Bodily Abjection and the Politics of Resistance in Tom Paulin's Greek Tragedies

Isabelle Torrance (Aarhus University)

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Abstract

Tom Paulin's Greek tragedies present extremes of bodily abjection in order to service of a politics of resistance that is tied, in each case, to the political context of the drama's production. The Riot Act *(1984),* Seize the Fire *(1989), and* Medea *(2010), share a focus on the degradation of oppressed political groups and feature characters who destabilize the status quo. Yet the impact of disruptive political actions is not ultimately made clear. We are left wondering at the conclusion of each tragedy if the momentous acts of defiance we have witnessed have any power to create systemic change within politically rigged systems. The two 1980s plays are discussed together and form a sequence, with* The Riot Act *overtly addressing the Northern Irish conflict and* Seize the Fire *encompassing a broader sweep of oppressive regimes. The politics of discrimination in* Medea *are illuminated by comparison with similar themes in Paulin's* Love's Bonfire (2010). *Unlike other Northern Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy, Paulin's dramas, arrested in their political moments, present little hope for the immediate future. Yet in asking us to consider if individual sacrifice is enough to achieve radical change they maintain an open channel for political discourse.*

Paulin's Greek Tragedies

Tom Paulin has published versions of three Greek tragedies, reworking Sophocles' *Antigone* and Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* in the 1980s and returning to Greek tragedy in 2010 with his *Medea*.

The latter two works have been largely overlooked by scholars.[1] By contrast, the politics of Paulin's *The Riot Act: A Version of* Antigone *by Sophocles* have been widely discussed since the drama premiered in 1984 and may be summarized here very briefly. As king of Thebes, Paulin's Creon conflates the most brutal aspects of unrelenting Ulster Unionism with characteristics typical of disingenuous Northern Irish Secretaries of State appointed by the British government. Antigone, who defies Creon to bury her brother, symbolizes oppressed Irish nationalists during the violent political upheavals in Northern Ireland of the 1980s. This configuration was a direct response to the inflammatory proposition of Conor Cruise O'Brien, first made in 1968 and refined in 1972, that the 'Antigones' of Northern Ireland were responsible for subsequent conflict-related deaths. Paulin's Antigone functions as an analogue for Bernadette Devlin (later McAliskey), who had publicly rejected the British government's claim that soldiers fired at protesters in self-defence on 30 January 1972 (Bloody Sunday). Devlin and her supporters were belatedly vindicated in the 2010 Saville Report.[2] The characters Antigone and Creon had appeared previously in Paulin's poem 'Under Creon' (Paulin 1983: 13), where Creon also represents the Ulster Unionist establishment, while the poet implicitly becomes the voice of Antigone in memorializing forgotten heroes of radical

[1] *Seize the Fire* is briefly mentioned by Arkins (2010: 130-2), M. McDonald (1997: 62-3), and Walton (2002: 12) but no detailed discussions of the play exist; Paulin's *Medea* is also neglected in scholarship.

[2] On the political aspects of *The Riot Act*, see e.g. Arkins (2010: 37-9), Jones (1997: 233-9), Macintosh (2011: 92-7), Mahony (2016: 667-70), P. McDonald (1995: 188-92), Murray (1991: 120-5), Paulin (2002), Pelletier (2012), Roche (1988: 221-9), Torrance (2020: 326-9), Wallace (2015: 69-89).

Presbyterianism (Kennedy-Andrews 2008: 189). Antigone thus functions as a generic figure of resistance against political oppression by Ulster Unionism across Paulin's two works.

Among the many dramatic versions of Sophocles' *Antigone* by Irish authors, however, Paulin's presents a particularly hard and unparalleled reading of Creon.[3] In a recent publication, I drew particular attention to the language Paulin's Creon uses to degrade Antigone, equating her with a beetle, calling her a 'bitch' and associating her with dirt; she is called 'a dirt watcher', for example, and a 'dirty bitch' (cf. Paulin 1985: 26, 27, 30, 34, 42, 43; Torrance 2020: 326-9). My aim there was to demonstrate how Antigone's treatment and fate in Paulin reflected contemporary political prejudices against a rural ethnic Irish identity and evoked the recent politics of 'dirty protests' by female prisoners in Northern Ireland. There remains something to be said, however, about the connection between bodily abjection and the politics of resistance in all three of Paulin's Greek tragedies – *The Riot Act, Seize the Fire: A Version of Aeschylus'* Prometheus Bound, and *Medea*. In this discussion, I first look more closely at Paulin's language of abjection in *The Riot Act*, reading this together with *Seize the Fire*, which was produced just five years later, first as a film and then as a published text, but is virtually unknown. Paulin's 2010 *Medea*, I suggest, also shares a focus on the politics of degradation. In this loose 'trilogy' of Greek tragedies, I argue that Paulin creates a radical politics of bodily abjection which signifies both the degradation of the body politic and, importantly, its continued potential for democratic resistance. Paulin's Greek tragedies thus illustrate Kristeva's observation that the abject continues to challenge its master even from a place of banishment

[3] Other Irish adaptations of Sophocles' *Antigone* include Aidan Carl Mathews' contemporaneous *Antigone* of 1984, Brendan Kennelly's 1986 *Antigone*, Conall Morrison's 2003 *Antigone*, Seamus Heaney's 2004 *The Burial at Thebes*, Stacey Gregg's 2006 *Ismene*, Owen McCafferty's 2008 *Antigone*, and Colm Tóibín's 2019 *Pale Sister*.

(Kristeva 1982: 2). If abjection is part and parcel of the original tragedies, Paulin pushes the physicality of abjection to an extreme and presents it within a rigged political system from which there is no certainty of escape and where self-sacrifice is not necessarily enough to move forward a democratic political agenda in its contemporary moment.

