

# **IRISH ANTIGONES**

**by**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the reception of Sophocles' *Antigone* in Ireland from 1984 to 2004, in the light of the social and political developments that took place in the country during that period. Chapter 1 examines the textual elements of translation, as well as the different ways in which the mythic element of the tragedy and the characterisation are 'translated' in different versions. Chapters 2-4 explore particular dimensions of contextual significance: politics, religion, gender. Each chapter first offers a brief discussion of the relevant Irish circumstances, comparing and contrasting them with the socio-political context of Sophocles' Athens. Then, it examines the extent, the degree and the different ways in which the translations reflect and engage with aspects of the writers' contemporary reality. Chapter 5, finally, deals with the scenic representation of the plays as a different and complementary aspect of translation, looking at the degree and the ways in which the different stagings reflect the Sophoclean play, the translations in question and the larger social and political contexts of adaptation. *Antigone* proves to be a remarkably flexible medium for the expression of strikingly different social and political agendas over time.

Overall the thesis finds that, while the writers of the earlier versions reflect through the Sophoclean tragedy the turbulent Irish society of the early 1980s, the writers of the turn of the millennium, living in a globalised era, and with a more settled Ireland, locate the reworking of the myth within a more international outlook. It argues however that the

reworkings of *Antigone* produced in 1984 by Aidan Mathews, Tom Paulin and Brendan Kennelly - despite the significant differences between them - are more adventurous treatments of the original play than the ones produced later, between 1999 and 2004, by Declan Donnellan, Conall Morrison and Seamus Heaney. The thesis concludes that the new readings of the Antigone myth in Ireland after 2004 suggest that the potential of Sophocles' tragedy within its Irish context is not exhausted yet.

Stories travel and stories stay. Stories cross boundaries and frontiers, settle in different places, and then migrate to or colonize other places. They resurface in different places at different times, preserving their ability to entertain, to enlighten and to bewitch.

Yannis Gabriel<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel (2004:1).

To my parents

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## INTRODUCTION

“Sophocles isn’t around to defend himself, but I suspect he’d be turning in his grave if he knew what was going on. And perhaps he is”; or perhaps he is not. Unfortunately, we will never be able to know whether Sophocles would feel mistreated watching a radical version of his tragedy - a rewriting which “seriously misrepresents a tremendous play”, according to the Critic, a character invented by Aidan Mathews for his version of *Antigone*. Sophocles did not invent the Antigone story himself, either.<sup>2</sup> Rather, he took the raw material from the huge stock of myths preceding him, creatively transforming it so that it meant something to his contemporary society<sup>3</sup> - and to many different societies thereafter. We should not forget that the theatrical culture in which the Greek poet worked was one based on the relentless recycling and revision of a limited number of myths.<sup>4</sup> Many of the themes had first occurred in epic and were restructured and reconceptualised for the tragic theatre, creative rewriting being an ingrained aspect of tragic intertextuality. This extends to the relationship between different tragic versions, since many of the same myths were dramatised by other tragic poets. The emphasis in this theatre is, therefore, not on the creation of new stories but on the creative reworking of received ones. Sophocles himself handled themes previously treated by Aeschylus and others, and his own work, in turn, was imitated in his lifetime. The repeated

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<sup>2</sup> We do not know for certain whether or not Antigone’s own story was invented by Sophocles or derived from the tradition but this does not significantly affect the issue, since the larger mythic context of the expedition against Thebes was certainly derived from epic, lyric and tragic sources.

<sup>3</sup> Walton (2002: 6-7) writes that “Greek tragedy was born from a corpus of myth that went back to the sagas of Homer and the other composers of epic cycles. This was a pre-literary world and, accordingly, it was a flexible one. Stories evolved within an oral tradition. There was no one standard version of the past, no definitive story, no fixed time-scale. [...] The situations and characters of myth were a huge and pliable conglomeration of recollection, exaggeration and pure invention”.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle writes in his *Poetics* (1453a/ 14: 10-15) that “to-day the best tragedies are written about a few families [...] whom it befell to suffer or inflict terrible disasters”.

reworking of his *Antigone* in Ireland, therefore, far from being offensive, might seem to him an exceptionally distinct honour, since this tragedy of his - chosen among a huge number of available stories throughout the world - had the great glory of being consistently studied, approached and interpreted by prominent scholars, rewritten by well-known writers, played by acknowledged actors, staged by influential theatre directors; and this was not an isolated case.

Despite the small number of dramas which has survived until the present day, Greek tragedy has been particularly influential in the modern world. Tragic poetry has been available in the western world since the 15<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> influencing and shaping the minds of diverse writers in subsequent centuries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in particular, tragedy was of profound interest for the Romantics, who wished to see it restored to its former glory; “the thought of such restoration preoccupied the best poets and novelists of the century. In many it grew to obsession”,<sup>6</sup> Steiner notes, offering a list of tragic plays produced by English romantics, “only to suggest the magnitude of implied aspiration and effort”.<sup>7</sup> This interest is itself part of a larger intellectual and cultural agenda. The fascination with tragedy has its roots in the Romantic reaction against 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism and especially Voltaire.<sup>8</sup> The reawakening of interest in the performance of Greek tragedy, however, belongs to the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>5</sup> Burian (2007b [1997]: 229) writes that “the texts of the extant Greek tragedies began to be available to Western Europe, along with the other central texts of the Greek heritage, in Italy in the fifteenth century”.

<sup>6</sup> Steiner (1995: 121).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 122. Wallace (2002), on the other hand, describes “the picture of Greek tragedy in the Romantic period” as “actually quite complex. Writers might seem to idealise the drama and raise it to impossible, unapproachable heights. But there was a latent, barely acknowledged sense that it might actually contain some quite unattractive elements, basically the nasty side of human nature”.

<sup>8</sup> For tragedy and the Romantic reaction to Voltaire, “the *bête noire* of the Romantics” (Steiner 1995: 153), see Steiner 1995: 186-191.



Another, probably the most important, watershed, can be found in the 1960s, when there was a sudden and unprecedented expansion of interest in the staging of Greek tragic plays, a trend which has continued unimpeded since then; the result is that “more Greek tragedy has been performed in the last thirty years than at any point in history, since Greco-Roman antiquity. Translated, adapted, staged, sung, danced, parodied, filmed, *enacted*, Greek tragedy has proved magnetic to writers and directors searching for new ways in which to pose questions to contemporary society and to push back the boundaries of theatre”.<sup>9</sup> Hall associates this trend, on the one hand, with the “increased interest in ritual performance styles, fed by the postcolonial theatrical critique of Western naturalism, especially through an engagement with Asiatic and African performance traditions”,<sup>10</sup> which made the genre appealing to modern directors; and, on the other, with “the seismic political and cultural shifts marking the end of the 1960s”.<sup>11</sup>

### **Greek Myths in Ireland**

This current reached Ireland, too, although with a decade’s delay and the partial influence of theatrical developments abroad.<sup>12</sup> This does not of course mean that the Irish were previously completely unacquainted with Greek drama; Macintosh argues that “the Irish national theatre movement from the end of the nineteenth century onwards [had] a history that involved Greek drama”, a development which she finds unsurprising, as “the performance history of Greek drama since the 1880s in Britain had

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<sup>9</sup> Hall (2005a: 2).

<sup>10</sup> Hall (2005b: 9).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 1.

<sup>12</sup> Murray (1991: 116) argues that “*Desire under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* might have nerved Irish writers to the challenge of viewing Greek tragedy as peculiarly suitable for translating or adapting for Irish audiences”.

been driven by Irish expertise and enthusiasm”.<sup>13</sup> Greek themes also appeared in the work of several prominent Irish writers of the first half of the twentieth century, such as Joyce, Synge and O’Casey.<sup>14</sup> There was not much interest, however, in rewriting or staging Greek tragedy as such, Yeats being the only one to embark on translating a Greek play. Early in the twentieth century he turned to the Greek tragedians, Sophocles in particular; “apart from Plato and Plotinus, the two most important Greek writers for Yeats were Homer and Sophocles. [...] Yeats read the seven extant tragedies of the great Athenian dramatist Sophocles (c.496-406 B.C.) in the prose translation of Sir Richard Jebb and was particularly interested in the two plays dealing with the Theban king Oedipus”.<sup>15</sup> He completed his first draft of *Oedipus the King* in 1912 and - after many adventures<sup>16</sup> - the play was staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1926, and was described as a great success.<sup>17</sup> This staging also had political reverberations; as Yeats is quoted as saying:

“ ‘Oedipus the King’ was at that time forbidden by the English censor, and I thought that if we could play it at the Abbey Theatre, which was to open on our return, we might make our audience proud of its liberty, and take a noble view of the stage and its mission”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Macintosh (2008: 526).

<sup>14</sup> “Playwrights as diverse as Synge, O’Casey and Murray”, Walton (2002a: 11) writes, “are invoked as demonstrating classical themes or structures; [...] others whose plays are of today and set in today - Friel, Carr, Murphy - set up resonances from the Greek world that clang and clatter round the mind”; see also Kiberd (2002: ix-x).

<sup>15</sup> Arkins (1990: 18).

<sup>16</sup> Macintosh (2008) provides a detailed account of what preceded the staging of Yeats’ *Oedipus the King*.

<sup>17</sup> Younger (2001: 48-49).

<sup>18</sup> Younger (2001: 35).

Less than ten months after the premiere of this production saw the opening of Yeats's *Oedipus at Colonus*; the two plays were "the culmination of an interest in Sophocles lasting more than twenty-five years [that he regarded] as his contribution to the repertory of the Abbey".<sup>19</sup> Apart from these two revisitations of Greek tragedy, however, the attempts at performance thereafter were only occasional,<sup>20</sup> including stagings of Greek plays at the Gate Theatre like Edward and Christine Longford's translation of the *Oresteia* in 1933<sup>21</sup> and Longford's translation of *King Oedipus* in 1942;<sup>22</sup> also, Louis MacNeice's *Aeschylus' Agamemnon* published in 1936, which was however "put on in London by the Group Theatre".<sup>23</sup> Things changed drastically at the end of the 1970s: Michael Cacoyannis' production of W. B. Yeats' *King Oedipus* in Dublin, already staged in 1973,<sup>24</sup> had made a sensation and aroused interest in a genre which had not been seriously dealt with since Yeats' time. That moment in time marked the beginning of a gradually accelerating interest in Greek tragedy in Ireland, with an increasing rate of plays and shows produced thereafter, which spanned more than thirty years and which continues to grow.

The long period of increasing interest in Greek tragedy on the part of several Irish writers of diverse backgrounds suggests that this was more than a passing trend. This was compounded by the strong hold on myth which Ireland has in comparison with other countries of the western world, something that will be further examined in the first

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<sup>19</sup> Arkins (1990: 127); see also Arkins (1992).

<sup>20</sup> The only exception was Louis MacNeice's *Aeschylus' Agamemnon* published in 1936; the difference in the case of his endeavour was that MacNeice had studied classics in Oxford and his translation was a literal one.

<sup>21</sup> Arkins (2005: 170).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 156, 158.

<sup>23</sup> Id. (2005: 170).

<sup>24</sup> The premiere of M. Cacoyannis' production was on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1973, starring Desmond Cave as Oedipus, Angela Newman as Jocasta and Patrick Laffan as Creon.

chapter of the thesis. It does not sufficiently explain, though, why the interest in Greek myths in particular became so immediate at that very moment in Irish history; that is, shortly after the beginning of the Troubles - a prolonged period of civil strife and political turbulences. Different scholars have emphasised different reasons in their attempts to explain what has made the Greek myths so appealing in late-twentieth century Ireland. Walton points to the thinking effect and the cerebral character of the genre and associates it with the fact that “in Ireland issues are still debated through theatre. Problems may not be solved but at least the problems are recognised and addressed”.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, as he sees it, “it is no accident that it is Irish settings which have given these Greek classics a new dimension: for Ireland has the last English-speaking contemporary drama that still sees the theatre as the natural place to juggle ideas”.<sup>26</sup> Kiberd associates the study of Greek, as opposed to Latin, with anti-colonialism: “by way of contrast and perhaps by way of reaction, the emphasis in Ireland in recent decades has increasingly been placed on the Greeks”,<sup>27</sup> unlike England where, Kiberd argues, the study of Latin as “the basis of many modern languages [...] was often a thin pretext for another agenda - the implantation in schoolboys of the imperial and administrative mentality, as developed through the writings of Caesar and so on”.<sup>28</sup> In recent years, there has been a wide range of writers who have translated and adapted Greek tragedies.<sup>29</sup> Although McDonald’s assertion that “in many ways Ireland was and is constructing its identity through the representations offered by Greek

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<sup>25</sup> Walton (2002: 27).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Kiberd (2002: xii).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. xi.

<sup>29</sup> McDonald (2002: 80- 82) provides an appendix of “English translations and versions of Greek tragedy” in Ireland, up to 2000.

tragedy”<sup>30</sup> seems slightly overstated, it still gives an idea of the impact that Greek myths have been having on the Irish in recent years. Among these, Sophocles’ *Antigone* undoubtedly occupies the most prominent position.

### ***Antigone* in the Modern World**

“Drama deals with disobeyers”,<sup>31</sup> asserts Declan Donnellan, as those who defy norms of behaviour have always been popular with audiences. Stories of rebellion against authority or suppression of any kind abound in world drama, *Antigone* standing out as an iconic play among them. The young girl in Sophocles’ tragedy ignores the edict issued by King Creon (who is also her uncle) according to which Polynices, viewed as a traitor for bringing an invading army against his country, will be left unburied, his corpse to be devoured by birds and beasts. Apart from resistance to civil authority, a strand that has made the Sophoclean tragedy very popular throughout the twentieth century, *Antigone* is first and foremost a play about conflicting principles, described in different terms by different scholars. Woodard examines the play in terms of antinomies: “divine versus human law, individual versus state, religious versus secular, private versus public morality”;<sup>32</sup> Porter, in terms of divisions “between and within persons, division between man and god, division between loyalty to the family and loyalty to the state, division between and within words and phrases, divisions between intentions and results”.<sup>33</sup> He also argues that “the play deals with this theme not in abstract, static terms but organically, working the rhythm of division deep into its every

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<sup>30</sup> McDonald (2002: 37).

<sup>31</sup> Donnellan (2005 [2002]: 134).

<sup>32</sup> Woodard (1966: 64).

<sup>33</sup> Porter (1987: 77).

part”.<sup>34</sup> The numerous facets of the play have afforded many different approaches from numerous scholars, as well as a plethora of revisitations on the parts of different writers. Far from suffering from lack of attention, *Antigone* has since Hegel’s time been subject to countless translations and productions around the world, and has been open to numerous interpretations.

“No play of the ancient world has been produced as often in modern times as Sophocles’ *Antigone*”,<sup>35</sup> Goldhill notes, associating its popularity with the political reverberations of the myth. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards,<sup>36</sup> different versions have been repeatedly written and produced around the world, Antigone herself becoming an iconic figure of resistance. As far as scholarly study is concerned, “ever since Goethe, Hölderlin and Hegel, almost no Greek tragedy has been more frequently and contradictorily interpreted than this one”.<sup>37</sup> Even the range of contemporary applications of the heroine’s name around the globe is indicative of the diversity of readings of the myth - feminism, charity, non-violence, knowledge, war, to name but a few.<sup>38</sup> George

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<sup>34</sup> Id.

<sup>35</sup> “It is a play which inevitably brings these political questions of citizenship and power to the fore, and it is precisely for this reason that it has been so often produced”, Goldhill (2007: 135).

<sup>36</sup> Fischer - Lichte (2010: 34) refers to nineteenth century performances of *Antigone*; see also Macintosh (2007 [1997]: 286-288).

<sup>37</sup> Hamburger (1996: 251).

<sup>38</sup> ‘The Antigone Foundation’ in Canada has as its mission “to empower young women and girls aged 10-35 to get involved in leadership, politics, activism and feminism in order to take on the world and create meaningful and lasting social change. Part of the project is the bi-annual ‘Antigone Magazine’, whose slogan goes “a magazine about women, politics, women in politics, and the politics of being a woman. ‘Antigone’ is also the name of the organization founded by Martha Lane Fox Foundation that works “with a small number of charities each year, learning more about the needs of socially excluded people so that we can help promote their successes to ministers and the press”. There is also the ‘Antigone Information and Documentation Centre on Racism, Ecology, Peace and Non Violence’ based in Thessaloniki and Athens. Named after the Sophoclean heroine is also “a software made to help teaching the ancient Greek”. USS *Antigone* (ID-3007) was, interestingly, a “17,024-ton transport [...] built in Germany; when the United States entered the War in April 1917, she was turned over to the Navy in July and converted to a transport. Renamed *Antigone* at the beginning of September 1917 and placed in commission a few

Steiner, in his exhaustive account of the play's reception since antiquity in his book *Antigones*,<sup>39</sup> examines major philosophical theories developed around *Antigone* as well as modern performances, showing the influence that the young heroine has had upon writers, scholars, composers, translators, and theatre practitioners of all times. His account, however, stops in 1984, when the second, revised edition of his book was published, leaving *Antigone* in Ireland - whose journey starts that very year - completely unexplored.

### ***Antigone* in Ireland**

Almost throughout the twentieth century, *Antigone* was - in equal measure to the rest of the extant corpus of Greek tragedy - ignored by Irish writers; even Yeats, otherwise interested in Sophocles, only translated some lines from the play which appeared in the 'Winding Stair' in 1929.<sup>40</sup> Productions-wise, Ó' Briain recalls a staging of the play in Dublin in the 1960s, but cannot be more precise than that.<sup>41</sup> An article in the 'Londonderry Sentinel' in September 1984 reports that the play was also "presented a few years [before] in Magee University College by the City of Derry Club".<sup>42</sup> Almost forgotten, *Antigone* makes a dynamic comeback in 1984, with three different writers - Aidan Mathews, Tom Paulin and Brendan Kennelly - translating the play at the same

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days later, she completed outfitting at Norfolk, Virginia, and began active service in late November".

<sup>39</sup> Steiner (2003 [1984]).

<sup>40</sup> Yeats, who had produced his own versions for the Abbey Theatre of *Oedipus King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, "like so many seminal thinkers of recent times, [...] had to make a response to Sophocles' enormously influential play about the conflict between the state and the individual, *Antigone*, and - having abandoned the idea of translating the entire play - did so by making a version of lines 781-800 serve as the final section of the poetic sequence 'A Woman Young and Old' in the volume *The Winding Stair*", Arkins (1990: 141); "Yet in this, *Antigone* clearly represents the tragedy of both sides of the Civil War" (Harkin 2008: 293).

<sup>41</sup> Ó' Briain - K. G. (2006).

<sup>42</sup> -- (1984).

time, a sudden interest not detached from the gradual turn in the country to the Greek myths. The interest in rewriting *Antigone* in Ireland recedes for some years, only to return - strong as ever - at the turn of the millennium: in 1999 the Irish-born director Declan Donnellan staged his own translation of the tragedy at the Old Vic, London. The inclusion of Donnellan in my set of authors requires further explanation. Unlike the other writers that are examined here, who grew up, lived and wrote in an unambiguously Irish environment, northern or southern, Donnellan grew up in London, where he now works. However, identity is not simply a function of geography. Donnellan had an Irish upbringing - his parents being Irish immigrants from Roscommon. Not only does Donnellan himself define and describes himself as Irish,<sup>43</sup> but also an important part of his theatrical imagination is inextricably involved with his Irish identity. It is indicative that *Lady Betty* (1989), the only original script he has written up to date, is set in 18<sup>th</sup> century Roscommon; as Michael Coveney notes, “Donnellan's Roscommon ante-cedents [are] celebrated in the wonderful tale of Lady Betty, the local jail's hangwoman, which he wrote and directed as a macabre ceilidh”.<sup>44</sup> This foregrounded Irish identity amply justifies his inclusion in this study; it also makes it unlikely that he would work on a play like *Antigone* without being aware of the Irish precursors. It should also be noted that his work was produced in London and there is a long tradition of Irish theatre in London - from Sheridan through to Shaw

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<sup>43</sup> Donnellan - K. G. (2008).

<sup>44</sup> Coveney (2006). Spencer (1989) also points out in his review for the *Daily Telegraph* that “the imposing jail still stands in Roscommon where Declan Donnellan spent his boyhood and you can see the window through which Lady Betty led condemned men onto a balcony, where the scaffold was erected with a three storey “drop””.



and more recently Martin McDonagh - that still claims the category of Irish, although performed in the (former) imperial capital.<sup>45</sup>

In 2003, director Conall Morrison also staged in Galway his own translation, commissioned by the Storytellers Theatre Company, and the year after Seamus Heaney was commissioned to translate *Antigone* for the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. As will be argued in Chapters Two, Three and Four, the dramatic changes that Irish society and politics underwent in the two decades that elapsed between the three 1984 versions of the play and the three later ones account to a large degree for the significantly different readings of the myth. As will be often pointed out throughout the thesis - despite each translation's distinct character - the writers of the early versions prove more adventurous in their treatment of *Antigone*, while the later ones stay closer to the Sophoclean original. Further than that, since the earlier versions were written at a very turbulent time for the country, their writers employ the myth as a platform to comment on Irish politics and society. In the later versions, however, the writers - living by that time in a globalised world - apart from scarce allusions to their own recent history, tend to look outwards, towards international politics. The play largely loses its Irishness, and with it, one might argue, not a little of its edge.

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<sup>45</sup> The issue of the 'Irishness' of artists who operated in England has been much discussed. Friel as early as 1972 (Harris 2011: 2) is quoted as pointing out in the *TLS* that "if we take as our definition of Irish drama plays written in Irish or English on Irish subjects and performed by Irishmen, we must scrap all those men who wrote within the English tradition, for the English stage and for the English people". Years later, Harris (2007: 198), in turn, in his account of Irish plays produced in London, suggests that "it was not considered appropriate to limit the scope of [his] survey to a rigorous definition of Irishness by place of birth", insisting that it he could not exclude dramatists or directors – Declan Donnellan among them - "on account of their English birth certificates".

To the above mentioned versions, which are examined in the thesis, we should add Marianne McDonald's translation, first staged in Cork in 1999 and directed by Athol Fugard, as well as Fugard's *The Island*, an "Antigone-based drama [that] was shown on Irish television and performed at venues in Dublin, Limerick, and Galway during the 1980s".<sup>46</sup> Field Day Theatre Company had actually considered staging the latter play back in 1983, an idea that was, however, abandoned. The official explanation was that the play "seemed too obvious a parallel with the situation [there], and [the company] felt that it would be seen in the wrong light, especially if [they] had white actors".<sup>47</sup> The reasons for rejecting the prospect of staging of *The Island* might also have to do with the refusal on the part of the Northern Arts Council to fund it. Worth mentioning is also Martin Murphy's *The Making of Antigone Ryan*, produced in 2003 by the Team Educational Theatre Company, a play meant for younger audiences, and loosely based on the Antigone myth; a further indication of the importance of the myth in educating students in Ireland was that Kennelly's translation of *Antigone* was "specifically offered as an 'educational edition' for the new Leaving Certificate syllabus in Ireland".<sup>48</sup> Pat Murphy's film *Anne Devlin*, also released in 1984, has often been described as the fourth *Antigone* of that year,<sup>49</sup> primarily due to the forbidden burial scene at the opening of the film. Apart from this and one or two other scenes, however, that may only superficially recall the ancient myth, the association between a historical film narrating the story of Anne Devlin and Robert Emmet and the Sophoclean tragedy seems a quite superficial one. Pat Murphy herself also finds that there is but a very slight connection

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<sup>46</sup> Scharffenberger (2003).

<sup>47</sup> Barber (1983).

<sup>48</sup> Cairns (1998).

<sup>49</sup> Paulin (2002: 165), McDonald (1997: 3), Younger (2006: 153, 156), Roche (1988: 247-249), Harkin (2008: 295), O'Toole (2003).

between the two stories, suggesting that “this powerful myth becomes reductive thinking when applied to a film like *Anne Devlin*”.<sup>50</sup>

## **Aims**

Sutcliffe evidently had a good reason to comment, back in 2004, that “*Antigone* itself could probably be said to have acquired Irish citizenship by now, given the number of pointed adaptations of the play that Irish writers have produced”.<sup>51</sup> Despite the continuing reception of Sophocles’ play in Ireland since 1984, however, and the urgency that it obtained in a specifically Irish context, there has been no thorough study of this powerful revival, the relevant scholarship being restricted to a number of articles, although the latter have steadily increased over recent years.<sup>52</sup> This thesis aims at least in part to cover that gap, examining in more detail the Irish versions of the Sophoclean play written between 1984 and 2004 as scripts and as performances, with particular emphasis on the different degrees and ways in which each rendering reflects both the Sophoclean original and aspects of the political and social framework in which it was written and staged. As the study will show, Ireland is arguably an unusually rich testbed for the exploration of the role of Greek tragedy in the modern world. The nature of tragic, and especially Sophoclean, reception in Ireland offers us a unique opportunity to chart the dynamic relationship of a single work with a community which has evolved

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<sup>50</sup> Murphy - K.G. (2006); it is on these grounds that Murphy’s film will be excluded from the discussion in this thesis on Irish *Antigones*.

<sup>51</sup> Sutcliffe (2004).

<sup>52</sup> Apart from articles examining individual Irish versions of *Antigone*, there have been a number of articles that examine the reception of the myth in Ireland: Roche (1988) ‘Ireland’s *Antigones*: Tragedy North and South’; Murray (1991) ‘Three Irish *Antigones*’; Arkins (2003) ‘Irish Appropriation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* and *Philoctetes*’; Younger (2006) ‘Irish *Antigones*: Burying the Colonial Symptom’; Harkin (2008) ‘Irish *Antigones*: Towards Tragedy without Borders?’.

with an almost unique rapidity<sup>53</sup> among western contemporary societies. This enables us to examine almost in microcosm the way in which readings of a play respond to the shifting nature of the experiences of audiences and authors, to see how war and peace, division and cohesion, religion and secularism, isolation and internationalisation, shape the imaginative response of writers, directors and theatregoers. This thesis seeks to chart that development, but, as it is not merely an exercise in cultural history, it also seeks to examine the way in which different writers with different agendas reshape a classic text.

This thesis aims to situate itself within the study of reception, a dynamic strand<sup>54</sup> of Classical Studies that emerged in response to the ever-growing interest in rewriting and staging Greek drama over the past decades. It therefore relies a good deal on previous work done by prominent scholars working on the reception of Greek myths, mostly Lorna Hardwick, Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Marianne MacDonald.<sup>55</sup> “In spite of the long-standing interest in the afterlife and influence of ancient texts in the field of classical learning”, Hardwick writes, “classical reception research as such is a fairly new area of prominence in anglophone scholarship, both within classics and in the relationship of the subject area with other disciplines”.<sup>56</sup> The significant expansion of Reception Studies is directly related to the increasing interest in Classics in general - and Greek tragedy in particular - both in terms of quantity and variety. Greek plays have proven very adaptable to different socio-political circumstances, not only surviving in a

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<sup>53</sup> Arguably, only Eastern Europe and postcolonial countries, especially southern Africa, offer quite the seismic changes witnessed in Ireland in the recent past.

<sup>54</sup> Hall and Harrop (2010: 1) comment that “although still a new field, [it] is now a fast-expanding and increasingly respected and influential one”.

<sup>55</sup> A number of other scholars such as Michael Walton, Brian Arkins, Erika Fischer-Lichte and Stephen Wilmer have also significantly contributed to the field of reception studies and have been an indispensable source of information for my research.

<sup>56</sup> Hardwick and Stray (2008: 2).

fast-changing world but evolving with it. What remains to be examined is the dialectical relationship between text and context, that is, “the two-way relationship between the source text or culture and the new work and receiving culture”.<sup>57</sup> The Irish *Antigones* are thus approached in this thesis both as rewritings of Greek tragedies, with the theatrical conventions and the cultural background that they entail, and as cultural products of a radically different society with completely different audience expectations.

### **Sources and Methods**

Since this PhD examines the Irish translations of *Antigone* mostly as products of a particular society, an extensive study of both Greek and Irish political, social and cultural history, literature and the arts was required; alongside academic scholarship, the approach of Irish history and (theatrical) culture through newspaper articles, films and websites not only proved particularly illuminating, but also made the study more vibrant. In the case of the plays under examination, in particular, theatre and cinema Archives proved of utmost importance, as they offered access to indispensable research material such as video recordings of the different shows, reviews and published interviews. Finally, one of the most revealing and insightful processes has been talking to all individual writers, directors and most of the protagonists of the Irish *Antigones* - in some cases - more than once, who had the generosity to share with me their views and experiences of working on the Sophoclean play, shedding light on otherwise unknown or unrecorded aspects of their work. Each of the theatre practitioners related to

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<sup>57</sup> Hardwick (2003: 4).

the plays and shows in different ways - thus seeing, interpreting and evaluating them accordingly - proved to be a rich and thought-provoking source of information. The advantage of personal interviews against published interviews was the access to non-verbal elements that a personal conversation offers: the interviewees' enthusiasm, their scepticism, their hesitation to take sides, their pauses - which often say more than words themselves - are 'audible' in the audio recordings, but invisible in a fragmented, polished transcript of an interview. The advantage, finally, of the academic interviews over the journalistic ones was that the former ones were targeted, thus focusing on issues that were of importance for my research, avoiding at the same time any unnecessary narrative.<sup>58</sup>

Immensely useful though reviews and interviews, whether personal or published, are, they can be highly subjective - even partial - and as such they should always be treated with caution and a critical mind. In the case of reviews, apart from the randomness of the single performance on which they are based, the reviewers' prejudices, expectations, previous experiences of a venue or certain actors' performance, previous reviews of the show, tiredness, state of mind, even their relations with members of the cast or the director, may all affect the way they see and evaluate the play. In the case of interviews, apart from each theatre practitioner's evidently different perspective that inevitably shapes his view of the play there is one thing that seriously affects their outcome: memory. The further back one goes in time, the more difficult it is for one to reconstruct past events; and since most interviews were conducted in 2006, especial caution is needed when processing those coming from people involved in the 1984 productions.

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<sup>58</sup> For the analysis of academic interviews, see Burke and Innes (2004).

Apart from the inaccuracy of memory, what often makes it unreliable is its selectivity, as it is continuously recreated, informed and coloured by events taking place in the meantime and one's personal response to them; more so, when it comes to actors/directors now in their maturity, recalling roles/stagings of their youth. Apart from the limitations of memory, most self-narrative tends toward the partisan; we should not forget that once the interviewees are people involved in a show, they cannot see their work objectively, often tending to be defensive of their work, or emphasising its strengths.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter One examines the textual elements of translation at the level of style and linguistic texture, as well as the different ways in which the mythic element of the tragedy and the characterisation are 'translated' in different versions. Chapter Two examines the political dimensions that most writers give to their work, in the light of contemporary or recent Irish history, as well as international politics. Chapter Three explores the religious issues that surface in some of the versions in question, mostly related to the impact that Catholicism has had on Irish people's lives. Chapter Four deals with the way in which the gender roles in the play are mapped on to modern experience of gender issues in Ireland, a theme especially prominent in Kennelly. Chapter Five, finally, deals with the scenic representation of the plays as a different and complementary aspect of translation, looking at the degree and ways in which the different stagings reflect the Sophoclean play, the translations in question and the larger social and political contexts of adaptation.

The translation of Sophocles' play used in the thesis is that found in the Loeb Classical Library by Hugh Lloyd-Jones. The spelling of some of the names of the Sophoclean characters differs from writer to writer; for reasons of convenience, the spelling of the proper names here follows again the Lloyd-Jones translation - except for Aidan Mathews' (significantly renamed) Heman. Finally, the original spelling (including proper names) and punctuation have been retained in the quotations, unless otherwise stated.



## CHAPTER 1

### VIOLENT WORDS, VIOLENT DEEDS: TRANSLATING *ANTIGONE* IN IRELAND AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God”: this is a phrase that intrigues Brendan Kennelly, who often quotes it;<sup>59</sup> “of course as someone who has spent a lifetime studying - in various ways - words, I particularly admire the statement in the Gospel”,<sup>60</sup> he writes. His second favourite phrase belongs to Patrick Kavanagh, who wrote “I dabbled in words and I found they were my life”.<sup>61</sup> As a poet, Kennelly is fascinated with words, he works with words, he plays with words, he explores their power; as an Irishman, he lives in a country with “a tradition that grants a superior status to the word”.<sup>62</sup> Brought up speaking both English and Irish he also knows very well the special weight words may have: as a child, he remembers a priest who encouraged the young boys to put six stones in their pockets every day and ‘kill’ six English words by substituting them with Irish ones.<sup>63</sup> Kennelly knows that the meaning of words extends far beyond their linguistic content. He also knows that - contrary to what the priest taught - “you can’t kill a word”.<sup>64</sup> Words, as Kennelly sees them, are strong and powerful, you cannot kill them, but you can probably kill *with* them: “You can kill with a knife, or you can kill with a fountain

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<sup>59</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

<sup>60</sup> Kennelly (2005:19).

<sup>61</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

<sup>62</sup> Witoszek and Sheeran (1998:1).

<sup>63</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

<sup>64</sup> Id.

pen; such is the power of language, such is the power of words”,<sup>65</sup> he says. Paulin also refers to what he describes as the “concept of immortal speech”, suggesting that “the spoken word is infinite and eternal because in not being a series of signs it does not submit to the deadly bondage of the letter”.<sup>66</sup>

Mighty and everlasting, words are often not even separable from deeds, and sometimes - at least - as powerful. J.L. Austin in 1957 challenged the traditional “assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact’, which it must do either truly or falsely”;<sup>67</sup> he subsequently introduced the term ‘performative’ to describe the capacity of language to perform by uttering. Depending on the context, thus, speech is action. As Speer wrote in 2005:

“discourse can be used to constitute events and identities, to manage issues of responsibility and stake, to present oneself in a favourable light, to account for one’s actions (to offer excuses, for example), to make invitations, requests, offers and assessments, to persuade and argue, and to achieve and manage justifications, mitigations and blamings [...] The idea that language does things - that it creates rather than reflects meaning - is closely tied to the concept of indexicality”.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Id.

<sup>66</sup> Paulin (1992:104).

<sup>67</sup> Urmson (1975 [1962]: 1).

<sup>68</sup> Speer (2005:23).

Drama is an art form that relies on words, the plays themselves being first and foremost verbal constructs - and as such they are examined in this chapter. Among the various dramatic genres, Greek tragedy is marked out by its verbal character: “Greek tragedy is essentially a drama of words. Characters enter, talk with each other, exit. Very little ‘happens’ on stage - no battles and no blindings as in Shakespeare. Physical action, though sometimes dramatically crucial, is usually limited in scope and relatively static - acts of supplication, gestures of affection or pity or lamentation”.<sup>69</sup> Words are the only medium through which disagreement, tension and conflict are effectuated. That tragedy is a verbal genre was also pointed out by Yeats in a lecture back in 1899, at a meeting of the Literary Society in London:

“The conception of the drama had changed like the conception of acting. The modern drama was all action, the ancient drama was all words about action. Nothing at all happened in many of the greatest of Greek plays, and it was Hamlet’s soliloquies and not his duel that were of the chief importance in the play”.<sup>70</sup>

Burian takes the discourse one step further, establishing a relationship between words and violence in Greek tragedy:

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<sup>69</sup> Burian (2007 [1997]: 199).

<sup>70</sup> Anonymous (2000 [1899]: 51).

“What we may call verbal violence is a regular feature of tragic discourse. [...] Words are tools of power in tragedy. Tragic discourse is still responsive to a notion of the ominous quality of language itself. [...] In whatever form, the power of words - intended or otherwise - remains one of tragedy’s enduring themes in the form of prophecy, vow, curse, riddle, lie and incantation. The power of such words is not easily controlled, and it should come as no surprise that their effects are often diametrically opposed to what the speaker intended or the hearer understood”.<sup>71</sup>

The potential violence of words is an issue we are going to deal with further in the first part of this chapter: the violence in Sophocles’ words and the ways and the different degrees in which this violence is emphasised in the Irish versions of *Antigone*. Before looking at the ways in which violence is ‘translated’, verbally, physically or otherwise, we should first have a quick look at issues related to translation - an act of violence in itself, according to Derrida.

### **Negotiating the text**

“All translation is an agreed negotiation”, concludes Declan Donnellan after a long discussion about the inherent impossibility of achieving a full representation of an original literary work. Translation becomes for him “the pursuit of an impossible ideal”,<sup>72</sup> a view which finds echoes in modern scholarship: “the paradox of translation is that the translator must strive to be as faithful as possible to the original

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<sup>71</sup> Burian (2007 [1997]: 199-200).

<sup>72</sup> Johnston (1996:80).

author's style and intent, while at the same time recognizing that it's impossible to reconstitute the unique meaning of the original words...”, Derrida is quoted as saying in a conference, eventually describing translation as a process of “contamination”, of a strong form of interpretation, of the imposition of bias and meaning on a text in a specially violent way”.<sup>73</sup> In Benjamin's words, “the transfer can never be total; [...] even when all the surface content has been extracted and transmitted, the primary concern of the genuine translator remains elusive. Unlike the words of the original, it is not translatable, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation”.<sup>74</sup> Hervey, referring to the inevitability of what he describes as ‘translation loss’, suggests that “the translator can concentrate on the realistic aim of cutting down on translation loss, rather than the unrealistic one of seeking *the* ultimate translation of the ST [source text]”.<sup>75</sup>

Translating a play, in particular, presents more specific difficulties. Reichert observes that “it has become commonplace in criticism to distinguish between speakers, narrators, characters on the one hand, authors on the other”.<sup>76</sup> A play is by default a genre where numerous voices are heard and accommodated; thus in a play, unlike in a novel or a poem, it is not only the narrator's voice that has to be meaningfully transferred to another culture, but also the voices of each and every character. Issues of speakability and performability pile up on top of the difficulty in ‘translating’ characters through their words. Morrison comments that “before you actually commit a line, so to say, before you say “that's the line I want to give to the actor” you've got

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<sup>73</sup> Hall (2004: 59-60).

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin (2004:79).

<sup>75</sup> Hervey (1992:24).

<sup>76</sup> Reichert (1977: 63).

to walk around the room, speak it yourself and say, “does that fall off the tone easily?” If it’s clunky or if it’s academic, then you’re doing something wrong”.<sup>77</sup> Pavis points out two factors as a starting point for his discussion of the problems related particularly to theatre translation:

- “1. In the theatre, the translation reaches the audience by way of the actors’ bodies.
2. We cannot simply translate a text linguistically; rather we confront and communicate heterogeneous cultures and situations of enunciation that are separated in space and time”.<sup>78</sup>

The translations of the plays, much like the plays themselves, are not written to be read, but to be acted out by specific actors, dressed by specific set designers and guided by specific directors, the translation becoming thus “a voice among voices”.<sup>79</sup> The audience also has to be taken into account, as the translation of the play involves transferring it from one cultural background to another. The translator has to decide between a neutral translation or a “translation for translocation”,<sup>80</sup> each option entailing a different kind of problem(s). The theatre translator has evidently to do much more than the already laborious task of transferring accurately the essence of the original play. The endeavour assumes different dimensions when he does not have access to the language - and therefore an individual view of the essence of the original - but translates based on another, literal, translation.

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<sup>77</sup> Morrison - K.G. (2006).

<sup>78</sup> Pavis (1989: 25).

<sup>79</sup> Boswell - Johnston (1996: 146).

<sup>80</sup> Walton (2002: 30).

“The use of ‘literal translation’ as a stepping stone to a ‘performable adaptation’”<sup>81</sup> has aroused a lot of criticism, regarding the status of the original translator,<sup>82</sup> the very status of translation,<sup>83</sup> even the quality of the final product.<sup>84</sup> This procedure seems, though, to be common practice among theatre companies in England and the US;<sup>85</sup> such is also the case with all Irish versions of *Antigone*. Not acquainted with the original Greek, all writers need at least one translation in English, on which they base their own work. Among the writers to be examined here, it is only Donnellan who has his own translators that produce the first draft for his translations;<sup>86</sup> all the other writers rely on existing literal translations, sometimes more than one. Morrison had read several translations before embarking in producing his own.<sup>87</sup> Paulin consulted Jebb’s translation,<sup>88</sup> Heaney “a Penguin translation from the 1950s and a new very thorough translation of *Antigone* of Sophocles done by a man called Robert Fagles,

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<sup>81</sup> Zatlin (2005:26).

<sup>82</sup> “The translator who produces that original script is doubly invisible: generally by-passed not only on the play programme but, having been paid a flat fee, also in the distribution of royalties if the play is a hit”, Zatlin (2005: 21).

<sup>83</sup> Zatlin (2005: 27) quotes the translator Espasa, who suggests that “the concept of ‘performability’ has been used as a pretext so that the status of translation is considered inferior to that of theatrical writing”; Zatlin argues thereafter that “the issue, again, is of commissioning the literal translator, then hiring the ‘real’ writer so that the translator may be pushed aside”.

<sup>84</sup> “Translations [...] prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty, but because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them”, Benjamin (2004: 82); Zatlin (2005: 24) again quotes translator Thévinin declaring that “such an indirect translation is a mere product, not a profound literary work.”

<sup>85</sup> Zatlin (2005: 26) quotes Holt, who reports that “in England and also to some extent in the U.S., theatre companies insist on commissioning a new translation for a production and, sadly, these are all too often a playwright or director’s adaptation of a so-called ‘literal translation’”.

<sup>86</sup> “I have always had a very good time working with my translators, although where problems may arise is with poetry because we all have completely different attitudes towards poetry”, Donnellan [Donnellan - Johnston (1996: 79)] says; he does not however make it clear if this is also the case in his *Antigone*. It would be worth mentioning that Irish dramatist Frank McGuinness (McGuinness 2006; see also McGuinness 2010) also commissions a classicist to produce a literal translation of the Greek play that he uses as a platform for his version of it (2006).

<sup>87</sup> -- (2003).

<sup>88</sup> Paulin (2002: 165).

an American translator”,<sup>89</sup> “Jebb and the Loeb [Classical Library] standard one”.<sup>90</sup> Kennelly is quoted as saying that he “worked from late nineteenth-century translations, six or seven of them”.<sup>91</sup> Although such literal translations are considered to be ‘unspeakable’<sup>92</sup> as well as ‘very intimidating and remote’,<sup>93</sup> the fact that they stay close to the original makes them a solid and secure base on which the adaptors can rely: “strangely enough”, Boswell writes, “in terms of the process of coming to terms with the play and its meanings, what I find incredibly useful is the most dreadful translation, which I consciously search out, the most archaic, academic, unactable, gobbledegook translation, which you can’t even imagine presenting to a group of actors. Even a translation like that can lead you to a quantum leap of perception that would, otherwise, be very difficult to make”.<sup>94</sup>

The fact, however, that all writers translate (or rather re-write) based on an English script and not on the Greek one means that they have access to the tenor of Sophocles’ text but not to the fine grain; no matter how accurate and thorough a translation from the original is, the inability to read the original may to a certain extent prevent the translator from grasping subtler hues that specific words might have, different layers of meaning, or different registers, their understanding of the Sophoclean meanings relying on the interpretation of the original translators. The writers themselves, though, do not always see it as a problem: Donnellan finds that understanding the sense of the original does not necessarily mean that you have to

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<sup>89</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008).

<sup>90</sup> Battersby (2004).

<sup>91</sup> Roche (2005: 150).

<sup>92</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008).

<sup>93</sup> McGuinness - K.G. (2006).

<sup>94</sup> Boswell - Johnston (1996: 147).



understand the language; it is “the basic spirit of the play”, as he describes it, which needs to be contained within the translation for it to work on stage.<sup>95</sup> Heaney does not think of this inaccessibility as a serious drawback either, although he recognises the deep limitations arising from it.<sup>96</sup> Discussing the same issue three years later, he agrees at the end that responsibility goes with knowledge:

“I miss a lot by not knowing the Sophocles, not knowing the Greek. [...] It certainly is a problem but I am not aware of it; I have no guilt at the abuse that I am giving out. I translated Book Six of the *Aeneid*; I know Latin and I have a completely different sense of responsibility to the writer, you know [...] So, I have no guilt, because I am operating as if this is all English in the text”.<sup>97</sup>

Even if the translations consulted in all cases are literal, academic ones and not versions that particularly shape the writers’ minds, in translation after translation there is inevitably a constant reinterpretation of myths that Campbell parallels with the oral tradition and the human need to tell stories:

“I think it’s part of the human condition that if you tell me a story about a friend of yours which is amazing, I want to tell it to my friend, I put my vision on it, what’s personal to me and that’s probably what’s interesting about it”.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Donnellan - Johnston (1996: 78).

<sup>96</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2005).

<sup>97</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008).

<sup>98</sup> Campbell - K.G. (2006).

Still, the fact that most of the translators in question consult more or less the same (or at least the same kind of) translations but come up with versions of the play with different notions and degrees of fidelity, means that what first and foremost determines the final product is the modern writer's perspective and what he seeks when he revisits the play, ranging from an accurate, word for word translation to his own version of the story; of course, "between the two extremes of literal translation and free rendering, one may imagine an infinite number of degrees, including some sort of ideal half-way point between the two".<sup>99</sup> The only writer who intentionally stays as close as possible to the original is Donnellan: "when we have done plays", he suggests, "we have never done adaptations, but translations that stick as closely as possible to the original", seeing it as "one of the great virtues of a translator [...] to recognize whatever is in the original that will work almost literally, and what won't".<sup>100</sup> Stephen Rea, on the other hand, throughout his interview refers to *The Riot Act* as a 'version'.<sup>101</sup> Heaney is also quoted to the effect that his play "is not a translation. It's a version", since he claims that he "was looking for meaning, not language".<sup>102</sup>

Whether language or 'meaning' is a translator's first priority, translation should at every point consider both the original text and its relevance to the world that it seeks to address. For the purposes of the thesis, it is important to dedicate the first part of this chapter to the exploration of the details of textual translation. This chapter also touches on the ways in which the writers of the Irish versions 'translate' the mythic

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<sup>99</sup> Hervey (1992: 21).

<sup>100</sup> Donnellan - Johnston (1996: 80).

<sup>101</sup> Rea - K.G. (2006).

<sup>102</sup> Battersby (2004).

element and the characters of the Sophoclean play, arguing that Mathews, Kennelly and Paulin, who revisited the tragedy in 1984, tend to be more creative and adventurous in their treatment of *Antigone*. Such issues of appropriation will be expanded in the following chapters, where the cultural, social and political implications of the translations in an Irish context will be broadly investigated.

## I. WORDS

“Words. Language. An agreed code. [...] All social behaviour, the entire social order, depends on our communicational structures, on words mutually agreed on and mutually understood. Without that agreement, without that shared code, you have chaos”.<sup>103</sup>

Friel is another Irish writer who explores in his work the significance of words, seeing them in this instance as the only way out of chaos. But words - even, or perhaps especially, in their superabundance - do not exclude the possibility of miscommunication, or even complete lack of communication. Man in contemporary societies - especially in urban ones - is bombarded with words; words that he indifferently overhears, words that he pretends to hear, words that he meaninglessly exchanges with others. Words are insufficient to cure human pain and injustice.

“No poem or play or song

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<sup>103</sup> Friel (1989: 18-19).

can fully right a wrong

inflicted or endured”,<sup>104</sup>

Heaney writes in his *Cure at Troy*, his version of *Philoctetes* first produced in Derry in 1990 by the Field Day Theatre Company. Worse than that, words may produce evil themselves, whether intentionally or not. This is an issue that tormented Yeats, who, in his late life wondered whether his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* urged Irishmen to fight and eventually lose their lives,<sup>105</sup> an issue to which we will return in the following chapter. The power of words to cause harm is increased when it comes to using language as a powerful tool to manipulate, distract and destroy. “Words”, Steiner writes, “have been used to justify political falsehood, massive distortions of history, and the bestialities of the totalitarian state. It is conceivable that something of the lies and the savagery has crept into their marrow. Because they have been used to such base ends, words no longer give their full yield of meaning. And because they assail us in such vast, strident numbers, we no longer give them careful hearing”.<sup>106</sup> As we will see, in all Irish translations of *Antigone* words often prove dividing, threatening, manipulating and generating violence; they are also used to hide base motives under a seemingly innocent cover. Kennelly, in particular, in his play, on the one hand exposes their emptiness, as the inconsistency between words and deeds - an issue to which we will return in Chapter Four - appears as a pattern.

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<sup>104</sup> Heaney (1990:77).

<sup>105</sup> W.H. Auden (2007: 245-246) wrote in his poem ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’ (1939) motivated by the death of W. B. Yeats and in response to his torturous self-questioning: “Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry./ Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still, For poetry makes nothing happen”.

<sup>106</sup> Steiner (2010: 4138).

On the other, he most tellingly reveals their (destructive) power. Throughout his *Antigone*, the word 'word' appears as many as one hundred and twenty times; the poet even invents whole lines, so that he puts his 'words' in, thus becoming wordy with words. Despite the abundance of words in the play - and contrary to what Friel would suggest - there is no communication among the characters. This is because words are not as neutral and harmless as they seem at the beginning of the play: "such is the word" (8), "I give you my word" (15), "a man should pledge his word" (19). Gradually, they became violent, threatening, menacing: "would you make me speak the words that create dread in my soul?" (40), "Tiresias has spoken cutting words" (42), "His words trouble my soul" (42), "muttered something about words that knew no mercy" (44), "merciless words" (44), "words of murder" (45), "words of cruel truth" (45), "words of cursing" (46), "stubborn and killing words" (47), "accusing words of the dead" (48). The association between stones and words - both recurring as motifs in Kennelly's play - is made explicit when Antigone exclaims: "These words are stones, battering me to death" (38). It is the very words, then, which eventually cause Antigone's painful death, Kennelly thus exposing the violence that language may hide. As pointed out earlier, if there is one thing that characterises the plays in question here, it is exactly this: violence. Violent words, violent thoughts, violent images of different forms and degrees recur throughout the plays, an expression of the everyday experience of violence; and tragedy is the perfect place to accommodate them.

The language of tragedy was not the one spoken by the Athenians in their everyday life but an artificial one in strict verse form, "both stylized - elevated and complex -

intensified”,<sup>107</sup> saved for tragedy only. One of its most distinguishing features is its differentiation between the scenes and the choral odes; while the scenes were written in iambic metre and in Attic dialect, although “with much heightening of expression”, the odes were written “in a large variety of metres” and in a language that was “not merely dense, heightened lyric poetry, but also [...] largely in a version - far from thorough-going - of Doric dialect”.<sup>108</sup> For a well-respected Athenian artistic invention that recounted the adventures not of ordinary mortals, but of gods and heroes, as Greek tragedy is, an elevated idiom probably added to its grandeur. Silk supports its appropriateness for tragedy and interprets these language properties in terms of “the universal, even metaphysical, vastness of tragedy’s concerns”, as well as “the high status of its significant human players”,<sup>109</sup> directly associating the linguistic features of the Sophoclean text with the content of the tragedy. In line with Silk, Palmer also suggests that “a fundamental distinction is drawn between colloquial and prose speech on the one hand and poetry on the other. Poetic diction is remote from, and raised above, the language of everyday life. What is dignified, elevated and ‘remote’ is σεμνός”.<sup>110</sup> He does not associate, however, the elevation of language with the content of tragedy but rather sees it as an end in itself: “men feel about words as they do about their fellow men: strangers are more admired than their fellow citizens. So to give dignity to literary diction we must alter the vocabulary of ordinary speech”.<sup>111</sup> The above approaches in a way explain why there is in modern versions of *Antigone* a shift away from the “grandeur of expression, high-flown

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<sup>107</sup> Silk (1998: 464).

<sup>108</sup> Goldhill (2007 [1997]: 127-128).

<sup>109</sup> Silk (1998: 464).

<sup>110</sup> Palmer (1980: 134).

<sup>111</sup> Id.

periphrasis and even heroic posturing”,<sup>112</sup> with which the tragic has become synonymous.

The language of all Irish versions of *Antigone* is in striking contrast to the language of the Sophoclean text as there is proximity of the language employed in theatre to the everyday, spoken language. In the twentieth century everyday idioms enjoy more respect as a literary medium than in the past and are seen as the most appropriate for literature and drama. Ibsen, back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was among the first to insist on the importance of using everyday prose in his plays:

“Verse has been most injurious to the art of drama. A true artist of the stage, whose repertoire is the contemporary drama, should not be willing to let a single verse cross her lips. It is improbable that verse will be employed to any extent worth mentioning in the drama of the immediate future since the aims of the dramatists of the future are almost certain to be incompatible with it... During the last seven or eight years I have hardly written a single verse, devoting myself exclusively to the very much more difficult art of writing the straightforward, plain language spoken in real life”.<sup>113</sup>

This shift from a formal to a less elevated - even colloquial - idiom also reflects the shift from the stories about kings, gods and heroes to the tragedy of common man,

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<sup>112</sup> Goldhill (2007 [1997]: 127).

<sup>113</sup> Hinchliffe (1977:5).

“as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were”.<sup>114</sup> The Irish tradition in some ways might be seen as working between the realist prose drama of Ibsen, present in peasant drama, and the symbolist poetics of Yeats’ mythic theatre.<sup>115</sup> Still, for the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century translators of *Antigone* in Ireland it seems all the more natural to use an everyday idiom for their plays: writing in a stylised, formal - let alone artificial - language in the late twentieth century, instead of adding to the seriousness of the play, would make it sound awkward and contrived and would more likely sound comic rather than tragic to the audience.

Despite its elevated style, in Greek tragedy there are instances of colloquial expressions, used sometimes to differentiate minor, everyday persons from major, heroic ones.<sup>116</sup> In the Irish versions, on the other hand, colloquialisms appear much more frequently in the texts and their use is not the privilege of minor or major characters; such social stratification being rather absent from the plays, everyday language is equally used by kings and guards. The use of colloquial language has at its root a desire to make more accessible to wider audiences a genre removed from the spectators’ experience, also achieving “the overwhelming sense that this play could have been written yesterday, and therefore that man has learned very little over the centuries”.<sup>117</sup> Colloquialisms occur both in early and later versions; in the latter

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<sup>114</sup> Miller (1991[1949]):85).

<sup>115</sup> Contrary to Ibsen, Yeats “attempted to revive the power of verse drama” Bushnell (2008: 47). Not surprisingly, “Yeats, the theorist and theatre manager was at war with Ibsen all his life, decrying the Norwegian’s meager language and bourgeois trappings” Richman (2000: 119); even so, Richman continues, “in his latest and arguably most successful plays, it is to Ibsen that Yeats the playwright paradoxically turned”.

<sup>116</sup> On this subject see the seminal work of P.T. Stevens (1976) *Colloquial Expressions in Euripides* and, more recently, C. Collard (2005) ‘Colloquial Language in Tragedy: A Supplement to the Work of P. T. Stevens’.

<sup>117</sup> Coll (2003).



case, it proves one important way of updating the plays which are otherwise comparatively faithful to the Sophoclean text; or their existence is associated with the plays' speakability, something that, as the translators themselves suggest and as their scripts indicate, is one of their concerns. Heaney himself associates the existence of colloquialisms in his translation with the play's speakability; when asked about their *raison d'être*, he responds: "I couldn't answer that. I just did moment to moment thinking of actors speaking".<sup>118</sup> Rather than forced into his play, or being a conscious decision of his, Heaney suggests that colloquialisms came naturally; naturally to him, but not to the reviewers who saw his language reduced "to an implausibly local vernacular",<sup>119</sup> with an "astonishing number of clichés" that threaten "to convert a great tragedy into a simplistic lampoon";<sup>120</sup> Donnellan's was also described as "littered with desperate colloquialisms"<sup>121</sup> or "littered with jarring anachronisms".<sup>122</sup> Four years later, for the second staging of his *Burial at Thebes* in Dublin in 2008, Heaney "did change one word, awful word. 'Garbage', 'talking garbage': "I changed that into 'nonsense' that is less violent, less vulgar",<sup>123</sup> he says. Removing this particular word from among a number of colloquialisms and violent phrasings throughout his play which he retained, however, it seems that what eventually irritated Heaney is solely the vulgarity that such a word denotes; this replacement is thus of minor importance, not only because it is only one in the whole play, but also because it does not significantly affect it, the word 'garbage' having neither any implications for the unfolding of the plot nor for Heaney's reading of the

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<sup>118</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008).

<sup>119</sup> Lentin (2004: 49).

<sup>120</sup> Sutcliffe (2004).

<sup>121</sup> -- (1999).

<sup>122</sup> Gross (1999).

<sup>123</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008); it is the instance when Heaney's Creon retorts angrily to the Chorus: "Your age, my friend, Still doesn't give you the right to talk such garbage" (14).

play. What it moderates is not Creon's violence, an issue we will return to in the following chapter, but probably Creon's vulgarity - and this only to a certain extent since a phrase like "I'll flush'em out" (3), which Antigone reports Creon as having said, was retained. Relevant instances where colloquialisms, apart from updating the language or making the play moreactable, are also associated with violence, occur in the other two later versions, too - Morrison's "if you begged me on your belly" (3), "dropped another bombshell" (8), or Donnellan's "spit it out fast" (30), being only a few examples.

If colloquialisms consistently appear in all later versions, in the early ones the pattern differs from play to play. Hardly any exist in Kennelly's version. In Mathews' play, the language becomes at times ostentatiously colloquial, something that does not sound awkward in a radical adaptation of the myth - a completely new script loosely based on Sophocles, as this one is. Apart from the syntax, there is also an abundance of colloquial phrases, such as "where's the big noise?" (24), "bet your boots" (26), "chuck both parents over" (36). Paulin's use of an everyday idiom, however, could not be seen in isolation from the intended Irishness of his script: "I used the Ulster vernacular as far as I could", Paulin the translator confesses,<sup>124</sup> in a play that, as he sees it, "belonged in Ireland".<sup>125</sup> In Paulin's, too, there are recurring examples of Belfast dialect - something that further points to the Northern Irish setting that Paulin chooses for his play, as we will see in the following chapter: 'yet', 'just',

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<sup>124</sup> Paulin (2002: 167).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 166; Burleigh (1989: 304) also writes that "its use of local dialect is assertive, and sometimes strained, but accords with the author's own call for a full and inclusive dictionary of Irish English".

‘like’ at the end of sentences,<sup>126</sup> use of “verb forms, e.g. *seen* and *done* as preterite”,<sup>127</sup> inversions,<sup>128</sup> use of singular existential, that is, “use of a singular verb in existential sentences despite a plural reference”<sup>129</sup> and more than sixteen instances of omissions of relative pronouns<sup>130</sup> (a feature shared with the Hiberno-English especially common in Synge that makes his plays “gain in speed and terseness”).<sup>131</sup> Even the title that he invents points to this direction, also revealing a political approach to the myth, as *The Riot Act* has a particular association with public disobedience in the UK.<sup>132</sup> “Staged in Derry”, Rea the director points out, “the actors speak in Northern accents, there is Northern language, and phrases reminiscent of words people said during the Northern conflict”.<sup>133</sup> Several Irish words, a mixture of Scots and Irish phonetic dialect (wee 15, 24, 26, 58, 60, eejit 18, 37, bairns 46, 47, 61) recur throughout the play. Paulin also employs Irish English features, such as ‘ye’ (22), “the old original input form of early modern English”<sup>134</sup> and ‘yous’ (23), “a constructed plural probably originating with speakers of Irish during the language shift period”.<sup>135</sup> These presumably reflect the way the play is meant to sound; the need the writer feels to register this in the text strengthens the Irishness of his play, and so do phrases that allude to contemporary Irish society, giving “the impression of

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<sup>126</sup> “We’ve to taste yet” (9), “they’re in the dark just” (15), “show me the door just” (62), “in the end, like” (20), “for myself, like” (26).

<sup>127</sup> Hickey (2004:42, 125). Examples from Paulin include “didn’t see it who done it neither” (19), “whoever done it” (20) “once we seen” (26).

<sup>128</sup> “respect them I will” (31), “Us dragged before them” (12), “Boy, were we frightened” (20), “covered in blood he was” (35), “We can none of us, escape” (48).

<sup>129</sup> Hickey (2004:42). For instance, “there’s younger men would mind” (18).

<sup>130</sup> “there’s someone else gets..” (19), “is there anyone likes..” (19), “there was someone really cared” (20); see also pages 20, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 45, 57 for more examples.

