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Commemorations

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## Greek Tragedy and Irish Politics in the Decade of Commemorations\*

THE DECADE OF COMMEMORATIONS has seen an unusually dense proliferation of adaptations of Greek tragedy in Ireland. Twenty-two works are discussed here, including translations and versions reimagined through stage, screen, and novels. Although Irish authors have a strong tradition of rewriting Greek tragedy, among them Marina Carr, Seamus Heaney, Brendan Kennelly, Derek Mahon, Frank McGuinness, and many others before them, including W. B. Yeats, the density of Irish versions of Greek tragedies performed in the past ten years has been striking.<sup>1</sup> It is argued here that the political focus of the commemorations and the nation's reflection on historical traumas go hand in glove with this surge in adaptations. This is explained by the fact that Greek tragedy is an inherently political art form, and that Irish versions of Greek tragedy are strongly tied to the emergence of the Irish Free State, the formation of which the formal commemorations recall.

There is regrettably no space here to do justice to the depth and complexity of individual adaptations. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate how Greek tragic myth has been widely and consistently deployed in Ireland during the Decade of Commemorations (at the time of writing) in order to raise issues of political significance, both overtly and in a more oblique fashion. Two main mythological sagas addressing the Trojan War and the traumas at Thebes respectively emerge as the most frequently produced, while other mythologies concerned with female trauma also appear (Medea, Elektra, Myrrha). A remarkable

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1. For an overview of the phenomenon up to 2010, see Arkins.

Irish-language translation by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill of Aeschylus's *Persians* implies correspondences between Irish independence and Greek victories against Persian invaders. Political concerns raised by these works include the traumas of the Northern Irish conflict, issues of identity and equality, domestic and institutional abuse, and the impact of colonial history. The common thread across these narratives is surviving the truth.

### **The Theban Saga: The Northern Irish Conflict and Colonial History**

*A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)* was written by the late American playwright and actor Sam Shepard and commissioned by Northern Irish actor Stephen Rea for the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry. It was produced in 2013, when Derry was the United Kingdom's City of Culture, with Rea in the starring role. The play is a fractured, episodic take on the Oedipus story, with characters that shift between time frames in ancient and contemporary manifestations of themselves. Shepard homes in on the fact that Sophocles's play begins as a murder mystery. Oedipus is told that the only way to cleanse the plague on his land is to find and cast out the murderer of the previous king. The premise of Shepard's play is the gruesome discovery of three bodies run over by a car in the U.S. desert near the border with Mexico. On the face of it the play might seem to have nothing to do with Northern Ireland, but the form of the play stresses that there are many different versions reported of the same crime. As a synopsis of the play states, "Who is the victim? Who is responsible? What are the consequences for generations to come?" ("A Particle of Dread: Synopsis"). The play is structurally complex, written in thirty-three mostly very short scenes, and can be challenging to follow. The different manifestations of the characters across time, however, allow for a deep exploration of repressed memories in the Otto/Oedipus figure, played by Stephen Rea, who dimly remembers something intangible when he reads about the highway murder in the newspaper.

An issue that becomes a central theme in Shepard's play, as in the original, is the significance and impact of the truth. Annalee, a manifestation of Antigone, directly engages the audience with this problem in scene 23, asking them what value there is in remembering

(Shepard 76–77). The truth is presented as a weight that can crush a person and indeed the whole community (Shepard 79, 89). Oedipus may find out the truth, but it comes at a hefty psychological price for everyone involved. The closing lines of the play are delivered by the Oracle: “On the surface, [the citizens] seemed returned to health and self-confidence, but a distant memory persisted, a shadow that never left. Something had been torn apart from the inside out. A ghost of something close at hand, yet far enough away and so terrible as to pretend it never happened” (Shepard 116). Such questions about the value and usefulness of truth and memory are pointed for Northern Ireland in 2013, which was entangled in the consequences of Boston College’s oral-history project. Part of a broader effort to find ways to deal with Northern Ireland’s traumatic past where no formal policy for such exists, the project had become mired in controversy and was much in the public eye as Shepard’s play premiered.<sup>2</sup>

Launched in 2001, the oral-history project recorded testimonies of former loyalist and republican paramilitaries who could tell their stories in records that would be sealed until after their deaths. In 2011, however, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) made a legal claim to access recordings related to the 1972 murder of widow and mother-of-ten Jean McConville, whose body had been discovered in 2003. After a lengthy legal battle the PSNI’s claim gained the support of the United States Supreme Court in April 2013, setting a worrying precedent for those who had participated in the project, and who now feared retaliation for providing details of terrorist activities. The ex-wife of Stephen Rea had participated in the Boston College project, was implicated in the disappearance of McConville, and had recently and unexpectedly passed away.<sup>3</sup> For a Northern Irish audience, then,

2. Also in 2013 a proposal for a peace-and-conflict resolution center designed on the site of the Maze Prison, originally agreed upon in April by both the first minister (Peter Robinson) and the deputy first minister (Martin McGuinness), proved too controversial to proceed and the plans were shelved. Sara Dybris McQuaid (2019) has demonstrated how many other initiatives aimed at dealing with the past have become entangled in legal and political tensions and contradictions. From a different perspective Graham Dawson has worked extensively on the complexities of trauma, memory, and attempts at reconciliation in Northern Ireland. See, for example, Dawson, “Life Stories,” and Dawson, “Making Peace.”

