

## REVIEWS

### **Alternative Readings of J. M. Synge's Drama Predicated on Archival Material**

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**Collins, Christopher. *Theatre and Residual Culture: J. M. Synge and Pre-Christian Ireland*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 301 pages. Hb. ISBN 978-1-349-94871-0. €106.99.**

Characteristic of our time, when the global and transnational have become so forceful concepts, a renewed concern with the local and regional has also started to invite attention. This might seem to be a paradox but its reality is hard to question given its manifestations in several domains of human thinking and endeavors. In literary studies, an important corollary of the phenomenon is the increasing interest in how the writers' engagement with smaller places, alternative geographies, and imagined spaces can modify the approach to canonicity. A case in point is Irish modernism, the parameters of which have been both challenged and redrawn by recent critical works stating that the Irish Literary Revival and Irish Modernism should no longer be observed as movements apart. Rónán McDonald claims that earlier critical views on the issue need to be revised as the Irish Revival can be regarded as an "incubatory moment" (51) of modernism since both revivalists and modernists seek "alternatives to modern epistemologies; both are attracted to primitivism, and mythology and the occult" (52). Numerous critics find J. M. Synge a pivotal author whose strong focus on the local intertwined with experimental dramaturgy embodies the meeting points of the Irish Literary Revival and Irish Modernism.

In the above outlined context Christopher Collins's *Theatre and Residual Culture: J. M. Synge and Pre-Christian Ireland* contributes to the inquiry into the idiosyncratic ways in which Synge's dramatic oeuvre represents aspects of the local and rural. Collins delineates the main direction of his study as follows: "Throughout, I will argue that Synge dramatized pre-Christian residual culture in order to critique the Catholic Church's ideological stranglehold on history, religion and politics in the Ireland of Synge's time" (1). The use of the term "residual culture," which refers to the remains of pagan rituals and practices Synge encountered in the hidden corners of rural Ireland, is a novelty, distinguishing the residual from dominant and emergent cultures based on Raymond Williams's classification (2). However, relating these categories to

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developments in Ireland raises questions chiefly because in Collins's argument the culture of the Catholic middle class is postulated as the dominant one (5). Collins appears to be undecided about which culture to call emergent in Synge's colonized Ireland. Perhaps the three forms of culture are more shifting than argued here and cannot be separated easily when applied to early twentieth-century Ireland.

To maintain the well-defined focus of the investigation on Synge's portrayal of residual culture, it is a justifiable choice that Collins addresses the first six plays and omits *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1909) since by being set in pre-Christian times the play presents a pagan culture not residual but dominant. True, yet pagan lore in this drama is mediated by the recorded sources of the Celtic myth Synge used and, therefore, comes close to the residual although in a somewhat other sense than Collins's argument would allow. At the same time, it is laudable that the book devotes space to Synge's first play, *When the Moon Has Set* (1901) and not in terms of a juvenile work albeit as one which has been professionally produced and included in the Synge canon only recently. Its analysis within the chapter about the playwright's life and his relation to the Anglo-Irish class he belonged to is a precious opportunity for Collins to demonstrate the autobiographical underpinning of the play, which makes it singular in the oeuvre. Nevertheless, when the guiding idea of the book is revealed by claiming that "Synge's plays . . . problematize the ideological dominance of the progressive history of Catholic modernity" (77), *Moon* is not excluded from the line. Set in Wicklow, it was undoubtedly influenced by Synge's roaming in the countryside, moreover, its plot and characters transmit the belief that "pre-Christian residual culture [may be] an alternative cultural lifestyle to the dominance of Anglo-Irish and Catholic culture" (26). Synge had become alienated from both of these to an extent by the beginning of his playwriting career, and in *Moon* the alternative is symbolized by the "pantheistic wedding" (46) of the Anglo-Irish heir and the ex-nun donned in green.

