

# Yeats's Reception of Apollo and Daphne in "A Prayer for my Daughter"

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Yeats incorporates the Apollo and Daphne story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a pretext for his "A Prayer for my Daughter," and while it is clear from the poem that Yeats's daughter, whom he likens to a laurel tree, serves as a stand-in for Daphne, there is debate as to what this source text reveals about Yeats himself. While Daniel Harris, in his book *Yeats: Coole Park & Ballylee*, claims that Yeats, in this poem, assumes the role of Apollo in pursuit of Anne as his Daphne (142), Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, in her chapter, "Yeats and Women: *Michael Robertes and the Dancer*," refutes this claim, stating that Yeats stands in for Peneus, Daphne's father (250). The Apollo-Peneus dichotomy, however, is a false one. In his poem, Yeats sees himself taking up aspects of both figures and, indeed, collapses each of their roles into one. This collapse not only reveals Yeats's conflicted desire to simultaneously preserve his daughter's innocent and achieve romantic satisfaction vicariously through her, but it also provides us an insight into Yeats's artistic impulse, one which leads to Anne Yeats's lignification and transformation into a monument of "custom and ceremony" from which beauty emerges.

Yeats's most apparent role in his "A Prayer for my Daughter" is that of a father, and so, given his incorporation of Ovid as a source-text, one might first think to conflate him with the river god, Peneus. Yet beyond the obvious connection to Peneus's paternal role (the fact that Yeats is addressing his daughter), Yeats weaves Peneus's two main actions in the Apollo and Daphne story into the fabric of his poem: his wish to sequester his daughter into married life and his transformation of his daughter into a tree.

## Yeats's Reception of Apollo and Daphne in "A Prayer for my Daughter"

We see the first of these actions in the concluding stanza of the poem. Yeats wishes, "And may her bridegroom bring her to a house / Where all's accustomed, ceremonious" (lines 73-74), thus outlining his hope for his daughter's domesticity. For Cullingford, this hope stems from Yeats's role as a father more broadly. She attributes this wish to Yeats's "paternalistic desire to protect [his daughter], seclude her, and guard her chastity" (247). But more than simply speaking to his fatherhood, this conclusion to Yeats's poem relates more specifically to Peneus's wish for Daphne. Ovid writes, "Often [Daphne's] father has said, 'daughter, you owe me a son-in-law'; / Often her father has said, 'child, you owe me grandchildren'" (*saepe pater... nata, nepotes; Met. I.481-482*). Not only does Peneus express the same desire as Yeats (his daughter's domesticity), but the expression of his wish serves the same end as well: to limit her freedom. Ovid's repetition of *saepe pater dixit* reinforces the constant presence of Peneus's wish for his daughter, while the next line equates the marriage torch to the yoke (*taedas... iugales; Met. 1.483*). And so, Peneus's constant wish seems to bind Daphne as the yoke would bind livestock, thereby taking away her freedom and independence. Yeats's vision for his daughter functions similarly. It consigns her to a future of domesticity in a way that is "at odds with the dignity and independence of women" (Cullingford 247). Yeats then engages in the same protective paternal impulse as Peneus, and though Daphne eventually escapes her father's wish by invoking Diana (*Met. 1.487*), both Yeats and Peneus's wishes to protect their daughters serve as an attempt to limit their freedom.

Peneus's only other involvement in the Daphne and Apollo story comes with her transformation. Yeats perpetrates a similar transformation both through metaphor and through his vision for his daughter at the end of the poem. According to Ovid, Peneus is the one who transforms Daphne into a laurel tree at the end of her encounter with Apollo. Tired of the chase

