RECONFIGURATIONS OF GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH STAGE ADAPTATIONS, 2019-2020: DEIRDRE KINAHAN'S *THE UNMANAGEABLE SISTERS*, EDNA O'BRIEN'S *THE COUNTRY GIRLS*, MARINA CARR'S *HECUBA*, AND MICHAEL WEST'S *SOLAR BONES*

Anne Fogarty

Adaptations are a conspicuous, lively, and inbuilt feature of the contemporary Irish stage. Despite their ubiquity, they have attracted little critical attention and are regarded in general more as an intellectual bane and a sign of downward mobility in the cultural sphere than as a consequential and distinctive area of creative endeavour. There is a gaping mismatch between the popularity and frequency of such shows, the wariness they arouse in reviewers and commentators, and the low prestige they are accorded. Programming for theatres in 2019 is indicative of the centrality, variety, and pervasiveness of such work. Offerings included a musical of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, at the Lime Tree Theatre in Limerick, Roddy Doyle's adaptation of his novel, *The Snapper* at the Gate Theatre and of his novella *Two Pints* at the Abbey Theatre, while the Dublin Theatre Festival featured an adaptation of Joseph O'Connor's *Redemption Falls* at the Abbey Theatre and an opera by Irish National Opera of Melatu Uche Okorie's *This Hostel Life* with a libretto by Evangelia Rigaki, performed promenade-style in the crypt of Christchurch Cathedral.

This chapter examines four plays performed between June 2019 and August 2020: Deirdre Kinahan's *The Unmanageable Sisters*, Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*, Marina Carr's *Hecuba*, and Michael West's *Solar Bones*.[1] My analysis posits the relationship between the adapted text, the production, and the original work as a three-way dialogue and not as a hierarchical arrangement. The purpose of juxtaposing these texts, moreover, is less to identify and compile a compendium of common or distinctive adaptation practices than to inspect how the productions of these plays emanate from and are coloured by conjoint socio-political concerns and anxieties, and to probe how in this light their dramaturgy self-consciously tests the span and limits of character, embodiment, and voice and interrogates power structures and gender roles in the different worlds that they envisage. Prominently, scenography and sound design are used to this end in these stagings to exercise critique, to articulate social impasses, and to lay bare the workings of ideology. Further, retrospection, circling back, and moments of revision are facets of these works that encourage both immersion and distance, and oscillate between acts of rebellion and escape, and the delineation of states of failure.

1 I am grateful to Lynne Parker for access to the unpublished script of *Solar Bones*.

Conceptually and theoretically, adaptations are a vexed phenomenon and occupy an in-between space awkwardly straddling the literary and the popular. The expansion of studies in this area in recent decades, and their consolidation into a discrete area of inquiry, have aimed, however, to rehabilitate this mode and raise understanding of how adaptations are created, and the artistic and social functions that they serve.[2] Nonetheless, the term itself is bedevilled, as commentators have long pointed out, because it is freighted with normative expectations. It is still regularly the case that adapted works are adjudged suspect and sub-standard, as illicit attempts to recycle the efforts of others, and signs of a lack of originality and creativity. A 2019 article by Fintan O'Toole taking the co-directors of the Abbey Theatre, Graham McLaren and Neil Murray, to task for failing to foster a world-class theatre through ignoring the literary play is a case in point. In making his case that the Abbey is not living up to its mission, and has turned its back on the Irish and international dramatic repertoire, he proffers as evidence for a lack of ambition and scope the fact that adaptation has become the dominant aesthetic at the theatre: "To get on to today's Abbey stage, it helps a lot if the work is already familiar from print or screen. Is this what 'ambitious, courageous and new' Irish theatre is meant to look like?" He cites the terms of reference of the Abbey's mission statement and uses them not only to critique the overall achievements of the institution, but also to attack adaptations as cultural exercises that are necessarily *ersatz*, derivative, and an indicator of a lack of creative drive and vision.

Whatever the validity of his overall broadside, O'Toole is guilty of falling back on a perennial and peculiarly entrenched stance that denounces adaptations in moralistic and value-laden terms. Some inherent gender bias also lurks in his argument, as four of the adapted shows that he itemises are by women – Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*, Louise O'Neill's *Asking for It*, Marina Carr's *Anna Karenina,* and Emma Donoghue's *Room*. Contrary to his comments, all of these shows were successful and compelling, and embraced by large and diverse audiences. O'Toole sees literary dramas and adaptations as binary antitypes in a hierarchical system which assigns dominance to the former and presupposes that the latter are devoid of merit or artistic value. Hence, he decries a situation in which adapted works, cuckoo-like, edged out the classics of the Irish stage and high-calibre international texts. The central assumption is that an adaptation is inherently unworthy and that reliance on such work is a sop to a populist taste for cultural experiences that are safe and pre-packaged or a reflex of a risk-averse theatre sector that for commercial reasons prefers texts with brand recognition that guarantee houses and publicity.

