

'Is Medea's crime Medea's Glory?' Euripides in Dublin

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I am convinced that we have two or three poets in France who would be able to translate Homer very well; but I am equally convinced that nobody will read them unless they soften and embellish almost everything because, Madame, you have to write for your own time, not for the past.¹

As early as 1720 Voltaire had arrived at the heart of a linguistic dilemma that echoes through the work of some of the most influential and popular Irish poets of the twenty-first century. Such diverse talents as Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney and Desmond Egan have turned their attention to classical Greek drama in an attempt to further examine the complex nature of Ireland's contemporary post-colonial condition. Their chosen texts reflect the violence, betrayal and sense of personal crisis that characterize not only the original Greek play but the context of its contemporary manifestation. The most prolific interpreter of these classical texts, however, has been Brendan Kennelly,² a poet characterized by his ability and desires to voice those traditionally marginalized by and excluded from cultural discourses. While his Greek heroines, from Antigone to Medea, rage against their oppressors and exact a terrible revenge on those who cross them, Kennelly's versions are characterized by his ability to bring the texts and the emotions they express into a highly charged, contemporary linguistic realm. The violence experienced by women in contemporary Ireland, from the overtly physical to the sublime elision of their personal experiences, drives Kennelly's versions and injects a passion into the texts that resonates with a sharper contemporary social and cultural critique.

Kennelly is certainly writing for his own time, delving into and becoming energized by the extreme verbal and physical violence of *Medea*, arguably the most successful of his three plays. The sense of betrayal and the ends to which Medea will go to avenge this overwhelming emotional drive are precisely the territory into which Kennelly has often ventured with terrific intensity and emotional bravery. The play easily lends itself to his vituperative, highly personal interpretations, yet exactly what specifically Irish dimension emerges is a more complex question and one that needs to be further explored.

There is, of course, a strong personal attraction between Kennelly and his subject. In 1986, he spent the summer in St Patrick's Hospital in Dublin, recovering from a prolonged period of alcoholism. In the hospital, he listened to the stories of women berating their fathers, sons and, most commonly, husbands, men characterized by their unerring ability to let down almost everybody who relied upon them. As recalled by Kennelly, their phoney declarations of love echo Medea's rejection of the 'plausible' Jason, a cool and calculating promoter of his own self-interest. The men of these women's stories lie, cheat, break promises, physically assault and drunkenly abuse the women and children in their lives. These women are themselves driven to refuge in alcohol, thereby perpetuating their sense of victimization. Their revenge finds expression in their anger, and clearly Kennelly drew parallels with these intensely personal stories and the experience of Medea. While their stories are described by Kennelly as the initial inspiration for his version of *Medea*, there can be little doubt that his own decision to attempt a resolution of chronic alcoholism provided a focal point for his creative energies. He deliberately mentions this crucial juncture of his life in the introduction to the Bloodaxe version of the play,³ and there can be little doubt that Medea's anger, which gradually hardens to a cool, moral detachment by the end of the play, reflects Kennelly's own difficulties at the time. Interestingly, in the same introduction, Kennelly recognizes in himself the men described by these women, thereby establishing a form of authorial connection with Jason. He recognizes the lies, the deceit and the destruction of family life that

go hand in hand with any chronic dependency, be it alcohol, social status or economic power, empathizing with both Medea and Jason, thereby cleverly blurring the distinction between the perception of who is victim and who is victimizer. Few characters emerge from Kennelly's play with any integrity, and the heroine least of all. Medea's final exchange with Jason highlights the fact that his suffering is paramount and Medea's justifications for her actions appear increasingly petty and spiteful. Perhaps for Kennelly this is the only resolution possible, that no life is free from its torment and no action can be wrought without consequences.

