

M. J. Molloy's *The King of Friday's Men* as Folk Drama: Celebrating the Ordinary Men's Life in the Community

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M. J. Molloy's importance in Irish drama is generally ascribed to his being the last exponent of the folk drama, which dominated the Abbey's stage for decades after its founding. D. E. S. Maxwell in his *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama 1891-1980* distinguishes three historical strands in the Abbey's folk-drama according to its descent: the poetic line coming down from Yeats, the realistic line from Padraic Colum and T. C. Murray and the grotesque line from Synge and Fitzmaurice. And as flimsy tail ends of these three lines, he names respectively Austin Clarke, Paul Vincent Carroll, and M. J. Molloy¹⁾.

Maxwell's grouping is flawed, especially in drawing a line between the poetic and the grotesque. By the poetic folk drama Maxwell seems to confine himself to mean verse plays, which makes it difficult to place in any of the three categories many clear examples of folk drama, even those that are hailed as the beginnings of the genre. The blatant omission, of course, are the plays of Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde even if we set aside other minor patriotic pieces of the early period. The problem here is that Maxwell, like Hans-Georg Stadler in his *Anglo-Irish Peasant Drama: The Motifs of Land and Emigration*²⁾, fails to include in his consideration of folk drama a drama that is directly inspired by folklore. This neglect, in turn, may be illustrative of the contemporary lack of appreciation for what plays like Molloy's that celebrate the ordinary life of marriage and survival may still have to offer us, as do the folktales in their beguiling simplicity.

Another point to be noted is that Maxwell's judgement of the later playwrights, Clarke, Carroll and Molloy, rests too heavily on the standard he imposes of their plays' relevance to the present world, which in his case means the 1980s and not the

1) Cambridge 1984, 147.

2) Bern.

40s and 50s, the period in which the plays were actually written. Carroll's plays he criticises as being 'prosaic documentary' and 'self-enclosed' in the realism of their time, besides being superficial in concept. The medieval period Clarke creates with his artificial verse, Maxwell says, does not even succeed in establishing its 'own claustrophobic universe, nor implies present analogies'. (145) But it is for Molloy that Maxwell reserves the unenviable role of ringing a knell to the Abbey's folk-drama. His reasons are that Molloy 'explores no new direction, no shaping towards contemporary landscapes and means of viewing their forms', and with a finishing touch he claims: Molloy's plays 'embody the sense of an ending, the final utterance of a line.' (148)

Whether the reasons Maxwell provides justifies his pronouncement or not, the harshest criticism is levelled against the very language which had first given Molloy his acclaim. Maxwell quite explicitly refuses to see any dramatic potential, or for that matter, any real poetry in Molloy's writing. He begins quite sarcastically by positing that simply because the verse plays have proved ineffective on modern stage, it does not mean that 'the use of prose is a warranty for the release of poetry, or of drama either' (145) and ends by saying Molloy's, what he thinks, self-indulgent poetry 'rarely vibrates, unpredictably, into higher registers of feeling' (147), as it does with Synge and Fitzmaurice. He says further that Molloy's plays do not 'burst through the constrictions of their time and place'. (145) In other words, not only is his material unexportably parochial, but the past, 'the fascinating then' as Maxwell calls it, of Molloy's history plays like *The King of Friday's Men*, remains detached from our present. The play 'is so close to it (the past) in sympathy that when the curtain falls the characters behind it remain fixed in their own time'. (147)

Michael Etherton, in direct opposition to Maxwell's estimation, elects to include Molloy in his book *Contemporary Irish Drama*³⁾ along with names like Leonard, Parker, Rudkin, Reid, Lynch, Hutchinson, Devlin, McGuinness, Kilroy, Murphy and Friel, those whose experimental style and often political message unmistakably place them in the contemporary scene, pointing to the last quarter of the century rather than the mid-century. Or we may follow Thomas Kilroy's classification and call them the third-generation playwrights of this century⁴⁾. (He sees the generations of Irish dramatists in the following order: the first is Irish born playwrights of the 18th and 19th centuries, the second, Anglo-Irish writers around Yeats, the third, predominantly Catholic

3) London 1989.

4) 'A Generation of Playwrights', *Irish University Review*, 22:1 (1991), 135.

playwrights of the 30s, 40s, 50s, who are then succeeded by those of Kilroy's own generation.) Etherton rescues Molloy out of what is often looked upon as a cave-in on the road of Irish theatre, which takes place around the time of the Second World War or De Valera's innocent Ireland, and he does it with a purpose.

