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Two Aspects of Synge's Playboy

E. H. Mikhail

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1. Deliberate Workmanship

The Playboy of the Western World was the result of arduous labour and was not written, as Maurice Bourgeois says in his study of Synge, "somewhat at random, without any very definite foreknowledge of its denouement."¹ Synge wrote and rewrote his plays many times. The Playboy of the Western World, like his other plays, went through a long process of careful and sensitive creation. Padraic Colum remembers one winter day walking across Phoenix Park in Dublin with Synge, and his telling me about a new play that he was planning. It would be an extravagant comedy, and it would turn up a story that he had heard—the story of a man accused of killing his father and who is given refuge in a West of Ireland village... Synge did not yet know what was to happen in the play: he had planned a scene in the first act—the young man, eating a raw turnip, sidles up to the counter of a public-house to get a glass of porter with the only penny he has—that was to be the opening scene.²

In August 1906 Synge wrote to Lady Gregory:

I shall be very glad, thanks, to go down and read you my play (The Playboy), if it is finished in time, but there is still a great deal to do. I have had a very steady week's work since last Sunday and have made good way, but my head is getting very tired.³

In October 1906 he wrote to Yeats:

My play, though in its last agony, is not finished, and I cannot promise it for any definite day. It is more than likely that when I read it to you and Fay, there will be little things to alter that have escaped me, and with my stuff it takes time to get even half a page of new dialogue fully into key with what goes before it. The play, I think, will be one of the longest we have done, and in places extremely difficult. If we said the 19th, I could only have six or seven full rehearsals, which would not, I am quite sure, be enough. I am very sorry, but what is to be done?⁴

Then he wrote to Lady Gregory in November:

¹ Maurice Bourgeois, John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre (New York, 1965), 201.
² Padraic Colum, The Road Round Ireland (New York, 1927), 367-368.
³ Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre (New York, 1913), 130.
⁴ Ibid., 132.
May I read *The Playboy* to you and Yeats and Fay, some time tomorrow, Saturday, or Monday, according as it suits you all? A little verbal correction is still necessary, and one or two structural points may need—I fancy do need—revision, but I would like to have your opinions on it before I go any further.

*The Playboy of the Western World* was indeed the result of arduous labour. We know now that Synge worked over this play “with great patience and unflagging persistence for seven years before he was satisfied with it and left at least ten complete drafts of the play, each one written over and corrected until it had become almost illegible.” George Moore relates that the last act was rewritten thirteen times. The manuscripts which were found after the author’s death show how Synge filled out his conception of characters and plot until they reached final form. How he first conceived the play can be seen from a short sketch in an early notebook called “The Murderer”:

Act I (a potatoe garden). Old Flaherty describes his son’s life and exasperates him so much that in the end he takes the loy and hits his father in the head with it, then runs across the stage and out on left.

Act II (public house, bar, or shebeen). Christy bossing the show, tells his story three times of how he killed his father. Police are afraid to follow him and other bombast, love affairs, etc. At the slightest provocation he starts off again with his story.

Act III. He is being elected county councilor. Old man comes in first and shows his head to everybody. He is as proud of it as his son is, as he is going round the crowd. His son comes out the elected member. He is put on a table to make a speech. He gets to the point where he is telling how he killed his father when the old man walks out. “You’re a bloody liar, that’s what you are.”

Synge thus originally planned to begin the play in the ploughed field where Christy struck his father, but he gave up his intention because he would not have six large trees, three on each side, growing in the middle of a ploughed field. When he thought of the actual stage he could not see any possible side wings for that “wide, windy corner of high, distant hills.” And it would have meant another change of scene. Similarly Synge

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5 Ibid., 132-133.
originally planned the resurrection of the father to occur at the very door of the chapel where Christy was to wed Pegeen. "But in the end all took place within the one cottage room. We all tried at that time to write our plays so as to require as little scene-shifting as possible for the sake of economy of scenery and of stage hands." Again, as Synge developed his idea, he abandoned the election, substituted the romance with Pegeen as the central incident, and developed Shawn Keogh as a rival for Christy. Next he decided to rehabilitate the character of Christy after his father exposes him as an imposter.

In the earlier version of the play Christy is dismissed as a coward and walks off tamely, with a ballad singer already at work on the incident:

Young Christopher, the daddy man,
Came walking from Tralee.
And his father's ghost the while
Did keep his company.

