

## “ESTRANGING EXTERIORITY”: TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION IN IRISH DRAMA

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### **Abstract:**

This paper tests Nicholas Grene's theory that Irish drama is "...outer-directed, created as much to be viewed from outside as well as inside Ireland" to see whether it holds true for Irish language theatre. Starting with three plays written first in the Irish language: Brendan Behan's *An Giall* (*The Hostage*), Máiréad Ní Ghráda's *An Triail* (*The Trial: a Play*) and Antoine Ó Flatharta's *Grásta I Meiriceá* (*Grace in America*), the paper will examine the authors' English versions of the plays to see whether they were literal translations, adaptations or transformation. If the English version were adaptations or transformations, what kinds of artistic, cultural or linguistic choices did the playwrights make to make "the otherness of Ireland" more accessible to their English readers and audiences?

**Keywords:** Irish language drama, translations, adaptations, transformations, social realism.

In *The Politics of Irish Drama*, Nicholas Grene's reading of Anglo-Irish plays in context from Dion Boucicault to Brian Friel, the author argues that:

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 58	p. 397-411	jan/jun. 2010
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[...] Irish drama is outward-directed, created as much to be viewed from outside as well as inside Ireland. Even where the plays are produced wholly within an Irish theatrical milieu, the otherness of Ireland as a subject is so assumed by the playwrights as to create the effect of estranging exteriority. (3)

Does Grene's theory hold for twentieth-century Irish language theatre as well as English or Anglo-Irish drama? Starting with an examination of three plays written first in the Irish language: Brendan Behan's *An Giall* (*The Hostage*), Máiréad Ní Ghráda's *An Triail* (*The Trial: A Play*) and Antoine Ó Flatharta's *Grásta i Meiriceá* (*Grace in America*), this paper will examine the authors' translations for English-speaking audiences. Were the translations literal approximations, or were the plays adapted or transformed from their Irish originals? If the English versions were adaptations or transformations, what kinds of changes did the authors make for their English readers/audiences?

The themes of the Irish language plays—tragedy brought by political abstractions (*An Giall*), the rejection of an unmarried mother and her child in the Ireland of the 1960s (*An Triail*), and the plight of the undocumented Irish in the United States (*Grásta i Meiriceá*)—suggest that late twentieth-century Irish language drama could be considered the dramatic corollary to the themes of social realism that marked the fiction of early Irish language prose writers of the twentieth century like Padraic Ó Conaire: arranged marriages, poverty and emigrants broken by the hardship of their lives abroad.

According to Máiréad Ní Chinnéide, historian of Amharclann an Damer, the Dublin Irish language theatre, Riobard MacGóráin, one of the founders of the Irish language cultural organization Gael Linn, the force behind the Damer and the editor of Gael Linn's monthly cultural journal, *Comhar*, who had published Brendan Behan's poems and essays, commissioned Behan, in March, 1957, to write a play for the Damer ("Tá *An Giall* caoga bliain d'aois agus é ar ais ar stáitse"). According to Behan's biographer Ulick O'Connor, he began immediately to write *An Giall* (191). Behan told Mac Góráin that his

theme would be the futility of war (*Letters* xv). The play, produced by Abbey veteran Frank Dermody, opened on June 16<sup>th</sup> (Bloomsday) 1958 to a full house and enthusiastic reviews. P. Mac A.'s "Brendan Behan's Fine Play in Irish" described the plot:

His new play *An Giall* (*The Hostage*) is set in a lower-class Dublin brothel owned by a fanatical Gael, the son of an Anglican bishop, who was educated at Oxford, and managed by a one-legged old IRA man willing to use it for his own end. A young English soldier, stationed in Armagh, is kidnapped by the IRA, brought to Dublin and imprisoned in the brothel. It is only by accident that he discovers that he is a hostage and will be executed by the Republican soldiers if a young man, under the sentence of death in Crumlin Road Jail, Belfast, is hanged. He falls in love with the maid in the house and she with him, and they find that both have more or less the same background—that neither cares a straw for any war or battle which Ireland and Britain might have had in the past or would have in the future. The manager of the place also understands the futility of carrying on the "Old fight" but he is powerless to intervene. (8)<sup>1</sup>

