

SYNGE AND 'PROTESTANT COMEDY'

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Humour is the test of morals

- J.M. Synge.¹

Four out of J.M. Synge's seven full-length plays are comedies and many of his playlets are predicated upon a humorous clash of frames that elicit laughter. These clashes of frames can be explained by philosophies of humour and laughter such as the Incongruity Theory (*The Shadow of the Glen* [1903], *The Tinker's Wedding* [1909]) and the Carnavalesque (*The Playboy of the Western World* [1907]). However, there is one theory of laughter and humour that Synge would return to again and again: the Relief Theory. The Relief Theory postulates that laughter is elicited by a physiological approach to the identification of humour. When presented with the comic event, the reader of the comic frame engages in a social transaction between joker and listener, thereby relieving nervous energies, frustrations and anxieties. Synge maintained that,

the heartiness of real and frank laughter is a sign that cannot be mistaken that what we laugh [at] is not out of harmony with that instinct of sanity that we call so many names.²

For Synge laughter was cathartic, and his dramaturgy often attempts to exploit the gap between actions of amusement and reactions of laughter. Synge's comedies ask the spectator to create binaries between objects of ridicule and subjects of social sincerity. An avid reader of Molière and François Rabelais and a keen spectator of melodrama, Synge's comic strategies are marked by extraordinary situations, mistaken identities, ironies and reversals. But Synge wasn't simply a writer of farce. He was a ruthlessly cruel dramatist

¹ J.M. Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2, *Prose*, ed. Alan Price (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 349.

² *Ibid.*

who could easily turn his hand to writing satire; his comedies are farcical but barbs of political commentary critically underwrite them. And so, if the efficacy of farce is in its ability to elicit laughter because the action is very much dependent on there being something at stake, then in Synge's comedies there is something doubly at stake: political intervention. A salient dramaturgical motif in Synge's comedies is to ridicule Ireland's Catholic bourgeoisie and their unswerving adherence to Roman Orthodoxy. Comic dramaturgy such as this is indicative of Synge's rearguard defence of Anglo-Irish sovereignty. Using Synge's unpublished manuscripts, this chapter will consider how Synge wrote *The Well of the Saints* (1905) not just as a comedy that ridiculed Catholic Ireland, but also as a comedy that supported Protestant Ireland. That Protestantism orbited *The Well* can hardly be overstated. By way of example, Synge wrote an impassioned letter to Lady Gregory complaining that 'Miss Laird has been frozen out [of the company] because she is a Protestant'³; Miss Helen S. Laird (Honor Lavelle) was an original member of the Irish National Theatre Society and she played Maurya in the premiere of *Riders to the Sea* (1904), but she was afforded no place in *The Well's* cast. It is true that Synge rejected Protestantism shortly after his eighteenth birthday but then, in 1905 and at the age of thirty six, the dramatist staged a play that supported not just a religious belief that he had supposedly rejected, but a political persuasion that he had spent most of his life resisting. For Synge, Protestantism was not just a residual belief, but also a residual ideology that could cause laughter when clashed with a bourgeois, Catholic frame. But in this clash of frames there was also room for an intervention into the realm of the political; what was at stake was the relief of Roman Catholicism being ridiculed at the expense of Anglo-Irish Protestantism. In order to make such an intervention, Synge's 'Protestant comedy'⁴ as he

³ J.M. Synge, *The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge*. Vol. 1, 1871-1907, ed. Ann Saddlemyer.(Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 94.

⁴ Synge writes this on 25 April, 1896. See, J.M. Synge, *The J.M. Synge Manuscripts from the Library of Trinity College Dublin*: 4417, f.18v. Hereafter quoted as *TCD MS*: and folio number. All quotes come with permission of Trinity College Dublin.

called it, was very much dependent on eliciting laughter in order to relieve Anglo-Irish social frustration and class anxiety. And in order to do that, Synge had to use farcical strategies in order to satirise a newly enfranchised Catholic middle class.

Synge was intensely political and he used humour in order to provoke political reaction. However, Synge is often considered to be a dramatist who was, in W.B. Yeats's famous phrase, 'unfitted to think a political thought'.⁵ Shortly after Synge's untimely death, Poet Laureate John Masefield would recall that Synge:

never played any part in politics: politics did not interest him. He was the only Irishman I have ever met who cared nothing for the political or religious issue [...] his mind was untroubled [...] He would have watched a political or religious riot with gravity, with pleasure in the spectacle, and malice for the folly.⁶

Synge's first biographer, Maurice Bourgeois, would substantiate Masefield's recollection: 'Synge was a man of practically no opinions in an opinion-ridden country. Had he taken an interest in politics, it would have been the interest of the man who watches a dispute for the fun of the thing'.⁷ There is negligence in these comments and one need look no further than the letters of the theatre-patron John Quinn who, just like Masefield, orbited the periphery of Synge's life: 'Synge was a keen observer of political conditions, although he never talked politics.'⁸ Synge was known to be reticent on most topics, choosing to never comment directly on even his closest colleagues' work.⁹ Even Masefield commented on Synge's placid attitude at dinner parties as the dramatist 'sat smoking, pushed back a little from the circle, gravely watching [...] Sometimes I heard his deep, grave voice assenting

⁵ W.B. Yeats, *Explorations: Selected by Mrs. W.B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 319.

