



## Re-examining and Redeeming the Tragic Queen: Euripides' *Hecuba* in Two Versions by Frank McGuinness (2004) and Marina Carr (2015)

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**Abstract.** A common approach to Irish theatre during the last years has been the identification of the interest by the playwrights in rewriting, adapting or translating Greek tragedies. This article examines Euripides' *Hecuba* by Frank McGuinness (2004) and Marina Carr (2015) from a comparative approach and emphasizes the revision and redemption of the figure of the queen of Troy in the hands of both Irish contemporary playwrights. From this perspective, a new image of Hecuba is suggested which adds to the classical heroine modern traits that allow to parallel her story with Ireland's (hi)stories of war as well as to redeem her from the burden of the myth which is then unmasked. The analysis of Hecuba's speeches in the three versions reveals language and plot variations that have allowed the myth to continue traveling in time.

**Keywords:** Hecuba, Greek tragedy, Irish theatre, Frank McGuinness, Marina Carr

**Contents.** 1. Irish versions of Euripides' heroines. 2. Hecuba revisited. 2.1. Euripides' *Hecuba* in a new version by Frank McGuinness. 2.2. Marina Carr's *Hecuba*. 3. Conclusions. 4. Appendix: Irish plays on Euripides' heroines.

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### 1. Irish Versions of Euripides' Heroines

In many ways Ireland was and is constructing its identity through the representations offered by Greek tragedy. (McDonald 2002: 37)

A common approach to Irish theatre during the last years has been the identification of the interest by its playwrights in rewriting, adapting or translating Greek tragedies.<sup>2</sup> The Irish have been always identified by a special attachment to drama

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<sup>2</sup> See *Dying Acts: Death in Ancient Greek and Modern Irish Tragic Drama* (Macintosh 1994), *Theatre Staff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Jordan 2000), *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy* (McDonald 2002), *Hellenizing Ireland: Greek and Roman Themes in Modern Irish Literature* (Arkins 2005), *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today* (Dillon 2005), *Found in Translation: Greek Drama*

as the platform to express their concerns (Walton 2002: 8), and the classical setting offers them a distance that facilitates to put on stage conflicts and themes that would otherwise be unwatchable. Within this scope, the plays of Euripides have been revisited and different intentions have been recognized. His tragedies address the issues of women, the stranger or foreigner, colonialism, freedom, social injustices in the form of different oppressions, men and women fighting each other, men and women as they are, women as heroines, children as victims, and slaves as the keepers of truths and honors. Euripides focused on the victims or less privileged in society, and this is an issue of much concern in contemporary Ireland.

Of the seventeen plays by Euripides that survive, twelve take their title from and have a woman or a group of women as protagonists. They are usually strong, kill enemies and sacrifice. Specific interest in these women by Irish dramatists from the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>3</sup> to the present time supports the idea of the reexamination of Euripidean heroines as a strategy to perform the realities of Ireland. (See section 4. *Appendix* for an updated record of these plays which reflects this attention).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tragedies were rewritten in peripheral regions such as Ireland, within the context of the Irish Literary Revival, and linked to the aim “to dignify Ireland by staging tragic drama that would exploit both contemporary settings and ancient Celtic myth” (Arkins 2010: 18). This was the intention of the first references to Greek tragedies in the plays of Yeats and Synge through the figure of Deirdre and her connections with Helen. Later on, links were established between the life of women in the Athens of the fifth century BC and Irish women in the twentieth century, to raise the point that in both contexts they suffered from exclusion from relevant social matters. The changing situation of women in Ireland after the independence from Britain in 1922 was marked by the initial confinement within the domestic spaces, supported by the 1937 Constitution, while men were empowered and dominated the public spheres. Over the following decades, the legalization of divorce, birth control and homosexuality benefitted women’s position and the election of Mary Robinson as president of Ireland in 1991, together with the scandals made public about the Catholic church and sexual abuses, have contributed to make the Irish society evolve towards “a secular society amid ongoing debate about gender roles and identities” (Wilmer 2005b: 138). However, even when women in Ireland started to benefit from these changes “there was a sense that much remained to be done for women” (Arkins 2002: 200) at a time when the country “was convulsed by debates and referenda having to do with the rights of

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*in English* (Walton 2006), *Irish Appropriation of Greek Tragedy* (Arkins 2010) and *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama* (Van Zyl Smit 2016).

