The Playboy of the Western World:

Ancient Tragedy's Reflection in the Irish Literary Theater, Anti-Authoritarian Nationalism, and Tragicomedy

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An Introduction

> CHRISTY
> *twisting round on her with a sharp cry of horror.*—Don't strike me. I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that.
> PEGEEN
> *with blank amazement.*—Is it killed your father?
> CHRISTY
> *subsiding.*—With the help of God I did surely, and that the Holy Immaculate Mother may intercede for his soul.
>
> PHILLY
> *retreating with Jimmy.*—There's a daring fellow.
>
> JIMMY
> Oh, glory be to God!
>
> MICHAEL
> *with great respect.*—That was a hanging crime, mister honey. You should have had good reason for doing the like of that.
>
> CHRISTY
> *in a very reasonable tone.*—He was a dirty man, God forgive him, and he getting old and crusty, the way I couldn't put up with him at all. (Synge, 105-106)

John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* is a comedy written in early-twentieth-century Ireland that unexpectedly follows a plot similar to a classical Greek tragedy. The play's protagonist Christy, a strange young man wandering the pastoral western lands of Ireland, arrives at a village and announces that he is his father's murderer. Oddly proud, he justifies himself to the townspeople. He explains that his aging, dirty father was abusive (portraying a common Irish stereotype), making him out to be unbearable company for Christy. His line was written as quite "reasonable" in the stage directions, and so it follows that Christy is actually well-received by his audience as a parricidal folk hero. In response, a character named Jimmy exclaims: "Bravery's a treasure in a lonesome place, and a lad would kill his father, I'm thinking, would face a foxy divil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell," (Synge, 106). Pegeen, a young woman who is soon charmed by him, agrees. She says "It's the truth they're saying, and if

I'd that lad in the house, I wouldn't be fearing the loosed kharki cut-throats, or the walking dead," (Synge, 107). By "kharki cut-throats", she is referring to the khaki-uniformed British colonists, appraising Christy as a brave Irishman who has no fear for authority.

Synge's tragicomedy draws parallels between its own predominantly comic form and some ancient Greek tragedies. The subject matter of parricide is common in Attic tragedy, and both *Playboy* and *Oedipus Rex* incorporate a hero/protagonist who has come to a *polis* after having killed his own father. The two plays also focus on how the community reacts to and is affected by the individual actions of the hero. In *Oedipus,* the murder of his father in self-defense and his role as the king of the *polis* brings Thebes into a state of pollution, and once the full story is revealed to him, he gouges his own eyes out in shame and disgust. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, he seeks his fated absolution as a suppliant in Athens while he acknowledges that he was not morally responsible for his blind ignorance pertaining to the tragic actions that unfolded in his life, family, and community. The premise of *The Playboy of the Western World* follows a far more modern—but still morally contrived—path from Christy's "murder" of his father. Christy, already appearing to believe he killed his abusive father, arrives at the Theban-esque town unashamed, even proud of his apparent actions. Unlike Oedipus, Christy is portrayed as defiant of greater authorities like the stereotypical tyrannical patriarch of an abusive drunk. That stereotype, somewhat fate-like in Irish culture, is the source of shame that the nationalists at the time found convenient to glaze over in their romanticization of the folk of Western Ireland and their nostalgia for their pastoral, non-British authenticity.

Playboy's comedy arises from an ironic revelation—in a similar manner that *Oedipus's* tragedy comes from the revelation that he killed his father—that Christy did not succeed in his attempted parricide. Old Mahon arrives at the pub, and the embarrassed Christy runs away to

hide from him. The community of the town who had just upheld Christy as a rebellious hero immediately turn their backs on him when it is revealed later on that Christy was a liar: he did not kill his father. Christy is left ashamed and morally scrutinized, not because he murdered his father but because he *didn't*. Christy and his father have a second duel, and once again it appears that Christy has murdered his father. The townspeople subsequently decide to hang their fallen champion for simply doing what he falsely boasted he did initially. Christy has a noose around his neck when his father, against the odds, arrives to save him from a mob drunk from poteen, Irish moonshine. The play ends unlike a typical comedy: Christy and Mahon end up leaving the town, but no one in the play has "won;" everything returns to as it was before.

The peculiarity of the moral action of *Playboy*— especially considering that it was performed in front of the audience of the Irish Literary Theater and that Synge was a member of the nationalist Irish Literary Revival—aroused controversy and outrage immediately. At its opening performance in January of 1907 at the Abbey Theatre, riots broke out and were led by Irish nationalists. At that time in history, Ireland's politics were rapidly polarizing, between the British unionists and the republican nationalists, affluent South-Dubliner Protestants and rural/blue-collar Catholics, political conservatives and cultural conservatives, and the many other oversimplified divisions that split the Irish people apart. It was the many of the Sinn Féin party members that stormed the stage, offended by their perceptions of the transgressive or satirical depiction of the Irish folk's morality and culture. The language was apparently foul, the characters came off as vulgar and insulting, the plot was judged as immoral, and the play was criticized for not being *politically useful* enough to be associated with a nationalist theater.

Especially among the Irish nationalists, the people of Western Ireland were regarded as the traditional "noble savages" that resisted modernity and British cultural influences, and the

nationalists were highly sensitive to how the Irish folk were portrayed in the media. This regard for the West of Ireland, as Mark Mortimer discusses in "Yeats and Synge: An Inappropriate Myth" (1977), was what led Synge to spend five months in the Aran Islands and receive his inspiration for his plays. In the introduction of *The Well of the Saints*, a preceding play to *Playboy,* the "appropriate myth" of Yeats' advice to Synge to leave France and immerse himself in the pure, authentic side of Ireland in the Aran Islands off the coast of Galway is told. The quote famously goes as follows: "Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression," (Mortimer, 4). Mortimer argues convincingly that despite the convenient idea that Yeats' literary and nationalistic authority was a direct influence of Synge's decision to write plays about the "real Irish folk", Synge resisted giving Yeats credit and stood by the fact that his interest in Western Ireland and folk culture was consistent throughout his upbringing in touch with his familial connection in the west, his studies at Trinity College Dublin and education as a writer, and his involvement with Irish cultural societies such as the "Association irlandaise" during his time spent in Paris. His setting himself apart from Yeats importantly separates the meaning in his works from the latter's reactionary, authoritarian politics, which will be further highlighted later in this thesis. Synge had a deeply personal relationship with and respect for the traditional, rural folk of western Ireland, yet his vision came into polarizing conflict with the versions found in the narratives controlled by the republican and nationalist authorities that rioted in moralized outrage to *Playboy.*

Despite the polarized response, Gregory Dobbins argues that respective of modernity, Synge's work was the "vanished mediator" between the reactionary literary revivalists (eg. Yeats) and the more radical modernists to follow, such as Samuel Beckett. Synge goes to the Aran Islands and Connemara regions of Ireland, the cultural heart of the country least touched by

modernity, but he avoids the fetishization of the past in the portrayal of these areas (137-141). Leder describes Synge's peasant communities not as Rousseauian fantasies of premodernity, but as "transitionals" encountering modernity. The aesthetic form of tragicomedy and the reflection of ancient tragedy by modern comedy reflects this intermediary, transitional characterization as well. How should these aesthetic and philosophical choices be perceived and discussed? That is one of the primary focuses of this thesis.

Let us consider specific evidence for Synge's philosophical influences: In Séan Hewitt's "Dialectics, Irony, and J. M. Synge's *The Well of the Saints"* (2017), the tenth footnote cites the philosophers that Synge had read:

> Synge first notes reading Nietzsche, alongside Hegel, Spinoza, Comte and Blavatsky, in the years 1894–1895 (see TCD MS 4379). . . . He read Thus Spoke Zarathustra in 1897 (see TCD MS 4418) . . .TCD MS 4393.

The nineteenth century hosted a substantial amount of theorization and scholarship on the topic of Attic tragedy, which was most significantly found in the works of big-name continental and existentialist philosophers: the mentioned Nietzsche and Hegel (a la *The Birth of Tragedy*), as well in the works of Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard (*The World as Will and Representation*, *Either/Or*). These philosophers had a common focus of analyzing ancient tragedy from a modern perspective, and this thesis takes great interest in the accounts of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. While it is confirmed that Synge had read a considerable amount of Nietzsche's writing, it is not clear if he had been exposed to Kierkegaard's works. Kierkegaard, arguably more directly than any of the prior-mentioned philosophers, wrote extensively about the differences between the ancient perspective of tragedy and how modernity struggles with conveying the ethical content of play within a cultural context that de-emphasizes the importance of individualism in light of fate, the gods, and the *polis.* In a chapter of *Either/Or* called "Ancient Tragedy's Reflection in

the Modern", Kierkegaard pseudonymously wrote that modern tragedy puts excessive emphasis on the role of the individual and their moral responsibility for their actions without considering "external determinants" and the greater picture of cause and effect that leads to tragic subject matter. Because the modern lens is more inclined to moralize tragedy and assign blame, Kierkegaard writes how the modern protagonist is an "exaggerated individual". This causes the modern tragedy, therefore, to unexpectedly evoke comic effect, as the moralization of their actions becomes absurd and ridiculous. Kierkegaard viewed a clear separation and distinction between the ancient and modern as seen in tragedy, and the junction between tragedy and comedy is signaled to be a point of transition.