3. Dolours Price, who was Stephen Rea’s wife for seventeen years, was a member of the IRA and remained a lifelong dissident republican, participated in the Boston College project in 2010, and had admitted a role in the murder and disappearance

Shepard's play, which opened on 30 November 2013, captures the potentially damaging consequences of revisiting old memories and of uncovering the truth at all costs.

The Boston College tapes controversy highlights the problematic and complex nature of postconflict Northern Ireland. Although intended to record information about crimes that would otherwise have remained secret and died with the perpetrators, the project ultimately exacerbated political tensions. At the same time, however, there remains a basic human need for acknowledging and processing traumatic events. As Anthony Roche observes in relation to drama, there is "a complex balance to be found between memory and forgetting [that] is particularly fraught in Northern Ireland" (77). This need for acknowledgment was a primary inspiration for Gerard Humphreys, playwright and war veteran, whose 2018 tragedy *Norah* revisits the 1981 hunger strikes through a fictional Belfast family and a sister who suffers the fate of Antigone by paying with her life for her choice to bury her brother. The "Antigone moment" occurs in the dénouement, when *Norah* is shot dead by the IRA (the implication is that it is by her boyfriend) because she has defied the order to bury her brother in paramilitary style. In a production that toured north and south of the border, Humphreys exploited the Antigone myth to highlight the complexities of armed conflict and the absolute intolerance of dissent within paramilitary ranks such that individuals might be tortured or killed by members of their own community, as in *Antigone*.<sup>4</sup> Despite their very different perspectives, Shepard and

of McConville. She died suddenly in January 2013, not long before the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the tapes. Her funeral was attended by hundreds of republicans; Rea was pallbearer along with their two sons, the coffin draped in the flag of the Irish Republic. On the Boston-tapes scandal and the significance of Price's testimony and death, see O'Donnell. This context could well make sense, I suggest, of a cryptic passing reference in Shepard's play to a woman named Dolores. Detective Randolph imagines a reconstruction of the last movements of the murder victim, Langos (the figure of Laius, Oedipus's father), where the man thinks of his girlfriend in his final moments and perhaps shouts her name: "Dolores!" His partner Harrington is completely mystified. "Dolores?" he asks, confused, but no further comment is offered (Shepard 27). This may be a brief metatheatrical homage to Price (whose name was often misspelled "Dolores"), the one-time partner of the real-life Rea, who plays Oedipus, the man who famously shares a bedmate with his own father (here Langos).

4. *Norah* premiered at The New Theatre in Dublin in April 2018 and was followed by performances at Friars Gate Theatre, Kilmallock; The Dock, Carrick on

Humphreys both challenge linear “us vs. them” narratives by underlining the complexities of memory and action respectively. Both also explore the impact of trauma on survivors left behind. In Shepard’s case it is Annalee/Antigone who sees no point in remembering the trauma of the previous generation. For Humphreys the focus is on a wider range of female relatives—wives, girlfriends, mothers, sisters—who must somehow find a way to cope and care for the next generation while their husbands, boyfriends, fathers, and brothers sacrifice themselves for their political cause.<sup>5</sup>

More detached, but in the same vein, is Colm Tóibín’s *Pale Sister*, written with Lisa Dwan, which premiered at the Gate Theatre in 2019. The piece is an extraordinary solo performance by Dwan as Ismene. We hear only the voice of the traditionally silenced sister of Antigone, who sympathizes with her actions and supports them in principle but fears acting against the state and losing her life. We hear her experience as a survivor of civil war in a text that was inspired by the Northern Ireland Troubles, even if it does not reference them explicitly (Tóibín, *Pale Sister* 44–45). Also appearing in 2019 was the digitally remastered version of pioneering feminist Irish filmmaker Pat Murphy’s *Anne Devlin* (1984). Set in 1803, the title character (a nationalist heroine, who worked as the housekeeper of the Irish republican and leader of the failed 1803 rebellion Robert Emmet) is reimagined as an Antigone figure. Jailed by the British authorities for her association with Emmet, Anne refuses to inform on the rebels, and the film closes with Devlin in prison, holding the body of her dead brother and mirroring the Antigone moment at the opening where a woman’s hands brush clay from a male corpse retrieved from British redcoats.<sup>6</sup> The Antigone myth is thus mapped onto the violence of Irish colonial history in a direct manner. Both Murphy and Tóibín stress the female experience of surviving conflict in revisiting the Antigone theme. If Murphy’s film was highly topical in the mid-1980s, which saw a concentration of Irish *Antigones* (Tom Paulin’s

Shannon; The Lyric Theatre, Belfast; Watergate Theatre, Kilkenny; Pavilion Theatre, Dún Laoghaire; and Riverbank Arts Centre, Newbridge.

5. For further comment on the political significance of Humphreys’s *Norah*, see Torrance, “Post-Ceasefire Antigones” 344–45.

6. On the significance of the Antigone myth in the politics of Murphy’s *Anne Devlin*, see Roche, “Ireland’s *Antigones*” 247–50.

*The Riot Act*, Aidan Carl Matthews's *Antigone*, Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone*), it has become relevant again for a new generation reflecting on Irish history.

