

MACMILLAN MODERN DRAMATISTS

---

# J. M. Synge

---

**Eugene Benson**

Professor of English, College of Arts  
University of Guelph, Ontario



Macmillan

---

Macmillan Education

© Eugene Benson 1982

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1982

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without permission.

*First published 1982 by*

**THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD**

*London and Basingstoke*

*Companies and representatives throughout the world*

ISBN 978-0-333-28922-8

ISBN 978-1-349-16915-3 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-16915-3

Published in Ireland by

Gill and Macmillan Ltd

Golden Bridge

Dublin 8

ISBN 978-0-7171-1243-2 (hc)

ISBN 978-0-7171-1242-5 (pbk)

The paperback edition of this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

## 4

# **'Riders to the Sea'**

*Riders to the Sea*, Synge's first play, is an astonishingly mature work of art. Whether we regard it as literature or as drama (a distinction Synge liked to make), it is a masterpiece enjoyed equally in the library or in the theatre; the role of Maurya has a special cachet for actresses like that attached to playing Medea or Lady Macbeth or Hedda Gabler. Like all great works of art it defies definition, seeming inexhaustible in meaning and complexity. The plot is simplicity itself. Maurya, an old woman, hopes that the body of her son, Michael, will be washed ashore. He was drowned nine days earlier. Already Maurya has lost her husband, her father-in-law and four other sons to the sea. When the play opens her two daughters have been given clothes from the body of a drowned man. Before they can discover whether the clothes are Michael's, Bartley, the youngest son, enters preparing for a journey by sea to the Galway horse-fair. Despite the entreaties of his mother not to go, he sets off. 'He's gone now, God spare us,' his mother cries, 'and

*J. M. Synge*

we'll not see him again.' It is as she says. The daughters identify the clothes of the drowned man as Michael's, and Bartley is knocked off his horse and drowned in the sea. In the last third of this remarkably short play Maurya mourns the death of her family and invokes mercy on all the living and the dead.

Although Synge's notebooks and letters tell us little about the origin and composition of *Riders to the Sea*, the central incident of the play and many of the motifs used in it are drawn from Synge's experiences on the Aran Islands on his last visit in 1901. The story on which the play is based and from which the play derives its title is told in Part Four of *The Aran Islands*:

When the horses were coming down to the slip an old woman saw her son, that was drowned a while ago, riding on one of them. She didn't say what she was after seeing, and this man caught the horse, he caught his own horse first, and then he caught this one, and after that he went out and was drowned.

The difficulties in dramatizing such an incident, in making a modern audience accept a ghost story based on 'second sight', are formidable. Shakespeare posed the difficulty squarely in the opening scene of *Hamlet*:

MARCELLUS: What, has this thing appear'd again tonight?

BERNANDO: I have seen nothing.

MARCELLUS: Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy  
And will not let belief take hold of him.

Synge secures from his audience a willing suspension of disbelief because he roots his theme of multiple death and

## *Riders to the Sea*

terrifying prescience in a meticulous faithfulness to the details of everyday peasant life, while simultaneously investing those details with archetypal associations that have validity for an audience seemingly far removed from any experience of peasant life.

An incident recorded in Part Three of *The Aran Islands* helped Synge ground his 'ghost story'. 'Now a man has been washed ashore in Donegal with one pampooty on him, and a striped shirt with a purse in one of the pockets, and a box for tobacco.' This becomes the substance of the slender subplot relating to Michael's death, and by investing it with realistic detail, such as the business surrounding the identification of the bundle of clothes as Michael's, Synge masks the difficulties inherent in dramatizing the supernatural. In his handling of this subplot, and in having Nora and Cathleen voice their doubts (and ours) about the reality of Maurya's vision, Synge skilfully presents an appearance of objectivity and reasonableness that allays our tendency to disbelieve.

MAURYA: I seen Michael himself.

CATHLEEN: (*speaking softly*). You did not, mother . . . .

