

M. J. Sidnell

SYNGE'S PLAYBOY AND

THE CHAMPION OF ULSTER

AS IS APPROPRIATE and usual with a great literary work, *The Playboy of the Western World* has been set off against the foils of a variety of literary traditions: it has been seen as Dionysiac comedy¹ and as Romance;² the transformation of Christy Mahon from the inarticulate, dreamy weakling into the man of action and of poetry has been seen for what it is, as the brilliant comic and ironic treatment of the growth of the hero myth;³ Synge's protagonist has been placed, where he belongs, amongst the progeny of the *miles gloriosus*;⁴ the metamorphosis of the hero has been described as exemplifying, in a Keatsian way, the power of the imagination to create actuality out of the stuff of dreams through the medium of fiction.⁵ Against such backgrounds the work remains immutable and seems ever-changing as each view seems to contain the others for a while. Here, I propose to set the play against a background of Irish saga and Synge's use of an organic metaphor and to glance along the dimensions of play and hero revealed from this view.

In his 1908 *Preface*, Synge uses an organic metaphor to tell his readers what poetry should be: "In these days poetry is usually the flower of evil or good, but it is the timber of poetry that wears most surely, and there is no timber that has not strong roots among the clay and worms."⁶ The seeds of that "timber" metaphor were probably sown by Ben Jonson, from whom Synge may also have taken the architectural metaphor earlier in his *Preface*. "That rooted man, John Synge" draws his nourishment among the clay and the worms that were Ben Jonson, and his works will be layered-up on time's literary compost heap:

With Fifteen-ninety or Sixteen-sixteen
We end Cervantes, Marot, Nashe or Greene:
Then Sixteen-thirteen till two score and nine,
Is Crashaw's niche, that honey-lipped divine.
And so when all my little work is done

They'll say I came in Eighteen-seventy-one
And died in Dublin. . . .⁷

So, and ironically, the process of organic change turns the bibulous parish priest of "Epitaph" into a water supply for the vine-roots that suck sustenance from his corpse. In the poem "In Kerry", a "new wild paradise" is built from the "stack of thigh-bones, jaws and shins" in the graveyard. With history as the substance of the organic metaphor, all the queens whose names appear on "wormy sheepskin", "Queens whose finger once did stir men,/Queens were eaten of fleas and vermin," can be seen as transubstantiated into the poet's "queen", for

these are rotten—I ask their pardon—
And we've the sun on rock and garden,
These are rotten, so you're the Queen
Of all are living or have been.⁸

A Yeats may unnaturally reincarnate the matter of Ireland in its old form; for the visionary AE the gods of Ireland are still to be seen; for Synge the new form is not much more like the old than the bung of a beer-barrel is like the Alexander whose dust made it:

Adieu sweet Angus, Maeve and Fand,
Ye plumed yet skinny Shee,
That poets played with hand in hand
To learn their ecstasy.

We'll search in Red Dan Sally's ditch,
And drink in Tubber fair,
Or poach with Red Dan Philly's bitch
The badger and the hare.⁹

What has been seen as a merely pessimistic preoccupation with death in the poems is, I believe, more frequently a grim play upon the ironies involved in the natural process of death, decay, and new growth.

Further, I suggest that for his literary themes Synge did not reject the matter of old Ireland so radically as has been thought, turning to it only at the end for *Deirdre*.¹⁰ To be sure, Synge the naturalist and tramp was much too absolute a knave to write "Cuchulanoïd" drama, but I suggest that Yeats's reincarnations and AE's visions have their counterpart in Synge's organic met-

aphor: that Christy Mahon is rooted in the clay and the worms of Cuchulain, Champion of Ulster, and that the *Playboy* may be seen as the story of the Championship of Ulster after it has passed through the literary guts of an Irish Tramp.

