

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 23
Issue 4 *December*

Article 3

December 1987

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 23, no.4, December 1987, p.168-172

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*"Our Incurable Genius":
Irish Comic Strategy
in Lady Gregory's Spreading the News*

by EDWARD GILLIN

IN ONE singing game popular on Dublin streets, children will divide into two groups. One side, the "English soldiers," begins the song with a haughty announcement of their arrival. The other side, the "Irish soldiers," very promptly rejoins, well, we are here too. At this the "English soldiers," proclaiming their valor (as each child closes an eyelid), sing: "Now we only have one eye—for we are the English." Unruffled, the "Irish soldiers" up the ante by shutting both eyes: "Now we have no eyes at all—for we are the Irish!" they chant in return. And in each succeeding stanza the English are topped again. Where they have "just one arm," the Irish have "no arms at all"; where the English lose one leg, the Irish defiantly lose both. Frustrated, the "English soldiers" finally uncork a boast that can't be intensified: "Now we are all dead and gone, for we are the English," the children sing. But they have fallen into a verbal trap, and a final rejoinder is hurled. "Now we are alive again," their gleeful rivals chant, "—for we are the Irish!"

Several of the elements embodied in the children's song—the creation of myth, the reliance on language, and the principle of rebirth—are themes that Lady Augusta Gregory also viewed as intrinsically "Irish," and it is interesting to see these concepts worked out in one of her earliest comedies, *Spreading the News* (1904).

The plot of this one-act play, first performed on the Abbey Theatre's opening night, is easily summarized. Bartley Fallon, a peasant visiting the fair at his country town, announces a gloomy philosophy early in the action: "If there's ever any misfortune coming to this world, it's on myself it pitches."¹ Almost immediately the prophecy becomes self-fulfilling, as a carnival of misunderstandings among the townspeople leads to a steadfast conviction that Bartley has killed a man. By the time his alleged victim, Jack Smith, re-appears on stage toward the end of the play, the rumors have achieved such intense life that a suspicious magistrate marches both men off as co-conspirators in the foul murder everyone has been talking about.

If the plot sounds simple, though, the execution is exquisite. "It is neat, taut, finished; a conundrum has been set and successfully solved," com-

1. Quotes are from the text of Lady Gregory, *Spreading the News*, published in *Seven Short Plays* (New York and London: Knickerbocker Press, 1916).

ments Elizabeth Coxhead. She adds that the play's "classic approach" defends it from the charge that it is a mere anecdote.² Una Ellis-Fermor, also noting the technical skill exhibited in *Spreading the News*, states: "The sureness with which the pace is maintained is, I think, unsurpassed by any comedy of the kind that I can recall."³

But if Lady Gregory's methods were highly polished, her inspiration was straightforward enough. Investigation of the Irish heritage had stimulated her appreciation for "our incorrigible genius for myth-making, the faculty that makes our traditional history a perpetual joy, because it is, like the Sidhe, an eternal Shape-changer."⁴ Like the slum children who mask as unbeatable warriors in their song, the people of Ireland transform themselves and their world through the imagination. "I was moved by the strange contrast between the poverty of the tellers and the splendours of the tales," Lady Gregory wrote in 1902. "These men who had failed in life, and were old and withered, or sickly, or crippled. . . . The stories that they love are of quite visionary things."⁵ The vision might be of a simple, comfortable life that had never seemed attainable (*The Workhouse Ward*) or of an unblemished, saintly character (*Hyacinth Halvey*), but it emerges most exuberantly when left free to embrace the truly exotic. Thus amid the "cattle and sheep and mud" of the district in *Spreading the News*, where all the local crime is apparently fixed in the English magistrate's head, what could thrill the romantic longings of the populace more than imagining a murderer in its midst? And, to exercise the imagination further, who more unlikely a felon than Bartley Fallon, the hapless peasant struggling under a pessimism truly glorious in scope?

The compensatory myth emerges in language, of course. And if this represents an intuitive myth process for the Irish children who defeat their "English" adversaries in verbal song-battles, it is a process that runs like an undercurrent through Lady Gregory's plays. It is significant that the first moments of one of the Abbey Theatre's first plays should subtly emphasize this element of verbal struggle; for how else should we interpret the conversation between the British magistrate and policeman Jo Muldoon:

Magistrate: So that is the Fair Green. Cattle and sheep and mud. No system. What a repulsive sight.

