

**Round Table: *The Politics of Re-reading/ Rewriting*
in Contemporary British Theatre**

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Our round table encompassed the rewriting of Greek myth, the classics and fairy-tales by authors such as Martin Crimp, Moira Buffini, David Greig and Martin McDonagh. Re-reading and/or rewriting of classical narrative became a trend in London in the 2000s, placed in the contemporary context of the war in Iraq and Terrorism. This renewed interest in Greek tragedy generated important revivals, above all two productions of Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* and another two of *Hecuba*, performed in 2004 and 2005 respectively.

In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s there were other waves of rewriting classical texts: Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971) and *The Woman* (1979), Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988), Sarah Daniels's *Neoptide* (1986), Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996), and, already in the 21st century, Caryl Churchill's version of Seneca's *Thyestes* (2001). Through the rewriting of Greek tragedy the authors hold up a mirror to reflect the danger of our globalised and violent world.

Clara Escoda, "Two Post-Holocaust Plays: World and Gender Inequality in Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* (2004) and Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes* (2010)"

This paper claims that both Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* (2004), a rewriting of Sophocles's *The Trachiniae* (c.430 BC), and Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes* (2010), a rewriting of *Antigone* (c.442 BC), have recourse to the classics, in which the female characters are given a "particularly loud voice" (Hall 2004:13), in order to denounce, through the female protagonist's instances of breakdown or irrationality, the latent violence or 'barbarism' which the current, late capitalist world order or 'Empire' (Hardt and Negri 2006: xii) enacts for its maintenance.

Both Crimp and Buffini, indeed, understand 'barbarism' as a radical manifestation of what Michel Foucault termed as bio-power, or the type of power over life characteristic of modern, liberal societies, and its inherent tendency to erode the individuals' political potential and render them mere 'docile', biological matter or *zoè*, as opposed to political, resistant bodies, or *bios* (Agamben 2005: 156). The paper ultimately claims that Crimp's and Buffini's concern with detecting the points where bio-power risks becoming totalitarian, characteristically makes them post-Holocaust writers, who seek to warn spectators of the dangers of slipping back into barbarism. This discussion was, incidentally, initiated by Élisabeth Angel-Perez in her book *Voyages au bout du possible: Les Théâtres du traumatisme de Samuel Beckett à Sarah Kane* (2006), where she claims that both Crimp and Sarah Kane display a clear post-Holocaust sensibility.

Ultimately, the paper claims that, through the figures of the testimony and of female irrationality, both playwrights look for a new ethics, with the aim to emerge from the post-Holocaust ethical *impasse*, and which may be grounded on the values of

proximity and on what Emmanuel Lévinas terms as the 'face-to-face' encounter with the Other. Both Amelia and Antigone assert a primeval identity, based on the body and proximity, through which they attempt to reinsert love and honesty within relationships, as well as the dignity and equality of all individuals.

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María Isabel Seguro, "McDonaghian Fairy Tales: *The Pillowman*"

Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* (2003), set in an unidentified totalitarian state, relates the arrest and interrogation of a storyteller, Katurian Katurian, as a result of the similarities of his fairy tales to a series of child murders. His brother Michal, who suffers from brain damage, has also been arrested. When Katurian finds out that Michal is the murderer, he chokes him with a pillow in order to avoid him a torturous death in the hands of the state. Moreover, Katurian confesses having committed the child murders on the condition that his stories will be saved.

The Pillowman, together with McDonagh's most recent play, *A Behanding in Spokane* (2010) seems to stand apart from the rest of his *oeuvre* set in Western Ireland. However, as Eamon Jordan aptly states, in *The Pillowman* McDonagh continues with his policy of deconstructing tradition, in this case Western tradition as represented by fairy tales (2006: 175).

According to Bruno Bettelheim (1975), the message provided by fairy tales to a child is that life is full of struggle and difficulties which cannot be avoided. If one faces them, it will be possible to overcome obstacles (8). However, McDonagh's 'anti-fairy tales', warn us about interpersonal encounters and the threat of ideological state apparatuses, from the family to higher and more complex structures (Jordan 2007: 185). The darker twists of McDonagh's stories point at how certain discourses in the early 21st century, in fact, work as dark fairy tales of the Western World.