Kennelly's stated belief that a marriage 'can be a kind of violent, exclusive intimacy'⁴ certainly rings true in his version of the play and the protagonists play out an all too familiar tragedy. Medea tells the audience that Jason was 'my sun, my moon and my stars, my sacred rivers and holy mountains' (p. 24), only to be revealed, after he has acquired what he needs, as a 'poisonous snake'. Marriage proves to be the 'revelation', a state of free-fall as the man exhibits 'a sudden loss of interest in her body', usually leading to the social exclusion of the woman. Often in the play Medea speaks for women in general, directly appealing to the women in the audience to listen and to respond with their 'silence', what Medea refers to as 'the most powerful weapon of all', and this motif of a communal, protective silence has been often seen in Irish literature. In John B. Keane's *The Field*, for example, the visiting bishop berates Mass-goers over their communal silence regarding the murder of an outsider who sought to buy a valuable local field that was the *de facto* possession of the Bull McCabe. He states:

The church bell will be silent: the mass bell will not be heard; the voice of the confessional will be stilled and in your last moment will be the most dreadful silence of all, for you will go to face your Maker without the last sacrament on your lips . . . and all because of your silence now.⁵

Given Keane's and Kennelly's north Kerry heritage it would appear that this concept of a self-protective silence shared by members of a community is a feature of *Medea* that would have particular

resonance within Kennelly's own local community and might again prove to be a source of attraction with the play.

There are, of course, difficult questions that have to be faced in any assessment of a 'version' of another author's work. Kennelly must follow some of the narrative structure of the original Euripidean myth. His Medea will be betrayed by Jason and infamously commit filicide as Euripides' Medea has done, and herein lie both the strengths and weaknesses of this type of drama. His only real freedom within the text is, arguably, the most powerful freedom of all, namely the reconstruction of the words of the characters in an attempt to contemporize the very morality that places these plays in the literary canon in the first place. Kennelly remains relatively faithful to the roles of the Nurse and the Chorus, both of whom retain their roles of moral interpreters of the action. The complex role of Medea as both feminist icon and heartless killer (interpretations which ironically hinge upon each other) cannot be altered by Kennelly to the degree that her actions are changed. Her psyche, however, is open territory and his role in constructing a world vision in which her actions can begin to be understood is crucial. His Medea is a complicated and contradictory character, her confused morality exemplified by the murder of the children. In the intervening twenty-four centuries between Euripides and Kennelly, however, the social, political, sexual and cultural roles of women have radically altered and therefore contemporary interpreters of *Medea* have to present the play in the light of an audience that is less likely to be impressed by the portrayal of an independent woman than their ancient Greek counterparts.⁶ This, however, is not to argue that the cultural situation is unrecognizable; Kennelly has clearly indicated, through his dialogue and plot, that certain human traits, invariably negative ones, have altered only in terms of the context rather than the content. It is these traits (jealousy, revenge, violence) that give the drama its edge and yet curiously it is the plot that restricts real character development. For example, in one of the blurbs on the back of the Bloodaxe edition, Oliver Taplin writing for the *Times Literary Supplement* rightly acknowledges the 'great verbal virtuosity' of Kennelly's play but curiously

also celebrates its 'unpredictable' nature. How unpredictable can a version of Euripides' play be when it largely follows the plot outline and development of the source text? Surely most audiences would be familiar with the original plot and therefore have certain expectations. Kennelly, however, appears to concentrate on making the play relevant to a contemporary audience rather than attempting to make the audience aware of the Greek conventions that the play explores. This crucial distinction is clearly visible in the recognizable Kennellian dialogic interchange between the characters. His Medea is initially humanly unhappy, rightly enraged with her husband, a man she gave up everything for, yet she cascades into an anger that appears superhuman, prepared to subvert all moral conventions in an attempt to satisfy her revenge. This, perhaps, is what most speaks to a contemporary Irish audience, weighed down by the collapse of the institutions which the Irish state had held as central to its perception of the nation. The rapid decline in public respect for the Catholic Church in Ireland in the 1990s, for example, after a series of sexual abuse scandals (ironically given Jason's behaviour) resonates with Medea's resolution that she 'will not continue to live in this house of lies' (p. 22). Her exasperation is born out of the climate of deceit that she has lived with for too long. When Fintan O'Toole wrote in 1992 that, apropos the exposure of the love-child of Bishop Eamonn Casey, one of the options facing the Irish hierarchy was that of 'the bishop as man, fallen, fallible, having no authority but the one that matters: the authority of experience',⁷ he could well be describing Jason, a man, as described by Medea, that 'gambled and lost' (p. 74). She labels him a 'poor, sad, pointless man' (p. 74), stripped of the veneer of power and authority that he so valued. Indeed, O'Toole's description of Casey's affair with Annie Murphy reads remarkably like the story of *Medea* itself:

He dazzles her with his power, his confidence, his command of the world. They fall in love and begin a sexual relationship. He promises her nothing, but he doesn't need to, for hurt and abused as she is, she is more than capable of making him into a promise to herself. She gives him pleasure, excitement and adoration. He gives her the first two but probably not the

third. She thinks of the future, he thinks of the present, floating on the delusion that he can have the best of all worlds. He makes her pregnant. The baby forces choices on her, choices which, because he is a man and a powerful one, he doesn't believe he has to make. He behaves badly, hypocritically, politically. It ends in tears: first hers, then, after many years, his.⁸

What one associates most with Euripides' *Medea*, and indeed provides a source of morbid fascination, is the fact that she murders her two children in an act of ultimate revenge on Jason. The act of filicide appears to question one of our most basic human moral precepts, that of the protection and nurturing of children. Of course, it can easily be viewed as a tired misogynistic portrayal of the killer woman, so obsessed with the man in her life that she is prepared to kill her children to avenge his betrayal. Equally, her actions can be viewed as the ultimate act of feminist liberation, freedom from the perceived emotional bondage of motherhood. Kennelly's *Medea* appears so consumed with her rage that the filicide appears less brutal than it otherwise might, the children almost necessary victims in the cross-fire between husband and wife. Her children were created with Jason, therefore they are a constant reminder to her of his eternal proximity and are thus doomed. Despite the best efforts of the Nurse, *Medea* damns both the children and their father in the same breath, frighteningly reminiscent of suicidal parents who decide that their children must die with them. In Ireland in the year 2000 six children died at the hands of a suicidal parent⁹ and the average murder rate for children (classed as under eighteen years old) in the state over the past four years stands at six. The taking of children by a suicidal parent is an occurrence that brings the often bizarre nature of parental love into sharp focus and can, in certain circumstances, be regarded as an act of ultimate love. In Philip Vellacott's Penguin Classics text, *Medea*, showing her cool but perverse logic, declares that 'I'll not leave sons of mine to be the victims of my enemies' rage.'¹⁰ Kennelly, on the other hand, has *Medea* acknowledging that 'passion strangles my love' (p. 66), a position that certainly places a different emphasis on

the reasons for the necessity of the children's death. Medea does not kill herself as this would appear as a Jasonic triumph and, indeed, she only embarks on her murderous revenge when an escape route to Athens has been prearranged. However, she is well aware of the effect the death of the children will have on Jason. Equally, a fundamental question of love arises in the case of filicide: to what extent are parents who commit suicide protecting their children by taking them with them? Arguably, parents who commit suicide can show their love for their children by also killing them, either to protect them, or to take them along. At the moment of her children's deaths, Medea exhibits that combination of fierce passion and steely will that characterizes her movement through the play. The love she forlornly seeks from Jason swamps whatever maternal feelings she might have and the children end their life exactly as they began it; directly as a consequence of the tumultuous union of husband and wife. However, whether it can be regarded as Medea's ultimate triumph is a hugely debatable question. While she certainly inflicts her desired revenge on Jason, what is she left with as she escapes to Athens on her fiery chariot? According to the Chorus (in the Penguin Classics text) 'The unexpected God makes possible',¹¹ and in the final analysis, perhaps this is all we know and all we need to know.

