MEMORABLE BARBARITIES AND NATIONAL MYTHS:
ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDY AND IRISH EPIC
IN MODERN IRISH THEATRE

A Dissertation

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by
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Abstract

by

Katherine Anne Hennessey

Over the course of the 20th century, Irish playwrights penned scores of adaptations of Greek tragedy and Irish epic, and this theatrical phenomenon continues to flourish in the 21st century. My dissertation examines the performance history of such adaptations at Dublin’s two flagship theatres: the Abbey, founded in 1904 by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, and the Gate, established in 1928 by Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards. I argue that the potent rivalry between these two theatres is most acutely manifest in their production of these plays, and that in fact these adaptations of ancient literature constitute a “disputed territory” upon which each theatre stakes a claim of artistic and aesthetic preeminence.

Partially because of its long-standing claim to the title of Ireland’s “National Theatre,” the Abbey has been the subject of the preponderance of scholarly criticism about the history of Irish theatre, while the Gate has received comparatively scarce academic attention. I contend, however, that the history of the Abbey--and of modern Irish theatre as a whole--cannot be properly understood except in relation to the strikingly different aesthetics practiced at the Gate.
Unlike Yeats and Gregory, MacLiammóir and Edwards brought extensive professional expertise to their theatre, in which a panoply of color, gesture, music, lighting, artistic and technical design worked in tandem with the spoken word to create the performance’s meaning. Their range of technical and artistic genius allowed them to stage ancient literature with lyric passion and cutting-edge visual effects—“memorable barbarities,” in MacLiammóir’s words. The Gate’s achievements radically reinvented Dublin theatregoers’ understanding and expectations of theatrical performance, thereby recharting the entire trajectory of modern Irish drama.

This study examines productions of ancient Greek and Irish adaptations at the Abbey and the Gate from the beginning of the 20th century through 2006. Utilizing a dual theoretical framework of performance studies and adaptation theory, my study complements close textual analysis with detailed examination of both theatres’ archival materials, including playbills, publicity, critical reviews, and visual images of the performances in photographs and video recordings.
For my grandmother,

Catherine Ludwick,

whose open mind,

insatiable curiosity

and joie de vivre

continue to inspire

admiration and love.
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His perceptions and insights have been invaluable, and his love and his faith in me
unwavering. I could not have done this without him.
INTRODUCTION

MEMORABLE BARBARITIES AND NATIONAL MYTHS:
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Storytelling is always the art of repeating stories.

--Walter Benjamin, Illuminations

Antigone proclaims her unwavering love for her dead brother while video footage of Palestinian children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks flashes upon enormous screens behind her. Medea squats upon a piece of bogland in the Irish Midlands, fiercely resisting her estranged husband’s attempts to secure farmland, wealth, and position in the nearby village. Óisín, last of the ancient Irish warrior heroes, wakes from a drunken stupor in a seedy Dublin hotel to discover that the golden-haired goddess who seduced him at the dance club the previous night has absconded with his wallet and his passport. ¹

These images have more in common than might appear at first glance. Each was created as part of a work of theatre, physically enacted and embodied upon a stage in the presence of an audience. Although these images themselves are quite recent (all appeared on stage within the last decade) each of the plays in which they feature takes as its basis an ancient plotline: Greek tragedy in the first two cases, Irish epic in the last. Yet each play also freely adapts its source materials, adding allusions to contemporary

¹ Respectively, these images hail from Conall Morrison’s Antigone (2000), Marina Carr’s By the Bog of Cats (1998), and Paul Mercier’s Homeland (2006).
social conflicts, be they domestic or international. Furthermore, all of these adaptations were penned by Irish playwrights, and produced and performed at Dublin theatres. Finally, while each of these three adaptations is remarkable per se for its fusion of the ancient and the modern, more striking still is the fact that these are merely three exemplars among scores of modern Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy and Irish epic, a theatrical phenomenon that flourished throughout the twentieth century and has continued to thrive thus far in the twenty-first.2

The following study examines the performance history of such adaptations at Dublin’s two flagship theatres, the Abbey and the Gate. The Abbey Theatre has laid claim to the title of Ireland’s “National Theatre” since its establishment by William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory in 1904 (predating the official formation of the “nation,” i.e. the Irish Free State, by nearly two decades). Much critical analysis of Irish theatre history has focused squarely upon the Abbey’s formidable contributions and challenges to public debates about the nature of Irish identity, and has credited its founders with the establishment and continuation of a unique Irish theatrical aesthetic: that of the poet-playwright’s theatre par excellence, where a minimalist acting style emphasizes the primacy of the words of the text, and where realistic sets and costumes distract as little as possible from the rich lyricism of the script.

In contrast, very little scholarly attention has focused upon the impact and influence of Dublin’s Gate Theatre, founded in 1928 by Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards. It is my contention, however, that the history of the Abbey--and of

2 The chart on pages 10-11 illustrates the proliferation of such works at Dublin’s two major theatres from the early years of the 20th century, but though prominent there this phenomenon is not limited to the Abbey and the Gate: smaller Dublin theatres and venues throughout Ireland have also staged these types of adaptations with surprising frequency. C.f. the Appendix for the long history of similar works in Ireland.
modern Irish theatre as a whole--cannot be properly understood except in relation to the strikingly different aesthetics practiced at the Gate. Unlike Yeats and Gregory, MacLiammóir and Edwards brought extensive professional expertise to their theatre, in which a panoply of color, gesture, music, lighting, artistic and technical design worked in tandem with the spoken word to create the performance’s meaning. Their range of technical and artistic genius allowed them to stage ancient literature with lyric passion and cutting-edge visual effects—“memorable barbarities,” as MacLiammóir described them. The Gate’s achievements revolutionized Dublin theatregoers’ understanding and expectations of theatrical performance, fueling a potent rivalry between the two theatres that has recharted the trajectory of modern Irish drama.

The original impetus for this research was a fascination with the quantity and quality of adaptations of Greek tragedy and Irish epic in contemporary Irish theatre, and an intuition that if examined in greater depth such works could illuminate significant facets of Irish society, identity, and politics. What this study has ultimately revealed is the complex nexus of cooperation and of competition between these two theatres, and the previously underrated importance of the Gate in shaping the Abbey’s post-1928 repertoire and production values, and vice versa. The cross-fertilization of the two theatres--actors, directors, and designers moving from one to the other temporarily or permanently, the same authors’ work being produced at both theatres, the Gate giving its first performances in the Abbey’s experimental performance space, et cetera--is especially surprising considering that these theatres were founded with diametrically opposed goals and proposed repertoires.
Adaptations of ancient Greek and Irish literature have a unique theatrical history: they have been performed extensively at both the Gate and the Abbey since the creation of each theatre, over the course of the 20th century, and into the present. No other group of performances can make this claim. Shakespearean productions and the plays of Brian Friel and Oscar Wilde have been performed on both stages, yet none of these subsets appears frequently enough or spans a sufficiently long period of time to provide a compelling historical outline. Conversely, ancient Greek and Irish adaptations have constituted a crucial segment of Gate and Abbey performances since each theatre came into existence, and frequently overlap in their repertoires. The adaptations are also of particular interest because the Gate and the Abbey produce them at critical moments: upon their foundation, after catastrophes like the Abbey fire, and at celebrations like the Abbey centenary. They thus constitute a sort of disputed territory upon which each theatre’s successes, shortcomings, and claims to preeminence are thrown into starkly juxtaposed relief.

Questions of Origin

Before discussing the modern history of these adaptations, however, a brief delineation of their source material: the ancient Greek plays upon which the modern adaptations draw are the surviving tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides from the fifth-century B.C.E., with Sophocles’ Oedipus plays, his Antigone and Euripides’ Medea most frequently adapted and staged. These tragedies were arguably adaptations themselves, since they took as their subject characters and plotlines from the complex mythology of ancient Greece, most notably preserved in the Homeric epics The Iliad and
Similarly, modern dramatic adaptations of ancient Irish literature reach back to epic fonts--most often to the tales of the Irish warrior-heroes Cuchulain and Fionn, products of an oral tradition centuries in the making that sprang from the complex mythology of the Iron Age Celts.

Throughout this study I use “epic” to refer to a lengthy narrative intended for recitation, which recounts a hero’s or a group of heroes’ involvement in a great historical or pseudo-historical event. Two characteristics of epic as thus defined are particularly salient: its proto-nationalist dimension and its time-hallowed prominence within the literary canon. As Jeffrey Wainwright notes, “There is often a national or communal dimension to the epic in that it tells a story taken as vital to the collective history... Epic was long held to be the ultimately significant poetic form” (187-188). Ancient Greek tragedy similarly maintains both a secure and celebrated position within the canon of western literature and an intimate connection to concepts of nationhood; Marianne McDonald has in fact described fifth century Attic tragedy as “that literature which most radically investigates and establishes national identity.”

But as scholars from Benedict Anderson to Michel Foucault have suggested, terms like “epic,” “nation,” and “canon” are all discursive formations, their recourse to ahistorical notions of tradition, community, and “essential” or “natural” identity masking an underlying and often coercive nexus of political and power relations. Despite the millennia-old struggle reaching back to

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3 The introductions to Kelly Younger’s *Dionysus in Ireland* (2001) and to Kenneth McLeish, Frederick Raphael, and Marianne McDonald’s *Greek Tragedy* (2005) provide brief synopses of the essential history and context of the most frequently adapted ancient Greek tragedies.

4 For discussions of the fascinating if fragmentary history of early Irish myth, legend, and epic, see for example MacCana (1982), Ni Bholcreann (1982), and Ni Dhomnhaill (2005).

5 McDonald, “Classics as Celtic Firebrand,” Jordan (2000), 16.
Aristotle to delineate the term “tragedy,” it too remains to this day both ambivalent and value-laden.⁶

The paradoxical nature of such labels helps to explain why critics like George Steiner and Joseph Wood Krutch have proclaimed modernity to be fundamentally incompatible with tragedy, and modern adaptation of ancient Greek tragedy a futile endeavor: “Since the modern imagination is no longer animated by tragic worldview of the classical world... the context is so totally altered that the ancient myths appear in the modern playhouse either as a travesty or as an antiquarian charade” (Steiner 323).⁷ If warranted, such sweeping criticism might well be extended to modern adaptations of Irish epic, especially insofar as Irish playwrights have almost exclusively often adapted “tragic” epic tales--i.e. those that culminate in the heartrending death of the hero, like “Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach” and “Diarmuid and Grainne.” (The conventions for staging this material, especially in the early years of the Abbey, also closely resemble those of ancient Greek tragedy, just as the critical reception of such plays tends to foreground such similarities.)

Yet the “crisis of tragedy” that Steiner bemoans in fact more closely resembles a crisis of taste: the modern world is supposedly void of the refined nobility, sensibility, and stoic virtue that characterizes the ancient; the true problem lies not in our scripts, but in ourselves. A similar school of thought, investing authority in imaginary hierarchies of genre or medium as well as in primacy and antiquity, views the very process of

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⁶ C.f. Ronan McDonald’s *Tragedy and Irish Literature* (2002) for a thorough and thought-provoking exploration of the function and value of the terms “tragedy” and “tragic,” and their evolution from Aristotle’s *Poetics* onward.

⁷ C.f. Steiner’s *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), Krutch’s *The Modern Temper* (1930).
adaptation as a necessary evil at best; fidelity to the “original” is the primary evaluative
criterion, and any change, however minute, is axiomatically an inescapable loss.8

Undoubtedly the transposition of a work of literature from a particular language,
culture, medium, genre, geographical area and historical period to another will give rise
to significant differences in form and in content. Yet even radical differences in
worldview and context need not preclude a modern audience from gleaming some
meaning, albeit incomplete and imperfect, from adaptation of an ancient tragedy. Julia
Kristeva has argued convincingly for a theory of intertextuality that posits all works of
literature as complex palimpsests, or better, as mosaics, artfully arranging pieces of
understanding gleaned from other texts and from a lived sequence of cultural
transmission which goes largely unacknowledged in value systems that privilege
primacy, originality, and autonomy. Foucault argues for lines of literary filiation in
which temporal primacy is no guarantee of quality or authority. It thus seems profitable
to explore not what a literary work must inevitably lose in translation and/or adaptation,
but rather what it might gain.

The Study of Adaptation: Means and Ends

In his detailed study of the use of ancient Greek tropes in modern Irish literature,
Brian Arkins argues that a modern author’s relationship to an ancient text can take one of
three forms: a) literal or “straight” translation; b) preservation of the “essential plotline,”
but with material added or deleted; and c) re-situation of the action in a different
historical context, usually although not exclusively the contemporary period.9 Yet the

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8 C.f. Hutcheon (2006), Ch. 1 for a detailed summary of such arguments.
9 Arkins (2005), 146.
majority of Irish playwrights who adapt ancient Greek and Irish literature do not fit into Arkins’s first category; they work from intermediary texts, themselves translations and/or versions which bear various degrees of similarity and scholarly authority with regard to their “original,” to what translation theorists refer to as the “target text”. Very few Irish playwrights, furthermore, opt simply to edit or add to their source (Yeats and Brendan Kennelly are arguably the only significant exceptions to this rule). Thus the overwhelming majority of adaptations considered in this study fall into Arkins’s category “c”: they resituate the action of the ancient plot within the context of current events, debates, and concerns.

This practice practically begs the question of intent: if the message that a playwright wishes to communicate regards a contemporary issue, why adapt an ancient Greek or Irish tale rather than creating a new, original play? Why force an intricate modern dilemma into the structure of an extant but potentially unsuitable plot? Instead of their politically driven adaptations of Sophocles’ Antigone, for instance, could Conall Morrison not simply have written a play set in Iraq after the American invasion, or Seamus Heaney a play about the Bush administration? Neither suggestion is inherently undramatic. In fact, Heather Raffo’s Nine Parts of Desire (2006) and David Hare’s Stuff Happens (2005) testify to the possibility of creating thought-provoking, entertaining, and politically-charged dramas that fit those descriptions exactly.10 Why, then, do so many Irish playwrights choose to adapt ancient Greek or Irish literature? Why do theatres like

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10 Raffo’s play is a series of monologues featuring eight Iraqi women and one Iraqi-American woman describing the devastating toll that the war has taken on their lives and families. David Hare’s focuses on the events and decisions that led to the war; its protagonists include George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice and Donald Rumsfeld.
the Gate and the Abbey produce these adaptations? And why do audiences go to see them?

Linda Hutcheon proposes that the fundamental pleasure that literary adaptations provide their audiences is that of “repetition with variation... the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (4). Adaptations are, potentially, both reassuringly familiar and wonderfully unexpected. Borrowing Benjamin’s insight about storytelling, one might argue that the art of adaptation is truly that of retelling stories: of reminding an audience of their enduring significance, while simultaneously imbuing them with novel and vital meaning.

My own driving interest is in the tenacious survival of such narratives and the means and ends of their continual reinvention. Irish playwrights often adapt ancient literature to challenge concepts that contemporary society takes for granted, in much the same way that Judith Butler has recently returned to the figure of Antigone as a potential model for an ultra-modern challenge to normative sexual politics.11 Such adaptations are valuable above all for their interesting, unexpected, novel additions, interpolations and perspectives, for their allegorical or oblique references to current events or to contemporary Irish society, for the challenges they pose to accepted ways of seeing/understanding. Using theories of adaptation developed by George Bluestone and Hutcheon, *inter alia*, I have therefore tried to examine these adaptations and their performances as their own autonomous creations, and not to evaluate them in terms of derivation or departure from any hallowed “original” text.

My research takes into account the entire spectrum of communication strategies, both verbal and visual, available to authors, actors, directors, designers, and audience

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11 Butler (2002).
members in creating the multifarious meanings of these adaptations on the stage. It takes as a premise that theatre is a unique, unrepeatable communal experience occurring in the physical presence of actors, technicians, and spectators, its meaning(s) arising from the communication between all of them.\textsuperscript{12} Since my interest in these plays is as technical as it is textual, the project has involved a great deal of archival work; at the National Library of Ireland, the Abbey archive, and the Gate archive in Northwestern’s Deering Library, I have endeavored to discover as much as possible what these plays actually looked and sounded like. This study integrates textual analysis with detailed examination of the archival materials relating to these productions, including playbills, publicity, critical reviews, and visual images of the performances in photographs and video recordings.

The following chart lists the ancient Greek and Irish adaptations performed at the Abbey and the Gate.\textsuperscript{13} To distinguish between the two bodies of source material, adaptations of ancient Irish literature are marked with an asterisk. Productions that took place at the Abbey’s experimental performance space, the Peacock Theatre, rather than on the Abbey mainstage are followed by the letter P, while the dates of productions by the Abbey’s immediate precursors, the Irish Literary Theatre and the Irish National Dramatic Company, are set in parentheses. Though a few of these adaptations are by playwrights from outside Ireland (e.g. O’Neill, Fugard), their production in Dublin contributes to my discussion of the two theatres’ rivalry and reciprocal influence, and thus I include them here as points of reference.

\textsuperscript{12} Richard Schechner provides a detailed analysis of this type of theoretical framework in \textit{Performance Theory} (1988) and \textit{The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance} (1993); it has been productively utilized and revised by a diverse group of critics including Joseph Roach (\textit{Cities of the Dead}, 1996), Roland Rollins (\textit{Ruin, Ritual, and Remembrance}, 2001), and Anna McMullan and Brian Singleton (\textit{Performing Ireland}, 2004).

\textsuperscript{13} The dates correspond to the first production of these plays at each theatre, not their publication; details of the latter can be found in the bibliography.
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<th>The Abbey</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1901): <em>Diarmuid and Grania</em>, Yeats and George Moore*</td>
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<td>(1902): <em>Deirdre</em>, George Russell*</td>
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<td>1904: <em>On Baile’s Strand</em>, Yeats*</td>
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<td>1906: <em>Deirdre</em>, Yeats*</td>
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<td>1910: <em>Deirdre of the Sorrows</em>, Synge*</td>
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<td>1926: <em>Oedipus the King</em>, Yeats</td>
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<td>1927: <em>Oedipus at Colonus</em>, Yeats</td>
<td>1928: <em>Diarmuid and Grainne</em>, MacLiammóir* (P)</td>
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<td>1929: <em>Fighting the Waves</em>, Yeats*</td>
<td>1929: <em>The Ford of the Hurdles</em>, MacLiammóir (revived 1933)*</td>
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<td>1931: <em>The Melians</em>, Edward Longford</td>
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<td>1933: <em>Mourning Becomes Electra</em>, Eugene O’Neill; <em>Agamemnon</em>, Edward Longford</td>
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<td>1947: <em>Diarmuid agus Grainne</em>, MacLiammóir*</td>
<td>1955: <em>King Oedipus</em>, Yeats</td>
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<td>1948-1965: Irish epic pantomimes* (Abbey at the Queen’s Theatre)</td>
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<td>1973: <em>King Oedipus</em> (revised version), Yeats</td>
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<td>1990: <em>The Cure at Troy</em>, Seamus Heaney; <em>Faith Healer</em>, Friel*</td>
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<td>1993: <em>The Trojan Women</em>, Kennelly (P)</td>
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<td>1996: <em>Phaedra</em>, Derek Mahon</td>
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<td>1998: <em>By the Bog of Cats</em>, Carr</td>
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<td>2000: <em>Medea</em>, Kenneth McLeish and Frederick Raphael</td>
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<td>2002: <em>Ariel</em>, Carr</td>
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2004: *The Burial at Thebes*, Seamus Heaney

2005: *A Cry from Heaven*, Woods*

2006: *Homeland*, Paul Mercier*;
* Bacchae of Baghdad*, Conall Morrison;
*The Grown-ups*, Nicholas Kelly (P)

2005: *bash*, Neil LaBute

2006: *Faith Healer*, Friel*

The Bacchae of Baghdad, Conall Morrison; The Grown-ups, Nicholas Kelly (P)

This dissertation does not attempt to provide a detailed analysis of every play listed, but rather to trace the evolving history of adaptations of ancient Greek and Irish literature and of their unique contributions to 20th and 21st century Irish theatre, concentrating on the meanings they create not merely as texts but as performances, and on the significance of their production at the Gate or the Abbey.

**Chapter Summaries**

My first chapter, “‘At Once the White Flame and the Red’: Ancient Greek and Irish Tragedies at the ILT and the Abbey, 1900-1929,” considers adaptations of ancient Irish epic and Greek tragedy as they were produced and performed at Abbey Theatre and by the Abbey’s immediate precursors, the Irish Literary Theatre and the Irish National Dramatic Company, during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The focus of this chapter is twofold. First, detailed textual analysis demonstrates the complex layers of meaning in these adaptations, and their potential to serve not only in advancing a cultural nationalist agenda but also in providing pointed commentary on Irish sociopolitical problems and on evolving definitions of national identity. (This examination of the myriad ways in which ancient narratives can be made to reflect contemporary concerns is a trope that will run throughout all five chapters.) Second, elucidation of the aural and visual effects created by these plays in performance at the
Abbey demonstrates that the authorial virtuosity of this “writers’ theatre” ultimately failed to camouflage inadequate technical skills in areas like lighting, costume, and set design. The underexploited potential of these adaptations, intriguing and provocative but often lacking profound sensory appeal in performance, is characteristic of many of the Abbey’s early productions.

The establishment of the Gate Theatre by Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards in 1928 threw the Abbey’s technical weaknesses into stark relief. My second chapter, “‘A Memorable Barbarity on the Stage’: The Dublin Gate Dramatizations of Ancient Greek and Irish Tragedy, 1928-1955,” discusses the prodigious and complementary artistic talents that each member of this team brought to the Gate’s productions, and the uneasy rapport between the founders of the two theatres. This rapport is often characterized by mutual admiration, as in the case of MacLiammóir and Yeats, but also by a fierce professional rivalry, which comparison of their ancient Greek and Irish productions makes evident. This chapter examines the spectacular success of two of MacLiammóir’s adaptations of ancient Irish legend--his “memorable barbarity” Diarmuid and Gráinne and his innovative fusion of Yeats’ Celtic Twilight and Oscar Wilde’s sophisticated drawing room comedy in Where Stars Walk. It also treats the Gate’s response to the success of Yeats’s Oedipus adaptations at the Abbey: a series of Greek tragedies, including the Irish premiere of O’Neill’s Mourning Becomes Electra, and a massive production of Aeschylus’ Orestaia. One reviewer dryly commented about the latter, “If the Abbey has its Sophocles, the Gate must have its Aeschylus”—a prescient observation of the power of the rivalry in shaping these theatre’s repertoires.

By the late 1940s the Gate had so thoroughly routed the Abbey in terms of
technical expertise and production quality, especially where ancient adaptations were concerned, that the senior theatre began searching for alternative modes of staging the national heritage. In a paradigm shift from the early decades of the century when ancient Irish epic was staged according to the conventions of tragedy, the Abbey placed it on the boards as Irish-language pantomime. I argue in my third chapter, “‘A Fevered Sense of Place’: Ancient Irish Epic at the Abbey Theatre, 1947-1994,” that since pantomime both demands the most complex possible series of special effects (car chases, explosions, etc.) and provides a forgiving comedic forum in which to develop expertise in that regard, these Irish epic plays drastically broaden the Abbey’s range of technical skills. This chapter concludes by examining theatrical adaptations of ancient Irish literature in the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that such adaptations build upon the ancient Irish literary tradition known as *dìnnsheanchas* (etymologies of place names) to provide dramatic expression for a sense of personal and communal identity grounded in place-history, articulated by Seamus Heaney as a “sense of place.”

The powerful adaptations of the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides crafted by celebrated and often controversial writers like Marina Carr and Brendan Kennelly are the subject of the fourth chapter, “‘She’s a Trojan’: Greek Tragedy and the Performance of National Identity at the Gate and Abbey, 1986-2003.” This section considers the means by which such plays were made to serve as commentaries upon current events like the Troubles in the North and on the drastic changes in the social fabric of the Republic in the wake of the Celtic Tiger. It posits the staging of Greek tragedy as a locus for a revived late-century rivalry between the Gate and the Abbey, and provides a detailed
analysis of Brendan Kennelly’s *The Trojan Women* as a reflection of a tragedy then unfolding on the international stage: Europe’s “backyard war,” the Bosnian conflict.

My fifth and final chapter, “‘If not for inspiration, then at least for a sense of location’: Ancient Greek and Irish Adaptations at the Abbey and the Gate, 2004-present,” examines the presentation of Irish epic and Greek tragedy in the context of the Abbey Theatre’s yearlong celebration of its centenary in 2004. Over the course of the year a series of scandals, controversies, and shoddy accounting left the Theatre with a stunning debt of 1.85 million euro and a wave of resignations from the directorate and the executive board. This chapter suggests, among other things, that the Abbey’s production of Seamus Heaney’s *The Burial at Thebes* (an adaptation of *Antigone*) demonstrates in microcosm one of the fundamental problems of the entire centenary year, and one of the potential pitfalls for any adaptation of Irish epic or Greek tragedy: a failure to adequately situate the theatrical experience within the recognizable and complex context of contemporary Ireland and the larger world. This chapter also examines the successes and failures of a spate of more recent productions at the Gate and Abbey, including Vincent Woods’ *A Cry from Heaven*, Conall Morrison's *The Bacchae of Baghdad*, Paul Mercier's *Homeland*, and Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*, and their connections to the complex social and political configuration of post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland.
CHAPTER 1


To us Irish these personages [of Irish epic] should be more important than all others, for they lived in the places where we ride and go marketing, and sometimes they have met one another on the hills that cast their shadows upon our doors at evening. If we will but tell these stories to our children the Land will begin again to be a Holy Land, as it was before men gave their hearts to Greece and Rome and Judea. When I was a child I had only to climb the hill behind the house to see long, blue, ragged hills flowing along the southern horizon. What beauty was lost to me, what depth of emotion is still perhaps lacking in me, because nobody told me, not even the merchant captains who knew everything, that Cruachan of the Enchantments lay behind those long, blue, ragged hills!

--W.B. Yeats, Preface to Lady Gregory’s Cuchulain of Muirthemne

William Butler Yeats once described Deirdre, protagonist of the ancient Irish legend of the exile of the sons of Uisneach, as “an Irish Helen of Troy,” a literary heroine whose exquisite allure ranked with that of Homer’s divinely beautiful Argive princess. Yet while associating Deirdre and ancient Irish epic with the towering literary achievements of ancient Greece, he also claimed a unique distinction for Deirdre, a combination of gracious attributes which even Helen could not be said to possess: “alone
among the women who have set men mad,” Yeats averred, Deirdre “was at once the white flame and the red flame, wisdom and loveliness.”¹⁴

“The white flame and the red flame, wisdom and loveliness” could also stand as shorthand for one of Yeats’s dramatic aspirations—marrying the philosophical wisdom of ancient Greek civilization to the newly rediscovered beauties of ancient Irish literature. Although it manifested itself in varying forms and genres, Yeats’s fascination with ancient Irish epic remained constant throughout his literary career, from his first published collection of poetry *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (1889) to the allusions to Cuchulain in “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” the manuscript of which he was editing the day before his death in 1939.¹⁵ References to Irish epic and legend abound in his poetry, fraught with startling and symbolic significance and the disturbing confluence of past glories with present turmoil.¹⁶ These references also inform his plays, from an early collaboration with George Moore on a staging of *Diarmuid and Grainne* to his final play *The Death of Cuchulain*, which he was in the process of revising when he himself died.

The literature of ancient Greece as well as that of ancient Ireland held a lifelong fascination for Yeats, who wove references to Homer, Helen of Troy, and the figures of

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¹⁵ Yeats had published a number of poems in newspapers and magazines before the *Oisin* collection appeared: *the Dublin University Review, The Irish Monthly*, and the *Irish Fireside*, as well as Yeats’s first publication in an English magazine, *The Leisure Hour*. This last, entitled “The Madness of King Goll” (1887), also took an Irish epic tale as its theme (c.f. Jeffares, 1971.)
¹⁶ A brief survey of such poems would include “Baile and Ailinn,” “The Old Age of Queen Maeve,” and the other poems of *In the Seven Woods: Ballads of the Irish Heroic Age* (1903), as well as “The Ballad of Wandering Aengus,” “Cuchlain Comforted,” “Who Goes With Fergus?” etc.
Greek mythology and epic into dozens of his poems.  

Believing that “the Greek drama alone achieved perfection,” he sought for many years to incorporate classical tragedy into the Abbey repertoire. In 1904 he began writing a version of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, which he revised continually until the time of its first performance at the Abbey in 1926; his adaptation of *Oedipus at Colonus* was performed the following year.

Yeats’s theatrical aspirations were undoubtedly lofty: a theatre of poetry, of noble action, of “Greek tragedy spoken with a Dublin accent.” But at the Irish Literary Theatre and in the early years of the Abbey, the realization of those aspirations was often hampered by inadequate technical expertise. Yeats and his collaborators could pen heartbreaking or hilarious scripts, but it is important to keep in mind that the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre began as, at best, amateur practitioners of the art of the theatre. While they eschewed the spectacular pyrotechnics of 19th century melodrama, they began with only a vague outline of what to put in its place, and no experience in the practical, technical demands of theatrical production. There is an underlying assumption in the manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre that plays “written with high ambition” are *per se* a splendid goal and a sufficient guarantor of success in performance. But substituting “ancient idealism” for “buffoonery and easy sentiment” proved more easily said than done, more easily written than produced and performed.

The conviction that the words of the script are the crucial vehicle for communication between author and audience seriously underestimates the importance of every other element of production. Examination of the production history of the early Abbey plays demonstrates that Yeats and Lady Gregory embarked upon their theatre

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17 “No Second Troy” (1910), “When Helen Lived” (1914), “Leda and the Swan” (1928) and “Beautiful Lofty Things” (1938) are just a few of the most famous examples.
project with some fundamental questions unaddressed. Who should perform their new plays? Who should direct them? What style of acting would be most appropriate? What should the supporting visual and aural elements (costumes, scenery, lighting, musical accompaniment) look and sound like? Answers to these questions gradually evolved through a process of trial and error, and with the practical assistance of actors and artists. Accounts of the Abbey’s history often gloss over, for example, the vital contributions of the Fay brothers in helping to establish a distinctive “Abbey acting style,” and of Lady Gregory’s son Robert’s innovative set designs.

This is not to suggest that Yeats, Lady Gregory, et al. lacked the imagination to envision their plays on stage. Yeats especially had strong (although mutable) opinions about which visual aesthetic would be most appropriate to his plays. I do believe, however, that the concrete realization of that aesthetic was often much more difficult to achieve than the Abbey playwrights originally anticipated. In fact, while my title for this chapter pays homage to Yeats’s desire to achieve on stage the wisdom and loveliness he admired in ancient Greek and Irish literature, it also alludes more facetiously to the Abbey’s technical difficulties—quite literally, to their inability to control the flames, as inveterate diarist Joseph Holloway hilariously recounts: “… Mr. Yeats, trying with the limelight man to get the right shades for certain effects in Deirdre, cried out, ‘Hold it. That’s what I want!’ But the materials in the lime-box were actually on fire.”¹⁹

This chapter will examine the Abbey Theatre’s productions of ancient Greek and Irish adaptations by Yeats and other important playwrights, including Alice Milligan, George Russell (AE), and J.M. Synge, in the first three decades of the 20th century. Several of these performances technically predate the founding of the Abbey in 1904, but

¹⁹ Holloway, Vol. III, 43.
I include them since a) they were products of the Irish Literary Theatre and/or the National Theatre Society, the Abbey’s precursors, and b) they represent crucial steps in the complex evolution of the staging of these types of plays. Several other adaptations of ancient Greek and Irish literature I mention merely in passing, as they were not performed under the Abbey’s auspices, or were not produced at the Abbey until much later in the century. Of Yeats’s five Cuchulain plays, for example, only *On Baile’s Strand* (1904), *The Golden Helmet* (1908, and a later verse version, *The Green Helmet*, 1910), and *Fighting the Waves* (the 1929 ballet version of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, written in 1919) were performed at the Abbey in Yeats’s lifetime.\(^\text{20}\)

This chapter opens with a number of caveats. Firstly, as texts, these plays have been thoroughly analyzed by many scholars. Although I admire the insight and ingenuity of a number of those works, my chapter focuses instead on the practicalities of these plays in performance—the costumes, the set, the lighting, the acting styles—and their reception and interpretation by Abbey audiences. Textual analysis is kept to the bare minimum necessary to elucidate historical context or dramatic legacy.

Secondly, although my dissertation begins with the Abbey, the history of Irish theatre does not. I have therefore appended a brief description of those previous Irish plays and theatrical debates that most powerfully influenced the staging of ancient Greek and Irish tragedy. This appendix demonstrates that, although adaptations of ancient Irish epic are not seen on the stage until the early 20th century, from the 17th century onwards plays that dramatized crucial moments in Irish and Greco-Roman history helped to shape the Irish theatrical traditions that the Abbey both railed against and borrowed from. It

\(^{20}\) *At the Hawk’s Well* was first performed in a London drawing room in 1916, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* at the Hollandsche Schouwburg in Amsterdam in 1922, and *The Death of Cuchulain* at the Abbey in 1949 by Austin Clarke’s Lyric Theatre.
also suggests that turn-of-the-century Dublin audiences expected a night at the theatre to be emotionally stirring and visually arresting—that is, to entail more than simply listening to splendid poetry recited from the stage.

Yeats serves as a useful touchstone in this chapter since his interest in both ancient Greek and Irish tragedies spanned the Abbey’s formative years; he penned more adaptations of Greek tragedy and Irish epic than any of his contemporaries, and the majority of those works were produced by the ILT and the Abbey. This chapter therefore builds on the important recent work of scholars like P.J. Mathews, Kelly Younger, and Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux on the societal context and visual impact of Yeats’s and the Abbey’s productions of ancient Greek and Irish tragedy, to argue for the evolution and formative influence of Yeats’s dramatic adaptations of Irish epic and Greek drama within the context of 20th century and contemporary Irish theatre. An understanding of Yeats’s and the Abbey’s early production successes and failures is crucial background for understanding the subsequent historical and aesthetic trajectory of these plays, from Yeats through Micheál MacLiammóir to contemporary playwrights like Seamus Heaney, Marina Carr, Vincent Woods and Paul Mercier.

*Lieu de mythe, lieu de memoire: Yeats and Ancient Ireland*

The historical context that helped to shape Yeats’s intellectual, literary, and political pursuits is worth noting. The 19th century antiquarian movement had engendered a flurry of interest in ancient Irish literature, an interest that reached its apogee in the last decades of the century with an extensive series of translations of heroic literature from ancient Irish texts by such notable literary figures as Sir Samuel Ferguson,
Douglas Hyde, Standish O’Grady, and Lady Wilde.\textsuperscript{21} While ancient Irish literary works were eagerly seized upon by Irish cultural nationalists in support of their claims for Home Rule and independence from Britain, Yeats’s vision of their potential power as a force for cultural change was even more ambitious.

As A. Norman Jeffares suggests, Yeats’s imagination was fired by “the possibility of recreating a national mythology out of the old Gaelic legends...[which] had been translated... but...had not yet become a new literature.”\textsuperscript{22} His chosen vocation of celebrating Ireland’s rich literary heritage was reinforced by a dislike of Victorian materialism and dogmatic religiosity, and informed by his early exposure to Irish oral traditions during his youthful sojourns in Sligo. According to Robert Welch, Yeats spent much of his time listening to the storytellers of this “locale unusually rich in fairy lore and tales of hauntings, ghosts and eerie happenings,”\textsuperscript{23} which may well have awakened Yeats’s desire in later years to plumb the depths of the supernatural and the occult.

These childhood experiences seem to have had a more complex effect on the poet as well. Welch suggests that the repertoire of the rural storytellers held a strange appeal for the Anglo-Irish landowning classes, mirroring the sense of unrest and anxiety they felt in the face of the rapid rise of the Catholic middle class\textsuperscript{24}; these experiences may well have provided the youthful Yeats with his first insight into ancient legends’ potential to reflect contemporary concerns. Furthermore, the strong ties Irish epic creates between

\textsuperscript{21} Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810-86), much admired by Yeats, contributed \textit{Lays of the Western Gael} (1865) and an epic entitled \textit{Congal} (1872) to the Irish literary movement. Standish O’Grady (1846-1928) compiled, among other works, a \textit{History of Ireland: Heroic Period} (1878-80). Douglas Hyde’s translations of ancient and folk Irish literature include \textit{Beside the Fire} (1891), \textit{Love Songs of Connacht} (1893), and \textit{A Literary History of Ireland} (1899). Jane Francesca “Speranza” Wilde, mother of Oscar, published \textit{Ancient Legends of Ireland} (1887) and \textit{Ancient Cures} (1890).

\textsuperscript{22} Jeffares, 12.

\textsuperscript{23} Welch, x.

the heroes’ adventures and particular features of the topography of Ireland\textsuperscript{25} helped to shape Yeats’ romantic ideal of an Irish literature whose precise grounding within an Irish landscape could, paradoxically, transcend the limits of geography:

The poet is happy, as Homer was happy, who can see from his door mountains, where the heroes and beautiful women of old times were happy or unhappy, and quiet places not yet forsaken by the gods... [W]ho would not think \textit{Prometheus Unbound} better to read and better to remember if its legends and its scenery were the legends and scenery they had known from childhood, or that Shelley had known from childhood and filled with the passion of many memories?... [M]y people, the people of a Celtic habit of thought... have a passion for their lands, and the waters and mountains of their lands remind them of old love tales, old battle tales, and the exultant hidden multitudes. There is no place in Ireland where they will not point to some mountain where Grania slept beside her lover, or where the misshapen Fomor were routed, or to some waters where the Sacred Hazel once grew and fattened the Salmon of Wisdom with its crimson nuts.\textsuperscript{26}

Poetry fails to move its audience to admiration and memory when it is not grounded in a particular landscape, but literature that expresses the “Celtic habit of thought,” the “passion for their lands,” can attain Homeric greatness. Yeats himself could be the new Homer, provided his work arose organically from the Irish landscape and the legends it already suggested.

By the time \textit{The Wanderings of Oisin} was published in 1889, Yeats had already devoted a great deal of time and creative energy to the painstaking research, collection and editing of Irish legends and folklore. In his introduction to \textit{Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry} (1888), he praised the accuracy with which Irish storytellers have

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} This linking of landscape and legend is so prominent in ancient Irish literature as to constitute a genre in and of itself—that of \textit{dinnseanchas}, to which I will return in more detail in the third chapter.
\item \textsuperscript{26} From “The Tribes of Danu,” originally published in the \textit{New Review}, 1897; anthologized in Welch, 138-9.
\end{itemize}
handed down their bardic tales, as evidence of an unchanging literary tradition directly connected to Ireland’s ancient past:

...the long tale of Deirdre was, in the earlier decades of this century, told almost word for word, as in the very ancient manuscripts in the Royal Dublin Society. In one case only it varied, and then the manuscript was obviously wrong--a passage had been forgotten by the copyist.27

Yeats’s admiration for the unchanging epic tradition did not preclude him from valuing the variety and multivalence of Irish folk- and fairy tales, which “vary widely, being usually adapted to some neighbouring village or local fairy-seeing celebrity,” or some local family, or a poet: “Round these men stories tended to group themselves, sometimes deserting more ancient heroes for the purpose. Round poets they have gathered especially, for poetry in Ireland has always been mysteriously connected with magic.”28

These early references to the uncertainty of manuscript sources with respect to oral tradition, and especially to folk-tales’ “desertion” of their ancient heroes in favor of mysteriously magical poets, are crucial clues for understanding Yeats’s own poetic and dramatic approach to ancient Irish epic--an approach that scorned word-for-word transcription, privileging instead a folk-tale teller’s license to adapt his material to the exigencies and supernatural potential of the surrounding community. In the preface to the first edition of The Celtic Twilight (1893, 1902), which collected many of Yeats’s subsequent articles on Irish myth, legend, and oral tradition, the poet affirmed the retelling of the legends he has collected as an expression of individual genius: “The things a man has heard and seen are threads of life, and if he pull them carefully from the confused distaff of memory, any who will can weave them into whatever garments of

27 Welch, 3.
28 Welch, 3.
belief please them best.” Ancient Irish epic could thus be adapted to reflect and illuminate events in the poet’s own life and that of the nation, in much the same way that Irish fairy tales could adapt to local conditions and nonetheless bespeak wisdom, timelessness, and poetic beauty.

The integration of Irish epic into his plays and poems offered Yeats a unique opportunity to bridge the age-old divide between the local and the universal, the temporal and the eternal, and to illustrate his conception of the hero and the heroic gesture. As Jeffares notes,

His heroes were solitary men, his ideal audience, he said, a man alone, fishing in the mountain streams, or meeting his death alone in the clouds. To him, both Fergus, who abandoned the bureaucracy of kingship, and Cuchulain, who, all unknowing, killed his son, and was racked by love for women, are matched by modern men, Parnell or Hugh Lane... all these heroes of his care nothing for the views of the mass, or the suburbs, but have a lively regard for their own standing in their own judgment. This is a lonely occupation, and the poet’s task is similar to it. To a man of sensibility, the contemplation of life’s meaning, the thought of death, demands a summoning of strength, the making of a gesture--out of pride--against death, the all-powerful, the all-mysterious.

Yeats’ dramatic versions of Irish epic are some of his first halting attempts to represent this gesture. By the end of his life and literary career, productions of *The Death of Cuchulain* and his adaptations of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* would demonstrate how much he had learned about theatrical craft, and how much remained to be accomplished.

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29 Welch, 108.
30 Jeffares, 98-99.
When, In Rome? Greece, Carthage, and the Celtic Revival

In his introductory essay to the anthology *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, Declan Kiberd contrasts the study of classical literature in England and in Ireland. Especially in the first half of the 20th century, he argues, translation of Latin texts was employed in English public schools to inculcate the values of imperial domination: “The stock justification was that Latin provided the basis of many modern languages, but this was often a thin pretext for another agenda—the implementation in schoolboys of the imperial and administrative mentality” necessary for the future leaders of the British empire.31 In Ireland, conversely, canonical classical texts have often been used to challenge notions of empire and deconstruct its paradigms, argues Kiberd; Irish writers have stressed the analogies between ancient Greece and Ireland, each a “home of lost but noble poetic causes, which might be no match for a Roman *imperium* but only because of the superior emotional and intellectual complexity of its native people”.32 This sort of smug analogy, while understandably attractive as a means as maintaining national dignity in the face of foreign military and political domination, risks a dangerous oversimplification of the historical and political complexities at play, as Seamus Deane, for example, has noted.33

Elizabeth Butler Cullingford observes that such a conceptualization of the relationship between Ireland and Britain was common currency among the authors and historians of the Celtic Revival, who

… constructed Irish identity in opposition to imperial Rome, which to them looked uncomfortably like the British

31 McDonald and Walton, xi. For a lengthier discussion of this phenomenon, see the introduction to Kelly Younger’s *Dionysus in Ireland* (2001).
32 McDonald and Walton, xii-xiii.
Empire. Some Anglo-Irish antiquarians identified with Rome’s defeated enemies, the Carthaginians. Others, despising Rome as the utilitarian exponent of power and plumbing, envisaged the Irish as latter-day Greeks... intellectually and culturally superior to their conquerors.

She traces this type of antithetical identity construction all the way back to the 12th century, when Gerald of Wales’s *Conquest of Ireland* described the Irish as barbarians foolishly resisting the civilizing extension of the British empire via Henry II’s invasion. In response, early Irish historians constructed elaborate genealogies linking the Irish to the Scythians, Phoenicians, and Carthaginians. Thus began a tradition which later Irish historians, authors, philologists, etc. would continue over the subsequent centuries and even into the early decades of the 20th century: that of celebrating the storied past and the cultural achievements of these supposed progenitors.

An ethnic link to the Carthaginians was particularly useful in this regard, as it recast a much-touted (although equally spurious) British pedigree in a less-than-flattering light. Early British historians like Geoffrey of Monmouth averred that Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas, had settled Britain. According to Virgil’s epic *The Aeneid*, the heroic Trojan prince escapes from the destruction of Troy to found Rome; en route, however, he seduces and abandons Dido, queen of Carthage. The association of the Irish with the betrayed Carthaginian queen who swears eternal enmity against Rome is, of course, one of defeat and tragedy, as Dido’s despair at her abandonment ends in suicide, and the eternal enmity eventual culminates in Carthage’s destruction. It is nevertheless an association that recasts Gerald of Wales’s account of the “civilizing” influence of the

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34 For Cullingford’s in-depth analysis see “Romans and Carthaginians: Anti-Colonial Metaphors in Contemporary Irish Literature” in her *Ireland’s Others*, pp. 99-131.
British invasion of Ireland as a story of violence and deception visited upon an adversary of equal civility, if not equal military prowess.

This analogy, as Cullingford points out, participates in a long and complex literary tradition linking Ireland with the feminine, of which perhaps the most insidious example is Matthew Arnold’s depiction, following Ernst Renan, of a feminized “Celtic sensibility.” Arnold’s Celts are mystical dreamers who produce inimitable poetry and the occasional fit of violent temper, but are generally ineffectual at more mundane tasks like self-governance. Thus for Irish writers the sword of Dido is double-edged: on one hand, it conjures up an admiring sympathy for the Irish as the unsuspecting victims of imperial ambition and betrayal; on the other, it can support a more Arnoldian vision in which the hapless romanticism and the passionate, self-destructive violence of the Irish necessitate English dominance in practical matters.

Yeats attacked Renan’s and Arnold’s Celtic stereotypes--or at least those with which he disagreed--in an essay entitled “The Celtic Element in Literature,” published in Cosmopolis in 1898. According to Yeats, Arnold mistakenly defined as “Celtic” traits which were common to any ancient European agricultural people’s view of life and the world; dreamy nostalgia for lost or bygone eras was a characteristic of primitive, rather than Celtic, melancholy.35 Although Yeats could not resist the temptation to reinforce and even heighten Arnold’s portrayal of the passionate, abundantly creative Celt, he rejects any notion that such passion and creativity is a peripheral phenomenon that would benefit from being brought back into the mainstream. Rather, he resituates it at the very source and center of European artistic tradition:

35 Welch, 197.
...[O]f all the foundations of the passions and beliefs of ancient times in Europe, the Slavonic, the Finnish, the Scandinavian, and the Celtic, the Celtic alone has been for centuries close to the main river of European literature. It has again and again brought the ‘vivifying spirit’ ‘of excess’ into the arts of Europe.36

In Yeats’s formulation the Anglo-Saxons, far from being a useful mediator between the ancient civilizations of mainland Europe and the wild, erratic Celts, are themselves latecomers to the European arts (or are perhaps subsumed beneath the label “Scandinavian,” but unworthy of individual mention). The “main river of European literature” has its source in ancient Greece, of course; elsewhere Yeats, like numerous 19th century commentators before him, stresses the similarities between Celtic and Greek mythology, Cuchulain and Apollo, Celtic peasants and their Greek counterparts.37

Yeats imagines ancient Irish literature, like its ancient Greek predecessor, as an “abundant fountain” pouring forth its poetic riches: “[E]very new fountain of legends is a new intoxication for the imagination of the world.”38 But the increasingly pressing question was how to channel the flowing fountain into a useful course—-one that would further Yeats’ artistic aims and aspirations and those of the burgeoning Irish nationalist movement.

The First Feast of the Fianna: Irish Epic at the ILT

P.J. Mathews’s excellent study of the numerous progressive, modernizing, and “self-help” movements that flourished in Ireland at the turn of the century provides a revealing glimpse into turn-of-the-century Dublin’s flourishing language and culture

36 Welch, 198.
37 Welch, 141. Kuno Meyer and Alfred Nutt, for example, provide an extensive comparison of the two bodies of literature in their commentary for their edition of The Voyage of Bran (1895).
38 Ibid, 141.
revival, into which Yeats, Gregory, and Edward Martyn launched their Irish Literary Theatre. According to the mission statement of the ILT, established in 1897, their primary object was “to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature.” Thus the ILT would “show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery or of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.” This lofty calling, the founders maintained, would not be sullied by references to contemporary politics, but would in fact remain “outside all the political questions that divide us.”

From the outset, this statement of purpose begs numerous questions, not least about its blithe postulation that a theatre in Ireland could remain outside politics, or its assumption that it was necessary to establish a school of Irish dramatic literature, tantamount to a dismissal of three hundred years of often quite sophisticated Irish theatre. In its characterization of Ireland as “the home of an ancient idealism,” however, the ILT founders did give some indication of the material that they would focus upon in many of their plays. While certainly not limited to such sources, the Irish theatrical revival as spearheaded by Yeats and Gregory would place a prominent emphasis on adaptation and dramatic staging of ancient Irish literature, especially of the heroic epics.

During the ILT’s opening season in 1899, Edward Martyn’s The Heather Field garnered some critical acclaim as a potential herald of modernism in the Irish theatre, but praise for Martyn’s play was overshadowed by F. Hugh O’Donnell’s vitriolic attacks.

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40 C.f. Appendix.
41 Trotter, 17.
on Yeats’ portrayal of “immoral” Irish peasants and “blasphemous” insults to Catholicism in *The Countess Cathleen.*\(^4^2\) In an attempt to reestablish the ILT’s credentials with the Irish nationalist audience, its founders turned to Irish epic, opening their 1900 season with a carefully chosen double bill. The first of the two plays performed was Alice Milligan’s *The Last Feast of the Fianna,* the ILT’s first use of Irish legend to represent the “national drama.”\(^4^3\) This twenty-minute play features the warriors of the Fianna, whose feasting is interrupted by the arrival of the beautiful Niamh\(^4^4\) from the enchanted realm of Tir-na-nÓg; Niamh convinces Finn’s son Óisin, who resents Grania’s presence as Finn’s wife and is mourning his own son’s death, to leave his comrades and return to the fairy realm with her. The actors communicated the story through a series of extended speeches, and the production incorporated little action or dialogue. Milligan, a committed nationalist, had had extensive experience performing and staging *tableaux vivants* and short dramas for the Gaelic League, and the staging featured a number of statuesque, tableau-inspired poses, “moments of picturesque stillness on stage.”\(^4^5\) Mary Trotter notes that reviewers “praised the rich costumes and minimalist setting” as well as the music, composed by Milligan’s sister and based on medieval Irish motets.\(^4^6\)

\(^{4^2}\) In *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (2002), Susan Harris argues convincingly the real roots of this controversy lie in its portrayal of Cathleen as both symbol of Ireland and sacrificial martyr, a collapsing of roles that the nationalist tradition had divided according to gender (S. C. Harris, 34-41).

\(^{4^3}\) Mathews, 76.

\(^{4^4}\) A word of clarification regarding the spelling of characters’ names: since many of these plays predate the standardization of the Irish language, the names may appear in varying transcriptions: Grania for Grainne is one obvious one, but Niamh, for example, might be written as Naoimh, Neve, etc. according to the predilections of the playwright. When discussing each play, I have tried to retain the spelling that the author used in the script; thus Russell’s king is Concobar, while Yeats’s is Conchobar, and so on.

\(^{4^5}\) Trotter, 22.

\(^{4^6}\) Trotter, 21-24.
In his reading of the play in *The Theatre of Nation*, Ben Levitas suggests much of the praise for this short play may have missed the author’s main point; he argues that Milligan intended *The Last Feast of the Fianna* to critique the escapist tendencies of cultural nationalism, which she feared would lead to the valorization of an idealized, utopian concept of Ireland’s Celtic heritage at the expense of concrete action in the political sphere. If Levitas is correct to attribute to Milligan a “suspicion of the distractions of Celticism,” then the allegory proved too subtle for most of her audience members. In fact, Milligan’s reputation as a nationalist activist, combined with the exotic appeal of the medieval music and stylized costumes, seems to have produced the very type of distraction against which the play supposedly warns. The on-stage presence of the famous Fenian John O’Leary, who played one of the Fianna, would also undoubtedly have drawn the audience’s attention away from the subtleties of Milligan’s “anti-Celtic Celticism.”

One of the difficulties with Levitas’s reading is that while Milligan’s text may be open to his interpretation, the production communicated something very different to the audience. The medieval music and statuesque tableaux suggested the richness and artistry of ancient Irish literature, and O’Leary’s presence, the status of modern-day Fenians as the true heirs to their legendary warrior predecessors. (Levitas’s analysis also begs the question of why Milligan would choose to stage ancient Irish epic at all if she believed Celticism to be a mere distraction.)

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47 Levitas, 56-57.
48 The quotation is from Levitas. Mary Burgess Smyth has suggested that a significant part of the attraction of some ILT playwrights to Irish epic is that it opened up a space for highly public nationalist figures like O’Leary to appear on stage without seeming brazenly provocative—a demonstration of patriotism which though less defiant than a fiery speech nonetheless carried a significant symbolic charge.
The second production on the opening night of the 1900 season was Martyn’s 
*Maeve*, an attempt to link Irish epic to Ibsenite psychological drama. The play’s eponymous protagonist is a young Irishwoman who on the eve of her wedding to an Englishman sees a vision of Queen Maeve from the *Táin Bo Cuailnge*, the ancient Irish epic that describes the battle between the warrior Cuchulain and the armies of Connacht. In Martyn’s play the queen summons the young woman away from the human world into the land of the immortals, leaving her corpse to be discovered by her father and her fiancé the following morning. The production’s visual innovations included a shift to a present-day setting49 and the incorporation of an extravagant Celtic pageant “featuring Queen Maeve, boy pages, ancient Irish harpers, chieftains, and warriors” into that setting through the vision scenes.50

Like Milligan’s play, Martyn’s dramatizes the conflict between the material world and a world of vision, imagination, and idealism, but whereas Milligan overtly stages the legend of Óisín, Martyn provides a very loose adaptation of it, changing the gender of the protagonist and the nature of the enchanted realm’s allure. Niamh lures Óisín to Tir-na-nÓg with promises of marriage and kingship; Martyn’s Maeve must escape from her impending mortal marriage to return to the immortal realm where, as Queen Maeve relates, her true birthright lies.51 Queen Maeve’s murderous and licentious characteristics as related in the *Táin* are written out of this depiction (as they were in fact out of many

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49 Levitas characterizes the setting as “the here-and-now backdrop where much of Irish drama was to remain: the tenant farmer’s dwelling”--an odd description for the crumbling castle of Maeve’s father Colman O’Heynes, prince of the Burren, but perhaps apt in its allusion to the castle’s shabbiness.
50 Mathews, 78.
51 In this respect Martyn’s play also incorporates elements of the Irish mythological story of Midhir and Etain, to which I will return in the next chapter.
Martyn instead portrays her as a mother-figure who has watched over her namesake since the latter’s birth. Maeve’s abandonment of both Irish father and English husband-to-be in favor of this maternal protection transforms her into an immortal of stunning beauty—a trope that Yeats and Gregory would use to great effect in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), although with the gender dynamics modified yet again.