The value of *Theatre and Residual Culture* lies mainly in its drawing extensively on Synge's notes, letters, and other archival material held at Trinity College Dublin, to offer alternative readings of the plays. Therefore, while some of the ideas it presents are controversial, on the whole, this monograph urges the readers to rethink their established views on the already much studied dramatic world of Synge. From Chapter 3 to Chapter 7 Collins addresses the five plays Synge completed between *Moon* and *Deirdre*, one after the other according to chronology while using co-references as well. This method is being employed since the plays, as Collins argues, differ from each other in the form of cultural residue they dramatize.

After the rather short chapter, “Flagrant Heathens: *The Tinkers Wedding*,” which does not surprise the reader with any noteworthy insight, Chapter 4, “A Christless Creed: *In the Shadow of the Glen*” deals with a play set in Wicklow again, also connected to *Moon* through pantheism. However, in *The Shadow* the appreciation of nature appears in far more complex ways. Represented by the Tramp, pantheism, as a distinct counter-discourse to Dan and Michael’s selfish individualism and bourgeois materialism, establishes a political undercurrent in the play, examined by many critics so far. A more genuine addition of the chapter to the scholarly discourse on *The Shadow* lies in the detailed exploration of the influence of Synge’s readings of Spinoza and Schopenhauer in conceiving the characters’ relation to nature. What Synge took from them, in Collins’s understanding, was the opposition of their views: “For Synge, Spinoza’s conception of nature as a deity had to be regulated by Schopenhauer’s conception of nature as a window unto suffering” (96). Thus the paradoxical title, “A Christless Creed,” borrowed from Synge’s prose (96), refers to the metaphysical basis for the antithetical characters of the Tramp, who idealizes nature, and Patch Darcy, who goes mad and dies of melancholia in the same countryside.

At the center of the book, “‘The Cries of Pagan Desperation’: *Riders to the Sea*,” can be seen as its peak achievement; it offers a well-balanced and contextualized look at the ways in which Synge dramatizes the pre-Christian ritual of keening. The play forcefully revitalizes this pagan tradition for the stage, challenging the strict rules laid down by the powerful Catholic Church in conjunction with Catholic modernity against the remains of pre-Christian practices. The author also clarifies the contradictory position of the nationalists regarding pre-Christian traditions. On the one hand, with its deep roots in the pre-colonial past, ancient culture could have served as a basis for the creation of a new state. On the other hand, pre-Christian rituals, especially keening as performed in *Riders*, had the power to intervene in the univocal, restrictive structures and value system of nationalism, representatives of which tended to find the surviving traces of pagan culture troubling and irreconcilable with the onward march of the dominantly Catholic, bourgeois modernity they fully supported (158). Collins introduces the term “magical realism,” known as a narrative mode but new in the discussion of drama, and claims that “[c]ottage-kitchen realism is magically subverted in *Riders* and Synge subverts it by accounting for the supernatural through nature, illocution, divination and death laments. . . . *Riders*, then, is no tragedy of cottage-kitchen realism but a tragedy of magical realism” (116). Further on, Collins manages to convince his reader, especially if s/he has a DruidSynge

production of the play in mind, that the term expresses the innovative dramaturgy of the play adequately.

Having highlighted Synge's modernist, dual view of pantheism filtered through his philosophical interests, Collins, unexpectedly, closes Chapter 4 with thoughts that contradict the insights he has already offered when saying that "Synge's conception of pantheism in the play demonstrates his classed position" (104). Likewise, at the end of the chapter on *Riders* Collins opines that "[t]he hostile response to *Riders* forced Synge to begin to question his strategies when staging the cultural residue from pre-Christian Ireland" (159). One might wonder why the author thinks that Synge was "forced" to make changes. The comments to follow are even more taxonomic: "By now he had undergone a transition from a playwright that dramatized pre-Christian sensibility in order to highlight the cracks and fissures of Catholic progressive history, to a playwright that would begin to use pre-Christian sensibility as a personal defence for his own class insecurity" (159). These remarks introduce a most contentious line to have its full bloom in Chapters 6 and 7, where Collins suggests that Synge's social background determined his dramatic use of the remains of pagan Irish culture.