The freedom offered by the 'version' moniker allows Kennelly the opportunity to explore, with some notable exceptions, however, the familiar territory of the marginalized, the socially excluded and those whose behaviour sets them apart from the norms of social discourse. It is precisely in this contentious area of the 'unvoiced' that elements of contemporary post-colonial theory shed fascinating light on new interpretations of those perceived to be at both the centre and margins of cultural, political and sexual discourses. Homi K. Bhabha asserts that it is in 'those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences',¹² such as those between Jason and Medea, the Greek and the outsider, that crucial composite elements in cultural identities begin to emerge. Jason's self-righteousness and, particularly in Kennelly's text, his bumptious self-importance wither when juxtaposed directly with

the passion of Medea. He represents a civilized, orderly existence in which marriage has a clear social and economic function. Medea, as a non-Greek, could never be recognized as his wife and she represents the passionate, instinctual barbarian, and it is precisely in the confrontation between Greek and barbarian that Greek society is defined. Jason's eventual tragedy results from his inability to reconcile these opposites, and his incredulous response to Medea's murder of the children highlights his personal removal from the emotional aspects of his psyche. Throughout his poetry, Kennelly has flirted with opposites, his poetic instincts heightened by characters who have to deal with a rational and safe life that is haunted by madness and an unquenched recklessness. Jason and Medea are two clear voices that inhabit every individual, personifying the shifting entity that is selfhood. Kennelly has written that self 'is always open to change and development, what the moral self might call betrayal',¹³ and perhaps it is this very lack of openness that seals Jason's fate, and indeed renders Medea unable to cope with the changes in her marital circumstances. Kennelly's poetry is awash with voices, what he refers to as 'prisoners on parole from history', characters desperately seeking articulation beyond the stultifying clichés of self and nationhood. His *Medea* presents a world vision of competing ideologies, and the adherence of both Jason and Medea to their respective beliefs results in the ultimate destruction of their relationship and the deaths of four innocent parties. It is only through the moderating influence of the Chorus at the beginning of Part Two that Kennelly overtly describes the middle ground between these competing ideologies, as usual a middle ground that is most regularly occupied. The Chorus declares that 'to live within limits is to honour the infinite, mysterious potential of excess', a fascinating insight given Kennelly's personal battle with alcohol at the time, a thought that resonates with Patrick Kavanagh's brilliantly simple maxim that 'through a chink too wide comes in no wonder'.¹⁴ Kennelly's play is arguably less concerned with grand national narratives and codes of behaviour than with, as Kathleen McCracken notes, 'the feminist imperatives and, by extension, the broad humanist ramifications'¹⁵ that emerge from the narrative.

Kennelly's text, however, is more complex than a mere rereading of a classic text in a contemporary light. If one accepts Kennelly's traditionally subversive poetic role then Medea's actions cannot be merely explained away as the justifiable actions of a woman scorned. What mention or regard is taken of Jason's undoubted suffering at the loss of his children? Is the experience of men again to be written out of the text as a mere exemplar of their pathological and unquestioned unworthiness? Indeed, it is the two children, significantly both male, who pay the ultimate price for their mother's scorn, begging the question as to the real nature of a sense of victimization in the text. Despite all her acknowledged bitterness, Medea flees at the end of the play; Jason is left in mourning, while her children lie dead. Who else can be regarded as the true victims, other than the children, or is the sentence of living with a loved one's murder a greater punishment, as Medea suggests? Although Medea's rage and sense of betrayal inevitably form the thematic basis of the majority of criticism of the play, Jason and the other men appear as social-climbing, sexually obsessed stooges, mono-dimensional characters who pale into insignificance when juxtaposed with the passionate, determined Medea. Aegeus, for example, is more than happy to overlook Medea's murderous actions on the promise that she will provide him with children, a repetition of her husband's behaviour that Medea, unable to learn from her past experiences, appears content enough to ignore.

Medea's description of Jason as a 'plausible man', skilled in the art of verbal deception, suggests a theme that has concerned Kennelly from his earliest poetic works. In a poem entitled 'Six of One'¹⁶ for example, he exposes the 'barbarian', a man secure in his own self-importance and unafraid to fill the perceived vacuum in the minds of those he meets. Remaining blissfully unaware of his own inadequacies, 'he makes articulate the pitifully dumb', robbing language from the mouths of those he deems as unworthy or incapable of self-expression. Again in *The Visitor*,¹⁷ the ubiquitous house guest struts into a house and, through his own delusions of self-importance and an inability to recognize the needs of those around him, proceeds to 'rob' the children 'of every word they had'

