

“The root of all evil”: Frank McGuinness’ Translations of Greek Drama

Loredana Salis

Università di Sassari (<lsalis@uniss.it>)

Abstract:

Whether in political propaganda or in creative works the myths of ancient Greece have long attracted scholars, writers and audiences from Ireland. Over the past forty years, a wealth of adaptations of plays by Sophocles and Euripides has been produced, which brings back to life ancient tales of heroes and heroines, in settings at times distinctively local and contemporary, at times deliberately universal. Field Day’s contributions represent a typical instance of the former approach to the classics, while other Irish playwrights have used Greek myths to reflect upon questions that are not exclusively Irish. Their plays may have an Irish echo, and some are even set in Ireland, but their main preoccupation lies beyond geographical borders. Frank McGuinness belongs to this second group of playwrights. To date, he has reworked and staged five Greek plays with great audience and critical acclaim. This paper locates his translations of Sophocles and Euripides within the tradition of classical tragedy use in Ireland at the crossroads between the local and the global and at the search of what he calls “the root of all evil” with special attention to his *Oedipus* (2008) and *Helen* (2009).

Keywords: culture, Frank McGuinness, Greek drama, language, permanence of myth, translation

The classical tradition has largely inspired Irish literature and drama: whether in political propaganda or in creative works, scholars, writers and audiences from Ireland have often returned to the tropes, the grammar and the philosophy of the Greeks (Stanford [1976] 1984). Over the past forty years, a wealth of new versions of plays by Sophocles and Euripides has been produced, which brings back to life ancient tales of heroes and heroines, in settings at times distinctively local and contemporary, at times deliberately universal. Field Day’s contributions are exemplary of the former approach to the classics – e.g. Tom Paulin’s *The Riot Act* (1984) and *Seize the Fire* (1989), and Seamus Heaney’s first work of that kind, *The Cure at Troy* (1991) –, as

are Michael Longley's translations of Homer in which the poet speaks of his native North at times of uncontrollable blood thirst¹. Other Irish writers have used ancient myths to reflect upon questions that are not exclusively Irish: their works may have a 'local' echo, and some are even set in Ireland, but their main preoccupation lies with solitude (Edna O'Brien, *Iphigenia*, 2003), fragmentation of the self and of the family (Marina Carr, *By the Bog of Cats*, 1998; *Ariel*, 2002) (Salis 2009), memory, change and the environment (Paula Meehan, *Painting Rain*, 2009); human and aesthetic experience (Theo Dorgan, *Greek*, 2010).

One playwright who has significantly revisited Greek tragedy is Frank McGuinness: to date, he has adapted four plays² – five, if one considers Racine's *Phaedra* (2006) – and staged them in theatres around the world with great audience and critical acclaim. In an introduction to Carr's version of *Medea* he maintains that "playwrights have to be in the business of discovering fire, for without it there is no passion, no comfort, no terror, no light" (2003, 87-88). His words reveal as much of his politics of translation as they do of Marina Carr's. Accordingly, this paper locates McGuinness within the tradition of classical tragedy use in Ireland at the crossroads between the local and the global and in search of what he calls "the root of all evil" in his most recent Greek plays, *Oedipus* (2008) and *Helen* (2009).

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC) tells the story of the eponymous king of Thebes. When a terrible plague strikes the city, the elders walk to the royal palace and ask the help of their sovereign. Oedipus, who has defeated the Sphinx by solving her riddle, and has thus become their king, is determined to save his people. But the gods have spoken through the oracle: Laius, the former king, has been killed and Apollo now demands that his killers are punished. The search begins and it soon leads to the tragic realisation that Oedipus, the son of Laius and Jocasta, is the man who has killed his father and married his mother. Overwhelmed by the horror of these findings, Jocasta takes her life and Oedipus blinds himself. Creon becomes the new king of Thebes while Oedipus is taken away from the city and from his children. A chorus chants of his dreadful fate: death alone will grant him his final rest³.

Since Sophocles first staged his play, and owing to Aristotle's notion that it is 'the perfect' tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* has been reworked countless times. Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation at the start of the past century, perhaps more than any other reading of the myth, has contributed to shape our contemporary perception of it. Indeed, Freud's Oedipus complex revives in modern versions of a tragedy that speaks of parricide, incest, *hubris*, contingency, the limitations of human knowledge and the necessity of fate⁴. In Ireland, Sophocles' play was chosen by W.B. Yeats to promote his Irish cultural revival. In 1927, he produced a 'modern' version of *King Oedipus*, a play that follows the source in its plot but, whose protagonist evidently feels 'at home' in Ireland. Yeats strongly believed in the affinity between old Irish and Greek literatures, and a

year later he also translated *Oedipus at Colonus*⁵. Yeats' notion of tragedy and its place in the poet's ideal of a cultural transformation for Ireland through a National Theatre haunt the history of Irish theatre in the twentieth century: when Seamus Heaney was invited to write a version of *Antigone* to mark the Abbey Theatre's hundredth anniversary, his thought went back to Yeats and to other Irish playwrights who had reworked that play before him⁶. "How many Antigones could Irish theatre put up with?" wondered the Nobel Prize winner, who went on to write a beautifully poetic and evocative adaptation of *Antigone* entitled *The Burial at Thebes* (2004). Similarly, when a production of *Oedipus* by Frank McGuinness was announced, some may well have thought that Irish theatre had already had enough Oedipuses⁷. The playwright had actually seen a production of Yeats' *King Oedipus* in Dublin when he was a teenager (Higgins 2008) – but his adaptation tells a different story altogether.

