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## A REVIEW OF *IRISH DRAMA AND THE OTHER REVOLUTIONS*

Susan Cannon Harris, *Irish Drama and the Other Revolutions: Playwrights, Sexual Politics and the International Left, 1892–1964* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 280, ISBN 9781474424462.

*Reviewed by Soudabeh Ananisarab*

In *Irish Drama and the Other Revolutions*, Susan Cannon Harris shifts the dominant critical focus on the relationships between the Irish dramatic revival and the struggle for Irish independence, to consider the work of playwrights such as Shaw, Yeats, Beckett, and O’Casey in the context of two other international, rather than national, revolutions. These are the socialist movement emerging in the 1880s and gathering momentum until the 1950s, and the campaign for gender and sexual liberation. Harris’s fascinating study of the intersections between these movements and Irish drama succeeds in uncovering some of the ways in which the playwrights discussed operated in “an international network of left organisations, people, parties and states” (5) to present a compelling account of the contributions made by Irish playwrights to modern European drama.

Harris begins in 1894 at the Avenue Theatre with the season of plays organized by the feminist actress Florence Farr and subsidized by Annie Horniman, a wealthy tea merchant who would later fund the building of the Abbey Theatre and establish the first English regional repertory company in Manchester. This season—which initially included Yeats’s one-act play *The Land of Heart’s Desire* and John Todhunter’s lesser-known *A Comedy of Sighs*, and later featured Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*—has been well documented by theater historians and Shavian scholars for its status as the first production of Shavian drama outside of private dramatic societies.<sup>1</sup> However, Harris provides an original reading of this event to argue for its role not only in establishing Shaw’s reputation as a playwright but also in shaping his entire dramatic approach. Harris rightly insists that Shaw’s politics should not be read purely through his associations with the Fabian Society. Situating Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* amidst the critical and public reactions to *The Land* and *A Comedy*, Harris introduces one of the main concepts of this book through associating Shaw’s early politics with what she identifies as queer socialism: a movement “defined by an insistence on pleasure as both practice and the objective of social progress” (11), emerging from Shelley’s “radical *eros*” (23) and later developed by William Morris, Oscar Wilde, and Edward Carpenter. According to Harris, hostile reactions to the depictions of desire between women in the works of Yeats and Todhunter

instilled fear of punishment in Shaw and prompted him to revise *Arms and the Man* and substitute Farr for a more “gender-conforming” actress (12). One of the most fascinating aspects of this chapter is Harris’s reading of Blanche in Shaw’s *Widowers’ Houses*, first performed prior to events at the Avenue in 1892. Through connecting Blanche’s violent behavior to nineteenth-century fears of the masculinization of women and its supposed links to homosexuality, Harris provides a plausible reading of a perplexing aspect of Shaw’s characterization and offers further support for her argument that events at the Avenue marked a significant shift in Shaw’s theater and politics.

In Chapter Two, Harris continues to explore Shaw’s turbulent relationship with queer socialism through examining Shaw’s radical ambivalence about Irishness and utopian desire, which Harris argues were interlinked for Shaw. Using the work of Lee Edelman and José Muñoz, Harris identifies two types of socialist utopias, reproductive futurism and queer futurity, with both of which Shaw associated. Other scholars have previously explored Shaw’s relationship with utopian desire, most notably Matthew Yde in *Bernard Shaw and Totalitarianism: Longing for Utopia*. Like Yde, in her analysis of *Man and Superman* Harris demonstrates Shaw’s acceptance of reproductive futurism in his characterization of Jack Tanner, sentiments that would result in his support for twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. Harris’s intervention into this debate, however, is to argue that in this play, Shaw also simultaneously represents the limitations of a world without space for queer socialism, later highlighting and rejecting Yde’s view of Shaw as “always already totalitarian” (207). Considering the Irish Players’ visit to London in 1904 (that included plays by Yeats and Synge) which depicted an Ireland that had not only resisted capitalism but also the reproductive imperative, Harris then presents *John Bull’s Other Island* as a play in which Shaw rejects his earlier enthusiasm for reproductive futurism as depicted in *Man and Superman*.