Rather than view adaptations as unworthy and lowbrow, this chapter sees them as hybrid and purposefully blurring existing presumptions about the distinctions between

2 For overviews of central debates in this field, see Cutchins, Krebs and Voigts, and Leitch. See, too, Elliott for an account of the inveterate theoretical problems attached to scholarship in this area.

the literary and the popular, the classics and the contemporary, high art and what I. Q. Hunter and Heidi Kaye have redolently termed "trash aesthetics" (1-13). It sets out to examine the heterogeneous nature of a selection of Irish stage adaptations 2019-2020, and to examine the synergies and individual and collaborative visions that inspire and shape them. Adaptations, it will be seen, are not a unified phenomenon or set of practices; they are diverse and varied artistically, but also because of their moot standing they free practitioners from many dominant artistic credos such as mimetic or naturalistic imperatives. Yet, as works that are unapologetically responsive to audience tastes and expectations, they are also vitally enmeshed in current cultural and socio-political moments which they harness and open up to scrutiny. In particular, the texts examined in this chapter are uneasily poised between critical interrogation, possibilities of empowerment, and the desire for social change in the past and present.

A foundational study by Linda Hutcheon persuasively formulated some of the key ways in which adaptations may be re-evaluated. Hutcheon's precepts and contentions continue to galvanise the expanding field of adaptation studies. As an initial and all-important rallying point, she contended that we need to eschew morally loaded assessments of adaptations and to consider them instead as aesthetic objects in their own right. Like many commentators, she recognised that, although the urge to repeat may form part of the pleasure of an adaptation, it can also validly be seen as a discrete and distinctive act of creation. In her pithy summation, "an adaptation is a deviation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing (9)," Hutcheon conceded that the verb 'to adapt' is slippery and ambiguous; the process always entails borrowing or rescuing a prior text, but it also presupposes interpreting and creating something anew. Writers who adapt works, whether their own or those of others, thus braid together many different activities; they appropriate and salvage an original work, but are also involved in a double process of interpreting and creating something fresh. In this light, adaptations are intertextual and engaged in dynamic acts of revision, recuperation, and invention.

Additionally, they are in dialogue with social and political undercurrents that determine their relevance and answerability to audience needs, and nuance the ways in which they may be interpreted, especially in terms of their contemporaneous frames of reference. A primary, formative context for the four plays examined in this chapter is the "Waking the Feminists" campaign, which ran from November 2016-November 2017. This strategic movement for the furtherance of gender equality in the theatre sector, spearheaded by Lian Bell, Anne Clarke, and Sarah Durcan, in unison with a large group of high-powered practitioners and activists, was sparked off by the startling absence of work by women in the Abbey Theatre's "Waking the Nation" 2016 programme with the sole exception of Ali White's *Me Mollser*. The strategic and focused crusade sought to utilise and channel the outrage caused by the public sidelining of women to make Irish theatres more inclusive and lastingly to undo the power base that had protected and continuously cemented and upheld a male hegemony.

The "Waking the Feminists" movement had many of the hallmarks of fourth wave feminism in its quest for gender balance, its acknowledgement of the importance of intersectionality, its interrogation of how power becomes enshrined, and its reliance on a goal-specific activism.[3]

Like many other current feminist movements, such as the "Me Too" initiative, it was impelled by what Hannah Arendt redolently described as "the right to have rights" (269-84). As Arendt noted, it is only when rights are overridden or in abeyance that their absence is brought home to us. Congruent with these movements that seek not only to reactivate feminist principles of egalitarianism and social justice, is also an endeavour to rethink gender in more fluid and inclusive ways. It is noteworthy that the unearthing of hidden forms of exploitation and disenfranchisement is a prominent feature of these plays that set out to grant a voice to individuals or groups that are normally silenced or viewed in distorted ways. Female disempowerment is scrutinised in the guise of home workers, mothers, girls, nuns, refugees, and victims of war, sickness, and violence. However, it is not just subaltern roles that are reconsidered and brought to life – the stances and attitudes of the wielders of power, the warmongers, such as Agamemnon in *Hecuba*, and Marcus Conway, the engineer and *paterfamilias* in *Solar Bones*, who is implicated in a post-capitalist, neoliberal economy that preys on and destroys the environment, are also graphically embodied and forensically exposed.

The interrogation of gender roles and power structures in these plays will be analysed through a set of suggestive terms and precepts put forward by Nancy Fraser. She contends that an apprehension of the politics of framing is a concomitant of the quest for justice by contemporary social movements (189-208). The political, she holds, is boundary-setting and determines who counts as a subject of justice in the first instance. Thus, one approach to the issue of framing is to contest, but not discard, existing structures, and to raise questions about who is encompassed in reigning concepts of power and who is granted political space, validity, and authority. In this regard, the calling out of injustices induced by misframing is important. The politics of framing, as Fraser avers, is concerned centrally with "the question of who" (189-208), that is, the issue of who is accorded the right to justice or not. The second approach to framing is more radical and transformative, in her eyes, and involves a recognition that the problem of justice goes far beyond the structures of the territorial nation state, and touches on matters of global governance. In such cases, she explains, the forces that perpetrate injustice belong not to the "space of places" but to the "space of flows" (189-208). While framing and frame-setting are defined as inherent aspects of the political sphere and of social contestation by Fraser, in the analysis that follows they will be seen as conjoint facets of the dramaturgy as well as the thematic concerns of recent Irish stage adaptations. These texts address the ques-