## The Theban Saga: Social Politics and Traumatic Abuse

Amid and beyond the Irish exploration of the Theban saga concerning political conflict and the aftermath of warfare, further Theban stories of significance appear in the Decade of Commemorations, with an oblique reflection on traumatic Irish social politics. Wayne Jordan's 2015 *Oedipus*, produced at the Abbey Theatre, was deeply influenced by Yeats's 1926 *King Oedipus* and also by the poem "The Second Coming," written in 1919 during the outbreak of the Irish War of Independence. Jordan's play opens with a well-known quotation from that poem delivered as an invocation by the chorus: "Things | fall apart | The centre | cannot hold" (repeated in the first chorus), while the closing lines of the invocation quote the final line of Yeats's *King Oedipus*, "the dead are free from pain." Jordan's Oedipus figure is both a hero and a savior in ways that evoke the heroes of Irish independence and Christian salvation (51, 58). We are told that he "brought back freedom" and was a "saviour" for the citizens, who are his "children" (4, 5, 58, 6). He carries the pain of all his citizens and had brought a "cure" to the land, but now there are "no new heroes" (6, 7, 20, 31). Oedipus has an impressive legacy, a Christ-like figure whose feet were "nailed . . . together," but he is nevertheless a mere man (86). He is fallible but determined to root out the poison that has been plaguing the land (10, 23).

The key issue is that the poison has been allowed to fester unchecked. Oedipus asks how this has come about. "What way was this for a nation to behave? . . . Justice neglected | On such a scale | It's unconscionable" (Jordan 25). Ostensibly, the reference is to the murder of Laius, but at a moment when Ireland is reflecting on its own identity and on the shortcomings of its independent republic, the nexus of secrets, unacknowledged crimes, the neglect of justice, and a religiously-charged narrative raise questions about secrecy and systemic abuses within what was for many decades a de facto church-run state. The fact that everyone has been turning a blind eye to what is going on at Thebes was reflected in the staging, which featured

rows of square lights at the back of the stage, at first rather dull, but becoming increasingly bright and dazzling, climaxing in a blinding glare on the audience, thus suggesting their blindness to the truth. Oedipus curses those who take no action, and he is a man of action even if he is horribly unaware of and flawed by his anger (Jordan 27). Jocasta, by contrast, desperately seeks to prevent Oedipus from coming to the truth. Rejecting oracles, she suggests that “everything is ruled by chance . . . we are | soldiers of fortune” (116).<sup>7</sup> A person who uses religion to suit her own purposes, a hypocrite, she rejects the oracle of Apollo and then prays to the same god when she has nowhere left to turn.

We are asked again to consider the significance of the truth and its consequences. Whereas in Northern Ireland the truth and silence carry postconflict implications, in the Republic these are most powerfully representative of systemic abuses. The issue of sexual aberration and silence, so pertinent to Ireland’s painful past, is raised in Jordan when the chorus asks: “How did | the fields | his father | ploughed | stay silent | underneath | him | Her womb | should have | screamed | its secret. . . . Time | found him out,” and religious imagery continues when the Messenger reports that “the rivers | of the world | couldn’t | wash away | the sin | that now | comes | to light” (151, 153). Oedipus remains an innocent of sorts, however, a product of the environment into which he was born “the unwanted | child | of unholy parents,” another pointed description in the context of the abortion ban that was still in place in 2015 Ireland (165). In their final song the chorus sing: “See | the storm | That followed him | the nightmare | of history | the kink of fate | Things fall apart,” and the song concludes with a further allusion to Yeats: “Only | The dead | Are free | From pain” (180–81). This reference to “the nightmare of history” in Jordan’s final scene casts his play as historically relevant and suggests that the drama comments on the pain of acknowledging historical events.

7. This is a striking expression of Jordan’s own invention and arguably evokes an apparently veiled allusion to Fianna Fáil, the conservative political party whose name is often translated as “Soldiers of Destiny” or “Soldiers of Fortune” and which had been least supportive of the Yes vote in the 2015 marriage-equality referendum. This suggestion subtly casts Jocasta as a representative of conservative, repressed values of the kind that flourished during the first decades of the Irish state.



Sexual abuse and child abandonment are addressed in stark terms by both Marina Carr and Carlo Gébler. Both authors reference the rape of the boy Chrysippus by Oedipus's father Laius, who had been his tutor. Both present the casting out of the infant Oedipus in traumatic terms. For Gébler in his 2021 novel *I, Antigone*, Laius's crime, which leads to Chrysippus's suicide and which Laius tries to keep secret, is the origin of all the calamities that afflict Thebes.<sup>8</sup> Laius makes the mistake of believing that because his crime had not been found out, there would be no penalty (Gébler 44). The abandonment of Oedipus, although she agrees to it, is traumatic for Gébler's Jocasta. In Carr's 2021 *iGirl*, meanwhile, Laius is named "The Ped-erast" and a rapist of "boy children | preferably" (Carr, *iGirl* 21, 29). Promotional materials for Carr's postponed theatre experience *The Boy* also suggest a focus on Chrysippus as the obvious candidate for the boy, who was "traumatically stolen from his family," with the disclaimer that this is "where it all begins and where it all ends" (Abbey Theatre).<sup>9</sup> The myth of Chrysippus, son of the king of Pisa and a nymph and thus considered a bastard, is regrettably timely. It reflects the vulnerability of children who are deemed "illegitimate," the violent abuse of power by those who should have been trusted with the care and education of children, and the crippling impact of sexual abuse on its victims. The realities of such horrors are very much a part of Ireland's current national consciousness, as allegations of institutional abuse by figures in authority, which first began to surface in the late 1990s, have not stopped gathering momentum ever since. Heartbreaking survivor testimonies along with the recent publications of reports on investigations into children's homes, Magdalen laundries, and mother-and-baby homes have lifted the veil on generations of endemic and systemic abuse, de facto slavery, and the human trafficking of Irish babies.<sup>10</sup>

8. The myth was the subject of a lost tragedy by Euripides entitled *Chrysippus*. Evidence for the play and the myth is collected, edited, and translated in Collard and Cropp 459–71.