“With its anguished linking of past and present,” Morash comments, ”*Maeve* is an unusually subtle attempt to find in Irish mythology an alternative to mundane reality”; yet the audience opted for a much starker and simpler interpretation of this play’s political message, as Mathews succinctly summarizes:

> Irish separatism must be pursued even if this is materially detrimental to the nation. Within the rhetoric of the play the separatist aspiration is linked with anti-materialism, and Irishness is seen to be best expressed in a flight from the modern world.

Significantly, in production the most compelling expression of the compensation of imagination’s riches for material poverty came not from the actors’ recitation of Martyn’s archaizing and rather stilted language, but from the visual images created on stage: the juxtaposition of Maeve’s shabby, rundown home—once a castle—with the panoply of Queen Maeve’s pageant.

These two plays presented Yeats and Gregory with widely different models for adapting Irish epic for Irish audiences. Milligan’s version of the legend of Óisín was set in the ancient era of the Fianna, exoticized through music and costumes, yet it marked

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52 Lady Gregory notes primly in her preface to *Cuchlain of Muirthemne* that she has “left out a good deal I thought you would not find of interest.”
53 Morash, 120.
54 Mathews, 79.
55 Yeats had actually written a play incorporating some elements of the legend of Midhir and Etain, entitled *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, which was produced in 1894 at the Avenue Theatre London. I will discuss this play in more detail in the second chapter.

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its connection to contemporary issues with visual markers like the onstage presence of John O’Leary. Martyn’s loose adaptation contrasted the allure of the immortal realm with a naturalistic depiction of life in a particular geographical location in modern Ireland, retaining the Óisín story in broad outline but incorporating modern-day humans as well as other mythological characters, and providing a visual contrast between the spectacle of the fairy world and the squalor of the human.

**Indecent Proposals: Pursuing Grania**

In 1901 the ILT presented Yeats’s and George Moore’s collaborative script *Diarmuid and Grania* at the Gaiety Theatre. This play adapts *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne*, one of the longest and most renowned tales from the Finn cycle; it was staged in October 1901 together with Douglas Hyde’s Irish language play *Casadh an tSugain* (“The Twisting of the Rope”) as the central event of the third and final season of the Irish Literary Theatre. Accounts of Moore’s and Yeats’s collaboration vary widely in their estimates of each author’s contribution to and satisfaction with the script. The extent of Lady Gregory’s influence upon this collaborative effort is also an open question, as is which precise version or versions of the original legends Moore and Yeats chose as the basis for their play. However, there is a general scholarly consensus that the performance was intended as a provocative foray into an ongoing public debate, and that it was received as such.

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56 In the ancient tale, which exists in several variants, the heroine Grainne, betrothed to the aging king Finn Mac Cumhaill, instead elopes with the young warrior Diarmuid. The lovers flee from Finn for the next seven years, Diarmuid is eventually killed, and in many but not all of the extant versions, Grania reconciles with and marries Finn.

57 See, for example, Anthony Farrow’s introduction to the 1974 version of Yeats’s and Moore’s play, P.J. Mathew’s account in *Revival*, and the authors’ own descriptions of their collaboration in their autobiographies.
The choice of subject has its roots in the “Mahaffy-Atkinson controversy” of early 1899. In the course of the Vice-Regal Inquiry into Irish and Intermediate Education, which purported to examine the state of secondary school education in Ireland, John Mahaffy, a professor of Ancient History at Trinity College, disparaged the value of the Irish language and Irish literature, describing the latter as “silly and indecent,” and noting that the extinction of the former would be nothing to “fret over”.

In the ensuing battle of words, with Douglas Hyde skillfully defending the merits of Irish language and literature, the commission called in Robert Atkinson, a professor of comparative philology at Trinity, to corroborate Mahaffy’s statements. In his testimony, which included criticism of the lack of standardization of Irish grammar, spelling, and syntax, as well as an attack on the “immorality” of Irish literature, Atkinson singles out *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne* for especial vituperation as “not fit for children… I would allow no daughter of mine of any age to see it.” A lively debate followed in the subsequent weeks. In a letter forwarded to the commission, Hyde denounced Atkinson’s statements, suggesting among other things that anyone who was truly scandalized by the Irish legends that Atkinson cited in his testimony would no doubt feel scandalized by the Bible as well.

P.J. Mathews has most recently drawn attention back to this controversy as crucial historical context for Yeats’s and Moore’s play. He argues that the choice of subject matter is itself a direct response to Atkinson’s attacks on Irish literature, and on the

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58 This controversy was no doubt central in the decision to stage Milligan’s and Martyn’s plays as well, but neither approaches the directness of Yeats’ and Moore’s intervention in the debate.
59 Cited in P.J. Mathews, 37.
60 “I know what folklore is,” Atkinson is reported to have said at one point, “and I would not allow any daughter of mine to study it!” (Mathews, 39)
61 Mathews, 39-40.
legend of Diarmuid and Grania in particular. Yet the playwrights clearly did not intend to whitewash the legend, or make concessions to those who bemoaned its immorality. Their exploration of Grania’s motives lends a psychological depth to her character that the original legend lacks, yet the additional attributes are generally negative ones: fickleness, vanity, a penchant for deception and manipulation, and a lust for violence.

In Yeats’s and Moore’s play, Grania forces Diarmuid to swear allegiance to her and thereby to make enemies of his former comrades, but she soon becomes disenchanted with her life as a fugitive and with Diarmuid’s newfound domesticity (the second act opened with him shearing a live sheep on stage). When Diarmuid voices fear that her love for him has waned, she suggests that he return to Finn and the Fianna and fight with them against foreign invaders, for, she promises, “I shall love you better when you come to me with the reek of battle upon you” (38).

Although she professes a desire to heal the rift between Finn and Diarmuid by arranging a meeting between them, Yeats’ and Moore’s Grania is secretly flattered by the men’s rivalry, and petulantly disappointed when Finn says his pursuit was motivated by Diarmuid’s betrayal: “I was proud to think you followed Diarmuid for me, but you have said it was to avenge the breaking of an oath. This is a man’s broil. No woman has a part in it.” She flirts with Finn, arousing his desire for her again and provoking Diarmuid to jealousy:

Grania: I wanted to see you because of your greatness. I loved Diarmuid... he was young and comely and you seemed to me to be old, you were grey.
Finn: I am seven years older now, and my hair is greyer. I must seem very old to you now.

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62 In a paper given at a 2004 conference on “The Irish Hero” at NUI Galway, I suggested that this debate not only informs the playwrights’ choice of subject, but is also inscribed in the text itself.
63 Yeats, Collected Works: The Plays, 588.
Grania: No, you seem younger. As you stand there, as you lean upon your spear, you seem to me a young man...
Diarmuid: What have you to say to one another; what were you saying to Grania, Finn? I can see by Grania’s face that she is but little pleased to see me again.64

Grania’s unwillingness to commit wholeheartedly either to the aristocratic values of stability and solidarity represented by Cormac and Finn or to the simplicity of the domestic life she shares with Diarmuid far from the excitement and glamour of the Fianna precipitates Diarmuid’s death. Although she mourns him, in the play’s final line one of the warriors predicts “her welcome to Finn shall be greater.”65 The tragedy of the legend, according to the interpretation of these playwrights, lies in Grania’s inability to reconcile a romantic ideal of self-determination with her real material attraction to wealth and power. Her vacillation ends only when one term of the binary opposition that Finn and Diarmuid represent is eliminated.

P.J. Mathews has described the nationalist rhetoric in the early years of this century as falling into two diametrically opposed categories. The first, headed by D.P. Moran and known as the “Irish Ireland” movement, defined Irishness as Gaelic and Catholic; Moran “was vocal in his hostility to Anglo-Irish culture and influence”.66 An alternative to Moran’s rhetoric (promoted by William Rooney and Yeats among others) advocated the “civic republicanism” of a secular state with the potential to integrate both Irish Catholics and Anglo-Irish Protestants on equal terms.

By choosing Diarmuid and Grania as their protagonists, Yeats and Moore evinced their determination to demonstrate the inherent literary and dramatic value of the maligned Irish epics. By depicting an unsympathetic, manipulative Grania who foists the

64 Ibid, 588.
65 Ibid, 607.
66 Mathews, 115.
role of husband and lover upon the reluctant Diarmuid, only to decide when he embraces it that such an identity does not attract her, the playwrights provide a critique of Moran’s rhetoric. Overly rigid definitions of national identity, in which adherence to a particular set of descriptive criteria leads to the destruction or suppression of potential alternative definitions, are associated with Grania’s fickle dissatisfaction and lust for blood. The play thus comments, allegorically but pointedly, on the specific literary controversy as well as on more general debates about the nature of Irish identity.

This potentially useful message was lost in production. The performance was marred by the ILT’s disastrous decision to hire an English acting troupe, whose declamatory Shakespearian style and inability to pronounce the characters’ Irish names marred dialogue already stilted by the playwrights’ uneasy collaboration. Frank Fay, who would be instrumental in training the Abbey’s fledgling actors and who would himself contribute many fine performances to the Abbey stage, recorded his admiration for the play and his dismay at the performance:

Beautiful words abound all through the play, and beautiful voices and beautiful speech are indispensable if we are to be moved. All through the play the English voices grated on one’s ear... Truly, Diarmuid and Grainne must be even a finer play than I think it, to have survived the vulgar acting it received.67

The nationalistic fervor and excitement generated by the opening play, Hyde’s Irish-language Casadh an tSúgáin, directed by Frank Fay’s brother William and performed with aplomb by members of the Gaelic League, rendered the English actors’ shortcomings even more apparent.

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The Freeman’s Journal criticized the “attempt at realistic production... Had a more subdued and suggestive method been employed both with regard to costumes and scenery--had a little more been left to the imagination of the audience--the effect would have been infinitely better.”

Roy Foster notes that “the costumes, allegedly researched from illuminated manuscripts, were impressively dreadful”; the Journal’s critic was especially scathing about “Fionn’s striped trews, the material and colouring of which is so obviously and aggressively modern.” The audience chortled at the overacting of Frank Benson and his wife in the roles of the lovers; even the score by Edward Elgar failed to win them over. The public’s reaction casts James Joyce’s attack on the play in his pamphlet, “The Day of the Rabblement,” in a rather ironic light—Joyce vituperates the ILT for pandering to the parochialism of the masses, when in fact the “masses” at the Gaiety found the play largely ridiculous.

There were quarrels with the play’s content, as well: erudite antiquarian complaints about the playwrights’ editing of the tale irritated both Yeats and Moore, while the latter wryly noted that part of the cold response was no doubt due to their decision to stage Grania as something other than the model of the virtuous Irishwoman. Standish O’Grady, refusing even to see the play, confirmed Moore’s intuition by excoriating Yeats and Moore for staging a legend that “sullied” the fame and character of the Irish heroes, while the critic from D.P. Moran’s Leader accused the playwrights of twisting the play beyond recognition and of changing Diarmuid from ‘a fenian chief to a modern degenerate.’ The character of Grania, it was felt, had been turned into ‘one of these

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68 Miller, 63.
69 Foster (1998), 251-2; Miller, 60.
70 For more on Joyce’s pamphlet, see for example Miller, 60; Foster (1998), 253.
71 Farrow, 12.
kinds of creatures that have been so prominent in the
degenerate London drama.\textsuperscript{72}

One would expect the theatre critic from Moran’s newspaper to sharply criticize any
presentation of Irish heroes as human as well as heroic, but part of this reviewer’s
uneasiness clearly stems from the authors’ ties to London literary and dramatic circles,
and their staking a claim to Irish literature and Irish identity while eschewing Moran’s
categories of Gaelic and Catholic. The review makes clear his refusal of Yeats’s and
Moore’s claim to Irishness by snidely referring to \textit{Diarmuid and Grania} as “an English
afterpiece,” in contrast to Hyde’s “Irish play.”

This review also contains an intriguing subtext: a fear of “degeneration,” visible
in the characters presented on stage and potentially infectious to the Irish body politic.
Susan Cannon Harris has traced the increase in and the widespread diffusion of the use of
scientific discourse related to disease, infection, and contagion throughout this historical
period in the Irish media, and she argues convincingly that dramatic presentation of
weak, maimed, or wounded characters on stage could trigger audience members’ deep-
seated fears about the infiltration of disease within the Irish population.\textsuperscript{73} What the
repetition of the word “degenerate” in this review suggests is that any dramatic
adaptation of Irish epic that failed to present the hero as “the vigorous, hypermasculine,
athletic Gael,”\textsuperscript{74} and the heroine as a model of idealized, immaculate Irish womanhood,
would risk the wrath of Irish nationalists.

\textbf{Re-writing Grania: Lady Gregory’s adaptation}

\textsuperscript{72} Mathews, 109, quoting from “An Irish Play and an English Afterpiece,” \textit{Leader}, Nov. 2 1901, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{73} See, for example, S.C. Harris’s section entitled “A Morbid, Unhealthy Mind: Disease, Degeneracy, and
\textit{The Playboy},” 89-117.
\textsuperscript{74} S. C. Harris, 25.
A number of critics have suggested that it is as a response to Yeats’s and Moore’s presentation of Grania as fickle and opportunistic that Lady Gregory eventually chose to write her own version of the tale, significantly entitled simply *Grania* (1908). Maria-Elena Doyle has argued that this play, along with Eva Gore-Booth’s dramatic adaptations from the *Táin* featuring Deirdre and Maeve, represented a lost opportunity for the Abbey and the Revival to challenge “the authority of the woman-nation ideal” and the corresponding vilification or passive, hyperfeminine portrayal of the heroines of Irish epic, whose exploits in the ancient tales were often as aggressive and forceful as their male counterparts’. Doyle proposes that Gregory and Gore-Booth re-wrote epic heroines as “models of female self-assertion whose difficulties are caused not by their own unruliness but by the narrowness of their society.” Although the ILT and the Abbey would stage other Irish epics in the intervening years, and though Gregory’s play would not be staged in Ireland in her lifetime, her *Grania* testifies to the tenacious and enduring hold that Irish epic had upon on the imagination of the Abbey’s most important figures. It also illustrates the use of such adaptations in addressing highly personal conflicts as well as national controversies.

Unlike Yeats and Moore, Gregory places her sympathies squarely with the female protagonist of the drama, vindicating her of the allegations of faithlessness and selfish manipulation. Gregory’s Grania defends her apparent betrayal of her promise to Finn in terms of adherence to a code of steadfast loyalty, having unwittingly but irrevocably fallen in love with Diarmuid before ever meeting Finn. In Gregory’s text, the men’s petty jealousy of each other rather than the passionate love they declare for Grania motivates their enmity. On his deathbed, Gregory’s Diarmuid professes his friendship for

75 Doyle, Maria-Elena. “A Spindle for the Battle.”
and loyalty to Finn, but makes no mention of Grania. Stunned by the realization of how little she meant to Diarmuid, and by Finn’s attempt to renounce his pursuit of her (ostensibly out of respect for Diarmuid’s memory), Grania refuses to allow either man the veneer of nobility that such a gesture might confer: “It is women are said to change, and they do not, but it is men that change and turn as often as the wheel of the moon.” Instead, she announces her intention of becoming Finn’s wife, places upon her head the crown Finn had previously offered her, and exits unafraid, daunted only for a moment by fear of ridicule from those who might misunderstand her motives.

Declan Kiberd, among others, has suggested that this version of Grania represents Lady Gregory’s attempt to come to terms with her extramarital affair with Wilfred Blunt in the early 1880’s; this may help to explain her reluctance to allow the play to be staged in Ireland. I would add that the vociferous debates about the purity and virtue of Irish womanhood sparked by the performances of Synge’s *The Shadow of the Glen* in 1903 and *Playboy of the Western World* in 1907 provide an equally important context for the composition of this play. Lady Gregory’s Grania emphatically rejects the essentially passive, idealized role of the Irish woman as symbol, repository, and conduit of national tradition—a role to which the increasing gender polarization of nationalist discourse threatened to relegate her. Gregory’s recovery of Grania emphasizes her adherence to a virtuous standard of conduct, but nevertheless suggests a challenge to rigidly gendered conceptions of morality in its assertion that such a code should apply equally to Grania’s male counterparts, who instead fall short.

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77 Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 93-95. In her diaries Gregory does mention receiving royalties for American productions of the play, however.
Despite the fact that both Gregory’s and Yeats’s and Moore’s plays are versions of the same Irish legend, and that neither attempts radical change to the source narrative or its geographical or temporal setting, their presentation of the heroine and the issues upon which each play provides oblique commentary are vastly different. Above all, these two plays indicate that one of the most important attractions of adaptation is the structured freedom it provides to the playwright. Working within a well-defined plot line can in fact free the playwright to invest characters with unexpected psychological depth, to render them three-dimensional while maintaining the outline that allows an audience to recognize them, and to continually reinterpret their emotions and motivations. Adaptation also allows for intertextual “conversations” and the evolution of particular characters, of the type we see in these two early theatrical versions of Grania.

“Empty Cage and Tangled Wire”: Staging Deirdre

Although Casadh an tSúgáin and Diarmuid and Grania were the last plays produced under the auspices of the ILT, by the next year Yeats and Gregory had already embarked upon a new collaborative theatre project:78 Kathleen ni Houlihan, which premiered together with George Russell’s adaptation of Deirdre79 to much acclaim in April of 1902. The explosive excitement that Kathleen generated in nationalist circles, the dramatic impact of Maud Gonne in the title role, the play’s definitive place in the

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78 As Trotter and Saddlemeyer among others have pointed out, credit for this play for many years went entirely to Yeats, but Lady Gregory was in fact responsible for the lion’s share of the dialogue. Similarly, authorship of Deirdre is traditionally attributed to Russell (AE), although there is evidence that William Fay significantly contributed to its composition.

79 Like the Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne, the ancient Irish legend of Deirdre and Naoise features a heroine who rejects the love of the king, bestowing her heart upon one of his young warriors instead, and living with him in exile. Unlike Grainne, however, Deirdre despairs upon discovering that King Conchobar has murdered Naoise, and commits suicide. Most scholars of ancient Irish literature agree that the legend of Deirdre and Naoise, also known as The Tale of the Sons of Usneach, is the older of the two stories, and that the legend of Diarmuid and Grainne is at least partially derivative.
history of Irish theatre, and Yeats’ ambivalence about the success of its symbolism of
sacrificial martyrdom have been discussed at length by many critics, while Russell’s play
has been largely overshadowed in the critical discussion. Yet as Mary Trotter points out,
the performance of Deirdre also had an important political resonance:

Russell’s manipulation of his source story and its
performance by Inghinidhe members and nationalist
actors with other affiliations transformed the myth
into a metaphor for the need for unity and inclusion
among different groups in the nationalist movement.

In performance, Yeats’ and Moore’s Diarmuid and Grania undermined its own critique
of exclusivity within the Irish nationalist movement by casting English rather than Irish
actors. No such misjudgment was made with Deirdre and Kathleen: advertisements
carefully and repeatedly described both as “Irish plays” produced “under the auspices of
Inghinidhe na hEireann.” The all-Irish troupe included highly recognizable figures
from nationalist circles, the staging recalled the tableau scenes performed at nationalist
festivities, and the banner of the Daughters of Erin was on prominent display by the
stage. Trotter notes that “one of the great strengths of [these] performances... was the
triple meaning of the actors’ bodies on stage, for they were recognized as the nationalist
characters they portrayed, as nationalist actors on the stage, as nationalist activists in real
life.”

The performances were thus clearly coded as patriotic events even before the
express treatment of anti-imperial rebellion in Kathleen. But while the country kitchen

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80 Inghinidhe na hEireann or “the Daughters of Erin,” was an important turn-of-the-century Irish
women’s/nationalist association. For more on their contributions to the Irish theatre movement, see Trotter,
Ch. 3.
81 Trotter, 95.
82 All Ireland Review, no. 162 vol. 7.
83 Trotter, 96-7.
84 Trotter, 110.
setting and the folksy dialogue of the Gillane family in Yeats’s and Gregory’s play evoked enthusiastic and amused recognition from the audience, the staging of Deirdre functioned to distance spectators from the action: the set included a gauze curtain lit in green, behind which the actors performed, creating an otherworldly ambiance that meshed well with Russell’s tendencies towards “impressionistic mysticism.” Joseph Holloway noted in his diary that the curtain “added much to the weird and dreamy effect of the play upon the listeners,” as did the chanting of their lines “after the monotonous method of the ‘Ghost’ in Hamlet.”

The language of the play is a heightened, Ossianic diction. Russell’s Concobar recounts his vision of the glorious deeds of his warriors in the following terms:

...Through the ancient traditions of Ulla, which the bards have kept and woven into song, I have seen the shining law enter men’s minds, and subdue the lawless into justice. A great tradition is shaping a heroic race, and the gods who fought at Moytura are descending and dwelling in the hearts of the Red Branch.

Concobar’s prophecy proves false in its immediate application, as his passion for Deirdre and his hidden desire for revenge will tear the Red Branch asunder, but it is an apt characterization of Russell’s own vision of the edifying potential of Irish literature. Later in his career Russell would aver that “Gaelic culture... inspires all that is best in Irish literature and Irish life.” When Standish O’Grady once again protested the dramatization of Irish heroic legends after Deirdre was performed, Russell complained

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85 Trotter, 96-7; she notes that the opening night audience was in fact too appreciative of the family’s exchanges--William Fay in particular played his role as the father of the Gillane household to its comedic hilt, overshadowing any hint of tragic suspense. The description of Russell is taken from Herbert V. Fackler’s introduction to the play (Russell, 1970).
86 Although he commends Maire Quinn’s “agreeable” delivery, he also notes that the strong regional accents of some company members rendered the effect “not impressive, to put it mildly” (Holloway, Unpublished Journal, 1967).
87 Russell, 11.
88 From The Inner and the Outer Ireland, (1921); quoted in Fackler’s introduction to Russell, 1.
that O’Grady “confuses the big and gigantic with the heroic.” To O’Grady’s objection
that dramatic treatment of the Irish heroes debased them by placing them before the eyes
of the unwashed masses, Russell responded that the heritage of heroic literature was
universal in scope—a “great tradition” that could indeed shape contemporary Irishmen
into the “heroic race” Concobar envisioned.89

Given such a goal, it is not surprising that Russell’s text censors most of the
legend’s seamier aspects (although it is ironic, as it demonstrates an affinity very similar
to O’Grady’s for a noble and chivalric portrayal of Irish kings and warriors). Russell’s
Concobar does not have overt sexual designs on Deirdre; in fact, he selflessly risked
censure to save her life when at her birth it was prophesied that she would bring
destruction on Ulster:

The Druids would have slain her, but I set myself against
the wise ones, thinking in my heart that the chivalry of
the Red Branch would be already gone if this child were
slain. If we are to perish it shall be nobly, and without
any departure from the laws of our order.90

He does threaten violent revenge against Naisi and his brothers when he finds they have
taken her away, but justifies this as a need to punish those who have flouted the laws of
the land.

Russell’s Deirdre and Naisi are noble lovers brought together by divinely inspired
visions, and rather than committing a gory suicide after Naisi’s death Russell’s Deirdre
dies of a broken heart by his side: “My spirit is sinking away from the world. I could not
stay after Naisi... Oh, fostermother, when they heap the cairn over him, let me be beside

89 See Fackler’s introduction to Russell’s Deirdre.
90 Russell, 11.
him in the narrow grave. I will still be with the noble one.”91 Concobar arrives too late, and alone on stage gallantly kisses Deirdre’s dead hand, mourning her loss: “I have two divided kingdoms, and one is in my own heart. Thus do I pay homage to thee, O Queen, who will rule, being dead.”92 Though this brief play privileges plot over character development, it succeeds in exalting the doomed love of Deirdre and Naisi and the stoic nobility of all its characters, which may help to explain its popularity (it was revived numerous times over the subsequent decade).

The performance of Russell’s Deirdre was a revelation to Yeats. The quality of the performances by amateur Irish actors like Maire Quinn (Deirdre), Frank Fay (Concobar), Dudley Digges (Naisi), and Maire nic Shuibhlaigh (the druidess Lavarcam) astonished him. Their acting troupe, under William Fay’s direction, had attained the “gravity and simplicity and quietness” Yeats desired his own plays to achieve in performance:

The actors moved about very little, they often did no more than pose in some statuesque way and speak; and there were moments when it seemed as if some painting upon a wall, some rhythmic procession along the walls of a temple had begun to move before me with a dim, magical life... I have said nothing of the acting of “Kathleen Ni Houlihan,” for though altogether excellent of its kind, it was not of a new kind.93

This new kind of acting would eventually characterize the “Abbey style” developed by the Fay brothers: “distinguished by its meticulousness of preparation, its thorough-going sincerity of tone, its reticence of movement, and its beauty of diction.”94 The Deirdre production’s experiment in chanted verse also coincided with Yeats’s ongoing attempts

91 Russell, 30.
92 Russell, 31.
93 Yeats, “The Acting at St. Teresa’s Hall,” United Irishman, April 12, 1902.
94 Hogan, introduction to Fay, 7.
to set spoken word to music.\textsuperscript{95} The scenery and the costumes met with less of his approval, but still provided fodder for his own musings on appropriate dramatic backdrops:

The scenery of a play as remote from real life as “Deirdre” should, I think, be decorative rather than naturalistic. A wood, for instance, should be little more than a pattern made with painted boughs. It should not try to make one believe that the actors are in a real wood, but it should decorate the stage. It should be a mass of deep colour, in harmony with the colours in the costumes of the players... I would try and make a theatre where realism would be impossible.

\section*{A Statue of Cuchulain: On Baile’s Strand}

When the Abbey Theatre opened on December 27\textsuperscript{th}, 1904, it brought together the creative talents of Yeats, Gregory, Synge, the Fay brothers and their acting troupe, with financial backing from English tea heiress Annie Horniman; Yeats believed his opportunity to shape his anti-naturalistic theatre had at last arrived. The first play he contributed to the theatre was \textit{On Baile’s Strand}, featuring a tale of conflict between Irish warrior Cuchulain and King Conchubar; this play premiered on the theatre’s opening night, together with Gregory’s \textit{Spreading the News} and revivals of \textit{Cathleen Ni Houlihan} and Synge’s \textit{In the Shadow of the Glen}.\textsuperscript{96}

Robert Gregory designed the set, hung with amber-lit drapes and “dominated by two gigantic doors decorated with shields.”\textsuperscript{97} These, Richard Allen Cave has argued, provided a visible analogue to the conflict between Conchubar and Cuchulain--closed when Cuchulain submits by oath to Conchubar’s authority, opened to reveal the advent of

\textsuperscript{95} He collaborated with Florence Farr, for example, on a technique for speaking verse to the accompaniment of the psaltery.

\textsuperscript{96} For an excellent analysis of this play in its nationalist context, see S.C. Harris, 79-89.

\textsuperscript{97} Cave (2004), 98.
the Young Man whose youthful “fierceness” reminds Cuchulain of his love for Aoife.\footnote{Ibid. Ben Levitas suggests that the play also reflects Yeats’s painful estrangement from Maud Gonne (Levitas 80).}

Gregory’s set seems to have enhanced the textual portrayal of that conflict, but the costumes designed by the Abbey’s financial backer Annie Horniman were less evocative; Joseph Holloway in fact records in his diary Yeats’s comments that the costumes made the actors look like Father Christmases or fire extinguishers.\footnote{Holloway’s \textit{Abbey Theatre}, 48-50, quoted in Miller, 118.}

The bizarre costumes undoubtedly detracted from Yeats’s intended effect: “Greek tragedy spoken with a Dublin accent,”\footnote{Yeats, \textit{Dramatis Personae}, 72.} or as Levitas describes it, “a Sophoclean path through interrogation to tragic revelation.”\footnote{Levitas, 80.} The murderous conflict between Cuchulain and the son he does not recognize certainly has an Oedipal resonance, but the dark ancient Greek underbelly of this play was largely ignored by the press, who instead lavished praise on the set and the acting of Frank Fay as Cuchulain and his brother William as the Fool.\footnote{Miller, 120.} (When the play was revived at the Abbey in 1915 the costumes were beautifully designed by Charlie Ricketts, who had offered to consult with Gregory on the 1904 set.\footnote{Fitz-Simon (2003), 50-51. Miller lists the date of the revival as 1915; Fitz-Simon, 1917. I have been unable to find out whether there were actually two separate revivals of the play or if the latter date is an error.})

Yeats’s disdain for Horniman’s black, green, and red color and fabric scheme evinced his growing conviction that the proper staging for his plays was one of elegant simplicity in all respects—costumes, set, and acting, with nothing to draw the audience’s attention from the words of the text. In her fascinating study \textit{Yeats and the Visual Arts}, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux traces the influence of pre-Raphaelite painting on the
visual images created by Yeats’s poetry, and on his conceptions of scenery and costume. During the early years of the Abbey Yeats’s ideal visual effects resembled those of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s and William Morris’s paintings--clean lines, repeating patterns, bold color schemes, with only one or two predominant color choices. In 1905, he looked back on the costumes designed by Russell for the 1902 production of *Deirdre* and criticized them as too elaborate.¹⁰⁴

By that point, Yeats was writing his own adaptation of *Deirdre*, which premiered at the Abbey on November 24, 1906, starring Florence Darragh as Deirdre and Frank Fay as Naoise. Unfortunately, the critics disliked Darragh’s performance, and audiences were sparse; a spring 1907 revival with Mona Limerick in the title role seems to have fared little better.¹⁰⁵ However, in 1908 when Yeats revived the play in Dublin and then in London, *Deirdre* was a smashing success--in fact, it became the Abbey’s first financially viable play.¹⁰⁶ This was due in great part to the interpretation of the title role by famous actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, whom Yeats and Moore had unsuccessfully attempted to engage to play Grania in 1901.¹⁰⁷

Some credit for the play’s success must also be given to Robert Gregory,¹⁰⁸ who designed the costumes and the set according to Yeats’s extensive and precise stage directions. These called for:

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¹⁰⁴ Loiseaux, 92.
¹⁰⁵ Yeats, *Variorum*, 344.
¹⁰⁶ Foster (1998), 392.
¹⁰⁷ Foster (1998), 236.
¹⁰⁸ When the play was published in 1907, it included a dedication to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and in memory of Robert Gregory, crediting him for designing “the beautiful scene she played in” (Yeats *Collected Plays*, 175) the *Variorum* edition of the plays also provides an earlier dedication: “To Robert Gregory, Who invented for this Play beautiful Costumes and a beautiful Scene” (Yeats *Variorum*, 344). It also provides extensive set and lighting notes from the 1907 American edition of the play. Alsopach, the *Variorum* editor, notes “It is almost as if Yeats didn’t trust American companies to play ‘Deirdre’ without more explicit aid from him than he thought English companies needed” (Yeats *Variorum*, xv).
A Guest-house in a wood. It is a rough house of timber; through the doors and some of the windows one can see the great spaces of the wood, the sky dimming, the night closing in. But a window to the left shows the thick leaves of a copse; the landscape suggests silence and loneliness... There are unlighted torches in brackets on the walls. There is, at one side, a small table with a chessboard and chessmen upon it. At the other side of the room there is a brazier with a fire...109

Gregory’s set, a variation on an earlier design that he had developed in collaboration with Yeats’s friend T. Sturge Moore, created “the effect of a primitive hunting lodge like a palisade, where the flats were painted in a repeating pattern suggestive of rough wooden planks”110—exactly what Yeats had envisioned upon seeing Russell’s Deirdre. This “stylized realism” was employed in the costumes as well, the draped cloaks toga-like but held in place by prominent Celtic brooches, and with colors carefully chosen to harmonize with the backdrop.111

The text of the play clearly demonstrates Yeats’s debt to Russell, whose success proved that plays based on ancient Irish legend could appeal to a wide Irish audience, provided the heroic characters were treated with the expected deference. Determined not to repeat the Diarmuid and Grania debacle, Yeats created a Deirdre whose words and actions were diametrically opposed to his previous heroine’s. Unlike Russell’s, Yeats’s play contains only the final scenes of the tale—Deirdre’s and Naoise’s return from exile and their tragic deaths. His play draws attention to its own theatricality, framing Deirdre’s story with mini-performances of other ancient Irish tales of love and loss: his Musicians sing of Midhir and Etain, and Naoise recounts part of the ancient tale of

109 Yeats, Collected Plays, 175.
110 Cave (2004), 97.
111 C.f. Flannery, plates 12, 13, 14.
Lugaid Redstripe and his queen, which Naoise and Deirdre then reenact, playing chess while awaiting death at the hands of their treacherous enemies.\footnote{112 Yeats, \textit{Collected Plays}, 179-80, 189-90}

In her futile attempts to save Naoise, furthermore, Deirdre deliberately assumes a number of different roles; for instance, she pretends to want the King’s attentions, in hopes that Naoise will agree to flee if his jealousy is aroused:

\begin{quote}
Deirdre: ...Look at my face where the leaf raddled it
And at these rubies on my hair and breast.
It was for him, to stir him to desire,
I put on beauty; yes, for Conchubar.
... And yet I think
That being half good I might change round again
Were we aboard our ship and on the sea.
Naoise: We’ll to the horses and take ship again.
Fergus: Fool, she but seeks to rouse your jealousy
With crafty words.\footnote{113 Ibid, 186-7.}
\end{quote}

When Conchubar arrives she pleads with him, attempting to win him over with flattery:

\begin{quote}
“... there is no one / That will not praise you if you pardon us. / ‘He is good, he is good,’
they’ll say to one another. / ‘There’s nobody like him, for he forgave / Deirdre and Naoise.’”\footnote{114 Ibid, 194.} Upon learning that Conchubar has killed him, to mask her grief she assumes still another persona, that of a capricious woman whose heart can be won by promises of wealth and comfort:

\begin{quote}
Deirdre: O, do not touch me. Let me go to him.
\textit{[Pause.}
King Conchubar is right. My husband’s dead.
A single woman is of no account,
Lacking array of servants, linen cupboards,
The bacon hanging--and King Conchubar’s house
All ready, too. I’ll to King Conchubar’s house.
It is but wisdom to do willingly
What has to be.\footnote{115 Ibid, 196-7.}
\end{quote}
She assuages Conchubar’s doubts about her sincerity by protesting that women are drawn to violence: “Although we are so delicately made, / There’s something brutal in us, and we are won / By those who can shed blood.”\textsuperscript{116} She stokes Conchubar’s vanity, mocks his fears, and finally challenges him to have her searched by one of his “dark slaves” if he believes her to be hiding a weapon. Cowed and cajoled, the king agrees to allow her to prepare Naoise’s body for burial; by her lover’s side, although hidden from the King’s and the audience’s view by a curtain, Deirdre kills herself with a knife that she had hidden in her robes.\textsuperscript{117}

Yeats’s Deirdre is a much more complex character than Russell’s, displaying much more personal agency and psychological depth, and capable of cunning manipulation. But unlike the self-serving Grania of Yeats’s and Moore’s play, Deirdre’s motivations are noble--to save Naoise from harm, or to join him in death. Yeats’s Deirdre performs the most repugnant aspects of Grania’s character--her lust for blood and her willingness to provoke discord and jealousy--yet her suicide proves them to be mere performance.

Here then was an epic heroine whose love was noble, unchanging and exalted; a heroine whom nationalists could admire. Ironically, however, Yeats’s Deirdre was in many respects more ancient Greek than ancient Irish: his explanatory note to the play, published in \textit{The Arrow} in 1906, even described her as “the Irish Helen, and Naisi her Paris, and Concobar her Menelaus,” glossing over the clear inconsistencies of the

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid, 197.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, 198-9.
analogy\textsuperscript{118} in his enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{119} Yeats wrote his play to resemble a Greek tragedy, hiding the death scenes from the audience’s view, incorporating a chorus of musicians to comment upon the action, and adhering to the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action (it is, after all, a one-act play). Yet his heroine is no slavish copy of Helen of Troy. Deirdre is arguably much more deserving of admiration than Helen—her death is noble, and her love profound. And despite the lighting difficulties Holloway anecdotally relates, the acting and scenery of this production seems to have beautifully cohered with Yeats’s vision.

**Paint and Fabric: *The Green Helmet***

Wilfred Blunt’s *Fand: A Féerie* opened at the Abbey in April 1907; little information about this play has survived beyond its subject (which Yeats would take up in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*) and its Alexandrine meter, which seem to have influenced the re-writing of Yeats’s next Cuchulain play, *The Golden Helmet*. This prose play was staged at the Abbey in March 1908, re-written in “ballad metre” as *The Green Helmet* and performed at the Abbey in February 1910. Yeats’s “heroic farce” adapts the ancient Irish satirical tale *Bricriu’s Feast*, which features a mysterious Red Man who appears to the Red Branch warriors Laegaire and Conall.\textsuperscript{120} He offers to allow them to cut off his head, if they agree that he may return after a year for one of theirs. Conall, angered by what he perceives as mockery, beheads the Red Man, but the jeering head, picked up by its headless body, promises to come back at the appointed time to obtain his prize. In the

\textsuperscript{118} Deirdre and Concobar are not husband and wife, Helen lives a life of royal ease rather than harsh exile in Troy, Paris feels no nostalgic longing to return to Greece, Helen does not commit suicide upon her lover’s death, etc. etc.

\textsuperscript{119} Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 853.

\textsuperscript{120} Yeats follows the version of the tale provided by Gregory in Cuchulain of Muirtheimne.
intervening time a golden helmet mysteriously appears in the midst of the warriors’
camp, with instructions that it be claimed by the bravest of the warriors. Cuchulain alone
remains aloof from the fierce quarrels not only between the warriors but also between
their wives and servants over which man best deserves it. The deafening pitch of the
argument is only silenced by the Red Man’s return to claim a head. To save the honor of
his fellow warriors Cuchulain offers his own, and the Red Man rewards his bravery by
refusing to strike him, bestowing the coveted helmet upon him as a prize.

By the time the Abbey staged *The Golden Helmet*, the Fay brothers had left the
theatre due to irreconcilable differences with Annie Horniman. Though Trotter reads the
play as “a reflection of Yeats’s frustration with particular nationalist factions,” it seems
equally probable that tensions between various Abbey personalities occasioned this
surprising celebration of a kinder, gentler Cuchulain, who sacrifices his own desires and
even offers his life for the good of his community. In both its variations, the play starred
J.M. Kerrigan as Cuchulain, Ambrose Power as the Red Man, and Sara Allgood as Emer.
Robert Gregory effectively recycled the *Deirdre* set for both productions, although with
different props.

The version of *The Green Helmet* published in 1910 evinces the detailed attention
that Yeats had paid to its stage direction, and his pride in the Abbey’s realization of the
set. He first provides a paragraph of more general set instructions, specifying a “house
made of logs,” with a door and two windows through which a rocky shore and “a misty
moon-lit sea” can be seen, with “a great chair... a table with cups and a flagon of ale”
inside. He then adds:

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121 Trotter, 77.
122 Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 863.
At the Abbey Theatre the house is orange-red and the chairs and tables and flagons black, with a slight purple tinge... the rocks are black with a few green touches. The sea is green and luminous... The Red Man is altogether in red. He is very tall, and his height increased by horns on the Green Helmet. The effect is intentionally violent and startling.\(^{123}\)

It is important to note that the “violent and startling” effect is created by the jarring color scheme, the horns, and the tricks of perspective that increase the perceived height of the Red Man (who makes his entrance upon “ground, higher without than within the house, [which] makes him seem taller even than he is”\(^{124}\)). In terms of realizing an artistic vision, such directions illustrate Yeats’s and the Abbey’s increasing precision and sophistication. In technical terms, however, must be observed that much of the dramatic effect is dependent upon the placement and costuming of the actors and the colors of the set, rather than on innovative effects of lighting or set construction.

**A Vast Emptiness: Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows***

The set of Synge’s adaptation of the Deirdre legend, staged at the Abbey a month before *The Green Helmet*,\(^{125}\) was arguably more evocative than the latter’s. Synge had begun writing the play in December 1906, hoping to create a work “quite different from *The Playboy... something quiet and stately and restrained*” that would star his fiancée, Abbey actress Molly Allgood (Máire O’Neill). He was still working on the play when he died in 1909, and a version edited by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Allgood premiered in

\(^{123}\) Yeats, *Collected Plays*, 241.

\(^{124}\) Ibid, 247. See Ronan McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature*, Ch.2, for a textual analysis of this work within the overall context of Synge’s oeuvre.

\(^{125}\) *Abbey Plays 1899-1948* (1949).
January 1910. Robert Gregory again designed the play’s set, an outdoor forest scene that managed to create a sense of immense depth and space on the Abbey’s constrained stage. His design sectioned off tent-like spaces within the forest where the majority of the play’s action took place, while

the landscape backdrops were but briefly glimpsed when the curtaining was pulled aside to effect entrances and exits. In the final act the curtains were opened as the stage darkened to reveal a stylized painted backdrop showing the freshly dug graves which awaited Naisi, his brothers, and lastly Deirdre herself.

The scenery thus creates the sense of an immense outside world that tantalizes the protagonists with the impossible promise of escape from their destiny, while their lives unfold in much more restrictive enclosures.

Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* was acclaimed for the beauty of its language, its acting, and its staging. Almost thirty years later Yeats said that Máire O’Neill’s powerful performance as Deirdre in the last act was one of the moments that still “haunted” him.

*Deirdre of the Sorrows* was the last adaptation of Irish epic that the Abbey would premiere for more than 15 years. The theatre would stage the revised *Green Helmet* the following month and revive *On Baile’s Strand* in 1915, but Yeats’s new Cuchulain plays would be performed elsewhere, as the Abbey struggled to overcome the loss of the Fays, the withdrawal of Horniman’s subsidy, the financial pressures which necessitated extended English and American tours, and the political turbulence of the Easter Rebellion and the Anglo-Irish and Civil Wars.

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127 Cave, 2004, 104.
128 Yeats, *On the Boiler*. 
Rituals of a Lost Faith: Yeats’s Irish Epic Dance Plays

Yeats’s Noh-inspired play *At the Hawk’s Well* was produced privately in London in April 1916, in the Cavendish Square drawing room of Lady Cunard; the French expatriate and book illustrator Edmund Dulac designed the set and costumes, and Japanese dancer and scholar Michio Ito choreographed the movement and played the Guardian of the Well. Most of the cast wore masks of Dulac’s design, while the others were made up to look masked. Sean O’Casey, who attended a subsequent performance of the play at Yeats’s residence in Merrion Square, remembered it as having “grace and slender charm... but it wasn’t even the ghost of a theatre.”

*At the Hawk’s Well* did not appear at the Abbey until July 1933.

*The Only Jealousy of Emer* received its first performance in a Dutch translation at the Hollansche Schouwburg in Amsterdam in April 1922, with masks designed by Hildo Krop. The Dublin Drama League (DDL) first performed these plays in Ireland: *The Only Jealousy of Emer* was staged by the DDL at the Abbey in May 1926, with F.J. McCormick (Ghost of Cuchulain), Arthur Shields (Figure of Cuchulain), Eileen Crowe (Emer), and Shelah Richards (Eithne Inguba) in the lead roles. Ninette de Valois, whom Yeats had asked to found the Abbey’s School of Ballet in the early 1920s, choreographed the dances. Norah McGuinness, who played the Woman of the Sidhe, also designed the costumes and the masks, which she later recounted having baked in her gas oven.

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130 Founded by Lennox Robinson in 1918 to bring contemporary international drama to Dublin (Miller, 231).
131 Quoted in Miller, 247.
In 1929 Yeats rewrote *The Only Jealousy* as *Fighting the Waves*, having asked the young American composer George Antheil to provide the musical score—"a very strong beat, something heroic and barbaric and strange," as Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory.¹³²

The Abbey production of the play in May of that year also featured Hildo Krop’s masks and Ninette de Valois in the role of Fand. Meriel Moore and Shelah Richards, who would both be better known for their later work at the Gate Theatre, took the roles of Emer and Eithne Inguba respectively.

In a letter to T. Sturge Moore praising the masks and music, Yeats commented, "I always feel that my work is not drama but the ritual of a lost faith."¹³³ It is an unintentionally apt commentary on the legacy of his dance plays, since the performance of *Fighting the Waves* attracted the Dublin intelligentsia only to perplex them. Critic and playwright Mary Manning recorded both the technical difficulties and the aesthetic potential of the performance:

> Some of the poet’s loveliest verse was rendered completely inaudible by a welter of strange sounds—drums beating, tin cans rattling, and somebody wailing out of tune. A kind of bastard Stravinsky or ‘Sacrifice to Spring Cleaning.’ However, the masks and the dancing were strangely lovely.¹³⁴

In part because of these kinds of production difficulties, Yeats’s unexpected and challenging fusion of Irish epic content and ritualized Japanese form would remain

¹³² Ibid, 278. These adjectives suggest that the Gate’s 1928 production of MacLiammóir’s *Diarmuid and Grania*, which I will discuss in Chapter 2, had made a strongly favorable impression on Yeats.


¹³⁴ Saturday Review of Literature, 17 May 1930: Mary Manning, “In Dublin To-Day.”
unique in the Abbey’s repertoire until Ulick O’Connor’s Noh staging of *Deirdre* in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{135}

Yeats moved away from the Noh form during the last ten years of his life, although his last, unfinished play, *The Death of Cuchulain*, retains certain Noh-inspired elements: the dream-like atmosphere, the incorporation of musicians, chorus, and a messenger-figure, and stylized dance. Though demanding for the actors, the play requires very little set--in fact, Yeats’s directions call for “a bare stage of any period,” and for abstract shapes (e.g. “a black parallelogram”) to symbolize the warriors’ heads.\textsuperscript{136}

The stark production directions suggest a distrust of the Abbey (or any theatre)’s ability to properly stage this play. And in fact, incredibly, the theatre Yeats founded has never produced this play.\textsuperscript{137}

**“But how will the Catholics take it?”: Yeats’s Versions of Sophocles**

The Abbey did produce Yeats’s adaptations of Greek tragedy, however, and to international acclaim. During a BBC radio broadcast in 1931, Yeats recounted the original source of his interest in producing Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* at the Abbey:

> Nearly thirty years ago I was at the Catholic University of Notre Dame... A certain monk ... told me ... that ‘Oedipus the King’ had just been performed under the auspices of his University. ‘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.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{135} Discussed in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{136} Yeats, *The Death of Cuchulain*, in *Collected Plays*, 545, 553.

\textsuperscript{137} The closest the Abbey seems to have come to producing Yeats’s last work was a 1978 Peacock Theatre lunchtime performance of a play entitled *Mr. Yeats and the Death of Cuchulain* by Jim Fitzgerald.

\textsuperscript{138} Quoted in Younger, 35 and in *Collected Plays*, 884. The latter also notes that Notre Dame students performed their own translation of *Oedipus* on 15 May 1889 (885).
Yeats began a version of the play in the winter of 1904, as preparations were afoot for the opening of the Abbey. Dissatisfaction with his own efforts led him to solicit translations from Oliver St. John Gogarty, Gilbert Murray, and John Eglinton over the next few years, and when Dublin Castle tried to pressure the Abbey not to produce Shaw’s banned play *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, Yeats retaliated by threatening an *Oedipus* performance.

Even after the English censor lifted the ban in 1910 Yeats continued working on his script (not a translation *per se* but a spare, modern version of classical scholar Sir Richard Jebb’s translation). Though essentially completed by 1912, his version waited fourteen years for its first performance—in part because of difficulties engaging an appropriate cast and director at the Abbey, and in part because of the towering success of Max Reinhardt’s massive 1912 production of Gilbert Murray’s translation of the play at Covent Garden in London.

Surviving photos of the December 1926 Abbey production of *King Oedipus* show an elegantly simple set—two square pillars against a dark curtain. F.J. McCormick played Oedipus, Eileen Crowe Jocasta, and Barry Fitzgerald Creon, and Lennox Robinson directed the play. The choral music was sung by the liturgical choir of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, standing “almost lost in shadow” in the orchestra pit in front of the stage.

Though Yeats worried that the audience would be unable to bear the play’s ninety minutes of dramatic tension and feared that its risqué content might arouse hostility (“how will the Catholics take it?” he wondered), the spectators were enthralled by the production. An American reviewer from the New York Times commented, “One does

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139 For a comparative analysis of Jebb’s translation and Yeats’s version, see Younger, Ch. 1.
140 C.f. Younger, 28-36.
not expect to see an audience, drawn from all ranks of life, crowding a Theatre beyond its capacity and becoming awed into spellbound, breathless attention by a tragedy of Sophocles. Yet that is exactly what happened at the Abbey Theatre.\textsuperscript{141} Reviews comment on the brilliant clarity of both the text and the actors’ recitation, and the play’s unexpected popularity inspired Yeats to begin \textit{Oedipus at Colonus} almost immediately, once again working from Jebb’s translation. By September 1927 the Abbey would present both plays together, maintaining the original casting for the first, and adding Shelah Richards as Antigone in the second.\textsuperscript{142}

Yeats described the language of the script as “bare, hard and natural like a saga,”\textsuperscript{143} and the play as a “plain man’s Oedipus” which he hoped would be “intelligible on the Blasket Islands.”\textsuperscript{144} Yeats’s conviction that ancient Greek and Irish literatures shared a common heritage and should share a common prestige helped inspire this endeavor to write in an ancient heroic style a Greek tragedy that would speak simply but profoundly to his fellow countrymen. The second play, for which he envisioned an Irish setting, makes this intention even clearer. “When I prepared \textit{Oedipus at Colonus} for the Abbey stage,” he later recalled, “I saw that the wood of the Furies in the opening scene was any Irish haunted wood...”\textsuperscript{145} His version of \textit{Oedipus} presents Greece-as-Ireland, with the simple set suggestive not only of an ancient Greek temple but also of the neo-classical buildings in modern Dublin.

Younger argues that the entire plot of \textit{Oedipus at Colonus} is that of

\textsuperscript{141} New York Times review, 26 Dec. 1926, reprinted on the cover of the first publication of the script (London: MacMillan, 1928). The NYT also described the enthusiastic final applause as “a spontaneous tribute such as almost beggared belief.” Reprinted in Miller, 263.
\textsuperscript{142} Younger, 67.
\textsuperscript{143} Letter to Olivia Shakespear, quoted in Miller 262.
\textsuperscript{144} New York Times, 15 Jan. 1933, W.B. Yeats, “Plain Man’s Oedipus.”
\textsuperscript{145} Yeats, \textit{On the Boiler}, 28.
a “search for place”... Oedipus’s attempt to find a place to call his own; a place to belong and a place where he can die. The conflict arises when Thebans and Athenians argue over rejecting him, or claiming him as their own. Oedipus, as a result, exists in a liminal sanctuary that teeters between integration and exile, community and isolation.146

But while Younger deems that the play reflects Yeats’s anxieties about his ambiguous “Anglo-Irish” status, I believe the play has much wider implications. The “search for place”--for a sense of national and communal identity--reverberates not just in this play but throughout 20th century and contemporary Irish theatre. Furthermore, as I shall argue in subsequent chapters, this search is frequently and compellingly expressed in dramatic adaptations of ancient Greek and Irish literature, both as literary texts and as theatrical performances.

A key to the success of Yeats’s versions of Sophocles lies in the elegant and suggestive simplicity of both set and language, pared down to a point that allowed glimpses of modern Ireland behind the ancient Greek veneer. The Abbey’s productions of Oedipus demonstrated the potential of Greek tragedy to represent modern Irish anxieties, a potential only partially realized in their productions of ancient Irish epic. With the advent of Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir and the founding of Dublin’s Gate Theatre, both ancient Greek and ancient Irish adaptations would be performed with the combination of technical genius and dramatic showmanship that the Abbey founders had dreamed of, but had been ultimately unable to attain.

146 Younger, 61.
CHAPTER 2

“A MEMORABLE BARBARITY ON THE STAGE”:

THE DUBLIN GATE DRAMATIZATIONS

OF ANCIENT GREEK AND IRISH TRAGEDY, 1928-1955

Molaim-se Gráinne thar na mnáibh eile atá 'sna sean-sgéaltaibh. Bhi sí cho beo briomhar sin go mbionn sí 'ndon geit nó gáire bhaint asaín fós féin, ach ní thig le Déirdre ná le Helen ach brón agus cumha chur ar an gcroidhe le méid a n-áilleachta.147

--Micheál MacLiammóir, from the dedication of Diarmuid agus Gráinne (1928)

The prodigious and complementary theatrical talents of actor, playwright and scene designer Micheál MacLiammóir and actor/director Hilton Edwards have been recognized by Irish and international theatre critics and audiences alike. For their pioneering work in Irish theatre, including the establishment of Dublin’s Gate Theatre, MacLiammóir and Edwards were honored with distinctions like the Freedom of the City of Dublin (conferred upon them in 1973, the first time such an accolade was granted to members of the theatrical profession).148 Both were fine actors; Edwards was also a gifted director, lighting designer, and musician, and MacLiammóir a brilliantly artistic

147 “I myself praise Grainne over all the other women in the ancient tales. She was so full of life she still possesses the ability to shock and amuse us, but the beauty of Deirdre and Helen is only capable of arousing sorrow and care in our hearts.” MacLiammóir dedicated this play to his dear friend Máire Ni Chaoimh, also known as Mary O’Keefe, who had been instrumental in its composition but died tragically young, before the play was completed. His dedication attributes this quotation to his dear departed mother, though his mother spoke no Irish and it is unlikely that she would have been familiar with either Grainne or Deirdre (MacLiammóir, Diarmuid agus Gráinne, 5; future references to this script will be given in parenthetical notation). My thanks to Dr. Brian O Conchubhair of Notre Dame, who kindly corrected the imperfections of my original translation.

costume and set designer.