⁶ John Masefield, *John M. Synge: A Few Personal Recollections, with Biographical Notes* (Dublin: Cuala, 1971), 6.

⁷ Maurice Bourgeois, *John Millington Synge and The Irish Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1913), 87.

⁸ *New York Public Library Manuscript, John Quinn Papers*. 2513. John Quinn to F.J. Gregg, 1 April, 1909. Hereafter quoted as *NYPL MS*: and folio number. All quotes come from the permission of the New York Public Library.

⁹ Yeats admitted: 'I never knew if he cared for a work of mine, and do not remember that I had from him even a conventional compliment, and yet he had the most perfect modesty and simplicity in daily intercourse.' See, Yeats, *Explorations*, 330.

'Ye-es, ye-es,' with meditative boredom.'¹⁰ Furthermore, Synge's closest friend Stephen MacKenna advocated that he would 'die for the theory' that Synge was intensely political 'but one thing kept him quiet – he hated publicity, cooperation and lies. [...] the lying that gathered round the political movement seemed to him to soil it utterly, and all that had part in it'.¹¹ By his own admission, Synge was unable to 'believe in trying to entice people by a sort of political atmosphere that has nothing to do with *our* real dramatic movement'.¹² But we should also remember that the Directors of the Abbey Theatre were proud members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. So while Synge would stop short of the social anarchism that Sébastien Faure invited him to consider by excusing himself from Maud Gonnet's Parisian *L'Association Irlandaise* (Irish League) in April 1897, maintaining that his 'theory of regeneration for Ireland differs from [hers]',¹³ he was certainly proud to be 'a radical', which he defined as a 'person who wants change root and branch'.¹⁴ Synge's political persuasions, then, had to take a direction other than what he considered to be Gonnet's 'plotting over tea-cups and cakes'¹⁵ and it would be channelled into Protestant comedy.

'The Hate of his Mind'

In September 1889, Synge began to reject his mother's strict diet of evangelical Protestantism. In truth, Mrs. Synge had expected the worst for quite some time; as early

¹⁰ Masfield, *John M. Synge*, 3.

¹¹ Stephen MacKenna, "Synge," *Irish Statesman*, 3 November, 1928, 171.

¹² Synge, *Collected Letters*. Vol. 1: 81-82. J.M. Synge to F.J. Fay, 10 April, 1904. Emphasis added.

¹³ Synge, *Collected Letters*. Vol. 1: 47. J.M. Synge to Maud Gonnet, 6 April, 1897. In privacy to Stephen MacKenna the dramatist admitted that 'he resented that Mdme Gonnet should sometimes exaggerate the sufferings of Ireland before an audience of Frenchmen[.] "What," he said, "must they think of us as a race if they think we submit quietly to such treatment and are too cowardly to rebel"' (See, Stephen MacKenna, *National Library of Ireland Manuscript*: 13,276, f.14. Hereafter quoted as *NLI MS*: 13,276, and folio number). Furthermore, Synge attended Faure's lecture on 15 June, 1895, concluding that Faure was '*très intéressant, mais fou* (very interesting, but *crazy*)'. See, *TCD MS*: 4416, f.77r.

¹⁴ J.M. Synge, *The Stephens-Synge Manuscripts from the Library of Trinity College Dublin*: 6193, f.1663. Hereafter quoted as *TCD SSMS*: and folio number. All quotes come with the permission of Trinity College Dublin.

