

THE FEMININE AND THE PRIMITIVE: J.M. SYNGE'S
TREATMENT OF ARAN WOMEN IN *THE ARAN*
ISLANDS

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CHAPTER I

THE FEMININE AND THE PRIMITIVE: J.M. SYNGE'S TREATMENT OF ARAN WOMEN IN *THE ARAN ISLANDS*

John M. Synge first took a trip to the Aran Islands in 1898 and stayed there the following five summers, where he observed the island people and gained much inspiration that he would later use in his contribution to the Irish Revival. In *The Aran Islands*, Synge highlights the “primitive” as he experiences it on the three islands. Synge refers to the islanders as “natural” people and insists in the “Introduction” that he “invent[ed] nothing...chang[ed] nothing essential” in his descriptions of them (307). Despite the claim that he gives a holistic view of the islanders, Synge primarily focuses on the island women as the subjects of his ethnographic inquiry in *The Aran Islands*; I argue that, as such, Synge’s portrayal of the primitive is gendered and serves mainly as an exploration of femininity. Additionally, Synge does not provide a picture of a weak society that desperately needs representation by and help from more civilized interpreters, and he instead depicts the island people as very powerful, namely through his descriptions of the island women. In so doing, Synge reshapes Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold’s “Celtic feminine,” establishing the image of an impressive and able iconic Irishwoman.

Ernest Renan provided depictions of the Celts as a feminine people and is very explicit when doing so in his *La Poesie des races celtiques (The Poetry of the Celtic Races)*: “If it be permitted us to assign sex to nations as to individuals, we should have to say without hesitation that the Celtic race...is an essentially feminine race” (8). Renan emphasizes the idea that the Celts have a poetry-loving disposition and are idealistic, peace-seeking, passive, and generally otherworldly, being mainly guided by spiritual endeavors and not to be bothered with “facts.” The Celts are “naïve,” prone to “romanticism” and “dreamy idealism,” “endowed with little initiative” (8), like a “simple...child, unwitting” (14) and have an “infinite delicacy” (9), being “ever in suspense between a smile and a tear” (14). He additionally argues that the Celts have an intense connection to nature, which is aligned with the feminine and therefore compatible with the temperament of the Celt. According to Renan, the Celtic race had become impure in many places, with Ireland being the exception: “Ireland [is the place] where the race has remained pure from all admixture of alien blood” (2). Since Ireland is, in Renan’s view, the locale of the authentic Celt, the people of Ireland (and Ireland itself) share the primitive, feminine qualities assigned the Celt:

Never has a human family lived more apart from the world, and been purer from all alien admixture. Confined by conquest with forgotten islands and peninsulas, it has reared an impassable barrier against external influences; it has drawn all from itself; it has lived solely on its own capital...Ireland...is the only country in Europe where the native can produce the titles of his descent, and designate with certainty, even in the darkness of prehistoric ages, the race from which he has sprung. It is in this secluded life, in this defiance of all that comes from without,

that we must search for the explanation of the chief features of the Celtic character. It has all the failings...of the solitary man;...timid, strong in feeling and feeble in action...to the outside world awkward and embarrassed. It distrusts the foreigner, because it sees in him a being more refined than itself. (5)

Renan, himself a Breton, uses the model of a primitive “noble savage” type to contrast with what he viewed as the barbarian of industrialized society (Chadbourne 80); in setting up this sharp opposition, though, Renan actually made the Celts appear incompetent, incapable, and hardly qualified for independent governance.

Matthew Arnold was deeply influenced by Renan after reading his *La Poesie des races celtiques* in 1860 and admiringly wrote of Renan’s depictions of the Celt, especially taking note of the instances where “Renan [outlines]...the timidity, the shyness, the delicacy of the Celtic nature, its preference for a retired life, its embarrassment at having to deal with the great world” (Arnold 99-100). In turn, Arnold describes the Celts as heavily emotional and easily taken by flights of fancy. In his own *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (published in 1866), Arnold explains his view of the Celtic nature:

sentimental, if the Celtic race is to be characterised by a single term, is the best term to take...If the downs of life too much outnumber the ups, this temperament...may no doubt seem shy and wounded; it may be seen in wistful regret, it may be seen in passionate, penetrating melancholy; but its essence is to aspire ardently after life, light, and emotion, to be expansive, adventurous and

gay...He loves bright colours, he easily becomes...full of fanfaronade...[and is] soon up and soon down because keenly sensitive to joy and sorrow. (100-101)

Much like Renan's version of the Celt, Arnold's Celt is childlike, moody, and vulnerable. Additionally, the Celt is connected to nature and unequipped for the realities of the modern world. In *The Life of W.B. Yeats*, Terence Brown writes that Arnold believed "the Celt [is] Nature's dreamer, one close to the 'natural magic' of the earth whose characteristic art was the lyric and whose spirituality was ethereal, impractical, and intimate with the supernatural" (63). Just as Renan insisted that the "civilized" French were materialistic and lacked many of the noble qualities of the "primitive" Celt, so, too, did Arnold suggest that the Irish were equipped with manners superior to the English, who could benefit from the acquisition of Celtic conduct (Murray 304). Nonetheless, both Arnold and Renan believed that the Celt did *not* possess any self-governing powers, having few reasoning skills useful outside of the natural and spiritual world. Furthermore, Arnold and Renan transposed the image of feminine, naïve Celt onto the Irish, and, in turn, exhibited their distaste for the idea of a self-governed Ireland. Arnold, greatly contradicting his statements about Irish manners, even describes the Irish as dimwitted, insisting that they are incapable of accepting and adverse to "the despotism of fact" on several different pages throughout *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (102; 103; 108; 152; 155). This is reminiscent of Renan's idea that the Celt does not like to be bothered with fact. Arnold and Renan, though in admiration of some qualities that they viewed as quintessentially Celtic and/or quintessentially Irish, were hardly in favor of Irish Home Rule and present themselves as superior to the Irish peoples about whom they write.