Synge would have known the story of the Championship of Ulster through de Jubainville, Hull, and others, but it was Lady Gregory who was nearest to Synge in her re-telling of Irish saga:

Lady Gregory had boldly written her stories from ancient Irish saga in the language of a modern English-speaking Irish peasant. Whatever Synge may have owed her for his mastery of the same medium, there is no doubt she had shown him the possibility of the personages of the past speaking like peasants while still remaining heroes.¹¹

There were other possibilities too, and I do not think that Henn is justified in saying that "Synge, though he had read Lady Gregory's saga versions, seems to have been unmoved by them."¹² Lady Gregory declares that Synge wrote to her "Your *Cuchulain (of Muirthemne)* is my daily bread"¹³, and while he was trying to finish *The Playboy* Synge wrote to Molly Allgood urging her to read in Lady Gregory's version the story he was to dramatise in *Deirdre*.¹⁴

The story of *The Champion of Ulster* was to be used by Yeats in his *The Green Helmet*, where it bears more resemblance to its English analogue *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In outline, as Lady Gregory gave it,¹⁵ the story goes like this: set on by the pride of their wives, Laegaire, Conall, and Cuchulain are quarrelling over who has most right to the title of champion among them. When Cuchulain is declared Champion after slaying a monster that had plagued them, the other two and their wives refuse to accept the decision. A further and definite test is then devised by Curoi the magician. He takes the form of a stranger, Uath, and appears without warning seeking a man who "will keep his word and hold his agreement. . . ."

"What agreement is that?" said Fergus. "Here is this axe", he said, "and the man into whose hand it is put is to cut off my head to-day, I to cut off his head to-morrow".¹⁶

Laegaire takes up the challenge and strikes off the stranger's head. Uath leaves with his head and his axe in his arms and returns next day to return the compliment. Laegaire fails to keep the appointment and is nowhere to be found. So it happens with Conall. Cuchulain, however, saves the honour

of Ireland by decapitating the magic stranger and offering his own head according to the bargain. With Cuchulain kneeling before him, Uath delivers a prodigious blow—but it is with the blunt side of the axe and against the floor, leaving Cuchulain unscathed. Uath then reveals himself as Curoi and declares Cuchulain Champion with all the Champion's rights. So, the story ends, "he left them. And this was the end of the Women's War of Words, and of the quarrel among the heroes for the Championship of Ulster".¹⁷ *The Playboy* resembles the story of the Championship of Ulster in certain obvious ways. Christy Mahon has done a deed equivalent to Cuchulain's in modern peasant terms: the axe has become a loy; he has split his father's skull and his father, as it were magically, returns for revenge. Like Cuchulain, Christy becomes Champion by virtue of this deed and his successive victories: "He's the champion of the world, I tell you. . . ." For all the world as though it were to be a battle of heroic times, Michael James would have Christy fight on the strand if fight he must: "Go on to the foreshore if it's fighting you want, where the rising tide will wash all traces from the memory of man".¹⁸

Where are Ireland's champions now if not hoeing spuds where the great halls once stood, and doing their great deeds in terms appropriate for peasant Catholic Ireland? If the champions of old are dead and turned to clay and their women with them, are not Christy and Shawn, Pegeen and Widow Quinn, nourished on that same clay, their modern incarnations? Given "the psychic state of the locality", the women will war in words and the champions in deeds, as before, but in new terms.

In some ways Christy looks more like Uath than Cuchulain, appearing by magic to solve the problems and quarrels of a community in answer to their need. Corkery, in a negative way, drew attention to the mysterious aspect of Christy: "Once it is seen for what it is, the graph of his progress is so direct as not to be interesting. . . . One easily exhausts him. . . . For Christy Mahon lacks an abundant background within himself. He is poverty stricken where Martin Dhoul is opulent".¹⁹ The development of Christy is indeed without surface complication, and Corkery is surely right in noting the lack of an abundant background in Christy, though he fails entirely to extend the observation as it may be extended. For the relationship between Christy and the society which receives him is, in large part, determined and fulfilled by Christy's very lack of background. Martin Dhoul is firmly rooted in the social environment in which he is presented and is certainly no more than human. Christy, on the other hand, is an outsider and almost superhuman in his prowess—"he's right luck, I'm telling you".

Before Christy's arrival, Pegeen Mike laments the absence of any interesting or exciting person among them:

where you'll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patchen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulvannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits. We're a queer lot these times to go troubling the Holy Father on his sacred Seat.²⁰

The girls, too, lack something—a something that the Church would regard as sinful: “you'd be ashamed this place, going up summer and winter with nothing worth while to confess at all”.²¹ The inadequacy of their lives, and particularly of Pegeen's, is dramatically expressed in Shawn, the insipid coward toward whom Pegeen has been driven for lack of a better mate. Significantly, Shawn Keogh's lack of manliness, spirit, and independence is indicated by his subservience to Father Reilly and the Church:

Michael . . . let Shawn Keogh stop along with you. It's the will of God, I'm thinking, himself should be seeing to you now.