Behan was not the first Irish writer to consider a tragedy of an innocent victim caught in the cross fire. According to Frank O'Connor's biographer James Matthews (63), Frank O'Connor's short story "Guests of the Nation" (1931) was based on a story that he heard from a Kerryman while imprisoned by the Irish Free State government in Gormanstown Internment Camp for his Republican activities.<sup>2</sup> "Guests of the Nation" reflected O'Connor's hatred of "abstractions that reduce life to a tedious morality" (72). While Behan told Mac Góráin that the incident that prompted his play was based on the story of a British soldier captured in County Down by the IRA in 1955, Matthews claimed that Behan modeled *An Giall* on O'Connor's story (72), and O'Connor mentioned Behan's debt to "Guests of the Nation" in his obituary of the playwright adding

that Behan admitted, "Ah sure, of course I stole the fucking thing," but by that time *An Giall* had become *The Hostage* (191).<sup>3</sup>

After *An Giall* gave the Damer its first international success, the English director Joan Littlewood promised Behan a London production if he would translate the play into English. Behan agreed, but when *The Hostage* opened at East London's Theatre Royal in October, 1958, *An Giall* was "changed utterly." It was no longer a play about innocent love caught up in that "old fight," a play that criticized revenge killing to satisfy a political abstraction. Declan Kiberd described the transformation in his essay "The Empire Writes Back – Brendan Behan":

What happened next is hotly debated, but the majority view is that Behan never really rewrote his own play, instead ceding it to Littlewood's company which teased it into a shape calculated to appeal to Princess Margaret and the fashionable, *avant-garde* first-night audience. A spare and simple tragedy thus became something very different, *The Hostage*, a variety-show play complete with topical references to Prime Minister Macmillan, risky homosexuality and the film star Jayne Mansfield. Only on opening night, amid the thunderous applause, did Behan's brother Brian detect that something might be wrong. "I looked at him closely. He looked suddenly as if he knew he had been taken for a ride, that he had been adopted as a broth of a boy, that they had played a three card trick on him. (520-21)<sup>4</sup>

Kiberd's analysis of the transformation of *An Ghiall* to *The Hostage* is accurate; however, his argument that *The Hostage* is "[...] one of the first examples of that form of writing more recently titled by Rushdie 'The Empire Writes Back,'" (528) that Brendan Behan was one of the first post-colonial writers is less compelling.<sup>5</sup>

In the Introduction to his edition of *An Giall* and *The Hostage*, Richard Wall describes the changes that Behan made in *The Hostage*: the additional characters, the bawdy banter and topical references

added to make the play more amusing to Behan's London audience, and the historical context that explained and informed the more hostile attitude of the Irish characters toward the English.<sup>6</sup>

The reader who compares *The Hostage* to its source *An Giall* is struck by the Irish play's construction: its opening and *leitmotif*, the Jacobite lament "Flowers of the Forest" which is repeated by Monsúr at the end of Act II, during the love scene between Leslie and Teresa, and Monsúr's speech at the End of Act I, as he stands in the press where Leslie will die, "Useful. It is a kind of refuge, as one might say, for anyone staying in this room", foreshadow the tragic, and senseless, death of Leslie. A further irony is Pat's description of the old IRA engagement outside of Mullingar where he lost his leg. The single casualty, who prefigures Leslie, was an innocent County Westmeath surveyor who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Behan's *An Giall* audience no doubt was struck that the bond between Leslie and Teresa was as much the bond between two orphans as the bond between two young lovers. Concerned with protecting Leslie, Teresa gives him her miraculous medal telling him that it will put him under the protection of the Virgin Mary who will be " [...] a mother to you now forever." In her last speech over Leslie's body, she promises to be all of the family he never had, and she repeats, ironically, the Republican trope, the curtain line of W.B. Yeats's *Cathleen ní Houlihan*, pledging that the hero will be remembered forever: "I'll be a mother to you, a sister to you, a lover to you and I will not forget you."