Policeman: That is so, indeed.

Magistrate: I suppose there is a good deal of disorder in this place?

Policeman: There is.

Magistrate: Common assault?

Policeman: It's common enough.

2. Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait*, second edition (London: Northumberland Press, 1966), p. 76.

3. Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (London: Methuen, 1954), p. 145.

4. Lady Gregory, notes to *The Bogie Men*, quoted in Ann Saddlemyer, *In Defence of Lady Gregory, Playwright* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1966), p. 25.

5. Lady Gregory, "Workhouse Dreams," *Poets and Dreamers* (Dublin: Hodges and Figgis, 1903), pp. 128-29; quoted in Saddlemyer, p. 25.

Magistrate: Agrarian crime, no doubt?

Policeman: That is so.

Magistrate: Boycotting? Maiming of cattle? Firing into houses?

Policeman: There was one time, and there might be again.

In a superb irony, the weapon that the laconic policeman is using to defeat the officious magistrate fresh from a tour of duty in the Andaman Islands is the *English* language. For it is the Irishman Muldoon whose ear is sensitive to the adjective "common" in "common assault"; thus he can report a large number of "crimes"—something the official obviously wants to hear—while the audience can presume that these were ructions surely beneath the notice of a judge's bench. Likewise, any crime in this rural community is unquestionably "agrarian crime"—a man of sense can gather that—but if the British magistrate wishes to infer that eighteenth-century "whiteboy"-style violence is still rampant in the countryside, Muldoon would just as soon not disenchant the expert from the Andamans. Marvelously, all this undercutting of authority has been accomplished completely below the surface level of conversation. The magistrate is still in charge, the policeman still his respectful subordinate. But a secret battle has been fought, and won.

These verbal skirmishes can exist on any level of the playwright's society. They can be directed against the helpless (like Bartley Fallon in *Spreading the News* or Fardy Farrell in *Hyacinth Halvey*); they can undermine the powerful (like the magistrate); or they can simply fuel the fire between miserable equals. Indeed, Lady Gregory illustrated this last case in *The Workhouse Ward* (1908), which in one sense dramatizes the jail scene glumly anticipated by Bartley at the end of *Spreading the News*. About the pair of workhouse misfits who would rather fight between themselves than accept a bland life of greater physical comfort, Lady Gregory wrote: "I sometimes think the two scolding paupers are a symbol of ourselves in Ireland . . . '—it is better to be quarreling than to be lonesome.'"⁶

David Krause offers insight into such attitudes, discussing those "necessary survivors in every country" who use comic Ketman as a ritualized, dramatic form of revolt. Elaborating on Czeslaw Milosz' suggestion that if a Ketman player's obstacles were removed "he would find himself in a void which might perhaps prove more painful," Krause notes: "The challenge of a world that provokes comic Ketman is good for the soul, and a country without sufficient *alazons* to goad the comic *eirons* into action would be an impossible and unlikely utopia."⁷

But are such serious concepts suitably applied to a one-act comedy of Lady Gregory? To answer that question, one must consider a final point where the children's street-song and Lady Gregory's *Spreading the News*

6. Lady Gregory, notes to *The Workhouse Ward*, in *Seven Short Plays*, p. 199.

7. David Krause, *The Profane Book of Irish Comedy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 52-53.

resemble one another. This is in the motif of rebirth, of the dead springing back to life. Such reanimation is illusory in the play, of course; Jack Smith's mourners are unquestionably premature, as his evident physical reality drives home the fragile nature of the inventive Irish imagination. But Jack's return is more than this, too.

Vivian Mercier has diagnosed it as belonging to a subdivision of comedy which he labels "macabre humor," an element "inseparable from terror" which "serves as a defense mechanism against the fear of death."⁸ Mercier, who traces this strain in Irish comedy to the tradition of the Irish wake, sees a continuing influence of the macabre in such incidents as the unsuccessful murders of the elder Mahon in Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907). He continues:

Gentler writers of the Revival, like Lady Gregory and Lennox Robinson, have not entirely rejected the macabre. In Lady Gregory's *Spreading the News*, a little farce performed over two years (December 1904–January 1907) before *The Playboy*, much humor is also extracted from an imaginary murder. The climactic remark is Jack Smith's "I'll break the head of any man that will find my dead body!"⁹