<sup>131</sup> Harmon (1972: 23).

<sup>132</sup> In one instance, though, Jeffery (1984) sees the title as “otherwise unexplained apart from the propensity of the characters to “read the Riot Act to each other”.

<sup>133</sup> Rea - K.G. (2006).

<sup>134</sup> Hickey (2004:123)

<sup>135</sup> Id.

a recognisable world in which moral laws are over-ruled by military might”,<sup>136</sup> as shall be seen later in the thesis. As Rea comments, part of the agenda of the Field Day Theatre Company was to translate world classics into an idiom ‘natural’ for Irish actors, as the intended effect was to help Irish audiences address those works with the familiarity previously understood as a luxury only available to the English.<sup>137</sup> As was the case with the later versions, colloquial language and especially its use as a means of locating Paulin’s play in Northern Ireland, did not go without criticism.<sup>138</sup> Joe Cleary does not find the existence of colloquialisms necessarily incompatible in the context of Greek tragedy; in line with the reviewers, however, she discerns a lack of clarity in the outcome:

“One of the more obvious signs of tension is perhaps the interesting disjunction between the elevated classical style we expect of the Greek original and Paulin’s heavily colloquial, slangy, often jokey language, along with his modes of characterization, which tend toward caricature at times, steering very close in the cases of Creon and the Messenger to satiric Northern stereotypes. Such a deliberate mixing of styles so as to “lower” the overall tone of a version of *Antigone* indicates, I think, a work that can never quite decide whether it really

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<sup>136</sup> Billington (1984).

<sup>137</sup> Rea - K.G. (2006).

<sup>138</sup> O’Toole (1984) writes that “Tom Paulin’s version of *Antigone* exploits the resonances of the classical text without clarifying them. It goes half way and ends up in something of a theatrical never - never land. For the sake of the modern resonances much of the theatricality of the original *Antigone* is lost. And there is no clear political passion to compensate”; Ballantine (2004) that “somehow the up-dated language, with its Ulster expressions, doesn’t work very well in the context of this piece”; Henderson (1984) that “The Ulster dialect rendering in *The Riot Act* works well in the early pragmatic exchanges but, in its necessarily prosaic nature, is precluded from reaching the emotional profundity which the end of the play requires”.

wishes to achieve a tragic-heroic or a satiric effect, so veers uncomfortably somewhere between the two”.<sup>139</sup>

### **From Colloquialisms to Violent Words**

More than colloquial, the language of the *Antigone* versions may, at times, be at an extreme distance from the tragic register of Sophocles; re-written under difficult social and political circumstances, as will be elaborated in the following three chapters of the thesis, the myth of Antigone obtains a particular urgency in Ireland and the language becomes not only violent, but also provocative, crude even. This may be meant either to shock audiences and provoke thought, or to bring the reality of the stage closer to the reality of the stalls; or both. In its extreme, Mathews’ Chorus uses the word ‘fuck’ as a swear-word in different forms (fucking, fuck off etc.) sixty one times out of the sixty three that it appears in the text.<sup>140</sup> Morrison’s conception of the Chorus bears several resemblances with Mathews’; his register, however, is generally more limited.<sup>141</sup> Indicatively, he uses the word ‘fuck’ only once, quoting Danae’s father who appears to have said that “Fate fucks you in the end”<sup>142</sup> (31). Exactly the same utterance had been interestingly used by the Guard earlier on (8). Unlike Mathews’ play, where the repetitive use of the word ‘fuck’ is an indication of social stratification, in Morrison’s play it appears to be used both by King Acrisius, Danae’s father, and by the Guard. Most strikingly of all it is used by

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<sup>139</sup> Cleary (1999: 529).

<sup>140</sup> The diction of Mathews’ Chorus is linked to his identity in the play, something that will resurface on different occasions in the thesis.

<sup>141</sup> Morrison’s Chorus does not often use expletives: calling Polynices a ‘boastful bastard’ (5), or a ‘traitor dog’ (6) definitely cannot be compared in terms of degree of crudity with the diction employed by other characters in the play.

<sup>142</sup> Interestingly, Partridge’s *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* records an American expression “fucked by the fickle finger of fate”, which, was reportedly used widely after WW2.

Antigone in her lament, where the word sounds even more shocking - all the more in the context of a deeply Catholic society - as she goes as far as to exclaim 'fuck God ! FUCK GOD !' (30). Apart from the religious implications of Antigone's utterance, what Morrison achieves with the choice of this register for his Antigone is to shock his audience and underline at the same time Antigone's feelings of abandonment. Antigone, insisting on keeping faith with the gods' laws before Ismene and Creon at the beginning of the play, feels by the end abandoned, alienated and betrayed by the whole world, both human and divine. The language thus establishes Morrison's Antigone not simply as a young woman, member of a royal family, going with pain and dignity to her death, but as an outraged, violent, outspoken, liberated - as she has nothing to lose - girl betrayed by everyone she believed in, including - and especially - the gods.

Apart from the word 'fuck', there are plenty of other instances of coarse diction in almost all writers such as words which allude to defecation or metaphorical references to parts of the body, the crudity of the diction reflecting and mirroring a brutal reality. The rapprochement between the language of the stage and the language of the stalls, including coarse diction of this sort, language-wise 'demotes' tragedy from the respectful stand on which the Athenian tragedians had placed it; the 'decency' of the language, though, is not a criterion anymore, neither of the seriousness of the themes it deals with, nor of the genre as a whole. As the study of the translations in question betrays, such words are not evenly distributed throughout the plays; most expletives, as well as other instances of crudity, occur during the characters' outbursts, in moments of powerful and intense emotion, also giving the

texts a grainy realism. In Morrison's version, the Guard tells Creon that he whipped his arse hard with his tongue (11), and that the guards "cursed the crap out of each other" (9). Antigone, again turning her rage against the gods, becomes provocative and probably blasphemous in the ears of Irish audiences, when she complains that she honours God but "he pisses on her" (26). In Paulin's version, Polynices did not come to burn the holy shrines, but 'to rape' them (8), a term that denotes sexual violence. Words like 'shite' (50) and 'sheep dirt' also (43) appear in Paulin's text. In Mathews' version, the word 'shit' appears several times throughout the play either on its own, or as a derivative or compound word.<sup>143</sup> Further than that, his Chorus in a dismissive tone refers to Antigone as "enigmatic, my arse" (1), to Polynices as "the poor bollocks" (13), and recalls the "novelty condoms that Polynices brought back from Corinth" (35). Antigone, although a rather timid character in this version, says, referring to herself: "I am in my ass the Princess Antigone" (16). The two poets, Heaney and Kennelly, are far more reserved with the use of such diction: Heaney registers only once the verb 'shit' (44) in the Creon - Tiresias encounter, its isolation giving greater emphasis to the King's outburst against the prophet:

"Not if Zeus himself were to send his eagle

To scavenge on that flesh and shit it down,

Not that would put me back on my word" (p.44),

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<sup>143</sup> shitting (8), shitty (10), gives a shit (20), bullshit (37), horse-shit (64); such words are used either by the Chorus or by Ismene in Morrison's *Antigone*.

Creon says, mad with rage, having completely lost control. This sole use in the whole play of such a crude word makes Creon sound shockingly insulting and offensive not only towards the prophet, but also towards Zeus. Again, this is carefully chosen for a climactic moment, his downfall thus being expected to be imminent. Moreover, it arguably makes more explicit for the modern audiences the divergence of Creon from contemporary religious practices in the Greek original - he is visibly tinged there not with atheism but with a rationalising approach to religious experience reminiscent of the sophists, something easily lost on a modern audience. Kennelly, finally, never employs such diction; the lack of abusive language in his play does not mean, however, that there is no violence in his words; on the contrary, in his play one encounters the most violent and cruel images of all the versions in question.

### **From violent words to violent images**

Creon's description of Polynices' rotten body is not only appalling but also sadistic in Kennelly; the poet here expands Creon's words both in terms of lines (four in Sophocles, twelve in Kennelly) and, mostly, in terms of intensity, Creon seeking not punishment, but humiliation:

“His corruption must be seen by all, witnessed by all,

Dogs and birds will eat his flesh and bones,

Children throw stones at him for sport,

Shouting his name in mockery,



‘Polyneices ! Polyneices !

Man of shame! Corpse of shame !’

That will be his special fame.” (13)

Earlier Antigone herself had reproduced this language, describing the image of a rotten body in the same almost pornographic way; ironically, Kennelly uses rhyme to dress the cruellest of lines:

“But that the body of the second brother

should be left unburied

To rot in the heat of the sun,

Be eaten by birds,

Laughed at by men.

Children can throw sticks and stones

At our second brother’s naked bones.

.....

A bit of trash

For claws to rip and tear

And beaks to feed on as they will.

Our dead brother's body, all rats and flies,

Must rot in the open air before men's and women's eyes." (7-8)

It is not, however, that Kennelly describes images in a way unknown to Greek theatre;<sup>144</sup> he rather takes better advantage of what Morrison calls "the atavistic bloodlust excitement"<sup>145</sup> that the description of images of horror incites in the audiences. "We feel we are morally engaged but we are really titillated by it",<sup>146</sup> Morrison says; his very translation also features a cruel image related to Polynices' corpse, Creon suggesting that "our children can kick his skull around the dust for sport" (6). For Kennelly, as well as for Morrison, living in a horror-saturated society makes it more difficult to shock audiences than it was in Sophocles' time; he therefore has to make his images even more vivid. This 'pornography of horror' again makes a point about the power of words that Kennelly explores; and the power of the words to kill, to destroy, to express base feelings like hatred or revenge are usually associated with Creon.

The rationale behind Creon's order to bury Antigone alive and the language he uses reinforce the King's cruelty: departing from the archaic religious beliefs in the pollution that Sophocles' Creon seeks to avoid by not shedding Antigone's blood - although he seems to relish the punishment, too - Kennelly's Creon aims to give her

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<sup>144</sup> The ultimate source to this motif of corpses being eaten by dogs is the Homeric trope, found for instance at the very opening of *The Iliad* (I: 3-4), as well as in King Priams's appeal to his son not to fight Achilles (XXII: 43-107).

<sup>145</sup> Morrison - K.G. (2006).

<sup>146</sup> Id.

a slow, torturous death. The five lines of the Sophoclean play (767-774) which Creon dedicates to the description of the punishment that awaits Antigone are now expanded to twenty three; driven by a deep hatred and not by reason - the reason expected of a wise leader - he seems to be taking pleasure in pronouncing the punishment that awaits Antigone:

“I will take her to the loneliest place in the world.

It is a hole among the rocks,

A black pit of emptiness.

I will give her food,

She must live forever

In that dark hole, blacker than any midnight

.....

I want Antigone to think of her life

as she lies in that black hole

among the rocks,

.....

I want Antigone to think,

to think until she knows

in every corner of her being

why she wasted her life for nothing” (33-34).

The same level of sadistic pleasure recurs in Morrison’s Creon, when he threatens the Guard that he will have him tortured until he begs for death, which he will deny him (9). The King’s cruelty in both instances extends beyond death; both Creons seem to enjoy the process of torturing someone, the translators here expanding the brutality already encountered in the Sophoclean King.<sup>147</sup>

## II. MYTH

Myth is a fundamental aspect of Greek tragedy, the origins of the genre and the raw material of its plots. As a corpus of archetypal stories, with common types across cultures basically involving “accounts of divine beings and their activities”,<sup>148</sup> myths are transferred from generation to generation, strengthening the links of the communities and shaping the peoples’ mentalities. Defining myth, however, is a highly contentious issue; “there is no one definition of myth, no Platonic form of a myth against which all actual instances can be measured. Myths [...] differ enormously in their morphology and their social function”.<sup>149</sup> Birenbaum produces a “working definition of myth”, expressing at the same time his reservations as to “how thoroughly it covers all that everyone else considers myth to be”; as he sees it:

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<sup>147</sup> “And there she can pray to Hades, the only one among the gods whom she respects, and perhaps be spared from death; or else she will learn, at that late stage, that it is wasted effort to show regard for things in Hades.” (lines 777-780).

<sup>148</sup> Larue (1975: 1).

<sup>149</sup> Kirk (1970: 7).

“A myth is a symbol, in the form of a story, expressing (or producing) a confrontation between the limited perspective of the self and the unlimited context in which it exists”.<sup>150</sup>

Buxton also addresses the “notorious definitional problems” that arise from the different approaches and meanings of myths in different cultures; he also attempts to sidestep the danger of reductivism by offering a very loose working definition of a Greek myth in particular:

“a Greek myth is a narrative about the deeds of Gods and heroes and their interrelations with ordinary mortals, handed on as a tradition within the ancient Greek world, and of collective significance to a particular social group or groups”.<sup>151</sup>

To examine Sophocles’ *Antigone* and the modern Irish versions, I think we should have both definitions in mind: *Antigone* is both narrative and symbol; the characters’ limited perspective in the play comes in marked contrast with the unlimited context in which they exist; and the myth was of collective significance when the play was first produced. It is in the light of this very shift in the collective significance of the myth since Sophocles’ time that the Irish versions of *Antigone* will now have to be examined.

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<sup>150</sup> Birenbaum (1988: 113).

<sup>151</sup> Buxton (1994: 15).

In the contemporary western world, myth has lost much of the authority it enjoyed and the influence it exercised in the past. “Every so often attempts are made to eradicate mythology on the grounds that we would be much better off without it. Whenever such an Enlightenment occurs, myths are held to be rather childish, certainly passé, and quite untrue”.<sup>152</sup> Kennelly regrets that the word ‘myth’, referring to all sorts of myth, is now used in a dismissive way (“Oh, it’s just a myth!”), seen plainly as opposed to reality.<sup>153</sup> In the past, no truthfulness was sought in myths; since then, there has been “a complete reversal of values; whilst current language confuses the myth with “fables”, a man of the traditional societies sees it as the *only valid revelation of reality*”.<sup>154</sup> The fact that myths are not related to reality, Dowden comments, does not make them less convincing either:

“If it’s a myth, it’s untrue. That is what we mean today - or part of what we mean. But a myth is also enticing: it lures not just a stray, mistaken individual, but whole groups and societies into believing it. [...] This is the paradox of myths. They are not factually exact: they are false, not wholly true, or not true in that form. But they have a power which transcends their inaccuracy, even depends on it”.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ruthven (1976: 47).

<sup>153</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

<sup>154</sup> Eliade (1968: 24).

<sup>155</sup> Dowden (1992: 3).

Kennelly also strongly believes in their impact, defining them as a “framework waiting for you to put in the picture of your life”,<sup>156</sup> or “a quality of the understanding you have of any phenomenon”.<sup>157</sup> Myth is no more part of the collective consciousness, but modern man is not entirely unaffected by it, either: “myth, mythology and the idea of myth have had a remarkable place in the intellectual and spiritual awareness of the twentieth century. [...] “Myth” took its place in contemporary consciousness alongside expanding economies and genocidal horrors”.<sup>158</sup>

Greek tragedy is directly and almost invariably associated with myth; as mentioned in the Introduction of the thesis, well known myths coming from the depths of time were the basis upon which the plots were built. Historical tragedies are very rare; Aeschylus’ *Persians* is the only play that has survived, alongside a record only of a limited number of other historical tragedies.<sup>159</sup> Invented plots in the fullest sense, on the other hand, are not attested before the end of the fifth century; Aristotle only registers one such instance: Agathon’s *Antheus*, in which play “both the events and the names are equally the poet’s work”.<sup>160</sup> Taking the opportunity to express his views on writing a play from scratch, the philosopher comments that “yet the pleasure it gives is just as great. So, fidelity to the traditional plots which are the

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<sup>156</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

<sup>157</sup> Younger (unknown date).

<sup>158</sup> Ellwood (1999: 1); Kirk (1970:2) also comments on “men’s endearing insistence on carrying quasi - mythical modes of thought, expression and communication into a supposedly scientific age”.

<sup>159</sup> Hall (1996: 7).

<sup>160</sup> Halliwell (1987: 41).

subject of tragedies is not to be sought at all costs”.<sup>161</sup> Aristotle’s comment only comes as a confirmation that myths fed Greek tragedy thematically. Vickers associates Greek tragedy with Greek mythology, suggesting that “not only did the corpus of myths provide the main material for tragic plots, but this large and diverse collection of traditional tales is itself invaluable evidence for Greek social and religious values - values which are evidently present in the society in which and for which the plays were written, and which are equally apparent in the plays themselves”.<sup>162</sup>

‘Transplanting’ a classical play, *Antigone* in our case, in modern day society presents a number of serious difficulties: first, the ‘social and religious values’ of which the myth ‘is itself invaluable evidence’ were so very different in Sophocles’ Athens compared to modern day Ireland. Updating the myth to mean to modern spectators what Sophocles’ myth might have meant to his contemporaries entails a constant decision- making in terms of the degree to which as well as the ways to do it. Secondly, a play based on myth has to be transferred into a society where myth does not enjoy the respect it originally used to. Though myth has deeper roots in Ireland than in other countries of the western world and has played a significant role in Irish culture, still, according to historian Kevin Nowlan, “myth and poetry have left modern Ireland with the unresolved problem of those who cannot identify themselves with Cuchulain of Muirthemne, or indeed with many of the other legends, real or

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<sup>161</sup> Id.

<sup>162</sup> Vickers (1973: 165).



otherwise, of Ireland”.<sup>163</sup> Moreover, *Antigone* is a play based on a foreign, and therefore alien myth; classical education being a minority experience, most members of the audience are virtually ignorant of it. Spectators unfamiliar with the original context are often not even aware if the characters ever existed in myth or in history; the proper names (names of places and characters) that carried a meaning of their own, are now meaningless to modern ears, even distracting. The name of the city of Thebes, for instance, as the place where the plot unfolds, comes to the ears of Sophocles’ spectators with a substantial set of detailed associations, derived from epic and lyric poetry, as well as the cumulative weight of previous tragic and even comic performances; to contemporary audiences, on the other hand, it is just a meaningless, exotic name. The translators of *Antigone* deal with it in various ways, making different choices each time as to whether to keep it, discard it, constantly remind their audiences where the play is set, or play down its significance.

Kennelly and Paulin opt for the final solution, since both gradually transpose their plays from the original set. Kennelly’s *Antigone* mentions ‘Thebes’ in her very first appearance.<sup>164</sup> Paulin also has his play taking place in Thebes; this is what we read in the introductory note of his published script, however, Thebes does not appear in the text until much later in the play. As the plays progress, both writers frequently avoid mentioning the name of the city, where Sophocles explicitly included it, gradually subtracting their works from the original time and place; thus, both versions start as Greek plays but end up as Irish ones. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the two

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<sup>163</sup> ‘Ancient Myth and Poetry: A Panel Discussion’ (1977: 12).

<sup>164</sup> “Published by King Creon to all Thebes” (7).

translators effectively transplant the Greek root on to Irish soil; and the soil makes much difference to the flavour of the fruit, as the following chapters will show. In marked contrast, in Mathews' version - which is the most radical departure from the original - Thebes is eliminated, since the set neither is nor even remotely recalls its royal palace. Antigone only mentions the 'House of Thebes' once (11), when she refers to a performance in Paris, Mathews transcending the boundaries of time and place. The play - at least as the script indicates - is vaguely located in contemporary Ireland but there are at the same time allusions to the Greek past mingled with recognisable events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The programme that the Chorus reads to the audience at the opening of the play is indicative of what is to follow: "the drama is set in Ireland in the 1980s B.C., soon after Sparta had entered the war on the German side" (1). Past and present, reality and myth are confused; the blending of references not only extracts the play from its original time and place, but deprives it of any specificity as to its mythic time, Mathews thus creating a whole new individual myth using the original play as a starting point. His is not, however, the only script whose *mise-en-scène* is different from that of the original. In Morrison's version the plot unfolds in the Middle East; this is only alluded to in the script, as we will see in the chapter to follow but becomes more explicit in the production. Donnellan and Heaney, on the other hand, mention the name of 'Thebes' many more times than Sophocles did, something that might be attributed to both writers' efforts to remind their audiences frequently where the plot unfolds. It seems that *Antigone* entered Ireland as more Irish than Greek, but it took two decades for the play to establish itself as more Greek than Irish.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> The circumstances in which this shift took place are to be further discussed in the following

The same conclusion is reached if we examine the plethora of mythic names, indirectly related to the Antigone myth, that appear in the Odes. Greek myths are not freestanding entities: individual stories exist both within the same theological framework and also within a larger network of often interconnected stories, which may be summoned up with a single name. This gives each play a dense allusiveness, since these references, “often thematically organised in order to help define a specific situation [...] are used like mirrors which provide a parallel image of the play.”<sup>166</sup> On top of the difficulty in translating the Choral Odes, alien as a concept to modern audiences as they are, the translators have to find an efficient and effective way of dealing with numerous names of mythic characters, whose story and actions were known to Sophoclean audiences. It is only Mathews who excludes all mythic references, such as names of gods, mythic persons or places; the rest of the Irish translators of *Antigone* are selective as to which of them they incorporate in their plays, depending on the importance that they attach each time to a particular name or story. In all scripts, there are occasional omissions of names or other details of minor importance for the understanding of the play that might sound confusing or distracting in a world geographically, culturally and chronologically remote from the original performance: Thrace (Paulin 35, Kennelly 27, Heaney 28), Corycian Bacchic Nymphs (Paulin 55), Niobe (Kennelly, 35), Phersephassa (Donnellan 50), Hades (Heaney 15, 24, 27, 36, 40) are only a tiny sample of omitted names; such omissions make the texts more accessible to an audience which does not share the same inherited cultural background. Still, the references to other archaic myths in the

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three chapters.

<sup>166</sup> Vickers (1973: 268).

Sophoclean play are a mythic framework for the story; removing them may not dramatically affect the meaning of the text, but certainly detach it from its mythic context.

Paulin and Kennelly tend to appropriate the myth, rather than translate its every detail. They both omit names much more frequently than Heaney and Donnellan and when they decide to include mythic references in their versions, they tend to adapt them to support the point they want to make, or to address their audiences' perceived needs. Kennelly either eliminates names that do not contribute anything to his story or which might sound meaningless to Irish audiences, or he 'translates' their meaning: thus, 'Acheron' becomes the "Lord of the Dark Lake" (34), the 'Cadmeans' become "the other people in this city" (22) and 'Dionysus' is invoked vaguely as the "god of the change of heart" (42-43). Kennelly retains the Sophoclean invocation to the god, but changes the content of the Ode and omits "much cultural material that is specifically Greek in favour of what is abstract and universal".<sup>167</sup> Dionysus, a name with specific if diverse connotations for the Sophoclean audience but probably neutral, even meaningless, in a society where Dionysus is not worshipped as a god, is not felt to be important anymore, so he is replaced with a vague, nameless god that "we fix and label with whatever names we will" (43); far from a god that is part of an institutionalised religion, the object of worship in Kennelly's play becomes more personalised, assuming any name or meaning that a spectator wishes.

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<sup>167</sup> Arkins (2003: 173).

Paulin employs a different strategy: he is very selective - much more so than Kennelly - as to the myths and other mythic references he incorporates, a choice dictated by practical considerations as well; his play being part of a double bill, Paulin himself writes that he “slashed away at the choruses to make the play run for fifty minutes and no more”.<sup>168</sup> The first paradox about his translation in this respect is that in the cases in which he chooses to include them, he makes the stories accessible to his audience not by ‘translating’ them, but by expanding them. In the fourth stasimon, for instance, the Chorus gives Antigone, just before she is led away, three examples of mythic persons buried alive:<sup>169</sup> Paulin includes all three myths in his text despite its brevity, and elaborates on them. Danae’s story is one of them:

“Danae too endured an exchange of heaven’s light for the brass-fastened dwelling, and immured in the tomblike chamber she was held prisoner” (Sophocles, 944-947).

“That yarn about Danae, we all know how lovely she was - her face shone, she was that beautiful - but her father was told she’d bear a son that would rise and kill him. So, he built her a house out of hard rock and put a door in it with thick brass nails, and he kept her there, locked up, all on her own”(Paulin, p.48).

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<sup>168</sup> Paulin (2002: 167).

<sup>169</sup> These are the stories of Danae, Lycurgus, and Cleopatra (lines 944 - 987).

Making the myth accessible to the audience, as Paulin does, is of critical importance for the understanding of Sophocles' rationale, as the association between Danae's name and the Antigone story is made clearer to the spectators, who do not feel bombarded with information they cannot handle. Paulin further attempts a direct link between the stories of the two women - unnecessary for Sophocles, as his audience would normally make the associations itself - by commenting on Danae's pride: "she was a proud girl - every bit proud, daughter", the Chorus tells Antigone, "as you are now" (49). This way, the Choral Ode no longer sounds (as it might for the modern audience) irrelevant or detached from the plot, but is directly linked with it. The only drawback is that in trying to familiarise the audiences with the myths, the Odes inevitably end up in narrative, something that loosens the dense writing and the poetic value of the original. In the case of Cleopatra, for example, whose name is never mentioned in Sophocles but which is inferred by his audience as she is described as Phineus' daughter, Paulin expands into nine sentences what Sophocles says in only two:

"... saw the accursed blinding wound inflicted on the two sons of Phineus by his cruel wife, robbing of sight the circles of their eyes that cried for vengeance, torn out by her bloody hands and the sharp point of her distaff". (Sophocles, lines 971-976)

"... Cleopatra her name was, who married Phineus, bore him two sons and then was cast off and put in prison. Phineus, he took a second wife, and she got this sharp shuttle, found the two sons and took them out walking on the strand one night. Then she hacked their eyes out". (Paulin, p.48)

Paulin, although he is explicitly offering a version - and this is the second paradox - yet in some respects comes closer to Sophocles than other writers who strive for greater fidelity to the original.

In Mathews' play, in line with his treatment of Thebes and as part of his strategy of thoroughgoing deracination, all mythic references are eliminated, as the script does not follow the Sophoclean storyline; this is not one more retelling of the Antigone story, but rather a "study of the myth itself",<sup>170</sup> an assertion of its continuity. What happens on stage should be seen as only one of Antigone's numerous appearances around the world. His Antigone recalls previous performances, neatly bridging past and present: an amateur run-through of the whole piece in Paris, in the winter of 1631 (11), and their first performance in Athens (33); a staging vaguely set in South America (33) and the immediate presentation of the *Antigone* at the Herodes Atticus Theatre on the slopes of the Acropolis in Athens after the Junta collapsed in Greece in 1974 (27). This very performance was directed by Alexis Solomos and Mathews himself was among the audience, whose passion he comments on.<sup>171</sup> Mathews' version again transcends the boundaries of time and place, Antigone's constant reappearances alluding to the everlastingness of the myth; the play is thus presented as never-ending as it reinvents itself in different times and places around the world.<sup>172</sup> Mathews' choices as to the modern moments he picks seem anything but random; the writer has carefully selected references in modern world history when democracy was suppressed, individual freedom was at risk - defiance accordingly

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<sup>170</sup> Scott - K.G. (2006).

<sup>171</sup> Mathews - K.G. (2006).

<sup>172</sup> Heap - K.G. (2006).

being dangerous as much as necessary.<sup>173</sup> At the end of his play Antigone disappears, but she does not eventually die; she is reported to be seen in various places around the world, but no one can with certainty affirm where she really is. Mathews, a deeply religious Catholic writer, makes of Antigone a Christ figure; after her disappearance everybody had seen her somewhere else, as had happened with Jesus Christ after his resurrection.<sup>174</sup> This Antigone is beyond physical death; by disappearing she becomes bigger, Michael Scott - the director - observes, than if she was buried in the cave. He also explains that with his decision to have her carried over by the Chorus to the other side of the river, it is as if Antigone vanishes into myth<sup>175</sup> - Mathews' play eventually being not about the myth of Antigone, but about Antigone, the myth.

### III. CHARACTERS

As the previous discussion has shown, translating a play means much more than mechanically transferring words from one language to another. The translator's interference with the original varies, sometimes ending up in a radical version and a brand new storyline. Even if the original plot is followed, however, its presentation varies from translator to translator, and is shaped also by the socio-temporal framework in which the play is written and performed. In this context, words may lose the special weight they might have had in the original, or gain a particular urgency absent from the original context; the characters' actions - as well as the

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<sup>173</sup> The - sometimes subtle, sometimes more explicit - ways Mathews chooses to politicize his play will be expanded in the following chapter.

<sup>174</sup> Mark, 16:9-14; throughout the play there are plenty of religious references that will be examined in detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>175</sup> Scott - K.G. (2006).



motives behind them - may be altered, played down, silenced or overstressed. Due to the starkness and the simplicity of its storylines - no sub-plots, turning points, sudden and unexpected events - Greek tragedy as a genre offers much scope for experimentation and creative rewriting.

Character is perhaps especially open to the impact of recontextualisation, given the different ways in which character is conceptualized in Greek tragedy and in modern works. As one (useful) modern definition notes, “characters are the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as possessing particular moral, intellectual and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive ways of saying it - the dialogue - and from what they do - the action”.<sup>176</sup> Modern approaches to character are thus heavily based on notions of individuality and idiosyncrasy, a feature for which Nietzsche would have nothing but contempt.<sup>177</sup> The Greeks, on the other hand, “were interested in individuals as part of a community much more than in the individual’s unique private experience, a difference of attitude which is sometimes hard for us to share or appreciate”,<sup>178</sup> thus, we tend to conceptualize characters inherited from Sophocles in a way that reflects modern culture. As Easterling puts it:

“Critics are always reminding us that character-drawing in Greek tragedy was a very different thing from what we meet in the modern theatre, different and (it is implied) perhaps more limited or rudimentary. [...] Modern audiences, brought

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<sup>176</sup> Abrams and Harpham (2009 [1957]: 42).

<sup>177</sup> As Fuchs (1996: 28) points out, “Nietzsche has nothing but contempt for the representation of individuated dramatic character. Among the most damning charges Nietzsche can level against the post-mythic drama produced by “theoretical culture” is “character representation”.

<sup>178</sup> Easterling (1977: 129)

up on post-Romantic literature with its overwhelming emphasis on the individual, and conditioned by modern psychological terminology, expect a dramatist to be primarily concerned with the unique aspect of each man's experience, with the solitary focus of consciousness which, as John Jones puts it, is 'secret, inward, interesting' ".<sup>179</sup>

This should not be taken to indicate that character in Greek tragedy is in any sense straightforward. Sophocles' Oedipus, Electra, Heracles, Ajax and Antigone continue to attract divergent readings. But over and above any ambiguities in the original text modern writers and directors, in working with characters in and from Greek tragedy, bring in the perspective of a different literary and cognitive culture. It is inevitable, and (one could argue) desirable that the modern director and to some extent the modern actor will reconceive a different character according to the circumstances, generic or specific, obtaining at the time of writing or production.

In the case of the Irish *Antigones*, Mathews excluded, all translators keep with the Sophoclean sequence of events. What is different in each version are the motives, the importance that the playwright attaches to them and eventually his perspective: by expanding or playing down aspects of particular characters, he sheds a new light and comes up with new approaches of their personalities. The interference with the original text is, again, more manifest in the early versions, where the writers

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid. 121.

experiment more with the myth and its implications. This becomes all the more evident when examining the series of conflicts in the play: those of Antigone with Ismene, Antigone with Creon and Haemon with Creon. Each of these encounters assumes different dimensions each time, something that is made evident from the very opening of the tragedy, when the two sisters meet.

### **Antigone - Ismene**

Antigone summons Ismene outside the palace; she has already made up her mind to bury Polynices and seeks her sister's support and assistance, which the latter will refuse to give. The Irish translators, intrigued by the conflict between the two, make fresh interpretations of their actions. In Paulin and Kennelly, Antigone's need to react and assert herself by burying her brother becomes as imperative as it was in Sophocles. "I must bury him" (10, 11) she repeats twice in Paulin's version, while in Kennelly she uses the same 'must/have to' as many as four times (8,10,11). The two Antigones - like their Sophoclean predecessor - see the burial as a duty they cannot but perform; contrary to the original, however, this duty is not dictated by the gods nor by any wish to gain glory.<sup>180</sup> In both versions the gods are still there<sup>181</sup> but they are not the driving force behind the actions of the characters, as will be elaborated in Chapter Four. Nor does Antigone seem interested in dying for glory; a fine and glorious death in Sophocles' time might have been the model of civic choice, distinguishing "a man from the rest of mankind which awaits its fate passively",<sup>182</sup> but it becomes more problematic in a Christian and post-Christian context. "It's

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<sup>180</sup> "καλόν μοι τουτο ποιούση θανειν" (line 72), "πείσομαι γάρ ουν τοσοντον ουδέν ώστε μη ου καλωσ θανειν".

<sup>181</sup> Kennelly, "to break my god's laws"; Paulin, "the gods will be proud of me".

<sup>182</sup> Loraux (1986: 104).

never pride, not pride that's pushing me", Paulin's Antigone tells her sister, "it's my own soul and honour, I can nor bend nor sell" (14). Paulin expands Antigone's sense of dignity that instructs her to "act from conscience", as Stephen Rea, director and protagonist of the play, puts it.<sup>183</sup> She is prepared to pay any price, since she sees it as her obligation to put her own life "right there on the line and show no fear of him" (10). Resistance and defiance become an end in itself; what matters is not the result of the action nor any change that the action might bring about, but the action itself: "the job if you are Antigone", Rea asserts, "is to bury the body. It doesn't matter if you change Creon or not. You bury the body. These people don't care for changes, they just keep going".<sup>184</sup> Rea's interpretation of Antigone's action is not far from Knox's portrayal of the Sophoclean hero:

"to those who face him, friends and enemies alike, the hero seems unreasonable almost to the point of madness, suicidally bold, impervious to argument, intransigent, angry; an impossible person whom only time can cure. But to the hero himself the opinion of others is irrelevant. His loyalty to the conception of himself, and the necessity to perform the action that conception imposes, prevail over all other considerations".<sup>185</sup>

If Paulin has Antigone die for her 'soul and honour', Kennelly's Antigone does not hesitate to sacrifice her life for her "loyalty and love" (8). Creon also insists on the importance of being loyal, the words 'loyal' and 'loyalty' appearing in his rhesis as many as seven times (12-13). Antigone, however, gives a different content to the

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<sup>183</sup> Rea - K.G. (2006).

<sup>184</sup> Id.

<sup>185</sup> Knox (1966: 28). Antigone also conforms to Silk's description of the tragic hero (1996: 465): "compulsion, excess and identity" being, in Silk's terms, three "of a small set of irreducible determinants [...] of special importance", "the striving individual *must* assert himself or herself or (like Creon) *must* give way".

word 'loyalty' than the one Creon seeks to establish: it is not blind loyalty towards a leader and the decisions he makes, but rather the loyalty that springs from love towards a member of the family.<sup>186</sup> Familial love as a duty already existed in Sophocles, "relationship [being] itself a source of obligation, regardless of the feelings involved".<sup>187</sup> In Kennelly, the importance of love is more explicitly stated: if Antigone leaves her brother unburied, that would mean betraying him, which in turn would mean killing her love for him. When it comes to choosing, Antigone will prefer to make an end to her life rather than to her love: "Because I would not kill my love, My love kills me", says she, just before she is led away to die. "In this place, killers of love go free" (38), she concludes, evidently pointing at her uncle, an utterance whose implications will be further examined in Chapter Three.

It might be the case, as Nussbaum points out, that when Antigone speaks of Polynices "there is no sense of closeness, no personal memory, no particularity animating her speech",<sup>188</sup> in one case, though, there is 'a personal memory' of Antigone's brother. In Mathews' version, a play where memory - and the effort to eradicate it - plays a major role, as we will see in the following chapter, there are reminiscences of Poly (as Antigone lovingly calls him). The reference to a book he had given Ismene as holiday reading (17), strongly recalls Anouilh's version, in which Polynices had given his sister a paper flower that she kept with care in her drawer.<sup>189</sup> The book triggers Antigone's memories; however, the limited sentimentality aroused is not what triggers her action; she does not react under the

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<sup>186</sup> *Antigone* was the first Greek tragedy that Kennelly translated and it was meant as a gift for his daughter, after years of estrangement.

<sup>187</sup> Nussbaum (2001: 64).

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.* 64.

<sup>189</sup> Landers (1986 [1954] : 79).

pressure of her memories, but under the pressure of an autocratic regime.<sup>190</sup> Further to that, Antigone's act in Mathews also assumes existentialist dimensions: apart from her belief in the legitimacy of her act (which is not articulated as strongly as in the other Irish versions, anyway), the young heroine here does not seem to feel comfortable in this life: "Antigone is not at home in this world. She wants out" (57), Chora comments, once more strongly recalling Anouilh.<sup>191</sup>

If each of the three writers of the early versions gives a different interpretation to Antigone's action, the Sophoclean reasoning<sup>192</sup> returns as strongly as ever in Heaney's and Donnellan's translations. "It is a fine thing for me to die like this", says Antigone to Ismene in the latter play (25). Going further than Sophocles, her action - she implies - means "sacrificing herself in glory" (25), later asking Ismene to keep out of her death (39). In her eyes, her glorious death is a prize that she does not mean to share with anyone, "revealing the single-minded nature of her mission which is not only to bury her brother but to die doing it".<sup>193</sup> In Heaney's play, the decision to be made is, Antigone tells Ismene, 'a test' she is facing, not refraining from commenting that "there'll be glory in it" (3).

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<sup>190</sup> The huge political implications of the play will be examined in the next chapter.

<sup>191</sup> There are many instances in Anouilh's version where Antigone presents death as a better alternative than living a life she has not chosen; Landers (1986 [1954]: 36, 82, 95). Creon thus at the end opines that she wanted to die, Polynices being only a pretext ("C'est elle qui voulait mourir. Aucun de nous n' était assez fort pour la décider à vivre. Je le comprends maintenant, Antigone était faite pour être morte. Elle-même ne le savait peut-être pas, mais Polynice n' était qu'un prétexte", Landers (1986 [1954]:100).

<sup>192</sup> Sophocles' *Antigone*: "it is honourable for me to do this and die" (line 72), also "I shall suffer nothing so dire that my death will not be one of honour" (lines 96-97); "if it is your pleasure dishonour what the gods honour" (lines 76-77).

<sup>193</sup> Labous (1999).

If for Sophocles' *Antigone* it is the action that matters whatever the price, for Ismene all that matters is the consequences. The gap between the two sisters is widened in all three early versions; Ismene is the perfect counterpart of Antigone, as the more revolutionary and idealist the latter is, the more practical and cynical the former becomes. Kennelly adds a number of phrases, whole lines even, that elaborate on Ismene's submissiveness,<sup>194</sup> also accentuating her mostly gender-based fear towards Creon: "a woman against the State is a grain of sand against the sea", she suggests, reproducing a male-centered mentality with which she has been brought up and from which she cannot escape. Saving her life in such an unfair world becomes her first priority, her approach to life being summarised in the following lines:

"Even when we do not believe in our obedience,  
  
we must obey in spite of disbelief. That is my belief. Better to obey and live  
  
than disobey and die" (9).

With his paternal affection towards his characters and in an effort to soften Ismene's cynicism, Kennelly reveals a rather sentimental part of her character that is hidden deep until the very end of the encounter between the two sisters. "In your going you are foolish, but truly dear to those who are your own", Sophocles' Ismene says (line 99), just upon Antigone's departure; "those who love you will always hold you dear.

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<sup>194</sup> "Creon, strongest of men" (9), "Creon's word is law" (9), "Mere women" (9), "A woman against the State is a grain of sand against the sea" (10), "Try to do what no strong man/ Can do. If a man can't do it, How can a woman?" (11). The explicitly feminist reading of Kennelly's play will be revisited in Chapter Four.

I love you, my sister” (10), Kennelly’s Ismene says, explicitly expressing her feelings towards her sister; her unsolicited confession of love gives her thus more potential appeal to the audience than she had possessed in the original.

This is not the case in Paulin’s play; overtly and explicitly political as it is, the writer cannot but sharpen the contrast between the two sisters. In this context, Ismene becomes an utter pragmatist, who has carefully calculated her decision. Far from the “commonsense and feeling for the living” that Conor Cruise O’Brien had previously attributed to her - in an article to which we will return in the following chapter<sup>195</sup> - the only discernible ‘feeling’ for Paulin’s Ismene is the feeling about herself. Her responses are usually short and dismissive,<sup>196</sup> revealing lack of emotion and compassion either for her dead brother, or for her troubled sister. Her brother being dead anyway, it does not make much difference if he is buried or not; since nothing would change, she would not risk her life for what she describes as “cold things, principles” (13). “Don’t tell me it’s not right - that’s what is” (12), she declares after describing what awaits them if they do not conform to the King’s edict. Contrary to Kennelly, who expands Ismene’s sentimentality upon her departure, Paulin further undermines her by depriving her even of her last Sophoclean utterance that although her sister is doing something foolish, she is truly dear to those who are her own (lines 98-99).

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<sup>195</sup> O’Brien (1972: 159).

<sup>196</sup> “You’re talking wild- it’s Creon’s order” (11), “I have my piety as well as you, but the state’s not putty and I can’t force it” (13), “It’s hardly worth it” (14).



The same pragmatism is encountered in Mathews' Ismene; her philosophy in a kind of nugget being "Don't fight it. Flow with it" (46), it is hardly believable that she would jeopardise her well-being for any values or ideals. She would not be expected to assist her sister in keeping their brother's memory alive for a little longer, as she does not show the least feeling for him. On the contrary, she has no inhibitions to say that "nobody gives a shit about Poly" (20), also wishing that "he had never been born" (20); he and the "Polynices of this world" (20). If Antigone is the one who stands up for her ideals, who challenges the boundaries between reason and pretext (52) and damns commonsense (56), Ismene is an everyday woman, who believes that "order is everything" (49), who is preoccupied solely with her daily chores and concerns,<sup>197</sup> the two of them at times (4,9) recalling the couple in *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>198</sup>

Accordingly, the dynamics of the relationship between the two sisters change dramatically in Mathews' version: here, Antigone does not become angry or rude towards her sister, it is Ismene who does. If Kennelly's Ismene, despite her inability to take action, is more sentimental towards her sister than Sophocles', and Paulin's less sentimental than Sophocles', Mathews' Ismene is mean and vicious. The argument between the two girls here does not involve Polynices, though; Ismene's occasionally aggressive behaviour derives from the fact that the role she is given is

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<sup>197</sup> Morrison's Ismene washes shirt-collars (13), checks the taps (12), keeps pine-cones in the fire and a hot brick in the bed at night (13), strains the goat's milk or blocks up the hole that the rat was getting through (15).

<sup>198</sup> In Scott's production, that has a language of its own independent from the language of the text, there are also echoes from Beckett's work.

less prominent than Antigone's.<sup>199</sup> In a play *about* Sophocles' *Antigone* some of the characters express their complaints and discontent about the distribution of roles, Ismene being one of them. Ismene is begging to take her sister's role, she is 'thirsting' to be Antigone in the place of Antigone (10-11), but she has to compromise with what the Chorus describes as "just sellin' ice-cream at the bullfight" (29). Eternally trapped in a little-appreciated role that she cannot change, she is irritated by the compliments that all the other characters pay to her famous sister,<sup>200</sup> whom she rather spitefully describes as "the real public enemy" (13), or an "exhibitionist", just pretending and looking for attention (11). She becomes proud - or so she sounds - of her sister only at the end, not because she eventually endorses her views and actions but because of the publicity that this relation secures her:

"You've given me a new identity. You've made me what I am. Fourteen people have asked me: "Are you really Antigone's sister?" And I blushed. They were so... respectful. And they turn, you know, they turn round in the street to look at me' (59).

Mathews' Ismene remains pragmatic to the end; trapped in her limited, miserable, meaningless everyday life and deprived of a light of her own, she is only illuminated

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<sup>199</sup> "Nobody has ever thanked me for being.. I have never made the difference to anyone, even to myself" (13).

<sup>200</sup> The Chorus comments that Antigone is about to become an example to the whole community (12) and that she always stands out (18). For Chora staying when Antigone comes means participating in History, having a seat at the centre of the epoch, being singled out (32); Haemon, although he finds her delusional, still comments on her beauty, asserting that "her face would have haunted Rembrandt." (18).

by the light her idealist sister emits. Antigone's value as a person becomes of importance to her insofar as there is something she can gain from it.

The gulf between the two sisters, clearly visible in Sophocles and intensified in the early versions, is reduced in the later ones to something resembling the Sophoclean scale, fear and prudence returning as the reasons for Ismene's indecisiveness. Morrison exaggerates her fear to disobey civil authority, adding lines revealing her feeling of powerlessness in face of the King: "Creon's word is law. Creon is the law!"(p. 2), she exclaims, the King embodying for her the law itself. Morrison's Ismene, echoing Paulin's, urges her sister to think not that they will die but how they will die, Antigone also commenting that it is fear that made her sister's choice (18). Fear is also behind Ismene's unwillingness to act in Heaney's version, but fear of a different kind; not associated with Creon, but with the family destiny that haunts the Labdacids and which Antigone now challenges. Heaney doubles Ismene's lines,<sup>201</sup> when she explains her reasoning to her sister: Ismene strongly urges Antigone to think twice before she acts: "easy now, my sister. Think this through for a minute. Think of the line we come from", she tells her, subsequently expanding the Oedipus story:

"The king they drove from their city.

No matter he didn't know.

No matter it was Oedipus

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<sup>201</sup> Sophocles gives her twenty lines (lines 49-68), Heaney makes them thirty nine (4-5).

Brought his own crimes to light

And then reached into his eyes

.....

Oedipus had to perish.” (4).

Donnellan’s approach does not differ from Heaney’s: Heaney’s Ismene defines themselves as “children of Oedipus” (4), Donnellan’s as “daughters of Oedipus” (24). As the examination of the conflict between the two sisters suggests, the translators of the 1984 versions tend to be bolder in the revisiting of the myth, appropriating it more than the turn of the century ones; this becomes all the more evident in the second major encounter of the play: that of Antigone with Creon.

### **Creon - Antigone**

In the early versions, the tension between Creon and Antigone becomes more explicitly a conflict of principles. In Paulin and Kennelly, Antigone is a liberal thinker, who fiercely reacts against an oppressive establishment the way she would if the issue at stake was of a completely different sort; the tip of the spear is not Polynices’ unburied corpse but Creon’s decision to leave it unburied. The dynamics of the discussion between the two change a lot in both cases; the translators’ admiration for the young girl and the values she stands for make them reduce Creon

to an anti-hero, “the representative of an unjust occupying government”<sup>202</sup> in Paulin, or “absolute and unquestioned incarnation of political authority”<sup>203</sup> in Kennelly. Creon becomes a despotic figure; a believer in the ‘divide and reign’ approach in Paulin, a staunch supporter of uniformity as the only way effectively to control the citizens in Kennelly. It is as if he is in the wrong from the outset, and every utterance of his only serves to glorify Antigone, who becomes an emblem of individuality; the difference between the two writers however, is that each gives different dimensions to the assertion of individuality.

Paulin’s Creon, like his production more generally, reflects the radical agenda of the company which commissioned the work, Field Day, a group whose aspiration was both to create a distinctive northern Irish theatre and one which engaged directly with contemporary Irish politics.<sup>204</sup> - Creon is depicted as an autocratic ruler, aiming at breaking social cohesion by having the citizens turn against each other. “Him who rates a dear one higher than his native land, him I put nowhere”, Sophocles’ Creon says (lines 182-183); “if ever any man here should find himself faced with a choice between betraying his country and betraying his friend, then he must swiftly place that friend in the hands of the authorities. That is the only right and proper decision

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<sup>202</sup> Walton (2002b: 54).

<sup>203</sup> Roche (1988: 239).

<sup>204</sup> Steinberger (2008: 70) describes Field Day as a company whose “nod towards tradition is closely linked with Ireland’s history; of that rich historical past, the violence of imperial domination and, most importantly, of the quest for a national identity”. An expression of the company’s pronounced interest in Irish politics has been the publication of pamphlets that “had signalled an intention to deal with cultural issues in a manner more explicitly political, and the ideas disseminated in them had been widely discussed in Ireland, especially in academic circles” (Richtarik 2001 [1995]: 245). For more, see also O’ Malley’s (2011) *Field Day and the Translation of Irish Identities: Performing Contradictions*, especially the Introduction and Chapter One; *Ireland’s Field Day* (1985) by Field Day Theatre Company, esp. chapter Four; finally, S. Deane’s ‘Introduction’ to Eagleton, Jameson and Said’s *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (1990). We return to the Field Day Theatre Company below, p.p. 161-162.

and we must all abide by it”, Paulin’s Creon asserts (16). If for the former the welfare of the country after a civil war was a priority, for the latter what is of importance is the perpetuation of the establishment. Here it is not a matter of rating, but a matter of betrayal; the establishment encourages betraying one’s kin, if the State is to appear stronger. In a play that glorifies civil disobedience, Antigone’s reaction against such a sick political environment is expected to be immediate. In the first place, because giving precedence to her responsibilities as a citizen would mean betrayal of her kin: “I can’t betray my brother” (11) she declares, twice telling Creon in a kind of refrain that she had to bury him, as she had also said before to Ismene. Antigone, whose conscience does not allow her to betray her people for the sake of any city, summarises Creon’s philosophy as “Break with your own kin, go lick the state” (27). In such a context, the burial of her dead brother’s body might just be the occasion, the ultimate motive behind her action being her resistance against the cruelty of the authority.

Kennelly also expands Sophoclean Antigone’s assertion of herself, the young girl becoming here the emblem of individuality as opposed to the uniformity that a dictator seeks. Kennelly expresses his admiration for the courage and strength with which she articulates her conception of difference, also seeing it as the reason for writing this play as a gift for his daughter.<sup>205</sup> His Antigone does indulge in a rhetoric of difference and directly accuses Creon twice of being scared by the idea of difference.<sup>206</sup> She also elaborates to Ismene, who enters the stage soon after, on her strong belief in the importance of not rejecting a different point of view; the

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<sup>205</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

<sup>206</sup> “It is my difference that you fear” (23), “Creon, you fear the thought of difference” (24).

Sophoclean line, “some thought you were right, and some thought I was” (line 557), is here expanded:

“There were two worlds, two ways,  
One world approved your way, The other mine.  
You were wise in your way, I in mine” (25).

Creon mocks Antigone’s ideas, dismissively referring to her or addressing her as “girl”. This is not simply a battle of an individual against the state; Kennelly’s Antigone, as we will see in Chapter Four, is a young girl suffocating in a world constructed, inhabited and ruled by mature men; her reaction against Creon’s cruel decision to leave the body of her dead brother unburied is again an action of revolt, but in this instance revolt against a male establishment that lacks imagination, endorses cruelty, rejects whatever deviates from the norm, seeks power and money and dismisses love as unimportant.

Mathews’ play takes again more existentialist dimensions, his play being the only one out of the three 1984 versions in which the difficulty of Creon’s mission is recognised. Here, there is no tension, no confrontation between the two characters; echoing Anouilh, Creon and Antigone are offered a chance to express their feelings about their past and present, about their expectations and dreams, about how they see themselves. They are not single-minded, they can see each other’s truth, they can recognise each other’s weaknesses as well as their own. Antigone, despite all the other characters’ admiration for her (Ismene excluded), describes herself as

‘confused’ (10) ‘colourless’, ‘abrasive’, even ‘a bore’ (36), but she also feels that she is right and that she has “to go on being right until somebody sends help” (36); she has a strong sense of mission, but she does not have the energy of the other Antigones. Marianne McDonald describes her as a “quiet protester.. weak and inarticulate”, finding parallels with cases of hunger-strikers in Ireland.<sup>207</sup> Creon, on the other hand, also strongly recalling Anouilh, sounds more like a bureaucrat rather than a determined, committed King: he describes himself as “a decent man doing a difficult job in appalling conditions” (36), having sacrificed his personal life when he took office (52). Here the roles change: Creon the President is the one who apologises for the job he has to do,<sup>208</sup> although he never chose to do it.<sup>209</sup> His feelings for his “funny Antigone” (33) are mixed: he becomes sarcastic in relation to her idealism and lack of practical spirit,<sup>210</sup> but at the same time he admires her for her integrity,<sup>211</sup> he is jealous of her, even envies her (38). Antigone, on the other hand, recognises his good intentions and the difficulty of his mission; “I know you’re doing your best”, she insists. Haven’t I been watching you all these years? I’d hate to have your part.

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<sup>207</sup> McDonald (2002: 58).

<sup>208</sup> “I’m only trying to plant some vegetables among the ruins. And you can’t do that without getting your hands dirty... Do you suppose that coal likes to be burned? That cabbage likes to be boiled? But these things have to be done” (38) “you make it seem as if I were responsible. You’ve never asked how I feel. I didn’t start this war.. But I’m not a monster...” (52); see also Anouilh: “Il faut pourtant qu’il y en ait qui disent oui. Il faut pourtant qu’il ya en ait qui mènent la barque. Cela prend l’eau de toutes parts, c’est plein de crimes, de bêtise, de misère...” (Landers (1986 [1954]: 81).

<sup>209</sup> “When I was a boy, I never wanted to be a ..soldier. never crossed my mind, I was thinking more of... an archaeologist, say. I never much wanted to be that.” (38) see also Anouilh: “Avant, du temps d’Oedipe, quand il n’était que le premier personnage de la cour, il aimait la musique, les belles reliures, les longues flâneries chez les petits antiquaires de Thèbes. Mais Oedipe et ses fils sont morts. Il a laissé ses livres, ses objets, il a retroussé ses manches et il a pris leur place” (Anouilh, p. 11), “Un matin, je me suis réveillé roi de Thèbes. Et Dieu sait si j’aimais autre chose dans la vie que d’être puissant” (Anouilh, p. 78).

<sup>210</sup> “You’re the sort who wants a world of butterflies without caterpillars. Statesmanship without politics. Growth without the growing pains”, “The whole world is sinking like Venice and she comes to tell me that human nature is a right, not a privilege” (38).

<sup>211</sup> “Nobody admires you more extravagantly than I do.. But it needn’t happen that way. I don’t want it to end like that. I don’t want to lose you. I... almost love you at this stage. I can’t imagine not having you to talk to. Even Heman can see that you’re special.” (36).



One look at the script and I'd send it back". (36) In this play, it is made clear that everything is a matter of - random - distribution of roles.<sup>212</sup> Creon wants them "to put away the script" and "stop playing games" (35); unfortunately, the two of them tried to do it over two thousand years ago and it did not work. So, Mathews suggests in his version that *Antigone* will not stop being performed, that the two of them are doomed to play their parts in eternity, always confronting each other.

### **Minor Characters**

Similar conclusions as to the approaches adopted in the earlier and later versions may be drawn from the examination of the minor characters as well: changes of minor importance are made in the later ones, while in the 1984 plays the minor characters are integrated in such a way that - despite their secondary significance - they become agents of the main ideas of each play, strengthening each writer's point. Mathews is the only writer in whose radical rendering of the play Tiresias, Eurydice, the Guard and the Messenger are discarded, while two new characters are introduced.<sup>213</sup> Haemon ('Heman', as he is renamed) is the only one of the minor characters that Mathews retains, although in a different role from the one we are accustomed to. The young man appears desperately in love with Antigone, as Ismene comments early in the play: "In love. Head over heels. Antigone. Can't keep his molars out of her.

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<sup>212</sup> Everything is also a matter of distribution of roles in Anouilh's *Antigone*, (p. 9, 24, 54, 75).

<sup>213</sup> Chora and the Critic. Chora, probably the male counterpart of the Chorus - who appears in the play more as a character himself than as to what the Chorus is perceived to be in the context of Greek tragedy - reproduces Creon's ideas, without showing any signs of independent thinking: she acts as his secretary or as his interpreter (41-42) and questions Antigone at the end. The Critic only makes two short appearances at the second part (27- 28, 40- 41). His appearance strengthens the play's metatheatricality and adds to the impression of a suffocatingly suppressive political environment, as will be shown in the next chapter.

Worships the ground she shakes off her feet” (8); or at least this is what Ismene sees. Mathews’ play being the only one among the Irish versions in which the engaged couple meet, Heman expresses his feelings to Antigone himself. Ismene was not so insightful; his love is not the pure and unchallenged one that even makes him put an end to his life by her side;<sup>214</sup> far from loving her, Heman rather seeks to control her, to patronise her, to protect her from herself, as he puts it (48).<sup>215</sup> He wants her to be his wife and to be happy, but in his own terms; he generously offers Antigone, an existentially minded character, a bourgeois approach to life and happiness that she gently rejects:

HEMAN: But to throw it away for the letter P! I could understand it if you’d blown up the Treasury or destroyed bridges. But for whistling prohibited tunes! For marking a bulldozed grave! [...] (HEAD IN HANDS) Such a ... waste. Such a squandering. (FURIOUSLY) You could have been my wife if you’d had any nous. You could have had me. Do you understand? Do you have any insight into what you’ve done to me?

ANTIGONE: (GENTLY) I’m not your type.

HEMAN: (MIMICS) I’m not your type. You don’t just break the law. You lay it down as well. (49)

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<sup>214</sup> Heman never commits suicide, something that would be meaningless anyway in a version where Antigone does not die.

<sup>215</sup> There is also an encounter between Haemon and Antigone in Anouilh (p. 37-44), although its content is different from Mathews’.

Money is the only reason that would excuse Antigone's 'waste'; acting from principle sounds too awkward, absurd even. In this 'relationship' Heman fails to really 'see' the woman he is presumably in love with; he only sees his needs, his aspirations for the future, his desires. Ego-centric as he is, he is not enraged because Antigone will suffer as a result of her action, but because of the cost of her action for him. Shortly after, he becomes physically violent - violent words not excluding violent deeds: Heman punches her hard, twisting her arms and kicking her, causing her to fall to the ground as many as three times (49). This outburst of violence is a result of his anger both as a man and as a Chief of the Secret Police that he is. Far from the idealist son of a King, Heman here by vocation expresses the views of authority, as represented by 'President Creon', whom he loves almost like a father (5) - alongside a tired and imprisoned Creon, Mathews needs this figure to invest with violence and control. Mathews changes his name into 'Heman'. Breaking the name in two (He-man), the new name actually reinforces a masculine discourse that differentiates him from the sensitive Haemons of all the other translations, also heightening the gender divide by making him an excellent foil for the female Antigone.

In Kennelly's play, on the other hand, the love between Haemon and Antigone is unquestionable, as Ismene again comments.<sup>216</sup> This was incidentally the case in Euripides' lost *Antigone*, in which there was a love interest between Haemon and Antigone, so much so that Haemon helped her to bury the body. Kennelly brings the two fiancés closer by having them share the same views about love and tolerance,

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<sup>216</sup> "But never again can there be such love, As bound these two together" (26).

two of the poet's favourite themes. Love not only towards Antigone, but also towards his father, since the Sophoclean 'concern' ('προκήδομαι', 741) is replaced in Kennelly by 'love' (31). The poet also adds as many as eighteen lines in which the young man implores his father to listen (30-31), insisting on the importance of being prepared to accept a different point of view. For Kennelly's Haemon, "listening to the voices of the people and then with the help of the Gods deciding what is right", becomes the definition of justice (31). The importance that Haemon attaches to being open to new ideas is also encountered in Morrison's and Donnellan's plays;<sup>217</sup> in both cases, though, Haemon's comments on the importance of listening are not part of a general discourse that runs throughout the play, as is the case with Kennelly's translation.

In Paulin's version, Haemon is not only a sensitive, emotional young man, but also an active one. This is almost the only play where Haemon does not respond to his father's crudity; Kennelly's Haemon comments on his father's stupidity (32), Heaney's calls him 'deranged' (35), Morrison's a 'foaming idiot' and then a 'stonewall' (22). The worst that Paulin's Haemon calls his father is 'old man' (42), definitely not equivalent in terms of crudity with the way Creon had just described Antigone as a 'dirty bitch'. The words do not have the power to make a difference for Paulin, it is the actions that do. Nor does Paulin's Haemon, as his Sophoclean predecessor did, threaten his father with committing suicide just before leaving the stage; instead of an emotional response, he is the only one among the Haemons of

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<sup>217</sup> Morrison's Haemon also adds the verb 'listen' a couple of times (20-21); Donnellan gives Haemon extra lines as well in which he suggests that "wisdom knows that she has much to learn and clasps the new idea as her most honoured guest" (44).

the Irish versions who looks for practical solutions and ways of action: “there’s noone here dare harm her now. I’ll see they don’t” he tells his father, (42) determined to do everything he can to save her life. It is only after he has arrived too late in the cave that he will eventually put an end to his life by her side, his death bringing about one more death: that of his mother, Eurydice.