Contemporary readers may likely read Teresa's past as the story of an Irish child who may have been raised in one of the country's Magdalen asylum orphanages that housed the children of the country's unmarried mothers. While Teresa's identity is uncertain, there is no ambiguity about the identity of Máire, the protagonist of Máiréad Ní Ghráda's courtroom drama, *An Triail* (1964). Like the protagonists of Behan's *An Giall*, Ní Ghráda's Máire is an innocent; however, she is destroyed not by politics and the old fight with Britain but instead by the complicity between the Roman Catholic Church and the Irish government to promote the image of Ireland as a country of moral

rectitude, a country that introduced censorship, prohibited divorce, contraception and even sex education, and treated their unmarried mothers as criminals.

Ní Ghráda's Máire represented those women who were banished to England, who were hidden till babies could be turned over to adoptive parents or who were incarcerated in the country's Magdalen homes where penitents, whose number included young women only *thought* to be vulnerable to promiscuity, worked as unpaid and exploited laundresses. The playwright courageously exposed the system that let off the male partner of an illicit sexual relationship (including incest and rape) while it required the female partner to face the consequences of her act. Máire is a symbol of an entire group hidden and shamed till the end of the twentieth century. (Paula Meehan's poem "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks," written in memory of a fifteen-year old girl who died alone in 1984 at the foot of the statute giving birth to a child, is another indictment of this hypocrisy).

Ní Gráda was a media pioneer as well as the most accomplished Irish-language dramatist of her generation. Born in Kilmaley, in Irish-speaking west Clare, she earned a B.A. in Irish, French and English and an M.A. in Irish at University College, Dublin during the Troubles. She worked for the Gaelic League and the Republican women's movement Cumann na mBan. She was arrested and sent to jail in 1920 for selling Irish flags on Dublin's Grafton Street. After working for Ernest Blyth, Minister for Trade and Commerce and Minister of Finance in early Irish governments, she joined radio 2RN, the forerunner to Radio Éireann, as an editor and producer. She was Ireland (and Britain's) first woman radio announcer, a position she successfully defended when the Free State government introduced a ban on hiring married women for civil service positions that was not lifted completely until 1973.

Ní Ghráda complemented her broadcasting with writing that included an excellent language textbook (*Progress in Irish* [1981]), as well as short stories and prize-winning plays in the Irish language. Pausing to consider drama in the Irish language in his magisterial study

of twentieth-century Irish prose, *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State 1922-1939*, Philip O'Leary judged Ní Ghráda "one of the few playwrights in Irish to write a work likely to last" (503). The work he had in mind would have been *An Triail*, one of the highlights of the 1964 Dublin Theatre Festival.<sup>7</sup> Harold Hobson praised the play in the *Times* (London); in 1965, it was the first Irish-language play to be broadcast on Radio Telefís Éireann, the national television service.<sup>8</sup>

Ní Ghráda based her play on a young woman who lived near her home in west Clare in the early decades of the twentieth century when arranged marriages were the norm in rural Clare. When the woman became pregnant by a local man, she was ostracized. While the identity of the father was known, he was not sanctioned. Incensed at the double standard and at the lack of Christian charity shown the young woman, Ní Ghráda wrote *An Triail* that indicted all who were responsible for Máire's ultimate and desperate infanticide/suicide: her mother, her brothers, her social worker, her employer, the matron in the House of Refuge, and the father of her child. Only Mailí, the stereotypical prostitute with a heart of gold who stands by her, emerges to give her eulogy with love and understanding.

The play is framed by Máire's singing the haunting traditional "Siúil a ghrá" ("Walk. My love"), a song in the tradition of the young woman's love lament, the song of one seduced and abandoned.<sup>9</sup> Ní Ghráda constructed the play as a series of short courtroom scenes with flashbacks. Máire's offstage voice explains in the first scene and again at the end of the penultimate scene why she killed her daughter and herself: she didn't want her daughter to be a hostage to any man, and she didn't want her child to go into darkness without her. All of the characters assemble in the graveyard for the last scene. They are there not to determine the verdict—that is a given—but to determine responsibility. While their culpability is clear to the audience, all deny their guilt.