¹⁵ *NLI MS*: 13,276, f.14

as April 1888, she had written a despairing letter to her son Robert in Argentina, maintaining that she could find 'no spiritual life in my poor Johnnie, there may be some, but it is not visible to my eyes, he is very reserved & shut up on the subject, & if I say any thing to him he never answers me, so I don't know in the least! The hate of his mind – it is a trying[,] state very trying'.¹⁶ Something needed to be done. On 17 September, 1889, the Rev. John Dowse, curate of the church on Zion Road, Rathgar, County Dublin, knocked on the door of the family home. Rev. Dowse took his strict instructions from Mrs. Synge in the drawing room before taking the younger Synge into the parlour, whereupon he advised him to accept the Lord as his saviour.¹⁷ The precocious teenager held his ground and, in December, 1889 Synge informed his mother that he would no longer attend church or partake in Biblical study.¹⁸ Turning to his notebook for 1888-89 we can see how Synge substantiated his crisis of consciousness:

The common idea of God, among religious people, is a Being supremely good delighting in virtue and in nothing nothing else. But if God did, as is generally believed make man in the state that he now exists, and if He guides and directs humanity at the present moment, if He gave us our intellects, can we believe that He does not require us to use them? Did He give Shakespeare or Garrick their abilities and not intend them to write and act? If He gives us our minds it is clear, to me at least that He wishes us to use them, if He wishes us to use them it is a sin not to do so, and a virtue to fulfill [sic] his wish.¹⁹

Synge's reading of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* at the age of twenty-four consummated his suspicion towards Protestantism²⁰ and after reading Darwin's implicit critique of the Lord as the Divine Creator he began to 'read works of Christian evidence at first with pleasure, soon with doubt, and at last in

¹⁶ TCD SSMS: 6220, f.15. Kathleen Synge to Robert Anthony Synge, 16 April, 1888.

¹⁷ W.J. McCormack, *Fool of the Family: A Life of J.M. Synge* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), 77.

¹⁸ See, Synge, *Collected Letters*. Vol. 1: xix.

¹⁹ TCD MS: 4371. ff.48r-49r.

²⁰ Synge claimed that when he 'was about fourteen [he] obtained a book of Darwin's' (Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2: 10). This is a retrospective analysis. Synge's diary for 30 September 1895, reads 'Began the Origin of Species' (TCD MS: 4416, f.129v).

some cases with derision.²¹ Refusing to attend Bible classes or discuss Protestantism with his family, Synge was truly isolated not just from his family but also from his own class. However, while Synge claimed that Christianity remained ‘a difficulty and occasioned terror to me for many years’²² and that he had no time for talk of ‘tedious matters of theology’,²³ caution should be heeded over reductive claims that Synge completely rejected Protestantism. As Synge was dying on his own – albeit surrounded by his nurses – the Bible was firmly pressed against his chest and he repeated a mantra over and over again: ‘God have mercy on me, God forgive me.’²⁴ Protestantism, then, was something that Synge played hide and seek with all his life, and as long as Synge held a lingering attachment to evangelical Protestantism, he also held an attachment to his Anglo-Irish Ascendancy upbringing.

Synge first began to write a comedy that strictly advocated Protestantism in 1903: *The Well of the Saints*. The play would go through several drafts until its premiere in 1905 and, concomitant with this particular advocacy of Protestantism is his 1904 work, *Bride and Kathleen: A Play of '98*, a playlet that Frank Fay commissioned. Fay feared that the spectators at the Abbey Theatre were of the opinion that the company’s theatre practice was ‘irreligious and politically unsound’²⁵ and so, quite surprisingly, Fay asked the rock ‘n’ roll kid of the Abbey Theatre to allay his fears. Synge presented two women fleeing from rebels and English soldiers: Bride, a ‘Papist Woman’ and Kathleen, a ‘Protestant Woman’.²⁶ Both women are on the run – Bride is fleeing the Republican rebels whereas Kathleen is fleeing the English soldiers. At this juncture, it is reasonable to postulate that Bride is, in fact, a supporter of Unionism (a political persuasion traditionally aligned with

²¹ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2: 11.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 1, 56.

²⁴ McCormack, *Fool of the Family*, 383.

²⁵ Frank Fay, quoted in J.M. Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3, *Plays*, Book 1, ed Ann Saddlemyer (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 215.

²⁶ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 216.

Protestantism) and conversely, the Protestant Kathleen is a supporter of Republicanism (a political persuasion traditionally aligned with Catholicism). Yeats, who was presented with the playlet, summarised the action between the two women as a 'quarrel about religion, abusing the Pope or Queen Elizabeth and Henry VIII, but in low voices, for the one fears to be ravished by soldiers, the other by the rebels'.²⁷ According to Yeats, the play ended with 'one woman [deciding to go] out because she would sooner any fate than such wicked company.'²⁸ That Synge would adopt such a political persuasion is not surprising, which is why the playlet ends abruptly with Kathleen's feline defence of Protestantism:

BRIDE. Heretic? What made them call you a heretic?

