

## THE JOCOSE SPIRIT IN VERSE DRAMA OF DONAGH MAC DONAGH

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### ABSTRACT

MOST modern verse plays are plays with a serious purpose. Even when the form of comedy has been adopted by the poets, it is often as a mere concession to the tastes of modern audiences who do not seem to feel at ease in witnessing scenes of tragic intensity; moreover, these comedies have always had a serious message. But verse, besides its capacity to meet its objective to help us to comprehend and appreciate the profound and the imponderable, has also a lesser function, which is to add point to wit in an epigrammatic statement by its form, to create a tone of light-heartedness by its blithesome jingling rhyme, and to lead us to discard our disbelief at the out-of-the-way, the fantastic, the macabre or the grotesque by its rhythm. And when it comes of a talented versifier, this light verse can be very effective in plays whose main purpose is to provide amusement and entertainment. Such plays are more appreciated by a larger audience as compared to the serious plays because they are neither portentous nor pretentious, and do not make the audience feel uncomfortable by posing disconcerting problems of conduct. Indeed, it might be said that a certain kind of play, witty, light-hearted and meant merely to amuse, gains by being written in verse. Nor can it be a matter for surprise that such plays are commonly written by Irish writers, for these qualities have always distinguished the work of Irish dramatists throughout the history of English drama. One of the ablest writers of plays of this genre is Donagh MacDonagh, the Irish poet.

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Donagh MacDonagh won recognition as a poet-playwright with a egregious comedy *Happy as Larry* in 1946. It was nearly ten years before he wrote his next play, a rollicking farce, *Step-in-the-Hollow*. He followed this with a fantastic ballad opera, *God's Gentry* (which reminds one of John Gay's *Beggars' Opera*) and a satirical re-interpretation of one of Ireland's most famous legends, that of Deirdre, called *Lady Spider*. Let us peruse some of the admired plays of Donagh MacDonagh such as *Happy as Larry* which had its English premiere at the Mercury Theatre, London, in 1947; *Step-in-the-Hollow* which was produced at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin in 1957 and *Lady Spider* which was produced at the Gas Co. Theatre, Dublin. *God's Gentry* has been staged so far only by amateur societies. All the plays, however, have been acclaimed by theatre-enthusiasts everywhere, for MacDonagh has a fine sense of the theatre, besides being blessed with bubbling humour and a lively imagination.

MacDonagh's avowed intention is similar to that of Eliot in his later plays, that is, to attract the poetry-fonded public by writing plays which are pre-eminently plays of entertainment. His plays are full of exaggerated comedy, wit and clowning; the audience, their attention completely taken up by these digressive amusing features, do not at first realise that they are being regaled with large quantities of verse. Any suspicion they might have is propitiated by the fact that the verse, though fundamentally based on the traditional blank verse, does not adhere rigidly to familiar metrical patterns, and very often is only lively prose cropped up into lines of equal length. But it is in rhythmical and imaginative indented prose of the Irish peasant or the Dubliner which has a poetry of its own. We have MacDonagh's own account of the genesis (or Guinnesses) of *Larry*:

*"The story goes back to 1941, when poetic drama was a dirty word. I thought it might be possible, by using the technique of the Marx Brothers and the circus, to lure the unsuspecting public into the theatre and then land dollops of verse in their laps.. "*

These plays do not deal with any profound theme; nor do they have a strong message. They are merely entertaining stories containing somewhat unusual and sometimes fantastic situations told in a humorous vein by an imaginative mind. There is no denying that the plays are definitely interesting and pleasing works of art, but hardly they have any lasting value. Mostly they have a sordid background but are lifted above the level of the ordinary by the poetic talent of the author, who fills his lines with a prodigally pleasing and occasionally startling images.

In each of his plays comes a central situation is what Pamela Hansford Johnson would call a 'strange situation'; and that justifies the use of verse in its telling. *Happy as Larry* tells the story of Larry's poisoning by an apothecary who is in love with his wife. Larry is resurrected in time to realise his wife's faithlessness and the apothecary's villainy. The poet dramatist plays with time in the drama and turns everything topsy-turvy. Larry's grandson and his friends living on earth many years after the incident are transported by the Fate into the past and actually contribute to Larry's resurrection. It is

the verse which enables the poet to carry a modern audience through such swift transpositions in time and yet keep them grounded on earth all the time.