by filling their spaces with his stories. In Kennelly's poetry, this form of linguistic violence is perpetrated by teacher against pupil, priest against congregation, parent against child, husband against wife, and almost anybody who is placed in a position of trust by another. 'Love and you will be betrayed' is a constant theme throughout his work and the closer the relationship the deeper the sense of betrayal. In *The Book of Judas*, the betrayal of Jesus involves that most intimate of gestures, a kiss, given by Judas as he stares into the eyes of his victim. When pressed by Hans Christian Andersen as to why he betrayed a man he adored with the ultimate gesture of love, Judas replies: 'One man in all this world understands that kiss.'¹⁸ Kennelly is a skilled demythologizer of language, always prepared to go beyond the semantic surface into the deeper realms of power, control and violence that lie at the heart of linguistic systems. The violence meted out in polite words is the most common violence of all. Medea castigates Jason, accusing him of a 'plausibility' that 'smothers the soul with oily words', preferring 'a passionately meant insult' which, as a consequence of its honesty, acts as 'a kind of compliment' (p. 40). However, this appearance of respectability is unmasked by 'one burning word of honesty', the plausible man uncovered in all his duplicitousness. In much the same way as Roland Barthes lamented the inevitable fate of the farmer Dominici¹⁹ faced with the labyrinthine linguistic constructions of the legal world, so Kennelly's Jason remains neutered by his passionless language, his Greek manners and upbringing withering in the face of his wife's untamed and ferocious passion. Barthes's brilliant study of Gaston Dominici's 1952 trial for murder concludes that the accused faced the ultimate terror, that of 'being judged by a power which wants to hear only the language it lends us'.²⁰ Jason undoubtedly suffers that fate at the pen of not only Kennelly but other translators of *Medea*. He is rendered almost mute, unable to move beyond platitudinous defences of his position, defences that are increasingly undermined by Medea's verbal onslaught. Barthes posits the view that 'to rob a man of his language in the very name of language is the first step in all legal murders'²¹ and, interestingly, it is Jason and, perhaps more

significantly, the two boys who are robbed of their language by Medea. Euripides failed to include the boys' stories in his play, and by extension Jason's story remains partially told, the detail and emphasis provided by Medea. Equally, the murder of the children has traditionally been seen as part of an overall dramatic convention. John Ferguson has written, 'The death of the children is transfigured by being seen as part of timeless sorrow. To understand this is to understand the soul of Greek tragedy; to fail to understand this is to leave empty formalism and dead convention.'²² Now to use the term 'death' in relation to two children who are consciously and deliberately led to their murder can quite reasonably be assumed in itself to lean towards empty formalism and thus a different and challenging perspective on the play can begin to emerge. The strength of *Medea*, therefore, lies precisely in the text's ability to arouse a variety of responses that depend almost entirely upon the reader's social, cultural and political stance, a classic example of Barthes's notion that the reader is 'simply someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted'.²³

Needless to say, it would also be a travesty to view Jason as some kind of postmodern masculinist icon. His prime motivation in wooing Glauke reflects his desire to move beyond what he perceives to be his lowly station in life. He tells Medea that 'it was not for the sake of a woman that I enter marriage', arguing that he wanted 'royalty to spread through my family', endeavouring 'to distance myself from poverty and shame' (p. 41). His justification resonates with post-colonial Ireland's attempt to distance itself from the poverty of its colonial past, embracing wholeheartedly a neo-colonial economics that brings with it the consequent dilution of a distinctive cultural identity. The architectural prevalence in rural Ireland of the arched hacienda-like bungalow built a few hundred yards from the ruins of the original family home is a contemporary visual manifestation of Jason's desire to be seen to be removed from an inglorious past. He cannot, or at best will not, understand Medea's reaction to his stated desire to improve the social position of his children and, by extension, Medea herself. His

shallowness is exposed and ultimately proves to be his undoing. Medea, equally, is a complex mixture of contradictions, an attractive proposition for a poet like Kennelly. Despite the fact that her brother has been murdered in her inevitably vain search for personal happiness, she proceeds to claim that 'I want the happiness that comes from my husband and my children' (p. 41), a claim that appears hollow in the light of the subsequent murder of the very children she mentions as central to her idea of happiness. In many ways, these contradictions lie at the heart of Medea's attraction. She eludes definition or categorization, her words and actions coinciding and diverging with no apparent consistency. driven solely by her vengeful desires. She admits that her one great error was the betrayal of her father, yet she proceeds to kill her two children in an attempt to gain revenge on Jason.