John Synge was certainly familiar with the work of both Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold. In his studies at Dublin University and the Sorbonne, Synge tried to further his knowledge of Irish language and culture by reading the works of literary figures such as Ernest Renan, Anatole Braz, Matthew Arnold, and Pierre Loti (Price 283). Upon reading Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, Synge states in his notes that he experienced " 'a sort of incredulous belief that illuminated nature and lent an object to life without hampering the intellect' " (Price 130). Along with the push from W.B. Yeats, the writings of Arnold and Renan drove Synge to visit the Aran Islands. In "Synge and the Celtic Revival," David H. Greene suggests that Synge's "reading in Irish literature seems to have been extensive, probably more extensive than any of his contemporaries, except professional Celticists" (288). While Renan and Arnold did not write about Ireland from a travel writer's perspective, Synge was intrigued by their version of Irishness and believed that firsthand experience would lend him a more authentic familiarity than would theorizing about the primitive Irish from afar. Arriving in the Aran Islands for the first time, Synge no doubt carried in his mind depictions of Renan and Arnold's Celt, and his study of these two literary figures may have led to some preconceived notions of the islanders. As G.J. Watson points out in *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival*, "An influence on Synge's vision of Aran was, of course, the cultural primitivism at the heart of the Celtic—and Celticist—revival" (44). Combining what he had read and heard about the Celtic (and Irish) primitive, in addition to his conception of the Aran Islands as three small and isolated land masses, separated from the mainland, forgotten by time and avoidant of modernity, Synge's idea of Irish primitivism is inextricably linked to the impression of a people connected to the land,

their lifestyles and beliefs relatively unchanged for hundreds of years. In “‘Magnificent Words and Gestures’: Defining the Primitive in Synge’s *The Aran Islands*,” Elizabeth Gilmartin writes that *The Aran Islands* marks Synge’s “attempt at demarcating a culture that remained pure of encroaching modernity” and is a piece “highly charged with ‘primitive’ moments” (63). In the simplest terms, argues Sinead Garrigan Mattar, “‘primitivism’ is the idealization of the primitive...and is always more reflective of the person or society doing the idealizing than it is of the people or culture being idealized” (3). Though Synge claims to “change nothing essential” when writing about the islanders in *The Aran Islands*, in parts of the work he implicitly admits to ignoring the actions and images of islanders whose practices do not match up with *his* idea of the primitive, which he tirelessly promotes in the book.

Providing his view of the primitive Irish in *The Aran Islands*, Synge echoes some of the same observations that Renan and Arnold impose upon the Celt. At the time, indicates Robert Tracy in *The Unappeasable Host: Studies in Irish Identities*, the Anglo-Irish tended to hold a negative view of the Irish: “To [the Anglo-Irish], the Irish were a quarrelsome and degenerate race, revolutionary in politics, reactionary in religion, lacking the saving virtues of industry, thrift, and steadiness” (137). Synge sought to overturn this view and utilized the primitive Irishmen and women as the means by which to do so. In *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*, Gregory Castle insists that Synge desired to “redeem the Irish peasant culture by idealizing or essentializing its ‘primitive’ social conditions” (3). As Renan and Arnold do with both the Celt and the Irish, Synge establishes the Aran Islanders as primitive through his illustrations of the people as being tied to the soil (while nature is still equated with the feminine, for the most part). Synge

uses the word “primitive,” not to mention “prehistoric,” constantly throughout *The Aran Islands* when describing both the islanders and the islands and has a strong dislike for anything “civilized” that he finds there, arguably because any representations of modern European civilization on the islands hamper Synge’s depiction of the island chain as a pristine, primitive place. Almost funny is that Synge, upon reaching the Aran Islands, first sets foot upon Inishmore. This island, according to Synge, has had too much contact with the mainland and does not embody Synge’s idealized version of the primitive; as such, Synge rather hastily leaves that island and is content to find far more “primitive” subjects to observe on the other two islands. While Synge may “change nothing essential” in his depiction of the Aran Islanders, he finds ways to avoid making too many observations that could lead him to conclude anything other than the Aran Islanders meet his standards for a primitive people.

