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What's in a Nickname? Christy as “Playboy” in J. M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*

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Nearly a hundred years ago, after an arduous labor, John Millington Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* burst onto the Irish stage, arousing considerable controversy. In spite of his and the play’s detractors, *Playboy* captured the position of masterpiece within the short-lived author’s canon. The title refers to Christy Mahon, a timid, feckless young man who is running from a dubious murder. Through exaggeration, role-playing, and unwitting exposure, Christy earns autonomy and manhood. During the past ninety years, critical scholars have debated Christy’s metaphoric function and his
resemblance to other characters in literature, drama, myth, and religion. Disagreement over these functions and semblances springs from the fact that Christy does redefine himself over the course of events as he plays at several roles, and he does resemble several fictional and mythic characters, often through Synge’s design. Most critics, however, have failed to correlate Christy’s multiple, successive façades with the fundamental character descriptor in the title: “playboy.” With likely intent, Synge entitles the play and nicknames Christy with a term that has various, disparate meanings and that has, not surprisingly, acquired other connotations since 1907. Through Christy’s role-playing, Synge redefines his title as his character redefines himself.

Despite its common usage in contemporary English, “playboy” is an ambiguous term with no single accepted definition. Defining it becomes complicated within the play’s context, in part because Synge exploits the ambiguity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] identifies playboy as a colloquialism that first appeared in literature in 1829 and has gained sexual connotations primarily in the last sixty years.
According to the OED, the term applies to “a man, [especially] a wealthy man, who sets out to enjoy himself; a selfish pleasure-seeker.”

Maurice Bourgeois presents several interpretations of “playboy” and the term’s possible derivations. Bourgeois explains that playboy, as Synge uses it, is a “Hibernian slang” term adapted from the Irish, which “literally [means] ‘boy of the game’” in reference to “the Irish game of ‘hurling’” (193, n. 1). Not all scholars concur, but several validate Bourgeois’s account of Synge’s source and the primacy of this explanation. According to Bourgeois, the definitions of “playboy” from Wright’s English Dialect Dictionary, “the devil” and “a playful woman,” are antiquated and inexact (193, n. 1). On the other hand, Wright’s dictionary was published in 1903 and thus was accessible to Synge during Playboy’s gestation (Swiontkowski 155). Bourgeois further defines the term as meaning a “hoaxer, humbugger, mystificator (not imposter), one who does sham things” and notes that “Synge’s use [. . . contains] three implicit by-meanings:
(a) one who is played with; (b) one who plays like a player \( (i. e. \) a comedian and also an athlete or champion \([\ldots]\)\); (c) one who is full of the play-spirit \([\ldots]\)" (193-4, n. 1). Bourgeois develops his definition primarily from Synge’s script, together with other corroborating works. As one of the most important early critical works on Synge, Bourgeois’s book provides the likely source for the understanding of “playboy” in subsequent criticism and modern scholarship (Casey 2).

To add further complications, the OED recognizes a hyphenated form, “play-boy,” meaning “a school-boy actor.” This definition seems particularly relevant to Synge’s *Playboy* because the playboy becomes a poet, playwright, dramatist, and actor through the course of the play. Despite the lack of consensus over the term’s exact meaning or origins and the continuing arguments among scholars over Synge’s implications and sources, the play incorporates all of these definitions of “playboy” in Christy’s transformation.

Others have recognized this composite, but only to a limited extent. In fact, much like Bourgeois, Patricia Spacks defines “playboy” by using the play’s action and Christy’s
various personifications of the term, rather than the term’s etymology (82). Spacks is on the right track, but to define the term she examines only the four scenes when Christy specifically is called a playboy or “the Playboy of the Western World.” Each instance implicitly functions as a distinct culmination. The first three announce others’ observations of Christy’s behavior; the last acknowledges Christy’s full metamorphosis. Spacks’s focus overlooks the major body of the play and consequently most of Christy’s defining moments, ignoring their cumulative effect.

