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*Pious and Impious Peasants:
Popular Religion in the Comedies
of Lady Gregory and John M. Synge*

by WILLIAM M. CLEMENTS

IN *Dramatis Personae* William Butler Yeats writes of attending a Masonic concert where someone sang a Stage Irishman's song—"the usual whiskey, shillelagh kind of thing." Yeats hissed the performance, was drowned out by the applause, hissed again after the applause had abated, and was joined in hissing by one other patriotic soul in the concert hall.¹ The important point about this anecdote is not that Yeats expressed disapproval of what any Irish nationalist should have considered to be a travesty of the national character; instead it is significant that only one person in the audience besides Yeats expressed that disapproval. For at the end of the nineteenth century, theater audiences in England, America, and Ireland had come to expect a certain type of portrayal of the Irishman on the stage. Consequently, only the most sensitive and bold would take offense and feel compelled to protest the appearance of a stereotypical Stage Irishman.

One of the functions of a stereotype like that of the Stage Irishman is to provide a model for intergroup contact which allows individuals to react to outsiders on the basis of preconceived ideas. A stereotype develops and persists when one group needs to maintain a degree of distance from members of another group, to react to them categorically rather than personally. This distance is essential when political and social hostilities between groups are operative or when one group requires a rationale for its mistreatment of another group. Both these conditions have characterized Anglo-Irish relations since the twelfth century when England gained a foothold in Ireland which ultimately led to complete hegemony over the island. The English, both fearing the wild Irish beyond the Pale and requiring justification for their conquest of them, needed a stereotype, an unflattering portrayal of the typical Irishman. Such a figure probably emerged first in folklore, then in chapbooks and broadsides, and finally in virtually all English expressive culture which dealt with the Irish. Because of the stereotype's particular development in theatrical performances, it became known as the Stage Irishman. In his history of Irish stage characters, G. C. Duggan quotes the following description of the Stage Irishman:

1. William Butler Yeats, *Dramatis Personae, 1896-1902*, in *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 349.

He has an atrocious Irish brogue, perpetual jokes, blunders and bulls in speaking. . . . He has an unsurpassable gift of blarney and cadges for tips and free drinks. His hair is of a fiery red: he is rosy-cheeked, massive, and whiskey loving. . . . In his right hand he brandishes a stout blackthorn, or a sprig of shillelagh, and threatens to belabour therewith the daring person who will tread on the tails of his coat. For his main characteristics . . . are his swagger, his boisterousness and his pugnacity. He is always ready with a challenge, always anxious to back a quarrel, and peerless for cracking skulls at Donnybrook Fair.²

Yeats and other Irish nationalists rightly viewed the Stage Irishman as a product of British imperialism, which not only held Ireland in political thrall, but also asserted the supremacy of English culture to indigenous Irish culture. Particularly after the disgrace and death of Parnell in 1891, more and more attention was paid to independence from cultural imperialism. Although Irish nationalists were not exactly resigned to being subservient to the British Parliament in political matters, the failures of the Home Rule Party effected a growing consciousness that more meaningful progress could be made in the intangible realm of art and literature than in politics. Hence, there developed a two-pronged movement toward cultural nationalism. On one hand, figures like Yeats, George Moore, Edward Martyn, and Lady Gregory worked at creating a national literary culture which would address Irishmen directly about Irish matters and at the same time take its place among the world's literatures. On the other hand, some cultural nationalists—really nativists—advocated a restoration of the former glories of Ireland, the Celtic civilization, traces of which survived primarily in the Congested Districts of the West. The fundamental difference between the two groups is discernible in their attitudes toward the Irish language. Members of the former group, like Lady Gregory, recognized the cultural treasures available in Irish Gaelic and learned the language primarily to exhibit those treasures in translation and literary adaptation to the rest of the world. Members of the second group maintained that Irish Gaelic, spoken by less than twenty percent of the population at the turn of this century, should be revitalized and reinstated as the first language of the island, although this would hinder Ireland's participation in world affairs.

