

M. J. Molloy. Selected Plays

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Writing in the mode of acclaimed peasant playwrights like Synge and Fitzmaurice has earned Michael Joseph Molloy (1917-1994) the reputation among literary historians as the last folklorist, the last of a line which gradually faded in the gallery of Irish drama. Until recently, Molloy's work was relatively undervalued and his plays often regarded as chronicles of the West of Ireland which explored no new direction and ventured no new enterprise. Now, however, Molloy's theatre is valued not only as a cultural document but also as a sharp sociological and historical analysis of his time, his people and his place. Molloy is often cited as an 'insider', who was born and lived in the region represented in his plays, Co. Galway region, which he loved and knew intimately.

Robert O'Driscoll's selection includes *The King of Friday's Men* (1948), *The Paddy Pedlar* (1952), *The Wood of Whispering* (1953), *Daughter from over the Water* (1963), *Petticoat Loose* (1979) and *The Bachelor's Daughter* (1985), first published in this edition, apart from a Bibliographical Checklist. Some of the plays are introduced by prefaces where Molloy discusses the themes of the plays in a literary and historical context. He refers to and analyzes aspects of Irish history and folklore and alludes to the work of Irish playwrights such as Shaw, Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory and Oscar Wilde.

In the introduction, Robert O'Driscoll discusses Molloy's significance in the Irish dramatic tradition, specifically in the tradition of folk-drama. He considers Molloy's theatre "as significant as Synge's in that it is a full and authentic representation of the survival of ancient Celtic customs and wisdom in the modern world" (vii). After describing Molloy's life and first contacts with the theatrical world, O'Driscoll presents a brief study of folk life as a source for drama. He discusses how the representation of a folk world functions in terms of theme, characters, action, stage conventions and language, most specifically in Molloy's plays. O'Driscoll also refers to the reception of Molloy's plays by a naturally prevailing rural audience: "The rural Irish audience of Molloy's time has the same credulity and involvement in the action as Shakespeare's audience, carrying the willing suspension of disbelief to the furthest point, reacting to events on the stage as if they were events in real life" (ix). Apart from the evident folk aspect of Molloy's work, O'Driscoll discusses its historical and sociological approach. According to him,

the romantic and poetic past Molloy regards as 'a hill' from which to view the harsh social and economic realities of contemporary Ireland. In considering the social backdrop to the plays, the modern Irish people, Molloy believes, were prisoners of history, free politically, but not free in "their own souls and minds from the ill effects of having been born is slavery" (xii).

However, O'Driscoll sees the ultimate significance of Molloy's theatre neither in its folk aspect nor in its historical approach, but in the kind of dramatic art that his plays exemplify and in the theatrical methods they use. According to O'Driscoll, Molloy's "plays resist classification into the common classical genres, comedy and tragedy, but are more in the tradition of the forms of drama developed in the Middle Ages: morality and farce" (xiv), categories in which he includes *The King of Friday's Men*, *The Wood of Whispering*, *Petticoat Loose and Paddy Pedlar*. He reads *Daughter from Over the Water*, using Molloy's own words, as a "religious problem play" and *The Bachelor's Daughter*, as "documentary drama".

Among the approaches proposed by O'Driscoll, let us privilege, in our reading, the historical aspect of Molloy's plays; let us consider their insertion in certain historical and literary moments and their response to those moments. The period after "The Emergency" or the war years (1939-45) was marked by mass emigration and rural depopulation, which generated a widespread national pessimism. In the late fifties, however, Irish society began to plant the seeds for the social and economic regeneration that would take place in the following decades. The harsh bitterness of earlier times gave way to a more humanistic and hopeful view of society. Besides, a new concept was brought into discussion in Ireland: historical revision. (see Terence Brown, *Ireland – A Social and Cultural History*, 1922-1979. Fontana Paperbacks, 1981).

Most of Molloy's plays in this edition seem to meet the prevailing spirit in Ireland in the years following the war and in subsequent decades. They are initially imbued with anxiety and pessimism. Molloy depicts the melancholy, desolation and impoverishment of the West of Ireland menaced by hunger and depopulation. Yet, there is often a note of hope, a solution which suggests reconstruction and regeneration.

The Wood of Whispering, taking place in the West of Ireland, in 1950, supposedly comic, dramatizes the tragedy of an older generation, menaced by depopulation, struggling to keep their youth in Ireland and thus manage to build a better future. Thus, after a series of successful marriage arrangements, the final words of the play suggest hope for non-extinction and for the beginning of a new era:

SANBATCH... maybe now He thinks we have enough good sense got again, and may be soon He'll bestow children on the village again. If He does, we'll have nothing more to want or to do, only wait for the death, and then die happy because we will be leaving room for more (177).

Daughter from Over the Water is a comic representation of the same problem with a different focus, however. The emphasis is on the clash between the values of an urbanized youth gone abroad and returning home and those of the elders who stayed faithful to their land and old beliefs. To a certain extent it anticipates a theme explored by future writers, that of the "émigré returning to Ireland" (xiii).

The Paddy Pedlar transports the audience to 1840, the time of Ireland's Famine. Although taking place in a past time, the misery and anxiety dramatized in the play could be easily recognized and reflected upon by an audience in the fifties. A dead mother carried in a pedlar's sack to be buried, perhaps symbolizing the death of an old suffering Ireland, and the marriage of a young girl who is, this way, "saved from going foreign" bring forth once more a pattern which seems to be recurrent in Molloy's treatment of history: the rising from pessimism towards reconstruction.

The King of Friday's Men and *Petticoat Loose* also bring the audience back in time, the first to a pre-famine feudal world, the latter to a Famine time of fairies, changelings and superstitions. Yet, both plays depict not the glamour of an ancient world, but its cruelty. *The King of Friday's Men* dramatizes the "droit de seigneur" and *Petticoat Loose*, the religious war between the Fairy Doctors with their cruel methods of salvation and the Priests with their curing gospels. Molloy's prefaces provide the reader with folk and historical references useful for the understanding of these plays. One might say that these two plays show Molloy's integration with the new concept of historical revision brought into discussion and into literature in the fifties and following decades.

The Bachelor's Daughter was written more than forty years after Molloy's first play, *Old Road* (1941), not included in this edition. Irish society had suffered profound changes and was preparing for even more significant transformations. There was an inevitable sense of estrangement, of dealing with the unknown, with social questions never thought of before. In *The Bachelor's Daughter*, then, while still dealing with his folk material and somehow happy ends, Molloy introduces the presence of an invisible poltergeist which in fact interacts with the other characters as a character itself through sounds, whistles and objects thrown on the stage, creating an atmosphere of conflict with the uncontrollable and the unknown.

Molloy's plays are enjoyable and at the same time bring a repertoire of themes to be reflected upon. The audience of his time may have experienced a sense of *déjà vu*, of redundant repetition of folk material in his peasant plays. Yet, for the audiences of our time, on the verge of a new century, this blend of anxiety and hope, of historical reality and mythical worlds, of regionalism and universal values is likely to have a prevailing appeal upon the perhaps repetitive localism of the plays.