<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive account of English translations and versions of Greek tragedy by Irish authors from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century can be found in McDonald 2002: 80-82. A more recent list has been recorded by Arkins 2010: 22-23. The website *Irishplayography* contains updated information about Irish plays which have been professionally produced and published since the foundation of the Abbey Theatre in Ireland (1904) and it includes information about those plays which are inspired by Greek drama: <<http://www.irishplayography.com/>> (Accessed 17 March 2016).

women” (Roche 2005: 150), so Irish playwrights continued translating and revisiting the Greeks to re-present these concerns. This has been the case of Brendan Kennelly, Derek Mahon, Brian Friel or Frank McGuinness. The same intention prevailed from 2000 onwards in the hands now of female dramatists too, such as Edna O’Brien or Marina Carr. As regards the themes to be addressed, these include, amongst others, women’s fight for independence, their attempt to gain freedom and agency from men, and their right to escape traditional feminine stereotypes and “react to their oppression with rage” (Arkins 2002: 201), showing their emotions.

Euripides’ heroines were seen in their original contexts as paradigms of submission and obedience, in the cases of queen Alcestis or Iphigenia; rebel and inhuman, as princess Medea; fighting together against their fate and denouncing the futility of wars, as *The Trojan Women* or *Electra*; protagonists of a positive ending, as Helen who escapes from Menelaus; mothers of sorrow, as Hecuba. Notwithstanding, they also represented female solidarity as a strategy to fight oppression; Medea, for instance, gains recognition from other women that Jason has not behaved correctly when he abandoned her by a younger and wealthier wife. Very often marriage constituted a trap for these heroines: it was a condemnation in the case of Medea, it equaled slavery for *The Trojan Women* and it demanded sacrifice for Iphigenia at Aulis. In conclusion, Euripides’ heroines can be considered as victims but also as strong women who “empower themselves and are empowered by the support of other women, to take action to overturn their oppression” (Wilmer 2005a: xx). They have been translated in Ireland in different ways, sometimes staying closer to Euripides and in other occasions being adapted to fit the new social and cultural contexts. For instance, Medea has not only been rewritten as a revengeful mother but also as encapsulating the epitome of the Other: Marina Carr’s *By The Bog of Cats...* (1998) constitutes a revision of the heroine where the main protagonist, Hester Swane, is portrayed as an Irish Medea that is seen as a tinker, a traveler and an outsider or even a refugee within her community of the rural Midlands, highlighting women’s inability to fit in Irish society. Moreover, she does not count on other women’s support in the new version. She has been read as a representation of a colonized image of Irish culture which is being expelled (Sihra 2005), and also a heroine who fights against patriarchal and social laws. The Irish playwright, Carr in this case, is definitely rewriting the myth of Mother Ireland through her construction of this new Medea: when Hester kills her daughter in the final scene of the play she does so not so much out of revenge but to save Josie from a life of longing for a mother who will never return. After killing her daughter, Hester herself will die. The rewriting of the myth here seems to have the intention of symbolizing the destruction of the myth of Mother Ireland in a culture where women had to represent this imposed image despite their real aspirations. The revisions of Hecuba that will be exposed in this article offer a reexamination and a redemption of the Euripidean heroine that also suit the needs of the new contemporary Irish contexts where she is rewritten.

## 2. Hecuba Revisited

The character of Hecuba in Euripides changes “from a passive sufferer in the first half of the play to furious avenger in the second” (Kovacs 1987: 79). Accordingly, the play can be divided into two parts according to the two main plots described: the story of Polyxena’s sacrifice by the Greeks and the story of the murder of Polydorus and Hecuba’s consequent revenge on Polymestor. By comparing her entry and supplication to Odysseus, or her plea to Agamemnon and her final transformation in the three plays it is possible to acquire a better understanding of the different ways in which the character was approached by the different playwrights.

Euripides’ *Hecuba* (mid 420s BC) is set at the end of the ten-year Trojan War with Hecuba as the queen of Troy and wife of king Priam. The defeat of the Trojans by the Greeks made a slave of her and the Trojan women and, after the sack, the Greeks intend to sail back home leaving behind the ruins of Troy. Hecuba’s son, Polydorus, is a ghost and her daughter, Polyxena, shares her mother’s condition as a slave. Moreover, her husband Priam has just been killed by Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, after the famous episode of the wooden horse, and, consequently, Hecuba is a widow, a mother and a slave. Within this context, the play opens with the ghost of Polydorus explaining how he was murdered by his father’s friend Polymestor who, moreover, left him “unwept, unburied” (Euripides in Harrison 2008: 5), and how Achilles is demanding his sister Polyxena as a sacrifice. At this point, Hecuba is introduced in the play and her new state of distress, caused by the gods, is emphasized:

ὦ μήτηρ ἥτις ἐκ τυραννικῶν δόμων  
 δούλειον ἦμαρ εἶδες, ὡς πράσσεις κακῶς  
 ὅσον περ εὖ ποτ’ : ἀντισηκώσας δέ σε  
 φθείρει θεῶν τις τῆς πάροιθ’ εὐπραξίας.<sup>4</sup>

Hecuba is physically frail and implores the gods to protect her children as she has had allegorical dreams foretelling their deaths. Her fears are to be confirmed by the chorus which brings the news that Polyxena “shall be offered in sacrifice to Achilles” (13) as his tomb must be crowned with young blood. When she tells her daughter about this, Polyxena’s lament is enacted and it highlights again Hecuba’s sorrow and the beginning of her fall:

καὶ σοῦ μὲν, μάτερ, δυστάνου  
 κλαίω πανδύρτοις θρήνοις,  
 τὸν ἐμὸν δὲ βίον λώβαν λύμαν τ’

<sup>4</sup> “O mother, used to a royal palace, you have now seen / Life as a slave, your fortunes as low / As one day they were high. Some god, to balance / Your prosperity before, now ruins you” (Euripides, in Harrison 2008: 9).

οὐ μετακλαίομαι, ἀλλὰ θανεῖν μοι  
 ζυντυχία κρείσσων ἐκύρησεν.<sup>5</sup>

Odysseus will accompany Polyxena to her death and ask Hecuba to “Accept your lack of strength and your parlous state” (21), marking now the queen’s lack of agency in the situation. The single-line dialogues between Odysseus and Hecuba recall how in the past she helped him in different matters and now she appeals to those favors as she feels that she is dead alive: “I am dead: I died of grief, before my death” (37). Hecuba’s pleas to Odysseus are useless and the sentence is passed: Polyxena will be sacrificed. After the first choral ode Hecuba is redefined as “once rich in gold [...] once blessed” (43), but now childless, robbed of her pride, “the saddest women” who has “surpassed all men and women in suffering” (55). In the third episode Hecuba has to confront the death of her son when she is brought his dead body and starts her “wild lament” (55). She now pleads with Agamemnon for revenge. He hears her disgraces and wonders “what woman was ever born to such misfortune” (63). In addition to being childless, widowed and enslaved, she is now “stateless, abandoned, most pitiful of mortals” (65), she feels as a prisoner, lost and dishonored, but also determined to enact her revenge after Agamemnon refuses to help her for the sake of his social status and public opinion. Hecuba plots her vengeance together with the Trojan women and the fourth episode marks her triumph over the killer of her son after she interrogates and entraps him: Polymestor will end up blinded and witnessing the death of his two sons in the hands of the Women. Hecuba finally feels relieved as she has a sense of justice -“I am avenged” (99)- and she is sent by Agamemnon to bury her children while the story is closed with the return of the Greeks to their home:

Ἐκάβη, σὺ δ', ὦ τάλαινα, διπτύχους νεκροὺς  
 στείχουσα θάπτει: δεσποτῶν δ' ὑμᾶς χρεῶν  
 σκηναῖς πελάζειν, Τρωάδες: καὶ γὰρ πνοᾶς  
 1290 πρὸς οἶκον ἤδη τάσδε πομπίμους ὄρω.  
 εὖ δ' ἐς πάτραν πλεύσαιμεν, εὖ δὲ τὰν δόμοις<sup>6</sup>

Euripides’ Hecuba is, at first, weak and frail, once a queen, now a slave, stateless and abandoned, and will end up taking her revenge on her enemies for the deaths of her children. This is a plot that suits the Irish history.

<sup>5</sup> “I weep for you, poor mother, / With all my heart. / But for my own life, the outrage and the insult, / I do not weep; / Mine is the better fate, to die” (21).

<sup>6</sup> “Hecuba, poor lady, go and bury your two dead. / Trojan women, you must go to your masters’ tents. / I see there is now a favorable wind to take us home. / May we have a fair passage homeward / And, freed from all these troubles, find all well at home” (103).

