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A REVIEW OF *THE ADULTEROUS MUSE*

Adrian Frazier, *The Adulterous Muse: Maude Gonne, Lucien Millevoye and W. B. Yeats* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2016), paperback, pp. 320, ISBN 978-1-84351-678-1

Reviewed by Anne Margaret Daniel

At nineteen, with the death of her father, Edith Maud Gonne was an orphan. She and her younger sister Kathleen lived unhappily in London, dependent upon the severe guardianship of their uncle William Gonne. At twenty, Gonne met Lucien Millevoye, sixteen years her senior, at a French spa town where they had both gone for their health in the summer of 1887, and they were soon lovers. When she turned 21, in December 1887, she inherited thousands of pounds from both parents, and independence therewith. Gonne was 23 when she bore a son to Millevoye in Paris. They continued their affair until the middle of 1898.

Adrian Frazier says his first thought for the book that became *The Adulterous Muse* was “Maud Gonne in France.” Frazier’s story of a woman best known for her connections to Irish politics and to an Irish poet showcases her life as a Parisienne—and it is the stronger for it. Gonne spent much of her life in France, and this shaped both her and her political career far more than has been acknowledged before. The heart of Frazier’s book is not W. B. Yeats’s well-worn, lovelorn relationship with Gonne, but the life she had with, and without, Lucien Millevoye in that last crashing decade of the *fin de siècle*.

Millevoye, a right-wing writer, editor and politician, was a passionate supporter of General Georges Boulanger. When Gonne and Millevoye met, Boulanger and his “boulangistes” were on a fast rise to power in Paris that crashed down just as speedily in early 1889. That Gonne and Millevoye named their son, conceived in the wake of Boulanger’s fall, Georges marks the ruined leader’s importance to them both. The attentive historical research Frazier has done on both Millevoye’s intense and dramatic involvement with the Boulangistes and, in a more peripheral way, the Dreyfus affair, is fascinating. Frazier’s account helps to explain in significant ways, and for the first time, some of the appeal that Millevoye—in Gonne’s words “a tall man of between thirty and forty [who] looked ill”—had for her in the first place.

Their affair, not so secret in Paris (and Frazier shows how Gonne worked hard to keep it unknown in Dublin), gives us “Maud Gonne lit up in her full Parisian flower.” I would like to know even more of Gonne’s life in Paris, now—what she attended in the evenings, the restaurants where she liked to go, with whom she associated socially, and who from these circles knew about

Millevoye—as well as more of her life in Normandy. She was a rich, independent woman, and enjoyed many things about these privileges, not least the safety and freedoms of living much of the first half of her life outside Ireland. “The Irish Joan of Arc” she may have been, but both parts of that phrase matter immensely in knowing Maud Gonne.

When a book’s first chapter is entitled “The Origins of Maud Gonne’s Hatred of the English,” its trajectory can be no surprise. English-born, a point that would often be used against her in the future, Gonne abjured that heritage early on, and chose her own homelands, made her own roots and mythologies. Frazier has uncovered interviews and accounts of Gonne in the French press that show her brightness and wit, her physical and intellectual attractions, in a fresh and thought-provoking way. Details abound, and lead instantly to further questions: that Gonne’s Dublin doctor for decades was writer, poet, politician and translator George Sigerson is useful to know, but that Sigerson was, as Frazier notes in passing, “a student of Dr. Charcot in France” stopped me cold. Jean-Marie Charcot, who experimented on “hysterical” women at the Salpêtrière, taught Gonne’s doctor? and Sigerson returned to Paris to keep up with Charcot’s experiments? This is a connection worth further investigation.