Christopher Fitz-Simon’s meticulously researched biography of the two men provides a wealth of information about their lifelong partnership and their prolific contributions to theatre, film, television, and radio; MacLiammóir himself published a series of (airbrushed) autobiographies, and both men wrote extensively about their goals for the Gate, their theatrical experience, and their respective areas of technical expertise.149 Yet Irish theatre historians are only beginning to analyze the impact of their contributions to the history of Irish theatre, not merely in bringing avant-garde European and American theatre to Dublin and but also in taking innovative Irish productions on tour, to London and New York and more exotically afield to cities like Cairo and Belgrade.150

I will argue in this chapter that two of MacLiammóir’s plays serve as a crucial bridge between the early portrayals of Irish legend staged by the ILT and the Abbey Theatre, and the complex dramatizations of such source material in the late 20th and early 21st century. MacLiammóir’s mélange of romanticized Celtic twilight inspiration and cutting-edge continental theatrical innovation laid the foundation, in fact, for some of the most sophisticated later adaptations of this material, by Woods, Carr, and Mercier among others.

I will also propose that the Gate’s remarkable performances of adaptations of Greek and Irish tragedy resituated the crucial issues raised by such plotlines within the

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149 See, for example, Hilton Edwards’s memoir The Mantle of Harlequin (1958) with a preface by MacLiammóir; MacLiammóir’s All for Hecuba: An Irish theatrical autobiography (1946), Aisteoirí faoi dhá sholas (1956), Each actor on his ass (1961), Theatre in Ireland (1964), and Enter a Goldfish: Memoirs of an Irish actor, young and old (1977).

150 “The Gate: Home and Away” by Richard Pine, published in the first volume of the Irish Theatrical Diaspora series (2005), makes a valiant first attempt at remedying this deficiency, but focuses on only five tours out of the dozens made by the Gate during MacLiammóir’s and Edwards’s lifetimes.
context of modern Irish society and international politics, and furthermore, that the technical expertise of Edwards and MacLiammóir in virtually every aspect of theatrical production posed a serious challenge to the Abbey. My subsequent chapters will trace the momentous impact of their rivalry, especially concerning the staging of ancient Greek and Irish adaptations, upon both of these theatres—a rivalry that continues in effect and intensity to the present day.

**Diarmuid and Grainne and the Founding of the Gate**

MacLiammóir’s *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*, the first of his two crucial adaptations of ancient Irish literature, was originally written in Irish and was staged for the first time on August 27, 1928 as the inaugural production of Galway’s *Taibhdhearc* Theatre. Although he was born in London and learned Irish as a second language through Gaelic League classes there, MacLiammóir’s linguistic talents and enthusiasm, not to mention his penchant for creatively enhanced autobiography, allowed him to pass in Ireland for a native speaker born in Cork.¹⁵¹ Serendipitous coincidence brought MacLiammóir, Edwards, and Galway university professor Liam O Briain together in early 1928, when a committee headed by O Briain was endeavoring to found, and had financial backing for, an Irish-language theatre in Galway. MacLiammóir provided the script of his *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* along with the scene and costume design, and took the lead role, while Edwards—who unlike his partner spoke no Irish—directed the amateur company.

In his autobiography *All for Hecuba* MacLiammóir explains that he had been working on this play for quite some time. The idea had sprung from conversations with Máire O’Keefe, a close friend and travel companion who had shared his love for the Irish

¹⁵¹ Barrett, xi, xiii.
language and Celtic myth and legend, and whose premature death had, years before, 
thrown the young MacLiammóir into an intense depression. He seems initially to have 
had Shakespearian actor Anew McMaster and his touring company in mind as director 
and cast, and not to have planned an Irish-language production—despite writing the play 
in that language.  

Edwards assisted MacLiammóir with the shaping of the second and 
last acts, but the romantic visions of the Fianna were entirely MacLiammóir’s:

I would take a train to Howth and climb the familiar 
places among the heather... the persons of the play were 
real here, and tradition has it that at least one of the most 
important episodes took place among the very hills where 
I lay with note-book and pencil. Sometimes they would 
seem to rise up out of the heather at my side and look at 
me for a moment before they turned to walk out of sight 
into the empty air, those tall shining figures I was 
dreaming of: Fionn with his winged helmet and his 
heavy tread, his mantle floating in the wind, his hounds 
fawning at his feet, his immortal son Oisin, the poet, at 
his side; or Diarmuid would pass, dark and grave and 
laughing, with his cap of eagle feathers pulled low over 
his fatal brow; or Gráinne herself would peer into my 
eyes, the locks of bewildering honey-gold hair blowing 
about the temples, the dreaming oval face as white as 
milk, a little shadow of mockery lying like a faint 
laughter over the red mysterious mouth.

Luckily MacLiammóir’s overblown Celtic mysticism was tempered by an 
intuitive understanding of the underlying technical difficulties of staging the play, and an 
awareness of the shortcomings of his translation: “What I had written in Irish sounded 
well and gave opportunities for acting, but translated into English it all seemed and still 
seems to me like an expurgated version of *Salomé*, through which the twilit winds of a

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152 In *All for Hecuba* MacLiammóir notes that O’Keefe “had wanted [him] to write the story of Diarmuid 
and Gráinne,” and also recalls a letter he sent to Anew McMaster, describing *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* as 
“the play I’m doing for you,” and noting that “I’m writing it in Irish—it goes better that way—but I am 
translating it scene by scene for you” (13). According to MacLiammóir, McMaster agreed to produce the 
play, and even went so far as to have playbills printed up advertising “*Diarmuid and Gráinne*, A romantic 
play on an ancient Irish theme, by Micheál Mac Liammóir,” before deciding against the endeavor.
The collaboration with Liam O Briain unexpectedly offered him both the chance to present the play in Irish with all of its original linguistic coloring, and the challenge of creating complementary, ground-breaking visual effects:

a practical opportunity for Diarmuid and Gráinne in its own language... I knew, whatever the faults of the play might be, that its settings alone offered a million occasions to producer and designer alike, and that a memorable barbarity on the stage of a Gaelic theatre in the only Irish-speaking town we had left would create a model that might well have results on the future.155

Diarmuid agus Gráinne is a three-act play, which opens in "seomra beag i dTeamhair. Na bhallá clúdaithe le bratacha"156 ("a little room in Tara. The walls covered with curtains," 7), or as MacLiammóir's English translation more briefly puts it, "a curtained room in Tara" (script 1).157 The bhandraoi ("druidess" or "witch," called "the wise woman" in MacLiammóir’s translation) and the bhanaltra (Grainne's nurse) discuss the wedding festivities to be held that night. The former lets out a sinister cackle upon hearing the plans for the feast, which makes the nurse ask nervously: “Cé’n sórt gáire é sin ort, a Bhandraoi na gCnoc? (An gáire ag dul i méid.) Cé’n sórt gáire é sin ort? Mh'anam ach go bhfuil do ghuth cho caol cruaidh le spéirling lann i geathanna na sean-aimsire?” (7).

A literal English translation might run like this: "What kind of laughter is that on..."
you, Druidess of the hills? (the laughter grows) What kind of laughter is that on you?
My soul, but your voice is as narrow-hard as the thunderstorm of blades in ancient
battles." Thankfully, MacLiammóir's translation does not attempt an exact reproduction
of the Irish vocabulary or syntax, although he clearly revels in the poetry of the similies:
"Why are you laughing, wise woman? (chuckles grow louder). Why are you laughing?
By the Gods, your laughter is thin and high like the dashing of battle swords and blades
in the wars of old times" (script 1).

The bhandraoi responds "Ag gáirídhe faoi mo rúnta féin áta mé... Rúnta dubha
uath-mhara, ar nós coillte móra Chonnacta faoi bhreac-sholus na Samhna" (8)--"laughing
about my secrets I am... dark, sea-deep secrets like the great woods of Connacht in the
November twilight," or as MacLiammóir renders it: "I laugh because of the secrets I
have... dark and terrible they are like the great woods," etc. (script 1). The dialogue
continues in this foreboding fashion, with the bhandraoi implying between peals of evil
laughter that the wedding will not occur as planned.

The second scene take place in the inner court of Tara; the warrior Diorraing
points out the other members of the Fianna to Grainne as they arrive upon the hill
outside. MacLiammóir's Grainne is a young woman dreading her impending marriage to
a man she does not love: "Ó, mó bhrán, mo dhiachair nach bhfuilim cho saor le héanlaith
an aeur nó le clainn allta na coille!" (22)158 When Diorraing points to Fionn she laments
"Ó, nach mór an t-ionndadh agus nach mór an náire é nach le h-aghaidh a mhic, Oisín,
thainig Fionn dom' iarraidh, agus nach le n-a aghaidh féin? Nár bhó chórtar mar chéile

158 MacLiammoir: “Oh my grief! My grief! that I am not as free as the birds of the air, or as the wild
things of the woods!” (script 10)
She stares intently at each of the men that Diorraing names (the list is truncated in the English version) but is instantly smitten upon seeing Diarmuid:

Grainne: (Go hobann, agus meangadh ar a béal): Agus innis dom, a Dhiorraing, innis dom... cé h-é an laoch óg binnbhriatharach a bhfuil a chasfholt cho dubh le h-oidhche gheimhridh, a bhfuil a dhá ghruaíadh ar dhath an chaoir chaorthainn, a bhfuil a chuid malaí cho dubh, cho tanaidh le sgríb pinn, a bhfuil a dhá shúil cho soilleach le dhá linn sléibhe um thráthnóna; é síúd a bhfuil caipín gorm cleiteach ar a cheann aige, agus é 'na sheasamh idir Oisín agus Fionn? Diorraing: (Sgeon ann de bhárr an tsoluis atá le tabhairt faoi deara i súile Ghráinne... 24)¹⁶⁰

Diarmuid channels Wilde's Salomé to describe his desire for Grainne: "Cé go bhfuil milseacht na meala in do chorp, is nimhneach an mhilseacht í, agus feicim drithle na nimhe faoi do shuíl"¹⁶¹ (51). He eventually agrees to escape with her, though conflicted by his oath of loyalty to Fionn: "Nuair a bhí tú im bhaclainn rinne mé dearmad ar 'chuile rud eile agus anois ní bheidh aon tsíocháin agam arís go deo..."¹⁶² (56).

The second act shifts swiftly between fantastic scenes: "Áit dhorchá i dTir na Óg," where the people of the Sidhe converse about the pair's trials in their flight from Fionn, the "bothán i lár coille" where Grainne and Diarmuid have taken refuge and where

¹⁵⁹ MacLiammóir's English text runs like a misplaced speech of Pegeen Mike's: "Oh isn't it a great wonder and a great shame that it was not for his son Oisin that Fionn asked me, and not for himself at all? For Oisin would be more fitting for me than a man who is older than my own Father." (script 10).

¹⁶⁰ MacLiammóir’s English translation runs as follows:
Grainne: (after a slight pause) And tell me, Dirring, tell me... who is that tall young sweet-worded man, whose cheeks are like the rowanberry, whose brows are like the stroke of a pen, whose eyes are like mountainy pools at evening, he who wears a cap of blue feathers on his head and stands between Oisin and Finn?
Dirring: (he is shocked by the look in her eyes)...(script 10-11)

¹⁶¹ “The sweetness of honey is in your body, a painful sweetness, and I see the sparkle of poison in your eyes” (my translation).

¹⁶² “When you were in my arms I forgot everything else and now I will never have peace again” (my translation).
Diarmuid's foster father Aonghus, god of love, appears to warn them of Fionn's approach, and a "pluais mhóir cois na fairrge" where Aonghus and Grainne await Diarmuid's return after he goes out to speak with Fionn\textsuperscript{163} (58, 69, 89). Diarmuid still maintains allegiance to the leader of the Fianna and therefore will not touch Grainne, and Grainne mistakenly believes that he has left to kill Fionn. She is bitterly disappointed when he returns with no blood on spear or sword, and disgusted to learn that there was no fight. When Ciach of the Fomor happens upon them and ogles Grainne, demanding that Diarmuid hand her over to be his wife, Grainne announces that she will go willingly since Diarmuid does not want her. In a fury, Diarmuid draws his sword on Ciach, and Grainne watches the ensuing combat "ag... meangadh beag aisteach leath-áthasach, leath-eaglach ar a béal"\textsuperscript{164} (108).

In her desire to see Fionn's blood on Diarmuid's sword and in her willingness to provoke his jealousy and to see him risk his life to prove that he loves her, MacLiammóir's Grainne exhibits all of the flaws that audiences abhorred in Yeats's and Moore's protagonist. Yet, in the most remarkable moment of MacLiammóir's adaptation of the tale, his Grainne actually ups the ante by committing an act of murderous violence herself--against Diarmuid. When she asks why he killed Ciach, Diarmuid stubbornly repeats that it was only because "Námhaid dom a bhí ann," not out of love for her\textsuperscript{165} (109), and in a bitter rage she stabs him: "Ó ba mhaith liom thú mharbhú, ba mhaith liom thú fheiceál marbh... Fuar marbh agus tú sinte faoi mo chosaibh! (Ritheann si chuige go

\textsuperscript{163} A dark place in the magical Land of Youth, a hut in a wood, and a sea cavern, respectively.
\textsuperscript{164} "with a strange cry, half of fear, half of joy" (script 70).
\textsuperscript{165} "He was my enemy" (script 70).
hobann agus sáitheann sí sgian 'na thaobh, 110). When her rage passes she has no recollection of what she has done, and is stunned when Diarmuid gently asks her to pull the knife out from between his ribs. Shuddering and sobbing she does so, throws the knife away, and kneels at his feet; he then puts his arms around her and kisses her, calling her his "chuid de'n tsaol" and promising "siad na tonntracha chanfas abhrán ar bpósta dhúinn anocht" (113).

This astonishing scene paradoxically works within the overall context of the play to redeem Grainne from the accusation that she manipulates Diarmuid for her own selfish ends. In the play's "barbaric" but consistent logic, the depth of a character's feelings is directly proportional to his or her willingness to shed blood. Fionn is sorrowful over Diarmuid's perceived betrayal and determined to drag Grainne back, but as Diarmuid says, there is no fight between them (97, script 61), since Diarmuid professes not to love her and Fionn sees her merely as a beautiful prize and a means to secure some of her father's power for himself. Conversely, Ciach's powerful desire for Grainne shows itself in his willingness to fight Diarmuid for her, and though Grainne continually professes her love for Diarmuid, it is not until her violent fugue that he accepts the truth of her words.

The last act takes place in the lovers' home, Ráth Ghráinne, after the passage of many years. Grainne's attempt to mend the feud between Fionn and Diarmuid leads to their hunt for the boar of Ben Bulben, who fatally wounds Diarmuid. Remembering his comrade's betrayal Fionn coldly refuses him the drink of water that could heal him, and Diarmuid dies staring into Grainne's eyes. As she kneels by Diarmuid's body,

166 "O I wish you were dying instead, I'd prefer to see you dead... cold dead and stretched out at my feet! (She runs towards him suddenly and stabs a knife in his side.)" (my translation).
167 His "share of the world"; "the waves shall chant our bridal song tonight" (script 73 1/2, due to a misnumbered page).
Síneann Fionn a lámh amach chuici. Geiteann sí agus sgannradh uirri... Imigheann an fuath dá haghaidh agus tagann féachaint uirri atá leath éadóchasach, leath fhonóideach. Éirigheann sí go mall ’na seasamh agus téigheann díreach chuig Fionn. Cuireann sé lámh leis thart uirri....

Grainne:  Cia atá in do bhaclainn, a Fhinn Mhic Chumhaill?
Fionn:  Cé beadh ann ach Grainne Chinn-óir!
Grainne:  Ní hí, ní hí!  Cé nach bhfeiceann tú?  (Í ag diriú a méire i dtreo chuirp Dhiarmuda.) Tá Grainne--annsín.
(Tagann sgannradh ar shúile Fhinn.  Fillean sé an clóca 'na timpeall.  Téighid amach le chéile)\(^{168}\) (157-8).

Though MacLiammóir’s Grainne, like Gregory’s, chooses to live with Finn, his play depicts Grainne and Diarmuid as passionately, violently in love, and her final decision as one of stoic fortitude in the face of tragic fate—a display of inner strength so powerful Finn fears it. The final curtain falls on a tableau: the remaining warriors of the Fianna kneeling in a mournful circle around Diarmuid's corpse.

The 1928 *Taibhdhearc* performance was a milestone in the history of the Irish-language revival and Irish-language drama, and also had farther-reaching implications for MacLiammóir’s theatrical practice. MacLiammóir and Ó Briain played the parts of Diarmuid and Fionn, respectively, and the cast included a number of members who went on to make their mark on Irish-language literature and music and Irish theatre, including Mairtín Ó Direáin (Darach), one of the 20th century’s greatest Irish-language poets; Proinnsias MacDiarmada (Oisín), later director of the Abbey; and Máire Ní Sgolaidhe

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\(^{168}\) ”Fionn stretches out his hand towards her. She starts back in terror… The expression of hatred changes slowly to one that is half mockery, half despair. She drags herself slowly to her feet and moves deliberately to Finn. He puts his arm about her...
Grainne:  Who is that you hold in your arms, Finn Mac Cool?
Finn:  Who but Grainne the Fair?
Grainne:  No, no. Do you not see? (she points to the body) Grainne is there.
Finn with fear in his eyes folds his cloak about her. They go out together” (script, last page, unnumbered).
(Grainne), who would have a distinguished career as an Irish-language actress.  

Reviews recount the audience's rapt concentration, their awe at the beauty of the sets, their thunderous applause after every act. The Connacht Tribune described the adaptation as "Celtic Magic," singling out Edwards's musical score for special praise:

The music for ‘Diarmuid and Grania’ was beautifully adapted by Mr. Hilton Edwards from Debussy’s “Apres Midi d’un Faune” and “Scherazade” [sic] by Rimsky-Korsakov. The latter work was inspired by scenes from Arabian Nights, and surely nothing more appropriate could have been found to accompany the beauty and pageantry it was our pleasure to witness during the week... One looks forward to the time when Irish composers will be inspired by the Celtic sagas, as Rimsky-Korsakov was by Arabian Nights, to give us in a national musical idiom, music worthy of these great themes.  

Ernest Blythe, then Minister for Finance, contributed an article to the Tribune as well, describing the production as an “event of national importance”.  The Sunday Independent's literary critic waxed particularly eloquent about MacLiammóir's success--and the Abbey's failures--in staging ancient Irish epic:

When the so-called Celtic Renaissance began thirty years ago, we were promised a series of saga plays or heroic plays. Cuchulain and Fionn, it was said, would live again--would capture the imagination of city dwellers--would become proud emblems--would be hewn in marble and admired like the figures of Greek myth. But it did not happen. Mr. Yeats wrote several poetic plays, which suffered on the stage from being the work of a lyrical rather than a dramatic mind... These experiments led nowhere. When the Abbey drama broke loose and became successful, it was as a satirical, realistic, and bitter drama. Dublin ignored Seanchan’s splendid death for the poetic cause; it cared not for Cuchulain baring his neck to the

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169 Fitz-Simon (1994), 51.
wasteful sacrifice; but it stormed the theatre to be allowed
to contemplate the Joxer, and the national flag dishonoured
in a pub. Galway changed this... The play was a real piece
of stagecraft, not a mere pageant that you were expected to
admire piously for your country’s sake.\textsuperscript{172}

One wonders how nuanced an understanding of the distinction between "a real
piece of stagecraft" and "a mere pageant" this rather cantankerous reviewer, or indeed
any of the spectators, actually possessed. Christopher Fitz-Simon has argued the
appreciative audience’s comprehension of \textit{Diarmuid agus Gráinne}’s formal innovations
lagged far behind their enthusiasm for its linguistic accomplishments:

\begin{quote}
It is possible that any play, in which the actors
remembered the words and the scenery did not
actually collapse, would have been well received in
that euphoric atmosphere. It is equally probable
that most of those present did not appreciate that
\textit{Diarmuid agus Gráinne} was very much a play of
the modern European movement, indeed highly
derivative of a number of strands of that movement,
although its story was taken from Celtic mythology;
and that the settings and costumes, while certainly
‘Celtic,’ interpreted Celticism in a contemporary
way—very much in the manner whereby the old
Russian legends had been given a new visual charge
in the work of Bakst, Benois, Golovin and others.\textsuperscript{173}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} \textit{All for Hecuba}, 59.
more strongly the Orientalist’s concept of Persian or Arabian finery. The visual cues, therefore, function to exoticize the legend, to render it “elaborately barbarous,” to contradict the audience’s preconceptions of over-familiarity with its elements. The sets were similarly painted with striking colors, “saffron and scarlet and black,” a palette as opposite as possible that of the greens, browns, and blue-grays most stereotypically associated with the west of Ireland. This detailed and creative attention to color, lighting, and visual effects would become a hallmark of the Gate's productions.

MacLiammóir continued to work closely with *an Taibhdhearc* for the next three years writing, translating, directing, and designing Irish-language plays, and throughout his career he enthusiastically supported Irish-language theatre productions in Dublin. In Alan Titley’s glowing praise, MacLiammóir’s contributions to *an Taibhdhearc* and to the revival of the Irish language “showed how one deeply passionate and driven man could light a flame where only darkness reigned before.”

Yet *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*’s theatrical impact would prove equally important in translation. Within two months of the *Taibhdhearc* performance MacLiammóir and Edwards had founded the Gate Theatre Studio in Dublin, and one of their first productions was MacLiammóir’s English translation of his Irish play. It was performed in November 1928 at the Abbey’s experimental performance space, the Peacock Theatre, since their company did not initially have its own stage, starring MacLiammóir as Diarmuid, Edwards as Fionn, and Coralie Carmichael, who would have a long and acclaimed career as a Gate actress, as Grainne.

*Diarmuid and Grainne* was hailed in Dublin as in Galway as a groundbreaking

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175 *All for Hecuba*, 61.
176 Fitz-Simon (1994), 52.
177 Titley, in *Players and Painted Stage*, 120.
work of Irish theatre. The Irish Times critic wrote that “the staging and production of the
play left nothing to be desired, and even as a spectacle it should not be missed. It is,
however, very much more than a spectacular feast: it is the first serious attempt this
century to stage Irish mythology.”178 The Irish Independent noted approvingly that the
production was superbly professional:

Stage versions of the heroic legends are not, it is true, as
much in favour as they were in the early stages of the
dramatic movement. This is due in a measure, at least, to
the assumption of all kinds of amateurs that the desire to
refashion epics into plays atoned for an entire absence of
knowledge of the practical requirements of the theatre... the
vast majority of these experiments, however lofty the
intention that inspired them, were from the point of view of
the spectator a weariness to the flesh. Mr. Mac Liammoir, I
need not say, does not fall into this error.179

Another reviewer claimed, “Messrs. Michael MacLiammoir and Hilton Edwards have
given new life to Irish folklore,” echoing the lament that a spate of mediocre amateur
productions had tainted dramatic Irish epic adaptations: "Speaking to some friends
afterwards I learned that they had avoided the production fearing that a play in the Irish
mode could not be made interesting. This unfortunately is often true, but it is certainly
not so in the case of Mr. MacLiammoir’s play.”180 The Evening Mail complimented the
costumes and lighting,181 but it was C.P. Curran from the Irish Statesman who heaped the
most lavish praise on the production:

The Gate Theatre is distinctly the place for infinite riches in
a little room. Here for over three hours you can listen to
the large utterance of the early poets and feast your starved

Theatre Archive.
179 Irish Independent, 19 Nov. 28. J.W.G., “Native Drama: Notable Success of the Gate Players.” Gate
Theatre Archive.
181 Dublin Evening Mail, 21 Nov. 1928: “Diarmuid and Grainne: A Notable Irish Play.” Gate Theatre
Archive.
eyes with sumptuous colour and heroic outlines. There is something so exuberant and splendidly prodigal about Micheál Mac Liammóir’s *Diarmuid and Grainne* that one wishes to shout one’s approval... Here is youth and courage and an artist in speech, colour, and design at work on an Irish epical story... There has been nothing like this for the last twenty years, and I can imagine the fastidious poets of my youth writhing their lips a little at these great careless mouthfuls of speech... the beauty that our elder poets sought in cunning words he gets by exhibiting his passionate and energetic characters in a succession of stage pictures of swift and sometimes astonishing beauty.182

The Gate’s ambitious and critically acclaimed first season also included productions of Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*, and the Irish premiere of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*. With a gourmand’s delight MacLiammóir slyly described such plays “exotic foods” which might tempt Dubliners away from the “honest and supremely well cooked bacon and cabbage” offered by the Abbey.183 As the first season’s menu demonstrates, Edwards and MacLiammóir conceived the goals of their new theatre company in direct contrast to those of the national theatre: where the Abbey’s theatrical manifesto announced Yeats’s desire to display Ireland to itself and to the world as the “home of an ancient idealism,” the Gate’s founders desired instead to bring to Ireland the best of European and American theatre in its most creative and revolutionary form. (Their program would later also encompass taking the most avant-garde productions of Irish theatre on tour around the world.) In contrast to the Abbey’s narrowly defined focus on “certain Celtic and Irish plays,” MacLiammóir and Edwards insisted that Ireland needed to see “the work of other writers and other countries, if only to further her understanding and appreciation of her own.”184

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183 *All for Hecuba*, 58.
184 Memorandum to potential subscribers, quoted in Fitz-Simon (1994), 60.
The distinction between their conception of Irish theatre and the Abbey’s was not merely aesthetic. MacLiammóir’s diaries and autobiography indicate an underlying suspicion of the nationalistic program envisioned by Yeats for the Abbey:

Had the artist a duty towards a country? Or was this national-aesthetic movement all a dream, a fantastic and lovely motif in the mind of the begotted individual, a species of dangerous and seductive opium with which he drugged his senses and stepped through gates of green jasper into a land of glowing and visionary heroisms, of sacrifices that burned him like fire and yet were all unreal?\(^{185}\)

His writing evinces keen insight into the paradoxes and ironies of Yeats’s stance as an Irish artist and the founder of a “national” theatre, who nevertheless depends upon London printing houses. They also display MacLiammóir’s personal concern about the practical difficulties faced by those who wished to work in Ireland as actors and producers rather than as poets and playwrights:

... [W]hen at the age of fourteen I had read Yeats’s *Ireland and the Arts* for the first time... I did not realize that Yeats had said no word in that most subtle and powerful piece of propaganda of the actor’s place in the Irish Zion or of the actor’s pressing need of a great community of people. Nor did I realize that while the poet stood drawing inspiration from the Sligo mountains and the enchanted woods about Galway, he recorded that inspiration in the language of a hundred million souls, and had a publisher in the capital of that language. He stood, in short, with Sligo at his back and London at his feet, whereas the actor who would work for Ireland must needs turn his face to his audience for inspiration, while behind him roars the useless and unrelenting sea, and behind that again all those places of importance that know him not.\(^{186}\)

\(^{185}\) *All for Hecuba*, 31.

\(^{186}\) *All for Hecuba*, 32.
MacLiammóir’s public persona--flawless Irish speaker and tireless proponent of Irish legend and folklore--made it difficult for passionate proponents of Irish nationalism to publicly attack him for doubting that the Irish theatre should or even could be a vehicle for a nationalistic platform. Hilton Edwards had no such buffer; yet despite undeniably British passport and pedigree, he was often willing to risk offending nationalist sentiment in order to augment the quality and integrity of Irish drama. At a 1933 Symposium entitled “Should the Theatre Be International?” Edwards noted, “I would prefer that Irish drama was incidentally national rather than consciously national. If an Irishman decides to write an Irish play he usually--instead of producing something original--writes a bad Abbey play, a pseudo Synge or an imitation O’Casey.”

Although the Abbey’s contributions to Irish theatre were worthy of admiration, both MacLiammóir and Edwards were convinced that the Abbey’s glory days were over. Ireland needed something more than warmed-over imitations of the Abbey greats. It needed exposure to continental and American scripts, trends and innovations, and it needed a production aesthetic that would enhance the words of the script with artistically arranged, professionally executed visual and aural effects.

The first season of the Gate firmly established the defining characteristics of Edwards’s and MacLiammóir’s distinctive approach to acting and the theatre, all of which directly contrasted prevailing practices at the Abbey:

There was a great deal to astonish. Firstly, the repertoire, which was carefully balanced, novel, and eclectic. Secondly, there was a serious visual interpretation of the texts. Thirdly, ‘production’ clearly meant much more than simply telling the actors where to stand or sit, or how to move about.

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187 Fitz-Simon (1994), 79.
without distracting attention from whatever else was going on.\textsuperscript{188}

We have already seen a number of other reviews that praised the Gate at the Abbey's expense; the reviews of \textit{Diarmuid and Grainne}, for instance, with their references to “fastidious poets” and to clumsily-staged ancient Irish adaptations clearly suggested Yeats and the Abbey productions of his epic plays. The following clip from the Evening Mail is typical in that regard: “Mr. Hilton Edwards has indeed made a host of admirers during the past season for his productions, as few imagined that the little stage of the Peacock Theatre could ever have been capable of setting the fine work which the Gate Theatre has staged during last season.”\textsuperscript{189}

Marvelously, neither aesthetic differences nor public rivalry precluded a cordial relationship between the Gate’s founders and those of the Abbey, including that between MacLiammóir and Yeats, which seems to have been characterized by mutual esteem.\textsuperscript{190} In fact, the Gate’s entire first season of plays was performed at the Peacock Theatre and attended by many of the Abbey’s most important contributors. These included Lady Gregory, who recorded in her diary that the company’s performance of \textit{Diarmuid and Gráinne} was “beautifully staged and lighted; no plot, just the simple story of Finn and the lovers. Simple language, a straight story, very moving... A new departure.”\textsuperscript{191} MacLiammóir recorded the “measured enthusiasm” with which she praised his delineation of the characters: “I know Gráinne. I have known her all my life, and your

\textsuperscript{188} Fitz-Simon (1994), 54.
\textsuperscript{189} Evening Mail, 2 Feb. 1929. “Jottings.” Gate Theatre Archive.
\textsuperscript{190} MacLiammóir records Yeats’s compliment that he was “a magnificent actor.” For his part, the magnificent actor saw Yeats as a poet, a visionary, “father of a whole nation’s reawakening” (\textit{All for Hecuba}, 73).
\textsuperscript{191} Quoted in Fitz-Simon (1994), 54-55.
portrait is a living one.” Yet Gregory made no secret of the alienation she felt upon viewing other Gate productions.

...[S]he went on to praise the work we were doing in Dublin, and wishing, she said, that she knew ‘how Mr. Edwards had made the stage look like a picture by Rembrandt’ in the stoke-hole scene in *The Hairy Ape* by his device of opening and shutting the flaming furnace lights. ‘Not,’ she added, ‘that I liked the play. An ugly, distressing thing. But this generation seems to like ugly, distressing things,’ and she began to talk of Molière and Raftery and *Don Quixote*. 

If an accurate transcription (with MacLiammóir one can never be quite sure), Gregory’s response to *The Hairy Ape* is a telling commentary on the Abbey’s founders’ relationship to the technical demands of production. She claims to wish she knew how Edwards created a particular visual effect, comparing his work to that of a great painter. Yet she is clearly disinterested in a practical understanding of the technique, and though she concedes its appeal to audiences of “this generation,” she finds the overall appearance of the production distasteful, and changes the subject to those authors and works of literature that do appeal to her.

In his autobiography MacLiammóir diplomatically alludes to a later coolness between the members of the Abbey and the Gate after the spring of 1929, when the Gate produced David Sears’ *Juggernaut*:

> It had been rejected by the Abbey but we liked it and so, it seemed, did our small but growing audience, and it gave the signal for that inevitable attack on the National Theatre by all those people in Dublin who had a grudge against it for no better reason than that it was an established institution that had had the impertinence not to fall into decay and disappear... We

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192 *All for Hecuba*, 70.
193 Ibid.
at the Gate were seized upon in this campaign as a stick to beat the old traditional horse, and that we were neither flattered by this move nor willing to be so used counted little, and a few enemies were made for us in the senior theatre --a silly, distressing business it all was that should never have begun.\textsuperscript{194}

MacLiammóir makes no mention of the subsequent and much greater controversy surrounding the Gate’s June 1929 production of Denis Johnston’s \textit{The Old Lady Says No!}--a play whose very title alludes to its rejection by Lady Gregory and the Abbey board. Instead, he notes simply that Johnston’s play--“altogether remarkable and precisely the sort of Irish play we had been hoping for”--had been offered to the Gate by its author, together with a generous Abbey subsidy for its production.\textsuperscript{195} (He does recount at length, however, his gleeful appreciation of the speeches of the old flower-selling hag, Johnston’s satiric parody of Yeats’s Cathleen Ni Houlihan.)

The Gate’s production of \textit{The Old Lady Says No!} was a theatrical sensation that crystallized the two theatre’ fundamental differences in aesthetics and technique. According to Christopher Fitz-Simon, Edwards had “seized upon the script and found that, like most of the innovative Irish drama, it had its stylistic roots in Europe rather than in England--in this case the romantic expressionism of Germany.”\textsuperscript{196} These roots together with the unusual plot of the play, which centers on the concussion and resulting hallucinations of the main character, permitted Edwards wide experimental latitude as producer and director. His production employed rhythmic flashes of light, synchronized with the actors’ stylized movements and driven by a background of throbbing percussion--a frenzied aural and visual accompaniment to the Speaker’s/ Robert Emmet’s delirious

\textsuperscript{194} \textit{All for Hecuba}, 82.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{196} Fitz-Simon (1994), 58.
wanderings through Dublin. Though Fitz-Simons contends that the Abbey board should never have rejected Johnston’s play, it is doubtful that any of the Abbey directors would have possessed a combination of courage, creative genius, and technical skills even remotely resembling that which Edwards’s direction brought to it.

Where Stars Walk: MacLiammóir’s Return to the Mythic

The novel, all-encompassing sensory effects of the Gate’s production of *The Old Lady Says No!* caused MacLiammóir to turn a more critical eye upon his own work. *Diarmuid and Gráinne* was revived in late 1929 at the Round Room of the Mansion House, while the company was waiting to move into the Assembly Rooms that they had leased from the Rotunda Hospital, which would become the Gate’s permanent home. The play was revived again in 1930, with a redesigned set and costumes, at the Rotunda. It was also produced in London, where the Daily Telegraph called it a “distinguished play” but couldn't resist remarking that it was "extremely Celtic, both in its atmosphere and in its insistence that the spelling of the names of its characters shall have little or no apparent connection with their pronunciation." Despite the play’s popular success in both Irish and English, MacLiammóir records that he soon grew to disdain that "extremely Celtic" atmosphere as overly florid and contrary to the prevailing aesthetic of the moment:

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197 Ibid.
198 A disagreement between MacLiammóir and Edwards and Edward Longford, who provided much of the Gate’s financial backing in its early years, eventually led to the formation of two separate companies. Time at the Rotunda premises was divided between the two. When not performing at the Gate Theatre proper, Edwards and MacLiammóir’s company would embark upon national and international tours, or lease other Dublin theatres like the Gaiety.
199 It was also performed at *an Taibhdhearc* for their twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, as well as in London by another company whose production made MacLiammóir cringe at his own script, and even broadcast in a Welsh translation on BBC radio.
...the Celtic Twilight...in those days of self-conscious virility and neurasthenic fact-facing was at its lowest ebb... These were no times for echoing the vanished rhapsodies of the ‘nineties, and in spite of much flattery and kindness I began to dislike what I had written immensely.201

It is perhaps for this reason that MacLiammóir waited for a dozen years, and for the inspiration of an innovative format, before producing his second original play, Where Stars Walk, which once again takes an Irish legend as its central theme.202

The tale of Midhir and Etáin forms part of the Mythological Cycle of Irish literature, and is in fact one of the most ancient surviving Celtic legends. Briefly, the plot centers upon the love of the otherworldly king Midhir for the beautiful Etáin, who is magically exiled to the human world, remembering her previous life only in dreams until Midhir succeeds in reclaiming her. As with Diarmuid and Gráinne, MacLiammóir notes the play had a long genesis, in this case in a series of discussions with Edwards. “We talked of this for years in a series of long and increasingly vague conversations, for both of us, I think, realised that the day of mythical romanticism was at its lowest ebb in the theatre.”203 Not till a friend told him a story about a sleepwalking servant who dreamed of splendid surroundings and company did he and Edwards hit upon the expedient of setting the action in the sumptuous Dublin drawing-room of a jaded actress bemused by the odd behavior of her servants, and “…to combine it all in a species of modern comedy that might amuse the Dublin audience and leave me with enough of the unseen world partially to satisfy an incurable craving.”204

201 All for Hecuba, 70.
202 He had also, in the intervening time, translated a number of plays into Irish for the Taibhdhearc.
203 Barrett, 3.
204 Ibid.
The title of the play is a quotation from one of Yeats’s early dramas, *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, published first in 1894 and appearing in seven editions between then and 1912. Set in County Sligo in “a remote time,” *The Land of Heart’s Desire* treats the advent of a fairy child into a peasant household. This changeling tempts the newly married Mary to leave her husband and his family for the realm of the fairies, with fatal results. Later, infused with the political rhetoric of Irish resistance to British colonial domination, this prototypical plot evolved into that of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. In this early play, however, Yeats’s interest lies in interweaving peasant superstitions and the tenuous survival of ancient legends and literature in the West of Ireland.

In the first scene Mary stands upon the threshold reading from an old vellum manuscript an account of the story of Midhir and Etáin:

MARY. How a Princess Edane,  
A daughter of a King of Ireland, heard  
A voice singing on a May Eve like this,  
And followed half awake and half asleep,  
Until she came into the Land of Faery,  
Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,  
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,  
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue.  
And she is still there, busied with a dance  
Deep in the dewy shadow of a wood,  
Or where stars walk upon a mountain-top  
[italics added].

While Yeats’s play intimates some separation as well as some overlap between the “remote time” of his peasants and the even more ancient world of Etáin, MacLiammóir’s stroke of creative genius, as noted above, is in wrenching the action out of a country cottage in the misty forests of the west and resituating it in a Dublin drawing-room--an unexpected fusion of the dramatic modes of Yeats and Oscar Wilde.

205 Yeats’s play was produced in London in 1894; in 1912 the final, revised version was staged at the Abbey.
MacLiammóir wrote the part of Martin, the genial but mysterious jack-of-all-trades who turns out to be Midhir’s avatar, with himself in mind. First produced at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin on February 19, 1940, the play also featured many of the other actors and actresses who by then formed the core of the Gate’s talented cast—Coralie Carmichael, Roy Irving, Shelah Richards, and Meriel Moore; Abbey actress Maureen Delaney was also wooed away temporarily from the National Theatre to play a supporting comic role. Carmichael performed the part of Sophia Sheridan, a retired actress taking part in a charity production of a new play about Midhir and Étайн; Meriel Moore played Sophia’s recently-hired serving girl Eileen, whose memories of her previous life in the otherworld grow increasingly vivid, triggered by the lines she hears her mistress rehearsing and by Martin’s arrival. After the successful performance of the play-within-the-play, Martin and Eileen fully recover their half-forgotten mythological identities as Midhir and Étайн and flee the house together, to be magically transformed into swans in the play’s final image.206

_Where Stars Walk_ is an early indication of MacLiammóir’s admiration for Oscar Wilde’s ironic humor and epigrammatic dialogue. The drawing-room scenes are awash with languid repartee and sly asides of the following type:

_Rex:_ I suppose there’s no such thing as a producer with decent manners.

_Sophia:_ Except you, darling. But then, you’re such a ghastly producer.207

Manners, according to the play’s jaded protagonist, were only to be had “...in the old days, you know, when we were oppressed. Grand it was, being oppressed. Only by the

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206 This image is suggested not only by the ancient legend but more specifically by the final lines of Yeats’s play, in which the child implores Mary to leave with him, calling her “white bird” and “little bird with silver feet.”

207 Barrett, 7.
English, though. The English oppress one so much better than any other nation could. Sort of firmly unconscious...”208 Luckily for MacLiammóir’s characters, opportunities exist for momentarily forgetting the uncouth state of contemporary society; when Sophia states proudly, “Oh, but I do things. I do Planchette. I get messages from the other world,” Rex dryly responds that such activity is “very enterprising.” In a nod to Yeats’s experiments with automatic writing, Sophia’s Planchette, or Ouija board, actually provides the first clues to Eileen’s and Martin’s true identity.

While this banter does not attain the sophisticated articulation of irony that characterizes Wilde’s comedies, it nevertheless amused Dublin audiences in performance. The play’s unconventional marriage of Irish legend and contemporary comedy also allowed MacLiammóir the authorial freedom to humorously critique the melodrama of many attempts to stage Irish myth, including his own, through his characters’ précieux speeches. To one dandy’s despairing comment that the play-within-the-play is “wrong from beginning to end,” another responds, “Badly dated, of course. But then, everything is, if you give it time.”209 Sophia Sheridan, rehearsing the part of Etáin on a darkened stage under eerie reddish lighting with harps playing faintly in the background, comments impatiently when the lights are turned back on, “It’s no good... this sort of Celtic Twilight ending. It’s not my stuff.”210 The characters mockingly re-title their production “Celtic Twilight Drama for Cab Horses” (the charity’s beneficiaries) and “Ancient Ireland comes to Rathmines” (to which one character replies, “Oh, well, I have no objection to ancient Ireland. It’s the new Ireland that gives me the willies.”) 211

208 Barrett, 12.
209 Barrett, 8.
210 Ibid, 6.
211 Ibid, 8, 15.
One comments acerbically, “English people may love the Celtic Twilight still, I don’t know; but here it reminds people of their nursery days.” Yet the eventual performance of the play-within-the-play seems reasonably successful to almost all the characters—all but Eileen, who realizes/remembers the protagonist’s sorrowful alienation from both of the worlds she has inhabited, an intensity of emotion which the “grand” words that Sophie recites are unable to capture.

As Christopher Fitz-Simon notes,

the mixture of romantic Celticism with the smart epigrammatic dialogue of Miss Sophia Sheridan and her theatrical friends in contemporary Ireland delighted the audience. This was something quite new in inspiration and technique, as far as the Irish theatre was concerned.

The premiere of Where Stars Walk was a high profile event: President Douglas Hyde and important members of the diplomatic corps and government were present; a picture of an Italian diplomat attending the premiere made the front page of the Evening Herald; the Irish Times had added to the pre-premiere hype an entire column on the leader page devoted solely to the elegance of Sophia Sheridan’s dresses.

The Evening Mail called Where Stars Walk “excellent theatre, artistic, original, lively and unashamedly Irish,” while in the Independent's opinion, “Only a master of the

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212 Ibid, 66.
213 Ibid, 68.
214 Fitz-Simon (1994), 130.
215 Irish Times, 19 Feb. 1940. This article gushes over "the ‘harem’ skirt, an entirely new departure in formal wear, which is the outcome of [fashion designer Patrick] Perrott’s genius..." the first evening dress, which was "backless to the waist... [and its] unusual bolero coatee, lavishly trimmed with silver fox," and the second evening gown’s “high, halter neckline and sheath-like skirt, with a slit up the back of one leg... what makes it so spectacular is the spider’s web arrangement of inch-wide black velvet ribbon, which fills in the low back, and which also forms the flowing angel sleeves from the elbow down,” etc. etc. Gate Theatre Archive.
art of the theatre could have written it.” Words failed both the Irish Press critic, whose review opens, “There are times when even a critic should take a holiday, and the present is such a time. People should go and see for themselves ‘Where Stars Walk,’” and the Leader: “We thoroughly enjoyed the play but find it difficult to write about. The comedy was excellent, the satire clever, and the charm and mystery of the whole play indescribable.” The Irish Tatler and Sketch noted the play’s universal appeal: “The feature of the month’s theatrical history was the sensational success of the Gaiety season of the Edwards-MacLiammoir company. To the Gaiety it brought back the glories of the old days when it was a famous legitimate theatre,” while to the Gate it brought new audience members, "Gaiety-goers" who loved splash and comedy but shied away from more cerebral drama.

The acclaim was not due merely to the charm of novelty; the play was revived numerous times and taken on international tours in the subsequent decade, and continued to meet with success. The theatrical techniques that displayed the penetration of the actual world with the mythic and the present with the ancient past, highlighting all the while the artificiality of the play’s presentation of the actual and the present, resonated with MacLiammóir’s audience. Since in 1940 their own reality was fraught with the imminent violence of world war, one is tempted to speculate that many members of the audience found the “incurable craving” for escape into an “unseen world” particularly acute when Where Stars Walk premiered. Only the week before the Irish Press had published a column entitled “Sidelights on a Balkan Capital” by Toska Bissing, who had

218 The Irish Tatler and Sketch, April 1940. Gate Theatre Archive.
helped to manage the Gate's tour to the Balkans the previous year, and who wished to
paint the picture of daily life as she had observed it in Belgrade to counterbalance the
media's portrayal of a city spiraling into violent chaos.\textsuperscript{219} In April the Irish Press also
observed that wartime tension increases the demand for drama as an entertaining
distraction: “In these days of storm the Irish theatre reveals itself as a sturdy plant rooted
in tradition” capable of providing hope and inspiration to the despairing.\textsuperscript{220}

Yet audiences loved post-war productions of the play as well. The Irish Times
described the May 1945 performance as “the best play that Micheál MacLiammóir has
written... brilliantly revived.”\textsuperscript{221} The dialogue had not grown stale; the play "contain[ed]
more wit than any other play Micheál MacLiammoir has written... wisecracks flow as
freely as gin and brandy,” and the Evening Herald smugly predicted that the upcoming
London production “would help English people to a new interpretation of the Irish
character and no doubt surprise them to discover that Rathmines can be as sophisticated
as Mayfair.”\textsuperscript{222} Abroad, in fact, \textit{Where Stars Walk} played very well. On a North
American tour which also featured \textit{John Bull's Other Island} and \textit{The Old Lady Says No!}
all three plays were warmly received in Canada, but American critics turned up their
noses at Shaw and Johnston, reserving their praise for MacLiammóir’s play. A June
1945 Northern Irish tour also received excellent reviews. One critic enthused, “\textit{Where
Stars Walk} presents with subtle artistry a blending of legendary romance with modern
comedy... The action of the play creates scenes of great emotional power, relieved by

\begin{footnotes}
\item[220] Irish Press, 11 April 1940. R.M. Fox, “Storm Over European Drama.” Gate Theatre Archive.
\item[221] Irish Times review, 2 May 1945. Gate Theatre Archive.
\item[222] Times Pictorial and Evening Herald reviews, May 2, 1945. Gate Theatre Archive.
\end{footnotes}
refreshingly humorous passages, clever satire, and witty dialogue..."223

The scripts from Gate Theatre Archive at Northwestern contain a revised version of the first scene that seems to have been used in the post-war productions, although its exact date is unclear. The revisions make the satiric comments on contemporary Celtophilia even more scathing--and all the more hilarious, given the success of MacLiammóir's own play. Sheila asks Tommy, for example: "What did you want to write a play about a legend for? Sure, the Celtic Twilight died the death the year I was born" (to which Rex responds, "No room for them both, you see").224 When Sheila later comments, "There's the most tiresome and typical note in all this Celtic School business--a vague woman wandering about without the remotest idea even of who she really is," Sophia replies sympathetically, "Oh, isn't it sad? It should all suit me so beautifully. I'm always forgetting who I really am."225 For the benefit of audiences unfamiliar with ancient Irish literature, the revisions also allow Sheila to recount the legend of Midhir and Etain while she mocks it.

Spurred on by Where Stars Walk's success, MacLiammóir wrote and starred in Ill Met By Moonlight in April 1946. This play once again takes up Yeats's changeling theme in a modern Irish setting, but this time combines it with the emergent academic discourse of the psychic and paranormal, since the action takes place in the home of a psychologist who firmly believes there is a rational explanation for the strange behavior of the changeling character. The Irish Times called it "first-class entertainment";226 according to the Irish Press, "[MacLiammóir] introduces a dramatic clash between olden

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226 Irish Times review, April 9, 1946. Gate Theatre Archive.
forces and modern sophistication, between superstition and science, and the whole thing enlivened by a subtle humor.” The Sunday Independent reviewer suggested that with this play MacLiammóir had

invented what might well become a new technique in folk-lore. There is a modern setting, a sophistication of to-day and the rational approach, while yet revealing the legend and the folklore in all the magic and fascination of its ancient power...For those who wish to believe in what may seem unbelievable here is a rational case, and for those to whom the folk-tale is a childish memory there is nothing to offend their common sense. And those to whom the rich store of Irish legend means very little may find that this play reveals to them a new interest.

The play did excellent business at the Gate, was revived in January 1947 in Dublin, and then taken to London and Broadway.

The extended popularity of Where Stars Walk and Ill Met by Moonlight indicates that their appeal was not confined to particular historical moments or geographical areas, but rather sprang from a combination of factors that included the unique dramatic talents of the Gate cast, the literary flair of the author, and his successful fusion of the theatrical models provided by Wilde’s brilliant banter and Yeats’s lyric legends. Christopher Murray has recently brought critical attention back to Where Stars Walk, using it as the centerpiece of an essay entitled “Where are they now? Plays of Significance in the 1940s and 1950s.” He suggests that the play represents a “sophisticated recycling of a Celtic myth,” and especially of Yeats’ deployment of the story of Midhir and Etáin in The Land of Heart’s Desire. In Murray’s reading, through the trope of the play-within-the-play,

[i]llusion and reality are... held up to scrutiny in ways which reinforce the nature of theatre itself. Very well, Pirandello had done this sort of thing in more complex

228 Sunday Independent, April 9, 1946: “Micheal MacLiammoir’s New Play.” Gate Theatre Archive.
ways already on the international stage but this doing it Irish-style made a bridge between the mythic and the actual in ways that keep faith with ordinary life... showing how a play is no more than an echo from the past which alerts and estranges the present.229

MacLiammóir would return to Yeats, Wilde, and ancient Irish literature many times throughout his theatrical career, as both actor and author. He wrote short stories, pageants, and even a ballet based on ancient Irish legend, occasionally mediated by Yeats’s poetry; he co-authored a book on Yeats with Eavan Boland and starred as Naoise in a revival of Yeats’s Deirdre, and at the apex of his career created his own wildly successful one-man show based on Wilde’s life and literature, The Importance of Being Oscar (1960).

Several contemporary Irish playwrights, I will contend, have built upon the intricate foundation laid by MacLiammóir. Although they may prefer other dramatic forms and models to those provided by Yeats and Wilde, they all deploy ancient Irish legend in conjunction with increasingly sophisticated theatrical techniques to create a “bridge between the mythic and the actual” which yet manages to “keep faith with ordinary life,” privileging the insight that the “echo of the past” heard in adaptations of ancient literature causes us to observe and question more closely the present as we perceive it. MacLiammóir’s Diarmuid and Gráinne and his Where Stars Walk are thus critical successive steps in the evolution of contemporary theatrical adaptations of Irish myth and legend.

Greeks at The Gate: Hamlet and Hecuba

The epigraph of MacLiammóir’s “Irish theatrical autobiography” is taken from

229 Murray, in Fitz-Simon Players, 59.
Act II, Scene 2 of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

‘... Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her workings all his visage wann’d.
Tears in his eyes, distraction in ’s aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing!
For Hecuba!
What’s Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba
That he should weep for her?...’

As often in MacLiammóir’s writing, this theatrical allusion is much more complex than it appears at first glance. On the surface it seems an ironic parody of the actor’s trade, a modest disclaimer to any fame or admiration that may have accrued to MacLiammóir through practicing it, and a salutary reminder of the necessary distinction between drama and autobiography--between acting out a tragedy and experiencing one.

Yet it is important to remember that Shakespeare wrote these words to be spoken by an actor--by one who could convincingly portray a startling range of emotional states, and who at this particular moment in the play could embody the confusion and frustration of a man unable to separate reality from illusion. The soliloquy continues with Hamlet’s meditation upon his conflicted loyalties to father and mother and his vehement but impotent denunciation of his own cowardice. In the end, as he tells the audience, “the play’s the thing”--the only thing which can resolve his doubts about Claudius’s guilt. The soliloquy thus provides an answer to the question it proposes: the relationship between actor and Hecuba is defined and valued according to the effect that the actor’s performance of Hecuba’s emotion has upon the audience, that is, according to the reaction that it provokes in the spectator. Poetry perhaps makes nothing happen, but theatre is a different kettle of fish.
Thus far, the complexity arises from considering the epigraph in its original context. However, in the additional context of MacLiammóir’s autobiography it acquires different resonance. Before the international success of *The Importance of Being Oscar*, MacLiammóir was best known for his towering interpretation of Hamlet, a role which he began to play early in his career with the Gate.\(^\text{230}\) The 1932 production starred many of the Gate’s best-known actors, including Edwards (Claudius), Carmichael (Gertrude), and Moore (Ophelia), but it was MacLiammóir’s Hamlet, together with the Gate’s minimalist staging (“of the utmost severity and simplicity... which yet gives sufficient stimulus to the imagination”\(^\text{231}\) ) that caught the attention of public and press. MacLiammóir would recite the part of Hamlet not only in later Irish revivals of the play, but also on the Gate’s Balkan and Egyptian tours. The Gate’s many *Hamlet* productions even included one in which the characters wore modern dress, startling press and audience, but eliciting generally favorable responses:

> Traditionalists railed against this novel idea, but when the production opened in mid-January 1940, they had to admit that Micheál MacLiammóir’s costumes added vitality and significance, for he had set the tragedy in a contemporary Balkan court, where all the Ruritanian trimmings of regality still, anachronistically, prevailed...\(^\text{232}\)

Given his intimate familiarity with this role, and his readiness to view it through the prism of events occurring during his own lifetime, it comes as no surprise that MacLiammóir selected some of Hamlet’s lines as his epigraph. But why these lines in

\(^{230}\) MacLiammóir’s first appearance in the title role took place on November 15, 1929, when he performed the “closet scene” with Coralie Carmichael as Gertrude, in a scene recital at the Taibhdhearc to raise funds for the Gate (Fitz-Simon 1994, 61).

\(^{231}\) Review from *The Standard*, quoted in Fitz-Simon (1994), 76.

\(^{232}\) Fitz-Simon (1994), 128.
particular? Hamlet’s allusion to Hecuba is brief and fleeting, yet she assumes a towering importance in MacLiammóir’s biography as a symbolic representation of Ireland.

Hecuba is MacLiammóir’s answer to Yeats’s personification of the nation as Cathleen Ni Houlihan. The latter requires blood sacrifice from the young men of Ireland to restore her to youth and beauty, and her desire to reclaim the “four green fields” of her lost kingdom overshadows any concern for the young men’s death or their families’ loss. For all of the nationalistic glory with which Cathleen celebrates their sacrifice, she remains a vampiric figure, drawing vitality and strength from the shedding of others’ blood. Hecuba, conversely, is both more human and more sympathetic: wife of King Priam, she is driven to despair by the loss of her husband and their children in the Trojan war, with a number of varying accounts of her subsequent tragic fate.

