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Leslie Ann Valley  
*East Tennessee State University*

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Replacing the Priest: Tradition, Politics, and Religion in  
Early Modern Irish Drama

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of English  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Leslie Valley  
August 2009

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Dr. Katherine Weiss, Chair  
Dr. Karen Cajka  
Dr. Thomas Crofts

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## ABSTRACT

### Replacing the Priest: Tradition, Politics, and Religion in Early Modern Irish Drama

by

Leslie Valley

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Ireland's identity was continually pulled between its loyalties to Catholicism and British imperialism. In response to this conflict of identity, W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory argued the need for an Irish theatre that was demonstrative of the Irish people, returning to the literary traditions to the Celtic heritage. What resulted was a questioning of religion and politics in Ireland, specifically the Catholic Church and its priests. Yeats's own drama removed the priests from the stage and replaced them with characters demonstrative of those literary traditions, establishing what he called a "new priesthood." In response to this removal, Yeats's contemporaries such as J. M. Synge and Bernard Shaw evolved his vision, creating a criticism and, ultimately, a rejection of Irish priests. In doing so, these playwrights created depictions of absent, ineffectual, and pagan priests that have endured throughout the twentieth century.

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## CHAPTER 1

### DRAMA AS IDENTITY

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Ireland's identity was continually pulled between its loyalties to Catholicism and its submission to British imperialism. English confusion over Ireland and its political relations to Britain resulted in what was frequently termed the "Irish question." Although used to denote the political uncertainty of Ireland, the term also refers to the struggle to define Irish identity. In the wake of the famine of 1846, the Catholic Church flourished, with the clergy often reaping the financial benefits, while the lower class struggled to survive. To maintain middle class status and the wealth of the Church, the clergy's interests became more political than spiritual, shifting from the lower class. As a result, the traditional identification of *Irish* as synonymous with *Catholic* became increasingly misleading as the Catholic laity found itself at odds with the Church.

Criticism of this shift can be seen in modern Irish drama, beginning with William Butler Yeats and the formation of the Irish National Theatre—the Abbey Theatre—in 1904. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory argued the need for an Irish theatre that was demonstrative of the Irish people. They proposed to "have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence [would] be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature" (Gregory 378). Furthermore, they hoped that they would find in their Irish audience the tolerance and freedom to express Irish topics regardless of religious, social, or political views. Lady Gregory claimed, "We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us" (379). However, as

was soon demonstrated, it was impossible to create a national drama that was both representative of the Irish people and free of political questions.

What emerged instead was a questioning of religion and politics in Ireland and the ways in which the two spheres overlap. In light of the shifting roles of the clergy and the battles for Home Rule and independence, drama intended to define Irish identity could not ignore such topics. Instead, it embraced them, providing commentary on nationalism, religion, and social issues present in the Ireland in the early 1900s. Yeats's own drama provided the foundation for Irish drama as it is still presented today. Through his ideals of returning to Celtic literary traditions of myths and legends, Yeats paved the way for his contemporaries and successors to criticize and, ultimately, reject the Irish Catholic priest. Although this criticism was not Yeats's goal, he intentionally shifted the role of the priest, absenting him from the plays and creating a place for those whom Yeats believed to be the new priests—the artists. Under this new priesthood, artists would be responsible for creating and spreading a new faith in the traditions of the past, thus creating a religion in which the Irish could define themselves free from the restraints of the overreaching arms of the Catholic Church and British imperialism.

Yeats's own drama reflected these ideals. The Abbey Theatre opened in 1904 with a performance of Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*, a patriotic play that questions Christianity's estimation of souls and the promise of heavenly rewards in light of earthly suffering and shifts the role of the priest to a pagan storyteller, fulfilling Yeats's ideal of a new priest. Similarly, his *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (also performed in 1904) presents a struggle between Christian ceremonies and Celtic traditions. These plays removed the priests from the stage, creating a figurative opening for artists to create a new religion that harmonized the Christian beliefs of the modern Irish with the Celtic myths of the past.

Influenced by Yeats, John Millington Synge also demonstrated the conflict between traditions and the transforming interests of the Catholic Church. Unlike Yeats, however, Synge's drama did not reflect a balance between the two. Instead, his drama demonstrated the tragedy that results when the two spheres cannot coexist. Although Synge used characters that represent the endurance of the literary traditions, fulfilling Yeats's call for the new priests, his drama demonstrates a much more critical view of the Catholic clergy than Yeats's. In his 1904 tragedy *Riders to the Sea*, Synge presents a young priest who is both absent and ineffectual. Similarly, his 1907 comedy *The Playboy of the Western World* illustrates yet another absent priest in Father Reilly, a man who is frightening in his authority, setting the scene for a community that displays an overwhelming fear of fathers. The usurping of the patriarchy through attempted patricide is a source of inspiration, demonstrating Synge's criticism of the current concerns of the clergy.

George Bernard Shaw, on the other hand, completely abandoned the concepts of Celtic tradition and de-romanticized perceptions of the Irish, instead condemning the Irish's propensity to give into dreams as an economic inhibitor. Like Synge, Shaw was a critic of the Catholic clergy, and his 1904 play *John Bull's Other Island* presents the conflicting depictions of a political, orthodox priest and a pagan, former priest amidst the battle between British imperialism and Irish autonomy. From these contrasts, Shaw presents a picture in which Ireland's attempt for salvation comes not from the political priest who is a product of the Catholic Church but from the defrocked priest whose knowledge provides an escape from the limiting authority of the Church.

Together these playwrights and their plays provide a commentary on the roles of the Catholic priest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although the degree of criticism varies from playwright to playwright, there is no doubt that the priests in these plays are

ineffective sources of spiritual guidance for their parishioners. Thus far, literary scholarship on this topic has been confined to the texts themselves. Many scholars have focused on religion as a theme in each of these works but have neglected to trace the perceptions of religion and their influence. Instead, the research has looked only on what the plays reveal about each playwright's individual perspective. Investigating these viewpoints and expanding to historical analysis and the broader perspective of what these plays reveal will provide a better understanding of not only the Catholic Church but also the role of the priests in the everyday lives of the Irish people. As well, investigating this foundation will illuminate the recurring criticism of priests in Irish drama throughout the twentieth century.



## CHAPTER 2

### YEATS AND THE NEW PRIESTHOOD

The need to define Irish identity in the early twentieth century was a direct result of British imperialism and the “Irish question”. The conflicts over Catholic emancipation, the potato famine, and land left the Irish resentful of the British and struggling for self-determination of identity. For many attempting to define Irishness, the term *Catholic* had become synonymous with *Irish*, equating religion with a national identity (Larkin, “Church, State, and Nation” 1244). This definition, however, proved to be erroneous as conflicts between nationalist politics and religion became more apparent. Although professed to be on the same side, politics and religion battled for their conflicting ideals of nationalism while functioning under the same definition of a Catholic Ireland.

Amidst this emerging distinction between religion and nationalism, W. B. Yeats, a conservative nationalist, was uncomfortable defining the nation based on religious ideals. G. J. Watson claims that Yeats, raised as a middle and professional class Protestant, “felt ill at ease even inside his own background” (414). As Yeats himself explained, “I had noticed that Irish Catholics among whom had been born so many political martyrs had not the good taste, the household courtesy and decency of Protestant Ireland I had known, yet Protestant Ireland seemed to think of nothing but getting on in the world” (quoted in Watson 414). For him, people, regardless of religion, were flawed in equally unflattering, un-nationalistic ways. Thus, religion provided little insight into Irish identity and the quest for national independence.

Instead of religion, then, Yeats believed firmly in the ability of literature to promote unity within the state, furthered by the creation of a national theatre as a means of disseminating the literature. From early on, Yeats acknowledged a connection between literature and nationality.

As Harper explains, “Although Yeats apparently decided early in his career that there is no fine literature without nationality, he was not always certain what nationality meant or what methods patriotic Irishmen should employ to achieve national freedom” (40). The method he found to promote national freedom was a direct result of the Irish Literary Revival of the 1890s, spearheaded by Charles Gavan Duffy, president of the Irish Literary Society. Disturbed by the lack of Irish literary production in the aftermath of the famine, Duffy called for an excess of Irish creation. For him, the lack of a distinctive Irish literature was responsible for the inability of Ireland to establish its own identity:

We are accustomed to say, not with unjust reproach, that England knows little of our country; but alas! My friends, we Irishmen know too little of it ourselves. ‘Tis a great possession given to us by a gracious God, which we do not take adequate pains to comprehend; and the philosopher has declared with profound truth that men only possess what they understand. (26)

If the Irish could not understand and define their own identity, they would never be in control of it and thereby forced to let others define it for them. Duffy further explained that “Good books will do more than this—they will awaken all that is best in our nature, and teach us to live worthier lives. They will do for us what we rarely permit the closest friend to do—they will teach us our own faults and how to mend them” (30). In this way, Duffy proposed literature as a way to mirror the realities of the Irish and, through that reflection enact change, thus creating an evolving identity of Irishness.

Influenced by this movement, Yeats built on the ideas of intellectual nationalism. As Harper explains, “Although Yeats insisted throughout his life that he was an intellectual nationalist with little interest in politics, he was in fact obsessed with the subject and sought to

create art out of the paradox suggested in these polar opposites, both of which appealed to him” (41). For Yeats, nationalism was an intellectual endeavor with national independence achievable through literary success. If Ireland could define itself in literature, it would create an identity separate from Britain’s—an idea also posited during the Irish Literary Revival. In his address to the Irish Literary Society in 1892, Douglas Hyde argued that

The Irish race is at present in a most anomalous position, imitating England and yet apparently hating it. How can it produce anything good in literature, art, or institutions as long as it is actuated by motives so contradictory? Besides, I believe it is our Gaelic past which, though the Irish race does not recognise it just at present, is really at the bottom of the Irish heart and prevents us becoming citizens of the Empire. (126)

This dichotomy of replication and resentment is representative of national feeling. The colonial assimilation of the Irish into British culture through nomenclatures, language, and even literary depictions of stereotypes was simultaneously adopted and repulsed.

Yeats and Lady Gregory used this repulsion as a way to establish support for creating the Irish National Theatre, or the Abbey Theatre. Prior to the formation of the Abbey, Irish theatre consistently contained overdramatic, sentimental depictions of nationalism. These depictions often asserted a “patriotism that assumed that only those descended from noble Irish families were truly heroic, patriotic, or worthy of a happy ending” (MacAnna 90). In contrast to these noble emblems of patriotism was the more familiar, pessimistic stereotype of the Irishman who “through all this shabby ritual [. . .] dances clumsily in his hob-nailed boots and his knee breeches and his swallow-tailed coat, the red-nosed, potato-faced figure of the stage Irishman” (MacAnna 91). Yeats and Lady Gregory appealed to the collective belief that these stereotypes

were unfair and neglected the artistic genius and cultural richness of the state. Thus, in their letter to prospective guaranters, they explained the proposed theatre's aim "to show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism" (Gregory 375).