### **Eurydice**

Eurydice, Creon’s wife and the last in a chain of deaths in the play, is given by Sophocles “a scant ninety-four lines” before she goes off to die, “the shortest life of any speaking character in Greek tragedy”.<sup>218</sup> Her appearance, despite its brevity, has a different impact upon each of the Irish writers: Kennelly gives her more time on stage, expanding her lines from nine to thirty. In her wordy lament, the words are powerful, menacing and finally destructive. They are the “words of murder” that “strangled” the “words that shaped Eurydice’s prayer” (45), they are “words of cruel truth that are now her only law”(45). And it is these ‘words’, mentioned as many as seven times in her speech (and four more times in her Attendant’s) that with a sort of masochistic pleasure she repeatedly asks the Messenger to repeat, although she knows that they will eventually kill her. Kennelly’s Eurydice is fully aware of what has happened and she is given the opportunity to express her pain and difficulty in coming to terms with her son’s death. By expanding her lament, Kennelly makes her more of a character, her presence no longer serving simply to heighten Creon’s misery. This is further supported by the invention of an Attendant, a figure very true

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<sup>218</sup> Zelenak (1998: 82).

to the Greek tragic tradition,<sup>219</sup> if alien to Sophocles' play, with whom Eurydice enters the stage. This addition could not be to establish her status as a queen; after all, King Creon entered the stage alone. Her Attendant, the person who knows her best and who can with validity give us more feedback about her, praises Eurydice's 'living beauty' (44) and 'blessed heart' (44). She also refers four times to the 'merciless' words that made Eurydice look 'distressed', 'pale', "trembling, as though with some unbearable fear"(44). And what she sees now as the only purpose of the queen's life is "to make a clear word doubly clear" (45). Kennelly offers her the good external evidence plus enough space to express her distress in public. Sophocles' Eurydice has the decency and the grandeur of a queen; Kennelly's has the despair of a mourning mother, the play becoming thus more domestic.

This is also the case in Conall Morrison's version, one located in the contemporary Middle East. Eurydice's lament is both private, as a mother who loses her son, and public, as a citizen of a bloodstained land. In a play with live music on stage, Eurydice "sings her angry lament" using the old-fashioned free-standing microphone that the Messenger brings her. Now a mother in pain herself, the queen addresses her song to her own mother, whom she invokes, screaming, at the beginning. The song turns out to be a ballad of disillusionment and despair that she ends screaming, as she started, suggesting that she will set herself free. Puzzling as this addition may seem, Eurydice's song is a powerful and effective device, if its aim is simply to move the

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<sup>219</sup> "Many of the plays feature attendants, soldiers, and other supernumeraries (including children), in addition to the principal actors and chorus", Walton (1991:145).

audience. However, it is not perfectly and coherently adapted to the script that has not been adjusted and accordingly results in discrepancies.<sup>220</sup>

Paulin's version moves once more to the opposite direction: Eurydice's speech is here reduced to only seven four-syllable lines that contain the minimum information necessary. This reduction in length might have to do with the practical considerations discussed earlier, although they do not seem to be enough to account for condensing to the bare minimum an already short speech of a character who makes one and only one appearance. Paulin does not attach much importance to the figure of Eurydice in general in a play whose aim is to address political realities; such a play is intended to be more thought-provoking and less sentimental, and Eurydice's appearance does not contribute much to this end. In this context, a number of details in Eurydice's speech are discarded as unimportant, one of which is her stabbing beneath the liver.

Eurydice, unlike Creon who pleads at the end for someone to help him put an end to his life, is strong enough to end hers in exactly the same way that her son ended his. This piece of information is also neglected by Kennelly; by expanding her monologue to illustrate her despair and pain over the death of her son, Kennelly does not need this bit to reinforce the link between mother and son. Conall Morrison and Seamus Heaney, in their more recent versions, abandon the stabbing under the liver and replace it with stabbing in the heart, thus making Eurydice's suffering more

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<sup>220</sup> Upon Eurydice's departure, the Chorus and the Messenger comment on her silence and her avoidance to lament in public, the latter concluding that "too much silence holds too many secrets" (34); unlike Sophocles' Eurydice, though, Morrison's was already given the chance to mourn in public, when singing her ballad.

symbolic in modern terms. In this case, the detail as to *how* her son died does not seem to matter more than the event of his death itself. Interestingly, what Morrison puts in rather violent terms, since his Eurydice “drives the blade into her heart”, Heaney describes as an action natural as a ‘burial’, as his Eurydice ‘buries’ her sword in her heart. For this ‘burial’ Creon has much of the responsibility, and the metaphor very nicely underlines the relationship of cause and effect between Creon’s policy and the fate of his family. Eurydice is an ‘*αυτόχειρ*’, she kills herself with her own hand, the Messenger announces; but Creon knows that it was he that killed the mother of his son. Heaney adds another detail that serves to further establish Creon’s responsibility for her death: it is Creon’s sword that Heaney’s Eurydice uses, the one that she takes from its scabbard, upon listening to how Haemon stabbed himself. Eurydice is more decisive and more effective than Creon and faster to figure out when the right moment for a ‘burial’ is; thus, she further exposes her husband’s incompetence and frustration in the end as he was the one who left his dead nephew unburied and his niece buried alive.

As the above discussion demonstrates, despite the fact that all six rewritings of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in Ireland were produced within a period of only two decades - apart from the range of inevitable similarities - there are substantial differences in the way each writer translates not only the Sophoclean diction and register but also the mythic element of the play and the characters’ motives. Since this chapter is primarily an introduction to the texts as texts and a first approach to different choices made by individual writers, more specific treatment of the effects created by the different choices will be explored in the chapters that follow



## CHAPTER 2

### “ODDLY RELEVANT TO THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES”<sup>221</sup>:

#### *ANTIGONE AND IRISH POLITICS, 1984 - 2004*

“‘Tragedy’ is a term frequently used to describe the contemporary Northern Irish situation. It is applied both by newspaper headline writers trying to express the sense of futility and loss at the brutal extinction of individual lives and by commentators attempting to convey a sense of the country and its history in more general terms,” Shaun Richards suggests, also noting that “‘tragedy’ [...] as both a descriptive term and a theatrical form, conveys an image of the North as the House of Atreus”.<sup>222</sup> Regardless of political affiliations and the different perspectives that these entail, the term with its contemporary meaning describing “an event causing great suffering, destruction and distress”,<sup>223</sup> has often been used by writers on both sides of the border: Dermot Keogh in his biography of Jack Lynch, Taoiseach from 1966 to 1973 and then from 1977 to 1979, describes Northern Ireland as a “tragedy foretold”,<sup>224</sup> Ken Wharton, recording the experiences of the British troops in the North, also sees Northern Ireland as a “tragedy just waiting to happen; but [...] a tragedy,

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<sup>221</sup> O’Toole (2003).

<sup>222</sup> Richards (1995: 191-2); the association between tragedy and the Northern Irish conflict seems to be a popular opening of the discussion: Richards, in this article, also gives examples of two quotations relating the two. Younger (2006) also borrows Richards’ statement to start his article, again offering two different quotations from newspaper articles to make his point.

<sup>223</sup> *OED* (2003 [1998]: 1870).

<sup>224</sup> As Keogh (2008: 152) writes, “if Northern Ireland was a tragedy foretold, little was done by the Government or by the media to prepare for likely developments and for the impact that they might have on the South”.

nonetheless”.<sup>225</sup> In other instances, the term assumes theatrical connotations: “despite the explosions in Birmingham, Guildford, Aldershot and London, the real tragedy of Northern Ireland was of course primarily played out in the province”,<sup>226</sup> Turner writes, while Kearney compares the hunger strikers with “some chorus in an ancient tragedy chanting Gaelic phrases and prayers”.<sup>227</sup> A variety of titles of books also relate the events in the North with the contemporary use of the term. In some of them the tragedy (or in one instance ‘near tragedy’) is described as Irish, Northern-Irish or Anglo - Irish, according to the perspective: *Bobby Sands and the Tragedy of Northern Ireland*,<sup>228</sup> *A Long Way to Go, An Anglo - Irish Near Tragedy?*,<sup>229</sup> *An Irish Tragedy, Britain’s Disgrace*,<sup>230</sup> *Communities without Consensus: The Northern Tragedy*.<sup>231</sup> In other titles, again related to Northern Ireland, it becomes *The Tragedy of Belief*<sup>232</sup> or a *Tragedy of Errors*”,<sup>233</sup> pointing more towards the mistakes made and their disastrous effects, rather than placing the blame on one side or the other. Bowyer Bell, in a series of articles, describes the violence in the North again in theatrical terms: ‘The Chroniclers of Violence in Northern Ireland Revisited: The Analysis of Tragedy’,<sup>234</sup> published in 1974 and, two years later, ‘The Chroniclers of Violence in Northern Ireland: A Tragedy in Endless Acts’.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Wharton (2008: 497).

<sup>226</sup> Turner (2008: 74).

<sup>227</sup> Witoszek and Sheeran (1998: 36).

<sup>228</sup> Feehan (1983).

<sup>229</sup> Armitage (1989).

<sup>230</sup> Unknown (1984).

<sup>231</sup> Daly (1984).

<sup>232</sup> Fulton (1991).

<sup>233</sup> Bloomfield (2007).

<sup>234</sup> Bell (1974).

<sup>235</sup> Bell (1976).

The link between tragedy and the Northern Irish conflict is, however, more than a lexical device; in practice, the turbulence in the North accounts to a large degree for the particular flourishing of the genre over the last two decades of the twentieth century. But though the specifics of Irish political history play a fundamental role in the reception of tragedy in Ireland, the connection between tragedy and politics goes back almost to the roots of the genre. Athenian tragedy predates the developed democracy of the fifth century, since “some kind of tragic drama seems to have been developed and officially recognised several decades earlier during the relatively benign and populist rule of the aristocratic dictator Peisistratus (c. 545-528)”.<sup>236</sup> Even if tragedy originated before the democracy, however, it evolved to its final form during it. Understandably, therefore, the degree to which and the ways in which Greek tragedy was originally politically oriented is an issue that has produced fierce debate among scholars. Goldhill argues that “the festival of the Great Dionysia is in the full sense of the expression a civic occasion, a city festival [...] an occasion to say something about the city”,<sup>237</sup> making a distinction between “intention (explicit or implicit) and ‘function’”,<sup>238</sup> he elaborates that “the festival itself, in organization and structure, despite earlier origins and later development, is in the fifth century fully an institution of the democratic polis, and that the plays constantly reflect their genesis in a fifth-century Athenian political environment”.<sup>239</sup> Similarly, Seaford points out that aesthetic pleasure, far from excluding the political implications of the genre, is a

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<sup>236</sup> Cartledge (2007 [1997]: 3).

<sup>237</sup> Goldhill (1990: 114).

<sup>238</sup> Goldhill (2000: 38).

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. 35; Burian, (2007 [1997]: 206) also writes that “the rise of tragedy as an art-form gave Athens a powerful instrument for the celebration, criticism, and redefining of its institutions and ideals, for examining the tensions between heroic legend and democratic ideology, and for discussing political and moral questions. The civic role was intensified and focused by the continuity and concentration of tragic production”.

prerequisite for it;<sup>240</sup> in support of what he sees as the political - and democratic - character of tragedy, he suggests that “Plato bans tragedy from his ideal state because in stark contrast to G. [Griffin], he believes that tragedy produces not just ‘individual’ pleasure but important *political* consequences”.<sup>241</sup> Griffin, on the other hand, in response to Goldhill (among others), minimizes the political character of tragedy, laying more emphasis on its aesthetic pleasure and its larger ethical and emotional dimension, as well as on the role of the gods in the genre.<sup>242</sup> He does not completely deny any link between tragedy and history: rather he detects it “not in the subfusc area of political institutions, but in dramatic confrontations, great temptations, and terrible crimes”.<sup>243</sup> P. J. Rhodes also limits the connection between tragedy and democracy: he makes a clear distinction between the terms ‘political’ and ‘democratic’, and argues that “the institutional framework within which the plays were performed [has been] a polis framework more than a democratic framework”, thus seeing “Athenian drama as reflecting the *polis* in general rather than the democratic *polis* in particular”.<sup>244</sup> Even if this is the case, however, what Rhodes rejects is the connection between tragedy and its immediate political context, and not the political character of the genre altogether. The truth about the relationship between democracy and tragedy is likely to lie somewhere in between: tragedy does explore issues of interest to the Athenians, but these are not exclusively Athenian issues.<sup>245</sup> This lack of explicit topicality accounts to a significant degree for the huge number of new interpretations and for the constant exploration of the

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<sup>240</sup> Seaford (2000: 32).

<sup>241</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>242</sup> Griffin (1998: 55-57, 60).

<sup>243</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>244</sup> Rhodes (2003: 119).

<sup>245</sup> See also Carey (2007).

genre's political potential by different writers, scholars, translators and directors from around the globe; understandably, therefore, Goldhill attests that the interest is "likely to continue, and to continue with its current intensity"; "this", he adds, "is, however, *one* reason why the study of tragedy continues to be particularly worthwhile in the current academy, and why we should be engaged in it".<sup>246</sup>

While "the use of Greek tragedy as political commentary [...] [is] traced to the ancients",<sup>247</sup> as a practice it extends to modern-day versions, since contemporary revisitations cannot be dissociated from contemporary politics either. Hall comments that the late twentieth century has reawakened the political potential of the genre, many plays having subsequently "been appropriated to serve diverse political causes".<sup>248</sup> Morrison associates the adaptation of Greek plays with their "raw power, the cold truth, the uncomfortable reality",<sup>249</sup> also commenting that "classics can reach us at any time, but we reach out to them more eagerly at times of crisis, as if to put our own troubles in a broader perspective".<sup>250</sup>

### **Sophocles' *Antigone* and Politics**

Sophocles' *Antigone* has been a political play from the start, in its Athenian context. "Of course almost all theatre is ultimately political in the broadest sense of that word,

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<sup>246</sup> Goldhill (2000: 56).

<sup>247</sup> McDonald (2003:158).

<sup>248</sup> Hall (2005: 18).

<sup>249</sup> Morrison (2010: 253).

<sup>250</sup> Ibid. 259.

insofar as it provides us with an insight into human society”.<sup>251</sup> The political character of this particular play, however, extends beyond that: “of all Sophocles’ tragedies *Antigone* is the most overtly political, in that it directly confronts problems involved in running a *polis*, a city - state”.<sup>252</sup> Woodruff relates the political dimensions of the play on the one hand with the burial theme - which will be examined shortly - and on the other with Athenian democracy: “Antigone’s refusal to obey Creon, though not part of a democratic uprising, will bring on the final catastrophe for the royal family, proving to the survivors that leadership must be tempered by advice from those who are led”.<sup>253</sup> A further evidence of the use of the play in a civic context is Demosthenes’ *False Embassy* speech against Aeschines, in which he includes part of Creon’s opening speech, one “regarded in antiquity as a model of statesmanship”.<sup>254</sup> As the story goes,

“Demosthenes’ great rival, Aeschines, had been an actor before turning to oratory; and one of his more notable roles had been Creon in *Antigone*. In order to bait his opponent about his deficiencies in citizenship, Demosthenes ordered that the “ship of state” speech be read over to Aeschines to remind him of the duties of a true statesman. Demosthenes’ tactic would lack point unless Creon’s speech were regarded by the average fourth-century audience as an idealistic statement of principle. [...] Demosthenes might even have seen a deeper similarity between Sophocles’ tyrant and “Creon-Aeschines”: both the dramatic

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<sup>251</sup> Nowlan (1984); Grant (1996: 205), on the other hand, argues that “still, to claim any poem is political is equivalent to claiming any human action is political, and this might soon dissolve and weaken the meaning of politics”.

<sup>252</sup> Hall (1994: xvi).

<sup>253</sup> Woodruff (2001: xi).

<sup>254</sup> Ringer (1998: 69).

character and the ex-actor have a fine patriotic speech in their “repertory” that only serves to illustrate their inner hollowness as politicians and as men”.<sup>255</sup>

In its modern productions, *Antigone* has also been repeatedly political, occupying a prominent position among the tragedies whose modern renderings are most of the time politically charged. Goldhill notes that “no play of the ancient world has been produced as often in modern times as Sophocles’ *Antigone*”, attributing its popularity to “political questions of citizenship and power” which it brings to the fore.<sup>256</sup> It has not been always so, though; despite the fact that the politics of *Antigone* was a major focus in the nineteenth century as well, there were also stagings in modern history dissociated from the politics of the time: “it was clearly not any contemporary political message”, Macintosh writes, “that led to the *Antigone*’s continuous success when it was seen in Paris at the Odéon in 1844 and in London at Covent Garden at the beginning of 1845. It was the authenticity of the staging and the costumes, together with the use of speech and song in serious drama, which captured the audiences’ imaginations”.<sup>257</sup> The exploitation of the myth in order to tackle political realities seems rather to be a trend that developed in the twentieth century. In a review of Morrison’s play in 2003, Fintan O’Toole writes:

“In times of trouble, when the relationship between political loyalty and individual conscience is at stake, there seems to be an irresistible urge to return to Sophocles’s *Antigone*. Most 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts, from the first World War to

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<sup>255</sup> Ringer (1998: 69).

<sup>256</sup> Goldhill (2007: 135).

<sup>257</sup> Macintosh (2007 [1997]: 287-288).

the rise of fascism, strung some major playwright into a revision of this great survival from the fourth century BC. *Antigone* exerts this continuing fascination because it can be adapted to an infinite variety of political purposes. The flexibility comes from its ferocious simplicity: the immovable object against the irresistible force”.<sup>258</sup>

The battle of the individual to assert himself in a hostile and autocratic political environment accounts to a significant degree for the popularity of the play around the world during challenging times. Four of the most well known political readings are Hasenclever's (1917), Anouilh's (1944), Brecht's (1948) and Athol Fugard's *The Island* (1973). The first one was written during World War I. Anouilh's was written during World War II and Brecht's in its aftermath, each of the two dramatists bringing something new to the myth. In Anouilh, “the central concentration of the drama on the supreme moment of choice provided a powerful link with the preoccupations of Existentialist theatre”.<sup>259</sup> “Existentialists reject the emphasis placed by rationalists [such as Descartes and Hegel] on the human being as primarily a thinking being. Many existentialists hold that freedom, not thinking, is ontologically prior when relating to human existence”;<sup>260</sup> Antigone in Anouilh is a free-thinker who “still elects to die as an expression of personal rebellion against the values of bourgeois society”.<sup>261</sup> Brecht's, written as an example of the ‘epic theatre’ that he introduced as opposed to the principles of the Aristotelian drama, becomes for him a platform “to reassess the role of art in the postwar era *and* to carve out a

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<sup>258</sup> O’Toole (2003).

<sup>259</sup> Bradby (1991: 36).

<sup>260</sup> Gordon (1999: xi).

<sup>261</sup> Wiles (2000: 63).



role for himself as a committed artist”.<sup>262</sup> Hall acknowledges the importance of these two versions, arguing that “Brecht’s *Antigone* (an adaptation of Hölderlin’s translation), like Anouilh’s, has always been one of the more important avenues by which audiences have approached Greek tragedy”.<sup>263</sup> What these two plays have in common is that both writers express their political concerns through the myth in a post-war background: “in occupied Paris during the Second World War, Jean Anouilh created, beneath a radical veneer, a ‘boulevard’ version of the play which demonstrates the futility of political engagement”.<sup>264</sup> Brecht, on the other hand, “took a more pointed political stance when he adapted *Antigone* in Switzerland in 1948 [...] his interpretation [being] based in contemporary politics and Marxist theory. Brecht’s Creon was a Hitler, an ambitious tyrant murdering his way to power. Antigone’s defiance showed how the individual could resist totalitarianism”.<sup>265</sup> The preoccupations might be the same; the perspective, however, is completely different, and *Antigone* is adapted accordingly to fit both. Decades later, in 1973, Fugard writes a play centering on the Antigone myth but unfolding on Robben Island, South Africa; *The Island*, first staged in Cape Town, South Africa, “became an icon for its denunciation of the brutality and injustice of the apartheid regime. It is a play of particular historical specificity - enhanced by Nelson Mandela’s role as Creon in the Robben Island performance on which it draws”.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Taxidou (2008: 245).

<sup>263</sup> Hall (2010: 333).

<sup>264</sup> Wiles (2000: 63).

<sup>265</sup> Green (1994: 43); Fuegi (1987:101) also reports that Brecht “clearly saw Kreon as Hitler and [...] the ways in which Polynices and Eteocles are killed (one by Kreon’s own hands) as a direct reflection of Hitler’s attack on Stalingrad”; see also Naish (1991: 194-195).

<sup>266</sup> Hardwick (2005: 238); according to Goldhill (2007: 135), “*Antigone* was, Mandela tells us, one of his favorite books in his long imprisonment, and subsequently history has made this all too poignant”.

Over the past decades several different politically oriented adaptations of *Antigone* have been written and staged around the globe: Gavran's *Creon's Antigone* (1990) “reflects the fear of people who live with a dictator and secret police. [...] This is no one’s tragedy, except the country’s [Yugoslavia’s]”,<sup>267</sup> Kapur's *The Antigone Project* (2003) “uses a Greek myth to depict the Gujarat holocaust”,<sup>268</sup> Sabata's *Giants: A South African Antigone* (2001) “conflates the story of Antigone with Hodova, an African legend”.<sup>269</sup> On several occasions the translated play has been set in very diverse areas: Lee's (1995) in South Africa,<sup>270</sup> Dickerson’s (1998) in 1930s Kenya, “with ancient Thebes transformed into a British-occupied African colony”,<sup>271</sup> Mason’s *Burial at Thebes* (2008) vaguely in the 1940s Greek civil war.<sup>272</sup> The National Theatre of Greece staged *Antigone* in 1975 - just after the collapse of the military junta and the restoration of democracy in the country - in the Herodes Atticus Theatre at the slope of the Acropolis, directed by Alexis Solomos. At the moment of completing this thesis, in March 2011, the Italian theatrical company *Motus*, founded by Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò, presents in Paris the play *Alexis, Une Tragédie Grecque*, inspired by the violent events that took place in Athens in December 2008, after a 15-year old boy, Alexis Grigoropoulos, was killed by a police officer; the play is, again, roughly based on the Antigone myth. The company “chose Bertolt Brecht’s very political *Antigone* written (in 1947) by the playwright to show “the importance of resorting to force when the State becomes

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<sup>267</sup> McDonald (2003: 84).

<sup>268</sup> G. R. (2003).

<sup>269</sup> McDonald (2001).

<sup>270</sup> Mezzabotta (1995).

<sup>271</sup> Lapinski (1998).

<sup>272</sup> Mason - K.G. (2008).

decadent”.<sup>273</sup> From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, *Antigone* has thus become “the resistance icon, hence the revival of the play at moments of protest in France, South Africa, or the Ireland of 1984”.<sup>274</sup>

With such a long and rich history of political readings, it is not surprising that *Antigone* appealed in Ireland in 1984 - given the turbulent period that had preceded in the country. The Troubles - a term “generally understood to refer to a murderous dispute which, for the past quarter of a century only, has come to involve the English and the Irish in a sectarian quarrel in the north-eastern part of Ireland commonly, but erroneously, referred to as ‘Ulster’”<sup>275</sup> - and the violence and the bloodshed that it entailed was all too fresh in Irish people’s minds. At the culmination of this period, the death of ten Hunger Strikers in Long Kesh<sup>276</sup> radicalised the Nationalists and further polarised the already tense political atmosphere. Sophocles’ *Antigone*, with its central character appearing from the ashes of a civil war and resisting the austerity of the State, is a play that - although roughly ignored by the Irish until that time - had at that point a lot to say about Ireland. Part of its political immediacy was the issue of the burial of the dead that is tackled in the play, a theme not alien to the Irish.

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<sup>273</sup> “Motus a choisi l'*Antigone* très politique de Bertolt Brecht écrite (en 1947) par le dramaturge allemand pour montrer *“la signification du recours à la force quand l'Etat tombe en décadence”*. Darge (2011).

<sup>274</sup> Walton (2002: 23).

<sup>275</sup> Coogan (2002: 1).

<sup>276</sup> The Nationalist paramilitary prisoners were demanding ‘special status’, but “IRA insistence on ‘special status’ was met with a steely rejection by the authorities. Refusal to wear prison garb resulted in a removal of privileges such as access to reading matter, television or radio. It also meant that prisoners were confined to their cells twenty-four hours a day. As the authorities tightened the screw and allegedly indulged in routine roughing-up of the prisoners (many wardens were flown in from Britain on temporary contract) the IRA prisoners responded by refusing to wash or shower. The ‘no-wash protest’ escalated into the ‘dirty protest’” [Bartlett (2010: 523)], which eventually led to the commencement of hunger strikes.

## **The burial of the dead and its political implications in Ireland**

*Antigone* “is a truly haunted play”, Kennelly writes; “the presence of the dead in the hearts and minds of the living is a fierce, driving and endlessly powerful force”.<sup>277</sup> It is not surprising, then, that this play became popular in a country where the presence of the dead is always haunting too, death, burial and sacrifice being issues Irish people are familiar with. In Seamus Heaney's words:

“the word ‘burial’ here still has deep roots in the common culture, a funeral or a burial. It’s a word that even hasn’t been secularised totally elsewhere. I’m not sure, maybe in America if you say ‘burial’ in the acoustic of United States English, it may not have the same purchase as it has certainly in Greece; I’m sure whatever the word is in Greek [it] still pulls [...] community and pulls ritual and pulls family and it does that in Ireland also”.<sup>278</sup>

There is something deeply humane about a burial and this is what the poet seeks to accentuate by changing the title into *Burial at Thebes*: “in my own case I think the change of the title gave me energy. Because it gave it anthropological purchase, so I say. It took it out of the realm of talking heads arguing issues [...] and it brought it right back to something primal and still at issue”.<sup>279</sup> Heaney also confesses that he was thinking of producing a new version of Sophocles' *Ajax* that he would call *Beach*

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<sup>277</sup> McDonald (2005b: 128).

<sup>278</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2005).

<sup>279</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2005); Meaney (2004) also writes that “flesh and dust are called to mind by the title of Seamus Heaney’s new version of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, emphasizing the Greek playwright’s preoccupation with burial rites, with ancient ritual”.

*Burial* (as the second play of a diptych, after *Burial at Thebes*), since in this play too the burial issue is a central one.<sup>280</sup>

Apart from the anthropological and religious implications that burial has for the Irish, it may have political resonances, too - especially when it involves burial of war dead, an issue not alien in Irish history. It should not be overlooked that the conflict in the Sophoclean play is over the body of a war dead. As Morrison writes:

“*Antigone* has had many different treatments down the years. But what struck me in 2003 was that it’s a play about bodies. After the Somme, the Nazi Holocaust, Cambodia and Rwanda, we have, understandably, become fixated by images of the war dead - and preoccupied with the dignities and indignities of their disposal. Article 17 of the Geneva Conventions in respect of the war dead states that they should be ‘honourably interred’, according to their religion, and that any possessions found on them be placed in ‘sealed packets’, so that they can be identified. We know such standards haven’t been met in Iraq or in many other wars. The ethos of Creon - that the enemy, deserving no better, be left to jackals and vultures (including the jackals and vultures of the media) - is hard to dislodge”.<sup>281</sup>

Burying the war dead is a political issue - that reinforces the political implications of the burial in *Antigone* - but is not particular to Ireland. As Macintosh argues, “it is history above all that has enabled these rituals to assume a political significance

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<sup>280</sup> Id.

<sup>281</sup> Morrison (2010: 259).

in Ireland far removed from any religious doctrine”.<sup>282</sup> In twentieth-century Irish history, the burial is directly associated with significant political events. Funerals of political figures - mainly related to the IRA - have offered an opportunity for huge crowds to gather and express their political sentiments: in 1920 the coffin of the hunger striker (and Mayor of Cork) Terence MacSwiney was initially taken by boat from London to Dublin; for the fear of the upcoming street demonstrations and after a scuffle with the dead man’s sister Anne clinging to the coffin, the British authorities put the coffin back into the boat and directed it straight to Cork to be buried. Arrests and rioting in the streets followed hunger striker Joe McDonnell’s funeral in July 1981; more than 100,000 people attended Bobby Sands’ funeral in Belfast in the same year.<sup>283</sup> “Recognizing the pervasiveness of martyrdom as a social metaphor”, Harris suggests, however, “is not saying that the Irish worship death - a frequent accusation - but rather that they celebrate committed, meaningful life - noble death being just one aspect of that life”.<sup>284</sup> Such a reference to the ‘noble dead’ is made by Kennelly’s Antigone: “I have more love for the noble dead than for the ambitious living” (10), says she to Creon, the diction that she employs bringing her close to two of the most influential female figures of the Easter rising:

“Grief for the noble dead

Of one who did not share their strife,

And mourned that any blood was shed,

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<sup>282</sup> Macintosh (1994: 30).

<sup>283</sup> See Harris’ (1988: 256) account of Sands’ burial.

<sup>284</sup> Harris (1988: 255).

Yet felt the broken glory of their state,  
Their strange heroic questioning of Fate  
Ribbon with gold the rags of this our life”,<sup>285</sup>

writes Eva Gore-Booth, in her famous poem ‘Easter Week’. Her sister, Constance Markievicz, an activist and the first female MP to be elected to Westminster, was also appointed minister for Labour in the first Irish Rebel Parliament, Dáil Éireann, set up by De Valera. In a Dáil’s public session in 1922, Markievicz poses the question: “where would Ireland stand without the noble dead?”<sup>286</sup>

Witoszek lists a number of instances in Irish history where mock funerals were also performed as part of political protests, the most recent of which in 1986: “on 3 March, 1986, Unionist protesters against the Anglo - Irish Agreement carried mock coffins on a bitterly ironic march “To bury democracy”, organised outside Belfast City Hall. North or South, a coffin or a cortège seems to be a *sine qua non* of political protest”.<sup>287</sup> The funeral, she suggests, becomes a nationalist statement for the Provisional IRA,<sup>288</sup> though she notes that the cult of death was also at the heart of Unionism.<sup>289</sup> The pain and the outrage for the death of someone who has given his

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<sup>285</sup> ‘Easter Week’, in Gore-Booth (1933: 76).

<sup>286</sup> Dáil Éireann Public Session (1922).

<sup>287</sup> Witoszek (1998: 34).

<sup>288</sup> “The provisional IRA have done most to revive and augment the failing fortunes of the funeral as nationalist statement. At some point in the late seventies, the graveside orations of Sinn Féin leaders, funerary processions and the reading out of clandestine messages from the prisons, became part of a *perpetuum mobile* revolving around death and sacrifice. They pointed to a mystical - religious tradition of renewal through death which operated with a mythic logic wherein defeat was victory and past was ever-present”. Ibid.34.

<sup>289</sup> “The cult of death is not the exclusive property of Republican myth-makers. That it also exists at the heart of Unionism - though much less developed and of more recent origin - is confirmed by

life for a political cause are thus expectedly magnified when the official authorities prevent his burial.

Heaney's lecture 'Title Deeds: Translating a Classic' starts off with an incident that took place in the village of Toomebridge in 1981, where the family of Francis Hughes, IRA prisoner who had died after fifty nine days of hunger strikes,<sup>290</sup> was demanding to be given the dead body. Heaney, employing the Irish word *dúchas*, refers to "a sense that something inviolate had been assailed by the state", and draws parallels between the old Greek myth and his country's recent experiences: "if we wanted [...] to find a confrontation that paralleled the confrontation between [Antigone] and King Creon we could hardly do better than the incident on the street in Toomebridge that I've just recounted".<sup>291</sup> Pat Murphy's film *Anne Devlin* starts off with a scene where the British authorities prevent the free passage of a burial procession; it is primarily due to this scene<sup>292</sup> that the film, also released in 1984, has been described as the fourth Antigone.<sup>293</sup> Indicative of the importance that the burial

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the speeches and writings of the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, Ian Paisley. His doctrine of martyrdom is based on the assumption that the "true faith is a martyred faith" and that the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians. (Paisley's own Church is, of course, The Martyr's Memorial Church)". Ibid. 35.

<sup>290</sup> According to Witoszek (1998: 35), "the most striking example of the premeditated, tactical use of death and its associated symbols [...] part and parcel of a culture in which the dead and the would-be dead can exert considerable pressure on the living and can therefore be turned into an instrument of personal or political blackmail" have been the hunger strikes. The memory of the prolonged hunger strikes in 1981 and the pain that they left behind were so fresh and haunting six years later, that Heaney anachronistically includes in his *The Cure at Troy*, his version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, an image of "a hunger striker's father [who] stands in the graveyard dumb", alongside one of a "police widow in wails [who] faints at the funeral home" Heaney (1990: 77) - both victims of the polarization and violence of the time; however, Hardwick (2006: 211) notes that "references to the bereaved in the Troubles also attracted criticism and were cut from some later performances".

<sup>291</sup> Heaney (2004: 413).

<sup>292</sup> Roche (1988: 248).

<sup>293</sup> Paulin (2002: 165); McDonald (2005b: 126); Younger (2006: 153, 156); Roche (1988: 247-249); O'Toole (2003).



has for the Irish is the fact that Heaney himself sees his change of the title into *Burial at Thebes* as his “contribution to an Irish understanding of the play”.<sup>294</sup>

### ***Antigone in Ireland and Politics***

The interest in the Antigone myth in Ireland has been primarily from a political point of view rather than an aesthetic one, since the play has been recruited to serve different readings of Irish and international politics and has been hotly contested as a result. According to Terence Brown, “the conflict which the play dramatises, between *real-politik* and unyielding principle, between the social requirement that order be maintained and the absolute demands of ancestral piety is a conflict made painfully real in many of the crises that have challenged the nation in the recent past”.<sup>295</sup> Writer and politician Conor Cruise O’Brien, in his controversial and debate-inciting essay ‘Civil Rights: The Crossroads’<sup>296</sup> reports that in 1968 he gave a lecture at Queen’s University, Belfast, the main point of which being that “civil disobedience in Northern Ireland was likely to prove an effective lever for social change”. He also reproduces in the same essay an article about civil disobedience that he published at the same time,<sup>297</sup> in which he addressed the issue, employing Antigone terms. It is this very conflict of the Sophoclean play that accounts also for the numerous representations of the play since 1984.<sup>298</sup> Olwen Fouéré, the protagonist in Mathews’ *Antigone*, suggests that the importance of the play lies is

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<sup>294</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2005).

<sup>295</sup> Brown (1986: 52).

<sup>296</sup> O’ Brien (1972: 152-159).

<sup>297</sup> The article was published in the *Listener*, London, on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1968.

<sup>298</sup> Harding (1986) writes that “in the space of about two years, Dublin has seen a Bogside civil rights Antigone from Field Day, a post-nuclear Antigone at the Project, a Robben Island Antigone from Athol Fugard and now this new version from poet Brendan Kennelly”.

making “your own statement in your own voice”, and being “true to what you believe”;<sup>299</sup> she also associates the young heroine with Bernadette Devlin,<sup>300</sup> an influential civil rights activist in the 1970s and the youngest woman ever to be elected at Westminster in 1969, at the age of twenty-two. Several writers and actors also associate Bernadette with Antigone, making her a resistance icon like the Sophoclean heroine, among them Seamus Heaney, who describes her as “the kind of firebrand young socialist- Marxist, Republican and [...] Antigone figure”,<sup>301</sup> as well as Conall Morrison<sup>302</sup>, Marianne McDonald,<sup>303</sup> Stephen Wilmer<sup>304</sup> and actor Barry McGovern.<sup>305</sup> Roche also comments that Devlin “steps into a role which could have been written for her, a strikingly young and impassioned woman standing up against the oppressive, patriarchal institutions of Stormont and Westminster”.<sup>306</sup>

Antigone’s name has even been applied to Esther Rafferty, the sister of Joseph Rafferty, a man “who was gunned down in Dublin nearly one year ago [ in 2005] by a member of the Irish Republican Army”. In an article that appeared online on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006,<sup>307</sup> Esther is described as “an Irish Antigone, a fearless woman who is applying the eternal principles of morality to her brother’s tragic death”. Describing someone as Antigone on the grounds that she “believes that justice will only be served once the person responsible for killing Joseph has been successfully

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<sup>299</sup> Fouéré - K.G. (2006).

<sup>300</sup> Id.

<sup>301</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2005).

<sup>302</sup> Morrison - K.G. (2006).

<sup>303</sup> McDonald (2005).

<sup>304</sup> Wilmer (2007: 239).

<sup>305</sup> McGovern - K.G. (2006).

<sup>306</sup> Roche (1988: 223).

<sup>307</sup> Skelly (2006).

prosecuted and sentenced to a lengthy prison term”, is a little close to hyperbole, since the sister’s reaction to speak up under such circumstances is neither unexpected nor surprising, and she runs no significant risk in doing so, which is an essential dimension of Antigone’s action. The article progresses from an emotional text about the deceased and his family, to vivid praise of George W. Bush and eventually to explicit political propaganda. The same hyperbole is evident elsewhere in the article:

“President Bush reveals his moral depth, he grasps how one of the fundamental lessons of Sophocles’ *Antigone* applies to this case: in a democracy the purpose of the state is to safeguard the dignity of each and every individual. [...] President Bush’s comportment will send the message that in a democracy it is the individual that matters most, that each and every victim of terrorism, whether in Dublin, New York, Baghdad or Bali, has been subjected to evil forces contrary to the moral foundations of civilization. [...] This Saint’s Patrick’s Day<sup>308</sup> Americans face a choice: to follow President Bush’s humane example and help the Rafferty family shatter the wall of silence surrounding Joseph’s murder, or be cowed by the modern-day, Irish versions of Kreon, who, just as he did in Thebes, terrorize their people and deny justice to the innocent”.

The demonisation of Creon as part of Skelly’s propaganda is apparent: with Creon demonized in most recent Irish versions of *Antigone*, Skelly establishes a distance between Bush and Creon, dissociating their deeds. He might already have been

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<sup>308</sup> According to the article, Bush was planning to meet with the family of the deceased “and other victims of Irish terrorism” on Saint Patrick’s Day.

aware, though, when writing the article in 2006 that the authors of those versions, especially Heaney, had directly associated the Creon that they produced with Bush himself, as we will see. But hyperbolic or not, this instance testifies both to the continuing potency of the myth in an Irish context and to the opportunities for flexible use.

*Antigone* was one of the central readings in Ireland during the turbulent period of the 1960s, according to Heaney;<sup>309</sup> the poet also gives the following account of his early experience with *Antigone* and the imprint that it left on him:

“I taught *Antigone* to college students in a Belfast teacher-training college in 1963. I talked about it in relation to Aristotle and Greek tragedy. Five years later, in October 1968, I read Conor Cruise O’Brien in the *Listener* using *Antigone* to illuminate the conflict in Northern Ireland - the conflict that is within individuals as well as within the society. *Antigone* and her sister, *Ismene*, represent two opposing impulses that often co-exist: the impulse to protect and rebel and the impulse to conform for the sake of a quiet life. From that moment on *Antigone* was more than a piece of the academic syllabus: it was a lens that helped to inspect reality more clearly”.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2005).

<sup>310</sup> Battersby (2004).

Paulin also recalls the impression made on him by a screening of black and white film of *Antigone* in Belfast in the 1960s, while he was in secondary school;<sup>311</sup> his engagement with the tragedy, however, can be seen “on one level at least [...] as part of the northerner’s ongoing imaginative engagement with O’Brien, a southerner whose intellectual migration from Irish nationalism to Ulster unionism ran in an inverse direction to Paulin’s own political development”.<sup>312</sup> O’Brien, in his - earlier mentioned - article in the *Listener*, sees Antigone, “the trouble-maker from Thebes”, as a threat to the peace in society, “dangerous in her way as Creon, whom she perpetually challenges and provokes”. He also places the responsibility for the tragedy solely on her shoulders, suggesting that “it was Antigone’s free decision, and that alone, which precipitated the tragedy. Creon’s responsibility was the more remote one of having placed this tragic power in the hands of a headstrong child of Oedipus”. He recognizes, however, that “she is an ethical and religious force, an uncompromising element in our being”, a heroine who expresses “the essence of what man’s dignity actually is. In losing it”, O’Brien concludes his article, “man might gain peace at the price of his soul”. In the three years that elapsed between his article in the *Listener* and his essay his views have changed:

“after four years of Antigone and her under-studies and all those funerals - more than a hundred dead at the time of writing [“over four hundred and sixty at the time of going to the press”, as O’Brien himself points out in a footnote] - you

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<sup>311</sup> Paulin (2002: 166) recalls that “it was before the Troubles but my friends and I were sure it was important, so we went and saw the film at eleven one night and walked back through the dark streets talking about it. All I remember now is Antigone being walled in the cave”. As he notes in a footnote this was *Antigone* by George Tzavellas (1962), starring Irene Papas.

<sup>312</sup> Cleary (1999: 525).

begin to feel that Ismene's commonsense and feeling for the living may make the more needful, if less spectacular element in 'human dignity'".<sup>313</sup>

The two different readings, even on the part of the same writer within such a short period of time, give a rough idea of how the socio-political circumstances affect the way a writer sees and evaluates the characters' actions. We will encounter such shifts again below, when it comes to examining the early and the later versions of Irish *Antigones* - produced at different moments of Irish history, with serious events and social changes having taken place in between.

Paulin's response to O'Brien was fierce; in his polemic, and at times ironical, essay 'The Making of a Loyalist' he suggests that "[O'Brien's] sympathies [...] lay with the status quo" and finds it "crucial to recognise how badly he misinterprets the play".<sup>314</sup>

"Creon [...] is both individual and institution, yet he appears to be more an institution, while Antigone, like St Joan, appears as an individual ahead of her supporters. She is 'headstrong' and therefore more responsible because she can supposedly exercise choice. So Creon is rendered almost innocent by his immobile precedence, his simply being there. This is a severe distortion of the tragic conflict".<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> O' Brien (1972: 159).

<sup>314</sup> Paulin (1984: 27).

<sup>315</sup> Paulin (1984: 28).

The use of the adverb ‘supposedly’ that Paulin - so committed to resistance - interestingly employs, tacitly suggests that there are indeed limitations as to what one can achieve. Not having lost his activist’s mindset, though, in the same year and in response to this debate, he also produces his own reading of the play for the Field Day, in which - in marked contrast to O’ Brien - all the responsibility weighs exclusively on Creon’s shoulders: “Creon’s final collapse - the death of Antigone, the suicide of his son, the suicide of his wife - are seen in Paulin’s play as the result of Creon’s own stance, the flaws of which are revealed by Antigone’s opposition”.<sup>316</sup> Paulin also rebukes in his play O’Brien’s reading that “it was the Irish Antigone (Bernadette Devlin McAliskey) who had brought all that woe to the Unionist State”,<sup>317</sup> as O’Brien implied. The link between *Antigone* and contemporary politics is thus immediate in several respects: Julie Barber, administrator of Field Day at that time, writes to Kevin McCaul of the Derry City Council on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1984: “ANTIGONE may seem rather an odd choice but it is a play about justice and power and is as relevant to Northern Ireland in 1980s as it was to Greece in 400 BC. It’s amazing to realise how little human behavior has actually changed”.<sup>318</sup>

Paulin’s intervention against O’Brien signals a significant change in the role of *Antigone* in Ireland. Though in retrospect the potential of the play in the Irish context seems obvious, in fact, up until that point interest had largely been confined to the schoolroom; after 1984, however, Antigone’s destiny changes, the play becoming the

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<sup>316</sup> Goldhill (2007: 143).

<sup>317</sup> Deane (2002: 153).

<sup>318</sup> Barber (1984).

most popular Greek tragedy in the country for years to come.<sup>319</sup> We should note, though, that despite several Irish writers' revisitings of *Antigone*, Frank McGuinness - who has already produced his own versions of other Greek tragedies, such as *Hecuba*, *Electra*, *Oedipus* and *Helen* - was never involved with this particular play. When discussing the issue, he explains that he has not been interested in *Antigone*, because "many people did it and many people ruined it, [...] looking for artificial parallels". As he sees it, in the period 1969-1971 *Antigone* was "the proper play for drawing parallels between Greek theatre and Irish society"; he becomes critical, though, both with Irish audiences - which he describes as "inclined to interpret everything in terms of their society, in terms of our war" - and with writers whose parallels are "too crude and obvious", since "the Northern Irish problem was much more complex than that".<sup>320</sup>

Despite their similarities, each of the versions to be examined here is distinctly different from the others. This is partly due to the obvious differences in the writers' origins, experiences and attitudes; it is indicative that three of the writers come from the North (Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney, Conall Morrison) and three of them from the Republic (Brendan Kennelly, Aidan Mathews, Declan Donnellan); two of them now live where they originally come from (Brendan Kennelly, Aidan Mathews), while four of them have moved to another of the three main areas of conflict (Heaney

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<sup>319</sup> Marianne McDonald (2002: 42) notes that Euripides is the most popular playwright in Ireland in the twentieth century, and *Antigone* the most popular play.

<sup>320</sup> McGuinness - K. G. (2006). Contrary to his earlier declarations, though, Macintosh (2011: 90) comments that "McGuinness in 2010 is poised to write two more versions, both based on the Sophoclean tragedy that is rapidly becoming *the* exemplary Irish tragedy". An edited version of McGuinness' interview to Fiona Macintosh can be found at the University of Oxford podcasts (<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/adapting-greek-tragedy-audio>).



and Morrison from Northern Ireland to the Republic, Paulin from Northern Ireland to mainland Britain, while Donnellan had been brought up in mainland Britain, where he lives now, although he is of Irish descent). A second factor that strongly affects the content of each play is the place and the timing of the staging: four out of the six *Antigones* have been first staged in Dublin (Mathews', Kennelly's, Morrison's, Heaney's), one in Derry (Paulin's), and one in London (Donnellan's); three of them were written in 1984 and three of them from 1999 to 2004. Finally, some of the writers mean to give their plays more explicit political undertones than others - although the different ways of interpreting something as 'political' make this categorization less easy to define.

### **Defining Politics**

“The ‘political’ has been variously understood in the context of Northern Irish literature”,<sup>321</sup> Andrews notes, offering a number of examples of different approaches to politics. Reaching a clear, unique and inclusive definition of the term is neither easy nor straightforward; the term ‘political’ is used to describe something “relating to the ideas or strategies of a particular party or group in politics” but also somebody “motivated by [his] beliefs or actions concerning politics”.<sup>322</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary gives many more definitions of the term, but these two are the most relevant here, as they represent the two different ways in which the Irish writers of *Antigone* politicize their plays; the first one addresses more topical issues, the second deals with broader themes and concerns that might still, however, spring from

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<sup>321</sup> Kennedy - Andrews (2003: 26).

<sup>322</sup> OED (2003 [1998]: 1362).

particular contemporary events. Seeing the one or the other as the exclusive way of politicising a play may result in mislabelling it as political or non-political - even by people involved in its creation.

Thus, Michael Scott, the director of and substantial contributor to Mathews' play, claims that he hates theatre that is political and explains: "the reason I loathe a theatre about today is that a play about the Troubles for example will be old in five years' time, while a theatre about myths is universal and will survive forever".<sup>323</sup> The examination of Mathews' play, as will be argued later, does not confirm the suggestion that it does not have political reverberations; on the contrary, it is one of the most politicized ones, "the most political", according to Murray, "in its focus upon repression".<sup>324</sup> What we have here is a problem of definition: Scott narrowly associates political theatre with "theatre about today", i.e. topical theatre. Politics is not to be seen only "as a set of programmes and policies, but as the fundamental set of underlying and informing ideas and attitudes";<sup>325</sup> thus, the lack of immediate, direct or explicit associations with the contemporary political reality does not necessarily make a work of art less political. On the contrary, Fouéré suggests that the theatre is more political when it does not narrow down to one situation.<sup>326</sup> Kevin McHugh, the actor playing Creon in Morrison's *Antigone*, also says that "you reduce the sharpness of the presentation if you make it more particular", thus reducing its

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<sup>323</sup> Scott - K.G. (2006).

<sup>324</sup> Murray (1991: 125).

<sup>325</sup> Richards (1995: 192).

<sup>326</sup> Fouéré - K.G. (2006).

power.<sup>327</sup> Other protagonists, like Barry McGovern and Robert O’Mahoney, are also against overt political allusions.<sup>328</sup> Kennelly and Heaney endorse this perspective; both are hostile to narrowing the focus of a play to deal explicitly with specific moments in time: Kennelly describes this as “simplification of complex situations”;<sup>329</sup> Heaney feels that “these links interfere with the integrity of the thing; people will remember the links with Devlin or Bush, not the play”.<sup>330</sup> He declares himself “temperamentally in favour of stealth and indirection”, describing his philosophy of adaptation in the following terms:

“My philosophy of adaptation would be not to caricature [a play]. I think that for theatre, and this can be true for Athens and it can be true for anywhere in the world, there is an informed first circle which is attuned in a different way; in a first circle of the culture in a language one word like ‘common criminal’ can indicate a whole set of sympathies, you drop one string and the whole harp of associations begins to tremble. So I believe that this is the best way to affect an audience stealthily, rather than bludgeoning them”.<sup>331</sup>

The two poets may be against narrowing a play down to reflect their contemporary society and politics - one also detecting a subtle anxiety on their part not to have their plays categorized as strictly political. The question that emerges, however, is whether they feel that - regardless of their intention - their translations eventually reflect their

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<sup>327</sup> McHugh - K.G. (2006).

<sup>328</sup> McGovern - K.G. (2006); O’Mahoney - K.G.

<sup>329</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

<sup>330</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008).

<sup>331</sup> Id.

contemporary society and politics. At first glance, they seem to contradict themselves as to the influence of politics in their plays. Kennelly claims that politics was not a concern of his while working on *Antigone*,<sup>332</sup> Colm Ó Briain, the director of his play, confirms that “Kennelly didn’t probably have a political note”.<sup>333</sup> In a second interview, a year later, Kennelly insists on what he had previously said, adding, however, that all the recent events in Ireland were nevertheless in his head at the time of writing; he also suggests that the best thing to be done is writing ideas and expressing contemporary concerns unconsciously.<sup>334</sup> Heaney also observes that, as a writer, he completely lacks “a political base” or what he describes as “an activist’s intelligence”,<sup>335</sup> this does not mean, though, that as a poet he operates outside the political framework in which he writes. As he notes in his essay ‘Place and Displacement’:

“That is the first point I want to emphasize: the profound relation here between poetic technique and historical situation. It is a superficial response to the work of Northern Irish poets to conceive of their lyric stances as evasions of the actual conditions [...] The second point to insist on is that the idea of poetry as a symbolic resolution of opposing truths, the idea of the poem as having its existence in a realm separate from the discourse of politics, does not absolve it or the poet from political status. Nobody is going to advocate an ivory-tower address for the poet nor a holier-than-thou attitude. [...] The poet is stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a

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<sup>332</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2005).

<sup>333</sup> Ó Briain - K.G. (2006).

<sup>334</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

<sup>335</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008).

single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions, negatively rather than positively capable”.<sup>336</sup>

The relation between politics and his *Burial at Thebes* in particular has also been commented on by theatre reviewers and actors alike: Battersby writes in the *Irish Times* that “the politics of *Antigone* would never be lost on an artist as politically alert as Seamus Heaney”, also describing his response to the political as “shrewdly subtle”.<sup>337</sup> Kelly Campbell says exactly the same when she notes that Heaney does not force the stories on the audience, does not talk about the North deliberately, but that he still has the North in mind when writing.<sup>338</sup>

This inevitably brings us face to face with the question of intention. The debate about intentionality is too long to deal with in detail here; suffice it to say that issues of political interest may not be there as a writer’s conscious decision, but they may ‘invade’ his work, since he cannot possibly be cut off from his social surroundings. “If we are writing with care, we may deliberate what words are best for doing what we want to do, but deliberating isn’t intending. The interpreter is not trying to recover a mental event; he’s after, rather, the reasons for the author’s having written what he wrote”, Reichert writes, also asserting that “there is no question but that we often do things unintentionally, and that not everything in a work can be explained

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<sup>336</sup> Heaney (1992: 130).

<sup>337</sup> Battersby (2004).

<sup>338</sup> Campbell - K.G. (2006).

by reference to the author's reason for putting it there".<sup>339</sup> When it comes to writing or translating for the stage in particular, as we shall see in the final chapter of the thesis, there are several more readings mediating between what the playwright or translator wrote and the final product, the staging not necessarily reflecting the word and the spirit of the text.

Morrison's view of his translation is ambiguous: when asked whether politicizing a play reduces its scope, he does not offer a clear cut answer. He suggests, though, that he does not narrow the play down, since he has "not made the actual text more specific", describing it as "a relatively faithful version of *Antigone*".<sup>340</sup> As a director, however, he allows himself the license to combine "the energy and the story of the original Greek [with the use of] the story as a point for meditation on the Palestinian and Israeli situation"; he justifies this kind of connection with contemporary reality:

"I have no problem with making connections like that; *Antigone* will survive me, there are already a hundred and more different other versions, there was something specific that I wanted to explore with my production. You can't produce a kind of big, open -ended *Antigone* that means everything to all people, you have to make choices about your production".<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Reichert (1977: 74).

<sup>340</sup> Morrison - K.G. (2006).

<sup>341</sup> Id.

The only *Antigone* in which the play unambiguously reflects the writer's declared political intentions was Paulin's. Believing that "literature is always implicated in its historical context",<sup>342</sup> he was straightforward about producing a version of immediate political relevance. *The Riot Act*, Stephen Rea says, was aimed at "addressing the Northern situation", as the Field Day Theatre Company would do "any play in a particular political context that will always mean something about that context".<sup>343</sup>

Making a play politically relevant can thus be done more or less explicitly, more or less directly, intentionally or unintentionally. It can also be achieved in a variety of ways, each writer employing different tools in order to give a political flavour to his work. Language, as we saw in the previous chapter, is one of them. Paulin, for instance, employs "language itself rather than necessarily the events portrayed as the primary means of giving a specifically Northern Irish locale for the play's action".<sup>344</sup> Jones, going back to the first Field Day production, points out that "Friel's *Translations*, in September, 1980, argues implicitly that language is inherently political".<sup>345</sup> Another way of making the play politically relevant is to create parallels between characters in the play and modern day politicians or other politically active people. In the plays we examine, we will find that characters in *Antigone* - mostly Creon - often sound like specific contemporary political figures, recognizable by the audiences. Equally effective is the use of symbolism of political power, something that we encounter more directly in Morrison and more discreetly in Mathews, where

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<sup>342</sup> Andrews (1995: 330).

<sup>343</sup> Rea - K.G. (2006); Stephen Rea was the co-founder of Field Day in 1981, director and protagonist in Paulin's play.

<sup>344</sup> Jones (1977: 233).

<sup>345</sup> Id.

references run throughout the play or at the intervals. Mathews and Paulin also make the most extensive use of anachronisms, politicizing their works in a more subtle way; though the former employs mostly contemporary products of well-known brands for consumerist use, while Paulin refers to groundbreaking contemporary achievements, including - and mainly related to - man's conquest of space. Finally, themes to which the writers seem to attach much importance occasionally reflect the spatial and temporal framework in which the plays were produced. Apart from each writer's personal agenda, however, the factor that plays a crucial role in the creation of new versions of *Antigone* is chronology, since the social, economic and political background of Ireland changed dramatically and extensively in the time that elapsed between 1984 and 2004.

### **Changes in Irish Politics and Society, 1984 - 2004**

The early 1980s was a tough time for the Irish. What determined their social and political life was first and foremost the country's poor financial situation, since its "net foreign debt (when external reserves had been deducted) [...] at the end of 1983 had reached the frightening figure of £6,703 million".<sup>346</sup> This also had an impact on the politics of the Republic, as "the dreadful state of the economy, partly home-produced and partly the product of external forces, went a long way towards forcing the emergence of coalition governments, headed either by Fine Gael or, from 1989 by Fianna Fáil as the norm in Irish politics".<sup>347</sup> Some of the "social results of this depressing economic picture" included, according to Brown, the dependency of one

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<sup>346</sup> Brown (2004 [1981]: 316-317).

<sup>347</sup> Bartlett (2010: 527).



million people on social welfare payments, a disturbing rise in criminality, a steady increase in drug abuse among the young, a fall in the number of births and the postponement of marriages.<sup>348</sup> This was not all, though; the problems with the North, the conservatism and the pervasive role of the Catholic Church in Irish people's lives and the inadequacy of the politicians, all add to the rich tapestry of issues that troubled Irish society at the moment when the first set of *Antigones* was written. In Murray's words:

“the failure of politicians to make any progress over the problem of Northern Ireland; the stagnation of the coalition government, dominated by conservatives; the obscurantism of the majority as manifested in the referenda that backfired, on the ‘right to life of the unborn’ and on divorce, the reluctance to liberalise laws governing homosexuality or illegitimacy, offset at the same time by a tolerance towards harsher standards of ‘criminal justice’; and the general atmosphere of economic retrenchment and caution, related to high unemployment, comparatively high inflation, and a much - complained - of tax system, have all contributed to a pervasive sense of inertia in modern Ireland. In 1984 the government's three-year plan was announced under the title ‘Building on Reality’, but the reality envisaged is notoriously negative. In addition, the *New Ireland Forum Report* (1984), the result of all-party debates and much national soul searching, failed to get a positive British response, which means in effect that it was short - circuited. [...] In such an atmosphere playwrights and theatres seem unable to find coherence”<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid. 317-318.

<sup>349</sup> Murray (1988: 285).

In the two decades that followed, though, the political and social life in Ireland underwent dramatic changes; in the first place, after much bloodshed, the Downing Street Declaration was reached in December 1993 opening up the road for the ceasefire both from the IRA and from the paramilitary groups related to the loyalist parties. The Good Friday Agreement was eventually signed in 1998, seeking “to bring to an end the current intense phase of conflict by bringing the structural and institutional power of each community into line”.<sup>350</sup> This was followed by the suspension of devolution to Northern Ireland in 2002, which “meant that a minister from the Northern Ireland Office was the only representative of the province present”.<sup>351</sup> The progress in the political arena coincided with the amelioration of the financial situation of the country in a rather short period of time which inevitably affected the mentality of the Irish:

“In May 1988 the *Economist* magazine, in a special edition on Ireland, under the photograph of a beggar on Dublin’s O’Connell Street, referred in its headline to the ‘poorest of the rich nations’. Only eight years later the same publication replaced the headline with ‘Ireland: Europe’s shining light’. It also posed the question of whether traditional Irish values had changed - had a people who had often been presented as representing the antithesis of materialistic values become greedy and profit-obsessed?”<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Ruane and Todd (2001: 928).

<sup>351</sup> Trench (2003: 146).

<sup>352</sup> Ferriter (2004: 4).

Theatre practitioners involved in the early translations of *Antigone* agree that the passage of the country from poverty to wealth was the major change in Irish life within these two decades - with whatever this implies. "Ireland, the traditional land of saints and scholars, is fast becoming a country of yuppies and dynamic young businessmen and businesswomen determined to make their profitable mark on the commercial life of the Continent", Kennelly writes; and he is not happy to point out that "Ireland is opening up in a consciously materialistic, trained and efficient manner to the teeming challenges and opportunities of the final decade of the twentieth century".<sup>353</sup> Kennelly, who has his Creon make a long speech on the corruptive power of money, suggests that he sensed the change early enough; "the Celtic Tiger was about to happen", he says, discussing the impact that the billions of dollars that entered the country had on the Irish people. It was not about "men making money anymore, but about money making men. [Money] can become your God. It can",<sup>354</sup> he asserts. He also associates this influx of money with immigration and the subsequent lack of tolerance, another theme that he explores in his play, his *Antigone* obtaining thus a particular urgency. As he says,

"I liked the way she [Antigone] articulated her concept of difference. And even though I didn't realise it then, I think that this has come very strongly into Irish life over the past ten years. Dublin is completely different, Ireland is completely different, it went from poverty to wealth. It went from a single language, English,

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<sup>353</sup> Kennelly (1992: 6-7).