9. It is not clear at the time of submission when *The Boy* will premiere.

10. The massive five-volume Ryan Report, the result of the Irish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse in church- and state-run institutions between 1936 and 1999, was published in 2009. In 2015 it became the subject of the Industrial Memories research project directed by Emilie Pine and funded by the Irish Research Council (<https://industrialmemories.ucd.ie>). In February 2013 the McAleese Report on

Oedipus is abandoned as a baby in order to avoid a divine curse. Laius had been warned by Apollo that he should not father any children as the child would grow up to kill him. Laius and Jocasta conceive a child despite this warning and subsequently try to avert the curse through abandonment. Although Oedipus is saved and brought up by loving and wealthy adoptive parents, his realization that he is not their biological son, and the mystery surrounding his true identity plague him for the rest of his life. He commits the terrible crimes of patricide and incest because he is ignorant of his true identity—crimes that bring down a plague on his citizens. Oedipus then spends the rest of his days as a blind and wandering exile once the truth has been revealed. The idea of abandoning an infant to avoid a divine curse, which is at the heart of the Oedipus story, has a powerful potential to speak to the Irish experience of extraordinary socioreligious pressures placed on unmarried mothers to give up their babies for adoption. Similarly, the myth can be related to the reported experiences of those babies adopted from homes who have struggled to trace their biological origins and to make sense of the circumstances of their birth.

Carr's poem 7 in *iGirl* stresses Oedipus's incest as well as the trauma that he vividly remembers from his abandonment as an infant. The heart-wrenching lines "will she never come?| What have I done?| I've never known| Such pain" imagine the terror of the abandoned infant (Carr, *iGirl* 23–24). Set to music by Roger Doyle and performed as an aria by Morgan Crowley with accompanying art-music video by Trish McAdam, this was a showpiece called "I, Oedipus" (after the poem's opening line) in the 2020 electronic opera *iGirl* performed at the Clonmel Junction Arts Festival.<sup>11</sup> References to human

the Magdalen laundries was published, finding significant state collusion in the placing of young women in such institutions, although survivors claimed that the report minimized the physical and psychological abuse endured. The report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters was published in January 2021 and proved controversial, with severe discrepancies noted between survivor testimonies and the committee's conclusions, prompting a major response by a group of twenty-five coauthors (see University of Birmingham). See Hogan for a searing account of lived experiences.

11. See Carr et al. for a video of "I, Oedipus." A double CD and digital album of the opera *iGirl* were released by Roger Doyle in 2021 and are available on Doyle's website, where individual tracks can also be heard and appear alongside Carr's printed text. See Doyle and Carr.

bones strewn across the desolate location of abandonment may provoke reflection on the mass graves of infants such as those uncovered in Tuam (Carr, *iGirl* 23).<sup>12</sup> Again in poem 8, which begins “I, Jocasta,” child abandonment is brutally represented. As Jocasta considers her fate, her shame, and her suicide, she traces her trauma to the moment when Laius took her baby son and “flung him | Naked | On the mountain | Like a blind kitten” (29). The baby is stolen while Jocasta sleeps, and she is viciously beaten to a bloody pulp by Laius when she protests. This ensures her future silence.

The taint of incest and the complexity of incestuous relationships are further issues that run through Carr’s *iGirl* poems and that also feature in Carr’s work elsewhere, most notably in *On Raftery’s Hill* (E. Jordan 138–50). In *iGirl* poem 3, which opens “I, Antigone,” the Theban princess confronts the grim reality of her incestuous origins and the social taint of incest but points out that Haemon loved her as she was. Poem 11 features Eteocles inconsolable at his mother’s death regardless of her incestuous deeds. There is love in spite of incest and there can be renewal. This is suggested by the theatre company Junk Ensemble’s visually spectacular contemporary dance retelling of the myth of Myrrha. Although known from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* rather than from Greek tragedy, Myrrha’s story is one of incest, birth, trauma, and metamorphosis into a tree. In the extraordinary production featuring Alice Maher sporting an enormous headdress of tree branches, Myrrha’s trauma is reconfigured as a tale of survival, strength, and transformative resolution.<sup>13</sup>

## Women and Children: The Trojan War, Medea, Suppliant Women

If Antigone, Ismene, and Jocasta represent female suffering in the Theban saga, with Chrysippus and Oedipus as traumatized children, recent Irish versions of the Trojan War saga, the Medea myth, and the Suppliant Women story give further emphasis to the sufferings of women and children. These concerns are in line with contemporary