Nietzsche's highly influential account saw another kind of dichotomy in his discussion of tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). He enframed tragedy as containing two intertwined, opposing aesthetic concepts, the Apolline and Dionysian. The former concept is a force within tragedy that is characterized by ethics, rationality, order, and singularity. It is predominantly the cognitive aspect of tragedy found in the dialogue and the "inner lives" of the characters. The latter Dionysian, in contrast, lurks in the background and the greater picture of the plot. It is the deeper, natural, *primordial* disorder, collective and united, and it is the more passionate, emotional, and musical part of the tragedy centered within the role of the chorus. Tragedy, as a medium of art, is how the audience can intimately connect with this unconscious underlying aspect of the human condition. Nietzsche viewed tragedy as innately amoral, yet it still contains quite a significant presence of moralized discourse within its content. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is probably the greatest example of a group of tragedies that possess a great focus on this Apolline moralization, especially as exemplified through Athena's trial of Orestes in the third play *Furies.* The Sophoclean tragic content that is paralleled in Synge's *Playboy* carries over traces of this

Nietzschean lens of tragedy, particularly a Dionysian domination of the moral content that quickly becomes comic. A significant theme of the play, rebellion against illusory authority and the satire of moralization, can be viewed as a reflection of a Nietzschean attitude towards cultural and nationalistic authoritative narratives that Synge rejected and provoked with this play.

This thesis seeks to explore the idea of the Irish tragicomedy by revisiting its foundation in the works of J. M. Synge, primarily in *The Playboy of the Western World*. While Synge has been largely been discussed as a transitional figure in the Irish Literary Theatre and the Revival, mostly viewed as an important playwright in the national and political sphere of his moment in time, there is little that has been written about his role as a *tragicomic* playwright as well as an enormously *philosophical* one. Additionally, the modernist and postmodern theory-heavy tragicomedy in Ireland that followed in the works of Samuel Beckett and more recently in the film and plays of Martin McDonagh carried on a Syngian tradition of tragicomedy; what this thesis aims to do is provide a philosophical account of the origin of this traditions and what it means within the past century of development of Irish culture and national identity.

This thesis will contain the following:

1) An analysis of how Synge's first play, *Riders to the Sea*, introduce and develop Synge's perspective of ancient tragedy within the framework of a transitional Irish culture in the Aran Islands
2) An expository account of the background of the philosophical and political influences that establish Synge's aesthetics of tragicomedy.
3) A literary and philosophical analysis of *The Playboy of the Western World* as a tragicomedy that skeptically rebels against the nostalgic fetishization of the Irish folk and the contemporary politically-controlled national *ethos.*

4) A discussion of the 2022 film *The Banshees of Inisherin* and the tragicomic legacy of J. M. Synge.

The Western World and the Aran Islands

Riders to the Sea, as mentioned above, was Synge's first published play, first performed February 25th, 1904. It is a tragedy that takes place on the island of Inishmaan in the Aran Islands off of the coast of Galway, the island where Synge immersed himself within the heart of the "old Ireland" and its traditional way of life. Inishmaan, even by today's standards, is one of the most remote places in the country of Ireland. A present-day Dubliner would still need to take a three-and-a-half hour bus ride across the country to Galway, an hour-long bus to the port, forty-five minutes on the ferry to Inishmore, and another twenty minutes on a second ferry to arrive at the wall-like cliffs on the shores of Inishmaan. One hundred years ago, the journey (as mentioned in the play) between Inishmaan and the mainland was already a commitment of at least two days for a roundtrip. Inishmaan, therefore, was and still is physically and therefore temporally removed from the rest of Ireland. Even to this day, the Irish language can still be heard at the pub by the sweater shop in the town center of Inishmore as the bartender swats your hand as you reach for your pint of Guinness before the foam settles at the top of the glass. *Wisht,* he'll say as you open your mouth to say something in protest. Back in Synge's day, modernity was perceived by much of the country to have not yet encountered the lives of the Aran Islanders. In 1901, Synge wrote a memoir of journal entries from his stay on Inishmaan titled *The Aran Islands* (1907). In the book he describes how far from civilization the islanders live their daily lives. Because of the rough waters, the steep, craggy shorelines of the islands, and the frequent storms, shipping between the islands and the mainland was unreliable and infrequent. This isolation, as Synge viewed it, prevented modernity from reaching the culture of the islanders. Due to the lack of natural resources on the island, the quality of life was, even relative to the rest of the country, frugal and difficult. The island was restricted to a merely agricultural

economic model, largely depending on sheep herding and wool textiles (à la the famous Aran Islander cable-knit sweaters). Going to Inishmaan was effectively going back in time, and that is the idea that Synge explores in *Riders to the Sea.*

The play situates an Aran Islander family in the midst of great loss and destitution. The mother, Maurya, has lost her husband and five of her sons to the torrential seas around their small island. The remaining daughters and son catch word from the island priest that their brother's body was found and identified on the shores of the mainland, and soon after, Bartley, the last remaining male child of the family, decides to sail to the mainland in an effort to sell their horse and donkey. Maurya strongly protests this, and she sees a prophetic vision of her son alongside his brother's ghost falling off of the seaside cliff with the horse and donkey on his way down to the boat. Her vision comes true, and Bartley's body is found washed up on the shore. The play ends in Maurya's complete despair.

The reason why this play serves as a segue into my discussion of *Playboy* is because *Rider's to the Sea* is widely found to be a "transitional" tragedy. Maurya represents the ancient, traditional perspective of tragedy; a vantage point that takes account of fate, naturalistic warnings, and pagan omens. This is contrasted with the younger characters of the play, especially by the son Bartley. Similarly, Judith Leder argued that these characters in *Riders* are cultural "transitionals" within a traditional community confronted by modernity (1). She described the generational differences in worldview between Maurya and her children as a conflict between folk tradition and modern liberalism. I will explain how the tragedy finds itself at odds with its transitional position between the ancient tragedy and modern drama, as well as how this play is expository to the philosophical and tragicomic material found in Synge's later works.

The Dichotomy between Ancient and Modern Tragedy

What *is* the distinction between ancient and modern tragedy that is confronted in Synge's works? While Kierkegaard goes on to say much more that I will describe in later sections, this thesis bases its framework of ancient and modern tragedy on what was laid out in "Ancient Tragedy's Reflection in the Modern" even on its most rudimentary level. A main crux which Kierkegaard discusses is the role of the individual/protagonist between the ancient and modern sensibilities. In ancient Greek tragedy, he writes that

> subjectivity was not fully conscious and reflective[, and e]ven though the individual moved freely, he still depended on substantial [determinants], on state, family, and destiny. This category of the substantial is the authentically fatalistic element in Greek tragedy, and its true peculiarity, (Kierkegaard, 143)

In other words, the classical Greek understanding of the individual placed much less emphasis on personal will, freedom, and the self/inner life. Even individual actions were seen through a deterministic perspective on the level of greater systems and forces like the gods, fate, the state, and history; the individual is dwarfed to be only an object of these influences, not quite an agent who decides and acts with full consciousness and power. In light of these substantial determinants (greater forces), the tragedy unfolds naturalistically and inevitably, as if there is a natural disaster, a terrible storm, and therefore the heroes and citizens of the *polis* suffer from misfortune and terrible circumstances that necessitate certain undesirable decision-making as a response to what they perceive as a threat to order. While individual actors play causal roles in this action, because of the broader picture of determinism, the source of the action is not solely tied up in the character of the hero. It is the collective character of the *polis* and *oikos* (community and family) that drives the tragedy; the tragic hero is just a representation of an

aspect of this *ethos.* This characterization of the ancient sensibility in tragedy is at the very least, not controversial. Aristotle's concept of *hamartia* in *Poetics* is contingent upon this understanding of agency and determinism. The tragic heroine makes a crucial mistake or error in ignorance of other forces, implications, and foreseeable consequences (the disaster), and her action is vaguely innocent. Kierkegaard was clearly drawing upon Aristotle in his view of ancient tragedy. However, his view of modern tragedy is more original and pessimistic.

The modern era, the "age of despair" Kierkegaard writes, is "melancholy enough to realize there is something called responsibility," (Kierkegaard, 141). The main difference that the modern sensibility introduces is the liberal idea of individual agency and freedom, and this muddles tragedy up, according to Kierkegaard, as freedom necessitates responsibility. And so, the tragic hero, responsible and also ignorant to the influence of substantive determinants, is a moral agent that can be blamed and judged for the disaster of the tragedy. In *Furies,* for example, Orestes would have lost his Athenian trial if his tragedy were *modern*, as he would have been myopically framed as an evil mother-killer. Another quality is the isolating exaggeration of the individual who "always become[s] comic by asserting [his] own accidental individuality in the face of evolutionary necessity," (Kierkegaard, 142). The introduction of moral action, in other words, makes the individuality of the tragic hero ridiculous and ironic. In Orestes' case, everything in his defense would be absurdly ignored (his family's curse, Apollo's prophecy), and the burden of all matters on a grander scale than Orestes would be thrown upon his back; he would be morally scapegoated. This is the element of moral comedy that Kierkegaard discusses. This ruins the modern tragedy, he argues, because it inappropriately inserts ethical discussion that "has no aesthetic interest," (Kierkegaard, 143). If the tragic hero is actually the villain, the tragedy has lost the plot, in other words.