When Shawn Keogh tells him to stop singing, that the murderer was an imposter, the ballad singer rings down the curtain. "Oh, God help me, and I after spending the half of me day making of his deed. But it's a lovely song. Well I'll sing it other roads where he's not known at all. It's a lovely song surely."

F. L. Lucas finds it a great improvement that, in Synge's final version, "Christy Mahon no longer creeps out crest-fallen, but departs exultant at having found himself 'a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime to the dawning of the judgment day.'" Such a change from the original plan can only be the result of arduous labour and continuous revision.

II. The Playboy and Peer Gynt: A Parallel

Synge's The Playboy of the Western World corresponds with Ibsen's Peer Gynt. As portrayed from the outside, both Peer Gynt and Christy Mahon are descended from rich fathers. It will be observed, however, that John Gynt, Peer Gynt's father, squandered his wealth. Here is Aase lamenting for lost wealth:

Where are now the sacks of coin
Left behind by Rasmus Gynt?
Ah, your father lent them wings,
Lavished them abroad like sand.

10 Gregory, <i>Our Irish Theatre</i>, 132.
11 Greene & Stephens, 253.
12 Lucas, 220.
Buying land in every parish
Driving round in gilded chariots.
Where is all the wealth he wasted
At the famous winter-banquet,
When each guest sent glass and bottle
Shivering 'gainst the wall behind him? (Act I, Sc. 1)

The fact that Christy's father is a wealthy man is brought out in a protest by Christy Mahon against the suggestion that he may be guilty of larceny.

Christy: (With a flash of family pride.) And I the son of a strong farmer (with a sudden qualm), God rest his soul, could have bought up the whole of your old house a while since from the butt of his tail pocket, and not have missed the weight of it gone. (Act I)

In another context, Christy says in support of Pegeen's reflections on the inevitability of his noble lineage, “we were great surely, with wide and windy acres of rich Munster land.” (Act I)

Second on the list of outward similarities is that the possibility of marriage to a moneyed woman was envisaged for both Peer Gynt and Christy Mahon.

Aase: Hegstad's girl was fond of you.
    Easily you could have won her
    Had you wooed her with a will —
Peer: Could I?
Aase: Ah, my Peer; — a golden girl —
    Land entailed on her! Just think,
    Had you set your mind upon it,
    You'd be now a bridegroom brave. —
    You that stand here grimed and tattered! (Act I, Sc. 1)

From a similar motive, the Widow Casey who is “a walking terror,” is proposed as bride for Christy Mahon.

Widow Quin: What did he want driving you to wed with her?
    (She takes a bit of the chicken.)
Christy: (Eating with growing satisfaction.) He was letting on I was wanting a protector from the harshness of the world, and he without a thought the whole while but how he'd have her hut to live in and her gold to drink. (Act II)

Again the two heroes are established as the successful lovers of two young women respectively who have pledged their word to marry two men other than their lovers. In the attempt to
have the marriage consummated, the two men turn to the lovers
for help, promising a generous reward.

The Bridgroom: *(Nudging him with his elbow.)* Peer, can't you help
me to get at the bride?
Peer: *(Absently.)* The bride? Where is she?
The Bridgroom: In the storehouse.
Peer: Ah.
The Bridgroom: Oh, dear Peer Gynt, you must try at least!
Peer: No, you must get on without my help.
The Bridgroom: *(Comes sidling up again.)* I'll give you an ox if
you'll help me!
Peer: Then come! *(Act I, Sc. 3)*

Shawn Keogh's approach to the problem of having his marriage
to Pegeen Mike consummated is through prevailing upon Chris­
ty Mahon to be bought off:

Shawn: *(Taking something from his pocket and offering it to Christy.)*
Do you see that, mister?
Christy: *(Looking at it.)* The half of a ticket to the Western States!
Shawn: *(Trembling with anxiety.)* I'll give it to you and my new hat
*(pulling it out of hamper)*; and my breeches with the double seat
*(pulling it out)*; and my new coat is woven from the blackest
shearings for three miles around *(giving him the coat)*; I'll give
you the whole of them, and my blessing of Father Reilly itself,
maybe, if you'll quit from this and leave us in the peace we had
till last night at the fall of dark.
Christy: *(With a new arrogance.)* And for what is it you're wanting
to get shut of me?
Shawn: *(Looking to the Widow for help.)* I'm a poor scholar with
middling faculties to coin a lie, so I'll tell you the truth, Christy
Mahon. I'm wedding with Pegeen beyond, and I don't think
well of having a clever fearless man the like of you dwelling in her
house. *(Act II)*

Furthermore, the wooing of the Green-clad Woman by Peer
Gynt is reproduced in the wooing by the Widow Quin of
Christy Mahon. In both cases the wooing is based upon the
identity of each of the two couples.