Interestingly, MacLiammóir does not refer specifically to the account contained in Euripides’ *Hecuba* (424 B.C.E.), undoubtedly her most famous theatrical incarnation and most likely that recited by Hamlet’s Players. In Euripides’ play, Hecuba has endured the spectacle of the gory slaughter of her aging husband and their daughters as they sought sanctuary at the altar of Zeus during the sack of Troy. She maintains her noble bearing despite the indignities and hardships of her ensuing enslavement, and pleads movingly but vainly to prevent the brutal sacrifice of her remaining daughter Polyxena, begging her captors to take her own life instead of her daughter’s. Hecuba harbors no vampire-like need to feed on the blood of others; the violent impulses natural to overwhelming grief are in her case self-sacrificing rather than homicidal. It is only the discovery of the murderous treachery of Priam’s ally Polymestor, to whom their son Polydorus had been sent that he might survive Troy’s destruction, that finally drives the
defeated queen to madness and rage. Her bloody revenge is exacted not only upon the traitor, whose eyes she plucks out, but also upon his innocent children, who are torn to pieces by the few surviving women of her former royal court.

Through the blinded Polymestor’s final prophetic speech Euripides’ play attempts to harmonize these events with alternate tales of Hecuba’s end, in which the pitying gods turn her into a dog that she might flee from Odysseus after being given to him as a slave, or in which her own mad rage effects such a transformation as she barks and snarls at her would-be master. In the end for Hecuba death is the only means of escape from grief; she hurls herself into the ocean to drown. It is at this point that MacLiammóir incorporates her image into his vision of Ireland:

... the sacrificing Hecuba, was, we are told, changed at last into a dog who leapt into the sea. Did she emerge from the waves, I wonder, again transformed, with green flowing hair and lakes for eyes and swelling mountainous breasts, a welter of sacrifice and weeping and slaughter and enchantment infinitely spread out for her?233

MacLiammóir’s Hecuba is “sacrificing” rather than bloodthirsty, more a passive spectator of the tragedy infinitely spread out for her than its cause. (Nowhere in All for Hecuba does MacLiammóir allude to her as the terrifying woman who in her insane rage commanded the murder of children.) This sorrowful figure easily morphs into that of a lover of questionable beauty but undeniable fascination, described with MacLiammóir’s characteristic fusion of humor and pathos. Gazing at the coast of Ireland from the deck of a returning steamship, MacLiammóir is prey to all sorts of romantic visions; the

233 All for Hecuba, 270.
island is “still beautiful,” “slowly smiling... a pensive Venus rising out of the sea.” But upon disembarking at Dun Laoghaire the lover’s quarrel begins:

This is Hecuba. How awful it is... One wants to say, ‘Now look here, my dear, what’s the matter with you?... Your hair’s all over the place, you talk of nothing but trivialities, you slouch about half-dressed... Oh I know you’ve had a bad time, but good God, that’s all over years ago. Can’t you forget it? Can’t you stop wearing that old grey shawl? Can’t you stop crying? Can’t you stop telling nasty stories about your children? Can’t you have your teeth seen to?’
Yet one is still in love, still hopelessly at her mercy.234

MacLiammóir mocks the tragic grandeur of Hecuba and of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, whom in this description she so clearly resembles--modern Ireland’s slovenliness obscures any suggestion of nobility, and the mournful lamentations over her tragic past now have the ring of inane, self-pitying complaints. Yet MacLiammóir, Edwards, and the Gate’s other talented cast members repeatedly turned down viable opportunities elsewhere in order to remain in Dublin.

Throughout his autobiography, MacLiammóir struggles to articulate and analyze the complex hold that Hecuba-as-Ireland exerts upon him as actor, playwright, and Irishman (not by birth but by choice), and for all its mockery the passage quoted above does relate to one of his theatrical ambitions for his beloved adopted country: to cajole her into paying more attention to appearance, to color, to beauty. Looking back on his career in 1976, two years before he died, MacLiammóir recalled his original motivation for founding the Gate: "Ireland had never experienced the joy of the visible, as Italy has. Ireland is essentially an oral country: its greatest art, like that of England, is literature... I

234 All for Hecuba, 362.
I will argue in the following section that the Gate Theatre's productions of ancient Greek drama were an integral part of MacLiammóir’s effort to reintroduce Ireland to "the joy of the visible.” As with Irish epic, many Greek tragedies had suffered from amateurish, pedantic productions (by university classics clubs, for instance). The Gate productions would enhance the focus on the words of the text with their attention to the visual details of performance.

_The Melians: A Lesson for Modern Ireland… or was it?_

The first Greek play produced at the Gate was an adaptation not from ancient tragedy but from ancient history (albeit a history that may have inspired Euripides’ _Trojan Women_). Edward Longford, who provided much of the theatre's financial backing from 1931-1935, also provided the Gate with a number of dramatic adaptations of ancient Greek works. His first was _The Melians_, a play based on the account in Thucydides's _History_ of the Athenians' slaughter of the inhabitants of the island of Melos in 415 B.C.; it was produced at the Gate in September 1931. Edwards directed and created the lighting for the production; MacLiammoir designed the set and costumes, and both men played important roles-- Edwards the Persian war profiteer Mithridates, whose only concern is how to extract the most money from the impending conflict, and MacLiammóir the courageous young Melian patriot Theon, who exhorts his fellow citizens to fight for their island's independence, even at the cost of their lives.  

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236 I will discuss the background to Euripides’s Trojan Women in Ch. 4.
237 The script was not published and is not contained in the Deering archive; the information I have here comes from the programme, press reviews, historical and biographical accounts.
Longford's introductory note in the Gate programme emphasizes his play's accurate correspondence to the events recounted by Thucydides:

It deals with the attempt of the Island City of Melos to resist inclusion in the Maritime Empire of Athens, during the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, in which most of the City States of Greece were involved. The Athenians professed to represent Democracy in the struggle and compelled their subjects to establish nominally Liberal Constitutions in the interests of their Imperial masters. As is shown in the play, the Athenians could accordingly rely on the support of an element in every State. The main incidents in the siege and its preliminaries were as they are shown in the play, and the Conference Scene is modelled closely on Thucydides. The siege ended with the massacre of the men of military age, the enslavement of the women and children, and the planting of the island with Athenian settlers. With the exception of the Historian himself, all the characters are imaginary, and the language, etc. is modernised, but without any intention of departing from true historical accuracy.

Yet phrases like "the planting of the island" and "nominally Liberal Constitutions in the interests of their Imperial masters" also clearly suggest a contemporary analogue for these events: the long Irish struggle for independence from the "Maritime Empire" of the British.

The majority of the reviewers gladly followed Longford's implications in their readings of the play. The theatre critic from *The Leader* in fact borrows the last phrase of the programme note in his review before noting the emotional recognition the play triggered:

Lord Longford, without departing from true historical accuracy, succeeded in interesting his Irish audience in the struggle of the little island of Melos in its fight for freedom and its glorious failure. As fights and failures have been Ireland’s specialties up to recent times, the sympathy of the audience went out to those desperate
islanders, whose history so resembles their own.238

The Irish Press review, subtitled "Drama of Our Own Time," commended the play's commentary on contemporary events:  “The production of such a play needed courage; but it is in such plays that the Theatre performs its traditional function, showing us the forces that are shaping our own and our nation’s destiny through the clarifying medium of dramatic art.”239

The Irish Times review provided the most minute examination of the analogies between the massacre at Melos and recent Irish history:

The premature declaration of war against the Athenians by Theon, while his elders were still discussing the policy they should adopt, is an almost perfect parallel to James Connolly’s coup d’etat of Easter, 1916, and the language used by Theon is strongly reminiscent of Connolly’s speeches... Mithridates the Persian might be any German, the Magistrates of Melos any group of Irish politicians of 10 years ago, the Athenian officers might be any group of British political or military negotiators, the murder of Straton might easily symbolize the death of Michael Collins at the hands of those who opposed his policy, and Theon is plainly representative of Pearse and Connolly.240

The Irish Independent reviewer alone criticized the contemporary relevance:  “[T]he play does not really grip us, and the characters do not come alive until we forget [current analogies], and concentrate entirely on the fortunes of the Melians without the distraction of looking for parallels in our own history.”241

The production was an enormous success, playing to packed houses and appreciative audiences. It also sparked a minor press controversy over the exact terms of the contemporary analogy: one reviewer pointed out that while many had jumped to the

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conclusion that the little island of Melos was a metaphor for Ireland, it could also symbolize the islands of Rathlin and Valentia, which were resisting incorporation into the Irish polity at the time. In such a reading Ireland would be the imperial power rather than its victim. An article in An Phoblac muddied the situation still further, interpreting the Peloponnesian War as an impending conflict between Britain and the United States (Athens and Sparta respectively), with Ireland caught perilously in the middle. Although his original intentions seem clear from the programme note, Longford may have sensed the potential of such a controversy to generate even more interest in the play, for he eaily resisted attempts to ascertain his meaning: “‘There may be some lesson to be drawn from this play,’ said Lord Longford after the curtain had fallen at the Gate last night, ‘but I do not say that there is.’”

Yet contemporary relevance, however flattering or controversial, will not convince an audience to applaud a mediocre play. Longford's script balanced fiery rhetoric with compelling action (one reviewer commended the play for having "no long boring speeches"), which MacLiammóir and Edwards complemented with vibrant visual and sound effects. A trio of musicians accompanied the action with musical selections from Puccini and Rachmanninoff, on the violin, cello, and piano. The production also included traditional Greek dances and choral odes, set to music by composer Frederick Stone. The audience acclaimed MacLiammóir's beautiful sets with “merited and spontaneous applause,” and one admiring reviewer commented that the production "teems with movement and color, the music of drums and trumpets, and the

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242 Irish Times reviews, 12 and 15 Sept. 1931. Gate Theatre Archive.
244 Evening Mail, 12 Sept. 1931, “‘May Be Some Lesson’: Lord Longford on His New Play.” Gate Theatre Archive.
shouting of crowds, and has settings that, for dramatic potentialities and pictorial beauty, could hardly be surpassed.\textsuperscript{246}

Some of the credit for the play's success also undoubtedly rests with the quality of the acting, especially by MacLiammóir, whose “final fiery outburst” as Theon did full justice to the highlight of Longford's text, "an oration in which patriotism of the most exalted kind finds adequate and dignified expression.”\textsuperscript{247} This was a new kind of Greek drama for Dublin: a feast for the senses that contained provocative--and ambiguous--political statements.

\textbf{“Since the Abbey has had its Sophocles...” : The Gate’s Agamemnon}

The Gate's next ancient Greek production built on \textit{The Melians}' fruitful combination of verbal and sensory vibrancy. The misleadingly-named \textit{Agamemnon}, translated by Lord Longford and his wife Lady Christine, was actually a condensed version of Aeschylus' entire \textit{Orestaia}. It was produced on a massive scale in February 1933, with a cast of forty-four; the three plays of the ancient Greek trilogy were performed in sequence, with an interval between each and a total running time of almost four hours. It featured MacLiammóir as Orestes, Edwards as Eigisthos, and Lionel Dymoke as Agamemnon, while the Gate's trio of actresses, Betty Chancellor, Shelah Richards, and Coralie Carmichael, played Electra, Cassandra, and Klytaimnestra respectively.

The Irish Times reviewer complemented both the “dignified and vigorous” translation and the “artistic triumph” of MacLiammóir's set and Edwards's lighting.

\textsuperscript{247} Evening Mail, 12 Sept. 1931, “May Be Some Lesson”: Lord Longford on His New Play.” Gate Theatre Archive.
design:

The setting of the first act, before the Palace of Agamemnon, was simple almost to the point of bareness, with only the golden doors of the Palace to give it colour. But the lighting--purple, green, and red--the coloured robes of the chorus and the statuesque grouping of the characters, all gave it variety.248

The Irish Press singled out MacLiammoir's designs for the costumes, as well as the tableaux stagings and the sets: “the dress worn by the Orestes and the Athena are works of art; the last episode has movements and groupings which make a feast of harmony, and no background could be more dramatically ominous than those great, slow-opening gates.”249

This time, however, the focus of the reviews was on the historical authenticity of the production, rather than on any contemporary resonance it might have. The Manchester Guardian's observation that “[t]he whole thing might have happened the other day; it did happen many times when the world's warriors returned to their homes fifteen years ago, and Lord and Lady Longford have kept the contemporary application prominent in this adaptation”250 was unique in its insistence upon relating the play's action to recent events; the majority of the other reviews stress the stark contrast between the ancient world and their own. The Daily Express, for example, praised the production of “a passionate drama of a kind not known here these days," and noted that "'[t]he Gate has gone to extraordinary lengths to preserve the atmosphere of the period... the air accompanying the opening chorus is the melody used for that chorus nearly 2,000 years

249 Irish Press 16 Feb 1933, “Great Tragedy: Aeschylean Trilogy at the Gate Theatre.” Gate Theatre Archive.
The information about the antiquity of the choral ode was highlighted in the programme, and noted in many of the reviews as a marker of the authenticity of the production. The programme also contains the following note, unmistakably composed by MacLiammóir:

for all its crudity [Agamemnon, i.e. the Orestaia] is one of the great plays of the world. It will be observed that the barbaric atmosphere of the heroic age is deliberately maintained by the author [Aeschylus], who has no use for the rationalizing attitude of later Greek writers towards the national legends. Accordingly the producer [Edwards] and designer [MacLiammóir] have endeavoured to keep the primitive and heroic nature of the play before the minds of the audience. It is frankly a story of primitive passions and savage deeds, but for all that it has a deep underlying purpose, and the characterization, though crude, is truthful and effective.

Many of the reviewers (the Manchester Guardian's notwithstanding) seem docilely to have followed MacLiammóir's lead, eschewing the temptation towards a "rationalizing attitude" and reveling instead in the exotic splendor of the production. One critic went even so far as to suggest an academic rationale for attendance, citing the use of incense and the lugubriously chanted choruses: “To anyone with any sort of interest in the theatre it is of importance, since in it (and particularly as the Gate people do it) can easily be seen the close connection that obtained between religious rites and the dramatic art of the ancients.” But why would MacLiammóir have gone to such pains to emphasize that this play should be interpreted on its own terms rather than with respect to contemporary events?

The answer involves issues of authorship, adaptation, and authenticity, but also of

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252 Evening Mail, 16 Feb. 1933: “‘Agamemnon’ at the Gate.” Gate Theatre Archive.
stylistic rivalry between the Gate and the Abbey. First, Longford's *Melians* was a creative extrapolation, in dramatic form, of Thucydides' brief historical account—a free adaptation par excellence. *Agamemnon*, however, was billed as a translation, which could potentially foreground questions of historical and textual accuracy. For MacLiammóir, however, fidelity to an ancient text was not determined by facts, dates, or literal translation. Rather, as with his *Diarmuid and Grainne*, it was an attempt to reconstruct "the barbaric atmosphere of the heroic age". The programme note in fact credits Edwards and MacLiammóir for "keep[ing] the primitive and heroic nature of the play before the minds of the audience," glossing over the Longfords' linguistic contributions towards that goal in favor of their own visual and aural aesthetic.

MacLiammóir firmly believed that the Gate's splashy effects were as integral a part of the performance experience as the script. Using them to create an "authentic" Greek tragedy was a test of master craftsmanship for which he wanted critical recognition.

Second, having established their own theatrical *modus operandi* in contrast to the Abbey's in 1928, "the Gate people" were acutely conscious of the Abbey's pioneering productions of Yeats's *Oedipus* in 1926 and 1927. Part of the attraction of Aeschylus was that his trilogy had never been performed in Dublin; the Abbey had not yet claimed it. The Gate had to prove that they too could successfully produce Greek tragedy, and that they could do it bigger, better, and more barbarically (in MacLiammóir’s view, more authentically) than the Abbey. They succeeded.

**Irish History as Greek Tragedy: The Ford of the Hurdles**

MacLiammóir's *Ford of the Hurdles: A Masque of Dublin in Seven Episodes*, a massive spectacle produced at Croke Park three months later in May 1933, deserves a
brief mention here for three reasons: first, for its Lady Gregory-like foray into early medieval Irish history; second, for the mass appeal of its patriotic pageantry; and third, for the review by Maud Gonne MacBride comparing MacLiammóir’s pageant to a Greek tragedy. A revival of a 1929 production MacLiammóir had created for Dublin Civic Week, *The Ford of the Hurdles* was structured around seven episodes from Irish history, all set in Dublin: the Viking invasions, the story of Dervorgilla (told in 3 parts), the arrival of Cromwell, the trial of Robert Emmet, and the Easter 1916 uprising.

High praise was lavished upon the production and upon MacLiammóir’s stirring performance in the role of Emmet. The Dublin Opinion gushed, “We should imagine that Emmet himself, could his shade come back from his disputed grave, would have been perfectly satisfied with the representation,” and averred that "the silhouetted setting and the lighting of the early morning scene [for the 1916 rebellion episode] had that in them which recaptured some of the magic of that Easter dawn.”

Maud Gonne MacBride, writing for An Phoblac, commented:

> It is not too much to say that Michael Mac Liammóir’s play, *The Ford of the Hurdles*, is a national achievement. Not since W.B. Yeates' [sic] *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* has any Irish dramatist written so fine a play embodying the spirit of Ireland... He uses the voice of Ireland and the voices of the crowd like a Greek chorus to fill in the story and to mark its continuity. ‘The Ford of the Hurdles,’ like the Greek tragedies, shows that great art is the intense expression of human emotion in its stark simplicity.

She deemed the play "a work of a great artist and of one who has steeped his mind in the history and tradition, as well as in the outer life of his nation"--one wonders what she might have said had she known that MacLiammóir had not a single drop of Irish blood in

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253 Dublin Opinion review, May 1933. Gate Theatre Archive.
254 An Phoblac, 27 April 1933, review by M.G. MacB. Gate Theatre Archive.
his veins!--and solemnly concluded, "The Gate Theatre deserves well of the Irish nation. It has given a worthy Easter commemoration."

One wonders to what degree Gonne's own fraught personal history with Yeats influenced this review, and to what degree her admiration for MacLiammóir arises simply from his not being Yeats. She implies that Yeats's crowning achievement was a play written more than thirty years before; she praises MacLiammóir as "a great artist" and heir to the noble nationalist tradition from which, she implies, Yeats has fallen away; she holds the Gate, rather than the National Theatre, worthy of the nation's praise and admiration. Five years into their project, the internationally-oriented theatre founded by two Englishmen had achieved an extraordinary amount of national and nationalist recognition.

1933 was a year of remarkable achievements for the Gate. In September David Sears's wildly popular *Grania of the Ships*, "a swashbuckling, sword-and-cape drama" based on the life of Irish pirate queen Grania O'Malley, brought to life "the picturesque Ireland of the sixteenth century" with gorgeous period costumes and music based on Aran melodies. And in October the Gate lent their stage to An Comhar Dramaíochta [the Irish-language Theatre Company] for an Irish-language revival of MacLiammóir's *Diarmuid and Grainne*, which enjoyed an astonishing popularity: when the first three performances sold out, an Comhar extended its run to the entire week, and added additional early performances for children. The Cork Examiner called the play "an Irish classic" and heaped scorn upon "the version served up by the late George Moore in collaboration with Mr. Yeats at the Gaiety Theatre about thirty-three years ago," which

“made no impression whatever.” MacLiammóir’s *Diarmuid and Grainne* had made theatrical history, as the Irish Weekly critic marveled: the first Irish language play ever to have an extended run.

**The Gate’s “special classical”: *Mourning Becomes Electra***

The Gate's October 1938 production of O'Neill's *Orestaia* adaptation starred Edwards as General Mannon (Agamemnon), Coralie Carmichael as Christine (Clytemnestra), Muriel Moore as Lavinia (Electra), and Christopher Casson as Orin (Orestes). The Gate's production was the play's Irish premiere, and Dublin audiences packed the house despite its forbidding four-hour running time. The Irish Press, the Manchester Guardian, and the Irish Times all provided excellent reviews, lauding the powerful acting, the Freudian overtones of the incest theme, and O'Neill's nuanced exploration of the psychology of drives and desires. As with Longford's *Agamemnon*, critics avoided scrounging for contemporary Irish parallels. Instead they concentrated on the author's daring relocation of the action to an American civil war setting, impossibly rendered on stage by MacLiammóir: a dark and austere drawing room dominated by massive Greek columns, dubbed ““special classical” by the Cork Examiner.

Following the production The Leader ran a series of three articles by MacLiammóir regarding set and costume design, in which he described his approach as anti-naturalist: the point of the set is not to reproduce nor even to suggest the real world, but rather to communicate a particular insight about the characters to the audience. “I

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258 c.f. for example, “Plays and Players: A Monthly Survey Conducted by Polonius” (Book 15, p. 38, Gate Theatre Archive).

should like to think that the Gate has had its share in the forming of taste in Dublin for theatrical design," he commented. "I am proud to say that I see, as every year goes by, that more and more people among our audiences are growing conscious of the existence of this art as a very vital and essential part of the development of Irish theatre." ²⁶⁰

**Oidipus the Tyrant**

In October 1946, the Gate produced a double bill at the Gaiety Theatre: Sophocles' *Oidipus the Tyrant*, translated by Longford, and George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell* (from *Man and Superman*). The second world war was over and a longstanding, bitter rift that had occurred between the Longfords and MacLiammóir and Edwards in 1936 had been patched up, but the critics were combative, grumbling about the two-hour length of the double bill, and the ill-starred combination of two plays with "very long speeches and very little action." ²⁶¹ As usual, however, they praised MacLiammóir's set, which for *Oidipus* was the facade of a great palace, flanked with towering columns and huge statues of the Greek gods. The IT critic found it "immensely satisfying to the eye".

None rose to the bait of contemporary political allegory, although Longford's translation seems to allude to the ease with which heads of state had recently transformed themselves from democratically elected delegates of the people to fascist dictators. Longford précised in the programme note that in ancient Greek a tyrant meant simply "a ruler who has won the throne by his own efforts," but his insistence on calling his *Oidipus* "the Tyrant" rather than "the King" presses the contemporary meaning upon the

²⁶⁰ Leader, Dec 31, 1938. Gate Theatre Archive.
audience's minds. The priest of Apollo addresses Oidipus as "my country's president," but in an exchange between Teiresias and Oidipus, the latter threatens to unleash the nation's wrath over a perceived personal rebuke:

Teiresias: Thou blamest my disposition. Blame thine own. Examine well the temper that is in thee.
Oidipus: Thou darest insult the nation to its face?262

The analogy is not overt, however, and critics responded more readily to the visual aspects of the production and the interpretation of Oidipus by the famous Shakespearian actor Anew McMaster.

Longford had actually translated the play in 1942 with McMaster in mind, but the production was delayed for the duration of the war--and also perhaps because of the coolness between Longford and MacLiammóir, whose sister Marjorie was McMaster's wife. Gabriel Fallon writing for the Standard described the production as “a great actor, greatly acting in a great play,”263 and the Evening Herald piously opined that the production “succeeded admirably in capturing the austere and terrible quality of this tremendous drama of pagan times, when men, unaided by the light of hope, accepted their destinies unquestioningly.”264 The praise was lackluster, however, compared to the Gate’s usual encomiums, perhaps because these more cerebral plays were staged without the trappings of “passionate barbarity” the Dublin public had come to expect of an ancient Greek adaptation at the Gate. After the less-than-spectacular success of this production, the Gate would wait almost a decade before attempting another Greek tragedy. This time, MacLiammóir would play the role of Oedipus himself, but in Yeats's

262 Edward Longford, translation of Sophocles' Oidipus. This unpublished script is part of the Gate archive at Deering Library, 15. Gate Theatre Archive.
version, not Longford's—challenging the Abbey on previously uncontested territory.  

One of the most important conclusions to be drawn from the above survey of the Gate's Greek plays is that just as MacLiammóir and Edwards invented alternative modes of staging Irish epic—the sleek barbarism of Diarmuid and Grainne and the sophisticated fusion of Yeats's poetry and Wilde's wit in Where Stars Walk—they also made innovative contributions to the staging of Greek drama, and not merely by offering their audiences previously unstaged plays like those of Aeschylus. The Gate productions demonstrated that Greek drama could be a feast for the senses—vibrant, colorful, elegant, incense-scented, euphonious (and occasionally cacophonous), alternately frenetic and statuesque, the stage exploding with people or featuring one solitary figure.

The difference between the Gate's Agamemnon and, for instance, the university classics students' amateur production of Aeschylus' trilogy in ancient Greek that J.T. Sheppard directed the same week at Cambridge, was that the former was not an academic exercise but a passionately envisioned, professionally executed, and popularly enjoyed theatrical experience. The Gate's ancient Greek productions also partially demonstrated the potential of Irish adaptations of Greek drama to comment upon and help to make sense of recent and contemporary events in Ireland and throughout the world—a potential which would not be fully tapped in Irish theatre until the last two decades of the 20th century, when poets and playwrights like Brendan Kennelly, Marina Carr, and Conall Morrison came into their own.

Finally, the wry comment of one reviewer of the Gate’s Agamemnon that "since

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265 The National Theatre would not stage this play (King Oedipus, the poet’s revised text of his 1926 play) until 1973.
the Abbey has had its Sophocles, the Gate must have its Aeschylus.\textsuperscript{266} stands as a potent reminder of the intrinsic rivalry between the two theatres. This rivalry would take on new dimensions, specifically with respect to ancient Greek drama, in the latter part of the century. By the time MacLiammóir donned his Oedipus costume in 1955, the Gate had conclusively bested the Abbey in staging of adaptations of ancient Greek and Irish literature. Producing the world-famous Greek adaptation of the National Theatre’s most famous playwright (in Yeats’s revised version, no less) was a final test of the junior theatre’s mettle. It was now up to the Abbey to respond.

\textsuperscript{266} Manchester Guardian, 18/2/33 “Aeschylus in Dublin: New Version of the ‘Oresteia.’” Gate Theatre Archive.
CHAPTER 3

“A FEVERED SENSE OF PLACE”:

ANCIENT IRISH EPIC AT THE ABBEY THEATRE, 1947-1994

A tremor runs through me when I recall the legend of Owl Lake. I knew that story as a child. So did the Mai and Robert. But we were unaffected by it and in our blindness moved along with it like sleepwalkers along a precipice and all around gods and mortals called out for us to change our course and, not listening, we walked on and on.

--Marina Carr, The Mai

The return to Irish heroic literature by such playwrights as Yeats, Gregory, Synge, Martyn, and Thompson wrenched the epics of Finn and Cuchulain from the hands of protective antiquarians and dismissive university professors, staging them as provocative interventions in heated debates about the value and virtue of ancient Irish literature. The embodiment of such epics on the Irish stage was calculated to enhance its audience’s sense of belonging to a distinctive national culture, distinguished from that of its island neighbor through an independent, impressive, and time-hallowed linguistic and literary heritage. Plays like MacLiammóir’s Diarmuid agus Gráinne and Where Stars Walk, while similarly impassioned celebrations of Irish epic, rendered this sense of identity more complex and problematic by inscribing the characters with elements of possible identities--from passionate barbarism to effete sophistication--that had been written out of Irish nationalist constructs.

In my previous chapters, I have attempted among other things to trace the cordial but compelling rivalry between the Gate and Abbey Theatres by examining their
respective approaches to the staging of ancient Greek and Irish tragedies. This rivalry declined somewhat in the late 1930s and especially after 1941, when Ernest Blythe took over the managing directorship of the Abbey.\footnote{Blythe had been appointed as one of three directors in April 1935, together with Brinsley MacNamara and F.R. Higgins. Upon the latter’s death in 1941 Blythe became managing director (Pilkington 2001, 126, 138).} In Irish theatrical histories the Blythe years (1941-1967) at the Abbey are generally written off as flat, stale, and unprofitable. The argument runs first that the great writers of the Abbey's early years were gone, and second that Blythe's insistence on staging productions in Irish led him to hire actors of mediocre quality simply because they were fluent in the language. Lionel Pilkington, whose research usefully charts the complex effects of socio-political events in Ireland on the Abbey (and vice-versa), in fact quotes a satiric ditty to that effect:

\begin{verbatim}
Went down to the Queen's ...
  in me scarlet jeans
And showed Mr. Blythe me gold \textit{fáinne};
Before he could be cross
I showed him me \textit{blás}
  and now I'm in \textit{Diarmuid and Gráinne}.\footnote{\textit{Fáinne} and \textit{blás} refer to the singer's ring and her fluency in Irish, respectively (Pilkington 2001, 139, quoting the text of \textit{Futher Follies} given in C. Swift’s \textit{Stage by Stage}, Dublin: Poolbeg, 1985.) The play in the ditty would most likely be MacLiannmóir's rather than Yeats's and Moore's adaptation, since the former was performed at the Abbey in 1947 and the Queen’s in 1954.}
\end{verbatim}

The disastrous fire of 1951, which forced the Abbey to shift its premises to the Queen's Theatre and required a massive reconstruction project that was not completed until 1966, also contributes to the prevailing perception that these years in the National Theatre's history were ill-starred.

Yet fascinating work remains from this period, which is beginning to edge back out of the darkness. The National Library of Ireland's collection of scripts produced at
the Abbey between the 1930s the 1960s features many English-language plays by playwrights whose work, though fallen out of favor some years ago, is currently being rediscovered and positively reevaluated by Irish theatre historians: George Shiels, Teresa Deevy, Louis D'Alton, Walter Macken, and M.J. Molloy, to quote just a few examples. The Irish language productions, furthermore, display a surprising variety, including a mix of new writing and translations of writers from Molière to Gilbert and Sullivan, and from Beckett to Arrabal. These were capably adapted by Liam Ó Briain, Tomás Mac Anna, and Máiread Ni Ghráda. Irish language highlights from this period also include Tomás Luibheid's 1959 translation of Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, and Liam Ó Briain's 1967 translation of Boucicault's *Colleen Bawn*. Austin Clarke and his Verse Speaking Society (later known as the Lyric Theatre), which performed at the Peacock from 1941 to 1944 and on the Abbey mainstage from 1944 until the fire, revived the aspirations that Yeats had expressed for a "theatre of poetry". So if talented writers remained, if plays were still staged with "high ambition," if neither amateur acting nor the Irish language necessarily precluded Dublin audiences from relishing a play--witness the remarkable success of *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* during its production by an Comhar Dramaíochta at the Gate--then why has the history of this period at the Abbey been recorded in such bleak terms?

While I do not want to entirely contradict the accepted wisdom that the quality of Abbey productions during this period declined, my research suggests that the decline was both less sharp and less disastrous than it is often painted. The underlying reason that these years are remembered as dead years for the Abbey is in fact the striking contrast between its production aesthetics and those of the Gate. MacLiammóir and Edwards had

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269 The National Library contains the majority of the contents of the Abbey Theatre archive up to the mid-1970s; later materials are preserved on site at the Abbey.
succeeded in introducing Dublin to "the joy of the visible" in the theatre; the technical brilliance and sensory appeal of their productions had raised Dublin audiences' expectations of visual variety in the theatre to levels that far exceeded the drab country kitchen setting that was the Abbey standby. Dublin audiences had developed a taste for the visual innovations to be had at the Gate, which the Abbey was unable to match.

This disparity was rendered even more obvious when the Abbey tried to stage plays upon which the Gate had already put its stamp. In early November 1947, for example, the Abbey staged MacLiammóir's *Diarmuid agus Gráinne*. The Irish Times reviewer lamented "the very poor house at the Abbey," speculating that potential audience members avoided the play either since it was in Irish, or because of a "general ignorance of the [play's] dramatic worth."270 Considering that MacLiammóir had taken Dublin by storm in the previous years with *Where Stars Walk* and *Ill Met by Moonlight*, one might safely assume that even those citizens of Dublin who didn't know this particular play nevertheless associated its author's name with a certain dramatic standard. As for the language question, an Comhar Dramaíochta productions were generally well attended in this period, and the successful revival of MacLiammóir's play a few years later at the Taibhdhearc for their Silver Jubilee in 1953--a “brilliant production and acknowledgement of twenty-five glorious years of Gaelic drama”--demonstrates that the *Diarmuid agus Gráinne* was not so dated as to be unpalatable to modern audiences.271

In fact, though it postulates other explanations for Dublin's indifference, the Irish Times review unwittingly reveals the real problem with the Abbey's production: a dependence upon the words and the audience's imagination to supply the play's visual

images, rather than creating them through scenery, costumes, and lighting. The review is full of praise for the play's dialogue, but makes no mention of the production's visual impact:

The author has kept his dialogue pared to a biblical simplicity that keeps the fugitive terrors and tragedies of the old heroic tale as boldly and as vividly in his audience’s apprehension as the thrust of Ben Bulben against the Western sky... [The destinies of his characters] weave the warp and woof of love hate, jealousy and death as inevitably as in Greek tragedy, and the three acts bring to the audience a stimulation and excitement that has been foreign to the Abbey for a long time.272

The Abbey tried to emulate the Gate's staging of the production, even to the point of reproducing the same incidental music inspired by the Arabian Nights, but the notes rang false (ironically, considering May Fogarty's enthusiastic endorsement of the use of “Scheherazade” in the Gate production). The IT reviewer sternly opined, "Rimsky-Korsakov as background music for primitive Irish tragedy might be expected of Hollywood; it should not be forgiven of the Abbey." The Gate could stage passionate barbarism convincingly, and with all the trappings of modern technology, but the Abbey’s attempts looked more like a B-movie.

The Abbey produced Diarmuid agus Gráinne at a time when their relationship with Dublin audiences was particularly strained. Days before the play opened, Valentin Iremonger and Roger McHugh had publicly announced their disgust with the poor production standards of the Abbey's revival of O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars, and walked out of the performance they were attending. The ensuing controversy caused the panicked Abbey directorate to cancel the last two scheduled performances of O'Casey,

substituting MacLiammóir’s play instead. It was a baptism by fire of sorts for Tomás Mac Anna, who had been hired that year as Director of Plays in Irish. The lackluster response to this, his first Abbey production, no doubt caused him to rethink the uses that Irish epic could have on a Dublin stage—and to move them in a direction that would provoke laughter (intentionally) rather than controversy.

**The first time as tragedy, the second as farce: Irish epic in pantomime**

It is at least in part because the Gate was surpassing the Abbey in dramatizing the national literary heritage that in this period the Abbey's staging of Irish epic swings from tragedy to farce—that is, to pantomime. Though not generally studied in relation to the “legitimate” theatre, especially in the twentieth century, the annual Christmas “panto” has a storied tradition in Dublin. MacLiammóir, Edwards, and the Gate, in fact, produced many successful Christmas reviews, and the choice of genre indicates the National Theatre's hope of emulating the Gate's successes, though on its own linguistic and literary terms. The National Library contains five battered, dog-eared Abbey pantomime scripts featuring the figures of Irish legend in modern caricature: *Diarmuid agus an réalt* (1948), *Setanta agus an chú* (1952), *Aisling as Tír na nÓg* (1964), *Emer agus an laoch* (1965-66), and *Táin Bó Cú* (1979). As the titles imply, the scripts are (mostly) in Irish, and while not exactly enduring contributions to world literature, they do reveal important aspects of the history of the Abbey during this period. Foremost among these are the

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273 Dubbed “International Variety Entertainments” or “Christmas Entertainments,” the first of these shows at the Gate premiered in 1930. Others were produced in 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, and 1944, before the Abbey instituted their own pantomime tradition in 1945.

274 The script provides this title; Fitz-Simon lists the play as Réalt Dhiarmuda (Fitz-Simon 2003, 198).

275 This last is listed in Fitz-Simon as an Abbey play, but the script indicates that it was performed as a pantomime.
theatre's concerns that it was losing both audience members and prestige to the Gate and to the increasingly popular media of cinema and television.

Soon after the Abbey's production of MacLiammóir's play, Diarmuid and Grainne took the stage again. *Diarmuid agus an réalt* (Ms 29578A) directed by Tomás Mac Anna, illustrates the classic characteristics of pantomime. Theatre scenes are interspersed with renditions of popular songs, usually with the lyrics bowdlerized. The scenes morph frequently into a play-within-a-play (or a film- or radio-show-within-a-play). The characters continually crack jokes about current events, especially about Irish politics. Pop culture parodies and opportunities for audience participation abound, and the entire performance is held together by the loosest of narratives--in this particular case, the legend of Diarmuid and Grainne.

*Diarmuid agus an réalt* is inundated with references to the modern media and to the Abbey's theatrical rival, the Gate. The series of riddling questions that, according to the ancient narrative, Finn asks Grainne at the wedding feast is rendered in the pantomime like a game show. Another scene parodies western films: set in Texas, it features Diarmuid singing plaintively in Irish to the tune of “Red River Valley,” and when Grainne ruminates that the "fear dearg" is "as Mosco is docha," Diarmuid suggests that "Indianach" is more probable.276 The two flee from Finn à la Bonnie and Clyde after Grainne kicks him in the backside and Diarmuid cocks him on the head with his pistol.

The couple travels to Egypt, where the Irish heroes converse with the Sphinx and Cleopatra; the Egyptian queen and Grainne vie to see whose life has been turned into a

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276 *an fear dearg*: "the red man," the mysterious warrior of Celtic legend and Yeats’s *Golden/Green Helmet; as Mosco is docha*: "from Moscow, probably;" and *Indianach* is of course Indian, to counterbalance the cowboys.
play by the more famous playwright:277

Cleo: ...an da dhrámadóir is cumasai ar domhan do sgriobhadar fumsa.

Grainne: Ce hiad?
Cleo: Liam craith an tseighe, agus Seoirse Bernard...
Fionn: Shaw.
Conan: O, Shaw, Shaw, go direach.
Sadhbh: Pshaw!
Grainne: Ceard faoi Seoirse Moore?
Cleo: Is beag liom i...

Grainne: Agus ceard faoi Mac an Gheata?
Conan: Agus ce he Mac an Gheata? O, Micheal, Micheal Mac Liammoir.
Sadhbh: Dun e.
Conan: Ni dun e. Longphort.

Grainne: In Amharclann na Mainistreach i...
Cleo: A ta sin na fotharach anois ar no na Mainistreach eile. Nior mhaith liom bheith i measga na brathar ata sa mhainistir sin.

Conan: Ta tus ro aibidh.
Cleo: Caithfidh tu bheith aibidh chun bheith ar na scannain...

This is not the only mention of the Gate: the game show host also mentions the name Micheál, upon which Grainne asks excitedly if MacLiammóir is there.

That MacLiammóir was not there (nor was the Gate's production team) is amply

277 I have retained the spelling (and occasional spelling errors) of the original typescript, which left out most of the accents of the Irish long vowels.
evident from the production notes, which call for simple recorded sound effects, and lighting cues limited to "up" and "down." The next Irish legend pantomime script, however, demonstrates the Abbey’s determination to increase their range of visual and aural effects. *Setánta agus an Cú* ("Setanta and the Hound," 1952) by Tarlach Ó hUid and Tomás Mac Anna was produced September 1952 at the Queen's. The narrative that underpins the action is that of the *reamh-sceála* from the *Táin*, but much of the action is relocated to contemporary settings--Trinity College, for example, where Setanta is comically interrogated by members of the of the Garda investigating a drama-induced student riot. The action is interspersed with parodies of popular songs and jokes about the Dáil Eireann [the Irish parliament], and both the figures of ancient Irish legend and those who portray them on the modern stage are roundly caricatured:

Bean Chulainn: Ta failte romat a ri go hamarclann na Bainriona...  
Culainn's wife: You are welcome, King, to the Queen's Theatre...

Deirdre: Bu-hu-hu-hu!  
An ri: Dhera cur stoca it' ghub. Ad cad ta uait?  
Deirdre: Boo-hoo-hoo!  
The King: Lord, put a sock in it. What's wrong with you?

Deirdre: Naoise, Naoise, Naoise!  
An ri: Ni-sea? Ni-sea? Ni h-e seo an Compantas!  
Se seo an Comhar Dramaíochta.  
Deirdre: Naoise, Naoise, Naoise!  
The King: "No, yes, no, yes"?  
This isn’t the theatre company. This is the Irish Drama League.

The production notes for this play call for a slew of special effects, especially in sound--gongs, crashing glass, cannons--and for frequent changes of backdrop, and many of the parts (the "snowmaidens," for example, for what seems to be an Eskimo scene) suggest

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278 Lit. "before-stories"--tales of Cuchulain's youth. The pantomime's title alludes to the manner in which Cuchulainn, originally called Setanta, acquired his new name: arriving late to a feast at Culainn's house, he was attacked by his host's ferocious guard dog. Setanta killed the hound, to Culainn's chagrin, but offered to guard the house himself until another hound could be trained to do so. Thus Setanta became known as Cú Chulainn, or "the hound of Culainn." In the pantomime, Setanta is reluctant to assume this responsibility and instead travels around the world in search of a suitable replacement for Culann's hound.

279 A pun on the pronunciation of Naoise's name, since *ní* and *sea* mean *no* and *yes* respectively in Irish.

280 Meaning, I assume, the regular Abbey company, as opposed to the members of an Comhar Dramaíochta.
elaborate, imaginative costumes.

By the 1964 production of *Aisling as Tír na nÓg* ("A Vision from the Land of Youth," Ms. 29559), a pantomime loosely based on the ancient Irish legend of the Children of Lir, the production notes call for car explosions, deafening helicopter noises as the cast is transported to land of faery, and dramatic exits accompanied by the James Bond theme; at one point a train that puffs smoke even thunders across the stage. The so-called "historical scene" that follows the faeryland segment is complete with tricolors, bayonets, ceilidh dance music and motor bikes--a hilarious confusion of past and present. The 1965-66 pantomime, *Emer agus an Laoch* ("Emer and the Warrior," Ms. 29562) similarly collides the figures of ancient legend and the hallmarks of modern technology. Laeg and Laoghaire argue over what to watch on TV, and "Ailfrid Hitch-Coileach" [Alfred Hitchcock] arrives with his Hollywood film crew to make a "scannán mór Epičiúil"281 on the greatest of the Irish heroes, whose name "Hitch-Coileach" mispronounces repeatedly as Chú-nú-chlainn, Canchulain, Cnucalainn, and whom, as it turns out, he is confusing with Diarmuid.

Last but not least, the 1979 pantomime *Táin Bó Cú*282 by Eoghain Ó Tuarisc and Tomás Mac Anna (MS 29578) opens on a strategic planning session of the "Bord an Mythology," who are trying to put together a "Million Dollar Epic" advertising campaign to attract foreign tourists to Ireland. This pantomime portrays the Morrígú as a militant feminist, performs the *reamh-sceála* as an episode of "This is your life!" starring Cuchulain, and includes an Irish language rendition of "Summer Nights" from the musical *Grease*--all with extensive scene changes and sound and lighting cues.

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281 "great Epical film."
282 A truncation of the title of the ancient Irish epic Táin Bó Cuailnge, or "The Cattle Raid of Cooley"; the pantomime title puns on *beaucoup*. 

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These are the only scripts available at the Abbey archive in the National Library, but they are by no means the only Irish epic pantos produced by the Abbey. Christopher Fitz-Simon also lists *Niall agus Carmelita* (1949) and *An Claiomh Soluis* (1962), both based on the King’s Cycle tale of Niall of the Nine Hostages, *Sonia agus an Bodach* featuring Fionn Mac Cumhnaill (1954), *Oisin i dTir na nOg* (1958), and *Diarmuid agus Balor* (1961). Though an essential part of the National Theatre’s repertoire during the years at the Queen’s, pantomimes were staged much less frequently after 1966, with the return to the rebuilt Abbey premises and Blythe’s departure.

Taken together, the Abbey's Irish epic pantomimes raise a number of points of significance. First, they represent the theatre's most frequent and most innovative productions of Irish epic during this period, and they open up to later writers like Paul Mercier and Vincent Woods the possibility of staging Irish epic outside the conventions of tragedy. Second, the pantomimes repeatedly engage with contemporary Irish issues, albeit in a humorous vein, as with Mac Anna's and Ó Tuarisc's comic indictment of the commercialization of Irish literature. Third, the increasing technical demands of the pantomimes indicate the Abbey's growing awareness that to survive as a viable theatre, it needed to develop a range of theatrical effects to rival the Gate's. The conventions of pantomime, which call for an extremely broad range of special effects but do not require that they be naturalistic (and in fact usually prefer the opposite), made these productions an excellent arena in which to experiment and hone those skills.

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283 Fitz-Simon (2003), 198. For brief synopses of these scripts, see Michael O’Neill, *The Abbey at the Queen’s* (Ontario: Borealis, 1999).

284 It is perhaps for this reason that *Táin Bó Cú* is not listed as a pantomime in Fitz-Simon, although it clearly falls into the same genre.
The Old Lady Says Nothing: Ignoring Grania

The pantomime adaptations of Irish epic were thus entertaining and quite useful to the Abbey in technical terms. Had the Abbey wished to staged a more intellectually challenging or thought-provoking Irish epic adaptation, however, the theatre might have seized an opportunity that presented itself in the early 1960s.\(^{285}\) The archival collection of the Abbey Theatre at the National Library includes an intriguing script entitled simply *Grania: a legend*. This two-act play, attributed to Patricia Cobey, was submitted to the Abbey but never performed.\(^{286}\)

The script's appearance is amateurish at first glance—it is, for example, riddled with typographic errors, "haunched" for "hunched," "taunt" for "taut," et cetera—but the author seems to have a clear, well-informed vision of the proper design and production mode for her play. She prefaces the script with injunctions that it is not to be "presented in a naturalistic way," that the underlying presence of the legend of Diarmuid and Grania should "effect its own stylistic mode of acting," that the costumes be "stylised Celtic dress which is surprisingly modern, sophisticated," and that her characters speak in a contemporary idiom.\(^{287}\) Cobey's instructions for the set designs are simple but suggestive, and begin with a tableau scene:

> We are in the open air, against a landscape of stone.  
> There is a stone wall, angled to make a corner.  

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\(^{285}\) Many thanks to Dr. Luke Gibbons for resolving the enigma about the dating of this play, which arose from a conflict between its date in the National Library of Ireland's electronic catalogue and a notation on the folder containing the script. The script itself is not dated, and I have been unable at this point to obtain more precise information about the year it was submitted to the Abbey.  

\(^{286}\) Mairead Delaney, the Abbey Theatre archivist, is currently compiling a full list of all the plays performed at the Abbey over its long history, and she kindly checked this play's title against her near-complete records, with no results. The conclusion that Cobey's play was not performed is supported by the fact that the file on this play contains one sole script, no production notes, prompt copies, or any of the other ancillary materials normally contained in the Abbey archive files.  

\(^{287}\) Cobey, *Grania: a legend* (1960?), i, ii. Subsequent references to this script will be provided in parenthetical notation.
top, to the left, sits Grania. Below her, on the ground, Nurse is hunched.\textsuperscript{288} In the centre of the wall there is an arched opening. Downstage right, Finn sits in a chair next to a table. To his right, Diarmuid lounges on the edge of the table. Upstage right, Cormac stands on a small dais. (ii)

Cobey seems fascinated by the art of storytelling, and by the ways in which legends can be passed down intact from generation to generation--or alternatively be reinvented, changed or challenged. And though she states that the play is meant to be a comedy, she also clearly intends it as a serious challenge to previous adaptations of the tale of Diarmuid and Grania. Like Lady Gregory in 1908, Cobey takes umbrage at representations of a fickle, opportunistic Grania, and pits her own adaptation against those that have come before.

Her cast includes a character called "The Storyteller," an omniscient (female) narrator who enters through the arch and moves downstairs during the initial tableau to introduce each of the characters in turn. She then warns the audience that this performance of the legend will be different from all previous ones:

\begin{quote}
Once again, they are going to act out their story... For hundreds of years now Diarmuid has struggled to maintain his honour as a Fianna and his loyalty to Finn. In death he redeems himself. Finn, too, safeguards his honour. Fierce in jealousy like a raging bull, he pursues, pursues, until he claims back the woman Grania. And she, the once lovely Grania, becomes a creature to be mocked--a fickle, troublesome female--the unfaithful woman of easy words and a changing heart.
Tonight we are going to change all that. That beautiful young woman there is Grania. She is upset... because she knows that she will have to find the strength and the will to change all that has gone before. It is difficult. She is exhausted and strained. You see the tension in those young arms--lean and taut. Time. She needs some time... [The Storyteller recounts the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{288} Originally "haunched." Typographical errors in the script have been invisibly corrected in the citations.
characters’ various motivations and the story of Diarmuid’s death. But all that is yet to come. For the moment, no one thinks or speaks of such things. While the storyteller has been speaking the lights have been dimmed on stage gradually until only a spot is on her face. Exit characters. Lights up slowly. (1-2)

The play's first scene takes place on an early spring morning in a meadow outside the halls of Tara. Grania rejoices in the warmth and the fresh air, but is soon cast down by the thought of her impending marriage, which she understands is motivated solely by politics and powermongering:

Grania: Sometimes I think it is only the rooms we live in—all those horrid smoky rooms. If we could live out in the open, out in the grass again, it would all be different.
Nurse: What are you saying? You the daughter of the King. The fields are for the men and the cattle.
Grania: And then there wouldn’t be any great halls and armies and other kings waiting to take them and the lands and then daughters wouldn’t have to be married in order to make peace for their fathers. (6)

Her father Cormac proves her intuition about the wedding correct in his meditation on its expediency in the next scene:

Divine right of kings--don’t make me laugh. As High King I am only a master builder. Stone by stone, the loyalties, oaths, treaties, and defections of a hundred petty clans are balances one against the other and in the end there is a wall on which I, and I alone, shall walk... and a daughter whose marriage now will secure the crown upon my head. (12)

Surrounded by the symbols of his wealth and power—the dais and a long banquet table, all lit by flickering firelight—Cormac nevertheless seems more practical than mercenary. He is a "master builder," a policy maker; he even tries to convince Finn to sit on his council of state rather than remaining captain of the Fianna, since men of their age are
crafty and worldly-wise (and a bit long in the tooth for combat).

Finn has never seen Grania, but wants a wife to warm his bed. Diarmuid is scarcely more sympathetic a choice: his aside to Oisin, after Grania confesses to having loved him since she first saw him years ago, is crude and callous: “I’m not responsible if the bitch is in heat” (19). The ensuing scenes depict him as weak, irritable, and cowardly, and the play suggests that Grania is in love with her own perception of Diarmuid, which does not correspond to reality; for instance, she refers to Diarmuid as her “blue eyed eagle” when, as Oisin points out sardonically, his eyes are actually green (22).

Nevertheless, by a combination of threats and cajoling she convinces him to escape with her. When Finn finds and confronts them,

There is the blue light of a storm over all. Grania and Diarmuid are in the centre of the stage. They look frightened. There is a miserable looking tree and in circular fashion three doors made of wooden longs. There is the incessant threatening sound of the bodhran and the massing of feet. Against the backcloth there is the image of a horde of men. (31)

Realizing the extent of his power over them, Finn allows the two to escape to what he is certain will be a wretched fugitive existence.

In the second act, which takes place several years later, the curtain rises on the pitiable couple, hunched in rags over a weak fire, shivering with the cold. They bicker until Grania cries in despair,

O when it is all going to stop? What are we doing here? This has nothing to do with us, none of it [...] Don’t you see--it’s at the head of high tables we should be, not driven into darkness like this... (a little embarrassed) I want the envy of other women when they see you before a great fire and all life dancing in your face. (Small voice) Is that too much--to want? (Act II, 1, 2-3)
Her plea leaves him unmoved, and they argue bitterly. When Grania attempts to slip away from their campsite, the Storyteller intervenes.

    Storyteller: Where are you going?
    Grania: I’ve had enough. I’m leaving.
    Storyteller: It’s not time yet (8-9).

The Storyteller takes her to Finn, who is waiting nearby, watching their encampment (10), and Grania marvels at his obsessive persistence: "What is strange to me is why you neither come nor go. Nothing is stopping you from doing either. Go home or face him. But you thwart and dangle on forever" (13). When he asks her to leave Diarmuid, she refuses, but more for her own than for Diarmuid's sake: "I am fighting for myself. I want a wholeness which you [Finn] will not give me. You will only tear me to pieces [...] You who have roared and butchered your way throughout the land, through a thousand lives." (17, 19) Unlike Yeats’s and Moore’s Grania, this heroine feels no attraction to Finn and the masculine ideals of power and violent conquest that he and the Fianna profess.

The manner of Diarmuid's death suggests, in fact, that the warrior culture of the Fianna is not one of courage but one of fear: anxiety that one's strength or one's manhood is insufficient, terror of the censure of one's comrades. Grania reaches out to Diarmuid one final time upon her return to their hovel, but he ignores or does not hear her; he is lost in his own daydreams, which eventually lead him back "sleepwalking" to Finn (20).

The stage directions call for the men to mount an upper stage level representing the slopes of Ben Bulben, where Finn announces that the black boar has returned, terrorizing the entire forest: "Last night, over there, a herd of cattle broke out screeching madly up to the western slope and then they ran down to drown themselves in the lake."
The world is coming apart in little pieces. Nothing will hold its place any longer..." (21). Fear of the boar causes everything to fall into chaos, including Diarmuid, who collapses in horror remembering the prophecy that the boar will kill him. Finn convinces him that his doom is inevitable:

Diarmuid: It isn’t the way I thought it would be.
Finn: It never is.
Diarmuid: I... I don’t know. It seems so meaningless this way, after all these years. You and me... I don’t have the right to fight it. I won’t fight it. I can get up and walk away from here and go on living.
Finn: Oh, stop being so squeamish. You can’t outrun what has been foretold. You always were a rotten soldier. Take your sword. (22)

After a blackly comic exchange where Finn and Diarmuid argue about the exact place and time foretold for Diarmuid’s death, Finn urges him to stand his ground "like a man. Alone." In a gesture fraught with double entendres, he helps Diarmuid position his sword (“A little higher. Show a little more pluck,” 25), then deserts him. Directions for the death scene call for "a flash of lights, the sound of hooves, a wild piercing screech. Lights out." When the lights come up again the fatally wounded Diarmuid is "lying centre stage propped against a small stone" as Finn and Grania enter. As in Gregory's version of the tale, Diarmuid is deaf to Grania's outpouring of grief; instead he seeks Finn's reassurance that he died as a brave warrior should (26).

