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The Treachery of Law: Reading the Political Synge

By Brenda Murphy

It has become an obligatory ritual to note at the beginning of any new study of The Playboy of the Western World that the play has been a critical problem since the riots at its opening in 1907 required men and women of letters in Ireland, Britain, and North America to take a stand on its depiction of the Irish character, its use of plain language and freedom with the names of God and the saints, and its general decency as a work of art. Critics have been arguing ever since about the play’s form, partly because Synge subtitled it a comedy, and got himself into a great deal of trouble during an unguarded moment of its trying first week when he called it an “extravaganza” within hearing of a journalist. Early critics called the Playboy farce, burlesque, tragedy or comedy. More recent ones have suggested tragicomedy, ironic comedy, and even “ironic epic” and “antidrama” as suitable labels. Within these formal paradigms, Christy has been called Dionysian and daemonic, a representation of Christ, Cuchulain, and Parnell. The general consensus on Christy has evolved into a view stated succinctly by Ann Saddlemyer: “In Christy, we see the constructive power of the imagination: it liberates the soul of Christy and creates him anew in the role of poet-hero that his admirers have granted him” (21). But there are still strong disagreements within the general consensus. That Christy can be seen both as a vibrant, cocky hero and as a tragicomic scapegoat or impotent failed Christ within this paradigm of the self-created poet-hero suggests the depth and breadth of the disjunction that still divides the critics of this play.

The controversy over the Playboy stems from a more fundamental issue than its formal definition. It is the lack of agreement on the meaning of Christy’s experience in Mayo that produces the formalist disagreements over the play’s genre. The Playboy riots required early defenders of the play to deny that Synge meant to attack Ireland or “the Irish peasant” in any way. In the first influential study of Synge’s work, Maurice Bourgeois established the critical stance of

1. For a good summary of the discussions of the Playboy’s form, see Thornton. Foster explains her theory of the play as ironic comedy and ironic epic. Ellis-Fermor and Krause make the case for its being tragicomedy. Bigley argues that the Playboy “is actually less a mixture of comic and tragic elements than a denial of either convention, a kind of anticomedy and an antitragedy, indeed a kind of antidrama” (158).
2. For the Dionysian view, see Faulk. For the daemonic, see Bourgeois. For the Christ parallel, see MacLean. For Christy as Cuchulain, see Sidnell. For the Parnell allusion, see Skelton.
3. For Christy as tragicomic scapegoat, see Krause and MacLean. The view of Christy as cocky hero stems from Bourgeois and Corkery. It is very much alive in more recent criticism, such as Kibroy and Salmon.
denying the play’s political meaning entirely, insisting that Synge’s intention was “to depict poetically and allegorically... the imaginative, emotional, and sexual self-discovery of a poet’s soul, burgeoning at first amidst uncongenial surroundings, and finally expanding into perfect flower of expression in the warm sunshine of public praise” (205). He ignored the “scorching” of Christy’s leg and the attempted lynching that follow upon the public’s withdrawal of praise in Act 3. In what almost seems a determined misreading, Daniel Corkery followed his lead by suggesting in 1931: “Not for a moment do we think [Synge] intended The Playboy as a satire on the people of the West. Rather it is his tribute to them, his thank offering that, among them, the daemonic had liberty to strike out, to caper on the sands, to tumble about, even outrageously” (185). These early critics seem to have been determined to ignore the third act while defending the first two.

As the memory of the riots and the attacks on Synge’s patriotism faded, critics tended to focus on Mayo’s rejection of Christy as the central event in the play, for it is on the reading of this crucial event that any particular interpretation of the play depends. Critics who emphasize Christy’s growth and see the play as a comedy tend to view his rejection by Mayo as a catalyst for his final development and liberation as poet and hero. Critics who focus on Pegeen Mike and the people of Mayo see their rejection of Christy as the tragic self-sealing of their fate, or simply as a more modern acceptance of their inability to act. As David Krause puts it, “the community, after it recovers from its ambivalent mood of outrage and loss, sinks back into its normal state of paralysis” (125). Because the driving force of the play is the interaction between Christy and the people of Mayo—who both in what Synge called its “Rabelaisian” or major motive of earthy conflict and its “romantic,” or minor motive of the love story—it is surprising that, while the play’s critics have expended untold energy on the precise definition of Christy’s role, little analysis has been made of precisely what the Playboy says about Ireland and its people.

