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The Peasant in Modern British Drama
THE PEASANT IN MODERN BRITISH DRAMA

BY

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THESIS

FOR THE

DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

IN

ENGLISH

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

1917
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

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OUTLINE.

THE PEASANT IN MODERN BRITISH DRAMA.

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THE PEASANT IN MODERN BRITISH DRAMA.

I. INTRODUCTION.

A notable literary movement in British drama has developed and attained considerable excellence thus early in the present century. As each century has seen some phase of literary endeavor raised to heights in the hands of capable British artists, so drama seems to have selected the twentieth century as a time for returning to its former greatness.

The peasant drama is one of the distinctive types of this movement, because in the past it was thought to be an artistic necessity for the leading characters to be of the upper classes. In the cases where these came from the peasantry they were so idealized and lifted out of their class that they were made to possess all the characteristics of their superiors. But during the present era the life and emotions of the rural toiler have appealed to the ablest writers when seeking an artistic expression for their highest conceptions of dramatic art.

This subject first attracted the Germanic opposers of the formalism which so dominated literature in the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries. In the peasant they found a subject having primitive force and energy, and emotions that lie close to the surface with no complicating element of convention to obscure them. Also, his quaint poetical speech, picturesque customs and manners, and the atmosphere of the past in ancient customs, expressions, and costumes have all combined to make the peasant an ideal
subject. In such plays as Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867) and Hauptman's *The Weavers* (1892), the peasant drama reached an artistic perfection that definitely placed it among the accepted literary forms.

This Germanic movement eventually widened its circle of influence until it was felt in England. But it was slow in gaining headway because of the low ebb to which English drama had fallen, and because the dominating French influence in the "well-made-play" and the comedy of intrigue was hard to overcome.

But before proceeding to the introduction of this peasant drama into England, it might be well to pause and examine the peasant characters found in British drama previously. As may be supposed in a drama of upper class characters, the peasant types are few and very subordinate. In purely English plays this is so much the case that it is difficult to find single examples of sufficient magnitude to illustrate the characteristics.

Spotty, a subordinate character in Henry J. Byron's *Lancashire Lass*, (1867), may be taken as a fair example of the prevailing conception and treatment of the peasantry by dramatists of the time. He is drawn not as an individual, with actions that grow out of his character, but as one of a class, performing actions that are supposed to be appropriate for all members of that class. He gives bright, funny answers, is curious, and is inclined to tell all he knows. In the play he helps supply the comic element, and his talkativeness and curiosity are used to further the plot. Spotty, conscious of his reputation for wit, continually strives to live up to it, and the play has many such passages as the following.

Redburn -- "Ah! You are quite loaded now."
Spotty (going) -- "Yes, sir, I am loaded like a gun. And like a gun I am going off."

A much more common member of this conventionalized peasant type was the "stage Irishman". As has been said the English peasant is rare in the drama of this time, but the Irishman came to be a stock comedy character. This type is historically important because modern Irish writers who seriously objected to this characterization of Erin's sons have produced many excellent plays to refute the old conception with truer portrayals of Irish character. The "stage Irishman" had a brogue, was clever at repartee, fond of women and whiskey, and brave to rashness. He usually possessed a conventionalized mouth, wore a shamrock in his hat, and sang The Wearing of the Green or some other patriotic song.

Good examples of this type are found in Dion Boucicault's Arrah-na-Pogue (1865). Although the characters are greatly idealized, they are all supposed to be of the Irish peasant class, and by examining several characters and combining their characteristics most of the "stage Irishman's" traits can be found.

Michael Reeny, the rent collector, exhibits the bad side of Irish character. He is cowardly, sneaking, treacherous, and a frequent visitor to prison. The following quotation gives an idea of his humour and bravery --

"I'm a corpse! two blunderblushes looking at me. Oh, cant'in darlint don't l'ave me! And a bagginet on full cock. How will I git home at all? I've got a canal runnin' down the middle av me back. I'm as wake as a wet rag this minnit."
Shawn, the hero, on the other hand is all goodness,—witty, loyal, and self-sacrificing. His type of witty answers illustrate what was considered to be part of the stock Irishman's possessions.