Further suggesting Synge’s agenda to not only experience but also lift up the primitive in the Aran Islands is the fact that, each time Synge mentions something “primitive,” he almost always does so in a positive context. For example, Synge writes, “It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilisation in this rude canvas canoe of a model that has served primitive races since men first went to sea” (316). Like Arnold and Renan, who respectively suggested that France and England could benefit from the personality traits and natural abilities of the Celt, Synge presents the Irish as a “noble savage” of sorts, from whom modern Europe can gain valuable lessons: “for Synge, the primitive is given a positive value against decadent, hyper-civilized Europeans...Synge’s description...isolates and elevates his subjects and gives them an aura of idealized *natural* nobility” (Castle 113). The people

of Aran, argues Synge, have an idea of what *real* living is like; they conduct their lives according to the rhythms of nature, and Synge typically depicts them working together as a communal whole. The only outcasts in the Aran community are those who side with or represent outside authorities. For instance, in *The Aran Islands*, a native to the Aran Islands acts as bailiff during an eviction. His mother, though not among the evictees, directs wild gestures and comments at him, proclaiming to all who will listen that she is ashamed of her traitorous son (Synge 347). The outside influences that come to affect the three islands and the islanders rarely do so in a positive way, based on Synge's presentation of them. As Elizabeth Frances Martin writes in "Painting the Irish West: Nationalism and the Representation of Women," Synge "desired to...perpetuate a simpler, rural, 'primitive' family-based way of life that was believed to exist in Ireland prior to England's colonial rule...[which] was dramatically different from the emphatically urban...culture that had prevailed under British colonial rule" (31). Likewise, indicates Scott Ashley in "The Poetics of Race in 1890s Ireland: An Ethnography of the Aran Islands," the Aran Islanders "were endowed with nationalist and racial significance. They were modern primitives, insulated from the deadening hand of progress and anglicization, true Irishmen and women, models for an Ireland freed from British dominion" (9). Synge argues that the Aran Islanders are extremely respectable and strong largely because, of the Irish people, the Aran Islanders have best managed to avoid being tainted, demoralized, and weakened by outside influences, such as those of their more modern European contemporaries.

Why was Synge so compelled to disclose and provide primarily positive images of the Aran Islanders? Quite possibly, Synge paints the Aran Islanders as an ideal people

in order to establish an iconic Irishperson through whom Synge could promote Irish Home Rule. Though Synge's political inclinations are often hard to pinpoint, as he embraced different political stances over time and even declared himself apolitical at many points, Synge did express pro-Home Rule sympathies around the time when *The Aran Islands* was written and published. In "Possible Remedies," an essay that Synge wrote about Connemara and which was first published in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1905, Synge begins by writing that "It is not easy to improve the state of the people [here] by any particular remedy or set of remedies" (198). Nonetheless, Synge tries to establish what the problems of the people are and how to solve them: "One of the chief problems that one has to deal with in Ireland is, of course, the emigration that I have mentioned so often. It is probably the most complicated of all Irish affairs, and...it is important to remember that the whole moral and economic condition of Ireland has been brought into a diseased state by prolonged misgovernment" (201-2). The Irish are leaving their homeland as a result of too much interference from a distant government, according to Synge. While certainly contesting the way in which Ireland has been governed, Synge does not directly encourage the idea of Home Rule in the previous statement. Preceding the statement, he does reassert that people even in the most primitive parts of Ireland know how to farm, raise livestock, and survive and are rightly wary of the advice from outsiders, governmental officials included. However, the remedy that Synge prescribes at the end of "Possible Remedies" can hardly be mistaken:

Happily in some places there is a countercurrent of people returning from America [to Ireland]. Yet they are not very numerous, and one feels that the only real remedy for emigration is the restoration of some national life to the

people...If Home Rule would not of itself make a national life it would do more to make such a life possible than half a million creameries. With renewed life in the country many changes of the methods of government, and the holding of property, would inevitably take place, which would all tend to make life less difficult in bad years and in the worst districts of Mayo and Connemara. (203)

Jack B. Yeats, who explored Connemara alongside Synge, expressed that Synge was ““an ardent Home Ruler and Nationalist”” (Innes, “Postcolonial Synge” 118). In the same vein, his good friend Stephen MacKenna wrote, ““As regards political interest, I would die for the theory that Synge was most intensely Nationalist; he habitually spoke with rage and bitter baleful eyes of the English in Ireland”” (Watson 37). While Synge may not always have explicitly expressed support for Home Rule, he did so soon after his last visit to the Aran Islands; “Possible Remedies” is an explicit call for Home Rule. Furthermore, by constantly pointing out (in *The Aran Islands*) how the Aran Islanders, presumably representatives of the *most* primitive people in Ireland, outdistance the “hyper-civilized Europeans” in so many ways—manners and survival skills, to name but two—, Synge could be showing that the Irish do not need ties with an imperial power in order to survive and flourish. *The Aran Islands* could be an implicit call for Home Rule.

But to whom was Synge addressing this call? Synge’s intended audience for *The Aran Islands* is questionable. Having been diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Disease just before departing for the Aran Islands, Synge did not know how long he had to live. So, this work could reflect the unfiltered thoughts of a man who cares little for the extent to which it might appeal to an audience. Having felt a great sense of isolation for much of his life, Synge was thankful for the feeling of acceptance that he received on Aran.

Synge claims that the purpose of this work is to depict the lives of the Aran Islanders in a truthful manner, merging ethnographic inquiry and literature. He did not view the piece as a work about himself, although many of the lines in *The Aran Islands* show that among the primary reasons Synge kept returning is that the Aran Islands made him feel happy and strong; they made him feel alive in the face of the impending death that would result from his illness. Synge describes the waves off of the Aran coastline as being educators, and he even writes that he “learned the natural walk of man” in Aran (324). Aran is empowering for Synge. As for his initial account of life on the islands, in 1898 the *New Ireland Review* published a piece about Synge’s first impression of Aran. *The Aran Islands* itself was published in 1907 by Elkin Mathews, a popular London-based publisher known for publishing authors such as Yeats, Joyce, and Pound. Synge definitely had a British readership, and he had an Irish Nationalist readership as well. His depictions of Aran could have angered or pleased his readers, depending upon where his readers stood in relation to their views of the Irish primitive and their thoughts on Home Rule.