## 2.1. Euripides' *Hecuba* in a New Version by Frank McGuinness

Hecuba started to feature in Irish appropriations with Frank McGuinness and Marina Carr. In the case of McGuinness, he found parallelisms between the story of the Greek heroine and Irish issues such as fighting, vengeance and danger:

War plays remind us of that. Hecuba reminds us of that. It is not a comforting play, particularly not for these dangerous times when there is so much grief. It shows that there is a dark hardness that we all possess, and that the impulse for revenge and war comes from within us all. That means nobody is safe. (McGuinness in Gardner 2004)

Born in Buncrana, County Donegal, Frank McGuinness lives in Dublin where he lectures at University College Dublin. He is considered as one of the most important playwrights of his generation and his plays have been produced and toured internationally. He is well-known by his interest in representing the reality of the Irish society. McGuinness' *Hecuba* was first performed at the Donmar Warehouse in London in 2004. Reviews of the time defined his version as poetic, paralleling with contemporary events, especially wars and conflicts, and as “a lesson in the potential for brutality in mankind that still exists today” (Fisher 2004). He explained the events that constituted the catalyst for the play: when the Omagh bombing took place in Northern Ireland in 1998, 31 people were killed, including teenagers, children and a mother pregnant with twins. On the other hand, in September 2004 the Beslan school bombing happened in Russia, and 330 people, including children, were killed by nationalists. McGuinness felt very close to the situations, both geographically and emotionally:

Two of the children who died that day came from the same estate in Buncrana where I grew up. At their funeral, the sister of one of the boys started crying and the sound she made seemed to come from the earth itself. It made me think about a grief so terrible and powerful and what it can do [...] I heard that sound again when I was watching the women of Beslan crying for their children. It was the same sound multiplied many, many times. (McGuinness in Gardner 2004)

The plot of his *Hecuba* is close to Euripides. One of the originalities from the playwright is his use of very short verse lines and a language which is vehement, definite and direct. For McGuinness words should sound in this play “like stones hitting a wall” (McGuinness in Cavendish 2004). The play opens with Polydorus' speech from death which exemplifies the playwright's use of language and his loyalty to Euripides:

**McGuinness**

I am Polydorus, son of Hecuba  
 Priam is my father.  
 I am dead.  
 I come from the darkness –  
 The abyss, the gates of godless  
 hell.  
 Son of Hecuba. (McGuinness  
 2004: 3)

**Euripides**

κω νεκρῶν κευθμῶνα καὶ σκότου  
 πύλας  
 λιπὼν, ἴν' Ἄιδης χωρὶς ὄκισται  
 θεῶν,  
 Πολύδωρος, Ἐκάβης παῖς γεγῶς  
 τῆς Κισσέως<sup>7</sup>

Hecuba enters the stage as an old woman who echoes the classical heroine but whose direct utterances that constitute McGuinness' innovation reach the contemporary reader effectively:

**McGuinness**

Children, lead this old woman  
 outside.  
 A slave like the rest of you,  
 She once was your queen.  
 Help me to find my feet.  
 Grab hold of this wrinkled hand.  
 I'll lean on your arm –guide me.  
 I'll walk as fast as I can –  
 But these legs are tired and slow. (6)

**Euripides**

ἄγετ', ὦ παῖδες, τὴν γραῦν πρὸ  
 δόμων,  
 ἄγετ' ὀρθοῦσαι τὴν ὀμόδουλον,  
 Τρωάδες, ὑμῖν, πρόσθε δ' ἄνασσαν:  
 λάβετε φέρετε πέμπετ' ἀείρετέ μου  
 γεραιᾶς χειρὸς προσλαζύμεναι:  
 ἄλλοτὶ σκολιῶ σκίπωνι χειρὸς  
 διερειδομένα σπεύσω βραδύπουν  
 ἦλυσιν ἄρθρων προτιθεῖσα<sup>8</sup>

Polyxena also repeats her Euripidean alter ego when she addresses her mother and emphasizes the endless pain inflicted to her as the main cause of her fall. Hecuba has become the mother of sorrow in the new version, and her life of blow after blow might well remind of those of many Irish mothers who saw how their children died due to the wars and conflicts that have happened in Northern Ireland during the twentieth century. On the other side, these same struggles, known as The Troubles, could well explain the words uttered in the excerpt below and the figure of Hecuba as the embodiment of the land of Ireland, Mother Ireland, (Mother of Sorrow) who suffers endless attacks, could work in this context :

What new torture awaits you?

<sup>7</sup>"I come from the vaults of the dead and the gates / Of  
 darkness, where, apart from the other gods, /  
 Hades' home is fixed. I am Polydorus, son of  
 Hecuba" (3).

<sup>8</sup> Come, girls, bring the old lady out, / Support her,  
 your fellow salve now, Trojan women, / Once

your queen. / Come, take me, help me on my  
 way. / Take my aged hand, And I will rest on the  
 crooked staff / Of your arm, and speed the slow /  
 Pace of my feet" (9).

