

PLAYBOY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD? SYNGE AND THE CLASSICS

Michael Lloyd
University College Dublin

The Irish literary revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of which John Millington Synge (1871–1909) was a leading figure, had a rather ambiguous relationship to the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. The classical tradition was not only a potential rival to the indigenous culture promoted by the Gaelic revival, but was also identified with Unionists such as J.P. Mahaffy (Professor of Ancient History at Trinity from 1871, and Provost from 1914). Mahaffy frequently expressed his contempt for the Irish language and the Gaelic revival, and his views on these matters were informed by his interpretation of Greek and Roman history.¹ It would therefore not be surprising if, as W.B. Stanford argued, ‘classical quotations and appeals to classical precedents became rarer’ towards the end of the nineteenth century in Ireland.² Fiona Macintosh has however argued convincingly that the classical tradition retained its relevance in this period. Nationalists could find a kindred spirit of freedom in ancient Athens, or compare Ireland to Greece under the Romans in suffering at the hands of stronger but culturally inferior neighbours.³

Synge showed little interest in Classics in his schooldays. The biography by his nephew Edward Stephens reveals that around the age of 16 he was mainly interested in natural history, music, and theology: ‘Latin, Greek, and mathematics he learnt with his tutor and, though quite willing [**end of p. 52**] to bring his knowledge up to the standard necessary for entering the University, he made no attempt to treat any of them as honours subjects’.⁴ A little later, his preference for being out in the open air was restricted by having to work towards the entrance examination for Trinity: ‘Greek and Latin he found difficult. He had not at this time evolved a settled system of learning languages; the strain of remaining at work, while he was filled with an unquenchable longing to be in the open air, disturbed his thoughts and he had no teacher to focus his attention on his books’.⁵ Nevertheless, despite these somewhat unpromising beginnings, he enjoyed reading Greek drama in his first year at Trinity (1888/9), and was also delighted by Homer.⁶ This was the background to his study of Irish and his discovery of the epic tales of ancient Ireland: ‘For him they had the same force in their references to Tara Hill and other places he knew as the Homeric stories might have had for a Greek in their references to the blue water, the shores and islands of the Eastern Mediterranean’.⁷

Comparative studies of Greek and Celtic mythologies reinforced Synge’s views of an affinity between Greece and Ireland. He attended lectures in Paris in 1897/8 and 1902 by Henri d’Arbois de Jubainville (1827–1910), the first Professor of Celtic Languages and Literature at the Collège de France, on ‘a comparison between the ancient Irish and ancient Greek civilizations’.⁸ The lectures confirmed for Synge the significance of Irish heroic literature in a European context. While in Paris, he also

¹ See Mairs (2010), 55, 58; Stanford & McDowell (1971), 104–6.

² Stanford (1984 [1976]), 219.

³ Macintosh (1994), 1–18.

⁴ Carpenter (1974), 39.

⁵ Carpenter (1974), 42–3.

⁶ Carpenter (1974), 66; cf. Macintosh (1994), 3 n. 12.

⁷ Carpenter (1974), 66.

⁸ Carpenter (1974), 114; cf. Kiberd (1993), 32–6; Macintosh (1994), 10.

met Stephen MacKenna, the translator of Plotinus' *Enneads* and a great influence on Yeats.⁹ [end of p. 53]

In *Ireland and the Classical Tradition*, W.B. Stanford is sceptical about Classical influences on Synge's plays: 'His own original writings show very little influence from the classics, though his *Riders to the Sea* may owe some of its form to Greek tragedy'.¹⁰ The relevance of the laments of Euripides' Hecuba for her dead children in *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women* is indeed widely recognized, and need not be discussed in detail here.¹¹ Various other features of the play recall Greek tragedy. It is structured in terms of onstage response to offstage events, and is pervaded by a sense of doom and of the arbitrary quality of fate. The keening women have something of the character of a Greek tragic chorus. *Playboy* similarly observes some of the formal features of Greek tragedy. It has a single location, with offstage action described by onstage characters, and takes place within a 24-hour period (albeit with a night in the middle). The crowd functions as a kind of chorus in Act III.

