Colby Quarterly

Volume 25
Issue 4 *December*

Article 6

December 1989

Natural Supernaturalism in "Riders to the Sea"

Keith N. Hull

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 25, no.4, December 1989, p.245-252

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.

Natural Supernaturalism in "Riders to the Sea"

by KEITH N. HULL

IN DISCUSSING "Riders to the Sea" most critics allow the validity of Maurya's vision of her dead son and the sea's supernatural identity. Nicholas Grene, a wide-ranging, illuminating commentator, states at one point in his essay on "Riders" that "Synge wins from his audience the willing suspension of disbelief by the strength and actuality of his dramatic image. . . . We not only believe that Maurya saw Michael on the grey pony, we believe Michael was there."[1] Robin Skelton, general editor of Synge's *Collected Works*, states directly that the play's "emphasis upon the dominance of the sea makes the sea itself into a power, a god."[2]

On the other hand some critics take a rationalistic view of "Riders," emphasizing its naturalism. Weldon Thornton says, "Synge . . . did not attempt to define a genre for the play, since his concern was with reality and the service of the truth."[3] Malcolm Pittock, harshly rationalistic, criticizes Synge, saying "he cheats us, for the sake of effect, into actively assenting to some of the [beliefs of the islanders] least acceptable elements. . . . When as a boy I first saw the play, the powerful justification given by the action for Maurya's subjective misgivings puzzled me: the implication seemed to be that to put to sea in rough weather was not merely to risk death but to make it certain. . . . Perhaps the most significant falsity in the play is Maurya's vision. Here Synge does not allow us to question the validity of her or her family's belief in its prophetic nature or its relationship to Bartley's death. . . ."[4]

Pittock overlooks what Grene sees, the incredulity with which Maurya's family and friends regard her, but he is right in pointing out how much in the play is realistic, reasonable, and natural and how this element can undermine the viewer's belief that something supernatural is happening in "Riders." Synge does not cheat us, however; he tempts us into assenting to both a supernaturalistic and a naturalistic view of the play. Succumbing to either temptation is a valid reaction, as long as one also eventually succumbs to the other. "Riders to the Sea" is an ambivalent drama, promoting the view that supernatural forces are at work while supporting the view that the play's action is purely naturalistic.

1. *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1975), p. 54.
2. *The Writings of J. M. Synge* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 43.
3. *J. M. Synge and the Western Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), p. 110.
4. " 'Riders to the Sea,' " *English Studies*, 49 (October 1968), 448.

Aside from Maurya's vision, which I will discuss later, the strongest evidence for supernatural forces in the play is its sense of design, its phenomenal unity. "There is nothing," Donna Gerstenberger writes, "that is extraneous; there is nothing that is without meaning in a total pattern. . . ."[5] On a surface level the boards for Michael's coffin become the boards for Bartley's; the bread for his trip becomes a meal for his coffin's builders; and his changing into Michael's cleaner coat—a natural enough action—becomes a highly significant aspect of Maurya's vision, as we shall see.

The unity also extends below the play's surface. Objects and actions take on symbolic values. Skelton and Declan Kiberd, a scholar of Irish language and culture, make "Riders" seem a compendium of folk beliefs. Colors, clothing, horses, the sea, certain actions and utterances, the hearth, all have superstitious meanings. For example, Kiberd mentions "that in Irish folklore 'the fire is symbolic of human life' and must not be allowed to die down. . . . In raking the fire aimlessly, Maurya gives us a vital clue to her spiritual condition and a premonition of the disaster which will soon overtake her household."[6] To take the point even further, Maurya's raking the fire after Bartley's departure is the means by which Cathleen discovers that they have not given him his bread, so Maurya must journey to the spring well to experience her vision. Thus, even random action takes on patterned significance.

The effect of such unity is to heighten the play's sense of design, hence its supernaturalism. If everything in the drama takes on meaning, and sometimes multiple meanings, the sense of order, and with it the sense of some supernatural agent, strengthens: order implies an orderer—and there is a preternatural degree of order in "Riders to the Sea." The nonrandomness of Maurya's raking the ashes is a fine example, but perhaps the most notable is the concurrence of events throughout the play.

The relentlessness with which the sea dispatches Maurya's menfolk is cruel enough—there have been many deaths with terrible consequences for the survivors. Michael and Bartley die so that Nora and Cathleen confirm Michael's drowning as Bartley goes to his death; this seems calculated, and such concurrent malevolence keeps piling up. A few minutes later, as Maurya describes the earlier drowning and recovery of the family's men, her friends enact the scene before the audience. Cathleen's mistaking Bartley's death for Michael's compounds the horror; she thinks the women are there to mourn the elder brother, so she convinces Maurya that Michael's body has been recovered at the moment the islanders are carrying Bartley's corpse to the cottage door.