Major -- "Your name?"
Shawn -- "Is it my name sir? Ah, are ye joking? Shure there's his honor beside ye, can answer for me, long life to him."

Major -- "Will you give the Court your name, fellow?"
Shawn -- "Well, I'm not ashamed of it."

O'Grady--"Come, Shawn, my man."
Shawn -- "There didn't I tell ye he knew me well enough."

Major -- "Shawn. That's the Irish for 'John' I suppose."
Shawn -- "No, sir, but John is the English for Shawn."

Major -- "What is your other name?"
Shawn -- "Me other name? Sure I never did innnything I wanted to hide undher anyother.----"

If the characters of Shawn and Feeny could be combined, with the extreme goodness of one and the extreme badness of the other exchanged for a greater tendency toward drinking and fighting, the result would very nearly represent the conception of Irish character held by the dramatists of that time.

The modern Irish writers in refuting this shallow formal type have seemed almost deliberately to select situations from these older plays, and place true, vital Irish characters instead of the former lifeless types. Some of the similarities between Arrah-na-pogue and modern plays are the resemblance between the scene of Lady Gregory's Soul Gate, and the scene of Arrah's grieving before Shawn's prison; and the likeness of theme in Synge's
Play boy of the Western World or Lady Gregory's The Rising of the Moon and the sheltering of Shawn who is sought by the law.

II. THE PEASANT IN IRISH DRAMA.

The Irish group of dramatists are by far the most important in the development of the peasant drama in English, because they are the pioneers, they have produced the greatest number of worthwhile plays, and the subsequent adoption of this type by other members of the British group has been largely through Irish influence.

At the opening of the present century Ireland had a revival in many fields of endeavor, and those interested in drama, like William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and Douglas Hyde, felt that the theater was the best means of placing Irish ideals and life correctly before the world. As they declared in the first statement of their purpose, "We will 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."¹ They also wished to arouse the great mass of the people to a "national consciousness", and they hoped a school of able Irish writers might be encouraged such as had arisen in Germany.

The great fundamental requirement they set for themselves was the production of artistic plays. Yeats in his Advice to Playwrights clearly states what they considered an artistic play. (First) "It must contain some criticism of life (preferably Irish life) founded on the author's observation ---- and important from

¹. Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre, p. 9.
its beauty or from excellence or style - - - (Second) Any knot of events where there is passionate emotion and clash of will can be made the subject of a play - - - and all effects must come from the logical expression of the subject. (Third) A work of art can have but one subject, - - - and it must possess a unity, unlike the accidental profusion of nature."¹

In order to criticize Irish life from observation or experience the writer must study Irish life, and this necessity led the majority of aspiring authors to study the most dominant type, namely, the rural peasant. They carefully recorded the peasant customs and dialect. Synge tells in The Aran Islands of lying in the loft above a kitchen and noting down the dialect of the peasant girls below. These dramatists, like their Germanic brethren, found the peasant an ideal subject and an inspiration for their best effort. One critic said of Synge, "He got emotion, the driving force he needed from his life among the people and it was the working in dialect that set free his style."²

In accordance with the ideal that "any knot of events where there is passionate emotion and clash of will can be made the subject of a play", the incidents chosen are in marked contrast to the popular play with its many conventional situations. In place of the old stock Irishman is placed an individual seen in a few situations that show the vital human side of his nature, as the single scene presenting the grief and fortitude of the mother and wife in Lady Gregory's Goal Gate.

2. Ibid., p. 25.
But it was in producing "effects from the logical expression of the subject" and striving for unity that probably the greatest difference between the old and new drama originated. It led to the use of fewer characters, and like the preceding requirement tended to simplify the plot. Character was more emphasized than action, and all unnecessary incidents were eliminated. In Synge's Shadow of the Glen there are only four characters, and the plot consists only of an old peasant pretending to be dead that he may test his young wife's constancy.