3 For an analysis of the "Waking the Feminists" initiative, see Miriam Haughton and Emer O'Toole.

tion of who in terms of what is enacted and performed on the Irish stage, and how stories are embodied and represented. Moments of blockage and dissonance in these productions, it will be seen, often point to disconnections between different forms of framing, and a clash between utopian desires for change and stagnation within existing value systems and hierarchies.

The Unmanageable Sisters by Deirdre Kinahan, an award-winning playwright, actor, and producer, was her first play on the main Abbey stage and a belated recognition of her considerable heft and scope as a writer. Kinahan is the "leading Irish playwright you haven't necessarily heard of" was the rueful but tendentious summary of the author's standing by Maggie Armstrong in a 2018 profile. In the interview, Kinahan argued that one of the reasons she had been excluded from the literary mainstream and lacked currency was because it was believed that women did not write national plays. Her adaptation of *The Unmanageable Sisters,* first staged in March 2018 at the Abbey and revived for the Summer season in 2019, gave the lie to such views. It is a version of *Les Belles-Soeurs* (1968) by the Canadian playwright Michel Tremblay and a transposition of his play set in Catholic, working-class Montreal to the Tower Blocks of Ballymun in 1974. Tremblay used *joual*, a Québec working-class dialect, to capture the women in his play, and Kinahan, by contrast, a Dublin demotic. As in his other work, Tremblay alternated naturalistic dialogue with experimental scenes which questioned the ambit and veracity of the voice. Hence, conversation regularly and unexpectedly ceded to choric declamations, in which all fifteen caste members spoke in unison, or to monologues in which a character broke away from the main action and revealed aspects of her private story in a confessional but often self-incriminating speech. Kinahan revelled in the disruptive structures of Tremblay's text and used them to draw out the friction between the jostling stories of her ensemble of fifteen working-class women. The alternations between realist dialogue and other forms of address to the audience raised issues of framing, of who gets to speak in this working-class world, and of the clashing realities touched on in public exchange, communal declarations, and private musing.

The title of Kinahan's play borrowed and repurposed a comment by Eamonn De Valera, who purportedly opined that women make for the boldest but most unmanageable revolutionaries.[4] The text in accordance with De Valera's sexist pronouncement shows the chasm that lies between obstreperous feminist insight and the effecting of social change. It also depicts the women who gather in the Ballymun on an evening in 1974 as an unruly, fractured collective as well as a potentially united feminist front. In the play, Ger Lawless, who has won one million Green Shield stamps, dreams of all the objects she can buy to transform her flat. She summons her daughter, Linda, her sisters Rose and Patsy, and her friends to help her stick the stamps into booklets. The other women are resentful and disapproving of her win, it tran-

4 Margaret Ward used the phrase in the title of her 1989 study of women and Irish nationalism but did not give a source for de Valera's comment.

spires, and over the course of the evening they contrive gradually to steal the booklets and the stamps. The exchanges between the characters and their confiding soliloquies to the audience exposed the unruliness of female desire and the emptiness of existences eked out on the margins of Dublin society. In the first chorus of the play (15-17), the women described the monotony of their lives; in a litany, they catalogued their repetitious routines as housewives and mothers which were replicated on a daily basis and punctuated only by the turning on of "the telly" in the evening. In unison they lamented the "dreary rotten life" (17) that they shared. Their joint voicing of their discontent in these choric pronouncements consolidated into an act of feminist protest. These poetic outbursts allowed Kinahan not only to frame their world differently, but also to question what rights these women have in a censorious society that curtailed their possibilities to pursue happiness; the jibes and in-fighting that characterised their exchanges with each other were transmuted into redolent protest.

Overall, Kinahan translated the unmanageability denounced by de Valera not into a vision of sisterliness but into a web of dissonant effects and insights. The anger evinced by the chorus was undercut by the fractiousness of the women's conversations in which there was little evidence of feminist accord or of working-class solidarity. These women were cross-linked instead by their Catholic conservatism, their rapacious but unappeased material and sexual wishes, and their bickering and irrepressible Otherness. Unruliness applied, too, to the clashing interweave of scenes in the play which moved unevenly from lacerating comedy to displays of heart-rending neediness. In one of the most poignant monologues of the play, Dolly Snow – who had devoted her life to caring for her mother – admitted to her unfulfilled longing for the travelling salesman, Mr Simon:

> I haven't held anyone's hand since Mammy died and I dream about him now every night and I dream that we're married and we're living all happy in my flat and the place is shining with his tea cups and brushes and he's the first man who ever cared for me and I don't want to lose him. I don't want Mr Simon to go away and I'm kind of terrified now on a Thursday that he won't come because then I'll be all on my own again and how would I ever meet anyone? (38)