A Brief Genealogy of Tragicomic Discourse between Kierkegaard, Beckett, and Synge

This dichotomy between ancient and modern tragedy as presented by Kierkegaard—while too reductive to accept without an addendum of countless nuances and exceptions in its application to the Western canon of tragedy— still highlights an interesting aspect of tragedy: the ethical/metaphysical content of drama that contains both elements of the tragic and comic. This essay predates a large bibliography of *tragicomedy* (the obvious fusion of these elements in drama) that emerged in the early/mid twentieth century with the modernists. Samuel Beckett, famous for his tragicomic, absurdist plays such as *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Endgame* (1957), is the most prominent figure whose works would draw connections to Kierkegaard in terms of a philosophical genealogy. Whether he liked it or not, he belonged to a movement that was characterized by its existentialist themes: Martin Esslin's "The Theatre of the Absurd" as coined in the eponymous 1961 book. This mid-century collection of tragicomic works are linked together by Esslin due to their shared relationship with the existentialist movement led by Sartre; the plays and philosophy were often read in dialogue with each other by critics like Esslin. Beckett's works do not incorporate or develop Kierkegaard's dichotomy between ancient and modern tragedy with any abundant interest (hence why this thesis will not feature much analysis or discussion of Beckett beyond this section), however, there is a line of influence that this thesis draws together. Beckett's plays focus heavily on themes of freedom, action, ethics, and meaning, all of which are developed and augmented in correspondence with Kierkegaard in Synge's works. *Waiting for Godot* incorporates these themes largely by negating them or stripping these concepts away entirely. The characters Gogo and Didi are free *prima*

facie, but they await the character Godot as if they do not have a choice. They discuss moral subject matter like the crucified thieves in the Bible, yet morality itself seems alien to them as depicted in their reactions to the violent dominance/submission power dynamics between the other two characters, Pozzo and Lucky. Beckett inverts Kierkegaard's idea of the exaggerated, moralized individual in his protagonists, making Gogo and Didi appear to lack agency, responsibility, and morality in the face of authority. That is the source of comedy within a play that is tragic in the larger picture, full of disaster and despair.

There seems to be a missing link between Kierkegaard and Beckett, and that is the main subject of this thesis: the plays of John Millington Synge. In "Synge and Irish modernism" (2010), Gregory Dobbins introduces a passage by Beckett's biographer James Knowlson:

> [I]n answer to a somewhat bold question relating to the most profound influences that he himself acknowledged upon his dramatic writing, Beckett referred me specifically to the work of J. M. Synge. Such an acknowledgement is relatively rare with Beckett and the nature and extent of his debt is therefore all the more worth pursuing, (Dobbins, 132).

Dobbins finds Beckett's identification with Synge's works puzzling, as their works are both stylistically different, and Beckett's connections to the Revival to which Synge belonged appear as sparse. Beckett, after all, intentionally rejected the conventions of his Irish predecessors, his mentor James Joyce being a prime example. As Joyce expanded on language (I paraphrase this), Beckett's inspiration was in his endeavor to strip language away. Why does Beckett still claim Synge as an influence, then? This thesis argues that it is specifically along the lines of tragicomedy and Kierkegaard's dichotomy between ancient and modern tragedy that an interesting explanation of Beckett's connection to Synge. While Synge uses the Kierkegaardian elements of the exaggerated individual contrasted by an ancient community and moral chaos, like stripping away Joyce's language, Beckett negates those elements in his tragicomedy. *Waiting for Godot* is a purgatory that is void of individuality, community, and logical morality. Synge's

first tragedy, *Riders to the Sea*, along with Synge's bibliography that follows, is a transitional that bridges Kierkegaard's influence to Beckett and modernist tragicomedy. The prior-discussed ancient/modern dichotomy is only the foundation for my discussion of Synge as a transitional figure in tragicomedy and Irish literature, however. The ideas that are drawn from Kierkegaard also help explain Synge's approach to the Irish national identity as well as the topics of authority, agency, and individualism, all of which also indirectly carry over to Beckett.

Riders to the Sea: A Transitional Tragedy for the Transitional Playwright

Unlike *The Playboy of the Western World*, *Riders* is not a tragicomedy. However, it is an important attempt at tragedy that anticipates much of the Kierkegaardian content that *Playboy* executes more successfully. *Riders* is a tragedy that depicts a community that is conflicted between the ancient and modern sensibilities, especially concerning the conflict between modern individual agency and ancient fatalism, and the characters within the play portray different perspectives between these sensibilities. Between the mother Maurya, the son Bartley, the daughters, and the priest, the disaster of their situation—the sea consuming their family while they starve on a destitute island—is discussed and perceived from various angles of despair, morality, and rationality. Maurya represents antiquity in this conflict, while the other characters are more and less *modernized* within the paradigm of British colonialism, industrialization, and other markers of "modernity" perceived by most in the early twentieth-century. The critic Judith Leder argued that these characters in *Riders* are cultural "transitionals" within a traditional community confronted by modernity. The transition which Leder references is the cultural transition between antiquity and modernity. The setting of the Aran Islands as discussed before is crucial; the islands are far behind the rest of Ireland in their temporal remoteness, and Synge saw their traditional way of life as the most authentically in-touch to the roots of Irish culture in comparison to the rest of Ireland. Pertaining to the play's contents, Leder described the generational differences in worldview between Maurya and her children as a conflict between folk tradition and modern liberalism; I will argue something similar. In my brief analysis, I will show how Synge uses this Kierkegaardian ancient/modern dichotomy to explore his contemporary discourse pertaining to traditional Irish folk and how it introduces themes like

authority, individuality, and freedom in anticipation of *Playboy*'s developments on those subjects within the tragicomic genre.

To begin with, Maurya's acknowledgement of the sea's power as an external, fate-like determinant is a significant aspect of the ancient side of the ancient/modern conflict, supporting the claim that her character represents the older, traditional perspective that clashes with the modern. In "*Riders to the Sea:* A New View", Bert Cardullo compares Maurya to Oedipus while also discussing how many critics view *Riders* as a conflict between the character Maurya and the overwhelming power of the sea:

> What all of these critics have in common is the belief that, since Maurya cannot possibly win or even "break even" against such an adversary as the sea, there can be no tragedy. But they are mistaken. Maurya of course cannot possibly win in any contest with the sea, even as Oedipus cannot win in his contest with Fate. The point, however, is not whether Maurya can win, but how she loses, how she tries to beat the sea at its own game, so to speak, and loses even at that, (Cardullo, 96).

Maurya recognizes the sea's power in the ancient sense. She notices that the "wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and it rising in the night. If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses [Bartley] had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?" (Synge, 5). The stars and moon do not align for this journey; they serve as the legitimate prophecy of this tragedy. Like Tiresias, the old blind seer, Maurya's traditional wisdom recognizes the inevitability of fate whose form is nautical in this tragedy's context. As much as she tries to warn her son Bartley against sailing to the mainland, his modern attitude disregards her fatalistic prediction; he believes in his individual willpower and the economic realities of his situation that are within his control. Throughout the play, Maurya is certain of Bartley's peril. Cardullo gives these examples from Maurya's dialogue: "He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is

falling I'll have no son left me in the world," and "It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drown'd with the rest," (Cardullo, 96). Superstitious more than anyone else in the play, she still fails to give her son her blessing for his safe travels. It's not that she wants him to reach his inevitable death sooner than later that prevents her blessing. It is not her fault that she choked, and that inhibition is a small substantial determinant. Maurya does, however. She explains this:

> Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say 'God speed you,' but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and 'the blessing of God on you,' says he, and I could say nothing, (Synge, 9).

Why would she go out and attempt to bless him if she consciously refuses to do so? She never says she changes her mind, only that she choked at the wrong moment. This superstitious failure is not only tragic, as it gives her son bad fortune in the eyes of all of the religious characters, but it is also ironic. Yet in the modern lens of the other characters, who perceive her inhibited blessing as a moral error in ensuring her son's safety, she is blamed for accidentally choking. This point relates back to Kierkegaard—the mysterious inhibition of blessing within an ancient fatalistic framework is only unfortunate, while the modern framework in which the other characters and the audience perceive the odd choke as an individual choice that Maurya made. It was her stubbornness that prevented the blessing, not some higher, fatalistic power. This instance is an example of what Kierkegaard called the "accidental individuality" of the modern tragic hero. Tragic characters in modern tragedy are always seen as responsible for the disaster and then judged for it.

As mentioned before, Leder sees *Riders* as a conflict between the traditional folk and the modern sensibility, and she views Maurya as the representative of the former side of the conflict. She describes Maurya as the wiser

> traditional island woman . . . [whose] s focus is on "this place," the island. She knows it intimately-its winds, its graves, its portents. She knows the amount of turf necessary to

> keep a fire alive, and the way a drowned son will look when he has been floating on the sea for nine days; she knows the long history of her own family-mostly a litany of death. Her knowledge is deep, but sharply limited to the island, (Leder, 208).