KATHLEEN. What is it they call any good Christian Protestant but a heretic now²⁹

Synge is defending Protestantism against claims of heresy; sentiments in this playlet are thinly disguised as Kathleen's, especially when the dramatist was a staunch supporter of the Protestant Irish Nationalists: Henry Grattan, Robert Emmet and Charles Stewart Parnell.³⁰ The irony that is involved in such a comic exchange exploits the transaction between colonial dominance and postcolonial dissidence, precisely because Bride and Kathleen do not conform to stereotypical character types. This is a situation comedy that is very much dependent on mistaken identities; the dramatist thought that it would have been amusing to see a Catholic Republican fleeing from the 1798 rebels while a Protestant supports them. But the comedy is underwritten by sincerity: Synge's privileging of Protestantism. Eric Weitz has suggested that laughter 'offers a most dramatic way of

²⁷ W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 319.

²⁸ Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 319-20.

²⁹ *TCD MS*: 4383, f.11v.

³⁰ After *The Playboy* disturbances Synge drafted (but never published) *A Letter to the Gaelic League by a Hedge Schoolmaster* where he stated: 'I believe in Ireland. I believe the nation that made a place in history by seventeen centuries of manhood, a nation that has begotten Grattan and Emmet and Parnell will not be brought to complete insanity in these last days by what is senile and slobbering in the doctrine of the Gaelic League.' See, Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2: 399.

subduing a group of people',³¹ but the rebel Synge never got the chance to subdue his audience. Left unfinished in the archive, the playlet was never performed because it was everything that Fay was looking to avoid: it was irreligious and politically hostile to a predominantly Catholic, bourgeois audience. This is why Gregory's summation of Synge's political persuasion offers a greater degree of critical insight: 'he seemed to look on politics and reforms with a sort of tolerant indifference, though he spoke once of something that has happened as "the greatest tragedy since Parnell's death."³² Synge often intervened into the realm of the political if he could support Anglo-Irish Protestant rebels. Like Kathleen, Synge advocated for Republicanism with Protestant hegemony, and he thought he could achieve such political intervention by using comedy to demonstrate that Protestants could lead Ireland's postcolonial project. *Bride and Kathleen: A Play of '98* should be seen as a precursor to *The Well of the Saints*, because in that play Synge uses farcical comic strategies in order to advocate for the Protestant religion over Catholicism and, in the Ireland of Synge's time, a satirical conceit such as this was extremely provocative. Not all humour elicits laughter.

'Careless Irish Humour'³³

The provenance of *The Well of the Saints* (hereafter, *The Well*) lies in two sources, one primary and the other secondary. For the purposes of considering Synge as a comic playwright, it is the secondary source that is of critical concern.³⁴ The secondary source is

³¹ Eric Weitz, *The Power of Laughter: Comedy and Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004), 5.

³² Lady Gregory, *NYPL MS, Foster-Murphy Collection: TS Carbon (312), Box 5, f.4.*

³³ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2: 398.

³⁴ The primary source that informs *The Well's* dramaturgy is a story that was told to Synge on Aran by Old Mourteen (Máirtín Ó Conghaile). Old Mourteen took Synge to the church of the *Ceathair Aluinn* (The Four Beautiful Persons) where the dramatist was shown a holy well that was said to cure blindness and epilepsy. As the two men sat looking at the well, another islander (nameless to the archive) approached Synge and told him of the well's miraculous effect on a blind child from County Sligo whose mother dreamt of the well. Both mother and son arrived on *Inis Mór* by curragh, whereupon she 'walked up to this well, and she kneeled down and began saying her prayers. Then she put her hand out for the water,

Andrieu de la Vigne's *Moralité de l'aveugle et du boiteux*, which Synge read in Professor Louis Petit de Julleville's *Histoire du théâtre en France: La Comédie et les Mœurs en France au Moyen Age*.³⁵ Synge first began studying with de Julleville in 1895,³⁶ but eight years later, when Synge began writing *The Well* he returned to his former Professor's work and made notes on the comic morality tale that was first performed in 1456.³⁷ Synge's verbatim notes on "*Moralités Religieuses*" (Religious Morality) include the following summary of de la Vigne's play:

La moralité d'André de la Vigne s'ouvre au moment où le saint vient d'expirer. Son corps est resté exposé au fond du theatre, et l'on va tout à l'heure l'emporter à l'église en procession solennelle. Deux mendiants sont en scène; l'un d'eux est aveugle, et ne marche qu'en tâtonnant, l'autre est boiteux, et gît au milieu de la route. Mais n'ayone pas trop grand' pitié d'eux. Ce son deux paresseux, deux ivrognes; quoiqu'ils gémissent d'une voix plaintive; l'aveugle en distant:

*L'aumosne au povre disetteux,
Qui jamais nul jour ne vit goutte.*

et le paralytique:

*Faites quelque bien au boiteux
Qui bouger ne peult pour la goutte.*³⁸

and put it on his eyes, and the moment it touched him he called out: "O mother, look at the pretty flowers!" See, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2: 57.