The relevance of Greek drama to *The Playboy of the Western World* is more open to question, since parricide as such does not necessarily evoke the mythical character Oedipus let alone Sophocles' play *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Possible connexions between the two plays are not much discussed in the secondary literature, and Stanford is not the only scholar to have questioned the influence of Greek drama on the play. Nicholas Grene, for example, includes Oedipus with Cuchullain and Jesus Christ when he writes, '[o]ne of the most inflexible and unhelpful critical attitudes involves the detection of concealed analogies'.¹²

A compelling argument in favour of the relevance of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is its high profile around the time of *Playboy* (1907). Yeats noted that the Lord Chamberlain had [end of p. 54] blocked a proposed production of the play in London in 1904, and his plans for a production at the Abbey proceeded intermittently until 1912. His version was eventually premièred in 1926.¹³ Yeats and Synge had a famous debate about whether the Abbey should perform 'foreign masterpieces' as well as new Irish plays. Synge agreed that some plays, including *Oedipus Tyrannus*, could justifiably be put on 'because they illuminate our work but for that reason only' (letter to Lady Gregory, 13 December 1906).¹⁴ The great French actor Jean Mounet-Sully made over 100 appearances in the role of Oedipus between 1881 and his death in 1916, touring all over Europe.¹⁵ In conclusion, there can be no doubt that *Oedipus Tyrannus* was too prominent both in European theatre more broadly, and in Irish theatre in particular, for it not to be an inevitable point of reference for a play dealing with the theme of parricide. In this context, it is not unreasonable to see *Playboy* as Synge's idiosyncratic response to the possibility of an *Oedipus* at the Abbey.

Parricide is the most obvious point of contact between *Playboy* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, but there is also the fundamental difference that Christy has not in fact killed his father at all. Oedipus falls from the high esteem in which he is held at the beginning of the play when it emerges that he has killed his father Laius, whereas the

⁹ Carpenter (1974), 105.

¹⁰ Stanford (1976), 96.

¹¹ See (e.g.) Skelton (1971), 49–50; Arkins (2005), 159.

¹² Grene (1975), 133.

¹³ See Macintosh (2008), 527–30.

¹⁴ Saddlemyer (1983), 261; cf. Roche (2001), 102–3.

¹⁵ See Hall & Macintosh (2005), 521–6; Macintosh (2009), 87–95, 102–7.

boast of parricide elevates the apparently insignificant Christy to the status of hero.¹⁶ He is proud of his exploit, and is admired for it by others. Pegeen elicits the boast of parricide from him by taunting, 'You did [end of p. 55] nothing at all. A soft lad the like of you wouldn't slit the windpipe of a screeching sow' (*CW IV*, 71). Jimmy is impressed by his prowess when he discovers what Christy has done: 'Now, by the grace of god, herself will be safe this night, with a man killed his father holding danger from the door' (*CW IV*, 77). Christy continues to insist as he accepts the prizes for his success in the sports that killing his father was his main achievement: 'Thank you kindly, the lot of you. But you'd say it was little only I did this day if you'd seen me a while since striking my one single blow' (*CW IV*, 147). This paradoxical reversal of Oedipus' tragic fall is central to the comedy of *Playboy*. The structural connexion is reinforced by more specific parallels. Jocasta's description of Laius to Oedipus ironically stresses the family resemblance: 'He was dark, but just beginning to have grizzled hair, and his appearance was not far from yours' (*OT* 742–3). Widow Quin gives this a comic twist when she describes Christy to Old Mahon: 'A hideous, fearful villain, and the spit of you' (*CW IV*, 123). There is repeated speculation in *Oedipus Tyrannus* that Laius might have been killed by robbers, as when Jocasta says: 'And he, as the story goes, was murdered one day by foreign robbers at the place where three roads meet' (*OT* 715–16). A similar possibility is raised by Widow Quin when she questions Old Mahon:

WIDOW QUIN [*taking his head in both hands and examining it with extreme delight*]: That was a great blow. And who hit you? A robber maybe?