Oedipus does not change the original plot but notably alters Sophocles' diction and turns it into something strikingly primitive and powerful. McGuinness shortens the play almost by half, strips the language bare, and he simplifies it to attain immediacy. There are no twists and turns, no long choral odes, descriptions or mythic accounts, mostly brief sentences uttered in a plain idiom that conveys a few simple but disquieting messages. The emotional impact is enormous. Oedipus loses his royal title in this version: though he remains the king of Thebes, he is firstly a man with his flaws and a sinner, at time presumptuous but also generous and sensitive to his people's suffering. The opening reveals a "man most hateful to the gods" (60) and a victim to their tricks: Oedipus is a character to sympathise with because, as he reminds us, he "had no wish to murder [his] father" (44).

The play begins with the protagonist's words:

My people, my friends, you come before me – *why?*
 You are begging, you are praying – *why?*
 The city, *why* is it sore with weeping?
Why is this whole city suffering?
 [...]
 Old man, I turn to you – *speak out*.
 I want to give you all the help I can.
 My heart's sore, for you are a black pity. (3, Emphasis added)

In Sophocles, the Theban king enters to address a group of suppliants gathered at the palace door:

My children, latest born of Cadmus old,
 Why sit ye here as suppliants, in your hands
 Branches of olive filleted with wool?
 What means this reek of incense everywhere
 And everywhere laments and litanies?

Children, it were not meet that I should learn
 From others, and am hither come, myself,
 I Oedipus [...] explain your mood and purport. Is it dread
 of ill that moves you or a boon ye crave?
 My zeal in your behalf ye cannot doubt;
 Ruthless indeed were I and obdurate
 If such petitioners as you I spurned. (ll. 1-13)

The *parodos* exemplifies McGuinness' use of the translated word: language is deliberately minimal and yet emphatic; by way of repetitions – my... my... you are... you are... the city... this whole city – it becomes direct and unequivocal. Oedipus' heart is "sore" (3) because "the city is sore with weeping" (3); the king suffers because his people suffer: "You feel your own pain [...] but mine is your own" (4). Sorrow, pain, and suffering afflict Thebes because "God is on fire – his fever is plague" (4, corresponding to Sophocles ll. 27-29: "armed with his blazing torch the God of Plague / hath swooped upon our city emptying the house of Cadmus"). McGuinness introduces the notion that "there is poison in this land / we feed on it, so we fester" (5), a significant diversion from Sophocles' lines: "King Phoebus bids us straitly extirpate / a fell pollution that infests the land" (ll. 96-98), rather echoing the Chorus in Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*⁸ and exposing the decay, the rot, even, affecting people from within. It is worth noting, in this respect, that the terms (and derivatives) "cure" (4, 12, 65), "curse" (12, 18, 34, 56, 58, 59), "dirty" (13, 32), "fester" (14), "filth" (20, 27, 61), "foul" (9, 27), "infect" (62), "plague" (3, 8, 9, 12, 14, 28, 63), "poison" (5, 10, 28), "pollute" (45), "sickness" (59, 63), "sin" (16, 18, 19, 37, 56, 57, 63, 64), "soiled" (10, 21, 59), "stain" (10, 56, 59), "stench" (14), (64), and "taint" (62) are reiterated throughout; these are strong words that depict a devastated people in need of healing (8). Evil is infectious, it spreads fast and it brings death: "Blood will have blood / Blood will drench this city" (6). Here is where the urgency lies for Oedipus to find "the stem [...] of all evil", which lies in his own self, as he eventually learns from Tiresias: "You are your own children" (19). His words to Oedipus are an addition in McGuinness: Sophocles' forecast that "a flood of ills [...] shall set thyself and children in one line" (ll.425-426), turns into a curse: "Your happy marriage [...] will drench you in sin / drown you in sin after sin" (18).

Oedipus' search for "the secret of my birth" (48) begins with the play and it culminates with the unveiling of parricide⁹. Sophocles refers simply to "the plague" (l. 833), but McGuinness takes a substantial liberty and names "the sin of all sins" (37), that blasphemous yet liberating deed – the killing of the father – that is deeply rooted in the Irish psyche and recurs throughout Irish drama and literature¹⁰. Parricide is a metaphor for an original sin that expects to be washed. In the text it sets the scene for a confrontation with one's own

past. Asked about the reasons for adapting *Oedipus*, McGuinness links it to the death of his own father¹¹, but to think of the play as a self-reflexive self-analytical enterprise would be reductive because *Oedipus* is where the personal, the local and the universal spheres converge. *Oedipus*, to put it differently, is not an alter ego of the artist, but rather a representation of the ordinary man, and woman, with their fragility, and their sinful and troubled soul.