³⁵ See, L. Petit de Julleville, *Histoire du Théâtre en France: La Comédie et les Mœurs en France au Moyen Age* (Paris: Librairie Léopold Cerf, 1886), 100-103.

³⁶ Synge first began studying with de Julleville on Monday 29 April, 1895. His diary simply states: 'cours de Julleville' (TCD MS: 4416, f 54v).

³⁷ Synge's diary for 3 October, 1903 records thus: 'Petit de Julleville[,] *Theatre en France* [sic]' (TCD MS: 4422, f.21v). For Synge's detailed notes on Andrieu de la Vigne's *Moralité de l'aveugle et du boiteux*, see, TCD MS: 4393 36r-34r.

³⁸ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 265. My translation from Synge's notes: The morality tale of André de la Vigne opens at the moment when the saint is about to expire. His body is left exposed at the bottom of the theatre, and it was quickly carried away to church in a solemn procession. Two beggars are in the scene, one of them is blind, and only walks around groping, the other is limping, and lies down in the middle of the street. But don't have too much sympathy for them. These are two lazy souls, two drunks; be that as it may they moan in a plaintive voice; the blind one saying: Alms to the poor beggars / Who cannot live a single day without a drop of spirits. / and the paralytic: /Be good to the lame / Who cannot move for the drink.³⁸

Clowning such as this runs right to heart of *The Well* as Synge focuses his attention on the trials and tribulations of two blind beggars, Mary and Martin Doul who are temporarily relieved of their blindness by a saint.

In *The Well* the Saint is not actually a saint, but a tramp that exploits the Catholic laity's residual attachment to Popular Catholicism (a syncretism of Roman Catholicism and Pre-Christian beliefs). It is true that individual saints first conducted the evangelisation of the Irish populace and, as J.N. Hillgarth has suggested, these saints were 'holy men who lived a life which alternated periods as hermits with periods as wandering preachers'.³⁹ This is precisely the character that Synge draws in *The Well*, where the Saint is characterised as 'a wandering Friar'.⁴⁰ However, the distinction between *The Well* and the material conditions of fifth century Ireland that Hillgarth describes is that Synge set the play in 'some lonely mountainous district on the east of Ireland, one or more centuries ago'.⁴¹ This is Greenane, near Ballinatone, County Wicklow (the play briefly held the title *The Crossroads of Grianan*)⁴² and if the play was first performed in 1905 then Synge sets the play anytime between 1705 and 1805. Irish Popular Catholicism in the eighteenth century placed a strong emphasis on the lives of the saints, which is why Martin Doul says that he has 'heard the priests a power of times making great talk and praises of the beauty of the saints'.⁴³ However, while an emphasis was placed upon holy wells and saints, the efficacy of this belief was predicated upon a pseudo-mythology of saints in fifth-century Ireland not, as Synge dramatises, a saint that arrives in a community out of the blue; in essence, the saint is at least ten centuries too late. Synge's comic implication, then, is clear: the Saint in

³⁹ J.N. Hillgarth, *Christianity and Paganism, 350-750: The Conversion of Western Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 118.

⁴⁰ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 69.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 262. Synge's letter to Max Meyerfeld points out that the space and place of the play is 'Bállinatone, Grianan'. See, *NLI MS: 778*, f.6v, J.M. Synge to Max Meyerfeld, 12 August, 1905.

⁴³ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 85.

The Well is akin to a wandering saint from the fifth century and his Saint is similarly faced with an Irish populace that gives considerable credence to those backward pre-Christian sensibilities found in Popular Catholicism: the ability for holy groundwater to cure blindness. In this comic framing Synge uses the implied efficacy of Popular Catholicism's rituals (holy water's curing of blindness) to satirise the belief in the implied efficacy of Catholic rituals, which is why the ritual ultimately fails: the Douls regain their sight. In this clash of comic frames, the Saint may be implicit in the humour, but the satire is directed at the Catholic Church's appropriation of pre-Christian beliefs. The legitimacy of the humour, then, is very much dependent on Catholicism being the butt of the joke. However, the Roman orthodoxy of Synge's Saint is in considerable doubt; as Mary Doul suggests, the saint is 'a simple fellow, and it's no lie'.⁴⁴ The character of the Saint, then, has a mistaken identity and this mistaken identity is the fulcrum upon which humour in *The Well* balances because it affords Synge the opportunity to construct the Catholic community in Greenane as one that believes in the miraculous powers of a tramp.