Redemption through ancient idealism is a goal that Yeats himself spoke and wrote of often. Returning to Celtic traditions would distinguish Irish literature as an entity separate from Britain's, effectively establishing a clearer idea of Irish identity. In his address to students of a California university<sup>1</sup>, Yeats explained the ability of all people to recognize the beauty in songs and verse of the past: "The countryman is much alone, and if, as happened all the Middle Ages, when the most beautiful of our stories were invented, he is of a violent and passionate nature, he seeks relief from himself in stories or songs full of delicate emotion" (qtd. in O'Driscoll 85). This statement was not applicable only to the Irish—Yeats considered this bond between self and literature as a universal connection to literary traditions. However, he quickly refined and explained the Irish's particular need for this connection between sentiment and Celtic tradition, claiming, "You who live in towns go to books at need. We in Ireland went to the ancient literature of the common people and it was the history of that literature in Ireland which gave Lady Gregory and Synge and myself the hope of creating a permanent literature" (qtd. in O'Driscoll 72).

Yeats and Lady Gregory discovered the possibility of a permanent literature through ancient traditions as they interviewed the common people. Collecting myths and collections for translations, Yeats and Lady Gregory interviewed the peasants of Galway for Lady Gregory's

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<sup>1</sup> O'Driscoll explains that the source for this lecture is a manuscript "of a paper which Yeats sent to be read at 'a Californian school,' San Jose, where he had lectured in 1904" (67). The manuscript was published in 1924 *The Voice of Ireland (Glōr na h-Éireann): A Survey of the Race and Nation from all Angles, by the Foremost Leaders at Home and Abroad*, but was not reprinted.

publications. Their stories instilled a fundamental belief in Yeats that Ireland's legends could transcend time, politics, and religion and represented his ideal of a permanent literature.

Specifically, Yeats cited Lady Gregory's version of the story of Oisín and St. Patrick, a tale that pits paganism against Christianity, as an enduring story told from generation to generation. The tradition of reciting these stories to Irish children over the centuries indicated, for Yeats, the nations' desire to maintain pagan traditions and past ideals. As the way to create an Irish identity separate from British imperialism and stereotypes, Yeats claimed that "We have to bring together in Ireland the remnants of that old folk faith, giving us a beautiful and romantic literature if we see it rightly. . . . Then we can create a great imaginative poetical literature for the internal and external battle" (quoted in O'Driscoll 79). He posited that by returning to the literary traditions of the past, Ireland would be able to establish a unified personal identity (the internal battle) and better promote nationalism (the external battle).

For Yeats, this return to the literary tradition signified not a rejection of Christianity, but the emergence of a new religion in which artists played a pivotal role. While not a full indictment of religion, his drama indicates the failure of religion in protecting and providing solace for the Irish peasantry. Despite this failure, the drama also indicates Yeats's recognition of Ireland's inability to abandon religion altogether. As Stephanie Pocock posits, Yeats "plants the early seeds of his concern with the artist's place in an illiterate, violent culture" (101). His drama attempts to create a balance between pagan traditions and Christianity. However, he redefines the roles, absents the Christian priests and replacing them with artists. In establishing the Abbey Theatre, Yeats and Lady Gregory not only confronted the stereotypical depictions of the Irish, but they also created a theatre which fostered a new role of the artist and the "preparation of a priesthood" that Yeats described in his *Essays and Introductions* (168). Through their new role

as “priests,” artists were responsible for reviving the literary traditions of the Celtic past and spreading them to the modern Irish population. As he explained, “I would have our writers and craftsmen of many kinds master this history and these legends, and fix upon their memory the appearance of mountains and rivers and make it all visible again in their arts, so that Irishmen, even though they had gone thousands of miles away, would still be their own country. [. . .] In other words, I would have Ireland re-create the ancient arts” (205-6). In doing so, the artists would cultivate a new priesthood: “We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith, and we must, I think, if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and the fervor of a priesthood” (203). This intention is seen quite clearly in Yeats’s own drama, specifically in his most nationalistic plays, *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902).

The balance of religion and Celtic tradition is quite evident in *The Countess Cathleen*, which premiered in 1899 and was performed at the opening of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, twelve years after Yeats wrote it. In this play Yeats not only returns to the literary traditions of the Celts, but he also depicts one of Ireland’s most tragic historical events. As the stage directions indicate, “*The Scene is laid in Ireland and in old times*” (2). Although not specified, it soon becomes clear that the action takes place during a potato famine much like the Great Potato Famine of 1846. In the aftermath of the war with France, the growing population in Ireland, combined with the inability of the small Irish manufacturer to compete with British industry, forced a reliance on potato crops for both food and income. Potato blight and crop failures in both 1845 and 1846 created a “disaster like a flood or earthquake” (Moody and Martin 273). Typhus, relapsing fever, dysentery, and scurvy ransacked the country already immersed in

poverty and unemployment. Emmet Larkin explains the economic status of those most affected by the famine as

A class of paupers, cotters, and marginal farmers who lived in hovels on their potato patches, paid their rent every year with a pig, sold their labor or begged for those absolutely necessary amenities over and above their shelter and food.

Anywhere from one-quarter to one third of the people subsisted on this level, and as the population increased, they began to make up a terrifyingly larger portion of the total. When the potato failed in 1846, this class was wiped out. (“Economic Growth” 853)

Left with few resources, this group had only religion and prayer to turn to, but found little relief from the hardships of famine. Yeats uses this lack of comfort in a time of poverty, hunger, and disease as the basis for the plot of *The Countess Cathleen*. Based on the legend *The Countess Kathleen O’Shea*, the play combines myth and tradition with the reality of the poverty and suffering of the Irish peasants during the famine. Faced with little hope, the Rua family (as well as the other peasants in the play) struggle with faith when presented with the opportunity to sell their souls. Yeats uses this struggle to juxtapose conflicting beliefs in Christian and pagan ideas, presenting the characters as representations of the conflicting beliefs.

Shemus Rua and his son Teigue demonstrate the first doubts in God and religion in the play. Teigue questions the value of religion and praying to God, asking his mother Mary,

What is the good of praying? Father says.

God and the Mother of God have dropped asleep.

What do they care, he says, though the whole land

Squeal like a rabbit under a weasel’s tooth. (22)

Like Teigue, Shemus disagrees with Mary's faith that God will continue to provide, explaining, "His kitchen's bare./ There were five doors that I looked through this day/ And saw the dead and not a soul to wake them" (24-25). Despite his wife's faith, Shemus recognizes the threats of the famine and is unable to hope for God's provisions. He understands the severe barrenness of the land: "Although I tramped through the woods for half a day,/ I've taken nothing, for the very rats,/ Badgers, and hedgehogs seem to have died of drought,/ And there was scarce a wind in the parched leaves" (24). He claims, "Pray if you have a mind to./ It's little that the sleepy ears above/ Care for your words; but I'll call what I please" (7). What he pleases to call are inhuman spirits or animals:

Out of a grave—for I'll have nothing human—  
And have free hands, a friendly trick of speech,  
I welcome you. Come, sit beside the fire.  
What matter if your head's below your arms  
Or you've a horse's tail to whip your flank,  
Feathers instead of hair, that's all but nothing.  
Come, share what bread and meat is in the house,  
And after that, let's share and share alike  
And curse all men and women. Come in, Come in. (29)

In this beckoning, Shemus trades his Christian faith for a more pagan faith, unknowingly inviting the "merchants" who buy souls. For him and Teigue, this opportunity does not present itself as a misfortune (as Mary has foreshadowed). Instead, they immediately accept the offer, becoming the local representatives of the merchants, instilling doubt in the other peasants as to the value of a soul that may or may not exist. Shemus soon explains his rejection of Christianity and



subsequent welcome to the inhuman symbols of paganism as he claims, “What has God poured out of his bag but famine?/ Satan gives money” (31). He recognizes that Christian prayers have proved useless in the face of poverty and starvation, as faith has produced no crops and no relief for these poor farmers. Salvation, for these peasants, lies in the possession of gold rather than the promise of heaven. He explains his rejection of the hope for a heavenly reward in exchange for the tangible, worldly comforts provided by money in his conversation with the Countess

Cathleen:

Cathleen: But there’s a world to come.

Shemus: And if there is,

I’d rather trust myself into the hands

That can pay money down than to the hands

That have but shaken famine from the bag. (37)

Sharply contrasted with the doubt in faith presented by Shemus and Teigue is the Christian piety of Mary Rua. She maintains her faith throughout, despite criticism from her husband and son, often exclaiming phrases such as, “Mother of God, defend us!” (23). Grateful that “God, that to this hour has found bit and sup,/ Will cater for us still” (24) seems to contradict the reality of the situation. Although she seems to be merely the sounding board for Shemus and Teigue’s rejection of Christianity in Scene I, Mary is vital for the side of faith in the battle against the merchants.

The merchants, frequently described as “horned owls,” are obviously sinister from their first entrance. Despite their doubt in faith and eventual welcoming of the merchants, even Shemus and Teigue are fearful of the merchants, arguing over which of them should speak to the merchants. Mary, however, is the one who recognizes their true nature, as Teigue explains, “She

thinks you are not of those who cast a shadow” (30). The merchants contradict this belief, claiming, “It’s strange that she should think we cast no shadow,/ For there is nothing on the ridge of the world/ That’s more substantial than the merchants are/ That buy and sell you” (31). According to their pride and vanity, there is nothing more substantial than those who can buy the intangible. This is also the first introduction to the idea of a soul’s worth. The merchants, Mary, Shemus, and Teigue discuss the existence of souls. The First Merchant equates the idea of a soul to a myth: “They have not sold all yet./ For there’s a vaporous thing—that may be nothing, / But that’s the buyer’s risk—a second self,/ They call immortal for a story’s sake” (31). The subsequent conversation between Mary and the Merchants represents the battle between faith and the rejection of that faith:

Mary: Destroyers of souls, God will destroy you quickly.

You shall at last dry like dry leaves and hang

Nailed like dead vermin to the doors of God.

Second Merchant: Curse to your fill, for saints will have their dreams.

First Merchant: Though we’re but vermin that our Master sent

To overrun the world, he at the end

Shall pull apart the pale ribs of the moon

And quench the stars in the ancestral light. (32)

Immediately following this argument, the Merchants “win” the battle. Mary faints and the Merchants eat the dinner she had refused to share with them. Weakened by poverty and starvation, Mary (i.e. Christianity) is not strong enough to overcome the adversity. After her death, Shemus and Teigue use her as an example to the other peasants to convince them to sell their souls. Once they have sold their souls, Shemus and Teigue feel free to live a pagan lifestyle.