Bartley, as Leder also argues, represents the other side of this conflict: the naïve modern individual. Bartley is equipped with the blind confidence of hope and self-determination with his plan to sell the horses. Leder argues that his decision to pursue capital gain at the risk of his own life, blind to the inevitable dangers of the disastrous sea and the traditional warning signs, represents the modern liberal value of profit before precaution (219). My analysis differs from this takeaway slightly. It is more that his confidence in his rugged individual willpower makes him myopic to the greater naturalistic forces at play. There is still an argument for modern liberal greed being portrayed in Bartley and the other sons, however. Of Michael, who died in the same way, Cathleen says "isn't it a bitter thing to think of him floating that way to the far north, and no one to keen him but the black hags that do be flying on the sea?" (Synge, 7-8). The black hags, cormorants, symbolize greed in both Greek myth and notable in Milton's *Paradise Lost.* In Irish folklore, they (the *Cailleacha* in Gaelic) represent winter, bad weather, and terrible storms. The symbol of the "black hags" highlights the narrow-mindedness of Maurya's sons whose eyes were set on fiscal benefit and ignorant to the folklorish warnings against their fatal seafaring. Their modern perspectives have lost touch to traditional knowledge, and they persist against forces to which they are blind.

Bartley also believes that his free individual willpower will conquer the substantial determinant of the sea. Cathleen describes his will, saying that '[i]t's the life of a young man to be going on the sea, and who would listen to an old woman…?"; this is a behavior that is typical of their modern generation (Synge, 5). While tradition emphasizes a high level of respect for elder authority and nature, the modern attitude encourages a *laissez-faire* value of autonomy.

Bartley's innocent earnestness disregards Maurya's experience with the sea. There is a false prophet, who deludes Bartley and his sisters, too. The *young* priest, an outsider to the premodern islander community, assures the family that since Maurya is faithful, "'the Almighty God won't leave her destitute . . . with no son living,'" (Synge, 3). This sets the importance of her blessing for Bartley. Its purpose, even according to Cathleen, is for superstitious luck and so Bartley is "easy in the mind," (Synge, 6). The blessing's significance to the younger characters (that Maurya cannot give) contradicts the recognition of the substantial determinants of fate and the sea: the concept of luck opposes the existence of fate, and the importance of Bartley's focus emphasizes his agency. The weight put on his individual agency is the ultimate source of the tragedy. If everyone besides Maurya knew better, if they recognized the substantial determinants behind their actions and external to their control, perhaps Bartley would not have gone into the sea.

Authority over the Past: Kierkegaardian Tragedy, Degenerationism, and Political Tragedy

So what does this Kierkegaardian ancient/modern dichotomy in tragedy have anything to do with the Irish cultural and political atmosphere surrounding Synge's writing? In the early twentieth century in Ireland, topics like the Irish national identity, autonomy, and freedom were often riddled with convoluted rhetoric and discourse respective of Ireland's long lost pre-colonial past. Ideas about the precolonial Irish among the Irish nationalists were often nostalgic, glamourized, and distorted by the pessimism about their modern conditions. Looking back to pre-British Ireland and its "pure" Celtic culture, many nationalists and Revivalist authors like Synge sought to find what was there before the disaster of colonialism and to clarify the Irish cultural identity. In *J.M. Synge: Nature, Politics, Modernism*, Seán Hewitt writes:

> During the 1880s and 1890s, anthropological, ethnographical, and literary attempts were made to distinguish the characteristics of the 'Celt'. Earlier characterizations, particularly from Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold, of the Irish as spiritual, effeminate, irrational, and naturally submissive were variously adopted and revised in order to suit political and aesthetic opinion.[1] Building on earlier nineteenth-century works, new scientific and anthropological theories were deployed in order to 'unravel the tangled skein of the so-called "Irish race"'.[2] Perhaps inevitably, the 'racial' qualities of the more 'primitive' Irish, notably the western peasantry, were conceived by many Revivalist writers in degenerationist terms, seeing the modern (urban, middle-class) population as having 'fallen' from a more heroic past. In some cases, this degeneration was perceived in a social sense, and thus attributed to cultural and economic factors; in others, it was more explicitly understood as a form of genetic, racial degeneration, thus requiring the sort of regenerative eugenic measures which proliferated in scientific and political discourse in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The political implications of social Darwinism were central to attempts to 'regenerate' the Irish in cultural and racial terms, and were thus central to attempts to 'revive' Irish culture, (Hewitt, 169).

Hewitt then continues to describe the "degenerationist" attitudes of the leading nationalist party of Sinn Féinn (at Arthur Griffith's time) and even Yeats. These Irish degenerationalists believed

that the problems of modernity harming Ireland were largely rooted in an ethnic, cultural/biological decline. Synge's literary confrontation with this eugenicist ideology, Hewitt argues, deals with its connections to later developments of authoritarianism:

> In Playboy, Synge moves closer to the development of a eugenic discourse more commonly associated with later modernisms, such as Yeats's authoritarianism, or Pound's fascism. Whereas Yeats would later criticize Russian communism for wielding 'the necessary authority' but incorrectly thinking 'the social problem economic and not eugenic and ethnic', however, Synge's deployment of eugenic discourses veers away from ideas of ethnic purity and towards a critique of bourgeois morality, capitalist economics, and imperialism (Hewitt, 174).

Furthermore on the subject of Yeats' politics (which Synge contrasted in his works), his authoritarian leaning developed after the Irish Revolution as he watched the rise of fascism in Italy. In "The Few and the Many: An Examination of W. B. Yeats's Politics" (1969), Mary Carden describes Yeats' reactions to the writing of Giovanni Gentile, Mussolini's Minister of Education. In his letters quoted in Carden's essay, he writes "[d]emocracy is dead and [authoritarian] force claims its ancient right," (53). Yeats saw conservative authoritarianism as a path for nationalist movements like the one in Ireland to return to a time before modern degeneracy. Something missing from Hewitt's political analysis of Synge amidst the degenerationist discourse and his works in the chapter, however, is how the genres of tragedy and tragicomedy augment Synge's commentary on Irish degenerationism, the "noble savages" of premodern Ireland, and the authoritarian politics that arise from this area of discourse. This thesis argues that Kierkegaard's ideas about the ancient/modern dichotomy in tragedy augment an analysis of Synge's use of genre to explore Irish degenerationism, nationalism, and authoritarianism.

Kierkegaard viewed the fatalistic, communal, *gods*-fearing model of tragedy as much more aesthetically effective than the modern one. His perspective is in favor of antiquity, and it is

pessimistic towards the modern. Tragic guilt is the focal-point here (the following quote is long, but it serves as better than any summary):

> The significance of this brief but adequate account is to illuminate a difference between ancient and modern tragedy which I consider of great importance: the different kinds of tragic guilt. Aristotle, as we know, requires the tragic hero to have hamartia (guilt). But just as the action in Greek tragedy is something intermediate between activity and passivity, so too is the guilt, and in this lies the tragic collision. On the other hand, the more the subjectivity becomes reflected, or the more one sees the individual, in the Pelagian manner, left to himself, the more the guilt becomes ethical. Between these two extremes lies the tragic. If the individual is entirely without guilt, the tragic interest is removed, for the tragic collision loses its power. If, on the other hand, he is guilty absolutely, he can no longer interest us tragically. So it is surely a misunderstanding of the tragic that our age strives to have the whole tragic destiny become transubstantiated in individuality and subjectivity. One turns a deaf ear on the hero's past life, one throws his whole life upon his shoulders as his own doing, makes him accountable for everything; but in so doing one also transforms his aesthetic guilt into an ethical guilt. The tragic hero thus becomes bad. Evil becomes the real object of tragedy. But evil has no aesthetic interest, and sin is not an aesthetic element. No doubt this mistaken endeavour has its origin in the whole tendency of our age to work towards the comic, (Kierkegaard, 143).

The modern sensibility makes tragedy ineffective and confused, according to Kierkegaard. It makes something that is intended to evoke pain and sorrow instead comic and ridiculous, reductively oversimplified, action mischaracterized, and responsibility mistakenly attributed to the "isolated individual", the scapegoat. From the perspective of the Irish nationalists, history had been told as a tragedy. Individual political figures were propped up as heroes until they failed. A prime example of this phenomenon, made literary by James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is the modern tragedy of the politician Charles Stewart Parnell.