But to explain Etherton's intention one must start with his idea of the theatre. He is an advocate of 'significant drama' by which he means drama that generates a 'shock of knowing' in the audience to make them come to a deeper understanding of realities and, as he adds later, the same audience 'through an active imagination' are to 'gain confidence to act - socially and politically.' (3) It is a distinctly collective process and therefore, the imaginative collaboration with the target community comes to have a paramount importance. And it is in the theatre in the West of Ireland that Etherton sees this happening rather than, and in anticipation of the changes to come, in Dublin and Belfast. (65) He has in mind here the Druid, whose tours of the remote towns, noticeably with plays of Molloy, Synge and Murphy, met with a rapt reception, *Siamsa Tire*, *An Taidhbhearca*, and Margaret D'Arcy's community drama work. Not only is a greater community involvement both as audience and practitioners witnessed in these ventures, but Etherton sees a more positive and creative search for the Irish identity launched from the West 'transcending colonial stereotyping and generating independent thought and new ideas'. (64) At the peak of all this he places Brian Friel and Tom Murphy.

Kilroy in the afore-mentioned article expresses his admiration for Anglo-Irish writers who, he quotes from Yeats (*Letters* 464), were able to 'stand above their subject and play with it' whereas the Catholic playwrights of the 30s were 'dominated by their subject.' Etherton, on the other hand, criticises the writers of the Literary Renaissance for having used the West as an emblem of their intellectual European sensibilities, so that the real rural communities had to wait till playwrights like Fitzmaurice, Keane and Molloy represented them on stage. I do not know where the realist school of folk dramatists come into this scenario, but Etherton probably thinks that the objective depiction of reality with which these writers contented themselves do not bring about the 'shock of knowing' and therefore disqualifies them from what he considers significant drama. Molloy and Keane, he pairs together as the two playwrights who 'shaped the sensibilities of a West of Ireland experience since the Second World War into a body of plays known in performance by appreciative audiences there'. (87)

He actually thinks Molloy's suffering peasants 'may strike a more contemporary

note than the quaint debauchery of the 1960s' (87) today with our increasing awareness of the social and political conditions in the Third World. To claim that Molloy is championing a new direction in theatre may sound rather preposterous but it proceeds from Etherton's particular stance as an activist in popular theatre in that part of the world. The puzzling ambiguity of the radical and conservative attitudes of today's Third World farmers, he believes, can be understood and resolved in Molloy's depiction of the innate contradiction of passivity and violence in the West of Ireland peasants.

The world Molloy paints in *The King of Friday's Men* is a landlord's village called Kilmacreena, or Culnacleha as indicated in the Ordnance Map, on the Mayo-Galway border in 1787. The play's plot, just like that of his other play *The Paddy Pedlar* was given him in a story he heard from William Kelly, reputedly the oldest man in the village near Tulrahan, who died in 1954⁵⁾. It is a world of faction fighting, *le droit du seigneur*⁶⁾ and overweening Gaelic poets.

The story is as follows. Caesar French, a historical figure, by the way, who fought a duel with Fighting Fitzgerald of Mayo, has a tallywoman he favoured for the past two years. This Maura insults Caesar deliberately so that she could be set free and get married before her prime is past. Caesar's bailiff Boorla and his Pressgang (these are the tough men encharged with the task of carrying off a tallywoman by force if necessary) storm the dance held at the cottage of Gaisceen, Caesar's huntsman and gillie, to get his pretty niece Una as the next tallywoman. Una has just been promised marriage by Owen, her sprightly young boyfriend, and in order to avoid the calamity, Gaisceen devises a plot. Una is to pretend that she is so attracted by the champion fighter Bartley Dowd, who happens to be sleeping in the room, that she wants to marry him. Bartley had come all the way from Tyrawley to support the men of Kilmacreena in their faction fight and win the ten-acre farm wagered to anyone who defeated another famed fighter Kithogue. Bartley, not failing them, drive off the Pressgang displaying an extraordinary feat of strength and courage and the two, Bartley and Una, fly to the neighbouring estate across the river.

5) The Program note to the Druid production of *The Wood of the Whispering*.

6) *Le droit du seigneur* is the landlord's prerogative to enjoy the pleasurable company of any young woman of his choice in the village, most frequently on her bridal night, though in Molloy's play the woman, called *tallywoman*, stays for a period of time with her landlord.

Act II opens on a hillside where Una and Bartley are hiding in a derelict cabin waiting for the Pattern of St. Brigid when the faction fight is to take place. Una in the meantime has become really attracted to the honest and sincere Bartley despite his advanced age (32) and battered face, the result of all the fights he has been through. On hearing from Rory, the son of a famous bard, Cormac, that Owen has been taken prisoner by Caesar as a ploy to get Una back, Una decides to marry Bartley, since Caesar would not bother with a married woman and thus Owen would be freed as well. But before that happens, Maura comes to tell her that she has bribed one of Caesar's servants, Murty, to let Owen escape. On the day of the Pattern, Una stays behind intending to meet Owen and tell him the whole truth, but Murty has betrayed her and comes disguised as Owen and catches her together with Boorla.