We can interpret these concurrences naturalistically. Men fishing on the open sea in small boats lead dangerous lives, and many men fishing often

5. *John Millington Synge* (New York: Twayne Publications, 1964), p. 45.
6. *Synge and the Irish Language* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1979), p. 166.

will suffer many accidents, probably with some strange coincidences. Large families will likely suffer more accidents than small ones. Still, there is an uncanny quality about the number of deaths within one family, the relentlessness with which they occur, and the degree of coincidence that haunts the last two, entangling them with Patch's drowning years earlier. Is there a supernatural power orchestrating the tragedy? How else could it occur with such eerie patterns?

Yet, the argument against the supernatural and for a realistic interpretation is as compelling. The most important points to remember are that the audience never witnesses any event that truly transcends natural order; there are naturalistic explanations for everything that happens in the play; and, furthermore, Synge was a stickler for authenticity.

Maurya's vision of the dead Michael following his doomed brother Bartley occurs offstage, and we have only her tormented description to help us visualize what critics usually see as a supernatural event. Moreover, Maurya is not the only character who sees Bartley riding to the sea. Immediately after her mother returns, Cathleen looks out the window and reports a normal sight, Bartley "riding the mare now. . .and the grey pony behind him."[7] The islanders who witness Bartley's fatal plunge report nothing supernatural, only an accident too likely to happen. Such testimony does not disprove Maurya's vision; visions are private and transcendent. Still, we do not see Michael, nor does anyone else. Besides, Maurya is grief-stricken and convinced before the accident that Bartley is doomed. Like her culture she is superstitious and paganistic, so when she goes to the spring well she is in a state of mind receptive to evil omens.

As Maurya tries to speak to her son, she is apparently not looking at him; she says of herself, "I looked up then," meaning after Bartley had uttered his blessing and passed on. If so, she sees Bartley and the ponies from behind after they have gone by. The ponies then might line up so that she looks over the grey pony's back at Bartley who could appear to be riding the pony rather than the mare. In Michael's coat Bartley could look like his brother from behind, given family resemblance, tear-filled eyes, and a predisposition to see someone return from the dead to claim the living, a common superstition of Synge's time (Kiberd, 164).

This explanation of Maurya's vision is consonant with some of Synge's well-known attitudes. He was a naturalist, not a nature worshipper, as we can see from his boyhood nature studies, and he was an astute, observant folklorist. In his famous Preface to "Playboy of the Western World" Synge called for "reality" on the stage, after insisting that "Riders" be staged as authentically as possible. When the earlier play was first produced, the cast wore costumes based on samples of Aran flannel and pampooties that the dramatist had obtained from an Inishere friend. He even thought that

7. J. M. Synge, *J. M. Synge: Collected Works*, ed. Ann Saddlemeyer, general ed. Robin Skelton (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), I, 19. This edition is a reprint of the Oxford University Press *Collected Works*.

Sarah Allgood, playing Cathleen, should really know how to spin on stage (Greene, 42).

Such attitudes and attention to detail indicate Synge was trying to build into "Riders to the Sea" a strong realistic, even documentary, strain. Again, nothing we see in the play breaks any natural laws, and Synge gives enough information for us to construct a natural explanation for Maurya's vision. Though on the one hand he supplies evidence for the supernatural, tempting us to see "Riders" as a play about something outside nature's order brutalizing hapless humanity, he supplies, on the other, evidence for the naturalness of what happens. Grene's certainty that Michael was present at the spring well and Pittock's that he was not is evidence of how successful Synge was in both temptations.

For the viewer who accepts and responds to both possibilities concurrently such ambivalence has profound ramifications. Among other matters it affects how certainly we can answer the question of who, finally, is responsible for what happens to Maurya's family. "Riders" may be a static tragedy in which humanity has no role but to suffer and acquiesce to supernatural power, but the play also supports the idea that Maurya takes an active part in determining Bartley's fate.

When Bartley leaves, he speaks the traditional "blessing of God on you." Maurya does not return the blessing, crying out, as Bartley is "in the door": "He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again." Cathleen takes a significant attitude toward this event. After she discovers the bread in the turf fire, she tells Maurya to go to the spring well to give Bartley his bread, saying, "You'll see him then and the dark word will be broken, and you can say 'God speed you,' the way he'll be easy in his mind" (III, 13). What does she mean by the "dark word"? If she means Maurya's actual utterance, she seems to see it as a curse to be "broken" and replaced by a proper blessing. However, the dark word might also be the omitted blessing which Maurya tries later to deliver when "something" chokes the words in her throat.

