

Who Is Kate Weaver? (A Storm in a Teacup?)

by Norman Barry

As long ago as 1899, the assertion was made that a certain Kate Weaver had composed a ballad dealing with a courageous helmsman on Lake Erie. The woman was never identified, and the suspicion was aired that she may have attempted to “pass off”¹ Horatio Alger’s famous lines in his ballad of “John Maynard” as her own.

Poetry, a thing of heart and soul, may sometimes – by sheer coincidence – be disassociated from its rightful “owner.” A recent example is Max Ehrmann’s famous poem “Desiderata.”

Presented in pamphlet form in Old Saint Paul’s Church in Baltimore (founded in 1692) during a Church Service, the poem was regarded as an ancient relic, anonymously composed, and dating from the end of the seventeenth century! Only much later did the truth come out. The little-known poet, whose name had been carelessly omitted, was Max Ehrmann, a 20th-century American:

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence, as far as possible without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth, quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant, they too have their story. Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are a vexation to the spirit.
(First lines)

This writer suspects that a similar example of “disassociation” of poet and poem is involved in the “Kate Weaver Story”.

As so often happens when ignorance is at play, Alger’s name was apparently not attached to the ballad, and the newspaper, which set the rumor in circulation, had simply not bothered to ascertain its authorship. It apparently also did a sloppy job of relating the ballad, as a number of passages were corrupted.

So where does the name “Kate Weaver” enter the picture if she was a real person and was not attempting to accept credit for a poem she did not write?

In Texas, there once lived a scholarly lady by the name of Kate (Gerald) Weaver, who had devoted a good deal of time delving into the field of literature. She had gained a sterling reputation as “one of the best Shakespearean scholars in the Lone Star State”. She was also involved in numerous social functions, particularly as one of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Recitations often served as a highlight of such social events. It is quite possible that she personally recited “John Maynard” on such an occasion. The announcement, perhaps graced with a similar pamphlet as “Desiderata,” may have read:

Kate Weaver, “The Ballad of John Maynard”

Out of this rather harmless, if ineptly described recitation, a grotesque transformation may be pictured taking place without Kate ever even knowing what had happened: The famous ballad she had recited and which she — a lady quite conversant with literature—had mistakenly assumed everyone would recognize, had suddenly been accredited to her name,

not by any attempt of her own to deceive, but by the absolute ignorance of a newspaper editor (for whose sake, we may – for the moment – abstain from further censure).

In other words, the claim to authorship – if the real Kate Weaver has indeed stepped forward – was *Much Ado about Nothing!*

* * * *

The Dallas Morning News, August 30, 1915, p. 2:

MRS. KATE GERALD WEAVER DIES.
Was Considered One of the Best
Shakespearean Scholars in State
of Texas.

Special to the *News*.

Waco, Texas, Aug. 29.—Mrs. Kate Gerald Weaver, aged about 53, daughter of the late Judge G. B. Gerald, died this morning in Seattle, where she had been since Aug. 15. She was visiting her father's cousin at Seattle, Clarence W. Gerald, and became ill two days after her arrival, presumably from ptomaine poisoning. Her condition did not become serious until a few days ago, when she was removed to a hospital to be under the constant care of physicians. Last night a telegram was received here saying Mrs. Weaver's condition was much worse. Her husband, J. W. Weaver, started for Seattle this morning. He was notified by wire at Denison of his wife's death.

In conformity with a request made many years ago by Mrs. Weaver, her body will be cremated at Los Angeles and the ashes brought back here. Her father's body was also cremated.

Mrs. Weaver was born in Yazoo, Mississippi, and came to Waco with her parents in 1885 and lived at Galveston for six or seven years after her marriage. With this exception, the major part of her life was spent here.

Educated at Baylor University and Sacred Heart Academy, Waco, Mrs. Weaver was a woman of brilliant intellectual attainments. She was considered one of the best Shakespearean scholars in the State. Mrs. Weaver was very prominent in U. D. C. [United Daughters of the Confederacy] and club circles throughout Texas. Besides her husband and mother, Mrs. Weaver is survived by two sons, Walter G. and Paul G. Weaver of Waco; two sisters, Mrs. Florence Gerald Clarke of New York and Mrs. C. A. Richardson of Beaumont. Decedent was a sister-in-law of Belvidere Brooks, vice president and general manager of the Western Union Telegraph Company.

* * * *

Footnote 1: As quoted by George Salomon in "John Maynard of Lake Erie: The Genesis of a Legend", *Niagara Frontier*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Autumn 1964, p. 85, footnote 31: "Another version of disfigured text appears in [John Brandt Manfield, editor] *History of the Great Lakes*, I (Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1899), p. 477-478: it is there described as a reprint from an unidentified newspaper, to which it had come 'from the pen of' a certain Kate Weaver. The ambiguous wording leaves it open whether the lady tried to pass off the well known verses as her own; in any event, neither the editor of the paper nor the author of the *History* recognized them."