The Storyteller steps back into this tableau scene to recount the subsequent events, which include the looting of Diarmuid's corpse by his former comrades-in-arms:

Diarmuid died. Word went to Tara. Grania’s people had just come to carry him home for burial when Oisin stepped forward and claimed Diarmuid’s powerful broadedged sword. Coillte snagged the great coloured cloak from his back, and Finn seized Diarmuid’s dogs. Piece by piece, the man was parceled out to his
comrades-in-arms and what was left was the mangled carcass nobody wanted. When Grania saw that, she left too. (27)

When Finn comes to look for her she excoriates him for ruining her chances at happiness both before and after Diarmuid's death. Her concern for her reputation again echoes Gregory’s Grania:

I like living in the world and that means that it matters to me what the world says about me, just as much as it matters to you. I loved one man and I gave up the world for that man and I was, if nothing else, faithful. Why should I be the target of ignorant men’s mockery? All you tell me is to forget about it. Why didn’t you forget, seven years ago? (36)

When he exhorts her to bury Diarmuid, she responds grimly that she has no intention of doing so:

Grania: I don’t care if he rots in the rain... What, pick up the pieces after you and your men have done with him! ... He was never with me. It was always you he wanted, in the beginning and in the end. So he’s yours.
Finn: You can’t do that!
Grania: I have.

For Cobey's Grania as for Gregory's, the realization that the bond between Diarmuid and Finn has always been stronger than any love Diarmuid may have felt for her ultimately allows for a reversal of the power dynamics in the relationship between Grania and Finn, so that Grania is able to impose her will on him. Cobey's play also deliberately echoes Gregory's in its last scene, which calls for raucous cries and laughter from the Fianna outside (one of whom even invades their space and must be thrown out by Finn). But unlike Gregory's, this Grania has no interest in becoming Finn's wife. The increasing tension of the scene culminates with her refusal to leave with him and his attempt to physically force her to do so, twisting her arm behind her back. Grania first
cries "Let go! I don’t belong to you" (41), then demonstrates her newly-gleaned understanding that the Fianna are most profoundly motivated by doubts about their courage and masculinity, by echoing Finn's command to Diarmuid: "Go on. Face them like a man. Alone" (42).

The play's final scene shows Grania and her nurse packing their few belongings to leave. Grania has decided to escape the "horrid smoky rooms" of Tara and to "live out in the open" on Ben Bulben, as she had daydreamed in the opening scene. In doing so she reclaims a matriarchal inheritance:

Grania: The lands belonged to my grandmother, Queen Maeve. She left them to my mother, and she left them to me.
Nurse: It’s the other side of the world, up there.
Grania: Every place is the other side of the world, until you get there.

The conclusion of the tale—a reasonably happy ending for Grania, and just deserts for the Fianna—is left to the Storyteller:

Storyteller: Well, that’s as far as we go.
Up they went to the mountain.
Grania lived a long and prosperous life,
leaving many after her... but she never married....
Finn and the others were last seen
in a cave by a fellow who got such a dread he ran from the cave, locking the door after him, and threw the key into the lake. The Fianna roared “You left us worse than you found us!” And after that, no more was heard.
Now they’re all gone, the dead and the ever-living ones, the ones we remember.
My own grandmother gave me the story told tonight. She had it from her grandmother who had it from hers, and so on back among the old women of the district. And as far as I know it has never been set down in a book. (43-44)

Like the lands of Queen Maeve, the "true" story of Grania has been passed down from
grandmother to granddaughter. The oral tradition (and the recitation/dramatization of it on stage) is gendered feminine in this reading; it stakes its claim to authenticity through its unbroken tradition, stretching back through countless generations of storytelling grandmothers. The exclusion of this version of the tale from the male-dominated realm of authorship and publication--the realm that had staged "false" versions of Grania--only enhances that authenticity.

Ironically, Cobey’s script, too, was ultimately excluded from the realm of performance. Properly staged, Cobey's adaptation might have provoked a certain degree of interest in its politics and its meditations on the nature of performance. The Storyteller guides and intervenes in the action in ways that look back to Pirandello's *Six Characters in search of an author* and forward to the character of Sir in Friel's *Living Quarters*, and the legend is given a new dramatic charge by its feminist overtones. Cobey's Grania does not require the extraordinary acting of a great tragedienne, and the simple but evocative sets and lighting effects should have been well within the Abbey's capacities. In the end, however, the Abbey consigned this Irish epic adaptation to the archive.

**A Foray into the Fantastic: George Fitzmaurice's *Enchanted Land***

One playwright whose work particularly lent itself to the extremes of special effects, costume, and set that the Abbey pantomimes helped to develop was George Fitzmaurice. Actually a contemporary of Yeats's, Fitzmaurice's plays are an incredible fusion of legend, fantasy, humor and childlike wonder, with a dark and chaotic energy at their core. Yeats’s and Lady Gregory’s disinterest in staging his *The Dandy Dolls* had
been a severe blow to this eccentric and rather reclusive intellect, but the publication of an anthology of his plays in 1967 and of biographies in 1972 and 1975 had renewed interest in his work, and in 1976 the Abbey staged Fitzmaurice's *The Enchanted Land*.

The protagonists' names are an odd hodgepodge of Latin and Irish, myth and epic. The play features the beautiful Eithne, betrothed to Aeneas, King of Ireland, but magically exiled from the country to the underwater palace of Mananaan, Celtic god of the sea. The first act opens

in an apartment in the under-sea habitation of Mananaan. At extreme left high staircase down which some light comes. At back near staircase is a high-up small window. Back of stage is obscure. At extreme right is a door apparently leading to a room. At rise of curtain Eithne is discovered seated on block a few paces from door, toying with ball of [magic] thread.

Diarmuid, husband to Mananaan's housekeeper Marse, enters intoning a paean to Aeneas's approaching ship, and Eithne's return to Ireland: “Happy is Eithne the dark-haired: Nearly ended in her sojourn in the Land of Mananaan, for the five years she was placed under enchantment... are drawing to a close...” (2). Thankfully, the lofty epic tone does not last; Marse comments “To tell God’s truth, it’s a surprise to me ‘tisn’t nearly off your nut you are with joy...” (3) Marse and Diarmuid hide their venomous hatred and envy of the gentle Eithne, but their foster daughter Elaine makes hers plain: “Happy I was and contented in the Land of Mananaan, till you coming and telling me of the game

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289 The Abbey did, however, stage Fitzmaurice’s *The Country Dressmaker* in 1907, *The Pie-Dish* in 1908, and *The Magic Glasses* in 1913.


291 The Gate archive at Northwestern unfortunately contains no pictures of the set of *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, but I would hazard a guess that the Abbey’s rendering of this set was at least partially indebted to the Gate’s presentation of the sea-cavern scene from MacLiammóir’s Act II.

292 *The Enchanted Land*, unpublished script from NLI Abbey archive, 2. Subsequent citations noted in parentheses.
they do be having in Erin with their fine clothes and their frolics, their music and their
dancing...” (7-8). The three contrive to steal Eithne's enchanted ball of rainbow-colored
thread, which allows Elaine to magically charm the vain and gullible Aeneas and his
courtiers after she and her foster-parents lock Eithne away in her room (8).

The second act takes place in

an apartment in King Aeneas’s Palace. At right front
Elaine is reclining on sofa, apparently sleeping. In
middle of floor hag with large harp. At right back table
laid with eatables, waiter standing near. A door at right.
Enter Diarmuid and Marse by left doorway, through
which landscape is visible. Window at left of door (24).

Elaine has been queen of Ireland for eight years, ruling through flattery and bribery, as
Marse proudly recounts: “…she knowing the weakness of the natives, guessing it even
before she left the land of Mananaan, and praise and porter able to make the Twelve Pins
of Connemara hop up out of their abutments and go bumping around the country for you"
(26). Aeneas proves to be a waffling, weak-minded king, easily manipulated by Elaine
until she runs out of magic thread. When this happens her allure comes to an end, right
before the arrival of the kings of every nation, their curiosity piqued by Aeneas's
descriptions of her incredible beauty.

Having escaped her prison and come to the palace disguised as the harp-playing
hag, Eithne throws off her disguise and leaves triumphantly, disdaining Aeneas’ pleas
that she take him back. He in turn spurns Elaine, who explains to her foster parents that
revenue she has embezzled as queen has been “well invested in East Anglia” and will
keep them in comfort: “Anyway, if I don’t land the King of England, there are other
chances--for an Earl over there is as big as a king here” (66). The three connivers,
“throwing their legs and arms about” “hie over to England” at the play’s end. (68)
The dialogue of this bizarrely charming play is laden with rhyme, repetition, and hyperbole, and with a richness of middle- and working-class idiom worthy of Flann O’Brien. The setting in the house of Mananaan suggests a tale borrowed from the Mythological Cycle, but the narrative reads more like a Cinderella story, with elements pulled from Greco-Roman mythology, and with jarring references to the modern age (like Elaine's embezzling and foreign investments) to call the audience's attention to the artificiality of the play's fantasy world. It is, in fact, a cosmopolitan fairy tale, the Abbey's closest analogue to MacLiammóir's Where Stars Walk.

Noh News is Good News: The Abbey's late 20th century Deirdre productions

The late 1960s and 1970s saw an increase in the Abbey’s willingness to experiment with theatrically challenging productions, and a desire to break out of the country kitchen setting, as the choice of Fitzmaurice’s play suggests. These years were a time of transition and renewal at the Abbey: the new theatre was inaugurated in 1966; Ernest Blythe stepped down from his position as director in 1967. The Abbey revived and reinvented a number of Irish epic adaptations from their early repertoire during this period. The talented director Joe Dowling staged Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows in 1971, for instance, while in 1975 Ulick O'Connor contributed an intriguing Noh version of the Deirdre legend to the Abbey.

The latter was first produced in the Abbey's rehearsal room along with another Noh play of O'Connor's entitled The Emperor's Envoy; it was directed by Tomás MacAnna, with settings, costumes, and masks by Wendy Shea. An attention to tiny visual details was lavished on this production, from the publicity onwards. The
performance poster advertising the performance balances Irish and Japanese elements, with a tripartite division of colors and text: the titles and the author's name appear in black against a pink sky, above a huge black standing stone (a slab lying across three pillars), trailing pink and white cherry blossoms form a semicircle around the location and times of performance, and the director and design credits appear at the bottom in white against a black background.

O’Connor’s program note provides a brief history of Noh drama, and an explanation of its typical characteristics:

There is a chorus and a small orchestra usually consisting of three drums and a flute player. There are generally not more than five actors. All parts are played by men, and not more than two are masked. The purpose of the other figures is to elicit from the masked actor the central theme of the play. The mask is usually changed during the performance of plays of two scenes to indicate the central character in another state—usually in a previous existence.

O’Connor notes that the Noh has ties to the Buddhist/Zen belief in reincarnation as a means to enlightenment; he also reminds his audience how congenial Yeats had found the form for his dance plays:

There is a subjective quality about the Noh which was bound to attract Yeats. We do not know if he read Zeami’s description of the Noh from the Book of Criticism, but if he did we can feel that he certainly would have approved.

‘Forget the theatre and look at the Noh.’
Forget the Noh and look at the actor.
Forget the actor and look at the idea.
Forget the idea and you will understand the Noh.’

O’Connor’s play opens with the entrance of a “Scholar from the South,” whose

293 In the Abbey production, actress Fedelma Cullen played the role of the Old Woman/Deirdre.
294 In Japanese, accomplishment or performance.
attendants carry a bodhran and tin whistle. He announces that he is traveling across the provinces to see Eamhain Macha in the springtime. He and the attendants praise the natural wonders of the country:

We have come across Ireland
Through the mist-filled plains
Leaving Cruachan behind us
Old Watch-dog of the Western sea.
We pass the purple mountains
Caught in the gold of the morning sun
Look, we have crossed the green plain of Tailte; where the athletes compete
Throwing the spear and running like the wind.
Now here are the little lakes of Eamhain Macha
The small hills sprouting to the sky.295

When they admire the beauty of a lone pine tree, a masked Old Woman ("old and bent and with white hair, wild and blowing like the winter wind") tells the group that the tree marks the burial place of Deirdre. She points out Naoise's grave, with his brothers', across a vast lake, and explains that Conor chose Deirdre's burial spot to keep her from Naoise even in death.

The Old Woman narrates in the third person:

When Deirdre was born
She screamed in the womb
Men heard it in terror
Cathbad the Druid went to Conor
And told him sorrow would come through her.

Though the narration follows a solemn cadence, the dialogue that the Old Woman recounts is lively, and in some cases directly quoted from Kinsella's version of the Táin, as for instance Deirdre's lines to Naoise: "Of the two I’d pick / a game young bull like you," and "Two ears of shame and sin / If you don’t take me with you."

295 NLI script from Abbey Archive, unpublished, with pages unnumbered.
296 Kinsella, 12; originally published by Dolmen in 1969.
translation actually reads “mockery” rather than “sin”; though the alteration in O’Connor’s text may occur for reasons of poetic meter, it adds Catholic overtones to the play’s themes of repentance and punishment for past transgressions.) The recitation ends with a solemn statement of eternal doom: “Deirdre is cursed and her ghost / Lingers by this tree.”

As the Old Woman exits the “Man of the place” enters; he is a storyteller figure, whose tales mix epic action with colloquial diction: Naoise and his brothers are “stirring fellows entirely,” strong and courageous and only defeated in the end by Druid magic. A forest and sea created by sorcery cannot slow the sons of Uisneach, but when the Druids freeze the sea the brothers are held fast and perish. While singing the praises of the heroes of Irish epic, the Man of the place disapproves of the heroines: “…the same women are responsible for a lot of the trouble in the world. Sure if you look at the tales of Ireland, wasn’t it Grania broke up between Finn and Diarmuid, and Maeve who put Cuhullain against Ferdia…"

The Old Woman returns, now wearing a youthful mask, and performs “the lithe dance of a young girl, swift and passionate.” She is Deirdre, continually reincarnated and lingering by her pine tree, “tormented by memory” because she brought destruction on Naoise and his brothers “and on the warriors of Ireland”. The scholar does not understand why she must suffer this way, saying that it was her fate, not her fault, but Deirdre rejects this easy exculpation:

I betrayed Conor who was my savior.
At birth I had been strangled
Were it not for his royal command...
I had broken the strongest bond between men
The warrior brotherhood...
I drove Naoise back to Conor
I knew... that Naoise would be killed ...
But I feared also that one day Naoise would leave me.
He would see I had torn him from the soil
He grew in....
One day he would not return.
If he died by the armies of Conor
At least I would be by his side.
I urged him back to treachery
Rather than die without him.

The chorus now add their voices to hers, suggesting the universality of this struggle.

Chorus:  I must linger by this tree
Unable to depart
Until my spirit is released
And I return perfected by nature.

The compassionate scholar announces his intention to pray that she be released
from her suffering, though she dismisses the hope he offers. “Is there no respite for her?”
he asks. “Surely she can be released from this / There is no one that cannot be touched /
by prayer.” As he prays, two of the cast members in minor roles bring together the two
pine trees that mark the grave of the lovers, so that the tops of their branches touch.

Chorus:  Within the fullness of time
But not before, pine will reach to pine.
Across the waters of the lake
Deirdre and Naoise will be together.
In the land over the wave
Where the young never grow old--
Where the young never grow old.

In a harmonious blending of Catholic and Buddhist theological tradition and Irish and
Japanese literary tropes, the final image symbolizes the lovers’ reunion.

O’Connor’s play was revived in 1978 and 1986. The 1986 lunchtime theatre
production, directed by Emory professor and Noh scholar James Flannery and designed
by Chisato Yoshimi, attracted then-President Hillery, among others, to the Peacock. This
revival of the Noh Deirdre was produced as part of a “mini-season” of Peacock
productions “dedicated to exploring the dimensions of movement, light, costume and 
colour in the theatre, as opposed to the primacy of the written or spoken word”\(^{297}\)--an 
overdue admission by the Abbey of the critical importance of the visual elements of 
theatrical production.

The reviews were mostly effusive, especially regarding Fedelma Cullen’s 
performance as The Old Woman/Deirdre. The same role in the 1975 production had 
been Cullen’s first at the National Theatre; she also played Deirdre in a 1980 double 
revival of Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and Yeats’s *Deirdre*, which was not so well 
received. Reviewers of the double bill enthused about the rich textures of the sets and 
costumes designed by Bronwen Casson\(^{298}\) and the lighting design by Tony Wakefield, 
but deplored Cullen’s decision, under Mac Anna’s direction, to portray a “smaller, 
bitchier” Deirdre, “more likely to goad and spit than to stand and sing.”\(^{299}\) The two plays 
together seemed repetitive rather than contrasting or complementary, a tedious academic 
exercise instead of a celebration of two of the National Theatre’s greatest playwrights or 
of Irish epic. Over the course of these decades, in fact, new adaptations of ancient Irish 
literature proved much more exciting and thought provoking than revivals of the Abbey 
classics.

“A simple and genuine sense of homecoming”: Friel’s *Faith Healer*

The late 1960s and 1970s were not merely an era of increased technical savvy and 
 improved production quality. During this period the Abbey also began to embrace the

\(^{297}\) Irish Times (?) 16 Sept 1986, Peter Thompson, “Irish Play in Noh Style.” Abbey Theatre Archive. 
\(^{298}\) Daughter of Christopher Casson, a noted Gate actor and director who had studied under Edwards and 
MacLiammóir (and granddaughter of Dame Sybil Thorndike). 
Theatre Archive
plays of a new and talented generation of authors including Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, Tom Mac Intyre, and Brian Friel, whose plays all fruitfully engage with questions about the nature of Irish identity in the modern world.

I will return to Friel's free adaptation of Euripides' *Hippolytus* (*Living Quarters*, 1977) in the next chapter, but his *Faith Healer* merits discussion here as a free adaptation of Irish epic. Unlike *Living Quarters* (subtitled "After Hippolytus,"), *Faith Healer* does not draw attention to the ancient origins of its plot, yet the play incorporates significant elements from the tales of Deirdre and Naoise and of Diarmuid and Grainne. In broad outline, as Declan Kiberd has noted, the play resembles the former story: Grace (Deirdre) falls in love with Frank (Naoise), while the aging Teddy’s (Conor’s) love for Grace is unrequited; the characters wander through Scotland (and Wales) for years before finally returning to Ireland, where Frank is killed by a band of Irishmen, Grace eventually kills herself, and Teddy lives on in despair. Shades of Diarmuid and Grania also flash through the text in the choice of Grace’s name, her family’s patrician status and her father’s bitter disappointment at her elopement with “a mountebank,” and the fact that Teddy accompanies them throughout their wanderings--jovial and unthreatening but still as omnipresent as Finn.

These are only background, of course, to the story of the Fantastic Frank Hardy, an itinerant faith healer whose sporadic, mysterious ability to cure alternates with periods of self-doubt and anguished questioning, yet they imbue the story of his predominantly squalid life and his violent death with a sense of profound tragedy and epic struggle. For Frank as for Naoise, the return to Ireland from Scotland is both the fulfillment of an

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300 Kiberd (1996).
301 Another famous Grania, the 18th century pirate queen from Connacht, was known in English as Grace O’Malley.
anguished longing for home and a death sentence, a stoic embracing of destiny. In his final monologue, describing his final steps towards the group of men who will kill him, Frank marvels,

And as I moved across that yard towards them and offered myself to them, then for the first time I had a simple and genuine sense of homecoming. Then for the first time there was no atrophying terror; and the maddening questions were silent. At long last I was renouncing chance. (55)

But as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has suggested, this play's connection to ancient Irish literature runs deeper than similarities of plot. Through Frank's and Grace's ritualistic invocation of the names of villages in Wales and Scotland, Friel's play actually creates a modern version of an ancient Irish literary genre known as *dinnsheanchas*, toponymic etymologies. The genre’s name is a compound word in Old Irish, from *dinn*, “notable or important places,” and *seanchas*, which is usually translated as “knowledge” or “lore.” Ní Dhomhnaill, however, emphasizes the semantic breadth of *seanchas* in its original Old Irish context:

[its] meaning… is in fact wide enough to encompass all the work of the professional learned classes of early Gaelic society, which included the genealogies of powerful families, tribal lore, stories of conquest or migration, traditional laws or customs of the tribe.

*Dinnsheanchas*, the means by which all of these aspects of cultural history and practice are related to particular geographical features of the Irish landscape, is a recurrent and crucial feature of ancient Irish epic. Thomas Kinsella notes in his edition and translation of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* that *dinnsheanchas* features so centrally in the original texts that it often seems to take precedence over actual plot events:

Place-names and their frequently fanciful meanings
and origins occupy a remarkable place by modern standards. It is often enough justification for the inclusion of an incident that it ends in the naming of some physical feature; certain incidents, indeed, seem to have been invented merely to account for a place-name. The outstanding example is in the climax of the Táin itself, where the final battle (toward which we might assume the action is leading) is treated very casually, while attention is directed in detail to the wanderings of the mortally-wounded Donn Cuailnge around Ireland, naming the places as he goes.

Yet the accretions of cultural history tied to these place names are often much more complex than mere explanatory invention. Ni Dhomhnaill notes that while the tradition of dinnsheanchas began with the arrival in Ireland of the Iron Age Celts, whose myths and legends alluded to the mysterious sacred places of prior tribes and civilizations, “[t]he arrival of Christianity and literacy added another layer to an already highly encoded matrix,” blending pre-Christian and Christian interpretations of place-names, thereby permitting both “a preserving of the past and a critique of the present.”

The layers of meaning and memory within this matrix and their corruption and loss due to the encroachment of the English language upon the Irish have been the source of numerous meditations by 20th century Irish authors. The epigraph that I have chosen for my first chapter, for example, is Yeats’s lament that he learned so late in life that the landscapes he loved as a child guarded an ancient literary heritage: “What beauty was lost to me, what depth of emotion is still perhaps lacking in me, because nobody told me... that Cruachan of the Enchantments [abode of Queen Maeve] lay behind those long, blue, ragged hills!” From Yeats’s On Baile’s Strand to MacLiammóir’s romantic reflections upon the hill of Howth to Ulick O’Connor’s Noh play, which ties Deirdre’s tale and her purgatorial afterlife so firmly to the features of its
landscape, the importance of dinnsheanchas flows like a subterranean current through early and mid-twentieth century Irish theatre, and bubbles to the surface in the last quarter of the century.

The foundational text for late twentieth-century discussion of *dinnsheanchas* in Irish literature is a lecture delivered by Seamus Heaney at the Ulster Museum in 1977, published under the title “The Sense of Place.” Discussing the “form of mythical etymology” by which the town of Ardee (from the Old Irish *Átha Fherdia*, or “Ferdia’s ford”) is linked to the Táin’s climactic combat between Cuchulain and his foster-brother Ferdia, Heaney laments that

> [i]t now requires some small degree of learning to know this about Ardee. We have to retrieve the underlay of Gaelic legend in order to read the full meaning of the name and to flesh out the topographical record with its human accretions. The whole of the Irish landscape, in John Montague’s words, is a manuscript which we have lost the skill to read.

Fortunately there are still some who glean meaning from the manuscript of the Irish landscape. Both Heaney and Ní Dhomhnaill trace the survival of a version of the *dinnsheanchas* tradition in the work of modern Irish writers. Ní Dhomhnaill notes that “[f]or poets such as Yeats, Heaney, Montague, Carson, Muldoon and many others, *dinnsheanchas* is a means of uniting psychological exploration with a larger framework of collective cultural understanding”—a profoundly personal translation and re-telling of communal stories.

Heaney goes so far as to suggest that the work of English-language poets like Yeats has created an entirely new nexus of *dinnsheanchas* that resonates more strongly in the modern Irish imagination than the Irish-language traditions that preceded it:
As we go through the village of Drumcliff and under Ben Bulben, we skirt Lissadell and Innisfree. All of these places now live in the imagination, all of them stir us to responses other than the merely visual, all of them are instinct with the spirit of a poet and his poetry. Irrespective of our creed or politics... our sense of the place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented.

In *Faith Healer* a meditative repetition of place-names--"for the mesmerism, the sedation, of the incantation," as Frank puts it (12)--occurs when the characters need to focus their cognitive energies, to lay their doubts to rest, or to heal the pain of their conflicting memories of the past. Yet the repetition of the names of "dying Welsh villages" (12) "from Britain's Celtic fringe," serves to remind the audience of loss, exile, and death, of a past that survives merely in fragments of indecipherable stories.

Given Friel's and Heaney's friendship and their collaboration on the various projects undertaken by the Field Day Theatre Company, it is unsurprising that both authors share this preoccupation with the creation, disruption, and/or the search for a "sense of place" in modern Ireland. The same year that the Abbey produced *Faith Healer*, Field Day’s wildly successful production of Friel's *Translations* (1980) staged the systematic standardization of Irish toponyms, with the accompanying submersion of their “underlay” of ancient legends and local lore. Although Friel admits the play took certain “theatrical license” with the finer points of the Ordnance Surveys’ history, *Translations* remains a touchstone in debates about the continuing importance of *dinnsheanchas* in modern Irish literature, and a powerful rendering of the sense of

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302 Roy Foster, "Faith Healer," Gate Theatre February 2006 production Programme Note.
303 Founded in 1980 in Derry by Friel and Irish actor Stephen Rea. Friel and Heaney, together with Rea, Seamus Deane, and Thomas Kilroy, served on the theatre's board of directors for many years.
profound alienation that resulted from the decline of the Irish language and the loss of the body of knowledge that *dinnsheanchas* represents. The uncertainty about the truth of the past created by *Faith Healer*'s conflicting monologues, though different in structure, reflects that same preoccupation.

The production history of this particular play, which has been performed at both theatres, also highlights the complexities of the relations between the Abbey and the Gate. Though each initially had its own goals, production style, and repertoire, the distinctions between them gradually blurred over the latter years of the twentieth century as the Abbey strove to adopt the Gate's successful innovations. Furthermore, as noted in the previous chapter, complex bonds of friendship, kinship, and cooperation had linked members of one theatre to the other from the Gate’s inception.\(^{304}\) Generally, of course, the Gate’s successes were used as “the stick with which to beat the old traditional horse,” in MacLiammóir’s phrase. *Faith Healer*, however, provides a striking example of a play upon which the Abbey put a hugely successful stamp—so successful as to pose a theatrical challenge to its rival.

*Faith Healer* was first performed on Broadway in 1979, with James Mason, Clarissa Kaye, and Donal Donnelly in the lead roles, but ran for only twenty performances. The Abbey production the next year, directed by Joe Dowling and starring Donal McCann, Kate Flynn, and John Kavanagh, was much more successful. The same can be said of the Abbey’s 1990 revival, which saw McCann return to the role of Frank.

\(^{304}\) To provide just a few examples of such links: Shelah Richards, who played Antigone in Yeats’s *Oedipus at Colonus*, left the Abbey to become one of the Gate’s leading actresses. Abbey actress Maureen Delaney entertained Gate audiences in *Where Stars Walk*, while the Abbey engaged MacLiammóir as a guest artist in the late 1950s. Gate actor Christopher Casson’s daughter Bronwen began designing sets for the Abbey in the early 1970s, and Michael Colgan, who has served as artistic director of the Gate since 1983, had previously worked as a director at the Abbey.
supported by Judy Geeson and Ron Cook (McCann would also star in an acclaimed revival of the play in 1994). McCann's performances as Frank are legendary. Looking back in 2006, one reviewer recalled watching the "incomparable" McCann's performance in Friel's play as "one of the transcendent experiences of my theatregoing life"; contemporary reviewers called him Ireland's "most creative performer" and his 1990 performance "great and terrible," a "tour de force." Reviewers also commented on the shadowy, sparsely-furnished sets, and the feeling of fearfully empty space that they appropriately evoked--a review of the 1990 production, for example, commented that Frank Hallinan Flood's set "ultimately seem[ed] to stretch to infinity." The Abbey archive performance videos show that Wendy Shea designed a similar set for the 1980 production (the similarities are not surprising, as Friel provides very specific instructions for the setting).

Friel's plays were primarily performed at the Abbey in the 1970s and 80s; the 1990 production brought Joe Dowling back from the Gate, where he had just directed a spectacular revival of O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock. In the 1990s, however, the Gate began to establish what their programmes characterize as a "unique relationship" with Friel, producing his The London Vertigo, A Month in the Country, Molly Sweeney, and Uncle Vanya, among others. Although--or rather because--the Abbey's productions of Faith Healer starring McCann had attained an iconic status, inviting comparisons

between McCann and MacLiammóir, the Gate accepted Friel's request that they revive the play in 2006. I will discuss the significance of this production at greater length in my final chapter, since it coincides with two remarkable dramatic adaptations of Irish epic at the Abbey that same year—Mercier’s *Homeland* and Vincent Woods’s *A Cry from Heaven*.

“Cradle and Coffin and All Between”: Irish epic as total theatre

While a vital contribution to the repertoire, *Faith Healer* was by no means the only dramatic adaptation of ancient Irish epic at the Abbey in the 1980s and 90s. For instance, in 1980, two and a half months before Friel's *Faith Healer* opened, the Peacock staged the aforementioned double bill of Yeats's *Deirdre* and Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*; there were also various revivals of Yeats’s Cuchulain plays at the Peacock, such as *At the Hawk’s Well* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer* in 1989. The most radical of these productions, however, was undoubtedly *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney*, written by Tom MacIntyre in conjunction with director Patrick Mason and actor Tom Hickey, which premiered on the Abbey mainstage in 1984.

Like Seamus Heaney’s *Sweeney Astray*, which was published the previous year, MacIntyre’s play takes as its source J.G. O’Keeffe’s edition and translation of the medieval Irish *Buile Suibhne*: the tale of the violent and obstreperous Mad King Sweeney, compelled to fly like a bird throughout Ireland during long years of wandering.

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308 Cf. for example Richard Pine's comments on RTE Radio 1--The Arts Show with Mike Murphy, 28 Nov. 1990, 7:02 p.m., or the Irish Times, 1 Dec. 1990, Fintan O'Toole, “Opening a Box of Darkness.” Abbey Theatre Archive.
exile as punishment for menacing a rather cranky saint. While Heaney’s volume is a “version from the Irish,” a poetic translation that closely follows the original text, Mac Intyre uses this same source material to create a highly experimental work of contemporary theatre. Yet both authors share an interest in the sense of place that the medieval text creates, and the tenacious survival of a version of this literary tradition in contemporary Ireland. In the introduction to *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney relates his inspiration in creating his new translation:

> My fundamental relation with Sweeney... is topographical. His kingdom lay in what is now south Country Antrim and north County Down, and for over thirty years I lived on the verges of that territory, in sight of some of Sweeney’s places and in earshot of others... When I began work on this version, I had just moved to Wicklow, not all that far from Sweeney’s final resting ground at St. Mullins. I was in a country of woods and hills and remembered that the green spirit of the hedges embodied in Sweeney had first been embodied for me in the persons of a family of tinkers, also called Sweeney, who used to camp in the ditchbacks along the road to the first school I attended. One way or another, he seemed to have been with me from the start (vii).

Mac Intyre’s adaptation of the tale may well have been influenced by Heaney’s evocation of this topographical relationship; his script even includes a direction that two of the characters speak a poetic plea for absolution with “relish, and a fevered sense of place” (45). But the Ireland portrayed in Mac Intyre’s play has none of the “green

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309 See Heaney’s introduction for a brief manuscript history of the medieval tale and its 1913 translation by James O’Keeffe (Heaney 2001). According to Dermot Healy’s commentary in the Abbey playbill, Mac Intyre used O’Keeffe’s text as his source, but his use of the phrase “sense of place” suggests that at some point he also consulted Heaney’s.

310 After an unsuccessful attempt to acquire a copy of this script from Mac Intyre’s literary agent Jonathan Williams, I had recourse to the only version I could locate, which was contained in the National Library archive. Unfortunately this is for a radio version of Mac Intyre’s play, broadcast by the BBC in May 1990. I checked the lines I have quoted against the Abbey performance video, and I believe them to be an accurate representation of the performance.
spirit of the hedges” that Heaney nostalgically recalls from his childhood; rather, it is a nation riven by the sectarian violence that has scarred the North, its citizens traumatized to the point of madness. During an early scene, one character inquires “Is it an asylum--would you say?” Though the characters are, in fact, in an asylum, another responds “It’s Ireland, Dad” (6).

The play’s vision of Ireland does indeed seem “fevered” and hallucinatory; the scenes are replete with terrifyingly sinister intimations of brutal, deliberate violence, and their sequence is nightmarishly disjointed. The play opens on a darkened, battle-scarred landscape; amidst a deafening cacophony of explosions, hovering helicopters and barking dogs, Sweeney desperately searches for escape from a manhunt ordered by “the Interrogator” (2). The single rifle shot that silences the noise foreshadows the manhunt’s fatal outcome.

The play is structured around a number of key sounds (like the rifle shot) and actions (like the aimless shuffling of the asylum patients) that become more sinister with each successive iteration. Repetition is itself identified as symptomatic of disorientation and madness, as when Sweeney babbles to himself in the asylum:

Sweeney: An island...consider carefully--an island, after all, is a barometer par excellence... Jesus stabs Ireland in the North, South and South South-East by South... All I ever wanted was to walk across a field.

Matron: And pluck watercress from the stream--the familiar plaint! (5, 7)

Sweeney’s cryptic utterances mask an underlying logic: as a barometer measures atmospheric pressure, so the island of Ireland registers its historical burdens--plantation,

311 For instance, during the third scene Sweeney ruminates to himself: “…We could never kill with their finesse. They work like surgeons, we like butchers. Same with torture. They operate, we hack and tear…” (13)
partition, enduring inequality. The bizarre image of Christ knifing the nation alludes both to the ancient figure of the heretical Sweeney (whose original transgressions included two attempts to spear St. Ronan) and to the inflammatory role that pseudo-religious rhetoric has played in perpetuating the Northern Irish Troubles, while Sweeney’s thwarted longing “to walk across a field” suggests the barriers of a border crossing.

It is perhaps the Matron’s exhortation that Sweeney familiarize himself with the cardinal points, so that he will understand where he lives (“Your home is in the east, Sweeney, not the West...,” 8) that prompts him to escape from the asylum and return home to his wife. Yet after a brief conversation he refuses her invitation to stay the night, noting as he heads off into the wind and rain outside, “I’m for the wood. There’s a tree in there that’s cradle and coffin and all between” (16). His various meetings with the woods’ denizens—a(nother) madman and a hag—are interspersed with scenes of a debonair Sweeney calmly recounting his harrowing escapes from the ongoing manhunt (these talk-show-style interviews are projected onto onstage screens in the Abbey performance video), and of Sweeney as a prisoner, being interrogated and beaten while lively traditional Irish music plays in the background.

Over the course of the play the intimate connections between Sweeney and the Interrogator become clear. When Sweeney’s interviewer queries, “Do you have a sense of--almost deliberately--leaving tracks--to help him in the pursuit?” Sweeney replies laconically, “Don’t we all leave tracks?” (18). The long years of hunting have taught predator and prey the other’s innermost secrets. Moreover, they are both from the same part of the country; Sweeney recounts that once when he found his pursuer sleeping he

312 This meeting, like Sweeney’s encounters with the madman and the hag and his love for watercress, parallels the plot of the medieval original.
chose not to kill him, but merely to whisper in his ear a description of the land that both hailed from: “It’s a running gag we share” (20). He describes the manhunt with the same eerily detached levity, as a child’s game gone ferociously wrong, “playing tig... but the bullets are real” (21).

Mac Intyre’s play continually blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality, and the production actually took this process a step further in the prison scene by projecting a second image of Sweeney onto the massive onstage screens, thereby making it possible for Sweeney to question and to threaten himself. Sweeney’s momentary usurpation of the role of the Interrogator suggests that the latter could be merely another facet of his fractured personality, an externally projected manifestation of unbearable guilt and self-destructive rage.

The Madman of the Woods and Sweeney are similarly conjoined, in their mutual expressions of fear, longing, and repentance. Much as the original text incorporates a broad range of lyrical meters, Sweeney’s exchanges with the Madman run the gamut from delicate lament to grisly anecdote. Their first conversation, about the hardships of their life in the forest, is a rhythmic plaint that recalls the legend’s ancient origins:

Madman: Our bodies a feast for birds of prey--
Sweeney: Ravens our heavy silence--
Madman: Bent the nails--
Sweeney: Worn the loins--
Madman: Pierced the feet--
Sweeney: Raw the thighs--...
Madman: A comfortless nest--
Sweeney: Heart of storm your only shelter-- (42)

But the two soon switch to a more prosaic register, as Sweeney confesses one of his first murderous acts. In a modern attempt at d’innseanchas, Sweeney inscribes this memory

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313 Heaney’s introduction to his translation suggests that the Buile Suibhne “could be regarded as a primer of lyric genres--laments, dialogues, litanies, rhapsodies, curses” (vii).
upon the nearby landscape, questioning its reality and its impact (“am I making it up? -- or is it making me up?”) as he does so:

Sweeney:  See that valley to the west, Old Cock?
Madman:  That I do--
Sweeney:  Glen flesk, where they bate the childher for going hungry... I seem to remember or am I making it up? -- or is it making me up?-- once in that valley.  Night.  Fog.  The pure black-white juice.  On a job --three of us.  Wire fence beside me... My hand drifts to the top wire.  And I feel--it’s in my fingers yet--another hand on the wire.  Few yards away, had to be.  I steadied, let fly.  Left four in ribbons.  (pause) Once upon a time there was a warrior bold... (44)

The events of this traumatic story are also etched upon Sweeney’s body (“it’s in my fingers yet”) and upon his mind, no longer able to distinguish past from present, memory from invention. The clearing of the fog reveals the ultimate result of the heroism of the ballad’s “warrior bold”: four mangled carcasses, cut to pieces by Sweeney’s murderous shots in the dark.

Images of death plague the dialogue between Sweeney and the Madman, even in their attempts at humor, as when they plan their tombstone inscriptions:

Madman:  What do you want on the stone, Sweeney?
Sweeney:  Let me think--
Madman:  If you have to think, it’s useless--
Sweeney:  Survivors will be persecuted--You?
Madman:  Mean the marvels--
Sweeney:  Mean the marvels...
Madman:  Came to me in a whisper.  What to do about the marvels?  Mean them” (47-8)

Both Sweeney and the Madman cling to a slender thread of hope that miracles may still happen, that they may still be forgiven for their part in the violence. They plead with nature and Ireland and especially the border zone for absolution and protection, the very
thought of which fills them with wild elation. Mac Intyre’s directions call for both to
“share the lines below, quoting with relish, and a fevered sense of place--they get high on
the stuff, à l’instant...”

Therefore forgive me,
border zone
from the year dot,
suspicion’s cradle,
conspiracy’s whorehouse,
ounce of blood before the churn of buttermilk,
blood all over...

The flowers
every spring,
whitethorn, flagrant hyacinth,
a fresh animal stir,

therefore absolve me,
fifty-year-old child with the killer touch,
vouchsafe my keeping,
devious watershed,
windgall of love,
smoor of sadness,
watch over me on the road home... (45-46)

Yet no absolution is forthcoming; instead a whirr of helicopter blades and the baying of
police dogs signal the recommencement of the manhunt.

In the final scene, as Sweeney poses for photographs at the start of another
interview, he echoes the question posed by the Irishman in Shakespeare’s Henry V: “I
want to know what ish my nayshun?” Impatiently brushing aside his interviewer’s
gloomy response (“My nayshun is the howl--but not the black howl. Some say the
whinge. I say the howl--but not the black howl...” 69) Sweeney announces that his nation
is “Appalachia,” battered, illiterate, and poverty-stricken, its iconic image the “busted
telly in the boghole” (70). “It’s too long a war,” he laments, “she grows old...Who will
cry sweetness, cancel black confetti, remove stretchers from the orchard... Christ I love this country!”

Sweeney’s paean to Appalachia is momentarily interrupted by a BBC radio announcement that God has been shot dead in Armagh, which Sweeney instructs his audience to ignore; he then tersely recounts his initiation into paramilitary activity:

“They found poor Johnny lying dead above in the meadow. Next day a man came by the house. ‘Care to help the friends of the enemy?’ Shite...Why have they hidden trust? And where may I find it?” (74). His soliloquy culminates with a desperate plea that his nation may be freed from her haunting past, couched in the language of exorcism (“Ego te exorcizo, Appalachia, ego te exorcizo” 315). This recourse to the Roman Catholic rites to counter demonic possession ironically recalls misplaced and barbaric medieval attempts to treat the symptoms of violent trauma and schizophrenia; Sweeney’s efforts to exorcise Ireland’s demons, the play implies, will be equally futile.

Yet might Sweeney himself be able to return from the brink of madness? In the ancient legend, the mad king is befriended by St. Moling, to whom he relates all of his wandering adventures. When Moling’s shepherd spears Sweeney in a fit of jealousy, Moling provides the last rites, listens to Sweeney’s deathbed confession, and ultimately announces that the penitent’s soul has fled to heaven. The gunshot in Mac Intyre’s play presages Sweeney’s death, and in his memory of poor dead Johnny glimmers an understanding of the pain he has inflicted by perpetuating the violence. The underlying strata of ancient legend thus allows for a somewhat less grim reading of the play’s final

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314 Author’s bold print.  
315 Author’s underline.
sequence—a reading in which Sweeney’s impending demise will finally free him from his madness and from the horrific violence that caused it.

Fintan O’Toole compared *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* to an erupting volcano, “releasing a blaze of fire and a few tons of rubbish.” He complained that the Abbey production under Patrick Mason’s direction worked at cross-purposes with the script:

...while the dialogue uses words in a way which is as cryptic and as terse as a set of crossword clues, the visual language of movement and action is often profligate, arbitrary, and anything but economical. While the words are precise and poetic, the visual images are jumbled and often incoherent, with a television screen competing for attention with the live action and a general air of fussiness preventing the formation of a single, stark image.316

The Abbey performance video certainly confirms O’Toole’s impression of a chaotic multiplicity of visual images, yet his criticism misses a crucial point: these images are clearly intended to mimic the incoherence of Sweeney’s perception of the world around him. His delusions are not those of obsessive compulsion, which could give rise to “the formation of a single, stark image,” but rather those of suppressed emotional trauma, of a magnitude and profundity which has splintered his identity and his understanding of the world around him into thousands of irreconcilable pieces. The images allow the audience to experience the murky, disturbing depths of Sweeney’s madness in a way that the spoken words themselves do not. Deliberately unnerving and perplexing, *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* is another milestone in Abbey production history: a theatrical experience in which visual images, no longer mere appendages to the text, actually create their own counter-current of meaning, and in so doing deepen and transform the significance of the words of the script.

316 Furay and O’Hanlon, 40.
Eye of the (Celtic) Tiger: Marina Carr’s Myth-haunted Midlands

Though the second half of the 1980s saw a number of revivals of plays based on ancient Irish legend (mainly Peacock productions of Yeats’s dance plays and various revivals of *Deirdre* adaptations, leading up to the 1990 revival of *Faith Healer*, as detailed above), the next original Abbey production to incorporate ancient Irish legend opened a full decade after *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney*. Marina Carr’s *The Mai* premiered at the Peacock in 1994, at an historical moment when European, American, and multinational investment and job creation\(^{317}\) had begun to provide momentum for the unexpected Irish economic boom that has become known as the Celtic Tiger. Carr’s play keeps a deliberate a temporal and geographical distance from mid-1990s Dublin, however; the action of *The Mai* occurs in the summers of 1979 and 1980, in a beautiful home overlooking a lake, in a country village the exact name and location of which remain unspecified.

Carr’s later plays *Portia Coughlin* (1996), *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998), and *Ariel* (2002),\(^{318}\) are set in the Irish Midlands--topographically central but culturally marginal, as Melissa Sihra has noted\(^{319}\)--and this liminal geography, this “metaphor for a crossroads between worlds” seems to provide the backdrop for *The Mai* as well.\(^{320}\) References to places outside the village are plentiful--Dublin, Connemara, Spiddal, Spain, Morocco, the Australian outback, New York City, even Zanzibar--but the village itself remains

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\(^{317}\) These are two of the most important among a complex series of economic, financial, political, and historical factors that provided the impetus for the economic boom. Job creation as a result of multinational investment was especially important since Ireland’s unemployment rates had soared as high as 15% in the mid-80s. For an in-depth analysis, see for example Ray MacSharry and Padraic White, *The Making of the Celtic Tiger: The Inside Story of Ireland’s Boom Economy* (2000).

\(^{318}\) The latter two plays are both adaptations of ancient Greek drama that I will discuss in the subsequent chapter.


nameless, a reminder of the characters’ rootlessness and marginal status within their adopted home.

The lake, conversely, is given both name and *dinnsheanchas*: the play’s narrator Millie carefully explains at the end of Act One that Owl Lake is a corruption of the Irish *loch cailleach oíche*, or Lake of the Night Hag. It is so designated because it was the possession of an evil witch who separated two divine lovers, Bláth (god of flowers) and Coillte (daughter of the mountain god). Bláth is forced to live with the Night Hag in the winter, and his eventual return heralds the coming of spring. Coillte, however, does not understand that his absence is merely temporary, an integral part of the yearly cycle of death and rebirth; she follows him to the witch’s lair, where she mistakes his enchanted immobility for indifference. Brokenhearted Coillte cries a lake of tears into which the Night Hag pushes her, and she drowns.321

This legend, invented by Carr322 to ground her play in a mythic, archetypal past, is a Greco-Irish hybrid, taking its form from ancient Irish place-name lore but its content from the ancient Greek myth of Persephone. But where the latter explains the coming of winter and the return of spring as Persephone’s annual unwilling descent into Hades’ underworld and her joyful reunion with her mother upon her return to Earth, Carr’s version holds out no hope of eventual rejoicing. Coillte’s death prevents the lovers from ever being reunited, and with the coming of spring Bláth returns to mourn her, playing the pipes in solitude among the lake’s reeds.

This legend becomes the archetype for the play’s crucial conflict; the rest of

322 To the best of my knowledge there is no such lake in Ireland, although the Midlands county of Westmeath does contain a Lough Owel north of Mullingar. I also believe the legend of Blath and Coillte to be Carr’s invention, although I must admit that I have not made an exhaustive study of local legend in the Midlands.
Carr’s play actually functions as a contemporary adaptation of the “ancient” legend that she has invented. *The Mai* portrays six generations of one family, centered around the title character. Abandoned by her husband Robert, beautiful and strong-willed Mai has built the home overlooking Owl Lake for their four children. Her success has been such that her family calls her “The Mai,” an allusion to the ancient Irish honorific title for the head of a great clan, but her name has an ambivalent resonance—it conjures up the maternal devotion of Catholic images of Mary, to whom the month of May is dedicated, but it may simultaneously hearken back to an ancient Irish myth of a mother who destroyed her own children.323 Mai’s joy when Robert returns soon gives way to disillusion when he begins an affair with another woman; neither her jaded sisters, her strait-laced aunts, her ribald opium-smoking grandmother nor her uncomprehending children can prevent her anger, despair and eventual suicide.

This trauma does, in a sense, destroy her children. Mai’s daughter Millie reflects sorrowfully that it has warped her entire adult life and those of her siblings: “None [of us] are very strong. We teeter along the fringe of the world with halting gait... [Memories of childhood and Mai’s suicide] go on and on till I succumb and linger among them there in that dead silent world that tore our hearts out for a song” (70-1). In hindsight, Millie looks back upon the legend of Owl Lake as a prediction of her family’s tragedy, as a dire warning that they had failed to heed. “I knew that story as a child. So did The Mai and Robert. But we were unaffected by it and in our blindness moved along with it like sleepwalkers along a precipice and all around gods and mortals called out for us to change our course and, not listening, we walked on and on” (42).

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The play continually emphasizes both the danger of inhabiting liminal spaces—the edge of the lake, the “fringe of the world,” the precipice—and the vulnerability of succeeding generations to the sorrows and errors of the past. Moreover, Carr suggests that these pitfalls are mutually reinforcing: the tragic realities of the past make the “dead silent world,” the dream-space, insidiously attractive, while prolonged detachment from the present renders the escapist progressively less able to cope with any of life’s quotidian demands. For each succeeding generation, this includes raising (and scarring) children: Millie’s five-year old Joseph “already... is watchful and expects far to little of me, something I must have taught him unknown to myself” (56). Mai’s mother died bitter and brokenhearted in childbirth, and Aunt Julie confesses, “I’m seventy-five years of age, Mai, and I’m still not over my childhood,” made a living hell by her widowed mother’s raving anger (40).

Even Julie’s mother Grandma Fraochlán, who avers she’d fling all seven of her offspring down the fiery slopes of hell for one more night with her departed husband, Tomás the nine-fingered fisherman (“an’ may I roh [rot] eternally for such unmotherly feelin’,” 70) has a poignant story to tell about her own mother, stigmatized by their island community for giving birth out of wedlock:

Was thah my fault? An’ she wouldn’t leh me call ‘er Mother, no. Tha Duchess, thah’s what i had ta call her... An’ Tha Duchess toult me me father was tha Sultan a Spain an’... in tha summer he was goin’ ta come in a yach’ an’ take us away ta his palace... an’ I believt her and watched an tha cliffs ever’day for tha Sultan a Spain... I’m noh over tha dismantlin’ a thah drame yeh (59-60).

Yet Grandma Fraochlán has remained fierce and feisty past her 100th birthday, surmounting devastating losses, while each successive generation of her family has
inherited less resilience, less ability to cope with dreams dismantled.

Carr suggests that Grandma Fraochlán’s indomitable spirit stems in part from a sense of identity strongly tied to place. This sense of identity is not national or ethnic; Grandma Fraochlán in fact claims various strains of parentage (“I’m half Spanish, half Moroccan... me greah grandfather was Tunisian...”, 37) as the fancy takes her. Instead it stems from her memories of life firmly rooted within the island community of Inis Fraochlán, to which she is so firmly attached that the family calls her by its name. She enters the scene with the gigantic oar of the nine-fingered fisherman in tow, and to the other characters’ dismay insists on it being brought into Mai’s living room, where it stands as a prominent reminder of her ties to the island and to her dead husband. For Grandma Fraochlán, identity is a remarkably simple concept: “I remember tha first time I met tha nine-fingered fisherman. Is mise Tomás, scipéir, mac scipéara, [Ir: I’m Thomas, a skipper, son of a skipper] he said. I knew were he was comin’ from, wan [one] sentence...” (20).

The next generation, Mai’s aunts, are also identified by the place they inhabit: Julie and Agnes are “the Connemara clique,” well-off and cantankerously opinionated, scarred by unhappy childhoods but nonetheless reasonably capable of functioning in the present. Less vibrant than their obstreperous mother, they are sharply observant and unexpectedly generous to their nieces (41).

Mai and her sisters, however, have set themselves adrift. Connie is bored with married life (52); Beck has wandered the globe, returning disillusioned: “I’m thirty-seven years of age, Mai, and what’ve I got to show for it? Nothing! Absolutely nothing” (31). And Mai comes to see the home that she has painstakingly built for her
family as a non-place, an embodiment of rootlessness and failure:

...these days I think it’s the kind of house you’d see in the corner of a dream... the kind of house you build to keep out neuroses, stave off nightmares. But they come in anyway with the frost and the draughts and the air bubbles in the radiators. It’s the kind of house you build when you’ve nowhere else to go (51).

This essential disconnect between person and place inhabited causes Mai to ignore the warnings embedded in place-history; she eventually lives out the tragic legend of Owl Lake by drowning herself. In Heaney’s optimistic vision of a “country of the mind,” the literary associations of one’s surroundings can deepen one’s sense of identity and inspire further creativity; Carr’s play darkly suggests that the lack of this profound understanding of place can be fatal.

Carr has expressed unease with the vertiginous pace of change and the burgeoning materialism and superficiality of contemporary Ireland: “... people are changing so rapidly... While we have more than we could ask for, it does nothing. You can only have one dinner, or wear one pair of trousers at a time.” 324 She avers that knowledge of the past can help to predict the present, but also that it is possible to escape the tyranny of history through an exercise of personal willpower:

I can almost imagine what my great-grandparents were like because of my grandparents... if you start hunting back you will find that it is there in the gene-pool, in the blue-print, in the hard-wiring. But I also believe in the individual’s ability to put their own version on it.325

It is perhaps because these concerns feature so prominently in the play that in the Abbey’s production the mise-en-scène was not forcibly that of the late 1970s--the set was beautifully but austerely decorated, and the costumes deliberately nondescript: Millie,

324 Interview with Melissa Sihra in Chambers et al (2003), 57.
325 Ibid, 60.
for example, wears a baggy sweatshirt, jeans, and tennis shoes, Robert a suit and tie. Reviewers commented upon the plot as though the actions were set in the present. One noted that watching Mai and Robert’s final, climatic argument seemed “almost like you’re in a neighbour’s house or your own house if you’re unlucky and you just want to walk out...[I was] trembling right then and there from the power of that particular conflict.” Director Brian Brady said that when he read the play “The Mai jumped off the page and grabbed me by the throat. The recognisability of these people and the fact that most people have these stories...”

Carr’s script was enhanced by a stellar Abbey cast—Olwen Fouéré in the title role, with Owen Roe as Robert, Joan O’Hara as Grandma Fraochlán, and Derbhle Crotty as Millie. The visual effects included a massive bay window stretching across more than half the stage, fittingly dominating the set, designed by Kathy Strachan. In production the beautiful new house (the price of which Mai’s visitors constantly estimate) and the inability of those living in it to find happiness clearly illustrated Carr’s underlying unease with the trappings of Ireland’s newfound wealth, and with the erosion of the cohesion and identity formerly provided by one’s sense of belonging to a community, and/or by an understanding of the history (and the *dinnsheanchas*) of the place one inhabits. The Mai is an early and evocative attempt to express these concerns; though Carr’s later plays plot the terrain of ancient Greek tragedy on the map of the Irish Midlands, her work nevertheless continues to evince her dual fascination with the wisdom encoded in ancient myth and legend and with the web of memory and history that binds people to the place in which they live.

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This chapter has traced the Abbey’s mid-to-late-20th century response to the Gate Theatre’s prodigiously successful productions. The focus of the Gate’s founders on creating a “culture of the visible” and their careful attention to the extra-textual effects of sound, lighting, sets, and costumes, helped spur the Abbey to a much needed re-evaluation of the production aesthetic established during their early decades. The Abbey’s Irish-language pantomimes (for reasons of genre and language essentially ignored in critical analyses of the Abbey’s history) played a crucial role in revising this aesthetic, because in their playful exuberance they both demanded the most spectacular series of special effects imaginable and provided a forgiving comedic forum in which to experiment with and gradually refine those effects. Furthermore, the majority of these pantomimes feature the heroes of ancient Irish epic, often in amusingly riotous conflict with contemporary figures and mores, demonstrating to Dublin audiences (and to a rising generation of Irish playwrights) that ancient Irish epic could be staged outside the parameters of classical tragedy.