Spacks misses the fact that Christy is a “play-boy” throughout the entire play, as he responds to others’ perceptions and experiments with new behaviors. In essence, he becomes an actor. Christy never fully embodies any of the roles until the end of the play when he realizes that he no longer needs to act a part. In her discussion of metadrama in *Playboy*, Mary C. King comments on Synge’s deliberate use of role-playing and Christy’s performance of several archetypes, such as hero and hero-victim. King is perhaps the only scholar who offers a full
treatment of the play’s metadramatic qualities, but even she fails to complete the connection between the title and all of Christy’s roles. These omissions also exclude the fact that Christy’s continuous play-acting involves experimentation, both with the various definitions of “playboy” and with unrelated roles. His minor transformations, along with Christy’s overall metamorphosis, offer successive, multiple meanings for Synge’s title and deepen its complexity, while reflecting the script’s intricacy. Several important incidents in the play illustrate the hyphenated “play-boy” as the central defining term that encompasses the numerous short-term “playboy” enactments.

Christy’s transformation begins before he physically enters the action. In the opening scene at the pub, the men’s discussion of the approaching stranger, who later is revealed to be Christy, initiates an expectation of peril that is destroyed as soon as Christy walks through the pub’s door. Shawn’s nervousness over the lone vulnerability of Pegeen, the pub owner’s daughter, and his fear for his own life create the anticipation of either a dangerous thief and threat to their safety
or a moaning robbery victim. Timid, diminutive, and mysterious Christy then enters and shatters these expectations. He seems neither menace nor victim.

The entrance provides Christy with his first role-playing opportunity and Synge with the first occasion to explore the play’s title. Once the other characters have seen Christy and know that he’s not what they were expecting, they try to determine his identity. Despite Christy’s initial reluctance, the pub’s occupants coax from him the shocking revelation that he has murdered his father and is on the run. The revelation carries multiple significance. Here, Christy gives the only honest account of the “murder” but tacks on a detail that must be a lie: the burial. At this interrogation, Christy begins to recognize that he is on stage and can exaggerate the story’s details, thus taking the opportunity to play the role of “play-boy” as actor and “playboy” as hoaxer. In this, he simply responds to the crowd’s expectations (Henigan 95).

In the reaction to Christy’s revelation, the other characters cast him in several new roles, such as hero and pot-boy. Once they are convinced of his deed, they treat
Christy with respect and admiration and deem him full of the "sense of Solomon," brave enough to "face a foxy devil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell" (Synge 81). This establishes Christy's ability and worthiness as Michael's employee in the pub and as Pegeen's protector. Christy's newfound work as pot-boy is loaded with significance and ironies, the most relevant of which is the likely deliberate play on both "playboy" and "play-boy." Either way, the significance of the other characters' actions lies in their accepting Christy at face value, replacing his notions of himself with their new perceptions to which he can respond.

Further on in the first act, Pegeen and the Widow Quin provide Christy with more potential roles. Pegeen praises Christy for his looks, apparent intelligence, and bravery, comments on his likely success with women, and equates him with the great bards and poets of Ireland's past. Despite the fact that her assessment completely contradicts Christy's prior experience, though perhaps because of that, Christy soaks in the flattery and begins to believe Pegeen. This opens several new role-playing possibilities for Christy, which he undertakes
in the next act. These additional roles include the poet, the dramatist, and the selfish pleasure-seeker who exploits women.

The Widow Quin’s influence on Christy’s role-playing lies in her womanliness and her meddling. The apparent rivalry between Pegeen and the Widow Quin, begun by the latter’s arrival at the pub, shows Christy his potential as a love interest. Their fighting over his appropriate lodgings forces Christy to further assume some of his new characteristics by acting on them. He ends the fight, temporarily, by telling the Widow Quin that he will stay at the pub that night, albeit timidly and at Pegeen’s behest. In response to this rejection, the Widow Quin mentions Pegeen’s impending marriage to Shawn, revealing Christy’s role as philanderer. Christy, however, seems unaware of the full ramifications suggested by the widow’s statement. His remarks as “he settles [into] bed [. . .] with immense satisfaction” reveal his naïve enjoyment of their mutual fondness for him, of the developing rivalry, and of his apotheosis to the center of their attentions (Synge 87). Christy’s growing appeal to women and his budding playboyish charm contrast distinctly with the disregard and
timidity of his former life. The change permits the emergence of a natural eagerness to enjoy women’s attention.