They all turn on Shawn.

Shawn (in horrified confusion). I would and welcome, Michael James, but I'm afraid of Father Reilly; and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard the like of that.

It is into a society which (in respect of its women in particular) feels an inadequacy, that Christy is projected, to supply virility, leadership, poetry, and freedom. Perhaps it would be better to say “summoned”, for Pegeen's lamentations immediately precede Christy's appearance, as if by magic and as if in answer, from the ditch. Like Uath, Christy Mahon comes unheralded and strange, to supply a need of the people:

Michael . . . it's the will of God that all should rear up lengthy families for the nurture of the earth. What's a single man, I ask you, eating a bit in one house and drinking a sup in another, and he with no place of his own, like an old braying jackass strayed upon the rocks? (*To Christy*) It's many would be in dread to bring your like into their house for to end them, maybe, with a sudden end; but I'm a decent man of Ireland and I'd liefer face the grave untimely and I seeing a score of grandsons growing up little gallant swearers by the name of God, than go peopling my bedside with puny weeds the like of what you'd breed, I'm thinking, out of Shawn Keogh. . . .²⁸

In such a passage as this one may see *The Playboy* as “perfectly serious when looked at in a certain light”. It is the gain of Pegeen and her companions

that through contact with Christy they become conscious of a natural good, of man's place in nature, and that the unnatural "goodness" of Shawn is displaced. There is a clear contrast between sterility and fertility, between Christy's "sniffing for a female wife" and Shawn, the "middling kind of scarecrow, with no savagery or fine words in him at all". Christy seems to be thrown up, as it were by Nature herself, as the embodiment of the principle of renewal and fertility. That he comes so literally out of the earth itself seems to me an aspect of Synge's "literary" humour and one of the subtle and playful aspects of his organic metaphor.

Christy's lack of background, his mysterious remoteness, is a positive aspect of the portrayal: "even long days I am walking the world, looking over a low ditch or a high ditch on my north or my south, into stony scattered fields, or scribes of bog. . . ." ²⁴ His boots bear witness to his travels and to his kinship with the earth: "I never seen the like of them for whitey mud, and turf on them, and the fine sands of the sea. . . ." ²⁵ So Uath has travelled "through the world of Ireland and the whole world" looking for the man who will accept his challenge and fulfil its conditions.

The consciousness of natural good brought by a Christy emerging almost from Nature herself is contrasted, explicitly and implicitly, with the restraints of a Church that has lost contact with natural good. The grounds for objection by a Catholic audience were much firmer than the mere mention of the word "shift":

If the mitred bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad, pacing back and forward, with a nosegay in her golden shawl. ²⁶

The kind of marriage Shawn can offer is "making a good bargain" with the formal approval of the ecclesiastical authorities. Christy offers Pegeen a mating for which the approval of the Church, like its disapproval, is irrelevant:

It's little you'll think if my love's a poacher's, or an earl's itself when you'll feel my two arms stretched around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in his golden chair. ²⁷

Widow Quinn meets Christy on his own terms: she is his like, she says, and lonesome "thinking on the gallant hairy fellows is drifting beyond", and so she offers him a share of her nest:

I've nice jobs you could be doing, gathering shells to make a whitewash for our hut within, building up a little goose-house, or stretching a new skin on an old curragh I have . . . and it's there yourself and me will have great times whispering and hugging. . . .²⁸

Natural, sexual man, suppressed in Shawn, is reasserted in Christy, and Christy revives nature and sexuality in the community. Like Marcus Quinn but in a healthier way, he brings a breath of old Ireland.

Pegeen . . . Marcus Quinn, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland till he'd have the old women shedding down tears about their feet . . .