Act III takes place in the French Hall, where the terrified servants are scurrying about in a state of panic before Bartley's expected attack since Una's capture has been inadvertently witnessed by the villagers. Caesar promises Una to save Bartley's life and let her go free with Owen if she tells him that she has deceived Bartley all along and never meant to marry him. Bartley arrives, having won the day at the faction fight, to save Una, but only to hear Una forswear herself and say that she prefers Owen. Bartley, completely dejected, sees her leave with Owen. But when he hears Una's cry for help outside, as she is again attacked by Boorla as has been arranged by the deceiving Caesar, Bartley jumps out of the window to rescue her and kills Caesar who has followed him. Bartley is now a wanted man, and with Una and Owen gone not knowing about Caesar's death, Maura offers to accompany him on his flight, but is dissuaded by Gaisceen on the basis that she would be a burden for a man on the run. Bartley leaves resigned to his life of misfortunes, accompanied by another unfortunate man, Rory the poet's son, who has just realized that his father's death did not confer on him the coveted gift of poetry.

The King of Friday's Men as has been noted by Robert Hogan⁷⁾ is actually very close to *The Playboy in the Western World* in terms of action. A man comes to a village. One is an every-inch-a-hero kind of a stalwart but with the modesty and purity of a maiden. Another is an abject case, a spineless loafer and a laughingstock of ladies, according to his father, but who rises to the huge expectations of a hero held out to him by the villagers who have heard his extravagant talk. Their worth is for-

7) *After the Irish Renaissance: a critical history of the Irish drama since "The Plough and the Stars"*, London 1968, 92.

mally proved at a fight or a race, which takes place offstage about midway in the play. However, after the heroic murder of a tyrant for one and a bungled second attempt at a murder for the other, they are forced to go off on an exile. Having lost their newfound love, each of them finds instead a male companion in a most unlikely quarter, but one who serves to suggest the future course the hero is to pursue. Bartley will be a storyteller with Rory to teach him more songs. Christy seems to have inherited his father's profligate recklessness and megalomaniac streak if not his skill in farming. The supporting characters have their parallels, too. The romantic pair in each play is reinforced by the more mature and practical heroine-in-waiting, Widow Quinn and Maura, brave women both, who are trying to carve out their future in despite of their tainted past; and Shawn and Owen, fiancés to the heroine before the play begins and very likely husbands after it ends, but who pall in the presence of the hero during the play's duration. The differences in tone of the two plays that follow this largely parallel format in action can be traced to the difference in the two playwrights' perception of the individual and of the community and their treatment of violence and grotesque elements in the play.

Synge's plays are usually set somewhere on the wayside or at a lonely dwelling in the wild, far from the organized social activities of the village. *The Playboy* more than any other of Synge's plays has a greater sense of the local life of Mayo men in that Michael and his cronies go off to a wake, the race can be seen from the shebeen window, the girls gather from various places to look at the brave stranger, but they are not foregrounded as as a unifying force for the community as in *Molloy*. And the question that emerges out of such setting is the liberation of the individual spirit. All of Synge's main characters display an irrepressible spirit of rebelliousness, even when their outward actions come out as defeat and submission to the conditions they were cast in. There is always an element of defiance in his characters. Martin and Mary Doul, Nora, Deirdre, and the tinkers all choose their own destiny in going their own ways. Even in Maurya's celebrated resignation, there is a touch of defiance and pride⁸⁾ in that she has seen it through, all the deaths of the men in her family to the very last one.

The fact that Synge never specified the year in which the play is set, except for *The Well of the Saints*, supposed to be vaguely 'one or more centuries ago' may indi-

8) This point has been suggested by Frank MacGuinness in his class at the University College Dublin.

cate the mythical rather than historical nature of his plays. (And perhaps again the maiming of the ewes in *The Playboy* suggests the land war, but that can be made flexible.) Synge's concern was more with the perennial, archtypal impulses of human nature that he found exemplified in pristine forms in the West of Ireland. His stories can be transposed to anywhere in the world as long as it fits the peculiar atmosphere and natural background of each play, such as a wind-swept rocky island, a wild and rugged countryside. It helps to remember Synge's early interest in natural history as opposed to Molloy's life-long devotion to social history.

In Molloy's play even when the scene takes place on the outskirts of the village, as at a former tallywoman's cottage or the French Hall, the fate of the whole community is embraced in the vision, in that they serve as a venue for the dance or as the local seat of power. The battle cries like 'Hi for Tyrawley', 'Hi for Kilmacreeena' ring throughout *The King of Friday's Men*. The community sustains itself by a set of activities and customs, with each member fulfilling some function in his allotted place. It could be a champion, a poet, or a trickster-adviser, each allocated as God sees fit. Molloy was just as concerned as Synge with human nature but it was in a more ethical sense of how we are to face life, as ordinary and as socially conditioned as it is.

We can schematize the society in *The King of Friday's Men* as triple or quadruple concentric circles. At the center is the landlord surrounded by his loyal retainers in the French Hall, round which exists the community of his tenants. Beyond the river, is Blake's estate over which Caesar's jurisdiction does not extend. It is as if the country is divided into fiefdoms, encompassing all of which in Molloy's vision is the Kingdom of God or, as familiarly called in the area in the olden days, the King of Friday⁹).