Chapter 6 addresses the next piece in the oeuvre, titled "A Sort of Saint: *The Well of the Saints*." The starting point of the analysis here is that the drama is "not just another comedy that ridiculed Catholic Ireland, but also . . . supported Protestant Ireland, by considering how the character of the Saint in the play is a Protestant tramp" (174). Synge, as Collins quotes the playwright's own label for *The Well*, called this work a "Protestant comedy" and, Collins surmises, there is a similarity between "the Saint-as-tramp and Synge-as-tramp" (174). It is well known that Synge frequently signed his letters to his beloved, the actress Molly Allgood, as her Tramp. However, perhaps more similarity can be detected between the Tramp in *The Shadow* as an ironical self-portrait and Martin Doull in *The Well* who, during the short period he has his sight back, tries to woo Molly Byrne away from Timmy, the prospering middle class smith. Christopher Murray's opinion that by his poetic speech "Martin translates Molly into a work of art which he must possess" (78) suggests in whom to see another portrait of the artist, more convincingly than Collin's argument. Provided that the Saint is a Protestant who "exploits the Catholic laity's residual attachment to pre-Christian beliefs" (184), here the long-surviving pagan belief about the curing power of water from holy wells, how does it "score points for the Ascendancy?" (181). It would have been better for the author to keep to the view that Synge satirized both social groups and not define political aims which supposedly influenced the playwright's construction of his characters.

“Savage Paganism: *The Playboy of the Western World*” is not the playwright’s words about his own work that the discussion starts from, but a horrible event Synge must have heard about: the ritual immolation of Bridget Cleary, a young woman by her own husband as he thought she was a changeling left in place of his real wife taken away by the fairies. Collins’s alternative analysis of *The Playboy* rests on his assumption that the pre-Christian belief in fairy lore and changelings reappears in the play when the protagonist, Christy Mahon’s leg is burnt by the Mayoite community turned hostile for his misleading them. It is an extremely savage form of revenge, no doubt, and Synge may have had the Clearys’ case in mind while composing the violent scene. However, an analysis based on the idea that Christy is a changeling reads as very speculative, even though Collins pinpoints the features of one in him by relying on and quoting from excellent sources like Angela Bourke’s writings on Irish fairies. The supposition that “Synge’s dramatization of changeling belief [with its possible savage acts] can be seen as a codified rearguard defence of Anglo-Irish sovereignty across a familiar ideological background” (242) misinterprets the play at best. Following the logic Collins chooses, Christy’s final leave-taking would be the changeling’s (and pagan Ireland’s) triumph over the Catholic middle class, haunted and gulled by it, yet this still does not invite audiences to revise their beliefs about Protestants.

In sum, I have reservations in Collins’s argument about his implication that it was manipulative, even ethically questionable on Synge’s part (241) to utilize the sometimes violent manifestations of pre-Christian Irish culture and thereby call attention to the superiority of his own class versus a modernizing Catholic Ireland with its ambivalent attitude to the savageries of its traditions. The playwright’s aims, if the word applies at all, were aesthetic primarily, otherwise there would hardly be this vivid critical interest in re-engaging with his oeuvre. A shortcoming of the book is that, except for the chapter on *Riders to the Sea*, it does not lay sufficient emphasis on the theatrical values of Synge’s works. Nonetheless, this is a finely researched book that approaches the plays drawing on Synge’s informed familiarity with ancient Irish lore and his readings in European philosophy and the social sciences. Although highly contentious at times, it is a useful source for further Synge scholarship by incorporating a wealth of archival material to substantiate the points it makes. Therefore, I recommend that scholars, teachers, and students of twentieth-century Anglophone drama, modern Irish theatre in general, and Synge’s work in particular add *Theatre and Residual Culture* to their shelf of frequently consulted books.

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