MAHON: It was my own son hit me, and he the divil a robber or anything else but a dirty, stuttering lout (*CW IV*, 121).

Finally, there is a similarity in the description of the blow itself. Oedipus tells Jocasta: 'this hand struck him with a stick, and he rolled backwards right out of the wagon, and I killed them all' (*OT* 810–13). Christy describes the deed as follows: [end of p. 56] 'I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt or groan from him at all' (*CW IV*, 73). Both descriptions are concise and matter-of-fact, and have a similar tripartite structure: (i) the blow; (ii) the collapse of the victim; (iii) the ruthless and comprehensive nature of the retaliation, expressed by Oedipus in terms of his annihilation of Laius' entire entourage and by Christy in terms of the silence of Mahon and the lack of need for a further blow.

Anthony Roche argues for a further similarity: 'In both plays, the parricide is in the past and can only be approached through a verbal reenactment; each work dramatises a making present of that event and a consequent disruption of the present order by that act'.¹⁷ This is true, although it also points to a significant difference between the two plays. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the murder of Laius is treated as an event in the distant past, as in the words of Oedipus which made such an impression on Freud: 'Where shall the track of an ancient guilt, hard to make out, be found?' (*OT* 108–9).¹⁸ Christy attacked his father 'Tuesday was a week' (*CW IV*, 73), and has since been on the road for eleven days (*CW IV*, 79). This suggests that the point in the Oedipus myth which is relevant to *Playboy* is the actual arrival of Oedipus in Thebes,

¹⁶ Cf. Arkins (2005), 159: 'Synge's *Playboy* transposes the tragic theme of *King Oedipus* into a comic mode: Christy Mahon has *not* killed his father, but by acquiring the false reputation of being a parricide, he becomes a hero'.

¹⁷ Roche (2001), 103–4.

¹⁸ Freud (1976 [1900]), 363.

and not the period on which Sophocles focuses in which Oedipus has long since been established as king. Mary Rose Sullivan, in her interesting discussion of the relationship between the two plays, argues that *Playboy* covers both the creation of Christy's myth ('the power of a lie', *CW* IV, 165) and its destruction. 'Both plays deal with a man who enters a society as a stranger to everyone—even to himself—to be hailed as a savior by that society because of some distant epic deed that has renewed [end of p. 57] the barren land; however, in the course of attempting to learn the facts about his own identity and the mysterious deed, the hero uncovers a truth which proves too harsh for the society to accept—with the result that he is forced to leave it as he came, a stranger and alone'.¹⁹ The heroes of both plays are ultimately able to set aside comforting myths, and face the truth in all its harshness.

Thebes is sick with the plague at the beginning of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and this echoes the persecution by the Sphinx from which Oedipus rescued the city long ago (*OT* 35–9). There are numerous indications that the world depicted in *Playboy* is also sick, despite its occasional redeeming features and the gusto with which Synge represents it. Pegeen ridicules Shawn Keogh's notion that the Pope would take the slightest interest in such a place: 'It's a wonder, Shaneen, the Holy Father'd be taking notice of the likes of you, for if I was him, I wouldn't bother with this place where you'll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits. We're a queer lot these times to go troubling the Holy Father on his sacred seat) (*CW* IV, 59). Elsewhere, there are references to the menace of unemployed soldiers from the recently ended Boer War (*CW* IV, 63, 75), the 'broken harvest' (*CW* IV, 69), and the grotesque story of Jimmy Farrell hanging his dog (*CW* IV, 73). Marcus Quin 'got six months for maiming ewes' (*CW* IV, 59), and allegedly died after being hit with a worn pick by his wife 'and the rusted poison did corrode his blood' (*CW* IV, 89). Sara drinks a health to 'the wonders of the western world': 'the pirates, preachers, poteen-makers, with the jobbing jockies, parching peelers, and the juries fill their stomachs selling judgments of the English law' (*CW* IV, [end of p. 58] 105).²⁰ This world may be ready to acclaim a hero, but it is one of Synge's many ironies that Christy does little or nothing to heal it, beyond providing a model of even more extreme transgression.