If it is accepted that one of the central features of contemporary versions is the translation of cultures as well as words, then surely the subversive nature of Euripides' original work has to be viewed in the context of intervening social and cultural movements and theories. Given that Euripides' Athens 'was a place in which Pericles proclaimed that the greatest glory of woman is not to be spoken of by men for good or bad',²⁴ then certainly a play in which a woman is allowed not only to express her emotions but to carry out her revenge to such devastating effect has to be seen as wonderfully challenging of the cultural orthodoxy of its time. Equally, Kennelly's experience of the battered, abused and marginalized women he came across in St Patrick's Hospital in the summer of 1986 finds a powerful expression in the play. His Medea is angry to the point of not caring about the long-term personal consequences of her anger, hinting at a rejection of traditional stoical acceptance of male abuse. Writing at a critical juncture in his own life, Kennelly understands Medea's anger, a vortex of self-loathing that manifests itself in the attempt to destroy all those who come close to her, culminating in the elimination of the only people who are directly of her own flesh. Perhaps she has to kill her children to stand any chance of recovering what little sanity has been afforded her. Attempting to break the grip of

alcohol, Kennelly empathizes with a character that is driven to pathological unhappiness, almost relishing the darkness and chaos that typify her existence. Alcoholism is a lonely pursuit, an existence dogged by a paranoia that distrusts all those who seek to help. The concept of a recovery only being possible when the alcoholic realizes his or her own predicament echoes Medea's repeated rejection of the advice of the Chorus, the Teacher and the Nurse. The one person who empathizes with Medea is Medea, as secure as her chaotic mind will allow in her mono-focal drive to avenge.

However, Kennelly's Medea, and for that matter other Irish versions of Greek tragedy, have emerged on the coat-tails of Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic and post-colonial critical theories and the impact of these ideas on the readers and writers of contemporary versions cannot be underestimated. For example, the elision of the psyche of Jason and the children from the story presents the contemporary reader with grave difficulties. Post-colonial theory in general, and Subaltern Studies²⁵ in particular, seek out the stories of those whose experiences have formed a central plank of the colonial or post-colonial exercise but who have been excluded from cultural discourses because their articulation would upset traditional and accepted perceptions of history, culture and society. Medea's anger flows freely, her complex character invigorated by an outpouring of revenge virtually unparalleled in classical or contemporary literature. Her story is told. Jason, despite his infidelity, is the pillar of Greek manners and his story is not told, at least not to the same degree as Medea's. Kennelly's Jason chastises Medea with 'my instinctive wisdom', 'the sanity and rightness of my choice', and refers to the 'noble service' he has rendered his wife and sons. His myopia is confounded when he states, to almost comic effect, that 'women should not exist'. His argument is so fundamentally flawed as to appear mock-tragic and certainly we find out little about his true motivations other than the trite stereotypical male concerns for a better material life for him and his children. As a straight man, he works very well. Medea's response allows Jason no room for