When he wrote *The King of Friday's Men*, Molloy says, he was worried that the presence of the character of the landlord might be discordant in a peasant play¹⁰). He asked Daniel Corkery, and the latter's reply was that it was. But Molloy for some reason did not follow Corkery's advice and instead of doing away with Caesar French, added another scene at the beginning to take place at the French Hall so that Caesar's

9) The appellation, 'King of Friday' is found commonly in Douglas Hyde's *The Religious Songs of Connacht*, Shannon 1972, along with other such titles as 'King of the Friends', 'King of the Elements', 'King of Worlds', 'King of Kings', 'King of the Saints', 'King of the Wounds', 'King of Heaven', 'King of Glory', 'King of Graces', 'King of Kindness'. An example is a poem titled 'O King of the Friday'. (7, Vol. 2)

10) 'The Making of Folk Plays' in Alison Feder and Bernice Schrank eds., *Literature and Folk Culture: Ireland and Newfoundland*, Newfoundland 1977.

presence can be well established early on the stage. Why did Molloy insist on keeping the landlord even though he sensed some difficulty that has to be overcome in terms of the consistency and organization of the play? The latest edition of his selected plays by Colin Smythe¹¹⁾, for instance, does not include this opening scene nor the later short scene (II. ii) at the French Hall in which Maura contrives to free Owen by bribing Murty. The play begins with the night of the dance at Gaisceen's cottage at which the hero, having just arrived in the village that day, saves the heroin from the Pressgang, thus setting off the major conflict in the plot. It is a dramatically clear, well-focused start. All that needs to be said about the landlord, such as the motivation of his action and his character, is contained in the long final scene anyway, which is the only French Hall scene in the new edition. What would be missed, however, is the sense of parallel progress in the action of the landlord and the tenant class providing a more multilayered social perspective of the locality. By cutting the two French Hall scenes, the balance in weight of the two antagonists at the head of respective class would be lessened, turning the play into a sad and heroic romance of Bartley, the champion fighter without the intended social implications of a history play. The long talked of villain would then make his appearance only at the last minute like the Wizard of Oz, simply to be overthrown.

The play in its expanded version starts with Maura, Caesar's tallywoman, being expelled from the centre to return to the surrounding community from which she originally hailed, thus introducing a channel of interaction across the wall of the French Hall. The landlord is shown to be rather excluded behind the door of his room, heard but not seen, and with two of his servants, Bidy and Boorla, deterred from entering to present respectively a tray of hot punch and a plate of mutilated human ears, because of his spleen. The forbidding atmosphere of the French Hall is contrasted with Gaisceen's cottage in the following scene, where the dance, the consummate expression of community spirit is taking place. Gaisceen has to literally 'struggle' off from the detaining hands and cries of his guests in the kitchen to have a moment of quiet to himself. When the door is opened 'the music and the tumult' offstage is 'heard at full length.' Even the quiet of his bedroom is no sanctuary, however, and first Una, his niece and then Owen her fiancée, run in to report their engagement, followed by

11) *Selected Plays: M. J. Molloy*, chosen and introduced by Robert O'Driscoll, Gerrards Cross, Bucks. 1998. All my subsequent references to the play are taken from *Three Plays*, Newark, Delaware: Proscenium Press, 1975.

Maura, who has come to seek Gaisceen's help. Gaisceen, the trickster figure like Ooshla in *The Paddy Pedlar* is the center of the villagers' community, who not only organize the dance and collect contributions for the piper, but to whom people come for advice.

But the situation is not that of a simple opposition between the landlord and his tenants. Gaisceen is actually a go-between between the two worlds in that he enjoys a special position as trusted huntsman and gillie for Caesar French, and the cottage where the dance takes place itself belongs to Caesar, a fact that is highlighted by the domineering presence of the canopied bed in the room. The landlord, therefore, is an inextricable centre, though alien, within the larger circle of community. Even a communal wedding that is being planned in the village, in contrast to the barrenness of the truncated family-line due to Caesar's bachelorhood and the lack of mutual trust among his retainers in the French household¹²⁾, is no exception from the infiltration of the landlord's sway. Since a marriage in their community means the setting up of a house and a family, a very practical matter that marks a stage in the course of men's life, the engagement immediately leads to the talk of a cottage that has to be built with the neighbors' help. However, what is of note here is that they depend on the generosity of the landlord for the supply of timber, rushes, and labor (in the sense of time excused from taskwork) needed.

The influence of the landlord's rule takes a more devastating shape at the end of the scene 2 as the Pressgang disrupts the communal dance. The two that withstood the attack, (a revolutionary act perhaps in a community that retained a tradition of obedience to the landlord's whims, the innocent Una and the hero Bartley, have to stay outside the border of the French estate. As brutal as it may seem, the landlord's right to take a tallywoman was part of the tradition that held the community of the estate together. So despite Molloy's vehement objection to the custom that he expresses in the preface, he does not force his opinion on his characters. For Bidy and Gaisceen and Boorla, the sense of loyalty erases any will to resist it.