Another member of the group, Angela Smith, who lives with her pious, church-going friend Ruthie Barrett, was outed as a secret frequenter of a night club on Leeson Street where she sought solace and a let-up from the prejudiced world that constrained her:

> It's easy to judge isn't it. It's always easy to judge. Ireland is awash with it … I've been judged all my life. That's what happens when you grow up in the convent, when you're born into it. Fallen. I fell into this world a fallen woman, a fallen child … Joys isn't the club where Patsy started, it's for the older crowd and although it's full of loneliness, there's a comfort in it because it's dark and we can pretend … That we are young. That we are loved … Now I'll have to stop going down. I'll have to stop pretending and live with who I am. (58-59)

The image of the fallen woman was a recurrent one in the play; it acted as an overarching trope for all of the *dramatis personae*, as each of the characters was revealed to be carrying a burden of shame. All of the women elicited the disapproval of

the others; each failed to attain her own desires, but nonetheless was castigated for deviating from society's expectations of female propriety. Patsy, Ger Lawless's sister, particularly epitomised this fallenness and the manner in which female desire was destined to be thwarted by Irish mores and moral norms. Treated as a pet when a child because of her beauty and intelligence, Patsy was shunned by her family and friends in adulthood because she was held to have violated the standards of sexual morality they purported to uphold. In her soliloquy, Patsy disclosed the material destitution she faced in the wake of abandonment by her procurer and lover:

> Now I've wasted thirteen years of my life on Leeson Street … He threw me out on the street … I've nothing to me name now bar the clothes on me back … What's left to me now but Fitzwilliam Square? Standing in the shadows. Hoping. Waiting. Praying that you turn a trick so you can get in out of the cold … You age fast down there on the square … you're lucky to get out with your life. But what choice do I have? I'll have to do it for a few weeks … take me chances … get some cash. (70-71)

The monologue framed Patsy's story differently. The precarity of a seemingly glamorous life as a hostess in a Dublin night club was prised apart and shown to be a prelude to the even more demeaning and uncertain existence of a prostitute turning tricks on the streets. The reframing effected by the address to the audience at once movingly outlined Patsy's predicament, and also made clear how capitalist exploitation and patriarchal control in tandem oppress and exploit women.

Kinahan's play conveyed the stories of women who suffer in isolation and are pitted against each other, rather than making common cause. It refused to romanticise working-class lives but emphatically exposed the way in which poverty ground these characters down, depriving them of vitality and the conditions they needed to thrive. The group at the end came to blows and then scattered, while Ger was forced to recognise the nullity of her dreams of material advancement. Tremblay's work ended with the cast reuniting to sing "O Canada"; the finale of an adaptation into Glaswegian culminated with the women singing "Scotland the Brave." In Kinahan's version and the Abbey production, the women sang "Amhrán na bhFiann," the Irish national anthem, forcefully, unironically, and seemingly in ungrudging unison. It is the final dissonance and jolting act of framing achieved by this tragi-comedy that succeeded in breaking with the overwhelmingly bourgeois conventions and perceptual lens of Irish theatre, and in creating a painfully suggestive and rare account of working-class women's lives in Ireland in 1974. Although Peter Crawley declared himself nonplussed by the ostentatious lack of irony of the ending, this conjured-up harmony was, in fact, central to its upending of things. The inclusiveness and sense of community that an anthem denotes are at variance with the individual stories of misery and oppression in the play, and the vignettes of interpersonal conflict such as Teresa Doyle's violent custodianship of her mother-in-law Olive, who is suffering from dementia. Kinahan pointed up the fallacies in de Valera's sexist observation. It is not given to the women she represented to be revolutionaries, and the unmanageability they embodied is an offshoot of their sense of shame, frustration, and disempowerment. *The Unmanageable Sisters* required the audience to abandon its need for

feminist uplift, and to grapple instead with the complex acts of empathy it elicited for the disappointed and broken lives of an embattled ensemble of women.

Edna O'Brien's adaptation of her epochal novel *The Country Girls*, which was published in 1960, was premiered in the Garter Lane Theatre, Waterford and the Gaiety Theatre Dublin in October and November 2011. A revised version was staged in the Minerva Theatre, Chichester, before being revived in a further revised text in the Abbey in February 2019. The production fortuitously coincided with the city-wide celebration of *The Country Girls Trilogy* in April 2019 for the "One Dublin, One Book" annual programme. At the opening night of the run in the Abbey, O'Brien came on stage for a final curtain call. Her adaptation of *The Country Girls* was hence in dialogue with her career and the changed status of a work, once banned and decried and now feted as a canonical and perdurable text. If, as in Hutcheon's view, all adaptations are palimpsestic then the new production of *The Country Girls* directed by Graham McLaren was coloured by the perspectives of a contemporary audience not only on the text but also on O'Brien as a feminist icon and pioneer.

