Dramatizing Deirdre

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Abstract: *The alarming cry that characterizes the myth of Deirdre breaks time, genre and geographical boundaries. Originally oral, then written narrative, the story was splendidly dramatized in the Irish Revival, in the well-known plays by William Butler Yeats,* Deirdre *(1907), and John Millington Synge,* Deirdre of the Sorrows *(1909). Less known Revival dramatizations of the myth include George Russell's* Deirdre *(1902) and Eva Gore Booth's* The Buried Life of Deirdre *(1908-12). Much later, the myth was revisited by Donagh MacDonagh in* Lady Spider – A Play about Deirdre *(1951), by Ulick O'Connor in* Deirdre *(1977), and by Mary Elizabeth Burke Kennedy, as part of the play* Women in Arms *(1984). The most recent dramatized version of the myth is Vincent Woods'* A Cry from Heaven *(2005). The aim of this article is to comment on the transformations that the story has suffered in dramatic form in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, somehow responding to historical and social changes in Ireland.*

The rewriting of tradition is definitely among the traits scholars, critics and practitioners struggle to identify in and make sense out of contemporary Irish theatre. The recreation of classical Greek as well as of European drama has been, perhaps, among the dominant trends in Irish theatre in the last decades. Brian Friel, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, Frank McGuinness, Brendan Kennelly, Marina Carr, just to mention a few, have contributed with their unique and invaluable adaptations of the classics and of the Russians, for instance, thus weaving a web of new and old knowledges.

Equally, or perhaps, more relevant, is the reinterpretation of the Irish tradition in the chain of textual borrowings and cultural exchange. The alarming cry from the myth of Deirdre has broken time, literary conventions and physical boundaries. Originally oral, then written narrative, the story was splendidly and successfully dramatized for the first time in the Irish Revival, and then revisited in later periods, up to contemporary times. The aim of this article is to present a brief survey, or map, of the extant versions of the Deirdre myth in Irish drama, considering the transformations that the story has suffered in dramatic form in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, somehow responding to historical and social changes in Ireland, rather than provide a full analysis of the texts, or focus on details of their approximation with the original written sagas.

The map was initially drawn as part of the research work developed together with the Brazilian theatre company, Cia Ludens, in preparation for the production of the latest version of the myth: Vincent Woods' *A Cry from Heaven* (2005).

In general terms, unlike the narrative variants of the tale, which maintain the plot and structure basically unaltered, the several versions in drama offer quite a range of variations in form and structure. Even more than in prose, the dramatic versions constitute "unstable texts," or "protean" texts, that have acquired and produced the fashions, purposes, agendas and particularities of each period and author. Also, the non-fixity of theatre in performance makes of the dramatic text a genre even more unstable and open to re-interpretation.

The best known versions of the story in drama are definitely those of the Revival period – in particular *Deirdre* (1907), by William Butler Yeats, and *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1909), by John Millington Synge, although the *Deirdre* by George Russell was composed earlier (1902). All three place the character of Deirdre in the title role, unlike both the Old-Irish and the Middle-Irish versions, whose titles shed light on the role of the Sons of Uisneach. The Revival plays, instead, give the female character a central position that would remain as a model to be later challenged or continued. All three playwrights develop their plays out of a shorter version of the original sagas, and can all be viewed, considering differences and specific traits, as somehow involved in the Revival agenda of restoration of the Irish heritage to the Irish stage.

Yeats's is a one-act play, with just a few of the characters of the sagas – Conor, Deirdre, Noise and Fergus, who act in slow, symbolic movements, and speak in verse, in elegiac tone. The play also includes the use of masks, music and dance elements, and the Musicians function as chorus, introducing and commenting the story. There is no psychological motivation in his re-creation of the myth. "The poet has dramatised a mood, more than people of flesh and blood," as Declan Kiberd has put it (176). According to Masaru Sekine, "Yeats, then, had actually written what was the Irish equivalent of a Noh play in *Deirdre* [even] before he knew about the Noh" (165).