## Yeats's Reception of Apollo and Daphne in "A Prayer for my Daughter"

and about to be caught, Daphne prays, "Bring help, father, if you possess a divine will as the river; / Destroy my beauty on account of which I have been too pleasing" (*fer, pater...perde figuram*; *Met.* 1.547-548), and this prayer is what results in her transformation: "Her prayer hardly finished, a heavy rigidity overcomes her limbs..." (*vix prece finite torpor gravis occupant artus...*; *Met.* 1.549). Ovid then clearly links Daphne's transformation to her father, pointing to his will/divine power (*numen*) as its cause. Yeats incorporates this same causal relationship in "A Prayer for my Daughter." On one level, he effects Anne's transformation into a tree through metaphor. He writes, "May she become a flourishing hidden tree" (Yeats, line 41) and "O may she live like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place" (lines 47-48). By the very act of introducing the metaphor of the laurel tree and incorporating Daphne and Apollo as a pretext, Yeats places himself in Peneus's place. Just as Peneus effects Daphne's transformation through his *numen*, he brings about Anne's metamorphosis through artifice.

Yeats, however, also accomplishes this transformation narratologically. Though Ovid does not point to it explicitly, he implies that Peneus transforms Daphne into the laurel tree to preserve her innocence from Apollo's imminent rape, as per her request earlier in the episode, "most loving father, let me enjoy perpetual virginity" (*da mihi...virginitate frui*; *Met.* 1.486-487). Yeats, in the last two stanzas, crafts a narrative for his daughter that will likewise preserve her innocence by introducing the bridegroom, which Cullingford (citing Harold Bloom) claims generates a "tension...between chastity and matrimony" (247). This tension, however, is superficial. In stanza IX, Yeats outlines the condition under which one might preserve innocence, writing, "Considering that, all hatred driven hence, / The soul recovers radical innocence" (lines 65-66). In the next stanza, he then narrates the purgation of such hatred, writing,

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house

## Yeats's Reception of Apollo and Daphne in "A Prayer for my Daughter"

Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;  
For arrogance and hatred are the wares  
Peddled in the thoroughfares. (lines 73-76)

These lines mark a removal from the public life (the "thoroughfares") and a turn toward the private life (the "house"), and with this removal, comes a shift from "arrogance and hatred" toward custom and ceremony. He then writes, "How but in custom and in ceremony / Are innocence and beauty born?" (lines 78-79). Thus, Yeats (according to the logic of the poem) preserves his daughter's innocence by consigning her to domestic life, and in doing so, he imposes on his daughter a process of lignification by cutting her off from the world. Matrimony then becomes not an obstacle to innocence but a means to ensure it, and by introducing it as an act of preservation and lignification, Yeats yet again comes to mirror Peneus.

Beyond assuming the role of Peneus by trying to preserve his daughter's innocence, Yeats also takes on the role of Apollo and, in fact, begins to collapse the distinction between Apollo and Peneus. He first dons Apollo's role as a potential lover by drawing the comparison between Anne and his former interests, but then he begins to mirror Apollo as an artist as he attempts to preserve Anne's beauty in addition to her innocence, coming to view her in terms of her artistic potential.

Yeats first assumes the role of a lover by comparing his daughter's beauty to his own former love interests. He uses the cases of Helen and Aphrodite as cautionary tales, writing that "Helen being chosen found life flat and dull / And later had much trouble from a fool" and that "that great Queen, that rose out of the spray, ... Yet chose a bandy-legged smith for man" (lines 25-29). These lines directly follow the stanza in which he prays for Anne's beauty, and so it would appear that Helen and Aphrodite, for Yeats, become examples of beauty, each of which

result in violence. Helen, having "had much trouble from a fool," supposedly caused the Trojan war on account of her beauty, while Aphrodite, who "chose a bandy-legged smith [Hephaestus] for a man," had an affair with Ares, causing Hephaestus to trap them in the act. This digression into mythological tales of beauty and violence, as Daniel Harris writes, "veil Maud and Iseult [Gonne]." Harris claims that Yeats uses the images of Helen and Aphrodite as a form of abstraction that allows him to discuss the painful memories surrounding his own love life.