In the late nineteenth century, Parnell was the founder of the Irish National Land League and the Home Rule League (later the Irish Parliamentary Party), and was held to be one of the most successful political figures in the Irish nationalist movement at his time. He was seen as a unifying leader for the cause of Home Rule, the political movement which sought to achieve autonomy and self-governance for the Irish government. Influencing William Gladstone, the leader of the Liberal Party, to adopt party-support for the home rule movement in the early

1880's, Parnell came close to achieving a parliamentary majority of votes for home rule. Momentum grew until 1890, when Parnell was discovered to be having an affair with Katharine O'Shea, the wife of another politician in Ireland, William O'Shea. The scandal quickly eroded public support for Parnell, and the Catholic Church viewed it as a threat to the home rule movement. In *Portrait*, the protagonist Stephen's family get into an argument about the scandal: "Let [Stephen] remember too [when he is older], cried Mr Casey to her from across the table, the language with which the priests and the priests' pawns broke Parnell's heart and hounded him into his grave. Let him remember that too when he grows up," (Joyce, 120). Due to the Catholic Church effectively splitting with Parnell's established home rule party, political cooperation pertaining to home rule fell apart. As seen in the fictional argument between Stephen's aunt Dante, his father, and Mr. Casey, the Irish public was divided in judgment. Ardent Catholics blamed Parnell for his humiliating adultery that caused the home rule movement to fail at the time, while many nationalists blamed the "priests and the priests' pawns." Either way, Parnell serves as somewhat of an example of the political tragic hero of recent (to Synge) Irish history. Moral judgment aimed towards Parnell isolated the blame in his direction, putting the responsibility for the Irish home rule cause solely on his shoulders after his scandalous love affair with Katharine O'Shea. Defenders of Parnell also aided in the making of him into the "isolated individual," as they equally staked such a great political cause on the character of one person, from their perspective, a martyr. Though it is a stretch to call Parnell's scandal a perfect Kierkegaardian modern tragedy, some parallels can be drawn. When disaster strikes, such as the complex political failure that was the home rule movement in the late nineteenth century, Parnell famously bore the burden of moralized public discourse. In reality, the power-struggles between the Catholic Church, the various types of nationalists, and the conservative unionists were the

cumulative forces behind the home-rule setback. Who really were the authoritative powers behind the disaster? It couldn't have solely been Parnell's failed leadership, nor just the condemnatory finger-pointing of the archbishops.

Riders to Playboy

Returning to the discussion of *Riders* briefly, one question must be answered still: how does the play and the prior analysis connect to Synge's political and cultural views in anticipation of the main focus of the thesis, *The Playboy of the Western World*? Two central facets of *Riders* lay the groundwork for contextualizing and analyzing *Playboy*: setting and genre. The setting of the Aran Islands directly relates to the ideas of pre-colonialism and the nostalgic perception of antiquity, as the play is situated on the western boundaries of a modernized Ireland and farthest from the colonial influence of England. *Playboy* is set on the coast of County Mayo, which is located directly north of the Aran Islands and similar in longitude. Both plays are set in the part of Ireland where the culture and infrastructure is least touched by the modernizing forces of colonialism, though County Mayo is more so politically connected to the problems of Ireland in Synge's day than the Aran Islands. Parnell's Irish National Land League traced its origins to the founding meeting of the Mayo Tenants Defence Association in Castlebar, Mayo. The land ownership problem is immediately textually-evident in *Playboy*, too. In the character list at the beginning of *Playboy,* the protagonist Christy Mahon's father is described in parentheses as a "squatter" (Synge, 98). Squatters were common in rural Ireland where there was an absent landlord; people would live on their land illegally. *Riders to the Sea* serves as an important precedent to this thesis' perspective on setting by framing that tragedy as temporally/culturally further in the past than the rest of Ireland due to its geographic remoteness; it draws relationships between geography and time, culture and politics. From this understanding (on which will be elaborated later), *Playboy of the Western World* can be interpreted to be more centered in the dichotomy between the romanticized past and the pessimistic present in the County Mayo. It is more involved with Ireland's politics and conflicts

(for example land ownership), but the region's people are still perceived as the more-authentic "Irish folk" in their rural isolation. In Synge's preface to the play, he writes:

> In writing *The Playboy of the Western World*, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of phrases I employ I have heard also from herds and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad-singers nearer Dublin; and I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk-imagination of these find people, (Synge, 96).

Alongside the immersive language that is tied to the setting of western Ireland in his plays, Synge's plays connect the Irish folk to the classical and the ancient through genre and plot-similarities, and Kierkegaard augments this perspective.

The genre of tragedy paired with the clashing perspectives of the characters pertaining to the disaster of the play—the ancient, traditional versus the modern, liberal in *Riders to the Sea*—has persisting relevance in a play that Synge labels "A Comedy in Three Acts" (Synge, 95). *Riders* recalled a perspective of the Irish historical past paired with the classical past by depicting a disaster-tragedy that resembled an ancient one by having naturalistic determinants and a traditional perspective in its character Maurya that recognized the natural order of authority (foreseen fate, the sea) on an island isolated from modernity. Synge contrasted that model of tragedy with the modern judgment of the younger characters like Bartley who failed to reject/ignore those traditional authorities. Maurya was judged by the other characters of the tragedy as a morally-judged Kierkegaardian "accidental individual," though it is hard to say if the melodrama that follows from that in *Riders* is just as "comic" as Kierkegaard would have predicted in "Ancient Tragedy Reflected in the Modern." Nevertheless, this analysis of *Riders* alongside the Kierkegaardian theory of tragedy intends to reveal a relationship between Synge's views on classical, ancient tragedy and genre and his parallel views on the romanticized Irish folk of the past and pastoral and nationalist authorities on culture and politics. I will argue that

Playboy of the Western World continues to incorporate those elements of classical Greek tragedy and the ancient/modern dichotomy in reference to Kierkegaard's work, expanding it within the genre of comedy or possibly tragicomedy/comitragedy.

Playboy is *prima facie* a simple comedy, but its plot (as discussed in the introduction) draws some similarities to classical Greek tragedy. The play's hero enters a new community after apparently having murdered his father (Oedipus), the community reacts to what is revealed about that apparent event (in *Playboy's* case, it was only a lie), and disaster occurs (the plague in Thebes and Oedipus' exile: a drunken Bacchae-like mob, violence, and exile in *Playboy*). Similar to *Riders*, communal/familial judgment is a prominent theme in *Playboy*. The Mayo villagers, especially the character Pegeen, are perpetually confused about Christy's moral character, responsibilities, and justification throughout the play. A Proteus of sorts, Christy is perceived as a patricidal rebel-hero, degenerate, womanizer, champion, playboy, and greedy fraud. Behind the characters' judgments, there are depictions and commentaries on the romanticized Irish folk that attempt to bring brutally-honest realism to cultural discourse. "Loose women," drunken fathers, peasants and bourgeoisie drunk on moonshine together, Catholic hypocrites, land-squatters, and lawless angry mobs are all portrayed to contradict nationalist, degenerationist narratives that idealistically reminisced about the "noble savages" of Irish culture and the precolonial, premodern Celtic race to rhetorically and deceptively feed reactionary, authoritarian political causes. Although *Playboy* is not a tragicomedy, its blend of genre between classical tragic features and political comedy navigates discourse about the past and present Irish cultural and national identity through an anti-authoritarian, more authentically nationalist sensibility, and the following chapter will work to reveal that claim.

Reflections and Contradicting Narratives in *The Playboy of the Western World*

> CHRISTY
> [*with rapture*] If the mitred bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad pacing back and forward with a nosegay in her golden shawl.
> PEGEEN
> [*with real tenderness*] And what is it I have, Christy Mahon, to make me fitting entertainment for the like of you that has such poet's talking, and such bravery of heart?" (Synge, 136-137)

The classics' reflections in *Playboy of the Western World* are not only evident in the plot similarities between the play and some of the Attic tragedies like *Oedipus Rex* and *The Bacchae*, but even in lyrical allusion in the dialogue of the characters. After winning the village's mule race, Christy and Pegeen both express excitement about the proposition of marriage. Christy joyously compares Pegeen to Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in Greek myth. This allusion grabbed the attention of some critics who thought it to be peculiar to come from a character described by his father as "a dunce [who] never reached his second book, the way he'd come from school, many's the day, with his legs lamed under him," (Synge, 132). This passage also attracted the prominent Irish critic Declan Kiberd in his book *Synge and the Irish Language* (1979). Kiberd argues that in this part of the play, much of Christy's lyrical dialogue is similar to the nineteenth-century poet Anthony Raftery who resided in the province of Connacht (which contains County Mayo). Of Raftery, he writes:

> Raftery was something of a cult-figure among Irish writers of the time, including Yeats, Lady Gregory and even Joyce. Synge's interest in the poet would have been increased by the attention given to his work by Lady Gregory in her *Poets and Dreamers* (1903). For him, no less than for Yeats and Lady Gregory, Raftery was an enigmatic but powerful exemplar. . . . The mingling of the names of classical and Gaelic protagonists is a major feature of Raftery's poetry.

Kiberd goes on to explain how it wasn't just the Raftery and then the Revivalists inspired by him that enjoyed "pseudo-learned references" to the classical texts in folk culture. Because classical

learning was reserved for the higher classes and rare in the countryside, the uneducated would strive to become familiar with classical references, upholding the knowledge as a sign of status. Poetry as of the likes of Rafferty, Hyde, and Synge merged Gaelic folklore and traditional Irish culture with the classical to have a hybrid form of ancient tradition that was accessible to the folk in lyric and music. *Playboy of the Western World*, I argue, does precisely *that* in the theater. Synge merges elements of ancient Greek tragedy (mainly plot in *Playboy*) with the Irish folk in the comic genre.