In either case Maurya's behavior possibly helps cause Bartley's death. Whatever she says or does not say seems to affect the course of events, since the first omitted blessing might have doomed him and the second might have saved him. The "something" that silences Maurya might be from within her or an active agent without. If she is certain of Bartley's death, maybe she unconsciously stops the blessing to keep the dark word in effect, or maybe she is a victim of some malevolence that takes advantage of her dark word, be it an uttered or a withheld blessing. Then again, maybe all this is superstitious speculation, and the blessing or lack of it or the cry as Bartley goes out can have no logical effect on events anyway, so the dark word has no significance.

There is no way to tell. Dark words have power in a supernatural world. If we accept "Riders to the Sea" as occurring in such a world, then the characters might be active agents in their own fates by supernatural means,

in which case we witness Maurya's ironically causing what she fears most. If the world is not supernatural, an unspoken blessing will not cause one horse to crowd another, pushing a rider off a cliff.

For those interested in generic questions—and few critics of "Riders" are not—ambivalence about motivation suggests a parallel between Synge's play and Aristotle's model tragedy. The degree of Oedipus' participation in his own doom is open to question: does he motivate himself or do the gods manipulate him? As the degree of self-motivation increases, so does the play's irony. In "Riders" we are caught up in much the same situation except that Oedipus' world is more certainly supernatural, and Synge adds to his play the additional irony that the supernatural order that we think we witness at work might not exist at all. That Maurya might cause the tragedy she fears is ironic enough; that she might think she caused it is an even crueler twist. This is highly complex irony whose intensity, if not precise kind, approaches Aristotelian tragic irony.

Still, if the islanders struggle against the supernatural, what precisely are they struggling against? On the realistic level they are clearly engaged against natural circumstances. They must fish to live, and their livestock must go to mainland markets; thus two mainstays of their small economy involve seafaring. This much is documentary. When critics like Skelton unhesitatingly raise the sea to godhead, however, they promote a supernatural interpretation of the play. Certainly the characters attribute supernatural significance to the sea. Cathleen, ordinarily a pillar of common sense, mentions "the black hags that do be flying on the sea" (III, 17), and she wonders how Michael's corpse could have drifted as far as Donegal in what seems to her an unusually short time. Maurya, too, attributes a supernatural malevolence to the sea when she says after learning of Bartley's and Michael's deaths, "there isn't anything more the sea can do to me" (III, 23). Even her scorn for the young priest's assurances betrays the sea's divine powers if we think that she puts the sea even above the representative of an omnipotent God.

We might see Cathleen and Maurya as superstitious and their portrayal as more documentary information: "Riders" in that case merely says that the islanders believe the sea is godlike. Again, what lends the play its most convincing supernatural strain is the concurrence of Patch's, Michael's, and Bartley's deaths. If we think that such coincidence is not natural, we might also question whether or not the sea is behind it. Cathleen and Maurya feel the sea is responsible for the drownings, but they give no indication that the conjunction of three deaths is the sea's work. Does it seem likely, however, that the sea, as the play represents it, could manage such a malevolent event?

The sea in "Riders" is brutal. The first seven deaths in Maurya's family have apparently all involved the victims' being pitched out of small boats. Bartley's death is significantly different; he dies in a bizarre accident that occurs on land and only coincidentally involves the sea. This means the sea

is so hungry for victims it will go to such lengths to get them. It could also mean that some other agent is at work. "Riders to the Sea" could be dominated not by the brutal sea but by something else which might use the sea or which might take advantage of circumstance; this other thing is systematic, malevolent. The sea might drown eight men in one family; this other kills the last just when the seventh's death is verified and an earlier death is being described.

Thus we have three possibilities for dealing with the existence of a supernatural agent in "Riders." First, there is none. Maurya's family live dangerous lives; they suffer more than most, perhaps more than other Aran families, but the difference is one of number, not kind. Second, they are possibly destroyed by a sea cruel enough to seem conscious, hence supernatural. Last, they are not just grieved and destroyed; they are tormented in a refined scheme transcending brutality, a scheme that reveals a vaguely perceived agent much like Sophocles' conscious gods.

To be more specific about this mysterious agent is impossible; there is little evidence about who or what it is. More importantly, to identify it would violate the play's integrity. A specific supernatural agent would have too much presence, too much character, for the naturalistic possibility of simple coincidence or circumstance to exist, so the play's rich, ironic ambivalence between naturalism and supernaturalism would wither. Certainty would destroy the drama's deepest meaning.

Other aspects of the play take on new significance when seen through naturalistic-supernaturalistic ambivalence. A strong ironic strain runs throughout the play in the pagan-Christian juxtaposition. Christianity seems feeble compared to the sea's obvious power or the force of Maurya's pagan outlook. No amount of prayer reduces the waves or makes small boats safer, but assigning godhead to the sea is a way of explaining extraordinary coincidence acceptably to the characters and probably to the audience as well. When Maurya says of the young priest "It's little the likes of him knows of the sea," we agree, particularly after she finishes the speech enumerating her losses: a husband, his father, and four sons to date. There is rich irony in the priest's telling her that "the Almighty God won't leave her destitute with no son living" (III, 21). She and the audience know his words' true worth.