In using these examples to counterbalance Anne's beauty, Yeats sets her up as the "ideal myth"—a beauty which does not incite violence (Harris 141). He prescribes Anne what he thinks will make her into this ideal myth in the next stanza, writing, "In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned; / Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned" (lines 33-34). But in wishing for Anne what he thinks will distinguish her from Helen and Aphrodite (and thereby Maud and Iseult), Yeats necessarily takes on the gaze of a lover. Daniel Harris would seem to accord with this reading, writing that Yeats's mention of "heart-revealing intimacy" in stanza III, reflects a desire for Anne to have what Yeats and Maud never could; moreover, he writes that, in "A Prayer for my Daughter," Yeats vicariously lives out the marriage he never could with Maud through his daughter (Harris 140). Yeats, therefore, in assuming the posture of a lover either through his idealization of his daughter or his living vicariously through her, seems to take on the role of Apollo. But this interpretation seems like a superficial reading. Yeats's incorporation of Helen and Aphrodite as models of beauty speak to a deeper reading, wherein Yeats, as the artist, tries to both shape and preserve his daughter's beauty. Even though Harris claims that, taken any further, the Yeats-Apollo comparison does not hold up—and is, indeed, "inappropriate" (142)—when one takes Ovid into consideration, the comparison actually withstands further scrutiny.

## Yeats's Reception of Apollo and Daphne in "A Prayer for my Daughter"

In prescribing what he thinks will make Anne the ideal myth, Yeats makes himself the moderator of her beauty. Not only does he make the aforementioned prescriptions, but he also writes lines such as "May she be granted beauty and yet not / Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught" (lines 16-17) and thinks of her in terms of "The sort of beauty that [he has] approved" (line 50). These lines—as well as the incorporation of Helen and Aphrodite—signify an attempt on Yeats's part to control Anne's expression of beauty and moderate it to his liking. This same attempt at controlling beauty is present in the *Metamorphoses*, and as Judith Hallett argues in her article "Omnia Movet Amor: Love and Resistance, Art and Movement, in Ovid's Daphne and Apollo Episode," this imposition of control speaks to a broader aesthetic reading of the episode. Daphne—rejecting artifice—comes to represent nature, while Apollo represents the artist imposing order on nature's unkempt beauty. Hallett points to Ovid's use of *liber* to describe Daphne's bark as a recognition of "Daphne's narrated experience as art," because *liber*, in addition to meaning *bark*, can mean *book* (Hallett 214). But the description of Apollo and Daphne's encounter lends more credence to this interpretation.

Throughout Apollo and Daphne's interaction, Ovid reinforces his aesthetic commentary using the language of order and disorder as well as artistic imagery. As he introduces Daphne, Ovid notes that "a band held her hair together, lawlessly arranged" (*vitta coercebat positos sine lege capillos; Met. 1.477*). Daphne's hair then becomes a symbol of both her beauty and her innocence throughout the episode. Once Apollo encounters Daphne, her hair is the first thing that he notices. Ovid writes, "he sees that her unkempt hair hangs on her neck" (*spectat inornatos collo pendere capillos*), to which Apollo says, "what if it were combed?" (*quid si comantur; Met. 1.497-498*). Apollo's first impulse upon seeing Daphne, then, is to exert control over her unhampered beauty. Ovid's description of Daphne's hair as *positos sine lege* and *inornatos*

## Yeats's Reception of Apollo and Daphne in "A Prayer for my Daughter"

reflects its natural state: no effort has been attempted to impose order on it. But Apollo's desire to comb it threatens to transform what is *inornatus* into what is *ornatus*—an act which constitutes artistic creation.

This impulse expands throughout the episode as Apollo attempts to preserve Daphne's beauty. As Daphne flees him, Apollo laments that she might injure herself, saying, "Wretched me, that you might fall as you lean forward or that thorns might mark [*notent*] your leg, unaware that it is being wounded!" (*me miserum...notent sentes; Met.* 1.508-509). Apollo's use of the word *notare* to describe Daphne's potential injury reveals that he is only concerned with her safety as far as it pertains to her *forma*. The metaphor that *notare* (to mark down or note) introduces likens her leg to a tablet or piece of marble, not to be deformed with writing or an inscription. Apollo then desires to maintain Daphne's status as a blank canvas until he can catch her. And so, with this metaphor and the motifs of order and disorder, we begin to view Apollo not only as a potential lover, but also an artist.