As discussed in the thesis' introduction, Christy and Oedipus are both heroes that encounter guilt/shame pertaining to the patricide amidst a community in widely different ways. Christy challenges, twists, and rubs against the judgment of the community as a modern individualist, while Oedipus conforms to traditional authorities like fate and political duty. And part of what makes *Playboy* comic instead of a Greek parricide-tragedy is that the reveal of parricide is inverted: Christy is revealed to be innocent of murder but guilty of fraud, telling self-aggrandizing tall-tales to win over the women of the town. Yet the ending of the play is not the typical happy ending that most comedies feature. The people of the town come close to a mob-like frenzy when they believe that Christy has killed his father a second time, mainly because they are drunk on Pegeen's father's moonshine at the end of the mule race. A second parallel to Greek tragedy arises from this: a similarity to Eurypides' *The Bacchae*. The community of the play is put under a spell (in this case, the folk-ish spell of illegal poteen), and they become a mob which persecutes the play's hero. When Christy's father Mahon returns a second time, the townspeople sober up a bit and stop their frenzy. These parallels to classical tragedy also seem to disrupt the play's structure, preventing it from conforming to traditional tropes in comedy. After all, the hero of the play gains nothing, reverting to his original state of

being as a pastoral wanderer and squatter. This leads to one relevant question: If *Playboy of the Western World* is not a straightforward comedy and also happens to contain some parallels to tragedy, then is it a tragicomedy then? This analysis aims to ultimately produce an answer to that question, as well as explain its impact on Irish theater on the subject of "tragicomedy."

At the beginning of the play, Christy arrives at the town practically bragging about killing his father. First he asks if there are any police at the pub. The pub owner, Pegeen's father Michael, assures Christy of his liquor license, and asks him why the police would be checking on him if he had one. Then he says "Is it yourself is fearing the polis? You're wanting, maybe?" (Synge, 104). Then some of the other people in the pub speculate why he would be wanted, giving him the benefit of the doubt. Christy explains that he is the "son of a strong farmer, [*with a sudden qualm*], God rest his soul, could have bought up the whole of your old house a while since from the butt of his tail-pocket and not have missed the weight of it gone," (Synge, 104). In other words, Christy lies by telling them that his father is a wealthy farmer. "Maybe the land was grabbed from him, and he did what any decent man would do," (Synge, 104), Jimmy suggests. This speculation is in reference to the land struggles in Ireland at the time. As mentioned before, County Mayo was the setting for land reform/home rule movements in the late nineteenth-century. In the discussion speculating what Christy had done, the pub serves as a public forum that is removed from the presence of the law, a "safe house", and it is the people who discuss Christy's moral status. Once Christy reveals that he killed his father by saying to Pegeen: "Don't strike me . . . I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that," (Synge, 105). He explains soon after to Pegeen that his father was an immoral, drunk person who was in and out of jail. He would see him "after drinking for weeks, rising up in the red dawn, or before it maybe, and going out into the yard as naked as an ash tree in the moon of

May," (Synge, 110). Pegeen expresses her sympathy, and he replies "It's time surely, and I a seemly fellow with great strength in me and bravery of . . ." (Synge, 111). From the beginning, it is clear that Christy *presents* himself as an individual who stands up to illegitimate authorities, mainly his father. He draws up a common folk tale about an abusive, dysfunctional father, a negative stereotype of a "degenerated" folk culture in Ireland, and he then claims to have overcome it head-on. Quickly Christy is recognized as a rebellious hero of sorts, especially by the female characters of the play.

While staying at Michael and Pegeen's public house, Christy manages to win over the attention of many of the women in the play: Pegeen, Widow Quin, and some of the "village girls." Widow Quin, after hearing that he has killed his father tells him "you'll find we're great company, young fellow, when it's the like of you and me you'd hear the penny poets singing in the August fair," (Synge, 112), insinuating that she has a ballad-like story similar to his own. Christy responds, asking "[*innocently*] Did you kill your father?" Pegeen answers:

> [*contemptuously*] She did not. She hit [her husband] with a worn pick, and the rusted poison did corrode his blood the way he never overed it and died after. That was a sneaky kind of murder did win small glory with the boys itself.
>
> WIDOW QUIN
>
> [*with good-humour*] If it didn't, maybe all knows a widow woman has buried her children and destroyed her man is a wiser comrade for a young lad than a girl the like of you who'd go helter-skeltering after any man would let you a wind upon the road.
>
> PEGEEN
>
> [*breaking out into a wild rage*] And you'll say that, Widow Quin, and you gasping with the rage you had racing the hill beyond to look on his face.
>
> WIDOW QUIN
>
> [*laughing derisively*] Me, is it! Well, Father Reilly has [cleverness] to divide you now. [*She pulls Christy up*] There's a great temptation in a man did slay his da, and we'd best be going, young fellow; so rise up and come with me.

Christy's parricide reminds Pegeen of another folklorish example of the trope of familial violence in the Irish countryside. In Greek myth and a few tragedies (such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*), the Queen Clytemnestra was depicted to have murdered her husband Agamemnon when he returned from the Trojan War. Because of the difficulties involving divorce in Ireland that stemmed from the authoritative influence of the Catholic Church, many women, especially in marriages involving domestic abuse, were driven to "sneakily" murder their husbands as their only way out. This reference to mariticide, another classical trope mixed with an Irish cultural one, complements the central topic of parricide in the play. It inserts another tragic undertone to the overall comic scene. Another aspect of this passage is the competitive "slut-shaming" (for lack of a better term) between Pegeen and Widow Quin. Quin ridicules Pegeen for chasing after any man who gives her attention, while Pegeen accuses Widow Quin of running after Christy on his arrival into town at first glance. Widow Quin reminds Pegeen of her engagement with the "rule-following" character Shawn Keogh, mentioning that the village priest has a good reason to keep her away from the temptation of the father-conquering Christy. In the next scene, more of the village girls come in to see Christy. One of them named Honor Blake comments: "[*pointing to straw and quilt]* Look at that. He's been sleeping there in the night. Well, it'll be a hard case if he's gone off now, the way we'll never set our eyes on a man [sic] killed his father, and we after rising early and destroying ourselves running fast on the hill," (Synge, 115). Her comment reveals the excitement that she and the other girls share in chasing after the patricidal newcomer. When they talk to Christy who is eating his potatoes, Susan offers to bring him some butter, "for it'd be a poor thing to have you eating your spuds dry, and you after running a great way since you did destroy your da" (Synge, 116), she tells him flirtatiously. Widow Quin catches the girls talking to him, and giggling, they explain "That's the man killed his father," (Synge, 117).

In the Sinn Féin founder's infamous review of *The Playboy of the Western World*, Arthur Griffith writes:

> Mr. Synge's play as a play is one of the worst constructed we have witnessed. As a presentation on the public stage it is a vile and inhuman story told in the foulest language we have ever listened to from a public platform. The play represents the peasant women of Mayo contending in their lusts for the possession of a man who has appealed to their depraved instincts by murdering, as they believe, his father. . . . The author of the play presents it as true to Irish life. He declares in the programme that 'the central incident in the Playboy'—that is the fighting of the women of the West for the hand of a parricide because he is a parricide—'was suggested by an actual occurrence in the West.' This is a definite statement, and if the author can sustain it, we shall regret that so vile a race should be permitted to exist. If, on the other hand, the author's statement is untrue—his play can only be considered as the production of a moral degenerate, (1-2).

The Irish nationalists really disliked Synge's portrayal of women, lustful over a parricidal man, especially because of the suggestion that some women in "the West" of Ireland may have acted that way before. Griffith and the conservatives of the Gaelic League were only interested in Irish folk stories that depicted the Celtic past of Ireland romantically and virtuously (á la Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde, and Yeats). They yearned for material from a distant, less intimate past like the *mythological* poetry of Oisín made famous by the Scottish writer James Macpherson (who claimed to have gotten his material from a Homer-like historical source, Ossian, which soon after was debunked). The nationalists were in search of *heroic* figures of Irish folklore, and the character of Christy was not the virtuous type of ancient hero to match their nostalgia. Still, as discussed before, *Playboy* and its characters draw resemblance to formal, classical folklore as well as more authentic Western Irish ballad-like stories. Synge is showing a traditional past in his narrative, only through a *realist* lens. Synge also depicts the women as subjective, individualistic characters instead of reserved and polite. Pegeen has no trouble chasing after Christy despite her engagement to a man she has no interest in, while the Widow Quin is a woman who was determined to escape a marriage to a man that she did not for whatever reason desire to stay with

as well. These Western Irish women are not as *traditional* in the way that fits into the conservative nationalist rhetoric about what (Catholic) women ought to be. Perhaps that is why they rally behind Christy as a self-determining hero who supposedly freed himself from an abusive male authority. He is their "exaggerated individual," judged at this time positively. Before Christy's father Mahon stumbles into the pub, he shares a toast with Widow Quin:

> SARA:
> . . . You're heroes surely, and let you drink a supeen with your arms linked like the outlandish lovers in the sailor's song. [*She links their arms and gives* (Christy and Widow Quin) *the glasses*] There now. Drink a health to the wonders of the western world, the pirates, preachers, poteen-makers, with the jobbing jockies, parching peelers, and the juries fill their stomachs selling judgments of the English law, (Synge, 119).

Sara Tansey has them toast to a list of what Griffith would label "moral degenerates," despite their inclusion to the modern folk legends. It is revealed later in the play that Pegeen's father is one of those "poteen-makers" (poteen is illicit Irish moonshine). What is most interesting about the list of "degenerates" is the "juries [that] fill their stomachs selling judgments of the English law." They are Irish citizens/landowners who shamelessly accept bribes in return for British political power, and they are included as "wonders of the western world." Most nationalists would frown especially at that reference, but Synge makes sure to maintain a standard of realism that deviates from the sanitizing rhetoric used by the other nationalists. "Sold judgment" is also another topic in the play that will soon be discussed.