The trajectory of Irish epic on the Abbey stage thus runs the entire course of the 20th century, from its earliest productions of Irish epic as ennobling but tragic through the boisterous satire of mid-century pantomime to the profusion of genres staged in the latter part of the century, in testament to the Abbey’s increased range of visual and technical capabilities: Noh play, total theatre, even adaptation of invented legend. These productions also provided a theatrical version of the ancient literary genre of dinnsheanchas--the dramatic expression of a sense of identity that is quite literally grounded in place-history (recent, ancient, mythological, and/or literary, as the case may be). Intuited by Yeats, the importance of this concept of a “sense of place” was
poignantly articulated by Seamus Heaney in the late 70s and, in the latter decades of the century, enacted with varying degrees of optimism upon the stage of a theatre searching to define its own place in the history of Irish theatre.

The Gate occasionally revived MacLiammóir’s Irish legend plays during the mid-to-late 20th century, but since his death the theatre has not attempted any new productions in this vein. The Gate has, however, maintained its vibrant tradition of staging visually and technically superb ancient Greek adaptations. My next chapter will turn to the remarkable impact that the Gate’s rivalry with the Abbey has had upon the production of Greek drama at both theatres.

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328 Arguably the sole exception would be the 1994 production of Vincent Woods’s By the Black Pig’s Dyke, which incorporates a legend surrounding a mythical black boar (identified with the magical beast that murdered Diarmuid) which, trapped and frantically burrowing underground, is credited for creating what are actually Iron Age defensive earthworks along the border with the North. This production, however, was created by the Druid Lane Theatre Company, and played at the Gate as part of a two-year world tour. As such it is arguably more complementary to the Gate’s production aesthetic that truly representative of it.
CHAPTER 4

‘SHE’S A TROJAN’:
GREEK TRAGEDY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY
AT THE GATE AND ABBEY, 1986-2003

All women are dead of shame tonight
and being dead we may cry
for the suffering of our city,
for the hungry in our midst,
the lonely in our rooms,
the sprawled outcasts in our streets,
the lost in doors and laneways,
the dumb in the pity of shadows,
the mad in the isolation of themselves.

Women, we are become this city,
we are become its untold loss,
its forgotten truths, commemorated lies,
its unspoken and unwritten history...

Who knows anything of love or hate
or joy or grief or callousness or pity?

All we know is that
we are our city.

Our broken, fallen, ridiculed city.

--Brendan Kennelly, The Trojan Women (34-5)

The Rivals: Abbey vs. Gate Adaptations of Greek Tragedy

In a seminal article entitled “Classics as Celtic Firebrand: Greek Tragedy, Irish Playwrights, and Colonialism,” Marianne McDonald notes with some astonishment that between 1984 and 2000, Irish playwrights produced over thirty adaptations of Greek
tragedy. In my opinion, however, it is even more extraordinary to consider that over a third of the plays she lists were performed at either the Abbey or the Gate theatre during that same time period (on average, one production every two and a half years). Moreover, performances of Greek adaptations at these two theatres have actually increased in frequency since the year 2000, to approximately one per year.

The following list contains the adaptations of Greek tragedies that have been performed at the two theatres from 1977 to 2007. The overwhelming majority of these plays are by Irish authors, from the Republic or from the North; those by non-Irish authors are marked with an asterisk. It is important to note that other theatre companies produced and designed some of these performances; Tom Paulin’s The Riot Act, for example, was performed at the Gate as a stop on Field Day Theatre Company’s lengthy 1984 tour. In such a case the Dublin theatre’s main contribution is to provide the visiting company with a performance space (and with any additional enticement that the theatre’s reputation might provide to Dublin theatregoers as they contemplate attendance); credit for the aesthetics of the production in performance in such a case rightly belongs to the visiting company rather than the theatre.

Similarly, while much of the Irish playwrights’ work premiered on these stages, plays by foreign authors like Fugard’s The Island and LaBute’s bash had already been performed elsewhere (London, New York, South Africa), and therefore had established a distinctive theatrical aesthetic before being produced in Dublin. In these cases, of course,
it is important to distinguish between previously established norms of production and the
Gate’s and Abbey’s innovative departures and additions. This observation also holds true
for the production of Kennelly’s Medea, first performed at the 1988 Dublin Theatre
Festival at the Royal Dublin Society Concert Hall, and revived the next year at the Gate.

Greek adaptations at the Abbey and the Gate, 1977-2007

1977, Abbey: Brian Friel’s Living Quarters: after Hippolytus.332
1986, Gate: *Athol Fugard, The Island (Antigone).
1989, Gate: Brendan Kennelly, Medea.
1996, Gate: Derek Mahon, Racine’s Phaedra.
1998, Abbey: Marina Carr, By the Bog of Cats (Medea).
2001, Gate: *Neil LaBute, bash (Medea, Iphigenia at Aulis)

Examination of the chronological listing of these adaptations reveals a number of
intriguing micro-patterns. For instance:

• in 1984 Tom Paulin’s version of Antigone was produced at the

332 For more on this particular play, which other scholars have commented upon at length, see Richard
Cave, “After Hippolytus: Irish Versions of Phaedra’s Story” and Marianne McDonald, “The Irish and
Greek Tragedy,” in McDonald and Walton (2002), and Redmond O’Hanlon, “Brian Friel’s Dialogue with
Gate. Two years later, both the Abbey and the Gate produced versions of Sophocles’ play (Kennelly’s and Fugard’s, respectively). For a time these performances even overlapped, so that on a given night in Dublin an Antigone was playing at each theatre.

• In 1986 the Abbey produced Kennelly’s Antigone. In 1989, the Gate produced his Medea. In 1993, the Abbey produced his Trojan Women.

• In 2000 the Abbey produced a spectacularly successful translation of Medea, starring Fiona Shaw and directed by Deborah Warner. In 2001 the Gate produced LaBute’s bash, a radically contemporary version of Medea and Iphigenia. In 2001 and 2002, the Abbey produced two strikingly different versions of Iphigenia, Taylor’s translation and Carr’s loose adaptation set in the Irish Midlands.

Clearly, the staging of adaptations of Greek tragedy has provoked a serious territorial competition between the two theatres, a fierce rivalry with respect to a) particular ancient tragedies, b) individual Irish authors, and c) distinctive production values. The wry observation of the Manchester Guardian reviewer of the Gate’s 1933 Agamemnon that if the Abbey has Sophocles, the Gate must have Aeschylus has proved prophetic, especially from 1984 onwards: if the Gate has an Antigone, the Abbey must have one as well; if the Abbey produces one of Kennelly’s adaptations, the Gate must follow suit.

Although all of these plays are worth examining in detail both on the page and on the stage, such a discussion would itself be dissertation-length. Therefore in this chapter I will confine my discussion to the following set of questions: why has the playwright chosen to adapt this particular tragedy? What implications does the ancient text possess for contemporary Ireland, especially in a period of sweeping socio-economic change that has radically altered definitions of Irish identity? How does the adaptation foreground
that relevance, and how do the production and performance of the play communicate these various layers of meaning to its audience?

The focal point of this discussion will be an extended analysis of the 1993 Peacock production of Kennelly’s *Trojan Women*. This performance is crucial for two reasons. Firstly, while a number of previous Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy contained allusions to contemporary sociopolitical issues, those issues were essentially Irish ones: violence and discrimination in the North, for example, in Paulin’s *The Riot Act* and Mathew’s *Antigone*. The 1993 production of *The Trojan Women* is the first performance at either of Dublin’s flagship theatres to use its ancient Greek source material as a reflection upon an international conflict (in this case, Europe’s “backyard war” in Bosnia). Secondly, as I shall argue, Kennelly’s adaptation contains a crucial critique of concepts of national identity that are tied to a “sense of place” as discussed in the previous chapter.

This chapter will also provide a brief account of a select few of the other Greek adaptations produced at the Abbey and the Gate, those that I believe provide particularly innovative responses to the above questions. The final two plays of the chronological listing, however—Heaney’s *Burial at Thebes* and Morrison’s *The Bacchae of Baghdad*—will be discussed in the context of the 2004 Abbey centenary celebrations in my final chapter.

**Antigone’s Crime and Medea’s Glory: Kennelly’s Early Adaptations**

Poet and playwright Brendan Kennelly’s *Antigone* opened at the Peacock in 1986, following a run of Athol Fugard’s *The Island* at the Gate; Fugard’s play returned to the
Gate later that same week, providing Dubliners with an unprecedented opportunity to see two very different versions of Sophocles’ play one after the other. *The Island* is based not just on Sophocles, but on the true story of Fugard’s friend, black South African actor Sipho Mguqulwa, imprisoned for his participation in politically motivated theatre projects (including a production of *Antigone*). While detained at the infamous Robben Island political prison, Mguqulwa staged a performance of Antigone’s final confrontation with Creon; the protagonists of Fugard’s play are two inmates of “The Island” whose performance of Sophocles’ play gives purpose and meaning to their torturous incarceration.333

Kennelly’s *Antigone* follows Sophocles’ text much more closely.334 The Peacock production directed by Colm O Briain reinforced the author’s textual decisions with an acting style described by Anne Byrne, who played Antigone, as “very formal. There’s no natural movement.”335 The visual elements were colorful but still stereotypically “ancient,” as Bronwen Casson also elected to follow the author’s lead in her designs for the costumes: stylized red and gold togas and headpieces for Antigone, Ismene, Creon and the Chorus, greco-roman military garb for Haemon.

Peter Thompson, writing for the Irish Press, called it “unquestionably the best” of the recent Irish versions of Antigone: “a successful rendering of what was probably the original author’s intention, insofar as this can be ascertained and served today.”336 David Nowlan was less willing to speculate about Sophocles’ intentions, but instead grasped

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333 For additional information, c.f. “Antigone in Africa,” Fugard’s account of the creation of this play, in *Amid Our Troubles* (2002).
334 Kelly Younger provides extensive textual analysis of Kennelly’s *Antigone* and his *Medea* in his chapter on Kennelly in *Dionysus in Ireland*.
335 Graham Sennett, “Something Special!” Irish Times (?) clipping from Abbey archive, undated.
ineffectively at straws for contemporary parallels to the play’s conflict: “Kennelly’s use of the word ‘man’ can refer to Creon as a mortal relative to the gods, or as a male relative to the female Antigone; and this, in these days of role and gender, adds layers to the politics of the piece.”

Both Fintan O’Toole and Colm Toibín, however, blasted the play for its lack of verbal and visual political charge. “The story of Antigone is relevant to the history of Ireland: again and again the notion of the individual act of heroism, self-sacrifice and conscience arises in our history,” reflected Toibín, “...but neither Kennelly’s text, nor Colm O’Briain’s direction, explore the Irish connection.” O’Toole forcefully condemned the production’s lack of style and substance:

[Kennelly’s] Antigone substitutes generalities about the human condition--family, men, women, money--for politics, as if in doing so he were returning to the true unsullied source of the play. This is, at best, a dubious exercise... Colm O’Briain’s production does precisely the same thing at [sic] the text, compounding the problem... With the political ideas vitiated and the theatrical ideas virtually non-existent, this emerges as a turgid and listless Antigone.

The playwright seems to have taken this criticism to heart. Before his Medea opened at the 1988 Dublin Theatre Festival, Kennelly carefully explained to the press that Medea’s story is (still) the story of every woman scorned; the play powerfully warns men against believing the women who support them are “disposable,” and illustrates through her cathartic destruction “a force which takes us beyond conventional morality.” (O’Toole might have opined that Kennelly was still speaking in generalities, but at least this time foregrounding their contemporary import.)

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The production under Ray Yeates’s direction dispensed with the formalized movements and gestures of the Peacock’s Antigone; one critic commented upon the “wild, maddened look” of actress Susan Curnow, who played the title role, and the visceral power of the “voice emanating from her belly,”341 while another marveled that “by sheer force of her torrential personality, [Curnow] floods the building with Medea, making you see through her eyes.”342 Chisato Yoshimi and Katrina McKillen designed the minimalist marble set and costumes. The Gate Theatre revived this production--actress, director, designers and all--in 1989, for a critically-acclaimed run in Dublin and subsequent British tour.

John McDonagh’s lengthy analysis of Kennelly’s play states that Medea’s “subver[sion] of all moral conventions” may be “what most speaks to a contemporary Irish audience, weighed down by the collapse of the institutions which the Irish state had held as central to its perception of the nation.” Unfortunately, the examples that he cites in support of this argument do little to explain the play’s appeal in performance, as they post-date its 1988 production (most post-date its 1991 publication as well): the sex scandals that rocked the Catholic Church in the 1990s, the revelation in 1992 of Bishop Eamonn Casey’s affair with Annie Murphy and the child they had had together, the sobering 2000 statistics on the murder of Irish children at the hands of their parents.343

To readers over the last decade, the play might seem eerily prophetic, but to its audience in 1988 and 1989 the play seems to have appealed in the much more straightforward way that Kennelly himself suggested: as the dramatic representation of a

341 Ibid.
universal emotion, of the towering rage of the rejected, and the refusal at even the highest
cost of a position of passive victimization. Kennelly’s third Greek adaptation, The
_Trojan Women_, continued this highly personal exploration of the extremes of negative
human emotions. But events that unfolded in the former republic of Yugoslavia during
the two years prior to its production at the Abbey in 1993 provided this play with a much
wider, extraordinarily tragic historical context.

**Wars against Women: Euripides, Kennelly, and the Bosnian Conflict**

Euripides’ _Trojan Women_ laments the plight of the women of Troy: though they
have survived the Greek onslaught, their husbands, fathers, and sons have been
slaughtered, their city razed, and they themselves are about to be distributed among the
marauding victors as spoils of war. The play was first performed in 415 B.C., a year after
an Athenian war fleet had swept through the island of Melos, slaughtering the men and
reducing the women and children to slavery. At the time of the City Dionysia (the
Athenian dramatic festival that showcased Euripides’ play), the hubris-filled invaders,
flushed with their recent victory, were preparing to sail for Syracuse. This military
expedition would end two years later with the annihilation of the Athenian forces, a
defeat that would redraw the political map of the ancient world.

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344 Kennelly’s take on the play is extremely personal. In his introduction to the published edition, he speaks
frankly about his battle with alcoholism, which led to an extended stay in St. Patrick’s Psychiatric Hospital
in Dublin. It was the rage of the women there—their “savage and pitiless and precise” stories of abuse,
abandonment, betrayal at the hands of the men in their lives—that he credits with inspiring his version of
_Medea_ (Kennelly 1991), 6-7.

345 This attack is recorded in Thucydides’ _Histories_, 5.84-116.

346 According to Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, the first modern scholar to have situated this ancient
Greek drama within its crucial historical and political context was playwright Gilbert Murray at the turn of
the last century. See Hall and Macintosh, “The Shavian Euripides and the New Euripidean Shaw: Greek
Tragedy and the New Drama” (2005). I will argue that Kennelly’s version of the play is in fact based on
Murray’s translation.
When Kennelly’s version of the play opened at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin on June 2, 1993, the military conflict most prominent in the news was the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, with reports of massacres, ethnic cleansing, and systematic rape in the former Yugoslav republic horrifying and increasingly frequent. In a depressing historical coincidence, the worst known atrocity of that conflict would also occur two years after the play’s performance: the July 1995 massacre of thousands of Bosnian men by Serbian forces in the region of Srebrenica.\footnote{Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill provides a compelling indictment of the violence in Srebrenica in her Irish-language poem “Dubh” [“Black”].} The war had begun in the spring of 1991, following Slovenia’s succession from Yugoslavia and amid rising tensions between Serbs and Croats in the Republic of Croatia. United Nations reports indicate that by late 1991 Serbian military forces had begun to perpetrate the mass rape of thousands of Bosnian Muslim women as an integral part of the Serb strategy for “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia.\footnote{Atrocities including rape and torture were perpetrated by and upon all sides of this conflict. There is evidence, however, that the Serbian-dominated Yugoslavian army systematically instituted rape on a mass scale in order to further its ultimate goals of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Beverly Allen in fact argues that the term “genocidal rape” should be used to describe the Serbian war crimes, since the rape was intended to lead either to the victim’s death or to a forced pregnancy. In the latter case, “the perpetrator—or the policy according to which he is acting—considers this child to be only Serb and to have none of the identity of the mother” (Allen, vii).} “Rape occurs in nearly every war, but in this one it has played a unique role,” as journalist Roy Gutman noted: “The degradation and molestation of women was central to the conquest.”\footnote{Roy Gutman, introduction to Stiglmayer (1994), x.}

Media coverage of these atrocities began in March 1992 and increased exponentially thereafter through the early months of 1993.\footnote{These facts are taken from the U.N.’s 1994 “Bassiouni report,” an investigation into violations of international human rights law in the former Yugoslavia, compiled by a committee headed by Cherif Bassiouni, and cited in Allen (1996).} In the meantime, the European Union struggled to achieve consensus about the proper response to what one historian dubbed its “Backyard War,” and citizens of Ireland questioned their own
government’s vaunted history of wartime neutrality. In May 1993 the U.N. Security Council established an international war crimes tribunal to prosecute those who had committed crimes against humanity in the former Yugoslavia.\textsuperscript{351} When Kennelly’s play opened in June, analogies between the violence endured by its protagonists and that inflicted upon the women of Bosnia were practically inevitable.

This discussion of the historical and political contexts of Euripides’ play and Kennelly’s adaptation is not intended to suggest that the psychological complexities of either work can be reduced to a simplistic allegory. Troy is not Melos, not Athens, not Ireland, not Bosnia.\textsuperscript{352} However, in the production history of both plays, the political context lent a terrible immediacy to the protagonists’ rage at the carnage and futility of war and their fearful despair in the face of the fate awaiting them. I shall argue in this section that the protagonists of Kennelly’s adaptation add a new, dissenting chapter to the long history of female embodiments of the nation in Irish literature. They do so, furthermore, at an historical moment when savage violence, inflicted upon women by the proponents of a doctrine of extreme and ethnocentric nationalism, had thrown a stark light on the dangers of xenophobia and misogyny lurking just below the surface of many late 20\textsuperscript{th}-century formulations of national identity.

In previous chapters I have attempted to trace the evolution, over the course of the twentieth century, of dramatic expressions of various definitions of Irish identity. I have been especially keen to analyze recent theatrical manifestations of one particular

\textsuperscript{351} Gutman, introduction to Stiglmayer (1994).
\textsuperscript{352} I include Athens in this list because in his introduction to the Loeb edition of The Trojan Women, classical scholar David Kovacs argues against the idea that Euripides intended the play to be understood as one of protest against the Melos massacre, but rather as a lament for the “complex web of destruction” that ensnares Greeks and Trojans alike. See Kovacs’ introduction to Euripides: Trojan Women, Iphigenia Among the Taurians, Ion (1999).
component of that identity, which Seamus Heaney has dubbed the “sense of place.” This sense arises from an individual’s understanding of the history of the place he inhabits, his recognition of the continuing influence of that history upon the present, and his conviction that he is part of a community of like-minded thinkers—citizens of a “country of the mind.” It is a remarkably peaceful, utopian construct, a stark contrast to early 20th century representations of the nation as Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the idealized woman-nation whose rejuvenation demands that men’s blood be spilled in revolution.

This next section will demonstrate that Kennelly’s play, especially in its production under director Lynne Parker, takes up the challenge of reconfiguring mutually constitutive constructs of woman and nation, and of creating and staging a sense of place and identity that transcends the horrors of war and the potentially murderous platitudes of nationalism. The deconstruction of traditional female archetypes in contemporary adaptations of Greek tragedy can arise from an author’s casting a bold eye upon an ancient dramatic text or from a director’s innovations in staging and performance; in the Abbey’s production of *The Trojan Women*, it stems from the fruitful combination of the two, and illustrates both the difficulties and the rewards of such an endeavor.

*The Trojan Women: Text and Context*

In his preface to the published text of the play, Kennelly explains the resonance that the titular adjective holds for him:

Almost fifty years ago, I heard women in the village where I grew up say of another woman, ‘She’s a Trojan,’ meaning she had tremendous powers of endurance and survival, was determined to overcome different forms of disappointment and distress, was dogged but never insensitive, obstinate but never

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C.f. Chapter 3.
blackscowling, and seemed eternally capable of renewing herself. And she did all this with a consciousness that seemed to deepen both her suffering and her strength.\textsuperscript{354}

The explanation is remarkable on numerous levels: for the various shades of meaning that Kennelly attributes to the women’s one-word description, for his sensitivity to the emotional and psychological state of the woman described, and for its intricate, interlocking layers of history and geography. While Kennelly hearkens back to his village and his childhood half a century ago, the description he quotes has for its frame of reference the coast of Ilium three thousand years earlier.\textsuperscript{355}

That the word “Trojan” can conjure up such a detailed psychological portrait testifies to the power of such adjectives of place, of ethnicity, of nation to stand as shorthand for an entire range of character traits. In the anecdote Kennelly recounts the associated stereotypes are positive, and the identity clearly a metaphorical one (assuming, of course, that this Kerrywoman does not actually trace her genealogy back to the ancient city of Troy). Yet the history of the 20th century has conclusively and repeatedly demonstrated that identity tied to place can become a justification for murderous violence. The exclusionary mentality of extreme nationalism stringently defines the identity of the citizen who can lay claim to the land within the borders of the nation-state; those who do not fit the definition’s parameters are aliens and outsiders, to be forcibly relocated (or worse) if necessary.

Benedict Anderson, defining the nation as an imagined political community, points out that the central paradox of modern-day nationalism is that its remarkably limited conceptions of its own sovereignty are apparently able to inspire limitless

\textsuperscript{354} Brendan Kennelly, \textit{The Trojan Women}, (1993), p. 3.
\textsuperscript{355} The Trojan War is traditionally dated from 1193 to 1183 B.C.
And a month before Kennelly’s play was first performed, Richard Kearney suggested that an obsession with national identity was crippling Irish attempts to find solutions to momentous challenges both domestic and international:

> It is time, I suggest, to contemplate superseding the exclusivist concept of nation-state sovereignty, as we come to understand ourselves as citizens of a larger community (e.g. a Europe of regions)... The move beyond the sovereignty-identity obsession would... enable us to concentrate on more concrete issues--such as how to solve the Northern Ireland problem (the result of a clash of sovereignty claims); how to cater for the one million poor on this island; how to promote participatory democracy at the local level; how to contribute more fully to international crises beyond our borders (Bosnia, Somalia)... Isn’t that how the issue of Irish identity should now express itself? As inclusive symbol rather than exclusive sovereignty? As culture rather than ideology? As imagination rather than murder?  

I shall argue that Kennelly’s play contains an intricate interrogation of constructions of personal identity that are bound too tightly to place. Having witnessed the destruction of her city and facing exile from the land she used to rule, Kennelly’s Hecuba is forced to redefine herself without reference to externals such as place and position, but rather as a unique human being whose mental and emotional life is not curtailed by fear or by the ravages of war.

Though his phrase “eternally capable of renewing herself” suggests a tendency to view women in archetypal terms, Kennelly emphasizes Hecuba’s individuality and agency, and her departure from the passive role often attributed to the protagonist of this play. He states that over his successive rewrites of the play (eleven in all) he “found a strong, active, resolute and shrewd note... I tried to write an active drama exploring the

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356 Anderson, 6-7.
complex reality of a few memorable women.” He casts that complex reality in contemporary language, rhythmic and poetic. At times his words and images resemble those of literal translations from the ancient Greek. Compare for example Menelaus’ explanation for his participation in the siege of Troy, in the Loeb Classical Library’s translation of the text by David Kovacs, and in Kennelly’s:

Loeb:
O glorious light of day, this
day in which I shall lay hands
on my wife Helen [...] I have
come to Troy not so much as
men suppose for the sake of
my wife as to find the man who
cheated his host and took her as
plunder from my house (99).

Kennelly:
I cannot imagine a more perfect day!
I am about to see the woman that I--
No, I haven’t come here for her.
I came for the man
who ate and drank with me
and stole my woman (48).

However, it seems clear from a comparative analysis that Kennelly does not work from the original Greek nor from a literal translation, but primarily from an intermediate text--Gilbert Murray’s 1905 version, which was adapted by that prolific and popular translator of Greek tragedy as an implicit commentary upon the British forces’ inhumane treatment of Boer women and children in the aftermath of the Boer War (1899-1902). Murray’s rendering of the above lines runs as follows:

How bright the light of heaven, and how sweet
The air this day, that layeth at my feet
The woman that I ... Nay: ‘twas not for her
I came. ‘Twas for the man, the cozener
And thief, that ate with me and stole away
My bride (50).

358 This quotation from the Loeb translation edits a few additional phrases at the ellipsis, mainly ones to which Kovacs attributes dubious provenance or uncertain translation. The ellipses in the quotes from Murray and Kennelly, however, are contained in their texts. Ellipses that result from my editing are indicated by brackets.

359 See Hall and Macintosh, 2005.
Kennelly eschews Murray’s “high Victorian manner, mellifluously romantic and consciously archaic,” but retains Murray’s important intervention in the text, in the line “...The woman that I... Nay, ‘twas not for her I came.” Kennelly follows this version almost exactly, retaining Murray’s suggestion that Menelaus is correcting not a common misperception of his motives, as in the more literal Loeb translation, but rather his own Freudian slip--his repressed but continuing desire for the faithless Helen. And although Kennelly discards Murray’s iambic pentameter couplets, his rendering of the line creates an assonantal rhythm in the repetition of the consonant h (“... the woman that I... No, I have not come here for her”). Kennelly’s rendering builds on Murray’s psychological insight, the repeated h’s suggesting Helen’s name even as Menelaus pronounces his contemptuous reluctance to speak it, in lines translated by both poets as follows:

And now I seek...  
Curse her! I scarce can speak the name she bears,  
That was my wife (Murray, 50).

Today I want to see--  
Curse the bitch! She was my wife  
and I can hardly bring myself  
to say her name (Kennelly, 48).

Although these versions differ in poetic form and linguistic register, the essential similarities between the two texts are evident. Furthermore, Murray’s and therefore Kennelly’s text follow Euripides’ plot outline closely, generally retaining the order of the speeches and their central emotions.

The crucial difference, however, between Kennelly’s text and Murray’s--and between Kennelly’s and Euripides’--lies in a series of passages added by Kennelly to demonstrate the identification of the surviving women with their fallen city, and the

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evolution and eventual disintegration of that sense of identity over the course of the play’s action. Though the clarity and the sustained emphasis on this symbolic association of the women and their place of origin has no precedent in either Euripides or Murray, it does draw on an extensive Irish literary tradition, one that in fact may reach back to the dawn of that literature in the oral traditions of the Iron Age Celts—the personification/deification of the land of Ireland as sovereignty goddess, “the woman who is literally as old as the hills yet endlessly restored to youth through union with her rightful mate... the goddess who by her own right selects her partner for his kingly qualities and thereby validates him in office.”

This association underpins many of the greatest and most tragic tales of Irish literature, like that of Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3 as well as the “aisling” poetry of the Jacobites as expounded by Brendan Ó Buachalla, and of the mid-nineteenth century nationalist “Young Ireland” movement, as Mary Trotter and Elizabeth Butler Cullingford have noted. Such poetry “played on the image of Ireland as a young maiden in need of rescue from subjugation or rape by her (English) conqueror” or on the image of Ireland as sean-bhean bhocht [Poor Old Woman], begging the young men of Ireland to fight the invaders to restore the land that has been stolen from her. These images were, of course, most famously exploited by William Butler Yeats and Augusta Gregory in their play Cathleen Ni Houlihan (1902),

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362. For more on the origins of this tradition and its (ab)use, see MacCana, as previously cited; Ní Bhrolchain (1982), 21-19, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s An Bhanfhile sa Traidisiun: The Woman Poet in the Irish Tradition, in her Selected Essays (2005).
364. Trotter, 75-6.
where the eponymous protagonist is transformed from a lamenting hag into a regal young woman by the blood shed by young Irish men in the United Irishmen’s 1798 rebellion.

Kennelly’s play draws on the iconographic power of this literary tradition at its outset, only to turn it on its head by the play’s end. The identification of Hecuba with Troy is near-total at the opening of the play, from the stage directions onward. The play opens upon a “battlefield after a battle. Walls of city at back, broken. Huts to right and left, with chosen women to be taken away by the Greeks. Hecuba is lying on the ground, asleep” (7)—her body stretched upon the foreground in a visual echo of the ruined city walls in the background. The play’s opening soliloquy provides verbal reinforcement of this identification; surveying the pitiful scene the god Poseidon mourns the ruins of the city he loved: “And I ... must leave this city of my dreams / this old broken city / that will always live in me. / My heart is only / smashed bits and pieces of my city” (10). The god’s allusion to “dreams” and the adjectives “old” and “broken” remind the audience of the sleeping figure on the ground, distinguished from the other characters by her age (Hecuba is Cassandra’s mother, Andromache’s mother-in-law, and Astynax’s grandmother; the women of the chorus, although of unspecified ages, are mothers of young children). Poseidon could well be voicing the fears of exile and destruction that haunt Hecuba’s dreams; the association of the heart and the broken shards of the city is one that the Hecuba and the Trojan women will repeat in sorrowful variation throughout the play.

The early scenes of the play emphasize the fluidity and interconnectedness of the identity of Troy and its women: the city becomes emotion becomes ruins become women’s bodies become the city, concepts conveyed through the imagery of flowing
water: “The river runs through the city’s body like a shock. / The river is women’s cries”

(8)—or women’s tears, as when the despairing Hecuba tries to deny the destruction that has been inflicted upon her and her city alike:

This is not the beautiful city I have known.
This is not my city whose every corner is part of me.
This is not my home.
I look, I look ... I see... ruin, desolation, decay,
my children lost, my land trampled, my man cut down [...]
In this morning-light, my body rocks with pain
caught in the rhythm of its cries,
my own tears burning music out of my eyes,
fierce cold burning music flowing far and wide
for what is lost, insulted, broken, ruined, dead.
Look at my city, look at my body,
this head, this neck, these hands, these lips, these eyes,
my city is lost, so is my country (12-13, my italics).

For a sense of how much Kennelly has added to this text, compare Murray’s version:

Up from the earth, O weary head!
This is not Troy, about, above--
Not Troy, nor we the lords thereof.
Thou breaking neck, be strengthenèd! [...]
Ah woe!... For what woe lacketh here?
My children lost, my land, my lord.
[...] All with changeful pain
My body rocketh, and would fain
Move to the tune of tears that flow:
For tears are music too, and keep
A song unheard in hearts that weep (12-13).

The Loeb edition, on the other hand, reads

This is no longer Troy you see, and we are no longer
Troy’s rulers. As your fortune changes, endure the change!
... Ah me, ah me! What lament is there that I cannot utter,
unlucky woman that I am? My country is gone, my
children, my husband! Great pride of my ancestors, now
cut short, how slight a thing you were after all! (25-6).

Hecuba, like Yeats’s and Gregory’s Cathleen, laments multiple losses—her land, the men who would fight for her, and exile from her beloved home. Yet as an immortal
symbol of Ireland, Cathleen can be rejuvenated and her lands restored to her through nationalists’ blood sacrifice. This restoration is only possible, as Susan Harris has argued, because Cathleen’s body is an immaterial one, invulnerable to any sort of physical sexual advance by the men she entreats to fight for her. She offers them instead the possibility of a metaphysical union, their deaths mystically rendering her young and fertile once again.365

Kennelly’s Hecuba, on the other hand, is an anti-Cathleen366—her body is vulnerable not only to the degradations of slavery, poverty and exile, but to the violation that she and the Trojan women most fear—rape at the hands of their conquerors. City, country, and body are indeed lost, since the Greeks’ destruction of Troy will culminate in the carrying of the Trojan women back to Greece as spoils of war, to be slaves and concubines. Although Hecuba calls out for a witness to her pain (“Look at my city, look at my body”) she soon realizes that the power of the gaze belongs solely to the Greek conquerors:

A man’s eyes
can look at me in public
as if I were his private property [...] 
A man’s eyes can
rape me in the street
and not a single word need ever be said! [...] 
A man is going to look at me, his eyes will say --
I want you in my bed [...] 
Yet, may not a woman
fight, yes, fight, here and now?
May not a woman
win?
How?367

This passage, which has no analogue in Murray or Kovacs, is remarkable in its sensitivity to Hecuba’s dread of the impending violation, her desire to defend herself, and

366  She in fact bears striking similarities to Micheál MacLiammóir’s Hecuba, discussed in Chapter 2.
367  Kennelly, Trojan Women, 13.
her complete lack of resources or stratagems by which to do so. It is a mentality remarkably similar to that described by Beverly Allen in her study of the effects of the policy of mass/genocidal rape, as carried out by the Serb military and paramilitary forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, reports of which had reached the Irish and international press six months before Kennelly’s play opened, and which continued to make headlines in the intervening and ensuing time.  

Building on the work of Italian journalist Giuseppe Zaccaria, Allen documents the decision by the highest ranking members of the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army to target women, adolescents, and children in their policy of ethnic cleansing, and the army’s subsequent satisfaction with the psychological effects of mass rape on the civilian population.  She notes that a common tactic was for irregular Serb forces to “enter a Bosnian-Herzegovinian or Croatian village, take several women of varying ages from their homes, rape them in public view, and depart” allowing the news of the event to foment fear and panic throughout the village. When the regular army arrived, they would offer the now-terrified residents safe passage away from the village on the condition they never return. Most [would] accept, leaving the village abandoned to the Serbs and thus furthering the genocidal plan of “ethnic cleansing.” It is hard to imagine they could do otherwise,  

368. As Cathy Moore reported in The Irish Times, “When the international community thought that it could not bear anything worse than the reports of death and torture in the former Yugoslavia, a horrific picture began to emerge last Christmas of the systematic rape and sexual abuse of thousands of women, children, and in some cases, men” (C.f. her“Obstacles to prosecuting rapists as war criminals,” April 17, 1993, p. 6). The Irish press ran numerous articles specifically about genocidal rape; the IT archive, for example, contains articles about about the Dublin Rape Crisis Center training Bosnian women to counsel rape victims (“Rape Crisis Center gets £30,000 for Bosnia Work,” February 3, 1993, p. 7, and “Rape Counsellors for Bosnia,” March 12, 1993), about an EC investigation of the mass rapes (“Investigating rape in Bosnia,” February 25, 1993, p. 9), and about the Pope’s plea that Bosnian rape victims not terminate their pregnancies (“Pope wants no abortions in Bosnia,” March 2, 1993, p.1), as well as an editorial by Kevin Myers (“An Irishman’s Diary,” March 18, 1993, p.13) and Cathy Moore’s chilling account of personal interviews with two victims (“We could hear her begging them,” April 17, 1993, p.6).  

369 See Allen (1996), Ch. 3.
being unarmed except for their farm implements and a rusty rifle or two. 370

Hecuba and the other Trojan women repeatedly voice a similar sense of terror and helplessness, in the face of the compound threat of impending rape and exile. Kennelly’s adaptation stresses the similarity of the women and the ruined home they must soon leave: “My city, O my city, / you are broken-lonely / and broken-lonely these men would have us go / to places we can’t begin to know” (15). It plumbs the depths of the women’s fear of these unknown places, and their hopeless longing for the peace that home used to represent. They continually ask each other where they will be taken: “My children cry for me, / but I must go from them forever. / Where? Where beyond the sea? / What city? Village? Town?” (63).

Cassandra emphasizes the organic connection between the women and their land, a connection born of their life experience and their memories, of love for their families and honor for their dead, in contrast to the Greeks’ spurious claims of possession based on military superiority:

Listen.
Now, I speak of us.
We are a fighting people
and fighting we died to save our people.
In the mad rage of war
friends bore their dead friends home.
Women’s hands washed them,
wrapped them in white shrouds
to lie at peace in their own loved earth.
And while the gentle dead enjoyed
a sweet eternal sleep
their living friends fought on
knowing what they were fighting for
close to their wives and children
in their own land, passionate, at home,
not like the Greeks,

370 Allen, 62.
the lost, conquering, joyless Greeks (25).\textsuperscript{371}

This contrast between “the mad rage of war” and the peaceful sleep of death, and the ways in which the ministrations of women can ease the transition from the former into the latter, is common to both Euripides’ play and Kennelly’s adaptation. The women again and again wish for death and the escape that it represents: “I would be free, free as the dead” (18); “Polyxena is dead, free / of the misery where we are trapped... Better to be dead than living horribly” (37). Of course, survivors of concentration camps and torture chambers often recount having similarly wished for death; for instance, Cathy Moore’s account of her interview with two survivors of a Serbian rape camp, published in the \textit{Irish Times} a month and a half before Kennelly’s play opened, states that while held prisoner both had contemplated escaping their sustained torture by suicide.\textsuperscript{372}

While I am not suggesting that this particular article influenced Kennelly’s adaptation--the Trojan women’s wish for death is contained in Euripides’ text--I do believe news of the atrocities in Bosnia provided a chillingly immediate context for the performance of \textit{The Trojan Women}, and threw into sharp relief one of the critical changes in Kennelly’s adaptation. While Euripides (and Murray) present Hecuba as ultimately and nobly resigning herself to her fate, Kennelly’s Hecuba possesses the inner strength and determination to survive her losses and degradation with her sanity and her sense of self intact, and even to find and celebrate the mental freedom that physical captivity cannot extinguish.

\textsuperscript{371} Murray’s translation contains a very similar passage, but without lines corresponding to “knowing what they were fighting for,” and “at home, passionate, in their own lands”; the adjective “lost” to describe the Greeks is Kennelly’s, as well. C.f. Murray, 31.

\textsuperscript{372} Moore, “We Could Hear Her Begging Them,” \textit{IT} April 17, 1993.
This transformation is foreshadowed when Hecuba must prepare her little grandson Astynax for burial, after Odysseus convinces the Greeks that the child must be thrown to his death from the city walls. The boy is buried honorably covered by Hector’s shield, which Hecuba’s words transform from his father’s weapon of war into a sign of loving maternal protection: “Child, there’s nothing left in Hector’s house, / Nothing left but Hector’s shield... / Your father’s hand gripped that shield / and he was feared. / Now it will cover you / with all we know of love” (67). The final sentence of this quotation from Kennelly replace a paean found in Kovacs and Murray to Hector’s prowess in war, emphasizing the women’s enduring love and tenderness in the face of the violent wounds that war inflicts.

Kennelly’s play gestures towards its final transfiguring moment at other points as well. This chapter’s epigraph, spoken by one of the women of the chorus, reinforces the absolute identification of the women with Troy (“Women, we are become our city...”) but suggests that the very scale of destruction visited upon both opens a space in which the women can rise above their individual loss and tragedy and express their compassion for all those ravaged by the war--the hungry, the lonely, the outcast, the mad: “All women are dead of shame tonight / and being dead we may cry / for the suffering of our city...” The challenge, of course, is to preserve and express such feelings in life rather than in death. This challenge is made starkly evident by Talthybius, who forces the women to watch as Greek soldiers raze the city to the ground. His sadistic words of encouragement to the soldiers373 (“Think of this city as an evil woman, / set fire to her flesh, her hair / rip out her heart, set fire to that, / stand back, enjoy the flames, / this is the best work you’ve ever done,” 70) form an obvious warning to the women about the potentially horrific

373 Also with no parallel in Murray or Kovacs.
consequences of “evil” behavior, and a concrete display of the kind of “murderous misogyny” that allows atrocities like mass rape to be perpetuated upon women in wartime.  

The Greeks’ display of power is motivated not by pride in their conquest but by a deep-seated fear of revenge even from the few remaining women and children of Troy. Talthybius’ admission that “There’s nothing more dangerous to a winner / than one seed of hope in the heart of the loser. / That’s why everything must be destroyed” (71) provides a response to the question that Hecuba had asked over Astynax’s grave: “Why were they so afraid / that one day this boy might restore / his country’s pride? / Is innocence to be more feared / than strength?” (66).

Kennelly’s Hecuba slowly begins to intuit that hope and innocence can be preserved even in the face of murderous cruelty, an insight expressed most profoundly in the 20th century in the literature of the survivors of Nazi death camps. Victor Frankl, for example, remembers from his experiences in Auschwitz:

> the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.  

This choice is not an easy one for Hecuba. She delivers a ferocious penultimate speech as she beats the ground with her hands in rage against her dead husband Priam, who has failed to protect her against the impending violation of her body--and yet again she describes her body in terms of identification with Troy: “Do you know what it means / to have this arrogant trickster, Odysseus, / ... prowl through every secret of my body / like a

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374 Allen, xii.
smug conqueror exploring / the streets and laneways of a beautiful city?” (73). She prays for vengeance upon Helen, whose arrival in the city set its destruction in motion. Yet once her anger is spent, she considers her fate dispassionately, and finally breaks the link that previous lines of the text had so insistently established between woman and city, displacing the image of the conquerable nation with that of the inscrutable sea:

What does it matter if I sleep with a stranger here or in another country?...
What does it matter if I fuck some tricky itchy stinking weasel of a Greek so long as I know what I’m doing and why I’m doing it?
And when he’s fucking me may I not smile and ask the very face of darkness --
darling, who is free?

Alone, may I not open or close my eyes, relishing the part of me that he can never reach, that no man living can ever reach?... he’ll never dream that there is a sea between us. I can explore that sea until I find the stranger living inside myself and get to know her and her cold power... (78-9)

This too is a set of images that Kennelly’s adaptation has carefully established: the “cold, fearless freedom of the waves” (7) was previously associated with madness and death, as for instance in the first scene when Pallas Athena and Poseidon plot the destruction of the Greek fleet in revenge for Ajax’s brutality against Athena’s priestess Cassandra:

POSEIDON: You want them to be lost and conscious forever in the sea wandering, wandering, never to come into the sanity of home?
PALLAS: I want them to know that home is what is always in the mind and always out of reach. I want the sea to be a sea of death
working for me.
I want you to make the sea
mad with its own ferocity,
wild with the genius of its treachery
till it grows thick and sluggish
with lost Greeks (11).

Hecuba’s final victory over the Greeks is her linking of the image of the sea with that of life, of survival, of sanity in the face of mind-bending horror, of a “home” not tied to a geographical location but discovered and explored inside herself—a profundity of human understanding never to be achieved by the “lost Greeks” who equate power and freedom with military conquest. Her heroic determination to move forward shows itself in the smallest of gestures, a slow “shuffle” towards her destination, in deliberate contrast to the physical prowess of her conquerors.

Her final speech contains an ironic reminder that for all the Greeks’ violent strength, they live in fear, while she can now choose to identify herself with the sea and the freedom that it represents. That choice, like her shuffling steps, is one that must be made again and again, in determined increments. It is a battle she must fight to reclaim herself from her conquerors:

I have to leave this place. How?
I have to go somewhere. Where?
How shall I go?
I shall put one leg in front of the other
and shuffle towards tonight and tomorrow...
That is how I shall reach the sea...

I want to live without fear
and I will, I will,
no matter where I happen to be,
Hecuba, a woman, Hecuba,
a natural, fearless wave of the sea.

Waves waves waves waves waves endless unknown driven
dreams in the hearts of women.
Nobody can count the waves...
The waves roar and moan in pain.
The waves laugh happily.
The waves are slaves.
The waves are free.
The war is over. The war begins--for me! (79).376

**The Trojan Women: The Performance**

Kennelly’s version of The Trojan Women opened at the Peacock Theatre on June 2, 1993, hours after Mother Teresa of Calcutta had given a public address outside Dublin’s Mansion House. In her short speech Mother Teresa had advocated “prayer as the way to love and peace,” and stressed that all human beings have a duty to work compassionately to relieve poverty and suffering.377 A reviewer who had attended both events was struck by the similarities of Mother Teresa’s words and the opening speech of Kennelly’s play, as spoken by Poseidon378:

The war is over. When will another war begin? ...
I’ve seen war piled on war, horror on horror, death on death.
I’ve seen love too
and I say this:
Love will come to rule the world,
that is, women will rule the world (7).

The god of the sea, dressed in a tuxedo, delivered these lines from a raised central stage draped with scarlet brocade. The play was performed in the round with the

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376. In the Loeb edition, on the other hand, the play ends abruptly with a sparse series of exchanges between Hecuba and the Chorus as they watch the city burn, and the Queen does not even have the last word:

Hecuba:  Oh, trembling trembling / limbs, march me forward!  Go to / your life’s day of slavery!
Chorus:  Alas, unhappy city!  Yet / go forward now to the ships of the Achaeans (143).

Murray’s translation is similar in theme, though more florid.

377. Audrey Magee, “A tiny figure in blue brings awe to Dublin,” Irish Times, June 2, 1993, and “Dublin honours Mother Teresa,” Irish Times, June 3, 1993, p. 7. The Bosnian conflict figured prominently in the in the Irish press even in the coverage of Mother Teresa’s visit to Ireland; Sean MacReamoinn’s article covering her life and accomplishments notes that her hometown of Skopje, Macedonia was “in danger of becoming a second Bosnia” (“Mother Teresa’s ‘call within a call,’” June 2, 1993, p. 12).

audience surrounding the stage, symbolically complicit in penning the women into the space to which they have been relegated. Set designer Frank Conway, working with Rough Magic Theatre Company’s acclaimed director Lynne Parker, had created a stage ambience of “sumptuous decay” in scarlet, gilt, and black—baroque mirrors, pillars, antique chairs, even a glossy baby grand piano, with cobwebs fluttering from the fabric and the furniture, flowers wilting in massive urns, and the stage strewn with uneven layers of sand, all lit in eerie red by lighting designer Trevor Dawson.

Poseidon (Birdy Sweeney) delivered his opening speech in tails and a black tie. The women played their parts elegantly coiffed and arrayed in ball gowns—black for Pallas Athena (Helena Montague), scarlet for the Trojan women, their make-up contrasting stark white skin with darkly shadowed eyes and deep red lips. Their costumes provided a dramatic contrast to that of Cassandra (Fionnuala Murphy), in bridal white and veil for her impending “marriage” to Agamemnon; the costume contrast was even more jarring with that of Talthybius (Martin Murphy), who wore a WWII-style army uniform and balaclava. The play opened with the women draped languidly over the chairs, the grand piano, and the steps. Onstage, musician Carole Nelson played haunting clarinet music composed by John Dunne, occasionally accompanied by Pallas Athena on the piano.

Reviews of the play raved about the atmosphere communicated by the set, but disagreed about where exactly to locate it; some interpreted the performance as a

380. See, for example, the play review by Kay Hingerty of the Cork Examiner (June 14, 1993), or by the Guardian’s Ian Hill (June 24, 1993).
381. In an interview with Kelly Younger, Kennelly relates an anecdote in which the clarinetist wandered into the Peacock during rehearsals, told Parker that she was looking for work, and Parker hired her on the spot.
commentary on contemporary gender dynamics and women’s struggles to attain equality throughout Ireland and Europe. The *Evening Press* found Kennelly’s play “as relevant today as when it was originally written in 415 B.C.,” but not because it reflected any particular conflict; rather, *The Trojan Women* “relate[d] the universal cry of womankind—a cry that calls for respect, equality, and self-determination.”

Kay Hingerty of the *Cork Examiner* took Kennelly to task for the very strength of his female characters, protesting that their inner strength and survival actually allowed men to ignore their guilt for inflicting violence upon them. She conceded, however, that the play served as a strong reminder of the need to redress the societal conditions that permit such violence: this adaptation of *The Trojan Women* was “opera/poetry, a new important experience in theatre, giving us the conviction at the end that change, individually and collectively, should start now.”

Other reviewers evoked the issues of war and rape with more specificity. Emer O’Kelly, writing for the *Sunday Independent*, also faulted Kennelly for an overly convenient portrayal of Hecuba’s ability to overcome and transcend tragic suffering—if only this were possible, she laments, especially after a violent “violation of women’s essential core” such as rape. *Irish Times* reviewer David Nowlan described the play as “ancient drama re-crafted in contemporary terms about war and men and women, well worthy of the stage of any national theatre,” and commends Kennelly for his complex

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interrogation of “the mechanisms [the women] utilise to ensure survival in the maelstrom” of war.\(^{385}\)

The Abbey programme encouraged more Irish-centered readings of Kennelly’s play. Poet and playwright Paula Meehan in her programme note introduced the play as “a terrifying journey into sexual politics and powermongering,” where “the very terms victor and subjugated, slave and master, conquered and free, are put under scrutiny”.\(^{386}\) She excoriated Irish culture for the inequality and injustices that it continued to inflict upon Irish women:

> Just as Euripides was addressing a city state at war, and using the Trojan story to intervene in the male psyches of his audience and to warn them of the shadow side of power and oppression, so I believe Kennelly is issuing a powerful warning to those who are engaged in the war against women now, a war fought in the bedrooms and kitchens and workplaces of this island. There is a terrible price to be paid for this oppression, in terms of an unbalanced and sick culture--as witnessed by the many instances of abuse we’ve had to listen to over the last decade as women begin to tell their battle stories.

Martin Murphy, who in the role of Talthybius personified military force and aggression, contributed a programme note entitled “The Heroic Myth” which situates the play in its Peloponnesian War context, making reference to the massacre at Melos and warning against the dangers of trusting “heroes.”\(^{387}\) The Athenians’ strength, he argues, begat a sense of entitlement and a greed for ever more wealth and power: “The Athenians went to war because of their arrogance, because it was profitable, because politicians realized there were votes in it…” His essay does not specifically allude to the


\(^{386}\) Meehan, “Of what is past, passing, or to come.” Trojan Women programme note. Abbey Theatre Archive.

Bosnian war, however, although debates in the Irish and international press regarding American and European plans for intervention in the conflict could have provided a contemporary parallel.

There were, however, a number of spectators who specifically referenced the Bosnian conflict in their reviews of the performance. Eileen Battersby noted that the opening speeches “could be commenting on Bosnia today, as much as reporting on the fall of Troy.” She commends Parker’s “rare sense of time and place,” and “Kennelly’s passionate, profound, and lyric language... moving through history to our time.”

Victoria White began the write-up of her interview with Lynne Parker with a quote from Kennelly about the “savage rape” of the sacked city, and continues, “The women too are raped, claimed as war spoils by the invading army. No, we’re not talking about Bosnia here, we’re talking about Troy...” For Ian Hill of the Guardian, the play cried out for more explicit Bosnian parallels than the production provided: he noted that, although half the cast spoke with their native Northern Irish accents, “Lynne Parker’s first production inside the National Theatre’s walls refuses to be located in any specific time or place. Bosnia might have tempted a more radical director.”

Parker herself anticipated this type of critical objection to the staging in her interview with White, stating “It would be arrogant for us to assume we knew anything about what those Bosnian women are going through... The parallel is so obvious it hits you between the eyes, and we didn’t need to make any reference to it.”

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389 Ibid.
recognition of the depth of the violence and brutalization experienced by the women of Bosnia suggests that the set and costume choices for her production were not intended merely as a baroque effect. Beverly Allen writes that many in the U.S. and western Europe assumed the women of Bosnia to be irrevocably “other,” not only in terms of language and religion, but more importantly in terms of culture, standard of living, and education. As Eastern Europeans, and especially as “Balkans,” their status on the cultural totem pole was perceived as much lower, and the violence inflicted upon “those people” was written off as the unfortunate result of primitive, uneducated bloodlust. In fact, many of the survivors of the violence in Bosnia were educated, articulate women who before the hostilities had pursued professional careers, and who were as shocked by the explosion of violence as any resident of Dublin might have been, had such atrocities occurred there. Clothing the beautiful, statuesque Trojan women in luxurious evening dresses served to remind the audience that these women were not intrinsically different from themselves, nor was their suffering any less worthy of the world’s attention or compassion.

Parker did not, of course, suggest that interpretations of the performance’s meaning should be limited to a reflection of the Bosnian conflict. She also stressed the play’s criticism of the subordinate position of women throughout the world, small steps towards redressing inequalities notwithstanding: “It’s a good time to be working as a woman in the arts, but in the real world, the attitude towards women still hasn’t changed.” Parker herself is a pioneering figure in the world of Irish theatre as one of

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393 Technically, the geographical area in question is to the north of the Balkan Peninsula, but the adjective is routinely applied to the conflict and its victims.
394 Allen, Rape Warfare, 6.
the first Irish female directors ever to achieve domestic and international recognition; her production of Kennelly’s *The Trojan Women* also broke new ground as the first ancient Greek tragedy Parker had ever directed, and her first production at the National Theatre. She explained to White that she was drawn to Kennelly’s Hecuba because of the character’s determination to find the strength to survive within herself and because of her individuality, her ultimate refusal to serve as an embodiment of nation or a mother-goddess, a tradition that Parker emphatically rejects: “There is a problem, from *Big Maggie* down, of women being used in Irish plays to denote some resurgence of the Earth spirit, which gives me a pain in the arse.”

Parker read Kennelly’s character as he intended. The playwright published a column entitled “Sex and the real test of strength” in the *Irish Independent* the week before the production opened, describing *The Trojan Women* as a play “about women’s strength,” which he contrasted with men’s lust for power. “The strength of women is more concerned with endurance... It is longer-lasting, it is marked by grit, shrewdness, calmness, patience... This strength may often go unnoticed but it is constant, deep, and real as the sea.” Catherine White’s passionate and nuanced performance as Hecuba under Parker’s direction communicated the message of courageous endurance that Kennelly desired, and he later recounted his satisfaction with Parker’s production, praising her “combination of commitment and openness” to realizing on stage the play’s multiple layers of meaning.

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396 Ibid.
398 In an interview with Kelly Younger Kennelly recalls that he was pleased with Parker’s production (and with the spontaneous addition of the clarinetist to the cast): “There was a musician wandering around Dublin, I think, and she went into the Abbey, and Lynn [sic] said, "Well, we're doing a play that's great for it" and
dedicated his play to all women who, like those in Bosnia, found the strength to survive unspeakable violence: “All over the world today, in countries devastated by war, famine, rape, ethnic cleansing and other forms of obscenity, these Trojan women are demonstrating their inspiring strength. My play is about these women and is dedicated to them.”