The opening passage above reveals a side of the hero that is peculiar to McGuinness' reading. His protagonist is a man in search of answers: he asks "why" four times (and he also asks the old man to "speak out", 3). *Oedipus* questions and poses questions incessantly because he needs to know – "What are the words to answer my question?" (62); to make things clear is an urge for him; to know more and better is an overpowering necessity:

Shepherd: Master, question me no further.

Oedipus: If I have to ask these things again /I will kill you myself.

[...]

Shepherd: That is what scares me most.

What I have to say –

Oedipus: What *I have to hear*.

And *I must* listen carefully. (54-55, Emphasis added)

Oedipus' anxiety for the truth gives the play its rhythm and tension: "It's time to reveal this thing", he tells the Chorus (48). His words are directed to the elders of Thebes and also to a character called Stranger – clearly, they send out a message for anyone in the audience that is ready to receive it. *Oedipus*' investigation, an unrelenting search for answers, soon leads to the discovery that he is the man he is looking for. This is another interesting addition to Sophocles: Tiresias' words to the King that "Thou art the murderer of the man / whose murderer you pursuest" (l. 362) become:

The man who was murdered, you murdered him.

You are who you are seeking to find. (15, Emphasis added)

The grammar in that second line is wrong (it should be "you are *he / the one* you are seeking to find"); it is as wrong as that which it reveals – the distorted articulation of a truth that can no longer "be chained" (15). "Riddles" (19) and "ignorance" (23) are repudiated and the first signs of clarity are about to be revealed: Creon laments that he doesn't "see who stands before [him]" (30), *Oedipus* is in a "blind panic" (34) while Jocasta regrets "paying heed to veiled visions" (38). Like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Oedipus* sees the "horror" he has brought in his head (58), and blinds himself so that "his eyes now would be at home in the darkness / they would not know those he still wished to know" (58). In Sophocles, blindness is a condition

of true knowledge and wisdom (Tiresias' second sight), but in McGuinness lack of sight is the result of a self-inflicted punishment as well as an evil state of being: it is a "cloud of darkness", an eternal torment for the heart "pierced by swords of sorrow"; it reawakens memories of the past (59).

The *exodos* confirms McGuinness' different view of the tragedy of Oedipus. The end of the protagonist's quest and the revelation that he is "the root of all evil" (61) bring a cure to the plague and placate the gods. The Chorus in Sophocles looks back at the greatness of a man who "was the mightiest in our state" and warns the audience that they may:

Look [...] in what sea of troubles sunk and overwhelmed he lies!
Therefore wait and see life's ending ere thou count one mortal blest;
Wait till free from pain and sorrow he has gained his final rest. (ll. 1528-1530)

For McGuinness, however, the ending bears a different, unsettling message:

Look on Oedipus and respect his deeds.
[...]
The grave is waiting for us all.
Our comfort lies in the cold clay.
Turn to dust and be contented. (66)

There is no pity nor condemnation of Oedipus: what happens to him may well happen to anyone because "our life is all random" (43) and man is "a ball to kick beneath [the gods'] feet" (60). There is no redemption either: for McGuinness tragedy is about coming to terms with man's fragility; it is the spelling out of human suffering. The closing variation shows another interesting aspect of this playwright's use of the Greeks in that he is actually closer to Euripides' rationalism than he is to Sophocles' profoundly religious view of life. McGuinness wrote *Oedipus* after *Hecuba* and one year before *Helen*, so it is no surprise that his reworking was influenced by Euripides' unique "touch of all human things" (Storr in Sophocles 1912, vii). Indeed, the vulnerability of men, the point at which *Oedipus* ends, is exactly where *Helen* begins.

Helen by Euripides (412 BC; Euripides 2002¹²) revolves around the eponymous character, the beautiful wife of Menelaus, whose love story with Paris, the Trojan prince, famously caused a ten-year war of the Greeks against the city of Troy. In the play, Helen recounts another story, unveiling the events that really led to the war and managing, in the end, to save her life and reputation, and the life and reputation of her husband. At the start of the Trojan war, Helen is taken to Egypt and lives there for seventeen years, but when the King dies, his son Theoclymenus, now the new sovereign, seeks to seduce and force her to marry him. To guard her innocence, Helen sleeps by the old king's tomb, her thoughts always fixed to Menelaus. A messenger tells her that he is alive and

has been travelling in search of her. The two are finally joined; Helen proves Menelaus her fidelity and tells him of how Hera, the goddess, annoyed because she did not win the beauty contest against Athena and Aphrodite, created a "breathing image" of her, a ghost which she gave in marriage to Priam of Troy and which brought war "upon the Greeks and the poor Trojans" (ll. 38-39). The couple plan their escape, outwitting the King and leaving the land of Egypt with the favour of the gods, who "gallop the sea [... and] escort them" to their own country (l. 1665).