In Chapter Three, Harris moves her focus from Shaw to revolutionary Ireland to investigate the representation of syndicalist labor at the Abbey. In this analysis, Harris is not concerned with the most well-known playwright of this period, Sean O’Casey, and instead considers three largely forgotten strike plays: St. John Ervine’s *Mixed Marriage*, A. Patrick Wilson’s *The Slough*, and Daniel Corkery’s *The Labour Leader*. According to Harris, syndicalism incorporated elements of queer socialism in its concept of “sympathetic” action, which implicitly encouraged workers to feel “for and with each other” (102). This link between syndicalism and queer socialism is further extended through the agitational style used by a key figure in the movement, James Larkin. Harris’s analysis of these plays is centered on their connections with Larkin as Harris argues that “Larkin’s theatricality was a source of both inspiration and anxiety to all of the playwrights under consideration” (104). Ervine’s focus on a

working-class family emphasizes heterosexual mixing, as the name suggests, suppressing the potential for homosocial relationships between male strikers. Wilson, inspired by Ervine's play, also adopts the family plot, revealing similar anxieties about the supposed disruptive potential of syndicalism. Harris once again returns to Shaw in her discussions on Corkery to argue that through embracing Larkin's excess, Corkery presents the case for a revolutionary theater receptive to syndicalism's passions, as opposed to the more cerebral model championed by Shaw and dominating the stage of the Abbey at the time.

Chapter Four explores the relationship between the Irish dramatic revival and the propaganda battles fought over the Spanish Civil War. Harris forms connections between the two by considering Brecht's use of elements from Synge's *Riders to the Sea* in *Senora Carrar's Rifles*. Surprisingly for Harris, Synge's Aristotelian play did not specifically interest Brecht for its Irish setting or plot, but rather for the possibilities it introduced in regards to Brecht's evolving thinking about form and style. According to Harris, frustrated by the disastrous Theatre Union production of *The Mother* in New York in 1935 in which Brecht's techniques were either poorly executed by the performers or misunderstood by the audience and critics, Brecht began to pursue alternative ways of dramatizing the radicalization of the working-class mother; a challenge with which Brecht had long struggled. Harris argues that Murya's refusal to express grief in *The Riders* inspired Brecht to refine his use of the V-effekt to create "audience excitement" without empathy that involved "the spectator's involuntary reproduction of the performers' emotion" (150). In other words, Brecht used *The Riders* to create the desired effects of epic theater techniques in *Senora*, a play that in many ways adheres to realistic conventions, and was thus within the technical capabilities of the amateur performers with whom Brecht was then cooperating.

In Chapter Five, Harris continues to investigate the impact of the Soviet Union on modern drama through exploring connections between O'Casey's aesthetical choices and his political affiliations during his red period. Harris undermines earlier readings by key critics including O'Casey scholars David Krause and Ronald Ayling, who dismiss any relationship between O'Casey's drama and his politics to argue that elements of O'Casey's post-realist work are firmly embedded in his exposure to Larkinite Syndicalism and Soviet Communism. Demonstrating a firm grasp of O'Casey's life and works, Harris presents O'Casey's interest in the Soviet Union as based on ideological similarities as well as O'Casey's pursuit of a market for his anti-realist work, previously rejected by Abbey directors. Harris considers O'Casey's relationship with queer socialism, like Shaw's, to be ambivalent. According to Harris, while O'Casey, in dialogue with Larkin syndicalism, adopted excess in his aesthetic style, he also adhered to Soviet orthodoxy through idealizing heterosexual masculinity.