Mercier goes on to mention the unsuccessful suicides of Lennox Robinson's 1933 *Drama at Inish* ("But if I'm no good at living, I'm bad at dying"); he might have also included the undead "corpses" of Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* and in the folk tune "Finnegan's Wake"; the unkillable "Irish soldiers" of the children's game or the strangely vivacious death supervised by Flann O'Brien's *Third Policeman*. In fact, these images of ongoing life in the shadow of death are so prevalent in Irish comedy that one is tempted to classify them not as a single facet of the humor, but rather as a symbolic image of the comic itself. As a simple test of this suggestion, envision Synge's *Playboy* with a single alteration in plot. At the end of the third act, when the determined Christy Mahon chases down his father with the loy once more, imagine that this time his blow is actually fatal. If the father does not come crawling back into Michael Flaherty's pub as Christy boastfully offers himself over to the avenging mob—question whether the resulting play is "comedy" or "tragedy."

The fine crossover between the two genres is, of course, a critical commonplace. Indeed, Lady Gregory's initial conception of *Spreading the News* as a tragedy¹⁰ illustrates that frequently indistinct border. Eric Bentley, who was interested in defining this border, significantly mentions sheer survival as a dominant action in comedy:

Now, of course, the comic stance is comparatively opportunistic. Its strategy is to evade and elude the enemy, rather than to tackle him. Inevitably the moralists will say that where tragedy is heroic and sublime, comedy is cowardly and frivolous—like Falstaff, its banner

8. Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 48–49.

9. Mercier, p. 70.

10. Lady Gregory, notes to *Spreading the News*, in *Seven Short Plays*, p. 196.

carrier. Serving survival better than morals, and traditionally hostile to the professional moralists, it will get better marks in biology than in religion.¹¹

Interestingly, Bentley's conclusion that "it is hard to survive" was foreshadowed by Lady Gregory in her notes to *New Irish Comedies*:

In a lecture I gave last year on playwrighting I said I had been forced to write comedy because it was wanted for our theatre, to put on at the end of the verse plays, but that I think tragedy is easier. For, I said, tragedy shows humanity in the grip of circumstance, of fate.

. . . Once in that grip you know what the end must be. You may let your hero kick or struggle, but he is in the claws all the time, it is a mere question as to how nearly you will let him escape, and when you will allow the pounce.

. . . But in comedy it is different. Character comes in, and why it is so I cannot explain, but as soon as one creates a character, he begins to put out little feet of his own and take his own way.¹²

Perhaps the difference Lady Gregory could not explain, the force that put a comic character on "little feet of his own," was a certain desperate determination to exist. It is the one factor that seems to connect Irish comedy with the sort of celebration of life Northrop Frye found so universal in English comedy. The fact that the "celebratory" aspect of the genre in Ireland has been largely subverted to the starker images of sheer survival should be of little surprise, in a land raked by persecution, poverty and famine throughout much of its history.

As Sigmund Freud states in *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, "Tendency-wit is used with special preference as a weapon of attack or criticism of superiors who claim to be an authority. Wit then serves as a resistance against such authority and as an escape from its pressure."¹³ Freud's further comments may elaborate some of the psychology behind the "underground" nature of Irish comedy:

But does on the one hand what we have learned about the nature of tendency wit and on the other hand the amount of satisfaction in these stories, harmonize with the misery of the persons at whom the joke seems to be pointed? Are these worthy opponents of the wit? Or, is it not more plausible to suppose that the wit puts the agent in the foreground only in order to strike at something more important; does it, as the saying goes, strike the saddle pack, when it is meant for the mule? This conception can really not be rejected.¹⁴

Far from rejecting it, Irish comedy seems to provide a remarkable endorsement of Freud's theory. Even as we smile at Bartley Fallon's anticipation of his own demise, we begin to suspect that his gloomy alternative—"I'm thinking if I'll be living at the end of twenty years, it's a very old man I'll be then!"—is even more apt. Where suicide or euthanasia might seem logical alternatives to prolonging the misery of life, Irish comedy commemorates the tenacious faith of prolonging the misery. And so it represents one more way to register a quiet victory over the forces of death.

11. Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1964), pp. 301-02.

12. Quoted in Ellis-Fermor, p. 66.

13. Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Authorized English Edition with introduction by A. A. Brill (New York: Moffat, Yark and Company, 1916), p. 153.

14. Freud, pp. 154-55.