*Step-in-the-Hollow* has an equally fantastic plot. A villainous old judge, who has been delivering justice according to his own will and pleasure in a remote Irish village happens to meet a very strict Inspector of the Law Courts, and, in the presence of this inquisitor, is obliged to try a case in which a young man is charged with breaking into a young woman's room and trying to grab her attentions. The humour of the situation comes when we find the fact that the young man is innocent and the real culprit is the wicked old judge himself. His vain attempts to keep the truth veiled and the trick he performs in the end by which the credulous and simple-minded Inspector himself compromises to agree to write a favourable report on the judge provides enough room for the basis of comedy in this pejorative farce. It must be admitted, however, that for a poet's play, *Step-in-the-Hollow* seems with hollow meaning.

*God's Gentry* tells an even more unusual story. Balor, the fire-god of old pagan Ireland, comes back to power when the tinsman reaffirm their faith in him, and grants them one year's absolute rule over Ireland. The amoral, nonchalant tinkers spend the year in rollicking riotous living. And when the stocks of liquor are exhausted, Balor advises them to work. This bitter advice makes them lose their faith in him, and he disappears leaving them once again homeless vagrants at the clemency of gombeens and guards. Woven into this is the parallel story of a lusty young tinsman's fascination for the carefully brought up daughter of an old pious money-bag. The tinsman's zest for life, their joyous abandon, their appreciation of the beauties of nature and their possession of an unexpected strain of romance and sentiment are well portrayed by the poet in this rollicking, comic opera.

In *Lady Spider* the comic genius of MacDonagh provides a neat, ironic twist to one of the most famous stories in Irish legend, that of Deirdre, the ill-fated princess, and Naoise, her youthful lover. In the poet's scoffing attitude to these two long-cherished idols of Irish legend we come across one of the aspects of the Irish temperament which is complimentary to the better known strain of love of the heroic and romantic.

MacDonagh's handling of a theme sacred to the Irish mind reflects his feverish feeling with the solemn portentousness of much modern verse drama. He portrays Naoise purposefully as a rude, callous fighting-man who never takes his love affair with Deirdre to be serious. After marrying her and having two children by her, he still finds time and inclination for extra-marital diversions. Deirdre, in the play, also is characterised in somewhat disparaged role up to the traditional heroic standard. When her husband is slain, she does not, as in the original version, kill herself, but, in fact has a craving for the good things of life which she has missed during the many years of her enforced life in the woods and settles down by marrying the old king Conor, with some idea of taking a tenuous revenge on the treacherous man.

MacDonagh's treatment of traditional romantic or reverent subjects, as well as over the poet's attitude to the function of verse in drama, in the last fifty years, has been stable since then no man's attitude to these subjects changed. The treatment of the same Deirdre Legend by Yeats or Synge, also offers no change in attitude when it comes to their romantic appreciation of the age-old legend in spite of their differing temperaments and the different media of expression they use in their plays - the story of immortal young love, an old jealous king's treachery and the young woman's noble sacrifice of her life. In Yeats's moving verse, as compared to Synge's carefully contrived Irish prose-poetry, the story is a strangely-moving lyric tragedy. Out of this material MacDonagh has fashioned a slightly comical, satirical allegory of love in modern times by providing a sudden, non-tragic ending after adhering in his tale to three-quarters of the old prophecy in the legend.

The old legend is translated into modern terms in deliberation. The beautiful princess (because of whom the weasels cry on a lonely wall where there are queens and armies and red gold'). becomes the Lady Spider, a female cannibal who devours her foolish partner. Naoise is also not portrayed as ardent, romantic and noble lover of the legend, rather a commonplace hero of modern times, say an Army or Air Force officer, brave but stupid and implausible. He is caught up in the spider's web and forced into a marriage for which he does not much care by the 'huntress' who is a masterful, scheming and quite an earthy creature and reveals her true nature in her shrewish nagging when she discovers that Naoise has been seeking variations of marital pleasure with a Scottish siren. The perfect heaven of lovers' happiness ending in high tragedy in the original yields place in MacDonagh's version to infidelity, boredom and a final, ironic dénouement in which Deirdre deviates from the time-honoured code for heroines of romantic tragedy and decides to marry the old king. She will suck the marrow from the old man's brittle bones and haunt him with the memory of Naoise's virility. She foresees and seeks preference to the soft and comfortable living at the palace which she will get through this marriage. By portraying one of the characters in this story, Fergus, as the romantic idealist that he is in the old legend, MacDonagh has succeeded in throwing practicality into sharp relief the cynicism of these down-to-earth realists.