<sup>354</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

to something like one hundred and twenty languages that are spoken in Dublin today”.<sup>355</sup>

Rea also sees money as the major change within the last decades, linking it, however, with dependency on the United States - which, he suggests, has funded the country - and the subsequent erosion of the society: “nowadays we are a society that tries to avoid political realities. We have an economic context for our lives and that rules everything”.<sup>356</sup> In line with Rea, Fouéré suggests that “theatre is more conservative now than twenty years ago; people didn’t care about the box office back then, they wanted good theatre. Now people are rich and conservative”, she adds, further commenting that the collective conscience of the 1980s has been replaced by an individual conscience.<sup>357</sup> Paulin makes the same observation, when it comes to his college students in Oxford:

“they seem so far away from the highly political 1960s culture that Stephen Rea and I grew up in. I notice that the culture of individualism which is the result of Thatcher’s victory in 1979 has produced a kind of apolitical selfishness and self-interestedness which makes students - English students of English literature - sometimes heavily resistant to learning anything about their own history”.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Id.

<sup>356</sup> Rea - K.G. (2006).

<sup>357</sup> Fouéré - K.G. (2006).

<sup>358</sup> Paulin (2002:170).

The changes in Irish society and politics in the two decades that followed 1984 coincide with the passage to a more globalized world era, where the local becomes international: the gradual fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union changed the global balance; the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 brought the cold war to an end; the first Gulf War in 1990 - 1991 was the first televised war, where millions of people worldwide were able to watch live missiles hitting their targets. In 2003 George W. Bush junior invaded Iraq, in a war that produced ambivalent feelings even among America's closest allies. In the meantime, Ireland - despite its recent financial difficulties - enjoys the benefits of the single market, as an equal member of the EU. The shift from pounds to euros was also a step closer to Europe and further away from British influence. The developments in air transportation with new companies such as Ryanair made travelling far and away from the UK accessible to all. In many senses, then, Ireland is no more an isolated country in the Atlantic between Europe and America, its citizens - much more cosmopolitan than ever before - now having a more international outlook. The waves of immigrants from countries of the Eastern Bloc, especially Poland, was something new to a country notorious for the huge number of emigrants over the past century. Henry McDonald writes in the Observer: "Ireland has experienced one of the fastest rates of immigration in history. In less than a decade its non-indigenous population has shot up from just under 1 per cent to 12 per cent. There are officially now half a million non-Irish living in a state of four and a half million".<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> McDonald (2008).

The different circumstances in the early 1980s and the late 1990s - early 2000s inevitably call for different approaches to the myth of Antigone. The 1984 plays are profoundly engaged with the political and the cultural crisis in Ireland; as such the relationship of text to context is complex and requires lengthy explication. In contrast, the productions after the turn of the twenty first century operate in an Irish world less focused on its own historical problems, the country having addressed most of the issues that had been tormenting it for years and the population being probably less politically engaged. The difference of the creative responses according to chronology is recognised by the writers themselves. Kennelly, whose Creon in 1984 was a dry, unimaginative leader, admits that he has tried to understand Creon a bit more since then;<sup>360</sup> Ó Briain, too, says that he now [in 2006] feels greater sympathy for the Theban King.<sup>361</sup> Heaney, who wrote his version twenty years later, expresses his sympathy for Creon and people in charge; he suggests, though, that he would do a different play in the 1980s.<sup>362</sup> Paulin, whose *Riot Act* was a polemical play written as part of a very specific politically oriented agenda, is the only exception: reviewing Donnellan's staging, which toured in Oxford,<sup>363</sup> he writes that "it is not criticism of Declan Donnellan's production to say that it eschews the topical", also describing it as "a highly effective platonic version of the great drama". We should not be misled, however, into believing that he changed his attitude as to the importance of the topicality of a play; on the contrary, he recalls sitting in the packed theatre before the show and wondering: "would Declan Donnellan's version have something to do with Ireland? Would it have something to do with living in Blair's Britain?", subsequently

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<sup>360</sup> Kennelly - K.G. (2006).

<sup>361</sup> Ó Briain - K. G. (2006).

<sup>362</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008).

<sup>363</sup> Paulin (2002: 168-170).

drawing parallels between the characters of the play and contemporary politicians. Later in his article, he also attributes Tara Fitzgerald's failure "to draw on the deep well of anguished principle that is the core of Antigone's character" possibly to the fact that "Britain just before the millennium was and remains a Teflon society where no principles find a sticking point". Despite the fact, however, that Paulin's political views two decades after his *Riot Act* are unchanged; despite the fact that he sees and assesses the play in terms of its political relevance, still he comments on Creon's "silky, subtle style" in Donnellan's production that interestingly makes him rethink his reading of the Sophoclean character. Stephen Rea is the only one with a consistent view of the Theban King, despite the passage of time: the director and protagonist of Paulin's play finds the conflict between Creon and Antigone a "sensational debate to be having", but suggests that he could "never be Creon, although many people feel like Creon".<sup>364</sup>

## **EARLY VERSIONS**

### **Parochial Colonialism**

One of the symptoms that Ireland has only recently managed to overcome is that of colonisation, the incomplete nature of Irish-nationalist ambitions being clearly evident in what remains the partition of Ireland. At its heart, the divided communities of Ulster attest to a profound crisis of political legitimacy in which a large minority of Catholic nationalists perceives their government as the remnant of age-old colonial oppression. Placing Ireland within a post-colonial theoretical model is, however, a rather simplified reading of Irish political and cultural history; the

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<sup>364</sup> Rea - K.G. (2006).

development of a colonial mentality is not necessarily a historical fact but possibly a political position. Although a hugely contested category,<sup>365</sup> colonialism and post-colonialism are still central issues for many writers in Ireland. Younger refers to what he describes as “*jouissance* in victimization”, “pleasure in such a dramatic display of failure”, or “narcissistic passivity” that the Irish people experience, something that also makes them “desire to hold onto the symptoms of colonization when they are no longer a colony”.<sup>366</sup> The hunger strikers are often seen as examples of this behaviour; Deane, presenting two different and contrasting views of them, writes that on the one hand “the strikers were heroic”, but at the same time they were “a cultic expression of the victimhood eagerly sought by the nationalists”.<sup>367</sup> Mathews associates victimhood with Christian ethos, an affirmation of the huge impact that Catholicism has had on Nationalist populations in Ireland:

“in the two thousand years of its [the Christianity’s] slow seepage into the substrate of Western consciousness, the Christian perspective on suffering, amounting almost to a mythology of victimhood, has so altered the cultural construction of anguish that affliction is now regarded as a badge of prestige instead of a proof of impurity and pollution, as it was in Jesus’ time”.<sup>368</sup>

Victimisation recurs as a theme in Irish literature, as well: “martyrdom has always been and continues to be a pervasive theme of Irish playwrights, despite political

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<sup>365</sup> Kiberd (1995) and Howe (2002) offer representative views of Ireland within a post-colonial framework.

<sup>366</sup> Younger (2006:157).

<sup>367</sup> Deane (2002: 155).

<sup>368</sup> Mathews (2007:173); the impact that Catholicism has had on Irish Nationalists will be further explored in the following chapter.



statements that modern Irishmen have ‘risen above’ that behavior. [...] Sacrifice or ‘victimage’ is a pervasive element in Irish political life as well as in Irish theatre”.<sup>369</sup>

Echoes of colonisation are encountered in Paulin’s and Kennelly’s versions, both written in 1984; not for the first time in their work, however. In the poetry of both, the image of the two islands is a recurring element. In Kennelly’s *Cromwell*, written a year before *Antigone*, there is a dialogue between the ‘Big Island’ and the ‘little island’:

### **In the Sea**

“Big Island whispered to little island

‘I’m right here at your back.

Shall I bugger you?

Shall I breathe down your neck?

Most of the time I hardly see you at all

You’re so small, you’re so small

And when you insist that you really exist

I can scarcely follow your voice.

Well, do you exist, you sea-shrouded mite?

Or are you a floating illusion

Invisible to all except me?’

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<sup>369</sup> Harris (1988: 251-252).

Little island replied ‘There is sea- light  
Between us, and storms and countless drowned men.  
Yes, I’m near you. Near. Right here. In the sea’.<sup>370</sup>

### **It Is the Nearness that Kills**

It is the nearness that kills, thought little island,  
And Big Island is too near,  
So near, it makes the sea a servant,  
Calls rebellious waves to order  
And eats me with its nearness.  
And yet, it does not see me at all’.<sup>371</sup>

There could be no clearer articulation of the asymmetrical power between colonizer and colonized than the image of the two islands, so different in size as they are. Paulin, in his poem ‘States’,<sup>372</sup> similarly evokes “the familiar Irish idea of crossing the water between Ireland and England”.<sup>373</sup>

“That stretch of water, it’s always

There for you to cross over

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<sup>370</sup> Kennelly (1987: 111).

<sup>371</sup> Ibid. 113.

<sup>372</sup> Paulin (1977: 7).

<sup>373</sup> Grant (1996: 160).

To the other shore, observing  
The lights of cities on blackness.  
.....  
Any state, built on such a nature,  
Is a metal convenience, its paint  
Cheapened by the price of lives  
Spent in a public service”.

Both poets’ choice to revisit *Antigone* in 1984, although each for different reasons, cannot be seen outside the conflict between Catholics/ Nationalists and Protestants/ Unionists. Roche argues that “translated into the local conditions of Northern Ireland in 1968, *Antigone* collectively represents the Catholics marching to protest the inequities of a state which has consistently discriminated against them”.<sup>374</sup> Similarly, Younger finds that the young heroine “serves [...] as an outlet in which the Irish not only identify with her defiant nature, but canonize her as a martyr for the Republic”.<sup>375</sup> The association of *Antigone* with nationalism and *Creon* with Unionism in the two plays seems inescapable and has been commented on frequently: Paulin refers to O’Brien’s Unionist position,<sup>376</sup> as well to the latter’s sympathy for *Creon*; Deane suggests that it is “quite easy to see *Creon* as a Unionist intransigent and *Antigone* as a republican martyr, one asserting the law of the state as a universal, the other a more fundamental natural law as superior to any created by

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<sup>374</sup> Roche (1988: 223).

<sup>375</sup> Younger (2006: 157).

<sup>376</sup> Paulin (2002: 166).

humans”;<sup>377</sup> McDonald observes that “our rebel Antigone, in Kennelly’s hands, is a republican”;<sup>378</sup> Arkins that Paulin’s play “subtly relates the action to contemporary Northern Ireland. Creon becomes a unionist politician who represents British law, and speaks in clichéd prose; Antigone becomes a Republican who buries her dead brother, and speaks in vigorous verse”.<sup>379</sup>

### **Interest in domestic politics**

In all early adaptations of *Antigone*, the writers look inwards, towards domestic politics; as has already been seen, the most explicitly Irish play is Paulin’s, strongly informed by the events that shortly before shook the country:

“The *Riot Act* appeared just three years after the 1981 hunger strike, when ten republican inmates of the H-Blocks had starved themselves to death to protest the British government’s attempts to impose a criminalization policy within the Northern prison system which would deny republicans the status of political prisoners. [...] Coming in the wake of these events, Paulin’s rewriting of Sophocles’ tragedy addressed itself to a society still traumatized by a powerful collision of wills and antithetical concepts of justice, a collision so intense that it threatened at certain moments to bring the province to the verge of total war”.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Deane (2002: 154).

<sup>378</sup> McDonald (2005b: 129).

<sup>379</sup> Arkins (2003: 170).

<sup>380</sup> Cleary (1999: 525).

This is, according to Roche, the only one of the three 1984 versions seen from a Northern Irish perspective, as “the mixed heritage [Paulin] embodies enlarges the perspective of the ‘Northern problem’ to set it in the dual context of the Republic of Ireland (the ‘South’) and Britain (‘Westminster’)”.<sup>381</sup> The fact, however, that he does not depict the Protestant community with much sympathy - despite retaining a distinctive Ulster protestant identity -<sup>382</sup> is evident in the treatment of Creon. Paulin, who admits that he got to know the play through reading Conor Cruise O’Brien, wrote his version trying to prove the latter wrong as we saw earlier:

“Really, Ismene and O’Brien side with Creon. To mount a production of *Antigone* in the North of Ireland all those years ago would be to take on O’Brien’s Unionist position and to suggest that the contradictions within the state meant that its politics would always be unstable, violent, tragic, until the border disappeared”.<sup>383</sup>

In the same article, Paulin says that he imagined Creon “partly as a Northern Irish secretary”.<sup>384</sup> In Paulin’s script, there are inescapable allusions to or echoes of real life British politicians. To start with, just before Creon’s appearance, the Chorus leader refers to Creon as ‘the big man’, a phrase associated with the Reverend Ian

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<sup>381</sup> Roche (1988: 221-222).

<sup>382</sup> Grant (1996: 161) writes that “Paulin thus retains a distinctive Ulster Protestant identity, though, as Edna Longley points out, he does not depict the Protestant community with much sympathy”.

<sup>383</sup> Paulin (2002: 166).

<sup>384</sup> Ibid. 167.

Paisley,<sup>385</sup> leader of the DUP and a hate figure for Irish Catholics. Thus Creon, “a rather heavy-handed caricature in *The Riot Act*” (as Cleary describes him), “would then incarnate all the more unappealing aspects of Ulster unionism that compel Paulin to reject the political culture within which he was raised: its intransigence, its puritanical severity, its triumphalist swagger, and its absurd, even “blasphemous,” fetishism of the state”.<sup>386</sup> A number of scholars also draw attention to the similarities between Paulin’s Creon and British politicians like Hurd and - more often - Thatcher herself;<sup>387</sup> the latter’s intransigence when dealing with the Hunger Strikers (best elaborated in her famous utterance “murder is murder is murder”) has been often seen as matching Creon’s in Paulin. Rea associates Creon with Thatcher but does not put the two of them on the same level; he rather describes the British ex-PM - in his eyes a “disgusting creature” - as being “beyond Creon”,<sup>388</sup> while Deane describes such Unionist and British positions as ‘No Surrender’ and ‘Not an Inch’ as “neo-Creonisms”.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Bruce (2009: 177); the Chorus referring to Creon as ‘the big man’ has been in one instance described as representing “in 1984 the Unionist community of Northern Ireland, refusing to recognize past injustices and blind to, and uncomprehending of, their lasting effects in the present”, Harkin (2008: 298). Paisley is referred to as ‘the big man’ in other instances as well: McKay (2006: 167), Coogan (1996: 59).

<sup>386</sup> Cleary (1999: 530); Goldhill (2007: 143) also comments on Paulin’s depiction of Creon “as a horrific man, smug at first in his public appearance, pushed into hypocrisy, bullying, and violence, as soon as he is crossed”, also commenting that “Paulin is attacking the political leaders in the Troubles (and their imitators and enforcers on the street).”

<sup>387</sup> Younger (2006: 155) parallels Creon with “a British politician in Northern Ireland during the Thatcherite era [sustaining] the political parallels through British and Ulster accents”; Roche (1988: 224-225) finds Paulin’s Creon sounding like O’Brien and associates him with British or Northern Irish politicians of the time, like Hurd or Paisley; exactly the same associations with Thatcher, Paisley and Hurd in this particular play are evoked in Harris (1988: 257-258).

<sup>388</sup> Rea - K.G. (2006); Morrison [Morrison - K.G. (2006)] makes the same point, commenting that Creon has more humanity than Thatcher.

<sup>389</sup> Deane (2002: 152). It was on account of such associations, direct and explicit as they were, that *The Riot Act* invited hostile reactions. Thomson (1984), for instance, describes it as “mercilessly didactic” and belonging in “that hopelessly outdated and, ironically, peculiarly British genre, the Theatre of the Political Whinge”, mainly due to the depiction of Creon and Antigone: “Set in Northern Ireland”, he writes, “it introduces the villain, Creon (-the State, NI-) the boss figure - the heroine Antigone (-the Oppressed, the one who tries to bury her brother-) and the

Creon's language, formal and legalistic as it is, differentiates him from the rest of Paulin's characters. His high-flown idiom - alongside his highly theatrical gestures as these are described in the text - is a metatheatrical device: it is as if Creon adopts that persona for the purpose of asserting authority in the context that Paulin is creating. His language not only distinguishes him from the rest of the characters, but is also intended to mark him out as an official of the British government, as a Northern Irish Secretary is. The association of authority in this context is seen as necessarily familiar to the idiom of the British governance - authority in Paulin's play having a British accent in the North of Ireland.

Interestingly, however, Paulin has Creon forget the formal speech of governance and the dignity of language when he gets into a more personal antagonism, his language eventually varying markedly according to mood and context in the play. The difference between his polished, almost caricature, speech to 'the loyal citizens of Thebes' (15-17) and the rudeness and vulgarity with which he addresses the Guard shortly after, is probably the most striking example:

“go you, dead quick,

and find who done it,

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self - serving mob most of us are for most of our lives. This done, it spoonfeeds us into an understanding of their respective qualities as if we were imbeciles. [...] It should be shelved”.

else I'll tear the skin

Off o'the whole pack o'ye

And roast you real slow" (22),

says he to the Guard, forgetting the mask of language and intonation he earlier used and slipping into his familiar language.

If, according to Nowlan, "Tom Paulin's version keeps more faithfully to Sophocles's draft, yet offers resonances of Northern Ireland today as a society with hatred in its roots", Mathews' play "dwelt on alienation in society and on the virtual powerlessness of Creon, the military power, to alter the arbitrary edicts of society".<sup>390</sup> Mathews also makes his play relevant to the recent events in Ireland, although in more indirect and less obvious ways. The international orientation of the play extends beyond the - rather surreal - affirmation that "the drama is set in Ireland in the 1980s BC, soon after Sparta had entered the war on the German side" (1); Mathews' *Antigone* unfolds in a post-war environment without any hint as to its exact locale, while there is an abundance of allusions to events and moments of oppression around the world throughout the twentieth century. Mathews' intention, as presented in the information statement issued by the Projects Arts Centre on 16 July 1984, is that the play,

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<sup>390</sup> Nowlan (1984).



“makes its way into the source-text as a sharp diagonal. What it seeks to represent is the final staging of the original drama in a time and space far removed from its first rehearsal. The *mise-en-scene* of the new play is a devastated world, its immediate location any one of a dozen shattered cultures - Stalingrad in 1943, Berlin in 1945, St. Petersburg in 1917, Nagasaki in 1945. Its whereabouts, in other words, is plural, for the simple reason that its major circumstance, a matter of commotion and debris, is anything but singular: instead, it is the unifying landscape of the present age, the ground of upheaval and demolition, a ground so specific to our history that it has become a historical, a universal metaphor”.<sup>391</sup>

This radical adaptation seems at first sight to be the least Irish one among the early versions; yet, it is difficult not to see in Mathews’ presentation the story of the two brothers as a comment on the futility of this civil strife instead of demonizing or absolving one side or the other. David Heap, who played Creon in this version back in 1984, recalls that Polynices and Eteocles could be seen as the two sides in the North (Protestants and Catholics).<sup>392</sup> The two brothers here are identical: Mathews has renamed Eteocles as Peteocles (or Petey), with the result that both brothers now share the same first initial ‘P’; thus, when Antigone, later, writes the letter ‘P’ on the wall with chalk or paintbrush in an effort to keep Polynices’ memory alive (43), it could in fact be for either of the two brothers. Later, when Creon “wishes rhetorically to assert the absolute difference between the brothers Polynices and Peteocles from a

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<sup>391</sup> Murray (1991: 125).

<sup>392</sup> Heap - K. G. (2006).

political point of view, the visual evidence contradicts or undercuts him, since the photograph flashed on the wall for each brother is absolutely identical.<sup>393</sup> Strongly recalling Anouilh, the two brothers here look exactly the same; demonising one of the two and making him a persona non grata is therefore a matter of random choice. Seeing this radical adaptation under this prism, it seems that Mathews and Scott employ a non-political language to make a political statement: if there is no visible difference between the two brothers, and by extension between the two sides in the North, then the battle between the two was about very little and makes really no sense.

### **The Failure of Politics**

Whether we see the conflict in the early plays as one between Unionist Creon and Republican Antigone or between two sides with artificial differences, in all three renderings of *Antigone* official politics seems to be inadequate. Sophocles' Creon, entitled both to make the political decisions and to execute them, is already an inadequate leader, whom Winnington-Ingram describes in the following terms:

“a tyrant - or well on his way to be a tyrant. But he is not the mere stereotype of a tyrant. He is a recognizable human- being, of coarse fibre, commonplace mind, and narrow sympathies. He is a politician without the capacity to be a statesman, because he cannot resist the temptations of power. He is a ‘realist’, for whom

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<sup>393</sup> Roche (1988: 234).

only the visible is real. The range of motives he can understand is limited, including lust for power and greed for money”.<sup>394</sup>

Despite his inadequacy and the failure of his political philosophy, Sophocles' Creon acts with the welfare of Thebes in mind; though Sophocles presents in the girl who chooses to die rather than to betray her ideals one of his most admirable (even if not his warmest) characters, he also (perhaps reflecting the fact that he had been in public office himself) shows an awareness of the responsibility of a new leader to rearrange a destroyed and divided city after a civil war - even if that entails making tough decisions. Creon is guilty, “but to establish culpability is not to amass conclusive evidence of morally depraved rule”.<sup>395</sup> This is the crucial difference between Sophocles and the writers of the early versions, none of which - following a long tradition of twentieth century adaptations that “invariably style the ruler as a despot or dictator”<sup>396</sup> - retains the Sophoclean balance between the two main characters of the play;<sup>397</sup> in all three cases, Creon is presented in a particularly unfavourable light that extends far beyond his inability to stand up to the challenging circumstances. Apart from being both ineffective and inefficient, Paulin's Creon - to start with - is additionally self- interested, rude and arrogant: “I wanted Creon to be a kind of puritan gangster, a megalomaniac who spoke alternately in an English public

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<sup>394</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1980: 126-127).

<sup>395</sup> Bourke (2006: 186).

<sup>396</sup> Id.

<sup>397</sup> McDonald (2005b: 127) notes that both Paulin's and Kennelly's versions are polarized, with Antigone “clearly in the right, whereas Creon is in the wrong. All these Irish versions lose the ambiguity of the two positions”.

school voice and a deep menacing Ulster growl”,<sup>398</sup> he writes, and he does in fact create a Creon of such a cast.

Paulin’s Creon is almost a caricature, from his very first appearance: his opening speech shows him as rigid, dry, unimaginative and comfortable in his new public role; his idiom is distinctly formal, elevated - unlike the everyday, informal (colloquial, even) language of the rest of the play - and carefully chosen to make him sound more like a contemporary politician than a Sophoclean hero.<sup>399</sup> Political rhetoric and machine politics are firmly visible in his words; his “any questions?”, in particular, mirrors press conferences called by presidents and prime ministers. His wooden language says a lot but means nothing: Creon resides a lot in clichés and pompous banalities<sup>400</sup> as well as short catchphrases and repetitions that politicians employ in order to grab attention.<sup>401</sup> His language lacks spontaneity, betraying a man who does not speak from the heart, sincerely and openly to his citizens - and this is not accidental. As Paulin’s stage directions indicate, Creon “often [...] seems to be speaking purely for his own delight, savouring certain juicy vowels, whipping others into fine peaks” (15). The writer’s intention is to present him as a clone of a 20<sup>th</sup> century leader: Creon is standing while the Chorus is seated, giving the former an air

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<sup>398</sup> Paulin (2002: 167).

<sup>399</sup> Creon starts off by addressing a certain “Mr. Chairman”, alongside the “loyal citizens of Thebes”.

<sup>400</sup> “If I may, I would further like to take this opportunity of thanking each and every one of you for your steadfastness and your most exceptional loyalty. [...] for purely technical and legal reasons - kinshp to the dead and so on, the office of King therefore devolves upon me. Such a position brings with it a very, very heavy responsibility” (15-16), “or even, we may say, of their professional limitations” (16), “and it follows naturally from those same principles that I should wish to amplify the statement which was issued in my name yesterday evening” (17).

<sup>401</sup> “however, let me say this, and let me say it plainly right at the very outset..”, “if I might further add - and I know that Zeus will support me here..” (16), “it was Polynices, you remember, who slipped into this country and tried to destroy our holy places..”, “it is in this spirit, and in this spirit alone..” (17).

of superiority from the start; he does not maintain any eye contact with the members of the Chorus, except for some “occasional public smiles in their direction” (15); during his speech he puts on a pair of rimless spectacles in order to read from a piece of paper and at the end he flashes a stonewall smile (17). The theatricality of his appearance does not indicate a man with any competence or sincere interest in communication, rather a politician who has carefully studied which body posture or words would be most suitable and effective for the occasion. The importance that he attaches to his public image is made more evident in his encounter with his son: “you’ve no respect then. To turn on me like this out here in public” (40), he tells Haemon, his problem being not simply that his very son contradicts him, but that he does it publicly. Haemon, in response, will attack his father in his Achilles’ heel: “if you weren’t my father, I’d go tell all Thebes what wrong you’ve done” (42), he tells him, instead of the Sophoclean “If you were not my father, I would say you had no sense” (line 755).

Apart from his public image, Creon’s deeds in Paulin are inconsistent with his prior words, as they are in Sophocles, but to a greater extent. His insistence on the importance of listening cannot but be welcome to his audience: “one of the soundest maxims of good government is: *always listen to the very best advice*”, Paulin’s Creon says, and he promises that “in the coming months [he] shall be doing a great deal of listening, sounding opinions and so forth” (16). The emptiness of the statement is soon evident, as after his lengthy speech is over he only allows one minute for questions: “Thank you all for coming, and any questions just now? We have one minute” (17), he says, obviously more interested in talking rather than in

listening. Paulin suggests that he had Creon use “the usual cliché about doing a great deal of listening”; his presumable commitment to listening evokes Douglas Hurd who took over as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that month and who, as Paulin noticed, “duly trotted out the cliché”.<sup>402</sup> Despite his initial declaration, Creon will soon prove as deaf as his Sophoclean predecessor and most contemporary politicians as well. “D’you hear the hush? They’re only waiting”, Antigone tells him, referring to those people in the city who disapprove of his leadership. “I hear nothing”, (28) he responds.<sup>403</sup> Apart from the above, Paulin’s Creon is also rude and arrogant, the Irish writer going much further than Sophocles. Thus Creon here treats the Guard (the plain man who does the dirty job for him) in a very contemptuous and dismissive way: as if talking to a child, he addresses him as “boy” (22), encourages him to tell him “simply what’s on [his] tiny mind” (19), snaps fingers in his face giving him orders (19), threatens him with cruelty (“else, I’ll tear the skin o’the whole pack o’ye and roast you real slow”) (22), even mocks him in the end (“a philosopher - guard would make us all weep”) (23).

Kennelly’s Creon is not a cruel caricature as Paulin’s is, perhaps in part because Kennelly is less concerned with establishing topical associations. Despite the occasional cruelty of his language, especially when it comes to describing Antigone’s punishment as we saw in the previous chapter, Kennelly’s Creon does not

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<sup>402</sup> Paulin (2002: 167); Goldhill (2007: 142) comments that “it is a blunt, but still painful irony, that Creon can depict himself as the “government that listens,”” also noting that “where Creon in Sophocles’ play begins with political maxims that the vast majority of the audience would recognize as the norms of civic life, Paulin’s Creon is undermined from the start. He is already marked by his shallow rhetoric, his glad-handing, power-broking, self-interested politicking”.

<sup>403</sup> The denial to listen is not limited neither to Hurd, nor to Paulin’s Creon; Wilmer (2007: 237-238) suggests that Heaney’s Creon as well, in his refusal to listen, echoes Bush and Blair and Rumsfeld.

rely on a display of power more than the Sophoclean one. The poet deviates from the original, however, when he exaggerates certain aspects of Creon, such as making his language more predictable and his speech lacking in originality, inspiration and imagination. In the few chances that he has in the play to address issues and express his views, he twice uses exactly the same lines when he talks about the importance of obedience to the law and the destructiveness of money:

“Money is the greatest evil men have known.

Money destroys cities

Maddens men from their homes

Twists decent souls till they

Will do any shameful thing.

Of all evils money is the King.

It offends the gods

Because money is godlessness” (16).

“Disobedience is the worst of evils -

It destroys cities

Maddens men from their homes

Twists decent souls till they

Will do any shameful thing.

Of all evils disobedience is the King.

It offends the gods

Because disobedience is godlessness" (29).

Sharing the ineptitude of Paulin's Creon, it is as if he has rehearsed a certain number of lines that he applies whenever possible; he is thus able to reproduce but not to create or to come up with new ideas as to addressing different problems, something that reinforces the ineffectiveness with which he will deal with Antigone's actions.

Mathews' Creon, finally, from certain respects recalls Paulin's and Kennelly's Creons; like Paulin's, he is fully aware of the importance and methods of manipulating the crowds: "Give them some rich, mouthwatering slogan to take home to their fourteen pairs of eyes around a table. Like a powdery sweet. Roll it down the table between the hands. From one end to the other. A big, glassy sweet" (24). It does not matter if the mouthwatering slogan makes a difference to people's lives; after all, nowhere in Mathews' play is Creon preoccupied with or worried about serving his people's needs, politics being thus reduced to a process of convincing people, manipulating them, cheating them. Like Paulin's and Kennelly's character, he lacks original thinking and true communication with his citizens. Instead of openly addressing them, he records himself over and over again, making extended use of a dictaphone, "the most onstage use of a tape recorder since Krapp in Beckett's play".<sup>404</sup> Chora associates his indulgence in dictating to his status as a dictator: "if you are a dictator, you must be seen by the audience to be dictating"

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<sup>404</sup> Roche (1988: 235).



(31). Creon here, as in Paulin, takes pleasure in articulating and pronouncing words, although empty of substantial meaning:

Creon: “And in committing ourselves to that trust, comma, we should take heart and take hands, comma, recalling in our separate struggles towards a future lived in charity and not in loathing, comma, in faith and not in fear, comma, the words of (STOPS DICTAPHONE) Found something?..”

Heman: Jackpot. (READS) “Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it”. Tom Paine, *The American Crisis*.” (23)

At the same time that Creon rehearses speeches and looks for elaborate words to dress meaninglessness, Heman assists him looking for quotations that would - and do - further enrich his speeches; quotations, however, that sound all the more ironical in such an oppressive environment. Creon - the epitome of contemporary politics - appears, at best, like an unimaginative demagogue and, at worst, as a totalitarian leader. In the play he is referred to as ‘the President’ (Ismene, 19), and addressed as ‘Your Excellency’ (Chorus, 15), ‘Mr. President’ (Chorus, 17), ‘Sir’ (Heman, 20). With the exception of Antigone, as we will see later, all other characters in the play address him in a very formal way, suggesting the authority that he has and the distance that he keeps from all the others. Apart from ‘Sir’, Heman also addresses him as ‘Pater’ (19), despite the fact that he is not biologically Creon’s son; as the young man confesses, though, he still loves him as a father: “I love that man. [...] Truly. Not just a father figure. Almost a father. I called him Pops once” (5). Heman

not only loves Creon, but also admires him, as a son admires his father: “If you weren’t the President”, he tells him respectfully, “there should be.. a law to force you to be the President”. (24) Mathews replaces the blood relation between the two men with a political one; interestingly, among all the offices that Heman could have, he is the Chief of the Secret Police. The Secret Police is, thus, the foster child of political authority, a child aspiring to become like his father. In the same regime, Presidents may not be elected, but be asserted by ‘law’, without any further elaboration as to who the one to make the law is. In this context, it is not surprising that Creon’s political authority is full and unquestionable, allowing him to control even people’s emotions and their public expression. As he instructs Heman,

“it is therefore necessary at this time of immense (PAUSE), italicize immense, public and personal emergency, to criminalize any act of weeping as an incitement to gloom. Weeping must be done at home or in the darkness. And it cannot be loud. Audible gnashing or sighing will be punishable in the same way as silent sobbing. The state cannot extend the privileges of the natural law into the domain of the criminal code”. (31)

The regime imagined here seems to have much in common with dictatorships in the developing world or countries of the former Communist Bloc; we should not forget that in 1984, when the play was written, the eastern European communist regimes were a reality and not titles of history books. One of the several allusions to such regimes is made in the play when it comes to a telegram that Creon receives, featuring “Bearhugs, the members of the ‘Politburo” (47). The Politburo was a

committee of the Soviet Union initially meant “to ensure the success of the impending revolution”, and later to be “capable of making prompt decisions on all matters of general policy”.<sup>405</sup> It was the perpetuation of the establishment that it sought to secure, and not necessarily the welfare of the people; thus it required its members to “have a certain amount of experience in police functions”.<sup>406</sup> As an institution it is generally described as “remote”, since there was “no personal contact between the members of the Politburo and the population”.<sup>407</sup> The special intimacy, therefore, that the word ‘bearhugs’ betrays between such an establishment and Creon’s regime only serves to point out the violence and suppression of human rights in the latter. At the same time the political background of the play strongly recalls Orwell’s prophetic novel, *1984*.<sup>408</sup>

What for Orwell was the future in 1949, when the book came out, for Mathews becomes the present: the latter’s play, written and staged in the Orwellian year, depicts a political environment as drab and scary as Orwell had prophesied, its plot unfolding in a post-war environment, vague in its historical references like Orwell’s Oceania.<sup>409</sup> In *1984* everything is under the tight control of the Party, the mechanisms of censorship and propaganda proving extremely powerful. In Mathews’ *Antigone*, the Critic at the beginning of Act Two opines that “this thing tonight is in very questionable taste. It seems to me that it’s basking in degradation, and that it

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<sup>405</sup> Schueller (1951: 1).

<sup>406</sup> Id.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>408</sup> Orwell (2000 [1949]).

<sup>409</sup> “The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated”, Orwell (2000 [1949]: 40).

sheds no light on --” (28); before he even finishes his phrase the lights are out, muffled noises of blows and suppressed cries of pain are heard, and when the lights come up the Critic has disappeared and the Chorus mops a stained area of the stage. Physical violence and muzzling of the press prove powerful tools in the process of controlling and manipulating - but there are even more drastic measures than those.

The Party, in Orwell, has come to the conclusion that in order to control the present more effectively, the past has to be controlled as well: “who controls the past”, ran the Party slogan, “controls the future: who controls the present controls the past”.<sup>410</sup> To this end, invented rumours circulate, photos are faked,<sup>411</sup> statistics - impossible to prove - are “bruising the ears” day and night by the telescreens.<sup>412</sup> Even worse, people perceived by the establishment as threats, simply disappear one night: “Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten. You were abolished, annihilated: *vaporized* was the usual word”.<sup>413</sup> Orwell’s fiction became harsh reality in numerous areas around the world in the decades that followed, including Colombia, Algeria, Morocco, Turkey, the Soviet Union and - most famously - Argentina. The ‘Report of the Argentine Commission of the Disappeared’

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid. 284.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid. 170.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid. 85-86. Also, the past is either destroyed or reinvented: the laws of Nature are re-written (p.303-304), the lyrics of the songs are composed with the help of an instrument known as a versificator (p.159). All records are destroyed (p.285) all books are destroyed (p.111), new books are produced not by writers but by novel writing machines in the Fiction Department, based on the general directive issued by the Planning Committee (p.149-150), new versions of old issues of *The Times* are continuously reproduced (p.171), and a definitive new edition of Kipling’s poems as well. (p.265).

<sup>413</sup> Ibid. 22.

describes the practices of the totalitarian regime, the mass abductions extending over a long period from 1976 to 1983:

“The abductions were precisely organized operations, sometimes occurring at the victim’s place of work, sometimes in the street in broad daylight. [...] Thus, in the name of national security, thousands upon thousands of human beings, usually young adults or even adolescents, fell into the sinister, ghostly category of the *desaparecidos*, a word (sad privilege for Argentina) frequently left in Spanish by the world’s press. Seized by force against their will, the victims no longer existed as citizens<sup>414</sup>. [...] The authorities had no record of them; they were not being held in jail; justice was unaware of their existence”<sup>415</sup>.

The above report was published in September 1984, while Mathews’ play was running at the Project Arts Theatre in Dublin. All these events, which made an impact on international public opinion, took place shortly before his *Antigone* was written and are echoed in a play abounding with references and allusions to instances of oppression. Polynices in Mathews is not dead but missing; accordingly, Antigone is not accountable for having buried him but for having written the letter ‘P’ on the wall with chalk or a paintbrush in an effort to keep his memory alive (43). As is the case in Orwell’s novel, all evidence of Polynices’ former existence has also disappeared, as if he never existed: “they took everything”, Antigone says, “even a copy of Cosmo he’d

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<sup>414</sup> National Commission on the Disappeared (1984:4).

<sup>415</sup> Ibid. 5. Argentinian playwright Griselda Gambaro presented in 1986 her own version of the Sophoclean play, entitled *Antígona Furiosa* inspired after that very historical moment, “Argentina’s most despicable period of military rule” (Nelli 2010: 354). Nelli (2010) gives an account of this text and the sociopolitical background in which it was produced in her essay ‘From Ancient Greek Drama to Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’; *Antígona Furiosa: On Bodies and the State*’.

done the crossword in. And his first Communion photo.” (17) He has also been “airbrushed out of the photo taken at the stadium”, a picture in which one can also see Eteocles (or Petey), Heman and Creon as well. Poly “has been painted out. Even his shadow” (18), Antigone observes; the job was not flawless, though, since Poly’s right hand was not erased but lay on his brother’s right shoulder, exposing Heman’s and Creon’s big lie. This is one of the very few proofs of his existence, along with the dark hair inside his pocket razor that Antigone has kept (17). Polynices, though, is not a unique case, but just one of thousands, as Ismene suggests:

“you take it all so personally. You’re not the only one. There are thousands of missing persons. You don’t know what’s happening. You can’t imagine. You’re not attending cabinet meetings. You’re not manning the cordons. The whole world isn’t in a conspiracy to wreck your portion of happiness” (18).

As in Sophocles, Mathews’ Ismene knows very well how the system works and she identifies with it; there is no time or space for sentimentality, everything has to be done without any deviations from what the establishment orders - even if that means betraying your own people. Indicative of the terrorism imposed on the people is that an old school friend of Polynices’, when talking to Antigone, terrifyingly denied that he ever knew him (18). So does the Chorus:

“Antigone: Do you know the name Polyneices?”

Chorus: Is that when you marry loads of women?

Antigone: Polyneices.

Chorus: (TRYING TO BE HELPFUL) Is he a character in Hamlet?

Antigone: Polyneices.

Chorus: (ALARMED) Not so loud, missus. I can hear you. No, I don't know any fuckin' Polyneices. Sounds like a salad.

Antigone: Peteocles.

Chorus: I'm telling you, I... Peteocles? Peteocles? You must take me for an addle-pate, missus. Every charlie's heard of Peteocles". (19)

While referring to and effusively praising Peteocles - as happens thereafter- is allowed, when it comes to Polyneices, the Chorus cannot even admit that he knows him. At that stage, however, the audience is fully aware that Polynices was not unknown to the Chorus, as the earlier scene with Heman reveals:

“Heman: Because you-know-who is still being talked about. (CHORUS LOOKS SCANDALIZED). You-know-who is still lurking in the folk memory. (CHORUS RAISES HIS HANDS TO HIS EARS) You-know-who is part of the collective conscious [...] (LOOKS AROUND THEATRICALY; STOPS; CAN'T REMEMBER HIS DRIFT) Where was I?

Chorus: (ENCOURAGING HIM) You know. (PAUSE) About you-know-who. (CHORUS MOUTH THE INDIVIDUAL LETTERS OF POLYNICES' NAME IN DUMBSHOW)

Heman: (FOLLOWING CHORUS'S LIP MOVEMENTS CLOSELY) P.O.L.Y.  
Stop. You're going too fast. N.E.I.C.E.S. (MORE QUICKLY)  
P.O.L.Y.N.E.I.C.E.S. (PAUSE) How well you know to spell it.  
(CHORUS LOOKS TERRIFIED)

Chorus: I keep rubbing it out. It's my job. And after a while, you can't help  
learning it. And after that, if it's not spelled proper, you... spell it the  
right way, and then rub it out.

Heman: You're a good man.

Chorus: I try, sir.

Heman: I know you do. And so does the President. (STRIKES CHORUS  
VICIOUSLY ACROSS THE FACE) So who the fuck is writing his  
name on every wall left standing?" (7)

Unlike the other Creons, Mathews' character is fully aware of the corruption of his  
oppressive regime: talking about his future, he wishes that "the only dirt on [his]  
hands from here on will be newsprint. And that washes off". (62) In an intimate  
discussion with Antigone that strongly echoes Anouilh, he expresses his discomfort  
with the public role he has assumed, at the same time accusing her of being too strict  
with him:

"You have turned me into a monster. You and your kind. I'm only trying to plant  
some vegetables among the ruins and you can't do that without getting your  
hands dirty... Do you suppose that coal likes to be burned? That cabbage likes to



be boiled? But these things have to be done. And I can't stop to budget for your superego" (38).

Antigone is the only person to whom Creon admits that Polynices not only existed, but that the two of them "were the best of buddies": "I think of him... and it hurts", he continues. "I can feel him in the room at night. Whenever I turn the lightswitch on. And just before I do" (34). Unlike Orwell's novel, however, in Mathews' play there is still a ray of hope that the state has not won; Antigone. In *1984*, the brainwash is such that Winston at the very end of the novel is made to succumb: "Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother".<sup>416</sup> In Mathews, Polynices has disappeared, Ismene is consistently the authority's mouthpiece, the Critic finds a job at the price of his soul; Antigone, though, never relents, never gives in. She vanishes, only to reappear when needed to confront the Creons of this world and comfort the weak and inarticulate. As Creon tells the Chorus as the play is about to end, "the door of hope must never be closed" (65).

### **Belief in Man's Potential - Call for Disobedience**

In such a drab background of political repression and manipulation, is there light at the end of the tunnel? And, if we take the optimistic scenario, where can hope come from? After the failure of long discussions and political negotiations in the Ireland of

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<sup>416</sup> Orwell (2000 [1949]: 342).

the early 1980s, people tended to believe that politics cannot effectively address and solve the problems - a feeling not limited to Ireland, however, since the world at that time slid into violence and conventional politics appeared impotent. The subsequent distrust in official politics gave rise to a new sense that man can achieve things himself. It is as if man - the everyday man - realizes his power and appears determined to take the future in his own hands. Art does not remain aloof from this perception; it is not accidental that, in this period, an important part of the literary production in Ireland has a political, and at times radical, layer underneath. Paulin sees poetry as “a paradigmatic gesture of spontaneity in an increasingly manipulated world. The poet is an underground resistance fighter [...] a dissenter in every way”.<sup>417</sup> Steinberger points out the need for social change, which he sees as a result of a “cultural rebellion”: “throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, as people lost confidence in political action, the idea of culture as an alternative to politics gained ground. The belief informing this approach was that it was necessary to change people’s fundamental attitudes before there could be any real hope of political change”.<sup>418</sup> As far as Ireland in particular is concerned, as a contemporary source wrote, “it may not be insignificant that much of the most recent political drama in this island has come from the north where there happens to be the greatest political vacuum”,<sup>419</sup> Field Day Theatre Company was the leading artistic collaboration in this respect.

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<sup>417</sup> Andrews (1995: 334-335).

<sup>418</sup> Richtarik (2001: 6).

<sup>419</sup> Nowlan (1984).

Field Day Theatre Company, Rea claims, was on the one hand “deeply interested in theatre as an art form, in setting new and different theatrical standards”,<sup>420</sup> with productions intended for “audiences unused to going to the theatre”,<sup>421</sup> aiming “from the onset to reach out the marginalized societies within Ireland”.<sup>422</sup> Friel and Rea set out “to establish a theatrical voice free of the constraining influence of either London or Dublin and to offer that voice to Irish people, primarily in the North, who had lacked access to professional theater”.<sup>423</sup> The company was based in Derry, a city whose very name even was contested: ‘Derry’ for the Nationalists, ‘Londonderry’ for the Unionists, also known by the nickname ‘Stroke City’.<sup>424</sup> The selection of the place was not accidental: first, according to Seamus Deane, the North never had up to that time a cultural or literary movement, all of the writers or artists tending to migrate south, or to England or to the Continent.<sup>425</sup> So, in Steinberger words, “for the first time, after many years of exile, the literary figures and scholars who made up the Board of Directors felt as though they found their place once more in the North of Ireland”.<sup>426</sup> Second, Derry was in the north, but right on the border between North and South, “right on the dangerous edge of things in Ireland”,<sup>427</sup> and at the same time independent, as Heaney points out, of “British influence exercised through Belfast and the equally strong cultural hegemony of Dublin”;<sup>428</sup> it was as if the company founded a separate capital, “standing outside of the institutions of both states,

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<sup>420</sup> Quilligan (2003 [1984]: 194).

<sup>421</sup> Lojek (1999: 83).

<sup>422</sup> Steinberger (2008: 67).

<sup>423</sup> Riddel (1980: 127).

<sup>424</sup> Because it was eventually read as “Derry/ Londonderry”; the choice of the city made Friel’s *Translations* - the first play Field Day produced - very pertinent, as it was a play about translating names.

<sup>425</sup> Radio Telefis Éireann (1983: 186-187).

<sup>426</sup> Steinberger (2008: 69).

<sup>427</sup> Radio Telefis Éireann (1983: 184).

<sup>428</sup> Steinberger (2008: 69).

remaining imaginatively - if not financially - independent".<sup>429</sup> In the company there was "symmetry between religious/ political convictions [...] essential in helping the Field Day steer away from one monologist identity in Northern Ireland".<sup>430</sup> It was thus open to different political views: there was "no general political accord [...] no political programme, nor any plan to produce one. In this sense, Field Day is a congenial collaboration among friends with shared interests",<sup>431</sup> aiming to create, in Rea's words, a "people's theatre".<sup>432</sup>

It comes as a natural consequence of the above that Antigone becomes in Paulin's play a symbol of disobedience to formal authority, if the latter opposes the values the young girl endorses. Despite the brevity of this play, Paulin expands Antigone's lines when she urges her sister to act:

"And you will soon show whether your nature is noble or you are the cowardly descendant of valiant ancestors". (Sophocles, lines 37-38)

"And you and me both,

We're expected to take this!

We must bend the knee

Or they'll stone us in the street.

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<sup>429</sup> Harris (1995: 162).

<sup>430</sup> Steinberger (2008: 68).

<sup>431</sup> Mitchell (1995: 163).

<sup>432</sup> Riddel (1980: 131).

All I know's this -

we must put our own lives

(pointing down) right there in the line

and show no fear of him". (Paulin, p.10)

Mathews' Antigone does not have exactly Paulin's fierceness; McDonald describes her as "a quiet one: she lets others rant and rave about her, exercising their various forms of power. Her power lies in her silent indictment, which she is able to articulate indirectly through her own life".<sup>433</sup> The fact that she does not explain or rationalize her actions on stage, does not make her as passive, though, as McDonald suggests; Mathews' Antigone, fully aware and fearless of an excessively violent regime, is the character who sprays the letter 'P' on the wall, when the Chorus does not even dare mention Polynices' name. In a play in which at its very opening, "as the audience is being seated, [the Chorus] is putting up posters... "Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil", "Loose Talk Costs Lives", "Strength and Patience", "Think Yes"" (1); in which Ismene - like Pontius Pilate - exclaims "I wash my hands of her" (11); in which, likewise, Creon suggests "I wash my hands of it", Antigone turns anxiously to the audience, asking:

"Do any of you know Polyneices? Polyneices? Please. Please tell them.

Please stop them doing this. (CHORUS ATTEMPTS TO MUFFLE HER

MOUTH WITH HIS HAND. SHE BITES IT, HE STRIKES HER) Jesus, my

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<sup>433</sup> McDonald (1997: 64).

nose is bleeding. Stop it please. Tell them. Tell them. They'll come for the woman down the street. Will you tell them then? They'll come for your next door neighbour. Will you tell them then? They'll come for you. They'll come for you. And after that, when there's nobody left, they'll come for themselves". (58)

Her action again to keep her brother's memory alive does not spring solely from love and duty for a brother, but is rather a political act, an urge to stand up for the others before our turn comes. In their activism, Antigone's words recall Martin Niemöller, who spent seven years in concentration camps during World War II, and his well-known quotation about the Nazi era and the "sins of omission":

"First they came for the communists, but I was not a communist --- so I said nothing. They came for the social democrats, but I was not a social democrat --- so I did nothing. Then came the trade unionists, but I was not a trade unionist. And then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew --- so I did little. Then, when they came for me, there was no one left who could stand up for me".<sup>434</sup>

The fact that Niemöller was a prominent theologian and Pastor reinforces the assumption that Mathews was well aware of his life and work while writing his *Antigone*; as we will see in detail in the chapter to follow, Mathews is a deeply religious man with particularly extensive religious knowledge dating back to his Jesuit education. Peires describes Niemöller and Bonhoeffer, whose name also

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<sup>434</sup> Meyer (1997: 88).

appears in Mathews' text, as we will see, as two of the "few dedicated Christians [who] mounted protests against the actions of the Nazis. They were pastors in the 'Confessing Church' that defended the autonomy of the church and repudiated the Nazi efforts to control its teachings or to expel converted Jews".<sup>435</sup>

Further to the depiction of Antigone as an activist, it is as if all 1984 writers draw a line between the common man on the one hand and the politician on the other - eventually taking sides in favour of the former. "But you're the top man"; the Chorus tells Creon in Mathews' play; "perhaps", Creon responds, "but the roots of history plunge into the likes of you. [...] you're at the bottom of everything" (15). Mathews' one-man chorus, unlike the conventional choruses of Greek tragedy, is a contemporary young man, who is treated as a character with his own views about things and his own complaints about the role he is given.<sup>436</sup> At first glance he looks far removed from the Sophoclean Chorus, as he is distant from it in both age and status. The crude language he uses, as well as his behaviour on stage, as described in the stage directions, also distance him significantly from the Theban elders. This concept of the Chorus might be far from the letter of the original, but still, from certain points of view, it is close to its spirit. In the first place, Mathews' script was written alongside the rehearsals, with all parts tailor - made for the actors that he and the director, Michael Scott, chose<sup>437</sup> - a practice not unknown to Sophocles. Both

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<sup>435</sup> Peires (2006: 34).

<sup>436</sup> "I got the most fuckin' difficult lines in the whole thing" (1), "But do I get a name? Even a fuckin' name... The Chorus. The Chorus! What kind of a fuckin' Chorus do I look like? I am a human being" (2) "I didn't ask to be the Chorus. I was told, O.K.? I was fuckin' ordered... After all, who's fuckin' play is it? It's not called "The Chorus". Didya ever think I might like to have a play named after meself? Didya ever think I might like the plum-part?" (10).

<sup>437</sup> Scott - K. G. (2006).

writer and director chose Gerrard Mannix Flynn to play the part of the Chorus, in reality “the lowest class person you could ever find in Ireland”,<sup>438</sup> a criminal in his youth who experienced reform schools, poverty and alcoholism. The language that he uses on stage is the language the actor used in real life; apparently it was not the Chorus as a dramatic construct speaking; it was Mannix.<sup>439</sup> The idea, as the director himself put it, was “that this worst character in the world, this lowest life is in fact the one who makes the comments; he’s the common man”.<sup>440</sup> If the Chorus in tragedy expresses the views of the community, then Flynn “embodies the voice of the people as a persona, as a character and as an actor”,<sup>441</sup> and this Chorus does not speak poetry, but rather the street talk of Dublin, his language being crude and particularly provocative. The choice of an outcast for a Chorus is not alien to Greek tragedy: the tragic Chorus is not usually composed of the institutional core of adult, male citizens, but by socially marginalized categories in 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens, such as old men, women, slaves and foreigners.<sup>442</sup> Seen from this point of view, Mathews’ choice seems an effective one. Finally, if the Chorus is “an intermediary between the world of the play and the audience whose perspective it helps to shape”,<sup>443</sup> and “its job is to help the audience *become involved in the process of responding*”,<sup>444</sup> Mathews’ Chorus is very effective in that as well: he often addresses directly the audience, he informs the spectators what they are going to see next (21), he winks theatrically at them (28), he even asks them for a cigarette (16).

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<sup>438</sup> Scott - K. G. (2006).

<sup>439</sup> Id.

<sup>440</sup> Id.

<sup>441</sup> Fouéré - K. G. (2006).

<sup>442</sup> Gould (1996: 220-221) discusses the ‘marginality’ of the Chorus and comments that “it is that ‘social’ marginality that in the first place deprives the chorus of tragic authority (most obviously of the power to initiate or control action, except by the exercise of indirect and often devious pressure)”.

<sup>443</sup> Burian (2007 [1997]: 198).

<sup>444</sup> Easterling (2007 [1997]: 164).



Paulin and Kennelly, on the other hand, creatively rewrite the Ode on Man, a choral ode in which “wonder and terror are not responses directed toward a divinity but toward the uncanny undergoings of humankind as it traverses “the uncharted territories of life””.<sup>445</sup> Man in *Antigone’s* first stasimon is “accomplished, all-inventive, intelligent, yet finally morally ambiguous; [...] but man in his greatness, in his formidable skills, has an equivocal fate”.<sup>446</sup> Sophocles focuses on the paradox of man, his ambiguity, his cleverness, but also his self-destructiveness. The Chorus in Kennelly and Paulin - at least in this ode - expresses his admiration for what man has achieved and his optimism for what he may achieve in the future. To start with, Kennelly’s version emphasises the intellectual aspect of human nature<sup>447</sup> and man’s individual potential - at least this is what the Chorus does in the first choral:

“Man, genius, wit, prophet, poet,

Thinker, worker, sage”

.....

“Man is strong and wise and beautiful” (18)

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<sup>445</sup> Mooney (2007:41).

<sup>446</sup> Seale (1982: 89); Segal (1995: 182) also observes that Sophocles, in his first Stasimon, “uses the motifs of birds, sea, and the contrasts between man’s control of his world and the unpredictable and dangerous powers of nature and the gods already established in the play; and these themes are further developed in a number of ways in the ensuing action”.

<sup>447</sup> Younger (2001: 118) notes that “it appears as if Sophocles is more concerned with the physical role of man, while Kennelly focuses more on man himself”.

Rarely do we find in poetry such praise for man; man - at least according to Kennelly's Chorus - is elevated into a complete, perfect being which has everything: strength and wisdom and beauty. He has thus the capacity to change, change being now an imperative, not simply a possibility. "And he has learned speech and wind-swift thought and the temper that rules cities" (lines 354-356), Sophocles writes; and Kennelly makes it:

"He tames the wild life of words  
The mad life of thought  
All the dangerous moods  
Of heart and mind" (18)

What man has achieved becomes more challenging in Kennelly: man did not just invent speech and rational thinking; the words have a *wild* life of their own and the thought a *mad* life of its own and he now needs to tame both of them, to control them, to master them; most of all to control the *dangerous* moods not only of the mind, but also of the heart. A poet like Kennelly, having led a turbulent life himself, is aware of the destructiveness of words, moods and thoughts, and knows the importance for man to make sense of them and eventually to control them; what is not clear by now is whether man *can* or *does* in practice always control them, or if being self-controlled is a prerequisite for wisdom. Wisdom, one of the assets of man, according to Kennelly, becomes thus in his play an object of exploration.

Contrary to Kennelly's interest in man's intellectual potential, his Chorus in the first Stasimon does not insist much on man's ability to solve practical problems, as was the case in Sophocles. Twenty five centuries after the original play was written, science and technology have made strides, offering man plenty of tools that help him predict and overcome natural phenomena. What the Chorus also omits is "the temper that rules cities";<sup>448</sup> Sophocles did not give much emphasis to it either but Kennelly accentuates man's need to control himself rather than his ability to control others. Kennelly is obviously interested in man's intellectual and moral power, not in political power, and this accounts for the distance that he keeps from dealing with his immediate political reality in his work.

Paulin also deletes this phrase. His translation might be systematically political but the writer is not an admirer of formal political power; on the contrary, his political position opposes the authority of the state. Things here are very different again: contrary to Kennelly, Paulin's Ode is significantly condensed: the Sophoclean forty lines become as few as fifteen. In them, there are neither references to man's ability to survive natural phenomena nor to his achievements as far as speech or thought are concerned. What we have here is only a series of technological achievements that would sound as impressive to 20<sup>th</sup> century audiences as Sophocles' had probably been in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC:

"He owns the universe, the stars,

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<sup>448</sup> *'astynomous orgas'*, line356.

*sput* satellites and great societies.

Fish pip inside his radar screens  
and foals kick out of a syringe:  
he bounces on the dusty moon  
and chases clouds about the sky  
so they can dip on sterile ground". (23)

Man is no more limited to the earth; after 2,500 years he also masters the universe, he controls it, he *owns* it, and Paulin does not hide his pride about it. His priority in this instance is not to reproduce Sophocles' words, but the impact that these words might have on the audiences. Paulin's great admiration for mankind is stressed from the beginning to the end of the choral passage. Sophocles starts the Ode with the human achievements, concluding that there is only one thing man cannot escape: death. Paulin inverts the order of the Sophoclean reasoning; starting off with death, which "baffles him" (23), the emphasis is no more placed on its inevitability but on man's difficulty to understand it.<sup>449</sup> The significance of death for human life already played down, Paulin subsequently indicates instead the other marvellous things man is capable of. The closing of his Ode is also revealing as to how he sees man:

"by pushing harder every day

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<sup>449</sup> Interestingly, Heaney too, emphasises man's achievements in his Ode but completely eliminates death that overpowers man's life.

by risking everything he loves  
he makes us better day by day:  
we call this progress and it shows  
we're damned near perfect!" (24)

Keeping his distance from the more reserved Sophoclean view that "he advances sometimes to evil, at other times to good" (367), Paulin's man - like Kennelly's who is strong and wise and beautiful - (almost) reaches perfection. It is also interesting that Paulin shifts from third person singular to first person plural in the last two lines, stressing that each man's achievements lead to a collective progress, bringing 'us' closer to perfection. The need for collective action, passing from 'I' to 'we', has been a cornerstone for the Field Day, as Rea points out in an interview for the RTÉ, in response to the individualism cultivated at the time by Margaret Thatcher: "People may choose to ignore it but I think that we have taken on some kind of cultural responsibility and one can't be ashamed of that. [...] Instead of operating just as individuals pursuing our own skills and our own careers and meeting with whatever success is there, I think we've at this point said let's pool the resources and take up that responsibility".<sup>450</sup> In the play, it is as if Paulin encourages his audiences to realize their potential - refusing to accept anything but death as a limitation - and to make use of it with the aim of a better future for all.

### **Antigone's insistence on personal duty, despite consequences**

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<sup>450</sup> Radio Telefís Éireann (1983: 189)

A question that is posed - one way or another - in all three early versions is whether Antigone's action was worth the disaster that it brought about. "Now Antigone must die. I ask you is it worth it for a handful of dust on Polynices?" (35), the Chorus Leader in Paulin's version asks the audience, just before Haemon's entrance. The question - posed directly to the audience - comes as a response to Conor Cruise O'Brien: even when he supposedly supported Antigone's activism, O'Brien described "the consequences of her non-violent action" as a "stiff price for that handful of dust on Polynices".<sup>451</sup> Are the actions measured in terms of the outcome? Will the action of Antigone bring about any change? Rea's answer does not leave much scope for wondering: "It doesn't matter. It *doesn't* matter. Your job if you are Antigone is to bury the body. It doesn't matter if you change Creon or not, *you bury the body*. These people they don't care for changes at this point; they keep going".<sup>452</sup> Should either of the two characters relent, the tragedy would have been avoided. As Cleary writes:

"the whole moral thrust of Paulin's version seems to insist, in a spirit nearer to comedy, that a greater capacity for compromise might have resolved everything. Compromise, after all, is what Haemon counsels: "Be firm sometimes, / then give a little—that's wise." The Messenger's verdict on Creon seems to underscore the same point: "He could neither bend nor listen. He held firm just that shade too long. There was no joy nor give in him ever." A few lines later, the Chorus reiterates the same message: "It was too late you changed your mind".<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> O'Brien (1972: 156-157).

<sup>452</sup> Rea - K. G. (2006).

<sup>453</sup> Cleary (1999: 529).

