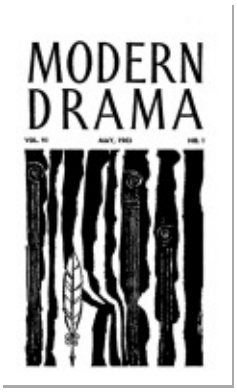
Ibsen and the Beginnings of Anglo-Irish Drama, I. John Millington Synge by Jan Setterquist, and: *Ibsen and the Beginnings of Anglo-Irish Drama II. Edward Martyn* by Jan Setterquist (review)



John Kelson

Modern Drama, Volume 6, Number 1, Spring 1963, pp. 89-90 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1963.0024*

The other translations by Professor Honig of Brown University, include the delightful comedy *The Phantom Lady*; *Devotion to the Cross,* an early Existentialist play; and *Secret Vengeance for Secret Insult,* in its first appearance in English. Two excellent essays are also included, the translator's enlightening comments in fifteen pages on the plays and the Spanish Honor Code, and a thirteen page reprint of Norman Maccoll's discussion of Golden Age drama, still timely though originally published in 1888. Both publishers have bestowed a favor on students of Spanish drama by these volumes.

WILLIS KNAPP JONES
Miami University

IBSEN AND THE BEGINNINGS OF ANGLO-IRISH DRAMA, I. JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE, Jan Setterquist, Upsala Irish Studies No. 2, 1951, 94 pp.

IBSEN AND THE BEGINNINGS OF ANGLO-IRISH DRAMA II. EDWARD MARTYN, Jan Setterquist, Upsala Irish Studies No. 5, 1960, 115 pp.

Mr. Setterquist tells us in a prefatory note to his comparative study of Synge and Ibsen that it was inspired by lectures on *English Literature after 1900* given at Upsala University by Professor S. B. Liljegren, who is also the general editor of the Upsala Irish Studies. The appearance of the second book, on Edward Martyn, marks the end of what Mr. Setterquist calls ". . . the first part of my investigation of Ibsen's influence upon the early Anglo-Irish drama." He does not hint at what paths he will explore in the second part, but one can hazard the guess that he will be looking for traces of the Norwegian master's influence in the early Yeats plays as well as in those of Lady Gregory.

Both Yeats and Synge formally repudiated Ibsen, particularly Ibsen of the "problem plays," as a model for Irish playwrights to imitate. It was apparently Ibsen's drawing-room prose, his "joyless and pallid words," as Synge says in his preface to *The Playboy,* that aroused their antipathy. It is known that Yeats bought the works of Ibsen (in Archer's translation), that he carried them about with him on his travels, and that he saw some London productions of several of the plays. The only evidence we have, however, that Synge was aware of Ibsen is in the two negative and oblique references in the prefaces to *The Playboy* and to *The Tinker's Wedding.* There is no documentary evidence that Synge actually read or saw a production of a single Ibsen play. Yet Mr. Setterquist assumes, for the purpose of his study, that not only was Synge familiar with a play such as *A Doll's House*—a play having world-wide fame and which any literate individual living at the turn of the century would know about, at least by hearsay—but that he had read and pondered on minor plays such as *The League of Youth* and *Love's Comedy* which only a dedicated Ibsenite would be supposed to have read. This reviewer finds it difficult to believe that what are admittedly parallel situations in Ibsen and Synge plays are necessarily the result of a direct borrowing. The play in which an individual leaves hearth and home in answer to an appeal from the "Beyond," as in *In the Shadow of the Glen,* is so frequently to be met with in Irish drama that one does not need to look to foreign literary influences to account for it. The theme of the lure of the Land of Heart's Desire is a common one in Irish folktales and in the Old Irish sagas; it would seem more likely

that Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen* was inspired by an Irish literary tradition than by *A Doll's House.*

Mr. Setterquist has found an Ibsenian parallel for the situation in each of Synge's plays, even for that most Irish of all stories, *Deirdre of the Sorrows.* But seeing in the death of Deirdre and Naisi something analogous to the situation in *Love's Comedy* in which Falk and Svanhild decide not to get married, but to go their separate ways, seems to be straining too hard to find a possible "source." It is also surprising to hear Mr. Setterquist say that Pegeen's final speech in *The Playboy*—"Oh, my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World"—is a direct borrowing from Hilde's "My—*my* Master Builder," in *The Master Builder* and that "This is . . . in all probability the most literal example of Ibsenian influence in the works of Synge." (p. 70) Ibsen has undoubtedly been the most influential modern playwright, but this influence is surely not as all-pervasive as Mr. Setterquist would have us believe.

In his study of the influence of Ibsen on Edward Martyn, Mr. Setterquist is on safer ground. Martyn was a avowed admirer of Ibsen, and the traces of the Master in *The Heather Field, Maeve, The Tale of a Town, An Enchanted Sea,* and *Grangecolman* are most convincingly demonstrated. In *Grangecolman* particularly the echoes of Ibsen are loud. The very title recalls *Rosmersholm,* and both plays are set in a "lonely old county seat haunted by a family ghost." The central character of *Grangecolman* is a woman obviously modelled on Hedda Gabler; she even meets her death, like Hedda, from the muzzle of her own pistol.

The very fact that it is so easy to find literary indebtedness in Martyn's plays is a good indication of how *bad* they are. None of the characters is given life; dialogue is wooden and unconvincing. If only Martyn had been a better writer, and had assimilated his sources more thoroughly, Mr. Setterquist's study, admirable as it is, would have gained in value. It is not likely that the plays of Martyn will ever exist anywhere but in the limbo of historical curiosities.

JOHN KELSON
University of Kansas

O'NEILL, by Arthur and Barbara Gelb, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1962, 970 pp. Price $12.50.

The past decade, in restoring Eugene O'Neill to his former eminence, has produced three fresh biographies: Croswell Bowen's *The Curse of the Misbegotten* (1958), Doris Alexander's *The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill* (Winter, 1962), and the Gelbs' *O'Neill* (Spring, 1962). The last is the best, excelling the others in quantity and the old "standard" biography by Barrett Clark in quality as well. This the Gelbs have accomplished by six years of assiduous research which took them to hundreds of sources across the country. The result is a detailed, reliable life which begins with O'Neill's Irish immigrant forebears in the mid-nineteenth century and ends with the dramatist's death in 1953. Despite its amplitude, the book is not "definitive," as the dust jacket claims, in the sense that no single-volume chronicle of so rich and varied a life could be. Bowen, for example, has an emphasis on the dramatist's relations with Agnes Boulton (his second wife) and their children which the present authors have in fact done well not to duplicate. Other volumes, in brief, will supplement the work of the Gelbs; none will displace it.

The Gelbs offer few revelations not previously surmised; their contribution is to add the abundance of facts which give depth and roundness and pinpoint