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Biljana Vlašković Ilić
Univerzitet u Kragujevcu
Filološko-umetnički fakultet
Katedra za anglistiku

ANTIGONE'S SPIRIT IN MODERN IRISH HEROINES[1]

Abstract: Within two decades, from 1984 to 2004, the Irish literary tradition was enriched with as many as six modified versions of Sophocles' classical play *Antigone*. The alterations of the original historical and cultural framework of *Antigone*, as well as the ways in which changing the context affected the modern perception of the play and enlivened its interpretation, made Antigone not only a classical, but a modern heroine as well. The focus of this paper is to comment on whether and to what extent Antigone's spirit lives within the heroines featured in the selected works of Yeats, Synge, and O'Casey, so as to show that the character of Antigone is easily adaptable to the context of Irish history and literature.

Key Words: Ireland, context, Antigone, drama, Yeats, Synge, O'Casey

1. Introduction

In his celebrated poem "Dover Beach", Matthew Arnold proclaims that Sophocles heard "the eternal note of sadness" on the Aegean Sea, which enabled him to think and write about "the turbid ebb and flow of human misery" (Arnold 2019). Nowhere is this more evident than in his *Antigone*, whose pathos and enduring relevance make it a worthy successor to *Oedipus Rex*. Although the latter play is the paradigmatic Aristotelian tragedy, the "tragedy" does not end with Oedipus, but extends to his posterity who must suffer and redeem their father's sins. Both plays deal with deeply personal tragedies, but at the same time they deal with the health of the state and its leaders, acknowledging the fact that all authority must always be questioned. In order to willingly question authority like Antigone does, the character needs to have free will, yet Sophocles seemingly gives priority to fate in his plays. In *Oedipus Rex*, the Chorus of Theban Elders exclaims: "The rule of fate is mystical indeed. For there is no escape from fate, however rich or warlike a man might be, possessed of black ships and a citadel" (Sophocles 2014b: 24). The modern heroines who embody Antigone's spirit that the paper is going to discuss emphasize the importance of free will. More recently, Seamus Heaney, who merely translated the play and titled it *Burial at Thebes*, slightly changed the original to favour Antigone's free will. Here, Antigone emerges as a bold, tenacious individual rather than a spiteful wench, as Creon and the Theban Chorus see her in the original play when they exclaim: "The child reveals her savage

[1] This paper is the result of research conducted for the international scientific research project "Brands in literature, language and culture" ФИЛ-1819.

heart, itself a legacy from Oedipus… and quite incapable of compromise" (Sophocles 2014a: 14). According to Hegel, Antigone is both a self-sacrificing and a stubborn hero, both just and rash, innocent and guilty, great and flawed: "indeed, her very greatness is her flaw" says Mark W. Roche (2006: 13), and therein lies the key for her recent popularity in Ireland. Antigone is made of paradoxes: the dichotomy between her just principles and her violation of state law is what defines her. Antigone is a great tragic character who feels it an honour to be culpable (14) and with respect to this, she resembles many famous Irish literary and historical heroines who steadfastly supported their countrymen in the Irish fight for independence. Our goal is to examine the selected heroines of Yeats, Synge, and O'Casey as possessing Antigone's proud spirit that survives despite the change of context.

2. Antigone's Spirit Within Modern Irish Heroines

One example of an Irish heroine who seems to be imbued with Antigone's spirit is Yeats's poetic muse, Maud Gonne, who was a fervent Irish patriot and one of the founders of Sinn Féin[2]. Despite rejecting Yeats's many marriage proposals, she did inspire him to turn back to his homeland in search of poetic inspiration. "When I first wrote", says Yeats, "I went here and there for my subjects as my reading led me, and preferred to all other countries Arcadia and the India of romance, but presently I convinced myself ... that I should never go for the scenery of a poem to any country but my own, and I think that I shall hold to that conviction to the end" (Yeats 2017: 170). Maud encouraged his dedication to Irish nationalism to such an extent that he dedicated his early plays, *The Countess Kathleen* (1892) and *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) to her; she also played the title role in the latter when it was first produced at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904. In his poem "To Ireland in the Coming Times", Yeats wishes to be accounted a "True brother of a company / That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong, / Ballad and story, rann and song"; "he promises to restore Ireland's great past in his poetry while he still may" (see Vlašković Ilić 2018a: 140), giving his heart to his only "rose", Maud:

> I cast my heart into my rhymes,
> That you, in the dim coming times,
> May know how my heart went with them
> After the red-rose-bordered hem.
> (Yeats 1994: 41-42)

Although Yeats remained doubtful about Maud's extremist national politics, he saw her as the personification of Ireland in the same way Antigone is the

[2] Sinn Féin is an Irish Republican party, founded in 1905, whose objective is to end British rule in Ireland. It seeks national self-determination, unity, and independence of Ireland as a sovereign state. Sinn Féin is committed to the transformation of Irish society and to a negotiated and democratic settlement. It is active throughout Ireland, on both sides of the Ulster border. The phrase "Sinn Féin" is Irish for "ourselves" or "we ourselves".

personification of Greece. One demands self-rule for her country, the other yearns for personal liberty, and both fit into Hegel's theory: Antigone forgets that she is "not only a family member but a member of the state" (Roche 2006: 15), and Maud forgets that there is more to life than blind nationalism. In so doing, "the action of each hero is shown to be not only destructive of the other but ultimately self-destructive" (Ibid). For her own part, Maud "destroyed" Yeats himself, who was so desperate because of her rejections that he eventually proposed to her daughter, who also rejected him (see French 2002).

When commenting on how Yeats's fellow-playwright Lady Gregory perceived his *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Henry Merritt mentions that "Cathleen's portrayal as a quasivampiric figure echoes Gregory's perception of one particular figure she saw preying on Yeats: Maud Gonne" (Merritt 2001: 644). Similarly, Irish women, both in history and literature, came to be viewed as bloodsuckers whose tomboyishness threatened the masculinity of Irish men. Nowhere is this more prominent than in J. M. Synge's infamous *Playboy of the Western World*, the play that caused riots upon its first performance at the Abbey Theatre in 1907. Declan Kiberd explains that

> [e]ven before the opening night of Saturday 26 January 1907, trouble was brewing. Synge's relation with nationalists had always been uneasy. They didn't like the frenchified themes of his earlier plays such as *The Shadow of the Glen*, in which a frustrated young wife in the Wicklow mountains walks away from her home and marriage into the arms of a tramp whose name she doesn't even know. (Kiberd 2011)

Synge essentially criticizes the paralysis of the Irish and their mediocre lives by mocking their masculinity:

> The role of Christy Mahon, father-slayer, was played by an actor who was the Woody Allen of the theatre, no more than five feet three inches in height and one normally cast in comic roles. It is a mark of the mediocrity of life in the Mayo village that peasant girls can turn such an unpromising figure into a celebrity. Christy provides a blank space which they can fill with their dreams. (Ibid)

Yet Christy is not a typical male hero: he rather resembles a heroine with his delicate feet and soft skin, features that are in sharp contrast with those of Pegeen, the leading female role:

> PEGEEN: … (*Bustles about*[3], then takes off her apron and pins it up in the window as a blind. CHRISTY watching her *timidly*. Then she comes to him and speaks *with bland good-humour*.) Let you stretch out now by the fire, young fellow. You should be destroyed travelling.
> CHRISTY: (*shyly* again, drawing off his boots.) I'm tired, surely, walking wild eleven days, and waking fearful in the night. (He holds up one of his feet, feeling his blisters, and *looking at them with compassion*.)
> PEGEEN: (standing beside him, *watching him with delight*). You should have had great people in your family, I'm thinking, with *the little, small feet you have*, and you with a kind of a quality name, the like of what you'd find on the great powers and potentates of France and Spain. (Synge 2013)

[3] All italics in the excerpt are added by the author of the paper.