This pervasive obsession with *forma* (and control over it), then, parallels Yeats's obsession with his daughter's beauty, and Apollo's imposition of control and attempts at moderation reflect similar impulses to those which Yeats exerts on his daughter. This artistic metaphor speaks to a broader reading of the Yeats-Apollo comparison that departs from the superficial "incest motif" that Harris is concerned about (142). The same artistic gaze that Apollo adopts also extends to Yeats in "A Prayer for my Daughter." Not only does he share Apollo's obsession with beauty (as previously mentioned), but he also—in a way—acts on the same desire as Apollo to shape his daughter into a piece of art. Yeats writes,

That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,  
And have no business but dispensing round

## Yeats's Reception of Apollo and Daphne in "A Prayer for my Daughter"

Their magnanimities of sound. (lines 42-44)

According to Daniel Harris, these lines reveal how Yeats "transmits his poetic identity to Anne," who "will generously create communal harmony by 'dispensing round / [Her] magnanimities of sound'" (lines 142-143). Thus, in transforming into a tree, Anne becomes host to birdsong—the highest form of poetry—and, in a way, also transforms into a piece of art: indeed, "The sort of beauty that [Yeats has] approved" (line 50). After this image is introduced, Yeats becomes concerned with how to preserve her artistic state. He introduces the idea that (alongside the innocence that Yeats wishes to preserve as a father) hatred is also an obstacle to beauty (art), for he writes that

If there's no hatred in a mind

Assault and battery of the wind

Can never tear the linnet from the leaf. (lines 54-56)

Because it allows for Anne's branches to host the linnets, the absence of hatred allows for art to exist. So, the expulsion of hatred and Anne's lignification in the last stanza becomes not only a way for a father to preserve his daughter's innocence, but also a way for the artist to preserve his work.

Yeats then embodies both the Penean desire to safeguard his daughter's innocence and the Apollonian desire to preserve her beauty. Each of these drives turns the poet against hatred, which he considers to be at odds with both innocence and beauty, and by the end of the poem, we find that these desires converge at one point: Anne's lignification. This process, whereby Anne is cut off from the world, reveals Yeats's broader artistic and political impulse. Yeats's position as a father not only has implications concerning his direct relationship with his daughter, but also his feelings towards Ireland's political future. The impulse we see to scorn the turmoil



associated with hatred and the public life points towards an underlying hope for the peace of domesticity. Harris takes the implications of this paternal desire one step further, claiming that consigning Anne to the home is a way for Yeats to insure "aristocratic continuity" (146). And so, Anne's transformation, in a way, peacefully upholds an established culture and social custom, leaning away from the revolutionary tendencies present in his allusions to Maud Gonne.

In a way, Yeats's aesthetic impulse serves to reinforce this political impulse. Anne, by the end of the poem, being shut off from the world in ceremony and custom, becomes like a monument akin to what Yeats describes in "Sailing to Byzantium"—outside of the world and outside of time. This reading too is served by the Ovidian intertext, because Daphne, in being transformed into the laurel tree, becomes a monument as well: Apollo addresses Daphne, "You, the same most faithful guardian, will stand before the doors by the gates of Augustus, and you will watch over the civic crown of oak leaves in your midst" (*postibus Augustis...tuebere quercum*; *Met.* 1.561-562). Daphne, through her metamorphosis, then, becomes a monument to culture in Rome under Augustus. In the same fashion, Anne (or Yeats's artistic creation in Anne), by assuming the image of the laurel tree also becomes a monument to culture. And so, both as a father providing for his daughter amid a tumultuous political climate and as an artist seeking to preserve his creation, Yeats upholds culture both by consigning his daughter to the home and offering her as a monument shut up in custom and ceremony.

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