This art by which Synge makes Nora and Cathleen surrender ultimately to Maurya's vision reveals how Synge moves between the literal reality of Aran life and a more elevated and richer reality of archetype and symbol. The island surrounded by the implacable, death-dealing sea is also the arena of man's struggle in a hostile and meaningless universe.

This simultaneity of Synge's art in this respect is clearly suggested by the props which dominate the set: nets, a spinning-wheel, new boards, a halter hanging on the wall. These are everyday Aran household items which persuade

J. M. Synge

us that the action is naturalistic, but as the play unfolds they become charged with enormous symbolic voltage. When the play opens Cathleen finishes kneading bread and begins to spin. The stage directions reinforce unobtrusively that extraordinary sense of inevitability in the play on which nearly all critics comment.

CATHLEEN: (*spinning the wheel rapidly*). What is it you have?

NORA: The young priest is after bringing them. It's a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal.

(*CATHLEEN stops her wheel with a sudden movement, and leans out to listen.*)

The abrupt stopping of the wheel intimates clearly that the clothes belong to Michael and that he is dead. The rope that the pig with the black feet was eating is used to lead a horse; but a halter or rope is also associated with death by hanging. The white boards are intended for Michael's coffin, not for new household furniture

The mood of the play which is suggested by the props and the opening stage directions is intensified also by the many references to storm, which intimate crisis and disorder. The play is dominated by the sound of the sea and allusions to the elements and the points of the compass. The two women discuss the impending storm as they prepare to identify the clothes of the drowned man:

CATHLEEN: Is the sea bad by the white rocks, Nora?

NORA: Middling bad, God help us. There's a great roaring in the west, and it's worse it'll be getting when the tide's turned to the wind.

## *Riders to the Sea*

The coming of the old woman, Maurya, forces the two women to postpone identifying the clothes and increases our desire to be convinced of what we already believe. The action now centres on Maurya's attempt to dissuade Bartley from going to the Galway fair. 'The young priest will stop him surely,' Maurya says, but Nora has already told Cathleen that the priest will not attempt to stop Bartley because he is convinced God will not take her last son. The dramatic irony here adumbrates a dominant and recurring theme in Synge's work – the opposition of Christian belief and older, pagan beliefs. The young priest, it is clearly intimated, is powerless in the face of the eternal and malignant sea. The drowning of the last surviving son is bitter testimony to the immeasurable cruelty of the god of the Aran islanders. The point is made more explicitly in the first completed draft of the play where the time is Martinmas, the old feast of Mars, god of slaughter. 'In three nights it is Martin's night and it is from this house a sheep must be killed.' Maurya herself dismisses the young priest's assurance. 'It's little the like of him knows of the sea. . . . Bartley will be lost now.'

The tragic inevitability which marks the opening of the play extends to the scene between Maurya and Bartley. Bartley acts like a man driven to carry out a predestined task and Maurya's arguments seem curiously inadequate, even obtuse. She asks him not to take the rope which will be needed for Michael's funeral and she points out that he is needed for the task of burying his brother. Her concern seems primarily directed at observing the proprieties due to the dead. Only in her third speech to Bartley does she speak of his possible death, and not of Michael's actual death. 'If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only?'

J. M. Synge

The inability of mother and son to communicate – their enmity even – is further emphasized by the fact that Maurya refuses to give Bartley her blessing even though she knows he is going to his death. Similarly, it is suggested that she, the mother, withholds from Bartley the bread that might have sustained him. ‘You’re taking away the turf from the cake,’ Nora reproaches Maurya and sends her off to give Bartley the blessing she has withheld.

The daughters now identify the clothes as belonging to the dead Michael because of the four dropped stitches. In this scene Synge works skilfully on two levels. Although the primary interest in the play is directed to Bartley and his fate, Michael dominates the play, and the various clues that lead to the establishment of his death help to establish Bartley’s death. No sooner do Cathleen and Nora establish Michael’s death than Maurya enters keening because she claims to have seen ‘the fearfulest thing’ – her son Michael riding the grey horse. The *peripeteia* or reversal which Synge has managed here – in apparent contradiction to the literal truth – is linked to a stunning recognition (*anagnorisis*) which is that Bartley will die. The finest kind of recognition is accompanied by simultaneous *peripeteia*, as in the *Oedipus*, Aristotle claims. The effect Synge achieves here in relating *peripeteia* and recognition is among the most theatrical of his entire work.