The power of the play was enhanced by the casting of two gifted actresses in the role of Máire: first, the Conamara poet, playwright and

traditional sean-nós singer Caitlín Maude, and later by the internationally-acclaimed actress Fionnuala Flannagan. Readers familiar with Maude's poems like "Idir an Paidrín Páirteach" ("Between the Family Rosary") and "An tÉinín Dubh" ("The Little Blackbird") know her depth of feeling for the outsider and the poor of the world. The poems reflect the deep compassion that Maude brought to the role. The last line of "Idir an Paidrín Páirteach," "Nós Chríosta/thriall sí an bother uaigneach," ("Like Christ, she took the lonely way") could have been written for Máire.

Once again the success of the play in Irish prompted the author to translate the play into English for a wider audience. Ní Ghráda translated the play herself for a production in Dublin's Eblana Theatre in 1965. It was published a year later as *On Trial: A Play*. While her translation is generally faithful to the Irish original, Ní Ghráda makes a number of contextual changes to make the play more accessible to her English-speaking audience; there are also slight changes in sensibility in her diction and stage directions.

The original play opens with "Siúil, a ghrá," but the song (the English lyrics not the Irish) is not introduced until Máire sings the song at the schoolhouse dance. The newsboys who open the Irish play shout only, "Terrible tragedy." "Tragedy in the city." The English-speaking newsboys add the headline, "Tragedy in gas-filled room. Inquest on dead child," details which are withheld till late in the second act in *An Triail*. Ní Ghráda casts the English speeches of the attorneys in the conventions of the language of the Irish bar. For some reason, the name of Máire's lover changes from Pádraig Mac Cárthaigh to Kevin O'Clery, from a sweet-talker to a fast talker.

When the characters gather in the graveyard in the English version of the play, Ní Ghráda added the tolling of the bell and the stage directions that the defense attorney stand center stage and address the audience directly and that the speakers turn away as they deliver their final lines rather than leave the stage as they do in the Irish original. Seáinín says, "Bhris sí na rialacha. An té a bhriseann rialacha an chluiche



cailltear ann é." ("She broke the rules. The person who breaks the rule, loses the game.") Johnny the Van says the more neutral. "Everyone should observe the rules of the game." Rather than have the women say their last lines individually, in the English version, the women speak as a Greek chorus with lines that could have come from Sean O'Casey:

She was a strange distant woman.  
'Tis a lonely life she had, a lonely funeral after she was dead  
'Twas a sad funeral, the two of them in the one coffin.  
The two of them going out of life together without plume or a  
hearse or anything.

The speech arrests the audience's attention before Mailí/Molly's curtain line which is far more poignant in the Irish original.

Ní Ghráda's courageous play appeared just a week after Michael Viney wrote a piece in the *Irish Times* criticizing the treatment of single mothers (Ó Ciosáin 7), but the Magdalen asylum went on until the 1990s. It took four decades before James M. Smith's *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (2007) comprehensively redressed the secret shame of the Magdalen system. Early in his study, Smith observes that Ní Ghráda, however sympathetic to single mothers, stopped short of identifying and criticizing the Magdalen system. She made the House of Refuge in *An Triail* a secular institution though it was clearly based on a Magdalen asylum (83). Certainly the scene in the House of Refuge's laundry room replicates the conditions described in Smith, and the workers' song to the little delivery man Seáinín an Mhótair (Johnny the Van) describes their daily slavery without play, slavery that is only relieved when Seáinín, the "Elvis Presley of the Gael" arrives.

