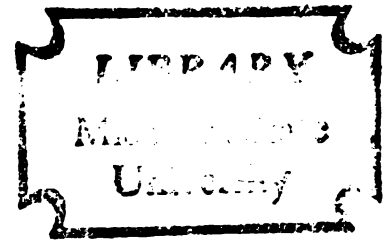
SYNGE AND O'CASEY WOMEN: A STUDY IN STRONG MINDEDNESS

DISSERTATION FOR THE DEGREE OF PH. D.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

BEATRICE O'DONNELL

1976



This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

Women in the Plays of Synge and O'Casey:

A Study in Strong-Mindedness

presented by

Beatrice O'Donnell

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in Theatre

Major professor

Date January 30, 1976

ABSTRACT

WOMEN IN THE PLAYS OF JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE AND SEAN O'CASEY: A STUDY IN STRONG-MINDEDNESS

by

Beatrice O'Donnell

When one reflects upon the characters in the plays of Synge and O'Casey, it is invariably the women who capture the imagination. What Pegeen Mike, Maurya, and Deirdre, what Juno, Nora, Loreleen and Mrs. Breydon have in common is a strong-mindedness that frequently makes the playwrights' male characters look pallid by comparison.

It is the purpose of this study to investigate not only the extent of this strong-minded behavior in the drama of Synge and O'Casey but to explore some of the reasons that account for this phenomenon.

Strong-mindedness implies all the overt and covert variations a woman might choose in order to exert her will. In this context the term is used to describe both the authoritarian impulse to dominate another and the humanistic attempt to govern oneself, often in the face of severe opposition. In short, strong-mindedness describes both the attempt to acquire power over another and the desire to achieve power over oneself, both the need to impose one's choices on somebody else and the determination to make one's own choices.

Part One focuses attention on the plays, with Chapter I an analysis of Synge's six dramas and Chapter II an exploration of O'Casey's thirteen full-length plays. The women in Synge's plays are frequently

given to trying to impose their wills on the men in their lives. O'Casey women, though also given to attempts at dominating the opposite sex, are more commonly characterized by an impulse to assert personal autonomy.

Part Two explores the socio-cultural background of Ireland for insight into sociological, historical and psychological influences upon the two playwrights. Chapter III investigates the strong matriarchal strain in the average Irish home to explain the submissiveness of men and assertiveness of women found in the family. Chapter IV gathers together evidence that both dramatists were not only scholars of ancient Gaelic mythology but also frank admirers of the autocratic and imperious women in the Heroic Cycle. It seems likely that the writers' mutual admiration of the female myth figures at least reinforced basic attitudes that women ought to be strong and assertive. Though these first two chapters suggest reasons why both artists created an extensive gallery of strong-minded female characters, they do not satisfactorily explain the differing types of strong-minded women each dramatist created.

Chapter V attempts to do so by exploring each man's unique efforts to effect adult separation from his mother. Because Synge was never able to declare emotional independence from his mother, his female characters are marked by an impulse to dominate, to manipulate the men in their lives, as he felt his mother did him. In consequence, his female characters often stand as larger-than-life dominating figures in relation to their men -- looking for all the world as awesomely imposing as a mother does to her small son. Whereas Synge relied emotionally upon his mother all his life and resented her for it, O'Casey asserted his independence of his mother and admired her ever after for encouraging it. As a result, his view of women was more balanced than Synge's. Though some of O'Casey's female characters also exhibit the tendency to manipulate their

men, they are more commonly characterized by a desire to govern themselves, a trait which his mother lived and exemplified every day of her life.

It is not possible to assert with absolute certainty that the latter three were the only influences on Synge and O'Casey, but they certainly contributed to the cultural milieu that helped shape the dramatists' assumptions about what constituted appropriate female behavior.

SYNGE AND O'CASEY WOMEN:

A STUDY IN STRONG MINDEDNESS

by

Beatrice O'Donnell

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
1976

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a very real debt of personal gratitude to:

Mr. Frank C. Rutledge, Chairman of the Theatre Department and Chairman of my Guidance Committee, for his valued advice on Irish drama and for his unfailing humor toward "getting me through."

Dr. John F.A. Taylor, Philosophy Department, for encouraging my best functioning as a genuinely extraordinary teacher.

Dr. Arthur Athanason, English Department, for his infectious love of theatre and theatre scholarship; and to Dr. John Baldwin, Theatre Department, for his thoughtful reading of my dissertation and useful suggestions about form.

Mrs. Maureen Spisak, my sister, who launched into the typing of this dissertation with the same generosity, good-nature, and thoroughness with which she pursues most things she does.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

At times the contradiction apparently operant between the modern Irish woman's subservient role in society and her dominating role in the plays of Synge and O'Casey seems downright bizarre. For the female characters in the majority of the plays of John Millington Synge and Sean O'Casey are remarkably strong-minded, often either more assertive or more autonomous than the playwrights' male characters. The women are, incidentally, not unlike the self-willed and determined females who appear in ancient Gaelic mythology.

This study investigates the extent of this strong-minded behavior in the drama of Synge and O'Casey, and then suggests some reasons to account for the phenomenon in their plays.

Since most social systems in western countries are patriarchal in their institutions and women treated as inferior beings, the means which women use to achieve their will is intrinsically interesting. Strong-mindedness is the not entirely satisfactory word I have chosen to convey all the overt and subtle variations a woman might choose in order to exert her will, so as to shape her own life and possibly the lives of others as well. In this context I have perhaps stretched the term to describe both the authoritarian impulse to dominate another and the humanistic impulse to achieve personal autonomy, without necessarily infringing on another's choices or rights. Though both drives imply fascinating variants in power-seeking, I make no attempt to judge the superiority of either. I content myself with merely describing the plays in which women are inclined to impose their wills on others and those in which they are more concerned with self-governance. In either case, I want to emphasize that strong-mindedness

implies vigorous expression of one's felt needs.

Though numerous critical and scholarly works have been published on Synge and O'Casey examining their plays within political, poetic, religious, historical and biographical contexts, no one has yet endeavored to analyze the relationship of Irish women to their men in this way. Occasionally, critics have broached the issue of relationship between the sexes but have never really come to grips with it. Instead they usually fall back on some standard assessment like the idea that Irish men are dreamers and Irish women are realists.[1]

Since this work probes the particular tensions existing between Irish females and males, it should prove useful to directors and actors engaged in the production of modern Irish drama by making palpable and discernible understandings about sexual relationships which before were either absent or but subliminally glimpsed.

In addition, it adds thrust to the young but exciting body of "women's studies," though the study is intended in no wise to be either political or polemical. Rather, it is largely descriptive, pointing out in individual plays the kinds of circumstances under which women either reverse the normative situation of male dominance or attempt to maintain their integrity by living autonomously without adherence to public opinion.

I pursued this investigation because, scholarly considerations being equal, I wanted to better understand myself, my family and my Irish heritage. The idea for the study originated when it struck me while re-reading O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock how easily Juno dominated

---

[1]David Krause, Sean O'Casey: the Man and His Work (N.Y.: Collier, 1960), p. 109 Also, see John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (N.Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 1954), p. 569.

her husband. I suppose the recognition startled me more than it should have because I had only recently come to an analagous recognition about my own parents' relationship. Returning to O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars, I was intrigued to discover in the young Nora Clitheroe a parallel insistence upon determining her husband's actions.

I then whipped through all the published scripts of the other giant of the Irish Renaissance, John Millington Synge, and found what looked to be an even more pervasive pattern of assertive behavior among women characters. Strong-minded women figure tellingly in his "Riders to the Sea," The Playboy of the Western World and Deirdre of the Sorrows, to mention but the best known.

During this same period I began dipping into the Gaelic myths for the first time and was fascinated by the often dominating behavior of the women in the Heroic Cycle. Initially, I was tantalized by the idea of a possible connection between ancient cultural behavior and contemporary. But the more I read about the women in the myths and the women in the plays, the less I understood them -- at least in the sense of being able to explain their behavior in terms of a neat little formula. For at first it seemed as though the dynamism of the woman in the plays was exclusively linked to the issue of domination. Certainly Synge's women seem characterized by an outright need to manipulate that makes them more assertive, more insistent than his male characters. However, O'Casey's women refused to be so neatly pidgeon-holed. Though a number of his ladies are often notoriously domineering, more frequently they are memorable because they possess an inner resourcefulness that makes them seem more centered, more whole than the men. I found that I needed not only a larger concept than "dominating" to describe the variety of the two playwrights' females, but a broader purview against

which to examine Irish behavioral modes between the sexes than just the idea of myths-as-behavior-models. I recognized that to understand strong-mindedness in the women of Synge and O'Casey, I would have to explore at least three specific aspects of the dramatists' cultural milieu:

(1) the effects of having been reared in a country where family life is usually dominated by the mother;

(2) the possible influence of both writers' knowledge of the Irish myths and their conscious admiration of the female myth figures in reinforcing their assumptions about typical behavior for women;

(3) the particular results of each author's unique relationship with his mother in shaping his attitudes about women.

The study then is essentially descriptive, focusing on character, specifically on females in varying degrees of intimate relationship with the opposite sex. Only women in such relationships are analyzed. For that reason, otherwise wonderfully-conceived characters like Mary Byrne in The Tinker's Wedding and Bessie Burgess and Mrs. Gogan in The Plough and the Stars are not considered. I attempt neither a formalistic analysis of structure nor an evaluative assessment of the plays except when the playwright's technique presents problems in character analysis, as O'Casey's technique does in several of his middle-period plays.

The work is divided into two parts. Part I represents a straightforward description of the behavior of women characters in the two playwrights' dramas. Chapter I focuses on the females in all six of Synge's plays including his one-acts, since his early death makes the body of his work slight without their inclusion; besides, a significant part of his artistic reputation rests on his powerful one-act tragedy, "Riders to the Sea." Chapter II focuses on the women in

O'Casey's thirteen full-length plays. Because the O'Casey canon is so extensive and the one-acts represent for the most part insignificant vaudeville pieces, the short plays have been eliminated from consideration. In both chapters the plays are considered chronologically.

Part II attempts to set the playwrights in sociological, historical and psychological contexts to throw light upon the curious coincidence that both created an inordinate number of strong-minded females. Chapter III concentrates on the fact that women have traditionally played the central role in Irish family life. Chapter IV probes the ramifications of the fact that both authors were aware of and admired the dominating women in the old myths. Chapter V considers the poignant influence of each playwright's relationship with his mother upon his subsequent attitudes toward what were appropriately female roles and behavior.

The latter biographical data may account for the different ways in which Synge and O'Casey female characters express their strong-mindedness. However, the issue of whether a character wins or loses her battle to dominate or to achieve autonomy is not addressed. Rather the focus is kept on the character's impulse toward one mode or toward the other. In general, Synge women are generally driven by an impulse to dominate their men and O'Casey women are more commonly concerned with governing themselves autonomously. These two aspects of strong-mindedness constitute the critical key to understanding the distinction between the two Dublin writers' similar attitudes toward women.

For the reader unfamiliar with Irish mythology, I include an appendix giving a brief history of the assertive and autocratic women found in the Heroic Cycle of the ancient Gaelic myths. Also included in this segment are some provocative, if inconclusive, opinions of

psychiatrists who contend that ancient myths continue to exert an ongoing influence upon contemporary attitudes, individual characters functioning as role models for contemporary behavior. It is a theory that I find insistent and appealing. However, because, it is not yet subject to absolute proof, I've relegated brief discussion of it to a humble appendix. Needless to say, I make no attempt to draw one-to-one comparisons between these mythic women and the modern females created by Synge and O'Casey. The various ancient queens, witches, and warriors are cited only to point out the tantalizingly similar attitude toward self-rule existing between them and the modern characters.

PART ONE: THE PLAYS

CHAPTER I

SYNGE WOMEN

John Millington Synge (1871-1909) published six plays during a brief career which ended when he died of Hodgkins Disease at an untimely thirty-eight. In all but one of them, women characters exhibit a marked determination to shape their own lives: their methods of dealin with the men in their lives range from the disarmingly manipulative to the frankly domineering. In these five plays Synge perceives the Irish battle between the sexes with fine compassion and unfailing good humor.

In considering Synge's female characters it is interesting to note that as he grows surer in his craft, the women too seem to develop in assurance and confidence about expressing their own ideas, needs and wills. Thereto they become progressively more domineering.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN (1903)[1]

If one regards his plays in their order of chronological production, one sees Nora Burke's peculiar brand of single-mindedness as a trial run for later women who would become very dominating indeed. The central character of Synge's first staged play, though hardly aggressive, is undeniably determined to hold to her own philosophy of life. She is strong-minded in a way that not only seems to have hypnotized the three male characters in the play toward her but, surprisingly, that seems to have eluded the attention of most Synge scholars.

---

[1]All play dates refer to production year, unless specified as publication date.

"In the Shadow of the Glen" is loosely based on a folk tale the author first heard in the Aran Islands about an old husband who feigns death in order to determine whether he has been cuckolded by his young wife. "Here we have a play about marriage and temptation, about an old man and a younger rival, with a taste of Deirdre about it." However, because Synge did not make the ending (the wife going off with a stranger) clear enough in moral terms, Irish critics have often found the story unsettling, suspect. They found it "more like Deirdre with a Shavian twist."[2] However, the one-act has most frequently been criticized on the grounds that Synge failed to maintain a consistently comic tone in his treatment of the story. Daniel Corkery contends that often hilariously farcical moments, like old Dan Burke's apopletically furious rising from the dead and the lusty Michael Dara's proposal of marriage to the "widow" in the corpse's presence, are diminished by Synge's insistence on giving Nora persistently poignant dialogue about her abject loneliness in the isolated glen. Corkery contends, "the play is too small for such changes in mood as occur in it; and, to use a musical term, there are no bridges between mood and mood. Nora Burke's desperate character is the reason for this uncertainty."[3] The effect, he maintains, is a teeter-totter quality tipping from the uproariously comic to the incongruously melodramatic.

However, I maintain it is exactly this propensity in Nora to see life through a fog of romantic gloominess that accounts for her

---

[2]Denis Johnston, John Millington Synge (N.Y.:Columbia U. Press, 1965), p. 15

[3]Daniel Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature (N.Y.: Russell & Russell, 1965), p. 126

sublimely comic contribution to the play. Corkery misapprehended the irony implicit in W.B. Yeats' assessment of Nora as a woman, "melancholy as a curlew, driven to distraction by her own sensitiveness, for her own fineness."[4] In interpreting literally Yeats' description of Nora as "sensitive," Corkery was forced to regard her as a noble soul suffering -- if not in silence, then certainly with poetic lyricism. Such an explanation would force "In the Shadow of the Glen" into the mere mold of a feminist tract decrying the Irish socio-educational structure which gives a woman no means for independence or even survival in old age except marriage to a man of property. Such a misconstruction of the play's thrust would make Nora a heroine whose spirit has been systematically crushed by the insensitive and silent old man she is tied to. That critical perspective lingers still. Alan Price and Ann Saddlemyer both tend to romanticize Nora, to miss the comic pervasiveness of her character by focusing on the weather. Price, particularly sees the play as a rather serious one, citing the paralyzing psychological effects of the misty glen.[5] However such a reading of Synge's intent would indeed blur the comic intent of the script.

For the point is, Nora is not a heroine. If anything, she is a victim, but no more so than her husband[6] whom she irritates beyond measure with her everlasting "sensitivity" to life's day-to-day anguishes. So determinedly melancholy is Nora that she drives her

---

[4]Ibid., p. 124

[5]Ann Saddlemyer, J.M. Synge and Modern Comedy (Dublin: Dolmen, 1968), p. 126; and Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama (London: Methuen, 1961), p. 15.

[6]Both are victims of being citizens "in a country where late marriages are part of an economic and traditional necessity." Donna Gerstenberger, John Millington Synge (N.Y.: Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1964), p. 38.

husband into making a great ass of himself (he pretends to be the guest of honor at his own wake) because her moroseness is so alien to his understanding.

For Nora Burke is single-mindedly devoted to seeing the worm inside the rosebud. Nora Burke has the habit of mind which the Welsh call haggith, a predilection to focus only on the bleaker aspects of life, an inclination to anticipate in the beginning of joy, its conclusion. That characteristic is also a markedly Irish one, and one which Synge turns to delightfully funny uses. So enamoured is Nora of her misery, she is incapable of responding with anything like happiness, no matter how promising the prospect. And in that inflexibility, she achieves in Bergson's term, "mechanical inelasticity" which makes her a genuinely comic figure.

Though other critics, like J.B. Yeats, praised the play as an effective attack on "our Irish institution, the loveless marriage,"[7] the compliment is a backhanded one since it overemphasizes the social criticism implied in the May-December marriage situation and again makes Nora a figure of bravery. Actually she is a humorless woman who functions brilliantly as the tool of Synge's comic intent. Far from being the catalyst who drives the play "to the heights of tragic intensity"[8] as one critic misguidedly insisted,Nora is a comically obtuse figure. She is hardly noble; after all, she married an old man for

---

[7]David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, John Millington Synge, 1871-1909 (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1959), p. 146.

[8]P.P. Howe, John Millington Synge: a Critical Study (N.Y.: Mitchell Kennerly, 1911), p. 49.

his money. She is the perfect butt for comic treatment. Ironically, it is her insistence upon seeing her state in the purple hues of tragedy that makes her character so deliciously funny. She positively savors her loneliness, hugs her misery.

"In the Shadow of the Glen" then is not propaganda for a social message. It is a play built primarily on character, one in which Nora pressures, coaxes and manipulates all three men in the play into doing things which without her influence they would never dream of doing.

Ironically, it is Nora's tendency to accentuate the negative that inexorably attracts the men to her purposes. Like many of Synge's subsequent male characters, the three are a rather ineffective lot, a fact which significantly accounts for their allowing themselves to be manipulated by Nora. But manipulate them Nora does.

Indeed Nora is indirectly responsible for her husband's foolish plot to catch her in adultery. Dan's evolving the ludicruous scheme of posing as his own corpse speaks volumes about the nature of their relationship. In spite of his jealously prohibiting her to talk with other men after their marriage, Nora pursued her own will. In spite of Dan's bullying, in spite of local gossip about the many men she had become friendly with, she continued to alleviate her loneliness by chatting with any friendly person who happened by the farm. For her home is isolated she insists with no little self-insight,

> you have to be talking with someone,
> and looking for someone, in the
> evening of the day, and if it's a power
> of men I'm after knowing they were fine
> men, for I was a hard child to please,

> and it's a hard woman I am to please this day. 9

That she has always had a telling influence on her acerbic husband is loudly attested to by her erstwhile suitor Michael Dara who, in a panic at finding the old man's "corpse" about to clobber him with a shillelagh, shrieks to her,

> Get me out of it, Nora, for the love of God. He always did what you bid him, and I'm thinking he would do it now. (italics mine.)

Furthermore, she apparently has an even stronger influence on the young shepherd himself. Though Michael half suspects that Nora is a bit mad with her perennial talk of the "lonesome fog," so intriguing does he find her, he eventually proposes marriage to her -- something Nora probably long fantasized about, in view of the fact that her old husband "was always cold, every day I knew him -- and every night."

Finally, the third man, the Tramp, a complete stranger till that evening, is so taken with Nora's ability to articulate her misery so poetically, that he impulsively offers to become her protector when her husband ousts her from their home -- no small thing in Ireland since the Tramp will thereby incur the blame for Nora's being, as her husband claims, a "bad wife."

In fact, the Tramp is impressed with her courage from their first encounter. On a fiercely stormy night, she admits him, a total stranger, to the house though she is -- she thinks -- completely alone. He cannot help feeling cowardly by comparison, since he once let a man

---

[9] All script citations are from J.M. Synge, The Complete Plays (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1935).

die in a ditch because he feared to investigate his cries for help after dark.

Nor can the Tramp help but be struck by her refusal to speak sentimentally of her "late" husband just because he is now dead. Gazing appraisingly at the corpse, she tells the Tramp detachedly, "he was always queer, stranger, and I suppose them that's queer and they living men will be queer bodies after." Nora admits frankly to him that she married old Dan Burke for security in her old age. But once she so guaranteed that security, she found she still was not happy. "What good is a bit of a farm with cows on it," she asks melodramatically, "when you do be...seeing nothing but the mists rolling down the bog... and hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm."

In the early months of her marriage, Nora used to ease the loneliness of the farm by elegiacally speaking of it to kindred souls who stopped by -- unfortunately, male souls, much to the chagrin of her husband. After one of those male friends died under mysterious circumstances near their farm, she developed a more salutary mode of behavior: she would take her misery to her bosom and savor it.

> It's very lonesome I was after him [her dead friend] a long while (She looks over at the bed and lowers her voice, speaking very clearly), and then I got happy again -- if it's ever happy we are, stranger -- for I got used to being lonesome.

So amenable has she found such a glum attitude toward life, that even when her husband's supposed death makes possible her freedom from the loneliness of the farm, she is compelled to find another source of misery. In his stage directions, Synge describes her absently stacking the liberating piles of her husband's gold pieces while

simultaneously and perversely considering the inevitable effects aging will have upon her.

Her absolute determination not to be happy, but rather to regard life with the myopia of a tragic poet, is seen in wonderfully comic terms when the burly young shepherd offers her a lusty marriage bed. However, she resolutely looks past his rippling muscles and hearty sensuality to forty years hence:

> Why would I marry you Mike Dara? You'll be getting old, and in a little while I'm telling you, you'll be sitting up -- the way himself was sitting -- with a shake in your face, and your teeth falling and the white hair sticking out round you like an old bush where sheep do be leaping in a gap.

Nora's comic obstreperousness is again underlined after her husband's roaring rise from the dead when he sputteringly expells her from the house. (It is difficult to tell how much of his outrage is a result of a marriage proposal proffered over his bier, or his final exasperation with Nora's interminable proclivity to blather about the barrenness of life. There is, however, some evidence for the latter in that during the final moments of the play, Dan blithely invites the man who proposed to his wife to join him in a hooker of whiskey.) Though Nora is thereby released from the shackles of a joyless marriage, she is consistent to the end. She will not be cheered even when, at the eleventh hour, the Tramp unexpectedly emerges as her protector and offers to become her tour guide on the open road, beyond the narrow pettiness of the glen. He ecstatically tells her,

> You'll be hearing the herons crying out over the black lakes, and you'll be hearing the grouse and the owls with them, and the larks and the big thrushes when the days are warm... And there'll be no old fellow wheezing, the like of a sick sheep close to your ear.

However, Nora has too long cultivated her misery and she is unable to rise to hope. So she insists with hyperbolic despair:

> I'm thinking it's myself will be wheezing
> that time with lying down under the heavens
> when the night is cold,

and exits with self-conscious anguish into the dark and rainy night that so suits her temperment.

Nora Burke as the earliest of Synge's female characters, though never consciously domineering, is certainly manipulative. By virtue of her single-minded adherence to her self-image as a woman of high-minded sensitivity, she hypnotizes three radically different men into wanting to attach their destinies to hers. In her obdurate fidelity to that comic self-image, Nora so captivates them that each man is willing to chance making a fool of himself for her: her husband pretends to be the main attraction at his own wake; Michael Dara, though in the inhibiting presence of a "corpse," pants to marry her; and the Tramp willingly takes up arms to battle provincial minds by offering to become her protector on the road.

Nora Burke, then, is her own woman. However, in dealing with her husband's unreasonable demands, she responds subversively rather than with frank aggression. Synge's next female creation seeks her own will more openly.

RIDERS TO THE SEA (1904)

When Synge turned his efforts to a genuinely tragic theme, he simultaneously created a woman of striking courage, fearsome will and a marked determination to dominate. In Maurya, the central figure in "Riders to the Sea," one senses an indomitable spirit as one watches at close quarters her canny and manipulative interaction with the last man

living in the house. One senses in her a woman who, Lear-like, would wrestle with Nature, hurl back the lightening, and still the tumultuous sea in her instincts to protect her son from its tyranny.

In the course of a hard life, she has lost seven men to the sea. But if, during that time, she has grudgingly recognized that she can neither defy nor control Nature's terrible forces, she has not acknowledged defeat in her struggle to guard her young.

Her last surviving son, Bartley, has become the man of the house. His sense of self, his very identity, rests upon his functioning in that role by providing for his mother and sisters. His determination to ferry two horses to the Connemara Fair during an impending storm represents a practical instance of such functioning.

However, Maurya is determined to subvert his intention in order to insure his safety. She would urge him to be submissive to her, protective of himself.

In Maurya's and Bartley's conflict lies the tragic tension: two goods irreconcilably opposed. She would protect him from death by dissuading him from a dangerous boat trip; he would affirm his selfhood by facing possible death -- lest he learn fear of life.

At curtain rise Maurya gives every appearance of being a beaten old woman. Nine days earlier the sea took her fifth and favorite son and malevolently, has not yet yielded up his body. She is exhausted weeping.

Scuffing slowly from one side of the room to the other, touching occasionally the coffin boards propped against one wall, moaning softly as she gazes out the window to the strand and the rocks beyond, she seems a woman utterly broken in spirit.

But Maurya cannot afford to break. She is marshalling her

energies toward keeping Bartley at home. She knows her efforts to prevent his going have become a monotonous litany not only to him but to her two daughters as well. The elder, Cathleen, points out pragmatically, "It's the life of a young man to be going to the sea, and who would listen to an old woman with one thing and she saying it over?"

Fearing to thus exasperate Bartley and lose the argument by default, Maurya first attempts to strengthen her case by alliance with the priest. Unfortunately, the priest regards her request to dissuade Bartley from the trip as motherly hysteria and merely tells her to trust in God's benevolence.

Flung thus upon her own resources, she galvanizes her failing energies in an eleventh hour bid to reverse her son's resolution to take to the sea -- during the very moments he is making his last-minute preparations to leave.

Bartley comes hurrying up the stones into the house, and her eyes rivet him in the doorway. Instinctively, she turns to psychological warfare. She regards him silently, accusingly. (She has caught him in a dilemma: he knows how much mourning she has undergone in this sorrowful house by the sea. He wants only peace for her in her ebbing days. But on an island, a man must go on the sea to survive. The land on Aran is not hospitable enough to live by farming alone. To survive, he must encounter the sea.) He cannot hold her glance; he turns to his sister and quietly asks for the new rope to make a halter for the horses.

Like one of the furies intent upon paralyzing him with guilt, Maurya says,

> You'd do right to leave that rope, Bartley,
> hanging by the boards. It will be wanting in
> this place, I'm telling you, if Michael is
> washed up tomorrow morning, or the next morning

> or on any morning in the week, for it's a deep
> grave we'll make him by the grace of God.

She won't be sidetracked by his insistence that the boat at the pier is the only one leaving for over two weeks. Instead, she prods his sense of family responsibility. "It's a hard thing they'll be saying below if the body is washed up and there's no man in it to make the coffin."

She attempts to lacerate him with guilt for risking the boat trip during dangerous weather: "What will I live and the girls with me, and I am an old woman looking for the grave?"

Sensing his implacability, she shifts from emotion to reason: the sea is dangerous at the best of times but at the moment, "that wind is rising the sea."

Furthermore, with unnamable terror that can only arise out of superstition, she reminds him that last night "there was a star up against the moon."

Desperately she points out, "if it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?"

Bartley makes no answer to her question. She is right. But he is right too: to survive on Aran, a man must encounter the sea..

Unable to check his determination to go to the mainland with either guilt or logic, she changes tack. She would immobilize him with fear. "It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drownd'd with the rest."

In silence, he changes to a warmer jacket for the voyage. Frustrated beyond tears, she grasps for a mother's ultimate weapon: she will withhold love. As her son stands in the door awaiting her blessing, Maurya literally turns her face to the wall, her back on her

son. In the stillness, the tension is palpable. In the open doorway, lowering clouds threaten, the turbulent surf pounds. But she will not bless him, a son who would defy her.

The wordless conflict is broken by the sound of her son's hasty steps down the cobbled stones that front the cottage.

Though Maurya loves Bartley deeply, she is aggressively determined to dominate him, to make his choices for him. And when she fails to do so, she cannot suppress a rising antagonism toward him. That she resents his recalcitrance is suggested by her description of their next meeting, and even more clearly in her epitaph over his corpse at the play's end.

Cathleen, shocked at her mother's bitter refusal to give Bartley her benediction, talks the old woman into hurrying down the shortcut with some bread and a soft word for Bartley before he leaves. However, the depth of Maurya's resentment is again demonstrated when she returns almost immediately after having encountered her son face to face, but unaccountably stifled her blessing a second time. "I tried to say 'God speed you' but something chocked the words in my throat." Malcolm Pittock suggested there is significant motive behind her action. He offered ample proof of her superstitious nature including the fact that she

> implicitly believes that by predicting Bartley's death, and omitting to say "God speed you" which is here referred to as if it were some superstitious formula, she has brought her son bad luck. 10

Yet so embittered does she feel because Bartley will not be ruled by her wiser judgment, that she refrains from undoing the harm she believes she

---

[10]Malcolm Pittock, "Riders to the Sea," English Studies 49 (Oct., 1968): 447

has done him. (She later maintains that what must have prevented her was a subsequent vision of her drowned son Michael coming behind Bartley, but that seems a bit pat, especially in light of the later barely-disguised resentment in her last words over the drowned Bartley's body.)

During his wake, though nominally accepting the will of God, her words mask a thinly-veiled disaffection for him, especially in her citing the economic implications of his having insisted on taking to the sea,

> It isn't that I haven't prayed by you, Bartley, to the Almighty God. It isn't that I haven't said prayers in the dark night till you wouldn't know what I'd be saying; but it's a great rest I'll have now, and it's time surely. It's a great rest I'll have now, and great sleeping in the long nights after Samhain, if it's only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking.

Maurya then is a woman of enormous emotional strength, sustained through much of her difficult life by a bracing haggith. Unlike the foolish Nora Burke, who uses haggith to side-step life, Maurya adopts it in order to face life. Haggith prompts her to expect the worst, to aver simply, "Bartley will be lost now" almost immediately upon his exit from the house. Her haggith is protective reaction. There is a certain relief in ceasing to worry that the worst will come to pass.

All her adult life, starting with her husband and down to her youngest son, Maurya has sought to dominate the men in her house. The fact that she wanted to do so in order to protect them in no way alters the truth of that basic situation. The fact that she and the men were locked into a dilemma which forced the latter into defying her in order to insure the family's survival in no way diminished her ferocious determination to keep them safe. Thomas Van Laan believed that Maurya

is too passive to be a tragic figure since the sea, the real protagonist, is from the start mightier than she.[11] But even the fact that her struggle, in a larger sense, has been not with the men so much as the implacable sea does not change the reality of her absolute determination to save them. That fact merely contributes to the situation the ingredients of tragedy: a dynamic in which an individual faces the unbeatable foe -- and chooses to fight anyway. The ferocity of Maurya's will to fight remains absolute until Bartley, the last man in the house, actually leaves the house and heads toward the swelling sea. Suddenly, her unfailing will collapses. She intuits his death as a foregone conclusion. And though she was wrestled with fate, implored God, struggled with her men; when her last son is dead, she acquiesces stoically. It's as though the absence of a man to contend with has diminished her somehow: "it's a great rest I'll have now and it's time surely."

A woman of archetypal proportions, Maurya finally is awesome in her contradictions. For despite her lifelong ferocity to keep her men living, once she realizes her struggle has been ultimately futile, she reacts with a startling fatalism about the ephemeral nature of life. It is shocking, for once Bartley's corpse is carried in, we wait expectantly for her great wailing grief to split the ears of the universe. We wait for her studdering abandonment to the only means animal enough to suggest her inexpressible grief: the keen. (In describing the practice of mourners at burials on the Aran Islands, Synge observed that the keen seemed

---

[11]Thomas Van Laan,"Form as Agent in Synge's 'Riders to the Sea,'" Drama Survey 3 (Winter, 1964): p. 353.

> to contain the whole passionate rate that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seem to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with wind and seas. They are usually silent, but in the presence of death all outward show of indifference or patience is forgotten, and they shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of the fate to which they are doomed. 12

However, Maurya reverses the expected pattern. Not for her the howling and keening of the other women who have come to mourn Bartley's death. As she approaches the still dripping body of her last drowned son, she regards him with the stoical detachment of a woman who has no more battles to engage her will, and observes with an almost shocking quietude, "No man at all can be living forever and we must be satisfied."

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD (1907)

After creating two women who are marked by growing strength of will, one within an early comedy and the other within a one-act play that has been called "the perfect tragedy," Synge next explored the glorious world of farce, and therein created his most memorable female character.

Perhaps because she exists within the joyous environs of farce, Pegeen Mike is Synge's most openly domineering woman. Reared in a country backwater off the roaring Mayo coast, she lacks the sophistication to disguise her blunt authoritarianism. She is self-assertive, demanding, and widely reputed as the local shrew.

However, Pegeen's boldness of character reverberates in direct proportion to the timidity of the men in her life. In fact, it is the timorousness of these men that encourages her dominance of them.

---

[12] Corkery, p. 137.

Her fiance is a bit of a simp and her father, a considerable sot.

Her intended, Shawn Keogh, is as hesistant and queasy a soul as one might expect to find in the length of Ireland. Afraid of the dark, afraid of gossip, afraid of the priest, he still seems in wistful shock at having somehow managed to secure Pegeen Mike's agreement to marry him.

Her father, Michael James, is an affable publican (albeit a perpetually thirsty one) who wants nothing so much as a quiet daughter who will leave off nagging him about his responsibilities to her.

The other men she encounters regularly, Philly Cullen and Jimmy Farrell, are too intimidated by her short temper and biting tongue to give her any argument when she orders them about the pub.

With such bland, unprepossessing men, it is little wonder that her natural bend for authority has developed to such a notorious degree.

However, despite her ability to manipulate, command, or simply terrorize the men in her life, Pegeen is a romantic. She is tired of being known as the "girl[who]would knock the head of any two men in the place." She hungers for a man she can respect, a man cast in a heroic mold, a lad with "a mighty spirit and a gamey heart in him." She longs for a bold man, a man capable of violence if need be, "the like of Daneen Sullivan[who]knocked the eye from a peeler," an uncommon man, a man with a poetical way with words, like Marcus Quinn who used "to tell stories of Holy Ireland till he'd have the old women shedding down tears about their feet."

Unhappily, her fiance is neither bold nor poetic; Shawn is an avowed coward and determinedly prosaic. And though she has decided to marry him, she will not turn a blind eye to his limitations:

'you're a daring fellow," she sneers upon learning that he has just left a man groaning in a ditch out of fear to investigate in the dark. In their relationship, it is she who calls the turns. She will not even give him a firm commitment that she will definitely marry him. "You're making mighty certain, Shaneen, that I'll wed you now," she prevaricates. And she makes short work of him when he dares to object to her hiring a young man to help her in the pub. She turns on her fiance unceremoniously and orders him to be still: "will you whisht? Who's speaking to you?" Later when Shawn offers to chaperone her and her handsome new assistant, she is even more peremptory, "you wouldn't stay when there was need for you, and let you step off nimble this time when there's none."

Pegeen has obviously had long practice in speaking her mind. On her father's first entrance, she pounces on him verbally for his plans to go out that night with the boys. "It's a queer father'd be leaving me lonesome these twelve hours of dark." And when she fails thus to engage his sympathy, before all his cronies she loudly announces she simply will not stay alone in his pub, and he can do what he likes about it! The efficacy of Pegeen's ability to manipulate her father is economically pointed by the alacrity with which Michael James agrees to her demand that he hire a total stranger, a "murderer," to keep her company in the pub. That she dominates her father is even more apparent when she browbeats him into approving her overnight intention to marry that stranger. Even though the old man has moments before rushed in in jubilant possession of the Church dispensation permitting her marriage to Shawn Keogh, Pegeen will not be swayed from her intention to marry someone else and orders her father, "bless us now, for I swear to

God I'll wed him [Christy Mahon] and I'll not renege."

Generally, Pegeen's relationship with men is cynical. She assumes a man to be a fool, a rogue, or a liar, till he prove otherwise. When the mysteriously close-mouthed stranger enters her father's shebeen, laconically dropping veiled references to some great crime he has committed, Pegeen is the only one in the room who remains dubious, even sardonic, about his insinuations:

> He's done nothing, so. (To Christy) If you didn't commit murder, or a bad nasty thing, or even false coining, or robbery, or butchery, or the like of them, there isn't anything that would be worth your troubling for to run from now. You did nothing at all.

Christy's impulsive avowal that he did, that, in fact, he killed his father brings a thunderous silence on the assemblage. Patricide! Even in her most romantic fantasies, Pegeen obviously never hoped to encounter such a man. She quickly recovers and in a state of high hope insures his staying by arranging a job for him in the pub.

As she readies a make-shift place for Christy to spend the night, she takes the initiative and begins wooing him. She flatters him; she subtly questions the extent of his prowess with the girls back home; she makes it plain she admires his music with words, his decisiveness, his very violence. "I've heard all times it's the poets are your like, fine, fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused." It is she too who initiates the physical level of their relationship. As she leaves him to go to bed, she touches his shoulder gently and says meaningfully, "well, you'll have peace in this place, Christy Mahon, and none to trouble you, and it's near time a fine lad like you should have your good share of the earth." And from that moment, she wins him utterly.

However, in Act II when she finds Christy at the center of a gaggle of townsgirls, she demonstrates her heavy artillary in keeping him tied to her. She hustles the young women out in a jealous fury and turns coldly on him, ordering him briskly about his duties, "fling out that rubbish and put them cups away. (He does so.) Shove in that bench by the wall. (Christy tidies away in great haste.) And hang that glass on the nail!"

When he innocently tells her he was using the mirror only to make himself presentable for the girls, she calculatingly suggests that such frivilous girls regularly talk to the local constables and with one deft touch she paralyzes any further notions he may have entertained about romancing other local girls. In anguish, he immediately envisions himself dangling from a noose and prepares to take to the road again.

However, seeing his genuine sorrow at the prospect of leaving her, she suddenly re-calls him, and like a mother who has momentarily withheld her love from a fractious child, she reassures him he's in no danger: she has checked the last three weeks' newspapers and found no reference to his crime having been discovered yet. With naive and grateful joy, he asks, "it's making a game of me you were, and I can stay so, working at your side, and I not lonesome from this mortal day?"

Plainly, it is she again who charts the course of their relationship.

However, Pegeen's strong-mindedness has its drawbacks. Her fiance notes that she is possessed by the "devil's own temper." Widow Quinn warns that Pegeen is the kind who when angered will "knock the head off you." Even Pegeen herself acknowledges ruefully that she is the "fright of seven townlands for my bitting tongue." And as deweyed-eyed as Christy is about her, he recognizes with chagrin that when

Pegeen finds out that he has not really killed his father, she "will be turning again, and speaking hard words to me, like an old woman with a spavindy ass she'd have, urging on a hill."