Helen has been defined an "escape tragedy", a play which, despite its happy end is "far from being [...] untragic, light or whimsical. [It] emerges as being serious, dark, pessimistic [and] raises some very disturbing questions about the audience's knowledge of their myths, their gods and their very existence" (Wright 2005, 5). Matthew Wright's words of defence are a response to misreadings of *Helen*, among other Euripidean plays, that deny it the value of tragedy proper on the basis of elements in it which bring it closer to other genres such as romantic tragedy, melodrama and comedy (Wright 2005, 7-10; 16-23). Interestingly, in reviews of McGuinness' *Helen*, critics often refer to it as "a comedy" whose success largely rests on the entertaining quality of speech (e.g. Billington 2009; Fisher 2009, Sulcliffe 2009). The presence of humorous light-hearted dialogues between characters in both plays cannot be overlooked, but that alone does not suffice to turn *Helen* into a comedy. It may be objected that it is a question of what one means by tragedy and comedy, yet it is also quite evident how, in this particular case, laughter is a momentary release from tension (Taplin 2006 [1996], 188), and comical elements "exist in a fruitful tension with the context, which enhances the tragic effect of the whole work" (Seidensticker 1982, in Wright 2005, 29). Similarly, the presence of a happy end and the absence of heroes and important deaths¹³ cannot be taken as the defining features of a comedy; where *Helen* by Euripides and McGuinness is concerned, at least, these alone do not alter its tragic quality. Indeed, in both plays tragedy is given by the writer's ability to bring the audience on the verge of a precipice, and to elicit laughter and astonishment at one and the same time. This is a significant correspondence; indeed McGuinness' dialogue with Euripides allows him to take liberties that hardly betray his master's work.

Tradition has it that were it not for Helen's beauty and lust no Trojan war would have ever occurred; factually, then, the ten-year bloodshed, which gave start to Greek history and life¹⁴ would (and could) have been avoided. This notion recurs throughout classical literature and it has been influenced, almost unanimously, by the hostile standard Homeric version of the myth (Wright 2005, 82-127). Euripides does not share this view and creates an alternative, rather unfamiliar portrait of Helen as a chaste and faithful woman through which he maintains that the cause of all evil lies elsewhere. This variant of the story is peculiar to Euripides, and I believe it explains, at least partially, McGuinness' fascination with it.

When the play opens, Helen tells the audience that she was “put forward for the Greeks as a prize of war” and taken to foreign grounds, so that she could “keep [her] bed unsullied for Menelaus” (ll. 42-43). Protected by Hermes, the woman knows that “one day [she] will live in Sparta’s plain with [her] husband, who will learn that I did not go to Ilium – provided I do not share my bed with anyone” (ll. 57-59). Helen is determined to preserve her chastity and wait until justice is made: “Even if my name is reviled in Greece, my body shall not here be put to shame” (ll. 66-67). Her prologue-speech is a suggestive section of the play which condenses all the thematic wealth of its narrative. Euripides’ *parodos* – “Here flows the Nile with its fair nymphs!” (Euripides 2002, l. 1) – locates the scene in Egypt, and centres upon images of the family and the gods. Helen tells of Proteus and his children, and of her father Tyndareus; but then adds that she has another father too: begotten by Leda and Zeus, who “flew to my mother [...] in the shape of a swan” (l. 18), she is a goddess herself. Similarly, the Dioscuri, her brothers, were made gods by the will of Zeus (l. 1659).

Euripides’ 67-line prologue-speech becomes a 75-line monologue in McGuinness’ version (2009)¹⁵:

My name is Helen – Helen of Egypt.
 The river Nile is my neighbour here.
 The King of this country – he’s called Theoclymenes.
 It’s said he’s devout – he adores the gods.
 His sister, everyone’s dote since she was a baby,
 She’s called Theonoe because she thinks like a god,
 Knowing what is past or passing or to come. (3)

This opening focuses on the protagonist, now Helen of Egypt, a woman well settled in a foreign land – “The Nile is my neighbour” (3). It has less to do with Euripides’ *parodos* than with the opening of McGuinness’ previous adaptation of a Greek play, *Hecuba*:

I am Polydorus, son of Hecuba.
 Priam is my father.
 I am dead.
 I come from that darkness –
 The abyss, the gates of godless hell.
 Son of Hecuba,
 Priam is my father. (3)

The analogy is telling; indeed the two plays are similar in their language, tone, and historical setting; both explore the causes and the consequences of conflict, and they revolve around a victimised female central character. *Hecuba* and *Helen* touch upon gender issues while stereotypes of female inferiority and

weakness are reiterated in speeches by Odysseus, Polymestor and Agamemnon (*Hecuba*) as well as in the words of Menelaus and especially Theoclymenes, the Egyptian King¹⁶. *Hecuba*, perhaps more bitterly than *Helen*, also comes to the conclusion that the gods cannot be held responsible for all evil, while humans are deliberately, and at times willingly, the makers of their own fate¹⁷. McGuinness develops a discourse based on the demystification of gendered roles and the demythologisation of myth in a context, our contemporary society, in which violence can only be ascribed to humans (“I’ve been the victim of woman’s vanity”, says Helen, 3). This view is common to other playwrights who have worked on Greek tragedy in recent years, and particularly those who have used myth to depict the futility of war. If some explore why violence erupts (Edna O’Brien) or demand when violence is going to end (Colin Teevan), McGuinness goes back in time to pose the question of where it all began; significantly, the Chorus in *Helen* chants: “Lady, I hear your litany of misery / *I link it to the wonder of your birth*” (11, emphasis added), while Menelaus links his bad luck to the day he was born (17). Their words bring to mind those spoken by Oedipus (above), and signal the importance of revisiting the past in *Helen* too¹⁸. Here, characters discover the uncomfortable truth that things are not as they seem or have always seemed: Helen’s beauty “is a mask, a mask that mocks” (13).