Rest assured, Yeats is in the subtitle of *The Adulterous Muse*, and his pursuit of Gonne in poetry and in person is also a large part of the book. The question of what Yeats knew about Gonne and Millevoye, and when, from the time he met her in 1889 and what he famously termed the “troubling” of his life began, may never be definitely answered—not least because Gonne and Yeats, in their own accounts, said what suited them and much that may not be based in fact. He was not utterly fooled about her double life at all, as Frazier rightly says on the first page of his introduction. Certain poems of Yeats’s from 1893—“On A Child’s Death” and “The Glove and the Cloak,” for instance—have long been recognized as written in response to the death of Georges. Frazier’s reading of them as confirming Yeats’s suspicion, or even recognition, that Georges was not adopted (as Maud had explained him) but was in truth her own son is speculative, but intriguing. Surely she kept Georges’ existence only a semi-secret at best. For instance, one surviving contemporary photograph of Georges aged about one bears on the back the name and location of an English photographer’s studio. This makes it overwhelmingly likely that Gonne brought her little boy to England in 1890 or 1891.

Yeats had another blatant clue delivered to him possibly as early as 1894. In Frazier’s magisterial biography of George Moore, he notes that Moore began thinking of the novel that would become *Evelyn Innes*, using his new friend W. B. Yeats as his model for the hero, in early 1894. The first edition (Moore later revised it heavily) appeared in 1898, and Yeats—who along with Arthur Symons had read earlier drafts of the novel—made hay of his depiction as

musician Ulick Dean. He wrote to Lady Gregory in June 1898, getting the name of his character not quite right, and with double-edged advice designed to cut into Moore's sales: "Get Moores *Evelyn Innes* from the library. I am 'Ulric Dean,' the musician." Two weeks later, he reported to Gregory that he was reading *Evelyn Innes* aloud to Maud Gonne.

Central to the plot of *Evelyn Innes* is Evelyn's performance as Richard Wagner's Isolde. It is where she is first smitten with the Yeats character. Moore heard the opera in London in 1892, and was smitten himself. Gonne, however, was at the première of *Tristan und Isolde*, at Bayreuth, in 1886; her father had taken her there. When she had her daughter by Millevoeye in August of 1894, she named the baby Iseult. In *Evelyn Innes*, Ulick Dean is in love with a woman who lives in Normandy, but she rejects him for a "Protestant clergyman" and soon has a baby.

Here is George Moore, Yeats's new good friend, having Ulick Dean enter this novel as the man in charge of a production of a Wagner opera that takes up most of his relationship with Evelyn—and not any Wagner opera, but "Isolde" (Moore rarely refers to Wagner's opera in the text as *Tristan und Isolde*, just *Isolde*). And, quite shockingly surely for Maud Gonne as her friend Yeats read the novel aloud to her, Ulick Dean is in love with a woman who lives in Normandy, who has had a baby the year before by another man. One must surely ask: did Moore know not only the fact of Maud Gonne's motherhood, but the name of her little girl, as he wrote *Evelyn Innes* in 1895 and 1896? More importantly, did Yeats know? If so, we need to think more about exactly what precipitated the cataclysmic events of late 1898 in his life. If it wasn't, as we've long assumed from what Yeats says, his discovery of Maud's relationship with Millevoeye and the fact she was a mother, then Yeats is misrepresenting this in his *Memoirs* to muddy another reason: his failure, when she had broken off her affair with Millevoeye, to make a marriage with her—just as he would fail once more, years later, when she was a widow.

Frazier spends much time on Gonne's sexuality in her relationships with Millevoeye, Yeats, and John MacBride. Yeats is the cypher here, for their relationship was notably without "physical love" until Gonne's involvements with both Millevoeye and MacBride were over, and he and she were in their early forties. Marjorie Perloff, writing on "sexuality and subterfuge" in *Yeats Annual No. 7* (1990), is properly suspicious of Yeats's report that Gonne told him in 1898 that she had a "horror and terror of physical love." Perloff contrasts these words to Gonne's actions—"her protracted affair with Millevoeye and subsequent elopement with MacBride, her numerous pregnancies"—and says that if "she really did tell [Yeats] that she had a horror of physical love, it may, accordingly, have been to spare him from the painful truth that she was not sexually drawn to him." Or, as Deirdre Toomey put it more bluntly, "her 'coldness' represents

perhaps her sense of chagrin at his feebleness.” When Gonne and Yeats did sleep together in the everyday meaning of the phrase, Frazier records it harshly—almost as harshly as did Yeats himself: “Nothing could compare with the oft-imagined flesh of the muse; the uncovered body of a 42-year-old mother of three disenchanted him.”