12. See BBC News, “Irish Mother and Baby Homes” for a timeline of the scandal.

13. See Clohessy et al. for a video describing the process of creating the piece and the inspirations behind it.

reflections on gender inequality and the tangled fates of women and their offspring (Connolly; Frawley). Carr's *Hecuba*, which premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in 2015, received its Irish premiere at the 2019 Dublin Theatre Festival in a positively reviewed production by Rough Magic. Carr's play presents the Trojan women captured after the fall of Troy with Hecuba, the matriarch and former queen, as the protagonist. In a radical move the women of Carr's drama, Hecuba and her daughters, are sexually liberated, yet they remain consigned to their fates and continue to be the possessions of the victorious male warriors with little agency of their own (Torrance, "Trojan Women" 263–66). Hecuba is forced to witness the murder of her daughter Polyxena in a sacrificial ceremony. The Syrian war and the ensuing refugee crisis were obvious points of reference (Wilmer 279–80). An award-winning 2016 production of Aeschylus's *The Suppliant Women*, adapted by Scottish playwright and theatre director David Greig, which played at the Grand Opera House in Belfast, also focused on women as refugees. The latter's success came in large part from the fifty-strong female chorus whose members were recruited from local communities wherever the play was staged. In Northern Ireland, therefore, "it translated to a 21st century Belfast audience" (Hardy).

Greig's *The Suppliant Women* also won acclaim when it played in Dublin at the Gaiety Theatre for the 2017 Dublin Theatre Festival, again with local women forming the large chorus. Similarly, although Carr claimed in 2015 that her *Hecuba* was not an Irish play, the well-known Irish actor Derbhle Crotty was cast in the RSC premiere with an audible Irish accent in performance, and it is an inescapable fact that Carr writes in Hiberno-English (Carr, "Beautiful Lofty Things" 11). This lends an Irish voice to the representation of conflict, at the very least, while the 2019 Irish production of *Hecuba* had an entirely Irish cast and a "distinctively Irish Agamemnon" (Lloyd, "Greek Tragedy in Ireland 2019–2020" 103). The production also coincided directly with a new public awareness of the sexual and gender-based violence suffered by Irish women during the Irish War of Independence and the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> The 2019 Irish *Hecuba* was thus a timely

14. Contemporary work of note with broad public reach included Connolly, "Sexual Violence a Dark Secret," and Connolly, "Sexual Violence and the Irish Revolu-

reminder of the impact of war on women both at home and abroad.

In Colm Tóibín's novel *House of Names* (2017) the hostile treatment of women and children in times of war is also a significant theme. Based on a number of Trojan War plays but primarily on the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus, which recounts the origins of that conflict and dramatizes Agamemnon's return, his murder by his wife Clytemnestra, and the ensuing cycles of violence that plague their descendants, Tóibín's novel casts the original play into a broad and complex set of social and political intrigues. When Iphigenia is led off to be killed as a human sacrifice at the start of the war, Clytemnestra is gagged, bound, and stuffed into a tiny underground crawl space covered by a heavy stone. As punishment for protesting against the murder of her daughter, she is left in a stress position for days without food or water until she is eventually released, but remains under guard, a prisoner in her own palace, while Agamemnon is at war. Their son Orestes is abducted and imprisoned with other boys, while their remaining daughter Electra is also taken prisoner. It is a brutal world. Tóibín's Agamemnon and Clytemnestra were partly inspired by Bashar al-Assad and his wife Asma, but the Northern Ireland conflict was also much on his mind, and a scene toward the end of the novel was inspired by the 1976 Kingsmill massacre that continued to haunt Tóibín thirty years later (Tóibín, "How I Rewrote a Greek Tragedy").<sup>15</sup>

Two further Irish engagements with the sacrifice of Iphigenia before the Trojan War were politically topical. Lorna Shaughnessy's *The Sacrificial Wind*, a series of poems transformed into a theatrical experience by director Max Hafler, was performed at the New Theatre Space, National University of Ireland, Galway, in 2016 and advertised as one of the "must-see events" of the 2017 Cúirt International Festival of Literature (McBride). It was subsequently produced in an online version in March 2021 (Hafler). Belfast-born Shaughnessy was drawn to the Iphigenia myth for its pertinent contemporary issues, notably the pretexts used to justify warfare, the collateral damage caused to innocent civilians, and the betrayal of

lution." The latter was published in conjunction with a public event and panel discussion on the subject at the National Photographic Archive in Dublin (26 Nov. 2019).

15. For further comment on Tóibín's *House of Names*, see Torrance, "Agamemnon" 157–59.

trust between a leader and his people (McBride). March 2021 also saw a live-streamed rehearsed reading of Carr's forthcoming *Girl on an Altar* at the Kiln Theatre in London, which explores the deeper psychologies of the mythological characters and their motivations. In conversation with Fiona Macintosh, Carr also notes that the myth gives the pretext of going to war for a woman's honor when in fact the true motivation is material profit. Although she does not credit any particular contemporary politics with inspiring her play, Carr acknowledges that it is impossible not to be influenced by images and reports of contemporary warfare. It is not hard for us to imagine children who are victims of warfare, she suggests, not only in an international context but also if we care to look at our own country going back a couple of generations (Carr and O'Kane 26:00, 47:45).