Eimear McBride has contended that *The Country Girls* as a quintessential tale of Irish girlhood "is not the novel that broke the mould, it is the one that made it" (xi). In her adaptation, O'Brien continued to innovate, as her stage version was not concerned with fidelity to her novel. Reviewers misconstrued this dimension of the production and accused it either of sentimentality or of reneging on the erstwhile radicalism of the original text. Inherent in such commentary was a presumption that a feminist text which has gained wider currency must necessarily have forfeited its challenging Otherness. A feature of the 2019 Abbey production was that it deliberately risked anachronism in revising some aspects of the plot and thus freely oscillating between the past and the present. It further challenged the audience in eschewing naturalism, forgoing a set, and fluidly deploying the ensemble of actors to double up on roles. Apart from the leads, all the actors played several different parts and were choreographed as they moved in and out of the rapidly succeeding scenes, gathering into tightly knit groups that then suddenly dispersed. The sense of an unfurling dreamscape was further added to by the swift set changes effected by aerially dropping and lifting sparse and uniformly painted pieces of furniture to indicate domestic settings, school rooms, or dormitories on a largely empty stage denuded of a backdrop.

The staging of this adaptation hence suggestively represented femininity as a phantasmagoria, thus breaking with the realism of the novel, the plot of which it echoed but also altered. Kate Brennan, the central heroine, was defined from the start of the play by her self-divided nature; her quest for the ineffable – she danced to "Liebestod" from Wagner's *Tristan* in the opening scene (3) – placed her at odds with the world around her. Her yearning to be an artist was shown to be at variance with the compliance and self-denial expected of her as a woman, and also with the hedonism and pragmatism of her friend Baba, who called her to task: "You want different things, kiddo …You want poems and stuff … that's not the buzz … that's not the carousel" (60). The conflict between Catholic conservatism and romantic idealism was particu-

larly drawn out in the boarding school scenes in which Sister Immaculata enjoined silence and asceticism, while a younger nun, Sister Mary, revealed her uncertainty about her vocation and its roots in unrealised desires. The latter's singing of the hymn, "Lady of the Way" (25), with its evocation of a lovelorn but otherworldly Mariolatry, captured the difference of female longing but also its fatally self-undermining aspects.

Indeed, music and poetry were used throughout the production to capture the subversive nature of the woman artist and of a female desire that seemed at once part of a heterosexual economy and to exceed and topple it. Kate's mother appeared to her as a reproving ghost, but also as a soothing spirit who sang to her and enveloped her in a shared feminine semiotic space. By contrast, the symbiotic but conflicted relationship between Kate and Baba was characterised by performances that alternatively expressed the mutual subversiveness that united them, as when they sang "I'll tell me my ma when I get home" at the end of Act One, and underscored their opposing stances on the world, as when Baba in Act Two ironically performed, "How Can You Buy Killarney," stressing her own mercenary attitude to love and taunting Kate's otherworldliness. Literature also acted as an instrument of female desire and queer attachment. Kate, for example, beguiled Sister Mary by reading the ending of James Joyce's "The Dead" to her and confiding that she regularly mixed up "God and poetry" (24). Despite her artistic proclivities, Kate was shown as torn between seeing love as sublimation and as pathic. Thus, she recited "Molly Bawn," a song about the tragic killing of the eponymous heroine who is mistaken for a swan, in order to fend off the advances of Reg and to convey her sense of fatedness. Contrastingly, she deployed poetry proactively in her affair with Mr Gentleman and repurposed Joseph Mary Plunkett's mystic poem "I See His Blood Upon the Rose" (57) to convey her lover's erotic power over her and her illicit but overwhelming sexual desire for him. His failure to make good on his promise to take her on a trip to Vienna during which he planned to seduce her, however, turned into a scene reminiscent of "Nighttown" in *Ulysses* in which hobos, buskers, and prostitutes sang "Monto" (66-67). Her passion thus was de-sublimated and redirected.

Notably, Joycean intertextuality, as in her performance for Sister Mary, allowed a reframing of her desire and the intermingling of her artistic ambitions with those of the male modernist author. Instead of with Mr Gentleman, her sexual initiation took place with the poet Finn, who also seduced with a talismanic poem, Padraic Colum's "The Drover" (71). In a moment that mirrored her abandonment by Mr Gentleman, Finn, too, deserted her but urged her to leave Ireland, citing Joyce's words in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Ireland is the sow that eats her farrow" (72). At the end, Baba, momentarily reconciled with Kate, shared her bewilderment, but also the growing insight into how they have both been shaped by patriarchal culture. She posed the question, "was it men who broke us?" to which Kate proffered the tentative "maybe" (79). Rebuffing Mr Gentleman, who pleaded with her to stay in the country, Kate uncertainly but defiantly boarded ship with Baba in the final moments of the play *en*

route to the UK. Emigration was depicted at once as enforced and as an active choice by the country girls who have recognised their precarious position as women in Irish patriarchy and asserted their right to have rights. O'Brien, hence, in conjoining past and present in her adaptation, links 1960s feminism with the contemporary movement, but leaves open what kind of future might await her heroines, albeit Kate in the closing words heralds her journey to a "bright, unwritten place" (81).

