Yeats’s “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop”

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Here is William Butler Yeats’s poem, “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop.”

I met the Bishop on the road

And much said he and I.

‘Those breasts are flat and fallen now

Those veins must soon be dry;

Live in a heavenly mansion,

Not in some foul sty.’

‘Fair and foul are near of kin,

And fair needs foul,’ I cried.

‘My friends are gone, but that’s a truth

Nor grave nor bed denied,

Learned in bodily lowliness

And in the heart’s pride.

‘A woman can be proud and stiff

When on love intent;

But Love has pitched his mansion in

The place of excrement;

For nothing can be sole or whole

That has not been rent.’

We know that Crazy Jane, the narrator, is old, since the Bishop says of her, “Those breasts are flat and fallen now . . .” He also says, “Those veins must soon be dry”; so she is not only old, but nearing death. Since she’ll soon be dead, the Bishop advises her to “Live in a heavenly mansion . . .” I assume the Bishop (and Yeats) picked up the word “mansion” from the King James Version of John 14:2, “In my Father’s house are many mansions . . .” Since Jesus is referring to life after death, the Bishop is advising Jane to turn her attention from this world to the next—in other words, to become otherworldly.

But Jane is determinedly this-worldly. She replies that “Fair and foul are near of kin.” “Fair” may refer to the otherworldly realm and “foul” to the this-worldly. Or “fair” may refer to the pleasant aspects of this world and “foul” to the unpleasant. Either way, according to Jane the beautiful and attractive needs the ugly and repulsive, for she adds, “fair needs foul.”

In other words, to concentrate only on the higher world, as the Bishop advises, is to deny this lowly world—as if it were not also part of God’s “good” creation. (That this material world *is* essentially good is asserted in Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31: “And God saw that it was good.”)

Toward the end, Jane focuses on an example of how fair and foul are intertwined:

A woman can be proud and stiff

When on love intent;

But Love has pitched his mansion in

The place of excrement . . .

When is a woman “intent” on love? When she is making love.

When, while making love, is she “proud and stiff”? As she nears orgasm.

Sexual love is part of what is “fair” (pleasant) in the world. Nevertheless, Jane introduces a “But”: “But Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement . . .” (“Pitched” is normally used of a tent. It may allude to the biblical nomadic period, when God regularly encountered the Israelites in the “tent of meeting” or tabernacle, Exod 25-40.) There is a mansion other than the Bishop’s “heavenly mansion”: the mansion between the legs. And that mansion is in “The place of excrement.” Our genitalia, the primary organs expressing love, are near our organs for urination and defecation.

This, too, is a *good* thing, a “fair” thing. How do we know? Because God intends it so. Notice that “love” is lowercase in the line, “When on love intent,” but uppercase in the next line, “But Love has pitched . . .” As a proper noun, “Love” indicates a person. Yeats also refers to “Love” with a masculine personal pronoun: “Love has pitched *his* mansion . . .”

So God has deliberately combined fair and foul; and, Jane seems to be saying, who are we to disconnect them, exalting the one (God’s heavenly mansion) and rejecting the other (God’s genital mansion)?

In effect, the Bishop is a Manichee, and Jane is a Catholic. Manichaeism was founded in Persia in the 200s CE by Mani (c.  216-274). It taught “the struggle between a good, spiritual world of light, and an evil, material world of darkness.” (“Manichaeism.” *Wikipedia*.). Augustine (354-430) was a Manichee before becoming a Catholic (and unfortunately Manichaeism continued to imbue his thinking, in my opinion). Despite its suppression, Manichaeism resurfaced several times in the Middle Ages: as Paulicianism (fl. 600s-800s), Bogomilism (fl. 900s-1100s), and Catharism (aka Albigensianism, fl. 1100s-1300s). Jane and Yeats come down firmly on the side of Catholicism.

So the adjective given Jane in the title—“Crazy Jane”—turns out to be ironic. Jane is not a crazy old lady: she is a wise woman.