Shemus never considers a return to Christianity once he has rejected it. When Cathleen offers to buy back his soul, providing him with an opportunity for both financial and religious freedom, he refuses, claiming, “For souls—if there are souls—/ But keep the flesh out of its merriment. I shall be drunk and merry” (37). Shemus believes that souls inhibit earthly enjoyment, a thought iterated by the Merchants: “Bear bastards, drink or follow some wild fancy;/ For cryings out and sighs are the soul’s work,/ And you have none” (51-52). This heathen lifestyle seemingly endorsed by the play, created controversy among the Irish public, especially the Church (Merritt 647). However, Yeats distinguishes between the heathendom of Shemus and Teigue and the pagan lifestyle of Aleel. Selfish and reckless, Shemus and Teigue do not demonstrate the love and wisdom of Aleel. This distinction clarifies Yeats’s advocacy of a return to the Celtic myths and legends—not the boisterous enjoyment of sin and vice.

In *The Countess Kathleen O’Shea*, the Countess’ character is uncomplicated; she has compassion, therefore she sacrifices. In his version, Yeats complicates Cathleen, combining both Christian and pagan elements in her character that, as Pocock posits, create a balance. Cathleen’s first words present her as a Christian character: “God save all here” (25). Like Kathleen O’Shea, Cathleen is full of Christian compassion for the peasants. However, she has no first-hand experience of the devastating effects of the famine; she has only read of them. As Oona explains, “Sorrows that she’s but read of in a book/ Weigh in her mind as if they had been her own” (27). Her sorrow establishes her altruism. Despite her concern for the peasants and her debates over the value of their souls, only the peasants face the danger of starvation. Her wealth insures that she, Oona, and Aleel will face no such danger.

Despite her Christian compassion and dedication to the duty of giving alms, Cathleen also demonstrates a connection to the pagan traditions. She is intrigued by Aleel’s myths and

legends and converses with him more than any other character throughout the play, often leaning on him for both physical support and spiritual comfort. Despite Aleel's belief that his vision was angelic, Cathleen believes it was of an "old god." She states, "I have heard that one of the gods walked so," establishing her belief in the Celtic gods as well as the Christian God. This belief seems to complicate her Christian beliefs, which are often at odds with her nurse Oona's, usually demonstrating a more compassionate nature than the strict piety of Oona. While Oona is relentless in her black-and-white concepts of sin, Cathleen is more sympathetic in her understanding of need and God's love, citing St. Thomas Aquinas' belief "That starving men may take what's necessary,/ And yet be sinless." Oona, in her strict adherence to doctrine, disagrees, exclaiming, "Sinless and a thief!/ There should be broken bottles on the wall" (36).

Cathleen's response foreshadows her later sacrifice and salvation:

And if it be a sin, while faith's unbroken,  
God cannot help but pardon. There is no soul  
But it's unlike all others in the world.  
Nor one but lifts a strangeness to God's love  
Till that's grown infinite, and therefore none  
Whose loss were less than irremediable  
Although it were the wickedest in the world. (36)

Cathleen's belief that the motivation for an act outweighs the sin itself so long as faith remains intact directly conflicts with Oona's belief that the act itself is important.

As Cathleen is duped by the Merchants and feels impotent in providing relief for the peasants, she turns to Aleel who tries to convince her to escape to the woods to live. Her grief

and compassion will not allow such an escape. At this point, she appears to have a brief lapse in faith, claiming,

Although I weep, I do not weep  
Because that life would be most happy, and here  
I find no way, no end. Nor do I weep  
Because I had longed I had longed to look upon your face,  
But that a night of prayer has made me weary. (40)

It is not her regret for a happy life or her perceived ineffectiveness that causes her sorrow, but the prayers that seem to have gone unanswered. She regains and maintains her faith, however, despite the peasants' belief that God has forsaken them: "I still have my faith; therefore be silent;/ For surely He does not forsake the world" (45). As she predicted earlier, her Christian faith saves her as she commits the sin of selling her own soul to relieve the peasants' suffering and need to sell their own souls. The angel confirms her belief in intent over action, explaining, "The Light of Lights/ Looks always on the motive, not the deed,/ The Shadow of Shadows on the deed alone" (57-58).

Throughout most of the play, Aleel criticizes the Christian beliefs (usually demonstrated by Oona) for their inability to comfort Cathleen. Oona frequently criticizes the "unchristened lover of pagan myth and solitude" (Armstrong 18), and warns the Countess against listening to his myths. Aleel points out that despite her adherence to her Christian duties, Oona is a "sinful woman" for destroying the comfort Cathleen finds in the pagan stories:

[. . .] you robbed her of three minutes' peace of mind,  
And though you live unto a hundred years,  
And wash the feet of beggars and give alms,

And climb Cro-Patrick, you shall not be pardoned.” (35)

As Cathleen’s nurse, Oona should be focused on comforting Cathleen, drawing her attention away from the troubles as the doctors have advised for Cathleen’s health. Her Christian beliefs prevent her from fulfilling her role effectively, an act Aleel considers unpardonable.

Yeats uses this doubt and faith amidst the juxtaposition of Christian and pagan images, beliefs, and actions to fulfill his vision for a new “priest” in Aleel. Despite all of the discussion of souls—both their existence and their worth—there is no priest in the play to provide spiritual guidance or wisdom. These responsibilities fall to Aleel. Presented as artist and prophet, Aleel provides visions, warnings, and advice that go unheeded. Cathleen’s first description of him as “Wandering and singing like a wave of the sea—/ [He] Is so wrapped up in dreams of terrors to come/ That he can give no help” indicates her belief that he is so submersed in his visions, myths, and legends that he can offer no practical help. However, Aleel sees the “devilish creature” in the “Two grey horned owls,” prophesying the danger in the merchants that only Mary also recognizes.

W. A. Armstrong supports Cathleen’s original perception of Aleel, but explains his transformation, pointing out that, “At first Aleel’s eyes are focused solely on the pagan past, but in his final visions of the victory of the angels, pagan and Christian lore are harmonized” (19). As the angels appear, Aleel relates the chaotic event to the pagan battle of darkness and light, effectively synthesizing the Christian and pagan elements. He recognizes that Cathleen has rejected both the Christian and pagan ideals in selling her soul as he explains to Oona, “She’s bartered [her soul] away this very hour/ As though we two were never in the world” (54).

As the visionary, Aleel’s warnings go unheeded. He tries to talk Cathleen out of sacrificing herself, but she discounts his warnings in order to save the peasants. She sacrifices

her soul to provide the peasants with money, eliminating their need to sell their own souls. This sacrifice, however, proves to be unnecessary as her ships carrying relief for the peasants will arrive in three days. Furthermore, as Marcia Halio explains, the attitude of the peasants is telling. Although they worship the Countess, they still place no value on their souls. Her sacrifice would be significant only if it resulted in some change in the parishioners, but, as Halio further explains, “the peasants are unchanged. They are still impulsive, they will return to their favorite sins, and they will follow any leader, be it angel or devil, who offers them what they want” (15).

Despite the Church’s criticism over the selling of souls, indifference to their worth, and the perceived advocacy for heathen lifestyles, *The Countess Cathleen* proved to be a successful premier for the Abbey Theatre. The combinations of paganism, nationalism, and Christian faith and doubt created enough criticism and support to generate interest in the play and the Abbey. The plays success helped lay the foundation for a national theatre that was free to define itself, thus achieving the goals set forth by Yeats and Lady Gregory.

Criticism over Yeats’s writing was not limited to *The Countess Cathleen*. Written in 1902 and performed at the Abbey theatre in 1904, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*<sup>2</sup> also instigated discontent among some of its audience while promoting a sense of nationalism amidst the conflict between Christian and Celtic traditions. Also like *The Countess*, this play, set in 1798, depicts an Irish struggle—the struggle for revolution and Catholic emancipation. Prior to the American Revolution that began in 1775, British imperialism imposed a daunting set of penal codes on Catholic Ireland. Ruled by its own Irish parliament, working in conjunction with the British parliament, Ireland began to demand its rightful status as an independent nation. R.B. McDowell explains Britain’s position at the time when he states, “The old empire was crumbling with

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<sup>2</sup> In recent years, authorship of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* has been credited equally to Yeats and Lady Gregory. Merritt has established her contribution to be mainly the speech of the characters. This discussion will focus on Yeats’s portrayal of Cathleen as an emblem of tradition and nationalism.

defeat in America, there was a loss of confidence, and in Ireland an absence of force” (233). In light of this predicament, British Prime Minister Lord North attempted to pacify Irish concerns by abolishing the restrictions on the Irish parliament. In effect, the nation was granted almost entirely autonomous rule in 1792.

The sense of nationalism and pride caused by this freedom resulted in the removal of many of the religious, social, and economic restrictions that had been placed on Catholics. Despite this apparent autonomy, Ireland was not a free state. Through the lord lieutenant, the representatives of the king of Ireland elected by the British parliament, the British government was able to maintain control over Ireland. Influenced by the imminent stirrings of the French Revolution, Irish Catholics and Protestant radicals began the campaign for Catholic emancipation. Overwhelmed by the results of the American Revolution and the impending French Revolution, British government conceded with the Relief Act of 1793, which granted Catholics entitled rights, including the right to vote. Still excluded from parliament and welcoming French invasion, in May 1798, the United Irishmen broke out in a poorly coordinated rebellion. The unsuccessful rebellion “demonstrated unmistakably that Ireland presented an urgent political problem” (McDowell 245). In response, British Prime Minister William Pitt proposed the union of British and Irish parliaments. However, members of the Irish parliament “emphasized with passionate intensity Ireland’s separate identity among the nations, and asserted that Ireland possessed a national individuality which demanded political expression in the form of a separate Parliament” (McDowell 247). Passed by a slight majority, the proposal reunited Ireland with Britain, making full and lasting Catholic emancipation a battle until the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1871.



This struggle sets the background for the conflict between pagan and Christian traditions in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, set, as the stage directions indicate, in the “*Interior of a cottage, close to Killala, in 1798*” (4). The play opens with the Gillane family who are surprised by the sound of cheering. Unknown to the family, the cheering at the beginning of the play is actually for the French troops landing to help support the Irish revolution. This nationalistic event is first equated with the Celtic tradition, as the Gillanes suspect that there must be a hurling. Hurling as a sport is thought to pre-date Christianity, brought to Ireland by the Celts. This traditional Celtic sport is immediately juxtaposed with an impending Christian ceremony—a wedding between Michael Gillane and Delia Cahel. The juxtaposition introduces the balance between Celtic and Christian traditions present throughout the play.

These juxtapositions are also evident in the characters themselves, the Celtic represented by the Old Woman and the Christian represented by the discussion of a priest. The priest himself is physically absent from the entire play. While necessary in the religious ceremony, the priest is presented as unnecessary in the cause for Ireland. He plays no role in the events that follow and is not mentioned as a participant in the revolution. Indeed, the only mention of him arises during the discussion of material goods—Delia’s dowry that will become Michael’s fortune:

Michael: I went round by the priest’s house to bid him be ready to marry us  
tomorrow.