Firstly, the once upon a time idealized family, "the primary agent of socialization, discipline, and punishment, becomes the cruel arbiter of fates" (185). In Katurian's stories no parental figure saves the child from his/her terrible fate and, if there is one –the Pillowman or Katurian enacting his own character– the supposed protection and ease offered by them is one derived from violence itself which, in turn,

generates more violence. If the family is taken as a microcosm of the state and/or society at large, then McDonagh's lack of faith in humanity is patent.

Although the first drafts of the play were written in the early 1990s, it is useful to contextualize the play's première at the time of 'War on Terror'. From the very beginning, the play's stage pictures remind us of the notorious images of Abu Ghraib: in fact, the first time Katurian is on stage he is hooded and, later on, he will suffer tortures similar to those aired on TV on the Iraqi War. Just as the family is no longer a sacrosanct source of security, so the discourses offered by democratic states sound very much like fairy tales. As Jordan states, "when greater things are at stake, like political stability, national security, institutional, party and individual reputations, democracies then may become 'a demotic freak show'" (193). As a result of its War on Terror, "first world democracy has devised its own theatre of cruelty, with its black prisons and phantom states" (193).

It would seem that the mercy killings performed in the play are preferable to life cycles of pain and suffering and yet, who is to decide and define what mercy killing is? The uneasiness created by this issue runs parallel to the question concerning the measures applied for the protection of democracy and whether these do not actually jeopardize democracy itself.

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Verónica Rodríguez Morales, "The Politics of Re-reading/Rewriting in David Greig's *Savage Reminiscence* (1991) and *The Bacchae* (2007)"

This paper focuses on the politics of re-reading/rewriting in David Greig's *Savage Reminiscence* (1991) and *The Bacchae* (2007). While *Savage Reminiscence* can be labeled a sequel that imagines Caliban's life on the island after all the other characters have left it at the end of *The Tempest*, *The Bacchae* can be considered a version of Euripides's text. Greig's theatre politics diverge from the oppositional and/or ideological politics of the so-called state-of-the-nation plays of the 1970s and 1980s, by looking for a more aesthetically experimental form which foregrounds politics.

Violence, as well as other conflicts, is metaphorically articulated in Greig's theatre. Violence is not presented for the sake of mere voyeurism. As Dan Rebellato argues, "I would suggest that these moments of violence offer a kind of socialist analysis, though one reconstructed and recast in the experience of capital, and one that operates at the level of feeling and metaphor, rather than explicit analysis" (2008: 202). Greig's plays foreground and present violence instead of explaining and representing it. Violence is presented in brutal, crude and also ironic ways in both *Savage Reminiscence* and *The Bacchae*. Violence is not mediated by a moral voice. Rather, the origin of violence is always highly problematised, sometimes to the point of appearing dangerously and necessarily ambivalent. Herein lays the provocation.

I agree with Rebellato that the reason for the elusiveness of and cold detachment to the violence conveyed in such plays is to be partly found in the yearning for connectedness: "Violence figures as a perverse attempt at connection, a desperate and

failed affirmation of the altruistic instinct. A cruel act of violence is often overlaid with an unexpected tenderness of affirmation" (2008: 204). There are three main ideas concerning the representation of violence in these adaptations:

- 1) The particular violent acts perpetrated in the plays are reminiscent of a wider concept of violence, namely, the violence created by the current world order's asymmetries.
- 2) Violence is presented as a complex phenomenon. It is not about violence for the sake of violence but violence as a result of humiliation, fear, powerlessness, and lack of understanding, communication and connection.
- 3) Ultimately, violence is the result of the collapse of connection with the Other. However, the plays do not only portray violent acts, but offer also the possibility of a new ethics of belonging.

As adaptations, *Savage Reminiscence* and *The Bacchae* bring about old stories in order to explore and problematise present concerns. They do not offer solutions but explore contemporary politics in imaginative and radical ways positing that instances of connection nowadays can indeed be a political strategy in a world dominated by the inequalities brought about by the asymmetries generated under globalization.

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