Yeats, the great pioneer of the movement, chose to tell of "that life of poetry where every man can see his own image because there alone does human nature escape from arbitrary conditions."1 His plots are largely from folk-lore, written in poetry, and filled with a symbolical atmosphere. For these reasons his dramas, though treating peasant character, as in The Land of Hearts (1894), Desire and Cathleen-na-Houlihan (1899), are not primarily peasant plays.

The great name in Irish peasant drama is John Synge. If the movement never produces anything but his plays, it has been fruitful. He was first interested in the movement by Yeats, who induced him to visit the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. He found subjects here that harmonized with his peculiar talents, for he delighted in the wild, forceful, primitive elements of life. As has been said, he diligently collected the dialect and faithfully transcribed it in his plays, but in the crucible of his genius all the native imagination, vigor, and beauty of the dialect as he found it, was blended into a medium capable of expressing every shade of

1. Boyd, Earnest, Contemporary Drama of Ireland, p. 89.
feeling. Synge possessed the necessary elements for master-work, when his artistic dramatic sense discovered a suitable subject and a medium of expression eminently suited to both.

In such a play as *Riders to the Sea* (1904) Synge has reached the ideals set by the founders of the movement, -- he has produced a truly artistic play. Not only is the sorrow of an old peasant woman wonderfully drawn, but that of a whole community.

In the patient grief of Maurya, as Synge said of the keening Aran Islanders, "the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars upon them with winds and seas." The play can hardly be said to have a lot for it is only the portrayal of the grief of old Maurya when her sixth and last son is taken by the sea; yet every phrase and incident steadily moves to what is felt to be the inevitable end. This end has the true tragical elevation in Maurya's triumph over grief:

"They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. -- They are together this time; and the end is come -- what more can we want than that? No man can be living for ever and we must be satisfied."

The fact that the play is such a masterpiece is the great distinguishing mark between it and the second rate work of such men as Boucicault and Byron. Also, the earlier writers used peasant characters almost exclusively in comedy, so that it is difficult to find characters at all comparable to those in *Riders to the Sea.*

The Playboy of the Western World (1907), which is considered Synge's greatest play, even more than Riders to the Sea exhibits Synge's powers. It has greater space and scope, having three acts as compared to the one of Riders to the Sea. Also, it is a comedy and the whimsical story, the humour, and the primitiveness of scenes and characters, were especially suited to Synge's talents. He realistically portrays the life he saw on the Mayo coast and the wildness of the scene pervades the play. The action is almost too violent, yet it seems naturally to grow out of the primitive characters and unconventional situations.

Christy Mahon, an ignorant peasant boy, takes refuge in Michael Flaherty's saloon from the police, whom he believes are seeking him for his father's murder. Christy soon becomes a hero for being so brave as to kill his tyrannical father, and Pegeen Mile, Flaherty's daughter, even casts off her lover, Shawn, for him. At the height of his glory when he has just won in the sports his father whom he had only stunned appears. Christy tries to make good his reputation by striking his father, but though the peasants could idealize "a gallous story" they have no use for "a dirty deed". Christy falls from grace and returns with his father.

Christy in some ways resembles Feeny in Arrah-na-Pogue. Both are unconsciously comic, for neither indulge in the conventional bright remarks. However, in Feeny the humour lies in his incorrect speech and his cowardice, while in Christy this element is found more in his odd ideals of life than in his bravado. Though each loves the heroine, the love scenes of Feeny and Arrah are conventional but those of Christy and Pegeen Mike are artistic creations. In the beginning of the play Christy is as cowardly as
Feeny, but during the course of the play Christy develops into a braggart in the atmosphere of praise and sympathy. This element of character growth is entirely wanting in the earlier plays. "Synge's work involves a reading and comprehension of the Irish peasant character which goes deep under the surface — — and everything has undergone the transmuting touch of genius true however it may be to life."¹

Lady Gregory shares Synge's lyrical quality, but lacks his genius. She, like Yeats, is important both as a promoter of the movement, and as a writer of clever little comedies. These have no great intrinsic value, but they are very important in the history of peasant drama, because they helped popularize this type of play, and led other writers to realize the dramatic possibilities in ordinary peasant life and speech.