Both nationalist groups agreed, however, in their rejection of the Stage Irishman as a figure representative of Irish culture: it was a travesty foisted on the Irish by their imperial masters, a stock character with little potential for literary development, and a complete distortion of reality. The nativists, though, responded to the stereotype of the Stage Irishman by creating a new stereotype—that of the Peasant. It is often the case that a group which has been victimized by a negative stereotype will attempt to replace it with a positive image, often as unrepresentative of reality as that which stimulated the substitution. The stereotype of the Peasant illustrates this phenomenon. Based on a rosy view of the past of the Celts and

2. G. C. Duggan, *The Stage Irishman: A History of the Irish Play and Stage Characters from the Earliest Times* (1937; rpt. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), p. 289.

an even rosier view of the present in the West of Ireland, the Peasant was an industrious, courageous, self-reliant yeoman devoted to an Irish nation, a closely knit patriarchy, and a Catholic god. The last point in the stereotype was especially important for the nativists and reflected their view that Ireland was "the 'most Catholic' of all countries—in historical tradition, strength of belief, and morality."³ Since the Peasant was a nationalistic creation, the antithesis of the alien Stage Irishman, acceptance of the new stereotype was a matter of patriotism. Refusal to do so was unpatriotic, and expressions of doubt regarding the validity of any of the traits in the stereotype—most especially the religious element—were perceived by nativists as being inspired by treason and Anglophilia.

Yet all cultural nationalists could not join the nativists in smoothly substituting stereotype for stereotype. Yeats and his colleagues could make no literary use of the Stage Irishman, but the Peasant also represented an artistic dead end for them. A method for depicting Irish character was sorely needed, however, since much of the group's efforts came to focus on the development of an Irish drama. A significant part of the cultural nationalists' dramatic interest, according to Lady Gregory, was "an attack on the stage Irishman, the vulgar and unnatural butt given on the English stage. We had the destroying of that scarecrow in mind among other things in setting up our Theatre."⁴ This aim accorded with that of the nativists, but the failure of the Irish Dramatic Movement—as the group of Yeats, Moore, Martyn, and Lady Gregory came to be known—to adopt the Peasant resulted in hostility and suspicion of the Movement's productions. From its inception, the Irish Dramatic Movement ran afoul of patriotic fervor because the Irish characters in the new Irish plays—mythic heroes, agriculturalists, townsmen—failed to conform to the Peasant stereotype particularly in matters of religion. The Movement's first performance in 1899 included Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*, which depicted an Irish noblewoman selling her soul—albeit for a worthwhile reason—and a wicked countryman trampling on a Catholic shrine. The objections which were raised foreshadowed the criticisms that beset the Irish theater for the next decade. In sum, by breaking through the stereotype of the Stage Irishman, the cultural nationalists ran head on into another stereotype, the Peasant. Despite the loss of a mass audience who expected to see the old figure on the stage and of a nativistic audience who had to see the Peasant, the playwrights of the Irish Dramatic Movement refused to compromise even when their less than pious stage creations caused their loyalty to Ireland to be challenged.

Challenges from nativists were especially evident when the Irish Dramatic Movement presented plays which were set in the rural West of Ireland. The characters in these plays were peasants, but they did not con-

3. John C. Messenger, *Inis Beag: Isle of Ireland* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 4.

4. Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (1913; rpt. New York: Capricorn, 1965), p. 115.

form to the stereotype of the Peasant. The leading dramatic interpreters of the Irish peasantry in the Movement were Lady Gregory and John M. Synge. Both had firsthand knowledge of rural Ireland, and neither was tempted to falsify what he knew to be real through the use of the Peasant stereotype. In particular, Lady Gregory and Synge knew that their countrymen were no more religious than anyone else, but practiced religion when it suited them and ignored it when it did not. Their peasant characters are superficially pious when piety serves some purpose, but a potent current of impiety runs beneath the pious surface to emerge sometimes in violent language and behavior bordering on blasphemy. Although both playwrights produced works in several dramatic genres, their comedies most clearly illustrate their failure to adhere to the religious element in the Peasant stereotype.