Considering that "the audience at the Abbey on the opening night was predominantly male" (Kiberd 2011), one could imagine their growing rage upon hearing passages like this:

> CHRISTY: (*He takes the looking-glass from the wall and puts it on the back of a chair; then sits down in front of it and begins washing his face*) Didn't I know rightly I was handsome, though it was the divil's own mirror we had beyond, would twist a squint across an angel's brow; and I'll be growing fine from this day, the way I'll have a soft lovely skin on me and won't be the like of the clumsy young fellows do be ploughing all times in the earth and dung. (Synge 2013)

As the Irish Times's critic observed, "It is as if a mirror were held up to our faces and we found ourselves hideous. We fear to face the thing. We scream" (Kiberd 2011). The word that broke up the audience in disorder, as Lady Gregory reported to Yeats, was "shift", the basic undergarment that women wore from the middle ages to the 1900s and one connected to the myth about the great Irish hero Cú Chulainn[4]. Namely, Christy says: "It's Pegeen I'm seeking only, and what'd I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the Eastern World?" (Synge 2013). With this, Synge not only deliberately mocks the fabricated male heroism of the Irish past, but he also emphasizes the importance of Pegeen's virility. In a similar vein as in *Antigone*, Pegeen's audacity is what the *Playboy* rests upon: Christy is pathetic insofar as Pegeen is audacious; Creon is tyrannical insofar as Antigone is just. In Synge's play, Pegeen even has the last word, and as she grieves for having lost "the only Playboy of the Western World" (Ibid), one cannot help but feel the numbness of the Irish at the time the play was first performed.

Although Synge's grim humour earned him some death threats, he exposed certain unpleasant truths in his *Playboy* thus lastingly affecting the future of the Irish theatre. Nineteen years after the *Playboy*, another play caused similar riots at the Abbey by those patriots who thought that the play disparaged the Irish heroes who had died in the Easter Rising of 1916. The play was *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), written by Sean O'Casey, a long-time patriot and member of the Irish Citizen Army, one of the two groups of armed rebels participating in the Rising and led by James Connolly[5]. The Abbey Theatre reports that "the riot featured a coordinated appearance by the widows and bereaved women of 1916. During the disruption W. B. Yeats rose to praise the new play and addressed the audience by saying: "You have disgraced yourselves again. Is this to be an ever recurring celebration of the arrival of Irish genius?"" (Abbey Theatre 1926). Yeats's appraisal of O'Casey and criticism of the Irish people are reminiscent of his description of Synge in his Nobel lecture as "a strange man of genius" (Yeats 1923), to which he added: "Whenever a country

[4] "What offended were lines in which Synge had remodelled a scene in the life of Chulainn. In the epic the hero underwent a "battle rage" after fighting, which so terrified his comrades that they would not permit him to reenter the city of Emain Macha. Eventually, they solved the problem in high style: 30 virgins were sent naked across the plain of Macha, walking towards the hero. Being a bashful lad, he blushed, bowed low, and, so the manuscripts say, "with that his battle rage left him"". (Kiberd 2011)

[5] The other group was The Irish Volunteers, led by Padraig Pearse.

produces a man of genius, that man is never like the country's idea of itself" (cited in Dungan 2018). Synge and O'Casey, two misunderstood and underrated Irish artists, complement one another: Synge's stark comedy is upgraded to a sinister tragicomedy in O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. The term 'tragicomedy' is not that easily applied to this play since the genre suggests tragic tension throughout the play with the final happy (or at least satisfying) outcome. *The Plough*, however, verges on tragedy throughout, with a few comic reliefs, but it also has a tragic outcome, albeit not all the main characters die. It is the surviving women that are particularly interesting because they unite in the all-pervading death and together embody Antigone's spirit.