She carefully collected the dialect and folk-tales of Galway, as Synge did in the West of Ireland. In using this dialect she has faithfully copied her model, and though lacking the ability to transform it into a speech that is poetically realistic, she has greatly improved on the conventional dialect of the earlier writers, by using the actual speech of the peasantry.

The plots are slight, being only a very few incidents chosen from the everyday life about her; as the plot of The Goal Gate (1906), which consists of the one scene portraying the grief of a mother and wife on hearing their son and husband has been hanged.

¹ Monahan, Nova Hibernia, p. 23, 29.
for a murder he did not commit. This is one of Lady Gregory's few serious plays and by some is considered her best, but artistic as it is, it lacks the breadth Synge succeeded in infusing into his plays.

The humour, which is the great element in Lady Gregory's work, lies in the quaint speeches which her peasants make in all seriousness, like the speech of one of the old men in *The Workhouse Ward*, when his companion with whom he was always quarreling was asked to live in his sister's home, --

"All that I am craving is the talk. There to be no one at all to say out to whatever thought might be rising in my innate mind! To be lying here and no conversible person in it would be the abomination of misery!"

The oftenest produced and perhaps the most popular of Lady Gregory's plays is *Spreading the News* (1904), which has for its theme the rapidity with which gossip grows. Bartley Fallow took a pitchfork to Jack Smith which Jack had forgotten when he went to help a neighbor with his horse. Some one said Bartley had gone with the fork, another that he was going after Jack, and by the time the news had spread, Bartley had killed Jack so that he might escape to America with Jack's wife. This eventually leads to a dispute between the two men which lands them both in jail. This play well illustrates the author's abilities and weaknesses, for although her plays are "witty, amusing, and have splendid dialect, still they do not go deep into the life of Ireland."¹

Lady Gregory is more in the class of the earlier writers than Synge, and the difference due to the modern conceptions of peasant

life is more clearly seen in contrasting her plays with theirs. As has been said, the modern ideals have led to the use of fewer characters, simplification of plot, unconsciousness of humour, truer copying of speech, and above all truth to life, and sincerity in treatment. The very fact that all the characters are peasants shows the changed attitude of dramatists toward the peasant, for the older writers merely tucked in a minor peasant character to give variety, contrast, humour.

Among the younger writers who promise to carry forward the Irish movement are William Boyle, Rutherford Mayne, and St. John Ervine. Such plays as Mayne's The Drone and The Turn of the Road, and Boyle's The Family Failing and The Mineral Workers are closely related in spirit to those of Synge and Lady Gregory.

III. PEASANT IN ENGLISH DRAMA.

The achievements of the Irish dramatists naturally aroused the interest of their English brethren in the peasant class of England. This tendency was further strengthened by the translation and production of some of the Germanic peasant plays, especially those of Ibsen.

The majority of English dramatists who have treated of peasant life combine it with the "problem play", and hence these dramas are not primarily peasant plays. Among the notable plays dealing with the labor question might be mentioned Galworthy's Strife and Brighouse's Garside's Career. Probably the best that treat the sex problem are Lawrance's The Widowin of Mrs. Holroyd, Houghton's Hindle Wakes and Cannon's Miles Dixon.
Although England has so far not produced many peasant plays, there is one at least, worthy to be classed with the best of Synge's. John Masefield's *Tragedy of Nan* (1908) occupies a place in English peasant drama similar to that held in the Irish by Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. Masefield, like Synge, was able to combine the real and symbolic until they seem one, and he has succeeded in attaining a dialect that is poetical and yet true to life. The exaltation in the end, when Nan triumphs over heart-break, is lyrical and the movement though reposeful moves steadily and naturally toward this end.