Travesty, mockery, trust and honesty are crucial aspects of this play¹⁹. Euripides shows that the eponymous character is not the one to blame, and, most tragically, that the Trojan War, *the* root of all evil, is a whim. More disturbingly, McGuinness reveals the extent to which uncertainty and precariousness define the contours of human life. Before the play opens, in an added line of stage directions, it is clear that for him nothing and nobody can be trusted:

Setting

A graveyard in Egypt before the gates of King Theoclymenes’ royal palace

Time

Seventeen years after the Trojan War started, when Helen was stolen from Paris, Prince of Troy, and taken from her husband, Menelaus – *apparently*. (59, Emphasis added)

None of this is present in Euripides: “Before the *skene*, representing the palace of the Egyptian king Teoclymenus, is the tomb of his father Proteus. When the action begins, Helen is sitting at the tomb as a suppliant. McGuinness’ addition, the adverb “apparently” at the end of the stage direction, is a key-point in a play about deception and the illusory nature of words. Ironically, perhaps, it also exposes how gullible humans can be.

This brings us back to the opening monologue in which Helen speaks of her two fathers (ll. 17-21; McGuinness 2009, 3), but also to other sections in the play which similarly assert duplicity. When Helen asks Teucer, a wandering Greek soldier, whether her brothers, “the sons of Tyndareus [are]

alive or not” (l. 138), Teucer replies that they are “dead, not dead: there are two accounts”. Helen’s response to this sounds puzzling, at first: “Which is the better one?”, but it clearly reflects her awareness that for each story there is a reverse, which may not be true, but it is equally valid. In the same conversation the woman also learns that Leda, her mother, “is dead and gone”; *apparently* she took her life:

Helen: What? Killed by Helen’s shame?
 Teucer: *So they say*: she put a noose about her fair neck.
 Helen: Are the sons of Tyndareus alive or not?
 Teucer: *Dead, not dead: there are two accounts.*
 Helen: *Which is the better one?*
 [...]

 Helen: [...] *But what is the other story?* (ll. 135-141, Emphasis added)

McGuinness follows his source very faithfully here:

Helen: And Helen’s mother – any news?
 Teucer: Leda – is that what you mean? She’s as dead as dust
 Helen: Did the dirty about Helen –
 Teucer: Destroy her mother? *So they say.*
 She found a noose for her long, lovely neck.
 Helen: Her sons – are they alive – Castor –
 Teucer: And Pollux? *Dead but not dead.*
Two sides of that story.
 Helen: *What do people believe?*
 [...]

 Teucer: *That’s just one story.*
 Helen: *Tell me the other.* (9-10, Emphasis added)

Helen wants to know both versions and yet she is sceptical; she knows that there can be no certainty since *both sides of the story* may be (un)reliable:

Helen: That’s not just hearsay? [...] You’re certain?
 [...]

 Helen: Maybe it was the gods fooling (8)

The discovery that the gods are fooling is unsettling: it must have been for Euripides’ public, and it undoubtedly was in 2009, at a time when the force of persuasive rhetoric resounded in the media with notions of a ‘war of words’. McGuinness claims to “despise people who try to hammer home the relevance of the Greeks” but the conflict in Iraq, and its public reception are between the lines of the play: he had touched upon those issues in *Hecuba* (“Europe / steals me from Asia / leaving me no hope”, Chorus, 24) and was now returning to them in a darker reflection on responsibility and trust²⁰. In

the meantime the history of Northern Ireland had reached a defining moment: a country long divided by the Civil War, finally achieved a “seemingly impossible” solution in 2007 as the leader of the DUP, Rev. Ian Paisley, became Northern Ireland’s new First Prime Minister in a power sharing executive with Sinn Féinn’s Martin McGuinness as Deputy First Minister (BBC History online). How long would peace last? Was this going to be another illusion?

In the light of those events, *Helen* also tackled the question of the power of language. Indeed, the entire process of adaptation is primarily linguistic and it is given by simplified dialogues, shorter utterances, idiomatic expressions, a low register and a basic vocabulary. Colloquialisms are common, though this is also a peculiarity of Euripides’ diction, but in the adapted text accent and dialect are also added. The effect is double: on the one hand, speech becomes recognisably local (causing a laughter that eases the dramatic tension), on the other, linguistic relocation helps construe a type of diversity that is at once ethnic and properly cultural. Helen is *unlike* the other characters; she stands out among humans and gods – her beauty, her descent, her reputation, her innocence, and her dignity make her exceptionally diverse. In McGuinness’ play she does more than simply replicate Euripides’ Helen and becomes a vehicle through which theatre can expose what the Chorus calls “the false prophets” and seek to “save” (32) man from the illusion and delusion of shared assumptions.