manoeuvre in that she decries 'the plausible traitor' as 'the worst scoundrel', strangling Jason's defence at birth and cleverly using her anger to portray him as uncaring and mono-dimensional. Ironically, the majority of the modern Irish versions of classical Greek drama have been written by men, yet the experience of women appears paramount. Are poets still afraid to write about the suffering of men because they may appear to simultaneously elide the experience of women? Is the fear also apparent that in writing about the male characters the poets might appear to tread on the toes of feminist interpretations of the tragedies? Interestingly, the poetic sensitivities are heightened when describing the emotions of the female Other but appear less concerned with the social and cultural pressures that formed the likes of Jason in the first place. Kennelly overtly describes his play as concerned with the 'rage' of women 'mainly against men, Irishmen like myself',²⁶ and the clear implication in the text is of Medea's being driven to her wits' end by the pathological wanderings of her husband. Indeed, Euripides' play begins at the point of Jason's betrayal of Medea, rather than with the various acts of murderous collusion that characterized their early relationship, including Medea's betrayal of her father Aeetes and the brutal murder of her own brother, Apsyrtus. Is Euripides also refusing to see the entire picture for fear that the creation of his feminist icon might appear more complicated than his play allows? Would the audience's Medean empathy be tarnished by the dramatic scene of Medea's chopping up the body of her brother and scattering it from the back of her fleeing boat? Equally, if the audience imagined the torment of Creon and Glauke as Medea's poisoned crown burns the flesh from their bodies? A critique of the portrayal of men in *Medea* is not a covert Freudian admission of fear or admonishment of Jason's betrayal but rather a filling in of a picture that, occasionally, appears very lop-sided. In *Cromwell* and *The Book of Judas* Kennelly seeks out the nooks and crannies of the psyche condemned to occupy for ever the role of moral scapegoat, so it has to appear unusual that he fails to allow Jason the chance to speak back, other than with hollow admonitions of his betrayed wife. An exception to this portrayal certainly

occurs at the end of the play when Jason's obvious and genuine grief for the death of his sons appears to overwhelm him. It is only at this point that he appears to express genuine human emotion rather than the politically driven social-climbing shibboleths of the previous scenes. However, Kennelly leaves his readers no doubt about the real victor in all of this emotional mess by concluding his version with this controversial line: 'Is Medea's crime also Medea's glory?'²⁷

The rhetorical nature of this question implicitly suggests that Kennelly's sympathies lie squarely with Medea and that, indeed, the murder of her children has been a literal and symbolic act of liberation. Certainly Kennelly's perception of the liberation of Medea from the traditional shackles of child-rearing and child love is a challenging and stimulating perspective and this final line certainly places Kennelly's version at odds with the standard conclusion of other versions of *Medea*. Is Medea's 'glory' the fact that, unlike Tess of the d'Urbervilles, she ultimately gets away with her murderous revenge? Perhaps it is in this outcome that Kennelly finds the attraction of the play. In drama, as in other forms of literature, an all-pervading Christian morality suggests that all wrongdoers will ultimately pay for their crime, yet Medea triumphantly leaves the broken Jason, takes her chariot and lives out an eventful life in Athens. Alongside Electra, she succeeds in her revenge, emerging from the play like a pre-modern Terminator, leaving behind her the obligatory body-count of discarded mortals who cross her ill-starred path.

The fundamental question of authorial intent inevitably hangs over any version of another author's original work. Kennelly's text is overtly defined as a 'version' and no claims are made to place the text in the genre of the translated edition of the original text. This approach is also adopted by Kennelly in his versions of *Antigone* and *Trojan Women*. Indeed, in his introduction to the text Kennelly makes no reference to any translated text of *Medea* upon which his version is based, contenting himself by referring to 'the Medea that I tried to imagine'²⁸ as his guiding principle. This arguably gives Kennelly greater freedom over his material in that while remaining

faithful to the traditionally accepted outline and development of the plot, he ascribes to himself the ultimate freedom of linguistic interpretation. The shaping of dialogic interchange and the manipulation of words empower Kennelly's Medea to escape the constraints of accepted versions of the original text. For example, in Philip Vellacott's translation for Penguin Classics, Medea attacks Jason on her first encounter with him since his betrayal of her:

You filthy coward! – if I knew any worse name
For such unmanliness I'd use it – so, you've come.²⁹

For a woman skilled in magic and prepared to go to any lengths to avenge her battered pride, it seems odd that she cannot come up with any words worse than 'You filthy coward!' In Kennelly's version, however, Kennelly's traditional penchant for the venomous *mot juste* comes to the fore as Medea vents her spleen on her traitorous husband:

Stink of the grave, rot of a corpse's flesh,
slime of this putrid world,
unburied carcase of a dog in the street,
the black-and-yellow greeny spit of a drunk at midnight –
these are my words for you.³⁰