O'Casey's play is set against the backdrop of the upcoming Easter Rising of 1916, in the squalid Dublin slums that reflect the poverty of the Irish and the waste of war. Although O'Casey was a member of the Irish Citizen Army, by 1916 he had been disgusted with all existing political parties, which resulted in his non-participation in the Rising. His often-quoted statement, "No welcome, genial or damnable, to a war. For we ourselves have had a bitter taste of what war is like" (Wa Remembers Easter 1916 2016), points to a pacifist sentiment akin to that of Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847), the "Liberator" of Ireland who was also against a violent rebellion against the British. O'Connell's philosophy of non-violence was resisted by those young Irishmen who saw violence as the only means to defeat the British (Vlašković Ilić 2018b: 246). However, "the consequences of violent actions were by [O'Connell] regarded as even more disastrous than the actual act of violence" (Mickley 1979: 6), and this is what O'Casey examines in *The Plough and the Stars*.

The play features five female characters, four of which may be considered the heroines of the play, with none more important than the other. While Nora Clitheroe represents the affirmative life forces, she is confronted with the side of life that she cannot control. When her husband Jack is appointed Commandant of the Citizen Army, she tries to hide the fact by burning the informing letter and delivers a desperate speech once her scheme is discovered:

> NORA [*flaming up and standing on her feet*]: I burned it, I burned it! That's what I did with it! Is General Connolly an' th' Citizen Army goin' to be your only care? Is your home goin' to be only a place to rest in? Am I goin' to be only somethin' to provide merrymakin' at night for you? Your vanity 'll be th' ruin of you an' me yet … That's what's movin' you: because they've made an officer of you, you'll make a glorious cause of what you're doin', while your little red-lipp'd Nora can go on sittin' here, makin' a companion of th' loneliness of th' night! (O'Casey 1981)

Despite this, Jack chose Ireland over Nora, saying that "Ireland is greater than a wife" (Ibid). His subsequent death during the Easter Rising and the birth of their stillborn baby leaves Nora desperate and insane, unable to cope with the excruciating pain. Unlike Nora, Rosie Redmond does not believe in ideals but in reality: she needs money in order to survive, so she works as a prostitute. Both submissive when she wants something of men and condescending when she feels threatened or insulted, Rosie refuses to be a subject woman and does not care about the impending Rising:

> ROSIE: Curse o' God on th' haporth, hardly, Tom. There isn't much notice taken of a pretty petticoat of a night like this … They're all in a holy mood. Th' solemn-lookin' dials on th' whole o' them an' they marchin to th' meetin'. You'd think they were th' glorious company of th' saints, an' th' noble army of martyrs thrampin' through th' sthreets of Paradise. They're all thinkin' of higher things than a girl's garthers… (Ibid)

Next, Mrs. Gogan, the widow who is compelled to defend her chastity, has a consumptive daughter Mollser who is "about 15, but looks to be only about 10, for the ravages of consumption have shrivelled her up. She is pitifully worn, walks feebly, and frequently coughs" (Ibid). Despite her frailty, Mollser exhibits emotional stamina, never complaining about her state so as not to upset her mother. As such, she symbolizes the poor, working-class society of Dublin's tenements in the early 1900s, people who suffered greatly but silently, surviving against odds in the face of extreme poverty. Mollser is also the play's tragic loss, the only character in the play who dies from sickness, whereas the military men die while fighting for Irish freedom. Her death stresses the fact that both kinds of freedom are essential: the "freedom from" the British rule and the "freedom to" live in a society that satisfies at least the basic needs of its people.