The core of the Oedipus myth is the combination of parricide and incest. The incest theme is less explicit in *Playboy* than the parricide theme, but it is present indirectly in the passage in which Christy recounts his father's attempts to make him marry his old wet-nurse Widow Casey:

WIDOW QUIN: And what did he want driving you to wed with her?

CHRISTY: He was letting on I was wanting a protector from the harshness of the world ...

WIDOW QUIN: There's maybe worse than a dry hearth and a widow woman and your glass at night. So you hit him then?

CHRISTY [*getting almost excited*] I did not. 'I won't wed her,' says I, 'when all know she did suckle me for six weeks when I came into the world ...'
(*CW* IV, 102–3).

Synge does not pursue the quasi-incestuous implications of the proposed match with Widow Casey, as in the passage just quoted one potential bride with maternal attributes is replaced by another. Desmond Conacher, in the most detailed discussion

¹⁹ Sullivan (1969), 243.

²⁰ Cf. Sullivan (1969), 247; Kiberd (1996), 179.

of the Classical background to *Playboy*, has an interesting discussion of how the incest motif appears in a displaced form: ‘the Widow Quin is a Jocasta-figure, maternally erotic in the first half of the play ... and maternally protective in the second half, when she seeks, unsuccessfully like Jocasta, to fend off from Christy the all too substantial ghost of old father “Laius” Mahon, when he comes back to [end of p. 59] plague his son’.²¹ The Oedipus background lends force to the incest motif in *Playboy*, and to Christy’s determination to resist maternal comforts and pursue his courting of Pegeen.

Synge adopts a dramatic device typical of Sophocles when he has an outburst of euphoria immediately before the catastrophe. After his triumph in the sports, Christy appeals to Pegeen’s father: ‘Let you give us your blessing and hear her swear her faith to me, for I’m mounted on the spring-tide of the stars of luck the way it’ll be good for any to have me in the house’ (*CW IV*, 157). Old Mahon promptly reappears, and punctures Christy’s triumph. Oedipus is excited by the prospect of discovering the secret of his birth: ‘May whatever will burst forth! Even if it is lowly, I desire to learn my origin ... I regard myself as the child of Fortune the beneficent and shall not be dishonoured. *She* is my mother; and the months that are my kin have determined my smallness and my greatness’ (*OT* 1076–83). The chorus then sings an excited ode (*OT* 1086–1109) speculating that Oedipus may even be the son of a god. This is one of four choral odes in Sophocles’ extant plays (the others are *Ajax* 693–718, *Trachiniae* 633–62, and *Antigone* 1115–54) which express excitement and joy immediately before the tragic outcome is confirmed.²²

Oedipus Tyrannus is not the only Greek parallel for *Playboy*. Another is a text well known to Synge, Homer’s *Odyssey*, and in particular Odysseus’ stay with the Phaeacians.²³ Odysseus is in a very bad state when he arrives in Scherie, the land of the Phaeacians, after his shipwreck: ‘With breath and with speech both failing him, he lay half-swooning, with desperate weariness upon him’ (*Odyssey* 5.456–7). He contemplates the danger of a night in the open: ‘I fear that the piercing frost and the soaking dew together [end of p. 60] may be too much for me’ (*Odyssey* 5.467–8). Fortunately, Nausicaa directs him to her father’s palace, where he is given food, drink, and a bed for the night. The next day the Phaeacians compete at athletics, and Odysseus is victorious in the discus, the only event in which he participates, although he boasts of his ability in other sports (*Odyssey* 8.143–233). W.J. Woodhouse gives a convincing account of the ‘folk-tales of immemorial antiquity’ which are treated with sophisticated narrative elaboration and variation in the *Odyssey*:

One of these stories is that of a castaway who comes on the scene in wretched guise, a mere wreck, or man of no account. In the sequel he is revealed in his true character, as a prince, foremost in manly exercises, in which he defeats all rivals, and wins the prize of marriage with the daughter of the king to whose land he has come thus incognito.²⁴

Christy is in a bad state when he enters, described in the stage direction as ‘very tired and frightened and dirty’ (*CW IV*, 67). He explains that he is ‘destroyed walking’ (*CW IV*, 67), and Michael invites him up to the fire with the comment that he is ‘looking famished with the cold’ (*CW IV*, 67). In contrast to Odysseus, he participates enthusiastically in the sports, ‘racing, lepping, pitching, and the Lord knows what’ as

²¹ Conacher (1969), 35.