I have provided this extended analysis of the Trojan Women production for three main reasons. First, Kennelly’s critique of the limitations of national identities connects fruitfully to the concept of the “sense of place” articulated by Heaney, a sense of identity and community that is realized on a more local, individual level. Second, the production of the Trojan Women marks an important milestone in Irish theatre history, as an ancient Greek adaptation that clearly and forcibly comments not only upon sociopolitical realities within Ireland, but also upon a conflict with global ramifications. As such it looks forward to Morrison’s Bacchae of Baghdad and Heaney’s Burial at Thebes. Third, it was a critical triumph for the Abbey, due to its combination of contemporary relevance and innovative staging. The National Theatre has tried to repeat this successful formula with every one of their subsequent productions of Greek tragedy.

This production also threw down a gauntlet to the Gate, which in its first decade under Colgan’s direction had staged multiple plays by Beckett, Wilde, Shakespeare and Boucicault, but few new works by contemporary Irish authors (Kennelly’s Medea might be an arguable exception, but it was originally staged at the Royal Dublin Society Concert Hall). In her interview with White, Lynne Parker criticized the National Theatre’s dearth of plays by women, but noted that “the real villain of the piece is the

she appeared in the play as well! That's the kind of spirit I like. I like the combination of complete commitment and openness, or flexibility.
Gate,” for not encouraging new writing, and for falling short of the standards for
production quality established by Edwards and MacLiammóir: “They keep producing
old, posh plays. The frocks aren’t even as good as they used to be. We have fabulous
frocks, but we also have a show to put them around.”

The Gate would respond to the challenge posed by the Abbey’s success by
staging Derek Mahon’s translation of Racine’s Phèdre in 1996. Racine’s neo-classical
tragedy was itself a Greco-Roman hybrid, taking Euripides’ Hippolytus and Seneca’s
Phaedra as its source material; Mahon crafted a brilliant, idiomatic translation of
Racine’s French text. Fintan O’Toole described the Gate’s production as a great play,
acted, directed, and designed to a very high standard, and one which illustrated a
burgeoning sense of identity that is not simply Irish, but also European:

Not only is the play accessible through Mahon’s language, but
it does also speak to things in modern Irish culture in a way that
is more profound than any surface political relevance or
political homeliness could... by a long way the finest Irish
production of a European classical play that I have seen... a
confident, consistently intelligent appropriation of a great work
of European culture. Watching it, you could feel that there is
after all, some substance to the notion that we are all Europeans
now.

O’Toole deplored the play’s lack of success at the box office, which he struggles
to explain, but my research suggests that O’Toole may have been too quick to dismiss the
draw of “surface political relevance or political homeliness,” of the intellectual
excitement generated by seeing an ancient text brought into clear juxtaposition with a
contemporary dilemma. When a comprehensible, current temporal and geographical
frame of reference is lacking, an ancient adaptation can fail to adequately communicate

400 O’Toole, “Are we all Europeans now?” Irish Times, 5 March 1996.
meaning to its audience, and in fact reviewers seemed to misunderstand the directorial and design decisions. For instance, director Crowley described *Phaedra* as a “physical production,” the character’s movements providing clues to the passions they strive to repress, but from reviewer David Nowlan’s seat, the staging seemed “daringly static.”401 There was a similar disjunction between the creators’ intentions and the audience’s perception of the visual cues. The set, for example, was “a huis clos, poised between the clear light of heaven and the underworld” according to Mahon, or as Crowley put it, “a spare mythical setting,”402 while the set that Nowlan observed was “beautifully spare” but also “Mediterranean.”403

**By the Bog of Cats... and Medea**

The Abbey avoided imitation of the Gate’s misstep in their next ancient Greek production, an inventive adaptation of Euripides by Marina Carr, containing a clear contemporary frame of reference. A close analysis of that frame of reference and the larger societal context in which it functions suggests, however, that this play’s underlying implications might have been better lost in translation.

The action of *By the Bog of Cats...*, a free adaptation of *Medea*, occurs in the Irish Midlands; its main conflict is that between Hester Swane and her estranged husband Carthage Kilbride.404 Recalling Medea’s status as an outsider in Corinth, Carr makes Hester a traveller, a tinker: that is, an itinerant who has chosen to live outside settled

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402 Both Crowley and Mahon are quoted in Helen Meaney, “Star Wars in the human heart,” Irish Times, 1 Feb. 1996.
404 One reviewer wryly noted that “a play set on an Irish bog, even a haunted one, has a lot of work to do once it has [given its protagonists names like those].” Harry Browne, “Why all drama is local,” Irish Times, 6 April 1999.
communities, similar to the continental Roma (gypsy) populations in lifestyle, though not in language and culture. (The Irish traveller population is estimated at around 23,000, most of whom exist on the margins of Irish society; they are often looked upon with suspicion by members of the communities that surround them, accused of perpetuating petty crimes and occasional violence.) Carr’s Hester has been “temporarily” living in her caravan by the Bog of Cats for the last fourteen years, squatting on the land against the wishes of the local community, whom she defies:

Carthage: ...ya know what they’re sayin’ about you? That it’s time you moved on to another haltin’ site.
Hester: I was born on the Bog of Cats, and on the Bog of Cats I’ll end me days. I’ve as much right to this place as any of yees, more, for it holds me to it in ways it has never held yees. And as for me tinker blood, I’m proud of it. It gives me an edge over all of yees around here, allows me to see yees for the inbred, underbred, bog-brained shower yees are (289).

Hester’s sharp wit and even sharper tongue mask an abiding sense of loss and desperation. Her abandonment by her mother at the tender age of seven has spurred her to unspeakable crimes, including the murder of her brother Joseph; it provokes her to kill her own seven-year-old daughter, Josie. In Euripides’ play Medea’s murder of her children is an act of horrifying revenge, but Carr casts it in a more forgiving light: Hester intends to leave her daughter with Carthage and his new bride, but Josie swears she’ll “be watchin’ for ya all the time ‘long the Bog of Cats. I’d be hopin’ and waitin’ and prayin’ for ya to return” (338). Having spent her life torturously waiting for her mother’s homecoming, Hester cannot condemn her daughter to the same fate, and kills her to spare her a greater anguish.405

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405 For additional information about this play, see Bernadette Bourke’s “Carr’s ‘cut-throats and gargiyles’: Grotesque and Carnivalesque Elements in By the Bog of Cats,” Victor Merriman’s “Poetry Shite: Towards a Postcolonial Reading of Portia Coughlin and Hester Swane,” and Claudia Harris’s “Rising out of the
Carr depicts Hester’s defiance of her greedy, xenophobic neighbors as heroic and hilarious, and her love (for her daughter, Carthage, and her mother) as fierce and passionate. And audiences seem to have found the Abbey’s production of the play, directed by Patrick Mason and starring Olwen Fouéré, remarkably moving; one critic recounts that “at the end of the play, a stunned silence, interrupted only by sobs, was followed by thunderous applause; many audience members were literally weeping in the aisles as they left the theatre.” But even if this sort of catharsis results from the audience’s compassion for Hester Swane and her daughter, there is something remarkably disturbing about Carr’s choice to identify her Medea figure with Irish travellers, whose status is already marginalized and whose motives already suspect.

In a towering outbreak of sadistic violence before the climactic infanticide, Hester vents her rage upon Carthage’s cattle, trapping them in his barn and burning them alive:

Hester: Well, Carthage, ya think them were only idle threats I made? ... Ya hear that sound? Them’s your cattle howlin’. Ya smell that smell? That’s your forty calves roasting. I tied them all in and flung diesel on them. And the house, I burnt the bed and the whole place went up in flames. I’d burn down the world if I’d enough diesel --Will somewan not come and save me from meself before I go and do worse (317).

She deliberately targets the symbols of “settled,” agricultural existence--Carthage’s house and his defenseless cattle--before killing her own daughter, an action which she seems to want to blame before the fact on the other characters’ failure to stop her. If Hester is meant to be an exemplar of a traveller, the portrait is not a flattering one; rather, it

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Miasmal Mists: Marina Carr’s Ireland,” in Leeney and McMullan (2003), and Melissa Sihra’s “A Cautionary Tale: Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*...” in Chambers et al (2002).

recycles pervasive suspicions about travellers’ propensities for crime and violence, and fears that they harbor hostility towards settled communities.

Thus Carr’s (anti-)heroine, though dramatically powerful, is ultimately a socially irresponsible creation, for which the underlying Greek play serves as a convenient justification. As Victor Merriman cautions,

> The mobilization of the worlds of the Greeks... ascribe[s] the inevitabilities of Fate as the explanatory context for the vicissitudes of poor and vulnerable women... [and] plays into a series of closed discourses around a reactionary social project. Among those reduced within that project... are women and travellers.\(^{407}\)

As though to correct a lingering unease with the results of the Carr production, the Abbey produced a second Medea two years later: the iconic Shaw-Warner production of 2000. This time the play was a straight translation of Euripides by Kenneth McLeish and Frederick Raphael. Their idiom was contemporary, as were the production’s visual cues and music: Medea (Fiona Shaw) and Jason (Patrick O’Kane) wore modern dress, and a bizarre soundtrack of country-western tunes and melancholy New Age Irish-language melodies were sprinkled throughout the scenes. The music and an occasional line of dialogue in Irish intimated the production’s intended geography, but while the production stressed its modernity, it took few pains to specify an exact location.

The set, designed by Tom Pye, juxtaposed a shallow wading pool center stage with a sinister grate lit from below stage left: the children’s playspace versus the underground dungeon where Medea will eventually take their lives. It also featured a long glass corridor at the back of the stage, put to chilling use when, after being hauled offstage, one of Medea’s sons tries to escape his mother’s murderous clutches; the

audience watches him search desperately for an escape from the sealed passage before
Medea drags him back out of view. The overall effect was described by one critic as
“modern, hellish... an industrial bunker of breeze-blocks and sheet glass,”\textsuperscript{408} and by
another as a “domestic killing fields of a set.”\textsuperscript{409}

The programme notes by John Banville and John Dillon carefully explicated the
original context of Euripides’ play and his terrifying but ultimately human presentation of
Medea:

Medea is emphatically not a nice person. But, on the other
hand, she is not a monster either--otherwise this would be a
mere melodrama, and not the great tragedy which it is. She is
a loving mother, who is driven to commit a dreadful crime
against her children by an overpowering sense of injured
pride, in response to callous rejection by a man whom she
deeply loved and for whom she had sacrificed everything.\textsuperscript{410}

Both the programme note and the production seem if not to tug on the audience’s
heartstrings, at least to suggest that the emotions that animate the protagonist are, in some
sense, universal. In production, most of the characters entered the performance space
through the audience, augmenting the impression that the spectators were somehow
complicit in the gory events.

Shaw’s and Warner’s Medea strove to illustrate its relevance to the present not
through analogy to current sociopolitical events or to debates in the national press, but
rather through an unrelenting insistence that each individual member of the audience
recognize the worst of himself or herself on stage. Frankly, had Shaw’s performance as
Medea been any less formidable, any less able to draw the audience in, the production

\textsuperscript{408} Kate Bassett, “Accolades are in order.” Daily Telegraph, 8 June 2000. Abbey Theatre archive.
\textsuperscript{410} John Dillon, Medea: “From witch to intellectual.” Abbey Theatre programme. Also contains John
Banville’s “Medea, or the Ambiguities.” Abbey Theatre archive.
would likely have foundered. Even with her performance, the production drew some criticism for “confusion,”411 for its “lack of perspective... too much unfocused emoting altogether” and for a lack of coherence,412 communication difficulties which might perhaps have been alleviated had the play been operating in reference to a specific contemporary event or concern. Nevertheless, the Abbey’s 2000 production of Medea achieved widespread critical acclaim, for its careful translation, its boldly-designed set and contemporary costumes, and for Fiona Shaw’s outstanding performance in the lead role. This production of Greek tragedy was Ben Barnes’s first in his role as the Abbey’s Artistic Director; it would remain the standard by which any others would be measured throughout his four-year tenure. The disastrous denouement of Barnes’s directorate—the debacle of the Abbey Theatre Centenary—and the National Theatre’s remarkable rise from its ashes, in part via successful adaptations of ancient Greek and Irish literature, will be the subject of my fifth and final chapter.

CHAPTER 5

“IF NOT FOR INSPIRATION, THEN
AT LEAST FOR A SENSE OF LOCATION”:

ANCIENT GREEK AND IRISH ADAPTATIONS

AT THE ABBEY AND THE GATE, 2004-PRESENT

How many Antigones could the Irish theatre put up with?

--Seamus Heaney,
epilogue to The Burial at Thebes

abbeonehundred: Primordial Chaos

The 2004 centenary of the founding of the Abbey Theatre was envisioned and promoted as a brilliant yearlong commemoration of the theatre’s contributions to Irish and European culture and identity, paying homage to its hallowed playwrights like Yeats and Synge, celebrating the vibrant diversity of subsequent generations of writers and actors, and proudly displaying the debuts of its contemporary talents. In the ringing words of Artistic Director Ben Barnes’s introduction to the “abbeonehundred” program, “2004 is the year in which Ireland and the world will celebrate the theatrical heritage that created the Abbey repertoire of Irish classic plays and gave a voice to a people.”

Unfortunately, as the events of the theatrical season unfolded, a widening series of controversies and scandals made such optimistic predictions appear first naïve, then downright ludicrous. By the end of the year the Abbey was 1.85 million euro in debt and

\[413\] abbeonehundred, 3.
both the executive and the board were in shambles, facing the possibility of a government
takeover by the Ministry of Arts, Sports, and Tourism.

This chapter will provide a brief synopsis of the decline and collapse of the
centenary celebration, as such context is essential for a discussion of the plays produced
over the course of the year. In keeping with the theme of this dissertation, this discussion
will focus on the selection, production, and reception of Seamus Heaney’s *Burial at
Thebes* (a version of Sophocles’ *Antigone*) and Yeats’ *On Baile’s Strand*, juxtaposing
these productions with two other Irish (but non-Abbey) theatrical versions of Greek
tragedy and Irish epic from 2004, *The Making of Antigone Ryan* and *fireface: the
Cuchulain plays*. I will argue that the reason for the Abbey productions’ relative lack of
critical and commercial success is that neither the scripts nor the direction adequately
evoked the connection between the time-hallowed plots of the original texts and the
contemporary Irish and/or world events that could have rendered them relevant and
challenging to centenary audiences, a connection that I will term “dual temporality.” The
non-Abbey plays, by contrast, catered to sophisticated and cosmopolitan theatre-goers
who relish a certain degree of formal and linguistic experimentalism and who expect
adaptations of myth and legend in Irish theatre to illuminate, even if obliquely,
contemporary social and political issues; these plays did successfully negotiate the
balance between an ancient setting and a contemporary one.

This chapter will conclude discussion of the centenary by arguing that while the
Abbey failed to fully capitalize on the debate-provoking potential of its versions of Greek
tragedy and Irish legend, it seemed to succeed in doing so within another sub-genre that
featured prominently in Dublin theatre in 2004: plays about the history of the Abbey and
about famous Irish playwrights. This chapter will suggest that such plays exhibit a number of the same features that make Greek tragedy and Irish legend attractive to contemporary Irish playwrights, the most important of which is the ability to simultaneously evoke two temporal periods, one in the distant past and one in the present.

This chapter will also examine five Greek and Irish adaptations which have been produced at the Gate and the Abbey since the dust of the centenary celebrations settled: Vincent Woods’s *A Cry from Heaven* (June-July 2005) and Paul Mercier’s *Homeland* at the Abbey (January 2006), Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer* at the Gate (February-March 2006), and Conall Morrison’s *The Bacchae of Baghdad* and the related Peacock production of Nicholas Kelly’s *The Grown-Ups* at the Abbey. Taken together, these plays illustrate contemporary Irish playwrights’ ongoing interest in adapting ancient Greek and Irish literature and the culmination of the sophisticated range of adaptation and production strategies that evolved at both the Gate and the Abbey over the course of the twentieth century.

**The Centenary Debacle**

The decade preceding the centenary had begun well for the Abbey. Between 1994 and 1997 the Abbey’s Outreach initiatives had succeeded in attracting new audiences to the theatre through collaboration with community, youth, and senior citizens’ groups. A series of mentoring programs and professional workshops encouraged and fostered the contributions of new playwrights, with special attempts to redress the under-representation of female authors, whose scripts previously represented only about 15% of the total received and produced by the Abbey. A cooperative agreement with the Samuel

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Beckett Link Centre at Trinity College encouraged theatre practitioners from the Abbey to host lectures and workshops for the students in the B.A. and M. Phil. degree courses in Theatre Studies, and allowed students the opportunity to observe firsthand the Abbey’s processes of script selection and production. Under the stewardship of general manager Martin Fahy and chairman of the board of directors James Hickey, Patrick Mason’s tenure as Artistic Director had demonstrated that it was possible to run the theatre at only a mild deficit--or even a small profit, as in 1997 and 1998.\footnote{Irish Theatre Magazine [henceforth ITM] 5:22, 20.} Karin McCully describes the climate of optimism that prevailed at the Abbey in these years, noting that the National Theatre was evolving in

\[\ldots\text{directions which as ever reflect the traditions of a rich and complex repertoire, but which pay heed more directly than ever before to the emergence of new voices, new influences and the new desires of a society in the eye of the storm of change. In many very real ways, there is the inspirational feeling in the Abbey at the moment that the vision of the theatre’s founders is more sharply in focus now than perhaps at any other time this century.}\footnote{McCully, 28.} \]

Fintan O’Toole similarly stated his intuition that the history of Irish theatre was coming full circle at the end of the Abbey’s turbulent first century: “… It strikes me that anyone looking at the theatre in Ireland in the 1990s would find more similarities with the theatre of Synge than they would have done even a decade earlier.”\footnote{O’Toole, “Irish Theatre: The State of the Art,” in Jordan (2000), 47.} Both McCully and O’Toole cite in support of these claims the fascination of late twentieth century Irish playwrights with lyrical and experimental language and with non-naturalistic theatre techniques, along with their highly sophisticated understanding and portrayal of what
O’Toole describes as the “angular rather than direct” relationship between Irish theatre and Irish society.

One can hardly imagine a better position for the Abbey Theatre in the years leading up to its centenary celebration. Yet from 1999 onwards, the successful leadership triumvirate was gradually replaced; Patrick Mason’s contract expired and Ben Barnes replaced him in 2000, Eithne Healy replaced James Hickey as board chairperson in 2001, and the following year Brian Jackson assumed the post of general manager after Martin Fahy’s retirement. The Abbey’s financial position grew increasingly more precarious until in 2003 an 8% cut in the nation’s overall budget for the arts led to a 15% decrease in the Abbey’s grant from the Arts Council, contributing to the Abbey’s 2003 operating deficit of over €800,000. Combined with its running deficit of €780,000, this meant that the National Theatre entered its centenary year already more than €1.5 million in the red.418

The directorate had additional reasons for unease. Ben Barnes’ tenure as artistic director had been marred from its very beginning by the Irish media’s vociferously expressed doubts about his abilities. Obviously smarting from the attacks in a 2001 interview, Barnes bemoaned the “truly appalling” state of theatre criticism, and responded with wounded defensiveness when asked why some in the media had labeled him a “safe pair of hands”:

> It certainly is not meant to be a compliment and is a product of lazy, myopic, and sometimes vindictive journalism from people that I do not know and have never met. It goes something like this: the best that can be said about Ben Barnes is that he is a safe pair of hands and that his career has been built on staging boring revivals and the plays of Bernard Farrell and John B. Keane… I think that what I have

done and continue to do gives a lie to that lazy categorization but ultimately, while I might be mildly irritated, I care little and lose no sleep over the ill-thought-out and selective ruminations of a few faceless journalists.419

In the same interview, Barnes spoke frankly about giving the Abbey personnel “quite a shock” after assuming the artistic directorship, by wanting to be highly involved in promotion as well as artistic direction: “They [the administrative staff of the Abbey] were used to a culture of non-interference by the Artistic Director.”420 The financial woes of Barnes’ subsequent years did nothing to rehabilitate his reputation in the eyes of the media, nor in the eyes of his colleagues, whom Barnes occasionally treated in a surprisingly cavalier fashion.421 In a caustic reply to Irish Theatre Magazine’s request that theatre practitioners envision an appropriate centenary celebration, with no spatial, temporal, or financial constraints, playwright Enda Walsh suggested that the reins of the National Theatre be turned over to Donal O’Kelly and a resurrected Samuel Beckett, and that Aer Lingus provide “free travel to see these productions from anywhere in the world to anyone who can complete the sentence, ‘Ben Barnes was the wrong man for the job because…’”422

Given such foreboding circumstances, the most prudent move that the Abbey directorate could have made was to take a fiscally conservative approach to the centenary celebrations, working within a rigorous budget and choosing plays that would generate a guaranteed revenue (or at least would not risk a whopping loss). However, as Karen

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419 Barnes, interview with Martin Drury, in Chambers et al, 13, 15.
420 Ibid, 10.
421 Later points of conflict arose when Barnes dissolved Abbey’s Associate Directorship, which he himself had instituted, informing all of the participating directors by letter that their services would no longer be required (cf. “Abbey Axes Associates,” ITM 4:18) and when the contents of a letter written to heads of various theatre organizations in Canada and Australia, roundly criticizing his Abbey colleagues, became public (Irish Times).
422 ITM 4:18, 31-2.
Fricker notes, the abbeyonehundred schedule was apparently decided upon before (or rather without) determining who would pay for it:

…the board and executive then put the theatre at exponentially greater risk by formulating and green-lighting the Abbeyonehundred centenary programme despite the fact that the extra funding necessary to deliver Abbeyonehundred was not secured at the time of the programme announcement (and indeed, it is understood, was never secured in full). 423

Furthermore, the choice of plays gave rise to a certain degree of perplexity—not to mention some highly colored commentary—on the part of theatre critics, who wondered how the admittedly eclectic selection was supposed to represent a coherent celebration of the Abbey’s century-long history.

The central event of the summer theatrical season, for instance, was *The Shaughraun*, a 19th century melodrama by Dion Boucicault. Given that the career of this flamboyant Irish playwright predated the founding of the Abbey Theatre, that Yeats repeatedly expressed a lofty disdain for Boucicault’s work, and that the 19th century melodrama as a genre typified many of the negative aspects of theatrical representations of Irishness—the “buffoonery and easy sentiment”--that Yeats and Gregory founded the Abbey to protest, this play seemed somewhat out of context in the centenary celebrations. 424 Moreover, the melodrama’s peasant costumes and set and its Riverdance-inspired choreography prompted accusations that the Abbey directorate was pandering to the tastes of summertime tourists rather than adhering to the lofty goals and

423 Ibid., 21.
424 In an exasperated 1901 editorial in the ILT’s journal *Samhain*, for example, Yeats implored would-be playwrights to stop sending him “imitations of Boucicault, who has no relation to literature.” In the Abbey Theatre’s program for *The Shaughraun*, Chris Morash noted that “the gulf between Boucicault’s work and Yeats’ original aims for the Abbey should not be underestimated... Boucicault was the enemy, the epitome of everything the Irish Literary Theatre was not”—in his aesthetics, his mass appeal, his “easy sentimentality,” even in his commercial success. Boucicault’s play also opened in 1874, predating the founding of the Abbey by 30 years, and premiered in New York rather than Dublin.
artistic vision of the theatre’s founders. If filling the house was the directorate’s intent, it succeeded. *The Shaughraun* was, ironically, the centenary year’s only significant box office success, and in fact was brought back to the Abbey mainstage during the Christmas season.

The rest of the program, however, failed to attain such popular acclaim, and moreover set forth what can only be described as an inchoate vision of the Abbey’s history. The centenary schedule called for a division of the calendar year into four sections, each celebrating a particular aspect of the Abbey’s legacy and its vision of the future. The year opened with a section entitled “The Abbey and Europe,” featuring Heaney’s adaptation of *Antigone* and Tom Murphy’s translation of Chekov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. It also included dramatic performances by three European companies (Polish, Hungarian, and Slovenian), and two dance presentations (by American and Belgian troupes) in conjunction with the International Dance Festival Ireland.

Leaving aside the debatable designation of Chekov’s play (let alone Mark Morris’s dance troupe) as European, the obvious question is why the Abbey directorate would choose to begin a year celebrating Ireland’s National Theatre with a selection of performances which are generally continental in origin and were performed by non-Irish companies. In the directorate’s defense, I should note that over the course of the five months that “The Abbey and Europe” productions were running, the Abbey also produced four plays by Irish authors, under a second rubric, “The Abbey and New Writing”.

These plays, however, were given secondary billing both in the centenary program book and at the Abbey itself, as they were produced on the Peacock stage, while

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425 These plays were Paula Meehan’s *The Wolf of Winter*, Peter Sheridan’s *Finders Keepers*, Stuart Carolan’s *Defender of the Faith*, and Eugene O’Brien’s *Savoy*. “New writing” does not signify “new writers,” as each of these playwrights had previously written well-received plays.
all of “The Abbey and Europe” performances took place upon the Abbey main stage.

“The Abbey and New Writing” was also described in the program as an initiative running throughout the centenary year, from January to December, when in fact four out of the five plays that fell under this heading had already been performed by May 2004, and the final one, Paul Mercier’s *Smokescreen*, was slated for performance in December but canceled due to the Abbey’s disastrous finances.

Furthermore, in what may be the culminating oddity, the beginning of the 2004 centenary celebrations did not correspond to that of the calendar year. Brian Friel’s *Aristocrats*, which opened at the Abbey in November 2003, ran all the way through the 24th of January. The centenary booklet gave *Aristocrats* a slightly sheepish nod (“abbeyonehundred gets underway with twenty-five performances in January of Brian Friel’s haunting and evocative play…”)[426] but left it outside the framework in which the other centenary plays were situated. Thus the opening segment of 2004 celebration neither highlighted the classic Abbey repertoire nor provided the most favorable showcasing of the “new writing” of Ireland’s contemporary playwrights. More damningly, it suggested an underlying lack of advance planning and coherent organization on the part of the directorate.

In the second section of the centenary program, “Summer at the Abbey” (May-September), the lucrative *Shaughraun* counterbalanced the financial drain of *Playboy of the Western World* directed by Barnes, which toured both Ireland and the U.S., losing an estimated €500,000 in the process. One scathing review of *Playboy* described it as a “production that oozes unconvincing familiarity with the text, obscures the talent of its

[426] abbeyonehundred, 12.
cast, and rushes a classic of Irish theatre in determined pursuit of a market”; it seems the market remained elusive. This section also included Colm Toibín’s *Beauty in a Broken Place*, and the directorate’s one stroke of collective genius: the contemporaneous runs of *The Shaughraun* at the Abbey and Stewart Parker’s *Heavenly Bodies* at the Peacock, to which I will return in the next section.

Finally, under the rubric “The Abbey and Ireland” (September-November), the Abbey produced eight plays together with ten script readings, all eighteen performed over the course of the Dublin Theatre Festival. The script readings were each chosen to represent one decade of the Abbey’s century—a combination of established classics, revivals of forgotten pieces, and popular contemporary scripts, unfortunately with no accompanying explanation in the program of why the directorate felt they best embodied the theatrical spirit of those decades.

The eight staged plays included Frank McGuinness’s *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* on the mainstage, and Marina Carr’s *Portia Coughlin* at the Peacock. Carr’s play alternated with a set of three one-acts directed by Conall Morrison: the eerie, enigmatic *Dandy Dolls* by playwright George Fitzmaurice—a script Yeats rejected in 1913—together with Yeats’s *Purgatory* and J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*, actually performed in Irish as *Chun na Farraige Síos*. Taken together, this is a dark, brooding series of plays, invoking various manifestations of violence (war, parricide, incest), fate, ghosts, and the haunting weight of the past—powerful productions,

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427 Peter Crawley, 12 Aug. review, ITM 4:20.
428 Scholars of Irish theatre history did provide such explanations, however, at a series of public lectures given in conjunction with the plays.
429 The other three full-length plays were Tom Murphy’s *The Gigli Concert*, Bernard Farrell’s *I Do Not Like Thee, Doctor Fell*, and the sole comedy, Lennox Robinson’s *Drama at Inish*.
430 Oddly, this fact was not mentioned in the *abbeyonehundred* program; possibly protests over the lack of any Irish-language theatre in the centenary schedule caused a subsequent change to the original plans to perform this play.
but ones whose portrayal of despair and doom fit uncomfortably with the notion of a gala celebration of the Abbey’s history and tradition and of its relationship to Ireland as a nation.

Why does the centenary program seem so at odds with the goals of the centenary?

Reporting on the third of a series of public debates sponsored by the Abbey over the course of the centenary year, Patrick Lonergan alluded to the ambivalence many feel about the theatre’s past. Yes, we’re proud of O’Casey and Synge—but we’re also frustrated with the endless revival of their plays in tourist-driven, “heritage” productions. We are vaguely embarrassed by the Theatre’s output from 1930 to 1970. And many commentators suggest that our focus on the Abbey’s role in Irish theatre has caused us to overlook other important theatres and movements.431

If Lonergan is correct to describe the centenary program as an “act of public memory—a statement of what we consider valuable, theatrically and socially, right now,”432 then it is small wonder that the lack of coherence in the Abbey’s act of public memory drew critical fire and inspired public apathy. The repeated emphasis on the Abbey’s ties to Europe, its international tours, and its promotion of new writing suggest that those who planned the National Theatre centenary were themselves deeply ambivalent about the Abbey’s past and its role in Irish history, to the point of wishing to bypass that history altogether and reach a century further back, to Boucicault.

Undoubtedly the Abbey directorate also wanted to bypass the more recent history that they had been instrumental in creating, as the denouement of the centenary year revealed a staggering loss of €1.85 million. Barnes, Jackson, and the entire board of directors resigned in the wake of the scandals, clearing the way for a radical restructuring

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431 ITM 4:19, 10.
432 Ibid, 11.
of the theatre’s finances and corporate governance structures at the behest of John O’Donoghue, the Minister of Arts, Sports, and Tourism, and under the aegis of the Abbey’s new artistic director, Fiach MacConghail.

**Myth and Terror: Antigone at the Abbey Centenary**

The centenary program makes a startling number of references to magic, myth, fantasy and the supernatural. It applauds the “haunting” power of Friel’s *Aristocrats* and Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*; extols the “vibrant, fantastical world” of Meehan’s fairy tale *The Wolf of Winter* and the terrifying intensity of the dreamworld of Yeats’ *Purgatory*; it highlights Murphy’s re-writing of the myth of Dr. Faustus in *The Gigli Concert* and touts *Smokescreen*, the cancelled play by Mercier, as “a journey into a world where nothing is what it seems… a challenging work of magic, mystery, and mischief.” The program calls Fitzmaurice’s *The Dandy Dolls* “a dark fantasy about artifice and obsession” populated by “grotesque characters… malevolent dolls and trickster hags,” and describes Carr’s *Portia Coughlin* as “haunted by visions” of the dead, and “burdened by her family’s dark past.” It also included, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, one version of Greek tragedy, Seamus Heaney’s *Burial at Thebes* (after Sophocles’ *Antigone*), and one version of Irish legend, Yeats’ *On Baile’s Strand*.

There is vast difference in prioritization evident in the billing of these two plays. Heaney’s play had a month-long run on the Abbey mainstage and was performed by a professional cast, while Yeats’ was scheduled for a single performance by an amateur cast as part of the Abbey’s “birthday celebration” on December 27, and is barely mentioned in the program. Heaney’s play, on the other hand, was promoted as a world
premiere by the Nobel prize-winning poet, and directed and designed by the internationally acclaimed Lorraine Pintal and Carl Filion of Quebec.

A performance of *Antigone* at the Abbey was also historic for a number of other reasons. Surprisingly, given the scores of adaptations and translations over the course of the century, the play had never seen a mainstage production by the National Theatre: a translation by Lady Gregory’s son Robert was actually slated for performance at the Abbey in 1907 but fatefuly replaced at the last minute by Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, while Yeats’ attempts at a version of the tragedy were never completed. However in 1984, “the year of the Antigones,” three Irish poets, Brendan Kennelly, Tom Paulin, and Aidan Mathews, all created adaptations of Sophocles’ play. Paulin’s play, entitled *The Riot Act*, was performed in Derry and on tour by Field Day, Mathews’ at the Project Arts Center in Dublin, and Kennelly’s at the Peacock (though not till 1986)—an Abbey production, but not on the mainstage.\(^{433}\)

All three of these *Antigone* adaptations use Sophocles’ play as a vehicle to reflect upon very specific contemporary Irish social and political issues. In the political climate in the Republic that year, which saw the passage of the controversial Criminal Justice Bill (increasing the powers of the Irish police and limiting the rights of suspects), with liberal opinion still lamenting the 1983 defeat of a referendum to legalize abortion and fearing the impending defeat of a referendum on divorce (1985), Mathews and Kennelly had constructed their versions of *Antigone* as meditations on the coercive powers of Church and State. While in Kennelly’s play the political resonances are subtler, Mathews’ version is openly provocative, calling for a reading of the Criminal Justice Bill after

\(^{433}\) The former were both staged in 1984. Kennelly’s play, though completed in July 1984, was not staged until almost two years later (Murray, 128).
Creon’s speech in Act One and during the subsequent intermission. Both plays lament the violence and suffering created by fanaticism and intransigence, alluding to recent political events in Ireland as dire examples of such. Paulin’s play does likewise, but his focus is upon politics in Northern Ireland, with Creon’s speeches rendered in the caricatured idiom of hardline Unionist politicians. Unfortunately, in his desire to condemn Creon’s obduracy, Paulin reduces Creon’s stature as a counterbalance to Antigone, robbing the play of much of its original complexity.434

Christopher Murray, exploring the divergent themes and preoccupations of these playwrights, privileges Mathews’s adaptation in accordance with his own conviction that “a translation of Antigone may be considered as theatrically successful only insofar as it bends the original towards an illumination of contemporary experience.”435 Mathews, Murray argues, creates the version that is most radical, most experimental, and most clearly relevant to contemporary politics, and therefore the most powerful theatrical experience. I would take Murray’s evaluation a step further, and suggest that the success of Mathews’ play and a number of other Irish adaptations of Greek drama is attributable in large part to their compelling navigation of dual temporality. In these plays’ simultaneous evocation of ancient Greece and of the contemporary world, the time-honored philosophical and dramatic traditions of the former lend gravitas and stature to the dilemmas and debates of the latter, or demonstrate ironically the latter’s lack of such

434 This is the reading put forth by a number of critics including, for example, Marianne McDonald in “The Irish and Greek Tragedy,” from McDonald and Walton, 54. Seamus Deane points out in the same anthology that “Part of the problem in relation to Northern Ireland is that the state is not felt to have any right on its side at all,” and therefore “there is no question of seeing the Northern Irish problem as one in which the injustices are evenly distributed” (154)–a view which he notes has “a withering effect on the complexity” of the play (152-3).
profundity. Mathews’ text (for example) achieved the necessary equilibrium; the Abbey’s production of Heaney’s play, unfortunately, fell short.

That Heaney intended *The Burial at Thebes* to illuminate current political debates is made clear in the author’s epilogue. In his description of the play’s evolution, Heaney indicated his initial reluctance to accept the Abbey’s invitation to translate it for the centenary. In addition to the above versions, Heaney notes, Irish playwright Conall Morrison was touring an adaptation that used the play to reflect on the injustices of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (the action of Morrison’s play took place against a backdrop of screens showing footage of, for instance, Palestinian teenagers throwing rocks at Israeli tanks). Reflecting upon these and other translations, Heaney wondered, “How many *Antigones* could the Irish theatre put up with?”

His decision that Irish theatre could stand at least one more stemmed, he explains, from a combination of poetic and political inspiration. Heaney began from the flash of insight that the rhythm and intensity of the eighteenth-century Irish poem *Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoghaire* (*The Lament for Art O’Leary*) could appropriately render Antigone’s passionate opening lines. He also explains his conviction that the Creon’s intransigence was being repeated (much less poetically) in the Bush administration’s “you’re either with us or against us” rhetoric regarding the so-called war on terror, especially the American president’s declaration that those members of the world community who did not support America’s war effort in Iraq were thereby taking the terrorists’ part. The unfolding of these world events amounted in Heaney’s opinion to “a meaningful political context for a new translation.”

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436 Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes*, 75.
437 Ibid, 76.
In some respects, this seems a masterstroke—the catastrophic events of September 11th as the analogue to the destructive siege of Thebes; the passage of the “Patriot Act” evincing the Bush administration’s privileging of state “security” over basic human rights and civil liberties; the ineffectiveness of American and international anti-war demonstrations highlighting the administration’s inflexibility in the face of conscientious protest. But how clearly does this meaningful political context come across in Heaney’s text? Louis Lentin’s April 7th review of the Abbey production deplores what he sees as a complete lack of present-day political reference: “Any questions on the absolute power of the state; state versus morality? Any relationship to current abysmal debacles? No? Well, that’s it then.” For Lentin, Heaney’s text and the production’s inept direction combined to “shamefully reduc[e] this great, clamorous, reverberative tragedy to an avoidable ‘local row,’ a family spat,” devoid of both classical grandeur and contemporary import.438

Lentin’s condemnation of the text seems not to take into account that Heaney refers to his invitation from the Abbey as one of translation, not of adaptation, and secondly that within these parameters his text does provide subtle references to the subtext of current American political rhetoric. In Creon’s first speech, redolent with self-congratulatory patriotism, he exhorts the Chorus: “Solidarity, friends, / Is what we need. The whole crew must close ranks. / The safety of our state depends on it./ Our trust. Our friendships. Our security…” (16). Antigone refers to her sentence as a “death penalty” (30), and accuses the chorus of being “so afraid to sound unpatriotic” that they refuse to admit their secret approval of her actions (32).

438 ITM 4:19, 49-50.
However, such references are few and far between. Creon’s repeated suspicion of the corruptive potential of money (“There’s always money lurking / and I never underestimate the lure of money… Money brings down leaders, / Warps minds and generally corrupts / people and institutions,” 19, 22) and his obsessive suspicions of bribery (“You can’t, friend, have your palm greased and expect / to get away clean,” 22) distance him from clear analogy to the American president, and the familial conflicts (between Antigone and Ismene, Antigone and Creon, and Creon and Haemon) strain the analogy still further.

Unfortunately, although Heaney’s stated intention was to refract the original text towards an illumination of contemporary politics, the script seemed to work at cross-purposes with Pintal’s direction and Filion’s design. The Abbey production video shows a stark grey set, massive concrete slabs providing long platforms at different heights upon which Creon, Haemon, and the messenger delivered most of their lines; to change platforms the actors availed themselves of an elaborate system of ladders and drawbridges. These acrobatics looked in performance like the scampering of hamsters through a maze—symbolically appropriate for the quandary in which Creon traps himself, but unintentionally comedic during what should have been the production’s gravest and most suspenseful moments.

Pintal also made the surprising choice to return the dead Antigone to the stage just before the final curtain fell: the corpse was slowly lowered from the rafters, still hanging from its improvised linen noose, and it dangled center stage for a long minute while the other characters and audience contemplated the grisly spectacle of death in silence. Since the Greek dramatic tradition generally requires deaths to occur offstage, and provides
ample textual framework to inspire the audience’s imagination of such scenes, the inclusion of this final visual image seemed gratuitous and unnecessary. In fact I would argue that revealing Antigone’s corpse actually detracted from the pathos evoked by Sophocles’ description of the discovery of her suicide, the vision of which is so heartrending that Haemon

...turned
The sword on himself and buried the blade half-way
In his own side. And as he was collapsing
His arms still cling to the girl and blood came spurting...
Out of his mouth all over her white cheek...
That was the kiss he gave his bride to be (68).

The mechanical return of Antigone’s physical body to the stage was a crude reminder that what the audience was witnessing was not a tragedy, but the theatrical production of a tragedy; as such it failed to communicate the playwright’s conviction that this action was both symbolically real and presently relevant.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Dublin: The Making of Antigone Ryan and fire face

Given Heaney’s question regarding the number of Antigones Irish theatre could reasonably be expected to handle, it seems ironic that still another version of Sophocles’ play appeared in Dublin later that year—and this one navigated its two temporal frames in innovative fashion. The Making of Antigone Ryan by Martin Murphy was produced at the Project Arts Center in October as part of an educational theatre initiative, with a target audience of secondary school students. This adaptation parallels the story of Antigone and that of Jo Ryan, a teenager in a working class Dublin suburb who helps to extricate her brother from a conflict with local thugs by paying them off with money she steals from her running club’s treasury. Her uncle, the coach, kicks her out of the club when
she confesses to the theft, but she is able to articulate her keen sense of the injustice of this punishment when she is cast as Antigone in a school play. Jo’s death—she is hit by a car while trying to run from the police, who come to arrest her during the performance—provokes her fellow students to riot in protest.

In his review Colin Murphy noted that the audience (“from a school in one of Dublin’s more impoverished suburbs”\textsuperscript{439} ) responded with recognition and understanding to the characters’ frustrations and the untenable situations in which they are enmeshed. State-sponsored repression and injustice in the form of the police (who focus their efforts on apprehending Jo, instead of the local drug dealers whose conflict with her brother incited her actions), the threatening social conditions that leave Jo with no other perceived option than to break the law—these conflicts were clearly rendered in the play, in a contemporary context that spoke directly to its intended audience. They were, furthermore, presented in an experimental hybrid genre, stage action alternating with the projection of scenes from one character’s “docudrama” about the school play.

To juxtapose these two versions of Antigone, as different as they are in genre, tone, literary quality, and intended audience, is to emphasize their divergent approaches to dual temporality, the fundamental ingredient for a successful adaptation of Greek tragedy in contemporary Irish theatre. The lesson of \textit{The Burial at Thebes} is that literal contemporary translation, however poetic, simply does not function adequately in provoking an audience to reflect upon the play’s most pressing and enduring issues—even when world events provide an obvious corollary, and even when the translator himself begins with such events in mind. The visual impact of the production is of paramount

\textsuperscript{439} ITM 4:18, 70.
importance in communicating a convincing vision of these connections between contemporary events and ancient plotlines.

Irish playwrights have at their disposal a range of theatrical strategies for such communication--including the use of contemporary local settings and idioms, parallel or fragmented narratives, hybridized genres, and references to contemporary political and social issues. However, the production history of Irish Antigones suggests that the clearer and more specific such allusions are (for instance, the reading of the Criminal Justice Bill during Mathews’ play), the more the playwright challenges his audience to debate Antigone’s dilemma. Such a statement is not to attribute, of course, any lack of intellectual sophistication to the audiences of these plays. On the contrary, contemporary audiences of all ages and social strata seem to react enthusiastically to the opportunity for intellectual debate that a provocative version of Antigone provides. Moreover, critics and audiences alike respond favorably to formal and technical experimentation in its staging, especially the incorporation of elements from film or television as in Morrison’s and Murphy’s versions, when such experimentation serves a demonstrable end.

The production of Heaney’s translation, unfortunately, failed to provide a clear illumination of contemporary experience. Had his play not been a translation of Antigone, but simply a generic representation of a conflict between the individual and the state, perhaps it would have been more highly lauded by critics and audience alike for its undeniably accomplished poetry. However, when Greek tragedies are in question--Antigone’s especially--the stakes and the expectations seem to rise exponentially. The Abbey production simply failed to make clear the link that its author perceived between the classical heroine’s anguish and present-day politics. The Burial at Thebes was in fact
dogged by the same difficulties that the centenary itself failed to overcome: the heightened expectations of audiences and critics, an insufficiently communicated vision of history, and a failure to adequately situate a theatrical experience within the recognizable and complex context of contemporary Ireland and the larger world. This particular version of *Antigone* did not succeed, in the end, in communicating the author’s understanding of its dual temporality.

The Abbey had announced a small-scale, amateur performance of Yeats’s *On Baile’s Strand* in December, as previously noted—a rather faint-hearted celebration of one of the theatre’s earliest productions. But if the Abbey directorate had assumed that Yeats’s epic plays were too dated, too stylized, or too hackneyed to truly interest the public, a relatively unknown theatre company proved them mistaken. In March 2004 a troupe called nervoussystem took up the challenge perpetually posed by Yeats’s Cuchulain plays. Their eighty-minute performance of *At the Hawk’s Well, On Baile’s Strand, The Only Jealousy of Emer,* and *The Death of Cuchulain,* brilliantly abridged and edited by Jeffrey Gormly, was re-christened *fire face: The Cuchulain Plays.* The rapidity of the Republic of Ireland’s sea-change to economic success story and cosmopolitan “melting pot” fails to entirely efface the irony this well-crafted revival of Yeats’s heroic plays was staged, not at the theatre that Yeats himself helped to found, but rather in the upstairs lounge of the Dublin’s International Bar, with a host of boisterous tourists pledging Guinness toasts to St. Patrick in a multitude of languages on the ground floor.

The production, directed by Aiden Condron and designed by Vanessa D’Alton, featured actors in masks and cloaks moving with balletic grace and precision against a
simple black background. By employing the speech and movement conventions of Japanese Noh drama, the company paid homage to one of Yeats’ original sources of inspiration, while the venue itself harmonized well with the playwright’s conviction that these plays were best fit for small “drawing-room” audiences of between twenty and twenty-five. Reviewer Colin Murphy commented that the adaptation redeemed these plays—“oft-derided as over-wrought, ponderous, and mired in dubious Celtic mysticism”—by proving them “instead to be both enchanting and timely.”

That timeliness, Murphy argued, was especially apparent in the argument between Conchobar and Cuchulain in *On Baile’s Strand*—essentially a debate about the claims of state security versus individual liberty. In Yeats’s play, of course, Conchobar’s implacable insistence upon Cuchulain’s oath of loyalty is ultimately destructive of the very security he hopes to attain thereby, since it compels Cuchulain to fight and kill his own son, whose bravery and skill in battle could have made the army of Ulster invincible. The encroachment of the demands of “national security” upon the rights of the individual has been the subject of much controversy, especially since the events of September 11th; undoubtedly the Abbey could also have used its production as an oblique reflection upon current events, but its billing of *On Baile’s Strand* as a “birthday celebration” emphasized the play’s original 1904 context rather than any present “timeliness.”

**Making (and Adapting) Theatrical History: Parker, Toibín, and West**

While *The Burial at Thebes* and *On Baile’s Strand* represent lost opportunities for the Abbey to foreground crucial connections between their performances and contemporary events, several other centenary productions merit applause for their success.

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440 Colin Murphy, theatrical review of March 13th performance, in Irish Theatre Magazine (4:19).
in that regard, most notably those plays which took Irish theatre history itself as their subject. This section will briefly examine two Abbey centenary productions at the Peacock: *Heavenly Bodies*, Stewart Parker’s meditation on the dramatic career and theatrical legacy of Dion Boucicaut, and Colm Toibín’s *Beauty in a Broken Place*, whose protagonists include Yeats, Gregory, O’Casey and other formidable personalities from the Abbey’s formative years. These plays, I will argue, each employ a version of dual temporality that evokes simultaneously the trials and tribulations of a particular era in the early history of Irish theatre and similar challenges and debates in the present. Additionally, as with Heaney’s and Murphy’s versions of *Antigone*, I will juxtapose these productions with that of a similarly themed play performed in Dublin in 2004 outside the auspices of the Abbey: in this case, Michael West’s *Dublin by Lamplight*, a commedia dell’arte farce performed at the Project Arts Center.

Directed by the playwright’s niece Lynne Parker,\textsuperscript{441} an acclaimed director in her own right, Stewart Parker’s *Heavenly Bodies* ran at the Peacock Theatre for over a month in conjunction with the mainstage production of *The Shaughraun*. As noted above, Boucicault’s flamboyant personality and oeuvre stood in stark contrast to the theatrical aesthetic of the Abbey’s founders. Thus numerous theatre critics lambasted the Abbey’s decision to include *The Shaughraun* in the centenary celebrations, especially since the production ran at the height of the summer tourist season and featured some of Ireland’s flashiest and most commercialized cultural exports. Directed by John McColgan, whose credits include the wildly popular *Riverdance* spectacular, the Abbey’s production included elaborate step-dancing scenes, a keening sequence at an Irish wake with musical performances reminiscent of Irish new age singer Enya’s distinctive vocal style, and a set...

\textsuperscript{441} Parker directed the production of Kennelly’s *Trojan Women* discussed in Chapter 4.
replete with thatched cottages and picturesque ruins. However, instead of dismissing this production out of hand as mere marketable entertainment, the more perceptive theatre critics noted that this piece ran in tandem with Heavenly Bodies, \(^{442}\) counterbalancing the rollicking comedy and “easy sentiment” of the mainstage production with a brilliant, sardonic interrogation of Boucicault’s life and legacy.

In Parker’s play, a moribund Boucicault is forced to defend his life and career against Yeatsian accusations that he pandered to audiences outside of Ireland by exploiting derogatory Irish stereotypes, that his melodramas were all spectacle and no substance, and that his obsessive preoccupation with making (and squandering) enormous fortunes abroad caused him to pay superficial heed to the political and economic plight of 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century Ireland, especially during the years of the Famine. His accuser/alter ego, one Johnny Patterson, \(^{443}\) explains that Boucicault’s work has not merited his inclusion in the sphere of lasting fame where the “heavenly bodies” of the great poets and dramatists reside—instead, “Boucie” is bound for the ignominious limbo of second-rate, soon-to-be-forgotten hacks.

Deftly interweaving performances of scenes from Boucicault’s plays, imaginatively reconstructed events from the playwright’s life, and the fictional “trial” scenes, Heavenly Bodies portrays a complex Boucicault, at turns brilliant, venal, compassionate, and rapacious. Though the verdict that Heavenly Bodies pronounces upon Boucicault himself is ultimately inconclusive (as he ascends triumphantly into heaven in the last moments of the play he is doused with rain, while Patterson chortles

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\(^{442}\) Parker’s play was originally staged in Birmingham in 1986; the Peacock production was the Irish premiere.

\(^{443}\) Johnny Patterson was a 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century balladeer and circus performer whose career was roughly contemporary with Boucicault’s. Actor Owen Roe portrayed him in clown makeup, wearing a leprechaun costume.
delightedly), Parker’s work resoundingly demonstrates Boucicault’s towering impact on Irish theatre and his work’s enduring ability to inspire contemporary Irish playwrights.

Most importantly, in the context of the centenary *Heavenly Bodies* took on a particularly resonant dual temporality, evoking the conventions and strictures of Victorian era theatre as well as an eclectic postmodern aesthetic, and interrogating not only Boucicault’s past but also the Abbey’s future. Indeed, the questions posed by Parker’s play seemed at least as appropriate to the celebration of the Abbey centenary as they were to Boucicault’s career: is the main objective of the National Theatre to turn a profit, or to make a political and/or artistic statement? Is the primary intended audience Irish or international? What understanding of the national and theatrical heritage do the Abbey productions communicate, and how will contemporary and future audiences judge their legacy? Like Parker’s “Boucie,” the Abbey board and directorate sometimes seemed unprepared to articulate their answers, but their juxtaposition of *The Shaughraun* and *Heavenly Bodies* certainly helped to bring the questions into focus.

The second half of the Abbey’s summer season saw another mainstage/Peacock couplet, but one which was much less fortunate financially and critically: Synge’s classic *Playboy of the Western World* and Colm Toibín’s *Beauty in a Broken Place*. Toibín’s play explores the events leading up to the first Abbey production of Sean O’Casey’s riot-inducing *The Plough and the Stars*. A dramatization of this critical moment in the Abbey’s early history is doubtless an appropriate pair for *Playboy*, given the riots that Synge’s play also provoked—but having seen the inspired juxtaposition of *Heavenly Bodies* and *The Shaughraun*, one cannot help but wonder what sense of historical depth
Toibín’s play might have lent to a mainstage production of O’Casey’s had the Abbey decided to stage the two together.

Why they did not is open to debate. The uncomfortable proximity of the Plough production that had been the centerpiece of the summer 2003 season might have discouraged the directorate from repeating it, although recent Playboy productions[^444] did not have the same deterrent effect. Alternatively another piece from O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy (Juno and the Paycock or The Shadow of a Gunman) could have been selected in tandem with Toibín’s script. In the end the Abbey did mount a 2004 production of The Plough and the Stars, but in London, while Ben Barnes’s production and tour of Playboy garnered scathing reviews and a staggering net loss.

Thus Beauty in a Broken Place was paired awkwardly with Playboy, perhaps reminding audiences of the strains and fractures between many of the Abbey’s founding members, or of the uneasy administrative coalition headed by Barnes. Toibín clearly intended for his play to foreground this sort of dual temporality, and to serve as a meditation on the past and present challenges to theatre production in Ireland. In a description of the setting of Beauty in a Broken Place he notes that

> The world of the Abbey in these years [when O’Casey’s play was first staged] is fragile, beset by issues of class and race, beset also, and perhaps most significantly, by a rising caution and dullness, which will affect not only the theatre in years to come, but the entire nation. Some of these battles are being fought still.[^445]

Considering the caution and dullness that seem to have hindered Barnes’s production, one could argue that Toibín’s play was well served by the juxtaposition.

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[^444]: These include Garry Hynes and Druid Theatre Company’s tour of Playboy, which was staged in Dublin (although at the Gaiety, not the Abbey) in early 2004, and Niall Henry’s 2001 Peacock production.
[^445]: ITM 4:19, p. 38.
It must be said, however, that another theatrical adaptation of Irish theatre history—one which was not part of the abbeyonehundred programme or even affiliated with the Abbey—far exceeded *Beauty in a Broken Place* in terms of dramatic innovation. In late October and early November 2004, in the Project Arts Centre’s Space Upstairs, a group called the Corn Exchange performed *Dublin by Lamplight*, a manic commedia dell’arte version of the formative years of the Abbey Theatre, featuring characters loosely based on the theatre’s founders. Yeats becomes William Hayes, an aspiring poet who is writing a play about Cuchulain; Maud Gonne is Eva St. John, whose starring role in the play is threatened by her arrest for nationalist activism. Together with caricatured versions of Lady Gregory, Annie Horniman, and the Fay brothers, this motley crew attempt to found the “Irish National Theatre of Ireland.” Michael West’s script calls for the actors to alternately narrate and perform the actions they describe—not only their theatrical endeavors but their political ones as well—in rapid-fire changes of scene and character, complete with musical numbers and plays-within-the-play.