And his intuition is correct. When she learns the truth her response is immediate and outraged at being made "the fool of men." Her ego wounded, she orders him out of her sight and her life. Pegeen's embarrassment and anger at supposing she has somehow been made "the fool of men" is highly significant. For it points plainly that she infinitely prefers having her romantic illusions about Christy's heroics dashed, to the thought that the local men find her somehow silly or pitiable. She finds absolutely intolerable the idea that in the men's opinion she has been the moon-eyed victim of a fast-talking interloper. She has made it abundantly clear throughout that she has little enough respect for the men of the town; nonetheless she cannot bear the idea that they might sneer at her for her infatuation with an articulate and glib liar. And so to prove she is nobody's fool, she headlong leads the local men in physical assault on Christy. Even though her best instincts prompt her to restraint, her vanity will not be reined in and she leads "the terrified locals to rope him like a steer, while she burns him on the leg with a red-hot turf in order to loosen his grip on the hearth."[13] That violent act finally clears Christy's romantic myopia about her and he picks himself up with no little pride and strides off into the sunset and out of her life.

Pegeen, watching Christy's renewed vigor and confidence in himself as he bounds down the path and along the strand about to start a new life, is suddenly consumed with self-pity. Suddenly, the

---

[13]Johnston, p. 38.

recognition of the fine hearty young man she has just lost through her rash and overhasty need to defend her ego overwhelms her. However, even in defeat the dauntless Pegeen's predilection to dominate is in no wit chastened: she greets her ex-fiance Shawn's grateful sigh of relief that the interloper is gone with a sound box of the ear, though she adds a wailing lamentation that by her own headstrong precipitousness, she has "lost the only playboy of the western world."

THE TINKER'S WEDDING (pub. 1908)

Synge's next play was so controversial and offensive to Irish audiences that it has been refused public staging at the Abbey Theatre up to this day. Its burly anti-clericalism is certainly at the heart of Irish resistance to staging it. For the climactic moment of this unruly and merry farce is a scene in which the local parish priest is rudely upended and dumped with dispatch into a burlap sack. Given the progressively more assertive women that Synge has been creating with each new play, it is not surprising that the instigator of this hilarous aggression against the sputtering prelate is a female, and a gypsy female (probably the most despised class in the whole Irish social structure) at that!

The Tinker's Wedding focuses on the formidable Sarah Casey's undaunted attempts to marry the tinker Michael Byrne. But the farce is more properly a paean to the rites of spring than to those of marriage. For in it, the tempestuous Sarah's sudden resolution to be formally wed to her man is as much a result of the headiness of warm weather as the sudden urge for respectability.

Nonetheless, whatever the cause of her unexpected turn of mind Sarah is determined to have her way. The fact that the two men oppose her will, only increases her insistence. A strikingly handsome gypsy, she

is another in the growing retinue of Synge's self-willed females.

Once she settles on the idea of having a proper ceremony to legalize her relationship with her long-time travelling companion, Michael Byrne, she gathers her resources to convince, first, her would-be groom and, then, the disdainful parish priest who wants nothing to do with tinkers.

While she stands at the church gate waiting to ask the priest for a cut-rate wedding, she bullies her hesitant intended to stop his grumbling and finish soldering her tin wedding band. She ignores his argument that a ritual is superfluous since she has been living with him contentedly for some time without benefit of sacrament. She knows his grousing is merely the dispirited grumbling of a resigned man. When Michael sarcastically says that he finds the prospect of waiting for the snobbish priest "a sacred and sainted joy," she aggressively picks up an edge in her voice and threatens, "it'll be a small joy for yourself if you aren't ready with my wedding ring." That she intimidates him is apparent in the alacrity with which he goes back to soldering the tin wedding band in spite of the numerous burns he has already received in working on so small a piece.

Since the moon changed (when she first took the notion into her head to be married), Sarah has firmly brought Michael Byrne around to grudging agreement to the idea of sanctified cohabitation, via periodic threats to run off with another tin-smith. Now, sensing his reluctance about to reassert itself, she prods his jealousy with reminders of how awestruck a certain Jaunting Jim was with her beauty at the last fair. She reminds Michael for good measure, that Jim has a jaunting car so that if she were to take up with him, she would no longer have to cart the pots and tin-smithing tools on her back, but

could ride in style at her trade, like a lady. She adds archly, "Oh, he's a great lad, I'm telling you and it's proud and happy I'll be to see him, and he the first one called me the Beauty of Balinacree, a fine name for a woman." Michael's glum silence assures her she has made her point.

And Sarah aches to be regarded a lady, or at least to achieve the respectability that a proper wedding bestows. When her prospective mother-in-law, Mary Byrne, cackles in gleeful bewilderment at the young woman's insistent plans for marriage, Sarah defiantly cries "I'll be married now in a short while; and from this day there will be no one have a right to call me a dirty name and I selling cans of Wicklow or Wexford or the city of Dublin itself!"

Sarah has a stubborn singleness of vision that makes it difficult for her to change her course even when logic suggests another plan of action. There is sense in old Mary Byrne's pointing out the extraneousness of a ceremony: "What good will it do? Is it putting that ring on your finger will keep you from getting an aged woman or losing the fine face you have?" And though for a moment Sarah is struck by its ring of truth, as soon as Michael adds an impatient and self-rightous post script to his mother's remark, Sarah bristles defensively again.

> MICHAEL
> That's the truth she's saying and maybe
> if you've sense in you at all, you'd have
> a right still to leave your fooling and
> not be wasting our gold.
>
> SARAH
> If it's wise or fool I am, I've made a
> good bargain with the priest and I'll
> stand to it now.

But as hungry as she is for respectability on this blithe spring evening, she is determined to get the best terms she can manipulate from the arrogant parish priest, a man she aptly sizes up as "a big boast

of a man." Seeing him at last returning toward the rectory, and knowing the canon has a great, though discreet, eye for a pretty woman, she whispers urgently to Michael to bellows up the fire. Like a canny stage director, she places herself in the campfire's most effective lighting and accosts the local holy man with her request to be married. Sarah has nothing if not a charming effrontery. At first, she appeals to his generosity by suggesting not only that he marry them without charge but that he contribute a little something toward the cost they've incurred in making the wedding band!

She is alive to his instant exasperation and quickly changes tack. This time she deals with him quite honestly and offers him all the money she has saved, which, unfortunately, is only half his usual fee. In the face of his adamant refusal, she changes to an emotional course and plays shamelessly upon his sympathy. "It's two years we are getting that bit, your reverence, with our pence and our half pence and an odd threepenny bit; and if you don't marry us now, himself [Michael] and the old woman [her prospective mother-in-law] who has a great drouth, will be spending it tomorrow." She breaks down, cries, cites the injustice of a world that makes possible the grace of a sacrament to the rich but denies it to her sort simply because she is poor. The truth of her charge, coupled with her calculated tears, have their effect. The priest grudgingly offers to officiate for the half-price fee, provided they add to it the large tin can Michael has just finished soldering at the fire.

Unfortunately, Sarah's moment of triumph is at that moment turned awry by the untoward return of her future mother-in-law, roaring drunk and singing bawdy ditties. As the curate becomes progressively more

outraged by the raucus old lady's indiscreet familiarity, Sarah's instincts go to work and she improvises on what threatens to be a loss by default. She scurries after the indignant canon and desperately pleads her case: he must perform the ceremony, otherwise he will condemn Sarah to "growing into an old wicked heathen like herself [her mother-in-law]!" Breathless, she watches his wrath soften, and with unspeakable delight, she hears him agree to perform the ceremony.

In an Irish village there is no one man who inspires more respect and kowtowing (however begrudged) so automatically as the parish priest. The canon in The Tinker's Wedding obviously is used to dealing with his parishioners peremptorily and pretentiously. Yet Sarah manipulates him with both charm and skill. Nor is she beyond handling him via rougher means when he becomes recalcitrant.

To wit: the farce's climactic scene earlier alluded to. On the morning of the scheduled wedding, the priest happens upon the two women arguing and maliciously recounting the most recent misdemeanours of the other. He summarily changes his mind about officiating, reasoning that it would not do for a man of his stature to mix with such an amoral lot.

Sarah bounds back into resolute action. Shocked that he would consider breaking his word, she frankly resorts to blackmail: she will file a complaint against him with the one man of whom he lives in terror -- the bishop. Her moral arm-twisting is instantaneously effective. He blusters, gasps, but rescinds his decision.

Nor is that the extent of her daring. Later, near the play's end, when the curate interferes with Sarah's attempt to throttle the old woman for having finally and irrevocably disrupted the wedding, she threatens to batter his holy person unless he clears off; she warns him

he will not be the first man she has essayed to prove her strength upon. "I've bet a power of strong lads east and west through the world, and are you thinking I'd turn back from a priest," she sputters in exasperated fury. Sarah'd boldness in threatening to physically beat the priest is the clarion call to the other two to lay hands on the chubby holy man. After the unholy gypsy trio frenetically tie him up, gag him and unceremoniously stuff him into a huge sack, they delightedly run off down the spring vally while his ineffectual curses echo in their ears. Sarah thus triggers the scene which culminates in what must be the ultimate indignity perpetrated against a priest in an Irish play.

The tempestuous Sarah Casey then is another Synge woman joyously devoted to having her own will, whether that implies inveigling her intended into surly agreement to wed her or readiness to wrestle with the local priest to convince him not to interfere with her life.

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS (1910)

Five out of Synge's six published plays focus on markedly strong women. That his last and unfinished play, Deirdre of the Sorrows, centers on the strongest of them is certainly due to the dramatist's turning back to Gaelic myth and plainly acknowledging the archetypal roots of his fascination for Irish women.

Dramatist Denis Johnston in discussing the mythical material which provided Synge with the stuff for his Deirdre of the Sorrows, observed "it displays a peculiarly Irish attitude toward women that has not been sufficiently remarked upon by scholars....when the great majority of good Irish dramatists come to depict the ripe young Irish female, they do not as a rule show her as a Ministering-Angel-Thou,

but basically as a killer."[14] Though Johnston is on the track of a significant insight, he falters and generalized with a simplistic evaluation that does not at all describe "the great majority" of Irish dramatists. He is absolutely right in sensing the existence of a peculiarly Irish attitude toward women; but it is the assumption that women are frequently the strong-minded partner in relationships between the sexes, not, as he so glibly suggests that "they are killers."

Deirdre is a woman of titanic will. So strong-willed is she that not only men hold her in awe, but other women as well. In answer to King Conchobar's criticism that as her governess, Lavarcham ought to control Deirdre's wanderings in the woods, the old retainer remarks simply, "who'd check her like was meant to have her own pleasure only." For Deirdre is a child of nature given to impulse and delight in the simple life of the primitive wood where the aging King has hidden her till she ripen to womanhood. So close does she feel to the elemental, the primal, the natural, that she is seen visibly to draw sustenance from it. Lavarcham explains why she does not interfere in her charge's daily excursions:

> She does be all times straying around picking flowers or nuts, or sticks itself; but so long as <u>she's gathering new life</u> I've a right not to heed her, I'm thinking, and she taking her will. (italics mine)

Deirdre pulsates with life. It is not difficult to grasp why the heretofore wise King Conchobar persists in his patently unwise decision to have her. An aging man ever aware of the imminence of death, he is captivated by her insistent youth. For Deirdre is too exuberant and headlong to be cautious, even about the dire prophecy concerning her that she would be the cause of "graves everywhere in

---

[14] Ibid., p. 40.

Emain Macha.[15] Her governess has tried to make her tread life more carefully because of it, but to no avail:

> I'm after telling her one time and another, but I'd do as well speaking to a lamb of ten weeks and it racing the hills. It's not the dread of death or troubles that would tame her like.

Deirdre's first entrance serves to re-enforce for the audience the hold she has on the great King. She has come bolting into the rough cabin carrying a bundle of twigs, a bag of nuts, and ready tales of the day's outing only to find herself unexpectedly encountering the High King himself. Nonetheless, she is self-possessed. She brushes aside her momentary astonishment, curtseys, and despite the unseemliness of her too buoyant behavior and dissheveled array, disposes of the twigs at the hearth "without any embarrassment."

Earlier, Conchobar has tried to dismiss Lararcham's warning against the marriage in the belief that Deirdre's willfulness is merely the fresh flush of youth. He even insists he is pleased that his prospective bride is "light and airy." That misapprehension he is made to see immediately by Deirdre herself. Whatever else she may be, she is not "light and airy" with him. The moment he tries to pressure her with innuendo about the unsuitability of woodland frolicking for a future Queen of Ulster, she darkens and states peremptorily, "I have no wish to be a queen."

She is no child playing "light and airy" games with a doting suitor. She can barely tolerate his labored breathing after his trek through the woods to visit her. And though he be High King, she knows

---

[15] Thomas Kinsella, trans., The Tain (London: Oxford U. Press, 1970), p.11.

the strength of her hold over him even to dare indiscreet converation with him. Audaciously, she goads him with subject he fears most:

> A girl born the way I'm born is more likely to wish for a mate who'd be her likeness. A man with his hair like a raven maybe, and his skin like the snow and his lips like blood spilt on it.

She watches him stiffen with anger, ready a bitter retort, then slowly opt for another choice. Conchobar instead chooses to flatter rather than discipline her. She has calculated her power correctly.

But Deirdre will be no more bribed than intimidated. Boldly, she makes it clear how little she regards the old King's greatness and gifts, by an ironic use of parallelism:

> CONCHOBAR
> I have come up bringing you rings and jewels from Emain Macha....What have you brought from the hills?
>
> DEIRDRE
> A bag of nut and twigs for our fires at the dawn of day.

Ignoring her rudeness, the old man thinks to win her with the promise of a place that is "safe and splendid." Ironically, what she craves is more of what she has tasted in the woods, the simplicity of the country not the sumptuousness of the court: "I will not be your queen in Emain when it's my pleasure to be having my freedom on the edges of the hills." Unfortunately, her bluntness succeeds only in firming his decision to make an immediate marriage.

At the great King's silent exit she is momentarily reduced to distracted whimpering, begging her governess to save her from an unthinkable marriage. But then she begins to collect herself. It is as though for the first time confronted with necessity, she discovers the roots of her own strength. She straightens. She rifles through her

agitated thoughts for the outline of a shaping plan. She grasps it, and is suddenly kinetic with energy:

She orders her women to take the tapestries from the chests and hang them, to set the table with wines and silver goblets-- while she wildly pulls from a trunk, gowns and jewels. Her head is spinning: reverberations of the prophecy of her deadly alliance with a young man pit themselves against the threat of a marriage bed shared with a tired old man. She wrestles with the dilemma and wrings an existential decision from its impossible alternatives:

> If Conchobar'll make me a queen, I'll have the right of a queen who is a master, taking her own choice and making a stir to the edges of the sea.

As she expected they would be, the hunting Naisi and his brothers are driven by the heavy rains to seek shelter in her compound in the woods. She frantically throws off her rough country dress, steps into a brocaded gown, manipulates her hair into a series of elegant twists and hastens back to the main room where the three men, apprised of the prophecy concerning her, are about to hurriedly exit. A bit breathless, framed in the doorway's dark silouette, she calls urgently, softly, "Naisi, Do not leave me, Naisi. I am Deirdre of the Sorrows."

The moment is electric. She holds him spellbound with the very information that under other circumstances would turn him to ice, the fact that it is she whose fate will intertwine with his and bring destruction.

Authoritatively, she orders his two brothers to be taken into the next room and dined, for as she tells them simply, "I have many things for Naisi only."

In a headstrong, headlong declaration, she tells Naisi that

since the first time she saw him earlier that day, she has loved him. She has no patience with coyness and no embarrassment at being his wooer, "It's a sweet life you and I could have Naisi. (pause) It should be a sweet thing and have what is best and richest, if it's for a short space only."

Even though Naisi is one of the High King's knights, she seduces him into agreement. Indeed, so compelling is her presence that his two brothers as well agree to put themselves under her sway. Thus she shapes not only the direction of Naisi's life but that of Ainle and Ardan, too, who voluntarily become her bodyguards in exile. Hers indeed is a dominant psyche.

Seven years after the lovers' excape to Scotland, a most paradoxical element of Deirdre's character asserts itself. Though she once used every ounce of her wit and beauty to defy fate, she is possessed by that tempermental attitude which will not permit her to enjoy the fruits of her defiance. She suffers from a philosophic myopia which makes her anticipate the conclusion of her joy at its fullest moment.

The original Deirdre of the myth was politically savvy enough to distrust Conchobar's apparent pardon for Naisi and his brothers and therefore argued fiercely with her lover to refuse the old king's offer of amnesty. It is only when faced with Naisi's stubbornness that she grudgingly agreed to return with him to Conchobar's domain.

But Synge chose to modify the myth in this respect by making it she who actively campaigned to return to Ireland. The playwright obviously wanted to underline in Deirdre's character a thorough going strong-mindedness, which made her the one who consistently made the major decisions about her and Naisi's life

together.

Synge managed this turn-about by investing Deirdre with that familiar Irish temperament that expects the worst inevitably to follow the best of times. That is, he filled her with a sense of haggith.

Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows has spent a gloriously idyllic seven years with Naisi; yet when the fateful word is brought by Conchobar's messengers of the King's dubious offer of a peace, instead of dismissing the malicious old ruler's offer out of hand, Deirdre unexpectedly begs Naisi to accept it. Deirdre has no illusion about Conchobar's sudden claim to enlightened generosity during his golden years; even if she were not aware of the terrible prophecy told at her birth, she knows the old King's temper well enough to realize he is incapable of full and munificent pardon, even seven years after the wound to his masculine vanity.

No, it is something else that impels Deirdre to accept the King's questionable asylum. After years so full of heightened joy and contentment in her lover, the prospect of age and waning passion in the future terrify her. The spectre of their love growing into a commonplace thing is an unbearably painful idea to her. Deirdre would prefer to end their affair at its height than wait for what she senses must be a debilitating denoument. She regards anything less than their current absolute and passionate commitment to the other as a low compromise of her romantic ideal. The unlikely effect of her present loving devotion to Naisi is paradoxically to be "wondering all times is it a game worth playing, living on until you're dried and old and our joy is gone forever."

Naisi is realistic enough to see Conchobar's promise of safe conduct for what it is, a ploy for revenge. When he attempts to

override her compulsion to return with a sturdy, "I said we'd stay in Alba," she regards him solemnly but replies plausibly, "there's no place to stay always." And so strong is her insistence on foreseeing the nadir of their love that she brings Naisi to the same perspective and he observes, "You're right maybe. It should be a poor thing to see great lovers and they sleepy and old."

And remarkably, just as seven years earlier she consciously chose the direction of their life, this time she chooses the circumstances of their death:

> We're seven years without roughness or growing weary; seven years so sweet and shining, the gods would be hard set to give us seven days the like of them. It's for that we're going to Emain, where there'll be a rest forever.

In this respect Deirdre is highly contemporary. She makes a consciously existential choice. She chooses the moment to end their idyl so as to control and shape its significance. They will relinquish their love at its zenith rather than wait the ignobling effects of age and the decline of passion.

However, once back in Ulster and faced with the terrifying reality of three freshly dug graves, Deirdre abandons her philosophical detachment, and desperately hatches a plan to try to save Naisi's life. Face to face with the embittered old Conchobar who for seven sour years has waited for this moment of revenge, Deirdre wildly dredges from within herself the means of stopping him. Such command has she over her emotions that she has the coolness to pull the enraged Naisi from Conchobar's throat; and slowly begins with smooth words to seduce the old King with an idea, a plan, a new order that would encompass a great fellowship between himself and the lovers. Against all odds, her

conscious manipulation of the old King works. Against all odds, Conchobar regards her with doting eyes. He is canny enough to know her honeyed words cover an urgent expedience, "and yet this night when I hear you," he murmurs, "I've small blame left for Naisi that he stole you off from Ulster."

Incredibly then, she is masterful enough, dominant enough, to wheedle a vengeful old man out of his avowed retaliation at the eleventh hour.

Only external circumstances prevent fruition of her effort. As Conchobar is about to extend the hand of fellowship to Naisi and Deirdre, the silence is shattered by the death screams of Naisi's two brothers, irrevocably ending that tenuous moment of peace, and catapulting the rest of them to their final destinies.

In the course of the play Deirdre exhibits a rather easy authority over those around her. So secure has she become in her ability to manipulate others to her will that she makes a fateful misstep. So certain has she become of her psychological ascendancy over her lover, that she indulges in <u>hubris</u>, with the usual tragic consequences. As Naisi whirls out of her arms toward the cries of his mortally wounded brothers, so assured is she of her absolute hold over him that she begs him to ignore them, to spend his last moments alone with her. So uncompromisingly selfish is she in her need to dominate him that she refuses to understand that his honor requires him to go. Instead she deliberately precipitates a scathing argument -- making their last words to one another painfully bitter ones. She suddenly breaks from him and asks him sarcastically "Have you no shame loitering and talking, and a cruel death facing Ainle and Ardan in the woods." Her unswerving demand for total fealty to her finally drives

Naisi to impotent rage as he cries out against her feminine unreasonableness,

> They'll not get a death that's cruel, and they with men alone. It's women that have loved are cruel only; and if I went on living from this day, I'd be putting a curse on the lot of them I'd meet walking in the east or west.

Inexorable, she watches him rush from her, and alone she listens in horror to Naisi's death cries outside her tent.

Upon Conchobar's gloating return, however, she begins to regain some stature when she boldly insists upon the significance of her life, especially that spent with Naisi:

> It was not a low thing to be chosen by Conchobar, who was wise, and Naisi had no match for bravery. It is not a small thing to be rid of grey hairs and loosening teeth. (with a sort of triumph) It was the choice of lives we had in the clear woods, and in the grave we're safe surely.

Seconds later she plunges a hunting kiife into her chest before Conchobar's horrified eyes. Unlike the Deirdre of the original myth who lived for a year as the sulking chattel of Naisi's murderer, Synge's Deirdre makes an immediate conscious choice about the moment she will rejoin her lover. She is insistently existential. She has altered not only the arc of her own life from the High King's ordained plan, but she has also determined the course of Naisi's and his brothers' lives, as well as shaping the last days of the High King Conchobar into those of loneliness and guilt.

THE WELL OF THE SAINTS (1905)

Of Synge's main body of six published plays, fully five of them contain women whose behavior is strong-willed to flagrantly domineering. Of his total output, only in his whimsical comedy The

Well of the Saints is there no evidence of attempted female domination.

Rather, in this, the third of his published plays (1905), Synge focuses on a theme that Pirandello and O'Neill were to make much of: the need for illusion. Rather than struggle for domination, the blind and foolish couple, Martin and Mary Doul, cooperate famously to bolster each's belief about the other's handsome features. A miracle which cures their blindness removes their mutual illusions of beauty in themselves and each other.

Instead of a struggle between the sexes, the tension in the Well exists, as it also does in a number of O'Casey's plays, between young and old, between the confident, cocky and beautiful young and the insecure, defensive, and wrinkled old. The comedy which occasionally takes on a biting edge pits the young, (who are callously truthful about the senior citizens' repulsive hoariness,) and the old, (who quickly learn a kindred malice in reminding the former that a parallel fate awaits them:

> It's them that's fat and flabby do be wrinkled young, and that whittish, yellow hair she has does be turning the like of a handful of this grass you'd see rotting, where the wet lies, at the north of a sty.)

As a result of the bitter disillusionment of seeing each other as decaying and ugly, the Doul's agree to cancel their miracle and go back to the harmonious cooperation that characterized their relationship when each idealized the physical beauty of the other.

With this single exception, however, all Synge's remaining plays center upon women who grow progressively more determined to have their own will. That fact obviously accounts for P.P. Howe's enthusiastic surmise that "the women of the plays are a more wide and wonderful

gallery than the men."[16]

SUMMARY

In considering this systematic progression of the women in his plays from hard-headed resistance to articulate domination of the male, Synge's first female creation Nora Burke represents a clear instance of the woman finding her way. If she finds it difficult in "In the Shadow of the Glen" to express open defiance toward her dour husband, she has found other ways to express her resistance to his jealous attempts to curtail her activities. Nor has she been unaware of the dyspeptic response her opposition effects in him. And if she does eventually cease talking to men who happen by the house in deference to his prohibitions, she gets a good bit of her own back again by venting on him her unrelenting, virtually obsessive, need to melodramatically lament her isolation on the fog-shrouded farm. So positively nurtures her "tragic" self-image. So fond has she become of it that when she is offered release from her sour old husband, she obdurately refuses to enjoy her freedom. In spite of the Tramp's lyrical propaganda, in spite of her husband's cheerful malice in tossing her out of the house thereby making it possible for her to discover a more satisfying life, she insists upon looking through the grey spectacles of haggith: she just knows that the life of freedom is going to be awful! And with the strong-mindedness that can only be called wrong-headedness, she grudgingly follows the Tramp out in his call to the open road. She goes only on her own terms -- determined to be miserable, melancholy and tragic.

---

[16] Howe, p. 162.

In "Riders to the Sea" Synge not only created what Walter Kerr called "the perfect tragedy" but also a woman who had no difficulty whatever articulating her will upon the men in her life. The play focuses on her last conflict, a primal struggle of will with her son that has broad reverberations: "The struggle between Maurya and Bartley is certainly not a static thing, and it becomes a cosmic expression of the larger struggle -- the contest between the cottage and the sea."[17] Despite the implications of profounder philisophic meaning that reverberate through their relationship, the struggle between them is an intensely personal one in which the metal of each is tested in a crucible of ineluctable circumstance. Maurya means to impose her will upon her son; he must relent, must submit to her urging. Relentlessly, she seeks a chink in his armour, a weakness, a vulnerability, in order to break his determination. There is no psychological manipulation to which she will not resort to stop him from going: she would fill him with guilt, shame, embarrassment; she would rob him of his sense of manhood - all to keep him with her. Maurya's will to power over her son is at the dead center of the play's dramatic tension.

Synge's next female creation was to be one neither mutely resistant nor given to subtle psychological warfare in trying to subordinate the man in her life. Pegeen Mike Flaherty is unabashedly aggressive and domineering with all the men in her life: she browbeats her bibulous father, bullies her timorous fiance, nags the locals who frequent the family pub, and subtly manipulates via a variety of wiles the title figure in the Playboy of the Western World.

Though Christy Mahon is of course Synge's focus in the play, Pegeen plays the pivotal role in transforming him from a shy, fearful

---

[17]Gerstenberger, pp. 53-54.

lonesome young man to one who finally realizes his own joyous capacity for life.But the price she would demand for that service is high. In Christy's attempt to heal the loneliness that has marked his life until the sudden notoriety he is delighted to have achieved since his "murder" of his father, Christy confronts a dilemma. If he would wed Pegeen, he would clearly be "exchanging one kind of domination for another." For Pegeen makes it abundantly clear time and time again that he can have her only on "her own overbearing terms."[18] But so enamoured is he of her for even noticing him much less for finding him an entrancing man, that for most of the play he is willing to accept her on those terms.

> It is significant that Pegeen is the first person to offer him violence when he enters the Flaherty cabin, and that she behaves with the most surly possessiveness ("seizing his arm" and "shaking him") when the Widow Quinn makes a play for him. 19

In short, Pegeen is hot-headed and thick-skulled. Nonetheless, she harbors within her a deeply-felt passion for poetry and a romantic hero. So encompassing is her need to find such a hero that she virtually creates such a figure out of the unlikely materials of a Christy Mahon. She wants to see Christy in terms of the rough idols she formed during her girlhood, the disreputable, but thrillingly violent sort like "Daneen Sullivan" or "Marcus Quinn." And indeed so insistent is her need to believe Christy like them, that she convinces Christy he is like them; he begins to see himself through the mirror of her eyes. The sublime irony, however, occurs in the fact that "the

---

[18]Augustine Martin, "The Playboy of the Western World: Christy Mahon and the Apotheosis of Loneliness," in Centenary Tribute to John Millington Synge, 1871-1909, ed. S.B. Bushrui (N.Y.: Barnes and Noble, 1972), p. 64

[19]Ibid., p. 65.

adventurous life she professes to prefer shocks her when it occurs before her eyes, and she turns against Christy."[20]

And so with a brilliant comic twist, Synge withheld the traditional comic ending. Not only does the couple not couple at the play's conclusion, but each sees with striking clarity the implication of their individual choices: Christy looks forward to a "romping lifetime," while Pegeen because of her hard-headed inflexibility realizes immediately the pearl without price she has just let slip through her fingers.

> A disconsolate Pegeen laments, too late, the loss of her only playboy. She realizes that Christy's visitation had presented her with a vivid possibility of passion and poetry and that she has failed to grasp it. 21

In constructing The Tinker's Wedding, a play Donna Gerstenberger would later call an "inferior," lightweight script, "hardly worth staging,"[22] Synge nonetheless produced another vital, stout-hearted woman determined to have her own way. One of Gerstenberger's reservations about the play's quality was the playwright's failure to strongly motivate Sarah Casey's sudden desire to be married (after several years of living with, and several children by Michael Byrne).

But the delicious point is Sarah Casey's stubborn character; the notion to marry is just that, nothing more than a whim brought on by the sudden balmy spring weather. The significant fact is not that her decision to marry is a whimsical one but that once made, she pursues it with enormous determination --in spite of her groom's reluctance, in

---

[20]Ruby Cohn and Bernard DuKore, Twentieth Century Drama: England, Ireland and the United States (N.Y.: Random House, 1966), p. 94

[21]Martin, p. 62.

[22]Gerstenberger, p. 66.

spite of her mother-in-law's hooting sarcasm, and most importantly, in spite of the priest's arrogance.

With both men in the play, her determination to legalize her relationship with Michael is implacable. It is only when the "old flagrant heathen," her mother-in-law, intervenes and is caught upsetting the financial arrangements Sara has made with the priest, that the young gypsy's focus on her marriage is distracted. Then fully in the boisterous spirit of this raucous comedy (and perhaps because of the feistiness that spring air prompts in her) Sarah takes another whim into her head: to thoroughly trounce the wheedling old woman at the gate of the church.

The fact that Sarah Casey makes choices on the basis of whim does nothing to minimize the determination with which she attempts to realize them. It is her glorious block-headedness that brings about the play's climax: the trio's hamstringing the pudgy prelate in a burlap sack. Whatever the limitations of the play, it boasts another strong-minded and domineering -- if frivolous -- woman.

Synge's last play offers a woman with not the least shred of the frivolous about her. Deirdre of the Sorrows, he wrote during the last fifteen months of his life while dying of cancer. During that time he was deeply in love with and engaged to one of the Abbey's most volatile young actresses, Molly O'Neill. He wrote the role specifically for her. Not surprisingly, the play is informed by the double themes of heightened passion and intimations of mortality.

Deirdre is his strongest woman; she is most completely her own woman. "Although caught in the web of prophecy, she is eminently

herself."[23] From the beginning of the play to its conclusion, we watch her strength of purpose grow firmer and her clarity about the meaning of her life grow more lucid. And from the moment she seduced Naisi into an elopement through seven years of bliss and happiness, she never falters in her assurance of the rightness of that choice. It is only "the dread of the natural course of life,"[24] the decline of passion, that makes her consider the mutability of the choice she made that stormy night in Ireland seven years earlier. She suddenly recognizes that she must take action to preserve hers and Naisi's love at its height of glory; i.e., she must end it at its zenith.

"The heroic resolve to settle for all or nothing, for an ideal love or an absolute death is in the grand tradition of romantic tragedy,"[25] remarks John Rees Moore enthusiastically. However, Moore is confused by the way the last movement of the tragedy is initiated. He expects and wants Naisi to be the inciting agent of the concluding action. He forgets that unlike the Red Branch story, this tale is not called the "Sons of Usnach" but Deirdre of the Sorrows. Synge quite deliberately changed his focus from the male to the female. Moore seems to resent a bit of contrast between the decision-making Naisi in the Red Branch saga and the modified role he plays in this modern version. In Synge's play, Moore objects "the complexities of Naisi get short shrift because he is

---

[23]Ann Saddlemyer, "Deirdre of the Sorrows: (Literature First... Drama Afterwards," in J.M. Synge Centenary Papers 1971, ed. Maurice Harmon (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1972), p. 100.

[24]Ibid., p. 97.

[25]John Rees Moore, "Synge's Deirdre and the Sorrows of Mortality," in Centenary Tribute to John Millington Synge 1871-1909, ed. S.B. Bushrui (N.Y.: Barnes and Noble, 1972), p. 100.

the passive character, the one to whom 'things happen' while Deirdre's energy continually forces the issue."[26]

But that is exactly the point. Synge read in the original myth other clues that pointed to Deirdre's powerful will and dominating hold over Naisi (not the least being her physically grappling him by his two ears and taunting him into an elopement), and made a conscious choice to give shape, scope and focus to this important element of her character. In doing so, he made apparent what was often only implicit, the fact that "the full responsibility of action rests finally on Deirdre alone." And in Synge's play, she accepts that responsibility with full awareness of its existential reverberations.

Her final act of will she determines to make suicide, quite simply because after Naisi's murder, suicide represents a clean act, a positive act, a completion, that will raise hers and Naisi's brief life together into the domain of legend.

> She knows that her seven years with Naisi are something priceless and rare, something which Conchobar would give his all to possess, but which neither he nor any figure in the play will ever attain. She knows also their death will forestall decay and prevent the perfection of the dream becoming marred, so they will become a wonder to all people. 28

So she joyously grasps the means of securing immortality for herself and the man she loved. She plunges Naisi's own knife into her heart, aggressively defying for a second time the plans of the great King who split his country into civil war to possess her.

---

[26] Ibid., p. 97

[27] Saddlemyer, p. 100.

[28] Alan Price, Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama (London: Methuen, 1961), p. 102.

CHAPTER II

O'CASEY WOMEN

The Early Period: the Dublin Plays

Sean O'Casey (1880-1964) was a man whose writing career spanned well over forty years, during most of which time he energetically sought to expand what he regarded as the commercial theatre's narrow fascination with "realistic" dramatic conventions. He commented acidly,

> In the theatre of today, realism is the totem pole of the dramatic critics. Matter-of-fact plays, true-to-life arrangement, and real, live characters are the three gods the critics adore and saturate with the incense of their commonplace praise once a day and twice on Sundays in their trimly dressed little articles.

However, O'Casey insisted that "Realism, or what the critics childishly believe to be Realism, has had its day."[1]

John Gassner admired O'Casey's theatricality prodigiously, finding in it a "baroque" quality not seen in theatre since the days of the Elizabethans. Gassner recognized that O'Casey wanted a more lavish, flexible and dynamic drama than "the largely trivial and constricted theatre" of the 1930's, '40's, and '50's which was given over to "neat constructions and small beer feelings."[2] And indeed O'Casey throughout most of his career experimented prodigally with new forms of theatre. He dabbled in Expressionism, Symbolism, and fantasy; he incorporated outrageous cartoon characters side by side with three-dimensional ones; and he explored wildly farcical uses of props and

---

[1]Sean O'Casey, Blasts and Benedictions (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1967), P. 153.

[2]John Gassner, "The Prodigality of Sean O'Casey," in Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays, ed. R. Ayling (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1969), p. 115.

people.[3] Though most critics believe that O'Casey's experimentation commenced with his expressionistic The Silver Tassie, J.C. Trewin found the seeds for his essentially presentational approach to dramaturgy even in his early period tenement plays. Trewin believed even in them O'Casey used an imaginative cross-section of theatrical techniques: "prose, verse, song, dance, incantation, melodrama, slapstick...to drive his message across the footlights."[4]

However, the majority of critics find the early-period plays different from his middle- and late-period plays, generally appraising them as his best drama primarily because of the objectivity of his characterization. Critics find the characters in these plays closer to the "realistic" ideal than those in subsequent O'Casey plays. Vivien Mercier applauds the fact that

> there is hardly a character in the three early plays for whom O'Casey feels either unalloyed admiration or simple-minded contempt -- the two commonest attitudes in Gaelic poetry. Even the admirable Juno appears ridiculous once or twice because of her ignorance.

Mercier continues that when the dramatist ceases to have a divided mind about his characters, his technique suffered.[5]

In other words, critics continued measuring his characters with a "realistic" rule even after O'Casey began working within a broader, non-realistic artistic ideal. Because the dramatist was aiming for

---

[3]Thomas Kilroy, Introduction to Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975), p. 12.

[4]J.C. Trewin, Dramatists of Today (London: Staples Press, Ltd. 1953), p. 62

[5]Vivien Mercier, The Irish Comic Tradition (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1962), p. 240.

different artistic effects in characterization during his middle-and late-period plays than he was during his early period, it is helpful to group analyses of the characters within these three periods.

THE SHADOW OF A GUNMAN (1923)

One of O'Casey's earliest biographers observed that "the heroines are the heroes of his plays."[6]

And indeed he does seem to perceive in women a greater resilience to life's pressures than men. Benstock found that O'Casey's "attitude toward women as stronger individuals remained consistent throughout his career." And certainly in his first full-length play, "the pathetic weakness of Seumas and Donal made Minnie Powell look strong by comparison."[7]

Nowhere is the phenomenon of O'Casey woman as heroine more economically, or more obviously, in evidence than in this first-produced play, The Shadow of a Gunman. In this early experiment with the technique of tragicomedy, O'Casey examines the nature of courage.

The Dublin dramatist sketched the character of Minnie Powell in simple, clean lines to stand in sharp relief against the affected bravery and verbose twaddle of Seumas Shields (pedlar) and Donal Davoran (poet), flat-mates in the same tenement where Minnie livies

Donal and Seumas spend the better part of the play engaged

---

[6]Saros Cowasjee, The Man Behind the Plays (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1964), p. 36.

[7]Bernard Benstock, Sean O'Casey (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1970), p. 74.

in literary name-dropping and intellectual one-upmanship. Much of the play's comic mileage derives out of their earnest consideration of the roots of their present stoic heroism in the face of Ireland's explosive martial law. To wit.

> SEUMAS
> Thanks be to God I'm a daily Communicant. There's a great comfort in religion; it makes a man strong in time of trouble an' brave in time of danger. No man need be afraid with a crowd of angels around him; thanks to God for His Holy religion!
>
> DAVOREN
> You're welcome to your angels; philosophy is mine; philosophy that makes the coward brave; the sufferer defiant; the weak strong; the...

Unhappily, their conversation is rudely interrupted at that point by a burst of gunshots in the alley below, and both stoics are brought promptly, and literally, prostrate with terror.

Compared with the honesty and directness of Minnie, both men are blatherers and irresponsible frauds. They talk continuously, improvidently. Seumas is a dime-store sociologist who berates the "Irish race" for the very faults that are most obviously his own. Donal is almost as enamoured of being mistaken for an I.R.A. gunman as he is of living up to his self-conscious image of himself as poet. He is simultaneously naive and arrogant: during another exchange with Seumas, he swaggers "damn the [common] people! They live in the abyss. The poet lives on the mountain top."