As Elvis is part of a teasing escape for the laundry workers, the figure of Elvis provides another escape for the two undocumented Irishmen in Antoine Ó Flatharta's *Grásta i Meiriceá* (1990). In her study of the Irish undocumented of the 1980s, *Irish Illegals. Transients*

*Between Two Societies*, Mary Corcoran estimates that there were some 50,000 undocumented Irish in the United States in the 1980s (11). Most entered the country legally on tourist visas, overstayed their visits and were living in major cities like New York in enclaves in Woodside (Queens) and in Woodlawn (Bronx) where they worked “off the books” on construction sites, in bars and restaurants and in private homes as nannies and eldercare providers.

Detection meant deportation; therefore, even ordinary transactions like opening a bank account or getting a driver’s license often meant using false documentation. Aware of the vulnerability of the undocumented, the Irish Immigration Reform Movement was founded in 1987 to provide support and to organize a campaign to reform the immigration laws, the family reunification preference system that replaced the old quotas so favorable to the Irish. Even with the lottery visa program the IIRM negotiated, young Irish like Seán and Finbarr, protagonists of Antoine Ó Flatharta’s 1990 picaresque play *Grásta i Meiriceá* (*Grace in America*), lived, and still live, fearing raids on their worksites and with uncertainty about their futures. Aside from annual Irish government grants to immigration centers like the Emerald Isle Immigration Center in Woodside, little attention in Ireland is paid to these emigrants.

Ó Flatharta’s *Grásta* was the first play to consider the undocumented with a measure of seriousness and sympathy. Seán and Finbarr, two undocumented immigrants from the Conemara Gaeltacht who work as housepainters in New York, plan a weekend escape by Greyhound Bus to Graceland, a post-catholic Irish pilgrimage to a shrine of American popular culture, but when Finbarr comes in from work, he finds Seán agitated because his construction site had been raided by immigration authorities who took Tommy Hughes off to Kennedy Airport for deportation. Finbarr suspects that Hughes was betrayed by an informer. Both know they could be next. Finbarr tries to keep their courage up by saying that there is a rumor that there will be amnesty for the undocumented, but Seán is uncertain.

Before they leave, Seán hears Finbarr singing "Heartbreak Hotel" in the shower. Instead of singing the second line as "I found a new place to dwell," he sings "I found a new place in hell." The line annoys Seán not only because it is irritating to hear Finbarr sing the wrong words, but also because their undocumented lives have, in fact, become a hell. Ó Flatharta uses musical intertextuality again when Seán and Finbarr hear a Nashville busker singing "This Land is Your Land," an ironic commentary on the undocumented in the United States (Murphy 69).<sup>10</sup>

They arrive in Graceland, see the guitars, the guns, the Vegas costumes, but, Graceland ultimately disappoints them. Finbarr proposes that they go home for Christmas, a trip so risky that chances are they would not be able to re-enter the United States. The cautious Seán refuses saying, "Tá muid sa mbaile" (We are home). For all of its uncertainties, America has been their destiny. Grace signifies not only Graceland but also the saving grace that is amnesty for the undocumented, the grace of God that will, meantime, help them avoid detection, and finally the phone message from Seán's father telling him that "he is praying for God's grace over me."<sup>11</sup>

Ó Flatharta wrote *Grace in America*, an English adaptation of *Grásta i Meiriceá*, in 1993. The play introduces Seán's uncle Con and Aunt Maggie whom they visit in Buffalo on the way to Graceland. Maggie and Con, who qualified for citizenship immediately when they emigrated in 1948, have not experienced the anxiety of the undocumented. That Seán secretly and successfully applied for a visa without telling Finbarr creates a tension between the two men in the second act; however, as in *Grásta*, at the end of *Grace*, both affirm their decisions to stay in America.

John L. Murphy's post-colonial, sociolinguistic analysis of the plays does not consider the consequences of that decision in terms of immigration status but rather addresses the consequences of their decision for Irish speakers, "the fate of Irish within a globalized, anglicized, and americanized context (71)." Maggie and Con, the

Gaeltacht emigrants of the 1940s, appear first to have lost their Irish, but they are able, with Séán, to retrieve placenames and reconstruct the geography of their *dúchas* (native place).

