

The Power of Gaelic National Ethos, Ideology and Irish Essentialism in prompting *The Playboy Riots*

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A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted. (Shelley 115)

John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* is a drama which concurrently explores the transformative effects of poetic and mythical rhetoric and equally the failure of such lyricism to transcend the prosaic praxes of Western peasant society. It is a text that pivots upon the juxtapositions of mimetic realism and modernist verisimilitude; comedy and Dionysian tragedy; poetic discourse and action, and examines the dialectic relationship between such oppositions. As Synge expresses, "there are ... many sides to the play" (qtd. in Holder 527). It is precisely this complexity that incites the rioting of a Catholic bourgeois in the Abbey Theatre in 1907. While *The Playboy* riots are affiliated with Synge's use of the word 'shift' and the impropriety it signifies, the sole attribution of the audience's indignation to such an utterance is an insufficiently reductive explanation for the upheaval in the Abbey Theatre on the opening nights of the play. The ruckus, as this essay will argue, is reactionary to, not only the overt and sanctioned violence by the Mayoites, but also Synge's demystifying of romantic Irish peasantry, the debunking of Gaelic nationalist ethos and the exposure of state and ecclesiastical institutions as stagnating forces in the creation of a vitalized, albeit, refashioned revivalism. It is these elements, in their cumulative force, that provoke "the uproar ... [of] gigantic dimensions, stamping, booing, vociferations in gaelic ... [and the] Babel of sounds the refrain of 'God Save Ireland'" (qtd. in Morash 148).

Declan Kiberd notes that, "the protestors shouted 'We Irish are not a violent people' and then sprang at the actors" (168), thereby becoming "the thing itself" and exhibiting the gruesome attributes that the audience claimed were farce in Synge's violent representation of Irish peasantry. At the crux of the audience's fury is the disjunction between Synge's unrestrained, antithetically savage representation of Irish peasantry and the audience's expectation of an ethnographic discourse that would be a rigidly mimetic endorsement of Gaelic nationalist rhetoric. Elemental to Romantic nationalism is the construction of the West as a bastion of innate Irish identity. Gaelic nationalists centre their revivalist discourse upon their conviction in an idealised native other and a topographical periphery unblemished by English colonisation. Nevertheless, just as Christy is forced to question his subjectivity, asserting "Is it me?" (14), Synge's Irish audience are prompted into querying their aesthetically purist constructions of Irish peasantry. While Christy confesses to killing his father, claiming in a violent lyricism that he "riz the loy" (25) and "hit a blow on the ridge of his skull ... and he split to the knob of his gullet" (25), this socially transgressive deed is transformed from "a grand story" (25) to a gallant action, where Pegeen declares that Christy is "fit to be holding his head

high with the wonders of the world” (53). Similar to the Lynchehaun case in the West however, where murder is mitigated through a justified political motive, Michael James remarks, “That was a hanging crime ... You should have good reason for doing that” (11) thus demonstrating a primitive sublimity to Western society (Knapp 61). This is a milieu where the concept of ‘justice’ and ‘morality’ are deconstructed. It is the community’s catalogue of justified and commonplace transgressions when determining Christy’s crime that demonstrate the distortion of Western mythos. As Philly probes, “Maybe the land was grabbed from him, and he did what any decent man would do” (9), equally the villagers wonder if Christy was “judged to be hanged” for “fighting bloody wars for Kruger and the freedom of the Boers” (10). By presenting the audience with references to agrarian land crimes, violent bailiff disputes, and landlord wars, Synge is presenting his audience with a social realism, but one which demonstrates how savagery is tightly interlocked into the peasantry social structure thus granting an authenticity to the sadist imagery that is causing abhorrence within *The Playboy* audience. As Patrick Kenny writes in *The Irish Times*, “It is as if we looked in a mirror for the first time, and found ourselves hideous” (qtd. in Kilroy 72). It is this tension generated by the dichotomous interspace between a bona fide representation of Irish peasantry and Synge’s embracing of Bakhtin’s “grotesque realism” that intensifies the riots. While Synge claims in his preface that the “wildest ... ideas in this play are tame indeed” (vii) compared to reality, Synge reduces Romantic nationalists’s idealised perception of the West to a phantasmal aesthetic construct by illustrating the community of *The Playboy* as a gruesome inversion of Western morality. In this amoral society, Jimmy Farrell is heralded for hanging “his dog from the license, and ... it screeching and wriggling three hours at the butt of a string” (11) and there is no retribution for inhabitants who catch “a maniac ... and pel[t] the poor creature” (44). Given that the Abbey – ‘The Irish National Theatre’ was meant to endorse an affirmative depiction of Irish peasantry, it is this Rabelaisian and unmitigating savagery that resembles England’s pejorative colonialist rhetoric concerning Irish lawlessness that prompt the audience to riot and avow vehemently “that is not the West” (qtd. in Martin 65).