Light-heartedness is the dominant note in MacDonagh's plays. In *Happy as Larry* even the Fates are represented as dancing, singing, in different preludes and making love to the tailors. The tailors are demented, like the tinkers in *God's Gentry*, of an easy nonchalance which enables them to meet the most incredible situations with easy aplomb and irreverence. The juxtaposition of serious incident and a wholly opposed mood of raillery gives rise to freaky turns of phrase that are breath-taking in their unexpectedness. The amorous Fates sing of their longing for mortal love in words like these :

'At heart I'm a simple young maiden,  
maiden, maiden,

At heart I'm a simple young maiden,  
Though they call me a Fate worse than Death,  
Though they call me a Fate worse than Death.'

and not unnaturally, evoke the following comment from one of the tailors:

'Well; Imagine these three young ones  
Being in charge of all creation,  
Controlling the electrons  
And every complication  
Of living and dying  
And of, even, incubation;

No wonder that we see such signs  
Of the time's degeneration

It has been observed that the modern poet in search of a language, which should remain close to contemporary speech and yet be capable of appealing to the poetic sensibility, should give up the suburban ectopian speech of the city which is a language deprived of all beauty and vitality, and should have recourse to a speech which is still instinct with poetry and vigour and at the same time, is quite familiar to him because he belongs to the group of people who use it. For example Norman Nicholson's language gains in force and vigour because it is the language of the original Methodist preachers and is still in use in Cumberland, which has by its fortunate geographical position escaped the unifying, standardizing, soul-destroying influence of the over centralised culture which is spread over the southern and the middle regions of England. MacDonagh is lucky in that he can draw on the still undefiled Dublin local parlance familiarised throughout the world by the novels and plays of Irish writers with its peculiar blend of poetry, wit and lusty vigour. The prose speech of the Dubliner, though varied many respects from the peasant speech of Galway or Sligo, is infect one with in its abundance of lively imagery and a well-defined rhythmic cadence. It has a rough poetry of its own; and when metre and occasional rhyme are added to it, it makes a lively and pleasing verse which appears to be aptest language for the kind of grotesque story that MacDonagh's genius enjoys to celebrate in his plays.

In a determined effort to break down the solemn and reverent mood in which modern audiences make it a point to listen to high-brow verse plays, MacDonagh has incorporated in his plays various devices from the music-hall, pantomime and the clowning of the Marx Brothers. Songs and dances, and direct addresses to the audience by various characters in the play compels the audience to participate in the action of the play, and help to produce a warm sympathetic mood of appreciation and a spirit of enjoyment. In *Happy as Larry* for instance, the doctor's friend exchanges confidence with the audience, the grave-digger invites them to the dawn and the widow calls upon them

Send for the guards and coroner

To investigate their death;

Send for the crime reporter,

Let him rewrite Macbeth.

The Comic Spirit in Verse Drama

MacDonagh's use of the chorus in his plays indicates the complexities involved in the path of a poet who would like to write a play in verse in these days. Over some decades a particular impression has been built up in the mind of the people of what a verse play should be like and the poet feels to a greater extent under a necessity to cast his play in a form the public seem to expect. In *Happy as Larry* and *God's Gentry*, MacDonagh has introduced chorus, but the chorus serves no particular purpose in either play. However, MacDonagh takes the credit to integrate the Chorus with play skillfully by making take active participation in the action of the play. Writing of the former play he has said:

'I can't remember why I planned to have a chorus except that it seemed to be a standard device in verse plays. After a time it began to be a bore, so I brought it right into the play which was a good thing.'