Language of Bodily Abjection: *The Riot Act* (1984) and *Seize the Fire* (1989)

Antigone is cast as abject in *The Riot Act*, but so too is the body of Polynices, branded a traitor for his defiant attack on the state. The degradation of his corpse is expressed through Antigone's angry monosyllabic plosives: 'crows can pick' at the body; 'rats and the rain' will also 'pick' at the corpse, which even in decay is stripped of any regenerative connection with the earth since the ground on which it must lie exposed is 'barren' (Paulin 1985: 10). The body is 'Soft and pobby' and 'smelt rotten', with assonance (soft/pobby/rotten) reinforcing the progression of decomposition (Paulin 1985: 25). In undignified death, however, the corpse is a catalyst for political resistance. The citizens of Thebes, moreover, are themselves an unclean and aggressive mob, characterized by hissing silibants as Ismene imagines them: 'some screggy, smelly crowd' who will 'spit' and 'sleg' her and her sister (Paulin 1985: 12). The body politic is both abject in itself and keen to degrade others. Similarly, in *Seize the Fire* the henchmen of an autocratic Zeus view human beings as degraded creatures. They are 'Dirty beasts', 'animals' living in 'shitpiled hills' (Paulin 1990: 1, 7). Where Antigone, as Haemon's fiancé, is reduced to a sexual object by Creon in *The Riot Act*, when he says dismissively 'There's plenty more| that he can poke' (Paulin 1985: 34), Io in *Seize the Fire* is Zeus'

tormented rape victim addicted to pain killers.[4] Zeus is exposed as a serial rapist whose seat of power, Mt. Olympus, is also 'patrolled by rapists' (Paulin 1990: 49, cf. 35-9, 41). As a victim of Zeus' aggression, Io compares herself to Prometheus who has been brutally immobilized and left to suffer (Paulin 1990: 35-6).[5]

When transferred to Zeus, Creon's odious qualities are magnified to divine proportions. The issue of racism, which irrupts briefly but starkly in *The Riot Act*, is developed along genocidal lines in *Seize the Fire*. Antigone's death by entombment seems appropriate to Creon, who casts himself as a 'hangman', because 'she belongs in the dark| like any blacky' (Paulin 1985: 46). Zeus' programme of eugenics, however, encompasses all of humankind. Before Prometheus' assistance, humans were 'cowed', 'frightened', and waiting 'for wipe-out' (Paulin 1990: 9). Zeus plots extermination for the human race, and decrees an edict for its replacement with 'some better breed', while Prometheus promotes miscegenation and is punished (Paulin 1990: 17, 19). If Prometheus had not interfered, 'every last human body| would be stacked up dead' (Paulin 1990: 11). This sort of language perhaps most obviously evokes the atrocities of World War II, but *Seize the Fire* is a socialist critique of dictatorships and of political oppression in general. Military regimes such as those of the

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[4] In the film version, Io appears as a Marilyn Monroe figure, used and abused by the men around her, but Paulin's text imagines a more classically-inspired twist, where Io wears cow-horns (as in the original where she has been transformed into a heifer) and calls herself a 'cow girl' (Paulin 1990: 33-5).

[5] The sufferings of Io and Prometheus are comparable insofar as they are both victims of Zeus, but there are, of course, significant differences between their plights (Io suffers as a human female, Prometheus as an immortal male). The contrast is brought out in performance through the juxtaposition of Io's enforced state of roaming to Prometheus' enforced immobility.

Greek junta in the 1960s and 1970s or of Chile's Pinochet, who came to power in 1973 and was still in place when *Seize the Fire* was broadcast on British television in 1989, are also brought to mind. In Paulin's play, the gods represent generals, politicians, and the elite upper classes, who collude in trying to prevent the people (humans) from gaining access to knowledge. Socialist politics are emphasized through the language of comradeship (Paulin 1990: 23, 25, 51). Zeus is repeatedly identified as a dictator who has introduced censorship, and whose rule is characterized by human suffering and food shortages (Paulin 1990: 1, 13, 15, 41). The abject status of different peoples in various political contexts is thus explored, and the manipulation of history by tyrants is laid bare. Zeus, we are told, has 'hijacked both… history| and the state', so that historians have become libellous against individuals and manipulative in their handling of the press (1990: 21, 25, 29). This suspicious treatment of 'history' and 'historians' chimes with Paulin's own misgivings about the selective presentation of history given by 'head-banging Ulster protestants, like Ian Paisley'.[6]

For his defiance of Zeus, the immortal Prometheus is cast out and degraded, chained up in a 'prison' that smells of 'the blood and shit| of those who died' there (Paulin 1990: 11). With the location also called an 'abattoir' and a 'meatgrinder', humans are viewed as animals once again (Paulin 1990: 3). Blood does not feature so prominently in *The Riot Act* (Antigone hangs herself to avoid death by starvation). Nevertheless, in extraordinary outburst by the Theban Chorus, as brief as it is striking, we are told: 'There was a man I knew| got footless at his own wedding.| Covered in blood he was' (Paulin 1985: 35). In an arresting wordplay, the man seems to have been shot in the

[6] Quotation from personal communication with Paulin (14/11/2018) in which he acknowledged that such figures were on his mind when he wrote *Seize the Fire*. For Paulin's views on Paisley's presentation of history, see Paulin (1996: 28-47). See also the poem 'Martello', where history is 'a fiction that pretends to be fact' (Paulin 1983: 55).

ankles, and so is literally 'footless' rather than metaphorically 'legless' (i.e. 'drunk'). Soaked in his own blood, he is made abject at a moment of celebration.[7] This gruesome hobbling, moreover, reflects, in particular, the brutal realities of paramilitary punishments associated with the Northern Irish conflict. [8] Similarly, in *Seize the Fire*, Prometheus the 'traitor' must be hobbled at the ankles (Paulin 1990: 2). Later in the play, when the politically inactive Oceanus, who pointedly 'glide[s] in [his] bubble', suggests that he might persuade Zeus to free Prometheus, Prometheus responds knowingly 'More likely you'll get kneecapped' (Paulin 1990: 21, 27).[9]

Politics and Production: Is personal sacrifice enough to effect political change?

Echoes of paramilitary violence that are regrettably familiar in Northern Ireland come as no surprise in *Seize the Fire*, produced as the conflict raged on just five years after *The Riot Act*'s overtly political stance. Prometheus' imprisonment in 'a dump for rebels| and the disappeared' (Paulin 1990: 3) further echoes contemporary political violence in Northern Ireland. Both Prometheus and Antigone are

[7] A bloody foot will bring to mind also Antigone's father Oedipus, another figure once celebrated then degraded, whose name famously means 'swollen foot' in reference to an injury suffered as a consequence of his abandonment as an infant.

[8] See Nicholas, Barr and Mollan (1993) for an overview of typical injuries sustained from punishment attacks between 1986 and 1989. For recent data on continuing attacks post ceasefire, see McGarry et al. (2017).