The Manichaeic thinking surrounding national and imperial ethos and Ireland’s will to activate a stark refutation of that colonised identity for an authentic Irish essentialism, is central to the audience’s antagonism. While Synge projects a universality onto his play claiming in *The Irish Times* that *The Playboy* is not “‘a purpose’ in the modern sense of the word” (qtd. in Thornton 136), the political consciousness of his audience cannot be divorced from the riots. Synge is not only destabilising the image of an ‘idealised rural past’ at a time when Irish nationalism is seeking to attain self-definition through that very concept (Doggett 285), but he is undercutting the notion of a puritanical patriarchy that is central to the state’s nationalism. As Nicholas Grene notes, it is the eroticism evoked by the crude use of ‘shift’ rather than the refined lexeme ‘chemise’ (*Politics* 80), in conjunction with the sexual promiscuousness conjured by Christy’s assertion, “what’d I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts” (54) that act as a catalyst in prompting the rioting in the Abbey Theatre. Rather than adhering to ecclesiastical dogma of an asexualised female purity, Synge usurps this ethos by presenting his audience with overtly sadistic and sexual female characters. Just as Sara Tansey, “yoke[s] the ass cart and dr[ives] ten miles to set eyes on the man bit the yellow lady’s nostril on the northern shore” (22), the women of Mayo

walk “four miles” (27) to “marvel” (25) at Christy. As Widow Quinn asserts, “There’s great temptation in a man did slay his da” (18). It is the male figure, Christy, who is constructed into an idealised sexual object (Kiberd 167). Synge deliberately challenges the patriarchal dichotomy of feminine and masculine identities. Indeed, Peegen’s “wild-looking” (57) nature - a temperament that leads her to violently apply a “lighted sod” to “scorch” (55) Christy, in conjunction with Christy’s “little small feet” (23) and his preening himself in “the looking-glass” (21), exhibit an inversion of stereotypical gender roles, and offer a fusion of feminine and masculine attributes that produces androgynous beings. Yet, as the men in Mayo community are instilled with “[t]he fright of seven townlands for Peegen’s biting tongue” (13), the reverse of these gender roles instigate barrenness within the community and annihilates the identity of the village (Cusack 157). As Julia Kristeva explains, “feminine subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* ... throughout the story of civilisations” (original emphasis 23). Yet, the distorted and destructive female sexuality of Synge’s play effaces the ethnographic continuity of the peasant community.