In most of what has been written about Synge, there is a marked tendency to assume that his statements about immediate social and political realities are marginal in his work because his themes speak to the general and universal rather than to the immediate and particular. We probably owe a great deal of this version of Synge to Yeats’ picture of him as a poet who “had no life outside his imagination, little interest in anything that was not its chosen subject” and “like all of the great kin, sought for the race, not through the eyes or in history, or even in the future, but where those monks found God, in the depths of the mind” (329). Those who have written of Synge’s political and social views have reinforced this portrait of the solitary poet, finding his material more within his imagination than in the reality it confronted and reshaped. Even Robin Skelton, who

4. See especially Salmon, 120; Kilroy, 441; Thornton, 139.
5. Similar views may be found in MacLean, 12, 17; Skelton, 20-21.
6. For a full discussion of Synge’s use of these two motives in the play’s composition, see Hart.
emphasizes that Synge was "a sensible and shrewd observer of the life around him," goes on to say that "his idealism was tempered by scepticism, and he was therefore unable to join any of the intertemperately nationalist movements of his day. He saw social problems as stemming as much from the nature of man as from local conditions" (15-16).

More recently, Edward Hirsch got to the same place from the opposite direction. While suggesting that the strictly modernist readings of the play have for too long denied its representational aspect and that Synge's "realistic mode of discourse established generic expectations in the audience which were then subverted as the plot developed" (86), Hirsch also insists that to Synge "peasant" was simply an ideological concept and that he used realistic representation as a means to gain the audience's identification with this concept so the modernist subversion of characters in the last act could be seen as "a frontal attack on the audience's ideology" (90).

There is no denying the ideological significance that specific terms have in a given culture, and it may well be true that Synge was more interested in the universal, but the writer of the essays on Wicklow and Kerry and the "congested districts" had also keen sense of the particular and a deep awareness of the social and economic, and therefore political, reality of his time and place. These essays are full of descriptions of the relief works, where old men, girls, and young boys were working for their shilling a day with dejection and humiliation; of the gangs of harvestmen departing for England and Scotland to work from three in the morning until ten at night for the same shilling a day; of the potato fields and the methods of farming them; of the women and girls gathering cockles, the men harvesting kelp, the various industries that kept the people alive; of the way the people managed the sale of their products and the payment of their grocery bills. These essays also describe the personalities of the people he meets and the conversations he has with them in minute detail.

J. M. Synge knew Mayo and its people and their life and he knew it and wrote of it, in precise, sometimes painful, detail. Emphasizing the universal in Synge's plays denies his representation of political and social reality, which he accomplished, not through vague ideological implications, but through overt and specific references to the world of both the characters in the plays and the audiences that witnessed them. In *Playboy*, the crucial interaction between Christy and the people of Mayo is defined by the specific social, political, and economic situation in which they find themselves. The form wherein Synge chose to embody it is not a failure to integrate a modernist and a realist perspective but a self-conscious commentary on the Irish people and their failure to confront the reality of their lives.8

7. One is tempted to ask Hirsch whether the characters in the *Playboy* designated "small farmers," "a young farmer," and "a squatter" are separate ideological concepts from "peasants," also used to designate some characters. He might be reminded that the characters who figure in the action are a squatter and his son and several members of the petite bourgeoisie—a publican and his daughter and some farmers. There isn't a "peasant" among them.

8. Holder's recent analysis of Synge's early drafts of the play confirms his political frame of mind (532). In one of the versions Christy is elected a city councillor, making the political significance a bit more overt than Synge eventually was satisfied with.
If one looks at the play’s world from the viewpoint of the Mayo peasants, its dominant reality is fear. There is of course Shawn’s fear of Father Reilly, an old-fashioned fear of the Church that the others ridicule in order to deny that they share it. Neither Michael James nor Pegeen would think of going through with her marriage to Shawn until the “gilded dispensation” had come from Rome, much as they might make fun of Shawn for his schoolboy fear of the priest. The more immediate and more pervasive fear, however, is fear of the law and its agents. From the beginning of the first act, the people express their constant fear of the law and “the peelers.” Shawn is afraid when he finds Christy, “a kind of fellow above in the furzy ditch, groaning wicked like a maddening dog, the way it’s good cause you have, maybe, to be fearing now” (61). But Pegeen mocks Shawn for his fear and expresses shock that he “never went to see was he hurted or what ailed him at all” (61). With typical bluntness, she reminds him of the more appropriate object of fear: “And if they find his corpse stretched above in the dews of dawn, what’ll you say then to the peelers or the Justice of the Peace?” (61). It is not the poor tramp in the ditch that is the source of danger, she suggests, but the law and its agents. Time and again in this first scene the audience is reminded of the danger these people fear from “the polis,” “the loosed khaki cut-throats” (75), and the “thousand militia—bad cess to them!”—walking idle through the land” (63).