Timmy, a blacksmith that proves to be the Saint's closest ally throughout the play, heralds the Saint's arrival in Greenane. However, while Timmy may claim that the Saint is a servant of 'the Almighty God',⁴⁵ in an earlier draft of *The Well* these words are visibly struck out in pencil and right up until the penultimate draft of the play Timmy claims that the Saint is 'a holy man' and a 'sort of saint I think they call him'.⁴⁶ The Saint seems to be a precursor to the charlatan of *The Playboy of the Western World*. In that comedy, Christy Mahon is followed by a group of Mayo girls that are 'after walking four miles to be listening to [him]'⁴⁷ carrying presents such as 'a brace of duck's eggs', 'a pat of butter', 'a little cut of cake' and 'a little laying pullet' that was 'crushed at the fall of night by the curate's car';⁴⁸ in

⁴⁴ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 83.

⁴⁵ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 81.

⁴⁶ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 80.

⁴⁷ J.M. Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 4, *Plays*, Book 2, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1982), 107.

⁴⁸ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 4: 99.

a similar fashion, the 'young girls' of Greenane are 'walking after the saint' while 'carrying things in their hands, and they walking as easy as you'd see a child walk, who'd have a dozen eggs in her bib'.⁴⁹ And just like Christy, who says that 'this is a fine country for young lovely girls',⁵⁰ the Saint believes that 'young girls' are the 'cleanest holy people you'd see walking the world'.⁵¹ If the Saint has a mistaken identity, then commensurate with this farcical strategy is the comedy of the situation that Synge places his characters in. In this situation comedy there is something at stake: the efficacy of the cure for the Douls' blindness, which inevitably fails. And when the comedy of the situation is coupled with the Saint's mistaken identity, comic ironies and reversals are soon summoned to exploit humour.

The cure of the Douls' blindness may only be fleeting but it presents Synge with a frame in which he can present gags, jokes and routines that are indicative of situation comedy. According to Irish hagiography those members of the laity that offended a saint's honour either through the telling of lies or by the stealing of his or her crozier and/or bell were said to be struck down by divine power. Conversely, those that venerated the saint and his/her power were said to be miraculously cured of whatever ailed them. Irish folk belief attached considerable importance to the saint's Vestments, which were said to 'remain dry in a rainstorm or when thrown into water'.⁵² However, the populace of Greenane fail to abide by this belief and Molly Byrne attempts to mock the Saint's divine power by asking Martin Doul to 'put his big cloak on you, the way we'd see how you'd look, and you a saint of the Almighty God'.⁵³ In a similar tone, the Saint admits that the only vestment he wears is a bunch of 'old sacks, and skin covering [his] bones'.⁵⁴ The Douls are expected to offer their respect to the Saint's vestments but they don't, thus offering

⁴⁹ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 83.

⁵⁰ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 4: 107.

⁵¹ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 83.

⁵² Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *The Hero in Irish Folk History* (Dublin: Macmillan, 1985), 46.

⁵³ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 85.

⁵⁴ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 101.

comic irony. Synge struggled to give saints the veneration that the laity gives them. Turning to his undergraduate notebook for Michaelmas Term 1899 at Trinity College Dublin Synge, who had been steadily reading Irish hagiography as part of his Gentleman's Degree, was finding the reading list less than interesting:

Nov. 23. I am sick of the ascetic twaddle of the saints. I will not deny my masculine existence nor rise, if I can rise, by facile abnegation. I despise the hermit and the monk and pity only the adulterer and the drunkard. There is one world of souls and no flesh and no devil.⁵⁵

The character of the Saint in *The Well* is informed by this logic as Synge ridicules Catholicism. Synge's conjecture is clear, saints should not be seen (as they are in the Catholic faith) as canonised and virtuous figures that intercede through prayer, but everyday people. In this way *The Well* may appear to measure appositely against the Incongruity Theory of humour and laughter; to postulate a saint as not being commensurate with the saintly is incongruous. However, it is because Synge chose to clearly define the religious persuasion of the Saint, that the Relief Theory of humour and laughter can readily explain *The Well's* comic dramaturgy. By means of comic performance, what Synge is relieving is his repressed desires that were founded on his own class anxieties and he does so by religious proxy: Protestantism.

'The Saint is Really a Protestant!'⁵⁶

Reflecting on Dion Boucicault's stage-Irishman, Synge lamented 'how much the modern stage has lost in substituting impersonal wit for personal humour'.⁵⁷ It is not that Synge wanted a return to 'the careless Irish humour of which everyone has had too much'⁵⁸ but

⁵⁵ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2: 34.

⁵⁶ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: xxii.