[9] M. McDonald (1997: 63) also notes the significance of this line in her brief discussion of *Seize the Fire*'s engagement with the 'legacy of imperialism' in Ireland.

advised to 'bend the knee' (Paulin 1990: 5, cf. 59; Paulin 1985:10).[10] Both refuse and are debased and punished as a result. Io must continue to suffer on an arduous journey. We are left to wonder, however, at the end of both tragedies, whether or not the personal sacrifices of the central characters were enough to effect any real political change. The question remains open, I suggest, precisely because both dramas reflect on unresolved contemporary political situations whose significance is made plain by examining the contexts of dramatic production.

Paulin's *The Riot Act* was commissioned by the Field Day Theatre Company, which had been founded just a few years earlier in 1980 with the aim of creating a space for artistic responses to the violent politics of contemporary Northern Ireland. References to the Northern Irish conflict in *The Riot Act* have been well documented (see n.2 above). How *Seize the Fire* overlaps with contemporary politics, however, remains to be discussed and there are some important observations to be made, not least because there are two versions – the 1989 film, directed by Tony Coe, and the 1990 published text. *Seize the Fire* was commissioned as the basis for a film that would form part of a second-year course on fifth-century BCE Athens run by the Open University.[11] There are a number of reasons, then, for which Northern Irish politics are more apparent in the 1990 text and essentially

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[10] This sort of intransigent language was commonly used by the evangelical Ulster loyalist Ian Paisley, on whom Paulin's Creon is partly modelled (see Roche 1988: 224). Paisely's own frequent rallying cry 'We will never bend the knee' rejected compromise of any kind.

[11] I am much indebted to Lorna Hardwick, Professor Emerita of Classical Studies at the Open University, and Tony Coe, director of the film *Seize the Fire*, for the information they have generously provided on the context in which *Seize the Fire* was commissioned. Thanks are also due to Fiona Macintosh at the Oxford Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama for access to the film itself.

absent from the 1989 film. As a pedagogical tool, the film was not intended to highlight a particular political point of view, especially since the students were to watch the film before reading the play by Aeschylus. Moreover, the film had an extremely strict time limit of twenty-four minutes, meaning that cuts had to be made in the script to accommodate this restriction. There must also have been certain further practical considerations. The Open University had been founded by the Labour government as a radically new distance learning university, with the cooperation of the BBC for broadcasting teaching programmes, and had opened its metaphorical doors to students in 1971. By the 1980s, however, under Thatcher's Conservative government, a 'Visiting Committee' had been established to monitor spending and activities at the Open University, which came to face regular accusations of having a Marxist bias against which it was repeatedly forced to defend itself.[12] Within such a climate, there were common sense reasons for avoiding overtly politicized material, though Paulin's epigraph from Marx in his published play, which reads 'Prometheus is the foremost saint and martyr in the philosopher's calendar', is also pointed in this context.[13] Meanwhile, the suggestion

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[12] For an overview of typical complaints and controversies, see Weinbren (2010).

[13] Marx wrote this in the preface to his doctoral dissertation, and Paulin has identified Prometheus 'as a sustaining poetic myth in his own life' (Feay 2010). It is probable, moreover, that Paulin will have consulted the 1932 edition and translation of *Prometheus Bound* by the Marxist Classicist George Derwent Thomson (who was also a staunch supporter of the Irish language revival and produced an Irish version of his edition in 1933). Although Thomson does not mention Marx in his editions, he writes of his 'dismay, when, after reading the *Prometheus Bound* for the first time at school, [he] turned to the introduction and found that, in the view of the editors, and despite any appearances to the contrary, Prometheus was in the wrong and Zeus was in the right'. Thomson

made towards the end of *Seize the Fire*, that Prometheus might yet write his memoirs, was inspired by the opening lines of the 'Foreward' to Trotsky's autobiography *My Life*, which reads 'Our times again are rich in memoirs, perhaps richer than ever before. It is because there is much to tell.'[14]

Paulin's play itself has much to tell, and deserves to be more widely studied in both forms. The film version opens with Prometheus already immobilized under concrete debris and covered in dust, implying entrapment after a bombing. On this configuration, the opening scene of Prometheus' imprisonment is removed, and the film effectively thrusts the action into a timescale of divine proportions without any sense of a specifically immediate context. To the sounds of the sea, breaking waves and seagulls, Prometheus calls on the 'Winds and rivers,| light, sea, earth, winds' to witness his 'first millennium| as Zeus' prisoner' (= Paulin 1990: 7-9). This is very different from the opening scene of Paulin's published text. The first line spoken by Power 'There's fuck all here' is angry, aggressive, and could not have been aired on national television. Violence responds 'No firing squad.| No nothing', while Power prods bullet holes in the cliff with his finger (Paulin 1990: 1).

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goes on to quote Shelley's assessment of Prometheus as the champion of mankind against the oppressor Zeus with wholehearted approval (Thomson 1932: 6).

Prometheus is also connected by Paulin to Jackson Pollock, another inspiration of his (confirmed in personal correspondence, 14/11/2018). The phrase 'a bee in a tin' used by the narrator in 'I Am Nature: *Homage to Jackson Pollock, 1912-56*' (Paulin 1987: 33), is applied to Prometheus in *Seize the Fire* (Paulin 1990: 23).

[14] Hermes suggests to Prometheus, while attempting to persuade him to recant and be rewarded by the State, that he might retire in peace to write his memoirs in beautiful surroundings, Paulin (1990: 57). Paulin confirms the inspiration from Trotsky's autobiography in personal correspondence (14/11/2018).

We might pause to remember that the production of *Seize the Fire* coincided with some of the worst tensions and controversies of the Northern Irish conflict. On 6 March 1988, three members of the IRA, the main paramilitary branch of the Republican movement, Mairéad Farrell, Daniel McCann, and Sean Savage were shot dead in Gibraltar by British Special Air Service forces. The British Foreign Secretary at the time, Sir Geoffrey Howe, claimed that British forces acted to neutralize terrorists whose movements suggested they were about to endanger lives, possibly by detonating a car bomb. There is no doubt that the three were planning to carry out an attack, but a documentary put together by Thames Television, *Death on the Rock*, which first aired on 28 April 1988 presented a very different story.[15] According to multiple witnesses, Farrell and McCann had their arms in the air in a gesture of surrender when they were shot repeatedly at close range and without warning in front of a petrol station, while Savage was shot in the back as he fled the scene and shot again repeatedly at close range after he had fallen. None of the three were armed when they were shot. A British Army bomb disposal expert further stated that there was no car bomb in place (contrary to suggestions by the British government) nor any possibility that a car bomb might have been detonated from the locations at which the three were killed. While it was evident that the three IRA members were planning a serious atrocity, the controversy over the manner of their deaths dogged the British government, which had repeatedly faced criticisms over the illegality or cover-ups of their apparent shoot-to-kill policies in relation to the Northern Irish conflict. Sir Geoffrey Howe