The supplanting of Maud and Iseult by Georgie Hyde-Lees is done swiftly by Frazier, far more swiftly than by Yeats: “While Yeats had difficulty getting the two Gonne women out of his sexual imagination—and his new wife into it—George by means of her automatic writing cast a spell over his thoughts sufficiently powerful to allow for two children to be born and a compendious, idiosyncratic occult system to be constructed (*A Vision*, 1925).” Yet Maud and Iseult figure prominently, to put it mildly, in the compendious *Vision* papers, in the *Visions* Notebook. And Yeats’s definition of the imagination was born of Blake’s, and while charged with the language of sex was driven by an engine stronger than sexuality. Consider the beginning of his 1897 essay on Blake and the imagination, in which there are the seeds of several poems and more: “There have been men who loved the future like a mistress, and the future mixed her breath into their breath and shook her hair about them, and hid them from the understanding of their times. William Blake was one of these men, and if he spoke confusedly and obscurely it was because he spoke things for whose speaking he could find no models in the world about him.” And Yeats’s preferred view of intercourse—to quote Deirdre Toomey—was “in conjugal (rather than conjugal) terms, as resulting in a Swedenborgian ‘conflagration of the whole being’ rather than mere children and domesticity.” This was what mattered to Yeats, not the “tragedy of sexual intercourse[.]”

Yeats’s former lover Olivia Shakespear was the woman who conducted him into his marriage to Hyde-Lees, who was her brother’s stepdaughter. If anyone merits the title “the adulterous muse” for Yeats it is Shakespear, who technically fits the bill better than Gonne. To have her introduced here, at the Yellow Book supper at which she and Yeats met, as “the wife of Hope Shakespear” while Pearl Craigie, who was also present, is identified as “the novelist”, emphasizes Shakespear’s marital state, but elides the fact that she was herself a novelist by the time she met Yeats, with *Love on a Mortal Lease* and *The Journey of High Honour* (its title taken from Sidney’s *Arcadia*) both in press by April 1894. She and Yeats were lovers while she was married, while Gonne and Yeats only consummated their relationship, and then quite briefly, as Frazier recounts, after her legal separation from MacBride. Indeed, Shakespear’s centrality to Yeats’s life, as friend, lover, correspondent, and muse (in which role Joe Hassett particularly features her in *The Muses of W. B. Yeats*), needs to be more widely acknowledged in accounts of Yeats’s life and work—not least since, for all Yeats’s reticence about this important relationship, it left its mark on so many

of the poems it is easy to think of as being “about” Donne alone. Frazier’s own reading of “Friends,” among other poems, smartly acknowledges the danger of ascribing a one-on-one correspondence to any “she” or “her” in a Donne poem.

Frazier’s decision to conclude the book with two events, Donne’s marriage in October 1617, and Millevoye’s death in March 1618, feels sudden, since those events did not mark the end of Donne’s connection to either man. It may be true that Donne, no longer anyone’s muse, “had no further need of any of them. She had her glory.” Yet Donne had become by then a national muse to many; her glory is not that she had such friends, or past lovers, but who she became in the days of the Irish Republic, and the Republic of Ireland, from 1618 until her death thirty-five years later. This story, told with redaction and personal agenda by Donne in her autobiography *A Servant of the Queen* (1638), is essential to the full record of her life and accomplishments—as well as to accounting for her continuing impact on Donne’s life and imagination, as he continued to work out his resentments of and contemplate his failures with her, in *A Vision* and elsewhere. It could well fill another volume—“The Unadulterated Muse,” perhaps.