As the men are the talkers, Minnie is the doer.

> Minnie Powell is only on stage for a short while in the first act and makes only one brief entrance in the second; yet she still remains the chief character in the play. She towers above the others because she at least lives up to her illusions and gives her

> life for them. O'Casey does not give her fine words to speak or great thoughts to voice, but he endows her with something finer still -- courage. It is the wastrels and good-for-nothings that are fine phrase-makers; and the incongruity between their words and deeds is a source of continual laughter. 8

She is a thoughtlessly romantic straightforward young woman who wants little more than pretty clothes, an attractive man, and joy in her life. "There's nothin' I'm more fond of than a Hooley," she bubbles animatedly to Donal at their first meeting, intimating she would not be averse to his taking her to such a dance.

For all his sophisticated talk about the aesthetic life, Davoren is quite the innocent about pursuing a sexual relationship; it is Minnie who initiates it. It is she who finds the excuse for entering his room via the transparent device of borrowing some milk. In the face of his initial bashfulness, she asks him "Do you be alone all the day, Mr. Davoren?" and then quite straightforwardly whether he is involved romantically at the moment, "But you have a sweetheart all the same Mr. Davoren, haven't you?" Informed to the contrary, she blithely procedes to flirt openly with him: "then if I'm a charmin' little girl, you ought to write a poem about me."

But for all her lightheartedness, Minnie has iron in her character, too. Unlike Donal she will not be intimidated by what others say of her behavior. She has a healthy self-esteem which enables her to make moral choices and abide by them boldly. When Donal is frightened by her offer to tidy up his room because of the gossip it is likely to provoke, she retorts

---

[8]Cowasjee, p. 37.

> An' do you think Minnie Powell cares whether they'll talk or no? She's had to push her way through life up to this without help from any one, an' she's not goin' to ask their leave, now, to do what she wants to do.

Benstock considers this moment quite revealing of each's true mettle in that "O'Casey often distinguishes the uselessly spineless and the potentially courageous by having his people commit themselves on their regard or disdain for what the neighbors will say."[9]

Perhaps this willingness of Minnie to take responsibility for her own life without an excessive concern about who is looking over her shoulder accounts for Donal's withdrawal from her. Or perhaps his shrinking from her has nothing at all to do with an intimation that her spirit is finer than his own; maybe his rejection of her is nothing more than another instance of fear of sex. For "from Gunman on O'Casey equated the pretty girl in pretty clothes with a vibrant love of life, in significant contrast to the mean existences of sex-fearing males."[10] For whatever the reason, Donal, though a short time before genuinely charmed by Minnie, eventually justifies demeaning her because of her ignorance. Whereupon his crony Seumas hurries to agree with perhaps more pettiness than necessary that indeed she is "an ignorant little bitch that thinks of nothing but jazz dances, fox trots, picture theatres, an' dress."

Despite their glib dismissal of her, it is only Minnie who is capable of decisive, aggressive action.

> The theme of the play concerns true and false bravery. The characters who are truly brave -- Maguire, Minnie, Mrs. Henderson --are not talkers

---

[9]Benstock, p. 74

[10]Ibid., p. 103.

> but doers...The characters who are falsely brave -- Davoren, Shields, Grigson, Tommy -- are all voluble braggarts." 11

When the Black and Tans begin battering down doors in the tenement later that night, both Davoren and Shields are paralyzed with panic at the thought of an incriminating bag of mills bombs hidden in their room. Minnie regards them uncomprehendingly, first at Shields who is breathless in "agonized prayerfulness" and then at Davoren who is prone, "almost fainting on the bed." Suddenly fierce with energy, she demands of the two terror-stricken men "What is it? What have you got; where are they?" Donal is shaken alert and almost instantly hysterical, "Bombs, bombs, bombs; my God! in the bag on the table there. We're done, we're done!"

While the terrifying sound of rifle butts being hammered against a door down the hall reverberates through the room, Minnie becomes quiet, calm and decides with authority "I'll take them to my room; maybe they won't search it; if they do aself, they won't harm a girl. Good-bye ---Donal. [She glances lovingly at Donal, who is only semi-conscious, as she rushes out with the bag.]"

Minnie's fate is concluded off stage. She is caught with the bag in her possession, arrested, and killed trying to escape.

The play's finale is shot through with a masterful sense of comic tragedy. O'Casey

> imposes a distinctively tragi-satiric/pattern on these characters and events. Indeed the play is in some respects an exercise in self-criticism, showing the superiority of feminine instinct to masculine rationalization. The two principal male characters are blighted

---

[11] Robert Hogan, The Experiments of Sean O'Casey (N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1960), p. 31.

by egotism. 12

Neither man can absorb the implication of the young woman's sacrifice. Donal, after paying lip service to his responsibility for her death, quickly slips back into a facile iteration of a favorite poet's catch phrase. A man of shallow emotional and mental responses, he has inured himself to real pain.

O'Casey deliberately gives his clown the play's last moment, With it, Seumas would make Minnie's death not only meaningless but ludicrous, when he complacently attributes its significance to the fulfillment of his superstition about some unexplained noises he heard earlier: "[solemnly]. I knew something ud come of the tappin' on the wall!"

Neither Shields nor Davoren is capable of appreciating Minnie's action. "These two egotists are judged in terms of their reactions to Minnie Powell." Neither realizes

> that Minnie is an embodiment of Cathleen ni Houlihan [the maternal symbol] of suffering Ireland in Irish folklore , that this slum girl treads just as thorny a path as Deirdre of Irish myth or the legendary Countess Cathleen of Yeats' first play. The archetypal quality of O'Casey's central character raises the play far above the level of topical realism. 13

JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK (1924)

More than any other female character, Juno Boyle represents

---

[12]William Armstrong, Sean O'Casey (London: Longman, Green and Co., Ltd., 1967) p. 12.

[13]Ibid., pp. 12-13

the "typical" O'Casey woman in the popular imagination. She it is whom critics idolize as "calm, tireless, heroic;"[14] deify as "aptly named: she does assume universal significance by the end of the play and can rightly be regarded as the 'goddess' or symbol of womankind and marriage."[15]

However, to analyze Juno in perspective, one must dig through the plethora of hyperbolic critical commentary to find the human being beneath the robes of deity too often heaped upon the harried housewife.

Juno Boyle is easily O'Casey's most dominating woman. With the possible exception of Reena Kilternan, the leading woman in his last published play Behind the Green Curtain, no other woman is less subtle about ordering her man about. However, dominance is not a behavior she likes in herself. She knows that though her having taken over the role of head of the house has given her family the only sense of stability it is likely to feel in the teeming Dublin tenement, her functioning thus has also made her abrasive and petty. Juno knows that her perpetual harping on her recalcitrant husband has made her soul shrink somehow. Her purview of life has become as narrow and demeaning as the view from her tenement window. She sees only too clearly that her marriage relationship is built on badgering and lies, nagging and bravado. Jacques Barzun understands her double bind, yet cannot refrain from attributing part of the blame for the family's

---

[14] G. Wilson Knight, The Golden Labyrinth: A Study of British Drama (London: Phoenix House, Ltd., 1962), p. 374

[15] Ronald Ayling, "Sean O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy," in Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. T. Kilroy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 83.

dissolution to her dominance as well as to her husband's irresponsibility: Juno and the Paycock is the story of a family that falls apart because of a shiftless father and a necessarily over-managing mother."[16]

Perhaps the fact that she has become so entrapped and entangled in a debilitating marriage is as much a tragedy as any in the play. More than any other circumstance, her marriage is responsible for her losing the animated and capable self she might have become. O'Casey observes in Act I that under other conditions, Juno would probably be "a handsome, active, and clever woman." However, living in poverty and tied to a man she cannot respect, she now wears a "look of listless monotony and harrassed anxiety, blending with an expression of mechanical resistance."

During the more than twenty years she and Jack Boyle have lived together, she has developed a pattern of bitterness and recrimination that has diminished them both. The fact that her husband is an alcoholic wastrel does nothing to lessen the vague sense of loss she experiences each time she falls into the familiar pattern of sarcastic prodding of the incorrigible "Captain."

When the action opens in a seamy two-room Dublin flat, Juno is waiting for her husband to come home so she can make him his breakfast. An ordinary enough domestic situation, except that we learn almost immediately that Juno is playing not only this wifely role in preparing breakfast, but is functioning as well in the traditionally male role of breadwinner.

---

[16] Jacques Barzun, "O'Casey at Your Bedside," in Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays, ed. R. Ayling (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1969), p. 121.

The man of the house, Jack Boyle, has been unemployed for some months and likely to be unemployed for some months to come -- if he has anything to say about the situation. As even his best friend says of him, Jack Boyle is a man who is constantly "lookin' for work, an' prayin' to God he won't get it."

The traditional roles of man and woman then are unsettlingly confused in the Boyle household. Since Juno paired off with a vain boaster, she has had to head the family herself. Though she has the moral fibre for the role, she is not at all content playing it.

It is with biting, rueful humor that Juno acknowledges her spouse's limitations; she has become a tired, anxious woman whose potential for cleverness has been perverted to a too-frequent resort to caustic irony. To Boyle's avowal that he has not been near the local pub that morning, she inquires sardonically, "Oh, is there a mad dog there?"

There is something especially poignant in the demoralizing effects of her "grousin'" upon both of them. Though she wishes she did not, Juno knows her husband only too well. She knows he does not want to work, but the frustration of having to listen to his latest lie about his intention of job-hunting that day involuntarily draws out of her the familiar stinging retort:

> If there was e'er a genuine job goin', you'd be dh'other way about --not able to lift your arms with the pains in your legs! Your poor wife slavin' to keep the bit in your mouth, and you gallivantin' about all the day like a paycock.

One can very nearly sympathize with the old reprobate Boyle who wants nothing so desperately as to be able to respect himself when he replies hopelessly:

It ud be betther for a man to be dead, betther for a man to be dead.

JUNO
Everybody callin' you "Captain" an' you only wanst on the wather...

BOYLE
Are you never goin' to give us a rest?

JUNO
Oh, you're never tired o' lookin' for a rest.

BOYLE
Do you want to dhrive me out of th' house?

JUNO
It ud be easier to dhrive you out o' the house than to dhrive you into a job!

Her husband's unwillingness to perform this most basic role as breadwinner alternately drives Juno either to nagging him like a fishwife or to ordering him about as though he were an intractable child, as when she premptorily tells him to "G'win and take off your moleskin trousers when you're told!" just before company is expected. He does so.

When the bullied man attempts a quick exit from the flat he has just returned to after an all-night pub-crawl, Juno impatiently denies him permission to leave: "You'll sit down an' take your breakfast, an' let me go to me work, for I'm an hour later already waitin' for you." Like a chastened schoolboy, Boyle sulkily responds he wants none of her breakfast. Finally out of patience with his whining childishness, she whips the frying pan off the stove and into the press with a tart, "Nobody's goin' to coax you -- don't think that."

Nor is Juno above threats to get her husband to accept another job. When the local priest sends word there is a job available for Boyle if he will but apply for it, Juno responds to her husband's familiar claim to a sudden "terrible twinge in me right

leg" with familiar acerbity:

> Oh, it won't be long now till it travels into your left wan. It's miraculous that whenever he scents a job in front of him, his legs begin to fail him,

but adds meaningfully, "Then, me bucko, if you lose this chance, you may go an' furrage for youself!"

Throughout the play, Juno regularly dominates not only her husband but his crony Joxer Daly as well. When both men return reeling to Boyle's flat after a carousal and Joxer observes commiseratingly of the former's marriage that "it's a terrible thing to be tied to a woman that's always grousin'. I don't know how you stick it, "he is thunderstruck to realize that Juno has overheard him, and with the agility of a rabbit his first impulse is to bolt out of her reach posthaste.

Later when both men are a bit more sober, Boyle recovers some of his courage and with the encouragement of his "butty," vows to change his wife's domineering ways,

> Let her hop in; we may as well have it out first as last. I've made up me mind -- I'm not goin' to do only what she damn well likes.
>
> JOXER
> Them sentiments does you credit, Captain; I don't like to say anything as between man an' wife, but I say as butty, as a butty, Captain, that you've stuck it too long, an' that it's about time you showed a little spunk. "How can a man die betther than facin' fearful odds,/ For the ashes of his fathers an' the temples of his gods?"
>
> BOYLE
> She has her rights -- there's no denyin' it, but haven't I me rights, too?
>
> JOXER
> Of course, you have -- the sacred rights of man!

BOYLE
Today, Joxer, there's goin' to be issued a proclamation, establishin' an independent Republic, an' Juno'll have to take the oath of allegiance.

Unfortunately, into this heady scene of self-emamcipation comes the sound of Juno approaching on the stairs. All promises of sturdy independence and mutual support between the two cronies dissolve in panic. Joxer literally jumps out the window on to a nearby roof, and the man who was about to demand an oath of proper submissiveness from his wife, races about the room frantically hiding evidence of Joxer's eating from the family larder.

Not only does Juno browbeat her husband, she sets the tone for the way everyone else treats him. Virtually everyone who holds discourse with Boyle either berates or mocks him. His daughter Mary has so absorbed her mother's assumptions about the old man's irresponsibility that she often no longer hears him when he addresses her. His son Johnny openly abuses his father for making too much noise while dressing. That the Captain feels his whole family has sided with his wife against him is rather poignantly evident in his rejoinder to Johnny: "Will you let me alone, will you let me alone? Am I never goin' to be done thryin' to please th' whole lot of your?" Even casual acquaintances of the family like Mary's former suitor Jerry Devine have cued in on Juno's appraisal of Boyle and dismiss him like a nuisancesome insect: when Boyle with an attempt at fatherly outrage orders him to leave off what appears to be rough handling of his daughter, Devine rudely responds "ah, dhry up, for God's sake," and hurries out after Mary.

Despite the glories of her suggestive name, O'Caseynever

intended this sturdy mother-figure to be a apotheosized to superhuman greatness. As he was careful to clarify his view of women generally: "women aren't nobler than men, but they are nearer to life, more enduring, and usually readier to face things and overcome bad times."[17] Juno then, though more pragmatic, realistic, and decisive than her husband in dealing with necessities, is hardly the paragon of selflessness that many critics have suggested.

For the daily tedium of contending with a lazy husband and his carelessly-crafted lies takes its toll on her. Her reactions become inevitably derisive. When Boyle claims a sudden recurrence of arthritis in his legs would prevent him from climbing ladders that the new job would require of him, she sneers that he can "get wan o' the labourers to carry you down in a hod! You can't climb a laddher, but you can skip like a goat into a snug!"

Despite her sardonic pettiness, there is in Juno that strength of character which enables her to meet each new calamity that circumstance heaps upon her family with unfailing resiliency. That indomitableness is seen best in Act III when events come avalanching down upon the Boyles: the unmarried Mary is found to be pregnant, and the will the family has been relying on for months to get them out of debt is discovered to have been a dud. Whatever disappointment Juno may feel in her daughter, it is quickly covered by a determined solicitousness for Mary's well-being.

In striking contrast, O'Casey shows us Boyle in a state of helpless, sputtering anger at his daughter's "shame." In righteous

---

[17]Maureen Malone, The Plays of Sean O'Casey (Carbondale, Ill.: S. Illinois U. Press, 1969), p. 37.

indignation, he careers wildly between blaming her excessive reading and raging against Bentham who did "this thing to her." But finally it becomes apparent that all his blustering amounts to is concern for his own reputation:

> It'll be bellows'd all over the disthrict before you could say Jack Robinson; an' whenever I'm seen they'll whisper "that's the father of Mary Boyle that had the kid by the swank she used to go with."

Juno's empathy has no hold on her husband's imagination despite her desperate attempt to make him understand that what they will have

> to go through'll be nothin' to what poor Mary'll go through; for you an' me is middlin' old, an' most of our years is spent; but Mary'll have maybe forty years to face, an' every wan of them'll be tainted with a bitther memory.

His adamant response is to put his daughter our of the house.

It is perhaps this inability on his part to be tolerant of another's weakness that finally prompts Juno to cut the cord between Boyle and herself. Seeing at last that he will be "hopeless to the end of his days," she determines to leave him and devote herself to her daughter and her unborn grandchild. Benstock finds her radical decision to walk out on her marriage a sublimely paradoxical comment on the basic distinctions between her and her husband's characters:

> That Juno's humanity circumvents her concentional conformity, while the free-wheeling Captain proves implacable, is the paramount triumph of the mother. 18

And as if to reiterate her unconventional stance, Juno soothes Mary's sudden realization that her child will have no father with the stoutly insistent, "It'll have what's far betther, it'll have two mothers."

---

[18]Bernard Benstock, "The Mother, Madonna, Matriarch in Sean O'Casey," Southern Review 6 (Summer, 1970): 616.

And that feminist viewpoint is one that O'Casey seems to be strongly avowing throughout the play. He seems to be saying more than simply that Juno was a victim of a misalliance with a besotted boaster. In light of the playwright's treatment of all the men in the play, he suggests the Irish male is a loser, capable of little more than fabricating fantasies of self-importance; that he cannot, in short, deal honestly with reality. For all the men prove unreliable, petty, and disappointing. In his view of the differences between the sexes O'Casey may have discovered one of the reasons why the Irish social system has been so frequently termed a "matriarchal" one.[19] Sociologists have observed that often a dominant individual has no real inclination to dominate, but merely fills a vacuum when no one else is willing or able to control or shape a situation's direction. Perhaps that perception explains Juno's tendency to dominate, since some individuals "are gradually pushed up the dominance ladder to define a social situation with a few positive strokes." Though such a person may "feel no personal desire to control other people," like Juno, he may find himself "seduced into assuming a dominant position."[20] The unrelieved weakness of all the male characters in Juno and the Paycock does at least suggest the possibility of a power vacuum in whatever social situations those male operate.

For instance, Joxer Daly, though regularly a benefactor on

---

[19]Ronald Ayling, Introduction to Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays, p. 22

[20]George MacLay and Humphrey Knipe, The Dominant Man: The Pecking Order in Human Society (N.Y.: DeLacorte Press, 1972), p. 84.

Boyle's piddling largesse, demonstrates his pettiness by the delight he takes when he discovers his friend's expected windfall has fallen through. Joxer has resented the Captain's playing the Benevolent Squire these last two months, and gleefully regards the discovery as the fitwages of Boyle's pride. Joxer savors his crony's comeuppance with the measured rime of a two-penny poet as he snears, "Jacky Boyle, Esquire, infernal rogue and damned liar." (Boyle, in a sputtering fury, answers in kind and demonstrates there is some truth in Joxer's belief that the Captain is a victim of his own brand of tenement hubris in his choice of $2.00 words: "I always knew you were a prognosticator and a procrastinator!")

The other man in the Boyle family, Johnny Boyle, though his mother's favorite, is pathetically like his father. Indeed like him, Johnny is desperate for self-respect; yet his actions run perversely counter to his aspirations. For apparently out of jealousy, he became an informer and caused the death of a fellow revolutionary before the play begins. He hides his self-loathing with unrealistic expectation of perfection from everyone else in his family. His response to his sister's pregnancy echoes his father's. "She should be dhriven out o' the house she's brought disgrace on!" (It is ironic that that judgment will be his own as moments later he is dragged from the room to answer charges of betrayal.)

O'Casey makes it a deliberately refreshing experience to compare this typically hysterical behavior of the males in his play with the calm, unsentimental reactions of his women. Though Mary at the beginning of Act III suspects her pregnancy and knows for a fact that Bentham is irrevocably gone, she will resort neither to blaming

her lover nor to futile self-recriminations. With simplicity and directness, she reflects upon her reasons for her affair with the Englishman. "The best man for a woman is the one for whom she has the most love. And Charlie had it all." Unlike any of the men, she accepts responsibility for her actions.

Bentham is simply another example of the unreliable male in O'Casey's world. Though both Mary and Juno are initially impressed with his ambition and promise of success, he too disappoints them. He lacks the stamina to face the Boyle family and admit the fiasco he has made of the will. He takes the easy way out and embarks for England without the kindness of an explanation. The revelation of his cowardice wrenches from Juno the reverberating question: "Ah, is there not even a middlin' honest man left in the world?"

In the character of Jerry Devine, O'Casey seems to offer momentary respite from his all-encompassing picture of the Irish male as hider-from-reality. Through a masterful use of ironic reversal, however, O'Casey uses Devine only to heighten his largely denigrating view of men.[21] When the Boyle family's fortunes have reached their lowest ebb, Mary's former sweetheart quietly enters, fairly bursting with the desire to demonstrate his love and humanity. In spite of all, he wants Mary back; he loves her more than ever. They are both young

---

[21]Irish literary historian Frank O'Connor observes of the tenement plays that "what unifies these three great plays and distinguishes them from all of O'Casey's later work is the bitter recognition that while the men dream, drink, drivel, dress up and go play acting, some woman with as much brains and far more industry sacrifices herself to keep the little spark of human life from going out altogether. They are hymns of praise to women, hymns, I should say, above all to his dead mother." A Short Literary History of Ireland. (N.Y.: Capricorn Books, 1967), pp. 218-219

enough, he tells her, to forget the past. For a brief moment it seems as though she can place hope in this earnest young man -- until she realizes he does not know the whole truth. As the fact of her pregnancy dawns on him, all his new-found "Humanity" dissipates in the face of this evidence of Mary's very real humanity. Shocked, unbelieving, he whispers to the woman he loves more than ever, "Surely to God, Mary, you don't mean that...My God, Mary, have your fallen as low as that?"

And Mary, faced with one more instance of the unreliability of the men in her life, answers ruefully, "Yes, Jerry, as you say, I have fallen as low as that."

After that encounter, Mary momentarily loses hope and questions the existence of God, but Juno never falters and sharply brings her daughter back to reality. "These things have nothin' to do with the will o' God. Ah, what can God do agen the stupidity of men!"

Unlike the men in her life then, Juno has the ability to look at life uncompromisingly. Unlike her husband, she takes responsibility not only for her own life but for those she loves. Perhaps she goes too far in trying to manage her irresponsible spouse, but dominating him must, at times, seem like her only alternative to induce him to behave maturely. When she realizes she will never be able to convince Boyle to take responsibility for himself, she leaves him. As painful as that insight is after twenty years of trying, she faces it nonetheless and accepts it realistically.

It is in her ability to face a bleak future realistically that she towers over not only her husband but all the men in the play. In her realistic outlook, she will transcend the hard facts of slum life by enduring them.

Indeed, as she leaves the tenement with her daughter for the

last time, she might repeat an earlier remark that seems to hold within it the essence of her character; it's "time we had a little less respect for the dead, an' had a little more regard for the livin'."

THE PLOUGH AND THE STARS (1926)

Nora Clitheroe is another O'Casey woman who quite persistently attempts to direct her husband's life, even if she does so with considerably more coyness than Juno.. In addition she is equally determined to order the lives of the other men in her life, the Covey and Uncle Peter who share the tenement flat with her and her husband.

In point of fact, she is the talk of the neighborhood because she quite high-handedly treats the roomers like schoolboys:

> She has th' life frightened out of them,
> washin' their face, combin' their hair,
> wipin' their feet, brushin' their clothes,
> thrimmin' their nails, cleanin' their teeth --
> God Almighty, you'd think th' poor men were
> undhergoin' penal servitude.

William Armstrong was greatly amused at the economical way the dramatist uses this tendency in Nora to take potshots at the "excessive love of patriots for picturesque regalia and military ranks"; while helping her self-important Uncle Peter to dress for a parade, "she makes his vanity seem like that of a small boy when she buckles his sword for him, puts his hat on his head, and hurries him out of the house.[22]

Upon her first entrance, the young housewife reinforces this image of herself as nursemaid to two battling bachelors when she scolds them for their perennial arguments:

---

[22]William Armstrong, "The Sources and Themes of The Plough and the Stars, Modern Drama 4 (Dec., 1961), p. 237

> Are yous always goin' to be tearin' down th' little bit of respectability that a body's thryin' to build up? Am I always goin' to be havin' to nurse yous into th' hardy habit of thryin' to keep up a little bit of appearance?

Though younger than the Covey and young enough to be Peter Flynn's granddaughter, Nora is accepted as mother-mediator by both of them. She regards the Covey like a little boy who must constantly be reminded of his responsibilities. "Willie," she asks during his reading of a philosophical treatise, "is that the place for your dungarees?" Willie mutters exasperatedly but retrieves them from the floor. And when he prepares to go out she reminds him,

> Willie, brush your clothes before you go.
>
> COVEY
> Oh, they'll do well enough.
>
> NORA
> Go and brush them. The brush is in the drawer.

He mutters under his breath but does as he is told.

However, it is in her relationship with her husband Jack that we see the extent of Nora's functioning <u>in loco matris.</u> The same neighbor who acerbically noted her peremptory manner with her two lodgers observes how patently relieved Nora was when Jack apparently lost interest in the dangerous Irish Citizen Army some months earlier when he was passed over for an officership.

> I'm telling you herself [Nora] was delighted that the cock didn't crow, for she's like a clockin' hen if he leaves her sight for a minute.

She is cloyingly protective of Jack's safety. When her husband goes to fight in spite of her efforts, Nora takes to the street barricades herself to find out if Jack has been wounded in combat; afterwards she recounts

her furious encounter with

> one blasted hussy at the barricade [who] told me to go home an' not be thryin' to dishearten th' men. That I wan't worthy to bear a son to a man that was out fightin' for freedom. I clawed at her, an' smashed her in the face till we were separated. I was pushed down the street, an' I cursed the rebel ruffians an' Volunteers that had dhragged me ravin' mad into the sthreets to seek my husband.

She is desperate to keep him secure from harm because she earlier sensed the depths of his fear of fighting, just as she sees it again in the eyes of his fellow rebels at the barricades:

> I tell you they're afraid ... Oh, I saw it, I saw it Mrs. Cogan ... At the barricades in North King Street, I saw fear glowin' in all their eyes.

Since well before she married him, Nora has disapproved of her husband's infatuation with the rhetoric and regalia of rebellion. Consequently, she has never abated her efforts to manipulate him away from citizen army activities. Her methods of redirecting his interests are naively obvious: insistent disapprobation of Irish Volunteer Army principles and members. For when Clitheroe tries to win her over to attending a candle-light parade by the Army that evening, she responds coolly, "I won't go, Jack; you can go if you wish." When he good-naturedly persists by suggesting the parade will offer her a good chance to see an old beau "swanking it" since his promotion to Captain, she handily turns inside out both his attempts to manipulate her and his envy of the promoted man by remarking of the officer: "He may have been [sweet on me]. I never liked him. I always thought him a bit of a thick."

Nora discourages not only his enthusiastic talk about the Army, but even his thinking about it. With bitterness she observes,

> You were thinkin' of th'meetin', Jack. When we were courtin' and I'd want you to go, you'd say, "Oh, to hell with meetings" and that you felt lonely in th' cheerin' crowds when I was absent. And we weren't a month married when you couldn't keep away.

In her efforts to turn his patriotic inclinations to domestic ones, she is not above lacing his swollen ego with some hard home truths about his inconsistent attitude toward the Army. For instance, when he exasperatedly reminds her he resigned from the Volunteers at her behest, Nora implacably points out "ay, you gave it up -- because you got the sulks when they didn't make a Captain of you. It wasn't for my sake, Jack."

During the same spat, she also needles him about his expectations that she do his menial cleaning simply because she is a wife, even though, like him, she holds a full-time job. When he tries to kiss her out of her pique, she carefully removes his arm from around her and says meaningfully,

> Oh yes, your little, little, red-lipped Nora's a sweet little girl when the fit seizes you, but your little, little red-lipped Nora has to clean your boots every morning all the same.

Jack finds himself guiltily in the wrong again.

But Nora's desire to be liberated from demeaning work is not her primary concern, merely a diversionary tactic to fuel his guilt about wanting to return to Volunteer Army activities. Also, she is quite anxious to distract him from thoughts of attending tonight's general meeting, especially since she had the temerity to destroy a letter informing him of his promotion to the officer's rank he so covets.

Consequently, she deliberately sets about righting their tiff by seducing him out of his irritation. She coaxes him, flirts with him,

easily charms him out of his funk, and in a trice has him softly singing a love song to her before the fire, as he used to do before they were married. Nora has persistently relied upon her sexuality to manipulate Jack to her wishes -- a fact which the neighbors have noted with puritanical disapproval. Mrs. Gogan is chagrinned to recall that it was impossible to go to their flat but "you'd feel, instinctive like, that they'd just been afther kissin' and cuddlin' each other." And Bessie Burgess adds sardonically of Jack's sensual dependance on Nora, "General Clitheroe 'd rather be unlacin' his wife's bodice than standin' at the barricade." (In fact, when Nora herself is most nearly overcome with futility about finding Jack again amidst the chaos of a beseiged Dublin, she is suddenly filled with the hope by the memory of her sexual hold over her husband:

> Oh, I know that wherever he is, he's thinkin' of wantin' to be with me. I know he's longin' to be passin' his hand through me hair, to be carressin' me neck, to fondle me hand and to feel me kisses clingin' to his mouth.)

Exactly how determined Nora is to keep her husband out of the ranks of the Volunteers is seen in the moments following the interruption of the idyllic love song before the fireplace. An irate messenger from the I.V.A. pounds on the door wanting to know why "Commandant Clitheroe" has not yet taken charge of his batallion for the night's parade. She responds self-righteously to her husband's ire upon learning she was informed of his promotion over two weeks ago. So resolved was she to keep him out of the potential danger that surrounds the costumed heroics of the Volunteers, that she not only withheld the news from him but, she informs him she "burned the letter" as well.

She refuses to be browbeaten by Jack's wrath. She forthrightly counters with a fury of her own and accuses him of frivolous

patriotism:

> Am I goin' to be only somethin' to
> provide merry'makin' at night for you?
> Your vanity'll be the ruin of us yet.
> That's what's movin' you: because they've
> made you an officer of you, you'll make a
> glorious case of what you're doin',
> while your little red-lipped Nora can go
> on sittin' here, makin' a companion of
> the loneliness of the night.

But this time her attempts to dominate him come to grief, because she tactlessly upraids him in the presence of a fellow officer. Unfortunately for Nora, Jack feels the pressure of his colleague's unspoken disapproval more than the impassioned words of his wife; and in an effort to assert his authority as the man of the house, he gives her a tongue lashing and exits in high dudgeon for the meeting she has exerted such effort to keep him away from.

Yet even in the fact of this disappointment, Nora maintains that independence of spirit and mind that distinguishes her from her vain, romantic husband. Unlike the rather ingenuous Jack who swallows patriotic cant uncritically, Nora sees through most of the patriotic assumptions operative since Easter Week fighting broke out between Acts II and III. Like Minnie Powell, she will not bow to peer-group pressure. She categorically refuses to accept the popular platitudes about the nobility of woman's particular contribution to the war effort:

> No woman gives a son or a husband to be
> killed -- if they say it, they're lyin'
> against God, Nature and against themselves.

When a guerrilla skirmish unexpectedly brings Jack past his tenement flat, Nora musters all her frantic energy to convince him to stay with her and their expected child. Deirdre-like, she is fiercely uncompromising in demanding he turn renegade no matter what the demands

of honor.

> No, I won't let you go! I want you to be thrue to me Jack...I am your dearest comrade; I'm your thruest comrade...They only want the comfort of havin' you in the same danger as themselves.

In her overweaning love for him, Nora has the courage to do the unseemly, to appear shameless in her distracted search for him along the shelled barricades. By contrast, like Donal Davoren and Seuman Shields, Jack is terrified of what people will think. Instead of being touched by her worry, he is shrilly embarrassed at what his mates will think:

> What possessed you to make a show of yourself like that?... They'll say now I sent you out th' way I'd have an excuse to bring you home. Are you goin' to turn all the risks I'm takin' into a laugh?

So concerned is he of the opinion of his watching comrades that he violently breaks her grip on him, throws his pregnant wife to the ground and hurries off with them. Afterwards, she loses their child and her mind with it.

Though some critics have found this turn of events memodramatic (Robert Brustein observed that "Nora's insanity has always seemed like rotogravure to me."[23]), her madness is a likely enough result of the anxiety she has endured during several days of shelling on the city and the miscarriage. Her insanity represents a retreat before her total failure to understand her husband's need for male approval. She interprets his returning with his fellow soldiers as a rejection of her and, possibly, an abandonment of the child. For the first time, she is

---

[23]Herbert Blau, The Impossible Theatre (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1964), p. 208

unable to manipulate Jack:

> she is helpless before male fear of dishonor, which in effect is at the bottom of hopeless but stubborn resistance of Clitheroe and his colleagues against impossible odds. 24

For all her love of Jack, however, Nora does not respect him; at least she does not respect his right to autonomous decision-making. She would keep him safe at the expense of tearing down his fragile sense of self.

On the other hand, Jack does not understand her sense of vulnerability in being left alone in a chaotic, beseiged city during her first pregnancy.

Nonetheless David Krause finds Nora "heroic"[25] in her own way. For as short-sighted, selfish, self-righteous as Nora is, she certainly ranks among those women who possess

> the only kind of untainted heroism that O'Casey recognizes. These women are his Ireland. They are not the patriotic Ireland that made an exhilarating epiphany of the ritual of bloodshed. They are not the romantic Ireland that idealized Kathleen ni Houlihan of the beautiful green fields and the harp. They are not the sweet blushing coleens whose fabled existence is exalted in the guise of the State Irishwoman. They are the Ireland of the tenacious mothers and wives, the women of the tenements -- earthy, shrewd, laughing, suffering, brawling, independent women. 26

---

[24] Malone, pp. 13-14

[25] David Krause, "Sean O'Casey and the Higher Nationalism" in Theatre and Nationalism in 20th Century Ireland, ed. Robert O'Driscoll (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 130.

[26] David Krause, Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work (N.Y.: Collier Books, 1962), p. 104

The Middle Period: Experiments in Symbolism

The plays of O'Casey's middle period present a problem for the critic analyzing character and character relationships. For during this time, the playwright was experimenting with form. Gone was his careful creation of quirky, contradictory and idiosyncratic individuals that characterized his gallery of tenement people in the first three Dublin plays. In their place he introduced two-dimensional figures, symbols rather than people, who function in the service of thesis. During this middle period, he was interested in character only as it could serve as a vehicle for his ideas. From The Silver Tassie, through Oak Leaves and Lavendar, The Star Turns Red and Within the Gates, O'Casey was inclined to "use" his characters rather than permit them to use the time and space of the play's action to define themselves as unique individuals. His characters are primarily symbols, not people. In consequence, though O'Casey often attributes strong-minded qualities to the woman in these plays, analyzing these characters is a frustrating endeavor since one must always bear in mind that the characters are not self-sustaining creations but most frequently tools of the author's opinions.

THE SILVER TASSIE (1928)

O'Casey's pacifist play is one full of paradoxes. Its expressionistic second act is as powerfully theatrical an indictment against the dehumanizing effects of war as any written. Its remaining three "realistic" acts, however, are flawed by his use of characters who are closer to puppets than people, characters, in short, who function as propaganda tools. As Yeats tried to make O'Casey understand when he rejected the play for Abbey production, O'Casey had used

his characters as coat hangers for his own opinions. "Dramatic action is a fire that must burn up everything but itself.... Among the things that the dramatic action must burn up are the author's opinions."[27]

Despite the working-class playwright's belief that Yeats' critique was biased by aristocratic snobbery, Yeats' assessment of one of the play's serious problems has been echoed by critic after critic. G. Wilson Knight objected to the tentativeness of the characterizations; with the exception of Harry Heegan, Knight felt "the artistic purpose has temporarily lost all contact with human individuality."[28] Critic Maureen Malone, focusing on the social and political background of the plays, mourned the fact that Tassie's characters

> have lost much of their individuality in comparison with the working-class people in the early plays. Simon and Sylvester have nothing of the idiosyncratic personalities of Boyle and Joxer, while Mrs. Foran and Mrs. Heegan are vague sketches compared to Juno and Bessie Burgess. 29

She found that "the detailed lines of individuality in character" pale, so that the dramatis personae "form a collective representation of the working class rather than so many highly individualized characters."

This problem in sketchy characterization especially affects the women. Not only are females rendered by O'Casey as straw women, more importantly, they are never really "in relationship" with the men in the play. O'Casey believed that men who had experienced the chilling horror of war were inevitably alienated from those back home who had not. As a result,

---

[27]Ibid., p. 138.

[28]Knight, p. 375.

[29]Malone, p. 44.

> None of the women in the play seem to understand the "sacredness of life" or the tragedy of war. O'Casey here departs from his earlier sympathetic treatment of women because he is writing about an aspect of war which is not directly their tragedy, the holocaust of the battle front. Also, the insensitivity of the woman increases the tragic isolation of the soldier, for it is their tragedy, their play. 30

For significant thematic reasons then, O'Casey made an artistic choice which precluded women functioning organically in this play. Because of that, there is little point in analyzing those two-dimensional women.

WITHIN THE GATES (pub. 1933)

The form of Within the Gates, unlike the preceding play, represents O'Casey's full profession of symbolism. And though none of the characters is Irish, the often claustrophobic religious atmosphere is, as well as the rhetorical ambiance. The play "probably owes as much to public meetings and crowd arguments in Beresford Place and Stephens' Green, Dublin, as to London's Hyde Park."[31]

All the characters function as symbols, of "the moral degredation and decay that characterized the Depression following World War I."[32] Maureen Malone continues that throughout, "O'Casey insists that the virtues of youth, joy and vigor -- both physical and mental -- must be used to combat the encrouching deadness of modern

---

[30]Krause, Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work, p. 150.

[31]Ayling, Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays, p. 27.

[32]Malone, p. 55.

life."[33]

Jannice, "the Young Whore" is O'Casey's central focus, and once again his empathy for women is evident. But unlike the women in the Dublin trilogy, Jannice is another sort of woman entirely. Whereas the other three women's characters were informed by a strong sense of self-esteem, Jannice has been so psychologically wounded by her early upbringing that her sense of work is badly maimed. She

> suffers as the principal victim of the forces O'Casey is exposing; at the same time she clearly stands out from the other characters because of her courage, vitality, and heightened self-consciousness. 34

She is the "compleat victim," opressed by religious propaganda, social ostracism, and class structure. The remarkable thing is that she resists. That she fights to assert her value as a human being might seem to place her in the ranks of strong-minded O'Casey women. However, Jannice could never be construed as either dominating or self-directing. So long has she been oppressed that she is incapable of making independent moral judgments. In fact, O'Casey structures the play so that she is cleanly centered between the influences of the conventional Bishop and the unorthodox Artist. Ultimately, she chooses the Artist's philosophy of life, but certainly not out of clear-headed preference. The Artist loves her, cares for her more than the Bishop. Jannice, like an insecure child, runs to the authority figure who offers her the greater solace. She has been battered for too long by intolerant narrow-minded Christians; she is no longer capable

---

[33] Ibid., p. 61

[34] Herbert Goldstone, In Search of Community: The Achievement of Sean O'Casey (Cork: Mercier Press, 1972), p. 97.

of rising to independence.

