MODERN IRISH DRAMA



EDITED BY JOHN P. HARRINGTON



A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Cathleen Ni Houlihan • On Baile's Strand • Purgatory
Spreading the News • The Rising of the Moon
Riders to the Sea • The Playboy of the Western World
John Bull's Other Island • Juno and the Paycock
The Quare Fellow • Krapp's Last Tape
Translations

BACKGROUNDS AND CRITICISM

Edited by

JOHN P. HARRINGTON

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Preface

The seminal document of modern Irish drama is the declaration of intentions agreed upon in 1897 by William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and Edward Martyn. The crucial text, composed at Lady Gregory's western Ireland estate, Coole Park, which was near Edward Martyn's estate, Tillyra Castle, and Yeats's future summer home, Thoor Ballylee, is that reproduced in Lady Gregory's memoir *Our Irish Theatre*:

We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres of England, and without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed. 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.

Some local context for this statement is provided in the selection from Lady Gregory's book reprinted in this volume on pp. 377–86. The more general context can be sketched here as introduction to this collection of plays, all of which follow, in assent or in dissent, willingly or unwillingly, from the thesis of this prospectus.

The idea of a national drama, which is not at all specific to Ireland, is to represent the theater's audience on its stage ("to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland") and at the same time to elevate that audience (to perform plays written "with a high ambition"). Thus national drama has a contradictory relation to its audience: to reflect the audience as it is, and to improve it. Both roles are presumptuous. The first presumes the authority to identify the nation, an exercise of radical reduction even in so small a country as Ireland. The exercise entails evaluating segments of a national society and determining which will occupy center stage as "the real Ireland," or the "Irish

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Ireland." Early in the century, especially in the works of John Millington Synge, the rural peasantry prevailed as "the real Ireland," and by mid-century, in the face of modernization, this identification of "the real Ireland" ossified into a convention whereby, many complained, Irish plays were ranked by measure of "PQ," or peasant quality. Also, in identification of a "real Ireland" empiricism was of little use. Roger McHugh, a contributor to the Abbey Theatre in a variety of roles, recalled how he defended Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* before an audience outraged by one character because, they argued, there were no prostitutes in Dublin, and how he, McHugh, was that evening solicited by prostitutes on his way home. The real Ireland, then, could be fictionalized by dramatists or by audiences alike.

The second role in national drama, improving the audience, presumes to identify the people's proper aspirations and to require their enrollment, by attendance, in an improving program. The historical record indicates that the Irish audience was generally quite happy with its current aspirations and so preferred self-congratulatory drama over any "new movement in art or literature." Further, its "passion for oratory" evidently trained the "uncorrupted and imaginative audience" in speaking as well as in listening, for modern Irish drama is notable for obstreperous objections to the images of the Irish people presented to the Irish people by Irish playwrights. "What is the meaning of this rubbish?" asked one notable, enraged objector, Frank Hugh O'Donnell, of the first Yeats contribution in 1899 to the Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature promised by the Coole Park manifesto. "How will it help the national cause? How is it to help any cause at all?" The same questions were asked at mid-century. At that time plays, now much-maligned, prevailed that were, if not wholly self-congratulatory, certainly of manageable demands. In 1958 O'Casey had a follow-up bout when the Catholic church, acting for its parishioners, objected to immorality in The Drums of Father Ned: O'Casey simply withdrew his play, and in this action he was followed by producers of a dramatization of James Joyce's Ulysses and by Samuel Beckett. In sufficient ire, then, the audience can walk away and the playwrights can close their own plays. Small surprise that the word "theater" is also used in reference to military maneuvers.

In Ireland in 1899 the cause in question was national independence. To this national drama was a contribution, though a problematic contribution. It could please, as with *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, and it could infuriate, as with *The Playboy of the Western World*. Nationalism, one of the principal factors in modern history, is organization and agitation to establish or to preserve a government that reflects its constituency.