[15] The full programme can be viewed on Youtube in four parts:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5nEqXt2wGE,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCnKaPHzf4Y,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8imkBMLTMs,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fn3hS9H26Q (accessed 15/09/20).

tried unsuccessfully to have the programme banned. Following its airing, the documentary was scrutinized in an independent inquiry. The result was the Windlesham-Rampton report, which concluded on 26 January 1989 with a vindication for the programme. *Death on the Rock* went on to win the 1989 BAFTA for best documentary and aired again in April 1991 on Channel 4.[16] In light of this contemporary controversy, the opening scene of Paulin's published *Seize the Fire* may evoke, albeit obliquely, certain pressing political issues which do not make their mark on the film version. Prometheus must be imprisoned, however brutal the process, rather than killed (since murder is not an option for an immortal) in a location notable for its absence of a firing squad, and through language written with a Northern Irish lilt.[17]

Abjection and Sacrifice: No Resolutions

Adaptations of Greek tragedy that reflect on a present and unresolved crisis often serve to offer hope for resolution in the future. Arguably the most pertinent example for our current discussion is Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles'* Philoctetes which, like Paulin's *The Riot Act*,

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[16] The report of the independent inquiry was published by Faber and Faber, also Tom Paulin's main publisher, as Windlesham and Rampton (1989). Detailed discussions of the events are given in Williams (1989), Bolton (1990), and Eckert (1999).

[17] Characters in Paulin (1990) use the Northern Irish 'Aye' (5, 21), Irish words like 'fella' (5), 'header'(15), 'thickos' (15), and Irish colloquialisms in expressions such as 'They scorned me, but' (17; cf. 49: 'I'm gonna take it but'), 'You better head' (27), and 'till I seen through his eyes' (35). Coe's film used neutral English accents throughout, with a barely audible Irish twang in Kate Binchy's disembodied choral voice.

was produced for Field Day Theatre in 1990 and is thus also almost contemporaneous with Paulin's *Seize the Fire*. The contrast in perspective between Heaney and Paulin, however, is evident already in their choice of titles. Heaney 'wanted [his] title to prefigure a benign and unexpected turn of events' (Heaney 2002: 172), while Paulin's titles evoke resistance against political oppression and daring action.[18] Where Paulin depicts tyrannical rulers and oppressed subjects, Heaney levels the main players into a list in the drama's opening lines: 'Philoctetes.| Hercules.| Odysseus.| Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings.| All throwing shapes' (Heaney 1991: 1). All parties are equally to blame in this drama where intransigence is the obstacle to peace. In a concluding choral section, which is now famous, we are told: 'History says, *Don't hope*| *On this side of the grave.*| But then, once in a lifetime| The longed-for tidal wave| Of justice can rise up,| And hope and history rhyme' (Heaney 1991: 77). This stanza, the antepenultimate in a series of six, has been quoted variously in public addresses by

[18] Where *The Riot Act* evokes both rioting and a heavy-handed response to dissent or disobedience (as in the phrase 'to read someone the riot act'), *Seize the Fire* references William Blake's 'The Tyger', specifically the line 'What the hand, dare seize the fire?', and Paulin mentions Blake among his influences at the time (in personal correspondence,14/11/2018). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing me to 'The Tyger' as the specific source for Paulin's title. Writing on Blake's poetry, Paulin (2007) discusses how his poems of apparent childlike simplicity contain a dark edge and revolutionary undertones. This is true also of Blake's paintings, where sinister elements lurk even in apparently pastoral scenes, ready to destabilize a predictable outcome (my thanks to artist Aaron Ryan for this insight).

significant political figures.[19] Its message of hope is, in part at least, what has captured the public imagination.

In Paulin's tragedies, on the other hand, there is little offered in the way of hope or resolution. Clair Wills has observed Paulin's refusal to create solutions for the conflicts he evokes, tracing this tendency back to his 1987 *Fivemiletown* collection (Wills 1992: 133). There is also a stark expression of inescapable misery at the end of *The Riot Act*, published two years earlier. The concluding lines of the Chorus read 'There is no happiness, but there can be wisdom.| Revere the gods; revere them always'. Men will suffer and be punished for their pride, we are told. 'It teaches them. It teaches us.' (Paulin 1985: 63). This grim, fatalistic conclusion evokes the kind of fire and brimstone evangelical rhetoric of Ian Paisley with whom Creon is associated in the play (on which see Roche 1988: 224). The Chorus are Creon's men. In Sophocles, wisdom is designated in the final lines as a central component of happiness, the two are linked, and the arrogant man is taught wisdom by the blows of the punishments he suffers (*Ant.* 1347-53). In Paulin, however, happiness and wisdom are incompatible, and all men learn wisdom from the punishment of the proud. The Creons of this world and his supporters will not know happiness, fair enough, but what is the impact of Antigone's stand from her position of abjection? It has exposed the misery of belated wisdom, and Creon finally admits that he has 'Made a right blood-mess' (Paulin 1985: 62), but what else, if anything, has Antigone's sacrifice achieved?

[19] These include Mary Robinson as President of Ireland; Bill Clinton as President of the United States; Jacques Santer as President of the European Commission; Dick Spring as Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs; Gerry Adams as leader of Sinn Féin. See further Denard (2000: 1-2), Heaney (2002: 176-8), and Taplin (2004: 145-7).

In mapping Antigone and Creon so overtly onto opposing sides of the Northern Irish political divide, Paulin's play concludes without any resolution for a more optimistic future. Antigone's self-sacrifice to her cause is final. In Paulin, as in Sophocles, there is no consideration of the impact of Antigone's actions on Ismene, who shares Antigone's distress but cannot condone her methods. More recent work by Northern Irish authors has revisited this issue. Stacey Gregg's 2006 *Ismene* highlights the experience of survival during and after paramilitary conflicts. Owen McCafferty's 2008 *Antigone* is structured around a different kind of survivor, an 'Old Man' who sorts through body bags during the entirety of the play.[20] New Northern Irish *Antigone*s can reflect on political violence through the lens of the Peace Process. *The Riot Act*, on the other hand, is frozen in its moment of bloody and abject struggle.