If someone asks what *The King of Friday's Men* is about, the answer is likely to be that it is a play about faction fighting and tallywomen. The two customs that lend color to the tapestry Molloy has woven of the West of Ireland at the end of the 18th

12) It could be seen in the hidden resentment Boorla, the bailiff discloses in having had to evict families with their cradles into the snow to buy jewelry for the mistress, or in Bidy's suspicion of the kitchen 'sluts'.

century. But unlike the custom of tallywomen from which the entire romantic plot is spun, the faction fight is conspicuous for having little to do with the plot itself. It is there to set the stage and create its atmosphere. The promised reward of a farm brings the hero onto the scene. The fight serves as a structural device framing the play, providing a pivot to which all converge. Everybody's mind is directed toward it, providing a great rallying cry for the community. The planned wedding, for example, must be put off for a couple of days to allow time for the men's recovery from the wounds of the Pattern day, and the conversation quickly switches from what should be the all-absorbing topic of marriage to the coming fight. Bartley is abstaining from drink for the purpose, 'I'm challenge-fighting the king bully-man of the Barony of Costelloe on St. Brigid's Day, so I'm dipping very little into the poteen till that fight is won' (34), and even as he hurries out with Una to escape from Caesar's revenge close to the end of Act 1, a promise to meet Gaisceen at the Pattern, 'Good luck to ye now till the Pattern Day', reassures the audience of a bigger fight to come.

Molloy delineates each step taken in preparation for the fight in a studied manner, raising the audience's expectations in proportion to the importance in which the event is held by the whole community. The hero who is to lead the fight is first seen just from behind, with Gaisceen drawing the curtain for one curious onlooker after another to examine him. The young couple make no comment about him for Una at this stage seems more attracted by the finery of the bed and linen than anything about the man and his nature. Maura naturally shows more keen interest. She and Boorla in turn admire every part of the champion's physique: 'shoulders like Goll McMorna' (25), 'a great piece of a man', 'look at his writst!' (26)¹³⁾ The background and the situation are explained, the crisis is developed, the plot is hatched, all this is done while the champion is dead to the world in his canopied haven. And when the hero is finally stirred to life, mumbling 'Is it rousing time? Is it breaking day? ... A mattress and a bed in place of rushes! Where am I at all?' (32), he needs a moment to reorient himself; a task and a life he never dreamed of are waiting for him on the stage. 'That sleep was very sweet. Now I'll be in high fettle for the day.'

Now that the hero is roused, he must be armed. And the weapon itself has taken a

13) But it is also to be noted that Bartley's physical impressiveness is balanced by his character, which Gaisceen guarantees: 'As mannerly as a priest, and decent moreover.' (24) What's more, Molloy makes sure to establish Bartley's idealism in love and marriage as his premier trait even before we see his face.

long time to prepare: 'six months seasoning this in the chimney, swamping it in goose-grease, polishing it, balancing it with lead and all.' (34). The wrist-thong he replaces while talking with Una, as he explains, is a present from his well-wishing comrades in his village. With his treasured shillelagh in one hand and the jacket he trails to be wielded as a shield in the other, he calls on Gaisceen to tie the wrist-thong for him as a final piece of preparation. Bartley stands ready, in full regalia, before the audience to take to the field in a heroic battle.

The battle takes place behind the door offstage, conveyed through the noise of howls and shouts and crashes, made intelligible with Gaisceen's close report given between his covert contribution to the fight, hurling potatoes at the enemies' backs. The only part that is shown on stage is when Boorla runs in and takes Una hostage for a moment to secure his chance of escape¹⁴). Since this initial battle at which Bartley single-handedly repulses the seven strong men of the Pressgang takes over the function of an exciting heroic trial required of any prince destined to rescue a princess¹⁵), the actual faction fight is left with a purely ritual function to fulfill. It is true that in his time and with his means Bartley could not possibly hope to marry anyone without winning the farm on the wager. The faction fight for him signifies the prospect of happiness in marriage, so important to Molloy. But except for this reason Bartley could well have flown far from the clutches of Caesar's pursuit with Una at the end of Act 1. In other words, what the faction fight does at this point is to keep Bartley and Una in a kind of a standby in the locale.

This allows a period of moratorium in an idyllic setting beside the river in Act 2 scene 1 during which a genuine love is nurtured between Bartley and Una through their modest makeshift home life, while the progress in action stays. It can be easily equated to the green world of Shakespeare's middle acts. Una, who is shown to be constantly engaged in some kind of housework or other, darning and boiling potatoes,

14) When I asked Michael Leyden, Molloy's friend and a member of a dramatic group at Dunmore which produced his plays, why his company did not take up this great opportunity for an exciting drama, he said that Molloy would have considered it unprofessional to stage a battle. Scruples like that may serve to give evidence to Molloy's strong belief in language as being the soul of drama and thus it being unseemly in Molloy's view to rely on any external means to appeal to the audience.