Bridget: Did he say anything?

Michael: He said it was a very nice match, and that he was never better pleased to  
marry any two in his parish than myself and Delia Cahel.

Peter: Have you got the fortune, Michael?

This discussion of the priest instigates Peter's interest in the fortune, equating the priest with the monetary gain of Christian ceremonies. After this conversation, the parish priest is never mentioned again—the fortune has been produced, and the priest is no longer needed.

The necessity of priests, however, is again questioned as Bridget presents her young son Patrick as a prospect for the priesthood. Unlike Michael, Patrick has no place of his own and little prospect of gaining a fortune for the family through marriage. He has nothing to contribute to the family. He has shown no inclination for the priesthood, but Bridget finds that the position may suit him as he is “good at books” (5). Thus, the current role of the priest as determined by the Catholic Church is one of convenience rather than inspiration. For Yeats, this distinction further indicates the necessity of removing the current clergy and establishing a new priesthood—one that arises out of inspiration and can create a new faith.

The play not only removes the priest and labels him unnecessary for spiritual guidance, but it also depicts the impending absence of “fathers” altogether (a depiction emphasized by the physical absence of the priest). Peter is obviously the patriarch in the play, established as the father of the family. However, Michael usurps his father's authority, telling him to “Hush” in favor of the Celtic matriarch—the Old Woman (10). There is much discussion of fathers in this play—both as the paternal and the religious—and their impending absence. The Old Woman claims, “many a child will be born and there will be no father at its Christening to give it a name” (10). Christening is a pivotal beginning step in Christian faith, establishing the identity of a child as a Christian and creating a sense of individuality through the assignment of a name. Without the “fathers” to help establish identity, children (of Ireland) will struggle to define themselves.

In response to this absence, Yeats presents the Old Woman as the new priest—the connection to the past and tradition. The Old Woman is a local legend or spirit, recognizable to the audience as the representation of Ireland through her reference to her “four beautiful green fields” (7), the traditional division of Ireland’s provinces. Despite her apparent appeal to the Christian God upon her entrance to the cottage, the Old Woman negates the necessity of prayer for the young men who will give up their lives for Ireland. Christian believers would pray for these men, considering it necessary for the salvation of their souls. The Old Woman, however, sees prayer as futile for these men: “For the dead that shall die to-morrow. . . / They will have no need of prayers, they will have no need of prayers” (10). Prayers are unnecessary because in sacrificing themselves, the men will not need salvation. Their noble sacrifices for the good of Ireland guarantee their salvation under Celtic tradition and establish them as heroes of Ireland.

Through her ballads and stories, the Old Woman becomes the manifestation of Yeats’s idea of the new priest. She effectively uses the legends and lyrics of the past to create a following. Michael reacts to her tales of tradition and sorrow. She, as the representation of Ireland, demands total sacrifice—nothing else will do. In this case, total sacrifice is nothing other than blood sacrifice—the death of young men for Ireland. As she states, “If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all” (8). She is successful in gaining this total sacrifice. We see early that Michael recognizes the ephemeral nature of money and the eternal necessity of a good woman: “The fortune only lasts a while, but the woman will be there always” (5). This statement foreshadows Michael’s later understanding of and connection to the Old Woman. His prophetic description of a “comely woman” (5) is fulfilled by the Old Woman’s transformation at the end of the play. Immediately following his description is more cheering

from the shore, encouraging Michael's belief in the lasting nature of beauty as manifested in the Old Woman, and, thus, Ireland itself.

The Old Woman reinforces Yeats's idea of the enduring nature of Celtic traditions. Despite his disdain, Peter recognizes that he heard the name Cathleen Ni Houlihan in a song as a boy. The name itself is embedded in the Celtic legends, and Peter's faint recognition reinforces the concept. However, as Pocock explains, "as representatives of Irish cultural memory, the Gillanes fail miserably" (104) Despite the many hints and even the Old Woman's revelation of her name, the family never fully acknowledges the Old Woman's heritage. According to Pocock, this renders the family ineffective in protecting Michael from her mythic call for sacrifice.

Despite this recasting of the Old Woman as the new priest, Yeats again attempts reconciliation between Celtic and Christian sympathies. As the Old Woman first enters the play, her first statement is "God save all here" (6). Although she is a representation of the Celtic, her reference to one god implies the God of Christianity. In her, Yeats once again seeks to balance the conflict. She indicates the ability of religion and Celtic tradition to coexist within Ireland. However, the two systems must play separate roles. Religion must step aside and let the Celtic traditions define and rescue Ireland. This balance is also evident in Peter, the most emphatic about the material possessions, who recognizes and sympathizes with the Old Woman's plight: "It's a pity indeed for any person to have no place of their own" (6). He, like all Irishmen, recognizes the need for independence and identity through the possession of land. This understanding is reinforced by his discussion over what to do with the new fortune. He wants to buy land. Peter recognizes the importance of land in distinguishing one as independent, defining identity. However, in his greed and narcissism, he does not fully understand what the Old Woman stands for. He believes her to be confused, possibly senile: "She doesn't know well what

she's talking about, with the want and trouble she has gone through" (8). He is still sympathetic to her plight, though, which is an interesting and balancing distinction if we consider him to be the spokesperson for the plight of the Christianity through his demands for the marriage ceremony.

Once she has conquered Michael, the old woman appears to the other characters as a young woman, revitalized by the ultimate sacrifice—the blood of young men. Once again, she seems to embody a balance between the two systems—this time through symbolism. Yeats adapts the Christian symbol of the sacrificial son into a more pagan sacrifice for nation. In doing so, she becomes an amalgam of symbols. Through the combinations, the Old Woman is “resurrected,” or revitalized as a young girl. Henry Merritt explains that this transformation is significant. Traditionally, Kathleen ni Houlihan is presented as a young girl with “implicit youth, quiet, and purity” (646). Her depiction as an old woman in *Cathleen* demonstrates the destruction of a forgotten heritage. Michael's sacrifice to her and Ireland returns her to her youthful state, creating faith in the power of stories and legends to restore Ireland to its rightful state.

In *The Countess Cathleen* and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Yeats demonstrated his faith in the new priesthood of artists. By creating doubt in Christian faith and physically absenting the clergy from his plays, he created an opening for the artists. In doing so, Yeats built a foundation on which his contemporaries would center their own drama on criticisms of the Catholic Church—specifically the clergy. And, although Yeats eventually immersed himself fully in the Celtic traditions with *On Baile's Strand* and his other Cuchulain plays, his early political plays have influenced the depictions of priests in Irish drama throughout the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER 3

### SYNGE AND TRADITION IN TRANSITION

While Yeats fused Irish history with Celtic traditions to create a national drama, J. M. Synge used his own drama to demonstrate the inabilities of traditions and the shifting Christianity to coexist harmoniously. Although Synge may not have intended for his drama to comment directly on the political issues of his time, his plays reflect the pervading influence of the political climate of Ireland on the traditional lives of the peasantry in the early 1900s. This examination emerges in a criticism of the Catholic Church. Like Yeats, Synge removes the priests from his plays, rendering them ineffective for their parishioners spiritual well-being. This ineffectiveness is established by the reported naiveté of the young priest in *Riders to the Sea* and the indifferent authority of Father Reilly in *The Playboy of the Western World*. Both plays illustrate the inability of the clergy in its shifting state to connect to their traditional parishioners.

Raised by his devout Protestant mother, Synge experienced an intense Christian education that emphasized the threats of sin and damnation. Synge commented on the effects of such a strict religious upbringing, claiming, “The well-meant but extraordinary cruelty of introducing the imagination of a nervous child has probably caused more misery than many customs that the same people send missionaries to educate” (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 5). Synge recognized the hypocrisy that existed in the God-fearing laity—both Protestant and Catholic. Many scholars claim that this intense, religious education led Synge to an anti-Christian sentiment aimed mostly at Catholics. Greene and Stephens further explain, however, that Synge’s sentiment was not a rejection of Catholicism but a rejection of the strict doctrines of religion as proselytized by his mother: “This atmosphere of religious intensity engendered by his

mother was something he could not overcome until he was eighteen years old and a student in college, and then he rejected it completely” (5).

Synge’s renunciation of religion was not due entirely to his mother’s strict Christian education but resulted from the conflict of that education with his growing interest in science. As Synge explained, “My study of insects had given me a scientific attitude—probably a crude one—which did not and could not interpret life and nature as I heard it interpreted from the pulpit” (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 9). This contradiction of beliefs agonized him and his renunciation was not made lightly: “By the time I was sixteen or seventeen I had renounced Christianity after a good deal of wobbling, although I do not think I avowed my decision quite so soon. I felt a sort of shame in being thought an infidel, a term which I have always—and still—used as a reproach” (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 9). His turn from Christianity created a chasm between him and his family that was never healed but that he often explored in his plays.

The strict religious edicts of Christianity were not the only teachings of his mother that Synge rejected. She displayed an intense hatred of passionate, “vulgar” language, preferring instead the stale, cold language of scripture. Synge, on the other hand, developed an interest in language, specifically the natural Irish language of the peasantry found in Wicklow. His interest in Irish culture became more profound during his time at Trinity College where he studied language. On learning Irish at the university, Synge wrote,

In those days if an odd undergraduate of Trinity. . . . wished to learn a little of the Irish language and went to the professor appointed to teach it in Trinity College, he found an amiable old clergyman who made him read a crabbed version of the New Testament, and seemed to know nothing, or at least care nothing, about the old literature of Ireland, or the fine folk-

tales and folk poetry of Munster and Connacht. (qtd. In Greene and Stephens 27)

Founded and run by Anglo-Irish Protestants as an anti-Catholic institution in 1592, Trinity College taught Irish as propaganda--a means by which to convert the peasantry through their own traditions. Like Yeats, Synge felt there was a lack of necessary interest in the literary traditions of the past. For him, the Irish language as read only through the New Testament, was incomplete without the Celtic stories of heroism and pride. His interest in the traditions of Celtic Ireland was also at odds with his mother's strict teachings. Greene and Stephens explain, "Synge's mother suspected that any interest in Irish tradition was linked up inextricably with popish superstition. His reading was probably furtive, therefore, and identified in his own mind at least with his escape from her religion" (19). Synge confirms this theory, writing, "Soon after I had relinquished the Kingdom of God I began to take a real interest in the Kingdom of Ireland. My patriotism went round from a vigorous and unreasoning loyalty to a temperate nationalism, and everything Irish became sacred" (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 19).