The sequence leading up to Bartley’s death contains many clues about the meaning of the play. Maurya, carrying Michael’s stick, sets out for the spring (where she gets Holy Water ‘in the dark nights after Samhain’) to meet Bartley. Bartley, wearing Michael’s clothes, blesses his mother, but she is unable to offer him the life-sustaining bread or return his blessing. ‘I could say nothing.’ It is then she sees Michael arrayed in new clothes riding the grey pony and she recognizes that her



## *Riders to the Sea*

last son must die. 'Bartley will be lost now.' On hearing of Michael's ghostly apparition Cathleen, who had earlier denied that he was living, immediately accepts the truth of Maurya's vision. Her *volte face* is immediate and unconditional. The grey pony seems an analogue of the allegorical 'pale horse' of the Apocalypse ('And I looked, and behold, a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him'). It is to the non-literal reality of the grey pony that the three women respond and we can be sure that this was the effect Synge intended. For example, the ship which comes to bear Bartley away is a very real ship which is mentioned three times and always with reference to 'the green head'. But the fact that Synge is very specific about the ship's location does not preclude suggestions that this is a death ship come for Bartley. *The Aran Islands* tells of two fairy ships one of which sought to lure a man to his death at a 'green point' and one which is associated with 'a great flock of birds on the water and they all black'. The storyteller specifically seeks a symbolic relationship between ship and bird. "I think those black gulls and the ship were the same sort." In a further equation the black gulls emerge in *Riders to the Sea* as 'the black hags that do be flying on the sea' over the dead Michael. Nets, halter, wheel, boards, ships, horses – Synge has woven a complex nexus of images that suggest entrapment, futility and death.

In *The Aran Islands* most of the many stories about horses appeal to the supernatural. A young woman who was stolen by the fairies describes a gathering or hosting. 'Then she told them they would all be leaving that part of the country on the Oidhche Shamhna, and that there would be four or five hundred of them riding on horses, and herself would be on a grey horse, riding behind a young man.' Another story tells of a man who heard

someone riding on the road behind him. 'The noise behind him got bigger as he went along as if twenty horses, and then as if a hundred or a thousand, were galloping after him.' Later the priest tells the storyteller, 'it was the fallen angels'. The horses of *Riders to the Sea*, like the riders of the title, suggest at once scenes from the actual life of the Aran people while intimating through myth and symbol more universal dimensions. The spectral and apocalyptic rider on the grey pony that Maurya saw has associations with the ghostly riders in the folk stories recounted in *The Aran Islands* and with the horsemen of *Revelations* and especially the pale horse; on the literal and mythic levels the rider represents death which is why the mother cried out in fear when she saw him. Michael is one of the company of the dead who comes seeking out his brother to join the fairy company just as the fairies stole the young women in the story in *The Aran Islands*. We might go further and argue that for some mysterious reason Michael murders his brother. 'It is the ghostly Michael who is the killer of his younger brother – for reasons that lie deep in the Irish psychology'.<sup>1</sup> This fratricide is the first of those complex psychological and familial conflicts that Synge explored in his plays. *The Shadow of the Glen*, like *Riders to the Sea*, is dominated by a corpse – in this case a husband symbolically killed by his wife. In *The Well of the Saints* husband and wife threaten to kill each other in a scene of startling realism immediately following their 'cure'; the theme of *The Playboy* is parricide. Deirdre and Naisi quarrel bitterly immediately before he is killed. 'It's women that have loved are cruel only,' Naisi declares. In the *Poetics* Aristotle states that the terrible and pitiful incidents proper to tragedy arise when suffering is caused by people whose relationship implies affection, as when a brother

## *Riders to the Sea*

kills a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, a son his mother.