The Playboy, as Paige Reynolds has noted, prompts the audience to critically examine the “types” of institutions constructed within one’s community and to determine if these establishments are detrimental to village’s stability and progression (57). Following the Famine and Emmet Larkin’s “Devotional Revolution”, Irish society is stalwartly dependent upon Catholicism as a source of political and moral identity and as a means of generating a solid base for national subjectivity. Nevertheless, Synge’s *The Playboy* dismantles these patriarchal and ecclesiastical structures and exposes them as degenerate and stagnating forces within Irish culture. While the presence of women is central to lineage and the Catholic Church fervently endorses a matriarchal family structure, there is either an absence of motherly figures in *The Playboy* or a distorted version of maternal presence (Cusack 127). Old Mahon, one is told, “did tend [Christy] from his hour of birth” (41) hence alluding to an absence of a mother figure, equally Peegen is “an orphan girl” (49). Similarly, Widow Quinn “buried her children and destroyed her man” (18) and is by this act rendered infertile; her genealogical line has been halted. Her transgressive and “noted misbehaviour with the old and young” (33) can only produce illegitimate offspring. This is a sterile and disfigured environment where Red Linahan with his “squint in his eye” (4) and “Patcheen [who] is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies ... lost in their wits” (4) are capable of producing pathetic “puny weeds the like of what [Peegen would] breed out of Shaneen Keogh” (50). Indeed, Peegen’s statement “Aye. Wouldn’t it be a better thing for a girl to go marrying the like of Shaneen ... with no savagery or fine words in him at all” (49) illustrates the need for “the Playboy” (57) Christy and the agency and vitality he represents. Within this dwindling and mutilated community, mother and wife spheres are usurped and Old Mahon, driven by monetary objectives, urges Christy to marry Widow Casey who “did suckle [him] for six weeks when [he] came into the world” (25). The suggestion of Old Mahon to Christy to engage in this incestuous and Oedipal relationship mars and destructs life as it is this very reason that “did rouse” Christy’s “spirits to a deed of blood” (17) thereby killing the male figure needed for procreation (Akin 57).

The “travesty on the sacrament of marriage”, as Bourgeois claims, is equally made profane by Synge’s implication that marriage and fecundity are made stagnant if one accepts the impositions of ecclesiastical doctrines (qtd. in Innes 60). Catholic

devotee, Shawn proclaims that he is “afraid of Father Reilly” (6) and wonders if he has a “right to pass in” (3) to his fiancé Peegen late at night, worrying “what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard [he] did the like of that?” (6). Marriage and reproduction are halted in *The Playboy* as Peegen and Shawn are “waiting these days on Father Reilly’s dispensation from the bishops, or the Court of Rome” (4). The very absence of Father Reilly’s presence from the play conveys Catholicism as an outmoded guardian of state order. The adherence to the tenets of the Catholic Church is depicted as disturbingly puritanical and is ridiculed. It is Shawn who is displayed as “a middling kind of a scarecrow” (49) when he refuses to stay the night with Peegen, scampering at the suggestion and claiming, “Leave me go you old, Michael James, ... you old Pagan” (7). It is not only the sacrament of marriage that is ridiculed by Synge, but death and the deeply valued custom of funerals are derided through the Bacchantic excess displayed by Michael James at Kate Cassidy’s wake (Doggett 288). *The Playboy’s* derision for Catholic morality and its favouring of a Pagan order coincided with Synge’s blasphemous and indiscriminate use of scared language during a period when Ireland is deeming the hegemonic rule of the Catholic Church as an elemental aspect of Irish nationalism, cause outrage in the Abbey theatre and spurs the onset of rioting.

It is the presence of these degenerative and debilitating social structures and the community’s need for a rejuvenating entity that will regenerate Irish national identity that permit Christy to be aesthetically constructed into “a fine, handsome young fellow with a noble brow” (14). When Christy wanders into the Mayo village, he is “nothing at all” (6) but a vagrant and a doppelganger of Shawn Keogh and confesses that he is “a middling scholar only” (9) and like Shawn, a “law-fearing man” (11). It is by the “power of a lie” (53) and the imposed poetic rhetoric of Peegen and the villagers onto Christy that transform him from another Apollonian, order sanctioning figure like Shawn, to a Dionysian and rebelliously vitalised hero who is as worthy as “Owen Roe O’Sullivan or the poets of the Dingle Bay (14). While the transposing of murder into a heroic discourse by Irish peasantry rouses disgruntlement in Synge’s audience, with the *Evening Mail* stating that “the parricide represent some kind of nation-killer” (qtd. in Watson 75), it is Synge’s portrayal of mythology and heritage as static forces that causes discontent. By killing Old Mahon and becoming a “poor orphaned traveller” (10), Christy has relinquished his past (Doggett 289). He is a nullified figure, a *tabula rasa*, who is by effect able to refashion himself into a rejuvenating being (Cusack 158). As Nietzsche argues in his secondly *Untimely Mediations*, one must “use history only in so far as it serves the living” (1). Rather than stimulate a will-to-power, Synge illustrates how fixation on mythology hampers the Mayoites’s agency and mummifies life. As Peegen nostalgically reminisces, “[w]here now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quinn ... got six months for maiming ewes” (4). The macabre imagery of “old Dane[s]” (39) bones, the continuous re-emergence of Old Mahon in his ‘living-dead’ state which threatens Christy’s vitalised poetic identity, act as metonyms for the decaying social order in Mayo; a crumbling order perpetuated through the communities preoccupation with legacy (Doggett 292). By doing this, Synge is undercutting the core of Gaelic nationalism whose creeds centre on fashioning a separatist Irish identity from England by imposing “a rhetoric of nostalgia” (Cusack 158) onto Irish civilisation. The patricide by Christy, which is an allegory for the killing