McGuinness exploits the original structure of the play to bring this aspect to the fore. Notably, *Helen* has no actual division into acts, though the action takes place in two clearly distinct moments: the first (ll. 1-385) introduces the background to the story through the voice of Helen, who narrates her past misfortunes until she discovers that Menelaus is alive; the second (ll. 385-1692) concentrates upon Menelaus and then Theonoe, the prophetess and a sister to the King, who helps the Greek couple leave the land of Egypt. The first part is considerably shorter than the second, and it acts as a sort of preamble to it: anything that is said or hinted at in those opening lines turns out to be a cautionary tale by the end of the play. Words become facts or else they are proved right as the action unfolds. McGuinness shortens Euripides by 240 lines (mostly in the second half of the play), condensing choral odes, monologues and dialogues. The tempo speeds up and exchanges gain dynamicity, often heightening the tension. As well as cutting down on Euripides’ lines, the Irish playwright also simplifies and revises the original language²¹ so that tone and register create an atmosphere that is dense with hatred, diffidence, uncertainty. Words are deceitful, we learn from the start, and similarly what our eyes see cannot be trusted. The play dismantles all that it constructs and “nothing is ever as we imagine”. As the Chorus chants in McGuinness’ *exodos*, “so this story ends, as do all stories” (63).

The second part of the play further explores the consequences of this realisation. Menelaus opens this section with a pseudo prologue-speech, an-

other authoritative account of why things are as they are and why. Like Helen, he also goes back to a time long before he was born. In Euripides, Menelaus enters the empty stage “dressed in pieces of torn sails” and pronounces a seven-line speech in which he evokes Pelops²², who begot Atreus, who begot Agamemnon and Menelaus. This, the Greek warrior says, he wishes had never occurred. McGuinness omits the mythological details, of little relevance to a contemporary audience, and focuses on Menelaus’ reasoning. In a couple of short, sharp sentences he makes his point clear:

I date my bad luck from the day I was born.
 No, I’ll go further back.
 Better my father had cursed his father,
 He brought him into this world. (17)

This speech opens a section of the play in which two major events take place: Menelaus finds his wife (and Hera’s trick is unveiled) and the couple return home safe thanks to the help of Theonoe. Menelaus arrives in Egypt not knowing where he is: he has lost his companions and has been cast upon a foreign land (ll. 408-410); he is hungry and in search of help (ll. 430-434). He arrives at a rich man’s house, a walled palace with “impressive gates”, and there he encounters an Old Woman, a rather hostile inhospitable gatekeeper. The scene is among the most suggestive and entertaining in the play: here, laughter serves to contain the underlying tension for the forthcoming events. The exchange between the two characters is also emblematic of McGuinness’ use of Greek tragedy:

Euripides (ll. 437-444)

Gatekeeper

Who is at the gate? Leave this house!
 Do not stand at our courtyard gate and
 bother my master! Otherwise you’ll be
 put to death! You are a Greek, and Greeks
 are not allowed here!

Menelaus

Ancient lady, you may say these same
 Words in a different tone: I will obey.
 Stop being angry!

Gatekeeper

Go away! It is my job, stranger, to see
 that no Greek approaches this house.

McGuinness (18-19)

Gatekeeper

What’s the racket? Away from here. Hop it.
 Who are you to bother your betters?
 You are Greek – I can tell by the cut of you.
 We’re not so keen on your kind.
 We’ll skin you.

Menelaus

Madam, keep a civil tongue, please
 There’s no need to be abusive..

Gatekeeper

You look like a Greek, you smell like a Greek,
 You quack like a Greek, I’d say
 you’re a Greek.
 I’ve a punishing entry policy.
 No dogs, no Greeks – fuck off foreign bastard.

Euripides' Gatekeeper is nothing like McGuinness'; her function is evidently different. The first woman provocatively gives voice to anti-Greek feelings that may have been common among slaves and Trojans, but were certainly not so among people sitting in the audience at Dionisia. This is a crucial point to be made when thinking of Euripides' alternative use of myth, because he wrote for an Athenian public but targeted their idiosyncrasies. Euripides knew how his audience felt about strangers; he sought to expose those notions and to invite his audience to rethink them. The irony, in the speech above, is caused by the fact that Menelaus, a Greek, is called a stranger and is treated like a barbarian; he is treated exactly the way barbarians were treated by the Greeks. It is indicative, in fact, that Menelaus is in rags, a beggar deprived of his actual royal status, even diminished in his intellect (l. 454). There is also a striking contradiction between the idyllic image of Egypt offered by Helen in the opening (this is the place where her life and honour are saved), and the not-so-welcoming land where Menelaus is a shipwreck. The contrast is ironic but only apparently so because that moment of irony soon turns into a non-ironic reminder that words are not reliable; however authoritative, words are deceptive, and impressions can be misleading. McGuinness expands on this aspect and recreates a character whose colourful language may be funny at first, but it gives way almost immediately to a grotesque sense of *déjà vu*. The speech above resonates with a sectarian hatred that recalls the no-entry policy ("No dogs-no Greeks") for Jews in Nazi-Germany, for blacks in Apartheid South Africa, for Italian and Irish immigrants in North America in the 1950s and the 1960s, or for Irish Catholics in Protestant Northern Ireland.