Marina Carr's *Hecuba*, a version of Euripides's play, was first staged at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon by the Royal Shakespeare Company in September 2015. It premiered in Ireland in the Project Theatre, 27 September-6 October 2019. Carr radically reworked Euripides's text in order to reconceive Hecuba and to question the violent vengefulness that she instigates and for which she is held to task. Her declared intention was to rehabilitate the central character and to redress how she has been received ("Playwright Marina Carr in Conversation with Fiona Macintosh"). *Hecuba* is traditionally seen as the most rebarbative of Euripides's tragedies because of its blighted view of human behaviour. Abducted and enslaved by the victorious Greeks, Hecuba is depicted as broken by grief and the impact of war following the death of her husband, Priam, and her fifty children, and the sacking of Troy. Problematically, she unites the roles of righteous war victim, grieving wife and mother, and bloodthirsty avenger. In Euripides's work, the unappeased ghost of Achilles, the Greek hero, demands the sacrifice of Polyxena, Hecuba's daughter, as recompense for his violent death. Hecuba attempts unavailingly to prevent this killing and to substitute herself for her daughter. Adding to her grief for the butchering of Polyxena is her devastation at the death of Polydorous, her young son, by Polymestor, her Thracian ally, who instead of shielding him has killed him for the treasure he brought with him. In retaliation, she blinds the latter and murders his two children. Her transformation from sorrow-laden survivor to merciless avenger is often seen as jarring and implausible by modern readers and audiences.[5] Moreover, the denunciation of Hecuba in misogynistic terms at the end of the play as a rapacious and immoral mother and the perplexing, closing prophecy that she will turn into a dog in the future, thereby fully embodying the bestiality that she has displayed, further reinforce the sense of a bifurcated figure who is viewed disjointedly and held to ransom for a gendered essentialism that casts women as Other and deems them prone to atavistic reversions.

Carr's adaptation thoroughly questioned every aspect of Euripides's play, revising its plot and overturning its sexist presumptions about women and patriarchal concepts of honour and male heroism. She excised the ghosts and chorus from the play and completely altered the ending. Her text, hence, is palimpsestic, at once an interrogation of the original Greek text, a host of later intertexts, and a discrete feminist reimagining of them. Countering her negative typecasting in received versions of the

5 See Foley 1-90 for an examination of the reception history of *Hecuba*, its interpretive cruxes, and modern stagings of it.

story, Carr's Hecuba never resorted to revenge; the violent actions she reputedly carried out are represented as hearsay and a falsification. In tandem with these departures from a supposedly fixed matrix, Carr replotted and re-psychologised the motives and affects of all the main figures, including the male characters, in different terms. Hence, Agamemnon and Odysseus are more torn and conflicted than in Euripides's play, and Polyxena, rather than transcending the bloodiness and injustice of her unwarranted death as traditional views of her as a complaisant daughter would have it, petulantly embraced her fate because of her love for Achilles and was shown as alternately resolute, defiant, fearful, and self-divided.

However startling these changes may be, Carr particularly challenged her audience to rethink inherited Greek myths and the foundational sexism of Western culture by constantly playing with point of view and the possibilities of dialogue in her script. All of the exchanges were a mixture of reported speech, inner monologue and, more rarely, direct conversation. This oscillating pattern was established in Hecuba's long opening speech and continued thereafter as in the following initial encounter between Agamemnon and the Trojan queen who has become his war slave:

> *Agamemnon*: Fabled queen I say. She hears the mockery in my voice though it's not compulsive mockery. I've been waiting to get a good look at her for a while. And there she is, perched on her husband's throne, holding what? His head? The blood flowing down her arms. And what arms they are, long and powerful. What's that? I say. She doesn't answer, just looks at me as if I'm a goatherd, the snout cocked, the straight back, three thousand years of breeding in that pose.
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> *Hecuba*: They told me many things about him, this terror of the Aegean, this monster of Mycenae, but they forgot to tell me about the eyes. Sapphires. Transcendental eyes, fringed by lashes any girl would kill for. I pretend I don't know who he is. And you are? I say. You know damn well who I am he laughs, and you may stand. (12-13)

Dialogue in the play thus constantly spliced the public and private, the words of others and internal monologue, direct address and narrated thoughts and events. Even though some critics found this risky textual strategy obstructive and unsatisfactory, it had the effect of radically unsettling things, as characters who were at odds nonetheless partook of each other's words and thoughts.[6] Conflictual conversations became participatory and unspoken thoughts breached the boundaries of private consciousness, and were factored into the emotional and political sparring in the play. Likewise, the audience was forced to rethink what it knew and constantly to reassess the action from the multi-perspectival viewpoints granted to them.