Interestingly, the Noh technique was later revisited by Ulick O'Connor in his *Deirdre,* in the 1970s, published in 1980, in the volume *Three Noh Plays*. Why revisit Yeats's chosen form so long after the Revival tide? For Ulick O'Connor, the Noh plays seemed to be the ideal form in which to present verse for a modern audience:

> A chorus could move a man across a continent in two lines. It could also take an audience backwards and forwards in time. Scenery is unnecessary. The actor tells you what is going on. It is back to the Elizabethan platform, an anticipation of what Gordon Craig and Yeats were to feel about the stage in the first decades of the century. In a television age, where realism can become ridiculous on a stage, the Noh seems extremely modern. (7)

Ulick O'Connor took, then, the Irish saga and re-wrote it in strictly classical Noh form. The Old Woman, the *Shite,* or principal character wearing a mask in the first

half of the play, is discovered by a pilgrim, the Scholar, the *Waiki,* or second character, who questions her. In the second half of the play, she is reincarnated as herself in her youth and changes masks, suggesting a wheel of reincarnation until the achievement of *Satori* or enlightment (O'Connor 7-9).

Back to the Revival modes, Synge's version – *Deirdre of the Sorrows (*1909), on the other hand, was coined in a realistic fashion, more dramatic, less symbolic. It expands the number of characters, including, for instance, Lavarcham, Ainnle and Ardan, among others, is written in prose dialogue and uses the framework of a traditional three-act structure. For Declan Kiberd "Synge's play is at once more dramatic and more faithful to real life than that of Yeats or Russell. . . . He saw the plot as a crisis in human relations. His play is at all times true to the way trapped and terrified people would act under intolerable strain" (177). Paradoxically, however, it is the realism and the contemporaneity of Synge`s play what perhaps approximates his text to the violence of the original stories, somehow erased by Yeats, for instance. Furthermore, Synge's knowledge of the Irish language and of the various sources helped him opt for the Hiberno-English dialect, thus giving the play a less romanticized quality than other Revival plays.

According to Kiberd, the brilliant innovation of Synge's text is that it makes Deirdre the motif force of the play, which leads us to the role of women in Irish drama, be it as characters or writers, and thus to one of the least known of the Revival versions, *The Buried Life of Deirdre* (1908-12)*,* by Eva Gore-Booth (1870-1926). The sister of Constance Markievicz, Gore-Booth "worked in the women's trade union movement, sharing a lifelong commitment to feminism, socialism, and pacifism with Esther Roper" (Welch 222). Until very recently neglected and forgotten, her plays were republished in 1991 by Frederik Lapisardi, who justified his enterprise by affirming that "it is neither fitting nor just that Eva Gore-Booth should be remembered simply as a support player to Constance's starring role. . . . [She] was so much more than that. She was an active pacifist in a militant age, she was a dedicated feminist, she was a sincere Christian mystic, and she was the author of at least nineteen published volumes of poetry, prose and drama" (iii).

Her Deirdre play, usually accepted as having been composed between 1908 and 1912, was supposedly first performed at the Gaiety in 1911, although there is some controversy over the actuality of this information, and published only in 1930, after her death in 1926. The play reunites most of the qualities of the author highlighted by Lapisardi. Written in verse, and organized in three acts, it includes some of the basic characters of the original stories – Conor, Deirdre, Lavracam, Naisi, Ardan, Ainlee and Fergus – and presents a plot that does not differ much from the plotline of her male contemporaries. Similarities, though, may end here. She seems to have found inspiration in the poems attributed to the heroine, rather than in the mainstream plot, conferring to and reinforcing in her protagonist the qualities of prophecy and keening, that is, her verbal skills and power of words. Eva Gore-Booth's is also a play based in the belief in re-incarnation, which she appoints as being part of druidic teaching, rather than an exclusive

Eastern doctrine. Moreover, it portrays as she herself explained "two contending forces . . . : the force of Angus, which is the possessive and exclusive passion of love, and the force of Mannannan, which is the freedom and universality of love" (qtd. in Lapisardi 152). And in the play, it is the women who accept the peaceful spirit of Mannannan, thus representing Gore-Booth's combination of feminism and pacifism. For Cathy Leeney, for instance, the title and the action of Gore-Booth's play

> presents a realm of existence which is, in a sense, already dead, is over and is now being repeated. Through the reincarnated Deirdre, [she] proposes the possibility of a present which is at once the past and the future, and the freeing, in that present moment, of human power from a cycle of violence, possessiveness and retribution. (59)

The feminist perspective in the re-creation of the myth was much later resumed by Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, in her unusual *Women in Arms,* perhaps the only one to place the single story of Deirdre into the wider spectrum of other female heroines of the medieval stories, and their agent capacities, as the intriguingly heroic title suggests. Written in the 1980s, the title is also an ambivalent reference to the growing feminist movement and the shifting role of women in Irish society – in the professions, business, politics and education, among other areas, in that decade and afterwards. The play can then be seen as a feminine version of *The Táin*. It includes a short prologue and a short epilogue, and is divided into four parts: "Nessas's Story"; "Macha's Story"; "Deirdre's Story; and "Maeve's Story", thus rescuing some of the most powerful women of the Irish myths, imbued with a wide range of characteristics far from more traditional female prototypes of mother or submissive woman. Heroic courage, but also hatred and vengeance; proud suffering, but also sexual desire and audacity are some of the features that inhabit these characters. "Burke-Kennedy reclaims these powerful women without idealizing them" (McMullan 38).