The Green-clad One: *(Falling on his neck.)* Ay, Peer, now I see that
we fit, you and I.
Peer: Like the leg and the trouser, the hair and the comb. *(Act II,
Sc. 5)*

Here is the Widow Quin establishing the identity between
Christy Mahon and herself.
Christy: (Interested.) You’re like me, so.
Widow Quin: I am your like, and it’s for that I’m taking a fancy to you, and I with my little houseen above where there’d be myself to tend you, and none to ask were you a murderer or what at all.
(Act II)

Finally, there is the incident of the bringing of food to both heroes following a deed of monstrous nature that cuts them off from the company of civilized men for a length of time. Sol­veig feels that Peer Gynt must be famished with ranging the mountains without food supplies, so she sends Helga with a basket of food. The episode has its counterpart in Sara Tansey, Susan, Honor Blake and Nelly bringing eggs, butter, a piece of cake and boiled chicken to the newly acclaimed wonder Christy Mahon.

As portrayed from the inside, Peer Gynt and Christy Mahon are credited with an ability to infuse life into any assembly. Here is an observation made at Ingrid’s wedding:

A Lad: (Comes from behind the house.) Wait a bit, girl! Things’ll soon be lively! Here comes Peer Gynt. (Act I, Sc. 3)

Christy Mahon produces the same effect soon after he walks into the shebeen and starts the rehearsal of his amazing deed.

Again both Peer Gynt and Christy Mahon are described as braggarts and unabashed liars. The bailiff gives it as the unanimous view that Peer Gynt was an “abominable liar”:

Peer: (Hat in hand.) But, tell me, who was Peer Gynt?
The Bailiff: Oh, he’s said to have been an abominable liar.
Peer: A liar?
The Bailiff: Yes — all that was strong and great
He made believe always that he had done it.
But, excuse me, friend — I have other duties —
(Goes.) Act V, Sc. 4

Peer Gynt is displayed as an “abominable liar” because he wove together all the famous exploits he has read about and claimed them as his own. After Christy’s exposure much the same thing is said about him by the Widow Quin and Pegeen Mike in Acts II and III respectively:

Widow Quin: . . . . Well, you’re the walking Playboy of the Western World, and that’s the poor man you had divided to his breeches belt.
Christy: *(Looking out; then, to her.)* What'll Pegeen say when she hears that story? What'll she be saying to me now?

Widow Quin: She'll knock the head of you, I'm thinking, and drive you from the door. God help her to be taking you for a wonder, and you a little schemer making up a story you destroyed you da. *(Act II)*

Pegeen is more severe in her estimate of the Playboy.

Mahon: *(Going to him, shaking his stick.)* Come on now if you wouldn't have the company to see you skelped.

Pegeen: *(Half laughing, through her tears.)* That's it, now the world will see him pandies, and he an ugly liar was playing off the hero, and the fright of me. *(Act III)*

Moreover, Peer Gynt and Christy Mahon are both alike in being puny sinners. Peer Gynt according to the Button-Moulder only merits the casting ladle because his sins belong to an inferior order of sins:

Peer: I'm not nearly so bad as perhaps you think,—

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Indeed I've done more or less good in the world, } &- \\
\text{At worst you may call me a sort of a bungler, } &- \\
\text{But certainly not an exceptional sinner.}
\end{align*}\]

The Button-Moulder:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Why, that is precisely the rub, my man;} &- \\
\text{You're no sinner at all in the higher sense;} &- \\
\text{That's why you're excused all the torture-pangs,} &- \\
\text{And, like others, land in the casting ladle . . .}
\end{align*}\]

Peer: Be off, and be careful what you're about!

The Button-Moulder:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{My friend, you're making a great mistake.} &- \\
\text{We're both in a hurry, and so, to save time,} &- \\
\text{I'll explain the reason of the whole affair.} &- \\
\text{You are, with your own lips you told me so,} &- \\
\text{No sinner, on the so-called heroic scale, } &- \\
\text{Scarce middling even } &- \text{ (Act V, Sc. 7)}
\end{align*}\]

Old Mahon pacing like the Button-Moulder as an agent of judgment voices similar thoughts:

Mahon: Rise up now to retribution and come on with me.