Scott Ashley argues that “By 1892 the Aran Islands, despite having a population of under 3000 (falling from a pre-Famine high in 1841 of 3521) and being of marginal economic or political value, were one of the most written about places in Ireland” (8). Since many eyes were turned toward Aran and Synge believed the Aran Islanders had likely been misrepresented by previous visitors to the islands, Synge could not have picked a better place from which to establish the image of an idealized, iconic Ireland, thereby implicitly or directly showing support for Irish Home Rule. By making the supposedly most backward people of Ireland appear to be respectable, strong, and

independent (qualities that popular ethnographers rarely assigned to the Irish or the Aran Islanders in particular), Synge could make a strong case for Home Rule. Unlike Arnold and Renan in that Synge rarely presents himself as better than the Aran Islanders, Synge also, unlike Arnold and Renan, concentrates mainly on women as the focus of his ethnographic inquiry. His depictions of them contrast and call into question many of the traits that Renan and Arnold assigned to the Celt.

In *The Aran Islands*, Synge gives far more specific and vivid descriptions of women than he does men, thereby leaving the reader's impression of the islanders most strongly linked to the image of the Aran woman. The island women are likened to animals, connected to the earth, and depicted as strong in their survival abilities. Synge's primitive islanders do reflect similar qualities of Renan and Arnold's Celt. The main difference in their descriptions is this: while Renan and Arnold's "Celtic feminine" is summarized in the image of elegiac, fanciful, and poetic males, Synge redefines this idea of the "feminine" through his depiction of strong, amatory, elemental, and uninhibited females. As Castle writes, "On one level, [Synge] creates an image of Aran women—exotic and sexual...--that conforms to the discourse of primitivism; but, on another level, he presents a quite different image—of a redemptive sexual naturalness—that deeply colors...his sense of the Irish 'race'" (129). In the Aran that Synge portrays, artificiality is a rarity. The authenticity and genuineness of these world-weary but ever-strong people should, in Synge's mind, be enough to quash less flattering images of the Aran Islanders produced by ethnographers and writers alike. Also, Synge was very aware that the women of the islands rarely, if ever, ventured to the mainland; as such, they represent the purest of the primitive, relatively undisturbed by outside influences. Because the

majority of *The Aran Islands* is spent in providing honorable descriptions of the landscape and the Irish women of the islands, the Irishmen and women of the Aran Islands are portrayed as a powerful people on the whole.

In her “Virgin Territories and Motherlands: Colonial and Nationalist Representations of Africa and Ireland,” C.L. Innes discusses depictions of Ireland and the Irish that were popular in the nineteenth century:

Cartoons published in English journals and magazines such as *Punch* in the nineteenth century often display a wide dichotomy between Ireland as a country, and the Irish as a species, and this dichotomy is most frequently seen aligned to feminine and masculine dichotomies. Thus Ireland or Hibernia is depicted as a virginal young maiden, fair-haired and helpless, besieged by a group of bestial, apelike Irish men. (6)

And from whom does Hibernia, representation of Ireland, typically need protection, according to popular images at the time? Why, from the much stronger and much more experienced Britannia, representative of Great Britain! Britannia was often depicted as Hibernia’s stronger and older sister, swooping in to save Hibernia whenever she needs assistance (and when she needs assistance in thwarting the “apelike” Irishmen in particular). Synge would have been well aware of these common depictions of the weak Hibernia needing protection, by the very capable and intimidating Britannia, from Irishmen and from her inability to protect and govern herself. But Hibernia does not need protection from Irishmen if she is stronger than Irishmen, and Synge constantly portrays the Irishwomen as stronger than the Irishmen. The right to vote, though useful when

trying to attain or retain power, is not necessary for women to exert some power against men. Based on Synge's account, the Aran women seem to suggest that a man only becomes truly powerful if he is united with a woman, as evinced by the number of times that the Aran women poke fun at Synge for not being married. Innes also points out that "Hibernia, as depicted in English journals of the nineteenth century...is the virginal young woman awaiting Union, her role is to be wed to John Bull or England, and thus to be saved from defilement by the bestial men of Ireland" (8). Just as the women of Ireland can handle the Irishmen and even help to empower the Irishmen through marrying them, Hibernia need not marry John Bull (representation of England) in order to attain power and security; Hibernia already has all of the power that she needs in order to control the men within her borders, given Synge's portrayals of Irishwomen, particularly those of the Aran Islands. By portraying Ireland as a "feminine" place, English patriarchal authorities could then assert the right and need to govern Ireland. By implementing a portraiture of Aran women as strong, independent primitives, Synge not only redefines the "Celtic feminine" that Arnold and Renan present but also defies the images of a susceptible, "feminine Ireland" that were supported and reinforced by those wishing to extinguish any possibility of Irish Home Rule.