The chorus in *Happy as Larry* is made up of six tailors, who, however, seldom speak or sing together. At the beginning of the play the second tailor is telling his friends the story of his grandfather Larry; as he comes to the part when Larry met a widow by her husband's grave, the inner curtains open and the story is taken up and played by the protagonists themselves, namely Larry and the widow. When at the end of a few minutes Larry leads the widow away, the inner curtains are drawn, the tailors comment upon the action and the second tailor continues with his narration until he reaches a stage in the story, when, the curtains opening, the story is continued by the actors in it. It is in the Second Act that the tailors who have been only commentators up till now are suddenly thrust into the action. At the beginning of the Act they are idly wondering how fine it would be if they could go back fifty years and be present at the wake before Larry's funeral. No sooner said than done, for the Fates take them at their word, appear before them, and transport them to back through time half-a-century and leave them before the door of Larry's house. The tailors mingle with the mourners, watch the little drama of the doctor's attempts to prevail upon the widow of an hour to marry him, and thwart his plan by poisoning the doctor. At the end of the play the second tailor speaks the epilogue and tells the audience :

'My wish for you all when you marry

Is that you may be as Happy as Larry'

In short the chorus is sometimes the Announcer or Narrator giving the audience necessary information which will enable them to follow the action on the stage; more often the members of the chorus act as clowns, popping up at unexpected times to make witty comments and raise a laugh.

In the only other play in which MacDonagh uses a chorus, *God's Gentry* where the chorus is purely conventional. The group of tinkers often break out into a lively song about their riotous and care-free life:

'Laughing, chewing, dancing, drinking

Breaking windows, cursing, winking,

Always happy, never thinking

From now to Easter Sunday'.

Viewing this, the chorus cannot be said to serve any particular or necessary purpose in the play.

The romantic lust for life which the tinkers have symbolised in the writings of many Irish poets and dramatists, expresses itself most aptly in bubbling verse which reveals its full potency in vituperation. Examples of invective repetitive abuse are recurrent in MacDonagh's plays and in this respect he invites a comparison with Christopher Fry alone among contemporary dramatists. This is the old miser, in *God's Gentry* talking to the improvident and fast multiplying tinkers who, even if they were allowed to copulate one day in the year,

.... would have litters of whey-headed, tow-headed

Hay-headed, straw-headed, red-headed brats'

This is but one instance of the peculiar gift of the Irish dramatists, their poetry and potential, which they bring to the English stage periodically to resurrect English drama whenever it seems to be in danger of debilitated condition owing to the lack of vitality in the work of English writers. The power of language which is actually a reflection of the vigour of life which engenders, is best seen in MacDonagh's rich, lively, hyperbolic ranting and fulmination as well as delightful sentiment. The verse flows forth in an unending stream of audacious imagery which startles one by its unexpectedness and strange vigour. Thus the doctor in *Happy as Larry* to the second tailor:

T'll poison you, I'll shoot you,

I'll carve you into goblets;

Your flesh will melt like water,

Your liver turn to stone,

Seamus will kick your heads like balls

From here to Ballyferriter...

The spirit of comedy pervades the play and infects the speech of everyone of the characters. The gay, carefree, irresponsible attitude is well elucidated in the tinker's account of the tragic end of St. John who was totally opposed to tinker morals, especially as regards their attitude to love of woman:

Saint John was a man with a mission,

He advised young men of the country

To avoid anything feminine,  
Now there was a young one called Salome,  
A devil to dance and sing  
And she took a great liking to Saint John And she went to her father, the king, "If I dance, will you give me a present?  
Says she, and the old lad agrees,  
So she started to dance like an angel And the king sitting back at his ease  
"Very nice", says your man, when she's winded

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Very nice, and now what'll you have?"  
"Oh, Daddy," says she, "give me Saint John,  
That lovely young man for my slave."  
"Fair enough", says the king, "You can have him."  
But Saint John, being a Saint, said, "no fear."  
So Salome was mad, and her father  
Said, "Right, you can cut off his ear."  
"No, no," says Salome, "His head please."

So she danced with the head round the Court,  
And bonfires on John's Eve remind us...  
That dancing is dangerous sport.?

The plays are full of topical satire. *Step-in-the Hollow* makes delightful fun of the small-town judge, and *God's Gentry* has a scathing attack on the pomposity of judge, guard and Member of Parliament. The dramatic personae sometimes make a joke at their own expense. The fire-god Balor in *God's Gentry*, occupied with how he was driven out of men's faith by St. Patrick who converted the pagans in Ireland, can ask the tinkers who have called him into being again : 'Who is it rouses Balor from the footnotes of mythology?