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Nationalism takes shape in the wake of colonialism, a prior factor in history, in which single imperialist states amassed global territories and administered them with policies that reflected home base more than local population. Ireland was claimed by England as long ago as 1141, and it was with considerable difficulty maintained as a tenuously manageable colony by Elizabeth I in 1601 and by successive monarchs. The persistent, contrary Irish movement for self-rule entered a modern phase in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Young Ireland movement addressed its people in the literary medium of patriotic poems and ballads, a medium that, like theater, demands group performance. Some argue that the Irish independence movement concluded in 1922, with the establishment of the Irish Free State: others argue that it continues today, when the island is partitioned into an autonomous Irish Republic and a smaller Northern Ireland territory that continues to be administered from London. As the Yeats / Gregory / Martyn prospectus for an Irish national drama dates from 1897, and as Irish playwrights continue to address the issue of self-determination and continuing civil strife today. nationalism is the informing focus of modern Irish drama in this century. Nationalism is a focus, but not a position: drama helps articulate both arguments and counterarguments. Bernard Shaw noted this in a 1913 essay on nationalism written about ten years after John Bull's Other Island and its preface: "The modern Irish theatre began with the Cathleen Ni Houlihan of Mr. Yeats and Lady Gregory's Rising of the Moon. in which the old patriotism stirred and wrung its victims; but when the theatre thus established called on Young Ireland to write plays and found a national school of drama, the immediate result was a string of plays of Irish life—and very true to life they were—in which heroines proclaimed that they were sick of Ireland and [be]rated their Nationalist husbands for sacrificing all the realities of life to senseless Fenian maunderings." Such was the outcome of the Yeats / Martyn / Gregory call for a "Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature": not a common set of unimpeachable axioms but an extended and ongoing critique.

Political nationalism is a pragmatic program in which a native population or spokespeople for a native population organize formidable resistance to outside, colonial government. Though he was not one, a political pragmatist must ask Frank Hugh O'Donnell's question: How will it help the cause? In *Juno and the Paycock* Sean O'Casey gives a particularly chilling portrait of political nationalists, members of the Irish Republican Army, assassinating one of their own, Johnny Boyle, as a matter of praxis: elimination of a suspected informer. Cultural nationalism, generally a corollary movement, is an aesthetic program to organize for a native population a sustaining image of itself, its uniqueness, and its

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dignity, all contrary to the subordinate and submissive identity nurtured by outside administration. Much of the thrust of cultural nationalism is rescue of a dignified indigenous culture previously submerged by powerful colonial culture. Thus a national drama often focuses on local culture as yet unspoiled by the influence of foreign colonialism, as in Synge's Riders to the Sea, or, better yet, in plays written and performed in Irish Gaelic, like Douglas Hyde's Casadh an tSugain (The Twisting of the Rope). Thus a national literary movement, like Ireland's at the turn of the century, is termed a "revival": restoration of a culture temporarily marginalized by outsiders to its proper, central place. A key component of this effort is reinterpretation of local history from a native perspective. The first and last plays in this collection, Cathleen Ni Houlihan and Translations, are historical dramas that restore Irish dignity to historical episodes previously regarded from a British perspective as evi-

dence of Irish inferiority.