In Part One of *The Aran Islands*, the first people whom Synge describes upon his visit (on the first page of the narrative, no less) are female: a tall, friendly bunch of girls who seem immune to the unpleasant weather and bring strength and life to the landscape itself: "I met few people; but...a band of tall girls passed me...and called out to me with humorous wonder...The rain and cold seemed to have no influence on their vitality, and as they hurried past me with eager laughter and great talking in Gaelic, they left the wet

masses of rock more desolate than before” (309-10). While the first female islanders he describes are physically strong and robust, the first male islander Synge mentions is disabled: “A little after midday when I was coming back one old half-blind man spoke to me...” (310). Although the elderly man is a talented storyteller, his hands and head both shake, and he regularly complains of his condition; like Renan and Arnold’s Celt, this man is poetic in nature but lacks physical prowess. The next female figure described in the book is a barefooted, uninhibited little girl who brings material for a fire and is “eager to talk” (311) to Synge. This little girl is much unlike Renan’s Irishmen and Irishwomen, who are cautious of foreigners and feel inadequate and introverted whenever in their company. Though unafraid to approach a visitor to the island, the next male figure Synge mentions in detail is a pitiful, sad beggar whom Synge calls “hopeless, dirty, and asthmatic” (312). Likewise, on the next page Synge introduces a man who lives in his sister’s house and depends upon her family. Synge seems to believe that this man is possibly delusional, completely unaware of reality: “From what I hear this man seems to have shut himself up in a world of individual conceits and theories, and to live aloof at his trade of net-mending, regarded by the other islanders with...sympathy” (313). Later in the book, Synge cites an island man who looks extremely healthy and robust but who is “said to be dying” (351). At best, the men are poetic in speech and have stories to be told; even those who appear healthy often are not. From the start of *The Aran Islands*, then, women are depicted as being stronger than men (holistically speaking). This trend continues throughout.

Synge meets few women who are like the inhibited, shy “feminine Celts” that Ernest and Renan paint. In vivid detail, Synge describes women on Inishmaan as they

wash their clothing in the sea, their “petticoats tucked up round [them]” (334). The girls and women are completely unapologetic for and unashamed of the display, while male islanders like Michael are inhibited: “Michael...is a little uneasy when they are in sight, and I cannot pause to watch them” (334). Later during his stay, Synge witnesses an eviction taking place; a woman of the house, full of “uncontrollable fury” (345), most adamantly protests the eviction. Another old woman, ashamed that her son acted as bailiff during the expulsion, stands on a rock and loudly screams curses at him for all to hear: ““This man is my own son...it is I that ought to know him. He is the first ruffian in the whole big world”” (347). Synge adds that “she gave an account of his life, coloured with a vindictive fury I cannot reproduce. As she went on the excitement became so intense I thought that the man would be stoned before he could get back to his cottage” (347). Synge uses this example to speak for the “passionate spirit” (347) of the islanders; this woman is the representative of the people. Similarly, Synge uses the example of a young woman to point out the lack of shyness among the islanders. As he is showing pictures to the family with whom he is staying, an island woman with whom he is hardly familiar enters the dwelling and sits right next to Synge, viewing the pictures with hungry eyes. Synge follows the description of this woman with “The complete absence of shyness or self-consciousness in most of these people gives them a peculiar charm...” (358). Additionally showing that the women are not bothered or silenced by his foreignness, the women not only open up easily but also take every possible chance to heckle Synge about his status as a single male; they seem bold and unafraid. Comparing the island women to ladies in New York and Paris, Synge emphasizes the islanders’ individuality, strong-willed natures, and decisiveness (391). The Aran women are not

relegated to the role of silenced follower throughout the text, instead often positioned as leaders.

While Synge regularly displays a condescending attitude toward the male storytellers of the islands (namely Pat Dirane and Old Maureen), among the most central male figures of the work, Synge positively presents women and the activities in which they engage. Pat Dirane is described as miserable, physically weak, rheumatic and crippled, and Synge seems to question his intellectual capacities as well: “It gave me a strange feeling of wonder to hear this illiterate native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story that is so full of European associations” (323). Rather than appreciating and genuinely listening to Dirane’s story, Synge’s thoughts revolve around Dirane’s literacy level. Old Maureen is described as “blind,” “childish,” and using “some such gibberish” in his stories (369-70), and Synge is detailed in explaining the means by which he guides Maureen on their walks together, even indicating that he has to lift Maureen at times. Synge typically appreciates their poetic natures, but Old Maureen and Pat Dirane are presented as more pitiable than anything else. The younger and middle-aged men also exhibit negative characteristics in their inability to be responsible in given situations. In numerous places throughout *The Aran Islands*, Synge relates that the island women feel the need to closely watch their male family members to make sure they do not waste money or foolishly lose their lives. For instance, Synge notes the irresponsibility of the island men in the “public-house”:

[They were] hanging about the door, miserably drunk...This is the haunt so much dreaded by the women of the...islands, where the men linger with their money till they go out at last with reeling steps and are lost in the sound. [It is a] place were

men sit, evening after evening, drinking bad whiskey and porter, and talking with endless repetition of fishing...and of the sorrows of purgatory. (393-4)