Harris concludes with an Epilogue that extends her study beyond Europe to consider the impact of Irish playwrights on the American Left during the Cold War. In this section, Harris once again takes us out of “straight time” (214) to consider the moment of intersection between Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and O’Casey’s *Red Roses for Me*—both of which received their New York premieres in the spring of 1956—in the work of the queer African-American writer Lorraine Hansberry. Harris provides a detailed close reading of Hansberry’s lesser known *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* to demonstrate Hansberry’s use of the techniques of Beckett and O’Casey to critique what Harris describes as heroic masculinity, “an ideal masculinity founded on an impossible desire for the individual’s heroic resistance to overwhelming forces of control” (220). Through its dialogue with the works of O’Casey and Beckett, Harris argues that *The Sign* enters the future as it points to new forms of activism that are grief-ridden rather than tied to an unattainable heroic masculinity.

This leads Harris to her conclusion, in which she provides a potent evaluation of the relevance of her study to current political issues without simplifying her arguments. Harris connects her study of the intersections between sexual and social politics with the challenges confronting the Left following Brexit and Trump’s election in 2016. She insists that the Left’s response to such events should not be to solely concern itself with the economic troubles of white working-class men, as suggested by some pundits, but to accept that “these revolutions need not and should not be in opposition or in competition” (239). Continuing with her repudiation of world systems paradigms based on evolutionary theory that Harris considers to be “wedded to the developmental logic of capitalism” (5), she further argues that considering the Irish dramatic revival’s internationalism points to new “ways of thinking about global networks and exchanges;” ways that are not stringently tied to “structures of a catastrophically exploitative global capitalism” (239). A thorough discussion of these issues is outside the scope of this book and thus, Harris only cites Mark Lilla’s controversial “The End of Identity Liberalism” as an example of the criticism against the Left she describes. Of course, Lilla is not alone and this critique of the Left is not limited to US politics. For instance, in recent years, Trevor Phillips has presented similar arguments in Britain, insisting that identity politics is no longer concerned with ending discrimination but is about stifling debate, leading to the marginalization of new groups including white working-class men.<sup>2</sup> Responses to these claims in the press have highlighted some of the flaws in a worldview that separates identity and class politics to reinstate already existing gendered and racialized hierarchies. Harris’s study is a valuable addition to this debate as it points the reader to new ways of engaging with and responding to such arguments.

In conclusion, *Irish Drama and the Other Revolutions* is an important study that makes valuable contributions to the debates with which it engages. The wide range of writers and works discussed does not result in oversimplification as Harris demonstrates a firm grasp of Marxist, feminist, and queer theoretical issues as well as relevant historical contexts while offering detailed original close analyses, often in the context of specific productions vividly brought to life through her extensive use of archival research. Consequently, although the range of topics and individuals discussed may mean that not all sections of this study are of direct relevance to the specific research interests of each academic engaging with the book, Harris's methodologies and findings present new ways of considering the relationships between form, content, and historical context in drama and, as her Conclusion states, new directions for thinking about our current social and political landscapes. Harris's writing is engaging and at times refreshingly honest as she avoids overstating or exaggerating the significance of her study and findings. The focus on lesser-known plays is never to establish them as long-lost treasures but rather, as Harris acknowledges and makes clear, to assess the relationships with which she is concerned. Thus, even if one does not agree with or find relevant every reading presented, *Irish Drama and the Other Revolutions* is always highly insightful and enjoyable.

### Notes

1. For instance, see Sheila Goodie, *Annie Horniman: A Pioneer in Theatre* (London: Methuen Drama, 1990), 1–12; Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The One-Volume Definitive Edition* (London: Vintage, 1998), 170–74; and Rex Pogson, *Miss Horniman and the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester* (London: Rockliff, 1952), 8–10.
2. See Trevor Phillips, “The day I was accused of being racist, I knew political correctness had gone mad,” *Daily Mail*, February 22, 2017. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-4251306/Political-correctness-gone-mad-writes-TREVOR-PHILLIPS.html>