This interest in "everything Irish" formed Synge's ideas of nationalism. Despite criticism from nationalists such as Yeats that Synge "seemed by nature unfitted to think a political thought" (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 62), his Protestant background and status as an Irish landlord necessarily situated him within the political battle. His brother Edward Synge asserted his status as a Protestant landlord, using cruel methods of eviction that repulsed the more compassionate J. M. Synge. Boycotts were popular methods of the Catholic renters to protest these evictions. In 1888 the Pope, however, condemned boycotts as unlawful, aligning the Catholic Church with the Protestant middle class and British political interests (Greene and Stephens 12-13). For Synge, this event demonstrated the Church's growing concern of economic



and political issues over the well-being of its impoverished parishioners—a criticism iterated by George Bernard Shaw and discussed further in Chapter Four. But, as Greene and Stephens explain, Synge’s political interests went further than his background. He joined the Irish league, headed by Yeats and fierce nationalist Maude Gonne. He attended meetings and frequently presented opinions on the current state of Ireland. However, he disagreed with the violence stemming from the nationalist movement (62). On April 6, 1887, he wrote to Gonne resigning his membership, but committing himself to Ireland:

I do not wish to enter the question which of us may be in the right, but I think you will not be surprised to hear that I cannot possibly continue to be a member of a society which works on lines such as those laid down for the *Irelande Libre*. I wish to work in my own way for the cause of Ireland, and I shall never be able to do so if I get mixed up with a revolutionary and semi-military movement. (qtd. in Greene and Stephens 63)

He further pledged to continue to attend meetings to offer any assistance, if Maude Gonne wished it. This resignation was not, as some have claimed, Synge’s resignation from the political debates of Ireland. Instead, it marked the beginning of his focus on the political ramifications on the daily lives of the Irish peasantry. To learn of this impact, Synge followed Yeats’s advice, submerging himself in the life and culture of the Aran Islands. There he found what he perceived to be a conflict between the traditions of the people and the changing Catholic influence in an increasingly urbanized society.

Synge’s 1904 tragedy *Riders to the Sea* depicts this conflict between tradition and the shifting perspectives of the Catholic clergy. Central to this conflict is Maurya, who represents the small world of the Aran Islands. Her knowledge is limited to the island, but superior in its

understanding. She knows how much turf is necessary to keep a fire alive; she understands the dangers in changing winds and their effects on the sea; and she recognizes the impending changes caused by the expansion of the “big world.” Steeped in tradition, she illuminates the tragedy of this influence. As Leder explains, “she seems acutely aware that the order of island life is being irrevocably altered; much of what she says reflects her concern about the erosion of custom and tradition on the island” (208). This erosion of custom and tradition is symbolized by her son Bartley’s impending departure for the sea. She has already lost her father, husband, and five sons to the sea. She tries to stop Bartley but is rendered ineffective by the shifting faith in customs of her children to the urbanization of culture represented by the young priest.

While scholars agree that Maurya is a woman of tradition, they disagree as to the nature of her traditions. Robin Skelton traces Maurya’s allusions, numerology, and actions to pre-Christian (mainly Greek and Celtic) mythology. Judith Leder, however, argues that the “customs cited as examples of paganism are hardly more than examples of the syncretism that prevails in most religions” (215). This distinction is not important to the argument presented here. Rather, it is the conflict that prevails between Maurya’s old traditions and the shifting concerns of the Catholic clergy that illustrate Synge’s criticism of the Church.

As a contrast to Maurya’s knowledge of the island, Synge presents the naiveté of the young priest. The conduit for the impending urbanization, the priest does not understand the threat the sea presents to Bartley’s life. Often referred to but never present in the play, the priest is useless in his reported attempts to comfort Maurya. In her traditional expectations of the priest, Maurya believes that the priest should protect her son Bartley by preventing his venture to the sea. The priest refuses, believing it is economically necessary for Bartley to go. Instead, he offers Maurya the false comfort that “the Almighty God wouldn’t leave her destitute with no son

living” (84). This belief demonstrates the gap between the current clergy and their traditional parishioners. As Skelton explains, “The priest never enters the action of the play. He is absent physically from the cottage of Maurya, just as he is, spiritually, a stranger to her world. His reported words are all comforting, but they do not comfort” (449). This gap between their spiritual worlds is iterated with the priest’s reported words of comfort upon Michael’s death. His assertion (as relayed through Nora) that through the “grace of God” Maurya’s older son Michael has received a clean burial at sea does little to alleviate Maurya’s grief. Indeed, Bartley’s death compounds her grief as he will be unable to perform the tradition of building the coffin for his brother, thereby not providing him with the traditional burial.

These differences between rural tradition and urban modernity are not only evident in Maurya and the priest but also in her children. According to Leder, they illustrate the different stages of transition. Cathleen, the oldest daughter, is closely associated with Maurya and the most comfortable with her. Because she understands Maurya, she is able to criticize her. The youngest daughter Nora is aligned with the priest, becoming his mouthpiece throughout the play. She speaks no thoughts of her own, only speaking to Maurya to relate the priest’s words. Bartley, the middle child, represents the midpoint of the transition; he is pulled equally by both the traditions of the rural community and the economic necessity of the big world. None of the children, however, are completely free of either tradition or modernity. As Leder explains, they all place stock in the words of the priest, trusting him as the new authority. Likewise, they all request Maurya’s traditional blessing for Bartley. Leder explains the importance of the blessing and the audience’s understanding of the tradition: “Nothing is said, but anyone knowing the Irish custom of blessing a child when he leaves on a journey would hear the silence, would notice the

absence of the blessing” (213). Maurya fails to give Bartley this traditional blessing three times throughout the play. Leder also explains this refusal:

Given [Maurya’s] traditional orientation and her peasant’s reverence for the power of words, pronouncing any blessing in the face of her certainty about Bartley’s death would be a sacrilege, a misuse of power, a lie. And the lie chokes in her throat. Thus Maurya’s need to withhold her blessing is best explained as an expression of her traditional attitude toward the significance of the word. (213)

Despite this absence of the traditional blessing, Bartley still leaves, supported by his sisters and encouraged by the faith of the priest in God’s mercy. In doing so, he and the girls submit to the priest’s authority, ignoring the dangers foreshadowed by Maurya and custom. “Their choice,” according to Leder, “is a destructive one, for, by accepting his authority, they fracture their own tradition. The priest, and outlander who has neither age nor experience, tragically ignores the cumulative wisdom of the island” (214). This disregard for the old customs in favor of the new as represented by the priest, demonstrate the destructive nature of modernization on traditional Irish culture.

These stages and conflicts present Synge’s views on negative changes in the Church and their continued involvement in politics. His criticism lies in the absence and futility of the priest. The priest offers comfort to Maurya without understanding her traditions, much like the clergy taught Gaelic at Trinity College without understanding Celtic traditions. The priest places a higher value on economic matters than life. He makes no effort to stop the impending influence of modernity and imperialism on rural areas like the Aran Islands. Maurya hints at and criticizes this emerging value of profit over person (Leder 208), questioning, “If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where

there is one son only?" (65). The priest's approval of Bartley's venture indicates his approval of profit over person.

Often accused of romanticizing the peasants of these rural areas, Synge and his works present a much more complex illustration of rural life than that view suggests. In his 1907 comedy *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge presents characters who are likewise in a state of transition, this time between their heathenism and fear of the Catholic Church. Like *Riders to the Sea*, *Playboy* displaces the priest, limiting his influence and eliminating his presence altogether. In addition to this depiction, the play criticizes those who fear "fathers." In this town, where people are praised for their murderous acts and soon become heroes, the arrival of the patricidal Christy Mahon provides excitement and hope. Amidst these pagan ideals there is a figurative void of Christian religion, represented by the literal void of Father Reilly's presence, whose fanaticism extends only to what is deemed proper and lends nothing to the spiritual or physical well-being of his parish.

The fear of fathers that pervades the play is first demonstrated by Shawn Keogh, a "God-fearing" man who is engaged to Pegeen Mike, the central female in the play. Shawn presents all representation of Father Reilly. More "father-fearing" than "God-fearing," he is driven only by his fear of and need to please Father Reilly, following his fanaticism to the point where he can no longer distinguish his own judgments of right and wrong. Pegeen and her father beg Shawn—her fiancé—to stay so that she will not be alone at night, but Shawn claims, "I would and welcome, Michael James, but I'm afeared of Father Reilly" (12). Despite his knowledge that he *should* stay to protect Pegeen, he can not defy Father Reilly. His fear of Father Reilly renders him ineffective in securing matrimony with Pegeen. This fear is again demonstrated with the introduction of Christy's character. Heard moaning in the ditch, Christy may be injured. Shawn knows that

Christy is outside, but in his fear, he leaves Christy there, ignorant of his ailments. Shawn tries to project his fears onto the other characters, calling on a universal fear of Christianity and its priests. He cries to Michael, “Leave me go, Michael James, leave me go, you old Pagan, leave me go or I’ll get the curse of the priests on you, and of the scarlet-coated bishops of the courts of Rome” (13). Shawn intends “Pagan” as an insult and uses the curses of priests rather than their prayers to persuade Michael into letting him go. However, this curse is ineffective on Michael. As Father Reilly’s representative, Shawn is just as unsuccessful in forcing the community to conform to Christian decorum as Father Reilly appears to be.

Father Reilly’s effect on the town is contradictory. Like the character himself, his influence seems absent at best. The villagers are violent, drunk, and vulgar. They flaunt their disobedience of Christian decorum with their discussions of drinking and violence, harassing and dismissing Shawn—the representation of Father Reilly. Likewise, they usurp Christian restrictions on language (just as Synge himself did), using passionate language to express emotion. There is only one report of Father Reilly’s attempt to interfere with the actions of the villagers. Upon Christy’s arrival and Pegeen’s distinction of him as her protector, Shawn and Father Reilly send Widow Quinn to remove him. She reports, “I’ve their word to lead that lad forward for to lodge with me” (27). The two men, the fiancé and the priest, should fulfill the role of protector—the former against physical danger and the latter against moral danger. Their substitution of Widow Quinn asserts the futility of Father Reilly’s interference. She is no more effective in removing Christy than Shawn.

Despite this apparent lack of influence, religion plays a substantial role in the play, with the townspeople distorting the Christianity of Father Reilly. Pegeen feels harassed by the priest’s beliefs, begging Shawn to “Stop tormenting [her] with Father Reilly” (9). She feels the

constraints of the Church as endorsed by Father Reilly. As a result, she and the other villagers revere Christy's act of patricide, exclaiming "Oh glory be to God!" (18). These exclamations to God and his mercy for Christy's act demonstrate their own desires to destroy the "father" who restrains them. This desire conflicts with the religious teachings of Father Reilly, creating a quasi-pagan/ Christian religion. The pagan portion of this transitional religion is suppressed when Christy attempts to kill his father a second time. The peasants face the reality of the act and abandon their desire to usurp the patriarchy. Pegeen explains, "There's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed" (77). The villagers return to the Christianity of Father Reilly, condemning Christy for the act they had previously praised. They remain in a liminal existence that is neither fully Christian nor fully pagan. Michael explains their "justice" to Christy: "If we took pity on you, the Lord God would, maybe, bring us ruin from the law to-day, so you'd best come easy, for hanging is an easy and a speedy deed" (77). They fear God and his justice, so they condemn the act. However, they seek a vigilante justice, torturing Christy and planning his execution themselves rather than leaving him to the authority of either the law or Father Reilly. Despite their submission to the Church's moral codes, they still fear the interference of a patriarchal authority.