²² Cf. Conacher (1969), 36.

²³ Cf. Henn (1963), 58.

²⁴ Woodhouse (1930), 54–5.

Widow Quin says (*CW* IV, 99), and wins them all (*CW* IV, 133). There is no doubt that he hopes now to win the 'crowning prize' (*CW* IV, 147; cf. 127), the hand of Pegeen.

A central paradox in *Playboy* is the way in which parricide is not only not treated as an abomination but is regarded if anything with admiration. This can be seen in terms of Freud's Oedipus complex, as has often been [end of p. 61] observed.²⁵ Freud argued that adult dreams of the deaths of loved ones originate in childhood death-wishes against rivals, and furthermore that children lack adult understanding of the reality of death.²⁶ Such death-wishes are thus not as inconceivable as might initially be supposed. A case can certainly be made for a parallel between Freud's interpretation of a child's attitude to kin-killing and the comic amorality of the general reaction to Christy's exploit in *Playboy*. A different avenue will however be explored here.

Synge may not have read *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but he was certainly familiar with the ideas contained in a work published at almost exactly the same time which also dealt with the subject of parricide, Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville's *La Civilisation des Celtes et celle de l'épopée homérique* (1899). Synge attended Jubainville's lectures on this very topic, as was mentioned above, and the book undoubtedly provides a good idea of what he heard in Paris. Jubainville's discussion of parricide starts from consideration of the question of whether a king or father remains in power until the end of his life. Jubainville notes that this is the case with Priam in the *Iliad*, and he finds the same practice in Rome, Gaul, and Ireland. The alternative is for the king or father to retire when his powers are waning and his successor is able to take over. This is the case in Homer's Ithaca, where Odysseus has long since taken over as king even though his father Laertes is still alive, and Jubainville finds the same practice in Wales and Germany. He then argues that the principle of indefinite paternal power in Ireland was moderated by the possibility that the father could become legally dependent on his son, as if he were a child, if he [end of p. 62] became unable to look after himself. The situation was even harsher in primitive times, with the son having the right to kill his father, 'conséquence impitoyable du principe éternel, quoique brutal, qui refuse à tout être inutile le droit à la vie' ['merciless consequence of the eternal, if brutal, principle which denies the right to life to every useless creature'].²⁷ There was no law against parricide, and the murderer had only two forms of retaliation to fear. The first was 'la haine de son père qui, quoique défunt, avait conservé la seconde vie qu'ont tous les morts et qui pouvait, sous forme de revenant, troubler le sommeil du meurtrier' ['the hatred of his father, who, though deceased, had retained the second life which all dead persons have and who could, in the form of a ghost, trouble the sleep of the murderer'].²⁸ The second sanction was the possibility of public disapproval of the deed. Jubainville cites this as the main factor restraining Phoenix from killing his father in Homer's *Iliad* (9.458–61):

My thought was to kill him with the sharp bronze. But one of the immortals stopped my fury, putting in my mind the talk of my people and all the shaming

²⁵ See (e.g.) Akin 1980. Cf. Sullivan (1969), 247: 'Synge artfully exploits all the psychological implications of the father-figure as a symbol of repression, the obstacle to an individual's achieving full human potential'.

²⁶ Freud (1976 [1900]), 354–6.

²⁷ Jubainville (1899), 313. His discussion of parricide occupies pp. 309–17.