The political span of *Seize the Fire* is far broader, alluding to various oppressive regimes and applying itself to the whole of humanity. Both Prometheus and Io sacrifice themselves to a shared cause aimed at lifting humankind out of abjection and overthrowing the tyrannical Zeus. In giving fire and knowledge to humans, Prometheus has given them a fighting chance, while Io must endure the indignities of rape and persecution for the promise of an offspring who is prophesied to challenge Zeus in a future generation (Paulin 1990: 49). The strength for meaningful political resistance will come only as a result of Io's continued abjection and objectification. In the closing words of the play,

[20] On the adaptations of Gregg and McCafferty, see Torrance (2020: 332-43). In 2019, Colm Tóibín's *Pale Sister*, written with Lisa Dwan, premiered at Dublin's Gate Theatre as an extraordinary monologue starring Dwan as Ismene recounting her own perspective on the events at Thebes. In the author's note, Tóibín mentions that he first came across the story of Antigone and Ismene through Conor Cruise O'Brien's analogy (Tóibín 2019: 44), which had also prompted Paulin's vigorous response in *The Riot Act* (Paulin 2002: 166-7).

Prometheus is to be extinguished and 'become one| with the democratic light!' (Paulin 1990: 65). There is more hope in this conclusion than in *The Riot Act*, but that hope remains fragile and under threat from the rigged nature of power politics and the manipulation of history that have been stressed throughout the play. It is only when minds come together, every one 'a splinter | of sharp, pure fire' (Paulin 1990: 63) that the throne of Zeus can be shaken.

In the film version, Prometheus' closing speech is accompanied by candle flames appearing around him against a gradually darkening screen. Eventually only Prometheus' face can be seen against a black background filled with candle flames. With the concluding sentence, Prometheus' face disappears and is replaced by another candle. The final word in the film, moreover, is 'fire' rather than 'light', thus linking the fire of democracy burning brightly in the dark more directly with the fire stolen by Prometheus to assist humans. The film offers a visually suggestive image of hopeful resistance that is absent in the text (which contains no stage directions here). At the same time, the flames of candles can be extinguished easily by a wind so it remains unclear if or when the sufferings endured in the present will translate into political reform. Lorna Hardwick observed that the closing scene in the film was 'an unwitting anticipation of the night sky with candles in Wenceslas Square at the time of the Czech resistance against the Soviet-dominated regime'.[21] The demonstration took place in November 1989, after the premiere of the film but before the publication of the text. On a broader scale, then, *Seize the Fire*, like *The Riot Act*, is arrested within a particular political moment and is concerned with the potential within abject figures to inspire political resistance.

[21] Personal correspondence 01/12/2017.

Politics of Abjection in *Medea* (2010)

Over twenty-five years after his adaptation of *Antigone*, Paulin returned to Greek tragedy, this time with a version of Euripides' *Medea*, and it will be argued here that Paulin's *Medea* shares some important features with his earlier tragedies. The drama once again involves an abject and disenfranchised figure who is beast-like and connected with dirt and (here particularly) with blood. From a position of political vulnerability, this figure asserts a defiant and extremely effective position against the status quo but the impact of Medea's actions, like those of Antigone and to a lesser extent those of Prometheus and Io, do not bring much hope for a better future. As with the previous tragedies, *Medea* also evokes Northern Irish politics, if less overtly, in this case both the armed conflict and contemporary legislation related to gender and racial discrimination.

In explaining his decision to do a *Medea*, Paulin traces a very clear line of motivation back to his version of *Antigone*.[22] He also draws attention to the word 'lunk' in the opening line of *Medea*, as a Northern Irish dialect word meaning 'an unbearably hot still day' (Feay 2010; Paulin 2010c), and there are some suggestive turns of phrase potentially evocative of the Northern Irish conflict and even of the gendered suffering of women.[23] Like Antigone in *The Riot Act* and

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[22] He says in Paulin (2010d) 'I came to *Medea* because 26 years back, the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry – started by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea – asked me to [*sic*] a version of *Antigone*.'

[23] Medea's difficulties are called 'troubles' three times in quick succession, exploiting a frequent euphemism for the Northern Irish conflict, and this Creon has 'soldiers' who can 'chuck [Medea] out' (Paulin 2010a: 18, 20). The phrase 'yourself alone', which echoes the Irish Republican motto 'ourselves alone', is applied to Medea's Nurse, and Medea is marked as being 'alone' (Paulin 2010a:

humankind in *Seize the Fire*, Medea is cast as bestial and abject. She is 'just like a wild animal', a 'foul bitch', a 'beast', a 'lion-bitch', and 'dirt' (Paulin 2010a: 8, 58, 59, 60, 63). In the final scene, she is 'a beast | smeared with the blood of her own children' (Paulin 2010a: 64), and there is far more blood in Paulin than in Euripides where the Greek word for blood appears only three times (1175, 1198, 1256). A woman will 'have blood', 'when her bed has been defiled', Medea tells us at the end

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5, 7, 9, 14). 'Ourselves Alone', the common (though inaccurate) translation of the Irish *sinn féin* 'ourselves' which gave its name to the Republican party, is also the title of a well-known Northern Irish play by Anne Devlin first produced in 1985. The drama addresses the impact of the political turmoil in Northern Ireland and is presented through the struggles of three sisters. The phrase thus has a theatrical heritage of pointing both to Republican politics and to the sense of isolation felt by women within the Northern Irish conflict. Feminist discourse has long been eclipsed in Northern Ireland by a political discourse that defines its own priorities and tends to assert traditional gender roles (Pelletier 2013: 23). Women who are mothers must stay at home and look after the children, while men are free to roam about in the name of political duty. In Gerard Humphreys' (2018) play about the 1980s hunger strikes, but also inspired by the Antigone story, the title character Norah reproaches a local male IRA volunteer: 'You men go out and do the fighting. You volunteer. Ya volunteer your wives and children to poverty and long, lonely nights wondering if you'll make it home' (69). Script accessed through the Oxford Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama.