The remainder of the play, following Maurya's account of her meeting with Bartley and Michael, is an extended threnody or dirge in which Synge heightens the ritualistic character of the drama and combines narration (the threnody) with enactment (the procession of mourners with the corpse of Bartley). Past and present merge as in a dream-sequence while the mother chants the name of her dead 'men-children' (Bourgeois's phrase),<sup>2</sup> and the enactment of one man's death becomes an image of every man's death:

There was Patch after was drowned out of a curagh that turned over. I was sitting here with Bartley, and he a baby, lying on my two knees, and I seen two women, and three women, and four women coming in, and they crossing themselves, and not saying a word. I looked out then, and there were men coming after them, and they holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it – it was a dry day, Nora – and leaving a track to the door. (Plays I, p. 21)

It is one of the finest speeches in the play; Maurya, *mater dolorosa*, remembers Bartley as a baby, while the man Bartley now reduced to 'a thing' is borne in. The sea, like a malevolent animal, tracks its victim even into the heart of the family. Past, present and the future coalesce to give a quality of timelessness and dream which is intensified by the sense of ordered ritual that prevails. The keening women take their prescribed place in a frieze of ceremonial grief; the daughters kneel at the one end of the table on which the corpse is laid. The mother, at the head of the table or altar, is like a priestess about to celebrate the last

J. M. Synge

rites as she begins her last great speech, 'They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . .'

Since the meaning of Maurya's final speeches is central to an understanding of *Riders to the Sea*, it is helpful if we define more clearly the genre of the play. If *Riders to the Sea* is a tragedy (which some critics doubt), it is clearly not a tragedy in the Greek or Shakespearean sense of the word. In both Greek and Shakespearean tragedy the unhappy catastrophe is brought about by causally related events associated with the protagonist's 'flaw' or *hamartia*. But *Riders to the Sea* differs radically in that there is no causality which dictates a fitting punishment; Michael and Bartley are the victims of an arbitrary fate and it is because of this arbitrariness that the play is closer to irony than to tragedy. And in what sense can the drowned men of *Riders to the Sea* be said to have a 'flaw'? Maurya (and Michael and Bartley) are too passive in their suffering and because of this they are scapegoats or *pharmakoi*, rather than protagonists. 'The archetype of the inevitably ironic is Adam,' Northrop Frye writes, 'human nature under sentence of death.'<sup>3</sup> One is reminded of what Synge wrote after witnessing the harrowing burial scene on his last visit to the Aran Islands: 'As they talked to me and gave me a little poteen and a little bread when they thought I was hungry, I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgement of death.'

We might also contrast Synge's play with Greek and Shakespearean tragedy in terms of the moral vision it establishes. Greek and Shakespearean tragedy is based on a system of values. Gilbert Murray writes that 'the ritual on which tragedy was based embodied the most fundamental Greek conception of life and fate, of law and sin and punishment.'<sup>4</sup> Shakespearean tragedy affords us a

## *Riders to the Sea*

complex vision of good and evil; in some cases evil may appear to win out over good, but the action, nevertheless, is always conducted within a value system or moral order. Dennis Donoghue argues that *Riders to the Sea* is not a tragedy because it lacks a significant equivalent of 'the valued'; it fails to give a sense of heightened life; Maurya is an unconvincing protagonist because her sufferings are determined 'by forces which do not include her will or her character'.<sup>5</sup>

And yet it may be argued that there is a 'value', a 'good', in the play which has been obscured or passed over because critics have been reluctant to modify traditional definitions of tragedy. The 'good' in *Riders to the Sea* is death itself. The play expresses fear and apprehension about living and dying, but never about a death which is attended by proper observance. The young priest offers comfort by stating that Michael has had 'a clean burial'; the rope to lower the coffin is 'new'; Maurya hopes to give Michael 'a deep grave . . . by the grace of God' and she has given 'a big price for the finest white boards you'd find in Connemara'. The tension in the scene between Maurya and Bartley arises partly from the fact that he may somehow thwart the burial that has been prepared for Michael. Cathleen echoes the mother's horror that Michael will not receive a proper burial. 'Ah, Nora, isn't it a bitter thing to think of him floating that way to the far north, and no one to keen him but the black hags that do be flying on the sea?' Later Cathleen, to comfort her mother, contradicts this statement when she says that Michael did get 'a clean burial, by the grace of God'. The imagery of Maurya's last speeches confirms this notion of death as a good. Michael, angel of death, wears 'fine' clothes and 'new shoes', the coffin for Bartley will be 'a good coffin out of the white boards'. The substance of