Finally, Bessie Burgess, the play's most enigmatic character, ties the plot together in an unlikely way. Depicted at the beginning of the play as an aggressive drunk, the boisterous and hot-tempered neighbor deliberately provokes those around her who support the national cause by stating that she supports the British. However, at the end of Act One, which is set in November 1915, during the First World War, she hears some Dubliners singing "It's a Long Way to Tipperary"[6] as they are flying off to the front and scornfully comments:

> There's th' men marchin' out into th' dhread dimness o' danger, while th' lice is crawlin about feedin' on th' fatness o' the land! But yous'll not escape from th' arrow that flieth be night, or th' sickness that wasteth be day. . . . An' ladyship an' all, as some o them may be, they'll be scatthered abroad, like th' dust in th darkness! (Ibid)

She shows contempt for those Irish who go to fight the World War for the British but refuse to see the "lice" that are feeding on the fatness of their own country. She later explains, in "quiet anger", that her son is also on the front, drenched in water and soaked in blood, groping his way to a shattering death in a shower of shells: "Young men with th' sunny lust o' life beamin' in them, layin' down their white bodies, shredded into torn an' bloody pieces, on th' althar that God Himself has built for th' sacrifice of heroes!" (Ibid). This contempt may justify Bessie's despicable behavior throughout the play: she grips Nora by the shoulders and shakes her violently in one scene, she calls the Irish people vipers in another, and finally she joins those who seize the opportunity to loot the Dublin shops amidst the chaos that surrounds them. Nevertheless, towards the end of Act Three, Bessie begins to expose her humane side when Mollser gets severely sick and of all the characters, including Mollser's mother Mrs. Gogan, she alone is determined to help the poor girl:

[6] The song itself is symbolic since it concentrates on the longing for home, not inciting glorious deeds, as is suggested by other characters in the play. For more information on the song, see: https://www.bhso.org.uk/work/novello-songs/

MRS. GOGAN: I'd be afraid to go… Besides, Mollser's terrible bad. I don't think you'll get a docthor to come. It's hardly any use goin.
BESSIE *[determinedly]*: I'll risk it… Give her a little of Fluther's whisky… It's th' fright that's brought it on her so soon… Go on back to her, you.
[MRS. GOGAN goes into the house, and BESSIE softly closes the door. She comes down steps, and is half-way across to R., when rifle-firing and the tok-tok-tok of a machine-gun bring her to a sudden halt. She hesitates for a moment, then tightens her shawl round her as if it were a shield]
[Softly] God, be Thou my help in time o' throuble; an' shelther me safely in th' shadow of Thy wings. *[She goes forward, goes up the lane, and goes oft R.]* (Ibid)

By Act Four, the final act of the play, it becomes obvious that O'Casey has a special role in mind for Bessie, the "old hag", as he moves the action into her room. Mollser has died of tuberculosis and Nora has lost her mind worrying about her husband Jack. Unexpectedly, Bessie becomes Nora's caretaker and ultimately her lifesaver:

[With a great effort BESSIE pushes NORA away from the window, the force used causing her to stagger against it herself. Two rifle-shots ring out in quick succession. BESSIE jerks her body convulsively; stands stiffly upright for a moment, a look of agonized astonishment on her face, then she staggers forward, leaning heavily on the table with her hands]
BESSIE *[With an arrested scream of fear and pain]*: Merciful God, I'm shot, I'm shot, I'm shot! ... Th' life's pourin out o' me! (Ibid)

O'Casey's stark realism does not allow for a romanticized scene of Bessie's death. Instead, she now calls Nora a bitch, now vehemently fears the upcoming end. But the complexity of her character is finally obvious: in the end, she is "transformed utterly" as Yeats says in his poem "Easter 1916". Although her transformation is the most conspicuous and delightful to observe, all the other characters, including men, are utterly transformed by the end of the play into "terrible beauty".

O'Casey's heroines bear a resemblance to Antigone insomuch as they perform duties that are atypical of women. Just as Antigone is determined to bury her brother, so these heroines are left to bury their brothers, husbands, sons, or as Bessie observes: "Afther all, there's a power o' women that's handed over sons an' husbands to take a runnin' risk in th' fight they were wagin" (Ibid). They fulfill this daunting task proudly, but not gladly, and do not pretend to be too brave. Prior to losing her mind, Nora desperately admits:

I can't help thinkin' every shot fired 'll be fired at Jack, an' every shot fired at Jack 'll be fired at me. What do I care for th' others? I can think only of me own self… An' there's no woman gives a son or a husband to be killed if they say it, they're lyin', lyin', against God, Nature, an' against themselves! (Ibid)

Hence, what makes Antigone so appealing to the Irish is her pride, her spite, her determination, but also her humanity and the courage to admit she is afraid to do what she knows is expected of her to do. In all this, the mentioned Irish heroines resemble Antigone.