Kennelly's version of the anger of this encounter presents a Medea very different from the somewhat restrained Vellacott version. In Vellacott, her anger is very Anglo-Saxon, restrained, controlled and yet hinting at a fierce retribution to follow. The Irish Medea, however, has no such hindrances. Indeed, the impression is given that Medea could have carried on in this vituperative Falstaffian vein for quite some time, flaunting her insults as her anger increased. The expression of anger is as important to Kennelly's Medea as the practical actions she carries out in the venting of that anger. Consequently, through this manipulation of the dialogue, Kennelly gives a very different portrait of Medea, a woman whose

ability to carry out acts of the deadliest ferocity is matched by her desire to express her anger in the clearest possible terms. Therefore, the question arises as to which Medea is most to be feared, the volcanic Medea who openly rants about her hatred for Jason or the more restrained, threatening Medea whose silences are as, if not more, threatening than her words? It is precisely in these areas of contestation that the vitality and imagination of the interpreter come to the fore.

For Kennelly, this voicing of bilious anger is a recurring poetic motif and it comes as no surprise that his Medea should be so adept at expressing her anger in such terms. In an essay dealing directly with the link between poetry and violence, Kennelly asks a seminal question: 'what do we do with the violence of our emotions?'³¹ In so many of his poems, Kennelly's characters content themselves with the cathartic power of expression, imploding in violent words and images that in many ways dilute the need for direct reparative action. Medea, therefore, might appear as an unusual choice for Kennelly in that her anger is manifested in the utmost physical violence as well as vituperative rhetoric, and it is in this final act of filicide that the central dilemma over Medea lies. Kennelly ends his version with a highly provocative rhetorical question: 'Is Medea's crime Medea's glory?' His play ends with a question as to the nature of Medea's existence. It is now up to the reader to reply.

Notes

1. André Lefevere, *Translation/History/Culture – A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 28.
2. For an extensive bibliographical reference see *Dark Fathers into Light: Brendan Kennelly*, ed. Richard Pine (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994). Kennelly's three classical plays are *Antigone* (1986), *Medea* (1988) and *The Trojan Women* (1993).
3. See pp. 6–8 of the Bloodaxe edn. of *Medea* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991). References to Kennelly's text of *Medea* are from this version and appear as page numbers in parentheses.
4. From an essay entitled 'Poetry and Violence', in Ake Persson (ed.),

- Brendan Kennelly – Journey into Joy – Selected Prose* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994), p. 41.
5. John B. Keane, *Three Plays* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1990), p. 150.
 6. Marina Carr in her version of *Medea* reflects the contemporary status of women in her *By the Bog of Cats . . .*, while at the same time showing their continuing social limitations; in *Plays One* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000).
 7. Fintan O'Toole, *Black Hole, Green Card* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1994), p. 137.
 8. *Ibid.*, pp. 139–40.
 9. Information courtesy of the Garda Press Office (gpresoff@iol.ie), Garda Headquarters, Phoenix Park, Dublin.
 10. *Medea and Other Plays*, trans. Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth, Mx: Penguin, 1963), p. 50.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
 12. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–2.
 13. *Dark Fathers into Light*, Pine (ed.), p. 171.
 14. Peter Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh* (New York: Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1996), p. 146.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
 16. Brendan Kennelly, *The Boats Are Home* (Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1980), p. 52.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
 18. Brendan Kennelly, *The Book of Judas* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991), p. 236.
 19. Gaston Dominici, a farmer, was convicted in 1952 of the murder of Sir Jack Drummond and his wife and daughter, whom he found camping on his land. The essay, 'Dominici or the Triumph of Literature' is contained in Barthes's seminal 1957 collection of essays, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1997).
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), p. 263.
 23. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory – A Reader* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 171.
 24. John Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, p. 249.

25. For an excellent examination of the work of the Subaltern Studies group, see an article entitled 'Subalternity and Gender – Problems of Post-colonial Irishness', *Journal of Gender Studies* 5(3) (1966): 363–73.
26. Kennelly, *Medea*, p. 7.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
29. *Medea*, trans. Vellacott, p. 31.
30. Kennelly, *Medea*, p. 36.
31. Persson (ed.), *Kennelly – Selected Prose*, p. 28.