THE STAR TURNS RED (1940)

O'Casey's hymn of hope for Communism's liberation of the oppressed worker, The Star Turns Red is often rich with raw theatricality though its characters, too, are insufficiently fleshed out. They relate to one another not in human terms but as mouthpieces for the opposing points of view O'Casey saw vying for political power in Ireland (and all of Europe as well) in the 1940's -- Fascism and Communism.

Though Herbert Goldstone thinks the play has been too readily dismissed as inferior dramaturgy, to my mind his reasons for pleading reevaluation serve only to further condemn it as propaganda. For instance, though he finds the old parents' arguments reminiscent of those of Juno and Boyle, however, he notes,

> O'Casey is more concerned with alerting people to a terrible danger, that of Fascism, and at the same time inspiring people to believe in the real, dynamic visions of Marxist laborite James Larkin. 35

None of the women characters really breathes. And though the Old Woman (the expressionistically nameless mother of Communist Jack and Fascist Kian) is given to sardonically bickering with her husband, she "is not really an individuated person but merely a representative of a complex number of attitudes indicative of the mother prototype." Bernard Benstock continues that her character seems "to fragment into unresolved contradictions." Though "she seems as contemptuous of [her husband] as Juno is of Captain Boyle, ...she lacks Juno's strength of character and independence and emerges as a travesty of a dutiful wife."[36]

---

[35] Ibid., p. 119.

[36] Benstock, "Mother, Madonna, Matriarch in Sean O'Casey," pp. 620-21.

Julia, too, becomes a victim of the playwright's excessive concern for his theme. Though she has enough bald courage to slap a military bully who threatens her man, she is, finally, nothing more than a puppet O'Casey never quite got around to investing with independent life, so enamoured did he become of his Marxist aspirations in this play.

> In his intense feeling for the cause, O'Casey had lost much of his sound common sense, his humor, and his judgment of human values. Unlike Nora Clitheroe, Julia is expected to be consoled by the glory of the cause for which her lover is sacrificed. 37

Unfortunately, not just the women lack flesh-and-blood dimension. The Fascist men are gratuitously vicious, while the Communist males too oftem seem ingenuously idealistic, particularly Red Jim. As even H. Goldstone, who for the most part regards the play indulgently, must finally summarize it, The Star Turns Red is

> an expressionistic vision of a violent conflict between Fascist-clerical forces and Communist workers, which has a Communist leader who on occasion resembles Superman, some wildly implausible action, and some turgid rhetoric. 38

Though several scenes in the play would probably be emotionally powerful as spectacle at a Moscow May Day theatre festival, to a less partisan audience, O'Casey's failure to create independent characters makes the play, finally, naive and unsatisfying.

---

[37] Malone, p. 68.

[38] Goldstone, p. 3.

OAK LEAVES AND LAVENDAR (1946)

Oak Leaves and Lavendar is a muddled play, a potpourri of familiar O'Casey ideas never quite integrated within the minds and impulses of living characters. Again there are those who espouse a joyous pleasure in the sensuous moment; again there is the young man with the instincts of a poet vociferously supporting Communism as the hope of the worker; again there is the chaos that befalls the civilian during war. However, in this play O'Casey abjures the pacifist stance that informed his play about World War I, The Silver Tassie. Set in west country England during the Second Wold War, Oak Leaves makes it clear that though still horrible, some wars are necessary.

As in Star and Tassie, O'Casey stumbles again with characterization. Maureen Malone, echoing an earlier Yeats critique of O'Casey, dismisses this play as a

> strange mixture of undigested opinions and ideas, none of which has been burned up by dramatic action, and its failure is of the same kind and attributable to the same causes as that of The Star Turns Red -- it is a piece of propaganda masquerading as drama, and would have been happier in the form of a political tract. 39

Vivien Mercier considers Oak Leaves among O'Casey's "worst plays." The critic contends that the playwright's "attempt to provide his drama with an idealogical foundation and an avant-garde manner (one which was already passé) very nearly ruined O'Casey for good."[40]

Though the play abounds in active, strong-minded, even

---

[39]Malone, p. 73.

[40]Vivien Mercier, "O'Casey Alive," Hudson Review 13 (1960), p. 632.

domineering women, none is really human; they are merely tools of the author's opinion, for as David Krause saw the problem, O'Casey had "allowed his political 'opinions' to dominate his artistic judgment."[41]

The most obvious puppet is the abrasive, stridently dogmatic Deeda Tutting, who engages in a vehement diatribe against the young Irishman Drishogue O'Morrigun when he will not agree with her that England and the United States should align themselves with Hitler against the menace of Stalinist Communism:

> Are you listening to this miserable, besotted, and belated nonsense! Don't be a fool, man! I've seen them [the Red Army] and I know -- a deformed, ill-nourished, tatter-clad crowd! Their rifles are soft-tube toys; the wings of war planes fall off in a sturdy wind; their guns melt away after a few shots; and their tanks crumple into scrap when they strike a stone in the roadway.

If the compulsiveness of her argument does not signal us that she is a symbol rather than a woman, the next phase of the altercation makes it eminently clear, when O'Casey employs naive, flag-waving rhetoric by the young Communist to silence her frothing fascism.

> DEEDA
> I will be glad, delighted, overjoyed at its [Communism's] overthrow! If there is any honesty or truth left in us, we'll be at war with them soon to sweep away the horrid falsity of them and their masters!
>
> DRISHOGUE
> [springing to his feet -- fiercely and loudly] Woe unto any nation making war on the Soviet Union! She will slash open the snout and tear out the guts of any power crossing her borders.

---

[41] Krause, Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work, p. 211.

The play's main female character, the aging Dame Hatherleigh, though a bit dotty on the subject of the lost tribe of Israel, demonstrates considerable courage in the face of crisis. When drink-maddened Abe Penrhyn brings an unexploded bomb into her house, she is the only one with presence of mind. While the Home Guard stand paralyzed with fear or run to take terrified cover, the old lady enters slowly and asks

> What is this I hear you have, Abe? You must carry it to where it can do no harm. The house must change; but it must not die. [She lays a hand on Abe's arm.] Each of us is very near the other now. Your home is gone; mine is going.
>
> ABE
> Us's a wicked daughter, ma'am, and she's brought a double woe on us.
>
> DAME HATHERLEIGH
> Your daughter's a fine girl, Abe. She must look before her; we can only look behind.... Come, my friend -- we shall go together.

She quite deliberately and slowly takes him outside.

The source of his worry is Monica Penrhyn, his daughter who is characterized by a certain straight-forward honesty. She it is who leads her sheepish lover out of a sense of guilt after their first night together, "Don't look so glum, dear. We haven't done anything so terrible as you may do before long: isn't it nobler to bring one life into the world than to hunt a hundred out of it." And when her fundamentalist father discovers her in her nightdress with Drishogue and calls down the wrath of God and her dead mother's shame upon her, she declares her independence from his cold and strict sway, fiercely falling back into her native Cornish dialect:

> Not since mother left 'ee for ever, when I was ten, ha' I been near you as daughter or friend, and am no more; no, never. Dame Hatherleigh has had to do for me f'r mother

an' feyther since. [More fiercly] Get away from me; get far away from me lover 'n' me.

She subsequently defies Drishogue's father as well, secretly marrying her lover to have a child conceived by him before he goes to war. When the elder O'Morrigun mourns after Drishogue's death that "a cap-badge an' a few buttons are all that's left of my boy!" Monica insists,

> There's more to come; a living spark from himself that will soon be a buoyant symbol of our Drishogue who is gone!
>
> O'MORRIGUN
> [his puritan nature asserting itself]. Oh! that was wrong of him! I knew something dangerous would come of the two of you bein' so often together.
>
> MONICA
> [fiercely]. It was right and proper of him, for I wanted a pledge of all he meant to me; and I got it; and I'm glad. Besides, we were married a month ago at a registry office; but his dad and my dad were so contrairy that we didn't say anything about it.
>
> O'MORRIGUN
> [shocked]. Woman, woman, that isn't anything in th' nature of a marriage at all!
>
> MONICA
> It satisfyies me. My dad won't, so you must stand by me now.

Another sturdy-spirited woman in the play is Jennie, a Land Girl, who exhibits an insistent determination to continue her affair with the young aristocrat Edgar Hatherleigh despite his mother's objections. She echoes the unconventional moral philosophy of Jannice in Within the Gates, everywhere attesting to her belief in and practice of a joyous sensuousness. When her lover worries about leaving for the Front, Jennie aggressively sets about turning his thoughts to more immediate and cheering ideas:

> My poor boy! Were they trying to measure your troubled thoughts with sky-blown rules again? The best prayers for giving courage and hope are ripe kisses on a young girl's red mouth! Though life's uncertain, we ought to edge its darkness with a song! ....[Getting Edgar to his feet, and putting an arm round him] I'm all cased up in a costume; but a hand can slip under the jersey, and the girdle's easy undone.

The broad outline of her character is strong and vivid; she is marked by a refusal to idealize war or death, and possesses a certain coarse vitality. However, that vitality has a manufactured quality about it, for as Malone observes,

> Jennie is the mouthpiece of O'Casey's philosophy, which she underlines with the occasional bawdy song, and she ends as a martyr to it by dying in the flames with Drishogue [sic]. The other people in various degrees echo the same theme, sometimes with embarrasingly cheap melodrama, as when Monica in opposition to her mean old father, invites Drishogue to "take me in your arms to my room again, an' show him I am lost forever." 42

In summary, though Oak Leaves boasts several strong and courageous women, neither they nor the male characters really convince, for they function as rather simplistic symbols of O'Casey ideas. In this play at least, Robert Brustein's charge that O'Casey's vision in his later plays suffered from a "weakness for adolescent sexuality or utopian social communities" [43] deserves hearing.

In this three-dimensional character that one misses. Walter Kerr longs for the dramatist's return to his earlier method of characterization, in which characters' foibles are rendered side by side with

---

[42] Malone, p. 88.

[43] Robert Brustein, Seasons of Discontent (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), p. 179

their virtues:

> In Juno, in particular, the texture of the play is thick and multicolored, patterned after the coherent contradictions -- the vices and virtues inseparably bound together -- of mulish mankind. In subsequent plays, however, O'Casey not only took sides in the sociological, philosophical and political arenas, he scrawled giant slogans in bright colored chalk. 44

Kerr, in short, found plays like Oak Leaves and Lavendar disfigured by an "intensely didactic style." David Krause refers to these middle-period plays as the dramatist's morality play period. It is an apt categorization which economically serves to suggest why the characters in this group of plays fail to satisfy audience members accustomed to more realistic character conventions.

Purple Dust was also written during this same period when O'Casey was seeking new forms for his political and religious views. However, possibly because he was investigating farce for the first time, the women characters are relatively free of the playwright's manipulation of them. In fact, they do most of the manipulating in this play.

PURPLE DUST (pub. 1940)

O'Casey's first farce ribs English notions of bucolic Irish country living and boasts two women who quite handily manipulate the men in their lives -- not incidentally, Englishmen..

Avril and Souhaun have quite calculatedly become the bed-mates of two silly but moneyed English gentlemen. The women are high-spirited, fetching and quite aware of the fact that they bring considerable sexual prestige to the otherwise bland and foolish men. Therefore, they are

---

[44] Walter Kerr, How Not to Write a Play (N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1955), p. 66.

remarkably direct and straightforward with one another in their plans to coax and beguile as many baubles and furs out of their "oul' fools" as they can during their period of co-habitation.

Ironically, bacause of their rather cold-blooded scheming, they are at the start of the play almost as fatuous and vapid in their responses to life as their lovers. In some ways, the Irish women have forgotten how to respond honestly in new relationships. They have slipped into the trap of role-playing in their inane attempts to live up to their images as grand ladies of English gentlemen.

However, one of O'Casey's most charming comic devices in this farce is the release of the women from the meaninglessness of their play-acting through encounters with "natural" men -- not incidentally, Irishmen.

Upon their first entrances, both women sweep on full of imagined elegance of posh ideas about how they are going to refurbish the interior of the seedy old Tudor manse one of their lovers has just bought. Both women cavort affectedly, full of inflated ideas about their stylishness until, of course, they encounter O'Casey"s delightfully romantic conception of real men. Avril addresses the local hired help with all the absurb snobbishness of a new Dame of the Empire deigning to nod to the peasants. Her cohort Souhan, carrying a huge vase, comes bustling on immediately after with all the frosty superiority of a head clerk at Harrod's: "Filled with gay flowers, Cyril, this jug'll be just the thing on your quadrocento desk-bureau."

Fortunately, Avril and Souhan change. They have too much vibrancy and hunger for life to long endure with their insipid British stockbrokers. Into their lives, O'Casey introduces the classic comic conceit that all any misdirected woman needs in order to make her whole

again is a real man, a virile man -- in this instance, an Irishman.

In so doing, what might otherwise seem like crassness of character in the two women, O'Casey refracts through the prism of farce to look like merely pragmatism. For the men they take advantage of are clearly fools. Even more than the women, they labor under hopelessly puffed up ideas of their own significance. "Foolish, inept and pompous,"[45] they are natural victims. Nouveaux riches business men, they are pathetically anxious to ape the upper classes.

That neither Avril nor Souhan respects her lover (Basil Stoke and Cyril Poges, respectively) is evident from the first. Upon the women's first meeting with O'Killigain, the sexually attractive foreman overseeing the repairs being made on the crumbling old estate house, each is so immediately and physically drawn to him that her fervor amounts to comic compulsion. And neither woman cares a jot for her wealthy lover enough to discreetly hide the violence of the attraction she feels toward the Irish workman.

In fact, Avril, as the younger and more impulsive, can so little tolerate Basil on account of his lack of sexual stamina that at one point she explodes with delicious hyperbole:

> That thing! A toddler thricking with a woman's legs; a thief without the power to thieve the thing he covets; a louse burrowing into a young lioness's belly; a perjurer in passion; a gutted soldier bee whose job is done, and still hangs on to life.

She has been, apparently, a mite frustrated in her relationship with her English would-be philosopher, so that when a virile man presents

---

[45]Sean O'Casey, Under a Colored Cap (London: Macmillan and Co., 1964), p. 264.

himself, she takes advantage of him with a winning aggressiveness. As she leads O'Killigain into the living room supposedly to chastise him about some work, she suddenly regards him meaningfully and says "You must sing me a few of your songs sometime." When the apt foreman offers, "Now, if you'd like to listen," Avril counters evenly but with pointed significance, "Not now; we might be disturbed; but some evening somewhere away from here."

Nor is Souhan behindhand at taking an aggressive lead with him. Though unsure and a bit insecure because she is a few years older than O'Killigain, she makes the first move toward a physical relationship with him. "I hear terrible things about you, Mr. O'Killigain," "that you're a great man for the girls." She continues more boldly, enquiring about his "familiar name, the name your girl would call you by." So informed, she turns the name over on her tongue like a piece of candy: "Jack. What a dear name, Jack! What a dear name -- [She suddenly stands on tiptoe and kisses him.] -- Jack." And for all her thirty-three years, she runs from the room like an embarassed adolescent.

Both women are characterized by a cavalier defiance not only of their lovers' opinions of them, but of the world's as well. Like Minnie Powell and Jannice the Young Whore, they have small regard for petty gossip. Both women have dared to return to Ireland to live in open disregard for conventional morality, no small thing in Ireland where even the suspicion of sexual indiscretion can have violent consequences as O'Casey's dramatized in his last play, Behind the Green Curtains. "Irish, too, an' not a bit ashamed o' themselves," observes one amazed local handyman. Neither woman will put on the face of shame, even when the straight-laced Canon comes to call. In fact, Avril makes a point of ignoring him, continuing the thread of a conversation she was

in the midst of before he entered: "Well, when are we going to have a decent bathroom, old cock-o'-the-walk?" she blithely asks Cyril before the nonpulsed pastor.

So independent and self-confident is Avril that she even challenges the conventional limits of her morally unconventional relationship with Basil when she dares her milquetoast lover to object to her going off with O'Killigain for a week. So sure is she of her hold over Basil that after her week's sojourn with the Irish foreman, she brazenly returns to the Englishman with neither apology nor explanation. Even in the last act when Basil finally musters enough jealous outrage to insist upon accompanying her during another night walk, she manages him with as little effort as she might to swat a fly. With an easy contempt she remarks, "Wouldn't you like to, eh? Take my advice and don't." Flabbergasted by the very casualness of her manner, Basil's determination withers on the spot and he can do nothing except stare after her frustratedly and sulk, "She's going to go with O'Killigain."

Souhan is quite as capable as her friend at manipulating her "oul' fool." Though most of the time she plays the role of attentive hausfrau scurring to keep the mayhem of the Irish household from driving Cyril into another sputtering rage, she has a dangerously low boiling point when his rage erupts at her personally. For instance, when he exasperatedly orders her to find someone to fix the telephone, and then rashly tears some curtain fabric out of her hands she is measuring so as to hurry her, Souhan turns, regards his petulance, calmly grabs him by the shoulders and gives him a thorough shaking. The physicality of the moment is pure music hall. Thus assured of his attention, she bellows, "What do you think you are doing, you old

dim-eyed, old half-dead old fool! I'll disconnect you as well as the telephone if you don't behave yourself." And as he attempts to justify himself, she concludes the argument, "another snarly sound out of you, and I'm off to live alone."

And well she might. Both she and Avril earlier joined forces to make sure they are well pensioned off once their looks fade. Both women have so cagily maneuvered their "oul' fools" that Cyril and Basil have settled £500 a year for life on each of them. Nor are the women content with their comfortable annuities. They are constantly alert to any opportunity to inveigle further bonuses of jewels and trinkets out of the doting men. Even the workmen on the premises see how easily the women manipulate the English businessmen: "Women you're not married to cost a lot to keep; an' the' two with them'll dip deep into the old men's revenues," to which a comrade adds sagely, "Th' two poor English omadhans [boobies] won't have much when the lassies decide it's time for partin'." Though Avril and Souhan often function as referees in the many battles between the two Englishmen, they more frequently turn those arguments to their own account. After one such spat, Souhan delightedly urges her confidante to "go on up, and flatter and comfort your old fool by ridiculing my old fool; and when he's half himself again, wanting still more comfort and flattery, wheedle a cheque out of the old prattler."

Other times, they will drop subterfuge entirely to manipulate the old men to their intentions. For instance, when the chaos of refurbishing threatens to get out of hand, Souhan is as openly domineering with Cyril as a mother with a testy child. Seeing him about to erupt again in a screaming temper at the awesome level of Irish inefficiency, Souhan steps in, catches up a pair of overalls, and orders him

> [in a bustling and dominant way.] ...Here, if we waste any more time talking, the house will never be ready to live in. Put this on, and go and bring in the roller from the front door through here out of the way to the back. When you've done that, bring the garden tools to the back too.

When she returns ten minutes later to find that he has gotten side-tracked into some gossip with a workman, she calls him up sharply, "Oh, look at you standing here still, and so much to be done --[her voice rises] so much to be done, and so much to be done! I asked you to get the roller away from the door an hour ago." She punctuates her expectation by heaving him physically out the door to tend to the garden roller.

But apparently neither of the women wants men they have to mother. Both women long for men whom they can respect as peers, as equals. O'Casey conveniently introduces such men in the persons and the simpler values of O'Killigain and O'Dempsey. They are admittedly straw men, idealized men, designed to make the Englishmen look like whey, but no matter for that in farce. The women listen hypnotized to O'Dempsey's seductive poetry calling them to make a new life in the spirit of their Celtic past: "Come then, an' abide with th' men o' th' wide wathers, who can go off in a tiny curragh o' thought to the new Island ....With firm-fed men an' comely, cordial women, they'll be laughter round a red fire." David Krause compares them to Synge's Nora in "In the Shadow of the Glen" and Pegeen Mike in Playboy of the Western World who are likewise offered a mystical picture of a life close to nature and an awareness of their Gaelic roots.[46] However, unlike the baleful Nora who goes grudgingly and Pegeen who fears to go at all, Souhan and Avril with considerable relish choose the exciting alternative represented by

---

[46]Krause, Sean O'Casey: the Man and His Work, p. 239

O'Dempsey and O'Killigain.

They tire of the games they have been playing with their weak-headed lovers; and in a last gesture of nosethumbing at them, Souhan and Avril elope with the two Irish workmen in a comic D.H. Lawrence climax of crackling thunder and surging flood waters. Defiant to the last, Avril refuses to be made to feel guilty by Basil's sneers that she is stealing jewels that he gave her. She points out self-rightously that:

> I gave more than I got, you gilded monkey. It's winnowed of every touch of life I'd be if I stayed with the waste of your mind much longer. [She taps the case.] Th' thrinkets I wormed out of you are all here, an' here they stay, for th' wages were low for what was done for you.

B.L. Smith finds the two women representative of more serious issues than the farce initially suggests. Smith believes that Avril in particular is typical of O'Casey people who are involved in

> struggles against tradition: against forces which, in their use of human beings, would lessen or obliterate the joys of life. O'Casey's healthy rebels declare their independence with Avril who says, "I'm fed up carrying things about to get this foolish house in order." 47

Along similar lines, Maureen Malone in her sensitive analysis of the social, economic and political backgrounds of the play, sees in the climax of Purple Dust a sober vision of Marxian apocalypse:

> It is clear that the theme of the play is not merely a frivolous comparison between Irish and English national characteristics; rather like the themes of all his other plays, it springs from O'Casey's Socialist convictions, and in the vision he presents in symbolic terms a picture of what in fact has not yet come to

---

[47] B.L. Smith, "O'Casey's Satiric Vision," James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 16-17

> pass; the sweeping away of Capitalism and
> the past from which it grew and the triumph
> of the young workers who carry off the booty
> of their enemy as the latter is destroyed. 48

To my mind, however, the play requires no awareness of portentous themes for its appreciation. Though O'Casey may have had such a dialectic image in mind when he wrote the play, fortunately the script stands on its own without it. The play's vulgar gaity is its own justification; it stands on its own without reference to the dramatist's symbolic concern with the Fall of the British Empire. O'Casey created a robust farce dedicated to youth and joy and sensuality, and he concluded it just as simply with one of the most cherished traditions of comedy -- a conventional bedding down of the two young women with the appropriately virile males as the 11 o'clock curtain rings down. The women get themselves out of the clutches of unworthy men (English) and into the clutches of worthy ones (Irish). Or as one character from an earlier comedy about a set of misalliances put it:

> Jack shall have Jill;
> Naught shall go ill;
> The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well.

The Final Period: Synthesis of Form

After the interim when O'Casey actively sought new artistic forms for his idea, fortunately he returned to a relatively familiar treatment of character, integrating some of the symbolist techniques he had earlier explored in selected sequences of his remaining plays. Even in his essentially realistic Red Roses for Me, he incorporated a third act in which the city of Dublin is mysteriously transformed by the

---

[48] Malone, p. 105.

visionary powers of a young social activist. For Cock-a-Doodle Dandy O'Casey invented an outlandish six-foot rooster to cavort among a sexually repressed community. In The Bishop's Bonfire, he not only added a new saint to the Church's calendar, but endowed the saint's statue with a horn that toots unaccountably whenever nearby Catholics are tempted to sin. In his Drums of Father Ned, the title figure becomes more of a power than a person, one whom stodgy traditionalist Christians literally cannot see. Behind the Green Curtains boasts a quite effective piece of theatricality in a doorbell given to ringing ominously whenever another message from the episcopal palace is brought.

Though his incorporation of fantasy elements add a welcome dimension to his work, it is O'Casey's return to richer characterization that one most appreciates in the late plays.

RED ROSES FOR ME (pub. 1942)

Although O'Casey deals with the violent Dublin Transport Workers' Strike of 1913-1914 in both The Star Turns Red and Red Roses for Me, in the latter he deals once again with character rather than concept, probably because he was integrating familiar friends into the script.

> The play contains more autobiographical matter than any of the others and is also, perhaps consequently, among his best. The four main characters, Mrs. Breydon, the Rev. M. Clinton, Ayamonn, and Sheila are lifted straight from O'Casey's account of his own experience in his autobiography. 49

Harold Clurman praised it because "it contains the earthy folk realism of his first work and the latter attempt to invest that

---

[49] Ibid., p. 102.

quality with a more conscious, stylized, and exalted lyricism."[50]

Interestingly, this Dublin play focuses on a male figure.

> In the earlier plays, we noticed only heroines, but here is an intrepid fighter for the cause he holds dear, ture, selfless, dignified and generous in his dealings with others. 51

Though Red Roses'spotlight is on a young man's determination to commit himself to a politically meaningful act, the play's emotional tensions arise because of a young woman's attempt to dissuade him from that existential responsibility. In fact, not just one woman but two are dedicated to that attempt. In Ayamonn Breydon's efforts to lead a strike that will affirm his most ardent hopes for the worker, not only his sweetheart Sheila, but his mother as well actively struggle to deflect him to a safer course of action.

It is paradoxical that at first glance both women appear unassuming, reticent, even shy; however, where Ayamonn's safety is concerned, both Sheila and Mrs. Breydon are iron-willed. Time and again, each woman works valiantly, if vainly, to mould the worker-poet into her image of the ideal lover/son. The fact that Ayamonn refuses to permit them to direct his life in no way alters their determination to keep trying. Both women persist in advising, cajoling, nagging and begging him to bend his life to their wiser counsels. Highly protective of him, they urge him to adopt a less exhausting, more conservative manner of living.

His mother, for instance, worries about his voracious appetite for life; she frets to see him bolting from a Shakespeare rehearsal to a

---

[50]Harold Clurman, Lies Like Truth (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1958), p. 122.

51 N. Sahal, Sixty Years of Realistic Irish Drama (Bombay, India: Macmillan & Co., 1971), p. 109.

union meeting, to chasing down a composer for a lyric he has written. She wants him to modify his prodigality in giving himself so fulsomely to his wide interests:

> I'd thry to rest a little, Ayamonn, before you go to work. You're overdoing it. Less than two hours sleep today, an' a long night's work before you. Sketchin', readin', makin' songs, an' learnin' Shakespeare; if you had a piano, you'd be thryin' to learn music. Why don't you stick at one thing, an' leave the others alone?

She worries not only about his health but his ego as well. As she listens to his ebullient plans to overcome fellow-workers' intimidation of Shakespeare by acting a scene from Richard III for them, she tries to warn him his good intentions may draw only mockery because of the inappropriateness of Shakespeare at the entertainment: "I don't think he'll go so well with a minstrel show," she ventures tactfully.

Like so many Irish, she is given to haggith and urges him to expect the worst from life, hoping thus to protect him from disappointment. For instance, when Ayamonn tells her of his plans to buy a Constable print he has wanted for months with his first raise, she undercuts his enthusiasm with the warning, "I shouldn't count your chickens before they're hatched." During another encounter she advises her son not to be too hopeful about his relationship with Sheila, warning him that so pretty a young woman is more likely to be attracted by a military man's glamour than by Ayamonn's romantic talk of their living together in love and poverty:

> Oh, go on with you, Ayamonn, for a kingly fool. I'm tellin' you th' hearts of all proper girls glow with th' dhreams of fine thing, an' I'm tellin' you, too, the sword jinglin' on th' hip of Inspector Finglas, the red plume hangin' from his menacin' helmet, an' th' frosty, silver sparklin' on his uniform are a dazzle o' light between her tantalized eyes an' whatever she may happen to see in you.

That her persistent haggith irks him is apparent in his irritated rejoinder, "tell me somethin' else to add to my hope."

In markedly parallel ways, Sheila is as determined as his mother to have him bend his life to a more conservative wind. Like the older woman, "Sheila, too, feels painting, acting, and reading are foolish because they ignore the realities of everyday life,"[52] and counsels him to husband his resources, to channel his many interests into one that will guarantee a regular income for them. When Ayamonn tries to distract her from so pragmatic an expectation with soft, wooing words of their future life together, she pulls away from him to break the spell of his hypnotic words. "I won't listen, Ayamonn, I won't listen. You must look well ahead on the road to the future. You lead your life through too many paths instead of treading the one way of making it possible for us to live together."

Both innocent and arrogant, Sheila wants a normal life as the wife of a good man with a steady job. Frightened by the implications of his far-flung interests, she whispers

> God knows I don't mean to hurt you, but you must know we couldn't begin to live on what you're earning now -- could we? Oh, Ayamonn, why do you waste your time on doing foolish things?....trying to paint, going mad about Shakespeare, and consorting with people who can only do you harm.

She needs and demands from him a full commitment to a regimented family life. Of a practical bent, she fears vague poetry about their living together in barefoot poverty while he revolutionizes the social order.

When made desperate enough, she attempts to manipulate him by embarrassing him in front of friends. Piqued because her determination

---

[52]Goldstone, p. 138.

to get him to plan realistically for their marriage is thwarted by the arrival of a friend who has written music to a poem of Ayamonn's, she erupts hotly, "I've waited too long already. Aren't you more interested in what I want to say than to be listening to some vain fool singing a song?" When he makes it clear he will not get rid of his friends, she makes to go but not without one last attempt to gain psychological ascendancy. To Ayamonn's anxious inquiry about when he will next see her, she answers meaningfully, "I can't tell. I'll write. Maybe never. [Bitterly] I warned you this night might be the last chance of a talk for some time and you didn't try to make use of it."

She stays away for some days and when she returns, the contradictory sides of her character are again in evidence. Both courageous and calculating, she has defied her Catholic parents' prohibition against seeing the Protestant Ayamonn ever again -- no small thing in Catholic Dublin. On the other hand, upon her return she immediately sets conditions Ayamonn must fulfill to win her agreement to marriage. She has thought about him constantly and realizes he must give up his strike activities if he is to insure a steady future for them. She has heard via her father's police connections that troops will definitely be used to quell the strike and urges him to take the expedient course to insure the promotion that will enable them to marry: "If you divide yourself from the foolish men and stick to your job, you'll soon be foreman of some kind or another." She determines to force his hand with the ultimatum,

> Oh, for goodness sake, Ayamonn, be sensible! I'm getting a little tired of all this. I can't bear the strain the way we're going on much longer. [a short pause] You will either have to make good, or --

AYAMONN
Or what?

SHEILA
[with a little catch in her voice] --or lose me; and you wouldn't like that, would you?

Unfortunately, Sheila has miscalculated how far she can push him; Ayamonn will not be pressured into such a choice. He tells her simply but pointedly, "I shouldn't like that to happen; but I could bear the sthrain." Nonetheless, even in the face of such plain speaking, Sheila's need to dominate him remains intact. Moments later, they learn that bullies have attacked Ayamonn's free-thinker friend Mulcanny in the street below. She watches momentarily dumbfounded as Ayamonn picks up a stick with which to revenge his friend's assault. Then outraged at his impulsiveness, she orders "Stop where you are, you fool!" But again her effort to manage him is in vain, and he rushes out.

Sheila's frustration turns to anger with the unfortunate Mulcanny. Long shocked by his habit of poking fun at institutionalized religion, she orders him to leave Ayamonn's flat. Trembling with misdirected feeling, she insists his blasphemy is "the kind that shouldn't find a smile or an unclenched hand in a decent man's house." To her chagrin, however, Ayamonn contravenes her order and quietly tells the radical, "you can stay, if you wish, for whatever surity of shelther's here, it's open to th' spirit seeking to add another colour to whatever thruth we already know."

She hears her fiance's offer of sanctuary to Mulcanny with stunned disbelief. Breathless with hurt pride, she bites back tears and angrily retorts,

> Well, shelter him then, that by right should be lost in the night, a black night, and bitterly lonely, without a dim ray from a half-hidden star to give him a far-away

> companionship; ay, an' a desolate rest under a thorny and dripping thicket of lean and twisted whins, too tired to thry to live longer against the hate of the black wind and the grey rain. Let him lie there, forsaken, forgotten by all who live under a kindly roof and close to a kindly fire.

Though Sheila's outbursts seem unduly vindictive, it needs to be understoon in light of Ayamonn's, at times, priggish idealism. Goldstone notes that "the truth is much of the time, Ayamonn <u>does</u> sound like a soft-headed idealist,"[53] and this particular evening he has been cool and remote, exhibiting a rather Olympian disappointment in her failure to appreciate his ambitions as worker-rebel. Following her embarrassing display of misplaced emotion, he responds with the disdain of the sainted. "There's nothing more to be said," he tells her as he stares desolately, if a shade melodramatically, into the fire.

However, there is a boundless resiliance in Sheila. Even after she has been so roundly rejected, she cannot give up trying to shape Ayamonn's life. When two strikers hurry into the Breydon flat to offer Ayamonn his fellow workers' mandate to address the strike meeting that evening, she indignantly steps between the awed workers and boldly answers for him:

> He'll do nothing of the kind. Cinder-tongued moaners, who's to make any bones about what you suffer, or how you die? Ayamonn's his reading and his painting to do, and his mother to mind, more than lipping your complaints in front of gun muzzles ready to sing a short and sudden death song!

In short, both Sheila and Mrs. Breydon treat Ayamonn in a motherly, over-protective fashion. Neither accepts the idea that

---

[53] Ibid.

Ayamonn is responsible for his own life choices. They seem compulsively driven to meddling in his affairs.

Even after her estrangement with him over Mulcanny and his refusal to stay away from the strike meeting, Sheila has the temerity to go behind his back to his best friend, the Rev. Mr. Clinton, to urge him to prevent Ayamonn from the dangerous business of leading the strikers. "Warning's no good; that's not enough -- forbid him to go. Show him God's against it," she demands a bit wildly. When the Rector's ethics hamper him from interfering, she employs a heavy irony to embarrass him into it: "I'll get his mother to bar his way. She'll do more than mirror good excuses."

Mrs. Breydon, too, calls on the minister and pleads with him to make a tool of his friendship with her son: "speak the word that will keep my boy safe at home."

In fact, so alike are the two women that they eventually join forces. Just as the strike parade is to start, Mrs. Breydon begs her son not to lead the strikers, "Stay here my son, where safety is a green tree with a kindly growth," to which Sheila adds in soft, Circe-like echo, "stay here where time goes by in sandles soft, where days fall gently as petals from a flower, where dark hair growing grey is never noticed."

However, as similar as the two women are in their proclivity to shape the direction of the young social activist's life, they differ significantly on one point -- flexibility. Ironically, it is the younger woman who lacks it. Sheila is finally rigid in her hostility to Ayamon's intention to lead the strike. And even though she reconsiders her point of view after Ayamonn is killed in the cavalry charge against the militant strikers, she is nonetheless narrowly limited by her

middle-class materialistic values.

> She looks small when placed side by side with Ayamonn. Even her refusal to go away with Inspector Finglas (who was responsible for Ayamonn's death) does not impress us, for it is merely a short-lived emotion. Sheila, it is clear, is no sister to Minnie or Nora, not to speak of Juno. 54

In a richly theatricalized climax, it is the old woman, surprisingly, who backs down from her implacable opposition. When she hears the arrogant Inspector Finglas threatening the strikers with the indomitability of the army's drawn swords and cavalry, she summons up a magnificient outrage, and pointing to Finglas' betasseled and shinily accoutred figure, she sneers, "Look at the round world, man, an' all its wondhers, God made, flaming in it, an' what are you among them, standing here, or on a charging horse, but just a braided an' a tasselled dot!" after which she exultantly gives her son her blessing,

> Go on your way, my son, an' win. We'll welcome another inch of the world's welfare.

COCK-A-DOODLE DANDY (pub. 1949)

Sean O'Casey was 69 years old when he launched into still another experimental form to create his exuberant fantasy Cock-a-Doodle Dandy. The playwright himself was highly pleased with the results of his using a huge rooster to symbolize the repressed sexuality of a large proportion of the Irish population. And critics like John Gassner judged it "the outstanding poetic extravaganza of the decade and one of

---

[54]Schal, p. 109.

the few masterpieces of Irish drama written since Playboy of the Western World."[55]

B.L. Smith noted that while O'Casey's effectiveness as a satirist earned him the suspicion and enmity of the major power sources in Ireland -- "Church, Business and Politics," "unlike many satirists before him, O'Casey's satiric vision includes ample room for joy and laughter, for having a good time and loving life in the process."[56] For beneath the frolicsomeness of Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, O'Casey takes serious aim at the theocratic establishment with its attendant puritanical and misognyistic influences. The play is O'Casey's metaphor of modern Ireland,

> the land where freedom is restricted by clerical vigilance, the young people thwarted, crushed into submission or banished, the arts suspected and severely censored, and the whole outlook one of bourgeois philistinism motivated by the desire to make money. 57

Cock-a-Doodle Dandy has a very contemporary tone. Though written in 1949, an advocate of the women's movement might be surprised by the playwright's sympathetic charting of the rocky course three women in a provincial Irish town traverse before cutting themselves loose from the demeaning self-images imposed upon them by the men of the community.

The rural society of Nyadnave ("Nest of Saints") is sharply polarized. In no other O'Casey play is the atmosphere so virulently anti-feminine. The men are puritanical bigots whose joyless view of

---

[55]John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (N.Y.: Dover Pub., 1954), p. 729.

[56]Smith, p. 15.

[57]Malone, p. 121.

life is reinforced institutionally by the local parish priest. The priest holds the most significant power, that of moral sanction. The town's men hold the remaining economic and political power. The women, because they are regarded as "the devil's handiwork,"[58] are psychologically oppressed from all quarters. However, two of those women learn to resist that oppression once a catalyst from outside the hermetically sealed moral atmosphere of Nyadnanave enters the scene.

Loreleen Marthraun, the vivacious young daughter of one of the town's most narrow-minded men, returns home from London where she has had a taste of a broader humanity and a more liberal life style than is possible in Nyadnanave. Loreleen serves several functions: she incites rebellion in her father's new young wife Lorna as well as in his maid; she nettles the town's men because her joyous vitality and sensuousness is a stinging reminder of their own denied sexuality; and most significantly, she is allied with the rambunctious Cock as a symbol of the life force that will not be denied.

In this suffocating Nest of Saints where love and happiness are continuously subverted by an unending series of "thou-shalt-nots,"[59] it is "the women who yearn to live creatively and exuberantly and the men who fear to do so."[60] The women are "saucy, vital wenches;"[61] the men are "dogma-dulled," "pusillanimous and unimaginative."[62] The women are

---

[58]Maura Laverty, "Women-Shy Irishmen," in The Vanishing Irish, ed. John O'Brien (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1953), p. 54.

[59]Krause, Sean O'Casey: the Man & His Work, p. 241.