*J. M. Synge*

those speeches should also be taken at face value; they speak of something won, rather than something lost; they are not speeches of despair or acceptance or resignation, but speeches of acquiescence, even justification. Birth is hard, life a trial to be endured, death a deliverance.

MAURYA: . . . Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. . . . What more can we want than that? . . . No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.

This is reminiscent of the sentiment voiced by the chorus at the close of *Oedipus Rex*:

Call no man fortunate that is not dead.  
The dead are free from pain.

It echoes too the sentiments voiced by Martin MacDonough in a letter to Synge: 'it fell out that the wife of my brother Seaghan died, and she was buried the last Sunday of the month of December and look! that is a sad story to tell, but if it is itself, we must be satisfied because nobody can be living forever.'<sup>6</sup>

But while the sentiments in both *Oedipus Rex* and this letter are reminiscent of that of Maurya's final speech, Synge's play is grounded on a metaphysical view of the universe far more pessimistic than Sophocles' or that expressed by MacDonough, which must be placed within the context of Christian belief in Resurrection. The passivity of Synge's characters and the arbitrariness of their fate suggest strongly that suffering has no redemptive or liberating role. In his fragmentary verse play, *Luasnad*,

*Riders to the Sea*

*Capa and Laine* (begun in 1902), Luasnad, a fisherman, presents a terrifying picture of life's pain and the maliciousness of the gods:

All this life has been a hurtful game  
Played out by steps of anguish. Every beast  
Is bred with fearful torment in the womb  
And bred by fearful torments in life-blood.  
Yet by a bait of love the aimless gods  
Have made us multitudes.

(*Plays*, I, p. 200)

The traditional attitude had been otherwise. 'Whatever its nature and whatever its apparent cause, his [man's] suffering had a meaning, it corresponded, if not always to a prototype, at least to an order whose value was not contested.'<sup>7</sup> But Synge contests this point of view; for him life has no dignity or significance 'only a bit of wet flour we do have to eat, and maybe a fish that would be stinking' (*Plays*, I, p.25); suffering leads to apathy, even callousness, rather than to compassion – 'I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening.' (*Plays*, I, p. 25) 'We, who have experienced Shakespeare and Racine,' writes Northrop Frye, 'can add the corollary that tragedy is something bigger than four phases of Greek drama.'<sup>8</sup> Our experience of Synge will suggest a further corollary – that he too has amplified the definition of tragedy. Death is a 'good' because it liberates one from a meaningless, and therefore terrifying, existence. The sea is the symbol of an implacable and ravenous mortality which makes existence meaningless when traditional humanist and Christian beliefs are jettisoned. Synge, in *Riders to the Sea*, has written a play that

J. M. Synge

anticipates existentialism in its nihilism and in its denial of meaning. Some forty years later Beckett will sound the same note of existential despair. It is the burden of Lucky's great monologue in *Waiting for Godot*: 'the earth in the great cold the great dark the air and the earth abode of stones in the great cold alas alas . . .'