Ultimately, Murphy offers an explanation as to why Ó Flathara, one of the most successful and prolific dramatists in the Irish language theatre, abandoned Irish for English. He had been surprised to hear that Kent Paul, the director of the Vermont production of *Grace in America*, had not known of an earlier Irish language version of the play (71). Was Ó Flatharta's choice to conceal the existence of *Grásta* a signal that he was planning to abandon Irish language drama? Murphy concludes his analysis of the two Graceland plays saying, "By refusing to idolize his native Irish, and by accepting his native English, O'Flatharta enacts, as do his characters, his freedom in a diasporic world to choose his destiny" (76), but choice in a diasporic world has its consequences, consequences that include the ambiguity and insecurity of being an undocumented alien and the unease about a past that exists, in Seamus Heaney's brilliant metaphor, in the bog of memory.

Irish language drama appears to follow the Grene thesis. All three Irish language playwrights made their own artistic, cultural and linguistic choices in making their Irish work, "the otherness of Ireland," available to English readers and audiences. Máiréad Ní Ghráda chose to translate *An Triail* literally, limiting her changes to the contextual ones she determined were necessary for her English speaking audience and to some changes in diction and in stage directions. Critics agree that Brendan Behan's broad adaptation of *An Giall* to *The Hostage* launched him into a career as a stage Irishman that cost him his self-respect and perhaps, ultimately, his life. Antoine Ó Flatharta's rewriting of *Grásta i Meiriceá* to *Grace in America* was, if Murphy is correct, a step toward his decision to leave his native Irish rather than translate his work into his native English. Ultimately, that is the dilemma of all bilingual writers who must balance the claims of a minority language with a globalized English. While Ó Flatharta, at least for the moment, has left Irish for English, other Irish writers have chosen to continue to

make their literary contributions in Irish. The best known of them, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, demonstrates that one can be a global writer in a minority language. In her poem "Ceist na Teangan" (The Language Question), she placed her "hope upon the water" (155) and, in the twenty-first century, her voice is in Irish and then in translation: French, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Turkish—around the world.

## Notes

1. *An Giall* celebrated its jubilee with a return to the Damer for a June 13-15, 2008 run. The production was directed by Aodh Ó Domhnaill.
2. O'Connor was captured by Free State troops on the road to Kilmallock, Co. Cork in February, 1923. He was held first in the Women's Prison, Sunday's Well, Cork, before being transferred to Gormanstown.
3. In New York, on June 26, 1958, just ten days after the opening of *An Giall*, an American dramatic adaptation of "Guests of the Nation" opened starring the Clancy Brothers, the popular Irish balladeers. Still another adaptation of "Guests of the Nation" was Neil Jordan's use of the story as the basis of his film *The Crying Game* (1992). See Craig 412.
4. Declan Kiberd, "The Empire Strikes Back-Brendan Behan," *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1995. Kiberd first made the point that *The Hostage* was a transformation rather than a translation in his review of the play in *The Review of English Studies*, NS, 33, 130 (May, 1982): 237-8. He repeated his point in his book *The Irish Writer and the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 36.
5. Salman Rushdie is the Indian novelist and cultural critic.
6. Richard Wall compared *An Giall* and *The Hostage* first in *Modern Drama* XVIII (June 1975): 165-172; the essay was reprinted in E.H. Mikhail, *The Art of Brendan Behan*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979. 138-46. He revisited the material for the Introduction to his edition of *An Giall/The Hostage*. Washington: Catholic University of America, 1987. The edition includes an English translation of *An Giall*.

7. For bibliographic information about Ní Ghráda see Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú 74-5, and Ó Céirín, 170-171.
8. See Ó Ciosáin 7. Ó Ciosáin is Ní Ghráda's grandson.
9. Seán Ó Tuama describes women's love songs in his essay "Love in Irish Folksong" (151).
10. John L. Murphy quotes Ó Flatharta and Kent Paul, American director of *Grace*, who spoke of the playwright's intention that his plays "function like a song."
11. The translation from the Irish is my own.

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