3. Conclusion

The play's revivals in the 1980s and early 2000s go on to show that Antigone's spirit is very much alive in modern times. Even though today it is highly unlikely to witness people bury their family members themselves, they continue to seek justice for them. In other words, burial, "the most significant metaphor of the early twenty-first century" (Vlašković Ilić 2017: 142), has become synonymous with justice. Seamus Heaney argues that burial reminds us of "the need to allow in every case the essential dignity of the human creature" (Heaney 2004: 426), not only in death, but also in life. The case of Joseph Rafferty (1974-2005), an Irish murder victim, clearly illustrates Heaney's point. Namely, the "29-year-old man was shot dead at close range by a gunman as he made his way to work" (Roseingrave 2016) by a man supposedly "known to be a member of the IRA and a prominent activist for Sinn Fein, the IRA's political wing" (Skelly 2006). Six months prior to the murder, the victim and his extended family had been intimidated and threatened, but no effort was made by the local police to put a stop to these threats. What comes as a special shock is the fact that the motive for the murder was the killer's personal grudge against the victim, who came to the aid of his sister after she had been assaulted at a party. It is Joseph's other sister, Esther, who is the hero of this story: following the murder and no arrest of the person responsible, she has been fighting for justice and defending her dead brother, especially after "the verdict that her brother had been unlawfully killed by a person unknown", of which she says: "That line is hard to listen to because we know who killed Joseph. It makes me so angry. The case is still open and we hope that someone will come forward and give that small extra detail that's needed for charges to be brought against Joseph's killer" (Roseingrave 2016). Skelly explicitly compares Esther Rafferty to Antigone, saying that

> Esther is, in short, an Irish Antigone, a fearless woman who is applying the eternal principles of morality to her brother's tragic death. She has said that if she ever comes face-to-face with Gerry Adams, she will ask him when the leaders of IRA/Sinn Fein are "going to stop protecting murderers, when are they going to hand over the person who murdered Joseph, and when are they going to start telling the truth?" (Skelly 2006)

Although Antigone is usually associated with women and their relentless, if not uncommon, courage, one may argue that she overcomes this limitation of socially constructed womanhood *and* manhood since she neither performs her gender role as expected nor tries to maintain her gender status (Chrisler 2013), which makes it easy for both men and women to identify with her. Whether knowingly or subconsciously, the Irish authors discussed in this paper recognized this trait of hers and exploited it in the best possible manner in order to inspire their countrymen "To strive, to seek, to find, and *not to yield*" (Tennyson 2019).

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Biljana Vlašković Ilić

ANTIGONIN DUH U MODERNIM IRSKIM JUNAKINJAMA

Rezime

U periodu od dve decenije, od 1984. do 2004. godine, irska književna tradicija postala je bogatija za čak šest modifikovanih verzija klasične Sofoklove drame *Antigona*. Preinačenja istorijsko-kulturnih okvira originalne *Antigone*, kao i načini na koji je promena konteksta uticala na savremenu percepciju ove drame i time osavremenila njenu interpretaciju, učinili su Antigonu ne samo klasičnom već i modernom heroinom. Cilj ovog rada je da preispita da li i u kojoj meri Antigonin duh nastavlja da živi i u junakinjama odabranih modernih komada Jejtsa, Singa i O'Kejsija, kako bismo pokazali da se lik Antigone sa lakoćom prilagođava kontekstu irske istorije i književnosti.

biljana.vlaskovic@filum.kg.ac.rs