Act Two shows Christy becoming more comfortable with his recently acquired roles as he, literally and metaphorically, tries them on for size. Caught in the midst of playing pot-boy and lady-killer to a mirror, he reverts to his reticent nature when several curious young women arrive from town to ogle Christy and make his breakfast. Here, an interesting shift occurs when Christy finds the courage to meet them and agrees to answer the Widow Quin’s questions about his recent adventures. Encouraged by the attention lavished upon him by the townswomen and by the Widow Quin’s continuing interest, Christy not only repeats the murder story in greater and more embellished detail but also dramatizes it (Henigan 96, King 143). In trying on Pegeen’s suggested role as seanachie, or Irish bard, Christy becomes the story’s actor, director, and playwright, thus producing a mini-drama in the midst of the play within the play that is already underway (King 141).

The women’s astonishment and admiration first place
Christy in the role of courtly lover through their presence and attention and then, in essence, appoint him to the part with their praises and their suggestion that he marry the Widow Quin. Thus, in quick succession, and at times concurrently, Christy embodies many specific definitions of “playboy,” such as hoaxer, schemer, philanderer, and actor as well as such non-related roles as a brave hero, a legitimate grown man, and a wise farmer’s son set for inheritance. These sharply contrast with all roles of Christy’s prior life, as he revealed during the first act, depicting himself as, “a quiet, simple poor fellow with no man [or woman] giving [him] heed” (Synge 83-4). Additionally, Quin’s arrival foreshadows his third-act role of playboy as champion athlete when she announces her determination to enter Christy into the games.

An essential step in Christy’s transformation develops in the final scenes of the second act as Christy receives costumes to supplement and enhance his new status. Hoping to rid himself of competition for Pegeen’s hand, Shawn offers Christy several new articles of clothing in an attempt to bribe Christy to sail for the United States. To the farmer’s dismay,
Christy rushes to try them on, eager for Pegeen to see him in his new clothes, but offers no signs of leaving. Shawn’s gift unintentionally provides more appropriate attire for Christy’s pretending and thereby becomes a costume, enhancing playboy, play-boy, and the play-within-a-play. Now, Christy looks the part and acts the part as he swaggers around the pub in Shawn’s clothes.

Ironically, this circumstance confers another role as Christy unknowingly threatens Shawn by assuming his appearance with the additional illusion of independence. He puts Shawn on both literally and metaphorically when he puts on Shawn’s clothes. Now, Christy is Shawn and everything Shawn wants to be. Each longs to be a self-made, self-employed man who answers to no one and claims Pegeen for wife, but neither yet is capable. Other offered costumes include Shawn’s wedding clothes, which he provides as part of a plot to marry Christy to the Widow Quin, and the jockey clothing which is given to Christy for the sporting events. These later gifts likewise function to augment the impression of playboy as athlete and playboy ladies’ man.
Christy’s first naming as “playboy” occurs when Old Mahon, his father, appears at the end of the second act. Old Mahon’s entrance reveals the intricacies of Christy’s inadvertent scheme to the Widow Quin and even to Christy himself. Until this point, Christy is unaware of the extent of his deceit; he truly believes that he has killed his father. Before Christy leaves for the games, however, Old Mahon arrives, most certainly still alive and searching for his wayward son. Subsequently, Quin names the shocked and panicked Christy “the Playboy of the Western World” in reference to his hoaxing (100). This revelation forces Christy to accept his designation as a hoaxer and to carry on with his current plot, thus making his play-acting deliberate for the first time.