[60]Goldstone, p. 167.

[61]Smith, p. 26.

[62]Sahal, p. 112.

are marked by "dancing, laughing, and loving,"[63] the men by "timidity, hypocrisy and selfishness."[64]

Into this priest-ridden village, Loreleen brings vitality and independence, in contrast to the apathy and fear that are Father Domineer's contribution. (David Krause objects that Father Domineer is "too much of a straight 'villain' to be an entirely satisfactory symbol,"[65] but to my mind, Domineer is an apt enough symbol for the spiritual paralysis brought about by his type of clerical zealot who substitutes chastity in place of love as the first commandment of the Church in Ireland.)

Loreleen is dynamically theatrical, "a character who embodies passionate sexuality so strongly that she dazzles all the men who meet her. At the same time she also has a more independent and original mind than the others, not to mention a sharp wit and a wild gay spirit."[66] Perhaps it would not be amiss to describe her as a consciousness-raiser of her father's young wife and of his maid since, as one critic notes, she "exerts herself to liberate the women from conditions of domestic slavery, and bring them forth into the land of the living."[67] In addition, she roundly criticizes the most authoritarian man in town when she "defiantly lectures Father Domineer on his myopic, Jansenistic view of women."[68]

---

[63]Ronald Rollins, "Clerical Blackness in a Green Garden: Heroine as Scapegoat in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy," James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 69.

[64]William Armstrong, "Sean O'Casey, W.B. Yeats and the Dance of Life," in Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays, ed. Ronald Ayling (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1969), p. 141.

[65]Krause, Sean O'Casey: The Man & His Work, p. 257.

[66]Goldstone, p. 167.

[67]Rollins, p. 69.

[68]Ibid.

In this comic allegory, Loreleen is allied with the six-foot cock who struts mischievously among the sexually repressed citzenry, a roguishly-outsized sex symbol that functions as an impish wink at the sanctimonious vanities of the villagers who regard themselves as exempt from the thrall of sexual impulse.

The outlandish cock who wreaks such chaos among the puritanical males of the village serves as a reminder that their insistence upon seeing women as second Eves, as "vile" and as "temptresses" is an evasion of their own sexuality. So long have the men in this community repressed sexual feelings, that when a sex thought fights its way to consciousness, the typical response is to deny responsibility and blame it on the nearest woman. The delightful thing O'Casey does in Cock is to employ this male tendency toward projection in a literal way. That is, "whenever the men glare at the women as though they were evil temptresses with horns on their heads, the mischievous cock obligingly sees to it that a pair of real horns appear on their pretty heads."[69]

Vague dissatisfaction drove Loreleen from her home to find work in London. Her return visit with her father clarifies for her what initially made Nyadnanave so stiffling. The place is gripped by a combination of puritanism and misogynism which crimps the very edges of her soul. During her first days back, she hears with new awareness the import of her father's casually destructive assumptions about her and women generally. His epithets ("you jade," "you bitch," "you painted slug") are still painful despite their familiarity.

In Marthraun's distrust and fear of women, he seems representative of most of the village's men. Unable to account for the air

---

[69]Krause, Sean O'Casey: the Man and His Work, p. 248

of emotional confusion of late in Nyadnanave, he fixes the responsibility on the high-spirited daughter he can no longer intimidate: "I'm talking about whispers ebbin' and flowin' about the house with an edge of evil on them since that painted, that godless an' laughin' bitch left London for a long an' leering holiday."

Loreleen, however, has learned to cover her pain at her father's loathing by adopting a wry, teasing manner with him. Ironically, her very vivaciousness and determination to find joy even in the gloomy confines of Nyadnanave are characteristics that make raprochement between them impossible. His philosophy (he's always "thinkin' of th' four last things -- hell, heaven, death, an' the judgment") and hers (she is "seeking happiness") are implacably opposed; his vision is otherwordly, hers is focused on this world.

So unfamiliar is old Marthraun with the simplest joy that he can explain his daughter's liveliness in no other way than that she is in league with the devil. At one point he insists rather hysterically to Sailor Mahon, "she isn't me daughter; she is't even a woman: she's either under a spell or she's a possessed person."

Loreleen's failure to kowtow to Father Domineer makes the priest, too, antagonistic to her. For the part he assumes she must have had in encouraging the men to dance, he demands that she kneel to him and beg forgiveness; he finds her a "proud and darting cheat," like most of the town's women "shameless" and "dhressed to stun the virtue out of all beholders."

Marthraun's and Domineer's fanaticism are not merely isolated instances of hostility toward one who has become a stranger among them. Antagonism toward women is rife among the town's men. Old Shanaar, a religious quack given to mouthing latinate mumbo-jumbo in order to keep

evil at bay, intones knowingly, "women is more flexible towards the ungodly than us men, an' well the old saints knew it." He disapproves of women wearing brightly-colored dresses or ornaments since they give a "gaudy outside to the ugliness of Hell." Pronouncements like "women's always a menace to a man's soul. Woman is the passionate path to hell" echo not only Shanaar's but the sentiments of most of the community as well.

As official moral voice of the village, it is Father Domineer who reminds women of their proper place. After a raucously farcical "exorcism" of the Demon Cock from Marthraun's house, the priest urges the women thereafter to submission and contentment in the kitchen:

> Off you go into the house, good women. Th' place, the proper place, th' only place for th' women. Straighten it out and take pride in doing it. [He shoves Marion toward the porch.] Go, on woman, when you're told.

However, the cock's mischievous presence in the village and Loreleen's casual insubordination make the other women less content with their usual habits. Both the maid and Lorna have systematically begun to abandon their wonted sobriety and obedience. Marion, the young maid, is the first to catch the contagion of Loreleen's impish humor. After witnessing the terrified behavior of Marthraun, Mahon and Shanaar when the cock accidentally got into the house, she cannot resist boldly teasing the old men,

> MARION
> What a clatther it[the cock] all made! And yous quakin', and even Sailor Mahon there, shakin' in his shoes, sure it was somethin' sinisther!
>
> MAHON
> [angrily] You go into your mistress, girl!
>
> MARION
> [giggling] Th' bould sailor lad! An' he gettin' rocked in the cradle of th' deep. Me faltherin' tongue can't import th' fun I felt at seeing yous all thinkin' th' anchor was bein' weighed for the next world.

Even the essentially timid Lorna is stirred out of her accustomed passivity because of Loreleen's courage and joyous appetite for life. As Marthraun's young wife witnesses the frenetic preparations to exorcise her house of evil spirits, she flares up excitedly to Marion "It's all damn nonsense, though Michael has me nervous in such a way I'm damn near ready to believe in anything." Her growing resistence to her husband becomes apparent in her daring to ask him in the mayhem following the attempt to shoot the cock, "Where were you hit? D'ye think there's any chance of you dying?" Her behavior becomes positively bold when she tells him he ought to give the strikers the shilling raise they ask, "be reasonable, Michael. You're making enough now to be well able to give him all he asks." This untoward plain-speaking from his wife, Marthraun answers by [savagely seizing her arm] Listen, you: even though you keep th' accounts for me, it's a law of nature an' a law of God that a wife must be silent about her husband's secrets! D'ye hear me, you costumed slut?" But Lorna will be intimidated no more and responds, "Don't tear th' arm out of me! If you want to embalm yourself in money, you won't get me to do it!"

So strong-minded does she become that at last she even stands up for her cause before Father Domineer. Though the priest himself sanctioned the rough pinioning of Loreleen by two local roughnecks, Lorna steps forward and protests vehemently to one of the men.

> Let the poor lass go, you cowardly lout! I know you: your whole nature's a tuft of villainies. Lust inflames your flimsy eyes whenever a skirt passes you by. If God had given you a tusk, you'd rend asundher every woman of th' disthrict.

What apparently opens her eyes to the misogynism in Nyadnanave is her recognition of the paranoic malevolence that drives the priest. She watches hypnotized as he responds to Loreleen's request for shoes so she

can leave the village; there is something fearful in the way he hisses

> Thrudge it; thrudge it on your own two feet; an' when these burn an' are broken an' bruised, go on your belly; crawl in th' dust, as did th' snake in th' garden of Eden, for dust is the right cushion for the like of you.

After that Lorna decides to leave Nyadnanave with Loreleen; she will stay no longer in a place so corrosive to her spirit:

> Loreleen, I go with you. [Lorna shoves Father Domineer aside at the gate, nearly knocks Shanaar over, and hurries to Loreleen.] I go with you, love. I've got a sthrong pair of shoes in the sack you can put on when we're free of the priest and his rabble. Lift up your heart, lass: we go not towards an evil, but leave an evil behind us.

The maid Marion also chooses exile. To her delight the town's Messenger wants to go with her for he loves her. She wants to be with him, too, "but not here, Robin Adair, o not here; for a whisper of love in this place bites away some of th' soul."

The three women then oppose oppression in the only way they can: like O'Casey himself twenty years before writing the play, they choose exile. By leaving the village, they exhibit more moral courage and independence of mind against the priest's puritanical authoritarianism than any of the old men. In effect, the three women "leave singing."[70]

The comedy is, finally, a sad one. As the women go off to a presumably less restrictive life abroad, the old men are left with a sense of emptiness. The closing image of a confused Marthraun sitting, head in hands, seems an apt one for the idea that

> O'Casey sees little hope for those who live like sheep, constantly bowed down under the unenlightened yoke of the clergy.... O'Casey's

---

[70]Smith, p. 24.

> sanguine hope is that the Irish, who fought so ferociously for Home Rule, will have some day power enough to fight the clergy, too. 71

THE BISHOP'S BONFIRE (1955)

In his next play O'Casey played upon a similar theme, though perhaps in a more bitter key. The Bishop's Bonfire is a cynical appraisal of the Irish temperament, particularly the fear of making independent judgments because of a fear of authority. In addition, O'Casey uses a small village's preparations for the return visit of a native son made-good in the episcopal hierarchy to make some devastatingly accurate criticisms about the uneasy alliance of the Church with Capitalism,[72] again about misogynism, and fear of sexuality.

Of all his full-length plays, The Bishop's Bonfire is the only one in which O'Casey's women are totally beaten by the "mental rigidity, moral apathy, and automaton living"[73] that characterize so much provincial Irish life.

The two sisters Foorawn and Keelin Reiligan have lived so long in a moral environment presided over by those "who consider mortification of the flesh as a prerequisite to joy"[74] that they are no longer able to fight for their emotional needs. Foorawn has almost succeeded in suppressing even her awareness of them. By taking a vow of chastity she has managed to secure some grudging approval from her otherwise overbearing

---

[71] Sahan, p. 111.

[72] Malone, p. 126.

[73] Smith, p. 16.

[74] Ibid.

father. However, her complacent virginity is jolted when Manus Moanroe tells her he loves her and gently upbraids her for wearing a large red cross "lying where my hand ought to be." She turns on him with icy fear: "Your words are like the words in the books that will burn in the Bishop's bonfire. Manus, you are a bad man." Though she loves him, she lacks the courage to withstand public disapproval were she to request release from her vow. In consequence, she clings to it with desperate pride; as the young liberal Father Boheroe recognizes, "she is too deep in the vainglory of her chastity" to hear the entreaties of a lover.

Foorawn has taken the Church's line and swallowed it whole. Of her self-conscious and joyless religiosity, the porter Hughie Higgins tells her with a frankness born of a bit too much whiskey,

> I don't want to listen to you; don't want to go too near you, for you're one of the higher ones ones hearin' woe in the first cry comin' from a cradle. They're queer these holy men an' holy women. Never have a minute's piece you let them get you thinkin'. Give one of them a chance to get a grip on you, and he'll have you worryin' God for help to do what you should be damn well able to do yourself without botherin' God at all.

And indeed Foorawn has given up trying to do for herself; she fears taking responsibility for her own life; half child-half woman, she is trying to please God as she managed to please her father by holding tightly to her vow of"ferocious chastity."

Not just the women, but virtually all the characters in Bonfire are heavily dependent upon authority figures to tell them how to live their lives. Out of their failure to take responsibility for their continued moral and intellectual growth, a sense of utter sterility imbues their collective outlook. Ronald Ayling comments that

> When the Codger speaks of the dusty aridity of Reiligan's fields, his observations extend beyond physical reality to apprehend the spiritual

> condition of the country. The theme of sterility pervades the play: Foorawn and Canon Burren bear symbolic names, for example, the former being a transcription of the Gaelic for 'cold one' (frigid one), and the latter derived from that bare and desolate part of Clare-Galway called the Burren. 75

Though the younger sister Keelin attempts to rebel against her father's expections of domestic servility and to defy his strictures against marrying a man out of her "class," her resistance is desultory and erratic. When her father and Canon Burren arrange a marriage between her and a farmer of nearly sixty, Keelin is outraged, "though the best she can do is organize a kitchen rebellion against preparing the feast for the Bishop."[76] She is chagrinned to watch the Canon wheedling the kitchen help back to their posts. Though she adamantly refuses to join them, "Keelin's victory [is] only a pyrrhic one."[77]

The Bishop's Bonfire is O'Casey's most pessimistic assessment of Irish timidity before authority. So cynical had the dramatist become about contemporary Irish life during the writing of Bonfire, that even his women are broken-spirited. Foorawn is so afraid of trusting her own feelings about Manus, that she blindly makes him her murderer. Though Keelin has some spunk, she cannot really muster sufficient courage to do more than shout rebelliously at her domineering father and the fawning Canon Burren. One suspects that once her loss of her young man becomes clear to her, her small resistance will dry up, and like the dust that covers her father's fallow fields, she will eventually dwindle into a dusty wife to the tired old farmer on the

---

[75]Ayling, Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays, p. 29.

[76]Benstock, Sean O'Casey, p. 78.

[77]Ibid.

land adjacent to her father's.

THE DRUMS OF FATHER NED (pub. 1960)

The mood of O'Casey's next play was by contrast sharply optimistic. The Drums of Father Ned is a rosy picture of the blithe effects revolution might have against what Shaw called the "sacerdotal tyranny"[78] of the priest class in Ireland. Unlike the heavy symbolism and didacticism of his propaganda piece applauding Communism in The Star Turns Red, The Drums of Father Ned is frothy and charming -- if just as unconvincing. However, if O'Casey succumbs to the preachy occasionally in the play, he is nonetheless, in Robert Hogan's estimation,

> an artist like Shaw was. He writes plays packed with opinion, plays that exist to teach and persuade as much as to amuse, to move, and to grip. His plays preach the full and free human life that his early struggles taught him to value. The lyricism of his plays extolls that life; the comedy of his plays laughs at the follies that would hinder it from coming into being. 79

Vivien Mercier compares The Drums of Father Ned to a latter-day Aristophanic comedy, "a victory of youth and fertility over age and sterility."[80] For here the conflict is clearly between the stodgy middle-aged, who suspect and fear the effects of Doonavale's cultural festival, the Tosthal; and the optimistic, hyperenergized young, who welcome it as some barely sensed signal for a new joy in life. The conflict is heightened by O'Casey's pitting the old traditionalist

---

[78]Krause, Sean O'Casey: the Man & His Work, p. 352.

[79]Sean O'Casey, Feathers from the Green Crow (Columbia, Missouri: U. of Missouri Press, 1962), p. XIII

[80]Mercier, "O'Casey Alive," p. 635.

Father Fillifogue, who marks Ireland's moral decline from the day women were permitted the wearing of "jeans," against the never'seen but ubiquitously felt young liberal, Father Ned, who urges his young parishioners to begin thinking, saying, and doing for themselves.

Again, there are young women who function independently and with considerable verve against the joyless middle-aged: "Nora McGilligan and the servant girl Bernadette Shillayley...succeed from the very beginnig in dancing rings around the fossilized symbols of local authority."[81] But one never quite believes the struggle, so stacked are the odds in the young woman's favor. The pert Bernadette, for instance, is forever deflating the self-important posturings of her two sets of employers, the Binningtons and the McGilligans. She has a fine sense of proportion and will be neither intimidated nor impressed by their affectations. After showing her two female employers the correct way to curtsey at the upcoming Tosthal Ball, she comments significantly to a friend, "the night is whispering that their day is ending." Unfortunately, the battle is not even ritualized; it is a foregone conclusion. The result: though we are delighted by her saucy independence, we are not quite convinced. The play has a glossy M.G.M. brand of realism, in which an ersatz Judy Garland <u>will</u> get the Tosthal show on the road despite overwhelming odds.

Bernadette is particularly strong-minded in her personal relationship with Tom Killsalligham. Though Tom is inclined fatalistically to believe "things here have been aged too long for us to try to make them young again," Bernadette will not resign herself to the idea that life must be sober and somber. She insists with heady optimism,

---

[81]Benstock, Sean O'Casey, p. 78.

> Old fields can still bring forth new corn,
> says Father Ned, my Tom, an' wintry minds
> give place to thinking born of spring.
> Doonavale'll know, says he, something about
> the liveliness of color; and Doonavale'll
> hear music.

With a great burst of courage -- then suddenly shy -- she shares with Tom something else the revolutionary priest said: "He said within the timid stir of this dim town would come laughter and a song or two; that girls who hurried away from boys, an' boys from girls, would linger closer together now." Bernadette is exhilarated by Father Ned's disapproval of priests who preach damnation as the wages of sexual attraction and his censuring of the same clerics for Ireland's notorious pattern of late marriages and disproportionate numbers of bachelors and spinsters. Tom, however, is frightened by Father Ned's unorthodox views: he removes his hand from her shoulder and says "that's a dangerous thing to say." Bernadette retorts fervently, "Oh here, in Doonavale, near everything said or done is dangerous. We're tired out at feeling afraid of a word or a look bringin' courage or affection into our lonely souls." Apparently, the intensity of her feelings on the subject quiets his fears and he resumes his embrace of her.

There is something winningly contradictory in Bernadette's character. From this scene in which she is much the young innocent awkardly trying to tell her young man she cares for him, she becomes with Skerighan who corners her for a kiss, a cunning wench who manipulates his fear of exposure as a "dirty old man" into an hilarious blackmail scheme. Nobody's pawn, Bernadette maneuvers the Ulsterman into parting with several pound notes as the price of her silence.

The other young woman in the play, Nora McGilligan, is likewise equipped with a quick tongue to overcome both the skepticism of

her young man and the obscurantism of the establishment elders. Though O'Casey clearly would have us admire her high-minded courage, it is hard not to be put off by her occasional preachiness. For instance, when Michael Binnington becomes squeamish about their taking on the Old Order, Nora's response sounds more like a homily than encouragement to a lover:

> MICHAEL
> An odd fight: I against your father and you against mine.
>
> NORA
> Oh, not against our fathers! We're fighting what is old and stale and vicious: the hate the meanness of their policies preach; and to make way for the young and thrusting.
>
> MICHAEL
> Easier said than done, Nora.
>
> NORA
> Everything said, Michael, is easier than anything done. It is a fine fancy to say brave things; better to do them.

Nora is an active agent who learns to believe in her own judgment because of her tutoring with Father Ned. She becomes, in David Krause's terms, one of O'Casey's instruments of "comic apocalypse"[82] when in the last act she lets loose on Doonavale an avalanche of new ideas and plans. First, she forms a library committee to defy Father Fillifogue's arbitrary decree to burn "objectionable" books found on the library's shelves. With a rhetoric that combines the excitement of the best melodrama and the never-neverland of musical comedy, she makes a declaration of independence to the non-plussed prelate:

> You see, Father, we're fed up bein' afraid
> our shaddas'll tell us what we're thinkin'.
> One fool, or a few, rules the family life,
> rules the school, rules the dance hall,
> rules the library, rules the way of a man

---

[82] David Krause, "The Principle of Comic Disintegration," James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970), p. 10

> with a maid, rules the mode of a girl's dhress, rules the worker in field or factory, rules the choices of our politician, rules the very words we thry to speak, so that everything said cheats the thruth; an' Doonavale becomes th' town of th' shut mouth.

She next declares her independence from her parents, openly asserting that she, not they, will decide what is morally correct behavior for her; that she will not stop seeing Michael Binnington, that at college, furthermore, she has "slept in the same bed o' Sundays" with him.

And finally she reveals hereafter she intends not only to take responsibility for her own life but to extend it to the polis as well: she and Michael are running for election to the Dail seats currently occupied by his father and her father! After which flabbergasting piece of news, she runs off with Michael to address their enthusiastic young followers with a campaign slogan winsome enough for musical comedy: "It's time to go, for more life, more laughter; a sturdier spirit and a stronger heart. Father Ned is on the March!"

Despite the buoyant hopefulness of Nora and Michael about bringing a new political and social life to Doonavale, apparently the last word should have gone to the thick-brogued Ulsterman Skerighan who warned the young people that they would never achieve independence or simple delight in life "so lang as ye suffer th' inseedious dumination of your Church, on' th' waeful inthurference of your clergy in what ye thry to do." For the difficulties O'Casey encountered in mounting The Drums of Father Ned made Skerighan's words eerily prescient.

As it turned out, O'Casey's "harmless comedy," as he called it, was to occasion a great tempest at, ironically, the Dublin Tosthal

Festival which the play was to open. Irony piled upon irony as the imbroglio erupted exactly along the lines the dramatist was satirizing. The Archbishop of Dublin, hearing that a play by Sean O'Casey was to highlight the Tosthal's drama events -- without reading the script -- quietly let it be known he disapproved. David Krause gives a meticulously detailed account of the fiasco which demonstrated how efficiently "unofficial" censorship by the Church operated in Ireland wherein even an artist of international repute can be effectively silenced.[83] After the episcopal nod of displeasure, militant lay groups in Dublin threatened to boycott the production, then labor unions protested its mounting; finally, even national government buckled when the Government Tourist Board, which subsidized the Tosthal festival, stepped in and requested The Drums of Father Ned to be dropped. It was.

Though Samuel Beckett and the adaptor of James Joyce's Ulysses withdrew their scripts from the Festival in sympathy for their colleague's victimization by censorship, O'Casey was bitterly disappointed. The untoward optimism that characterized the mood of Drums from beginning to end, the hope that vital Irish youth might overthrow conservative pietists and stop the steadily outward flow of young emigrants from Ireland was apparently once and for all dashed for the aging playwright.

His next, and final, long play was a scathing denunciation of Irish timidity and cowardice in the face of episcopal pressures.

BEHIND THE GREEN CURTAINS (pub. 1961)

O'Casey's concluding play presented corruscating criticism

---

[83] John Jordan, "Illusion and Actuality in the Later O'Casey, in Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays, ed. R. Ayling (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1969), p. 160.

of Catholic emotional dependence upon the clergy. An often heavy-handed caricature of "Irish fear of Episcopal condemnation,"[84] Behind the Green Curtains ends with the bald suggestion that to live with integrity, one must emigrate from Ireland -- as have most of her great artists during the past three hundred years.[85]

For satiric purposes however, O'Casey focuses on a group of very minor artists, impressionable pawns in behind-the-scenes power plays conducted by local churchmen. The dramatist seems more incensed by Irish failure to make adult choices than by clerical arbitrariness -- though obviously childlike acquiescence by church members and high-handed demands by "Mother Church" are obverse sides of the same problem.

The script's slight plot centers on attempts by Ballybedhust's resident "intellectuals" to assert independence of clerical pressure. Interestingly, the only Catholic whose attempt succeeds is a woman. "As elsewhere it is the young women who play the role of saviors and redeemers."[86]

Like the woman in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, Reena Kilternan pays for her independence with exile. However, in many ways she is more interesting than Loreleen Marthraun, for Reena changes markedly in the course of the play's action. Reena develops from a docile, dependent individual anxious to please Mother Church to an enlightened, committed woman determined to expose moral blackmail employed by the church community to encourage conformity to clerical dicta. It is through

---

[84] Their ranks are impressive by one standard, including Congreve, Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, Joyce, Beckett, Behan.

[85] Sahal, p. 112.

[86] Jordan, pp. 159-60.

her eyes that we learn to see the complex interrelationship of the country's religious, social and political forces, a phenomenon O'Casey finds clearly infuriating. For the play is clearly a disillusioned

> attack on everything in Ireland: the Church, the State, the intelligentsia, poets, playwrights and novelists, and organizations as dissimilar as the Legion of Mary ...and the Irish Academy of Letters. The Legion of Mary is a highly influential society of the lay apostolate which ... has a reputation, deserved or not, for busy-bodying and pressurizing.... [The play] represents the 80-year old dramatist's accumulated spleen against an Ireland become for him utterly unredeemable. 87

Even before Reena's awakening to the ubiquitousness of Church influence on every aspect of life in Ballybedhust, she is marked by an impulsive courage possessed by none of her Catholic colleagues. When a Church proscription against attending non-Catholic services stops the town's intellectuals from going to the funeral of a late playwright-friend, it is she alone who defies the ban and attends the Protestant service. For emotionally, these so-called intellectuals are children fearful of disobeying Mother Church. They are a fatuous group of self-seekers, with the exception of Senator Chatastray who is genuinely concerned with the moral dilemma in which he finds himself. He argues passionately for ignoring the prohibition: "dammit, we must do it, if we aren't to feel ashamed for the rest of our lives!" Though Chatastray with much eloquence, he fears to disobey without the unanimous support of his peers. Reena, on the other hand, sees the issue not as a dilemma at all but in clear, unequivocal terms: the late playwright

---

[87] As had been the actual case for Catholic friends of Protestant playwright Lennox Robinson who died three years before O'Casey wrote Behind the Green Curtains.

was a man she admired and as such deserves her last respects. Therefore, she urges the stalemated intellectuals, "we can't live our lives disputin' whether what we think o' doin' is right or wrong; we have to risk at times. Come on," she calls enthusiastically as she leads the way up the chapel stairs. But the men hang back, shamefaced and afraid.

In the days following, Reena's act of clerical defiance is efficiently punished by the lay network in Ballybedhust. Local newspapers refuse her articles and Legion of Mary friends ostracize her. She feels her isolation painfully and when offered pardon, responds as cheerily as a forgiven child only too happy to do her father confessor's bidding. At the latter's suggestion, she goes to the intellectuals and encourages them to show solidarity with the Church by attending the anti-Communist demonstration being planned by local clergy. There is at this point something naive and still unformed in her character. Given the hot-house moral environment of Ireland, her thinking could become as dogmatic as most of the town's citizenry. However, she witnesses the vigilante kidnapping of the Senator's young maid, and that experience changes Reena utterly.

Outraged that masked Sodality men should abduct the girl for "giving scandal" by working as a live-in maid in the home of a single man, Reena attempts to convice the intellectuals to pursue the bullies. However, only the "atheist" Martin Beoman has enough Christian charity to attempt to help the kidnapped girl. (Ironically, Senator Chatastray's fear to even report the incident to the police is punished moments later in a touch of poetic justice when another masked intruder forces him as well from the house for his part in contributing to the public scandal.)

As melodramatic as the incident sounds, O'Casey based it upon

fact. He abhored such examples of a brother's keeper morality which results from the Church's failure to encourage moral, intellectual or emotional autonomy in its members.

Ballybedhust is full of "prying and probing. Ireland's full of squinting probers!" The leader of the local Sodality, Christy Kornavaun, is endemic of the type. Robert Hogan observed correctly that while in other of his plays, O'Casey "had treated his villains with a relatively light hand,"[88] in Behind the Greet Curtains, "his condemnation is almost Swiftean. Christy Kornavaun, the spokesman for organized religion, is totally loathesome. He heads a sort of religious Storm Troop that pries into everyone's personal and public life."[89]

For instance, since open expression of sexuality is discouraged by the clergy, anyone who appears to be enjoying some sexual activity is resented belligerently. Kornavaun apparently projects his own lusts on the pert Noneen and her employer, Sen. Chatastray. While awaiting the Senator's arrival in an early scene, he mutters a jealous appraisal of the politician's accomodations: "snug as abug in a rug here, with a saucy girl to keep him company, an' no one to watch him." When Noneen brings word that Chatastray is engaged with another visitor and cannot see him, Kornavaun's neurotic repression becomes apparent by the very luridness of his language:

> KORNAVAUN
> Maybe now, you yourself is the private visitor.

---

[88] Robert Hogan, "In Sean O'Casey's Golden Days," in Sean O'Casey: a Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Thomas Kilroy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 173

[89] Malone, p. 153.

NONEEN
[vehemently,] Saying' that, an' you the Prefect of Sodality! You have a dirty mind.

KORNAVAUN
What else would you say? All correct an' cautiously coy while the daylight's here to see things; but when darkness hides things,an' th' flimsy frills of night are warm, behind the green curtains th' handlin' sport begins. You'd be a thrill in anyone's arms. You're damn pretty before, behind and below as I seen when I folleyed you up the stairs.

So militant are Kornavaun and his like at seeking out Church-prohibited behavior that anyone who dares an independent thought contrary to the Church line does so at his peril. For such ideas are quickly labeled either anti-clerical or communistic; and the Church's pressure on the lay sector of society is such that serious consequences can and do ensue, be they devastating economic sanctions or physical brutality. For "such is the power of the Church in modern Ireland -- obscurantist, superstitious, and at times, brutal."[90]

The sad thing, O'Casey observes of Irish society, is that even after such oppressive, manipulative events occur, virtually no one questions the mechanism of the Church-dominated life. As in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy, the only Catholic in Ballybedhust to object is a woman.

Once Reena sees the bullying techniques of the Sodality men who subject Noneen and Chatastray to public humiliation and beating for their purported sexual activities, she is unalterably radicalized. Once presented with the immediate evidence of how dangerous frightened provincial minds can become, she turns her former readiness to please

---

[90]Bernard Benstock, "The O'Casey Touch," in Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Thom Kilroy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 142.

the Bishop to a firm intention to expose the fear that lies at the heart of Ballybedhust.

She returns to the bruised and cynical Sen. Chatastray determined to convince, cajole, shame him into at last publishing his doubts about Church strictures and pressures in their village.

Realizing Chatastray is in the grip of a profound depression following his assault, Reena becomes extraordinarily tough-minded. She recognizes that for the masked rough-necks to have dared attack a national political figure, the Senator himself had to have given them psychological permission to punish him when he failed to resist them. However, despite his former passivity, she determines that he can change.. That he must change, if anyone in Ballybedhust is to raise his head again:

> REENA
> We're all frightened -- those in the North as well as us in the South; th' men who took Noneen an' you away with them were as frightened of faith, an' of anyone setting himself apart from th' others an' themselves; an' you an' your friends frightened of fighting for yourselves, or for anything disliked by th' clergy an' th' foggy explosion of townsfolk talk.
>
> CHATASTRAY
> An' what th' hell does a Legion of Mary lass know about such things -- tell me that?
>
> REENA
> Some of us do a little thinking, sir. I've thought about it long these many days, an' frightened under th' hand of fear.

Despite the fact that Reena's dialogue often lapses into stilted propaganda, just as often she rises to very nearly heroic proportions. She has a daring that is inflammably theatrical as she learns to put her need for clerical approval behind her in favor of taking responsibility for her own thoughts and actions. And as she sees the possibilities of autonomy for the first time, she becomes quite aggressive in her attempts

to encourage Chatastry to make his own leap to intellectual freedom.

When at first he sullenly declines, observing he wants no further touch of small-minded Ballybedhust, she responds with crushing honesty, "You deserved all you got." Inexorably, she attacks his self-pity like another Emer daring to tell her community's great man to rouse himself from self-absorption:

> You got what you got through th' cowardice of your friends an' your own -- over the years! I looked back, an' now I remember things done which shouldn't ha' been done, but you nor your friends never said a word against them! No wonder Martin Beoman laughed when I said I had come to the leaders of Ireland's thought! Big fellas behind the green curtains, but in the open, a flock of scurvy sheep! Scant of wool an' scabby!

Though Chatastray legitimately argues that it was people of her ilk from the Legion of Mary and the men's Sodality that formed the mob which intimidated him and his friends, Reena counters implacably that the latter failed in their primary responsibility as educated men, "You never tried to tell us how to think, what to do, where to go.... Youse yourselves helped to form the crowd that cry out against youse." Relentless in her passion, she points out that the collective silence of him and his friends gave the mob its sanction.

Unyielding, Reena insists that he must face up to the vacuum in leadership he helped create in the community because for too long he solaced himself with feelings of intellectual superiority behind the security of his green curtains. Stating it is now time to air his ideas openly, in a richly theatrical moment she sweeps open the heavy green curtains in his den. For as Benstock observes, "the opening and closing of the curtains serve to underscore freedom from parochial restrictions and the petrification of those who lack the courage to let

the outside world break in."[91] Because Reena admires Chatastray's idealism and sympathizes with his terror about changing, she softens and leads him gently over to the window to watch the marchers readying to parade against Communism -- the same parade he and his friends have been pressured by the Bishop to attend: "there they go: an army with banners marching in the wrong direction." Horrified that she dares voice such deviant ideas, he responds,

> the wrong direction? I thought you believed
> you were on the right road?
>
> REENA
> I did; I don't know now. Do you?
>
> CHATASTRAY
> [hesitant,] I don't really know.
>
> REENA
> I'm not asking if you know; I'm just asking
> you if you believe one way or th' other.
> Will you mingle the patter of your feet
> with th' feet of th' marchers; or will you
> sit sullen, angry, undecided and afraid?

Ruthlessly realistic, Reena makes him see that neither course is acceptable if he is to maintain his integrity. She insists he must at last free himself from the clergy's psychological domination and declare himself mature enough to think for himself. She appears to be the only person in Ballybedhust who perceives that the Bishop's anti-Communist slogan "Free Thought in a Free World" is just as much a desideratum in Ireland as it is behind the Iron Curtain countries. Her determination apparently prevails and Chatastray drops his stuffy posturing to admit with a flood of feeling the shame he feels for not springing to Noneen's defense, a girl he loves like a daughter. Reena's news that

---

[91] Goldstone, p. 7.

that he is to be presented with a sackcloth coat for the Parade sparks his nearly extinguished pride as he cries out his refusal to march: "the Brothers Repentant can go to Hell in their own sweet way in their sackcloth coats!"

Though Chatastray finds the courage to send the Church delegation away, he finds Reena's fighting spirit somewhat abashing. For instance, when Kornavaun infers correctly that she has been responsible for the Senator's new resistance and tries to pull her away from Chatastray, Reena "[resists fiercely, breaks his hold on her, and hits him in the face, making him stagger into the group]" telling him "you boarder-line lunatic, you full-feathered hypocrite, you mouldly crumb of life, lay no further hand on Reena or it will be the worse for you!" The Senator watches her in silence as she makes it eminently clear she will not be the passive victim for bigots that Chatastray was. Ironically, though she is generous and supportive with the Senator, she finds that both her physical and moral courage frighten him. After Kornavaun and his cohorts leave in defeat, Reena exhilaratedly proposes to take care of Chatastry. "After hospital duties, I can cook a simple meal for both of us; and on my free day, we can have a good time together." To the Senator's shocked refusal lest she incur worse punishment than Noneen did, Reena replies decisively "It won't happen to me, an' if they should thry any thuggish thricks, there'll be an afterglow that'll singe th' whole damned town!"

Her very strength of will apparently breaks his determination. Or perhaps because the truth game she has played with him resembles the temporary, feverish atmosphere of an encounter group, the resolve she provoked in him does not hold. In any event, while her back is turned, Chatastray slinks off, back to the comfort of old habits, old

friends, old rituals -- and belatedly joins the Church sponsored Parade.

Though disheartened, Reena will not be disspirited. And after a properly brief mourning period appropriate for a comic ending, she finds (in the spirit of the lovers' pairings in Purple Dust) a more suitable man -- the town's outspoken social critic Martin Beoman. She proceeds with engaging directness to seduce him out of his sexual timidity. By virtue of her good humor and compassion, she releases her erstwhile swain to realize the active sexual role they both want him to play. Beoman literally sweeps her off her feet and out of Ballybedhust.

Like so many young Irish men and women before them, they choose exile to the stultifying repressions of Ireland's "theocratic establishments."[92]

SUMMARY

Before comparing the work of O'Casey with that of Synge, one must realize that O'Casey wrote three times as many full-length plays as his predecessor at the Abbey. Yet in most of them, O'Casey, too, created a gallery of female characters far more strong-minded and autonomous than the males who inhabit their worlds. While they are not as domineering as Synge's women, O'Casey women are -- with the exception of those in four of his thirteen plays -- far more active, inner-directed, and independent than most O'Casey men.

Of the exceptions, the Reiligan sisters of The Bishop's Bonfire are so emotionally immature, so psychologically beaten down, they have become unable to put up any real or sustained struggle for what they want in life. Though Keelin briefly objects to her father's

bullying, her resistance is half-hearted and finally abortive.

In his The Star Turns Red, though Julia has a fine moment in which she defies the local priest's order to renounce her Communist philosophy, she is essentially a background figure in the action. O'Casey was more concerned with focusing attention on the struggles of two brothers: Communist Jack and Fascist Kian.

Jannice of Within the Gates somewhat resembles the Reiligan sisters in that she has been emotionally oppressed all her life. Though she has more stamina than they to resist local pietistic pressure about how she ought to live, she lacks the ability to live creatively according to her own lights. She chooses to accept the Artist's way of life over the Bishop's, but her choice is at least as motivated by her desperate need for his love as by a commitment to his value system.

In his expressionistic The Silver Tassie, O'Casey chose to fashion symbols rather than women, to underline his vast pity for the front-line soldier of World War I. As a result his female characters move like insensitive shadows among his anguished and crippled soldier-heroes. The structure of this play does not permit the women to function organically, it does not allow them to function in genuine "relationship" to their men. Rather the women move through the action in ignorant alienation from the men whose tragedy the play defines.

In his remaining nine plays, O'Casey created a series of female portraits that cumulatively form an image of Irish womanhood that is generally far more vital than that of the male half of the population.

Two things in particular typify the majority of O'Casey women: (1) their impulses to manage their men and (2) their interior

autonomy, which enables them to make moral choices without regard for, often in the teeth of, public opinion. Both these traits are in notoriously short supply among his male characters.

Personal autonomy is one of the things O'Casey values most highly. It is what makes Minnie Powell seem so casually courageous in his first play and Reena Kilternan so breathtakingly revolutionary in his last. The O'Casey character who is willing to take responsibility for her own choices (despite church antagonism, authoritarian bullying, or neighborhood gossip) is invariably a woman. His male characters are just as invariably intimidated about acting against public expectation. Their ranks seem endless:

Donal Davoren is terrified of gossip about Minnie Powell's visiting his room, while the girl is brashly contemptuous of local opinion. Capt. Boyle is outraged at his daughter's illegitimate pregnancy because of what his pub cronies will sneer behind his back, while his"conventional" wife walks out on her marriage to care for her daughter and the expected child. Though Jack Cliteroe desperately hides the least sign of battle fear from his comrades, Nora defies the whole network of patriotic war idealizers to go scrambling over barricades in search of the husband who has been seduced to war. The Bishop in Within the Gates is terrified to be seen in the company of a sinner, the irony of which only the prostitute Jannice sees and as a result rejects the conventionally-approved Christian prescription for forgiveness.