As with *Hecuba* five years earlier, McGuinness turned to a vocabulary of race in which *the other* is a "savage" (27), a "parasite" (32) "stinking of slavery" (31), a "barbarian" (13), and an uncivilised, undignified other. But unlike that first adaptation of Euripides, in which racist practices pertained to the Greeks exclusively, in *Helen* both sides, Greeks and non-Greeks, rely on the same language to articulate intolerance and a deeply-felt sense of racial superiority. Discourses such as these are seen in war contexts around the world, and it is to them that the play refers, though it cannot be denied that McGuinness had his Northern Ireland in mind when he reworked the Greeks and the Egyptians in *Helen*. His characters speak a language that is rich with colloquial and idiomatic expressions, 'Irishisms' proper, that shift the geography of the play to McGuinness' native land ("ownio", "arse", "shenenigans") and resound with the local talk ("the big man", "she did, so she did"). Dialect – which brings verbal communication closer to the truth and helps convey a sense of authenticity – was used in performance, and it was the regional variant of the North that went on stage ("voice and dialect work" by Jan Haydn Rowles in McGuinness 2009). The effect was comic, but laughter could be only temporary. The search for clarity and certainties retraces a past that needs uprooting, it leads to the conclusion that reality is beyond human control and that evil is always futile. That, in McGuinness' plays, is a non-negotiable truth.

Notes

¹ Longley depicts the conflict in “The Butchers” (1991), a poem based on Book XXII of the *Odyssey*, and overcomes it, at the imaginative level, in “Ceasefire” (1994), a prophetic sonnet based on the *Iliad*.

² *Sophocles’ Electra* (1998); *Euripides’ Hecuba* (2004); *Sophocles’ Oedipus* (2008), and *Euripides’ Helen* (2009).

³ Sophocles 1912; references are taken from this edition and they are indicated parenthetically within the text.

⁴ “His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours ... It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and murderous wish against our father”, wrote Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The quote is reported in The National Theatre’s workpack for McGuinness’s *Oedipus* (Kent 2008, 18). Director Jonathan Kent believes that Freud “audaciously expropriated” Sophocles, yet acknowledges his influence on contemporary readings of the play. The same applies to versions by Storytellers Theatre Company (*Oedipus* 2000) and more evidently Pan Pan’s production of *Oedipus Loves You* (2008).

⁵ “Greek literature, like old Irish literature is based upon belief [...] At the Abbey Theatre we play both *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* and they seem at home here” (Stanford 1984 [1976], 99).

⁶ As early as 1903, Yeats translated part of the play which survives as “Ode to *Antigone*”, the last stanza in “A Woman Young and Old”, published in *The Tower*, 1928. In 1984, *Antigone* was revisited by Aidan Carl Matthews, Tom Paulin, Brendan Kennelly, and Pat Murphy. In 1999 and 2003, there were four more versions of the play in Ireland (respectively, Declan Donnellan and Marianne McDonald, and Conall Morrison and Crooked House Theatre Company). In 2004, Seamus Heaney and Conall Morrison added to the list, followed, in 2009, by Owen McCafferty.

⁷ E.g. Rev. Sheridan (1723); Synge (1907), Yeats (1926); de Brún (1927); Burke-Kennedy (2000); Doyle/Quinn (2006).

⁸ “Your wound is what you feed on, Philoctetes [...] stop eating yourself up with hate” (Heaney 1991, 61).

⁹ In Sophocles, Oedipus refers to “the secret of my birth” towards the end of the play (l. 1393), when he tells the Chorus that he does not regret causing his blindness: “For, had I sight, I know not with what eyes / I could have met my father in the shades”. McGuinness uses Sophocles’ words earlier in the play, when Oedipus has his last conversation with Jocasta (48).

¹⁰ Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) is the most exemplary dramatic work of this kind. For a reading of parricide as a metaphor of a national issue with the father figure cf. Kiberd (1995, especially chapter 21).

¹¹ The loss of both parents also influenced the writing of *Hecuba* four years earlier. In 2008, while working on *Oedipus* the playwright “had an astonishing experience [...] My father died 11 years ago and my mother about 10 months before. I have spent the past decade dealing with her death; the death I hadn’t really dealt with was my father’s. [...] This dreadful shock came over me [...] I had some tremendous buried grief and sorrow and fear, and it came to the fore” (Higgins 2008).

¹² References to the play are taken from this edition and are indicated parenthetically within the text.

¹³ No main character dies, but at the end of the play lots of minor characters actually fall in a bloody battle (Euripides, l. 1065).

¹⁴ According to Herodotus, Greek history and life were perceived to have begun with this conflict (Wright 2005, 117).

¹⁵ References to this play are indicated parenthetically within the text.