⁵⁷ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2: 398.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

rather, he called for a return to the stock routines of situation comedy that marks Boucicault's melodrama. Placing ordinary characters in extraordinary situations was, in Synge's opinion, universally humorous because 'all decadence is opposed to true humour.'⁵⁹ And yet Synge also thought that 'no vice is humorous',⁶⁰ that is to say the object of amusement must force the spectator to question his/her coordinates of his/her moral compass. Martin Doul's slapstick clowning as he attempts to woo Molly Byrne is indicative of Synge's ability to allow his comedy to dangerously border on the immoral; Martin Doul '*takes her by the arm and tries to pull her away softly to the right*' while Molly screams 'leave me go, Martin Doul'.⁶¹ Synge was fully aware that laughter is a social phenomenon and that his comic compass had immoral coordinates. But to Synge this mattered not. Above all else, Synge maintained that 'humour is the test of morals'.⁶² The legitimacy of humour in *The Well* was certainly a test of morals.

After the premier of *The Well*, Willie Fay received an objectionable letter from Abbey actress Maire Garvey, who wrote to announce that Synge's latest play was guilty of debunking Catholic priests. Fay subsequently passed on Garvey's sentiments to the dramatist, who took exception to sentiment:

Dear Mr. Fay,

I have just come home from a long day in the country and found your letter waiting for me.

[...]

In your letter you quote your objector saying '*these things are not true*'. What put the smile into my head was a scene I saw not long ago in Galway when I saw a young man behaving most indecently to a girl on the road side while two priests sat near by on a seat looking out to sea and pretending not to see what was going on. [...] The way the two priests sat stolidly looking out to sea with this screaming row going on at their elbows tickled my fancy and seemed to me rather typical of many attitudes of the Irish church party...the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 349.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 117.

⁶² Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2: 349.

man in question – in my play – may have been a tinker, stranger, sailor, cattle-drover – God knows what – types with which no priest would dream of interfering. Tell Miss G. – or whoever it may be – that I write of Irish country life I know to be true and I most emphatically will not change a syllable of it because A. B. or C. may think they know better than I do.⁶³

Synge readily admits that ‘although the priests are learned men, and great scholars, they don’t understand the life of the people the same as another man would’.⁶⁴ Synge’s task, then, was to understand the politics of the people, but in *The Well*, these politics are refracted through the kaleidoscope of his Ascendancy gaze. Six months before *The Well* opened at the Abbey, Synge was anticipating organised resistance under the guise of what he classified as ‘a Neo-patriotic-Catholic clique’⁶⁵ and in anticipation of this resistance the dramatist made it his intention to satirise Catholic bourgeois sentiment:

MARY DOUL. Let the two of you not torment me at all. [*She goes out left, with her head in the air*].

MARTIN DOUL. [*stops work and looks after her*]. Well, isn’t it a queer thing she can’t keep herself two days without looking on my face?

TIMMY. [*jeeringly*] Looking on your face is it? And she after going by with her head turned the way you’d see a priest going where there’d be a drunken man in the side ditch talking with a girl.

And so, ‘on the spur of the moment’, Synge told Miss Garvey ‘that the said man in the side ditch was a Protestant and that if the priest had touched him he would have got six months with hard labour for common assault.’⁶⁶ Synge’s jokes were falling flat. Shocked and appalled by Synge’s suggestion that a priest would turn a blind eye to a drunk Protestant in a ditch with a (presumably) Catholic girl, Garvey ‘seemed to have thought that [Synge] was sneering at the priest for not doing his duty’, to which the dramatist replied that the

⁶³ *NLI MS*: 13,617, ff.7r-7v. J.M. Synge to W.G. Fay, February 1905. Synge does not stipulate the date on which he wrote the letter, apart from ‘Thursday night’. Certainly, during this month Synge was in Dublin. See, Synge, *Collected Letters*. Vol. 1: xxiv. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 2: 239.

⁶⁵ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: xxii.

⁶⁶ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: xxiv.

very idea had 'never entered [his] head'.⁶⁷ However, to return to Synge's letter to Willie Fay, Synge pointed out that 'the man in question' in the ditch was a type 'with which no priest would dream of interfering,'⁶⁸ the suggestion being that a Catholic priest would not meddle in a Protestant's affairs. Joseph Holloway was also offended by Synge's disrespect for the Catholic Church and he failed to stomach the passage 'about the priest and the pair in the ditch'⁶⁹ because it contained 'more than a slight touch of irreverence'⁷⁰ and that was without considering the fact that Synge used language 'as freely as a coal-lever or a Billingsgate-fishwife'.⁷¹ Willie Fay, the Abbey's resident producer, was in a tailspin. 'I realised', Fay writes in his dairy, 'that every character in the play from the Saint to Timmy the Smith was bad tempered', and so he asked Synge if 'the Saint might be made into a good-natured easy going-man' but 'Synge would not budge. He said he wanted to write "like a monochrome painting, all in shades of the one colour". I argued that all drama depended on contrast and on tension. All in vain.'⁷² And the man in the ditch wasn't the only Protestant in the play.