The list of men living in fear of what people may say of them is long indeed. It is as if O'Casey measures his characters' worth by a standard proportionate to their willingness to throw petty public opinion to the winds and act upon a self-contained value system. In his farce Purple Dust, the two calculating leading ladies are presented as redeemable

in some measure because they do not give a fig for provincial opinion about their openly living with their paramours. Even in less effectively-crafted plays like Oak Leaves and Lavendar, the pattern still holds that his women fly in the face of convention. Monica Penrhyn,after her first night with her Irish lover, absolves him of the sexual guilt that is such a notorious part of Irish culture; while her friend Jennie almost makes a reactionary moral philosophy out of her adamant refusal to be bound by any conventional expectations about proper sexual conduct.

O'Casey was well aware that flaunting public values is often a dangerous business in Ireland. Because the majority of the population is rural, Irish small-town fears and prejudices are always susceptible to violent explosion. Loreleen Marthraun of Cock-a-Doodle Dandy is beaten and robbed with her priest's approval because she dared to walk with her head a shade to high for the cleric's taste. The guiltless maid Noneen in Behind the Green Curtains is kidnapped, beaten, stripped and tied to a telephone pole on a public road all night for "giving scandal" by keeping house for a single man.

Whether writing "harmless comedy" or serious social criticism, O'Casey is particularly partial to the woman with a sound enough sense of her own center that she is able to make her own moral choices no matter what the public pressure. It was obviously with great delight that O'Casey created Nora McGilligan of The Drums of Father Ned and structured a musical-comedy climax for her during which she tells off the community's old fogey priest, happily reveals she has been having an affair with her young man, and announces that she and that young man are about to upend middle-class tradition by challenging both their fathers for their Dail seats in the upcoming election!

In retrospect, O'Casey often seems to have found in womankind a special grace which enables them, unlike their men, to perceive

dilemmas in black or white terms and act decisively upon their perceptions. Where his men are often fearful, tentative, pusilanimous, his women are strong-minded, even headstrong. It seems more than coincidence that it is usually O'Casey's women who are tough-minded, who see beneath facile rhetoric and pull their men -- hesitant and dragging their heels -- into the light; as Nora McGilligan does when Michael is suddenly overcome with qualms about seeking their parents' seats in Parliament; as Jennie does in Oak Leaves when Edgar buries himself in sober thoughts and somber demeanor he believes appropriate for a soldier about to depart for the Front; as Souhan does for Philip O'Dempsey when his shyness will not permit him to make love to a woman not his wife.

Even with the whole village ranged against her, Loreleen Marthraun will not relinquish her headstrong new philosophy. She yearns to take more delight and joy in life than the otherwordly pietism of Nyadnanave permits; but so afraid are the village's men to even think about the ramifications of her wider vision, that they believe her the Devil's handmaiden. Minnie Powell, O'Casey's first heroine, epitomized the woman with the capacity to clearly see what needs doing, and simply does it. While Seamas and Donal stand immobilized with terror about the bombs in their room, Minnie decisively takes the incendiary devices to her room. Her courage hangs almost palpably in the air after her exit.

Interestingly, there are, proportionately, significantly fewer women in O'Casey than in Synge who forthrightly attempt to either manipulate or dominate their men. Juno is the most unrelentingly domineering, forced by her husband's irresponsibility to nag him constantly to get a job, to stay sober, to stop lying. Nora Clitheroe of

Plough and the Stars is more circuitous than Juno at manipulating her spouse away from his interest in guerilla revolution, using her sexuality, she manages to divert him only for a time from the dangerous patriot games that eventually lead to his death. The stereotypical Fascist Deeta Tutting in Oak Leaves makes a brief and ineffectual attempt to dominate the idealistic young Communist Drishogue O'Morrigan by browbeating him rather hysterically with rabit anti-Communist rhetoric. In Red Roses for Me, both Sheila and Mrs. Breydon interfere shamelessly in Ayamonn's life-choices. Despite their final failure to swerve him from his intentions, they make sustained attempts to dominate him. In Behind the Green Curtains, Reena attacks Dennis Chatastray's milquetoast acceptance of Church domin a-tion with ruthless clarity until she at last pulls from him an admission of the self-loathing he feels for not having repudiated clerical intolerance long ago. Unfortunately, her strong-mindedness is not a transferable commodity and his resolve breaks before he can act upon his insights. However, Reena embraces her new perspective like a voyager and delightedly emigrates to a country that has room for her expanded horizons.

The pattern in the majority of O'Casey's plays emerges rather strikingly then: though the women do not dominate as Synge women so often attempt to do, the O'Casey women possess an autonomy and strong-mindedness that makes them seem more vital, whole, and self-possessed than the men.

PART TWO: SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

CHAPTER III

MATRIARCHY IN THE IRISH HOME

The female characters, then, in both Synge's and O'Casey's plays are, generally, emotionally stronger than their male counterparts.

To explore this phenomenon, one must reflect upon three distinct areas of explanation:

1) Sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychiatrists report that wives dominate in the Irish home -- though not in the larger social sphere;

2) The Irish mythological system is rife with models for female behavior which is strong-minded and assertive. Joseph Campbell stated the case most plainly when he observed, "In Ireland, the woman has always been the dominant figure in mythology."[1] Both playwrights were deeply interested in Gaelic mythology;

3) Each dramatist's perception of the role and character of women in general was influenced by his mother, the first woman in his life. Both men had singularly close relationships with their mothers, Synge's a suffocating one and O'Casey's apparently a more nurturant one. The differences in these two relationships offer provocative suggestion for the differences each dramatist's female characters exhibit in needing to demonstrate their strength vis a vis male characters.

This chapter explores the first consideration.

---

[1]Personal conversation with Joseph Campbell during Jung Seminar, The Open Eye Theatre, New York City, N.Y., weekend of May 10-12, 1974.

Matriarchy in the Irish Home

Few would deny the old saw that women are paradoxical creatures. However, in Ireland that idea seems to have been underlined with a peculiarly dramatic intensity: in the social structure of the community, women are cavalierly ignored or discriminated against as inconsequential persons; yet, in the domestic structure of the family, women usually dominate their children and manipulate their spouses. In consequence, though in the macrocosm of the larger world they are slaves, in the microcosm of family life they are rulers.

The pattern of treating women as inferior is as ubiquitous in Ireland as it is in most western societies. According to Elizabeth Coxhead, the Irish peasant society has persistently "relegated women to serfdom."[2] Robert E. Kennedy found that the subordinate status of females in rural Ireland is so onerous that their mortality rates are significantly higher than those of Irish males: "male dominance carried to such an extent that it considerably reduced the advantage in longevity which females normally would have expected for biological reasons."[3] He points out that wives on farms do not sit to dinner until after all the males have eaten, and that the single girl in a rural family "is subservient to all other members of the family and shares no confidence with either her parents or her brothers."[4]

---

[2]Elizabeth Coxhead, J.M. Synge and Lady Gregory (London: Macmillan & Co., 1961), pp. 145-6.

[3]Robert E. Kennedy, Jr., The Irish: Emigration, Marriage and Fertility (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1973), p. 56.

[4]Ibid., p. 56.

Sociologist Donald Connery agrees that Ireland is a "man's country where men are rulers."[5] Though aware of the common attitude of male superiority in western Europe, Connery is nonetheless surprised by the extent of male assumptions of superiority in Ireland and particularly by the "unprotesting submission of the female to her inferior status."[6] He points out that, although there are signs of change in the air, women have been quite fatalistic about their lot as an oppressed group and have made no substantial objections to inequities such as the fact that "twice as many males as females go on to higher education;" that it is universally accepted Irish women receive "unequal pay for equal work;" that in state employment, an Irish woman must sign a contract agreeing to resign upon marriage; that "there are no women in the Irish Cabinet and only four females among the 144 members of the Dail."[7]

However despite the pervasiveness of female willingness to accept a submissive role in the larger structure of the community, when it comes to the intimate structure of the family, the Irish woman undergoes a dramatic transformation and becomes the dominating figure in the domestic drama. Psychologists Marvin Opler and Jerome Singer observe that

> the central figure in Irish families is likely to be a controlling figure on the distaff side, while fathers, especially

---

[5] D. S. Connery, The Irish (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 192.

[6] Ibid.,p. 195.

[7] Ibid., pp. 192-6.

> in straitened economic circumstances, are frequently by contrast shadowy and evanescent. 8

The phenomenon occurs for a complexity of reasons.

One of the most galling circumstances in the life of the young Irish woman is the tacit social assumption that her husband "has a separate social life with his male friends while the wife stays home."[9] Male solidarity is a striking aspect of the Irish cultural profile, in which males derive considerable satisfaction through the pleasure of each other's company at pubs, dog and horse races, and football matches. Unfortunately for the wife, the social gratification which her husband derives from his male cohorts often functions as a substitute for conjugal interaction and pleasure. As one critic of the Irish social scene observed, flippantly but accurately, the Irish husband seems to regard his wife as little more than a

> king-size hot water bottle who also cooks his food, pays his bills and produces his heirs....He takes what should be the happy, leisurely love-making of marriage like a silent connubial supper of cold rice pudding. A rapid sex routine is effected, as if his wife is some stray creature with whom he is sinning and hopes he may never see again.

In consequence, the young wife finds herself starved for some show of love, fondness or even attention -- the need for which becomes so strong that it is eventually displaced upon her children, and most particularly upon her sons. Mary Frances Keating regards the Irish

---

[8]Marvin K. Opler and Jerome L. Singer, "Ethnic Differences in Behavior and Psychopathology: Italian and Irish." International Journal of Social Psychiatry 11 (Summer, 1956): 12.

[9]Connery, p. 195.

[10]Ibid., p. 200.

woman's transformation from submissive wife to demanding mother as an inevitable occurrance. It is simply another instance whereby

> the worm turns, and so from being the slighted and bullied one, she becomes the bully: often denied the protection, affection, and tenderness of marital love, she placates herself with a stranglehold on her children, refusing to allow them to grow up and accept their share of responsibilities 11

lest they leave the nest. In her effort to win male love she turns her attention to her son, lavishing great care and devotion upon him from his earliest years. So overarching is her love for him that, in effect, she spoils him for other women. Novelist Maura Laverty bemoans the fact that the Irish mother contributes heavily toward making the average young Irishman

> the world's prime example of the Oedipus Complex. He is anchored to his mother for as long as she lives....In this matriarchy, the men cannot help but be mother-bound. Mothers prize their sons far above their daughters....Sisters are taught at an early age to dance attendance upon their brothers. I myself remember that my nightly duty was to clean my brother's boots. The inevitable result is that the Irish boy grows up with an exageraged affection for and dependence upon his mother, and with a contempt for all other females. 12.

Time and again, bitter personal memories like Laverty's are corroborated by the more objective evaluations of social scientists.

---

[11]Mary Frances Keating "Marriage-Shy Irishmen, in The Vanishing Irish, ed. John O'Brien (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1953), p. 173.

[12]Maura Laverty, "Women-Shy Irishmen," in The Vanishing Irish, ed. John O'Brien, p. 57.

A.J. Humphreys cites the formidable instances of Oedipal fixation found in the Irish family accounted for, he believes, by a

> centripetal mechanism built into the fabric of rural life. This is the strong-preferential love of the rural mother for her sons. She is the magnetic center of the family and her cohesive power is affection. This love, which leads her to "slave" for her sons and to demand that her daughters do likewise, cushions the sons' hard lot. It mollifies the constant rub of his subordination to his father. 13

This same habit of favoritism by the mother is found just as encompassingly in Irish urban settings.[14] Cultural anthropologist J.C. Messenger believes that the relationship between mother and son is so close that for all practical purposes she serves "in all but the sexual sphere (at least consciously)" as a "surrogate wife."[15]

So consuming is her love for her son that she finds it difficult to loose the silver cord. Should her son show inclination toward marmiage, the mother frequently obstructs the blossoming relationship. This maternal impulse is "also the basis for conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law that is quite intense in Ireland, the prospect of which leads so many sons to refuse 'to bring another woman in on my mother.'"[16]

---

[13]A.J. Humphreys, "The Family in Ireland," Comparative Family Systems, ed. M.F. Nimkoff (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1965), p. 245.

[14]A.J. Humphreys, The New Dubliners: Urbanization and the Irish Family (N.Y.: Fordham U. Press, 1966), p. 33

[15]J.C. Messenger, Inis Beag: Isle of Ireland (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 69.

[16]Humphreys, "The Family in Ireland," pp. 245-6.

The sad irony concludes with the fact that the once-young Irish mother so thoroughly succeeds in winning from her son the fondness and attention that was never forthcoming from her spouse, that she unwittingly shapes the unsatisfactory conjugal behavior of the next generation of Irish husbands.

> By pampering and then clinging desperately to her dear boy, she makes him a victim of her possessiveness and he turns out to be something less than a full man. While bachelors in other lands can hardly wait to have a flat of their own and a life of their own, he finds it easier just staying home with Mother. If he does decide to marry he may unconsciously look for a mother substitute. Even then, he contrives until his mother's death to turn to her frequently for advice and comfort. 17

Ironically, the very tightness of her son's bond to her becomes a source of irritation to the Irish mother. Though initially she formed her attachment to her son as a substitute for her spouse's lack of tenderness, ultimately she finds such a compensatory relationship unsatisfactory. In consequence, her son becomes the target for her subconscious frustration. In a study involving a group of male Irish psychiatric patients, it was found their primary problem grew out of "a dominating, rejecting mother" who alternately resented them as "forever boys, and burdens" and lavished upon them indulgent affection. The result, the study concluded, was that the mother often succeeded in instilling in her sons "primary anxiety and fear towards female figures." Such ambivalent behavior on the part of the mother, Opler and Singer suggest, might go a long way toward explaining in the Irish male

> the sexual repressions and socio-religious definitions of marriage and sexuality for

---

[17] Connery, p. 199.

> which his culture, with its high celebacy rates, protracted engagements and sin-guilt emphases, is justly famous. In extreme instances, all this spells a final anxious and fearful lack of positive sexual identification, varying in a continuum from repressed and local homosexual balances through to added displacements and distortions that are either pallid asexuality or fearful and bizarre misidentifications. 18

The more commonplace result of maternal ambivalence is male fear of, if not outright hostility to, other females. Consequently, those males who manage to break away from mother long enough to marry find themselves behaving like the husbands their mothers so bitterly resented in the early days of their own marriage. These new husbands bring full cycle the behavior pattern of cold, unaffectionate, and immature spouses.

However, it would be simplistic to suggest that the Irish female is exclusively responsible for the cyclical continuation of mutually unsatisfactory relationships between the sexes. The Irish male, as unwitting as his female counterpart, contributes in equal measure to spinning the web that keeps them both victims of implicit cultural expectations. Also, since the pattern of mother favoring sons and father favoring daughter is one that is relatively common throughout rural communities of the western world, one must look for another ingredient to explain the uniquely individual coloration given to Irish sociological results. The most significant characteristic in relationships between the sexes in Ireland is sexual puritanism. For this phenomenon, the Roman Catholic church bears significant responsibility.

Sociologist K.H. Connell believes that the pattern of immature males in modern times was given considerable impetus by the Famine of

---

[18] Opler and Singer, p. 15.

1845-1848. When it became clear that farms could no longer be subdivided into progressively smaller holdings, the practice of keeping the land intact for one favored son came into being.[19]

Ironically, though the practice started as a means of insuring survival for the son who stayed on the land (the other sons presumably emigrating to more promising surroundings), the custom eventually spawned clearly unhealthy relationships and growth patterns between father and sons. The tradition called for land to pass through the father, but there was no settled pattern for deciding which son would be the sole heir to the farm. As a result, fathers often manipulated their sons quite calculatedly. In an attempt to get maximum free labor on the farm from all his boys, the father would withhold the name of which son should be the inheriting one, thereby keeping them all malleable to his will. Messenger found instances where fathers are so "loathe to surrender their property and with it control of the family" to a willing son that they "even postponed receiving the old age [pension] in order to maintain their status position past the age of 70 years."[20] It is not difficult to see how such fathers contribute mightily to the cycle of dependent sons who become dependent husbands. Because they blackmail their sons during their formative young adult years with the economic club of possible inheritance, the sons remain "extremely subordinate to their father, who treats them as boys and refers to them as 'boys' even when they are in their thirties."[21] As a result the sons are not only economically, but

---

[19]K.H. Connell, Irish Peasant Society (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 116.

[20]Messenger, Inis Beag, p. 68.

[21]Humphreys, "The Family in Ireland," p.245.

psychologically, dependent.

The father's tenacious holding on to control of the farm until their "children" are of a uniquely advanced age constitutes a kind of gerontocracy which leaves the sons with "a deep sense of inferiority and submissiveness and other juvenile traits."[22]

As a result, Irish sons seethe with frustrated rage against their fathers and resist identifying with them. The result of this failure to identify with the male role is an anxiety in future relationships with females, a tendancy which is only heightened by their mother's ambivalence toward them.

Social scientists have long been fascinated by Irish male reluctance to marry. In his The Irish, Kennedy attributes such hesitance to the fear of economic responsibility which marriage implies.[23] Most anthropologists however lay it to the fear of sexual relationships, stemming from a complex interrelationship of the strong Oedipal fixation in the son's relations with his parents, male solidarity, and the long range of cultural effects of the Roman Catholic church's promulgation in Ireland of a Jansenistic attitude toward sex.[24]

Though other male relationships are the only ones the average Irishman feels comfortable in, when providing heirs makes marriage necessary, the Irish male does marry-- though the nature of his relationship with his wife necessarily reflects his past psychological relationship with his mother and father. Because the Irish male is often not

---

[22]Humphreys, The New Dubliners, p. 23.

[23]Kennedy, pp. 153-4.

[24]Messenger, Inis Beag, p. 107

encouraged in his youth to become autonomous, he is unable to fully function as an adult within marriage. Sean O'Faolain complains that the average Irishman envisions the ideal wife not as a passionate lover or an intelligent companion but a kind of mother-housekeeper to look after him.[25]

Though the wife resents that expectation, eventually she does treat her husband as he wishes.[26] Eventually she abjures the hope of a husband whom she can regard as friend, as peer and gives in to his wish to be treated as a son. Humphreys found one Dublin husband unusual only in the frankness with which he admitted to a research sociologist, "I am just the eldest son in the family."[27]

Needless to say, the price paid for this emotional atrophy is high for both husband and wife. Keating contends that the Irish wife takes on the dominant role in the family to fill a vacuum. Like O'Casey's Juno she often feels the role ill suits her; the role makes her "frequently dislike herself heartily. It earns for her, too, the dislike of her man," for he resents the fact that she has become "the driving force, the seeker out of ways and means."[28] Consequently, their dilemma is mutually dissatisfying: "the wife is the 'strong' person in the household on whom the husband is emotionally dependent, even when the relationship is one of mutual withdrawal and uncooperativeness."[29]

---

[25]Sean O'Faolain, "Love Among the Irish," in The Vanishing Irish, ed. John A. O'Brien, p. 114.

[26]Humphreys, The New Dubliners, p. 144.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Keating, The Vanishing Irish, ed. John O'Brien, p. 173.

[29]Messenger, Inis Beag, p. 78.

Finally, one must consider the Church's contribution to the sociological scene.

The fact that Irish men grow up fearful of women is complicated by the Irish clergy's teachings about sex. A.J. Humphreys suggests that Irish Catholicism is marked by a notable sexual puritanism not found in other Catholic countries because the specific doctrinal tradition that Ireland fell heir to was an Augustinian one. "By comparison with other orthodox views within the general framework of Catholic doctrine, the Augustinian tradition lays relatively greater emphasis on the weakness and evil to which human nature is prone as a result of original sin."[30] Because of this theological purview, the average Irishman

> although he is certain that man's bodily nature with its emotions is at root good, he is rather more suspicious of it and deals with it more severly. As a result he inclines to a jaundiced view of sex and a generally ascetic outlook which places a high premium upon continence, penance, and in most spheres of life, on abstemiousness. 31

Some critics frankly blame Ireland's pattern of late marriages, personality disorders, and its high percentage of single men and women upon the antisexual attitude of priests and nuns. The latter, sociologists like Paul Blanchard claim,

> have exalted virginity to the point of national catastrophe: they have surrounded the sins of the flesh with such a poignant sense of guilt that they have weakened the Irish mating instinct. 32

---

[30]Humphreys, "The Family in Ireland," p. 249.

[31]Ibid., pp. 249-50.

[32]Paul Blanchard, The Irish and Catholic Power (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), p. 141.

Another observer of the Irish scene waggishly observed that when a couple does marry, the Church's attitude toward sex undermines their pleasure in one another, for in Ireland sex seems "to be more of a function than a passion, a case of procreation without recreation."[33]

The relationship between the Irish woman and her man then is colored by a complex spectrum of variables. The woman contributes, the man contributes, the church even contributes. The end result is the paradox that although the Irish woman is clearly oppressed in the community, within the home she is clearly the central, indeed the dominating, influence upon her husband and children. J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey merely reflected certain facets of that socio-cultural pattern in their plays.

---

[33]Connery, p. 116.

CHAPTER IV

DRAMATISTS' KNOWLEDGE OF FEMALE MYTH FIGURES

James Joyce once observed that "History -- collective and individual -- is a nightmare from which nobody can awake."[1] Though the remark sounds a bit melodramatic, there seems more than a grain of truth in it when one contemplates Ireland's mythological system. At times, it seems very likely indeed that Gaelic mythology may continue to influence and shape behavior in contemporary Irish society. For instance, the pronounced tendency of women in the Ulster Heroic Cycle to be dominant or at least markedly assertive with the men in their lives would appear to be a pattern that has continued in the social structure of modern Ireland -- if the observations contained in the plays of John Millington Synge and Sean O'Casey constitute reliable indices.

Just as Sigmund Freud found in the Oedipal myth a profoundly true archetype for early human sexuality, it may be that Synge and O'Casey were responding in their plays to a particularly Irish attitude toward woman and her relationship with man which they found implicit in the early Celtic myths. In fact, ever since Sir James Frazer published his Golden Bough in 1890, scholars have been growing steadily more attentive to the influence upon a culture of its mythic materials. Carl Jung postulated the daring thesis that all men possessed in addition to a personal unconscious, a "collective unconscious," i.e., a repository of experiences and memories that occurred to man's most primitive ancestors. Such a collective unconscious, Jung believed

---

[1]John Raleigh, "O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night and New England Irish Catholicism, Partisan Review 26 (Fall, 1959): 592.

would explain otherwise unaccountably known patterns of behavior from the ancient days of the race.[2] Unhappily, though tantalizing, the hypothesis remains just that and unprovable.

The Gaelic myths, nonetheless, seem likely to have had an effect upon reinforcing Synge's and O'Casey's ideas about women. For, at a conscious level, both dramatists had a redoubtable knowledge of Celtic mythology and the power of the women in these stories. During the end of its 19th Century, Ireland was poised for

> a swing away from the civilized and toward the primal. It was such a surge as that remarked by Vivien Mercier with regard to the Irish Revival: in it there was "the mysticism, the sense of elemental forces... a movement toward the primitive and archaic." 3

Ireland was hearing the siren tune of the Romantics which had been playing on the Continent for half a century. With Yeats' supple mind to articulate the tenor of the times for them, both Synge and O'Casey became firm advocates of Nationalism for Ireland.

One of the drawbacks to the fulfillment of such a dream, however, was the common people's internationalization of years of British opinion of them as a backward, lazy, uncivilized race -- not unlike the plight of Blacks in America today. Before the Irish could be made to believe they were capable of ruling themselves, they had to be reacquainted with the facts of their illustrious history before the Diaspora[4] in the

---

[2]Erik Lund, et al., A History of European Ideas (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1962), p. 300.

[3]R. H. Currie and M. Bryan, "'Riders to the Sea:' a Reappraisal" Texas Quarterly 11 (Winter, 1968): 142.

[4]Frank O'Connor, A Short of Irish Literature (N.Y.: Capricorn Books, 1968), p. 154.

seventeenth century when Britain deliberately attempted not only to scatter Ireland's population, but to obliterate her history and her language.

Irish scholars like Standish O'Grady and Douglass Hyde began to realize that one of Ireland's first psychological lifts had been provided by an obscure German linguist named Johann Zeuss in 1853 when he published his monumental Grammatic Celtica, proving Irish was part of the same Indo-European group of languages which spawned Greek and Latin. Matthew Arnold reinforced this boost to the national ego when he published his On the Study of Celtic Literature in 1910, a book which "added greatly to the effect of German scholarship in making Ireland and things Irish dignified."[5]

However William Butler Yeats had intuitively grasped the imminent significance of national prestige of primitive Gaelic literature some years before, when he began a systematic study of Old Irish language and myth while living in Paris. It was while living in France that he committed himself to transforming the ancient bardic stories to theatre fare. Yeats early perceived that making the rich lore of the myths accessible to a wide popular audience could not but help buttress confidence in weakened Irish pride.

Revisionist histories were already being undertaken restoring knowledge to the Irish people of the extraordinary "Golden Age" that had persisted in the country during the period which the rest of Europe called "the Dark Ages." During this period of chaos following the Roman Empire's collapse, Ireland's Christian culture grew luxuriantly at monastic centers like Clonmacnoise. Art flourished in the form of illuminated manuscripts, intricate metal- and enamel-work, and elaborately

---

[5]Ibid., p. 160.

carved high crosses. Scholarship was of such high standards that students from the Continent flocked to the Irish monastery schools.[6]

During the vigorous period of movement toward a national identity, Synge and O'Casey could not help but be influenced by the sense of history swirling about them. Rediscovered Irish history as well as the timeless aura of pre-history represented by the myths seem to have had a telling effect upon their artistic efforts. Granting that Joyce is correct in his assessment of the persistent influence of both collective and individual history upon behavior, it seems fruitful at this point to investigate how aware the two playwrights were of the "collective" cultural history implicit in Ireland's myths. For the reader unfamiliar with the women in Gaelic mythology, a reading of the Appendix would be quite helpful. In the next chapter we will consider the effects of the dramatists' "individual" histories upon their work.

Synge's Awareness of Female Myth Figures

John Synge's interest in the subject began as a boy. Restricted from games because of his sickliness, his exercise became walking. One of his favorite haunts was Glenasmole, at the time

> as wild as the glens of Wicklow. Irish had been spoken in the vale of Glenasmole only forty years before, and stories were still told of ancient Gaelic heroes by the people of the valley, and the place names were redolent of Irish folk lore. [7]

He began serious study during his first semester at Trinity College, Dublin, when he delved into Irish antiquaries and the language. So

---

[6] Alice Curtayne, The Irish Story (N.Y.: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1960), p. 59.

[7] D.H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, J.M. Synge, 1871-1909 (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1959), p. 7.

rich was his delight with the latter that after only a year's study, he took the College's first prize in Irish. Undoubtedly caught up in the spirit of the Irish Renaissance and the dedication of scholars like Douglas Hyde who founded the Gaelic League in 1897, Synge continued to deepen his pursuit of Celtic studies. As a graduate student he attended lectures on Old Irish language and civilization at the Sorbonne by one of Europe's foremost scholars on the subject, Prof. H. d'Arbois Jubainville, during "which the ancient Irish civilization was compared with that of Homer's Greece, a comparison he never forgot."[8]

It was during this French sojourn that he also had the opportunity to spend enthusiastic hours discussing the myths with W.B. Yeats and Maud Gonne. During this same period he contributed some half dozen reviews to French periodicals of new translations and adaptations of the myths, critiquing them rigorously for their fidelity, or absence thereof, to the barbaric spirit as well as the letter of the originals. He was intrigued by Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne for having caught something of the essence of the women in the Heroic Cycle.

> Most of the moods and actions that are met with are more archaic than anything in the Homeric poems, yet a few features, such as the imperiousness and freedom of the women, seem to imply an intellectual advance beyond the period of Ulysses. The chief women of the cycle, Maeve, Queen of Connaught, and Emer, wife of Cuchulain, and Etain, the daughter of Etar, King of the riders of the Sidhe, are described in many passages of great clarity and beauty. 9

---

[8]Robin Skelton, J.M. Synge and His World (N.Y.: Viking Press, 1971), p. 46.

[9]J.M. Synge, Collected Prose, ed. Alan Price, vol. 2: Prose (London: Oxford U. Press, 1966), p.

At Yeats' suggestion he left the bohemian life of Paris and returned to Ireland in an effort to rediscover his creative roots among simpler people. He continued his avid interest in folk history, filling notebooks "with scores of anecdotes, local history, and folk tales which he carefully recorded as they were told him."[10]

Critic Una Ellis-Fermor wrote a brilliant assessment of Synge as a mystic and nature writer.[11] It is not unlikely that his mystical sense of continuity between earlier generations and contemporary ones coalesced during his stays on the Aran Islands, off Galway. For there,

> he found a belief in the miraculous and supernatural which invigorated his imagination. He found himself believing that he could understand the cries of the gulls, and one night, after a dream of ecstasy and frenzy in which he was "swept away in a whirlwind" of music, he found himself convinced that "there is a psychic memory attached to certain neighborhoods. 12

During this same period, he also tried to articulate his sense of the mystic power of women. One Aran Islands woman he perceived as possessed by a dual persona, at one time "a simple peasant" and yet at another as "looking out at the world with a sense of prehistoric disillusion." So struck was he by the formidable simplicity and directness of the woman that he was moved to wonder if perhaps there was not a relationship "between the wild mythology that is accepted on the islands and the strange beauty of the woman."[13]

---

[10]Greene and Stephens, p. 138

[11]Una Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London: Methuen, 1939), p. 166.

[12]Skelton, p. 57.

[13]Ibid.

I am inclined to believe that he answered that question in the affirmative when he created characters like Sarah Casey, Pegeen Mike, Deirdre of the Sorrows, women of startling beauty and domineering will.

O'Casey's Awareness of Female Myth Figures

Though robbed of a formal education by poor eyesight and extreme poverty, Sean O'Casey, by a determined program of self-education, provided himself with a "rich and wide-based culture." At the turn of the century, spurred by the hopeful zeitgeist of his country's Nationalistic and Labor Movements, he taught himself the Irish language proficiently enough to become a teacher himself at the Gaelic League. The same spirit led him to become "widely read in English and Gaelic literature;"[14] in fact, so enamoured did he become of the latter that most of his middle and late period plays are full of rich allusion to the myths.

In volumes III and IV of his autobiography (Drums Under the Window and Innishfallen, Fare Thee Well) he recreates the spirit of the time when nationalistic hopes for an Irish Republic free of British interference sparked fervent interest in recovering the ancient heroes and history of the country. O'Casey made himself a scholar of the Gaelic myths, and in plays like Purple Dust and Red Roses for Me he incorporated figures from them, along with contemporary heroes like Parnell, to sound a call to Irishmen to pride and self-respect. Red Roses for Me is rife with references to "Celtic heroes -- Finn Mac Cool, Goll Mac Morna, Caoilte, Milesius, Emer, Oscar, and Osheen."[15] Even an

---

[14]Ronald Ayling, ed., Introduction to Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1969), p. 26.

[15]David Krause, Sean O'Casey: the Man & His Work (N.Y.: Collier Books, 1962), p. 221.

early play, The Silver Tassie, carries evidence of O'Casey's profound interest in Ireland's mythic past. Playwright John Arden notes that in the expressionistic second act, two front-line soldiers are sent parcels from home, one a prayerbook in a green plush cover with a gold cross, the other a red and yellow colored ball. Arden points out that "these are not just any old props, introduced so the dialog can make a verbal point, but carefully selected emblematic objects like articles of equipment carried by heroes of the Tain,"[16] the main story in the Heroic Cycle.

Some critics even maintain that one of O'Casey's major artistic purposes in his plays was to "unite what is best in Irish myth and history with what is best in Christianity."[17] William Armstrong believes in plays starting with Red Roses through Cock-a-Doodle Dandy and The Drums of Father Ned, O'Casey intended to satirize certain flaws in Irish civilization by affirming "a highly personal creed which blends a pagan delight in the free expression of the senses and the imagination with intuitions and ideas drawn from Irish mythology, Christianity and Marx."[18] One of O'Casey's most intensely felt criticisms of contemporary Ireland was her uncritical acceptance of Christian joylessness in the world and mortification of the flesh. In Within the Gates and The Bishop's Bonfire, he makes explicit his disapproval of the "repressive pietism" that had taken hold in Ireland, in sharp contrast to the wildly joyous philosophy of Osheen from the Fenian cycle.[19] But perhaps nowhere

---

[16]John Arden, "Ecce Hobo Sapiens: O'Casey's Theatre," in Sean O'Casey, ed. Thomas Kilroy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975), p.66

[17]William Armstrong, Sean O'Casey. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 1967), p. 29.

18 Ibid., 26.

[19]David Krause, "The Rageous Ossean: Patron Hero of Synge and O'Casey," Modern Drama 4 (Dec., 1961), pp. 287-90.

does he more brilliantly capture the distinction between the life-affirming Ossianic philosophy of the myths and the joyless other-worldly stance of Christianity than in his hilarious five-page monologue of St. Patrick haranguing his Irish flock in Pictures in the Hallway.[20]

As for the women in the myths, he suggests something of the hold they had upon his imagination in a letter to his great friend Lady Gregory. For a time it would appear such strong-willed women constituted his ideal conception of woman.

> Shaw once wrote that you were the most distinguished of living Irishwomen. And now I have thought of our present country women, seeking some, seeking even one, that had in her something of Grania, or Emer, or of Maeve, but God, perhaps, has hidden them from my eyes. 21

So O'Casey,too, it would seem likely had at least part of his conception of woman shaped by the imposing gallery of self-possessed and imposing females in the Gaelic myths.

---

[20]Sean O'Casey, Autobiography: Pictures in the Hallway (London: Pan Books, 1971), pp. 13-17.

[21]David Krause, Sean O'Casey: Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968), p. 25.

CHAPTER V

AUTHORS' RELATIONSHIP WITH MOTHER

While it is undoubtedly significant to point out that the Irish home is powered by a matriarchal impulse, and that mythic role models for strong female behavior existed in the consciousnesses of both Synge and O'Casey, it is just as true that their personal experiences with women, and particularly with their mothers, could have negated these powerful cultural and intellectual influences on the dramatists. However, they did not. If anything, their maternal relationships reinforced their inclination to see women as emotionally stronger than men. Naturally, the particular nature of each man's relationship with his mother had particular modifying influences on his vision of the degree of power possessed by women: Synge's female characters being usually dominating and O'Casey's more commonly being less threatening to, but more autonomous than, his male characters.

Approaching the interpretation of biographical data is of its nature an iffy endeavor. Psychographs seem particularly dangerous because they rely so strongly upon inference and are not subject to verification with the authors in question. Add to this the paucity of raw autobiographical material kept by the Synge family after the playwright's death and the disregard of O'Casey for things like dates and chronological sequence in his huge six-volume autobiography, and the task seems frightening indeed. Nonetheless, such data as are available tantalizes and cries out for explication. The caveat stated, the argument proceeds.

Synge's Relationship with His Mother and Other Women

John Millington Synge was one year old when his father died, too young to have retained any memories of him. Therefore, his mother and his maternal grandmother became the central influences in his life. Because of a sickly constitution, the boy's early education was irregular; however,

> there was nothing irregular about his religious training: for his mother and grandmother ruled a household where discipline was almost as strict as that of a religious order. Mrs. Synge and her mother had gone to school themselves to a harsh master. Their authority was the Bible and they cited it constantly to their children. 1

Though in adolescence he came to bitterly resent his mother as "a woman of narrow Protestant piety, to whom he was closely bound by an exasperated and rebellious piety,"[2] his boyhood relationship with her was apparently quite fond. Early on he learned to rely upon her for emotional support. When at six years of age he woke one night from a dream in which the theological concept of Hell became terrifyingly real for him, he permitted himself to be soothed, even flattered, by her explanation that the dream meant he was now of an age that the Holy Ghost was convicting him of sin and therefore preparing him for salvation.[3]

Kathleen Trail Synge, ("rigorously religious, thoroughly well-meaning, energetic in her triviality, possessive in her sense of family, didactic, and utterly uncomprehensive of her son's nature"[4]), of

---

[1] D.H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, J.M. Synge, 1871-1909 (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1959), p. 7.

[2] Elizabeth Coxhead, J.M. Synge and Lady Gregory (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 9.

[3] J.M. Synge, Collected Works, ed. Alan Price, vol. 2 Prose (London: Oxford U. Press, 1966), p. 4.

[4] S.B. Bushrui, ed., A Centenary Tribute to John Millington Synge, 1871-1909 (N.Y.: Barnes & Noble, 1972), p. 9.

necessity had to be with five children to rear. She drew considerable sustenance and psychological comfort from her religion and her membership in Dublin's Protestant Ascendancy, the city's elite landowning class. Eminently pragmatic, she had little patience with what she regarded as John's maudlin guilt about evicting a tenant farmer from family land and burning his house to prevent surreptitious return. She argued implacably that not to evict him for non-payment of rent would be to weaken the strength of landowners, and 1887 "was no time for the landlords to relax their already precarious hold on the rights and privileges that gave them their power."[5]

Though Synge absorbed his mother's bourgeois horror of revealing personal aspects of his life in his writings, one can detect between the lines of his sketchy autobiographical notes an early tendency to idealize the female sex. During these same boyish years, Synge also developed the passion for Nature that would so strikingly identify his art. In the course of long therapeutic walks through woods outside his mother's country home, he grew exquisitely susceptible to the changing moods and beauty of Nature. In fact, all his work is alive with a palpable sense of beauty of the outdoors.

Interestingly, he seems to have identified, equated, women with the rapturous beauty and power of nature. In his autobiographical manuscript, he remembers

> about puberty when the boy begins to look
> with uneasy awakened gaze that lingers
> because it is not satisfied, I saw in one
> hour that both nature and women were alive
> with indescribable radiance -- with beauty.

---

[5]Greene and Stephens, p. 12.

> Even when the animal feelings were at their height, a beautiful woman seemed an intangible glory. 6

Of the thin amount of material he left about his early family years, his memories of his first attachment to a member of the opposite sex at ten years of age seems to have struck him as important since the relationship apparently taught him to distrust the sex it was his tendency to idolize. He recalls in uncommonly luxuriant detail the delight and agony of his friendship with Florence Ross. He recalls avidly sharing tennis, bird-watching, and drawing with her. He developed an intense affection for her and told her "with more virile authority" than he felt he ever possessed again "that she was to be my wife. She was not displeased." Nonetheless, upon the arrival of a male cousin upon the scene, she rather blithely transferred her affections. Synge "was stunned with horror" and moped about the house for days. Though his mother, recognizing the source of his malaise, attempted to get him to walk again with the girl, his faith was broken: "thus I learned very young the weakness of the false gods we are obliged to worship."[7]

A year later, however, he was sufficiently over his wound to adore her again. When the male cousin moved to another part of the country, he resumed his relationship with her and contrived to believe he was in love with her. As though he needed to believe the female sex were constituted of some sort of extraordinary beings rather than merely the other half of humanity, he took to kissing "the chair she had sat on and [he would] kiss the little notes she sometimes sent to me till I blotted the ink."[8]

---

[6]Synge, Collected Works: Prose, p. 13.