The women, however, are much more sensible, and Synge appears to respect their abilities. Many of the island women occupy leadership roles, and Synge first discusses an islander having “authority” when he describes a young woman driving cattle: “Troops of red cattle, driven mostly by women, were coming up from several directions...I noticed one extraordinary girl in the throng who seemed to exert an authority on all who came near her” (326). This is the only instance in which Synge uses the exact term, and the fact that he employs it while describing a young woman who is controlling scared and strong cattle is significant. Similarly, the island women—not men—most successfully comfort and control the panicky pigs that are being loaded onto the steamer for market (386). Though Synge does present erotic images of the island women throughout the work, in many cases he lingers more on the work being performed by the women than the appealing parts of their physical appearances. For instance, when Synge focuses on a woman washing her clothing in the ocean, he “present[s] her as one of a recurrent type and took interest in the real conditions of her washing; she engaged actively in a task, rather than suffering his gaze or making seductive movements of her limbs...she conveys a way of life and an integrity of action” (Scott 180-1). Another powerful female figure is the “native witch” who uses her abilities to help the people. Two separate evictions are thwarted by storms, and the islanders believe that she is responsible for calling up the storms upon sighting the approaching steamer, preventing the vessel from landing and thereby preventing the evictions (344). Additionally, little Michael’s grandmother makes him behave by reminding him of “‘the long-toothed hag’, that lives in the Dun and eats

children who are not good” (362). Even the potentially fictitious female islanders (such as the hag) mentioned in the book are often formidable, though most are impressive in a positive way. Also, Synge seems amazed that women rarely have doctors in attendance when they are having children and seems equally amazed at the speed with which they take up their daily activities and routines after giving birth.

Having established the grandeur of the landscape early in the text, Synge describes the island women with much the same fondness and detail with which he describes the Aran Islands’ geography and characteristics: colors, shapes, moods, and textures are all highlighted. The “crevices,” “ripples,” “radiance,” and “warmth” of the islands are mentioned in a number of ways throughout the four parts of the work. Synge even describes the miraculous colors in the face of an impending hurricane: “Bars of purple cloud stretched across the sound where immense waves were rolling from the west, wreathed with snowy fantasies of spray. Then there was the bay full of green delirium, and the Twelve Pins touched with mauve and scarlet in the east” (361). The scene leaves Synge filled with “exultation,” and, more importantly, this vivid depiction comes just after a description of the island women and Synge’s profession of a belief that there is a “powerful...maternal feeling...on these islands” (360). Synge pays attention to minute details when describing the island women, noting their “powerful legs” (317), “the joy with which the eye rests on the red dresses of the women” (325)—the red petticoats of the women are mentioned constantly—, and the women’s “peculiar charm [accompanying]...the complete absence of shyness or self-consciousness” (358). Their connection to nature is further emphasized in as much as Synge usually describes the women against the landscape and elements: old women are described at the graveyard,

where their rhythmic chanting is attended by hailstones and thunder which seem to sympathize (332-3), an undisturbed young woman washes in the sea like a bird, seaweed wrapped about her limbs (334), and other women stand in the sun, their frames against fishing nets and oilskins (380). The frequent comparison of women to birds is important, as Synge reports on the virtues of the brilliant and bold island birds throughout the work. His most detailed description of the birds is immediately followed by more discussion of the island women, making the association even more notable.

Within the first few pages of all four parts of the work, Synge draws a connection between women and nature. Upon arriving at the second island (Inishmaan), Synge first sees men (whom he hardly describes at all). Then he sees women, whom he compares to a storm; key in this description is the fact that the women wear men's waistcoats. (Men's items are often associated with women throughout). The red dresses of the women, which are mentioned extremely frequently throughout the work, are almost always noted beside the "grey clouds and sea" (325). A young, independent girl has "grey-blue eyes [which express] the whole external despondency of the clouds and sea" (364). The women carrying seaweed are pictured as beautiful, wild creatures and likened to seals, the wreaths of seaweed in their hair giving them almost a regal look (360). Their "natural nobility" comes undeniably through the text.

The island men, on the other hand, are less natural: "men...are always further than women from the simple, animal emotions" (Synge 392). For instance, Michael will not talk of nature in a straightforward manner: "Though Michael is sensible of the beauty of the nature round him, he never speaks of it directly" (377). Men are constantly defeated by nature, and many of their deaths are attributed to drowning; they wash up on

shore and often cannot be identified because of the toll that the ocean and its inhabitants have had on the bodies (384-5). Several men complain of being associated with the island (whether by dress or through the pictures that Synge wants to take of them on the islands), while the women almost never whine about their roots. When Synge is trying to take a picture of one young man, the islander tries to disassociate himself from the island: “We nearly quarreled because he wanted me to take his photograph in his Sunday clothes from Galway, instead of his native homespuns that become him far better, though he does not like them as they seem to connect him with the primitive life of the island” (382). (This example also shows Synge’s drive to capture the “primitive” and to ignore any of the potentially modern qualities that the people might exhibit.) Possibly because they seem less fit for their environment, the island men are mentioned less frequently and typically described in basic terms when they are portrayed: “an old man,” “young man,” “one man.” Though the men are sometimes described toiling and at work, the women have the toughest character: they handle births on their own, rarely needing the assistance of a doctor, illness hardly strikes them, they wear men’s clothing, unhesitatingly serve as surrogate mothers, they can have magical powers (fairy women, hags who eat bad little children, and native witches are described throughout, often by the island men who seem wary of these female figures), they are capable of striking fear in their grown sons, and are even described as “strong” by the island men, all of which leads to a “powerful...maternal feeling...on these islands” (360) and throughout the text. The island men even suggest that only in becoming married (and thereby connected to a woman) does a man actually become a man. Synge demonstrates the power of the island

people—and the functioning primitive—by focusing on the power of the island women. Women are the primary representatives of the primitive in *The Aran Islands*.