Christy is the only character who is able to overcome his fear of fathers. His first act of patricide is more accidental than rebellious. It was not his intention to kill his father. After striking his father, his fear of punishment forces him to leave before ascertaining that his father has indeed been killed. Upon meeting the Mayo villagers, Christy repeatedly reports his own cowardice, at one point explaining, "I'd be as happy as the sunshine of St. Martin's Day [ . . . ] till I'd hear a rabbit starting to screech and I'd go running in the furze" (24-25). The villagers overlook this fear, focusing instead on his destruction of the patriarchy as a heroic act. They

build his confidence, establishing in him a false confidence that relies on the false act. Upon his father's arrival and realizing that he has not killed his father, Christy reverts back to his fear. He "*darts in behind the door*" (47), attempting to hide and leaving the Widow Quinn to face his father. After she protects Christy and his father leaves, his false bravado returns and he wins every competition at the fair.

Christy does not gain real courage until his second attempt at patricide. Faced with the villagers' disappointment, Christy tries to regain their respect by killing his father, old Mahon. Again, he fails. This time, however, Christy maintains his courage. Because the second act was a willful decision, Christy is able to overcome his fear of his father. Despite the villagers' horror at the second act, Christy gains the respect of old Mahon, who becomes submissive to him. This transformation is revealed in their final dialogue:

Mahon (*grimly, loosening Christy* [To Michael]): It's little I care if you put a bag on [Pegeen's] back, and went picking cockles till the hour of death; but my son and I 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. (*To Christy, who is freed.*) Come on now.

Christy: Go with you, is it? I will then, like a gallant captain with his heathen slave. Go on now and I'll see you from this day stewing my oatmeal and washing my spuds, for I'm master of all fights from now. (*Pushing Mahon.*) Go on, I'm saying.

Mahon: Is it me?

Christy: Not a word out of you. Go on from this.

Mahon: (*Walking out and looking back at Christy over his shoulder*). Glory be to



God! (*With a broad smile.*) I am crazy again! (80)

The stage directions here are as telling as the dialogue itself. The literal actions of Christy being loosened and freed also demonstrate his figurative emancipation from his father's control.

In his final lines, Christy recognizes his own transformation, telling the Mayoites, "Ten thousand blessings upon all that's here, for you've turned me a likely gaffer in the end of all, the way I'll go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgment day" (80). The villagers built his confidence enough that he is able to overcome his fear despite his apparent failure—the symbolic nature of his attempt is more important than the actual success.

Christy's symbolic nature is not limited to his actions. As many scholars have pointed out, Christy Mahon is often analyzed as Christ in man. While Skelton and Bretherton (as well as many others) debate the seriousness of the depiction of Christy as Christ, they tend to focus on the mock-heroic nature of the character, classifying him as a leader created by the Mayoites. His attempts at patricide, however, are often analyzed as separate from his depiction as a mock-Christ. In light of Synge's criticism of the Church evident in his drama, the patricidal acts become an even more significant attempt to usurp the patriarchy. Rather than the father sacrificing the son for the salvation of man, Synge inverts the Christian tradition, sacrificing the father instead. As a "mock-Christ" (Bretherton 323), Christy subverts the power of God the Father, establishing himself as the authority.

The Mayoites' dislike of the Christian patriarchal structure and Christy's ability to usurp it allow Christy to fulfill the role of the new priest—at least for a time. In this pagan-Christian setting, Christy becomes the storyteller, much like Aleel and the Old Woman of Yeats's drama. As Podhoretz explains, "The Mayoites are primitive people who live almost entirely in an imaginative world of their own creation. They are all poets manqués; their life is all language,

and it is only what they can make out of poetry that is important to them” (69). The villagers’ needs are satisfied by stories and imagination rather than religion. Christy’s increasingly elaborate story of the murder of the father entices the peasants in a way that Father Reilly and the Catholic Church have failed to. As Podhoretz further explains, “Language is the very being of these people, and so they naturally pay tribute to the great master of language who has come among them. Moreover, it is the poetic, the symbolic deed which has set their imaginations afire: the murder has for them the reality of fitness and beauty but never the reality of fact” (71). When faced with the reality of fact, however, the Mayoites “fall back into the mortifying guilt system of Father Reilly and the law, which once again deprives them of their ‘powerful instinctual urgencies.’” (Krause 41). They have built the myth of Christy’s murder, but their rejection of the actual act signals their rejection of this new faith, and thus their rejection of the new priest, damning them to “go on living without dreams” (Krause 43). Only Pegeen, knowing she will now wed Shawn, recognizes this damnation. At the end, nothing in the village of Mayo has changed. Pegeen will return to her life and marry Shawn. She recognizes her loss in rejecting Christy, lamenting, “Oh my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only Playboy of the Western World” (80). She understands that Christy’s symbolic act of patricide is a rarity and one that she will not find again, especially not in Mayo. The town’s fear of Father Reilly and God, the “Holy Father,” restricts their ability to define themselves. Instead, their fear defines them and they become like Shawn, pathetic and cowardly.

The detachment from and fear of the priests in *Riders to the Sea* and *The Playboy of the Western World* reflect Synge’s concerns over religion and Irish culture. Although there are pagan elements in his plays and characters, Synge does not call for the complete return to pre-Christian traditions as Yeats does. Instead, he presents characters whose faith seems to be in transition,

criticizing the shifting focus of the clergy away from the culture and well-being of their parishioners as responsible for this paralyzing conflict.

## CHAPTER 4

### SHAW AND THE DE-ROMANTICIZATION OF IDEALS

In the works of George Bernard Shaw there is a degree of criticism of the Catholic Church only hinted at by Yeats and explored by Synge. If Yeats tried to create a balance between Celtic and Christian traditions and Synge depicted the problems of a transitioning clergy's inability to identify with its parishioners, then Shaw took his drama one step further. He openly criticized the Church, blaming its priests for Ireland's inability to establish independence from Britain. His condemnation of the Church and its enforcement of class structures aligned with his socialist political views, the culmination of which is evident in his political play of 1904 *John Bull's Other Island*.

Like Yeats and Synge, Shaw was raised an Irish Protestant, although his religious education was considerably less severe than that of Synge. As a child, Shaw disliked attending Church, finding enjoyment only in the use of his literary imagination to compose prayers. Eventually, his parents abandoned all attempts to involve him in religion. A victim of class structures and poverty, Shaw was repulsed by the Catholic Church's acceptance (and, in his view, encouragement) of the cruelties and inequalities suffered by the lower class. As well, he developed a compassion for the poor that would later manifest itself in his socialism as well as his renunciation of Christianity.

The authority of the Catholic Church, according to Shaw, did not allow parishioners to follow a nationalist sentiment—or any sentiment—outside of its own agenda of unity of Church and state. Nationalistic rebellion was considered an act against the Church. In short, “It [was] the aim of the priest to make and keep him a submissive Conservative” (Shaw, *Prefaces* 447). For Shaw, then, the Catholic Church, and, more specifically, the Catholic clergy, inhibited Catholics'

ability to defend itself against British imperialism. He explains in his preface to *John Bull's Other Island*,

In Ireland the Roman Catholic peasant cannot escape the religious atmosphere of his Church. Except when he breaks out like a naughty child he is docile; he is reverent; he is content to regard knowledge as something not his business; he is a child before his Church, and accepts it as the highest authority in science and philosophy. He speaks of himself as the son of the Church, calling his priest father instead of brother or Mister. To rebel politically, he must break away from parish tutelage and follow a Protestant leader on national questions. His Church fosters his submissiveness. (447)

This perception of Catholic parishioners is similar to Synge's depiction of Shawn in *The Playboy of the Western World*. But while Shawn's deference to Father Reilly is comically pathetic in its childishness, to Shaw this patriarchal structure was inhibiting both economically and politically to the laity. These limitations, according to Shaw, inspired the "very English characteristic of the Irish people, their political hatred of priests" (Shaw, *Prefaces* 447). Shaw did, however, acknowledge that there was a sentiment of love that parishioners felt towards their priests—a love he equated with the love that slaves and schoolboys often develop for their masters. Shaw explained, "An Irish Catholic may like his priest as a man and revere him as a confessor and spiritual pastor whilst being implacably determined to seize the first opportunity of throwing off his yoke" (*Prefaces* 448). Despite this desire to usurp the priest, parishioners were reluctant to do so. Shaw also explains this hesitancy of the Irish public to denounce its clergy: "If you expose the tyranny and rapacity of the Church, it is an argument in favor of Protestant ascendancy. If you denounce the nepotism and jobbery of the new local authorities, you are

demonstrating the unfitness of the Irish to govern themselves, and the superiority of the old oligarchical grand juries” (*Prefaces* 454). In denouncing the Church and its clergy, Irish Catholics would not only assent to the social superiority of Protestants but would also indicate that they were ill-equipped for political autonomy.

Thus, Catholic parishioners were forced to maintain the class structures as dictated by the Church. Shaw explains the economic and social authority over the peasantry that the growing wealth of the clergy allowed:

Imagine the Church Rates revived in the form of an unofficial Income Tax scientifically adjusted to your taxable capacity by an intimate knowledge of your affairs verified in the confessional! Imagine being one of a peasantry reputed the poorest in the world, under the thumb of a priesthood reputed the richest in the world! Imagine a Catholic middle class continually defeated in the struggle of professional, official, and fashionable life by the superior education of its Protestant competitors, and yet forbidden by its priests to resort to the only efficient universities in the country! (*Prefaces* 448)

These “imaginings” demonstrate the very real actions of the clergy against their parishioners.

Shaw’s interest in class structure was not limited to the issues of the Catholic Church. In 1876 he moved to London and joined the Fabian Society in 1884. Reformist rather than revolutionary, the Fabian Society was a socialist group that sought to use intelligence and reason to enact change through the middle class—the class they perceived to hold the most political power. Shaw recognized that change would have to come from the middle class as the lower class would always support the middle class because they were dependent on the success of that class. For him, politics and political economy were one and the same—there are no politics

without economics and the two systems can never be separated. Shaw's main objection to capitalism was the existence of poverty. To him, there was no worse way to exist than in poverty, and his solution was to abolish it altogether, although he had no real plan to accomplish this goal.