The military commander of the Greek expedition against Troy, Agamemnon, is a child-killer. He murders his daughter to appease the restless army, and in Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* we are told that he had previously murdered Clytemnestra's infant when he took her away from her first husband, a detail on which Carr expanded in her 2002 *Ariel* (Torrance, "Greek Tragedy" 84–87). As the murderer of his own daughter, Agamemnon is a mirror for Medea, who infamously murders her two sons in Euripides's tragedy following the acrimonious dissolution of her relationship with their father. In Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, which first premiered in 1998 at the Abbey Theatre and was revived in 2015, the Medea myth structures the plot but is significantly reinterpreted for an Irish audience. The Medea figure Hester Swane is of Traveller origin and ultimately kills her only child, a daughter, before taking her own life at the play's devastating conclusion. The infanticide is unplanned and is motivated by Hester's desire to save her daughter from the trauma of abandonment, which she herself has endured since her mother left her as a child. Set and written in the dialect of the Irish midlands and drawing on Irish archetypes (Traveller, farmer, self-righteous mother-in-law, priest), the drama's ethnic specificities have not curtailed its universal appeal. It has been staged in numerous award-winning productions worldwide, all while retaining and consolidating its status as an Irish classic and prescribed text on the secondary-school curriculum (Sihra 117–19).

The 2015 production at the Abbey Theatre was the first major

Irish revival of *By the Bog of Cats* since its 1998 premiere, and the timing seems significant, falling within the Decade of Commemorations. Playing from August to September 2015, it was followed by Wayne Jordan's *Oedipus* at the Abbey, which opened at the end of September 2015. As discussed above, Jordan's *Oedipus* raises significant questions about a community's blindness to inexcusable actions and behaviors. *By the Bog of Cats* focuses our attention even more starkly on the injustices of Irish social norms, particularly as they relate to the treatment of women, children, and Travellers. The issue of perceived "illegitimacy" is key to the traumatic experiences of Hester Swane (the Medea figure), who is not married to the father of her daughter Josie and whose identity as a Traveller makes her an outcast in the eyes of the local people. The period between 1998 and 2015 saw a huge shift in public awareness of such issues, especially regarding the endemic abusive treatment of children, particularly those considered "illegitimate," and to a lesser extent of young women and unmarried mothers.<sup>16</sup> The damning evidence of systemic and endemic child abuse in Irish institutions is not, of course, a direct echo of what is going on in Carr's play, but the underlying structural social causes are present in the vilification of women and children who do not meet the restrictive, prescribed social norms of twentieth-century Catholic Ireland.

Suffering children were the central focus of Kate Mulvany and Anne-Louise Sarks's *Medea*, the Irish premiere of which was produced at the Gate Theatre in Dublin in February 2020. Told primarily from the perspective of two boys experiencing the acrimonious disintegration of their parents' relationship and the erratic behavior of their distraught mother, this production of *Medea* shifted audience focus in a timely response to growing cultural awareness of the importance of a child's voice and its need to be heard. The drama unfolds in the boys' bedroom, which should have been a safe space, but which becomes infected with family dysfunction until the climactic moment when the boys are killed on stage by their mother. The ceiling of stars in the

16. See note 10 above. Abuses against the rights of Irish Travellers have received less public investigation, although activism has been visible through important networks such as the Irish Traveller Movement, established in 1990, and through notable individual female activists such as Nan Joyce (1940–2018), Sindy Joyce (appointed to the Council of State by President Michael D. Higgins in 2019), and Eileen Flynn (nominated to Seanad Éireann by Taoiseach Micheál Martin in 2020).

room gives a nod to the greater world outside, while the bedroom itself becomes an increasingly oppressive space in which the boys are trapped. This production, as it turned out, was the last live performance at the Gate before the COVID-19 pandemic forced its closure. Its themes of domestic pressures, confinement, and associated dysfunction are in retrospect eerily prescient. The dysfunctional marriage between Medea and Jason that contextualizes the infanticide, moreover, can be compared to that of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, explored in depth by Carr in *Girl on an Altar*. On playing Agamemnon, Northern Irish actor Patrick O’Kane in conversation with Fiona Macintosh mentions the documented rise in domestic abuse during the pandemic as a contemporary sociopolitical issue that can help to dig deeper into the psychology of playing a child-killer and a dysfunctional marriage partner (Carr and O’Kane 51:25).

In a different manner Elektra is a suffering adult child driven to extremes of psychological distress in Richard Strauss’s *Elektra*, which had its Irish premiere with the Irish National Opera in a critically acclaimed outdoor production at Kilkenny Castle in August 2021 in association with the Kilkenny Arts Festival. The opera, which largely follows Sophocles’s *Elektra*, presents Elektra as an outcast. Attached to her deceased father Agamemnon, Elektra’s ability to reproduce is a threat to her mother Clytemnestra and to Aegisthus, as they are the new rulers who are responsible for Agamemnon’s murder. A son produced by Elektra could avenge Agamemnon’s death, so she is kept forcibly unmarried and reaches a state of obsessive derangement. This leads to her collusion in a brutal revenge of reciprocal murder, which becomes possible when she is reunited with her brother Orestes. A violent trauma within the family, years of escalating rage, female disempowerment, control of women’s bodies—all these themes present in *Elektra* reflect the kind of female experiences being uncovered during the Decade of Commemorations.