Equally, if Antigone had compromised, nothing would have happened. But compromise stands outside the logic of both; in Creon's case because he wants to assert his power, in Antigone's because she acts from conscience, regardless of the consequences. Her response represents a whole political philosophy that has shaped the Field Day agenda; Rea himself associates Antigone's action with the hunger strikers in Ireland, who say: "we don't care if you withdraw our political status, we know that we are acting from conscience"; their actions, according to Rea, are thus justified because of the motives, not because of the outcome of their actions, something that will change in the later versions, as we shall see shortly.

Mathews and Kennelly also deal with the issue, albeit not posing directly the question: "Such a ... waste.. you could have been my wife if you'd had any nous. You could have had me. Do you understand?" (49), Heman tells Antigone in Mathews' version; "I want Antigone to think, to think until she knows, in every corner of her being, that she wasted her life for nothing" (34), Creon says in Kennelly's. In both cases, the evaluation of Antigone's action comes from someone who has a completely different mindset and stands on the opposite side: Heman, a Chief of the Secret Police, standing for and endorsing different values in the play, could not possibly fully understand the motives behind Antigone's actions. Both Creons' statements, however, are undermined in the plays, since in both cases it is the Antigones that we are in both writers invited to sympathise; moreover, Kennelly (as is the case with Heaney as well) also takes sides in favour of Antigone by accentuating the burial theme before an Irish audience which places a special importance on the dignity that a proper burial offers to the dead. In such a cultural

context, the audience would, in all probability, agree that offering a burial - even a quick, symbolic one - to a dead brother is far from 'nothing'.

### **Ismene's dangerous neutrality**

Ismene's actions - or rather her inaction - also assumes political dimensions in Paulin's and Mathews' plays. Paulin describes Ismene's stance in the following terms: "Ismene is caught in the middle, a classically liberal position, and one forbidden in ancient Greece, where there was *nomos* (an understood law) which made it accepted practice not to remain neutral in a civil war".<sup>454</sup> Rea also comments on Ismene's belief in the middle way and describes her as a "detestable figure".<sup>455</sup> Looking at the political conditions in Ireland in 2006, when the interview was held, he feels that "the country is full of Ismenes", and that this figure "as the time passes becomes smoother"<sup>456</sup> - a view that is to be confirmed shortly.

Mathews' view of Ismene is relevant to Paulin's: in his play, Ismene - worlds apart from her famous sister - is the person who deals with the practicalities of life, an ordinary woman who has to cope with survival, and struggle day after day to lead a decent life: she is the one who checks the taps (12), washes shirt collars, keeps pinecones in the fire and a hot brick in the bed at night (13), strains the goat's milk and blocks up the hole that the rat was getting through (15) and many more. Ismene finds

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<sup>454</sup> Paulin (2002: 166).

<sup>455</sup> Rea - K. G. (2006).

<sup>456</sup> Id.



joy and takes pride in the *order* of her everyday life<sup>457</sup> and her accomplishment of the chores, mocking Antigone's incompetence<sup>458</sup> and morbidity: "if you had to worry about where your next meal would come from you wouldn't be so morbid" (48) she tells her sister. On one level, Ismene is an 'ordinary' woman worth of respect for coping with her daily chores and down-to-earth anxieties. As she tells Antigone:

"I'll tell you what takes blood and guts. Not burning your draft card or standing up for sodomy. A thirty thousand pound mortgage takes blood and guts. Finding time for a parent - teacher meeting takes blood and guts" (14).

On the other hand Ismene is trapped in a limited miserable life, without imagination, without individual thinking, without ideals or visions, drained of love and compassion for others. Given her inferiority complex in relation to her famous sister, which resurfaces on several occasions throughout the play, it seems that her life does not give her as much pleasure and satisfaction as she suggests. Antigone's sister has been *trained* to follow a particular routine without deviations and to stand up for it; to favour order, regardless of whose order it is; to be blindly obedient to the regime, without ever challenging it. Ismene, in short, is a woman who has been taught that "order is everything" (49) and who can thus be easily manipulated and fanaticized, as much as the proletariat in Orwell's novel. It comes as no surprise, then, that such a

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<sup>457</sup> "That's the secret. Order is everything. I'm a living example. Every day I water my roses at five past five. Sometimes it's raining heavily, but I water them notwithstanding. Even though I get wet. That's order" (49).

<sup>458</sup> "Redhanded. I'm the one who's redhanded. From washing shirt-collars. Oh, no, Antigone's allergic to Persil" (13).

person - dangerous as much as miserable in her submissiveness - is described by Creon as an “an asset to the community” (49); in this political establishment the less one can think the more he is appreciated.

Evidence of this attitude is also the incidence with the Critic, who reappears later in the play as “shortlisted for the vacancy in the Ministry of Culture and Defence” (40) - such an awkward institution only serving to affirm the role of culture as controlled propaganda in the hands of the regime. The dialogue between Creon, Heman and the Critic is indicative:

“Creon: Is he vacant enough?

Heman: He’s impressed me.

Creon: (TO CRITIC) You’re quite sure you’ve no credentials?

Critic: None, Sir. And less each year.

.....

Creon: Have you ever published in The Crane Bag?

Critic: Never, sir. Not once. In fact, I’ve had material rejected. Three times.

Creon: But you’re admitting you’ve read The Crane Bag?

Critic: (TERRIFIED) Once. Perhaps. But I didn’t understand any of it. And what I did understand, I’ve... forgotten.

Creon: And what is your opinion of such literature?

Critic: The very same as yours, sir.

(PAUSE)

Creon: "Welcome aboard." (40-41)

In between the two parts of the above conversation, Heman takes the chance to spell out his views (and the views of the regime that he represents) on the place that intellectuals should have in society:

"the academics out to join the barefoot doctors. The dons should dig ditches. Let the peasants tell us what culture is. Let's be evangelized by the downtrodden for a change. I mean, the mandarins are a hothouse breed. What we need is some salt of the earth.. (HEMAN A LITTLE DUBIOUS ABOUT HIS OWN ANALOGIES) Let the profs pile dishes, in the people's cafeterias! More power to the ... grossly incapable." (40)

Again, what makes Mathews' *Antigone* markedly - although indirectly - political is the writer's allusions in several parts of the play to events that span twentieth-century history; the distinction between intelligentsia and the peasants, for instance, emerged as an issue before the Russian Revolution and continued after it:

"for the lower classes the notion of "educated society" largely overlapped with that of "privileged Russia." Educated Russians of the upper, middle and professional classes were, to the peasants and workers of the lower classes, "them". This helped set the stage for the sharp social antagonisms of 1917

between “educated” or “privileged” society and “the masses” of workers, peasants, soldiers and even some of the urban lower middle class”.<sup>459</sup>

Several decades later, this attitude towards education and learning was adopted in different communist countries around the world, China in the late 1960s being one of them:

“The Cultural Revolution despised culture and openly denigrated learning, causing many to look down on education and cultural knowledge. Graduates therefore were not wanted by any office or profession. In addition, revolutionary education excluded science and cultural subjects, depriving the students of the knowledge base needed to qualify them for complex work. Faced with such a situation, the authorities pointed the middle-school and university graduates toward rural villages, frontiers, factories, and basic-level positions. [...] On December 22, 1968, *People’s Daily* ran the following advice from Mao: “There is need for the educated youth to go to the countryside to receive reeducation from the poor lower and middle peasants. [...] Let’s have a mobilization”.<sup>460</sup>

Other regimes were more violent than that; the communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia that ran from 1970 to 1977, turned violently against “the educated, professional, bureaucratic, and urban classes in general”:

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<sup>459</sup> Wade (2000: 8).

<sup>460</sup> Yan and Gao (1996 [1986]: 279).

“Dispatched to the countryside, they became “new people”, dehumanized slaves of the former underclass. Many who did not die as a result of their living conditions were later executed [...] Social inversion was often a prelude to death”.<sup>461</sup>

This thesis does not obviously claim to any in-depth or analytical study of oppressive regimes around the world, the above references serving only to give an idea of what preceded in world history in the decades before Mathews wrote his *Antigone*. What evidently differentiates his play from the other two, written in the same year, is that it has both a national and an international outlook, something that we encounter again - although in different analogies - in the later revisitations of the Sophoclean tragedy.

## II. LATER VERSIONS

### **From Parochial Colonialism to Global Colonialism**

In the later versions of *Antigone* the writers scarcely echo the painful Irish past, as they no longer deal with domestic political and social issues. It seems that “it took over a decade for a new Irish Antigone to appear who [...] stops buying into her symptomatic situation”. Younger attributes this shift to “the cultural, political and economic stability Ireland experienced during the end of the twentieth century - in conjunction with the Good Friday Peace agreement between North and South - that

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<sup>461</sup> Jones and Robins (2009: 15); Jones and Robbins (2009: 15) also note that “the red of their flag, to which the national anthem referred, was not so much communist in nature as symbolizing the blood red of violence and revenge”.

finally created a space for a new Antigone”.<sup>462</sup> This has been a generalized tendency: according to Fiona Shaw, “in Ireland there is a very small repertory of plays, obsessively nationalistic and inward looking, something that has changed in recent years”.<sup>463</sup> When it comes to Greek myths in particular, Harkin attributes “the fact that the most recent Irish versions of Greek tragedy have resonated with international rather than national politics” to “domestic stagnancy”.<sup>464</sup> Abandoning the local in favour of a more global perspective, however, does not make the *Antigones* written after 1999 less politically relevant.

The political orientation of the plays and their associations with modern day politics is already established before the show starts, in the theatre programmes. In the program of Declan Donnellan’s translation, a show staged in London in 1999, Peter Stothard’s article starts by placing the story in modern Kosovo:

“the play opens at night in a Balkan city at war. [...] Ancient Thebes, like modern Kosovo 2500 ago and a few hundred miles away, is a place of shattered loyalties where morality has to be remade from the rubble of conflict”.<sup>465</sup>

Stothard also evokes “one recent war report from Kosovo”, according to which Anouilh’s *Antigone* is “read with respect in the divided town of Mitrovice today”.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Younger (2006: 157-158).

<sup>463</sup> Shaw - K. G. (2008).

<sup>464</sup> Harkin (2008: 292).

<sup>465</sup> Stothard (1999).

Four years later, in 2003, there is the first new version of *Antigone* in Dublin for years; Morrison sets “the story in the context of today’s Middle East conflict”, the theatre programme states, “with its tragic cycle of action and reaction feeding into global conflict”.<sup>467</sup> Heaney’s version, a year later, is full of undertones of Bush’s war in Iraq. The poet directly associates Creon with the American President in his note, commenting on his pseudo-dilemmas and ‘the war on terror’. In his essay “‘Me’ as in ‘Metre’: on Translating *Antigone*”, he explains that one of the two reasons for deciding to revisit the myth were the political circumstances of the time:

“One consideration weighed heavily in favour of a new start. Early in 2003 we were watching a leader, a Creon figure if ever there was one, a law-and-order-bossman trying to boss the nations of the world into uncritical agreement with his edicts in much the same way as Creon tries to boss the Chorus of compliant Thebans into conformity with his. With the White House and the Pentagon in cahoots, determined to bring the rest of us into line over Iraq, the disposition and passion of an Antigone were all of a sudden as vital as oxygen masks, so I soon found myself doing a version of the ‘wonders chorus’ and publishing it as a sort of open letter to George Bush:

let him once

Overbear or overstep

What the city allows, treat law

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<sup>466</sup> Id.

<sup>467</sup> Morrison (2003).

As something he can decide for himself -

Then let this wonder of the world remember:

When he comes begging we will turn our backs”.<sup>468</sup>

The association between Creon and Bush is evident in his script as well: at the very opening of the play, Antigone quotes Creon affirming that “the enemies of the state [are] to be considered traitors” (1). “Whoever isn’t for us is against us in this case” (3), says Creon upon his appearance, recalling Bush’s statement after September 11<sup>th</sup> that “every nation in every region now has a decision to make: either you are with us or you are with the terrorists”.<sup>469</sup> Bush often employs in his discourse the terms ‘terrorists’ and ‘traitors’, to describe those who disagree with his policies, and Heaney’s Creon does it also: Polynices is described as “a traitor, an anti-Theban Theban” (10); and Creon is determined “never to grant traitors and subversives equal footing with loyal citizens” (11). Antigone, who defies his edict and buries him, is described by her uncle as “a danger” (33) and she must not be the only one: Creon has had “reports of disaffected elements at work here” (14), while Antigone implies that the citizens would openly agree with her “if [they] weren’t so afraid to sound unpatriotic” (23). Creon insists on the importance of issues like the “safety of our state”, “security” and “good order in the city” (10), as it is quite common “in terrorism discourse, as news agency reports on terrorism show, fears (or worries or concerns) [to be] often combined with the concept of security”.<sup>470</sup> The play translated into modern terms, Polynices is an “enemy of the state” and as such he is denied

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<sup>468</sup> Heaney (2005: 170).

<sup>469</sup> Bush (2001).

<sup>470</sup> Stenvall (2007:219).



burial, echoing “the denial of human rights and dignity to Iraqi and other prisoners. [...] Like George Bush, who denied the applicability of the Geneva convention (relating to prisoners of war) to those detained in Guantanamo Bay and Afghanistan, Creon regards Polynices as undeserving of human rights”.<sup>471</sup>

In contrast to Polynices, who “terrorised” them (24), and Antigone - the danger, there is also Eteocles, who “stood by [them]” (24), and whom Creon strongly praises: Eteocles is a true patriot and - as Creon suggests - “for the patriot, personal loyalty always must give way to patriotic duty”. In this context, Eteocles, “who fell in our defence”, is made an example of as “a hero of his country” (10), the same way that Bush after September 11<sup>th</sup> recalled “passengers like an exceptional man named Todd Beamer” who “rushed terrorists to save others on the ground”, or “George Howard who died at the World Trade Center trying to save others”. The police shield of the latter, Bush attests, “was given to [him] by his mom, Arlene, as a proud memorial to her son”.<sup>472</sup> The “need for heroes, villains, scandals lessons [the] self-conceived role as moral agent and bringer of retributive justice, scourge of the hubris of power”,<sup>473</sup> are all constituents of propaganda; both Bush and Creon employ all. “Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero”, Andrea says in *Galileo*; “No, Andrea: Unhappy is the land that needs a hero”, Galileo responds,<sup>474</sup> Brecht sounding as timely as ever.

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<sup>471</sup> Wilmer (2007: 236).

<sup>472</sup> Bush (2001).

<sup>473</sup> O' Shaughnessy (2004: 53).

<sup>474</sup> Bentley (1966 [1940]: 115).

Heaney's declaration that his play is not overtly topical should then be put to the test - unless he associates the topical character of the play with strictly regional, Irish in this case, politics. Of course there are no direct references to George W. Bush in the play; however, echoes from his speeches are very easily discernible and the text invites us to make the relevant associations. The play, "thanks to Heaney's revision of Creon as an American imperialist rather than an English colonist, and his revision of Antigone as a global protestor rather than an Irish rebel, finally breaks the cycle of tired depictions of Irish Antigones and sets the stage for a more global audience. While Irish playwrights before him transformed the *Antigone* from a Greek to an Irish tragedy, Heaney succeeds at transforming it from an Irish tragedy into a global one".<sup>475</sup> The passage from British to American colonialism does not mean, though, that there are no allusions whatsoever to the Irish past. Heaney himself points out the obvious association between Antigone's refutation of the charge that Polynices was "a common criminal" (23) with Thatcher's denomination of the IRA members.<sup>476</sup> It should also be recalled here that the second source of inspiration which urged Heaney eventually to commit to translating *Antigone* was 'Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire' (The Lament for Art O'Leary), an eighteenth century poem written in Irish. Apart from its evident Irishness, both thematically and linguistically, "that the poem was written in Irish by a woman mourning her husband, who had been killed by the English and left to rot, evokes a strong anti-colonial sentiment".<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Younger (2007: 211); we should not forget, though, that Morrison's play, staged in Dublin just a year earlier also had an international outlook rather than a local one.

<sup>476</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008); in this context, Harkin (2008: 305) associates Antigone with Bobby Sands.

<sup>477</sup> Wilmer (2007: 231).

Morrison's *Antigone* is set against a distinctly Middle Eastern backdrop, mostly evident in the visual part of the production, as will be further elaborated in chapter five; a choice, though, for which he was occasionally criticized: firstly, because *Antigone* has no relevance to the Israeli - Palestinian conflict, and secondly, because the play - which he turned into an anti-war play, isn't about war.<sup>478</sup> In the script there is a reference to "the promised land" (8), plus a song performed live by Eurydice towards the end of the play, whose lyrics subtly emphasise the Palestinians' plight and their non-stop struggle. Harkin also examines the first choral of the play in which there are allusions to the struggle of the Palestinians, among them the "six short days" (5) that echo the six - days war in June 1967, or the utterance "we have come through flame before and we no longer fear the fire", alluding to "the flames through which they have come attest to the Jewish holocaust".<sup>479</sup>

Despite the differences in the background of the production, Morrison's play, written and staged just a year before *The Burial at Thebes*, follows the same pattern as Heaney's: global politics, propaganda, scarce allusions to domestic politics and a distinct flavour of American exceptionalism. "Nothing is greater than our country. Our country is our friend, our family. Our country is our life. Our country is our law. And our law is our protection" (7), says Morrison's Creon, recalling Bush's often recycled rhetoric on the superiority of the United States. Terms like terrorism and patriotism also recur: Morrison's Creon describes "anyone who puts friends or family or himself before his country" as a traitor (7), soon asserting that his heart

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<sup>478</sup> O'Kelly (2003).

<sup>479</sup> Harkin (2008: 301).

“loves the loyal as it hates the liar and the traitor” (7). In the play he defines as such two of them, the first being Polynices, the traitor (17 [twice], 33), or “mongrel traitor” (10); interestingly, apart from Creon, the Chorus also refers to him as “the traitor dog” (5). He is not the only traitor in the play, however; Antigone is also three times described by Creon, whom she disobeyed, as a “traitor” (16, 19, 22) and once as a “traitorous, little bitch” (26). The word “patriot”, on the other hand, is mentioned only once (17), evidently describing Eteocles. As was the case in Heaney, Morrison’s Creon also describes Eteocles as “a hero at rest” (7), employing the same word twice to refer ironically to his brother Polynices<sup>480</sup> (9,10).

Although Morrison claims that his play was meant to have both “Irish and Middle East resonances, bouncing Antigone off modernity [to] hear what the echo sounds like”,<sup>481</sup> in his *Antigone* there are hardly any allusions to Ireland’s painful past. There are echoes, however, from the earlier, 1984 versions: his one-man Chorus, to whom we will return in the final chapter, who smashes a burnt out car and drinks wine, recalls Mathews’ Chorus, while the importance that Morrison’s Creon attaches to issues like obedience and money recall Paulin and - even more - Kennelly. The result is a play rich in references but often lacking in coherence and clarity of purpose.

## **Return to Politics**

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<sup>480</sup> “Bury him like a hero? The hero who came to rape their holy shrines?” (9-10).

<sup>481</sup> Morrison - K.G. (2006).

Along with the political circumstances, what has also changed in Ireland in recent decades are people's attitudes to acts of civil disobedience. There is one thing - if any - on which the translators of *Antigone* between 1999 and 2004 seem to agree: after years of violence and bloodshed, politics seems probably the only way out of the dead end. Heaney, as is already mentioned, admits that he sympathises with Creon and people in charge,<sup>482</sup> while Donnellan associates politics with discussion:

“politics to me is about discussion, it's about Parliament, it's about the Senate, it's about the place where we discuss things, it's about people having a dialogue with each other, that to me is a political act; a work of art is truly political [when] it invites us to see the world in a different way and that's a political act, a true political act. [...] A terrorist act is anti-political because it invites us not to think about something, it invites us not to join in the discussion, so it asks you to strengthen your prejudice about the status quo. So, any good work of art is political in the same way that any act of terrorism is anti-political, it just stops us having political discussion. [...] A political act is sitting with somebody that you disagree with and trying to talk about what you disagree; shooting somebody else is the opposite of a political act, I mean you have a war but now politics have failed. War is about the failure of politics”<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> Heaney - K.G. (2008).

<sup>483</sup> Donnellan - K.G. (2009); Donnellan's definition of politics is not far from Ó Briain's: as the director of Kennelly's *Antigone* [Ó Briain - K.G. (2006)] says, “politics is about how people relate to each other and how they deal with the individual responses to issues that are bigger than themselves”. Sharing also similar views as to topical associations in the plays, their two stagings of *Antigone* have many similarities, as will see in the final chapter of the thesis.

Donnellan is against narrowing a play down for political purposes, endorsing only, as he says, the use of plays by his definition of politics; given this definition, *Antigone* is a political play since it “invites us to discuss the individual and the state, men and women what is to be in the city, what it is to be outside the city, to discuss many things”.<sup>484</sup> Similar are Morrison’s views, since he describes *Antigone* as “an anti-fundamentalist play, [...] a play that suggests that the onus is on us to see the other side”.<sup>485</sup>

As we saw earlier, it took Conor Cruise O’Brien three years to change his views towards the young heroine; after twenty years, the interpretation, definition and evaluation of Antigone’s action changes again - dramatically, in both senses. Antigone is seen as heroic in 1984, but as a principled extremist in 2003; what Paulin defined as “acting from conscience”, for Donnellan becomes “a terrorist act”, for Morrison “extremism”. Ismene, praised by O’Brien in 1972 for her “commonsense and feeling for the living” is subsequently derided in 1984, but returns triumphantly at the turn of the century. The young generation of actresses sees the play through this lens, too: Fitzgerald, whom Paulin criticized, as we have seen, for the way she played Antigone in 1999, argues that “one of the keys to *Antigone* is that it’s about compromise and that is a contemporary word”,<sup>486</sup> Campbell confesses that she felt very comfortable with the role of Ismene - a character whose action she describes as trying to stop her sister from dying - as she feels that she is more like her.<sup>487</sup> Haemon and Eurydice’s deaths are, finally, described by Morrison as the collateral damage of

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<sup>484</sup> Id.

<sup>485</sup> -- (2003b).

<sup>486</sup> Palmer (1999).

<sup>487</sup> Campbell - K .G. (2006).

a suicide bomber.<sup>488</sup> The turn of the century, and what follows thereafter, proves a challenging time; the line between what is heroic and what is extremist is so thin, that it is often blurred. Before history almost concluded that the war in Iraq, disastrous in every respect, was an unnecessary mistake, the wars that followed in the area of the Middle East and the current upheavals in the Arab world - which are in constant danger of further escalation - account for a global sense of insecurity and confusion as to what the role of man or art is under these circumstances. Morrison argues that the Greek plays have never been more timely than they are today, if we do not want to end up in a nuclear war;<sup>489</sup> as he sees it, “*Antigone* feels more vital than ever now that we seem to have lost of the idea of a global village and replaced it with something like global cockfight”.<sup>490</sup> The future alone will judge what roles are carved out for the Antigones in these uncertain times.

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<sup>488</sup> Morrison - K.G. (2006) 36.30-41.25; Harkin (2008: 302) also establishes some connections between *Antigone* and a suicide bomber in Morrison’s play.

<sup>489</sup> Morrison - K.G. (2006) -1.17.40

<sup>490</sup> -- (2003b).

## CHAPTER 3

### *ANTIGONE AND RELIGION IN IRELAND*

Religion in Ireland is a sensitive issue full of complexities. To a significant degree, Ireland is a secularised country like most democratic states of the western world in which “religions, or rather, a plethora of competing and sometimes cooperating religious establishments, have accommodated to changes because they have been republicanized”.<sup>491</sup> This inevitably shapes the organisation of social life and affects the impact that the divine has on people’s lives, compared to religious establishments encountered in other parts of the world, as, for example, in countries of the Middle East.<sup>492</sup> Living in a secularized society, however, does not exclude the possibility of different religious systems or beliefs operating at the same time, since “for all its marginalized religion, [a western society] is replete with myriads of individual idols, as each person thinks and does what is “right” in his or her own eyes, unwittingly conforming to the fragmented dictates of this secularizing age of pluralism”.<sup>493</sup> Nor does it mean that religion is absent or uninfluential in people’s lives; on the contrary, Catholicism has had a disproportionately big impact on its flock, especially in rural areas, affecting - despite the seeming secularization of the society - the social norms, even the political life of the country:

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<sup>491</sup> Safran (2003: 2).

<sup>492</sup> “Almost all law existing in Middle Eastern countries stems at least partially from religious belief. In some countries religious law is the law, as in Saudi Arabia, where the Sharia informs jurisprudence. In other Middle Eastern countries, religious groups pressure their governments to adopt religious law, leading to compromises where at least some of the legal code derives from religious belief. Thus, in many Arab countries and in Israel, religious codes form the basis of family law” Sorenson (2008: 43).

<sup>493</sup> Carson (1996: 41).



“the society in which the political culture developed has also been an essentially rural one, and since the late nineteenth century one with a strong sense of proprietorialism. This rural, Catholic, English-speaking and proprietorial society imposed specific social norms on the political culture. These reflected the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, were patriarchal in nature and content, narrowly moralistic in family and sexual matters, and inculcated an anti-intellectual ‘intellectual’ environment”.<sup>494</sup>

A second issue that makes Ireland a special case among other countries of the West is the “overlap between religious and national identities”.<sup>495</sup> Irish history has been afflicted by sectarian hatred, the historical and cultural divisions dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> and, especially, the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The conflict, however, is not simply between two different religious denominations, but also between two different ethnic origins and political orientations. Since nationalism in Ireland emerged in antagonism to a power that took as its state religion Episcopalian Protestantism, a specifically Irish set of politics has historically been bound to religious identity. The divisions were evident in Ireland at the time that the first set of *Antigones* was written, particularly in the partitioned North. Thus,

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<sup>494</sup> Girvin (2002 [1997]: 124-125).

<sup>495</sup> Kearney (1988: 240).

“a ‘Protestant’ or ‘Roman Catholic’ is a person who belongs to the relevant one of these two groups and who holds the political and ideological views acceptable to the group to which he belongs. Thus a ‘Protestant’ is a person who believes he is ‘British’, is conscious of a cultural heritage which is British - few Protestants learn the Irish language - and has a great respect and admiration for the British sovereign. He also supports one or other of the Unionist parties, opposes the idea of a United Ireland and goes to a ‘church’ on Sunday where he worships with his fellow members of one of the non -Roman catholic sects or denominations. A Roman Catholic, on the other hand, is a person who believes he is ‘Irish’, is conscious of a cultural heritage which is Irish - if he doesn’t actually *learn* the Irish language he does approve of its preservation - and regards the British sovereign as the symbol of an imperial power. He also supports some form of Nationalist or Republican party, is in favour of a united Ireland and goes to a ‘chapel’ on Sunday where he worships with his fellow Roman Catholics”.<sup>496</sup>

Despite the decades that have passed since, the essential distinctions have not changed; religion is still an issue of primary social and political importance, especially in the North of the country, since interpersonal relations, education and vocational perspectives are all determined to a significant degree by religious allegiances; “at a fundamental social level, religion is still an essential element to these communities because it is through religion that communities are organised. Social groups and sports teams tend to be denominationally specific or, if not, they exist in communities that are ideologically grounded”.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> Hickey (1984: 57-58).

<sup>497</sup> Hartnett (2011: 76).

If the religious divide is profound north of the border, in *Éire* religion impacts on society at large in a different, though not less significant way. More than simply a denomination, Catholicism penetrates most aspects of life in Ireland; “the deeply embedded desire to remain Catholic, combined with the Church’s monopoly over education, health and social welfare, ensured that little or nothing was said or done that was contrary to the ethos and teachings of the Catholic Church. While Ireland did not become a theocratic state, it did become a very Catholic society in which a Catholic way of thinking permeated public opinion, the media and everyday social life”.<sup>498</sup> Before, however, looking in more detail at the issue of religion in Ireland and the implications of the particularities that it presents, we should first examine religious beliefs in Sophocles’ time.

### **Religion in Sophocles’ Athens**

The picture we have sketched has some affinities with, and in addition some fundamental differences from the role of religion in the world of Sophocles’ audience. The belief in the divine in classical Athens had significantly different characteristics from modern societies - Ireland included. In the first place, “there was no competing religious system which would require individuals to choose between systems”.<sup>499</sup> Despite the importance that the gods had for the Greeks, there was no such thing as an institutionalised and organised church as we understand it today: “though we may speak of a Greek religious system, it is a system which is never consciously defined as such

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<sup>498</sup> Inglis (2008: 15).

<sup>499</sup> Mikalson (2010: 170).

(at least until the end of pagan antiquity), and remains extraordinarily fluid and inclusive”.<sup>500</sup> The Greek religion was a polytheistic one, distinctive for its fluidity, which, “with its tendency to construct new representations of the divine in response to new circumstances, is alien to the great monotheistic religions which make their one god an eternal god, whose word is also eternal”.<sup>501</sup> Cartledge, despite what he describes as “unfortunately very incomplete and uneven evidence”, records the existence of religious festivals “celebrated at over 250 places in honour of more than 400 deities”.<sup>502</sup> Perhaps most importantly, unlike contemporary religious systems, religion in Greece (at least mainstream religion) lacked any notion of creed. “Greek religion is not ‘revealed’ as Christianity is; there is no sacred text claiming the status of the ‘word of God’, nor even of His prophets; no Ten Commandments, no creed, no doctrinal councils, no heresies, no wars of religion in which ‘true believers’ confront the ‘infidel’ or the heretic”.<sup>503</sup> Bremmer attributes the absence of a separate word for ‘religion’, to the very fact that “religion was such an integrated part of Greek life”.<sup>504</sup>

Sophocles lived in a world where the sacred and the secular were deeply intertwined, the embeddedness of Greek religion being one of its marked characteristics. In contrast to the secularisation that is the norm in modern western societies, in ancient Greece there was nothing that did not have a religious reference both in family and in public life, no secular group which did not also share ritual activity; “birth, maturity and death, war and peace, agriculture, commerce, and politics - all these events and activities were

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<sup>500</sup> Kearns (2010:2).

<sup>501</sup> Wiles (2007: 182).

<sup>502</sup> Cartledge (1985: 98).

<sup>503</sup> Gould (1985: 7).

<sup>504</sup> Bremmer (1994: 2).

accompanied by religious rituals or subject to religious rules”.<sup>505</sup> Politics and religion were both public affairs in the ancient world, “the modern categories “church” and “state” had no place in any Greek *polis*. Concern for the proper worship of the gods was deeply embedded in all levels of society”.<sup>506</sup> The citizens in classical Athens sought divine assistance, since “leaders alone [...] could not save the city. Any of the gods could help or harm as they pleased. So every effort was made to carry out rituals and festivals properly, to avoid impiety and to punish any acts which might anger the gods”.<sup>507</sup> It comes as a natural consequence, then, that betrayal of the city also implied betrayal of the gods. According to Mikalson:

“traitors were considered disrespectful of the gods because by treason against their country they also, as the Athenian orator Lycurgus put it, “betray the gods’ and heroes’ temples, statues, sacred precincts, their honors established in the laws, and the sacrifices handed down by our ancestors” (*Leocrates* 1). A traitor’s success could result in the destruction of the deity’s sanctuaries and property and the loss of their cults in his city, and that is man’s ultimate “dishonoring” of the gods”.<sup>508</sup>

Religion was an integral part of Greek theatre as well, both because of its origins and because of the framework in which the plays were staged. Invariably performed at festivals of Dionysus, and therefore by definition located within a religious context,

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>506</sup> Evans (2010: 48).

<sup>507</sup> Garner (1987: 50).

<sup>508</sup> Mikalson (2010: 172).

tragedies, though ultimately about human beings, also had a pronounced interest in religion. Among the plays of all three tragedians that have survived, there are instances where the gods themselves appear on stage.<sup>509</sup> Even when they are not there, their presence is felt, since they take sides, provide solutions, demand sacrifices, assist or sabotage the characters' deeds. The characters, on the other hand, invoke and appeal to them when in need of help, and they usually act according to their prerogatives; still, tragedy is not about the gods, but about man and how he behaves.

This is also the case when it comes to *Antigone*; man is placed at the centre of Sophocles' universe, as the first stasimon of the play underlines; the gods are invisible, but still they are drawn by the participants into the conflict, since neither of them functions outside an ethical context framed by the divine. Antigone argues that she has divine support for her position, as she acts following "the unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods" (454-455). Creon, on the other hand, describes Polynices as a traitor, since he "came back from exile meaning to burn to the ground his native city and the gods of his race" (199-201). Returning to the issue after the revelation of the forbidden burial, he insists again on the fact that he "came to burn their [the gods'] colonnaded temples and their offerings and to destroy their country and its laws" (285-287). Creon is a pious man, too; yet, in the view of Tiresias, whose role as prophet makes him the nearest thing the play offers us to a spokesman for the unseen world, Creon offends against the gods by "blasphemously lodging a living person in a tomb" (1069) and for keeping there "something belonging to the gods below, a corpse deprived, unburied, unholy" (1070-1071). Despite the fact that Tiresias' ability to see

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<sup>509</sup> For examples, see Hall (2010: 156).

beyond what is humanly visible is initially challenged by Creon - probably suggesting that there might occasionally be scepticism as to the role and the integrity of the seers, a recurrent literary motif that goes back to Homer and is inherited in tragedy<sup>510</sup> - the power of his words is such that makes the King not only take back what he had earlier proclaimed, but also to take personal care to make sure that everything will be sorted out the best possible way to the gods' satisfaction. The potent combination of political conflict and contesting appeals to religion gives Sophocles' *Antigone* an especially rich potential when staged in the religiously charged context of Ireland, to which we will now return.

### **Religion in Ireland**

As pointed out above, religion has a central role in Ireland as it permeates public life. As far as the divisions between the two denominations are concerned, it is indicative that in the North in 1997 - halfway between the two sets of *Antigones* - the sensitive area of education, both primary and secondary, was "strongly segregated by religion for both children and teachers, with less than 2 per cent of children attending the newly formed integrated schools".<sup>511</sup> The discrimination continues and becomes more obvious and pronounced when it comes to employment: "Catholics are seriously underrepresented in

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<sup>510</sup> See Polydamas' speech in Homer's *Iliad* (XII: 229-245); the prophet Halitherses challenged by Eurymachus in Homer's *The Odyssey* (II: 238-244) and, later, the prophet Theoclymenus' mockery by the suitors (XX: 450- 455). This tradition was inherited by tragedy, with Tiresias mocked by Creon in *Antigone* and by Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* (310-327).

<sup>511</sup> Darby (1997: 49); unfortunately this account does not differ at all from 1981 accounts, despite the significant social changes that took place. Hickey (1984: 115) writes that "in Northern Ireland there are effectively two educational systems, replicating each other and rigidly divided on religious grounds. On the one hand there is the system controlled by the Roman Catholic Church, through which all Roman Catholic children are supposed to proceed, and on the other hand there is the State system which is effectively Protestant. The data that exist indicate that the segregation between the two is virtually complete".

the workforce, and especially in the better-paid positions. [...] There has to be (and this is admitted even by those who play it down) a residual element of discrimination, or prejudice”.<sup>512</sup> This discrimination and its - mostly financial - implications also served as a stimulus for the Troubles, a period still echoing in the ears of the translators of the early versions. In this way religion, far from uniting people, as its role is normally expected to be, “in the concrete church forms it takes on in Ireland bears significant direct responsibility for social division and indirect responsibility for violence”.<sup>513</sup>

As to the influence of the Catholic Church on people’s lives - with which we will mainly deal in this chapter - Hickey writes in 1981 that religion “has not become privatized and retreated into the depths of the personal lives of individuals. On the contrary, it still pervades this society in the sense that it was assumed to have pervaded all societies in the past”.<sup>514</sup> Hirschl, almost thirty years later, after establishing a distinction between pure theocracies and constitutional theocracies,<sup>515</sup> classifies Ireland in the latter category and suggests that it is as a good example of countries “where formal separation of church and state, as well as religious freedoms more generally, is constitutionally guaranteed, but where long-standing patterns of politically systemized church hegemony and religion-centric morality continue to loom large over the

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<sup>512</sup> Eversley (1989: 232); various sources insist that this is far from an exaggeration: Hout (1989: 154) writes that “If Catholics and Protestants from identical backgrounds have identical economic fortunes, then discrimination can be ruled out as the source of gross differences. Such a definitive outcome is unlikely”.

<sup>513</sup> Fulton (1991: 2)

<sup>514</sup> Hickey (1984: 116)

<sup>515</sup> Hirschl (2010: 2-3) defines pure theocracies as when “the supreme religious leader is also the highest political leader”, while constitutional theocracies as the countries in which “formal separation exists [...] between political leadership and religious authority” but on the other hand “both formally endorse and actively support a single religion or faith denomination”. Moreover, he adds “that state religion is enshrined as the principal source that informs all legislation and methods of judicial interpretation”.



constitutional arena”.<sup>516</sup> Although the term ‘constitutional theocracy’ is contentious, still - in the light of the examples from the Irish legislation since the 1970s that Hirschl cites - it firmly underlines the significant role that religion has even in political life.

Of course things have substantially changed within the past two decades, the current of change significantly affecting the primacy of the Church; as Aidan Mathews notes, “the conformist church-going of the 1960s has become the conformist non-church-going of the millennium”.<sup>517</sup> This was partly an experience shared with other western countries: during the twentieth century, most western societies gradually became less dependent on religion than they had been in the previous centuries, the rate and the timing of the change differing from country to country. The shift in mentality in Ireland, however, was also accelerated by “successive and highly publicized sexual scandals involving pedophile priests and clerical mistresses, even at the episcopal level, in recent years”.<sup>518</sup> The - mostly, but not solely, sexual - scandals ongoing since the 1980s weakened the social position of the Church and resulted in a collapse of confidence in the clergy, whose morality and authority were now challenged, and whose abuse of power for personal gratification was now recognized and strongly condemned. Fahey comments too on the “shocking character” of the scandals; he argues, however, that “their relevance to most people’s daily lives may be less than the more personal questions of contraception, divorce and abortion”,<sup>519</sup> issues that will be further examined in the following chapter. Consequently, recent Irish attitudes toward religion in general and

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<sup>516</sup> Hirschl (2010: 29).

<sup>517</sup> Mathews (2007: 24).

<sup>518</sup> Hachey (1996: 261).

<sup>519</sup> Fahey, Hayes, Sinnott (2005: 33).

the Catholic Church in particular show the disillusionment and a distancing of many people from the Church. Notorious for its inflexibility and conservatism, the Irish Catholic Church has been severely criticised by several prominent writers, Kennelly being one of them:

“In Ireland, religion is an assault on consciousness. It is not sporadic; it is pervasive and permanent. It takes you over. It is a form of spiritual imperialism. It dominates your ways of thinking and feeling. It invests you with images that cannot be forgotten. You cannot flirt with Catholicism. It is a love - affair or a hate - affair. Either way, it invades the soul. People often think they can shake it off. They cannot. Not completely, anyway”.<sup>520</sup>

Colm Ó Briain, who directed the poet's *Antigone* in 1986, also condemns the all-pervasiveness of Catholicism in the early 1980s, accusing it at the same time of distracting Irish people from the real problems of the time:

“Ireland in the 80s was divided, terribly divided. We had a national debt that was greater than that of Poland, so the country was on its knees, economically. And rather than dealing with economic issues, we only dealt

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<sup>520</sup> Kennelly (1985: 108).

with the religious issues and the role of the church in our governance, in our laws, in our rules. Everything was led by the Catholic Church. There was no room for any other opinion”.<sup>521</sup>

The excessive conservatism, the consequent scandals and the corruption of the Catholic Church on the one hand and the gradual secularization of the country on the other, may have had an impact on the degree to which people’s lives in critical areas are shaped according to the preachings of the clergy. On the other hand, it is also true that “many totemic “Irish Catholics” have stepped away from religion *except* as marker of identity”<sup>522</sup> [italics mine]. In this respect religion has never ceased to play an important role, since “many people in Ireland still consider their identity to be linked in some vague but deep sense with their religion”.<sup>523</sup> As both Heaney and Kennelly agree, religion is more influential in people’s lives than they recognise. It is in this almost unconscious sense that Heaney associates the issues of ‘burial’ and ‘cure’ - both part of the titles of his two translations of Greek tragedy - with the importance that religion has for the Irish:

“[Irish people] have a residual sense of religion, even though this is a country where far fewer people go to church. The actual mental equipment, the climate of the common mind, secular mind, still has a religious unconscious, if you like. The word ‘gods’ still has meaning, it

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<sup>521</sup> Ó Briain - K. G. (2006).

<sup>522</sup> Hartnett (2011: 76).

<sup>523</sup> Kearney (1988: 237).

doesn't mean that you have to believe in gods, but they have a religious understanding and I would say that the two titles I have used, in 'burial' and 'cure' they have very deep purchase, beneath the rational level, you know. And I think this is true in Ireland, cure is still miracle, there are still miracle cures at Lourdes. [...] People go there to be cured, there is a whole culture of miracle cures. That is part, if you like, of our anthropological possession. Of course there is no precise awareness, we don't think in terms of mythical figures, but we are not removed from a religious understanding of the world, even though we are secular. Religion hasn't disappeared entirely from the grown plan of the understanding".<sup>524</sup>

Kennelly also suggests that religion unconsciously informs Irish people's psychological make-up: "for some curious and incurious reasons, almost every Irish person has a deep interest in religion, even, or perhaps especially, when he declares himself agnostic or atheist".<sup>525</sup> Religion, in this context, could not but inevitably have a pronounced effect on the writers - though in very different ways. Transferring the play, however, from a particular, fluctuating religious context with specific rituals, practices and rules to a - temporally and spatially remote - social environment, where religion is moreover associated with ethnic conflict, tensions and scandals; from a society where religion was deeply embedded in every aspect of everyday life to a society religious but also questioning the authority of the institutionalised church, is a challenging thing to do.

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<sup>524</sup> Heaney - K. G. (2008).

<sup>525</sup> Kennelly (1985: 107).

Some of the ways in which the texts are adapted are not specific to Ireland but reflect rather the larger differences between Christian or post-Christian cultures and Greek paganism, together with the gap between audience and (ancient) artefact opened up by the much-reduced role of classical education in twentieth century Europe in general. So, when it comes to religious references that are either (felt to be) too culturally remote or of no importance for modern audiences, the translators employ different strategies, including their expansion - thus providing a framework for the modern spectator - their 'translation' into a modern equivalent notion, or their deletion.

### **Religious references in the Irish versions of *Antigone***

The antithesis between monotheism and polytheism is perhaps the most obvious point of difference between Greek paganism and Christianity. In a polytheistic religious system as the Greek one was, the word 'god' or 'gods' was more fluid in its meaning and its connotations: "the most usual Greek word which we translate as 'god', *theos*, is of uncertain origin. It may be used to indicate a particular named deity (Zeus, Athena, and so on) or more vaguely in Homer as *theos tis*, 'some god', when the speaker feels that an event has suggested divine input. [...] The plural form 'the gods' is of course also common, often (but not exclusively) used when the speaker or writer wishes to invoke the divine apparatus as a guarantor of morality".<sup>526</sup> In Christianity, however, there is a more specific reference to 'God' as the single, omnipotent creator of the universe. Sophocles most often uses the word 'gods' in plural form, though he also uses

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<sup>526</sup> Kearns (2010:5).

the word ‘god’ in the singular to the same effect;<sup>527</sup> so do the translators of *Antigone*. Mathews is the only one to be excluded, since his radical adaptation is set in the AD period; understandably, therefore, all his religious references (and there are plenty of them) refer to the one and only God of Christianity. Morrison’s translation, set against a Middle East backdrop, becomes a special case in this respect, as will be pointed out soon.

Another marker of differentiation, unmissable in the text and indicative of the writers’ intentions but invisible to the spectators since pronunciation does not differentiate between small and capital initials, is the initial letter of the word god/s. There might be different reasons why a writer chooses a capital or a small initial for the ‘god’; it is generally the case, though, that usually a capital initial is used to denote the uniqueness of a noun or the special importance that it carries in the cultural and social system in which the writer operates. In Christianity, there is only one God, creator of the universe, omnipotent and all-seeing; thus, the word ‘god’ is most of the time spelt with a capital G, even by non-practicing Christians, or atheists.<sup>528</sup> When it comes to the plural form, however, things are more clear-cut: since there is only one God in the Christian tradition, the initial cannot but be a small letter, since the term should normally be used to refer to a different, polytheistic religious system. Paulin, Kennelly and Heaney - different though their perspectives generally and their attitudes to religion, more specifically, are - always use a small initial. It appears thus that they consistently keep in mind that *Antigone* operates in a pagan environment; it may also be relevant that they

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<sup>527</sup> “the god is driving towards disaster” (line 624), “a god bearing a great weight” (line 1273).

<sup>528</sup> It is not only the word ‘God’ that is spelt with capital G but also pronouns related to him, such as He, Him etc.

wrote at a time when institutionalised religious belief was challenged in Ireland, with ‘god’ thus seen as a notion vaguely coinciding with the divine, not as the property of a particular religion. On the other hand, Mathews and Donnellan always use a capital initial. In the former case, Antigone twice refers to ‘God’, in both cases, however, echoing Biblical references, so that the use of a capital initial makes sense, at least in its new context. God with a capital initial is also used in Donnellan’s translation, again suggesting the Christian God. This does not explain, however, the plural ‘Gods’ in a religion that acknowledges the existence of a single God only. In a translation as concise and careful as Donnellan’s, marked by an overt desire to keep to the spirit and letter of the original, the director’s choice of this rather odd hybrid might be attributed to his effort to ‘translate’ the Sophoclean reverence to the gods into modern terms.

Equally alien to modern sensibility but important in Sophocles’ time was the notion of ‘pollution’ (*miasma*) as a dangerous contagion, the result of an impious act: “the polluted person in the city put at risk the whole city’s relationship with the gods, and therefore any in the city who hindered the identification and proper conviction and punishment of the murderer could be thought to share in the religious wrong as well as in the pollution of the murderer himself”.<sup>529</sup> It is on these grounds that in *Antigone* Creon decides to bury his niece alive instead of killing her; shedding her blood might result in pollution, something that he wants to avoid. Man is not always aware, though, of what disturbs the divine order, what constitutes a pollution or what might bring about a pollution. Tiresias soon informs Creon that - despite his efforts to avoid it - he has

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<sup>529</sup> Mikalson (2010: 172).

indeed polluted the city because he has left Polynices' corpse unburied. This ancient belief in *miasma* is foreign to the experience (religious or other) of modern audiences and the translators address the issue in different ways. Paulin and Kennelly, as has been shown on several occasions, are interested in the appropriation of the myth more than the faithful rendering of Sophocles' text; this presumably explains why the reference to this notion is mostly omitted.<sup>530</sup> The writers of the later versions, on the other hand, interested in retaining crucial issues of the Greek original and at the same time in making the play more audience - friendly, apart from omitting the 'pollution' - which they sometimes do too - they occasionally employ alternative strategies as well. Thus, Heaney refrains from mentioning it early in the play, probably to avoid the overload of new information for his audiences, replacing the phrase "to avoid pollution" with a plain "just to be on the safe side" (13). Later on, however, Tiresias explains to Creon "that's why we have this plague, this vile pollution" (44), a line that does not feature in Sophocles. Heaney presumably adds it in order to associate the failed sacrifice with Creon's previous decision, thus familiarising his audience with a notion alien to them; it is probably to this end, too, that he adds the word 'plague' - a word more familiar to a modern spectator, although in plot terms much more at home in *Oedipus Tyrannus* than *Antigone* - on top of "pollution". Morrison, finally, either leaves the word as it is - meaningless though it might sound to Irish ears - or 'translates' the phrase "to avoid pollution" into a vague "to put a seal on its soul" (8). Equally alien are the burial rites as described in Sophocles' tragedy,<sup>531</sup> so, little details that are (presumably) perceived as

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<sup>530</sup> Omissions: "to escape pollution" (Kennelly 33, Paulin 43), "mortals have no power to pollute the gods" (Kennelly 40, Paulin 51), "not even then shall I take fright at this pollution" (Kennelly 40, Paulin 51).

<sup>531</sup> In the play there are accounts of two burials: first, Polynices' symbolic one performed by Antigone and second, the subsequent proper burial performed by Creon.



meaningless are discarded as unnecessary.<sup>532</sup> What matters here is not the particular death rituals but rather, as we saw in the previous chapter, the burial as an act in itself.

Apart from what can be seen as amendments considered necessary in order to make the play more accessible to contemporary audiences, there is a number of other interventions, more substantial ones, which reflect preoccupations of the writers. As we shall see, the writers of the early versions once again offer a more dynamic treatment of the Sophoclean play. Paulin, whose interest in religion is generally limited and whose translation is basically politically-oriented, significantly secularises his play. He does not completely eliminate the divine, however; he just diminishes its regulating role in human life. Kennelly and Mathews, on the other hand, are both religious and they both employ the myth to criticise the role that the Catholic Church has been playing in Irish people's lives. Each of the three early versions deserves a separate examination in this chapter, since each displays significantly different characteristics as to which religious issues and in what ways are dealt with. However, before proceeding to a detailed treatment of these versions, we will look more briskly at Morrison's translation. Though he offers what is potentially at least one of the most stimulating approaches to the issue of religion in the play, in transferring the plot in the Middle East, Morrison, unlike the writers of the early versions, does not demonstrate a coherent and consistent stance on religion or place, and ultimately his reading fails to live up to its promise, in that it declines the opportunity of exploring the relevant religious issues.

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<sup>532</sup> Omissions of burial rituals: the well-wrought brazen urn (Heaney 20, Kennelly 21), the threefold libation (Kennelly 21, Morrison 12), the wash with purifying water (Paulin 58, Kennelly 46), the burning of the remains (Kennelly 46).

### **Conall Morrison's *Antigone***

Setting the play in the Muslim environment of the Middle East presents both challenges and opportunities. The main problem of the endeavour lies in the fact that a third religious system comes into play: Islam. So, added to the already existing difficulties in dealing with an ancient, pagan, polytheistic system addressing a Christian monotheistic audience - that account for the occasional inaccuracies in the other plays - is the extra difficulty of making particular amendments to the pragmatic context of the Islam-based text. As seen in the previous chapter, Islam does not penetrate very deep into the texture of the play. Islam is a contemporary, strictly monotheistic religion; Morrison, however, in his script refers as many as nineteen times to 'the gods' in the plural, much as do the writers who operate with a binary pagan-Christian 'translation'. He also employs all four possible combinations of singular/ plural and capital/ small initial, namely 'God', 'Gods', 'god' and 'gods'. The former two are used more frequently, but all of them appear nonetheless and without any consistent pattern whatsoever. Of course the spectators for whom the play is written (since it is not a published script) are not aware of such discrepancies; to the reader, though, it gives a vague sense of confusion that resurfaces when it comes to the issue of the burial of the dead.

The burial is a problematic issue in Morrison's play, since in Muslim countries of the Middle East there are different funeral rituals, such as "performing funeral prayers", or

burying “the corpse on its right side, with the face turned to Mecca”.<sup>533</sup> In the play, however, there are no references, or even allusions that might locate the burial - even in the Messenger’s account of Creon’s proper burial of the dead body - in a Middle Eastern context. Additionally, contrary to both Greek and Irish funerary traditions, in which preparing the dead body for the burial was basically the responsibility of women,<sup>534</sup> in Islam the funerals are usually associated with men, since “men usually preside in the funeral prayers and ceremonies, but in many cultures women also participate”.<sup>535</sup> Apart from the fact that women play, at best, a subsidiary role in burying a dead man’s body, “the *ghusl* (full ritual bath) is traditionally performed by a Muslim of the same gender as the deceased”.<sup>536</sup> In this context, Antigone’s utterance “I will do my duty by him” (2) has different echoes in a Middle East context from those in a Greek or an Irish one. In Sophocles’ Athens or Morrison’s Dublin it would suggest that Antigone disobeys the King and proceeds to an action, whose responsibility - as dictated by religion or simply by social custom - falls on her as a female relative; in an Islamic context, though, it would imply that Antigone buries her dead brother, rejecting not only the King’s decree but also the social and religious limitations that her gender entails. Although the stage in Morrison’s rendering is set - at least theoretically - for an intensification of the challenge from below by the female, since the Middle East in this play is only a very loose frame, the potential is never explored or exploited.

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<sup>533</sup> Campo (2009: 251).

<sup>534</sup> For more information about the *prothesis*, to which we will return soon, see Macintosh (1994: 20).

<sup>535</sup> Id.

<sup>536</sup> Joseph (2006: vol.3: 119).

Similarly, transferring a play like *Antigone* in a problematic area such as the Middle East opens up an opportunity to address issues related to religious fanaticism and fundamentalism. Morrison, in his interview, often refers to both terms, using them to describe the polarisation caused by Antigone and Creon's stance. In addition, the destructive consequences of war are accentuated in the play through the destroyed set, the heart-breaking projected images of pain, death and despair and Eurydice's ballad. Fundamentalism also has religious dimensions which, however, are never explored either; in the play the influence of religion, its destructive capacity, the association between religion and power are virtually absent. The myth, as presented by Sophocles, had the potential to be recast in these terms; a conflict where each of the two main figures espouses a different view of divine approval might, in other circumstances, have been used to explore the divisive effect of religion. And, as we shall see, some of the other writers inject the intersection of (Christian) religion and politics into their versions. Morrison's is a hybrid version in this respect: the set is unambiguously Muslim; the script is not. Despite the fact that the translator chose to transfer the plot in a Muslim world, he still operates within the Irish - Greek tradition with a thin patina of Middle East.

### **Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act***

Paulin's name does not seem to have been associated with views on religious issues - excluding, of course, the accusations of anti-Semitism with which he has often been charged because of his views expressed in lectures, interviews and poetry in the early 2000s. In *The Riot Act*, a play with clear and unambiguously secular political

undertones which call for political activism, there is little space for religion, for all that it was part of Paulin's contemporary political landscape. Though the short preface of his published script reads that "it is the law of the gods that Antigone must bury her brother's body" (5), nonetheless, references to the gods in the original are repeatedly omitted throughout the play, especially when it comes to divine interference in human lives. The gods, however, are not non-existent; they are simply powerless, Paulin believing strongly in the power of fate but, as it turns out, not in that of the gods. The ending of the (here expanded) choral song, just before Tiresias appears, is indicative:

"That daughter of Boreas, she was brought up safe right in the eye of the storm - the gods loved her - but the Fates came and took her in the end. They're as old as the hills, they're grey as stone, and they've found you, my dear daughter, they've taken you away from me, so I'll never see your face, never catch that voice, your voice again, ever." (49)

The gods, spelled with a small initial in Paulin's play, are as powerless as humans are in the face of the Fates, whose capital initial underscores their regulating power, or the awe and respect that the writer pays to them. Equally, although the gods are not invisible in Tiresias' significantly condensed scene, Paulin drastically reduces the part of the seer's speech in which he refers to the violation of the gods' prerogatives:

“and you have kept here something belonging to the gods below, a corpse deprived, unburied, unholy. Neither you nor the gods above have any part in this, but you have inflicted it upon them! On account of this there lie in wait for you the doers of outrage who in the end destroy, the Erinyes of Hades and the gods, so that you will be caught up in these same evils” (Sophocles, lines 1070 - 1076).

“his body you let ret

With neither prayer, nor rite” (Paulin, p. 53)

Sophoclean Creon’s references to Zeus’ eagles snatching the body and bearing the carrion up to their master’s throne, his comments on the fear of pollution and on the inability of mortals to pollute the gods (1040-1043), are also omitted altogether.

The depiction of Tiresias in Paulin also differs from that of the Sophoclean reverend old man<sup>537</sup>, strict, abrupt, insensitive - cruel even - as he is. He usually speaks rhythmically, in short five beat lines, frequently rhyming, his delivery sounding like “a flinty chant in places”, as Paulin himself indicates in his script. Much like Kennelly’s Creon, who also uses rhyme when it comes to delivering cruel words, Tiresias’ words are cutting, making him abrupt from the start: “Aye, I’ve a message. You may listen close. I’ll not

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<sup>537</sup> In *Antigone*, as in *Oedipus* (298-462), the text places great weight on Tiresias’ great authority. This authority is already well-established in the tradition (see in particular Homer’s *Odyssey*, X: 541-542 and XI: 109-172 and Stesichorus fr. 222A 234-293 *PMGF*). Tiresias remains consistent with his Sophoclean role in Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* (834-959) and *Bacchae* (266-369).

repeat it” (49), he tells Creon, and later, with a more authoritative tone, “mark what I say then: you’re right on the edge” (50). As the scene progresses, Tiresias shows no sign of sentiment or good will towards the King; “Creon, you maimed him twice - that’s never right. You’ll pay the price” (51); these are his only utterances after the description of the sacrifice, his abrupt words offering no counselling or encouragement to Creon to act in a different way. Paulin’s Tiresias, unlike the Sophoclean one, is not there to help the King out of the plight that awaits him; he only describes it as something inescapable from the start, leaving him no possibility to react. Paulin’s unfavourable depiction of the seer - the intermediary in this instance between the human and the divine plane - brings him - paradoxically, since he is not religious himself - close to the other two 1984 writers, Mathews and Kennelly. Contrary to Paulin, Mathews and Kennelly are both religious and very similar in their perception of the divine, their views on religion, Catholicism in particular, being subtly but strongly reflected in their *Antigones*; the degree, however, to which religion informs each writer’s life is different and, correspondingly, different is the degree of fierceness with which the conservatism and the hypocrisy of Catholicism are attacked in each of the two *Antigones*.

### **Aidan Mathews’ *Antigone***

Mathews is much more than a believer in the true spirit of Christianity. Religion has been continuously informing his life since his very early years: he had a Jesuit education at Gonzaga College outside Dublin and aspired to be a priest in his youth.<sup>538</sup> Now in his maturity, as a radio producer - among other things - he visits churches and

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<sup>538</sup> Scott - K. G. (2006).

monasteries (both throughout and outside Ireland) and records Masses to be broadcast by the RTÉ, Ireland's National Radio Broadcaster. From 2005 until 2007, he also had his fifteen minute slot on air for "reflections on matters of faith and a faith that matters".<sup>539</sup> Those scripts, published in a volume entitled *In the Poorer Quarters*, betray a very thorough study of the scriptures done by a deeply religious man with clear - and often unconventional - views about what religion is and what its role in society should be. Mathews is critical of institutionalised religions in the first place: "Convictions can imprison us, and they have. Half of the New Testament is a tirade against organised religion",<sup>540</sup> he writes. He is even more savagely critical when it comes to Catholicism in particular; having strong Roman Catholic beliefs, he inevitably becomes hostile towards institutions that betrayed the trust of the communities of the Church. The - more than twenty - years which elapsed between his *Antigone* and *In the Poorer Quarters* have not changed his views; in his play, as in his prose, he questions the moral status of people related to religion, he exposes their hypocrisy and violence and aligns formal religion with the power of the State.

Religious references of a different sort pervade Mathews' script; almost every character mentions the name of Jesus Christ or God, sometimes more than once, the play having completely abandoned its pagan, mythic context. Still, most of such exclamations, as they appear in the text, are devoid of any religious meaning and mostly denote surprise or exasperation: "for Christ's sake" (37), Creon cries, "Jesus, my nose is bleeding" (58), says Antigone, "what in the name of Jesus" (9) wonders the Chorus, "Oh God" (9),

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<sup>539</sup> RTÉ Radio 1; a collection of his scripts was published in 2007 in his book *In the Poorer Quarters*.

<sup>540</sup> Mathews (2007: 44).



Ismene exclaims; they are thus as much to be classed as anachronisms as explorations of religion. Apart from such superficially religious references - which are extensively used in our everyday lives but which express nothing but the religious system within which we operate - in Mathews' play there is an abundance of Biblical references or quotations, made by Creon and Heman. Creon occasionally seeks to refresh his knowledge of the Bible: "what is the shortest verse in scripture" (40), he asks the Critic and later on he asks Heman "what was it Solomon did" (60). He also employs Biblical examples or references: "I know your sort. You've been sniping at me since the book of Genesis" (38), he tells Antigone; "never judge by faces. Judas was the life and soul of the Last Supper. He outsmarted the master" (5), Heman tells the Chorus; "there were flashers at the Sermon on the Mount. The flashers will always be with you." (31) Heman tells Creon - in itself a parody (audible to the Christian ear) of Christ's "the poor will always be with you".<sup>541</sup> What the two characters do is either to look at the Bible with encyclopaedic curiosity (Creon) or to dress their utterances with frequent references from the Scripture (Creon, Heman). Either way, quoting the Bible, or treating it as a book of tales, has nothing to do with seeking the essence of the sacred text, with discovering its truth.