In other words, the main source of fear for the people of Mayo is precisely the structure of law and order that supposedly exists to protect them. This is an accurate representation of the people in Western Ireland as Synge describes them in the straightforward journalistic discourse of his essays. In the play he uses this specific situation metonymically so that the Western World becomes the representation of a paradigmatic oppressed society, the occupied territory, a world in which the normal relation of the individual to law enforcement institutions is reversed. In a country where the agents of law and order are the enemy—the instruments of an alien and oppressive government—the heroes are those who resist law and order—those who can counter the violence of the oppressors with greater violence and thus conquer that constant, pervasive fear that is at the center of the people’s daily life.

Pegeen shows very early in the first scene that she draws a great deal of strength from the legends of these local heroes. The inhabitants of the Western World are the defective ones who would be unacceptable anywhere else: “Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies were driven from California and lost in their wits” (59). Pegeen shows pride in the very violence that permeates the legends of the neighborhood: “Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland till he’d have the old women shedding down tears about their feet” (59). The juxtaposition of Quin’s stories

9. In an interesting semiotic analysis, Chaudhuri denotes fear as the dominant significance attached to the space of the pub and suggests that “the play’s opening sequence is devoted to evoking a spatial paradigm characterized by its shifting position on two related axes, one of safety and danger, the other of desire and fear” (377).
of “holy Ireland” with his crime may be one of those grotesque and wild bits of humor that is characteristic of Synge’s comedy, but it makes perfect sense within the value structure of the “Western World.” Sullivan’s forthright assault on the peeler is one way of attacking the oppressors. Quin’s assault on their flocks is another. In fact, a man both of violent deeds and of fine words, Quin prefigures Christy as poet-hero.

Philly articulates the source of the reversed value system simply when the men are trying to guess the reason for Christy’s flight: “Maybe the land was grabbed from him, and he did what any decent man would do” (69). The others then make the natural assumption that Christy assaulted one of his natural enemies: bailiffs, agents, landlords. Their other suggestion, that he was “judged to be hanged, quartered, and drawn” for “fighting bloody wars for Kruger and the freedom of the Boers” (71), is also a straightforward assertion of the occupied territory’s values. A man who is adjudged a traitor by the British for fighting for the freedom of another occupied territory of the British Empire is certainly a hero in their eyes. Even the grotesque image of Jimmy Farrell’s hanging “his dog from the licence and . . . it screeching and wriggling three hours at the butt of a string, and himself swearing it was a dead dog, and the peelers swearing it had life” (73) draws the strength of its humor from the fact that Jimmy’s violent act is really directed against the peelers, whom he is defeating with the seemingly perverted and self-destructive strategy of the oppressed.

In fact, in this world where law and order is the oppressor, any violation of the law becomes a deed of glory. Thus when Sara makes her toast to “the wonders of the western world, the pirates, preachers, poteen-makers, with the jobbing jockies, parching peelers, and the juries fill their stomachs selling judgments of the English law” (105), she is praising anyone who has the strength and courage to subvert the structure of laws that have been imposed by the English on Ireland. By extension, anyone who is afraid to resist authority, like Shawn Keogh, is worthless, and anyone who assails an authority that oppresses him, like Christy, is a hero. Pegeen voices this feeling when she expresses her admiration for Christy’s fearlessness: “I never killed my father. I’d be afeared to do that, except I was the like of yourself with blind rages tearing me within” (81). Thus one of the play’s apparently absurd lines, “now, by the grace of God, herself will be safe this night, with a man killed his father holding danger from the door” (77), is perfectly sensible in the occupied territory.