[7]Ibid., p. 8.

[8]Ibid., p. 0.

During these early years "he was inevitably very much dependent upon his mother and grandmother for his understanding of the world;"[9] during his adult years it is perhaps not so surprising he was more comfortable with women friends than men. John Mansfield recalled that

> when I turn over my memories of him it seems that his grave courtesy was only gay when he was talking to women. His talk to women had a lightness and charm. It was sympathetic; never self-assertive, as the hard brilliant Irish intellect often is. 10

However, the ease of these relationships apparently did not carry over into the sexual sphere. He seems to have chosen for his friendships women cut in his mother's mold, educated and strong-minded persuasions.[11] Despite the strength of his attraction toward them, these women apparently never returned his affections. His pliant charm was not enough for them. In an autobiographical segment of his first play, the unpublished The Moon Is Set, Synge apparently gave vent to the frustration he had felt in being rejected by several self-possessed young women with whom he had fallen in love during several years living on the Continent:

---

[9]Robin Skelton, J.M. Synge and His World (N.Y.: Viking Press, 1971), p. 10.

[10]John Mansfield, J.M. Synge: A Few Personal Recollections (Philadelphia: Richard West, 1973), p. 9.

[11]He counted upon the friendships of women like Valeska Von Eiken, a German girl with whom he confided his hopeless love for Cherry Matheson. She apparently reined in his growing attraction toward her by upbraiding him for addressing her as "Valeska" unpreceded by "Miss." While studying at the Sorbonne, he met Therese Breydon who was a French art teacher interested in politics and the Feminist Movement, and a defender of Dreyfus. He loved arguing religion with an American woman, Miss Capps, who he met while studying Italian in Italy. Likewise, he was attracted by another strong-minded woman, Hope Rea, an Englishwoman studying art and doing research on Donatello and Rubens; he was fascinated by her rationalist and later theosophical philosophies.

> my life has gone to ruin because I misunderstood love and because I was scrupulous when I should have been strong. I treated women as though they were gods and they treated me as if I might be damned for their amusement. 12

His relationship with his mother looms tantalizingly in the background during these courtship years. Synge began his many attempts to break his dependence upon her during his adolesence. At 15 or 16, after reading Darwin, he began doubting her religion. At 18 he announced he would no longer attend church. Mrs. Synge was shocked by his apostasy and with Samuel, another son, she

> carried on a constant campaign of prayer and propaganda directed at John. She reported to Robert [her eldest son]: "Sam has lent him a book to read, written by a clergyman, to those who have doubts and unbelief, and we are asking the Lord to speak through the book. We take ahold afresh of His promises." 13

His next attempt to assert his independence of her expressed itself in his determination to study the violin for performance. Bound by a formidable sense of class obligation, she was rocked to the soles of her shoes and implacably opposed to his serious preparation as a performing artist. Only the intercession of a female cousin convinced Mrs. Synge to relent. Though his study of the violin and music theory in Germany occasioned his leaving home for the first time, it did not mark his psychological independence of his mother.

While he was on holiday in Dublin, he fell in love with and proposed to an attractive young woman named Cherry Matheson. However, because of his lack of religious orthodoxy, she rejected his suit. So

---

[12]Skelton, p. 34.

[13]Greene and Stephens, p. 26.

undimmed was Synge's reliance upon his mother that he begged her to convince Cherry to relent in her determination not to marry him. Since his mother probably hoped such a match would bring him back to the church, she did intercede but without avail. Upon his return to the Continent, he made friends with and confided the painful details of his frustrated love affair to a number of educated and sympathetic young women, who invariably side-stepped the relationship when Synge attempted to turn the friendship to romance. He may have been unconsciously expecting them to function as mother-substitutes. Such a possibility is not unlikely since he maintained a bond of dependency upon his mother until her death when he was in his mid-thirties.

At 35, he apparently grew tired of being treated by women as little more than an affable conversationalist. He entered into a relationship with Maire (Molly) O'Neill apparently determined to change his pattern of relating to women as he did to his mother. Ironically, he chose to function more like Molly's father than lover. For she was young enough to be his daughter and in many respects he treated her as such. He may have believed her youth and inexperience would make her more malleable than the previous women in his life; however, Molly O'Neill demonstrated a strong inclination to dominate the by-then famous playwright. "When walking together in the glens of Wicklow, they were often ecstatically happy, but quarrelled as often, for Molly had a quick temper and seems, at least on occasion, to have enjoyed making her lover buckle under."[14] Something in her conformed to the "wildness," the primitiveness," he had learned to love in the Celtic myths while

---

[14]Skelton, p. 102.

a bookish boy.

In addition, as an actress she was exactly the choice of fiancée guaranteed to chagrin his mother. It is not unlikely that he chose her at least partly as another rebellious attempt to assert his independence of his mother. Molly was Roman Catholic, uneducated, and a former shop-girl. Her "unsuitability" was sure to nettle Mrs. Synge. Robin Skelton commented of the young actress's tempestuous personality that

> while Pegeen Mike's language owes a great deal to [Synge's] Kerry friends, her temperament is not unlike that of his beloved. The waywardness, the wildness, the warmth, the independence, the sudden burst of temper and the restless yet ill-formed ambition were all characteristics of Molly. 15

A psychiatrist might well suspect Synge's choice, wondering if the fifteen year disparity in their ages, their different class backgrounds, did not constitute an unconscious way of assuring the match would never be concluded. Certainly, the course of their relationship never ran smoothly. Synge apparently decided that this time it would be he who would steer the direction of their romance. He liked to think of Molly as an impressionable student and himself as her wiser teacher: "I hope you'll read steadily while I'm away," he wrote.

> I hate to preach at you or schoolmaster you -- I like you so perfectly as you are -- but you must know that it will make life richer for both of us if you know literature and the arts, and the things that are of most interest to me and my friends, that you'll know one of these days. 16

---

[15] Ibid., p. 102

[16] Greene and Stephens, p. 207.

His love letters are more often than not imbued with a stuffy, paternalistic tone. For instance, when she moved out of her parent's house into that of a married sister, where there would be presumably less supervision, he wrote high-handedly,

> you agreed not to stay there as I did not like it for you. Now at the last moment you tell me you are going back on your definite word, and going to do what I ask you not.... You seem determined that I am never to trust you. 17

Or else his letters alternate with querulous requests for greater sympathy on Molly's part for his periodic bouts of illness. Ann Saddlemyer observed that since Synge had become used to "the close attentions of a devoted mother," he came to expect a corresponding sympathy from his fiancee.[18]

His difficulty in relating to her like a lover instead of a father must have been compounded by his shyness about being demonstrative with her. He tried to explain his reticence about displays of affection in a letter: "You must not mind if I seem a little distant at the theatre; everyone is watching us, and even when we are publically engaged I do not care to let outsiders see anything."[19]

That he had not yet broken his mother's hold upon him seems evident from the fact that during his wooing of Molly, he spent anguished months trying to write a letter to Mrs. Synge informing her of his plans to marry. He attempted to justify the delay to Molly by explaining it was better to give his mother time to adjust to the idea. When he finally did summon up the courage to tell her, she accepted the idea without fuss conceding it could be a good thing for a man of his

---

[17]Ibid., 210.

[18]Ann Saddlemyer, Letters to Molly (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1971), p. XVLL.

[19]Greene and Stephens, p. 263.

lonely bent. Apparently, however, Synge was afraid not only of his mother but of marriage as well, for even after acquiring his mother's acceptance of the engagement, he hedged about setting a wedding date, explaining to Molly: "my mother enquired quite pleasantly about our walk and where we had been. She is coming around to the idea very quickly, I think, but still it is better not to hurry things."[20]

Before Synge could marry, however, he became ill requiring abdominal surgery. Soon after, his mother became ill. He attempted to nurse her himself, but as the period of her illness lengthened and he suspected she was dying, "he felt a sudden need to return to Germany once more." For

> just as in the past he had avoided confrontations by telling both Samuel and his mother of his marriage plans by letter rather than face to face, so now he could not help evading the issue. 21

His feelings toward her were at best ambivalent; the unresolved emotions that continued to dog him because he was still strongly bound to her, were once again expressed in rebellion against his sense of duty. When a letter from Dublin informed him that her condition was grave, he decided to do nothing unless she got even worse. However, when he received word that she had died, he decided he was not strong enough to rush back to the funeral. In consequence, the mother who during her life could never bring herself to attend one of her playwright-son's "theatricals" at the Abbey, was buried without her much-loved son, Johnny, in attendance.

It seems an ironic conclusion that only five months afterwards, Synge followed his mother's lead and succumbed to Hodgkins Disease.

---

[20] Ibid., 2. 226.

[21] Skelton, p. 123.

His unresolved relationship with his mother seems everywhere apparent in both his personal life and in his plays. A father figure being unavailable to him, he seems to have identified himself almost exclusively with Mrs. Synge, and "except for two brief periods during his last years, Synge made his home with his mother."[22] Further, because he both idolized and feared her, he was never able to conclude a successful sexual relationship with a woman, equal to equal. The only way he could sustain an intimate relationship was in choosing a female who resembled a daughter more than a fiancee. His failure to sever his psychological dependence[23] upon his mother may explain the disproportionate number of female characters he created who stand as larger-than-life dominating figures in relationship to their men -- looking for all the world as awesomely imposing as a mother does to her small son.

O'Casey's Relationship with Mother and Other Women

Sean O'Casey, on the other hand, appears to have successfully negotiated release from emotional dependence upon his mother in a relative natural, if lengthy, maturing process.

Like Synge, O'Casey was born in Dublin, of Protestant stock, the last of five surviving children. Like him, he was sickly as a boy and educated erratically (Synge by a series of tutors, O'Casey by himself). Like Mrs. Synge, Mrs. O'Casey was widowed, snobbish about Roman Catholics, and disapproving of theatre. Unlike her, however, O'Casey's mother seems to have provided her son with greater freedom to make, and

---

[22] Saddlemyer, p. xvii

[23] Robin Skelton observed that Synge's "intellectual rejection of her beliefs had been complete, but he had never lost his emotional dependence upon her presence." J.M. Synge and His World, p. 123.

respect, his own choices.

Whereas the Synge's were well-off financially and socially, the O'Casey's lived in abominable and debasing poverty until Sean's success at the Abbey Theatre in middle age. What Susan O'Casey ("O'Casside" in the Autobiography) was unable to give her children in material comfort, she attempted to make up for in selfless generosity of spirit. O'Casey immortalized this singular quality of his mother not only in his six-volume autobiography and in the character of Mrs. Breydon in Red Roses for Me, but in conversation and correspondence for the rest of his life.

Though she died when he was thirty-eight,[24] Susan O'Casey remained the most important woman in his life till he married, nearly ten years later. In I Knock at the Door, he remembers her with a boy's eyes as a woman of heroic proportions, who contended with Poverty at every turning. Thomas Kilroy regards I Knock as primarily "an account of a fierce maternal act of defiance against death, or rather Death in a Morality Play, with his own mother cast as Everywoman."[25] The ferocity of her struggle may be surmised from the fact that death had already claimed two sons before Sean who had been given his name. The entire autobiography is packed with recollections of the woman who struggled so assiduously to compensate in warmth and affection for the demoralizing effects of the tenement slums in which she was forced to rear him.

---

[24]In Innishfallen, Fare Thee Well, O'Casey claims to have been 35 years when his mother died, but in 1964 his friend and scholar David Krause showed him O'Casey's birth certificate which he had finally located in Dublin's Hall of Records. Its date was 1880, leaving the dramatist three years older than he had supposed himself to be.

[25]Thomas Kilroy, ed., Introduction to Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 3.

Susan O'Casey was a loving, nurturant mother whose persistence alone was responsible for preventing her son's total blindness as a boy, and whose strong-mindedness protected him from the bullying of ignorant schoolmasters. Though she might have suffocated him with overprotection because of his sickliness, she did not. She recognized the importance of her son's growing at his own pace, in his own independent style; consequently, she turned down a welfare scholarship to a Protestant military school for him:

> they'd hammer [religion] into him.... Every turn he'd take would be chronicled; and if one wasn't done as they had planned, the boy'd be broken into their way of doin' it; an' Johnny's my boy an' not theirs.... I'm not goin' to have the life in him cowed out of him so long as I can prevent it. There's no use harpin' on the Blue Coat School, for me mind's made up -- the boy won't go into it. 26

She was a woman who did not permit her own prejudices to straitjacket her children. Though she suspected the theatre as the breeding place of sin, when she saw that teenaged Sean meant to act in an amateur production of a Boucicault play despite her misgivings, she had the grace to add to his departing figure, "well, since you've committed yourself, do your best and don't, for goodness' sake, make a show of the Cassides by giving a bad performance." She had the knack of bestowing on her son the gift of his own joy in doing the thing he wanted to do.

But most important, she taught him to trust and value his own judgment. When he refused to remove his cap while collecting his pay

---

[26] O'Casey, Autobiography: I Knock on the Door (London: Pan Books, 1971), p. 186.

[27] O'Casey, Autobiography: Pictures in the Hallway, p. 137.

at the end of a fifteen-hour day and lost his job in consequence, his first thought -- in spite of the knowledge of how much his family counted on his salary -- was, "well, my mother will be glad I left it."[28] He instinctively knew she would support his decisions. (Near the end of his life, he reflected in an interview his philosophy of raising his own children was very much like his own mother's:

> Children must feel free to follow their interest, and not feel under any obligation to the parents. I've always treated my children as equals, and not expected anything back from them. I don't meddle. I'm of a different generation -- what right should I have to meddle? Fledglings flee the nest in their own good time -- the debt contracted to one's parents in one's youth is paid to one's offspring. That is the natural order of things. 29

Like Synge, O'Casey, too, early lost his father. However, O'Casey had the advantage of his father's presence during the critically formative first six years of his life. During that period, his most significant memory was his father's fear that the boy was doomed to ignorance on account of the eye disease that made reading excruciatingly painful to him.[30] That recollection, coupled with the fact that Susan O'Casey kept the memory of her husband as scholar a live and loved image before her family, was responsible for one of the playwright's major life choices. Though he could not read until he was 14 because of the ulcerating eyes, he determined

---

[28]Ibid., p. 183.

[29]Sean O'Casey, The Sting and the Twinkle, ed. E.H. Mikhail and John O'Riordan (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 78.

[30]O'Casey, Autobiography: I Knock on the Door, p. 36.

> he would learn, he would learn. He wouldn't keep on being the ignoramus [his brother] Archie had called him when he ventured to say a word in an argument.... If his father had made himself into a scholar by boring into books, his son could do the same. He was studying all words he didn't really know the meaning of in an old dictionary his father had left behind him. More than that, he was busy learning something about physical, political, and commercial geography out of his father's old book, Sullivan's Geography Generalized. More than that, he was learning grammar, too; and history from his father's Merle d'Aubigne's History of the Reformation. 31

O'Casey senses that the abasement, the soul-pinching despair that were the accoutrements of poverty could be eased only by enlarging his mind. So with his father's image before him, he spent his free time -- often fifteen hours at a go on his day off -- peering down at jumping words lit by the sputtering flicker of a paraffin lamp.[32] He pored over the most exciting and demanding books he could find in second-hand book stalls, till he could at last wrest for himself a tenuous sense of self-respect.

The ideal of intellectual integrity which his father represented to him stayed with him throughout his life. For instance, at 46 in the course of an interview with W.B. Yeats about his new play, The Plough and the Stars, the older man complimented O'Casey for it calling him "the Irish Dostoyevsky." O'Casey felt he ought to have laughed and informed Ireland's most famous poet that he was indulging in a bit of literary pompousness inasmuch as the dramatist knew Yeats had been introduced to his first Dostoyevsky novel only the night before. O'Casey

---

[31] O'Casey, Autobiography: Pictures in the Hallway, p. 87

[32] Ibid., p. 184.

refrained, though he was afterwards ashamed: "Sean's father would have said how he felt and what he thought without a hesitation. He had let his father's memory down. He'd try to be braver next time."[33]

O'Casey was further aided in formulating a positive identification with a male role by three older brothers. Whereas Synge's older brothers were sent away to various boarding schools and colleges, the tenement playwright had his brothers readily accessible as role models. From the eldest Archie, he learned that once he started working, he would automatically be accorded the right to pursue his inclinations independently; for fourteen-year old Sean observed that though his mother often objected to Archie's plans, she held her tongue since her oldest son was

> the only one bringing in the wherewithall to keep the little home together. Johnny, too, had to be kind to Archie, and careful not to say anything that would offend, for, as well as keeping him, he gave Johnny tuppence a week, a treasure that gave him the power to buy The Boys of London and New York, a further volume of Deadwood Dick or Franke Reade, Jr. and His Electric Airship. So Johnny cleaned Archie's boots with a cake of Cooney's Paste Blacking taken out of its oiled green paper, and pressed into an old tin to keep it soft; ran errands for him; and generally laboured to please and serve his brother in every way. All the same, Johnny didn't like him, and did these things because there was no way out of it. 34

However, Johnny/Sean got "out of it" as early as he could by enthusiastically getting his first job that same year.

From his favorite brother, Tom, a handsome and well-turned out Dublin Fusilier, he acquired a sense of ease in masculine, and an anticipation for feminine, company. For Tom gave the teenaged Sean his

---

[33] O'Casey, Autobiography: Innishfallen, Fare Thee Well, p. 191.

[34] O'Casey, Autobiography: Pictures in the Hallway, p. 20.

introduction to pub-life. Soon he knew all of Tom's favorite pubs by heart,

> had drunk ginger beer or claret in each of them; had listened to the rare manly talk beatin' round the house like the stirring wind or bustling sea. And now he was at the Cat 'n Cage. He was getting on and filling his young life with wondhers. Here he was in a pub miles from home between two oul' swaddies havin' his share of dhrink with the best of them. Few more years an' he'd be workin', able to go on his own way, swagger about the streets, an' show Jennie Clitheroe the sort he was. 35

These twin influences of his father's idealized image and his brothers' roisterous company helped the young O'Casey toward a natural, if occasionally painful, separation from his mother. During one pub adventure with his brothers that erupted in a melee among them, a hurling team, and two constables, Sean suggested they "borrow" a coach and horse to engineer their escape from the law. With Sean driving, the exhilaration was high indeed as they dashed through Dublin streets in a stolen cab while police whistles grew steadily more dim behind them. Afterwards as his brothers and the hurlers complimented him lavishly, he was full of satisfaction and a sense of growing up. But growing up encompasses ambivalent feelings; for "then he remembered he had left behind on the counter the lovely branch of crimson and golden berries, plucked for his mother; and his heart got a little sad again."[36] Despite his mixed emotions, however, he made the inevitable break from his mother's authority.

Perhaps Susan O'Casey's greatest heritage to her son was the

---

[35]Ibid., p. 55.

[36]Ibid., p. 64.

seedbed of self-confidence she implanted in him, enabling him through seven years of rejections to continue believing in his talent as a writer.

> He had made up his mind years ago that the Abbey Theatre curtain would go up on a play of his; an' up it would go, sooner or later. First decide slowly and deeply whether it is in you to do a thing; if you decide that you can, then do it, even though it kept you busy till the very last hour of your life. 37

Whereas Synge depended emotionally upon his mother all his life and resented her for it, O'Casey asserted his independence of Susan and admired her ever after for encouraging it. As a middle-aged man O'Casey quite unself-consciously recalled his abiding respect and affection for her. His contemporary Gabriel Fallon remembers how often O'Casey

> would talk of his mother, her care of him, her unfailing kindness, her "gay laugh at the gate of the grave." "Though she is dead now for many years, she is still a living presence with me. 38

As a result of his releasing himself from his childhood bond with his mother, his relationships with women seem to have been more relaxed than Synge's. Neither do his female characters loom so large and domineering as Synge's women do; they are scaled closer to life size, they are less inclined to manipulate than Synge's women.

Given the sexually puritanical milieu of Ireland, O'Casey's relationships with women were remarkably natural. He tells of stealing his first kiss at twelve from a slum neighbor named Jennie Clitheroe. At about fifteen or sixteen, he carried on an intense flirtation with a co-worker named Alice Norris in a secluded company stock-room. In

---

[37] O'Casey, Autobiography: Innishfallen, Fare Thee Well, p. 117.

[38] Gabriel Fallon, "The House on the North Circulor Road: Fragments from a Biography," Modern Drama 4 (Dec., 1961), p. 229.

Pictures in the Hallway he recalls his sexual initiation with a Daisy Battles whom he met at an anti-British demonstration that turned violent. Initially, he was shy, kissing her rather tentatively. Good humoredly, she commented on the kiss, "well, you take care not to hurt yourself when you're kind to a girl," whereupon she proceeded to relieve him of his trousers on the pretext of sewing them. O'Casey recalled with delight that several hours later she observed correctly, "you've learned a lot here today, haven't you? You'll be a knowing fellow from this out."[39]

He was middle-aged before he fully recognized intellectually the misogynism that clerics implanted in Irish minds[40] but his instincts early revolted against such attitudes as he found himself drawn to women's bodies just as often as he was to their spirits or minds. At a political meeting in Dublin's Liberty Hall, O'Casey found himself staring at a 20-year old woman who wept as she denounced Michael Collins' 1916 Treaty partitioning Ulster. Regarding her with unabashed desire, he

> thought how good she would be to have beside him under a hiding hedge away in the country where no one thought of trespassing. She had a great mass of dark-brown hair rippling over her neck, big grey eyes, a tempting mouth, ripe and red as a finely-born cherry; her coat was open, and underneath the blouse Sean saw

---

[39] O'Casey, Autobiography: Pictures in the Hallway, p. 208.

[40] O'Casey regularly took aim against misogynistic clerics, pointing up anti-feminine attitudes dating back to medieval times. He cited one Benedictine of Luny who warned that woman's beauty was merely skin deep; that if a man were to look within her, he would find there merely "phlegm and blood and humours and gall," adding logically "if we cannot bring ourselves even with the tips of our fingers, to touch dung, wherefore do we desire to embrace this bag of filth?" O'Casey was often incensed to find that "this outlook on woman [is] as strong among the clerics of today as it was in the middle ages." Autobiography: Rose and Crown, p. 192.

> that her breasts were lovely enough to make
> a nest for a hero's head. 41

Unlike Donal Davoren in The Shadow of a Gunman, O'Casey was able to get past his initial fear of gossip when a forward young tenement wife named Bessie Ballynoy offered herself to him with hilarious assertiveness after a Black and Tan Raid.[42] He courted a beautiful young Catholic girl named Nora Creena (the prototype for Sheila in Red Roses for Me) for several seasons until he realized that she lacked the courage to defy her parents or her priest in his behalf, that she was too mindlessly tied to her Faith. "Free thought to her would be blasphemy and ruin eternal," he saw, while to him it was as necessary as breath. Yet he felt no bitterness for her inability to follow his lead: "let her gentle, quiet nature lead a quiet, gentle life; let his doubting, strenuous one live out its activity, struggle however bitter and painful, any, or all of it, might be."[43] However, the brief, if unsatisfying, happiness he had felt during his courtship of Nora did serve to clarify that he must have a woman to share his life.

And so at 47, more than halfway through his life, he married. Interestingly, like Synge he chose an actress, a Roman Catholic, and a woman considerably his junior. Eileen Carey O'Casey in her Sean gives the impression of idolizing her husband virtually from their first meeting, when he had her salary doubled for playing Nora in Plough and the Stars. He was the lionized dramatist of that 1926 London season

---

[41] O'Casey, Autobiography: Innishfallen, Fare Thee Well, p. 84

[42] Ibid., pp. 57-8.

[43] Ibid., p. 231.

and she found both his tenderness and his social gaucheness endearing. She spent the thirty-four years of their marriage loving him for the one and protecting him from the results of the other. Fortunately for them both, she appears not to have had any axes of superiority or dominance to grind.

O'Casey is quite clear about his reasons for choosing her: she was pretty of face and figure, as well as charming and soothing company. Unlike Synge, he felt no need to "educate" her to the ways of the world. He recognized that at 23 she already possessed considerable sophistication. Instead he took real delight in watching her natural impulses develop at their own pace. For in her girlhood, Eileen Carey had been taught by restrictive Ursuline nuns,

> taught primarily to repress natural vivacity beaming from her nature, an active, imaginative, and humorous mind hidden in a silly repressive gentility; till she escaped their consecrated clutches and found a fuller life in the theatre. All these precious convents did the same service to their pupils; you must grow up into a ladylike person at all costs; refined, reticent, ignorant of life, its valour and its vehemence; she was developing the rash and lovely confidence which the nuns had dulled. 44

Because he absorbed his mother's lesson of trusting each soul to respond, open and blossom in its own time, his marriage to her was a long, fruitful and contented one.

In summary then, because he was able to separate himself psychologically from his mother and achieve an ongoing and positive identification with male role models, O'Casey adopted a more balanced view of women than did Synge. O'Casey was never overwhelmed by feminine

---

[44] O'Casey, Autobiography: Rose and Crown, p. 140.

sexuality as it seems likely Synge was. In consequence, though O'Casey's female characters may be strong-minded, they are not outsized and domineering as Synge's are. However, O'Casey's females singularize themselves as generally more courageous, autonomous, and realistic than his often "stupidly idealistic"[45] males. In a letter to Maureen Malone, he stated that though

> women aren't nobler than men, they are nearer to life, more enduring, and usually readier to face things and overcome bad times.... They are nearer to the realities of life than men. 46

In short, he found in women generally the fortitude, strong-mindedness, and personal autonomy that had characterized his own mother.

---

[45] O'Casey, The Sting and the Twinkle, p. 92.

[46] Maureen Malone, The Plays of Sean O'Casey (Carbondale, Ill.: S. Illinois U. Press, 1969), p. 37.

SUMMARY

Strong-minded female behavior in the plays of John Millington Synge and Sean O'Casey, then, is quite extensive. Five out of Synge's six plays, and nine out of O'Casey's thirteen plays contain women who function assertively.

Though his early death prevented Synge from producing a large body of plays, all but one of his dramas, The Well of the Saints, focuses on strong-minded women. It is interesting to note that Synge's women grew steadily more aggressive with each play he produced. However, even in his earliest play "In the Shadow of the Glen," Nora Burke has most of the earmarks of the women to come. Though not domineering, she is certainly single-minded and so determined to hold to a tragic view of life that she succeeds in being very funny indeed. In "Riders to the Sea" old Maurya exhibits a fierce resolution to manipulate her last surviving son through reason, guilt, or terror from encountering the Sea that has become her personal enemy. Pegeen Mike of Playboy of the Western World is the gentle playwright's most violent and openly domineering woman. Though secretly a Romantic, the shrewish Pegeen is as subtle as a pub brawl in manipulating the timid Christy Mahon into wooing her. In the dramatist's paean to Ireland's gypsies, The Tinker's Wedding, Synge created in Sarah Casey a tempestuous and hot-headed woman who brooks no contradiction from her lover. Her sudden whim to be married is for Sarah a consuming passion which Michael Byrne dares not question. Synge's final play, Deirdre of the Sorrows, centers on a woman whose will is her only guide. A female of titanic purpose, she imposes her desire upon the man she chooses to be her lover merely by her insistent and headlong determination.

Women in a remarkable nine out of thirteen of O'Casey's plays are significantly strong-minded. Though there are also women in the O'Casey canon who attempt to dominate their men, proportionately, they are not as clearly represented as the women in Synge's plays. However, Juno in Juno and the Paycock rather easily, if exasperatedly, dominates her irresponsible spouse. Nora Clitheroe of Plough and the Stars is just as frequently given to "pesterin'" her uncle and her cousin into behaving respectably. But more importantly, she attempts to shape her husband into a conventional domestic animal. More coy than Juno, she is just as manipulative in trying to seduce Jack Clitheroe out of his interest in dangerous revolutionary activities. In a like vein both Mrs. Breydon and Sheila insistently struggle to deflect Ayamonn from dangerous actions in the Labor Movement. Both women mother him, over-protect him, wheedle, cajole, and nag him in an effort to convince him to bend his life to their wiser and more conservative counsels. Reena Kilternan of O'Casey final play Behind the Green Curtains all but hypnotizes the cautious Senator Chatastray in her unrelenting efforts to convince him into acknowledging that priests intimidate most Irish laymen from taking responsibility for their own moral choices. Her own recent recognition of that fact makes her seem ruthlessly dominating in her badgering him to see the same fact.

However, the quality that most commonly characterizes O'Casey women is their impulse to govern their own lives, make their own choices. This ability to function on an internal moral code, to be inner-directed, was one of the personal qualities O'Casey most admired. Interestingly, it is usually the women who most dramatically possess interior autonomy. His first heroine, Minnie Powell in The Shadow of a Gunman, possesses it in unselfconscious innocence when she refuses to be cowed by local

gossip into refraining from visiting Davoren in his room. The brash young gold-diggers in his farce, Purple Dust, get our sympathy in part because they look down their noses at local opinion about the way they live their lives. Loreleen Marthraun is physically manhandled when she will not accede to the narrow pietism of her provincial village. Both the young women in Oak Leaves and Lavendar, Monica Penrhyn and Jennie the Land Girl, make quite theatrically effective soapbox speeches for acting on one's beliefs rather than other people's expectations. Nora McGilligan is newly liberated because of the tutoring she received at the hands of the title figure in The Drums of Father Ned about the primacy of making one's own life choices. And of course, the fiery Reena Kilternanan spends half her time in Behind the Green Curtains urging the town's resident "intellectuals" to take responsibility for their own thoughts and actions.

This phenomenon of strong-minded women in the plays of Synge and O'Casey seems to have occurred because of certain socio-cultural influences upon the authors:

(1) the general domestic pattern in Ireland is strongly matriarchal;

(2) both playwrights were exposed to specific influences that served to reinforce the national cultural pattern:

a.) Synge and O'Casey were not only profoundly aware of the strong women in the literary tradition of the ancient Gaelic myths but avowed clear admiration for them;

b.) both Synge and O'Casey had extremely close relationships to their mothers, women who were strong-willed and influential forces on their sons. These primary relationships very clearly shaped both authors' attitudes

> toward women as well as their assumptions about what were suitable roles and behavior for the female sex.

In general, the strong matriarchal strain apparent in the average Irish home makes for a corresponding tendency toward submissiveness and immaturity in the Irish male, whether his role be son or spouse. Consensus is clear that Irish men never quite break the Oedipal bond with the mother. The Irishman

> is anchored to his mother for as long as she lives. If this should seem an exaggeration, consider the following facts: an Irishwoman's life expectation is sixty-eight years. Her marrying age is thirty. Her son's marrying age is thirty-five. It follows that an Irishman does not marry until after his mother has died or is about ready to die. 1

Again and again, the striking fact is reiterated that chronologically mature men permit their mothers to control "their lives well into adulthood."[2] Irish men seem unaware of any biological or emotional urge to separate themselves from the maternal bond even after sexual maturity. They seem unwilling or unable to confront maternal resistence to the idea of a possible marriage. Male passivity before the power of the mother seems to explain

> the remarkable number of men in the countryside working the farm for their widowed mothers through their forties and even into their fifties, who will not marry until she dies and who, by then confirmed bachelors, may never marry at all. 3

---

[1] Maura Laverty, "Women-Shy Irishmen," in The Vanishing Irish, ed. John O'Brien (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1953), p. 57.

[2] D.S. Connery, The Irish (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 194.

[3] A.J. Humphreys, "The Family in Ireland," in Comparative Family Systems, ed. M.F. Nimkoff (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1965), pp. 245-6.

Female power and male subordination within the family has the expected reverberations in setting up deeply resented polarities. In fact, "it has been said that Ireland is divided by a boundary even more pernicious than that between the North and South -- the boundary between the sexes."[4] Males express their resentment toward the mother by hostility and fear toward other women.[5] They compensate by socializing with their own rather than the opposite sex, a pattern which is readily apparent today in the "masculine society of clubs and bars, of wit and talk and stimulus from which a woman...would be forever excluded. Anthropologist J.C. Messenger felt that John Synge captured some of the ramifications of male exclusion of female company in his plays. Synge's heroines, Messenger contended, "are creatures caged and raging, given no scope for their powers, condemned to love men who are poor things compared to them."[7]

The history of dominating and assertive women in Ireland goes back eons in time to pre-history and mythological times. The race's ancient myths record the disposition of women to rule not only themselves but their men as well. And if it cannot be conclusively proved, as psychiatrists like Carl Jung postulated, that a race's myths continue to exert an ongoing preconscious influence upon contemporary cultural patterns, it can be demonstrated that both Synge and O'Casey were conscious of the myths and admired the autocratic and fiery women who

---

[4]Arland Ussher, "Boundary Between the Sexes," in The Vanishing Irish, ed. John O'Brien, p. 154-5.

[5]Marvin K. Opler and Jerome L. Singer, "Ethnic Differences in Behavior and Psychotherapy: Italian and Irish," International Journal of Social Psychiatry 11 (Summer, 1956), p. 15.

[6]J.C. Messenger, Inis Beag (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 145-6.

[7]Ibid.

are such notable figures in the Heroic Cycle. Since both men were sensitive in the early twentieth century to Ireland's nativistic aspirations, her attempts to find pride in her own heritage after seven centuries of British rule, they both made it their business to garner an uncommonly broad knowledge of Gaelic mythic traditions. Widespread interest in the Celtic myths had begun at the turn of the centuries through the work of scholars like Drs. Doughlas Hyde and Standish O'Grady. Both Synge and O'Casey sensed that the myth scholars' work would provide Irish

> society with psychological compensation for the frustrations engendered by cultural subordination; the revived forms would symbolize the real or imagined freedom, unity, greatness, or happiness enjoyed by the people. 8

before British colonization. However, whatever their patriotic reasons for beginning study of the bardic traditions, both men were soon struck by the vitality of the myths and particularly the dramatic and dynamic women in them. Encountering such imperious women in the race's most primitive literature may have served to reinforce an inclination on their parts to regard women in varyingly strong-minded terms.

However, the fact that both men were closely bound to their mothers well into their middle thirties is a consideration that seems to offer the most pregnant area of speculation about the dramatists' future atitudes toward women. Given the admitted dangers of attempting to interpret biographical data to construct psychographs of authors who are no longer alive either to contradict speculation or fill in gaps in information, it is nonetheless possible to see at least the outlines of each man's particular relationship with the first important woman in his life. Furthermore, while both authors appear to have been influenced

---

[8]Ibid., p. 3.

by their socio-cultural heritage so that both created strong-minded women in their plays, the different types of strong-minded women each created can perhaps best be explained by each man's unique attempt to effect adult separation from his mother. Because Synge was never able to declare emotional independence from his mother, his female characters are more frequently than not marked by an impulse to dominate, to manipulate the men in their lives as he felt his mother did him. Synge's females are rather larger-than-life, imposing in scale. Deirdre has the temerity to scorn a king and the arrogance to challenge the man she has chosen to become her lover to dare to ignore her. Pegeen Mike has the boldness and authority that make more men than Christy Mahon quake in her presence. Old Maurya has the personal animus to struggle against the tyranny of the Sea itself. Synge's women are idealized. They often feel more like primal female powers than female humans. In short, they suggest the vision of women that a young boy might have.

O'Casey's women, too, are manipulative on occasion, but more often his women characters' particular brand of strong-mindedness is marked by an impulse to achieve personal autonomy. O'Casey women, unlike his timid men, refuse to be browbeaten by the gods of public morality. They often act directly in the teeth of public expectation, as if they define themselves by the integrity with which they pursue their own needs and desires, unswerved by external pressure. O'Casey draws sharp contrast between his women's insistence on governing their own lives and his male characters' frequent capitulation to the spectre of public opinion.

It is of marked interest to compare the tenement dramatist's relationship with his mother to that of Synge to his. Whereas the middle-class Mrs. Synge appears to have had a rigid series of expectations

about religion, education, and career for her son John to fulfill appropriate to his position in Dublin society, Mrs. O'Casey's particular wisdom seems to have resided in an innate recognition that while she might have hopes for Sean, "expectations" for him impinged upon his developing personality. She had the good sense to perceive that he would mature best when left to grow at his own pace and according to his own lights. She supported his decisions and approved his growing assurance in trusting his judgments. O'Casey's six-volume Autobiography as well as his collected letters amply testify to his mother's gift to him. He appreciated her courage, endurance, and quiet autonomy in surviving the debasing degradation of daily tenement life. His female characters are in consequence often testimony to her influence on him. They are most frequently low-key, realistic, and strong-mindedly persistent to their philosophy of life.

In brief, Synge's and O'Casey's inclination to perceive women as strong-minded was probably influenced by a combination of the general Irish socio-cultural pattern of matriarchal incidence, the dramatists' study of the autocratic females in the Gaelic Heroic Cycle and each playwright's specific attempt to effect emotional separation from his mother.

APPENDIX:

WOMEN IN THE HEROIC CYCLE

APPENDIX

Women in the Heroic Cycle

The central cycle in Gaelic myth, the Heroic or Red Branch or Ulster Cycle, which was extant at least as early as the second century, abounds in women who were quite determined to shape their own destinies, with or without the acquiescence of the men who chose to live with them. However, a tendency toward matriarchy in Ireland goes back even earlier into the country's pre-history.[1] The Gaels trace their beginnings back to the goddess Danae, (not to her male companion Bile) calling their predecessors the tuatha de Danae, children of Danae.[2]

And even earlier into the darkness of pre-history, there is a tradition that a queen and her women followers ruled Ireland. She, Cessair, was a magician and is said to have inhabited the country "after the great universal flood."[3]

Thomas Kinsella in his fine translation of the central tale of the Heroic Cycle, the Tain bo Cuailngne, "The Cattle Raid of Cooley", gives testimony to the fact that ancient Irish women had the uncanny knack of singularizing themselves.

> Probably the greatest achievement of the Tain and the Ulster Cycle is the series of women, some in full scale and some in minature, on whose strong and diverse personalities the action turns: Medb, Derdriu, Macha, Nes, Aife, It may be as goddess-figures, ultimately, that these women have their

---

[1]Marie-Louise Sjoestedt-Jonval, Gods and Heroes of the Celts, trans. Myles Dillon (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1949),p. 36.

[2]Pierre Grimal, ed. Larousse World Mythology (N.Y.: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), p. 347.

