

CHRISTY AND CUCHULLAIN :

A RE-PLAY OF SYNGE'S PLAYBOY

Now entering its ninth decade of life, J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* has proved a sturdy survivor, not only of the audience rioting that surrounded its debut in 1907 but also of a continuing exegesis by critics interested in its psychology (mainly Freudian, noting parallelism with the Oedipus legend) and symbolism (mainly Christian, focusing on the main character and the circumstances of his heroic "birth"). This in addition to canonic studies of Synge's language (reportage or invention?), his grasp of the Connemara sensibility, the relationship of the plot to the Aran Islands material collected by the author at the turn of the century, as well as Synge's gifts in plot-construction and characterization, all of this a tribute to Synge's own prefatory comment on "the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality." Hopefully, this study may add to that reality, whether superb or wild or both, as yet another tribute to the haunting qualities of the play.

It is my contention here that certain elements in the *Playboy* world represent a kind of parody of ancient Irish myth, a body of literature that attracted Synge to the extent of his basing his last work *Deirdre of the Sorrows* on the famous Ulaid theme. If Deirdre is the most memorable heroine of the early Irish material, a kind of Gaelic Helen of Troy, her masculine counterpart must be Cuchullain, the Irish Achilles of the fabulous deeds and short life, like Achilles of semi-divine parentage and governed by a complex set of totems and taboos. This Celtic world, as it involves the Ulaid and Cuchullain, offers the student of *Playboy* certain dimensions that warrant comment. For purposes of organized discussion I have divided the subject into four aspects :

- 1) The solar theme in the Cuchullain legend,
- 2) The Aillil and Maeve theme, together with the rivalries among women and goddesses for Cuchullain's love,
- 3) The Cuchullain *persona*, as presented in the *Tain Bo Cualnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley) and related pieces,
- 4) The heroic boast or "gab", as featured in an Ulaid piece like *Mac Da Tho's Pig*, (It should be noted here that Professor Declan Kiberd in his *Synge and the Irish Language*, MacMillan 1979, has mentioned correspondences between Christy and Cuchullain, concentrating on the Cuchullain - Emer relationship).

1) Anthropologists of myth have noted in the Cuchullain story an impacted solar-deity implication, with the hero's divine paternity in Lugh, perhaps the leading deity in the very vaguely structured Celtic pantheon, and the hero's solar aspects in battle-stress, e.g. the flaming head and the raging and overpowering heat. And Cuchullain is the champion of Ulster (the east, sunrise) against Connacht (the west, sunset), with the implications of the birth and death of the day and year and the inevitable resolution of the one within the other. In the Cuchullain legend it is ultimately the west, in the person of Maeve Queen of Connacht, that brings about the death of the hero. In addition, there is in Irish myth and legend the important dimension of SAMUIN (the first of November) which marks the onset of winter and the death of the year, around which so many of the saga heroics are organized. This relationship between the death of the year and the meaning of the sun may be a clue

to the opening of the *Playboy*, "an evening of autumn" with its insistence on darkness and the terrors of darkness for both Pegeen Mike and that ultimate un-hero Shawn Keogh. This together with Pegeen's yearnings and fantasies, for a yellow wedding dress and about "fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused," prepares us for a most unlikely solar hero in Christy. But when one considers that it is in the high noon of the next day that Christy performs his wondrous athletic feats and that it is presumably in the late afternoon (or early evening) that he resumes his course westward, we have at least the hint of a solar day, with Pegeen again facing the onset of darkness and loneliness. And there is the relationship of the Mahons, father and son, as a possibly grotesque parody of the divine-parent-of-the-hero theme. Old Mahon is "murdered" more than once and comes back for more, the ritual killing of one solar year by its successor in the seasonal implication and finally in the love-hate attitude of Pegeen toward Christy, culminating in her ritual act of cruelty in burning him, there may be a hint of sacrifice of the sun to the sun through fire as well as Maev's attraction toward Cuchullain together with her appreciation that he represents the enemy from the east. Pegeen, the "wild-looking but fine girl" of Connemara, yearns for something very different from Shawn Keogh but proves the most provincial and aggressive of the westerners in coping with the intrusion into their world.