### **Aeschylus’s Persians and Irish Independence: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Na Persigh* (2020)**

If Pat Murphy’s digitally remastered *Anne Devlin* shone a spotlight on the brutalities of colonial oppression in early nineteenth-century Ireland through the lens of the Antigone myth, Ní Dhomhnaill’s



translation of Aeschylus's *Persians* presents victory over imperial oppressors. If we look back on the history of Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy, it is striking that there have never been to my knowledge any Irish stagings of Aeschylus's *Persians*. This is remarkable because the drama relates the extraordinary historical defeat, against the odds, of a well-equipped and powerful imperial force, the Persians, by a much smaller but fiercely independent-minded collective of ancient Greeks, with whom the Irish have often identified.<sup>17</sup> The Battle of Salamis, dramatized in *Persians*, was linked allusively by Yeats to Irish independence in his 1938 poem "The Statues," and there are some obvious parallels to be mined in the ultimately successful Irish revolt against the British empire (Macintosh, *Dying Acts* 14). The exploration of possible parallels, however, has gone untapped until now, and it is arguably no accident that an Irish version of the play has suggested itself within the parameters of the Decade of Commemorations for Irish independence.

The first Irish version of Aeschylus's *Persians*, moreover, is in the Irish language, translated by one of Ireland's foremost Irish-language poets. The translation was commissioned by director Conor Hanratty, and since a theatrical production had not been possible before 2022, selections from the play were produced in a series of podcast episodes for the 2020 Dublin Theatre Festival along with accompanying commentary from Hanratty and several experts. The performed selections were to serve as a blueprint for a future theatrical production. In the introductory episode of the podcast Hanratty explains how Ireland's struggle for independence inspired him to choose this play, and why it was significant for him to work with the Irish language both as a marker of cultural importance and as a new means of exploring the rich connections between the Irish and Greek literary traditions.

Aeschylus's *Persians* is told from the perspective of the defeated imperial powers, and several of its themes highlight the cultural differences between the Greeks and the Persians. They speak a different language and have different religious customs. The Greeks fight for their freedom, whereas the Persians fight because, as imperial

17. Irish connections with Greece are traced all the way back to the legendary Fir Bolg. See Currie 173–92.

subjects, they must. Greek thirst for freedom inspires them toward their ultimate victory. Ní Dhomhnaill's *Na Persigh* is thus especially political in channeling the Irish language to represent the defeat of an imperial army by an ancient culture, with obvious parallels to Ireland repelling British colonial powers during commemorations for independence.

## Why Greek Tragedy in the Decade of Commemorations? Conclusions

The invention of Greek tragedy in Athens in the late sixth to early fifth centuries B.C.E. coincided with the invention of Athenian democracy. As an art form, Greek tragedy has always had a significant political function in reflecting and debating contemporary political concerns ranging from warfare to legislation. In classical Athens Aristotle observed that disputes within the individual households of significant figures could cause public crises (*Politics* V 1303b19–20, 31–32), so that even the personal traumas of Greek tragedy can be read in terms of political impact. In contemporary society such private suffering also has a political dimension as it relates to state legislation and provisions for dissolving legally or religiously binding relationships, and in seeking resolution and justice for survivors of trauma and crime. Greek tragedies are effective for confronting contemporary political issues across different historical periods through the malleability of the mythic content that forms their subject matter, along with the acknowledged classic status of these works.

There is, however, a unique quality to Ireland's tradition of engagement with Greek tragedy. Like Greek tragedy itself, Irish versions erupted in a political moment—that of 1920s newly-independent Ireland. Yeats's *King Oedipus*, which premiered in 1926 after many years in gestation, is the best known. An exceptional success, it was reperformed at the Abbey in 1927, 1929, 1931, and 1933, and lends its text to celebrated later productions such as Tyrone Guthrie's 1957 film *Oedipus Rex* and director Michael Cacoyannis's *King Oedipus* at the Abbey (1973). As we saw above, it lies behind Wayne Jordan's 2015 *Oedipus*. Originally planned for the first decade of the twentieth century to denounce English censorship of Sophocles's play as anti-intellectual, the final version produced in the tumultuous early years

of the Irish Free State channels the Oedipus myth to reflect on the challenges facing the leader of a suffering state and to raise issues of identity.<sup>18</sup> Yeats's *King Oedipus* was of course preceded by the radical 1907 *The Playboy of the Western World* by J. M. Synge, with its oedipal plot that can be read as anticolonial.<sup>19</sup> Other national dramas by Synge and O'Casey were deeply influenced by Greek tragic form, as Fiona Macintosh has shown (Macintosh, *Dying Acts*).