Paulin claims to have written *Medea* in 'standard English' (Feay 2010; Paulin 2010c), but Irish inflections remain. Examples include 'a mere young thing' (4); 'I was sat down just' (6); 'You'd banish me| without you'd head my plea' (17); 'some slip of a girl' (24); 'Go you on to Hades' (60). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who brought these examples to my attention.

of her first on-stage monologue (Paulin 2010a: 15), and she is practiced in the art of murder. She is a 'child-butcher' who killed her 'little brother' onboard the *Argo* and 'spread his blood right across the decks' (Paulin 2010a: 60). It was she who had Jason's uncle Pelias 'butchered by his own daughters. | It was the most horrible of deaths | All that was left of him | was a broth of grisly bones | that stopped his bloodline dead.' (Paulin 2010a: 24). In Medea's deadly revenge on Jason's new bride, her target melts away in a heap of agony: 'Her eyes and face had disappeared. | The blood and flame dropped from her spitting. | Her poisoned flesh dripped off her | like resin from a torch.' The princess' father, rushing to his dying child's side, sticks fast to his daughter in a 'ghastly wrestling match' from which he painfully and unsuccessfully tries to free himself until he too collapses dead (Paulin 2010a: 55). Both Pelias and Creon have lost their bloodlines. Blood and reproduction are connected, as are blood and love through end-of-line assonance (love/mother/blood) in a striking choral address to Medea as she plans to murder her children:

> 'How will you blind your eyes
> and blacken your own heart
> enough to push a blade into the flesh you love?
> And when they look at you their mother
> with her arm upraised
> will you dare to spray the wall with blood?' (Paulin 2010a: 41).[24]

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[24] In *The Riot Act*, also, love is brutal, 'like chains', 'a dead light', 'a padded cell' (Paulin 1985: 44). Violence and sexuality are frequently linked in Paulin's work, as Wills discusses (1993: 124-45), and the connection is made in *Medea* also when we are told that 'Sex leads to death| and grief is at the very heart of life.' (Paulin 2010a: 58).

This connection and associated assonance (blood/dull/loves) is reiterated in the concluding summary of the Chorus, reflecting on the play's events: 'The gods… | …swill blood down | on our dull lives and loves.' (Paulin 2010a: 65). The meaning of 'swill' is redirected by the preposition 'on'. Where it first appears that the gods greedily consume human blood (i.e. swill it down), the final part of the sentence reveals that blood is being use to wash out (i.e. swill down on) 'our dull lives and loves'. Being of divine ancestry, Medea herself is implicated in this sort of divinely orchestrated purification by blood.

Conflict and Discrimination: Reading *Medea* (2010) through a Northern Irish Lens

Paulin's reading of Medea, like his reading of Creon, is a particularly hard one, and it is significant that 'Medea is not mad' (Paulin 2010a: 58). There is no indication of the kind of mental instability resulting from abuse or neglect that we see in other Irish Medeas.[25] In Paulin, Medea's crimes are unmitigated by any extenuating psychological circumstances, and it is Jason who considers himself 'mad' by the end of the play for having brought 'this barbarian' home (Paulin 2010a: 60). This steely characterization of Medea may well align with the capacity for violence among female paramilitaries during the Northern Irish conflict whose rational commitment to a political cause led them to commit

[25] In Brendan Kennelly's 1993 *Medea*, the title character is a woman betrayed by her husband but also by society at large. In Marina Carr's 1998 *By the bog of cats…*, the Medea figure, Hester Swane, suffers from deep-rooted abandonment trauma, and kills her daughter immediately prior to her own suicide in an unpremeditated decision designed to save her child from that same trauma.

horrific crimes.[26] Medea's prior crimes, her murder of her brother and her orchestration of Pelias' death, were committed for Jason's benefit. Now she is betrayed and cast aside by him for an alliance with the monarchy. The story arc reflects, in a bizarre manner, the experience of female dissident Republicans, such as the Price sisters. These women committed crimes on the orders of men who, they felt, later betrayed the Republican cause by decommissioning weapons and entering into a power-sharing executive with Unionist politicians who support allegiance to the British crown.[27]

Medea also resembles Paulin's Antigone and Prometheus in asserting her defiance from a position of degradation. As a rejected woman she is 'soiled' and 'damaged goods', and she has suffered 'much abuse' (Paulin 2010a: 13, 15). She is a double outsider in a man's world, a woman and a foreigner. Jason targets Medea in both categories. He suggests that 'all human misery would stop' if children could be conceived without the need for women (Paulin 2010a: 28), and urges her to be grateful that she is 'with the Greeks now | - not with Gypsies no', 'in a land of culture and of justice | not in some base tribal swamp.' (Paulin 2010a: 26). When interviewed about his *Medea* in the

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[26] Mairéad Farrell, for instance, was recruited to the Provisional IRA in 1971 at the age of 14. She became involved in the IRA's bombing campaign and was imprisoned in 1976, serving ten years in the Armagh Women's prison where she was the acting commander of female IRA prisoners. During her incarceration, Farrell instigated the dirty protests and went on hunger strike. As we have seen, she resumed her paramilitary activities on being released and was shot dead by British forces in 1988.

[27] The story of Dolours Price, who was married for twenty years to the man who commissioned, directed and stared in *The Riot Act* (Stephen Rea), is now documented in the 2018 film *I, Dolours* directed by Maurice Sweeney. Whalen (2019) discusses the challenges faced by female paramilitaries in Northern Ireland.

Financial Times, Paulin observed that '[t]here is a sort of feminist angle in it' (2010c). The observation is arguably surprising in the sense that Paulin is not known as a feminist. In 1993, Clair Wills could write that Paulin is 'unable to acknowledge the political force of issues such as women's rights', and that 'the lack of sensitivity to women's concerns damages the model of synthesis Paulin utilizes; …his model of politics remains weighted towards the masculine' (1993: 126-7, 143). By 2010, however, Paulin's perspectives seem to have developed. *Medea* was produced during the period of preparation for the 2010 Equality Act, which had been promised by the British Labour Party in its 2005 election manifesto, and whose final amendments were approved by parliament in April 2010. The Equality Act effectively updated, simplified and consolidated anti-discrimination laws in the United Kingdom. It did not, however, apply to Northern Ireland, whose devolved government, which is responsible for such matters, has not moved forward with the sort of Single Equality Bill that was briefly considered in 2005. The main anti-discrimination law in Northern Ireland thus remains the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995, now outdated in the rest of the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland has been found lacking in its standards on gender- and race-based discrimination.[28]

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[28] Potter (2011: 4) reported that Northern Ireland had been identified as a problematic region 'in the non-compliance of treaty standards, including prison reform, the representation of women, reproductive rights, poverty, deprivation and health issues, community segregation, judicial and policing matters, academic selection, treatment of non-nationals, treatment of Irish Travellers and the status of the Irish language'. In 2008, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women examined the UK and advised the implementation of a list of actions in Northern Ireland to combat discrimination against women. However, 'the substantive issues relating to Northern Ireland were not tackled' (Potter 2011: 22). Northern Ireland has even lagged behind the notoriously conservative Republic of Ireland in overturning a complete ban on