Counterbalancing Carr's estranging effects with dialogue, the Rough Magic production directed by Lynne Parker transposed the action to a contemporary but unspecified warzone, reminiscent of the war in Syria.[7] Upturned chairs on a stark, denuded

6 For conflicting views of Carr's narrative experimentation see Wallace, Wang, and Sihra 265-76.

7 Headrick and Lonergan 109-14 provide useful summaries of Parker's vision and resourcefulness as director and the co-operative ethos that she fosters as a central dynamic of performance.

stage space were the only items used to suggest the chaos and violence of the context and setting. The text was acted in the traverse with the spectators seated around the central performance space and placed deliberately close to the action. The emotional immersiveness and inquisitorial nature of the text were reinforced by the actors' positioning of themselves in the audience when not directly performing, thus continuing their wary involvement in the unfurling events.

Hecuba's moral stance and ethical questioning of war in terms that coincided with contemporary concepts of rights and criminality were immediately made evident in her opening speech:

> And I say, the women? What about the women? The children? The women too, they're killing the women he says, all the old ones, the ugly ones, the ones past childbearing, past work. And the children? I say. Priam's head oozing onto my dress. The children he says, all the boys and all girls under ten. Why? I say, though I know it's a stupid question. Not enough room on the ships he says. They're rounding them up, have them in the cattle pens. And I think, this is not war. In war, there are rules, laws, codes. This is genocide. They're wiping us out. (12)

Shifts in point of view gave contour to this disquisition, as Hecuba, chorus-like, commented on the killing of the citizens of Troy in the aftermath of the sacking of the city, made us privy to the visceral immediacy of violence, and also forensically adduced the carnage that she witnessed to be "genocide." The use of this twentieth-century coinage alerted us to the way in which contemporary perspectives necessarily infiltrated and contaminated the play. In another signal scene of horror, Hecuba's discovery of the dead body of Polydorous, her young son, Carr also effected a disquieting intermingling of reportage, the direct voicing of emotion, and intertextual allusion to intimate the unspeakable brutality of war:

> *Hecuba*: And there he is on his side looking past me, they didn't even close your eyes. I gather him up, he resists me, doesn't want my embrace now, will never want it again, no breath none. You knew you would come to this day, in you from the start, all gone now and something akin to relief comes flooding in, you can put aside motherhood now, take it off like a scarf…Who did this? Who did this to my war baby, born in the first year of these unimaginable times? I must bear this too it seems.
>
> *Agamemnon*: She comes howling, charging, her mother's nose has smelt him out. She stumbles past me, the veins leaping from her neck with the dead weight of him. The howls. This. This. This. This. This. (53-54)

Hecuba, unlike in Euripides's play, was completely taken up by maternal grief and not by thoughts of revenge. Spectators were made aware of the extremity of her emotion which was conveyed with impartial but not unfeeling precision by Agamemnon. The echoes of King Lear holding the body of Cordelia and of Maurya faced with the body of her drowned son in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* compounded the intensity of her loss and endowed it with a universal but also meta-theatrical dimension. It was not bestiality that was laid bare but the enormity of engulfing anguish. Hecuba's comments also, in keeping with Carr's feminist reclaiming of her, had a self-explicatory and accusatory force. Her question, "Who did this to my war baby?," pointedly re-

framed the scene and directed attention to the largescale issues that the play addressed about the voicelessness of refugees, their right to a fair hearing, the ethics of war, and the marginalisation of women. In the final scenes of the play Cassandra, Hecuba's daughter, changed from ostracised prophet to a knowing witness who discerned her mother's grief-stricken decline into "a ghost of herself now, haunting herself" (55). Cassandra's final speech, which rounded out the play, continued the readjustment of our vision and uncovered the porous and questionable lines of division between self and Other, civilisation and barbarity, victim and hero:

> They said many things about her after, that she killed those boys, blinded Polymestor, went mad, howled like a dog along this shore. The Achaeans wanted to get their stories down, their myths in stone, their version, with them as heroes always, noble, fair, merciful. No. They were the wild dogs, the barbarians, the savages who came as guests and left an entire civilisation on its knees and in the process defiled its Queen and her memory. What she did was put her last child on the pyre, say her prayers, wait for death quietly by that pyre. And it came, grudgingly, but finally it came. And the wind came too, and we sailed with it to a new and harsher world. (57)

Ultimately, too, Cassandra exposed how versions of history are dominated by the victors, in this case the Greeks, and their obliterating partisan views. By contrast, Carr's play preserved its revisionist and emphatically questioning stance to the end. In daring to rewrite Euripides but also to concoct a disturbing dramaturgy predicated on a continuous interrogation of reported speech, third-person narration, hearsay, rumour, and mythic transmission, she wielded the art of adaptation to compose a radical renegotiation of a provocative tragedy, to produce a heart-rending, feminist reclamation of Hecuba, and a potent denunciation of war. The right of stateless minorities and of subaltern groups, including women and refugees, to have a voice is asserted as part of the unfurling, adaptational vison of Carr's play.