Of the more direct reworkings of Greek tragedy from the 1920s, Yeats's *King Oedipus* was one of many. His less known *Oedipus at Colonus* premiered in 1927. Simultaneously, the Irish-language community was enjoying performances of *Aintioghoiné* (1926), *Rí Oidiopús* (1928), and *Oidiopús i gColón* (1929) in translations by Pádraig de Brún, which were also positively received (Ní Mhurchú 86–87). An ardent nationalist forced to suppress his outspoken political views by his clerical superiors, de Brún found a vehicle for expression through Greek tragedy, starting with *Antigone*, a drama about the aftermath of a civil war, not long after Ireland's own civil war. Moreover, de Brún's translations of the Oedipus plays, about an ailing state and issues of identity, are injected with language evoking ancient Ireland (for example, Oedipus is "Árd Rí," the Eumenides are "An Tríur Morrígna"). Elsewhere, the political Dublin Drama League produced Euripides's *Trojan Women* in 1920, featuring Maud Gonne as the devastated matriarch of Troy in the aftermath of the war, as well as Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris* in 1925, a drama that interrogates colonial theft.<sup>20</sup>

It is not the case that all Irish versions of Greek tragedy are political. Alice Milligan lamented in a 1918 poem that the *Antigone* produced

18. Yeats was working on plans for a production of *Oedipus* in the first decade of the twentieth century—for political as well as artistic reasons—subsequent to a staging he had attended in 1899 at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. The performance at this conservative Catholic university allowed Yeats to champion artistic freedom and attack English censorship while simultaneously fending off criticism from conservative Irish Catholics. See Morash; Macintosh.

19. On the oedipal plot in Synge as anticolonial, see Innes; on the wider application of the Oedipus myth in a postcolonial context, see Goff and Simpson. For a detailed discussion of various issues, see Lloyd.

20. On the 1920 *Trojan Women*, see Torrance, "Trojan Women" 253–61; for colonial readings of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, see Hall 214–15, 235–36, 274–96. The Dublin Drama League production is mentioned in Hogan and Burnham 380. I owe this reference to Ronan Crowley.

at the Abbey Theatre by William Earle Grey and Dorothy Macardle was “scarcely up to date” despite the immediacy of the theme of not being able to bury one’s dead in a contemporary context (Milligan).<sup>21</sup> Almost one hundred years later, new translations of the *Oresteia* and Euripides’s *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Andy Hinds in collaboration with Trinity College Dublin classicist Martine Cuypers, published in 2017, also avoided contemporary resonances. Their *Agamemnon* produced at the Dublin Project Arts Centre in 2012 was “a museum piece,” according to Peter Crowley.<sup>22</sup> The radical 2014 deconstruction of the *Oresteia* by The Company, on the other hand, entitled *The Rest is Action* and also produced at the Project Arts Centre, was praised for condensing tragic momentum and social commentary into an hour (Crowley, “Fringe Review: The Rest is Action”). Although far removed from the original structure, the self-reflexive artistic engagement with the expansive themes of the *Oresteia* (cycles of violence, human engagement with the divine) and the production’s consideration of such themes for contemporary society was in line with the Irish tradition of the politicized rewriting of Greek tragedy sketched out here.

The 1920s represent a major cluster of Greek tragedies on the Irish stage, but the Decade of Commemorations is unsurpassed to date for its density of adaptations. The reason for this, I suggest, is twofold. First, Greek tragedy is strongly associated with the origins of Irish national theater, so much so that for the centenary anniversary of the Abbey Theatre in 2004, Seamus Heaney rewrote *Antigone* in yet another Irish adaptation (*The Burial at Thebes*). Second, Greek tragedy continues to provide a rich medium of expression for engaging with traumatic events. If Yeats downplayed the incest in his *King Oedipus* almost one hundred years ago, issues of incest, rape, and abuse have come to the fore in the current decade along with questions regarding state collusion and the necessity and complexity of sociopolitical truths. These narratives are about facing the truth and surviving it, the survival of the state and its people, surviving war, surviving abuse, surviving trauma.

21. I owe this reference, with gratitude, to Ronan Crowley.

22. For a review of the play as a piece of classical Greek theatre, see Lloyd 118–19.

## Chronology of Works Discussed by Date Staged, 2012–21

- 2012: *Agamemnon* (Andy Hinds and Martine Cuypers; published 2017 in *The Oresteia*)
- 2013: *A Particle of Dread (Oedipus Variations)* (Sam Shepard; published 2017)
- 2014: *The Rest is Action* (The Company)
- 2015: *Oedipus* (Wayne Jordan)
- 2015: *By the Bog of Cats* (Marina Carr; first staged and published 1998)
- 2016–2017: *The Suppliant Women* (David Greig)
- 2016–2021: *The Sacrificial Wind* (Lorna Shaughnessy)
- 2017: *House of Names* (Colm Tóibín)
- 2017: *Iphigenia in Aulis* (Andy Hinds and Martine Cuypers; performed 2011)
- 2017: *The Oresteia* (Andy Hinds and Martine Cuypers; *Agamemnon* performed 2012)
- 2018: *Norah* (Gerard Humphreys)
- 2019: *Pale Sister* (Colm Tóibín)
- 2019: *Hecuba* (Marina Carr; Irish premiere; first performed 2015 at Royal Shakespeare Company)
- 2019: *Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy; digitally remastered version of 1984 original)
- 2020: *Medea* (Kate Mulvany and Anne-Louise Sarkis)
- 2020: *iGirl* (Roger Doyle and Marina Carr; double CD and digital album released 2021)
- 2020: *Na Persigh* (Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill)
- 2021: *Girl on an Altar* (Marina Carr)
- 2021: *I, Antigone* (Carlo Gébler)
- 2021: *Elektra* (Richard Strauss, Irish National Opera)
- 2021: *iGirl* (Marina Carr)
- 2021: *The Misunderstanding of Myrrha* (Junk Ensemble)
- 2022: *Na Persigh* (Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill)
- 2022: (anticipated at time of publication) *The Boy* (Marina Carr)

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