15) he has already past another smaller test in that he was the only 'hardy chuck' moreover who dared to cross the flooded river. However even here Molloy does not allow this superhuman feat to happen without reasoning that a man can reach beyond his limit when he is fired by love.

(while Bartley goes out to work to earn the day's provisions), has grown from an earlier innocent, if somewhat superficial and impetuous girl to a tender and patient woman, able to fathom others' feelings. It is love that is tried in adversity and born of appreciation of one's character rather than youthful infatuation. And to be added, it is in this scene that Rory the poet's son, who lends peculiar colours to the lining of the play without contributing to the main action, like Owen in Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, wanders in to be introduced for the first time. Behind the idyll, however, we are to see nefarious forces set at work by the corrupt method Maura has employed to save the captured Owen in scene 2. Biddy's comparison of her to a rainbow after the storm would fit her better at the end of the play, than here.

Act 2 scene 3 opens with a redoubled impetus of action moving towards the awaited faction fight. It is the day of the Pattern and the flood, which has helped to guarantee a sanctuary period for the newly united pair by cutting off traffic with Caesar's estate across the river, has cleared. The significance that Molloy intended for the faction fight in this play becomes clear in the expanded stage direction he provides at the beginning. From a sketch of a range of hills stretching out dotted with tiny villages, Molloy goes on to give his interpretation of the period as a great age of 'population increase' and bold pioneering in the reclamation of the land, with people enjoying the 'three essentials of food, shelter and marriage' despite their being subjected to a 'state of slavery'. The exuberant energy of people as Molloy saw in this period finds expression in the form of faction fight in the play. Though the brutality of the fight is not denied¹⁶⁾, Molloy's artistic design was different from that of Carleton, for example, in his 'The Party Fight and Funeral', in which the loss of a promising young man is poignantly lamented.

Bartley is again loudly called from his sleep. 'Pipers, fiddlers, pedlars, hucksters, pilgrims, beggarmen, tinkers, and the big and little of the country' are 'all drawing fast to the Pattern.' Gaisceen's gesture to people on the road below the hill, shouting 'Hi for Kilmacreena!' as he flourishes his shillelagh to be responded to in kind, an exchange that is later repeated between Bartley and the men, gives rise to a large vista such as that recreated by Edgar's exquisite verbal painting of Dover's cliffs to his blind father. Molloy uses the moment to provide even a sociological background note on the proceedings of the day by way of Gaisceen's explanation to Una: 'First

16) Bartley knows it only too well since he had to sacrifice his youth tending the family of his brother who died on one such fight.

all'll do the Stations around St. Brigid's Well, then they'll go buying and selling, and dancing and drinking and singing till about the hour of five o'clock, when we'll fight the Tulrahans and beat them out of face at last, with the help of Bartley and of St. Patrick's Curse.' (60) The song, which we first heard Gaisceen practicing to himself while the dance was in progress in Act 1 is now chorused in full by the villagers to welcome their champion fighter.

All this emphasis on the community-wide support in preliminaries leading to the fight¹⁷⁾ reinforces the function of the faction fight as a mobilizing activity for the community. Since what Molloy is trying to do is to depict a half-feudal society in which people still retain sufficient sense of loyalty to willingly submit to the tyranny of the landlord, he needs something other than nationalism as an expression of the people's vitality to counterbalance the power of the landlord class. Although the play ends in the killing of the landlord by a peasant, it is not an enlightened rebel that stands up for his country but a champion fighter in pursuit of his happiness and that of the girl he loves that accidentally brings an end to the tyrant. Molloy was keenly aware, as seen in his preface, of the significance of the time in which the play is set, 1787 a few years before the French Revolution and the rebellion in Ireland inspired by it, but the only intimation he offers of the political and social change to come is in the demise of Caesar French without an heir to succeed him and the loss forever of the Gaelic genius in Rory's failure to keep alive the tradition. The history Molloy offers is an alternative to the national narrative of oppression, rebellion and independence. It is the changing life of the community with time's passage as experienced by the people who live in the area; he calls it the folk history.

The violence of fighting in the tenants' scenes in *The King of Friday's Men* is, thus, either in the nature of a challenge to the hero as found in folktales or of a communal ritual as an expression of their energy diverted from the direct confrontation with their oppressor. The violence in *The Playboy* functions in an altogether different way. Synge plays with the ambivalence in the perception of physical reality so that the changing nature of violence as reflected in the eyes of the people produces an effect of the grotesque. At the beginning the admiration Christy's story wins from the men at the shebeen and from the girls who gather to pay their tribute next morning makes the parricide seem a disembodied act, of the kind we find in folktales, even as it

17) The all too expected victory for Bartley is only reported after it took place unseen by the audience between the Acts.

satisfies the people's taste for sensual details. This folkloric quality is epitomised in Christy's breezy summary at the end of Act 1 that 'a clean bed' and 'two fine women fighting for the likes of me' led him to think 'till ... wasn't I a foolish fellow not to kill my father in the years gone by.'