[3]Ibid., p. 352.

> power; it is certainly they, under all the violence, who remain most real in the memory. 4

Unquestionably, the most imposing personality among the women in the Heroic Cycle is that of Queen Maeve of Connacht who started a war over a domestic spat.

> Beautiful, ambitious, and imperious, she is equally fearless in forming her designs and unscrupulous in executing them. She is a splendid type of the barbarian chieftainess, ruling her people with the craft of an Elizabethan and leading them to war with the courage of a Boadicea. 5

Always competitive, she was chagrined to learn while in bed with her husband of an evening that they were equally matched in all things, except that he possessed a great white bull called Findbennach.[6] She instantly determined to gain possession of the Brown Bull of Cooley, the only creature in Ireland magnificient enough to even up her relationship with her husband.

When the Brown Bull's owner refused to sell it, Maeve simply mobilized the army of Connacht and declared war on Ulster -- a war that was to prove the most devastating in the whole of Gaelic mythology. Though her motives for such an act of aggression were trivial, her behavior was not surprising when seen in the light of the great and unusual care Maeve took in locating an ideal husband for herself

---

[4]Thomas Kinsella, trans., The TAIN (London: Oxford U. Press, 1970), p. XV

[5]Eleanor Hull, ed., The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature (London: David Nutt, 1898) p. LIV

[6]John Arnott Macculloch, Mythology of All Races, vol. 3, Celtic Myth (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1954), p. 59.

originally.

Before marrying Ailill, she determined she would in no way be submissive to her husband. She interviewed many men so as to find one who was her equal in generosity, courage and freedom from jealousy. She refused categorically to even consider a man prone to jealousy inasmuch as she insisted as prelude to any marriage contract that she retain the same extra-marital rights as her mate. She observed quite pragmatically

> Should he be jealous, the husband with whom I should live, that too would not suit me, for there never was a time I had not one man in the shadow of another. 7

Her intuition that Ailill of Leinster was such a man was reinforced emotionally for Maeve by a mystical encounter with a transfigured swineherd who advised her to "marry Ailill," pointing out he "would never get the upper hand" over her.[8]

At the nuptials Maeve further secured her independence by preventing her husband from ever saying that he had saved her from her father's domination by reversing the patriarchal ritual existent at the time.[9] First, she paid the "purchase price" to him, which of tradition was paid to the bride. Second, she turned inside out the usual notion of the wife's honor being the responsibility of the husband, by deliberately taking upon herself full burden to right any slurs upon Ailill's good name. She made her reasons amply clear when she declared

---

[7]Padraic Colum, ed., A Treasury of Irish Folklore (N.Y.: Crown Pub., 1954), p. 59.

[8]Hull, The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature, p. LXXIII.

[9]Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology (N.Y.: Viking Press, 1964), pp. 36-40

to him, "Whosoever brings shame and sorrow and madness upon thee..., it is to me the compensation belongs,...for a man dependent upon a woman's maintenance is what thou art."[10]

Though after their marriage, they governed Connacht jointly, Celtic scholar Rolleston observed

> Maeve was the ruler in truth, and ordered all things as she wished, and took what husbands she wished, and dismissed them at pleasure; for she was as fierce and strong as a goddess of war, and knew no law but her own wild way. 11

Other scholars interpret the significance of Maeve's dominance over her spouse in terms of quite elementary sexual forces. Heinrich Zimmer believed flatly that the famous Pillow Talk episode between Maeve and Ailill was an instance of a primal "conflict between Celtic-Aryan father dominance and the mother dominance of the pre-Celtic inhabitants of the British Isles."[12] Joseph Campbell adds that the Pillow Talk sequence demonstrates that

> the pre-Celtic goddesses, though subjugated in Ireland, were by no means out of power. The grotesque epic of the war of the Brown Bull of Cooley, precipitated by the brazen action of Maeve, when she sent for the bull and offered herself in partial payment is filled with a sense of the force of female powers over the destinies even of war. 13

An even more dramatic instance suggesting this kind of elemental animosity between ancient Irish women and men is to be seen in the encounter between Morrigan, who figured in Celtic myth

---

[10]Colum, p. 59.

[11]T.W. Rolleston, Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race (London: George Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1911), p. 202.

[12]Kinsella, p. XII

[13]Campbell, p. 303.

"variously as earth-mother, culture-giver, muse, and goddess of fate and war,"[14] and Cuchulain, the greatest male hero in the Heroic Cycle. When the latter foils Morrigan's attempt to steal the famous Brown Bull of Cooley for Queen Maeve by making a "great leap into [her] chariot and putting his two feet on her shoulders and his spear on the parting of her hair,"[15] she reacted with breathless rage. After maneuvering herself out of his clutches, she planted herself on the opposite side of the river and began to hurl invective at him, promising him dire punishment for his insult to her ego. Cuchulain took up the gauntlet of verbal battle and the encounter seemed to hold within it something basic and elementary indeed, a kind of schema for future Irish generations in the ongoing battle between the sexes:

> MORRIGAN
> I will become a gray wolf for you, and take the flesh from your right hand as far as to your left arm.
>
> CUCHULAIN
> I will encounter you with my spear until your left or right eye is forced out.
>
> MORRIGAN
> I will become a white red-eared cow, and I will go into the pond beside the ford in which you are in combat, with a hundred white red-eared cows behind me. And I and all behind me will rush into the ford, and the Fair Play of Men [the ultimate test of courage] that day shall be brought to a test, and your head shall be cut off from you. 16

And indeed so fierce was the enmity between them that Morrigan thereafter became the great hero's nemesis and eventually caused his

---

[14] Ibid., p. 307.

[15] Ibid., p. 305.

[16] Ibid.

death.

In the Heroic Cycle there was no short supply of women ready to right their wronged honor. One redoubtable one was subsequently to found the seat of Ulster government, Emain Macha. Macha was the daughter of one of the three kings of Ireland. Upon her father's death, she naturally sought to ascend to his kingship. However, the three sons of Dithorba said they would not confer kingship upon a woman.

> So she fought against them and routed them, and they went as exiles to the wild places of Connacht. And after a while she went in search of them, and she took them by treachery, and brought them all in one chain to Ulster. The men of Ulster wanted to kill them, but she said, "No, for that would be a disgrace on my good government. But let them be my servants." And she said, "and let them dig a rath for me that shall be the chief seat of Ulster forever." 17

Irish mothers have a long tradition of strong-minded political astuteness. Before contracting to marry King Fergus of Ulster, the widow Ness stipulated that her son Conachar should rule in Fergus's place for one year so that "his posterity may be called descendant of a king."[18] Upon her husband's agreement, Ness began a secret program of educating her son in how to work toward achieving the support of the most important men in Ulster. So skillful was she in supplying him with secret funds and giving him advice on how to distribute that wealth among the populace that at the end of the bargained-for year, the chieftains rose up in Conachar's favor and would not permit him to return his throne to his stepfather, rationalizing that "having consented to barter the kingdom as a dowry to his wife, [Fergus] had,

---

[17] Lady Augusta Gregory, Cuchulain of Muirthemne (N.Y.: Oxford U. Press, 1970), p. 39

[18] Hull, The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature, p. 9

in fact, actually resigned it."[19]

Interestingly, it appears to be the "career" woman more than the mothers who captured the imagination of the Celtic myth makers. Women who shaped their fortunes squarely in the center of man's world as warriers were invariably the focus of both adulation and fear. Sjoestedt observed that when a female combined the bravery of a warrier and sensuality of an attractive woman, more frequently than not the pattern developed that the woman became "dominant" over the male.[20]

It is fascinating to note that it was a woman warrior, Scathach, who literally taught Cuchulain everything he knew about battle. So proud did she become of his aptness as pupil, she presented him with the ultimate weapon, the gae bulga, a mysterious instrument that apparently worked on the principle of a dum-dum bullet: it entered the wound of an enemy at one point and made thirty tearing points within.[21] Scathach would have thus conferred invincibility upon Ireland's greatest hero.

Unfortunately, Cuchulain had the misfortune to incur the wrath of another female warrior, Aife, who perversely constructed a plot to turn the gae bulga against Cuchulain to wound him where he was most vulnerable -- in his love for his son.

Aife was a woman of utter integrity and independence. An expert warrior (Scathach gave her a character reference as "the hardest woman-warrier in the world."[22]), she lived in a man's world bound by a

---

[19] Ibid.

[20] Sjoestedt-Jonval, p. 29.

[21] Myles Dillon, Early Irish Literature (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, n.d.), p. 10

[22] Hull, The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature, p. 78

male code of bravery and courage. In battle, she gave no quarter; in defeat, she surrendered fearlessly. Possibly because Cuchulain was the only warrior to best her in battle, she took him for her lover and had the singular distinction of bearing to Ulster's greatest hero his only child. After he abandoned her, however, she made that distinction more memorable by setting up the circumstances that would make him the murderer of that child. Lady Gregory recounts that word of Cuchulain's faithlessness was brought to Aife shortly after their son was born, and

> great jealousy came on her, and great anger, and her love for Cuchulain was turned to hatred... and she determined in her mind that when her son would come to have the strength of a man, she would get her revenge through him. 23

One can sense the measure of her fearsome determination to take revenge by the fact that she never backed down from her decision during all the years young Conlaoch was growing up. She had him taught all the same skills his father was taught as a boy. However, since only Cuchulain had the ultimate weapon at his disposal, she knew she was dooming her son to death at his father's hand. Temperamentally then, she was iron-willed and implacable once she set her course of action. One wonders if she would have melted somewhat had she been able to hear Cuchulain's lament as the full implications dawned upon him that the stranger he had just killed was his son: "Without a son, without a brother, with none to come after me; without Conlaoch, without a name to keep my strength."[24] It seems more likely though that her pleasure in the fruition of her revenge would have climaxed were she to hear Cuchulain's futile rage once he realized it was she who devised the scheme that made

---

[23]Gregory, Cuchulain of Muirthemne, p. 237.

[24]Ibid., p. 241

him the killer of his own son. At his son's last breath, Cuchulain's famous Fury gripped him, and seeing an enormous white rock before him, he wrenched his sword from his scabbard and roared, "'If I had the head of the woman that sent her son to his death, I would split it as I split this stone,' And he made four quarters of the stone."[25]

Emer, the wife who remained loyal to Cuchulain through his countless and regular infidelities was the most apparently fragile, docile and malleable of the women in the Heroic Cycle. Yet she was never simply a shadow of her famous husband, any more than she was her father's compliant little girl. Even before she married the Ulster hero, she demonstrated her stamina in resisting her father's will.

When her father insistently betrothed her to Lugaid of Munster and invited him to the castle for the nuptials, Emer set about shaping her own future. Entering the great hall to meet her father's choice, she moved silently down its great length, stopped in front of Lugaid and regarded him meaningfully.

> She took between both her hands his two cheeks, and laid it on the truth of his honor and his life, confessing it was Cuchulain she loved, that Forgold [her father] was against it, and that anyone who should take her as his wife should suffer loss of honor. 26

She calculated well the risk between defying her father and antagonizing her betrothed, for Lugaid out of fear of Cuchulain refused to take her as wife and left her father's castle that very night.

And even after Emer had cleared the way for Cuchulain's wooing of her, she valued herself highly enough not to be won easily.

---

[25] Ibid., p. 241

[26] Hull, The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature, p. 77.

She treated the Ulster hero during this period with a winning capriciousness and confident teasing which he apparently found irrisistible. If her intelligence in adeptly conversing with him in the poetic language of the kennings (a skill unheard of in women) had not won him, her sophisticated bantering certainly would have:

> For while they were thus conversing, Cuchulain saw the breasts of the maiden over the bosom of her smock: "Fair is this plain, the plain of the noble yoke."

To which the glib Emer retorted, "No one comes this plain who does not slay three times nine men at one blow."[27] thereby both whetting his sexual appetite and reminding him of the task he must perform before possessing her.

After her marriage to Cuchulain, Emer continued this same frankness with him. Though all her girlhood training inclined her toward feminine submissiveness (indeed Cuchulain was attracted to her because he believed she encompassed in one person all the traditional feminine virtues: "the gift of beauty, the gift of voice, the gift of sweet speech, the gift of needlework, the gifts of wisdom and chastity."[28]), Emer regularly confronted and contradicted her spouse, subtly puncturing the swollen ego that was an occupational hazard of every professional "hero."

In one such notable instance when Cuchulain, because of a spell, had been pining, idle and in the grip of a mysterious "wasting sickness" for over a year, only Emer approached him. When none of his fellow champions of the Red Branch had dared to urge him to rouse

---

[27] Ibid., p. 68.

[28] Ibid., p. 61.

himself from his ennui, Emer it was who stepped forward and cried, "Shame on you! Arise, Hero of Ulster."[29] Seeing the man she loved regard her so lethargically, she stepped up to him and said quietly "This stupor is not good wholesome sleep; it is idleness and fear of battle; long sleep is the same as drunkenness; weakness is only second to death."[30] And hearing this first honest appraisal of his behavior in over a year, Cuchulain at last shuddered, roused himself, and "put his stupor and heaviness off him."[31]

Perhaps the most determined woman in the Cycle was Deirdre, "the femme fatale of Irish tradition."[32] whose insistent seduction of young warrior Naisi provided the original source of the story of Tristan and Isolde.[33] Deirdre was paradigmatic of all that is bitter and sweet in a romantic triangle. She should have been a young innocent, naive and timid, reared as she was in seclusion to be a fit wife to the great though aging King Conchobar. Totally sheltered from the sophistication of the court, she might have been expected to be shy, timorous, reticent. Unaccountably, she was not. Deirdre was nothing if not paradoxical. Despite her careful rearing to be a docile companion to a great ruler, she grew to be an independent and self-willed woman.

One winter day while her foster-father skinned a calf for her dinner, she watched a raven swoop down from the sky to drink the blood staining the whiteness of a fresh fall of snow. With an absoluteness

---

[29] Ann Moray, A Fair Stream of Silver (N.Y.: Wm. Morrow, 1965), pp. 19-20.

[30] Gregory, Cuchulain of Muirthemne, p. 214.

[31] Ibid.

[32] P. Power, A Literary History of Ireland (Cork: Mercier Press, 1969), p. 18

[33] Dillon, Early Irish Literature, p. 43.

of will that was striking even for those mythical times, she declared her determination to give herself only to that man who could compare to the aesthetic she saw implicit in that moment of barbaric beauty: "That man only will I love who hath the three colors I see here, his hair as black as the raven, his cheeks red as the blood, and his body white as the snow."[34]

When a day later fate brought just such a man across her path, she permitted nothing to stand in the way of her gratifying her yearning for him -- neither honor about her betrothal to the King nor terror of the prophecy forecast about her since birth. When she saw Naisi hunting near her compound in the woods, she stole out to see him at a nearer place. And upon clear sight of him, she impulsively thrust aside modesty to seduce him with her presence by provocatively striding past him. Unlike the more coy and almost wilting maiden that appeared in the modern literary adaptations of Yeats, Ferguson and James Stephens, the Deirdre of the original myth was of a considerably bolder, more passionate and elemental nature. To Naisi's appreciative "Nice is the heifer which goes by us," Deirdre retorted with engaging straightforwardness, "It is proper that big heifers would be wherever the bull is."[35] Patrick Power observes that "the blunt style of this passage reflects an agricultural society where the secluded maiden makes no secret of her desire. She actually seduces Naisi [sic]."[36]

When the young warrior attempted to evade her, citing his fear of the prophecy concerning her, her response was as immediate as it was aggressive. "She sprang upon him, and she seized him by his

---

[34]Power, p. 19.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid., p. 20

two ears. 'Two ears of shame and mockery shalt thou have,' she cried, 'if thou take me not with thee'"[37] Not only did she thereby win over Naisi to her will but also his two brothers Ainle and Arden who swore to become her acolytes and defenders wherever exile would drive them.

In the name of love then, Deirdre split the country into civil war since half the country's men swore to revenge Conchobar's wounded honor and the other half pitted themselves against the old King after he trapped and slaughtered the three brothers via treachery seven years later. Significantly, even after being forced to witness her lover's mutilated body, Deirdre was no whit subdued. Even in that desperate hour, she remained willful, wild, even barbaric; for when she approached the place where Naisi's decapitated body lay, "Deirdre disheveled her hair and began to drink Naisi's blood,"[38] a desperate effort to become one with him again one last time.

And for a full year later after she had become the old King's prize, she refused utterly to bend her will to his. For a full year she refused to speak to Conchobar about anything except her inconsolable grief for her dead lover. When at the end of that time, out of malevolent frustration, Conchobar attempted to break her spirit by turning her over to the warrior who had actually slain Naisi, Deirdre exhibited her refusal to be dominated by an ultimate and absolute act.

---

[37] A.H. Leahy, ed. and trans., Heroic Romances of Ireland, vol. 2, (London: n.p., 1905-6), p. 95

[38] Hull, The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature, p. 45.

As she was being driven away to the warrior's palace, she quite deliberately thrust her head outside the chariot as it took a turn around a great jagged boulder and spattered her brains out against it.

Possible Relationship between Ancient Myths and Contemporary Behavior:

There is a considerable body of scholarship suggesting that mythology functions as an ongoing preconscious force which shapes a society's present attitudes. Otto Rank, for instance, believed myths are expressions of a group's desires, needs, hopes. In short,he regarded myths as group phantasies, "wish-fulfillments for a society strictly analagous to the dream or daydream of an individual,"[39] a position that gives some weight to the idea that Irish men may prefer Irish women to make decisions in matters concerning both of them.

Bronislaw Malinowski insisted myth "in its primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived....believed to have once happened in primeval times and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies." He continued inexorably,

> These stories live not by idle interest...but are to the natives a statement of primeval, greater, and a more relevant reality, by which the present life, fates, and activities of mankind are determined, the knowledge of which supplies mankind with the motive for ritual and moral actions, as well as with indications of how to perform them. 40

Adding further support to this idea, Carl G. Jung credited myth with the most organic sort of functioning within the human animal. The Swiss phychologist observed that just as a study of comparative anatomy

---

[39]Clyde Kluckhorn, "Myths and Ritual: A General Theory," Myth and Literature, ed. John B. Vickery (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska, 1966), p. 33.

[40]Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth and Primitive Phychology (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1926), p. 39.

reveal the development of man's body from archaic times, so does a study of comparative mythology reveal the development of man's mind[41] particularly through "archetypes" exposed therein. These archetypes Jung defined as unconcious images of the instincts themselves; in other words, they are patterns of instinctual behavior."[42]

Building upon Freud's definition of dreams as fragments of the repressed life of the infantile psyche, psychiatrist Karl Abraham went on to define myths as the collective dreams of a given people, expressing the same repressed infantile wishes of that race or society as the dream reveals in the individual. He pointed out, "the myth springs from a period, in the life of a people long gone by, which we may designate as the childhood of the race." He continues significantly that the myth "contains (in disguised form) the wishes of the childhood of the race.[43]

Irish myth scholar Jeremiah Curtain embraces this psychoanalytical point of view in noting the significance of myth to today's recurring unconscious patterns of social response. He insists that a nation's myths are "tales that embody the philosophy of the races that made them."[44]

As early as 1871, Edward B. Taylor in his Primitive Culture postulated the provocative hypothesis of evolutionary anthropology, that

---

[41] C.G. Jung, et al., Man & His Symbols (N.Y.: Dell Pub., 1968), p. 57.

[42] C.G. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton U. Press, 1969), p. 44, italics mine.

[43] Karl Abraham, Dreams & Mythology: A Study in Race Psychology, trans. W. White (N.Y.: The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Pub. Co., 1913), p. 36, italics mine.

[44] Jeremiah Curtain, Hero Tales of Ireland (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1894), p. XLVII.

is, "our culture's institutions and artifacts repeated patterns derived from earlier societies."[45] Though his theory awoke renewed interest some twenty years later when Sir James Frazer's justly esteemed Golden Bough was published, hard scientific proof that myths exert specific influence on contemporary behavior through what Jung termed a "collective unconscious" is still inconclusive.

However, both Synge and O'Casey had conscious knowledge of the Heroic Cycle and admired the female figures in them. The influence of that admiration upon the creation of their female characters seems a more profitable area of investigation and is discussed in the chapter on the "Authors' Knowledge of the Myths."

---

[45] Sheldon Grebstein, ed., Perspectives in Contemporary Criticism (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 313.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abraham, Karl. Dreams and Myths; a Study in Race Psychology. Translated by William White. N.Y.: The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1913

Alvarez, A. "The Love, that was born of Juno and the Paycock." Saturday Review 55 (January 29, 1972): 57-9

Arbois de Jubainville, H. d'. Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology. Translated by R. Best. Dublin: n.p., 1903

Arden, John. "Ecce Hobo Sapiens: O'Casey's Theatre." In Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 61-76. Edited by Thomas Kilroy. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975

Arenberg, Conrad. The Irish Countryman: An Anthropoligical Study. Garden City, N.Y.: American Museum Science Books, n.d.

Arenberg, Conrad and Kimball, Solon T. Family and Community in Ireland. 2nd. ed. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U. Press, 1968.

Armstrong, William. Sean O'Casey. London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 1967

_____. "The Sources and Themes of The Plough and the Stars." Modern Drama 4 (Dec., 1961) 234-242.

Ayling, Ronald. "Character Control and 'Alienation' in The Plough and the Stars." James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 29-47

_____, ed. Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1969.

_____. "Sean O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy." In Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 77-90. Edited by Thomas Kilroy. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.

Beckerman, Bernard. Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis. N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970.

Benstock, Bernard. "The Mother Madonna and Matriarch in Sean O'Casey." Southern Review 6 (Summer, 1970) 603-23.

_____. "The O'Casey Touch." In Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 139-48. Edited by Thomas Kilroy. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975)

_____. Sean O'Casey. Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1970.

Bentley, Eric. The Dramatic Event. Boston: Beacon Press, 1954.

Bickley, Francis. J.M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement. London: Russell, 1912.

Blanchard, Paul. The Irish and Catholic Power. Boston: Beacon Press, 1953.

Blau, Herbert. The Impossible Theatre. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1964.

Bourgeois, Maurice. J.M. Synge and the Irish Theatre. London: Haskell, 1913.

Brown, Ivor. "Life by the Liffey: Juno." (London) Saturday Review 140 (Nov. 21, 1925) 594.

Brustein, Robert. Seasons of Discontent. London: Jonathan Cape, 1966.

Bushrui, S.B., ed. A Centenary Tribute to John Millington Synge, 1871-1909. N.Y.: Barnes and Noble, 1972.

Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1968.

_____. The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology. N.Y.: Viking Press, 1964.

Carens, James. "Four Letters: Sean O'Casey to Oliver St. John Gogarty." James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 111-18.

Cassirer, Ernst. Language and Myth. Translated by S.K. Langer. N.Y.: Dover, 1946.

Clurman, Harold. Lies Like Truth. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1958.

Cohn, Ruby and DuKore, Bernard. Twentieth Century Drama: England, Ireland and the U.S. N.Y.: Random House, 1966.

Colum, Padraic. Orpheus: Myths of the World. N.Y.: Gross and Dunlop, 1930.

_____, ed. A Treasury of Irish Folklore. N.Y.: Crown Pub., 1954.

Connell, K.H. Irish Peasant Society. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.

Connery, D.S. The Irish. N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1968.

Corkery, Daniel. Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature. N.Y.: Russell and Russell, 1965.

Corrigan, Robert. Masterpieces of Modern Irish Drama. N.Y.: Collier Books, 1967.

Cowasjee, Saros. Sean O'Casey. The Man Behind the Plays. N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1964.

Coxhead, Elizabeth. J.M. Synge and Lady Gregory. London: Longmans, 1962.

Cox, G.W. An Introduction into the Science of Comparative Mythology and Folklore. 2nd ed. Detroit: Singing Free Press, 1968.

Currie, R.H. and Bryan, M. "'Riders to the Sea': a Reappraisal." Texas Quarterly 11 (Winter, 1968): 139-46.

Curtain, Jeremiah, collector. Hero Tales of Ireland. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1894.

Curtayne, Alice. The Irish Story: a Survey of Irish History and Culture. N.Y.: P.J. Kennedy and Sons, 1960.

Deane, Seamus. "Irish Politics and O'Casey's Theatre." In Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 149-58. Edited by Thomas Kilroy. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

Devlin, Bernadette. The Price of My Soul. N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1969.

Dillon, Myles. The Cycle of the Kings. London: Oxford U. Press, 1946.

_____. Early Irish Literature. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, n.d.

DuKore, Bernard. "Synge Centenary Celebration. Dublin, Ireland, April, 1971." Educational Theatre Journal 23 (Dec., 1971): 470-72.

Durbach, E. "Peacocks and Mothers: Theme and Dramatic Metaphor in O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock." Modern Drama 15 (May, 1972): 15-25.

_____. "Synge's Tragic Vision of the Old Mother and the Sea." Modern Drama 14 (Feb., 1972): 363-72.

Edwards-Rees, Desiree. Ireland's Story. N.Y.: Barnes and Noble, 1967.

Eliade, Mircea. Myth and Reality. Translated by Willard Trask. N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1963.

Ellis-Fermor, Una. The Irish Dramatic Movement. London: Methuen, 1939.

Fackler, H.V. "J.M. Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows: Beauty Only." Modern Drama 11 (Feb, 1969: 404-09.

Fallon, Gabriel. "The House on the North Circular Road: Fragments from a Biography." Modern Drama 4 (December, 1961): 223-33.

_____. Sean O'Casey: The Man I Knew. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1965.

Gassner, John. "The Prodigality of Sean O'Casey." In Sean O'Casey: Selections of Critical Essays, pp. 110-119. Edited by Ronald Ayling. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1969.

Gerstenberger, Donna. John Millington Synge. N.Y.: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964.

Goldstone, Herbert. In Search of Community: the Achievement of Sean O'Casey. Cork: Mercier Press, 1972.

Greene, David H., ed. An Anthology of Irish Literature. N.Y.: Random House, 1954.

_____. "Tinker's Wedding: a Re-evaluation." PMLA 62 (Sept, 1947): 824-27.

Greene, D.H. and Stephens, Edward M. J.M. Synge, 1871-1909. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1959.

Gregory, Lady Augusta. Cuchulain of Muirthemne. N.Y.: Oxford U. Press 1970.

_____. "Journals." In Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 17-34. Edited by Thomas Kilroy. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

_____. Our Irish Theatre. N.Y.: Capricorn Books, 1965.

Grimal, Pierre, ed. Larousse World Mythology. N.Y.: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963.

Hall, Calvin S. and Nordby, Vernon J. A Primer of Jungian Psychology. N.Y.: Mentor Books, 1973.

Harmon, Maurice, ed. J.M. Synge Centenary Papers, 1971. Dublin: Dolmen Press, Ltd., 1972.

Henn, T.R. "'Riders to the Sea': a Note." In A Centenary Tribute to J.M. Synge, 1871-1909, pp. 33-60. Edited by S.B. Bushrui. N.Y.: Barned and Noble, 1972.

Hogan, Robert G. After the Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of Irish Drama since "The Plough and the Stars." Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1967.

_____. "The Haunted Ink Bottle: A Preliminary Study of the Rhetorical Devices in the Late Plays of Sean O'Casey." James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 76-95.

_____. "In Sean O'Casey's Golden Days." In Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 119-132. Edited by Thomas Kilroy. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

Howe, P.P. J.M. Synge: a Critical Study. N.Y.: Mitchell Kennerly, 1912.

Hull, Eleanor, ed. The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature. London: David Nutt, 1898.

_____. A Text Book of Irish Literature. Dublin: N.H. Gill and Son, Ltd., 1908.

Humphreys, A.J. "The Family in Ireland." In Comparative Family Systems, pp. 232-58. Edited by M.F. Nimkoff. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1965.

_____. The New Dubliners: Urbanization and the Irish Family. N.Y.: Fordham U. Press, 1966.

Hyde, Douglas. A Literary History of Ireland. N.Y.: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1899.

Jacobi, Jolande. Complex Archetype, Symbol in the Psychology of C.G. Jung. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1959.

Johnston, Denis. John Millington Synge. N.Y.: Columbia U. Press, 1965.

Jordan, John. "Illusion and Actuality in the Later O'Casey." In Sean O'Casey: Selections of Criticals Essays, pp. 143-61. Edited by Ronald Ayling. Nashville, Tenn.: Aurora Pub., Inc., 1970.

Jung, Carl G. Analytical Psychology. Its Theory and Practice. N.Y.: Random House, 1968.

_____. The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1969.

_____, ed. Man and His Symbols. N.Y.: Dell Pub. Co., 1968

Jung, C.G. and Kerenyi, C. Introduction to a Science of Mythology. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1963.

Kaufman, Michael. "The Position of The Plough and the Stars in the Dublin Trilogy." James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 48-63.

Keating, Mary Frances. "Marriage-Shy Irishmen." In The Vanishing Irish, pp. 170-82. Edited by John A. O'Brien. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1953.

Kennedy, Robert E. Jr. The Irish. Emigration, Marriage and Fertility. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1973.

Kerr, Walter. How Not to Write a Play. N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1955.

Kilroy, Thomas, ed. Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

_____. "Synge and Modernism." In J.M. Synge Centenary Papers, 1971, pp. 167-179. Edited by Maurice Harmon. Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1972.

Kinsella, Thomas, trans. The Tain. London: Oxford U. Press, 1970.

Knight, G. Wilson. The Golden Labyrinth: a Study of British Drama. London: Phoenix House, Ltd., 1962.

Koslow, Jules. Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Plays. N.Y.: Citadel, 1966.

Krause, David. "O'Casey and Yeats and the Druid." Modern Drama 11 (December, 1968): 252-62.

_____. "The Prinicple of Comic Disintegration." James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 3-12.

_____. "The Rageous Ossean: Patron Hero of Synge and O'Casey." Modern Drama 4 (December, 1961): 268-91.

_____. "Sean O'Casey and the Higher Nationalism: the Desecration of Ireland's Household Gods." In Theatre and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Ireland, pp. 114-133. Edited by Robert O'Driscoll. Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1971.

_____. Sean O'Casey: the Man and His Work. N.Y.: Collier Books, 1962.

_____. A Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Man: Sean O'Casey's Letters. Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968.

Kundsin, Ruth B., ed. Women and Success. The Anatomy of Achievement. N.Y.: Morrow and Co., 1974.

Laverty, Maura. "Women-Shy Irishmen." In The Vanishing Irish, pp. 50-59, Edited by John O'Brien. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1953.

Leahy, A.H., ed. and trans. Heroic Romances of Ireland. London: n.p., 1905-6.

Loomis, Roger S. Celtic Myth and Arthurean Romance. N.Y.: Columbia U. Press, 1927.

Lucas, F.L. The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello. London: Cassel and Co., Ltd., 1963.

Lund, Erik, et al. A History of European Ideas. London: C. Hurst and Co., 1962.

McCaffrey, Lawrence J. The Irish Question. Lexington, Ky.: U. of Kentucky Press, 1968.

MacCulloch, John Arnott. Myths of All Races, Vol. 3: Celtic Myth Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1918.

McHugh, Roger. "The Legacy of Sean O'Casey." In Sean O'Casey: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 35-52. Edited by Thomas Kilroy. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.

MacLean, Magnus. The Literature of the Celts. London: Blackie and Son, Ltd., 1902.

MacManus, Seamus. The Story of the Irish Race. N.Y.: Devin-Adair, n.d.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. Myth in Primitive Psychology. N.Y.: W. Norton and Co., 1926.

Malone, Maureen. The Plays of Sean O'Casey. Carbondale, Ill.: S. Illinois U. Press, 1967.

Martin, Augustine. "The Playboy of the Western World: Christy Mahon and the Apotheosis of Loneliness." In Centenary Tribute to J.M. Synge, 1871-1909, pp. 61-74. Edited by S.B. Bushrui. N.Y.: Barnes and Noble, 1972.

Masefield, John. John Millington Synge: A Few Personal Recollections. Phila., Pa.: Richard West Publishing, 1973.

Mercier, Vivien. The Irish Comic Tradition. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962.

_____. "O'Casey Alive." Hudson Review 13 (1960): 631-36.

Messenger, John C. "A Critical Re-examination of the Concept of Spirits: with Special Reference to Traditional Irish Folklore and Contemporary Irish Folk Culture." American Anthropologist 64 (April, 1962): 367-73.

_____. Inis Beag: Isle of Ireland. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969.

Mikhail, E.H. Sean O'Casey: a Bibliography of Criticism. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1972.

_____. "Sixty Years of Synge Criticism 1907-1967: A Selective Bibliography." Bulletin of Bibliography and Magazine Notes 27 (Jan.-Mar., 1970): 11-13 and April-June, 1970): 53-56.

Moore, John Rees. "Synge's Deirdre and Sorrows of Mortality." In A Centenary Tribute to J.M. Synge, 1871-1909, pp. 91-106. Edited by S.B. Bushrui. N.Y.: Barnes and Noble, 1972.

Moray, Ann. A Fair Stream of Silver: Love Tales from Celtic Lore. N.Y.: W. Morrow and Co., 1965.

Murphy, Robert. "Sean O'Casey and The Bald Primaqueera." James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 96-110.

O'Brien, John A., ed. The Vanishing Irish. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1953.

O'Casey, Eileen. Sean. N.Y.: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc., 1972.

O'Casey, Sean. Autobiography. 6 vols. London: Pan Books Ltd., 1971-73.

_____. Behind the Green Curtains. Figuro in the Night. The Moon Shines on Kylanoe. N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1961.

_____. The Bishop's Bonfire. N.Y.: Macmillan, 1955.

_____. Blasts and Benedictions: Articles and Stories. N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1967.

_____. Collected Plays. 4 vols. N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1971.

_____. The Drums of Father Ned. N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1960.

_____. Feathers from the Green Crow, 1905-1925. Edited by Robert Hogan. Columbia, Missouri: U. of Missouri Press, 1962.

_____. The Sting and the Twinkle: Conversations with Sean O'Casey. Edited by E.H. Mikhail and John O'Riordan. London: Macmillan, 1974.

_____. Under a Colored Cap. London: Macmillan, 1964.

O'Connor, Frank. A Short History of Irish Literature. N.Y.: Capricorn Books, 1967.

O'Faolain, Sean. "Love Among the Irish." In The Vanishing Irish, pp. 111-122. Edited by John A. O'Brien. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1953.

Opler, Marvin K. and Singer, Jerome L. "Ethnic Differences in Behavior and Psychopathology: Italian and Irish." International Journal of Social Psychiatry 11 (Summer, 1956): 11-22.

O'Rahilly, T.F. Early Irish History and Myth. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946.

Peacock, Ronald. The Poet in the Theatre. N.Y.: Hill and Wong, 1946.

Peete Cross, Tom and Stover, C.H. Ancient Irish Tales. N.Y.: Henry Holt Co., 1936.

Pittock, Malcolm. "Riders to the Sea." English Studies 49 (Oct, 1968): 445-49.

Power, Patrick C. A Literary History of Ireland. Cork: Mercier Press, 1969.

Price, Alan. Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama. London: Methuen, 1961.

_____. "Synge's Prose Writings: A First View of the Whole." Modern Drama 11 (December, 1968): 221-6.

Raleigh, John Henry. "O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night and New England Irish Catholicism." Partisan Review 26 (Fall, 1959): 573-92.

Rolleston, Thomas W. The Celtic Race. Boston: D.D. Nickerson, n.d.

_____. Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race. 2nd ed. London: George Harrap and Co., Ltd., 1911.

Rollins, Ronald. "Clerical Blackness in the Green Garden: Heroine as Scapegoat in Cock-a-Doodle Dandy." James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 64-75.

Saddlemyer, Ann. "Deirdre of the Sorrows: Literature First...Drama Afterwards." In J.M. Synge Centenary Papers, pp. 88-107. Edited by Maurice Harmon. Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1972.

_____. J.M. Synge and Modern Comedy. Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968.

_____. Letters to Molly. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1971.

Sahal, N. Sixty Years of Realistic Irish Drama. Bombay, India: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1971.

Sanderlin, R. "Synge's Playboy and the Ironoic Hero." Southern Quarterly 6 (1969): 289-301.

Sheehy, Michael. Is Ireland Dying? Culture and the Church in Modern Ireland. N.Y.: Taplinger Pub. Co., 1968.

Sigerson, George. Bards of the Gaels and Gall. 2nd ed. London: Fisher Unwin, 1907.

Sjoestedt-Jonval, Marie-Louise. Gods and Heroes of the Celts. Translated by Myles Dillon. London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1949.

Skelton, Robin. J.M. Synge and His World. N.Y.: A Viking Press, 1971

Smith, B.L. "O'Casey's Satiric Vision." James Joyce Quarterly 8 (Fall, 1970): 13-27.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "The Making of the Playboy." Modern Drama 4 (Dec., 1961): 314-23.

Squire, Charles. Celtic Myth and Legend, Poetry and Romance. London: Gresham Pub. Co., Ltd., 1910.

Synge, J.M. The Autobiography of J.M. Synge. Constructed from the manuscript by Alan Price with 14 photography by J.M. Synge. Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1965.

_____. "Celtic Mythology: Review of H. d'Arbois de Jubainville's The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology. The Speaker (London), April 2, 1904, pp. 17-18.

_____. Collected Works. Robin Skelton, gen. ed. 2 vols. London: Oxford U. Press, 1966. Vol. 2: Prose. Edited by Alan Price.

_____. "An Epic of Ulster: Review of Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne." The Speaker (London) June 7, 1902, pp. 284-5.

_____. "Irish Fairy Stories: a Review of Seumas MacManus' Donegal Fairy Stories." The Speaker (London), June 21, 1902, p. 340.

_____. Letters to Molly, 1906-1909. Edited by Ann Saddlemyer. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1971.

_____. "A Translation of Irish Romance: a Review of A.H. Leahy's Heroic Romances of Ireland." The Manchester Guardian, Mar. 6, 1906, p. 5.

Trewin, J.C. Dramatists of Today. London: Staples Press, Ltd., 1953.

_____. "Theatre: Olivier's Juno." Illustrated London News, May 7, 1966. p. 38.

Ulanov, Ann Belford. The Feminine in Jungian Psychology and in Christian Theology. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern U. Press, 1971.

Van Laan, Thomas. "Form as Agent in Synge's 'Riders to the Sea'." Drama Survey 3 (Winter, 1964): 352-65.

Vickery, John B., ed. Myth and Literature. Contemporary Theory and Practice. Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1966.

White, Edward M., ed. The Pop Culture Tradition. N.Y.: W. Norton and Co., 1972.

Wilde, Francesca Speranza. Ancient Legends, Mythic Charms and Supersticions of Ireland. Boston: Ticknor and Co., 1887.

Yeats, W.B. The Celtic Twilight. London: A.H. Bullen, 1893.