Mother of sorrow,  
 Sorrow upon sorrow,  
 One blow after another blow  
 Hits you in the face.  
 How do you live through this hate?  
 What power have you offended?  
 Why is pain piled upon you? (11)

Hecuba's supplication to Odysseus in McGuinness is used by the contemporary playwright to insert references to modern feelings of discomfort about hypocrisy, which echoes philandering politicians, about the treason and futility of wars, the uselessness of power and how it corrupts people, and the weak position of women in society compared to that of men. Moreover, she also states clearly that men, Odysseus in this case, and not only gods, have the power to change things:

Yes, I treated you well.  
 You say so yourself.  
 Why do you act this way against me?  
 Stab me in the back,  
 Grind me into dirt,  
 Do me no good, only bad.  
 Coward.  
 May your breed turn their backs  
 On you and your like,  
 Smelling sweet up all men's noses.  
 You're not friend of mine –  
 Stay that way.  
 You shake the hands of all and sundry  
 Smiling as you spit  
 On your nearest and dearest  
 For the sake of pleasing everybody [...]

You say it yourself –  
 You begged me,  
 You clung to my hand and withered cheek.  
 Now I cling to you –  
 I demand you return my favour.  
 I beg you.  
 Don't take my child from my arms.  
 Don't kill her.  
 No more deaths –enough. [...]

You have the upper hand.  
 Use it gently.  
 You have power.  
 Power passes.



I once had power too.  
 No longer. [...]  
 You're a man,  
 Pity me.  
 Feel for me.  
 Go to the army.  
 Tell the Greeks this.  
 Killing women is-  
 It is unspeakable. (15)

Finally, Hecuba's plea to Agamemnon to obtain his help and revenge marks the moment of her transformation, which in this version consists in a moment of empowerment: she becomes stronger but also starts to transform into a monster and then into a beast and, in McGuinness, this is achieved by her recognition of her status as a woman abandoned by the gods, and her demand of a right for justice and revenge. Through the use of contemporary language, Hecuba also highlights the fact that she has become a war prisoner, a refugee who looks for asylum in the form of her right to revenge and she significantly notices the stigma of belonging to a place which has been destroyed by war and her consequent loss of identity as an exile. Her speech at this point echoes recent episodes in our contemporary history such as those related to immigrant communities who have to abandon their countries of origin and are despised on the grounds of discrimination:

I am the mother of all misfortune.  
 Have the gods themselves sanctioned what I suffer?  
 If you believe they do, I bear with it.  
 If you believe the opposite –be my avenger. [...]  
 Why do you turn from this wretched woman?  
 Have you been listening to my sad words?  
 There are ways and means to persuade people.  
 We should learn them above all other skills.  
 I'd pay a fortune to have that power.  
 That way I might have some hope of success.  
 But I'm a prisoner, a prisoner of war.  
 Carted off to the ends of the empty earth.  
 I stink of the smoke of burning Troy. (39)

After Hecuba has asked Agamemnon to summon Polymestor so that she can lure him into her quarters and blind him as well as slaughter his children, she proudly acknowledges her participation in the crimes, as Euripides' heroine did, and she feels relieved. The sense of justice which is mentioned by the Euripidean woman has become in McGuinness' text a more flagrant declaration of the satisfaction gained after revenge, and the Irish Hecuba advocates a justice system that is based on the principle

of an eye for an eye. This feeling echoes the (hi)stories of suffering, confrontation and hatred that have existed in Ireland for centuries, and that have also caused deaths on the basis of vengeance:

**McGuinness**

You will see him soon,  
Staggering about the place,  
Dark sightless eyes and feet.  
You will see his sons' bodies.  
I killed them with the women.  
He has paid what he owes me.  
(50)

**Euripides**

ὄψη νιν αὐτίκ' ὄντα δωμάτων  
πάρος  
1050 τυφλὸν τυφλῶ στείχοντα  
παραφόρῳ ποδί,  
παιδῶν τε δισσῶν σώμαθ', οὓς  
ἔκτειν' ἐγὼ  
σὺν ταῖς ἀρίσταις Τρωάσιν:  
δίκην δέ μοι  
δέδωκε.<sup>9</sup>

McGuinness' *Hecuba* explores "the causes and consequences of conflict" (Salis 2014: 152) and suggests that humans are the ones to blame for conflict and violence rather than the gods from the mythical times. His version is quite faithful to Euripides' as regards the plot, but it adds a new language and an intention to establish blatant links with contemporary events. Moreover, he adds emotion and clarity in *Hecuba* to achieve this aim. When asked about the new generations of Irish playwrights in Ireland, Frank McGuinness stated his admiration for the figure and work of Marina Carr:

The one that I particularly have a great admiration for is Marina Carr. I find hers a very disturbing, very liberating authenticity. And I have immense regard for her use of language, she's very much her own voice, very much her own woman. (McGuinness in Long 1999: 18)

## 2.2. Marina Carr's *Hecuba*

Born in County Offaly, Carr is currently acknowledged as one of the most prominent Irish dramatists. Her plays take a very strong feminine perspective and she is considered as a rebel woman "within the impressive lineage of Irish playwrights who are drawn to ancient Greek drama" (Sihra 2005: 116). When she wrote the *Introduction* for the compilation of her latest plays, published in 2015, she said that her *Hecuba* constituted her attempt to "show her in another light, how she suffered, what she might have felt and how she may have reacted" (Carr 2015: x). The play was first produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre, in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2015, and Carr is here representing her belief that we are creatures of passion rather

<sup>9</sup> "You'll see him in a moment in front of the tent, now / blind, / Making his way with blind, staggering steps, / And the two boys, whom I killed, / With the help of these heroic Trojan women. I have justice" (83).

than rational beings, and that Hecuba has been misrepresented through times: “I fundamentally disagreed with the idea of her killing her two little grandsons in revenge. I just never bought that. So I’ve written my own version of what might possibly have happened on that beach” (Carr in Hutton 2015: 5).

Marina Carr is mainly interested in the emotional passions that moved Hecuba and, thus, she is determined to unveil her most private thoughts in the dialogues of the play. In order to achieve this, Carr uses free reported speech through which each of the characters in the play retells what the others say and, in addition, add their own interpretations. There is no chorus due to this, and the different perspectives are confronted at all times, in such a way that “In this piece, everyone becomes everyone else’s chorus –they comment on the other person” (Carr in Williams 2015). Thus, *dramatis personae* address the spectators/readers directly and this brings Greek tragedy closer to contemporary audiences. The classical mode has definitely been modernized through this technique which, moreover, results in a deeper analysis of Hecuba’s psychology and contrasts heavily with the one line dialogues between characters in Euripidean version or McGuinness’ short lines.

As it happened with McGuinness’, reviewers saw in Carr’s play “a sharply contemporary resonance in the exploration of what it means to feel powerless in a world dominated by military force” (Hitchings 2015). The word *genocide* resonates in the play and present day images, such as that of the three-year-old Syrian boy and refugee Aylan Kurdi who drowned on September 2015 in the eastern Mediterranean coast when his family was trying to reach Greece from Turkey, have been linked to Hecuba’s young son Polydorus (Williams 2015). Hecuba has been seen here as “the victimized embodiment of a rich Trojan culture” (Billington 2015), who commits no violence and who is very far from Euripides’ furious vindictive heroine. The play opens, not with the ghost of Polydorus’ speech, as did Euripides’ and McGuinness’, but with Hecuba on stage surrounded by blood and pieces of bodies from the corpses of her dead sons. Priam, her husband, is lost, and her two daughters Cassandra and Polyxena accompany her in what is described as a Greek genocide. They and her son Polydorus are all she has left. The narration of what she sees is devastating and echoes a modern war scene of carnage:

**Hecuba** So I’m in the throne room. Surrounded by the limbs, torsos, heads, corpses of my sons. My women trying to dress me, blood between my toes, my sons’ blood, six of them, seven of them, eight? I’ve lost count, not that you can count anyway, they’re not complete, more an assortment of legs, arms, chests, some with the armour still on, some stripped, hands in a pile, whose hands are they? Ears missing, eyes hanging out of sockets, and then Andromache comes in screaming, holding this bloody bundle. My grandson, intact except for his head, smashed off a wall, like an eggshell. They’re through the south gate, she says, they’ve breached the citadel, they’re here. (Carr 2015: 211)

After this, Carr alters again the original plot and introduces Agamemnon who is portrayed as a lustful monster from Mycenae and a barbarian king. His words echo corruption and sexual harassment when he refers to Hecuba in these terms:

**Agamemnon** And she says she'll stand when she feels like it. So I lift her off the throne. Now that wasn't too difficult, was it? I say. I can't resist twirling her though I know I should show more respect. Used but good. Still good. I was expecting an auld hag with her belly hanging down to her knees. But she's all right, there's bedding in her yet. (213)

Hecuba dismantles here the mythical account, which sustained that the destruction of Troy had been justified, by explicitly asserting that Helen did not exist since it was an invention from the Greeks who, as colonizers, needed an excuse to take her land:

**Hecuba** You saw our beautiful city, our valleys, our fields, Green and giving. You had never seen such abundance. You wanted it. You must have it. You came to plunder and destroy.