Equally amusing in a rather more unexpected manner are the references which these characters make to the audience and to the business in the theatre, and the way in which such comments are woven up with their legitimate dialogue which the dramatic situation necessitates. An apt example are the words off Marks the tinker in *God's Gentry* telling Nora whom he is kissing as the curtain descends:

'Here's a kiss for the shop, and here's one for the pence.  
Here's a kiss for the future, and one for the past.  
Here's one for the curtain-cue. This one will last.'

On another occasion when goes to her house to serenade her and take her away from the house to the fields, he says offering a ladder to hand :-

"And thanks to the stage-hand who left this ladder Ready here for what's to do"

Similarly Larry in *Happy as Larry*, astounded at his wife's faithlessness and the doctor's perfidy, tells the audience:

"Come and tell us that this story  
Is neither strange nor glory..  
That poison's drunk like tea  
And that what happened to me  
Wouldn't even make the action of a play?"

In spite of this serious episode, the audience are made to feel as at a musical or revue, quite at home. No character is too sacred to escape the poet's scathing satire. Rhyme and the Irish epigrammatic tone of verse add point and force to his wit:

"I remember my father's dying injunction  
If you drink fuel-oil you need extreme unction."

While the essentially Irish vein pervades plot, character and dialogue in these Falstaffian fantasies, another equally strong trait in the Irish temperament, namely a vein of deep sentiment and love of the beauty of nature, keeps percolating unexpectedly on various occasions. Marks in *God's Gentry* reveals all the amoral gaiety and inadvertent nature of a tinker youth, but at the same time his capability of tender poetry as, for instance, when he comes to meet Nora at dusk and breaks out into a rhapsody on the bewitching moonlight:

"Day entertains the birds for a last fling,  
Presses the last drink, the road drink, on its guests,  
Urges that birds on one wing never flew.  
Soon the dusk will soften all, will smudge  
The hill-line, swarm within the trees, and soon

The perches, footlights, floats of fire will grow  
Undimmed, and amber sports of turf-fire flow,  
Here in the thickening darkness I will wait  
A signal from the oldest god of all."

*Happy as Larry* is the most at par creation of MacDonagh's plays and it is the one in which the use of verse is most justified. In this rollicking comedy, the introduction of the Fates and the journey backwards through time provide the poet an opportunity to insinuate mysterious processes in Nature and awful possibilities girdling human life. Its verse with its overtones, creates a special awareness in which thoughts of the beyond appear plausible if not natural. Such thoughts fill our mind when the second tailor, calls upon to poison the doctor in the play, spells a momentary doubt which all the audience no doubt must share:

"We're the future, and I'm doubtful  
That we can meddle in the past,  
This play is fifty years of age  
And we're not even in the cast.  
But may be what is happening now  
Did happen fifty years ago,  
And may be if we take a part  
We can assure our future too."

Unprofessional drama has always had a hearing in Dublin. The lovers of drama there have, fortunately, a band of devoted souls who are dedicated to bring not merely good but also great theatre accessible to the public. The Irish as a people have always loved the music of the words, and verse plays are regularly produced in Dublin. Many of the conditions, artistic as well as financial, that stand in the way of producing such plays in Shaftesbury Avenue or Broadway do not exist in the Irish reserves. Dublin has many small theatres and many actors and writers who can always rely upon extremely ingenious producers and designers who seem to be able to create marvellous effects on small stages at small expense. Even the conditions in which these plays are staged seem to point to the Dubliners' fervent desire to make the poetry of the theatre an integral part of their daily life and not leave it as an aesthetic fad for the chosen few. To state an instance, *Lady Spider* had its world premiere in 1959 at the Gas Company Theatre, a small hall with a tiny stage on the first floor of a little building, which houses a shop selling gas stoves and cookers on the ground floor. And so while with the on-going cookery demonstrations all the day in the premises, but in the evening the little hall is packed with theatre-lovers who attend the plays appreciatively and follow critically the intoxicating words spoken by the actors on the stage.

To sum up, a little effort of imagination is required to enter MacDonagh's fantastic world, but once followed, the experience of what can be effected by real poetic talent, and a genius for comedy is eminently worthwhile. Such plays are

certainly not on the heights of Paeon and as such the human mind always grasped as comfortable though they may not be so ennobling. Such plays as MacDonagh's have an honoured place though at a lower ebb where the human mind is more at home. There is no doubt that more plays in this genre will help the poets in their attempt to attract the drama enthusiasts multitudes to verse drama.

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