English colonised authority, offers a symbolic break from this stagnant culture. Similar to the 'cuchulainoid heroes' of Irish society, Christy's individualised will deems him fit to defy colonial and patriarchal power (Greene *Critical* 138). Indeed, Peegen asserts "if I'd that lad in the house, I wouldn't be fearing the loosed kharki cut-throats" (12). Equally, the villagers consider Christy as "a lad would kill his father ... would face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell" (sic 12) thereby portraying Christy as a heroic figure that can challenge and transgress the other limiting force in Mayo community; the church. Nevertheless, Christy's second patricide and the community's rejection of him show the failure of narrative form to alter a society steeped in the mere idealisation of poetic rhetoric and revolutionary activity rather than the reality of actively prompting that revivalism. There is a disjunction between the concept of the poetic and the transformation of such discourse into a vigorous action. As Peegen states, there is "a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (55). Christy's self-actualisation involves the incorporation of myth to produce a refashioned and more vitalised subjectivity. By accepting that "one must have reality, and one must have joy" (viii), Christy becomes the "masters of fights" (57). Nevertheless, just as Synge's audience reject the hybridising of language and the producing of Hiberno-English and a refashioned national identity through the fusing of the coloniser's English and the land's native Gaelic, Christy's modernist and adopted intersubjectivity is rebuffed in the Mayo community (Davis 43). He must go "romancing through a romping lifetime" (57), subjugating patriarchal authority and having his father by his side as a "heathen slave" (57). Nevertheless, his new found authenticity and revolutionary actions are ineffectual against the ecclesiastical and patriarchal rule in Mayo. The villagers, threatened by revolutionary potential, regress to colonial control as a means of perpetuating the archaic status quo. As Old Mahon declares, "[i]t is the will of God that all should guard their cabins from the treachery of the law" (57). Furthermore, Michael's cry, "[b]y the will of God, we'll have peace now for our drinks" (57) establishes patriarchal power, just as ecclesiastical control is reinstated by Shawn's assertion, "[i]t's a miracle Father Reilly can we us in the end of all" (Doggett 293). Losing "the only Playboy of the Western World" (57) inevitably means a return of paralysis to the Mayo community. There will be no revolutionary activity or change. This debunking of mythology and the failure of a revolutionary hero at a time when Gaelic nationalism is seeking to spur individuals to revolutionary heroism is fundamental in understanding the rioting of *The Playboy* audience.

Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* is heteroglossic in style, incorporating many discourses and styles in order to challenge Gaelic national discourse. Challenged by Synge's use of profane language and the demystifying of Western peasantry and femininity, the Abbey Theatre rioted. Indeed, the political consciousness of the audience is fundamental to the fury generated within the spectators. While Synge's play was condemned as a libel assault on the tenets of Gaelic nationalism and Ireland's revivalism, Synge's drama is not attacking the concept of an independent Irish identity, rather he is advocating a modernist refashioning of Irish essentialism that uses the past as a catalyst for a revitalised authenticity. Yet, Synge's view was too far-reaching in manner. As Yeats stated, "the outcry against *The Playboy* was an outcry against the style, against its way of seeing" (qtd. in Holder 45).

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