This context of unsatisfactory legislation on discrimination in Northern Ireland suggests a political reason for which Paulin may have been inspired to return to Euripides' *Medea* in 2010. Issues of women's and immigrants' rights remain particularly fraught in Northern Ireland. In the Northern Broadsides performance at the Oxford Playhouse, Paulin's *Medea* played to the theme of immigrant experiences in British culture more generally. Nina Kristofferson starred as a black Medea alongside Kulvindher Ghir as a Jason of ostensibly Indian origin. Medea's Nurse was played by the black British actress Cleo Sylvestre, while the remaining cast members were white.[29] Paulin's own hostility to racism is personal, since his wife comes from Northern Ireland's small Sikh community and his children are mixed race (as noted by Wroe 2002). 2010 also saw the publication of Paulin's *Love's Bonfire*, a collection of poetry within which the themes of violent death, his romantic relationship with his wife, and the Northern Irish conflict all loom large. The title poem is set in 1970 (Paulin is twenty-one) and charts Paulin's early and secret romance with his wife, along with their cultural differences, at the beginning of the Northern Irish conflict. They come across a bonfire that has petered out. 'Giti', as she is later named in the poem, stokes the fire back to life again with a stick. The poet realizes in this moment that his beloved rejects the arranged marriage prescribed by her

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abortion and in legalizing gay marriage. In October 2019, Northern Ireland's complete ban on abortion was repealed, more than a year after this occurred in the Republic of Ireland. Same-sex marriage has been legal since January 2020 in Northern Ireland and since November 2015 in the Republic.

[29] The production received mixed reviews. Lyn Gardner (2010), writing for *The Guardian*, gave it a single star, although it was noted that the fault was not with Paulin's text, which 'seems robust'. For Dominic Cavendish (2010), in *The Telegraph*, it was 'at times lamentably scrappy'. Ian Shuttleworth (2010) in the *Financial Times* called the production 'an efficient rendering'.

cultural background, and chooses him as her husband. She is 'active', and the poem contemplates the challenges associated with leaving one's 'tribe' (Paulin 2010b: 12). The fire of love is a 'bonfire', which can be lit both for celebrations and for the functional burning of rubbish. It is also a term with political resonance in Northern Ireland where bonfires are commonly associated sectarian unrest.[30] Love and politics are inextricable in Paulin's representation, because it is not possible to become 'entirely detribalized'.[31] If Paulin's wife remembered that bonfire she stoked back to life all those years ago, the poet fears she would 'say only| veteris vestigia flammae' though he prays in the final line that she would not (Paulin 2010b: 13). This quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* (4.23) casts Paulin's wife as Dido, the tragic Queen of Carthage, when she says '[I recognize] a trace of that former flame'. Dido describes how her capacity to love had died when her former husband passed away, but it is now reawakened by Aeneas. Famously, Aeneas will abandon Dido who commits suicide as a result. Paulin thus fears that he has been an Aeneas from his wife's perspective, putting his personal political quest and academic career above his marital relationship over the past forty years.

The themes of 'Love's Bonfire' echo strongly with those of *Medea* in depicting a relationship blossoming out of passion that requires from the woman the sacrifice of leaving her tribe

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[30] Bonfires are lit in connection with the annual 12th of July loyalist celebrations of the 1690 victory of the Protestant King William of Orange over the Catholic King James II, and the foundation of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. On the eve of the 12th of July, every year, huge bonfires are built in loyalist communities on which flags of the Irish Republic and effigies associated with Irish nationalism are burned.

[31] The phrase is quoted from Paulin (1992: 13) where he describes himself as 'never entirely detribalized' from his upbringing as an Ulster Protestant; cf. Wills (1993: 123-57) on the drive to overcome 'tribal' affiliations as a recurring concern of Paulin's work.

and becoming forever an outsider in her new community. Two sons and many years of marriage later, the poet wonders from the woman's perspective, from his wife's perspective, whether it has been worth it for her. Where the suffering of women was relevant to *The Riot Act* and *Seize the Fire* through the experiences of Antigone and Io as emblematic of human oppression more generally, reading Paulin's *Medea* alongside 'Love's Bonfire' reveals a more personal reflection on the politics of gender and discrimination. The impact of Medea's experiences and her subsequent revenge are summarized in the bleak closing lines of the play where the Chorus give their verdict on the gods: 'They turn the bright air to blackest night. | They turn our dreams to nightmare. | And this is just what happened here today.' (Paulin 2010a: 65). Once again we are left with little hope. Medea has succeeded in her aims, but what impact, if any, do her actions have on the politics of discrimination?[32] Like Paulin's wife, Medea has charted her own course, but systemic change in attitudes to women and foreigners remain elusive in the context of contemporary legislation on discrimination in Northern Ireland and of human experiences in general.

Paulin's Tragic 'Trilogy' and the Radical Politics of Abjection: Conclusions

A state of abjection is a common feature of tragic suffering (the 'abject, mimed through sound and meaning', Kristeva 1982: 28), and Northern Irish poetry frequently creates associations between

[32] An anonymous reviewer points out that the final line of Paulin's play evokes to the closing words of the Chorus in Jules Dassin's *A Dream of Passion* ('This happened here today'), where the Medea story is mapped onto a real life situation. Michelakis (2013: 178) argues that these concluding words are significant in casting Medea as a figure who reappears 'not outside of time…, but in history, …every time the circumstances call for it.'

abjection and the body politic (see Brewster 2005). Indeed, the representation of Ireland itself has been read in terms of colonial abjection which may yet harbour revolutionary potential (see Currie 2020). The radical nature of Paulin's specific presentation of political abjection through Greek tragedy is tied, it is argued here, to its contemporary moment. His work proposes that political order can be challenged effectively by society's most abject and ostensibly most vulnerable figures. Antigone, Prometheus, Io, and Medea are made abject in the extreme through physical suffering, violent language, and vulgar imagery, and their actions engender severe pain to their own selves. Antigone commits suicide, Prometheus is trapped in constant torment, Io accepts to suffer violent abuse, while Medea views her murder of the children as a 'sacrifice' that must be stomached (Paulin 2010a: 50). They represent the interests of contemporary political groups to varying degrees of specificity – oppressed Irish nationalists, the proletariat, women and foreigners. Yet the conclusions of Paulin's tragedies remain arrested in their respective contextual moments, and without a clear indication of long-term implications or systemic change. If the system is rigged against disenfranchised groups, as all three tragedies suggest, we are left with the same questions at the end of each drama. Can meaningful political advancement be effected from a position of abjection? Does the potential for resistance within the abject translate into social reform?