²⁸ Jubainville (1899), 313.

things that men would say, so that I would not have the name of parricide among the Achaians.²⁹

It should be noted that Jubainville has moved on here to the question of possible sanctions against parricide in general, since Phoenix's provocation was a curse by his apparently far from incompetent father. [end of p. 63]

Synge could not transplant early Greek and Irish mores to early 20th-C. Ireland without a certain amount of modification. The main difference is that there is a legal system in the world of *Playboy*, in which Christy's deed is in theory punishable by hanging. On the other hand, he does not regard what he has done as illegal ('I'm a law-fearing man', *CW IV*, 73), and in the ensuing discussion any possible intervention by the 'peelers' is not taken very seriously. The community makes the decision to accept him, and hanging only becomes a threat when it later rejects him. Public opinion is thus in practice a more significant sanction than the law. Jubainville's second sanction against parricide, the anger of the ghost of the murdered man, also features in *Playboy*. Christy is terrified when he hears a knock on the door, thinking that it might be 'the walking dead' (*CW IV*, 85; cf. 'the walking spirit of my murdered da', *CW IV*, 119). Old Mahon is not actually dead, but he resembles Jubainville's 'revenant', as Christy complains: 'To be letting on he was dead, and coming back to his life, and following me like an old weazel tracing a rat' (*CW IV*, 125). Old Mahon, like Phoenix's father, is domineering rather than incompetent, although one reason which Christy gives for killing him is the following ('in a very reasonable tone', states the stage direction): 'He was a dirty man, God forgive him, and he getting old and crusty, the way I couldn't put up with him at all' (*CW IV*, 73). He undoubtedly represents an intolerably perpetual continuation of paternal power, for which Jubainville regarded parricide as an essential corrective in early Greece and Ireland. He is 'three score years' (*CW IV*, 137), while Christy is 21 (*CW IV*, 139). There is no need to elaborate here on his unrelentingly overbearing and contemptuous attitude to his son, and the exhilarating effect on Christy of his release from this tyranny. Jubainville's speculative anthropology, with which Synge was undoubtedly [end of p. 64] familiar, offers an alternative to Freud for an interpretation of parricide as an acceptable or even socially necessary act.

Oedipus Tyrannus is the basis of an influential model of cultural transmission which involves both rejection and appropriation of what is transmitted. This creates a suggestive interaction of context and content when it is itself the text in question.³⁰ Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson (2007) have pointed to the prominence of *Oedipus Tyrannus* in postcolonial theatre (e.g. in Africa), where the anxiety of influence has a clear political dimension. It is less clear that postcolonial theory has anything useful to contribute to understanding the Oedipal aspect of *Playboy*. C.L. Innes, for example, writes: 'As in many anti-colonialist works, the plot revolves around an Oedipal conflict between father and son ... in which the values of the father are seen as harsh, materialistic and sterile, and are in turn linked to the values of the colonising power'.³¹ Innes does not begin to explain how Old Mahon or Father Reilly are 'linked to the values of the colonising power'. The relevance of *Oedipus Tyrannus* to *Playboy* needs to be interpreted more broadly. In terms of his background and education, Synge was very much part of the Western cultural tradition of which

²⁹ Translation by M. Hammond (Penguin). The authenticity of these lines is disputed, but the only consideration relevant to the present discussion is that they are treated as authentic by Jubainville.

³⁰ See (e.g.) Goff & Simpson (2007), 4–7, 26–30.

³¹ Innes (2009), 123.

Classics was and is a central part. On the other hand, his urgent desire to distance himself as a playwright from the overbearing influence of ‘foreign masterpieces’ highlights the Oedipal dimension of his appropriation of Greek texts, in particular the *Odyssey* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The present discussion has tended to focus on parallels between *Playboy* and these texts, but Synge’s inimitable genius has also subjected them to a drastic process of appropriation and distortion which leaves ample scope for [end of p. 65] the distinctively Irish drama which he was committed to creating.³²

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³² This is a revised version of a paper given at the annual summer school of the Classical Association of Ireland in Sligo on 20 August 2011. I am grateful for the invitation to speak, and to those who took part in the discussion after the paper.

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