During an association of more than twenty-five years, the Irish Dramatic Movement produced twelve comedies by Lady Gregory. Characterized by the use of the peasant dialect, a technique which she pioneered and Synge perfected, these plays represent a view of Irish country life and religion which does not shock, but avoids the expectations promulgated by the stereotype. For example, the chief concerns of her characters are not patriotic or spiritual; they will go to any lengths to obtain physical comfort and material wealth, goals which they view as antithetical to religion. *Damer's Gold*,⁵ Lady Gregory's longest comedy, treats a family's concern with assuring their inheritance of the wealth of a rich and miserly kinsman. During the course of the play, Damer the miser loses his gold and only then turns his thoughts to matters of religion. When his sister asks whether the rumor of his having become poor is true, he replies, "If I had not, why would I have been setting my mind upon eternity and striving to bring to mind a few prayers?" (p. 154). Religion is for the poor, the weak, and the somber. In *Hyacinth Halvey* (pp. 31-56), an early play by Lady Gregory, a young man is prevented from enjoying life by the reputation for piety which he has falsely and foolishly acquired for himself. In order to tarnish his image and be free to enjoy the pleasures of gambling, drinking, and hunting, he steals a sheep and robs a church. Nothing avails him, and he is condemned to an unwanted life of spirituality and unworldliness. Religion and the world do not mix, for poor Hyacinth laments, "Why would I be living in the world at all, or doing the world's work?" (p. 40) if the image of his piety be true. *The Wrens* (pp. 177-191), a historical comedy set in 1799 before the Parliament house in Dublin, depicts a married couple who are willing to abandon their religious positions for worldly ends. The husband, a seemingly ardent Catholic, vows not to touch liquor until Irish independence is voted in the Parliament. The Church hierarchy, though, supports continued union

5. *The Comedies of Lady Gregory, Being the First Volume of the Collected Plays*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 133-157. Further references to this volume are given parenthetically in the text.

with Britain. The husband's sentiments are with the Church until he fully realizes the nature of his foolish vow. He changes his mind, ready to sacrifice his god for a pint of porter. His Protestant wife, who had followed her religious scruples in supporting independence, changes to the unionist position when she recognizes that the price of independence will be her husband's return to drink. She prefers a secure household to religious freedom. The characters in these three comedies share the view that religious commitment somehow involves a sacrifice of worldly contentment. In each case the desire for the world easily overrides that for God.

If Lady Gregory set the tone for ignoring the religious element in the Peasant stereotype, Synge developed that tone to its fullest. Consequently, his four comedies offended nativists to a much greater degree than those of Lady Gregory with their relatively mild commentary on peasant religious attitudes. The characters in Synge's comedies—as in those of Lady Gregory—strike religious attitudes for self-serving ends. However, they are candid and frank about their usage of religion in this manner. For example, Shawn Keogh in *The Playboy of the Western World*⁶ uses religion transparently to justify his cowardice and conventionality. When Michael James the publican suggests that he spend the night alone in the shebeen with Pegeen Mike, Michael James's daughter and Shawn's affianced, Shawn responds with shocked religiosity: "I would and welcome, Michael James, but I'm afear'd of Father Reilly; and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard I did the like of that?" (p. 12). In *The Tinker's Wedding* (pp. 180–209), a play so controversial that it was not produced in Dublin during Synge's lifetime, the playwright depicts even a priest using religion for selfish ends. The mercenary clergyman agrees to perform a marriage ceremony for a tinker couple as long as they agree to pay him his fee of a pound. When that fee is not forthcoming and the wedding becomes a melee, the priest calls down the power of the supernatural to blight his adversaries. After vowing to "call the fire of heaven from the hand of the Almighty God" (p. 209), he begins to recite a malediction in Latin. Since religion is used by Synge's characters as long as it can serve them, they evince no hesitation about ignoring or even attacking religion when it cannot. Nora, the heroine of *In the Shadow of the Glen* (pp. 99–118), Synge's first play, is an adulteress who does not concern herself with religious proscriptions against her actions. Christy Mahon, the protagonist of *The Playboy*, kills his father twice without thinking of the religious implications of his deed. In fact, he assumes that his rebellious, romantic, heroic image will be enhanced as he strays beyond the conventionalities of religion. He boasts, "I'm thinking Satan hasn't many have killed their da in Kerry, and Mayo too" (p. 79). In *The Tinker's Wedding*, the couple who ask the priest to marry them have