Nan, an orphan, lives with her uncle. She loves Dick Gurvil, the man her aunt has selected for Jenny. When Mrs. Pargetler learns of Nan's and Dick's engagement, she informs Dick that Nan's father was hung, and his father will disown him for marrying "a gallus-bird". Dick then decides to marry Jenny. The officers come offering money to Nan in reparation for hanging her innocent father, and Dick is willing now to return to Nan "so as he mid 'ane that gold", but in her disappointment and heart-break Nan stabs him and rushes off to drown herself in the sea.

Like *Riders to the Sea* this play is so truly artistic that it is difficult to compare it with second rate ones, also being a tragedy there is little in common between it and the earlier melodramas. There is no peasant character in English drama that is at all comparable to Nan, "the sensitive, love-hungry girl who has been given a glimpse of the love she longs for only to see it vanish".
With the past glorious history in drama as an inspiration, with a peasantry possessing all the qualities foreign writers have found so advantageous, and the masterpiece of Masefield for a guide, there seems to be no reason why the countrymen of Shakespeare should not reach the highest degree of excellence in this movement which seems just starting among English writers.

IV. PEASANT IN WELSH DRAMA.

Another member of the British group that promises to have a dramatic revival is the Welsh. The movement is only beginning, but with such a play as J. O. Francis’s Change to begin with, the awakening bids fair to reach a high degree of perfection.

In Wales, as in Ireland, the peasant class predominates, and the life, ideals, and struggles of this class constitute almost the entire national life. But, like England, a large part of the peasants are engaged in mining and manufacturing, but the majority have been little affected by modern progress and thought. Francis has chosen to portray the peasant meeting the ideas of modern civilization, and to treat of the struggle between the old and the new. In the play "John Henry and Lewis represent the new, and their father the old, with Swilyn, - poetical and loving as a mean between the two extremes."¹

John Price, an old collier, has deprived himself that John Henry may go to college and prepare for the ministry. In college John Henry becomes imbued with new ideas and feels he can not honestly enter the ministry. Lewis, another son, follows the trade of his father, but must against the will of the latter takes part

¹. Moses, M. J., Introduction to Change.
in a strike. John Henry gives up the ministry, quarrels with his father because of it, and violates the family ideals by joining a musical company. During the rioting, Owilyn, the delicate, idolized, youngest brother is accidentally shot. The father partly blames Lewis, because of his leadership in the trouble, and Lewis feeling this goes to Australia. During all these trials the one who suffers most cruelly is the gentle, loving little mother, Given.

Francis in this play has met the requirements set by the Irish group, for here is "a criticism of life" with elements of beauty, a group of "events where there is passionate emotion and clash of will", effects that come logically from the characters, and compactness and unity. The dialect is vigorous and yet lyrical and the whole play is permeated with a Welsh atmosphere. "The spirit of unrest which pervades every line of Change lifts it out of its atmosphere, and gives it meaning wherever there is industrial unrest, wherever the old order is pitted against the new, wherever there is a struggle for survival, social, economic or religious."¹

Change has common elements with the Germanic, Irish, and English modern peasant drama, but little or nothing with the comedies using peasant characters during the nineteenth century. It possesses practically none of the comic element, the characters are individuals, and the dialect is drawn from life.

Looking over this list of truly remarkable plays -- Irish, English, and Welsh, the advance made by the peasant movement in

¹ Moses, E. J., Introduction to Change.
so short a time seems extraordinary. From a decidedly subordinate position the peasant has risen to the highest place in drama, and instead of a caricature there is an understanding, sympathetic picture. This marked change in drama is a reflection of the marked change that has taken place in the life of the world during the last century. With the triumph and spread of democracy every man has gained a hearing, especially the long unnoticed lower class. This movement drawn out of the dominant spirit of the times, and affecting so many countries, promises to be one of the most distinctive forms of literary endeavor in the twentieth century.
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