Although Shaw was an Irishman, his interest in Irish nationalism arose only out of his interest in socialism. He saw the battles for Home Rule and, later, the Irish Free State only as a necessary step in solving social issues. He viewed the Irish as an enslaved people, and like all enslaved people, they would need to assert autonomy of nation before it would be able to settle its economic problems (Griffith 120-21). Once free to govern themselves, the Irish could begin focusing on social structures that would help alleviate the economic problems of the lower class. Shaw's main interest was in organizing society in such a way that all would benefit, rather than a select few (Evans 2).

Shaw's nationalism differed greatly from that of Yeats and Synge. He avoided the traditional themes and characters of which Yeats and Synge were so enamored. He believed that focusing on the traditions of Kathleen ni Houlihan allowed the Irish to ignore the issues at hand by submerging themselves in myth and legend. As Colbourne explains, "Shaw had yet to make his way in the world, and he knew instinctively that Kathleen ni Houlihan could give him no lift on that way. She could only entice him along the meandering Irish road, ending him up, as likely as not, in a treacherous bog" (57). This sentiment was illustrated in 1904 by Larry Doyle in *John Bull's Other Island*, Shaw's only attempted contribution to the Abbey Theatre and rejected by Yeats as a "hindrance rather than a help" (Colbourne 58). Larry states, "An Irishman's imagination never lets him alone, never convinces him, never satisfies him; but it makes him that he cant face reality nor deal with it nor handle it nor conquer it: he can only sneer at them that do, and [*bitterly, at BROADBENT*] be 'agreeable to strangers,' like a good-for-nothing woman

on the streets” (131). Rather than idealize the myths and dreams of the Irish, Shaw’s play criticized them as inhibitors of economic and social progress, blaming mostly the Catholic Church and clergy. He de-romanticizes the Irish people, presenting them instead as passive against the patriarchal structures of both the Catholic Church and British imperialism.

Shaw’s perception that it was the desire of all Nationalist Catholics to reject the authority of their priests is an underlying element in his drama. In *John Bull’s Other Island*, he examines the extent of the clergy’s political authority. The play presents two civil engineering partners, Tom Broadbent (an English Protestant) and Larry Doyle (an Irish Catholic), who must visit Larry’s hometown of Rosscullen to foreclose on a mortgage. Once there, Broadbent forces himself into the social and political circles of the community while Larry tries to distance himself from them. These two characters set the political contrasts that culminate in the depictions of two priests—the authoritative Father Dempsey and the defrocked Keegan.

Broadbent, the “villain” of the play, represents Shaw’s perceptions of the English as imaginative and opportunistic. Ignorant of Ireland and its people, Broadbent romanticizes the culture, finding delight in each peculiar word, phrase, custom, and event. Upon Nora’s questioning how he likes Ireland, he exclaims, “[*suddenly betraying a condition of extreme sentimentality*] I can hardly trust myself to say how much I like it. The magic of this Irish scene, and –I really don’t want to be personal, Miss Reilly; but the charm of your Irish voice—“(151). He is enamored of Nora’s Irishness within minutes of meeting her, proposing marriage almost immediately. Despite his unrealistic perception of Rosscullen and its villagers, Broadbent is truly English in his ability to manipulate the community, securing a candidacy for the Irish Parliament, an Irish heiress as a fiancée, and the potential for land ownership—all in less than twenty-four hours. In *Prefaces*, Shaw explains his goals in creating Broadbent:



Writing the play for an Irish audience, I thought it would be good for them to be shewn very clearly that the loudest laugh they could raise at the expense of the absurdist Englishman was not really a laugh on their side; that he would succeed where they would fail; that he could inspire strong affection and loyalty in an Irishman who knew the world and was moved only to dislike, mistrust, impatience, and even exasperation by his own countrymen. (439)

Accordingly, Larry Doyle fulfills Shaw's depiction of the Irishman in that he, in all of his grim practicality, allows Broadbent to conquer the town. Despite his objections to the political platforms of Broadbent, Father Dempsey, and the villagers, Larry refuses to accept the candidacy for a seat in Parliament, allowing Broadbent the opportunity to explore his political prowess. Likewise, he distances himself from Nora Reilly—the town's only heiress who has waited for Larry for eighteen years. Larry not only allows, but also encourages, her to marry Broadbent, believing it is in Broadbent's best interest. Finally, Larry knowingly allows his father and the other villagers to indebt themselves to Broadbent through extensive loans that they will be unable to repay. Although Larry cautions his father, he provides no explanation or hint of Broadbent's intentions to bankrupt the villagers and foreclose on their land in order to develop a golf resort. In allowing these excessive debts, Larry succumbs to the Irish tendency to align himself with English agenda, which, in this case, will cause the expansion of urban development, effectively destroying the little Irish charms of which Broadbent was supposedly so enamored. Although often classified as a Marxist, Shaw was actually a follower of Jervons' theory of value rather than Marx's labor theory (Evans 4). Simply put, Shaw believed that an object's value is determined by its importance to the purchaser rather than by the cost of the labor used to produce the product. This theory of value is evident in the play. The value of Rosscullen is determined by

Broadbent rather than the villagers who have built the town. The amount that he is willing to pay far exceeds the needs of the villagers, but Broadbent's desire for ownership creates an inflated value. Larry is a partner to this plan, seizing the opportunity for individual profit in the financial and social ruin of the villagers—including his father.

In keeping with Shaw's criticisms of the Church as being too aligned with British interests, Broadbent's manipulations are further fueled by Father Dempsey, on whom Shaw seems to place the most criticism. The current priest in the parish, Father Dempsey, is an authoritative bully whose concerns are centered on political matters. Although he is present in the play, unlike the priests of Yeats and Synge, Father Dempsey is similarly absent from his role as spiritual leader. The description of his character is telling:

*The priest, stout and fatherly, falls far short of that finest type of countryside pastor which represents the genius of priesthood; but he is equally far above the base type in which a strongminded unscrupulous peasant uses the Church to extort money, power, and privilege. He is a priest neither by vocation nor ambition, but because the life suits him. He has boundless authority over his flock, and taxes them stiffly enough to be a rich man. The old Protestant ascendancy is now too broken to gall him. On the whole, an easygoing, amiable, even modest man as long as his dues are paid and his authority and dignity fully admitted.*

(145)

This description of Father Dempsey presents him as a product of the Catholic Church. Presented in the stage directions as likeable, his role as priest creates an uncomfortable paradox. While he has no malicious intent to extort money, he is a priest because of the comfort, stability, and authority it provides. Father Dempsey is more concerned with his own means of living than with

the spiritual or physical well-being of his parishioners. Indeed, he feels no compassion for the lower class and no compulsion to alleviate their suffering. This indifference is obvious in his treatment of the common laborer Patsy Farrell. He insults him and repeatedly asserts his authority over the man: “Are you drunk Patsy Farrell? Did I tell you to carry that hamper carefully or did I not?” (145). And in case his position as priest is not enough, Father Dempsey uses Patsy’s own superstitions to threaten him into submission: “You mind what I tell you or I’ll put a spell on you thatll make you lep” (148). The Catholic priest stoops to using non-Christian superstition to manipulate his congregation, further asserting his power.

Father Dempsey does not focus his authority solely on Patsy; he is also condescending, patronizing, and often insulting to the other to lower class characters—Matthew and Doran—present during the discussion of politics. Corny Doyle (Larry’s father and Irish land owner) insults Matthew (a farmer), classifying his social status as that of the scorned Patsy Farrell. Father Dempsey supports this distinction of class and manipulates Matthew into suppressing his anger against Corny, claiming, “I told you, Matthew Haffigan, that Corny Doyle was saying nothing against you. I’m sorry your priest’s word is not good enough for you. I’ll go, sooner than stay to make you commit sin against the Church” (162). The stage directions describe Matthew as “*crushed*” (163), most likely because of Father Dempsey’s demotion of him to lower class status.

This distinction between the lower class and the middle class—as well as the emerging middle class aspirations of the priests—was not uncommon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cara Delay explains that after the famine respectability became an ever-increasing concern for the middle class as a way to distinguish themselves from the peasantry. They turned from traditional methods of gaining respectability to materialistic methods. Many

priests were representative of this shift, coming from middle class families themselves and perpetuating ideas of “middle class respectability” across Ireland (114-15). Father Dempsey displays this desire to preserve the middle class at the expense of the lower class, arguing against Larry’s proposal to pay people like Patsy a decent wage: “Why some o dhese honest men here cant make that much out o the land for dhemselves, much less give it to a laborer” (165). Part of Father Dempsey’s authority comes from his economic superiority. If the people of the town were to adopt Larry’s suggestions, they would eliminate the lower class, thus removing a portion of Father Dempsey’s authority.

Despite his pretensions that he has no interest in discussing politics, claiming, “No, no: go on, you: the Church has no politics” (161), Father Dempsey places himself both figuratively and literally in the center of the discussion over the new candidate for Parliament. His main concern revolves around his own well-being, looking for a candidate who will help him maintain his current prosperous lifestyle: “When too much money goes into politics, it’s the Church who has to starve for it. A member of Parliament ought to be a help to the Church instead of a burden on it” (163). Father Dempsey further demonstrates this interest in the financial situation of the candidate once Broadbent has been chosen. He dictates, “You might find out from Larry, Corny, what his means are. God forgive us all! it’s poor work spoiling the Egyptians, though we have good warrant for it; so I’d like to know how much spoil there is before I commit myself” (170). His willingness to support the English candidate so long as he has sufficient income is indicative of Shaw’s belief that the Church would also align itself with the British given strong enough economic circumstances.

Like Yeats and Synge, Shaw presents a substitute for this ineffectual priest. However, Shaw does not infuse him with the same qualities of myth and tradition; instead he develops a

substitute based on his own ideals of nationalist qualities—knowledge, courage, and independence. Shaw contrasts the political narcissism of Father Dempsey with the compassion and wisdom of defrocked Keegan. His description of the former priest is noticeably kinder than that of Father Dempsey:

*A man with the face of a young saint, yet with white hair and perhaps 50 years on his back, is standing near the stone in a trance of intense melancholy, looking over the hills as if by mere intensity of gaze, he could pierce the glories of the sunset and see into the streets of heaven. He is dressed in black, and is rather more clerical in appearance than most English curates are nowadays; but he does not wear the collar and waistcoat of a parish priest. (138)*

Shaw classifies Keegan as a greater religious force than a mere priest, depicting him as a “young saint,” and indicating that the man has made a sacrifice of some kind. The play later details that sacrifice as the loss of his Church in favor of knowledge. Keegan’s travels taught him wisdom and tolerance the Church strove to suppress. Keegan explains, “I found an elderly Hindoo, who told me one of those tales of unmerited misfortune, of cruel ill luck, of relentless persecution by destiny, which sometimes wither the commonplaces of consolation on the lips of a priest. But this man did not complain of his misfortunes” (183). Upon his death, the man demonstrated a “cleareyed resignation” that Keegan had rarely seen in a Christian. From this experience, Keegan developed an understanding of people beyond the bounds of the Catholic Church—beyond Christianity as a whole. He explains that the man’s death revealed to him the “mystery of the world” (183). This knowledge, as Keegan reveals, is the understanding that this world “is very clearly a place of torment and penance” (183). He has adopted the Hindu belief in reincarnation, claiming that our existence in this lifetime is paying penance for the sins of the previous. He

combines this newfound belief with his Christian understandings, claiming, “there is only one place of horror and torment known to my religion; and that place is hell,” thus, “this earth of ours must be hell” (183-84). In light of his new beliefs, the Catholic Church has declared him mad and removed him from his position as priest.