6. *The Complete Works of John M. Synge* (New York: Random House, 1935), pp. 3–80. Further references to this volume are given parenthetically in the text.

been living together without benefit of the sacrament. These irreligious characters far overbalance the single truly religious personage in Synge's comic corpus. The saint in *The Well of the Saints* (pp. 119–173) may be sincerely pious, but he is so unworldly that his piety does harm to those with whom he comes in contact. When he tries to heal the blindness of Mary Doul, whose affliction has been temporarily relieved once before by the miraculous water from the well of the saints, the woman's husband objects. Remembering the disastrous effects of the previous healing—especially the loss of illusion which accompanied the restoration of her eyesight—Martin Doul storms, “What call has the like of you to be coming between married people—that you're not understanding at all—and be making a great mess with the holy water you have, and the length of your prayers?” (p. 170). In Synge's Irish countryside, therefore, even lip service in religious matters is not always the norm, and too much spirituality is just not practical.

In her account of the early years of the Irish Dramatic Movement, Lady Gregory writes, “Some who are lovers of Ireland believe we have lessened the dignity of Ireland by showing upon the stage countrymen who drink and swear and admire deeds of violence, or who are misers and covetous or hungering after land.”⁷ Indeed it is clear that Lady Gregory and Synge did not conform to the nativistically created Peasant stereotype. The public reaction to the production of their plays, especially those of Synge, was often physically violent. Furthermore, the playwrights were subjected to criticism from some nativistic artists who accused them of perpetuating the Stage Irishman stereotype. The nativists whose art was designed to propagandize in the public marketplace could conceive of characterization only in terms of stereotypes; if their Peasant stereotype was ignored, it followed that the Stage Irishman stereotype had to be employed. Writing for the *Irish Homestead* in 1912, George Russell (AE) claimed that the Irish dramatists were “drawing nearly all their characters from the imbeciles, the half-witted, the knaves, the drunkards, shoneens and fools of Ireland.”⁸ Many of Synge's contemporaries were labelling his characters as “The Stage Irishman of the Pseudo-Celtic drama.”⁹ While Synge and Lady Gregory to a lesser degree present characters who boast and swagger as a Stage Irishman might, they challenge the stereotype through their insights into the peasant mentality based on firsthand contact and into human nature in general. The parricides of *Christy* and the adultery of *Nora* may be comic, but they touch on qualities of Irish life—filial frustration and arranged marriage—too subtle for a stereotype. Although exaggerated, the characters created by Lady Gregory and Synge were real. Writing in the 1908 edition of *Samhain*, a bulletin which accompanied the

7. Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, pp. 254–255.

8. Quoted in Herbert Howarth, *The Irish Writers, 1880–1940* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), p. 229.

9. Duggan, p. 295.

programs of the Abbey Theatre, Yeats comments, "Some countrymen in Galway, whither we carried our plays in dialect a few weeks ago, said that it was no use going in to see them because they showed people that could be seen on the road every day."¹⁰

The comedies of Lady Gregory and Synge failed as popular art. As reactions against stereotypes from popular culture, they did not meet audience expectations. The Abbey Theatre did not supplant the music hall with its *Stage Irishman* nor the nativistic rally with its *Peasant*. The playwrights lost two audiences by not providing them with what they expected or with what they wanted. The impious peasants who inhabited the stage of the Irish Dramatic Movement were fresh creations for which the popular mind had not developed an appreciation.

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10. W. B. Yeats, *Explorations* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 231.