Shawn . . . (*with a peculiar emphasis on the words*) Father Reilly has small conceit to have that kind walking around and talking to girls.²⁹

A way of seeing *The Playboy*, then, is to see Synge taking the Aran case and the Lynchehaun case for his "idea" and discovering in it an essential and archetypal quality which make those cases the present-day versions of the kind of actions embodied into saga. In his letter to MacKenna asserting the seriousness of the play, Synge declared: "If the idea had occurred to me I could and would just as readily have written the thing, as it stands, without the Lynchehaun case or the Aran case. My story—in its essence ["essence" underlined four times] is probable, given the psychic state of the locality. . . ." ³⁰ In its essence *The Playboy* is the same story as "The Championship of Ulster", and though there is no exact correspondence in all details yet there is more than enough to suggest that Synge was aware of the essential similarity. Nor should we expect a Cuchulain who has passed through hundreds of cycles from body through clay to spud, from spud through body to clay to be exactly similar to the Christy who is his most recent embodiment. In Cuchulain-become-Christy the metamorphosis of the protagonist is complete—though by no means at an end. Similarly the story has been transformed but not *in its essence* changed, for in the human and natural world, as Synge saw it, nothing is changed utterly.

Talk of Christy's success at the sports and his great deed naturally leads to Philly's reminiscence:

When I was a young lad there was a graveyard beyond the house with the remnants of a man who had thighs as long as your arm. He was a horrid man, I'm telling you, and there was many a fine Sunday I'd put him together for fun, and he with shiny bones you wouldn't meet the like of these days in the cities of the world.³¹

Decay, time, and usage have made the horrid man what he is. Lacking the flesh of life and polished by handling, the thigh-bones seem to belong to a man of mythical stature and quality. So, we may suppose, Christy's exploit will cease to be a "dirty deed" and become once more a "gallous story" with his death, time, and re-telling. To reverse the proposition, Cuchulain in the flesh would seem as unheroic as Christy sometimes does. The objective reality matters little. There is a "psychic" need in the place and the race for a Christy/Cuchulain who will restore natural good, defeat its enemies, embody local pride, and quell the squabbling of women with his virility and fine words. So Christy, who has had the good fortune to be born the Cuchulain of his time, is set fair for immortality: "Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the Judgement Day."³²

That Christy, unlike the "Cuchulanoid" hero, does not appear in some lights to be the stuff that Champions are made of, may be seen as Synge's ironic comment on the concept of the hero and heroic virtues, denigrating the past rather than the present. The powerful and unambiguous presence of the hero in saga and myth does not correspond with an equally powerful and unambiguous existence in the reality of past, present, or future.

Looked at in this light, *The Playboy* and other works of Synge appear as the appropriate and necessary complement to Yeats's treatment of Irish mythology and his assertion of heroic values. Synge had the advantage over Yeats in knowing not only Irish mythology but also, and intimately, the race descended from the ancient heroes, and it is no small part of his genius that he managed to express, through his organic metaphor, the tension existing between past and present where so many of his contemporaries were forced to see Ireland from one or the other aspect in making their contribution to a national literature.

NOTES

1. T. R. Henn, *The Plays and Poems of J. M. Synge* (London, 1963), p. 57.
2. F. L. Lucas, *The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats, and Pirandello* (London, 1963), p. 201.
3. Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement*, 2nd Edition, (London, 1954), p. 176.
4. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1957), p. 40.

5. Alan Price, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Drama* (London, 1961), p. 161 et seq.
6. J. M. Synge, *Collected Works, Volume I: Poems*, edited by Robin Skelton (London, 1962), p. xxxvi. Subsequent quotations from Synge's poems are taken from this edition hereafter called *Poems*.
7. "On an Anniversary", *Poems*, p. 33.
8. "Queens", *Poems*, p. 34.
9. "The Passing of the Shee", *Poems*, p. 38.
10. D. H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge* (New York, 1959), p. 158.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
12. Henn, *Plays and Poems*, p. 310.
13. Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (New York, 1913), p. 124.
14. Greene and Stephens, p. 218.
15. In her *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, pp. 75-81.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 81,
18. Henn, *Plays and Poems*, p. 221.
19. Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork, 1955), p. 194.
20. Henn, *Plays and Poems*, p. 177. The subsequent quotations from *The Playboy* are taken from this edition.
21. p. 194.
22. p. 179.
23. p. 222.
24. p. 187.
25. p. 194.
- 26, 27. p. 218.
28. p. 209.
29. p. 177.
30. Greene and Stephens, p. 265.
31. p. 211.
32. p. 229.