Before old man Mahon stumbles into the pub, Shawn Keogh is trying to persuade the threat of his engagement to leave the West of Ireland to go to the United States. A rule-following Catholic who at the beginning of the play repeats that he is "afeard of Father Reilly, and what at all would the Holy Father and the Cardinals of Rome be saying if they heard" he would stay alone with Pegeen at the pub to keep her company at night (Synge, 102). Shawn's character

represents the moral authority of the play, a supposedly decent God-fearing man who follows the rules of the Church. Disgusted by Christy, he attempts to bribe him to get on a boat to the "Western States." He says to Christy after giving him a ticket:

> SHAWN
> [*trembling with anxiety*] I'll give it to you and my new hat . . . and my breeches with the double seat . . . and my new coat . . . I'll give you the whole of them and my blessing and the blessing of Father Reilly itself, maybe, if you'll quit from this and leave us in the peace we had till last night at the fall of dark.
> CHRISTY
> [*with a new arrogance*] And for what is it you're wanting to get shut of me?
> SHAWN
> . . . I'm wedding with Pegeen beyond, and I don't think well of having a clever fearless man the like of you dwelling in her house.
> CHRISTY
> [*almost pugnaciously*] And you'd be using bribery for [sic] to banish me?
> . . .
> SHAWN
> She wouldn't suit you, and she with the divil's own temper the way you'd be strangling one another in a score of days. . . . It's the like of me only that she's fit for, a quiet simple fellow wouldn't raise a hand upon her if she scratched itself, (Synge, 123).

Christy, a parricidal hero of sorts, stands as competition to the hypocritical "holy man" Shawn Keogh, who tries to bribe Christy with material goods as well as a commoditized priest's blessing to leave the village. Shawn also suggests that Christy would follow the trope of being a violently abusive husband, because after all, he had just apparently killed his own abusive father. Later in the play, Shawn is contrasted by Christy as a coward who refuses to fight after Pegeen's father asks him to. "I'd [rather] live a bachelor simmering in passions to the end of time, than face a lepping savage the like of him has descended from the Lord knows where. Strike him yourself, Michael James, or you'll lose my drift of heifers and my blue bull from Sneem," (Synge, 140). Here again it is reflected that Shawn Keogh is a selfish, materialistic man that uses religious "restraint" as an excuse not to act. It is also revealed that Shawn Keogh is entitled to Pegeen, not because of love, but because of his business dealings with her father Michael. This

passage shows that he has bargaining authority over the well-off pub-owner. Yet he recognizes that Christy is a "clever fearless man" that he stands no match to in terms of a physical conflict. His character, a foil to Christy, ends up reflecting Christy's virtue as an agent willing to execute his own will with determination. In contrast, Shawn Keogh, the rule-following (but not really) Catholic tries to play the game of traditional societal authorities (economic courtship, the Church), which only results in his own humiliation. Christy exists between the seams of the Irish legal system, landlords, priests, and the moral customs and narratives that those institutions preach. He is a playboy, a hero who laughs off conservative authorities, blazing his own path through folk storytelling, poetry, and echoes of classical tragedy.

The primary switch in the play's action, the reversal that Christy in fact did not actually kill his father, is what drives the tragic-like—yet still comical—outcomes that follow in the rest of the story. First Christy watches his father stumble into the pub, and he retreats in fear of the confrontation. Mahon comes in with no custom greeting and soon talks to Widow Quin. She assumes that he was in the wrong for his fight with Christy, saying "[*amusing herself*] Aye. And isn't it a great shame when the old and hardened do torment the young?" Their interaction continues:

> MAHON: [*raging*] Torment him is it? And I after holding out with the patience of a martyred saint, till there's nothing but destruction on me and I'm driven out in my old age with none to aid me?
> WIDOW QUIN: [*greatly amused*] It's a sacred wonder the way that wickedness will spoil a man.
> MAHON: My wickedness, is it? Amn't I after saying it is himself has me destroyed, and he a lier on walls, a talker of folly, a man you'd see stretched half of the day in the brown ferns with his belly to the sun," (Synge, 126).

It becomes clear at this point in the play that conflicting narratives is a central theme. While the level of abuse and dysfunction relationship between Christy and Mahon is undetermined,

whether whose perspective is more accurate, both characters have a narrative. Christy's narrative depicts Mahon as a stereotypical drunk, beater father, an illegitimate domestic authority common in the Irish folk against which Christy heroically rebels and to which other characters can relate. In that narrative, Christy is a parricidal tragic hero, much like Orestes or even just Oedipus, justified by fate or simply circumstantially, and his actions were driven by familial forces. In Mahon's narrative, however, Christy is a lazy, womanizing "lout" who tells tall tales for attention. Mahon says "wasn't he the laughing joke of every female woman where four baronies meet, the way the girls would stop their weeding if they seen him coming the road to let a roar at him, and call him the looney of Mahon's," (Synge, 127). Perhaps Mahon might be exaggerating; after all, his son hit him on the head with a loy and he is far from happy about it. Mahon's narrative, conversely, depicts Christy as the village idiot and Mahon as the embarrassed father. The character list at the beginning of the play still notes that Mahon is a squatter, as mentioned before. Mahon is no noble man, and neither is Christy. Widow Quin tells Mahon that she has not seen his son, and he leaves the pub. Christy appears again, begging Widow Quin to help him prevent his father from finding him and winning over Pegeen. She says "If I aid you, will you swear to give me a right of way I want, and a mountainy ram, and a load of dung at Michaelmas, the time that you'll be master here? … Then we'll not say a word of the old fellow, the way Pegeen won't know your story till the end or time," (Synge, 129). Again Christy tries to regain control of the narrative surrounding his background to get what he wants, Pegeen. He employs an oral tradition to maintain his status as a folk hero, maybe even a tragic hero, preventing a more realist, humiliating past from being revealed.

Instead of being that tragic hero driven by dire circumstances to do something morally ambiguous and taboo like parricide, Christy is soon revealed to be an agent who is *not* judged for

the effects of natural determinants, but for his own entirely-voluntary actions. At the beginning of the play, the townspeople acknowledge his "ambiguous guiltlessness" before upholding him as even a hero, a champion against the "degeneracy" of Irish folk culture which the nationalists would prefer to ignore. Although this results in being a complete farce, so far the play has shown that even the "undesirable" aspects of Irish folk culture are productive in making Irish figures into heroes. Acknowledging the ugly stereotypes instead of glossing over them is done in a creative manner, fusing classical tropes in tragedy with trashy legends involving stereotype-narratives and less flattering parts of traditional Irish life.

The narratives can still move people, even from Mahon's side of the story. Mahon comes into the pub to talk with Jimmy (who is drunk) and Philly (who is looking to get a drink) before the mule race. Mahon tells them, "[*wandering about the room*] I'm after walking hundreds and long scores of miles, winning clean beds and the fill of my belly four times in the day, and I doing nothing but telling stories of that naked truth," (Synge, 131). The Widow Quin is also there, preventing the other characters from drawing similarities between his story about his son and Christy, who has just won the mule race. By winning the mule race, Christy has won the hand of Pegeen. The two of them express their love for each other before her father and the villagers return from the wake of Kate Cassidy, drunk on his poteen. Michael refuses to allow their marriage, as he is "crusted with his father's blood," (Synge, 139), and instead he advocates for Shawn to marry his daughter. Christy offers to fight for Pegeen, and as mentioned before, Shawn refuses. Because of Shawn's disrespect towards Michael, the latter drunkenly changes his mind and approves of Pegeen and Christy's. This is when the plot of the comedy reverses from an ending of good fortune, the hero and the girl getting married, and devolves into a disaster. Old Mahon rushes onto the stage and starts beating on his son. It is then revealed that Christy is a

fraud. The crowd cries "You're fooling Pegeen! The Widow Quin seen him this day and you likely knew! You're a liar!" (Synge, 141). Pegeen, betrayed, denounces him: "Take him on from this, for I think bad the world should see me raging for a Munster liar and the fool of men. . . . [*half laughing, through her tears*] That's it, now the world will see him pandied, and he an ugly liar was playing off the hero and the fright of men!" (Synge, 141-142). Christy, embarrassed to be found a fraud, proceeds to attempt to kill his father a second time. He hits Mahon with a loy in front of everyone, and Sara and the Widow Quin attempt to disguise him and put him on a boat to exile on Achill Island (Synge, 144). He refuses, going back to the pub to sleep. In his slumber, the Bacchae-like crowd fueled by poteen attempts to hang him. Philly says "Let you take it, [Shawn]. You're the soberest of all that's here," (Synge, 144). As he squirms, being half-hanged, Christy tells Shawn:

> If I can wring a neck among you, I'll have a royal judgment looking on the trembling jury in the courts of law. And won't there be crying out in Mayo the day I'm stretched upon the rope with ladies in their silks and satins snivelling in their lacy kercheifs, and they rhyming songs and ballads on the terror of my fate? [*He squirms round on the floor and bites Shawn's leg*]" (Synge, 145)

Nevertheless, Christy argues at the end of the play, his story will remain within the webwork of Irish folklore despite the results of his mob-jury. He reminds the people that their lynching of him is illegal, as they do not have the "royal judgment," the signature of approval from the Governor, to execute him.