Cultural nationalism, however, is not as pragmatic or didactic as political nationalism, and that accounts for drama's lack of unanimity. Lady Gregory, despite the prospectus of an Irish National Theatre, admits buffoonery in depiction of folk culture in Spreading the News. Shaw depicts Irish nationalism as a clever scam in John Bull's Other Island. One might well ask how these works were to help the national cause. Further, political nationalists, seeking unanimity, could and did argue that the dramatists establishing images of folk culture were not of it. Yeats, Gregory, and Martyn, who presumed to tell the people who they were and who they should be, were landed gentry or, in Yeats's case, at least of such pretension. Synge, authorized dramatist of peasant culture, could be termed an urban, professorial linguist with equal enthusiasms for Gaelic folk culture and the very latest in Parisian intellectual fashion. Thus the landmark early plays of Irish national drama could plausibly be viewed, as they have been by some, as an invented folk culture that served the needs of artists and intellectuals. The notable theater riots in Dublin over Synge and O'Casey plays were audience counterarguments that the plays in question were neither useful nor accurate. Playwrights often responded without challenging that point. In his autobiography, Yeats wrote that the national drama, and in particular the Abbey Theatre that epitomizes it, "will fail to do its full work because there is no accepted authority to explain why the more difficult pleasure is the nobler pleasure. The fascination of the National Movement for me in my youth was, I think, that it seemed to promise such authority." Synge was blunter. "I have the wildest admiration for the Irish Peasants and for Irishmen of known or unknown genius," he wrote to fellow literary nationalist Stephen McKenna, "but between the two there's an ungodly xii Preface

ruck of fatfaced sweaty-headed swine." Thus the playwright position might be that the questions of usefulness and accuracy were simply irrelevant.

The theatergoer in Dublin at the turn of the century might also wonder if the playwrights considered entertainment a further irrelevance. Though the comic mode was an element of modern Irish drama from its beginning, the national drama scarcely matched the popular draw of other theater fare already well-established in Dublin. Dublin was in fact the site of the first licensed English theater outside London: it was established by a new lord deputy of Ireland, Thomas Wentworth, and opened in 1637 on Werburgh Street near the center of colonial administration at Dublin Castle. There the estimable dramatist and resident playwright James Shirley wrote St. Patrick for Ireland (1639), generally considered the first play with Irish subject matter. After the restoration of Stuart monarchy reopened theaters briefly closed by Puritan government. Dublin was notable for the Smock Alley Theatre and for a series of playwrights. Irish by birth or association, critical to English drama; William Congreve, George Farquhar, Richard Steele, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and others. These, like Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw in a later period, gravitated to London, to its dramatic traditions and innovations, and to its English audiences. Dublin theater functioned as a provincial theater, or a straw-hat circuit theater, trying out productions that hoped to reach London or wringing last earnings from productions already closed in London. By the late nineteenth century Dublin houses offered light operas, melodramas, the "well-made" plays of curtain solutions, and musical variety shows. This was entertainment indeed. Robert Hogan and James Kilrov's The Irish Literary Theatre lists offerings in the late 1890s that included the musical comedies The Skirt Dancer and A Greek Slave, respectable British dramas such as Arthur Wing Pinero's The Second Mrs. Tangueray, and a musical card with Virto, the Man of Many Instruments: Werner and Rieder, Duettists and Swiss Warblers; and the Eight Eldorados. Some of this could be done with an Irish angle: there was the light opera Lily of Killarney or the drama An Irish Gentleman. There were as well the Irish melodramas of Dion Boucicault, such as Arrah-na-Pogue and The Coleen Bawn: these were and are thought to have more than purely melodramatic potential. But all this Irish material was done with an eve to export, usually to London, though Boucicault went to New York. Hence the "Irish" quality—conspicuous drunkenness, clownishness, and sentimentality—was exaggerated for recognition by a foreign audience, and the result was a caricature known as "the stage Irishman."

This was the condition the Irish Literary Theatre hoped to offset, to "show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment."