Christy: *(Getting up in shy terror.)* What is it drives you to torment me here, when I'd asked the thunders of the might of God to blast me if I ever did hurt to any saving only that one single blow.

Mahon: *(Loudly.)* If you didn't you're a poor good-for-nothing and isn't it by the like of you the sins of the whole world are committed? *(Act III)*
The upshot of both arguments is that Christy Mahon like Peer Gynt lacks the redeeming virtue of sinning on a grand scale. Both heroes resemble the common run of sinning humanity in being despicable sinners.

Both The Playboy of the Western World and Peer Gynt are pre-eminently occupied with a quest in search of Self, and both heroes start from an identical position. Sverre Arestad in an article on “Peer Gynt and the Idea of Self” says: “Our first impression of Peer might well be that he is an irresolute egoist, a fraud, a failure, a completely negative character who never reaches a decision, never fulfils a promise, never attains a goal.” This is more or less the impression that emerges from Old Mahon’s portrayal of the character of his son. And if we exclude from consideration the lionization of Christy Mahon by the myth-making powers of the shebeen audience in Act I, we find this impression to accord with the Widow Quin’s dubbing Christy “the walking Playboy of the Western World,” and Pegeen’s description of him at the conclusion of Act III as an “ugly liar playing off the hero and the fright of men.” Yet for all the adverse, if true, criticism that is levelled against the two heroes, they finally manage to make good through the attainment of Self-knowledge. This they achieve by partly related means. The major part of Peer Gynt’s life is taken up with the pursuit of the Gyntish self. The encounter with the Button-Moulder diverts him from the already beaten track and takes him to Solveig in whose love he finds his true Self. Peer, as G. Wilson Knight says (Ibsen, p. 29), “learns that his true self, sealed with God’s plan and thought, had been living in Solveig’s love.” Christy Mahon’s attempt to vindicate his claims to the affections of Pegeen Mike after his exposure leads up to his full-blooded assault on his father, an assault that completes the already begun process of his liberation from his old self and launches him onto a full awareness of his true Self.

The theme of The Playboy is that of the unheroic victim who has heroism thrust upon him through the needs of the people for a myth to enrich their barren lives. Christy Mahon, who murdered his da, becomes a living myth and thereby changes the lives of the people. And when the climax comes and he is exposed by the appearance of the father whom he is supposed to have murdered, the myth has done its work.
and changed him from a coward to a hero. The people lose their playboy but Christy finds himself.\textsuperscript{14}

What is noteworthy, however, is that Christy Mahon's discovery of his true Self is precipitated by his desire to win Pegeen Mike's regard. Thus in \textit{Peer Gynt} as in \textit{The Playboy of the Western World} the liberating force, the orientation toward self-knowledge resides in the woman. One here cannot but note the striking difference in technique in the two playwrights' approach to the quest of Self. It has taken Ibsen a lifetime to carry his hero through to self-knowledge, while it has barely taken Synge twenty-four hours to accomplish the same end. Does this imply that, for all the differences between the two plays in question, what Ibsen spreads over a lifetime, Synge could do within one revolution of the sun, and, what is more, achieve concentration and immediacy through observing the three unities? I have no definite answer. But if this were his intention, we should not be surprised, for the note of challenge to Ibsen is sustained throughout his work.

\textsuperscript{14} Arnold Kettle, \textit{An Introduction to the English Novel} (London, 1953), II, 183.

\section*{YEATS'S SWANS AND ANDERSEN'S UGLY DUCKLING}

\textbf{By RUPIN W. DESAI}

\textsc{WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS'S poem “The Wild Swans at Coole,” written in October 1916,\textsuperscript{1} depicts a situation that in many ways bears a striking similarity to Hans Christian Andersen's well known tale for children, “The Ugly Duckling.” This note points out the resemblances between both works, and suggests that in addition to the actual experience of witnessing nine-and-fifty swans on the lake in Lady Gregory's demesne, Yeats was influenced by the indelible impression that Andersen's story had left on his mind many years earlier when he was a boy.}

Significantly enough, just two years before he wrote the poem, Yeats mentioned Andersen twice, both times with great

\textsuperscript{1} For the dating of the poem see Richard Ellmann, \textit{The Identity of Yeats} (New York, 1964), 289.