In “Synge’s Language of Women,” Bonnie M. Scott agrees that Synge’s *The Aran Islands* focuses on the feminine and the island women. Because the women of the islands were actually quite repressed and often viewed as child-bearing vehicles by the island men—“it appeared that the greatest merit they see in a woman is that she should be fruitful and bring them many children” (Synge 392)—Synge may have emphasized the importance of heroines (like Pegeen Mike and Nora Burke) in his plays to further the image of powerful Irish woman and shrug off the roles imposed upon them by the island men (Scott 30), whom Synge viewed as less able, given his depictions of them in *The Aran Islands*. Curiously, though most of the plotlines in Synge’s plays come from his visits to the Aran Islands, only one of his plays (*Riders to the Sea*) actually has that type of setting (Tracy 47). Synge’s Aran Islands are a difficult place, but Synge views them as edenic according to Tracy: “the Eden-like status of the islands is validated in Synge’s imagination by his awareness of the fragility of their life-style, of impending irrecoverable loss” (46). Since many of the tales from Aran that are found in Synge’s plays include much vice and immorality, Synge could not lastingly uphold the image of the “noble savage,” primitive Irishman/woman of the Aran Islands should he set his plays in a setting identical to that of the islands. For Synge, the primitive that he encountered on Aran is edenic, or, even if he did not experience the primitive as he recounts it, he at least wants to present the primitivism of The Aran Islanders in a positive light.

Robin Skelton, in *J.M. Synge and His World*, furthers the idea that Synge found a kind of perfection in the Aran Islands, namely as a result of the women who inspired him.

In sections omitted from *The Aran Islands*, Synge reveals his love for the islands, which is primarily driven by the women he has seen and met, and his jealousy at the thought that others may have experienced the same love:

‘With this limestone Inishmaan...I am in love, and hear with galling jealousy of the various priests and scholars who have lived here before me. They have grown to me as the former lover of one’s mistress, horrible existences haunting with dreamed kisses the lips she presses to your own...[I have] fallen in love with a goddess...One woman has interested me in a way that binds me more than ever to the islands...In moments of loneliness I am drawn to the girls of the island...’
(48)

Again, the Aran women are likened to the landscape here, portrayed as powerful in being compared to a goddess. The islands themselves seem to be female—but a strong Hibernia, in this case—given the phrases with which Synge describes them.

Scott, however, infers that Synge strongly emphasizes the “female-domesticated environment” in *The Aran Islands*, especially in Inishmaan, which he describes as the most primitive. “Synge spent many of the frequent intervals of adverse weather in the female domestic realm of the kitchen, and he found ‘beauty and distinction’ there,” Scott points out (179). While this is true, Scott fails to note that, in a large number of scenes depicting women in the home, they are set against the backdrop of “masculine” items such as fishing and tackle nets. While the fishing was typically done by men, Synge emphasizes that the women can and do take on the men’s chores if and when necessary.

In few scenes are the women presented as homemakers and no more; they are versatile and hardy.

Tracy insists that Synge's frequent use of objects in scenes throughout *The Aran Islands* is greatly influenced by Impressionism, by which the artist

looks at a scene or object and then constructs an image moulded around whatever interests him most in the scene or object...So it is with Synge. An object is emphasized and examined to summarize the total reality of a person or place...Details are obscured...and we get only those shapes and tones of importance to the eye. The rest are sacrificed. (143)

Tracy then proceeds to two examples in which he believes Synge utilizes Impressionism; curiously, in both instances Synge seeks to make women stand out most from a given scene. In many of the scenes involving women, Synge's primitive Irishwoman improves the landscape in some way: the grey rocks, for example, are made welcoming when women with red dresses are walking near them; the women keening and wailing at the funeral provide a human element to the impending darkness and thunderstorm. At the least, the women fit into the landscape: no matter what setting the women of the islands are in, Synge finds some way to liken the majority to animals (typically birds, seals, or another creature of the seas or seashore), making them seem as if they are always in their natural habitat and connected to the earth. Synge even makes himself a part of the landscape and the people when dealing with and describing Aran women. As Castle argues, "[Synge's] stance of the participant-observer is simultaneously underscored *and* undone in the presence of young native women" (127).

Why does Synge so regularly present the Aran women as being extremely powerful and the Aran men as having only mediocre or limited power? The answers could be many. Possibly, he is using hyperbole to emphasize that even the women, presumed the weaker sex by many people of the time, of Aran have incredible strength and fortitude. Hibernia does not need the protection of Britannia and can certainly handle her own people. If these islanders represent the most primitive people of the country and can easily and sometimes enjoyably survive on their own, why accept or believe in the idea that Ireland needs governance by a distant land? Synge seemingly uplifts and embraces some of Arnold's and Renan's theories through his depictions of the Aran men but then undermines those theories by portraying the "weaker sex" as mighty and respectable. Synge takes the model fragile and feminine Celt, a figure backed by Arnold and Renan and typically applied to men, and applies the greatest attributes of that type to women, while showing how the negative characteristics of that type do not even fit the "fairer sex," let alone the stereotypically stronger sex (men). Also, Synge could be applying the theories of Arnold and Renan to men in a mocking way to show how ridiculous and infeasible their "Celtic feminine" appears when applied to real Irish individuals; this could be a means of proving Arnold and Renan wrong. Whether or not Synge is trying to argue for Irish Home Rule in *The Aran Islands*, he is certainly arguing for greater respect of the Irish people, namely the Aran Islanders, and he primarily makes these people appear dignified and thriving through his depictions of the Aran women and by overthrowing many of Renan and Arnold's theories pertaining to the Irish people.