If *Riders to the Sea* is read in this light, we may wish to redefine the role of the three women in the play. Certainly they mourn the deaths of the Aran fishermen, but they also preside over those deaths. In *Riders to the Sea* only men die; the women endure. Maurya, spokeswoman for all three, justifies those deaths and acquiesces in them. The women endure because behind Cathleen, Nora and Maurya there may be faintly discerned those archetypal agents of the Greek *ananke* or *moira* – Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, the three Fates.<sup>9</sup>

The parallels are neither exact–nor mathematical, but they are strong enough to suggest the presence in the play of this powerful myth. The three Fates or Moirai presided over birth, marriage and death: the thread of life is spun on Clotho's spinning-wheel, it is measured by the rod of Lachesis, it is cut by the shears of Atropos. The myth, writes Robert Graves, 'is based on the custom of weaving family and clan marks into a newly-born child's swaddling bands, and so allotting him his place in society.'<sup>10</sup> When *Riders to the Sea* opens Cathleen's rapid spinning is interrupted by Nora's news that they must identify the clothes of a drowned man. Cathleen immediately stops her wheel '*with a sudden movement*'. Later she cuts the string binding the clothing with a sharp knife and her sister identifies the clothes as Michael's because she had dropped four stitches thus giving them a 'family' mark. The mother, Maurya, withholds the bread of life because Bartley's allotted time has come – he is setting out on a



## *Riders to the Sea*

journey; the ghost ship awaits him; he is in Michael's clothes; he is being stalked by Michael, the angel of death on the grey pony. In the scene between Maurya and Bartley, explanation or apology is irrelevant because both are playing roles already established. Maurya is the prescient seer, Bartley the predestined victim. Bartley is still standing in the doorway when Maurya foretells his death. 'He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again.' Knowing this she cannot give him the bread or her blessing. It is only after Bartley's death, in which she co-operates, that she can finally give him her blessing. 'May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul.' The actress Maire Ni Shiubhlaigh, who played in the original production of the play which was supervised by Synge, describes Maurya as 'an old woman counting the loss of her sons with a bitter satisfaction.'<sup>11</sup>

In redefining the role of the three women, and especially Maurya's role, we realize that Maurya is not the protagonist of the plays. Maurya's 'child-men' represent the protagonist and if they seem too passive for tragedy it is because they have no defence against the mortality represented by the ever-present sea. *Riders to the Sea* is a counterblast to Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. In Yeats's play the old woman calls the young men of Ireland to their death, but she also promises them immortality:

They shall be remembered for ever,  
They shall be alive for ever,  
They shall be speaking for ever,  
The people shall hear them for ever.

But Synge is not one of the last Romantics: he is modern in his irony and in his unbelief and in his alienation. His

J. M. Synge

victims stand in stark contrast to Yeats's heroic martyrs. 'And isn't it a pitiful thing when there is nothing left of a man who was a great rower and fisher, but a bit of an old shirt and a plain stocking?' Maurya, the querulous, bitter old woman, is no queenly Cathleen Ni Houlihan; she is more akin to Mrs Moore, the old lady in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, who had arrived at the state where 'the horror of the universe and its smallness are both visible at the same time.' The echo in the Marabar Caves speaks of the same nihilism that makes Maurya long for sleep and oblivion: 'the echo began in some undescrivable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at the moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, "Pathos, piety, courage – they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value."' <sup>12</sup> Mrs Moore's journey to India is a *rite de passage* in which she comes to realize the essential irrationality of the universe. Synge, in attendance at a burial on the Aran Islands, believed he heard a similar realization in the keening of the Aran islanders. 'This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island.' Maurya, however, shows nothing of this passionate rage – 'She's quiet now and easy,' Nora observes – only bitter satisfaction that she has seen her menfolk to their death. 'They're all together this time, and the end is come.'

Northrop Frye notes that man's entry into nature is an entrance into the existentially tragic. 'Merely to exist is to disturb the balance of nature. Every natural man is a Hegelian thesis, and implies a reaction; every new birth provokes the return of an avenging death. This fact, in itself ironic and now called *Angst*, becomes tragic when a sense of a lost and originally higher destiny is added to

### *Riders to the Sea*

it.<sup>13</sup> It is a limitation of *Riders to the Sea* (which makes the play a pathetic rather than a tragic experience) that Synge's metaphysical nihilism deprives his protagonists of any sense of a lost or higher destiny. Synge did come to understand that the artist might give meaning and pattern to this 'pragmatical, preposterous pig of a world'<sup>14</sup> and with increasing insight he embodied this understanding within the tragicomic perspectives of the succeeding plays.