The people of Rosscullen, however, have not renounced his role of priest as the Church has. Keegan accepts his dismissal from the Church and tries to respect the Christianity of Father Dempsey, explaining to Patsy, “The Church let me be its priest as long as it thought me fit for its work. When it took away my papers it meant you to know that I was only a poor madman, unfit and unworthy to take charge of the souls of the people” (140). The villagers, however, maintain their perception of Keegan as a spiritual guide. Patsy argues, “Father Dempsey sez youre not a priest; n we all know youre not a man; n how do we now what ud happen to us if we shewed any disrespect to you? N sure they say wanes a priest always a priest” (140). His assertion that Keegan is not a man supports Shaw’s description of him as a saint, or at least a greater spiritual force than Father Dempsey. Patsy’s faith in Keegan is likely because Keegan is kinder to him than Father Dempsey, admonishing him only when he calls Keegan “Father.” Like Patsy, Nora Reilly looks to Keegan for guidance before Father Dempsey. Nora’s explanation for seeking out Keegan is his worldly experience, wanting to know if Ireland seemed “small and backwardlike” when he returned from his travels to Salamanca, Rome, Paris, Oxford, and Jerusalem (among other cities). He replies,

When I went to those great cities, I saw wonders I had never seen in Ireland. But when I came back to Ireland I found all the wonders there waiting for me. You see they had been there all the time; but my eyes had never been opened to them. I

did not know what my own house was like, because I had never been outside of it.  
(143)

Keegan represents Shaw's belief in the restrictions of the Catholic Church on knowledge as a form of oppression. Because he left the small Catholic parish, Keegan is more fully aware of Ireland—both its beauties and its faults. His understanding of the cruelties of the world and people's acceptance of them leads to his conclusion that Ireland must be Hell.

Similarly, Keegan is able to recognize his own failings. He tells Patsy, “[. . .] when you're tempted to throw a stone at a sinner or curse at a beggar, remember that Pether Keegan is a worse sinner and a worse beggar” (141). In recognizing his own sins, Keegan is able to see the troubles of others objectively and offer guidance free of judgment. While Father Dempsey never notices the dynamic between Nora and Larry, Keegan is keenly aware of it. Nora wants to deny Keegan's perceptions but she cannot. The stage directions explain, “*She turns as if to forbid him; but the deep understanding in his eyes makes that impossible; and she only looks at him earnestly and goes*” (144). Keegan makes observations about Larry and Nora and their propensity to torment each other, but always aware of his own sins, he never criticizes them. This perception echoes Shaw's own awareness of being a “consciously and deliberately ‘immoral’ playwright” (qtd. in Evans 11). Evans explains that “He was seeking to convey that morality was not a question of right and wrong, or otherwise of ethical values, but simply a question of what society was prepared to accept” (11). This distinction is apparent in Keegan, whose morality the audience does not question—it is the Church that is unprepared to accept his beliefs.

Keegan's wisdom allows him a spiritual authority that father Dempsey lacks, a difference between the two men that is significant in Act IV. Keegan replaces Father Dempsey, becoming

*“the central figure in a rather crowded apartment”* (175). Abandoned by Father Dempsey and the Church’s ambitions for power and wealth, the town of Rosscullen has no other spiritual leader to protect it. Keegan must defend Ireland in the end because he understands its flaws and that Broadbent’s plans will destroy it. Thus, the salvation of Rosscullen relies on this character depicted by the Church as a “mock-heroic figure, a failed saint without miracles or martyrdom, without any disciples in Rosscullen, except, ironically for an animated grasshopper and a half-witted Patsy Farrell” (Krause 490). Free from the Church and its British alignments for economic interests, Keegan is able to take up the political battle, arguing with Broadbent over the need for British involvement. In the end, however, Keegan recognizes the futility of one man’s knowledge against the illusions of a nation inhibited by its Church: “You see, Mr. Broadbent, I only make the hearts of my countrymen harder when I preach to them: the gates of hell still prevail against me. I shall wish you good evening. I am better alone at the Round Tower, dreaming of heaven” (203).

Heavily influenced by his ideas on socialism and the oppressive authority of the Catholic Church, Shaw recognized the inability of Irish to overcome their own oppression. The difficulties of the Irish, as he saw them, could only be overcome once Ireland had established itself as an autonomous nation. His nationalist ideal focused on the importance of recognizing and usurping the Church’s authority. These beliefs are evident in his drama, where Shaw abandons the pre-Christian traditions and ideas for a new priesthood advocated by Yeats. Like Synge, Shaw evolves Yeats’s depictions of Christian futility, rejecting priests who adhere to a Church that suppresses knowledge.



## CHAPTER 5

### THE ENDURING INFLUENCE

Yeats's belief in the new priesthood of artists and the return to Celtic traditions as a method of defining Irish identity in the early 1900s fit in with the prevailing ideals of the Irish Literary Revival. While W. B. Yeats's faith in the power of the Celtic myths and legends may or may not have endured throughout the twentieth century, his questioning of religion has evolved into a criticism of the Church and its priests by J. M. Synge and George Bernard Shaw, Yeats's depiction of the priesthood planted the seeds for modern, postmodern, and contemporary depictions of absent, ineffectual, and pagan priests.

A nation struggling to define itself against British imperialism and the pervading influence of the Catholic Church, twentieth century Ireland saw the realization of Home Rule in 1920, followed by the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921. By this time, however, discontent among the Irish had already culminated in violent events such as the Easter Rising of 1916. The establishment of the Irish Free State was not the solution to domestic social and religious problems as nationalists like Yeats, Synge, and especially Shaw had hoped. Instead, the Anglo Irish Treaty prompted civil war, dividing nationalists and maintaining political strife. Similarly, the development of Ireland into an independent nation instilled fear in Irish Protestants at the hands of an overwhelmingly Catholic population. The result of this fear was the division of Ireland into two geographical distinctions—Ireland and Northern Ireland, a section of Ireland ruled by England and populated mostly by Irish Protestants.

Protestant fears of the Church's power were justified. With the majority of Ireland's population identified as Catholics, the Church's influence and authority increased exponentially, governing education, healthcare, law, and moral issues such as divorce, contraception, abortion,

and pornography. The influence of the Church was pervasive, and religious hatred between Protestants and Catholics culminated in violent attacks and rebellions throughout the twentieth century, with visible residual effects remaining in the early twenty-first century.

Criticisms of Christianity, Catholicism, and the clergy as presented by Yeats, Synge, and Shaw not only endured throughout this period, but have become the staple for depicting priests in Irish drama. In his 1924 play *Juno and the Paycock*, Sean O'Casey carries on the emerging tradition of the absent priest, presenting him as ineffectual when the Boyle family is struck by poverty then admired upon the family's expectation of wealth and elevation to middle class status. The perception of the priest is defined by the economic status of the family, a depiction in line with that of Father Dempsey in *John Bull's Other Island*.

The criticisms of the Church and its clergy throughout the past century have not been limited to presentations of indifference and ineffectualness as depicted through a literal absence. Indeed, the criticisms that have emerged in the last sixty years illuminate the social and political issues through methods much more literal than symbolic. In 1954, Brendan Behan used his own prison experience to present false piety and condemnation of a Church that preached salvation while sentencing sinners to death in *The Quare Fellow*. Similarly, Edna O'Brien's *A Pagan Place* (1973) and Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997) depict priests who make sexual advances on their young, female parishioners, foreshadowing the accusations of molestation leveled at the Church in 2001.

However, the influence of Yeats and Synge and their faith in tradition have not disappeared entirely but seem to have fused with Shaw's defrocked Keegan, creating a pagan priest who is both wise and doubted. This pagan priest is evident in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), which present priests whose

understandings of their respective communities contrast with the moral constraints imposed by the Catholic Church.

The role of the Church throughout the twentieth century and depictions of Christianity and priests as presented by Yeats, Synge, and Shaw have heavily influenced Irish drama. Originally intending to promote nationalism, these playwrights have provided a medium through which representations of the Church and its clergy reflect the criticisms of the public. Their influence on Irish drama will continue to endure so long as the Catholic Church continues to play a central role in Irish politics.

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VITA

LESLIE A. VALLEY

- Personal Data:      Date of Birth: March 12, 1982  
Place of Birth: Manchester, New Hampshire
- Education:            M.A., English, East Tennessee State University, August 2009  
B.A., English, East Tennessee State University, 2005  
B.S., Human Development and Learning, East Tennessee State University,  
2005
- Professional  
Experience:            Teaching Assistant, 2008-2009  
English Department  
East Tennessee State University
- Graduate Assistant, 2007-2008  
Writing and Communication Center  
East Tennessee State University
- Retail Manager, 2005-2007  
Cracker Barrel Old Country Store
- Administrative Assistant, 2004-2005  
Writing and Communication Center  
East Tennessee State University
- Student Editor, 2003-2004  
ETSU Today: Alumni Magazine  
East Tennessee State University
- Conferences:         “Maria takes on London: Rejection and Subversion in Frances Brooke’s  
*The Excursion*.” SEASECS Conference. Charlotte, NC. 7 Mar. 2009.
- “‘Good God no!’ Questioning the Efficacy of Religion in Beckett’s  
Dramatic Works.” SASCOL Conference. Johnson City, TN 27 Sept.  
2008.
- “Writing Development: Beyond the Assignment.” Poster Presentation.  
*Work in Progress, Destination Unknown*. SWCA Conference. Savannah,  
GA. 8 Feb. 2008.



Honors and Awards: Assistantship, East Tennessee State University, 2007-2009

Curriculum Honor, Cum Laude, 2005

Academic Performance Scholarship, East Tennessee State University,  
2000-2004

Dean's List, East Tennessee State University, Spring 2001

Activities:

Sigma Tau Delta, 2007-2009

President, 2008-2009

Secretary, 2008

Youth Villages

Mentor, Mar. 2008-Nov. 2008

Human Development and Learning Student Organization, 2001-2004

President, 2003-2004

Vice President, 2002-2003

Secretary, 2001-2002

Founding Member, 2001

Writing and Communication Center

Volunteer Tutor, 2003-2004