While never explicitly mentioning Home Rule, Synge does provide a few depictions of the actual functions of local self-government in *The Aran Islands*. The way

in which the people govern themselves is probably not something that most members of Synge's British readership would view as admirable, but Synge obviously views their self-governing efforts as both admirable and effective. Aran works as a community, and the Aran Islanders are supportive of one another as long as no one violates or threatens the communal harmony. For instance, when an islander acts as bailiff during an eviction on one of the islands, Synge approvingly writes of the note that is left for the man following his actions: "Patrick, the devil, a revolver is waiting for you. If you are missed with the first shot, there will be five more that will hit you. Any man that will talk with you, or work with you, or drink a pint of porter in your shop, will be done with the same way as yourself" (Synge 344). Synge is disgusted by the police who have traveled there from the mainland to perform the eviction. They are unnatural and unnecessary beings: "After my weeks spent among primitive men this glimpse of the newer types of humanity was not reassuring. Yet these mechanical police, with the commonplace agents and sheriffs and the rabble they had hired, represented aptly enough the civilization for which the homes of the island were to be desecrated" (345). Seeming to hate the police force and all that they represent, Synge reiterates how foreign their presence is on the islands: "The police when not in motion lay sweating and gasping under the walls with their tunics unbuttoned. They were not attractive, and I kept comparing them with the islandmen, who walked up and down as cool and fresh-looking as seagulls" (346). The islandmen are superior to these sweaty officers lying about. Synge follows this description with a long discussion on how the islands were much better off before the introduction of the police and on how the implementation of the sorts of laws respected in more "civilized" places only brought violence to the Aran Islanders,

whose ideas of morality, proper deterrents, and appropriate punishments were marked by a natural, common sense (Synge 350-1). Synge does not map out how Home Rule could work in the Aran Islands, taking his ideas of how the primitive Irish could govern themselves only so far. However, he seems convinced that the system (imposed by foreign entities) under which he finds the Aran Islanders is something to be loathed and changed. As participant-observer on the islands for several summers, Synge feels like he has the right to make such assertions.

Throughout *The Aran Islands*, Synge applies to the islanders Renan and Arnold's idea of the primitive, feminine Celt, and he sometimes refutes their theories. Like Renan and Arnold's Celt, the Aran Islanders are connected to the land, seem to retain a certain harmony with nature, and are endowed with a great amount of passion. Unlike the aforementioned Celt figure, however, Synge's Aran Islanders are powerful in a number of ways (erotically, physically, mentally, naturally), and the main source of this strength comes from the Aran women, whom Synge uses to build a picture of an idealized Ireland and an ideal Irish primitive. The iconic Irish woman presented in *The Aran Islands* represents a disappearing primitive that Synge seeks to turn into a reappearing primitive, even if only by immortalizing it on the page. Synge himself assumes the character of Arnold's and Renan's poetic, melancholy Celt when he ponders what may become of the islands: "The thought that [these] island[s] will gradually yield to the ruthlessness of 'progress' is as the certainty that decaying age is moving always nearer the cheeks it is your ecstasy to kiss. How much of Ireland was formerly like this and how much of Ireland is today Anglicized and civilized and brutalized?" (356) For Synge, Ireland is hardly edenic without the Celtic/Irish feminine (as he sees it). By idealizing the

islanders, Synge asserts that the Irish are not flimsy, fickle, and undisciplined people, and his positive portrayal of the islanders backs and possibly promotes the idea that the Irish *are* capable of self-governance.

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Scope and Method of Study: When reading John Synge's *The Aran Islands*, I almost immediately noticed that Synge focuses on Aran women as the primary subject of his ethnographic inquiry, which is what he intended *The Aran Islands* to be. I also noted that the women are always portrayed as strong, connected to nature, and uninhibited, while the Irish men are mainly relegated to the role of weaker sex. Additionally, I observed how often Synge snubs English ways in the piece, and I was curious to know his motivation behind depicting the Aran Islanders as having a natural nobility while portraying more modern Europeans as unrespectable. Some of my beginning questions were 1.) Why did Synge travel to Aran? What was his inspiration to go there?, 2.) Why does Synge provide the portraiture of Aran women that runs throughout the text?, 3.) Why does Synge portray the Aran men in a less flattering light?, 4.) What was Synge's idea of the primitive?, and 5.) Why does Synge constantly bring up how superior the Aran Islanders are to the people of England?

Findings and Conclusions: Synge's desire to visit Aran largely stemmed from his reading of Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold, both of whom wrote on the "Celtic/Irish feminine." Renan and Arnold argue that the primitive Irish are not capable of self-governance as a result of their Celtic natures, and *The Aran Islands* does not suggest this at all. Synge depicts the primitive Aran Islanders, and the women in particular, as respectable and ideal beings. I also determined that Synge had expressed some pro-Home Rule sympathies at that point in his life. In the paper, I argue that Synge portrays the Aran Islanders as having a natural nobility, mainly through his positive depictions of the Aran women as strong, intelligent, and capable primitives who know how to survive in the natural world (which is far better than the artificial world of more modern European places, according to Synge.) While questioning the "Celtic feminine" model that Renan and Arnold transposed on the Irish, Synge is also implicitly arguing for Irish Home Rule.

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