The third act’s opening reveals Christy’s further embodiment of his new label and provides another instance of characters using the term in reference to Christy. Upon returning from a wake, several of the townsmen discuss Christy’s incredible success at the games, allowing him to satisfy the regional meaning of playboy as champion athlete. During their discussion, Old Mahon returns in his search for
Christy, supplying the Widow Quin with an especially ironic opportunity to refer to Christy as "the champion Playboy of the Western World" (105). Quin, now in league with Christy, uses the term in an attempt to convince Old Mahon that the successful lad definitely is not his inept son. Quin’s double-edged meaning provides a moment of dramatic irony since only Quin and the audience know of Christy’s other playboy incarnations. The men in the pub notice Quin’s overt denotation and apply the term to Christy.

The remainder of the act comprises a series of scenes that force Christy’s transition from role-playing to autonomy, first by stripping Christy of his gains. Exhilarated from his athletic success, Christy discovers his genuine capability as a poet in a touching love scene with Pegeen, the outcome of which is her blushing agreement to marry him. Her father’s initial disapproval of the match forces Christy to stop playing and act on his role as hero by threatening Shawn. Immediately after his success, the crowd leads Old Mahon and his son, thereby revealing Christy’s lies to all and stripping him of his roles. During this scene, the crowd hurs the word
“playboy” at him as an insult. Faced with Pegeen’s hatred and his father’s demands for his compliant return, Christy reenacts his attempted patricide, thus becoming an actual criminal and inciting the crowd’s fury.

A crucial advance in Christy’s metamorphosis occurs when the Widow Quin offers him a disguise to aid his escape. In a surprising reversal, Christy stubbornly rejects the costume and stays to win Pegeen. By refusing the offered costume and facing his dilemma, Christy discovers and seizes upon his own ability to define himself, even in the face of others’ perceptions. His realization expands moments later when Pegeen places a noose around his neck and the men attempt to drag Christy to the gallows. Christy violently resists by thrashing about, hurling threats, and biting Shawn’s leg. Here, noticing the townspeople’s incapacity to comprehend his inadvertent deception, Christy realizes their equal inability to accept anyone who overturns their perceptions. He likewise discovers the folly of trying to live according to their limited judgment. Christy realizes that his new ability to define himself empowers him to reject their judgment and to take control
of the situation. This enables Christy to alter his circumstances radically when his freshly reinjured yet living father returns. Old Mahon again orders Christy to leave with him, but Christy refuses and announceds that his father will leave in his company. Now Christy no longer plays any role but his own.; he exits, autonomous and triumphant.

In the play’s closing moment, Pegeen provides Christy’s final and preeminent naming as “the only Playboy of the Western World” (118). As Pegeen wails at her loss, she underscores Christy’s triumph and his embodiment of hte title as she gains partial understanding of Christy’s transformation. She realizes, at least somewhat, that Christ has “won the right to the title” (Spacks 83). The skills as actor, poet, lover, hero, and champion that Christy discovers through the course of the play “previously undeveloped talents” which he possessed all along (Henigan 103). His new awareness of these attributes “gives him the confidence to assert himself,” and thereby he becomes the ultimate Playboy (104).

Prior criticism has tended to associate the playboy image’s metaphoric implications to Christy and has
developed Christy’s likeness to literary, mythic, and religious characters and archetypes. Several prominent scholars, however, have noted that these correlations never sustain themselves throughout the play. In *The Writings of J. M. Synge*, Robin Skelton discusses Christy’s arguably intentional likeness to Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan, Shylock, and Don Quixote. Skelton then points out each correlation’s eventual collapse. Nicholas Grene criticizes scholars who reduce Christy to a mock Cuchulain, mock Oedipus, and mock or true Christ-figure, even as he notes the relationships to these and other characters. Neither Skelton nor Grene dispute the obvious significance of the title or its basic correlation with Christy’s character. Even so, like Spacks and King, they fail to develop the title’s full significance, perhaps because none of the likenesses extend through the entire play nor seem consecutive or connected to each other. The parallels can exist simultaneously without ambiguity, however, along with the many roles that Christy plays because the only continuous metaphor is that of play-boy. During the course of his play-acting, Christy “transform[s] from a stuttering lout into the
playboy poet who is finally the master of his da and of himself [...]” (Deane 152). Consequently, Christy becomes worthy of Pegeen’s lamenting appellation, worthy of being called the only playboy.
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