Playboy of the Western World is largely about how different narratives, moral sensibilities, and genres reflect and contrast one another over the course of change. The characters react to the development of Christy's story, how it changes between narratives and appearance, as well as the perception of his character that they desire to apply to him, "the playboy of the western world," an irresponsible, liberal folk hero that twists tropes and rejects

social and conventional authorities, representing no greater virtue than his own desires, while still remaining a figure that the people can rally behind. Christy ultimately is not responsible for his father's murder (because he did not die), but he is held responsible for his fabulation. The fabulation that his character belongs to is the target of external moral judgment, whether or not the play is actually based on a true story from western Ireland. Its critics emburden the play with expectations and imperatives of what the Irish folk hero *ought to be*, yet the play depicts its protagonist writing his own narratives about himself. The nationalists, like Christy, try to distort and twist narratives about the Irish folk to get what they want. They tell pessimistic stories about the tragic degeneration of the people's culture over history with the external modernizing authority of the British, while Synge's play shows that the authentic Irish folk least touched by the "east" are not some lost "perfect race."

Through the lens of mixing genre, Synge avoids using traditional plot-structures in combining more classical tragic aspects with a modern comedy, resulting in an uncertain ending. There is no victory, no moral *ethos* of the story. There instead are realistic, yet bizarre characters engaging with various narratives that are told about themselves. It is unclear if Mahon is really a comic stereotype, an abusive, drunk father and squatter in the countryside, or a patient, well-to-do man who has a disturbed village idiot as a son. Is Christy an Orestes, a parricidal hero who wins the hearts of the village women after defending himself from his unfortunate fate/domestic victimhood? Something that is consistently repeated throughout the play is that Christy is a "playboy" of the western Irish people, likened to a folk poet (Rafterty) by Synge. He is difficult for the folk to really uphold as a virtuous hero, and he avoids simplification through twisting narratives about himself. He avoids becoming a Parnell-like figure, a hero turned into a scapegoat due to authority-driven scandalization. He is more subjective, more modern, than a

representative object of a community's desires, and after some avoidance, he eventually owns up to his scandal. He stands up to the mob-authority, and by the end of the play, the mob is made to look like the villain. Mahon says "my son and myself will be going our own way and we'll have great times from this out telling stories of the villainy of Mayo and the fools is here," (Synge, 146). Mahon and Christy leave the town having gained and lost nothing, and the people of the town go back to their original state. Nothing has progressed, and no moral can be drawn. Every character is complex, virtuous in some ways and "degenerate" or imperfect in other ways. At the end of the play, the Irish folk is authentically real and contains its own narratives; it does not follow the rhetoric that is either a "higher race of people" or a degenerated one as Griffith briefly suggests in his review. It avoids being a simple nationalistic play that shows off the virtues of the Irish people; it celebrates both the good and bad qualities of a real peasantry, being nationalistic without an authoritative *ethos*.

Returning to the overall discussion: Kierkegaard, the ancient/modern dichotomy and blend of the tragic and comic, and the *Riders* tragedy, et. cetera, it is clear that *Playboy* is a play that has transitioned past ancient tradition (while still embracing the classics and folk culture) and towards modernity. It transcends simple genre, as well. While Synge calls it a "Comedy in Three Acts," I believe that I have shown that the play incorporates both comic and tragic aesthetic qualities, *somewhat* reflecting what Kierkegaard writes about ancient tragedy reflected in the modern theater. Instead of falling through the pitfalls that Kierkegaard outlined about modern tragedy— a traditional tragic trope that contains subjective characters that get comically, accidentally moralized despite naturally-caused action—*Playboy of the Western World* makes the modern subjectivity and complexity the point of his comedy, in a way. Christy is initially presented as a tongue-in-cheek pseudo-tragic hero, gets morally condemned, not for his claimed

guilt of killing his father but rather for his strategy of fooling everyone with a story about it in order to receive female attention, and the moral judgment that occurs in response to his intentionally exaggerated individuality becomes ridiculous yet effectively *comic* for a play that is presented as a comedy. It removes the pessimism from a Kierkegaard-inspired reading of the play, as well. *Playboy* is a complex comedy, not an aesthetic failure of a tragedy. It also shows how moral complexity, particularly not having a moral to the story, is possible in the theater with a guilty, subjective protagonist.

To conclude my analysis of *Playboy of the Western World*, I have shown in the discussion above how the reflection of ancient tragedy in a modern comedy makes way for an anti-authoritarian, anti-degenerationism reading of Irish folk culture and nationalism. This thesis has tied together a Kierkegaardian analysis of a transitional, precursory work of Synge, *Riders to the Sea* as well as a discussion of Irish politics and folk culture along the lines of setting, genre, and history in order to deliver a multi-faceted reading into an influential, controversial play in Irish literature. In the next section, the final one, I will discuss where *The Playboy of the Western World*'s legacy can be seen in contemporary culture from the perspective of my analysis of the play.

The Legacy of J.M. Synge

In 2022, the British filmmaker Martin McDonagh premiered a film titled *The Banshees of Inisherin.* Set in the Aran Islands during the Irish Civil War (1923), the film attracted great critical attention with eleven Oscar nominations. I remember one review called the film "an Irish tragicomedy," and after I watched it, I noticed that many of the characters and much of the plot strike similarities with the plays in this thesis.

Looking further into Martin McDonagh's background, he is an Anglo-Irish (with Irish parents from Galway who raised him in London) playwright who started his career trying to produce plays titled *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* at the Abbey Theater in the 1990s. His plays were rejected and later produced in Galway, but they were deeply, obviously inspired by the plays written by Synge. One of his plays, *The Banshees of Inisherin*, was half-written alongside the other ones, but it was scrapped and put away until the mid-2010s.

The Banshees of Inisherin, like *The Playboy of the Western World*, begins with a silly premise: The island's fiddler, Colm Doherty suddenly begins ignoring his old friend Pádraic. Once Pádraic starts annoying him about it, he tells Pádraic that he no longer wants to be friends (for an undisclosed reason), and for every time then on that he gets bothered by him, he will cut off one of his fiddle-playing fingers until he runs out of them. The play's cast has many Syngian characters, too. The young, clueless Dominic hangs around Pádraic and his sister Siobhan's house to avoid his policeman father's beatings at home. There is a Maurya-like pagan island elder, Mrs. McCormick, who warns Pádraic that death will soon come to the island. Then there is Jenny, the donkey, who soon in the play becomes Pádraic's last remaining friend.

Pádraic refuses to avoid interacting with Colm, which causes drama on the island. He drunkenly yells at Colm in the pub one night for not talking to him but drinking with Peadar, Dominic's abusive father. Colm comes to his house the next morning and throws his left index finger on his lawn. Later in the play, Pádraic is told by Colm the reason why he no longer wants to be friends. Colm had a bout of existential despair and began to worry about his legacy as a violinist and songwriter, so he decided to stop wasting his time talking to the "village idiot." Hurt by that revelation, Pádraic sabotages Colm's collaborative writing session with a man from the mainland named Declan by lying to the latter, comically saying that his mother had been hit by a bread cart back home. When drunken Pádraic reveals to Colm what he did, Colm reacts by throwing the remainder of the fingers on his left hand on Pádraic's garden. Siobhan ends up moving to the mainland to find work, while Dominic refuses to speak to Pádraic after he finds out what he did to Colm. Pádraic is left all alone with his only remaining friend, the donkey Jenny, until he finds the donkey dead in his garden, having choked on Colm's severed fingers.

The rest of the play devolves into unnerving disaster and despair, despite much of the play being riddled with humorous irony and jokes. Dominic commits suicide after he declares his love to Siobhan and gets rejected, Pádraic burns down Colm's house, and Colm can no longer play violin due to his mangled, fingerless hand. At the end of the play, watching the cannonfire on the mainland, Colm suggests that he and Pádraic are even after having his house burned down. Pádraic disagrees, saying that they would have been if Colm stayed in his burning house.

McDonagh's film had obvious inspiration from the works of Synge, as well as Synge's approach to genre as discussed in the *Playboy* analysis. The setting in the west of Ireland, the use of folklore and lyrical poetry in the plot and characters, the blend of genre between tragedy and comedy, and most interestingly how Kierkegaardian qualities of tragedy are reflected throughout

the film. Mrs. McCorkmick, the black-dressing old pagan woman, delivers a prophecy that death would come to the island, introducing an ancient, naturalistic aspect of the play that was developed in *Riders to the Sea.* One of the play's main characters, Colm, strives for individualistic freedom to write his music, tragically abandoning his commitments as a friend as a means to develop his role and legacy within their community. By the end of the play, there is a certain inevitability portrayed in Pádraic's violence, too. Like the nationalistic war on the mainland and The Troubles that will follow, Pádraic will not stop the fighting for a long time.

This thesis has gone on far enough, and there is not enough space left to continue an in-depth analysis for *The Banshees of Inisherin*. Still, its critical and theatrical success marks a continuation of the relevance of J.M. Synge's impact on Irish and popular culture, especially in its themes and style. The Irish tradition of folk and classical genre-blending of tragedy and comedy continues in recent years, and hopefully this thesis has provided a new perspective on it.

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