Nevertheless, the audience, and not Maurya, must feel additional irony in her practicing Christian rites, knowing well their emptiness; as Gerstenberger says, "The drops of holy water are themselves pathetic reminders of the implacable appetite of the waters of the sea and of the meaningless reassurance of the young priest . . ." (47). This irony is compounded by the doubt that a naturalistic view throws over the play's supernaturalism. We see paganism overwhelming Christianity in the characters' minds, yet we also doubt that the supernatural exists in the play. As a pagan outlook proves itself more influential, it becomes more credible to an audience, yet if naturalism proves as compelling for the audience as

paganism, a double irony results. We sense the truth of Maurya's opinion of the young priest, but we must in turn question the truths by which she questions him.

Finally, Synge's famous Anglo-Irish dramatic language helps weave a unified work from divergent threads. In his "Playboy" Preface Synge asserts the realism of his characters' language: "In writing 'The Playboy of the Western World,' as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland . . ." (IV, 53). To this he added the well-known claim about hearing the servant girls through a chink in the floor of a Wicklow house. No recent critic has taken Synge's claim at face value; his language seems too stylized so his dialog must somehow be as divided as the whole play, in this case between realistic talk and some other mode of language.

Declan Kiberd, who knows Irish, notes that Synge's dramatic language tries to allow the Aran islanders "to speak directly for themselves," demonstrating that Maurya's famous words, "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" (III, 27), are translated almost directly from a letter to Synge from an Inishmaan friend. Though such borrowing might seem the epitome of the documentary spirit, Kiberd also notes that Synge's language is "often a direct translation from the Irish of Aran, rather than a representation of the English spoken by the peasantry" (205–06). Here Kiberd catches Synge having his linguistic cake and eating it, too. Good translations try to capture the original in spirit if not in letter, but finally they are not the original words; Synge's language is an English no one has ever spoken, but it is a representation of Aran Irish speech. Thus it is at once realistic and stylized, documentary and heightened.[8]

In this paradoxical situation we have a linguistic analog to the natural-supernatural ambivalence in "Riders to the Sea." The play's realistic language supports the idea that its action takes place in our world where the dead apparently do not return to claim the living. "No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied" is a plain truth plainly stated that applies mundanely to each of us. Yet its expression and circumstance give it dignity and grandeur to match his drama's thematic greatness.

Such language not only suggests greatness; it also strengthens the supernatural presence:

> I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house—six fine men though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world—and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they've gone now the lot of them. . . . (III, 21)

Here Maurya's language suggests the massive forces arrayed against human existence on Aran. Partly because of the magnitude of her loss but also because of her magnificent expression we sense more happening in

8. Kiberd, pp. 213–14. See also Alan Price, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), pp. 43–44.

Maurya's life than a long run of tough luck. In her world there is a force acting by design, an interpretation validated by what follows her speech. During a pause Nora and Cathleen hear the crying outside heralding Bartley's death. During the next pause, after Maurya has been describing the keeners and the men bringing Patch's body home, women enter to keen not Patch but Bartley (III, 21).

The language in this passage is characteristically plain and characteristically extraordinary. Phrases like "they're gone now" and "some of them were found and some of them were not found" convey a strong sense of the common and real that English speakers in Synge's time and ours would recognize. "And they coming to the world" is also typical of Synge's translations of Irish constructions into English, specifically representing Irish peasant language, so the characters do speak realistically for themselves. Still, the heightened language lends authority to the impression that the Aran islanders are more than their literal selves; they represent mankind struggling tragically with superhuman forces.

Works Cited

GERSTENBERGER, DONNA. *John Millington Synge.* New York: Twayne Publications. 1964.

GREENE, DAVID H. and EDWARD M. STEPHENS. *J. M. Synge: 1871–1909.* New York: Macmillan, 1969.

GRENE, NICHOLAS. *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays.* Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1975.

KIBERD, DECLAN. *Synge and the Irish Language.* Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1979.

PITTOCK, MALCOLM. " 'Riders to the Sea.' " *English Studies,* 49 (October 1968), 445–49.

PRICE, ALAN. *Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama.* New York: Russell and Russell, 1961.

SKELTON, ROBIN. *The Writings of J. M. Synge.* Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971.

SYNGE, J. M. *J. M. Synge: Collected Works.* 3 vols. Ed. Ann Saddlemeyer, general ed. Robin Skelton. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982, pp. 4–27.

THORNTON, WELDON. *J. M. Synge and the Western Mind.* New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979.