**Agamemnon** She rattles on about their paved streets, their temples, their marbled libraries, their Holy Joe priests, their palaces of turquoise and pink gold. I say, where's Helen? We can't find her.

**Hecuba** Helen? Helen? Helen was never here and well you know it! (216)

Polymestor's story, on the other hand, happens in this version first, and he faces Agamemnon to respond for the disappearance of Hecuba's son. He will have his own boys kidnapped by Agamemnon and Carr gives him a voice in the form of a new narration to tell his own story and show both sides in a conflict:

**Polymestor** It has not been easy sandwiched between Ilion and the Achaean these long years. Whatever word I broke was to protect my people. The Thracians in all this carnage. What we have endured, the plunder, the rape, the livestock, the fields ruined, all the young men dead, the women taken and used like mules. You have stolen the bread from our children's mouths. Give me my sons. (221)

Another character who has gained prominence in this play is Cassandra. She is depicted as a woman that evokes Carr's previous female characters: the daughter who responds to a mother in a disdainful tone, the woman who openly states her lack of familial feelings when these impede her social privileges and who talks blatantly about her desire for young men. The interexchange below shows her disdain towards Hecuba and also her ambition to become one of the invaders or colonizers herself:

**Hecuba** Don't you love any of us? No, she says I don't. You get in my way, you're too soft, soft with privilege and arrogant on top of it. You thought Troy was untouchable. You thought your gilded life would go on forever. (225)

**Cassandra** Nothing goes on forever. All of this privilege must be paid for. We need to lie down with the Achaeans now, we need some of that barbarian abandon in our

weak perfect blood. Look at them dancing, singing. No Trojan man moves like that. The lightness, they don't care about anything, they're all dead by twenty. He wants you, Mother, he wants the Queen, the legend, the mythic horsewoman all the stories are about. And she tosses her head like a mare. She wants to hit me. (225-226)

This is followed by Odysseus and Agamemnon planning Polyxena's sacrifice and sentence Polydorus to death at the same time and in the middle of the play, in such a way that the order of the events is altered and both deaths are placed together, being the effect an increased sense of loss for Hecuba which is made explicit in her following conversation with Odysseus: her supplication in the previous texts is substituted here by a strong complaint about the unfair of her situation which also marks the beginning of her transformation and her definite distancing from the gods:

**Hecuba** I've never heard... This is obscene! I won't allow it.

**Odysseus** I'm afraid you no longer have the power to allow or disallow anything. You're subject to our laws now. Laws, she hisses, growls, she looks old now, the face clamped with rage.

**Hecuba** You dare call this a law? It's an atrocity on top of all the atrocities! You want to sacrifice my daughter to appease your savage gods. No proper god would ever ask such a thing. (239)

Carr makes Hecuba go with Polyxena to the altar to explain better the suffering of a mother who sees her child die and she rewrites Polyxena as a terrified girl and Hecuba as a brave woman who accompanies her to death:

**Polyxena** It takes forever to untie it, my hands slick with sweat, the knot too tight, the sea of faces looking on, the drums, my mother clinging, her eyes boring into me. This is my death. Mine. Can't she be quiet? Let it be over. Just to stand here, face him, not to cry out, beg, run, takes everything I have. I've nothing left for her, nothing. And of all things I'm embarrassed. It's embarrassing to die like this in front of everyone. (243)

After having lost Polyxena, Cassandra, who is one of the choric figures in this play, rewrites Hecuba's reaction and starts to eliminate the false accounts of previous versions to leave only the grief of Hecuba, her emotions:

**Cassandra** [...] My mother stands, watching, speechless. Her women try to make her lie down. She ignores them. She watches as my sister is put in the flames. My mother's feet are bare, her clothes ruined, no hint of the fabled queen now. She could be one of her own servants. She doesn't insist on the proper funeral rites. No singing, no washing the corpse, no recounting the day of her birth, no stories, no paeans, no dirge, no endless panegyric, no sitting, no stroking the body, no weeping, no laughter, no three-day goodbye no, my mother has moved somewhere beyond grief now. (247)

Other alterations in the plot include the moment when Hecuba and Agamemnon make love, which precedes Hecuba's fall after knowing her son Polydorus has died, or the very relevant twist that implies that Hecuba does not kill Polymestor's sons, or blind him, as Agamemnon will do this instead. The play closes with Cassandra completing the transformation of Hecuba in the form of the redemption of the heroine by making reference to the stories which were told after Hecuba, which were untrue, rewriting her exit and unmasking the myth:

**Cassandra** 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 the heroes always, noble, fair, merciful. No. they were the wild dogs, the barbarians, the savages who came as guests and left an entire civilization 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. (260)

### 3. Conclusions

Euripides' Hecuba possesses the timeless quality of a myth, as did the rest of his heroines, and this has been demonstrated through her presence in the contemporary versions of the play by Frank McGuinness and Marina Carr which continue providing models to address effectively the situation of women and the less privileged in different Irish contexts. In a postcolonial and post catholic Ireland, women continue playing an important role in drama which reflects both the evolution in their situation and the recurring need of change. What we saw in Euripides' Hecuba, how the fall of Troy also brought the fall of its queen, is used by McGuinness to parallel Hecuba and Ireland's (hi)stories of war and its consequences, and is rewritten by Carr to redeem the queen from the burden of the myth.

Hecuba's most significant speeches in the three plays studied here allow to identify the parallelisms and differences which have been introduced by each dramatist with a specific intention. Her presentation as a weak and old woman in Euripides becomes a personification of the character as a woman (land) of sorrow in McGuinness and a denounce of the situation of women who, as mothers, have to see how their children die in war conflicts in Carr. Her moments of supplication and plea are used by McGuinness to denounce the political use of power and to defend the end of violence and grief, while Carr gives Hecuba her right to rewrite (her)stories. Transformation episodes vary from a sense of justice in the classical text to become a stronger woman who, in the context of Ireland, takes pleasure in revenge but also wins her voice and emotions back.

#### 4. Appendix: Irish Plays on Euripides' Heroines

Irish dramatist	Play and date of first production	Title and date of publication	Euripides' heroine revisited
Marina Carr	<i>Hecuba</i> (2015)	<i>Hecuba</i> (2015)	Hecuba
Andy Hinds	<i>Iphigenia in Aulis</i> (2011)	unpublished	Iphigenia
Robin Robertson	<i>Medea</i> (2010)	<i>Medea: a New Translation by Robin Robertson</i> (2008)	Medea
Frank McGuinness	<i>Helen</i> (2009)	<i>Euripides' Helen</i> (2009)	Helen
Conall Morrison	<i>The Bacchae of Bagdad</i> (2006)	unpublished	Bacchae Women
Frank McGuinness	<i>Hecuba</i> (2004)	<i>Euripides' Hecuba in a New Version by Frank McGuinness</i> (2004)	Hecuba
Edna O'Brien	<i>Iphigenia</i> (2003)	<i>Triptych and Iphigenia</i> (2005)	Iphigenia
Colin Teevan	<i>Bacchai</i> (2002)	<i>Bacchai</i> (2001)	Bacchae Women
Marina Carr	<i>Ariel</i> (2002)	<i>Ariel</i> (2002)	Iphigenia at Aulis
Kenneth McLeish	<i>Medea</i> (2000)	<i>Medea</i> (1996)	Medea
Colin Teevan	<i>Iph</i> (1999)	<i>Iph</i> (2002)	Iphigenia in Aulis
Marina Carr	<i>By The Bog of Cats...</i> (1998)	<i>Marina Carr: Plays 1</i> (1999)	Medea
Frank McGuinness	<i>Electra</i> (1997)	<i>Electra</i> (1997)	Electra
Marina Carr	<i>The Mai</i> (1994)	<i>Marina Carr: Plays 1</i> (1999)	Electra
Aidan Carl Mathews	<i>Trojans</i> (1994)	Unpublished	Trojan Women
Brian Friel	<i>Wonderful Tennessee</i> (1993)	<i>Wonderful Tennessee</i> (1993)	Bacchae Women
Brendan Kennelly	<i>The Trojan Women</i> (1993)	<i>The Trojan Women</i> (1993)	Trojan Women
Derek Mahon	<i>The Bacchae</i> (1991)	<i>The Bacchae: after Euripides</i> (1991)	Bacchae Women
Brendan Kennelly	<i>Medea</i> (1988)	<i>Medea</i> (1991)	Medea
J. M. Synge	<i>Deirdre of the Sorrows</i> (1910)	<i>Deirdre of the Sorrows: A Play</i> (1910)	Antigone and Trojan Women
W.B. Yeats	<i>Deirdre</i> (1906)	<i>Queen Edaine</i> (1905)	Helen

George Bernard Shaw	<i>Major Barbara</i> (1905)	<i>Major Barbara</i> (1907)	Bacchae Women
J. M. Synge	<i>Shadow of the Glen</i> (1903)	<i>In the Shadow of the Glen</i> (1904)	Alcestis

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