The meaning of the Playboy is rooted in the reversal of accepted values that constitutes its moral and social milieu. It is true that much of the play’s action consists of Christy’s self-creation as a hero by means of his self-legendizing. But the crux of the play lies in Mayo’s inability to bridge, as Christy does, the “great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed” (169). It can harbor its hero as long as his deed is only a legend, but when the deed is committed in its back yard, it succumbs immediately to its fear. While Christy confirms his liberation from law and authority with his second assault on his father, and thus proves through praxis the heroism he had created through mythos, Mayo fails to live up to its value of resistance and turns traitor out of fear. It is fittingly Shawn who becomes the
spokesman now as he drags Christy out: “Come on to the peelers till they stretch
you now” (169). Pegeen shows her capitulation to fear of the law and the peelers
when she echoes Shawn in denying Christy’s plea to cut the rope: “And leave us
to hang, is it, for a saucy liar, the like of you?” (169). But it is Michael James who
articulates the final state of impotence to which Mayo’s fear has reduced it: “It
is the will of God that all should guard their little cabins from the treachery of law
and what would my daughter be doing if I was ruined or was hanged itself” (173).
The first act of the play has prepared the audience to see the debilitating effects
of fear on this community, and the contrast of Christy’s triumphant exit line, “ten
thousand blessings upon all that’s here, for you’ve turned me a likely gaffer in
the end of all, the way I’ll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this
hour to the dawning of the judgment day” (173), with Pegeen’s final lament, “oh
my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only playboy of the western world”
(173), makes a clear distinction between the liberation of the poet-hero and the
self-imprisonment of the world of Mayo within its own fear.

There is a general sense among those critics who see the Playboy in terms of
Christy’s development that Mayo is a kind of green world and that Christy’s
departure from it is the hero’s movement back to the civilized world after his
growth experience in the primitive. It is a mistake, however, to put so much
weight on Christy’s experience and so little on Mayo’s, for Synge is careful to
divide the emphasis. It is Pegeen’s lament that is the play’s last word, after all,
not Christy’s triumphant boast. This very evenhandedness in Synge’s emphasis
has resulted in the lack of critical consensus about whether the play is tragedy,
comedy, or any of the variety of mixtures that have been suggested. Most critics
agree, however, that the play is deeply ironic. That fact and the reversal of values
in the world of Mayo do not suggest the kind of romantic comedy that features
a salvific trip to the green world. The Playboy is an ironic comedy, and, in Frye’s
terms, the structure of its mythos is quixotic. Christy is the comic hero who has
created his world and is now setting off to inhabit it. But Synge is not about to
let his audience forget the reality of Mayo, its fear and its loss because of that fear.
By its failure to come with Christy into his new world, Mayo remains what it was,
the “old order,” an occupied territory ruled by an oppressive and alien set of laws
and enforcers of those laws, a society with a deep wrong in its organization which
it is unable to change because it lacks the courage to defy its oppressors.

It would be too simple to suggest that in the Playboy Synge was writing a
political allegory about Ireland. But it would be a mistake to ignore his
representation of the nation’s state of mind in the play’s characters and his
comment on the reasons for Ireland’s political condition in the fatalistic accept­
tance of its oppression for fear of the peelers and the hangman. In suggesting that
Ireland’s poets could create its heroes, indeed could become its heroes, Synge
was making a much more radical political statement than people expected of him,
but one which was entirely in keeping with his journalistic essays on the “western
world.” When one considers the Playboy’s political implications carefully, the
riots become much more believable as protests against the representations of
Irish character than when they are seen only in the light of the most literal
explanation at the time, as a protest against indecent language. The riot on that
first night did not actually begin until the middle of the third act, although the play
has plenty of earthy language and picturesque swearing before that point. If one
considers that it is the third act that makes the Irish look like cowards afraid to
resist the English law and like traitors willing to turn over a hero to the oppressors
because they are afraid for their own skins, the Dublin audience’s strong though
inarticulate dislike of the play is more understandable. The PlayBoy suggested
what heroes the Irish could be, but also showed what cowards most of them were.
Synge’s careful division of emphasis was calculated to keep both images before
his audience. Given the times, it might be expected to disturb them, but perhaps,
as with all didactic drama, that was the point.

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