¹⁶ The Gatekeeper, a marginal character in Euripides, acquires an important role in McGuinness. In the Greek play, the woman appears once, in a conversation with Menelaus, but in the

modern adaptation she leads the scene twice, namely in a curious exchange with the Spartan warrior (18-20) and, when she defies Theoclymenes (61, echoing Shakespeare's Emilia in *Othello*).

¹⁷ Hecuba's utter desperation is spelt eloquently in one of McGuinness' best tragic monologues: "Who is to protect me? What son, what city? [...] Is there a god to hear me?" (9).

¹⁸ This is also a central theme in *Electra*, a play in which revenge is a manifestation of the overpowering force of the past. The past revisited returns in *Hecuba* with the image of a revenant, the ghost of Polydorus. Killed by Polymestor and thrown into the ocean, Hecuba's son returns to his motherland to demand a rightful burial (2004, 5).

¹⁹ See "mock" (48, 57); "honest" (38, 40); "fair" (43); "loyal" (62); "loyalty" and "fairness" (36, 37, 43, 62); "false" (32); "illusion" (25, 32); "trust" (59). Travesty is recurrent: Menelaus wears rags on his first appearance; he is travestied as a Greek slave when he testifies of Menelaus' death; and he wears new clothes and armour to bring offerings to the dead hero in the escape scene, while a servant acts as dead Menelaus in the funeral scene. Helen is notably an "illusion" (25, 32); she pretends to be a desperate widower who wears black and cuts her hair in mourning.

²⁰ This aspect is particularly evident in productions of *Hecuba* at the Donmar Warehouse, London (2004), at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre in 2006, and at the Dundee Rep Theatre, Dundee, 2013. Jonathan Kent, who directed the play in London, observes that although it would be a mistake "to set the action explicitly outside Basra or Baghdad [...] it would also be a sign of failure if the play didn't bring Iraq to mind" (Kent 2004). In Dundee, the audience are "invited onto the stage-set seating as radio recordings of the 2003 Iraq war and the oft-imitated tone of George W. Bush crackle overhead" (Donaldson 2013).

²¹ McGuinness commissions literal translations of the original plays in English which he then adapts and modernises. Fionnuala Murphy translated *Hecuba* and *Helen*; and Ciaran McGrogary translated *Oedipus*. For *Electra*, McGuinness used the LOEB edn (1912).

²² A suitor to Hippodamia, daughter to the King of Pisa, Pelops "won the race and his bride by bribing [the king's] charioteer" (Euripides 2002, 53, n. 14).

Works Cited

- BBC History (2014), "A History of Ian Paisley", <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/people/ian_paisley> (05/2014).
- Billington Michael (2009), Review of *Helen*, *The Guardian*, 6 August, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/aug/06/helen-theatre-review>> (05/2014).
- Donaldson Kayleigh (2013), *Hecuba: Dundee Rep*, *Theatre Review*, <<http://www.femalearts.com/node/795>> (05/2014).
- Euripides (2002), *Helen. Phoenician Women. Orestes*, LOEB edn. by David Kovacs, London, Harvard UP.
- Fisher Peter (2009), Review of *Euripides' Helen*, by Frank McGuinness, <<http://www.britishtheatreinfo.com/reviews/globehelen-rev>> (05/2014).
- Heaney Seamus (1991), *The Cure at Troy*, London, Faber.
- Higging Charlotte (2008), "I'm not entirely respectable. I couldn't be", Interview to Frank McGuinness, *The Guardian*, 18 October, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/oct/18/frank-mcguinness>> (05/2014).
- Kent Jonathan (2004), Review of Euripides' *Hecuba*, <<http://www.theaterpro.com/hecuba.htm>> (05/2014).
- (2008), *The National Theatre's Workpack for McGuinness's Oedipus*, <<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/document/oedipus-background-pack>> (05/2014).
- Kiberd Declan (1995), *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London, Virago.

- McGuinness Frank (1998), *Sophocles' Electra*, London, Faber.
- (2003), “Writing in Greek: *By the Bog of Cats*...Programme Note: Abbey Theatre: 1998”, in Cathy Leeny, Anna McMullan (eds), *The Theatre of Marina Carr: Before Rules Was Made*, Dublin, Carysfort, 87-88.
- (2004), *Euripides' Hecuba*, London, Faber.
- (2008), *Sophocles' Oedipus*, London, Faber.
- (2009), *Euripides' Helen*, London, Faber.
- Salis Loredana (2009), *Miti antichi, storie d'oggi*, Cosenza, Pellegrini.
- Sophocles (1912), *Oedipus the King*, LOEB edn., trans. by F. Storr, London, William Heinemann.
- Stanford W.B. (1984 [1976]), *Ireland and the Classical Tradition*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press.
- Sulcliffe Tom (2009), “The BBC Saturday Review”, 8 August, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b00lxsrg/Saturday_Review_A_new_translation_of_Euripides_Helen_by_Frank_McGuinness_and_Everything_That_Rises_by_Lawrence_Weschler/> (05/2014).
- Taplin Oliver (2006 [1996]), “Comedy and the Tragic”, in M.S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 188-202.
- Wright Matthew (2005), *Euripides' Escape-Tragedies. A Study of Helen, Andromeda and Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, Oxford, Oxford UP.