There is a leap in the planes of perception, however, when the same act is committed before the characters' eyes. It is followed by a change in Christy's own perception and in that of the audience. In place of the half-appreciative/half-amused and rather relaxed marvelling that Michael and others showed when Christy first confessed to his murder¹⁸⁾, what the audience hear in the final scene is 'a terrified whisper'¹⁹⁾ and screams such as Christy lets out as he kicks loose the table when his shin is burnt. Cornered and gauded by all, Christy has attacked his father the second time out of desperation, but it was above all still to win back Pegeen's esteem. Then after experiencing the initial 'horror' of seeing Pegeen join with the rest in threatening to send him to the gallows, he resorts to pleading with her to let him escape at least. However, it is the moment when he sees Pegeen intent on actually torturing him that a kind of illumination descends upon him. The bravura declaration he makes then that he will make a bloody path of his way to death, by no means an empty threat, is uttered with a cynical pleasure that transcends any glorification of parricide in its retold forms or desperation that drove him to strike a gory blow on old Mahon's already puckered head.

Pegeen's burning of Christy's shin, his twisting his legs round the leg of the table and biting Shawn like a mad dog, which are realistically enacted on the stage, all strike us as grotesque because we see these actions through the eyes of the characters who now register fear, shock and pain. Likewise the completely emancipated Christy's coldness to his father who comes to his succour on all fours and his father's gleeful submission to his son's cruel treatment arouse a disturbing sense of ambiguity in the audience that is akin to black humour. Synge was attracted by the strong primitive passions of the people in the West of Ireland which often expressed themselves in their seeming indifference to or enjoyment of others' pain as described in various episodes of *The Aran Islands*. An aspect of Synge's attitude to the physicality in his play may

18) 'Is it killed your father?' 'There's a daring fellow' 'Oh, glory be to God!' (183) All references to the play are taken from the Methuen edition of Synge's *The Complete Plays*, London 1991.

19) 'Is the old lad killed surely?' (226)

be illustrated by Jimmy and Philly's talk of the colorful skulls 'ranged out like blue jugs' (211) in the city of Dublin and the shiny bones that Philly assembled like a jigsaw puzzle when he was a child. The skulls and bones are taken out of their context as isolated objects to be either exhibited for dispassionate pleasure or made a plaything of. What Synge is doing with violence and the grotesque may be similar. His is essentially an artist's point of view that appreciates and perhaps enjoys the darkness that is in men and shows it for what it is by playing on the differences in perspectives²⁰.

Despite Maxwell's placing of Molloy in the line of the grotesque folk dramatists, Molloy's perception is not that of the grotesque. *The King of Friday's Men* does abound in graphic images of physical injuries: like the plate of chopped off ears, 'skulls leaking' (57) and Owen 'soaking in his blood' (43), but who is considered all right because 'his skull is nowhere softened'. However, these do not go beyond creating the atmosphere of the unconcealed savagery of the period, for rather than choosing to explore its grotesque implications Molloy neutralizes the violence. One reason is Bartley's moral uprightness that is appealing to the modern sensibility. Even after he himself has narrowly escaped what Gaisceen overhastily predicts as 'a dirty fate' (42), he shows concern for the condition of his vanquished enemies: 'Pressgang ruffians, I must view them over. ... None of them are suffering death, whatever.' Another reason is the insouciance of the characters for whom violence and pain are part of the business of life. Sometimes it even comes near to caricature as when Bidy describes the Pressgang that 'every time they think of the blows they got, they fall again'. (57) This is different from the gloating pleasure in recounting physical damage or the terrified shock of Mayo people at witnessing the murder that is translated to the audience's shock at seeing, for example, Christy scorched as we found in *The Playboy*.

The brutality, to be sure, is more obtrusive at the French Hall where things take on a more malignant tone than within the tenants' community where all the fighting is done for some approvable cause, either heroic or festive, and that hidden from the audience's view. In the final French Hall scene, Una appears drawn by a rope tied

20) A delight in sensual descriptions like 'swaying and swigging at the butt of a rope' 'with a fine stout neck' (200) or 'pouring down quicklime on a dead man's head as 'a woman pour(s)ing any frish-frash from a cup' (199) runs through the play leading on to the actual violence at the end. But this is rather typical of the lush country speech as we find in other Irish plays.

around her wrists with a sack pulled over her head, and then is flung to the sofa in a melodramatic fashion. Bid²¹⁾ is there to relieve Una and to even offer a glass of wine to brace her up. But all this is done in such an offhand manner that it impresses us as neither too sympathetic nor too cold. Her brutish insensitivity (though it is without any ill intention) makes for a comic effect in this otherwise vicious scene. She is so inured to deaths and violence that nothing seems to perturb her. Her practical mind can accommodate shooting just as easily as she can regret the loss of a good fighter, once she is told of the expediency of the action.