Synge had mooted the Saint's religious persuasion as early as 1896. Between February and April of that year, Synge found himself in Rome and while staying in Rome he quickly adapted a daily routine: Italian language lessons with Signor Conte Polloni and Italian literature lessons at the Collegio Romano in the morning, before afternoon excursions to the Vatican to admire the Pietà, the Sistine Chapel and, on one occasion, the Pope.⁷³ The week before Synge quit Rome for Paris, his diary reads thus: 'Vaticano Statute & Sistina. Protestant comedy';⁷⁴ even at the spiritual home of the Catholic Church

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Joseph Holloway, *NLI MS*: 1803, 11 January, 1905, f.23.

⁷⁰ Holloway, *NLI MS*: 1803, 11 January, 1905, f.23.

⁷¹ Holloway, *NLI MS*: 1803, 11 January, 1905, f.23.

⁷² W.G. Fay and Catherine Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre: An Autobiographical Record* (London: Rich and Cowan, 1935), 168.

⁷³ Synge writes this on 3 March, 1896. See, *TCD MS*: 4417, f.11r.

⁷⁴ Synge writes this on 25 April, 1896. See, *TCD MS*: 4417, f.18v.

he was thinking of how to write a Protestant comedy and even though the diary entry is laconic and the Protestantism of the Saint is not directly alluded to in the play, Protestantism as subtext is mobilised because, as the dramatist admitted to his friend and walking companion, Padraic Colum: ‘the Saint is really a Protestant!’⁷⁵ This is why Timmy the smith informs the Greenane parishioners that ‘there’s a holy man below’;⁷⁶ according to the Protestant religion, saints are considered to be holy men and/or women; it is only in the Catholic Church that that they are revered through canonisation. Like Sean O’Casey, Synge was a satirist of pomp and while in Rome the dramatist became fascinated with the ostentatious ritual performances that mark the orthodoxy of Roman Catholicism. From that point on, it was only a matter of time before the dramatist would write a comedy that clashed Protestantism with Catholicism. Turning again to Synge’s notes from de Julleville’s *Histoire du théâtre en France: La Comédie et les Mœurs en France au Moyen Age*, it is reasonable to presume that Synge had been thinking about writing a comedy utilising Protestantism for quite some time because, as he recorded from de Julleville, ‘theatre [can be] used by [a] Protestant to attack the Pope’.⁷⁷

In *The Well*, the Catholic laity are held up for ridicule and satirised for believing in the comical powers of a Protestant saint. Comic dramaturgy such as this allowed Synge to pay lip service to Protestantism as a religion, while at the same time advocating Anglo-Irish socio-politics. Just like Kathleen in *Bride and Kathleen: A Play of ’98*, Synge was an advocate of the grammar of Nationalism only if his own class articulated its language. Synge’s comedy, a seditious cocktail of farce and satire had succeeded in doing just that. At least Mrs. Synge could take some comfort in her son’s dramatisation of a Protestant saint and as she remarked to her family, if holy water could be upset from the Saint’s hands, then her son’s ‘associations with Nationalists had at least not brought him under

⁷⁵ Synge, *Collected Letters*. Vol. 1: 94. J.M. Synge to Lady Gregory, 31 September, 1904.

⁷⁶ Synge, *Collected Works*. Vol. 3: 80.

⁷⁷ *TCD MS*: 4393, f.5r.

the thumb of Rome.’⁷⁸ However, the humour inherent in Synge’s dramaturgy was not conducive towards laughter. Synge may have found relief, but his predominantly Catholic middle class audience certainly did not. *The Well* failed to pull in the punters; the ridiculing of Catholicism at Protestantism’s expense was no laughing mater.⁷⁹ But as Synge wrote to the Editor of the *Irish Times*, you were either laughing with him or at him: ‘that is often the case, I think, with comedy’.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Mrs. K. Synge, quoted in *J.M. Synge: 1871-1909*, ed. David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 180.

⁷⁹ Fay concluded that: ‘[t]he great majority, thinking of religion and themselves, abominated the play on both counts. It had bad press and we lost money and audience over it’. See, Fay and Carswell, *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre*, 169. Similarly, George Roberts remembered that ‘[t]he play was not at all popular on its first performance. At that time we were not accustomed to very large audiences, but there was an exceptionally small audience for the first performance of “The Well of the Saints.” The second and third performances were even worse. I remember counting the people in the house on one of these nights and there were less than 20 present’. See, George Roberts, “Memoirs of George Roberts,” *Irish Times*, 2 August, 1955, 5.

⁸⁰ Synge, *Collected Letters*. Vol. 1: 286. J.M. Synge to the Editor of *Irish Times*, 30 January, 1907.

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