What further stresses how unconnected the study of the Bible is with adhering to its teachings on love and solidarity, is that Heman - the cruellest character in the play and the character by vocation closest to Creon - admits that he "did twelve years in a seminary" (60). The Chorus does not think very highly of the impact that this education

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<sup>541</sup> Matthew (26: 11).

had on him: “Used to be a Jesuit. Did twelve years. Very sad case. The Spiritual Exercises. They got him in the end” (8), he says early in the play. Heman’s religious education accounts for his fluency in the Bible and partly explains his “comforting clerical tone” (5) and the authority of a cleric conducting a service with which he orders the fear-stricken Chorus - who is knelt down and cries uncontrollably - “I say unto you, arise” (4). It also further betrays a discrepancy between the high degree of acquaintance with the formalities of religion and the distance from its spirit. Religious education, even more Jesuit education, sits disconcertingly with the viciousness, cynicism and violence as encountered in Heman, the Chief of the Secret Police; like “the Devil quoting scripture” (30), as he puts it. Apart from simply quoting it, however, Mathews has Heman also preparing his own edition of the sacred text; as he tells Creon,

“My own edition will be out in due course. And there won’t be any textual problems after that. I have some discalced Carmelites working on the Pauline letters in the cellars of the Holiday Inn down by the waterfront. (PROUD) They’re going great guns” (30-31).

It sounds terrifying to have - what Heman sees as - the textual problems of the Bible solved by someone working for an oppressive regime in which ideas are censored and literature and the arts are subjected to its interests; it also echoes *1984*, where ongoing editing of influential texts supports the regime. Although he describes it as his ‘own edition’, he is not, however, the one to undergo the labour that a scholarly text entails, some Discalced Carmelites doing it on his behalf. Members of a very strict religious

order, “known for their piety, their strict observance of their rules, and their contemplative prayer”,<sup>542</sup> the image of Discalced Carmelites working in the cellars of the Holiday Inn is as unorthodox as the Chief of the Secret Police editing the Bible. A cellar is, on the one hand, a humid and dark underground room alluding to prison-like existence and ascetic life; on the other, it is associated with wine, which in turn is associated with pleasure. Whichever approach one may choose, among all cellars in which the monks could study, they gather in the luxurious premises of a world renowned chain of hotels, “down by the waterfront”. Materialism is apparent throughout the play, with contemporary brands of products (Perrier 6, Coke 9, Persil 13, Cosmo 17, Johnson’s baby powder 19, Southern Comfort 28, Budweiser 30, Brasso 65, American Express 28) recurring throughout, the shortage of ideas and freedoms being counterbalanced by the abundance of material goods. This is a strategy that can successfully keep men in Creon’s regime content enough to be blind and silent to a drab political reality. Although this is not an unknown practice in modern societies - contemporary Ireland included, as we saw in the previous chapter - it becomes awkward when it comes to people directly associated with religion, since its (presumed) spirituality is incompatible with luxury and a good quality of life. It also becomes deeply ironic given the words that were delivered by the Pope in Ireland in 1979 (a visit to which we will return shortly), suggesting that Catholic faith now has “to confront the challenges of materialism, self-indulgence, consumerism and affluence”.<sup>543</sup> This is not the first instance, however, in which Heman’s shallowness and hollowness of heart is exposed; he is indeed shown as such ever since his very first appearance, early in the

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<sup>542</sup> Holder (2009: 192).

<sup>543</sup> Carroll (unknown date).

play, with his awkward prayer to God following the description of what he sees as a revelatory experience that made him exclaim “Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief”.

Among the Biblical references in the play, this is the only one that is uttered twice, once by Creon and once by Heman. Originally it belonged to the father whose child was miraculously cured by Jesus Christ, according to Mark (Mark 9:24); in *Antigone*, what seems equally miraculous and triggers the same reaction to Creon is the appearance of “a man dressed in his cricket whites [...] among all this ... wreckage” (26). The image of a man who has a bat and pads and a box and practises his blocking and his nicking among the ruins is a ray of hope, a miracle in such a drab environment. Earlier, Heman had employed the same phrase from Mark’s scripture - as one of three Biblical references used at once - in order to show his surprise and gratitude to the Lord for seeing nothing but a traffic light. As he narrates:

“the road was cratered. Deep, dry holes. A burnt out jeep. Bazooka shells. And ash over the tarmac. Ash... like blossom. The sky above. (LOOKS UP) The colour of newspaper. Yellowy grey. (PAUSE) It was a sight too deep for tears. My glasses clouded over. And when they cleared, I could see quite suddenly, in the very middle of all that anguish and yuk, I could see... Do you know what I could see? (CHORUS SHAKES HIS HEAD) Do you want to know? (CHORUS NODS HIS HEAD) A traffic light. It was green. Then it went (PAUSE) amber. The most beautiful amber. And, after that, it went red. The richest, most exquisitest red in the world. It was like a sign, the sign of a new Covenant. It was

the rainbow, seen from the deck of the Arc. My glasses clouded over again. I gave thanks. "Lord", I said. "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief". As I prayed, the traffic light went ... green. (IN A WHISPER) Just like that." (6)

The vivid colours of a traffic light - an item not generally described as an icon of beauty - become in such a grey background of destruction and despair a sight as rare and long-awaited as the rainbow after the rain in Noah's Arc; as significant and promising as a sign of a new Covenant between God and man; as miraculous and relieving as the healing of a child. Apart from Heman's despair in this instance, the lengthy description of his revelatory experience - with God miraculously responding to Heman's confession of belief and the traffic light suddenly turning green - also suggests the banality of the faith of those who parade their piety; those who desperately seek everywhere signs of God's existence; those who assert their intimate relationship with God, persuading the uneducated flock of the special communication they have with Him. After the description of this experience, Heman prays. His is not the only prayer in the play; Creon will later be reported to be praying as well (42) and the Chorus, raising his hands, will utter "Praise the Lord" (22), but Heman's prayer, starting as follows, is different altogether:

"O Lord, Almighty Father, you who sent the rich and powerful of this world to follow the star of Bethlehem, make bright the ballroom of the heavens with a new brilliance, and send us too, the well-bred, the barbarous, under the guidance of your blazing comet, far from the dickey-bow ties and the Perrier water of our

semi-detachment to the slums and shanty towns of the proletariat. Lord, free us from the tyranny of our own good taste. Send the peace of Christ like a fever among us. Strengthen and protect our leader Creon. Save him from lawyers and his own best friends. He means well.” (6)

In this first part of his prayer, Heman recognises the social injustice, the frivolity and shallowness of the well-bred, hypocritically including himself. In an unfair world where even the star of Bethlehem was meant for a portion of the population only, those with money and power, he presents himself as a missionary of messianic zeal, who prays not for the discipleship to minister among the poor, but for the souls of the rich and powerful. The pomposity of his words betray a man too confident of his closeness with the divine; in his prayer he does not forget Creon, whose good intentions (“he means well”) he remarks on as if giving a recommendation to God.

The prayer coming from his mouth only sounds both pretentious and shallow; in the first place, living in a world of bow ties, Perrier water and semi-detached houses is a choice, not a need as Heman presents it, and, again, it does not match with faith. Also, the world does not change with prayers only, especially if those delivering the prayers are those who are there to make sure that injustice, violence and cruelty in the world are eternally maintained - hence Heman’s prayer not for the welfare of Creon, but for his strengthening as well. The second part of the prayer is even more revealing of the association between Heman’s zeal and Realpolitik:

“Suffice it to say that the ten chief enemies of the state have not been terminated, at least not yet. To the best of my knowledge they are safe and well in a cable car suspended halfway above the practice slopes. Supplies are dropped by helicopter on a daily basis. One of them jumped, and the law of terminal velocity was not suspended in his favour, poor bugger. But be it death-wish or simple boredom, his decision is not to be blamed on President Creon, a man whom I have personally seen administer first aid to a negro with bad steam burns. Amen.” (6)

The torturous punishment of the “ten chief enemies of the state” recalls Creon’s punishment of Antigone; only that in Sophocles, Creon buries Antigone alive to avoid pollution, not to torture her by condemning her to a slow death.<sup>544</sup> The verb ‘terminated’ that Heman uses is also indicative of the value that human life has for the regime Heman works for; the possible, or, rather, imminent, death of ten people is seen as an indifferent biological process, devoid of any feeling or compassion. And Creon is of course not to blame for their destiny; not even that of the man who jumped to his death due - as Heman puts it - to suicidal tendencies or to boredom. The argument that, finally, Heman employs in order to prove Creon’s compassion, reveals exactly the opposite. Creon is not described as offering first aid to a man in general, but specifically to a negro. Identifying the man by the colour of his skin and implying that it is *even* to a negro to whom Creon offered first aid, only adds racism and intolerance to the rich

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<sup>544</sup> It should be worth recalling here that burying Antigone alive in order to torture her is encountered in Kennelly’s version.

collection of flaws with which Heman the Jesuit is endowed. More than that, the image of Creon - the strong, white man of authority - helping a negro - the black man of inferior status and in need - underlines a paternalistic attitude from his part, itself a signifier of violence of a colonialist and imperialist nature. Heman addressing such a prayer to God sounds all the more absurd and nonsensical. Apart from the fact that it is not clear exactly what it is that Heman prays for, his words unashamedly display a hypocritical, pretentious, racist, violent - murderous even - regime in which God is invoked and asked for assistance. Equally interesting in this respect is the context of the prayer; what precedes and what follows it.

Between the description of the traffic light that turned green and Heman's prayer immediately afterwards, Heman addresses the Chorus three times: "Shall we pray together?", "Give me your hands", "Shall I pray for both of us?". Heman sounds very gentle and caring for his interlocutor - who responds solely by nodding affirmatively. His questions, however, are purely rhetorical: as has been made evident since the beginning of the scene (and as will be further elaborated later), the Chorus is very afraid of Heman; the act of asking a terrified man for his consent accentuates the power gap and the sinister and hypocritical nature of the speaker. What is also hypocritical on Heman's part is asking him to pray for both of them, holding hands. The Chorus is not well-bred, however; he is a homeless man living in the streets, but Heman's prayer is not meant for him, nor for the likes of him. In this respect, the Chorus accompanying Creon in his prayer to God to free him from the tyranny of his own good taste sounds deeply ironic. The scene is enriched with "the noise of a distant siren swelling and



fading” (6), a constant reminder of the oppressive setting of the play that makes any prayer on the part of the Chief of the Secret Police sound empty of meaning; then, “a man’s voice offstage, shouting ‘if the blanket isn’t big enough, turn the fucking light off’ ” (6). The prayer which starts immediately afterwards is a confirmation that the blanket in Creon’s regime, backed up by Heman, is indeed not big enough to cover all - the star of Bethlehem is for those privileged few and the whole world is for those privileged few as well. The suggested solution here is not to provide a bigger blanket or more blankets to suffice for everyone but to turn off the lights, thus hiding the insufficiency and the injustice.

If all the above are an introduction to Heman’s prayer, what follows comes as a confirmation of the futility of prayers in his violent world. Heman and the Chorus each returning to his role, their ‘Amen’ is followed by the former’s interrogation of the latter about Polynices, solely referred to as ‘you-know-who’: “And you’ve seen nothing?”, “And you’ve heard nothing?”, “And you’ve said nothing?” (6-7), Heman consecutively asks. The Chorus, always terrified, responds by pretending to be blind, deaf and suffering from laryngitis, thus confirming the constant fear and oppression as well as the association of religion with Realpolitik, a consistent pattern in Mathews’ play.

Mathews, however, aims his arrows higher than Heman the Jesuit, since on two different occasions he targets the Pope himself. As he writes in his prose, “the very Vatican, whose name in Latin denotes a place of prophecy, has so confused ministry

with administration”,<sup>545</sup> he writes; in *Antigone* he does not only accuse (indirectly, albeit clearly) the Vatican of misinterpreting its role, but also associates it with violence and oppressive politics. As we will see in detail in Chapter Five, at the back of the stage there is a burnt out car, reminiscent of the catastrophe that has preceded; in its roof, there is a hole from which Creon is reported by Michael Scott, the director, to appear at the beginning of the play, his speech containing sections of the excessively oppressive Criminal Justice Act<sup>546</sup> that had been very recently issued. Mathews’ play becomes relevant to the contemporary Irish experience in two different ways: the first is the Bill, parts of which - as we saw - were also read while the audience was taking seats; the second is the fact that Creon appearing from the hole in the roof of the burnt out car looked, according to Scott, like the Pope greeting his audiences from the Popemobile. It was only five years earlier, back in 1979, that the Pope visited Ireland for the first time ever, and this visit was described as “a seismic social event”;<sup>547</sup> it is reported that “the Pope had arrived in a country where normal life came to a virtual standstill over the next three days and where an estimated two-thirds of the population crowded various venues to see and hear the first Roman pontiff to visit Ireland since St Patrick brought Christianity to the country more than 1,500 years ago”.<sup>548</sup> The image of the Pope greeting the public left a deep imprint on the Irish psyche; so Creon speaking from inside the car in Scott’s production five years later could not escape the audience’s attention. Creon’s speech, however, came in sharp contrast with the Pope’s sermons: “I appeal to you in language of passionate pleading”, the Pope is reported to have said in Drogheda; “On my knees I beg you to turn away from the paths of violence and return

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<sup>545</sup> Mathews (2007: 123).

<sup>546</sup> Irish Statute Book (1984).

<sup>547</sup> McDonald, D. (2005).

<sup>548</sup> Carroll (unknown date).

to the ways of peace”.<sup>549</sup> It is not exactly clear which part of the script Creon read through the smashed car;<sup>550</sup> still, being part of the Criminal Justice Act, it is not expected to be the rhetoric of love. Mathews and Scott, by having Creon, the leader of a corrupted and violent regime, recalling - even subtly and indirectly - the Pope, make a strong comment on the corruption of religion and religious values. Even the fact that the car, unlike the sleek Vatican one, is destroyed, corroded and immobilised, alludes to corruption and destruction. It also implies that even when the whole world is destroyed, there is still and always a place for preachers; “when everything around was crashed and destroyed, there still remained that little thing to do the speeches”.<sup>551</sup>

Later in the play the Pope is directly referred to; among the telegrams that “are still pouring in”, Ismene reads one that ends “Kisses. The Pope” (47), suggesting Creon’s good relations with the religious authorities. The Pope’s telegram is surprising in several ways: in the first place because the Pope retains strong connections with the Head of an autocratic state, in which people disappear, all freedoms are suppressed and violence abounds. What makes it more shocking is the special intimacy that the telegram reveals, the word ‘kisses’ being an awkwardly mawkish and highly inappropriate greeting to be used by the Pope. As if these intimate connections between him and Creon’s regime are not enough, Mathews has the Pope’s telegram come in at the same time with the one from the Politburo a reference calling for immediate associations between the two institutions in the minds of the early 1980s spectators. Creon seems to be extremely well- connected with top of the range, exclusive

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<sup>549</sup> -- (1979).

<sup>550</sup> Again, the script here seems not to have been appropriately updated.

<sup>551</sup> Scott - K. G. (2006).

institutions, whether religious or political. His regime thus - apart from the Politburo, the connotations of which were explored in the previous chapter - is welcomed and endorsed most strikingly by the Pope, the very top in the Catholic hierarchy. What the two telegrams have in common is the shocking degree of intimacy with their recipient; what makes them differ is that the one comes from an institution normally associated with brutal repression, while the other from the Head of the single, most influential institution preaching love and compassion, the Catholic Church. Presenting the Vatican as being on such good terms with a regime as violent as Creon's, and its telegram being read alongside another one coming from an equally violent regime, Mathews questions again the Church's love, compassion and good will.

Contrary to Kennelly who, as we shall see, is critical of the representatives of the Church generally, lower clergy included, Mathews detects the erosion higher in the ecclesiastical hierarchy; he exposes the hypocrisy, the cruelty, the self-interest and the violence behind two particular institutions, the Order of Jesus and the Vatican, both of utmost importance and influence for the lower clergy and for the lay Catholics. There is another parameter in the relationship between the two institutions, however, since there seems to have been an ongoing war between them dating since the 1960s:

“A state of war exists between the papacy and the Religious Order of the Jesuits. [...] Indeed, though the first open skirmishes began in the 1960s, it took time for the effects of the war to become widely apparent. [...] All wars are about power. In the war between the papacy and the Society, power flows along the lines of

two fundamental and concrete issues. The first is *authority*: Who is in command of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church? Who lays down the law as to what Roman Catholics must believe and what sort of morals they must practice? The second issue is *purpose*: What is the purpose of the Roman Catholic Church in this world?”<sup>552</sup>

The worst thing about this particular war is that - although invisible to lay Catholics - “almost everything that happens in [it] bears directly and immediately on the major dissensions that wrack every nation and people in the world”.<sup>553</sup> This war, in which each part aims at extending its sphere of influence and expanding its territory of jurisprudence, is not only deeply indifferent to lay Catholics, but also excessively harmful. In the play there is no evidence of such an antagonism; both Heman, the Jesuit, and the Pope feverishly support Creon - a Pope figure himself in the play. It is highly probable that Mathews, given his background and his continuous study of religion, was aware of this ‘war’; if this is the case, Mathews has elided it to create here an (un)holy alliance: if these two major Catholic institutions (both corrupted, self-interested and power-hungry, as they are depicted) are in conflict in real life but implicitly in harmony in the play, this amounts to a further hint that they are ultimately no different to each other.

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<sup>552</sup> Martin (1988: 13-15).

<sup>553</sup> Ibid. 14.

The character which eventually emerges triumphantly as the only one embodying Christian values is Antigone. Antigone in Mathews is not associated with any particular religious body, she is not reported to have received any religious education and she is not associated with religious leaders. She is, however, what Mathews describes as a spiritual character: “independent, individual, autonomous, and, most of all, original”. Mathews himself separates religion from spirituality, a distinction that he attributes to the particular 1980s culture in Ireland. As he remembers,

“When I was a small schoolboy in the 1960s, the opposite of the adjective ‘religious’ was ‘irreligious’. During my early college years in the East European bleakness of the new university at Belfield, the opposite of ‘religious’ altered gradually to ‘nonreligious’. By the time I became a father in the mid-80s, when the birth of my daughter Laura brought me into the world for the first time, it had changed yet again. Now, if you weren't religious, you were nonetheless spiritual. In fact, if you weren't religious, you were deeply spiritual. Your spirituality was in inverse ratio to your religiosity. You had the cultural prestige of having cut your own path through the wilderness without any assistance from those awful ordinary Christians who fill the smelly churches with their body odours and their bawling children, let alone the bronchial geriatrics on their walking frames who pass wind during the Eucharistic prayer. If you were on your own, you were out on your own. If you stood outside, you were outstanding. You were, as Sylvia Plath says somewhere, the only vertical in a world of horizontals. You were your

own man or woman: independent, individual, autonomous, and, most of all, original".<sup>554</sup>

Seen from this perspective, in a play also written in the mid-1980s Antigone is the only spiritual character. She does not assume "a comforting, clerical tone", she does not pray, she does not quote the Bible; she challenges it. If she was granted one wish, that would be "to know if the Son of Man was the Son of God" (57). Antigone is neither irreligious, nor non-religious; she believes in God, but at the same time she is keen on finding a personal meaning in her object of worship. The real embodiment of Christian values, she is there when she is needed, especially when it comes to disadvantaged people. More than that, as if in a play between Old and New Testament she rejects Creon's "I didn't strike the first blow. I just struck back. Same as anyone", with "you can't fight violence with violence" (51). Kennelly would probably be particularly fond of Mathews' heroine as it these very qualities that he also discerns and admires in Jesus:

"I am enthralled by the compassion of God and Jesus to people. There are days when I'm very far away from this, but I'm always inspired by the image of Jesus in the Gospels. He was someone who brought the compassion of God to people, someone who didn't judge or condemn. He was someone who was with people wherever they were, especially those who found themselves on the margins of society".<sup>555</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> Mathews (2007: 20).

<sup>555</sup> Kennelly (2005: 20).

For Mathews' Antigone "a human being is God's greatest weakness" (38) and is very far from a masterpiece or a creator's triumph. Sophocles' *Antigone* is a play about human suffering and pain; Mathews' Antigone is a character carrying at her back all the suffering of humanity which spans the centuries. Tired though as she is, Antigone is always there to relieve, to stand up for, to encourage. Among the titles of books found on her bedroom shelves there is no Bible, but three books related to female religious figures: *St. Joan* by Bernard Shaw, the *Autobiography of St. Therese de Lisieux*,<sup>556</sup> *Alone of All her Sex. A Study in the Marian Cultus*<sup>557</sup> (54-55). By creating parallels between these emblematic figures that call for instant associations in the minds of the Irish Catholics, Mathews casts Antigone in the light of Christian martyrdom. All three have substantial similarities to one another, as well as a number of differences.

St. Joan, canonised as a Saint in 1920 for having successfully led the French army against the British five centuries earlier, has been a very influential figure for Catholics. In Ireland in particular what also contributed to her popularity, apart from the obvious religious reasons, is her rebellious character as well as her religious crusade for national purposes, the latter bearing resonances for Ireland in terms of establishing religious connections to a national crusade; we should not forget that Paulin in 1984 associated Antigone with St. Joan, too.<sup>558</sup> Turbin's account is revealing:

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<sup>556</sup> The full title of the book is *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*..

<sup>557</sup> This is Marina Warner's book, (1976) *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*.

<sup>558</sup> "Antigone, like St. Joan appears as an individual ahead of her supporters. She is 'headstrong' and therefore more responsible because she can supposedly exercise choice", Paulin (1984: 28).



“although, in worldly terms, she was a woman in a subordinate position to men, she acted with courage and conviction in the secular world, and she was not afraid to confront men of the highest authority. Joan of Arc conflicted with leaders of state, dressed in men’s clothes, and led armies of men. In the end, she clashed with representatives of the church who approved of the acts that condemned her. Moreover, her cause was not only justice but nationalism. Joan of Arc’s story echoed most Irish immigrants’ nationalist sentiments, especially their hostility toward England’s aggressive military strategies. Just as the Irish sought to end England’s domination of Ireland, Joan of Arc led French armies in order to prevent the English from capturing the French throne”.<sup>559</sup>

Joan’s heroism, sense of self-sacrifice and persistence in Catholic and national ideals made Pádraig Pearse, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising, argue that “a heroic tale is more essentially a factor in education than a proposition in Euclid. The story of Joan of Arc or the story of the young Napoleon means more for boys and girls than all the algebra in all the books. What the modern world wants more than anything else, what Ireland wants beyond all other modern countries, is a new birth of the heroic spirit”.<sup>560</sup>

St. Thérèse of Lisieux is also of considerable importance for the Catholics, the Basilica named after her in Lisieux being the second large place of pilgrimage in France, after

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<sup>559</sup> Turbin (1992: 172).

<sup>560</sup> Pearse (1976 [1916]: 21); Maud Gonne was also “called the “Irish Joan of Arc” by the New York Sun in 1916” (Londrville, 1999: 1), a label that followed her throughout her life.

Lourdes. She was particularly influenced by Joan herself; she wrote two plays about her life which were performed by nuns in 1894 and 1895, *The Mission of Joan of Arc* and *Joan of Arc Accomplishes her Mission*. Like her, she was a virgin who died young, a devoted Catholic, a woman who set her life in the service of the others - and of God. Her name, however, is not associated with wars and heroic acts but with what she described as “the little way”, the little everyday things through which one may glorify God, as well as her ascetic life, her relentless labour and her attitude to suffering: “suffering, for Thérèse, was not merely a trial to be undergone; it was a gift to be used gratefully for the extension of God’s kingdom. Only suffering, says Thérèse, can give birth to souls. [...] A gift, a precious treasure, a gold mine - that is how Thérèse regarded suffering”.<sup>561</sup> Again, her attitude to suffering finds echoes in Catholic Ireland: as Kennelly remembers, “brought up in a Christian tradition, if you asked the question, maybe as a boy, “why do things happen the way they do” the answer was always in Ireland “God’s ways are not our ways” ”. He also recalls “a very good sermon about pain and suffering given by a priest who had been diagnosed for cancer just briefly and he saw it almost as a gift and that’s the way some people see it”.<sup>562</sup>

The third female figure is Mary, mother of Christ. Like Joan and Thérèse, Mary was a virgin too; unlike them, she was also a nurturing - and subsequently suffering - mother, an image both familiar and appealing to the Irish. Unlike Joan and Thérèse, Mary did not choose her own path in life; rather she was the one chosen to bear the son of God. Mary has always been a particularly influential figure for Catholics all over the world -

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<sup>561</sup> Leslie (1988: 56-57).

<sup>562</sup> Kennelly - K. G. (2006).

Ireland included - often functioning “as a screen on which culture projects its interests”.<sup>563</sup> In the *Marialis Cultus*, the Apostolic Exhortation given by Pope Paul VI in 1974, the Pontiff refers to the “mission and the special position she holds within the People of God, of which she is the preeminent member, a shining example and the loving Mother”,<sup>564</sup> also suggesting that “the People of God have learned to call on her as the Consoler of the Afflicted, the Health of the Sick, and the Refuge of Sinners, that they may find comfort in tribulation, relief in sickness and liberating strength in guilt”.<sup>565</sup> The fact that “she became and remains, a - if not *the* - major point of contention between Catholics and Protestants”,<sup>566</sup> might be an extra reason for her worship in a country where religion is also a significant marker of identity.

Known for their activism or for their submissiveness, having paved their own way in life or having been chosen for what they were, having enjoyed motherhood or not, Joan, Thérèse and Mary share the same piety and religious devotion, true adherence to religious values, love and compassion for the others, martyrdom and suffering. All three have been very important for the Irish Catholics and all three have, among others, informed Antigone’s life. When prompted by Chora, who discovered these books on Antigone’s shelf, she admits that in them she looks for examples. Unlike Heman and Creon, who often indulge in looking for or collecting flashy quotations from a variety of books, Antigone never shows off her knowledge residing in linguistic fireworks; unlike Creon’s interest in superficial details of the Biblical stories, Antigone looks at their

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<sup>563</sup> Levine (2005: 1-14).

<sup>564</sup> Paul, Pope VI (1974: 86).

<sup>565</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>566</sup> Levine (2005: 1).

essence; unlike the inconsistency between Heman's seminarian education and his current vocation, Antigone is consistent in what she reads and how she leads her life.

Apart from these three books, there is a fourth one on Antigone's shelf associated with religion: Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, who was executed by the Nazis at the age of thirty-nine, involved as he seems to have been in a plot aiming at the assassination of Adolf Hitler, explores in this book the sacrifices that the grace of God demands. The book opens by establishing a distinction between what Bonhoeffer describes as cheap grace, "the deadly enemy of the Church", and costly grace, "the treasure hidden in the field": "Cheap grace", he writes, "is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate".<sup>567</sup> The costly grace, on the other hand, "is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life".<sup>568</sup> The insertion of this very book into Antigone's list reinforces the importance and special value that pain and self-sacrifice - as opposed to the superficial adherence to the Catholic practices - have for Antigone. Consistency between words and deeds also emerges again as a key issue: Bonhoeffer, much like Joan and Thérèse, remained loyal to his beliefs and ideals throughout his short life and up until the very end, paying for his resistance to a totalitarian state with his life; and so does Antigone. Her endorsement of Christian values, although she never advertised herself as a Christian, has earned her

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<sup>567</sup> Bonhoeffer (1959: 36).

<sup>568</sup> Ibid. 37.

respect from - most of - the other characters in the play and have resulted in her often being paralleled with a martyr or a Saint.

Creating parallels between Sophocles' *Antigone* and a Christian martyr or a Saint is not something new - despite the fact that *Antigone* operates within a completely different religious framework and does not offer or sacrifice her life in the name of any religious cause. As early as 1902 Jebb suggested that "the situation in which *Antigone* was placed by Creon's edict was analogous to that of a Christian martyr under the Roman Empire. It was as impossible for *Antigone* to withhold those rites, which no other human being could now render, as it was impossible for the Christian maiden to avoid the torments of the arena by laying a grain of incense on the altar of Diana".<sup>569</sup> Terence Brown, in his short article 'An Uncompromising Female Spirit' that appears in Kennelly's *Antigone*, writes that "the early 19<sup>th</sup> century [...], in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic imperium, canonised *Antigone* as sacrificial victim, proto-Christ".<sup>570</sup> In Mathews' play, *Antigone* is described by Creon and Heman as a Saint, as a martyr, as an Evangelist; this is, however, never done in love or respect, but always in a mocking attitude.

At the opening of the play the Chorus, reading from the theatre program, describes Sophocles' *Antigone* as "a study in martyric energies" (1); thus, he places her from the start in a contemporary Christian context, since the notion of the martyr was inexistent

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<sup>569</sup> Jebb (1902: xxi).

<sup>570</sup> Brown (1986: 52).

in pagan Athens. From then on, there are a number of instances where Antigone is associated with Catholicism. Creon describes her as “the author of the fifth gospel” (37), a term - according to Mathews - used by the “Jewish mystic Simone Weil”,<sup>571</sup> to describe the young Sophoclean heroine.<sup>572</sup>

“I suppose they’ll open your home to the public when you’re dead. You know. Stitch the cutlery to the table-cloths, and lead the openmouthed from one room to another. (PAUSE) This is where the author of the fifth gospel dropped her milkteeth. By then, I imagine your example will be spreading like flu”. (37)

Despite his highly ironic tone - spiced though with a zest of jealousy as he soon admits - Creon places Antigone in an equal position with the four Evangelists. Thus, apart from qualities such as divine inspiration, depth of thought, intuition, eloquence of expression that he instantly attributes to her, he also sets her apart from Heman, who simply edits the Bible: seen from this respect, he recognises Antigone’s authenticity, since she has the capacity to engage in original thinking, while the best that Heman can do is just reproduce; and in an era when originality is much valued, it is better to “be a bad original than a good copy” (11), as Ismene remarks. At the same time, he takes one more chance to expose the banality and superficiality of people of faith, attracted as they are by nonsense and not by the essence - and this is not the only occasion. Later, in

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<sup>571</sup> It should be noted here that no such reference was found in Weil’s books; according to a reference only, “Weil sees Antigone as a Christological figure” (Meaney 2007: 109).

<sup>572</sup> Mathews (2007: 53).

a scene that strongly recalls Anouilh, Creon accuses Antigone for what he sees as her martyr-like attitude (52):

“You want them weeping in the stalls. You want them using your hairs for bookmarkers in their missals. You want to be a martyr. You want me to have you killed! But I won’t do it. Because there’s no martyr without a monster. And I won’t play that part”. (52)

Creon at this peak of rage, which will soon calm, revealing his vulnerability, depicts Antigone as an object of religious worship. By claiming, however, that she wants all the trappings of conventional sainthood, he actually undermines her; or tries to. Weeping or using hairs for bookmarkers does not suggest grounded religious thinking nor solid religious convictions which would save people from being manipulated; the exploitation of piety by organised religion seems to be common practice, though, in Creon’s regime - probably in Ireland as well - and as such it is criticised by Mathews. Antigone with her true spirituality sets herself apart not only from Creon and Heman, but also from the rest of the Catholic population, whose very shallow religiosity empowers corrupted institutions like the Vatican or the Jesuits.

If Creon’s associations of Antigone to martyrs and Evangelists betray his discomfort, jealousy even, it is because Creon understands Antigone and what she stands for - even admires her. Heman, on the other hand, completely unable to understand, relies on hard

physical violence against her, as has already been pointed out in Chapter One, to release his frustration over her rejection. After punching her heavily in the breast, she sinks down to her knees, and he stands behind her twisting her arm, delivering the following lines:

“You make love to it, don’t you? You ride your own death in the female astride. You want to go out in a blaze of glory. Saint Antigone. Wafting off into cumulus nimbus while the rest of us stay where we are in the ruins. Walloping nails into wood. (PAUSE) No wonder Christ chose men. Your sex is diseased.” (49)

In a display of physical and verbal violence, Heman becomes vicious towards the woman he wished to marry, mocking what he cannot understand. Antigone does stand out from the crowd and Heman, unable to do so, only accuses her of pretentiousness, ironically describing her as ‘Saint Antigone’; he also takes the chance to turn against women (something to which we will return in the following chapter). His imposition of his own prejudices on to Christ, though in this play not untypical of organised religion, makes him all the more unfit to present his own edition of the Bible.

### **Brendan Kennelly’s *Antigone***

Kennelly’s views about religion, as they appear very often in his prose, pervade his play, although in a different, more indirect way than Mathews’ do. Kennelly does not



share Mathews' religious education and extensive study of the scriptures thereafter, his experience of religion being mostly empirical. As he says, he has no answer as to whether the gods created us or we created the gods, suggesting, however, that belief is beyond understanding.<sup>573</sup> Kennelly declares himself "fascinated by Christianity":

"I am fascinated by Christianity and the figure of Christ. I constantly marvel at the fact that those who are followers of Christianity believe that even before we were born and long after we die, there is at work a provident, gracious God who has created us and loves us and wants us to share in His own life. This view shapes the Christian's moral life by enabling them to live in faith, in hope and in love. Accordingly, Christianity issues us with an invitation into the heart of what it is to be human. I love the idea of the divinisation being most tellingly revealed by our humanisation".<sup>574</sup>

Kennelly's God is not a vicious God of judgment and revenge; in his *Antigone*, the gods are still there but the poet minimises the regulating role of the divine in human life, omitting a number of references related to punishment incurred by them.<sup>575</sup> Man is not led to destruction by a vindictive god - the fear of Hell and divine punishment very often hanging over the heads of his compatriots - but by his own mistakes and miscalculations. Neither destiny nor the divine are accountable for human suffering.

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<sup>573</sup> Kennelly - K. G. (2006).

<sup>574</sup> Kennelly (2005: 19).

<sup>575</sup> "a god driving man towards disaster" (27), "swift avengers from the gods cut off those who think mistakenly" (42), "a god bearing a great weight struck my head, and hurled me into ways of cruelty" (47), "the gods have shaken the city's fortunes" (25).

This does not mean however that the gods are inexistent or impotent, as Creon admits when he tells the Chorus: “They may rescue her/ If they are able” (33). Creon naïvely challenges the gods, in this instance, to undo what he has ordered to be done. He challenges their power by asking for a miracle, recalling Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness: “if thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread” (Luke, 4:3); and later the devil “set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee; and in their hands they shall bear thee up; lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone” (Luke, 4:9-11).<sup>576</sup> As the course of the play will show, the gods do exist and do interfere in people’s lives, provided men themselves allow them to: “A change of mind, a change of heart allows the gods to play their part” (42), says the Chorus, immediately after Creon has receded; had Creon not changed his mind, the gods would be unable to do anything.

Unlike Mathews, neither Kennelly’s beliefs nor his personal history are evident in his text, but nonetheless one can see in it serious associations with his stance towards life: as is evident throughout his work, he strongly criticises prejudice, single-mindedness, conservatism and intolerance. Since God is love, Catholicism should be also based on love and not on prejudice. “I love the idea of a religion that is based on love which is best summed up in the quotation from St. Paul, “To live through love in God’s presence” ” he writes; “all love invites love. God calls us to love”.<sup>577</sup> In his play, Antigone insists on love as a motive for her action, not on the burial as a dictate from

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<sup>576</sup> Holy Bible (1830).

<sup>577</sup> Kennelly (2005: 19-20).

the gods: although she asserts, when talking to her sister, that she does not mean to dishonour “those laws established in honour by the gods” (10), later, when talking to Creon, her rhetoric on divine law in her - anyway condensed - speech is completely missing (21). In Kennelly’s play *Antigone* stands for everything that - as the poet frequently repeats in his prose - the Catholic Church should have but lacks: love, individual thinking, tolerance. His *Antigone*, in words and in actions, becomes in his play a very agent of love. “I have no wish to school myself in hate. I want to love” (24), she tells Creon. Kennelly here replaces the Sophoclean “I was born to love not to hate” with the verb “school myself”, as if hating is a matter of training, a way of being brought up. As he sees it, however, this is the case in Ireland and it is directly associated with religion:

“Religion should unite people in love. In Ireland, it frequently divides them in hatred and violence. The chief reason for this sad state of division, I think, is that many Irish people are saturated in religion from early childhood. Subsequently, what should be religious belief becomes religious prejudice. What should be religious tolerance too often becomes religious animosity”.<sup>578</sup>

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<sup>578</sup> Kennelly (1985: 107); elsewhere, Kennelly (1992: 9) writes: “In a long poem, *Cromwell*, I tried to open my mind, heart and imagination to the full, fascinating complexity of a man I was from childhood taught, quite simply, to hate. A learned hate is hard to unlearn. It would be easy enough to go through life hoarding and nourishing such hate, feeding it dutifully with endless “proofs”, thus keeping alive the explosive frenzies that fuel political situations such as that in Northern Ireland. [...] The process of unlearning hate is a genuine insult to some, particularly those whose prejudices are called convictions.”

Although in a very implicit way, Kennelly here exposes the insufficiency of the church in Ireland to stand up to its role. The priests preach love but their deeds are inconsistent with their words: “part of the tragic inadequacy of the Irish Catholic Church is that it always separates *being* from *doing*”,<sup>579</sup> he writes. Once again, Antigone is a step ahead: “Word and deed are one in me. That is my glory” (22), she tells Creon. Worse than failing to bring and sustain love in the world, the priests kill love. “Because I would not kill my love, my love kills me. In this place, killers of love go free” (38), Antigone says just before she is led away to die. Kennelly again paraphrases Sophocles using the rather harsh word ‘killer’; he uses exactly the same word when referring to the priest in Austin Clarke’s poem ‘The Redemptorist’.<sup>580</sup> “Is he therefore a killer?”, he writes; “how many priests have murderously advised women like this? And yet the priests believe that they themselves are “good”? What is this “goodness?””.<sup>581</sup> Even Antigone’s lines on men and power that will be examined in Chapter Four, too, also invite a religious reading, Kennelly suggesting that “these strong, intelligent, respectable bishopmen are basically more interested in power than in love”.<sup>582</sup>

Individual thinking, an issue of such importance for Kennelly, interestingly extends into the domain of religion too, Antigone, yet again, being its best agent. Kennelly’s Antigone yearns to find her own path in life, sets her own standards, establishes her own set of values she stands up for until the end; she keeps up with what the gods ordain (as Tiresias suggests) without, however, seeking to keep up with some divine law as is the

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<sup>579</sup> Kennelly (1985: 112).

<sup>580</sup> The priest advised - almost ordered - the woman to have one more child despite her fragile health and against the doctor’s suggestions; as a consequence of his advice, the woman died.

<sup>581</sup> Kennelly (1985: 116).

<sup>582</sup> Kennelly (1985: 113). Paparles

case in Sophocles. In this respect, as we will see, she is very close to Mathews' Antigone in the approach of the divine, as much as the two writers are. They are not however the only ones who point out the need to abandon religious pretensions for the sake of finding a personal, deeper meaning in Christianity. In the same year that both *Antigones* were written, Walsh writes that "culture forming is our God-ordained creaturely task. Unfortunately, Christians have been culture followers rather than culture formers".<sup>583</sup> In Walsh's terms, thus, Antigone is the ultimate culture former in Kennelly's play.

Still, it is not Catholicism that Kennelly attacks in his play; it is its advocates. This is more explicitly stated in his humorous poem 'The Dinner': in the poem, James Joyce - famously critical of the moral scriptures of the Catholic Church, although a product himself of Catholic Ireland and its community - has dinner with the Holy Family; Jesus comments that Joyce has been living in the Continent for a long time and Joyce replies that living there made him think things out for himself:

"I had to leave Ireland to do this

Because no one in Ireland has a mind of his own,

I know that place to the marrow of its bone

And I insist that people are dominated by your henchmen,

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<sup>583</sup> Walsh (1984: 100).

Those chaps in black who tell folk what to think.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Jesus ‘These men

Are not me.’

‘Would you put that in ink?’

Asked Joyce.

‘In blood,’ Jesus replied”.

Joyce had to leave the country in order to avoid the spiritual tyranny of the Church that suppresses people’s thought, impeding them from thinking autonomously. The priests ‘advertise’ themselves as the sole agents of a universally accepted truth: the one and only truth belongs to them and their flock belongs to them as well. Kennelly’s Creon, when forced to change his mind, cries that he has been working all his life for the good of his people, his own people (42). Self-declared saviour of humanity, beholder and sole agent of wisdom, he sounds like the priests - at least as Kennelly sees them - whom everybody is expected to respect just because of their status. And the main victims of the clergy’s conservatism, rigidity, insensitivity and - often - cruelty are women themselves, the Catholic Church significantly contributing to their social inferiority and voicelens in Ireland, as the next chapter aims to show.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Irish Antigones and Gender Politics**

Clitheroe: (*Angrily*) Why didn't you give me th' letter? What did you do with it?... (*He shakes her by the shoulder.*) What did you do with th' letter?

Nora: (*flaming up*) I burned it, I burned it! That's what I did with it! Is General Connolly an' th' Citizen Army goin' to be your only care? Is your home goin' to be only a place to rest in? Am I goin' to be only somethin' to provide merry-makin' at night for you? Your vanity'll be th' ruin of you an' me yet... That's what's movin' you: because they've made an officer of you, you'll make a glorious cause of what you're doin', while your little red-lipp'd Nora can go on sittin' here, makin' a companion of th' loneliness of th' night!

(Sean O'Casey, *Plough and the Stars*, 1926)

Hugh: Anything I do, I do for our country. It has to be done.

Margaret: I am your country. (*shouting*) I AM YOUR COUNTRY!

(Daniel Mornin, *In the Border Country* [television drama], 1991)

The problem of gender roles has been at the heart of Irish cultural politics from the Easter Rising to the Troubles. Despite periods of hope, the decades up to the Troubles were largely disappointing in terms of the advance of women in Irish society. Though

the military dimensions are specific to these two particular periods, larger antitheses apply throughout the twentieth century. Speaking broadly, man's existence is validated through his participation in public life, including - in this context - the recourse to arms for a national cause, if need be; "in fact, an Irishman was not fully a man unless he could bear arms and risk his life for the cause".<sup>584</sup> The woman has limited rights: she is restricted to the home, coping alone with the household and family responsibilities, and patiently waiting for her husband to return. Her individual need for affection is reproached, and her fear for his life (in a military context) is scorned and dismissed as absurd and irrational; after all, for a man to give in to his wife's - presumably absurd - demands does not make him a loving husband but an effeminate one.<sup>585</sup> Eventually, Nora has a stillbirth and a nervous breakdown as a result of James' absence and subsequent death, and Margaret has just suffered a miscarriage, while Hugh was on an IRA mission. Both women's experiences are physical manifestations of extreme distress and anxiety. Irish women's restriction to the domestic realm was worsened by the war, partly responsible as it was for their marginalisation, as we shall see. Interestingly, the social background of the Irish *Antigones* in relation to gender is in some respects disconcertingly close to that of their Sophoclean predecessor. The closeness between the two cultures in terms of the strict assignment of gender roles, despite the spatial and temporal distance that separates them, is an issue worth examining. For all its schematism, Vernant's comment on the ideology of space and gender is still relevant:

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<sup>584</sup> Knirck (2006: 25).

<sup>585</sup> In a scene from *The Plough and the Stars* [O'Casey (1998: 135 - 136)], Nora is clinging to her husband, begging him not to go out with his comrades, while Clitheroe struggles to release himself. Captain Brennan, watching the scene, says fiercely to Clitheroe: "Why are you beggin' her to let you go? Are you afraid of her, or what? Break her hold on you, man, or go up, an' sit on her lap!"; earlier on Clitheroe had reproached Nora for looking for him at the barricades the night before, "in fear her action would give him future shame": "What possessed you to make a show of yourself, like that?... What way d'ye think I'll feel when I'm told my wife was bawlin' for me at th' barricades? What are you more than any other woman?"



“in Greek, the domestic sphere, the enclosed space that is roofed over (protected), has a feminine connotation; the exterior, the open air, has a masculine one. The woman’s domain is the house. That is her place and, as a rule, she should not leave it. In contrast, in the *oikos*, the man represents the centrifugal element”.<sup>586</sup>

### Women in Sophocles’ Time

In Sophocles’ Athens women had limited rights, limited responsibility and limited mobility, extremely underprivileged as they were both in the public and in the domestic sphere. The passage to democracy brought no obvious advantages as to how a woman was seen or the rights she could exercise, since the democratic procedures of the city were meant for men only: “Women’s membership of the Athenian *polis* was always derivative, dependent on their associations with the men through whom they gained their status and their rights. Like other non-citizen groups of the Athenian population, their presence was necessary for the existence of that state [...] but they were not in their own right members of the *polis* which remained ‘*un club d’hommes*’. They were members of the *oikoi* of those who were members of the state. Their position was, as it were, marginal”.<sup>587</sup> Women in Athens did not have any active political rights: they had

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<sup>586</sup> Vernant (2006: 163).

<sup>587</sup> Just (1991: 192); there are a number of ways in which women in Athens were, in practice, non-citizens: Todd (1993: 201) observes that they “do not normally come to court as litigants, at least in person; nor do they appear as witnesses”; Robinson (2004: 248) that “women and slaves were, among other restrictions, barred from attending meetings of the assembly, holding annual public offices, serving as jurors, independently initiating legal proceedings”. MacDowell (1978: 69) points out the absence of deme records for women: “Each deme kept an ‘officer-lot register’ (*lexiarkhikon grammateion*) listing all the adult male members of the deme, to show who was eligible for appointment to office. [...] There were no complete lists of women and children of citizen status”; as far as issues of inheritance and property are concerned, indicative is the institution of *epikleros*, the case in which a man had only a daughter and no son to inherit him; in this case, the woman married (usually a close relative) expecting to have a son that would inherit her father’s property. In this case, “the woman did not really own the property herself in the sense

neither the right to vote nor to be voted for; they could not appear in the Assembly or in the court, even as witnesses. The restrictions went beyond what we would call political rights; women were not even imagined as having a professional, social or personal life; they were “ideally silent, anonymous and invisible, except in certain cult contexts. They were to confine themselves to the house, not even answering a knock on the door and certainly not running out to the street (Menander Fr. 592 Koerte)”.<sup>588</sup> The lament of the dead was one of the few social occasions in which women were exclusively and actively involved (in line with their unusual prominence in religion), since it was the women of the house who - during the course of the *prothesis* that lasted two days - washed, anointed, dressed the dead body and subsequently mourned it beating their breasts, tearing at their hair and scratching their cheeks, while chanting traditional laments.<sup>589</sup> It is true that the degree of seclusion was often overstated in ancient sources and this has frequently been taken over uncritically in modern discussions. Cohen attempts to dissolve the confusion between separation and seclusion, noting that “while it is undeniable that women did not operate in the public and political spheres in the way that men did, it does not necessarily follow that they did not have public, social, and economic spheres of their own, nor that these categories were not fluid and manipulable as opposed to rigid and eternally fixed”.<sup>590</sup> Even so, the social expectations were different for males and females: while men were expected to excel in battles, in public life, in science, in commerce, in the arts, women were brought up to marry early and have a family, since this was seen as the sole end of a woman’s life: “girls should be married off as soon as possible after puberty. [...] In fact, marriage, sex and

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of being able to dispose of it as she wished; it just remained with her until her son was ready to inherit”, MacDowell (1978: 95).

<sup>588</sup> Jameson (2004: 282).

<sup>589</sup> Macintosh (1994: 20).

<sup>590</sup> Cohen (1991: 149).

motherhood were seen as the only long-term roles available to a woman, so that the sooner she settled down to them, it was believed, the more comfortable life would be for all concerned”.<sup>591</sup> Even when married, however, with a family and a household of her own, a woman was under her husband’s control; a legal minor throughout her life, she was always accountable to and controlled by a man.

All the above features of the marginalisation of women inside and outside the *oikos* are also evident in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. This is not specifically a play about gender; nonetheless, in many respects, it is saturated with it. Creon has assumed the throne of Thebes as the only remaining male relative of the royal family, despite the fact that he has a marital and not a blood relationship with it. Antigone and Ismene - the only two direct descendants of the royal line - are, as women, excluded from any such offices; in contrast to the male characters in the play, for whom it is normal to be seen outside the palace, they even have to excuse their presence outdoors, and so does Eurydice later.<sup>592</sup> Creon concentrates within himself all political and family power; Antigone has none. She is a woman as well as a member of Creon’s family, “excellent reasons”, according to Meyer, “for a woman in a patriarchal society to submit to masculine authority”.<sup>593</sup> Instead of submitting, however, Antigone challenges the moral legitimacy of his decree, transgressing the gender role assigned to her. Her championing of the *oikos* against encroachment by the *polis* accurately reflects the circumscribed role and focus of female life;<sup>594</sup> at the same time, the ritual aspect

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<sup>591</sup> Blundell (1998: 25).

<sup>592</sup> In the former case, Antigone explains that she has dragged Ismene out of the palace to talk in secret; in the latter, both appearances of the queen outside her *oikos* are related to religious obligations.

<sup>593</sup> Meyer (2010: 254).

<sup>594</sup> Fainlight (2009: lvii) writes that “moral authority is articulated in relation to gender in this play. The female expresses particular principles, while the male generalizes the principles of the state.

of her intervention reflects both the traditional role of females in burial and the fact that religion is “the one area of public life in which woman played an acknowledged part”,<sup>595</sup> her importance in that even beginning to approach that of the male. As a result, Antigone is patronised, reprimanded, repudiated, sentenced to death by Creon - the man and the uncle. Ismene, on the other hand, is the perfect product of a male-dominated society: fearful, obedient, submissive, gender-conscious. This, of course, saves her life but does not earn her any respect; “*Ismene* seems indisputably a “woman” in her weakness, her fear, her submissive obedience, her tears, madness, hysteria - all of which in fact are met with condescending scorn on the part of the king. Ismene is subsequently shut up, as a punishment, in the palace, the house, with the other women, who are all thus deprived of their freedom of action for fear they may sap the courage of the most valiant warriors”.<sup>596</sup> Whether a woman conforms to the social norms or not, she is still dismissed simply for being a woman, Creon’s words echoing a whole set of cultural prejudices relating to women: “from now on these two must be women, and must not be on the loose” (578-579). Even more contemptible is a man who dares side with a woman, as Haemon does in the play; Creon dismisses him as “inferior to a woman” (746), or “slave of a woman” (756). He is not described as “inferior to a traitor”, for instance, or even just “traitor”; what matters most for his father is that his son sides with a woman, not with a rebel. For Creon - the only man in the play, it should be noted, who endorses this attitude - the issue of gender is inseparably connected with issues of power and authority; hence, for him, to be challenged by a woman exacerbates an already unacceptable degree of disobedience.

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The play examines cultural clichés about women and gender as a way to highlight and explicate contemporary Athenian social and political issues.”

<sup>595</sup> Blundell (1995: 160).

<sup>596</sup> Irigaray (1985: 217-8).

All this subtext of Sophocles' play has attracted much attention in the past decades from feminist critics - among them Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler and Nicole Loraux.<sup>597</sup> It is not within the scope of this chapter, though, to examine different feminist readings of *Antigone*; rather to see the ways in which the translators of the play in Ireland address the gender issues which appear in the original. To do this, we first need to have a look at both mythic and real-life images of the female that have informed the Irish consciousness, and examine the social position of women in Irish society.

### **Female Imagery Associated with Ireland**

Despite the traditional limitations imposed on women in Irish culture, which will be discussed shortly, the female plays a significant role in Irish myth and identity. Cathleen Ní Houlihan, Éire, Erin, the Shan Van Vocht, Dark Rosaleen, Mother Ireland; in the rich repository of Celtic myths, these are some of the female mythic images that have been associated with Ireland. The imagery of Ireland as a woman penetrates the Irish imagination: it “derives from the sovereignty goddess figure of early Irish tradition, the personification of this goddess in the figures of Irish medieval literature, and the allegorisation of Ireland as woman in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century classical poetic genre, the *aisling*, following colonial censorship of the expression of direct political dissent”.<sup>598</sup> An essential characteristic of *aisling*, literally meaning vision, is that the author sees Ireland as a radiant and majestic virgin:

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<sup>597</sup> The feminist readings of the play have very recently inspired a whole collected volume of essays, entitled *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, see Söderbäck (2010).

<sup>598</sup> Nash (1994: 229).

“the poet states how he finds himself in a certain spot at a certain moment to meet there a mysterious, beautiful but unsettling female figure; she is clearly not a mere mortal, but perhaps a fairy, or a heavenly emissary; she may also explicitly be identified as Éire herself, a personification of the country, and she voices her complaints and sorrows to the poet, who listens spellbound by her words and enchanted by her beauty. The mysterious heaven-woman is of a wonderful polyvalence, a veritable floating signifier, who can be either, literally, a human figure of amorous attraction, or else, symbolically, an embodiment of the country’s political or cultural identity, or at times even a symbol for poetic inspiration”.<sup>599</sup>

The most well-known poem drawing upon the *aisling* tradition is James Clarence Mangan’s ‘Dark Rosaleen’, written in the 19th century; in it, Mangan expresses his admiration and love for Ireland, here in the guise of a woman, as well as his resolution to raise her to her previous glory. Yeats, one of Mangan’s keen students, in his poem ‘To Ireland in the Coming Times’ also depicts the country as a woman with a “red-rose-bordered hem”,<sup>600</sup> his most well-known female personification of his country was, however, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a play that promotes Yeats’ nationalist vision. Yeats, on 5 April 1902, describes the show of “my ‘Kathleen Ny Hoolihan’”, as “a great success”:

“Crowds have been turned away at the doors & great numbers stood about the walls with patient enthusiasm. They had to stand through all the intervals too, for

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<sup>599</sup> Leerssen (1998: 13).

<sup>600</sup> Yeats (2000: 41- 42).

they were packed too close to move. It was only a hall not a theatre but we could have filled quite a big place, I think”.<sup>601</sup>

The protagonist was first played by Maud Gonne, an influential activist in Ireland, renowned for her free spirit as well as for her beauty; “the electrifying effect of Maud’s performance in April 1902 is well known. Ireland’s Joan of Arc, the Woman of the Sidhe, now became Cathleen, a personification of Ireland”.<sup>602</sup> Yeats at first defends his play against critics who see it as nationalist propaganda, explaining that he wrote Cathleen as a result of a vivid dream that he had one night.<sup>603</sup> Years later, however, he confesses that: “my Cathleen Ni Houlihan was propaganda but I was not conscious of it at the time”.<sup>604</sup> At a later age and in a self-critical tone, he even wonders in his poem ‘Man and the Echo’: “Did that play of mine send out/ Certain men the English shot?”<sup>605</sup> The representation of Ireland as a woman does not stop, though, in the early twentieth century; as Speer argues, “women characters in the early Troubles stories are made to symbolize Ireland, and are vaguely reminiscent of Cathleen ni Houlihan or the Aisling figure, a tendency that feminist critics decry”.<sup>606</sup> It seems that throughout the twentieth century, the female becomes an integral part of the construction of Irish identity; the

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<sup>601</sup> Kelly (1994: 169).

<sup>602</sup> Jeffares (1992: 29); as is already mentioned in the previous chapter, Maud Gonne was called the “Irish Joan of Arc”, Joan being a very prominent figure for the Irish.

<sup>603</sup> Ross (2009: 315) quotes Yeats writing: “I am a Nationalist, and certain of my intimate friends have made Irish politics the business of their lives, and this made certain thoughts habitual with me, and an accident made these thoughts take fire in such a way that I could give them dramatic expression. I had a very vivid dream one night, and I made *Cathleen ni Houlihan* out of this dream. [...] I took a piece of human life, thoughts that men had felt, hopes they had died for, and I put this into what I believe to be sincere dramatic form. I have never written a play to advocate any kind of opinion and I think that such a play would be necessarily bad art, or at any rate a very humble kind of art. At the same time I feel that I have no right to exclude for myself or for others, any of the passionate material of drama”.

<sup>604</sup> Unterecker (1967: 430).

<sup>605</sup> Yeats (2000 [1936-1939]: 298-299); it is to this poem that Auden responded in 1939 when he wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen”, as we saw back in Chapter One.

<sup>606</sup> Storey (2004: 179).

identity that Irish people construct for themselves as well as the one constructed abroad<sup>607</sup> - for different ends, of course.

The image of the female as a representation of the country, however, is a flexible one which evolves with time. Ireland initially glorified in the guise of a passive, sexually intangible daughter, is depicted in the nineteenth and twentieth century as a mourning mother - both images associated with colonialism. In the former case - that of a vulnerable virgin victimised by the masculine invaders - “retaining the image of the relationship between Great Britain and Ireland as one between masculine and feminine, the metaphors most frequently used have been those of robbery and rape”;<sup>608</sup> in the latter, “the passive daughter seems to assume the more militant guise of a mother goddess summoning her faithful sons to rise up against the infidel invader so that, through the shedding of their blood, she might be redeemed from colonial violation and become pure once again - restored to her pristine sovereignty of land, language and liturgy”.<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> Alongside the ugly, pugnacious, ape - like cartoon figures of individual Irish men, stereotypically employed by Britain, Walter (1999: 78) remarks that “different layers of racialization simultaneously depicted the island of Ireland, and by association its inhabitants, through Victorian stereotypes of femininity”, which he views as “feminine qualities of aesthetic appreciation, sensitivity and unreliability [that] required control and protection”. The feminisation of the Celts by the British, Walter (1999: 80) concludes, “was a strategy to place Irish men in a weak position rather than a celebration of female virtues”. If the relationship between the two countries is seen by Britain as one between the masculine and the feminine, the need for control makes sense, as “autonomy” - that Byrne (1999: 80) associates with masculine identity and behaviour - “is denied in the female”.

<sup>608</sup> Balzano (1996: 92); Kearney (1997: 119) associates Ireland with a female body, suggesting that “the cult of virginity undoubtedly corroborated this process of sublimation. Woman became as sexually intangible as the ideal of national sovereignty became politically intangible. Both became imaginary, aspirational, elusive”. Loomba (1998: 152) also sees this attitude as a symptom of colonialism, arguing that “from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolise the conquered land”.

<sup>609</sup> Kearney (1997: 119-120).



Apart from the influences of Celtic myths which helped shape these images, we should not underestimate the influence of the Catholic imagery. If the Irish ideal of a woman - identified as it was with the country itself - has been either one of a virgin, or a grieving mother, then the Virgin Mary is the only figure who uniquely embodies both. Rosemary Sales comments that “a prominent nationalist image during the hunger strikes of the 1980s was the Virgin Mary watching over the dying prisoners”, also pointing out that “there is no equivalent symbolic role for women in Protestantism, where worship of the Virgin Mary is strongly condemned (McWilliams 1991:86). Unionism is associated with conquest and settlement, its imagery triumphalist and masculine”.<sup>610</sup>

### **Influential Irish Women**

Apart from the female mythic images the country has been identified with, a number of women who defied the social norms and assisted their country in turbulent times - especially the most disadvantaged parts of the population, women included - were very influential to the Irish. A potent set of Irish feminists such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Countess Constance Markievicz, Anna Parnell, Mary MacSwiney, Eva Gore-Booth, all well known for their free spirit, passion, spontaneous generosity and political activism, played a crucial role in the 1916 Revolution. They identified with the marginalised and the dispossessed, challenged the role of the State (whether as active Republican women or as feminists seeking more power for women in Irish public discourse),<sup>611</sup> and fought for women’s rights. They founded or were actively involved in

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<sup>610</sup> Sales (1997: 63).