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The prospectus written by W. B. Yeats, Edward Martyn, and Lady Gregory resulted most immediately in productions in 1899 intended to add to this functioning Dublin theatrical scene artistic idealism and native culture. The project operated in conjunction with an Irish literary revival in all genres: poetry, fiction, criticism, new histories, and translation from and into Irish Gaelic. Because drama is fundamentally a group event, involving authors, production personnel, and a group audience. Irish drama took a critical public role in this revival. The dramatic movement, in particular, took on the role of the Young Ireland movement of the mid-nineteenth century. The Young Ireland movement had hoped to catalyze nationalistic unity with ballads. It lost influence when political nationalism, particularly agitation over ownership known as the land wars, was more influential than cultural nationalism. In 1890 the political movement for Home Rule, or parliamentary autonomy, collapsed with the fortunes of its charismatic leader, Charles Stewart Parnell. With political nationalism in eclipse, cultural nationalism could and did regain its influence. Yeats organized a London Irish Literary Society in 1891 and a National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892. The conception of a national drama in Dubin benefited from the local literary revival, and participants in the Irish Literary Theatre usually had sidelines in other genres. However, the dramatic movement also benefited immensely from external models, a foreign influence that, though distinctly not English, was to engender its own complications. In 1850 Ole Bull had established a national theater in Norway, to which Henrik Ibsen, especially when young, contributed plays based on Norwegian life, history, and cultural traditions. The later, better-known Ibsen plays had direct impact on the Irish Literary Theatre, especially through Martyn, for whom Ibsen was a model, and Yeats, for whom Ibsen's social drama was a perfect example of how not to proceed. Other Continental models, to be taken for positive and negative instruction, included André Antoine, who founded Théâtre Libre in Paris in 1887, and Otto Brahm, who founded the Freie Bühne in Berlin in 1889. In addition, Richard Wagner's Bayreuth theater festival was a great personal influence on the founding participants of the Irish Literary Theatre.

All these factors, local and Continental, nationalistic and aesthetic, came to bear on the first, formative production of the Irish Literary Theatre in May 1899: Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Martyn's *The Heather Field*. The first represented the theater of art, of aesthetics, initially bound up in Yeats's own emerging philosophy of drama. The second represented the theater of praxis, of social drama, immediately descended from Ibsen. The organizing force joining them was Lady Gregory, assuming a managerial role that would continue. The result

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was general clamor. The Yeats play, for its personification of a feminine Ireland bartering immortality for food, was denounced as heresy by the keepers of a distinctly Catholic public morality of "Irish Ireland." Police protection was required for performance, and newspapers were filled with letters from those outraged by the play's representation of Ireland. The Martyn play, for its extended consideration of agricultural ethics, was denounced as pedestrian by keepers of literary standards, and reviews decried its mechanical exhaustion of a predictable liberal thesis. At issue was both the accuracy of the representation of Ireland on the stage and the formulation of Ireland's proper ambition: the central conflict in nationalism between the pragmatic and the aesthetic. Martyn saw no benefit in alienating the audience or, most important, the Catholic church; he saw the benefit of addressing the audience on its own terms, with its own problems, and with realistic resolutions. Yeats instead took the course of a drama that would be "remote, spiritual, and ideal." These remain options today: for playwrights, for production directors, and for audiences.

All participants in that general clamor of 1899, however critical, were active participants in a debate about a drama with national pretensions and so about the nation itself. This same debate, sustained by Lady Gregory and successors under auspices of the national theater, the Abbey, and the dissenting competitors it inspired, has continued throughout the history of modern Irish drama represented in this volume in the dramatic texts themselves and in the critical texts they have provoked. The most noteworthy public clamors followed the plays of Synge and O'Casey, but the work of Shaw, Behan, and Beckett also demanded, on public performance, a public response to dramatic provocation. Brian Friel's Translations, and indeed the whole Field Day program of which it was the first production, is the most recent installment in this continuing debate. What joins all these plays is not the birthplace of the authors but their collective contemplation of Ireland's identity. These plays dwell on shared national symbols, such as Cathleen Ni Houlihan or the Shan Van Vocht; events, such as the 1798 rising; political movements, such as Home Rule; and emblematic places, such as the political landmark Kilmainham Jail or the open wilds of Connaught. In response to this common framework these plays offer plural commentaries. Irish drama is notable for shifting allegiances to self or to place, to the individual or to the collective obligation, to liberatory aesthetics or to unifying traditions. At issue throughout is the relation between individual writer and national state, a relation that binds even in dissent. "The first duty of a writer," Brendan Behan wrote, "is to let his Fatherland down, otherwise he is no writer."

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