These questions may be left open but they are raised nonetheless, and these are issues with which, I would argue, an audience is left to grapple in all three cases. Shaun Richards, followed by Mark Phelan, has suggested that Northern Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy are fatalistic in implying the working out of some inevitable tragic destiny (Richards 1995, Phelan 2016: 376). Certainly, Richards' thought-provoking discussion highlights the problems inherent in casting the Northern Irish conflict as an inevitable and inexplicable 'tragedy', particularly in the absence of any contextual information. Richards' case study, the 1991 film *In the Border Country* directed by Thaddeus O'Sullivan, self-consciously mapped the cycle of vengeance in the first two plays of

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy onto Northern Ireland, but omitted any allusion to the final play of the trilogy in which the Furies of vengeance are appeased and domesticated as the Eumenides. As a result, the cycle of vengeance seems inescapable and any implementation of human judicial practices, which feature in the final play, is erased. The film differs markedly as such from Seamus Heaney's *Oresteia*-inspired 'Mycenae Lookout' set where the cleansing powers of fresh water are almost within reach in the concluding poem (Heaney 1996: 34-46; cf. Wilmer 2004). Heaney hints at something inherent in Greek tragedy, that seems to be absent from *In the Border Country*, namely that the end of the drama is not the end of the story. This is true of all the tragedies adapted by Paulin. In the Theban cycle, following Antigone's death, the sons of the seven leading warriors (six of whom died attacking Thebes) return to Thebes to avenge their fathers and successfully sack the city. The group, called the 'Epigoni' (meaning 'Descendants'), included Thersander, son of the dead Polynices. Sophocles had written an *Epigoni*, from which small fragments survive, and this tragedy is mentioned in the notes of Jebb's edition which Paulin consulted (Paulin 2002: 165).[33] As for the sequel to *Prometheus Bound*, it famously captured the imagination of Shelley, whose *Prometheus Unbound* has ensured popular awareness for a sequel even if Shelley's work is entirely his own creation. A possible reconstruction for the lost plays of a Prometheus trilogy by Aeschylus is given in Thomson's edition (cf. n. 13 above). Similarly with Medea, various myths existed relating the aftermath of Euripides' presentation of events, not least in connection with the foundation of 'a holy festival' at the temple of Hera to honour the memory of her sons and to expiate her filicide (Paulin 2010: 63).

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[33] That Paulin is aware of the broader framework of Theban mythology is clear also from his lengthy poem 'Cadmus and the Dragon', published in the *Walking a Line* collection (Paulin 1994: 93-101), which 'interrogates metaphors of nation' through imagery of bodily abjection (Brewster 2005: 315).

Recognizing that Greek tragedies have both a past and a future may allow for meaningful political engagement to remain possible and desirable through politicized adaptations such as Paulin's. In a similar vein, we may consider Michael Longley's poem 'Ceasefire' which rewrites the end of Homer's *Iliad* and maps the retrieval of Hector's body from the enemy camp by the old Trojan king Priam onto the announced 1994 ceasefire in the Northern Irish conflict. Longley's poem is no more about the end of a war than is the conclusion of Homer's *Iliad*, and it drew much of its force from its immediate context (see Alden 2020). Paulin's *The Riot Act* is closest to Longley's 'Ceasefire' in being harnessed most overtly to contemporary politics, but all three of Paulin's tragedies allude to pressing political issues. I would argue, then, that Greek tragedy, in Paulin's hands at least, leaves unanswered questions rather than 'foreclos[ing] possibilities and depoliticiz[ing] conflict by naturalizing the conditions which precipitate it' (Phelan 2016: 375).

In 1984, when *The Riot Act* was first produced, it was not at all clear that the nationalists represented by Antigone were making much progress towards their final goals. The Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985), which was a first step in the attempt at a peace process, was satirized by Paulin in his drama *The Hillsborough Script* (1987), named after the location of the signing of the Agreement. For dissident Republicans the final goal of a united Ireland, one which Paulin supports in a non-sectarian version (Paulin 1984: 16-17), has not yet been achieved. In 1989, when *Seize the Fire* was produced, the situation in Ireland was not improved. As Paulin expanded his view to a panoptic of oppressive political régimes across the world through the lens of the Prometheus myth, the audience is left to wonder at the epic scale of time due to elapse before any challenge will come to Zeus' power as a result of the suffering and sacrifices of Prometheus and Io. In its conception and film version, Paulin's *Seize the Fire* predated the fall of the Berlin Wall and other significant political events, such as the replacement of notorious Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. With hindsight, we can say that change was eventually effected by the Antigones, the Prometheuses, and the Ios of the world, but that

conclusion is not presented as certain in Paulin's 1980s tragedies, and political change in the contexts evoked has been slow.

Paulin's *Medea* is more complex both in its allusions to generic discrimination, relevant though not exclusive to Northern Ireland, and through its entanglement with Paulin's personal reflections in 'Love's Bonfire'. Nevertheless, it shares with his other tragedies the same essential question left open at its conclusion. Do Medea's actions effect any political change in relation to the status of women and residents of foreign origin? The answer, of course, is 'No'. That much is clearer in this case than in the other two dramas, within their respective moments. Medea is labelled a 'most monstrous woman' on her own definition (Paulin 2010: 50); she is simply an anomaly, and the status quo will resume. Yet this begs a further question in relation to contemporary politics, namely, why is it that so little has changed in society's treatment of women and minorities? Paulin recognizes his wife's sacrifices for him, as a woman and as a minority, in 'Love's Bonfire'. He identifies her agency and his own shortcomings, but all he can do is pray that she does not regret her choices. No solution is offered. Oppression can be challenged from a position of abjection, but what comes next? If there is the slightest 'glimpse', as I believe there is, of 'the potential for radical transformation', at the end of Paulin's tragedies, after 'years of blood and shit', this aligns them with his other works such as *Liberty Tree* and *Fivemiletown* which are the subjects of the text quoted here (from the analysis of Brewster 2005: 313). As political adaptations of Greek tragedy, however, Paulin's plays stand apart from the work of his peers in pushing the politics of bodily abjection to an extreme and in proposing that the body politic risks stagnation while the painfully slow wheels of political change nurture the seeds of radical action illustrated by Antigones, Prometheuses, Ios, and Medeas.

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