<sup>611</sup> Knirck (2006: 11-12). refers to the conventional “division of active Irish women into clear ‘nationalist’ or ‘feminist/suffragist’ camps. According to this classification, nationalist women were those who put the freedom of Ireland first and foremost, and believed that other issues, such

a number of revolutionary organisations, such as the Ladies' Land League, *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Erin), *Cumann na mBan* (the female wing of the militaristic Irish Volunteers), Women's Prisoners' Defence League (WPDL), Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL). They issued the first women's newspaper in Ireland, *Bean na hÉireann*, and were imprisoned again and again for their beliefs and deeds. "On the whole, radical Irish women out-lefted their menfolk - hardly surprising, given that women were traditionally excluded from the public sphere, and so on entering it (usually, in Ireland, as supports or substitutes for their male colleagues) were less likely to be bound by its protocols".<sup>612</sup>

Women were always assisting the struggle for Independence, despite the fact that their role was often unacknowledged.<sup>613</sup> It was on these grounds, on the one hand, that they expected their service to their country to be recognised in the post-revolutionary years; on the other, "revolutionary times initially seemed to hold tremendous promise for Irish women, [since] war and revolution are often points in time when gender boundaries - as well as other social and political conventions - are potentially open for renegotiation".<sup>614</sup> However, once the Revolution was over, it seems that women unceremoniously returned to their kitchens and their limited household lives. Indicative of the intentions of the new Government formed after the Revolution, was article 41.2 of De Valera's

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as suffrage or socio-economic reform, should only be dealt with after the creation of an independent Irish state." He dismisses, however, this distinction suggesting that "many women were both nationalists and feminists, and crossed over between two movements. The differences, when they arose, were primarily about timing and priority, not about the ultimate desirability of Irish independence or women's suffrage".

<sup>612</sup> Eagleton (1995: 291).

<sup>613</sup> Storey (2004: 179) comments that "throughout Irish history, and especially since the late nineteenth century, women have played significant, albeit unsung, roles in the revolutionary struggle for Ireland's independence"

<sup>614</sup> Knirck (2006: 1).

Constitution, according to which “the State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that *mothers* shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home”.<sup>615</sup> Where the struggles of 1916 had placed men and women almost on an equal footing, the subsequent war in 1918 further widened the gap between them; unlike the English women for whom the First World War brought removal from the household, the right to vote in 1918 (at least for some) and the first steps in what would ultimately lead to their emancipation, in Ireland “women, because they were prohibited from serving in the Volunteers, were relegated to subordinate roles. Rather than a time of promise, the war became a major setback for [them]”.<sup>616</sup>

The restart of violence in Ireland in the 1960s coincides with the aftermath of the second feminist movement; its reverberations spread to Ireland with a little delay, but the impact is felt. The most influential woman in the 1960s and 1970s was undoubtedly Bernadette Devlin, reportedly called “the Jeanne d’Arc of Northern Ireland and a Cassandra in a mini-skirt”.<sup>617</sup> Devlin, a Catholic from the North, politically active since her student years at Queen’s University, Belfast, was the youngest MP to be elected in the Westminster Parliament at the age of twenty one. Unconventional in her views, highly active and activist, Devlin fits more in the context of militant nationalists than militant feminists - no wonder she is very frequently associated with Antigone, as was pointed out in Chapter Two. The impact of female empowerment has, if anything,

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<sup>615</sup> Scannell (1995: 201) describes it as “the grossest form of sexual stereotyping . . . an implicit denial of freedom of choice to women in personal matters, a freedom taken for granted by men”; Knirck (2006: 11) quotes Valiulis suggesting that on the one hand “removing women from public life and returning them to the home also emphasized women’s traditional role as the transmitters of culture, and therefore devolved upon them responsibility for ‘Gaelicizing’ the new state and its future citizens”, and on the other that “the Free State also tried to demonstrate its respectability and moral rectitude by putting women in their proper place”.

<sup>616</sup> Knirck (2006: 13).

<sup>617</sup> Olsson and Stendahl (1971: 89).

increased in recent years; nowhere perhaps is this impact more clearly registered than in the fact that two women in Ireland successively became Presidents of the country and offered a new perspective as to the role and the potential of the female: Mary Robinson - the first female President to be inaugurated in Ireland in 1990 - and Belfast-born Mary McAleese, who succeeded her in 1997 - the first President of the country coming from the North - brought passion, energy and a spirit of unity to Irish political life.

### **The Social Position and Role of Women in Ireland**

Despite the mythical female representations of Ireland which - although extremely stereotypical - inspire respect and love for the feminine, and despite the recognition of what women can and do offer in society, the social position of women in Ireland was highly disadvantaged almost throughout the twentieth century. This was partly attributed to a widespread view of “woman as sin”, as Kennelly describes it, best expressed in his play by Creon. Thinking back on his early youth, the poet recalls:

“having been brought up in this passionate over-simplification [...] where woman was an occasion of sin, that woman *was* sin, that is very hard to overcome. Whether you're charming, or attractive, or repulsive to a woman, under it all, at a certain level, there's this sense in an Irish catholic male of my generation, of woman as sin. [...] A lot of male tyranny over women is over sin, in conquering sin”.<sup>618</sup>

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<sup>618</sup> Pine and Kennelly (1994: 178).

Despite the vast gulf in time and space between Sophocles' Athens and twentieth-century Ireland, both societies share a conviction that a woman has to be controlled; accordingly, the expectations a woman has to meet in order to be socially acceptable do not differ much: a woman's place is at home and the only acceptable progression of her life is the passage from maidenhood to motherhood. Even towards the end of the century, the ideal for a Republican woman was still not far away from what is quoted as de Valera's description:

“the ideal woman is also passive. She has no work of her own to do, but rather fulfills the wishes of her sons. She performs her role in public not with an agenda of her own, but rather as a living vessel through which the dead may speak. All of this manifests an air of self-effacement, of meekness, of indirectness. What it lacks is passion, vitality, independence and assertiveness”.<sup>619</sup>

The persistence of such stereotypes in Irish society does not mean that the everyday reality of women or the structure of the family have been completely unaffected by other, inevitable social changes. In the first place, women have dynamically entered the workforce in recent years; at the same time, there has been a dramatic decline in the birth rate, an obvious result of extensive use of contraception - also suggesting the gap between religion and lived reality.<sup>620</sup> Despite such changes, however, the expectations a

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<sup>619</sup> Knirck (2006: 16); indicative of this attitude is “the ‘marriage bar’ which required civil servants and local authority workers to resign their jobs on marriage, a practice legitimized in 1929 with a Marriage Grant in the form of a lump sum given to women employees on marriage”, Jackson (1993: 74).

<sup>620</sup> Kearney (1988: 237) comments that “in response to the suggestion that the South displays a conservative religious outlook in its laws on divorce, contraception, or homosexuality, many might

woman has to meet have not significantly changed either in the Republic, or in the North. The strict assignment of gender roles is still there, a relic, but a powerful relic, of the past: thus, while men are associated with money making, women are still identified with the private sphere, the care of the household and the family still weighing upon their shoulders.<sup>621</sup> The fact that Ireland joined the European Community in 1973 “provided the occasion for women to begin to claim rights as part of a wider community and to begin to challenge the thinking behind many of the normative assumptions which had dominated Irish social policy concerning family, motherhood and household”.<sup>622</sup> Though claims were raised and debates were held, the progress made was notably slow.

Even worse, “not only is [a woman] excluded from public space but she herself becomes the terrain over which power is exercised”, Balzano comments, also suggesting that “the Irish obsession with control over the body of woman is today the object of conflict between Church and State”.<sup>623</sup> In this respect, women have to conform to the ideal of virginity, thus “belonging” to one man only; as Kennelly puts it, “if a man can harness a woman’s sexuality, he will guarantee his own powerful position”.<sup>624</sup>

Women in Ireland, as was the case in Athens twenty five centuries earlier, claim adult

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wish to distinguish between the conservative *ought* of the official legislation and the more liberal *is* of people’s everyday lives”.

<sup>621</sup> Byrne (1999: 71) suggests that in the Republic “while family size is generally decreasing, suggesting that women’s life-time dedication to home duties is no longer necessary, and though the number of nonmarital families continues to grow, familist ideology continues to inform conceptions of what it is to be a woman”. Likewise, according to Foley (2003: 25), in the North “the traditional role of women has been perceived as mothers and carers, as unseen supporters of fathers and husbands, keepers of hearth and altar”. Sales (1997: 153), finally, comments that in Northern Ireland “women’s role was increasingly identified with the private sphere, they were excluded from full political and economic citizenship”. Thus, in both North and South, “Irish women are limited to a symbolic role and rendered invisible as real bodies, allowing their material needs to be ignored”, Walter (1999: 94).

<sup>622</sup> Jackson (1993: 72).

<sup>623</sup> Balzano (1996: 93).

<sup>624</sup> Kennelly (1985: 115).

status only once they have completed “the appropriate female rites of passage [...]. Marriage, reproduction, and demonstrable, active heterosexuality are still regarded as the only legitimate pathways to adulthood for Irish women, one that single women do not take”.<sup>625</sup>

Crucial issues related not only to women’s social position but also to their rights of sexual self-determination and control of their fertility were first tackled at the time of the second wave of the feminist movement that broke both North and South during the late 60s - early 70s.<sup>626</sup> In the early 1980s, however, they took the form of an unprecedented debate for Irish society, with issues of sexual morality - such as the right to contraception and abortion - causing deep divisions and social upheaval, with staunch supporters on both sides.<sup>627</sup> “We were not a united country, we were a divided one, with lots of issues and tension around”, Colm Ó Briain comments, also referring to serious divisions even within families. 1984, when the first set of *Antigones* was written, was a very crucial and turbulent year in this respect, with the referendum on abortion just the

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<sup>625</sup> Byrne (1999: 73-4).

<sup>626</sup> Jackson (1993: 78) writes that “the contemporary women’s movement was launched in the late 1960s with the founding of a Women’s Liberation Group by women intellectuals, many of them writers and journalists. This was followed by a spread of organizations such as Irish Women United and the Trade Union Women’s Forum, the Contraceptive Action Programme to campaign for the legalization of contraception and the campaign for equal pay”; Sales (1997: 185) also comments that “the 1970s saw the development of feminist campaigns in Northern Ireland which challenged the conventional view of women’s role, particularly in relation to the family and the regulation of sexuality”.

<sup>627</sup> Allen (2000: 329) notes that “during the 1980s and early 1990s the Irish public were experiencing an unprecedented period of public debate over key issues of sexual morality, above all over issues that focused on the claimed rights of women to control both their sexuality and fertility [that] lasted until the early 1990s”. Likewise in the North, Sales (1997: 129-131) points out that “although contraception is free and legal as it is in Britain, it is often difficult to obtain [...] few doctors are prepared to challenge the prevailing taboo and openly acknowledge performing abortions.” Conrad (1999: 61), finally, argues that “women who seek abortions still find themselves subject to prejudice and ostracism, and women’s centres and their workers often find themselves subject to violence and threats of violence from sectarian groups”.

year before, the death of Anne Lovett, and the Kerry Babies scandal<sup>628</sup> being only some of the events that were sensationalised in Irish public opinion. Rather unsurprisingly, most Greek plays staged in Ireland in the 1980s have female protagonists: “in such a climate where women had been rendered powerless even over their own bodies by a patriarchal society, [...] the writers, admittedly male, turned to a body of myth that dealt with women forced beyond the laws, pushed out of society and compelled to take desperate measures”.<sup>629</sup>

### **Gender Issues in the Irish Translations of *Antigone***

The female representations of Ireland<sup>630</sup> as well as the inferior social role of women in the country have attracted the attention of some of the Irish translators of *Antigone*. For most of them, Antigone - like Bernadette Devlin - is represented as more of a Republican than as a feminist; Brendan Kennelly is the only exception and therefore the translator whose play will receive most extensive treatment in this chapter. Kennelly is the only one to offer a consistently feminist reading of the myth, the inferior - often deplorable - position of women in Ireland being an issue to which he often returns in his prose as well. Morrison’s translation shows a marked influence from Kennelly’s and bears similarities with his, lacking, however, in consistency and clear focus. Though none of the other *Antigones* shares this overt feminist agenda, there is an undercurrent -

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<sup>628</sup> For further reading on issues such as female sexuality, contraception, abortion and divorce in the early 1980s, see Allen (2000: 322-340); also Sales (1997: 28-29, 128-135).

<sup>629</sup> Teevan (1998:80).

<sup>630</sup> “Ireland has often been posited as the feminine Other in relation to the aggressive male British Empire, and so, in a romantic nationalist interpretation, Antigone still can represent oppressed Ireland fighting for her rights, [...] clearly given the morally superior position, justifying action against the colonial oppressor, whether it involves acts of civil disobedience, hunger-strikes, or even more violent acts”, Wilmer (2007: 241).



especially in the other two 1984 translations - of the sexual degradation of Antigone by means of language, mostly on the part of Creon.

### **Language and Gender**

A powerful tool for controlling women is language itself. Despite the elevated idiom of Greek tragedy which forms the source text, crude words, occasionally accompanied by sexual overtones which mean to insult and humiliate, appear in all Irish versions of *Antigone* - Heaney only excluded. Among all the translations, there is only one instance of diction denoting male promiscuity, the Chorus in Kennelly referring to “old horny Oedipus” (36). In all other cases such words refer exclusively to women, the language thus being not only crude but also designedly sexist. The fact that in the English language there are 220 words for a sexually promiscuous female and only 20 for a sexually promiscuous male, Dale Spender suggests, would seem to indicate that “the language - as a system - embodies sexual inequality and it is not women who enjoy the advantage”.<sup>631</sup> Almost all writers - although each to a different degree - make explicit that structural sexism, the dialogue of the plays routinely representing Antigone as verbally attacked, mostly by Creon, in a language that is expressively sexist.

To start with, the word ‘bitch’ appears in as many as four different versions, Paulin’s Creon using it the most. The king initially warns his son about “good men wrecked by some hard-nosed bitch” (36) and soon becomes more specific, describing Antigone as a “hard bitch” (34) and later as a “dirty bitch” (41); Morrison’s Creon also describes his

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<sup>631</sup> Spender (1990: 15).

niece as a “traitorous little bitch” (22). Apart from Creon, in two instances Antigone and Ismene -rather unexpectedly - also use the same word: thus, Donnellan’s Antigone comments on her brother’s marriage to “the enemy’s bitch” (25), while Mathews’ Ismene calls Chora a “common bitch” (60). In a male dominated society it should not come as a surprise that women themselves (Antigone included) reproduce sexist language to address or refer to other women. Apart from this particular word, which is used to describe an unpleasant, contentious woman or one perceived as a threat, words like ‘slut’ or ‘whore’, denoting female promiscuity, also appear, and although they do not refer to Antigone, they nonetheless contribute to an atmosphere of intrinsic suppression. Kennelly’s Creon describes pleasure as “the perfumed slut of one night” (29), while Donnellan’s tells Tiresias that seers are “bought like whores” (53). Again, in two instances women themselves use the word ‘slut’: Chora calls Ismene as such, while Kennelly’s Antigone encourages Ismene to show that she is not the “slavish slut of a noble line” (8). The plays in which the female characters never employ this kind of vocabulary are Paulin’s and Morrison’s; in these two translations, offensive language of this kind is saved for Creons’ use only, both registering the vulgar word ‘bitch’.

This was not completely alien to Sophocles: “Creon, fittingly representative of the political reality of fifth-century Athens, becomes more and more obsessed with the ideology of gender”,<sup>632</sup> Zelenak concludes after examining lines such as “others have furrows that can be plowed” (line 569), which he finds “startling in the dignified context of tragedy”. Neither the language nor the concept is in itself inappropriate; according to Vernant, “the Greeks compared marriage to ploughing the soil (arotos), the woman

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<sup>632</sup> Zelenak (1998: 78)

symbolizing the furrow (*aroura*) and the man, the ploughman (*arotēr*)”, imagery which he describes as “almost obligatory for the tragic poets but also employed by the prose writers”.<sup>633</sup> Nonetheless, in context, it does degrade the woman from person to object or instrument. It is not surprising, then, that Antigone is seen by Sophocles’ Creon as a means of procreation. This is of course in itself an acknowledged and central aspect of marriage; after all, all relationships being civic in Creon’s view, “the bond between husband and wife is simply a means of producing new citizens”.<sup>634</sup> What is, however, wrong in Creon’s treatment of Antigone is not that he sees her in terms of male transactions of the preservation of the *oikos* but that he sees her *solely* in such terms, interchangeable (as a body) with any other female.

Paulin pushes the line further, making it “plenty more [girls] that he can poke” (34), thus reducing Antigone solely to an object, but this time not even of family transactions but of individual (male) sexual pleasure, devoid of feelings or needs of her own. The verb ‘poke’, vulgar as it is, has an element of verbal violence suggestive of transitory and casual (since there is no element of procreation implied) use. Paulin creates a character whose violent behaviour extends to his personal and sexual life, the language of domination which he employs in this instance, too, revealing a misogynistic aggression. Given Creon’s attitude towards women, his son subsequently taking a woman’s side makes him not a slave of a woman, as in Sophocles, but a woman himself (“Just listen to her!”, 42). Despite the fact, however, that Paulin’s Creon articulates

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<sup>633</sup> Vernant (2006: 171); he also points out that the “the father or the *kurios* authorized to arrange the daughter’s marriage pronounces the pledge of betrothal (*egguē*): “I bestow this girl in order that ploughing shall bring forth legitimate children”.

<sup>634</sup> Nussbaum (2001: 61).

more strongly his son's perceived effeminate behaviour, it is in this version that Haemon moves more explicitly from obedience to reaction - in a sense, from femininity to masculinity. This is in fact the only play in which Haemon admits at the beginning of the encounter that he has always been obedient to his father ("Haven't I shown it always by doing what you bid me?", 36). Gradually, it is made evident that it is not his father he wants to protect - the Sophoclean phrase "if you are a woman; because it is you for whom I feel concern" (line 741) is omitted - but his fiancée. At the end, not only does he depart in anger for the punishment that awaits her, threatening to do harm to himself, but he is also determined to protect her ("there's no one here dare harm her now", 42).

In marked contrast with Paulin's Haemon, Mathews' Heman echoes Paulin's Creon in the way he degrades Antigone. Although this text does not seem to have any feminist orientation, still, Heman in addressing Antigone in the following terms - while, at the same time, physically abusing her - adds to the long list of his flaws of character an inability to see beyond biology:

"You make love to it, don't you? You ride your own death in the female astride. You want to go out in a blaze of glory. Saint Antigone. Wafting off into cumulus nimbus while the rest of us stay where we are in the ruins. Walloping nails into wood. (PAUSE) No wonder Christ chose men. Your sex is diseased." (49)

### **Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone***

Kennelly, rather than adapting or accentuating details related to gender issues in the original, sees Antigone first and foremost as a young girl trying to assert herself in a male-dominated environment. Although, as he maintains, he is not “a feminist as such, in the political sense”,<sup>635</sup> through young Antigone he expresses his admiration for women, praises them, stands up for them. Kennelly not only significantly expands the gender discourse of the original but, as we will see, also makes his play a hymn to womanhood - or rather to girlhood; we should not forget that this translation, Kennelly’s very first engagement with Greek tragedy, was not a commissioned one but was meant as a gift for the poet’s young daughter.<sup>636</sup> Even so, his play cannot be seen apart from the socio-cultural context in which it was produced. Roche points out the significance of the translation’s timing, since Kennelly’s *Antigone*, alongside his *Medea* and *The Trojan Women*, was written at a time “when Ireland was convulsed by debates and referenda having to do with the rights of women and control of their own sexual identity in relation to abortion and divorce”.<sup>637</sup> In line with Roche, Brown also suggests that “that such conflict is symbolised in a battle of wills between a powerful man and a vulnerable but indomitable young woman must have peculiar significance for a society undergoing a protracted and often fraught adjustment of its fundamental attitudes to sexuality. It touches some of our deepest anxieties, echoes our intimate hopes”.<sup>638</sup> Heaney also sees Kennelly’s play as “too right for the time”, though he describes it as “overstated a bit” as a feminist version.<sup>639</sup> Kennelly’s transfer of focus from politics to gender politics has indeed been often criticised: the poet has been accused of

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<sup>635</sup> Pine and Kennelly (1994: 177).

<sup>636</sup> Eventually, this became part of a larger pattern in his work, since both versions of Greek tragedies that he produced thereafter (*Medea*, *The Trojan Women*) were centered on emblematic female characters, too.

<sup>637</sup> Roche (2005: 150).

<sup>638</sup> Brown (1996: 52).

<sup>639</sup> Heaney - K. G. (2008).

transforming Sophocles' play "into a piece of pseudo-feminist propaganda that foregrounds a simplistic opposition between the individual and the state";<sup>640</sup> of switching "the emphasis from the clear, majestic discussion of politics to a vague psychosexual drama [...] the play [suffering] a consequent failure of energy";<sup>641</sup> of "having no idea what he is doing, the speech about love [being] as banal as the first sermon at a bad retreat".<sup>642</sup>

Kennelly's Creon, apart from the rigidity, conservatism and intolerance which associate him with the male clergy, as we saw in the previous chapter, also becomes an emblematic figure of misogyny. Sophocles' Creon already feared surrendering to sexual pleasure as a distraction from rational thinking, as much as being dominated by a woman. Kennelly takes to the extremes the Sophoclean Creon's fear and obsession with control over women, his Creon embodying all the qualities of the leader in a male, patriarchal establishment: autocracy, intransigence, misogyny. His universe is not only man-made but also man-inhabited only. In *Antigone* and Tiresias' discourse, men and women are represented alike: "before men's and women's eyes" (8), *Antigone* says; "the boy had listened to men and women", Tiresias says. In Creon's discourse, on the other hand, there is no space for women: "the laws they gave to living men" (12), "it will be maintained by rule, by law, By men who understand that truth" (13). Even inside the family, it is the law of the father which applies: "to ward off chaos", he tells his son, "a family must still be moulded by the father's will. A father is the maker of the future" (28). In an interesting interplay between North and South, this recalls Ian Paisley's

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<sup>640</sup> O'Rawe (1999).

<sup>641</sup> O'Toole (1986).

<sup>642</sup> Tóibin (1986).

description of the gender roles in the family, as quoted by Sales: “I believe that the husband is the head of the wife and the home. I believe that the father should be prophet, priest and king in his home”.<sup>643</sup>

Creon’s assertion about the primacy of the father in context probably reveals anxiety rather than conviction; we should not forget that Creon does not take for granted his son’s support, even before the latter’s arrival. It is also interesting in several respects; in the first place because it challenges the primacy of the woman in the domestic sphere, the only area in which she can exercise some control. Thus, while a woman in Irish society traditionally bears sole responsibility for rearing and catering for the children, and despite her day- to- day struggle to deal with all the practicalities of the household, she is, however, excluded from the decision-making, since it is still the father who thinks and decides for the family. Moreover, rather ironically, Creon’s articulation of power proves a false claim; in the play, the father’s will does not in the event mould the family, since it is not he whom Haemon will follow but his fiancée. Even worse, if Creon is the maker of the future, then he is not a particularly effective one in this respect: his rigidity leads to the destruction of his very family, since it deprives him of his only remaining son; as a result, for his family, there is no future at all.

Given Creon’s views on women, excluded both from his conceptual space and from his language as they are, when his authority and sovereignty is challenged by one, the conflict inevitably becomes one between a man and a woman; even worse, a ‘girl’. For

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<sup>643</sup> Fairweather, McDonough and McFadyean (1984: 266).

Sophocles' Creon Antigone was a disobedient woman; becoming a 'girl' in Kennelly, a term he consistently uses to describe Antigone, an extra element of disparagement is added. As he wonders,

"A mere girl offers a King a double-insult.

How will a King endure it?

How will any man endure it?" (22)

As the play progresses, it becomes all the more evident that Creon is primarily threatened as a man, rather than as a King, challenged by what he describes as a "mere girl". One of the "linguistic disparities" that Lakoff, as quoted by Speer, detects in the representation of women in the language is that "women are more often referred to as 'girls', whatever their age, than men are as 'boys'".<sup>644</sup> This is indeed very close to Kennelly's experience and goes back to his childhood, since he recalls "eighty-year-old women saying 'I'm a lively girl'",<sup>645</sup> and enjoying being described as such. For Creon, however, the word 'girl' has purely negative connotations; he uses it as many as sixteen times, either to refer to Antigone ("this girl - how was she captured?" (20)), or to address her ("you, girl, staring at the earth" (?)). In his case, this is a carefully chosen word, a powerful tool in his hands - as words in Kennelly often are - with which he dismisses Antigone and Ismene as well, for being both women (whatever negative that implies) and immature, associated with emotion and infantile thinking. To Creon contemptuously referring to her as 'girl', Antigone

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<sup>644</sup> Speer (2005: 35).

<sup>645</sup> Kennelly - K. G. (2006).



responds by dismissing him as ‘man’, “thereby appropriating the sexist terminology and using it against him”.<sup>646</sup> Brown suggests that Antigone chooses to address Creon as ‘man’ “at her moment of pure rebellion. An uncompromising female spirit declares itself in radical opposition to Creon’s male authority”.<sup>647</sup> Antigone does not identify maleness with mature and rational thinking, however, but rather with greed for power and money:

“You know all about men,

You know all about power,

You know all about money.

But you know nothing of women.

What man

Knows anything of woman?

If he did

He would change from being a man

As men recognise a man.

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<sup>646</sup> Roche (2005: 153).

<sup>647</sup> Brown (1986: 53).

If I lived,

I could change all the men of the world.” (35)

Antigone’s final lament, which was virtually rewritten by Kennelly, since there is no Sophoclean element in it, becomes a high praise for women. “Feminist criticism has felt the need to emphasise how hard it is for men *really* to imagine what women experience”;<sup>648</sup> and Antigone is aware of this difficulty. She is confident about the qualities of her gender and convinced that it is out of ignorance on the part of men that they undervalue them; what only prevents her from teaching them is her shortage of time. Antigone in Sophocles might have been a young powerless woman fighting against a strong man. Her struggle, however, though intensified by the gender/ power divide, as she is not accidentally a woman, was not gender-based; she rather struggled for her right to offer a member of her family proper burial rites. Kennelly’s character, on the other hand, has a feminist consciousness, seeing herself as having the capacity to challenge and change *men*. Antigone proves right; in the play there is at least one male character that did get to know her: Haemon. Once Haemon enters the stage, Creon twice addresses him as “my son” (28-29); after the former expresses his doubts as to his father’s decisions, he is addressed as “a boy of his limited sense” (30); and as the dialogue progresses, he becomes a “sad little boy”, a “woman’s slave”, and eventually a “woman” (32). Kennelly, like Paulin in this instance, takes the Sophoclean gender discourse one step further; by approaching women so closely, his son in Creon’s eyes not only has been effeminised but has become a woman himself.

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<sup>648</sup> Williamson (2001: 2).

“You sad little boy, you woman’s slave,

Out of my way.

Go, be a woman

Since you understand the thing so well,

Be a woman like the woman

Whose brother was condemned to rot in public hell.” (32)

For Creon, embodying deeply patriarchal values, this process is utterly contemptible; probably as contemptible and shocking as when Francis Skeffington, a pacifist journalist and Joyce’s close friend, who died in the 1916 Easter rebellion, changed his surname to Sheehy Skeffington after his marriage with Hanna Sheehy, back in 1903.<sup>649</sup> Haemon, however, being consistent in his views and fearless in standing up for them, neither refutes his father’s comment as an exaggeration, nor apologises.

Interestingly, Haemon is not the only man whom Antigone has charmed in Kennelly’s play. The Chorus, rather ambivalent in its stance towards Antigone before she was sentenced to death, does take sides once she makes her final appearance. The Sophoclean Chorus was already emotional: “but now I myself am carried beyond the laws at this sight, and I can no

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<sup>649</sup> “As Frank once said when called upon to rein in his wife, he considered himself ‘merely the male member of the Sheehy Skeffington household’ - a far cry from the universally held notion of the husband as the head of the household and, in law, the owner of his wife”, Broderick (2002: 168).

longer restrain the stream of tears” (801-803), it says. Kennelly, on the other hand, has his Chorus go further than being “carried beyond the laws”; “All Kings I scorn, for Antigone I cry” (34), it says, expressing in a very pronounced way its disapproval of the King and his decision. It subsequently praises Antigone for her “fiery heart [that] would never let her tell a lie”; thus, both Haemon - who had suggested earlier that there are people who mutter in secret that Antigone was right - and Antigone, who soon accuses the Chorus of being “used to flattering men” (35), prove right. The Chorus also contrasts her with

“[...] other women

Who have to prowl among men

Or other women

For their little pleasures.” (34-35)

Again, Kennelly subtly but effectively moves away from Sophocles. Sophocles’ Chorus softens towards the end and allows itself to show sympathy for the imminent death of Oedipus’ daughter. Kennelly’s Chorus not only empathises with her, but he also takes a chance to praise her. The old men at this stage cry for the imminent loss of Antigone, distinguishing her for her integrity of character, her passion, her honesty, virtues that make her stand out from the rest of womankind. As the progression of the play shows, it is not only Haemon who came to understand her, but the other men in the city as well; only that, contrary to her young fiancé, the Chorus does not take sides in time but only decides to speak up when it is too late. In this respect the play also becomes the triumph of boyhood

over maturity. The Chorus' shift, though, might also prove that Antigone's courageous death was not for nothing; if what she wished was to change all the men of the world, she achieved it to a degree at the end. The Chorus, afraid up to that point to react - or finding it more convenient to remain silent - now does so, unafraid of Creon and of "all Kings" and the authority they stand for; and Antigone is the one to be credited with this change.

The Chorus' final words, before Tiresias is led in, are unexpectedly tender and kind, confirming the old men's sympathy and distress for the loss of a young girl; Antigone, previously praised for her character, is now praised as a 'daughter' who has so much to offer to a man.

"A daughter!

She is the light of life

The better part of man's blood

The transformation of crude manhood

Into a creature to be loved by men

She is the reason for his being

She opens him up to himself

Through her he may know himself

And know more deeply the proud pain of love. [..]

Buried alive

Victim of love

Victim of law

Daughter in the darkness

Blind to the world of men” (38)

This is for Antigone probably the ultimate vindication: not only because in a play where gender discourse is of primary importance from the very beginning, the winner at the end is unanimously the female, but also because the language of transformation hints at a hope of change in the future. Men eventually recognise how much they have to learn and gain from a young girl's light; instead of submissive followers and intruders in men's world, women can help men gain self-awareness, find meaning, orientation, joy and love in their lives. Far from seeing a young woman as the unknown 'other', Kennelly has his Chorus describe her as being inside a man, part of *his own* blood; in fact, its better part. The Chorus does not describe Antigone as 'girl', something that might sound as if it were reproducing Creon's dismissive discourse; instead it refers to her as many as three times as 'daughter', a word alluding to her young age but also connoting affection and tenderness.

Antigone's fate is also described by Kennelly through the use of implicit sexual imagery. Antigone, here, is not just entombed in a dark cave (which could also be seen as a metaphor for the female body), but in a "black hole among the rocks". Irigaray, a

year later, described the Sophoclean Antigone's punishment in the same terms as being "led along that *forgotten path* and there is *walled up* alive in a *hole* in the rock".<sup>650</sup> Creon condemns her to "live forever in that black hole, blacker than any midnight" (33), an image with sexual undertones, mentioned as many as fifteen times in Kennelly's play as such or with slight variations. But this vagina image introduced by Creon as a tacit speech act of humiliation can also be seen as a metaphor for the womb. Antigone, going to her death, joins those who are her own ("πορεύομαι πρὸς τοὺς ἐμαυτῆς", lines 892-893); not, however, the family that she created, but the family that she came from. Antigone in the play has to choose between the love for her brother and the love for her fiancé, whom she rejects when she chooses death rather than life with him. This is further illustrated in the well-known passage that follows shortly after, where she explains why she would never sacrifice her life for the sake of her children or her husband. Her ultimate choice becomes, therefore, one between making a family of her own, or returning to her parents and brothers. With the imagery of the "black hole among the rocks", where Kennelly's Antigone is entrapped and in which she finally dies, it is as if she ends her life by returning to the beginning, to the womb where she came from, a destiny that she accepts with courage ("I am a woman without fear/ In a hole in the rocks", 35). The black hole in this instance is not a source of life but will eventually become "the black hole of death" (46), not only for her, but also for her young fiancé. At the same time, this becomes Antigone's triumph: fearless as she walks to her death, the hole, which for Creon is an image/representation of subjugation, becomes for her an expression of defiance, her sex being no longer her political vulnerability, but her personal strength.

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<sup>650</sup> Irigaray (1985: 218).

Creon is not the only character in the Sophoclean play, however, who disapproves of and intimidates Antigone on account of her behaviour; so, earlier, did Ismene, who tried to discourage her sister from burying her brother not because she did not believe in the legitimacy of the action, but because she was too afraid to disobey the King's edict. In Sophocles, Ismene refuses to assist her sister, part of her reasoning being related to the weakness which she feels as a woman; in Kennelly, Ismene's inaction is purely and exclusively gender-related. In this version, it is not only the case that "injustice against women has rarely been voiced, even by women themselves";<sup>651</sup> worse than that, Ismene faithfully sustains and reproduces a male-centered mentality, in which women should have no voice. To Antigone's passion for action, she responds with discourse indicative of her gender-based sense of impotence: the two of them are "mere women" (9), the adjective 'mere' (that Creon also uses to describe them as "mere girls") serving to reinforce the voicelessness and powerlessness that their gender (necessarily) entails. As such, they cannot possibly contradict "Creon, strongest of men", whose "word is law" (9). Her repeated attempts to convince her sister of the impossibility of her ambition end with the simile "a woman against the State is a grain of sand against the sea" (10). Antigone soon realises that she is alone in what Ismene sees as a "hopeless task":

“Do it if you can. But you would

Try to do what no strong man

Can do. If a man can't do it

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<sup>651</sup> Foley (2003: 27).



How can a woman?" (11)

The third of the three female figures in the play is Eurydice, a mother who has recently lost one of her sons in the war and who, in the course of the play, hears that she has lost another. In a country ravaged in the past by famine, poverty and wars, it was the mother who nourished her children against all odds, who consoled them, who sent them to war, who suffered their loss; again we note that, in the Irish imagination, Ireland has often been associated with the figure of a mother, since, according to Bernadette Devlin, "people who have a long history of oppression tend to think of their community in terms of motherland".<sup>652</sup> The image of Mother Ireland has provoked ambivalent feelings in different women. Anne Crilly, in her film *Mother Ireland*, which was produced in 1988 but released in 1991, investigates this image, seeing it through the lens of some of the most influential women in Ireland. Devlin is the only one among them who feels comfortable with the association of the country with a mother figure, suggesting that she "would still see [herself] as a child of Mother Ireland".<sup>653</sup> Mairead Farrell, on the other hand, does not refer to her with the most flattering of words:

"it became a standard joke, "Mother Ireland, get off our back". It didn't reflect what we believed in and it doesn't reflect Ireland; maybe at one time people could relate to it but we move onwards, not backwards".<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>652</sup> Crilly (1988).

<sup>653</sup> Id.

<sup>654</sup> Id.

Pat Murphy describes it as “a very repressive image,” associating it with Virgin Mary and the Church “telling women what they should be like”.<sup>655</sup> Kennelly is critical too about the icon of Mother Ireland which he, much like Murphy, directly associates with the spiritual tyranny exercised by the Catholic Church. In his words,

“Spiritual tyranny is a subtle thing. The first thing to say about it is that it usually works. The people who defend it most vigorously are its victims. That is why the “Irish Mother” of song and story, the bearer of infinite children, the heroine of countless ballads, is the first person to come to the defense of the Church’s sexual policy which would use women mercilessly. [...] The Church’s exploitation of motherhood derives from its long use of the Mother of God, a most loving, patient, gentle, conscious and vigilant woman. So we have “Mother Ireland” just as we have “Mother Church” and even “Mother Machree”. Mother. Mother. Mother. Many Irish writers have tried to get to grips with the gentle tyranny of motherhood”.<sup>656</sup>

Kennelly is not unaffected, however, by the “gentle tyranny of motherhood”; in his play, he gives voice to a mother - the character who probably suffers most in the play, but who is given no space to express her distress and pain: Eurydice. Despite the gravity of her plight, Sophocles only gives Eurydice as many as nine lines in the play, in which we learn nothing about her before she goes off to put an end to her life. Eurydice thus is not there as a significant figure in her own right, but only serves to heighten her

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<sup>655</sup> Id.

<sup>656</sup> Kennelly (1985: 116).

husband's tragedy. Kennelly's Eurydice is accompanied onstage by an Attendant - a character which the poet invents and whose appearance is not an inevitable concomitant of her royal status; after all, King Creon always enters alone. The Attendant, whose gender is not specified but who should, presumably, be a woman, is there to give a portrait of Eurydice, to praise her blessed heart and her living beauty, also poetically referring to the impact that the "merciless words" had upon her. As the Attendant comments, Eurydice is there as "the only purpose of her life is to make a clear word doubly clear" (44-45). The grieving mother has a unique chance in this play to mourn for her dead sons and for the miseries of her life, Kennelly thus creating an emblematic figure out of the nine lines granted to the Sophoclean one. What is worth examining, though, is the effect of this extended appearance.

Kennelly's Eurydice may have more time on stage, but there is nothing more substantial which we discover about her. What emerges from her words, as well as from the Attendant's, is that she is "a most loving, patient, gentle, conscious and vigilant woman", as Kennelly described earlier the image of the Irish mother as exploited by the Church - and this is the pattern in which she fits perfectly. Except for speaking out and describing the death of her son as a 'murder', there is nothing new about Kennelly's Eurydice, except for the delivery of some repetitively melodramatic lines: "I heard everything you said, but my heart, my mind, my blood will not believe my son is dead. Dead! How can my son be dead?" (45). Mourning in itself, however, is not an articulation of a viewpoint, nor does it bring about any change; Eurydice, thus, subdued and helpless as she seems, lacks the passion and the dismissal of the norms that made Antigone so appealing to the poet. Instead, with the exception of the chance that she

takes to mourn in public - something more appropriate for men than for women - Kennelly's Eurydice further fits into the role that Irish society had carved out for her, since mourning and display of pain are usually associated with women. Even if Kennelly, therefore, offers us an insight into the Queen's plight that is not that acknowledged in Sophocles, and more space for her to mourn, his Eurydice is still a woman conforming to male ideals as much as Ismene is.

### **Conall Morrison's *Antigone***

Morrison's treatment of Eurydice recalls Kennelly's, in that the Queen is also given more time on stage than she had in Sophocles. Morrison's Eurydice sings her lament on stage accompanied by live music; in her excessively emotional ballad she recounts her anguish and woe, but addressing her own mother and recalling her miseries, she puts her plight into a different perspective: it is not her own distress she cries for, but rather the endless suffering of the mothers who are not the ones to decide to wage a war, but are always those who pay the price. Still, the difference from Kennelly is that, where Kennelly's enhancement of the role of Eurydice forms part of a larger conception of the role of the female both within the play and within the world, Morrison's seems to float free. Although Morrison does not give a feminist reading of the myth, in his text there is an allusion to the social norms that Eurydice, being a woman, has to follow; "I hope it simply means she wants to mourn in private, *which is as it should be*" [italics mine] (34), the Messenger says after Eurydice's departure.<sup>657</sup> This comment is revealing of the women's confinement inside their house and the double standards that apply for men

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<sup>657</sup> This comment is an unsuccessful one, though, since Morrison's Eurydice - contrary to Sophocles' - by singing her ballad, was already offered a chance to mourn in public.

and women, since, while for Creon it is legitimate to mourn in public when he loses his son and wife, for Eurydice it is expected that she only mourns in private.

Although gender is not the primary concern of most writers, this is a play which inevitably draws out issues of gender. Again, the boldest effects are to be found in the earlier period, when the play is responding visibly and strategically to its immediate socio-political context. All the writers not foregrounded here retain the elements of male-female conflict and unequal power ratio found in Sophocles, but there is less of a vibrant engagement with the world around them. For some modern critics (Goldhill, for instance, as we will see in the following chapter) pronounced topicality of the type found in some of these play is problematic. Certainly it comes with the risk of having a limited shelf-life; but the price may be worth paying.

## CHAPTER 5

### FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE:

#### SCENIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE IRISH *ANTIGONES*

The first four chapters of the thesis saw the examination of the translations of *Antigone* in Ireland both as texts in themselves and as mirrors of their writers' contemporary reality. A study of the route of the Sophoclean tragedy in Ireland in recent years would be incomplete, however, if the transfer of the scripts on stage was not touched on. Sophocles' *Antigone*, apart from the unique chance that it had to enjoy a whole new range of approaches by prominent Irish writers, was also scenically interpreted in a number of distinct ways; the result is a rich constellation of shows, staged in theatrical buildings of varying capacity and audiences, by directors invited to work on the play under different circumstances, coming from different theatrical traditions and having different views as to the existence of political allusions in their shows - issues that will keep resurfacing throughout the chapter. Before proceeding to the examination of the different scenic realisations of the translations in question here, we should first address some issues particular to the very nature of performances which have profound implications for their study.

Staging a play is the final, and most radical, 'translation' of a play; Hall describes the process of staging a translation as "a second and by no means less significant act of

translating - or traducing” (in our case, the third one, as the translations in question were based on previous literal translations), offering two reasons for this: first, “the psychological power of actorly mimesis” and, second, the number of people involved in the realisation in performance, since “the text is exposed to artillery from a whole battalion of human interpreters, rather than to single combat”.<sup>658</sup> It is not only a matter of interpreters, though; I would add that it is also a matter of available means. Both the original writer and the translator work with only one raw material: words. The director may radically alter the appreciation of the play by transferring it to a different theatrical tradition, with different perceptions of acting, theatrical space and relationship between audience and artefact. More than that, in an era of fast growing technology, apart from the actor’s body, he has continually evolving means at his disposal when it comes to visually interpreting the writer’s or his own ideas; projection of images, bright coloured lighting and technologically advanced set designs have been used, for instance, in the shows to be examined here. The staging, thus, is a more complex and fluid process compared to the writing; at the same time, a good translation may be subject to more than one realisation, multiplying the factors that result in huge numbers of different interpretations and evidently minimising the control that a writer has over the final product.

“However much one may try to control affairs at the typewriter”, Hadfield writes, “once the play is acted its meaning is extruded out of one’s reach along the fluid and numinous line that separates art from life”.<sup>659</sup> It might have been described as a quality

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<sup>658</sup> Hall (2004: 61).

<sup>659</sup> Hadfield (1984).

of a “good playwright of any period [to] leave enough flexible for the director and the actor to bring new interpretations and fresh emphases according to the mood and sensibilities of a new occasion”;<sup>660</sup> in practice, it is not always easy, however, for a dramatist not to worry about the scenic interpretation of a play that bears his name. Friel, for instance, comments on what he describes as the “big fear - that the piece isn’t going to be interpreted as you heard it in your head originally”, also recognising that “after a first production, [the particular actors] become the definitive sounds of the play”.<sup>661</sup> Campbell describes the tension between writer and director as a “kind of unnecessary conflict”, pointing out the former’s often unprivileged position: “it is difficult for a writer”, she suggests, “to let someone take their work and interpret it; and it is difficult for a writer to be in the rehearsal room. I think there has to be a balance, to come in and out is probably the best way. I say, as a writer, you have to say to yourself “I have to step back here, I can’t get too involved”, or “I can’t try and fix this, if I see something going wrong”.<sup>662</sup> In that sense, the way a director relates to the writer critically affects both the perception of the staging and the staging itself.

In the case of the productions in question, the relationship between translator and director differs from play to play, something that results in different degrees of cohesion between text and performance. To start with, Morrison and Donnellan were the directors but also the translators of the plays they staged; the image of their shows preceded their scripts. Morrison himself says that he writes “with a director’s heart. As I am writing”, he continues, “I am thinking of how to stage it, the actors, the technicalities, the

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<sup>660</sup> Walton (2002: 6).

<sup>661</sup> Radio Telefis Éireann (2003 [1983]: 179).

<sup>662</sup> Campbell - K. G. (2006).



imagery. I am very much bringing my directorial experience there”.<sup>663</sup> Scott may have not written the script himself, but he was the one to inspire a play about the myth of Antigone and, having a clear idea of what he wanted, commissioned Mathews to write it. Paulin and Rea worked on *The Riot Act* together, as members of a theatre company with set goals and perspectives; Rea, playing Creon, was also the one to direct it, after the director initially employed resigned, while Paulin - apart from translating the play - also inspired the set, as we will see, after the set designer resigned in sympathy with the director. Given the circumstances, it is to be expected that the above mentioned productions keep close to the spirit of the translations,<sup>664</sup> as well as to the concept and objectives of their writers, something that is not necessarily the case in the other three shows (Ó Briain, Pintal, Mason).

Kennelly and Heaney are reported to have been in the rehearsal room a couple of times, leaving very pleasant memories to the cast: recalling that period back in 1986, Anne Byrne reports that Kennelly “came in and out” and describes him as being “very affable, very warm and charming [...] and very encouraging and really delighted that [they] were doing this production”. She also praises his generosity: “if lines were causing difficulty” she says, “I remember he was open to changing things within reason, because obviously you don’t want a free-for-all thing that would bend it out of shape”.<sup>665</sup> According to Campbell, “Heaney came to the rehearsals a few times and he came to the first reading”.<sup>666</sup> McAnnally also recalls Heaney being there during the first stages of the

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<sup>663</sup> Morrison - K. G. (2006).

<sup>664</sup> In this respect they had much in common with the original authors, who in the Greek tragic theatre usually both wrote and directed.

<sup>665</sup> Byrne - K. G. (2006).

<sup>666</sup> Campbell - K. G. (2006).

rehearsal period of the 2008 production of the same play.<sup>667</sup> The fact that two poets visited the rehearsal room, however, does not mean that they impacted on the directors' concept of the staging, nor that they were always happy with the result.

### **Studying performances**

Studying a performance is not as straightforward as studying a script and drawing safe conclusions about it. To start with, unlike the printed text, a performance is characterised by ephemerality and contingency; “a performance always takes place here and now; it belongs only to the present. Unlike pictures, statues, and other objects, we cannot behold past performances in a museum”, Fischer-Lichte writes.<sup>668</sup> This means that, by default, a show is not accessible to a theatre-goer the way a novel is to a reader any time he wants to revisit it. The implications for the researcher are not negligible: if he is lucky enough to be able to watch the show once or twice, he needs to take good notes in the darkness of the stalls, while watching, and rely on them and on his - ever fading - memory to reconstruct as accurately as possible what he has seen. The second problem related to the study of a live performance is its contingency. Unlike the script that is always the same, a performance is not reproduced the same way every evening; a number of factors may interfere with one or more actors' performances, including previous bad reviews or empty seats at the stalls, the fatigue of the cast after, say, a matinee, the stress that they might experience during the first performances, serious social or political events that affect the psychology of the actors, technical problems, emergency or unpredictable events before or during the show, such as an illness or an

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<sup>667</sup> McAnally - K. G. (2008).

<sup>668</sup> Fischer-Lichte (2010: 31).

actor forgetting his words. “Staging”, Hardwick writes, “implies a live performance, a live audience. Each live performance is different and it is impossible to recapture it to allow the kind of analysis and debate about an established ‘text’ that is possible when discussing a poem or painting”.<sup>669</sup> Indeed, the audience also plays a very crucial role, giving a different flavour to the show night after night; Fischer-Lichte rightly insists on the interaction between actors and spectators, suggesting that “performances are not to be regarded solely as an artistic but always also as a social process”.<sup>670</sup> Ó Briain, in turn, sees the interaction as not only one between actor and spectator, but also among the spectators themselves:

“It’s not just the performance, it’s how people are behaving around you. It’s very interactive, *very interactive*. I mean if you go to a comedy and nobody in the audience laughs, then this will fix your judgment; but you are not reacting to the play, you are reacting to everybody around you. These are the things you can’t plan. That’s the magic of theatre. That’s the wonder of theatre. That’s why theatre will never be replaced by television or by cinema. Because it’s a changing experience. And people who work in it have to live with that and make that work”.<sup>671</sup>

The main problem that contingency poses for the researcher is that he draws his conclusions based on what is a random performance among a series of performances.

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<sup>669</sup> Hardwick (2003: 51).

<sup>670</sup> Fischer-Lichte (2010: 30).

<sup>671</sup> Ó Briain - K. G. (2006).

Though a video may address some of the problems of researching a performance during the performance itself, it is still vulnerable to the problem of contingency. More than that, apart from the fact that the evening of the recording is just one among a series of shows, it might not be the most representative one, since it is in the company's interests to keep in its archives a favourable version of the production;<sup>672</sup> thus, the evening a spectator chooses to watch a performance may be more random than the evening the theatre company chooses to record it.

A video recording of a particular staging - whenever there is an archived copy available - is a very useful tool, though it can never really approximate to the experience of watching the performance live. Its quality, in terms of sound and image, might also be one of the problems to be taken into consideration, as - unless it is of appropriate professional quality - it may distort the experience of the viewer. Further, the long distance from the stage to the camera which is eventually needed in order for the shooting to cover the whole of the action onstage, means that facial expressions, gestures, make up, even props of small size become difficult to discern. Martin notes the existence of more sophisticated archival recordings: videos shot with several cameras, or even edited versions reproduced on a split screen, that would make them more effective research material.<sup>673</sup> Those are rarely available, however, and the researcher

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<sup>672</sup> A theatre company might achieve this by choosing a day of the week in which the actors are expected to give their best, or warning them beforehand that they are going to be recorded, or even replacing a recording of, say, a not that successful evening with the recording of another evening that the outcome might be better. Of course there is no evidence to suggest that this is common practice among the theatre companies, nor that this is malpractice from their part; it is absolutely normal for a theatre company to want to keep in its records a good sample of its work as much as a researcher wants a good sample of his.

<sup>673</sup> The problems related to the video recording as a document are also dealt with in Martin and Sauter (1995: 110-111).

usually has to work with whatever material he has at his disposal. Among the seven shows to be examined here, there are available recordings for only four of them: Ó'Brian's (1986), Pintal's (2004) and Mason's (2008), all shot with one camera and retained in the Archives of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. There are also two different shootings of Morrison's *Antigone* (2003), one from a camera covering the whole stage and a second one with a mobile camera featuring close-ups; a copy of both recordings was generously offered by the Storytellers Theatre Company in digital form.

Apart from the video recordings, a number of other sources help reconstruct the experience of the performance, giving an idea of what the show looked like, what the main concept and objectives were, and how effective the production eventually was in terms of achieving them. The theatre programmes and the theatre posters function as the introduction of the show to the spectators. At the same time, they are a rich source of information: they “often include useful visual and printed evidence about design, production values, the approach taken by the director and translator”.<sup>674</sup> “Still photographs (sometimes posed for pre-performance publicity)”<sup>675</sup> kept as archival material, as in Scott's case, or included in the theatre programmes, are also of help for the researcher. Reviews and interviews are finally very useful tools, the disadvantages that they present - mainly related to issues of objectivity and neutrality - having already been discussed in the Introduction to the thesis.<sup>676</sup>

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<sup>674</sup> Hardwick (2003: 52-53); due to space restrictions, however, no study of the available theatre programmes and posters is attempted in this chapter.

<sup>675</sup> Ibid. 52.

<sup>676</sup> See also, Ibid. 53-4.

The varying availability of research material of the various stagings of *Antigone* here, both in terms of quality and of quantity, and the lack of sufficient data for some of them, means that some of the productions are inevitably better represented than others. Usually, the further back in time one goes, the more difficult research becomes; an important advantage of examining more recent productions, is the independence that the researcher enjoys, having at his disposal probably the most democratic and cost-free tool: the Internet. Factors other than time, however, play an equally crucial role in the availability of the data, such as the archive policy of a theatre company and the generosity of the people involved.

The seven stagings of *Antigone* to be studied here - rich in their diversity and their varying perspectives, as they are - range from highly stylised (Ó Briain) to ones with blurred boundaries between performance and lived reality (Mathews); from shows staged on a bare stage (Ó Briain, Donnellan) to shows (over)loaded with visual information (Pintal, Scott); from productions having a very specific and explicit political orientation (Morrison), to more subtly political ones (Mason). The directors also had different backgrounds and working experience at the time of staging: thus, while those working on the 1984 translations were relatively young and inexperienced at the time, three out of the four directors working on the later stagings were more mature and experienced, Pintal and Donnellan even having a successful international career behind them. All of the plays, commissioned as they were, were staged in the same year that they were written, except for Kennelly's, whose translation - written out of pleasure - was staged two years later, in 1986. Donnellan's play was performed at the London Old Vic, seating more than 1,000 people. Among the other shows staged in

Ireland, Heaney's 2004 *Burial at Thebes* was the only one to be staged in the spacious Abbey Theatre, accommodating more than 600 spectators, all the other shows being performed in smaller venues, whose capacity does not exceed in most cases 350 people.<sup>677</sup> Morrison's and Rea's shows were the only ones to tour around the country: the former, after the premiere in Galway, visited Bray, Cork and eventually Dublin. The latter was first performed at the Guildhall, in Derry, a nineteenth-century building meant for the assemblies of the members of the Derry City Council; the choice not of a purpose-built theatrical space for the staging of this particular play, but of the civic as well as the cultural centre of the city, is a political statement in itself. So is the choice of the towns in which the production subsequently toured: because Field Day Theatre Company wished to offer the chance to unprivileged portions of the population living in rural areas to enjoy a theatrical evening, *The Riot Act* was also performed in bigger and smaller venues around Ireland, North and South, destinations featuring Galway, Belfast, Newry, Enniskillen, Dublin, Cork, Coleraine, Limavady, Mullingar, Athlone, Limerick, in venues including small sized theatres and high school auditoria. The audiences, being no longer the conventional Dublin theatre-goers, differed not only in terms of quantity but in terms of composition as well.

The differences between the several directors, their backgrounds, their views and approaches about staging are inexhaustible, the above being just a tiny fragment of them. The result of the different choices that all the above entail is an interesting variety

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<sup>677</sup> Ó Briain and Mason staged Kennelly's *Antigone* (1986) and Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* (2008) respectively at the Peacock stage of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, seating 157 spectators; Scott staged Mathews' *Antigone* (1984) at the Project Arts Centre, seating up to 220; Morrison's *Antigone*, finally, was first staged at the Town Hall Theatre in Galway, seating around 430 people.

of shows that would call for a more thorough and extensive study, probably deserving a thesis in their own right. Due to the obvious restraints of space, however, a compromise is needed. So, this chapter is going to focus on the particular ways in which the directors ‘translate’ the script from page to stage as part of their overall reading of the play, and the extent (if any) to which they see their own *Antigone* as a specifically Greek tragedy as well - with the conventions and the special problems that it entails, as well as the extent to which the directors absorb within their productions their contemporary reality and recent world history, as the translators did before them. The examination of the stagings will start with each director’s choices as to the design of his set and costumes; then the role that he carves out for his Chorus - a substantial element of Greek tragedy, if an alien one to modern spectators; and, finally, the stage and action, that is, how the characters physically relate and interact with each other. All the above issues mean to shed light on the way each director ‘reads’ the particular version of *Antigone* he works on and to illuminate the main concept of his production.

## I. SET AND COSTUMES

“No chairs and no telephones”; this is in Claire Higgin’s words, as quoted by Goldhill, “the first and founding problem for an actor facing Greek tragedy”.<sup>678</sup> Greek tragedy is a verbal genre, where little - at least in physical terms - actually happens on stage, leaving it to the audience’s imagination to recreate the narrative. In a genre where the emphasis is on the word and the ritual, there is minimum need for props and sophisticated set designs. This is not always the case in modern stagings of Greek

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<sup>678</sup> Goldhill (2007: 82).



tragedy, though. In reality, there are a variety of different approaches to staging a Greek play, as the examination of the various shows of *Antigone* in Ireland indicates. Higgin's comment, for instance, taken absolutely literally, seems to lack validity, since, at least in three out of the seven productions in question, there is indeed at least one chair on stage, which the characters use in a number of different ways: to sit on, to leave a jacket on, to lean on in despair, to throw away in anger, to rock back and forth, even to sleep in, the most interesting use probably being Pintal's, as we will see later. "Once onstage in a particular context", Donahue comments, "a chair becomes more than an object on which to sit; its meaning transcends its utilitarian purposes".<sup>679</sup> The significance and use of set, props and costumes for dramatic purposes makes their study of utmost importance, since this very first image that the audience has of the show is profoundly revealing of the social and political (if any) orientation of the particular instantiation and the themes identified by the director for exploration. The examination of the set and costume design here will be done along three different axes: in terms of the ways that it relates to the Sophoclean text (and the conventions that it entails as a Greek tragedy), the ways that it relates to the translated script (since there are different degrees and ways to which the design of the show relates with the content, the spirit and the concept of the text or works outside it) and the ways that it relates to the director's contemporary world.

Most of the directors examined here stage their *Antigone* as a modern late twentieth or early twenty-first century play, offering - to a different extent each - a contemporary political reading. It is only Ó Briain and Donnellan who declare at the level of set design the status of the text as translation, thus trying - again, to a certain degree - to

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<sup>679</sup> Donahue (1993: 83).

operate within the (reconstructed) theatrical tradition of Greek tragedy. This significantly affects first and foremost the theatrical space that they create, as the first - and immediately obvious - difference between the Athenian stage and the modern one is the theatrical space itself. The two directors make special arrangements in the stalls of the theatre, in order to give the stage an amphitheatric effect: Ó Briain stages Kennelly's *Antigone* in the round, having the audience watch the show from three out of four sides.<sup>680</sup> Donnellan creates a "special thrust-stage [...] built out into the stalls, with seating behind it, so that the audience completely surrounds the action".<sup>681</sup> What makes it 'Greek' is that it replicates the performance and viewing space of the Theatre of Dionysus (and indeed the pattern of the ancient Greek *theatron* more generally) with a 'wrap-around' auditorium. This does not mean however that they can effectively recreate the atmosphere of a theatre in antiquity; "for a modern company to try somehow to reproduce the shape or design of ancient theatre would be a fool's errand" Goldhill writes, suggesting that "the conditions of antiquity are lost to us".<sup>682</sup> The impossibility of the venture, however, is also related to the different conditions and environment of staging. Apart from the obvious differences between the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century audiences, their backgrounds, their expectations, their needs, there is still a crucial difference between modern and ancient theatrical space that goes beyond the shape of the stage, what Revermann describes as "the first fundamental feature of Greek theatrical space: it is an open air, daytime, environmental theatre with

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<sup>680</sup> Rush (1986), Finegan (1986), Hingerty (1986).

<sup>681</sup> Taylor (1999); see also Billington (1999), Spencer (1999) and Nightingale (1999). A number of seats meant for the audience on either side of the stage exist in Scott's show, too. In this case, though, the seating has nothing to do with keeping the conventions of Greek drama, in a play that abandons all conventions whatsoever, the existence of members of the audience just a breath away from the actors being rather associated with the play's meta-theatricality and the writer's attempt to break the boundaries between stalls and stage, as we have seen earlier in the thesis.

<sup>682</sup> Goldhill (2007: 11).

no artificial lighting”.<sup>683</sup> Whether on an amphitheatric stage or trying to “minimize the dire effects of trying to force a round play into a square box”,<sup>684</sup> reviving the atmosphere of an open-air theatre in a closed space at night seems a hopeless task. Reproducing the stage design of antiquity is not an end in itself, however, and it does not seem to be the objective of the two directors, either. The formality of the staging is rather part of a wider concept of the play; Ó Briain and Donnellan, who share a similar aversion to overt topicality, as we saw in Chapter Two, avoid contemporary political undertones - popular among all the other directors - for the sake of a cerebral show that retains a balance between two, equally valid, opposing principles, as represented by Creon and Antigone. It should be noted, however, that - as Ó Briain recalls<sup>685</sup> - the fifth symphony of Soviet composer Dmitry Shostakovich, himself a victim of Stalin, was playing before the production. The director comments that this does not mean “equating Antigone with Shostakovich or Creon with Stalin”; still, Ó Briain in choosing a particular symphony, written after an autocratic regime had imprisoned and killed members of the composer’s family and personal friends of his, adds a reference that - although very subtle and probably unnoticed by most spectators - subtly invites, while not imposing, a contemporary political reading.

The stage design is also part of this attempted reconstruction of the Greek setting. Both directors have their actors move on a bare stage, reflecting a perception of Greek tragedy as a genre in which “the playing space constitutes a blank to be filled by the character/ actor, who by his or her presence and movement creates space and begins to

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<sup>683</sup> Revermann (2006: 111).

<sup>684</sup> Goldhill (2007: 11).

