THEATRE RESEARCH INTERNATIONAL · VOL. 36 | NO. 3 | PP272–275
© International Federation for Theatre Research 2011 · doi:10.1017/S0307883311000502

Synge Scholarship: Nothing to Do with Nationalism?

CHRISTOPHER COLLINS

John Millington Synge (1871–1909) is the fulcrum upon which Irish drama and theatre studies is balanced. Synge's nodal position is predicated upon the dramatist's rock 'n' roll recalcitrance towards the dramaturgical praxis of his contemporaries; his subject matter was as shocking as the Anglo-Irish idiom in which it was articulated. After Synge's premature death in 1909, W. B. Yeats's fundamental concern was that Synge scholars would attempt 'to mould . . . some simple image of the man'.[1] However, W. J. McCormack's concentric biography of Synge, *The Fool of the Family: A Life of J. M. Synge*,[2] and Ann Saddlemyer's *The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge*,[3] have demonstrated that Synge's life was complex, multifaceted and in deep dialogue with Irish culture. But with respect to Synge's drama a simple image has surrounded critical discourse: the politics of Irish nationalism.

In Synge's playlet *National Drama: A Farce*, the dramatist debunked Irish theatre's impetus to 'hold up a mirror to the Irish Nation', maintaining that 'an Irish drama that is written in Ireland about Irish people, and not on a foreign model will and must be national in so far as it exists at all'.[4] But what keeps scholars coming back to a negotiation of Irish nationalism in Synge's plays is his curious relationship with Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Synge held a familial allegiance with the class formation known as the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, which had a traditional monopoly on all forms of Irish capital (economic, social, symbolic). Accordingly, Synge's drama has been considered as an articulation of Anglo-Irish nationalism as advocated by Daniel Corkery, who, in *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*,[5] propagated Irish nationalism apropos of Synge's plays to the extent that they have become irretrievably concomitant with the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy's battle for political hegemony. Nicholas Grene's *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays* did much to reconcile this reductive logic by pointing out that Synge simply did not care for national identity politics, least of all Anglo-Irish national identity politics.[6] Therefore the postulation that Synge's drama is indexical of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy's battle for hegemony is speculative because, as Grene points out, with respect to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, Synge saw 'nothing but repressiveness, hatred and decadence'.[7] Much of the scholarship that followed in Grene's wake – such as Declan Kiberd's *Synge and the Irish Language*,[8] and Mary C. King's *The Drama of J. M. Synge*[9] – continued to model Synge as the exception to Ascendancy rule – as the Anglo-Irish renegade who developed a deep understanding of Irish culture. Kiberd, for example, adroitly demonstrated Synge's knowledge of the Irish language to advocate that the dramatist staunchly believed 'in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883311000502 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a fusion of the two Irelands, Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, so that neither should shed its pride'.[10]

What was at stake for these scholars was an alternative reading of Synge's plays that tried to distance the dramatist from the sterile formalism of Anglo-Irish nationalism. Synge was acutely concerned with the cultural cost of Irish nationalism and his dramaturgy privileges those cultural formations that did not harmonize within Irish nationalism. Sinéad Garrigan Mattar's *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival* is a concentric analysis of Synge's 'intense engagement with scientific compartivism', which allowed the dramatist to account for the cultural cost of nationalism.[11] Garrigan Mattar points out how Synge used evolutionary and anthropological discourses to intervene in the colonial stereotype, which the dramatist feared would haunt Irish culture after independence from British rule. This is why Kiberd's essay 'J. M. Synge – Remembering the Future' in his *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* is particularly apposite.[12]

However, the ethics that predicated Synge's articulation of those cultural logics that lurked between architectural fissures of Irish nationalism was brought into critical discourse by Paul Murphy's essay entitled 'J. M. Synge and the Pitfalls of National Consciousness', which first appeared in *Theatre Research International* and was expanded upon in his seminal work *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama 1899–1949*.[13] Murphy's intervention in Synge scholarship gave credence to the supposition that Irish nationalism apropos of Synge's plays was redundant, but he complicated this by pointing out that Synge's plays were driven by Anglo-Irish anxieties as well as by issues of gender and class disparity. Murphy turned Irish nationalism apropos of Synge's drama on its head by interrogating those classed and gendered formations that had little or no access to political hegemony. The blame for this inequity was, according to Murphy, due to Synge's Anglo-Irish allegiance and to the fact that Synge's dramaturgical praxis was driven by 'the Ascendancy trait of constructing the peasantry as fantasy objects which function as the key component in an ideological assault on [Catholic] *bourgeois* economics and a defence of aristocratic virtues'.[14] Murphy's paradigmatic shift re-established the question of Synge's Anglo-Irish heritage within critical discourse and it has called for a concentric consideration of Synge's ethics when staging those disenfranchised and, at times, subaltern formations.