Brian Singleton, in his November 4th review, lauded the troupe’s extraordinarily versatile performances and the originality of the script. He also pointed out that the play’s ending, in which the ultimate success of the “Irish National Theatre of Ireland” venture is left in question, was startlingly apt in the context of the Abbey’s contemporary difficulties:

Corn Exchange’s production opened barely a month after the real-life National Theatre had gone through its own farcical trauma in a face-off between management and artist. Michael West’s imaginative treatment of a pseudo-historical moment in theatre could thus be read as a satire on the precarious position of the Abbey as it stands today. Will the incumbent director leave for Canada before the appointed
date? And will the director-designate rescue the national theatre project from implosion?\textsuperscript{446}

Like the other successful productions we have examined above, this play operates in two time frames contemporaneously, portraying the chaos and uncertainty of the Abbey’s early years and implying that the Abbey’s current administration is repeating the mistakes of the theatre’s founders.

**Picking up the Pieces: Post-centenary Productions**

The first play that the Abbey produced after Fiach MacConghail assumed the role of Artistic Director was Vincent Woods’ colossal re-telling of Deirdre’s and Naoise’s love, exile, and death: *A Cry from Heaven*, which premiered in June 2005. In the wake of the centenary’s scandals and failures, the Abbey staged yet another Irish epic--and this time, came surprisingly close to achieving the kind of theatrical experience at which the Gate had for so long excelled.

A previous play by Vincent Woods--*At the Black Pig’s Dyke*, which won the Stewart Parker Award for Drama in 1993--had played at the Gate in 1994 as part of Druid Lane Theatre Company’s two-year long world tour. Though not a dramatic adaptation of Irish epic per se, Woods’s play did incorporate a broad range of literary and theatrical allusions (from ancient Irish myth to medieval romance to the modern folk drama traditions of the Mummers and the Wrenboys) in its portrayal of ongoing cycles of violence and revenge in the North of Ireland. For instance, the play takes its name from a series of fortified earthworks that runs close to the Northern border; as high as 20 feet and as wide as 30 in places, these massive mounds form “a sort of Irish Hadrian’s Wall”

\textsuperscript{446} ITM, 5:22, 64.
separating the North from the South. Though in fact the fortifications are man-made and date back to the Irish Iron Age, Irish legend recounts that a gigantic enchanted black pig (sometimes identified with the black boar that killed Diarmuid on Ben Bulben) threw up the earthworks while burrowing an underground tunnel. Woods’s play, though set in the 20th century, metaphorically links sectarian violence with the image of the frantic and furious black pig, trapped underground at the border.

In *A Cry from Heaven* Woods meditates in a similar vein upon the roots of sectarian conflict. The play opens on a hopeful note: Fergus has returned home from his exile in Connaught, and King Conor, at a Samhain gathering of the Red Branch soldiers, hails this opportunity for reuniting the province of Ulster:

> We gather every Samhain and we mark  
> The death of darkness, the victory of light:  
> The night when past and present meet  
> And stretch new skin on future day.  
> A time to make amends, to scar old wounds...  
> Tonight, his exile over,  
> Fergus returns to us from Connaught--  
> a flame come back from darkness:  
> My uncle and my father home.  
> Now let the Red Branch flower again,  
> Now let division heal and one strong limb  
> Be whole and healthy.  
> Long may it endure. (3)

Conor’s mother, the wily, pitiless Ness, seconds these pacific intentions: “With joy we gather here tonight, / For the sake of Ulster and the start of a new day... May the past be past and buried, / Made fertile ground for future peace” (3-4). Fergus announces in

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448 Woods has come under fire from republicans in the North for this play, which represents the murderous persecution of Protestants (and Catholics who marry them) in a border community in the Republic of Ireland. In fact at a production of this play in Derry a group of local actors actually marched onto the stage just before the final curtain, in order to enact a variant ending; this unexpected action of protest alarmed the Druid Lane actors, who feared an outbreak of violence (c.f. for example Ian Kilroy, “Breathing new life into the legend,” Irish Examiner, June 3, 2005, from the Abbey Theatre archive).
response that he has “swallowed pride and passion” and potential revenge for Conor’s usurpation of the throne, choosing instead to stand beside the king, to “Help scar the wounded past / And see no knife will agitate that wound again” (4-5).

The assembly continues with a ritualistic battle between the Bull of Day and the Bull of Night: “two men in bull costumes, the hides of bulls covering part of their naked bodies, the bull heads complete with horns,” their bodies painted white and black respectively. Conor impulsively intervenes in the spectacle, killing the black bull (8), but the dismay of the dumbfounded spectators at his rash act soon gives way to terror at the peal of an unearthly scream--that of Deirdre while still in the womb. Cathach the Druid prophesies

This cry tells siegeful towns and rafters burning,
Old women running from the sear of heat;
It brings a scurry plague of yellow vermin,
To raid the spilling entrails in the street.

It brings the clash of steel and stench of battle,
Betrayal, and a vulture shrouded-sky;
The rivers stained with shit and clot of bodies,
A thousand years of Ulster in that cry.

Great forests burned to clear more room for killing,
Swift pike and eel pick clean the drifting dead;
The red branch ripped like bone from tender socket,
A King brought down, all youth and mercy fled.

A thousand years of Northern history in an eerie fetal scream? Like At the Black Pig’s Dyke, this play’s grisly lyricism camouflages a disturbing tendency on the part of this playwright to divorce his interrogation of sectarian conflict in the North from a pragmatic analysis of the history, economics, and politics of colonization, and to explain it instead as the result of atavistic animosities dating back millennia, always lingering balefully below the surface of one’s consciousness or seething ferociously to the surface.
In Woods’s defense, however, pragmatic analysis and gripping drama are not easily reconcilable goals, and *A Cry from Heaven* (more overtly than Woods’s previous play) opens up a debate about the nature of free will and destiny that counters the assumptions implicit in this vision of history. It is possible, in fact, that Woods stages this ancient example of Ultonian conflict precisely to provoke a radical revision of those assumptions.

The most thoughtful characters in Woods’s play repeatedly question the others’ conceptions of destiny and fate. When Ness and Cathach urge that Deirdre be strangled at birth, Fergus protests against killing the newborn, suggesting that the fate prophesied is unavoidable (“We cannot commit an evil act / To change the course of destiny,” 15). After Deirdre’s and Naoise’s escape to Scotland, however, Deirdre’s father Felim blames himself for the fulfillment of the prophecy, since he abandoned his daughter to Conor: “The gods did this / Because I turned my back on life. / I should have taken Deirdre in my arms, / Reared her as the daughter that she is ... / And none of this would happen” (63). By the end of the first half of the play (the third of five acts) Fergus recognizes the potentially disastrous effects of Conor’s rage, but avers that those can be avoided:

No joy now from wishing acts undone.
They met each other and they’re gone.
The future’s here before us, look at it;
A raving mind that must be calmed
Before the tide of vengeance washes in. (63)

Each character, the play suggests, bears some responsibility for the lovers’ escape. Conor blames Cathach for not foreseeing Deirdre’s elopement with Naoise. Fergus tells Conor (“aimed at Ness”) that his unjust treatment of Naoise at his mother’s command caused the disaster. Ness and Conor accuse Leabharcham of bringing the lovers together. Conor is clearly unwilling to overcome his ferocious longing for a grisly revenge: “I’ll
kill him: I’ll cut off his hands, / Put out his eyes / With his own thumbs, / So beyond the grave / He will be blind / And never see her” (62). It is his mother Ness, however, who secretly urges him on, manipulating his jealous rage to settle her own private score against Deirdre, whom she resents for usurping Conor’s love.

Fergus tries once again to broker a peace settlement when Conor’s thirst for revenge has been turned upon his own people. Conor refuses to admit the high price of his desire to destroy Naoise and reclaim Deirdre, despite Fergus’s detailed denunciation:

    The price all Ulster pays;
    The fire lit by vengeance burns still,
    There’s hardly one who hasn’t felt its singe;
    Each house where rumor had them sleep
    Now lies in ashes;
    Each pair of hands that might have offered help
    Or food or nothing but what mind imagined
    Shackled now;
    Their loyal friends made guilty, division
    Forged and strengthened on this maddened anvil...

Fergus urges Conor to forgive the lovers and heal the breach; if not, he warns, Conor’s own choices, his own actions, will bring about the prophecy of Ulster’s destruction:

    Let this war on them continue
    And [Ulster’s] borders will shrink back
    Until you’re circled round with no way out,
    With all that Cathach saw that Samhain night
    Made real--by you and not by Deirdre (68-9).

Woods’s play also recalls the ancient Irish traditions of the sovereignty goddess, suggesting that Deirdre stands as a symbol of the province, her body a territory to be possessed and her love a validation of kingship that Conor cannot do without. Ulster is described with images of the female body; when Naoise’s brothers stage a mock bullfight, Deirdre urges them to “Fight for Ulster! Fight for me!” (64). The brothers’
discussion of the greatest beauty that they have ever witnessed moves seamlessly from people (their mother’s smile, Naoise) to place (their home and hunting grounds in Ulster). When Deirdre sadly tells them that because of her captivity she knows “only the sky of it!” the brothers reassure her that she will see its beauties upon their return, inevitable since “[Naoise’s] heart is there.” Deirdre retorts, “Naoise’s heart is me,” but soon confronts Naoise, who reassures her: “My place is where you are” (65-67).

Yet a sovereignty goddess cannot confer sovereignty of a territory she does not inhabit, and Deirdre eventually expresses a desire to return to Ulster so that she may exercise power over others. Faced with the hardships of manual labor in exile, Deirdre petulantly exclaims, “If I were Queen in Ulster I’d not be fixed to this-- / I’d have slaves to do it. / How can you see me so reduced? / If you were a man / You’d take me back, / Face Conor down, / I know that he’d give in to me” (75). Naoise cautions, “If you knew my love of Ulster / You’d not taunt me to go back” (76), but Deirdre is unmoved: “Still you jabber ‘Ulster’ / Though in exile... / Would you not fight for me, / Make me your Kingdom, / Would you not shed your blood / To write my name?” (78)

Tempted by Fergus’s offer of peace and forgiveness, the exiles return; the brothers are betrayed and killed and Fergus swears to avenge his besmirched honor. But Woods adds to the ending of the tale as recited in the Táin: when Conor returns from the battle, hands covered with the brothers’ blood, Deirdre offers herself to him in resignation: “Take me, Conor; / This is the body you have waited for. / Its soul is fled.” Although the offer initially seems to appease Conor, his desire for violent revenge is checked only for a moment before being appallingly depicted onstage: “Conor advances upwards towards Deirdre, wiping his bloody hands on his clothes. Stands before her,
touches her cheek tenderly, stares at her, then suddenly hits her hard across the face, knocks her down, rapes her” (102).

Woods suggests that Deirdre has an ulterior motive for her apparent resignation: she is carrying Naoise’s child, and wishes to make Conor believe it is his so that she can bring it to term. But like her father before her, Deirdre abandons her child at birth: “How could I give you love / And not hate his absence / And hate you?” (107)

Immediately after giving birth she throws herself from the battlements of Eamhain Macha, her body breaking to pieces on the rocks below (108). Conor offers to protect Leabharcham and the new life that could symbolize the rebirth of the province: “If he’s mine, he’ll live; / As you will live / And be a nurse to Ulster” (109), but when Ness announces her intention of judging whether the baby more resembles Conor or Naoise, Leabharcham strangles the newborn as act of mercy: “Better this life be sacrificed by me, / These learning lungs be stilled by hands that love / Than choked to silence by a hateful claw.” (110)

The play ends with Conor’s collapse in grief and Ness’s realization of the hollowness of her revenge as Felim carries bloodied corpse of Deirdre back onto the stage: “My heart should soar. / This sight so long now / Longed for... but a lifetime’s span too late” (111-2). The final speech, Leabharcham’s lament for the dead, contains a plea for unity in grief (“Give single cry, all Ulster, to this passing...”) as well as a sense of utter despair at the ultimate victory of death, revenge, and darkness, symbolized on stage by the re-entry of the Bulls of Night and Day, now weary and blood-spattered: “They face each other, embrace, kiss; the Bull of Night kills the Bull of Day. They lie down

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449 In the Abbey production, Conor responded to Deirdre’s unexpected submission with astonishment (and enthusiasm), but without the violence the text calls for.
together” (114). As with Conor’s momentary tenderness before his savage rape of Deirdre, the Bulls’ embrace raises fleeting hope that some balance, some peace can be achieved between the two warring elements, only to crush that hope with a depiction of ensuing violence and an ironic tableau of unity in death.

The elaborate barbarity of Frenchman Olivier Py’s direction of this production—the actors in whiteface, the set and costumes murky black, with flashes of silver, scarlet and gold, the passionate sex and even more passionate violence—took Abbey audiences completely aback. The critics were either impressed or disgusted, but none came away indifferent; Brian Lavery of the International Herald Tribune described the production as “a bold attempt to reinvigorate the theatre” and lauded the adventurous theatrics;450 Luke Clancy of the Evening Herald described the styles as “gloomy in the extreme, and at its worst, rather adolescent in its gothy self-seriousness.”451 The production’s graphically simulated sex scenes sparked protests; a number of audience members including a Jesuit priest sent open letters to the Abbey demanding that those scenes be edited, which generated even more publicity for the play (including an article in the Sunday Tribune entitled “Priest wants to stop sex in the Abbey”452).

Having seen the Abbey archive of this performance, I concur with a certain amount of this criticism. Py’s directorial choices constantly veered between intriguing and inexplicable—as, for instance, the constant drenching of the actors in simulated rainfall. Deirdre and Naoise struggled to maintain the tragic lyricism of Woods’s script as they strode soggily about the stage, occasionally slipping in puddles. Conor is

rendered ridiculous through the addition of a Freudian running joke: with every scene, his sword increases in size until in the last act, it is bigger than he is, and he is unable to lift it and struggles to push and drag it around the stage. And while Woods’s script calls for three deliberately juxtaposed sex scenes--one illustrating the powerful fascination Ness exerts upon Fergus, one the tender passion between Deirdre and Naoise, and one (the rape scene described above) the brutality of Conor against the woman he professes to love--Py muddies this clear contrast. He inserts sex scenes between Fergus and Ness in which both seem rather bored, and elides Conor’s ferocious aggression; he also adjoins a sequence of sexual posturing by Ness over Deirdre’s corpse, as though the near-incestuous relationship of Ness and Conor and her consequent resentment of Deirdre were not adequately clear from the text.

The overall effect is a flattening of Woods’s multifaceted characters. Ness becomes unrelentingly evil, Conor pathetically weak and susceptible to his mother’s manipulation, the passionate lovers pallid and unconvincing. Despite these flaws, however, the production did communicate to some critics a sense of terrible grandeur; many of these predictably commented on its similarities to Greek tragedy, but also noted the play’s contemporary overtones, Irish and international. Ian Kilroy noted that “throughout, Ulster moves towards peace, only to teeter again towards civil war. It’s a work that resonates with the present”; he also noted the irony of staging Irish heroic epic at a moment when the Irish government had decided to move forward with a controversial plan to run the M3 motorway right by the ancient seat of the High Kings,

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the Hill of Tara. Colin Murphy, conversely, understood the play in global terms:

“This is a play about war. As an audience, we are now familiar with war, as mediated by the media and used as leverage in politics...” Differences of interpretation notwithstanding, Woods’s ancient epic adaptation was undoubtedly perceived as relevant to current events—not the least of which was the rebirth of the National Theatre from its centenary ashes.

**Rivalry Renewed: Homeland at the Abbey and Faith Healer at the Gate**

The Abbey followed *A Cry From Heaven* with Paul Mercier’s *Homeland*, a version of the ancient Irish tale of Oisin’s journey to and return from the enchanted Land of Youth. In this tale from the Finn cycle, the beautiful Niamh of the Golden Hair convinces Finn’s son Oisin to leave the Fianna and accompany her to Tir na nÓg; after three years of joyful existence, Oisin announces his intention of returning to Ireland to visit his comrades. Niamh reluctantly agrees, on the condition that he not descend from his magical steed. But upon his arrival Oisin learns that three hundred years have passed, and the Fianna are no more; instead, Ireland is a Christian country, its powerful warrior heroes passed into legend. Forgetful of Naoimh’s injunction, Oisin climbs down from his horse; instantly he ages three hundred years, his warrior prowess gone, his stature shrunken to the measly proportions of the day.

Unlike *A Cry from Heaven*, Mercier’s play does not foreground the epic tale. His play is set in contemporary Dublin, a free adaptation in which the underlying story serves to structure the action and to provide ironic commentary on the city’s recent economic

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transformation. Mercier’s previous foray into the territory of Irish epic, a blackly hilarious re-writing of *Diarmuid and Grainne* (2001) also situated its action in contemporary Ireland, starring Finn and Diarmuid as unscrupulous members of a seedy organized crime syndicate, and Grainne as the mob boss’s aging starlet daughter. This play was produced by the theatre company Mercier founded, Passion Machine; the Abbey commissioned his *Down the Line* (2000) which was produced at the Peacock, and his *Smokescreen* was slated for production during abbeyonehundred but abandoned after the centenary’s financial woes became apparent. *Homeland* finally provided Mercier a well-deserved mainstage production.

Where the characters and locales of ancient legend retained their names in *Diarmuid and Grainne*, *Homeland* places more distance between itself and its epic precursor. The protagonist of this play is the suggestively named Gerry Newman, a “communications consultant” who specializes in helping white-collar criminals charm juries into acquittal. His own shady real estate deals necessitate a life in exile on the continent, but at the request of a new client he returns to Ireland for what he envisions as a brief visit. His wife forbids him to leave the airport lest he be recognized, but at the end of their session his grateful client insists on taking him out to a nightclub, where he meets Niamh, a blonde-wigged prostitute. She plies him with drink and steals his wallet when he blacks out.

With no credit cards, no money, and no return ticket, Newman wanders around Dublin till a group of young gang members mug him; he is sheltered (and brainwashed) by members of “The Church of Christ,” who put his communications skills to pious evangelical use. While making his missionary rounds in the housing development his
crooked deals made possible, he re-discovers Niamh and helps her flee from her pimp/boyfriend, who has threatened to kill her because she has contracted HIV. Newman then offers to help her fulfill her dying wish: to find her daughter, born when Niamh was only sixteen, and whom she gave up for adoption. After a touching scene of failed reunion, where Niamh converses with her daughter without revealing her identity, Niamh and Newman live together on the squalid Dublin streets till Niamh dies of AIDS and Newman finally returns to the continent.

The Abbey provided this play with a production much in keeping with Mercier’s preferred style for *Diarmuid and Grainne*: swift, ironic dialogue, vibrant sets and colorful special effects, and physical comedy. But for all the laughter that it provoked, *Homeland* also staged a serious condemnation of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland--its political corruption, its widening gap between rich and poor, its insufficient attention to endemic problems like urban crime, AIDS, homelessness.

The critical response to this play also added an intriguing new term to the critical analysis of Irish epic plays and of the theatrical expression of a “sense of place.” Fintan O’Toole’s review of the play opens,

> Just as it was a century ago, Ireland is a country in search of a national myth. The old epics of nationalist self-assertion and Catholic triumphalism have worn out, and have yet to be replaced. And just as it did a century ago, the theatre is turning to the ancient Irish epics, if not quite for inspiration, then at least for a sense of location.\footnote{456 “Reviews: Homeland—Abbey Theatre, Dublin,” Irish Times, February 4, 2006.}

In previous chapters I have tried to tease out the long history of the notion of a “sense of place” in Irish theatre, and I believe O’Toole’s term, a “sense of location,” represents yet another watershed moment. There are significant differences between these two phrases,
differences that can perhaps best be defined with reference to the ubiquitous technology of the 21st century. A global positioning system, for example, can tell you your location; it cannot define your place.

Location is essentially a mathematical term; it implies coordinates, latitude and longitude, the position a particular point in space, decontextualized except in its measured distance from other points. Place, on the other hand, implies dinnsheanchas, context, surroundings, history, the sort of human connection to geography implicit in the designation of home as “my place”. O’Toole’s neologism is keenly appropriate to an analysis of the changes in national identity wrought first by Ireland’s unprecedented economic prosperity and its newfound influence on the world stage, and later, by the uneven distribution of that prosperity, the perceived decline of traditional social structures and institutions, and the demographic changes resulting from immigration by EU nationals, asylum seekers and refugees from around the globe. In 1977 Seamus Heaney postulated a “country of the mind” arising from a shared sense of place. Almost three decades later, Mercier’s ironically-entitled Homeland stands as a warning of the dangers of reducing a sense of place to one of mere location.

The month after Homeland premiered at the Abbey, the Gate revived Brian Friel’s Faith Healer, a play which I have argued is a crucial theatrical interrogation of identity and the sense of place. The Gate's production starred Hollywood actor Ralph Fiennes as Frank, with Cherry Jones and Ian McDiarmuid as Grace and Teddy. The director, Jonathan Kent, was "best known for ravishingly chic productions of the classics," including several adaptations of Greek tragedy at London's Almeida Theatre, but like

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his predecessors opted to follow Friel's prescription for the set. The draw of Fiennes in the lead role was incredible, far surpassing any of the Gate's previous box office records--tickets for all the performances in the two-month-long run were sold out long before the play even opened.

Taken to task by disgruntled Dubliners who were unable to obtain tickets the Gate’s Artistic Director Michael Colgan suggested an international conspiracy was at fault:

On Irish television’s main evening news [Colgan] blamed the sellout on “the Ralph Fiennes fan club” from Belgium, Holland, and Iceland, with its “greedy” tactic of buying tickets to several nights in a row.\footnote{Colgan’s comments were in fact oddly representative of the national reaction to this performance: a combination of giddy excitement at the presence of a Hollywood star on the Gate stage and an anxious suspicion that the “Irishness” of Friel’s play had thereby been compromised. International critics raved about the production; according to the New York Times, Fiennes's performance at the Booth Theatre "paint[ed] a portrait of the artist as dreamer and destroyer that feels both as old as folklore and so fresh that it might be painted in wet blood... directed with poetic starkness."\footnote{Ben Brantley, “Ralph Fiennes, Portraying the Gaunt Genius in ‘Faith Healer.’” New York Times, May 5, 2005.} But in the Dublin reviews, caution and even skepticism prevailed. Describing \textit{Faith Healer} as “one of Ireland’s finest pieces of modern drama,” Brian Lavery suggested that the “smooth excellence” of the production and of Fiennes’s performance prevented “the dark magic necessary to tap}
into the mesmerizing and transformative heart of the play.”

Irish Theatre Magazine prefaced Patrick Lonergan’s review of the production with the boast that “as celebrity looms over the production and marketing of Irish theatre, our critics refuse to be dazzled”; Lonergan concludes his praise for the production with a careful reminder that its power is “fundamentally due to the script: we’ve been seduced—not by Fiennes, and not by Frank, but by Friel.” (ITM’s refusal to be dazzled by Fiennes did not preclude their using a photo of Fiennes on the Gate stage as the cover image for that issue, nor the full-page black and white photo of him in costume that accompanies Lonergan’s review.)

Fear that international superstar Ralph Fiennes was more of a selling point for the play than was Irish dramatist Brian Friel and anger that other nationalities were crowding Irish men and women out of the theatre may seem to be momentary or superficial concerns. But they belie a deep underlying anxiety about whether a distinctive sense of Irishness can survive globalization, paradigm shifts in population demographics, and the economic roller coaster of the Celtic Tiger. In March 2005 the Irish Independent published a two-page spread entitled “Whatever happened to Irish Ireland?” that recounted the unexpected results of a recent Tourism Ireland survey: Ireland has fallen out of favor with British tourists because the Irish “have become too like them... [The Irish] are no longer foreign enough. We speak the same language and get drenched by the same rainclouds. We’ve lost our curiosity value.” This article sardonically bemoans the decline of the national Character-with-a-capital-C, listing as characteristics of contemporary Irishness “Traffic. Golf hotels. Everyday murders... Smoke-free pubs.

461 ITM, 6: 26, Spring 2006, 110.
Empowerment. Diets. Criminal Gangs..."—none, it should be noted, particularly unique to Ireland.\textsuperscript{463}

The content of Friel’s \textit{Faith Healer}–its characters’ anguished search for an understanding of who they really are, their contradictory narratives of memory, their ritualistic repetition of the names of “dying Welsh villages”\textsuperscript{464} “from Britain's Celtic fringe”\textsuperscript{465} speaks profoundly to these anxieties about the nation’s future and its citizens’ sense of identity. Frankly, it was to be expected that staging this particular play with a Hollywood superstar and a British director would trigger the acute sense of critical alarm displayed in the press, as well as a healthy amount of public suspicion that the national heritage was being looted to in a bid to please international spectators.

\textbf{“What this town needs is a good bacchanal”: The Bacchae of Baghdad and The Grown-ups}

During the second half of \textit{Faith Healer}’s run at the Gate, the Abbey produced a new version of Euripides’s \textit{Bacchae}, adapted and directed by Conall Morrison under the titled \textit{The Bacchae of Baghdad}. Taking their cue from the ingenious pairing of the mainstage production of \textit{The Shaughraun} and the Peacock’s \textit{Heavenly Bodies}, the Abbey also ran a new play by Nicholas Kelly in the smaller theatre: \textit{The Grown-ups}, story of the Bacchic intrusion of chaos and desire into a contemporary Dublin couple’s sterile, materialistic existence.

Morrison’s choice of title makes clear his desire to refract the controversies of the Iraq war through the lens of Euripides’s play. His chorus of women are dressed in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Friel, \textit{Faith Healer}. 12.
\item Roy Foster, "Faith Healer," Gate Theatre February 2006 production Programme Note.
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\end{footnotesize}
Middle Eastern garb; there were traces of African and Arabian accents in their sonorous speech and that of dreadlocked Dionysus Christopher Simpson. Robert O’Mahoney’s Pentheus, on the other hand, wore the uniform of a general in the American army and spoke with an American accent; his messengers looked like CIA spooks in black suits and dark sunglasses. The chorus’s makeshift shelters, improvised from the crumbling remains of bombed-out concrete buildings, lined the backdrop; the swift-footed chorus vaulted over and around the debris while Pentheus and his henchmen plowed through it, occasionally disoriented by the ubiquitous destruction.

The play’s contemporary analogy seemed apt in many respects: Pentheus in his contemptuous underestimation of the power of the new god clearly recalls the bungling architects of the American-led Iraq invasion, who completely failed to reckon with the internecine carnage that their toppling of Saddam Hussein would unleash. Moreover Pentheus’ unbending insistence upon the course of action that he has plotted for himself, despite the pleas and warnings of those around him, and his dogged assertion that he is the representative of justice, law, and order which he will maintain by whatever force necessary, bear a disturbing similarity to George Bush’s Iraq rhetoric. The most compelling of the play’s images, Agave’s lament for the son she and the other bacchantes have torn to pieces in their psychotic frenzy, is a sobering warning that the debacle may well end in a catastrophic defeat for the Iraqi people as well as for the American military.

In other respects, however, this play is a completely inappropriate vehicle for an illustration of this conflict. The presentation of a petulant, arrogant Pentheus suggests that the audience throw its sympathies to Dionysus--but it is actually Dionysus’ desire to avenge the outrage to his honor that sparks the gory brutality carried out by Agave and
the chorus. Neither Dionysus nor the women, therefore, serve as adequate representations of innocent Iraqis caught between the invasion and the insurgency. Morrison’s play actually implies (unintentionally, I hope) an identification of the inhabitants of Baghdad with the raging bloodlust of the Bacchantes. As a spectator, I found this implication at its most disturbing when, following the conclusion of Agave’s lament, the chorus members cover their bright costumes with dark burkas and wrap their heads in veils, thus inviting an association between any traditionally-dressed women in Iraq or Afghanistan and the dismembering fury of Euripides’ chorus. Morrison’s previous adaptation of Greek tragedy, his *Antigone*, seems to illustrate a sincere desire to rouse his audience to reflect upon the injustices of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the muddled analogies of his *Bacchae*, however, ultimately do the Iraqis a grave disservice.

Kelly’s play at the Peacock incorporates the theme of Dionysian revelry in a much more lighthearted manner. Reflecting upon the recent economic transformation of Dublin and the stress of keeping pace with the rat race, one character ruefully exclaims that a bit of bacchanalia is exactly what the city needs. Alan and Nicola are a twentysomething couple clawing their way up the socioeconomic ladder. He works at a trendy bar, she shops in all the right stores and worries that her teeth aren’t white enough. At first the only intrusion of the wild outside world into their antiseptic apartment, fronted with faux-Doric columns, is a tenacious tendril of ivy that has worked its way through the wall from the outside. But soon Dionysus himself arrives in the guise of fifty-year-old alcoholic Stephen, boyfriend to Alan’s estranged sister Amy.

The two couples are thrown together through a series of sinister coincidences: Amy is under police investigation, accused of violently attacking Scott, who is involved
with a series of shady dealings at Alan’s bar. Knowing that she is innocent, Stephen ferrets out clues to the real attacker, bemoaning all the while the “malaise” of “this splenetic city, with its heart wrapped in ice” (21) and proposing as remedy “the true bacchanal... a search for oneself” (41). Reluctantly drawn into what he perceives as Stephen’s mild lunacy, Alan is eventually forced to recognize the hollowness of his relationship with Nicola, the mediocrity of his existence, and the criminal corruption of his boss. But Alan’s attempts to extricate himself prove fruitless: he and Nicola move to a new apartment, but it looks exactly like the old; he continues in his job, salving his conscience with antidepressants; the irrepressible ivy works its way back through their walls. Stephen, too, breezes back in, having traded his rumpled suit for a Hawaiian shirt and sunhat, and announces his intention to whisk Amy off to Aruba. When he offers Alan a drink from his flask, Alan explodes:

   Alan: Oh, here we go again, the Great God bloody Bacchus?
   Stephen: The gods are dead, son. Or banished, at least.
   (Beat, to Amy.) So, to recap: we fly the coop, as I said, live like kings a while, limbo-dancing, tequila... and after that, well... (Thinks.) Well, we’ll burn that ... bridge when we come to her. A birth and a death, Amy. A resurrection.

His final words to Alan before their departure define true bacchanal as a stripping away of all the masks that people wear: “I don’t think the folks could take it” (80). Alan is unable to live without his masks, and the play closes with him smiling, “defeated,” and telling Nicola he thinks he’ll buy a car (82)--one more status symbol, one more encumbrance, one more futile attempt to buy happiness and tranquility in the new Dublin.

My survey of adaptations of Irish epic and Greek tragedy at the Abbey and the
Gate concludes with this play, the last to date. Given the flourishing of these types of plays especially at the Abbey over the past three years, however, I highly doubt that the historical trajectory I have tried to trace throughout this dissertation will come to an end here. My research in fact suggests that these adaptations will be an integral part of the repertoire of both theatres in the coming decades: Irish playwrights will continue to delve into this ancient source material as a meditation upon contemporary events in Ireland and around the globe, and Dublin’s two most important theatres will continue their search for innovative ways to stage and produce them. Although some critics have argued that the most enthralling aspect of heroic tales and ancient tragedies is their “timelessness,” their aura of eternity, I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter that adaptations of such works in contemporary Irish theatre are most compelling when they simultaneously evoke their ancient origins and their relevance to our time—a dual temporality that aims to provide the inhabitants of contemporary Ireland with a more intricate sense of location, and perhaps even with a more profound sense of place.
CONCLUSION

To write the story of the nation demands that we articulate that archaic ambivalence that informs modernity.
--Homi Bhabha, *Dissemination*

What ideas, what philosophies, what codes of ethics or aesthetics could possibly have transcended the barriers of time, language, geography, and culture that separate modern Ireland from the ancient Athenians or the Iron-Age Celts? How might a modern author presume to interpret, to re-narrate, to re-create the ancient myths and sagas that have survived, to adapt them to the tastes and the exigencies of the present? And why would the theatrical performance of such adaptations be of sustained--and commercially viable--interest to contemporary audiences, both Irish and international?

The historical scope of these questions may be daunting, and the ultimate sources of authorial inspiration and audience enjoyment problematic to pinpoint. Yet by focusing on the production history of these works at Dublin’s two main theatres, the Abbey and the Gate, this dissertation illuminates the evolution of the form and content of such adaptations over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries, and provides a thorough explanation of their function and their fascination.

While scholarly analyses of Irish theatre history have often centered upon the successes and failures of the Abbey Theatre, a surprisingly different historical narrative has emerged from this study. This narrative has shifted focus to the complex relationship between the Abbey and the Gate, positing their collegial but nevertheless intense rivalry as a driving force in both theatres’ programming decisions and production aesthetics.
This revision of accepted history is made possible in part by this study’s extensive survey of archival materials specifically related to the visual and technical aspects of production. The archival research permits another, fertile paradigm shift away from the standard critical focus upon to the words of the text, instead taking into account the ensemble of communicative strategies available to practitioners of the theatre: for instance, acting style and delivery, blocking, music, lighting, set and costume design.

**The Gate and the Abbey: Together at Last**

This dissertation demonstrates that from the Abbey’s opening night in 1904 through the Gate’s first season in 1928 and continuing through the two theatres’ most recent productions, adaptations of ancient Greek and Irish literature have formed a fundamental and strategic segment of each theatre’s repertoire. The intense professional rivalry between the two playhouses, and the fact that their repertoires do not consistently overlap in any other obvious respect, has made such productions a particularly useful public forum in which each theatre can stake its contrasting claims to artistic and aesthetic preeminence, and can strive to provoke debate about the nature of Irish identity and the role that the nation should play in the wider world. My dissertation likens this phenomenon to a territorial dispute: a struggle to establish a definitive claim to various authors, subjects, themes, and modes of production.

In the early years of this contest, a desire to confirm the validity of its assumption of the role of National Theatre motivated the Abbey, while the Gate craftily called into question the very idea that theatre can or should be somehow representative of the nation. Yet this research has demonstrated that despite their contrasting goals and ideals, the
relationships between the founders of these two theatres were characterized by mutual respect and guarded admiration, and that a complex nexus of friendship, kinship, and professional cooperation has linked the theatres’ personnel from the very beginning through the present day.

As noted above, analysis of the complex relationship between the two theatres provides an essential counterbalance to the numerous accounts of Irish theatrical history that focus disproportionate critical attention upon the accomplishments and failures of the Abbey, making scant (if any) reference to its major domestic rival. This dissertation demonstrates the vital, sophisticated, but generally overlooked contributions of the Gate to the evolution of modern Irish theatre, per se as well as in its determinative effects upon the Abbey’s repertoire and aesthetics. Just as MacLiammóir’s contemporaries acclaimed his “memorable barbarities” both Greek and Irish, and his elegant fusion of romantic ancient legend and satiric ultra-modern wit, as revolutionary new departures in Irish theatre, so this study reclaims the significance of his plays and his theatre, in aesthetic as well as textual terms.

The Page on the Stage

Detailed analysis of the scripts of these adaptations, combined with an examination of accounts of the audience’s response and of the critical reception as evidenced in newspaper and magazine articles and play reviews, has allowed me to propose a number of novel readings even of plays that have been previously subjected to extensive academic scrutiny; for example, extended comparison of the two plays clearly suggests that Yeats composed his Deirdre adaptation in direct response to the criticisms
leveled at his and George Moore’s version of *Grania*, obliging his new heroine to feign and then repudiate the former’s most criticized flaws. Furthermore, having scrutinized press clippings from both theatres’ archives at length, I have drawn detailed conclusions in this study about why these plays entranced or failed to appeal to their audiences, and have provided evidence of the near-ubiquitous comparisons in the critical reviews between the two theatres’ repertoires, and between their divergent aesthetic practices.

An amalgamation of textual analysis and close attention to the visual and aural aspects of production ultimately proved most fruitful in analyzing these plays. The Gate highlighted its sleek, stylish European urbanity not merely in its eclectic repertoire but also in its painstaking attention to visual detail, and in the technological sophistication of its production designs. Critical reviews from both archives have confirmed what archival photographs of the Abbey and Gate plays through the 1930s and early 1940s suggest: the Gate productions were visually intriguing, satisfying, even stunning, and made the Abbey’s look simplistic and amateurish by contrast.

Visual analysis of the Gate’s adaptations of ancient literature, furthermore, demonstrates MacLiammóir’s and Edwards’s success in directing their audiences’ attention to the fundamental contrast between the ancient and the modern, the stable and the evolving, the static and the dynamic—a contrast inherent to the very concept of adaptation. In visual terms, the display of such a contrast on stage could be as seemingly simple as a juxtaposition of straight lines and curves provided by the actors’ statuesque poses, by an architectural set or backdrop, by a carefully arranged grouping of props or colorful costumes, and so forth. Though Yeats also strove to attain “moments of

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466 I am greatly indebted for the following observations to Seamus Deane’s insightful comments during my dissertation defense.
picturesque stillness on stage,” one of the triumphs of the Gate’s founding fathers lay in their sophisticated alternation of the motionless artistic tableau with the sweeping vitality of movement and gesture. Their theory and practice of theatrical adaptation provided a provocative visual counterpoint to the problematics of sexuality, violence, individual vs. communal rights and responsibilities, etc. that were inscribed in the scripts themselves. These early Gate productions provide one of the subtlest articulations of the ideology of adaptation I have characterized as “dual temporality”—the contemporaneous foregrounding of both the antiquity of the plot and the modernity of its potential significance.

**Cuchulain and the Carnivalesque**

This study’s juxtaposition of contemporary theatrical adaptations of ancient Irish literature with those of Greek tragedy also prompted a foray into a segment of the Abbey repertoire that, to the best of my knowledge, has not previously been examined with any critical depth: the series of Irish-language holiday pantomimes featuring the heroes and heroines of ancient Irish legend, predominantly produced during the Abbey’s years in exile at the Queen’s Theatre. Examination of these unpublished scripts works led to two significant conclusions:

1) A paradigm shift from early Abbey audiences’ expectations that legendary Irish heroes would be presented according to strict codes of tragic nobility, the slapstick comedy of the pantomimes demonstrated that the Abbey could stage ancient Irish legend outside the conventions of tragedy, and that in fact ancient Irish epic possessed entertainment value as well as pedagogical and/or patriotic utility. Furthermore, dual
temporality provided a significant font of the productions’ humor: Cuchulain wanders
mystified through the streets of contemporary Dublin, Grainne longingly contemplates
life as a Hollywood actress, and various characters comment caustically on the
contemporary world, including the vagaries of the entertainment industry and the
continuing Abbey-Gate rivalry.

2) Additionally, the increasing frequency and complexity of the special effects
called for in the production notes for these scripts suggest that, given the extravagant,
carnivalesque nature of the genre, these pantomimes provided the Abbey with a sorely-
needed practical forum for experimentation with and implementation of more complex
production technology, necessitated by the Gate’s technical virtuosity. Such observations
recast the Blythe years (1941-67), generally dismissed by Irish theatre historians as staid
and uninteresting, as crucially important to the Abbey’s subsequent development.

**Contemporary Adaptations/Continuing Significance**

The majority of these conclusions arose from this study’s sustained attention to
the non-verbal, non-textual strategies of theatrical communication, combining textual
analysis with examination of archival photos, performance videos, and eyewitness
accounts of production. This focus confirms the utility of exploring such productions
through a performance studies framework, and provides a richer, more accurate
investigation into each theatre’s contributions to the development of modern Irish drama.

Comprehension of the historical trajectory of productions of these types of
adaptations leads to a more profound understanding of their continuing fascination. Thus
far in the twenty-first century, the Abbey has produced more adaptations of ancient Irish
and Greek literature than in any previous decade, even the 1980s and 90s, when the two theatres vied fiercely with each other in staging Antigones and Medeas. Furthermore, the Abbey seems to have taken a vital insight away from the lackluster staging of Seamus Heaney’s Burial at Thebes during the catastrophic centenary year: one of the essential ingredients for the popular success of such adaptations is the delicate navigation of their dual temporal frames, clearly rendered not only in the spoken words of the script but via a comprehensive combination of all the visual, aural, and technical strategies for theatrical communication—strategies which the Abbey and the Gate alternately invented, perfected, and provoked each other to develop.

**Adaptation and National Identity**

There remains worthy of mention a final facet of this dissertation’s contributions to the field: as implied by the previous paragraph, this study not only traces the evolution of theatrical adaptations of ancient literature throughout the 20th century, but also productively utilizes that framework to investigate a current and continuing historical phenomenon. A number of the theatrical works that this dissertation examines are sufficiently recent to comment upon the drastic changes in the social fabric of the nation since the onset of the Celtic Tiger. Hard upon the Tiger’s heels has come criticism of the greed and materialism that has accompanied the increased economic prosperity; this study illustrates why a number of contemporary Irish authors (Nicholas Kelly in The Grown-ups and Paul Mercier in Homeland, for instance), consider the plots and tropes of ancient Greek and Irish literature a fitting vehicle through which to explore the shifting
identities of those who have benefited from the economic boom as well as those whom it has marginalized.

The full repercussions, both positive and negative, of the Celtic Tiger remain to be seen, as does the ultimate extent to which it will necessitate a redefinition of both individual and national identity. Yet in many ways, the definition of adaptation used throughout this study--i.e. a re-creation of a previously existing plot or storyline, to be examined both as an autonomous whole and in its complex relationship to that which precedes it--suggests the potential utility of adaptations in periods of flux and instability. Adaptation reassures through its resemblance, but can also provoke critical reevaluation and/or redefinition through its difference.

Following Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, and Ernest Gellner, Homi Bhabha has eloquently argued that

\[ \text{[t]he problematic boundaries of modernity are enacted in [the] ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space. The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past. Historians transfixed on the event and origins of the nation never ask, and political theorists possessed of the ‘modern’ totalities of the nation... never pose, the awkward question of the disjunctive representation of the social, in this double-time of the nation.}^{467} \]

This dissertation suggests that one of the most profound attractions of adaptation is that it mirrors this dilemma of “ambivalent temporality”--of absolute and contemporaneous insistence upon both unquestionable antiquity and indubitable modernity--without necessarily falling into the “disjunctive representation of the social” against which Bhabha warns. As this research demonstrates, not all theatrical adaptations of ancient Greek and Irish literature navigate their two temporal frames with the same degree of

\[^{467} \text{Bhabha, 132-3.} \]
success, yet all of them have the potential to pose the “awkward question” that Bhabha’s historians and political theorists studiously avoid. And all have the potential to interrogate the ambiguities inherent in our binary constructs of modern and classical, of individual and universal, of real and represented. This study demonstrates that Yeats intuitively understood this potential, how MacLiammóir suavely exploited it, and why contemporary Irish authors continue to creatively and provocatively capitalize upon it.
APPENDIX

ANCIENT GREEK AND IRISH ADAPTATIONS BEFORE THE REVIVAL:

A BRIEF HISTORY

A survey of the long history of Irish theatre reveals a near-total dearth of adaptations either from Greek tragedy or from ancient Irish epic before the 20th century. Chris Morash’s lively account of four centuries of Irish theatre, while not constituting an exhaustive list of performances in Dublin, does suggest that before the Irish Revival audiences were much more likely to see Richard III and Robert Emmet on stage than Cuchulain or Clytemnestra. In fact, John Green and Gladys Clark’s survey of the theatrical seasons in Dublin from 1720-1745 lists only one ancient Greek tragedy in that twenty-five-year span: Sophocles’ Oedipus, King of Thebes in a translation by Dryden and Lee. This play was staged once in 1721, once in 1722, and twice in the summer of 1740 at the Smock Alley Theatre, and at the Aungier Street Theatre in March 1738.\textsuperscript{468} The advertisements for this latter command performance, given at the request of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, tout the rarity of a production of Oedipus in Dublin: “Not acted here these 20 years.”\textsuperscript{469}

Oedipus had in fact been acted in Dublin more recently, but not professionally, and not in English. The students of Rev. Thomas Sheridan, grandfather of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, had performed both Oedipus Rex and Euripides’ Hippolytus in ancient Greek in the early 1720s. Productions of ancient Greek drama in the original language

\textsuperscript{468} Greene and Clark, 438.
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid, 224.
were a popular educational exercise in Irish, English, and American universities in the
18th and 19th centuries. (In fact, in a 1931 BBC radio broadcast Yeats would explain that
his original inspiration to write his adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* was learning of a student
performance of the play at the University of Notre Dame, which he visited during a
lecture tour.\footnote{Younger, 35.})

Professional productions of Greek drama did not often occur in Dublin, however,
and productions of ancient Irish epic were non-existent, due predominantly to the fact
that the manuscripts containing them were rare, rarely studied, and even more rarely
understood. A study of Irish drama from the 17th to the 19th century does, however,
illuminate two theatrical trends which I would argue foreshadow the flourishing of Greek
and Irish tragedy in modern Irish drama: the Irish history play and the classical (Greco-
Roman) history play.

Early Irish dramatists drew upon a culture of poetic performance that ran from the
recitations of the Gaelic *filidh* through medieval liturgical drama and civic ceremony to
performances in Dublin Castle in the early years of the 17th century, according to
Morash.\footnote{Morash (2002) 3.} Their plays had to negotiate complex and shifting political allegiances, and
playwrights often turned to the heroic figures of the past in order to voice their own
aspirations for and conflicting sentiments about the Irish political situation. Thus James
Shirley’s 1639 play *St. Patrick for Ireland* attempts to reconcile Catholic and Protestant
differences in the figure of the saint, whose stage presentation combines his traditional
associations with Irish Catholicism and the Latin mass with the colonizing, evangelizing
features of a Protestant missionary—arguably a thinly veiled plea for harmony between
proponents of the two creeds at a time when Charles I’s grasp of royal power was weakening.472

Similarly, Katherine Philips’ 1663 translation of Corneille, Pompey, pays homage to both Charles II and his father in its depiction of the noble Roman senator, exiled and beheaded for his principles—yet Pompey’s exile stemmed from his protest against Caesar’s attempts to rule despotically, making him in some respects more suggestive of Cromwell. The prologue recited at the opening performance in the Smock Alley Theatre even proposes that the play be used as an instrument of reconciliation between the contemporary political factions, to “provide a forum in which ‘mighty Rivals’ can acknowledge both victory and defeat, and in which the audience can applaud both equally.”473

Subsequent Irish plays often spurned such complex allegory, opting to expound the lessons of Irish history more directly. John Michelburne’s Ireland Preserv’d (1705), set during the Seige of Derry, and Robert Ashton’s The Battle of Aughrim (1728) celebrate the Williamite victories,474 while Charles Shadwell’s Rotherick O’Connor, King of Connaught (1720) lauds the Norman invasion. As Helen Burke points out in Riotous Performances, Shadwell’s play has the express purpose of

…reinventing English hegemony in Ireland. By reminding his audience of the horrors of life under Gaelic rule and law, he suggests, he will teach them a better appreciation and acceptance of the present system of English government, and a deeper contempt for old Irish customs and laws.475

472 Ibid, 7-8.
473 Ibid, 24-5.
474 Ibid, 32-3.
475 Burke, 70.
Conversely, in William Philips’ *Hibernia Freed* (1722) the heroic protagonists are Irish noblemen who fight to repulse a ninth-century invasion of Ireland by a bloodthirsty Viking king.

The obvious political implications of *Hibernia Freed* help to explain why it was not performed at Dublin’s Smock Alley Theatre, given the close and mutually beneficial relations between Dublin theatres and Dublin Castle since the former’s inception.\(^{476}\) But the strict censorship of the early 18th century would gradually give way to make the stage a much more volatile forum. The emergence of the Irish antiquarian movement in the latter half of the 18th century coincided with burgeoning nationalist movements throughout Europe and in the U.S., and the theatre provided a public forum for patriotic debate.\(^{477}\) Tragedies drawn from ancient and medieval history focused and polarized this debate: Joseph Addison’s *Cato* celebrates the protagonist’s “patriotic” willingness to die rather than accept despotism,\(^{478}\) while at the opposite end of the spectrum, the eponymous hero of Nicholas Rowe’s *Tamerlane* is a thinly disguised William III, forced into attacking his enemy Bajazet by the latter’s incorrigible animalistic violence and bloodlust.\(^{479}\)

Towards the turn of the 18th century, changing population demographics, including increasing theatre attendance by a volubly patriotic middle class, the continuing political unrest provoked by the establishment of the Irish parliament and the rise of the Volunteers, and the perpetual difficulties of running a financially viable theatre made the staging of recognizably “Irish” plays a risky business. Tragedies drawn from Irish

\(^{476}\) Morash, 38-9.  
\(^{477}\) Ibid, 53.  
\(^{478}\) Ibid, 84.  
\(^{479}\) Burke, 39.
history were temporarily overshadowed in this period by sentimental comedies employing traditional Irish music and lavish depictions of Irish landscapes, in what Morash describes as a “newly popular mode of virtual tourism.” Gothic melodrama, opera, and pantomime constituted much of the rest of the programme offered at Dublin theatres in the first half of the 19th century.

John Banim’s *Damon and Pythias* (1821) is an important exception to the above trend, however. Like Philips’ Pompey and Addison’s Cato, Banim’s hero combats tyranny in the person of the despot Dionysus. As Morash points out, Damon’s rebuke of the corrupt senate which has conferred power upon Dionysus must have had special resonance with Dublin audiences resentful of the Irish Parliament’s approval of the 1801 Act of Union. This play proved to be the most popular of the 1821 season when it premiered—as much for the frisson of excitement created by the daring political analogy as for any literary merit Banim’s play may have had.

Even when productions were carefully selected with an eye to political neutrality, even when they were painstakingly planned to appeal to the widest possible audience, riots sometimes erupted. Dublin audiences were apparently determined to use the theatre as a forum for political debate, regardless of the content of the plays themselves. At the same time an American market for Irish plays was emerging, which viewed nationalist sentiments with much greater approbation than did its London counterpart, and which welcomed productions of such plays as James Sheridan Knowles’ *Brian*.

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480 Morash, 72.
481 Ibid, 84.
482 Ibid, 80.
Boroimhe (first produced in Belfast in 1811, in Dublin in 1821, and in New York in 1827), a glowing portrayal of the high king’s heroic battle against the invading Danes.

Dion Boucicault would take this audience by storm in the second half of the century, with brilliantly realized Irish melodramas like *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), *Arrahna-Pogue* (1864), and *The Shaughraun* (1874). Although the first play in this series makes scant reference to events in recent Irish history, the second is set during the immediate aftermath of the 1798 rebellion, while the action of the third takes place after the failed Fenian uprising of 1867 and features an escaped Fenian prisoner as hero. His most overtly political melodrama, *Robert Emmet* (1884), celebrates the heroism and death of the leader of the 1803 rebellion. Boucicault’s plays are clear attempts to sway public opinion in favor of the Irish nationalist cause; as Elizabeth Butler Cullingford notes, “after the failure of the Fenian rising, Boucicault understood that England’s strength permitted no practical challenge; he therefore chose to mount a theatrical challenge instead, using his power to move audiences as a political tool.” These plays were, furthermore, wildly popular in America and England as well as Ireland, winning their author fame and fortune previously unheard of.

Irish actor Hubert O’Grady and English entrepreneur J. W. Whitbread followed in Boucicault’s footsteps, penning popular, overtly political Irish melodramas. The former’s include *Eviction* (1879), *Emigration* (1880), *The Famine* (1886), and *The Fenian* (1888), while *Lord Edward, or ’98* (1894), *Theobald Wolfe Tone* (1898), *The Insurgent Chief*, and *The Ulster Hero* testify to the latter’s fascination with the 1798 rebellion.

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483 Morash, 85-6.
484 Cullingford, 27.
The above survey of three centuries of Irish theatre is, of course, far too brief to begin to do justice to the vibrancy and variety of Irish productions that were staged at venues throughout the city of Dublin, the rest of the country, and even further afield. It does, however, demonstrate the recurrence in Irish theatre of two interconnected phenomena. The first is a predilection for staging critical moments in Irish history, from the Viking invasion to the Norman Conquest, from the Williamite victories to the failed Fenian rebellions, in order to influence public opinion about more recent political conflicts in Ireland by analogy. The second striking feature of the above survey is the continuing interest in staging plays that feature watershed moments in classical history, like those depicted in *Pompey* and *Cato*. (I would also include *Damon and Pythias* in this group, for although the events depicted therein are fictitious, they are clearly based on the conflict between Cato and Caesar.) These plays are, essentially, meditations on empire, based on the defining events and conflicts of ancient Rome.

Although these plays formed a crucial part of a uniquely Irish repertoire, Yeats and the foremost Irish playwrights of the early years of the 20th century strove to distance themselves from this theatrical legacy, attempting to wipe the slate clean of all “misrepresentations” of Ireland. A significant part of this attempt involved turning to a new body of literary material for their productions—translations of medieval Irish literature and of ancient Greek tragedy. Yet despite their protestations that their work signified a definitive break from previous, flawed representations of Ireland and the Irish, the Revivalists’ staging of ancient Greek tragedy and Irish epic tragedy actually participated in the tradition of politically-motivated adaptations established by previous generations’ staging of ancient Roman and more recent Irish history. (Lady Gregory, in
particular, would return to the Irish history play at numerous moments during her career--
for instance, in *Dervorgilla, The White Cockade, Kincora*, and her famous collaborative
effort with Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan.*) The addition of Irish epic or Greek tragic
content to the Revivalists’ plays is, in the end, a less innovative contribution to the Irish
theatre than their verbal and visual representation of contemporary Ireland, poised just
beneath the veneer of ancient Ireland or ancient Greece.
ABBREVIATIONS

--Diarmuid agus an réalt, unattributed [Tomás Mac Anna?], 1948.
--Setanta agus an chú, Tarlach Ó hUid and Tomás Mac Anna, 1952.
--Aisling as Tír na nÓg, unattributed [Tomás Mac Anna?], 1964.
--Emer agus an laoch, unattributed [Tomás Mac Anna?], 1965-66.


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---“On the siting of doors and windows: aesthetics, ideology, and Irish stage design.” Richards 93-108.


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--“The Cure at Troy: Production Notes in No Particular Order.” McDonald and Walton, 171-180.


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*Diarmuid and Grainne* performance reviews:  

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In London:  
  --“A Distinguished Play.” *Daily Telegraph* [London], 30 Dec. 1931.  

By An Comhar Dramaíochta in Dublin:  

* The press cuttings from the Gate archive often lack complete publication information, especially authors’ names, but sometimes also titles. I have therefore grouped the performance reviews as they can be found in the archive itself—that is, under the heading of each individual performance, in chronological order according to publication date.
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* This collection contains archival materials from the late 1970s onwards; earlier collections are housed at the National Library of Ireland in Dublin.  I have listed the latter, together with all Abbey scripts and performance videos, in the general bibliography.


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