After the first lockdown brought about the closure of public venues due to Covid-19, Michael West's adaptation of Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* became one of the only plays actually to be staged in Ireland in 2020. Exceptionally, it was viewed by a live, albeit masked and socially distanced, audience in Kilkenny in August 2020 as part of an attenuated programme for the annual arts festival in the city. Directed by Lynne Parker, the show skilfully transposed much of the virtuosity and intensity of the novel, but also reimagined key aspects of it. Reinforcing the current vitality and cogency of adaptations, it may with some justification be dubbed *the* Irish pandemic play, as it was subsequently filmed and screened on 2 November 2020 on RTE and as part of *Seoda*, a week-long online celebration of Irish culture made available internationally by Culture Ireland to mark St. Patrick's Day, 2021.

McCormack's celebrated fiction is a poetic meditation voiced posthumously by Marcus Conway as he revisits his life during a brief, anguished return to the world afforded to him on 2 November, All Souls' Day. Self-consciously carrying forward some aspects of the artistry of the modernist novel, it narrates in unpunctuated but carefully sculpted and formatted prose Marcus's meandering and anxiety-laden reminiscences about his marriage, family life, and working existence as a road engineer in County Mayo.

Mirroring Joyce's *Ulysses*, it is a one-day novel which centres largely on the private and familial life of one man, but also on the public role he fulfils as a benign, but conservative, patriarch. However, it also inverts some aspects of *Ulysses*, as it is the central hero, not the heroine, who is confined to the home to which he has returned to mull over his festering existential predicaments.

Michael West's deft adaptation distilled vital facets of the meandering and increasingly ominous preoccupations of the protagonist, but also dovetailed them with those of a community in the throes of a pandemic. Not surprisingly, the first-person narration is transmuted into a monologue. But, startlingly, Marcus's house which, we learn in McCormack's text, he has constructed with great pride, was depicted as an unfinished building project, divided by ghostly plastic sheets in lieu of walls. In step with this dismantling of the domestic and of the neoliberal pretensions of contemporary Ireland, the play also deconstructed Marcus's hold on his role as spouse and father and his presuppositions about masculinity. In particular, his retrospective worries about his wife's illness due to contaminated water unmoored him as did his discomfiture with the installations of his daughter – a visual artist –, which were inscribed with her own blood. To the degree that Conway played the part of a reconceived and transgendered Molly Bloom, his kinship with her was borne out by the emphasis on the bodily, the sexual, the introspective, and the domestic in this adaptation. West's reimagining of McCormack's text also drew out and orchestrated its gathering apocalyptic undertones in the precise computational pronouncements of the main figure. Thereby, masculinity was rendered not as toxic, as the current nostrum would have it, but as a purgatorial and anguished state of incompletion and lack. But damnation as well as salvation and insight dogged the vision of this male *persona* who hovered between a bodiless spectre, a soul in torment, and a material, atomistic object on the verge of disintegration:

> animal, mineral, vegetable
> father, husband, citizen
> my body drawing its soul in its wake, these residual pulses and rhythms, nothing more than a vague strobing of the air before they too are
> cast out beyond darkness into that vast unbroken commonage of space and time, into that vast oblivion in which there are no markings or contours to steer by, nor any songs to sing me home and where is nothing else for it but to keep going, one foot in front of the other
> the head down and keep going
> keep going
> keep going to fuck (32-33)

Even though Conway's compulsive chewing over of the diurnal and unremarkable events of his life suggested, in part, that he was an Everyman figure, his unexplained but insistent distress marked him out ultimately as a latter-day Faustus, doomed not because of any particular misdeeds but because of the very modernity and ordinariness that he had embraced and was part of, and because of his floundering but human lack of discernment. The *angst* dissected and enacted in the production was peculiarly apt to the ongoing experience of the pandemic. However, the redisposition

of things intimated by the house as building site also suggested that the issues of contamination and culpability addressed in the play belonged, in Arendt's locution, to the space of flows rather than of places. Global and even cosmic anxieties trumped and reframed local, domestic, and particularist ones.

Linda Hutcheon has argued that adaptations should be seen as processes as much as products. The four distinctive plays examined in this chapter, Deirdre Kinahan's *The Unmanageable Sisters*, Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*, Marina Carr's *Hecuba*, and Michael West's *Solar Bones*, chime with this formulation since they all interrogated, changed, and re-envisaged the original text which was their jumping-off point. As adaptations they were exploratory and inventive, and provided the basis for productions that were dramaturgically imaginative and innovative, and often broke with many of the naturalistic and narrative norms of the Irish stage. Above all, ethical, feminist, and revisionist imperatives underwrote and variously cross-connected these works which inspected and amplified the modes of femininity and masculinity that may be envisaged socially and culturally, whether in the form of the working-class woman, country girl, tragic heroine, grieving mother, refugee, male warmonger, or citizen and father, and the injustice, exclusions, and exploitation attendant on gender divisions. Even though frequently denigrated and discounted, adaptations, as these texts and productions exemplify, constitute a fertile, resonant, hybrid, and variegated mode of writing for the Irish stage which command attention and warrant further and ongoing critical investigation.

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