her gaze.

O heart, O heart! if she but turn ~~her~~ <sup>her</sup> head,

You would know the folly of being  
Comforted.

Wyelet

shadows come about her eyes”’. In an earlier draft, that second line read: “‘And there are crows’ feet round about her eyes.” Perhaps another (female?) friend advised Yeats against the physical explicitness of ‘crows’ feet’ in favour of the romantic vagueness of ‘little shadows’.

A feminist poet like Adrienne Rich can accurately identify the women in these male-authored poems ‘who were almost always beautiful, but threatened with the loss of beauty’ or a woman who ‘was like Maud Gonne, cruel and disastrously mistaken’ while protesting that such rigid gender constructions left no room for the woman who wanted to write. But Arlene Croce argues for much less gender essentialism and greater fluidity in such poems and art in general when she claims that ‘whenever a gifted male artist has embraced his Muse he has in fact made a woman appear in his art, because he has voluntarily embraced the woman in himself.’ Yeats adopts what is traditionally a ‘feminine’ position, the empty vessel waiting to be inspired by a woman whose beauty is ‘like a tightened bow’, Amazonian and powerful. As ‘Fragments’ puts it in a memorable couplet: ‘Where got I that truth?/ Out of a medium’s mouth.’ The medium is traditionally a woman, who passes on wisdom (‘truth’) to the waiting poet. But the question of agency (and gender) is further complicated by the fact that it comes from somewhere beyond the man and the woman; its ultimate source remains mysterious. Much of the ongoing development which is so striking a feature of Yeats’s long career as a poet arose from hours of dialogue with these remarkable women, so clearly represented in one of his greatest poems, ‘Adam’s Curse’:

We sat together at one summer’s end.  
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,  
And you and I, and talked of poetry.  
I said, ‘A line will take us hours maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.  
Better go down upon your marrow-bones  
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones  
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;  
For to articulate sweet sounds together  
Is to work harder than all these...



## THOSE IMAGES

What if I bade you leave  
The cavern of the mind?  
There's better exercise  
In the sunlight and wind.

I never bade you go  
To Moscow or to Rome.  
Renounce that drudgery,  
Call the Muses home.

Seek those images  
That constitute the wild,  
The lion and the virgin,  
The harlot and the child.

Find in middle air  
An eagle on the wing,  
Recognise the five  
That make the Muses sing.

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