The form is narrated dialogue or a series of short monologues – a story told by many characters, who alternate the narrative voice. As the author herself suggested, the play is written to be performed by seven actors with doubling roles in the different parts/stories of the play, and each becomes part of the others' stories. Still according to the dramatist – "as well as their named roles, the actors are the chorus in the stories in which they are not central. In this capacity, they play not only human characters . . . but animals, atmospheres, and landscapes" (qtd. in Leeney 4). She challenges, then, not only the roles traditionally ascribed to women but also the dramatic form. Her Deirdre has to be seen in the context of *Women in Arms* as a whole, and is perhaps the most unusual of the eight plays dealt with here.

The least known text is most probably *Lady Spider – A Play about Deirdre*, by Donagh MacDonagh, first produced in 1951 and published only in 1980 by Gordon M. Wickstrom, in *Journal of Irish Literature* 9 [(Sept. 1980): 3-82]. MacDonagh, the son of the poet Thomas MacDonagh, leader executed in the Easter Rising in 1916, wrote all his

plays in verse, and most of them are considered comedies. For Donagh MacDonagh`s son, "even the tragedy, *Lady Spider* (based on the story of Deirdre of the Sorrows) is as funny as it is tragic," and it is "[his] father's best writing, where he passes over from being a consummate craftsman to a true artist" (*irishbornman.tripod.com/DMacD.html*).

A Cry from Heaven, by Vincent Woods, however, first staged at the Abbey, in 2005, recreates the myth of Deirdre in verse, recalling some of its previous dramatizations in a poetic version, in a predominant tragic mode, hovering with great subtlety on comic aspects. Woods' choice, within a certain revivalist tide in Irish theatre, could easily be interpreted as an act of resistance against the homogenization of global Ireland, as a reassembling of a sense of identity out of the "Celtic Tiger." What I would like to stress, however, is the force of poetry in his play. Woods believes that poetry and theatre are closely linked: "sometimes my poetry runs into the theatre and vice-versa. I know what I am at in terms of poetry, and I have a notion of where it may lead me in terms of theatre, but I am not absolutely sure" (qtd. in Chambers 494), he commented earlier in his career. It seems that the answer may have come in the beautiful mythological recreation of the Deirdre story. For José Lanters, Woods' version of the myth contains a transnational approach "and its emphasis on a mythical theme (the inescapability of war) rather than allegories of Irishness, the Woods . . . version of the Deirdre story seems the antithesis . . . of the *Deirdres* of the Revival period" (39).

In the spirit committed to exploring, explicating and enjoying the emergence of new interpretations, articulations and understandings of Irish literature and culture and their relationship to older, established practices, Vincent Woods, apart from being immersed in his native land, its folklore and history, as source material for both his poetic and theatrical texts, has also developed substantial connections and relations within a more international spectrum. His work has been staged in the U.S., England, Canada and Australia, and has been translated from English into French, Spanish, Romanian and Irish. Cathy Leeney has stated that "a master-narrative of Irish theatre is no longer tenable. [One] has to move on from an idea of Ireland and Irish theatre that is requiredly . . . independent of connections with other countries, other cultures, other histories. This range of work invites us . . . to open Ireland out into the world at large" (viii). Vincent Woods lived in Australia for several years, and co-edited (with Colleen Z. Burke) a collection entitled – *The Turning Wave – Poems and Songs of Irish-Australia*. And as the waves turned, across the Atlantic, his *Cry from Heaven* has been translated into Portuguese by Domingos Nunez, and will be staged in Brazil soon. A departure to other shores. And, thus, I finish by quoting from one of Vincent Woods' poems, which, after all, reminds us of Deirdre's farewells and laments:

Departure

The blue bus stopped too late, we were already on our way.
We were already halfway across the mountain
……

Looking back, we should have known,
…….
But we were tired, displaced, tradition
Was the last thing on our minds.

(Qtd. in Guinness 329)

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