2) And it is this aggressiveness of Pegeen ("a hardy girl would knock the head of any two men in the place") that further relates her to the warrior-queen of Connacht. Like Maev, she will finally consort with an Aillil-like figure in Shawn, the passive man of property who establishes human relation - ships in terms of cattle-dealing (his stratagem with the widow Qunn). It must be remembered that in the *Tain Aillil* basically exists as a bull-owner, certainly not a leader of men or an emotional match for Maev. And just as Maev is prepared to buy away Cuchullain from the Ulster cause, Pegeen is a commercial wooer of Christy with her offer of the pot-boy job. Her real challenge in the play comes from the Widow Quinn, and in the fierce competition of the two women we find another suggestion of Cuchullain's world. Thrice in his development he is fought over by women : his warrior-queen mentor Scathach vs, Aife (the amazonian who bears Cuchullain's only son), Emer vs, Eithne Ingeba (the hero's two "wives"), and Emer vs, Fand (the Side enchantress). It is probably no exaggeration to imagine the village girls Sarah et al entering the competition were Christy to remain at the shebeen.

3) A man so sought after by women would presumably be the swashbuckler par excellence, and both Christy and Cuchullain cover themselves with glory in the public arenas of sport and warfare. But in appearance both Christy and Cuchullain impress with their boyishness, their almost child-like qualities. The legendary hero first distinguishes himself at age six in destroying the fearsome hound of the smith Cullan and assuming his name as the "hound of Cullan", and throughout his stories he remains a boyish hero, bashful to the point of comic absurdity in fainting at the sight of bare-breasted women. This is manifest in Christy as well ; he charms Pegeen with his delicate features (she marvels at his small, "well-bred" feet) and near the play's end the women of the place plan an escape for him dressed in women's clothes. And the nomenclature in the Cuchullain legend has a passing application to Christy's position in the play: at first SETANTA, the passer or traveller of the ways, and then CUCHULLAIN, the guard-dog, finding an absurd echo in the pot-boy role assigned Christy as custodian of the shebeen.

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4) When the men of the shebeen guess at Christy's offense and the stakes mount with each conjecture until Pegeen's unwitting guess at the truth ("You did nothing at all"), we have not only one of the comic gems of the Irish theatre but a highly controlled parody of another Ulaid legend, "The Tale of Mac Datho's Pig." Its main body consists of a boasting game played by the warriors of Ulster and Connacht over rights to carve the festive pig. Here, Connacht deflates one Ulster claim after another until the triumphant Ulster claimant appears. Although Cuchullain plays no part in this Ulaid piece, the ambiance is certainly consistent with the Ulster-Connacht tensions established in the *Tain*. And although no valid claim can be made for Christy as an Ulster figure, the east-west confrontation is at least evident with the youthful easterner topping the wildest surmises of the west.

But in the last analysis, when one conjectures on the implications of the Cuchullain material for Synge's play, it must be the disturbing, alien presence of the hero in the western world that is most suggestive ; and here we fall back on Maev as the warrior goddess of the west, perhaps the supreme example of the matriarchic figure in Irish legend, confronting something which excites all her womanliness and finally challenges all her authority. Maev of the legends may bed with heroes like Fergus MacRoy and flirt with Cuchullain, but ultimately she must conjure up an her powers of magic against the challenge from the east, to destroy its champion, and Pegeen's ferocity at the play's end, her witch-like use of fire to brand the hero, and her realization that Aillil-Shawn not Cuchullain-Christy is her lot, these are perhaps the most telling linkings of past and present of myth and sociology. This, together with the solar implications of Christy's progression from birth to temporary death to natural recovery in the course of moving further into the western world. The completion of the plot within a solar day, the ambiguities and tensions of the east-west confrontation, the demonic unveiling of Pegeen - none wholly explains the power and fascination of Synge's accomplishment, but each elicits our further admiration for one of the greatest pieces of the twentieth century theatre.

Léonard H. FREY
San Diego State University