<sup>685</sup> Ó Briain - K. G. (2006).

outline the dramatic space of the play”.<sup>686</sup> In the shows there are no props either; in the first place, this keeps with the conventions of Greek tragedy, a genre in which “there are no props - in the sense of emotional supports or physical objects to busy the body with”.<sup>687</sup> Also, in the cerebral productions that Ó Briain and Donnellan envisage, props, as much as sophisticated set designs, may be seen as distractions. Both directors also opt for warm colours for their set and costumes: Donnellan uses wood for his set, having “a stage of plain, shiny wood flanked by two small, shiny wooden walls”;<sup>688</sup> Ó Briain features at the back of the stage terracotta pillared walls [that] suggest the heat of Greece, the palace”,<sup>689</sup> the style being “shaped by Cretan sources for the set and costumes, [including] two Knossos style pillars”.<sup>690</sup>

Ó Briain’s staging is the only one among the productions in question that has a - vaguely but distinctly - Greek design, evident in the costumes as well. Thus, the one man Chorus is dressed in a toga, Creon in a tunic and the two girls in elegant, loose, long dresses and hats - an allusion to their royal descent - a means to point out that “this debate does not involve the common people, but those who are at the centre of power”.<sup>691</sup> He also uses gold makeup, as a modern equivalent for a mask, “not mask as such, but gold make up to make the faces mask-like without the mask”.<sup>692</sup> Although it may not have been immediately obvious to the audiences, by opting for a stylised production in a Greek setting, the director does not mean to present a play devoid of

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<sup>686</sup> Donahue (1993: 81).

<sup>687</sup> Goldhill (2007: 82).

<sup>688</sup> Nightingale (1999).

<sup>689</sup> Hingerty (1986).

<sup>690</sup> Ó Briain - K. G. (2006).

<sup>691</sup> Id.

<sup>692</sup> Id.

political references; instead, he wanted to encourage the spectators to make connections for themselves, rather than explicitly update the play to make it an overt and specific statement about the contemporary society, thus imposing on them his own topical reading; to leave it to the audience to select the application (actual or potential) for itself rather than to have its attention directed to a specific chronological, geographical and political context. “I wanted a cerebral, not an emotional production”, says Ó Briain, a choice that affected “the style of acting, the design and the atmosphere [which] had that coarseness”, also commenting on “the disappointment for those who wanted an emotional experience”.<sup>693</sup> Donnellan’s show, on the other hand, seems to have a combination of Greek and 20<sup>th</sup> century references. Unfortunately, due to insufficient data we cannot reach a safe conclusion as to the extent that this works on stage. According to one of the few accounts that we have of this show, the performers wear “loose, vaguely modern clothes: an embroidered tunic beneath Creon’s golden robe, khaki cartridge cases for the comically harried soldier who brings him ill tidings, black knickerbockers for the Theban elders”.<sup>694</sup> Although the costumes have an oriental touch (especially when it comes to Creon’s), they remain vague in terms of historical time and place.

In the rest of the productions, in marked contrast with Ó Briain and Donnellan, the stage design is usually more complicated, often overwhelmed with images and other references. Shades of grey and other cold colours have replaced the golden and brown hues, concrete and metal the wood and terracotta. Concrete, a cold material in itself with

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<sup>693</sup> Ó Briain - K. G. (2006).

<sup>694</sup> Nightingale (1999).

its own modern associations, seems to be dominant in almost all productions: the plot in Pintal's *Burial at Thebes* unfolds in a sophisticated stage surrounded by concrete that looks rather Stalinist and brutalistic; Mason features a concrete wall at the back of the stage with pinned pictures of war dead and a heap of rubble and debris against it, while several of the projected pictures in Morrison's production feature concrete walls, demolished, destroyed and marred by bullet holes - witnesses of the horror that has preceded. Scott, more radical in his use of concrete, uses a large amount of it to cover the whole stage area, creating a post-apocalyptic set, as we will see. Rea does not feature concrete as a material onstage; still, his *Riot Act* is played out by actors dressed "in discreetly graduated shades of grey",<sup>695</sup> "on a cool grey sloping stage surrounded on three sides by a muslin scrim" featuring "faint geometrical outlines of the seven arches of Thebes. [...] The landscape of remote, stony paths, boulders and vultures is grittily evoked and, what is more", Coveney comments, "you believe these people inhabit it".<sup>696</sup>

Apart from the set in the literal sense of the physical stage space on which the actors move, what is also of importance is the set in the complementary sense of the time and place in which the plot unfolds. The first and easier conclusion that is inferred here is that, while most translators retain the city of Thebes as the explicit location of the play, as reflected in the use of names, the directors almost invariably choose either an abstract set for their production or transfer the plot in visual terms to another time and place. In three of the seven shows, the set is not culturally specific; there are some spatial or

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<sup>695</sup> Coveney (1984).

<sup>696</sup> Id.

temporal references in terms of set design, costumes and music, but their vagueness or inconsistency leads up to a timeless production. As “timeless”, Goldhill describes “just such an artful mix of costumes, sets, and props with specific connotations, a jumbled historicity which aims to prevent a close connection with any particular period and thus to proclaim its generality”.<sup>697</sup> Scott’s and Pinal’s shows, with twenty years separating them and despite the significant differences in terms of concept and effect, are both examples of timeless productions in this sense.

#### **Michael Scott’s staging of Mathews’ *Antigone* (1984)**

Scott’s show is far removed from mythic Thebes; its plot unfolds in a vague twentieth-century set, one of the marked characteristics of this staging being the blurred boundaries between past and present. If in conventional theatre “the time of the story extends almost always into the past beyond the point zero signaled by the opening scene”,<sup>698</sup> in Mathews’ play the plot unfolds in the present, the audience witnessing the point zero, too. According to Scott’s account,<sup>699</sup> shortly before the beginning of the show and after the audience had taken their seats, there was a very loud noise of a bomb that literally shook the place. The results are immediately evident: when the lights come up a post-nuclear set is revealed, full of debris and dust alluding to “huge war and destruction”. Scott remembers that along with set designers Brian Power and Barbara Bradshaw, they set out to “completely create an exploded and destroyed city and for that we took, I think, 9-10 tons of concrete and we built a concrete set literally like a landscape, like a volcanic exploded landscape with solid concrete, [...] one where the

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<sup>697</sup> Goldhill (2007: 129).

<sup>698</sup> Donahue (1993: 101).

<sup>699</sup> All details in this paragraph are based solely on Scott’s personal interview.

actors had difficulty even moving on”.<sup>700</sup> The image of destruction is reinforced with the immobilised car on the right of the stage and a stagnant river among the concrete in the centre. The director suggests that the set was inspired by images from a huge collection of photographs that he had been gathering for years; pictures of bombarded Dresden after World War II proved particularly influential as a starting point for this *Antigone*, especially one with “a woman with a shopping bag trying to go through the debris, a tiny spec in this huge industrial landscape”.<sup>701</sup> However, although the time-location is unambiguously twentieth century, the set is imprecise as to its exact geographical location; Scott noted several times in his interview that this could be any place in the world destroyed by war. He had just returned from the Continent, after a prolonged stay, and his production is the only one among the three early shows to have an international outlook.

The post-apocalyptic set does not evidently reflect any recent or remote Irish experiences. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing Irish about it; on the contrary there are several references in the staging that allude to Irish contemporary society and literature. “By putting the Criminal Justice Bill and the pope mobile - icons of Irish society - I tried to reinvent a language for it to speak to the people in 1984”,<sup>702</sup> Scott comments. He also creates “a visual language echoing the literature of Ireland”,<sup>703</sup> Beckett in particular: apart from Creon recording himself, as we saw in Chapter Two, a scene strongly recalling *Krapp’s Last Tape*, at the right of the stage there is a bare,

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<sup>700</sup> Scott - K. G. (2006).

<sup>701</sup> Id.

<sup>702</sup> Id.

<sup>703</sup> Id.



disfigured tree with a rocking chair underneath; it is the tree where, Scott notes, “everyone waits for Godot” and a rocking chair - also alluding to *Rockaby* - where “sitting, going backward and forward, nothing changes”,<sup>704</sup> the Chorus also, that will be examined in more detail soon, could be - according to Scott - one of the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>705</sup> Such allusions link the production with the Irish literary past; they are “images”, the director says, that “pulled other plays and created references in the production, so that the production existed within the context of Irish literature”.<sup>706</sup>

In its remoteness from Thebes the set reflects both the script and the show. However, there is in both a reference to Thebes, which bridges the gap between the production and the Greek literary past. Mathews’ *Antigone* refers once to the “House of Thebes”,<sup>707</sup> while Scott plays with the symbolic idea of Thebes as a ship in Creon’s entrance speech; in the latter case, Scott recalls that in the stagnant river there was a little toy boat, named after the city; it is as if, he explains, Oedipus’ sons and daughters “played with the idea of State as children”.<sup>708</sup> A beggar woman who appears early in the play, the narrative again based solely on Scott’s account, tried to sail the boat - Thebes in the river, but the boat sank; Creon tried to fix it later on but realised that he could not.<sup>709</sup> Although it is questionable how much of this detail is visible to the spectators, if the

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<sup>704</sup> Id.

<sup>705</sup> Id.

<sup>706</sup> Id.

<sup>707</sup> “Once upon a time.. in Paris, 1631, winter of.. I remember an amateur run-through of the whole piece.. That was the last time I understood my part.. I brought the house down. The whole House of Thebes” (11).

<sup>708</sup> Scott - K. G. (2006).

<sup>709</sup> The problem with the sources is again apparent here; the only evidence that we have about Scott’s conceptualisation of the scene comes from Scott’s account based on his recollections twenty two years after the show that the interview was taken. The script has not been updated to include such details and a video recording that would shed more light is not available.

director's recollections are precise, Scott finds an effective way of inserting Thebes into his narrative.

This is the set in which *Antigone* (re-) emerges: a place not only devastated by war (as the Sophoclean Thebes is) but leveled by a bomb attack; neither Irish, nor Greek but alluding to both, thus properly serving the main idea of the play: *Antigone*, as in all the other appearances - widely scattered in time and place - that she makes, emerges here once again just after the world around is collapsing, a survivor from a holocaust. Among the ruins, visualised by the debris and the burnt out car, there are toys and items of value dispersed in the stagnant river<sup>710</sup> - like a silver teapot - reminiscent of a luxurious past, useless by now but still there; even the characters' torn and out of shape clothes, are indicative of former wealth and good taste.<sup>711</sup> Scott's set, with its postmodern design, "virtually reeks with the presence of the past, and it often pastes together a collage of stylistic imitations that function not as style but as semiotic code".<sup>712</sup> The props themselves also have a history of their own: "every single thing that was in the production of *Antigone* had a history somewhere, either of its own or from other works I had done. I wanted every single object to be like a sacred, precious thing that had its own story and brought those stories consciously or unconsciously to the production. So that if you picked up a spade, it was in fact my own childhood spade that

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<sup>710</sup> A beggar woman at the beginning of the play, according to Scott, was looking for something precious among the debris, picking objects from the river and throwing them back, children's toys that also alluded to the innocence of childhood that is by now lost.

<sup>711</sup> The costumes chosen are also indicative of the characters' characters: *Antigone* is dressed in a discreet, beige coloured with peacock patterns knee-high dress, that Scott describes as "very summery kind of girly dress but old-fashioned, like the forties" and wears a pearl necklace; *Ismene* on the other hand wears a more vividly coloured red dress. Her impressive blonde hair, along with her flashy garment make her look more of a woman than *Antigone* does. *Creon*, finally, wears an old leather jacket and torn clothes, as much as the *Chorus*' are as well.

<sup>712</sup> Aronson (2005: 18).

I had found in my own house. Everything in the production came from somewhere and had a history of some kind". Past and present are linked, the post-modern idea of constantly layering every piece of the show with images going back to Scott's training as a director in France.<sup>713</sup>

This collage of images and references - that make the past appear as always present in various ways in Scott's *Antigone* - does not result in a visually pleasant, coherent whole; on the contrary there is a calculated dissonance and awkwardness on a stage featuring graffiti and silver teapots, a burnt out car and pearls, tons of concrete and a toy spade; where there are characters choking on stage, delousing themselves, swearing, telling the audience off. There is no beauty, in the conventional use of the term, but "a seemingly vulgar and alienating collage of styles, periods, and references - a very conscious lack of unity among the visual elements of a production. It is this intentionally radical disruption of pleasing aesthetic synergy that is a cornerstone of postmodern design".<sup>714</sup>

We should point out, however, that Scott in this instance does not work outside the play: on the contrary, his staging perfectly serves Mathews' script, one in which the characters' utterances express violence and crudity, not beauty; further than that, this is a play where the past is always there, whether in the form of objects - souvenirs of Polynices (a magazine with a dedication, a photo, a battery razor with his hair in it), or

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<sup>713</sup> As Scott recalls, "a lot of the work that I had done in the Project was a result of the work and the training I had received while working in Paris and I was very interested and still am effectively that I use the same costumes and elements of the same set for maybe ten or fifteen productions so that the same jacket was an icon in one production moved into another production took over a kind of a new role. So the jacket that I used for Creon was the jacket that I used for a character in *Bent*. It was an old, worn jacket from the 1940s that I found and you can only buy that sort of stuff in Europe. A lot of these items were reminiscent from when I lived in Paris [...] stolen icons from other places".

<sup>714</sup> Aronson (2005: 17-18).

in the form of references to previous *Antigone* productions that span time and place. This congruity with the conception of the play is less certainly the case in Pintal's 2004 production of the *Burial at Thebes*, which has frequently been accused by a number of theatre practitioners of not properly serving Heaney's text.

### **Lorraine Pintal's staging of Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* (2004)**

Pintal also opts for a contemporary set, based, as was pointed out earlier, on concrete and metal, imprecise again as to where the plot unfolds. The set, designed by Carl Fillion, features two separate, bare acting spaces, with a gap in between: a rectangular stage in the foreground and a square platform at the back surrounded by tall, concrete walls. A large, metal staircase featured against the wall at the back, two movable bridges on either side of the platform, lighting of different hues and intensity and a panel removed halfway through the play completed Pintal's suggestive, modernist setting. "In the modern *mise-en-scene* [...] the stage was not illusionistic - it was identified as a stage for acting, not some other place such as a room, a forest, and so on. If identity of space was required, it was to be established through dialogue, action, reference, or through suggestive rather than explicit scenery. Scenery consisted of platforms, ramps, steps, screens, walls and curtains",<sup>715</sup> the stage design having some marked affinities with Athenian theatre.

The vagueness of the set in terms of its sociotemporal framework matches that of the costumes, Pintal opting for a combination of both contemporary and international looks.

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<sup>715</sup> Aronson (2005: 16-17).

As to the former kind, Hemon wears a casual, dark brown leather coat with a black T-shirt and black jeans, since he was meant to look like a “young, student-type revolutionary man”, his look described by Cleary as “simplified” and “not as contrived as the others”;<sup>716</sup> Antigone, appears in a neutral black knee-high garment and a black coat “with flashy red lining in her coat [...] red being symbolic in this production”, as well as a red scarf; Ismene’s dress is chocolate brown, a neutral colour, since “if there was more red it would indicate more drama attached to her”. Eurydice, finally, in her first appearance (an invention of Pintal) by the side of strong King Creon, wears an elegant dark red (old rose hue) dress, a “classic fashion of no particular time or country [...] [of] a symbolic colour to use in drama that looks so dramatic on stage [...] and highlights people”.<sup>717</sup> As to the latter kind of costumes, “Creon was costumed and played as a white-uniformed, red-sashed Latin American-style dictator amidst a brutalist set design that gave little sense of the House of Thebes”,<sup>718</sup> in the scene of Antigone’s lament, at the peak of his power, he also wears a white military dress coat to accentuate his power as an authority figure. Eurydice wears a garment “like a kimono that, [...] within the context of the set, it looks like she was at home; it could be a night gown but it still has the elegance of a Queen about it”. Tiresias, finally, was meant to look like “a wise old man from China or from India, or from Africa - Chinese Emperor’s robes, being classic and also contemporary”. As Cleary remembers, “Pintal had a very strong

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<sup>716</sup> All the costume descriptions in this paragraph come from Joan Cleary [Cleary - K.G. (2006)], costume designer in Pintal’s show, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>717</sup> Cleary - K. G. (2006).

<sup>718</sup> Hardwick (2006: 213).

idea of what she wanted”, opting for references immediately recognisable by the audiences that drew “on archetypes of certain looks”.<sup>719</sup>

Goldhill would perhaps describe Pintal’s attempt “to be timeless and to refer to the modern age”, as wanting “to have its cake and eat it”.<sup>720</sup> In principle, I would not suggest that creating a timeless area and referring to modern age are necessarily mutually exclusive, the idealisation of timelessness probably resting on the traditional notion of the classic and the Classics as somehow timeless and universal; contemporary reference need not impede and can underline continuing relevance. The drawback rather seems to me to be that such a combination betrays a reluctance to make a specific choice as to the framework of a production, something that may in practice leave the show staggering in uncertainty and lack of focus - unless addressed in a very effective way. The more crowded with references the show is, the more distracting it may turn out to be; the more incoherent or inconsistent the contemporary elements themselves are, the more they may add to the audience’s confusion. This is indeed one of the serious problems with Pintal’s production; overwhelmed with references of different sorts, the vagueness of its setting and context “contribute to a sense of a dramatic vacuum”.<sup>721</sup>

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<sup>719</sup> As Cleary [Cleary - K. G. (2006)] suggests, Pintal wanted it to be immediately clear to the audiences that “this is a soldier, this is a General, this is a General’s wife, this is a rebellious student; to draw on this kind of images from all over the world and then simplify it down to the most basic”.

<sup>720</sup> Goldhill (2007: 130) employs these terms to refer to Mitchell’s *Oresteia*.

<sup>721</sup> Meaney (2004).

The production is not explicitly politically oriented; the claustrophobic, Stalinist set, however itself seems to carry implicit allusions to a totalitarian regime, Creon's appearance reinforcing this impression. Cleary explains Pintal's choice to have him dressed like a Latin American dictator in the following words: "we know instantly in our kind of collective conscience that a Southern American dictator is a baddy, is somebody with ruthless morals, so you are subconsciously drawing on that image to tell you, here comes danger".<sup>722</sup> By visually depicting a character so explicitly as a "baddy", however, Pintal already and overtly takes sides in favour of Antigone, something that differentiates her staging from both Sophocles and Heaney.

### **Stephen Rea's staging of Paulin's *The Riot Act***

In contrast with Pintal's vaguely set show, Rea's staging of Paulin's *The Riot Act* had a distinct Belfast flavour, intending to recall the audience's immediate reality. Hadfield regards the "ambience of spare gloom" as "a prerequisite for Belfast tragedy",<sup>723</sup> while Billington comments that "the cast of nine wear grayish street clothes of the kind you might see around modern Belfast".<sup>724</sup> The Northern Irish idiom of Paulin's script was played out in a Northern Irish set, inspired by Paulin himself: halfway through the rehearsals, the director initially employed resigned and subsequently the set designer resigned in sympathy with him,<sup>725</sup> so a new set was urgently needed. As Paulin recalls,

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<sup>722</sup> Cleary - K. G. (2006).

<sup>723</sup> Hadfield (1984).

<sup>724</sup> Billington (1984).

<sup>725</sup> Paulin (2002: 167 -168).

“the next morning, I woke at five, got out of bed and walked through the silent city. I looked up at the Victorian gothic Guildhall - no joy there. Then something led me down a street I didn’t know - Great James’ street - and I found myself in front of a disused Presbyterian church. It was a perfect, neo-classical meeting house, which represented more than a daylight god. When the new designer, Brien Vehey, arrived, I took him to the church, and then later we got hold of a book of Jefferson’s architectural drawings and a new Enlightenment set emerged”.<sup>726</sup>

Thus arose the “triangles, Masonic symbols, neo-classical architrave” (9) that Paulin refers to in his stage directions at the opening of his script. Goldhill, referring to the Irishness of the setting and the language of *The Riot Act*, concludes that: “this all encourages the connection with the here and now without an explicit parallelism. This suggestiveness can be handled with real subtlety”.<sup>727</sup> I would suggest, however, that in a show where the set is inspired by a particular building in the city of Belfast; where the costumes allude to everyday clothing in the same city; where - apart from the numerous Northern Irish idioms and echoes of contemporary Irish and British politicians - the actors were speaking in Northern Irish accents, the parallelism is not as implicit as Goldhill suggests. The play, written and staged in a Northern Ireland still racked by civil and political conflict, with Antigone clearly in the right and Creon clearly in the wrong, was not open to multiple interpretations; the connections with the immediate reality were far from subtle, and it was not in the company’s intentions to be subtle,

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<sup>726</sup> Paulin (2002: 168); Paulin also reports that he disliked the initial set that he found “too ethnic irish [...] - three whitewashed walls splashed with red paint, a bit like a courtyard after a shoot-out in a spaghetti western” Ibid. 167.

<sup>727</sup> Goldhill (2007: 140).



anyway. In exactly the opposite direction from Ó Briain, Rea comments that: “we very deliberately said the people that this isn’t just a Greek classic play that means anything you think it means; it means *this*. So, of course that we did it in the North perhaps it wouldn’t be seen to have a range of meanings”.<sup>728</sup>

### **Conall Morrison’s staging of his *Antigone* (2003)**

If Paulin in his, explicitly politicised, play keeps Thebes only at a superficial level as the place where the plot unfolds - although he refers to it in his script significantly less frequently than Sophocles did - in Morrison’s version, there is no reference at all to the city of Thebes. The translator/ director has completely extracted the play from its original context. Here, as in Scott, the plot unfolds in a set evoking war and destruction, as the burnt out car and the sequence of projected pictures of war, pain and death suggest. The political circumstances at the opening of this production in 2003 gave new dimensions to the location of the conflict; incidentally, on the night of the premiere the crowds were marching outside the theatre against the war in Iraq which was just about to start; as Robert O’Mahoney remembers,

“the timing was amazing because we opened the *Antigone* just after the Iraq war; so in a way it became less of Palestine and Israeli and more about Bush and the war. It was extraordinary because there were people holding banners in the streets with lines from the play like “you must listen Bush”, “you must listen Blair”.

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<sup>728</sup> Rea - K. G. (2006).

This is a line from the play “you must listen Creon” and therefore it became very popular”.<sup>729</sup>

Much like Rea, Morrison, as we saw in Chapter Two, defends his choice to have a very specific framework for his *Antigone*; there seems to be a very crucial difference, however, between the two in terms of their intentions. Rea - a politically minded actor - directed a play written by Paulin - a politically minded writer - as part of a politically oriented theatre company. Rea proposed a particular political reading of the play and opted for a cerebral production that would incite the audience to think. Morrison, on the other hand, seems more concerned to update the production in order to make it more easily ‘digestible’ by its audiences. In his interview, he points out that Greek drama is “for hard-core theatergoers”, and that “people think that [the Greek plays] are not accessible enough, probably dull”. Goldhill does not see in a favourable light the attempts to update a play for the sake of making it more engaging for the audiences - whether in terms of translation or of staging; as he writes,

“the belief here is clear: it is through contemporary references that an audience can be engaged in ancient tragedy. As for so many poorly thought-out government educational policies, for the education department of the National Theatre, it would seem, history is alienating, and only the contemporary is relevant”.<sup>730</sup>

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<sup>729</sup> O’Mahoney - K.G. (2006).

<sup>730</sup> Goldhill (2007: 130).

Goldhill here seems to be missing an important point; the past is only ever perceived through the present, as there is no such thing as pure history. The modern productions which use anachronism to create a link with the audience are actually following Sophocles (and Greek tragedy more generally), who introduces features alien to the heroic world inherited from epic. What Goldhill seems to be particularly critical of here, however, is updating the play for the sake of making it more digestible for the audiences. The objection is valid to the extent that if theatre deals solely with what is contemporary, it risks becoming no more than a product of contemporary culture on a par with the soap opera. Of course, the issues dealt with here are not as mundane as in soap operas - but a production dominated by contemporary associations risks being undemanding, 'spoon feeding' instead of challenging the audiences, and this may occasionally be the case in Morrison's staging. It may be significant that the director returns a couple of times in his interview to the importance of emotion in the play, associating it with the degree to which the play is engaging for the audience.<sup>731</sup> This may account for the fact that he loads his show with heartbreaking images of casualties and has Eurydice sing an emotional ballad, both gestures which call for an emotional response. Of course, one of the top priorities for a director in live theatre is the creation of a show that does not have the audience "switch off"; the question is how he achieves it, as there is always the danger of a reductive staging which will limit the play, resulting in a loss of the subtleties and complexities of the original.

### **Patrick Mason's staging of Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* (2008)**

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<sup>731</sup> O'Mahoney [O'Mahoney - K.G. (2006)] also points out that Greek drama is not always very popular with Irish audiences, something that he attributes to the fact that serious drama without an interval is too much; "the Irish like the drink and the interval", he asserts.

Making specific choices about the design of a production, avoiding at the same time the parochial and the easy connections with modern day reality and producing on top of everything an engaging show is a combination of qualities definitely not easy for a director to achieve. The most effective show in this respect seems to be Mason's *Burial at Thebes*. In Mason's production the costumes and the set allude to modern Greece of the 1940s, a time when the country was tormented by a civil war after the destructive World War II. This choice seems a well calculated one: "set in the period of the Greek civil war in the aftermath of the second World War, the emotional and psychological situation leads people to do things, extreme things that otherwise they might not do",<sup>732</sup> Mason says; at the same time he avoids the simplistic associations that would probably be made should the show allude to the Northern Irish conflict, without at the same time being too remote from the audience's experience. As he puts it,

"What I wanted was a recognition; if you do it in togas and classical dress, you don't know who anyone is, you don't know the story, you can't see the character because it's just someone in a toga. [...] All the associations were possible if we had a 20<sup>th</sup> century setting but not too close; if it's too close, it gets too literal. So my calculation was, my instinct was, that if you put it there, it could be both an emblem but also enough of a real world to engage us with the characters".<sup>733</sup>

By placing the play in a modern Greek context, Mason also addresses another problem, although of minor importance: the name of the city of Thebes is mentioned several

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<sup>732</sup> Mason - K. G. (2008).

<sup>733</sup> Id.

times in Heaney's translation (in fact more times than in Sophocles); the name heard in the script does not sound awkward in the context of the show - Thebes is indeed a city in modern Greece that went through the evils of a civil war in the twentieth century, too.

Mason's show is the only one that harmoniously combines warm and cold colours, concrete and wood, the director providing a very powerful - albeit subtle - political reading of the play. On the concrete wall at the back, as mentioned earlier, there are black and white pictures of war dead and against it, on the left, debris and rubble. On the front left of the stage, there is a monument dedicated to the war dead - grey again. In marked contrast, on the right of the stage there is a shiny wooden table around which the Chorus sits, Members of a Cabinet as they are in this show. This co-existence of two different worlds and the political implications of the Chorus will, however, be examined in detail shortly after.

## II. THE CHORUS

The Chorus, "the essential and original nucleus of the performance",<sup>734</sup> is an integral part of Greek tragedy - institutionalised in its role and function - its existence dating back to the origins of the genre: "Greek tragedy took origin, it seems, from the improvising leaders of the early Bacchic dithyramb; it seems that the leader split off from the chorus to become an actor, the protagonist".<sup>735</sup> Easterling sees it as one of the Chorus' main functions "to act as a group of 'built-in' witnesses, giving collective and

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<sup>734</sup> Sommerstein (2002: 11).

<sup>735</sup> Cooper (2004: 27).

usually normative responses to the events of the play”, also suggesting that “in a few plays they have a specific identity as major participants in the plot”, or where they are “witnesses without fully revealing their response”.<sup>736</sup> The institution of the Chorus cannot also be seen outside the context of Athenian democracy, in which being an active member of the community becomes a top priority - the choral odes, in the sense of the communal voice, consequently having a unique force.<sup>737</sup> The political, social, cultural and aesthetic circumstances have changed dramatically since Sophocles’ time, however, the Chorus becoming an alien feature for the contemporary spectator; its treatment, thus, in terms of its role and status, number of members, even the place it occupies on stage - now that there is no orchestra to contain it - are issues that have to be dealt with by a director today, a significant challenge, since the Chorus offers much scope for creative work.

The directors of the various Irish versions of *Antigone* treat the Chorus in different ways, some of them also employing it to address contemporary political realities. The number of its members varies: Donnellan is the only one to retain a large Chorus of nine; Paulin has “the whole cast (of nine actors) grouping and re-grouping to form the Chorus”,<sup>738</sup> Mason has a Chorus of four, Pinal a Chorus of two and three out of the seven directors (Ó Briain, Scott and Morrison) have one-man choruses. The reduction in its members can be due to a number of reasons, practical considerations included. Morrison admits that a chorus of six could not be afforded and, as he notes, this is the

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<sup>736</sup> Easterling (2007 [1997]: 163).

<sup>737</sup> Goldhill (2007: 49).

<sup>738</sup> Billington (1984).

case with several theatre productions.<sup>739</sup> In this respect, it is unsurprising that the only show with an extensive Chorus is Donnellan's at the Old Vic, which addressed the massive London audiences. Apart from practical considerations, however, the one-man Chorus was a conscious decision of Morisson's, once again associated with the director's wish to make his play more engaging:

“I wanted to make it one person because I thought you were going to engage with that character more. With a full chorus speaking, the argument spreads out, one line here, one line there, it's just simply hard to engage. By having one character, you engage more with the character and you listen more to the quality of the argument. [...] I wanted to present the Chorus as accessible, as immediate, as intelligible as possible and it helps by just having one person do it. That is very much a character and the audience engages, relates and listens more closely to that character”.<sup>740</sup>

Apart from Morisson's specific reasons that dictate that choice, the presence of a large Chorus, generally speaking, might be perplexing - and probably offputting - for a spectator unacquainted with the Greek tradition and unaccustomed to a group of people commenting on the plot, whether in lyrics or in prose. McGuinness argues that “ten people speaking together [...] does not work in English at all, [it's] like children

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<sup>739</sup> Morrison - K. G. (2006).

<sup>740</sup> Id.

chanting, the worst form of music”.<sup>741</sup> What, however, affects the rendering of the Chorus the most is the way each director integrates it into the plot.

Ó Briain and Donnellan do not significantly depart from the traditional concept of the Chorus, although they approach it in different ways. Donnellan has a chorus of “shaven-headed men with long staves and baggy breeches, speaking one at a time”, something that is described in one instance as “unusually effective”.<sup>742</sup> Apart from speaking, Donnellan’s Chorus is reported to be emitting “a mournful and harmonised moaning and strange rhythmic sniffing which recreates the true Greek concept of the singing Chorus, and which forms a perfect background for the scenes of emotional and political collapse around them”.<sup>743</sup> The lack of an available video recording prevents us from detecting any political implications in the treatment of the chorus in this production; thus, we rely solely on reviewers’ accounts such as Spencer’s, who suggests that the members of the Chorus “dressed in black suits, Fair Isle sweaters and gaiters, [...] look like recently demobbed soldiers from the First World War, pale and hollow-eyed with the horrors that they have witnessed”.<sup>744</sup> Even if, as Spencer felt, its movements and music are often distracting, Donnellan seems to have succeeded in having a modernised version of the Chorus, without it losing completely its ritualistic character.

Ó Briain, on the other hand, has a one man Chorus, as Kennelly had it: “I’ve stuck fairly close to the original”, the poet has reportedly said, “but I’ve replaced the chorus with a

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<sup>741</sup> McGuinness - K. G. (2006).

<sup>742</sup> Gross (1999).

<sup>743</sup> Labous (1999).

<sup>744</sup> Spenser (1999).



single person, a sort of Hamlet figure, a voice in your ear that tells you the truth about yourself. I think this is more suitable for the Irish voice. I don't think Irish voices work in choruses".<sup>745</sup> McHugh describes the role of the Chorus in Ó Briain's highly stylised show as "a member of the audience, [who] invites the audience to share the tragic",<sup>746</sup> an intermediary between the characters and the audience broadly in line with its role in Greek tragedy. Ó Briain's Chorus is statically based in the very middle of the stage, as he recites; he is allowed only a slight movement of his torso from the left to the right and vice versa as well as very precise and stylised movements of his hands. "Paedar Lamb allows the words through uncluttered, powerfully",<sup>747</sup> assisted by the lack of (potentially distracting) accompanying music or excessive movement.

Rea's Chorus, on the other hand, in accordance with Paulin's script, consists of several members. "The *Riot Act* is given admirable coherence by the splendidly choreographed chorus, led by the cool, intense Ciaran Hinds, who emerges from time to time, like John the Baptist from the Wilderness, to utter occasionally gnomic words of wisdom",<sup>748</sup> Jeffery writes in the TLS. Other reviewers have made favourable comments on the "choric functions of vocal crescendos",<sup>749</sup> or the "fine majestic stances which greatly enhance the production".<sup>750</sup> The depiction of the Chorus is seemingly too Greek for an overtly Irish rendering of *Antigone*; the fact, however, that all the members of the cast interchangeably become members of the Chorus, apart from solving the serious problem of financing a larger group of actors, serves to accentuate further the political

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<sup>745</sup> Myers (1986).

<sup>746</sup> McHugh - K. G. (2006).

<sup>747</sup> Hingerty (1986).

<sup>748</sup> Jeffery (1984).

<sup>749</sup> Coveney (1984).

<sup>750</sup> Aibhe (1984).

orientation of Paulin's translation: in Rea's staging the chorus consists of characters, people with different views and values, but at the same time members of the same community, all affected by everything that happens around them. John Peter, in his review for the *Sunday Times*, goes one step further:

“Rea organises the Chorus in a choreography of harassment and indignation: they're a tormented knot of watchful and brutalised people dissolving now and again into small frightened groups. Rea himself is part of the Chorus: he detaches himself to be Creon, then rejoins them with almost faceless anonymity. The point is eloquently made that Creon is very much part of the community he tries to hammer into submission and that a community in civil strife has produced a leader it deserved”.<sup>751</sup>

There are two things here to bear in mind, however; first, that Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* was not elected, therefore the community does not necessarily bear the responsibility for the quality of the new leader; second, *Antigone* was also part of the Chorus and the outcome of the tragedy was not brought about solely by Creon. So, Peter's statement would not make sense if we talked about Sophocles' *Antigone*. But we should not forget that this is Paulin's *The Riot Act*, unofficially set in modern day Northern Ireland; Creon, a caricature of a contemporary politician, is clearly in the wrong from the outset of the play and the responsibility for the ineffectiveness - not to say brutality - of the elected leader falls on all those people who elected him. What Peter effectively points out here is that Creon and the Chorus are the two sides of the

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<sup>751</sup> Peter (1984).

same coin, rendering the latter as responsible for what is about to happen as is the former. Or, in Thompson's (often quoted) words, Paulin's play

“set (with aching obviousness) in Northern Ireland, it introduces the villain, Creon (- the State, N.I.- ), the boss figure - the heroine, Antigone (- the Oppressed, the One who tries to bury her brother-) and the self-serving mob most of us are for most of our lives”.<sup>752</sup>

Mason's production takes a further step in having a chorus not only implicated with Creon, but bearing direct responsibility for political decisions. The elder men here are members of a Cabinet, in which Creon presides; as such, they have political power, actively participating in the making of decisions. Although they function as a group, each has distinct character and appearance traits, reactions and responses. Among them there is a friendly atmosphere and, despite the formality of the situation, they also allow themselves to make a joke or friendly pat each other's back. Their occasionally relaxed tone and their convenient seating around a polished, rectangular table come in sharp contrast to the tension that exists outside the room.

Mason makes a very effective division of the stage: he reserves its right part for the Chorus, leaving the left part for the characters. The symbolic division of the stage provides the central political argument of the show: everything on the left (the heap of rubble and debris against the wall in the background, the monument of the war dead in

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<sup>752</sup> Thompson (1984).

the foreground) alludes to destruction and death that touches all characters in the play; except for the men in suits, the ones making decisions - probably those who decide the wars but seem completely unaffected by them. The appearance of the Guard, who enters the stage to announce the burial of the dead body, further elaborates this differentiation: dressed in ragged clothes, pitiable, dirty and exhausted, his looks come in sharp contrast with the fluency of the Chorus' costumes, the decency of their appearance and their good humour. As with Paulin, Mason's interpretation of the Chorus is a significant step away from Sophocles; the Chorus does not consist anymore of powerless men simply offering advice, but of accomplices.

Pintal's Chorus consists of two middle aged men, smartly dressed in suits too, their role here being restricted solely to commenting on the action. The functional distance they keep from it is also visually depicted, as the Chorus watches the characters and interacts with them most of the time from a different part of the split-in-two stage; significantly so, when it comes to Creon. Contrary to Mason, who had Creon collaborate with the Chorus in city matters, Pintal's Creon - arrogant and self-confident as he is depicted - always appears on a different part of the stage from the Chorus, the physical gap separating the two parts alluding to the gap between the leader and his people. This changes dramatically after Creon hears Tiresias' cutting prophecies: it is at the moment of imminent personal tragedy that the King and the Chorus appear on the same stage for the first time, Pintal subtly but effectively suggesting that only Creon's fall can bring him closer to his subjects. The King's misfortune is such that, at this very moment of rapprochement, he does not fall to the level of common people - as the Chorus are - but far below; Pintal accentuating Creon's misery, has the Chorus standing, comforting and

offering advice to a fallen, pitiable King, breathlessly crawling and desperately lying on the ground. One of the two elder men even kneels by his side to talk to him, the lowering of his body to approach Creon's coming in sharp contrast with the latter's air of superiority at the opening of the play.

Ó Briain has his Chorus retain its conventional role of the intermediary between the characters and the spectators, although - in keeping with Kennelly's script - he is unconventionally restricted to one man only. Morrison and Scott have also devised a one man Chorus for their versions;<sup>753</sup> in both cases, however, far from an old, respectable man, he is a marginalised tramp, provocative and vulgar. Although both men, however, seem much less respectable than the members of the Sophoclean Chorus, we should not forget that the Chorus in Greek tragedy "usually represented a group of persons who had little power over events (such as women, old men, sailors) but who stood to be deeply affected, for good or ill, by the actions of the principal characters".<sup>754</sup> Exactly these terms, as we will see, would also perfectly apply to the two young men in Scott's and Morrison's productions.

Scott's Chorus, using consistently crude language, comments on the plot and the characters, interacts with them, questions the role he is given. Maybe this is the Chorus for our time, the man who despite his young age has seen it all and has been through all.

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<sup>753</sup> Scott is the director of Mathews' version of *Antigone*; still, the initial idea and general structure of the play is his.

<sup>754</sup> Sommerstein (2002: 11); we should not forget Sophoclean Creon's dismissive tone when he addresses the Chorus: "Cease, before your words fill me with rage, so that you may be found to be not only an old man but a fool!" (lines 280-281), he tells the Chorus when they suggest that maybe the Gods are behind Polynices' burial.

He (calculatedly) does not enjoy respectability, since this is a different way of representation of the ordinary people from what we find in Sophocles; he does not have the wisdom of the old age, but he has the wisdom of the streets. He is a man at the bottom of society, and, as such, the most powerless, vulnerable and terrorised of all characters in Creon's regime. It is worth reminding here that it is the Chorus who "is putting up posters... "Hear No Evil, See no Evil, Speak No Evil", "Loose Talk Costs Lives", "Strength and Patience", "Think Yes"" at the very opening of the play; it is the Chorus who pretends to be blind, deaf and voiceless in order to avoid trouble; it is the Chorus who is physically and verbally abused. Scott's political message is clear: the everyday man, who consistently bears the weight of the leaders' decisions, is always neglected, always trampled on, invisible as a man, faceless in his anonymity, even nameless. His outcry is a punch in the stomach:

"It's always me who gets things moving round here. They couldn't start any fuckin' play without me. I'm your numero uno, your sine qua non. Me. But do I get a name? Even a fuckin' name. I'm not talkin' about a title. I mean, I don't want to be a fuckin' Field Marshal. But I want a name. Look at this. (READS) The Chorus. The Chorus! What kind of a fuckin' Chorus do I look like? (BEATS HIS BREAST FIERCELY) I am a human being." (2)

His reference to a Field Marshal as the embodiment of power, further alludes to a military, autocratic regime; and the fact that the director himself describes his chorus' words as "just Dublin street talk", suggests that this regime is not necessarily far from

Ireland; maybe it is there, too. Scott directly associates this “Dublin street talk” with Mannix Flynn; after all, again blurring the boundaries between fiction and real-life, Mathews wrote the role of the Chorus with the particular actor in mind.<sup>755</sup> As the director comments, “Mannix talks the way the Chorus talks for real; that’s not acting, that’s Mannix”.<sup>756</sup>

Morrison’s conception of the Chorus, almost twenty years later, seems very similar: his is a young tramp too, who appears out of the burnt out car where he is based, with dirty trousers at the back and, later, a crown made of paper on his head. He is an outcast, whose kingdom is the destroyed car in which he presumably lives. Morrison’s Chorus is the man in the streets who has been witnessing all this violence around him projected in the photos and has, in turn, become violent himself: he shouts, screams, swears, pours the car with petrol, hits it with a metal stick, drinks wine and smokes. Morrison explains his choice in the following terms:

“The Chorus is [...] different from play to play; the audience thinks “ah, yes, this is a Chorus, it’s going to be somebody preaching”; [...] I wanted this guy to be representative of the guys in the streets throwing stones or looking for meaning,

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<sup>755</sup> It was Michael Scott who insisted to have Flynn in the cast, as he finds him [Scott - K. G. (2006)] “a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful actor, an actor who simply appears not to be acting, but to give a performance. He’s extraordinary”. The objections - again, according to Scott - from the part of the Board of Directors of the Projects Arts Centre and some of the actors as well were based on the fact that he was known for being unreliable and an alcoholic.

<sup>756</sup> Scott - K. G. (2006).

trying to make sense of it all, trying to watch out what is happening in the middle of the power politics that are going on above their heads”.<sup>757</sup>

Unlike Mathews’ Chorus, whose subjection to violence has made him submissive, Morrison’s Chorus becomes part of an endless cycle of violence, his appearance reinforcing that violence brings violence, an issue to which we will return in the final part of this chapter. Deprived of home, affection, meaning in life, he spends his days aimlessly, shouting (although never heard) and defusing his frustration by destroying an (already destroyed) car. Scott’s and Morrison’s choruses are probably two sides of the same coin; both young but already defeated, paying the price for the violence imposed by well-bred middle-aged men.

## I. THEME AND ACTION

The last, and probably the most important, aspect of the productions to be examined is the way in which the characters physically relate and interact with each other and with the scenic space, effectuating thus the directors’ concept of their productions. To see how the directors ‘translate’ their characters through action, and through them their thematic reading of the story, both gestural and proxemic signs will be examined. Although crucial for the understanding of a director’s reading of the play, examining characters in action presents a number of difficulties: to start with, contrary to the set and costumes, which are the same in every performance, the (even slight) changes in the ways the characters act and move that inevitably occur night after night, affect to a

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<sup>757</sup> Morrison - K. G. (2006).



higher or lesser degree the perception of the play. Also, again unlike the set and costumes, which can be depicted in still photographs or described by the director or other people involved in the production, the only ways to approach the acting is through watching a performance or a video recording. This means that productions for which neither option is possible (in our case Scott's, Rea's and Donnellan's) are unfortunately excluded from the discussion, since in practice it is hardly possible to accurately and in detail reconstruct what happens on stage through third party accounts. The three out of the four available shows that will be examined here present an extra layer of reading from the part of the directors, each of whom chooses a different aspect of the play to emphasise. It should be noted here that the principle of selection noted above with reference to staging, in general, applies especially to the elaboration of each director's view of the play through the actors' bodies, as considerations of space unfortunately prevent the level of detail which a nuanced reading of the productions demands.

### **Conall Morrison's *Antigone***

Morrison's staging focuses on the endless cycle of violence and the impact that it has on people's lives; in this case the director comes up with the most emotionally charged staging of all. His show is one saturated with violence; as has already been mentioned, as the plot unfolds a sequence of photos are projected in the background, featuring soldiers and casualties, children warriors and caravans of refugees, destroyed buildings and people in despair. The characters are not detached from this horror; the play in fact opens with all of them onstage, staring intensely at a rapid succession of pictures.

Witnessing all this pain informs their actions and behaviour; continuously exposed to violence as they are, they are doomed to become in turn violent themselves. The transformation of Antigone from a loving sister to a violent one is indicative.

Despite the tension and anger in the first encounter of the two girls, Antigone appears as affectionate towards Ismene, as she has been towards her dead brother Polynices. Thus, the scene opens with Antigone anxiously calling Ismene and, when seeing her, running and embracing her; in contrast to what follows and despite the fact that Ismene appears reserved, distanced and unemotional, the scene ends with Antigone kissing her sister goodbye before departing. Here Morrison attempts an interesting reversal of Sophocles' relationship: in Sophocles, Antigone - after her initial affection - is subsequently dismissive of Ismene, who even after the rebuff speaks affectionately toward her. His Antigone, despite her elevated moral tone is by nature loving and affectionate, even when she feels rejected by her sister. The circumstances have, however, a corrosive impact on her: when the two sisters meet again, Antigone - now arrested and charged by a regime that has brought so much pain and violence - releases all her anger and frustration on her sister, violently pushing her twice once to the side and the other to the ground. Violence is recycled in Morrison's play and those exposed to it - despite having the best of intentions and the noblest of feelings are inevitably destined to become violent themselves, too.

The same infectious violence can be seen in the Chorus: having the destroyed car as his home, and being therefore at the centre of the action, he becomes nervous in his

moves and meaninglessly violent: he shouts, screams, laughs, dances in a frenzy, pours petrol on the car and considers burning it, hits it with a metal stick. His most violent scene, however, is probably one with Antigone: as he recites the lines on Danae's destiny, fully aligning himself with Creon's regime he helps the king immobilise her; he quickly wraps the upper part of her body with a thick piece of fabric and forces her violently to the ground. As Antigone lies there helpless, motionless and almost crying - face down, hands tied with a rope - he lies above her, in a scene that also has sexual connotations. For several minutes he keeps her there, immobilised, shouting and screaming at her. What follows makes it clear that his violence is a result of extreme pain and the violence he himself has been through. After releasing his frustration on Antigone for some time, he subsequently breaks. He removes his body from hers, lies next to her crying, his hands hiding his face in shame and embarrassment; he looks horrified with what he earlier did. Then he raises her body and embraces her affectionately, his face and gestures betraying extreme pain and compassion.

The only character whose behaviour is not significantly affected by the violence around him is Creon - incidentally the man who is responsible for its perpetuation; generally self-composed and distanced from pain and despair, in his militaristic attire and his particularly harsh, high-pitched voice betraying austerity and determination, he is from the start associated with war; apart from the Chorus' utterance when announcing him as "made by war, made by the Gods" (6), upon his appearance, the sequence of photos of pain, violence and death are replaced by a single picture of two military airplanes and the figures of three men (presumably Air force pilots) looking at

them. He is thus implicitly rendered responsible for much of the violence and pain portrayed in the pictures as well as onstage. The theme of people generating wars but being insulated from their horrific results seems to become popular in the globalised world of the new millennium, as it returns with still greater force in Mason's 2008 production of *The Burial at Thebes*.

### **Patrick Mason's *Burial at Thebes***

Mason, in his rendering of *The Burial at Thebes*, depicts a family bound by bonds of love, subsequently divided and disintegrated by the clash between personal and family interests. This clash is evident ever since the introductory scene, one invented by the director. This short scene features all members of Creon's family, going to the monument on the left part of the stage to honour the war dead. Creon is handed a laurel wreath that he ceremoniously places at the bottom of the monument; he then goes one step behind, removes his hat and stands for a while in front of the monument in respect. Eurydice, in turn, carries in her lap a picture of her recently dead son Megareus that she deposits next to the wreath, kneels in pain and then unceremoniously leaves. These fifty seconds summarise the main conflict of the tragedy: Creon is first and foremost a man of office, while Eurydice is uniquely and solely a mother. Between them, there is a hint of coldness ever since this short scene, as Eurydice does not respond to Creon's affectionate touch of her hand. As the progression of the show will show, the conflict between civic and domestic duties eventually ruins the family bonds of the play, with both Creon and Eurydice paying the price.

Mason - pointedly distancing himself from the earlier militarism in Pintal's and Morrison's Creons - offers a depiction of the Theban King as a contemporary politician with a bureaucratic attitude, often trapped in his statutory role. As pointed out earlier in the chapter, the stage in this production is symbolically divided in two areas: the domestic sphere on the left and the civic on the right. Creon moves across both areas, but, since his public persona emerges more often than the family one, he is mostly based near the Chorus on the right. Self confident and composed, he presides - standing, his hands against the table - at a meeting with the Chorus, seated around the table, which applauds him upon his entering the stage and on several occasions while he speaks. A man functioning as a secretary takes the minutes of the meeting, further highlighting the bureaucratic character of Mason's conception. The friendly greetings and relaxed pats at the back which Creon exchanges with the Chorus, his decision about Eteocles and Polynices being read out from a piece of paper handed over by the scribe, and the two security guards that accompany him, are all formalities associated with contemporary politicians.

The ineffectiveness which he displays when it comes to accommodating the exigencies of his civic and family life does not mean that he does not suffer for his family's misfortunes; on the contrary, throughout the Choral Ode on destiny Mason has him mourning for the earlier death of his son, first knelt before the monument and subsequently standing, leaning against it with his left hand, his right hand holding his head. The pain that he experiences explains to a great extent the excessive affection

that he shows towards his other son, Hemon, who appears just after the end of the Ode: Creon warmly embraces his son, and talks to him affectionately. Despite the intimacy of the scene, Creon still cannot escape his public role, the clash between his roles as a father and as a ruler emerging again. So, when expressing his views about the city and the discipline that it requires, he leaves Hemon standing on the left of the stage and approaches the Chorus whom he addresses, assuming the exact position which he held in his previous appearance before them. Subsequently, he is conveniently seated on a chair near the Chorus, legs crossed, and hears his son's position, as if in an official meeting; thus, when Hemon speaks, he addresses not only the father - who is by that time sitting at a distance - but also the Chorus - members of the Cabinet. Despite the love that Creon has for Hemon, as his initial reactions betray, the private moments between father and son are all too brief, and Hemon's personal appeal to his father for Antigone becomes a public affair. Creon gives priority (or the circumstances force him to give priority) to his role as a leader, and his subsequent downfall comes from his (neglected) family. At the end he appears beaten and desperate, in torn and dusted clothes - unlike his earlier polished appearance - and a faint - almost inaudible - voice; he kneels begging, he crawls and then he slowly and defeatedly exits.

The destiny that awaits his wife has an even greater dramatic impact. Mason creates in Eurydice's short appearance one of the most memorable scenes of the play, without inventing any extra scenes or working outside the text. In what is generally a careful reading of the script from the part of the director, Eurydice - already aware of her son's death - enters the stage staggering, using her right hand as a support against the

wall; other physical manifestations of pain and despair include holding her head, speaking in a fainted voice, covering her face with her palm or bending her body as if the pain is such that she cannot hold it upright. She nevertheless stands with dignity before the Messenger, listening carefully to what he has to say. When the Messenger finishes his account of the events, Eurydice turns to tell him something; she extends her hand towards him for a good while as if wanting to deduce more information; she means to talk, but she is inarticulate. The confirmation of what she already seemed to know has overcome her. Speechless as she is, she heartily and kindly greets the Messenger holding his hands and slowly departs; halfway to the exit, she leans against a chair as if she is about to faint, gently refuses the assistance that the Messenger offers her, resumes her strength and walks slowly, decisively and with her head held high to her way out. In a wonderfully efficient rendering of the Queen's short appearance, Mason portrays a strong, dignified and kind character in extreme pain. After she makes an end to her life, Eurydice's dead body is brought onstage alongside Hemon's, two corpses - evidence of Creon's insufficiency to cater for the needs of his family. His wife's body is strategically laid on the table around which all decisions were earlier made. If the essence in Mason's reading of the play is the conflict between the civic and the domestic sphere, the real victim is not Creon, but Eurydice. Eurydice never participated in the decision-making, she had nothing to do with the city, the men in suits and the polished table; at the end, however, it is the city that deprives her of her son and leads her to her death. Mason goes one step further than Sophocles: by having her dead body placed on the Cabinet table instead of her home bed, Mason blurs again the boundaries between civic and domestic - as was also the

case earlier in the scene with Hemon; incidentally, on the same table that 'killed' her and that has both literally and symbolically become her death bed.

### **Lorraine Pintal's *Burial at Thebes***

Pintal, in her earlier staging of *The Burial at Thebes*, focuses on the rebellion of an intransigent and strongly minded girl in a military context - again evident in her introductory scene that features an encounter between Antigone and Hemon. Antigone, in this brief scene, is seated on the ground, legs apart in a 'V' shape like a child, pouring sand with both hands. Hemon approaches her from behind and puts his hands around her waist; Antigone stands up in surprise. There is affection between the two fiancés, but their physical communication is always fragmented: Antigone touches Hemon's head, caresses him and feverishly embraces him but then withdraws. Hemon, in turn, embraces her, tries to approach her, but she twice violently releases herself from him. Antigone is evidently the one to lead the game and she is the one to decide the destiny of both: when it comes to choosing between burying her brother (symbolically depicted in this scene by Antigone pouring sand) and Hemon (who makes every effort to come closer to her) she opts for the former choice. Hemon, desperate and helpless, kneels on the ground. Antigone, at a distance, her back against him, kneels - presumably under the weight of her decision - as well; she remains there, motionless, while her fiancé slowly stands up and exits.

Antigone is equally determined and dominant in her encounter with Ismene, the power relationship being represented both visually and aurally. Ismene, rather fragile as she



is, upon hearing the news about Polynices, she falls slowly to the ground and remains kneeling; when she hears Antigone's decision, she stands up frightened and retreats, then runs in panic to the exit and she almost cries when narrating their misfortunes. Antigone's voice, on the other hand, is throughout higher and occasionally aggressive; she speaks standing to her kneeling sister, her head bent forward in agitation, talking down to her as if lecturing her. Every attempt at physical communication is, again, fragmented, an allusion to the lack of effective communication between the two girls. Indicative of Antigone being used to playing with her own rules is that, while she allows herself to touch her sister, she does not allow her sister to; as many as five or six times in the play - practically almost every time that Ismene seeks some physical contact - she violently releases her hands, as she did earlier with Hemon. In one instance, she even violently releases her hands from Ismene's, only to pass immediately after her hands around her sister's neck herself. Addressing Creon, unsurprisingly, does not intimidate her at all; on the contrary, as the Guard explains the circumstances of her arrest, she has her back turned on him. She only turns when it comes to addressing him, her voice and the stillness of her body betraying determination and fearlessness. She later has her back turned on Ismene, too, even when talking to her. The tension in the intercourse between Creon and Ismene does not touch her, either; Antigone is standing still, determined, her back turned against both.

The militarism of Creon's appearance - evident in the choice of his costume and the military gestures of the Attendant that precedes him (standing to attention or in formal salute and walking as if in a military parade) - hints at the imminent clash between a

military, thus omnipotent, leader and a strong-minded young girl. Creon is presented as powerful and occasionally arrogant; in his first appearance, apart from the Attendant that precedes him, he is also accompanied by his beautiful wife dressed in a red, impressive dress - Pintal thus reinforcing his image of happiness and accomplishment by portraying him both as a strong leader and as a happy family man. His first lines, in which he explains the circumstances under which he became king, are uttered halfway down the stairs, on a level above the other characters, Creon assuming an air of superiority from the start. This sense of omnipotence is mostly evident in the scene with Hemon, where Creon arrogantly ignores his son, who almost begs him to reconsider. The conflict between the two men is not, however, restricted to the exchange of insults, but ends up in a fight. Creon's physical strength, reflecting his political power, is such that he easily pushes Hemon to the ground, screaming. "We'll wait and see. The bigger the resistance, the bigger the collapse" (21), Heaney's Creon said earlier, the irony of the statement being enhanced in Pintal's production, in which both the intransigence of the two characters and its outcome are accentuated.

Antigone, to start with, makes her final appearance in a wedding dress; thus drama is added to the earlier rejection of her fiancé, only to wed death at the end. Cleary, too, suggested that she and Pintal wanted "to make it a full statement to the audience she was going to be a bride [...] emphasising her tragedy at the end".<sup>758</sup> Creon, however, will have the most dramatic downfall of all. His very dramatic collapse in this show will not wait until the end of the play, as Pintal has him crawl in despair right after Tiresias's departure. The King here is not only by far the most pitiable of all Creons,

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<sup>758</sup> Pintal - K. G. (2006).

his downfall thus being strongly accentuated, but the most ineffective as well, since he collapses at a moment when nothing was lost, when he should be acting instead of mourning. Additionally, Pintal makes use of the single piece of furniture on the platform to depict visually that Creon's downfall symbolically comes from his own son, adding thus more drama to it: the chair. Earlier in the play, just before Creon appeared onstage, the Attendant that preceded him raised a chair that was fallen on the ground; it is the very chair, dressed in dark red cloth that (solely) Creon will be using in the play, thus alluding to his throne and sovereignty. The Attendant's gesture to restore the fallen chair before Creon's appearance points forward to developments later in the play, when the chair ends up fallen again. In an outburst of anger, Hemon violently overthrows the chair - which is, however, never restored; after this scene it simply disappears. This scene thus alludes to the short-lived reign and omnipotence of King Creon; having only recently assumed the empty throne (symbolically depicted by the fallen chair), he is doomed to lose it only too soon and it is his very son who will bring about his downfall.

Many of the plays we have studied take us a long way from the sparseness of the Greek stage. It would however be difficult to insist on fidelity to classical minimalism as the yardstick of theatrical success in modern versions of Greek tragedy. Unlike conventional scenic representations which feature "no chairs and no telephones", Pintal creates a memorable moment out of the falling chair. As the examination of the various stagings of the Irish *Antigones* in this chapter has shown, the success of a production is not to be judged on the presence or absence of anachronisms; ultimately the test is whether props and text converge to give a coherent meaning rather than

whether a prop is in any sense authentic. What does emerge from this brief study is the enormous flexibility in directorial engagement with theatrical space as with all other aspects of the potential of this rich and suggestive text.

## CONCLUSION

“How many *Antigones* can Irish theatre put up with?”, Seamus Heaney wondered in the theatre programme note of his *Burial at Thebes*, back in 2004, expressing - in these often quoted words - his initial reluctance to be involved in a project on which so many writers in Ireland had worked before him. However, though his is the most recent translation of the Sophoclean tragedy to be examined in this thesis, it is certainly not the last version to be written by an Irish writer. In 2006, Belfast-born Stacey Gregg, a student at Cambridge at that time, wrote the play *Ismene*, which, “set in contemporary Northern Ireland, [...] uses the Antigone myth to respond to the McCartney murder”.<sup>759</sup> The play was first staged at the ADC Theatre in Cambridge; it was, she observes, “ironic” to have “a Cambridge cast attempting to portray working class, largely alien and unrepresented N. Ireland”.<sup>760</sup> 2008 saw the second production of Heaney’s *Burial at Thebes* in Dublin; in the same year, playwright and director Owen McCafferty, also Belfast-born, wrote his own version of *Antigone*,<sup>761</sup> produced by Prime Cut Theatre Company at the Waterfront Studio in Belfast. These two new plays introduce a Northern Irish perspective to the myth, which seems to be crossing the border in the new millennium, a further testimony of its durability and adaptability to different circumstances, as well as itself a marker of the changing political situation in Ireland as a whole. “Stories travel and stories stay”,<sup>762</sup> leaving their imprints on human psyches, souls and minds - surviving us; this PhD was about

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<sup>759</sup> ADC Theatre (2006).

<sup>760</sup> Gregg - K.G. (2006b).

<sup>761</sup> McCafferty (2008).

<sup>762</sup> Gabriel (2004: 1).

the journey of one of those stories, that, having long transcended the boundaries of their first production, colonised the world twenty five centuries later.

Hopefully, this thesis has shed light on the route of *Antigone* in Ireland at the end of the second and the turn of the third millennium, the social and political circumstances in which it was produced and the ways in which the lived - and evolving - reality of the Irish is reflected in the various texts. Contrary to what Loraux suggested as many as twenty five years ago,<sup>763</sup> I would not agree that everything has been said about Antigone; the ever-growing interest in this defiant girl from both writers and theatre practitioners over the past decades opens new avenues for research; and, as the dynamics of the myth in Ireland, in particular, indicate, this thesis is probably only the first approach - but, assuredly, not the last word.

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<sup>763</sup> Nicole Loraux (1986b: 165) wrote that “A propos d’ *Antigone* tout est dit et l’on vient trop tard”.

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