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Analysis of Revisions in
“The Ballad of Moll Magee”

“The Ballad of Moll Magee” is a part of *Crossways*, a collection of poems by William Butler Yeats, which was published in 1889. The poem is relatively short; however, it is long enough to tell the story effectively. There is notable revision of the poem; twenty-three of the fifty-six lines have been changed in some way. Many of the changes appear to be minor, but a few of the changes significantly alter the prosody and the meaning of the poem.

The editors of the *Variorum* state that “much has been said about Yeats’s carelessness and lack of knowledge in punctuation [. . .].” Yeats himself wrote, “I write so completely for the ear that I feel helpless when I have to measure pauses by stops and commas.” However, Yeats’ widow reported that Yeats “had become very irate several times with a publisher who had taken it upon himself to change the poet’s punctuation” (Allt and Alspach xv).

The first notable change, in line 3, is one of punctuation. Yeats changed the comma at the end of the line to the longer pause of a semicolon to cause the audience to listen more intently, because the identity of the narrator, who is also the protagonist of the story, is about to be revealed in line 4. The identity of the audience has already been established as “little childer” in line 1, but we do not yet know who is telling the story or what the story is about. The difference in pause time between a comma and a semicolon is enough to capture the children’s interest and perhaps listen to what she is saying instead of “flinging stones” at her.

There are two changes in line 5: “husband” is replaced with “man,” and “fisher poor” is replaced with “poor fisher.” There are elements of both prosody and meaning involved in these changes. Since there was a change in two parts of the line, we may assume that Yeats changed one of them to adjust the meaning, then had to change the other to restore the meter. We have no way to know which one he changed first. He may have changed “husband” to “man” first; this theory is supported by the fact that he made the same change in lines 22 and 41 as well. This change affects the overall tone of the poem. Now, we are not sure if Moll Magee was actually married to the fisherman. It seems consistent with the character, to be living with a man to whom she was not married. Also, he does not have to divorce her; he simply tells her to leave. Even if they were married, saying “my man” suggests less of a commitment or bond of love than does “my husband.”

The other possibility is that he changed “fisher poor” to “poor fisher” first. In that case, “My husband was a fisher poor” is iambic, but in order to make it so, the poet was forced to place the adjective “poor” after the noun “fisher.” This creates a new problem; meaning is sacrificed for meter. Aside from the fact that the adjective usually precedes the noun in English, placing the word “fisher” first makes it seem more important. The fact that the man was poor is much more important than what he did for a living. The overall meaning of the entire poem would have been just as well served if he were a poor miller or a poor blacksmith. In order to say “poor fisher,” something else had to be changed to retain the meter. The solution which Yeats employs, in this scenario, is to change “husband” to “man.” Whichever part he changed first, both changes significantly improve the line.

In the third stanza, lines 10 and 12 were originally in the reverse position from where they now appear. The meaning of the stanza is not significantly altered, but there is a subtle

difference. Line 10, as it now appears, places more emphasis on how tired she was, and that she was so tired that she could barely walk at the end of her work day. Where she walked, the “pebbly street,” is now less important than the depth of her fatigue. Line 11, the middle line, was changed from “Home in the blessed moonlight” to “Under the blessed moonlight.” The two versions of the line are metrically identical, so Yeats must have made the change to alter the meaning of the line. “Home in the blessed moonlight” indicates that the streets were her home. In the timeline of the narrative, this was not yet the case; the man did not tell her to leave until the morning after she walked home in the moonlight. Although the third stanza describes a scenario that she has experienced more than once, it is implied that the night that she smothered her baby was one of those occasions.

The punctuation in line 17 was changed from a comma to a semicolon for a similar reason as the change in line 3. The difference is that line 3 needed a longer pause to prepare the listener for what was to follow, and line 17 needed a longer pause to enable the listener to process what has just been said. Line 17 is arguably the most important line in the poem. Until this point, all we know about Moll Magee is that she is poor, works hard just to survive, and that doing so makes her very tired. There is nothing unusual about the story so far. Then, we learn that one night she was so tired that she accidentally rolled over on her baby and it died! I imagine a pause long enough for her to suppress the impulse to sob. Note that the fifth stanza now has a semicolon at the end of line 17, followed by a comma at the end of line 18, followed by no punctuation at the end of line 19. It is as if this poor woman was hesitating the first time she said the word “baby,” then pushed herself to keep talking when she said it the second time.

Yeats changed line 22 from “My husband stood up pale” to “My man grew red and pale”—both of which are metrically identical. The change from “husband” to “man” has already

been addressed, but the change to “red and pale” is also very interesting. The man could not have been both physically red and pale at the same time; are we to believe that he turned pink? The most reasonable explanation is that he turned red first, then turned pale. Upon discovering that Moll Magee had, accidentally or not, smothered their baby to death, his physiologic reaction was that first his face flushed with blood, then the blood drained out of his face. His first reaction was one of anger, followed by one of sheer horror.

One of the many definitions of “red,” as an adjective, in the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is as follows:

7. a. Of the face, or of persons in respect of it: Temporarily suffused with blood, esp. as the result of some sudden feeling or emotion; flushed or blushing *with* (anger, shame, etc.) [. . .].

The *OED* lists the primary definition of “pale,” as an adjective, as follows:

1. a. Of a person, a person's complexion, etc.: of a whitish or ashen appearance; lacking healthy colour; pallid, wan, bloodless (typically connoting shock, strong emotion, or ill health) [. . .].

The most important elements of this definition of “red” as it relates to line 22 are “sudden feeling or emotion” and “blushing with anger.” The man’s first reaction was anger. The most relevant part of this definition of “pale” is the connotation of “shock.” After the initial reaction of anger, Moll Magee’s man was shocked, appalled, and horrified to discover that the baby was dead.

The changes in the rest of the poem are much like those that I have previously examined. In the ninth stanza, Yeats changed the line order and cleaned up the syntax a bit—which greatly improved the stanza. In line 34 of that stanza, he changed the word “wood” to “byre,” which

according to the *OED*, is much like what we would today call a barn. The final four stanzas have few changes, which tells me that the drama of the death of the baby, in the middle section of the poem, was the part that Yeats considered the most important part, and which he was determined to get as perfect as he could.

I was very moved by this poem—especially after examining it so closely. Yeats' changes greatly improved the emotional impact to the reader. The changes of meaning required changes in prosody, and the overall effect was positive and caused the poem to flow more smoothly.

Works Cited

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