THE DRAMA OF J. M. SYNGE: A CHALLENGE TO THE IDEOLOGY AND MYTHS OF IRISHNESS

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SUMMARY

Opinions about Synge's work vary from redundant noise to vanguardist art, or the embodiment of the spirit of the Nation. The literary mask created by Yeats and the disparaging caricature his opponents publicised, have barred access to the unbiased study of his work documents. Synge's plays changed the course of the emerging National Theatre. Yeats's plays were attacked for not serving well enough the nationalist cause, but Synge's were seen by nationalists as working completely on the other side of the fence. This argument and the poetical fallacy of Synge's political inactivity are here reappraised. For the nationalists both his witling silence and his social and family background caused aggravation which found opportunity to be voiced at each production of his plays. What still disturbs in the plays is the interaction between individuals and social groups. The exchanges between characters, the progress or stasis of individual characters through the play, the continual change of perspective forced on the audience, these are the features that still strike a controversial note today.

Synge is here seen as a "colonizer who refuses" as he frees himself from family strict rule. The first two chapters analyse the historical and personal evolution towards a native Irish Theatre in English. The following chapters study the process by which each play diverts the expectations it arouses in the audience, following the genesis of each play through its source material when possible, to see how some controversial images and dialogues were arrived at, where they acquired their polemic weight. This part of the study focuses on the writing methods of Synge, and the "reading formation" of the public. The grotesque style of the plays and prose is found to be similar in tone to the Rabelaisian grotesque: both share the hope of regeneration in life's forces and nature, as opposed to a strict Christianity. Synge's use of grotesque shattered aesthetic and philosophical expectations in his intellectual audience, causing the anger among the nationalists and the literary coterie. The particular depiction of women's roles in his plays are compared with Victorian and modern patterns of female behaviour.

In the plays Nature is seen not as the bucolic "locus" for philosophical self-contemplation, but as nurturer and threat for its original dwellers. The knowledge of and closeness to the forces of Nature elicit respect for outsiders as possessing a valuable culture, either in isolation or organised in marginal societies. The outcasts in Irish society are given an articulate voice in Synge's plays: beggars, vagrants, tinkers, the blind and women. In all plays strong female characters assert themselves in unorthodox ways, defying custom and legend. The use of legend in his last play shows Synge as heralding the end of a mythologising era, presenting legendary events issuing not from fate but personal heroic decision, that of a woman who chases her life and death, following her own values.
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Item 4340, Draft for the printers, Synge's copy of Samhain, October 1903, and a typescript cast-list

4373 (5) Notebook with reading and lecture notes from 1889, on Locke, Stokes, Petrie, Trench

4378 (10) Notebook used in 1895-96 and 1898-99, with language notes, Italian and Irish, reading notes on folklore, mythology, contemporary writers and literary exercises

4339 (11) Notebook used probably 1894-95, with notes on books covering various interests, literary, artistic scientific, political, and philosophical. Notes on Marx and Hegel were taken in German

4382 (15) Notebook used in 1897-98, with notes on the Irish Tramp, a dialogue between Rabelais and à Kempis, among other French material
4383 (16) Notebook in use between 1904-8, with drafts and fragments of plays on old Irish themes, and notes on Villon, Ronsard and Greene

4385 (19) Notebook dated Aranmore/Inishmaan May 1898, with material on the Aran Islands

4386 (20), 4388 (25) Notebooks in use in 1898 with drafts and poems for 'Vita Vecchia'

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"The Myth of Manliness is a work of exemplary scholarship and astute analysis. Fluently written and beautifully presented, it marks an original and very significant contribution to the study of Irish culture in this remarkably formative period."--Modernism/Modernity. "Required reading for all interested in gender studies in both Irish and postcolonial contexts, and a landmark in the field of masculinity studies, Valente's book is a major, and lasting intervention."--Irish University Review. "Rewarding and challenging."--James Joyce Quarterly. "One of the