Many scholars choose to ignore the question of Synge as Anglo-Irish peasant fetishizer and this, in turn, has produced some extremely rewarding scholarship – mostly emanating from the annual Synge Summer School in Ireland's County Wicklow. Nicholas Grene's *Interpreting Synge: Essays from the Synge Summer School: 1991–2000* renegotiates Synge's life and work to foreground just how much of a rock 'n' roll kid Synge was in the Ireland of his time.[15] R. F. Foster's essay in that collection, 'Good Behaviour: Yeats, Synge and Anglo-Irish Etiquette', demonstrates how Synge struggled to conform to the received conventions of Anglo-Irish propriety. This is substantiated by Angela Bourke's essay in the same collection, 'Keening as Theatre: J. M. Synge and the Irish Lament Tradition', where Synge's religious iconoclasm is foregrounded through his staging of a prepolitical and pre-Christian ritual (the keen) on a stage of national–popular, even Catholic, sovereignty.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883311000502 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Patrick Lonergan, the current director of the Synge Summer School, has succeeded in bringing Synge scholarship (traditionally a literary terrain) into a dialogue with performance studies and discourses on globalization. Lonergan's *Synge and His Influences: Centenary Essays from the Synge Summer School* is a valuable collection of scholarship that articulates what Synge was influenced by and whom he has succeeded in influencing.[16] Melissa Sihra's essay in the collection, 'Re-Location and Re-Locution: Adapting Synge', reveals how Synge's dramaturgical praxis has been successfully adapted across the globe; Synge scholarship is a truly globalized discourse. But as Anthony Roche reminds us, Synge will always haunt the pages and the stages of Irish theatre.[17] Samuel Beckett could only think of one playwright who had a deep resonance on his praxis,[18] and one of Ireland's most popular contemporary playwrights, Marina Carr, continually returns to Synge's plays for aesthetic inspiration.[19] Synge would have understood why. Like all rock stars, he felt that no one else could please the crowd in the same way he could: 'it just happens that I know Irish life the best, so I made my methods Irish'.[20]

NOTES

1 W. B. Yeats, 'A Memory of Synge', *Irish Statesman*, 5 July 1924.
2 W. J. McCormack, *Fool of the Family: A Life of J. M. Synge* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000).
3 J. M. Synge, *The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer, *Volume I: 1871–1907* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) and *Volume II: 1907–1909* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
4 J. M. Synge, *Collected Works, Volume III: Plays Book I*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 224.
5 Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1966).
6 Nicholas Grene, *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays* (London and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1975).
7 Ibid., p. 4.
8 Declan Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language* (London and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979).
9 Mary C. King, *The Drama of J. M. Synge* (London: Fourth Estate, 1985).
10 Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language*, p. 5.
11 Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, *Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 130.
12 Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), 1996.
13 Paul Murphy, 'J. M. Synge and the Pitfalls of National Consciousness', *Theatre Research International*, 28, 2 (2003), pp. 125–42. See also Paul Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama, 1899–1949* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
14 Murphy, 'J. M. Synge and the Pitfalls of National Consciousness', p. 128.
15 Nicholas Grene, ed., *Interpreting Synge: Essays from the Synge Summer School: 1991–2000* (Dublin: Liliput Press, 2000).
16 Patrick Lonergan, ed., *Synge and His Influences: Centenary Essays from the Synge Summer School* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011).
17 Anthony Roche, 'Synge and Contemporary Irish Drama', in P. J. Matthews, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
18 James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1980), p. 260.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883311000502 Published online by Cambridge University Press

19 Eileen Battersby, 'A Double Take of Savage Realism', *Irish Times*, 7 February 2009.
20 A. F., 'I Don't Care a Rap', *Dublin Evening Mail*, 29 January 1907.

CHRISTOPHER COLLINS (collinch@tcd.ie) *is in his final year of his PhD candidature at the School of Drama, Film and Music, Trinity College Dublin, where he is also a Teaching Assistant. His doctoral thesis, entitled '"The Playfellow of Judas": The Pre-Christian Drama of J. M. Synge', explores how the vestiges and traces of pre-Christian Ireland are manifested in Synge's dramaturgical praxis. With Mary P. Caulfield he is editing the collection,* The Rest Is History: Ireland, Performance and the Historical Imagination. *He also works as a dramaturg on productions of Synge's plays.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883311000502 Published online by Cambridge University Press