Biddy [Taking down two swords from the rack]: 'Tis a pity to shoot to death such a good fighter. Maybe Murty and yourself could defeat him back with swords and avoid killing him.

[She draws the swords from their scabbards.]

Boorla: He's the match of ten men with any fair weapons. Our wan chance is the guns.

Biddy: Ye'd better shoot him so. For fear the guns'd miss fire I'll leave these handy.

[She leaves the swords on the sideboard with their hilts projecting conveniently.]

(72)

The misery of Murty's luckless station (which he describes as 'Wherever a skelping is sure - Murty is sent there!' 74) is vividly conveyed to the audience through Caesar's offstage voice ('Take that and that, you drone you!' 75), but the audience's revulsion at such specific instances of barbaric behaviour just as at the persistent savage handling of Una is immediately diffused by the general atmosphere of the place. The roughness is taken for granted, it is part of their life and the playwright's intention is not to exaggerate the depravity of melodramatic villains, nor to unnerve the audience with the grotesque. Caesar himself is wounded with a bloody forearm, which he then coolly expects Una to dress as if she has been working as his maid for years. There is an unmistakably comic routine of deflating ineptitude when the gun misfires because of the damp powder. But the comedy, like the menace of violence, is not overdone to

21) With the obligatory tobacco in her mouth, Bid²¹⁾ in Act 3 seems a different character from Maura's wise friend in Act 1, probably owing to Molloy's later addition of the earlier scene.

the extent of turning the scene into a farce. All is subsumed beneath the glaze of what for the characters is taken for the ordinary manners of life in the feudalistic times.

Nobody shows pity to the scapegoat Murty²²⁾. Neither are any tears shed at Caesar's death notwithstanding all the loyalty they have displayed. What are offered is Bidy's fatalistic decree that 'God must be tired of the Frenches of Kilmacreeena' (79) and Gaisceen's exhaustive practical advice to Caesar's soul on how to manoeuvre his way past the Heaven's Gate with the summary of Caesar's achievements recited to Rory as material in composing his lament. The coverlet over the dead man's face is pulled off and even his body is dragged down to the floor from the couch on which it rested. The discourtesy to the corpse done without any residual animosity, coupled with Rory's repeated renunciation that 'I am only a man still' (93) has the overall effect of making light of man's life. Man is just a man and cannot reach beyond. What is beyond is God's province.

The end is rather crowded as usually happens with Molloy, with a rush of new decisions or proposals made and withdrawn, but what upholds Molloy's work is the solid grip of the ordinary life. And I use this word in no pejorative sense. Synge's plays have an aggrandising tendency. Human nature and imagination, including the depths of grotesque darkness, are depicted in an expansive manner. But for Molloy the extraordinary is reserved for the divine will. The language of *The Playboy* has a scope of references reaching out to the wide world and to the stars and the moon²³⁾.

22) Bidy declares: 'He's the same as the ass: he has to be bet' (77) and Boorla even shows some glee in the misfortune of his co-worker: 'Your honor, will you not thrash Murty yet? We have him grandly tied up and all.' (79)

23) Listen to Christy describe Old Mahon: 'after drinking for weeks, rising up in the red dawn, or before maybe, and going out into the yard as naked as an ash-tree in the moon of May, and shying clods against the visage of the stars.' (188) The mule Christy rides to his victory runs 'kicking the stars'. (214) Old Mahon knows his son's 'way of spitting and he astride the moon' (215) and Christy boasts that he is 'mounted on the spring-tide of the stars of luck'. (222) Pegeen thought Christy to have been living the like of a king of Norway or the eastern world'. The exhumed skull is construed as that of 'an old Dane ... drowned in the flood' and not to mention, there is the famous 'drift of chosen females, standing ... from this place to the eastern world'. (226) Christy becomes variously 'the wonder of the western world' (215), 'the champion of the world' (214) and 'the jewel of the world'. (222) Biblical references are just another means of recalling exotic places, no different from the pagan myths: Holy Joseph driving his mule westwards 'in the days gone by' to 'the holy prophets ... strain-

Time, too, tends to stretch back to 'the drying of the flood' since which time the Quin family is said to be without a white shift or shirt' (198) to 'through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the Judgment Day'. (229) This flamboyant allusion to his future career that sees no bounds but the Judgment Day in the Play-boy's parting shot contrasts sharply with the foreseen remainder of Bartley's life in Molloy's play. Having realized that it was not for good fortune but 'to do odd jobs for Him' that God put his like in the world, Bartley's only consolation lies in the hope that he will be rewarded highly when his 'life is over at last'. The ending of *The King of Friday's Men* is suffused with a deep sense of inexorable limitation in this world. Bartley asks no more than a few days' prayer from those he leaves behind: 'let ye spare an odd prayer for Rory and myself - for a few days whatever. Misfortune that sticks too long'd wear the rocks.' And even his fortitude is not to be relied on if it should be demanded for too long.

ing the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy' (218), 'Esau or Cain and Abel' wandering not the east but 'on the sides of Neifin or the Erris plain'. (200)